



December 18, 2020 – 3 Tevet, 5781 – Parashat Miketz

Dear TBE Family and Friends,

The Pharaonic dream that opens this week's Torah portion (Parashat Miketz) is, in many ways, "everyman's dream" – or rather, every person's nightmare. It is a vision of our life's accomplishments, all that we have worked for, all we have achieved, being swallowed up in an instant by an unpredictable turn of circumstance: a competitor who "scoops" our idea and beats us to the patent office or academic publication; a change in the economy that renders our our line of work outmoded; a catastrophe, man-made or natural, that suddenly consumes our savings and endangers our physical well-being.

In the current climate, it is hard to state convincingly that such fears reflect no more than baseless paranoia. We are all witnesses to the speed with which an unforeseen turn of events can claim millions of lives and turn the global economy on its head. And while the current calamity is of a scale that occurs perhaps once a century, smaller misfortunes, no less catastrophic in their localized (or personal) impact, transpire on a regular basis.

This is the observation of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), who laments that all that he has built up over his lifetime of toil will eventually be taken by a competitor or handed to a successor who never lifted a finger to earn his spoils. For Kohelet, the very prospect of such a fate is enough to rob from him the ability to find joy in the largesse that he presently enjoys. And this is precisely the danger of making an accountant's assessment of our life's achievements and prospects.

As the Nobel-prize winning economist and psychologist Daniel Kahneman has demonstrated, there is a deep-seated tendency in the human psyche to become overwhelmed in moments of crisis and experiences of loss and to focus on these so deeply and exclusively that we allow them to obscure from view the positive, experiences that surround and accompany them. He invokes as an example the family that goes on a wonderful vacation, enjoying luxurious stays in well-appointed accommodations, stimulating visits to interesting sites, delectable meals and a relaxed period of self-indulgence. Then, on the final day of their trip, their pocket is picked and they lose all their cash and travel documents.

"How was your trip?" friends ask when the family returns home. "It was *terrible*," they reply. "Our wallet was stolen, and we had to spend hours replacing all the lost items." Unaccounted for in this retelling of events is the family's sidelined memories of all the pleasurable experiences that they had during the first 90% of their vacation, happy moments that disappeared from their consciousness when they switched to focusing exclusively on their end-of-trip misfortune.



We would be foolhardy not to take steps to safeguard against misfortune or to ignore the lessons that can be gleaned from missteps or naïve (in-)action. Like Pharaoh, we are certainly well served by prudently insuring ourselves against failure (or being prepared to cushion its impact). But one of the most robust and least costly forms of insurance our tradition provides us is a reminder to consciously balance our consideration of all that has gone – and is going – both well and poorly in our lives and to give the former as much significance in our internal assessment, and in our memories, as the latter.

In this way, we truly do justice to Psalmist's charge to "number our days" in a way that bequeaths us "a heart of wisdom."

Wishing everyone the ability to hold onto Chanukah's glow as we head into the (literally) darkest Shabbat of the Northern Hemisphere year.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Rachel Safman