

VAYEI'SHEV – 5771

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[FYI: THIS PARSHA HAS 112 PESUKIM, 1558 WORDS, and 5972 LETTERS]

This parsha is a perfect example of the immortal words of R' Akiva- "*KOL D'AHVID RACHAMANA LETAV AHVID*" (*Gemara Berachot 60b*) "What ever the Merciful One does, He does for the best". We do not always see it that way, for we are finite mortal human beings and can only perceive what we see at the moment. We cannot see the "good" that lies beyond the tragedies. It takes the wisdom and Emunah of a R' Akiva to see the good that will come after today and tomorrow.

I will presume we are all totally familiar with the story of Yosef and his brothers. The parsha begins with Yosef, a 17 year old shepherd, was sold as a Hebrew slave to a group of Yishmaelim and he ends up (beginning of Parshat Mikeitz) becoming the viceroy, a deputy king of Mitzrayim (Egypt), with the awesome responsibility of implementing and administering a master plan for the national salvation of the mightiest country at that time. Now, how is that possible and logical? As a matter of fact, according to Egyptian law, a slave could not be appointed to a high position. The *Gemara Sotah (36b)* states that the royal astrologers protested, "Will you set over us a slave whose master bought him for twenty pieces of silver?" Notwithstanding their protests, Par'oh wanted to make an exception to the law. Since he knew that Yosef would not be able to function well unless he was accepted by the aristocracy, Par'oh consulted with his courtiers. Only after they agreed did he address Yosef directly (41:39).

So how did this young, inexperienced Hebrew slave manage to learn the intricacies of aristocracy, national budgeting and financing? How did he acquire these skills? He attended no university and took no courses in economics, diplomacy or public administration? **These are *not* my questions. These questions are raised by Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel (1437-1507), better known to us as "The Abarbanel" in his commentary on the Torah.**

The Abarbanel was a great Talmid Chacham and also worldly educated. He was enlisted by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to help finance their war against the Moslem outposts in Spain. Rabbi Abarbanel used his great talent to help Spain become a world power. I mention these historic tidbits because it helps us understand why the Abarbanel, who was familiar with the intricacies of royal life raises these penetrating questions and is able to offers us a plausible explanation of how Yosef was able to achieve his greatness.

He begins by stating that the Hash'gachat HaShem was apparent from the very beginning. The Yishmaelim that bought Yosef did not bring him to some obscure

city, they did not sell him as an obscure field worker or mill grinder. Rather, they brought him to the metropolitan capital city of Egypt and sold him to Potifar, “*Seris Par’oh, sar ha’tabachim*” (39:1). What exactly “seris” means is debated by Chazal, but the Abarbanel favors the peshat that Potifar was the chief minister in Par’oh’s regime. Sar Ha’tabachim is translated as the “Minister of the Butchers “. However, Abarbanel argues that there were no butchers in Egypt because no meat was allowed to be eaten, it was a vegetarian society. So “Butchers” here means “executioners”. So that Potifar was the chief warden and head of all prisons. Into such an environment, of royalty and aristocracy, Yosef is brought in.

“*VA’YEHI HA’SHEM ET YOSEF, VA’YEHI ISH MATZLI’ACH, VA’YEHI BE’VEIT ADONOV HA’MITZRI*” (39:2). “HaShem was with Yosef, and he became a successful man; and he remained in the house of his Egyptian master” The fact the it says “VA’YEHI” three time, teaches that Yosef was steadfast in his fear of G-d, he was a faithful worker and because of that he was successful. Potifar did not send him out to do field labor but kept him in his palace, in spite of the fact that Yosef ate meat which was abhorrence to the Egyptians. “Yosef found favor in his (Potifar’s) eyes, and he attended him, he appointed him over his household, and whatever he had he placed in his custody.(39:4)...He concerned himself with nothing except for the bread he ate (39:6)”. The Tur explains this to mean that his personal menu he did not give over to Yosef because of dietary reasons.

This, Abarbanel explains, unbeknown to Yosef, is where he acquires his skills, his education and his proficiency in management, administration and aristocracy. Once he has mastered these skills he is slandered by Potifar’s wife and accused of attempted rape. Potifar reacts by being angry (39:19), but since Potifar “knows” his wife, it does not say he was angry at Yosef, only-“he was angry”. Of course, he couldn’t just ignore the charges against Yosef so he “places him in prison-the prison where the king’s prisoners were confined”. (39:20). Note, not a prison for murderers or rapists, but a plush minimum security prison, where Yosef meets the King’s baker and butler, where he successfully interpret their dreams. This brings Yosef into the next round of being introduced to King Par’oh himself. Yosef is now ready to meet Par’oh, not as a slave, but with the stature of a recognized aristocratic leader.

[Interestingly, the Ibn Ezra has a similar thought about Moshe Rabbeinu. Where did he pick up the skill to becoming a leader of a nation? And he answers that was why he had to be raised in the house of Par’oh.]

Undoubtedly, Yosef must have been thinking to himself through all these trials and tribulations, “Why is this happening to me? What did I do so wrong? Why am I being subjected to all this suffering?” But we, who are privileged to see the “entire picture”, can appreciate R’Akiva’s statement- *KOL DE’AHVID RACHAMANA LE’TAV AVIHD*. May this serve as a lesson for us in our own daily lives.