

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Miketz

Pharaoh's Two Dreams

וַהֲנִיחַ שִׁבְעַת פְּרוֹת אֲחֵרוֹת עֲלוֹת אַחֲרֵיהֶן מִן הַיָּאֵר רָעוֹת מְרָאָה וְדַקּוֹת בְּשָׂר וַתַּעֲמֹדְנָה אֶצְלֵי הַפְּרוֹת
עַל שִׁפְתֵי הַיָּאֵר

And behold, seven other cows emerged after them from the Nile, of ugly appearance and emaciated flesh, and they stood next to the cows on the banks of the Nile. (41:3)

TWO (ALMOST) IDENTICAL DREAMS

The beginning of our Parsha describes Pharaoh's two famous dreams involving the cows and the ears of grain. These dreams are identical in almost all aspects, as Yosef himself informs Pharaoh that they are, in fact, "one dream".¹ However, this makes it all the more important to take note of any details which do not appear in both dreams.

An example of such a detail is the fact that the first dream mentions that after emerging from the Nile, the seven thin cows stood next to the seven fat ones. There is no parallel reference in the second dream to the seven parched ears of grain standing next to the seven healthy ears. Why does this detail appear in the first dream, but not the second? It is unlikely that the reason is because stalks of wheat would not naturally move to be next to each other. Cows do not naturally rise up out of the Nile either, which means that, apparently, the dreams are not governed by the rules of normalcy, but rather by the message Hashem wishes to communicate to Pharaoh. Why, then, the discrepancy?

CALLING – ONCE!

When Yosef is taken up out of the pit, he successfully interprets Pharaoh's dreams as referring to two sets of seven years, the first of plenty and the second of famine. However, Yosef does not stop there. He proceeds to recommend a course of action for Pharaoh which will help deal with the situation, making provisions during the years of plenty for the years of famine. The mefarshim are simply dumbfounded by this move on Yosef's part. Has Pharaoh appointed him his advisor for agricultural affairs? For a recently released slave to offer unsolicited advice to the Emperor of Egypt appears ill-advised, if not suicidal! What possessed Yosef to nonetheless offer Pharaoh this piece of advice?

¹ Bereishis 41:25.

The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, is that Yosef at this stage was still acting in the capacity for which he had been called – interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams – for this advice was also included in those dreams.

Pharaoh dreamt that the seven thin cows emerged and *stood next to the seven fat cows*. What is the meaning of the two sets of cows standing next to each other? This aspect of the dream is communicating to Pharaoh that he should see to it that the years of famine are “brought close” to the years of plenty, i.e. that they should draw off and be provided for by the grain which will abound in the first seven years!

This is the meaning of that detail in the first dream and, moreover, it is for this very reason that detail was not repeated in the second dream.

Yosef himself explains the significance of Pharaoh having two dreams about the same thing:

כִּי נִכּוֹן הַדְּבָר מֵעַם הָאֱלֹהִים וּמִמֶּהָר הָאֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ

*For the matter stands ready before God, and God is hastening to bring it about.*²

The repetition of the dream signifies that it will definitely occur – and soon. This is why the detail of “seven standing next to seven” features in the first dream but not the second, for that aspect is by no means definite, rather, it is entirely dependent on whether or not Pharaoh responds to it. Therefore, this message is not repeated; it comes from the dreams once and only once, the rest is up to Pharaoh.

RECOVERING THE ORIGINAL DREAMS

There is a further point here. This detail of the two sets of cows standing near each other, while included in the Torah’s account of the dreams, was omitted by Pharaoh’s own retelling to Yosef. This means that Yosef is responding to an aspect of the dreams about which he had not been informed! Yosef, however, had access through *Ruach HaKodesh* to the dreams, and was thus able to interpret them with all their details as they were actually experienced by Pharaoh – even those details which Pharaoh forgot to relate. Indeed, says Meshech Chochmah, this is what is behind Pharaoh’s enthused response to Yosef’s interpretation: “הֲנִמְצָא כָּוֶה אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בּוֹ” – *Could we find another person like this, a man within whom resides the spirit of God?*³ Pharaoh’s certainty that Yosef was possessed of the spirit of Hashem was not just the product of Yosef interpreting the dreams correctly, but also of his being able to remind Pharaoh of aspects of the dreams which Pharaoh himself forgot!⁴

EGYPT AND OTHER LANDS

In a second explanation as to why the aspect of “seven standing next to seven” featured in the first dream but not the second, the Meshech Chochmah draws our attention to

2 Pasuk 32.

3 Pasuk 38.

4 Perhaps we may add that the forgetting of this detail on Pharaoh’s part was also part of the message for Yosef. Yosef recommends that Pharaoh appoint someone to oversee the process of gathering in the grain. Why should Pharaoh not oversee the process himself? Was the dream not directed first and foremost toward him? However, the fact that Pharaoh did not remember this aspect of his dream, even though he was extremely perturbed by these dreams and knew full well that every detail was important, indicated that this part of the dream was not intended for him, but rather for someone whom he would appoint.

another difference between the two dreams. In the first dream, the two sets of seven cows are described as emerging from the Nile. In the second dream, the two sets of ears of grain are simply described as sprouting or growing, with no mention of them coming out of the Nile.

How was the Nile more relevant to the first dream than the second?

The Meshech Chochmah explains that although the two dreams shared the same general message of years of plenty and of famine, they differed in terms of the location to which they were referring. As we know, the Nile is the water source for Egypt's agricultural endeavors. The first dream which featured the cows coming out of the Nile was depicting the years to come as they would relate specifically to Egypt. The second dream which featured only grain but no Nile was referring to other countries.

Were there any actual differences between the way the years of plenty and famine affected Egypt as opposed to other lands?

The Meshech Chochmah points out that there were two differences, and they are both reflected in the exchange between Pharaoh and Yosef:

Firstly, as the Parsha describes, the stockpiling of grain during the years of plenty was something which took place only in Egypt. This either means that other countries did not think to do this, or they tried but were unsuccessful.⁵ As we have seen, the utilization of the years of plenty to provide for the years of famine is what is alluded to by the two sets of cows standing near each other. This will further explain why this detail was mentioned in the first dream – which pertained to Egypt, but not the second dream – which pertained to other countries.

The second difference relates to the fact that when Yaakov came to Egypt, the famine stopped, even though it was then only the second of the seven predicted lean years.⁶ In other countries, however, the famine persisted for the full seven years. In light of the above idea that the two dreams refer to two different locations, the Meshech Chochmah shows how this distinction is already contained within Yosef's words. Commenting on the meaning of the thin cows and thin ears of grain, Yosef says:

וְשֵׁבַע הַפְּרוֹת הַרְקוֹת וְהָרְעָת הָעֵלֶת אֲחֵרֵיהֶן שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים הֵנָּה וְשֵׁבַע הַשְּׂבָלִים הַרְקוֹת...
יְהִיוּ שִׁבְעַת שָׁנֵי רָעָב

The seven thin and weak cows who emerged after them – they are seven years; and the seven thin ears of grain... will be seven years of famine.⁷

We see that Yosef does not express the meaning of the two thin entities in exactly the same way. While he explains that the thin ears of grain “will be seven years of famine,” when it comes to the seven thin cows, he does not specify but rather states more generally that “they are seven years.” The meaning behind this differentiation is that since

5 See Rashi to 41:55 s.v. *vatir'av*, based on *Midrash Bereishis Rabah*.

6 See Rashi to *Bereishis* 47:10, based on *Midrash Tanchuma*. See also *Sifrei to Parshas Ekev* sec. 38 for a discussion as to whether the famine resumed in Egypt after Yaakov passed away.

7 Pasuk 27.

the second dream refers to other lands, Yosef was able to specify that there would be seven years of famine. However, since Egypt was not to experience seven years of famine, Yosef found himself unable to state more than the fact that “they are seven years.”

Yosef’s words of interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams are thus multi-layered. They are, first and foremost, a response to Pharaoh’s recalling of his dream. Additionally, they contain a response to aspects of the dreams which Pharaoh failed to recall. Moreover, they include a nuanced allusion to the unique way Egypt would experience the years of famine, the full meaning of which would only become apparent years later with the arrival of Yaakov in Egypt.