

# REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

HOW CAN WE PREPARE FOR TIMES OF HARDSHIP DURING TIMES OF ABUNDANCE?

## TORAH BLESSING

### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Rabbi Buchdahl recognizes the ups and downs of Joseph's story:

He lost his mother as a young child, but he was his father's favorite. He was thrown in a pit and left to die but then his life was spared. He is given full trust over Potiphar's house, but is falsely accused and thrown in prison. He wallows there for two years before he is taken out only to quickly become the Pharaoh's most trusted advisor and commander.

In looking at this cycle of highs and lows, Rabbi Buchdahl asserts:

He [Joseph] understands what it means to have abundance and then scarcity. Darkness then light. And these experiences helped him understand how to appreciate the good when he has it, and to store up that abundance in time of blessing for the inevitable times of hardship.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How do you see Joseph bringing abundance to times of hardship?
- (b) Is it possible that this process could happen backwards, where Joseph brings an awareness of hardship to times of abundance?
- (c) Which of these mentalities most resonates with your own experience?

Rabbi Buchdahl references a commentary by Dena Weiss<sup>1</sup>, which says:

The Hebrew word for the dungeon from which Yosef was freed is *bor*. This is not an accident. A *bor* is also where Yosef was cast by his brothers. When Yosef is brought from the *bor* to the palace, he emerges completely from the unfortunate chain of events precipitated by his brother's jealousy. He begins to take his fate into his own hands and move it in a positive direction. The term *bor* here is very deliberate and instructive. When the royal butler refers to the prison that was his former home, he says that he

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<sup>1</sup> Dena Weiss is the head of the Jewish text study program at Mechon Hadar, a pluralistic center for learning in New York City. She currently teaches our Friday morning Talmud class.

was *ba-mishmar*, in custody. Yosef's master, Potiphar, sends him to the *beit ha-sohar*, prison. Yet Yosef himself refers to the prison as a *bor*. Yosef understands his life trajectory as being in and out 2 of the pits that he has been thrown into. In his own narrative, every dark place from which there should be no escape is a *bor*. And crucially, for Yosef, every *bor* eventually leads to freedom.

Rabbi Buchdahl explains:

Because you see-- a *bor* in Hebrew is neither technically a pit nor prison. It is literally a cistern--which is very important--and intentional. A cistern is a very dark hole, but very different than a pit: A cistern is a means for weathering the cycles of nature, and of life.

Because there are many ways to get water: You can dig a well and get water from below. You can go to a river or other source and make a channel of water. You can sit around and pray for rain. Or you can dig a cistern and collect and save water in the times of plenty for the inevitable times of drought. It takes faith and courage to build a cistern because it comes with no guarantees, it requires hope and also some sacrifice and discipline. The cistern is a perfect expression of Joseph's philosophy for surviving the vicissitudes of life: Be patient and save up during your abundance, accumulate blessings, and then you will then have enough in your time of need.

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) What significance is there to Joseph's use of the word "bor" to describe his place of imprisonment?
- (b) How does the idea of Joseph in a cistern relate to strengthening or sustaining Joseph?
- (c) Have you experienced a time of darkness leading to freedom, as Weiss interprets Joseph's experience?
- (d) How has sacrifice in times of abundance or scarcity enabled you to prepare for future hard times?

Joseph rises to such a high position in Egypt because of his ability to understand the messages in Pharaoh's dreams:

<p><b>Genesis 41</b></p> <p><sup>1</sup> After two years' time, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile,</p>	<p>א וַיְהִי, מִקֵּץ שְׁנַתִּים יָמִים; וּפְרָעָה הָלָם וַהֲנִיָּה עֹמֵד עַל-הַיָּאָר.</p>
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<p><sup>2</sup> when out of the Nile there came up seven cows, handsome and sturdy, and they grazed in the reed grass.</p> <p><sup>3</sup> But presently, seven other cows came up from the Nile close behind them, ugly and gaunt, and stood beside the cows on the bank of the Nile;</p> <p><sup>4</sup> and the ugly gaunt cows ate up the seven handsome sturdy cows. And Pharaoh awoke.</p> <p><sup>5</sup> He fell asleep and dreamed a second time: Seven ears of grain, solid and healthy, grew on a single stalk.</p> <p><sup>6</sup> But close behind them sprouted seven ears, thin and scorched by the east wind.</p> <p><sup>7</sup> And the thin ears swallowed up the seven solid and full ears. Then Pharaoh awoke: it was a dream!</p>	<p>ב וְהִנֵּה מִן-הַיָּאֵר, עֹלֹת שֶׁבַע פָּרוֹת, יָפוֹת מֵרְאָה, וּבְרִיאַת בָּשָׂר; וַתִּרְעֶינָהּ, בְּאֲחוּיָהּ.</p> <p>ג וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע פָּרוֹת אַחֲרוֹת, עֹלֹת אַחֲרֶיהֶן מִן-הַיָּאֵר, רַעוֹת מֵרְאָה, וְדַקּוֹת בָּשָׂר; וַתַּעֲמִדְנָה אֶצְלַת הַפָּרוֹת, עַל-שֵׁפֶת הַיָּאֵר.</p> <p>ד וַתֹּאכְלֶנָּה הַפָּרוֹת, רַעוֹת הַמֵּרְאָה וְדַקּוֹת הַבָּשָׂר, אֵת שֶׁבַע הַפָּרוֹת, יָפֹת הַמֵּרְאָה וְהַבְּרִיאַת; וַיִּיקֶץ, פְּרָעֹה.</p> <p>ה וַיִּישָׁן, וַיַּחֲלֵם שֵׁנִית; וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע שִׁבְלִים, עֹלֹת בְּקִנְיָה אֶחָד--בְּרִיאוֹת וְטֹבוֹת.</p> <p>ו וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע שִׁבְלִים, דַּקּוֹת וְשָׂדוּפוֹת קָדִים--צִמְחֹת, אַחֲרֶיהֶן.</p> <p>ז וַתִּבְלַעְנָהּ, הַשִּׁבְלִים הַדַּקּוֹת, אֵת שֶׁבַע הַשִּׁבְלִים, הַבְּרִיאוֹת וְהַמְּלֵאוֹת; וַיִּיקֶץ פְּרָעֹה, וְהִנֵּה חֵלֹם.</p>
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Rabbi Buchdahl explains that Joseph has experience that allows him to interpret Pharaoh's dreams when Pharaoh cannot:

...Joseph understands that pharaoh's dream means that Egypt will experience 7 years of abundance of food, followed by seven years of famine. But drawing on his experience he is able to make a plan of action for the Pharaoh--to save up food in the time of plenty for the years of scarcity. This might seem an obvious strategy to those of us who have heard this story, or who are accustomed to cycles, but this was not obvious to the Pharaoh--a man and ruler who only knew abundance. Joseph knew inherently the necessity for self-discipline, sacrifice, and delayed gratification in times of abundance to prepare for times of scarcity. Joseph had the hard-earned wisdom to know that plenty--is often followed by famine and then, we hope and pray back to plenty.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think of the idea that Pharaoh lacks the necessary experience of hardship to interpret his own dreams? What role does perspective play in framing life events? How have you seen this play out in your life or in the lives of those you know?
- (b) Pharaoh knows that he needs outside help in navigating his situation. How likely are you to call in advisors when you find yourself in an unfamiliar situation? How do you recognize when such help is needed?

## DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF UPS AND DOWNS:

Joseph's life seems to embody the message present in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8:

<sup>1</sup> A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven:

<sup>2</sup> A time for being born and a time for dying, A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted;

<sup>3</sup> A time for slaying and a time for healing, A time for tearing down and a time for building up;

<sup>4</sup> A time for weeping and a time for laughing, A time for wailing and a time for dancing;

<sup>5</sup> A time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones, A time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces;

<sup>6</sup> A time for seeking and a time for losing, A time for keeping and a time for discarding;

<sup>7</sup> A time for ripping and a time for sewing, A time for silence and a time for speaking;

<sup>8</sup> A time for loving and a time for hating; A time for war and a time for peace.

He experiences times of plenty and times of scarcity. Our own lives, however, are rarely so clearly defined. A poem by the modern Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai's expresses a messiness of life that may feel more realistic:

### ***A Man In His Life by Yehuda Amichai***

*A man doesn't have time in his life  
to have time for everything.*

*He doesn't have seasons enough to have  
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes  
Was wrong about that.*

*A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,  
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,  
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,*

*to make love in war and war in love.  
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,  
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest  
what history  
takes years and years to do.*

*A man doesn't have time.  
When he loses he seeks, when he finds  
he forgets, when he forgets he loves, when he loves  
he begins to forget.*

*And his soul is seasoned, his soul  
is very professional.  
Only his body remains forever  
an amateur. It tries and it misses,  
gets muddled, doesn't learn a thing,  
drunk and blind in its pleasures  
and its pains.*

*He will die as figs die in autumn,  
Shriveled and full of himself and sweet,  
the leaves growing dry on the ground,  
the bare branches pointing to the place  
where there's time for everything.*

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- a) How does our experience of scarcity and abundance change when we experience both at the same time? Which one more powerfully colors moments when you have experienced both in your life?
- b) What can we learn from Joseph and apply to the simultaneous experience that we may find more often in our own lives?