

Parshat Miketz: "LIFE IS A BIG JOKE"

From Crisis to Redemption to Laughter

By Harlen Evan Wall (on Genesis 41+)

It has been said that in order to understand the meaning of "crisis" you need to understand a joke. Now that is funny! But could it be true? Let's see now. What really makes us laugh? While it might be hard to pinpoint every scenario, it's rather simple to describe the mechanism at work---or more succinctly put, the "process." Laughter is most commonly generated after witnessing a sharp contrast from one extreme to the other. Even the most basic joke, with a punchline simple enough to amuse a monkey, must adhere to this rule.

The classic example is the arrogant and pompous millionaire walking down the street in a two thousand-dollar Armani suit, adorned in gold and diamonds, and suddenly slipping on a little banana peel and falling to the ground. As long as he's not seriously hurt, anyone witnessing this incident would be provoked to audible laughter (if not hysterics). But why? And could there be a "depth" to this human reaction?

Laughter, generally, involves the contrast or juxtaposition of two polar opposites; a process that seems to be going in one direction, all of a sudden snap and produces an unexpected result. When you strip it all down to its most basic elements, laughter is the process of "crisis to redemption."

It doesn't matter who you are. Every individual will, at one point or another, experience a crisis. In truth, however, life is one big crisis from start to finish (with little interludes of course). It should be no surprise that we all come into this world wailing. The greatest transition from crisis to redemption happens when a child is born. The "Geshet HaChaim," a classic philosophical work, refers to twins in the womb. This analogy is given to illustrate the most fascinating and animated process of human redemption.

The one who remains inside is sad when his twin brother is born because he thinks that's the end. He thinks his twin is gone. Logic would certainly dictate that result since a baby lacks everything it needs to survive in the outside world.

So, what happens? As soon as the baby enters the world and thanks the doctor with shrills of discontent, it starts to turn purple and blue. It starts to die. There is no blood circulating to the lungs and it lacks the physiology to survive for even one minute. A baby only has the blood volume equivalent to a coffee mug. Now that is a "crisis" in any country and in any language!! There is no bigger crisis than the first few minutes of a child's life. The good news is that within a few short minutes, blood is pumped rapidly, at a rate that would make a firehose seem like a garden tool. The blood makes its way through an elaborate human canal system to the dormant lungs and they pop open and the baby takes its first breath. After turning blue and starting to die and giving the parents the scare of their lives, the baby is perfectly adapted to its new home on planet Earth (within a few minutes).

OK, now what does all this have to do with the weekly Torah portion? Everything! In this instalment of the Five Books of Moses, the story of Joseph and his Brothers reaches a feverish pitch. The narrative describes the biggest "crisis" in all of recorded history!

After selling Joseph into slavery, there is famine in the land of Canaan. 22 years have now passed and the starving family of Israel is forced to go down to Egypt in a desperate search for food. And who is the leader of the largest empire in the world and the man holding the key to their salvation? Their kid brother Joseph who they betrayed and abandoned years ago, at one point even throwing him into a pit filled with snakes and scorpions.

They all bow down to the ground, in front of him, just as Joseph had predicted as a child when he had his dream. Ironically, the Brothers don't recognize Joseph but he recognizes them.

However, instead of identifying himself right away, he conceals his identity in order to teach his siblings an important lesson. He interrogates them, suggesting, at one point, that they are spies or infidels. The Brothers tell Joseph their story; that they are from the land of Canaan and their father is home alone with their youngest brother.

Joseph, in his supernal wisdom, creates an elaborate charade to test his brothers and allow for their collective "soul-correction" that we call repentance. He insists that they must be spies and keeps them under house arrest for three days. Then he decides that he will only keep one hostage: Simeon. The others are allowed to return to Canaan with supplies of food for their hungry families, with the proviso that they return with their youngest brother to substantiate their claim. If they don't return with Benjamin, they will be declared spies and killed.

The brothers return to Canaan and relay the entire story to their father, Jacob, who refuses to part with Benjamin. After losing his favorite son, Joseph, who he believes is dead, he cannot bear the thought of something happening to his youngest child, the son of his beloved late wife, Rachel. The brothers explain to him that there is no other option because without returning to Egypt with Benjamin, they will all surely perish. The only way to substantiate their claim, get Simeon back and secure enough food to survive the famine is to return to Egypt with Benjamin. Judah, the leader of the clan, assures his father that he will take responsibility for Benjamin and they descend, a second time, to the land of the Nile.

Upon their return to Egypt, Joseph invites all the Brothers to his Palace for a festive meal. He is sure to seat the siblings in a specific order, according to their age; an act that mystifies the entire family and sets the stage for the unfolding drama. During the course of the meal, Joseph is sure to give Benjamin five times the normal amount that he gives the others. His reason for this is to show blatant "favoritism" and provoke the Brothers to feelings of jealousy towards the youngest, Benjamin. By doing this, he re-creates the exact situation that led his Brothers to betray him 22 years ago. He wants to give his Brothers every reason to "turn" on Benjamin, who receives special treatment (just as Joseph had 22 years earlier).

Before the Brothers depart, Joseph orders his officers to plant his silver chalice in Benjamin's sack. As they leave Egypt with sacks full of food and money, the authorities stop them at the border and search their belongings. The silver chalice is found in Benjamin's sack and the Brothers are forced to return to Joseph's palace. They're back in the same situation that led to their betrayal of Joseph. They have every reason to turn on their youngest brother, who allegedly, has stolen the chalice, and save their own lives.

On the surface, there is no way out of this crisis. If they leave their brother behind to be killed, their father will be devastated as soon as he notices that Benjamin is missing. He'll surely die from the added grief of the loss of another son. Especially the son of his beloved Rachel. On the other hand, if they don't comply with the orders and leave Benjamin to face the penalty, they will all die (either from the punishment or lack of food).

Let us pull back the zoom lens and press the cosmic pause button. At this moment, EVERYTHING is on the line. There is no way out of this crisis for the Brothers. And it's not only the future of Israel that hangs in the balance, but also the future of the world. If the family of Israel is killed, either as punishment for this crime or due to lack of food during the famine, there is no Moses. No Torah. No David. No Messiah. And no salvation for the world. The stakes could not be higher!

When it seems that all is lost and Israel is on a sure path to destruction, Judah steps forward, and says to Joseph "take me instead." At the moment he utters these words, the crisis is over. He proves to Joseph (and the heavenly court) that he has learned his lesson. He finally learns to be selfless and love his brother more than he loves himself. And in the process, he rectifies his previous transgression. Instead of abandoning his kid brother, which he had done with Joseph, he is completely loyal, even to the point of facing death himself. At this point, Joseph orders everyone to leave the room because the time has come to identify himself.

Let's bring this all back around to where we started with the process from crisis to redemption to laughter. As I stated at the outset, there is no greater example than a woman giving birth and a child being born. Every Shabbat, traditional orthodox Jews sing Aishes Chayil (Proverbs 31) and recite the line "she joyfully awaits her last day." Perhaps only now we can fully understand what this means. Only a woman, who gives life after experiencing the most intense pain, and the one who is acutely and painfully aware of the birth process---the transition from crisis to redemption---can smile even on the last day of her physical life. She knows better than anyone that what seems like the end, is really only the beginning.

May every crisis in the world come to an end and may we merit to see the final redemption. Then our mouths will be filled with genuine laughter as we greet the Messiah and celebrate together in Jerusalem.

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