



In the Pit:
Torah Reflections on *Parashat Miketz* (Genesis 44:1-44:17)
December 23, 2006 2 Tevet 5767 (Last day of Hanukah)

Our Torah portion begins with Joseph still in the pit—this time a dungeon in Egypt. Joseph is in a hole that he can't get out of. Uriel Simon teaches that the first pit he is thrown into is, in part, the result of his own actions. His arrogance and ignorance lead him to a place where he can't speak civilly to the people in his family. His brothers take their revenge on him. But the second pit he is thrown into—jail—is not because of his actions. He is innocent. He did not try to sleep with Potiphar's wife. He tried to avoid her. Yet, there he is in jail—a *tzaddik* in training, in cell #342, having to face the terrors of the dungeon.

The question I want to ask is—what did Joseph think about while in the pit? What did he hold on to? What got him through the ordeal? How do we get through those dark moments in our lives? The text gives us precious little by way of hints. We learn in last week's portion, Vayeshev, that Joseph keeps busy, works hard, cares about those around him (“Why do you appear downcast today?”), and has God on his mind. When the baker and cupbearer tell him their dreams Joseph is quick to respond, as he does to Pharaoh in our portion, that God can interpret dreams.

Joseph is a God-centered guy. God gives him a bigger picture, a greater lens through which to view life. After Judah's incredible speech Joseph will re-frame the entire story, putting God at the center. Having God in his life allows Joseph to see everything differently. I imagine Joseph in jail picturing life outside. He needs to hang on to the possibility that some day he could be outside. There are people who get out—the chief cupbearer for example. I imagine Joseph also leaning on God for strength. “The Eternal is my shepherd; I shall not want. God makes me lie down in green pastures; God leads me beside still waters. God restores my soul; and guides me in straight paths for God's name's sake; Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For you are with me.” (Psalm 23) When times are really tough we have to reach deep inside for that pure, holy part of us that we sense is from God, that we intuit has strength and power beyond our normal reach, and that can heal and nourish us. Not only can I survive, but my soul can be restored. I picture Joseph, over and over again, coming to the place where he realizes this and counts on it. It allows him to overcome some of his fear. Overcoming fear is probably the most important task for some one in the pit. This is what the Baal Shem Tov's father told him on his death bed—the most important thing is not to be afraid.

What did Joseph whisper to himself during the scary nights? Was it the word “courage”? Did he breathe deeply, focusing on exhaling and inhaling new life? How did he manage to come out of the hole with such strength and vitality? We don't know. But we have his story. We are connected to him. As with Joseph we know that in life we often suddenly end up in the pit and suddenly are out. Thanks to teachers like him we know that it is never too late to hope or dream or imagine. We have God's presence. We

don't have to fear evil. Even fleeting glimpses of the big picture can make a huge difference to those in the hole. May God grant each of us moments when we know.

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