

## **This Week In Torah *VaYigash***

Let's think outside of the box. Let's move quickly beyond the *pashat* or simple meaning of the text into a deeper more spiritual realm. This may not be easy; in fact, it requires some suspension of rational thought. That can be a challenge – especially for Reform Jews whose foundation of spiritual thinking is rooted in what is called in German *wissenschaft des Judentum*, the scientific and rational study of Judaism.

Take a look at Genesis 47:14—“And Joseph collected all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan with the grain that they were buying, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house.” It is a very straight forward narrative. Joseph does his job with honesty and integrity. He does not steal. He does the task quite thoroughly.

Enter the world of Hasidic thought, which the earliest of Reform Jewish leadership had very little appreciation for their approach. In particular, let's look at the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov's grandson, known as the *Degel Machane Efraim*. Through a stroke of interpretive genius, he re-reads a verse that describes Joseph's strategic move to amass wealth for Pharaoh as a set of instructions for working with and breaking free of greedy thoughts that pull our focus away from the Divine in prayer. In doing so, he flips the meaning of Joseph's actions on its head. Instead of hoarding money, Joseph is instead painted as gathering in the hidden sparks that lie buried within his lustful, greedy thoughts. By highlighting that the word for money, *keseif* also points to the verb for “yearning,” Joseph's desire for material wealth is re-read as the mind's innermost yearning to connect with its divine Root. By connecting the word for grain, *shever*, with the root for “breaking,” the grain apportioned from Pharaoh's silos in return for money is now recast as the tzaddik's capacity to break free of the allure of his greedy mind by inviting its inner core to reveal itself as a divine spark. Pharaoh's palace is re-imagined as the *Shekhinah*, the divine Immanent with which the sparks can be reunited and integrated as cells within an aggregate body.

Even more striking, by employing a line of interpretation that turns a verse about amassing wealth into a set of instruction points for overcoming greedy thoughts, the Degel is suggesting that our very greed can become the grounds for our liberation from greed if we are willing to look deeply into the nature of the greedy mind, and discover the divine spark buried within even the most materialistic and self-serving thoughts.

Pause.... Let that sink in.

Rabbi Shalom Noah Berezovsky, known as the Slonimer Rebbe wrote that a true spiritual encounter has an element of *yehud elyon*, union with what's on high, by transcending the self so that one can attach themselves [*devkut*] to God. To reach that level, one must confront the evil yearnings and transform them into positive ones. He believed that the Degel was on to something—standing up to the temptation of body in order to suppress it and transcend it. In this case, the fact that Joseph was honest and did not steal when he had the opportunity; Joseph did not yield to the temptation—same way he defied his body's lustfulness by not succumbing to Potiphar's wife's temptation.

For us, these teachings model a goal that can make us more spiritually attuned. We can channel our bodily urges into our spiritual lives. It is not about suppressing our desires, rather turn them into virtues by directing them toward God.

May God bless you in that endeavor.