



Taking Initiative • Parshat Vayeishev

The story of Joseph's descent into Egypt is championed by many as an example of the power of Divine decree. In a stark formulation, reflecting on the events in *Parshat Vayeishev*, Nahmanides comments that "the Divine decree is true, and man's industry is worthless" (Gen. 37:15).

The direct context for this statement relates to when Jacob sent Joseph to seek the welfare of Joseph's brothers and their flocks. Joseph came to Shechem but could not find his brothers. An anonymous man approached him and directed him to the town of Dotan. Nahmanides notes the Divine providence inherent in this chance encounter. He references the tradition of the Sages that this anonymous man was actually an angel. The whole story reflects the Divine plan.

Unlike Nahmanides, French Jewish philosopher and Bible commentator, Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, Gersonides, utilizes the same story to emphasize the importance of human choice and the value of initiative. Professor Alexander Green, a scholar of Medieval Jewish philosophy, identifies nine examples in Genesis where Nahmanides and Gersonides diverge in their interpretations. Where Nahmanides interprets a story to accentuate the exemplary belief and trust the patriarchs had in God's providence, Gersonides instead stresses the patriarchs' personal endeavor and diligence.

One of these examples includes Joseph's search for his brothers in Shechem and Dotan. Instead of highlighting the Divine will, as Nahmanides does,

Gersonides blames the brothers' choices. They should never have gone to Shechem to let their flocks graze. They should have been concerned that Shechem's residents would likely avenge Shimon and Levi's previous ambush (Gen. 34). It was because of this danger, Gersonides argues, the brothers had to leave for Dotan, delaying their return to Jacob. This set in motion Joseph's search, which ultimately led to the Jewish people being enslaved in Egypt.

Like Nahmanides, Rashi also points to the story of Joseph to critique human initiative. He quotes a midrash that Joseph was punished with an extra two years in prison for requesting that the chief butler ask Pharaoh to remove Joseph from prison (Gen. 40:14).

In contrast to Rashi, Gersonides points to Joseph's imploring of the chief butler as exemplary behavior. He observes that Joseph used every means possible to escape and writes that "A person should attempt with all his strength to save himself from a bad situation, utilizing all available means that could be beneficial. He should not rely on a miracle, even if Divine providence clings to him."

The potential tension between these two values of Divine providence and human initiative can impact how we conceptualize the holiday of Chanukah as well. Do we laud the courageous military action of the Maccabees in protecting their faith and traditions or the impact of the Divine in securing the victory represented by the miracle of the oil?

These tensions prompt us to ask ourselves difficult questions:

Does trusting in God lead to unwarranted passivity?

Are we doing everything within our power to augment successful outcomes? Alternatively, are we overly reliant on our own strength or power?

Are we putting too much faith in others, without turning enough to God?

It may be difficult to fully answer these questions, but our texts and traditions plead with us to grapple with these difficulties.

*Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman is an assistant professor at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, associate faculty at the Sacks-Herenstein Center, and the author of *Psyched for Torah: Cultivating Character and Well-Being through the Weekly Parsha*.*

Character Challenge: Try to identify one area of life where you may not be putting in as much effort as you should. What can you do to rectify this passivity? Now identify an area where you may be relying too much on your own initiative and not enough on your faith in God.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “One of the most remarkable features of Judaism – in this respect it is supreme among religious faiths – is its call to human responsibility. God wants us to fight our own battles. This is not abandonment. It does not mean – God forbid – that we are alone. God is with us whenever and wherever we are with him.... What it means is that God calls on us to exercise those qualities – confidence, courage, choice, imagination, determination and will – which allow us to reach our full stature as beings in the image of God” (“The Turning Point,” *Covenant and Conversation*).