

Parshat Mikeitz: Pharaoh's Wake up call

Parshat Mikeitz begins with the story of how Yosef was summoned from prison to interpret two dreams that Pharaoh had: in the first dream, seven fat, healthy cows come up from the Nile only to be consumed by seven skinny, sickly cows, which come up after them. In the second dream, seven full, healthy ears of grain sprout on one stalk, only to be eaten up by seven withered, thin ears that grow after them. An important moment of transition occurs when Yosef goes from simply interpreting Pharaoh's dreams to offering Pharaoh advice. After explaining that Pharaoh's dreams mean that seven years of plenty are coming, only to be followed by seven years of famine, severe enough to consume all the wealth of the good years, Yosef segues from prediction to prescription:

“And now, let Pharaoh look for a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt, and let Pharaoh act to appoint officers over the land, and take one fifth from the land of Egypt during the seven years of plenty, and let them gather the food of these coming good years, and collect grain under Pharaoh's control, as food in the cities, and let them guard it. Let that food be set aside for the land for the seven years of famine which will be in the land of Egypt, so that the land will not perish during the famine.” (Bereishit 41:33-36)

R' Moshe Alshikh raises the question: “Was Yosef appointed as an advisor to Pharaoh?! He was only supposed to listen to the dream and interpret it. Who gave him permission to say 'And now, let Pharaoh look for a man...?'” It is indeed striking that Yosef, a foreigner, a slave and a prisoner, would dare to offer unsolicited advice to the king, who after all, had summoned him for his skill in the interpretation of dreams, not for his expertise in domestic policy or agriculture.

R' Yaakov Zvi Mecklenburg, the author of HaK'sav V'HaKabbalah offers an insightful answer to the problem articulated by R' Alshikh. He writes that Yosef is not offering his own opinion, but that his instructions as to how Pharaoh should act are actually part of his interpretation of the dreams. R' Mecklenberg explains that the fact that the Torah mentions, seemingly extraneously, that Pharaoh awoke (וַיִּשְׁכַּח) between the dreams, and that Pharaoh also tells Yosef “I awoke (וַיִּשְׁכַּח)” after the first dream means that the waking itself is significant, and a part of the message of the dreams. He goes

on to say

“From this, Yosef learned that Pharaoh himself needed to be stirred up and pay attention to the matter that was made known to him through his dream, to be industrious, to awake to the future evil that would come to his land, and to make all the preparations and to take all the opportunities in the good times to reduce as much as he could the evil that would come after. And just as waking refers to being stirring from sleep, it also refers to stirring to action, as in Psalm 35:23 'Wake, rouse Yourself for my cause, [for my claim, O my G-d and my L-rd!]' For just as one who is sleeping has no focus (*kavanah*), while the waking person does, so the one stirring themselves to focus on something is referred to as someone rousing from sleep.”

R' Mecklenburg's explanation neatly accounts for both the seemingly redundant mention of waking, and the boldness of Yosef's advice. He also adds a layer of understanding to the meaning of the metaphor of waking from sleep. We often describe those who are unaware of something as being asleep, and use waking as a metaphor for realizing some important truth. However, for R' Mecklenburg, what distinguishes waking from sleep is not awareness. After all the sleeping person may be fully aware of their dreams, as Pharaoh was. What distinguishes waking from sleep is not the awareness of facts, but acting based on that awareness. And for this reason, R' Mecklenberg says that Yosef understood waking as symbolic of rising to action, rather than of mere dawning awareness.

HaK'sav v'HaKabbalah says *kavvanah* or focus, is what distinguishes the waking person from the sleeping person. We often translate *kavvanah* as attention, and speak about “having *kavvanah*” when we pray, as a matter of not being distracted. *Kavvanah* is not really about the absence of distraction. If it were, then there would be no reason to claim that *kavanah* distinguishes the waking from the sleeping. The word *kavvanah* comes from a root meaning direction, and refers to our ability to direct or focus our thoughts and actions towards an intended outcome. Someone who “has *kavvanah*” is someone whose thoughts, words and actions are deliberate, and aligned with a goal or intention.

The opposite of *kavvanah* is neither distraction nor lack of awareness, but aimlessness.

A sleeping person might be aware of their dreams, but they are unlikely to be deliberately directing them towards any clear purpose. Thus, metaphorically speaking, Pharaoh's awakening took place not when Yosef explained the dreams to him, but when he made the decision to appoint Yosef his prime minister and empower him to take the necessary steps to avoid disaster.

In an era when truth and facts have become politicized, it is easy to congratulate ourselves for simply recognizing reality, and to act as if that is enough. But there is no special virtue in being aware of reality, if we do not act appropriately in response to that reality.

Whether it's a problem in our personal lives, like a health issue or a toxic relationship, or a bad habit, or a problem in society, like violence, racial injustice or climate change, very often, we see the problem very clearly, and take some measure of pride in at least not being in denial. However, if we fail to intentionally address the problem, we are no more awake and certainly no more virtuous than one who is completely unaware of the issue.

Being awake, by R' Mecklenberg's definition requires three things: awareness, intention and action. Even if we are aware of an issue and respond with action, if we do so in a reactive, thoughtless, unplanned sort of way (i.e., without kavvanah), we are unlikely to be very effective at addressing the issue. I encourage all of us to take the time this Shabbos to think about a problem or issue that keeps us up at night, whether it's something personal or a larger societal issue, and to reflect on what we have actually done in response. If we have done nothing at all, or we have acted but in an ineffective and mindless way, it's worth stopping and choosing an intention for how we will act to address the issue in the future. In doing so, we not only increase our chances of actually bringing about a desired resolution, but even when that is not possible, we can find a peace in knowing that we did what was appropriate and necessary.

May we, and all our society, be blessed to awaken, not only to awareness, but to intention and to action.

Shabbat Shalom!