

Echoes of Eden

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Victim No More

Parshat Miketz

Yosef is one of the most impressive characters in the Torah. Although he faced seemingly insurmountable challenges, he remained strong, focused, dedicated, where others would surely have given up.

His mother died when he was young, and when his father filled the gap with twice as much love, his half-siblings responded with hatred and jealousy. Those closest to him conspired to murder him, but fortunately the plot was aborted. He was kidnapped; he was sold as a slave. He was wooed by his boss's wife and then framed when he did not capitulate to her lewd advances. He was imprisoned. And yet, despite all of these experiences, he never lost his dignity or his faith.

More than this, he never lost his belief and trust in God. Quite the opposite: God is always in his thoughts and in his words. He speaks of God to the libidinous Mrs. Potifar. He speaks of God to his fellow inmates, he speaks of God to his brothers, even when they do not recognize him and believe him to be an Egyptian despot.

Perhaps most impressively, he speaks of God to Pharaoh, a man who thinks of himself as a deity. A lesser man than Yosef would have carefully crafted his speech to endear himself to the Egyptian leader. Yosef is given an opportunity to position himself as an advisor to Pharaoh; his freedom, if not his very life, hinges upon this dialogue. Rather than taking credit for

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his ability to interpret dreams, rather than talking up his own skill and insight, Yosef explains that he does not possess any personal talent; it is God who knows all. Rather than highlighting or aggrandizing his ability, which is so crucial for Pharaoh, he takes no credit; Yosef instead demurs and speaks only of God. This was certainly a dangerous strategy to employ when dealing with Pharaoh - yet it succeeds.

Yosef includes God in his every move and speaks of God's presence in every situation. In a sense, the feeling is reciprocal: God is clearly with him in all he does. Everyone around him (other than his brothers) sees it, from Pharaoh to the lowliest Egyptian. Yosef sees God's hand in every situation, and, through Yosef, the hand of God becomes apparent to others, who recognize that Yosef is blessed and God is the secret of his

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success. Yosef succeeds in bringing God-consciousness into the lives he touches, but even more striking is that he brings God Himself, as it were, into the bitter exile in Egypt: God is with him in the House of Potifar, God is with him in prison, and God is with him when he enters the palace, a place many others thought only had room for one (imagined) deity.

Yosef even sees that God was with him when he was sold; when his brother's recoil from his presence, Yosef comforts them by sharing his certainty that it was not they but God who brought him to Egypt.

Keeping all of this in mind, we can understand why, in the one instance that Yosef complains and sounds like a victim, the rabbinic commentaries express bitter disappointment.

Yosef explains the dream of the wine steward, and gives him so much more than a mere prediction of his future: It is God, Yosef explains, who controls the world; it is God who has revealed the dream, and it is God who will see to it that he will soon be reinstated to his former job. At

the same time, Yosef pleads that he not be forgotten, and begs his fellow inmate to help him leave his prison cell.

To the wine steward, this must surely have seemed like a mixed message: If God is so intimately involved, why would Yosef turn to a prisoner, or even to Pharaoh's wine steward, for help? When Yosef's name is eventually put forth as a potential dream interpreter, the steward does not mention God or Yosef's unique connection to God's plan. While this may have been due to the wine steward's assessment that mentioning another God in Pharaoh's presence would be impolitic, the truth may be somewhat harder: Asking the steward for help was counter-productive in terms of Yosef's larger mission – to spread monotheism. The steward was left with the impression that the young man he met in prison had a quirky ability to understand dreams; the God of whom Yosef spoke left no impression, having been undercut by Yosef's plea.

For this, the Rabbis claim, Yosef languished in prison an extra two years. His "crime" was not that he attempted to free himself, but that he removed God from the consciousness of those around him. Only when Yosef, in a moment of weakness, describes himself as a victim of human injustice and pleads for the wine steward's help, does he actually become a victim.

For Yosef, this was a one-time lapse, which was immediately rectified when he stood before Pharaoh. Once again, Yosef ascribes all the power and knowledge to God, and there is no hint of the sense of victimization that was discernible in Yosef's speech to the wine steward. When Yosef regains his faith and his vision, when he reminds himself – and Pharaoh, and all of Egypt – that God is in the driver's seat, God's involvement in human history becomes evident to all that surround

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him. Yosef is immediately catapulted to a position of power, the victor rather than the victim.

This is one of Yosef's many lessons to us all: Even in the most difficult situations, when we believe that God has engineered events for our ultimate benefit, we are not victims of fate, but living testament to God's power and ultimate kindness.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/11/audio-and-essays-parashat-miketz-chanuka.html>