

Vayashev 5771, 2010:

Not Remembering and Forgetting – What They Really Mean

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The final *pasuk* (verse) of our *parasha* offers us a fascinating exegetical challenge: “But the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, and he forgot him.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 40:23, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own) In classic style rabbinic language, we might very well ask: “If Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer did not remember Yosef, why are we also told that ‘he forgot him?’ Then, too, if the chief cupbearer forgot Yosef, why does the Torah need to teach us that he ‘did not remember him?’” Stated simply, what difference is there between not remembering and forgetting?

This timeless conundrum has captured some of the finest minds among our *meforshim* (Bible commentators). Rashi (1040-1105) suggested that “did not remember” refers to “that day,” i.e. the day that the chief cupbearer resumed his duties for Pharaoh. In contrast, “and he forgot him” means “afterwards” or from then on. In other words, “did not remember” connotes a sense of immediacy, whereas “and he forgot him” means over time. Rabbeinu Avraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1167) opined that “the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph” refers to his failure to speak about Yosef to Pharaoh, while “and he forgot him” connotes the sense of a total lack of memory of Yosef and his multiple

talents and abilities. The first was “*b’peh*” (“oral”) while the second is “*b’lev*” (“in one’s mind”).

I believe that the Ibn Ezra’s explanation is based upon *Talmud Bavli, Megillah* 18a. Therein the Talmud is focused upon another well-known instance of “double language” that deals with remembering and forgetting, namely, Parashat Amalek. In *Sefer Devarim* 25:17 the Torah teaches us: “You shall remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt.” Yet, just two *pasukim* (verses) later, we are told: “...you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget!” (Underlining my own) This prompts the Talmud to state:

It was taught in a *baraita*: “When the text states: ‘You shall remember,’ I would have thought that a cognitive gesture of remembering would have been sufficient (*b’lev*). Yet when the Torah says ‘You shall not forget!’ by definition this is referring to forgetting in one’s mind. If that is the case, how can one fulfill the mitzvah of ‘You shall remember?’ This must be done *b’peh* (orally – via the reading of the annual reading of this Torah portion, translation my own).

My approach to understanding the Ibn Ezra’s analysis is substantiated by the consummate Lithuanian scholar, Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1941), known as the “Torah Temimah” after the title of his most famous work. In the course of his examination of Parashat Amalek, he explained our *pasuk* in the following manner:

“But the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, and he forgot him” is an example of “double language.” It can be explained in the sense that since the chief cupbearer did not create any kind of mnemonic device to remember Yosef, he therefore forgot him. Moreover, we can use this idea to explain Parashat Zachor: “Zachor” means create a mnemonic for this historic event. If one does so, he will not forget [the heinous behavior of Amalek]. This explanation is subsumed within the Gemara’s analysis of our section: “I would have thought that a cognitive gesture of remembering would have been sufficient (*b’lev*),” how, however, can I properly fulfill the command of “Zachor?” - this must be done *b’peh*. In other words, one must make a verbal utterance that engenders the act of remembering – in order not to forget. (Translation and brackets my own)

Thus far we have focused primarily upon the interpretations of Rashi and the Ibn Ezra. A careful reading of both of their commentaries suggests that the chief cupbearer's failure to remember Yosef, and the consequent forgetting that it entailed, was inadvertent in nature. An entirely different approach to understanding our verse, however, was offered by one of the greatest halachic thinkers of all time, Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Asher (1269-1343,) in his commentary on the Torah entitled "*Baal Haturim*":

There are three instances in *Tanach* (Hebrew Canon of Scripture) wherein it states, "He did not remember." The first is in our *pasuk* ["But the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph...]. The others are: "And King Joash did not remember the loving-kindness that Jehoiada his father had done with him, but he killed his son, and upon his death he said, "May the L-rd see and requite" (*Sefer Divrei Hayamim* II: 24:22) and "How has the L-rd in His anger brought darkness upon the daughter of Zion! He has cast down from heaven to earth the glory of Israel, and has not remembered His footstool on the day of His anger." (*Sefer Eichah* 2:1) This means to tell us that the chief cupbearer purposely repudiated the good (*hiyah kafui tovah*) and did not remember the good that Yosef had done. So, too, in the case of Joash – who also rejected all of the good that was performed on his behalf by Jehoiada the Kohen, As a result, he murdered his son, Zechariah. (Translation and underlining my own)

According to Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Asher, the chief cupbearer purposely and premeditatively forgot all of the good that Yosef had performed on his behalf. Moreover, he deprecated him to Pharaoh, contemptuously describing him as nothing more than "a Hebrew lad, a slave of the chief slaughterer" (*Sefer Bereishit* 41:12).

Such acts of *kafui tovah* are found throughout our nation's history. While anti-Semitism has many specious rationalizations, I believe that the first step down this vicious path is often *kafui tovah*. This is seen quite clearly in Pharaoh's words that appear in *Sefer Shemot* 1:8-10, wherein he exhorts his people to loathe and fear the Jews:

A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know about Joseph. He said to his people, "Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more numerous and stronger than we are. Get ready, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they increase, and a war befall us, and they join our enemies and depart from the land."

The first of these three verses may be best described as “the denial of Jewish contribution to society.” Whether we follow Rav’s opinion that he was, in fact, a new king, or Shmuel’s opinion that he *acted* like a new king (*Talmud Bavli, Sotah 11a*), one thing is very clear: It is close to impossible to imagine that there could be anyone on any level of authority in Egyptian society that did not know that Yosef had saved Egypt and the entire world from starvation. At the very least, one would have expected some modicum of gratitude to be the operable behavior. Yet, this Pharaoh denied Yosef’s life-saving legacy and role in preventing worldwide starvation. As suggested above, one of the first things that anti-Semites do when attempting to create their power base is to follow Pharaoh’s heinous example. Thus, the anti-Semite consistently repudiates the nearly innumerable contributions that we have given the world. This is beyond question *kafui tovah* in its lowest and most reprehensible manifestation.

With Hashem’s help, may our enemies soon cease their *kafui tovah* against us, and actively remember the good that we have brought, and continue to bring, to the world, both as individuals and as a nation. May this lead to the end of anti-Semitism soon and in our time. May it herald, as well, the imminent coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the one and only righteous Messiah) and the ultimate vindication of our people in the eyes of all mankind. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and a joyous Chanukah!

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: rdbe718@gmail.com.