

*D'var Torah for Parashat Miketz*  
**December 20, 2014**  
**Stephen Baum**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

**Bit Parts**

Shabbat Shalom.

About 21 months ago I was preparing, with many of you, to perform “Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat”. As any of us can tell you, it was a blast. It was an intense, scary, and joyous experience. I sensed, and certainly hope, that those of you in the audience had a good time as well.

As I’m sure you know, a similar group is having a similarly fine time with “Fiddler”. If you are one of them, Yasher Koach. If you can help them with props, with costumes, with prompting, or with ushering, please join in. And, of course, none of this effort would make any sense without an audience – if you can serve in that role, and encourage others to do the same, that’s important too.

I have a limited memory, so I’m happy that the only roles I was qualified for in Joseph have just a few lines. I had bit parts. Perhaps it is that experience which influenced my choice of topics for this D’var. I’d like to talk about two bit parts in the Joseph story.

**A Few Well Chosen Directions**

The first part didn’t even make it into the play, but is in bible – three verses from last week’s portion, *Va-Yeishav*. As you remember, Jacob asked Joseph to see how his brothers were faring. It was not a short walk. Joseph walked from Hebron to Shechem, a distance of fifty miles. Once there, we reach these lines: “a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, ‘What are you looking for?’ He answered, ‘I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?’ The man said, ‘They have gone from here, but I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan.’”



Some of you may not remember a time before our cars and our phones could tell us where we were and where we were going, but there was a time when we relied on maps and especially on each other to help us find our way. Like most men, Joseph apparently didn't want to ask for directions. This unidentified man noticed him, approached him, and asked if he needed help. He did. Dothan was another 13 miles away, and Joseph had no reason to expect his brothers to go there. As Harold Kushner's commentary in *Etz Hayim* says: "We never hear of this man again. Yet if Joseph had not met him, he never would have found his brothers. He never would have been sold into slavery. The family would not have followed him into Egypt. There would have been no Exodus. The history of the world would have been so different! Could that man have known how his chance encounter changed history? Do we ever know the consequences of the little acts of thoughtfulness that we perform?"

### **The Cup Bearer, Part 1**

The second bit part in the Joseph story that I'd like to mention did make it into the Joseph play, and is in two parshiot – last week's, and this week's, *Miketz*. Like the helpful giver of directions, the bible does not provide him with a name. In *Va-Yeishav*, he is paired with another servant of Pharaoh's, the baker. They both displeased Pharaoh at the same time, they were both tossed into the same prison that held Joseph, they both had a dream, and they both had their dream interpreted by Joseph. At that point their paths diverged. The baker was executed, while the cup bearer was freed and returned to his old position. After interpreting the cup bearer's dream, Joseph added this: "...think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place". Our portion ended last week with this final verse: "Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him."

### **The Solstice**

One portion ends, another begins. I think of the indiscernible pause between *Va-yeishav* and *Miketz* as the winter solstice for the original family of Israel. They are at a low point. The brothers are now bound by their own attempted fratricide, they are separated from each other and from their parents by the secrets they keep. Jacob is mourning, and plans to continue mourning until he dies. Joseph is

imprisoned in Egypt, and the cupbearer has forgotten him.

Chanukah always includes the Rosh Chodesh that is closest to the winter solstice – hence the longest, darkest night of the year. This year, they happen to occur on the same day. Tomorrow evening the Rosh Chodesh of Tevet will begin at sundown. It will also be the winter solstice.

After tomorrow, the nights will begin to shorten, the days lengthen. In today's portion, Joseph's public career takes a rather spectacular turn for the better, and he begins the long task of repairing his family.

### **The Cup Bearer, Part 2**

Pharaoh had a few troubling dreams. He gathered his wise men, but they could not interpret these dreams. When the Pharaoh was troubled, his household was troubled. The cupbearer said five words "*Et hata-i ani mazkir ha-yom,*" (I make mention of my sins today). Those five words are another pivot point in the Joseph story. Without them, Joseph will remain in prison. With them, the cupbearer must continue, reminding Pharaoh of his imprisonment, and suggesting that one prisoner has a remarkable ability to interpret dreams.

Imagine what the cupbearer risks. The Pharaoh is not merely his employer, but has already demonstrated that he holds the cupbearer's fortune and life in his hands. Surely it would have been easier and safer to continue to say nothing. But the cupbearer tells his story, belatedly fulfilling his promise to Joseph, and the world changes. As Dr. Joseph Lukinsky wrote in a commentary about this portion, "The five words of the butler... may be the most crucial words ever spoken by anyone in all Jewish history. And he's not even Jewish!"

### **Conclusion**

I found myself imagining that the man at Shechem who provided Joseph with a few crucial clues as to the location of his brothers could somehow miraculously know what the consequences of his actions were at various times in the Joseph story. How would he feel about his small part in the story? Joseph finds his brothers. He'd feel happy about this, as any of us would about aiding a traveler. Joseph is thrown into a pit and then sold by his brothers. He'd be shocked and saddened that

his presumably good deed had turned out so badly. Joseph becomes a ruler in Egypt and saves countless people, perhaps including the anonymous man in Shechem, from the worst of a famine. Now the man has a story to tell, and serious bragging rights. The family of Israel remains in Egypt, and is gradually enslaved. Perhaps he would stop telling his story at this point. A trip by the sons of Israel from Canaan to Egypt, which took perhaps three or four weeks, causes the people of Israel to wander for forty years, to return, and to build a nation. How would the man from Shechem feel then? And how would he feel now? At what point could he decide that he had done the right thing?

And at what point do we feel that we've done the right thing about our own actions? Our knowledge of the consequences of our actions is always limited, first by the paucity of the facts that we actually have access to, and secondly by the biases of our own viewpoint. We are those actors on the stage – but our sight lines are limited and we don't seem to remember the script. How do we know if we are acting properly, if we are on the right path?

I don't have any certain answers, but I do take comfort in what Judaism provides. We do have a map of sorts – a path which we are to walk – the literal meaning of the word “Halacha”. And we don't only follow that path as individuals, but as a community. We rely on each other to find our way. Some of us will stop and ask for directions, but all of us will occasionally need a helpful nudge from that anonymous man in Shechem.