



# The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

## Miketz 5781

### On Being Out of Touch

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered December 17, 1955)

It is no great news that our world is a rather unhappy one. Judging by the quantity of sleeping pills sold, Peace-of-Mind books on the best-seller lists and lectures on how to overcome all sorts of personal problems, most of us are in a pretty bad shape. And the best sellers, the sleeping pills and the lectures do little to help us in our unhappiness.

Most recently one book has appeared which is different from the rest. It is different because the book itself is far more profound than anything the eager salesmen of Quick Happiness offers us, and because the author is one of the outstanding psychoanalysts of our day. Dr. Erich Fromm's latest thought provoking book is entitled "The Sane Society," and addresses itself to the problem at hand-why is ours such an unhappy day.

According to Fromm, this profound unhappiness of contemporary man can be traced to the ALIENATION of the individual from the basic and essential force of life. The alienated person experiences his very self as an alien, an outsider. He is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. The individual has become only a cog in the great machines of production and consumption. We do not know how bread is made, how cloth is woven, how a table is manufactured...we live in a world of things, and our only connection with them is that we know how to manipulate or to consume them. Our lives have become depersonalized, and we have given up every vestige of selfhood in order to achieve the thin and shallow success which everyone is expected to strive for. Our people are educated, well-fed and profess a belief in G-d. But underneath it all is a great spiritual void and religious bewilderment. Modern man is an alien in his world.

This is the analysis Dr. Fromm has to offer. We are unhappy because we are alienated from life, and out of touch with both others and ourselves. It is a brilliant analysis, and

you can convince yourselves of it by reading the book.

Now, what is the solution? Stop deifying the machine, Fromm tells us. Be done with this hollow glorification of power and success. Create the Sane Society "in which man relates to man lovingly, in which he is rooted in bounds of brotherliness and solidarity." No one can disagree with the intention of this solution. But we may take exception to its practicality.

First, it is difficult for individuals, in order to rid themselves of alienation in their own lifetimes, because it takes more time than that to remake all of society. It is perhaps too much to ask of us to enter into a relation of immediate brotherliness with others when the others are not prepared for it. Second, it is very possible that the lack of brotherliness is partially a result of our alienation and aloneness, and not the cause of it. So prescribing brotherliness for the disease of alienation is no more than removing a symptom, not going to the root of the malady.

But third, and most important, is that even if we grant all other objections, the solution will not work for us Jews. It may be bold and unpopular to say so, but the fact is that we Jews, wherever we are, are and always will be regarded and made to feel like aliens. It is not of our own choosing-it is hard, stubborn, irreducible fact that no matter how extensive our political rights, no matter how deep our loyalty to the nations of which we are citizens, no matter even how much we want to be accepted completely and not as aliens, our very differentness makes us just that -aliens. Except by suicide, we cannot rid ourselves of our Jewishness, and that Jewishness always marks us off from all others, it makes us aliens. And let me make myself clear: not only do the half- and three-quarter-anti-semites regard us as being alien. The finest gentile thinkers, people of great moral and intellectual substance in their own right, do so. The renowned Protestant

theologian Paul Tillich recognizes the differentness of the Jew when he asserts that there must always be a Judaism if only to act as a corrective against Christianity's relapsing into paganism. The great economist Thorstein Veblen said of us that the Jew is "an alien of uneasy feet...a wanderer in the intellectual No Man's Land...seeking another place to rest, further along the road somewhere over the horizon." It is the Jew's differentness, his being an alien, that is responsible too for the fact that he has shown himself a leader in all kinds of progressive movements, in politics, in labor, in economics. Whether that alienation has evoked admiration or condemnation of us or by us, the fact remains that we are aliens, and that even if the rest of society should become, in Fromm's words, "sane", we would remain aliens.

Now, if that be so, we are faced with a very unappetizing conclusion. If alienation is the root-cause of modern man's great unhappiness, and if the Jew must forever, in the Diaspora, remain an alien, then it would follow that the Jew must forever be doomed to unhappiness. Must it be so? Must we, in all truthfulness, concede that to be a Jew is to accept the fate of unhappiness and misery?

I do not think it must be so. And allow me to explain by an illustration, drawn from this week's Biblical portion, in comparison with the predicament of most of us American Jews.

The rise of Joseph in ancient Egypt is a Biblical Horatio Alger story. He started out as an immigrant, a slave and a prisoner, unknown and unwanted. Within a short time, by the use of a lot of brain power, he has become a powerful figure in government-second to Pharaoh alone- and a man of great personal wealth with a great reputation as a wizard of finance. He marries into an important family and literally has the world eating out of his hands. Most American Jews have experienced a similar rise in political power, economic wellbeing and material success in this blessed country.

But the picture is not complete until we add the anti-climax, one the Bible tells of Joseph and which we recognize as applying as well to our own solution. For all his success, for all his eminence, for all his fame, no Egyptian would break bread with him: "For the Egyptian would not break bread with him, for they consider it an abomination". The great vice-lord of Egypt, saviour of their empire and favorite of Pharaoh-he was abominable to the most menial Egyptian, because he was, after all, a Jew! -an

outsider, a foreigner, an ALIEN. Is it not so too with the American Jew? -despite all his attainments in this world of commerce or science or the professions, despite all his patriotism and sacrifice for America-he remains a Jew, an alien, whether for good or for bad, whether it results in him being tagged as a man with drive and ambition, or as a subversive and either capitalist or communist, or, ultimately, as the descendant of those reputed to have crucified the Nazarene.

But here is where our comparison ends, and with great abruptness. Joseph is above all a happy man. He doesn't care one whit whether or not he is socially acceptable. He doesn't bother with worrying about not being invited to dine with his Egyptian peers. Loyal to Egypt, yes. But forcing himself upon them-not necessary. He has been successful in his undertaking and he is happy. He has two children, and names the first Menashe in recognition of his gratitude that he has forgotten the grudges against those who made his youth one stretch of uninterrupted misery, and the other Ephraim in thankfulness for his great success. He is an alien, he knows it, and yet he is supremely happy!

What of our American Jew? You know the answer as well as I do. He can be a major industrialist, a millionaire, happily married, in good health and a man of influence. But if, Heaven forbid, he is not invited to the gentile Country Club, if he sees "restricted" sign on a hotel billboard, if he detects the least sting of his own social acceptability in a gentile society, he is ready to commit suicide! All his other real successes are hollow for him, he is resentful, he is anxious, ready for the psychiatrist's couch and, as a result of his ALIENATION, a miserable, forlorn, unhappy man. This alienation has transformed and ruined his life as no failure in business could do. Life's pleasures have no real allure for him beside this great tragedy of social alienation.

So then, while this alienation which we Jews must experience whether we like it or not has caused much unhappiness in the ranks of American Jewry, it is not a situation which must necessarily continue to exist. It is still possible to find happiness, as did Joseph under similar conditions.

Wherein lies the difference between the Josephs and the great majority of our fellow-Jews? It lies in this: that the American Jew is a COMPLETE ALIEN, utterly without roots, whereas Joseph has roots which run deep, and his roots are- in heaven! He is spiritually anchored, religiously fastened, he is not an alien to G-d, and hence his happiness

is supreme, much greater than the kind of happiness society would experience even if it did adopt Erich Fromm's advice. Whereas the Josephs are close to G-d, rooted in Torah, in touch with the Almi-ty, the American Jew, that composite being, is estranged from his Maker, has no roots in a spiritual realm and is out of touch with G-d just as he is out of touch with his fellow humans and hence himself. The brotherliness- to all people, the creativeness, the relatedness which Dr. Fromm preaches as the solution to alienation, is Having this greater, deeper and more permanent companionship and relatedness, the social alienation they experience on earth is not only tolerable, but what is more, becomes creative! Not unhappiness but happiness, not anxiety and neurosis but tranquility and creativity are the lot of those who are not alienated from G-d. The true Jew has never been like a tree, with roots in this material world, but like a hanging vine whose roots are in heaven and who can enjoy earthly atmosphere all the more because of it.

Philo, the great Jewish philosopher of the bustling metropolis Alexandria of 2,000 years ago, wrote that those whom the Torah calls wise are always represented

as sojourners-alien! "Their way is to visit earthly nature as men who travel abroad to see and learn ... To them the heavenly region, where their citizenship lies, is their native land; the earthly region in which they become sojourners is a foreign country" (quoted in "Selections from Philo" ed. Hans Lewy, p. 37). That is the point we are making: when a man is deeply religious, truly pious, when he is in touch with G-d and a citizen of Heaven, then his alienation from petty little societies is not worthy enough to make him unhappy.

As we American begin the fourth century of our history, let us remember that that the sense of alienation does not reflect unfavorably on the hospitality of America or the loyalty of Jews; and that that alienation can destroy our happiness unless we end the estrangement between ourselves and our Father in Heaven, unless we reaffirm our citizenship in Heaven, our relatedness through Torah and our brotherliness in all men because they were created in the Image of G-d. May the supreme happiness be ours as we keep ever in touch with G-d.

Read more at [www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage](http://www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage).

## Who Can Plan for the Future?

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

Accordingly, let Pharaoh find a man of discernment (navon) and wisdom (chacham), and set him over the land of Egypt... And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, "Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of G-d? So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since G-d has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you.'" (Bereishit 41:33; 38-39, JPS translation)

While Pharaoh had requested help interpreting his dreams, Yosef went further and offered pragmatic advice, outlining the kind of leader Pharaoh needed to find to ensure that Egypt would survive the seven years of famine. What were the qualities that Yosef deemed essential, that Pharaoh saw in Yosef himself?

### Know-how

Ramban (Bereishit 41:33) suggests that navon refers to economic and political know-how. The leader needs to be able to calculate how much food is needed for the population, how much has to be collected to meet those needs, and how to sell the excess to other nations at a price. Chacham, on the other hand, refers to the knowledge to

store the produce without it spoiling. Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar (Or HaChaim ad loc.) agrees with this basic outline, though he flips which skills each term captures.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Haameik Davar ad loc.) propounds that *chacham* refers to one who possesses knowledge of facts, and identifies this term with the skill to keep the produce from rotting.

However, *navon*, he contends, refers to analytical abilities. Specifically, he suggests that it refers to the interpersonal skills needed for a politician to persuade people to do what is needed.

### Planning

Several commentaries, however, seemingly channeling earlier rabbinic commentary, add another dimension. "Who is wise? He who sees what it is to come." (Tamid 32a) Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (Beit HaLevi to 41:39) suggests that chacham refers to this ability to plan ahead. Rashbam (ad loc.) understands this ability to be captured by the word navon.

## Changing the Future

Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian (Lev Eliyahu, Miketz) expounds on this idea. He argues that it is not simply that one must see the future. The real challenge is to live in the present with the belief that the future will be different. The affluence offered by the seven years of plenty could have easily enticed people to spend extravagantly, rather than responsibly save (especially, one might add, on the basis of a dream). The leader that Pharaoh demanded would implement policies for the future that were not in consonance with the lived reality of the citizens. This required, as Netziv put it, an incredible amount of social and political wisdom indeed.

Each year that we learn the parshah, different aspects of the reading re sona te. This year, this brief contemplation of the skills needed for leadership jumps out at us. While most of the world has been ravaged by COVID, Taiwan was not because it learned the lessons of SARS and set in place a system for dealing with epidemics/pandemics. Then, when the rest of the world struggled, Taiwan managed to contain the virus, keeping the disruptions to society, not to mention the deaths, at a minimum. Other countries, though they knew a medical emergency like

COVID might hit, did not set those emergency measures in place.

As we have seen, it has been hard to make policies that took into account the long-term picture. Measures to keep the virus at bay, especially during flu season, were hard to formulate months in advance, and even harder to implement. Even those governments that had ideas, needed the skills to have people buy in to the hard decisions that needed to be made. Coming up with plans that would balance the long term need to keep the virus under control while vaccines were developed, while not irreparably destroying the economy for years to come or denying a generation of children with education, has been even harder. And who knows which leaders got it right?

In the end, Pharaoh understood the truth: it is almost impossible to expect a human being to successfully live up to these standards. He chose Yosef because he recognized that G-d was with him. Human leaders try as hard as they can, but in the end, we must realize that we need G-d to ensure we balance these complexities properly.

## The Guilt Train

*Rabbi Moshe Taragin*

**T**he situation has become dire. An elderly father traumatized by the death of his favored son and the imprisonment of another child, refuses to dispatch his youngest child to Egypt. If Binyamin doesn't make an appearance in Egypt, Shimon will remain incarcerated by a merciless Egyptian despot. Almost as menacing, the chances of the family riding out the famine without food reinforcements from Egypt are bleak, at best. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, Reuven, the oldest brother and leader, reassures his father: he personally guarantees the safe return of Binyamin from Egypt. If he fails in this mission, Reuven offers to take the life of his two children.

This is obviously a ridiculous offer! Ya'akov has seen enough suffering and lived through enough bloodshed; the added death of two grandchildren could not possibly offset the potential trauma of losing another child. If anything, watching his grandchildren put to death by his own son would be more disturbing than Binyamin's extinction in

Egypt. What was Reuven thinking when he made this outrageous offer?

Reuven is certainly a man of deep passion and of intense feelings. During the "hectic harvest" season most of his brothers were too busy reaping and collecting grain to sense Leah's distress. Reuven alone, has a soft spot for his forlorn mother and collects a bouquet of roses to comfort her. Likewise, the gemara documents that, after Rachel died, Ya'akov resided primarily with her servant-maid Bilhah instead of affirming Leah. Reuven, indignant that his father would favor a simple handmaiden over his mother Leah, rearranges his father's residence. Twice we witness Reuven's sensitivity to his "neglected" mother's suffering and to the overall injustice of the complicated situation.

Passionate people "feel" their emotions very deeply. Guilt is one of the most potent emotions and Reuven senses his own guilt very deeply. Though guilt is absolutely vital for healthy social experience and of course for

religious conscience, when it is all-consuming it can be emotionally draining and incapacitating. We have already witnessed how “self-handicapping” excessive remorse can become. At the fateful “pit scene” when Yosef was sold, all the brothers were completely deaf to Yosef pleas and only Reuven rescued his younger brother from a grisly death. To stall for time and delay the violence Reuven suggests tossing Yosef into a pit. Mysteriously, Reuven departs the scene and by the time he returns Yosef has long since been sold off to passing caravans. Where did Reuven disappear to during these pivotal moments? Reuven is a “tragic hero”- his heart is in the right place but, sadly, he vanishes at the very moment that he can rewrite history.

In explaining Reuven’s disappearing act, the midrash depicts him as so overcome by his guilt that he withdrew from the “pit scene” to indulge in his grief and his shame. It is not clear whether Reuven was consumed with guilt over the Bilhah scandal or possibly was crippled by his guilt over the current treatment of Yosef. Either way, his guilt is self-destructive: while he ruminates over his failures, he misses an opportunity to fully protect his younger brother and return him safely to his father.

Apparently, this excessive guilt also “prompts” his appalling offer to kill his two children if he fails in his mission. Reuven is searching for any way to purge this toxic guilt even if it carries tragic consequences- such as the death of two children. Such is the nature of unbearable guilt that, in our search for catharsis, we sometimes consider self-crippling consequences- as long as our guilt can be ridded. In his rattled search for catharsis, Reuven undoubtedly noticed that his younger brother Yehuda, a ringleader in the sale of Yosef had undergone his own catharsis. Yehuda lost two of his own children!! Though the Torah casts their death as punishment for their own sins, without question, it was also seen as retribution for Yehuda’s role in the sale of Yosef. Reuven covets the same catharsis that Yehuda achieved and imagines suffering the same fate: losing two of his children. As unspeakable as this tragedy seems, a guilt-ridden Reuven actually considers it and the emotional “cleansing” which this tragedy will produce. Though he obviously doesn’t welcome this tragedy, even the fact that he is willing to offer this option demonstrates how deep his guilt runs and how desperate he is to rid that sadness from his conscience.

Guilt cripples Reuven’s rescue attempts at the “pit” and

it also seduces him into considering or even “inviting” a horrifying tragedy. Additionally, it also hampers his ability to manage a crisis. The brothers quickly realized that their current “quagmire”- being toyed with by this foreign tyrant- was, in reality, Divine punishment for their sins. They acknowledge that their past sins are now being retributed. However, Reuven is far more terrified and far more panicked. First, he blames the brothers by reminding them that he warned them against any harm to Yosef. Crisis management requires cooperation and unity-building; Reuven points fingers squarely at his brothers. He also ‘catastrophizes’ the situation. There are many potential outcomes to this sticky crisis, but Reuven immediately assumes the worst: the blood they spilled will now result in their own deaths. Instead of maintaining calm in the face of crisis, Reuven quickly ratchets up the tension and fear by assuming the worst-case scenario.

Guilt is vital emotion both for authentic religious growth and for healthy social life. Ideally, we avoid religiously errant behavior because of an inherent desire to fulfill G-d’s will. Sometimes, however, guilt protects us against forbidden behavior which we may otherwise have chosen. Additionally, guilt helps us absorb the shock of religious failure, process our culpability and dream of repair. A world without “healthy guilt” easily deteriorates into religious free fall. Socially, guilt can serve as an “inhibitor” against destructive behavior; it may also serve as a springboard for improved behavior. Additionally, when we sense our own guilt, we tend to feel more humble, and less judgmental of others.

However, disproportionate guilt can also become self-destructive. The religious journey is long and fraught with failures- it demands of us the ability to sense guilt but not be drained by it. Instead of hiding from our failures we are meant to repair the damage we caused. Instead of sabotaging our future and inviting catastrophe, we are challenged to continue believing in ourselves and continue viewing our future optimistically. Instead of panicking during crisis and assuming the worst we are meant to maintain level-headedness.

Healthy ability to accept guilt without being crushed by it, is, generally, a sign of a healthy religious inner world.



to show off not only the menorah but the entire dining room or living room area? Is it necessary that the window coverings remain open for hours after the last candle has been extinguished, thereby allowing every passerby, especially non-Jews, to observe what is going on in the home, and the many possessions and luxuries contained therein? That is certainly not a part of the mitzvah and can arouse the jealousy of non-Jews who see how much their Jewish neighbors have.

“Jews must live their lives in a ‘low-key’ way and not forget that even in the hospitable, comfortable atmosphere of the *medinah shel chessed*, America, they are still in *galus*. When non-Jews, especially poor ones, see the opulence in the homes of their Jewish neighbors, it does not lead to good things. Therefore, while taking all necessary precautions to keep the menorah a safe distance

## Who is Osenath the wife of Joseph?

*Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald*

In this week’s parasha, parashat Mikeitz, Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dream and is elevated to serve as *מִשְׁנָה לְמֶלֶךְ*, second in authority only to king Pharaoh. Pharaoh removes his signet ring from his own hand (Genesis 41:42-43) and places it on Joseph’s. He dresses Joseph in clothes of fine linen, places a gold chain around Joseph’s neck, has Joseph ride in Royal Chariot number 2, and appoints Joseph to be the authority over all the land of Egypt.

Pharaoh also gives Joseph a new name, *צָפְנָת פַּעֲנִיחַ* — Zaph’nath Pa’neach, (Genesis 41:45), which according to some means interpreter of secrets, and gives him *אֲסֵנַת* – Osenath, the daughter of Potipherah, the Priest of On, as a wife.

According to tradition, Osenath’s father, Potipherah, is really Potiphar, Joseph’s former master. The fact that Potiphar allowed his daughter to marry Joseph serves as a vindication of Joseph in the eyes of the Egyptians, proving that the accusations made against Joseph by Potiphar’s wife, were not at all true.

But, the Potiphar that we had known until now had been a *שַׂר הַשְּׁבָחִים*, the chief butcher, or chief executioner, or in charge of the kitchens, and this Potipherah is the Priest of On. What happened? The rabbis say that after Joseph was imprisoned, Potiphar suffered devastating economic reversals, and the only way he could earn a living was by

from any window coverings that can catch fire, it is prudent advice that the shades be kept closed as much as possible” (A Vort from Rav Pam, p.72).

*כִּי הִפְרִנִי אֱלֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ עֲנִי*, for G-d has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering. While our nation may be fruitful and successful in our current exile, let us remember that to Yosef ha’Tzadik, no matter how much power he yielded, how many riches he had, and how great was his leadership... he was in *galus*, and *galus*, by definition, is the land of our affliction. Perhaps, when we truly desire the dust of the Land, as did Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov and Yosef, then we will merit to be returned to her, in everlasting peace. *כִּי רָצוּ עַבְדֶּיךָ אֶת אֲבְנֵיהָ וְאֶת עֲפָרָהּ יְהִינֵנוּ*. - For Your servants desired its stones and favored its dust (Tehilim 102:15).

serving as a clergyman. What a comedown!

There is, however, an intriguing alternate version to the tale of Mrs. Potiphar and Osenath, which is found in *Pirkei d’Rav Eliezer*, chapter 38. According to Rashi Genesis 39:1, the reason that Mrs. Potiphar was so persistent in her pursuit to seduce Joseph was because she had seen through her astrological investigations that she (Mrs. Potiphar) would be the progenitor of Joseph’s children. She could not know that it would be through her daughter Osenath, rather than herself.

The rabbis of the Midrash were apparently left terribly unsettled by the story of the rape of Dina by Shechem, which was recounted in parashat Vayishlach. Yes, it is true that Simeon and Levi avenged the rape by massacring all of the men of Shechem. But, what became of Dina?

Rashi, Genesis 46:10, citing the *Genesis Rabbah*, says that Simeon eventually married Dina to spare her dignity. But, another Midrash (*Tractate Sofrim* 21:9) relates that Dina became pregnant after the assault by Shechem, and bore a female child. Although the child’s grandfather, Jacob, tried to protect his granddaughter, the sons would not tolerate the presence of this child in their home. The sons eventually prevailed on Jacob to cast the child out of their house.

Jacob, in despair, made the child an amulet engraved with G-d’s name, to serve as a reminder that she was the

daughter of Dina, the granddaughter of Jacob, and the great-granddaughter of Abraham. He attached the amulet to a chain, which he placed around the child's neck, took her to the wilderness and placed her under a bush. The Hebrew word for bush is סנה —s'neh, hence the name, Osenath. Divine providence eventually brought the child to the house of Potiphar, whose wife, being childless, raised the child as her own. Consequently, scripture refers to the girl as their daughter.

Various Midrashim, including the Yalkut Shimoni, Genesis 146, maintain that Joseph actually encountered Osenath in Potiphar's home. But, not knowing her origins, paid no attention to her. According to the Midrash, after Mrs. Potiphar accused Joseph of attempting to violate her, Osenath came to her adoptive father on her own initiative and convinced him of Joseph's innocence. That is perhaps why the text (Genesis 39:19) says about Potiphar, וַיִּחַר אַפּוֹ, that he was very angry.

At the end of Jacob's life, when he blesses Joseph (Genesis 49:22), Jacob says of Joseph, בְּנוֹת צָעָדָה עָלֵי שׂוֹר . This literally means that the women "climbed the walls" to see Joseph as he passed by. According to Rashi Genesis 49:22, they did so because Joseph was so dashing and handsome. Elaborating on this, the Midrash says that as Joseph would pass in his chariot, the women would throw precious things at him from atop the wall to gain his attention. Since Osenath had nothing else, she threw her amulet. When Joseph opened the amulet, he realized that she was Jacob's granddaughter, and married her.

This series of fascinating and complex Midrashim are an attempt to explain two issues. First, they come to vindicate Dina, who despite the horrendous tragedy that she experienced, manages to bear a child who becomes the wife of Joseph, and the progenitor of two tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Menashe. It may be a bitter consolation, but there is some sense of redemption.

Secondly, it comes to explain how Joseph, the assimilator, who married the daughter of the Priest of On, manages to raise two committed "Jewish" children,

who become two of the 12 tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Menashe. The Midrash, in effect, validates the fact that Joseph must have had much help and support in raising these two special children. In fact, the mother of these two children was none other than the granddaughter of Jacob, who instilled in her children the values of Jacob.

It is no surprise then, that in Genesis 48:20, when old Jacob blesses his grandchildren Ephraim and Menashe, he blesses them saying, בְּדִבְרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאִמּוֹהּ, יִשְׁמְךָ אֱ-לֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאִמּוֹהּ, by you shall Israel bless saying: May G-d make you as Ephraim and Menashe. With these words, Jewish parents, the world over, bless their male children every Friday night.

Why, ask the rabbis, of all the noble people of Israel, are Ephraim and Menashe selected to be the paradigms for the blessing bestowed upon male children?

Some of the commentaries explain that perhaps it is because Ephraim and Menashe were the first Jews to be reared in גלות—Galut, in exile. Since most Jews throughout Jewish history would dwell in exile, Ephraim and Menashe are entirely appropriate role models for the blessing, especially since these two children, Ephraim and Menashe, reared in the fearsome galut of Egypt, remained loyal to Jewish tradition.

Says Jacob: "Bless your children that they may be like Ephraim and Menashe." May all the male Jewish children, and female Jewish children for that matter, who grow up outside of Israel, in face of the blandishments of assimilation and in an alien culture, be like Ephraim and Menashe, and be able to resist the forces of assimilation and emerge proudly as committed Jews, committed to Jewish life and to Jewish peoplehood.

Leave it to the rabbis to bestow such a beautiful blessing on Jewish children at the conclusion of such a bitter story!

Do not think for a moment that it is a coincidence that the theme of assimilation and the battle against assimilation in the story of Joseph, is almost always read on Chanukah! It is there for a profound purpose.

## The Audience is Listening. But for How Long?

*Rabbi Yosie Levine*

A recent study by the Pew Research Center examined almost 50,000 sermons delivered in US Churches this past year. It doesn't seem the researchers were much interested in the content. More important, it seems,

was the length of the sermon. So maybe Christians and Jews have more in common after all. Turns out the average length of a sermon is 37 minutes – and among evangelical Protestants – talks go on even longer.

The story of Yosef and his brothers is one of the most complex and protracted dramas in the Torah. And every now again – betwixt and between the political intrigue – the text pauses to share something that humanizes the characters.

And it's one of these moments that I want to think about with you this morning. I want to argue that – understood correctly – it will dramatically alter the very way we think about Yosef and his family.

Remember the story: A famine has gripped the region. Thanks to Yosef's sage advice, the land of Egypt is prepared. But those in Canaan are starting to go hungry.

So Yaakov dispatches ten of his sons on a mission to buy food in Egypt. Years have passed. Yosef recognizes his brothers when they arrive; but they fail to recognize him.

He asks who they are. They tell their story, but Yosef accuses them of being spies and throws them in prison. And it's this short scene when the brothers are incarcerated to which I want to return.

Their fate unknown, they begin to reflect.

We're being punished, they say, on account of our brother. We saw his anguish, and yet because we paid no heed when he pleaded with us, this distress has come upon us.

My question is very simple: What's the trigger? All these years later, what makes them think of Yosef? In their own minds, there was no doubt that the ills they were suffering at the hands of the Egyptian viceroy were some form of divine retribution. The question is: Accepting this internal logic: How do they purport to know the cause of their suffering?

By this point, the brothers had accumulated a list of crimes: They weren't just guilty of selling Yosef.

- Reuven had played fast and loose with his father's concubine.
- Shimon and Levi had decimated Shchem.
- Yehudah had misjudged and almost executed, his daughter-in-law, Tamar.

If our modern appreciation for psychology has allowed us to say that the brothers are suffering a guilty conscience, it seems there's plenty of guilt to go around! What makes them jump immediately to the sale of Yosef?

It's certainly true that the circumstances are triggering. They threw Yosef into a pit and now they find themselves in a dungeon. And the fact that it was the whole lot of them who were responsible for Yosef's sale and now the whole of them is in trouble is surely a contributing factor. But I think

their words themselves contain the answer.

Pay close attention to what they say. What's the great sin for which they're being punished?

- For hatching a plot to kill their brother?
- For selling Yosef into slavery?
- For covering up their crime by lying to their father?

If all these years later they're still racked with guilt, wouldn't one of these rise to the top of the list?

In the minds of the brothers, their real crime was their failure to hear Yosef when he was pleading for his life from the bottom of that fateful pit. And that's the giveaway.

Yes – they've been thrown in a prison.

Yes – they've been tasked with going back to Canaan to fetch Binyamin.

But everything that's happened to them is a function something much more fundamental: It's all a function of the fact that they've not been heard. They've told their story and it's not been believed. They made their case and their pleas were not heeded.

And so they jump to the natural conclusion: If our words aren't being heard, they reason, it's because at some point in the past we failed to hear the words of someone else.

And of course their minds race to the fateful scene in which Yosef pled with them from the bottom of a pit; and they callously ignored his cries. It's the desire to be heard that animates the entire narrative.

Do you remember the very first thing Yosef says to his brothers in the Torah?

Please listen, he says, to the dream that I have dreamt.

All he wants is for them to hear his words!

And so when the story finally reaches its dénouement, it should come as no surprise that listening is once again the centerpiece of the narrative.

Yehudah has just given his impassioned speech.

Yosef can conceal his identity no longer.

He clears the room as he's about to reveal himself.

And then entirely unexpectedly, the Torah tells us that Yosef breaks down and he cries – and everyone hears!

What otherwise would be an inexplicable line, now makes perfect sense. Do we really need to know who heard Yosef when he cried?

The answer is yes. Because it's when Yosef is finally heard that the story can come to a close.

In the rabbinic imagination, the most heinous interpersonal sin in the Torah is the sale of Yosef.

But it's what precipitated that dreadful event that's the

real message of the story. The real problem is when we fail to listen. And so the rest of the Torah is about listening.

It's axiomatic in Judaism that God cannot be seen; He can only be heard.

And so almost 100 times in his farewell address does Moshe tell the Jewish people to listen.

The first pasuk we teach our children and the last line we say before we leave this world – is about listening.

To listen in Judaism means to hear the word of God.

To listen in Judaism means to hear the cries of those in distress.

And to listen in Judaism means to stand eternally on call: ready to act; ready to do the right thing in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

So it's with great pride that I share with you how our own community listened and responded when such a moment arose just a few days ago.

This past week a member alerted us to a passing in the community. A 96 year old Holocaust survivor had passed away with no family at all. She wasn't herself affiliated, but had made her wishes known to a neighbor that she wanted a traditional Jewish burial.

And so our community swung into action.

- The Jewish Center donated a burial plot in our cemetery.
- Our chevra kaddisha arranged for a tahara.

- Through anonymous donations to our chesed fund, we covered all the fees owed to the funeral home and the cemetery.

- We put word out to be sure that we would have a minyan. And dozens of people answered the call.

One man who had come from Westchester said he was there because the members of his family who perished in the Holocaust were never given the dignity of a Jewish burial. So in some small way, he wanted to do his part to make sure a survivor of the Holocaust wouldn't suffer the same fate.

This is what's possible when we become listeners.

Not just those who hear; but those who hear and respond.

On Chanukah, we celebrate the victory of those who heeded the call of Jewish particularism in a world bent on universalism. I'm not sure things are so different today.

At the end of the day, it's not a question of how long we can listen, but simply a question of how we listen. Are our ears attuned to hear not only the voice of God; but also the voice of man?

We can never take for granted the wonders that Hashem has wrought both in ancient days and in our own. But neither can we gainsay our own capacity to do wondrous things in this world if we are but willing to listen.