VAIGASH 5780
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

To review the story of this week's parsha for just a moment. Joseph is seated as second in line to the Pharaoh in Egypt. His brother's have come down to Egypt to seek food and shelter as there is a famine in the land of Canaan. Joseph has concealed his identity from his brothers, in the previous parasha he frames them for stealing money and his goblet and holds his brother Simeon as ransome till they returns with Benjamin.

In this week's parasha the third act in his unfolding tale his brothers return to Egypt, Benjamin in tow and seek Joseph's forgiveness for an offense they didn't know they committed. Joseph now holds Benjamin, his youngest brother, hostage and Judah the eldest pleads with Joseph to release Benjamin lest their father Jacob die from the shock of now losing yet another son, Benjamin being his favorite second only to Joseph.

Joseph seeing his brother's love for Benjamin and their father is moved by love and emotion, he reveals himself to his brothers and bestows all manner of favors upon his family. Jacob rushes down to Egypt to see his long-lost son and Pharaoh out of respect for Joseph greets the family with open arms and open store houses of goods and land.

There are many important moments in the series of events that unfold in this story but perhaps the most poignant is when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and says to them,

> *"I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold to Egypt; and now, don't be troubled, don't be chagrined because you sold me here, for it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you." (Gen. 4-5)*

This is a Jewish response to suffering. It's the biblical version of 'everything happens for a reason'. But it is more complex than that. The Jewish response is that something good can come from, or be made from, every challenge or disappointment or heartache life throws at us. Its lemonade out of lemons.

The Joseph his brothers encounter in this dramatic moment is not the young Joseph who foolishly taunts his brothers with his egocentric dreams. This Joseph is wise and experienced; he has learned from life and takes the long view of things. Experience is his guide and faith his support in moments of despair.

Cataclysms are often retrospectively seen as fortunate; the gains outweigh the losses. Hanukah – yields a rededicated sanctuary and Jewish people. The sin of the apple in the garden of Eden, brings about knowledge of the human condition. The flood in Noah's day, serves as a reset for humanity and a reset for God's relationship with us, never again will God bring a flood we are told. Even the golden calf and the breaking for the first 10 commandments is met according to legend with God essentially saying to

Moses, "*Yasher Koach!* You broke them." In the long view the second set of tablets the dynamic in which they are created is more useful and meaningful to the Jewish people psychologically and spiritually.

This is not simply lemonade out of lemons, this is recasting the situation to find a greater meaning and message. Joseph speaks to his brother with wisdom and comfort. He tells them the past is the past, beyond their control, but they can endeavor to shape the future. He finds meaning in the trauma that changed the arc and trajectory of his life.

This was the great insight and contribution of Viktor E. Frankl (1905–1997) a Jewish psychiatrist and a Holocaust survivor. In this capacity, he wrote one of the most important books of the 20th century, Man's Search for Meaning (1946). The book is more than a description of the horrors of life in the concentration camp; it is also and perhaps more importantly a meditation on the nature of human beings, and our eternal search for meaning.

Frankl states that most people in the concentration camp believed that the real opportunities in life had passed, even though they in fact had been offered an opportunity — and a challenge: "One could make a victory of these experiences, turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate, as did a majority of the prisoners."[1]

German philosopher and writer Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) framed it this way. One must transform every 'it was' into an 'I willed it thus!', that is, to take hold of the situation, accept one's fate, and strive towards a goal worth pursuing. Not "everything happens for a reason" but "there can be meaning in everything that happens."

Frankl believed that Nietzsche's dictum "he who has a 'why' to live for can bear with almost any how."[2] Frankl writes that this could have been the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic efforts concerning the prisoners in Auschwitz. But its value transcends that horrific extreme example of the Shoah.

Joseph sees in his brothers' treachery the origin of things that place him in the improbable but essential position to save his family and his people during a time of extreme famine. He finds meaning in his suffering.

The beginning of the 21st century has been called the aught's – some say they aught never have happened. But it did and the Jewish view is to say what can we learn from this; the experiences of our past shape and inform our future if we find meaning in

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[1] Man's Search for Meaning, Viktor Frankl 1963 p. 71

[2] Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols (1889) 'Maxims and Arrows' as quoted by Viktor Frankl in Man's Search for Meaning p. 71

them. That is the eternal challenge and also the opportunity presented to us in how read the life of Joseph. Perhaps his brothers meant what they did for bad, but Joseph, through his faith in God found meaning in all that had befallen him, he found the good.