

A Shabbat message from Rabbi Rick Rheins
Shabbat Mikeitz 5781

After the Dream

This week's Torah portion is *Mikeitz* (Genesis 41:1- 44:17). It is the second of four consecutive *parashiot* that feature Joseph. The extended story of Joseph is both tragic and heroic, heartbreaking and heartwarming.

To briefly review: Joseph's mother Rachel died when he was a boy. He was doted on and favored by his father Jacob/Israel, which contributed to a seething animosity from his brothers. Of course, Joseph's habit of having elaborate dreams that portrayed him as a leader of the family with all the others bowing down to him did not help matters.

Tragically, his brothers got their revenge by selling Joseph into slavery. From beloved son to hated brother, Joseph's journey kept going south. Indeed, he not only went down to Egypt as a slave, he was also falsely accused of a crime and thrown down into a dungeon. Even there, he was betrayed by his fellow prisoners who forgot about him even when he correctly interpreted their dreams. Joseph literally was in the lowest state possible. Betrayed, framed, abandoned, and forgotten in a dungeon.

And yet, Joseph never stopped believing. Yes, he was a dreamer, but his dreams were not the stuff of fantasy. Rather, he dreamed of a better world,

of his family healed and reconciled. It was his faith in the face of tragedy that earned him the epithet ***Tzadik*, the righteous one**. A *tzadik* is distinguished by his or her actions AND by the way he/she teaches and inspires others.

In this week's Torah portion we read that Joseph was elevated from the dungeon in order to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. None of Pharaoh's advisors and wise men could adequately interpret the meaning of his first dream about 7 healthy cows being swallowed up by 7 emaciated cows, or his second dream about 7 healthy ears of grain being swallowed up by 7 withered ears of grain. However, Joseph understood the significance: the dreams foretold of 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of famine.

Now, if all Joseph did was give Pharaoh a convincing interpretation, perhaps, *Dayeinu*, perhaps it would have been enough. But Joseph did give Pharaoh much more than an interpretation. Joseph also gave wise advice about how to prepare for the years of famine.

Pharaoh was impressed. He asked his courtiers, "Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?" So Joseph was elevated to the position of Head of the Royal Court, second only to Pharaoh.

It is from that position that Joseph was able to arrange for a reconciliation with his family.

The significance of dreams is hotly debated in the Talmud. In Tractate *Berakhot* it is written that “just as there is no grain without straw, so, too, every dream has some nonsense.” Thousands of years before the advancements of modern psychology, our ancestors understood that dreams are mostly the product of our daily concerns and obsessions. At the same time, they also noted that there is some meaning in them as well.

No doubt, the extensive commentary that we find in the Talmud concerning dreams laid the foundation for the modern interpretation and analysis of dreams. It’s worth noting that in addition to groundbreaking psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, most of the early pioneers psychoanalysts in Vienna were Jews. Karl Abraham, Max Eitingon, and Hans Sachs were later followed by giants in the field like Erik Erikson, Erich Fromm --- all Jewish.

So it should come as no surprise that our ancestor Joseph showed such a talent for dream interpretation that his skills elevated him from a dank dungeon in Egypt to the heights of Pharaoh’s court. But let’s note that what really won Pharaoh’s trust was the wise plan that Joseph laid out for surviving the famine.

Some of the dreams we have can be inspiring. They might even reflect a positive, encouraging vision of what could be. Turning dreams into reality is

another cherished Jewish tradition. Indeed, it was Theodore Herzl, the visionary of early Zionism, who wrote: "If you will it, it is no dream."

We have been living through a long pandemic nightmare. And yet, psychologists also have documented that in many cases, the pandemic has given us extra time to sleep which leads to dreams that often are more vivid and memorable. Perhaps, you have been having more vivid and memorable dreams. If so, take note of them. They might contain nuggets of insight and inspiration. Then again, they might not. Regardless, what is most important is to wake up with a renewed determination to make the best of whatever situation in which we find ourselves. Like Joseph, it's time to consider the lessons learned, take note of the dreams that inspire us, and plan for the unfolding events of tomorrow. Yes, with vaccines on the way, the ordeal of COVID-19 may soon be over. And then what? Have we made our plans?

With the New Year 2021 just a few weeks away, now is the time for us to consider the lessons we've learned during this long nightmare of 2020 and make plans for a healthier, happier future.

Shabbat Shalom,

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