

# Torah Weekly

בס"ד

15-21 December, 2019  
17-23 Kislev, 5780  
Torah: Genesis 37:1 - 40:23  
Haftorah: Amos 2:6 - 3:8  
PARSHAT VAYEISHEV

**Calendars**  
We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

**Family Programs**  
Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

**Grape Juice & Matzah**  
We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

Hyman & Martha Rogal Center  
5804 Beacon Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15217  
412-421-0111  
Fax: 412-521-5948  
www.alephne.org  
info@alephne.org



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**The Child in the Pit** There is high drama in the Bible this week as we read the story of Joseph and his brothers. Technicolor dream coats, sibling rivalry, snake-infested pits and attempted fratricide dominate the Parshah proceedings.

When the brothers plot to actually kill Joseph, Reuben, the eldest, makes a valiant effort to save Joseph's life, and suggests that instead they throw him into a pit. That would be sufficient to teach him a lesson, and no blood need be shed. In fact, according to Rashi, the Torah itself testifies that Reuben's intention was to save Joseph from his brothers and bring him back to their father. But destiny had a different plan. While Reuben was away, the brothers sold Joseph into slavery. When he returns to rescue him, the boy is gone and he rends his garments in grief. But where was Reuben when the sale took place? Why wasn't he there with his brothers at the time? Where did he suddenly disappear? Rashi gives two possible explanations: 1) It was his turn to go and serve his aged father. The brothers had a roster, and Reuben's time had come, so he was back at the ranch. 2) Reuben was busy doing *teshuvah* (repentance), with sackcloth and fasting, for the sin of interfering with his father's marital life (as per Genesis 35:22). I remember hearing the Lubavitcher Rebbe ask: According to the second opinion, Reuben left Joseph in the pit to go and busy himself with "sackcloth and fasting," i.e. his own repentance for his sins. So let's take a look and see what happens as a result. Reuben is absent, so Joseph is sold into slavery and taken down to Egypt. There he is imprisoned

on false charges and, one day, rises to sudden prominence by successfully interpreting Pharaoh's dreams. He becomes viceroy of Egypt, then meets his long-lost brothers when they come searching for food during the famine. After revealing his true identity, he brings his father Jacob and the entire family down to Egypt, where he supports and sustains them. And that is precisely how the Jews became slaves in Egypt. It all started with Joseph being taken from the pit and sold to the Egyptians. Why? Because Reuben decided to be busy doing *teshuvah*! I remember the Rebbe thundering, "The whole Egyptian exile can be traced to Reuben's ill-timed *teshuvah*! When a young Jewish boy is languishing in the pit, this is **not** the time to be worrying about your own spiritual state. That is the time to save a Jewish child!" Of course, *teshuvah* is a wonderful mitzvah. In a way, it is the greatest mitzvah of all, because it can repair the damage done by failing to observe all other mitzvahs. And yet, there is a time to do *teshuvah* and a time to save lives. And when a life is in danger, even *teshuvah* really must wait. The analogy of the Jewish child in the pit resonates powerfully today. It is about saving lives not only physically, but also spiritually. How many millions of Jewish children are at risk spiritually? And how many Jews, indeed how many rabbis, are preoccupied with their own personal spiritual upliftment and ignore the plight of young people "in the pits"? It is a sobering thought, and one that demands a response. *By Rabbi Yossi Goldman*

**Destiny or Free Will?** Does Judaism believe in destiny? Do

we believe that G-d is in control of all that transpires in the universe, that every human being is playing a predetermined role in a vast Divine plan? Or, do we believe in the freedom of every human being to choose a path, and to experience the consequences of those decisions? These two possibilities, destiny or free will, seem to be mutually exclusive. If we believe that everything is determined by G-d, seemingly we cannot also accept that a human being can be held accountable or rewarded for his or her actions. Yet Judaism teaches us that Divine destiny and free choice both exist, and are not mutually exclusive. No biblical story expresses this lesson more powerfully than the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph dreamed that his brothers would bow to him. The brothers in turn viewed Joseph as a threat and planned to kill him. At the last moment, they decided to sell him as a slave. Many years later, Joseph became the viceroy of Egypt, and his brothers indeed bowed to him. Joseph was reunited with his brothers and sustained them during a terrible famine. How should we view the actions of the brothers? On the one hand, the brothers were certainly guilty of sin. After all, they conspired to kill Joseph, and they sold him as a slave. On the other hand, the selling of Joseph was part of the Divine plan for Joseph to achieve greatness and become the leader of the world's superpower. Were the brothers succumbing to sin, or were they pawns in the Divine plan that would ultimately save their entire family? Was this an act of sin or was it an act of redemption?

The Torah responds to the sale of Joseph by issuing two commandments. The first is the

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**Passing of Maggid (1772)** Rabbi DovBer, known as "The Maggid of Mezeritch", was the disciple of, and successor to, the founder of Chassidism, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. Rabbi DovBer led the Chassidic movement from 1761 until his passing on Kislev 19, 1772.

**Liberation of R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1798)** On the 19th of Kislev of the year 5559 from creation (1798), Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi -- a leading disciple of Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch (see previous entry) and the founder of Chabad Chassidism -- was released from his imprisonment in the Peter-Paul fortress in Petersburg, where he was held for 53 days on charges that his teachings threatened the imperial authority of the Czar. More than a personal liberation, this was a watershed event in the history of Chassidism heralding a new era in the revelation of the "inner soul" of Torah, and is celebrated to this day as "The Rosh Hashanah of Chassidism."

**Rebbetzin Menuchah Rachel born (1798)** On the very day that Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi was liberated from prison (see above), a granddaughter was born to him -- the daughter of his son Rabbi Dovber and his wife Rebbetzin Sheina. The girl was named Menuchah Rachel -- "Menuchah", meaning "tranquility" (Rachel was the name of a daughter of Rabbi Schneur Zalman who died in her youth). In 1845, Rebbetzin Menuchah Rachel realized her lifelong desire to live in the Holy Land when she and her husband, Rabbi Yaakov Culi Slonim (d. 1857), led a contingent of Chassidim who settled in Hebron. Famed for her wisdom, piety and erudition, she served as the matriarch of the Chassidic community in Hebron until her passing in her 90th year in 1888.

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**Tanya Published (1796)** The first printing of the "bible of Chassidism", the *Tanya*, the magnum opus of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad.

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**Alexander in Jerusalem (313 BCE)** On Kislev 21 of the year 3448 from creation (313 BCE), there occurred the historic meeting between Shimon HaTzaddik and Alexander ("the Great") of Macedonia. The Samaritans, bitter enemies of the Jews, had convinced Alexander that the Jews' refusal to place his image in their Temple was a sign of rebellion against his sovereignty, and that the Holy Temple should be destroyed. The Kohen Gadol ("High Priest") at the time was Shimon HaTzaddik, the last of the "Men of the Great Assembly" who rebuilt the Holy Temple and revitalized Judaism under Ezra. On the 21st of Kislev Alexander marched on Jerusalem at the head of his army; Shimon, garbed in the vestments of the High Priest and accompanied with a delegation of Jewish dignitaries, went forth to greet him. The two groups walked towards each other all night; at the crack of dawn they met. As Alexander beheld the visage of the High Priest, he dismounted his horse and bowed respectfully; to his men he explained that he often had visions of a similar-looking man leading him into battle. Shimon HaTzaddik brought the emperor to the Holy Temple and explained that Judaism prohibits the display of any graven image; he offered to name all the male children born to priests that year "Alexander" as a demonstration of loyalty to the emperor (which is how "Alexander" became a common Jewish name). The Samaritans plot was rebuffed, and Kislev 21 was declared a holiday. (Talmud Yoma 69a) According to an alternative version, this episode occurred on the 25th of Tevet.

commandment to redeem the firstborn son, and the second is the commandment to give a half shekel once a year (every Jew would give a half shekel, which would go toward paying for the Temple's communal offerings). The Torah refers to the half shekel as an "atonement for the soul." The Talmud explains the connection between these commandments and the sale of Joseph: Rabbi Berechyah and Rabbi Levi say in the name of Rabbi Shimon Ben Lakish: "Because they sold the firstborn of Rachel for 20 pieces of silver, let each one redeem his firstborn with 20 pieces of silver." (Joseph was sold for 20 *dinars*, there are four *dinars* in a *sela*. The firstborn is redeemed by the father giving the priest five *sela*, the equivalent of the 20 *dinars* the brothers earned through the sale of Joseph.) Rabbi Pinchas says in the name of Rabbi Levi: "Because they sold the firstborn of Rachel for 20 pieces of silver [20 *dinars*] and each one of the brothers received [a *tibbah*, which is] two *dinars* as his share of the proceeds, therefore let each one give for the shekel obligation [a *tibbah*, which is the value of] two *dinars*." (Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim, ch. 2, halachah 3.) The theme of each of these two commandments is completely different. The commandment to give a half shekel is about "atonement for the soul." Atonement implies that there is a sin. The commandment of redeeming the firstborn—commemorating the saving of the Jewish firstborn children at the time of the exodus from Egypt—is a symbol of redemption. Despite the opposing themes, sin and redemption, both these commandments are associated with the sale of Joseph. The Talmud is teaching us how to view the actions of Joseph's brothers, as well as how to view the broader question of free choice versus Divine destiny. The Talmud is revealing how any given scenario has multiple layers of meaning, and can therefore be viewed from multiple perspectives. Free choice and Divine destiny operate simultaneously, and without negating the other. If we look at the sale of Joseph from the perspective of the brothers, we see sin. We look at how much each brother profited from the sale—a half shekel—and we understand that the Torah's commandment to give an annual gift of a half shekel is a reminder to correct and avoid the terrible mistake of the brothers. If, however, we choose to look at the story from the Divine perspective, we understand that no human action can interfere with the Divine plan. While the brothers used their free choice to choose sin, G-d used the sale of Joseph as the conduit for Joseph's eventual greatness. If we look at the big picture, if we don't look at the sum that each brother profited by, but rather we look at the general story, at the "combined profit" from the sale of Joseph, we see a totally different story. We see a story of salvation. We then focus on the totality of the profit earned by the sale, which symbolizes the totality of the story from G-d's perspective. The lesson we learn from the story of the sale of Joseph is profound. A fellow human being can choose to harm us. We can even use our own free choice to harm ourselves. We can make a choice that will lead to failure, pain and tragedy. Yet, like Joseph, we must understand it all can be a blessing. We must remember that despite human choice, G-d's plan is always at work, leading us toward redemption and healing. Where the human being chooses evil, G-d is planting seeds of redemption. (Based on the teachings of the Rebbe, Likutei Sichot, vol. 20, Vayeshev.) *By Rabbi Menachem Feldman*

*\*Passover order forms have been sent to the Chaplains and Rabbis. Please begin speaking with your Chaplain about Passover.*