

TIMELESS TORAH

MIKEITZ: Coping With Change: The Art of Spiritual Adaptation

From Slave to Sovereign

Throughout the long narrative of Yosef and his brothers, there is a consistent theme of adaptation and growth in the face of change. The most obvious place this is found, of course, is in Yosef himself, whose life went through – in an instant – a staggering metamorphosis. The Gemara (Sotah 36b) records a fascinating exchange between Pharaoh and his advisors when Pharaoh announced his intention to appoint Yosef as the viceroy of Egypt. Amazed at this prospect, the advisors argued that a slave could not possibly be raised to a position of rulership. Pharaoh responded, however, that he could see trappings of royalty about Yosef. Something in Yosef's demeanour persuaded Pharaoh that he was able to rule Egypt.

The Gemara continues to relate that the advisors, not entirely convinced by Pharaoh's observations, requested that Yosef be tested in his proficiency at foreign languages. That night, before the examination began, the angel Gavriel came to Yosef and taught him what he needed to know, but for some reason, Yosef was unable to absorb the information until Hashem added the letter hey to his name, as the verse in Tehillim states, '*Edut biYehosef samo ... sfat lo yadaati eshma*' (Tehillim 81:6; Song of the Day, Thursday).

In this passage, the Sages are showing us various perspectives on Yosef's change in circumstances. Yosef began his life in Egypt as a slave, and the ministers of the king could not see any change about him at all. As the *Sar HaMashkim*, the Chief Butler, put it, 'He is a Jewish lad, a slave' (41:12).

Governed by a self-centred concern for their own careers, the Chizkuni explains, Pharaoh's ministers were unable to detect Yosef's true qualities. Pharaoh, however, as a ruler, saw in Yosef the sensitivities needed in order to govern. He noted Yosef's humility in his insistence on attributing his abilities to Hashem rather than to his own brilliance – 'Not I, but Hashem will answer the peace of Pharaoh' (41:16) – and he knew how crucial this was for a position of power.

Neither Pharaoh nor his advisors, however, saw the real extent of Yosef's self-growth. Much as many of the hostages released from Gaza have shown how they built a remarkable sense of faith through their imprisonment, Yosef too, in the depths of the Egyptian dungeons, grew from being a young lad to forging a close bond with Hashem, fully appreciative of the fact that everything he experienced in life was Divinely sent. This was the message of the added letter to Yosef's name. Yosef was being told to always remember that whatever honour and power he would receive, he would need to always be cognisant of where his success came from.

Faith in Darkness

When Yaakov is finally persuaded to allow the brothers to return to Egypt with Binjamin, he prepares them with sufficient money to cover any mishaps as well as a lavish gift to appease the Egyptian ruler. Having made these preparations, Yaakov then prays for their success: 'And may *Kel Shakkai* give you mercy before the man' (43:14). By using this particular Divine Name in this prayer (consisting of the letters *shin daled yud*, pronounced *Shakkai* when not read as part of a scriptural verse), Yaakov displayed his perception on his own journey through life.



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Rashi explains that the Name is related to the word '*dai* – enough'. Here, Yaakov was evoking Hashem's Attribute of having 'sufficient' mercy and ability to provide a favourable outcome. Alternatively, explains Rashi, Yaakov was praying that the One Who created physical limits in Creation by saying '*dai* – enough' should say, 'Enough!' too to my own struggles.

Expounding on this Rashi, Rav Shimon Schwab (d.1995) demonstrates that whereas Avraham's mission was to develop a whole-hearted devotion to Hashem and Yitzchak's mission was to dedicate his very life to Hashem's service, Yaakov's unique mission was '*bchol me'odecha* – recognising Hashem's presence in every single step of his life, every single '*middah* – measure' meted out to him. Yaakov represents the power of prayer when everything seems helpless and the future seems bleak. He had experienced so many deep struggles throughout his lifetime, yet always kept his perspective, and his prayer now was that his acceptance of Hashem's will should have already proven his dedication to Hashem's service, thereby allowing salvation from this particular trial.

In expressing this idea to Yehudah and the rest of the brothers, Yaakov was imparting to them that they must also focus on Hashem's intimate involvement in all they were destined to experience. Through allowing this perspective to change their attitude towards anything they might face, they could hope to be successful in their mission.

The Art of Adaptation

Indeed, this message seems to have found its mark. When the brothers are arrested after Binyamin's supposed theft of the goblet, Yehudah's response to Yosef's accusations

is '*Elokim matza et avon avadecha* – Hashem has found the iniquity of your servants' (44:16). Rashi explains that Yehudah was really referring not to the theft of the goblet, but to his and his brothers' own sin of the sale of Yosef. At this point, the brothers came to the point that they could admit their wrongdoing and appreciate why they had to undergo such a difficult test.

Remarkably, Yehudah's statement at this point is reminiscent of Yosef's response to Pharaoh at the beginning of the parshah: '*biladai Elokim yaaneh et shelom Par'o* – It is not I, but Hashem Who will answer the peace of Pharaoh' (41:16). Just as the added letter *hey* in Yosef's name helped him to remember constantly that only Hashem was behind all of his successes, Yehudah had now learned how to accomplish his own role: to understand that Hashem was accompanying him through every ordeal and had the ability to continue or to stop his distress at any moment. This is the depth of meaning behind the Name of Hashem (*shin daled yud* – *Shakka'i*) that Yaakov had used before they left Canaan.

Thus, this parshah provides the catalyst that allowed the rebuilding of Yaakov's family. Finding Hashem's presence in every situation that one finds oneself in is the key to the art of spiritual adaptation. With this tool, Yosef retained his confident humility even in his role of one of the world's most powerful men; Yaakov attained his mission of revealing Hashem's presence in the midst of darkness; and Yehudah and the brothers reached a sense of clarity in the consequences of their actions.

Next Week - VAYIGASH: From Crisis to Connection: The Hidden Ascent