

5 Perspectives on Finding God in the Chaos



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To the modern reader, Parshat Miketz can feel rigged. If Yosef must remain in prison until Pharaoh dreams, then the butler has to forget him. If the famine must drive the brothers to Egypt, then their journey becomes inevitable. The story looks like a clockwork universe where every character plays their predetermined part while maintaining the illusion of choice. Free will begins to look like an elaborate costume worn by actors following a script they cannot see.

Jewish tradition refuses this flattening. The parsha insists on a more complex reality where Providence and human freedom occupy different planes of existence without canceling each other out. Free will governs what people choose; Providence governs how those consequences are woven into meaning. Yosef's ascent from dungeon to throne happens through entirely human choices, though none of the actors can see the larger pattern. Take the butler, for example. He exercises selective memory, choosing when to forget and when to remember a prisoner who once helped him. At the same time, an Egyptian king extends trust to foreign wisdom despite the political risk. And far to the north in Canaan, brothers decide to travel south for grain, responding to famine with pragmatic calculation rather than any sense of spiritual mission. Yet these choices, fully free and morally consequential, somehow weave into a pattern of redemption that transcends any individual's intention. The challenge lies in understanding how divine orchestration and human agency coexist without negating each other.

On its surface, the parsha reads like a political thriller involving a forgotten prisoner, a panicked monarch, and a famine that threatens an empire. But beneath this drama of statecraft and survival runs the reality of how God works in history. The parsha reveals how Providence operates through genuine human freedom, ensuring that free choices cohere into redemptive patterns without controlling those choices or negating their moral weight.

1. The Art of Attribution

When Pharaoh summons Yosef from the dungeon to interpret his dreams, the moment crackles with opportunity. This is the chance every prisoner dreams of: He finally has the ear of absolute power, desperate for his unique skill. The obvious play is to demonstrate your indispensability, to position yourself as the irreplaceable solution. Yet Yosef opens his mouth and the first words that emerge are a deflection of credit: "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace" ([Genesis 41:16](#)).

Yosef's response reveals a theological commitment so deep that he risks his entire opportunity. Consider first what Rashi notes: Yosef uses the divine name in addressing a pagan monarch who has no frame of reference for Hebrew theology. Sforno takes this further, suggesting that Pharaoh could have dismissed him as a religious fanatic rather than a pragmatic interpreter. And Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch identifies in this moment Yosef's defining characteristic: his absolute refusal to see himself as the source of his own wisdom.

This raises an immediate question. If Yosef's wisdom comes entirely from God, then where is Yosef's moral agency? Is his humility genuine if he has no choice in the matter? The answer lies in understanding that Yosef is making an active choice to align his linear reality with God's ultimate reality. He possesses real interpretive gifts, developed through years of experience. Think of what he brings to this moment: the practice of reading dreams in prison, deep insight into human psychology, and political intelligence about Egyptian culture. These are his talents, shaped through his choices and suffering. What Yosef chooses is attribution itself, the decision to locate the source of these gifts beyond himself. His humility is a moral achievement, an act of navigation within his freedom where he chooses to see himself as a conduit rather than an origin.

Rabbi David Bashevkin has explored this theme in his conversations about failure and success. His insight cuts to the heart of Yosef's stance. We live in terror of being exposed as frauds because we've convinced ourselves that we are the sole authors of our achievements. When we succeed, we can't enjoy it because we know how much was circumstance. When we fail, we can't recover because we believe it reveals our true inadequacy. Yosef offers a third way, acknowledging that his gifts come from beyond himself while recognizing that his choice to use them ethically remains his own. His choice to attribute them correctly—to refuse self-deification—remains within his freedom even as he rules Egypt, commands armies, and controls the food supply of the known world. He makes the daily choice to see himself as steward rather than sovereign.

2. When God Wears a Mask

The scene in Genesis 42:7-8 arrests the reader with its layers of irony. Yosef sees his brothers coming to buy grain and "he recognized them, but he made himself strange to them" (*vayitnaker*). They do not recognize the Egyptian viceroy as their brother. The Hebrew word *vayitnaker* carries additional freight beyond simple disguise. It suggests a deep, transformative estrangement, as if Yosef has become genuinely foreign to them through his years in Egypt.

The classical commentators connect this moment to the larger theological concept of *Hester Panim*, the hiding of God's face. In exile, divinity does not announce itself. The Ramban argues that Jewish history in *Galut* appears entirely natural, explicable through politics and economics and human agency. God wears the mask of ordinary causation in these circumstances. Yosef—in his Egyptian robes, speaking through an interpreter, wielding Pharaoh's authority—embodies how redemption can look like its opposite, how salvation can arrive in a form we cannot recognize.

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Dr. Erica Brown has explored how we misread divine action in exile. In *Esther: Power, Fate and Fragility in Exile*, she shows how redemption can arrive disguised as politics—the costume mistaken for the character. Rabbi Meir Soloveichik takes this further in his discussions of Jewish history, arguing that our greatest error is treating the diaspora experience as purely secular when it is deeply theological. Like the brothers unable to see Joseph beneath his Egyptian persona, we fail to recognize divine Providence beneath the disguise of natural events.

But here the question becomes acute. If God is hidden, if history looks like pure politics, then how do we distinguish between authentic Providence and wishful thinking? How do we avoid the trap of seeing God's hand everywhere, turning every coincidence into a miracle? The answer lies in learning to read for pattern rather than intrusion. God's presence in history shows itself through the way freely made human choices somehow form a coherent narrative arc toward redemption.

Consider the brothers' journey as an example. They choose to come to Egypt because they are hungry and have heard there is grain. This is entirely pragmatic, entirely human. Yet this choice, made for mundane reasons, places them exactly where they need to be for the family's ultimate reconciliation. Providence operates by ensuring that the outcomes of genuine human freedom somehow cohere into meaning, that history has a direction even when no individual can see it.

3. Awakening Conscience Through Crisis

There is a jarring non-sequitur in Genesis 42:21 that reveals the entire psychological architecture of the parsha. Yosef's agents accuse the brothers of being spies, a political charge entirely pragmatic within the context of national security and grain distribution. The brothers respond by confessing to a kidnapping that happened 22 years earlier, saying: "Indeed, we are guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us."

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No one has mentioned their brother. The Egyptian viceroy knows nothing of their family history. Yet they immediately interpret a political crisis through a spiritual lens, reading their current suffering as a direct consequence of ancient guilt. The Ramban notes that this reveals how trauma actually works. Suffering does not create conscience but excavates what was already buried. The Abarbanel suggests that it was Joseph's unexpected mercy—providing for their households—that reminded them of their own lack of mercy toward their brother.

As Rav Shagar explores in his writings on teshuva, guilt cannot be imposed from outside—it must emerge from within when circumstances force us to acknowledge what we already know. Joseph's accusation functions as what we might call a psychological squeeze, where external pressure forces internal reckoning. The brothers are not confessing to win clemency from the Egyptian; rather, they are confessing because they can no longer live with what they've done.

What makes this especially profound is that Yosef creates this pressure intentionally. He is not randomly cruel or vindictive. The Rambam, in his laws of Teshuva, establishes that genuine repentance can only be demonstrated when a person faces the same situation that led to their original sin and chooses differently. Yosef recreates the original conditions by placing his brothers in a scenario where they face a choice to abandon one brother to save the others. Will they leave Shimon in Egypt as they once threw Yosef in a pit? Will they return without Binyamin as they once returned without Yosef? The squeeze serves as a diagnostic tool for moral growth, a way to test whether transformation has actually occurred or whether guilt has simply been suppressed.

This transforms our understanding of suffering in the service of Providence. The crisis is the mechanism by which conscience awakens. Yosef exercises genuine moral agency in creating these conditions, while his brothers exercise genuine moral agency in how they respond. God's Providence ensures that these human choices, freely made on all sides, somehow serve the larger project of family reconciliation and national formation. The suffering has purpose, yet everyone involved is making real choices with real moral weight.

4. The Spirituality of Waiting

"It happened at the end of two full years" (Genesis 41:1). That phrase, *vayehi miketz*, gives the parsha its name and encapsulates its central agony. Yosef has already spent years in Pharaoh's dungeon, falsely accused, forgotten by everyone except perhaps God. Then comes the moment of hope when the butler is released, promises to remember Yosef, and presumably has every incentive to mention the Hebrew who correctly interpreted his dream. Yet two more years pass, two years of nothing, of waiting in darkness while the man who could save you goes about his life.

Here the theological tension becomes impossible to ignore. Rashi, drawing on Midrash Tanchuma, suggests that Yosef had to wait the extra two years because he placed too much trust in the butler rather than trusting entirely in God. But this creates a brutal paradox worth examining. If God decreed the two-year delay, then the butler had no choice but to forget. How can we call the butler's forgetfulness a moral failure if God needed Yosef to remain in prison until Pharaoh's dream? The entire parsha seems to collapse into determinism, where everyone is simply playing their assigned role in a drama whose ending was written before it began.

Jewish theology offers a framework for holding this tension, though it requires us to think about time itself differently. Consider first the divine name itself. The name Y-H-V-H contains within it past, present, and future tense simultaneously, conveying the meaning 'Was, Is, Will Be' (*Hayah, Hoveh, Yihyeh*)—as traditional rabbinic interpretation explains, drawing on the work of commentators like Rabbi Yoseph Bechor Shor and Ibn Ezra. God exists outside the linear time that constrains human experience. Medieval philosophers like the Rambam distinguish sharply between divine knowledge and human knowledge, arguing that God's perspective transcends temporal sequence. Modern thinkers illustrate this concept with a metaphor that can help us grasp what the medievals were describing. We experience time as if we are marching in a parade, where we can see what's directly around us, we remember what we've passed, we anticipate what's coming, but we cannot see the whole route at once. God's perspective, by contrast, is more like a helicopter viewing the entire parade simultaneously, where beginning, middle, and end exist for Him in a single eternal moment.

This metaphor points toward a way of understanding how Providence and freedom coexist without canceling each other out. The butler makes a genuine choice in his linear timeline. He chooses ingratitude, chooses to forget the prisoner who helped him, chooses to get comfortable in his restored position and not take the political risk of mentioning a Hebrew convict. This is his moral failure, real and consequential. Meanwhile, God, from His simultaneous vantage point, observes this choice eternally without scripting it or forcing the butler's hand. History took the branch where the butler chose delay. Providence revealed itself by redeeming that delay, ensuring that when Pharaoh's dream finally arrived, Yosef had developed the additional maturity and political wisdom the crisis would demand. The butler could have remembered earlier; had he done so, history would have unfolded differently, and Providence would have worked through that alternative timeline. What we see in Miketz is how God works with the actual choices people make, weaving even human failure into a narrative of redemption.

Sivan Rahav-Meir, whose insights on contemporary Jewish life have illuminated the challenge of maintaining spiritual depth in a culture of instant gratification, speaks to this directly. We live in a world that has pathologized waiting, where every delay feels like a denial, every pause like abandonment. Social media feeds us a constant stream of other people's victories, making our own waiting feel like evidence of being left behind. Yet Miketz suggests that timing itself has moral and providential significance, that premature success would have been premature failure.

The person waiting for the job offer, the *shidduch*, the medical results, the return of a prodigal child does not experience their waiting as purposeful. It feels like waste, like punishment, like evidence that God has forgotten. Yet the parsha insists that the end comes at the exact right moment, even when that moment is years later than we thought we could endure. This does not make the suffering easier, but it does make it meaningful.

5. Active Effort vs. Passive Trust

When Yosef finally interprets Pharaoh's dream, he does not stop at prophecy. He delivers a seven-year economic forecast followed by a detailed policy proposal, saying: "Let Pharaoh appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store grain under Pharaoh's authority for food in the cities, and let them keep it" (Genesis 41:33-36). What follows is practical management consulting at the highest level. Yosef specifies tax rates, storage infrastructure, bureaucratic oversight, long-term planning.

This immediately raises another question about the simultaneity framework we've been exploring. If God already sees the outcome, if from His eternal perspective the famine and the survival are both already present, then why bother with economic planning? Why not simply trust that God will provide? The question becomes even sharper when we consider prayer. If God's simultaneous view includes the entire future, then how can prayer change anything? Aren't we just asking God to alter what He already knows will happen?

The medieval philosopher Rav Yosef Albo offers a profound answer to this question. Prayer changes the person praying, he argues. When we pray, we transform ourselves in significant ways. We clarify what we actually want. We align our will with divine purpose. We open ourselves to receiving what we're asking for. A changed person stands in a different relationship to what outcomes become possible. God's simultaneous view includes this transformation, meaning He sees not just the future event but the person we become through the process of preparing for it. The outcome that manifests is one that reflects who we've made ourselves into through our effort and prayer.

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Yosef embodies this principle completely. He knows the famine comes from God and that Egypt will survive, yet he immediately begins calculating logistics. His planning is real work, requiring genuine human ingenuity and political skill. The miracle happens through grain storage and rationing, through tax policy and bureaucratic coordination. Yosef's faith activates his human agency rather than replacing it. He trusts God precisely by taking the material world seriously, by building robust systems, by using every faculty he possesses to prepare for what's coming.

Rabbi Shlomo Brody has written extensively about the intersection of halacha, policy, and statecraft. His work explores how Jewish law demands both faith and pragmatism, how we are commanded to trust God precisely by building robust human systems. Rabbi Ari Lamm, who brings Modern Orthodox ideas to new audiences through his *Good Faith Effort* podcast, stands in a tradition that takes the material world seriously as the arena of religious life..

The synthesis is this. Our human effort represents the demanded response of someone who takes both God's sovereignty and human responsibility seriously. We are called to build the vessels that Providence will fill. Yosef stores grain because he believes in the famine; his planning expresses his trust rather than undermining it. This synthesis of effort and trust prepares us to understand how we navigate our own unfinished stories.

Questions for Reflection:

- 1. What in your life once looked like coincidence but now looks like Providence?**
- 2. What are you waiting for that feels like abandonment rather than formation?**
- 3. Where do you use faith as an excuse not to act, or effort as a way to avoid dependence?**

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