Pharaoh's Wisdom: Thoughts for Parashat Mikkets

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mikkets

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And Pharaoh said to his servants, can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom is the spirit of God? And Pharaoh said to Joseph, since God has shown you all this, there is none so discreet and wise as you are: you will be over my house, and according to your word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than you.” (Bereishith 41: 38-40)

Pharaoh had dreams that troubled him. He obviously ascribed special meaning to them. He asked his wise men to interpret the dreams, and they must have offered their suggestions. But Pharaoh was not satisfied. He felt a persistent foreboding.

His butler told Pharaoh of Joseph, a Hebrew slave who was currently in prison. When Joseph was brought to Pharaoh, the monarch said that he heard that Joseph can interpret dreams. Joseph demurred: no, he could not interpret dreams, only God could do that. Pharaoh must have been surprised by this answer. Who was Joseph’s God? Why did that God have such power? Why weren’t the Egyptian gods able to interpret dreams? In spite of likely misgivings, Pharaoh related his dreams, and Joseph offered the interpretation as well as a plan of action for Egypt.

Pharaoh immediately sensed that Joseph’s interpretation was correct. He was so impressed that he appointed Joseph to be second in power over Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh acknowledged that God—Joseph’s God—had endowed Joseph with the wisdom to understand the dreams and to offer a constructive way forward.

Why was Pharaoh so impressed with Joseph? Why didn’t he take the interpretation under advisement, discuss it with his wise men? Why didn’t he return Joseph to prison? Why was he so impetuous as to raise the Hebrew slave to become his top official?

Pharaoh was a great leader! He was remarkably perceptive.

Psychologists remind us that dreams are often a product of our inner thoughts and concerns. Pharaoh was worried about the wellbeing of his people. He knew that economic circumstances vacillate. In his dreams he had forebodings of economic distress for his land. The dreams were really not so mysterious. When lean cows swallow fat cows and when thin sheaves swallow fat sheaves, these would seem to be omens of upcoming disaster.

Pharaoh's dreams haunted him so he asked his wise men to offer their interpretations. Whatever they told him did not make sense to him. He knew in his mind—and in his dreams—that huge problems loomed for his country. He was looking for confirmation of his insight and for a plan to deal with the upcoming challenges.

Pharaoh's greatness was not simply in his insightful analysis, but in his willingness to seek advice even from a lowly Hebrew prisoner. Joseph came before Pharaoh without any credentials. He was not a professional wise man, diplomat, or celebrity. Moreover, Joseph claimed to rely on his God, not the gods of the Egyptians.

Pharaoh might have expected Joseph to use the occasion to offer words of flattery and to plead for freedom. But Joseph was humble, unpretentious…authentic. Pharaoh instantly knew he was in the presence of an unusual human being. When he heard Joseph's interpretation of the dreams, Pharaoh was confirmed in his own understanding of the situation. When Joseph not only interpreted the dreams but offered a plan of action, Pharaoh sensed that Joseph was someone to be trusted.

It must have astonished Pharaoh's wise men and advisers that Pharaoh immediately appointed Joseph to a position above them. However, it was astute of Pharaoh to appoint a lowly outsider to manage the coming years of abundance and famine. If Joseph's interpretation and plan failed, he could be blamed and sent back to prison. If Joseph's interpretation and plan succeeded, all Egypt would benefit in spite of the unhappiness of Pharaoh's advisers.

Pharaoh was a great leader. His concerns for his people extended even into his dreams. His search for truth went beyond his professional advisers. His humility enabled him to listen to and grant power to a Hebrew slave.

The great neurologist, Dr. Oliver Sacks, pointed out the psychological barriers that prevent people from thinking "out of the box." It is natural to resist new ideas from untested individuals. It is natural to listen to one's closest friends and advisers. But greatness entails the ability to break through the barriers and to think clearly for oneself. Dr. Sacks referred to the need for "spaciousness of mind," the receptivity to new ideas and unexpected insights. ("The River of Consciousness," p. 205).

The people of ancient Egypt were fortunate to have a ruler such as Pharaoh. All nations--all communities-- could benefit from leaders who share Pharaoh's wisdom, intellectual openness, "spaciousness of mind."