

"MAH TEVAKESH": KEEPING FOCUSED ON ONE'S GOAL IN LIFE

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Parshas Vayeishev

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Yaakov told Yosef to go check on the welfare of his brothers and the welfare of the sheep and to bring back a report. [Bereishis 37:14] This was a mission that changed more than just the life of Yosef and his brothers. Indeed, it changed the entire history of the Jewish people.

The pasukim [verses] say: "A man found him and he was wandering in the field and the man asked him what he was seeking (Mah Tevakesh?). Yosef responded 'It is my brothers that I seek, please tell me where they are pasturing.'" [Bereishis 37:15-16] The man gave Yosef directions to his brothers, Yosef went to find them, and the rest is history.

This all constitutes the "p'shuto shel mikra" [simple reading of the verses]. What follows is not the "p'shuto shel mikra" but rather is the "drush" [homiletic interpretation] that the Kotzker Rebbe (Rav Menachem Mendel of Kotzk) saw in these pasukim.

First the pasuk says, "A man found him." The Medrash Tanchuma states that the "man" is the Angel Gavriel as we find the Angel Gavriel referred to as "the man" in the book of Daniel [9:21].

Next the pasuk says, "And he was wandering in the field." This is a metaphor for man and his life on earth. People often do nothing more in their lives than wandering and searching. They are seemingly lost and don't know in which direction to go.

Finally, the pasuk says, "And the man asked him what he was seeking." The Angel Gavriel told Yosef: "Listen well, Yosef. You are about to embark on one of the greatest odysseys in the history of mankind. You are going to be thrown into a pit. You are going to be taken down to Egypt. You are going to be sold into slavery. You are going to be falsely accused. You are going to spend time in a dungeon. Then you are going to be taken out of the dungeon and become the viceroy in Egypt. In your lifetime, you are going to experience the greatest heights and the greatest depths. What is the key to success under those circumstances? The key is to remember one thing: 'Mah Tevakesh?' You always have to be focused on what you want to accomplish in life (what is it you seek?)."

If a person focuses on what he wants, then no matter what happens to him in his lifetime - whether

be it the greatest troubles or the greatest success - nothing will ever spoil him. Nothing will ever corrupt him.

Yosef the righteous, despite all that happened to him, did stay focused. He was never corrupted. When people endure terrible troubles and ask themselves "Why is this happening to me?" they are many times tempted to throw in the towel. One's natural inclination might be to give up and forsake his religion under those circumstances. "Why do I need this?"

On the other hand, when people meet with undreamed of success, they also tend to forget where they came from.

"Yosef", the Angel said, "I am telling you two words. Remember these two words: 'Mah Tevakesh.' Keep what you are seeking in focus. If you hold to that goal, nothing will ever corrupt you."

Many times, we meet people who are very successful. We ask ourselves what made them so successful. Why are some people successful and others not so successful? We tend to say that the key to success is brains, talent, luck or some combination of them. This insight of the Kotzker Rebbe is teaching that the main ingredient to success in life is FOCUS. A person will usually be successful if he has a goal and he keeps to that goal and never loses sight of that goal.

Rabbi Yaakov Luban once illustrated this idea by referencing the physical phenomenon of laser beams. Lasers have revolutionized the world. They have revolutionized medicine, technology, and defense.

A laser is basically a beam of light that is focused to a high degree that increases its power to such an extent that it can even cut through a diamond. Such a laser might use about 15 watts of electricity. The distinction between laser light and ordinary light is that laser light is focused and regular light is diffused. This metaphor is a metaphor for success in life as well. This applies not only to material and monetary success; it applies to spiritual success as well.

If a person knows what he wants, is committed to what he wants and can always maintain the focus to achieve what he wants then he can undergo the trials and tribulations of a Yosef and can still come out on top.

This is the message that the Angel Gavriel gave Yosef. All of us wander on this world. We do not know where to turn and what to do. The basic solution to this uncertainty is to focus on "Mah Tevakesh" - that which we want to achieve in life.

The Drasha Addressed to Napoleon

Yosef found himself in the dungeon together with Pharaoh's wine butler (Sar HaMashkim). He interpreted for him his dream: "The three clusters are three days. In another three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and will restore you to your post and you will place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as was the former practice when you were his cupbearer." [Bereishis 40: 12-13]

Yosef then added the following words: "If only you would think of me (ki im zechartani) with yourself when he benefits you, and you will do me a kindness, if you please, and mention me to Pharaoh, then you would get me out of this building." [Beresis 40:14].

The words "ki im zechartani" give the impression that Yosef is giving this dream interpretation SO THAT the Sar HaMashkim should remember Yosef to Pharaoh. This additional statement, introduced by the words "ki im zechartani," seems like a somewhat inappropriate insertion by Yosef. They are not part of the dream.

We would understand if Yosef appended a personal request for a favor to his interpretation of the dream and would have said, "By the way, I would appreciate it if..." However, this is not the way Yosef expressed it. Yosef makes it sound like the Wine Butler is getting out of jail SO THAT he will be able to intervene with Pharaoh in gaining Yosef's release from prison.

Rav Yaakov Moshe Kalefsky, zt"l, once told me the following incident. When Napoleon had achieved one of his major military victories, he threw a party and asked all the assembled to say a toast. Everyone got up and said a few words but they left Napoleon unsatisfied. Napoleon had a close connection with the Jews. He knew that in this town there was a Rabbi. He told his servant to go summon the Rabbi to the party to say a few words on the occasion of his victory.

The Rabbi was awakened in the middle of the night by Napoleon's servant and was brought in the chariot of the king to the banquet. Napoleon requested that he give a speech -- on the spot -- in honor of the occasion.

What does a Rabbi know from politics? What does a Rabbi know from military campaigns? But a Rabbi knows the Parsha of the week. It happened to be Parshas Vayeshev. The Rabbi explained to Napoleon "pshat" (the simple interpretation) of the above-cited pasuk.

The Rabbi said that when a simple person commits a crime and is indicted, prosecuted, and convicted of the crime, he can always appeal. But when an important person commits a crime and is indicted and prosecuted then his chances of appeal are far less. Why is that? In those corrupt times, the only people prosecuted were the downtrodden in society. The legal system did not start up with the elite of society. They only started up with those who could not defend themselves.

If they are already indicting and prosecuting and convicting an important person, they must have the goods on him so badly that it was simply impossible to look the other way. The person must be as guilty as sin. Appeals will be worthless. If he were not guilty, they would not have started up with him in the first place. But sometimes, even for an important person, an appeal can help.

But what happens if a minister in the government is indicted and convicted? What are his chances that he can appeal and be successful? Slim to none. Governments are hesitant to uncover their own corruption. If they are already prosecuting and convicting him he must be so guilty that appeals will have virtually no chance of success.

For a minister who was convicted to be returned to the same position of power that he previously held is literally impossible. This never happens.

Yosef spelled this out to the Sar HaMashkim. "Listen, you were guilty. You were convicted and you served time. But you are going to be restored to your original position and serve wine to the king again. That is miraculous. It can only be happening for one reason - so that you will be able to remember me to the king. The Almighty wants to use you as the instrument for my release from prison."

In other words the "ki im zechartani" [so that you mention me...] is indeed part of the explanation of the dream. This is the only reason that such a thing can happen.

The Rabbi then turned to Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France, and said: "Napoleon you have met military success the likes of which have not been seen since Alexander the Great. Why did you merit such success? You have merited it because you have been good to the Jews. You have extended freedoms to them that they never had in Europe. That is why all these successes have come your way. Whenever you are blessed with success, now and in the future, you should remember: 'ki im zechartani' - it is only because you have been good to the Jews in the past and so that you can be good to the Jews in the future."

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Vayeishev are provided below:

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