

A SIGNIFICANT INSIGNIFICANCE: THE MEETING OF JACOB AND PHARAOH

LEON KOSOFSKY

It is virtually axiomatic that the Bible does not deal with trivialities. All that is recorded therein serves some purpose. There are hints on were to seek meaning, conveyed through alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhythm, assonance, parallelism, allusion, or repetition. In short, all of the arts of the skilled author are drawn upon to deliver a message with the proper weight and shading given to each part of the narrative.

There is a fine illustration of this in Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek in Genesis 14:20. Melchizedek says: *'Blessed be Abram of God, the Most High.'* Abram replies: *'I lift my hand to **the Lord**, God Most High.'* Abram here inserts one word, *the Lord*, which indicates a most profound difference in outlook.

In Numbers 32:16 and 32:24, we find that Moses does not change words, only the order of words. With this simple device, he points up the gross materialism and lack of caring on the part of the two-and-a-half tribes who wish to settle outside of the land of Israel. They approach him and say: *'Pens for the flock we shall build here for our livestock and cities for our small children.'* Moses replies: *'Build for yourselves cities for your small children and pens for your flock.'* As the narrative continues, we see that the tribes immediately get the point.

Let us turn to the scene of the meeting of Jacob and Pharaoh in Genesis 47:7-10. One, head of a tribal family of 70 men, represents the principles of justice and righteousness. The other is the ruler of a mighty kingdom where there is immorality, slavery, cruelty, and worship of beasts. Pharaoh, perhaps because he wants to compliment Joseph, gives time and public respect to an old man of an (as yet) insignificant family. One might expect this meeting to be heralded by a significant introduction. One expects this meeting to be fraught with meaning, each word portentous and hinting at great events past and future. Yet, what do we see?

Leon Kosofsky, a native of Newark, NJ, studied at Yeshiva University and studied Bible with Nehama Leibowitz. After a long career as a chemist and teacher of chemistry, he moved to Israel where he is now retired and resides in Jerusalem.

Joseph then brought his father Jacob and presented him to Pharaoh; and Jacob greeted Pharaoh. Pharaoh asked Jacob, 'How many are the years of your life?' 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.' Then Jacob bade Pharaoh farewell, and left Pharaoh's presence (Gen. 47:7-10).

Why was this meeting recorded at all? On the surface, quite a trivial exchange. A midrash says that Jacob blessed Pharaoh that the Nile should flood properly. Perhaps the authors of this midrash wanted to give some weight to the exchange. Another commentator explains that since very old people were a rarity in Egypt, Pharaoh blurted out *'How many are the years of your life?'* This, too, seems an attempt to give significance to this apparently banal meeting.

An alternative solution to this conundrum may well be found in the following considerations. The apparent lack of significance points up its very significance. For a meeting to have a meaningful conclusion, the parties must have a common agenda. In my view, the agenda of the principals is not at all the same. There is a short episode prior to the meeting of Jacob and Pharaoh in which a clash seems to crystallize. Joseph had sent a select group of his brothers to plead with Pharaoh: *'We have come to sojourn [lagur] in this land . . . the famine being severe in the Land of Canaan'* (47:3). Pharaoh's response is: *'The land of Egypt is open before you. Settle [hoshev] your father and your brothers in the region of Goshen'* (47:6). Whereas Jacob's intent is to remain temporarily (as is clearly indicated by the use of the word *lagur*), Pharaoh's expectation is that the stay is permanent. Jacob's purpose is to ward off the influence of the Egyptian culture. Pharaoh's purpose in lending the land is economic. Not unlike the attitude toward foreign workers in industrially advanced countries, he is delighted to have this clan in Goshen. These are experienced and trustworthy breeders of livestock, a necessary calling that the Egyptians themselves would not follow because they regarded it as an abomination (46:34).

The contrasting purposes of Jacob and Pharaoh are further illustrated in the 40 or 50 verses dedicated to the death and burial of Jacob (49:20-50:14).

Jacob extracts a promise from his beloved son that he be buried in the Cave of Machpelah in Canaan. Joseph seems to have difficulty in asking the *house of Pharaoh* for permission to fulfill the oath given to his father. There is a note of hesitation on the part of Joseph, who appeals to Pharaoh's court (50:4) and not to Pharaoh directly. Joseph promises that after the burial *'I shall return'* (50:5). One can easily discern displeasure in Pharaoh's response: *'Go up and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath!'* (50:6).

All this is a strong indication that Joseph assumed Pharaoh wished the Israelites to remain in Egypt. Jacob's concern about this is apparent when he stresses time and again: *'I am about to die but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers'* (48:21). His fears turn into reality when it is stated: *And Israel settled [va'yeachazu] in the country of Egypt in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, and increased greatly in numbers* (47:27).

To come back to the first encounter: Both want this discourse to end as soon as possible. Again, the seeming lack of significance points to its significance. Is it any wonder that the results are less than significant?

SUBSCRIBERS TO VOLUMES 32 AND 33

The American Friends of the Jewish Bible Association has received a special grant to cover the cost of subscriptions to Volume 34, 2006. Thus, you will **not** receive a subscription renewal form in October – November. You will automatically receive a (paid) subscription for Volume 34, 2006. We hope our loyal subscribers will enjoy their free subscription for 2006.