

TIMELESS TORAH

PARSHAT MIKEITZ - Points of Light in the Confusion of Night

The End of an Era

During the latter part of the twentieth century, the term *Anthropocene* was increasingly popularised as a proposed title for a new geologic time interval, or epoch, in which Earth conditions and processes have been significantly altered by human impact. In March 2024, however, after fifteen years of deliberation, the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) rejected the formal adoption of the Anthropocene. While the committee noted the undeniable effect that human behaviour has had on the Earth in recent decades, there were insufficient grounds to mark this period as a truly new period in the Geological Time Scale. The beginning of a new epoch, whether geological or in terms of human history, is notoriously difficult to identify.

This week's parshah begins with the end of the previous episode: '*Vayehi mikeitz shenatayim yamim*', after a further two years in jail, Yosef was released in order to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. The Hebrew word, *mikeitz*, however, is uncommon. We would have expected the word *lebasof*, the more usual term for an ending, to denote the conclusion of Yosef's jail term. What is the significance of this unusual expression? Rav Soloveitchik explains that although both words mean 'the end,' *sof* has a connotation of finality while *mikeitz* is related to the word *katzatz*, meaning to cut off, implying a fixed term. As such, *mikeitz* refers to the end of an epoch. This means that when we see this word, we understand that although one era has passed, a new era is about to begin. In other words, this *parshah* does not really open with the arbitrary end of Yosef's

imprisonment but rather with the idea that the previous era has terminated to make room for a cataclysmic change. There is an orchestration of Divine events playing in the background that is radically shifting towards the next major scene in the Jewish story.

This shift is hinted to in another word in the same verse. The Ohr HaChaim (Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar, d. 1743) points out that the opening word of the parshah is not *v'hayah* but *vayehi*. Both words mean 'and it was', but our Sages always connect the word *veyhi* to negative circumstances. It is used here because this incident of Yosef's freedom would eventually lead to the Jewish people's exile in Egypt. Paradoxically, then, in the very verse that tells of Yosef's miraculous transformation from slave to ruler, the Torah is alluding to the terrible period of Egyptian exile and slavery.

Indeed, the Ramban maintains that even when Pharaoh praised Yosef's insight and leadership qualities, his applaud was actually an insidious gibe. The very fact that Pharaoh found it necessary to justify this appointment to his ministers indicates that he faced severe opposition to the idea of placing a Hebrew in such a senior position of power.

Hope Within Darkness

Conversely, however, the Midrash Tanchuma finds an optimistic nuance in the same word, *mikeitz*. The Midrash connects this verse with another verse, '*Keitz sam lachoshech*—He has set an end for the darkness (Iyov 28:3)'. The implication of this cryptic verse is that darkness, or periods of suffering,



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always have a predetermined limit. In the context of this parshah, we see from the word *mikeitz* that although Yosef languished for many years in prison, Divine Providence had already set an end for this period of darkness in his life. Now, at the end of two years, it was time for Yosef to move from jail, and therefore, Pharaoh dreamed in order to facilitate his release.

For the Beit HaLevi (Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, d. 1892), this Midrash forms the cornerstone of a fundamental principle in the concept of faith and trust in Hashem. Generally, we understand that cause leads to effect. For example, if someone buys merchandise and sells it at a profit, his venture is the cause of his income. But, explains the Beit HaLevi, in reality the opposite is true. The real cause of the merchant's success is Hashem's decree that he should be successful. His sales and revenue are merely the effects of Hashem's will. Ostensibly, the cause for Yosef's release was Pharaoh's dream coupled with the previous demonstration of his ability to interpret dreams correctly. In truth, though, Yosef's release and rise to greatness at this precise juncture was predetermined, and Pharaoh's dream was merely a catalyst in order to enable this to materialise.

So, in this verse we find two opposing themes. On the one hand, there is a premonition of adverse events to come, but on the other hand, there is an allusion that just as Yosef's suffering was finite and came to an end at precisely the right time, so too, the future enslavement and exile of his descendants would come to an end at precisely the intended moment.

The Wisdom of Retrospection

With these lessons in mind, the deeper explanation behind two names in this *parshah* comes alive. Upon Yosef's appointment

as ruler of Egypt, Pharaoh bestowed upon him an honorific name, Tzafnat Pane'ach. Although these words are presumably Egyptian, the commentaries attempt to find analogies to them in Hebrew. According to Rav Hirsch, Tzafnat is related to the word *tzafun*, meaning 'hidden', and Pane'ach can be understood from an obscure rabbinic source to mean 'protection' or 'guarding'. Put together, this name therefore means 'Keeper of Secrets'. Yosef is given this enigmatic name because there is an understanding that his life is somehow a microcosm of the Jewish people. The story of Yosef, through which the Divine hand can be seen behind all its twists and turns, essentially follows the trajectory of our own national story.

A second name that follows this theme is that of Yosef's eldest son, Menashe. At Menashe's naming, Yosef declared that '*nashani Elokim et kol amali v'et kol beis avi*', which would normally be translated as, 'Hashem has enabled me to forget all of my troubles and all of my father's house.' Rav Hirsch, however, refuses to accept this interpretation. That Yosef should have named his child after his gratefulness that he had forgotten his family seems too astonishing to believe. Rather, Rav Hirsch suggests that the word *nashani* can denote 'being a creditor'. As such, Yosef was saying that all of his troubles and his complex relationships with his family have become his 'creditors'. His misfortunes have turned into an instrument to shape his happiness, and he finds himself greatly indebted to them. When his first son was born, Yosef felt that he was finally able to appreciate Hashem's plan, something that he was unable to fathom until now.

Next Week: There will be no shiur next Wednesday evening, 1st January. Timeless Torah will appear in Kol Kinloss as usual.