



BEREISHIT

Vayigash

Why Such Celebration Over Rubashkin's Release from Prison?

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WHY SUCH CELEBRATION OVER RUBASHKIN'S RELEASE FROM PRISON? LESSONS FROM JOSEPH IN EGYPT

ABSTRACT

After sitting in prison for eight years and eight days, Sholom Mordechai Rubashkin's sentence was commuted on the last and eighth day of Chanukah this week. As the sun was setting on Zos Chanukah, and the news broke about his release, the Jewish world – people from all communities – exploded in an unprecedented exuberant celebration. Everyone was surprised by this astounding show of unity and joy over the release of one man from prison, a stranger to so many of those celebrating.

Why this extraordinary exhilaration? What chord did it touch in so many different people?

Chanukah – the Holiday of Light – contains the answer, and it is illuminated by the events we read about in this week's Torah portion.

Light makes us 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 navigate these waves and cycles. We must learn to swim and not fight the waves.

Faith and trust in G-d – as demonstrated by Sholom Mordechai Rubashkin's unwavering trust – resonates in people's hearts, and gives us all a sorely needed boost of hope that we can overcome any obstacle.

1. Rubashkin's Release from Prison

After sitting in prison for eight years and eight days, Sholom Mordechai Rubashkin's sentence was commuted on the last and eighth day of Chanukah this week. As the sun was setting on Zos Chanukah, and the news broke about his release, the Jewish world – people from all communities – exploded in an unprecedented exuberant celebration. Everyone was surprised by this astounding show of unity and joy over the release of one man from prison, a stranger to so many of those celebrating.

Why this extraordinary exhilaration? What chord did it touch in so many different people?

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To understand the Chanukah message of light, let us look a bit closer at darkness and light.

2. 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 G-d." 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 G-d..."

Light makes us 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.

3. 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 G-d.”

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 G-d has sent me ahead of you to save lives. There has been a famine in the area ... G-d 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 G-d. 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

¹ Genesis 45:1-11.

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 G-d”?

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

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

Therefore, Joseph must have clearly understood that his descent into Egypt was destined by G-d, not by his brothers. Had his brothers not sold him into slavery, G-d 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 G-d may have placed us in a particular situation.

5. 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.

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

² Genesis 15:13-14.

\$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?

The secret, my friends, is the power of faith and trust in G-d. When one knows with absolute certainty that G-d is “running the show,” one can navigate any challenge no matter how formidable.

Joseph had that faith and trust. And he instilled into each one of us.

Certainly, Joseph experienced the darkness of existence – the world that breaks people. But he also knew that he had a deeper strength that can never be broken: His connection with G-d. That allowed him to transcend his darkness. and from him we can learn the solution to the most difficult problems we are likely to face.

During his twenty-two years in Egypt, Joseph came to understand the 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 G-d 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 G-d'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 G-d that ultimately led him to Egypt, he himself said: “G-d sent me ahead of you to save lives ... G-d 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 G-d.”³

6. Navigating the Waves

Joseph teaches us all how to navigate the waves of life – the good times and the more difficult ones, the bright times as well as the dark times: Armed with faith and trust in G-d we can endure and grow through any situation.

I submit that this was one of the primary reasons that Sholom Mordechai Rubashkin's release from prison elicited such a powerful reaction.

Most of us live lives of “quiet desperation.” And we urgently seek some relief, some hope.

³ Genesis 45:5-7

The sudden and unexpected – and miraculous – release of Sholom Mordechai Rubashkin from prison, commuting is 27 year (!) sentence, and happening on the last day of Chanukah – resonated with us all, and gave us all a sorely needed boost of hope that we can overcome any obstacle, and that we all can find instantaneous salvation, in the blink of an eye, *tsbuas Hashem k'heref ayin*.

Sholom Mordechai Rubashkin demonstrated unwavering faith and trust in G-d. One of his first statements upon his release was that he came out of prison with the holy book the Chovos HaLevovos, Duties of the Heart, whose chapters on trust (Shaar HaBitachon) he studied many times through his eight years in prison, chapters that gave him the strength to continue on. “I could not have survived without that message of trust in G-d.”

It teaches us that 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.

7. 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.

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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 is to navigate these waves and cycles. We must learn to swim and not fight the waves.

Joseph's selfless act of restraint and transcendence [– seeing beyond the anguish his brothers caused him, recognizing G-d'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 G-d, and live a long happy life to enjoy the obvious blessings of health, wealth and peace. Amen.

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