



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Miketz

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December 15, 2012

Miketz-Chanukah

The Secret of One Little Jar



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

Do our small – often unnoticed – acts make a difference?

Last week a man met his death on a New York subway platform while a crowd of by-standers watched, one even taking the time to photograph the victim as he desperately tried to scramble to safety.

Perhaps the others were frozen in shock, perhaps events moved too fast. None of us were there, so we don't know. And if we had been there, it is hard to know how anyone of us would have reacted. We'd all like to think that we'd have the courage to step up to the plate and be a hero. But we never truly know until we are tested.

Truth be told, most of the tests we face do not come amid such dramatic events such as an imminent death on a subway platform. Most of the tests we face do not make the front page. Often, no one else even knows about them. More often than not, it is the small things that matter most.

This is the lesson we take away from a rich mosaic of stories which culminate in this week's Torah reading, which just happens to dovetail with the events of Chanukah.

In this sermon, we examine the story of the small jar of oil ... which Jacob found on Mount Moriah as he was making his escape from his brother Esau ... and which the Maccabees found on Mount Moriah when they re-captured the Temple ... a small jar containing enough oil for one day but which kept the menorah lit for eight days.

This small jar was something that Jacob could not bear to leave behind. As a result of his attempt to retrieve it, he was accosted by a stranger in the middle of the night, wrestled with him and was injured by having his hip dislocated. It is this wound that Joseph later sought to repair as he reconciled with his brothers.

We thus see how seemingly unrelated events transpiring in different times and places come together in a fascinating mosaic. And this mosaic – when it is revealed before our eyes – teaches us how we can transcend our own wounds, and pass the tests that come our way.

THE SECRET OF ONE LITTLE JAR

Do Our Small Acts Count?

1. Death on the Tracks

It was an event so dramatic that it shook even New York City out of its complacency.

The scene was a subway platform. Two men argued – they apparently did not know each other; one appeared mentally disturbed. Then one pushed the other onto the tracks just as an oncoming train approached. The fallen man tried to scramble up to the platform, but he didn't make it. Twenty-two seconds later he was crushed to death.

All of New York found out about it the day after – from a front page photograph in the New York Post. The photograph showed the man desperately trying to scramble to safety under the blaring headline: THIS MAN IS ABOUT TO DIE.

R. Umar Abbasi, the freelance photographer who took the photo, said “It all happened so fast.” That apparently was his explanation for why he took the photo instead of helping the victim. And he defended himself that nobody else on the crowded platform helped the guy either, while some people even ran away.

It is sad but true that people get pushed or fall onto the train tracks in New York with some regularity. The New York Times listed some of the more notable instances, pointing out that, only six months ago, a woman in Bronx was pushed onto the tracks by a stranger, but was pulled to safety by people on the platform.

The most dramatic of the rescues happened in January 2007, when a man fell onto the tracks and a 50-year-old construction worker, Wesley Autrey, jumped in to save him. With the train rapidly approaching, Autrey positioned the man’s body safely between the rails and lay on top of him. Five cars passed over them before the train screeched to a halt.

2. What Would You Have Done?

If faced with a similar situation what would you have done?

We’d all like to think that we’d have the courage to step up to the plate and, like Wesley Autrey, be a hero. But we never truly know until we are tested.

Truth be told, most of the tests we face do not come amid such dramatic events such as an imminent death on a subway platform. Most of the tests we face do not make the front page. Often, no one else even knows about them.

We may be in a rush when we meet a lonely soul in need of help. Will we take the time, miss the bus, forego what we were about to do?

We may be in a bad mood when we meet a little child or an elderly person who could use a smile. Will we get out of ourselves and think of the other?

More often than not, it is the small things that matter most.

This is what we learn when we examine the story of the small jar of oil ... which Jacob found on Mount Moriah as he was making his escape from his brother Esau ... and which the Maccabees found on Mount Moriah when they re-captured the Temple ... a small jar containing enough oil for one day but which kept the menorah lit for eight days.

3. An Amazing Mosaic

In this week's Torah reading, an amazing mosaic of events comes together. It is as if all through the past weeks' readings – which have been detailing events in the life of Jacob and his sons, the Twelve Tribes of Israel – we have been collecting pieces of a puzzle that now come together to reveal a fascinating picture which further illuminates the story of Chanukah.

And it all has to do with the secret of the small jar.

As we might recall, during his flight to escape the murderous rage of his brother, Jacob fell asleep on the stony ground of Mount Moriah – not knowing that this would be the site of the future Temple. There, he had his famous dream of a ladder reaching into heaven, with angels ascending and descending.

According to the Midrash, in the dream God showed Jacob the rise and fall of the empires to come and the persecutions and redemptions of his descendants. So certainly, Jacob saw the religious persecutions of the Jews by the Greeks, their war to preserve the ways of Torah, and the miraculous victory which we celebrate today as Chanukah.

When Jacob awoke, he exclaimed: "God is truly in this place but I did not know it ... This must be God's Temple. This must be the gate to heaven." He then erected the stone on which he had slept into a make-shift monument and poured oil on it.

Where did Jacob get the oil? The Midrash explains:

When he picked up the stones from under his head ... he found one stone that had a small jar of oil in it, and he used it to pour on his monument. [Though now empty,] the jar refilled itself, and Jacob knew it was set aside for God. He thus said, "It's not right to leave this jar behind" [and he took it with him].

4. Jar of Olives (Joke)

By the way, speaking of jars have you heard the joke about the man who goes into a bar and orders a martini?

When it's put in front of him, he carefully removes the olive with a spoon, places it into a small jar, and downs the martini. And then he orders another, and does the same thing. After a couple of hours, he is completely sloshed. He closes the small jar which is now full of olives and staggers out.

"That's the strangest thing I've ever seen," remarks another drinker.

The bartender just shrugs. "What's so strange about it? His wife sent him out for a jar of olives."

5. A Night Spent Alone

The next piece in the mosaic comes twenty years later into the story. Having married his cousins, Leah and Rachel, and fathered twelve children, Jacob returns to his homeland. He is full of trepidation as he braces for the imminent meeting with his brother Esau. Having taken measures to protect his vast household – his wives, children, servants, and livestock – Jacob spends the night by himself.

How is it that Jacob came to spend the night alone?

He had turned back to retrieve some “small jars” that he inadvertently left behind. One of these small jars contained the miraculous oil that he poured on the site of God’s Temple, and so again he knows that “it’s not right to leave this jar behind.”

The Midrash informs us that God approved of his actions and said to Jacob: “In the merit of you endangering yourself for a small jar, I will repay your descendants with a small jar to the Hasmoneans [i.e. Maccabees – the heroes of Chanukah].”

How did Jacob endanger himself?

6. The Struggle with the Stranger

Because Jacob returned for the small jar of pure oil, he was accosted by a stranger in the middle of the night and forced to wrestle with him. This is how the Torah tells it:

Jacob remained alone. And a stranger wrestled with him until just before daybreak. When he [the stranger] saw that he could not defeat him, he struck the upper joint of Jacob’s thigh and his hip became dislocated, as he [continued to] wrestle with the stranger.

“Let me leave!” said the stranger. “Dawn is breaking.”

“I will not let you leave, unless you bless me,” [said Jacob.]

“What is your name?”

“Jacob.”

“Your name will no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have contended with God and man, and you have prevailed.”

...

[Afterwards, Jacob] was limping because of his thigh. Therefore, the Israelites do not eat the sciatica nerve on the hip joint to this very day. This is because [the stranger] struck Jacob’s thigh on the sciatica nerve.

The stranger with whom Jacob wrestled was the angel/spirit of his brother Esau who had once vowed to kill him. But Jacob had prevailed over him, and received a blessing in the end. (The next day when he met Esau in person, his brother hugged and kissed him, and offered to live in peace with him.)

Because Jacob took this huge risk for the sake of the small jar, some 1,400 years later his descendants would be repaid by God. Victorious over the Greeks (the descendants of Esau), they would enter the desecrated Temple and find pure oil in exactly the same place where Jacob found oil the morning following his dream.

And though Jacob was wounded in the process – reflecting the fractured world in which we live – he prevailed over Esau’s angel and ultimately was healed. So, too, through the discovery of the small jar of pure oil on Chanukah to kindle the menorah, the Jews conquered (and continue to conquer) the darkness and repair the original wound, the dislocated hip.

7. The Sale of Joseph

One of the consequences of Jacob's wound was the selling of Joseph into slavery by his own brothers.

The sages teach: "Everything that transpired in the lives of the Patriarchs is a sign for their children ... All the events that took place in their lives come to teach us about the future ... [for] they were shown what would happen to their descendants."

Therefore, everything that happened to Jacob was in some way reflected in the life of his favorite son Joseph, of whom his brothers were so terribly jealous.

How was it possible that such great men – the founders of the tribes of Israel, and forbearers of the entire Jewish nation – should stoop to petty jealousy? And then that this jealousy would drive them to want to sell their own brother into slavery?

Jacob's ten older sons saw Joseph as a formidable threat to their family and descendants in fulfilling their divine mission. In this they were partly correct, but also fatally wrong.

8. Healing of the Wound

As a good son of Jacob, Joseph recognized the wound that had ruptured his relationship with his brothers. Therefore, he prepared to repair it when his brothers arrived in Egypt seeking to buy grain during a time of famine.

Of course, the brothers had no way of knowing that Joseph was no longer an Egyptian slave but – thanks to his dream interpretation powers – had risen to become the Pharaoh's right hand man, the viceroy of the empire.

As part of the healing, Joseph prepared a special meal for his brothers. This is how the Torah relates what he did in this week's reading:

When Joseph saw [they were all there] ... he said to the overseer of his household, "Bring these men to the palace. Slaughter an animal and prepare it. These men will be eating a meal with me."

Why does the Torah make such a fuss about a meal that Joseph served his brothers?

The Talmud explains that Joseph's instruction specified that "the sciatic nerve be removed in front of [his brothers]." Joseph was making sure that his brothers could see how the meat was being prepared for them, and in this way he reminded them about the schism caused by the Esau's angel, which was at the root of their estrangement.

When the brothers realized that something strange was happening, they became frightened. (Although they didn't know that he was Joseph, they sensed that the meal he prepared was sending them a message from above.) They began to understand their grave error in selling Joseph.

9. Kabbalistic Insights (Optional)

Yet another manifestation of the wound of Jacob occurred when the Greeks defiled the Temple and most of the pure olive oil used to kindle the menorah.

The great 16th century Kabbalist, the Ari, teaches that the miracle of Chanukah came to repair this wound. And another 16th century mystic, the Shaloh, explains that all this is alluded to in the phrase *kaf yereicho* (meaning "joint of his hip"), since the word *yereicho* (which can also mean "base") is also used to describe a part of the menorah.

Furthermore, when the letters of the word *kaf* (meaning "joint") are reversed, they spell *pach* (meaning "jar"). And when we relate this to Chanukah, we see that the small jar of pure oil helped repair the wound Jacob suffered to his hip joint.

In other words, the small jar of pure oil (pach), which represents the pure essence of the soul, transforms the dislocated hip (kaf). And kindling the menorah with pure oil reconnects the base (kaf) of our beings – that is, our actions to our branches or higher faculties.

And as for the meal, Joseph prepared for his brothers, this is explained by the 13th century scholar Rabbi Mordechai Ben Hillel (also known as the Mordechai). He states that the meal Joseph shared with his brothers alludes to the Chanukah meal.

10. Lesson for Us

We thus see how seemingly unrelated events transpiring in different times and places come together in a fascinating mosaic. And this mosaic – when it is revealed before our eyes – tells us how we can transcend our own wounds and move past them to reintegrate our lives.

Jacob's wrestling with Esau's angel through the night represents the battles with all forms of darkness in our own lives. Throughout the long night of exile – in all its shapes and forms, external and internal, physical and psychological – we have fought and continue to fight many battles against those that would try to extinguish our spiritual light.

Often, very often, we have to fight a lonely fight. At times we may feel resigned and demoralized. We may ask: Is anybody watching over us? Does anybody care? Or, are we trapped in our own existential solitude, left to struggle by our lonely selves? And if so, why should we bother? Why make the effort to retrieve the “small jar,” why search out a seemingly trivial detail?

11. A Freezing Night in Times Square (Inspirational Story)

On a freezing November night in Times Square, Officer Lawrence DePrimo was on a counterterrorism shift when he spotted a barefoot, homeless man. The policeman went into a nearby shoe store and bought him a pair of warm boots. He knelt down beside him and put the boots on his shivering feet. No one was watching.

No one, that is, but a tourist from Arizona who witnessed the scene and took a picture with her phone. [Another opportunistic photographer but this time documenting a human being reaching out to another instead of ignoring another in time of need.]

The photo was posted on Facebook and within the first week up, it has been viewed 1.6 million times, receiving 275,000 “likes” and 16,000+ comments.

Officer DePrimo was shocked; he had no idea that he was being photographed and that his photo had become an online sensation. As he later said in an interview, “It was freezing out and you could see the blisters on this man’s feet. I had two pairs of socks and I was still cold. He was the most polite gentleman I had met. His face lit up when he saw the boots. As soon as the boots were on him, he went on his way, and I just went back to my post.”

How many others had passed by that frozen man? Some dropped a coin in his cup, but most had ignored him. They had learned to look away from the pervasive poverty of New York City. Commented the salesman in the shoe store: “Most of us are New Yorkers, and we just kind of pass by that kind of thing.”

Most, but not that one policeman.

And because of today’s technology, he has now gone on to make inspire thousands for whom his selfless act embodies hope. Hope that we can all change. Hope that we can rise to the occasion and not stand idly by the suffering of others.

Often, all it takes is one small act of kindness.

12. Small Jars and Great Achievements

We may like to score great achievements; we may prefer to gravitate to major events and dramatic experiences. But often we will encounter just a “small jar” – nothing very substantial or glamorous. We may never suspect what potent energy, what great miracle hides inside.

The “small jar” may take on the shape of a lonely person you meet on the subway. You can change his life with a kind word. It may manifest in your young child in need of an extra hug. Or in any non-dramatic encounter, that may not seem like much, but your one gesture, your one act, your own word – can move worlds.

There is no small jar that should be left behind. It may well be that the entire purpose of our existence is to uncover this very one and release its potent energy.

By returning for the small jar of undiminished oil, Jacob battled the Esau’s angel all night long and prevailed. He thus imbued us with the power to fight and win our battles, until we reveal the ultimate light of personal and global redemption.

So, next time a “small jar” situation comes your way that may not seem very significant, remember: The jar contains powerful fuel. Go redeem it. “It’s not right to leave this jar behind.” Amen.