

ONEG SHABBAS

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Oneg Shabbas explores drinking in the weekly Torah portion, along with timely essays on drinking in Jewish life.

What Did Pharaoh's Officials Do to Land Them in Prison?

Towards the end of this week's Torah portion, we read of a couple of senior officials of Pharaoh being imprisoned (Gen. 40:1-3):

The drinks-provider and the baker of the king of Egypt gave offense to their lord, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two courtiers, the Chief of Drinks and the Chief of Baking, and put them in custody, in the house of the prefect, in the same prison house where Joseph was confined.

חֲטְאוּ מִשְׁקָה מֶלֶךְ-מִצְרַיִם
וְהָאֶפֶס לֹאדְנִיָּהֶם לְמֶלֶךְ
מִצְרַיִם וַיִּקְצַץ פַּרְעֹה עַל שְׁנֵי
סְרִיסָיו עַל שֵׁר הַמִּשְׁקִים וְעַל
שֵׁר הָאֹפִים וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם
בְּמִשְׁמַר בֵּית שֵׁר הַטְּבָחִים
אֶל-בֵּית הַסֹּהֵר מִלּוֹם אֲשֶׁר
יוֹסֵף אָסוּר שָׁם

(N.B. While many English translations typically mention that the *מצרים* in the first verse or *שר המשקים* is either a butler or a cupbearer, a more literal translation yields that he is the Drinks-provider of the King of Egypt (Gen. 40:1) and Chief of Beverages (Gen. 40:2). As if the literal translation is not clear enough, his dream makes it quite clear that, whereas the Chief of Baking dreams about bread (Gen. 40:16-19), he is dreaming about wine (Gen. 40:9-13). So these two incarcerated senior officials are in charge of baking and of providing beverages to Pharaoh, respectively.)

Imprisonment as Part of the Punishment

While it is unclear what the nature of the sin was that these two senior officials had committed, it's clear that Pharaoh was greatly displeased with their actions, causing him to imprison them. While this imprisonment is not the conclusion of their stories, it is interesting to consider this punishment of imprisonment for not only these two senior officials, but Yoseph, as well.

As Jonathan Homrighausen described it:

The narrator supplies few details about the nature of the cupbearer's imprisonment. This is not a long-term prison sentence, but merely a holding cell while awaiting further sentence. We learn no morsels about the cell other than Joseph's description that it is a "pit", possibly marking it as fully or partially underground (40:15). No other prisoners are mentioned, though that does not preclude their possibility. There have been other prisoners with Joseph before (39:22), but that does not mean these others overlapped with the cupbearer and the baker.

("Forgetting the Forgetter: The Cupbearer in the Joseph Saga (Genesis 40-41)", *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies*, Vol 4.2 (Autumn 2022), 53.)



Ultimately, we read that the conclusion of their imprisonment goes in two different directions (Gen. 40:21-22):

He restored the Chief of Drinks to his providing drinks, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand, and he impaled the Chief of Baking, just as Yoseph had interpreted to them.

וַיָּשֶׁב אֶת-שֵׁר הַמִּשְׁקִים
עַל-מִשְׁקָהוֹ וַיִּתֵּן הַכּוֹס
עַל-כַּף פַּרְעֹה וְאֶת שֵׁר
הָאֹפִים תָּלָה כְּאֲשֶׁר
פָּתַר לָהֶם יוֹסֵף

Categories of Possibilities

What is the sin these two senior officials committed? Indeed, as one description has it (Homrighausen, "Forgetting the Forgetter", 53-54):

The nature of the cupbearer's offence looms as another large narrative hole. There is no reason to assume he has committed any real crime; he and his companion have only "offended" or "gave offence to" Pharaoh (Gen 41:9) and made him angry (Gen 41:10). ... The cupbearer's punishment may not have been occasioned by any actual crime. This narrative lacuna has not stopped exegetical traditions from speculating on the nature of the cupbearer's offence. ... In short, the cupbearer may be guilty of a truly punishable crime. He may also be, or at least feel himself, wholly innocent, or at least guilty of nothing more than a minor courtly faux pas....

As he mentions, throughout the generations, scholars have speculated broadly one of two possibilities: The first of these possibilities is that they sinned in a matter that was specific to their job, while the second of these two possibilities is that the two of these senior officials sinned in a similar manner.

What is appealing about the first of these possibilities is to differentiate between their emerging from prison, that one receives a return to his position, while the other is killed. However, even for those scholars who advocate that these two senior officials committed the same type of sin, they seek to find some differentiation. Alternatively, it could very well be that one of the aspects of the story is to show the capricious and wanton behavior of the Pharaoh to reward one and kill the other despite there being no difference in their behaviors.

{continued on the next page}

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{continued from previous page}

We read of both possibilities in this midrash (בראשית רבה פ"ח):

Our rabbis said: "The drinks-master - a fly was found in the vial of his medicinally-spiced wine. The baking-master - a pebble was found in his delicate bread. This is what is written 'The drink-provider of the king of Egypt and the baker sinned to their lord' (Gen. 40.1) - in the service of their lord."

Rabbi Evyatar said: "They sought to marry the king's daughter - it says here 'they sinned' (Gen. 40.1), and it says there 'How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?' (Gen. 39.9)."

According to Rabbi Evyatar, their sin was the same, which provokes the question: why did one of them get hanged and the other returned to his role? A couple of possibilities were offered by Rabbi Shmuel Yaffe Ashkenazi (1525-1595) (יפה תואר על בראשית רבה פ"ח):

With all of this, the drinks-master was elevated, but not the chief baker, even though their sin was equivalent; perhaps it was on account of good things having been said of him. Or possibly it was on account of finding gracious aspects in his work. Therefore, he was elevated and not the chief baker.

Differentiating Between Their Offenses

While these possibilities are certainly clever for providing an answer to this question for Rabbi Evyatar's suggestion, the possibility provided by the rabbis is certainly more intriguing, as their sins are differentiated, making sense of their differing outcomes (also, since the verse describes them as eunuchs (Gen. 40:2), it does not seem likely that they would want to marry her). One such explanation of the rabbis' suggestion is provided by Rabbi Yehudah ben Eliezer (13th-14th century) (ריב"א על התורה, בראשית) (מ"ב):

Because the fly in his cup occurred without his ability to stop it, as the fly flies about in the air and people are unable to prevent it from occurring, but the stone is an error. Therefore, he hung the chief baker.

In addition to his contemporary, Rabbi Bahya ben Asher ibn Halawa (1255-1340) (רבו בחי, בראשית מ"א) also distinguishing between fly and pebble, Rabbi Shabbethai ben Yoseph Bass (1641-1718) offered an expanded articulation on this perspective (שפתי חכמים, בראשית מ"א):

Why was this one hung, yet the other, was not? It is understandable if the fly was the drinks-master. He should not have been hung, since it was beyond his control; he could not prevent a fly from suddenly falling into the cup. The baker, however, whose bread had a pebble, was negligent. He should have cleaned out the oven thoroughly, so that no pebble remained.

What is fascinating in differentiating between the offenses of these two officials is that the chief baker is being positioned as having been negligent in the preparation of the bread during his production, while the drinks-master is being perceived as having simply been negligent in not shooing away a fly while having brought out the wine. There are so

many ways that the drinks-master could otherwise have failed, such as having brought out bad/souring wine, spoiled wine, or even poisoned wine, yet it is for such a silly and fleeting matter he is being imprisoned.

Poor Supervision

Despite a lot of rabbinic commentators through the ages liking the differentiating of the offenses of these two servants, there are also a couple of other clever possibilities. One of these was articulated by Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1549), who suggested (ספורנו על בראשית מ"ב):

Because they had not supervised their underlings carefully. שלא השגיחו על עבדיהם

A fuller articulation of Rabbi Sforno's suggestion is provided by Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865), who wrote (כתב והקבלה, בראשית) (מ"א, ד"ה משקה מלך מצרים):

Pharaoh scolded the ministers, not the servants who stood under them, because the sin of the servant is the sin of the minister for his lack of guarding and warning his servants. פרעה על השרים קצף לא על המשרתים העומדים תחתיהם, כי חטא המשרת הוא חטא השר לחסרון שמירתו ואזהרתו למשרתיו

Matter of State

Another suggestion, offered by Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) (אבן עזרא על בראשית מ"א, ד"ה חטאו) is:

The sin was a matter of state. חטא מוסר המלוכה

This approach considers their sin to be the exact same, somehow being offensive to Pharaoh's rule, or perhaps even holding them up to a higher standard of behavior, as they served in senior positions.

Conclusion

While Yoseph undergoes his imprisonment with these two senior officials of Pharaoh, was their imprisonment related to baking and providing drinks, or were they of a similar nature not specific to their positions? These are the broad categories of approaches to considering what it was that landed them in prison. It is curious that none of these suggestions considered that the drinks-master had messed up any of the wine or other beverages in what he brought to Pharaoh, much as one would worry about either poorly deciding upon providing good one, or even accidentally allowing poisoned wine, but that he was seen by the rabbis to have been imprisoned for such a trivial matter of not having shooed a fly away from the wine brought out to Pharaoh. Either way, at the end of the story, he is restored to his post and provides drink into Pharaoh's hand.

L'chaim 🍷

