

Even a Little Something Can Go a Long Way
Parashat Vayeshev
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham

I recently read a sermon by Rabbi Jack Riemer that had a message I want to share with you today. He brings to our attention a curiosity in this week's Torah portion. You'll recall that at the beginning of the portion, Joseph was stripped of his coat of many colors, thrown into a pit, and then sold to a group of traders going down to Egypt. Think about it: Jacob's favorite, pampered child suddenly finds himself near death, and then he is saved, seemingly by chance, when his brother Judah convinces the rest of his brothers to sell him into slavery instead of murdering him.

The Torah doesn't tell us much about the caravan of traders going down to Egypt. It basically tells us that they were Midianites or Ishmaelites. But it does go on to tell us one curious detail. It tells us what they were transporting. The text reads:

“The camels were bearing spices, balm, and myrrh, which they were carrying down to sell in Egypt.” (Genesis 37:25)

It is a curious detail that was already noticed thousands of years ago. Why? Why does the Torah go out of its way, as it were, to tell us what spices the caravan was carrying?

To address the question, we turn to Rashi, the great 11th century French-Jewish commentator. And Rashi tells us the answer. Basing himself on an earlier midrash, he tells us that that detail comes to teach us about God's kindness to the righteous.¹

¹ AND THEIR CAMELS WERE BEARING etc. — Why does Scripture specially announce what they were laden with? It is to tell you how great is the reward of the righteous: it is not usual for Arabs to carry anything but naphtha and itran (tar) which are evil-smelling, but for this one (Joseph, the righteous) it was specially arranged that they should be carrying fragrant spices so that he should not suffer from a bad odour (Genesis Rabbah 84:17).

למה פרסם הכתוב את משאם? להודיע מתן שכרן של צדיקים, שאין דרכן של ערביים לשאת אלא גפס ועטרן, שריקן. 'וגמליהם נשאים וגו': רע, וְלִזְהָה נִזְדַּמְנְגוּ בַּשָּׁמַיִם, שְׁלֵא יִזְוֶק מְרִיחַ רֵעַ

Let me explain: Usually, according to Rashi, caravans of this kind would be transporting naphtha down to Egypt. Long before the word “Nafta” referred to a free trade agreement, the word “naphtha” referred to a petroleum product that was known way back in antiquity. (In modern Hebrew, incidentally, “*neft*” is kerosene.) Naphtha can be found in certain areas seeping up from beneath the surface. It’s dark and sticky and smells really, really bad. According to Rashi, that’s what most caravans going down to Egypt would be carrying: naphtha for fuel.

Now, had Joseph been sold to traders in a caravan carrying naphtha, he would have been tossed into a chamber smelling of naphtha, which would have been horrible. He would have been miserable. Instead, God brought it about that the caravan was pleasant-smelling. This, Rashi concludes, is a sign of God’s goodness and caring for Joseph: that he was brought down to Egypt in a *pleasant* smelling caravan, not a terribly smelling one.

Now, that sounds sweet, but how convincing is that? Do you think that if Joseph had been told that he was in a pleasant-smelling caravan rather than a putrid one, he would have said, “Thank you, God! You made my day”? Or mightn’t he have said instead, “I really don’t care what the caravan smells like; just get me out of here!!

Now, as we know, God doesn’t do that. He doesn’t rescue Joseph. He merely does a very small, almost insignificant, favor that adds just a bit to Joseph’s comfort level.

Now, you might think, that gesture is so insignificant: maybe it doesn’t matter at all. It’s hardly worth mentioning. But it was mentioned. Why?

As was pointed out in a *dvar torah* by Dena Weiss, a scholar at Machon Hadar in New York, the point is that **small deeds do matter, more than we think they do**. A small deed may not be very significant; it may not be life-changing; yet it is still something, and shouldn’t be taken for granted.

We can see other examples of the importance of small things, small steps, in the Jewish tradition.

For example, we know that poverty is a problem in our society – as it has been in every society. We all know that we are supposed to help the less fortunate, right?

But how? How much *tsedakah* should we be giving to the poor? You could say that we should give everything we have to anyone in need whom we encounter—even if it leaves us needing support ourselves. Or you could say that because *anything* we might give is just a drop in the bucket, we might as well give up and do nothing.

Well, the approach in the *halachah* is somewhere in-between. If we're farmers, we shouldn't hand over our fields to the poor. And we shouldn't ignore the poor. Instead, we should leave them the produce from the corners of our fields. Not half our fields; not even a tenth of our fields; just the corners. And if you should ask: "How big is a corner?" The answer given in the Mishnah is, "About a sixtieth." That is, you should leave to the poor at least about a sixtieth of the yield of your field (M. Peah 1:2).

We could all do that, couldn't we? That's less than 2%. (2% is 1/50; this is smaller than that.) We won't solve the problem of world hunger by giving a 1/60; but it is *something*, isn't it? And something is better than nothing, isn't it?

Another example comes from our practice of reciting Birkat HaMazon, the Grace After Meals. The source for the obligation to recite Grace is a verse in Deuteronomy that goes like this: (You may know it because when we sing the Birkat HaMazon, we sing this verse outloud.) "*Kakativ, v'achaltah, v'sava'tah uveirachtah, et adonai elohecha.*"

"*When you eat and are satisfied, you should praise the Lord your God.*"
(Deuteronomy 8:10)

OK. That tells us that if we eat and "*v'sava'atah,*" are fully satisfied, we owe God a *brachah*, a blessing, an expression of thanksgiving.

In fact, though, Jewish practice is to recite Birkat HaMazon even if we don't eat until we're full; in fact, even if we only eat an olive or an egg's worth of food! And this, according to the Talmud, causes God to look with favor upon us. Because by doing so, we're acknowledging the importance even of a little bit of food.

An olive's worth or an egg's worth of food isn't very much, is it? Yet to a hungry person, it's something to be thankful for, and so we too, when we eat even that small amount of food, say "Thank you!"

Even a little can be a lot.

Here's another example that we should be mindful of in the coming week:

The holiday of Hanukkah is coming. I'm sure that we are all taking out our menorahs, and buying Hanukkah candles and getting ready to light them on the first, second, third, and so forth nights of Hanukkah.

As we know, the practice is to light one candle the first night, two the second, and so on.

But what if we can't afford to buy 44 candles? What if we run out of candles halfway through the holiday? What if we don't have enough even from the start? What should we do?

The answer is, we should light one. Just one candle. With just one candle we fulfill our obligation. Of course, if we have more, it's nice to light one for each day that that has passed by. But if all we have is one candle, that is sufficient.

What's the lesson there? It's clear: From even one candle we can generate much light.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlbach once told a story about a *meshulach* – a person who would go from community to community collecting funds for the poor – who came to a town to raise money for a worthy cause. He wanted to see one person who was known to be very wealthy. But the townspeople said, “Don't bother. He is a terrible miser and gives to no one.”

Nonetheless the *meshulach* persisted and managed to get an appointment to see this man. He poured out his heart and told him about the cause he was collecting for. The man laughed at him and said, “I don't give to anybody. Why should I give to you?”

So the *meshulach* tried again. This time he described in greater detail the plight of the people he was raising money for, and he begged the wealthy man to help them. But again, the man rebuffed him and refused to give anything.

The *meshulach* tried one last time. This time, he said, “Please sir, would you at least give me one penny?”

How can anyone say no to such a request? And so the rich person took out his purse and gave the *meshulach* one penny.

The *meshulach* took it and thanked him for his gift. He then turned around and started to leave.

Just as he got to the door, the fellow called him back and gave him a second penny. Again the *meshulach* thanked him profusely for his kindness and started to leave. Again, he called him back and gave him another penny.

This went on and on until the man began giving the *meshulach* dollar bills instead of change, and eventually, the *meshulach* walked out with a sizeable donation, one that would really make a difference in the lives of those he was raising funds for.

The townspeople heard about this and couldn't believe it. So they asked the *meshulach* how he did it. And this is what he told them:

“This man, he said, was trapped by his *yetzer ha-rah*, his evil inclination. His evil inclination kept his *yetzer tov*, his desire to do good, locked up tightly inside him. But once I invited him to give the first penny, something happened inside him. The impulse to do good broke loose from its chains, and it became easier for him to give the second coin, and then the third, and then the fourth, until finally he was able to give a generous gift.

“If I had turned down that first penny, he would never have given me another one.”

So we can see the power of even a small deed to break open the locks that keep us from doing more.

And so it is with us.

Here's my wish for all of us this Shabbat: If we can't do *everything*—and, guess what? We can't—let's at least do *something*.

Let's remember the story of Joseph being brought down to Egypt in a **sweet** – rather than **foul** – smelling caravan. Let's remember the power and the impact of small gestures.

Let's give a little to those in need – even though by ourselves we can hardly abolish world hunger.

Let's study a bit of Torah on a fixed basis, even though we do not have the time or the discipline that it takes to study a lot of Torah.

Let's be a bit kinder to each other even if we cannot really feel each other's pain completely, or take it completely away.

Let's do what we can – and in doing so let's get used to doing good so that eventually we learn to do more.

Let's do a little, and let's realize that a little can lead to a lot; that a little *is* a lot.

Shabbat shalom!