



Dear Friends,

Parashat Vayeshev appears to be about Yaakov, but then takes a sharp turn:
“This, then, is the story of Yaakov: Yoseph was seventeen years of age, when he tended the flocks with his brothers...” (Bereishit 37:2)

The parasha seems at first to tell us how Jacob finally “sat” - Vayeshev - resting and revelling in his many accomplishments, but then takes us into the saddest and most difficult chapter of his life: **“Then they took Joseph’s tunic, slaughtered a kid, and dipped the tunic in the blood. They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, “We found this. Please recognize it; is it your son’s tunic or not?” He recognized it, and said, “My son’s tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!” Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days. All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, “No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol.” Thus his father bewailed him.** (Bereishit 37: 31-34).

This week we finally find the answer to a puzzling question from two weeks ago: Why did a ladder with angels ascending and descending on it appear in Yaakov’s dream? Now it is all clear: **“This, then, is the story of Yaakov: Yoseph was seventeen...”** - the ascending and descending are Yoseph’s - Yaakov’s beloved son. Yoseph is the prince of ebb and flow, and his descent will break his father’s heart.

For us, though, Yoseph is the great teacher of the highs and lows of life.

Like the angels on the ladder in his father’s dream, Yoseph’s story begins with a glorious ascent: his father loves him and spoils him, clothing him with a cloak of fatherly love. However, the higher the ascent, the more painful the descent that follows. His brothers envy him greatly and throw him into a pit in the area of the Dotan valley while they themselves sit down to rest and eat.

Shortly afterwards, Yoseph rises again, only to descend even further. He is raised out of the pit to be sold to a convoy of Midianites who take him down to

Egypt, to the slave market. As a slave, Yoseph again ascends, this time to the position of butler in the home of the royal chef. Then, once again, he is thrown into a pit - a dungeon this time - having been wrongly accused of raping his master's wife.

From the depths of the dungeon Yoseph again climbs the ladder of success, becoming the leader of prisoners. His ability to interpret dreams lifts him even higher, to the royal palace, where the distressed king seeks answers to his own confusing dreams. From there Yoseph is elevated even further to rule over Pharaoh's land and people.

Yoseph's ebb and flow continue even after his death. His coffin is submerged in the Nile to await its ultimate ascent and return to Canaan some 200 years later. Before that happens, though, Bnei Yisrael will all sink in the mire of Egyptian slavery.

Yoseph will be finally lowered and buried in the same valley near Sh'chem where his first descent into the pit took place.

All of this begs the question: is this ebb and flow a necessary part of life? Must there always be a descent before an ascent can take place? Is there any way to avoid the painful lows in our lives?

Perhaps these lows have a purpose, and understanding them may make them a little less painful. Perhaps they also contain blessing. After all, we experience many meaningful and formative experiences at such times.

Yoseph knows this and hence does not complain throughout his travails. Although he does not know how his journey will play out, he had a dream, hence he knows that it will end well, and that his brothers will one day bow down to him in his lofty position. Yoseph was so connected to his dream or vision that even in times when he was laid low he knew it had a purpose. He knew that it was all part of the journey.

These highs and lows were neither positive nor negative.

Imagine drawing a graph of our life's journey, with its dramatic highs and its challenging lows. Now erase the line, keeping just the events. All that's left are meaningful and significant formative points.

Yoseph's story contains another lesson: his success, like that of us all, is not really his, just as our success is not truly ours. Early in his life, coated with his father's love, Yoseph appears to be arrogant and insensitive, but slowly we come to understand that he does not attribute his achievements or his failings to himself. He tells Pharaoh, and later tells his brothers, that his entire journey

flows from the Source of all of life. That he just carries out, willingly, the implicit Will.

“And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it. Now I have heard it said of you that for you to hear a dream is to tell its meaning.’ Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, ‘Not I! God will see to Pharaoh’s welfare.’” (Bereishit 41: 15-16) and **“God has made me lord of all Egypt.”** (45: 9)

This message is already concealed beautifully in Yaakov’s dream: **“a ladder was set on the ground... And the LORD was standing over it...”** (Bereshit 28, 12-13). God stands overlooking the ladder. This does not absolve us of responsibility, but it does ease the pain, the guilt and the grief when the spiral descends and life disappoints, and it should also tone down our pride when our life soars.

Yoseph accepts the ebb and flow, secure in the knowledge that the Source of life “watches over him” (metaphorically, of course) and Divine blessing flows through him.

It flows through us as well.

Shabbat Shalom and a Happy Chanuka,

Elisha