

The Softening of Hardship

D'rash on Parashah 11, Vayagash
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Young Andras was born in 1936 to a middle class family in Budapest, Hungary. As a young boy he grew up with the normal problems that come from being different, since he and his family was Jewish. This was nothing compared to what he would witness and have to endure once the Nazis began exterminating the Jews of Europe, including Hungary, during World War II. His own father was arrested and sent to a concentration camp. His mother also fell victim to the Nazis brutality. Andras had to endure the same hardships as millions of Jews like himself. However, unlike most of them, God protected him and under the cover of night, he escaped. There is something about listening to stories of Holocaust survivors that make most if not all the difficulties we endure or have endured seem insignificant. Nevertheless, we all have aspects of our lives that are undesirable, perhaps even unbearable at times.

Did anyone drive here today in their dream car? How often do you go to get money out of your wallet to find that the cupboard is bare? We can have a job we actually like, then the company downsizes and it's back to being thankful just to have a job. Favorite jeans don't fit, the neighbor's grass always seems greener, we get sick at the most inopportune times, cars break down, relatives die, friends go separate ways, and the list goes on.

Hardships are a part of life. We learn to accept the good with the bad. However, some things are more difficult to endure than others. The problem is not our problems. It's how we deal with them. Sometimes difficulty is particularly difficult to reconcile for Believers. We tend to get the idea that if we have faith in God, especially when we begin to observe Torah, God somehow owes us something. Even if we don't say it, we think it, and act it in our behavior and attitudes. When we begin wearing tzizit and observing the holidays, we can lose friends and ostracize family. We end up having to deal with things we never dealt with before. We can easily think, "Is this how I get rewarded for my obedience?"

I'm sure some of these thoughts went through the mind of Yosef as he sat in an Egyptian prison after being sold as a slave and falsely accused by Potifar's wife. He had a unique ability to interpret dreams given to him by God, and lived the way he believed God wanted him to live. He stood up against temptation, even running from it when he needed to. Some would have turned from God in the face of what seemed to be more of a punishment than a reward for his obedience. However, he continued to trust in God until a later time when God's purpose could be more clearly seen.

Once he began to interpret dreams for Pharaoh, some of the plan of God began to unfold for Yosef. "So this is why God gave me this annoying ability to interpret dreams," he probably thought. Then, after becoming governor of Egypt and then seeing his brothers come for food, more of God's plan was revealed, to the point that even any bitterness most people would have harbored toward brothers who treated Yosef as harshly as his did, seems to have dissipated when he reveals himself to them in this week's parashah and states this.

"I am Yosef, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But don't be sad that you sold me into slavery here or angry at yourselves, because it was God who sent me ahead of you to preserve life." **[B'reshet/Genesis 45:4-5]**

We see here a very important lesson in dealing with hardship. Many have asked the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" God is a loving God, and all-powerful, so you would think He would not allow some of the hardships a righteous person like Yosef to come to him. That line of thinking, however, assumes two things that Scripture teaches us are not true. One is that there are bad things and that there are good people.

"For everything there is a season, a right time for every intention under heaven -
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to throw stones and a time to gather stones,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to discard,
a time to tear and a time to sew,
a time to keep silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

He has made everything suited to its time; also he has given human beings a awareness of eternity; but in such a way that they can't fully comprehend, from beginning to end, the things God does. **[Kohelet/Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11]**

What we see as good and bad things are all simply moments of time equal to one another to God. Shlomo also teaches us that the end of a matter is better than the beginning, and unlike us, God sees all human events from beginning to end.

When a woman is giving birth, she is in pain; because her time has come. But when the baby is born, she forgets her suffering out of joy that a child has come into the world.
[Yochanan/John 16:21]

Not only are all things potentially equally part of God's plans, but from God's perspective, but the same is true of people.

"...all have sinned and come short of earning God's praise." **[Romans 3:23]**

This verse is in the context of describing how there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, because no one is righteous in themselves. True righteousness and holiness comes from God, and not human works. If there is anything "good" about us it comes from God, so God is

not obligated to do anything for people whose "goodness" comes from Him to begin with. Let's take another look at this. Since the setting of our parashah is in Egypt I will use a pyramid. From the ground, or human perspective, the pyramid is a tall, triangular object looming high into the desert sky. However, from above, God's perspective, the pyramid looks like a flat "X" inside a box. Therefore, what seems good and bad from a human perspective looks the same from God's perspective. Of course God is aware of good and bad, but God can use bad to accomplish His will just as much as He can use good, and goodness can lead to destruction just as much as the bad.

Yosef had just as much free will as Pharaoh, and could have made ungodly choices and actions just as easily a Pharaoh could have made righteous ones. Yosef had just as much ability to serve God and live according to His will in prison as he did as governor of Egypt. In the same way, from a human level, slavery, false accusations, and imprisonment are bad things, but from God's perspective they were necessary actions to put Yosef in a place where not only was he honored in a pagan society, but he was able to save the world, including his own family. Yosef saw this when he saw his brothers causing him to have compassion on them rather than bitterness. Why be bitter about something which resulted in him being a big hero to both God and man?

This is how we ought to approach the hardships of our life. What seems like an obstacle or setback from a physical point of view, is merely an opportunity to learn, grow, and do things you never thought you would do. We are all afraid of change, but the world is constantly changing. You cannot stop that. This is why we must hang on to the one and only constant in our universe. God.

It was one thing for Yosef, who had been through God's yeshiva of hard-knocks to know how to react to difficulty. What about his family, including his father Yakov? Imagine you were under extreme hardship, to the point that you and your family would die if you didn't get help. Then you find out there is a distant relative who is a wealthy, high level official in Iraq who knows of your situation and is willing to help if you and your family come and live in Iraq. This is what it was like for Yakov to consider going to Egypt to get help from Yosef, however, this is what God tells him.

"I am God, the God of your father. Don't be afraid to go down to Egypt. It is there that I will make you into a great nation. Not only will I go down with you to Egypt; but I will also bring you back here again,..." [B'eresheet 46:3-4]

As God's people we do not seek out the darkness, but we need not fear it either. Sometimes we have to be led through the valleys before God can set our feet on mountains. As long as He goes with us, we have safety and security, and can trust that eventually, just like Yosef, good will come out of our trials. In fact it is within our trials that God does the greatest work in us. When it comes to trials and hardship, there is one passage used more than any other. It is Romans 8:28. However, it is rarely used in its context, so it is often misunderstood.

"...we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called in accordance with his purpose; because those whom he knew in advance, he also

determined in advance would be conformed to the pattern of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers; and those whom he thus determined in advance, he also called; and those whom he called, he also caused to be considered righteous; and those whom he caused to be considered righteous he also glorified! What, then, are we to say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare even his own Son, but gave him up on behalf of us all - is it possible that, having given us his Son, he would not give us everything else too?... Who will separate us from the love of the Messiah? Trouble? Hardship? Persecution? Hunger? Poverty? Danger? War? As the Tanakh puts it, "For your sake we are being put to death all day long, we are considered sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are super conquerors, through the one who has loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers, neither what exists nor what is coming, neither powers above nor powers below, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God which comes to us through the Messiah Yeshua, our Lord."

In the midst of our hardships, God conforms us into the pattern of his Son, Yeshua, who came as Machiach ben Yosef, the suffering servant. As we read also in Revelation, we will one day be united with Him in victory over sin and hardship in the pattern of our Macias ben David, the Conquering King.

As a holocaust survivor, Andras experienced many horrific things. However, whether you know it or not, we all have been influenced in one way or another by his life. After immigrating to America in 1957, he went on to earn a bachelor's degree in Chemical Engineering from the City College of New York in 1960. After settling in California, he earned his Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering from the University of California, Berkeley in 1963. He later became the third employee of Intel Corporation. He became Intel's president in 1979, its CEO in 1987, and its Chairman and CEO in 1997, the same year he was chosen as Time Magazine's "Man of the Year". Now known as Anthony S. Grove, he is credited with having ushered in the modern computing industry, turning Intel from a manufacturer of memory chips to the origin of the microprocessor. As CEO, Grove oversaw a 4,500% increase in Intel's market value from \$18 billion to \$197 billion, making it at the time, the world's most valuable company. Though no longer CEO, Anthony still works at Intel as a senior advisor.

We never know what God's plans for us are. As a prisoner in Egypt, Yosef had no idea he would become governor of that pagan land. While hiding from the Nazis, Anthony Grove had no idea he would become one of the top businessmen of the corporate world, putting Intel inside almost every American home. For both Yosef and Anthony, part of their success came from what they learned in the midst of their hardships. It was their hardships and God's providence that put them where they needed to be when they needed to be there, before whom they needed to be before, with the knowledge and character necessary to accomplish great things. So the next time you are running late for an appointment because one of your kids threw up on you and then your car won't start anyway which means you won't get to the store, giving you nothing to feed your family for dinner, just think that these might all be God's ways of preparing you for something great in the future. You might not ever change the world, but then again, you never know.