

One of the most dismal exercises in which intellectuals engage is the attempt to predict the future. Aside from the fact that the future has a way of developing differently than we command it to act, there is plenty of research that shows that experts in a particular subject are worse at predicting developments in that area than a non-expert. When we do not have a broad enough view of the world, we cannot comprehend how many intertwining forces will affect the future. Somehow, though, this is often an occupational hazard of my profession: the discouraging data about predicting the future never seems to stop us from trying.

I will not, however, be so foolish as to predict how things will look in a month or six or twelve. But it does feel, finally, that we have the beginning of a turning point in our ability to imagine a world after Covid-19. Spiritually, we have survived, and sometimes thrived, during this new world we have temporarily inhabited. But if we are, with Hashem's help, moving toward a world that looks more like the one we remember, the spiritual challenge ahead of us is going to need even more of our attention.

The last section of *Parshas Vayigash* arouses our curiosity. The story of Yaakov, Yosef and the brothers has more or less been resolved, and Yaakov and his family have taken up their residences in the place where they will spend the next two centuries. It is then that the Torah describes how Yosef managed the Egyptian population during the years of famine, how he took advantage of their needs to reconstruct Egyptian society in the way that was most beneficial to Pharaoh. It is fascinating material for a political scientist, perhaps, or a economic theorist, but the Torah is neither a political nor a economic seminar. What about Yosef does the Torah want us to learn from this episode?

What we learn from this part of Yosef's life is the quality Yosef possessed of being able to take upheaval and fashion it into a more glorious future. Yosef is not content merely to survive until the better times come; he makes use of the hard times to turn the country's structure into something better.

As a principle of political leadership, you might say that he was fulfilling a dictum every politician knows - never let a good crisis go to waste. He saw uncertainty and change as a means for fulfilling the agenda he was appointed to enact. But on a deeper level -- the level of the Torah and its lessons for us -- the quality that defines Yosef specifically is the ability to take chaos and fashion it into something that will define a more perfect future, to take a world of disconnect and fashion new connections. Yosef has the vision to see that a crisis is not just an opportunity of which he can take advantage; it is orchestrated by Hashem with the goal of creating something better. Yosef is the one who shows his brothers what the next generation of *klal yisrael* was going to look like, even though it had been marked with so much challenge and friction. And Yosef is the one who shows us that when the world changes, it is so that you can create something more lasting and meaningful from the chaos.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook used to interpret the last paragraph of the first *bracha* of *krias shema* -- the paragraph that begins לא-ל ברוך -- as teaching about the good that can emerge even from upheaval. We describe Hashem creating a new version of the world: *He is the one Who enacts mighty deeds, makes new things, the master of wars.* But

what follows immediately after that? *He Who plants righteousness, causes salvation to grow, creates healing.* The new things, even the wars, are not happenstance or punitive, *chas v'shalom*; they are to bring about something greater and more beautiful. Salvation does not appear; it has to grow -- מצמיח ישועות. But Hashem is always bringing us towards it.

I once heard a homiletic interpretation of a prayer that we say in Avinu Malkeinu: גא אל תשיבנו ריקם מלפניך. The real meaning of this prayer is that we ask Hashem not to turn away our requests completely, without granting anything. Homiletically, though, we might say that are praying for our own spirituality. After all the growth and inspiration we achieve in praying to Hashem -- please, Hashem, do not let us leave without taking some of it with us, do not let us leave spiritually empty as though this intense experience had never taken place. And as an idea for reference, perhaps as a slogan, this sums up much of what gives me anxiety as I try to predict what might take place in a world after Covid.

There has been much to be afraid of during this crisis, and -- Hashem should continue to protect us -- Covid is still a dangerous reality in our community and around the world. But another terrifying possibility is that when Covid is behind us, we might just go back to the way things were before, that we might forget all the lessons we have learned with such sacrifice and hard work.

We have discussed some of the many positive spiritual achievements we have made during this time, and we have had our eyes opened to many realities that need more of our attention. There will yet be time to articulate what we must hold on to and what we must never return to. But there is one principle on which we must agree. With Hashem's help, we will be vaccinated, our restrictions will eventually start to relax, and life will eventually return to more familiar rhythms. But we should not imagine that we are returning to the good old days. The good old days are no longer; we have learned too much to want to go back to them. Instead, we will agree to look forward to the better days that are to come. We will, like Yosef, bring all this chaos and upheaval towards something good. We will fashion a more beautiful and holy world out of the lessons we have learned. We will not leave this encounter with Hashem empty-handed.