

“*Mikkeitz*: Relying on man, God, or both?”

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At the beginning of the saga of Joseph’s life he is described as *na’ar*, a mere lad, someone lacking tact and sensitivity (Gen.37:2), a situation that got him into such trouble in his relationship with his brothers. As a teenager, he *sensed* he was chosen for greatness, but he lacked the *sense* and patience required to attain it. He only developed and matured after he had confronted adversity and was thrown back on to his own resources, a skill that he would have learnt during the long years he spent in prison¹ on the trumped-up charge of having attempted to rape Potiphar’s wife (see 39:7). Learning to cope with his many challenging situations would have enabled him to survive and ultimately to rise to a position of leadership. So long as he thought he could rely solely on other people, however, his suffering was prolonged.

And that seems to have been his one big mistake as a youngster, leading Joseph to believe that the friendship he extended to the Chief Cupbearer, and the hope and confidence he gave him by interpreting his dream so positively, would be rewarded in kind, and that, once he was released and restored to his position and influence with Pharaoh, he would use it to help secure Joseph’s release from jail (see 40:14-15). The naivety of such trust was later to be expounded by the Psalmist when he advised, ‘Put not your trust in nobles, in mortals who cannot save’ (Ps.146:3). And no one knew more about court intrigues, power struggles and machinations than King David, author of the Psalms!

The opening four words of our sidrah – ‘And it was at the end of two years [that Pharaoh had a dream]’ (Gen. 41:1) – is enigmatic, in that the text provides no indication either of the event that preceded those ‘two years’ following which Joseph secured his freedom and became Viceroy of Egypt, nor of the actual duration of his incarceration. We cannot be sure, therefore, whether the ‘two years’ refers to the time from which Joseph was first incarcerated, or, more likely, from when the Chief Cupbearer was released and until he ‘remembered’ Joseph and brought him to the attention of Pharaoh. Hence the dispute among the early sources, with some Midrashim referring to him as having been in prison for twelve years,² others thirteen years,³ and with some reducing the number to ten years,⁴ given their assessment that he served in Potiphar’s home for three years before his incarceration.

The illustrious Spanish bible commentator, philosopher, poet and grammarian, Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), offers two “possible suggestions” to elucidate the reference to the ‘two years.’ His first is that it refers to the period following the release of the king’s Chief Cupbearer – that is, the two years during which the latter ‘forgot Joseph’ (see Gen. 40:23). This view was inspired by the Midrashic comment that, because Joseph put his faith in the Chief Cupbearer rather than wholly in God – by twice begging him to “remember me [to Pharaoh]” (see Gen. 40:14) – two years were added to his initial basic divine sentence of ten years for having (mis)used his holy powers to interpret the dreams of both the Chief Cupbearer and the baker.

The second of Ibn Ezra's "possible suggestions" to elucidate the phrase 'at the end of two years' is totally at variance, and irreconcilable, with the first in its ramifications. He relates it to the period between the wife of Potiphar's attempted seduction of Joseph, which led to his imprisonment, and the events of Pharaoh's dreams as described at the outset of our sidrah. However, this interpretation would imply that the entire duration of Joseph's incarceration would have been a mere two years!⁵

Though, at first glance, this may sound highly implausible, yet I would argue that, given the devious and shamelessly immoral behavior of Potiphar's wife as compared with the nobility of character that her husband recognized in Joseph, it would have been understandable had Potiphar released him after two years.

It should not surprise that the alternative interpretation of Ibn Ezra represents a rejection of the Midrashic chronology and tradition. But this is not unusual, given that his approach to textual interpretation was to view it from a literalistic and rationalistic perspective which considers the *peshat* (literal sense) as more authentic than *derash*, the Talmudic expository method which prioritizes the goal of extracting spiritual, moral, and ethical, teachings and perspectives.

But, to return to the seemingly harsh Midrashic critique of Joseph, which views his incarceration as a punishment for seeking the help of those in high places rather than solely of God,⁶ may we not argue that this seems an overly heavy price to pay for such a natural and instinctive human reaction?

Well, the Midrashic answer is to quote the verse, 'Happy is the man who makes the Lord his trust and does not turn to the arrogant' (Ps.40:5). However, it may be inferred that it is only from 'the arrogant' that he cautions against seeking help – which is truly a wise piece of advice – but, one may ask, from people of experience and influence why should it be unacceptable to do so?

This issue is elucidated by the *Netziv* of Volozhin (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin: 1817-1893) in his commentary on Gen. 40:14-15):

This is intended to show that in a crisis one should rely neither on human beings alone nor on God alone to provide a miracle. Of course, those who seek a way out of difficult situations should not fail to pray for Divine aid, for frequently God answers by sending earthly agents to work on His behalf.⁷ But if one tries to manage without God entirely, and put one's trust exclusively in human beings, they often prove to be broken reeds, unreliable, unsympathetic, and unhelpful.

This point is beautifully illustrated in a story told of David Ben Gurion and Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog. In the tense days of the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, it is said that Ben Gurion came to the rabbi and asked why God does not send the Israelis some miracles to get them out of their present crisis? Rav Herzog replied, "But Prime Minister, He has. *You* are one of God's miracles!"

Indeed, one of the reasons the sages lay such inordinate stress on the miracle of the Chanukah oil, rather than on the military prowess of the Maccabees, was precisely so that

we should appreciate the element of the miraculous - by which they meant the hand of God – in absolutely everything that happens in life. Moreover, what we perceive as our own achievements – be they personal, business, national, scientific or cultural – have their origins in a divine creativity that has been shared with man. After all, we are all ‘one of God’s miracles.’

At certain times of our lives, we sense it particularly powerfully. A baby is born, and the grateful, doting, parents look at it and have that overwhelming feeling that birth in general, and their baby in particular, is truly ‘one of God’s miracles.’ The same applies if we are delivered from danger, or recover from serious illness, against all odds. Indeed, we thank God three times a day, in the *Modim* prayer, for *al nisecha sheb’chol yom immanu*, “the miracles that we experience *every day*.” The challenge for us is, having been born a divine miracle, how to live in gratitude for it and be worthy of it throughout our lives.

At some time in our life, most of us are offered the privileged mission of touching the lives of others, by offering help, advice, love, or support. And when we respond readily, wholeheartedly, and successfully, the relief we bring truly makes us ‘one of God’s miracles.’

NOTES

1. The Torah states that Joseph was seventeen years old when his brothers sold him to become a slave in Egypt (see Gen.37:2) and was aged thirty when released from

prison to become its Viceroy (41:46), making a total of thirteen years. Rabbeinu Tam in his *Sefer HaYashar* (44:76), and followed by many other sources, gives the total number as 12 years, a calculation based on the Seder Olam's chronology (see next note), according to which Joseph spent only one year in Potiphar's household before being imprisoned.

2. For sources that calculate a term of 12 years for Joseph's incarceration, see *Seder Olam Rabbah*, sec 2; Mid. *Shemot Rabb.* 7 (1), *et al.*
3. See n.1.
4. The Mid. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, sec 39 calculates that Joseph was incarcerated for 10 years.
5. See Ibn Ezra on Gen. 41:1.
6. See Tal. *Sota* 13b; Mid. *Ber. Rabb.* 89 (3).
7. See the Netziv of Volozhin in his *Ha'amek Dava* rcommentary on Gen. 40:14-15. For an elaboration of the Netziv of Volozhin's statement that, 'frequently God answers by sending earthly agents to work on His behalf,' see my discussion in "*Vayyishlach*: Angelic men and human angels." www.rabbiJeffrey.co.uk > Torah Thought, 3rd Dec. 2025.

Chanukah same'ach v'shalom al Yisrael,

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