

Britney Griner and Yosef: From the Pit They Shall Emerge

In last week's parsha, Yosef's brothers threw him into a pit. As far as I could see, no Mefarshim comment on how long he was in the pit or what he was doing there. Only one Mefarsh, the Daat Zekeinim, tried to describe Yosef's state of mind:

“While Joseph had been in the pit, wondering how he would ever escape, he had lost his good looks and was not presentable to people who wished to buy a young and able-bodied slave” (Bereishit 27:28:3).

His deep fear marred, even disfigured, his young boyish face.

While few seem interested in Yosef's emotional state, many are interested in describing the pit, the *bor*, itself. The Torah says:

וַיִּקְחֵהוּ וַיִּשְׁלְכֵהוּ אֵלֶיךָ הַבּוֹר וְהַבּוֹר רֵק אֵין בּוֹ מַיִם:
“and they took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it” (37:24).

Rashi famously asks: why was it necessary to say that the *bor*, the pit was empty and that there was no water?

וְהַבּוֹר רֵק, אֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ שְׂאֵין בּוֹ מַיִם,

מַיִם אֵין בּוֹ, אֲבָל נְחָשִׁים וְעַקְרָבִים יֵשׁ בּוֹ (בראשית רבה, שבת כ"ב):

“The pit did not contain water, but there were serpents and scorpions in it” (Shabbat 22a).

Rashi paints a vivid picture of a dark, empty, scary, snake and scorpion-infested pit. Yosef must have been petrified.

Perhaps prison has been on my mind as I found myself watching Britney Griner's release from a Russian prison and her journey home. Britney, or BG as her fans affectionately know her, is a WNBA basketball star and two-time gold medal Olympian. Griner's ordeal began last February when she was returning to Russia to finish her overseas season. She was arrested for carrying vape cartridges with a small amount of cannabis oil into the country. BG was tried and sentenced to nine years in prison and was serving her sentence in a Russian Penal colony, where she spent her days sewing, transporting fabric, and other menial labor.

Yosef was also ultimately thrown into prison. After being accused of seducing Potiphar's wife, Potiphar threw him into prison. This time, Yosef finds himself not in a *bor* or pit but in a *beit ha'sohar*:

וַיִּקְחֵהוּ אֲדֹנָי יוֹטָף אֵתוֹ וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ אֶל-בֵּית הַסֹּהַר

“Joseph's master had him put in prison” (39:20).



Throughout the story of Yosef in prison, the word used for his confinement is *beit ha'sohar*. Then at the beginning of this week's parsha, Parashat Miketz, before Yosef tells Pharaoh about his dreams, Yosef is taken out of jail. Here, the *pasuk* refers to the jail once again not as a *beit ha'sohar*, but as a “*bor*,” a pit (Bereishit 41:14).

Trying to make sense of this, Mefarshim offers an array of explanations. Rashi says that the prison is called “*Min HaBor*” because the prison was actually a sort of pit. Perhaps, some explain, the *bor* was a night jail where prisoners slept, and the *beit ha'sohar* was where they lived during the day. Others say that the *bor* was a more serious form of punishment, like solitary confinement.

I didn't like any of these explanations, and so when I re-looked at the *peshat*, I noticed that right before Yosef is freed, both times, he is taken from a pit. He emerges not from *beit ha'sohar*, from jail, but from the bottom of the bottom. From the place that was dark and scary and filled with the beasts that were meant to instill utter fear: it is from here that he emerged. From utter darkness, he is pulled into the light.

The first time Yosef is pulled from the pit, the Torah adds what I think is an extra word:

וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלֵי אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִן־הַבּוֹר:

“They pulled Joseph and brought **him up** out of the pit” (37:28).

Not only did the brothers (or the Midianites) pull him out – but *וַיַּעֲלֵי* – the word that implies rising up. And indeed, although Yosef was sold to Potiphar, he rose very quickly to the highest position within his house.

And then, the second time Yosef was taken from prison, again, the Torah tells us:

וַיִּרְצְחוּ מִן־הַבּוֹר, “and they rushed him from the dungeon (the *bor*).”

Rabbeinu Bachya explains that Yosef came, in his words:

מתוך צרה רוחה מתוך אפלה אורה מתוך נבולן של צדיקים נשיאות, שנאמר (משלי ל) אם נבלת בהתנשא

“out of a narrowly confined space into a spacious area; from darkness into bright light; from the disgrace suffered by the righteous to principedom.”

All of this has been described by Solomon in Proverbs 30:32: with the words “if you have suffered disgrace you will be elevated” (41:3).

So here's my hopeful *chidush*: at the moment when Yosef has reached rock bottom, literally and metaphorically, when all hope seems lost, and he is surrounded by fear, it is then that he is able to emerge. His emotional state was in the pit. It is the experience captured by King David

is Tehilim 40:

לִמְנַצֵּחַ לְדָוִד מִזְמוֹר:

קוֹה קִנִּיתִי יְהוָה נִיט אֵלַי וַיִּשְׁמַע שׁוֹעֲתִי:

וַיַּעֲלֵנִי מִבּוֹר שְׂאוֹן מָטִיט הִיָּן וַיִּקַּם עָלַי־סֶלַע רַגְלִי כוֹנֵן אֲשֶׁרִי:

וַיִּתֵּן בִּפְּיִי שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ תְּהִלָּה





For the leader. A psalm of David. I put my hope in the LORD; He inclined toward me and heeded my cry. He lifted me out of the muddy pit (*bor*), the slimy clay, and set my feet on a rock, steadied my legs. He put a new song into my mouth,

When someone reaches rock bottom, be it with regard to addiction, mental health, stress, or a general sense of desperation, we often think that this is the end of the road. And yet, the very experience of rock bottom, of being at the bottom of the pit, means that there is only one direction to go in, and that is upwards. When there are no alternatives, it is then, perhaps that we can begin to hear that soft still voice, be it the voice of God or the inner voice that is ready to accept help.

I don't know what Britney Griner's state of mind was right before she was released. But I imagine that there were plenty of days that felt like she was in an empty cold, serpent-filled pit. There must have been days of darkness. I heard that before she was sentenced, waiting at a detention center, she was offered a chance to toss around a basketball. She refused.

But, BG's wife, Charlene advocated; her team and fans, and the White House fought, and finally, in a prisoner exchange, the American government brought Britney home. Days after she came home and reunited with her family, she finally spoke, "The last 10 months have been a battle at every turn. I dug deep to keep my faith." That phrase dug deep, and implied that she was at a low; and yet, as soon as she emerged, she began to look towards her future. At the first possible moment, she picked up a basketball for the first time in 10 months. And she recently announced that she would indeed be playing basketball for the WNBA's Phoenix Mercury this season. And perhaps even more importantly, she will be using her new platform to help reunite Paul Whelan, an ex-marine who has been in Russian custody, as well as others, with their families.

There's a beautiful Midrash and Gemara in Berachot cited in Parashat VaYechi, that describes an older Yosef walking past the pit into which he was thrown. Yosef doesn't cry out with anger or bitterness. Rather, he makes a *berachah*: "She'asah li neis," "Thank you, God, for the miracle." Yosef understood, in retrospect, that the *bor*, the pit was not the end of his existence but the beginning of the rest of his life. It is why the gemara also suggests that Yosef is freed on Rosh Hashanah (Rosh HaShana 11a-b). He emerged not from a *beit hasohar*, from jail, but from the pit. And he was able to recognize the place not as a prison but as a new beginning.

On this Chanukah, when you light your candles, when that first light emerges from the blackness, from the darkness, shining forth, let that light guide you upwards; let it help you emerge from whatever pit or hole you have fallen into. Let the light bring you toward a new beginning. From darkness, light is born.

