

Vayechi “Alive and Well in Exile”
Sermon by Rabbi Hirsch – 1/11/20

Shabbat Shalom. First, I'd like to acknowledge that this week's kiddush is sponsored by Ellen Geller in memory of her grandmother Chava Baila bat Chaim Yehoshua whose yahrzeit falls on the 15th of Tevet. May her memory be a blessing.

And on behalf of the entire Mekor Habracha community, I would like to congratulate Rebecca and Ben Falk, upon the birth of their daughter, named Eliana Ruth, in shul this past Thursday. Mazal tov!

The recent resurgence of antisemitic violence in the United States is in the forefront of our minds, and many people have approached me with their concerns about safety in the United States. Some even asked if I think that we should prepare to leave the United States if the situation becomes more dire. There is no question that there is growing fear and negativity about our survival; after all, that is our situation – we are still in galut, in exile.

I believe this week's parsha has much to say about our existence in galut. It begins with the words *Vayechi Yaakov B'Eretz Mitzrayim, and Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt*. The Zohar explains that this means **not** simply that Yaakov was functioning physically, but that he was truly **alive** for the first time in his life, and this fulfillment specifically occurred in exile, **not** in Israel.

At first glance, this turn of events seems counterintuitive. But it makes more sense when you consider that Yaakov was the father of the galut, the prototype for the Jewish experience in exile and that was to be his main contribution to the Jewish people.

The opening of Parshat Vayeishev that we read 3 weeks ago, says "*Eileh toldot Yaakov.*" "*This is the history of Yaakov's progeny, his descendants.*" It goes on to tell the story about Yosef and his brothers, and the narrative seems to begin with Yosef's name, which is what you'd expect. But Rashi quotes the Midrash which gives us a deeper interpretation – it tells us to end the previous sentence with Yosef's name – *Eileh Toldot Yaakov - Yosef. This is the history of his progeny, who is embodied in Yosef*. Why? Because Yosef was Yaakov's spiritual progeny; he was an extension of Yaakov, whom as we just mentioned, was the father of the exile. That's why many Mefarshim say based on this week's parsha that we give a blessing to Jewish sons that they be like Yosef's 2 sons, Ephraim and Menashe, because they are the only 2 tribes who were raised entirely in exile.

It is clear that Yosef was the most secular Jew of all time; he was not simply a proxy leader of Egypt. He embraced exile, and Egypt became known in Sefer Yirmiyahu as an *Egla Yifay Yefiya – a beautiful calf*, because Yosef's symbol was a calf, and so this nickname for Egypt expressed Yosef's influence on all Egyptian society. In contrast, his brothers had a completely different attitude. We read in last week's parsha that Yosef tried to help them look better in the eyes of Paraoth by advising them to identify as cattle merchants and not shepherds, but they did not take his advice. I believe this is because they viewed galut as a place we don't want to be, a situation to resist. But if you think about it, most of Jewish history

has been in galut, and despite the obvious negative aspects of exile, there also must be a positive reason for it.

Rabbi Josh delivered a beautiful sermon last week, but Yosef holds a very special place in my heart, which is why, as many of you know, I am writing a book about him, so I always feel the need to defend Yosef against any assertions against him. If you look at the sequence of the Torah and Sefer Beraisheet we finished this morning, it is focused on how to achieve the ideal of individuality before we speak about Jewish nationhood in Sefer Shemot. Sefer Braisheet presents the evolution, so to speak, of *individuals* beginning with Adam. I think it is no coincidence that Sefer Bereisheet ends with Yosef's death because he was the one who reached the apotheosis of individuality. The Zohar tells us that when Yaakov spoke to his brother Esav, saying *Yeish li kol, I have everything*, he was referring to Yosef.

This demonstrates to me that Yosef was an integrated person, not split in 2 as was suggested last week. It was a complete Yosef who brought his father's mission in exile to completion.

And it is in **that** context that we must analyze Yosef's interactions with the Egyptian people. At the story's end where he tells them to sell themselves, along with their livestock and provisions to Egypt, and supposedly enslaves them, it makes little sense to interpret that as literal slavery. Imagine a politician in a wealthy country, where the common people are without food. There is little doubt that there would be a massive rebellion. But in the Torah's narrative, Yosef has a calm interchange with the nation, and they agree to his plans, without any protest and without any sign of force or intimidation from the government. Why is that the case? Why did this story not end in anarchy?

If we go back even earlier and consider how Yosef came to be appointed Viceroy of Egypt; that was also a bizarre story, to say the least. He was an ex-convict just released from prison, a dream interpreter, and a foreigner. Some commentators say his rise to power was obviously a miracle.

But in my view that can't be the case; Yosef's accomplishments must be teaching us something relevant to our lives.

Rashi says at the end of Parshat Vayeishev that because Yosef asked the butler to intercede with Paraoh on his behalf, God punished him with 2 extra years in prison.

This seems like a rather harsh punishment for such a minor infraction! I think the answer is that the secret to Yosef's success was going to be **not** his good looks, charisma, or even his spirituality. Rather, his success came from his **sincerity**.

Therefore, the 2 extra years were not a punishment to Yosef; he needed those 2 years to learn this vital lesson. God had to ensure that he would learn never to manipulate for his own gain, not even slightly, as he tried to do with the butler. When Yosef entered Paraoh's court, he was on stage; everyone was watching him with enormous skepticism. Certainly, the other dream interpreters who Paraoh dismissed would be salivating to show him up.

Instead, in a few short minutes, he had the entire palace in the palm of his hand. Not simply because he charmed them with his charisma, but because of his complete

sincerity. They all knew he was telling the truth with his interpretations and prophecies about the 7 years of plenty and 7 years of famine.

Paraoh was extremely insightful and understood that since he believed Yosef's prophecies to be accurate and that Egypt needed a leader that the people would believe in, he knew that Egypt needed a leader who had no self-interest at all and was completely motivated by his sincere desire to do what was right for the entire country of Egypt, as opposed to a typical politician who would be laughed at if he declared that everyone should save their crops and be frugal. Only Yosef could tell an entire nation, as John F. Kennedy did *Ask not what your country could do for you, ask what you can do for your country* and have the people believe in him and take him seriously.

I think that is why Yosef could negotiate with an entire nation -- they trusted that everything Yosef did was for their benefit, **not for his own gain**. He knew that it would benefit them more if they were invested in Egypt's success, instead of simply getting a handout of food from the government. And that's why I do not think that Yosef had an evil side at all. He did not turn the Egyptian people into slaves, he genuinely created a nation of investors in Egypt, and Egypt survived and thrived due to his efforts. Because the people felt his love for Egypt and the people in it, the nation idolized him and mourned his death.

As we contemplate our situation in exile here and across the globe, we should look to the message in our Parsha and consider the significance of our living in exile and what the experience means to us as Jews. There is a reason why Yosef's story is so prominent in the Chumash. There is a reason why *Vayechi Yaakov B'Eretz Mitzrayim* – that Yaakov lived his best years in galut. The Jewish exile experience is meant to be a story of turning negative circumstances into something positive. We must always be mindful of the spiritual danger presented by assimilation, and the physical danger of antisemitism, but we cannot only remain mired in a defensive stance, focusing only on mere survival. Instead of predicting the worst if Mashiach does not come immediately, we should try our best to discover and embrace the meaningful opportunities we have in our secular society. If we learn to emulate Yosef's sincerity in his life and in his interactions with Egypt, we will do much more than survive in our exile – we will flourish. Shabbat shalom.