

Parsha Pearls

Vayigash 5768

And Yehuda approached him, and said, "Please, my master, let your servant speak a word in the ears of my master, and be not angry with your servant, for your likes are like Pharaoh." (44:18)

Rashi says that Yehuda spoke harshly to Yosef. But why was Yehuda so angry? Hadn't he just said that all the brothers were willing to be slaves as punishment for stealing the silver cup? Yosef was the one who had been lenient when he said, "Far be it from me to do that! The man in whose sack the cup was found will be my slave, and you will go up in peace to your father."

Furthermore, what is the meaning of the words "for your likes are like Pharaoh"? He should have simply said "for you are like Pharaoh".

Furthermore, why did Yosef say "Far be it from me to do that!" Rashi on 44:10 tells us that the Egyptian law was indeed that if one member of a group was caught stealing, the entire group was sold into slavery. Certainly a ruler has the power to grant clemency and bend the rules, but the words "far be it from me" are not appropriate.

The Satmar Rav explains that Yosef was acting as a Jew, saying: "Far be it from me to follow Egyptian law and go against the Torah! I will take only Binyamin as a slave." Therefore Yehuda spoke harshly and said, "If you are following the Torah, the Torah says that only a thief who has no money to pay back becomes a slave, but Binyamin has money to pay back."

Although Hashem prevented Yehuda and his brothers from recognizing this ruler as their brother Yosef, they did see that he had some holiness in him and was following the Torah. On the other hand, when it came to Binyamin's form of punishment he was acting like an Egyptian. He was straddling two sides of the fence.

Those who straddle two sides of the fence are more dangerous than those who are only on the wrong side of the fence, because they lead others astray. The first of the Ten Commandments is to believe in G-d, and the second is not to worship any other gods. One who keeps the first without keeping the second is a greater threat to the Jewish people. This is why Eliyahu told the Jews on Mt. Carmel (Melachim I 18:21), "Until when will you straddle both sides of the fence? If Hashem is G-d, follow Him, and if the Baal, follow him!" And that is why Yehoshua said to the people (Yehoshua 24:15), "And if it is bad in your eyes to serve Hashem, choose whomever you want to serve, the gods your fathers worshipped on the other side of the river, or the gods of the Emorites in whose land you live." Eliyahu and Yehoshua were not encouraging idol worship, but were teaching the people that they had to make a clear choice: Hashem or idolatry.

Serving both was not an option.
(Akeidah, Vaeschanan 89)

The Kli Yakar on Devarim 25:13 says that the prohibition to have in one's pocket "two stones, a large and a small" means that one may not have both an accurate and an inaccurate measure. If one has only inaccurate measures, everyone will know he is a cheater and no one will trust him. But the more dangerous cheater is the one who sometimes uses an accurate measure in order to appear honest.

Yehuda and his brothers knew that G-d had decreed that they must live in exile under the Egyptians, and they were willing to accept the decree. They could live under a Pharaoh who followed all Egyptian practices and posed no spiritual danger to them. But this Egyptian ruler was straddling both sides, following the Torah partially and Egyptian law partially. Under such a ruler they could not live, and this is why Yehuda spoke harshly to him.

He also said, "For your likes are like Pharaoh," meaning that someone like you, who follows a mixture of Torah and Egyptian law, will eventually become a complete Egyptian like Pharaoh, with no holiness at all. However, there are rare exceptions to this, and so Yehuda did not want to say directly, "You are like Pharaoh."

When Pharaoh first met Yosef, he said, "Can we find anyone like this, a man who has the spirit of G-d in him?" Why didn't he say, "Can we find a man who has the spirit of G-d in him like this one?" The answer is that Yosef was able to speak all seventy languages, because the angel Gabriel came to him the night before and taught him the languages. But Pharaoh did not know about the angel, and so he assumed that Yosef had learned all those languages by studying the non-Jewish literature and idolatrous texts. Thus he said, "Can we find anyone like this, who has studied all these texts, and yet has the spirit of G-d in him?" Pharaoh recognized Yosef as an exception. In a similar way, the Chassid Yaavetz writes that studying philosophy as very bad and is sure to bring spiritual destruction upon the Jew. Then he adds, "Do not ask me, what about the Rambam, who studied philosophy yet remained a great tzaddik? The Rambam was holy from the womb and a miracle occurred for him, like a man who eats snakes and scorpions and derives nourishment from them."

So Yehuda said, "I recognize that you have some holiness in you and I am not sure if you will end up being like Pharaoh. But someone like you will end up like Pharaoh!" (Divrei Yoel, p. 431)