

D'var: Va-Yeishav:

Almost every day recently my wife has told me her dreams and over coffee we associate to the images and storyline. The dreams seem to express, like poems, her life and the life of our family, though not in as obvious a way as Joseph's dreams express his life. I want to speak about dreaming—especially about Joseph as a dreamer.

Joseph says to his brothers:

"Hear this dream which I have dreamed: ⁷ There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf" ⁸ His brothers answered, "Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?" And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.

⁹ He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: And this time, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing, down to me." ¹⁰ And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him. "What," he said to him, "is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground?" So his brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind.

What does a dream mean? *How* does it mean? On the one hand we have Freud's interpretation of dreams, and, on the other, interpretation in written and oral Torah. Call *that* Joseph's model. The two approaches to interpretation agree: the dream means, and it means more than it says. Basically, Freud sees dreams as telling us about the past. We manufacture dreams out of our old needs and longings—in disguised form we dream what we wish for even when we'd deny those wishes; then, out of guilt, we hide the needs and longings from ourselves. Or, in later Freud, we may get stuck in the past, repeating and repeating trauma in dreams. Freud speaks of repetition compulsion. In either case—wish fulfillment or repetition of trauma—dreams enact the past. In therapy, of course, they enact the past to create a future not trapped in the past; still, the dreams have their source in the past—

especially in childhood.

The Biblical understanding is essentially different: dreams tell us the divine truth; they tell us not about the past but about the future; they're prophetic or instructive or both, especially if they're repeated. They're given by God, not derived from *mishegos*. Abraham is given a dream by God. Jacob dreams of the angels on the ladder; Laban dreams that he should not mess with Jacob, and so Jacob is able to leave Laban without a problem; Joseph dreams. The prisoners—cup bearer and baker—dream. The Pharaoh dreams, and God, through Joseph, tells Pharaoh how to define his future; Samuel dreams, though at first he doesn't know it's dreaming, Gideon overhears a dream and is comforted; Solomon dreams and gains wisdom. *All* these dreams are about the future.

Maybe the distinction between Freud's interpretations and Biblical interpretations can be useful in examining Joseph's dreams.

We've all heard about the immature, spoiled Joseph who has to change before he can be the leader of the people. In *Freudian* terms, he dreams perfect wish-fulfillment dreams. According to this paradigm, Joseph wants to be a *macher*. He's a young Donald Trump. He dreams of his own authority—or, really, of his *desire* for authority, since he doesn't have any authority now.

But there's something limited about this understanding: for how can this organizational genius, who is able, not much later, to run all of Egypt, not understand that it's uncool to stick his tongue out at his older brothers, some of whom, after all, murdered the men of Sechem? And to dis his father and mother! Arrogance, I admit, can be seen as a part of Joseph, and the material of the dreams partly derives from and expresses past family

dynamics. But to see his dreams only in this way is inadequate. If his youthful dreams derive merely from wish fulfillment, Joseph is a young brat hungry for power. *But suppose his dreams come from God*—like his father Jacob’s dream of angels going up and down the ladder. That changes things.

I’ll suggest an answer. Joseph speaks prophetic truth with dreams that, in a sense, are *not his*. They come *through* him, not *from* him. “All dreams follow the mouth,” it says in the Talmud, Tractate Berakhot. The dreams Joseph dreams motivate his brothers to take vengeance—why? Because the dreams are already *their* truth. *Their* interpretation tells us about their “mouths.” The brothers *could* interpret the dreams differently—as expressing Joseph’s weakness as a younger brother, his desire to be important. They could laugh and sympathize. Poor kid. But they know, they know, they *know* their inferior role in the family. Rachel’s little boy got all the love. It’s part of their basic family narrative. If the dreams were only his, the brothers wouldn’t have to act with violence. But the dreams are *theirs*. The meaning of a dream lies in its interpretation. Even before Joseph arrives at Sechem, that place of violence and betrayal—remember the trickery of the brothers, who butchered the men of Sechem when they were recuperating from circumcision—it’s the brothers and father who interpret the dreams and, by interpreting, acknowledge their family truth. And Joseph—he may feel he’s not *responsible* for telling the dreams. For after all, the dreams of a promise future were handed him *by God*. The dreams belong not to Joseph—there’s no evidence that he’s *intentionally* putting his family down—and they don’t, finally, belong even to his brothers; they belong to God. *They are a holy communication about the future*. Some people would call them “Great Dreams.” If so, it lessens the charge of vanity for

Joseph to speak them. How can he *not* speak them?

Joseph goes into the pit and later into a dungeon. There he interprets the dreams of the baker and the cupbearer. Again, the interpretations don't belong to Joseph.

"Why do you appear downcast today?" And they said to him, "We had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." So Joseph said to them, "Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams]."

And the cupbearer does. Then the baker tells *his* dream. According to Joseph it's not he but God who interprets. Later, the Pharaoh demands that Joseph interpret. Joseph insists: "Not I! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare."

²⁵ Again, Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same: God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do. ²⁶ The seven healthy cows are seven years, and the seven healthy ears are seven years; it is the same dream. ²⁷ The seven lean and ugly cows that followed are seven years, as are also the seven empty ears scorched by the cast wind; they are seven years of famine. ²⁸ It is just as I have told Pharaoh: God has revealed to Pharaoh what He is about to do. ²⁹ Immediately ahead are seven years of great abundance in all the land of Egypt. ³⁰ After them will come seven years of famine, and all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. As the land is ravaged by famine, ³¹ no trace of the abundance will be left in the land because of the famine thereafter, for it will be very severe. ³² As for Pharaoh having had the same dream twice, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and that God will soon carry it out.

And so we can see the young Joseph not as a narcissist putting down his brothers but as the messenger of God. Of course, he's younger when he speaks to his brothers than when he speaks to Pharaoh. But how can he *not* tell these dreams? And why be uneasy or afraid of repercussions if the dreams tell his future and their future? The dreams are definitely going to be fulfilled! Great dreams, though perhaps not all dreams, come from God and tell the future. Job says,

For God speaks time and again—
Though man does not perceive it—
In a dream, a night vision,
When deep sleep falls on men,
While they slumber in their beds.
Then He opens men's understanding.

At times in the Tanach, when someone interprets a dream, that interpreter is, like Joseph, making it hard on himself. Yet can he help telling it? Think of Daniel, the ultimate dream interpreter in a dangerous court. Joseph isn't interpreting his own dreams by himself; he's telling God's truth about the future. He's a conduit for the word of God.

Let me ask a question that takes us beyond Joseph's dreams: Do dreams still tell truths about our lives? Do we still dream Great Dreams, dreams from God, dreams that show us our inner life and our future, or are such dreams limited to the Tanach and Talmud? The Talmud insists that we read our dreams, especially a dream that's repeated. There's a lot of hokey dream interpretations, God knows, and a position that says dreams are arbitrary nonsense, detritus of meaningless brain activity. Can we understand dreams as expressing our lives and instructing us about how to live? Can we understand dreams as invitations to change our lives? Have you had dreams like that—Great Dreams that come from God and tell the future or instruct you? And what does it mean to say a dream comes from God? Especially if we don't consider God as a personage, what can it mean? I've been puzzling this over. It implies, I'd say, that beyond our personal dynamics there's a flow of spirit, of images, in which we take part. An ocean not ours; its waves go through us. We live within truths bigger than the individual. We dream out of *that* material. That dream, we say, came from God.