

Vayigash

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This is from God, that which is wondrous in our eyes” (Tebillim 118:23). I remember the day during Chanukah one year when it all of a sudden occurred to me to turn the verse around and make it a corollary: If something does not seem from God, then it is only because it stopped being wondrous in your eyes. Restore the wonder and fix your spiritual vision.

Realizing this side of the verse felt like the sun rising on a previously dark evening, and resulted in a solid approach to teaching people how to see God. It also gracefully dovetailed with the Rambam’s advice on how to achieve love and fear of God, and other important sources as well. That was about thirty years ago, and it has never gotten old. The idea and excitement remain the same, which is saying an awful lot about both.

Had I been smart I would have realized then, that the other verses in that paragraph could possibly yield similar corollaries and insights, like I did this Chanukah. For example, the verse before the one mentioned above says, “*The stone the builders rejected became the cornerstone*” (Tebillim 118:22). Dovid HaMelech, who had been written off by his father and brothers, wrote this about himself because he ended up becoming the king of the Jewish people and ancestor of *Moshiach Ben David*. And, I’m sure he also had Yosef HaTzaddik as well in mind when he composed it.

This verse has been my own cornerstone when explaining the more *kabbalistic* nuances of Jewish history, especially to people who expect it to be straight as an arrow. I also use the verse to remind myself from time to time not to be easily fooled by first impressions of people or events. Little ends up being in the end what it seemed to have been in the beginning, and often when it comes to Jewish leaders.

Which led me to think of the corollary: If you want to be a cornerstone, you’ll have to be despised by the builders, i.e., the very people who *seemingly* should respect you.

Just to qualify, this idea is only true if God doesn't despise you as well, which means you are doing right by Him. You have to be doing your best to please God with what you have become and what you do. So, why then would the "builders" not like you as much as they should? Because conventional people do not like unconventional people. People who do things by the book do not like it when others do not, even if their result is the same, or even better.

They're not completely wrong. On the contrary, Torah *mesorah* has worked because of convention and by sticking firmly to rules and standards. But in our zeal to preserve those rules and standards, we often forget about the Yosefs and the Pinchases and Dovids of history, the exceptional leaders who developed into exceptional leaders because they *were* unconventional in their service of God, while never breaking Torah or its traditions in any way.

But every society is protective of itself and its members. The brothers sold Yosef to protect the future of the Jewish people from learning from Yosef's ways and following them in the wrong way. Their concern was real since it was Yeravem, a descendant of Yosef, who later built golden calves. It was just that their approach to Yosef and their concern ended up being wrong.

The harshness that is targeted at the unconventional can be very intimidating for those who prefer to fit in and go unnoticed. No one wants to be a pariah, and some people would rather ignore their specialness than be castigated for it. Fitting in for them is a better fit than accomplishing unique things and being despised, or at least marginalized.

After all, Yosef was despised for many decades before he became that cornerstone of God. Dovid too. Yiftach had to leave mainstream society to make a life for himself before society came looking for him to be its hero. Who knows how many others like them have had to do the same or even had a chance to find out how special they were to God?

Why must it be that way? For a couple of reasons, some of which may only be known to God. But the more obvious reasons are things like humility... tests of faith in God... to develop resilience, you know, standard leadership qualities. Undoubtedly, the path to greatness and prominence for some is straight and uncluttered, which makes it easier for everyone.

But ever since Avraham became *Isb Ivri*, "the guy on the other side," being great and conventional have not always been the best of partners. And for all we know, *Moshiach*, who has to already be here in the world, may be a difficult pill for many to swallow once he reveals himself and assumes his final redemption duties. How many

of us will end up standing there in shock at the revelation, stunned to the point of complete silence like Yosef's brothers in this week's *parsha*?

Given where we are in history at this time, and all that is currently happening, it might be worth dwelling on that point before turning the page to next week's *parsha*. For all we know, their story in this week's *parsha* is to better prepare us for our current one.