

# The Jewish Ethics Workbook: Chapter Seven

## Stuff Happens

*And Joseph said to his brothers, fear not, for am I instead of God? You thought evil against me, God thought it for good; in order to do as at this day, to preserve numerous people alive. Now therefore fear not: I will support you and your little ones. So he comforted his brothers and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis: Chapter 50, Verses 19-21)*

No matter how careful we are, life never follows our plans. For whatever reasons, stuff happens. As the plots of our lives unfold before us, we continually revise old plans. This is a never ending cycle.

Sometimes the stuff is good, like winning the lottery. “What am I going to do with all of this money now?” Sometimes it’s not so good. “I was sure I got an A on that exam. Now, how am I ever going to get into to med school?”

In large part, the quality of our lives—how they look and feel to us—rests on our ability to improvise as things change. It depends on how well we can *make sense* of what is happening around us. In other words, to exercise our free choice wisely, we have an urgent and constant need to find meaning where ever we can. This search for meaning and purpose in the everyday world is a uniquely human ability and motive. It is the chain that connects up life’s experiences one to another.

### Joseph as Improvisor

In Jewish history, the biblical figure of Joseph provides the classic example. On the surface, Joseph’s story makes him look like he’s simply a victim of his circumstances.

His father Jacob loved him more than any of his brothers or sisters. Not because of anything special or unique about Joseph himself, but because “he was the son of his old age (Genesis 37:3). Because Jacob loved Rachel, he loved her son Joseph best among his children. Jacob gave Joseph a special coat, and his brothers--obviously jealous of the unique treatment--hated him and can’t speak nicely to him.

His father, seemingly oblivious to the sibling rivalry, sends Joseph out alone to meet his brothers. Although initially Joseph can’t find his brothers, “a man found him” (Genesis 37: 15) and pointed him in the right direction.

His brothers, blinded by their envy, throw him into a pit, and eventually sell him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Then they go back to their father and lie about the whole episode, telling their father that Joseph was eaten by an evil beast. The brothers produce the bloody coat as proof of their story.

As Joseph is sold again to Potiphar, an Egyptian officer, he must wonder to himself how far he now is from realizing his childhood dreams of power and leadership. Talk about stuff happening to somebody.

Just when Joseph probably thinks that things can't get any worse, Potiphars' wife sets him up and accuses him of attacking her. "See," she screams to her staff, "Potiphar brought in a Hebrew to mock us; he came to lie with me and I called in a loud voice. When he heard that I lifted up my voice, he left his garment and ran away" (Genesis 39: 14-15).

Joseph--stripped of his coat for a second time--must feel like a boat cut loose from its mooring and tossed about by an angry sea. This was not the original plan! As Potiphar angrily drags him away to prison, there is no sun, there is no moon, nor are there any stars prostrating themselves to him.

Joseph makes the most of his situation, and with God's help, he is soon elevated to a position of authority in the prison. For the first time, Joseph begins to prosper.

His reputation as an astute interpreter of dreams grows. Pharaoh himself calls on Joseph to help him and Joseph seizes the opportunity. Not only does he correctly interpret Pharaoh's dream, but Joseph provides Pharaoh with practical political advice on how to make the most of the upcoming seven years of feast and seven years of famine. And so Pharaoh, recognizing Joseph's abilities, appoints him to be the viceroy of Egypt.

But stuff keeps happening to Joseph, even as his luck has dramatically changed. His past is fast catching up with him. "And Joseph was the governor over the land, and he sold grain to all the people of the land; and Joseph's brother's came and bowed down to him with their faces to the earth" (Genesis 42:6).

Probably, for the first time in many years, Joseph remembers his childhood dreams, and although he was always quick to interpret everyone else's dreams, it's only now that Joseph begins to make sense of his own dreams and his own life's purposes.

Joseph does seem to have some fun at the expense of his brothers, but in the end, his actions are a way for his brothers to prove that they have undergone a kind of *teshuvah* or repentance.

Joseph could have easily chosen to take revenge on his brothers. With his immense power, Joseph was now calling the shots. But, what did his youthful dreams really mean? At the dramatic climax of this story, Joseph can no longer refrain himself from revealing his true identity. In order for Joseph to really be Joseph, his brothers must know and acknowledge who he is. And Joseph said to them:

I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. Don't be angry with yourselves because you sold me. For God did send me before you for the preservation of life. For two years there has been a famine in the land and there are five more years in which there will be no plowing or harvest. And God sent me before you to...save your lives by a great deliverance. And, it is not you that sent me here, but God (Genesis, Chapter 45:4-8).

It might seem odd to say, but one of the hard things about really understanding this story is that it is so familiar to us. As we study it each year, we know already how it's all going to turn out. But if we step back for a moment, and we read this as if we were reading it for the first time, Joseph's decision is really an astonishing conclusion. Joseph, in a foreshadowing of Moses's farewell address to the children of Israel, chooses to choose life, "For God did send me before you for the *preservation of life*."

This is Joseph as an improviser; as an interpreter of his own dreams. In choosing to preserve life, despite his childhood trauma, Joseph has discovered the next link in the chain that connects together everything in his own life with the best that has come before him and the best that is yet to come.

In searching for and finally finding the "correct" meaning of his own life, Joseph becomes a beloved figure in Jewish history so much so that he is known to us today as *Yosef hatzadik*, Joseph the righteous one.

Few people can rise to the heights of a Joseph, but all of us can identify with the way that Joseph eventually created a kind of order out of a seeming chaos. Stuff happens. The question is though how do we best respond?

### **Zeke's Story**

Imagine that you haven't been feeling very well for a few weeks. You've lost weight--more than 30 pounds in three weeks, you're constantly thirsty, and you've been going to the bathroom more frequently than ever before in your life. One rainy Friday afternoon, your mom picks you up from school and takes you to see to your pediatrician to figure out what's going on. After taking a sample of your urine and asking you a few questions, the doctor recommends to your mother that she get you to the nearest hospital as fast as possible.

Just two hours later, the blood tests results come back, and the doctor from the hospital walks in to your room with a gloomy look on his face. Speaking to your parents and not to you directly, the doctor states flatly, "Your son has Juvenile Diabetes. His glucose levels were about 500 where the normal human range doesn't go beyond 120." You learn that you will need to stay in the hospital for the rest of weekend so that the doctors can stabilize you and teach you about injections and insulin.

As Zeke told me this story, he explained more to me about diabetes.

It is a disease in which the body does not produce or properly use insulin, a hormone that is needed to convert sugar, starches and other food into energy needed for daily life. The cause of diabetes is a mystery, although both genetics and environmental factors such as obesity and lack of exercise appear to play roles. It is estimated that about 6.3% of the American population is currently living with diabetes. About 5.2 million [people] are unaware that they have it. Diabetes has many life threatening complications that if go unnoticed can be fatal.

Zeke continued to explain that diabetes dramatically increases the likelihood of heart disease and stroke. It is the leading cause of blindness among adults. It is one of the causes of renal disease and lower limb amputations. In general, people with diabetes are more like to suffer from a host of other diseases including influenza and pneumonia. Once they get these diseases, they have a worse prognosis than other patients who don't have diabetes.

Stuff happens, and this time it all happened to Zeke. He and his family were devastated by the bad news. "Constant injections, lessons, and endless tears were now becoming a daily routine and I hated every moment of it!"

### **Zeke's Search for Meaning**

It was time to improvise, but how do you make sense out of something like this? Thinking back about his lonely ordeal more than three years later Zeke says, "I looked deep into myself and discovered that there must be a reason why God had chosen to give me this disease instead of someone else. It was my job to learn from this experience and make a change." The prison Zeke found himself in was not a physical prison like Joseph's, but was the prison of his disease.

The following year, Zeke—now a senior in high school-- was feeling much better. When it came time to choose a location for a three month internship program run by his school, Zeke decided to volunteer his services at the Diabetes Association of Greater Los Angeles. This job had its drawbacks, especially the two hour daily bus commute. But Zeke says, "For the first time I felt that I could work hard and actually make a difference."

During the internship, Zeke was extremely motivated to do a good job. He spent endless hours, checking his data entry to make sure that he didn't make any mistakes. What to most people would have been a tedious grind, to Zeke was one of the most meaningful activities of his young life. Because Zeke had personally experienced the trauma of learning that he had diabetes, his routine work was transformed. He was contributing, in however modest a way, to research that was designed to help kids with diabetes live longer and better lives.

After the internship was over, Zeke decided to continue volunteering at the Diabetes Association. "I spoke with the director and told her that I wanted to help in the program that they were going to run in May. This program was going to help the elderly with monitoring all of their health tests and teach them how to ask their doctors the right questions and give them insight on a healthier lifestyle." Upon completion of this project, Zeke felt a wonderful feeling of accomplishment like nothing else he had ever felt in his life.

Today Zeke says that “diabetes constantly plays a role in my life. The decisions that I make based on my experience with the disease are defining moments that leave an impact.”

So how does Zeke cope with a serious and potentially life-threatening disease like diabetes? Zeke has successfully integrated his experience into his life’s story. His disease and his ability to cope with it by giving back to the community is integral to him. “These stories are important to me in understanding my life and the role I play in it.”

Zeke says, “I feel as though God had given me not only a disease, but rather a window of opportunity to make a change in this world for the better.” As I think about Zeke’s mature reaction and as I study his words carefully, I can’t help but think back to the story of Joseph. In Zeke’s attitude and expressions, I hear a faint echo from Joseph’s story. Zeke is discovering his own link connecting him to Joseph’s ancient chain.

Zeke concludes that his “defining moment” is not one of a single occurrence; rather it is a constant flow of events that help me in realizing what kind of a person I really am. I truly believe that through diabetes my ethics and values have made a leap in making an everlasting change in this world. I continue to live hoping to help others in any way that I can.” These are Zeke’s words and not mine, but having gotten to know Zeke for the past few months I truly believe them.

### **Natan Sharansky Again**

Meaning, and the search for it, is a powerful motivating force. But just how powerful is it really? Many psychologists have accepted this idea that human beings do have a need for meaning. They may call it self-actualization, or something like that, but what they’re really talking about is meaning.

Abraham Maslow was one of the most articulate and outspoken psychologists to have made this claim. Nevertheless, he believed that this need for living a meaningful life could not emerge unless lower level needs were already satisfied. He said that the hungry man can’t think about anything else except his own hunger. Perhaps this is true, but it doesn’t mean that humans will always *act* on these thoughts. In fact, there are ethical heroes, both historical and contemporary, who when faced with life’s ultimate challenges will choose with care and reason to put aside their own physiological needs in favor of their vision of what it means to live a life of integrity and connection. Simply put, they believe that some values are worth dying for.

Let’s return to Natan Sharansky. What motivated him to stand up to the KGB? From what source or sources did he derive the energy to stand up against the evil of the Soviet Empire? Life’s circumstances were not always kind to Sharansky. That’s obvious. But how one chooses to react and respond to these circumstances is what life is all about.

What Zeke’s story says implicitly, Natan Sharnasky says explicitly, “The only way out was to hold on fiercely to my own world. No matter how difficult it was, I had to *preserve the link* with

my former environment and my values (p. 47, emphasis added).

### **Becoming the Author of One's Own Story**

But, how does one accomplish this? In prison, Sharansky began to author and edit his own powerful narrative (not literally, of course, but figuratively). "I felt long ago that the meaning of life came be discovered only when you challenge fate and destiny, when you tear yourself away from the numbing iron embraces of 'social,' 'historical,' and other necessities" (p. 374). In other words, Sharansky's advice is that each of us has to find his or her own unique voice appropriate to one's own historical circumstances.

His was a story that connected him to the greatest characters of all time, real and fictional. "Socrates and Don Quixote, Ulysses and Gargantua, Oedipus and Hamlet, had rushed to my aid. I felt a spiritual bond with these figures; their struggles reverberated with my own, their laughter with mine. They accompanied me through prisons and cams, through cells and transports" (p. 361).

In further elaborating on the deep connection he felt with these classical heroes, Sharansky writes:

I was inspired by Ulysses, with his wit, his stubbornness and his enormous curiosity—even on the edge of the abyss. There was Gargantua, whose physical strength and laughter broke through all the borders of this world. And Antigone—pressed by fate, she refused to violate the basic, eternal values, and saw her mission as bringing love, not hate. And Don Quixote—a dreamer who enjoyed life to the fullest, in contrast to the dull players around him. All of these characters, it seemed to me, hurried toward me from various countries and across the centuries. "You see," they told me, "there is nothing new in this world of ours. But how much there is that is worth living for—and, if necessary, worth dying for as well." (P. 83)

He found some of his strongest inspiration in the words of King David. On the eve of his incarceration, his wife Avital had given him, as a gift, a small volume containing the book of Psalms. In jail, it was this book that he kept with him at all times and that he read and re-read. Sharansky quotes Psalm 39 as the model he tried to emulate in defying the KGB:

I resolved I would watch my step  
Lest I offend by my speech;  
I would keep my mouth muzzled  
while the wicked man was in my presence.  
I was dumb, silent;  
I held my peace  
While my pain was intense.

Sharansky imagined himself living in dialogue with the great religious spokesmen, philosophers, scientists, and kings. He knew how they lived their lives must necessarily affect the way he lived

his own life. Further, he boldly imagined that what he did mattered not only to himself, but his actions would somehow also affect the great leaders of the past.

He describes an almost mystical feeling. He calls it a “reverse connection.” According to Sharansky, “not only was it important to me how these characters behaved in various circumstances, but it was also important to *them*, who had been created many centuries ago, to know how I was acting today. And just as they had influenced the conduct of individuals in many lands and over many centuries, so I, too, with my decisions and choices had the power to inspire or disenchant those who had existed in the past as well as those who would come in the future” (p. 361).

In the Pirkei Avot, we discover that the best teacher or student is like a sieve (and not a funnel)—“which lets the course flour pass out and retains the fine flour” (Chapter 5, Mishna 15). This describes Sharansky’s approach to tradition.

In fact, in one especially poignant moment, Sharansky finds himself struggling with Galileo’s decision to recant to the Inquisition. Sharansky considers Galileo one of the all time greats, but this doesn’t mean that his behavior should be accepted and emulated in every case.

Sharansky finds fault in Galileo’s capitulation, however much Galileo did not really mean what he said. He believes that because Galileo was so great, his precedent to cave in when confronted with his “unorthodox” beliefs, even though it is three and a half centuries old now, provides a poor model for those of us who have come after. “His very fame undoubtedly multiplied the number of individuals in various times and places who cited his great name in order to justify their own moral failure, caused by an inertia of fear, and who argued that what they told the authorities was less important than the fact that “it moves” (p. 362).

Ironically, Sharansky, even though he staunchly disagreed with Galileo, was able to learn from him. He strengthened his own will to fight on by reminding himself that his own actions will soon become a precedent to the next generation.

As important as Sharansky found his dialogue with these historical figures from both his own Jewish heritage and the broader western tradition, Sharansky does not paint himself devoid of real feeling and emotion. He’s no stick figure.

If one’s story is only a kind of philosophical dissertation then it is doubtful that it will be able to provide sufficient impetus for it to do what we want it to do. In the end, everyone of our stories has to answer the question “why bother at all?” Quite literally, it is our special stories that move us.

Think back to Joseph. His decision to forgive his brothers and to save their lives is no doubt something that he, in his calmest moments, would find intellectually satisfying. But, if we study Joseph’s story more carefully, there is a deep and abiding love for his brothers that Joseph can no longer contain. “Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him. Let every man go out from me. And there stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known to his

brothers. And he wept aloud” (Genesis 45: 1-2).

Zeke’s story was also one that was not only intellectually satisfying to him, but more importantly, it was a story that allowed him to express his bottled-up emotions. In helping others, he was helping heal himself more than anyone else.

In the end, Sharansky, too, found his sense of purpose not just in how he thought, but in how he felt. On this point, Sharansky is about as clear as anyone could be. Throughout his years in the Gulag, his one fixed point was the love he felt for his wife Avital:

The coordinates in my life changed many times, and there were moments when I doubted almost everybody. Archimedes called for one fixed point to move the world. For twelve years I continually relied on my own fixed point—Avital—even as our globe was spinning, throwing us madly from one situation to another. (p. 121)

I guess it’s obvious, but it’s still worth stating explicitly. A meaning or a purpose that is devoid of real, live human relationships is no meaning at all. In searching for meaning, we’re not looking for just any old link in the chain, but we’re looking for the golden link. When you finally find it, you know it’s right because it is intellectually defensible and emotionally satisfying.

You know you will have found the golden link when you can answer yes to all of the following questions:

- Is my interpretation of events true to my historical roots?
- Does it honor my tradition but not idolize it?
- Does the story that I am telling allow me to live fully in the moment?
- Does it recognize that today’s actions will lead to tomorrow’s realities?
- Does my story make me a more complex person?
- Does my interpretation enlarge my sense of community?
- Does it bring me closer to those I love?
- Can I explain my version of what is happening to an impartial judge?
- Am I proud to take responsibility for my story?
- Finally, if I act upon my interpretation of events, will my action get me to where I want to go?

## **Conclusion**

Joseph, Zeke, and Natan Sharansky were all victims. Joseph was the victim of his brothers’ jealousy. Zeke was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. Natan Sharansky became a pawn in the politics of the cold war.

What Joseph, Zeke, and Natan Sharansky have in common is their mindful decisions not to define themselves as victims. Each of them found a positive meaning to their suffering. Joseph realized that his youthful dreams meant that he would be given the opportunity to help save his family from a deadly famine. Zeke used his disease as an opportunity help others with the same

disease. Sharansky became a powerful symbol of the power of one person to stand up against the state.

The meaning that each of these people discovered became a powerful motivating force in their lives. Joseph, Zeke, and Natan Sharansky learned how to look at themselves and their own lives in a kind of detached way. Each of them cultivated a kind of profound acceptance. They did this not to live a detached and emotionless life, but to live a deeper, richer, and more purposeful life, a life of integrity and connectedness.