

Sermon | Parshat Miketz
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We Are Watching

"American universities are openly breaking their bonds with the Jewish community by embracing active discrimination against Jewish students and rejecting their intellectual, emotional, and moral attachments to the values of equal human dignity, universal rights, critical inquiry, and rational thought."¹ I did not write that sentence. It was written by Liel Leibovitz, editor-at-large for Tablet Magazine and a host of its podcast Unorthodox. That sentence sounds like it was written last week in the aftermath of the infuriating congressional testimony offered last Wednesday by the presidents of three of America's most elite universities. But that sentence was actually published on May 6, 2019 in an article entitled "Get Out." More than four years ago, Leibovitz warned the American Jewish community that our nation's greatest universities, the ones that bear the names of generous Jewish American philanthropists on their building's walls, had become hotbeds of antisemitism and its modern manifestation, anti-Zionism. He warned us that these were no longer places that existed to further research, exploration, and critical thought, but that they "have divested themselves of the values and practices that have made them mighty engines of American intellectual and economic growth." As we have seen these past few months, Leibovitz's words were prophetic.

Parshat Miketz begins just like last week's parsha: the main character in each narrative has two dreams, each one foretells the same vision of the future. In last week's parsha, Joseph's

¹ Liel Leibovitz, "Get Out," in *Tablet*, May 6, 2019 (<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/get-out>).

dreams enrage his brothers, and lead to their sale of Joseph to slave traders who bring him to Egypt. In this week's parsha, pharaoh's advisors cannot interpret his dreams. But one advisor, the chief cupbearer, acknowledges that there is a young Hebrew man in prison and he is an interpreter of dreams. We all know how the story unfolds from here. Joseph not only interprets pharaoh's dreams, but also offers a solution to the impending famine. As a result, Joseph is elevated to be second-in-command beside pharaoh, and all of Egypt is saved. Pharaoh understood that tough times were ahead for Egypt, and so he responded by preparing himself and his country for the future.

In his commentary on one of the verses in this narrative, Rashi juxtaposes pharaoh with Nebuchadnezzar, the king in the Book of Daniel. These two kings have similar stories. Each one awakes agitated by their dreams, וַיְהִי בִבְקֹר וַתִּפְּעֶם רוּחוֹ, "Next morning, Pharaoh's spirit was agitated."² Similarly we read in the Book of Daniel, וַתִּתְּפֹעַם רוּחוֹ וַשְּׁכָתוֹ נִהְיָתָה עָלָיו, "his spirit was agitated, yet he was overcome by sleep."³ The verbal forms are slightly different, but are here translated identically, so we do not see any difference in English. The Hebrew, however, offers a slightly different read, and a *midrash* highlights this small difference to make a major point: Pharaoh awoke agitated only because of his inability to understand the dreams, whereas Nebuchadnezzar awoke agitated both because of his inability to understand the dreams, and because he would ultimately ignore their interpretation.

For those who are unfamiliar with the narrative, Nebuchadnezzar awakes from his dream, gathers all of his advisors and sages, and then refuses to even tell them his dream.

² Genesis 41:8.

³ Daniel 2:1.

Instead, as a test of their abilities, he requires them to describe to him what he dreamed, and then also properly interpret those visions. It is Daniel who comes to understand the king's dream by being shown a vision by God, a vision in which he sees a statue made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay, and that statue is destroyed by a rock. Daniel offers his interpretation: four successive kingdoms will be destroyed one after the other, and only the final one, God's kingdom, will endure. Daniel comes to interpret more of the king's dreams, but the king does not prepare for the doomed future foretold to him. He ignores the interpretation, and faces the consequences of his inaction.

The *midrash* thus demonstrates to us that there are two types of leaders: one who sees the writing on the wall and responds appropriately, and the other who sees it and willfully ignores it. Pharaoh understands that ignoring his dreams will lead to the destruction of Egypt, and so he takes action to change the course of history and prevent this undesirable outcome. Nebuchadnezzar, on the other hand, hears that his downfall is imminent and does nothing productive to prevent that prophecy from being realized.

When Liel Leibovitz wrote his article, "Get Out," he was playing the part of pharaoh—recognizing that something has gone awry and warning his community that they must prepare to respond. I am not sure how many took him seriously in 2019, but certainly more people, myself included, are hearing his warnings with a more attuned ear today. Juxtapose this with the inadequate, unfortunate, and embarrassing testimony of three individuals who are supposed to represent some of the greatest universities in America: their inability, or perhaps their cowardice and unwillingness, to unequivocally condemn antisemitism as a violation of their codes of conduct should remind us of the hubris and shortsightedness of Nebuchadnezzar.

They are witness to the same antisemitic rhetoric, violent protests, and other methods of intimidation and harassment against Jewish students that we see on the news, read about on social media, and hear about from our very own college students on these campuses and others. Meanwhile, they finagle their way around straightforward questions, engage in intellectual acrobatics to avoid the ire of others, and refuse to speak moral truths because doing so would be, God-forbid, unpopular in the ivory towers in which they find refuge.

Leibovitz suggests that young American Jews forgo college. Instead, they should find a job, live on their own, and pursue educational opportunities outside of the walls of American universities. He writes, “An institution that does not demand basic civility and true respect for intellectual diversity isn’t worth your time as a scholar.” I am not sure that I would discard all of higher education in America, but certainly these past two months since October 7 have demonstrated to the American Jewish community that something has gone awry in academia, and that something must be done about it. Nebuchadnezzar ignores the truth when it is clearly explained to him. Pharaoh hears it, recognizes it as true, but then delegates the task to someone else. We do not have that luxury. Nobody is going to fight antisemitism for us. Those that need it most will not educate themselves on the issues, especially when they seem to be incapable of even seeing the issues when they are set just before their eyes on their own campuses.

Therefore, I turn to Joseph and his model of leadership. He identifies a problem, and immediately offers a solution. Not only that, when given the opportunity to take action himself, he willingly accepts and does indeed save Egypt from starvation. He does not attempt to run away from the problem and seek refuge in another land. Rather, he acts from within and brings

change from within. As a result, Egypt is saved. We in the Jewish community must do the same. We must find ways to combat antisemitism. We must engage in strategic partnerships with allies and friends of the Jewish community. Sometimes these partnerships happen quietly and without much fanfare—like the relationships that many of us have built with non-Jewish clergy and colleagues. And others are more obvious to the world and are visible at the forefront—like the efforts made by the Biden administration and especially the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt.

Meanwhile, here at B’nai Israel, we are also doing our part to combat antisemitism in various ways. Last Thursday you received an email from Robin Lenkin and Lisa Miller, co-chairs of our newly established Fighting Antisemitism Committee, directing you to a page on our website that serves as a hub of resources for fighting antisemitism. We are raising awareness through our sermons, divrei Torah, and the writings of our members. We are participating in ADL’s Kulanu program to further educate ourselves and equip us with the tools to identify and speak out against antisemitism. And we are taking action by speaking out, by reporting antisemitism when we see it, and by showing up at Jewish communal events. If you want to get more involved with this sacred work, please reach out to us and we will connect you.

At this critical moment in Jewish history, we are called upon to recognize and respond to the problems before us. We must not only see and understand the warnings like Pharaoh, but we must take action and make a difference like Joseph. For those who wish to follow the path of Nebuchadnezzar and ignore the festering antisemitism that is manifest right before their eyes, we are putting you on notice. We are watching. And we will not sit by and allow it to continue unchecked. We will speak out. We will take action. We will hold you accountable.