



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Vayechi

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Vayechi

**A New Way to Deal
with Darkness**



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

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ABSTRACT

Do you have someone in your office that is just plain obnoxious? Have you ever faced evil in your life? What can we do when we are confronted with a negative experience? How do we deal with its various manifestations, such as an abusive employer, a corrupt colleague or a hurtful relative?

All of us at times are thrust into unpleasant situations and uncomfortable environments – places where we would prefer not to be. How we deal with these challenges define who we are. Often we find ourselves overwhelmed by the cruelties of life, we feel victimized, desperately groping for some respite.

This week's Torah reading offers us a brilliant yet simple approach that has the power to change your life. The chapter begins: "And Jacob lived in Egypt seventeen years..." Biblical commentators make a great deal of this introduction, noting that 17 is the numerical value (*gematria*) of *tov* ("good"). They thus conclude that Jacob's final years in Egypt were the best years of his life.

But how is that possible? The Egypt of his day was the most depraved of civilizations. The Egyptian polytheistic religion and its morals and ethics ran totally counter to those of Jacob and his family. Furthermore, his sojourn in Egypt began 210 years of exile and bondage. So what could be good about it?

The answer opens up for us the Divine mystery, which "uncovers deep things out of darkness." And provides us with a formula how to look at darkness in a new and empowering way: As an opportunity to bring in light.

A NEW WAY TO DEAL WITH DARKNESS

Can We Find Good In Evil?

1. Afraid of the Dark

A little boy was afraid of the dark. One night his mother told him to go out to the back porch and bring her the broom.

The little boy turned to his mother and said, "Mama, I don't want to go out there. It's dark."

The mother smiled reassuringly at her son. "You don't have to be afraid of the dark," she explained. "God is out there. He'll look after you and protect you."

The little boy looked at his mother real hard and asked, "Are you sure he's out there?"

"Yes, I'm sure. God is everywhere, and he is always ready to help you when you need him," she said.

The little boy thought about that for a minute and then went to the back door and cracked it a little. Peering out into the darkness, he called, "God? If you're out there, would you please hand me the broom?"

2. Facing Negativity

Darkness is a formidable force. It manifests in our lives in many ways. And it can be very frightening.

Do you have someone in your office, for example, that is just plain obnoxious? Have you ever faced evil in your life? What can we do when we are confronted with a negative experience? How do we deal with its various manifestations, such as an abusive employer, a corrupt colleague or a hurtful relative?

All of us at times are thrust into unpleasant situations and uncomfortable environments – places where we would prefer not to be. How we deal with these challenges define who we are. Often we find ourselves overwhelmed by the cruelties of life, we feel victimized, desperately groping for some respite.

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3. Good Years in Egypt

This week's Torah reading begins, "And Jacob lived in Egypt seventeen years..."¹

Biblical commentators make a great deal of this introduction, noting that 17 is the numerical value (*gematria*) of *tov* ("good").² They thus conclude that Jacob's final years in Egypt were good, in fact the best years of his life.

And we have to ask: How is that possible?

Yes, it's true that Jacob had seen much trouble in his life up to now. He had to flee his home to escape the murderous hatred of his brother, Esau. He was then swindled by his uncle Laban for whom he worked many years without pay. His family was in constant discord; his daughter was assaulted; his beloved wife Rachel died in childbirth; his favorite son Joseph was lost and presumed dead.

Of course, the grieving Jacob could not know that Joseph had been sold into slavery by his own brothers and was still alive and doing well in Egypt. Then, when a famine hit the area and Jacob's sons traveled to Egypt to buy food, they discovered that Joseph had risen to become the viceroy of the empire. Overjoyed to see them, eager to forgive all, Joseph sent for the whole family to come live in Egypt under his protection.

¹ Genesis 47:28.

² Baal HaTurim on Genesis 47:28.

Thus Jacob was reunited with his beloved son, and saw his whole family settle on a choice piece of land in the Nile Delta. He could enjoy some peace at last. No wonder he saw these years absent of strife as the best years of his life.

But while that argument can be made, we must, nevertheless, remember the downside. For one, Jacob had been forced to abandon his homeland – the Land of Israel – the land promised by God to him as well as to his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. In fact, he made his sons swear that upon his death, his body would be returned home. So it is clear that leaving Israel was not a small thing to him.

Secondly, and most importantly, Jacob knew of the prophecy that his grandfather Abraham had received – that his descendants would be slaves in a foreign land.³ And that this prophecy was about to begin.

So how could his time in Egypt be truly good?

4. Good Years in an Evil Land

Jacob spent 17 “good” years in the land of evil. And Egypt was certainly that. The Egypt of his day was the most depraved of civilizations. The Egyptian polytheistic religion, and its morals and ethics – witness the subsequent wholesale slaughter of newborn baby boys – ran totally counter to those of Jacob and his family.

We discern what Egypt was all about from its very name, which reveals its essence. The Hebrew name for Egypt – *Mitzrayim* – literally means “narrow constraints.” It further suggests entrapment, limitation, conformity, inhibition – the very opposite of the ideal of freedom.

In fact, *Mitzrayim* helps us understand the meaning of good and evil as freedom and slavery, transcendence and myopia. A constant reminder of this fact is a fundamental part of Jewish liturgy and tradition – at every turn Jews are required to remember God’s liberation of the Nation of Israel from Egypt, even though it happened more than 3,000 years ago.

³ Genesis 15:12-16.

This is because the issue of slavery and freedom reverberates through time. In fact, *Mitzrayim* refers to all the constraints and limitations of our lives, the things that we are always trying to escape from, but find ourselves tied down by nevertheless. *Mitzrayim* has many forms, all of which keep us down, not allowing us to soar freely to reach a higher, freer place, frustrating us from achieving what we aspire to.

5. *Mitzrayim* as Archetype

Like all biblical concepts and personalities, *Mitzrayim* is an archetype. And it refers to the original constraint/limitation that happened on the cosmic level in the mystical realms when God created the universe.

Kabbalah calls it *tzimtzum* – the contraction/concealment of the Infinite Light of the Infinite One. It is what made possible the creation of a consciousness that is independent of God. Without *tzimtzum* the Infinite Light of the Infinite One would have filled everything and any expression of individuality and free will would have been totally precluded.

So the *tzimtzum* was the first *Mitzrayim* – the first limitation of all. And each limitation thereafter was another manifestation of that cosmic *Mitzrayim*.

This is not just an interesting esoteric idea. It is a piece of essential knowledge that we must possess if we are ever to deal with the root of our problems, rather than simply the symptoms. Knowing it also helps us see the Torah not only as a collection of interesting stories that happened thousands of years ago, but as a guidebook to freedom. When we study how the Jews were liberated from Egypt, we learn to liberate ourselves.

6. The Concept of *Klipot*

Another Kabbalistic concept that is very important in seeing the good in evil is the concept of shells – *klipot* – which we can imagine as egg shells, or walnut shells, or orange peels.

Because God concealed His Infinite Light to make room for us and our free will, we live in a world of necessity that obscures His presence. We live atop the orange peel, not realizing there is a delicious fruit inside. Of course, we know that the essence of the orange is the fruit and not the peel, but it is the nature of our existence that we often miss the analogy when it comes to our own reality.

God made it so. He concealed the inner “fruit” and created a perception that those living on the level of the peel would not immediately recognize the fruit. They could, of course, if they searched. But it would not be obvious or easy. Finding the fruit takes education and discipline and hard work. But when we do find the fruit, our lives and our perception of the world are dramatically altered.

When we do find the fruit, do we lose our free will? Not at all. By then, through all our seeking and hard work, we have sufficiently expanded our consciousness to admit truths we had been previously unprepared for.

If we had not done the necessary preparation work, we would be like kindergarten kids who accidentally find themselves in a graduate-level physics class. We would not be able to receive the wisdom – no matter how hard the professor tried to explain it to us.

By the way, here is what one physics professor answered to a young man who challenged him in class, thereby guaranteeing that he would never again be interrupted during the rest of the semester: “I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.”

We cannot begin school in a graduate-level physics class. We need to start at the bottom, learning to read, learning to count, advancing through high school and college, learning physics from the ground up, before we can begin to fathom the quantum theory.

This is why limitations have their place.

7. *Mitzrayim*: Good or Bad?

And now, we begin to glean why Jacob found good in Egypt.

Mitzrayim has its positive application. Contraction/limitation – the *tzimtzum* – was essential to creation. The key thing to remember is that it was never meant to be an end in itself. It was meant to be the means to something greater. To be stuck in limitations is bad indeed. To use limitations as a springboard to greatness that is true good. Resistance and pressure, as unwanted as they may be, bring out the best in us.

Here is a great metaphor that captures this theme. It's a story about a water-carrier who each day fetched the water to his master's house. He did this task by means of two large jars hung on the ends of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the jars was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the well, but the other jar was cracked and so it arrived half full.

For two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one-and-a-half jars of water. The perfect jar was proud of its accomplishments, while the old cracked jar was made miserable by its failure.

One day, the poor cracked jar apologized to the water-carrier and confessed his shame.

"What are you ashamed of?" asked the water-carrier.

The cracked jar responded, "For the past two years, I have been able to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out. Because of my flaws, you have had to do all of this work, and you haven't gotten full value from your efforts."

The water-carrier smiled. "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice all the beautiful flowers on the side of the road."

Indeed, the jar noticed the flowers and also noticed that they grew only on its side of the road. And then the water-carrier explained: "You see I took advantage of your flaw and put it to good use. I planted seeds on your side of the path and as we went along you watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table."

The doctrine of *tzimtzum* is therefore called *sod ha'tzimtzum*, the “mystery of the *tzimtzum*,” because in its dark belly lies secret powerful light. The concealment is not an end in itself, it is a means to deeper revelation. And when we recognize and connect to that inner force we reveal the Divine mystery, which “uncovers deep things out of darkness,”⁴ and “reveals the profound and secret things... what is in the dark.”⁵ We then can see how the “cracks” in the jar actually allow the water through to nurture the flowers.

Tzimtzum happened when God constrained His light in order to enable our creation. But God does not want to constrain His Presence. God wants to reveal Himself and give to us. It is just that we cannot hold what He has to give – like the kindergarten child cannot hold the quantum theory. Therefore, God gives to us through a narrow/constrained channel.

Is the narrow channel good or bad? It is *fundamentally* good, and it is necessary.

8. Frustration: Good or Bad?

The same can be said about frustration.

When we are in the middle of a creative endeavor, when ideas are flowing and we are trying to bring to light a new concept, we often encounter frustration. Is that good or bad?

Sure, no one likes it. It's very uncomfortable. But, after we struggle with it, perhaps even thinking of giving up, we eventually break through, and then something good and beautiful results. And truly, this is the only way to grow. Nobody ever arrives anywhere worthwhile without first being forced to deal with constraint, frustration and limitation.

⁴ Job 12:22.

⁵ Daniel 2:22.

But frustration is not a positive thing in and of itself. It is only positive if you grow as a result of the frustration. But if you were to quit as a result of the frustration, that would not be good at all. And if somebody would intentionally stop you from growing, from achieving, that would be downright evil.

9. The Chemistry of Evil

What is evil? If we were to put it through the world's largest particle accelerator – the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland – what would we find?

We'd find negative energy. Or, put another way, the negative end of the magnetic pull.

Evil initiates the resistance necessary to create tension, and tension in turn creates growth. So is resistance a positive or negative thing? It's a negative thing. And that's why it brings out the positive energies from within us.

So, in a sense, that negative energy is exactly what gives us the power to grow and succeed. But when that negative energy becomes a devastating force that damages us, or when we begin to give it credence and credibility, when we equate it with good, then it leads us astray, and it is not good, it is what it is, it is evil.

10. How to Weaken Evil

If that is the problem we encounter, we have to know how to weaken evil, how to take away its energy.

Let us imagine we have two choices before us – to hurt someone or to help that person. These are equal choices and both will release energy. If we choose to hurt, we will release negative energy. If we choose to help, we will release positive energy.

And the evil in this world will be fed by the hurt and starved by the help. That is how we weaken it.

A parable (optional):

After many, many years, Darkness approached God and told him, "This is too much! I have been patient enough, but for no reason at all your Sun goes on torturing me, chasing me every morning. I have not even taken enough rest and he is back and the chase begins. And I have to run and he goes on running after me. Now it is getting tiring. I have not done anything wrong to this Sun. Why is he so much after me? Why is he carrying such enmity for me?"

God agreed, "This is unfair!" And he summoned the Sun. The Sun came and said, "I don't know what you are talking about. What Darkness? I have never come across any Darkness. I have never seen her, I have never met her. How can I torture somebody I have not even seen? I don't even know her! Where is she? You bring her before me! And unless you bring her before me, how can I answer? Both parties have to be present in court. First I have to see who this Darkness is who has been complaining against me and with whom I am not even acquainted. All these years since you have made me I have never seen her, I have never met her. I don't even know her whereabouts."

And God said, "You are right. I will call her."

And of course, when the darkness comes to face the sunlight, she disappears...

Evil is a very strange creature. It's a creature that feeds on negative energy. It gets bigger in direct proportion to our attitude.

We all have a selfish side. And we have a capacity to hurt others because, before all else, we want our needs met. But when we restrain ourselves – when we overcome our selfishness and our egos to bond with our fellow human beings – then we become greater people. We inject positive energy into this world. And then evil, *Mitzrayim*, the *tzimtzum*, serve their purpose and become a force for good.

11. Two True Stories

Let me relate two true stories from life that illustrate this point.

The first is told by the former editor-in-chief of *Newsweek* magazine, Bill Broyles, in his Vietnam memoir, *Brothers in Arms*.

A Marine lieutenant in that war, Broyles vividly recalls the evil of war, but also – ironically – the good in it. Fighting against a common enemy brought out a brotherhood amongst the soldiers rarely found in normal society. In order to stay alive, the soldiers had to negate their egos and competitive natures; they had to learn to depend upon one another and function as one organism. And when they did so, the feeling was incomparable. Long after the war, Broyles remembered it and missed it.

Indeed, what Broyles described is oneness that is divine. It is a oneness we are meant to strive for, but it escapes us in a fragmented world where we do not see ourselves as cells within a cosmic human body, but rather as separate entities that compete with one another. We do not realize that our hurtful actions make as much sense as the left hand wounding the right. Sad but true that it takes evil (such as war) for many people to realize this fact.

The second story was related by the Holocaust survivor Bart Stern.

When he was imprisoned at Auschwitz, Bart was only 16 years old. He and his fellow inmates were forced to do back-breaking labor from sunrise to sunset, being fed one slice of bread a day. As months wore on, this slice of bread stood between each man and certain death. One day, an inmate in Bart's barracks found that his slice of bread had been stolen. His despair was beyond words. Then Bart and two others broke off pieces from their one slice and gave it to the despairing man so that he would not die.

Years after liberation, when he was a wealthy man and well known for his philanthropic endeavors, Bart would say, "All the money I have given away since liberation do not add up to one crumb of that small piece of bread I gave away that day. Because the money I give away is something I can spare. That small piece of bread, I could not spare."

And yet that action – which caused Bart to overcome his own drive for self preservation, the most essential aspect of human selfishness – helped build him into the giving, loving man he would become, a man who inspired countless others and thus injected immeasurable good into this world.

12. The Good of *Mitzrayim*

It might seem strange to see good in evil, in war, in the Holocaust, in slavery. And yet it is there – hidden inside the shell, inside the peel – and its discovery reveals that much more of the Divine in this world.

When Jacob came to Egypt, he saw good in it. Not that Egypt was good – not anymore than Auschwitz was good. But he saw the positive elements that this land of evil could bring forth. Jacob was able to connect to the Divine mystery, which “uncovers deep things out of darkness,” and “reveals the profound and secret things... what is in the dark.”

Though they had become beaten slaves, Jacob’s descendants found refuge in God, who responded to their cries. And when they left Egypt – with wealth that was rightfully theirs – they were not just an extended family. They were a nation, the Nation of Israel, which was ready to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai. They had grown into something much greater as a result of their travails.

The same can be true of us when we confront a difficult challenge. We can see it as an evil in our life and be devastated and paralyzed by it. When we do, we feed the negative and the real evil begins to grow. But if we find within ourselves the capacity to see the good beneath the surface, ultimately we will be able to “uncover deep things out of darkness” and something good will come of it and we will grow as a result into greater, better people.

13. Not a Justification of Evil

I am not trying to justify evil by any means. I am trying to explain its cosmic underpinnings.

And here I must note that despite spending 17 “good” years in Egypt, Jacob did not want to remain there. He insisted that, after his death, his sons take his body home. He knew he did not belong in Egypt – *Mitzrayim* was not his place.

Mitzrayim – the *tzimtzum* – with all its limitations is not our place either. It is only a means, a springboard to a higher place ... to discovering and building the good within ourselves and becoming the best human beings that we can be.

14. Two Forces Within Us

We have two forces within us, as the Torah explains. On the one hand, we have an inclination towards selfishness.⁶ On the other hand, we have the divine part⁷ that is selfless and yearns for transcendence. So, we are engaged in a constant struggle between the two. But with God on our side, how can we possibly fail? As King David so eloquently said, “From the straits, I called upon God; God answered me with a vast expanse. God is with me, I have no fear. What can any man do to me?”⁸

We have so many tools at our disposal to help us strengthen our better side. One is the example of the struggles and victories of our ancestors – in particular the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the founding members of the Nation of Israel. Another is the guidance of the sages and mystics, and the seasoned understanding of the workings of the world that they offer us.

And most important of all is the message of the Torah which inspires us with the knowledge that every battle between good and evil – between the forces of slavery and freedom – can be won.

⁶ Genesis 6:5.

⁷ Genesis 1:27.

⁸ Psalms 118:5.

But it takes some courage and it needs you to act. When faced with obnoxiousness, corruption or plain cruelty, instead of retreating or cowering in fear, take the bull by the horns, and recognize that you were placed in this “*mitzrayim*” for a purpose – to illuminate and refine the depravity around you.

When you feel its cold, bring in warmth. When you see its dark, shine some light. When you see a problem, innovate a solution.

Because at the end of the day if you are not part of the solution, you are, sadly, part of the problem.

And with each victory, the good is empowered, the evil is weakened, and we advance that much closer to personal and global redemption – may it come speedily in our days. Amen.