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**Sermon by Rabbi Shalom Paltiel
Delivered at Chabad of Port Washington**

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Sold or Sent

A man comes home from an exhausting day at work, plops down on the couch in front of the television, and tells his wife, "Get me a beer before it starts."

The wife sighs and gets him a beer. Fifteen minutes later, he says, "Get me another beer before it starts."

She looks cross, but fetches another beer and slams it down next to him. He finishes that beer and a few minutes later says "Quick, get me another beer, it's going to start any minute."

The wife is furious. She yells at him "Is that all you're going to do tonight? Drink beer and sit in front of that TV? You're nothing but a lazy, drunken, fat slob, and furthermore ..."

The man sighs and says, "It's started ..."

Jews love to complain:

Jewish answering machine: You've reached the Goldbergs, at the tone state your bad news

Waiter in restaurant goes over to table of 5 Jewish women: Is anything ok?

Communist joke – Jew leaving Russia – they ask him as he's leaving – How was life here? Can't complain How was food? Can't complain How was living quarters? Can't complain So why are you leaving to America? Because there I could complain!

Jokes aside, there are some serious reasons to complain nowadays.

How do we deal with losing a job or an important client, or not getting the promotion we were expecting, relationship challenges, our children not doing well physically or emotionally, G-d forbid health problems...

There are thousands of sudden curve-balls in life that suddenly plunge us into a crisis – how are we to deal with these?

There are various approaches offered by therapists, professionals and self-help books on how to deal with “tzoros”...

- Cup half full
- Count your blessings
- Fifty years ago you'd have been dead without current medical breakthroughs

What's Judaism's approach? The Torah is G-d's gift to us, it's there to help us...

Torah is really intended as a self-help book...

(Man walks into a book store and asks a salesperson where the self-help section is. She replies: If I told you, I'd be defeating the purpose...)

When we look into the Torah, specifically into the daily Torah portion, we can find answers to things we're struggling with at that particular time. Try it – it works! But it's self-help... No rabbi or mentor can help you with this. Each of us needs to take a close look at Torah to find how it speaks to us individually, specifically within a given set of circumstances.

So, what does Torah have to say about dealing with “tzoros” – crisis and tough times?

Answer lies in story of Joseph, one of the greatest Biblical heroes.

BTW – Rosh Hashanah is connected to Joseph – that's the day he was released from prison and crowned viceroy of Egypt. (It's also the day of the creation of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. It's also the of the birth of Isaac our miraculous patriarch).

The story of Joseph is one of the most dramatic in the entire Torah. Joseph was seventeen years old, his brothers despising their younger kin, seized him by force, threw him into a pit, and then sold him as a slave to Egyptian merchants.

In Egypt, he was falsely accused of attempting to violate his master's wife. He was convicted and sentenced to a twelve-year prison term. From the age of eighteen until the age of thirty, Joseph lived in a dungeon without a single visitor or friend in the world.

He has every reason to be down – instead he flourishes:

He's a slave in Potiphar's house – he works and becomes a success, makes Potiphar's affairs much more successful

He's in prison, he helps everyone, organizes things so that life is better for all the inmates, eventually he's given complete authority on the goings on there

He's helping the butler and the baker – giving therapy... lifting their spirits (I bet they did have regular visitors and care packages...)

From prison, he rose to become viceroy of the country that was the superpower at the time.

At no point did he despair – quite extraordinary!

And the ultimate wonder – the way he handled his brothers:

And Joseph said to his brothers: 'I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?' His brothers were so horrified that they could not respond.

"Joseph said to his brothers, 'please come close to me'. When they approached him, he said, 'I am Joseph your brother – it is me whom you sold into Egypt'.

"Now, be not distressed, nor reproach yourself for having sold me here, for it was to preserve life that G-d sent me ahead of you ... G-d has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival in the land and to sustain you for a momentous deliverance."

"It is not you who sent me here, but G-d. He has made me Pharaoh's vizier, master of his entire government and ruler of all."

How are we to understand Joseph's emotional response to his brothers?

One can only imagine how much bitterness and resentment such a man would ordinarily harbor in his heart. One would have expected that Joseph would have been so angry that he would never forgive his brothers. Think what you would do if your siblings tried to kill you and then sold you into captivity as a pitiful slave, abandoning you for the rest of your life. I could only imagine the hours of therapy any one of us would be going to, and the enormous fury that we would be venting the rest of our lives.

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, instead of rage and revenge, Joseph ends up calming his mortified brothers: "Do not be distressed!"

He's giving them the therapy!?

What did Joseph do? (Yes, he did give them a hard time initially. As the Talmud explains, he wanted to make sure they wouldn't be punished by Heaven for what they did, so he caused them to experience the same fear he had experienced, albeit for a short period of time. Once that was taken care of) - He treated them like royalty, and took care of their needs in royal fashion – for 80 years!

Sold Or Sent?

How we tell a story, the words we choose to tell a narrative, determines the meaning of that story for us. The same exact story can be told by two people in two ways, and the story becomes different for each of them. The facts remain the same, but the way they experience, internalize, and interpret the facts varies on the words they use to describe the narrative.

Example: I miss the bus that's supposed to take me to the LIRR station on Main Street. I can choose to say: "OMG that's terrible – my wife didn't let me get out of the house, now I got to walk all the way, it's hot, I'm uncomfortable... I'm angry." Or else my reaction can be: "Hey, it's an opportunity for me to take a nice walk along the water, it's a beautiful day... by the time I get to the train I'm feeling better than ever, I had a chance to clear my thoughts, I'm ready to take on the day..."

Same facts – different reaction

I missed the bus this morning – or – I had the most amazing walk this morning

Joke: Guy who comes home huffing and puffing and tells his wife: Today I ran after the bus and saved \$150. Wife: You should've ran after a taxi and saved \$10

There is today a popular school of psychology known as "Narrative Therapy," helping a patient create a narrative out of his or her life's experiences which will help them remove the focus from the negative occurrences. It was initially developed during the 1970s and 1980s, by Australian Michael White and his friend and colleague, David Epston, of New Zealand. Their approach became prevalent in North America with the 1990 publication of their book, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. Yet its genesis can be found in the Torah — in the Joseph drama. Joseph—who became his own therapist—took all of his experiences and turned them into a narrative, which was healing and empowering.

Let us review Joseph's words to his brothers again, and we will see that he changes one word in the story. And this single change altered the entire story for him. A disastrous episode became part of a narrative which was meaningful and wholesome.

What happened to Joseph? What was the most defining story of his life? He was sold as a slave. That's the fact. You can't argue with that. But now listen to Joseph telling the narrative. He used another word to describe the same facts:

"Now, be not distressed, nor reproach yourself for having sold me here, for it was to preserve life that G-d sent me ahead of you ... G-d has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival in the land and to sustain you for a momentous deliverance."

"It is not you who sent me here, but G-d. He has made me Pharaoh's vizier, master of his entire government and ruler of all."

One word changed in the narrative: From "sold" to "sent." I was not sold; I was sent. You might think that you have sold me; but in truth, I was sent. This is how Joseph chose to tell and experience his story.

The difference is dramatic: When you are sold, you are a passive victim. Slaves are sold. Houses are sold. Companies are sold and objects are sold. When you are sent, you are an active participant; you are chosen to be sent somewhere, because you possess the resources and skills to fulfill a particular mission for which you were sent.

This was the how Joseph told himself the narrative of his life and it is what he shared with his brothers at this moment. His brothers might have tried to sell him, and have indeed done just that, but in Joseph's mind, nothing happens in this world without G-d's approval, so it was G-d who was sending him somewhere.

Did Joseph feel Pain? Yes. Tears? Yes. Despair? No! Paralysis? No!

Joseph was never a victim of his circumstances. As strange as his life's curve balls were, Joseph was inculcated with the awareness that G-d has sent him wherever he was, in order to fulfill a mission. Whether in a pit, or as a slave, or as a prisoner, He was G-d's ambassador there, chosen by G-d to accomplish something in these circumstances.

And when he became the most powerful person in the world, he still felt the same: he was a messenger of G-d. The circumstances may have changed, but the core of his life remained the same throughout all of the years and experiences: he was a "shliach," an ambassador of the Divine.

Each life has its struggles. Many of us have been hurt, sometimes badly. At times we feel our lives are just in chaos... everything seems to be coming crumbling down...

Joke: A surgeon, engineer and politician are discussing which profession came first.

The surgeon: The Bible clearly states G-d put Adam to sleep and took one of his ribs to create Eve. So there you have it, the surgeons came first.

The engineer: But earlier in the book it speaks of the entire universe being chaos, and then order was brought to the chaos. Who do you think created the order? Engineers.

The politician: And who do you think created the chaos...

The facts cannot always be changed. But the way we tell the story can make all the difference. Our versions of our lives narratives determines our perception of what happened to us and what to do with it.

Just like Joseph, we all end up in a “pit” once in a while. We all feel like slaves at some point or another, and we all spend time in one type of prison or another. Some of us become even Prime Ministers (either in reality, or in our own minds), on top of the world.

But it is up to us to decide whether we have been sold into these situations, or, perhaps, we were sent there, to bring healing to ourselves and to the world around us, to bring light to a place of darkness—the purpose of all existence.

People may have hurt you, situations may have disappointed you, circumstances may have been unfair. But remember, Joseph said, “it is not you who sent me here but G-d.” It is not people, events and circumstances that create a dark world where there is always potential danger, but it is G-d who created it. No one sold you anywhere; G-d sent you into many interesting places. Because you are empowered to fulfill your special mission there.

Story –Back in the 80s, Gershon Jacobson, publisher of *Algemeiner Journal* Yiddish weekly, suffered a minor stroke and goes into hospital Erev Rosh Hashana. The Rebbe gives *lekach* – sweet honey cake - to his son Rabbi Simon Jacobson and says: “Please bring this to your father. And tell him he’s there in the hospital for a mission; as soon as he accomplishes it he will be discharged.” Gershon began speaking to doctors and nurses about yiddishkeit or otherwise helping the people around him. The night immediately following the holiday, the Rebbe sent his personal secretary Rabbi Chodakov to see how he’s feeling. “The Rebbe said to ask if you already completed your mission here...” For years later the family heard from people who were affected by that “visit” and those conversations.

Story bus ride in NYC Story of my aunt's illness bringing her family together. She sees it clearly as a mission she's been given. She's not a victim – she's an empowered agent to accomplish the goal.

An American politician famously once said: Never waste a crisis. You learn more in bad times than in good.

The Chinese ideogram for 'crisis' also means 'opportunity'. Perhaps that's why the Chinese have been around so long.

Only one language I know goes one further, and that is Hebrew. The Hebrew word for 'crisis' is mashber, which also means a birthing-stool. In Hebrew, crises are not just opportunities; they are birthpangs. Something new is being born.

Chief Rabbi of the UK – Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Saks observes:

There's one biblical passage that's deeply helpful. It's the phrase when Jacob says to the stranger – Angel of Esau, who wrestled with him all night: "I will not let you go until you bless me". Within every crisis lies the possibility of blessing. Events that at the time were the most painful, are also those that in retrospect we see most made us grow.

Crisis forces us to make difficult but necessary decisions. It makes us ask, "Who am I and what really matters to me?"

It plunges us from the surface to the depths, where we discover strengths we didn't know we had, and a clarity of purpose we had hitherto lacked.

So you have to say to every crisis, "I will not let you go until you bless me". The struggle isn't easy. Though Jacob was undefeated, he "limped". Battles leave scars. Yet God is with us even when He seems to be against us. For if we refuse to let go of Him, He refuses to let go of us, giving us the strength to survive and emerge stronger, wiser, blessed.

Story – In the 40's - a young man born to immigrant parents in poor section of Newark.

Started working at 13, balancing job and school

Wanted to become a doctor, enrolled at Rutgers with hopes to get into Harvard Medical School. Found out that as a Jew would have to bribe an administrator to admit him. He didn't have the \$10,000. Settled on becoming a pharmacist.

He worked only briefly as a pharmacist; within a few years of completing college he had entered retail sales. For the next several decades he moved up the corporate ladder.

By the mid-1970s he was employed as a high level executive at Handy Dan Home Improvement Centers, a Los Angeles-based company with several dozen stores in the West. His good friend, another yidddele (Jew) also worked at Handy Dan as its chief financial officer.

In April 1978 both he and his friend were abruptly fired from Handy Dan's.

VERY disappointing. For a Jewish boy to have reached his level was truly the ultimate American dream. And suddenly it was gone.

A friend and business associate, Ken Langone, (a local resident here in Port Washington – Sands Point) convinced him that it was the right time to open his own business. Why work for Handy Dan – open your own place!

And he did!

Some of you may have heard of this store – it's called THE HOME DEPOT!

The story I'm telling you is about a man named Bernie Marcus – Home Depot's founder.

Today the Home Depot employs more than 300,000 people in more than 1,800 stores located throughout North America.

He faced challenges:

Poverty, rejected from med school, fired abruptly from a high paying job

In the end: he was being led in the direction towards accomplishing his mission and purpose in life.

He became a huge success

Employs 300,000 people

Created the sole consulting think tank for the Israel Defense Force

Marcus became involved in children's health issues after an experience he had with a Home Depot employee and her sick child. In 1991 he founded the Marcus Institute, which provides treatment to children suffering from brain-related illnesses and disorders.

Marcus gave \$3.9 million to the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for the creation of an emergency anthrax response center.

Since that time he has focused on his most recent and public philanthropic undertaking, the Georgia Aquarium. Marcus donated \$200 million from his personal fortune to fund the project. The facility opened in November 2005 and is one of the largest aquariums in the world and engages in international conservation research.

He's made a difference. Clearly there was a mission planned for him.

Say to the crises: I won't let you go until you bless me. I know there's a purpose here. I'm not a victim, I'm an active participant.

I'm not SOLD – I'm SENT!

In our Yom Kippur prayers we read about the special prayer the High Priest would say upon emerging from the Holy of Holies. It contained the most important requests in behalf of the Jewish people.

May it be a year of plenty, a year when we all have what we need and don't need to ask each other for sustenance, a year when when no woman suffers miscarriage, etc.

Then there's a most unlikely prayer for this important time: "Al yikonsu lfonecho tfilas ovrei drochim..." We pray: G-d, don't accept the prayers of travelers who complain to you when it rains...

Why is this so important a prayer that the High Priest should include it in his Yom Kippur prayer upon emerging from the Holy of Holies?

A deeper meaning is this: "Rain" refers to those small tzoros – the minor challenges in life that make things inconvenient...

On our journey through life, when You G-d give us those situations because of an opportunity or mission it'll present to us, don't listen to us when we cry to you – let us deal with these small "tzoros" (not G-d forbid big ones though...) and give us the strength to deal with them and accomplish the greater goal you have in store for us.

Dear friends, we're not SOLD – we're SENT

Each of us is chosen by Hashem for our tailor made mission in life down to its last details. We're chosen based on our strengths and weaknesses, circumstances and opportunities.

An elderly Chinese woman had two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole which she carried across her neck. One of the pots had a crack in it while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walks from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments.

But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, it spoke to the woman one day by the stream.

"I am ashamed of myself, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house."

The old woman smiled, "Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side?"

"That's because I have always known about your flaw, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you water them."

"For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table.

Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house."

Even our flaws are part of who we are and part of the skill-set we bring to the table

Sara and I have a many children – I promised if you come I'd tell you how many...

We've got ten – a minyan

Or as I sometimes say: a baseball team – plus the DH (I'm an American League guy...)

When we discuss the needs of each child, obviously each is unique, each is different. We try with Hashem's help to make the best decisions we can for their schooling, summer experiences, etc based on their personalities, strengths, weaknesses, where they are in the "line up"... it's not cookie cutter...

We humans can handle (hopefully) a few children, looking after each one individually. G-d can handle millions – it's not a problem for Him. It's not cookie cutter. Every detail about your life, including the negatives – why was I born into a difficult situation of poverty, or a broken marriage, or why am I experiencing a threat to my own marriage, all the negatives are part of who we are.

Our beloved Father in Heaven has chosen each of us. We are being SENT on our own special mission to this particular place, to these particular conditions, to transform darkness into light and bring goodness and Hashem's light to our environment.

Let's not despair. Let's take His challenge and live up to it.

With strength and fortitude.

Joyously!