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תורה ואחריות

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## If You Must Will It, Does That Mean It's Not A Dream?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Exile is usually the consequence of defeat and evokes depression. But Yaakov Avinu's descent to Egypt has a celebratory vibe. The brothers gain economic security. Yaakov and Yosef each see great-grandchildren, and Yaakov shows no hint of regretting his decision to retire near them.

So it comes as a surprise when Yosef tells his brothers that "*G-d will surely remember you (someday), and you will bring-up my bones from this with you*"; where is the evidence that G-d has forgotten them?

The sudden intrusion of an Israel-centered perspective makes us wonder whether we have missed something all along. What does Israel mean to Yaakov's children?

One explanation for the absence of melancholy in Yaakov's descent is that he kept the Covenant Between the Pieces (Bereishit 15:13-16) in mind, and in the manner of Rabbi Akiva seeing a fox on the Temple Mount, he saw this exile as a harbinger of Redemption. G-d in fact promised him directly that *I will descend with you to Egypt, and I will surely bring you up*. But this explanation does not satisfy me.

A fascinating comment of Chizkuni may point the way to an alternative. Bereishit 37:5 reads:

Yosef dreamed a dream; He told (it) to his brothers; They hated him even more

Chizkuni comments:

This dream was not fulfilled; Therefore it was not written (in the Torah).

Fair enough. But 37:5 is written in the Torah. We apparently need to know that some of Yosef's dreams didn't come true, even if we don't need to know the content of the unfulfilled dream or dreams. Why? Because it means that none of the dreams **had** to come true.

Chizkuni lets us see that Yosef's dream-interpretations were not necessarily correct. We'll give him the butler and the baker. But Pharaoh dreamed of seven skinny sheep consuming seven fat sheep, and yet Egypt only suffered two years of famine. Yaakov's descent to Egypt ends the famine. R. Yoseh in Tosefta Sotah 10:9 calls attention to the problem by trying to solve it:

Until Yaakov descended to Mitzrayim – there was famine, as Scripture says: *for it is now two years that the famine . . .*

Once he descends, what does it say? "*Take seed for yourselves, and sow the earth.*"

Said R. Yoseh:

Once our forefather Yaakov died – the famine returned to its prior (condition).

R. Yoseh makes each skinny cow of Pharaoh's dream correspond to a year of famine, just as Yosef said. But Yosef plainly meant seven **consecutive** years. Pharaoh's dream needs two more cows to match up with Yosef's interpretation.

Ramban to Bereishit 42:9 tries to find a way through.

Therefore (Yosef) did not wish to tell them *I am Yosef your brother,*

or to say *hurry and go up to my father,* or to send wagons with them as he did the second time –

because his father would undoubtedly have come immediately – but (only) after the first dream was fulfilled, he told them (who he was),

in order to fulfill the second dream.

**Were it not for this –**

**Yosef would have sinned a great sin in causing his father to suffer**

**and to leave him for many days/years in loss and mourning over Shimon and himself.**

Even if he wished to cause his brothers a little suffering, how could he not pity his father's white hairs? **Rather he did everything in its proper time in order to fulfill the dreams, because he knew that they would truly be fulfilled.**

Ramban's answer seems paradoxical. If Yosef knew the dreams would inevitably be fulfilled, why couldn't he act to spare Yaakov suffering, and trust the dreams to be fulfilled regardless?

Nonetheless, the Vilna Gaon in *Aderet Eliyahu* doubles down:

This is why the Torah introduces (the scene by writing) *Yosef remembered the dreams –*

to inform that everything he did – he did only out of his great righteousness,

so that the dreams would be fulfilled,

so as not to contradict the will of Hashem and the decree of the Ultimate,

and this is the general principle of the Torah = **וזוהו כלל התורה**.

I cannot parse the theology. I was therefore very glad to find these comments of Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky z"l in *Emet L'Yaakov*:

I am dust beneath (Ramban's) feet,

but is there a mitzvah to fulfill dreams?!

Even if he knew 'that they would truly be fulfilled', is it his obligation to strive to make this so?!

This is like "What have you to do with those secrets of the merciful?!"

This requires investigation.

I haven't been able to make peace with any of the resolutions offered in this matter . . .

I am dust beneath the dust of one who was dust beneath Ramban's feet, and I gladly follow him in this case. Yosef wanted to fulfill his dreams; he was acting on his own.

If we accept Chizkuni, Ramban's interpretation provides grounds for sharply criticizing Yosef. Yosef causes Yaakov years of suffering – he never writes home – in an attempt to make his dreams come true. But the dreams were not inevitably true.

An alternative emerges from the interplay of Yosef, Yaakov, and Pharaoh in 47:7-10.

Yosef brought Yaakov his father  
He stood-him-up (*vayaamideihu*) before Pharaoh  
Yaakov blessed Pharaoh.

...

Yaakov blessed Pharaoh.  
He went out from before Pharaoh.

RADAK explains that Yaakov's "blessings" were ordinary greetings, which is why the Torah says nothing about their content. Then he comments:

I cannot find a reason for this story to have been written (in the Torah)

Why does the Torah record Yaakov's perfectly standard behavior? I suggest that what we have here is 'a curious case of the dog in the night', in other words: what matters is what Yaakov didn't do. What didn't he do? Abravanel provides a candidate action:

After Pharaoh did all this good to Yosef's brothers,  
Yosef brought his father,  
and he stood-him-up before Pharaoh – to bow to him =  
להשתחוות לו and to bless him.

Kedushat Levi offers a completely different interpretation of Yosef's intention:

Pharaoh in the dream saw himself standing adjacent to the river  
from which Egypt's sustenance is drawn,  
But Pharaoh the wicked did not have the power to seek mercy  
from G-d to annul the decree of famine,  
so Yosef said: This is the meaning of the dream that you saw:  
*Behold I am standing on the riverbank* = that you do not have the  
power etc.  
*So now Pharaoh must identify a person sage and wise, and place  
him over the Land of Egypt –  
"sage and wise" meaning a righteous man,  
and he will be "over the Land of Egypt" – to seek the mercies of  
Hashem to annul the decree of famine,  
because truly Hashem wants to be gracious, and His Will is not  
for the world to be destroyed;  
just there must be a righteous person to seek mercy from before  
Him,  
and this is the meaning of Yosef brought Yaakov his father and  
stood-him-up 'before' Pharaoh –  
read it closely as meaning that he would be above (=placed  
before) Pharaoh . . .  
as for why Yosef did not himself annul the decree –  
that was because Yosef's authority derived from Pharaoh, and he  
was as if bent beneath his hand,  
unlike Yaakov . . .*

I suggest that we follow Abravanel in saying that Yosef intended Yaakov to bow to Pharaoh, and that we follow Kedushat Levi in saying that Yosef was motivated by his own subservience to Pharaoh. But, very much unlike Kedushat Levi, I suggest that Yosef's motivation was not to place Yaakov above them both; rather, Yosef was trying to maintain the dream in which the sun, which Yaakov understands as a reference to himself, bows to him. If he is below Pharaoh, then Yaakov must be as well.

But as Seforno points out,

*Yaakov blessed* – but he did not bow, neither when he entered nor when he exited.

Yaakov knew full well why Yosef want him to bow, and his refusal was calculated. *Will we surely come then, I, your mother, and your brothers, to bow to you, (all the way) to the ground?! Yes, his father kept the matter in mind*; he remembered the dreams as well. But he had no interest in their being fulfilled (knowing as well that Rachel wouldn't be bowing in any case. I will leave it to readers to explain why Yaakov bows directly to Yosef on his deathbed.)

A person, or a people, or a state, need dreams, and their dreams matter. Yaakov initially dreamt of "angels of E-lohim ascending and descending (עולים ויורדים)"; when after years with Lavan he dreamt instead of livestock mounting (עולים על) each other, G-d intervenes and sends him back to Israel.

But Yaakov knows that dreams do not necessarily come true, and certainly not in the way you want them to. That's why his reaction to the first dream is to make a vow conditional on his own interpretation coming true.

Dreams are not their own justification – they are valuable because they point to something worthwhile. They are about ends, not about insisting on specific means, or justifying any means.

Dreams can conflict. Fulfilling my dream can obstruct yours. The gleam of a dream can lead a person to torment their aged parents, or insist on being in absolute power.

Sovereignty is a dream of the Jewish people. This dream need not come true exactly as we first understood it, and we would be wrong to make others suffer in order to force any specific version of the dream's fulfillment.

Instead, we need to ask why sovereignty matters, and make that purpose our purpose. Here's my try at that.

Yaakov's roots and identity as a freeman in the Land of Israel enable him to resist bowing to Pharaoh. Yosef's success is derivative, so he cannot resist bowing.

The restoration of Jewish sovereignty in Israel enables Jews around the world to be Yaakov rather than Yosef, to be the source of their own dignity rather than relying on the kindness of strangers.

There are not words enough for the gratitude Diaspora Jews owe Israelis for their constant bearing of the risks and sacrifices necessary to maintain the Jewish State's existence. But this is a time when words of gratitude, however inadequate, must be said, along with words of support and, too often these days, of consolation.