

The Meaning of Yosef's Dreams

By Rav Elchanan Samet

PROPHETIC DREAMS?

Were Yosef's dreams prophetic? Did they foretell the future, like the dreams of Pharaoh's ministers and Pharaoh's own double dream? According to Chazal and the commentaries, there is no doubt that this is the case (see, for instance, Rashi 37:11 and 37:20). Furthermore, the dreams do, in fact, turn out to be true: in the story of Yosef and his brothers the dreams occupy a central position in the plot and they themselves reflect the hidden Divine Providence guiding the events. It doesn't seem logical that that Yosef's own dreams, which serve as the starting point for the whole story, should be an exception to the rule applying to all the other dreams in the narrative.

But when we compare Yosef's pair of dreams to the two following pairs later on in the story, there are some important differences, casting doubt on our certainty:

1. Each of the dreams of the ministers and of Pharaoh merits an interpretation by Yosef which explains not only the general message but also each and every detail which they contain. Yosef's dreams, on the other hand, are given no detailed, authoritative solution throughout the story.
2. After Yosef explains to the ministers and to Pharaoh the meaning of their respective dreams, the Torah goes on to describe the full realization of the dream in accordance with Yosef's explanation (40:22, 41:54). Thus we know that these were Divine messages to these people. With regard to Yosef's dreams, though, there is no explicit testimony in the Torah as to whether and how they were realized.
3. From the way in which the events follow exactly the explanations given for the dreams, we learn what a special

gift of Divine inspiration Yosef was blessed with, such that he was able to decode God's messages sent to mortals in the form of symbolic dreams. Indeed, in explaining these dreams Yosef takes great pains to emphasize God's role (40:8; 41:16, 25, 28, 32, 38, 39), but God's name is not mentioned even once in connection with Yosef's own dreams.

4. It is clear why God reveals to the ministers and to Pharaoh what is going to happen: the dreams represent a vehicle for change in Yosef's position, lifting him from a prisoner in the dungeon to the King of Egypt's right-hand man. But what is the purpose of God's message about the future to Yosef?

PROBLEMS WITH THE STANDARD APPROACH

The commentaries provide no satisfactory answers to these questions: they see no reason to address the solution of Yosef's dreams, apparently since the matter appears quite simple. The message of Yosef's dreams is so clear as to appear not to require any explanation at all (unlike the dreams of the ministers and of Pharaoh, the symbolism of which is rather more difficult to fathom). Moreover, the explanation for Yosef's dream is readily to be found in the text, in the words of the brothers: "Will you then rule over us; will you then govern us?" and in the words of Ya'akov: "Will I and your mother and your brothers then come and bow down before you to the ground?" Although all of these utterances convey an obviously ironic tone and end in question marks, it is nevertheless clear that they represent an accurate interpretation of the dreams.

But this is not sufficient. Yosef himself teaches us that the person who interprets dreams needs to explain the significance of the dream's every detail. What, then, is the symbolic meaning of the brothers' sheaves bowing down to Yosef's sheaf in the first dream? Why do they not bow down to Yosef himself, as in the second dream? And why are the brothers symbolized in the second dream by stars, while in the first dream by sheaves? Why do the sun and moon suddenly appear in the second dream, symbolizing Ya'akov and his wife, while no parallel exists in the first dream?

Moreover, what is common to both dreams is bowing down to Yosef (and for this reason Yosef says, "Behold I dreamed a FURTHER dream"). Why, then, is there a need for two dreams which essentially say the same thing? Yosef himself answers a similar question when he says (41:32), "[The reason for] the repetition of the dream twice to Pharaoh [is] to show that the matter is truly from God and that God will soon perform it." No such explanation can apply to the double-dream of Yosef, since a very long time - twenty-two years - must pass until his dream is realized.

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE DREAMS ACCORDING TO RASHI AND RAMBAN

Even with regard to the realization of Yosef's dream as the plot develops, the commentaries provide no satisfactory answers; the Torah provides no testimony at all. The verse, "And Yosef remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them" (42:9), relates only to Yosef's own thoughts, and even this is subject to debate among the commentaries. Rashi maintains that "He knew that they had been fulfilled, for behold – they were bowing down to him," while the Ramban differs:

I believe that the opposite is the case. The Torah is saying that when Yosef saw his brothers bowing down to him, he remembered all the dreams he had dreamed about them and he knew that one of them had not been realized on this occasion. He knew from the explanation of his first dream that all of his brothers would bow down to him: "And behold, we were binding sheaves" – the "we" implied all eleven brothers, while he knew from the second dream that the second time the sun and moon and eleven stars would bow down to him.

Further on the Ramban explains that Yosef's tactic of hiding his identity from his brothers was meant to bring about the realization of his dreams – first by making them bring Binyamin in order to realize the first dream, "and after the first dream was fulfilled, he told them [that he was Yosef] in order to bring about the fulfillment of the second dream." (Because after he told them, Ya'akov and his entire household came to him.) The Ramban summarizes as follows: "He did everything properly at the right time in order to realize the dreams, for he knew that they would truly come to be fulfilled."

A discussion of the Ramban's interpretation here is beyond the scope of this essay; we shall deal only with the question of the fulfillment of the dreams. The first dream was fulfilled, according to his explanation in chapter 43, when ALL the brothers come before Yosef (w.15-16), and explicitly in verse 26 – "And they bowed down before him to the ground." But Yosef's dream is not mentioned there at all – neither in the Torah's

testimony nor in Yosef's thoughts. Even more problematic is the second dream: nowhere at all is it mentioned that the entire family, including his father, bows down to Yosef. If this is the case, then the fulfillment of the second dream is not described anywhere, and we have no way of knowing if and when it happened in reality.

Lastly, let us return to the question of the purpose of the dreams: the Ramban attaches great importance to Yosef's dreams, for they are the key to understanding his surprising behavior in hiding his identity from his brothers. But the result cannot, in this case, serve as the explanation for its cause, because we still do not understand why Yosef dreamed these dreams.

THE MEANING OF THE PROSTRATION

The answer to our questions requires a detailed analysis of the dreams. The Torah seems to be hinting us that the dreams were not properly understood at first – neither by Yosef the dreamer, nor by the brothers, nor by Ya'akov. (As a result, the commentaries who rely on the utterances of the brothers and of Ya'akov are similarly mistaken.) What was their mistake? They all understood the repeated bowing down in the two dreams according to its literal meaning: "Shall I and your mother and all your brothers then come TO BOW DOWN BEFORE YOU TO THE GROUND?" The brothers, too, understood the prostration literally, as an expression of kingship and rule: "Will you then rule over us?" Therefore, the commentaries the remainder of the story for the literal fulfillment of the dream in the prostration of the brothers before Yosef. But was this truly the language of the dreams?

By comparison, should we seek the literal fulfillment of a detail such as the lean cows swallowing the fat cows in Pharaoh's dream? Yosef explains this detail as follows: "And there shall come about after them seven years of famine, AND ALL THE ABUNDANCE WILL BE FORGOTTEN in the land of Egypt... and there will be no reminder of the abundance in the land for the famine which will follow it..." Just as the cows are a symbol for years, the lean cows swallowing the fat cows is a symbol for a process which will stretch over a considerable time, and hence it is inappropriate to seek its fulfillment in one concrete event.

What, then, is the symbolism of the prostration? In one sense it is indeed rulership, but in a more profound sense the prostration expresses the dependence of he who bows down on the one before whom he bows. (Compare the following verses, where prostration expresses dependence and not

rulership: [Bereishit 23:7](#), 23:12, 47:31, Shemuel I 2:36.) The situation of dependence of the brothers and Ya'akov's household on Yosef is not difficult to find further on the story, and there is no need to locate it in any one particular concrete situation in which the brothers actually prostrate themselves before him.

THE MEANING OF THE FIRST DREAM

Let us now clarify the symbolism in Yosef's dreams. It is easy to understand that the first dream expresses the brothers' economic dependence on Yosef during the years of famine and during their stay in the land of Goshen. The sheaves are a symbol of produce and of bread. The dream comprises three stages, the beginning of each marked with the word "behold" (hinei):

1. Behold, we are binding sheaves
2. And behold, my sheaf arises and stands
3. And behold, your sheaves stand round about and prostrate themselves to my sheaf.

At first Yosef is included among the brothers – "we" – in the common economic effort on behalf of the family's sustenance (before he is sold). In the second stage there is a surprising turn of events: in the midst of all the brothers' joint work, Yosef's sheaf suddenly stands out; it straightens up and remains that way for some time. Stage 1 describes a natural scene; stage 2 describes a supernatural phenomenon. This stage refers to Yosef's remarkable rise in status. At this stage Yosef stands alone, and the brothers are not mentioned at all – neither in the dream nor in reality.

The third stage is also surprising: the sheaves of the brothers get up from their places, surround Yosef's sheaf and bow down to it. Here the brothers are reunited again with Yosef, as in stage 1, but this time not in a situation of equality but rather in a situation of dependence on Yosef, who is the distributor of produce. This is the stage during which the brothers go down to Egypt and the family is reunited there in order to survive the years of famine by Yosef's hand. Thus the entire story of Yosef is spread before us, from beginning to end, all rolled up in this dream.

Does the brothers' interpretation of this dream – "Will you then rule over us?" – suffice? It seems that it satisfied Yosef, but had

he analyzed the more profound significance of the dream he would have been forced to reject his brothers' words and to tell them, "No; rather, the day will come when 'I will provide sustenance for you and your children' (50:21)."

THE MEANING OF THE SECOND DREAM

Let us now turn our attention to Yosef's second dream: "Behold, the sun and moon and eleven stars bow down to me." This is one single vision: Yosef is not represented by a symbol here; it is he himself before whom they bow, while the family is symbolized by the celestial bodies. It is difficult to describe the picture that Yosef saw in his dream, for even if the prostration of the sun and moon can be explained as a movement from one side of the heaven to the other, how are we to imagine the prostration of stars? However, as mentioned above, the symbol of prostration comes to express only dependence, and we do not need to know what material form this idea of dependence took in Yosef's dream.

How does the family's dependence on Yosef in the second dream differ from that described in the first? Clearly it cannot refer to the economic sphere. What are the sun, moon and stars in fact meant to symbolize? It seems that they symbolize Ya'akov's household as the foundation of the chosen nation. This nation is chosen to shed light to the world: "And all the families of the earth will be blessed in you". Indeed, the comparison of the future nation to the stars is first found in the brit bein ha-betarim when God tells Avraham (15:5): "Look to the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them. And He said to him, So will your descendants be..." (So too in God's words to Yitzchak, 26:4). Although there the emphasis is on the number of his descendants, the comparison is clearly also meant to describe the unique and illuminating quality of Avraham's seed. Ya'akov's household is the first cell of this nation compared to the stars, and the patriarch and matriarch of this family are quite naturally symbolized by the sun and moon.

How are these dependent on Yosef? It seems that the idea symbolized here is that the survival of Ya'akov's household and the foundation for the existence of the future chosen nation as a separate and illuminating element in the world, is dependent on Yosef. Not on Yosef as the distributor of food and produce (the symbolism of the sheaf in the first dream), but rather on Yosef the man, the person, his sensitivity and his spirituality. For Yosef's mission in Egypt is a dual one: he must take care of his family's physical survival during the years of famine, but no less important is his concern for the separate national-spiritual existence of his father's household in exile – the first exile of Am Yisrael.

Yosef prepares for the exile – not only in that he sees to the internal unity of the family as a precondition for surviving there, but also in his concern for outer appearances, "in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen, for any shepherd is an abomination to Egypt" (46:34). Yosef also prepares for survival in exile in the sense that he takes care to preserve a longing in Ya'akov's household for the land of their forefathers, by organizing the funeral procession for Ya'akov to the land of Canaan, and by commanding his brothers prior to his own death, "The Lord will surely remember you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Ya'akov" (50:25). Yosef's second dream, then, places upon him the responsibility for the spiritual existence of his family as the first cell of the nation of Israel.

Does Ya'akov's interpretation – "Shall I and your mother and your brothers then come and bow before you to the ground?" – suffice? Certainly not. This dependence of the sun and moon and stars does not necessitate any prostration at all in reality. Moreover, this dependence does not even require that these people be alive. Even after Ya'akov passes on, his light continues to illuminate the world: "Ya'akov our forefather did not die; so long as his descendants live, so does he" ([Ta'anit 5b](#)). And this light which will continue to illuminate the world through his descendants depends, once again, on Yosef. (This solves the problem posed by the fact that Rachel was already dead, assuming that the moon indeed symbolizes her.)

But just as Ya'akov failed to interpret the dream correctly, Yosef, too, misses its message. If this was not so, he should have argued with Ya'akov and said, "You will not come to bow down before me to the ground, but the day will come when the light of our family, which is meant to illuminate the world, will be dependent on me!" In Yosef's own words we see a hint of this aspect of his mission much later: "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the land and to keep you alive for a great deliverance" (45:7), and further on: "to be a numerous nation" (50:20).

Hence we conclude that the double dream, with its seemingly repeated message, is in fact preparing him for a double mission with regard to his family – on the one hand, economic survival; on the other hand, spiritual survival.

SERVITUDE, NOT RULERSHIP

But Yosef, who later on learned to solve other people's dreams, could not explain his own. For if he had interpreted his own dreams correctly, he would not have told them to his brothers and his father, expecting them to solve them as they did. The meaning of the dreams, as he understood them, was quite convenient for the youthful Yosef, for they suited his position in his father's house: "He would perform youthful fancies, styling his hair and beautifying his eyes in order to appear attractive" (Rashi 37:2). The striped coat which Ya'akov made for him was a royal garment (as we learn from Shemuel II 13:18), and his complimentary dreams appeared to him a direct continuation of the same idea. One is reminded of the words of Rabban Gamliel to the students upon whom he conferred ordination (Horayot 10a-b): "You think I'm giving you rulership? I'm giving you servitude!"

He who understood only the external, empty shell of his dream, without the profound message which it contained concerning his mission/servitude to his family, had to come to understand his dreams the hard way: "Yosef was sold as a slave." Yosef's path from this point onwards teaches him that any greatness bestowed upon him by Divine grace is meant for the benefit of others and not for his own enjoyment. This was so in Potiphar's house, in the prison, and even – especially – when he became the Viceroy of Egypt.

Yosef also came to learn that dreams sent from Heaven do not come just to compliment a person and foretell a shining future that awaits him; rather, they foretell the future in order that the person properly prepare himself for the mission that he will have to undertake. Such dreams always have a purpose, and demand that a person be ready to act and to assume the burden. Moreover, the interpretation of dreams requires Divine help and the decoding of every detail of the dream's symbolism. All of this Yosef learned and applied later on.

"AND YOSEF REMEMBERED HIS DREAMS..."

After learning his lesson the hard way over and over, and once the conditions were right for Yosef to fulfill his mission with regard to his family, he is reminded of his distant dreams and now understands them correctly: "And Yosef remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them." (Thus according to Rashi, who explains "lahem" as "aleihem"). The Abarbanel poses the question: "Why does the text say 'lahem' – the dreams were not primarily about them but about him!" In the center of the dreams stood Yosef himself, and it was to him that the others bowed. But if we interpret the use of this word as in "God will fight for you (lakhem) and you will be silent" ([Shemot 14:14](#)), it appears that this verse represents the turning point in Yosef's understanding of his dreams. (Compare similar uses of this word in [Bereishit 24:7](#), [Shemot 14:25](#), [Tehillim 27:8](#).)

After everything he has been through, Yosef now understands that his dreams were not for himself, but rather 'lahem' – for them; it was for their sake that he dreamt them. From now on, he has the dual responsibility of sustaining the family and reuniting them under conditions of exile in the land of Egypt. (Once he understood this, Yosef hid his identity from his brothers, accusing them of being spies. We shall not now examine how this specific behavior on his part represented the fulfillment of his mission to his family.)

Later on, when Yosef reveals himself to his brothers in Parashat Vayigash, he gives clear expression to his perception of his double mission (45:5-7):

"For it was FOR SUSTENANCE that God sent me before you...
And God sent me before you to preserve a REMNANT IN THE
LAND and to KEEP YOU ALIVE BY A GREAT DELIVERANCE."

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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