

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

The Secret Message Lost in Translation



While attending the University of Texas in Austin in 1974, I met Rabbi Sholom Ber Alperowitz. This very kind and wise rabbi changed my life.

The first Torah lesson I heard from Rabbi Alperowitz was from this week's Torah portion, *Miketz* (Genesis 41:1- 44:17). We examined Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams and Joseph's appointment to a position of leadership in the Egyptian government.

As we explored this incident, I witnessed the importance of studying the Torah carefully rather than reading it superficially. By examining the context of the text and the subtle nuances of the Hebrew language, I discovered deeper insights otherwise lost in translation.

When I was young, I was familiar with the story of Pharaoh's dreams concerning seven fat cows swallowed by seven lean cows and then seven healthy ears of grain swallowed by seven parched ears.

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I also knew that after Pharaoh's wisest advisers failed to provide a satisfactory interpretation, Joseph was removed from prison and brought before Pharaoh. Upon hearing the dreams, Joseph interpreted that the seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine.

Furthermore, Joseph advised Pharaoh to appoint a wise man over Egypt to manage and store grain during the plentiful years in preparation for the impending famine. So, at once, Pharaoh appointed Joseph to be second-in-command of Egypt and put him in charge of overseeing the grain storage.

Rabbi Alperowitz pointed out that a superficial reading raised many questions. For example, why would Pharaoh, upon hearing Joseph's interpretation, immediately proclaim, "*Will we find anyone like this, a man in whom there is the spirit of God?*" (Genesis 41:38).

This proclamation did not make sense because it would take seven years before Pharaoh had proof that Joseph's prediction of famine was true, as it says, "*The seven years of abundance that came to pass in the land Egypt ended*" (Genesis 41:53).

What could have possibly influenced Pharaoh to accept an unsubstantiated interpretation of his dream and appoint a lowly Hebrew prisoner to a position of leadership?

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Rabbi Alperowitz explained that subtle nuances in the Hebrew text provide an answer.

When Pharaoh shared his dream with Joseph, he intentionally changed small details to test Joseph. In Pharaoh's original dream, he witnessed the cows while he stood “on” [על–*al*] or “in” the river. When he shared his dream with Joseph, he changed the wording to say he was “*standing on the edge of the river*” (Genesis 41:17). In the Hebrew text, we see that Pharaoh inserted the word [שפת–*sefas*], which in this context means the “edge or shoreline” of the river, although this word can also mean lips or language.

When Joseph heard Pharaoh’s extra word, he pointed out that the word “*sefas*” was not a part of Pharaoh’s dream. Upon hearing this, Pharaoh realized that Joseph knew this through Divine inspiration, as the Torah says, “*God has informed you [Joseph] of all this*” (Genesis 41:39). Consequently, Pharaoh understood that Joseph was worthy of a position of leadership.

Our sages teach that King David provided an allusion to Joseph’s revelation of Pharaoh’s secret message. The book of Psalms states, “*A testimony of Joseph when he went forth from the land of Egypt; I heard a language [שפת–sefas] that I do not know*” (Psalms 81:5-6).

In other words, Joseph testimony was that he heard an unfamiliar word when Pharaoh changed the language [שפת–*sefas*] of his dream by inserting the same word [שפת–*sefas*] to indicate that he was standing by the “edge or shoreline” of the river and not in the midst of it as he originally dreamed.

This insight taught me important lessons. First, in order to properly understand the Torah, we must read biblical passages in context and carefully examine the original Hebrew for nuances that are lost in translation. Second, the oral tradition plays an invaluable role in understanding the Torah.

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When confronted by individuals or missionaries who selectively quote bible verses as “proof-texts,” we must apply these lessons before jumping to conclusions. We must make an informed decision; as our sages said, “*Turn it over, and [again] turn it over, for everything is in it*” (Ethics of Our Fathers 5:23).

May this Shabbos bring opportunities to learn our holy Torah and discover new insights that inspire a more meaningful life.

Shabbat Shalom.

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