

PARASHAT MIKETZ

Dedicated in memory of my father, Hillel ben Yechiel (Herman) Reiter, of Debrecen, Hungary, whose yearzeit falls on the 24th day of Kislev. May his soul be among the Righteous in Gan Eden.

"There is None So Wise and Knowing as You" By Rabbi Amnon Bazak

A. PAIRS OF DREAMS

As our parasha begins, we find – for the third time in Yosef's story – a pair of dreams. The first time (37:5-10), it was Yosef himself who dreamed a pair of dreams, one depicting sheaves, and the other - the sun, moon and stars. The second time, Yosef proposed an interpretation for the pair of dreams dreamt by the royal butler and baker. Now Yosef is asked to interpret the double dream that so troubles Pharaoh. We see a development in these pairs of dreams, in several respects:

- A. The first pair of dreams happened at different times. Yosef first dreamed about the sheaves, and told his brothers, and then dreamed about the sun, moon and stars. The second pair of dreams occurred on the same night, but to two different people, while the third pair is dreamt by one individual on a single night.
- B. Yosef's status as an interpreter of dreams likewise undergoes development. In the first dreams, he does no interpreting; he simply recounts them to his brothers (and, with regard to the second dream, also to his father). He interprets the second pair, but only after convincing the two royal officers to tell him their dreams. When it comes to the third pair, Yosef is presented as a qualified interpreter of dreams: "I have heard it said of you that you hear a dream and can interpret it" (41:15).
- C. Understanding the dreams becomes an increasingly difficult task. Yosef's first pair of dreams is entirely clear; there is almost no need to explain its significance. When he tells his brothers about his first dream, without adding a word of commentary, their obvious reaction is: "Will you really be king over us; will you really rule us?" – and they hated him even more because of his dreams and because of his words" (37:8). After he tells his father of his second dream, Yaakov rebukes him: "Shall I and your mother and your brothers really come to bow down before you to the earth?" The second pair of dreams leaves the respective dreamers in distress, for they are unable to understand: "Yosef came to them in the morning and he saw them, and behold, they were distressed. He asked... 'Why are your faces sour today?' They said to him, 'We have dreamed a dream, AND THERE IS NONE TO INTERPRET IT'" (40:6-8). When it comes to Pharaoh's dreams, even the

professionals who are meant to be able to interpret dreams are unsuccessful: "He sent and called for all the soothsayers of Egypt and all its wise men, and Pharaoh told them of his dream, AND THERE WAS NONE TO INTERPRET THEM for Pharaoh" (41:8). While the expression "there is none to interpret it" (poter ein oto), in the context of the dream of the butler and of the baker, appears to mean "we have no one to turn to," in Pharaoh's case the words "ein poter otam" mean that there are people available who should be able to interpret the dreams, but they are unable to do so.

D. Concerning numbers and times, again, there is a gradual development. In the first pair, the dimension of time is entirely absent. In Yosef's first dream, there is no mention of any number; he merely says: "Behold, your sheaves were surrounding, and bowed down to my sheaf" (37:7). In the second dream, there is mention of a number: "Behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowing down to me," but here the significance of the numbers is clear: the eleven stars symbolize his eleven brothers. The number THREE features in both dreams in the second pair: "upon the vine were three tendrils" (40:10), and "three woven baskets" (40:16). Both details are interpreted by Yosef as referring to "three days" (40:12, 18). In the third pair, the number SEVEN appears over and over, and Yosef understands this as symbolizing "seven years" (41:26).

What arises from the above is that the three pairs of dreams should be regarded as a unified system. I shall attempt to show that the first two pairs prepare Yosef for his audience with Pharaoh, sharpening his ability to interpret the king's dreams accurately and successfully.

B. YOSEF'S DREAMS

As noted above, Yosef's dreams are easy to understand, and he is not required to interpret them. At the same time, there is one important point that may be derived from the understanding of these two dreams. The chief difference between them is that, while in the first dream Yosef dreams only about his brothers – "Behold, we are binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright, and behold, your sheaves were surrounding, and bowed down to my sheaf" (37:7), the second dream includes additional figures: "Behold, I dreamed another dream, and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me" (37:9). It is reasonable to assume that Yosef understood that one of these two new elements – either the sun or the moon – represented his father, for he tells the first dream only to his brothers, while he recounts the second dream "to his father and to his brothers." What is the meaning of the second added element? Yaakov seems to interpret it as symbolizing Rachel: "Shall I AND YOUR MOTHER and your brothers really come to bow down before you to the ground?" As Rashi points out: "Has your mother not already passed away?"

Now Yosef is left with two possibilities: one is to abandon his dream, for – as his father says – how can it be realized? The second option is to interpret the significance of the sun and the moon in a different way. Yosef appears to have chosen the second

option, since even Yaakov is not quick to dismiss the dream ("But his father kept the matter in mind"). The alternate interpretation of the "sun" and the "moon" – other than referring to his father and mother – brings the dream into an entirely different sphere. The sun and the moon represent rulership: "The Lord made the two great lights, the great light TO RULE by day and the lesser light TO RULE by night, and the stars" (Bereishit 1:16). There is therefore room to posit that the dreams, in conjunction with Yaakov's words, led Yosef to assume that he was destined to achieve a position of power much higher than he had originally imagined. From this point onwards, that consciousness will guide his way in the future.

C. DREAMS OF THE BUTLER AND THE BAKER

The royal butler and the royal baker were distressed by their inability to understand their dreams on their own. But we may ask, what was so original and brilliant about the interpretation offered by Yosef? Could the butler not have understood on his own that "Pharaoh's goblet was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's goblet, AND GAVE THE GOBLET INTO PHARAOH'S HAND" (40:11) meant that, as Yosef informs him, "Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position AND YOU SHALL GIVE PHARAOH'S GOBLET INTO HIS HAND, as in the beginning, when you would give him to drink"? After all, the dream describes precisely what is supposed to happen, without any parables or metaphors! Indeed, that is what really transpires: "He restored the chief butler to his butlership, AND HE GAVE THE GOBLET INTO PHARAOH'S HAND."

It seems that the great mystery of the butler's dream lay in its introduction: "Behold, there was a vine before me, and the vine had three tendrils, and it was as though it was budding, its blossoms came forth, and its clusters offered ripe grapes." The fact that a vine features in the dream of the chief butler obviously comes as no surprise, but what is the meaning of the three tendrils?

Yosef interprets this aspect, too: "Yosef said to him, This is its interpretation: the three tendrils are three days." How did Yosef know this?

Until now, the dreams have been explainable in a logical manner, so it is reasonable to assume that here, too, the solution was in front of their eyes. I believe that Yosef was well aware of the fact that in three days' time Pharaoh would celebrate his birthday and hold a banquet for all his servants. In his wisdom, Yosef put two and two (or three and three) together, positing that the three tendrils meant the three days until this special occasion.

Now we can also understand the baker's behavior. It is patently obvious that his dream – "in the top basket were all kinds of baked foods for Pharaoh, and the birds were eating them from the basket atop my head" – does not bode well. But the baker, too, is stumped by the significance of the "three woven baskets atop my head." Again, Yosef states without hesitation: "Yosef answered and he said, This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days."

Yosef gained enormously from this episode. He learned here that the presence of a certain number of items in a dream signifies that many units of time. This knowledge will be useful to him in the future.

However, this leaves us with a difficult question. Yosef approaches the butler with a poignant request: "But keep me in mind when it will be good for you, and please show kindness to me, and mention me to Pharaoh, that you may bring me out of this house. For I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews; here, too, I have done nothing that they should put me in the dungeon." Why, then, at the end of the chapter, do we learn that "the butler did not remember Yosef, and he forgot him"?

Rashi quotes Chazal, who teach that Yosef's request of the butler was improper: "Because Yosef put his faith in him [the butler] to remember him, he ended up being in prison for another two years." However, on the literal level, it is difficult to understand Yosef's action as being improper (see Ramban). Is a person then forbidden to act to the best of his abilities in order to save himself from unjustified imprisonment? For this reason, it appears that Yosef's continued imprisonment resulted solely from the evolution of that wondrous Divine plan that had guided his fate thus far. During the course of the next two years, Yosef came to understand that the time had not yet come for his dreams to be realized. Indeed, what would he have amounted to if the butler had remembered him? Clearly, the future held a greater potential for the realization of his dreams.

D. PHARAOH'S DREAMS

The Torah recounts what happens after Pharaoh awakens from his dreams: "It was in the morning, that his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the soothsayers of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dream, but there was no one to interpret them for Pharaoh" (41:8). Here, again, we may ask: Are Pharaoh's dreams really so difficult to understand? Is it so difficult to comprehend that well-fed, healthy-looking cows indicate fullness, while sickly, thin cows indicate famine? Is it not clear that healthy, good ears symbolize bountiful produce, while thin and blasted ears denote scarcity?

It seems to me that what confused the soothsayers and wise men of Egypt, like the butler and the baker before them, was the numbers. All assumed that numbers symbolized objects, rather than units of time:

"They proposed interpretations, but he rejected their suggestions: 'The seven good cows are seven daughters that you will sire; the seven bad cows are seven daughters that you will bury. The seven good ears indicate seven provinces that you will conquer; the seven bad ones symbolize seven provinces that will rebel against you.'" (Bereishit Rabba, 89)

Yosef has already learned that numbers, in a dream, express units of time. Since the concepts of fullness and famine are not suited to units of days, as in the story of the butler and the baker, the conclusion must be: "The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good sheaves are seven years; it is the same dream. And the seven thin, sick cows arising after them are seven years, and the seven empty, blasted ears will be seven years of famine" (41:26-27). Thus Yosef applies what he learned in the previous pair of dreams.

It appears that even what Yosef learned from his own first dreams assists him in interpreting Pharaoh's dreams. As mentioned, Yosef learned from his dreams that a lofty, elevated status of rulership awaits him. After his hopes that the dream would be realized with the help of the butler are dashed, Yosef now understands the enormous potential of his current situation. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Yosef understands that Pharaoh's dreams also include the possibility of realizing his own dreams. This is the only way we can understand why Yosef does not end his speech with the interpretation of the dream, but rather goes on to add: "Now let Pharaoh seek out a man who is wise and knowing, and set him over the land of Egypt" (41:33).

Ramban (41:4) maintains that all of Yosef's detailing of the plan to divide the land and gather food during the years of plenty, is part of his interpretation of the dream:

"In my opinion, it is a sign that the years of famine will consume the years of plenty, and from this Yosef deduced and told Pharaoh that all the food of the good years should be gathered, and the food would be a guarantee for the land for the seven years of famine, for he saw that the good cows and ears would be consumed into the bad ones. This was not advice [to Pharaoh] – was he then appointed an advisor to the king? Rather, he spoke thus as the interpretation of the dream."

However, this still raises a difficulty: where is there any hint in the dream that all of this is meant to be done by a "wise and knowing man"? Therefore, it seems that Yosef added this not as part of the interpretation of Pharaoh's specific dream, but rather as the interpretation of the comprehensive development of the three pairs of dreams, all directed towards a single goal: bringing Yosef to power.

Now Yosef is left with one single point in Pharaoh's dreams that must be addressed. What is the meaning of the repetition of the dream? Yosef has encountered this phenomenon before, in the first pair of dreams – his own. The dreams there were not successive, nor did they signify the same thing, for – as noted above – in the second dream new elements (sun, moon) appeared that were absent from the first dream. The dreams of the butler and the baker were, of course, two dreams that differed, and even represented opposites. It seems that for this reason Yosef understood that if there is no qualitative difference between the dreams, the significance of the duality must likewise be related to the dimension of time. Thus he concludes: "As for the repetition of the dream to Pharaoh twice – it is because the thing is determined by God, and God will hasten to bring it about" (41:32).

E. "DO INTERPRETATIONS NOT BELONG TO GOD?"

Thus far, we have seen that Yosef succeeded, in his wisdom, in finding the way to interpret dreams. Our fundamental assumption has been that a person has the intellectual ability to interpret a dream, with the power of his faith and his understanding, but without requiring prophecy. We shall see that this idea is expressed explicitly by Yosef himself.

When the butler and the baker tell Yosef, "We have dreamed a dream and there is no one to interpret it," Yosef replies: "Do interpretations not belong to God? Please, tell me" (40:8). This utterance seems to contradict itself: if interpretations belong to God, why should they tell their dream to Yosef? The commentators offer various explanations (see Ibn Ezra, R. Sa'adia Gaon, Chizkuni), but the Radak writes:

"Do interpretations not belong to God' – just as dreams are His, and He [thereby] heals people and shows them the future, likewise interpretations are His – He enlightens people to understand the things in their dreams and their interpretation, for if no one can interpret the dreams, the dreams are dreamt in vain."

Hence, we may say that the ability to interpret dreams arises from the wisdom that God grants those who fear Him. A dream has no meaning if the person has no way of understanding it. A person is required to activate all of his powers, and with the help of heaven he will merit to land upon the correct meaning of his dream. It is only with this attitude that Yosef was able to interpret his dreams and act to realize them.

It seems that Pharaoh reached the same understanding. After hearing Yosef's interpretation, Pharaoh was able to summarize the entire development of Yosef's career in dreams in a single, brief sentence:

"Now that God has shown you all of this, there is no one as wise and knowing as you." (41:39)

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)