

Never Give Up

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Just like life, the history of the Jewish people is comprised of highs and lows, mountains and valleys. Much of what transpires is only understood in hindsight. Often, things look bleak and gloomy. It appears as if there is no hope. Everything is closing in. And then the looming clouds separate and light begins slipping through. Eventually, life is bright again.

We deal with all types of people. We try to lift the weary, gladden the downtrodden, and bring light to those for whom everything appears dark. We speak to them softly, lovingly, and with much patience.

We attempt to light small flames of hope within their hearts, shed light where there is confusion, and offer friendship where there is loneliness and solace where there is pain.

We do our best, yet we never know if those flames will remain lit and take hold, burning brightly and amending the trajectory, or whether the storms that are life will extinguish the sputtering flame. But we do our thing. We do what we can and we hope and daven. We anticipate that one day, all of those small flickering flames will join together and form a torch in the person we longed for.

Until the day of the redemption arrives and the world becomes bathed in the light of kedusha, chochmah and understanding, there are days when we hear news that is too difficult to bear. Life throws us awful twists and we think, "Ovdah tikvoseinu.

All hope is lost.” We feel beaten, overwhelmed and devastated. We put so much effort into a person, or a project, or a case, or a deal, and it appears as if we failed.

The Chofetz Chaim would relate a parable about a visitor who came to town and had an opinion about everything. On Shabbos, he went to daven in the big shul. As the gabbai gave out the aliyos, the visitor sat in wonderment. The man who was obviously the most prominent in town was passed over, as was the person who had all the marks of a senior talmid chochom. The way the gabbai chose to do his job made no sense. Why this one and why not that one? There was no rhyme or reason for his actions.

The flabbergasted guest approached the gabbai to tell him off. The seasoned veteran smiled patiently, saying to the man, “You’re here for one week. Stay here a few weeks, maybe longer, and you’ll begin to understand. As for the aliyos, the g’vir has yahrtzeit next week and will get his aliyah then. The talmid chochom made a simcha last week; he and his family all had aliyos for the occasion. Everything I did was calculated, but to appreciate what I do, you need to stay here longer.”

The Chofetz Chaim would conclude by saying, “Ich bin shoin an alter Yid. I have been around this world for a long time, and I am just beginning to perceive the small things that are evidence of the plan with which Hashem runs the world. Sometimes you have to wait fifty years to watch things come full circle.”

The parshiyos that we have been laining the past few weeks and those that are forthcoming are cases in point. We read this week the sad account of Yosef being sold into slavery by his brothers. We are astounded each year anew by their act, compounded by the fact that they returned home and told Yaakov Avinu that his most beloved son had been killed by an animal. Yaakov, as Chazal tell us, refused to accept their story.

The Torah then tells us the story of Yehuda and Tamar, another astounding tale, for which the explanations are wanting, until what transpired is viewed through the prism of history and the Yad Hashem becomes evident.

We learn of Yosef's sale to an Egyptian minister and how he ended up in jail on trumped-up charges. Apparently, in unrelated news, two ministers were jailed with Yosef. Then they had a dream and we know the rest of the story.

Nothing happened by chance.

Years later, the world was hit by hunger and Yosef's brothers were forced to travel to Mitzrayim in search of sustenance. While there, they were confronted by the viceroy, who seemed intent on preventing them from obtaining food. He threw one bureaucratic obstacle after another in their way, making their lives miserable.

At the beginning of Parshas Vayigash, Yehudah recounted their conversations since they had been coming to Mitzrayim to purchase food for their large family. He retold that the minister had asked whether they had a father and a younger brother. He said that they explained that their father had already lost one of the two sons from one of his wives, and if he would lose the second, he would surely die. The food minister didn't care and forced them to bring their young brother if they wanted additional food. When they brought their brother on their return visit, he was taken away. Yehudah recounted how brokenhearted their father was over the loss of the older son and how they could never face him again without taking the young son back home with them.

When it seemed that a head-to-head battle was imminent following Yehudah's powerful argument, the minister, who had seemed determined to cause them

maximum anguish, suddenly sprang forth and said to them, "Ani Yosef. I am Yosef." He then asked them, "Ha'od avi chai? Is my father still alive?"

Yosef's question was, in fact, an answer. He was aware that their father was still alive, as that had been a central point in the brothers' arguments during their prior meetings and in Yehudah's arguments to him. He was, in fact, answering Yehudah, "You claim to be so concerned about your father's welfare? Where was your anxiety and concern when you pulled a young boy away from his doting father, selling him into Egyptian servitude?"

The posuk relates that the brothers were unable to respond to Yosef – "velo yochlu echov la'anos oso ki nivhalu miponov." They were speechless, embarrassed by this rebuke, devastated as the realization of what they had done sank in.

Yosef brought them close and told them not to be depressed or angry: "Al tei'atzvu ve'al yichar be'eineichem. It was to keep us alive that Hashem sent me here, lo sum lochem she'airis ba'aretz, to establish a place of refuge for us in this country.

"It wasn't you who sent me here. It was Hashem. Don't worry. All that has occurred isn't because of your mistakes, but, rather, was merely a chapter in a grand Divine plan. Al tei'atzvu! You were merely messengers, characters in a story written by the Author of creation. Now rush home to my father and tell him that I really am alive.

"You will then all return here with your father and your families, cattle and sheep. I will feed you and care for you so that you do not die of hunger in Canaan. Please tell my father of all the honor I have here. Tell him everything you have seen and rush back here with him."

The overwhelmed brothers returned home bearing news they knew would bring much joy to Yaakov. They returned home proclaiming, "Yosef is alive and he is a ruler in Mitzrayim."

Surprisingly, when Yaakov heard that Yosef was alive and a ruler in Mitzrayim, he reacted differently and rejected the news. He didn't believe it. "Ki lo he'emin lohem" (Bereishis 45:26).

It seems inconceivable. Yaakov Avinu had a special relationship with Yosef and deeply mourned his loss. Why would he not believe that Yosef was alive? Shouldn't he have been relieved to learn that his beloved son was indeed living? To compound the problem, the very next posuk relates, "Vayedabru eilov es kol divrei Yosef asher diber aleihem...vatechi ruach Yaakov avihem." When Yaakov heard all the words that Yosef had spoken, he was revived.

What was the reason for his initial doubt and what was it in the words they shared that convinced him?

Perhaps we can suggest that the fundamentals of emunah were playing out here just beneath the surface. Yosef Hatzaddik had survived several miserable experiences that would have broken men smaller than he. Orphaned of his mother, he clung to his beloved father. Then he was cut away from his father and cast aside, despised and scorned. He fell deep, almost into the clutches of aishes Potifar, tested yet again. When he persevered in maintaining his integrity, he landed in prison. Things were dark. Life was bleak. There was little hope for a productive future or a happy ending to his saga.

Yet, when he was reunited with the shevotim who ruined his life, he promised that he bore them no ill will and had no hard feelings. He told them that there is a

Master of the world who writes the script. "Al tei'atzvu," Yosef said. "Don't be depressed. He calls the shots, not you or anyone else. Life has peaks and valleys, but we never know which is which. What seems to be a curse is often a blessing and vice versa."

The shevotim returned home, eager to share with their father that his beloved Yosef was alive. But they faced a dilemma. They had originally told Yaakov that Yosef had died. They had shown him as evidence his shirt which they had bloodied. "Chaya ra'ah achalasu. A wild animal ate him. Tarof toraf Yosef. He was ripped apart,"

Now, in order to tell Yaakov that Yosef was alive, they were forced to admit what they had done. They had to tell him that they sold their brother to traveling merchants and created a story to fool him. They had to tell him that he was not really ripped apart by a wild animal, but that they had soaked his kesones pasim in the blood of a goat they had slaughtered to be able to create the fictitious event.

It was to this missing link in the story that Yaakov reacted. He was unable to accept that his own sons had sold Yosef, acting in a way that was so callous and filled with hatred. When the posuk says, "Lo he'emin lohem," it means that Yaakov didn't believe that his sons had been capable of such an act and refused to accept that version of the tale. It may have been easier to believe that Yosef was dead than to think that his own children had sold their brother into oblivion and lied to their father about what they had done. He couldn't believe it.

Yet, what the brothers did next made all the difference. Following Yosef's instructions, they shared with him kol divrei Yosef, the entire message that Yosef had shared with them – the reminder that we are but pawns in His hands and that actions that seem so destructive are actually the groundwork for construction.

They told their father Yosef's message: "Al tei'atzvu ve'al yichar be'apchem ki mechartem osi heinah." They told Yaakov that Yosef said that they shouldn't be upset or depressed about having sold him. They told Yaakov that Yosef explained to them that Hashem had arranged for him to be transported to Mitzrayim so that he could establish a place of refuge where they would be able to live while hunger prevailed in their homeland.

The posuk relates that when Yaakov heard this, "vatechi ruach Yaakov," he not only believed them, but upon hearing the lesson Yosef taught, his spirit returned. He was revived, because along with the good news came a message of chiyus.

Yosef's message explodes with meaning and beauty. There are easier times and harder times, but it is always by design.

Yosef taught the brothers an enduring lesson in emunah and how little we know and understand about what is going on. Yosef told the brothers that we are all like the visitor to the shul who felt authorized to give his opinions, not realizing that he had no concept or clue of the bigger picture.

Jewish history is replete with souls planted in a location where they could best impact others. Sometimes, they had to be uprooted and replanted elsewhere, causing no small amount of hardship, but in the end, the Divine precision became clear.

There is a mesorah regarding the arba'ah shvuyim, the four captives. Four Rishonim, all great gaonim, were traveling to a wedding via Italy, when pirates overtook their boat and captured the passengers. The three gaonim, Rav Shmaryohu, Rav Chushiel and Rav Moshe (the name of the fourth is unknown), were sold into slavery and ended up in North African countries. Providentially, they

brought with them the Torah of Bavel and laid the groundwork for the emergence of great yeshivos there.

No doubt they were despondent, as they were viciously chained, but in time, they realized Who was really leading them along and the greater purpose of their suffering.

This was true in our recent history as well, as the Holocaust devastated the European Torah world. A few hardy souls were waiting in America to greet the limping remnant. Most of these European immigrants had come to America before the war because they were forced to, perhaps due to hunger or some other threat. In time, it became clear that they were sent there lefleitah gedolah.

My grandfather, Rav Eliezer Levin, was one of the many who survived what appeared at the time to be tragedy. He had taken a leave of absence for one year from his rabbonus in Lita when his relatives dragged him to America. Fearing for his life as the winds of war circled over Europe, they brought him here and arranged a rabbinic position in Erie, PA. Needless to say, he couldn't adapt to Erie and wanted to return to his beloved Vashki and to his wife, children and baalei batim.

The thought of bringing his family to die a spiritual death in Erie frightened him. But he couldn't return to his hometown. He had left his rabbinic position there in the hands of a trusted friend, who agreed to serve as rov until he would return from America. The friend would gain serious experience, aiding him in his pursuit of a position. However, when Rav Levin wrote that he was coming home to reassume the position, the friend was devastated. He said that he would never get another job and pleaded with Rav Levin to let him stay there, asking Rav Levin to find himself a different position.

Although it was his father-in-law's position, which he had inherited and occupied for several years, Rav Levin didn't have the heart to unseat the man from the job. Meanwhile, his family members secured a rabbinic position for him in Detroit. With no choice, he moved there and sent for his family. With their meager possessions and several of Rav Levin's seforim along with kisvei yad of his father-in-law, the family set sail on one of the last boats to leave Europe before the war broke out. They arrived here just ahead of the destruction of Lithuania. The rabbi of Vashki and the entire town were wiped out. No one survived.

Rav Levin played a key role in establishing a Torah community in Detroit and actively assisted the roshei yeshiva of Telshe as they started their yeshiva in Wickliffe, Ohio, after being stranded here. His own children would emerge as prominent rabbonim and roshei yeshiva in this country, providing "michyah," spiritual sustenance, "she'airis," and "pleitah gedolah" as the generation faced starvation.

He would recall that when he arrived in Detroit, there were over thirty rabbonim in the city. Some of them wondered who needed another rov, especially a greenhorn immigrant who didn't speak a word of English. But Rav Levin was the only one among them who sent his son away to yeshiva upon his bar mitzvah. Thanks to his mesirus nefesh and stellar chinuch, Rav Levin's son, Rav Avrohom Chaim, went on to found the Telz Yeshiva in Chicago and earn much fame and prominence, raising thousands of talmidim, as well as turning Chicago into a Torah city and influencing thousands of people there and around the country through his Torah leadership. This week marks Rav Avrohom Chaim's fourth yahrtzeit and he is sadly missed.

Examine the history of the rebirth of Torah in this country and around the world and you will find similar stories of people who had lost most or all of everything and everyone they had known and became virtual refugees. Miraculously, they survived

the Holocaust, reestablished themselves, and planted the seeds of a recovering nation now blossoming larger than ever before.

Stories of Hashgocha Protis abound. Tales are often told about people being in the right place at the right time, thinking that they are in the wrong place and bemoaning their fate, only to learn that fate had intervened on their behalf. The stories depict how the Divine Hand reached down from Heaven and plucked the protagonists from disaster, with neither their knowledge nor acquiescence.

We know stories of people who had thought their world was closing in on them and their life was ending, only to learn later that their salvation was cloaked in what at the time they perceived as torture.

But it is not enough to read and be reminded of those stories if we don't realize that our life is also comprised of such stories. Look back at what you've gone through and your experiences throughout life, and you will see the Yad Hashem evident in all.

But when you have a bad day and things don't go according to plan, remember the call of Yosef as he says, "My brothers and sisters, grandsons and granddaughters, al tei'atzvu. Don't despair. Don't be desperate. Don't think it's all over. Never give up."

When it seems as if the bad guys are winning, when you feel all alone, when your teacher or boss or child has screamed at you, or when you feel as if you're at the end of your rope, know that it is not yet over and the plot will change. Sometimes it happens quickly, while other times it takes longer to see the sun behind the clouds. But you must know that it is always there.

Yosef calls out to us throughout the ages and proclaims to never become despondent. People may mock you, take advantage of you, and question your abilities and stability. Don't give up. Al tei'atzvu. Maintain your faith and you will be able to overcome your adversary, even if he is more powerful than you. It may take time, but ultimately you will succeed and Hashem's kindness will become apparent to you.