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Leadership Under Pressure

In Parashat VaYigash the story of Yosef and the story of Yehudah and the story of Yaakov all reach a climax. As these strands of the story are closer and closer braided together, each of these heroes has the opportunity to interact with or confront Pharaoh and they take very different tacks.

When Yosef reveals his identity to his brothers, he also shares with them his perception of his relationship to Pharaoh.

וַיְשִׁימֵנִי לְאָב לְפָרְעֹה וּלְאֹדוֹן לְכָל־בֵּיתוֹ וּמִשָּׁל בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

“...He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt.”

Yosef describes his own circumstances as though he were a father-figure to Pharaoh. In that capacity, he confidently tells his brothers to bring the entire family to Egypt because Yosef will be able to arrange for them to all find a homeland within Egypt, in the Land of Goshen, were they can survive the years of famine that are still to afflict Canaan.

And, indeed, there appears to be signs of genuine affection between Pharaoh and Yosef. Pharaoh is happy that Yosef’s family is reunited and wishes to help!

וְהַקֵּל נִשְׁמַע בַּיֵּת פְּרַעֲוֹה לְאֵמֹר בָּאוּ אֶחָיו יוֹסֵף וַיִּיטֵב בְּעֵינֵי פְּרַעֲוֹה וּבְעֵינֵי עַבְדָּיו:

The news reached Pharaoh’s palace: “Joseph’s brothers have come.” Pharaoh and his courtiers were pleased.

וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־אֲבִיכֶם וְאֶת־בְּתִיכֶם וּבָאוּ אֵלַי וְאָתַנְתִּי לָכֶם אֶת־טוֹב אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְאֶכְלוּ אֶת־חֶלֶב הָאָרֶץ:

Take your father and your households and come to me; I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you shall live off the fat of the land.’

The relationship between Yosef and Pharaoh seems to be positive and symbiotic, built on mutual admiration and a desire to treat one another in a magnanimous and benign fashion. Pharaoh is glad when Yosef is able to be united with his family. He is generous in supporting Yosef’s family and allows them to settle in a region where they are able to have their numbers grow.

And Yosef works diligently on behalf of Pharaoh. When the Egyptians come to Yosef to purchase food, he sells it to them, even though it had been their own surplus food that Yosef had taken from them through taxation during the years of plenty. When the money runs out, Yosef purchases their livestock. When they have no more livestock, Yosef purchases their land. They have no choice.

לְמַה נָּמוֹת לְעֵינֶיךָ גַם־אֲנַחְנוּ גַם־אֲדַמְתָּנוּ קִנְיָה־אֲתָנוּ וְאֶת־אֲדַמְתָּנוּ בַּלְחָם וְנָהָיָה אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲדַמְתָּנוּ עַבְדִּים לְפָרְעֹה וְתוֹרֵזֶנָּה וְנַחֲיָה וְלֹא נָמוֹת וְהָאֲדָמָה לֹא תִשָּׁם:

Let us not perish before your eyes, both we and our land. Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste.”

Yosef knows when he has leverage and he uses it on behalf of his patron, on behalf his sponsor, and accumulates vast wealth and power in Pharaoh’s hands.

וַיִּקְנוּ יוֹסֵף אֶת־כָּל־אֲדָמַת מִצְרַיִם לְפָרְעֹה כִּי־מָכְרוּ מִצְרַיִם אִישׁ שָׂדֵהוּ כִּי־חָזַק עֲלֵהֶם הָרָעַב וַתְּהִי הָאָרֶץ לְפָרְעֹה:

So Joseph gained possession of all the farm land of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to Pharaoh.

In the short term, this is good for the Egyptian population who are saved from famine, this is good for Pharaoh who emerges from the famine with unprecedented wealth and power, and good for Yosef who has proven his loyalty to his patron. In the long term, however, Yosef has been treated as a middle man, just as countless generations of Jews have been treated by those in power.

The Egyptian people - in their own words - have sold themselves into slavery to Pharaoh. When they resist their slavery, as they surely will, Pharaoh is able to pivot and deflect their anger onto the Jews who were responsible for this policy.

In contrast, Yaakov is thoroughly unimpressed by Pharaoh. When he is brought to meet Pharaoh, the exchange could almost be comedic. Pharaoh accepts Yaakov into his palace to receive his blessing. Trying, perhaps, to make small-talk, Pharaoh asks Yaakov how old he is - Yaakov has an aura of a sainted elder, he looks every inch as a venerated patriarch.

Have you ever met a curmudgeonly Jewish man of a certain age who complains about everything? That's the persona that Yaakov adopts:

יֹאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־פָּרְעֹה יְמֵי שָׁנַי מְגוּרֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאֵת שָׁנָה מֵעַט וְרַעִים הָיָו יְמֵי שָׁנַי חַיִּי וְלֹא הִשִּׁיגוּ אֹתִי יְמֵי שָׁנַי חַיִּי אֲבֹתַי בְּיָמֵי מְגוּרֵיהֶם:

And Jacob answered Pharaoh, "The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns."

This is Yaakov's response to a friendly question from his son's boss! Why won't he make the moment pleasant? He's called in to give a blessing, it's an easy task! But he isn't happy and he won't pretend to be happy. Yaakov understands his journey to Egypt in a theological framework. He was addressed by God prior to his departure from Eretz Yisrael:

אֲנֹכִי אֵרָד עִמָּךְ מִצְרַיִמָּה וְאֲנֹכִי אֵעֲלֶיךָ גַם־עֹלָה וְיוֹסֵף יִשִׁית יָדוֹ עַל־עֵינֶיךָ:

I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes."

Yaakov knows that his family's journey to Egypt is a fulfillment of the *brit bein habetarim* - God's promise to Avraham that his descendants would be strangers in a strange land - and would be subjugated there. For whatever reason, the Jewish people was destined to be forged into a nation through the suffering of Egyptian slavery. Yaakov knows several things when he meets Pharaoh: He knows that he and his family are not in Egypt because of a conversation between Yosef and Pharaoh but because of an ancient promise that God made to Avraham. And Yaakov knows that, however friendly Pharaoh is at the moment, the Jewish people's sojourn into Egypt will end in tragedy. And so Yaakov shows up, says his blessing, and leaves with only a curmudgeonly complaint offered to Pharaoh.

Perhaps the most interesting dynamic to explore, however, is Yehuda. Yehuda never meets Pharaoh. He does, however, meet someone whom he characterizes as being "like Pharaoh" and that is Yosef himself when he was still hiding his true identity from his brothers. In our parashah's opening verses Yehudah is confrontational, but also respectful when addressing an Egyptian man who seems to have all of the authority, power, and potential for capricious cruelty as Pharaoh:

וַיֵּגֶשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוֹדָה וַיֹּאמֶר׃ כִּי אֲדֹנָי יְדִבְרֶנָּה עִבְדְּךָ דָּבָר בְּאָזְנֵי אֲדֹנָי וְאֶל־יֹסֵר אֶפְרָי בְּעַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְמוֹךָ כִּפְרָעָה׃
Then Judah went up to him and said, “Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh.

Yehudah is confrontational and polite, but he also appeals to the best instincts, the better angels of the nature of the mysterious man he is confronting.

וַעֲתָה כְּבֹאִי אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ אָבִי וְהַנָּעַר אֵינְנוּ אֲתָנוּ וְנַפְשׁוֹ קְשׁוּרָה בְּנַפְשׁוֹ׃
וְהָיָה כִּרְאוּתוֹ כִּי־אֵין הַנָּעַר וְמָת וְהוֹרִידוּ עִבְדֶיךָ אֶת־שֵׁיבַת עַבְדְּךָ אֲבִינוּ בְּיָגוֹן שְׂאֵלָה׃

“Now, if I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us—since his own life is so bound up with his—when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will send the white head of your servant our father down to Sheol in grief.

Yehuda fills his speech with pathos. He describes the love that Yaakov has for the children of Rachel, Yosef, believed, dead, and Binyamin, and he describes his own sense of responsibility for Binyamin’s safety and for his father too. And the combination of an appeal to the heart and a bold willingness to confront injustice, softens Yosef’s heart and is effective.

There are therefore three distinct ways that our heroes interact with Pharaoh. Yosef embraces the support of Pharaoh and responds in kind, ultimately to the detriment of the Egyptian people and his own Jewish descendants. Yaakov tries his hardest to ignore Pharaoh. He is in Egypt but refuses to be “of Egypt.” At this stage of his life he is living in a different level of existence, focused on the ultimate destiny of the Jewish people and aware that Pharaoh is irrelevant to that ultimate destiny being fulfilled. Yehudah, when addressing the individual who seems “like Pharaoh” adopts an entirely different strategy. He is bold and confrontational, and also polite and deferential. He does not ignore the injustice of Yosef’s treatment of his family but still appeals to his conscience and in that way is successful in a way that Yaakov and Yosef are not.