

PARASHAT MIKETZ

Genesis 41:1–44:17

Miketz, which means “at the end of . . .” continues Joseph’s adventure in Egypt. Pharaoh has two dreams that none of his advisors can interpret. The cupbearer remembers Joseph and tells Pharaoh about him. Joseph is brought from jail and interprets Pharaoh’s dreams to mean that Egypt will have seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of his land. When the famine strikes, Jacob sends his sons, except for Benjamin, to Egypt. When they arrive, Joseph recognizes his brothers and accuses them of coming to spy in his land. They tell him that they have come for food and that they have an elderly father and one younger brother. Joseph seizes Simeon and tells the brothers that he will not go free until they return with their youngest brother. He takes their money and sends them off with sacks of food. Later, they discover that each of their sacks contains the money they had previously given to Joseph. As the famine worsens, Jacob tells his sons to return to Egypt. They remind Jacob that they cannot return without Benjamin. Judah pledges that Benjamin will be safe. When his brothers return to Egypt, Joseph frees Simeon and invites the brothers to his house for a banquet. He has yet to reveal his identity. When the banquet concludes, he orders that the brothers’ bags be filled with food and that his wine cup be secretly placed in Benjamin’s bag. After the brothers depart, Joseph sends his steward to pursue and arrest them for stealing his wine cup. They reply that they have taken nothing. When the wine cup is found in Benjamin’s bag, the brothers are brought back to Joseph’s house. He informs them that he will keep Benjamin as a slave but release the rest of them.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

Two years after Joseph interprets the cupbearer's dream and is restored to Pharaoh's service, Pharaoh has a dream. He is standing by the Nile River when out come seven large cows. They are followed by seven thin cows that eat up the seven fat ones. Then he dreams of seven ears of solid grain growing on one sturdy stalk and of seven scorched ears that swallow the sturdy ones.

When Pharaoh's magicians and advisors cannot interpret his dreams, the cupbearer tells him about Joseph.

Pharaoh sends for Joseph and tells him about his dreams. After listening, Joseph explains that both dreams carry the same message. They forecast seven years of plenty to be followed by seven years of famine. Joseph counsels the Egyptian ruler to appoint "a man of discernment and wisdom" who can manage Egypt's resources wisely.

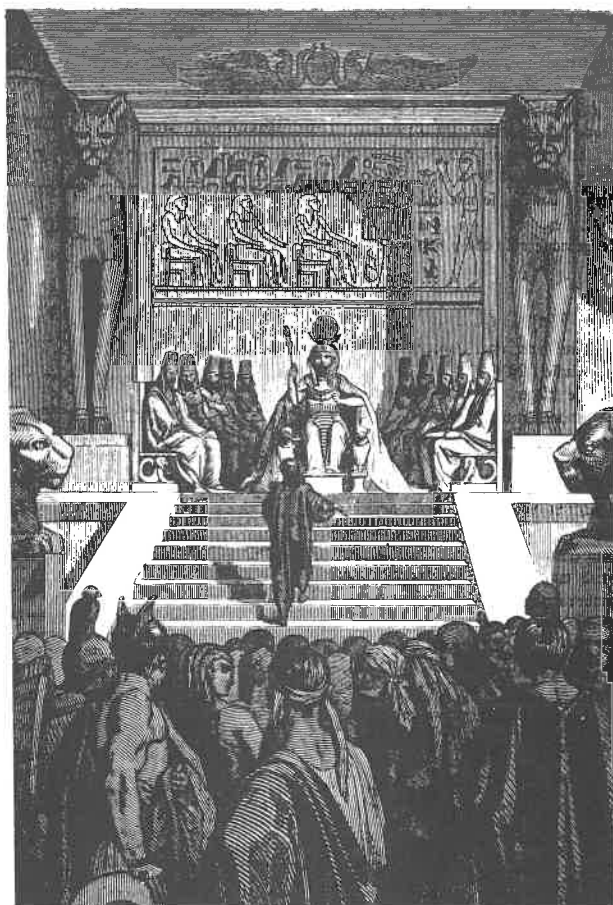
Pharaoh asks Joseph to assume the responsibilities and presents him with his signet ring of authority, a house, a gold chain, a chariot, and a wife. Joseph organizes storage cities for Egypt's grain and carefully plans for the future. He fathers two sons. The first he calls *Manasseh*, meaning "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home," and the second is named *Ephraim*, meaning "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction."

· 2 ·

When famine sets in, Jacob instructs his sons to go down to Egypt to purchase food. When they arrive, Joseph recognizes them but acts like a stranger. They bow before him, and he recalls his dreams.

He speaks harshly to them, accusing them of coming to spy in his land. They tell him that they are ten brothers, sons of an old man, that they were once twelve but that their youngest brother has remained with their father, and that one brother "is no more."

Once again, Joseph calls them "spies." He puts them in jail for three days. Realizing that they are being punished for what they had done to Joseph,



Reuben tells them: "Did I not tell you, 'Do no wrong to the boy'? But you paid no attention. Now comes the reckoning for his blood."

Joseph overhears them but pretends not to understand their language. He orders Simeon seized and tells them to return to their land and not to come back without their youngest brother. Secretly, he instructs his servants to fill their sacks with grain and replace the money they have paid to him in each of their bags.

· 3 ·

The brothers return to Jacob and tell him about "the man" they met in Egypt, about Simeon, and about the money returned to them. They also share "the man's" demand to see Benjamin, but, fearing the loss of his youngest son, Jacob refuses. "My son must not go down with you," he says to them, "for his brother is dead and he alone is left."

As the famine becomes more severe, however, the brothers approach Jacob again. Judah prom-

ises to look after Benjamin, and Jacob finally agrees. Taking gifts and money with them, they return to Egypt. Joseph welcomes them and tells his steward to prepare a meal for them in his house. He returns Simeon to them and, greeting Benjamin, inquires about the health of their father. However, he does not reveal his identity to his brothers.

After the meal, he tells his steward to fill their bags with food and to return their money. Cleverly laying a trap for Benjamin, he instructs the steward: "Put my silver goblet in the mouth of the bag of the youngest one." When his brothers leave,

he has them followed, stopped, and searched. They protest, declaring that they have taken nothing from Joseph. When the goblet is found in Benjamin's bag, the brothers are brought back to Joseph's house.

Fearing that returning without Benjamin will kill Jacob, Judah pleads with Joseph. He tells Joseph to take all of them as slaves, arguing that they are as guilty "as he in whose possession the goblet was found." Joseph refuses, telling them that he will take only Benjamin and that the rest of them can return to their father.

THEMES

Parashat Miketz contains three important themes:

1. Knowing what to do with dreams.
2. The choice between revenge and caring.
3. The choice between death and survival.

PEREK ALEF: *Joseph Knew What to Do with Dreams*

We have already encountered Joseph the dreamer. At seventeen he dreams about his brothers' sheaves bowing down to his and about the sun, moon, and eleven stars—his parents and brothers—also bowing to him. These dreams, as we have seen, anger his brothers and make Jacob suspicious about Joseph.

Some years later, while he is in prison, Joseph the dreamer becomes Joseph the interpreter of dreams. He accurately predicts the future for Pharaoh's former baker and cupbearer. The baker will die, and the cupbearer, he forecasts, will be restored to his position in Pharaoh's court.

Now, in our Torah portion, Pharaoh's cupbearer recalls Joseph's interpretive powers. Pharaoh has dreamed dreams that neither his advisors nor magicians can explain. The cupbearer informs his ruler about "the Hebrew youth" who understood his dream and predicted the future. Pharaoh is impressed. He frees Joseph and brings him to his court so that he can tell Joseph about his own dreams.



Hirsch

Joseph listened

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explained that Pharaoh said to Joseph: "I have heard of you that you listen to a dream in such a manner that you solve its meaning from its very contents." It all depends on listening to it correctly. Of ten people who listen to a speech or a story, often hearing it differently, only one hears it correctly. (The Pentateuch, on Genesis 41:15)

Listening

Human beings were endowed with two ears and one tongue that they might listen more than speak. (Abraham Hasdai, 13th century, translator and philosopher, Barcelona)

Listen and you will learn. (Solomon ibn Gabirol)

When two students listen patiently to each other in a discussion of Torah, God also listens to them.

And, if they do not, they cause God to depart from them. (Simeon ben Lakish, Shabbat 63b)

When Joseph arrives at court, Pharaoh greets him and says: "I have heard it said of you that for you to hear a dream is to tell its meaning." The Hebrew verb "hear" is *tishema*. It derives from the root *shema*, meaning not only "hear" but also "comprehend" or "understand."

Apparently, Joseph's success at interpreting the dreams that Pharaoh's wise men and magicians could not decipher had to do with his special listening skills. Some commentators speculate that Pharaoh's servants probably heard the king's description and then rushed off to consult their books on dreams. Instead of paying careful attention to Pharaoh's unique experience, they looked for an already accepted theory and explanation. As a result, they concluded that the dreams were two separate predictions of disaster. (*Genesis Rabbah* 89:60)

Joseph's approach was very different. He was ready to experiment with various original explanations. So he listened carefully to the dreams and to the varying shades and tones of Pharaoh's description in order to comprehend the emotion inside the words and to understand the subtle distinctions of each object Pharaoh mentioned and of every gesture made by the Egyptian ruler.

Because of his careful listening and openness to original insights, Joseph concludes that Pharaoh's two dreams are actually "one and the same." His ability to "hear" makes all the difference in his successful interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams.

But Joseph does more than offer interpretations. Psychologist Dr. Dorothy F. Zelig, in her study of Joseph's personality, calls attention to the fact that he also presents Pharaoh with "a plan for dealing with the situation." Grain is to be stored throughout the land during the period of plentiful harvest in order to provide for years of famine. "Again," Zelig writes, "Joseph the dreamer shows himself to be also a man of action. . . . Again he uses his very real abilities and his capacity for hard work to consolidate his position. His achievements therefore cannot be said to be based on fortuitous circumstances alone. For the rest of his life, Joseph remains in Pharaoh's favor. This

is no small accomplishment when one considers how fickle were the moods of those mighty potentates." (*Psychoanalysis and the Bible*, Bloch, New York, 1974, pp. 77-78)

Rabbi Mordechai Ha-Kohen, who lived in Safed during the seventeenth century, points out that Joseph did not delegate the responsibilities for distributing food to subordinate officials. Instead, he supervised all the storage and sales, personally making sure that no one was cheated. By the example of his own hard work and his compassion for the hungry and needy, he set a model of behavior for others. (*Siftei Kohen on Miketz*)

Dreamers and Dreams

Do not mock the words of our dreamers. Their words become the seeds of freedom. (Heinrich Heine)

If you will it, it is not a dream. (Theodor Herzl)

You see things; and you say, "Why?" But I dream things that never were; and I say, "Why not?" (George Bernard Shaw)

Other interpreters also emphasize that Joseph was not just an interpreter of dreams but a person of action as well. He established a careful plan for dealing with the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine. Rather than procrastinating, he developed solutions to the problems facing Egypt. Nor did he lose time in implementing his design for saving the country from disaster. He planned and built storage cities, organizing an original system for collecting one-fifth of Egypt's produce during the years of plenty by storing it in silos.



Steinsaltz

"From being a dreamer of dreams," commentator Adin Steinsaltz observes, "Joseph became the person of the dream . . . a man who experienced the dream . . . as a burden and a re-

sponsibility and a course of action from which there could be no digression.” (*Biblical Images*, p. 70)

Joseph’s greatness, according to our interpreters, was not only that he developed a “sensitive ear,” an ability to listen to what others were saying, but that he was also ready to assume responsibility for transforming dreams into reality. Pharaoh obviously sensed Joseph’s leadership qualities and, therefore, immediately told him: “You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all my people be directed. . . .”

It was a wise decision, for Joseph was a person who got things done. He was not a dreamer who shirked responsibilities. He was a hard worker who willingly used his skills for turning Pharaoh’s dreams into a strategy for survival.

PEREK BET: *The Choice between Revenge and Caring*

Abravanel



In his commentary to our Torah portion, Isaac Abravanel asks: “Why did Joseph denounce his brothers? Certainly it was wrong of him to take revenge and bear a grudge against them. After all, while their intent had been evil, God turned it to good. It is true that he had suffered years in jail, but he had also emerged as one of the most important and powerful leaders of Egypt. None of his good fortune would have occurred had his brothers not sold him into slavery. So what justification did Joseph have for taking revenge after twenty years? Why did he not have compassion for them or at least show more concern for the feelings of his aged father?”

Bearing a grudge

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge. . . .” (*Leviticus 19:19*)

Do not say, “I will do to him as he has done to me.” (*Proverbs 24:29*)

Do not say, “Since I have been humiliated, let my neighbor be humiliated. Know that, when you humiliate another person, you are humiliating the image of God.” (Ben Azai, Tan-chuma, *Genesis Rabbah 24:7*)

If you refuse assistance to a neighbor because he had been unkind to you, you are guilty of revenge; if you grant him his request for aid and remind him of his unkindness, you are guilty of bearing a grudge. (*Sifra to Leviticus 19:18*)

Author Maurice Samuel is also bothered by Joseph’s treatment of his brothers and father. He accuses Joseph of “cruelty” and “revenge.” He calls Joseph “the brilliant failure” because of his success in reaching the pinnacle of power in Egypt and because of his insensitivity toward his brothers and father. Samuel writes:

He accused them of being spies. He watched their consternation, and he toyed with it while they, poor devils, stammered their protests at this unbelievable turn of events and argued with him, to no effect of course. It was like arguing with a lunatic—an omnipotent lunatic. They thought of their families at home, their wives and their little ones and old Jacob—very old by now—waiting for bread. And here was this mad governor of Egypt. . . . If you have forgotten some details of the story, if you think that Joseph is now satisfied, that, having had his innocent little revenge, he calls the shocking comedy off, then you do not know your man. The actor has an insatiable appetite for encores. . . . This wantonness of Joseph’s, this frivolity, this cruelty, is particularly embarrassing.

(*Certain People of the Book*, Knopf, New York, 1955, pp. 312–326)

Ramban (Nachmanides)



Nachmanides disagrees with both Abravanel’s and Maurice Samuel’s criticism of Joseph. He

maintains that Joseph is not guilty of cruel revenge but is simply carrying out the predictions forecast in his youthful dreams. He dreamed that “all the sheaves,” and “the sun, moon, and eleven stars” would bow to him.

Joseph, Nachmanides argues, now recalled those dreams and believed that it was his duty to fulfill them. Therefore, he hid his identity from his brothers so that they would be forced to bring Benjamin and, ultimately, Jacob down to Egypt where they would all bow before him. “Joseph,” Nachmanides writes, “carried out everything in the appropriate manner in order to fulfill his youthful dreams.”

Rabbi Isaac Arama is shocked at Nachmanides’ explanation and justification of Joseph’s behavior. Not hiding his surprise, he comments, “I am astonished at Nachmanides’ explanation that Joseph did what he did in order to make his dreams come true. What did such behavior benefit him? And, even if he benefited, he should not have sinned against his father with such cruel treatment of him.” (*Akedat Yitzhak*)

Elie Wiesel agrees. Condemning Joseph’s desire for revenge, he writes: “Later, when his brothers were brought before him, he sought only to ridicule them, to take his vengeance. Instead of inquiring about his father and his younger brother, he demanded hostages; instead of feeding them, he made them tremble with fear. Weeks and weeks went by before he deigned to reassure them. Ten times he heard his brothers refer to their father as *your servant Jacob* and, unmoved, neither protested nor betrayed himself.” (*Messengers of God*, p. 160)

Hirsch



Clearly, many commentators criticize Joseph for mistreating his father and brothers. Like Nachmanides, however, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch believes that Joseph acted neither out of revenge nor out of selfishness by seeking to fulfill the predictions of his youthful dreams. Instead, Hirsch argues, Joseph put his brothers to the test in order to determine two important matters: *First*, he wanted to know if they would do to Benjamin

what they had done to him. If so, then he could neither forgive nor trust them. *Second*, he needed to test how they would react when, and if, he, as a ruler of Egypt, revealed himself as their brother. Would they trust him? Would they be loyal to him? Would they love him?

Hirsch calls Joseph’s treatment of his brothers and father “unavoidable.” He justifies Joseph’s withholding his identity from his brothers, his accusing them of being spies, his forcing them to bring Benjamin to Egypt against their father’s will, his planting of his goblet in Benjamin’s sack and seizing him as hostage—as *necessary*. Joseph, Hirsch maintains, had to protect himself, his position, and his family. He had to be certain that his brothers could be trusted and that they were no longer out to destroy him. He had to test them. Joseph, says Hirsch, acted out of wisdom, not out of spite or revenge.

The differences of opinion remain about whether Joseph’s behavior was justified or not. And so do the questions: Did he care about the feelings of his brothers or his aging father? Was he still angry about what his brothers had done to him? Was he determined to make them suffer as he had suffered? Did Joseph want revenge or reconciliation?

PEREK GIMEL: *Jacob’s Choice— Risking Death for Survival*

Jacob’s sons returned from Egypt with food but without Simeon. They explained to Jacob that “the lord of the land” spoke harshly to them, accused them of spying, and told them not to return unless they brought their youngest brother, Benjamin, with them.

Jacob responded with anger. “It is always me that you bereave: Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you would take away Benjamin.” Hoping to win his father’s trust, Reuben declared that if anything happened to Benjamin he would allow Jacob to put to death his own two sons. But Jacob refused. He would not allow them to take Benjamin to Egypt.

Months passed. Their food provisions began to run low, and famine threatened. So the brothers,

once again, approached their father, hoping to convince him to send Benjamin with them back to Egypt. Judah spoke on their behalf, promising to care for Benjamin. This time, Jacob agreed. He sent them off with gifts and money. "As for me," he told them, "if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved."

The incident is a dramatic illustration of family tension and parental love. And it raises important questions: What prompts Jacob's change of mind? Why is Judah able to convince Jacob to send Benjamin when Reuben's argument failed? Why is Jacob suddenly ready to risk Benjamin's life, with the potential of bringing great sorrow upon himself?

According to Rabbi Judah, Reuben demonstrated his moral insensitivity and stupidity when he tried to persuade Jacob to allow Benjamin to go down to Egypt with his brothers. His proposition to Jacob that, if anything were to happen to Benjamin, he could take the lives of his own sons was unacceptable. Jacob dismissed it by telling Reuben: "Fool! Do you not realize that your sons are my grandsons. How could I take their lives?" (*Genesis Rabbah* 91:8)

Rashi



On the other hand, Rashi believes that the real reason Jacob dismissed Reuben's argument but accepted Judah's was simply a matter of timing. Reuben approached Jacob just after returning from Egypt. Jacob was deeply upset that his sons had returned without Simeon and refused to place Benjamin's fate in their hands. Furthermore, because they had brought back plenty of food, he was not concerned with the danger of famine. He saw no reason, at that time, to risk losing another son.

Consequently, as Rashi points out, Judah waited until hunger finally threatened Jacob's entire family. Then, he came before his father and presented his argument. According to Rashi, Judah told Jacob: "You say that you fear for Benjamin. Well, none of us knows whether or not he will be seized by the Egyptian ruler. What we do know is that, if we do not return to Egypt with

Benjamin, all of us will die of starvation. Is it not better to let go what is doubtful and snatch what is certain?"

Leibowitz

The worst decision

*A story is told of two pious men who went on a sea journey. A huge wave threatened to sink their ship. One of them said: "This is the worst!" The other replied: "It could be much worse." "How is that possible?" asked the first. "We are at the gates of death. Can there be anything worse?" "Yes," explained the other. "We could be placed in the predicament of Jacob whose sons came to him seeking bread, and he had none to give them. Remember that choice. As long as he had food in the bin, he refused to allow Benjamin to go to Egypt. But, as soon as the bin was empty, he was forced to say: "Take your brother." (As related in *Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Bereshit, p. 474*)*

Can one life be sacrificed for many? A group of people, walking along a road, are stopped by evil people who say to them: "Give us one of you, and we will kill him. If not, we will kill all of you." What shall be done? Rather than surrendering one person, let all of them be killed. But, if the evil people single out one person, as was the case with Sheba ben Bichri (who rebelled against King David), that person may be surrendered to them so that the others may be saved. Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish said: "Only someone who is under sentence of death, the way Sheba ben Bichri was, may be turned over."

But Rabbi Yochanan disagreed. He argued that, if the evil people single out one person, then the others should save themselves by turning that person over to them. (Jerusalem Talmud, Terumot 8:12)

Nachmanides agrees with Rashi's view but extends it. He suggests that Judah wisely counseled

his brothers to wait until there was no bread left in the house. Then Jacob would listen. He would make the difficult decision to risk one life in order to save many lives. (Nachmanides on Genesis 42:37)

Nehama Leibowitz wonders what it was that convinced Jacob to change his mind and agree to send Benjamin with his brothers. He does not seem to have been moved by either Simeon's imprisonment or by Reuben's appeal. Leibowitz believes that it was the hunger of his grandchildren that persuaded the patriarch. It was seeing the children wasting away, crying for food that moved him. "The hunger of the little ones finally broke his resistance. Judah meaningfully ended the first sentence of his appeal with the words: ' . . . and also our little ones.' " (*Studies in Bereshit*, p. 474)

Jacob's refusal to go along with Reuben's suggestion that the brothers return immediately to Egypt with Benjamin in order to rescue Simeon raises several questions: Was it right for him to leave Simeon imprisoned and, perhaps, suffering for so long? Was he justified in delaying until they ran out of food, endangering the children?

Our commentators all suggest that the patriarch acted justly. He carefully weighed his options,

waiting to see what events might bring. In the end, his difficult decision was based on compassion for all his children and upon what might guarantee their survival.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. According to our commentators, what is the art of interpreting dreams? Are dreamers essential for human development?
2. Who has the better argument about Joseph's treatment of his brothers and father: Abnavel, Samuel, and Wiesel or Nachmanides and Hirsch? Was Joseph's motive innocent or deliberate revenge?
3. Should Jacob have rejected Reuben's plea to return immediately with Benjamin to Egypt? Was it just for him to wait until starvation threatened his grandchildren?
4. Are parents justified in taking any risk to prevent their children from starving?