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Parashat Vayeshev

We know the story of Chanukah, but every year at this time we still ask ourselves: What is the miracle of Chanukah?

These two answers that we heard (small army defeating the big army and the oil lasting eight days) seem equally strong. Yet, I am not satisfied as to which of them is the true miracle of Chanukah. For help, I turned to the parasha for this week.

Vayeshev, this week's parasha, seems like it is anything but filled with miracles. Joseph, the second youngest of twelve boys, may be a spoiled brat, but that doesn't excuse the harsh and even harsher things that befall him. His own brothers strip him of his beautiful coat and shove him into a deep pit. The sons lie to their father, Jacob, to make him think that Joseph is dead. Joseph is sold into slavery, eventually landing in Egypt. He's falsely accused of rape and is thrown into prison. And there, despite everything he does to be noticed, he remains forgotten for years. Every time it seems that something will go well for Joseph, the farther down he goes into his deep pit.

Now, we, who have either read this parasha or have seen *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, know that, farther down the line in the story of Joseph, everything will right itself: Joseph will rise to power as the second most powerful man in Egypt, his brothers will get their just desserts, and all will be well. But at this point in the story, where this week's portion ends, we don't know any of that. And Joseph, lying forgotten in prison, doesn't know any of that either. All he can do, it seems, is lie there and despair.

But he doesn't.

Here's the miracle of the Joseph story. Even though everything in his life has led to things going terribly wrong, Joseph still keeps working to promote himself. When he interprets the dream of the cupbearer, he says to him, "Think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place" (Gen 40:14). Now, this may seem like an obvious thing to say, but think about it: after having failed again and again since his childhood to maintain any favor that he has gained, after being thrust from a pit of sand to the pit of slavery to the pit of prison, after years of abandonment and rejection, Joseph reaches out and puts himself out there. He does the little thing he can from the pit he's in, without any reason to think that this time will be different. Without any reason to hope, he hopes. And, we know, from the song "Any Dream Will Do" (or even from the Torah itself) that Joseph's hoping pays off. The miracle of his acting against all odds leads to more miracles, such as: his release from prison, his gaining favor with Pharaoh, and his eventual reconciliation with his brothers.

So, what is the miracle of Chanukah? The true miracle is neither in the Maccabees' defeat of the Greek army nor in the oil's lasting for eight nights. Those miracles are secondary. The real miracle here is in the fact that the Maccabees fought even when there was no reason to think that they would win. The real miracle is that the Jews who entered the desecrated Temple went ahead and lit the eternal lamp, rather than waiting for new oil to be pressed. The miracle is in the fact that against all odds, they acted optimistically.

This is our challenge this Chanukah: hope where there is no reason to hope; try where there is no good reason to try. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "Instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle." It's lighting that candle, when there's no reason to think that lighting it will make a difference. It's writing a letter to your congressman, even if it feels like it's writing into a black hole. It's giving to a food drive, even though you know that it can't stop hunger. It's donating money to the typhoon relief even if it feels like a few dollars can't put someone's life back together. It's replacing a light bulb with an Energy Saver compact fluorescent, even though that alone can't stop global warming. It's giving money to that person who asks you for it, even if you don't know what they're really going to do with that money. It's lighting a candle against the darkness, even in this darkest of nights.

Saint Francis of Assisi said, "All the darkness cannot extinguish the light of a single candle. But, one candle can illuminate all the darkness."

This Chanukah, we light our candles every night beginning next week, each night one light more, because with every candle we add to our chanukiah, we remind ourselves of the miracle of hoping against all hope, dreaming against all dreams. We remind ourselves of the power we have, simply by doing that miraculous thing, to change the world.