

Parsha Ponders

Vayigash | December 29, 2022 | 5 Teves 5783

Yaakov's divine blessing¹

ויברך יעקב את-פרעה ויצא מלפני פרעה

Yaakov blessed Pharaoh, and left his presence²

The epic meeting between Yaakov and Pharaoh was short and sweet. They exchanged pleasantries, and Yaakov shared a bit about his life. Upon his departure, the Torah tells us that Yaakov blessed Pharaoh. Rashi asks³: What did Yaakov bless Pharaoh with? That the Nile River should rise to his feet. Meaning, Egypt's climate doesn't allow it to survive off rainwater. Instead, the Nile River would overflow and water the fields. After Yaakov's blessing to Pharaoh, whenever the latter would go to the Nile, it would overflow and water the fields⁴. There are few questions on this Rashi. First of all, why does Rashi ask what blessing did Yaakov give Pharaoh? Does it really matter? Couldn't it be anything? Maybe he blessed him with a long life, or lots of children. Since it could be anything, why bother asking the question? Also, Rashi didn't need to go on a whole long explanation of the intricacies of the blessing and how it manifested. What's going on?

The answer could be based on what our Sages tell us⁵, which is that Pharaoh made himself out to be a god. Someone privy to this insight would then be bothered: how could Yaakov bless Pharaoh⁶? A supposed god can't be blessed by mere man. What can Yaakov bless Pharaoh with that he supposedly didn't already have? If Yaakov blessed Pharaoh with a long life, Pharaoh would mock him. "You're blessing me with long life, when I'm the one who bestows life?" These questions are what motivated Rashi to ask what blessing Yaakov gave Pharaoh.

How did Rashi's answer address these questions? Well, what's the significance of the Nile River? Our Sages tell us⁷ that Pharaoh's whole proof to the Egyptians that he was a god was the Nile. Every time he went to it, it would rise and water the fields. They were so amazed; it had to be that he was god. What that means is that only once that started happening was Pharaoh coming across as god. When Pharaoh met with Yaakov, he wasn't yet "proven" to be god. It was therefore possible for Yaakov to offer him a blessing. It happened to be that the blessing he gave provided Pharaoh with the avenue to come across as god⁸. But until that time, he had no proof to that effect. That's why Rashi goes on to explain that from the time of the blessing, onward, Pharaoh had this supernatural ability.

Good Shabbos

¹ Based on Bechor Shor to Eruvin 53a

² Genesis 47:10

³ *Ad. loc.*

⁴ *Ibid*, based on Seichel Tov *ad. loc.*

⁵ Shemos Rabbah 5:14, 8:1,2; Midrash Tanchuma *Va'eira* § 5,9; Tanchuma Yashan *Va'eira* § 16; Mechilta *Masechta D'Shira* § 8; Mechilta D'Rashbi to Exodus 15:11; Yalkut Shimoni *Va'eira* § 180

⁶ I would have asked how is it proper to bless someone who presents himself as god, but the Bechor Shor goes in a different direction

⁷ *Midrashim loc cit.*, based on Ezekiel 29:3

⁸ Cf. Gur Aryeh *ad. loc.*, who rejects the possibility that Yaakov would give Pharaoh a miraculous power which could certainly then be used to make himself a god. Instead, he explains Rashi to mean that the Nile's natural cycle of overflowing would occur whenever Pharaoh went to the Nile. It wasn't supernatural, but clearly there was a link between Pharaoh and the Nile River