

מאמרי תורה – Torah Talk



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Parashat Vayigash
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פרשת ויגש
ה' בטבת תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 44:18-47:27

In this *parasha*, Yosef reveals his identity to his brothers, prompting the entire family to move to Egypt, where Yosef reunites with his father, Yaakov.

There is a story in the Torah about a person who is banished from the Land of Yisrael and winds up living in a nearby country. The person's innate beauty affects the course of their life. The character helps the local ruler with a major issue, which was recognized by disturbed sleep at night, and the person is promoted to second-in-command of the country. Over the course of these events, the person's true identity remains hidden, and is revealed at a dinner only after meeting a number of times with those who don't realize this true identity. In the end, the hero succeeds in saving the Jews from certain death.

Yosef was banished from his home in Canaan and wound up living in Egypt. As a result of his beauty, he ended up in jail after he rejected Potifar's wife's attentions. He correctly interpreted Pharaoh's nighttime dreams and figured out a way to make sure Egypt had food during the seven lean years. He hid his true identity from his brothers until they demonstrated that they had grown beyond the jealousies which arose because Yaakov favored Rachel's children. Only after this did he reveal to them who he truly was. He saved the Jacobite clan from certain death by starvation and, at the end of the book of *Bereshit*, the entire family is reunited with Yosef, the second-in-command to the Pharaoh.

Much later in the *TaNakh* (*Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim*; the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings), Mordechai and Esther were exiled from the Land of Yisrael and wound up living in Persia. Mordechai saved the life of Achashverosh, who subsequently could not sleep as he had not rewarded Mordechai for this act. In the meantime, Esther, as a result of her innate beauty, was made queen, but did not reveal her Jewish identity to anyone around her until she had met with Achashverosh and Haman twice, and the time was right for her to plead for the lives of her people. In response to this plea, Achashverosh allowed the Jews to fight back against those who

wanted to kill them, thereby assuring the continuity of the Jewish people. At the end of the book of *Esther*, Esther remains queen of Persia, and Mordechai is promoted to second-in-command to the king.

It is difficult to believe that the similarities between these two stories are coincidental. As a matter of fact, there is an established method of biblical literary analysis called “intertextuality” that utilizes a comparison of linguistic and contextual similarities between two sections of the Torah. *Da'at Mikrah*, a contemporary Biblical commentary, written by the scholars at *Mosad HaRav Kook*, often presents intertextuality and suggests reasons for the similarities between the sections.

Near the beginning of the *TaNakh*, a Jew living in the diaspora successfully becomes involved in the government and helps the country in a way that others could not. A similar situation arises towards the end of the *TaNakh*, with Esther and Mordechai creating a stronger Persian empire. These stories happened approximately 1400 years apart.

A number of possible reasons have been suggested for this parallel. Perhaps the author of *Megillat Esther*, the Book of Esther, whom the Talmud lists as Mordechai, wanted to give legitimacy to his book. Whoever the author was, he or she was clearly steeped in Biblical knowledge. Perhaps the author of *Megillat Esther* wanted to “bookend” the exile from Judea and return to the land, with Yosef in Egypt being the original exile and the Persian exile being the final exile. (The Book of *Esther* was probably written before the return to Zion and the rebuilding of the Temple by Ezra. This would, therefore, be a hopeful “bookend,” but one which unfortunately was not real, as the Jews faced exile again approximately 500 years later.) Perhaps the author of *Megillat Esther* wanted to equate Esther and Mordechai with Yosef to give them and the story more *gravitas*.

Whatever the reason, it is fascinating to note the contextual and linguistic similarities (which abound in these sections) between what, at first glance, seem to be two very different episodes in Jewish history.

Shabbat shalom.

For Discussion:

- Can you think of any other similarities between Yosef and Esther/Mordechai?
- Why do you think the stories have so many similarities?
- Can you think of any other stories in the Torah which contain similarities? (For example, think of people meeting other people at wells.)