**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

PARASHAT MIKETZ

SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN SHLIT”A

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Happy Chanuka! In honor of the matriarch of our family, Oma Ina,

May you continue to shine your light on us brightly!

From her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren

The Sondheim - Adler and Distenfeld Families.

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In Honor of Avital Nehorah’s 1st Birthday, 30 Kislev

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Please daven for a refua sheleima for YHE alumnus
Rav Daniel ben Miriam Chaya Rut

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Pharaoh’s Dream and Its Interpretation

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“And it came to pass, at the end of two years, that Pharaoh dreamed, and behold, he stood by the Nile. And behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows, well favored, and fat of flesh, and they fed in the reed grass. And behold, seven other cows came up after them out of the Nile, ill-favored and lean of flesh, and stood by the other cows upon the bank of the Nile. And the ill-favored and lean-fleshed cows ate up the seven well-favored and fat cows. So Pharaoh awoke. And he slept, and dreamed a second time: and behold, seven ears of corn came up on one stalk, plump and good. And behold, seven ears – thin and blasted by the east wind – sprang up after them. And the seven thin ears devoured the seven plump and full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream.” (*Bereishit* 41:1-7)

A.

Upon reading these dreams, as when reading the dreams of the royal butler and royal baker, we cannot help but wonder how wise Yosef really had to be in order to understand their meaning. Why could the magicians not interpret the dreams themselves? And why, after Yosef explained their meaning to Pharoah, did Pharaoh in his astonishment declare him “a man in whom is the spirit of God”?

The midrash expounds on the interpretations offered by Pharaoh’s magicians:

“Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin taught in the name of R. Levi: They [the magicians] offered interpretations, but Pharaoh could not accept them: [They suggested that] the seven good cows symbolized seven daughters that would be born to him, while the seven lean cows represented seven daughters that he would bury. The seven good stalks represented seven capitals that he would conquer, while the seven blasted stalks represented seven capitals that would rebel against him.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 89)

But the seven fat cows testify to satiety and abundance, and plainly the seven good ears of corn have the same meaning. Both the seven lean cows and the seven blasted ears symbolize years of famine. Yosef’s interpretation is so logical and self-evident that the question passes, as noted, to the magicians and Pharaoh who were so profoundly impressed by Yosef’s wisdom.

The key to this puzzle may lie in pointing out what we regard a difference between the dream of the cows and that of the stalks. The Nile region was well irrigated, and most of what grew there was watered by means of irrigation *ditches*, “like a garden of vegetables,” “like the garden of the Lord”:

“For the land into which you come, to possess it, is not like the land of Egypt, from whence you came out, where you would sow your seed and water it with your food, like a garden of vegetables.” (*Devarim* 11:10)

“And Lot lifted his eyes and beheld all of the Jordan plain, that it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sedom and Amora, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Tzoar.” (*Bereishit* 13:10)

There was no pasture for flocks within this irrigated area, for fear that sheep and goats would eat up the vegetable fields and the produce, and therefore “all shepherds are an abomination to Egypt.” The more disciplined cattle would graze in an area near to the Nile but not too near, for along its banks were the fields that were watered by means of ditches that carried the water from the Nile.

The first dream depicted famine and leanness in the area some distance from the Nile, in the grazing areas, where the cows were. The second dream conveyed a more acute crisis: here the signs of famine were manifest close to the Nile, in the fields that were watered on a regular basis by its water. The dreams therefore proceeded from the relatively less severe to the more severe, from the less urgent to the more urgent.

Let us now return to our question. It would seem that the magicians could imagine any scenario in the world – including wars with seven kingdoms – but they could not imagine a situation of famine in the Nile region. The Nile is a huge river with a tremendous flow of water; the drying up of the Nile seemed to them an unreal, impossible situation. The possibility of severe pollution of the water – pollution that would destroy the crops or poison them – did not occur to them. They sought a different interpretation, a different story.

However, Pharaoh had some good reasons to accept the interpretation proposed by Yosef. First, Yosef’s explanation adhered more closely to the details of the dream. Second, Yosef dared to define a timeframe for the realization of the dream, declaring that all of this would happen forthwith. He was completely confident that he was not mistaken, for an erroneous interpretation would no doubt have cost him his life. The magicians, in contrast, would not dare state when the scenarios that they foresaw would come about. Third, along with his interpretation of the dream, Yosef proposes a solution, a plan of action. What the magicians proposed was, in effect, submission to what the dream had decreed.[[1]](#footnote-1)

B.

“And now look out for a man who is insightful and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh do this, and let him appoint officers over the land, and take up the fifth part of the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. And let them gather all the food of those good years that come, and lay up corn under the hand of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities. And that food shall be for store to the land against the seven years of famine, which shall be in the land of Egypt, so that the land shall not perish through the famine.” (*Bereishit* 41:33-36)

Yosef was not asked for advice regarding the famine; as Ramban notes in surprise, “Was he then appointed an advisor to the king?!” Ramban, as noted, resolves this difficulty by explaining that Yosef’s advice was actually part of the interpretation of the dream. However, the similarity in the structure of Yosef’s interpretations of the dream of the butler and the dream of Pharaoh might lead us to a different understanding.

Yosef is, in fact, interpreting his own dreams – the dream of the sheaves that bow down to his own sheaf, and the dream of the sun, moon and stars bowing before him. Immediately after explaining the butler’s dream to him, he asks that the dreamer mention him to Pharaoh – perhaps as a skilled interpreter of dreams. Immediately after explaining Pharaoh’s dream to him, he asks the king, who had the dream, to appoint a wise and insightful man over all of the land of Egypt – with the intention of submitting his own candidacy for the position. Yosef viewed his own dreams as representing a profound inner truth that could not be negated; it is a truth that had its source in the Divine spirit – a one-sixtieth portion of prophecy. He recognized what was happening to him now as the sign of God’s hand carrying him towards the realization of his own dreams. It seems clear to him that this ascent to power is not meant as an achievement or end in itself, but rather as a means to a greater purpose.

Nevertheless, if Pharaoh accepts Yosef’s advice, it seems that only Yosef’s first dream – that of the sheaves – will be fulfilled. The famine will bring his brothers to bow before Yosef’s abundant sheaves – the produce stored in Egypt’s treasuries. The lives and sustenance of his brothers will be dependent on him. This is the meaning of the first dream. But will Yosef’s ability to explain Pharaoh’s dream, and to propose the simple idea of storing the excess produce for the lean years, cause the sun, moon and stars to bow down before Yosef? Will this be enough to make him the *de facto* ruler of all of Egypt and its environs, and officially Pharaoh’s second-in-command?

C.

“And Pharaoh said to his servants, Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the spirit of God? And Pharaoh said to Yosef: Since God has shown you all this, there is none so insightful and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and according to your word all my people shall be ruled; only in the throne will I be greater than you. And Pharoah said to Yosef, See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it on Yosef’s hand, and arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck, and he caused him to ride in the second chariot which he had, and they called before him, ‘Bow the knee (*avrekh*)!’, and made him ruler over all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh said to Yosef, I am Pharaoh, and without [an instruction from] you no man shall lift up his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.” (*Bereishit* 41:38-44)

As noted, the advice that the text documents Yosef as offering – storing the excess produce from the years of plenty in order to assure a supply of food for the lean years – sounds like a simple conclusion that any sensible person could reach without any special ability. However, logic dictates a more complex and insightful addressing of the problem – and we may assume that Yosef did indeed offer a plan, explaining it to Pharaoh and his advisors in all its details. A general overview of the plan is that the seven years of famine, to be managed by the kingdom, will include far-reaching economic reforms, significant social upheaval, and the dangers presented by external intervention, in the form of invasions of hungry migrant tribes, and possible internal attempts to topple the regime. Pharaoh’s readiness to promote Yosef from the rank of Hebrew servant to the officer of the guard, from an inmate imprisoned without trial to the position of second to the king, ruling over the entire kingdom, suggests that Yosef set forth in detail a practicable plan that included elements addressing all the challenges and possible dangers that could threaten the kingdom. He is therefore indeed worthy of the king’s manifest awe and the compliments that he heaps upon him.

1. Ramban (41:4) maintains that the solution proposed by Yosef was actually included within the dream itself. During the seven years of famine, the population of Egypt would eat the produce of the seven years of plenty – just as the thin cows has eaten the fat cows, and the thin stalks had devoured the healthy ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)