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ASBI Congregation
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Which Side Are You On?

One spring during college, a week or two before Pesach, I joined a small group of students to assist a prison chaplain in leading a seder at a local prison. As it turned out, most of the prisoners attending the seder were not Jewish (I suppose that's a good thing). They were at the seder because they studied and prayed with the rabbi during his weekly prison visits. Apparently the session with the rabbi was better than whatever the prisoners would have been doing otherwise.

Before our model seder began, the prison warden delivered a very paternalistic and fairly corny speech about the beauty of human interactions in prison: "So ironic," he intoned, "that a building as filled with walls like a prison can be a place where the walls between us can be broken down." He then addressed the themes of Pesach head on - freedom - but, he hastened to add, "freedom within limits." After all, we were in prison.

The warden seemed like a decent person and I think all of his wishes for the prisoners in his charge were benign. He hoped that could be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society and he understood how religion could be a tool in that goal. How did Yoseph experience prison?

Yoseph's first days in prison may have been the hardest time of his life. He had already been through so much. He was thrown into a pit by his own brothers and left to die. He is saved from imminent death only to be sold into slavery. He then is purchased by Potifar and his fortunes improve, eventually he is in charge of all of Potifar's household, overseeing his entire estate. But at that moment, right when Yoseph exhales and begins to enjoy his foothold of security, Mrs. Potifar begins her attempted seduction and Yoseph is back in the pit - thrown into prison. It is quite significant that Yoseph refers to the prison as a "*bor*" - a pit. Despite how far he has come, he is once again back in the pit

And then, the Torah tells us, something curious happens.

וַיְהִי ה' אֶת־יֹסֵף וַיְטֵ אֵלָיו חֶסֶד וַיִּתֵּן חַן בְּעֵינֵי שַׂר בֵּית־הַסֵּהֶר:

"But God was with Yoseph, and showed kindness unto him, and gave him favor in the eyes of the warden of the prison."

Is this a good thing? Would you want the prison warden to like you? It's certainly helpful - Yoseph is placed in charge of the other prisoners just as he was in charge of Potifar's household (and just as his father had placed him in charge of his brothers). So, it's advantageous to have favor in the eyes of the warden. But is it good? What kind of person was imprisoned there? Innocent people, like Yoseph who had not committed any crime. Political prisoners, guilty only of running afoul of Pharaoh's caprice.

If this is the sort of prison Yoseph was confined to, what positive thing can be said about someone liked by a warden at a prison of this kind? Is the warden in any position to be a character reference?

The question can be sharpened. God is the one who ensures that the warden liked Yoseph? Was God just taking care of Yoseph? Maybe. Or maybe God is testing Yoseph. How will he respond to privilege. Which Side are you On? Does Yoseph sympathize with the other prisoners or with the warden?

The Prayer for the State of Israel that we recite at ASBI is based on a prayer that was written by Rabbi Avraham Herzog, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel. A friend and colleague of mine

came across a hand-written draft among the papers of Rav Herzog, which should dispel the persistent rumors that the true author of this prayer was not Rav Herzog but the Hebrew writer Shai Agnon.

Whatever the prayer's provenance it was written in Israel to be recited by Israeli Jews. It does contain a mention of the diaspora and expresses concern for Jewish brothers and sisters dispersed throughout the world and prays for their ingathering to Eretz Yisrael.

Although the prayer was written in Israel, it quickly spread to Jewish communities in the diaspora and was included in early editions of the siddur that Rabbi Philip Birnbaum edited in the 1950s. But adopting the language, word for word from the Israeli prayer to a diaspora setting makes little sense. How can we sit in the diaspora and pray for the ingathering of dispersed Jews in the third person, as though those dispersed Jews are other people?

This mistake was corrected in the new Koren Sidurim (reason #56 why the Koren Siddur is far superior to Artscroll) - instead of references to "*pizureibem*" and "*tolichem*" - "their dispersal" and "bring them" - the siddur speaks of, "our dispersal - *pizureinu*" and "*tolicheinu* - bring us" back to *Eretz Yisrael*.

This version makes sense and it teaches us two ideas. First - the Jewish hope for the ingathering of exiles includes us too. Aliyah isn't only for persecuted Jews abroad, it's something that in our prayers we hope for all of us.

Second, concern for Israel's well-being, and Jewish solidarity and strengthening the bonds of Jewish peoplehood, should be primary concerns and not secondary ones. They concern us - not only them.

I personally feel a great deal of pride when I lead the congregation each week in reciting the Prayer for the State of Israel because the prayer means something here. ASBI gets it. This congregation cares passionately about Israel and seeks out ways to actualize that passion.

The AIPAC session this coming Thursday is just one of many opportunities that we have to turn our love for Israel into advocacy and support. I expect that there will be significant positive energy from the event on Thursday, and that energy can fuel our Israel advocacy here in Chicago, and hopefully will motivate more of us to travel to Washington this March for the AIPAC conference in Washington DC.

We also recite a prayer each week on behalf of the United States. That prayer also means something to us. Yirmiyahu tells us that we are meant to pray for the welfare of the city where we live. This means we have responsibility to this community and to this city. If we pray for our fellow-citizens and if we pray that the constituted officers of government should succeed in upholding peace and freedom, then we have to work as hard as we can to make it so. That is always true about prayer. If you pray it, you have to do it. And so we have to do what we can to preserve peace and freedom.

And for this reason, I was so proud to see so many Jews in Bronzeville last Sunday afternoon. Paster Chris Harris publicly acknowledged the presence of so many members of the Jewish community, quite a few from Lakeview and from this shul, and the residents of Bronzeville greeted us with tremendous warmth. The march itself was somber and dignified, but also hopeful and, as the crowd dispersed, there was a joyful spirit in the neighborhood.

Yoseph was tested, repeatedly throughout his life, by how he responds to privilege. How does Yoseph act when things are good for him? For whom does he work? Who is he serving? How will his sympathies move him? Which side are you on?

Those questions are not definitively answered until the end of Yoseph's life. Perhaps they aren't fully answered until after Yoseph's life is over.¹ Those questions become a prism for understanding his life.

And we are asked the same question. The American Jewish community has unprecedented security and prosperity. We have achieved more than any diaspora community in history. What will it all be for? Which side are you on?

¹ Rabbi Aryeh Klapper introduced me to this perspective on Yoseph in a shiur titled "Yospeh: The Righteous Bureaucrat" given at the Chabad of Lexington in July, 2000.