

OzTORAH

The Royal Minders

Much of the Book of Sh'mot deals with the encounters of the two titans, Pharaoh and Moshe Rabeinu.

According to the rabbinic sages (Sotah 11a) Pharaoh had a council of minders. The three chief royal advisers were Bil-am, Iyov and Yitro.

Without worrying too much about the historical context, let's ask why each of these three was chosen.

Bil-am, as we see from his later relationship with Balak, king of Moav, was good at cursing. If the king was hostile to someone, Bil-am was brought in to pronounce a curse on that person.

Iyov - whom we meet again in the Biblical book named for him - was known for counselling silence in the face of evil: his view was "Put up and shut up".

Minder Number Three, Yitro, turned his back on evil but opted out in favour of building a new, changed society based on more positive principles.

All three had their limitations.

The person we don't hear of in this context was the Hebrew leader Moshe. Though Moshe was not a 100% Egyptian, he was brought up in the royal palace and was well aware of what was going on in the intricacies of palace administration.

So if we imagine Moshe as a fourth counsellor, his contribution to royal policy making would have been unique. Neither cursing, silence or abdication, but consulting God. In the Moshe story, the Burning Bush (Sh'mot 3) symbolised the support of the Almighty.

Pharaoh had his gods but the greatest deity in his pantheon was himself. Moshe however had a different God, the One who ruled over the rulers - the Supreme King of Kings.

When earthly rulers thought they were the greatest, Moshe knew that the real Greatest was the one to listen to.

Rabbi Apple served for 32 years as the chief minister of the Great Synagogue, Sydney, Australia's oldest and most prestigious congregation. He was Australia's highest profile rabbi and held many public roles. He is now retired and lives in Jerusalem. Rabbi Apple is president of the RCA Israel Region. He blogs at www.oztorah.com