

## A Thought on Parashat Mikeitz and Chanukah 'Epic Encounters, Royal Clarity'

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



Some of the most dramatic, poignant and pivotal moments in the Torah involve personal meetings, encounters, reconciliations and confrontations. Among these are the following: Eliezer meeting Rivkah at the well, Yaakov purchasing the Bechorah (the firstborn's birthright status) from Eisav, and then his receiving the brachah from Yitzchak, the reunion of Yaakov and Eisav years later, the discovery by Paroh's daughter of baby Moshe, Moshe's encounter with Hashem at the Burning Bush, Yitro's joining Moshe at the Israelite camp, Shmuel's exchange with Shaul after Shaul spared King Agag of Amalek, Boaz's approach to Rut as she gleaned in his field, and Esther's unannounced audience with Achashveirosh. Furthermore, in addition to the importance of these moments in Judaism's early unfolding, a closer study of their details reveals timeless lessons for our own lives that reside within the Torah's narratives.

Experience teaches us that much in our own lives that is significant has at some point originated in encounters and dealings with other people, whether planned or unexpected. If this is so, it follows that we should wish to understand these moments, their significance, and how they influence and affect our lives. Additionally, if we are to take any measure of control over the way these events may impact us, we will want to appreciate them not just in retrospect but even when they are taking place. Clearly, to be able to correctly intuit or predict the long term effects of particular events requires a rich combination of life experience and wisdom. Nevertheless, there are times when we indeed sense that a little bit of personal history is being made: when we meet others who have the answers to our questions, hold the keys to our locked doors, or know the solutions to our puzzles, we shudder at the sudden, unexpected feeling of release and relief, and are warmed by the glow of new optimism and possibility.

The epic encounters in Parashat Mikeitz between Yosef and his brothers, between Yosef's brothers and their father, and then Yosef and his brothers again, beg to be understood. In light of what we have said above it is interesting to note that Yosef is not only fully aware of the reality and the truth of the situation, but, moreover, he is exercising full control over it. Yosef knows these are his brothers, he understands that ה' has placed him in this remarkable position

of power for good reasons and as part of the Divine plan, and he seems to have clear personal objectives in directing the actors and scenes of this play in the theatre that he all but owns. The brothers, on the other hand, are negotiating the stage in complete darkness. They do not know that they stand before their brother, and each setback in their attempt to gain favour with this all-powerful and enigmatic emperor further dashes their hopes and deepens their confusion.

Let us join the story where Shimon has been withheld and imprisoned by Yosef, the brothers have returned to Yaakov without Shimon, and they have found, fearfully, that their money has been returned to their sacks. They tell their father that the ruler demanded they should return to Egypt with their youngest brother, Binyamin; Yaakov expresses grief for both Yosef and Shimon, and fear for Binyamin. In time, the food they had brought from Mitzrayim runs out, and Yaakov instructs his sons to return there to buy more. Yehudah reminds Yaakov that, "The man repeatedly warned us, saying: You shall not see my face again unless your brother be with you," and continues, "If you will send our brother with us we will gladly go down and buy you food..." (Bereishit 43:3,4)

One would imagine that this would be a moment of further-deepening grief, mental confusion and emotional turmoil for Yaakov. And although that may well have been the case, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch notices delicate nuances in the text that are somewhat enlightening. Following Yehudah's emphatic refusal to return to Egypt unless Binyamin goes with, we see the following response described: "וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמָה הִרְעַתְּם לִי לְהַגִּיד לְאִישׁ הָעוֹד לָכֶם אֲחִי?" - "Yisrael said, 'Why did you deal so ill with me, to tell the man that you had another brother?'" (Bereishit 43:6) Rav Hirsch points out that, since the loss of Yosef, the name 'Yaakov' has always been used. "Yaakov," writes Rav Hirsch, "designates the depressed state of mind in which one feels oneself dependent, sinking, and 'limping behind' circumstances, unable to be master of them, and having to submit to being dragged along by them."

Rav Hirsch goes on to explain that a Jew feels depressed when he does not know what to do, when he is "in doubt as to what he ought to do, but not about what could happen." As long as Yaakov was in doubt as to whether or not Binyamin should go with, he appears as *Yaakov*. However, from the moment he realised the necessity that Binyamin should indeed go, "he pulled himself together and was *Yisrael*." It became clear in his mind that Binyamin's life would be in as much danger if he stayed and starved as if he went with to Egypt. It was beyond Yaakov's capability to help Binyamin any more; for this reason, he does not make any further

complaint about Binyamin going, but only rebukes his sons for having unnecessarily mentioned Binyamin to the man at all.

We suggested above that this moment could have been one of deepened grief, confusion and turmoil for Yaakov; indeed, for an instant, perhaps it was - for Yaakov - but with the enlightening realisation and sense of clarity about what he now needed to do, his spirit lifted and he became Yisrael. It is at this point, explains Rav Hirsch, when a Jew knows it is beyond his human powers to help himself further, where it is beyond man's powers to direct matters, there 'G-d's Direction' begins for him, and he even does what is most difficult with new courage, now with renewed trust in Hashem.

At this moment, with Yaakov achieving clarity and becoming Yisrael, the next stage in the destiny of the Jewish People begins. It is a simple, somewhat tense interaction between father and son, yet their dialogue makes possible a sense of clarity, and an ability to let go, but to let go into the secure clutch of Divine supervision. This is the "...unexpected feeling of release and relief, and ...the glow of new optimism and possibility" to which we referred above.

Turning to the Chanukah story, many answers are suggested in response to the 'famous' question of the Beit Yosef: If there was in any case enough oil to last one day, then why do we celebrate Chanukah for eight days? Surely only seven miraculous days need be marked! There is even a sefer, 'Ner LeMeah' (by Rabbi Yerachmiel Zeltzer) that provides one hundred answers to this question.

Rabbi Chaim HaLevi Soloveitchik of Brisk (*Reb Chaim Brisker*) offers an ingenious solution based on his reasoning that the miracle needed to be one of quality, in the strength of the oil, rather than of quantity. After all, only olive oil, from olives that grew on trees, was kosher (valid) for the mitzvah of lighting the menorah. A miraculous increase in the quantity of oil would not have been any help, since the mitzvah of lighting the lamps in the Temple could not have been fulfilled through lighting oil generated by a miracle! Rather, there must have occurred a miraculous intensification of the one day's worth of natural olive oil, which resulted in only an eighth of it burning up each night, and hence the miracle lasted for all eight nights.

(See 'Hamo'adim BeHalachah,' or 'The Festivals in Halachah,' by Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin)

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's beautiful answer is that the Rabbis included also the first day to teach us that even the natural way of the world is itself miraculous. The very fact that oil burns is itself a miracle. And therefore, the first day was indeed miraculous, since the oil burnt!

(ספר פרדס החנוכה רל"ה)

These two beautiful and ingenious answers are very different from each other, yet they both reveal the clarity and simplicity with which our great Rabbis see things through their Torah lens. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's approach is rooted in the steadfast belief that Hashem's ongoing influence extends to the entirety of His created world, such that all details and events in what we call nature are in fact miraculous manifestations of the Divine will. Reb Chaim Brisker's resolution emerges from a strict and scrupulous application of halachic principles. Each of these approaches is an important aspect of the authentic Torah outlook that facilitates clarity, inspires confidence and gives life definition and direction.

In moments of personal challenge yet historic import, our great forebears often possessed clarity about how to act, and this clarity flowed from their understanding of Hashem's will and the duties it placed upon them. Yaakov, aware of his personal destiny and Divine mission, seized fleeting opportunities to first purchase the birthright from his older brother, Eisav, and later to take the Brachah from him, despite the potential dangers in doing so; after King Shaul spared Agag, falling short of his mission to utterly destroy the nation of Amalek, Shmuel confronted Shaul with great strength and courage despite first weeping all night in torment at the thought of having to do so; and Queen Esther braced herself to face Achashveirosh, uninvited, with the ominous words, "אָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־כָזֶה וְכֹאֲשֶׁר אֶבְדְּתִי אֶבְדְּתִי" – "...I will go to the king contrary to the law, and if I perish, I perish." (Megillat Esther 4:16) Let us remind ourselves of what we learnt above in the thought of Rav Hirsch: "...when a Jew knows it is beyond his human powers to help himself further, where it is beyond man's powers to direct matters, there 'G-d's Direction' begins for him, and he even does what is most difficult with new courage, now with renewed trust in Hashem."

There is a wonderfully instructive pasuk in Parashat Vayeishev: "וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי ה' אִתּוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר" וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי ה' אִתּוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' מִצְלִיִּם בְּיָדוֹ" - "And his master saw that the L-rd was with him, and whatever he (Yosef) did, the L-rd made successful in his hand." (Bereishit 39:3) On the words, "that the L-rd was with him...", Rashi says: "The name of Heaven was frequently in his mouth." Yosef often articulated his belief in Hashem's presence and involvement in his life, and even his Egyptian master, Potiphar, could see that this was the source of Yosef's success.

We learn from Yosef that a deep-rooted belief in Hashem's ongoing השגחה, His guiding involvement in our lives, is a worthy and necessary beginning and foundation; but also that externalising and actuating this belief by speaking of it frequently, verbally linking daily events

with the Divine, is what enables us to achieve real clarity and leads to success in our dealings, בעזר"ה.

Though Yosef and his brothers were in the same room, the place Yosef occupied was bathed in incandescent light while his brothers stood in abject darkness. It is true, of course, on the level of simple reality, that Yosef's superior knowledge of prevailing events and circumstances gave him a strong upper-hand. Yet we may nevertheless discern a message: you may stand at my left and I to your right, yet your world could remain a blackest winter's night while mine is a bright summer's day. Such can be the stark difference our respective personal circumstances can make to how we perceive our own lives and the world around us that we share; or, as we see in the story of Yosef and his family, even identical circumstances can yield vastly different perceptions from disparate vantage points.

There is much darkness in our world, lack of clarity and direction; but the Almighty sometimes sees fit to hand us a candle to help us emerge from the darkness and light our way. In stark contrast to the darkness of a prison cell, Yosef rises to a vantage point of royal clarity. Yet, standing with him in the same space, his brothers shiver in a gloomy fog. Reality eludes them, confusion overwhelms them...

But then, only a few moments later, the brothers' dark rainclouds disperse and their eyes begin to squint in a startling splash of warm sunlight.

Now let us again turn our minds to Chanukah, beginning with a question: Why is the practical focus of Chanukah on the 'small,' quiet miracle of the oil, which was witnessed in private by a few people, instead of on the great, public military victory?

The Maharal explains that Greece represented darkness:

חשיכה זו יון שהיתה מחשכת עיניהם של ישראל בגזירות  
 מפני שמלכות יון היו רוצים לבטל מישראל התורה  
 ולפיכך מלכות זה שגזרה על מצות התורה שהיא האור  
 דכתיב כי נר מצוה ותורה אור (משלי ו' כג)  
 נקראת חשיכה (גבורות ה' פרק ח')

"This darkness is Greece, for it darkened the eyes of Bnei Yisrael with (harsh) decrees, since the Greek Empire wanted to abolish the Torah from Israel; therefore, this kingdom, which decreed against the mitzvot of the Torah, which is light, as it is written: "For a commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light..." (Mishlei 6:23) is called 'darkness.'" (Gevurot Hashem chapter 8)

On Chanukah we therefore celebrate the miracle that happened in the Menorah, whose oil and flames symbolised the triumph of holiness and purity over spiritual darkness, and the clarity for our lives that is available only through the light of Torah.

May the year ahead indeed be illuminated by the light of Torah, our paths floodlit with clarity and purpose, and all darkness banished from the world until, אור חדש על ציון תאיר – Hashem will cause a new light to shine over Zion.



Wishing everyone Shabbat Shalom and Chanukah Sameach,

Jeremy