

Parashat Vayeshev, Rabbi James Proops

At the suspenseful conclusion of our *parsha*, we find Yosef languishing in an Egyptian dungeon despite his innocence. Not only has he been forced to suffer the past ten years away from his family, now he must be incarcerated for an additional two years. Rashi explains that he was punished for relying excessively on the mercies of Pharaoh's butler, and because he used the word "remember" twice, while asking the butler to remember him, Yosef was penalized with an extra two years (*Breishis* 40:14).

The question can be asked, why two *years*? Why not two days, two weeks or two months?

It was explained by Rav Zeidel Epstein zt'l, Mashgiach of Yeshiva Torah Ohr, that a Divinely administered prison sentence is not simply a random punishment to admonish the individual for his sin. Rather, it is a means of isolating the person so that he has time to contemplate why he is there, what he has done wrong, and how he can rectify his actions in future. Were he to remain part of society, he would have great difficulty in focusing his thoughts on his past misdeeds. In prison, there is little else to occupy his mind. This provides him with a much-needed opportunity to reflect and to formulate a firm decision to remedy his behavior from now on.

Once he comes to a decision to improve himself, the decision must be resolute. A loose commitment will have him returning to his old ways in no time at all. In order to arrive at a genuine decision of wholehearted commitment, twelve months are necessary. We can suggest that this is similar to the *halachot* of a *treifah*, an animal that is expected to die within twelve months. If the animal outlives the twelve-month life-expectancy then this is a clear indication that it is in fact not a *treifah*. The reason for this is that twelve months incorporate all the seasons and the varying conditions that come with them. Before twelve months have elapsed, we cannot be sure that this animal will survive under the widest possible range of environmental factors. Only once the animal has successfully weathered an entire year can we be confident that it is healthy and will remain so for the foreseeable

future. Similarly, when a person sits in a prison cell for a year and makes a commitment to improve his ways, this is an indication that his decision is strong and healthy. Therefore we can see that Yosef needed two years for his two utterances.

Interestingly, we find a similar idea in relation to *Chanukah*. After the *Chanukah* miracle, Chazal did not immediately establish the eight days as a holiday. Rather the *Talmud* states לְשָׁנָה אַחֲרַת קִבְעוּם וַעֲשׂאוּם יָמִים טוֹבִים בְּהֵלֵל וְהוֹדָאָה - the following year they established them and made them holy days of praise and thanksgiving." Why did they wait an entire year before establishing the holiday? *Chazal* wanted to make sure that they still felt the influence of the miracle and its everlasting nature after the passage of time. Only then could they be sure that it was fit to become a fixture in the calendar, a day on which to reinvigorate ourselves with the special light revealed at that time. Our duty therefore is to utilize the lights of Chanukah and be inspired and influenced by them.

As we light our Chanukah candles amidst another lock-down there is a sense that we too are experiencing a 'prison sentence', although drastically different from that of Yosef. Cut off from family, friends and community at a time of year when we are supposed to be celebrating together. Hopefully with the advent of a vaccine soon to be available we will have this pandemic under control, but in the meantime the weeks continue to roll by as we get scarcely closer to having been afflicted for a whole twelve months. Are we, like Yosef, using this time that we are cut-off from wider society to reflect, prioritize and improve? As we gaze into the spiritual lights of the menorah, let us contemplate how this Chanukah will be different from last year for the positive. Let us make firm and resolute commitments to change our ways for the better and heed the lessons that this difficult time has afforded us. May the light of Chanukah spread warmth, good health and inspiration among us all.

Shabbat Shalom