

They sold Yosef to the Yishmaelim for twenty silver pieces and they bought Yosef to Egypt. (37:28)

The *Midrash* (cited by *Sefer Ha'Yashar*) teaches that when the Arab caravan taking Yosef to Egypt passed by Rachel *Imeinu's* grave, Yosef ran out to it and prayed. He fell on the tombstone and pleaded, "Mama, Mama! Look at the suffering your son is experiencing. Please, stand before Hashem and plead with Him that He allow me to return to my father (*Yaakov Avinu*). Do not refrain from helping me!" A young man, orphaned from his mother, was wrongfully sold into slavery. To be relegated to living in a country in which debauchery and hedonism are a way of life is a terrible and cruel fate. It is absolutely indescribable for someone of the holy and righteous status of Yosef *HaTzaddik* to be compelled to live as a slave, amid the pain and suffering, and the moral profligacy to which he would be exposed in an Egyptian dungeon alongside criminals and perverts. This was to be Yosef's fate! Despite his heartfelt prayer at his mother's gravesite, he received no positive response to his pleas. Heaven had decided he was to descend to Egypt, to take what would be the first step towards our nation's Egyptian exile.

Why did Yosef's prayer not receive a positive Heavenly reply? An orphan, a righteous saint, to be separated from his family and sent to Egypt is a grim, onerous pill to swallow. This is true even when the "perpetrator" is guilty of sin. Yosef, however, was an innocent, righteous young man who just got caught in a situation that was misconstrued. Should his pleas go unanswered?

The question becomes magnified when we take a look at another example of an individual who supplicated Hashem and received a positive response. This person was as evil as Yosef was righteous. Menashe was a wicked king who sinned and caused others to sin. He worshipped idols and killed anyone who challenged him. Hashem sent prophets to warn him to repent his ways; he did not listen. In the end, Hashem sent the Assyrian army, who captured him and brought him in chains to Babylon, where he was subjugated to what was to be a most painful death. His captors placed him in a large copper pot and ignited a flame beneath it, whose purpose was to burn him alive.

Menashe yelled; Menashe screamed; blood-curdling sounds emanated from him, as he began to burn alive. He cried out to every idol he had ever worshipped. Understandably, the stone and molten images were powerless to help him. He then declared, "I remember learning as a youth that Hashem will never turn His back on us. He is all-merciful, with no parameters or end to His mercy. I will cry out to Him. If He answers me, good. If not, then He is no different than the idols." (*chas v'shalom*) The angels did everything to block his prayer from ascending to Hashem. The Almighty told them, "If I do not accept his *teshuvah*, repentance, then I am closing the door before any other *baal teshuvah*. Menashe is right. I have no limits to My mercy. I cannot have this." Hashem "dug out" a hole beneath His Heavenly throne in order to permit access for Menashe's prayer to reach him. Menashe was thereby saved.

Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl, questions Menashe's contention that if Hashem did not accept his pleas, then He is no different than the others who did not hear him. What type of comparison is this? They did not listen because they were stone, inanimate idols who were powerless. Hashem, however, listened, but said no. Why should He absolve the man who murdered His prophets, who placed an idol in the *Heichal* (Temple)?

Horav Pincus explains that if Hashem had not accepted Menashe's *teshuvah*, because he had exceeded the limits of mercy and he had gone beyond the parameters of *teshuvah* acceptability, it would have undermined all future *teshuvah* applicants. Hashem's mercy has no limitations, no restrictions, no boundaries. This explains why, despite his unabashed evil, Menashe was still able to repent, and his repentance accepted by the Almighty. This makes our original question concerning Yosef even stronger. Why did Hashem seal the Heavenly gates to Yosef's prayers? Why was his mother helpless in her ability to help him?

Horav Yitzchak HersHKowitz, Shlita (Nitzotzos) quotes *Chazal* in *Meseches Berachos 5a*, "If a person sees that *yissurin*, afflictions, are befalling him, he should investigate his deeds (to determine which sin he may have committed that would be the catalyst for such suffering). If he examines his deeds and finds nothing inappropriate, he should attribute his afflictions to *bitul Torah*, neglect of Torah study. If he still has found nothing to which to attribute his suffering, it can be assumed that they are *yissurin shel ahavah*, afflictions of love. (This is not the place to discuss the concept or purpose of "afflictions of love," other than to say that it enhances the sufferer's Heavenly reward. The dynamics of this phenomenon are discussed by the various commentators.) The *Talmud* teaches us that two varied forms of affliction may strike us. One is for deserved punishment; the other is out of Heavenly love, in order to bring the person close to his spiritual mission.

Yosef was destined to achieve *tzaddik* status, to become the righteous person who would lead the Jewish community through the Egyptian exile. He would set the tone and enable *Klal Yisrael* to look forward to their liberation. To achieve such distinction one must undergo trial by fire, to suffer in the crucible of pain, loneliness and suffering. Yosef had to experience his own personal exile in order to have the personal spiritual endurance and stamina to weather what was in store for his family. This is why Hashem did not answer his prayers (positively). Hashem answers every prayer. His took a little longer to realize the meaning of – and reason for – the response.

Everyone has his individual mission in life for which he is uniquely suited. At times, achieving successful fruition involves experiencing triumph over adversity. We must remember that Hashem does not give us anything that we cannot handle. If it is on our plate, then we should be able to eat it – and *bentch* afterward!

The following vignette buttresses this idea. Dr. Albert Einstein, the distinguished physicist, was traveling by train from Princeton, New Jersey, when the conductor came down the aisle of the car, punching each passenger's ticket. When he came to Einstein's row, Einstein reached into his vest

pocket to retrieve his ticket. He could not find it, so he searched his jacket pocket, with the same result. He checked his other pockets, with no luck. Finally, he pulled down his suitcase and opened it and rifled through his clothes, but had no success in locating the ticket. The conductor calmed him saying, "Don't worry, we know who you are. I am certain that a man of your integrity purchased a ticket before alighting the train."

The conductor moved down the car punching tickets. As he was about to enter the next car, he turned around and was startled to see the great physicist down on his hands and knees, searching between the seats for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, please do not worry. I know who you are. There is no problem. I am sure you bought a ticket."

Einstein looked at the conductor and said, "Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I am going."

Do we know where we are going? Do we even care? We have goals, objectives, plans, missions, but do they coincide with Hashem's designated destination for us? A person goes through life: does well financially; is generous with his charitable gifts; sets aside time to study Torah; is involved in reaching out to others; is involved in his community. He has been a good Jew all of his life, but was he fulfilling Hashem's purpose for him? Did he "travel" to the wrong city?

When Yosef *HaTzaddik* did not receive the positive response for which he was hoping, he realized that Hashem had different plans for him. What are Hashem's plans for us? While we do not know, we should at least give the question some thought.