

**Parshat Vayeshev:
On Success
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Nearly murdered by family members? Check. Enslaved? Check. Expelled to a foreign country? Check. Framed for a crime? Check. Imprisoned? Check. Check. Check. Success.

Other people in the Torah pray for success, but Joseph alone is described as successful. In Bereishit Chapter 39, Joseph is described as successful, as *matzliach*, three times over:

(1) When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there.

(א) וַיֹּסֵף הוֹרֵד מִצְרַיִם וַיְקַנְהוּ פוֹטִיפָר סָרִיס פְּרַעֲהוֹ שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מִיַּד הַיִּשְׁמְעֵלִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹרְדוּהוּ שָׁמָּה:

(2) The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master.

(ב) וַיְהִי ה' אִתּוֹ וַיִּשְׁפַּר וַיְהִי אִישׁ מַצְלִיחַ וַיְהִי בְּבַיִת אֲדֹנָיו הַמִּצְרַיִ:

(3) And when his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord lent success to everything that he undertook....

(ג) וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי ה' אִתּוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר-הוּא עֹשֶׂה יְהִי מַצְלִיחַ בְּיָדוֹ:

(23) The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him, and whatever he did, the Lord made successful (NJPS).

(כג) אֵין שָׂר בֵּית-הַסֹּהֵר רֹאֶה אֶת-כָּל-מְאוּמָה בְּיָדוֹ בְּאֲשֶׁר ה' אִתּוֹ וְאֲשֶׁר-הוּא עֹשֶׂה ה' מַצְלִיחַ:

Joseph isn't just successful, he is an *ish matzliach*. A Man of Success. A paragon. We are reminded over and over again that he is successful, that Hashem made him successful. But if this is what success looks like-- sold into slavery and imprisoned-- I certainly wouldn't want it.

In English, we use the word "success" in two different ways-- in a more narrow sense and a more broad sense.

(A) The broad meaning of success can apply to all sorts of things. In this meaning, we intend a simple goal-fulfillment. For example: I added coriander to my chulent and it was such a success! My goal was to add an interesting flavor to my chulent, and I fulfilled that goal.

(B) The narrow definition of success is what we mean when we call a person "successful." A successful person has accomplished one or more of our collectively idealized goals. In our culture, those things are usually wealth, influence and/or prestige. A successful person would be a candidate for the Time Magazine Person of the Year award. She has achieved the very specific goals whose accomplishment we have determined to call "success."

Some classical commentators, in understanding Joseph's "success," point to the broad definition of the word. The Radak suggests that these verses don't mean that Joseph's life is a model of prosperity. They just express that while Joseph was enslaved by Potiphar and in prison, his activities were successful. He accomplished every task at hand (Radak 39:2). The Ramban shares in the Radak's read, and he adds that Joseph was so extraordinarily capable that it became clear to all that his capabilities came from Hashem (Ramban 39:3-4).

The Ramban and Radak's read makes a lot of sense. Joseph, at this point in time, simply does not deserve the Person of the Year Award. He is a low-class, hopeless slave and prisoner. When the Torah calls a person in that situation "successful," it must mean success in our more broad definition.

The problem, of course, is that the Torah doesn't just say that Joseph was successful. The Torah calls Joseph an איש מצליח -- a Man of Success, a person defined by success. This language points to our more narrow definition of success, assuming that the Torah has that usage. If the Torah has that usage, we would still need to understand which collectively idealized goal or goals Joseph has achieved in the eyes of the Torah. If the Torah does not have that definition, then it is hard to know what "Man of Success" might mean-- since our broad definition of success would just tell us that he accomplishes lots of goals. Which goals? I aim to tie my shoes every day and I succeed at it every single day. Would the Torah call me a Woman of Success? The Ramban and Radak seem to suggest that, more or less-- yes. Joseph was assigned various jobs by Potiphar and he accomplished them handily. That's enough, apparently, to earn the title *ish matzliach*. Ultimately, I'm not certain that the Torah assigns to Joseph either our broad or our narrow definition of success.

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch suggests a different definition of success. He writes that, "success is defined as progress towards a goal by means of overcoming every obstacle."

Until now we have been looking at two different understandings of the term "success," but they shared a general orientation around goal-achievement. Rabbi Hirsch takes success in a radically different direction. He adds "overcoming obstacles" into his definition, and, strikingly, he isn't interested in achievement. For Rabbi Hirsch, success requires progress.

An *ish matzliach*, in the definition of Rav Hirsch, is a person who articulates a clear vision and drives towards it despite adversity. A small success in this paradigm might be someone who unknits his shoelaces in preparation for tying them into a bow. However, importantly, a person who achieves their goals without difficulty is not experiencing success. Nor is a person who overcame obstacles and now rests in his achievements-- though he did experience success while he was still progressing towards his goals. Rav Hirsch would say to these people: set loftier goals, pursue them against adversity, and only in that pursuit will you experience success.

The Torah, through the image of the enslaved and imprisoned yet "successful" Joseph, shows us a very unusual model of success. This model begs us to re-assess the way we think about our own successes. Are we successful in the way that Joseph, the Torah's only model of success, was successful? Are we progressing? Are we persevering through adversity? And if not, perhaps we need to establish new goals, reroute and aim higher.



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