

YOSEF THE MOHEL

by Nechama Stampller

Yosef the Mohel¹?

The people cried out to Paroh for bread. Paroh said to all of Egypt, "Go to Yosef. Whatever he tells you, do."

Rashi: What prompted Paroh do issue this instruction? It was the people reporting to him that Yosef asked them to circumcise themselves. Paroh said to them, "Why did you not store up food? Didn't he warn you that years of famine were approaching?" They responded, "We stored up plenty! It all rotted." Paroh then said, "If so, you had better do whatever he tells you. He decreed that the stored up grain should rot and it did. What if he decrees upon us that we should all die?"

What was Yosef's point? Why would he want a country of decidedly non-Jewish Egyptians to circumcise themselves? He certainly did not mean to make converts of them; we do not believe in coercing the conversion of non-Jews!

Something deep and wondrous is at work here. Yosef observed that all that had been stored up had spoiled, other than what he himself had squirreled away. Why would that be?

Yosef understood what Hashem was indicating. He, Yosef, had the advantage of milah, while they didn't. Milah is also "bris," a covenant. Onkelos renders bris as kayama, which means both establishment and permanence. An agreement between two parties is formally established through a covenant; that covenant makes the relationship endure. Man can seemingly function on his own, but his existence is inherently flimsy and unstable. Human existence achieves its endurance, its persistence, only when Man is in a strong relationship with Hashem. His protection can safeguard a person from all sorts of hazards that might shorten his life. A covenant creates that relationship, and is entered into through milah, which is what the Torah specifies to create a covenantal relationship with G-d.

The mechanics of milah support the concept of endurance through covenant. Milah entails the removal of tissue from Man's body. Nothing that Hashem engineers is without purpose. When G-d orders that part of that body be removed, He effectively differentiates between that which should last and endure, and the orlah, which shouldn't. Those who insist on retaining the orlah effectively cling to non-permanence rather than permanence. This non-permanence extended to their material possessions as well; their grain therefore had no permanence and rotted. Yosef, on the other hand, became blessed with permanence and endurance through milah, through his covenantal

relationship with G-d. His grain therefore persisted. (It was given an extra lease on life through its connection with Hashem, rather than being subjected to the forces of nature, which in this case would have doomed it.)

As Yosef became aware of what was happening to the stored grain, he realized that in this instance He wished for people to opt for milah, to differentiate between the Divinely chosen elements of life, and the Divinely rejected. Yosef therefore compelled the Egyptians to circumcise themselves, not as part of a program of forced conversion, but simply to satisfy what he recognized was the will of the Creator{2}.

Yosef also understood the merit through which he had risen to power. He had plowed superhuman effort into safeguarding the kedushah of the mitzvah of milah by refusing the advances of Potiphar's wife. He further understood that for others to share in the dividends of his rise to power, they needed to have some values held in common. Those who rejected the principle behind milah were not going to be beneficiaries of its protection. Yosef's stored food would only benefit those who shared at least part of the constellation of values connected with bris. By mandating milah for all, Yosef widened the circle of potential beneficiaries, so that they might all eat of the stored grain.

1. *Based on Gur Aryeh, Bereishis 41:55; Chidushei Aggados, Nedarim 31B, Zevachim 118A*

2. Maharal offers no explanation as to why HKBH might have wanted this from the Egyptians. Perhaps He wanted to give them some chance of accepting Him. As a first step, they had to learn the lesson of choosing between elements of existence that should be embraced, and those that should be spurned.
