

Yosef: The Ultimate Sales Pitch

Reading Between the Lines in Miketz

I have received wonderful feedback on the “reading between the lines” format so here is another portion. This time, however, I would like to present the questions for discussion first, per the request of several readers.

Questions for discussion:

1. In verse 41:14 we read that Yosef “shaved and changed clothes”. Whose initiative was it? Can it be proven from the grammar?
2. How does Pharaoh echo Yosef’s language?
3. How are Yaakov and Pharaoh similar in their treatment of Yosef?
4. Why did Yosef create local and not regional granaries?
5. Why did the people turn first to Pharaoh and not to Yosef?

MIKETZ

Two years after Yosef correctly interpreted the dreams of the royal cupbearer and baker, Pharaoh had two disturbing dreams. He summoned all his advisors and sages but none of them provided a satisfying interpretation. The cupbearer, seeing an opportunity for reward, broke the silence regarding his criminal past, and told Pharaoh of Yosef, describing him unflatteringly as a Hebrew lad, a slave of the chief executioner. By framing the information in that manner, the cupbearer hoped to be the true hero of the day and cast Yosef as nothing more than a vehicle for divine knowledge, to be used and cast aside... our story starts here:

Genesis 41

14: Pharaoh sent personal messengers to call Yosef. They came to the pit and rushed him out, but Yosef, who has already been betrayed three times by his brothers, Potiphar’s wife, and the

cupbearer, knew that from now on he is on his own. He knew that if he appears in front of Pharaoh dressed in rags, the cupbearer's scheme to cast him aside will succeed, since the king will not want that moment, in which he was saved by an imprisoned slave, to be remembered. Yosef therefore made the messengers, and all of the royal court, wait while he shaved and changed his clothes. Not only he had to look sharp and presentable to the king, but stripping himself of prison garb to wear decent clothes was his own closure for the time when his brothers stripped him of the garment which was the symbol of his father's love.

15: Pharaoh said to Yosef, I had a dream, but no one can offer me an interpretation. Now there is a rumor, which may not be true, that you hear a dream and are able to interpret it. 16: Yosef, sensing Pharaoh's unease in requesting his help, and the cautious phrasing of the request, and knowing that this is his only chance to redeem himself and realize his dreams, answers with a subliminal message: I am not needed here, since God Himself is taking care of Pharaoh's well-being. After Yosef neutralized the unease of the king's reliance on a lowly slave, Pharaoh tells him his dreams... [verses 17-24]

25: Yosef told Pharaoh, your two dreams are one. God has foretold Pharaoh what He is about to do. 26: Yosef merges the two dreams to explain that the seven good cows are seven years and the seven good stalks are seven years, they are one dream. 27: And the seven thin, bad cows which rose after them are seven years, and the seven empty, wind-beaten stalks. They will be seven years of famine. 28: This proves my point in my words to Pharaoh. God, who is concerned about Pharaoh, is showing Pharaoh what He is about to do. After establishing the idea of a close relationship between God and Pharaoh, and framing himself as a tool in God's hands, Yosef continues to offer unsolicited advice. But he wisely phrases it as a prediction, more than an advice.

33: I assume that Pharaoh will now look for an intelligent and wise man, to be appointed over the Land of Egypt. 34: Pharaoh will surely appoint officials over the land, and he himself will secure provisions for Egypt during the seven years of abundance. 35: Those officials could gather all the excessive of the seven good years, which will come soon. They will guard the wheat under the supreme rule of Pharaoh. Food for the cities, the power centers of the kingdom, and thus will protect both the cities and the stability of Pharaoh's empire. 36: That food will serve as a reserve

for the land during the seven years of famine which will befall Egypt and so the land will not be annihilated by the famine.

37: The presentation was well received by Pharaoh, and his servants had to follow suit. 38: Pharaoh understood very well Yosef's subliminal message. In a system full of power players and cronies, Yosef positioned himself as the best candidate for the job of top administrator. He demonstrated his intelligence and his ability to make long term plans, but at the same time hinted that he will never take credit for his actions and will always project the image of a tool in the hands of God, who is concerned with Pharaoh's well-being. Yosef was suggesting to be the perfect employee, who takes care of everything but lets his boss take credit for it. He also insinuated that Pharaoh has nothing to lose since he could always blame Yosef, the lowly slave, for possible failures.

38: Pharaoh answers, echoing Yosef's priming, of course we will have to search for a candidate, but we surely will not be able to find someone like that man, a man imbued with the spirit of God, my friend and protector. 39: Turning to Yosef, Pharaoh says, now that God [my friend, protector etc. etc. etc.] has informed you all of that, there is none intelligent and wise such as you, and God knew that I will choose someone intelligent and wise. 40: You will be in charge of my palace and the sustenance for the people will be decreed by you [ועל פיך ישק כל עמי], but remember, I sit on the throne and I am the king.

41: Pharaoh told Yosef, see, I have appointed you ruler of Egypt. 42: Pharaoh removed his seal-ring off his hand and put it on Yosef's hand. He then personally dressed him with fine linen garments and put a golden choker on his neck. 43: He made Yosef ride in the chariot of the second-in-command which so far has been idling as the position was unmanned. As he traveled the streets announcers called people to bow down before him and show that he is the ruler of Egypt. 44: Pharaoh told Yosef, I am Pharaoh, but without you no one can raise as much as a foot or arm in all of the land of Egypt. In using the word בלעדריך – without you, Pharaoh echoed Yosef's first word to him – בלעדאי – without me. Pharaoh thus tells Yosef that he recognized his willingness to serve obediently and selflessly under the king and that this loyalty is now rewarded.

45: Pharaoh, who started taking Yaakov's place and becoming Yosef's new father figure by dressing him with precious garments and favoring him over all his other servants, completed his

role as an adoptive father by naming Yosef Zafenat Paanea'h and creating for him a new family. That family is Asenat, the daughter of Potifera', the priest of On. Yosef now got out to Egypt as a ruler. This coming out is in sharp contrast to his previous ones, the time he went out of his father's house to be kidnapped, the time he came out of the pit to be sold to into slavery, the time he ran out of Potiphar's house to be accused and imprisoned later, and the time he came out of prison uncertain of his future. This time he was free and independent, no longer trapped in a pit or threatened by others' jealousy. 46: Yosef was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh. He left Pharaoh's palace and traveled through Egypt, knowing that a good administrator must be hands-on, gathering data and talking to people in the field. 47: All the crops produced in the land during the seven years of abundant were consumed sparingly.

48: Yosef gathered all that was possible to spare during those seven years in Egypt, and he stored it in the cities. Yosef avoided the pitfall of communism, in which the equal distribution of resources stifles productivity and ambition, Yosef created local storage facilities. He conveyed the message that each city will rely on its local supplies, and so encouraged the citizens and farmers to save as much food as possible. 49: Yosef gathered grains as the sand on the shore. He stopped counting because it was impossible to count. 50: Two sons were born to Yosef before the first year of famine arrived, they were born to him by Asenat, the daughter of Potifera', the priest of On. 51: When Yosef's first son was born, his longing for his family and his deep pain for their betrayal came out. He called his son Menashe, saying, God has paid me for all my toil and for all the suffering I had at my father's house. 52: He called the second one Ephraim, saying, God has made me fertile in the land of my misery.

53: The seven years of abundance in the land of Egypt have ended. 54: The seven years of famine started coming as Yosef said. There was famine in all the lands, but in the land of Egypt there was bread. The Torah replaces the terms "food" and "grains", used before, with the word "bread". This is because bread for the Egyptians was associated with the temple service and so the presence of bread represented God's concern with them. 55: Yosef, however, did not start distribution right away because he wanted to cement his position as indispensable. He waited for people to run out of provisions and clamor for food, but even at that point he did not open the granaries. Rather, he directed people to Pharaoh. He did so to ostensibly show that he is subservient to the king, but also to make Pharaoh realize what it means to deal with hungry mobs

at the palace's doors [cakes, anyone?]. And indeed, Pharaoh had to reiterate his reliance on Yosef. He told the people of Egypt, go to Yosef, and do whatever Yosef tells you.

With that last statement, and with it the final and unshakeable installment of Yosef as Egypt's viceroy, the stage was set for the arrival of his brothers and the eventual family reunion.

Shabbat Shalom

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