

WORMS AND WAGONS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The news was heard in Pharaoh's palace, saying, "Yosef's brothers have come!" And it was pleasing in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants. Pharaoh said to Yosef, "... take from the land of Egypt wagons for your small children, and for your wives; take your father, and come..." They went up from Egypt and came to the land of Canaan, to Yaakov their father. And they told him, "Yosef is still alive!" - and that he is ruler over all the land of Egypt; yet his heart rejected [their words]. But 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. (45:16-27)

Rashi explains that it was the wagons that ultimately convinced Yaakov that Yosef was alive. Wagons, in Hebrew, are "agalos." Calves are "eglos" (these two words are written identically). Yaakov had been in the middle of learning with Yosef the laws of the "eglah arufah," the calf whose neck is broken in expiation of an unsolved murder (see Devarim 21:1-9), when Yosef disappeared. When he saw the agalos (wagons), Yaakov was reminded of this. Rashi points out that although Pharaoh had in fact sent the wagons, the verse recounts that when Yaakov saw "the wagons that Yosef had sent" - then his spirit was revived!

It does seem kind of strange, though, because ultimately the wagons were not Yosef's idea, but rather Pharaoh's! Imagine you're looking for someone in a crowd. You've been told, mistakenly, that this person always wears a red necktie, so you're looking for the man with the red necktie. Suddenly, you spot him - there he is, with the red necktie. You run up to him and introduce yourself. "How did you find me?" he asks in wonder? "Why I just looked for the person with the red necktie!" "But I never wear a red necktie! It's just that this morning all my other ties were at the cleaners, and this was the only necktie I had. It's the first time I've ever worn it!"

Amazing coincidence? Yes. But the sign was still a lousy one. He was looking for something he shouldn't have seen, yet by some incredible hashgacha pratis (Divine providence), did! That it occurred to Pharaoh to send Yaakov wagons, which in turn reminded him of what he had been studying with Yosef, is truly amazing. But it does not seem to have been a sign from Yosef to Yaakov - so why does the Torah make it sound that way? Also: What was it about the wagons that brought back Yaakov's spirit more so than all the other signs Yosef had given the brothers (that he was circumcised, that he spoke the Holy Tongue, etc.)?

Sha'ar bas Rabim (volume 1 page 204 quoting Mesoras ha-Bris) cites the Targum Yonasan ben Uziel

(Devarim 21:8) that after the beis din (Rabbinical court) would break the neck of the calf, worms would emerge from its body which would slither and squirm until they came to the true murderer, thereby identifying him. This would enable beis din to begin gathering the evidence they needed in order to convict him. By sending the wagons (agalos), Yosef was hinting to the following: You may not believe that I'm still alive. But I am! It is true that they had originally intended to put me to death (see Rashi parshas Vayechi 49:9 that Yaakov had suspected the brothers of killing him). Do you know how I convinced them not to? I told them about the halacha of the eglah arufah we were studying, and how worms would ultimately come and identify them! They reconsidered. [Yosef apparently sent additional wagons, besides those sent by Pharaoh, to hint this to his father.]

Perhaps, however, there is a simpler explanation. Suppose you're making a wedding. You send out invitations to friends and relatives across the globe. Do you put a plane ticket into each invitation? Not unless you're very wealthy. But, if you're inviting someone very special and important, such as a Rebbe or a Rosh Yeshiva, then it's a sign of respect for you to provide the transportation (and to do so in a way that befits their honor, i.e. don't send them a bus ticket!).

Upon hearing that Yosef had become very powerful and influential in Egypt, it was no small matter of concern to Yaakov that perhaps all this power had gone to his head. Could Yosef, finding himself in a high-ranking position in the Egyptian government, still have remained true to the values and morals Yaakov taught and lived? Or had he, G-d forbid, taken on the appearance of the modern-day politician; worldly mannerisms and all the bells and whistles of wealth and power? How would Yosef feel about Pharaoh meeting his 130 year old father - an alter Yid (an old Jew) - whose manner and dress were a far cry from the Egyptian vogue? Would he feel proud or ashamed?

Rabbi Yosef Shaul Nathanson zt"l explains that it was not really important whether it had been Yosef's idea, or Pharaoh's, to send the wagons. The wagons were an expression of Yosef's deep respect and honour for his father - something which he evidently had succeeded in conveying to Pharaoh. Such that Pharaoh insisted that for someone as important as Yaakov, nothing less than the best-equipped royal wagons would do! When Yaakov saw the wagons, and understood that Yosef took pride in his father, and was not ashamed, "then the spirit of their father Yaakov was revived!" [Divrei Shaul].

Have a good Shabbos.

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