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Vayeshev

“But think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place.’...Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Yosef; he forgot him.” (Bereishis 40:14, 23)

In this week’s parsha, Yosef is thrown into prison by the Egyptians because of the false accusations made against him by Potiphar’s wife. It seems like he will meet his death in that dark place until he encounters Pharaoh’s imprisoned head baker and head cupbearer or butler. They tell him about the strange dreams they had, which he correctly interprets: The baker would be put to death by Pharaoh, while the butler would be restored to his former post. He only requests one favor from the butler: “...think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place.”

Rashi comments here that Yosef was punished for placing his trust in the gentile butler, instead of Hashem. The butler indeed neglected to mention him to Pharaoh, and Yosef would not be freed for another two years. Rashi makes reference to the verse in Tehillim 40: “Happy is the man who makes Hashem his trust, who turns not to the arrogant or to followers of falsehood.”

The Chasam Sofer points out that according to the Sages, it is incorrect for even a tzaddik, a righteous person, to leave everything to Hashem, as it were. Rather, a tzaddik does some modicum of hishtadlus (effort) and Hashem takes care of the rest. Why, then, was Yosef punished for his conduct with the head butler?

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He explains that Yosef indeed was right to interpret the dreams of the baker and the butler. After all, this was the minimal level of preparation required to alert his fellow prisoners to his existence and to leave them with a positive impression of him. However, Yosef erred in explicitly requesting the butler's help upon his release. One should not rely on another man to speak for him, for two reasons: firstly, the speaker might not be capable of successfully relaying the message. This, the Chasam Sofer concedes, was not an issue here. Later, the butler would indeed relay the message: "A Hebrew youth was there with us, a servant of the chief steward; and when we told him our dreams, he interpreted them for us, telling each of the meaning of his dream." (Bereishis 41:12) Secondly, the speaker may not be worthy of the task. The Chasam Sofer says that this was Yosef's mistake. He relied on the gentile butler, who was indeed arrogant and false. We see this from the disparaging way in which he refers to Yosef: "A Hebrew youth...a servant..." The butler feared Yosef's influence and charisma supplanting his at court. He therefore first neglected to report his existence, and later attempted to downplay his importance. It was Yosef's failure to recognize this human flaw that led to his punishment.

Shabbat Shalom
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