

ECONOMIC, MORAL AND RITUAL CHOICES

Parashat Miketz (Genesis 41:1-44:17) - December 17, 2014 / 5775

Rabbi Dara Frimmer

At the beginning of Parashat Miketz, Pharaoh dreams of cows and grain; the healthy, sturdy specimens are consumed by the thin and gaunt. Joseph is remembered as a dream-interpreter and released from prison in order to serve Pharaoh.

Joseph explains that seven years of abundant harvest in the land will be followed by seven years of famine. As Pharaoh's dream is brought from darkness into light, he must choose a course of action. What will he do?

Impressed by Joseph's skills and close relationship with God, Pharaoh places Joseph in charge of the grain collection and storage. He chooses wisely; Joseph saves Egypt from scarcity and starvation.

At the conclusion of Parashat Miketz, Joseph's brothers are tested. Benjamin appears guilty of stealing Joseph's goblet, and his punishment is slavery. He will not be allowed to return to his father, Jacob, in Canaan.

The brothers have a choice: Leave Benjamin and return home with food and their freedom or stay and fight for his release at risk to their own lives. What will they do? Years ago, they sold their brother Joseph into slavery, effectively abandoning him to live a life of servitude. This time — spoiler alert for next week — Judah chooses a different path.

Our sacred texts provide countless examples of hard questions with challenging answers — questions that test our morality, our economic acumen and sometimes our ritual knowledge. Sometimes we read along as our ancestors struggle to find the right response. Sometimes, our ancestors ask *us* to decide. For example:

Two people are lost in the desert. There's one bottle of water. If both hope to survive only one person can drink. What do you do? (The owner of the water is the one to drink.)

A Jewish community lacks a synagogue and a shelter for the poor. You must choose which one to build first. What do you do? (First, you build a shelter.)

And, an example that is particularly timely for this week of Chanukah: You only have enough money to buy oil and wicks for Chanukah or wine for Shabbat. What do you do?

In the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b, Rava asks and answers his own question. Both are important, but if you can only buy one ritual item, Chanukah lights take priority over Shabbat wine.

Unlike Pharaoh or Judah, this scenario of scarcity is not asking us to make an ethical or economic decision. This is a choice between two sacred acts that can bring blessing into our lives: the joy of Kiddush wine or the light of candles. What do you do? You choose light.

Rava says it's because the oil and wicks publicize the miracle — the oil that was meant to last for one night instead burned for eight. This is true, but the miracle is more than a burning wick. The miracle is everything that can be revealed in light.

Times of darkness are often synonymous with uncertainty, fear and hopelessness. We despair. We struggle to find our way. Light shows us a path. Light testifies that the darkness will not last forever. It forces us to acknowledge that darkness cannot (and will not) occupy every space in our lives. We know that the darkness that filled the Temple was dispelled with only one glowing flame.

Elizabeth McCracken, in her book "Thunderstruck," writes about MISSING posters that people put up for themselves: "*Missing: former self. Distinguishing marks: expectations of fame, ability to demand love. Last seen wearing: hopeful expression, uncomfortable shoes.*" Light helps us to recognize ourselves when we have been lost in the dark. We rediscover the strength we thought was gone, the hope we thought extinguished.

The Torah teaches us that during the ninth plague of darkness it was so dark that people could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was. People shared a home but could not find one another in the dark. What can be revealed in light? The faces of our loved ones, our friends and our community, who stand by our side.

Sometimes, we need light more than joy. We need candles more than wine.

The Hasidic Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger, also known as the S'fat Emet, teaches: "We light candles on Chanukah precisely because the obligation of Chanukah is for us to find the hidden sparks of light, even in the darkest and lowest of places...."

On the darkest nights of the year, in the darkest moments of our life, we are encouraged to ignite a flame so that we may see ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. We light a candle so that we might rediscover our path which leads us forward.

And, yes, we kindle our Chanukah lights to remember the miracle of oil that lasted eight days. This year, let us expand the miracle and remember, as well, everything that can be revealed in light.

Rabbi Dara Frimmer is a rabbi at Temple Isaiah. You can follow her on Twitter @rabbidara

