

Shabbat Miketz 5784  
From Bad to Good to Bad to Good  
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

It's amazing what happens when you zoom out, when you widen your perspective.

Imagine you go to a Cubs game with your family, and after the game you want to take a family photo outside of Wrigley Field. You assemble the rest of the family and ready your phone to take the picture. Shockingly, all the kids are smiling and looking at the camera! Great image, so you snap the photo. But you want another shot. You want to zoom out a little bit to get some of the ambience. When you zoom out and snap the second photo, you are disappointed to see a guy walking by in a St. Louis Cardinals jersey. Unwittingly, this rival fan is now in your family photo. Boo. But your kids are still smiling so you want one more photo. You zoom out further and this time can see that famous Wrigley marquee, with the words "Chicago 10, St. Louis 0." Now *that's* a great photo, even with the Cardinals fan on the side. Actually, it's better that way. That same image of your family went from wonderful to horrible to amazing, all because you zoomed out, you widened the lens. Same people, same smiles, different vantage points, different results.

This hypothetical reminds me of something we are reading about in the Torah these weeks. Last week we read that Joseph's brothers callously disposed of him by selling him off to an Egypt-bound caravan. It's appalling that brothers would treat one of their own that way. But with the passage of time, our perspective of that pivotal incident changes. And this is because, after a long series of very fortunate events, Joseph emerges as the second in command in all of Egypt. As Egypt amasses food during the regional famine, Joseph's entire family of 70 leaves the famine of Canaan for the plenty of Egypt, courtesy of Joseph. His landing in Egypt, previously a tragedy, is now a lucky break. How fortunate the family was that Joseph landed in Egypt! It saved their lives. Time passes, and that family of 70 grows into a populous nation of Israelites, so numerous that the new Pharaoh is threatened by them and enslaves the nation. We reevaluate once more the original moment of Joseph's descent to Egypt, and in the light of Egyptian slavery, it's calamitous. But we zoom out even further and more time passes, and the stage is set for Moses to lead the Israelites from slavery to freedom. The Exodus is the ultimate story of freedom for the Jewish people, and it has inspired so many other peoples throughout history. Simply put, Jews would not be who we are, and our freedom would not be the same, without our story beginning in slavery. From this angle, Joseph being sold to Egypt was ultimately a net positive.

It's remarkable that the single incident of Joseph's arrival in Egypt toggles between being negative, then positive, then negative, then positive. Sometimes something that seems terrible emerges over time to be a blessing. While at other times an incident that seems to be favorable ends up being regrettable over the long term.

I bet this has happened to each of us, where something negative ended up being best for us. I remember when I was a high school senior on my soccer team, and I was once 10 minutes late for the team bus to leave for an away game. It was quite embarrassing, and all the seats on the bus were taken, so I sat at the front, next to the coach, who was not in a good mood. Needless to say, it was a quiet bus ride for me. We ended up winning the game against Hamilton, so as the team piled onto the bus after the game, we were all in a really good mood. Everybody took the same seat they did on the ride over, which meant I was in the front again next to the coach. But having won the game, we were both in the mood to talk. That conversation was when we really connected, when he got to know me not just as a player but as a person. It was a real highlight of the season for me, and it's all because I was late. Sometimes something bad can lead to something good. But we have to be open to changing our perspective.

What's true for us individually can also be true on a large scale.

Many of us American Jews in this room today have relatives who left the anti-semitism of Europe for the promises of America between 1880 and 1920. Raise your hands if you have relatives who immigrated to America during that time. Now raise your hand if you have relatives who immigrated to America between 1920 and 1948. Not very many.

Millions of European Jews fled religious persecution during this time, and a vast majority ended up in America before 1920. But in 1921, the United States effectively shut its borders to immigrants. The 1921 Emergency Quota Act and the 1924 Johnson Reed Act excluded almost all Jews and others from moving to America. But Europe was still burning and Jews still needed to escape. In response to America closing its doors to immigrants, Jews began to immigrate from Europe to Palestine, pre-state Israel, in large numbers for the very first time. In 1923, Palestine was home to 90,000 Jews. But that was not nearly enough of a critical mass to found a Jewish state of its own. Any nation needs a much larger population to sustain itself. With American shores closed to them, European Jews continued to move to Palestine in waves, so much so that by 1948, Palestine was home to over 700,000 Jews. It had a staggering growth rate of 800% in 25 years. This core of Jewish residents was significant enough to launch a state of its own and defend it. And ironically, it was only possible because in the 20s America shut its doors to Jewish immigrants. Now, if you are a European Jewish family living in the

1920s and looking to move, those anti-immigration bills were curses. But ever since Israel was created in 1948, we can look at those same laws and feel fortunate they redirected Jewish immigration to Palestine. Israel might not even exist today without that population surge. It's the passage of time that allows us to zoom out and see a moment of history in a new light.

Sometimes, even, fortunes go the other way. What seems to be a positive turns out to be negative.

After the Israelites leave the slavery of Egypt, they have to march 40 years through the desert to reach freedom in the Promised Land. This being an empty desert and G-d being compassionate, G-d provides the Israelites with all their needs. G-d gives them manna from heaven to eat, a traveling well for water to drink, and protection in the form of divine clouds. What does this free ride lead to? Kvetching, lying that things were better as slaves in Egypt, and committing the sin of the Golden Calf. In response, G-d shifts the approach. G-d then instructs the Israelites to make a Mishkan Tabernacle, a portable sanctuary in the wilderness. But this time G-d doesn't dole out the parts and labor, which would have been very easy for G-d to do. Instead, G-d calls on the Israelites to give up their *own* precious metals and materials, and to pitch in with their *own* hands in weaving the fabrics. And guess what happens? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes this construction phase is *the only time* in the desert journey where the Israelites do not complain! The only time they do not demand to return to Egypt. The challenges given to them make them generous and sensitive, and empower them with a sense of ownership. Having everything handed to the Israelites backfired. The sweet turned sour. But that challenge of building the Mishkan themselves does not crush them, but instead elevates them.

I want to point out here that the potential of something positive to become negative and vice versa is not absolute. It doesn't always happen. Sometimes a terrible thing remains in the moment and forever a terrible thing. Death is like that, for example. And it would be insensitive to tell someone in their moment of pain that it will turn out to be something to their benefit. But I do hope that with the passing of time, each of us becomes open to the *possibility* that some other challenges might have positive endings. That openness makes all the difference.

I think the Torah itself hints to this in the Joseph story we are reading. Certainly the brothers play an indisputable role, but other descriptions of Joseph's descent to Egypt are clouded. For example, at different points the text says that the intermediaries were the Ishmaelites, the Midianites, and the Medanites. Well, who was it then? At the end of the story, Joseph even tells his brothers to take it easy on themselves. He says,

“although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result- the survival of many people” (Gn. 50:20). Joseph basically says that G-d brought him to Egypt through their unknowing hands. Readers also know that much earlier, in Genesis 15, G-d tells Abraham that the Israelites will one day be slaves for 400 years. It really does seem like G-d intended this to happen, and the brothers were merely puppets while G-d was pulling the strings, as it were. This does not absolve them of their horrific unbrotherly love, but it highlights that this was G-d's plan all along. Indeed, the story of Egyptian slavery is a testament to all peoples for all time that the G-d of all desires that people be free.

For G-d, time is flat, but for us people, time passes slowly. We have to make a conscious effort to reevaluate previous actions. But when we revisit events from the past, sometimes, just sometimes, it feels different in the present and future.

Shabbat Shalom.