

בס"ד
ערב ר"ח טבת תשפ"ב
December 3, 2021

פרשת מקץ

When Yosef is told by Pharaoh of his reputation for dream interpretations, he is quick to deny ownership of such powers, replying, "Not I; G-d will give an answer [that will bring] peace to Pharaoh."¹ Just a little while later, after putting his brothers in holding cells for three days, Yosef proceeds to tell them, "Do this and live, for I fear G-d."² While Yosef relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu is not given a tremendous spotlight throughout the Torah, these two instances are certainly worth making note of: not only does Yosef attribute his success to Hashem as an imprisoned man who is given an incredible opportunity to climb the Egyptian social hierarchy, he defines himself as a G-d fearing man even once he has scaled the social stratum and has nothing more to achieve from a materialistic viewpoint. Despite all of the vicissitudes and fluctuations that he endured, Yosef continued to see his ultimate role in life as a servant of the Ribono Shel Olam, a lifetime role that persisted regardless of his position in other capacities.

In 1995, Rabbi Emanuel Feldman wrote an article in *Tradition*³ titled *God and Mrs. Cooperman* about a pious widow in his father's shul who never knew the meaning of any of the words she so carefully davened, and could not tell the difference between the prayers meant for Shabbos, and the prayers meant for when Shabbos coincides with Rosh Chodesh, or Yom Tov, or Chanukah. Consequently, every single Shabbos of the year, the poor woman would recite every single prayer on every single page of the Shabbos davening.

Upon being told by the Rebbetzin that some of the prayers could be omitted, Mrs. Cooperman would smile, and respond: "I ask you, what is so terrible if I do say it? If it isn't Rosh Chodesh today, soon it will be. So it really makes no difference." And so she would continue to thank Hashem for the miracles of Chanukah, in the middle of July.

Recounts Rav Feldman, "We three pre-teen brothers, growing up in our father's shul, were more than a little amused by Mrs. Cooperman. After all, we were already studying Humash and Rashi and knew a little bit of Shulhan Arukh, and we found it absurd that an old lady could not make distinctions between Shabbat and Yom Tov. The mere thought of Mrs. Cooperman reading the shemone esrei or the birkat hamazon straight through without distinguishing one section from the next was enough to brighten up the dullest of days. One year, Rosh Hodesh Tevet happened to coincide with the Shabbat of Hanuka. During the davening we recited ya-ale veyavo and al hanissim and hallel, and at the birkat hamazon after our meal we omitted nothing, reciting everything from beginning to end: the al hanissim for Hanuka, the retze for Shabbat and the ya-ale veyavo for Rosh Hodesh. Suddenly it dawned on us that this was the one time that Mrs. Cooperman was right: on this one Shabbat of the year you simply opened up the siddur and kept going, reciting everything, omitting practically nothing. "Today is her day," we laughed, and from that moment and forevermore the wondrous conflation of Shabbat, Hanuka and Rosh Hodesh became known among us as Mrs. Cooperman's Shabbat. That such a

¹ בראשית מא:טז

² בראשית מא:יח

³ Feldman, Emanuel. "THE EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK: God and Mrs. Cooperman." *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, vol. 29, no. 2, Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), 1995, pp. 1–4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23260802>.

Shabbat occurs just once every few years only intensified the wicked anticipation of the recurrence of that magical moment in time... But while we still chuckle at the memories which her name evokes, our laughter is of a different kind now. She no longer provokes the giggles of mischievous young boys, but rather smiles of appreciation and illumination. Now we realize that while she may have been ignorant of the subtleties and nuances of Torah learning, she possessed something that we utterly lacked then, and probably still lack now: devotion, surrender, and child-like innocence before the Presence of God.

We were too young to understand that in the torrent of words she poured out before the Creator every Shabbat morning there lay a key ingredient of worship. She didn't know the translation of those words, but in a much deeper sense she understood their meaning. She brought to her praying a total submission of the self before the Presence of God, a love for her Creator so consuming that she could not bear to pass over a single word of His holy siddur. She worshiped God not from knowledge or intellect, but from an inner spirit that transcends the mind. She did not know the proofs for the existence of God, but she needed none, for God was not an abstraction but a reality. She had no idea of the philosophical underpinnings of prayers, but when she said barukh ata, she knew she was talking to her personal Creator and that He was listening. She did not know the subtle differences between faith and trust and belief, and her prayer calendar was a seamless web which did not distinguish between one kind of holiness and the next, and she thanked God for the miracle of the Hanuka oil every Shabbat, and ushered in the new moon every week of the year, but she loved God, and her greatest joy was to engage in conversation with Him...

... In our restless society, when a synagogue's worth is often measured by the rapidity with which it runs through its Shabbat service, and when insufficient velocity of prayer is considered sufficient cause to break away and begin a shtiebel of one's own; when omitting a tahanun prayer is cause for joy at a Minyan, and we are irritated by a ba-al tefilla who keeps us in Shul five extra minutes; when our prayers are often a robotic, mechanical service of the lips, in unhappy fulfillment of the mitzvah anashim melumada of Isaiah 29:13 – in such a hurried time, the picture of a Mrs. Cooperman lovingly whispering every word of prayer is a striking counterpoint.

Yes, her davening was halakhically out of joint. Certainly God is addressed differently on a Shabbat-Hanukah than on a normative Shabbat. Granted, our relationship to God is different on Pesah than it is on Rosh Hodesh, and we may not arrogate our transient moods the right to transform different approaches to God into one happy mishmash of words – which is why we don't recite hallel every day of the year. And while we certainly may approach God at any time with any words of our own, the words of the siddur are sacred because, stemming from the Men of the Great Assembly, they reflect the changing divine-human connectedness of different religious seasons of the year that may not be shifted and molded according to our momentary whims.

But when Mrs. Cooperman appeared before her Maker Who is not constrained by the mortal boundaries and limitations of clocks and calendars, and for Whom Time is an indivisible entity, I like to think that perhaps He did not look with disfavor upon the seamless, timeless universe of His loyal servant Mrs. Cooperman."

Both Mrs. Cooperman and Yosef HaTzaddik continued to see their servitude to HaKadosh Baruch Hu as a timeless and transcendent position that surpass any of their other roles in life, and regardless of the situation (or time of year!), they had an alignment of priorities that we should all be so fortunate to emulate. May we be zocheh to take these two examples as paradigms of Avodas Hashem, and strive to imbue such devotion into our lives, l'emes Hashem l'olam.