

NOT ALL THAT GLITTERS IS GOOD GRAIN

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Yosef said to Paroh, "Paroh's dream is one. What Elokim is going to do, He has told Paroh.

Be'er Mayim Chaim: Yosef keeps referring to G-d as "Elokim." This is worthy of consideration. It is not the obvious choice, at least not as an exclusive one. The dreams that Yosef addresses and interpret are not all gloom and doom, which would call for the use of a Name associated with strictness and Judgment. Instead, the dreams heralded a mixed bag that included seven years of bounty before the years of famine. We would have thought that Hashem's Name of rachamim would therefore appear as well.

The gemara² says that when HKBH sees fit to smite us, He creates the cure before sending the plague. The gemara says this in reference to His treatment of Am Yisrael; indeed, in regard to others He is described as destroying directly, without mention of any therapeutic inclusion. "He exalts nations, and then destroys them. He spreads out nations and then leads them away. He removes wisdom from the leaders...and causes them to wander in a pathless wasteland."³ We therefore find it surprising that with the years of bounty and famine HKBH employed a trademark behavior towards the Egyptians that is usually reserved for the Jewish people.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, the comparison does not hold up. Hashem did not really create a "cure" before visiting the plague. In retrospect, we discover that the seven years of plenty did not flow from Hashem's midah of rachamim offsetting His stern judgment. Rather, they framed and defined the makah He sent against the Egyptians.

We can appreciate this on several levels. The seven good years turned out not to be so good, because they sharpened the sense of deprivation and pain in the years of want that followed. When He sends the cure before the illness, that cure serves as a final and abiding sense of joy, not a set-up for more pain.

Additionally, the experience of the first seven years was not one of celebration and euphoria. Because the prediction of those years was coupled with one of overwhelming privation in the years of famine, the Egyptians were overcome with worry in anticipation of what was around the corner, and unable to feel real happiness in the years of plenty.

Finally, Hashem made it clear to the Egyptians that the famine would be so severe that it would wipe out all memory of any past surplus. He provided the years of good in order to underscore the

severity of the years of hunger. The good years could not be considered, therefore, as some sort of Divine gift to blunt the effects of the painful years ahead.

We might speculate that the mixture of positive and negative elements stymied Paroh's soothsayers. Unable to detect a single theme (as we did above), they were confounded by predictions of both good and evil. Were these dreams a good omen, or prognostication of disaster? Unable to see that the good only reinforced the evil, they could not get past the apparent contradiction.

If we settle on understanding that the bottom line of all the dreams combined was negative rather than positive, we will solve another problem with the text. Standing before Paroh after he succeeds in interpreting his dreams to his satisfaction, Yosef calls for the appointment of "a person

understanding and wise"⁴ to oversee the collection and storage of food during the years of plenty. Storing up food makes sense. But why does Yosef stress appointing an understanding and wise person? The job might require some leadership and organizational skills, but not any penetrating wisdom.

Now that we have discovered that the entire period should be seen as a curse rather than a berachah, we understand what Yosef meant. Storing up grain would not work to overcome the curse. Indeed, Chazal tell us⁵ that private attempts to hoard grain failed. The grain rotted. What was needed was something that could connect with the strongest of Divine Influences, pulling down something powerful enough to change the evil into good. When Yosef invoked "understanding and wisdom," he did not mean them in the generic sense, but in the very specific sense of binah and chochmah. Yosef was connected enough with them that he could turn around the years of plenty and transmute them into blessing.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bereishis 41:25, 33-35
 2. Megilah 13B
 3. Iyov 12:23-24
 4. Bereishis 41:33
 5. Bereishis Rabbah 91:5
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