

**SEFER DANIEL**  
**By Rav Yaakov Medan**

**Chapter 3 (continued) –**  
**The First Dream and Its Interpretation**

**3. The Meaning of the Dream – Holy vs. Profane**

Let us now return to Nevukhadnetzar's dream. In the previous *shiur*, we discussed at length the dimension of "prophecy" within dreams, as opposed to their mundane, psychological dimension – that is, the source of a dream in a person's own thoughts. However, it is specifically to this latter dimension that Daniel first addresses himself:

"As for you, O king, your thoughts have come to you upon your bed..." (2:29).

Daniel starts off by speaking like an expert in psychology. Were it not for the amazing fact that he reveals the content of the dream after Nevukhadnetzar himself had forgotten it, we might have maintained, at this stage, that Daniel is simply a very wise person, not necessarily someone endowed with Divine inspiration or possessing any sort of communication with God.<sup>[1]</sup> However, the story includes also the miracle of the revelation of the dream's content, and not only the interpretation of its meaning.

Perhaps a skeptic would still argue that based on Nevukhadnetzar's psychological state as "king of kings," and in light of the fact that his spirit is troubled to the extent that he has forgotten his dream, one might guess with a reasonable degree of certainty that the dream concerned the demise of the kingdom of Babylon. One might also suggest that the idol that Nevukhadnetzar dreams about actually existed and that he was familiar with it. Nevertheless, the ability to describe all the details of the dream, without any special revelation of Divine inspiration, is not reasonable.

Once the content of the dream has been made known, it is possible that its interpretation follows human logic. Nevukhadnetzar knows that he is the "golden head," the omnipotent ruler of the kingdom who rules all of the known world. At the same time, he knows the nature of the world, and he knows that just as he replaced the Assyrian kingdom, some day some other kingdom will conquer Babylon, and later on that kingdom will be conquered by yet another.

It would appear that the surprising part of the dream – the part that transcends the boundaries of human psychology and enters the superhuman sphere, the part that requires Divine inspiration for its interpretation and justifies the inclusion of the dream in its entirety within the *Ketuvim*, rather than being consigned to the realm of psychological literature – is the final part. The element of the dream that certainly cannot be explained away as "an educated guess" concerns the stone that annihilates the memory of all the kingdoms and, contrary to the laws of history, grows into an immovable mountain, into a

kingdom that will never collapse. This, of course, refers to the kingdom of God. More surprisingly still is that this kingdom finds political expression in our world – the kingdom of God's nation and its king, who sits upon God's throne.

Nevukhadnetzar's dream and its meaning merge human fears and the consciousness of a mortal king, whose origin is dust and who returns to dust, with Divine inspiration, revealing Divine plans for an eternal kingdom that will never fall, against all the laws of history.

From Daniel's perspective, the explanation of the dream comes through a combination of his own intelligence, which is fundamentally bound up with wholehearted faith and fear of God, and God's word, which is revealed to him. This is the level of "Divine inspiration," and it is this level of consciousness that is expressed in the *Ketuvim*, in contrast to the Books of the Prophets.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### 4. Yosef – Dream and Interpretation

In order to illustrate the level of Divine inspiration in dreams, we will look briefly at a biblical character who parallels Daniel – Yosef. As we have noted previously, Yosef was similarly torn away from his family and birthplace at a young age, and he similarly withstood bravely the test of assimilation into the surrounding culture. He, too, experienced dreams and interpreted dreams, thereby achieving honor and status in the royal court.<sup>[3]</sup>

Yosef was not a prophet. The forefathers were prophets, and God spoke with them, but God did not speak with Yaakov's sons; they were regular people. Yosef is not even counted as one of the tribes; he was the father of two tribes (Efraim and Menashe), but he did not achieve the level of the patriarchs. He experienced powerful, special dreams, and attained the level that we have been discussing – the level of Divine inspiration.<sup>[4]</sup> Were his dreams about the sheaves and about the sun, moon and stars merely adolescent delusions of grandeur, as his brothers assumed, or were they a sixtieth of prophecy, originating in the upper worlds, as his father believed, saying nothing but "keeping the matter"? What did Yosef think about his own dreams when his life took a very different turn and instead of attaining royalty he became a slave and a prisoner in Egypt?

Let us look at the dreams of others that Yosef interpreted. It took no great genius for Yosef to interpret the butler's dream: after all, the explanation he offers is the same as the description of the dream itself. The butler dreamed that he would place the royal goblet in Pharaoh's hand, and that is exactly what Yosef explained to him. Was his sole stroke of insight the knowledge that the three branches represented three days and not, say, three months? Did it take such great genius to discern the difference between the dream of the butler and that of the baker?

Consider Pharaoh's dreams (in light of Ramban's commentary). Cows grazing at the Nile and sheaves growing from it express the economic and agricultural abundance

of Egypt. This conclusion is a matter of simple logic; it does not require Divine inspiration. The same applies to the fact that fat, healthy-looking cows and full sheaves express plenty, while lean cows and bedraggled sheaves indicate famine. Hence, the obvious conclusions concerning the content of Pharaoh's dreams do not require "a man who has a Divine spirit in him." The interpretation of these dreams seems no more difficult than interpreting the dreams about the sheaves and the sun, moon, and stars – which everyone involved understood immediately. Perhaps, then, the emphasis needs to be put on a different part of the solution.

At the end of his interpretation of the butler's dreams, Yosef says:

"But have me in your remembrance when it will be well for you, and show kindness, I pray you, towards me, and make mention of me to Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house. For I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews, and here, too, I have done nothing for them to put me in the dungeon."  
(*Bereishit* 40:14-15)

As he concludes his interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, Yosef once again addresses practical concerns:

"And now, let Pharaoh seek out a man who is discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt" (41:33).

Ramban asks the obvious question – since when did Pharaoh appoint Yosef to advise him? He explains Yosef's words according to the approach he develops throughout his commentary on this story; there can be little doubt that Yosef's recommendation to Pharaoh was meant to refer to himself. Yosef, despite his lowly servile status and the long years that he spent in prison, continued to believe that his early dreams were true and that he was indeed destined to rule over his brothers. Since Divine inspiration cannot be bound up with aims that are not pure, we can be certain that his aim in leading his brothers was for the sake of faith, kindness, righteousness, justice, and fear of God. Despite the fact that reality contrasted so sharply with his dreams, he was still convinced of their truth – and he identifies the dreams of Pharaoh and his servants as the aid that God sent him to realize his own dreams and to achieve kingship and the leadership of his family in the way of God.

Once again, we see here a combination of intelligence and faith, expressed even in the times when God's guiding hand is hidden. This combination is accompanied by the extraordinary courage to act in accordance with God's guidance and to risk statements which, if later proved wrong, might cost one his life (interpretations of the dreams of the butler, baker, and Pharaoh). The interpretations are especially impressive because Yosef did not postpone them for some far-off time, but rather is ready to deal with the consequences of his statements "in three days' time," in the case of the butler and the baker; to Pharaoh he says, "The matter is established by God, and God will soon make it happen."<sup>5</sup>

We do not seek to diminish in any way the status and level of Yosef and of Daniel, nor their ability to receive prophecy. However, both of them operated in foreign lands, removed from the sanctity and prophetic spirit of Eretz Yisrael.<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, their level was that of "Divine inspiration."

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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[1] Cf. *Berakhot* 55b: "R. Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: 'What a person is shown is only from the thoughts of his own heart, as it is written, 'As for you, O king, your thoughts have come to you upon your bed'."

[2] The *ruach ha-kodesh* which we speak of in connection with, for instance, the Sages of the Sanhedrin is likewise more a matter of inspiration, a force guiding them in a certain direction of thought and towards certain conclusions, without them receiving anything explicitly in a vision.

[3] Furthermore, both Yosef and Daniel were cast into a pit by people who hated them and were jealous of them; Daniel's pit housed lions and Yosef's pit, according to *Chazal*, was crawling with snakes and scorpions. It is possible that the similarity between the two situations was part of the reason for *Chazal's* teaching that Yosef's pit, too, held dangerous creatures. It was likewise based on this parallel that *Chazal* associated Yosef with the "man clothed in linen" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 37:15), since Daniel also spoke with him (*Daniel*, chapter 10).

[4] The Sefat Emet writes in several places that the forefathers were "like Shabbat," while the tribes (Yaakov's sons) were "like the six days of activity" (see, for example, *Parashat Vayechi* 647, on the verse "ben porat").

[5] To explain the point further: the solution to the butler's dream and, to some extent, also that of the baker, is contained within the dream itself. The only real insight contained in Yosef's interpretation is that the three branches, like the three baskets of bread, represent three days. Yosef could have said "three periods," just as Daniel told Nevukhadnetzar in his second dream about seven periods (*idanim*). Had he taken this safer route, he would not have been answerable with his life to these ministers had his interpretation not been realized, had these been regular dreams with no special meaning, since his solution would have indicated no specific time. But Yosef says "three days," thereby risking the non-realization of his interpretations and the possible price that he might have to pay. He did not know that in three days' time a birthday celebration would be held for Pharaoh. The baker has the impression that "the interpretation was good" – mainly because of Yosef's courage and his adamant claim that the interpretation would be realized immediately.

According to the *midrash*, Pharaoh's ministers offered interpretations whose realization would lie in the distant future. Yosef was prepared to risk an immediate materialization. His courage testified to the veracity of his words.

[6] Concerning the unique case of Yechezkel, see *Mo'ed Katan* 25a.