

D'var Torah – Parashat Miketz, Genesis 41:1 – 44:17

Solomon ibn Gabirol said: “Listen and you will learn.”

Perhaps in a knowing nod to his coat of many colors, the story of Joseph is the longest and most elaborate narrative in the Torah, comprised of the last four parshiot of the Book of Genesis - including this week's, *Parashat Miketz* - which begins with Joseph imprisoned in Egypt. Joseph's story is that of a man blessed by God with a special grace that allows him to surmount any misfortune that may befall him.

It is also a story of unintended consequences. About the story of Joseph, Nechama Leibowitz writes: “On the surface, the actors in the story make their own way in life. In fact, however, it transpires that it is Divine Providence that is carrying out, through mankind, its own predestined plan.”

Listen:

The parashah begins with Joseph falsely imprisoned in Egypt. His father, Jacob, believes him dead for several years now. The Egyptian officials have forgotten him. *Vayehi miketz shenatayim yamim ufaroh cholem v'hineh omed al hayor*. A dream. And then another. But what do they mean? According to the

Sages, double dreams mean that the hand of God is at work. A grand design is being fulfilled.

Listen:

In his agitation, Pharaoh summoned all of the magicians and wise men of Egypt, none of whom could provide interpretations that would satisfy him. The chief cupbearer, who had been imprisoned with Joseph, mentions the Hebrew youth who accurately interpreted his dream and that of the chief baker. Pharaoh summons Joseph to interpret his dreams.

Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that Pharaoh said to Joseph: "I have heard of you that you listen to a dream in such a manner that you solve its meaning from its very contents."

Abraham Hasdai, a 13th century Spanish philosopher, said: "Human beings were endowed with two ears and one tongue that they might listen more than speak." If only we could remember this when engaging with someone who needs our help, or with whom we disagree.

Listen:

Joseph, himself a dreamer, was summoned to interpret seemingly indecipherable dreams. This seems like an easy decision. But a dreamer is not just someone who has dreams. A dreamer is someone who takes action to make those dreams reality. Joseph accurately interprets Pharaoh's dreams, and – unsolicited – presents a plan of action. Pharaoh, believing that God was with Joseph, elevated him to second-in-command over all of Egypt. He also gave Joseph the Egyptian name Zaphenath-paneah: “God speaks; he lives,” or, “the creator/sustainer of life.” The second meaning is especially apt given that Joseph has devised a plan to save Egypt from famine. Joseph's success, and the success of Egypt, depended on listening.

Listen:

Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that, “Of ten people who listen to a speech or a story, often hearing it differently, only one hears it correctly.” The trouble with historical narrative is that it's often presented from only one perspective. It presents a subjective version of reality. After Joseph's promotion, we are told that he is given a wife. Her name, Osnat, is mentioned only twice. She gives Joseph two sons: Manasseh and Ephraim.

In her book, "The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah," Dr. Ellen Frankel narrates the untold story of Asneith - adopted daughter of Potiphar and future wife of Joseph - whose Egyptian name means "she who belongs to (the goddess) Neith."

Rabbinic legend identifies her as the Hebrew child born of Shechem's rape of Dinah. Like Joseph, she was sold to traders by her mother's brothers, who were ashamed of her. Out of pity, Jacob gifted her a gold breastplate inscribed with the story of her birth. Although she grew up in privilege and had numerous marriage prospects, she was determined never to marry until she saw Joseph and sensed his extraordinary qualities. She fell in love with him, and Pharaoh happily tried to arrange a marriage.

However, Joseph rejected her as an idol worshipper, despite knowing her identity as his niece. She locked herself in a tower, where she was visited by an angel. There, she embraced Joseph's God, and was anointed by the angel with honey from the Garden of Eden. She received a new name, Osnat, meaning "tower," in honor of her strength of will. After her conversion and total transformation, she was accepted by Joseph.

But that is not what we are told about her. Was no one there to listen to her story? We know that can't be true, but I digress.

Listen:

Joseph's brothers, with the exception of Benjamin, come to Egypt to acquire food rations during the famine in Canaan that Joseph had predicted. Joseph does not reveal his identity to them. They bow before him, fulfilling one of his youthful dreams.

In his role as vizier, he imprisons Simeon and sends the rest back to Jacob, with rations, money, and instructions to bring back Benjamin. The brothers believe they are being punished for what they did to Joseph. In the words of Reuben, "Now comes the reckoning for his blood." *Vayisov me'aleihem vayeivchi*. "And he turned himself away from them, and wept." Hearing what his brothers were saying, Joseph was overcome with emotion and, presumably, guilt. Though they didn't think he could understand them, he was listening.

After the brothers return to Canaan and try desperately to negotiate with him, Jacob eventually agrees to send Benjamin to save his extended family from starvation. Upon their return to Egypt, Joseph releases Simeon and hosts a dinner for his brothers though, as an Egyptian, Joseph does not dine with them. When

they depart, he frames Benjamin for stealing his goblet, which he has had surreptitiously placed in Benjamin's bag, and enslaves him. He then sends his brothers back to Jacob, who now believes he has lost both Joseph and Benjamin.

Listen:

Shema Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad. The central prayer, creed, statement of faith of the Jewish people. It is not a commandment from God, no. It is a plea from one Jew to another: To recognize the sovereignty of Adonai. To recognize our unique relationship with Adonai. To identify a community and a responsibility.

Ha'azinu hashamayim v'adaberah v'tishma ha'aretz imrei-fi. "Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; let the earth hear the words I utter!" In his final address to the people Israel, Moses implores them to give ear and remember their history (to ensure their successful continuation). Here, the root word means "balance," and the implication is clear: When we actively listen – to one another, to the world around us, to those we may not understand or agree with – we are in a better position to confidently negotiate or accept a shared path forward.

Listen:

One of the lessons of the Joseph story, reinforced by its reading as autumn turns to winter, is that life is cyclical. Good years are followed by bad, adversity by success, rejection by connection, winter by spring then summer, only to return.

In the novel “Watership Down,” Richard Adams writes: “To come to the end of a time of anxiety and fear! To feel the cloud that hung over us lift and disperse – that cloud that dulled the heart and made happiness no more than a memory! This at least is one joy that must have been known by almost every living creature.” Some of us are learning to cope with that time of anxiety and fear. Others of us are coming out from under that cloud.

Listen:

How do we prepare ourselves in good days, days in which holiness is revealed, to set the light in our hearts, to be there in times when holiness seems far off? The answer is that we need to cultivate resources of faith, as the Egyptians did grain under Joseph’s direction, to nourish us spiritually when events turn against us.

Simeon ben Lakish, in the Talmud, writes: “When two students listen patiently to each other in a discussion, God also listens to them. And if they do not, they cause God to depart from them.”

A parting note on the theme of listening: There is a double entendre in this parashah. The Hebrew word “*shever*,” meaning grain, food, or provisions, is repeated often in the story. The first people to retell this story, the descendants of Ephraim, replaced the first letter, *shin*, with the letter *sin*, to make “*sever*,” or hope. To anyone listening, the implication would be that there was hope in Egypt. Whether intentional or not, it served – and continues to serve – a meritorious purpose. And that is to encourage us to look for hope, even in the unlikeliest of places. Sometimes all we need to do is listen.

Shabbat shalom.