

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter IX: Vayeishev (Gen. 37:1–40:23)

Essay 15. Joseph's trust in the L-rd.

מדרש רבה על פסוק "וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ, "אֲשֶׁר־יִהְיֶה הַגֹּבֵר אֲשֶׁר־שָׂם ה' מִבְּטָחוֹ"—זֶה יוֹסֵף. "וְלֹא־פָנָה אֶל־רֵקֵבִים וְשָׁטִי כְּזָב" על ידי שְׁאָמַר לְשֶׁר הַמְּשָׁקִים זְכַרְתַּנִּי וְהִזְכַּרְתַּנִּי בְּתוֹסֶפֶת לֹא שָׂמִי שָׁנִים עַבְדִּי."

There is a Midrash Gen. Rabbah 89:3 on the verse, “It was at the end of two years time” (Gen. 41:1): “Happy is the man who puts his trust in the L-rd’ (Ps. 40:5)—this is Joseph. Ps. 40:5 ends: “Who turns not to the arrogant or to followers of falsehood”—Because Joseph failed in that regard, because he said to the chief cupbearer, “But remember me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness and mention me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place” (Gen. 40:14), he was punished, and two years were added to his [sentence].”

קָשָׁה רִישִׁיָּה לְסִיפִיָּה, דָּאִם נִעְנָשׁ עַל שְׂבִטַח בְּשֶׁר הַמְּשָׁקִים אִם כֵּן לֹא בְּטַח בְּהַקְב"ה. וּמַהוּ זֶה שְׁאָמַר "אֲשֶׁר־שָׂם ה' מִבְּטָחוֹ"—זֶה יוֹסֵף? וְעוֹד אֵימָא בְּמִדְרַשׁ רַבָּה סוּף פְּרָשַׁת [וַיֵּשֶׁב] וּ"ל, מִי מְחַכֵּה לְיוֹסֵף שְׁעָבְרוּ עָלָיו כָּל הַצָּרוֹת הָאֵלּוּ שְׁיִהְיֶה מְלֶךְ עַבְדִּי. וְקָשָׁה מַה בָּא לְלַמְדָנוּ.

This is difficult from beginning to end, i.e., it's hard to understand how both parts of the verse can be applied to Joseph. For if he was punished for the fact that he trusted in the chief cupbearer, if so, then he did not trust in the Holy One, Blessed be He. So if that is the case, what is this Midrash saying, “Who puts his trust in the L-rd”—this is Joseph? There is also brought in Midrash Gen. Rabbah 88:7 at the end of parshat [Vayeishev],² “Who waits for Joseph, i.e., expects that Joseph, who had all these troubles, that he should be the king?” It is difficult to understand what this Midrash comes to teach us.

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¹ These are the introductory words of the following parsha, Miketz, but the Midrash also discusses Gen. 40:14, a verse at the end of this week's parsha, Vayeishev.

² The first edition named parshat Tzav, but Gen Rabbah 88:7 quotes Gen. 40:23, which is the final verse of parshat Vayeishev.

אָמַנְם אָמְרוּ ו"ל כַּל הַבָּא דְּבַר עֲבִירָה לְיָדוֹ וְנִיצוּל מִמֶּנּוּ עוֹשִׂים לוֹ גַם ע"כ. וְאִם כֵּן יוֹסֵף שָׁבָא דְּבַר עֲבִירָה לְיָדוֹ וְנִיצוּל הַיְמִנָה הָיָה בְּטוֹם בְּה' שְׂעִישָׁה לוֹ גַם, אָבֵל לֹא הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ אֵיזָה גַם יְהִיָה. וְאַף הָיָה בְּטוֹם שְׂעִיָה הַגַּס לֹא יְהִיָה הוֹצָאָתוֹ מִבֵּית הַסּוּהַר לְבַד, שְׂעִיָה אֵינּוּ נִקְרָא גַם מִהַטְעַם שְׂפִירֵשׁ בְּעֶצְמוֹ, "כִּי־גִבַּב גִּנְבָתִי מֵאַרְצֵי הָעֵבְרִים וְגַם־פָּה לֹא־עָשִׂיתִי מְאוּמָה" וְכו'. וּמִשׁוֹם הַכִּי אָמַר הַמְדַרְשׁ, "אֲשֶׁר־י הַגִּבְרָ אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם ה' מִבְּטַח"ו—זֶה יוֹסֵף. שְׂעִיָה בּוֹטֵחַ בְּה' שְׂעִישָׁה לוֹ אֵיזָה גַם, אָבֵל אִף עַל פִּי שְׂעִיָה לוֹ בְּטַחֲוֹן בְּה', טְעָה לְתַלּוֹת הוֹצָאָתוֹ מִבֵּית הַסּוּהַר אִף עַל פִּי שְׂעִיָה גַם בְּשֵׁר הַמְשָׁקִים, שְׂעִיָה לוֹ לְבְטוֹם בְּה' אִף עַל הוֹצָאָתוֹ.

In truth, [the rabbis] of blessed memory said: “Anyone to whom a matter of sin presented itself to him and he was saved from it, a miracle is performed for him.”³ If so, Joseph, to whom a matter of sin presented itself and he was saved from it toward the right, was certain that G-d would perform a miracle for him, but he didn’t know which miracle it would be. But he was sure that this miracle wouldn’t only be his release from prison, for this would not be called a miracle for the reason he himself interpreted, “Indeed, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should have put me in the dungeon” (Gen. 40:15). Because of this, the Midrash says, “ ‘Happy is the man who puts his trust in the L-rd’—this is Joseph.” For he trusted in G-d that he would perform some miracle for him, but even though he had trust in G-d, he erred to hang his hopes for release from prison on the chief cupbearer. That is, Joseph expected a miracle, but thought that his release from prison would either not be miraculous at all, or at least would not be the only aspect of the miracle. Even though Joseph understood that help from the chief cupbearer would be no miracle, and he did not think it would necessarily take a miracle to be released from prison, it was still wrong for him to ask the chief cupbearer, for it was incumbent upon him to trust in G-d even for his release from prison.

וְזֶהוּ פֶשֶׁט הַכְּתוּב לְפִי דַעַת הַמְדַרְשׁ, "אֲשֶׁר־י הַגִּבְרָ אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם ה' מִבְּטַח"ו—זֶה יוֹסֵף, אָמַנְם לִהְיוֹת מְאוּשָׁר וְרְאוּי לוֹמַר בּוֹ אֲשֶׁר־י, צָרִיךְ שְׂעִישָׁה כְּמוֹ יוֹסֵף שְׂעִישָׁה אֶל־רְהָבִים וְכו'. אֲלֵא כָּל עֲנִן צָרִיךְ שְׂיִבְטַח בְּהַקְב"ה. וְזֶהוּ, מִי מְחַפֵּה לְיוֹסֵף וְכו'.

This is the plain meaning of the Scripture according to the opinion of the Midrash, “ ‘Happy is the man who puts his trust in the L-rd’—this is Joseph,” although to be happy and worthy to say regarding [such a man] that he is happy, he should not do as Joseph did when he turned to the arrogant etc. Rather, for every matter he should trust in the Holy One, Blessed be He. This is, “Who is waiting for Joseph etc.”

³ Kiddushin 40a. Our modern edition reads “forbidden intercourse” (*eirva*) (עִרְוָה), but the earlier editions read the broader “sin” (*aveira*) (עֲבִירָה).

אף על פי ש'יוסף הקנה מצפה לאיזה גס משום דניצול מעבירה, סוף סוף לגדולה כזו לא הקנה מצפה. והיינו שהואיל שאנו רואים שעברו על יוסף כל כך צרות, שמע מינה שתטא בהבאת לשון הרע על אחיו, ונפיר עבדו אהיו שמכרוהו לעבד. ואף כי במעשיו הטובים ובנסיון שלו זכה להתגדל, לא הקנה לו להיות מלך שהוא הפך הקנס של עבד, שאדרכא מזה משמע שלא תטא כלל. ועיין עוד בזה בסדר הבא על "נירא יעקב כי יש-שבר במצרים".

Even though Joseph was expecting some miracle because he was saved from a sin, in the end he wasn't expecting such greatness. Since we see that so many troubles befell Joseph, we might think from this fact that he sinned in bringing an evil report about his brothers to their father,⁴ and it is fine that he was punished by becoming a servant of his brothers, who sold him as a slave. But while through his good deeds and through his test of being enslaved and then imprisoned, he merited to rise, if he was indeed a sinner, he did not have to become equivalent to a king, which is the opposite of the penalty of a slave. To the contrary, through this achievement of his we learn that he had not sinned at all, and that he was justified for bringing a bad report of his brothers. See further on this subject in the next chapter, Mikeitz, essay 10, on the verse, "When Jacob saw that there were food rations to be had in Egypt" (Gen. 42:1).

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⁴ Gen. 37:2: "At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father."