



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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מקץ תש"ף
Mikketz 5780

Joseph and the Risks of Power

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

Political power can lead to harm - policies must be humane and politicians humble.



PARSHAT MIKKETZ IN A NUTSHELL

This week's *parsha* begins with Joseph at his lowest point, chained and forgotten in prison. But when Pharaoh is disturbed by two dreams, his butler remembers Joseph is an interpreter and may be able to help explain them. Joseph tells Pharaoh that the dreams contain a prophecy that there will be 7 good years in Egypt, followed by 7 years of drought and famine, but he also tells Pharaoh he has a solution to the problem – storehouses during the good years to help them survive the bad years. Pharaoh is impressed, and appoints Joseph to be his Prime Minister. Only Pharaoh himself is now more powerful than Joseph.

The famine affects Canaan too, and Joseph's family struggle, until Jacob sends the ten elder brothers to Egypt to buy sackfuls of food. (Egypt is the only place with extra supplies because of Joseph's plan!) The brothers come before

Joseph, but do not recognise him as their brother, because he has now grown up, and is dressed and speaking like an Egyptian. Joseph, however, recognises them immediately.

Without revealing who he is, Joseph creates a situation for the brothers that is designed to test them. He tells them to come back with their youngest brother, Benjamin, and then he accuses Benjamin of stealing from him. The test is this: will they abandon another brother like they abandoned Joseph, or have they learned to be better brothers? We will have to wait until next week's *parsha* to find out!

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How did Joseph get his new job? Did he plan it?



THE CORE IDEA

The story of Joseph in Mikketz shows us the fastest and most extreme transformation of one man in all of the Torah. In a single day, Joseph moves from zero to hero, from forgotten, abandoned prisoner to Prime Minister of Egypt. He becomes the second most powerful man in the land, controlling all the money in the whole country.

Before this, Joseph was hardly ever in control of his own life. He had things 'done to' him, rather than being the 'doer'. First his father, then his brothers, then the Midianites and Ishmaelites, then Potiphar and his wife, then the prison warden, all directed his life. He showed a special talent for understanding dreams, but dreams are also things that happen to you, not things you choose.

Then, after explaining the chief butler's dream, Joseph realised that the chief butler would soon be in a position to help him get released from prison, and asked him to do this – a decisive act! However, the butler "did not remember Joseph, and forgot him." This one attempt to take control of his life failed. Despite being the centre of the story, Joseph was still not in control.

But then, suddenly, everything changes. Joseph is asked to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. But he does far more than that. First he interprets the dreams. They are a prophecy of the next fourteen years. The people are in danger of starving during seven years of famine. But with a stroke of genius, Joseph solves the problem. Store a fifth of the

produce during the years of plenty, and it will then be available to feed the people during the famine.

Pharaoh is so impressed, he gives Joseph the job of carrying out the plan. At the age of 30, he becomes the most powerful man in Egypt, next to Pharaoh. He travels round the country, arranges for collection of the grain, and ensures that it is stored safely. There is so much that, in the Torah's words, he stops keeping records because it is plentiful beyond measure. When the years of plenty are over, his

position becomes even more powerful. Everyone turns to him for food. Pharaoh himself tells the people, "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you."

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the source of Joseph's power and authority?
2. What kind of a leader did Joseph become?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Once a non-Jewish man came to see the great Rabbi Shammai, saying he would like to convert to Judaism if the entire Torah could be taught to him while he stood on one foot. Shammai was furious at the idea that the Torah was being mocked, or that it could be taught in mere minutes, so he grabbed a nearby stick and chased the man away.

The same non-Jewish man then approached Hillel, a Rabbi just as learned and respected as Shammai, and he made the same request. Hillel smiled and summarised the whole Torah in one sentence: "All you need to truly understand is this: That which is hateful to you, do not do to another person. That is the entire

Torah, the rest is just an interpretation of that. Now go and study it!" Hillel converted that man to Judaism.

Shabbat 31a

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why did Shammai react in the way he did? What gave him the right?
2. What kind of values can we see here from Hillel by his behaviour and leadership style?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The second half of the story shifts its focus from Joseph, Prime Minister of Egypt, controller of its economy, to Joseph, son of Jacob, and his relationship with the brothers who, 22 years earlier, had sold him as a slave. It is this story that will dominate the next few chapters, rising to a climax in Judah's speech at the beginning of the next parsha.

One effect of this is that it tends to move Joseph's political and administrative activity into the background. But if we read the story carefully – not just how it begins, but how it continues – we discovered something quite disturbing. The narrative is taken up in next week's parsha in chapter 47. It describes an extraordinary sequence of events.

It begins when the Egyptians have used up all their money buying grain. They come to Joseph asking for food, telling him they will die without it, and he replies by telling them he will sell it to them in exchange for ownership of their livestock. They willingly do so: they bring their horses, donkeys, sheep and cattle. The next year he sells them grain in exchange for their land. The result of these transactions is that within a short period of time – seemingly a mere three years – he has transferred to Pharaoh's ownership all the money, livestock and private land, with the exception of the land of the Priests, which he allowed them to retain.

Not only this, but the Torah tells us that Joseph "removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to

the other" (Bereishit 47:21) – a policy of enforced resettlement that would later in history be used against Israel by the Assyrians.

The question is - was Joseph right to do this? Seemingly, he did it of his own accord. He was not asked to do so by Pharaoh. The result of all these policies is that unprecedented wealth and power were now concentrated in Pharaoh's hand – power that would eventually be used against the Israelites. More seriously, twice we encounter the phrase *avadim le-Faro*, "slaves to Pharaoh" – one of the key phrases in the Exodus account and in the answer to the questions of the child in the Seder service (Bereishit 47:19, 25). With this difference: *that it was said, not by the Israelites, but by the Egyptians.*

During the famine itself, the Egyptians say to Joseph, "Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and *we, with our land, will be slaves to Pharaoh,*" (Bereishit 47:19). Later, agreeing to a permanent arrangement whereby they would be Pharaoh's servants, giving him a fifth of all they produce, they said "You have saved our lives. May we find favour in the eyes of our lord; *we will be slaves to Pharaoh.*"

This entire passage, which begins in our parsha and continues into next week's, raises a most serious question. We tend to assume that the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt was a consequence of, and punishment for, the brothers selling Joseph as a slave. But Joseph himself turned the Egyptians into

a nation of slaves. What is more, he created the highly centralised power that would eventually be used against his people.

Aaron Wildavsky in his book about Joseph, *Assimilation versus Separation*, says that Joseph “left the system into which he was elevated less humane than it was by making Pharaoh more powerful than he had been.” Leon Kass, in *The Beginning of Wisdom*, says about Joseph’s decision to make the people pay for food in the years of famine (food that they themselves had handed over during the years of plenty): “Joseph is saving life by making Pharaoh rich and, soon, all-powerful. While we may applaud Joseph’s forethought, we are rightly made uneasy by this man who profits from exercising his god-like power over life and death.”

It may be that the Torah intends no criticism of Joseph whatsoever. He was acting loyally to Pharaoh and judiciously to Egypt as a whole. Or it may be that there is an implied criticism of his character. As a child, he dreamt of power; as an adult he exercised it; but Judaism is critical of power and those who seek it. Another possibility: the Torah is warning us of the hazards and ambiguities of politics. A policy that seems wise in one generation discloses itself as dangerous in the next. Or perhaps Leon Kass is right when he says, “Joseph’s sagacity is technical and managerial, not moral and political. He is long on forethought and planning but short on understanding the souls of men.”

What this entire passage represents is the first intrusion of politics into the life of the family of the covenant. From the beginning of Shemot to the end of Devarim, politics will dominate the narrative. But this is our first introduction to it: Joseph’s appointment to a key position in the Egyptian court. And what it is telling us is the sheer ambiguity of power. On the one hand, you cannot create or sustain a society without it. On the other hand, it almost cries out to be abused. Power is dangerous, even when used with the best of intentions by the best of people. Joseph acted to strengthen the hand of a Pharaoh who had been generous to him, and would be likewise to the rest of his family. He could not have foreseen what that same power might make possible in the hands of a “new Pharaoh who knew not Joseph.”

Tradition called Joseph *ha-tzaddik*, the righteous. At the same time, the Talmud says that he died before his brothers, “because he assumed airs of authority.” Even a tzaddik with the best of intentions, when he or she enters politics and assumes airs of authority, can make mistakes. **I believe the great challenge of politics is that politicians remain humble and policies are humane and so that power, always so dangerous, is not used for harm. That is an ongoing challenge, and tests even the best.**

QUESTION TO PONDER:

How could Joseph have wielded his power in a more humane way?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

“There is a distinction between leadership and authority. Authority is something you have in virtue of office or the position you hold in a family, community, or society... Judaism has tended to be critical of power. Kings had it and often abused it. Prophets had none, but their influence has lasted to this day... Judaism is about leadership by influence, not about authority in virtue of formal office.”

Daring Greatly: Introduction to Lessons in Leadership, p. xxii-xxiv



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What do you understand to be the agenda behind Joseph's leadership decisions?
2. Do you think Joseph was cruel?
3. What is the lesson to be learned here? Did Joseph have an opportunity to learn it in his lifetime?



QUESTION TIME

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IN A NUTSHELL

1. Joseph became the second most powerful man in Egypt through a complex series of events over which he had no control. It seems clear from the story that this was not his plan or agenda. He merely wanted to gain his freedom, and probably just to return to his family and the land of his birth. But God had other ideas, and before he knew what had happened, he had become Pharaoh's viceroy. Pharaoh saw that he was talented, intuitive, and eager to help, and therefore likely had the potential to be a great asset to Egypt, if given a leadership role. The question is, what did he do with this power.

THE CORE IDEA

1. The simple answer to this question is Pharaoh. Pharaoh gave him the authority when he appointed him as his viceroy. Pharaoh had this ability because of his own power, which he chose to share with Joseph. However, we can also say that Joseph earned this power through his intelligence, both spiritual (that he interpreted the dreams successfully) and political (and when he created an economic plan for Egypt). Finally, of course, it is God that is the ultimate source of all of our resources, and it was God's plan to place Joseph in this position.
2. This is the subject of this week's *Covenant & Conversation*, and a full evaluation is explored in the *Thinking More Deeply* section. At the beginning it seems that Joseph was a highly competent and deeply thoughtful leader. It is also possible to say that his loyalty and full commitment is to his new country and its leader. If we look further in Rabbi Sacks' interpretation this week, we will see that this was at the expense of its people, and arguably without engaging the core values of compassion and morality.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The man came to Shammai because he was one of the greatest Rabbis of his generation. He said he was interested in converting to Judaism and the Rabbis held the key to that. The source of Shammai's power was his knowledge, his position as leader of the community, a spiritual and halachic authority. Shammai felt the man was mocking the Torah. The request was so ludicrous he must be a time-waster who needed to be sent away, because there is no way to learn the entire corpus of Jewish knowledge in a few moments (while standing on one foot). So, Shammai concluded, he could not have been genuine if he was not showing respect, and therefore he did not merit a respectful response. To show him his behaviour was unacceptable, Shammai chased him away.
2. Hillel, unlike Shammai, found room for compassion, even though the request seemed unreasonable. Perhaps the man was joking, but his question could still be answered gently. Perhaps the man was genuine and merely felt he would not be able to embark on a long educational journey of some depth. Hillel applied his power through the lens of compassion. However, he left the man with an eternal message, (one which also addressed the possibility he was not genuine and was there to mock.) Don't do to others what you wouldn't want done to you. This is the core message of the Torah – concern and love for your fellow.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. The plan concocted by Joseph saved the Egyptian people from starvation and rewarded Pharaoh financially. The economy and state flourished more than the people though, because by the end of the famine, the Egyptians were penniless and landless, and totally dependent on Pharaoh and the state. If Joseph's leadership had been based on values such as compassion and concern for the weak in society, he would have found a way to maintain the dignity of the people of Egypt and ensure they had the means for independent economic sustainability following the famine.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. Joseph's clear agenda was twofold – his loyalty to Egypt, and to Pharaoh as its leader, meant that he wanted to ensure that there was enough food for all during those years of famine, and he also so an opportunity to create economic growth and power for Pharaoh. The plan he created to deal with the impending economic disaster was designed to ensure the economic stability of the institutions of state in Egypt. Unfortunately this agenda and the resulting plan was not focused on the long-term needs of the people of Egypt, exploiting them and their need for food, to gain power and wealth for the leader, and taking their animals, land and freedom in exchange for the same food they had willingly put into storage just a few years earlier.
2. This did not make Joseph cruel *per se*. But in choosing this agenda, rather than focusing on the needs of the people, Joseph was not demonstrating leadership based on the values of compassion and concern for the individual subjects of the realm. It was a leadership strategy lacking humanity.
3. Joseph's leadership ultimately led to the enslavement of the Egyptian people to Pharaoh and the state, and in the longer term it enabled a future ruler to enslave Joseph's own people, in the cruelest way. The lesson to be learned here is that a leadership focused on anything other than the concerns and needs of the people is a leadership lacking in humanity and compassion, and this can ultimately lead to cruelty and injustice. Joseph did not learn this message in his lifetime, but the message is there for us to learn with the hindsight of history.