

Have you ever received some kind of recognition or outreach that just made your day? A card or note or an unexpected phone call from an old friend, just to say hello?

I have, and I hope most people have at times. It feels great to be remembered, and to know that someone took time, especially in an unanticipated way, to reach out and connect.

We encounter something similar in this week's Torah portion, Miketz. The Joseph narrative picks up with Joseph still in jail and the cup-bearer restored to his position, having forgotten about Joseph. Pharaoh experiences a pair of perplexing and distressing dreams, which leads the cupbearer to recount his meeting with Joseph in prison. Hearing this, Pharaoh sends for Joseph in a desperate (and ultimately successful) attempt to interpret his dreams.

As readers who are rooting for Joseph, we might: just what took the cupbearer so long? He owes Joseph his entire existence; why did he wait two years to say something to Pharaoh, a man he saw every day?

One midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 89:7) answers, perhaps cynically, that his intervention now was entirely self-interested. The cupbearer saw just how distressed Pharaoh was, on the verge of death. Fearing that Pharaoh would die and be replaced by another with no particular loyalty to him, the cupbearer "remembers" Joseph, choosing to intervene in order to preserve his own position. Indeed, such were the "sins" the cupbearer refers to in his speech to Pharaoh: forgetting about Joseph for those two years, and also not coming forward sooner with a possible solution to Pharaoh's problem.

However, even if his motives were self-interested, the cupbearer plays his role in this long drama that will ultimately result in the reconciliation with and rescue of Joseph's brothers. His small act made an impact well beyond the immediate issue he was trying to address.

I'd like to suggest that we all can often be in a similar position. We can make small interventions that make a big impact, often in ways that we couldn't anticipate.

Some recent psychological research had considered the concept of “undersociality.” The basic idea here is that “decisions to engage with others are driven by how people expect a recipient to respond, but that people consistently underestimate how positively others will respond to their other-oriented actions” (Kumar and Epley 2022).

<https://myscp.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/jcpy.1336>

In other words, sometimes we avoid reaching out because we don't think our efforts will matter, but they actually matter much more than we anticipate.

You've likely experienced this: that unexpected call or note probably meant much more to you than the person making it.

So, as we continue our celebrations of Hanukkah this week, let's try to bring more light to our world. Make that call, send that text, say hello to that stranger.

We can all benefit, as Joseph did, from being remembered.