

## VAYECHI - 5774

Braisheet is loaded with twists and turns. It is a book that unabashedly shows us many sides of the human condition and persona. We see deceit, violence, loyalty, betrayal, righteousness, love, and a clear belief in a single supreme being (as clearly demonstrated and articulated when Joseph told his brothers that he is where he is as a part of God's plan). The Joseph story occupies a full third of the book of Braisheet.

So what is the Torah trying to teach us? Clearly, dreams and times of altered consciousness are the moments that posit questions, provide inspiration, and glimpses of what the future can hold.

Joseph had his dreams and Pharaoh his. Joseph came to realize that the dreams were messages from God. He attributes his ability for interpretation to HaShem and doesn't take credit for himself. But, what we see from Joseph's interpretations is that a dream or foreboding of something negative is not a time for despair but rather a time to plan, take action, and submit to hope. This is precisely what Joseph arranged when Pharaoh appointed him second in command. He communicated to Pharaoh that rather than despair of the future or just hope, action needed to be taken. Hope alone doesn't do anything.

There is a story of a person who prayed and hoped and believed in HaShem. When he passed away, he asked God why he never won the lottery considering how pious and religious he was and how kind he was to others. God told him he had to buy a ticket. Wishing and hoping is just not enough. One must act. That way we are partners with HaShem. Joseph understood this.

When we have struggles, just as Joseph did, we must take action. One of the messages, the strong messages of Braisheet and particularly Joseph is the double aphorism – Go forth and fear not... Go forth is the active dimension and Fear not (i.e. hope) is the spiritual dimension. Another way to put this is to act as if it all depends on us and pray as if it all depends God.

The other piece I want to touch on is Jacob's blessing of his sons

At the end of Braisheet Jacob blesses his sons. Very poignantly he does not start with Re'uven but with Joseph's sons Menasheh and Ephraim. In 48:20 we see "By you shall Israel shall invoke blessings, saying :'God make you like Ephriam and Menasheh.'" This raises several questions. Why E & M first, why the reversal of eldest and younger, why is the blessing focused on the grandchildren. And why at the beginning of Shabbat do we invoke Ephraim and Menashe as opposed to Avraham, Yizhak, and Ya'acov?

I like the interpretation that states that unlike the other siblings we have learned and read about, Ephraim and Menashe represent siblings who got along and were not jealous of or spiteful toward one another. Furthermore, they are born outside of Cana'an and we yet able to hold on to their heritage. They are an example for all of us – men and women, young and old.

In Jacob's blessing of the boys he says in verse 48:16 that they should increase like fish in the land. A phrase that doesn't make sense. Fish are not of the land and if they were, they would die. Why not frogs, birds, ants, or some other numerous creature.

The rabbis puzzled with this as well. In the Talmud, Brachot Joseph is compared to the fish. How is this so you may ask – I know I did. The sense of the rabbis is that since the fish are in the water, actually under water, they were not susceptible to the Evil Eye. Similarly, Joseph, is perceived as one who has developed a strong inner character and so he, too, was not susceptible to the evil eye as in his avoidance of Potiphar's wife. It is said that if we are secure within ourselves we are not as easily influenced by outside sources. Joseph, with his understanding and deep belief that God was with him, was also secure and thus he could avoid external influences.

Joseph remained faithful to his inner convictions, despite the external pressures and influences of his roller coaster life – a foreign land, a foreign culture, family estrangement, slavery, imprisonment, and temptations; none of which succeeded in leading him astray. Joseph remained true to his own inner world, despite his active participation in a vastly different outer world. Just like 'a fish in the land'.

One last midrash about avoiding temptations – and it is connected to the last paragraph we read together with the Shema. It is told of a man who was on a journey far from home for a long time and needed some companionship. ..he asked in the town and learned of a woman who could give him the companionship he sought. He made the arrangements and then as he was getting undressed, his tzitzit hit him in the face and he was reminded – "lo taturu acharei le'vavchem veacharei eyneichem" – don't be led astray by your heart or your eyes. He avoided the temptation and was not led astray.

May we all fear not, go forth, and stay the path avoiding temptations.