

Mikeitz

The Secret of Exile Survival

A. Yosef – Man of Faith

The midrash in Parshas Mikeitz relates a perplexing message.

Ashrei hagever asher sam Hashem mivtacho, zeh Yosef. Happy is the person who puts his trust in God – this is Yosef.

V'lo pana el rehavim. And does not rely on proud people. – After interpreting the dream of Paroh's butler, Yosef believed that the butler would return to his former position. Yosef then asked him, “Mention me to Paroh to take me out of this dungeon.” Because Yosef asked a favor from this proud minister, it was decreed in heaven that Yosef stay in prison for another two years.

The message of this midrash is paradoxical. The first part says that Yosef was the epitome of reliance on Hashem. But then the midrash criticizes Yosef for asking the *sar hamashkim* to help him get out of jail. Isn't it acceptable to do something to help yourself? What could be wrong with Yosef asking the minister for a favor to help him get out of prison?

Be'ezer Hashem, we will understand this midrash after we first study some fundamental principles of *chassidus*.

B. Three Exiles

The Jewish people has experienced many exiles. The first one, the exile of Egypt, beginning with Yosef's descent, is a paradigm of the four exiles that followed. The first of the four exiles was Bavel. The Babylonians destroyed the first Beis Hamikdash. Their power was then usurped by Persia, during whose time the story of Purim happened. Then after the Jews built the second Beis Hamikdash came the Greek exile, which was unusual as it was an exile at home in Israel. Shortly before the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash, the Romans rose to power, destroyed the Temple and then the long, seemingly unending exile of Rome began. This fourth exile is considered to be the combination of the challenges of the first three. The exile in Mitzrayim is considered the paradigm of all four, which were told to Avraham in the Bris Bein Habsarim. Each of the first three exiles, Babylonia, Persia, and Greece, presented a unique challenge to the Jewish people.

The Maharal, who predated *chassidus*, teaches that the human soul has three levels. The first level is biological. We have physical bodies and bodily functions. In Maharal's nomenclature this level is called *guf*. It is alternatively called *nefesh* by the kabbalists. The second level is called *ruach*, and the Maharal calls it *nefesh*. This is the emotional, spiritual level of the soul. The third level is called *neshama* or *seichel*, meaning intellect. Man is unique among all living beings in his intellectual level.

To summarize these are three levels of the human soul.

1) Guf	2) Nefesh	3) Sechel	in Maharal language.
1) Nefesh	2) Ruach	3) Neshama	in common kabbalistic usage.

1) Biological 2) Emotional 3) Intellectual in our regular language.

This is also true of nations, especially of the Jewish people. The Jewish people has within it expressions of all three of these levels. We are a physical people, a certain race. We marry among one another. We have a Jewish genetic makeup. Recently, for example, researchers found the *kohanim* gene. Thus, we are a physical entity.

We are also an emotional entity. The Torah and our history has developed in us a certain emotional makeup. We feel certain emotions that are unique to us as Jews. For example, our *chesed* is unusual. The Jewish people have a fleshy, living heart, not a heart of stone like some other nations. We are sensitive to the suffering of any people. Jews in the US give far more charity per capita than any other group in the US. The United Jewish Appeal is one of the largest charities in the US. This is from a people which is less than 2% of the general population. The Democratic Party of America receives approximately 50% of its donations from Jews. This is because some Jewish people think it represents ideals like help for the poor and human rights. Our sense of *chesed* pushes some Jews to support the Democrats. I do not agree with this view, but it is essentially an expression of Jewish concern for *chesed*. In Israel there is an astounding number of free loan societies. A woman who gives birth can get diapers, a crib and a carriage from many free loan societies. Handicapped people can receive wheelchairs and free taxi rides to hospitals.

The kindness of Jews for one another is outstanding. It is greater than any other group of people in the world. This comes from the emotional makeup of Jews. It comes from our suffering in Egypt. The purifying furnace of Egypt ingrained in our flesh and hearts what it means to suffer. We have therefore made an eternal covenant to fight human suffering wherever it is. Sometimes Jews in the forefront of these causes are unfortunately misguided, like the Jews who fought for communism. It was a romantic idea, that people would share wealth equally, but it was a mistaken notion. The party bosses just kept the wealth for themselves. However, Jews are always at the forefront of charity, because we learned this value at our very inception. We have made a vow of *v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho* to love our fellows as we love ourselves.

The third, highest level of the Jewish soul is the intellect. Consider the dedication of *Am Yisrael* to Torah study. For thousands of years we have worked hard to learn Torah. Young and old, well and infirm, we have used our minds to understand God's word, and still do so today. The result has been an explosion of Torah knowledge over the centuries. When Jews move over into other intellectual fields, we also outstandingly succeed. For example, there is a preponderance of Jewish Nobel Prize winners. While less than a quarter of a percent of the world population, we are around 25 percent of Nobel prize winners in science research and economics. Intellect is an important part of who we are. It is the crown of the Jew who uses his intellect day and night in the study of our holy Torah.

Each of these three exiles, Bavel, Paras, and Yavan, attacked the Jews on one of the three specific levels of the Jewish soul. Bavel attacked the Jewish people on our physical level. They cruelly committed mass murder when they conquered Israel. Hundreds of Jewish babies were smashed in one particular spot in Jerusalem. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were cruelly massacred. They wanted to physically destroy the Jews. Then Paras launched an emotional attack on the Jew. Megilas Ester graphically describes the luxury of Persia, of the royal palace, and how Achashveirosh invited the Jews to participate in his inaugural ball. The Jews there wanted to be part of the opulence and to enjoy the society of Persia. This was an emotional challenge. Many Jews succumbed to this attraction and some

even intermarried. Towards the end of the Persian exile, we received permission to go back to Israel. Many Jews, though, who returned to Jerusalem to build the temple were intermarried. It was a huge struggle to restore the Jewish family. Persia had caused a social breakdown among our people. It was not done with physical weaponry. It was, rather, sociological, peaceful warfare. Persia didn't use a forceful weapon. It chose a calculated, seductive approach. The Jewish people had to fight emotionally, sociologically and spiritually to resist the temptation and attraction of the Persian empire.

The exile of Yavan then brought on an intellectual battle. The ancient Greeks emphasized man's intellect. Greek society focused on philosophy and wisdom, as represented by Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, and Herodotus, and the great playwrights of Athens and Greece. Greek culture elevated the scholar and the wise man, scientific achievements and accomplishments. The Greeks built wonderful structures that the world still marvels at, including the Coliseum and Olympus stadium in Athens. They also used their intellect to make sophisticated weaponry. Athens, Sparta and Greece had the lock on the intellect of the ancient world. Aristotle was considered the standard in philosophical and scientific thought for over 1000 years until the end of middle ages. This was Yavan's intellectual challenge to the Jewish people.

Chazal say that when the ancient Greeks and their followers in Syria were dominating the Jews of Eretz Yisrael during *galus Yavan*, they decreed that every Jew would have to write on the horns of his cow, *ain lanu chelek b'Elokai Yisrael*. The Jew had to denounce his special relationship with the Almighty. The message of this decree from the Greeks was, "You Jews are a mere part of general humanity. All people are equal. No one has a special relationship with God." The Greeks claimed that the Jews were wrong when they said they had received a special revelation. There was no revelation, no special message for any one group of people, and this, they said, was racist. The Greeks, though, claimed themselves to be superior to the Jews. "We build bridges, Jews don't. We build weapons that the Jews cannot defend against," they said. This was the challenge of general human wisdom as opposed to the wisdom of the Torah.

C. The Difference Between the Wisdom of Greece and the Wisdom of the Torah

Ancient Greek wisdom emphasized what man *does* know, and produced hubris, *gaava* and a superiority complex. People who were not citizens of Greece were stepped on, victims of Greek colonialism. The Greeks preached democracy only for themselves. Their intellect blinded them to the worth of all human beings. They could not accept that God created every human being with a *tzelem elokim*. The Torah though teaches that *every* person is a child of God Himself, no matter if he has superior intellect or not. The Greeks may have preached democracy and equality and denounced the idea of the chosenness of the *am hanivchar*. They preached democracy but practiced superiority. They practiced the worst forms of imperialism and colonialism, because they were blinded by their minds. They said false words, since they did not practice what they preached. Indeed, they condemned the humble Socrates to death, the one man who truly believed in the equality of all people.

Judaism, however, is different. Torah says chosenness implies a responsibility to serve God and to help mankind. We are servants of the Almighty, and our task is to help the world become a better place. Man's job is to improve the condition of God's creation. We Jews don't build huge buildings, send men to the moon, or climb Mount Everest. We don't have a hero complex as represented by the Olympic games. In Judaism there are no competitive games. Each person has a mission to make the world better for his children and for the world community. We practice charity and mercy. This is the Jewish mission, to improve the world and to help people in this world. We were given the responsibility to try

to make the world better, especially for downtrodden, humble and suffering people. This is what the Jews have done everywhere, in America, England, France and Morocco. We did not build vast towers, bridges and empires. Jewish people prefer to be nameless contributors to the work of Hashem in the world. We are not here to prove our superiority, but to focus on what we don't know. Like Rambam says in Moreh Nevuchim, *sof yediya she'ain yediya*. "The ultimate goal of knowledge is to know that there is more to do and more to know." The intellectual faculty of a Jew is always open to discovery. The Jewish mind always wants to study and to learn more. This is the mission of *La'asos*, to do, as stated in the first chapter of Breishis. God created the world for people to work together together with Him to improve His world. Our intellect is an intellect of service and humility, the antithesis of Greek imperialism and colonialism.

I personally don't subscribe to the peace process in Israel, but some Jewish people – misguided as they are – want to help the suffering even of our enemies. This is based on the Jewish idea that repentance is possible, that even the worst of people can become good. This is a concept of goodness. At the root of this is the intellectual Jewish expression that we don't know everything, not about God and His world, and not about people. The Greeks said the opposite, that their wisdom made them very knowledgeable and superior. We say that our wisdom makes us humble and forgiving.

D. The Roman Exile – All Three Levels Combined

The fourth exile, the exile of Rome, contained the three levels of challenge all together. This longest and most difficult exile attacks us physically. The Roman and European countries have perpetrated countless pogroms, mass murders and persecutions against us. In our generation they attacked us in the Holocaust, a physical attempt to annihilate our nation. We also have had enormous emotional challenges from Western cultures and its associated assimilation. Today, Western society is open to Jewish membership and many Jews have unfortunately opted out of Judaism just for an emotional feeling of belonging. No governmental official today is planning pogroms. The United States indeed appreciates its ethnic and racial subgroups. There is also no financial reason for Jews to abandon their Jewishness. Nonetheless, in the last several years more than 50% of Jews in the US intermarry. The social trend of not being Jewish has become very tempting. It is the second part of *galus* Edom, the emotional challenge to the Jewish soul.

This exile also includes a challenge to the third level of our soul, the intellectual level, in the form of the ideas of atheism and agnosticism. We have to thank Hashem that the agnostic attitude of modern science is now waning. More people know now that science without faith is an empty shell. Science has made great discoveries and explained many things about the physical world, but it has not improved the social situation of Western society. Crime, drugs, suicide, broken families abound. Science cannot solve these problems, but faith can, for Jew and for non-Jew alike. People are tired today of science driven by a godless philosophy. Today people want science to admit this. We are happy with technological advancements, we like them. But we are tired of the antagonistic approach to the spiritual world represented in Western scientific thought. Nonetheless, it is still quite strong. For example, the entire country of China believes in it. In America too, it is still unfortunately a strong force.

I once saw a magazine article entitled, "Is religion a force for good or bad in America?" Religion has to be a force for good, because religion brings a person closer to Hashem. A world without religion will ultimately self destruct. If we don't recognize the God given image He gave us we will self destruct like

the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and the Roman Empire. Sometimes a distorted view of religion comes forward, like the distorted view of Islamic terrorism opposed to an atheistic West. We Jews have to be at the forefront of true religion and faith. We cannot accept agnosticism or atheism, but we also cannot accept a terrorist form of religion. We must present the world with the message of Torah, of service to Hashem in peace and with love for all of His creatures. Thus, our current *galus Edom* challenges us on all three soul levels.

E. The Avos and Their Preparation for Our Exiles

Shem Mishmuel explains that our forefathers laid the foundation for our survival in these various exiles. On the physical level, the challenge of Bavel, we have the strength of Yitzchak. He was taken to the *akeida* slaughter and survived. Against Paras and the modern day temptations to drop out of Judaism and to become a pleasure seeker and an emotional weakling, we have the power of Avraham. Avraham fought against the social trends of his time to introduce belief in Hashem. The intellectual fortitude to stand against Greece and its culture comes from Yaakov, the prime example of a Torah scholar.

In Edom we need someone who can stand simultaneously against all three levels. In this exile the trials take on many different forms. One year there is a pogrom. The next year, non-Jews express a dangerous welcome to us. “Join us,” they say, “we will love you when you abandon your faith.” Then come intellectual challenges, such as an atheistic university professor. All of these various challenges come at us together in our present *galus*. We need a role model who can withstand all of these. This is where the prowess of Yosef comes to bear.

Yosef went to Mitzrayim. He faced physical challenges as a slave in a dungeon. He displayed emotional fortitude, surviving the seductions of Potifar's wife. She wasn't the only one. Once Yosef became a ruler in Egypt, all of the Egyptian girls fawned over him. We see today that even presidents and rulers are subject to these difficult challenges. This was Yosef's emotional trial. On the intellectual level, Yosef combated the sorcery of Egypt and showed that it was not true. Even today we marvel at the scientific and engineering accomplishments of ancient Egypt, the pyramids and the mummies. Yosef had to show that Torah wisdom was greater. Yosef was the one who was able to withstand all of the tests at each level of his soul.

F. Yosef's Secret of Success

So in today's *Galus Edom* we need the model of Yosef to also withstand every type of test. How was Yosef able to be so multifaceted? What was the secret of his success?

Shem Mishmuel explains that Yosef in particular had one central trait, *emunah*. He accepted his lot and had faith in God no matter what happened to him. He was in prison for ten years. When he saw two sad fellow prisoners he asked, “Why are you so sad?” Yosef was always in a good mood in prison. He achieved this by maintaining total faith in God. People liked Yosef because even in prison he was happy. He knew that ultimately everything would work out for the best. After Yosef was reunited with his brothers, Yosef told them, “You thought to do me harm but Hashem made it all work out, so I am able now to take care of you in the famine.” Even in the dungeon of the executioner of Egypt, where his life was in the balance he was able to maintain his love for people and for Hashem. He maintained equanimity and joy. This was the secret of his ability to face and overcome every type of challenge –

his absolute *emunah*, his faith in Hashem.

This is the meaning then of the midrash that we started with. *Ashrei hagever asher sam Hashem mivtacho*. “Happy is the person who relies on Hashem,” and thus knows that everything is for the best. He proclaims, “I am happy that Hashem has given me life. I know that this situation will be good.” Yosef had this unquestioning *bitachon* in Hashem. When he understood that the butler would be restored, Yosef saw in this his ticket to freedom from Hashem, and asked him to help. However, Hashem expected even more from Yosef. Chazal say Hashem holds His close ones to higher standards and Yosef was held to a higher standard. He should have left the minister alone and let him leave without requesting his aid and let Hashem alone take care of his situation.

Had Yosef not said anything, Hashem would have quickly made the butler the medium of Yosef's deliverance. Indeed, an additional two years later, this actually happened. At that time, Paroh demanded an interpretation of his dreams and threatened all of his ministers. The butler became frightened and remembered Yosef. Hashem did take care of Yosef in the end, but Yosef should have left it to Him from the very beginning.

G. Chanuka and Yosef

Chanuka is also a celebration that comes in part due to the *zechus* of Yosef, whose story we read in the *parsha* of the week. The Maccabees had the faith of Yosef that in every situation we should be optimistic and believe that Hashem is with us and will help us. This is why the Maccabees fought impossible battles against Yavan and won.

This is why we put the *menora* in the streets. We put the Chanuka candles outside, even in the darkest place in the street. We thus say that there is light in the darkness. We can find Hashem's light in the darkest situation, just as Yosef found it in his dungeon thousands of years ago. We put the *menora* out into the street as a message to everyone, for Jews and non-Jews alike, to have faith.

Let us pray that the message of Yosef, and of Chanuka, will inspire us and our children with the strength to always have faith and trust in Hashem. May we feel the joy of being Jewish, the amazing people who was chosen by Hashem to help Him and to help the world. Let us pray that we have the faith that Yosef and the Maccabees had. May we do what we can to authentically express our Jewishness, physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

Questions:

- 1) What are the three levels of the soul?
- 2) How did the respective exiles of Bavel, Yavan and Paras challenge each level?
- 3) How was Yosef challenged on his three soul levels?
- 4) How does *galus Edom* challenge us?

Exercises:

- 5) Make a chart of the three levels of your soul. In it, list daily challenges you experienced for a week at each soul level.
- 6) Did you successfully handle the week's challenges?
- 7) Where were you strongest? In which areas were you weakest?
- 8) Develop a strategy to strengthen your weakest level.