

MORASHAH
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Parshat HaShavuah Series

Parshat Vayeshev

In recent Jewish history, the Siddur has recaptured the attention of scholars and students. Many synagogues and academic institutions offer a variety of learning opportunities geared toward enhancing our fluency and understanding of Jewish prayer. For the active Jewish mind, the Siddur provides the catalyst for reflection and meditation on life events. Over the last few months, the world has experienced a financial crisis as well as an ongoing battle against terrorism. It is clearly a dark period in world history. With the recent election of Barak Obama to the presidency of the United States, there has been much discussion and commentary about the road that needs to be traveled in order for us to regain a bright future. Since the November 4th election, I have been struck by two passages in the *Siddur*, which, when coupled with this week's *Torah* reading, *Vayeshev*, and Rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen's commentary, provide us encouragement and inspiration so that we can overcome the difficult time we are experiencing.

The first passage appears early in the morning, in Psalm 30, directly before the *Pisukei Dizimra*. In it we read:

כי רגע באפו, חיים ברצונו, בערב ילין בכי, ולבקר רנה

For His anger lasts only a moment, but His favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may lodge with us at evening, but in the morning there are shouts of joy.

The Psalmist conveys an inspirational message not to hold onto the sadness of life. The dark moments of life are temporary. This encouragement to work through the challenging times is a focal point of *Parashat Vayeshev*.

This week's *Torah* reading offers us an opportunity to reflect on both God's intellect and ours. In detail, *Vayeshev* begins the narrative of Jacob and his children, which will take us to the conclusion of the Book of Genesis. Jacob seemingly favors Joseph over his other children, presenting Joseph with a multi-colored coat. Joseph's ego gets the best of him to the point that his brothers tire of him and throw him into a pit. He is eventually sold, and sold again, and he ends up in jail. Thanks to his God-given intellectual ability to interpret dreams, he rises out of the darkness of the jail, becoming governor over the land. Joseph's rise and fall and rise create a pattern similar to that of the sun rising and setting each day. We can derive from this story that descent is necessary for ascent.

In his comments on *Parashat Vayeshev*, Rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen from Radom, known as the Hafetz Hayyim, tells the following story. On *Shabbat Vayeshev* 1933, he was sitting in the company of a number of relatives and students. Someone groaned about the

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recent Nazi decrees upon Jewish communities in Europe. The groan caught his attention, and the rabbi pointed out to the gathering that embedded in *Parashat Vayeshev* are clear hints of Jewish history, even of events occurring in that day and age. In the first section of the *parasha*, the suffering of the righteous Joseph is described. A child, who is the apple of his father's eye, was torn from his father's love and sold into slavery. There he was made to serve the lowest of people. Surely during these difficult years of servitude and loneliness Joseph struggled with his Judaism and with the life lessons that he had acquired in his father's house. He did not surrender to the crushing stress from which he was given no relief. And what happened to Joseph at the end? It was precisely his suffering in a foreign land, when he was distanced from his father and the land of his birth, that caused Joseph to ascend to a great height of mortal success.

So too, with us, the descendants of Jacob: Divine Providence will similarly determine our fate. We were exiled from our land to foreign countries. The residents of these lands oppressed us and mocked us and implemented hard and evil decrees in order to make it challenging, if not impossible, for us to observe our Judaism. However, from the darkness of the exile, our future rises to bring the dawn of redemption. And in the eyes of the world it will be revealed that all of our hardships and suffering will be but for our good, and our luck will turn to our ascent up the ladder of life success. In that great hour, we will thank God for his kindness to us, as the prophet Isaiah stated, "In that day, you shall say: I will give thanks to You, O Lord, although You were angry with me. Your anger has turned back and You now comfort me."

מנחם בקר, פרפראות לתורה כרך א עמודים 175-176

This story comes to deepen our thinking about troubled times. Whether these troubles are personal (divorce, illness, job-loss, or death), or national/international (natural disaster, collapse of government or financial institutions, plague, or war), humans need to cleave to God, הַצּוּר, the Rock that is solid, stable and impenetrable, and unbreakable. By doing so, we provide ourselves with a strong foundation to withstand the challenges and to rebuild for a better tomorrow. Yet, to do so only during the dark hours presents Judaism and God as one-sided. In truth, God and Judaism are multi-faceted and are there to enhance and celebrate as well as to comfort. Regardless of what happens in our lives, God and Judaism will always be there for us. This is the message of our evening prayers.

Each and every evening during the *Ma'ariv* service we learn of God's awesome intellectual abilities:

"ברוך אתה... אשר בדברו מעריב ערבים, בחכמה פותח שערים.

"Blessed are you...Who with His word brings on the evening, with wisdom He opens the gates of heaven.

בורא יום ולילה, גולל אור מפני חשך וחשך מפני אור, ומעביר יום ומביא לילה,
ומבדיל בין יום ובין לילה, ה' צבאות שמו.

He creates day and night, rolling away light before darkness, and darkness before light; He causes the day to pass and the night to come, and makes a distinction between day and night, Lord of hosts is His name.

(First blessing before the Shema in the evening. Siddur)

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No matter what happens in the world, no matter what happens in our lives, like clockwork the sun rises and sets. It is interesting to note that in this particular prayer the language used to describe God's abilities is "host." In Hebrew, the word for "host" is the same word as "army", which indicates that God is powerful. This prayer also describes the core of God's power as "wisdom," thus teaching us that our intellectual capabilities, a gift from God, are all we need to address the issues life brings our way. Consistently God and Judaism offer the intellectual power and determination we need to enjoy life.

To this end, as we continue to experience rough waters in our personal lives as well as on the national and international stage, may we have the wisdom to strengthen and deepen our connection with God and Judaism through the pages of the Siddur.

Shabbat Shalom!

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