BIBLE 365

Daily podcast with
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Groundhog Day in Egypt

Parashat Miketz, Genesis, Chapters 39-41

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In 1993, filmmaker Harold Ramis gave us a seemingly simple comedy about a man for whom time had ceased to move forward. The movie, *Groundhog Day*, took on a cult status, beloved by clergymen and philosophers, thinkers and theologians. Writer Jonah Goldberg informs us that:

> When the Museum of Modern Art in New York debuted a film series on "The Hidden God: Film and Faith" two years ago, it opened with *Groundhog Day*. The rest of the films were drawn from the ranks of turgid and bleak intellectual cinema, including standards from Ingmar Bergman and Roberto Rossellini. According to the *New York Times*, curators of the series were stunned to discover that so many of the 35 leading literary and religious scholars who had been polled to pick the series entries had chosen *Groundhog Day* that a spat had broken out among the scholars over who would get to write about the film for the catalogue.

As for us, *Groundhog Day* will offer new insight into the tale of the stunning rise of Joseph from Hebrew prisoner to vizier of all Egypt and savior of civilization from certain starvation.

Literally sold down the river by his brothers, we experience Joseph as a man who makes lemonade out of every lemon. Bought from the slave dealers by Potiphar, a member of Pharaoh's court, Joseph excels in the Egyptian household, but catches the eye of his Potiphar's wife:

> *And it came to pass on a certain day, when he went into the house to do his work, and there was none of the men of the house there within.*
>
> *That she caught him by the garment, saying: Lie with me. And he left his garment in her hand and fled.* (Genesis 39:11-12)

We note here the difference between Joseph and his brother. Whereas Judah takes up with the disguised woman on the side of the road, Joseph resists all temptation. Judah personifies one who falters and ultimately overcomes. Joseph, in contrast, naturally embraces the right and the good. Judah will be the paradigmatic penitent, Joseph an embodiment of astonishing righteousness, not only resisting the advances of Potiphar's wife, but ultimately also forgiving his brothers' trespasses against him.

> "Only the Hebrew is able to explain how, with the passage of time, their lives will fundamentally change for good or for ill. This is a hint to us that the Egyptian relationship with time lies at the heart of this story..."

Potiphar's wife, rejected, claims that Joseph was the one who had made the advances, thus choosing the moral path lands Joseph in prison. Yet there too he flourishes, finding favor with his overseer, and striking up a friendship with two of his fellow prisoners, other members of Pharaoh's court whose own misdeeds have apparently aroused the ire of the monarch they served: the *Sar Hamshkim* and *Sar Haofim*, literally the "Minister of Drinks" and "Minister of the Bakers." We must not imagine these men in our minds merely as a bartender and a pastry chef. These were the overseers of drinks and bread for the Pharaoh, and these foodstuffs were central to the Egyptian economy and way of life. As Pharaoh's birthday celebration approaches, Joseph suddenly makes manifest a new talent. He not only has dreams, but is able to interpret those of others:

> *And the Minister of Drinks told his dream to Joseph and said to him, In my dream, behold, a vine was before me;*
>
> *And in the vine were three branches: and as it was budding, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters thereof brought forth ripe grapes;*
>
> *And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand.*
>
> *And Joseph said unto him, This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days;*
>
> *Within yet three days shall Pharaoh lift up thy head, and restore thee unto thine office...*
>
> *When the Minister of Bakers saw that the interpretation was good, he said unto Joseph, I also saw in my dream and, behold, three baskets of white bread were on my head;*
>
> *And in the uppermost basket there was of all manner of baked food for Pharaoh; and the birds did eat them out of the basket upon my head.*
>
> *And Joseph answered and said, This is the interpretation thereof: The three baskets are three days.*
>
> *Within yet three days shall Pharaoh lift up thy head from off thee and shall hang thee on a tree; and the birds shall eat they flesh from off thee.*
> (Genesis 40:9-18)

Joseph's predictions come true. The Minister of the Bakers is executed, whereas the other Egyptian is restored to his position. And then, despite Joseph's pleas, he immediately forgets the man whose prediction has come true. Note what these two dreams have in common. In both, the images represent units of time, that is, the branches or baskets embody days. And yet, unlike Joseph, the dreamers seem utterly incapable of making heads or tails of what they have seen. Only the Hebrew is able to explain how, with the passage of time, their lives will fundamentally change for good or for ill. This hints to us that the Egyptian relationship with time lies at the heart of this story; and so we return to a famous film about time.

Groundhog Day stars the actor Bill Murray as Phil Connors, a cynical and selfish weatherman, who travels the town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania,

in order to do a puff piece on the emergence of the groundhog on Groundhog Day in that locale. Phil looks down upon all those in the town as simpletons. After treating everyone rudely, he goes to sleep in his motel, and wakes up the next day only to experience Groundhog Day once again. He keeps waking up morning after morning in Punxsutawney, and it's always February 2, with the radio always blaring, "it's Groundhog Day!" At first Murray's character embraces his time stasis, realizing that he can do whatever he wants without consequences, as he will just wake up at the beginning of that same day. He eventually grows frustrated, attempts to commit suicide, and still continues to wake up in his bed on February 2. Finally, having come to know in intricate detail everything that happens in that town on that day, he focuses on using every minute toward a good purpose. He saves the lives of those who died on that day, fixes the flat tires of those in need, enjoys art, and learns to love a woman, Rita, played by Andie MacDowell, who originally was spiritually far out of his league, but whose love he ultimately earns. Eventually, having spent every instant of February 2 in a proper way, having lived a perfect day, he actually wakes up the next morning, and it is February 3. Tomorrow finally comes.

In other words, only after Phil has grown to appreciate the preciousness of time, is he allowed to experience time. So let us now ask ourselves; is this only a fable, a cinematic metaphor? Perhaps the film also, albeit unintentionally, embodies the ethos of a society that once long ago sought to stop time itself. For at the heart of ancient Egypt was the attempt to stop time. We see this first and foremost in mummification, in which every attempt is made to deny decay, to allow the body, buried with all its items, to live on in the next world, in the belief that you really *can* take it all with you.

Indeed, a hint to this cultural obsession with preventing change can be found in one affectation pertaining to the Egyptian court. Let us continue the Joseph tale. Pharaoh himself has a dream:

> *And it came to pass at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh dreamed, and behold, he stood by the river.*
>
> *And, behold, there came out of the river seven cows, well favored and fat fleshed; and they fed in the reed grass.*
>
> *And, behold, seven other cows came up after them out of the river, ill favored and lean fleshed; and stood by the the other cows upon the bank of the river.*
>
> *And the ill-favored and lean fleshed cows did eat up the well favored and fat ones...* (Genesis 41:1-4)

Pharaoh then dreams again, seeing seven fat ears of grain swallowed up by seven lean, blasted ones. No one in his court can interpret these visions. Joseph's former friend from prison informs the Pharaoh about a man who has a gift for dream interpretation.

> *Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily from the dungeon, and he shaved and changed his clothes and came unto Pharaoh.* (Genesis 41:14)

This is the first time shaving appears in the Bible. It appears that one could only appear in high society in Egypt in a barefaced state, and the head, it would seem, was shaved as well. Leon Kass notes that the practice of shaving in the ancient world was, to a great extent, unique to Egypt. And other scholars who have written on this passage, such as the archaeologist Lisbeth Fried, concur. Fried tells us that:

> Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh shows in exquisite detail the fall of the Judean city of Lachish to the Assyrian armies in 701 B.C.E. It depicts the Assyrian king (whose head is unfortunately defaced, though the beard is still visible), seated on his throne, receiving his chief minister (perhaps the "Tartan" mentioned in 2 Kings 18:17) and other officers from his army. Behind them,

> Jews from Lachish are shown bowing in submission. The Jews and Assyrians are all in full beard...At least from the time of the [Egyptian] Old Kingdom (2686-2181 B.C.E.), the custom among men was to shave beard and mustache, and wear a false goatee on special occasions. Foreigners can be distinguished from native Egyptians in many Egyptian tomb paintings by the presence of full beards, for example.

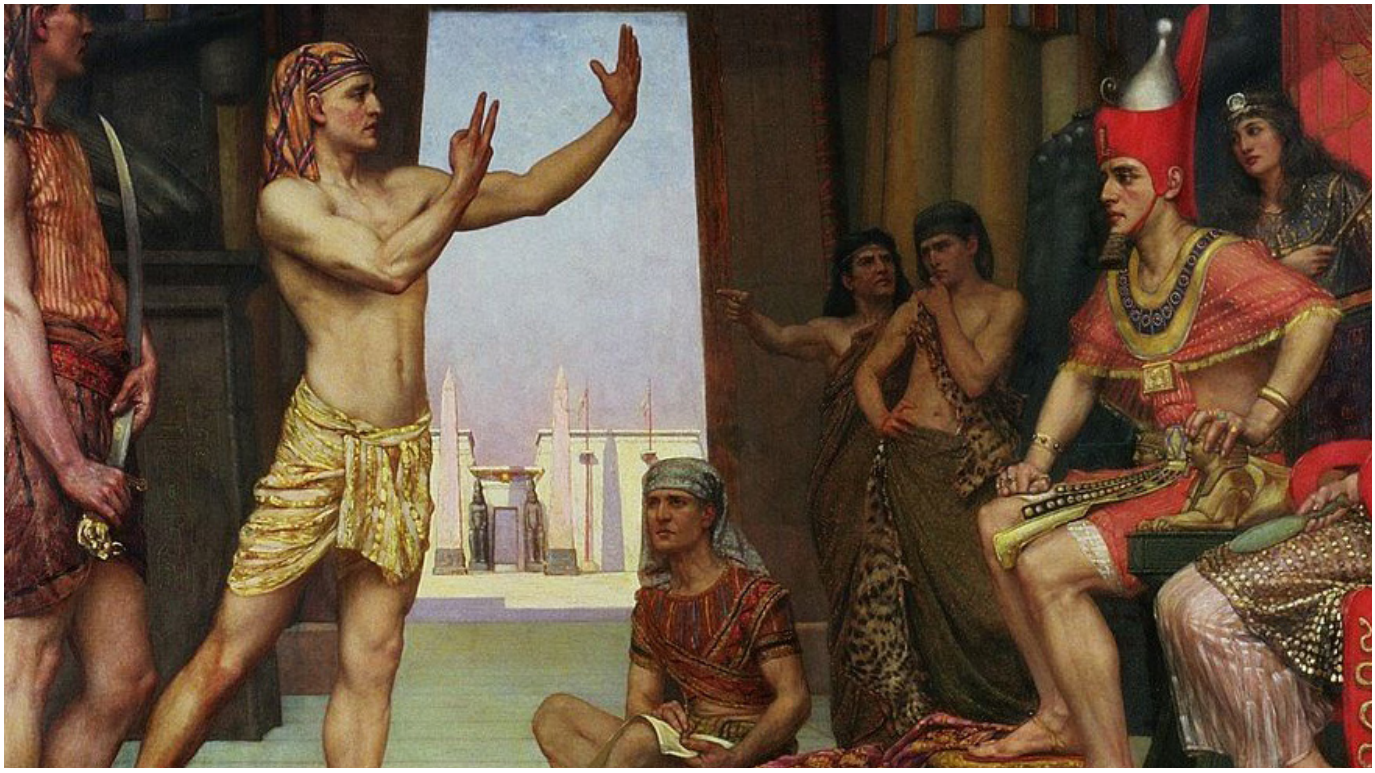
It is with the Egyptian pursuit of eternal youth in mind that we can understand the country's affection for hair removal. Biblical society has beards; Egyptian society does not. I wrote about this once in an article in *Commentary* in which I discussed the biblical penchant for beards. It is linked, I argue, to the fact that the Bible wishes to warn us not to ignore our aging, our mortality.

The biblical word for beard is "*zakan*," and an elderly person is a "*zaken*." To shave our beards, as was done in Egypt, was originally (in the ancient world at least) to deny our inevitable aging. As Leon Kass writes, while hair removal might seem to be an act of revealing, it is in fact a disguise:

> [T]he cleanly shaven face and head hides all signs of growth, change, and senescence. No shaggy outlines or blemishes mar the perfectly smooth look. What appears to be an unveiling is actually also a disguise, a veiling of age and disorder...Shaving is a perfect emblem of the Egyptian penchant to deny change and to conquer decay by human effort...

Egypt then is, in all respects, an attempt not to turn back time, but at least to freeze time; to bring about Groundhog Day. Its culture reveals an Egypt obsessed with youth, with immortality. Leon Kass further writes:

> Whether we look to the hieroglyphic in which the mobile world is represented in static ideograms; or to the worship of the eternally circling but never changing heavenly bodies... or to the practices of denying aging through bodily adornment and defying death through mummification...everywhere one looks, one sees in Egypt the rejection of change and the denial of death.



"For Egypt, Groundhog Day is not a curse; it is an ambition."

Another way of saying this is that for Egypt, Groundhog Day is not a curse; it is an ambition. And thus, Egypt emerges as the opposite of Israel. For the biblical message is that only when we understand the finitude of time on Earth do we truly become focused on our own lives, and even more importantly, on transmission to the next generation. Of all the sentences I have seen written about *Groundhog Day*, the best comes from the historian Richard Brookhiser, cited by Goldberg, who writes as follows:

> The curse is lifted when Bill Murray blesses the day he has just lived. And his reward is that the day is taken from him. Loving life includes loving the fact that it goes.

Egypt does not understand this, but Joseph does. And though he is of course guided by the Divine, Joseph's understanding of change in time is the key to his interpretation of these dreams, and he applies this insight to all that Pharaoh has told him. For here too, the images that Pharaoh has seen embody units of time, and the king's visions—as Joseph explains to Pharaoh—predict that after seven years of prosperity, famine will descend on Egypt, and Pharaoh must now prepare for the radical change that time will bring.

It is with this in mind that we can suddenly understand how it is that only Joseph is able to interpret the Egyptian dreams. For in Egypt, only an Israelite understands that time moves foreword. I owe this insight to Robert Sacks, who is cited by Kass in his book on Genesis. These are Sacks' words:

> The awareness of time is the crucial key, not only to this dream, but all three dreams. Apparently, the difference between him who can and him who cannot interpret the dreams depends to a large extent upon the interpreter's awareness of the importance of time...

Or as Kass adds in his own expansion on Sacks' point:

> The secret of interpreting or solving the code of Egyptian dreams, here and with Pharaoh, seems to be turning all numbers into units of time, a static and discrete multiplicity into a measured period of change. On the surface, the Egyptian dreams hide the passage of time and the fact of change; but Joseph puts time and change back into the picture.

If there is one moment that truly captures the self-important sarcasm of Bill Murray's character before his own repentance in *Groundhog Day*, it is when Phil closes his initial report about the groundhog's emergence. And he says, "This is one time where television really fails to capture the true excitement of a large squirrel predicting the weather." Here in our story, Joseph informs Pharaoh that, indeed, seven cows are predicting the weather: that the agriculture of Egypt is not an eternally renewing cycle, that time itself will bring about radical change for Egypt, and ultimately for Joseph's career. And in the end, the greatest change of all will take place not without but within, in Joseph's heart and the hearts of his brothers.

Decades after the release of the movie *Groundhog Day*, a musical version of the film premiered on Broadway. One man who came to see it was Bill Murray. Hilariously, after seeing it, he came the next day, to experience, if you will, *Groundhog Day* again.

But most poignantly, the *New York Times* reports that at one point Murray was seen weeping, brought to tears, and he was asked why:

> "The idea that..." Mr. Murray trailed off as he paused to collect his thoughts. "The idea that we just have to try again. We just have to try again. It's such a beautiful, powerful idea."

The cycle of hate and jealously that has occupied not only the family of Jacob, but many biblical families, is about to come to an end. And as we shall soon see, it is Judah, a man who will change himself, who will illustrate how Groundhog Day is not our destiny.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik highlights the contrast between Joseph—to whom righteousness comes naturally—and Judah—who must fail and repent before he grows intro greatness. It is the tribe of Judah that ultimately becomes the leading tribe among the People of Israel. Considering the difference between these two sons of Jacob, why might that be?

2. Joseph negotiates living in Egypt while remaining loyal to the faith and moral traditions of his father. What can this teach us the story of Jewish life in the Diaspora?

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