



Parsha Encounters

1 Teves 5767/Dec. 22, 2006

Parshas Miketz — Rabbi Aaron Rokach

Perfect Vision

The *Medrash Rabba* (30:8) mentions five individuals who, in the words of the *medrash*, saw "a new world." One of these individuals is *Yosef*. The *medrash* bases this observation on the following two *p'sukim*: In *Tehillim* (105:8), the *posuk* states (in reference to *Yosef*): "they afflicted him with chains." In this week's *parsha* (42:6), the *posuk* states (also in reference to *Yosef*): "he is the ruler of all Egypt." The *medrash* notes that these two *p'sukim* seem to be inconsistent and reconciles them by explaining that *Yosef* must have seen "a new world."

At first glance, this *medrash* seems difficult to understand. The two *p'sukim* that the *medrash* mentions are simply referring to different points in *Yosef's* life. Why does the *medrash* consider these *p'sukim* inconsistent? Also, what does the *medrash* mean that *Yosef* saw "a new world," and how does this help to explain the *p'sukim*?

One of my *Rabbeim*, *R' Yitchok Kahn*, explained the *medrash* as follows: Looking back at the pattern of *Yosef's* life in last week's *parsha*, we see a remarkably traumatic sequence of events. In the beginning of *Parshas Vayeshev*, *Yosef* is the favored son of *Ya'akov*, learning with his father and enjoying his special attention. Suddenly, he is seized by his own brothers, stripped of his *K'sones Pasim*, his special cloak, and thrown into a pit to die. Shortly afterwards, the brothers change their minds and sell him into slavery instead. *Yosef* is carried away from his privileged life as *Ya'akov's* favorite son to be a degraded slave in a strange faraway land. Eventually, *Yosef* achieves some measure of success in *Potifar's* house, and is appointed to a position of authority. However, that too dissipates when *Yosef* is publicly humiliated by the accusations of *Potifar's* wife and sentenced to rot in an Egyptian

prison. *Parshas Vayeshev* ends with the failure of *Yosef's* attempt to secure his freedom with the help of the *Sar Hamashkim*.

After all that happened to *Yosef* we would have expected him to be depressed and completely broken by his traumatic experiences. Yet, in the beginning of this week's *parsha*, we are presented with a different picture. *Yosef* is summoned to the palace and asked to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. Facing a powerful ruler who wields absolute life and death authority, *Yosef* is not afraid to offer a negative prediction of the future based on his interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. Also, *Yosef* makes such an impression that Pharaoh takes the unprecedented step of appointing him, an imprisoned foreigner, to be his second in command. *Yosef* then proceeds to rule over Egypt, a world power at that time, with an iron fist. How is it possible that after all he had been through, *Yosef* still maintained the poise and confidence to not only face Pharaoh, but also to impress him to such a degree? How did *Yosef* maintain the strength and willpower necessary to rule forcefully over a powerful nation like Egypt? This is the difficulty the *medrash* is raising.

The *medrash* answers that when times were rough *Yosef* saw "a new world." He was capable of looking past his current situation and seeing the potential for a brighter future once his present challenges were overcome. This is the "new world" that *Yosef* saw. *Yosef* wasn't drowned by his current state of difficulty and suffering. Rather, he saw all of his challenges as necessary steps in the fulfillment of *Hashem's* master plan and patiently worked through them one step at a time until he eventually persevered.

Rabbi Rokach learns nightly at the Kollel.

Halacha Encounters

Birthdays

Rabbi Henoch Plotnik

This week's parsha begins with Pharaoh's dreams and Yoseph's subsequent interpretations. The narrative actually begins with the incarceration of Yoseph at the end of Parshas Vayeshev and his fame spreading to Pharaoh's palace as an expert interpreter of dreams. It was on "yom holedes es Pharaoh" that Yoseph's wisdom became revealed to all. This is the only direct reference to a birthday in the entire Torah. Interestingly, Rabbeinu Bachya in the beginning of Shmos writes that this party was actually for Pharaoh's son. We know from the Mishna in the beginning of Ms' Avoda Zorah that kings celebrated their birthdays (g'nusia) as a matter of course. How they celebrated is not necessarily known to us although the widespread custom of birthday cakes has been traced to the ancient Greeks who would put honey cakes on the altar of their goddess on the sixth day of every month, a celebrated birthday of their "tiflah". (See Journal of Halacha #51 P. 68-69 for some secular mar'eh m'komos).

To be sure, birthdays cannot be totally insignificant as we know from the Gemara in Megilla that Moshe Rabbeinu's birthday was considered a significant good omen in the days of Haman. Similarly, we make special note of the birthday of Dovid by reading Megillas Rus on Shavuos (Sha'arei T'shuva Orach Chaim 494:6). It is brought in the name of the Chidah quoting mekubalim that a person's "mazal" (heavenly tendencies) is stronger on his birthday. This concept is also mentioned in Ben Yehoyoda on the well known Gemara of R' Elazar ben Azaria's appointment to be the Nasi. It was because it was his 18th birthday that he merited such a prominent promotion. In fact, the Yerushalmi in Rosh Hashana (3:8) says that Amalek chose soldiers to fight B'nai Yisroel whose birthday coincided with the day of his attack. Apparently, even the nations of the world understood the power of the birthday although it is implied in Rishonim (see Chizkuni at the end of B'shalach) that they

used witchcraft as a secret weapon and knew how to tap in to its power. This may have been the significance of birthdays to them.

There is a reference in Hoshea (7:5) to "Yom Malkeinu" which Metzudos Dovid says is a reference to the king's birthdays, although the Navi gives scathing rebuke related to how they were celebrated — in a state of wild drunkenness. The Abarbanel writes that customarily Jewish kings made a simcha on that day. The Gemara at the end of Moed Katan tells us that Rav Yosef made a Yom Tov when he turned sixty because he had passed the age of kares. However, the celebration was not necessarily a "birthday" one, rather it was an acknowledgement of his having passed 60. Interestingly, the Chasam Sofer in parshas Vayera writes that he would celebrate the anniversary of his bris every year. It is also brought in the name of Minhagei Chasam Sofer that on his own birthday he would make a Siyum on Chumash and give out money to his talmidim, quite contrary to common practice. It is also reported that when Rav Shmuel Salant turned 70 and 80, the Yerushalmi Jews made a party in his honor and gave Tzedaka the sum of his years. In fact, when he turned 93 there was yet another celebration and he was sent a cake by Rav Chaim Berlin ZT"l. (Journal of Halacha quoting the famous historian Rabbi Moshe Kolodny). Similarly the K'sav Sofer would make an annual siyum mesechta on his birthday.

One thing is clear; whether there are grounds or not to actually make a celebration on a birthday, we may certainly use the opportunity to thank Hashem for the gift of life and resolve to make the most of it.

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This weeks Parsha Encounters is sponsored in honor of the Birthdays of Rivky and Devorah Leah.