

When Paths of Individuals Cross— Chance Happenings or Parts of a Grand Plan?

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Midrash Rabba presents two very different approaches to the last verse in Parashat VaYeishev:

Beraishit 41:23

And the minister¹ of the butlers did not remember Yosef and he forgot him.

Beraishit Rabba 88:7

All day long he would devise schemes and an Angel would come and upset them. He would tie knots, and an Angel would come and untie them. God Said to him, "You forget him and I will not Forget him.

Another interpretation: The minister of the butlers forgets him and I will not Forget him. Who Waited for Avraham and Sara, although they were elderly, they would have a child?² Who Waited for Yaakov who although he crossed the Jordan with (only) his staff, he would eventually expand and prosper?³ Who Waited for Yosef who although he underwent so many troubles, would become king? Who Waited for Moshe who although he was thrown into the river, would become what he became?⁴ Who Waited

¹ Several commentators note that the two individuals whom Yosef met in prison were not merely Pharaoh's butler and baker, but rather in charge of all of the butlers and bakers in Egypt. The idea that they occupied court positions explains why when Pharaoh has his dreams, the butler is in a position to recommend Yosef to the ruler as someone who can explain the dreams' symbolism. Furthermore it also accounts for why a servant was in a position to assume responsibility for the administration of an entire nation during times of emergency. Yosef's prolonged discussions with these men who themselves occupied high governmental positions familiarized him with Pharaoh, the court and the manner in which a country's business is conducted. See Meshech Chachma on 40:4.

² Avraham and Sara themselves had trouble believing that this would happen to them as evidenced in Beraishit 17:17; 18:12.

³ Since instead of giving gifts to Lavan in return for the privilege of marrying his daughter Rachel, Yaakov offers to work for seven years for his future father-in-law (Beraishit 29:18), this is understood to indicate that Yaakov was penniless when he came to Charan. He commits himself to a second seven year period of employment in order to justify his marriage to both Leah and Rachel (Ibid., v. 27). Only when he has completed his fourteen year obligation does he ask to return to Canaan, and is deterred from doing this when Lavan agrees to the Divinely-inspired arrangement (Ibid., 31:9-12) whereby new-born speckled and spotted sheep born in his flock would belong to Yaakov (Ibid., 30:25 ff.) In the end Yaakov becomes wealthy to the point where his success is resented by his father-in-law and brothers-in-law (Ibid., 31:1, 43).

⁴ Moshe certainly had an uncertain beginning, to say the least, when his mother felt forced to put him into a basket and hide him among the reeds of the Nile in an attempt to save him from being drowned by the Egyptians (Shemot 1:22; 2:3).

for Ruth who although she was a convert, would become part of Jewish royalty?⁵ Who Waited for David that he (and his descendents) would be king until the end of all generations?⁶ Who Waited for Yehoyachin that he would emerge from prison?⁷ Who Waited for Chanania, Mishael and Azarya that they would come out from the midst of the fire?⁸ Who Waited for Israel during the days of Haman that the Holy One, Blessed Be He would Save them?⁹ Who Waits for the exiles that they should be notable and praiseworthy?¹⁰ Who Waits for the fallen Sukka of David¹¹ that it be resurrected by the Holy One , Blessed Be He, as it is said, (Amos 9:11) “On that day I will Raise up the fallen Sukka of David...” in order that the entire world be united into a single entity, as it is said, (Tzephania 3:9) “Because then I will Change for the nations the Name of God to serve him with common cause.”

The second of these Midrashic approaches assumes that Yosef’s prison mate deliberately and maliciously made an attempt to obliterate Yosef from his mind and leave him to interminably languish in prison, only to have God Thwart his intention, as He has Done and continues to Do throughout Jewish history. When such incidents, as well as many other events that this Midrash does not explicitly mention,¹² are all taken together, it becomes apparent that the Jewish people have defied the typical laws of history due to their being Shepherded and Protected by some Supernatural Force that is beyond classification and convention. It calls to mind the well-known couplet, “How odd of God to Choose the Jews,”¹³ to which one rejoinder contends, “It’s not so odd; the Jews chose God.”

However, I find the first interpretation of the verse in the Midrash much more evocative and theologically as well as personally intriguing. This view proposes that the butler had the best of intentions to honor Yosef’s request, and therefore made repeated sincere attempts to fulfill his promise to his fellow prisoner to try to win his release, only to repeatedly forget to do so . Despite his best intentions each morning, by the end of the day, another series of opportunities had been missed. While the Midrash attributes the butler’s futility to God and His Angels, one might speculate that certain psychological ambivalences and personal uncertainties could have also contributed to the butler’s

⁵ The end of the book of Ruth clearly traces David’s descent from Ruth (Ruth 4:21-22).

⁶ By being the youngest of Yishai’s children, no one in his family imagined that he was the individual that Shmuel had been Directed to anoint as the future king once Shaul’s reign came to an end (see I Shmuel 16).

⁷ See Yirmiyahu 52:31-34. (It is curious that this incident is recorded neither in Melachim or Divrei HaYamim.)

⁸ Daniel 3.

⁹ This is a reference to practically the entire book of Esther.

¹⁰ The implication of this comment is that exiling the Jews from their homeland not only constitutes a punishment for their failure to comply to the Tora’s Commandments (see e.g., VaYikra 26:33; Devarim 28:36), but also an opportunity for them to recommit to their spiritual heritage and via acts of Kiddush HaShem, make a favorable impression upon the non-Jewish world, thereby contributing to the eschatological vision implied in the latter portions of this Midrash.

¹¹ A reference to the Jerusalem Temple that had originally been discussed with David (II Shmuel 7) , built by Solomon (I Melachim 5 ff.), and destroyed twice, first by the Babylonians and then the Romans. To this day we are considered to still be mourning that second destruction and looking forward to its being rebuilt yet again.

¹² E.g., Pharaoh tries to diminish the number of Jews, but God Determines to greatly increase them (Shemot 1:12); Inquisitions, pogroms, the Holocaust, the Israeli War of Independence, etc.

¹³ Attributed to William Norman Ewer. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Norman_Ewer

failures. Was he subconsciously afraid that the Jewish slave would eventually have more influence in Pharaoh's court than he himself would have, something that indeed comes to pass? Was he uncomfortable admitting how beholden he was to Yosef for correctly predicting what his dream foretold, and thereby putting the butler's mind to rest? Did he fear that if he did mention the dream interpretations to Pharaoh or others in a position to free Yosef, should the latter fail to live up to his reputation of correct dream interpretations, this would reflect badly upon him for having recommended him in the first place?

And then there is the period of the two years which elapse before Pharaoh dreams and Yosef ultimately explains the dreams' meaning (Beraishit 41:1). On the one hand, some understand this time period as a punishment for Yosef, who according to their view, improperly placed his faith in another human being, the minister of butlers, rather than exclusively trusting in God.¹⁴ But another way to understand the passage of two years is to see them in light of the greater sequence of the overall events that comprise the story, i.e., the coordination of Yosef's emergence with Pharaoh's dreams which in turn foretell the ensuing seven years of plenty followed by the seven years of severe famine. Could these fourteen years of agricultural extremes have begun at any point, or were they built into the natural cycle of earthly events and their onset therefore had to be awaited before Pharaoh would begin to dream and Yosef would be released and begin to interpret? And assuming that such natural cyclical events could not begin at any arbitrary time, is there no possibility for variations with respect to when such things would happen, or were the variations susceptible to "gross" rather than "fine" adjustments, i.e., a year sooner or a year later, rather than with respect to a given day that could be immediately decided upon as the beginning of the special period of time?

Such considerations would appear to be functions of other concepts and specific aspects in Jewish thought. In Yeshayahu 60:22, regarding the ultimate redemption, the oxymoronic phrase, "Belta Achishena" (in its time I will Make it happen sooner) appears at the end of the verse. While RaDaK suggests an interpretation that does not require dealing with an inherent contradiction, i.e., when the time finally arrives, I will bring things to a conclusion quickly, the more traditional approach cited by RaShI and based upon Sanhedrin 98a—"Said R. Alexandri: R. Yehoshua ben Levi posed a contradiction—it is written, "In its time" and it is written, "I will Make it happen sooner"? If they are deserving,¹⁵ I will Make it happen sooner; if they are not deserving,¹⁶ it (the redemption) will happen in its time"—

¹⁴ Maintaining a balance between Hishtadlut (individual initiative/striving) and Bitachon (trust in the Divine) is an acute dilemma for the observant Jew. We are simultaneously enjoined, "Ein Somchin Al HaNeis" (Do not rely on miracles) and yet to believe in "Hashgacha Pratit" (Divine Intervention in the personal affairs of men). It appears that only "after the fact" does one have enough information and perspective to determine whether too much of one or the other played a role in an individual's decisions making.

¹⁵ The Jews have repented and recommitted themselves to carrying out God's Law, in accordance with some verses describing what will bring on the end of exile and the ingathering of the scattered people, as in Devarim 30:2.

¹⁶ Since the exile experience is extremely caustic with respect to Jewish identity, a point will be reached where even though the Jews have not earned redemption, it will be forthcoming anyway in order to preserve at least a remnant of the nation that originally inhabited Israel as the Jewish people. Such a situation is implied in VaYikra 26:44-45. This is the sense of the Rabbinic comment (Zohar Chadash, beginning of Parashat Yitro) that the Jews in Egypt had reached the 49th level of spiritual impurity, and had they been left there any longer, there would have been nothing left to save when the time for redemption arrived. (As it is, the Rabbis state in Mechilta, based upon

suggests that there can be a considerable time lapse between an earlier time in contrast to a “no-fault” outer limit for God Saving His People.

Whereas Yeshayahu is referring to the future redemption, a discussion regarding one that that has already taken place in the past, similarly reflects the idea that there can be variations in the time when a particular dramatic event takes place, based upon the spiritual states of the people involved. Initially in the Brit Bein HaBetarim (covenant between the pieces) Avraham is informed of the length of the exile that his descendents will experience:

Beraishit 15:13

And He Said to Avraham: You shall surely know that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that does not belong to them, and they (the inhabitants of that land) will enslave them and afflict them for four hundred years.

However, in a later verse as well as according to Rabbinic interpretation, we find both a longer and a shorter period listed as the actual time that the Jews spent in Egypt:

Shemot 12:40

And the habitation of the children of Israel that they dwelled in Egypt was thirty years and four hundred years.

Mechilta on Shemot 12:40

And did they dwell in Egypt 430 years? Behold they only were in Egypt 210 years. Behold Kehat was among those who came down to Egypt (from Canaan, accompanying Yaakov—see Beraishit 46:11), and it states, (Shemot 6:18) “And the years of the life of Kehat were 133.” And it is stated, (Ibid., v. 20) “And the years of the life of Amram were 137.” And the 80 years of Moshe (his age when he came to Pharaoh—see Ibid., 7:7) all add up to 350 years (which fall far short of 430!) (*The Midrash proceeds to calculate how the number 210 is arrived at, positing that the 430 actually begins from the time of the Revelation to Avraham, prior to the birth of Yitzchak.*)

Regardless of the Rabbinical explanations for the inconsistency of the numbers in these various sources, the strong impression arises that initially, it was entirely possible that the Jews were intended to spend 430 years in Egypt, but that the number of years was subsequently modified in light of various considerations, in keeping with “Belta Achishena”.

Another biblical institution which allows for considerable variations regarding a form of sentence meted out to a particular individual is the amount of time that an inadvertent murderer must stay in a City of Refuge in order to not be subjected to attempts on the part of the blood avenger to kill him.

BaMidbar 35:28

Shemot 13:18 that the term “Chamushim” represents only a fraction of the Jewish people actually leaving Egypt—either 1/5, 1/50 or 1/500!—implying that the rest were too assimilated to consider leaving their environment, however oppressive or immoral.

Because in his city of refuge he will remain until the death of the High Priest, and after the death of the High Priest the murderer can return to the land of his inheritance.

Some of the variables that affect individual cases become apparent in rules codified by RaMBaM:

Mishna Tora, Hilchot Rotzeach U'Shmirat HaNefesh 7:10-12

A murderer whose judgment requires him to go into exile (to relocate to a City of Refuge) at a time when no Kohen Gadol was appointed (e.g., the previous one died and a new one had as yet not assumed the role), or one who kills the High Priest and there is as yet no other High Priest, or the High Priest is the murderer and there is as yet no other High Priest, these individuals are exiled and they never can return from their exile. If the person's judgment is completed and afterwards the High Priest dies (before the individual could relocate to the City of Refuge) he is exempt from exile. However if before his judgment is concluded the High Priest dies, they appointed another High Priest to replace the deceased one, and only then is his judgment concluded, he can leave the City of Exile only upon the death of the second High Priest.

If his judgment is concluded and it is then discovered that the High Priest is the son of a divorcee or the son of a woman who had undergone Chalitza,¹⁷ the priesthood for this person is cancelled, and it is as if the judgment was concluded when there was no High Priest, and he does not emerge from there (the city of refuge) ever.

But aside from these extreme situations where there might not actually be a High Priest in place, assuming that inadvertent murder happened commonly enough whereby all forty-eight cities belonging to the Levites qualified as Cities of Refuge throughout the land of Israel, individuals would be sent to these places at various points during the High Priest's life, resulting in an extremely wide range of actual sentences. Someone could be sent to such a city while the High Priest is very young, while someone else would only have to move to such a place when the HP is quite elderly. And then there are the different factors of disease, circumstance, accident, etc. that could impact upon the HP's life expectancy. One could insist that this is all serendipity and there is no specific correlation to the individual in question and the length of his stay in this type of city; yet others contend that since these cities were inhabited by priests and Levites, they were particularly spiritual in terms of their overall atmospheres, and the time spent in such locales was intended to be rehabilitative for the person judged requiring the stay,¹⁸ with the particular city (the murderer would first take refuge and then be returned to the one closest to where the accident occurred) specifically designed to address the individual's problems for the length of time that his case and problem required. And if there were any number of inadvertent murders monthly, if not weekly or even daily, how could they all be coordinated in such a specific manner in light of the HP's life expectancy to fairly and appropriately deal with each case according to its own lights?

¹⁷ The procedure which is carried out when the brother of a deceased husband who has not had children, declines to marry the widow—see Devarim 25:7-10.

¹⁸ This approach assumes that the inadvertent murder did not constitute the individual's specific sin, but rather some other unresolved issue that he had, and the fact that he was deemed responsible for someone's death served as a means by which he could deal with some other matter from his past. Hence the need for different cities with different spiritual specialties.

Therefore in the instances of Yosef and the Egyptian famine, as well as the times when the Jews are to be redeemed and the nature of the sentence of inadvertent murderers, how precise can the Divine timing be, considering the many human variables that would need to be taken into consideration?

Finally, there is a fascinating human dimension to the case of Yosef meeting the two court officers that always intrigues me. So much of our lives appear to be strongly influenced by apparently chance meetings, conversations, decisions and experiences. If we hadn't struck up a conversation with the individual sitting next to us on the Metro; if we had preferred to take a nap rather than get up and attend a particular class or lecture; if we would have chosen to attend a particular Yeshiva or university instead of the one that we ended up studying at; if we would have gone on a blind date that our friend wanted us to pursue; etc. Of course, one could insist that we are fated to do the things that we end up doing and nothing is left to chance. And we see ample evidence that when He Chooses to do so, God can manipulate men's minds so that they think they are making decisions on their own when in fact they have been irreversibly forced to choose a particular path. But it seems to me that the basic assumption that God Wishes the vast majority of us to have and utilize free choice, places within our own decision-making powers the ability to choose between not only the right and the wrong, the holy and the profane, but life choices in general. What if Yosef had not been interested in the mood of his two cell-mates and had never been given the opportunity to explain their dreams to them? What would have occurred had Moshe not been curious about the burning bush that he saw off in the distance. Would God have Pursued him until he was given the mission to lead the Jews out of Egypt? What would have taken place if Chana was not so desperate to have a child, would Shmuel have been born to someone else? These questions can go on infinitum.

The interrelationship between fated determinism and the extent to which what happens to us is part of some larger and far-reaching plan intended to affect our respective families, communities, nation, species is an underlying meta-question that certainly cannot be readily answered, but nevertheless lies close to the surface of both our lives and the stories that inform our heritage.