

(A reprint of one of our favorites from last year)

Parshat Vayeshev

Embrace the Smell!

By Joshua Jackson

Sometimes we wonder why people who have tough lives still believe in G-d. Joseph, in this week’s parsha “VaYeshev”, is an example who can help explain how such people are able to feel this way.

Joseph’s brothers sold him to a caravan of Ishmaelites who brought him to Egypt and sold him to an Egyptian officer named Potiphar. Then the torah says:

וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי ה' אִתּוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה ה' מִצְּלִיחַ בְּיָדוֹ

And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and whatever he (Joseph) did the Lord made prosper in his hand.

Potiphar saw that G-d was helping Joseph be successful in everything he was doing.

Rashi is puzzled by the seemingly unnecessary repetition of the pasuk. It says that Potiphar “saw that the Lord was with” Joseph, and that “whatever he did the Lord made prosper”.

Rashi answers that the first phrase means:

“the name of Heaven was frequently in his mouth”. [From Tanchuma Vayeshev 8]

Rashi is explaining that the first phrase means whenever Joseph was successful, he thanked G-d for His help. The second phrase conveys that Joseph’s comments enabled Pharaoh to realize that Joseph was successful because of G-d.

We may wonder why Joseph was so thankful to G-d when he had such a difficult life. Joseph suffered so much from the jealousy of his brothers. They tried to kill him by abandoning him in a pit. Though his brothers soon relented, they separated him from his beloved father by selling him to an Ishmaelite caravan, who brought him to Egypt where he became a slave.

Apparently, Joseph knew that whatever G-d did was for his benefit. Even his difficult experiences would not have been caused or allowed to happen by G-d had they not been for the best.

Joseph had recently experienced an incident that probably strengthened his attitude that G-d was always directing his life. Two chapters earlier, the Torah says:

וַיָּשְׁבוּ לֵאכֹל לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אֲרֻחַת יִשְׁמַעְאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד וּגְמָלֵיהֶם נִשְׂאִים נָכָאת וּצְרִי וְלֹט הוֹלְכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרַיִם:

“And they sat down to eat a meal, and they lifted their eyes and saw, and behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, and their camels were carrying spices, balm, and lotus, going to take [it] down to Egypt.”

After throwing Joseph into a pit, his brothers saw a caravan on the way to Egypt. They decided to sell him to the caravan merchants, who would bring Joseph to Egypt.

Rashi wonders why the Torah records the products that the caravan was transporting. This seems to be irrelevant.

Rashi answers by quoting a MIdrash that caravans on this route usually transported foul smelling tar. When Joseph would notice the unusually pleasant smelling baggage, he would know that G-d was communicating with him that He was there with him. Then he’d be able to feel that even the unpleasant experiences were part of G-d’s plan, and that G-d was always with him.

When we go through difficult experiences and think that G-d is not with us, we have to keep our eyes out for the “good smelling caravans” in our lives. G-d is always with us, but we often don’t notice the “simple stuff” that G-d arranges for us. That is why it is hard for us to believe He is always with us when life is hard. It becomes easier when we notice the clearly good things that G-d does for us. Let’s keep our eyes open for our own “sweet smelling caravans”!