



Miketz 2023

When The Tables Turn

2 minute read | Straightforward

After a turbulent relationship with his siblings that culminated in his abduction and exile, Yosef climbed his way from the gutter to Egyptian aristocracy.

Years later, his brothers came to Egypt to avoid a famine back home, and Yosef entrapped them in a drawn-out ruse.

Instead of identifying himself, he role-played as a meticulous bureaucrat. Noticing that Binyamin was absent, he apprehended and jailed Shimon until they returned with Binyamin, and then had his personal effects planted on Binyamin to make him look like a thief.

The story is a classic, albeit protracted, and theatrical. Why did Yosef act so strangely?

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch perceptively notes that Yosef's goal must have always been to bring his family back together because if he'd wanted to forget his family, then when his brothers came to Egypt, he could have just let them be. They'd return to Israel none the wiser!

But to reunite the family, Yosef had several major obstacles to overcome. If he ever went home or wrote back to reforge the connection, it would not bring the family together; it would irreparably tear it apart. By exposing to Yakov the murderous cover-up and human trafficking perpetrated by his brothers, Yakov might regain a long lost son, but he'd undoubtedly lose the rest.

The only way to make it right would be for things to be different. The brothers would need to see that Yosef had changed, and Yosef would need to know that they had changed, and he has cause for concern.

Where was Binyamin? Had the same thing happened to Rachel's last son?

Judah, who had once instigated Yosef's abduction, would now take responsibility and endanger himself to protect Binyamin. Coupled with their admission of guilt and repentance – מה־נאמר לאדני – אָבֶל אֲשֶׁמִים אָנֹחֶנוּ עַל־אֶחָיו / וּמֵה־נִצָּטְדָק וּמֵה־נִדְבָר – they had accomplished something remarkable – our very first encounter with teshuva in Jewish history.



Seeing how Yehuda courageously took responsibility for his family and stood up to take the blame, Yosef knew that they were not the reckless and impulsive young men they had been all those years ago. Seeing that they had grown, he revealed himself to them.

Once, they had feared Yosef's ambition, believing he wanted them to serve him. Now Yosef had power over them; he could show that he didn't want to take anything from them; he wanted to help them!

With all the theatrics, the brothers could learn more about each other than they ever could have with words, and it was the one way to tease out the insights that could bring their family together once more.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that the stories of Bereishis are about families that could not learn to live together – it is one acrimonious falling out after another. But now there is a new paradigm – teshuva and forgiveness. Forgiveness brings Yakov's fragmented family back together and forms the foundation of the Jewish people.

The Miracle of Resolve

3 minute read | Straightforward

Although modern science has demystified the world, the world is still magical.

With a sense of wonder, you can look at the world as more miraculous than natural without saying there is a difference between the two and without disputing the scientific narrative.

Every breath you take, every sunrise, a child's smile; these are the kind of things that are so commonplace that we overlook how special they are and take entirely for granted – וְעַל נִסֵּיךָ שֶׁבְּכָל יוֹם עִמָּנוּ – וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ וְטוֹבוֹתֶיךָ שֶׁבְּכָל עֵת עָרַב וְבִקְרִי וְצִדְקָתֶיךָ.

If we can see the miraculous in nature, then the natural and supernatural are the same.

There is another kind of miracle though, things that are incredibly unlikely, and we naturally perceive these categories of miracles differently.

When we talk about an underdog winning against the odds or a remarkable comeback story, people also talk about miracles of the hidden kind. The history of the State of Israel, or someone recovering from a severe illness, can be spoken about in such terms.



The Chanukah story includes similar elements; the hidden miracle of an underdog defeating a formidable and vastly more powerful enemy – מְסֻרֵת גְבוּרִים בְּיַד הַלְּשִׁים וְרַבִּים בְּיַד מְעֻטִּים. While unlikely, it was not impossible; it was not openly miraculous or explicitly magical in the way freezing and splitting an ocean is.

The brave victors diligently searched for kosher oil to light the Menorah once more; the enemy had deliberately contaminated and sabotaged all the stores. But in a fortunate turn we could also perceive as miraculous, they discovered one last jar of oil, enough to last one day and night. This, too, was unlikely but not impossible.

They chose to use the entire jar for the first lighting and rededication, and their efforts were met with an open miracle; oil that should have burned for one day lasted eight days and nights, by which time they had been able to prepare more kosher oil. We live in a finite and limited universe where one day's worth of anything does not last for eight; that's how numbers and words work. One day's worth of oil lasting for eight isn't simply unlikely; it's not physically possible.

Making a day's worth of oil last eight days is an incredible display of the Creator's power, unbelievable unless we acknowledge the magic of it.

Our sages explain intuitively that miracles are never redundant; the natural order is deliberate. The purpose of a miraculous military victory is obvious, perhaps even necessary, with the Torah and the future of the Jewish People in grave danger – כְּשֶׁעָמְדָה מַלְכוּת יוֹן הִרְשָׁעָה עַל-עַמָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַשְׁכִּיחַם תּוֹרַתָּה וּלְהַעֲבִירָם – מִחֻקֵּי רִצּוֹנָּךְ.

What was the point of making the oil last longer?

The Sfas Emes explains that in terms of lighting the Menorah, it didn't matter at all. They could have found a hundred jars of oil, or perhaps even zero – circumstances would have permitted the temporary use of any oil.

R' Shlomo Twersky highlights the capacity of these heroes to hope and search for a jar of oil in the first place when malicious forces had done everything they could to snuff out any chance or possibility of success.

From the perspective of these brave heroes who stood up for the Jewish People, the miracle meant everything. A military victory might be a wink from Heaven that they were correct, as might be political and religious freedom, but the Chanukah miracle left no room for doubt that there is a power in the universe that gives spiritual victories sacred purpose and meaning. It was a smile from Heaven at their efforts; a thumbs up that their hopes and dreams were well placed and mattered.



We are awed by God's power to shape the universe, but miracles aren't the only thing that shapes the universe. The power of human desire can also shape the universe and awe the Creator to the point of upending the natural order; magic born of wanting, the miracle of human resolve.

The Chanuka Amida prayer doesn't talk about God making oil last a long time; it celebrates the daring few who stood up to restore their religion to greatness – באו בגיה לךביר ביהמה ופנו אתהיקלה וטמרו אתמקדשה ונהדליקו נרות בתצרות קדשה.

We might take courage from their example that no matter the odds, there is always one last untainted source of light from which everything else can flow and grow; the lone jar, or what in Yiddish is called the pintele Yid. It means the dot of a Jew, the fundamental essence of Jewish identity, and is perhaps related to the concept of the incorruptible soul – חלק אלוך ממעל. This story and this imagery articulate clearly and plainly that there always remains some residual spark that cannot be lost or extinguished; it can only ever lie dormant, waiting patiently for as long as it takes to be rediscovered, to reignite and burst into flame once again.

The magic of Chanuka isn't only in God's power to shape the universe by making one day of oil last for eight. The magic of Chanuka is the example of our ancestors utilizing the power of human desire to shape the universe, the miracle of human resolve, something we all possess.

We light Chanukah candles to remember how powerful that truly is.

Living with Differences

3 minute read | Straightforward

The formative stories in the book of Genesis are powerful and moving.

They tell us where we come from, what our heroes and role models looked like, and how they got there. We recognize the individual protagonists' greatness when we read these stories, but the stories also include plenty of failings.

In the stories of Yakov's children, there is constant tension, a sibling rivalry. Yet Yakov's children are the first of the Jewish People; the first generation to be entirely worthy of inheriting the covenant of Avraham collectively – מטתו שלימה / שבטי י-ה.

While the Torah's terse stories obviously cannot capture who these great people truly were in three dimensions, we shouldn't ignore that the Torah deliberately frames the stories a particular way,



characterizing and highlighting specific actions and people. We should sit up and notice, wondering what we are supposed to learn from the parts that won't quite fit with our picture of greatness.

Each generation of our ancestral prototypes added something – Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov. What are we supposed to make of the apparent disputes and strife between Yosef and his brothers?

R' Yitzchak Berkovits suggests that one lesson is how perilously close people came to killing one of their own in Yosef, how their inability to tolerate Yosef nearly ruined them, with a straight line from their disagreements to centuries of enslavement in Egypt.

While we can't get to some ultimate historical truth of the matter, the Torah's characterization is unequivocal. As much as we believe that there is a right and wrong approach to life and that we must fight for what we believe in, we must still love and tolerate people we disagree with. If, in our pursuit of truth and justice, we end up dividing the family, hating and alienating others, we have gotten lost along the way.

The Sfas Emes suggests that Yosef's criticisms stemmed from the fact that he had different, which is to say, higher standards than his brothers. Being the closest to his father, he was the best placed to claim authority from his father's teachings; and being so highly attuned, he was sensitive to his brother's nuanced missteps, so while Yosef's brothers could not dispute his greatness, they determined that his standards were destructive.

It's not so hard to see why. Although they were the heirs of Avraham's covenant, it was intolerable to have someone so demanding and oversensitive policing them day and night. In their estimation, it was untenable for a viable Jewish future.

The brothers would eventually see that Yosef wasn't a threat, that he had been on the right track all along, just not the right one for them. But they would only realize too late, after the family had already suffered greatly from the fallout, and would be mired in Egypt for centuries as a result.

R' Yitzchak Berkovits suggests that the lesson for us is to learn to live with high standards in the place where theory and practice meet.

Daily, we see the razor-sharp edge of absolute truth clashing with the realpolitik of practical rather than moral or ideological considerations. It's impossible to measure and quantify values or where to draw the line; it's deeply personal and subjective to specific circumstances, continually hinging on so many practicalities.

Yosef and Yehuda never clash about what's true, or what matters. They agree entirely about the value of Avraham's legacy, but they could not agree on what that might look like. One of the story's lessons is the error of confusing theory with practice; with no difference in values, we can and should tolerate differences in practice.



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Two of the most fundamental principles of the Torah and life are loving your neighbor and the image of God, both of which speak to the dignity of others – ואהבת לרעך כמוך / צלם אלוקים. Reserving love and compassion for people who are just like you is not the Torah's greatest principle – that would demand literally nothing of us. We must tolerate the existence of those who are not just like us, which is incredibly hard.

Like Yosef, we mustn't be afraid of high standards. But if we aren't quite ready to live that way, we should at the very least tolerate others who do have high standards. Society has to tolerate the person who wants things to be better just as equally it has to tolerate the person who can't quite live up to that just yet.

Because true to life, you can't teach someone anything you've chased them away.

Resurgence Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward

Some things are elastic, which means that when one variable changes, another one does too. In our everyday life, we recognize that when people want more or less of a product or service, the price will correspondingly flex, an example of economic elasticity.

In physics, when you coil a spring from its resting position, it exerts an opposing force approximately proportional to its change in length; the greater the force compressing the spring, the stronger the corresponding tension that will be released. Children quickly learn this when playing with rubber bands; the release of built-up energy is extremely powerful, not to mention painful.

There is also a certain elasticity in the world of spirit.

In stories, life, and all things, there is a moment of failure, a catastrophic fall from grace, the abyss.

It is inevitable; we live in a dynamic world, a fluid environment where failure is possible. On one reading of the Creation story, placing clueless people in a world of stumbling blocks all but guarantees failure. We try to do all sorts of great things and fall short. We fail. Whether to a greater or less extent, we fail and live in a world of failure.

Some failures are particularly acute.

The last chapters of the stories of Genesis revolve around failure. Yehuda has a catastrophic fall from grace, going from being the respected leader of his brothers to an exile, leaving his family, marrying a



heathen, and losing his way entirely. Joseph has a corresponding fall from grace, being forced out of his family, trafficked into slavery, and finding himself in a prison dungeon. Something thematically similar happens in the Chanuka story, where the Greek empire occupied Israel and successfully suppressed Jewish practice to the extent that pigs were openly slaughtered as sacrifices to Zeus in the Beis Hamikdash.

But then something magical happens that follows these failures; transformation.

The Proverbs describe how righteous people stumble seven times and rise, and wicked people stumble on their evil just once and are done for – *כִּי שָׁבַע יִפּוֹל צַדִּיק וְקָם וְרָשָׁע יִפְּשָׁלוּ בְרָעָה* –

The Metzudas David notes that in this conception, the definition of righteousness is in the rising, the wicked in staying down. The Kedushas Levi points out that the proverb still calls a person who falls righteous because it says the person rises after they fall – *יִפּוֹל / צַדִּיק / וְקָם*.

R' Yehoshua Hartman suggests that part of what makes a comeback inevitable is the emptiness in the fall; the bland and hollow present contains the potential for a different future, the building blocks the future can be built out of.

As the Chozeh of Lublin teaches, it is the awareness and recognition of downfall that triggers the possibility of redemption – *אֲחֵרֵי נִמְכַר גְּאֻלָּה תִּהְיֶה לּוֹ*.

The power of transformation is magical, but it's entirely within our reach. Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh observes that failures are not an obstacle to growth but the source of it. In other words, every fall is a spring containing the energy of a comeback, a second wind, a resurgence, or an upturn. It often comes after exhaustion and complete deconstruction.

From rock bottom, the heart of darkness, Yehuda and Joseph rises from the abyss and climb higher than the rest in both the physical and spiritual worlds, even paving the way for the aspect of Mashiach they embody. Yehuda makes amends and rises to rule as king, and Joseph forgives his brother and rises to reunite and sustain them all. The Maccabees improvise with what little they have to re-establish Judaism permanently.

Nested here is a template for all change, reconceptualizing disorder as a catalyst for transformation and overcoming challenges.

Our sages affirm the power of a comeback; repentant people can get to places that no one else can – *מִקּוּם שְׁבַע לֵי תְּשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִים*, אין צדיקים גמורים יכולים לעמוד. The Chafetz Chaim told R' Elchanan Wasserman that Yakov made the unusual comment of needing to see Yosef before he died because the place Yosef would go after surviving his ordeals was far beyond the place Yakov would be.



Intuitively, the potential precedes all forms of the actual; our sages teach that Teshuva predates Creation. Our sages describe the integrated coexistence of God's greatness within smallness, which perhaps we can perceive in the force to bounce back already existing in the moment of failure; the potential for greatness is present, even if not yet manifest.

We typically recognize a passive transition from darkness to light – מאפלה לאורה. R' Yitzchak Hutner challenges us to realize within ourselves the transformative ability to actively create light from the very darkness itself – מאפלה לאורה. In R' Hutner's formulation, only fools believe that the rise is in spite of the fall; the truth is that the rise is because of the fall. Science bears this out; the force that makes the sun set is the same as the same one that will make it rise.

Change isn't an external thing that happens passively, not some irresistible force. You are not a leaf blowing in the wind; what comes before is not the final form. You must surrender to the challenge, giving yourself wholly to it, annihilating the self that comes before, to return in the higher form that has risen to the occasion, death and rebirth.

The heights you can reach are directly linked to the contours of your failure.

You will fall; you can be sure of it.

You may even lose your spark.

But you will rise like the sun.

Avoiding I Told You So

4 minute read | Straightforward

The book of Genesis concludes with Yosef's story.

It's worth noting that roughly a quarter of the book revolves around Yosef as the central character, making him its most prominent protagonist by a distance.

As an adolescent, Yosef was his own worst enemy, sharing vivid dreams with brothers already jealous of his special relationship with their father. Determining that this arrogant dreamer was unworthy of their great ancestral legacy and posed a threat to its future, the brothers disposed of him, selling him into ignominious slavery.



But he could not be stopped. Undeterred, he climbed his way out the depths of slavery and false imprisonment without faltering until he reached the height of Egyptian aristocracy.

The story reaches its climax with Yosef positioned as the fully naturalized Egyptian ruler of all, Tzafnas Paneach. In a stunning reversal, his brothers unwittingly made their way to him:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְשֹׁבֵר בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּאִים כִּי־הָיָה הָרָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן. וַיֹּסֵף הוּא הַשְּׁלִיט עַל־הָאָרֶץ הוּא הַמְּשַׁבֵּיר לְכָל־עַם הָאָרֶץ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֲחֵי יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ־לּוֹ אַפַּיִם אֲרָצָה. וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־אֲחָיו וַיִּכְרַם וַיִּתְנַכַּר אֲלֵיהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אֲתָם קָשׁוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֵאִן בָּאתֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיִּשְׁבְּר־אֹכֶל. וַיִּכְר יוֹסֵף אֶת־אֲחָיו וְהֵם לֹא הִכְרָהוּ – The sons of Israel were among those who came to procure rations, for the famine extended to the land of Canaan. Now Yosef ruled the land; it was he who dispensed rations to all the people of the land. Yosef's brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground. When Yosef saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to procure food." For though Yosef recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. (42:5-8)

It's hard to overstate the importance of this moment, quite arguably the moment the entire book of Genesis turns on.

In every story up to this point, siblings could not get past their differences, and families would fracture and splinter off in separate ways. But this time, something different happens, and it's because Yosef did something different.

We can be confident that Yosef remembered his childhood dream that his siblings would one day bow before him; sharing this vision was the very thing that had torn him from his family and landed him in his current position!

Then this moment happens – they bow and humbly beg for his benevolence and assistance. Despite their best efforts, his dream has come true, and this moment utterly vindicates him. The upstart dreamer had, in fact, been a full-fledged prophet all along!

We can't begin to imagine all the years of pain and hurt, the difficulties and torment he experienced, first at home, then through abduction and slavery, then prison and later in politics, in utter isolation.

But this moment conclusively proves that however childish or immature he had been, they were completely and utterly wrong.

If he were to reveal his true identity now – the moment his brothers are on the floor beneath him, entirely at his mercy – can we begin to imagine the sense of power and vindication those words might be laden with? How tantalizingly sweet would those words taste rolling off our tongue?



Yet, presented with the ultimate I-told-you-so opportunity, Yosef turned away from that path and towards the road to reconciliation, paving the way for the family to let go of past differences successfully.

The Kedushas Levi highlights how gracious and magnanimous it was for Yosef to avoid rubbing in this complete and total vindication. He recognized exactly who they were, remembered precisely what they had done, and only troubled himself to make sure that in their lowest moment, they would not recognize him – וַיֵּרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־אֶחָיו וַיִּכְרַם וַיִּתְנַבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אִתָּם קְשׁוּת –

Yosef refused to kick them when they were down, and would ultimately offer a positive spin on the entire story, that God had ordained the whole thing to position him to save them from their predicament – שְׁמַנֵּי אֱלֹהִים לְאֶדוֹן לְכָל־מִצְרַיִם / לֹא־אַתֶּם שְׁלַחְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִּי הֵאֲלֵהֶם / כִּי לְמַחְנֵה שְׁלַחְנֵי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם –

All grown-up now, Yosef is able to understand that his dreams were not about him; he was able to recognize that he was a tool. There was no glory to be had in his power, wealth, and success, or even his prophetic ability, except to the extent he could use it to help others and heal the rift in his family he had contributed to. No one had understood his childhood visions; they weren't going to bow because he was better than them but because he was going to save them all. From this point on through the end of the story, he repeatedly makes sure to feed and care for his brothers and their families.

In this moment, this hero of heroes acted from his heart instead of his pain. He truly was better than the brothers who had once tried to break him; rather than make them bitter too, he healed them all.

Most families are at odds a little too often, that is, assuming they're even on speaking terms! Inevitably, there are quite a few I-told-you-so moments. It's a rehash of the cycle of most of the book of Genesis, a tale as old as time, and perhaps even the natural course of life. But just because it's natural, that doesn't mean it has to be that way. It's not inevitable.

We should remember that our greats weren't robotic machines. They hurt each other deeply and caused their family immense and undeserved pain. Yet when things came back around, although they had not forgotten, they faced those moments with compassion and humility, invoking the power to defuse decades of hurt.

The legacy of these stories is that humans have the ability to choose to avert cycles of hurt, the power to fill that void with healing. Be the person you needed when you were hurting, not the person who hurt you.

Break the cycle.



TorahRedux

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.

If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.