Yosef

Training to Change the World

By

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*If you train hard, you’ll not only be hard, you’ll be hard to beat.*

- Herschel Walker

The other day, I was walking along the street and I passed one of those exercise studios in which lines of stationary bicycles face a large, plate glass window. I glanced inside to see men and women of all ages and shapes riding madly. To a person, they appeared determined and focused.

I turned away and chuckled to myself, “What *do* they think they’re training for?” And then, as I walked on, I considered how many things we all “train” for – our drivers’ licenses, to our professional goals, to our “ideal” weight. And then it occurred to me, why do we not train for the things that really matter?

It was not a good time for the King of Egypt. His Kingdom was flourishing. His people showed him the respect. His armies were strong. And yet, he was anxious. Panicked. He had been having these dreams and *no one* had been able to interpret them to his satisfaction. And then he learns of a certain young man, a prisoner, who had brilliantly interpreted the dreams of his butler and his baker. A master of dream interpretation.

“Bring him to me!” Pharaoh demanded. And so, “they rushed him from the dungeon, and he shaved and changed his clothes, and he came to Pharaoh” (41:14).

As anxious as Pharaoh was to have his dreams interpreted certainly Joseph was even *more* anxious to escape the horror and misery of that dungeon. And yet, before he accepted his freedom he shaved and changed his clothes. Why?

Rashi suggests it was “kevod ha’malchus” – the honor due to royalty. While that makes sense, such a reason would have been enforced by Pharaoh’s guards, just as courtiers explain to anyone approaching a royal personage how to approach, how to bow and generally how to behave. Yet here, the text makes clear that it was Yosef himself who made the decision to shave and clean up. Certainly, Yosef could have been intuitively aware of kevod ha’malchus and so Rashi’s observation would still hold. However, something does not quite fit.

Remember, two years earlier, Yosef had asked the butler to, “…remember him to Pharaoh…” and now, two years later, set to be freed from the dark and horrible dungeon where he’d been languishing, two years later when his hopes and prayers are *finally* answered, his first reaction is to shave? Not to feel the sun on his face. Not to stretch his legs. But to shave. To change to more “appropriate” clothing.

After his long wait, he behaves as a man who has none of the urgency of one desperate for freedom but rather one who has all the luxury of the free.

Then, he finally stands before Pharaoh. The ruthless tyrant peers down at Yosef and speaks, “…it is said of you that you understand a dream, to interpret it.” (41:15) And Yosef responds not with the voice of one knowing that he is speaking to someone with his fate in his hands, not with the voice of someone desperate for his long-sought freedom. He responds calmly, telling Pharaoh that no, he is wrong. “Not I, God will give an answer [that will bring] peace to Pharaoh.”

Incredible. Yosef, at the very moment when his fate hangs in the balance, rather than eagerly cooperate with the man who holds the keys to his freedom, he remains cool and calm, at peace with himself. He remains pious, *frum*. Not I, he tells Pharaoh. God.

In behaving as he does, Yosef demonstrates himself to be the ultimate *Ba’al Bitachon*, a true man of faith and trust in Almighty God. He feels no urgency to turn the world upside down just because some mere human being seems to hold power over his hopes and dreams. He knows that no human, no matter how great, can ever accomplish what God can.

As a man of true *bitachon* he is fearless, for he knows God is his strength. He knows it is God who will solve his problems. People are simply vehicles for that solution. Therefore, one of the great blessings of the *ba’al bitachon* is deep peace of mind – *menuchas ha’nefesh*. It is the one disconnected from God who feels turmoil and anxiety.

Pharaoh is anxious. Yosef is at peace. Yosef knows that solutions come only from God. He knows that there is no urgency, for all things move forward at the pace God dictates.

Such a level of *bitachon* does not come “naturally”. It takes a great deal of “practice” to reach the level of *bitachon*. It takes dedication and training. The level of *bitachon* required to absolutely trust God is no small matter but when it is achieved it can change the world. Yosef’s *bitachon* was so apparent that even Potiphar recognized that, “…the name of God was constantly on his lips.”

When even a gentile like Potiphar recognizes *bitachon* you can be sure that any of us encountering a genuine *Ba’al Bitachon* will know it. Such a person of faith is able to stand before the most powerful, the most ruthless, the most vulgar person in the world and declare with modesty and firmness, “It is not I. It is God.”

Such faith!

Such a degree of faith does not come easily, even to one such as Yosef. And it does not come all at once. Only two years before he stood before Pharaoh, Yosef himself was practically pleading with the butler, “Remember me to Pharaoh!” as if the butler had any say in the matter. For placing his faith in another man, Yosef was punished with an additional two years of imprisonment.

You and I would certainly beg for mercy before anyone we think could help us. But Yosef Hatzadik? Still, in this example we can see just how much training is demanded to become a *Ba’al Bitachon*.

Two years later, Yosef was ready to stand before Pharaoh. After those two years, he was ready to stand before Pharaoh and to stand for the rest of his life. After those two years, he fully understood that he was but God’s vehicle and emissary vis-a-vis Pharaoh, his brothers, his father as well as the one to initiate the monumental drama of *Galus Mitzrayim*.

What do we learn from Yosef? Certainly, that *bitachon* is a hidden strength that can be found deep within each of is. However, it exists as a wonderful potential. It must be nourished, massaged, communicated with, all the time until it is fully realized. Reaching such levels of *bitachon* never happens overnight. It takes practice and training. It is not unique to Yosef. We are all Yosefs – with sufficient training, that is.

In every generation and in every place, we can see the power of such faith and holiness. Not only in places of relative peace and tranquility but, just as with Yosef in the darkness of his imprisonment, even in the blackness of Auschwitz, in the frozen evil of the Gulag and hidden behind the Iron Curtain.

Those of us not yet *ba’alei bitachon* can gain inspiration from knowing the arc of those who clearly are. Consider Avital Sharansky. Avital did not even know she was Jewish until her older brother turned sixteen, at which time he had to fill in his nationality on his Soviet identity card. His parents begged him to use their connections with the local communist party to write down, “Russian.” He refused. He wrote “Jewish.” Only fourteen at the time and having no idea what it meant, she piped in alongside him, “I am Jewish too!”

From that first conscious seedling, Avital continued to grow in her understanding of what it meant to be a Jew. She felt intuitive power from the brave act of some young people who had tried to hijack a plane to get to Israel, a country she had never heard of. In secret, she learned the Hebrew alphabet and language.

As a college student, and at significant risk, she attended the main synagogue in Moscow. It was there that she learned about the Yom Kippur War and met a young man who would become her husband.

They married just before she left for Israel and he was sent to prison.

For nine years, she championed her Refusnik husband, Natan Sharansky who never let go of his tiny *Sefer Tehilim*. Nine long years. Until finally, her great faith – and his – brought the Soviet Empire to its knees and he was released.

Rabbi Ephraim D. Becker, in his article “On the Road to Bitachon” on Torah.org gives us a clear understanding of what it means to train for *bitachon*. Indeed, he plots out a training schedule that would be the envy of any personal trainer!

He lists eight components required,

1. An awareness of HaShem as all-powerful and in absolute control (Emunah).
2. An awareness of HaShem as only desiring my welfare (Chesed).
3. An awareness of the existence of eternity (Olam HaBah).
4. An awareness that the good is not only in this world but ultimately in the next.
5. An acceptance of the limitations of human understanding of what is best for me.
6. An acceptance of reality as the backdrop against which one is meant to operate.
7. The relationship between human effort and reliance on HaShem.
8. An understanding of the concept of prayer and its role in our relationship with HaShem.

Rabbi Becker understands clearly that becoming strong in each of these components is the work of a lifetime but that the *process* of becoming a *Ba’al Bitachon* is as valuable and meaningful as becoming one.

When, as a fourteen-year-old girl, Avital Sharansky discovered she was Jewish, she did not yet possess the faith to bring the Soviet Union to its knees. No, that level of faith took time and energy, dedication and disciplined training.

That’s something to consider the next time you are on either side of the plate glass window of an exercise studio!

**Many of Rabbi Safran’s essays on all parshiyot ha’Torah can be found in his *Something Old, Something New – Pearls from the Torah* available on Amazon.**