



Adaptive Growth • Parshat Mikketz

How did Joseph, the disgraced, rejected, and dejected foreign prisoner, rise to the rank of second in command of Egypt?

If we were to ask Joseph to answer this question, he would likely attribute his accomplishments to God. Yet, while acknowledging God's hand in the story, we can also identify personal qualities that contributed to Joseph's success.

Pharaoh describes Joseph as being the most "discerning and wise" (Gen. 41:39). What is the difference between being "discerning" (*navon*) and "wise" (*hakham*)? In *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik suggests that "wise" intimates intuitive thinking, while "discerning" connotes critical thinking. People often excel at either being wise or discerning, but rarely do they masterfully balance the two. Joseph, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, "was a synthesis of two *prima facie* contradictory attitudes: inspiration and precision, fantasy and practicality, vision and a distinct awareness of an unalterable reality, poetic sweep and scientific accuracy." This blend of distinct intellectual aptitudes aided Joseph's success.

The famous first century historian, Flavius Josephus in *The Antiquities of the Jews*, also points to Joseph's intellect as contributing to "great felicity among the Egyptians." Joseph was able to conduct, "all his affairs by the rules of reason." Josephus also emphasizes Joseph's character. Joseph was "a man of admirable virtue" who "used

his authority with moderation." What accentuates the greatness of Joseph, Josephus concludes, was that he was able to succeed "even when he came from another country," and from "such ill circumstances."

Josephus' conclusion points to another key element of Joseph's success, namely, his ability to adapt to a new environment. The verse states that when Joseph rode in his chariot, the people of Egypt would call before him "*Avrekh*" (Gen. 41:43). The word "*Avrekh*" is so peculiar that it is generally transliterated instead of translated. Rashi cites three possible meanings: According to Onkelos, it means father (*av*) of the king (*rekh*). Alternatively, Rabbi Judah in a midrash explains that Joseph was a father (*av*) in wisdom while tender (*rach*) in years. Finally, Rabbi Jose in the same midrash assumes that it relates to the word *birakaim*, knees, alluding to the necessity to submit to Joseph's authority.

Rabbi Aaron Levine, known as the Reisha Rav, suggests a novel interpretation. Pointing to obscure agricultural laws found in the Mishnah, Rabbi Levine suggests that *Avrekh* is related to the word *havrakha*. *Havrakha*, according to Rabbi Levine, means removing a branch from one location and replanting it in a second location. When the Egyptians called out *Avrekh*, they were alluding to Joseph's ability to adapt to his new surroundings and flourish on foreign soil. This signature strength spurred Joseph's success.

Educational Psychologist, Andrew Martin, champions psychological adaptability as “a key capacity whose time has come” in his article in *InPsych*. A person who demonstrates adaptability can adjust his or her thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to changing, novel, or uncertain circumstances. Strategies to adapt well include thinking about the situation in a different way, adjusting assumptions or expectations during transitions, seeking out helpful resources, or minimizing negative emotions when circumstances change. Martin’s research has demonstrated that

children’s adaptability improves their success in school and that adaptability has positive effects on personal wellbeing.

With God’s help, Joseph synthesized intuition and critical analysis along with his moderate and virtuous character; he exemplified psychological flexibility and adaptability to his changing circumstances. As we encounter our own challenges and opportunities, we would do well to emulate Joseph’s inner qualities.

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Character Challenge: Identify a changing or uncertain situation in your life. What strategies can you use to adapt better to the circumstance?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “To be a Jew is to be one of God’s ambassadors to the world, for the sake of being a blessing to the world, and that necessarily means engaging with the world, acting in such a way as to inspire others as Abraham and Joseph inspired their contemporaries” (“E.g.: The Power of Example,” *Covenant and Conversation*).