

The whole world Dependent on One Jew

Category: Bereishis, Mikeitz

What is the true form of Tikkun Olam? What is the biggest contribution we can make to civilization?

Joseph's Deal

About ten years ago, one of the most heated debates in Washington was about Healthcare. There were 59 Democrats and 40 Republicans in the Senate—and one independent: Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman. And the whole Affordable Care Act depended on him; the entire future of the health scene in America, the strongest nation on Earth, depended on one Jew.

The Divine Providence, which we call Hashgachah Pratis, was amazing. Here was a man who was considered a political lost cause, and now had become the fulcrum of the bill's future. Healthcare for 300 million citizens suddenly depended on the finger of one single Torah-observant and proud Jew, a Jew who walks, not drives, to the Senate in Washington on Shabbos when he has to participate in proceedings.

And what was his name? Joseph! Just like the Joseph that we read about today in this week's Parsha.

The biblical Joseph was a slave, and he had been thrown in prison on serious charges brought by the wife of one of the most important government officials in Egypt. He was thrown into a dungeon without any hope of getting out—and then suddenly, in one moment, he is appointed by the Pharaoh himself as the ruler of all Egypt. It's an unbelievable story—he almost literally went from rags to riches.

As soon as Yosef became a ruler, seven abundant years began in Egypt. The stock market went up, there was plenty of food, and Yosef advised everyone to store up as much as they could because seven years of famine were coming.

Indeed, the famine came. At first, the Egyptians used the food they had stored for

themselves. But it wasn't too long before they found themselves hungry. As we read in this week's Parshah, "The people screamed at the Pharaoh for bread, and the Pharaoh said to the entire country, 'Go to Yosef! Whatever he says to you, do it!'"

But this seems a little strange. The Pharaoh had appointed Yosef as his right-hand man, as the second in command, specifically to handle food problems during the years of famine. So why did the Egyptians come to the Pharaoh for bread, only to hear him say, "Go to Yosef!"? They should have gone to Yosef in the first place—because he had only risen to such a high position so he could handle the famine!

Additionally, what exactly is meant by the words, "Whatever he says to you, do it!"? It seems to indicate that Yosef would tell them to do something that they would not want to do—and that the Pharaoh was warning them to do it anyway.

Rashi picks up on this problem, which is why he explains that really, the Egyptians went to Yosef first and that he had told them to do something—but they had not liked what he had said and so they came to complain to the Pharaoh for food.

What exactly was it that Yosef had demanded of them? Rashi tells us something hard to believe: Yosef had ordered them to undergo circumcisions. Yosef had announced that anyone who wanted food would have to be circumcised, and that there was nothing else to discuss.

But why did Yosef really decide that the Egyptians needed circumcisions? This mitzvah is only for Avraham and his descendants! It is what distinguishes them from all other nations! The Egyptians were not required to be circumcised! On the contrary—a person is not allowed to injure himself for no reason. Why did he make this demand?

Some commentaries explain that Yosef knew that his entire family would soon be arriving in Egypt because of the famine throughout the region. He also knew that there was a gezeirah, a Heavenly Decree, that the Jewish Nation was to be in Egyptian exile for hundreds of years. And so, to make the Jews more comfortable and not embarrassed among their neighbors because they were circumcised (the same way they felt embarrassed about circumcision during Greek rule of the Holy Land much later), Yosef ordered that every Egyptian be circumcised. Then, the

Jews would not feel different or embarrassed.

A Better Solution?

Now, you can only imagine the situation. The mohels were over their heads in work. There were long lines. Everyone was hungry for food, and everyone wanted to get circumcised as soon as possible so they could just get their bread already.

But there's another explanation for Yosef's motives—Yosef wanted them to abandon their idol worship and pagan practices and start believing in the One True G-d. He wanted them to forge a pact with G-d.

In that era, Egypt was brimming with pagan practices and worship of idols. Yosef was now saying to them, "The fact that I'm providing you with food is because of G-d," and he therefore wanted them to know and recognize that there is a G-d in the universe.

In truth, Yosef was trying to change the Egyptian world even when he was a slave.

As Rashi tells us, "the name of Heaven was secure on his lips." Yosef had learned this philosophy of life from his great-grandfather Avraham, who also had lived according to this philosophy. He would give people food to eat and teach them that there was a G-d. As Rashi says about Avraham, "After they would eat and drink, he would say, 'Bless He of Whose food you ate! You think you ate my food?! You ate from the food of He Who Spoke and the universe came to be!'"

And it was these very words that Yosef said to the Egyptians: "You think you ate *my* food?!" In other words, it's not me who's providing you with food—it's all because G-d revealed to me the secret meaning of the Pharaoh's dream. Therefore, it is because of G-d that you have what to eat.

Our Gift to Society

We are all familiar with the concept that Judaism calls "*tikun olam*"—the familiar idea that says that one needs to help the poor by giving them charity, to donate to hospitals to heal the sick, to volunteer at old-age homes to show respect for the elderly, to repair the homes of the poor and all other forms of giving.

But where did this expression “tikun olam” come from? Where is its source in the Torah?

We all know the prayer Aleinu. We say it at the end of each prayer service. Everyone sings it in shul. But in many synagogues, only the first section is sung and second recited quietly and quickly. Either way, the last sentence is also sung out loud: “V’ne’emar...”

But within the second section, we find mention of tikun olam, courtesy of a verse from the Prophet Zechariah (14:9), who says, “*l’sakein olam b’Malchus Shakai*”—to improve the world under the Kingdom of G-d. What does it mean, “to improve the world?” It’s not enough to give a person food to eat—rather, one must give the person faith in G-d, to tell them when you give them the food that there is a G-d.

It’s very nice to give the person a meal or two for one or two days—but ultimately, it won’t improve the person’s situation.

The greatest gift in the world that you could possibly give a person is faith and trust in G-d.

When a person knows and understands that there is a Creator Who created him, Who loves him, Who can give him a livelihood, and Who has the power to lift the person from the lowest depths to the highest heights, then he begins to understand and internalize it and to truly believe it. And then, this will give him or her strength to cope with life’s problems.

Up to that point, the person may have despaired of life. They may not have believed that they had a chance. They may have thought that the whole world was against them and that they did not have the power to fight it all.

But then he finds out that he is not alone, that he has G-d at his side and that G-d indeed has all the power and capacity to do the impossible. And this gives him the willpower to wake up and fight the battle of survival, and win it.

It was this gift that Avraham wanted to give people when he gave them food. It was this present that Yosef wanted to give all of Egypt when he fed a starving country. And it is this gift that we must share with all of humanity—and then, we will have truly improved the world.