

## The Interpretation of Pharaoh's Dream

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

In this week's parasha we read of Pharaoh's two dreams. These dreams are recounted to Yosef, who here encounters a third example of what seems to be a set structure and formula for dreams - they come in pairs:

1. Yosef's own two dreams - the sheaves of corn and the stars.
2. The two dreams in prison - that of the baker and that of the butler.
3. Pharaoh's two dreams - the seven cows and the seven sheaves.

Pharaoh's dreams, located in our parasha, are particularly interesting because of the drama which surrounds them. Yosef, the Hebrew slave, is hurriedly brought before Pharaoh after Egypt's most skilled magicians fail to provide a satisfactory interpretation of the dreams. The challenge now passes on to the shoulders of this criminal slave incarcerated in an Egyptian jail.

Chazal assume that the magicians, too, attempted to solve the riddle of Pharaoh's dreams, but he did not accept their explanations. This assumption seems reasonable enough, since magicians at that time were "professionals" who received a regular salary from the king and whose job included advice and counsel in situations such as these. Hence we may assume that they presented their various explanations but that Pharaoh rejected them.

It will be the aim of this shiur to understand why ultimately it was Yosef's interpretation which Pharaoh was prepared to accept despite the fact that, as we have mentioned, there were people in Egypt officially recognized as professionals in this field.

Before addressing that problem, let us add another. After Yosef explains to Pharaoh the symbolism of the dreams, he goes on to suggest to how to deal with the oncoming famine. "And now let Pharaoh find a wise and clever person and place him in charge of the land of Egypt. Pharaoh should appoint officials over the land, and set aside a fifth portion of the land of Egypt during the seven years of plenty... And the food shall be a surety for the land for the seven years of famine which will come upon the land of Egypt, such that the land shall not be cut off for reason of famine." (41:33-36)

This suggestion is a good and sensible one in its own right, but quite surprising considering the context. After offering his interpretation, and before Pharaoh even responds and says whether Yosef's interpretation pleases him or not, Yosef goes on to suggest a practical treatment for the problem that is going to arise according to his own interpretation of the dream. How can Yosef be so certain that Pharaoh will accept his

interpretation and not reject it outright, as he had the suggestions of the magicians?

Moreover, Yosef is on the bottom rung of the Egyptian social ladder - not only is he a foreigner (clearly identified as a Hebrew, as is clear from the words of Potiphar's wife - "a Hebrew man"), but he has been sold into slavery. Not only is he a foreign slave in Egypt, but he is suspected of having attempted to seduce the wife of his trusting master. This is a most serious crime, involving not only immorality but also - perhaps even worse, in Egyptian eyes - ingratitude towards his master. It is no simple matter for such a crime to be forgiven (and in Egypt, of course, everyone believes Potiphar's wife rather than the despised slave), and so Yosef is thrown into the dungeon. Now this criminal, a slave from a foreign land, is taken and asked to propose an interpretation of the dream of the king of Egypt himself. Pharaoh saw himself as a descendant of the gods (see Yechezkel 29:3 - "Behold, I am upon you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt...who says, 'My river is my own, and I have made it for myself.'"). And the dream itself emphasizes the Nile river, which symbolizes the rich Egyptian economy, and which also apparently embodied a religious presence: "And Pharaoh dreamed, and behold, he was standing BY THE RIVER. And behold, from THE RIVER rose seven cows... And behold, seven more cows rose after them from THE RIVER... and they stood next to the cows on the banks of THE RIVER."

Such obvious emphasis on the fact that the events take place at the river immediately connects this dream with Egypt's power, such that the combination presents the epitome of Egyptian culture and art - Pharaoh, who considers himself a demi-god, dreams of the river which itself is considered a god. In the encounter between Yosef and Pharaoh, in this context, the Torah proposes an almost unimaginable contrast: Yosef, lower than anyone else in the whole of Egypt (a foreign slave who is also a criminal), meets with Pharaoh who has dreamed a dream about the very center of Egyptian power.

In this encounter it is fairly easy to imagine the feelings of fright on the part of Yosef and those of disdain on the part of Pharaoh and his magicians. And nevertheless this slave dares to propose political suggestions to the king - suggestions pertaining to the social order and system of rule; suggestions which he is not asked to make and which extend far beyond mere interpretation of the dreams. We expect that the king's staff will immediately seize this slave and throw him back into his prison cell, and that his conditions will only worsen. But that is not what happens. Despite Yosef's audacity the king accepts what he says and even goes so far as to praise him.

In fact, Pharaoh's praise in itself presents a problem: Even if Yosef has correctly interpreted the dreams, for what reason does Pharaoh enthuse to such a degree and see in him a person who has contact with the Divine ("Is there to be found such a person, in whom the Divine spirit rests?")? It is reasonable to assume that from time to time Pharaoh accepted interpretations and explanations offered by his magicians. But would these solutions then have made them, in his eyes,

people in whom the Divine spirit rested? Would he then have made them his second-in-command? In this particular instance they are unsuccessful in interpreting the dream. In what way, then, is Yosef's solution different from the interpretation of any other dream?

The two problems we have raised - Pharaoh's conviction as to the veracity of Yosef's interpretation and Yosef's seemingly impertinent proposal (with Pharaoh's consequent excitement and enthusiasm) - are interconnected. The fact that Pharaoh refuses to accept the suggestions of the magicians indicates that he had some kind of sign as to who would interpret correctly. This dream disturbed Pharaoh greatly, and he felt that something was being hinted at, but he himself was unable to decode the meaning of the hint. In dealing with a dream of such significance Pharaoh did not wish to leave the solution in the hands of any interpreter who appeared sufficiently creative; he wanted to be sure of the correct interpretation. It should be borne in mind that part of the job of a magician involved interpretation of dreams, and the king must have experienced incidents in the past where interpretations offered by various magicians had not come to pass. Now, in light of this strange and important dream, Pharaoh wants some security in knowing the correct interpretation.

How does he go about this? The Torah itself emphasizes the method which Pharaoh employed. The Torah repeats details of the dream almost word for word when Pharaoh relates it to Yosef. Why not simply write, "he told him of the dreams which he had dreamed?" Whenever the Torah repeats at length a description which has already been given, we need to analyze the repetition carefully, because the very fact of the repetition itself apparently plays an important role in the story. (An outstanding example of this rule is the Torah's repetition of the story of Eliezer, Abraham's servant, at the well when he recounts the story before Rivka's family.) Here the Torah repeats the dream because that is precisely the tactic which Pharaoh chooses in order to test his magicians and the various proposers of solutions.

If we compare the description of the dream as Pharaoh dreamed it with his description of it to Yosef, we find that they are greatly similar. The dream as recounted by Pharaoh is (almost) a word-for-word repetition of the actual dream; but this very similarity makes two differences between them all the more noticeable:

In the original description of the dream we read, "And behold, from the river arose seven cows... and behold, seven other cows arose after them AND THEY STOOD NEXT TO THE COWS ON THE RIVER BANK."

In Pharaoh's description of the dream the last part is omitted: "And behold, from the river arose seven cows... and behold, seven other cows arose after them." No mention is made of the two sets of cows standing side by side before the lean ones consume the fat ones.

Pharaoh omits this detail but invents another.

In the original description we read, "And the bad-looking, lean cows consumed the seven good-looking, healthy cows. And Pharaoh woke up."

When Pharaoh recounts the dream he says, "And the lean and bad cows consumed the first, healthy cows, and when they were inside them it could not be known that they had been consumed, for their appearance was as bad as it had been at first; and I woke up."

It is difficult to ignore Pharaoh's significant addition. The Torah repeats it twice for emphasis: "And it could not be known that they had been consumed / for their appearance was as bad as it had been at first."

These changes were Pharaoh's secret, and he used them to see who would correctly interpret the dreams and who would be led astray by these incorrect details. It should be emphasized that Pharaoh apparently understood that this was no regular dream but rather a Divine message, which caused "his spirit to be troubled." The genuine interpreter of such a dream would certainly know how to distinguish between the crux of the message and an insignificant detail, between the dream itself and Pharaoh's personal additions, between what was related and the hidden message.

It seems that Pharaoh's magicians all fell into the trap he had laid for them and based their interpretations of the dream on the fact that the lean cows grew no fatter after consuming the healthy cows, or suggested interpretations which ignored the image of the two sets of cows standing side by side. Thus the king knew that all of their solutions were to be rejected.

Rashi brings an example of a solution proposed by the magicians (quoting the Midrash Bereishit Rabba, chapter 89): "They said, You will give birth to seven daughters and you will bury all seven of them." Such a solution precludes the image of the healthy cows standing next to the lean cows, since if the daughters were to die, they could not simultaneously be alive and so the two images could not exist TOGETHER.

When Yosef arrives to solve the riddle of the dream, Pharaoh repeats his description, with the addition ("And their appearance was as bad as it had been at first!"), and once again omits the two sets of cows standing side by side. Yosef begins interpreting the dream and it appears for a moment as though he, too, is going to fall into the trap: "And seven years of famine will follow them, and all the bounty of the land of Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will consume the land. And the bounty shall not be known in the land because of that famine afterwards, for it shall be most severe." Yosef, too, relates to this false detail and his interpretation is incorrect. But a second before Pharaoh signals to his servants to haul the slave back to his prison cell, Yosef continues and, to the astonishment of all present, proposes a reorganization of the Egyptian national economy as a means of dealing with the years of famine!

In fact, this entire suggestion indicates that the seven years of famine will not entirely consume the bounty of the previous seven years. Or, in the terminology of the dream, even after the seven years of famine come and consume the seven years of bounty, it will indeed be known that those years of bounty preceded them. The appearance of the "seven lean cows" can indeed be changed: "And the food shall be for a surety for the land for the seven years of famine which shall come to the land of Egypt, and the land shall not be cut off for famine." In other words, the years of bounty have the power to save Egypt from the years of famine - in complete contrast to the false detail supplied by Pharaoh.

How did Yosef gather the audacity to say such a thing? From the dream itself - but from the secret, hidden detail known only to Pharaoh and to Yosef (who admits that it is not he himself who interprets dreams but rather that "God shall put Pharaoh's mind at rest"). This is the significance of the two sets of cows standing side by side on the banks of the river. There will be a stage, Yosef informs Pharaoh, where it will be possible to place the years of plenty parallel to the years of famine - before the years of famine devour and consume the years of bounty. The food must be gathered during the years of bounty and kept aside for the years of famine!

Yosef's audacious suggestion is not a personally-motivated addition to the interpretation of the dream, as it appears at first glance, but rather a direct continuation of the interpretation itself; it is the interpretation of the detail which Pharaoh "forgot" to mention. This suggestion - hinted at in the original dream - invalidates the false detail which Pharaoh added of his own accord, and therefore Pharaoh is left amazed: "And Pharaoh said to his servants, Is there a man such as this, in whom the Divine spirit rests?!" The rest is history.

Further study:

1. After Yosef finishes explaining the dreams, and before Pharaoh's exclamation of appreciation, the Torah writes: "The matter was good in the eyes of Pharaoh and IN THE EYES OF ALL HIS SERVANTS" (41:37). What impressed the servants, and why are we informed of it?
2. See 41:53 and 41:54. How does this highlight the "hidden detail" of the dream, as explained in today's shiur?
3. Read 41:54-56. Was there, or wasn't there, a famine in Egypt? Was there hunger or was there bread?
4. Compare the aspects of the Pharaoh dreams explained in today's shiur to the dreams of the Egyptian ministers in last week's parasha (39:9-22). How did the ministers know that Yosef's explanation was "good" (39:16)? There also Yosef makes a suggestion (though it seems to be based on nothing in the dream). Was it a "good" suggestion?

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