

## Shemot - Guided by wisdom

Rabbi Eliezer Barany

**A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.” So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses. (Shemot 1: 8-11)**

### 1. Respectable Brothers

In this week’s parsha B’nei Yisrael, who had previously been welcomed with open arms into the land of Egypt, became enslaved. What led to this change in attitude? How did the guests of the sovereign go from cherished members of society to servants of their master?

The above pesukim mention that the Egyptians were worried that the Israelites, who have become too numerous, might join the enemies of Egypt. What caused such a distrust of the Jewish people that replaced the previous welcoming attitude of the Egyptian people? The Torah explains, “*Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation.*”<sup>1</sup>

If we look to the previous pesukim, we see that the deaths of Yosef and his brothers are mentioned directly before the enslavement of the Jews. It seems that the Torah is establishing some sort of connection between these two matters. In fact, Rashi later explains the Torah’s enumeration of the days of Levi was for this purpose:

AND THE YEARS OF THE LIFE OF LEVI WERE etc. — Why is the number of the years of Levi mentioned? In order to tell us how long the period of slavery lasted — because so long as even one of the sons of Jacob (lit. the tribes) remained alive there was no slavery imposed upon the Israelites, as it is said,

---

<sup>1</sup> Sefer Shemot 1:6

(Exodus 1:6) “And Joseph died and all his brethren”, and afterwards it is stated (Exodus 1:8), “Now there arose a king” (who enslaved them); and Levi lived the longest of all of them (Seder Olam 3). (Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Shemot 6:16)

Rashi tells us that slavery did not come to fruition until all of the sons of Yaakov had passed. What was so special about Yosef and his brothers that slavery did not commence until they were no longer present? If we look to last week’s parsha, we can gain some insight into why the brothers were held in such high regard in the eyes of the Egyptians.

## **2. Honor for Yaakov**

At first it seemed that no honor was given to the brothers, save Yosef. Rashi notes this when summing up the gemara:

AND HIS BRETHREN AND ALL THAT WENT UP WITH HIM — here, speaking of their return to Egypt, it mentions his brothers before the Egyptians who went with him whereas when speaking of their journey to Canaan to bury their father it mentions the Egyptians before his brothers, as it is said, (Genesis 50:7) “and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh ...” and afterwards it states (Genesis 50:8) “and all the house of Joseph and his brothers”. But the explanation is: because they (the Egyptians) saw how much respect the kings of Canaan paid to Jacob by hanging their crowns on his coffin they now treated them (the sons) with much respect and gave them precedence on the return journey (Sotah 13a). (Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Beresheit 50:14)

In referencing an earlier event, the gemara explains that the brothers gained favor from the people of Egypt upon witnessing the honor paid to them by the kings of Canaan. They had already respected Yosef, second in command and savior of Egypt. However, that honor and esteem did not transfer to the brothers until this specific incident. What event took place that bestowed this admiration? The gemara explains:

And does a boxthorn bush have a threshing floor? Thorns are not collected and eaten. Rabbi Abbahu says: This teaches that they surrounded the casket

of Jacob with crowns, like this threshing floor that is surrounded with boxthorns, because the children of Esav and the children of Yishmael and the children of Keturah all came to the burial of Jacob. A Sage taught: Initially, they all came to wage war with the family of Jacob, but once they saw the crown of Joseph, the viceroy of Egypt, hanging on the casket of Jacob, they all took their crowns and hung them on the casket of Jacob. (Mesechet Sotah 13a)

The gemara says that the children of Esav, Yishmael, and Keturah came to do battle with the family of Yaakov. However, once they saw the crown of Yosef hanging on the casket of Yaakov, they placed their crowns on his casket. Apparently, it was the sight of Yosef's crown that led them to this action. What would cause the sight of Yosef's crown to lead them to place their crowns, to display honor? Iyun Yaakov<sup>2</sup> explains that the sons of Esav, Yishmael, and Keturah were worried that they might need to further rely on Yosef. During the years of famine, they, along with the rest of the world, needed to rely on Egypt to sustain them. They thought that perhaps they might need future help from Egypt, from Yosef.

The problem seems to be that there are conflicting testimonies. The gemara says that the sons of Esav, Yishmael, and Keturah placed their crowns on Yaakov's coffin due to Yosef. They certainly were not planning to honor Yaakov, they came to wage war and contest Yaakov's right to the legacy of Avraham! However, the Egyptian people saw this as honor being given to Yaakov. So who was being honored, Yaakov or Yosef?

### **3. Surprising family reunion**

It could be that the Egyptian people were mistaken and misinterpreted the intentions of the sons of Esav, Yishmael, and Keturah. However, the gemara does not say that they *thought* the people were honoring Yaakov, rather, the gemara says that they *saw* the honor given to Yaakov. In fact, the sons of Esav, Yishmael, and Keturah placed their crowns on Yaakov's casket. They did not need to do this, they could have merely desisted from war!

---

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Jacob ben Joseph Reischer, author of *Shevus Yaakov*, commentary on *Ein Yaakov*

However, why did the people travel so far to wage war in the first place? Did they not expect to see Yosef accompany the burial? If they did not, certainly after Yosef would hear of this battle and would decline to offer support to and may even wage his own battle against them.

From this surprise it seems to be evident that the sons of Esav, Yishmael, and Keturah did not know that it was Yosef who was viceroy of Egypt, the one who sustained them. When did they find out? When they saw the crown of Yosef hanging on Yaakov's coffin, the crown of Yaakov's son. They were astounded. After preparing to war with their brothers, they had now encountered the second in command of Egypt.

#### **4. Recognition**

Upon this realization, they could have done one of two things. They could have merely desisted from war, or they could have joined in honoring Yaakov. They had not just withdrawn from a fight, they had actively paid deference to Yaakov. It seems to me that they were not merely being strategically sound, rather, they were admitting that the legacy of Avraham went exclusively through Yaakov, not the other descendants. The son of Yaakov was the second most powerful person in the region. They saw that Hashem was with Yosef, Yaakov's child. They recognized that Yaakov was the sole heir to the path of Avraham. With that in mind, they honored Yaakov, the representative of Avraham.

After the Egyptian people saw Yaakov receiving this tremendous sign of deference, they recognized that the brothers deserved similar admiration that was given to both Yosef and Yaakov. So what was the initial source of awe surrounding Yosef and Yaakov? It is clear why they would have cherished Yosef. He saved them from famine! Why would they honor Yaakov?

#### **5. Walking with wisdom**

How did Yosef save the people? He developed a calculating plan for the people to succeed. He used wisdom to guide his actions. Yaakov shared this feature. When giving blessings to Menashe and Ephraim, he <sup>3</sup>שָׁכַל אֶת-יָדָיו, moved his hands with wisdom. He was a man who was guided by wisdom.

---

<sup>3</sup> Bereishit 48:14

The Rabbis harped on the import of this message, as it is highlighted in the Haftorah:

וְשָׁמַרְתָּ אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ לִלְכֹּת בְּדַרְכָּיו לְשֹׁמֵר חֻקֹּתָיו מִצְוֹתָיו וְעִדּוּתָיו כַּכָּתוּב בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה לְמַעַן תִּשְׁכַּח יָלֵאֵת כָּל־אִשָּׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה וְאֵת כָּל־אִשָּׁר תִּפְגַּח שָׁם

And keep the charge of the Lord your God to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, and His commandments, and His judgments, and His testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that you may may **act with wisdom** in all that you do, and wherever you turn. (Book of Melachim 1 Chapter 2 verse 3)

So now we see that Yaakov and Yosef were guided with wisdom. What about the brothers? Once the people saw the approbation given to Yaakov, they recognized that this wasn't just a father and son duo, rather, this was a family of notoriety. The cousins who also descended from Avraham did not share in this feature. The cousins acknowledged this fact and revealed to the Egyptians that all of the sons of Israel were unique. Rashi makes this exact point, quoting Bereishit Rabbah:

Before you came down hither people spread rumours about me that I was born a slave; through you it became public that I am a free-man by birth. If I were to kill you what would people say? “He saw a party of fine young men and he prided himself on his relationship with them, saying “These are my brothers”, but afterwards he killed them. Have you ever heard of a man killing his brothers?!” (Commentary of Rashi on Sefer Bereisheit 50:21)

The midrash reveals that the people of Egypt did not fully revere Yosef. Despite coming to Egypt and saving the people, they still had some hesitancy towards his greatness. So even though the people who accompanied Yosef to bury Yaakov let him move first, there was some deficit in his reputation. After they saw how great the family was, both Yosef and the brothers gained esteem in their eyes.

## 6. Motivation

We see that the people of Egypt honored and revered B'nai Yisrael. Why? Because they acted with wisdom. It was only until after they had passed, when the Jews stopped following in the ways of Hashem, that this admiration was

diminished. Hopefully seeing the people's response to those walking with wisdom can help motivate us to improve, and modify, our Avodat Hashem.