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ASBI Congregation
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On the Interpretation of Dreams

A good Hassidic story ends with a pithy punch-line that exposes some profound wisdom regarding the human condition. I'm going to begin this morning by sharing a Hassidic tale with you, but not a story about a great or minor *rebbe*, but a story of a true interaction between a Boro Park Jewish saleswoman and my mother.. On a wedding-dress shopping excursion with Sara, my mother mentioned to a saleswoman at a famous wedding dress store, that she was a psychoanalyst. This elicited a strong response from the saleswoman who launched into retelling all of the sad episodes of her life, concluding: "You and all your psychology couldn't understand what I've been through."

Without missing a beat, my mother responded, "No, but you can."

A good psychologist or analyst does not offer objective interpretations of someone else's life, but provides a setting for an individual to interpret and uncover the meaning of his or her own life. Freud's insight into dream interpretation replaced earlier notions of the fixed meaning of dreams with the understanding that dreams could only be understood by referencing the specific subjective meaning and symbolism for each individual dreamer. One can interpret one's own dreams, and professional help can be important to that effort, but nobody can truly interpret the dreams of others.

Yoseph, throughout this *parasha* and throughout his life seems to be interpreting the dreams of others. Upon closer examination, Yoseph is actually interpreting his own life, and giving meaning to his own life, through his acts of interpretation.

Yoseph did not ascend to his position of power in Egypt because he satisfactorily interpreted Pharaoh's dreams. Yoseph became second to Pharaoh because of what he does immediately after he interprets Pharaoh's dreams - something audacious and quite surprising.

Yoseph was called from prison in order to explain and interpret Pharaoh's dreams. And he does that. But then, on his own and without being asked, and without showing any embarrassment or shame, Yoseph proceeds to tell Pharaoh how he should respond to the coming years of plenty and famine.

According to Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin - Netziv - it was an act of boldness and courage on the part of Yoseph to suggest a strategy to Pharaoh to respond to the coming famine. Yoseph had not been asked his opinion, but having been guided by *Ruah HaKodesh*, a prophetic spirit, in interpreting the dream, Yoseph felt emboldened to propose a strategy to survive the famine.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe understood this episode in a different way: When the seven weak and thin cows emerge from the Nile they stand next to the fat and healthy cows - "*va'ta'amodna*" - the two sets of seven cows are there standing together in front of Pharaoh - demanding some response. That is to say, the suggestion that Yoseph offers to Pharaoh, save food during the years of plenty to eat during the years of famine, was a demand that was explicit in the dream - the two groups of cows stood next to each other demanding that Pharaoh promulgate a solution and a response to the years of plenty and years of famine.

The contemporary rabbi and *Tanakh* scholar, Nachman Levine¹, points us in another direction. Yoseph's proactive step - offering a solution that he had not been asked to provide, is the culmination of all the dreams that have occurred in the Torah's narrative of Yoseph. The dreams all tell that same message to Yoseph.

Pharaoh's dreams had four elements: He saw himself, Pharaoh, standing beside the River Nile, there were cattle, and there was grain. Pharaoh, Nile, Cattle, Grain - that's a four part summary of Egyptian religion and Egyptian society. But Yoseph saw himself as the subject of the dream.

There is a subtle difference between the Torah's account of Pharaoh's dreams in the first aliyah, and the way that Pharaoh repeats that dream to Yoseph in the second aliyah. The good healthy cows, in the first aliyah, are described as “בְּרִיאֹת בָּשָׂר וַיִּפְתַּח תֶּאֱרָא” in the second aliyah they are described as “בְּרִיאֹת בָּשָׂר וַיִּפְתַּח תֶּאֱרָא” Both descriptions are ways of saying the cows were healthy and good looking, but each phrase has an element that is lacking in the other. Combining the two descriptions, we are left with “וַיִּפְתַּח תֶּאֱרָא וַיִּפְתַּח תֶּאֱרָא” which is the Torah's description of Yoseph himself in *Parashat Vayeshev*. Those good looking cows are described in language that, throughout the Torah, is used almost exclusively to describe Yoseph.

Yoseph recognizes himself in the dream. He was fat, then he became thin. That's life. You can go from being fat and healthy and prosperous, to being thin and sick and poor all at once. That was Yoseph's life. He had, time after time, been prosperous and healthy, and then lose everything.

But then Yoseph remembers the dreams of the baker and the butler. What was the message of those dreams? They weren't difficult to understand. The butler dreamed he was actively doing his job, and things turned out well for him. The baker was passive - he could not accomplish anything, he could not do his job - and things turned out very badly for the baker. The message of that dream-pair is to be active and proactive and to do one's job.

And this harkens back to the original dream-pair, Yoseph's own dreams. In one dream he is surrounded by his family amidst an abundance of wheat at harvest time. In the other dream he is alone, surrounded by the heavenly bodies. Yoseph realizes that his destiny is to be a source of food for his family. He realizes that his destiny is to be a source of illumination and enlightenment. But - only if he acts.

So, Yosef acts.. He intercedes. He inserts himself into Pharaoh's policy and offers a solution.

And Pharaoh is thunderstruck. In Pharaoh's world, you don't respond to a dream, you submit to it. In the entire pagan worldview, there is no way to respond to the decree of fate - you just submit and wait for fate to reach you.

That was certainly true for the Greeks. Think of Oedipus, whose tragic life was the inevitable outcome of an attempt to escape fate. Nobody ever returned from the Oracle of Delphi with a plan for how to thrive under the challenging circumstances that the future will bring.

And so Yosef's message to Pharaoh is also a message for Hanukah, the celebration of our ability to overcome a Greek way of thinking and embrace instead the potential for human freedom that a Jewish religious worldview makes possible.

The Maccabees are described by the Book of the Maccabees as brave warriors, skilled military commanders, and inspiring leaders. Things usually turn out well for people like that. But the rabbis who incorporated Hanukah into the Jewish calendar rejected the Book of Maccabees and kept it out of our *Tanakh*. The Maccabees as they are known to Judaism through the Talmud and the *Al HaNissim* passage in the siddur are

¹ Most of the core analysis and parshanut of this drasha are derived from an audio recording of a presentation by Rabbi Levine at one of the annual *Tanakh yamei iyun* sponsored by YCT Rabbinical school.

described as being few in number and weak, as well as righteous, pure, and diligent students of Torah. There was nothing predictable or expected about the Maccabee victory.

Their victory, like every victory worth celebrating, was the result of individuals deciding, not to accept conventional wisdom, not to go with the flow, to refuse to become a victim of fate, or a product of circumstances beyond one's control. Yoseph is a hero of the Hanukkah season because he had the courage to take dramatic action, to roll up his sleeves and involve himself in politics, in order to protect his family and in order to protect the entire region where he lived. He embraced the destiny laid out in his dreams and provided food and he provided illumination. On the festival of lights, we can celebrate the menorah that burned for 8 days, and we celebrate the illumination and enlightenment of Yoseph as well.