**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

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Pashat Miketz – פרשת מקץ

December 31, 2016 – ב טבת תשע"ז

This essay is sponsored by Richard Hochman in loving memory of Frances Roth Hochman Z”L; and by Tatyana Tchaikovska and Eugeny Rubashevsky in loving memory of Leah Rubashevsky Z”L.

**Incompetent Magicians**

Pharaoh dreamed of seven ugly gaunt cows eating seven handsome sturdy cows and of seven thin and withered ears of corn swallowing seven solid and full ears of corn.  In the morning, Pharaoh was agitated and desired an explanation for his nocturnal visions.  “He sent for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men, and Pharaoh told them his dreams but none could interpret them for Pharaoh (Genesis 41:8).”

It is implausible that the Egyptian magicians had no answers for Pharaoh.  Unlike in the case of the Chaldean wise men who were at a loss for words when summoned by Nebuchadnezzar to reveal both the substance of the Babylonian king’s dream and its interpretation, the Egyptian wise men heard the content of the dream and were free to offer possible interpretations.  Presumably they tried, but their guesses were unconvincing (Rashbam).  One can infer this from a close reading of the final clause of 41:8.  The inability of the wise men to interpret the dream was not absolute; it was only so “for Pharaoh,” meaning to his personal satisfaction.

In the Midrash, Rabbi Levi suggested that the wise men and magicians did offer interpretations, but that their “learned” speculation fell upon deaf ears.  They understood the first dream about cows to mean that Pharaoh would beget seven daughters, but that, tragically, he would also bury them.  The second dream about grain was interpreted to mean that Pharaoh would conquer seven kingdoms, but that seven provinces would rebel (Genesis Rabbah 89:6).

According to Ramban, Pharaoh was dissatisfied with the various interpretations put forth by his counselors because they based their theories on the incorrect premise that Pharaoh had had two distinct and unrelated dreams.  The Biblical text repeatedly hints that Pharaoh knew that the two dreams were merely slight variations on the same theme, even before Joseph explicitly confirmed that to be so.  In 41:7, Pharaoh awakens and is startled by the realization that it was all a “dream” (written in the singular).  In 41:15, Pharaoh first speaks to Joseph: “I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it.”  His use of the singular instead of the expected plural is meaningful.

Nahum Sarna suggested that Pharaoh was unimpressed by the magicians’ interpretations because it is the usual behavior of royal underlings to flatter their monarch, and accordingly the magicians had put forth interpretations that pertained personally and favorably to Pharaoh despite the fact that he did not at all appear in the dream.  In light of this absence (a first for the Book of Genesis), Pharaoh understood that the dream was not about him.  Rather, it had wider national and international significance.  Accordingly, he found Joseph’s explanation about years of plenty and years of worldwide famine to be compelling.

Rabbenu Bachya was troubled by the Egyptian magicians’ failure correctly to interpret the dream.  He thought the matter to be obvious.  Cows are symbolic of plowing and ears of corn are symbolic of harvesting.  Perforce, the dream is about agricultural bounty followed by devastating crop failure.  Bachya suggested that Divine intervention caused Egyptian interpretative ineptitude so that Joseph would be brought before Pharaoh, elevated to viceroy, and thereby advance the process of Israelite descent to Egypt.  Pseudo-Jonathan preceded Bachya in positing that God’s will for Joseph to be released from prison made necessary the failure of the Egyptian magicians.

Genesis 41 depicts a competition between pagan magicians and a Hebrew youth endowed with the spirit of the Lord.  The heathen wise men are exposed as empty charlatans.  Their science of the occult is proven worthless.  The Hebrew victor denies possessing either innate or acquired talent in the field of augury, instead, he acknowledges that his ability successfully to interpret dreams is a gift from God.  Consistent with the rabbinic dictum that “the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children,” this battle between heathen practitioners of preternatural arts and Israelites relying on the supernatural power of God repeats itself throughout Scripture.

The struggle in Exodus to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go played itself out as a wonders-working competition between Moses and Aaron, on the one side, and the Egyptian magicians, on the other.  Both sides could turn a wooden staff into a serpent; but Aaron’s serpent swallowed his opponents’ staffs (Exodus 7:12).  Both sides could turn water into blood, resulting in Pharaoh’s remaining unconvinced of the need to release his slave population (7:22).  Both sides could produce frogs, but only Aaron was able to remove the frogs (8:4).  Aaron produced lice.  The Egyptians could not, leading them to concede that the causer of the plague was not Aaron but was the “finger of God” (8:15).  The magicians were so thoroughly defeated that during the sixth plague of boils they “were unable to confront Moses because of the inflammation (9:11).”  Badly beaten, the heathens retired from the competition.

Balaam, the infamous Aramean sorcerer hired by the Moabite King Balak to curse the Israelites, was eager to fulfill his mission and injure his Israelite adversaries.  Yet -- partly to provide himself cover for his abysmal professional failure and partly as a sincere admission of truth -- he was forced to concede that his magical talents were of no avail whatsoever when employed to seek an end that was contrary to God’s will (Numbers 24:13).

The Book of Daniel, too, records the superiority of pious believing Jews over pagan magicians in the fields of government service and royal dream interpretation.  Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Aariah impressed Nebuchadnezzar.  “He found them to be ten times better than all the magicians and exorcists throughout his realm (Daniel 1:20).”  When the wise men of Babylon were unable to tell the king about his dream, Nebuchadnezzar, in a wild rage, ordered them killed.  Daniel saved the lives of his fellow bureaucrats by daring to approach the king with a solution.  The king expressed surprise at Daniel’s claim to have an answer.  Daniel retorted, “The mystery about which the king has inquired wise men, exorcists, magicians, and diviners cannot tell to the king.  But there is a God in Heaven Who reveals mysteries (2:27-28).”

The Biblical tales discussed in this essay are not to be understood, primarily, as national victories for Israel over its rivals.  Rather, this strand of Scripture emphasizes the relative ineffectiveness and uselessness of black magic, sorcery, augury, divination, and the like.  If we seek to understand this-worldly phenomena, we must do so by legitimate scientific and rational means.  And on the rare occasion of an inexplicable breakthrough in knowledge, we are bidden to attribute such successes not to our own greatness but to the grace of God.