

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Miketz

Dreams. Never has there been a person whose life was defined by dreams as much as Yosef. Not only did his own dreams give him a sense of purpose and mission from a very young age, his interpretations of the dreams of the wine butler and Pharaoh brought him up from the depths to never before seen heights - from prisoner to Viceroy. Keeping in mind the profound influence these events had on Yosef's life, certain aspects of his behavior are quite puzzling.

Put yourself in Yosef's shoes (or sandals) for a moment. You are standing before the leader of the not-so-free world, Pharaoh. He is the most powerful person in the ancient world - his own countrymen believe he is a god. You, on the other hand, are part of the lowest class of society. Not only are you a slave, but you are coming straight from jail, sent there for the attempted rape of an Egyptian official's wife. Pharaoh has a dream that is bothering him and he wants you to interpret it. If you can muster the confidence to actually open your mouth, you would probably help Pharaoh out as quickly as possible, and maybe get up the gall to beg for your freedom. You would certainly not want to contradict Pharaoh, and you definitely would not want to appear brazen and offer Pharaoh advice he didn't ask for!

Now get out of Yosef's shoes, because everything we suggested is the exact opposite of what he actually did! Pharaoh tells Yosef, "I heard that you know how to listen to a dream and interpret it." Yosef contradicts Pharaoh and says, "It's not from me; G-d will inform [us] about Pharaoh's welfare" (Bereishit 41:15-16). We might be tempted to pass that off as understandable - after all, even though he is contradicting Pharaoh, the statement itself is a humble one. However, what comes next is almost unbelievable! After Yosef finishes interpreting Pharaoh's dream and telling him about the upcoming seven years of plenty to be followed by seven years of famine, Yosef immediately gives Pharaoh some advice: "Now, let Pharaoh appoint a wise and understanding person over the Land of Egypt... [to] gather the food from the good years... and the food will be kept for the land, for the seven years of famine" (ibid, 33-36). Not only does this seem to be an overwhelming display of chutzpah, but, after displaying his wisdom and acumen, we can almost picture Yosef pointing at himself, nominating himself to fill this new post in Pharaoh's government. Indeed, Pharaoh picks up on this hint: "And Pharaoh told Yosef, 'After G-d has informed you of all of this, there is none as understanding and wise as you'" (ibid, 39). Compounding our difficulty is the fact that Yosef does not even pause between his interpretation and his advice. A quick reading of the text leaves us with the impression that Yosef's advice is part of the dream's interpretation!



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

continued ...

To make matters worse, this is not his first offense - Yosef did the same thing when interpreting the wine butler's dream. Immediately after telling the wine butler the meaning of his dream ("In three days Pharaoh will elevate you and return you to your position, and you shall place Pharaoh's goblet in his hand" (Gen. 40:13)), Yosef throws in his own two cents - this time a personal request: "Just remember me when [Pharaoh] does good to you, and please do me a kindness and mention me to Pharaoh..." (ibid, 14). Yosef's words flow together, with no clear stop demarcating the end of the interpretation and the addition of a request for a favor. How could Yosef blur these lines where protocol would seem to demand adhering to them stringently?

The answer seems to lie in the way Yosef relates to dreams. These dreams are not the product of these people's overactive imaginations hard at work while they sleep; these dreams are messages from G-d. Yosef takes this idea to a new level: not only do the dreams carry a message for the dreamer, but, Yosef feels, there is a message for the interpreter also! If Yosef is called upon to interpret these dreams, the dreams must also include a message for him. Yosef already knows that G-d is going to save him - he has his own dreams from his youth, where G-d showed him a future of leadership and prominence amongst his brothers - the only questions are how and when. Yosef therefore sees a personal divine message in his encounter with the wine butler and Pharaoh - they are going to be the means by which he is freed from jail and reunited with his family, this time with a clearly defined leadership role. Yosef is not really adding advice or requests to the interpretation of the dream. All he is doing is explaining the dream's message in such a way as to be relevant to all interested parties. And, with our usual twenty-twenty hindsight, we would have to say that he was correct.

Not all of us merit G-d communicating with us as clearly as He did with Yosef. However, Yosef teaches us that if we look for signs of G-d's love, guidance, and direction we will find it - sometimes in the funniest places. But when we see it we can be confident that we aren't dreaming.

Shabbat Shalom

JSN Parsha Team

3626 El Camino Real
(650) 493-5764



Palo Alto, CA 94306
www.jsn.info