

Sweat the Small Stuff

The story of Yosef's transition from pauper to Egyptian prince is definitely one of the most inspirational stories in Tanach. His rise to greatness was not just a story of personal triumph, it was also the stepping stone that set the rest of Jewish history into motion. Among his many accomplishments, Yosef saved the world from famine, brought his family down to Egypt, and caused G-d's promise of the Jewish people becoming slaves in a foreign land to come into fruition. Put simply, Yosef was the single most influential figure in his generation.

Despite Yosef's great accomplishments, he was not immune to the criticism of our Sages. The Gemara in Brachos (55b) states that one of the three things that shortens a person's life is exercising power in a self-aggrandizing manner (*hanoheg otzmo b'rabanus*). Fascinatingly, the example the Sages chose to exemplify this character flaw is none other than Yosef! Presumably, Chazal in this Gemara are referring to their comment found in the Gemara in Sota (13b) that states that Yosef was punished because he remained silent when his brothers referred to their father Yaakov as "your servant." Indeed, the *Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer* elaborates that Yosef's death five years prior to his brothers' death corresponds to the five times Yosef remained silent when he heard his brothers refer to their father as "your servant."

The Gemara's example is quite puzzling. It is true that Yosef remained silent when hearing his brothers refer to their father in a disrespectful way, but that was not done out of arrogance or pride! On the contrary, Yosef was surely doing everything in order to carry out G-d's will! After all, it is logical to assume that Yosef was merely using his place of authority to fulfill his prophetic dreams of his brothers bowing down to him! Why should a minor sin of not protesting his father being referred to as "your servant" - at a time when Yosef did not yet reveal his true identity to his brothers- warrant such a severe punishment of premature death?

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook in his *Ein Ayeh* (Brachos 55b) gives a beautiful answer to our dilemma. Many people see life as the mission to accomplish lofty goals. Whether it be finding a cure to a disease, learning *Shas*, raising a family, or any other goal a person may consider lofty-it is those things that occupy most of one's time and energy. While these goals are definitely important, that does not mean that they should override any of the goals that seem comparatively less important. G-d desires that we succeed in both our lofty and our mundane goals. To illustrate this point, our Sages chose Yosef as the example of one who exercises power in a self-aggrandizing manner. It is true that Yosef's minor lack of respect for his father pales in comparison to his broader loftier goals; but that does not give him a free pass. Despite Yosef's unbelievable accomplishments, he should have still realized that mundane activities and goals are just as much a part of one's service of G-d as the lofty goals.

We find this idea elsewhere in the parsha as well. Upon reuniting with his father after decades of separation, we are told that Yosef "*harnessed his chariot, and ascended to Goshen to meet Yisra'el, his father; he appeared to him, fell upon his neck, and cried on his neck for a long time* (Genesis 46:29)." Rashi cites the inference of Chazal that it was only Yosef who embraced his father Yaakov and cried on his neck, however Yaakov did not return the gesture towards his son

because he was reciting *Krias Shema* at that time. The meforshim are astounded: was this really the best time to recite *Krias Shema*? Couldn't Yaakov have just enjoyed the moment of embracing his beloved son, whom he thought was dead, instead of reciting *Krias Shema*? Could he not have said it prior to his meeting or sometime afterwards?¹

In answering this question, the Netziv (who happens to be one of Rav Kook's rebbeim) cites the Targum Yonason on this verse. The Targum Yonason writes that Yosef came to greet Yosef in his Egyptian clothing and thus, when Yaakov initially saw him he did not recognize that it was Yosef. Thinking it was an Egyptian dignitary or Pharaoh himself, Yaakov bowed down to greet him. The Targum Yonason adds that this was the reason that Yosef's life was cut short. But what did Yosef do wrong? As we asked above, wasn't Yosef merely trying to fulfill his prophetic dreams that his father Yaakov would bow down to him? Perhaps Yosef only wore the royal garb because he thought his father would not bow down to him otherwise and the prophetic dream would have to be fulfilled in a different, more-degrading way!

The Netziv explains with the same idea we cited from Rav Kook. It is true that Yosef had noble plans and was not trying to degrade his father. However, his lack of attention to detail resulted in Yaakov becoming embarrassed. Ultimately, when Yosef witnessed his father bow before him he realized his mistake. However it was too late. Distressed, Yosef fell on his father's neck and cried about the sin he had just committed towards his father. The reason that Yaakov did not cry is not *because* he was reciting *Krias Shema*; he recited *Krias Shema* in order to distract himself from his feelings of anguish.

The first step in constructing a bridge over the Niagara Falls Gorge was made by a 15-year-old American named Homan Walsh. On January 30, 1848, Homan flew a kite he named Union from one side of the gorge to the other. Someone on the opposite side caught the kite and tied a stronger string to the end of the kite string, and Holman pulled the new, thicker string back across the gorge. The process was repeated with an even stronger string, then a cord, then a thin rope, then a thicker rope, and eventually a steel cable, which crossed the expanse and was strong enough to support workers, tools, and materials. Finally, a sturdy bridge, over which trains and trucks could easily pass, was completed. And it all began with a string.

People too often overlook the small strings of life. We tend to forget how big bridges are built. While the lofty goals and accomplishments of life may make the headlines, it is the day-to-day activities of life, the

¹ Many baalei Mussar answer this question by saying that the Torah is teaching us that even in our moments of greatest joy we should channel those feelings to enhance our service of G-d. R. Chaim Brisker disagreed. He explained as follows: Ya'akov Avinu, having been commanded to travel to Egypt, had been – throughout his trip – occupied with God's command and thus exempt from other *mitzvot*. Having now arrived in Egypt, however, he became obligated anew in the *mitzva* of reciting *Shema*, and fulfilled it immediately. I saw this answer cited here: <https://traditiononline.org/torah-of-the-mind-torah-of-the-heart/>.

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small strings that make up the bridge, that truly build a person's character. As we celebrate _____ aufruf this shabbos, we will note that this message is especially true when it comes to marriage. The importance of washing the dishes, taking out the garbage, and waking up in the middle of the night to attend to the baby should not be overlooked. The lofty goal of having a great marriage is not accomplished *despite* marriage's mundane demands. Rather, marriage's mundane demands are what *creates* a great marriage. We give _____ and _____ a *bracha* that they should succeed in both the lofty and mundane goals of their marriage and of their lives.