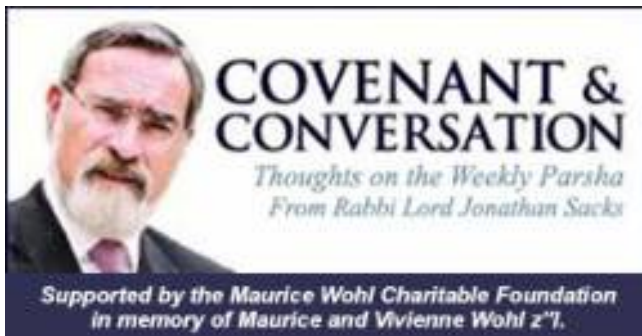


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## Three Approaches to Dreams

In one of the greatest transformations in all literature, Joseph moves in a single bound from prisoner to Prime Minister. What was it about Joseph – a complete outsider to Egyptian culture, a “Hebrew,” a man who had been languishing in jail on a false charge of attempted rape – that marked him out as a leader of the greatest empire of the ancient world?

Joseph had three gifts that many have in isolation but few in combination. The first is that he dreamed dreams. Initially we do not know

whether his two adolescent dreams – of his brothers’ sheaves bowing down to his, and of the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing down to him – are a genuine presentiment of future greatness, or merely the overactive imagination of a spoiled child with delusions of grandeur.

Only in this week’s parsha of Mikketz do we discover a vital piece of information that has been withheld from us until now. Joseph says to Pharaoh, who has also had two dreams: “The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon” (Gen. 41:32). Only in retrospect do we realise that Joseph’s double dream was a sign that this too was no mere imagining. Joseph really was destined to be a leader to whom his family would bow down.

Second, like Sigmund Freud many centuries years later, Joseph had a gift for interpreting the dreams of others. He did so for the butler and baker in prison and, in this week’s parsha, for Pharaoh. His interpretations were neither magical nor miraculous. In the case of the butler and baker he remembered that in three days’ time it would be Pharaoh’s birthday (Gen. 40:20). It was the custom of rulers to make a feast on their birthday and decide the fate of certain individuals (in Britain, the Queen’s birthday honours continue this tradition). It was reasonable therefore to assume that the butler’s and baker’s dreams related to this event and their unconscious hopes and fears.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph may have known ancient Egyptian traditions about seven-

year famines. Nahum Sarna quotes an Egyptian text from the reign of King Djoser (ca. twenty-eighth century BCE):

I was in distress on the Great Throne, and those who are in the palace were in heart's affliction from a very great evil, since the Nile had not come in my time for a space of seven years. Grain was scant, fruits were dried up, and everything which they eat was short.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph's most impressive achievement, though, was his third gift, the ability to implement dreams, solving the problem of which they were an early warning. No sooner had he told of a seven-year famine than he continued, without pause, to provide a solution:

“Now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine.” (Gen. 41:33-36)

We have seen Joseph the brilliant administrator before, both in Potiphar's house and in the prison. It was this gift, demonstrated at precisely the right time, that led to his appointment as Viceroy of Egypt.

From Joseph, therefore, we learn three principles. The first is: dream dreams. Never be afraid to let

your imagination soar. When people come to me for advice about leadership, I tell them to give themselves the time and space and imagination to dream. In dreams we discover our passion, and following our passion is the best way to live a rewarding life.<sup>3</sup>

Dreaming is often thought to be impractical. Not so; it is one of the most practical things we can do. There are people who spend months planning a holiday but not even a day planning a life. They let themselves be carried by the winds of chance and circumstance. That is a mistake. The Sages said, “Wherever [in the Torah] we find the word *vayehi*, ‘And it came to pass,’ it is always the prelude to tragedy.”<sup>4</sup> A *vayehi* life is one in which we passively let things happen. A *yehi* (“Let there be”) life is one in which we make things happen, and it is our dreams that give us direction.

Theodor Herzl, to whom more than any other person we owe the existence of the state of Israel, used to say, “If you will it, it is no dream.” I once heard a wonderful story from Eli Wiesel. There was a time when Sigmund Freud and Theodore Herzl lived in the same district of Vienna. “Fortunately,” he said, “they never met. Can you imagine what would have happened had they met? Theodore Herzl would have said: ‘I have a dream of a Jewish state.’ Freud would have replied: ‘Tell me, Herr Herzl, how long have you been having this dream? Lie down on my couch, and I will psychoanalyse you.’ Herzl would have been cured of his dreams and today there would be no Jewish state.” Fortunately, the Jewish people have never been cured of their dreams.

The second principle is that leaders interpret other people’s dreams. They articulate the inchoate. They find a way of expressing the hopes and fears of a generation. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech was about taking the hopes of Black Americans and giving them wings. It was not Joseph’s dreams that made him a leader; it was Pharaoh’s. Our own dreams give us direction; it is other people’s dreams that give us opportunity.

The third principle is: find a way to implement dreams. First see the problem, then find a way of solving it. The Kotzker Rebbe once drew attention to a difficulty in Rashi’s writing. Rashi (Ex. 18:1) says that Yitro was given the name Yeter (meaning, “he added”) because “he added a passage to the Torah beginning [with the words], “Choose from among the people ...” (Ex. 18:21). This occurred when Yitro saw Moses leading alone and told him that what he was doing was not good: he would wear himself and the people to exhaustion. Therefore he should choose good people and delegate much of the burden of leadership to them.

The Kotzker pointed out that the passage that Yitro added to the Torah did not begin, “Choose from among the people.” It began several verses earlier when he said, “What you are doing is not good.” (Ex. 18:17) The answer the Kotzker gave was simple. Saying “What you are doing is not good” is not an addition to the Torah – it is merely stating a problem. The addition consisted in the solution: delegating.

Good leaders either are, or surround themselves with, problem-solvers. It is easy to see when

things are going wrong. What makes a leader is the ability to find a way of putting them right. Joseph’s genius lay not in predicting seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, but in devising a system of storage that would ensure food supplies in the lean and hungry years.

Dream dreams; understand and articulate the dreams of others; and find ways of turning a dream into a reality – these three gifts are leadership, the Joseph way.

### **QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)**

1. Dream dreams: How big are the ideas you dream up for your life?
2. Understand the dreams of others: Do you ever listen to other people’s aspirations, and help them to visualise them more clearly?
3. Find ways of transforming them: How can you turn these dreams into realities?

### **NOTES**

1. Ibn Ezra 40:12 and Bechor Shor 40:12 both make this suggestion.
2. Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, New York, Schocken, 1966, 219.
3. One of the classic texts on this subject is Ken Robinson, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).
4. Megillah 10b.



## A Cherished Chalise

As a young man, Yosef was a dreamer of dreams. There were those who considered these dreams nothing more than delusions of grandeur, but Yosef knew the dreams would come true.

As a dreamer, Yosef knew how to read symbols; he understood things others often missed, enabling him to see into the future with clarity. From the moment Yosef takes his place on the stage of history, everyone who comes into contact with him - other than his brothers - sees that he is gifted; Yosef is revered, but feared. In at least one instance, this unusual combination saved his life: Yosef's first "home" in Egypt was in the household of the chief executioner, Potifar. Surely a man with such a vocation was neither friendly nor forgiving. Yet when Yosef is (falsely) accused of cuckolding the executioner, somehow he emerges unscathed. Potifar, who killed people for a living, could quite easily have dispatched Yosef with one quick chop of the guillotine; strangely enough, Potifar doesn't lay a finger on Yosef. The executioner was no fool; simply put, he was terrified of Yosef.[1] Potifar saw how his personal fortunes had soared from the moment Yosef arrived. He understood that God was with Yosef, and he was afraid that if he harmed Yosef, not

only would he lose his new-found wealth, but he might also be subjected to the wrath of Yosef's God. Perhaps Potifar knew his own wife well enough not to believe her accusation; perhaps he knew Yosef well enough to know that he was an upstanding, trustworthy man and not some sort of Rasputin. Either way, Potifar arrives at a rather elegant resolution of the problem: He incarcerates Yosef in his prison, knowing full well that even from the dungeon Yosef may still be an asset.[2]

Yosef, for his part, displayed nothing but loyalty - both to his master and to the Master of the Universe, to Potifar and to God - when he withstood the advances of Mrs. Potifar:

Now that I am here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. There is no one in this house who holds more authority than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?" (Bereishit 39:8-9)

Yosef's description of his own position of authority and the trust his master has placed in him differs subtly from the "narrator's" description, several verses earlier, of the relationship between Potifar and Yosef:

And from the time that [Potifar] put Yosef in charge of his household and of all that he owned, God blessed the Egyptian's house for Yosef's sake, so that the blessing of God was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside. [Potifar] left all that he had in Yosef's hands and he

did not withhold anything save the bread that he ate. And Yosef was good looking and handsome. (Bereishit 39:5-6)

The text tells us that only one aspect of Potifar's household was beyond Yosef's authority: the "bread." When Yosef describes the limits of his own authority, he replaces this expression with a reference to his master's wife. The switch is deliberate, and is one more indication of Yosef's talent at utilizing and understanding symbolism. The symbol of bread is what lands Yosef in prison, and it continues to be an ominous symbol in the dream of the king's baker; to Yosef, the recurring symbol is as clear as day.

On the other hand, the sommelier's dream contained no such ominous symbols; he would live, and would be returned to his former position. He would once again bear the king's chalice, and through him Yosef's abilities would be made known. Apparently, the sommelier, like Potifar, both revered and feared Yosef's powers. He seems to have been unsure whether Yosef only read the future, or if he was responsible for creating it.[3] Either way, the sommelier does his best to steer clear of Yosef. He tries to forget the entire incident, and to put a safe distance between himself and the man with the frightening abilities.

When Pharaoh is tormented by his own dreams, the sommelier steps forward, racked with guilt;[4] he knows that Yosef had predicted his personal future, and is convinced that Yosef can see the future of Pharaoh and all of Egypt.

Pharaoh's dreams had particular significance for Yosef, not only because of their importance for

the Egyptian economy, or even because they catapulted him from prison to prestige. Pharaoh's dreams held the key to the fulfillment of Yosef's dreams: When he heard Pharaoh recount his recurring visions, Yosef was able to see, for the first time, how and under what circumstances he would be reunited with his brothers. He knew, without a doubt, that his brothers would soon be on their way to Egypt, seeking food. The dreams he had seen as a young man would be fulfilled:

Once Yosef had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: We were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf." His brothers answered, "Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?" (Bereishit 37:5-8)

As the story unfolds, Yosef's dreams come true; his brothers bow low, humbling themselves before the man who holds their fate and the fate of their hungry children in his hands. But Yosef's "victory" is hollow; the fulfillment of his dreams is marred by the brothers' lack of recognition.

Now Yosef was the vizier of the land; it was he who dispensed rations to all the people of the land. And Yosef's brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground. When Yosef saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From

the land of Canaan, to procure food."  
For though Yosef recognized his  
brothers, they did not recognize him.  
(Bereishit 42:6-8)

While Potifar, the prison warden, the sommelier, and Pharaoh were all aware of Yosef's greatness and powers, those who were closest to him could not see past their own hatred and jealousy. They could not imagine that their tormentor, the viceroy of the world's greatest superpower, was in fact an old adversary, the brother whom they had mocked for his "delusions of grandeur."

Yosef has a plan; he is determined to open their eyes as the first step toward healing the rift. And so, Yosef - the dreamer and interpreter of dreams - speaks to them in symbols. They are sent on their way back to their father's house in Canaan with food in their bags and an incarcerated brother (Shimon) left behind. Yosef alone sees the symbolism of their situation, the inner meaning: When Yosef languished in the pit, screaming for mercy, these same brothers sat and broke bread, filling their bellies at their brother's expense. When they sold Yosef, they chose money over their brother - and so, in an act of symbolism colored with poetic justice, Yosef sees to it that they leave for home not only with food in their bags, but with their money as well. After all, don't these people prefer food and money to a brother?

Throughout the ordeal, the brothers do not begin to guess the true identity of the man who has latched on to them; in fact, they don't ever seem to entertain the obvious questions: Who is he? What does he want from us? What have we ever done to him to deserve such treatment? Their

manner and demeanor is of innocent victims, yet they are far from innocent, and it is their erstwhile victim who is now in control.

The brothers return to Egypt, this time with their youngest brother, Binyamin. Yosef greets them; all the talk of the "mistake" through which the money ended up in their bags is excused. Yosef (via his emissary) explains that it is his understanding that God has been looking out for them. (Bereishit 43:23)

Once again, Yosef orchestrates a scene that is ripe with symbolic meaning - but only he understands it. He gathers all of his brothers, and they sit down to a meal together. Once again, the brothers fail to recognize the significance of the moment; they do not recognize Yosef, and therefore they do not know that they are whole.

The brothers seem relieved; Yosef's hospitality indicates that they will not be charged with theft or espionage. They let their guard down, and they raise their glasses and drink with their host, who has now taken on the role of sommelier. Yosef alone understands the symbolism of wine in the story of his life; the brothers are unaware of the circumstances of Yosef's ascension to power. They have avoided asking about their inquisitor's identity or history.

Once again, Yosef sends them away; once again, their money is returned - but this time, another item is added to their bags: Yosef's chalice.

When they are tracked down and detained, they are accused of repaying Yosef's benevolence with malevolence, of stealing the magical chalice he

uses for divination. Why did Yosef choose this, of all things, to ensnare them?

The brothers are completely at a loss. They are no longer able to act, to speak in their own defense. They become deflated, and believe that their predicament is God's way of punishing them for a crime committed long ago. They analyze the strange accusation with which they have been charged. Grasping at straws, they posit that the inscrutable man who has been tormenting them is immersed in the occult, which is the source of his uncanny knowledge about them and their family. For the brothers to accept this explanation, they must embrace a world of black magic and supernatural powers.

The true explanation, a far less far-fetched explanation, eluded them: Yosef, the interpreter of dreams, was communicating through the use of symbols. He hoped to speak to his brothers on a much deeper level than the superficiality of words, to make them face their past - and the symbol of the chalice was part and parcel of Yosef's message.

Yosef's rise to power was made possible by his interpretation of the sommelier's dream. By placing the cup back in the hand of the sommelier, Yosef would one day leave his prison. The chalice, Yosef understood, was a symbol for his own life. The chalice told Yosef's future, just as Yosef told the future through the chalice.

The brothers were not guilty of stealing the chalice - but they were guilty of "stealing" Yosef, the person whom the chalice represented.

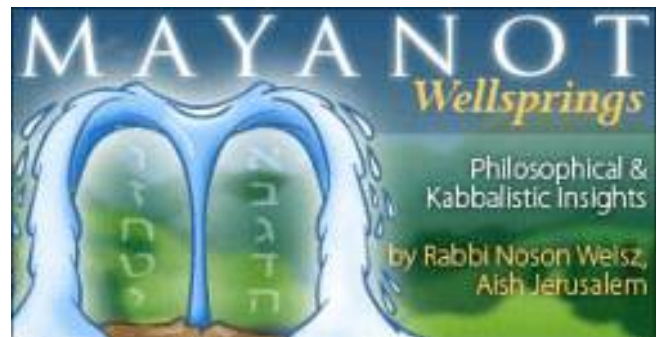
Yosef understood the symbolic representation of the future in each of the dreams he interpreted. Yosef was a vessel for communicating the future, and the magical chalice, a vessel of divination, was a symbolic representation of Yosef's unique vision. In his confrontation with his brothers, Yosef used the symbol of his own dreams to awaken his brothers to the sins of their past. As the visions of his youth came to fruition, Yosef hoped he could heal his family by helping his brothers see, through the use of symbols, what they had so steadfastly avoided seeing for so many years.

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<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2017/12/audio-and-essays-parashat-vayeshev.html>

1. Alshech, Bereshit 39:20.
2. R' S.R. Hirsch and Malbim, 39:20.
3. See Malbim and Ha'amek Davar Bereishit 41:13.
4. When he speaks to Pharaoh, the sommelier speaks of his **sins** in the plural, how he had sinned against Pharaoh and Yosef. See Bereishit 41:9, and comments of Hizkuni.



## An Issue of Trust

Parshat Mikeitz overlaps this week with the celebration of Chanukah. Interestingly, it brings

up an issue that defines the very essence of the holiday -- *bitachon*, trust in God.

We begin with Joseph, who just been dragged out of jail for the occasion, interpreting Pharaoh dream and then going on to offer this choice bit of unsolicited advice:

*[And Joseph said to Pharaoh:] "Now let Pharaoh seek out a discerning and wise man and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed and let him appoint overseers over the land and he shall prepare the land of Egypt during the seven years of abundance." (Genesis, 41:33-34)*

Where does courage end and presumption begin? Why did Joseph presume to offer Pharaoh unsolicited advice and thus jeopardize the grace he had gained with the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams?

Joseph may have been capable of doing something impetuous, but he was a *tzadik* and he was not allowed to do something forbidden in the eyes of God. For merely requesting that the cup-bearer remember him to Pharaoh if he were reinstated as Joseph had predicted, he was punished by having to remain two extra years in jail for his lack of faith. (See Rashi, Genesis 40:33.)

It is a much greater violation of faith to place oneself in a situation of danger needlessly. If Joseph was not punished for his apparent presumption, this was obviously what he was supposed to do. How did he know? What made him think that it was the will of God that he suggest to Pharaoh that an advisor was needed,

implying that he be appointed for the job straight out of jail?

## **TRUST IN GOD**

The commandment to believe in God subsumes within it the obligation to place one's trust in God. Nachmanides explains the relationship between these concepts thus:

1. implicit in the command to believe in God is the command to believe in a just God;
2. a just God inflicts no harm without reason;
3. therefore, unless a person fears that his sins may expose him to harm, his belief in God necessitates that he trust in God's protection.

Other than humans who have free will, there is nothing loose in the world at all -- everything is under God's direct personal control. Even the evil forces of nature have no permission to attack autonomously without first obtaining God's permission. Thus no evil can befall anyone who is under God's protection.

On the other hand, explains Nachmanides, this does not mean that all one's designs are automatically guaranteed to have a successful outcome. In order to be confident of a favorable outcome, you must first be certain that what you are proposing to do is in line with God's will. If it is, you can proceed with full confidence, as it is written, "Trust in God and do good" (Psalms 37:3). But if you are uncertain that your chosen course of behavior is in line with God's design, there is absolutely no reason why you should be



entitled to assume that God will engineer the outcome you desire.

Thus, Joseph's act of presumption can be understood if we assume that it was taken in line with this commandment to "trust in God and do good." He had *bitachon* that God would help him attain the seemingly impossible.

How can we learn from Joseph when to have *bitachon* and forge on (as he did in this instance) and when to question our actions (as he should have earlier)?

### **CHANUKAH VS. PURIM**

Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman finds the answer in the different actions taken by our ancestors in two times in history when the Jewish people were threatened -- the events which we now celebrate as the holidays Chanukah and Purim.

Chanukah commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greek army of Antiochus -- a victory in the face of hopeless odds. The *Al Hanisim* prayer describes it as the victory of "the few over the many and the weak over the strong."

Knowing in advance that there was no natural way they could possibly win, the Maccabees placed their faith in God, went to war, and succeeded in destroying the superior enemy. While there is no arguing with results, nevertheless, the decision to attack a vastly superior power under these circumstances is highly problematic, according to Jewish law. It is far from clear that such a course of behavior is always permissible. Judaism forbids useless

gestures of resistance that can only be termed suicidal.

In line with this philosophy, when Haman issued his edict of genocide against the Jewish people, whose abolition we commemorate and celebrate with the festival of Purim, the Jews did not engage in war. The Book of Esther records public fasting and prayer and repentance as the method of resistance adopted by Jews. They did not attempt a war against hopeless odds. They called out for God's help.

How can we account for the difference in the policy adopted by the Jewish people in the Chanukah and Purim stories, in the face of situations that appear so alike on the surface? Which policy was correct, and if they were both correct how do we explain the difference?

This is the explanation presented by Rabbi Elchanan in the name of his mentor the Chofez Chaim. The reaction of the Jewish people in each case was correct according to Jewish law because it was tailored to suit the sort of danger they faced. Haman was threatening them with genocide. He was not offering clemency to anyone who would abandon his Judaism. All Jews were to be slaughtered no matter what. Antiochus was offering clemency to anyone who was willing to abandon the practice of Judaism. All a Jew had to do, to gain the rights and privileges of all Greek citizens, was to adopt a Greek lifestyle.

Explained Rabbi Elchanan: Perhaps the primary obligation imposed on the Jewish people by the Mitzvah of believing in God is the requirement of accepting His edicts. If God allows an edict of genocide to be issued against the Jewish people, a

believer has to accept the fact that in the eyes of God such an edict must be warranted. If they did not deserve it, a just God would not allow such an edict to be issued in the first place. There must be something terribly wrong with the Jewish people. The source of the problem is not the external Haman as he is merely the executioner. Therefore the solution is not to attack Haman, but to repent. Thus the Jews did not go to war but focused their energies where they were required, into making peace with God.

Antiochus was not out to harm Jews at all. He was out to destroy their religion. An edict against the religion is never from God but from the Satan. It is the Satan's job to make the Jews abandon their religion by any means at his disposal. Normally he only has the permission to tempt man, not threaten him with force. But if Jews are unwilling to come up with the small measure of self-sacrifice required to resist temptation, the Satan becomes stronger. The lack of Jewish resistance gives him the power to get Jews to abandon their religion by force. Nevertheless, an edict forcing a Jew to abandon his Torah does not issue from God. God commands Jews to observe His Torah at all times not to abandon it. Thus it was the Satan's edict the Jewish people were facing, not God's. In this situation the Jewish people went to war.

Satan's edicts can always be overcome by Jewish self-sacrifice no matter how great the temporal power backing them may be. The overcoming of such edicts requires the very display of the self-sacrifice toward the practices of their religion that Jews failed to demonstrate in the peaceful course of their ordinary lives. The victory over the Syrian

Greeks was only gained at the cost of much Jewish self-sacrifice.

But the war against the Syrian Greeks was not an act of suicide because it was a war against Satan, not a rebellion against God's edict. No matter how great the odds against it were, ultimate victory was always assured. The mismatch between the power possessed by the Jews and that wielded by their enemies was merely an indication of the great self-sacrifice that was being demanded. As God wins wars, not man, military prowess has no bearing on victory.

A war against Haman, however, would have been considered an act of suicide. As Haman's edict was directed against Jews themselves rather than against their religion, it originated from God and not from the Satan. To war against Haman would have amounted to warring against God.

To demonstrate how strongly He backed the policy Israel adopted against the Syrian Greeks, God sent the Jews a most unusual miracle. Generally, miracles are not provided as gestures of pure affection and approval. But the miracle of the Chanukah lights was an exception.

In the absence of ritually pure olive oil, the Maccabees could have, under Jewish law, used tainted oil for the lighting of the menorah. But in appreciation of Jewish self-sacrifice God miraculously provided Israel with ritually pure oil. The purity of the oil was symbolic of the clarity of vision that was required of the Jewish people to decide to engage in this apparently hopeless war.

How can we apply this to situations we find ourselves in today?

Interaction with God always requires an intelligent assessment of one's life and circumstances. A person always has to think to himself, "Assuming that I live in a world that is controlled by God in all particulars, how can I account for the circumstances that I find myself in?" The answer always provides the background for the proper application of *bitachon*.

### EXILE

But the story of Chanukah illustrates a deeper concept of *bitachon* as well. The victory over the Syrian Greeks that Chanukah serves to commemorate is the redemption of one of the four major exiles of Jewish history.

*When the earth was astonishingly empty, with darkness upon the face of the deep* (Genesis 1:2). Rabbi Shimon interpreted this verse as referring to the four kingdoms that took Israel into exile. The word "empty" refers to Babylon, as it is written, *I have seen the land and behold it is empty* (Jeremiah 14); "astonishingly" refers to Persia, as it is written, *and they made extreme haste*; and the word "darkness" refers to Greece, who darkened the eyes of Israel with their edicts, because they said to them "write on the horns of the ox that you have no share in the God of Israel..." (Genesis Rabba 2:4)

Each of the four kingdoms is distinguished by the fact that it provides an alternative organizing principle to the one offered by Israel around

which human society can be organized. As humans are intelligent, they cannot live in a senseless world.

Israel explains the world as a place God created in which man can earn his reward by serving God. But the Greeks envisioned the world as a self-contained entity. God was a part of it, but Aristotle defined God as a first cause who created the world not because He chose to, but because it was in His nature to do so. Consequently, the world He created was exactly the world He was compelled to create. Man has no recourse but to come to terms with the world he lives in, for the natural world constitutes his entire reality. Greek culture rejects Judaism on the grounds of practicality.

This rejection is focused more at Torah study than at actual observance. The investment of so much effort in knowledge that does not seem to improve man's lot by an iota seems futile to the Greek mind. All the divisions of knowledge organized by Aristotle were designed to improve man's lot.

But perhaps it can be argued that Judaism is a practical necessity for Jews as Jews cannot live without a close relationship with a personal God. Just as one doesn't think of one's children in terms of practical advantages, and would never consider selling them for any kind of price, an emotional attachment to God cannot be measured in terms of its utility either.

Maharal explains that this is the proposition the Greeks were shooting down by making the Jews write on the horns of the ox. This ox is a reference to the golden calf. If the people who stood at Mount Sinai could serve an idol a mere forty days

after the experience of bonding with God in such an intensive way, this amply demonstrates that Jews can manage quite well without their attachment to this God of theirs. In the post- First Temple world, Judaism is of no practical or emotional necessity, so why stubbornly cling to it?

The downside of Greek knowledge, which is fully shared by the modern secular culture (which is its great grandchild) is that it is forced to accept a pointless universe. If the universe was not created for any purpose by an intelligent God who designed it in conformity to His purpose, it just is. And, human beings, as they are a part of this pointless universe, also have purposeless lives -- they live and they die and it all makes no difference.

It is precisely in this area that Torah knowledge is focused. The Torah teaches us the purpose of the universe. It explains how and why it was created, what God wanted to accomplish with it, and how the purpose of human life relates to God's design. Man lives in a world of relationships, not in a world of practicalities. The practicalities of the world are related to its purpose and have no importance in themselves. They merely provide the venue in which the relationship between God and man can develop.

## CLASH OF CULTURES

The clash of cultures that Chanukah commemorates was over the willingness of the Jewish people to live in a practical but purposeless world, or to insist to the point of self-sacrifice on leading lives of significance and meaning.

*Bitachon* is only rational in a word that has purpose and meaning. If this is truly such a world, than we can place our trust in God that He will never allow considerations of practicality to force us into leading meaningless lives. No matter what economic or military force may be aligned against the practice of Judaism, a Jew can always succeed in leading his life according to Torah values if he is willing to undergo some self-sacrifice.

*Bitachon* is the certainty that God will never demand more self-sacrifice than one is capable of. A person who approaches life with *bitachon* learns to expand his own self-perceived limits. He knows that, if God asks him for more self-sacrifice, then he is capable of demonstrating it.



## Hanukkah All Over Again

Popular wisdom contends that "the more things change, the more they stay the same." The Talmud recognizes the value of popular wisdom, often remarking, "Hainu d'amri inshi, this is what people say." Popular sayings are the product of long experience, and they are usually on target.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Events change. Conditions change. Styles

change. But people do not change. Human nature today is no different from what it was a hundred, a thousand or five thousand years ago. Therefore, sooner or later, people driven by the unchanging drives and ambitions of human nature will manipulate the new events, conditions and styles into forms that help them achieve the same goals people have been pursuing since time immemorial.

A little over two thousand years ago, Alexander the Great, at the head of a Greek and Macedonian army, conquered the entire Middle East and introduced it to Greek philosophy and culture. The Greeks transformed the ancient world by rejecting the worship of a Higher Being and making mankind the focus of the culture. The Greeks promoted the importance of the human intellect and the beauty of the human form as ideals to be held up for admiration and even worship. It was the antithesis of Judaism, which focuses on the Creator and gives man value in proportion to the level of his relationship with the Divine.

The Greeks recognized the power of the Torah. They knew it was the mortal enemy of their culture, the force that threatened Greek civilization more than any other, and they mounted a campaign to eradicate Torah observance among the Jews. They passed laws outlawing fundamental Jewish practices such as milah and Shabbos. And they built theaters and gymnasiums throughout Eretz Yisrael to entice the Jews to share in the pleasures and rewards of Greek culture.

Unfortunately, the Greek campaign was very effective. Many Jews, among them High Priests and others holding the highest offices in the land, abandoned the ways of their fathers and assimilated into Greek society. These Jews were known as Hellenizers, since the Greeks referred to Greece as Hellas and themselves as Hellenes. As time went on, it seemed as if the juggernaut of Greek culture and values would completely absorb the tiny Jewish commonwealth and Torah would be forgotten. But then the Chashmonaim, a small band of staunch Jews loyal to the Torah and Jewish tradition, rose up against the Greek oppressors nearly two hundred years after the Greek conquest, and they restored the supremacy of the Torah among the Jewish people. The festival of [Hanukkah](#) celebrates this triumph every year.

In our own days, we have seen similar events take place. One hundred years ago, a new philosophy called communism appeared on the stage of world history. The appeal of communism was in the simplicity and apparent justice of its ideas. The rich should not exploit the poor. All the people should own all means of production. Everyone should work according to his ability and consume according to his need. In all else, everyone in society would be equal. As you can well imagine, this was an extremely attractive system for the masses in impoverished and exploited societies, and it spread like wild-fire. It scored its first victory in Russia and then spread to Eastern Europe, China and countries in Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and Africa, as well as innumerable "liberation movements" across the world.

Sad to say, many Jews were drawn into the communist movement during its early stages. Young men and women chafing under the repressive Czarist and other totalitarian regimes and too restless to adapt to shtetl life sought fulfillment of their natural idealism in the communist ranks. For a while, there was even a Jewish section in the Communist Party called the Yevsektzia. This went on until the 30's when Stalin purged the party of its Jews. Afterwards, the Jews were only on the receiving end of communist repression.

Ultimately, communism was discredited by the old nemesis of all starry-eyed systems, the avarice and ambition of human nature. In the end, the communist system engendered more exploitation and less justice than any other system in history. It remained in force for nearly a century by virtue of state terrorism, and then it collapsed. But in the interim, it brought untold devastation and ruin to the world for an entire century.

Hellenism rose, and Hellenism fell. Communism rose and communism fell. All changes are impermanent. The more things change, the more they remain the same. The only constants are Torah and Judaism. The Rambam writes (Yad, Hilchos Mezuzah 6:13), "[By affixing a mezuzah,] he will be reminded of the Name of the Holy One, Blessed is He, every time he enters or leaves. He will be stirred from his slumber and realize that nothing endures forever other than the knowledge of [Hashem]." All ideologies are like a fleeting shadow, but Torah endures. Many Jewish brothers and sisters forgot this during the times of the Greeks, with disastrous consequences. Many more forgot it in the last century, with

consequences that were perhaps even more disastrous.

For those of us that grew up during the Cold War, the fall of communism was a thing of absolute wonder. Among my childhood memories are Khrushchev pounding the lectern in the United Nations with his shoe. I remember listening to the radio during the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. I remember the Prague Spring of 1968, when Soviet tanks crushed the rebirth of democracy in Czechoslovakia. For me, communism was a fact of life, something I expected to prey on my consciousness for the rest of my life.

And then it was gone. Just like that. Poof! The Soviet Union, that dreaded "evil empire," crumbled to dust.

In December of 1989, I was riding in a cab in New York. The driver had a thick Eastern European accent, and I thought he might be a Russian Jew. We began to talk, and it turned out he was a Romanian. By then, Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia had already gone the way of the Soviet Union and I remarked that Romania would be next.

He guffawed. "If you knew that tyrant Ceausescu, [the Romanian president], you would never say such a thing. He is another Stalin!"

Well, it didn't take long before Ceausescu fell and Romania discarded communism. Stalin himself could not have stopped this disintegration of a movement that had once seemed poised to take over the world.

What was happening here?

Why did communism have such phenomenal, almost supernatural success in the beginning, and why did it experience such a phenomenal, almost supernatural collapse in the end?

Rav Shimon Schwab believed that communism enjoyed such great success because the early communists were true believers; they were doing it lishmah, for altruistic reasons. They were willing to forgo personal gain and honor for the sake of the greater cause. Altruism can energize any idea, even if it is the greatest falsehood.

Rav Schwab asks a question. The first time Balak's messengers asked Bilam to curse the Jewish people, Heaven forbid, Hashem did not grant him permission to go with them. But when they returned a second time and offered Bilam money and honor, Hashem let him go. What changed?

The first time, Rav Schwab explains, they did not offer Bilam any reward. His curse would have been delivered altruistically. This would have been a dangerous curse. The second time, however, they offered him rewards. Now, his curse would be delivered for self-interest. Such a curse would not have nearly the same power and effectiveness.

The Kotzker Rebbe was once asked why other religions, which are based on sheker, falsehood, are so successful, while Judaism, which is the emet, the truth, doesn't attract others and even loses many of its own. "True, they serve sheker, falsehood," the Kotzker snapped, "but they serve it as if it were emet. True, we serve emet, but we do it as if it were sheker."

This was the power of the early communists. They were sincere. They were altruistic. They believed in what they were doing. They believed they were creating a utopian society on earth. It was a fantasy, an illusion, a mirage, but their idealism gave it reality for almost a century.

So why did communism fall so precipitously? Granted that the idealism had dissipated over the years, to be replaced by cynicism and corruption, but how do we explain the sudden collapse?

Rav Schwab contends that the only antidotes to falsehood are Torah and mitzvos. During the last years before the collapse of world communism, there was a revival of Torah in the Soviet Union. A small group of people returned to Torah with great mesiras nefesh, dedication at tremendous personal risk. They underwent circumcision even when there were no anesthetics available. They abstained from family relations when they had no access to a mikveh. They studied Torah diligently, even if it meant losing their jobs or being expelled from universities and other institutes of higher learning. They did it because they believed in it, not for personal gain, and their Torah lishmah brought down communism. All the other factors about which one reads in articles and books - economics, finance, geopolitics, military preparedness - are just window dressing. The Torah of the dissidents brought down communism. They are the Chashmonaim of our generation. They wrought the modern miracle of Hanukkah.