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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mikkets

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And Pharaoh called Joseph Zaphenath Paneah...” (Bereishith 41:45).

When Pharaoh elevated Joseph to high office, he gave Joseph an Egyptian name. Egyptologists have suggested various translations of this name: “the god speaks and he lives;” or “says the god, he will live;” or “food-man of the life.”

Jewish exegetes sought to translate Zaphenath Paneah as though it had roots in Hebrew language. Targum Onkelos translated it as “the man to whom hidden things are revealed.” Rashi interpreted it as “explainer of hidden things.” Other commentators have similarly defined the name as relating to Joseph’s talent in revealing secrets.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, a 19th century rabbinic sage known widely as the Netziv, offered an interesting analysis in his Torah commentary, Ha’amek Davar. Also seeking Hebrew roots for Zaphenath Paneah, he suggested that the “pa” of Paneah refers to glory and honor (hofa’ah); and the “neah” alludes to pleasantness and spiritual contentment (nahat). Pharaoh gave Joseph this name because he detected something amazing about Joseph, beyond ability to decipher dreams.

Pharaoh wondered: here was a young Hebrew slave who has spent long months in prison. How could someone with this background appear to be entirely comfortable assuming a position of great power and leadership? How was Joseph able to carry himself with so much confidence? Pharaoh intuited that Joseph was inherently not a slave at all; rather, Joseph had natural poise; he carried himself as a nobleman. So Pharaoh gave him a name that meant: a man who has hidden powers of glory, leadership, and serenity.

While the Netziv’s etymological theory is questionable, his psychological insight is apt. Although many people would have viewed Joseph as a lowly slave, Pharaoh was perceptive to see the “real” Joseph. He was impressed with Joseph’s self-image as a dignified, competent human being. The key to Joseph’s greatness was that he did not let negative external circumstances undermine his own self-worth.

People—especially those who suffer from various kinds of discrimination—need the strength of character to withstand negative pressures. One must be strong to avoid internalizing feelings of inferiority.

Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, who had been a Jewish prisoner in a German concentration camp, wrote that prisoners feared not only for their physical lives; they feared that they would come to see themselves as the Nazis saw them—as animals. “The main problem is to remain alive and unchanged...the more absolute the tyranny, the more debilitated the subject.”

The Jewish People have understood this idea very well. We have been subjected to all sorts of abuse, calumnies, lies, ugly stereotypes. Some Jews, unfortunately, lost their pride and self-confidence; they withered under pressure. But the masses of Jews—like Joseph—maintained their inner nobility, idealism, and self-respect.

Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, who survived the Kovno ghetto, wrote a book, “Mima’amakim,” in which he recorded his responses to various questions put to him during the Holocaust years. One person inquired whether it was still appropriate to recite the morning blessing thanking God “for not having made me a slave.” After all, Jews were indeed reduced to slave conditions.

Rabbi Oshry replied that one must continue to say the blessing, to remind himself that he is not innately a slave, that God did not create him to be a slave, that he should not internalize a slave mentality. It is vital to retain self-awareness of who we really are; we must not surrender our inner identity to the wicked oppressors who seek to debase us.

Joseph set a model of maintaining pride, dignity and self-worth even in difficult conditions. It’s a model relevant to us today.