

D'var Torah: Parashat Vayeishev

by Eli Shebson - Tuesday, November 27, 2018

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From this week's Parasha of Vayeishev, the Chief Rabbi sets out a new way of understanding personal failure.

When is failure a blessing from Hashem?

Parashat Vayeishev provides us with details of the height of Yosef's success. The Torah tells us, "Vayehi Hashem Et Yosef Vayehi Ish Matzliach – Hashem was with Yosef and he was a successful man."

Why is it necessary for both statements to be given? If Hashem was with him then surely it means he was successful and if he was successful it was because Hashem was with him?

Rav Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, one of the great Chassidic masters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, explains as follow: He said we have a tendency to reach out to Hashem primarily when things are going wrong. We should also naturally reach out to Hashem when we are successful, when we are happy and when everything is going right.

It is in this vein that the Chafetz Chaim commented on our Rosh Chodesh bensching which we recite on the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh: There is one request from Hashem that is repeated. Twice we say, "Chaim Shel Yirat Shamayim – Please, God, give us a life of the fear of heaven." Why is that prayer repeated?

The Chafetz Chaim explained that after the first 'Yirat Shamayim', we ask for "Chaim Shel Osher V'Chavod – Please God, give us a life of wealth and honour." And the trouble is, once you achieve wealth and honour you might forget about Hashem and that's why we ask again 'Chaim Shel Yirat Shamayim.' Please God, guarantee that we will always reach out to you and have that fear of heaven.

Yosef was somebody who maintained his fear of heaven under all circumstances. When he was in desperate trouble and also when he was a man of great success.

That is why the Torah tells us, "Hashem was with him and he was successful."

I would like to suggest a different 'peirush'. It is possible for Hashem to be with somebody and for that person not to succeed. That is because in the midst of our failure, the door that is closed in front of us will actually open many other doors of opportunity in the future.

That too is a sentiment that we express in our Rosh Chodesh bensching. It concludes with the request, "Chaim Sheyimalu Mishalot Libeinu L'Tova - Please God, give us a life in which the requests of our heart will be answered for the good."

This is because we acknowledge that, in truth, we do not know what success is. We might think that something in our lives constitutes success but it might ultimately lead to our downfall.

So we place everything in the hands of Hashem and we recognise that sometimes what is considered to be a failure might actually be the best thing for us.

That is something that Yosef understood. When he was failing. When he was a victim of attempted fratricide. When he was thrust into a prison despite being totally innocent – Hashem was with him. He felt the presence of Hashem just as he did when everything was going well. He knew that in times of trouble there would be light at the end of that tunnel.

As Winston Churchill put it, “Success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.”

Shabbat Shalom