# Two Pharaohs, Two Modes of Leadership: Thoughts for Parashat Mikkets

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Thoughts for Shabbat Mikkkets and Hanukkah

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Pharaoh was a powerful ruler, assumed by his people to have divine qualities. Pharaoh was surrounded by a group of wise advisers, among the greatest sages of Egypt.

But an amazing thing happened. Pharaoh had dreams that neither he nor his wise advisers could decipher. The butler, who once had a dream correctly interpreted by Joseph, informed Pharaoh that there was a Hebrew slave in prison who might be helpful. Pharaoh summoned Joseph, related his dreams, and listened to Joseph's interpretation. Joseph not only deciphered the dreams, but gave advice on how to deal with the forthcoming years of surplus followed by years of famine.

Pharaoh responded in a profoundly wise and unexpected manner: "And Pharaoh said to his servants: Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom the spirit of God is?" Pharaoh immediately elevated this Hebrew slave into high office, second only to Pharaoh himself.

This response by Pharaoh is worthy of careful attention. Many leaders go to great lengths to demonstrate their infallibility. They don't like to appear incompetent. They surround themselves with the best available talent so that they can be sure always to come up with the right decisions. Their egos prevent them from admitting weakness, ignorance, or incompetence.

Yet, here was the powerful Pharaoh who listened to the advice of a Hebrew slave, and delegated tremendous powers to this unlikely person who wasn't even an Egyptian. Pharaoh was wise enough to realize that Joseph had not only interpreted the dreams but had offered a practical plan of action. Pharaoh did not stand on ceremony. He could have had Joseph cast back into prison, but he did not do that. He was not embarrassed to let the public know that he had

needed—and accepted—the advice of a lowly slave.

Because Pharaoh did not allow his ego to get in the way, he was able to make an intelligent decision that ultimately proved highly successful for Egypt. Not only was long term famine averted, but the power of Pharaoh's own central government was enormously strengthened.

Bravo Pharaoh!

But the Torah later informs us of another Pharaoh "who knew not Joseph." This new Pharaoh, wishing to expand his power, enslaved the Israelites. When Moses confronted him with the demand from God that the Israelites should be freed, this Pharaoh arrogantly responded: "Who is this God that I should listen to Him?"

This Pharaoh was drunk with his own power. He could not admit personal mistakes. Even after confronted with one plague after another, he maintained a hard heart. He would not give in to Moses…or to God. Pharaoh's own advisers realized that the situation was out of control and that it would be best to liberate the slaves. But Pharaoh was adamant. He allowed his egotism to cloud his ability to think clearly.

As a result of this Pharaoh's unwillingness to admit error, his people suffered ten horrible plagues causing massive damage to the crops, the animals, and the people themselves. Ultimately, the slaves went free in spite of Pharaoh. But Pharaoh's ego still pressed him to have his troops pursue the Israelites. The result: the Egyptian chariots and horsemen were drowned in the sea.

Shame on this Pharaoh!

There is much to be learned from the approaches of the two Pharaohs.

The first Pharaoh exemplified intelligent leadership and responsible behavior. His goal was not to protect his delicate ego, and not to prove how wise he and his advisers were. His goal was to address a problem in the way that would yield best results for his people. Because of his clear-headedness, Egypt prospered as never before.

The second Pharaoh exemplified leadership tainted by egotism, allowing emotion to prevail over reason. His goal was to demonstrate his power, to lash out at those who questioned his judgment, to push aside advice of his own advisers. He was not thinking of the long term welfare of his people; he was concerned more with showing how strong he was. Because of his egotism, Egypt suffered terrible

catastrophes.

When leaders of societies and communities follow the wisdom of the first Pharaoh, the people are well served. When leaders of societies and communities succumb to the egotism of the second Pharaoh, disaster is sure to follow…not only for the people, but for the leaders themselves.

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