

STANDING OVER THE RIVER

by Shlomo Katz

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Miketz

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Today's Learning:

Yevamot 14:1-2

Orach Chaim 358:3-5

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Sotah 9

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Shevuot 8

We read in this week's parashah of Pharaoh's dream, in which Pharaoh was standing "over the river." The midrash comments: "The wicked stand over their gods, as it is written, 'He was standing over the river.' [The Egyptians worshipped the Nile.] In contrast, G-d stands above the righteous, as it is written (Bereishit 28:13), 'Behold! G-d was standing over him [Yaakov]'." R' Elya Meir Bloch z"l (1894-1955; rosh yeshiva of Telshe in Cleveland) explains:

The righteous constantly strive to improve themselves and raise themselves to greater heights. Thus they always see G-d as above them. Not so the wicked; they see themselves as above G-d and they constantly redefine Him and His commandments in a way that meets their perceived needs. (Peninei Da'at)

R' S.R. Hirsch z"l (Germany; 1808-1888) writes in a similar vein: One is accustomed to call the Torah "Religion" or Jewish Religion because the word religion usually describes the relationship of man to

his G-d or gods. Yet, it is exactly this term "religion" that has made it so difficult to understand the essence of the Torah. The Torah is not the thought of man, but the thought of G-d, expressed in Divine laws. The Torah is not man's teachings about G-d, but G-d's teaching about what is and what man should be.

Given the common understanding of "religion," it is small wonder, writes R' Hirsch, that people ask questions which have no meaning so far as the Torah is concerned: "You want Judaism to remain the same forever?" "All religions rejuvenate themselves and advance with the progress of the nations, and only the Jewish 'Religion' wants to remain rigid, always the same, and refuses to yield to the views of an enlightened age?" These questions are meaningless and futile because the Torah is the unique eternal message of the Unique and Eternal G-d of heaven and earth. (Collected Writings: Sivan I and elsewhere)

"Now let Pharaoh seek out a discerning and wise man and set him over the land of Egypt." (41:37)

Why was a "discerning and wise man" needed to oversee the collection of provisions during the seven years of plenty? R' Shalom Schwadron z"l (1911-1997; the "Maggid" of the Maggid Speaks series) explains in the name of his teacher, R' Elya Lopian z"l (1872-1970):

Gathering provisions during a time of plenty for a famine that is seven years in the future requires real wisdom and understanding, for it is against human nature. The Sages say (Tamid 32a): "Who is wise? One who has foresight." Moreover, convincing the entire nation to share this foresight requires an additional measure of wisdom and understanding.

Our life times, continues R' Schwadron, are a time when mitzvot are plentiful, but they will be followed by years of famine when it is impossible to add to our stores of mitzvot. When those years come, we will regret every berachah we omitted and every prayer and bentching that we recited with less than full attention. This is what King Shlomo alluded to in the verse (Kohelet 11:8), "Even if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in all of them, but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many." (Lev Shalom)

"Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Could we find another like him - a man in whom is the spirit of G-d?'" (41:38)

R' Yekuti'el Yehuda Zalman Laib Teitelbaum z"l (1808-1883; the first "Sigheter Rebbe") asks: Were there no other people alive who had the spirit of G-d in them?

He answers: Certainly there are many people who engage in spiritual matters all day and have the spirit of G-d in them. What impressed Pharaoh, however, and what is unusual, is to find a working person like Yosef in whom is the spirit of G-d. (Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei Ve'geonei Ha'dorot)

"Then Pharaoh said to Yosef, 'Since G-d has informed you of all this, there can be no one so discerning and wise as you'." (41:39)

What did Pharaoh mean by, "of all this"? Why didn't he say simply, "Since G-d has informed you of this"? R' Zvi Yechezkel Michelsohn z"l (1863-1943; chairman of the Warsaw rabbinical council beginning in 1920) explains:

When we compare Pharaoh's dream (verses 1-8) with his retelling of his dream (verses 17-24), we notice that Pharaoh changed certain details. For example, verse 1 says, "Behold! He was standing over the river," while verse 17 says, "Behold! I was standing al sefat ha'yeor / on the bank of the river."

Why did Pharaoh make these changes? Perhaps it was Pharaoh's way of testing those who offer their interpretations, for no one could give a true interpretation of the dream unless he also divined what the dream had actually been.

We read in Tehilim (81:6), "He appointed it as a testimony to Yosef when he went out over the land of Egypt, when I heard a sefat unknown to me." R' Michelsohn explains that these were Yosef's words to Pharaoh, "I know what your dream was and what its interpretation is. However, when you retold your dream, I heard the word 'sefat,' whose place in the dream is unknown to me. I do not think it was actually part of your dream."

When Pharaoh heard this, he responded, "Since G-d has informed you of all this, there can be no one so discerning and wise as you'." (Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei Ve'geonei Ha'dorot)

"Their hearts sank, and they turned trembling one to another, saying, 'What is this that G-d has done to us'?" (42:28)

Why did they tremble "one to another" and not to themselves? R' Shimon Yosef Meller shlita explains that each of Yaakov's sons was not worried for himself. After all, one is obligated to bless G-d for the bad just as for the good. However, that attitude is appropriate only with regard to one's own troubles. When it comes to someone else's troubles, one must bear his burden with him.

This is why they trembled "one to another." (Haggadah Shel Pesach Shai La'Torah p. 436)

"Then Reuven said to his father, 'You may slay my two sons if I fail to bring him [Binyamin] back to you'." (42:37)

R' Yisrael Alter z"l (the "Gerrer Rebbe"; died 1977) used to say: Why did Yaakov reject Reuven's offer? Because it showed only a half-hearted commitment to Binyamin's safety. After all Reuven had four sons! (Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei Ve'geonei Ha'dorot)

In light of Yaakov's resistance to Binyamin's going to Egypt, why did the brothers have to bring the real Binyamin to Egypt? Since it was a matter of life and death, why didn't they pick any person from their household, or even from the street, and say he was Binyamin?

R' Chaim Soloveitchik z"l (1953-1918) answers: The Torah records that the Egyptian viceroy (Yosef) kept one of the brothers (Shimon) imprisoned when he sent the others home. Had the brothers returned with an imposter, Yosef could have forced Shimon to pick "Binyamin" out of a line-up and thus reveal their trick. (Quoted in Torat Chaim p. 44; Shai La'Torah p. 107)

Selected Laws of Shemittah

(From Rambam's Mishneh Torah, Hil. Shemittah Ve'yovel Ch. 1)

[Ed. Note: This year is a shemittah year, and from time-to-time, we are presenting excerpts from the laws of shemittah. As with any halachic issue addressed in Hamaayan, our goal is to increase awareness of the subject, not to provide practical halachic guidance. For such advice, consult a competent rabbi.]

12. If one plants during the seventh year, whether he transgressed willfully or unknowingly, what he planted must be uprooted. The reason is that many people are suspected of transgressing shemittah, and if you say that one who transgressed unknowingly may preserve what he planted, people who transgress will say, "I did not know [that I was transgressing]."

13. If one plows his field or fertilizes it during the seventh year so that it will be fit for planting in the following year, he is penalized and he may not plant the field in the following year. In such a case, one may not rent the field from the owner; rather, it must lie fallow. However, if the owner dies, his son may plant it [and we do not penalize the son].

14. If one gathers thorns from his field during the seventh year so that it will be fit for planting in the following year, or if one gathers stones from his field, even though this is not permitted, the Sages did not penalize him and he may plant the field in the year after the shemittah.

16. Originally, the Sages said that a person may gather twigs, stones and grass from his own field, so long as he only takes the large ones and does not thoroughly clean his field, and he may gather even small items from his friend's field. [According to Torah law, these activities are permitted during the shemittah.] However, when the number of transgressors - i.e., people who intended to clean their fields but said [falsely], "We are only taking the large ones" - increased, the Sages prohibited gathering [twigs, stones and grass] from one's own field. A person may still gather from his friend's field as long as there is no quid pro quo, i.e., he does not say, "Look how much good I did by cleaning your field."

18. If one chopped down one or two trees for their wood, he may uproot their roots. If he chopped down three or more trees side-by-side, he may not uproot them, for then he will be preparing a

patch of land for planting. Rather, he should chop the wood and leave the roots.

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