

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Vayeshev

The story of Joseph begins the longest saga in the book of Genesis. There are many unique qualities to Joseph, and Rashi points out one of those unique qualities. The Torah tells us that when Joseph was first sold into slavery, everything he touched became successful. His master understood that Joseph's success was due to God being with him. (וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱדֹמִי כִּי ה' אִתּוֹ וְכֹל לְאֲשֶׁר-הוּא עֹשֶׂה ה' מִצְּלִיָּהּ בְּיָדוֹ). The master attributed the success to God and not to Joseph's talents, because, as Rashi explains, the master saw that Joseph himself attributed everything to God (כי שמים שגור בפיו) Genesis chapter 39, v. 3).

Indeed, Joseph attributed his successes and his talents to God. He explained his refusal to be seduced by Potiphar's wife as a betrayal of his master and as a sin to God. God, he explained, is the source of his understanding of the dreams of the royal inmates who shared his prison. God, not Joseph, will be the source of well-being to Pharaoh. God, not his brothers, sent him to Egypt to allow his family to survive the famine.

Joseph never took the credit for the good he accomplished. He never promoted himself, but laid it all into the hand of Almighty God. If we reflect on his easy attribution of events to God, we can't help but be amazed at Joseph's greatness. Joseph lost his mother at a tender age. He was cut off from his father and betrayed by his brothers. It is a marvel that he held on to the God of his fathers, even after being sold into slavery and cut off from the covenantal family. The genius of Joseph is not that he gave credit to God for his moments of success and triumph. Joseph's genius is that he held onto God in his darkest moments and in the darkest of places. God, he believed and felt, was in the pit his brothers placed him in before selling him as a slave. God was with him even when he wore the livery of a slave instead of the ornamented coat showing his special status as his father's favorite. God was with Joseph even when he was sentenced to the deepest pit of Egypt for a rape that he did not commit. God was with him even in that pit of Egypt's deepest dungeon where no one could even dream of the possibility of pardon and freedom.

We always read the story of Joseph during Hanukkah. Joseph's story is the perfect biblical narrative for the only Jewish holiday not referenced in our Scripture. The miracle of Hanukkah is not the great victory of the Maccabees over their enemies. Nor is it the miracle of the light that burned eight days instead of only one day. The

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miracle of Hanukkah is that the Maccabees experienced the light of God's presence even in the darkest days of Hellenistic tyranny and oppression.

Joseph is the first hero of our people who does not hear the voice of God speak to him. Instead, he has to discern the meaning of events and of dreams. Joseph's genius is the ability to see God present in the meaning of events and dreams. The Bible is a record of God's voice and message to humanity. Hanukkah is the story of the Jewish people finding light even in the darkest times. The light of the menorah reminds us that we can discern meaning and feel God's presence even in the absence of prophecy.

We all need to learn from Joseph. The Mishnah teaches us that the mitzvah of "and you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" means that we must love and accept God in the bad moments as well as the good ones (בְּכֹל מֵאֵדָה, בְּכֹל מִדָּה וּמִדָּה שֶׁהוּא מוֹדֵד לְךָ הַיְיָ מוֹדֵה לּוֹ בְּמֵאֵדָה בְּמֵאֵדָה Mishna Berachot 9:5). Joseph is our biblical model for never abandoning God because he felt that God never abandoned him. The Maccabees were overwhelmed by Syrian dominance and a triumphant Hellenistic culture; nevertheless, they felt the inner light of God in their conviction that right makes might, leading to the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty and independence.

May the light of Hanukkah and inspiration of Joseph stir us to rekindle our connection to God's light and presence in our lives.

חג אורים שמח

Shabbat Shalom!

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