

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## ON THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

On his way to Lavan's house, Yaakov dreams of angels ascending and descending (28:11-15). But after 14 plus years in Lavan's house, he dreams of sheep ascending each other (31:10-13). The second dream ends with G-d telling him "Get up and leave this land, and return to your birthland (מולדתך)". On the one hand, the last sentence's ironic reversal of G-d's initial instruction to Avraham (לך לך מארצך וממולדתך) shows how far the family has progressed: Yaakov has a cultural backstop, a morally usable past. On the other hand, it appears to track Yaakov's personal decline: Deborah often quotes Rabbi David Silber as saying that when your dreams shift from angels to copulating sheep, it's time to "Get up and leave this land".

Or maybe not such a decline. The question is whether we understand dreams as Divine interventions from without, or as the result of internal promptings. Yaakov's dream-perspective pulls back from the sheep until he can see the projector and notice the angelic operator, who in turn identifies as the G-d of his previous dream ("I am the E-l of Beit E-l"; if we continue to think cinematically, perhaps the camera pulls back further, revealing that the angel is also a projection) and holds him to his previous commitments ("where you made an oath to Me"). Maybe there is no real difference here, and all that matters is, in Kotzker terms, that Yaakov retains the spiritual capacity to let G-d in.

Here is another way of looking at it: Yaakov's dream-visions always include their own interpretation. He watches the DVD with the director's commentary. By contrast, his son Yosef dreams in full naivete. Interpretation happens only after he wakes up. Even though he declares piously that "after all, Interpretations are G-d's" (40:8). Yosef plainly understands interpretation as a conscious process. Otherwise, how could he be confident of his ability to interpret other people's dreams?

Here we should note that while Yosef tells his dreams to his brothers and father, he emphatically does not ask what they mean; he knows, and they know that he thinks he knows. Yaakov's outburst "Is it really so that I, and your mother, and your brothers, will come to prostrate ourselves before you?!" does not shake him. (He and his brothers understand that the moon is Leah. But the brothers also realize that the dreams are progressing. With apologies to lyricist Tim Rice, Joseph is a sheave, but he is not a star. The sun and moon and stars bow to him directly. That's why that dream makes the brothers hate him more.) Even in prison, Yosef remains confident that he understands his own dreams.

Chazal depict the "baker" and "butler" as somewhere in between. They know what their dreams are about, but now what they mean. The result is that they lose all agency. The only decision they make that matters is to tell their dreams to Yosef (except that the "butler" realizes that the dream said nothing about showing gratitude to the interpreter, and decides to bide his time before mentioning Yosef in the royal court.)

Finally, we come to Pharaoh. Unlike his underlings, he retains the agency to reject interpretations he dislikes, whether or not they accord well with the "text" of his dream.

Why does Pharaoh need an outside interpreter, when Yosef does not? My tentative suggestion is that Yosef wants to make his dreams come true, while Pharaoh wants to prevent his dreams from coming true. Yosef is inspired and energized by his dreams; Pharaoh is terrified and depressed by his.

It should be clear that no one dreams about anything but what will happen to themselves. Pharaoh fully identifies himself with Egypt. Dreaming about national Egyptian bounties and famines is therefore about him. But he is a great man because he maintains that identification even in the face of disaster. What he wants is an interpretation that will save the nation rather than one that will enable him to avoid sharing its fate.

Yosef realizes that what Pharaoh needs is not an interpretation but an attitude. Of course that's what the dream means – but who says its inevitable? My dreams won't happen unless I do something, and his dreams will happen unless he does something. Maybe it's G-d's will that my needs and his coincide.

So Yosef tells Pharaoh that G-d sent him this dream as a warning and spur to action. As with the “butler”, nothing in the dream means “You must appoint a man of discernment and wisdom and place him over Egypt”, let alone identifies Yosef as that man. But Pharaoh realizes, as Yosef certainly intended, that no one else in the court had even considered the possibility that something productive could be done.

Moreover, no one else had the guts to provide a self-refuting interpretation. It's clear from the outset that if Yosef's policy is correct, his prediction will not be. The “butler” had no need to show gratitude to Yosef, because his reappointment would have happened anyway; and Pharaoh will have no need to acknowledge that a famine would have happened otherwise. This is presumably the tack his successor takes in “not knowing Yosef”. (Also: Nothing about Pharaoh's dream, or Yosef's initial interpretation, says anything about using the potential famine to turn Egypt into an absolutist monarchy in which the state owns all the land. I wonder how this Pharaoh would have reacted had Yosef included that at the start.)

One reason all this interests me is that Yosef is often presented as the model successful Diaspora Jew. I have always pushed back hard against this on the ground that Yosef's policy plainly leads us into centuries of slavery, which most plausibly is measure-for-measure retribution for his enslavement of the Egyptians to Pharaoh. Yosef makes the mistake of accepting the premise of Pharaoh's dream, meaning the premise of even a genuinely great Pharaoh's worldview, that his interests and Egypt's are identical. (Deborah argues that Pharaoh's treatment of the “butler” and “baker” suggest a more negative evaluation.)

Last week I happened to be reading the first volume of Bernard Baruch's autobiography, and it immediately put me in mind of Yosef. Let me tell you part of his story, and see whether it can serve the function of making us reread the story of Yosef and consider what it means for American Jews.

As you know, President Wilson desperately wanted to keep America out of World War I. Baruch was one of those who urged the necessity of preparing for war regardless. In 1915, in his first meeting with Wilson, he presented a plan for a commission, headed by one wise and understanding man and reporting only to the president, that would have complete authority over the production and pricing of all militarily necessary materials within the United States and its allies.

Wilson finally asked for a declaration of war on April 2, 1917, and by early 1918 became convinced that Baruch had been correct. At that point, even though Baruch had no administrative experience, Wilson told him “After G-d has shown you all this, there is no one as wise and understanding as you”, handed him the Presidential Seal, and appointed him to the job. Baruch thus went out to the land with unprecedented power. There were those who called him dictator – he had particular trouble with Henry Ford, who (as he tells it) refused to believe that there was not enough steel available to keep making both cars and tanks. I'm fictionalizing the details, but you get the idea that Baruch was Joseph. And you've probably guessed from his name that Baruch was Jewish.

There is much to discuss about the content of Baruch's Jewish identity, and what/whether it might help us understand about American Jewishness. But my interest here is that he apparently never considered the possibility of extending the powers of the War Industrial Board into peacetime. He conceptualized wartime economics as an emergency exception because the small sample-size meant that the market could not be trusted to properly regulate supply and demand.

Perhaps that was because Wilson's dream was peace, and Baruch himself had achieved great wealth as a young man and found it unsatisfying. (What drove Yosef's life once his family had bowed to him?) I like to think that its not only that dreams don't inevitably come true, but also that we are responsible for choosing our dreams, or at least which dreams matter to us. What is American Orthodoxy dreaming of?

Shabbat Shalom!

*The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, [www.torahleadership.org](http://www.torahleadership.org), which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.*