



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Vayigash

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

December 11, 2010

Vayigash

Two Sermons

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

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Bereishit > Vayigash > Do We Live in a Dark World?

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ABSTRACT

Now that Chanukah – the Holiday of Light – is behind us, we are all that much more aware of the darkness around us. So many sad things happen daily that we cannot help but ask whether we live in a dark, cruel world, which promises little hope for improvement.

“The world breaks everyone,” wrote Ernest Hemingway, “and afterward some are stronger at the broken places.” Was Hemingway right? Does life break all people? And, if so, what hope can we have – if we’re lucky we’ll make it through, and if not, tough luck? Are we just victims of circumstances with no real control of our destiny?

The answer lies in this week’s Torah reading. With a twisted sense of cosmic irony, Joseph’s suffering illuminates for us one of the most powerful messages we will ever hear – that by facing the true nature of our dark existence, we access the deepest form of light.

Light and dark, day and night, joy and pain, ups and downs – this is the nature of existence. Life is all about cycles that orbit a broad spectrum spanning from the brightest light to the darkest gloom, and back again.

Life is not static. As much as we would like to just stop moving, the fact remains that the time and space we occupy is always moving, no less than the spinning earth beneath our feet. The secret to success in this world is to understand the nature of darkness that defines it and to make our peace with the cycles of light

and dark in our lives and in the world around us. We must learn to swim and not fight the waves.

Two words describe the basic structure of existence: Light and dark. If we master these two words and search for them in all our experiences, if we recognize the cycles, they will become our friends instead of unknown, unexpected forces that flood our life.

ANATOMY OF DARKNESS

1. A Dark World

One dark night, in middle of a loud thunderstorm, a young trembling child came running to his mother's bed, terrified of the roaring claps of thunder. His mother soothed him and told him, "Fear nothing but God." The boy, comforted, returned to his bed, only to wake up to even louder booms. And so, he ran to his mother's side again. "Now what?" she asked him. The boy innocently answered: "Mommy, I am afraid of God..."

Now that Chanukah – the Holiday of Light – is behind us, we are all that much more aware of the darkness around us. So many sad things happen daily that we cannot help but ask whether we live in a dark, cruel world, which promises little hope for improvement.

In his *Farewell to Arms* Ernest Hemingway wrote: "The world breaks everyone, and afterwards some are stronger at the broken places."

Is Hemingway right? Does life break *all* people? And, if so, what hope can we have – if we're lucky we'll make it through, and if not, tough luck? Are we just victims of circumstances with no real control of our destiny?

The answer lies in this week's Torah reading.

With a twisted sense of cosmic irony, Joseph's suffering illuminates for us one of the most powerful messages we will ever hear – that by facing the true nature of our dark existence, we access the deepest form of light.

2. The Example of Joseph

Twenty-two years passed from the time that Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery. During that time, he was humiliated as a slave, but he overcame his lowly station and rose to a position of authority over his master's house. Then, he was falsely accused of attacking his master's wife and thrown into an Egyptian prison. There he lingered for twelve years, before his amazing dream-interpretation skills brought him to the attention of the Pharaoh.

Joseph endured twenty-two years of suffering all because of what his brothers did to him. One could expect that Joseph would be so angry that he would never forgive them. Think what you would do if your siblings first tried to kill you and then sold you into captivity as a pitiful slave, abandoning you for the rest of your life! You can just imagine the hours of therapy anyone with that kind of experience would have to go through, and the enormous anger that he'd be venting the rest of his life.

But what did Joseph do?

When the brothers arrived in Egypt during famine seeking to buy food, Joseph – whom the brothers did not recognize because he was by then the viceroy of Egypt – put them to the test. And then he revealed his identity to them, but instead of recriminations, he sought to calm them. "Don't feel guilty," he told them, "for it is not you who sent me here, but God."

This is how the Torah relates the moment of re-union:

Joseph could not control his emotions ... He began to weep with such loud sobs that the Egyptians [outside] could hear it ... His brothers were so startled, they could not respond. "Please come

close to me,” said Joseph to his brothers. When they came closer he said: “I am Joseph your brother. You sold me to Egypt. But don’t worry or feel guilty because you sold me, for God has sent me ahead of you to save lives. There has been a famine in the area ... God sent me ahead of you to insure 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 viceroy, master of his entire government and ruler of all Egypt.”¹

Unbelievable!

If Joseph would have sought to exact vengeance, no one would have blamed him. Certainly, he had a right to be angry and rebuke his brothers instead of soothing them. But, instead, Joseph did everything to make them feel *less guilty!*

Now, was Joseph so detached that he forgot all the pain that his brothers caused him?

Hardly. Joseph was anything but detached. It was Joseph who “could not control his emotions.” One could hardly call this detached. But Joseph was more invested in what he saw as his divine mission – to use his position of power to save lives, and first and foremost the lives of his family.

The fascinating question is this: What allowed Joseph to transcend all the anguish that his brothers caused him and have the presence of mind to recognize that “it is not you who sent me here, but God”?

How did Joseph achieve such unique clarity? Above all, how can we achieve it?

3. Descent into the Constraints of Egypt

Having the hindsight of three thousand years of history, we can ostensibly explain that Joseph’s descent into Egypt heralded the beginning

¹Genesis 45:1-11.

of Jacob's family's descent, which ultimately led to the entire Egyptian exile. This descent was foretold by God to Abraham,² and the Patriarch surely informed his descendents of the divine plan.

Therefore, Joseph must have clearly understood that his descent into Egypt was destined by God, not by his brothers. Had his brothers not sold him into slavery, God would have found another, perhaps a more painful way, to get him and his family there.

Furthermore, Joseph must have understood the greater significance of the descent into Egypt.

The Hebrew word for Egypt – *Mitzrayim* – literally means “constraints.” Thus, the descent into *Mitzrayim* represents the spiritual plunge each of us takes when our soul is born into a physical body, when we enter into this material world, with all the limits and inhibitions that life on earth imposes upon us. On a cosmic scale, this reflects the very nature of our existence – which is a result of a quantum leap from the higher reality defined by Divine Oneness into the confines of a dualistic and pluralistic world.

Joseph saw the big picture; he saw that his predicament reflected the challenge of life itself. He certainly understood the process *intellectually*. And each of us can glean a lesson from Joseph how to deal with our own challenges – not to blame others, but to recognize the reasons God may have placed us in a particular situation.

4. The Emotional Ramifications

But there is vast difference between understanding something *intellectually* and accepting it *emotionally*.

The hard part is using the intellectual understanding to quell one's emotions.

²Genesis 15:13-14.

The greater question is – how was Joseph able to put aside his pain and overcome his anger to such a degree that he could tell his brothers they shouldn't even feel guilty? Just exactly how did Joseph do it? *That* is the \$64,000 question.

We all want to know his secret. We all want to know how to deal with our challenges emotionally. Even when our minds know that our predicament is meant to be, how do we get beyond our feelings of rage and unfairness at those that may have hurt us?

To answer these questions, we need to probe into Joseph's psyche and try to understand his perception of life and existence as a whole. Certainly, Joseph experienced the darkness of existence – the world that breaks people – and from him we can learn the solution to one of the most difficult problems we are likely to face.

When we have a dark experience – something that causes us pain, anxiety, grief or the like – we can tackle it in two ways: 1) we can try to eliminate the symptoms, or 2) we can search for the root cause that allowed the darkness to manifest itself in the first place.

Joseph understood (and he had twenty-two years to think about this) that for him to make any sense of his predicament he had to search not for the symptoms of his problems, but for their roots. He had to understand the very nature of existence that allows people, even brothers, to hurt each other in awful ways.

True, each person is responsible for his or her behavior. And his brothers certainly were. But the question is what kind of world did God create allowing the *possibility* that people can hurt each other? If the underlying truth is that all people are but different parts of an integral unity, how is it that one part can intentionally hurt another? How is it possible that the right hand can injure the left hand?

The answer lies in understanding the very nature of existence as we know it – its dark and light components.

5. Science and Torah

On a personal and psychological level, most people would say that life is made up more of darkness than of light, because that is our experience of the world.³

Furthermore, science confirms it. According to *Science* magazine, the greatest scientific breakthrough of the decade was the confirmation that “dark energy” and “dark matter” make up the overwhelming majority of our universe. This has been a major development in physics and quite a surprising one at that. Because, until this discovery, all the cosmic objects that scientists knew about shared one attribute – they gave off light. Now we know that the particles that we’re all familiar with (like electrons and protons) make up only four percent of known matter. The rest is either “dark matter” or “dark energy,” called by that name because it represents the bulk of the universe that cannot be seen.

Fascinatingly, this confirms what every mystic and, for that matter, every Torah reader always knew – the universe is first and foremost a dark place. The first description of the universe in the opening verses of Genesis states that “the earth was empty and void, and darkness covered the surface of the abyss.”

6. Kabbalistic Insights (Optional)

In an effort to clarify Genesis, the *Zohar* begins: “In the beginning of the King’s authority, the lamp of darkness engraved a hollow in the supernal luminescence.” Right – some clarification!

But the great 16th century mystic known as the Ari – in the beginning of his classic work *Etz Chaim* – explains all this. He states that the primal darkness at the beginning of Genesis describes the *tzimtzum* or “the great primordial withdrawal.” In the beginning, he says, the Endless Light of the Endless One – that is the limitless energy of an infinite God – filled all existence. But then God withdrew or concealed His light in order to make room for the consciousness of an independent existence.

³Indeed, the Talmud quotes the School of Shammai as saying: “It is more pleasant for a person to not be created than to be created.” (Talmud, *Eiruvin* 13b.)

To be independent – to exercise its will freely – this consciousness needed to feel disconnected from its source.

In other words there are two types of consciousness, or two dimensions of reality: pre-*tzimtzum* and post-*tzimtzum*. The higher reality is a divine consciousness that is all encompassing. The lower reality is an existential consciousness that sees its own existence as primary and can barely sense a reality outside of its own.

The *tzimtzum* is “dark energy.” The residue that remains after the *tzimtzum* is “dark matter,” which later evolved into the vessels of existence.

7. Darkness: a Fact of Life

The fact that science and Torah [as well as the classic works, the *Zohar* and the *Etz Chaim*] all understand the universe as being essentially a dark place, tells us that this information is critical and fundamental to our understanding of the nature of existence. We cannot possibly comprehend our universe if we don't know that the beginning of the universe is rooted in a state of primordial darkness. Furthermore, we can never overcome the darkness and difficulties of our lives if we don't face and respect where the essential foundation of our existence has its roots.

However, there is one important qualification – darkness alone is not the ultimate essence of existence. It is only a means to allow existence to come into being. Beneath the darkness – or more accurately, within it – lies light.

In other words, darkness is just another form of light energy, and its purpose is to reveal light. But in order to reveal the light we must first recognize the darkness for what it is. This is the first step in transforming the darkness into light.

¹² Ezekiel 37:15-28.

During his twenty-two years in Egypt, Joseph came to understand this essential truth – that the fundamental nature of the existential confines of *Mitzrayim* is darkness. Joseph learned that life is not cruel because people do bad things. Life is cruel because God created a universe that shrouds its true purpose and feels disconnected from its source.

Twenty-two years of challenges did not break Joseph. They made him stronger than ever. He became filled with sensitivity and awareness of God’s mysterious, larger plan. He acquired the profound understanding of life’s light and dark cycles. Because this perception permeated Joseph to his very core, he was able to transcend – not just intellectually but emotionally – his circumstances. And finally, he was able to acknowledge that it was not his brothers but God that ultimately led him to Egypt, he himself said: “God sent me ahead of you to save lives ... God sent me ahead of you to insure that you survive in the land and to sustain you through great deliverance. It is not you who sent me here, but God.”⁴

8. The Symptoms vs. the Root Cause

A world in which people do not sense their inherent unity allows the potential for people to hurt each other. Darkness does not just mean that we are subject to bad experiences (they are the symptoms). Darkness is what allows the bad experiences to happen in the first place (it is the root cause). Bad experiences are symptoms of a dark world that does not feel connected to its source.

Consider this analogy: You buy a computer and bring it home. You open the box, but disregard the manufacturer’s instructions. A year passes without incident. One day your entire computer crashes, with no way for you to retrieve all your valuable data. When did the problem begin – when the computer crashed, or on day one, when you first opened the box without following the instructions?

⁴ Genesis 45:5-7.

The Torah [as explained by the *Zohar* and the Ari,] tells us that the world is a dark place from the very outset (from the time you open the box) even if its symptoms manifest at a later stage.

To master this secret, we ought not wait until something bad happens to us. Rather, we need to confront the root cause of what makes it possible for humans to hurt one another.

People may hurt us, situations may disappoint us, circumstances may be unfair. But let's remember that – to paraphrase Joseph – it is not they who sent us into the constraints of difficulty but God. It is not people, events and circumstances that create a dark world where there is always potential danger, but God.

To transform the darkness into light, we need to first recognize the true nature of darkness in our lives. That darkness is not the immediate pain and despair we may be experiencing at the moment; those are only the symptoms. It is the very nature of this world that allows such pain to exist in the first place. In other words, even if life is going perfectly, it is still dark because we feel disconnected from our source and from each other.

9. Navigating the Waves

This discussion on light and darkness is not a mere academic exercise, but actually an attempt to dissect the essential structure of our very existence. Genesis tells us that the world was first covered in darkness, but it also tells “and then there was light.”

At first darkness and light were mixed together in one light/dark snowball. Then God divided between them, and named the light “day” and the darkness “night.” The result was: “And there was evening and there was morning...”

The cycle of night and day, evening and morning – repeated in Genesis on each day of the creation week – is the cycle of life.

We must learn about this cycle, assimilate it and align every aspect of

our daily lives with this rhythm. This is called learning how to swim. To navigate the waves of our lives we must learn to recognize their cycles.

Have you ever tried to swim against the waves? When you do, your energy gets drained faster than your flailing arms. If you keep fighting, the waves can defeat you. But when you swim with the waves and allow them to carry you, their energy propels you forward, like the air that lifts the wings of a soaring bird.

So why is it that, when it comes to our everyday life, so many of us seem to be fighting the waves? That may be the reason that we are so exhausted and overcome by fatigue.

Two primary reasons are the cause for this futile and weary battle. One, we are not aware or familiar with the cycles of life. They are like unexpected waves that catch us by surprise, and by the time we are struck by them it is often too difficult to begin swimming. Second, human nature gravitates toward the comfortable and the static. We'd prefer to sit back and be left alone.

10. True Life Stories (Optional)

Let me illustrate this phenomenon with two true life stories:

The first is the life story of a known Jerusalem rabbi, let's call him Ben. When Ben was only 14 years old, his father died of a heart attack – an early introduction to the dark side of life if there ever was one. Then, when Ben grew up and married, he discovered that his wife had a heart defect which required many operations and which caused her to suffer a disabling stroke at an early age. Not willing to let life break him – and not willing to seek answers in the Torah – Ben started swimming against the waves. He became a marathon runner, convinced that if he was strong and fit, a similar fate could not befall him. He ran obsessively, every marathon in the Western world, even when his own body told him to rest. And that is how he overtaxed himself, and the very thing he feared happened – he suffered a heart attack.

And yet this event led to his great spiritual turn-around. Because of his heart attack, Ben turned to Torah, discovered Joseph and the many answers he had been seeking since age 14. Once this world opened up to him, and he began to swim with the waves, accepting the cycles of life, he found peace at last. Even when his wife finally succumbed to her heart disease, he was able to remarry and find happiness in a new way of living and relating to life.

That's one true story. The other is related by the actor Kirk Douglas in his autobiography, *Ragman's Son*. In it, he dramatically describes how each of his parents died. His father – an alcoholic who frequently abandoned his responsibilities to his family – fought against the waves his whole life. And his mother – who despite extreme poverty and an unreliable husband – accepted life as she found it and searched for understanding in the Torah.

His father, says Douglas, died terrified of what lay beyond this world, begging his son to stay with him. His mother died with dignity, with a peaceful smile on her face. Seeing the fear in her son's face, she said, "Don't be scared. It happens to all of us." And gently, she passed away.

That's what happens when you ride against and ride with the cycles of life.

11. Cycles of Darkness and Light

Every year, we read and reread the story of the Israelites descent into Egypt followed by their ascent from there, and we are minded of the cycle of darkness and light as Jacob and his sons descend into the constraints of *Mitzrayim*.

- First comes the darkness – Joseph is sold into slavery and ends up in prison in Egypt.
- Then comes the light – Joseph's ascent to leadership, his reconciliation with his family, their descent into Egypt, where they live in the finest part of the land and flourish.
- After Jacob's and his sons' deaths, comes the darkness again – Egyptian bondage and genocide that lasts for a bitter 210 years.

- Finally comes the light of the redemption from Egypt and the birth of the Nation of Israel, which receives the divine mandate at Mount Sinai.

The Torah's account of Jacob's family's the descent into Egypt is essentially the story of our own lives. Life is all about descents and ascents. Beginning from the descent of the soul into this material world, we will go through many more descents. Some are an absence of light, some a darkness of substance. Yet, every descent has a corresponding ascent. Indeed, the purpose of the descent is to reach a place higher than the one that preceded the descent.

The mystery of life is not about achieving nirvana; it is about navigating the vicissitudes.

Light and dark, day and night, joy and pain, ups and downs – this is the nature of existence. Life is all about cycles that orbit a broad spectrum spanning from the brightest light to the darkest gloom, and back again.

Life is not static. As much as we would like to just stop moving, the fact remains that the time and space we occupy is always moving, no less than the spinning earth beneath our feet. The secret to success in this world is to understand the nature of darkness that defines it and to make our peace with the cycles of light and dark in our lives and in the world around us. We must learn to swim and not fight the waves.

Two words describe the basic structure of existence: Light and dark. If we master these two words and search for them in all our experiences, if we recognize the cycles, they will become our friends instead of unknown, unexpected forces that flood our life.

Joseph's selfless act of restraint and transcendence [– seeing beyond the anguish his brothers caused him, recognizing God's hand in his ordeals, and discerning the master plan to bring salvation to the world –] goes down as one of the greatest moments of human dignity. And it serves for us as a shining model how to face our own challenges with aplomb and nobility – to transform the “breaks” in our lives into strengths.

With the Torah as our guide, may we be blessed with the shortest periods of darkness and the longest periods of illumination, and may we bask in the revealed presence of God, and live a long happy life to enjoy the obvious blessings of health, wealth and peace. Amen.

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

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Bereishit > Vayigash > How to Melt a Heart of Stone

December 11, 2010

ABSTRACT

It is a harsh world we live in, and our frequent response to it is to turn to stone. We have minds of stone (that do not admit the truth) and hearts of stone (that refuse to ignite our emotions). But how do we melt a mind or heart that has become desensitized and turned to stone?

In finding the answer – how to melt a heart of stone – we study the story of Joseph and his brothers who sold him into slavery. In this week’s Torah reading, the story comes to a climax, as Judah rises to the challenge that Joseph has posed, and in turn challenges Joseph. In response Joseph’s heart melts, and he reveals his secret identity. He weeps and hugs his brothers, forgiving them for what they had done.

It is a moving story. A dramatic story. A beautiful story of forgiveness and reconciliation. But what does it mean to us? What is the personally relevant message here?

It is a story that helps us unravel our make-up. It explains how our two inner dimensions – mind and heart, intellect and emotions, knowledge and action – dictate how we respond to challenge.

This sermon goes on to examine the role of challenge in our lives and suggests how best we can melt our mind of stone – which will lead to God melting our heart of stone – by being sensitive to and helping others.

Because sometimes the easiest way to help ourselves is by helping somebody else. Because caring about another person often brings out abilities and strengths that we didn’t know we had.

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE: HOW TO MELT A HEART OF STONE

1. The Drama at Its Apex

In this week's Torah reading, the drama of Joseph and his brothers reaches its apex.

Twenty-two years earlier, the brothers had sold Joseph into slavery, mistakenly believing that he was a destructive force in the family. Now, when they come to Egypt to buy food in time of famine, he has a chance to avenge the wrong done to him.

Many avenues are open to him because the brothers do not recognize him after all these years. Not only has he grown, not only is he no longer a slave, but he is now the viceroy of Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh, charged with overseeing the storehouses of grain during the famine.

Joseph does not opt for vengeance. Instead, he decides to test his brothers – to see if they had seen the error of their ways.

The test he devises is an elaborate one, centered on Benjamin – his full brother by Rachel and the only one who had not participated (or indeed known) about the plot against him. The test amounts to this: Will the brothers abandon Benjamin to an Egyptian prison in order to save their own skin, knowing this will break their father's heart again?¹

If they do, they have not changed. If they do not, they are now different people.

2. Judah Challenges Joseph

Joseph gets his answer in the opening words of this week's Torah reading: "And Judah challenged him..."²

¹ Genesis chapters 42-44.

² Genesis 44:18.

Judah who had led the brothers in selling Joseph into slavery, now puts his life on the line in trying to save Benjamin from prison. He makes an eloquent speech (all the while believing he is speaking to an Egyptian official and not his long lost brother) and offers himself in place of Benjamin.

This is all the proof that Joseph needs. And he is deeply moved by Judah's words, as the Torah relates, "He began to weep with such loud sobs that the Egyptians [outside] could hear him." And then he reveals himself, "I am Joseph!"³

It is interesting to note the Torah's choice of words in describing the climax of the story. Vayigash alov Yehudah. Vayigash – meaning "challenged/confronted" is almost a declaration of war. And then Judah continues to speak in very strong language, demanding that Benjamin be released and he be imprisoned in his stead.

In response – far from being angered by Judah's approach – Joseph breaks down emotionally. Judah's words, spoken from the heart, melt his heart at the core. He bursts out in tears, reveals his identity, forgives them and hugs them.

So we see here that Judah's challenge not only did it not enrage Joseph but it was ultimately what melted his heart.

3. Relevance of Vayigash

A moving story. A dramatic story. A beautiful story of forgiveness and reconciliation. But what does it mean to us?

What is the personally relevant message here?

To understand the relevance of this story, we must first understand that Joseph and Judah are two archetypes that represent two dimensions in all our lives that often challenge each other – mind vs. heart, intellect vs. emotion, wisdom vs. faith, knowledge vs. action.

³Genesis 45:1-3.

We learn this from the very meaning of their names:

- Judah – *Yehudah* – comes from the Hebrew *hoda'ah* meaning “acknowledgment” or “thanksgiving.” Thus Judah stands for selflessness and humility. When we embody *hoda'ah*, we are able to empty ourselves and acknowledge something greater than us.
- Joseph – *Yosef* – comes from the Hebrew *hasafa* meaning “addition.” Thus Joseph stands for continual growth. When we embody *hasafa*, we are filling ourselves and continually growing, becoming greater and greater.

Hasafa leads to the study of God’s word and therefore acquisition of wisdom. *Hoda'ah* leads to implementation of God’s will and therefore action. But the Talmud asks the question, “Which is greater – learning or doing?” And it answers: “Learning is greater because it leads to doing.”⁴

In other words, *both* are necessary but they must come in the correct order. Uninformed action can do more harm than good. Knowledge that stays in the ivory towers is useless to the world at large. But proper education which then leads to informed and proper action ultimately makes the world a better place.

4. Mind and Heart

All growth requires a combination of mind and heart, thought and action. Initially, you need to open your mind. You need to study and acquire wisdom that will lead you to the open your heart, which will react with emotion and spur you to action.

But, ultimately, the world of action is where it’s at. The mind is only a tool, an instrument. The mind, when it applies logic at its best, takes you to a place that is beyond logic. As the expression goes, “the ultimate knowledge is knowing that you don’t know.” This means not just that you know how much you don’t know. This means that you begin to comprehend the unknowable.⁵

⁴ Talmud, *Kiddushin* 40b.

⁵ Rabbi Joseph Albo, *Ikkarim* II:30.

We can all relate to that because deep inside we are much greater and intuit that which is beyond the logical. The mind is a great instrument, a big computer, but there is a place beyond it.

So the conversation between Joseph and Judah is a metaphor for the conversation between our mind and our heart, our intellect and our emotions, our knowledge and our deeds. Both are necessary but they must come in the proper sequence.

We see this in the lives of Judah and Joseph. First Joseph is the leader – the mind, intellect and wisdom prevail. But, ultimately, Judah – the heart that propels one to action – becomes the leader of the Twelve Tribes of Israel and the progenitor of the great Jewish kings, of David and Solomon, and of the future Messiah.

5. Mind of Stone/Heart of Stone

Of the Messiah, God said that he will come when “I remove from you a heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”⁶

The 18th Hassidic Master, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, asks: “Why a heart of stone?” Isn’t it our mind that is blocking us from following God’s ways? Isn’t it our mind that is made of stone, not allowing the truth to enter in? Should not God want to remove our mind of stone and replace it with one of flesh?

And he answers: “No.” A mind of stone is something which we can remove on our own. We don’t need God to do that. Our mind has the cognitive strength to understand and accept as true many principles that we are emotionally not yet ready to live by.

The standards and ideals that our mind subscribes to are always greater than those we actually live by. Our mind, in other words, is always ahead of our heart. The mind is able to see the objective big picture and understand what is right or wrong for us. But often, because our emotions are subjective, immature or selfish, they refuse to follow.

⁶Ezekiel 36:26.

6. Example of Rabbi Akiva (optional)

We see this in the example of the great 1st century sage, Rabbi Akiva.

A simple shepherd until age 40, Akiva fell in love with the daughter of his employer, who agreed to marry him if he would devote himself to the study of Torah. Initially, Akiva thought it was impossible to make such a late start – after all, he was 40 and he was Torah illiterate. But while walking by a well one day, he saw a perfectly round hole, which had been hewn in the stone by dripping water. He realized that soft water, one drop at a time, was able to cut through hard stone.

And so, applying the reasoning power of his mind, Akiva made this very famous statement: “If the soft water can penetrate this hard stone, how much more can the words of God penetrate my heart.” In other words, Akiva concluded that even if his heart were made of stone, the teachings of the Torah – which are often compared to water – are bound to penetrate it.

It is interesting that he was 40, because that is often the age when Jews raised in secular environments explore their roots. It is usually the age when people have gone through enough in life to ask: “What’s it all about?”

Incidentally, in the landmark study of aging, *Biomarkers*, Drs. William Evans and Irwin Rosenberg concluded that 40-year-olds are perfectly capable of competing in the Olympics. The reasons very few try for it – Mark Spitz being one of the exceptions – is that at age 40, a rare individual is willing to dedicate every waking moment to sports training. By then, the question “Why punish yourself for a chance at a fleeting award?” has been asked and answered with “There is more to life than this.”

7. The Blind Spot

Once you remove the mind of stone, then God will help you remove the heart of stone. That God will do. It will come as a result of you doing your part, but you can’t do it alone.

When you are emotionally blocked – when your heart is encased in a stone shell – it’s as if you have a blind spot. The blind spot just doesn’t allow you to see things properly, because your emotions are in the way. Yes, you can understand with your mind. When you look at other people, you understand them perfectly. You can analyze their problems and give them the best advice in the world. But when it comes to your own self, you seem unable to follow your own advice. This is not because you are ignorant or even unwilling, it is because your heart of stone does not let you.

A story is told of a Talmudic scholar who was in the lumber business. One day he invested all his money in a big venture, but the ship carrying his lumber sunk at sea, and he lost his entire fortune. When the news arrived, he was out of town, and his family fretted how to break it to him when he returned home. Ultimately, his best student was chosen to do it.

When the Talmudic scholar returned, the student challenged him on a question of Jewish law. Should Jews thank God for the good things in their life as well as for the bad? The student posited that to equate the two made no sense. And of course, the Talmudic scholar expounded the classic explanation that your down-turns eventually take you to a higher place. The student persisted in not understanding this notion, and the scholar was forced to advance every argument that God’s will was ultimately good.

Finally, the student said, “Are you telling me that when tragedy strikes someone, he should get up and dance? Is that what you are telling me?” And the Talmud scholar responded vehemently, “That is exactly what I am telling you.”

Then the student said, “Well, start dancing.” And he told the scholar that the ship had sunk with all his lumber, and he was now flat broke.

Did the scholar start dancing? No. He fainted. And when the student revived him, he said, “I don’t understand the Talmud at all.”

This is the classic example. We can have all the explanations in the world when it comes to others. When it comes to ourselves, the emotions take control.

The Talmud says, “A man in prison can’t release himself.” You cannot pull yourself out of the pit by your own hair. You need someone else to do that.

When the heart is blocked by a stone or has turned to stone, it does not have the capacity to remove or penetrate that stone. It’s impossible. By definition, emotions are locked within themselves. You can understand with your mind what is wrong with you, but you can’t remove the blockage, because it is in your heart.

This is why you must turn to God. You must do your part by cracking the stone that is blocking your mind, and then God will do His part by cracking the stone that is blocking your heart.

8. Mind as Defense Mechanism

Our minds are often the first defense that we put up in front of our hearts. The mind can come up with brilliant justifications and smoke-screens to support our temptations. It thinks it has it all figured out. And this is why the Torah contains a whole arsenal of logical arguments simply to soften the mind of stone, so that it will allow the heart to listen.

And the paradox is that with all its blockages, in many ways, the heart is much more honest than the mind. Of course, a healthy mind is our most honest and objective tool, but a dishonest mind is the most destructive thing we have. The heart, however, might be ignorant, emotional and impulsive, but at least it’s honest. It feels what it feels, while the mind can create sophisticated illusions and build elaborate castles in the air.

You see the honesty of a heart in the simple emotional responses of a child. When a child feels something, it feels it completely. You can’t argue with a feeling. It might be a foolish feeling, or an ignorant feeling, but a feeling is a feeling.

The mind can create illusions and delusions that are total distortions. The mind can scheme, manipulate and control. At its worst, the mind

can use every facetious argument in the book and be completely dishonest. That is what a mind can do at its worst. At its best, the mind knows its limitations. It sees things objectively, and it doesn't allow itself to get caught up in "mind games" (so to speak). But when it doesn't work properly, it can lead you astray.

So the Torah has a host of intellectual arguments to counter the mind and challenge it on its own terms. And it has a host of mitzvahs – actions which are meant to soften the heart. This is God's way of turning a heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

Pure action is guaranteed to get to the "heart of the matter" (so to speak). It is really simple – when you stretch out your hand and put a coin in the hand of a beggar, when you light Shabbat candles, when you listen to words of Torah – when you do these things, you are using the mitzvahs like nutcrackers, cracking the shell of stone that is encasing your heart.

9. The Role of Challenge

In summary, this is the personally-relevant message contained in the Judah-Joseph encounter. First we need to tackle the resistance of the mind through study (the dimension represented by Joseph). With knowledge thus gained, we need to move into the mode of action (the dimension represented by Judah).

But what if the mind resists? What if despite the study, the heart remains closed and action does not follow?

Note what happens in the Judah-Joseph story: "And Judah challenged him [Joseph]..." (*Vayigash alov Yehudah*).⁷

We are all given the opportunity to educate our mind, melt our heart and do the right thing. But, in good times, we tend to become compla-

⁷Genesis 44:18.

cent and not to bother. And sometimes the only thing that wakes us up is challenge. For there is nothing more powerful than challenge to crack us open.

Though challenge is rarely a pleasant experience – and often it is painful – ultimately, it always leads to a greater good. Challenge means that there is a resistance and an obstacle which you have to overcome. By so doing, you find resources and tools you never knew you had, and you tap into your deeper abilities. In this way, you build your confidence, so that the next time around, you can surpass your previous accomplishments.

If you were never challenged ... if you lived in a shock-proof environment without any obstacles ... if you never had to climb a mountain ... if you never had to cope with a dilemma ... if you were never frustrated ... if you lived that kind of charmed life, you would have been given everything on a silver platter, but then you would not be half the person you are today.

10. Chelm Bridge Story (Optional)

The key is to learn from the challenge – to apply our mind to overcoming the obstacle and correctly interpret its message and learn its lesson in order to move to right action.

In Jewish folklore, some of those who misinterpret life's obvious lessons are sarcastically called "the wise men of Chelm." In one story, the "wise" men of Chelm are puzzling what to do with a bridge that is always collapsing. The wooden bridge had been built to withstand the weight of a horse-drawn cart, not that of an automobile or truck. But each time the wooden bridge collapses, they rebuild it anew without making it stronger. Finally, they realize that something more has to be done because with each collapse more people are injured and even killed.

So what do they do?

After a lengthy deliberation, the “wise” men of Chelm decide to... move the hospital closer to the bridge.

This is like the story of the man who dropped his keys on the way to his house. His neighbor saw him searching and offered to help. “Do you remember where you dropped them?” the neighbor asked. “Over there,” said the man, pointing further down the path. “So why are looking over here?” the neighbor was puzzled. “Because here the light is better.”

As ridiculous as that sounds, in many ways we do the same thing. There are many problems that we try to solve exactly the same way by finding some good rationalization that lets us avoid responding to the challenge.

11. Responding to the Challenge

When Judah challenged Joseph, Joseph responded.

Joseph perceived in Judah a caring heart which had long ago melted its stone casing. This was not the same Judah who sold him into slavery. This Judah was standing firm in his resolve to save his brother Benjamin, no matter the personal cost. And that heart-felt action melted Joseph. He responded to Judah’s challenge and his heart melted on the spot. He broke down in tears and revealed himself to his brothers.

And here we uncover the final secret for melting the heart of stone: caring about others (just as Judah cared about Benjamin).

We are souls in bodies who have a mission to fulfill in this world. And that mission is not just to survive and get by. That mission is taking responsibility for the world we live in and making it a better place.

There are no words that adequately describe the responsibility that lies on our shoulders.

And with every day that goes by, we have to ask ourselves the question: What did I do today to justify my existence?

A story is told about a young man who went to a great Hassidic Master to ask for a blessing. And he had a long shopping list of his needs. He wanted a blessing for a comfortable livelihood, for good health, a suitable marriage match, and so forth. When he got done with the list, the Hassidic Master said, "You've told me everything you need, but now tell me: What are you are needed for?"

We have to ask ourselves the same question.

We have many needs, that's true. And, with God's blessing, we should see all our needs fulfilled. But we should also know what we are needed for. Because we are in this world to make a difference.

And perhaps the best way to discover our purpose is to look around and see how we can be of use to others. Because more often than not, when we help someone else, we are helping ourselves.

Let me conclude with this story:

Two men were once traveling on foot through a very cold night. One was a very frail person but the other was stronger. As they went on, it got colder, and the weaker man became frozen and fainted. The stronger one then got down on his hands and knees and started to rub his companions' limbs to revive him.

It got colder and colder, and the stronger man was about to succumb to hypothermia himself. He was about to pass out from the cold, when miraculously a wagon came by and took them both to their destination. They were brought into town and revived by a fire.

Naturally, the weaker man was extremely grateful to his companion. He said, "I have to thank you for saving my life." And the other answered, "What do you mean? If I didn't exert myself and massage your arms and legs to warm you, I too would have frozen. The exertion warmed me up and saved my life."

Sometimes the easiest way to warm yourself up is by warming somebody else. Because caring about another person often brings out abilities and strengths that you didn't know you had. When you take on the re-

sponsibility of warming others, you yourself become warmer – you arrive at a greater place without even trying to do so.

So, may God help us all to rise to meet the challenges in front of us, preclude them whenever possible, and with the Torah as our guide, and our great ancestors (Judah and Joseph) as our models, may we go forward to save the world, and if not the world then at least those around us and ourselves. Amen.