

Parashat Vayyeshev - Dreams and Prophecies by Yitzchak Etshalom

I INTRODUCTION

Parashat Vayyeshev is “bookended” with stories about dreams; both stories featuring Yoseph as the central character. At the end of the Parashah, we are told about Yoseph’s success in the prison of the court of Egypt - and of his insightful explanation of the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners:

“Each of the two men - the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were being held in prison - had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. When Yoseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh’s officials who were in custody with him in his master’s house, ‘Why are your faces so sad today?’ ‘We both had dreams,’ they answered, ‘but there is no one to interpret them.’ Then Yoseph said to them, ‘Do not interpretations belong to G-d? Tell me your dreams.’” (Beresheet 40:5-8)

Yoseph is confident about his ability to explain their dreams - and that confidence is quickly validated, as each of his explanations is played out in Pharaoh’s court. The butler is restored to his position and the baker is hanged. (40:21-22)

Where did Yoseph get this confidence; indeed, where did he get the ability to interpret dreams? The earlier dream sequence in the beginning of the Parashah, involving Yoseph, posits Yoseph not as a **dream interpreter**, rather, as a **dreamer**. His brothers and father are the ones who make inferences from his dreams - but he just reports them. When did he learn how to explain dreams?

This question carries extra significance in light of the later story of Yoseph’s redemption from prison. The butler “finally” remembers Yoseph and reports his successful dream interpretation abilities to Pharaoh. This leads not only to Yoseph’s rise to greatness (as a result of his explanation of Pharaoh’s dreams), but ultimately to our terrible oppression and slavery in Egypt. (See BT Shabbat 10b)

II DREAMS AND REACTIONS

In order to understand Yoseph’s ability to interpret the dreams of the butler and baker - and then those of Pharaoh, let’s look back at the first dream-sequence at the beginning of our Parashah:

Yoseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.” His brothers said to him, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?” His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. (37:5-11)

Yoseph had two dreams - the dream of the sheaves and the dream of the stars. We have already presented an in-depth study of the differences between these dreams and their fulfillment in a previous essay on the career of Yehoshua bin-Nun. Without entering that complex issue, several significant differences in the reactions of the members of Yoseph’s family can be noted. Resolving two questions about these reactions and one (seemingly) ancillary issues will help us understand Yoseph’s later confidence and ability as a dream interpreter:

1) Why did Yoseph tell his brothers about his dreams? He already had a tempestuous relationship with them and, surely, relating these dreams would do nothing to reverse that trend.

2) When he told them that he had had the first dream (the dream of the sheaves) - before informing them of the content, they hated him more than before (37:5). After he related the content of the dream, his brothers accused Yoseph of plotting - or, at least contemplating - a “takeover” of the family. After he related the second dream (the dream of the stars), they had no reaction. Note that the dream of the stars is much more impactful than the dream of the sheaves in two ways:

- a) Not only are the brothers bowing down (akin to the blessing given to Ya’akov - Beresheet 27:29), but the sun (father?) and moon (mother?) are also bowing.
- b) Unlike the first dream, where their sheaves bowed to his sheaf, the second dream had the stars, sun and moon bowing to Yoseph himself.

Nevertheless, the brothers remained silent in response to hearing this dream - although they were jealous (37:11). Note that he related this dream twice; to his brothers and, later, to his father in their presence. Why didn’t they react to the second dream - either time?

3) The father, on the other hand, reacted to the second dream in the same fashion as the brothers’ reaction to the first dream - yet he *kept the matter in mind*; i.e. he waited to see if it would be fulfilled. Why did Ya’akov simultaneously castigate his son for this “egocentric” dream - indicating a dismissive attitude towards it - while waiting to see if it would come to pass?

III

YA’AKOV AND HIS כְּנֻזְמוֹתָיו

Solving one other difficulty at the beginning of our Parashah will set us on the path to a solution. As we are introduced to Yoseph and the special relationship he had with his father, we are told:

Now Yisra’el loved Yoseph more than any of his other sons, כי כְּנֻזְמוֹתָיו הָאֵל לוֹ (Beresheet 37:3)

The Rishonim provide several opinions about the key phrase כְּנֻזְמוֹתָיו הָאֵל לוֹ. Rashi understands it as our translation indicates - since Yoseph was born to Ya’akov when he was old, the father felt a special affection for him. Ramban challenges this interpretation on two points:

- a) Yoseph was apparently born not much later than Yissachar and Zevulun;
- b) The verse states that Ya’akov *loved Yoseph more than any of his other sons*; the implication is that Ya’akov loved him more than Binyamin, who was born much later and when Ya’akov was much older.

Onkelos translates כְּנֻזְמוֹתָיו as “wise child”. Ramban points out the difficulty with this translation: The verse states כְּנֻזְמוֹתָיו הָאֵל לוֹ - he was a כְּנֻזְמוֹתָיו to him (to Ya’akov). If כְּנֻזְמוֹתָיו is rendered *wise child*, then there is no need for the possessive לוֹ afterwards. Clearly, the כְּנֻזְמוֹתָיו position was not an objective description, rather it was relational to Ya’akov.

Ramban then offers his own explanation:

“The custom of elders was to take one of their younger sons as a servant, and he would lean on him at all times, never separating from him. He would be called “the son of his old age” (כְּנֻזְמוֹתָיו) since he would serve him in his old age...this is what they [the Rabbis] intended when they stated (Beresheet Rabbah 84:8) ‘Everything that [Ya’akov] learned from Shem and Ever he passed on to [Yoseph]’, i.e. he transmitted to him the wisdom and secret teachings...”

Following Ramban’s explanation, Yoseph had every reason to see himself as the heir of the Avraham-Yitzchak-Ya’akov tradition. As the closest and most favored recipient of Ya’akov’s wisdom and tradition, Yoseph understood that he was destined to experience some of the same events that befell his father - and to have a similar relationship with G-d. (See Rashi at 37:2 - “...everything that happened to Ya’akov [also] happened to Yoseph...”)

IV **YA'AKOV - THE FIRST DREAMER**

Among our Avot, the only one who dreamt (as far as we are told) was Ya'akov. Ya'akov dreamt not once, but twice - on his way out of the Land (Beresheet 28:12-15) and when being beckoned back (31:10-13).

[It is interesting to note that the only other two dreams recorded in Beresheet before Yoseph were nearly identical occasions. G-d appeared to Avimelekh (Beresheet 20:3-7) to warn him to return Avraham's wife to her husband. G-d then appeared to Lavan (31:24) to warn him not to attack Ya'akov. These two dreams are not of a category with Ya'akov's - or with the three remaining couplets of dreams - Yoseph's, Pharaoh's stewards' or Pharaoh's. In those dreams, there was a message about the future of the individual or his nation, not a divine intercession on behalf of the righteous.]

It is reasonable to posit that Ya'akov related his dreams, their meanings and their outcomes to Yoseph. The favorite son, heir apparent to the tradition, had every reason to believe that if he dreamt a dream where the "message" of the dream was obvious, that he should regard it as prophecy and the word of G-d - just as his father experienced.

V **DREAMS AND VISIONS**

We can now look through the first dream sequence and understand the different reactions of the brothers and Ya'akov - and what Yoseph learned from them.

It is clear from the opening verses of Ch. 37 that Yoseph was engaged in a power struggle of sorts within the structure of the family (see Rashi and Ramban on 37:2). Yoseph then experienced a dream - with an obvious implication for that struggle and its [seemingly divinely mandated] outcome. He told the dream to his brothers - and they hated him even more just for telling them! He must have been confused by this (unless he wasn't aware of it) - for why would they not be interested in hearing the word of G-d, especially as it affects them so directly?

When he relates the dream of the sheaves (only to his brothers - his father does not hear of it), they understand its implication - and berate him for it. What did they find so offensive about his vision?

The verses do not indicate that the brothers disbelieved his dream - but they were offended by it. The brothers had a piece of information which was not yet known to Yoseph: Although father Ya'akov is a prophet - and his dreams are indeed visions from G-d, that is no longer the case with the next generation. A dream may not necessarily be a vision - it may be the expression of subconscious desires and repressed urges (as conventional psychology maintains). The Gemara in Berakhot (56a) records two incidents where the local (non-Jewish) governor challenged one of our Sages to predict the content of his dreams of the coming night. In each case, the Sage described a detailed and horrific dream - which so preoccupied the governor that he dreamt about it that night.

An important distinction between a vision-dream and a subconscious-based dream is in interpretation. If the dream is truly a prophecy, its meaning should be fairly evident, as it is not generated by the person's own subconscious - we need not be privy to the psychological makeup of the dreamer to understand the message. A conventional dream, as we are all aware, may take a great deal of sophistication to understand - although that is not always the case.

The brothers were not offended by the dream - rather, by the apparent cause for this dream. They figured that Yoseph must be thinking about his takeover of the family so much that these thoughts have entered his dreams. Their derision and hatred is now clear - but why did they keep silent at the second dream?

There was a tradition in the house of Ya'akov that although a single dream may be caused by internal thoughts and ruminations, if that same dream (or the same "message" clothed in alternate symbolism) occurs twice, it is no longer a happenstance - it is truly G-d's word. We find this approach explicitly stated by Yoseph when he explains Pharaoh's doubled dream:

The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by G-d, and G-d will do it soon. (41:32)

When Yoseph reported his second dream to his brothers, they did not “increase their hatred” - not at the report of the dream nor at the retelling of its content. The fact of the second dream - and its similar implication - was no longer reason for hatred, rather for concern and jealousy.

Ya'akov, however, had heard nothing about the first dream. That is why he, upon hearing about Yoseph's second dream, responds in an almost identical fashion as the brothers did to the first dream:

What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?

At this point, Ya'akov surely expected his other sons to have a similar reaction - but they were silent. [Remember from the incident in Sh'khem that these sons were not shy about speaking up in father's presence - their silence here is telling]. After his rebuke, the Torah tells us that *his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind*. Ya'akov must have been surprised by the brothers' silence - and must have figured that this dream was not the first one Yoseph had shared. That clued him in that there may be more to this dream than he first thought - and he *kept the matter in mind* - i.e. he waited to see if it would be fulfilled.

Yoseph learned a powerful lesson from this encounter - that even if a dream is “just a dream” and not prophecy - this is only true when it is an isolated incident. When the dream is repeated, this is a sign from G-d and must be understood that way.

We can now return to Yoseph in the Egyptian prison and explain his response to the butler and baker. When he learned that they had both experienced significant and terrifying dreams in the same night, he understood that these were more than dreams. He reasoned that just like a dream that occurs twice to the same person is more than a dream, similarly, if two men sharing a fate have impactful dreams on the same night, their dreams must be divine messages. His response:

Do not interpretations belong to G-d? Tell me your dreams - is not presumptuous. He was telling them that their dreams were more than “just dreams” - they were in the province of G-d and, as such, would not need sophisticated interpretation (as is the case with a subconscious-based dream). They would be fairly easy to understand - as indeed they were. Yoseph earned his reputation as an interpreter of dreams - and his ultimate freedom and final rise to power - not by interpreting dreams at all! He earned it by remembering the lesson from his father's house - that the “doubled dream” is a mark of prophecy, and by applying it intelligently years later in the Egyptian dungeon.