

Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Miketz

How Can we Learn from Yosef to Transform our Darkest Reality by Adding Light?

Gleaning the Valuable Lessons of Light During the Moment of the Darkest Pain

By choosing the topic of Gratitude in the Torah, I attempt to condition myself and my readers to notice and give thanks for the good points even within all the pain. Through this work, I've come to recognize more and more how the challenges of the hardships are in themselves shining lights of disguised blessings. For example, in dealing with an exasperating roommate situation in the midrasha, which aroused many delicate feelings between the students involved, and brought about challenges for me as well, everyone is learning and growing tremendously from the ordeal. Although one of the students involved suffered greatly, through this painful roommate saga she was able to clarify exactly what she needs from a living situation conducive to her spiritual growth. Personally, I gleaned valuable lessons both in interpersonal relationships and management skills. I gained greater clarity about the importance of limiting the number of staff members involved to efficiently resolve such ordeals. I also developed more compassion and empathy when dealing with interpersonal problem-solving. It is often a life crisis that spurs people to make positive life-changing decisions affecting great breakthroughs. Likewise, many great healers develop their healing skills specifically by going through painful diseases. With hindsight, it becomes clear how the various difficulties I experienced throughout my life have helped me greatly to identify with others' pain and help guide them through similar kinds of challenges that I have myself have experienced. The next step is to learn to appreciate the hardships not only after but while we are in the midst of experiencing them. I pray to strengthen my emunah during the moments of the darkest pain to be able to glean their valuable life lessons of light.

Celebrating the Large Sheaves in Life as Much as We Bemoan the Lean Ones

In *Parashat Miketz* we read about Pharaoh's dreams which foretold the onset of a seven-year period of prosperity which would be followed by seven years of shortage. Pharaoh first saw seven emaciated cows devouring seven large cows, and then seven lean sheaves of grain devouring seven large sheaves.

ספר בראשית פרק מא פסוק ה וַיִּישָׁן וַיַּחְלֵם שְׁנַיִת וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע שְׁבָלִים עֹלֹת בְּקִנְיָה אֶחָד בְּרִיאֹת וְטֹבוֹת: (ו) וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע שְׁבָלִים דַּקּוֹת וְשְׂדוּפֹת קָדִים צִמְחוֹת אַחֲרֵיהֶן:

“He fell asleep and dreamed again, and behold, seven ears of grain *עֹלֹת/olot* were rising on one stalk, healthy and good. Then behold, seven ears of grain, thin and beaten by the east wind, were *צִמְחוֹת/tzomchot* – ‘growing’ up after them” (*Bereishit* 41:5-6).

The Torah describes Pharaoh's second vision as featuring seven large sheaves “rising in a single stalk” (41:5), followed by seven lean sheaves “growing after them” (41:6). Curiously, whereas the first set of sheaves is said to have “arisen,” the seven lean sheaves are described as “growing.” Rav Shalom of Belz noticed that the term “*tzomechot*” (growing) used to depict the second set of sheaves connotes a more evident and readily discernible process than the word “*olot*” (rising)

referring to the initial set of sheaves. Since the onset of the famine years was far more widespread, and thus far more evident, than the onset of the surplus years, the Torah refers to the seven lean sheaves with the word “*tzomechot*,” which connotes a very obvious and widely recognized phenomenon. The Torah speaks of the seven large sheaves’ emergence with the term “*olot*” – which is more subtle, because the period of surplus set in less conspicuously than the “growth” of the lean years, represented by the lean sheaves. This language difference teaches the following message for our lives: People tend to discern misfortune more quickly than they recognize good fortune. The ‘lean years’ of our lives generally catch our attention and trigger anxiety and angst more quickly than the ‘surplus years’ evoke feelings of joy and gratitude. The ‘lean years’ – hardship and misfortune – tend to feel like they ‘*tzomechot*’ sprout forth everywhere, whereas our good fortune tends to feel ‘limited,’ less significant, and insufficient, affecting us less profoundly than hardship. The subtle distinction between the Torah’s depiction of the large sheaves and the lean sheaves perhaps reminds us to feel at least as enthusiastic over our ‘large sheaves’ as we feel despondent over our ‘lean sheaves,’ to celebrate our good fortune with at least as much fervor as that with which we cry over our troubles – and even much more so (Rav David Silverberg).

Growing Hope from Within the Darkness

Rabbi Natan of Breslev regards the word **צִמְחוֹת**/*tzomchot* – ‘growing’ in a different and positive light. *Parashat Miketz* which means, “at the end” alludes to the end of days, as it states, “He put an end to darkness” (*Iyuv* 28:3). However, the ‘end’ is late in coming, due to our lack of emunah and all our confusion and unclarity that distance us from the truth of Torah. Pharaoh is the incarnation of ‘the other side’ that confuses the mind. He dreams about the opposing forces that prevent the Torah from being manifest. The seven good cows and good ears of grain correspond to the truth of the Torah, which becomes swallowed up by the bad cows and sheaves. Yet, even from within the darkness, hope can grow as hinted in the word **צִמְחוֹת**/*tzomchot* – ‘growing’ describing the seven bad ears of grain. We learn not to give up clarifying the truth of the Torah even from within all the confusion, by keeping the points of light and truth growing within the darkness. This is the work of Yosef the Tzaddik. His name means to add and increase. Yosef teaches us that despite what happens to us in life, our job is to add the light of Torah in the world. He gathered the good from the years of plenty and saved it for the years of famine. By publishing innumerable Torah books, he preserved the truth of the Torah for the years of spiritual famine. This is alluded to in the following Torah verse:

סָפַר בְּרֵאשִׁית פָּרֶקַח מֵא פְּסוּקֵי מִטְ וַיִּצְבֵּר יוֹסֵף בָּר כְּחוֹל הַיָּם הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד עַד כִּי חָדַל לְסַפֵּר כִּי אֵין מִסְפָּר:
 “Yosef gathered grain like the sand of the sea, in great abundance, until [one] stopped counting, because there was no number” (*Bereishit* 41:49).

The Hebrew words for counting **לִסְפֹּר**/*lispor* and number **מִסְפָּר**/*mispar* both share the root of the word **סֵפֶר**/*sefer* – ‘book.’ By publishing innumerable Torah books, the Torah will be saved and kept forever from being forgotten, as according to the *Zohar* publishing holy Torah books brings about redemption.

The Stalks Allude to the Seven Branches of the Menorah Perpetuating the Torah

There is a further allusion to book publishing in the Pharaoh’s dream about the seven healthy ears

of grain that rise on one stalk. The Hebrew word קַנֵּה/*kane* - 'stalk' can also mean 'reed' utilized as a writing quill when dipped in ink. Still today many artists prefer a reed pen. This same word קַנֵּה/*kane* is also used in the Mishna, referring to the importance of finding a friend: "Appoint for yourself a Rabbi and קַנֵּה /*kene* - 'acquire' for yourself a friend" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:6). Through writing down the Torah, the reed becomes the friend and study partner that ensures that the words of Torah will be established. Through the holy books written with a קַנֵּה/*kane* - 'reed' that you connect with and learn from you can discern a true Rabbi and thereby anchor yourself to the truth. Thus, the rectification for all the confusions of our current exile is the קַנֵּה/*kane* - 'writing reed' through which we increase publicizing innumerable holy books. The stalks of the seven ears of grain moreover allude to the seven branches of the menorah (Temple candelabra). It is known that the pure menorah alludes to the light of the Torah. Its main existence is through the קַנֵּי/*kanim* - 'branches or stalks' that allude to the quills with which we write new Torah concepts that bring about the main rectification - the light of Chanukah (Rabbi Natan of Breslev, *Likutei Halachot, Orach Chayim*, Chapter 6:54-55). Thus, the lights of Chanukah perpetuate the Torah throughout the darkness of exile, until the final redemption when the eternal Menorah will illuminate the Holy Temple.

Expanding the Light Through the Challenges of Darkness

Throughout Jewish history, the darkest periods bring about the greatest light. After emerging from the Egyptian exile, we merited the Tablets of the Torah. At the near holocaust of the Purim story, we accepted the Oral Torah willingly (*Babylonian Talmud, Shavuot* 39a), and the destruction of the second Temple by the wicked Romans brought about the organized written form of the Oral Torah. In the same way, it was specifically through the darkness of the Greeks and their defilement that we merited the increased light of the additional holiday of Chanukah. From within the night of the deepest darkness, the light of that little cruise of pure olive oil saved the day for all eternity. Had the Maccabees disregarded and depreciated that little bottle which wasn't sufficient, we would have lost the light of the millions of Chanukiahs infusing our reality with *ohr haganuz* (original hidden light hidden away for the tzaddikim for the world-to-come). We too can ignite and expand our personal light by appreciating the small insufficient good points in life, such as a gift from a loved one which is not exactly what we would have chosen ourselves, a half-hearted apology, or a Torah teaching that we may have heard before. By developing gratitude and appreciation for even the imperfect minor sparks of goodness, like the Maccabees, our light too can increase to illuminate the darkest areas of our lives.

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Miketz

We are in this world to rectify ourselves and develop our potential to its fullest. It is specifically the challenges that we go through that facilitate our greatest rectifications. While it may be fun and easy - especially for children - to zoom down a steep hill, climbing that hill makes us huff and puff. Likewise, life may seem like a bowl of cherries when we go downhill, but when things are tough let us not forget that we are actually climbing uphill.

• Where There's Pain, There's Purpose

Find the purpose of your pain! For example, it can be upsetting and painful if one of your good friends suddenly stops talking to you. You experience that pain due to your loss of something meaningful. The love, kindness, and social connection that you value have been taken away. Yet your pain sheds light on what you value. Your pain shows you are a caring human being. If you

didn't feel anything, it would show you didn't care about such relationships. So, the blessing is your self-awareness and reminder of your desire to connect. This experience will help you develop your deeper compassion for others going through a similar experience in their lives.

- **Recall Your Past Adversities and the Lessons They've Taught You** – I remember in the past I had an unpleasant experience with a tenant which taught me a lesson. So, although the experience was frustrating, I've learned a lot about how to avoid getting into that kind of situation again. Do a scan of the history of your life and recall difficult situations you have gone through. Remember the lessons your hardships taught you and all the good that came out of them one by one. Recognize how all your past difficult times indeed are blessings in disguise!

- **Practice Paying Attention to the Good Points Within Your Pain** – When things seem dark and difficult ask yourself, "How can I grow within this meager situation? Which personal lesson can I glean from this hardship?"

- **Gratitude and Intention Setting** – Incorporate gratitude and intention setting into your spiritual meditation practice. Before you begin, take a few moments to express gratitude for the blessings in your life and set a clear intention for your meditation session. It could be to deepen your connection with your higher self, gain clarity on a specific aspect of your life, or invite spiritual guidance. The combination of gratitude and intention creates a receptive and focused mindset for your practice.

- **Acceptance is a Skill That Brings Peace** – When things go wrong and we don't accept them, we feel a lot of pain, and acceptance is hard. But it's a skill we can learn to grow over time. We can begin with small things. You spill some milk. Your loved one forgets to do something. Learning to accept is one of life's greatest skills, and when things go wrong, it's a chance to practice that skill. You may never be perfect at it, but you can get a little bit better each time. One cool trick to develop acceptance is to notice the emotions in your body when something goes wrong, and just become curious of them rather than trying to immediately react to them. This curiosity is a powerful friend of yours that can help to bring acceptance into your life, especially of the things you can't change.

- **Be Flexible** – Life has a habit of not going according to plan. The preparations of the heart are man's, but the answer of the tongue is from Hashem (*Mishlei* 16:1). "Man plans but G-d laughs!" When we experience this, it's not all bad. There are many different perspectives we can take. This ability to be flexible and see things from different perspectives can help you to see challenges as blessings in disguise.