**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYIGASH**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (21b) famously presents a brief account of the miracle that occurred in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* after the *Chashmonaim* ousted the Greeks and rededicated the Temple, kindling the *menorah* with the lone jug of pure oil, which miraculously sustained the candles for eight nights. The next year, the Gemara relates, “they established them [these eight days] and made them holidays for praise and thanksgiving.”

*Sefat Emet* (Chanukah, 5641) boldly suggests explaining the Gemara not only that the days of Chanukah is to be observed through praise and thanksgiving, but that these days enhance our ability to give praise and thanksgiving. A verse in Sefer Yeshayahu (64:10) refers to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* as “the house of our sanctity and our glory, where our forefathers praised You.” *Sefat Emet* explains that it is only in the sacred grounds of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* that one is capable of purely and wholeheartedly giving praise to the Almighty. Although we are able to praise God outside the Temple, and even under the difficult conditions of exile, this praise is of a lesser quality than the praise that was given in the *Mikdash*. On Chanukah, however, we experience what *Sefat Emet* terms “a little illumination from the Temple” (“*ketzat he’ara mi-Beit Ha-mikdash*”). As we declare in the “*Ha-neirot Halalu*” proclamation recited immediately after lighting, “*Ha-neirot halalu kodesh heim*” – the Chanukah candles are “sacred,” as they commemorate the candles of the *menorah* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. And thus, like the lights of the *menorah*, we are forbidden from deriving personal benefit from the lights of the Chanukah candles. The kindling of the Chanukah lights in the home, according to *Sefat Emet*, signifies the extension of the sanctity of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* into our homes, a phenomenon that is experienced each year on Chanukah even after the Temple’s destruction. (An earlier source for this concept is likely the famous comments of the Ramban, in the beginning of Parashat Behaalotekha.) As such, *Sefat Emet* explains, the days of Chanukah are truly “days of praise and thanksgiving” – days when we have the special ability to give praise to God, more so than throughout the rest of the year.

The struggles and travails of day-to-day life make it difficult to feel grateful and appreciative, to recognize God’s boundless love and the kindness He bestows upon us at all times. The “darkness” of the world prevents us from experiencing true joy and contentment, and so it prevents us from fervently praising and thanking God. This joy can be experienced only in the sacred confines of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, where God’s presence was felt in an especially powerful way. One of the themes of Chanukah is that we are capable of illuminating the darkness, that even a small “jug” of “purity” can shine brightly far more than we would expect. Even as we struggle against the “impure” forces of the world, are capable of igniting within ourselves the light of joy and gratitude. This, perhaps, is the meaning of *Sefat Emet*’s teaching regarding the definition of Chanukah as “*yemei hallel ve-hoda’a*” – “days of praise and thanksgiving.” The message of this celebration – or at least one message of this celebration – is that we can and must strive to find light even in darkness, that just as our candles illuminate the long, dark nights during the period of the winter solstice, so do we have the capacity to illuminate the darkness of the world and of our lives with the light of joy, contentment and gratitude, appreciating our blessings and giving praise to the Almighty for all He does for us.

Sunday

Rav Elazar of Worms, in his *Sefer Rokei’ach* (Chanukah, 225), draws an intriguing association between the Chanukah candles and the mysterious tradition of the “*or ha-ganuz*” – the special light which God made at the time of the world’s creation, and then concealed. Rashi, in his commentary to Sefer Bereishit (1:4), cites from the Midrash that God created this light but then determined that human beings would be unworthy of it, and so He “concealed” it for the righteous to enjoy in the next world. But while Rashi indicates that this light was “concealed” immediately, or at least soon, after its creation, the [Talmud Yerushalmi (Berakhot 8:5)](https://he.wikisource.org/wiki/%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%9C%D7%9E%D7%99_%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%AA_%D7%97_%D7%94) tells that it was not “concealed” until the end of the first Shabbat after creation. The Yerushalmi states that Adam and Chava enjoyed this special light on Friday, the day they were created, through the end of Shabbat, for a total of 36 hours. The *Rokei’ach* comments that the 36 candles which we light over the course of Chanukah (1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8) allude to the “*or ha-ganuz*” which shone for Adam and Chava for a total of 36 hours. We can, in a sense, access this special light through the lighting of the Chanukah candles each year.

How might we explain this connection between Chanukah and the “*or ha-ganuz*”?

The concept of a “concealed light,” an “illumination” that is not accessible in the current state of our world, perhaps alludes to our recognition of the impossibility of perfection, the reality that the world we live in is flawed. As hard as we try, both individually and collectively, to improve and grow, some level of “darkness” will always exist in our world. The “light” of perfection remains forever unattainable.

The Chanukah story is about the power and significance of even a small ray of light in an otherwise dark world. Seeing their country, their Temple and their people overrun by Greek influence, beliefs, culture and values, a small group of committed Jews kindled the light of faith, confident and determined in their quest to defeat the “darkness” into which the Jewish People had been plunged. The miracle of the oil symbolized the ability of a single, small “jug” of “pure oil” to shine and radiate beyond all expectations. The *Chashmonaim* saw themselves as the small “light” of purity that defeated the forces of impurity that had overcome the nation – as symbolized by the flask of oil that miraculously sustained the candles in the Temple for eight nights.

By viewing the Chanukah lights as containing a quality of the “*or ha-ganuz*,” the *Rokei’ach* is perhaps teaching us that we experience the “*or ha-ganuz*,” the ideal purpose of our world, by kindling the brightest “light” we can under whichever conditions we find ourselves in. The kindling of lights during the darkest time of the year – around the time of the winter solstice, and at the end of the lunar month (Kisleiv), when the moon is at its smallest point – powerfully symbolizes the struggle for spirituality under “dark,” hostile conditions. And the *Rokei’ach* instructs us not to underestimate the significance of the small “lights” of spirituality we kindle, and to regard them instead as the “*or ha-ganuz*” – the ideal goal for which we must strive. The ideal in our imperfect world is to kindle as much “light” as we can. We must never belittle the value or importance of our small “lights,” our modest spiritual achievements, as long as they were realized through hard work, struggle and determination. As long as we work to “shine” the brightest we can in the “dark” realities of the world, we experience the “*or ha-ganuz*” – we are living the ideal life that we are brought here into the world to live.

Monday

Parashat Vayigash begins with Yehuda’s impassioned plea to Yosef, the Egyptian vizier whom Yehuda did not recognize as his brother, after Yosef’s goblet was discovered in the luggage of the youngest brother, Binyamin. Yosef – who had his servant plant his goblet in Binyamin’s sack – decreed that Binyamin must remain in Egypt as his slave as punishment for this crime, and Yehuda pleaded to Yosef to allow Binyamin to return home, and to allow Yehuda to remain in Egypt as Yosef’s slave in Binyamin’s place.

Yehuda introduces his petition by stating, “Your servant shall please speak in my master’s ears, and do not be incensed at your servant, for you are like Pharaoh” (44:18). What did Yehuda mean by emphasizing that he regarded Yosef as important as Pharaoh?

Several commentators, including the Rashbam, the Radak and Chizkuni, understand the phrase “for you are like Pharaoh” as Yehuda’s explanation for why he feared that Yosef might react angrily to him. Just as they would be frightened speaking before the king, they were likewise frightened speaking before the vizier, whose authority they respected and revered no less than Pharaoh’s. The Ramban explains differently, commenting that Yehuda was telling Yosef not to be angry at him for petitioning against his decision, because he was speaking with respect and reverence, as though he was speaking to Pharaoh.

A slightly different explanation is offered by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, who writes that Yehuda was telling Yosef, “I honor you as Pharaoh, so if anything that I say does not please you, do not think that I do it from lack of honor; what I say to you I would also say to Pharaoh.” Yehuda was emphasizing to Yosef that if his appeal for Binyamin, or any part of it, seemed disrespectful or offensive to Yosef’s royal position, it should be understood that no such disrespect or offense was intended. His words would be spoken with emotion and passion due to the direness of the situation, and they thus might come across as inappropriate. Yehuda therefore prefaced his appeal by making it clear that he held Yosef in high esteem, and any indication otherwise should be recognized as a function of his heightened emotions in the face of the crisis which he now confronted.

Very often, people take offense at words which sound inappropriate or disrespectful, and may indeed have been inappropriate or disrespectful, but they were not intended as such. Just as Yehuda feared that his passionate appeal might come across as disrespectful, similarly, people sometimes speak discourteously or otherwise improperly as a result of the difficult emotions they experience. While we must certainly strive to speak in a respectful, dignified manner under all circumstances, even when we feel agitated, anxious or distressed, we must also be forgiving towards those who fail to speak properly as a result of their emotions. Certainly, there is no sense in taking personal offense, in feeling insulted by a misspoken word, once we realize that it very likely resulted from a difficult emotional condition. A disrespectful remark does not necessarily demonstrate disrespect, and this realization can spare us feelings of hurt and resentment when such words are spoken.

Tuesday

After Yosef revealed his identity to his brothers, he implored, “And now do not be saddened and let it not be disturbing in your eyes that you sold me here” (45:5). Realizing that his brothers must have deeply regretted the crime they had committed against him twenty years earlier, Yosef urged his brothers not to feel anguished over what they did, explaining, “for God sent me before you for sustenance” – that selling him as a slave ended up saving them and the region from starvation. After being brought to Egypt, Yosef eventually stood before Pharaoh and predicted seven years of shortage, which he then prevented when Pharaoh appointed him to oversee the storage of grain during the preceding seven years of surplus. As this was the result of the brothers’ actions, through which God “sent” Yosef to Egypt to ensure the region’s survival, they had no reason to feel remorse for what they did.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch notes the unique construct “*yichar be-eineikhem*” (“be disturbing in your eyes”) in this verse. The word “*yichar*” is commonly used in reference to anger, but it is always followed by the preposition *le-* (“to”) and the name of the aggrieved individual (as in Kayin’s reaction to the rejection of his offering: “*Va-yichar le-Kayin*” – Bereishit 4:5). Here, however, the word “*va-yichar*” is followed by a different preposition – “*be-*” (“in”) – and it is used in reference not to the individuals themselves (Yosef’s brothers), but rather to their “eyes” – “*al yichar be-eineikhem*.” What is the meaning of this unique construction? What is the difference between “*va-yichar*” in its conventional usage, and “*va-yichar*” in reference to the eyes?

Rav Hirsch explains that ordinarily, when “*va-yichar*” modifies the individual himself, this word refers to an emotional reaction of anger or frustration, whereas “*va-yichar*” used in reference to the eyes speaks of a mental process. According to Rav Hirsch, when Yosef told his brothers, “*Al yichar be-eineikhem*,” he was saying, “I cannot prevent your feelings of regret and sorrow, for wrong is wrong, and your feelings are justified. But your minds should temper even this consciousness by teaching you ‘to look at the deed with other eyes,’ as I have long ago come to look at it.” Yosef told the brothers that their remorse and angst over the crime they committed were certainly understandable, and even in order, but from a rational perspective, they should approach the situation differently, recognizing that God wanted Yosef to be brought to Egypt in order to save the region from widespread and devastating hunger.

As human beings, we are not always able, or expected, to control our emotions. It is not realistic to seek to eliminate all negative feelings, such as animosity, jealousy, anger, frustration, resentment, insecurity or anxiety, and we will occasionally find ourselves experiencing these emotions in circumstances when they are not warranted or appropriate. Rather than try in futility to avoid these feelings, we should, as Rav Hirsch explains Yosef’s plea to his brothers, accept our difficult emotions, but ensure not to allow them to cloud our understanding and lead us to act in an irrational or inappropriate manner.

Wednesday

Kabbalistic teaching draws a curious association between the character of Yosef and that of Chanokh – Noach’s great-grandfather, about whom the Torah mysteriously says, “Chanokh followed God, but he was gone, because God took him” (Bereishit 5:24). This association is found already in *Tikkunei Zohar* (70), which suggests a link between the Torah’s description of Yosef as a “*na’ar*” (“lad” – Bereishit 37:2) and the famous verse in Mishlei (22:6), “*Chanokh la-na’ar al pi darko*” (“Educate a youth according to his path”), alluding to a connection between the characters of Yosef and Chanokh. The Arizal (*Sha’ar Ha-gilgulim*) asserted that Yosef had the soul of Chanokh, a concept elaborated upon by the mystical work *Megaleh Amukot* (by Rav Natan Neta Shapiro), in Parashat Vayeishev. (Rav Pinchas Friedman discusses the connection between Yosef and Chanokh in [*Shevilei Pinchas*, Parashat Vayeishev, 5772](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BRc9lAvHT010zOR1tg1Gw01GqKpjPDol/view?usp=sharing).)

The Midrash (cited by Rashi to 5:22) explains that Chanokh was a righteous individual whom God took from this world at a relatively young age, to protect him from the sinful influences of his time. In Rashi’s words, “He was righteous and his mind would have easily resorted to evildoing. The Almighty therefore quickly removed him [from this world] and had him die before his time.” Chanokh’s piety was incompatible with the harsh realities of this world. He was sincerely and genuinely righteous, but his piety could not survive exposure to evil. Chanokh was capable of being righteous in seclusion, alone, protected from the complexities the world and the vices of other human beings. But he could not be righteous while living and interacting with other people.

And so the Kabbalists contrasted the piety of Chanokh with the piety of Yosef – who lived righteously, in steadfast devotion to his principles and values, while living and interacting with other people, even in the company of evil, and even as he led a major empire. At the age of seventeen, Yosef was brought in chains to Egypt, a civilization depicted by the Sages as especially immoral, and he remained there for the rest of his life. Yosef’s story is the opposite of Chanokh’s. Not only was he not taken from the world to be protected from negative influences, he was placed right in the heart of an immoral society, where he excelled in every possible way, including morally and spiritually. Chanokh’s piety was incapable of surviving the harsh realities of the world, whereas Yosef thrived by confronting the harsh realities of the world, following his morals and values under every circumstance and under all conditions, emerging as a respected and influential leader.

The Kabbalistic teaching linking these two figures teaches us that we must strive for a level of devotion that is impervious to foreign influences, that is firm and unshakable, and thus not endangered by involvement in, and interaction with, other people. We should not aspire merely to the piety of Chanokh – to religious devotion that can be sustained only in the safety of isolation – but rather to the piety of Yosef, to a level of confidence and conviction that does not necessitate the safety of isolation, and is instead strong and secure wherever and to whomever life takes us.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Vayigash of the dramatic moment when Yosef revealed his identity to his brothers, who did not consider for a moment that the Egyptian vizier who had accused them of spying, and demanded that they bring their youngest brother to him, was actually Yosef, the brother whom they had sold as a slave twenty years earlier. Yosef said to his brothers, “I am your brother, Yosef, whom you had sold to Egypt” (45:4).

Seforno explains that Yosef mentioned the event of his sale as his slave to prove to the brothers that he was Yosef. The merchants who purchased Yosef, Seforno writes, did not know, and likely would never imagine, that the people selling them a slave were the slave’s brother. They probably assumed that this transaction was like any other sale of a slave that was common in ancient times, and were not aware that this slave was an ordinary man cruelly betrayed by his brothers. Therefore, Seforno explains, by identifying himself by name as both their brother, and the one they had sold as a slave, Yosef proved to his brothers that he was speaking the truth, because nobody else knew that he had been sold by his brothers.

*Or Ha-chayim* adds a different insight into the reason why Yosef found it necessary to mention his having been sold by his brothers. According to *Or Ha-chayim*, when Yosef announced, “I am your brother, Yosef, whom you had sold to Egypt,” he was indicating that he was their “brother,” and retained his brotherly love for them, even at that moment when they acted cruelly to him. Yosef did not merely forgive his brothers twenty years later – he maintained his feelings of love for them even at that very moment when they sold him as a slave. Although he cried and pleaded with them (“*be-hitchaneno eileinu*” – 42:21), nevertheless, according to *Or Ha-chayim*, he did not despise or resent them at those painful moments. He regarded them as his brothers, to whom he felt unconditionally loyal and devoted, even at the very moments when they conspired against him. And so Yosef stressed to his brothers, “I am your brother, Yosef, whom you had sold to Egypt” – even when they sold him, he felt as their brother.

*Or Ha-chayim*’s creative reading of this verse teaches that we are capable of not only forgiving wrongs committed against us, but of looking beyond those wrongs even as they unfold. Forgiveness itself is certainly noble, and often very difficult, but *Or Ha-chayim* challenges us to reach even higher – to maintain feelings of kinship even at the time the pain is inflicted. Of course, in many – or perhaps most – instances, a person cannot be realistically expected to feel fond feelings towards an individual who is acting wrongly towards him. However, *Or Ha-chayim* teaches that we can and should try to see beyond the wrongful act and respect the individual’s admirable qualities even as we are exposed to the other elements of his character. We should be trying to find what to like and admire about others even when we observe and even suffer from their negative traits – just as we want people to recognize our own good qualities even when they see our less admirable characteristics.

Friday

Parashat Vayigash begins with Yehuda’s plea to Yosef on behalf of Binyamin, who was framed as a thief when Yosef’s goblet was planted in his luggage. Yehuda, who had pledged to Yaakov that he would assure Binyamin’s safe return home, implored Yosef to allow him – Yehuda – to remain in Egypt as Yosef’s slave in place of Binyamin, whom Yosef had decreed must remain as his slave as punishment for his crime (44:33).

Yehuda introduced his petition by telling Yosef “*ki kamokha ke-Pharaoh*” – that he “was like Pharaoh.” Different explanations have been offered by the commentators for why Yehuda would begin by stating that he regards Yosef as the same as Pharaoh. Rashi, based on the Midrash, writes that Yehuda spoke to Yosef in a harsh, belligerent and threatening tone, and was warning Yosef that just as a previous Pharaoh was punished for unlawfully taking Sara into his palace (Bereishit 12:18), he, too, would be punished for keeping Binyamin with him.

A surprising interpretation – one which also hearkens back to the story of Saras abduction – is offered by the Tosafists, in *Da’at Zekeinim*. They explain: “Just as Pharaoh desired our matriarch, Sara, because of her beauty, so do you desire Binyamin as a slave because of his beauty.” The Tosafists see Yehuda’s introductory remark as drawing a comparison between Pharaoh’s lustful desire for Sara, and Yosef’s desire to keep Binyamin as his slave. This explanation likely relates to the previous passage in *Da’at Zekeinim*, where the Tosafists explain that Yehuda questioned why Yosef would want to keep as his servant somebody who he believes had just committed a crime of theft. It seems foolish to specifically want a convicted thief to serve in one’s palace. After making this argument, Yehuda now ridiculed Yosef for his foolish desire to keep Binyamin with him as a servant, which could only be explained as driven by an irrational fondness of Binyamin’s appearance.

It might be worth reflecting further on the comparison drawn by *Da’at Zekeinim* between Pharaoh’s sexual attraction to Sara, and what Yehuda perceived as the Egyptian vizier’s desire to keep Binyamin as his slave because of his pleasing appearance. Just as outward appearance can arouse physical attraction, so can superficial stimuli irrationally draw us to people, and convince us that they can “serve us,” that we stand to receive benefit from them. An impressive exterior – qualities such as good looks, rhetorical skill, a pleasant voice, athletic prowess, or wit – can often lure us to believe that we can benefit from the individual’s “service,” that we can gain by including that person in our lives. People connect with celebrities, for example, because these figures’ outward appearance and exterior qualities make them feel that these personalities can somehow serve their interests and enhance their lives.

More generally, there are many things which outwardly appear beneficial and rewarding, leading us to embrace them as our “servants,” when in truth they have little, or nothing, to offer us. Certain pastimes, pursuits, ideas and ideologies appear valuable or worthwhile, but in actuality will not serve us in any meaningful way. The connection drawn by *Da’at Zekeinim* between sexual attraction and Yehuda’s assessment of Yosef’s interest in Binyamin’s service reminds us to be wary of misleading appearances, to remember that not everything which gives the appearance of “serving” us indeed serves our interests, and to ensure that we bring into our lives only that which is truly valuable and beneficial, and not that which only appears valuable and beneficial.

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