



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Vayechi

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

December 18, 2010

Vayechi

Two Sermons

1) Can You See the Forest for the Trees? How to Navigate Transitions, Page 1

2) Can We Find Good In Evil, Page 16



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart*

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Enter the Heart”

Bereishit > Vayechi > Can You See the Forest for the Trees? How to Navigate Transitions

December 18, 2010

ABSTRACT

It saddens the heart to hear about his week’s tragic suicide of Mark Madoff, the 46-year old son of the disgraced Ponzi schemer, Bernard Madoff, who reportedly defrauded people of an unprecedented \$50 billion or more. What can we learn from this tragedy?

So often we get consumed with the pain of the moment that we cannot see things in perspective – the bigger picture. Therefore, we must learn how to step back and distinguish between painful losses and true openings of new horizons. But how?

This sermon takes us back to one of the first paradigm shifts in history – the death of Jacob, an event that heralded the beginning of the harsh Egyptian exile and the ensuing grand exodus, all of which have parallels in our modern times. Along the way, the sermon explores how to understand time, and see our lives as frames of a larger narrative.

If we perceive ourselves as travelling in a little boat down the fast-moving river of time, all we can see is the sky above us, the river banks on each side, and maybe the fish in the water. We no longer see our point of departure, and we cannot see our destination. If a storm comes all we can do is hold onto the rudder and hope we don’t sink. But if we see ourselves as a bird flying over the river, we can see everything.

This is also an analogy for the body and soul – the body travels in the boat, the soul soars like the bird. If we relate only to the physical, only to our body, then we will feel trapped in time. We

Bereishit

Vayechi

Can You See the Forest for the Trees?
How to Navigate Transitions

will feel blinded by events, and we will not see our way clear to a solution. In short, we will feel trapped. But if we find a way to relate to the bird in our soul, we will have the ability to soar and traverse change, challenge and transition.

With that understanding, we can learn how to navigate an uncertain future, as we transition from one life-space into another, and we can stay the course and grow through the process.

HOW TO NAVIGATE TRANSITIONS IN OUR LIVES: PARADIGM SHIFTS AND THE VOIDS IN BETWEEN

1. The Egg Basket (Joke)

One day, while his wife was not at home, a rabbi was desperately searching for his galoshes. In the back of the pantry - only a rabbi would look there for his galoshes right? - he knocked over a box from which fell out three eggs and \$2,000. Puzzled, he asked about his wife about it when she came home.

"Oh," she said, looking embarrassed. "I didn't want you to find that."

"But what does it mean?" the rabbi pressed.

Finally, the wife agreed to explain. She told him that whenever he gave a bad sermon, she put an egg in the box.

"That's great!" the rabbi interrupted, "I feel highly complimented. In twenty years of sermons, I have given only three bad sermons!"

"Well, not exactly. Every time I've put away a dozen eggs I sold them for a dollar."

So, now, seeing my wife in the front row, with her egg basket tucked under her seat, I must muster the courage to begin.

2. Paradigm Shift

In this week's reading, the Torah addresses itself to the subject of transition. It is the last segment of the Book of Genesis, and as such, it closes out the era of the Patriarchs, preparing us for a paradigm shift.

It begins, "And Jacob lived in Egypt seventeen years..."¹

Jacob had been through a lot in life. 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. The grieving Jacob did not know that Joseph had been sold into slavery by his own brothers and was still alive and doing well in Egypt.

All that changed when famine hit the area and Jacob's sons traveled to Egypt to buy food. There they discovered that Joseph had risen to become the viceroy of the empire and he sent for the whole family to come live in Egypt under his protection.

Reunited with his beloved son, his whole family peacefully settled on a choice piece of land in the Nile Delta, Jacob could relax at last. Torah commentators say that his last 17 years were good years, drawing that conclusion from the fact that 17 is the numerical value (*gematria*) of *tov* ("good").²

3. Death of Jacob

As the Book of Genesis comes to a close, Jacob blesses his sons on his deathbed and requests his body be returned to the land of his fathers. He wants to be buried in Hebron, in the burial place Abraham purchased for his wife Sarah,³ where Abraham himself was later buried, as

² Baal HaTurim on Genesis 47:28.

³ Genesis ch. 23.

well as Isaac, Rebecca and Jacob's wife Leah. This burial place is called in Hebrew Maarat Machpelah which means literally the "Cave of the Couples."

Jacob's sons comply with their father's wishes.⁴

The final passage relates the death of Joseph, who also asks to be buried in the same place. But his instructions were for that to happen when the Israelites finally leave Egypt:

"I am dying. God is sure to grant you special providence and bring you out of this land, to the land that He promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ... When God grants you [this] special providence, you must bring my remains out of this place."⁵

And that's how the Book of Genesis ends, bringing to a close an end of an era.

The next book, the Book of Exodus, begins with travail – a pharaoh is on the throne who does not remember Joseph. Seeing the prosperity of the Israelites, he enslaves them and begins a genocidal campaign to keep their exploding population in check.

This state of affairs will last for 210 years until God hears the cries of the slaves and arranges for their dramatic redemption. But before that happens, they will endure plenty of pain.

4. Cycles of Life

So we are reading now about the in-between stage. It seems that everything is good – Jacob has lived 17 good years in Egypt – but suddenly without any warning there is a turn of fortune.

Incidentally, this is the standard plot structure of any drama – be it a page-turning novel or a Hollywood movie – when a family is happily

⁴Genesis 50:12-13.

⁵Genesis 50:24-25.

enjoying a picnic in the park, a bomb is about to explode. When children are frolicking on the beach, a shark is about to jump out of the water. From where do Hollywood screenwriters – and novelists or storytellers – get their plot schemes, so often defined by tension and resolution? From life. Because life is made up of constantly revolving cycles of darkness and light, a fact established in the earliest passages of Genesis when God created the world, dividing between darkness and light and establishing the cyclical pattern: “And it was evening and it was morning ... [another] day.” And this pattern we see repeated constantly thereafter.

Failing to understand this pattern is often a big part of the problem, because if our expectations and reactions are out of alignment with the cycles of life, we are bound to be disappointed and hurt.

5. Economic Cycles (Optional)

Many people were not prepared for the latest economic cycle; they lived with the expectation that the high period would never end and, as a result, are now suffering financially. Some have gone bankrupt.

It's true that the economic high seemed to have no end. Just a short while ago, we were riding high, money was making money and the sky was the limit. Technologically, we were seeing new wonders every month – the Blackberry, the iPod, the SmartPhone – and it seemed that we were living in the Dick Tracy fantasy where your wrist watch would bring you all information you wanted anytime, anywhere.

That march of progress has not stopped but the depressed financial markets have demoralized us collectively and individually. Deep uncertainty prevails.

This, unfortunately, exposes the weakness of a materialistic society where money rules. Money and wealth create the illusion of power and control; the feeling that we can buy anything and anybody we want, and that others will do our bidding. But in truth our money ends up controlling us. If our definition of self and our sense of empowerment

comes from our money – if we feel that we would self-destruct without it – then our money controls us. And to the extent that it does, it creates a blindness which doesn't allow us to see and navigate through transitions.

Now, today, much blame is going around – people are accusing their leaders of myopic vision. They are asking where were the regulatory agencies, where were the watchdogs, why were no checks placed on the financial banking system that caused the latest economic collapse. And those who are part of the system are saying, "Mistakes were made, but give us a little time and we will fix the system." And those who are not part of the system are saying, "Maybe it is the system that doesn't work."

This is the difference between dealing with the symptoms of the problem and dealing with the roots of the problem.

Anytime you are part of the system, you cannot see clearly outside that system. As the Talmud says "A man in chains cannot free himself."⁶ Psychologically, that means that whenever you are bound to something, you are subjective and then you are part of the problem and cannot be part of the solution. Your subjectivity keeps you trapped. And this is, unfortunately, what can happen in the middle of a transition.

Certainly, Mark Madoff, the 46-year old son of the disgraced Ponzi schemer, Bernard Madoff, must have felt trapped in a nightmare. His annual income of some \$5 million a year from his father's firm had dried up. He told his lawyer that no one would employ him, and that his friends, who had invested in his father's schemes and lost all, were accusing him of collusion – that is, if they were talking to him at all. Lawsuits to recover money he had received from his father over the years were mounting. Seeing no way out, he committed suicide earlier this week. A tragic story which need not to have come to such a bitter end.⁷

⁶ Talmud, *Brochot* 5b.

⁷ *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 2010

6. Middle of Transition

When we are in the middle of a transition, we often feel trapped between the past and the future. Money especially has the power to obstruct the bigger picture. Like the silver smeared on the back of a pane of glass that turns it into a mirror, the illusory power of money cause us to see only the immediate reflection. We can only see right now, and if we do not learn from the cycles of life, we can feel quite desperate, not realizing that a bright future might be just around the corner made possible by today's losses and sorrow.

We discern this process in nature – a flower must die before a seed-pod can grow; a seed must decompose in the ground before a tree can flourish; a caterpillar must disappear inside a cocoon before a butterfly can emerge.

How does the caterpillar feel as it hangs inert inside the dark cocoon undergoing metamorphosis? The fact is that the caterpillar is dying but, by its death, it is giving birth to another form – a beautiful butterfly. And now when it emerges from the cocoon, it will not just crawl. It will fly, and it will have the power to lay eggs and create new life.

The point is that, when we are going through a transition, we cannot readily see what will be. We feel stuck in time between the present and the future. But it doesn't have to be that way – a different understanding of time changes everything.

7. The Mystery of Time

Time was once considered an imaginary element, a human construct, but Albert Einstein proved that time is a form of energy.

Long before Einstein, Kabbalah understood this and further posited that reality is an interplay of three forms of energy – *olam* (space) *shana* (time) *nefesh* (man).⁸ The chief work of Kabbalah, the *Zohar*, explains the six

⁸ As explained in the Kabbalistic work *Sefer Yetzirah* ("Book of Formation"), attributed to Abraham.

days of creation as not only being days on which various events in creation occurred but also as cycles of energy, which repeat each week.⁹

So the concept that time is energy is an ancient Jewish idea. And Judaism teaches that we have the power to tap into that energy. Time is not linear like a straight line where you start at point A and arrive at point B. Time is a spiral with an axis point to which we return to again and again – a constantly revolving and accessible cycle. Every birthday you celebrate is a return to the energy in time on the day you were born. That's the Jewish model of time.

8. Bird's Eye View

If you see life as cycles and time as a spiral, transitions are not frightening. But if you see time as linear, then the past is behind you and visible only through a haze of memory, the future is down the road and shrouded in fog. And you are stuck in the middle.

If you see yourself as travelling in a little boat down the fast-moving river of time, all you can see is the sky above you, the river banks on each side, and maybe the fish in the water. You no longer see your point of departure, and you cannot see your destination. If a storm comes all you can do is hold onto the rudder and hope you don't sink.

But if you see yourself as a bird flying over the river, you can see everything.

This is also an analogy for the body and soul – the body travels in the boat, the soul soars like the bird.

If you relate only to the physical, only to your body, then you will feel trapped in time, in the here and now. You will feel blinded by events, and you will not see your way clear to a solution. But if you find a way to relate to the bird in your soul, you will have the ability to soar and traverse transition.

⁹ *Zohar*, I 247a. III 94b. 298b.

9. Jewish Power of Survival

The Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – whose stories the Book of Genesis covers had the ability to soar above their present hard times. And so did Joseph. Though he was sold into slavery by his brothers, though he was accused of a crime he did not commit by his slave-master’s wife, though he languished in an Egyptian prison for 12 long years, he knew that any one of these events was not the complete narrative, and surely not the end of the story. He knew that a better day was coming.

And, because of the tests he faced and passed, he bequeathed to his descendants the same power. The children of Israel have always related to time as a spiral, they have had this special ability to weather the Crusades, Inquisitions, Pogroms and of late, the Holocaust. They always understood that these tragic events were not the end of the story.

Life is a series of transitions. There is a bigger picture that informs each frame of the smaller pictures, even if we can’t see it at the moment. This is what the Jews always knew.

And when we realize that we are part of a long relay race – that began long ago and continues on with the baton being carried from generation to generation – we can draw on the strengths of our ancestors and acquire the same awesome power.

A story is told about a congregation in a big city which was looking to hire a rabbi. But not just any rabbi, they wanted a distinguished scholar who was also wise, just and sensitive. As luck would have it, they found such a person, but when he arrived he turned out to be, shall we say, vertically challenged – he was physically very short. The board of directors went into a huddle trying to decide: Should they offer him the job or not? Would people relate to him as a person of distinction? Would his height be a liability? Would they even be able to see him behind the pulpit?

Being a wise man, the rabbi discerned the problem and he told them, “The person may be small, but he stands on the shoulders

of giants.” He explained that his stature was not measured in inches but in the teachings he had absorbed from those who came before him.

We are in the same position.

We might be midgets in terms of our own strengths and our own wisdom but we stand on the shoulders of giants. And, therefore, when we climb atop their shoulders we can see even further than the giants could see. We have the hindsight of so much more history, and we can see farther as a result of the wisdom that we have inherited.

10. The Humility Factor

There is one more essential ingredient that allows us to have the bird’s eye view of the soul and, therefore, to weather transitions with an optimistic outlook. And that ingredient is humility.

In the 1st century BCE lived two great scholars, Hillel and Shammai. For many years they debated many issues in Jewish law, frequently disagreeing. Eventually the sages had to decide whose opinions they would follow – as both opinions were logical and well-reasoned. They decided to follow Hillel. Why? Because Hillel was the more humble. Before he would advance his own opinion, he would summarize the opinion of Shammai.

In Torah study the goal is not academic excellence but truth and justice. And the one who is more humble is considered more objective, and therefore more likely to arrive at the proper conclusion.

Objectivity comes from humility and, for this reason, humility is essential to the bird’s eye view that allows us to see the big picture and not despair when we are in the middle of a transition.

11. The World We Live In

The world we live in feels very uncertain. As the world's economy goes up in flames – with Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain defaulting on their debts, with unemployment in the US at an all time high, with the political picture dramatically changing every two years – we could get very anxious. We could feel that there will never been a light at the end of the tunnel.

But the Torah reminds us not to confuse a transition with a dead end. To paraphrase Genesis: “There was evening, but then there was morning ... and another day.” Learn from the cycles of life. Learn and discover a new reality. Remember a butterfly is not a caterpillar. A butterfly can fly and a caterpillar can only crawl. Transition is a metamorphosis that is meant to take us to another dimension.

What has carried the Jewish people through the harshest of times was this vision. They understood that time does not begin today and does not end today. There will be a better day at the end of these travails.

And even in the midst of the travails, we must never forget to count our blessings.

Despite the bleak economic picture and the constantly looming terrorist threat, the life we live today is very good. The prosperity, rights and freedoms we enjoy are unprecedented in history. We are not vassals of tyrannical leaders who have no sense of justice, who discriminate, persecute and kill at will.

Consider how different the picture was for the Jews of the 19th century, especially the Jews living in Eastern Europe under the domination of czarist Russia. The tyranny and persecution drove some 1 million Jews to flee to America. Some have questioned whether this move was in fact good for the Jews? On the one hand, the life of the *shtetl* was spiritually purer than the materialistic, work-driven life in America. On the other hand, their lives were saved.

Clearly, it was God's plan to take the Jews out of the cocoon of the *shtetl*. Yes, the transition was painful, but we can speculate what would have

been if they had stayed in Russia. How many would have died? And would the eventual development of technology have not opened the *shtetls* anyway?

12. What Would Have Been?

What would have been? That is always an interesting question.

What would have happened to the Israelites had the brothers not sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt, where he became the viceroy with the power of saving his family in time of famine?

The famine would have come. And then what? Joseph's family, without Divine intervention, would have naturally died out. After all, without Joseph to interpret the Pharaoh's dreams, there would not have been storehouses of grain there, and the Egyptians would themselves have been dying.

And what about the other bad things that happened which ultimately led to a transition to something better and something higher? Would the Jews have become the Nation of Israel if they had not been slaves first? Would they have received the Torah at Mount Sinai? Would they have been strong enough to conquer the Promised Land if they had not wandered in the desert for 40 years?

13. What Will Be?

So now we must ask, as we complete 2,000 years of exile, what will be next?

Judging by the past events – which all had happy endings, endings which no one could have dreamed of beforehand – something wonderful is about to happen to us.

We have the past to study, and we see that in each case the promise was fulfilled and the world was a better place as a result. So where are we headed?

Well, we can be sure of one thing – it is going to be a new world. We are leaving the cocoon. We are experiencing a paradigm shift.

But those who are part of the old paradigm – or hold on to it stubbornly – cannot conceive of the new paradigm, because they are defined by the old. Only those who manage to lift themselves above the fray – or those that see the cracks as openings that let the new light in – can see a bit ahead and are not demoralized by the present.

Some may argue: But we are all part of the system. We are all trapped by it.

I say: It doesn't have to be that way. Not if we connect ourselves to a lifeline that is the timeless Torah, which links us to a higher place, which hoists us above the fray.

Connecting to something higher than the materialistic world we live in takes commitment. It cannot be just a hobby – an occasional Torah class, an infrequent mitzvah – an extracurricular activity we engage in from time to time. To gain a new perspective from the bird's eye view requires some life-changing actions.

There is a saying in psychology, which is a take-off from the scientific maxim “for every action there is a reaction.” So the psychologists says, “if there is no action, there is no reaction; if nothing changes, nothing changes.”

Or as one third-grader put it, “Bodies in motion remain in motion, and bodies at rest stay in bed unless their mothers call them to get up.”

[Seriously though,] the best way I've heard this summed up is: “If you think what you thought, and you say what you said, and you do what you did, you have what you had.”

Now that's just common sense. If you want to change your life, you have to commit to action that will cause movement.

Yes, it is hard. As the ground-breaking book on living a spiritual life, *The Road Less Traveled* – which stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 13 years – famously opined, “Life is difficult.” It’s just a plain fact. And doing anything to significantly change your life is also difficult.

But as Moses, even more famously advised, “It is not too mysterious or distant from you ... It is not in heaven ... It is not across the sea ... It is something very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart...”¹⁰

Your challenges will be difficult but you have the power to overcome them. You have more strength than the challenge. And you can rely on the wisdom of those who came before you, on the lessons they learned, on the in-roads they made. You can stand on the shoulders of giants and see far and wide. And you can make your own original contribution as a legacy to those who will come after you. [Amen]

14. Call to Action (Optional)

If we are to have a real chance to make an original contribution to improving this world, we must begin with a plan. I propose that any plan should have three components:

- 1) The first is a regular schedule of Torah study – there are classes offered in the area, and hundreds of options on line, or you can find a like-minded friend and begin a course of study together.
- 2) The second is a regular schedule of good works – and here, too, there are plenty of options: visit the sick, give charity to the poor, return a lost object, or do something special to honor your parents.
- 3) And the third is a regular schedule of prayer – you can pray from the heart or pray from a book, or just talk to God, and when

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

you do you will come to feel that He is listening, responding in subtle ways and helping you in this self-initiated metamorphosis.

With such a regular program you will find yourself rising about the travails of the day, and because you will be connected to your soul and soaring like a bird to see the future that is coming in all its glory. May it be the final redemption and may it come speedily in our days. Amen.



Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Enter the Heart”

Bereishit > Vayechi > Can We Find Good In Evil?

December 18, 2010

ABSTRACT

Evil appears to be a real force in the world. Often we find ourselves challenged by it and desperate to know how to overcome it. How do we weaken evil? How do we diminish its force? How do we deal with its various manifestations in our lives, such as an abusive employer or a corrupt colleague?

We find the answers in this week’s Torah reading, which 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 we have to ask: How is that possible? Jacob spent 17 “good” years in the land of evil. 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. Furthermore, his sojourn in Egypt began 210 years of exile and bondage. So what could be good about it?

The answer lies in the cosmic understanding of the meaning of Egypt – *Mitzrayim* – which represents the limitations and constraints of our lives. Yet these constraints – as difficult and even painful as they often are – have a purpose.

The key thing to remember is that *Mitzrayim* is never an end in itself. It is merely the means to something greater. To be stuck in limitations is bad indeed. To use limitation as a springboard to greatness that is true good.

The same can said of any difficult challenge. We can see it as an evil in our life and be devastated and paralyzed by it. When we do, the real evil begins to grow. But if we find within ourselves the capacity to see the good beneath the surface, we empower the good and we grow as a result into greater, better people.

CAN WE FIND GOOD IN EVIL?

1. New Examples of Murphy's Law (Joke)

Before we partake of some Torah wisdom, let me share with you some "street wisdom" I recently came across – also known as new discoveries in the field of Murphy's Law:

- Light travels faster than sound. This is why some people appear bright until you hear them speak.
- Change is inevitable, except from a vending machine.
- Those who live by the sword get shot by those who don't.
- A fine is a tax for doing wrong. A tax is a fine for doing well.
- The shin bone is a device for finding furniture in a dark room.

And with that illumination, we can go on to talk about more serious stuff.

2. The Cracked Jar Story (Optional)

I'd like to begin by telling you 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 moral here is that there is a purpose to every imperfection and a little bit of good in everything bad, which brings us to today's topic, "Finding Good in Evil," which is the hidden lesson in this week's Torah reading.

³Genesis 45:1-3.

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.

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.

¹Genesis 47:28.

²Baal HaTurim on Genesis 47:28.

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.

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.

³ Genesis 15:12-16.

5. Mitzrayim as Archetype

Like so many 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 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 exercise of 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 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 withdrew His Infinite Light to make room for us and our free will, we live in a world that of necessity 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 had to create an illusion so 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.

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.

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.

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 an 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.

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 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.⁴ On the other hand, we have the divine part⁵ that is selfless and yearn 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?”⁶

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 – be-

⁴Genesis 6:5.

⁵Genesis 1:27.

⁶Psalms 118:5.

tween the forces of slavery and freedom – can be won. And with each victory, the good is empowered, the evil is weakened, and we advance that much closer to the final redemption – may it come speedily in our days. Amen.