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Reality, Justice & the Sale of Joseph

Rabbi Israel Chait
Transcribed by a student

Interesting is this week's parshas Vayeshev regarding Joseph the tzaddik, and it is followed by the haftorah, which must always relate to the parsha. What is the connection? The haftorah reads as follows (Amos 2:6-3:8):

Thus said the Lord: "For 3 transgressions of Israel [I will not punish, but] for the fourth, I will not let them alone.

This is a general principle regarding how God judges the world: God excuses the first 3 sins, but institutes justice on the fourth. In his laws of repentance, Maimonides says the same. Job 33:29 also says this: "Truly, God does all these things 2 or 3 times to a man."

Everyone learns the connection between Vayeshev [Joseph's sale by his brothers] and the haftorah is the common theme of selling a person, as Joseph was sold by his brothers for silver. But looking at the verses in Vayeshev, how is it similar to the haftorah? For the haftorah discusses this sin of the Jewish nation whose judges were bent on corruption of justice. God brings a verdict against those judges because they cared more about money than about justice. They took bribes and perverted justice. That is the focus of the haftorah. The plain pshat about the words "sold out the needy for pair of sandals" means those judges accepted bribes for even a small amount of money.

Because they have sold [accepted a bribe] of silver [and falsely accused] those

whose cause was just, and the needy for a pair of sandals.

The one who made the connection between "accepting a bribe to falsely accuse the just" and Joseph the tzaddik was Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezer:

"Because they accepted a bribe of silver to accuse just": this refers to Joseph. "And the needy for a pair of sandals": Every one of the [10] brothers purchased shoes with the 2 pieces of silver they received [Joseph was sold for 20 pieces of silver].

It seems like a far-fetched association. Let's look further into the haftorah. It describes greed to the nth degree:

You who desire the ground's dust from the heads of the poor, and pervert the path of the humble.

[The corrupt judges desired the monetary value of] even the small amount of dust on the poor man's head. There was no limit to their greed. The poor man needs what he has, but their greed desired even that.

Father and son go to the same girl, and thereby profane My holy name.

This means there was no shame regarding sexuality.

They recline by every altar on garments taken in pledge, and drink in the house of their god wine bought with fines they imposed.

This means that not only did they satisfy their greed by taking money to corrupt justice, but they did so without compunction. What is meant by "house of their god"?

Rav Yebuda says that Rav says: "The Jewish people knew that idol worship is of no substance; they worshiped idols only in order to permit themselves to engage in forbidden sexual relations in public." (Sanbderin 63b)

It is difficult for a person to be a sinner;

his conscience bothers him. That is why the Jews partook of idolatry as it eased their conscience; they felt religious. They created a religion in which their conscience was satisfied and in which they could continue in their corruption and in their greed. That is the meaning of "house of their god."

Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose stature was like the cedar's and who was stout as the oak, destroying his boughs above and his trunk below! And I brought you up from the land of Egypt and led you through the wilderness forty years, to possess the land of the Amorite! And I raised up prophets from among your sons and nazirites from among your young men.

The last verse refers to people removed from the lusts [perfected people].

"Is that not so, O people of Israel?" — says the Lord. "But you made the nazirites drink wine and ordered the prophets not to prophesy."

The Jews enticed them and removed them from their lives of abstinence.

"Ah, I will slow your movements as a wagon is slowed when it is full of cut grain. Flight shall fail the swift, the strong shall find no strength, and the warrior shall not save his life. The archer shall not hold his ground, And the fleet-footed shall not escape, nor the horseman save his life. Even the most stouthearted warrior shall run away naked that day" — declares the Lord. Hear this word, O people of Israel, that the Lord has spoken concerning you, concerning the whole family that I brought up from the land of Egypt: "You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth— that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities."

[Next] God explains the reason why He will do this to the Jews is because of a special relationship he has with Israel:

Can 2 walk together without having met?

There's no coincidence [God's relationship with the Jews is intentional].

Does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey? Does a young lion let out a cry from its den without having made a capture? Does a bird drop on the ground—in a trap—with no snare there? Does a trap spring up from the ground unless it has caught something? When a ram's horn is sounded in a town, do the people not take alarm? Can misfortune come to a town if the Lord has not caused it? Indeed, my Lord God does nothing without having revealed His purpose to His servants the prophets. A lion has roared, who won't fear? My Lord God has spoken, who won't prophesy?"

What is the continuity of this haftarah; what is the relationship between one idea and the other?

Amos depicts the essence of Judaism's philosophy. He first describes a person completely overcome by greed. Man's lowest level is when his essence is the "I," the self, as we were discussing. In this state, man has no other reality but the self. He fails to recognize a metaphysical reality. The Rav once said, "To learn Torah, one must abandon businessman's logic." But the gemara says that the one who loses his money [fails at business] lacks wisdom. So, what is the Rav's point? The gemara also says that one who partakes of wine in moderation is a good thing. Wine is called "ti-rosh." Rosh—head—means that wine improves one's mind; moderate wine drinking produces a state conducive towards thought, one is relaxed, and he can think. But ti-rosh can also be read ti-rash: rash means poor. If one overindulges in wine, he becomes poor. Thus, handling one's money properly is a good thing. So, what is the Rav's point about abandoning businessman's logic? The Rav means the businessman's logic is restricted only to the world of the senses; nothing else is real to him. This is the same phenomenon Amos depicts: the world of the senses. But Judaism maintains that there exists another reality; a reality behind the world of the senses. A metaphysical reality. That is why the verse above says, "I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose stature was like the cedar's and who was stout as the oak." Why does the verse describe the Amorite's strength? "And I brought you up from the land of Egypt and led you through the wilderness forty years, to possess the land of the Amorite!" God tells Israel that He was one who destroyed the Amorite. [In other words] because of the metaphysical reality,

you Israel, are in existence. The Amorite was destroyed so you might have nazirites and prophets, as the verse says, to establish a nation that has abstinence, prishuss. The Amorite was destroyed in order that a nation following metaphysical reality would exist.

Is that not so, O people of Israel?

That is, you Israel, can't deny that your very existence depends on the metaphysical [which overpowered the Amorites' world of the physical].

But you made the nazirites drink wine

You removed abstinence from Israel.

and ordered the prophets not to prophesy.

"Don't prophesy" is the last step in Israel's corruption. It is the final separation from metaphysical reality. The prophet is the voice of reality. It is one matter if a person gets lost [on his path towards perfection]. But if he silences the prophet, it means that he cannot tolerate the voice of reality. He completely obliterates metaphysical reality.

God then says that He will deal with the Jews measure for measure. The description of the light footed, the powerful man and others refers to people who depend on physical reality. In that world, they should escape [based on the military prowess]. But God says that He will demonstrate measure for measure that it is not the physical world of sense perception [which the Amorites valued] that ensures success. God says that He will not allow Israel to find success naturally, to teach that the true reality is metaphysical reality. This is because of the special relationship God has with Israel, as the prophet says:

Can two [people] walk together without having met?

To suggest this, denies the world of causality. [This verse is a metaphor for God's relationship with the Jews.]

A lion has roared, who won't fear?

A lion's roar instills the greatest fear of all animals. It is a deafening roar. This refers to the senses.

My Lord God has spoken, who won't prophesy?

This refers to the ultimate source of reality. How is it possible to deny that?

In these few verses, Amos spells out Judaism's philosophy: the denial of the false view that the practical world of sense perception and pleasure is the ultimate causality. In Judaism, God and providence are the true "ultimate" causality. The prophet expresses man's ability to reject physical reality as the ultimate reality.

Amos discusses greed, where one is capable of taking something for himself and corrupting justice. Such a person's reality is limited only to the physical world. And what stops a person from corruption? (And we are not discussing where one fears getting caught. Amos refers to judges who were above the law.) Recognition of a metaphysical reality is what stops corruption. In Judaism, it is not merely a concept of being honest [as a mere virtue] but it is a whole philosophy. Honesty refers to the recognition of a metaphysical reality. Other people might be honest due to feeling better about themselves, to alleviate their consciences. But true honesty is brought about in only one way: the recognition of the metaphysical reality:

So that we abandon the oppression of our hands (Neilah Prayer)

This refers to the physical desire to take for the self.

Now, how does this haftarah of Amos relate to Vayeshev? Gemara Kesuvos (105a) discusses justice. It says that there is a prohibition upon judges: "Do not take a bribe" (Exod. 23:8, Deut. 16:19). However, based on "Do not pervert justice" (Exod. 23:6, Deut. 16:19 and 24:17), we wonder why Torah adds a second prohibition of taking a bribe, as this should be subsumed under the general rule of not perverting justice; no additional verse should be needed. The gemara says "Do not pervert justice" suffices to prohibit corrupting justice by acquitting the guilty and sentencing the innocent. However, this verse does not prohibit accepting bribes to acquit the in-

nocent and sentence the guilty. For this prohibition we require the second verse of “Do not accept a bribe,” even to find the innocent innocent, and the guilty guilty. Taking a bribe—even to judge properly—still corrupts a judge to favor one of the litigants, as any bribe must incline a judge towards the briber. But the halacha goes even further: even if one takes the same bribe from both litigants, the prohibition is still in place, even though in this manner both litigants are treated equally. But what type of bribe is this?

In Judaism, justice is more than just being truthful. It is the conquest of the metaphysical over the physical. It is where ideas prevail over man’s instincts. The gemara says, “One who judges a case properly is a partner with God in creation.” This is because the creation of the universe is a metaphysical phenomenon [creation was initiated/performed prior to any physicality]. Behind creation itself is a metaphysical phenomenon [God’s will and universal intangible metaphysical laws].

Thus, taking money from litigants means the judge’s energies are removed from the metaphysical world. The judgment is no longer a metaphysical phenomenon but has become a selfish act.

What is the connection between Amos and Joseph the tzaddik, Vayeshev? Pirkei d’Rebbe Eliezer answers. Joseph’s brothers judged him as deserving death. The question then arose whether to kill Joseph or put him in a pit. Ruben desired to place him in a pit in order to return later and save him: it was 9 versus one. Then the other brothers decided to sell Joseph. Pirkei d’Rebbe Eliezer says that their justice was incomplete because they took money. This reduced their judgment from being a purely metaphysical phenomenon. A certain amount of the brothers’ energies were involved in material gain, namely, the 20 pieces of silver they received from the Ishmaelites. This is the connection between the Torah and the haftarah.

Rav Aharon Soloveitchik said that even a tzaddik becomes jealous. A person cannot help himself, he is a human being and it is expected. The problem is when one cannot [then] raise himself to the metaphysical level. This is when a person becomes a sinner.

It is amazing, but the condemnation of the brothers is not because they had those weaknesses; everyone has them. The brothers were jealous of Joseph because

Jacob gave Joseph all his Torah that he learned from Shame and Ever. Their jealousy was not simplistic, like a father favoring one sibling. The brothers were grown men. The brothers envied the knowledge which Joseph received from Jacob their father. It was a jealousy based on love of knowledge. That was excusable. But what was inexcusable was their failure to rise to the total metaphysical level when it came to judging Joseph. Their verdict was corrupt.

*Fear no man, for judgment is God’s
(Deut. 1:17)*

Judgment is a metaphysical phenomenon. Fear of a human being is an [emotional] physical phenomenon. There is no room in justice for anything else but the recognition of the absolute metaphysical [reality].

Before the giving of Torah, the halachic system was not in existence: justice and human perfection were philosophical systems. After Torah was given, the system assumed a fixed form forever. It caters to philosophical perfection, but it is more than just that. Before the giving of Torah, one could perfect himself in his own way, in line with his own nature. After Torah was given, that liberty no longer existed. A system now exists that must be upheld and not breached.

Similarly regarding judging, before Torah, it was a philosophical justice system, a different type of system. The brothers held that Joseph’s existence was worthless, so he had to be removed. They considered what they would tell the father. In our current day justice system, *bais din* would not make that consideration.

*And each man said to his brother,
“Truthfully, we are sinners to our
brother, when we saw the bitterness of
his soul when he pleaded with us and
we did not listen. Therefore this tragedy
has come upon us.” (Gen. 42:21)*

When the brothers saw that God’s providence was going against them, as strange and terrible occurrences arose, they said these words. They felt that they were cold-hearted and that they closed their ears to their brother’s cry: “We had no pity upon him.”

The halacha is that in every judgment

there must be mercy, “*And the congregation shall save him*” (Num. 35:25). The brothers reflected upon their lack of pity with their words, “*when he pleaded with us and we did not listen.*” The gemara says that one must have children in order to sit on a *bais din*. This is because how one is merciful to others is via a psychological mechanism. Basically, mercy is derived from the self. And once a person has a child, this is the first time there is a bridge: now there is someone other than himself upon whom he has mercy and identification. That is the first bridge between a person and others. A judge requires this identification with others through this bridge in order that he can have mercy and pity on litigants.

Judaism says that in every trial mercy must exist. The emotions of the court must be stacked in favor of the defendant. One might say that absolute justice demands neutrality of feelings and not an inclination towards the defendant. Not true. There must be mercy, although the verdict must be based purely on wisdom. Why must the court incline towards mercy? It is because God is merciful. If God would judge with absolute justice, no one would exist. The Rav asked, “Why does Torah say [that the guilty party pays] “*eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot*” (Exod. 21:24)? Chazal say that this refers to the monetary value of those limbs, and not that we punish a person who severed someone’s hand, by severing his hand in return. So why couldn’t Torah write “Money is paid for severing another’s hand, foot, etc.?” This is because one would say that money is absolute justice. But to suggest that money can replace a person’s eye is untrue. The only real justice is an “eye for an eye.” But man cannot tolerate absolute justice [and therefore money is paid instead].

Truthfully, we are sinners to our brother...

The brothers did not say that they made a false judgment; they were apparently confident in their verdict regarding Joseph. But they admitted that the method with which they judged Joseph was without pity. A small person would be more concerned with the outcome. But the brothers were on a high level. It was the way that they judged that they regretted. Their judgment wasn’t on the highest level.

*God stands in the assembly of God
(Psalms 82:1)*

This means that judgment is a metaphysical phenomenon.

...for judgment is God's (Deut. 1:17)

Man is to imitate God in his justice as far as possible.

A common thread unifies the haftorah and Vayeshev: judgment that does not operate on the metaphysical level. Had the brothers operated on the metaphysical level, they would have copied God's trait of pity. They also would have taken no interest in the 20 pieces of silver.

Joseph underwent 2 judgments: one by the brothers and the second was the metaphysical judgment by God. The verses point to this as they say:

*Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am."
(Gen. 37:13)*

"Here I am" refers to a certain resistance. The style of these verses indicates the metaphysical judgment. Similarly, Torah says,

*God told Abraham, "Please take your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac."
(Gen. 22:2)*

Until God said "Isaac," Abraham could not think of sacrificing him. Therefore, it had to be spelled out precisely. On this verse, Rashi says as follows:

Abraham said to God, "I have 2 sons." God answered him, "Thine only son." Abraham said, "This one is the only son of his mother and the other is the only son of his mother." God then said, "The one whom thou lovest." Abraham replied, "I love both of them." Whereupon God said, "Isaac."

This prophecy came to Abraham very slowly until God said, "Isaac." This is because this was very painful. So too, when Joseph said, "Here I am," this indicated resistance. The story of Joseph continues:

So Jacob sent Joseph from the valley of Hebron. When he reached Shechem, a man found Joseph wandering in the fields. (Gen. 37:14,15)

Who is this mysterious person? This is another indication of metaphysical judgment.

*The man asked him, "What are you looking for?" He answered, "I am looking for my brothers."
(Gen. 37:16)*

Chazal comment on every one of these phrases. Rashi says:

"So Jacob sent Joseph from the valley of Hebron": Jacob sent him in consequence of the necessity of bringing about the profound thought of the righteous man (Abraham) who was buried in Hebron (Midrash Tanchuma, Vayera 22) — in order that there might be fulfilled that which was spoken to Abraham when the Covenant was made between the parts.

"And a man found him": This was the angel Gabriel.

These verses are written in a mysterious manner to demonstrate that every step was planned by God's providence. Thus, Joseph the tzaddik underwent 2 verdicts. There was the judgment of his brothers, but it was the judgment of God's providence that was the underlying cause of Joseph's fate. The brothers were only a means. It was the Bris Bain Habisarim (Treaty Between the Parts) that was responsible for Joseph's sale. Torah's mysterious description of each step in Joseph's story intends to highlight God's providence at work.

[God told Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved for 400 years: "And He said to Abram, 'Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed 4 hundred years'" (Gen. 15:13). Joseph's sale and descent to Egypt was the catalyst to bring this about.]

Rav Yosef Ber spoke about 2 aspects of Joseph's dreams. The bowing of the 11 sheaves to Joseph's sheave meant that Joseph will gain financial power over his brothers. The second dream of the 11 stars, the sun and the moon bowing to Joseph meant that Joseph will be superior to his

brothers and his father metaphysically. Rav Yosef Ber said that you can see the brothers' level [of perfection]. Because in the first dream the verse says that the brothers "hated" Joseph (Gen. 37:5). Hatred is a natural reaction for one who wishes to dominate you financially. But in the second dream the verse says that the brothers were "jealous" of Joseph (Gen. 37:11). The brothers valued metaphysical matters over financial matters, indicated by a higher level of jealousy, not merely hatred. This is because the brothers' emotions were in-line with wisdom.

I once mentioned the reason why Joseph had the right to treat his brothers cruelly. Penina tormented Chana so she should pray for a child, and Penina suffered a tragically [as she was wrong to be cruel to Chana]. How then could Joseph do the same, subjugating his brothers to torment when the brothers descended to Egypt to purchase grain? True, Joseph intended to perfect his brothers, but he should have suffered like Penina for being cruel. In fact, one is obligated to cater to a person's emotions and not conflict with them. How then could Joseph torment his brothers and his father, causing them tremendous aggravation?

*And Joseph recalled the dreams that he had dreamed about them, and Joseph said to his brothers, "You are spies, you have come to see the land in its nakedness."
(Gen. 42:9)*

This licensed Joseph's actions. Joseph understood his dreams as [divinely] authorizing his use of his financial superiority [viceroy of Egypt] to perfect his family metaphysically. The dreams were related. Without this license, one has no right to torment another to repent.

The Rav mentioned that the first dream was strange. The brothers were shepherds. Why then did the dream depict them as farmers? He said what Joseph the tzaddik was saying with that dream was that there will come a time when we will leave this current lifestyle of shepherds. The brothers didn't agree. The Rav said that even though in psak halacha we follow the greatest mind, but regarding forecasting the fate of the Jewish nation, there is no psak, ruling. That is why Joseph the tzaddik was entitled to his opinion, even conflicting with Jacob and his brothers.

There we were binding sheaves in the field

This was more than a prophecy. Because in the prophecy Joseph was telling them a message that God's will is that we will not stay here always, and Joseph was correct. That new life will be centered around grain. Similarly, before World War II when the gedolim said that the future of the Jewish nation is in Europe, that is not given over to psak or to the greatest mind. It is not that gedolim made a mistake. Rather, that area is not given over to man [to determine]. ■

SOCIETY & SIN

Joseph & His Master's Wife

Rabbi Israel Chait
Transcribed by a student

A human being can only truly be happy if his energies are directed towards God's wisdom. This is the only state in which one finds happiness. In all other states, one is frustrated. By definition, human desires always lead towards frustration. [King David's sentiment about his pleasure derived from God's wisdom was] *"For I am sick with love"* (Song of Songs 2:5). Man possesses a capacity for love, as well as a tremendous amount of psychological energy which can never be satisfied in the pursuit of physical desires. In satisfying the physical desires, one is fulfilled only temporarily. The energy then reestablishes itself and will always be expressed in frustration. As such, whenever one is tempted to commit a sin, what is the temptation? The temptation is that one thinks that the frustration he currently experiences will be removed through the sin. The person seeks relief. His fantasy tells him that he can satisfy

himself through a means other than through love of God and Torah wisdom. [But] this is false. [However] this method is successful because it is partially true: there is momentary relief. Sin is a momentary phenomenon and after one sins, one finds oneself in a situation more tragic than before sinning. That was the case with Naval (I Samuel 25:37). While he was drunk, all was fine. But the moment he faced the next day and his energies regrouped, he found himself in a greater state of frustration than before. Anytime one sins, he is convinced that sinning is a proper act. He is lured by the fantasy that he can satisfy his frustrations in ways other than through love of God and Torah's wisdom. Every person is a philosopher. In the back of every person's mind is a philosophical voice telling him, "This is what you need."

Torah says, "Joseph was in Egypt." Rashi comments:

Do we not know that he was in Egypt? But its purpose is to inform you of Joseph's righteousness: this is the same Joseph who tended his father's sheep; this is the same Joseph who was in Egypt and became king there, and yet he remained steadfast in his righteousness, and the change from a humble position to exalted rank in Egypt caused no deterioration in his character. (Exod. 1:5)

Rashi refers to Joseph's righteousness by not sleeping with Potiphara's wife [she had made several sexual advances towards Joseph, but Joseph resisted].

One such day, he [Joseph] came into the house to do his work. (Gen. 29:11)

Rashi comments:

Rab and Samuel differ as to what this means. One holds that it means, to do his actual house work; the other says that it means to associate with her, but a vision of his father's face appeared to him and he resisted temptation and did not sin as is stated in Treatise Sotah 36b.

The second position means that Joseph truly wished to sin, but he heard the voice of his father and his head: *"Do you desire that your brothers' names will be inscribed on the Ephod [the high priest's garment] and*

your name will not?" This means that the voice one hears in the back of his mind is always the voice of society. One is very influenced by his society:

Anyone who resides in Eretz Yisrael is considered as one who has a God, and anyone who resides outside of Eretz Yisrael is considered as one who does not have a God. As it is stated: "To give to you the land of Canaan, to be your God" (Lev. 25:38).

A person who lives among gentiles can't help but absorb their norms. These notions learned from youth do not leave in adulthood. These values always remain with a person. This society's philosophy is always playing in the back of one's mind. A philosophy that is sanctioned by the masses is always assumed to be correct. Very few people can buck the voice of society. This voice affects a person in subtle ways which he does not detect.

Torah teaches that the Joseph in Egypt was the same Joseph who shepherded his father's flock: the Joseph who remained firm in his righteousness. Joseph never lost the philosophical voice of his father. *"One such day, he came into the house to do his work"*—his instinctual drive [yetzter hara] had the most powerful attraction possible, and in the most powerful area possible in human nature. But before committing the sin, the true philosophical voice of his father presented itself: *"Do you want your name removed from the ephod?"*

Aaron shall carry the names of the sons of Israel on the breastplate of justice over his heart when he enters the sanctuary for remembrance before the Lord at all times. (Exod. 28:29)

These names represent man's true perfections. The true ideal of what is perfection played before Joseph's eyes. And once he saw that, he was not able to succumb to sin. Despite all those years alone in Egypt, Joseph never gave in to the voice of society.

As long as one learns, but does so only to achieve a certain level of perfection in learning [achievement oriented learning], he is not learning for the sake of knowledge [lishma], but he is learning for the same reason that society has taught him to

engage in any pursuit: to achieve excellence. Society pushes one to attain a title, and not to learn for its own enjoyment. One is frustrated in learning due to a false value adopted from society that learning must be achievement oriented. Our society reflects no perfection at all, as its values are not based on thought. There should be no frustration at all in learning; it should be a total pleasure. Even when realizing one did not know something, that is a gain. The person gained insight into the fact that he thought he knew something, and he now realized that he truly did not know it. That should be a moment of joy as he removed a false notion from his mind. What can be more joyful or beneficial? He is now closer to the truth. If one did not know a svara [definition] in Tosfos and then he discovers it, he should certainly be full of happiness. Learning should have a no frustration. The only frustration is, as we said, when one does not learn purely for the enjoyment of knowledge [lishma]. The truth is, the more one learns, the more he realizes that he doesn't know, and he reaches a point where he abandons learning to reach a goal, and that is precisely when he becomes happy. This is because now [when] he learns, he views it as the only worthwhile activity. As strange as it sounds, according to Judaism, happiness is attained when one reaches the level that this society views as the most frightening thing. Being a total failure is the worst thing that can happen to a person. But that is the best thing in learning [as the person abandons goal orientation and learns for learning itself]. The reason we cannot fathom this is due to being raised in this society. We do not have the voice of Jacob playing in the back of our minds.

One of the reasons that historians can't understand Judaism or Tehillim and utter nonsense about Holy Scripture [kisvei kodesh] is because they come from a society where good and evil are determined by conscience, which is not the case regarding Judaism. In Judaism, the good is the eternal; the evil is the temporal. It is a different definition of good and evil. In society, good and evil are determined by conscience. Killing is evil unless you work for the mafia, and then it is honorable with no guilt associated to it [thus, conscience is not absolute and can't determine what is truly good or evil]. ■

GOD'S "DECREES"

Joseph & the Wine Steward

Rabbi Israel Chait

Transcribed by a student

At the end of parshas Vayeshev, Joseph interprets the dreams of the wine steward and the chief baker. On the third day afterwards, all occurred precisely as Joseph had predicted: the baker was hung and the wine steward was returned to his post. But then the Torah says, "*And the wine steward did not remember Joseph, and he forgot him*" (Gen. 40:23). The simple understanding is that the wine steward forgot Joseph and there's nothing more to the story. But on this verse, Rashi says that there is something more: Joseph committed a serious sin:

Since Joseph depended on the wine steward to remember him, he had to remain in prison an additional 2 years, as it says, "Happy is the man who trusts in God and does not turn to the arrogant" (Psalms 40:5) and does not trust in Egypt who are called arrogant.

The difficulty with this Rashi is that we do not see Joseph committing a sin. But if we understand this [Rashi], we will understand what is meant by "God's decrees" on people. Everyone learns that due to Joseph's faith in the wine steward, God decreed for Joseph 2 more years in prison in response. I say that this is a very simplistic evaluation. [But] it is not so simple that Joseph committed a sin, and now there was a decree from God. There's much more to this account.

A person is supposed to use all diplomatic means at his disposal to benefit himself. Torah endorses this, as we see Jacob approached Esav bowing 7 times and sending him gifts. Jacob acted properly; Joseph acted the same way. What then was Joseph's sin?

[Joseph said to the wine steward] In 3 days, Pharaoh will pardon you and restore you to your post; you will place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, as was your custom formerly when you were his cup-bearer. But think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place. For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should have put me in the dungeon (Gen. 40:13-15).

What was wrong with Joseph asking the wine steward to assist him? The baalei mussar cite a Chazal that you could answer this in a manner of mussar—moral discipline. Jacob was punished through Dinah's rape because he placed her in a box when Esav approached. Jacob did not want Esav to see her because he would have taken her as wife. Chazal say that Jacob was not punished for putting her into a box, but because he shut it too tightly. That came from hatred. But I'm not satisfied with that kind of answer. I like to see the answer from the event itself [from the verses]. To suggest such an answer there must be some expression in this story [which is absent here in connection with Dinah].

My opinion of Joseph's mistake is that had Joseph properly thought through matters, he should not have said anything to the wine steward. There was no reason for Joseph to speak, for he performed an unbelievable feat that astounded the Egyptians—the wine steward in particular—and the wine steward would have remembered Joseph. If the wine steward would not have been impressed with Joseph's accomplishments, he would not have been impressed with his entreaties. Pleading won't help. The language of Yonasan ben Uzziel—but more so, Targum Yerushalmi where he expands on Yonasan ben Uzziel—is how I thought of an approach:

(Yerushalmi): Joseph abandoned the kindness from above (God) in place of the lower kindness (man). And he abandoned the kindness that accompanied him from his father's house and he placed his faith in the wine steward, made of flesh and blood that tastes death, "His breath leaves and he returns to the ground" (Psalms 146:4). And Joseph did not remember the verse, "Cursed is he who trusts in man, who makes mere flesh his strength" (Jer. 17:5)

Of course, this verse did not yet exist in Joseph's time. But it means that all the prophets possessed all true ideas. What Joseph said was of poor judgment:

But think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place. For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should have put me in the dungeon.

One should learn from Joseph's mistake. Here, one gains very practical advice. If one tells another person, "I was mistreated by such and such person and another and I am not at fault, and now again I am in trouble," meaning that one claims that he has been victimized, this can result in one of 2 responses. One is that since people have psychological kindness, one can have pity and will want to help. But there's a second effect: one listening to claims of victimization might think that himself, "It's strange that all this happened to this person; there must be a reason. A great chocham this person certainly is not! And perhaps he is not a truly nice person, as he's complaining that he is a victim."

That was Joseph's mistake. How do we know that Joseph had this second negative effect on the wine steward? Torah records the wine steward's words 2 years later, standing before Pharaoh:

And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but none could interpret them for Pharaoh. The chief wine steward then spoke up and said to Pharaoh, "I must make mention today of my offenses. Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and placed me in custody in the house of the chief steward, together with the chief baker. We had dreams the same night, he and I, each of us a dream with a meaning of its own. A Hebrew youth was there with us, a servant of the chief steward; and when we told him our dreams, he interpreted them for us, telling each of the meaning of his dream. And as he interpreted for us, so it came to pass: I was restored to my post, and the other was hung." (Gen. 41:8-13)

He referred to Joseph as young and as a slave. Chazal commented that with these terms, the wine steward degraded Joseph. Although the wine steward wished to be

the hero and save the day by producing an interpreter for Pharaoh, he did not want Pharaoh to be impressed with Joseph: "He can interpret dreams, but otherwise he is a fool, a slave who has no other qualities." He was selfish and stripped Joseph of any good qualities other than his interpretive skills. Why? Because Joseph's story of victimization created a poor image in the eyes of the wine steward.

Torah's lesson is that faith is only to be placed in God; we do not confide in man. One cannot turn to man for that kind of support. This is what the Yerushalmi means that Joseph forgot the verse, "*Cursed is the man who places his faith in flesh.*" At that moment standing before the wine steward, Joseph the tzaddik experienced a moment of weakness and sought the support of a human being to comfort him and take up his plight. He misjudged and therefore remained in the pit for an additional 2 years. Joseph the tzaddik felt that people will have mercy on him when they realize that he was a victim. Doing so denies God. Only one Being can know your plight: God and no one else. We appeal to God and not flesh and blood for mercy. [When Jacob sent Esav gifts and bowed to him, he did not turn to man alone for mercy, as he also prayed to God. It appears that Joseph placed all his trust in man alone.]

Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was rushed from the dungeon. He had his hair cut and changed his clothes, and he appeared before Pharaoh. (Gen. 41:14)

Once they were bringing Joseph before Pharaoh, he abandoned the role as victim. Pharaoh's servants wanted to whisk Joseph from the pit and bring him before Pharaoh to quickly help resolve Pharaoh's disturbance from the dreams. But Joseph said, "Wait, I will present myself as a confident and collected individual." He shaved and changed his clothes; he no longer desired anyone's pity. And in truth, that mode of operation [dignity] was the only thing that secured Joseph's total success. He learned from the last incident that although it is very tempting to turn to one of flesh and blood to seek justice, that is not the correct way. Had Joseph not told the wine steward all the stories of victimization, the wine steward, being so impressed, would have made a bee line to Pharaoh immedi-

ately and Joseph would have been freed right away. That is what Chazal mean that he remained in prison 2 more years. [Because Joseph played the victim, he remained in prison. But had he not played the victim, this Chazal means he would have been freed from prison immediately due to the wine steward's impression of Joseph]. The diplomatic move Joseph should have made, was not to make any move at all. He should have remained silent. [The astounding impression he would have left on the wine steward would have eventuated in his release.]

Another important point is that when one is asked for a favor, that person loses respect as he now feels that the one seeking the favor [Joseph] had ulterior motives. Joseph lost respect because he asked for help. As soon as a talmid chocham derives any benefit from a typical person, the latter loses all respect for him. It is the same phenomenon.

We started by seeking to understand "God's decrees." But this does not mean what people think [that it was God who decreed those 2 additional years of Joseph's imprisonment]. A negative "decree" refers to when a person abandons wisdom. Maimonides says in Hilchos Dayos (5:11):

The way of intelligent people is to first arrange a livelihood, then to buy a house, and then to marry. As it says, "Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it. Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard but has never harvested it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another harvest it. Is there anyone who has paid the bride-price for a wife, but who has not yet married her? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another marry her" (Deut. 20:5-7). But a fool first marries, and if he then finds that means he buys a house and afterwards at the end of his life he seeks a livelihood or lives off charity. And so it is stated in the curses, "If you pay the bride-price for a wife, another man shall enjoy her. If you build a house, you shall not live in it. If you plant a vineyard, you shall not harvest it" (Deut. 28:30). Matters will be reversed to inhibit success. And in a blessing it says, "And King David was wise in all his ways and God was with him" (I Sam. 18:14).

The worst decree in Torah's rebukes is that man abandons the path of wisdom.

There is an issue now (1990) whether the slogan "Never Again"—a response to the Holocaust—conforms to Torah ideals. One could say that if the Holocaust and the future tragedies are divine decrees, saying "Never Again" opposes God's will. However, this is a question only for one harboring a primitive notion of what a decree is. But as Maimonides says, when we look deeper into Torah, an evil decree refers to one who abandons Torah and wisdom resulting in a distorted life leading to catastrophic results. [It is self-inflicted and not God's doings.] An example is from Chanukah when a miracle took place because of the war. What would have transpired had the Jews not waged war? Would you say that they would have retrieved the Temple? If so, they wasted their efforts. But it makes no sense to suggest they would retrieve the Temple without war. Without battle, it would have been a tragedy. Would you say that tragedy was a divine decree too? No. To say that the Holocaust was a divine decree and just write it off as some unavoidable tragedy is nonsense. It is only a decree—a *gizaira*—in the sense that it was due to our abandonment of Torah and wisdom. But to claim it was a decree, yet I see a defect [that may have caused it] and not correct that defect, that is nonsensical. The only heretical notion would be if one said "Never Again" means not to follow the ways of Torah and feel certain that one's own efforts will prevent tragedy. But that is not what Meir Kahane meant. The idea of searching for a flaw [that warranted the Holocaust] and to seek out a rational mistake that was part of the tragedy does not violate Torah. Also, if one would say "Never Again" and feels that he could abandon Torah but he's going to fight to prevent another Holocaust, perhaps you could say such a proactive defense might prevent another Holocaust, but other decrees could take place [for leaving Torah]. Because once one abandons Torah and wisdom, one lives in distortion and it is impossible to abandon Torah and wisdom and not meet with some catastrophe.

There is no heresy in suggesting that through abandoning Torah and wisdom the Jews acted poorly [going like sheep to

the slaughter] and this contributed to the Holocaust. Perhaps they went like sheep because they did not follow wisdom. There is no heresy in saying so.

Again, Joseph's 2 additional years in prison was a decree in the sense that it was a result of his poor actions and not a direct act of God.

The brothers expressed the proper view of calamity:

They said to one another, "Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us" (Gen. 42:21).

[The brothers did not say some decree fell upon them, but they traced their calamity back to their error.]

I personally say it should be emphasized that Israel's catastrophes are due to abandoning Torah and wisdom. When Joseph erred, he placed his trust in the wine steward because he was in a low state and sought comfort from flesh and blood. What was the wine steward's response? "*And he did not remember Joseph and he forgot him.*" "And he did not remember" refers to the removal of the wine steward's emotional impact of Joseph's interpretations. When the wine steward left Joseph's presence, his emotions favoring Joseph weakened. Yet, he felt a sense of obligation to Joseph. To relieve his burden to Joseph, all the wine steward needed was some way to explain away Joseph's significance, and then he could "forget him." He felt Joseph's many troubles were self-inflicted and this allowed him to forget Joseph, thereby relieving his sense of obligation to him.

I stress this to show how Chazal deduced this explanation from the verses because they held that Joseph made a political error. Alone in prison for many years, Joseph sought human emotional support out of weakness. Therefore, Joseph made this error [of pleading with the wine steward instead of remaining silent and allowing the impression he made through his interpretation to weigh on the wine steward]. That is how Chazal knew it was based on a sin. ■

WISDOM VS. MYSTICISM

Joseph & Pharaoh

Rabbi Israel Chait
Transcribed by a student

What was superior about Joseph's interpretations of Pharaoh's dreams [that Pharaoh accepted only his interpretation]? It is because Joseph presented Pharaoh with a plan that could convert catastrophe into great success: "During the years of plenty we can buy a grain at a low price and sell it at a high price during the famine and thrive." Pharaoh said, "*Can one be found like this, a man who has the spirit of God him?*" (Gen. 41:38) Chazal commented, "If you go from one end of the world to the other you won't find a man [Joseph] like this."

Joseph told Pharaoh, "It is not me (*biladai*) but it is all God's wisdom. When I speak, it is not [mystical] powers, but God gave man wisdom." But [when Pharaoh sought an interpretation for his dreams] the magicians took the opposite position: "We have certain powers."

Daas Torah [accepting our rabbis as authoritative on all matters] is similar. It is not that a great rabbi—a *gadol*—has a monopoly on truth. But a *gadol* uses wisdom like Joseph and has a place in making decisions in areas other than Torah. Daas Torah is not a mystical, 100% infallible knowledge like Pharaoh's magicians claimed to possess. Joseph's plan to convert 7 years of famine into wealth was Daas Torah. But today's view of Daas Torah does not suggest that we follow rabbis due to wisdom, but it projects a mystical [infallible] image onto the rabbis. This is similar to Pharaoh's magicians. The Rav said that everything a *gadol* says is not correct; he is not infallible. [However] one whose source of knowledge is wisdom is in the best position to answer. That is [the correct view of] Daas Torah.

Pharaoh was not ignorant of God. Maimonides and Rashi (in *Trei Assar*) say that idolaters believed in one supreme being. The Gold Calf is the best proof that belief in God and in idolatry can coexist. For those Jews did not deny that God existed,

as the verse says, “*These are your gods Israel that took you up from Egypt*” (Exod. 32:4). Man’s desire is to have many gods. Judaism’s contribution was not innovating monotheism, one supreme being. Even the generation of Adam’s grandchild, Enosh, [the generation that initiated star worship] believed in one supreme being. What Judaism established was the manner of relating to this one supreme being [that we are to relate to Him alone with no medium, not that mediums exist]. Maimonides says this in many places. Contrary to popular opinion, idolatry and the belief in one supreme being is not a contradiction. This is a verse in the Torah:

God (divine) of Abraham and the god (mundane) of Nabor (Gen. 31:53)

Lavan was pursuing Jacob because Lavan’s idols were missing. He was certainly an idolater, yet he found no contradiction in placing God in the same sentence with an idolatrous belief. You see from the Torah itself that the concept of monotheism existed among idolaters. Judaism’s contribution is the insistence on relating to God alone and not through any medium, which is primitivism.

This precisely was Joseph’s lesson to Pharaoh. The mystics viewed the 7 years of famine as a curse. But Joseph told Pharaoh that this view that a famine is a curse is a false mystical notion. Joseph said that all we have before us is what is going to happen, as God provided this information to us. Now we must act rationally, and we can convert this famine into the greatest success. This was Joseph the tzaddik’s lesson to Pharaoh: one must relate to God through wisdom alone.

Pharaoh was impressed with Joseph, “*Can one be found like this, a man who has the spirit of God him?*” (Gen. 41:38). But how much did Pharaoh change due to Joseph’s lesson?

And when all the land of Egypt felt the hunger, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do.” (Gen. 41:55)

On this verse, Rashi mentions that Joseph instituted circumcision for the Egyptians:

Pharaoh said, “Did he not warn you of the famine; why did you not prepare?” Egypt replied, “We did prepare but our grain rotted.” Pharaoh replied, “If so, do all that Joseph says to do [circumcise yourselves]. He decreed about the grain and it rotted. What if he decrees upon us and we die?”

It seems from here that Pharaoh was still involved in superstition. He liked Joseph’s idea at the time, but Pharaoh wavered. He also had some resistance to Joseph. Pharaoh desired to use Joseph for his knowledge, and then discard him.

This encounter between Joseph and Pharaoh illustrates the difference between the primitive mind and one guided by wisdom. The essence of Judaism is the pursuit of knowledge of God. Knowledge of God means to know God through wisdom alone. Like Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda, author of *Duties of the Heart* says, “*Know Him only through a path of proof alone.*” ■