



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 10 - Parshat Mikketz
Dreams and Power Schemes

Genesis 41 & 47

בראשית מא:כה וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-פַּרְעֹה הַחַלּוֹם פַּרְעֹה אֶחָד הוּא אֶת אֲשֶׁר הָאֵל הִים עָשָׂה הִגִּיד לְפַרְעֹה. כֹּחַ שְׁבַע פְּרֹת הַטֹּב בְּתֹבֵעַ שְׁנַיִם הֵנָּה וְשְׁבַע הַשְּׁבָלִים הַטֹּב בְּתֹבֵעַ שְׁנַיִם הֵנָּה חַלּוֹם אֶחָד הוּא. כֹּחַ וְשְׁבַע הַפְּרוֹת הַרְקוֹת וְהַרְעוֹת הַעֲלִית אַחֲרֵיהֶן שְׁבַע שְׁנַיִם הֵנָּה וְשְׁבַע הַשְּׁבָלִים הַרְקוֹת שְׁדָפוֹת הַקְּדִים יִהְיוּ שְׁבַע שְׁנַיִם רַעַב. כֹּחַ הוּא הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֶל-פַּרְעֹה אֲשֶׁר הָאֵל הִים עָשָׂה הִרְאָה אֶת-פַּרְעֹה. כֹּחַ הֵנָּה שְׁבַע שְׁנַיִם בָּאוֹת שְׁבַע גְּדוֹל בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. לֹא וְקִמּוּ שְׁבַע שְׁנַיִם רַעַב אַחֲרֵיהֶן וְנִשְׁכַּח כָּל-הַשְּׁבַע בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וְכָל־הָרַעַב אֶת-הָאֶרֶץ. לֹא וְלֹא-יִדְעַע הַשְּׁבַע בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם הָרַעַב הַהוּא אַחֲרֵי-כֵן כִּי-כִבַּד הוּא מֶאֱדָם. לֹב וְעַל הַשְּׁנוֹת הַחַלּוֹם אֶל-פַּרְעֹה פְּעֻמִּים כִּי-נִכּוֹן הַדְּבָר מֵעַם הָאֵל הִים וּמִמֶּהָר הָאֵל הִים לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ. לֹב וְעַתָּה יִרְא פַּרְעֹה אִישׁ נְבוֹן וְחָכָם וְיִשִּׁיתֵהוּ עַל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. לֹד יַעֲשֶׂה פַּרְעֹה וְיִפְקֹד פְּקִידִים עַל-הָאֶרֶץ וְחִמַּשׁ אֶת-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם בְּשְׁבַע שְׁנַיִם הַשְּׁבַע. לֹה וְיִקְבְּצוּ אֶת-כָּל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם הַטֹּב בֹּת הַבָּאֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְיִצְבְּרוּ-בָּר תַּחַת יַד-פַּרְעֹה אֶת כָּל בְּעָרִים וְשִׁמְרוּ. לוֹ וְהָיָה הָאֵל כָּל לְפָקֶדוֹן לְאֶרֶץ לְשְׁבַע שְׁנַיִם הַרַעַב אֲשֶׁר תִּהְיֶינָה בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וְלֹא-תִפְרֹת הָאֶרֶץ בְּרַעַב.

בראשית מא:נג וְתַחֲלִינָה שְׁבַע שְׁנַיִם הַשְּׁבַע אֲשֶׁר הָיָה בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. נד וְתַחֲלִינָה שְׁבַע שְׁנַיִם הַרַעַב לְבוֹא פֶּאֶשֶׁר אָמַר יוֹסֵף וְהָיָה רַעַב בְּכָל-הָאֲרָצוֹת וּבְכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם הָיָה לָחֶם. נה וְתַרְעַב כָּל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וְיִצְעַק הָעָם אֶל-פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר פַּרְעֹה לְכָל-מִצְרָיִם לְכוּ אֶל-יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר-יֹאמַר לָכֶם תַּעֲשׂוּ. נו וְהַרַעַב הָיָה עַל כָּל-פְּנֵי הָאֶרֶץ וְיִפְתַּח יוֹסֵף אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר בְּהֵם וְיִשְׁבֹּר לְמִצְרָיִם וְיִחַזַּק הַרַעַב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. נז וְכָל-הָאֶרֶץ בָּאוּ מִצְרָיִמָה לְשֹׁבֵר אֶל-יוֹסֵף כִּי-חִזַּק הַרַעַב בְּכָל-הָאֶרֶץ.

פרשת ויגש בראשית מז:יג וְלָחֶם אֵין בְּכָל-הָאֶרֶץ כִּי-כִבַּד הַרַעַב מֶאֱדָם וְתַלְהָ אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן מִפְּנֵי הַרַעַב. יד וְיִלְקֹט יוֹסֵף אֶת-כָּל-הַכֶּסֶף הַנִּמְצָא בְּאֶרֶץ-מִצְרָיִם וּבְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן בְּשֹׁבֵר אֲשֶׁר-הֵם שְׁבָרִים וְיָבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת-הַכֶּסֶף בֵּיתָה פַּרְעֹה. טו וְיִתֵּם הַכֶּסֶף מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וּמֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְיָבֵאוּ כָּל-מִצְרָיִם אֶל-יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר הִבְהַלְנוּ לָנוּ לָחֶם וְלָמָּה נִמּוֹת נִגְדָךְ כִּי אָפֶס כֶּסֶף. טז וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף הִבּוּ מִקְנֵיכֶם וְאֶתְנֶה לָכֶם בְּמִקְנֵיכֶם אִם-אָפֶס כֶּסֶף. יז וְיָבִיאוּ אֶת-מִקְנֵיהֶם אֶל-יוֹסֵף וְיִתֵּן לָהֶם יוֹסֵף לָחֶם בְּסוּסִים וּבְמִקְנֵה הַצֹּאן וּבְמִקְנֵה הַבְּקָר וּבְחִמְרֵים וְיִנְהַלֵּם בְּלָחֶם בְּכָל-מִקְנֵיהֶם בְּשָׁנָה הַהוּא. יח וְתִתֵּם הַשָּׁנָה הַהוּא וְיָבֵאוּ אֵלָיו בְּשָׁנָה הַשְּׁנִית וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ לֹא-נִכְחַד מֶאֱדָם כִּי אִם-תֵּם הַכֶּסֶף וּמִקְנֵה הַבְּהֵמָה אֶל-אֲדָנֶיךָ לֹא נִשְׂאָר לְפָנֶיךָ אֲדָנֶיךָ בְּלִיתֵי אִם-גּוֹיִתְנוּ וְאֲדַמְתָּנוּ. יט לָמָּה נִמּוֹת לַעֲיֹנֶיךָ גַּם-אֲנַחְנוּ גַּם אֲדַמְתָּנוּ קִנְיָה-אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֶת-אֲדַמְתָּנוּ בְּלָחֶם וְנִהְיָ אֲנַחְנוּ וְאֲדַמְתָּנוּ עַבְדִּים לְפַרְעֹה וְתִתֵּן זֶרַע וְנִחְיָה וְלֹא נִמּוֹת וְהָאֲדָמָה לֹא תִשֵּׁם. כ וַיִּקַּח יוֹסֵף אֶת-כָּל-אֲדַמְתֵּי מִצְרָיִם לְפַרְעֹה כִּי-מָכְרוּ מִצְרָיִם אִישׁ שְׂדֵהוֹ כִּי-חִזַּק עֲלֵהֶם הַרַעַב וְתִהְיֶי הָאֶרֶץ לְפַרְעֹה. כא וְאֶת-הָעָם הָעֵבְרִי אֲתוֹ לַעֲרִים מִקְצֵה גְבוּל-מִצְרָיִם וְעַד-קִצְהוֹ.

Genesis 41:25 And Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same: God has told Pharaoh what S/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 S/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



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that the matter has been determined by God, and that God will soon carry it out. ³³ "Accordingly, let Pharaoh find a person of discernment and wisdom, and set him/her over the land of Egypt. ³⁴ And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. ³⁵ Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority as food to be stored in the cities. ³⁶ Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will come upon the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine."

Genesis 41 ⁵³ The seven years of abundance that the land of Egypt enjoyed came to an end, ⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine set in, just as Joseph had foretold. There was famine in all lands, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. ⁵⁵ And when all the land of Egypt felt the hunger, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do." — ⁵⁶ Accordingly, when the famine became severe in the land of Egypt, Joseph laid open all that was within, and rationed out grain to the Egyptians. The famine, however, spread over the whole world. ⁵⁷ So all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations, for the famine had become severe throughout the world.

VaYigash Genesis 47 ¹³ Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. ¹⁴ Joseph gathered in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan as payment for the rations that were being procured, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's palace. ¹⁵ And when the money gave out in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us bread, lest we die before your very eyes; for the money is gone!" ¹⁶ And Joseph said, "Bring your livestock, and I will sell to you against your livestock, if the money is gone." ¹⁷ So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them bread in exchange for the horses, for the stocks of sheep and cattle, and the asses; thus he provided them with bread that year in exchange for all their livestock. ¹⁸ And when that year was ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, "We cannot hide from my lord that, with all the money and animal stocks consigned to my lord, nothing is left at my lord's disposal save our persons and our farmland. ¹⁹ Let us not perish before your eyes, both we and our land. Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste." ²⁰ So Joseph gained possession of all the farm land of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to Pharaoh. ²¹ And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other.



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Context

After two years in prison, the Egyptian Minister of Beverages, a former inmate with Yosef, arranges for Yosef to be released so that he can interpret Pharaoh's troubling dreams about wheat and cows. Yosef makes sense of the king's dreams and proposes a strategic fourteen-year plan to address the upcoming agricultural bounty and subsequent drought. Pharaoh appoints Yosef to administer the plan. Yosef immediately sets about collecting excess grain in the government storehouses. The famine that comes after seven plentiful years also affects Yosef's family in Canaan. His ten brothers appear at his offices seeking to buy grain. Yosef does not reveal himself to them, but rather interrogates them harshly. He accuses them of spying and demands that they leave one brother, Shimon. They will be able to redeem Shimon only by bringing their youngest brother, Binyamin, when they return to buy more food. On their way home, the brothers discover that Yosef has given back their money in their sacks.

When they finish their food supplies in Canaan, Yehuda convinces their father to send Binyamin with them in order to procure more. Though he is overcome with emotion seeing his brother Binyamin, Yosef continues with his deception. He sends his brothers away with grain, hiding his silver goblet in Binyamin's sack. Yosef's servant catches them on their way home, finds the goblet in Binyamin's sack, and brings them back to Yosef. Yosef threatens to release the rest of them and keep the guilty one, Binyamin, as a slave.

Explorations

There are two elements in Joseph's audience with Pharaoh:

- the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams; and
- the unsolicited advice that he gives Pharaoh about how to respond to the national crisis he foresees.

Yosef attributes the first part--his ability to interpret dreams--to God, "It is not I. God will answer the welfare of Pharaoh." (Genesis 41:16)

This declaration suggests that God reveals the meanings directly to Yosef. Here we inspect how Yosef's dream interpretation skill develops and in what direction.

There are three pairs of dreams in the cycle of Yosef stories. The meaning of the first pair of dreams, Yosef's own [see Bereishit 37:6-11], is crystal clear to him and to his family: he is to rule over them. By contrast, in neither of the other two cases--the pair of dreams in prison [Bereishit 40:9-23] and Pharaoh's pair of dreams [in our parasha, Bereishit 41:1-7] -- is the meaning clear to anyone but Yosef. Through the series of three pairs of dreams, Yosef builds a repertoire of dream interpretation tools that he uses not only to interpret Pharaoh's dreams in our parasha, but to install his worldview.

At the outset, Yosef states that Pharaoh's two dreams deliver the same message about bounty and famine. God emphasizes the urgency and importance of the message by revealing it in two consecutive dreams. The events are imminent, and, according to Yosef's judgment, must be addressed immediately with a proper administrative policy.



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Pharaoh's first dream about the stalks of grain recalls Yosef's original dream about harvesting wheat with his brothers in the field. In that dream, the wheat symbolizes power relationships; the brothers' stalks bow down before his to indicate his brothers' subordination to him. Yosef's two consecutive dreams [see Ber. 37:5-8 and 9] deliver one and the same clear message about his future powerful position. However, they do not indicate when or how to expect fulfillment. The message makes the brothers' jealous. Their jealousy prompts them to dispose of Yosef, sending him off to Egypt, an ironically crucial step toward realizing the dreams. Yosef seems to know of nothing he ought to do to fulfill his own dreams; he reacts passively to his tumultuous life as it unfolds. It is the brothers who act to thwart the dreams and unknowingly end up working to fulfill them.

The dreams Yosef solves in jail [Ber. 40:9-23] add the dimension of time to his repertoire of interpretation—he predicts the timing of events in the baker and butler's dreams with reference to objects, grape branches and baskets of bread each denoting a day. With respect to timing, Yosef reads Pharaoh's dreams similarly to the baker and butler's dreams. Since the cycles of bounty and famine are not measured in days but rather in years, each stalk of grain and cow represents a year. Both pairs of dreams foretell a positive judgment and a fatal one—a Minister's job restored and the beheading of another; years of bounty and years of drought. Like Pharaoh's dreams, they represent the deadly outcomes in terms of feeding—birds devour the bread from the baskets of the baker just as the thin stalks and the lean cows consume the robust ones.

In prison, Yosef does take some small initiative in response to the dreams. Foreseeing that the Minister of Beverages will have the ear of Pharaoh, he pleads his innocence, and asks the Minister to remember him and try to have him released. By the third set of dreams, Yosef takes matters into his own hands. Without being asked, Yosef offers his opinion about how Pharaoh ought to proceed. Yosef presents his advice in his meeting with the king smoothly as if it is part of the dream interpretation.

Yosef is the only one who sees Pharaoh's dream about grain against the background of the sheaves of wheat in his own dream. In the grain stalks of Pharaoh's dream, Yosef sees the possibility to fulfill his own; on account of the scarcity of grain, his brothers will prostrate themselves before him as his dream foretold. He subtly proposes a plan that will position his brothers before him like the wheat sheaves in his dream.

And now, Pharaoh should find an insightful and wise person and appoint him over the land of Egypt. (Ber. 41:33)

Joseph recommends that Pharaoh appoint a leader to oversee the stockpiling of the bounty of the first seven years to sustain the people during the subsequent seven years of famine. He suggests consolidating all of the wealth "under the hand of Pharaoh." He advocates for a hierarchy of overseers who systematically collect and store the grain centrally. When the Egyptians are desperate for food, they end up selling their animals, their land, and ultimately, themselves into destitute slavery to Pharaoh. Pharaoh gives Yosef an Egyptian name, "Zaphnath-pa'aneach" [Ber. 41:45]. The [Ibn Ezra](#) understands Yosef's new name via Aramaic to mean, "the person to whom secrets are revealed." Yosef attributes his dream interpretations to divine inspiration, but does not attribute his *advice* to God—it is Yosef's own scheme. His new appointment frees him from prison, from his position as a powerless slave and convicted criminal, and sets him on a path to achieve his childhood dreams.



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Yosef's dream interpretations culminate in the institution of oppression; he lays the foundation for the enslavement of the Egyptians that ensues. Later, another Pharaoh will use the excessive power that Yosef had consolidated in the office of the king to enslave the Israelites. Perhaps Yosef's ideas about power and authority are rooted in his experience of jealousy and betrayal by his brothers and by Potiphar's spouse, enslavement, and imprisonment. Based on the abuses he has suffered, Yosef conceives political and economic arrangements that deprive people of the dignity of their livelihood and any morsel of autonomy.

One of the foundations of the women's movement is a claim that the “personal is political”--relationships of intimacy, family, and friendship enact power and political dynamics that form the infrastructure of society. This analysis of the making of Yosef's economic and political policy as a subtle interaction between insights from the divine/unconscious source and from brutal experience demonstrates how the *personal is political* from a unique perspective. A man who has been “feminized” in some respects, dressed up, then mocked, stripped, and imprisoned is promoted from powerlessness to extreme power. He takes with him and implements the abuse and punishment that he suffered at the hands of those who ought to have cared for him. With the benefit of critical feminist analysis, Yosef might have envisioned and implemented a plan to distribute responsibility and resources, respecting human dignity and sustenance, and intervening in the cruelty that perpetuates abuse.

Questions for Discussion

- How does Joseph's solution affect the distribution of resources and power in the country? What problems does it solve and what problems does it create? What alternatives to this centralized hierarchy of power might Joseph have suggested?--evaluate the pros and cons. What comparisons can we make with our societies in relation to the distribution and control of resources?
- In the span of a few moments, Joseph moves from utter powerlessness and poverty to second in power and prestige only to Pharaoh. In the dramatic ascent to power, to what extent do people replicate oppressive models of power, and why?
- In situations where we have power "over" (an)other, how can we make an effort to increase trust and predispose others to behave with responsibility, self-respect, and autonomy? How can we better use our power to improve the conditions of our community?
- To what extent is gender a factor in the acquisition, possession, use and abuse of power? Explain.



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Study Links

- Rabbi Chisda is recorded in the Talmud stating that, “A dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is not read” [Berakhot 55a]. For a discussion of the rabbinic background of Freud's views of the unconscious in dreams, see Ken Frieden, [Freud's Dream of Interpretation](#).
- Here is a [brief synopsis](#) of some of Freud's central ideas about dreams and wish fulfillment.
- See this article about [“Inequality: the Mother of All Evils.”](#)
- Joan Mandle discusses, [“How Political is the Personal?: Identity Politics, Feminism and Social Change.”](#)
- Check this consideration of [“Why Is our Hero Judah and not Joseph?”](#)

Summary of Issues

Yosef refines a method of interpreting dreams that wins him respect and power to implement a plan that saves people from starvation at the same time as it enslaves them.

Methods & Observations

While much rabbinic literature portrays Yosef as a noble and righteous figure, resisting temptation, and keeping his focus on divine service with integrity, the text also opens to a critical perspective on his personal and political choices. From the Torah we learn not only from the righteous examples set by characters, but also by analyzing life experiences that are problematic in our eyes.

Contact

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