

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Miketz

Dreams for the Near – and Distant - Future

וּתְבֹאֲנָה אֶל קַרְבָּנָהּ וְלֹא נֹדַע כִּי בָּאוּ אֶל קַרְבָּנָהּ וּמְרֵאִיהֶן רַע כַּאֲשֶׁר בְּתַחֲלָה

They [the fat cows] came inside of them [the thin cows], and it as not apparent that they had come inside of them, and their appearance remained inferior, as at first (41:21)

Although most of the elements within Pharaoh's dreams featured in both dreams, the idea mentioned in this pasuk is only stated with respect to the first dream, but not the second.

What is behind this exceptional aspect?

The Meshech Chochmah suggests that this part of the dream relates to something which happened a long time after the years of plenty and of famine.

As we know, when Bnei Yisrael left Mitzrayim, they did so taking with them with "great treasure," in fact, emptying the land of its riches, as compensation for decades of being enslaved as a nation.¹ The Gemara² informs us that this includes the wealth that Mitzrayim had accumulated all those years ago during the years of famine, when everyone from surrounding lands came to purchase food.

This is what is being indicated in the dream where, although the thin cows swallow the fat cows, i.e. the years of famine bring in income from the years of plenty, nonetheless, ultimately, there will come a time when this will no longer be apparent by looking at Mitzrayim. Once Bnei Yisrael leave, taking all that wealth with them, Mitzrayim will look exactly as it did before they accumulated it.

As the pasuk states later on,³ Yosef informs Pharaoh that the reason the dream was repeated is in order to indicate that a) it will certainly happen and b) it will happen soon. With this in mind, says Meshech Chochmah, we can understand

¹ Shemos 12:36

² Pesachim 119a.

³ Pasuk 32.

why this particular aspect of the dreams was *not* repeated; for unlike the other elements within the dreams which were to happen imminently, this element related to something which would not happen for many years to come.

A Time to Reflect

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו אֲבָל אֲשַׁמִּים אֲנַחְנוּ עַל אָחִינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוּ
אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמַעְנוּ עָלֵינוּ כִּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת

The brothers said to one another, "Indeed, we are guilty concerning our brother, for we saw his soul's anguish when he pleaded with us and we did not listen; therefore, this distress has happened to us." (42:21)

The pasuk describes how the brothers, unable to make sense of the unduly harsh treatment they are receiving from the Egyptian viceroy, conclude that it is in fact retribution for the way that they treated Yosef when they sold him all those years ago.

Timing

It is most interesting to ponder why it was at this particular moment that they reached this conclusion. After all, as the earlier pesukim in the perek describe in detail, they had already gone through the trauma of being baselessly accused of being spies; moreover, they had been incarcerated for three days – a long time to reflect on their predicament. Yet the order of the pesukim seems to indicate that they did not make the connection between their tribulations and the sale of Yosef until now. What happened at this point specifically which triggered this association?

The Meshech Chochmah explains. Pasuk 19 describes how, after holding them for three days, Yosef said, *"If you are truthful [i.e. innocent of spying], let one of your brothers be imprisoned... while [the rest of] you go and bring provisions for the hunger of your households. And bring the youngest brother to me so that your words will be verified."*

Which brother was to be imprisoned? Yosef did not immediately say. Apparently, he was leaving the decision up to the brothers themselves. This put them in an extremely difficult situation, for it was not clear that they had the right to choose any one brother to stay behind.

Brotherhood

The Yerushalmi⁴ states that if a group of people are accosted by bandits who demand that they hand over one of their number to be killed, otherwise they will kill everyone in the group, they are not entitled to select one of their number to be killed, even though their inactivity will result in their all being killed. It is only if the bandits themselves selected one of the members that there is room for the others to hand him over. The Meshech Chochmah states that the same is true when the threat is one of incarceration, as was the case with the brothers. As such, they were unable to choose one who would stay behind, even though it meant that they might all be incarcerated indefinitely.

However, the Meshech Chochmah adds, there is one possibility in the situation discussed by the Yerushalmi which would allow the rest of the group to be saved. If one of the group volunteers himself in order to save the rest, they are not required to stop him. Similarly, in the case of the brothers, the only way the rest of them could go free is if one of them volunteered to stay behind for everyone else's sake.

Now we can understand why it was this stage specifically which evoked the brothers' association of their predicament with their earlier treatment of Yosef. The brothers understood that Divine justice works with the system of *middah keneged middah* – measure for measure. Notwithstanding the difficulties they had experienced so far in Mitzrayim, none of them had any direct correspondence to the issues between them and Yosef. However, this latest demand related directly to their relationship with each other. No one among them could be sacrificed even for the sake of saving the others. Indeed, the test of brotherhood was even more accentuated as they realized that their only way any of them would go free is if one of the brothers would volunteer to stay behind as an act of compassion toward the others.

⁴ Terumos 8:4.

It was when faced with this dilemma that the brothers made the connection between their situation and their treatment of Yosef, saying, “If we are being tested with our loyalty and responsibility toward each other, with the only way out being one of us giving up his freedom for his brothers sake, it must be as retribution for the compassion that we did not show our brother when he pleaded with us all those years ago.” Hence, the brothers emphasize in their concluding words, ‘*Therefore, **this distress** has happened to us*’.⁵

As the ensuing pesukim describe, upon hearing these words, Yosef himself was moved to tears. Having composed himself, he returned and “spoke to them and took Shimon from among them.” The words “he spoke to them” prior to his taking Shimon are rather difficult, for the Torah does not say what he said to them! However, the Meshech Chochmah explains that he spoke to them about their situation. Seeing that they had not selected anyone to stay behind, Yosef said, “I see that you are not prepared to choose one of your number, therefore, I will make the choice.”

⁵ Appreciating the background to the brothers’ reflection on the sale of Yosef as one that tested their compassion for each other may explain why, as the Seforno points out, they did not call into question their actual decision to sell Yosef, considering now that maybe it had been made in error. Rather, they felt that even if their decision was justified, they nevertheless should have had compassion on him when he pleaded with them to release him.