

YOU ARE LIKE PHAROA

by Shlomo Katz

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Vayigash

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Today's Learning:

Yevamot 15:6-7

Orach Chaim 362:4-6

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Sotah 16

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Shevuot 12

As the parashah opens, Yehuda addresses Yosef: "If you please, my lord, may your servant speak a word in my lord's ears and let not your anger flare up at your servant - for you are like Pharaoh."

Rashi comments: "The simple meaning [of 'you are like Pharaoh'] is, 'You are as important in my eyes as Pharaoh is.' The deeper meaning is, 'You will suffer from tzara'at because you have taken Binyamin, just as Pharaoh did when he took my ancestor Sarah.' Alternatively, 'Just as Pharaoh does not keep his promises, so you do not'."

R' Zvi Yechezkel Michelsohn z"l (Poland; 1863-1943) suggests that Yehuda's words and Rashi's comments can be understood as follows: Until this point, Yosef's brothers addressed the Egyptian viceroy (Yosef) through an interpreter, as described in last week's parashah. Yehuda thought that perhaps the problems that they were experiencing resulted from the translator's not translating correctly, and he therefore said, "May your servant speak a word in my lord's ears." He explained (as

Rashi writes), "If I were to say the words, 'For you are like Pharaoh,' your translator could render that in several different ways. He might say, 'You are as important in my eyes as Pharaoh is.' Or he might say, 'You are destined to suffer from tzara'at because you have taken Binyamin, just as Pharaoh did when he took my ancestor Sarah.' Alternatively, the translator might interpret: 'Just as Pharaoh does not keep his promises so you do not'. For this reason, I must speak to you directly so that your anger will not flare up at your servant."

R' Michelsohn observes: There is an important lesson here for those who relate, and those who hear, lashon hara. A small change in inflection or tone can change a phrase's meaning, even if the words themselves have not changed. [Thus, even a story whose words are completely true can be told in a way that makes it a lie.] (Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

"And now: It was not you who sent me here, but G-d; He has made me a father to Pharaoh, master of his entire household, and ruler throughout the land of Egypt. Hurry - go up to my father and say to him, 'So said your son Yosef: "G-d has made me master of all of Egypt. Come down to me; do not delay".' "
(45:8-9)

"They went up from Egypt and came to the land of Canaan to Yaakov their father. And they told him saying, 'Yosef is still alive,' also that he is ruler of all the land of Egypt; but his heart rejected it, for he could not believe them. However, when they related to him all the words that Yosef had spoken to them, and he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to transport him, then the spirit of their father Yaakov was revived. And Yisrael said, 'Rav, my son Yosef still lives. I shall go and see him before I die'." (45:25- 28)

These verses present several questions: (1) Why did Yosef state in detail that Hashem made him "a father to Pharaoh, master of his entire household, and ruler throughout the land of Egypt"? (2) Why did he tell his brothers to say to Yaakov only, "G-d has made me master of all of Egypt"? (3) Why did Yaakov's heart reject his sons' news? (4) Why did Yaakov's attitude change after his sons "related to him all the words that Yosef had spoken to them" and after he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent?

R' Avraham Moshe Shereshevsky z"l (1857-1924; rabbi in Portland, Maine, where he delivered this dvar Torah in 1894) explains: when a person rises to power too quickly without holding lower offices and building a power base, he cannot rule effectively and is in danger from those who are jealous of him. Pharaoh understood this and knew that he could not take a slave (Yosef) out of jail and make him viceroy. Instead, he gave Yosef a series of positions with increasing responsibilities: first, "a father to Pharaoh," then, "master of his entire household," and only later, "ruler throughout the land of Egypt." Yosef told this to his brothers and mentioned that this gradual ascension was part of Hashem's kindness ("It was not you who sent me here, but G-d").

However, Yosef did not want Yaakov to be told that he was secure in his position. If Yaakov knew, Yosef feared, he would not hurry to see Yosef. Therefore, Yosef told his brothers to tell Yaakov only that "G-d has made me master of all of Egypt" (implying a sudden rise to power), therefore, "Come

down to me; do not delay."

When Yosef's brothers arrived home, they followed his instructions at first. However, they saw that Yaakov's heart rejected the news, that he was pained and that he did not want to believe them (because if Yosef rose to power suddenly then he would be in danger). Therefore, "they related to him all the words that Yosef had spoken to them" - that his rise to power was gradual. Also, Yaakov saw the wagons that Yosef had sent -- the modest wagon in which Yosef rode when he was "father to Pharaoh," the grander wagon in which he rode when he was "master of [Pharaoh's] entire household," and the very ornate wagon in which he rode as "ruler throughout the land of Egypt." Only then was Yaakov reassured.

As Yosef predicted, Yaakov decided that since Yosef was secure, there was no rush to go down to Egypt: "Rav -- for a long time -- my son Yosef still lives. I shall go and see him [at some time] before I die." Therefore, Hashem appeared to Yaakov and told him not to fear going down to Egypt. (Nachal Avraham)

"And they told him saying, 'Yosef is still alive,' also that he is ruler of all the land of Egypt." (45:26)

"And Yisrael said, 'How great! My son Yosef still lives'." (45:28)

Why did Yaakov's sons tell him that Yosef was ruler of all the land of Egypt? Was that important to Yaakov compared to the fact that his beloved son was alive?

R' Mordechai Kletzky z"l (Boston; early 20th century) explains: Rashi (Bereishit 37:33) writes that Yaakov had a premonition after Yosef disappeared that Yosef's morality would be tested (as it later was in the incident with Potiphar's wife). Also, the midrash teaches that the tribe of Shimon never produced a king or a national leader because Zimri, the leader of that tribe, acted immorally (see Bemidbar ch. 25). Had Yosef sinned, he, too, would never have become a ruler. Thus, the news that Yosef was ruler of all the land of Egypt was very good news to Yaakov, for it meant that Yosef had not failed the test to which he was put.

This is why Yaakov answered, "How great! My son, Yosef still lives." We read later that Yaakov disassociated himself from the tribe of Shimon because of Zimri's act (see Bereishit 49:6 and Rashi). In contrast, Yaakov called Yosef, "My son." (Techelet Mordechai)

"And Yisrael said, 'How great! My son Yosef 'od' / still 'chai' / lives'." (45:28)

"Then Israel said to Yosef, 'Let me die this time . . . ' " (46:30)

R' Aryeh Laib Zunz Charif z"l (1765-1833; rabbi of Plock, Poland) writes: The Zohar states that King David would have died at birth, but Yaakov and Yosef gave him 70 years. Yaakov lived 33 fewer

years than his father and Yosef lived 37 fewer years than his father, a total of 70 years.

The Torah writes that Yaakov lived in Egypt for 17 years. Together with the time it took Yaakov to travel to Egypt, Yaakov had (part of) "chai" / 18 years left when he heard that Yosef was still alive. For his part, Yosef had (part of) 62 years left. (Yosef was 39 when his father arrived in Egypt and he died on his 110th birthday, one day into his 111th year.) The sum of 18 and 62 is 80, the gematria of "od" / "still."

Yaakov recognized that he and Yosef had 80 years left between them. Yaakov wanted to see Yosef, but he also wanted Yosef to live as long as possible (without taking years from King David). Therefore, as soon as Yaakov saw Yosef one more time, Yaakov was ready to die. "Let me die this time, because you are still alive," he said. (Melo Ha'omer)

"When that year ended, they came to him in the next year and said to him, 'We will not conceal anything from my lord . . . ' " (47:18)

What did the Egyptians mean? R' Moshe Shimon Sivitz z"l (1856- 1936; rabbi in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania beginning in 1888) answers:

Rashi (41:55) writes that when the Egyptians came to Yosef for food, he ordered them to be circumcised. Why? There is no mitzvah for gentiles to be circumcised!

R' Sivitz explains: Yosef took this drastic measure to find the black-marketers among the Egyptians, for only those who truly needed food would submit.

After the first year of the famine, the Egyptians came to Yosef again to obtain food. They did not know what test Yosef would impose this time in order to discover which Egyptians really needed food, and they wanted to convince him that they really were hungry. They told him, "We will not conceal anything from my lord" - we are not black-marketers and we have nothing to conceal. (Tzemach Ha'sadeh: Eshkol Amarim p. 63)

Selected Laws of Shemittah

(From Rambam's Mishneh Torah, Hil. Shemittah Ve'yovel Ch. 2)

[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.]

1. One should not take waste out of his yard and place it in his field during the shemittah, because it looks like he is fertilizing his field so that it will be suitable for planting. However, if

he took it out and set up a waste-pile, it is permitted. One should not make a waste-pile of less than 150 se'ah [approx. 2000 liters /500 gallons] of waste, so that it will be apparent that it is a waste pile.

6. One may not open a new quarry in his field during the shemittah lest people say that his intent is to remove stones from his field [to make it suitable for planting]. If he opened the quarry before the shemittah and already hewed 27 stones from an area of ground three stones long, three stones wide, and three stones deep - each stone being at least one amah cubed [approx. 18-24 inches on a side] - he may mine from it as much as he would like during the shemittah.

10. If one removes stones from his field because he needs stones, he may take the upper layers, but he must leave the lowest layer which is next to the ground.

11. One may not fill a depression with dirt or repair it with dirt because then he will be preparing the earth [for planting]. However, he may build a chayitz [defined by some as a brick wall without mortar] on the mouth of the depression. For this purpose, one may take any stone which he can reach with his outstretched hand when he is standing at the edge of the depression.

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