



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Man Proposes, God Disposes

MIKKETZ · 5769

Rarely in the Torah is a sedra break more strategically placed. Last week's sedra ends with Joseph's bid for freedom. Having correctly interpreted the chief steward's dream – that in three days he would be restored to his position – Joseph pleads with him:

“When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon.”

He fails to do so. The last line of last week's sedra underlines the point by repeating it: “The chief steward, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.”

Two years pass. Pharaoh has dreams. None of the interpretations offered by his experts satisfy him. Only then does the chief steward remember Joseph. He is taken from jail, washed, dressed and brought before Pharaoh. He interprets the dreams, proposes a solution to the problem they foretell – seven years of famine, after seven years of plenty – and is made viceroy of Egypt, second in authority only to Pharaoh himself.

Why the delay? Joseph sought his freedom and he obtained it – yet he did not obtain it because he sought it. The steward forgot. Joseph had to wait two years. Something else – Pharaoh's dreams – had to intervene. There was a break between cause and effect – emphasised by the sedra division, which means that we have to wait for a week before hearing the end of the story. Why?

Significantly, this is not the first time the Torah uses such a device in the Joseph narrative. There is an extremely enigmatic passage several chapters earlier when the brothers decide to sell Joseph:

Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels laden with spices, balm and myrrh to be taken to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed. When Midianite merchants passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt.

Who pulled Joseph from the pit? Was it the brothers or the Midianites? The subject, “they,” is ambiguous. The commentators offered many interpretations. Of these, the simplest is given by Rashbam.

He reads it as follows: The brothers, having thrown Joseph into the pit, sat down some distance away to eat. Reuben, sneaking back to rescue Joseph, finds it empty, and cries, “The boy is gone! Now what am I to do?” The brothers do not calm him by telling him they have sold Joseph. They are as surprised as he is. Rashbam’s explanation is that the brothers, having seen the Ishmaelites in the distance, decided to sell Joseph to them, but before they had the chance to do so, a second group of travellers, the Midianites, heard Joseph’s cry, saw the possibility of selling him to the Ishmaelites, and did so.

The brothers intended to sell Joseph, and Joseph was sold, but not by the brothers. They sought to do the deed, and the deed was done, but not by them.

Unusually, but of immense significance, the Torah is telling us something about Divine Providence. Between intention and outcome in both cases, there was an intervention – the appearance of the Midianites in one case, Pharaoh’s dreams in the other. We are being given a rare glimpse of the workings of providence in history. Nothing in the Joseph story happens by chance – and where an event most looks like chance, that is where Divine intervention is most evident in retrospect.

We are at best co-authors of our lives. Not realising it at the time, the very act the brothers did to prevent Joseph’s dreams coming true, was the first step in their coming true. As for Joseph, unbeknown to him, his life was part of a larger story – revealed by God to Abraham generations earlier when He told him that his children would suffer slavery in a land not their own.

Sometimes we too catch a glimpse of the workings of fate in our lives. Many times, I have had prayers answered – but never when I expected, nor in the way I expected. In many cases, the answer came after I had given up hope. Often God answers our prayers. Providence exists. As Shakespeare said: “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will.” But there is a pause, an intervention, a break in the sequence of cause and effect, as if to say: things do not happen merely because we wish them, but because they are part of the larger scheme of things.

What Joseph discovered is that, as well as initiative and enterprise, we also need patience, humility and trust. If our prayers are legitimate, God will answer them, but not necessarily when or how we think He will. That is the meaning of Mikketz – “at the end of two full years.” We must do our part; God will do His. Between them there is a gap, not just in time, but in consciousness. We learn that we are not sole masters of our fate. Sometimes it is only after many years that, looking back, we see the pattern in our life, and understand how Providence has shaped our destiny. Mikketz is the space we make in our minds for the things not under our control. The name of that space is faith.