

## ***About this week's sidra and essay:***

The gloom of last week's parasha comes to a sudden end in Miketz, which begins two years later. Yosef is hauled from the dungeon to begin a brilliant career as leader of Egypt and pacesetter of world civilization. The parasha opens with the dreams of Pharaoh, and the impending world drought for which Yosef must prepare. But the international events provide a mere backdrop to the essential story of Miketz: the complex plot of Yosef to draw his family to him, to heal the broken relationships that he left behind.

FrameWorks this week examines a small portion of that plot: the exposure of Yosef's identity to his brothers. It turns out that dreams, so much a part of the entire episode of Yosef and his brothers, are the crucial element here in facing painful reality.

## ***The Interpretation of Dreams***

Sigmund Freud once said that “the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to knowledge. . . .”<sup>1</sup> It is a royal road that the king of Egypt traveled most attentively, and Miketz opens with a royal dream crying out for interpretation:

*It was at the end of two years, and Pharaoh was dreaming. . . .*

*In the morning, he was distraught. He summoned all the magicians and sages of Egypt, and Pharaoh told them his dream – but no one could provide Pharaoh a satisfactory interpretation. (41:1,8)*

Dreams are thematic in the saga of Yosef. The “two years” which end here are counted from another dream – that of the Chief Steward who “forgot Yosef” in the concluding verse of last week's parasha (40:23). The graphic gap appearing between the two sections in the Torah scroll represents, then, a two year hiatus *between dreams* – now, *Pharaoh was dreaming. . . .*

Dreams seem to play a definitive role throughout Yosef's life. The sale of Yosef is triggered by his brothers' resentment of his repetitive dreams. Yosef's success in Egypt is a result of dreams, as well: he is brought before Pharaoh because of the dreams of his jail mate, and reaches the pinnacle of success through his successful interpretation of the dreams of Pharaoh.

Yosef was sold [into captivity] only because of dreams, as it says, *Look! – the dream master himself is coming! (37:19).*

And he was liberated only through dreams, as it says, *It was at the end of two years, and Pharaoh was dreaming. . . .*

Aggadat Bereishit, 1:67

It is not only in Yosef as an individual that dreams play such a pivotal role. Beginning with Ya'akov's departure to build the family that will later be so rocked by dreams, the subject of dreams and their interpretation is set squarely at center stage of this crucial period in Israel's history.<sup>2</sup>

Ya'akov came into his own through a dream: *He dreamed, and he saw a ladder. . . .(28:12);*

Yosef came into his own through a dream: *Pharaoh was dreaming. . . .*

*Tanhuma, Miketz, 3*

Contemporary research and events have brought much disrepute to the practitioners who travel Freud's “royal road,” and there are many who consider them no more effective than Pharaoh's magicians. But there is no denying the essential difference of approach between the earlier and later wizards (if so they be). Freud's road is fundamentally rational, and is meant to lead to an understanding of the effects of an individual's *past*; Pharaoh's approach appears primitive – he searched for a dream interpretation that would magically unveil the *future*.

The two roads, then, exhibit only a most superficial resemblance. Freud saw dreams as a communication of the unconscious mind, a crucial component of “the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.”<sup>3</sup> Dreams to him are the creations of the human mind, and speak to us not of external reality, but of an individual's ambiguous and confused perception. The Torah, on the other hand, seems here to regard dreams as prophecies, unambiguous visions of an objective reality coming from Beyond, *using* the individual as a mere tool of communication.

A case could even be made that the animosity between Yosef and his brothers developed primarily out of their differing viewpoints regarding dreams. Yosef experienced

his dreams as truth, undeniable messages of an inevitable future in which he would be an honest pawn. Just as he could be a psychic *dreamer* himself, so too would he be psychically able to interpret the dreams of others. But to the brothers, Yosef's dreams spoke of *Yosef* himself and exposed nothing but his own subconscious. The more he told them, the more in their eyes he exposed sociopathic narcissism and dangerous egomania. The thought of Yosef attempting to *interpret* the dreams of others was nonsensical to them, like putting the patient in the doctor's seat. They spoke of "*The dream master*" with a sneer. *Miketz* would then be a warning to take dreams and dreamers more seriously.

But the situation is not quite so simple. The Torah sees dreams as anything but unambiguous visions of the future. Even Ya'akov himself, after awakening from the dream of the ladder that came to symbolize him, had doubts about how seriously to take his dream.

*Ya'akov took an oath, saying: If God will be with me and watch me along this path . . . (28:20) – Why did he not believe God's promise [in his dream]? He said to himself, "Look, it's only a dream...if it really happens, then I will know that it is true!"*

Zohar, I:150b

When Yosef presented his dreams to his father, Ya'akov's response was less than enthusiastic:

*"What sort of dream did you have? Do you really expect that I, your mother, and your brothers are to come and prostrate themselves on the ground to you!?" (37:10)*

*"Your mother is already dead, is she not!?" (— Rashi<sup>4</sup>)*

The dream is obviously misleading, says Ya'akov, but nonetheless – *his father waited to see (37:11)*.

Dreams themselves are confusing enough, but the Torah's relationship to them is even more confusing.

When Shmu'el [the amora] would have a disturbing dream, he would say, *Dreams tell fabrications. . . . (Zecharia 10:2)*. But when he would have a good dream, he would say, "Could it be that dreams speak lies? Does it not say, *I speak to him in dreams (Bamidbar 12:6)!*"

Berachot, 55b

The rule of thumb in the Talmud is that dreams are self-fulfilling prophecies, products of their own self-generated interpretations, and anything but objective.

*"There were twenty-four dream interpreters in Jerusalem. I once dreamed a dream and went to all of them – and every single one gave me a different*

*interpretation, and all came true. As they say: All the dreams follow the mouth (that interprets them)!*

ibid.

But what is astounding, is that the Talmud, quoting *Miketz*, invokes the interpretations of the dream master Yosef himself as proof that such interpretation is personal and not objective.

*How do we know that "All the dreams follow the mouth (that interprets them)"? It says, The way that he [Yosef] interpreted it was exactly the way it worked out. . . .(41:12)!*

ibid.

The Talmud takes it yet a step further, making it clear that not only the interpretation but *the very dream itself* can be understood as a product of the subconscious.

*A person sees only from his own subconscious, as it says, You king, your own thoughts emerged in your sleep. . . .(Daniel 2:29).*

ibid.

And then, the final extreme: manipulating the subconscious to create dreams to order!

Caesar once challenged R. Yehoshua b. Chanania: "You Jews claim to be very wise – tell me what I will see in my dreams!"

He answered, "You will see yourself captured by the Persians, who will set you to grinding date stones, and shepherding rodents with a golden staff."

He thought about it all day, and sure enough, at night he dreamed it.

Berachot, 56a

In a sense, what Yosef does in *Miketz* is create a dream – actually, a nightmare – for his brothers, and then challenges them to find the interpretation. It is remarkable that though he constantly reveals more and more, hinting ever more openly at his identity, they never even begin to suspect what is the only reasonable explanation of the bizarre events to which they are subject. The entire world is aware that a Hebrew captive has risen to prominence in Egypt,<sup>5</sup> and despite all Yosef does, they never suspect a thing!

Yosef has them identified, apprehended and brought to him, despite all their precautions.

When Ya'akov's sons entered Egypt, each one entered at another border crossing, and registered his name. That evening when the records were checked, Yosef closed all the granaries but one, and left orders that they were to be arrested as they showed their passports.

Bereishit Rabba, 91:6

He peppers them with personal questions, about their father, about their brother, and displays a magical awareness of their personal lives – yet they suspect nothing.

*Yisra'el said, "Why did you do such an awful thing to me, telling the man that you had another brother!?"*

*They replied, "The man kept asking about us and our family. He asked, 'Is your father still alive? Do you have another brother?' We simply answered his questions. . . ." (43:6,7)*

He even knew secrets from our nursery!

Bereishit Rabba, 91:10

They are kept imprisoned for three days, on trumped-up charges of spying. Though they recognize that this is a reflection of how they treated Yosef, they attribute it only to divine retribution.

*They said to one another, "We deserve to be punished because of what we did to our brother. We saw him suffering when he pleaded with us, but we paid him no attention. That's why this disaster is happening to us!" (42:21)*

It also never occurs to them that they may have been *wrong* about Yosef – only that they should have shown him more mercy.

Then, apparently arbitrarily, Yosef separates Shim'on, and imprisons him. But Shim'on just happens to be the brother who threw Yosef into the pit.<sup>6</sup> This mysterious leader seems to *know* everything!

Yosef said, "I see in my chalice that two of you murdered the entire city of Shechem!"

*Tanhuma, Miketz, 8 and Vayigash, 4*

The brothers return to find that Shim'on had been treated like family during his putative incarceration – yet they suspect nothing. Their payment for the food was secretly – and graciously! – returned in their packs, yet still they suspect nothing.

*He said, "Peace to you! Have no fear – your God and the God of your father gave you a treasure in your packs. I did receive your money. He brought them out Shim'on. . . ." (43:23)*

As soon as they had left, Yosef took Shim'on out of jail and had him washed and wined and dined.

*Tanhuma, Miketz, 8*

They are invited to a royal banquet in honor of their return, where the still mysterious leader tearfully greets their youngest brother, Binyamin. Once again, he knows all.

He took the chalice, tapped it, and said, "I thought that Yehuda was the firstborn, because he always

speaks first. But now I see that Re'uvein is the firstborn and Yehuda is just a big talker!" He set Re'uvein first at the table.

He tapped the chalice again, and announced, "Shim'on, you are next in line – sit next to him." He continued this way in order of their births.

*Tanhuma, Vayigash, 8*

The brothers are amazed, but suspect . . . nothing!

*The brothers stared at each other in amazement. (43:33)*

Yosef then exposes his special love for Binyamin, making it clear that the two of them fit together – like a last missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

At last, Binyamin alone was left.

Yosef said, "I can perceive that this one had a brother who was torn from him, and he has no mother. I, too, had a brother who was separated from me and I have no mother – sit him down next to me!"

Then each one was served a portion, and Yosef turned and gave his own portion to Binyamin. Osnat [his wife] gave Binyamin her portion, too, as did Efra'im and Menashe, so that Binyamin had five portions, as it says, *Binyamin's portion was five times larger. . . .* (43:34).

*Tanhuma, ibid.*

Even watching the piece fit in, they suspect . . . nothing!

The brothers begin the return journey to Cana'an, but Yosef has framed Binyamin. The "magic chalice" is planted in his bag, in an obviously orchestrated recreation of the scene where Rachel, the mother of Yosef and Binyamin so resented by the others, has stolen the magical devices of her father. Instead of picking up on the message, the brothers believe that indeed Binyamin is just like his mother!

*The chalice was found in Binyamin's pack. . . . (44:12) – They said to him, "You thief the son of a thieving woman!"*

Answered Binyamin, "Is Yosef around? Are there any goats around [for you to dye my shirt with their blood]? You brothers who sold your own brother [have the nerve to accuse me!]. . . .

At that point, *they tore their clothing. . . .*

Bereishit Rabba, 92:8

They even respond with the same disastrous words inadvertently spoken by Ya'akov of Rachel,<sup>7</sup> when accused by Lavan of stealing:

*Whoever is found to have it shall die. . . .* (44:9)

They return to hear Yosef accuse *them*:

“I know why the boy stole the cup—he probably wanted to discover where his brother is!”

*Tanhuma* (Buber), *Miketz*, 14

Yehuda responds viciously as Yosef, knowing full well that they can never return home without Binyamin, makes the cynical comment that they are all, except Binyamin, free to “*go in peace to your father (44:17).*”

Yehuda said to Yosef, “What will we say to my father!?”

Said Yosef, “Tell him, ‘the rope just fell in along with the bucket’ (i.e. Binyamin went the way of Yosef).”

Said Yehuda, “This is a kangaroo court!”

Said Yosef, “Nowhere near as bad as the one that sold your brother!”

Said Yehuda, “I can feel the fire of Shechem burning in my heart!”

Answered Yosef, “The fire of your daughter-in-law Tamar can quench that problem.”

Yehuda shouted, “I will dye the streets of every market in Egypt with blood!”

Said Yosef, “You have had a lot of experience dyeing – you dyed the coat of your brother with blood, too!”

*Tanhuma*, *Vayigash*, 5

None of this makes any difference. They are blind, completely blind. Every last detail of what has happened is calculated to make them realize every mistake that they made, but they see nothing even when it is in front of their very eyes. Now Yosef attempts to stick their faces in it!

Yosef said to them, “Did you not claim that this one’s brother is dead? I *purchased* him, and I will call him now to come here!”

He began to shout, “Yosef, Ya’akov’s son, come to me! Yosef, Ya’akov’s son, come to me and speak with the brothers who sold you!”

Their eyes darted to every hidden corner of the house.

Said Yosef, “Why are you looking from side to side. **YOU ARE LOOKING AT HIM!**”

*I am Yosef! (45:3)*

At that moment they collapsed in shock.

ibid.

But how could they have been so insanely oblivious to the obvious? The midrash offers a simple explanation:

[Yosef was unrecognizable because] he had left without a beard, and stood now before them as a bearded king.

ibid.

That explanation is even more maddening than the rest of the story! Unless that is the whole point. The blindness of the brothers was a creation of a lifetime of postulates and assumptions, and twenty-two years of misjudgment, miscalculations, dishonesty, and rationalizations. So much had been invested by the brothers into seeing things their own way, that the new context was simply inconceivable to them. The most slender of disguises was sufficient to hide Yosef from his brothers, simply because they were convinced *that he could not possibly be there!*

This is the fabulous denouement of the drama of dreams played out in *Miketz*. The brothers had announced the coming of *the master of dreams*:

*We shall see what will come of his dreams! (37:20)*

[Said God] “Indeed – let us see who wins in the end: you or I!” (—Rashi<sup>8</sup>)

Here is where we see at last what does come of his dreams. Surely nothing that Yosef ever imagined in his worst nightmares—but nonetheless his dreams came true, and ever so crushingly to his brothers. The more convinced they were that his dreams were lies, the more overwhelming was the shock of the truth.

Dreams are indeed ambiguous, and can mean almost anything at all. But, curiously, even dreams which are projections of one’s own subconscious are filled with an immensity of new information. In dreams, the mind may be released, and the limits of suppositions and presumptions breached. These are the dreams of discovery, the famous dreams in which months of fruitless work suddenly burst into bloom, the dreams so familiar to creative individuals that many keep pen and paper at bedside for noting dream insights.

One of the most well known dream stories concerns the discovery of the benzene ring. In the mid-nineteenth century, Friedrich Kekule was immersed in one of the most perplexing problems of his day: to find the structural basis of organic chemistry. Kekule had dwelt intensely on the behavior of organic compounds, but found no solution. It was in a dream – a dream projected by his own subconscious, [and, incidentally, full of Freudian allusions, which changes nothing at all] – that he discovered the solution. In his dream, chains of carbon atoms seemed to come alive and dance before his eyes, and then suddenly one coiled and twisted on itself like a snake seizing its own tail. He had the solution: the benzene molecule is a ring of carbon atoms joined to themselves, surrounded by bonded hydrogen.

Dreams are limited by the limits of wishful thinking. Only someone free enough to grasp the gift of a dream of discovery is rewarded by his dreams. But take a dream, and twist it to show what you *need* to believe yourself, and the dream will imprison you, will *blind* you. Yosef spent the years in Egypt doing one thing only: losing all personal agenda. His life was a study of performing flawlessly in *whatever needed to be done*. The incident with his master's wife was the test of his ability to avoid personal desire and wishes when out of place. The only time he failed was when he tried to *make* a dream work out.

*Yosef said to him, "This is the interpretation: The three branches are three days. In three days, Pharaoh will lift your head and restore your position. You will place the cup in the hand of Pharaoh, just as you did before, when you were his steward.*

*When things go well for you, just remember me with you. Do me a favor, and say something about me to Pharaoh—maybe you will be able to get me out of this place!" (40:13,14)*

The *miketz*, the end, of the two years mentioned in the opening verse of this parasha, refers to the two years of incarceration that Yosef suffered for that single sentence.

*The chief steward did not remember Yosef – he forgot all about him (40:23).*

Because Yosef relied on this intervention, he needed to suffer another two years in prison. (—Rashi<sup>9</sup>)

Yosef gained not only freedom, but mastery, through learning to accept surprises, to respond to new situations. The more faithful he was to reality, the more strongly his dreams opened new possibilities. The moment he attempted manipulation for his own needs, his dreams imprisoned him.

Ironically, those who rejected dreams altogether in favor of a controlled and well-planned objectivity, end up in *Miketz* unable to perceive anything at all but their own deceptions. So real is this phenomenon, that results of clinical studies are considered significant only if conducted "double-blind," so that neither the patient nor the researcher knows which compound is being administered – otherwise, the introduction of some subtle bias will inevitably distort the results.

The ambiguousness of reality itself is a dream of sorts, constantly tantalizing with alternative futures, and making equivalent demands on our interpretive abilities. The

wishful thinking, the self-fulfilling oracles, the tunnel vision, the rationalizations, the blinders that restrict the interpretation of dreams, are a very real threat in a very real world. Even planning with due deliberation is paralyzing when it comes at the cost of responsiveness.

Planning is effective [at ruining] even Torah, as it says, *He frustrates the planning of the cunning, and their hands cannot perform their goal. (Iyov 5:12)*<sup>10</sup>

Sanhedrin, 26b

It is the non-dreamers who here lose all contact with reality. If not for Yosef and the new solutions opened by his dreams, there would have been no future for Yisrael in Egypt, no preparation for the great day of the Exodus, no creation of a viable nation-in-exile. Those who would twist dreams end up as putty in the hands of dream-interpreters, who mold the future through perceptions. The ultimate irony is that the fears of the brothers themselves provided both the interpretation and the eventual actualization of Yosef's dreams.

In dreams begins responsibility.

—YEATS

*Said his brothers to him, "Are you then to be king over us! Are you to rule over us!?" (37:8)*

At that moment *they themselves* gave the dream its definition and its destination!

Zohar, I:183b

*Miketz* presents in the interpretation of dreams a model for interpretation of reality – and a typology of the dark dangers of self-inflicted blindness. The horror experienced by Yosef's brothers at the collapse of their own elaborate house-of-cards, the trauma they suffered at seeing, in a single instant, straight through the intricate web of self-deception that had nearly obliterated their future, is a metaphor for each of us. Every human being must eventually face his individual revelation and the dissolution of his own web.

Woe to us from the day of Judgment! Woe to us from the day of reproof! When Yosef – who is mere flesh and blood – showed his brothers the truth, they collapsed before him. When God Himself judges every human being, just imagine how no flesh and blood will be able to stand before *Him*!

Bereishit Rabba, 93:11

Every human being must eventually face himself in the full light. If only it be sooner, in his own discovery of truth, rather than later.

*Miketz* means literally "at the end," and brings an end here to the darkness – both to the two year penalty imposed on a dreamer out-of-bounds, and to the twenty-two years of pain and gloom that had enveloped Ya'akov and his family. But,

more to the point, *Miketz* introduces the elements of a course leading towards a universal end to confusion and darkness.<sup>11</sup>

ויהי מקץ שנתיים ימים...

*Miketz* – It was at the end of two years. . . . So too does it say, *He set an end* [קץ] *to darkness*. . . .(Iyov 28:3). There will come an end to the years that the world must spend in darkness. . . .

Bereishit Rabba, 89:1

It is not a coincidence that *Miketz* is annually the parasha of Chanukah.<sup>12</sup> The end of darkness is a fitting message for the holiday of Light, which itself brought an end to a period of dark confusion.

*Darkness on the face of the deeps* . . . (Bereishit 1:2)

– “Darkness” refers to the Greek exile. . . .

Bereishit Rabba, 2:4

Yet we live once again in a period of deep divisiveness and confusion, living, as the brothers, a dream that beggars our power of interpretation. It sometimes seems as if we are constantly moving further from *Miketz*; further from the denouement of an interminable exile that has us entrapped in a series of reruns, an endless cycle of ancient errors. But *Miketz* teaches that this investment of thousands of years and millions of lives may reach fruition in a sudden and traumatic rush, truth staring us in the face as it did Yosef’s brothers. The more elaborate the distortions embedded in our beliefs, the more dramatic and powerful the confrontation with truth. The more comfortable we are with our answers, the more devastating the critique of our temerity. Nothing was or will be wasted, for history awaits each contribution.

There will surely be no end to the surprises that accompany the dawning of the light, as the time for authentic interpretation of reality draws nigh. Only the removal of the blinders of comfortable presuppositions, emotional prejudice, and artificial props can make truth survivable, if not palatable. This is the uncomfortable but joyous light *Miketz* and Chanukah offer us: the ability to live faithfully, dependably – and in scrupulous peace with our dreams.

*A song of ascent: When God restored the prisoners of Zion we were as dreamers*. . . .(Tehillim 126:1)



## endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> *The Interpretation of Dreams*, chapter 7
- <sup>2</sup> 28:12; 31:10; 31:24; 37:5; 37:9-11; 37:19,20; 40:8-20
- <sup>3</sup> Quoted by Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 1957
- <sup>4</sup> s.v. *havo navo*, ד"ה הבוא נבוא
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. 43:32
- <sup>6</sup> *Tanhuma, Vayigash*, 4
- <sup>7</sup> Bereishit 31:32
- <sup>8</sup> s.v. *venireh*, ד"ה ונראה
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Bereishit Rabba, 92:9
- <sup>10</sup> Rashi, s.v. *mefer*, ד"ה מפר: Plans that people work out, establishing goals for themselves, are effective in impeding those goals, even for Torah study, e.g. “I will complete X by date Y”!
- <sup>11</sup> The actual end to the entire Egyptian galut, the Exodus, is introduced with the same word: *Miketz*—*It was at the end of four hundred and thirty years – on that very day – that all the legions of the Lord left the land of Egypt*. (Shemot 12:43)
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. *Shelah, Derasha Tzon Yosef*, and my *Patterns in Time*, Volume 8.