

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS VAYESHEV

Yosef, the Butler and the Baker – A Deeper Look

BACKGROUND

The final section of our parsha deals with Yosef's encounter with Pharaoh's butler and baker. A brief synopsis of this episode would likely go as follows: Both the butler and the baker incurred Pharaoh's wrath, who threw them in jail, where they met Yosef. While there, they both had dreams, which Yosef interpreted – positively for the butler and negatively for the baker. In time, his interpretations were born out, with the butler being restored to his post and the baker being executed, thereby setting the scene for Yosef's abilities to be recalled by the butler when Pharaoh had his dreams, two years later.

However, a closer look at the verses in this chapter indicates that the matter might not be quite that simple...

THE BUTLER, THE BAKER – AND THE CHIEF BUTLER AND CHIEF BAKER

The key point to note at the outset is that reference to these two individuals seems to shift over the course of the chapter:

- ▷ Verse 1 states that “חָטְאוּ מִשְׁקָה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וְהָאֶפֶה לְאֲדֹנָיָהֶם לְמֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם” – the butler and baker of the king of Egypt sinned against their master, the king of Egypt.”
- ▷ Verse 2 then states: “וַיִּקְצַף פַּרְעֹה עַל שְׁנֵי סֹרִיסָיו עַל שֵׁר הַמִּשְׁקִים וְעַל שֵׁר הָאוֹפִים וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם בְּמַשְׁמַר” – Pharaoh became angry at his two stewards, the chief butler and the chief baker; and he placed them in jail.”
- ▷ Verse 5 says “וַיַּחֲלְמוּ חֲלוֹם שְׁנֵיהֶם... הַמִּשְׁקָה וְהָאֶפֶה אֲשֶׁר לְמֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר אֲסוּרִים בְּבַיִת הַסֵּהר” – They both had a dream... the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were incarcerated in jail.”
- ▷ From that point on until the end of the chapter they are referred to once again as “the chief butler” and the “chief baker.”

What is behind this shift in reference?

The Malbim¹ explains that these are not two ways of referring to two people, but are actually *two sets of two people*. It all began with one of the king's butlers and bakers mishandling his bread and wine. Chazal

¹ The basis of the approach developed by the Malbim is found in the Seforno in this chapter. See also Haamek Davar.

inform us that this took the form of a stone that was baked into the bread and a fly that found its way into his cup of wine. Pharaoh was incensed at this disgraceful lack of service. However, he did not take out his anger on the butler and baker who themselves prepared the wine and bread. Rather, it was their overseers, the chief butler and chief baker whom he held accountable for not ensuring that those who were under them were performing to par. After all, with great prestige comes great responsibility, and hence, the chief butler and baker were thrown into jail. Indeed, this will give us a more nuanced reading of the concluding words of verse 1, which state the butler and baker sinned “לְאֹדְנֵיהֶם לְמֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם”. Although the word “אֹדְנֵיהֶם” in the plural form can be used even when referring to one master, in this instance, it is actually meant in the plural, as these two workers sinned both against “their masters” – the chief butler and baker – and against “the king of Egypt.”

Whatever became of the actual butler and baker who made the actual mistakes? This we do not know. Perhaps they were dispatched forthwith, perhaps they were thrown in some other jail, or perhaps they were simply ignored. Being insignificant does have its advantages. At any rate, the ones who became Yosef's cell-mates were their bosses, the chief butler and baker, as stated in verse 2.

WERE THE DREAMS INTUITIVE?

This brings us to the two dreams. On the one hand, the interpretations Yosef gave do not seem to indicate such great expertise. After all, the chief butler dreamt that he was giving a cup of wine to Pharaoh, while the chief baker dreamt that he wasn't doing anything, not even enough to stop birds from eating all the food in his baskets! What was it then, about Yosef's interpretation that so impressed the chief butler that he would in time recommend Yosef to interpret Pharaoh's dreams?

The answer that although the message of the dreams was quite straightforward, it was also entirely counter-intuitive.

To understand why this is so, we need ask a simple question: Which of these two individuals should have more likely been restored to his former position?

Clearly, the one whose sin against Pharaoh was milder would be more expected to be restored, while the one with the greater sin would be punished. And so we proceed to ask: Which infraction was greater, that with the bread or with the wine? Interestingly, the answer to this question depends on whether we are looking at it from the point of view of the original butler and baker who prepared those items, or from that of their overseers who presented them to Pharaoh:

Regarding the Bread – the problem really lay with the one who baked it, for it was at that stage that he allowed a stone to get into the dough. After that stage, the chief baker could not really have done anything to remove or even detect the problem. If he was punished, it was only because he was ultimately in charge of the offending baker.

Regarding the Wine – the opposite is true. The one who squeezed the grapes and made the wine was not necessarily at fault, for who knows when the fly actually entered the wine, perhaps it was only after! By contrast, the chief butler, who was the one who actually handed the cup to Pharaoh, should have been able to notice the fly before doing so.

It turns out that while in terms of the original butler and baker themselves, it was *the baker* who was more at fault, in terms of their overseers, it was *the chief butler* who was more at fault than the chief baker.

However, this leads us to a problem – for their dreams indicated exactly the opposite. It was specifically the chief butler who dreamt he would be restored while the chief baker dreamt he would be killed. In fact, as we have seen, these dreams would have more appropriately been for the actual butler and baker, but not for them. It is for this reason verse 5, which describes the two overseers dreaming, refers to them as “the butler and the baker”. Although those two individuals were not actually in jail and did not have these

dreams, nevertheless, the messages of their overseers' dreams were actually more appropriate for them.

In brief, although the message of each dream seems quite straightforward, the connection with each of the dreamers themselves was completely inverted.

A very perplexing situation indeed!

“IT IS ONLY THAT YOU SHOULD REMEMBER ME”

Upon hearing the dreams, Yosef informs his companions that the message of the dreams will be fulfilled through them themselves. Each will undergo a reversal of fortune, contrary to all expectation. In three days' time, not only will the chief butler be pardoned and allowed to work in the palace again, he will immediately be restored to his former post, placing the cup in pharaoh's hand. Indeed, the reversal itself is part of the dream, for initially there are no grapes on the vine, reflecting the total lack of prospects for the chief butler's future, yet they subsequently budded and ripened very rapidly, representing the rapid turnabout of events which will result in his reinstatement as Pharaoh's cup-bearer.

Likewise, the chief baker too would experience a reversal, indicated by the initial presence of all manner of baked goods which subsequently were consumed leaving the basket empty.

As to the reason *why* these reversals were about to take place, which were completely contrary to all expectation and defied all comprehension, Yosef proceeds to inform the chief butler:

כִּי אִם זָכַרְתָּנִי אֶתְּךָ כְּאִשֶּׁר יִטֵּב לְךָ... וְהִזְכַּרְתָּנִי אֶל פַּרְעֹה

It is only that you should remember me, when things go well for you... and remember me to Pharaoh.

In other words, Yosef is stating that when you consider all that you experienced here: both of you being placed in jail, thereby bringing you into contact with me, and then having your dreams which I am informing you will mean that you, the chief butler, the one who would surely never leave will be presently reinstated as if nothing had happened, you will come to realize that all this can only be in order for you to remember me and mention me to Pharaoh.

In the event, as we know, Yosef's interpretations of the two dreams were borne out, but it would be another two years before his accompanying message to the chief butler was recalled and acted upon. In the meanwhile: “The chief butler did not remember Yosef, and he forgot him.”