

Vayeshev Davar Torah – Nov. 27, 2021

By Sandy Remz

I am going to talk about dreams:

- Who here believes that they have had dreams that were omens of the future? That G-d has spoken to them in dreams?

- Who here has dreams of grandeur?

Now, let's talk about Joseph and his dreams, which are described right at the beginning of the parshah. He is a "na'ar" of 17 (not a mere babe then or now -- indeed, Rashi saw him as a childish dandy of sorts, doing his hair and making up his eyes). After ratting out his half-brothers and then receiving his fabulous coat - - which led them to conclude that Jacob favored Joseph and they hated Joseph for that -- Joseph had 2 dreams. He immediately reported them respectively to his half-brothers in the case of the first one, and, in the case of the second one, to his half-brothers and then repeated it to Jacob in front of his half-brothers.

First Dream: His brothers' sheaves bowed down to his sheaf

Second Dream: The sun, moon and 11 stars (remember he had 11 brothers) bowed down to him.

In neither case did Joseph himself provide any interpretation of the dream. Rather, in the case of the first dream, his brothers (even in the absence of any Freudian training) filled in the meaning, which, at least in hindsight we might consider obvious. His brothers hated him even more after the first dream.

In the case of the second dream, his brothers were curiously silent, and simply envied Joseph, but Jacob filled in the meaning, interestingly asking rhetorically whether he and Joseph's mother (the deceased Rachel) would bow down to Joseph. (The rabbis note the impossibility of the dead Rachel actually bowing down to Joseph to say that all dreams have something out of place and cannot come true in their entirety.) Despite Jacob's seeming rebuke of Joseph (VaYigar Bo), he may have been secretly pleased since Joseph was his heir through Rachel and the dream may have been a sign of G-d's approval. (The text reports that Jacob bided his time, "Shamar et haDavar" "kept the saying in mind" to see if would come to pass.) According to Rashi, Jacob's real concern may have been that Joseph was his own worst enemy in triggering his brothers' hatred by telling them his dreams – indeed repeating the second dream to their faces twice.

Joseph then responded "Heneni" when Jacob asked him check in on the brothers and flock in Shechem, and we all know what happened after that. As

Joseph approached his brothers, they conspired initially to kill him before switching to a non-lethal Plan B. Their express motive seems to be his dreams as they say (Hebrew from 37:19) _____
_____ (literally, “here comes this master of dreams”) and then (Hebrew from 37:20) _____
_____ (“what will become of his dreams?”).

Fast forward to the end of the parsha: Joseph is in prison, courtesy of Potiphar (really his sex-crazed wife), and he interprets the dreams of the butler and the baker – correctly as it turns out, giving full credit to G-d. That sets up, in turn, the opening of next week’s Parsha, Miketz, in which, again giving full credit to G-d, Joseph interprets Pharoah’s 2 dreams that no one else can figure out (if you can believe that) explaining that is G-d’s way of speaking directly to Pharoah. As we know, Joseph’s interpretation of Pharoah’s dreams is the vehicle of success for Pharoah, and personally for Joseph, and is the catalyst for the fulfillment of his 2 dreams that got him in such hot water with his brothers: His brothers did ultimately bow down to him, and Joseph became the dominant figure in his family, B’nai Yisrael and for all Egyptians. This turn of events reflect classic Biblical

irony: His own dreams – specifically his report of them to his brothers -- almost got him killed. But his interpretation of the dreams of others first got him out of prison and then vaulted him to the position of power that enabled him to do great things for his family and people, earning him the title of Yosef the Tzaddik from the rabbis.

Dreams in Torah

10 dreams (Chalomot) in Torah, all in Breshit, of which 6 involve Joseph. Other 4:

- God direct messages Abimelech to keep his hands of Sarah
- Jacob and the ladder (beginning of VaYetze)
- Jacob and the speckled sheep (VaYetze – G-d tells Jacob to leave Haran)
- God direct messages Lavan to watch out and speak neither good nor bad to Jacob (VaYetze)

Clearly all dreams were understood to be messages from G-d, whether direct (requiring no interpretation) or through indirect dream narratives or metaphors (requiring at least some interpretation).

Dreams in Talmud:

There is extensive discussion of dreams in Masechet Brachot. Dreams are generally seen as a divine or supernatural omen. However, at the same time,

there is also a recognition that dreams are borne of human experience and are an expression of the dreamer's subconscious. It is said that a person is shown in a dream only what is already in his thoughts. For example, Aggadic stories in Brachot tell of Caesars and kings asking rabbis what they will dream, the rabbis telling them of dire predictions of their destiny, and the potentates then having precisely that dream.

Whatever the ultimate source of a dream (G-d, the subconscious, or power of suggestion) the rabbis leave lots of room for interpretation and manipulation:

- First, a dream has meaning only through interpretation; absent interpretation, it is as if the dream never happened. According to R. Hisda, an uninterpreted dream is like a letter that has not been opened. It will not be fulfilled.
- Second there is a formulaic process for converting what appears to be a palpably bad dream into a good dream and a blessing by approaching 3 others and essentially getting them to agree it is a good dream portending positive events.
- There is also the story of a rabbi who went to all 24 dream interpreters in Jerusalem, received 24 interpretations, and they somehow all came true.

- Finally, you probably won't be surprised to learn that there were interpreters who gave favorable interpretations to paying customers and less favorable, indeed ominous interpretations to those who did not pay

Thus, though the rabbis took dreams seriously as messages from on high, as well as expressions of the subconscious, there was a lot of room for play.

Back to Joseph's Own 2 Dreams:

Although he was Ba'al HaChalomot (Master of Dreams), he only described his own two dreams to his family. He did not interpret them. This raises several questions:

- Was he merely naively relating them as in, "I had a very strange dream last night?"
- Maybe he didn't have any filters and just told it as it was without thinking how others may react.
- Maybe, and you might find this hard to believe, he did not understand the message of the dreams, notwithstanding his divinely inspired powers of interpretation that he later capitalized on. Abravanel and some modern dream students assert that dreamers are not able to understand the language or symbolism of their own dreams.

- On the other hand, as a Ba'al HaChalomot, one would think he ought to have known full well the meaning of his dreams, and if he had any emotional intelligence, he likewise should have anticipated the reaction of his brothers in particular.
 - Was he consciously and callously rubbing it in his brothers' faces?
 - Was he simply oblivious to any consequences?
- At bottom, were Joseph's dreams a subconscious expression of a young narcissist's grandiose yearnings for a dominant role in the family?
- Or, were the dreams a prophetic message from G-d waiting for fulfillment, and if so, did Joseph understand them as such? As Joseph later tells Pharaoh, the doubling of a dream in substance (even if different in the details) means it is the true word of G-d.

Conclusion:

I will say that no matter what was going on inside the head of the 17 year-old Joseph, he set himself on a path that resulted in all of the trials and adversity he experienced after he said "Hineni" to Jacob until he emerged from prison to interpret Pharaoh's dreams and subsequently became a force – indeed, G-d's *shaliach* -- for good. The 17-year-old, apparently full of pride and the desire or

drive to dominate, was transformed by his experiences into Yosef HaTzaddik, the savior of his family and B'nai Yisrael.

