

Everyone knows about Groundhog Day—no, not the movie, though it was funny and meaningful, but the holiday, February 2nd. Especially if you are from somewhere cold and snowy, it is an important day when you watch the groundhog to see if he will see his shadow and run back into his hole. If so, then it's 6 more weeks of winter.

Did you know that Judaism has a ground hog day equivalent? I didn't, until I started reading commentaries on this week's Torah portion.

I found a teaching that when Rosh Hodesh Shevat is announced on this week's Torah portion, then it means that there will be bitter cold and heavy snow that winter. This comes from a reading of the name of the Torah portion, Veyigash, backwards, so that in Hebrew, the letters stand for "Sheleg Gadol yihiyeh vakor- lots of snow there will be and cold". In case you are worried, with all the rain this weekend, we don't announce the new month of Shevat until the 21st this year, so I guess we are in for a milder winter.

Now the evidence is pretty clear that this wasn't a tradition from Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel. Jerusalem occasionally gets a dusting of snow, which closes down the whole city. But other than a snow covering the top of Mt Hermon in the

Golan, Israel's mini ski resort, Israel doesn't really get snow. This is clearly a tradition from a colder climate.

Not every rabbi was satisfied with the interpretation of the word Vayigash, that I just shared with you. One famous rabbi, Rabbi Levi Yizchak of Berdichev, read the letters from the name of this Torah portion in a completely different way. He claimed, reversed, they stood for "Sova gadol yihiyeh vezol " which means, "There will be great plenty and food will be cheap." This was much more welcome news in the shtetl's of Eastern Europe than the prediction of cold and snow. The same calendar, the same Torah portion--but an entirely different reading.

We have a bit of this in the Torah portion as well. When Pharaoh and Jacob meet, it would appear that Pharaoh was respectful towards this very old man. "How many years to you have?" he asks. "130" says Jacob, and you can feel Pharaoh nod in respect, but Jacob continues, "few and hard have been my years". The Pharaoh is impressed by Jacob's longevity, and sees his long life as a blessing, but Jacob, ever the kvetcher and complainer, calls to mind only the difficulties he has experienced.

There's an old Jewish joke about a man who was travelling on a train for a great distance. His neighbor, in the seat next to him, begins to groan, "oy am I thirsty, oy am I thirsty". This goes on for miles, "oy am I thirsty, oy am I thirsty". Finally the man can stand it no longer. He gets up and walks to another car and to get his neighbor water. His neighbor drinks with gusto but no sooner does he sit down, hoping to make the rest of the trip in peaceful silence, then he hears, "oy was I thirtsy, oy as I thirsty".

In a poem about the meeting between Pharaoh and Jacob, Amy blank sees Pharaoh as a man focused on hopes fulfilled, while Jacob remembers "hungry hills, the well's dusty lip, the long journeying, hopes far removed".

Think about it-- even at this time of great joy, reunited with the son he had feared he would never see again, the threat of starvation lifted off his household, Jacob focuses on the travail and not the triumph.

Each of us has a propensity to focus on travail or on triumph, and a choice to make. Will we be like the anonymous source- spelling out words of chill in the innocent letters of the Torah portion? Or are we more like Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, a great defender of the Jewish people, who can spell out blessing, with those same letters?

Will we be like the neighbor on the train, who even when satisfied, remembers that he had something to complain about? Or can the remembrance of difficult times help us to appreciate the good that does befallen us?

Emily, all of us who know you pray that your positive outlook will carry you through life's bumpy spots, and allow you always to feel the blessing of gratitude.