

# THE WAGONS THAT YOSEF SENT

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

*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 ruled over all of Egypt... Yet [only] when they related all the words that Yosef had spoken to them, and he saw the wagons that Yosef sent to transport him, was the spirit of their father, Yaakov, revived. (45: 26-27)*

Why was Yaakov only convinced that Yosef was alive after "seeing the wagons that Yosef had sent to transport him?" (see Rashi) This is even more strange if we consider that ostensibly it was Pharaoh that ordered Yosef to send the wagons: "Pharaoh said to Yosef, 'Say to your brothers... take from the land of Egypt wagons for your small children and for your wives, and transport your father and come.' (45:17-19)" It seems it wasn't even Yosef's idea to send the wagons—yet it's precisely the wagons that convince Yaakov to come! And why does the Torah insist on describing the wagons as, "the wagons that Yosef sent to transport him," if it was in fact Pharaoh's doings of?

During the French rule over the region of Tafilalt, Morocco, the only way to travel from one city to another was by caravan. A few decrepit trucks loaded down with cargo and passengers would clang along through the searing desert wasteland until an engine would overheat, bringing the caravan to a grinding halt. Then they would have to wait until the geyser of hissing water and steam emanating from the radiator would subside before forging on. Rusted truck carcasses lined both sides of the road, half submerged among the sand dunes. Tafilalt's caravan would depart once a week, every Tuesday, and its route was such that it would always arrive at a certain remote village on Saturday.

It so happened that this remote village contained a sizeable number of Jewish residents. They, like most Jews of rural Morocco, were deeply religious people who observed the laws of the Torah. Non-religious Jewish members of the caravan, who would arrive from the big city on Shabbos, were not always given the warmest welcome.

One week, fortune had it that a very wealthy and influential non-religious Jew from Tafilalt was a member of this caravan. He had been completely unaware of the timing of the stopover until the caravan was on the outskirts of the small village. His truck driver warned him what lay ahead, giving him a blow by blow description of the reception given the last Jew who had arrived there on Shabbos. The man desperately tried to think of a means to avoid discovery, but for miles in every direction he could see only the glaring sands of the Sahara Desert. One could not last a single day in that harsh environment. There was no question about it—he would have to enter the village along with the rest of the caravan, bring what it may.

All of a sudden, a brilliant plan entered his mind. It involved a minimal expenditure—paying off the caravan drivers. As he suspected, they were most willing to accept his money and play along with his plan. When the trucks rounded the last curve and reached the village, he made himself as conspicuous as possible. Looking on with satisfaction, he noticed a pair of Jews on their way to shul pointing their fingers at him. Perfect! Now everyone would learn of his arrival. Everything was proceeding exactly according to plan.

The trucks lurched to a stop and the rich Jew headed straight for the village's shul. In he walked, and as he had expected, the worshippers were already waiting for him. "Shabbos desecrator!" an older man screamed, "how dare you walk into our holy synagogue after arriving with your caravan on Shabbos, dressed as you are with weekday garments? Have you no shame? Have you no fear of Heaven?!"

The stranger raised his eyebrows in a feigned expression of disbelief. "Dear gentlemen," he said, "I'm afraid you've made a most grave mistake. I am no Shabbos desecrator. Today is Friday—not Shabbos!" The people looked on, stunned. They had no idea how to respond to his astonishing claim. "If you don't believe me, just go and ask my Arab drivers—they're right over there!"

Members of the congregation looked at one another with mouths agape. Was this respectable big city Jew telling the truth? After all, considering how isolated their village was from the rest of the Jewish world, it was conceivable that someone long ago had made a mistake about the day of the week, and since then, the error had gone unnoticed. One of the worshippers called the stranger's bluff, and asked the caravan drivers what day of the week it was. To his horror they all insisted that it was indeed Friday, and not Saturday!

After recovering from their initial shock, the townsfolk came to grips with the reality of the situation, and thanked the stranger for correcting them at long last. Shabbos morning service was cancelled, and the members of the congregation went back to work, as they would on any other weekday. They ate their Shabbos food for the midday meal as they would eat lunch on any other day, without the air of reverence and devoutness that usually permeated their Shabbos meals. Their wives began preparing food for the following evening, which they believed was the beginning of the "real Shabbos."

It was only due to a Heavenly decree that Rabbi Yechiah Azruel zt"l happened to pass through the village the very next day—Sunday—which the townsfolk now believed was Shabbos. Knowing that most of the Jews were in the marketplace on Sundays, Rabbi Yechiah made his way to the shul, where he had thought he would find the village's Torah scholars poring over their holy seforim. He could hardly believe his eyes when he opened the door of the shul—the entire congregation was gathered there, dressed in their Shabbos finest and listening to the reading of the weekly portion!

"What in Heaven's name is going on here?" he demanded. Silence descended, and all heads turned to him questioningly. "It's Sunday today—not Shabbos!" The people were dumbstruck. For such a

thing to happen twice within twenty four hours was too much. The men looked on with their mouths wide open. Someone fainted. One of the worshippers recounted the surprising events of the previous day, at which point Rabbi Yechiah grasped what had transpired. He summoned the stranger to the shul and swiftly exposed him as a fraud. In the presence of the entire congregation he put him into cheirem (excommunication) and sentenced him to one year in prison (the rabbis of Morocco were invested with judicial power by the civil authorities). For the village's Jews, he imposed certain regulations through which they could atone their inadvertent desecration of Shabbos. [Adapted from Yated Ne'eman December 23, '98]

The moral of the story? One must be most careful and circumspect when contemplating the suggestions of others, especially those who don't share our moral nor religious beliefs and values. While they may ostensibly seem to be steering us "towards the right path," their words may, upon closer inspection, be the antithesis of da'as Torah and ratzon Hashem.

Pharaoh told Yosef to take "wagons for your small children and for your wives," and to "transport [lit. carry] your father to Egypt." Pharaoh had great respect for Yaakov, so much so that transporting him by wagon simply wouldn't do. Wagons were okay for his wives and children, but for Yaakov himself, something more grandiose was called for. Pharaoh suggested: "Carry your father to Egypt,"—lift him up on your shoulders and bring him to Egypt by hand.

Such a display of grandiosity and pretentiousness was natural for Pharaoh. He would have accepted no less for himself. Yet for Yaakov, who had raised his family by constantly stressing the virtues of humility and modesty, such a pompous expression of flashiness was unthinkable. Especially now, with his family leaving its homeland and forced into exile, it was a time to lie low and attract as little attention as possible. Such is the way of the House of Yaakov.

"Is it possible," thought Yaakov, "that Yosef has completely forgotten everything I taught him? That he too has been taken-in by the glitz and flamboyance of Egyptian royal life, and expects me to parade myself through the streets of Egypt upon my children's shoulders, as if I were some kind of military hero or sports-star?" When Yaakov saw "the wagons that Yosef sent to transport him," his spirit was revived. Pharaoh's instructions had been to send wagons for the women and children only. Yosef understood differently; his father would arrive in Egypt in a covered wagon, modestly; this was the only way he'd have it.

We live in a time where we sometimes come under the influence of those whose values don't necessarily reflect ours. Self-help books and gurus of various shapes and colours bombard us with one message: Herein lies the path to health, wealth, happiness, etc.. While it is impossible to live in a vacuum and block secular culture out completely, a Jew must be on constant guard, remembering that what works for 'them' may not necessarily be the best solution for 'us.' The Torah must ultimately be our guiding light; all else must be examined and refracted through its prism before giving it our stamp of approval.

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