

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Vayeishev

“AND THE WINE SERVANT DID NOT REMEMBER YOSEF AND HE FORGOT HIM.” (BEREISHIS 40:23)

The butler made himself forget about Yosef

THE FORGETFUL *sar hamashkim* – royal butler – is described in uncomplimentary terms at the close of this week’s *parasha*. Yosef had courageously offered (see Ramban 40:7) to explain the dream of the imprisoned butler. Yosef correctly interpreted it to mean that the butler would be reinstated to his position in Pharaoh’s palace. Yosef asked one small favor in return for the great kindness he had done: To remember him and to ask Pharaoh to free him from his unjust incarceration in the dungeon. The servant neglected to return Yosef’s favor. The Midrash Rabbah (Bereishis 88:7) comments that the servant not only decided not to help Yosef, but he also, “forgot him.” The Midrash explains those words to mean that the butler made himself forget about Yosef. Every day he busied himself with different tasks so that his mind would be preoccupied and thereby not remember Yosef (see Rashi *ibid.*).

Why couldn’t he remember Yosef?

Busying yourself with various chores so that you “don’t remember” something is itself the strongest indication that the thought is very much on your mind. The butler was deliberately avoiding all thought of Yosef, the *chesed* he had done, and his tragic predicament. (This behavior was not completely out of character for the butler – he is described by Rashi (41:12) as a *rasha* – a wicked person.) Evidently, the servant had made a conscious decision to ignore the kindness that Yosef did for him, to maliciously turn his back on Yosef, and to cruelly allow him to languish in prison. If so, why did he have to keep busy and distract himself from thinking about Yosef? Why couldn’t he remember Yosef and while sticking with his decision to not act on Yosef’s behalf?

The inherent goodness in our neshamos will then automatically respond

This episode opens up a window of deeper insight into the glory and goodness of every human being. Even a lowly individual, such as this butler, has a deep-rooted sensitivity to recognizing *chesed*. Yosef’s interpretation of the dream had helped him by putting his mind at ease when he was in anguish. The butler could not merely put those feelings on a shelf and forget about them. His *neshamah* – super-attuned to appreciate any *chesed* – gnawed at him and reminded him about Yosef and the kindness he had performed. The only way for the butler to alleviate this discomfort that naturally welled-up within him, was to find a way to forget Yosef. Only by being continuously busy could he subdue his natural sensitivities and be at peace with his decision to forget Yosef.

A person’s life, from birth until the last breath, is a never-ending series of infusions of *chesed*; whether directly from Hashem – the Source of all *chesed* – or indirectly, from His representatives, such as parents, teachers, family, friends or neighbors. All we have to do to heighten our awareness of these acts of kindness is to avoid getting caught up in the trivial distractions that preoccupy our minds. The inherent goodness in our *neshamos* will then automatically respond with proper feelings of gratitude. The natural appreciation for *chesed* we all possess will motivate us to serve Hashem from love, because He does so much for us. It will also move us to be thankful to all the earthly emissaries through whom He sends His blessings. If we use the wondrous gifts and delicate sensitivities Hashem has granted us, we will experience the life of genuine joy and satisfaction that the Torah prescribes for us.