

This week, we begin the story of Yosef and his brothers. There is not one story in all of Chumash that takes up so much space as this one. It takes three full parshiyos to complete. And there are a lot of important yesodos that we learn from this story.

Yosef understood that his dreams were a form of nevuah. The halacha is that a novi may not suppress his nevuah. And if he does, he is severely punished. But the application of this halacha to Yosef's dreams is not so simple, because this halacha requires that Hashem directly instruct the novi to publicize his nevuah. It is not clear that Yosef was told by Hashem to tell these dreams to his brothers and his father.

In the end, of course, the dreams came true and they were indeed prophetic.

There is a strange twist to this story. It was clear to Yosef that his brothers hated him. It is also clear that by leaving the protection of his father and his home to find his brothers, he is putting himself in extreme danger. But Yosef obeys his father's command to seek out his brothers in Shechem. Yosef says "Hineni".

On the way to Shechem, Yosef runs into an "ish" who gave him directions. Chazal say Yosef kept getting lost, and malochim were repeatedly sent to keep him on course. Yosef could have easily said to himself – I'm not finding them and I don't have to keep looking for them to put myself in danger! But he persists, and Hashem keeps sending malochim to point him in the right direction.

Here, the Ramban makes a classic statement of our hashkofo:

וַיֵּאָרֶךְ הַכְּתוּב בַּזֶּה לְהַגִּיד כִּי סִיבוֹת רַבּוֹת בָּאוּ אֵלָיו שֶׁהִיא רְאוּיָ לְחַזֵּר לוֹ אֲבָל הַכֹּל סָבֵל לְכַבּוֹד אָבִיו, וְלִהְיוֹדִיעֵנו עוֹד כִּי הַגְּזֵרָה אִמְתָּ וְהַחֲרִיצוֹת שֶׁקָּרַח כִּי זִמְנוֹ לוֹ הַקֶּבֶ"ה מוֹרָה דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֵא מְדַעְתּוֹ לְהַבְיֹא בִידָם וּלְזֶה נִתְכוּנוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ בְּאִמְרָם כִּי הָאִשִּׁים הָאֵלֶּה הֵם מְלָאכִים, שְׁלֵא עַל חֲנָם הָיָה כָל הַסִּפּוּר הַזֶּה לְהוֹדִיעֵנו כִּי עֲצַת ה' הִיא תְּקוּם.

Hashem used Yosef's incredible dedication to his father to bring about His plans for bringing Yosef down to Egypt. If it didn't happen this way, it would have happened another way, because Hashem's decree is not able to be foiled by people's free-choice. Hashem works within people's bechiroh to bring about His ultimate plans.

Hashem will not take away free choice from a person, except for very rare circumstances, as the Ramban writes in the case of Pharaoh or Nevuchadnezer. Certain extreme reshaim have their bechiroh removed as a punishment for their aveiros. But none of us have this level of evil to warrant this response.

We are all responsible for all our actions, and everyone can get control over his life. It doesn't mean you can transform yourself overnight, but you can always – at any moment – decide to start moving on a path that leads you to the person you really want to be.

Hashem can manipulate people's free choice to arrive at the outcome He wants. This is the basis of the posuk in Parshas Mishpotim – וְהָיָה אִינֶנָּה – Rashi there explains it with a story of one person who committed murder intentionally and another person who killed by accident, and neither were caught by Beis Din and given their correct punishment. Hashem will arrange justice for them anyway. He will cause the murderer to walk under a ladder, while the accidental killer is climbing up. He falls on the murderer, killing him in front of witnesses, and he must go into golus.

So Yosef has a middoh of incredible kibbud Av, and the brothers have

a middoh of jealousy, and Hashem puts it together to bring Yosef down to Egypt.

Yosef recognizes this hand of hashgocho bringing him to Egypt very clearly. He tells this to his brothers when they come to him begging for mercy after Yaakov dies. The brothers assume Yosef will now want to take revenge on them for how they treated him before he became the ruler. But they were completely mistaken. Yosef explains that he knows full well that everything that happened to him was directly orchestrated by Hashem. He has no need for revenge – since it was clearly the will of Hashem all along. He adds, but you will have to answer for your choices to do what you did to me – that is between you and Hashem. It has nothing to do with me, because it was going to happen to me one way or another.

When Yosef came to Egypt as a slave, his master noticed that he was successful. But Yosef made sure that his master also realized that it was all coming from Hashem. Yosef never took credit for any of his successes.

Just imagine – Yosef is in the most intensely corrupt, idol-worshipping culture, where they despise Ivrim – they can't even eat together! But Yosef doesn't feel inferior. He doesn't try to please them by changing his manner of speech. He remained the same Yosef with Shem Shomayim constantly on his lips, and that is how he earned his master's respect!

Then Yosef is framed by Potifar's wife and is thrown into a dungeon. But Hashem gave Yosef so much charisma and success that he becomes the main jailkeeper. Two new prisoners come in – the Sar Hamashkim and the Sar Ha'ofim. One morning they look down and depressed, and Yosef takes notice. He asks what the problem is. They tell Yosef about their dreams, and Yosef immediately says it is not up to me to interpret these dreams. It all comes from Hashem.

He says the exact same thing when he is brought to Pharaoh to interpret his dreams. Yosef never lets his success go to his head. He is always aware of where his success comes from, and makes it clear to everyone around him. Yosef understands deeply how this world runs.

The Ramban says this is not just happening in this parsha. It happens all the time. Hashem uses people's free choice like a grand chess master. He can manipulate people with their choices to make any outcome He desires. But we have to realize this and show everyone that this is how we understand how we go through life.

But this is not always so simple to do. Especially in Yosef's situation, as a 17-year-old boy who is rejected from his family, enslaved, and is far away from anything familiar.

Yosef gets a terrible nisayon from the wife of Potifar trying to seduce him. As we have been saying the past few weeks, Yosef's greatest nisayon is happening with no one else around to see it. Avrohom and Yitzchok's greatest nisayon – the akeidah – happened with no one else around. Yaakov's greatest struggle with the Sar of Eisov happened while he was alone. The Kohen Godol goes into the Kodosh Hakodoshim on Yom Kippur with no one else around.

These are the crucial moments in our lives when we make fateful decisions and we are alone with Hashem and no-one else knows about them.

There are many elements in this scenario which makes this nisayon extremely difficult. Yosef is handsome and successful, she makes sure

no one is in the house, and she is extremely persuasive. Chazal say Potifar's wife made all kinds of promises – she will make him a free man, an Egyptian nobleman! There is tremendous hesitation on Yosef's part. But Yosef is thinking he has a simple choice to make – being with her in olom hazeh, or being with his father and brothers in olom haboh.

I often imagine what would happen if Yosef had given into temptation and taken Potifar's wife up on her offer to make him a nobleman. He would have congratulated himself on his smart decision to leave his lower station in life as a slave. Yosef the nobleman would have never anticipated that he was trading away an even better life of power and prestige and the viceroy of Egypt by taking this path! That never would have crossed his mind, and the only reason he refused her was because he was going to lose his olom haboh. He has no other cheshbon.

Yosef eventually catches himself and just runs out of there – leaving his cloak as incriminating evidence behind. He didn't trust himself for a second to go back and get his clothes. He doesn't care about the consequences to himself in this world, since his whole olom haboh with Yaakov Ovinu is at stake. Indeed, Potifar's wife uses the cloak to frame Yosef and he is put in jail.

Is Yosef bitter about it? Does he regret what he did and get angry at Hashem for not helping him after what he did to overcome this nisayon? No. He accepts everything as Hashem's will and makes the best of it. Hashem is with him at all times.

It is one of the most incredible stories of all Chumash.

First, Yosef could have gone home to safety instead of continuing to look for his brothers and be put in danger. After he is sold into slavery amongst Egyptians who despise him, Yosef continues to keep Shem Shomayim on his lips. He attributes all his success to Hashem, who the Egyptians reject. He never takes credit or inflates his own ego. He is confronted with the nisayon of his life and what gets him through it is the simple cheshbon – gaining a few years of olom hazeh against losing an eternity of olom haboh. Once you frame it in those terms, it is not a hard decision to make.

Most of our dilemmas in life can easily be resolved once we ask ourselves which option is going to get me a bigger chelek of olom haboh. Whom you marry, where you live, which profession to follow, etc.

When I first moved to Eretz Yisroel, I was living in Sanhedria Murchevet. Someone from a nearby kollel came to my door asking my advice. He said he had been planning to continue learning, but he just received a fellowship offer at a very prestigious university. Should he take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for an unbelievable career? Or continue learning in kollel?

I looked at him and asked him a single question: Will you get a bigger chelek in olom haboh by taking the fellowship? Or a smaller one? He stood there and stared at me for a second and walked away. The whole encounter took two minutes.

Many years later I was visiting London and someone came up to me with such warmth and gratitude telling me I saved his life! I was embarrassed to say that I honestly didn't know who he was! He told me that he was the avreich who approached me about the fellowship all those years ago and now he is a major marbitz Torah in England – because of the simple advice I gave him at that moment. He told me his whole perspective in life changed because of that question.

Imagine Yosef – rejected by his family, sold into slavery – you would be certain that anyone going through something like that today would be

depressed and completely dysfunctional. Then Potifar's wife offered him a way out...! Can you imagine how any of us would respond to those circumstances? But Chazal say Yosef framed it as a choice between her or his father, and then it was easy – he chose his father.

The purpose of a nisayon isn't to make us fail. It is to push us and force us to find ways to bring out the hidden potential power that exists deep inside all of us and grow. Some nisyonos are very painful. Not everyone survives a nisayon. Some fail. Hashem is completely good, but He can withdraw His presence and bad things can happen. But connection to Hashem always leads to something positive in the end.

Avrohom Ovinu only became who he was because he underwent very difficult nisyonos. Same with Yitzchok and Yaakov. Nothing came automatically. Nothing was guaranteed. Yosef had all these dreams of great influence and dominance, but he had to deserve it. Hashem made him grow and grow until he became worthy of those dreams coming true. If Yosef had failed, those dreams would not be fulfilled. It wasn't guaranteed.

This is the story about every individual's life. Whether we like it or not, we are all faced with difficult choices. We have to decide which is the right path to take – which choice leads to a greater chelek in olom haboh – and choose that one. Often that means giving up something in olom hazeh that we really want. But mature adults know how to make mature decisions and know what is more important and what is less important.

Yosef went through it all. At first he lost everything in olom hazeh by resisting the temptation, and then he became the leader of Egypt because of it! He didn't lose out because of the nisayon. Just the opposite!

The rule is that Hashem doesn't give us a nisayon that we can't overcome.

There is a story about the Kotzker. There was a panicking shopkeeper on the verge of a breakdown as a fire was raging in town and he thought that his store would burn down. The Kotzker assured him that even though there was a fire raging in the town, his store won't burn down. That is exactly what happened – the fire spread and spread and suddenly stopped at this man's store. The man asked the Kotzker how did he know that this would happen? He answered that he saw the shopkeeper's state of mind and realized he wouldn't survive if his store burned down. The Kotzker had a yesod – which is supported by all sifrei machshovoh – that Hashem doesn't give people a nisayon that they can't handle.

I keep this klal in mind whenever someone comes to me worried about some impending tragedy. I had a talmid who underwent a tremendous nisayon about a child whom the doctors assured him would survive a difficult birth only as a vegetable. His reaction was to give up on Yiddishkeit. I told him to get back to himself and it will be alright. I assured him that the child would be healthy. How did I know? Because I saw that he was already breaking down under the nisayon of just *thinking* his child would be a vegetable. Surely he wouldn't be able to manage if it actually happened. I told him Hashem wouldn't give him an impossible test. I told him you could have passed the test of *thinking* your child would be a vegetable, and you flunked that test.

Hashem gives us nisyonos in order for us to grow. It doesn't make our life easy, because growing isn't easy. The very nature of life forces us to make difficult decisions, and we have to use our bechiroh chofshis to frame the situation in the right way and realize how we can use the nisayon to grow and bring out our great potential.