



D'var Torah – Parshat Mikketz

Dec. 16, 2023 by Neal Green

Dreams

Many of us have woken up in the morning and said: “Boy, I had a really weird dream last night”! And, if it was a particularly vivid dream, or if the dream recurs, we may spend some of our awake time trying to figure out what the dreams mean.

In Tanach, dreams are a big deal. Here is a list of all the dreams recorded there:

- The first God-revealing dream, guess who? Avimelech in parshat Vayera, warning him not to sleep with Sarah.
- Then, Jacob is visited by God in two dreams.
- Laban also has a God-visiting dream.
- Joseph has two dreams (that are really one), interprets three more including Pharaoh’s dreams (which are really one) the one we just read about today.
- Balaam dreams that God tells him it is “OK” to go with Balak’s men.
- In Judges, an unnamed man dreams about bread in the Midianites’ camp foreshadowing a military victory.
- What dream of Solomon is being referred to in today’s haftarah? Solomon requests and receives wisdom.
- In almost the same fashion that played out in this parsha, Nebuchadnezzar has two dreams (the statue and the tree) interpreted by Daniel and then Daniel has a dream of four beasts.

OK, that's 15 dreams give or take. So then, what are we to make of the meaning of dreams?

In the Babylonian Talmud the theme of dreams is primarily found in Tractate Berachot, 55a through 57b. The Talmud first teaches that a dream which is not interpreted is like an unread letter ([Berachot 55a](#)). In this vein if none interprets the dream, although there exists the negative or positive potential, there will be not any negative effect in reality. This is the reference of R' Bana'ah's statement that the realization of a dream follows the mouth of the interpreter.

There is a second category of dreams that have a particular interpretation and can therefore be considered either a negative or positive dream. But nevertheless, its interpretation can change the dream from either positive to negative or from negative to positive. The Talmud (Berachot 56b) states that whoever sees a well in a dream beholds peace for him or herself. However, if the dreamer contemplates an ominous passage pertaining to wells it can be transmuted negatively.

A third category of dreams is prophetic. Prophetic dreams have only a single interpretation and cannot be changed. In this category fall the dreams of Jacob, Joseph and Pharaoh.

Dreams are the future that we experience, in sleep, as the present. The uninterpreted dream, still secretly residing in the world of dreams, has therefore never left the future and so has no impact on the present.

I always wondered how Joseph could be so reckless to tell his brothers and father about his sheaves and stars dreams. Perhaps he knew that he had to publicize his dreams, to begin actualizing his future potential. Far from stupidly bragging about his dreams of grandeur to his brothers, Joseph recognized that his future would only be his if he himself would mouth it.

Let's talk about Pharaoh's dream(s). And Joseph's brilliant interpretation.

The interpretation of the necromancers

The Midrash Rabba (69:6) states Rabbi Joshua of Siknin said in R. Levi's name: There were indeed interpreters of the dream, but their interpretations were

unacceptable to Pharaoh. He explains that the necromancers interpreted the dream that seven good cows mean that Pharaoh will beget seven daughters; the seven ill-favoured cows, that you will bury seven daughters. The seven full ears of corn, that you will conquer seven provinces; the seven thin ears, that seven provinces will revolt against you. According to this analysis of the story of Pharaoh's dream, it is evident that the reason that Pharaoh did not accept the interpretation of the necromancers was not because he knew that whatever interpretation was given would follow the mouth of the interpreter but rather because he felt that there has to be a single absolute interpretation which only Joseph offered.

Joseph's interpretation

Joseph said (41:25) to Pharaoh, the dream of Pharaoh is a single one. The seven good cows are seven years and the seven good ears are seven years. It is a single dream. Similarly, the seven emaciated cows that emerged after them and the seven scorched ears are seven years.

There should be seven years of famine.

Behold, seven years are coming of great abundance throughout the land of Egypt then seven years of famine will arise after them and all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten.

As for the repetition of the dream to Pharaoh it is because the matter stands ready before God and God is hastening to accomplish it.

This point eluded the necromancers. They thought that since Pharaoh had the dreams in two parts, they reflected two separate interpretations. They therefore gave two interpretations, one referring to the conquering of seven provinces and the revolt of seven provinces and the second dream referring to the birth of seven daughters and the burial of another seven daughters.

Furthermore, the interpretation of the necromancers did not explain another enigmatic portion of the dream, 'and they stood next to the cows on the bank of the river.'

Why did the emaciated cows stand next to the fat cows on the bank of the river? Joseph understood that this meant that although the two periods of seven years will follow one another, there had to be a relevant overlap of the final seven years on the first seven years.

This was answered in Joseph's interpretation that Pharaoh should appoint someone to oversee the gathering of the food during the seven years of plenty to preserve for the seven years of famine.

This enforces the above-mentioned contradiction to the statement of R' Bana'ah, that realization of dreams follows the mouth, implying the possibility of more than one interpretation to a dream and the absence of negative or positive dreams.

By the way, regardless of which three categories a dream might be classified, this all stands in contrast to the opinion of psychoanalysts at the beginning of the 20th century that dreams are a product of internalized thoughts and desires (i.e. not having anything to do with the future – good or bad).

The Abarbanel, who lived in Portugal between 1437-1508, wrote that dreams are the revelation of disorganized thoughts that are suppressed during waking hours and released during sleep. Such dreams are vain, have no meaning and have no effect one way or the other.

According to Maimonides (Mishne Torah Maaser Sheni 6:6) even specific dreams relating that certain money located in a particular place is tithe has no significance one way or another and the money can be used for profane purposes. The reason for this is that these dreams fall in the category of most dreams that have no significance at all.

In **ISMAR SCHORSCH**'S commentary on Parashat Vayeshev, he states:

“We humans populate the world with symbols. The Rabbis assert that five everyday phenomena embody a tiny fraction of a greater whole. Thus fire constitutes one-sixtieth of purgatory; honey, one-sixtieth of manna; Shabbat, one-sixtieth of the world-to-come; sleep, one-sixtieth of death and a dream but one-sixtieth of prophecy (B.T. [*Berakhot 57b*](#)).”

This avoidance of prophecy, no doubt was due to the unmitigated disaster of three failed Jewish rebellions against the Roman Empire between 66-134 fueled by zealotry. According to Josephus in the book *The Jewish War*, who chronicled the first uprising which led to the destruction of the Second Temple, when Palestine was overrun by messianic pretenders who incited Jews weary of Roman misrule: “Deceivers and impostors, under the pretense of divine inspiration fostering revolutionary changes, they persuaded the multitude to act like madmen, and led them out into the desert under the belief that God would there give them tokens of deliverance.”

And Rabbi Schorsch continues along the line of what several of us Maor folks have learned from Rabbi Lenny Gordon in our Wednesday night Mishan class “It is no accident, that the Mishna, which appears around the year 200, is a legal compendium (although it certainly doesn’t read like one), without an iota of apocalyptic tension. The mission of the teachers and students of the Mishna, who were rapidly assuming the religious leadership of the nation, is not to keep the embers of messianism burning, but rather to administer the courts, instruct advanced students of Torah and keep the canon pliable through exegesis ([Pirkei Avot 1:1](#)). And the Mishna closes poignantly extolling the blessing of peace. There is no plea for national redemption. Dreams, which were previously likened to prophecy, have been confined to the dustbin of history in an effort to keep religious enthusiasm in check.”