

Torah From a Mussar Perspective
***Parshat Mikketz* – Genesis 41:1-44:17**
Rabbi Eric S. Gurvis with Sandy Greenstein

I began studying this week's portion in the middle of last week. With *Hanukkah* on the horizon, I wanted to get a jump on our offering for this week. Of course, that was before . . .

- Before the heinous attack on the *Hanukkah* gathering at Bondi Beach in Australia;
- And before the horrific attack on students at Brown University.

In the days since, we have also taken in news of other horrific and disturbing events in our fractured world. As I gathered with my family to welcome in *Hanukkah*, in the back of my mind was the thought that I would need to choose a different direction for these words. Sunday gave way to Monday, and I reviewed my work from last week. At the same time, I received a beautiful message from our past co-president, Sandy Greenstein, I realized that the approach I had been pursuing still had resonance – especially when combined with Sandy's heartfelt and heart-rending message.

Parshat Mikketz is standard during *Hanukkah*. It tells a story we know well, as Joseph, who we met anew in last week's portion, is brought out of jail due to his facility with interpreting dreams. The same skill that landed him in a pit and sold to a tribe has now brought some redemption.

Studying the portion anew last week, I noticed, perhaps for the first time, a parallel between the recounting of Pharaoh's two dreams. The portion begins with Pharaoh's dream about lean and fat cows. This part of the narrative culminates as we read:

וַתֹּאכְלֶנָה הַפְּרוֹת רְעוֹת הַמְּרֻאָה וַדָּקוֹת הַבְּשֹׂר אֶת שֶׁבַע הַפְּרוֹת יְפֹת הַמְּרֻאָה וְהַבְּרִיאָת
וַיִּקְרַץ פְּרִעָה:

The ugly gaunt cows ate up the seven handsome sturdy cows.
And Pharaoh awoke.¹

Pharaoh immediately drifts back to sleep and proceeds to have a second dream, involving stalk of grain, both fat and lean. This dream culminates as we read:

וַתִּבְלַעַנָּה הַשָּׁבְלִים הַדְּקוֹת אֶת שֶׁבַע הַשָּׁבְלִים הַבְּרִיאוֹת וְהַמְּלֵאוֹת
וַיִּקְרַץ פְּרִעָה וְהִנֵּה חֲלוֹם:

The thin ears swallowed up the seven solid and full ears.
And Pharaoh awoke: it was a dream!²

¹ Genesis 41:4.

² Genesis 41:7.

Somehow this caught my attention in a way it has not before. Exploring these verses through the lens of *Mussar*, scouring my various resources yielded almost nothing in terms of commentary from *Ba'alei Mussar* on Pharaoh's experiences of being startled awake by his dreams. When I'd set my work aside for *Shabbat*, I could not have imagined how the world would change over the course of *Shabbat*. Yet, we all came of *Shabbat* into the horrible news out of Providence and then awoke to the horrors of *Hanukkah* on Bondi Beach on Sunday morning.

I was awake – and I was angry, and horrified. I was seeking both news, and a way to frame our *parshah* in light of the news and realities we are facing. Of course, such attacks are not new – we have been watching violent rhetoric, and resulting violence, as well as hate, especially antisemitism and anti-Jewish sentiment on the rise for some time now.

What is taking place in our world is no dream. Nor can we respond with sleep. It is a nightmare and demands spiritual fortitude and response! While the *ba'alei Mussar* did not choose to comment on Pharaoh's two awakenings, I immediately realized that for us, the notion and practice of *hitorerut*/awakening is crucial at this time!

In a lesson on *Zerizut*/Alacrity in *A Season of Mussar*, our teacher Alan Morinis has written:

In traditional *Mussar yeshivot*, the talks given by the spiritual supervisor (*mashgiach*) are sometimes called *hisorerus*, meaning “awakening.” Rabbi Yisrael Yaakov Lubchansky, the *mashgiach* of the Baranovich *yeshiva* in the years leading up to its destruction in the Holocaust was a master of the *hisorerus* talk, usually delivered to about 500 people on Saturday night, in total darkness! But there is another sense or interpretation for the word *hisorerus* (*hitorerut*) and that is “inspiration.”

Zerizut carries the same sense of awakened energy; laziness is uninspired and somnolent. The heart wants to be inspired, and the first step to becoming inspired in a positive, spiritual way is to become aware of the pitfalls we are likely to meet on that way. That will help us to avoid them. Laziness is the obstacle Rabbi Luzzatto points out to us, and his guidance coincides with experience and common sense. Nothing could be further from inspiration than laziness.³

We cannot give in to despair or laziness. We need to respond with *hitorerut* – awakening ourselves in the shadow of the horrors of our time. And the festival we are celebrating, even in the shadow of the darkness – both physical and spiritual – gives us a roadmap to increasing our alertness. We light lights even as the darkness grows. And we place them in a window so they shed light, and let us pray, awakening throughout our world. Our world needs awakening. Our leaders need awakening.

³ From *A Season of Mussar*, Introduction to *Zerizut*.

As this week began, our past-President, Sandy Greenstein shared this message with a few of us – and now we share it with all of you. May it, too, provide *hitorerut* as well as some *Mussar* food for thought in this dark and troubling time!

A Student of *Mussar* Responds – Sandy Greenstein, past-co-president, The Mussar Institute
In love, in grief, and in a tradition of ethical soul-work.

I write not as a rabbi, nor as someone with answers, but as a student of *Mussar* living in the 21st century, trying to learn how to keep my heart open when the world breaks it.

When I read about the attack at a *Hanukkah* gathering in Sydney, I felt a familiar teaching from the *Mussar* tradition rise up inside me, not as comfort, but as a challenge: Do not turn away. Do not rush to explain. Do not harden your heart in the face of pain.

The great teachers of *Mussar*, those who devoted their lives to refining the human soul, taught that real spiritual work begins where the heart wants to close.

So, I sit with the pain.

. . .With the grief of families who lit candles and buried loved ones.
. . . With the terror of a people who know too well what it means to be targeted simply for being who we are.
. . . With the ache of celebrating light while surrounded by darkness.

Mussar does not ask me to transcend this pain. It asks me to stay present to it, to let my *nefesh*/soul feel what it feels, without denial and without becoming numb. Rabbi Elya Lopian taught that transformation happens when what the mind knows finally reaches the heart. Right now, my heart knows sorrow.

And still, this is where *Mussar* quietly insists on something difficult and holy.

Not optimism.
Not spiritual bypassing.
But faithful presence.

Hanukkah, as I have learned through *Mussar*, is not about pretending the darkness isn't real. It is about refusing to let darkness define reality. One small flame does not defeat the night; it simply testifies that the night is not all there is.

This is why, in this tradition, we say: May the memory of those murdered be a blessing.

Not because their deaths were meaningful. Not because violence is redeemed. But because memory, in *Mussar*, is not passive. Memory becomes a blessing only when it obligates the living, when it calls us to guard our hearts from hatred, to choose compassion over cruelty, and to live with greater moral clarity because human dignity has been so brutally violated.

As a student of *Mussar*, I am called to light that flame first within myself:

- To guard my heart from hatred even as I name evil honestly
- To resist fear without dismissing danger
- To choose compassion without becoming naïve

This is not weakness. This is disciplined love.

The *Mussar* teachers taught that strength of soul is measured not by how loudly we respond, but by how carefully we tend the inner world that gives rise to our actions. If I allow rage to consume me, I lose the very humanity *Mussar* asks me to refine. If I turn away in despair, I abandon my responsibility to be a bearer of light.

So, I light candles with trembling hands. I grieve openly.

I stand with my people.

I commit myself again to *hesed*/lovingkindness, to moral clarity, and to the stubborn insistence that the human soul is still worthy of cultivation.