

Two Dreams and Two Solutions

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

In this week's parasha, Vayeshev, we read of Yosef's descent, stage by stage, to the depths of the Egyptian jail. At first his brothers cast him into the pit, and then he is carried off by the Ishmaelites to Egypt, where – just as his fortune seems to be looking up, with his master Potiphar truly appreciating him – he is cast once again into a "pit": this time, the prison in Egypt.

There can be no doubt that Divine Providence accompanies Yosef throughout his stay in Egypt. Yosef himself ultimately testifies thus before his brothers ("For it was to preserve life that God sent me before you" – 45:5), and the Torah hints at the same idea, by means of various literary devices throughout the story. I would like to focus on the last stage recounted in our parasha – a stage that again (like Yosef's job in Potiphar's house) raises high hopes at first, but ultimately brings Yosef (and us, the readers) bitter disappointment; I refer here to Yosef's interpretation of the dreams of Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker. The chief butler is convinced that the Hebrew lad imprisoned with him is blessed with special talent and is able to interpret dreams most accurately. We are confident that after being freed from prison, he will not be quick to forget him. However, at the end of the story – the point at which the parasha concludes – we read: "But the chief butler did not remember Yosef, and he forgot him" (40:23).

Chazal address the clear discrepancy between our expectations and the events as they transpire, and suggest that this forgetfulness was in fact a punishment for Yosef, for his having relied on human aid.

"Happy is the man whose security is God's Name' ([Tehillim 40:5](#)) – this refers to Yosef, 'and who does not turn to insolent ones' - because he said to the chief butler, 'Remember me' and 'Make mention of me,' two years were added to his imprisonment." (Bereishit Rabba, quoted by Rashi)

This midrash conveys a very clear message about the relationship between faith in God and human effort, but the Torah's text seems to give the opposite message. Yosef regards all the events that happen to him as Divine Providence, and it is precisely for this reason that he feels justified in exploiting them. He follows this same approach when he stands before Pharaoh: he understands the opportunity that has opened before him, and so he suggests that "Pharaoh should appoint an understanding and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt" (41:33). It is hard to imagine that

Chazal's criticism is directed at Yosef in this instance, too – although here again, Yosef simply seizes the chance that God has offered him!

We must explore the issue of the chief butler's forgetting of Yosef in a broader sense. But I would like to raise the question from the other direction – that of the chief baker. Ultimately, the chief butler DOES remember Yosef, and it is thanks to his mention that Yosef is brought before the Egyptian king. The contribution of the butler's dream to the development of the plot, then, is obvious. His dream plays a role in the providential plan to get Yosef out of prison.

But the baker, too, dreams an unusual dream. His dream is likewise interpreted most accurately by Yosef – however, it seems redundant. The baker's dream and its interpretation play no part in the flow of the events surrounding Yosef, such that if he had not dreamed at all, it would have made no difference to the story. Since it is clear that Yosef's trials and tribulations in Egypt are directed by Divine Providence, we must seek the role of the baker's dream in the overall development of the story of Yosef.

We may, of course, claim that whole incident takes place solely for the great impression that it will make on the butler: Yosef interprets not only his dream, but also that of the baker! But I am reluctant to accept this explanation (although it is clear that two correct interpretations of two dreams certainly create a greater impression than a single one). After all, upon being freed, the butler promptly forgets Yosef, showing that even the correct interpretation of two dreams did not impress him sufficiently. Even when the butler finally remembers Yosef, two years later, it is difficult to posit that it is simply because Yosef interpreted not only his own dream but also that of the baker. It seems reasonable to assume that even if Yosef had explained only his dream, the butler would have been reminded of him when the king's dreams needed an interpreter.

What, then, is the significance of the baker's dream? In order to analyze this question, let us first compare the dreams of the two Egyptian officials and the respective interpretations that Yosef offers ([Bereishit 40:9-19](#)).

BUTLER'S DREAM:

"In my dream,

behold there was a vine BEFORE ME.

And upon the vine there were three tendrils,

And it was as though it was budding, its blossoms came forth, and its clusters offered ripe grapes.

And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes

And pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand."

BAKER'S DREAM:

"I too, in my dream:

Behold, three woven baskets UPON MY HEAD.

And in the top basket was food for Pharaoh:

All kinds of baked goods, and the birds were eating of them from the basket upon my head."

Each man's dream relates to his occupation: the butler dreams about a vine and wine, while the baker dreams about "baked goods." This serves to relate the dreams to their professional futures (rather than, say, their health or family situation), as Yosef indeed explains.

Moreover, the dreams are surprisingly similar to one another. Both men dream about "three" objects related to their occupation: three vine tendrils and three baskets. The text emphasizes the connection between the two dreams by means of the common expression, "And behold... three...." The similarity between the dreams continues with Pharaoh's involvement in the dream. The butler dreams that he is giving Pharaoh the wine, while the baker dreams about "Pharaoh's food" – i.e., food that is meant for the king's consumption. As stated, Yosef deduces from this that the dreams concern the men's occupations and their standing before the king.

At the same time, there are a few important differences between the two dreams – differences which apparently lead Yosef to give them differing interpretations. Even before the presentation of the dream itself, there is a difference in how the two characters express themselves. The butler begins by saying, "In my dream...", while the baker adds: "I, too, in my dream...." This is obviously related to the fact that he relates his dream after that of the butler, and therefore he adds the conjunctive expression. However, in using this expression he seems to reveal his hope and expectation that the interpretation of his dream will be like that offered by Yosef to the butler. "I, too," he emphasizes – as if asking for the positive interpretations to continue.

In the presentation of the dreams, there are four important differences that I would like to address:

1. The butler sees a vine BEFORE HIM, while the baker sees baskets of baked goods UPON HIS HEAD; this latter description is highlighted once again at the end of the dream: "from the basket upon my head."
2. The butler dreams about the source of the grapes ("tendrils"), and envisions the entire process of the growth of

the grapes. The baker, in contrast, dreams about the storage place ("woven baskets" rather than, say, an oven), and his dream contains nothing of the baking process.

3. The butler is active in his dream. He himself holds Pharaoh's cup, presses the grapes into it, and hands it to Pharaoh. The baker is passive throughout his dream; even if interesting things are happening above his head, he does nothing.
4. The most outstanding difference, of course, concerns the foods' destination. The butler serves wto Pharaoh, while in the baker's dream the birds eat the food.

It seems that Yosef, in his interpretation, employs both the similarities between the dreams and the differences. Just as the formulation of the dreams is similar, so is the formulation of the interpretation that Yosef proposes.

INTERPRETATION OF THE BUTLER'S DREAM:

"And Yosef said to him, This is its interpretation:

The three tendrils are three days.

In three days' time, Pharaoh will lift up your head

And restore you to your place,

And you will place Pharaoh's cup in his hand

As was the case originally, when you were his butler."

INTERPRETATION OF THE BAKER'S DREAM:

"And Yosef answered and said: This is its interpretation:

The three baskets are three days.

In three days' time Pharaoh will lift up your head from off you,

And hang you on a tree,

And the birds will eat your flesh from upon you."

The similarity of the language here is so great that Yosef seems to be deliberately leading the baker on, at first creating the impression that the interpretations are indeed the same. He begins with the symbolism of the number three, explaining it in the same manner and using the same language as he did for the butler. After this introduction, Yosef continues in the same vein: "Pharaoh will lift up your head...." We can almost imagine the smile starting to spread over the baker's face: See, his

dream is going to turn out well, like that of the butler! But suddenly Yosef adds just one more word: "me'aleikha!" (from upon you).

In contrast to the butler, who will be returning to his job, it turns out that the unfortunate baker will be hanged on a tree.

The formulation of the interpretation in such a way as to start out seeming the same and differing drastically only at the end, represents the two aspects I mentioned previously. On the one hand, the dreams are very similar, but on the other hand, there are important differences, upon which Yosef bases his different solutions. I shall return to this point later.

Let us now clarify whether there is any connection between the differences in the dreams and their different interpretations.

There are two types of interpretations of dreams. First, there are symbolic dreams, in which a "tree" is not a literal tree, but rather a hint at something else (growth, perhaps); a "house" describes not a real house but rather some concept or feeling (security?), and so on. (Freud, as we know, developed a system of dream interpretation based on this concept.) It was in this way that Yaakov interpreted Yosef's dreams at the beginning of the parasha: the sun and moon bowing to Yosef symbolized "I and your mother," while the eleven stars symbolized "your brothers."

In contrast, there are dreams in which the objects or figures that appear in them reflect their real essence. A tree is a tree, a house is a house, and the interpretation of the dream depends mainly on the events surrounding these objects. This, for example, is the way in which most of the commentaries understand Yaakov's dream while he flees to Charan. The angels ascending and descending the ladder did not symbolize some other thing, but rather represent themselves. Their ascent and descent here aim to hint to Yaakov that "this is the gateway to heaven," as indeed Yaakov declares when he awakens from his dream.

In our story, Yosef distinguishes between the two dreams and interprets each in a different way. His interpretation to the butler does not use the objects in the dream as symbols of something else (except, perhaps, for the three tendrils, which hint at three days). The chief butler dreams that he is pressing wine for Pharaoh and serving it to him, and Yosef tells him that this is exactly what will happen. His dream is destined to come true, literally, and he will once again serve Pharaoh as in the past. [1]

On the other hand, in the butler's dream the baked goods consumed by the birds represent not themselves, but rather the baker's own flesh, which is to be consumed. The basket in which the food is placed (balanced atop the baker's head) symbolizes the tree upon which the baker himself will be "placed."

What is the meaning of the essential change in Yosef's way of interpreting the dreams? It seems that the differences we mentioned above showed him that, despite their similarities,

the two dreams were of two different types. In the butler's dream, the butler himself takes part in the action. The vine is "before him," for he is active in relation to it: he presses its grapes and serves Pharaoh. The baker, in his dream, is not active. The action takes place "above his head;" had he not dreamed, he would have no idea of what was taking place there. In order for the baker's dream to have any significance for him, then, attention must be paid to the objects mentioned there symbolically. As opposed to the butler, who is active in his dream and whose dream can therefore have meaning on its own, without any need for external symbols and hints, the baker's dream must be understood symbolically, for he is altogether passive.

In light of the above, let us now return to our original question: what is the significance of the baker's dream in the development of Yosef's career in Egypt? The Torah seems to emphasize over and over the fact that Yosef is interpreting a pair of dreams, dreamed by a pair of royal servants, rather than a single dream of an individual. At the very outset, we are told:

"It happened after these things that the butler of the king of Egypt and his baker offended their master, the king of Egypt. And Pharaoh was angry at his two officers, at the chief butler and at the chief baker." (verses 1-2)

The seemingly excessive verbosity here stands out. After the text describes the offenders ("the butler of the king of Egypt and his baker"), what need is there for the double repetition in the next verse: "at his two officers / at the chief butler and at the chief baker"? This introduction alone is enough to draw our attention to the fact that the story is about "two officers," a pair that is not to be separated.

Further on, the Torah again emphasizes the fact that it is a double dream, dreamed by the king's two officers:

"And they dreamed a dream, both of them,

each his dream on the same night,

each according to the interpretation of his dream –

the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt." (verse 5)

This emphasis is no coincidence, highlighting the importance of the fact that there are two dreams. Surprisingly, when the butler again stands before Pharaoh and remembers Yosef's accurate interpretation of his dream, he emphasizes once again the fact that two officers each dreamed a dream:

"Pharaoh was angry at his officers and placed me in custody, in the house of the officer of the guard – I and the chief baker; and we dreamed a dream on the same night, I and he, each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his dream... and he explained our dreams, interpreting for each in accordance with his

dream. And as he interpreted for us, so it was:
[Pharaoh] restored me to my position, and hanged
him." (41:10-13)

The Torah does not suffice with its own emphasis on the two dreams; even two years later, when the episode is recalled by the chief butler, the point is made once again. Why?

It seems that our surprise at the butler's emphasis on the two dreams is, in fact, the answer. Pharaoh's dream, too, is a double dream. First he dreams about thin cows and healthy ones, and then he dreams about thin and healthy sheaves. It is this duality that suddenly reminds the butler of the double dream that he and his colleague had dreamed in prison. The profound impression created by Yosef on the butler involves not only the accurate interpretation of a dream, but his ability to distinguish between two dreams which appeared, at first glance, very similar.

It is reasonable to assume that this is exactly what the butler was trying to emphasize to the king: "It is quite possible that your two dreams do not convey the same message; perhaps one must distinguish between them. The Hebrew lad, servant to the officer of the guard, knows how to draw this kind of fine distinction."

This may be what convinces Pharaoh to "hasten Yosef out of the dungeon" - his ability to give different interpretations to two dreams dreamed on the same night, sharing similar motifs, but conveying different meanings.

The role of the baker's dream, then, is clear. It is not a matter of the number of dreams that Yosef interprets correctly, but rather of the fine distinction that he detects between one dream and another, between "Pharaoh will lift up your head" and "Pharaoh will lift up your head from upon you."

Indeed, the text hints at a parallel between the reactions of the officers to their respective dreams and Pharaoh's reaction to his dreams. The officers' reaction is apparent in the morning: "And Yosef came to them in the morning, and he saw them, and behold – they were sad" (40:6). Similarly, we are told concerning Pharaoh: "And it was in the morning that his spirit was troubled" (41:8). The officers tell Yosef: "We have dreamed a dream, and there is no one to interpret it" (40:8), and the king of Egypt later tells him, "I have dreamed a dream and there is no one to interpret it" (41:15). [2] Parallel to Yosef's words to the officers, "Do interpretations not belong to God?" (40:8), he tells Pharaoh: "It is not me; God will restore Pharaoh's peace of mind" (41:16).

Ironically, however, Yosef has no need for his special power when he stands before Pharaoh. Pharaoh's two dreams turn out to mean the same thing - "Pharaoh's dream is one" (41:25) - and its repetition is perceived by Yosef as hinting to the imminent approach of the events in the dream. But at this stage, the lack of distinction is no longer important; Pharaoh is sufficiently impressed by the figure standing before him to appoint him over all of the land of Egypt.

Yosef's two dreams about his brother's bowing before him cause him to be thrown into the pit (in Canaan), while the two dreams of Pharaoh's officers, preparing the way for Pharaoh's two dreams, cause him to exit the pit (in Egypt).

Now we are left with only one question. Do Yosef's two dreams, in Canaan, about his family bowing before him, convey a single message, or should Yosef's special skill - of distinguishing between two dreams that appear so similar - be applied to them, too?

NOTES

1. In the Midrash, Chazal expand on Yosef's interpretation and see symbolic meaning, too, in the butler's dream:

"And behold, there was a vine before me' – this is Israel, as it is written, 'You bring forth a vine from Egypt.' And upon the vine – three tendrils' – Moshe, Aharon and Miriam. 'It was as though it was budding' – bringing forth Israel's redemption. 'Its blossoms came forth' – the blossoms of Israel's redemption." ([Bereishit Rabba 88:5](#))

2. R. Bekhor Shor adds, in explaining the officers' words: "For if we were not in custody, we would consult the magicians and wise men" – just as Pharaoh does. Ramban suggests that they do indeed send messages to the magicians, asking for their help, but the interpretation that they receive do not satisfy them – just like Pharaoh.

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