

Yosef: The Great Dreamer

Food for Thought for Parshat Miketz by Rabbi Reuven Spolter



I have a dream. In his fiery and unforgettable speech, Martin Luther King burnt this passage into the American consciousness, altering history. In these four words he couched his hopes, his efforts and his yearning for a brighter future for himself, his children, his people and his country. His rhetoric, passion and ultimately sacrifice transformed his dream largely into reality.

But his “dream” wasn’t really a dream in the classical sense. The dictionary provides seven definitions for the word “dream.” The first three define a “dream” as “a succession of images, thoughts, or emotions passing through the mind” associated with sleep, and the fourth defines it as, “an involuntary vision occurring to a person when awake.” The common denominator between these definitions is their involuntary nature. You don’t choose your dreams. They come to you.

Then come the fifth and sixth definitions, which categorize a dream as, “a vision voluntarily indulged in while awake; daydream; reverie,” or “an aspiration; goal; aim.” This type of dream has very little in common with the first form. In fact, they’re not really “dreams” at all. They’re goals and aspirations; desires for the future.

Which “dream” did Martin Luther King have? Did his dreams come to him, involuntarily in the night? Were they waking “visions” that appeared to him during those long days in county prisons in the South? Or were they the second kind: not visions that came to him, but visions he brought to himself, to his people, and to his country?

Dreams play a prominent role in the second half of Bereishit. Beginning with Ya’akov’s vision of the ladder ascending to the heavens, we find dreams throughout the ensuing biblical narrative, specifically surrounding Yosef. He dreams about the sun, moon and stars, and the bowing stalks of wheat. He interprets the dreams of the baker and butler. And then he interprets the dreams of the Par’oh, leading himself to prominence and power. But his dreams provide not only vision but also motivation. When Yosef identifies his brothers, instead of revealing himself and reconciling with them, we read that (Bereishit 42:9),

וַיִּזְכֹּר יוֹסֵף--אֶת הַחֲלֹמוֹת, אֲשֶׁר
חָלַם לָהֶם; וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מִרְגָּלִים אַתֶּם
And Joseph remembered the dreams
which he dreamed of them, and said
unto them: 'You are spies!'

Rashi explains that in remembering his dreams he realized that, “they had been fulfilled, for they had bowed down to him.” Ramban however disagrees, arriving at precisely the opposite conclusion. Yosef remembered that in his dream, eleven stars bowed to him, and not ten. “And since he did not see Binyamin with them, he conjured this plan so that they would bring Binyamin as well to him to fulfill his original dream.” Somehow, says Ramban, his dreams not only envisaged his future, but also prompted his behavior to bring them to fruition. In his mind, his dreams carried so much weight that they compelled him to conspire against his brothers, imprison them and cause anguish to his father – just to make his dreams “come true.”

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or did they control him?*

All this makes me wonder: which type of dreams did Yosef have? Were they the first type of dreams: prophetic, involuntary visions which appeared whether asleep or awake? Or, when we

describe Yosef as a “dreamer”, do we really mean that he was a “visionary”, whose voluntary visions drove him to greatness later on? What I really want to know is: did Joseph control his dreams, or did they control him?

When Yosef recounts his dreams to his brothers, we find no mention of sleep. The Torah simply tells us, וַיִּחְלֵם יוֹסֵף חֲלוֹם – “and Yosef dreamt a dream.” (37:5) In addition, his brothers hated him for those dreams. After he tells them about the second dream of the constellations, we read that (35:8),

וַיִּסְפוּ עוֹד שִׁנְאָו אֶתּוֹ, עַל-חֲלֹמֵי תִּיּוֹ וְעַל-
דִּבְרָיו

And they hated him yet the more for
his dreams, and for his words

While we can readily understand their hatred for “his words” – after all, no one forced him to recount his dreams of domination to his brothers – why did they hate him for his dreams? If dreams are simply involuntary visions that arrive whether awake or asleep, how could the brothers blame Yosef for them? Could it be possible that Yosef’s dreams were not

dreams in the classic, subconscious sense, but something more voluntary? Was it possible that he himself conjured his dreams of domination over his brothers?

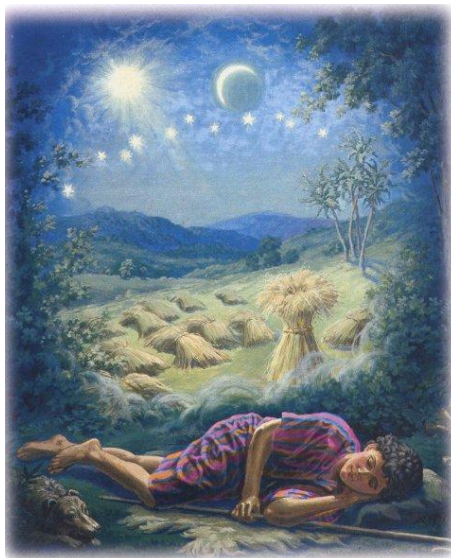
Par'oh's dreams clearly come during sleep. After each of his dreams we read, וַיִּיקָץ, פָּרְעֹה, "and Par'oh awoke." And yet, he finds these dreams so powerful that he cannot simply ignore them. Something inside him prompts him to search not only for an interpretation, but for the "right" one. When he awoke in the morning, וַתִּפְעַם רוּחוֹ – "his spirit was troubled." Rashi explains that it "rang inside him like a bell." (פַּעֲמוֹן). He knew that his dreams carried a critical message, yet he could not unravel their message. No matter what interpretations his servants suggested, אִין פּוֹתֵר אוֹתָם – "there was none that could interpret them for him." (41:8) Rashi notes that of course people tried. Still, "their voice did not enter his ears and he had no 'peace of spirit' from them." He just knew that their interpretations were off the mark. He knew that the answer to the riddles of his dreams was locked somewhere inside him.

He simply needed the right person to find the key. That person was, of course, Yosef. Who better to unravel the complicated meaning of dreams than the "dreamer" himself. Who more than Yosef could appreciate the mysterious and complicated connection between divine vision and personal aspiration; between strange visions and personal interpretations – and maybe even between hopes and aspirations and the desire and willingness to make the effort to translate them into reality?

On the one hand, Yosef tells Par'oh that his dreams bear the stamp of God: "What God is about to do He hath declared unto Par'oh," (41:25) and, "it is because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass." (42:32) But then Yosef proceeds to insert himself into "God's" plan – in order to make his own "dreams" come true. "Now therefore let Par'oh seek out a man discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt." (42:33) Let's see. Who could Yosef possibly be talking about? So did his dream presage his rise to power, or did it cause it? Did he act in accordance with God's original plan, or did God's message motivate him to fulfill that Divine desire? It's a maddening Catch-22. There's no way to know. Even more importantly, even if we entertain the possibility that Joseph's dream came to him during his waking moments, does that make them any less "real"? What is our imagination, our ability to

"dream"; to see the impossible, to yearn an unlikely and improbable future; to see the world not as it is but as we feel it should be – other than the spark of the Divine?

Yosef's greatness lay in two critical areas: First and foremost, his personal dreams and hopes mirrored those of the Creator. His vision of rule over his brothers derived not from a selfish desire for power and glory, but for the betterment of his father's family and the fulfillment of God's plan. He saw his own greatness in the future because he realized his



potential – and his destiny, to use his capabilities to change and ultimately save the world. But he also realized that dreams aren't simply visions which come true. They must be made true. Had he sat back and waited for his dreams to fulfill themselves, they never would have been realized. Yosef realized that dreams demand action; so he told them to his brothers, bore the brunt of their hatred, and set into motion the unlikely chain of events that transformed his dreams into reality. Today we no longer have the first type of dream. God doesn't come to

us in visions during the night, sending strange messages to world leaders through images of sheep and wheat. (Can you imagine what would happen if Barack Obama called for a dream-interpreter, to help him make a critical policy decision? Impeachment? Insane asylum?) But we do have an abundance of the second type of dream: aspirations and yearning for fundamental change, whether in our personal or communal or national lives. In moments of peace and tranquility – not unlike Yosef, alone in the fields with his sheep for hours on end – we allow our minds to see the world the way it should be; it could be and perhaps it will be. Do we see in them the spark of the Divine? Do our dreams mirror the will of God? Do we envision in our dreams the redemption of the world, the betterment of life, or perhaps bringing the Jewish people closer to our national goal? (Or do our "dreams" have more to do with large LCD television sets and man-caves with surround sound?) And then, have we done anything to follow in Yosef's footsteps: not just to have the dream, but to make it happen? Martin Luther King's greatness lay not just in his ability to dream a future of racial equality. Rather, he also gave the speech, and organized the protests, and sacrificed his life. And ultimately, translated his dream into the social fabric we take for granted today .