

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Vayeshev
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פרשת וישב
כ"ג בכסלו תשע"ט

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 37:1-40:23

In this *parasha*, Yosef's dreams anger his brothers, and they sell him into slavery in Egypt, where he eventually ends up in prison interpreting others' dreams.

Most of us are familiar with the story of Yosef and his brothers, his journey to Egypt, his run-in with Potiphar, and his interactions in prison with the baker and the butler. Most of us are also familiar with the story of Esther in Shushan, which we recount every Purim. *Da'at Mikrah*, a contemporary Israeli commentary, points out several similarities between the two stories:

- In both stories, we encounter a Jew in exile in the capital of a foreign empire (Yosef in Egypt; Esther in Persia).
- In both stories, the Jew is described as “beautiful” and is clearly politically astute. (Yosef determines how to preserve Egyptian prosperity even during seven years of famine; Esther figures out how to influence the King to save the Jews.)
- In both stories, the Jew saves the king and kingdom. (Yosef spares Pharaoh a potential people's revolt due to famine; Esther's cousin, Mordechai, reports Bigtan and Teresh's conspiracy to assassinate Achashverosh.)
- In both stories, the Jew hides his or her true identity. (Yosef is known as *Tzaphnat Pane'ach*, an Egyptian name, and the Egyptians don't realize his Jewish roots; Esther hides her “nation and heritage” until the propitious moment.)
- In both stories, the Jew reveals his or her true identity at a festive gathering (Yosef at a meal; Esther at a wine feast).
- In both stories, the Jew becomes the second in command to the king.

Are these similarities coincidental or do they contain a subtle message? There is at least a 1200-year gap between the Yosef story and the Esther story. There are also 19 books of the Bible between *Bereshit* and *Megillat Esther* (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Minor Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes), so it does not make sense to say that one story simply foreshadows the other.

The message that these stories contain is open to interpretation. But there is one interpretation that is especially meaningful to us as the only Jewish day school in Washington, DC, the capital of the United States.

Throughout history, Jews have been involved in the upper echelons of government. Despite the warning of *Pirkei Avot* (1:10) "Do not become too familiar with government," Jews have contributed ideas, money, time, effort, and even their lives to the countries in which we have lived. Yosef and Esther are but two examples of such political leaders. Whether Maimonides in 12th-century Egypt, Benjamin Disraeli in 19th-century England, or Haym Solomon in the fledgling 18th-century United States, Jews have played vital roles in the governments of many of the nations in which we have resided.

At MILTON, our children are taught about the importance of a country having a government, and of contributing to the welfare of all of those who live in that country. It is a good reminder to ourselves that our contributing to those governments and to their nation's residents is a tradition dating back to Biblical times.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Why do you think the stories of Yosef and Esther are so similar?
- Can you think of any other similarities in the stories?
- How many Jewish people involved in government can you name? Does it make a difference that they are Jewish? Why or why not?