

TAFSEER OF SURAH YUSUF

LECTURE 18: PROPHET YUSUF (a.s) ASSISTS HIS BROTHERS

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Once Prophet Yusuf (a.s) was appointed as Minister of Finance and became established in this position, seven years of rain and good times came and passed very quickly. During this time Prophet Yusuf (a.s) micro-managed this period through various strategies which included:

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1. Encouraging and incentivising people towards focusing on agriculture and maximising the growth of crops;
2. He encouraged people to minimize consumption of their produce and to sell their surplus crops to the state; and
3. He established storage houses for the crops so that it could be used in the future.

As predicted, after the initial seven years of affluence, the rains stopped and drought gripped the land and Prophet Yusuf (a.s) again managed this period in a sublime manner by making available the stored food to people.

The system that he established for the distribution of food supplies included:

1. Everyone had to buy their supplies from the state;
2. A special arrangement was made for those who were not by the means to pay for their food; and
3. Every person was allocated the same quota of food supply.

Imam Reza (a.s) narrates that Prophet Yusuf (a.s)'s condition that people had to pay for their food supplies obtained from the state ensured that all the money that the wealthy elite were hoarding was collected whether it was in the form of money, jewellery, properties or various other assets. In this way, over a seven year period an element of equality in society and the breaking down of the class structure was achieved.

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During this period of drought, Egypt was not the only country that was affected as the surrounding countries were also affected. And in this way, Prophet Yusuf (a.s)'s homeland which was back in Qan'aan also experienced drought which affected his father and brothers too.

The brothers of Prophet Yusuf (a.s) thus also started to search for food in other places to survive. At this point that they ended up travelling to Egypt in search of food and reached Prophet Yusuf (a.s)'s Ministry.

BROTHERS OF PROPHET YUSUF (a.s) DO NOT RECOGNISE HIM

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Verse 58 thus says: “And Yusuf’s brothers came and went in to him, and he knew them, while they did not recognise him.”

When the brothers of Prophet Yusuf (a.s) entered his court, he recognised them immediately, as he was a Prophet. But they did not recognise him due to the passage of time that had passed.

Prophet Yusuf (a.s) was nine years old when he was placed in the well. Thereafter he ended up living in the palace in Egypt, then he became mature, then he had the incidents when various women tried to seduce him, then he spent at least seven years (or longer) in prison, then the seven years of good rains passed and possibly in the second year of drought he met his brothers. This should have resulted in Prophet Yusuf (a.s) having reached an age of approximately 35 to 40 years.

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During this time, his brothers did not imagine in their wildest dreams that the person that they dumped in the well who they thought was either dead or serving as a slave to someone would be in such a high position.

We also observe that Prophet Yusuf (a.s) was in a such a high position which according to certain narrations is indicated to be the Governor of Egypt or even the King of Egypt. If he was in this high position, it's amazing to see how accessible Prophet Yusuf (a.s) was to the normal people. Hence the brothers were able to directly enter his court. Many centuries later, during the khilafate of Imam Ali (a.s) we see that he had the same approach in being accessible to people and even advised his Governor in Egypt, Maalik Ashtar to have the same approach.

Interpreters have also discussed at length the reason why Prophet Yusuf (a.s) did not immediately introduce himself to his brothers at this point. In this regard Ayatullah Makarim Shirazi considers all the views on the matter to be a best guess and thus one cannot confidently establish the reason for it. However, he believes that the most likely reason is that Allah commanded him to do that and basically wanted him to have more sabr or patience in this matter and was thus another test for him to pass.

STRATEGY TO MEET HIS YOUNGER BROTHER

So the brothers then asked the Governor if they could buy food.

Verse 59 thus says: “And when he furnished them with their provision, he said: “Bring to me a brother of yours from your father; do you not see that I give full measure and that I am the best of hosts?”

When the brothers asked to buy food, Prophet Yusuf (a.s) immediately obliged and sold food to them. This again re-emphasises the fact that there was sufficient food to even sell to people

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from surrounding countries.

Since there were strict conditions regarding the quota of food that was available per person, though Prophet Yusuf (a.s) gave all his brothers who came to buy food their full lawful share, he alluded to them that they could have received more food if they had brought their (younger) brother Bienyamin along with them. He thus asked them to bring him with the next time they came to Egypt as the drought would continue.

He further says that he has been the best host to them. Where else would they find that the Governor of a country personally receives you when you are in difficulty and grants you your needs. Compare this to the manner in which they treated time once upon a time!

Verse 60 says: "But if you do not bring him to me, you shall have no measure (of corn) from me

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nor shall you come near me.”

The purpose of these words was to serve as a threat to ensure that they actually brought their brother along. This condition caused some distress to them as they knew that they had a poor prior record in relation to their younger brother and that their father would never allow him to travel with them.

Verse 61 says: “They said: We will strive to make his father yield in respect of him, and we are sure to do (it).”

This verse thus indicates that Prophet Yusuf (a.s)'s brothers basically said that they will try their best next time to bring him along. They had no other alternative to say this as they were concerned that he might change his mind.

PROPHET YUSUF (a.s) RETURNS THEIR MONEY

Verse 62 says: “And he said to his servants: Put their money into their bags that they may recognise it when they go back to their family, so that they may come back”

Prophet Yusuf (a.s) asked his servants secretly to return the money that his brothers paid for their food supplies so that when they get home, they will recognise their money and be further incentivised to return to Egypt.

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The question arises at this point regarding how Prophet Yusuf (a.s) could return the money which was actually state property.

The answer to this is that:

1. Since Prophet Yusuf (a.s) was in a position of authority, he thus authorised the return of their money;
2. He probably had a discretionary budget to do that as this is common in modern day governments too; or
3. Prophet Yusuf (a.s) used his own personal money to reimburse the state with the money that he returned to his brothers.

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