

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Mikeitz 20 “The Flame”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. I hope everyone had an enjoyable Chanukah. In the historical sequence of our ancient Jewish holidays, Chanukah is chronologically last. We know that Chanukah specifically occurs during the winter, when the nights are longer, because it represents our exile -literally and metaphorically a time of darkness, when God is not visible. It commemorates events which occurred when the Greeks attacked us, and so we had to grapple with non-Jewish society, which is a significant element of our exile.

As we've discussed before, countless commentators say that our Chanukah candles will light up the night and provide us with spiritual illumination. I think it's particularly fitting in this year of Covid that we ended Chanukah with a snowstorm for the 1st time in a few years, which as usual was a mixed bag – it created hazardous conditions for moving about, but it also created a sparkling landscape to enjoy. Similarly, it has been a long, dark year, but now the vaccine has arrived -- the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. And yet I find that many people have a hard time escaping their doldrums even with this undeniably good news.

I think Yosef in our parsha has a message that bears on this topic. We read of his miraculous ascent to power, virtually overnight, moving from the lowly status of prisoner to the exalted position of leader of the world's superpower.

How did this astonishing transformation come to pass? There are multiple levels of explanation, but in the most concrete terms, Yosef rose to power because he interpreted the butler's dream in prison, and 2 years after the butler was released, he recommended that Yosef be summoned to interpret Pharaoh's troubling dreams. But we need to take a step back and consider how Yosef came to interpret the butler's dream in the first place. On that particular day, he was sensitive enough to notice that a couple of his fellow inmates looked even sadder than usual, and he took the trouble to ask them why. That question set all the other events into motion. Despite the dismal situation in which Yosef found himself, he had an optimistic frame of mind – he thought he could find a way to cheer up the other prisoners. This story is a dramatic demonstration of the way a positive attitude can change lives.

Chazal compare Yosef to a flame, and I think that is because he exemplifies the message we learn from Chanukah. In order to bring light into the dark times of our lives, we must learn to rekindle a happy disposition. Joseph's life story teaches that this idea is not just theoretical. It actually works. That is the message we can take with us as Chanukah leads into Shabbos – even in the midst of so much negativity, we should keep looking until we find a spark of the positive, because that is the tried and true way to transform our lives for the better. Shabbat shalom.