



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## BEREISHIT > Vayigash

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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December 30, 2011  
Vayigash

**What Will the New Year Bring?  
Insights From Joseph's  
Arab Spring**



## Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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### ABSTRACT

Arab Spring. The economy. Occupy Wall Street. The weather. Europe. Israel.

Wherever you turn, the past year 2011 was a tumultuous one, filled with upheavals, surprises and changes, unlike any year in recent history. *Volatility* is the word that defines this historic year.

As the curtain comes down on 2011, we all wonder what 2012 will bring. And above all, how can we ride the waves of these turbulent times? Is there anything we can do to calm our nerves and find clarity, direction and fortitude? Or, is our only option, as many suggest, to hunker down and wait the storm out?

An excellent – but sorely overlooked – place to turn for guidance is this week’s Torah reading, where we learn about a similarly major global upheaval in what can be considered the very first “Arab Spring,” and the very first “Occupy Wall Street” movement. Though it took place thousands of years ago, the parallels are uncanny, and there is much we can learn today from Joseph’s attitude to the radical turmoil and volatility he faced back then.

Bereishit

Vayigash

What Will the New Year Bring?

## WHAT WILL THE NEW YEAR BRING? INSIGHTS FROM JOSEPH'S ARAB SPRING

### 1. A Volatile Changing World

One of the reality jokes going around this year was:

Ten years ago we had Johnnie Cash, Bob Hope and Steve Jobs. Now we have no cash, no hope and no jobs...

Of course, we also no longer have Osama bin Laden nor Muammar el-Qaddafi, so not all the news of 2011 has been *completely* bad.

But close.

There is no denying that we are living in one of the most volatile times in recent history.

Arab Spring. The economy. Occupy Wall Street. The weather. Europe. Israel.

Wherever you turn, the past year 2011 was a tumultuous one, filled with upheavals, surprises and changes, unlike any year in recent history. *Volatility* is the word that defines this historic year.

### 2. The Events

Let's look at some of the events of the past year.

To begin with - the Arab Spring. Or as some are now calling it: the Arab Winter.

In dramatic succession, popular uprisings have toppled long-reigning dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya ... with regimes in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain increasingly losing their grip on power. And even Russia and China are in upheaval. In our global village, the death of a leader even in a small, obscure country like North Korea, has international impact and consequences.

Amid these momentous events, scholars, journalists and politicians are scrambling to explain how these revolutions came about after years of political stagnation and dashed attempts at reform. What remains most unsettling is where these tremors are headed, as we see today in the extremely unpredictable events in Egypt.

Next, the economy.

Well, there isn't much to say except that the only thing certain is that everything is uncertain. No one knows what is going on and what will be. We can't even agree to disagree about the deficit running into the trillions.

It's like the story of a mathematician, accountant and economist who all apply for the same job.

The interviewer calls in the mathematician and asks "What do two plus two equal?" The mathematician replies "Four." The interviewer asks "Four, exactly?" The mathematician looks at the interviewer incredulously and says, "Yes, four, exactly."

Then the interviewer calls in the accountant and asks the same question "What do two plus two equal?" The accountant says "On average, four ... give or take ten percent, but on average, four."

Then the interviewer calls in the economist and poses the same question "What do two plus two equal?" The economist gets up, locks the door, closes the shade, sits down next to the interviewer and whispers, "What do you want it to equal?"

Even the weather - notoriously unpredictable - has been more unpredictable than ever this year. From a surprise earthquake and hurricane striking the American East Coast, to the largest fires ever seen raging across Texas and California, from flooding and mudslides in Brazil (and other places) to a major tsunami in Japan, and the resulting damage and leakage of its nuclear reactors.

On the Jewish front - both in Israel and abroad - we have had a very difficult year. With the fall of the Egyptian regime of President Mubarak and the new changes to the Middle East leadership, Israel's fragile position has gotten even more precarious. The flotilla incident and

Turkey's posturing has added to the pressure. As did the recent confrontation at the UN between the Palestinians and Israel, and between the US and the entire world.

Not to mention that the brutal murder of Leiby Kletzky has shaken us all and has helped fuel the most recent crusade against child molestation and abuse in our religious communities.

This was indeed a tumultuous year – one of the most radical in recent memory.

### 3. Where Are We Headed?

As the curtain comes down on volatile 2011, we all wonder what 2012 will bring. And above all, how can we ride the waves of these turbulent times? Is there anything we can do to calm our nerves and find clarity, direction and fortitude? Or is our only option, as many suggest, to hunker down and wait the storm out?

Predicting what the New Year will bring can seem quite presumptuous, if not outright foolish. Yet, I will venture to do so anyway. No, I don't have a crystal ball. I have something far better.

By looking back we can see ahead. The greatest guide for the future is the past. We cannot predict the coming year's events. But we can learn from those before us who have seen and experienced far worse than we will ever see and experience. But they managed to rise above it. What is the secret of the resilience and power of these heroic people who endured and thrived despite such great suffering?

An excellent – but sorely overlooked – place to turn for guidance is this week's Torah reading, where we learn about a similarly major global upheaval in what can be considered the very first "Arab Spring," and the very first "Occupy Wall Street" movement. Though it took place thousands of years ago, the parallels are uncanny, and there is much we can learn today from Joseph's attitude to the radical turmoil and volatility he faced back then.

Joseph can inspire us to look at changes in our lives, especially severe and unexpected ones, as opportunities. How to see the forest for the trees when we are faced with tremors and our institutions are crumbling around us. He teaches us the secret of how to navigate our way through the most trying experiences, not the least of which is our trembling world.

#### 4. An Uprooted Life

Joseph's life was one of the most volatile lives in history – and surely it was one of the first documented cases of such a life. Not many people ever endured the uprooting upheaval and pain that Joseph suffered.

At the tender age of 17 years, living in peace with his father and family, Joseph was torn away from his innocent life. He was left for dead, to be mourned by his father (to whom his own brothers falsely reported that he had been killed, when, in fact, they had sold him into slavery).

For 22 long years Joseph did not see his father – and during that time it must have seemed like they would never reunite. Joseph suffered greatly – first in captivity, then in the home of Potiphar, then in prison, but finally he was freed and rose to become viceroy of Egypt.

Yes, Joseph did well for himself, but we could well imagine that he would have foregone all his glory if he could have only remained at home, at peace with his father and family.

Joseph, therefore, had good reason to be angry, bitter and vengeful, for what his brothers had done to him.

But he was not. He only saw good – and God's hand – in the heartbreaking and seemingly tragic trajectory of his life.

## 5. The Antithesis of Victim Mentality

He thus represents the antithesis of the victim mentality.

The “victim” of the victim mentality blames everyone else but himself or herself for what happens. If he did not get the promotion it is because the boss was out to get him, not because his boss found him playing on the Internet. Or, if her friend would not go out to dinner with her, it is because her friend is insensitive, not because her friend has had extra pressures lately and that her invitation was last minute.

As the joke goes: Everyone needs four basic things – food, clothes, shelter, and somebody else to blame.

Joseph did not suffer from this attitude (of victim mentality). His attitude was the diametric opposite.

Sold into slavery by his brothers, when Joseph met up with them again – though he had good reason to be angry and bitter – he uttered these unforgettable words:

“Don’t worry or feel guilty because you sold me. Look, God sent me ahead of you to save lives. There has been a famine in the area... God sent me ahead of you to ensure that you survive in the land and to sustain you through great deliverance. It is not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me Pharaoh’s vizier, director of his entire government and ruler of all Egypt.”<sup>1</sup>

These words of Joseph reveal an attitude that is the antithesis of the victim mentality, and they deliver a powerful lesson for all history.

Despite his travails, despite his great suffering, Joseph ends up calming his mortified brothers: “Do not feel guilty,” he tells them, “for it is not you who sent me here, but God,” in order to save lives!

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 45:5-8.

## 6. Where Do We Get Such Power?

Where did Joseph find such strength of character, such power? Why did he not permit the circumstances to shape his life, but instead he shaped the circumstances?

The same can be asked of the Jews throughout the ages, who maintained their equilibrium despite the harshest of circumstances.

One of the most remarkable and overlooked stories of history was the transcendent ability of Torah scholars to produce an enormous volume of literature despite the harshest circumstances surrounding them.

Throughout the Middle Ages, with Jewish persecution at its heights, sages like Rashi, Rambam, Ramban, Rabbeinu Tam, Rashbam, the Tosafists and so many others – literally hundreds of scholars – wrote thousands of pages of the most brilliant and eloquent commentary you will ever read. And nowhere in their writings will you find complaints, bitterness, depression or demoralization. During this time, the Crusades, the Inquisition, as well as persecutions and expulsions were ravaging the Jews of Europe. But as much as you analyze their words, you will not uncover an iota of the tragic and difficult events taking place around them!

Quite the contrary. Page after page is filled with inspiration, uplifting words, enormous strength and powerful insights.

Usually, you would expect to find some mention or reference in a book to the personal challenges of the author. Often authors bare their souls and their life traumas in their writings. And even when they don't, with a bit of deconstruction and analysis, you can uncover the author's personal traumas.

But, when it comes to these Torah sages, you find nothing of the sort. Neither fear nor tentativeness – indeed, nothing in their writings reflects the most trying challenges of their times! They left a legacy of writings that reflect a higher world, not at all scarred or touched by the horrible events of the world below.

Where did they have the composure, the presence of mind, to focus and produce such clarity? How were they able to not be overcome by doubts and fears for themselves and their families?



Was Joseph – and all the Middle Age sages – out of touch?

Hardly. They were keenly aware of what was going on and sensitive to the welfare of their children and their descendants. Yet, they still were able to rise above the fray.

## 7. The Source of Eternal Strength

How?

The answer lies in a powerful Chassidic expression: “When you are bound above, you don’t fall below.”

Worship man-made devices below, and your life will be determined by your attitude. Connect to the sublime above, and you will be able to rise above the immediate events and move forward with fortitude and optimism.

This is the secret of transcendence.

If you feel that mortals – or money – control the forces of your life, then you have delivered your own verdict. You will be subject to these forces, with all their unpredictability. If, however, like Joseph, you recognize that the circumstances of your life are driven by a higher hand, and nothing, absolutely nothing, that humans do can control your destiny, then you have freed yourself from the behavior of others, and overcome all challenges and even you (like Joseph) can “save lives.”

The very question – “What will be?” or “What will happen?” – is your undoing. If you feel that things “happen” to you, or that you “find yourself” in a predicament, then you have relinquished control and surrendered your destiny to the “things” that you empower.

The secret to success in the New Year is not to empower the weak force that drives fear into your heart. But, instead, to empower the strong force which is your own soul ... and to recognize that you have within you all the necessary strength to fulfill your life’s mission ... to realize that things don’t happen to you – you make things happen. You don’t “find yourself” in situations; you place yourself in them.

## 8. Taking Control

It's true that we cannot control future events. But we can certainly control how we will be influenced by them. Good ships are not those that can stop the storms or tame the waves; they are the ones that ride the swells, confident in their own ability to know when to move forward and when to slow down.

I do not mean to minimize the challenges of our times, but I do mean to ask: Can we really call 2011 the worst year in history for the Jews?

By looking back to far worse years, we can learn how to proceed.

And how much of our troubles are actually psychological? Imagine, if a critical mass would have a change of attitude, and learn from our predecessors how to "bind" ourselves to that which is "above."

But for now, let us look at ourselves.

No, we do not know what the New Year will bring. But I will make a confident prediction – our attitude will define it.

No matter what happens this year, whatever ups and downs will be coming our way, our destiny will be shaped by our attitudes; we will experience exactly what we allow ourselves to experience. We will either be dragged down by the gravitational pull of the earth that we worship, or we will be lifted on the wings of our soul and the God that we believe in.

## 9. What We Can Teach the World

When Chou En-Lai, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China, was asked by Western journalists to assess the impact of the American and French Revolutions, he quipped, "It's too early to tell."

If that's true for the ancient Chinese civilization, how much more so is it true for the Jewish people – the oldest nation on earth.

Both individually and collectively we Jews have seen the worst and the best of history. We have faced the abyss more times than anyone can count. We have suffered like no one else has. We have been massacred, oppressed, tortured, expelled, thrust out from country after country for three millennia.

No nation has experienced as much *volatility* as we have, through every age and virtually every empire of the last 3,000 years – be it Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, or Soviet.

And – the most amazing thing of it all – we are still here to tell about it.

As Jews we have much to teach the world about volatility, upheaval, crises – and above all, how not just to survive it, but how to thrive in the process!

We have the unique ability to put events in perspectives, rather than being overwhelmed by adopting the myopic vision of here and now.

## 10. The First “Arab Spring”

So back to the lessons of Joseph.

The first “Arab Spring” was when Joseph turned Egypt around. He prevented a famine by thinking ahead, and as a result Egypt became a superpower. In so doing Joseph transformed a selfish, corrupt, greedy (Wall Street) land into one that, guided by God, would “save lives” and be a source of sustenance and “great deliverance.”

But no transformation like that can happen without a trembling that precedes it. To bring in the new, the old must crumble. Witness the birth of a new child. It always follows the contractions which open new channels that allow the newborn to enter this world.

Every form of growth, every worthy achievement, every creative burst is always preceded by the tremors of the past. So when we are faced with tremors, and our institutions are crumbling around us, Joseph reminds us that the old system is dying to give way to a better one.

## 11. Navigating Through the Unknown

Now, you are probably thinking that all this sounds right philosophically, but what does it mean practically? How does one navigate through the challenges of these uncertain times?

So let me ask you: How did the Jews manage to overcome all these millennia of adversity and make it until today, despite all odds?

Joseph provides us with the answer to that question as well – in the form or a method that is both simple and powerful – and therein lies the secret to navigating our way even in the most trying of experiences.

We can only be shaken up when we don't have strong footing. Psychologically, this means that when we don't feel secure and confident inside, we are very vulnerable to the forces around us.

Nietzsche said, "He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*."<sup>2</sup>

Joseph teaches us how to renew our contract with our "why" – with our essential purpose and our indispensable contribution to life. This, in turn, allows us to bear any "how."

Joseph's inspiring story re-charges our self-esteem; it helps us connect to our source in God ... to our divine self, which is always – no matter the volatility of the moment – invincible.

## 12. Divine Opportunity

See your life – and all its unexpected turns – as a divine opportunity. (As Joseph said, "God sent me ahead of you to ensure that you survive in the land and to sustain you through great deliverance.")

Allow your challenges to serve as springboards for the birthing of new ideas and innovations. Initiate something new to help another. Resolve

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1963, p. 121.

to bring a new light into your life – commit to begin or participate in a new study group, volunteer for a good cause, host a Shabbat dinner in your home.

Do something new to serve others. Give birth. And in turn this commitment will serve as an anchor to help you through even the most volatile of times.

Joseph teaches that everything in life – including the volatility of these times – has a purpose, offers an opportunity. Because it is God that has placed you – indeed, who has placed us all – in this situation. He has done so to turn it into fuel for sustenance and growth.

May we all rise to the occasion.

Amen.