MIQETZ: Droughts, Floods, and the Exquisite Accuracy of our Tora

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> *There has been famine in the land for two years now, and for the next five years, there will be no **plowing,** no reaping.*

Genesis 45:6

Popular wisdom notwithstanding, modern archeology helps us to corroborate some historical aspects of the Tora's narrative. Sometimes, it also provides us with cultural or historical tools to understand some little details that the Tora tells us that might go unnoticed.

Let's see now a couple of examples.

THE REASON FOR THE FAMINE

We all know Yosef's story and rise as the Vizier of Egypt. Yosef interpreted Pharaoh's dream, who saw seven full cows coming up from the Nile and seven thin, unhealthy cows coming from the Nile. Yosef interpreted the dream, predicting that Egypt would benefit from seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine.

Famine also affected other regions in the area, such as the land of Israel (Canaan). That's when Yosef's brothers came to Egypt for food, and Yosef recognized them, and after a dramatic reunion and reconciliation, his father and his brothers settled in Egypt.

Personally, and although I never thought much about the subject, I always assumed that the years of famine in Egypt were due to the same factor that determined hunger in the land

of Israel: a severe drought. The problem with this assumption is that there is virtually no rain in Egypt (between 10 and 15 days a year), and Egypt's abundant water comes exclusively from the Nile. But if lack of rain is not a phenomenon that could affect Egypt, what caused starvation in Egypt?

THE ARCHIVES OF AMENEMHAT

Modern archeologist and egyptologist David Rohl refers to ancient archives that recorded the measurements of the river Nile. Records show that the average level of the Nile was approximately 30 feet height. When the river dropped to, say, 25 feet, fewer crops were expected since the waters that annually overflowed the river would cover less land. When this happened, Pharaohs lowered the taxes to alleviate the farmers. On the other hand, when the river level rose to 40 or 45 feet, the water covered more territory, producing more crops, and taxes were obviously up.

The most exciting thing for our subject is the records of a gradual and "exceptional" flood of the Nile in the time of Amenemhat III, which allows us to entertain a perhaps different explanation of some of the details of Yosef's story.

TOO LITTLE OR TOO MUCH WATER

The archives record that in the times of Amenemhat, the Nile rose to 50 feet, producing an unprecedented abundance in Egypt. But then, and according to these identical records, the waters rose higher and higher, reaching almost 70 feet high! And suddenly, the abundance of water became a national emergency. The waters of the Nile rose like tsunamis, destroying the levees, drowning the cattle, and razing the adobe houses. The water did not recede. And it flooded the land during the plowing and sowing seasons. And as a result, there was no harvest. The starvation caused by these floods threatened Egypt on an unprecedented scale.

According to what was discovered in these archives then, it is

possible that the famine in Yosef's time was not a product of the drought but of the overflowing of the Nile.. This data would allow us to understand better a mysterious (or superfluous) little word that our Tora incidentally mentions, as in passing.

When Yosef tries to comfort his brothers, who feel guilty about having sold him as a slave to Egypt, he tells them that in all these events, the Divine Providence intervened. It was God who sent Yosef to Egypt to save its people from famine. And then Yosef says (Genesis 45: 6): "… two years of hunger have already passed, and there are still five more years in which [the land] will not be plowed or harvested"

It is obvious why the Tora says that there will be no harvest. But why would Yosef mention that the land will not be plowed? Typically, every year, the farmer tries to plow and sow at the right season, even after a year of drought, hoping for the rain to come. The variable is the harvest, not the plowing.

We can understand now that in Egypt, the problem was not the drought but the flooding that prevented the plowing and sowing of the land.

Thanks to the discoveries of these archives, we can better appreciate the exquisite accuracy of the biblical story, even in what seems to be an extra and otherwise, irrelevant detail, like: "that the land will not be plowed".

WHEN YOU DREAM OF COWS

Ramban asserts that the cows represent "plowing" and wheat represents "harvesting".

The records of the Nile may help us understand the symbolism of Pharaoh's dream, and his confusion, differently. "The cows that rise from the Nile" represent the rise of the Nile.

Usually, “the cows are full, healthy, that is, the annual flooding of the Nile brings food and prosperity. The mysterious and confusing element of Pharaoh’s second dream is that he saw seven “thin”, “hungry” cows coming up from the Nile. These skinny cows were an oxymoron for Pharaoh because the flooding of the Nile was supposed to be a source of abundance, not hunger!

The extreme flooding of the Nile for so many years in a row, as David Rohl suggests, was an exceptional phenomenon in the history of Egypt. In that case, it is not surprising that neither Pharaoh nor any of his advisers were able to understand the meaning of that mysterious dream until Yosef came to the Royal Palace.

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Here are a couple of examples:

THE REASON FOR THE FAMINE

We all know Yosef’s story and rise as the Vizier of Egypt. Yosef interpreted Pharaoh’s dream, which predicted that Egypt would benefit from seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine.

Famine also affected other regions in the area, such as the land of Israel (Canaan). This is when Yosef’s brothers came to Egypt for food, and after a dramatic reunion and reconciliation, his father and his brothers settled in Egypt.

I had always assumed that the years of famine in Egypt were due to a severe drought, like in the land of Israel. However, there is virtually no rain in Egypt (only 10 to 15 days a

year), and Egypt’s abundant water comes exclusively from the Nile. So what could have caused starvation in Egypt?

THE ARCHIVES OF AMENEMHAT

Modern archeologist and egyptologist David Rohl refers to ancient archives that recorded the measurements of the river Nile. These records show that the average level of the Nile was approximately 30 feet. When the river dropped to around 25 feet, fewer crops were expected because the annual overflow would cover less land. In response, Pharaohs would lower taxes to help the farmers. On the other hand, when the river level rose to 40 or 45 feet, the water covered more territory, producing more crops, and taxes would go up.

The most interesting thing for our subject is the records of a gradual and “exceptional” flood of the Nile in the time of Amenemhat III. These records allow us to consider a different explanation for some of the details in Yosef’s story.

TOO LITTLE OR TOO MUCH WATER

According to the archives, in the times of Amenemhat, the Nile rose to 50 feet, producing an unprecedented abundance in Egypt. However, the waters then continued to rise, reaching almost 70 feet high! Suddenly, the abundance of water became a national emergency. The waters of the Nile rose like tsunamis, destroying the levees (barriers built to prevent flooding), drowning the cattle, and razing the adobe houses. The water did not recede and flooded the land during the plowing and sowing seasons. As a result, there was no harvest. The starvation caused by these floods threatened Egypt on an unprecedented scale.

Based on these archives, it is possible that the famine in Yosef’s time was not a result of drought but of the overflowing of the Nile. This information allows us to better understand a mysterious (or seemingly unnecessary) detail

mentioned in the Tora.

When Yosef tries to comfort his brothers, who feel guilty about selling him as a slave to Egypt, he tells them that in all these events, the Divine Providence intervened. It was God who sent Yosef to Egypt to save its people from famine. Yosef then says (Genesis 45: 6): “… two years of hunger have already passed, and there are still five more years in which [the land] will not be plowed or harvested”

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