Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center
Conservative Yeshiva

TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Miketz
December 19, 2020, 4 Tevet 5781
Torah: Genesis 41:1-44:17; **Triennial** 41:53-43:15
Haftorah: I Kings 3:15-4:1

On the Interpretation of Dreams
Ilana Kurshan

Before Joseph was a dream interpreter, he was a dreamer. As a young lad Joseph dreams about binding sheaves in the field with his brothers when suddenly his sheaf stood up and remained upright and the other sheaves gathered around and bowed low to his. Joseph shares the dream with his brothers, but he leaves the interpretation to them – it is they who ask him whether he means to rule over them. Then Joseph shares another dream with his brothers, this time about the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him. Once again, he is the dreamer, and they are the interpreters. His brothers interpret the dream cruelly and mockingly, and the spark of anger that had been kindled when Jacob gave Joseph an ornamented tunic flares when the brothers catch sight of Joseph approaching them at Dothan: "Here comes that dreamer" (Gen. 37:19), they sneer, resolving to throw him into a pit.

Joseph's dreams land him in one pit, but his ability to interpret dreams gets him out of another. He is like the pestering little kid obsessed with robots who grows up to land a top job at Google. By the time he has become a young man, he has shifted from annoying kid brother to grand vizier in Egypt, and from amateur dreamer to professional dream interpreter.

The Talmud discusses this transformation in Joseph's life as part of an extended discussion of dream interpretation in the final chapter of tractate Berakhot. Rabbi Bena'a declares that "all dreams follow the mouth of the interpreter" (56a) – that is, meaning is to be found in the interpretation and not in the dream itself. He relates that he once had a dream and took it to all twenty-four of the dream interpreters working in Jerusalem at the time. Each one interpreted the dream differently, and yet all the interpretations proved accurate.

Rabbi Bena'a does not base this claim only on anecdotal evidence, but also on a verse from Genesis: "And it came to pass, as he interpreted, so it was" (41:13) These words are spoken by the chief cupbearer, who reports to Pharaoh that his fellow prisoner Joseph had accurately interpreted both his dream and the dream of the baker imprisoned with them. Pharaoh understands the cupbearer's words to mean that Joseph is a skilled dream interpreter who

should be released from prison and employed in the royal court; but Rabbi Bena'a understands these words to mean that it was Joseph's interpretation—and not the dream itself—that determined the fate of each dreamer.

While we cannot control our dreams, we do have some control over how we respond to them. Rav Hisda states that "a dream which is not interpreted is like a letter which is not read" (55a) – implying that a dream is like a coded message transmitted from a sender, perhaps God, but that the dream cannot have any effect until it is deciphered. One way of deciphering a dream is by reciting a particular biblical verse in which an image from the dream appears. For instance, the rabbis teach that one who sees himself shaving in a dream should rise early and recite the verse that describes the reversal of Joseph's fortune when Pharaoh sent for him out of prison: "And he shaved himself, and he changed his clothes, and he appeared before Pharaoh" (Gen. 41:14). If the dreamer fails to recite this verse quickly enough, the rabbis add, another verse might become the reality instead: "If I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall be weak" (Judges 16:17). The rabbis imply that whether the dreamer rises to greatness like Joseph or meets a tragic demise like Samson depends on the words invoked to interpret the dream.

If the significance of a dream is determined by how it is interpreted, then a dream is not all that different from waking life – it is not about what happens to us, but about what we make of it. Just as we have some degree of control over the way we respond to and interpret our dreams, we have some degree of control over the way we respond to the events in our lives. This is a lesson exemplified by Joseph, who was the ultimate self-made man. Though he was rejected by his brothers and taken for dead by his father, he succeeded in becoming the second most important man in Egypt, saving the country from famine.

At the end of his life, Joseph's brothers try to interpret his life in one way – they offer to become his slaves as punishment for treating him so cruelly as a child and causing years of estrangement. But Joseph rejects this interpretation, insisting to his brothers that "though you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result" (50:20). May we learn from Joseph to respond to the events in our lives in a way that our dreams, too, come true.

Yoseph's Brothers or the Children of Israel?
Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Bereshit 42:1-5

1Now Yaakov saw that there were provisions in Egypt, and Yaakov said to his sons: 'Why do you look one upon another?' 2And he said: 'Behold, I have heard that there are provisions in Egypt. Go down to there and provide for us from there….' 3And Yoseph's ten brothers went down to provide corn from Egypt. 4But Binyamin, Yoseph's brother, Yaakov did not send with his brothers; for he said: 'Lest harm befall him.' 5And the sons/children of Israel came to buy among those that came...

- What did Yaakov see that indicated to him that there was food in Egypt?
- How can we tell from the text that the brothers seemed aware of the food situation, but were not acting to resolve it?
- The Torah chooses carefully the way it describes people. In v. 3: who heads down to Egypt? Based on vv. 1-2, how should this group have been described? So, what is the text suggesting by describing them as "Yoseph's brothers"?
- In v. 4, Binyamin is described as "Yoseph's brother." What does it tell you about Yaakov's state of mind regarding Binyamin?
- Finally, in v. 5, how is the group of brothers called now? Why is this title used? Why are they not called "Children of Yaakov" or "Yoseph's brothers"?

Commentary: Or HaChayim Bereshit 42:3

Yoseph's brothers- they were determined to perform the brotherly act of redeeming him out of slavery.

Ten…it appears that Yoseph was selling a fixed amount of grain to each purchaser. He had two objectives, an obvious one and a secret one. The obvious objective was to prevent speculating in grain. Yoseph's method was of benefit both to him and to the purchasers. By refusing to sell large quantities at one time, Yoseph could take advantage of any rise in price when it occurred. The customers benefited since Yoseph did not raise prices unreasonably. Joseph's secret objective was to force each of the brothers to make a trip to Egypt to provision himself as he only sold rations for one family at a time.

- Based on Or HaChayim's explanation of "Yoseph's brothers," what change had taken place in the brothers during the twenty plus years since the sale of Yoseph?
- Why was it necessary for all ten of the brothers to go to Egypt? How does this explain the emphasis on Binyamin not being sent?
- The system described here is likely what happened (check v. 19). What do you think that Yoseph thought would happen when the brothers arrived in Egypt?

Difficult Decisions
Bex Rosenblatt

Our parasha, Miketz, and our haftarah, 1 Kings 3:13-4:1, each tells a story of a "wise and discerning man." Both Joseph and Solomon use their wisdom to test and to judge, preserving morality and authority under their rule. Joseph tests and judges his brothers, Solomon tests and judges two prostitutes. In both stories, those tested face extraordinarily difficult circumstances. In both stories, one person will pass and one will fail.

In our parasha, Joseph's brothers are in an impossible situation. There is famine in the land and they are starving. Joseph will give them food, but only if they bring his full brother, Benjamin, to him. Jacob, their father, refuses to give Benjamin to them, fearing that something will happen to him, just as he thinks happened to Joseph. Nonetheless, Jacob commands them to go get food. Faced with this catch 22, two brothers step up. Reuven, the eldest, swears to bring Benjamin back to Jacob, saying, "You may put my two sons to death if I do not bring him back to you." Jacob refuses the offer. Judah then tries to persuade Jacob. He offers himself as a guarantee for Benjamin, accepting full responsibility for returning Benjamin to Jacob. Jacob accepts. And indeed, later, when Joseph issues his secret test, placing a goblet (*gevia*, from the same root as the city, *Givon*, in which Solomon acquired wisdom at the beginning of the chapter) in Benjamin's bag and then accusing him of stealing it, Judah offers himself in place of Benjamin. He is willing to give up his freedom to save that of Jacob's youngest child. Where Reuben offered to kill his own children in order to assure that he will survive the famine, Judah sacrifices himself. It is at this moment that Joseph finally breaks down, revealing his true identity to his brothers.

In our haftarah, two mothers, prostitutes in the same house, also find themselves in an impossible situation. Each of them has given birth to a child, one three days after the other. Then, in the middle of the night, one of the children dies. The first mother accuses the second of having accidentally killed her own baby and then switching it with the first mother's baby in the middle of the night while the first mother was sleeping. They bring the case to Solomon to judge. He listens and then calls for his sword, to divide the baby in half and give one half to each mother. One mother breaks down and begs Solomon to give the child to the other mother, just as long as he does not kill the child. Solomon declares this one the rightful mother and gives the child to her. The other mother says nothing, perhaps fearful of being punished for killing her child and trying to steal another. We are left with a story of one mother willing to give up her child in order to save him and one mother willing to kill a child in order to save herself.

Both the parasha and the haftarah present us with people in nearly identical situations who make drastically different choices. In the story of the two brothers, raised by the same parents, one will choose selfishness and one will choose selflessness. Likewise, in the haftarah the two women are presented as identical in every way. Both are prostitutes. Both are mothers. Each of them loves her baby. And yet they make diametrically opposed decisions.

When we stand before the judge of wisdom and discernment, let us remember that even in the most dire of circumstances, we are capable of making moral choices. If in the face of famine and enslavement for Judah, and potential loss of a child for the mother, each chose to give, let us hope that we can as well.