

Yosef: Dreamer and Interpreter

By Rav Tamir Granot

I. The Problem with the Solution of Pharaoh's Dreams

a. When Yosef is brought for an audience with Pharaoh, the Egyptian king receives him thus: "I have heard it said of you that you understand a dream to interpret it." – And indeed, Yosef's interpretation is accepted by Pharaoh as genuine.

But Yosef will not accept the compliment: "It is not me! God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." In other words, the answer is not in my hands; it is not by my own merit. In the same vein he previously told the ministers, "Do interpretations not belong to God? Tell me, then." Nevertheless, the story itself proves that Yosef's gift of interpreting dreams cannot be attributed solely to Divine assistance. The interpretation has its own internal logic and is suited to the dream – both in the case of the ministers and in the case of Pharaoh. Although Yosef, in his modesty, attributes the entire answer to God, we must assume that this is a general religious statement about God helping him. He does not mean that God reveals Himself to him *ad hoc*, supplying him with the answer in each instance.

If we agree with the assertion that Yosef interprets dreams using his special insight, then two major questions arise:

1. What clues does he use to interpret Pharaoh's dream?
2. How does Pharaoh know that Yosef's interpretation was correct?

The early commentators address these questions, but we are not left with any satisfactory answer. Some opinions assume a super-human gift. If this is the case then we have no further questions – but, as stated, this hypothesis does not seem to suit the spirit of the story. Another opinion asserts that Pharaoh dreamed the interpretation along with the dream, but then forgot it. He was immediately reminded of it when Yosef offered his interpretation, and hence Pharaoh knew that this was the correct one. We cannot rule out this possibility, and we certainly recognize the existence of such psychological phenomena, but from an exegetical point of view it is better not to rely on hypotheses that have no basis in the text. Furthermore, an answer of this type may solve the problem on the level of understanding the events themselves, but it is devoid of significance from our point of view.

I believe that the correct exegetical working assumption is that the Torah is telling us how Yosef solved the dreams, and it is the task of every Torah scholar to reveal that which is still hidden. In the present instance, the assumption is reinforced by the fact that the Torah elaborates at great length in its description of the dreams. This detail is obviously not meant for the sake of literary ornamentation; rather, it allows us to follow the process of interpretation.

II. Repetition of the Dreams

In our *shiur* on *Parashat Chayei Sara*, we noted the principle formulated by Nechama Leibowitz concerning the importance of literary repetition. Let us briefly review this idea. Repetition in a narrative generally appears where the development of events is described once by the text itself, and then again by one or more characters involved in the story. The repetition sometimes allows us to discover the intentions of one of the characters (in the case of *Parashat Chayei Sara*, where Avraham's servant wants to succeed in finding a wife for Yitzhak) or to see the development from different angles. The discrepancy between the events as they are and the way in which they are perceived by the characters who take part in them may serve as an important source for understanding the story.

In our present case, the text describes Pharaoh's dreams three times:

1. Objective description – of the text itself
2. Description by Pharaoh – here we must decide what the purpose of the repetition is, and which point of view it reflects.
3. Description by Yosef – for the purpose of interpretation. Here Yosef connects elements of the dream to parts of his interpretation, and therefore the repetition is a necessity. In any event, since this is not a word-for-word repetition, we shall pay attention to this version, too.

The focus of our discussion is on the repetition by Pharaoh, because it is entirely redundant. The Torah could simply have recorded that "Pharaoh told his dreams to Yosef" – and left it at that. Alternatively, it could have omitted the description of the dreams in the beginning, and structured the incident differently: "And it was, after two years, that Pharaoh dreamed dreams. He awoke in the morning and called all the magicians of Egypt..." and then, "Pharaoh told them to Yosef, and he said: In my dream, behold..." – and only here provided a full description of the dreams. The repetitive description in full is unquestionably superfluous, and requires explanation.

Let us compare the three descriptions with a view to discovering their differences.

FIRST DREAM:

Torah's description (41:1): "...Behold, he stood at the river. (2) And behold, from the river there rose seven cows – of beautiful APPEARANCE and fat, and they grazed in the reed grass. (3) And behold, another seven cows arose after them from the river, OF BAD APPEARANCE and thin, and **they stood by the other cows upon the bank of the river.** (4) And the cows OF BAD APPEARANCE AND THIN consumed the seven cows OF GOOD APPEARANCE and fat."

Pharoah's description: (17) "...Behold, I was standing upon the bank of the river, (18) and behold, from the river there arose seven cows, fat and of good VISAGE, and they grazed in the reed grass. (19) And behold, another seven cows arose after them – WRETCHED AND OF VERY BAD VISAGE AND THIN; **I had never seen any so bad in all of the land of Egypt.** (20) And the cows that were THIN AND BAD consumed the original seven healthy cows. (21) **And when they had eaten them one could not see that they had eaten them, for their appearance was as bad as it had been at the start.**"

Yosef's description: (26) "The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good sheaves are seven years; it is the same dream. (27) And the seven thin, bad cows that arose after them are seven years, and the seven empty sheaves blasted by the east wind are seven years of famine... (31) And the plenty shall not be remembered in the land because of that famine afterwards, for it will be very severe."

SECOND DREAM:

Torah's description: (5) "And behold, seven ears of corn arose on the same stalk – HEALTHY and good. (6) And behold, seven ears that were thin and blasted by the east wind sprang up after them. (7) And the seven thin ears swallowed up the seven ears that were HEALTHY AND FULL."

Pharoah's description: (22) "... Behold, seven ears of corn arose on the same stalk, FULL and good. (23) And behold, seven ears – WITHERED, thin, and blasted by the east wind – sprang up after them. (24) And the thin ears swallowed up the seven GOOD ears...."

Yosef's description: (32) "And as to the twofold recurrence of the dream to Pharoah – it is because the thing has been established by God, and God will hasten to perform it."

Let us now summarize what we learn from the above:

- a. One set of differences (those indicated in upper case) involves the use of synonymous words to describe the fat or thin cows and ears of corn. They do not involve any real difference in the essence of the dream.
- b. A different set of discrepancies involves real additions. We must gauge the importance of each of these individually:
 - "They stood next to the other cows on the bank of the river" – this appears only in the Torah's description.
 - "I had never seen any so bad in all of the land of Egypt" – this appears only in Pharoah's version.
 - "When they had eaten them up one could not see that they had eaten them, for their appearance was as bad as it had been at the start" – only in Pharoah's version.

It appears that a distinction should be drawn between the first two additions and the third. The first two apparently reflect the objectivity (in the case of the first) or subjectivity (in the case of the second) of the description. The Torah notes the proximity of the two sets of cows, while Pharoah seems to omit this detail

because it seems obvious, or because he forgets it in his excitement. Pharoah adds a comment about the cows so as to express the powerful impression that their appearance made on him. Clearly, there is no room for an expression such as this in the first description, since from an objective point of view it adds nothing.

But the third difference belongs to a different category: this is a fact; not mere impression. Either Pharoah actually saw in his dream that ONE COULD NOT KNOW THAT THEY HAD EATEN THEM, or he did not see this, or he saw something else. Whichever the case may be, the Torah makes no mention of this in the objective description. Why does Pharoah add this fact? Does the strong impression created by the dream cause him to elaborate based on his own imagination? What is the significance of this? We shall address this question below.

As to the disparities in the descriptions of the cows and the ears of corn, it would seem that these, too, reflect the difference between an objective reporting of facts, and the subjective impressions of Pharoah, who experiences the dreams.

Pharoah's descriptions are either brief or lengthy in accordance with his feelings. The use of the word "visage" rather than "appearance" seems to reflect his impression. The same may apply to the difference between the word "healthy," in the Torah's description, and "full," as he puts it. In the same way, the addition of the word "withered," and the summary of the description of the second ears as "good" also appear to arise from the personal nature of Pharoah's description.

Yosef's quotations from the dreams generally follow Pharoah's description, for Yosef does not know what Pharoah really dreamed. Therefore his interpretation employs the expressions "good," "empty," "bad," and "blasted by the east wind," all echoing Pharoah's terminology.

But, as we have explained, the focus is on the additions that Pharoah makes, which have no parallel in the original version, and especially the comment, "When they had eaten them up, one could not know that they had eaten them, for their appearance was as bad as it had been at the start." Does Yosef know that Pharoah adds this on his own? This is a critical question. If Yosef knows only the dream as recounted by Pharoah but not the original dream, he can interpret only what he is told. And then, if the dream has prophetic status and it reveals the future, perhaps the interpretation of Pharoah's dream is mistaken?

Before answering this question, let us address another critical point in Yosef's answer. Yosef is asked to interpret Pharoah's dream. In fact, he does much more. His interpretation concludes with the words, "And concerning the twofold recurrence of the dream to Pharoah – it is because the thing has been established by God, and God will hasten to perform it." Here we would expect Yosef to stop talking – but he goes on, proposing a plan to accumulate a fifth of all produce throughout the seven years of plenty, so as to solve the problem of the famine. He seems to go far beyond interpreting the dream: "And now, let Pharoah seek out an insightful and wise man, and appoint him over the land of Egypt..." This proposal would seem to bespeak no small measure of arrogance on the part of a prisoner who has been summoned before the king, and who brazenly proposes that he himself undertake the task

of advising Pharaoh! How does Yosef have the temerity to talk in this way?

We may regard this as the expert plotting of a man who prepares his listener and gives him precisely the message that he wants him to hear. In other words, Yosef prepares the role for himself, and Pharaoh's response is exactly as expected: "There is none so insightful and wise as you." Alternatively, we may regard Yosef's suggestion as an expression of genuine concern for the welfare of the kingdom. But I believe that neither of these explanations is sufficient. Attention should be paid to the fact that Yosef's operative suggestions actually negate his interpretation of the dream. He tells Pharaoh, "The plenty in the land will not be known because of that famine afterwards, for it will be extremely severe." But if the Egyptians follow Yosef's instructions, "The land will not be destroyed by famine"; on the contrary, the plenty will be known and recognized even during the years of famine, for the accumulation and storage of food will make it possible to eat even during the lean years.

III. Solution to the Solution

This problem, I believe, is the key to the crux of the story and the answers to all of our previous questions. Let us systematically analyze the progression of Yosef's interpretation:

- The methodology of the solution is: "As to the twofold recurrence of the dream to Pharaoh – it is because the thing has been established by God, and God will hasten to perform it." In other words, the two dreams do not require two interpretations, but rather share the same one. The same message is conveyed twice, to show the reliability of their details.
- The cows and the ears of corn are symbols. One represents the plant kingdom, the other – the animal kingdom; both connote abundance. Leanness, of course, means the opposite. This part of the dream appears quite simple. The symbols are transparent; their interpretation does not require any special wisdom. Yosef then interprets the number of cows and ears of corn as symbolizing units of time – just as he did in the dreams of Pharaoh's ministers (three vine tendrils = three days). This element of the dream is likewise reasonably intelligible; even the magicians could guess at its meaning.
- Yosef then addresses the addition inserted by Pharaoh: "They were eaten up but ONE COULD NOT TELL (*lo noda*) that they had been eaten," Yosef declares, "The plenty in the land WILL NOT BE KNOWN (*lo yivada*) because of that famine afterwards...." It is interesting that this part of the dream is interpreted without any direct quotation of Pharaoh's words.
- Now let us pay attention to the way in which the message is conveyed by Yosef: "The plenty in the land will not be known because of the famine afterwards, for it will be extremely severe. And as to the twofold recurrence of the dream to Pharaoh – it is because the thing has been established by God, and God will hasten to perform it. Now, let Pharaoh seek out an insightful and wise man, and appoint him over the land of Egypt." (31-33)

After interpreting Pharaoh's addition, he establishes the principle of the recurrence of the dream as evidence of its reliability, and then he moves immediately on to the stage of advising. Here, I believe, his brilliance is revealed. Verse 31, explaining the addition, is defined by the principle of the repetition of the dream. Pharaoh, in his description, does not repeat a second time the matter of "they were eaten up..."; he adds this only at the end of the first dream [1]. The other details are repeated with precision and at length. Yosef hints here to Pharaoh, "I know that this was an addition of your own invention; you did not dream it. I am interpreting your addition in order that you will understand that it is a symbol of your own anxiety concerning the famine and its results. But right away I will propose to you a way of overcoming this anxiety." In other words, our questions are explained by each other. Yosef advises Pharaoh as to how to alleviate the suffering of the famine by means of exploiting the plenty. He does not negate the fact that the dream is symbolic of a Divine decree which is destined to be fulfilled. But he does address the dimension of Pharaoh's personal anxiety and despair, by proposing a practical solution. Yosef's wisdom is revealed in the fact that he is able to locate the objective kernel of the dream and free it of its subjective wrapping. The subjective dimension of "Their appearance was as bad as it had been at the start" is the omen for a catastrophic future. If the famine is so severe that it will seem as though the years of plenty never existed, then real devastation awaits Egypt. But in truth, in the dream which He revealed to Pharaoh, God decreed only famine. The despair is Pharaoh's own invention. How the Egyptians will deal with the famine and what its effects will be – these matters have not been decreed, and therefore it may be possible to find ways of coping. Yosef, in his wisdom, senses that Pharaoh has incorporated his personal impression into his description, for he notes that this detail in the dream was not repeated – i.e., it was not a vision like the other visions which Pharaoh repeated with such precision.

Pharaoh, for his part, is impressed by Yosef's God-given insight and ability to distinguish between the kernel of objective truth and its subjective wrapping. He understands that standing before him is a wise man. Thus, Yosef's suggestion as to how to deal with the famine is actually part of the interpretation - not the interpretation of the original dream, the kernel, but certainly an interpretation of Pharaoh's innermost thoughts and feelings, and a practical proposal as to dealing with them.

If we go back to our original questions, it appears that we already have the answers. The textual repetition of the dream by Pharaoh is essential because the discrepancy between the original dream and Pharaoh's recounting holds the key to the proposal of a solution, in which Yosef's wisdom is revealed. Yosef understood what was really troubling Pharaoh. Pharaoh knew, of course, that the dream contained symbols of abundance and of famine, but did not know if this was a decree of destruction; he did not know if he would be able to deal with it. And it was specifically because Yosef grasped this that Pharaoh recognized his abilities.

To the above we may add a further significant dimension:

Why is Pharaoh struck with terror; why does he believe that the decree of famine is absolute, that it will bring about annihilation, while Yosef immediately understands that the famine is something that can be dealt with?

I believe that this reflects more than just the personality structure of each of the two characters involved; it also goes deeper than the simple fact of Yosef's keener understanding. Rather, Yosef's view is an expression of a "Jewish" way of handling a harsh reality, while Pharaoh's view is the expression of a pagan consciousness.

Pharaoh lives within a deterministic consciousness. If something has been decreed, there is nothing to be done – certainly not on the level of practical action. Reality weighs down on us, and all we can do is to recognize it. Yosef presents Pharaoh with the Jewish alternative: the reality is admittedly harsh, but it should be perceived not as a disaster, but rather as a mission and responsibility. The famine is a fact, but the task of leadership is to find ways of dealing with the suffering that it is likely to cause. This is precisely the spirit of Yosef's proposal, and it is for this purpose that he is appointed. Thus, when Pharaoh says, "Is there any man like this, with the spirit of God within him?," he refers especially to the particularly JEWISH spirit of God by virtue of which Yosef knew the correct solution.

IV. Understanding Yosef's Turning Point

At the end of last week's *shiur*, we wrote:

An examination of the development of the story reveals that its turning point is the stage where Yosef turns into the "interpreter of dreams," and thus his status is "upgraded" – to the point where ultimately, at the end of this process, he is appointed second-in-command to the King of Egypt. The event in which the crux of this "turning point" takes place is the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. Until this point Yosef has not been a personality who determines his own path and is active within the events; rather, events have acted upon him. He is "a dreamer." He is dispatched by his father, he is cast into a pit, he is sold, he is appointed head of Potiphar's household, he is drawn towards sin and then thrown again into a dungeon. It is only when he proposes to Pharaoh's ministers that he will interpret their dreams that the beginning of a change makes itself felt. The dramatic turning point is, obviously, where he not only responds to Pharaoh's demand that his dreams be explained, but also advises him – in a way more appropriate to a Minister of the Treasury or a Prime Minister – what he should do in order to prepare his country for the years of famine: "Let Pharaoh act to appoint officers over the land...".

In other words, the transition from passivity to activity in his relationship to dreams – from dreamer to interpreter – is likewise reflected in a transition from passivity to activity in his relationship to reality: from "determined" to "determiner." Yosef, who has been pushed around at the mercy of his environment, now becomes its director.

The understanding of this turning point in Yosef's personality and activity is important for an understanding of his story as a whole. It also gives rise to several questions:

1. What is it about Pharaoh's dreams – or the context in which they are interpreted – that

causes this change of heart on the part of Yosef, who arrives unaided at the understanding that he must now take the reigns? How does he change his situation from "fate" to "destiny," using the classic terminology of Rabbi J. D. Soloveitchik? [2]

2. How does Yosef act when he understands that he must guide history rather than being at the mercy of his fate? How did he understand his destiny?

3. As to the three levels of significance discussed above – the Divine, the moral, and the real – on which of these levels does Yosef's turning point take place, and what is its significance on each level?

I believe that we now hold the key to understanding the entire development, and we can answer our questions:

Yosef dreamed his dreams within a "fate" consciousness - in a certain sense - as a seer of the divine future [3]. In other words, reality is deterministic, dictated; all that is destined to be is set down in advance, and now it is revealed to me in a dream. When he awakens from the dream he runs to tell his brothers about what will come to be – and this, understandably, angers them. Yosef fails to ask himself the correct questions: "What is this telling me? What is the dream charging me to do? With which mission is it entrusting me?" This was his mistake and his sin.

The prophet – in complete contrast to the pagan fortune-teller (diviner, magician, etc.) – does not reveal the future in order to say "what will be," but rather in order that we will know what we must do in relation to it. Very generally we may say of the prophets of Israel that they prophesy in order that their prophecies will not be fulfilled. The threat of punishment is always a call to repentance, which in turn will nullify the punishment. A perfect example of this is the story of Yona.

The moment when Yosef understands that his quasi-prophetic ability is not meant to give him a personal advantage, or just to bring him success, but rather assigns him a mission – everything is open to change. Therefore the turning point is the stage where Yosef ceases to act as a dreamer of the future, or a diviner, and starts acting as a "prophet."

Why does this happen specifically when he is faced with Pharaoh's dreams?

- a. Because Yosef understands now that the fact that he has arrived there by means of an altogether "unreal" series of events, cannot be coincidental. Therefore he asks, What should I be doing with this? What does it tell me?

- b. Because, as we have said, Pharaoh's dream – as it is recounted – reflects exactly the tension between the prophetic dream placed before a person as a challenge, and the "pagan" dream that drops fate upon him. When Yosef grasps this, he understands that he is being called upon for a mission that arises from the challenge presented by the dream.

- c. Because he understands that the encounter between Pharaoh and himself – Yosef,

son of Yaakov – is an astonishing convergence of two completely different stories, which are unified only by an external view. Pharaoh is completely unaware of Yosef's story. He knows only his own story as King of Egypt, within which Yosef features in the role of interpreter of dreams and thereafter also as royal advisor. The famine, as he sees it, is an internal, Egyptian problem.

But Yosef understands that the Egyptian context of the story is only the outer "shell." More profoundly, he understands that Pharaoh's dream is not meant for Pharaoh at all, but rather for himself – Yosef. And not only in order to save Yosef or to "organize" him a good job, but in order to bring him face to face with his destiny.

Yosef, as we have said, did not know the significance of his own dreams. But now he hears from Pharaoh's mouth a dream that contains the same motifs – ears of corn, two groups of ears of corn – and a crazy image of the lean ones swallowing up the fat ones. Is this not my own dream, he asks himself. Is this not my dream, in which my older brothers' sheaves bow down to my own?

Then he understands: the first dream showed me that a day would come when my brothers would need my sheaves. Now God is showing me – me and not Pharaoh – how this might come about. Therefore Yosef knew how to interpret the dream, while no-one else could possibly have known - because Pharaoh's dream was meant for him all along. Yosef needed no further revelation in order to understand the significance of Pharaoh's dream. It was already there. His wisdom stood him in good stead, and showed him how to connect the dreams.

Yosef thinks: "If until now I did not know how their sheaves would bow down to my sheaf, now God has shown it to me: the land is destined to be struck with famine. Severe famine. My forefathers, Avraham and Yitzchak, came down to Egypt at times of severe famine – as others must also have done - relying on the abundance of Egypt. If I am in Egypt, I will be in the right place to provide their sheaves – but how? By ensuring that there will be sheaves in Egypt; by ensuring that I will be the person responsible for the Egyptian economy." Hence, Yosef's proposal to Pharaoh has dual significance. For Pharaoh, it reveals the mistake in his story – which, as we have explained, is the key to its solution. The mistake in Pharaoh's story is understood by Yosef as a window, beckoning him to enter. The place where Pharaoh is helpless – that is where I am able to act. The proposal of setting aside a fifth of all the produce, and the heart of this proposal – "Now, let Pharaoh seek out a man who is insightful and wise, and appoint him over the land of Egypt..." - is directed towards a single purpose: for Pharaoh to appoint him to carry out the project. Yosef's audaciousness is surprising, but it has a religious foundation: If I have come this far, if Pharaoh needs me, then there must be something to it. God does not perform miracles for nothing. And indeed, Yosef is appointed by Pharaoh to oversee the implementation of the project. Pharaoh believes that he has thereby found a solution to his own internal problem as King of Egypt, but Yosef knows that he is thereby embarking on the mission that God has given him; a mission whose purpose

ultimately concerns not Egypt but rather the household of Yaakov.

Summary and points to ponder until next week:

To our first question, we responded that Pharaoh's own dream, the development of events that lead him to be Pharaoh's "salvation," and the connection between Pharaoh's dreams and his own, are what cause the change from "fate" to "destiny."

To our second question we responded that Yosef acts with determination to fulfill his first dream, including the submission of his brothers before him, but also – by the same token – their economic salvation. In fact, all of this is realized through his appointment as second-in-command over Egypt, and his actions in this capacity.

Concerning our third question, we may say that this is precisely the heart of Yosef's turning point - its significance and ramifications. The adoption of a prophetic consciousness means a transition from the level of being bound by a Divine plan set in advance, to the level of acting in order to influence. Thus the levels no longer parallel one another, but rather converge. This transition also changes Yosef's behavior in relation to his dreams from egocentric (hence sinful) to moral and responsible (thus making him worthy of his prophecy).

What remains is for us to explain how Yosef perceived his second dream – which we have not yet addressed, and which appears to have no direct connection with Pharaoh's dreams. More on this next week.

Notes:

[1] Look at the verses if you do not remember. This phrase is used only in the dream about the cows.

[2] See Rav Soloveitchik's article, "Kol Dodi Dofek."

[3] By this we do not imply idolatry, heaven forefend, but rather the style or manner in which he understands the revelation of the future.

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