

From the Ohr HaChayim

by Jacob Solomon

Par'o said to his servants: "Can there really be found such a person who has the spirit of G-d in him?" (41:38)

So declared Par'o after hearing Yosef's interpretation of his dreams. The thin cows devouring the fat cows and the thin ears of corn swallowing the full ears of corn were G-d Himself communicating the oncoming seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. None of Par'o's wise men gave satisfactory analysis (Rashi to 41:8), and Yosef's elucidation was the only one that struck him as correct.

However, the words "Can there really be found such a person who has the spirit of G-d in him?" seem rather exaggerated in compliments. Cycles of abundance and famine have until very recently been characteristic of Egyptian history. Yosef's explanation on first sight seems rather obvious, something that anyone might come up with. And Egypt, together with Mesopotamia, was the most sophisticated society at that time in the Middle East. Par'o would have no shortage of highly educated consultants. What was unique about Yosef's handling of the dreams that so impressed Par'o?

It may be proposed that Yosef's approach was a specifically Israelite

one, which differed from the Egyptian culture at the time. The pharaohs of Egypt built the temples to accommodate Egyptian gods. Inside the temples, the priests performed ceremonies designed to win the favor of the gods and protect Egypt from disasters. By contrast, the Torah values taking initiative and working together with G-d as Helper.

The Ohr HaChayim sees this teaching within the actual dreams. The dreams themselves alluded to the years of plenty yielding enough grain to support the years of famine. "Let Par'o take action and appoint officers over the land, and prepare the land of Egypt during the seven years of plenty" (41:34) was not Yosef offering unsolicited advice, but part of the actual interpretation of the dreams: the purpose of the dreams. Yosef effectively was telling Par'o: "Your dreams are telling you to avoid famine by planting, harvesting, and storing as much food as possible during the seven years of plenty." With G-d as helper: the dream communicated that only G-d, the deity of the Hebrews, would "answer for the welfare of Par'o" (41:16).

[The fact that Par'o acknowledged the Hand of G-d does not mean that he abandoned his pantheon - as the saying goes, "a man who has twelve gods can tolerate a thirteenth".]

However, other commentaries take

the story more literally: Yosef moved on from interpretation to indeed proffering unsolicited advice. Not only did Yosef promote in G-d's name (41:16) a central Torah value for humanity at large, that the country should act pro-actively and not as fatalists, but he did it in a very subtle way. He implied that the land surviving the famine would be due to the preparation "under Par'o's hand". Thus the deity of the Hebrews, who "would answer for the welfare of Par'o" would take care that Par'o would take the credit for it. He would ensure that Par'o would go down in history for saving the Egyptians from extinction...

Indeed, Rav Elie Munk (1900-1980) goes even further and suggests that Yosef believed that his own dreams (37:5-9) would be fulfilled despite suffering at the hands of his brothers, as a slave, and as a prisoner. That was the moment, to fulfill the dream if he made the most of the opportunity. It may be seen as pushing his chance to make himself indispensable to Par'o, a chance that he had to take because of his dreams when he was 17 years old.

Many people point to their successes, whether in learning, parnasa, shiduchim, or other worthy endeavors as not just being products of hard and persistent work, but responding immediately with presence of mind and proactive assertiveness when an opportunity

momentarily presents itself. They (usually rightly) believe that the risk of failure is better than the pain of regret for not stepping out. 🚪