

Parshat Miketz: Carrying Yosef's Flame—Hidden Greatness in Times of Trial

Ilana Gimpelevich, Class of 2026

The end of last week's parsha, Vayeshev, does not bode well for Yosef. What began as the bravado of an arrogant youth quickly unravels as he is brought low. His father rebukes him for his wild dreams; his brothers remove him from the picture by casting him into a pit; then, in Egypt, he finds himself thrust even further down, locked away in prison on false charges. By this point, Yosef's confidence appears to be thoroughly crushed, his earlier certainty replaced by the suffocating heaviness of despair. His plaintive cry to the chamberlain "remember me!" (Bereishit 40:14) echoes down the damp dark passages. One can almost feel how completely his world has narrowed—how easily it could seem that this dark Egyptian jail is where he will remain, unnamed and unseen, for the rest of his life. How it could seem as though this bleak confinement were the only future left to him.

In the beginning of Miketz, the shift is jarring. We leave Yosef in the darkness of an Egyptian prison and suddenly find ourselves in Pharaoh's world of light, power, and effortless abundance. The two scenes feel so far apart that it is almost impossible to imagine how they could ever meet. The pit and the palace seem to belong to different stories entirely. Yet the parsha asks us to hold both at once, setting the stage for the moment when these opposite trajectories will converge in ways we could not have anticipated. Through an improbable chain of events, Yosef stands before Pharaoh, interprets his dreams with uncommon confidence "not I, but God will concern himself with Pharaoh's well-being" (Bereishit 41:16), and is elevated to the position of second-in-command, in the blink of an eye. With this new position comes a new name: Pharaoh calls Yosef Tzafnat Paneach. It is hard to tease out what this new name means or signifies. Rashi notes that Paneach appears nowhere in Tanakh, leaving its meaning opaque and resisting easy translation. Tzafnat comes from the root tzafun: hidden, concealed, kept out of sight. This signals Yosef's emerging role as a revealer of hidden things.

The Netziv (the 19th century Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin) has a radically different take. He notes that Paneach is composed of an unusual four-letter Hebrew root and, therefore, can be broken into two words: Pa, related to the root of appearance, showing up (think of the Hebrew word po, meaning here), and Nach, meaning contentment and enjoyment of the soul. According to the Netziv, Pharaoh was astonished by the strength of Yosef's character: most people, when experiencing a meteoric rise from the depths of the darkest pit to the limelight, would lose their heads, become overwhelmed, and be unable to cope. The Netziv even suggests that such a heady rise could lead to psychosis or be life-threatening. Yet Yosef was clearly able to control himself and his faculties, to be present and content.

The second argument that the Netziv advances follows from the conclusion of the first. If Yosef could step into his new position of power with such ease, then perhaps he had never been the

“lowly Hebrew slave” as portrayed to Pharaoh but someone whose inner capacity for leadership had been present all along. The appointment made by Pharaoh did not transform Yosef, but simply allowed his natural characteristics to blossom. Hence, he was called Tzafnat Paneach: the one in whom a previously hidden wholeness, a quiet contentment is revealed. In this sense, the name captures not only Yosef’s new public role but the essence that had been waiting beneath the surface.

It would seem highly improbable for ordinary people to undergo a transformative experience as dramatic as Yosef’s, yet we have witnessed something strikingly similar unfold before our eyes. As the hostages were being released from the inhumane captivity, many of them—still visibly marked by what they had endured—nevertheless stepped almost immediately into roles of courage and public presence. It would have been entirely understandable for them to retreat from the spotlight, to be ensconced in privacy and care, turning inward to heal. Instead, a remarkable number took on public roles of advocacy, speaking out, meeting with leaders, rising to the heights of access that seem miraculous. Instead of wondering in the season of Hanukkah miracles whether we can trust our eyes, we need only look at them: each one carries a small flame of Yosef, the original man pulled from a pit who rose to unexpected prominence. Their public appearances, high-level meetings, and unwavering advocacy reveal a latent greatness—an inheritance of resilience and dignity—that is now, at last, brought into the light.



Ilana Gimpelevich holds an MS in Structural Biology and is deeply engaged with the intersection of science and halakha. A published author and sought-after speaker, she contributes writing and scholarship that explore the texture of Jewish life and learning. She has served her communities through roles including editing Shema Koleinu, teaching conversion candidates, organizing the first women’s Megillah reading in Richmond, leading a tefillah cohort at Rudlin Torah Academy, and helping craft child-safety policy as a board member of Keneseth Beth Israel. After making aliyah, Ilana now resides in Modi’in, where she continues to learn, teach, and contribute thoughtfully to the Jewish world.