

POWER AND ANTI-SEMITISM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Yehudah approached [Yosef] and said, ". . . Don't be angry with your servant, for you are like Pharaoh. (Bereishis 44:1)

"One of the things that always amazes me about Torah is how small things can mean so much." That is the way I began last week's Perceptions about the concept of a keitz, a Divinely-ordained historical endpoint for the sake of redemption. Another thing that amazes me is how easy it is to take the stories of the Torah for granted, as if they are the more natural occurrences when really, upon further investigation, they seem quite bizarre.

Yosef, second-in-command over Egypt? A Jew, with whom the Egyptians would not even sit at the same time table, was now putting food on theirs? That certainly could never have happened naturally, even if Yosef did successfully interpret Pharaoh's dreams. That was a miracle for sure. Just as it was for Don Isaac Abarbanel, the Finance Minister for King Alfonso V of Portugal in the 1400s, and for others after that as well. Though it is not so miraculous when assimilated Jews make it into gentile governments, including high up in the administration, it is unusual for Orthodox Jews to do so, even (perhaps especially) in Yosef's time.

True, the Ramban says that the Forefathers did not necessarily keep Torah mitzvos outside of Eretz Yisroel—hence Ya'akov married two sisters, one of whom died just before entering Eretz Yisroel—since they were not yet obligatory even in Eretz Yisroel, it seems that they tried to do so whenever they could. Had Heaven not arranged for Ya'akov to marry two sisters, he probably would only have married Rachel, as planned.

Therefore, it is safe to say that Yosef ate kosher in Egypt as well, evident by the fact that Menashe, his son, knew how to perform shechitah and remove the gid hanashe from an animal, as instructed by Yosef in last week's parshah. And, he must have kept Shabbos while there, and the laws of family purify as well, since we know that Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov certainly did.

And, considering that he became Viceroy of Egypt at the age of 29 and that he didn't die until the age of 110, he must have been in office for a long time, for at least a couple of generations. In fact that Talmud says that he died earlier because of his leadership role (Brochos 55a), though more than likely, it just looked that way.

Actually, 110 is the gematria of the word neis, which means miracle, more than likely, not a coincidence. After all, the Arizal said the whole reason why Yehoshua, a descendant of Yosef and

the successor to Moshe Rabbeinu, died at the age of 110 was to indicate that his life was one miracle after another. Given his mercurial rise to power and the dreams he had as youth that predicted it, it would not be difficult to say the same thing about Yosef HaTzaddik.

Is it a good thing for Jews to rise to power in gentile governments, especially when they are so obviously Jewish? Usually not. Historically, though being in positions of influence in non-Jewish governments has often resulted in benefits for the Jewish community in general, over time it has often backfired and resulted in terrible anti-Semitism. It even did in Yosef's time, and certainly in the Abarbanel's time.

I suppose the trick would be to stay in power as long as it benefits the Jewish community, and get out once it doesn't. That would be a trick, because no one seems to have been able to time it just right. Anti-Semitism seems to be one of those things that you only understand clearly in hindsight.

Besides, it is hard to leave power just like that. First of all, there is the power itself, even if you exercised for Godly reasons. Secondly, there are the pressures of higher authorities to remain in positions of responsibility, the leaving of which could itself result in anti-Semitism. Thirdly, there is the pressure of the Jewish community, which might be willing to risk a little more anti-Semitism to maintain their man in a position of influence. It doesn't take much for a religious politician to find himself between a rock and a hard place.

The Malbim, on the following verses from Yirmiyahu's prophecy about the End-of-Days, cites another reason why governing amongst the gentiles can be a major pitfall, one that is especially relevant in our times:

For thus said Hashem: Sing, O Ya'akov, with gladness, exult on the peaks of the nations; announce, laud [God], and say, "O Hashem, save Your people, the remnant of Yisroel!" Behold, I will bring them from the land of the North and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, the pregnant and birthing together; a great congregation will return here. With weeping they will come and through supplications I will bring them; I will guide them on streams of water, on a direct path in which they will not stumble; for I have been a father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn. (Yirmiyahu 31:6-8)

At the end of their exile, the oppression will be removed from them, and they will be joyous because they will be on the peak of the nations. The gentiles will give them honor and they will be their heads, instead of being disgraced and lowered amongst them as they were at first. Ya'akov will be the masses of the people, and the lesser amongst them; Yisroel are the great ones. The joyousness from being at the peak of the nations will be Ya'akov's only, and not Yisroel's, because they will want to return His Presence to Tzion. However, at that time they will "announce" and publicly proclaim, and "praise" Hashem when they say, "O Hashem, save Your [righteous] people, the remnant of Yisroel," because they will want the true salvation of the

ingathering of the exile and return to Tzion. Then it will be like that, that Hashem will return them: Behold, I will bring them . . . (Malbim, q.v. v'Tzahalu B'Rosh HaGoyim)

After centuries, even millennia, of fierce anti-Semitism and degradation at the hands of gentile powers, it will be an incredible breath of fresh air to be finally accepted amongst many of them. After being forcibly ruled by so many anti--Jewish governments for so long now, it will be enlivening to be given civil liberties and equal opportunity to govern. Who wouldn't find reason to celebrate?

The only problem is that it will come at a time that we need to go home. It's like what my friend says, "With my mazel, I'll win the jackpot lottery one day before Armageddon!" The Jewish people will gain acceptance, it seems, just as it becomes time to reject it and head for Eretz Yisroel. Perhaps, then, this is what the actual acceptance is for. Maybe the break in anti-Semitism, which is usually only temporary at best, is to make it easier to return home from the Diaspora on favorable terms, including with the wealth he has been fortunate enough to accumulate over the last six decades. Maybe its not about rising to high positions of influence in gentile governments, but so that we can use the reprieve as a chance to leave.

At least that's what the Malbim seems to have said. And, according to him, the majority of Jews living in the Diaspora just won't get it, and never have. Jews have always been good at seeing opportunity, but not always so good at seeing the right one. After all, as the Haggadah of Pesach tells us, we only came down to Egypt to sojourn there, to stay a little while and then go back home.

We ended up staying 210 years, 116 of which included intense anti-Semitism and slavery. And things had started off so well . . .

Text

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