

Torah Reading for Vayeishev, 3rd triennial: Gen 39:1 – 40:23

Vayeishev has 2 types of themes: historical and theological. It's about life's good events and bad, successes and reversals as illustrated in Joseph's life. And it's also a parsha that brings up the paradox of destiny versus free will.

Joseph does not appear to demonstrate the concept of free will. From Genesis chapter 37 - 40, Joseph is cast into a pit, sold by his brothers to Ishmaelites (or Midianites), sold to Potiphar, pharaoh's chief steward, and is put in charge of his household. So far you could call these events, in order, good, bad, bad, fair, good, and none of them has Joseph caused to happen. His situation changes radically when, because he refuses pharaoh's wife, he ends up in prison – definitely bad. In prison Joseph interprets – correctly – the dreams of pharaoh's baker and cupbearer (good); however his reward, getting released from prison – (excellent) is delayed 2 years because the cupbearer forgets his promise to help Joseph until the time comes when pharaoh is actively seeking an interpreter of dreams. Rashi interprets this as the outcome of trusting a man rather than trusting in God.

What caused these successes and reversals – God's favor, Joseph's chosen actions, his character and skills, just random chance, or some combination? The writer makes clear – it's predominantly God's favor. The phrase, "the Lord was with Joseph", is mentioned 4 times in the parsha –

- **39:2.** First, as Joseph takes on responsibilities in Potiphar's household, the Torah says the "**The Lord was with Joseph** and he was a successful man...(this explains how an inexperienced teenager could learn to run a household)
- **39:3** Not only was Joseph so capable due to God's help, but Potiphar recognized this divine favor, as it says "**his master saw that the Lord was with him** and that the Lord lent success to everything he undertook and (therefore) took a liking to Joseph.

“Because of this Potiphar made Joseph his personal attendant as well as putting him in charge of the household.

- **39:5.** And from the time that the Egyptian put him in charge of his household, ***the Lord blessed his house for Joseph’s sake, so that the blessing of the Lord was upon everything that he owned.***
- **39:21.** God’s help continued even when Joseph was thrown into prison ***“The Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and disposed the chief jailer favorably toward him”***
- **39:23.** As in the case with Potiphar, the prison chief gave Joseph responsibilities and ***“The prison chief did not have to look after anything that was under his hand because the Lord was with him and whatever he did the Lord made him succeed.***

Not his own agency but God’s blessing made Joseph successful, caused others to like him, and blessed those who had power over him. Rashi’s comment (40:14) about trusting in God emphasizes the point:

- “ (Joseph asked the chief cupbearer, when he would be released, to mention him to Pharaoh, so that he would be released. But the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph after he was released. Because Joseph depended on the chief cupbearer to remember him, it necessitated his remaining imprisoned for two years, as is stated: “Fortunate is the man who has made God his trust and has not turned to the arrogant i.e., and does not put his trust in the Egyptians. The one event he tried to accomplish, getting out of jail, had to wait until circumstances beyond his control occurred.”

Considering the importance of the role Joseph plays in the history of the Jewish people, I find it striking that only one decision he has made so far (refusing Mrs Potiphar) has a direct impact on what happens next in the chain of events. The situation he finds himself in with Mrs Potiphar is the one where God leaves Joseph on his own to make the moral choice, and Joseph does so.

As Joseph is carried along by others to his destiny (bringing the Jews to Egypt), the Torah does not report any strong emotions on his part regarding what happens to him. We read about his brothers' hatred and jealousy, Jacob's excessive love, Mrs Potiphar's lust, and Reuben's guilt. But nothing is said about what we would imagine the terror Joseph must have experienced at being thrown into a pit, fear of the outcome of being sold as a slave, misery at being separated from his father, and homeland, or any other expected reactions.

I think that Joseph's apparent acceptance of each turn of events stems from the fact that he learned, at a very young age, through his dreams, that he was destined to rule. At the time, dreams were considered a direct communication from God, so all he had to do is, as Rashi says, have trust in God and he would fulfill his destiny. His apparent lack of emotion in the face of individual successes and setbacks is consistent with a person who knows that no matter what happens, and no matter what he does, God's plan is for there to be a happy ending for him and the way forward for Jewish history.

So throughout the entire parsha it's clear that Joseph's life events are caused by the hand of God. This seems strange, since the concept of free will is fundamental to Judaism. As Rabbi Akiva said in Pirke Avot: "All is foreseen yet free will is given" (Avot 3:15). Isaac Bashevis Singer describes the paradox succinctly: "We have to believe in free will: we have no choice."

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (Chief Rabbi in the UK, 1991- 2013) states: "That is the paradox of the human condition as understood by Judaism. On the one hand we are free. Adam and Eve were free not to sin. Cain was free not to kill Abel. We are free and we bear responsibility.

He says, "it was this view, according to Josephus, that distinguished the Pharisees (the architects of what we call rabbinic Judaism) from the Sadducees and the Essenes. The Sadducees **denied** fate. They said God does not intervene in our lives. The Essenes **attributed all** to fate. They believed that everything we do has been predestined by God. The Pharisees believed in **both fate and free will**. "It was God's good pleasure that there should be a fusion

[of divine providence and human choice] and that the will of man with his virtue and vice should be admitted to the council-chamber of fate” (Antiquities, xviii, 1, 3).

Rabbi Sacks continues: We and God are co-authors of the human story. Without our efforts we can achieve nothing. But without God’s help we can achieve nothing either. Judaism found a simple way of resolving the paradox. For the bad we do, we take responsibility. For the good we achieve, we thank God. When Joseph tells his brothers of his success he attributes it to God. That is how we too should live.”

How do each of you view the paradox of fate vs free will?

Ellen L. Hochman

The Farmer's Son:

One day, an old farmer was working in his field with his old sick horse. The farmer felt compassion for the horse so he left it loose to go live out the rest of its life in the mountains.

His neighbors said, "What a shame that your only horse is gone. You must be very sad. How will you live, and work the land,?" The farmer replied: "Who knows? We shall see".

Two days later the old horse came back now rejuvenated. Twelve younger, healthy horses followed the old horse into the corral. People stopped by to congratulate him. "How fortunate you are!" they exclaimed. You must be very happy!" Again, the farmer said, "Who knows? We shall see."

The next morning, the farmer's only son was kicked by a horse and broke his leg. Villagers bemoaned this. "What a tragedy! Your son won't be able to help you farm with a broken leg. How will you survive? You must be very sad". Calmly the farmer answered, "Who knows? We shall see"

Several days later a war broke out. Most young men were conscripted into the army, but the farmer's son was deemed unfit because of his broken leg. "What good fortune you have!!" the villagers exclaimed. "You must be very happy." "Who knows? We shall see!", replied the old farmer.

The son's broken leg healed but he was left with a limp. Again the neighbors paid condolences. " what bad luck."! But the old farmer replied; "Who knows? We shall see."

As it turned out the other village boys had died in the war and the old farmer and his son were the only able bodied men capable of working the lands. The old farmer became wealthy and was very generous to the villagers. They said: "How fortunate we are, you must be very happy", and the old farmer replied, "Who knows? We shall see!"

In this story the farmer is not blessed with a vision of the future. He knows that life is full of good fortune and setbacks, and that we cannot control which will come our way and when. So his approach is to keep going, doing his best, and making decisions that seem right for him in the present.