



INSPIRE

MIKETZ
4TH TEVES - 19TH DECEMBER

FAMINE IN THE LAND

This week we read of the dreams of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. When all the king's men and all the king's soothsayers fail in their attempts at dream analysis, the Chief Butler remembers Joseph and how the Hebrew prisoner correctly interpreted his own dreams when they were together in jail. In a flash, young Joseph is hauled out of the dungeon and finds himself standing before the mighty monarch. Pharaoh repeats his two dreams – seven fat cows being devoured by seven lean cows, and seven healthy ears of grain being swallowed by seven withered ears.

Joseph interprets the dreams to Pharaoh's satisfaction. Seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of famine. His explanation rings true for the king. But Joseph doesn't stop at the interpretation. He goes on to offer some seemingly unsolicited advice to the mighty ruler of the mightiest superpower of the time. "And now Pharaoh should select a person who is understanding and wise, and appoint him over Egypt," continues young Joseph. This man oversee the economic plan for the country – to store grain during the seven good years of plenty that are coming in order to sustain the people during the next seven lean years.

Brilliant. But who asked him for any advice? And where does this young man, who a moment ago was languishing in prison, get the temerity to offer eitzos – unsolicited advice – to none other than the king himself? I know Jews are renowned for their chutzpah, but still! You gave your interpretation, fine and well; but did anybody ask you for solutions?

The explanation is that the advice was actually part and parcel of the interpretation. Why were there two dreams with essentially the same message? Why were the thin cows standing next to the fat cows before they swallowed them? Moreover, why did Pharaoh wake up after the first dream, go back to sleep, and only then experience the second dream? According to Joseph all of this was highly pertinent. The dream was repeated because it will happen soon and therefore no time is to be wasted in preparing for the famine. The two sets of cows stood side by side to indicate that there is an important connection between them – that the good years can, in effect, co-exist with the lean years, if their surplus of grain is preserved to sustain the people during the famine. And Pharaoh woke up in between the two dreams because G-d was saying to him, "Wake up before it is too late to save your people!" In other words, the solution was implicit in the dreams. Thus, if Joseph hadn't shared extended his advice to Pharaoh, he would have been derelict in his duty by omitting crucial sections of the dreams' meaning. Offering the advice was not chutzpah at all. Withholding it would have been a job half done.

Pharaoh is so impressed with this explanation that he immediately appoints Joseph as viceroy of Egypt, and the rest, of course, is history.

Long ago the Prophet Amos said,

Behold, days are coming, says the L-rd, when I will send a famine in the land; not a famine for bread, nor a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of the L-rd. And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of G-d and they shall not find it. In that day shall the fair virgins and the young men faint from thirst.

Is this not a prophecy of our own day and age? Are we not witnessing a hunger for truth and authenticity in a corrupt and plastic world? Do our own young people from America and even Israel not go wandering across the far corners of the earth desperately seeking spirituality and some deeper meaning to their lives? And what is our response when many of our youngest and brightest get lost in the East? Do we appreciate the tragedy when they despair of finding fulfillment in the faith of their fathers? Do we mimic the Pharaoh and turn over on the other side and go back to sleep even when we seem to be getting heavenly signals and messages that something momentous is about? Or do we seek out the guidance of a "wise and understanding man" who can guide our young people towards the path of what, for them, must be the only truth, the Torah?

In the end, Pharaoh took Joseph's advice, acted responsibly, and spared his nation the famine that engulfed the world. Will we, today, feed our spiritually starved souls and give them the nourishment they crave? Many among us are trying to do just that. I pray we will all join in.

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Shabbos ends 4:50pm

It was Joseph's first real attempt to take his fate into his own hands, and it failed. Or so it seemed.

Consider the story so far, as set out in last week's parshah. Almost everything that happens in Joseph's life falls into two categories. The first are the things done to him. His father loves him more than his other sons. He gives him a richly embroidered cloak.

His brothers are envious and hate him. His father sends him to see how the brothers are faring, attending the flocks far away. He fails to find them and has to rely on a stranger to point him in the right direction. The brothers plot to kill him, and sell him as a slave. He is brought to Egypt. He has acquired as a slave by Potiphar. Potiphar's wife finds him attractive, attempts to seduce him, and having failed, falsely accuses him of rape, as a result of which he is imprisoned.

This is extraordinary. Joseph is the center of attention whenever, as it were, he is onstage, and yet he is, time and again, the done-to rather than the doer, an object of other people's actions rather than the subject of his own.

The second category is more remarkable still. Joseph does do things. He runs Potiphar's household. He organizes a prison. He interprets the steward's and baker's dreams. But, in a unique sequence of descriptions, the Torah explicitly attributes his actions and their success to G d. Here is Joseph in Potiphar's house: d was with Joseph, and He made him very successful. Soon he was working in his master's own house. His master realized that G d was with [Joseph], and that G d granted success to everything he did.

As soon as [his master] had placed him in charge of his household and possessions, G d blessed the Egyptian because of Joseph. G d's blessing was in all [the Egyptian] had, both in the house and the field.

Here is Joseph in prison:

G d was with Joseph, and He showed him kindness, making him find favor with the warden of the dungeon. Soon, the warden had placed all the prisoners in the dungeon under Joseph's charge. [Joseph] took care of everything that had to be done. The warden did not have to look after anything that was under [Joseph's] care. G d was with [Joseph], and G d granted him success in everything he did.

And here is Joseph interpreting dreams:

'Interpretations are G d's business,' replied Joseph. 'If you want to, tell me about [your dreams].'

Of no other figure in Tanakh is this said so clearly, consistently, and repeatedly. Joseph seems decisive, organized, and successful and so he appeared to others. But, says the Torah, it was not him but G d who was responsible both for what he did and for its success. Even when he resists the advances of Potiphar's wife, he makes it explicit that it is G d who makes what she wants morally impossible: "How could I do such a great wrong? It would be a sin before G d!"

The only act clearly attributed to him occurs at the very start of the story, when he brings a "bad report" about his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah the handmaids. This apart, every twist and turn of his constantly changing fate is the result of someone else's act, either that of another human or of G d (as for Joseph's dreams – were they a Divine intimation or a product of his own imagination? – that is another story for another time).

That is why we sit up and take notice when, at the end of the previous parshah, Joseph takes destiny into his own hands. Having told the chief steward that in three days he would be pardoned by Pharaoh and restored to his former position, and having no doubt at all that this would happen, he asks him to plead his cause with Pharaoh and secure his freedom: "When things go well for you, just remember that I was with you. Do me a favor and say something about me to Pharaoh. Perhaps you will be able to get me out of this place."

What happens? "The chief steward did not remember Joseph. He forgot about him." The doubling of the verb is powerful. He did not remember. He forgot. The one time Joseph tries to be the author of his own story, he fails. The failure is decisive.

Tradition added one final touch to the drama. It ended the parshah of Vayeshev with those words, leaving us at the point that his hopes are dashed. Will he rise to greatness? Will his dreams come true? The question "What happens next?" is intense, and we have to wait a week to know.

Time passes and with the utmost improbability (Pharaoh too has dreams, and none of his magicians or wise men can interpret them – itself odd, since dream interpretation was a specialty of the ancient Egyptians), we learn the answer. "Two full years passed." Those, the words with which our parshah begins, are the key phrase. What Joseph sought to happen, happened. He did leave the prison. He was set free. But not until two full years had passed.

Between the attempt and the outcome, something intervened. That is the significance of the lapse of time. Joseph planned his release, and he was released, but not because he planned it. His own attempt ended in failure. The steward forgot all about him. But G d did not forget about him. G d, not Joseph, brought about the sequence of events – specifically Pharaoh's dreams – that led to his release.

What we want to happen, happens, but not always when we expect, or in the way we expect, or merely because we wanted it to happen. G d is the co-author of the script of our life, and sometimes – as here – He reminds us of this by making us wait and taking us by surprise. That is the paradox of the human condition as understood by Judaism. On the one hand we are free. No religion has so emphatically insisted on human freedom and responsibility. Adam and Eve were free not to sin. Cain was free not to kill Abel. We make excuses for our failures – it wasn't me; it was someone else's fault; I couldn't help it. But these are just that: excuses. It isn't so. We are free and we do bear responsibility.

Yet, as Hamlet said: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends/ Rough-hew them how we will." G d is intimately involved in our life. Looking back in middle- or old age, we can often discern, dimly through the mist of the past, that a story was taking shape, a destiny slowly emerging, guided in part by events beyond our control. We could not have foreseen that this accident, that illness, this failure, that seemingly chance encounter, years ago, would have led us in this direction. Yet now in retrospect it can seem as if we were a chess piece moved by an invisible hand that knew exactly where it wanted us to be.

It was this view, according to Josephus, that distinguished the Pharisees (the architects of what we call rabbinic Judaism) from the Sadducees and the Essenes. The Sadducees denied fate. They said G d does not intervene in our lives. The Essenes attributed all to fate. They believed that everything we do has been predestined by G d. The Pharisees believed in both fate and free will. "It was G d's good pleasure that there should be a fusion [of divine providence and human choice] and that the will of man with his virtue and vice should be admitted to the council-chamber of fate." Nowhere is this clearer than in the life of Joseph as told in Bereishit, and nowhere more so than in the sequence of events told at the end of last week's parshah and the beginning of this. Without Joseph's acts – his interpretation of the steward's dream and his plea for freedom – he would not have left prison. But without divine intervention in the form of Pharaoh's dreams, it would also not have happened. This is the paradoxical interplay of fate and freewill. As Rabbi Akiva said: "All is foreseen yet freedom of choice is given." Isaac Bashevis Singer put it wittily: "We have to believe in free will: we have no choice." We and G d are co-authors of the human story. Without our efforts we can achieve nothing. But without G d's help we can achieve nothing either. Judaism found a simple way of resolving the paradox. For the bad we do, we take responsibility. For the good we achieve, we thank G d. Joseph is our mentor. When he is forced to act harshly he weeps. But when he tells his brothers of his success he attributes it to G d. That is how we too should live.

PARSHA SUMMARY

Joseph's imprisonment finally ends when Pharaoh dreams of seven fat cows that are swallowed up by seven lean cows, and of seven fat ears of grain swallowed by seven lean ears. Joseph interprets the dreams to mean that seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of hunger, and advises Pharaoh to store grain during the plentiful years. Pharaoh appoints Joseph governor of Egypt. Joseph marries Asenath, daughter of Potiphar, and they have two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Famine spreads throughout the region, and food can be obtained only in Egypt. Ten of Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to purchase grain; the youngest, Benjamin, stays home, for Jacob fears for his safety. Joseph recognizes his brothers, but they do not recognize him; he accuses them of being spies, insists that they bring Benjamin to prove that they are who they say they are, and imprisons Simeon as a hostage. Later, they discover that the money they paid for their provisions has been mysteriously returned to them. Jacob agrees to send Benjamin only after Judah assumes personal and eternal responsibility for him. This time Joseph receives them kindly, releases Simeon, and invites them to an eventful dinner at his home. But then he plants his silver goblet, purportedly imbued with magic powers, in Benjamin's sack. When the brothers set out for home the next morning, they are pursued, searched, and arrested when the goblet is discovered. Joseph offers to set them free and retain only Benjamin as his slave.

HAFTORAH SUMMARY

I Kings 3:15-4:1. This week's haftorah opens with the words "And Solomon awoke, and behold it was a dream," echoing this week's Torah portion which opens with Pharaoh's dreams. Though not included in the haftorah, in this dream G-d granted King Solomon his legendary wisdom. The haftorah relates a famous episode that made all of Israel aware of their new monarch's keen intellect. Two harlots approach King Solomon to adjudicate their dispute. They lived together in the same house, and each had given birth to an infant three days apart. One night, one of the infants was accidentally crushed to death by her mother, and one woman accused the other of switching infants in order to have a live baby. Each woman claimed that the live child is theirs and the deceased child was the other's. King Solomon asks that a sword be brought and orders that the child be cut in half with each woman receiving one half. At this point, the mother of the living child exhorts the king to give the child to the other woman so that he may live, while the other woman says, "Let it be neither mine nor yours, divide!" The king ruled: "Give her the living child, and by no means slay him: she is his mother!"

WISHING ALL THOSE WITH YARTZEIT THIS WEEK CHAIM ARUCHIM

Levy Mark Father Moshe ben Mordecai HaLevi 4 Tevet
Pushkin Norman Father Yehuda ben Mordecai 4 Tevet
Cohen Lois Mother Devorah bas Yitzchak Lev 10 Tevet
Goodman Stacey Father Labe ben Avraham 10 Tevet
Lieberman Leonard Brother Meilech Ben Zvi 10 Tevet

JEWISH HUMOUR

A wealthy woman from California telephones El Al Airline requesting a first-class ticket for her dog. The airline attendant is astonished and promptly advises the lady that she cannot have a seat for her dog. The

lady is very upset, but at the end of the discussion the airline attendant agrees to personally carry the pampered poodle in a suitable cage on the plane. The plane lands in Israel and as the service people remove the cage, they notice to their horrified surprise that the poodle is dead. They immediately dispatch someone to fetch another poodle which looks the same as the demised dog. They happily hand over the cage to the lady who looks at the cage and flatly rejects it on the ground that: "This is not my dog!" The airline personnel are surprised -- they thought the substitute poodle looked like an exact match, whereupon the lady replies: "My dog was dead and I was taking her to Israel to be buried."

RIDDLE OF THE WEEK

If two's company, and three's a crowd, what are four and five?

Answer for last week

Chocolate coins

STORY TIME

It was dark outside. Nobody was out on the street. But in one building you would not have known it was night. It was the study hall of the Kotzker Chasidim in the heart of the forest. The Chasidim were sharing Torah thoughts. They sang Chasidic melodies and their faces were aglow with joy. Chanuka was approaching and the next day they would kindle the first light of Chanuka. As they did every year, the Chasidim traveled to their Rebbe to celebrate the holiday in a special atmosphere of holiness. Dawn broke and the Chasidim were still going strong, as though they had slept through the night. "Chasidim," called out one of the elders of the group. "The sun is rising; let us go to the Rebbe."

They quickly got ready for the morning prayers which were recited in an especially joyous atmosphere. After that, they set out on the way with song and dance. "G-d willing, we will arrive by this evening when the Rebbe lights the menorah," rejoiced one of the Chasidim. The wind howled. The Chasidim wrapped their coats even more tightly and continued battling the strong wind. Just a few hours remained until they would reach the Rebbe's holy court. But the sky darkened, the wind picked up strength, and snow began to fall, making walking difficult. "Chasidim, be strong, surely this is the Satan who wants to delay us from being with the Rebbe on Chanuka. Let us muster our strength and with G-d's help we will get there safely," called out Hershel encouragingly. They continued walking but for some reason, the road did not come to an end. According to their calculations, they should have arrived at the Rebbe's court already. A thick forest surrounded them and the Chasidim realized they were lost. Suddenly, they heard someone shout, "Halt!" The Chasidim froze in their places. A few moments later, a band of Cossacks on horseback surrounded them. "Ha," the evil ones chortled. "We have caught fat fish this time. Jews!" The Cossacks felt around in the Chasidim's pockets and knapsacks and took every penny they could find. They then brought them deeper into the forest to a place only the Cossacks knew about. The Chasidim walked quietly, each one immersed in his thoughts, making a spiritual accounting, and praying for a Chanuka miracle. The Chasidim were soon led to dark underground cells. "We will wait here until the commander comes and decides what to do with you," said a Cossack as he whipped one of the Chasidim. Some time went by and the commander appeared. He declared that they be hung. The Chasidim began pouring out their hearts in the recital of Psalms and they rent the heavens with their tears. At that very same time, in the court of the Rebbe, many Chasidim were waiting. The menorah was ready and the first cup was filled with oil. The Chasidim waited for the Rebbe to come out of his room and light the menorah. One hour went by and then another and Reb Menachem Mendel of Kotzk was still in his room. The Chasidim there were surprised. "Every year, the Rebbe lights the menorah as early as possible because the mitzva is so dear to him. Why is he waiting this year?" The clock showed that it was close to midnight and the Chasidim were still waiting. Suddenly, the door opened and the Rebbe came out in a rush. Something looked amiss. There was silence in the room as the Rebbe walked toward the menorah. The Shamash was lit and the Rebbe said the first blessing loudly. Then the Rebbe said the next two blessings and held the Shamash to the first light, but oy, the wick did not ignite. The Rebbe tried again and again with no success. He sighed heavily and the Chasidim knew something had happened. The Rebbe extinguished the Shamash, looked at the Chasidim, and quickly left the synagogue. The Chasidim looked at one another in shock. A commotion erupted until one of the Chasidim gave a bang and said, "It is not time for talking. Let us recite Psalms to avert the evil decree." Books of Psalms were quickly opened and the Chasidim read chapter after chapter with tears. In the meantime, the Rebbe went to his room and changed his clothes. He put on a coarse leather jacket, big boots, a hairy coat and a leather hat that covered his face. He wrapped himself in a scarf and went out a back door into the blizzard. The Rebbe had a hard time walking through the deep snow, but this did not deter him from his mission. A few hours of exhausting walking passed until he reached his destination. He entered the forest and knew just where to go. He stopped at the entrance to the Cossack camp and stood there fearlessly. The Rebbe gazed at the Cossacks and they trembled. They quickly dropped their weapons and fled. The Rebbe approached the hidden trapdoor, lifted it, and went down until he was facing the Chasidim. "Rebbe!" they exclaimed in disbelief. "What is the Rebbe doing here? How did the Rebbe know we were in trouble?" The Rebbe did not reply. He just motioned to them to get out and go with him to his synagogue so they could light the menorah before daylight. "You did not wander far, the road to Kotzk is not long," the Rebbe said reassuringly. This time, the walk was easier and within a short time they were at the Rebbe's warm, inviting synagogue. The Rebbe went over to the menorah and lit the Shamash. This time, the first light lit immediately.

FOOD 4 THE SOUL

The history of the Jewish people is not just one of rise and fall. It is a process, a purification, a sieve of many filters, a smelting furnace that refines the raw ore again and again until only the purest gold remains. That is why today we are able to do a mitzvah today in a world so foreign to mitzvahs; to fill our lives with that which filled our great-grandparents' and raise children that way; to go against the stream of the culture around us and be the Jew inherent within. It is not with our own power, or with our own minds. It is with a hidden memory, an indestructible force that survived as our heritage.