

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093 718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Miqqueş Part I

1. Joseph's Ascendance

Two years after Joseph interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker, while he was still in prison, Pharaoh had two dreams one night that greatly agitated him. He sensed they were of great significance but did not grasp their meaning. After the soothsayers and wise men of Egypt failed to provide him a satisfactory interpretation his chief cupbearer stepped forth. At the time of his release from prison Joseph had informed him of his own personal situation, that he was innocent of any crime and falsely imprisoned. He requested of him, "If you could keep me in mind that I was with you, when things go well for you please do me the kindness and mention me to Pharaoh and have me released" (Gen. 40:14). But "the chief cupbearer did not mention Joseph, he forgot him" (v. 23). Now that Joseph's skill was required, he remembered him and recommended him to Pharaoh.

Joseph was hastened from prison, shaved and changed his clothing and came before Pharaoh. His moral integrity in dealing with Potiphar's wife landed him in prison where he made the connection that led to his incredible opportunity.

Beginning by attributing his dream-interpretation ability to G-d, Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams convincingly as relating to matters of national welfare. The seven lean cows that consumed the seven healthy cows, yet remained lean, as well as the seven scrawny ears of grain that devoured the seven healthy ones, communicated one basic message. G-d would provide Egypt with seven years of enormous plenty followed by seven years of dreadful famine. The doubling of the dream indicated that it would be soon. He added that it was Pharaoh's responsibility to use the years of plenty to provide for the famine years that would follow – possibly recognizing this strategy in the

details of the dreams – and suggested several practical measures.

Pharaoh and his courtiers were impressed with the interpretation as well as with Joseph's advice. (Many commentators assume that standard dream interpretation of the time focused on the personal dimension while Pharaoh sensed that his dreams were of greater importance.) Joseph's interpretation was consistent with a well-known fact that the yearly overflow of the Nile, the lifeblood of Egyptian agriculture, did sometimes fall short for several successive years, producing hardship.

Immediately, Pharaoh placed Joseph in charge of preparing the land for the coming emergency. He invested him with his signet ring, dressed him in robes of fine linen, placed a gold chain around his neck, had him ride in the chariot of the second-in-command and gave him the daughter of the priest of On as a wife. "Joseph was thirty years of age when standing before Pharaoh" (41:46), concluding a thirteen-year phase of life since being sold by his brothers.

Joseph led Egypt to stockpiling huge quantities of surplus during the years of plenty. When the famine arrived Egypt was well stocked and even able to provide for neighboring lands, for the famine extended to the land of Canaan. When the food shortage was serious the narrative shifted back to Jacob and his family. Besides the chapter on Judah, now rejoined with the family, the reader had not been provided any information concerning Jacob or his other sons during the more than twenty years that had elapsed since the sale of Joseph.

2. Unknowingly Going to Joseph (Gen. 42:1-8)

"The whole land [of course including Canaan] came to Egypt to purchase food from Joseph for the famine

had become severe throughout the land” (41:57). The following verse informs us that Jacob, having learned that food was available in Egypt, asked his sons a most revealing question, לָמָּה תִּתְרָאוּ. This phrase does not appear to mean “Why are you showing off [giving the impression that you have no need for more food]?” (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam). Surely the family was strictly conserving its food resources like everybody does in a famine, and as Jacob says afterwards, they were in a life and death situation.

The NJPS translates: “Why do you keep looking at one another?” The plural reflexive form of the verb רָוָּה (“see”) does appear to indicate reciprocal action, “looking at” and “being looked at.” Although heads of families, they were behaving abnormally in an emergency, they were not going to Egypt to purchase food like everybody else, they were “looking at each other,” doing nothing, hence Jacob’s reprimand. He could not know that they were in a state of inertia, resistant to the idea of going to the land to which they had sold their brother as a slave, although more than two decades had passed.

The unusual form of תִּתְרָאוּ, without the object פְּנִים (which would then mean “to meet face-to-face”), may possibly be related to the word יִרְאָה (“fear”) and לָמָּה תִּתְרָאוּ would then translate “why are you fearful?” (*Targum Jonathan*). This would be depicting Jacob as recognizing, but not understanding why, his sons are apprehensive about going to Egypt. Perhaps the phrase is a double entendre.

Jacob raised the subject again in the next verse. Such back-to-back וַיֹּאמֶר statements (“he said”) without an in-between response from the interlocutors indicates that the latter were silent. In a subtle commentary on the aftereffects of unexpiated sin, the brothers are depicted as immobilized, possibly unconsciously, by their refusal to confront their past deed even remotely or indirectly. What if they came across the brother they sold into slavery? Jacob then virtually orders his sons down to Egypt.

In Jacob’s last appearance on the textual scene prior to our chapter his focus was on death; he entered a prolonged period of mourning for Joseph and refused consolation. The last words the Torah reported from him at that time were, כִּי אֶרְדָּ אֶל בְּנֵי אִבְלִי שְׂאֵלָה (“I shall

go down to my son to *sheol* mourning” [37:35]). But much had transpired since then; he had endured mighty chastisement for his deception of his father and the stage is now set for a reversal of circumstances. His words on this occasion reflect a new outlook, as he states וְלֹא נָמוּת...וְנִחְיֶה שָׁמָּה (“go down there...so that we may live and not die”). He is revived, caring about living, and providence was actively at work on his behalf. In an inversion of the situation that had prevailed, especially manifest in his meek role in the Dinah episode, he recovers his leadership and overcomes his sons’ torpor.

On the last occasion of interaction between Jacob and Joseph, the patriarch had sent his favorite son to check on the welfare of his other sons, unaware that he was creating a problem. Now, to provide for the welfare of his other sons, unaware of the deeper reality of his action, he sends them to Joseph, advancing the solution.

The Torah informs us וַיֵּרְדוּ אֶחָי יוֹסֵף עֵשְׂרָה (“And Joseph’s brothers, ten, went down, to purchase grain from Egypt” [42:3]). It is understandable that all brothers must go to Egypt, as food was surely being sold in restricted quantities, according to families. (The oft-used word in this context שָׁכַר, which may be derived from the root that means “break” – that is, that which “breaks” the hunger – may thus indicate that only restricted quantities of food were being sold. A cognate Akkadian term means “subsistence grain portion.” Either way, rationing may be understood.) But use of the phrase “Joseph’s brothers” in this first mention of their going, in contrast to the previously used בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב (“Jacob’s sons”) or the new designation of בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“children of Israel”) that appears shortly afterwards (v. 5), surely is significant.

This term acknowledges the momentous event that was occurring in their lives. It may hint that in a vague way they sensed the connection between going to Egypt and Joseph. It surely appears likely that the locution points to divine providence and foreshadows the ultimate objective of their trip, signaling that this journey is ultimately to be defined as Joseph’s brothers going to him, proceeding toward the goal of reunification. Use of וַיֵּרְדוּ corresponds to the use of that root in describing Joseph having been “taken down” to Egypt, וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיִם (39:1) – they followed him.

The second reference to their going, in which they are termed בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, envisions them as the microcosm of the nation they are destined to become in Egypt, foreshadowing the longer-range purpose of their trip. In the very next reference to them (v. 6) they are before Joseph and, in a reflection of the ironic reality, they are once again termed “Joseph’s brothers.”

They were only ten brothers because Jacob did not send Benjamin, “Joseph’s brother” (v. 4), that is, his full brother from Rachel. “He said” – which might mean “he thought,” but regardless, his decisive resolution speaks louder than words – that something may happen to him. (Journeys are dangerous. Joseph disappeared upon undertaking a journey.) Although Benjamin is a grown man with a family, Jacob is protective of him, much more concerned about him than his other sons. With Joseph absent, his preference for Rachel manifested itself in his partiality toward Benjamin. The passage of time had not changed him in this respect; this is the way he believes things are to be and his other sons must be resigned to the reality. The reader wonders: Do they accept this situation? Has their attitude truly changed toward their father’s favoritism for Rachel’s sons?

In Egypt, “Joseph was the ruler of the land, he dispensed the food to all the people of the land” (v. 6a). We may wonder, was it necessary for him, the man in charge, to be the one who dispensed the grain to all those who came to purchase? Did he intentionally place himself in the forefront, awaiting, perhaps not consciously, his brothers to appear? In any event, when his brothers arrive he does notice and recognize them.

The first statement the Torah provides regarding the brothers upon their arrival in Egypt describes the striking development: “Joseph’s brothers came and bowed to him, faces to the ground” (v. 6b). They engaged in a complete fulfillment of his first dream, that of their sheaves bowing to his sheaf! Once again we are reminded that providence was at work. It should be noted that the first dream undoubtedly did not include Benjamin. The latter, whom we assume to be not more than four or five years of age at the time of that dream,* would not have been thought of as working in the field with his brothers binding sheaves. In any event, the stage was now set for Joseph to act.

Immediately, “He acts the stranger to them and speaks harshly with them” (v. 7a), although not explicitly accusing them of anything at this point. His initial remarks – prior to his recalling the dreams, which is only mentioned two verses later – may have been his natural, human reaction to their vile mistreatment of him and the agony they caused him, reflecting emotions long subdued and virtually forgotten. He had solemnized that state in naming his firstborn son מְנַשֶּׁה (Manasseh), which he explained to mean, “G-d has made me forget all my hardships and all my father’s house” (41:51).

Alternatively, especially if he is thought of as somewhat awaiting his brothers to arrive, his speaking harshly in verse 7a may be understood as a general digest of the episode, followed by details, and need not be taken as a chronological point in the happening.

Verse 8 repeats the detail that Joseph recognized his brothers, adding that they did not recognize him. The combination of these clauses allows the verse to serve as a dramatic signifier of the amazing situation that had just materialized, along with the enormous possibilities presented to Joseph. Joseph now has the remarkable opportunity to deal with his brothers as he sees fit, to punish them, test them, educate them or to devise a plan for some objective that he may feel appropriate. The delay of action caused by the textual repetition of Joseph recognizing his brothers may also be a literary device to reflect his having taken a moment to contemplate exactly what to do.

Moreover, the repetition highlights the now-familiar key words (various forms of ה-כ-ר [“recognize”]) that are central to these two verses, linking them to the series of relevant past deceptions. The וַיִּכְרַם and וַיִּכָּר said of Joseph followed by לֹא הִכְרָהוּ regarding the brothers (vv. 7-8), are striking reminders of the perfidy perpetrated by the brothers.** The key phrase they used with their father regarding Joseph’s “found” ornamental tunic was הִכָּר נָא (37:32), while the pivotal word describing Jacob’s being deceived by them was וַיִּכְרָה (v. 33).

This concludes the string of thematically interlinked deceptions in which the ה-כ-ר stem is most prominent: Jacob of his father (27:23); Rachel of her father (31:32); Joseph’s brothers of their father (37:32-33);

Tamar of her father-in-law (38:25) and Joseph of his brothers (42:7-8). In the larger picture they point to “measure for measure” and “poetic justice,” metaphors for the subtle workings of divine providence.

3. Recalling the Dreams (Gen. 42:9)

After their bowing and, as mentioned earlier, apparently after his first remarks to them, “Joseph recalled the dreams that he dreamt regarding them” (42:9a). With the first dream just having been fulfilled he was encouraged to focus on the larger picture and devised a complex plan for proceeding. He accused the brothers of being spies (v. 9b), a not uncommon concern in ancient Egypt. Perhaps he chose the spy accusation since it was somewhat similar to their crime and might stir their conscience. They had acted treacherously in a brother-to-brother relationship; nationals of one nation spying on a friendly fellow nation, possibly for a nefarious purpose, violate the brotherly relationship that should obtain between neighboring nations. The ascendancy of the Asiatic Hyksos in Egypt (mid-17th to mid-16th centuries B.C.E.) must have been a salient topic in the education of the leading classes in Egypt, and would be called to mind in educated Near-Eastern circles. It might be assumed that in the course of their ordeal the brothers would have been informed of it.

In any event, the narrative states that the spy accusation resulted from Joseph's recalling his dreams. It did not result from his recalling their hatred of him, their casting him into a pit or their selling him, or, on the other hand, from his recalling the immense suffering he endured through the years because of their deed. From this we understand that Joseph was not acting out of malice or a desire for revenge.

Of course the dreams had magnified the brothers' jealousy and hatred of him and prompted their plotting to rid themselves of him, as portrayed in their derisive reference to “the master of dreams” at that critical moment when they saw him approaching (37:19-20). However, in Joseph's consciousness the dreams surely stand in too indirect a connection to their feelings to be used as the signifier of their hostile behavior. Their hatred of him and inability to speak to him peaceably

preceded the dreams and were explicitly attributed to their seeing that their father loved him more than he did them (v. 4), that he had made a *ketonet passim* – a token of leadership – only for him, that they could not tolerate the thought of his becoming ascendant over them. Even if recalling the dreams refers to the image of ascendancy, a status highlighted in the dreams, such recollections by Joseph only point to his visionary disposition, his special gifts and potential, as well as his responsibilities, and have nothing to do with thoughts of vengeance.

Also, interpreting Joseph's plan of action as based on seeking revenge is incompatible with his steadfast and ongoing commitment to carry it out. How would he not have abandoned it, or at least modified it, upon having overheard his brothers' remarks of contrition after three days of incarceration, especially given that he experienced an urgency to leave their presence to cry (42:24)? It would be unnatural for a son to devise a scheme of revenge – and to so stubbornly stand by it – that would necessarily subject his aged father, with whom he had been so close, to continued and extensive suffering. Why would he subject the totally innocent Benjamin to the tremendous ordeal he placed on him by demanding they bring him to Egypt? Furthermore, motives of revenge are incongruent with everything we detect of Joseph's character, with all that he says to and does for his brothers when he finally reveals himself to them and in his subsequent relationship with them.

In addition, the dreams possess too rich a context of their own, pointing toward the future, for the text to utilize them as a substitute for the brothers' sinful actions. “Recalling the dreams” surely indicates that Joseph's motivation in implementing his plan was connected to the deeper meaning of the dreams, which has now become his focus. By the Torah stating that he recalled *הַחֲלֻמוֹת אֲשֶׁר חָלַם לָהֶם* (“the dreams he dreamt for them”), and not employing the more normal personal possessive term *חֲלֻמוֹתָיו* (“his dreams”), it depicts him as thinking of the dreams in an objective mode. It informs us that it was his recognizing the dreams that were now being fulfilled to have been a prophecy that inspired him to devise his strategy. Further, *לָהֶם* (“regarding them” or “for them”), indicates that the dreams were, indeed, “for them,” that the brothers had a responsibility to

respond to them positively, that they had to acknowledge Jacob's selection of Joseph for the primary family and national leadership role as legitimate. It was their rejection of what now proved to be a prophetic vision that is weighing heavily on Joseph, guiding him to act as he does. In our next study we will elaborate upon Joseph's motives and his strategy for acting as he did toward his brothers.

Endnotes

* Joseph was seventeen at the time of the dream. Dinah was about the same age (or slightly younger). Jacob married Leah and Rachel in the beginning of year 8 of his sojourn by Laban. Joseph was born at the end of year 14 while Dinah, the seventh-born of Leah, was most likely not born earlier, considering that Leah had stopped giving birth for a time. (Dinah may have been born later than year 14 but was included with the account of the births of her brothers in order to conclude the section of Leah's childbearing [30:21], thus being slightly younger than Joseph.) At the time of the Dinah episode, when she had gone out alone "to

see the girls of the land" (34:1) and Shechem saw her, we assume she was not less than eleven or twelve years of age. Benjamin was not born until some time after the Dinah episode and was thus about twelve (if not more) years younger than Joseph. See the discussion on chronology in our *Va-yishlah Part III* study.

** Some consider the reflexive verb **נִתְנַכַּר** (v. 7), rendered by NJPS "he acted like a stranger," located in the midst of the cluster of the three attestations of the **ה-כ-ר** ("recognize") expressions, to also be a derivative of the same underlying root, translating "made himself unrecognizable." Going further, the Mandelkern Concordance of Hebrew and Aramaic (entry: **נכר**), while acknowledging the view that we are dealing with two distinct meanings, conjectures that the root **נ-כ-ר** may originally have denoted "strange" and subsequently, because that which is strange occasions much attention, it was extended to "recognize."

©2009 Sephardic Institute