Reform Voices of Torah
Union for Reform Judaism
Shabbat Chanukah, December 28, 2019/ 30 Kislev 5780
Mikeitz, Genesis 41:1−44:17
The Torah: A Modern Commentary, pp. 264–277; Revised Edition, pp. 267–283
The Torah: A Women's Commentary, pp. 233–258
Haftarat Hanukkah, Zech. 4:1–7 (and I Sam. 20:18, 42 or Isa. 66:1,23)
The Torah: A Modern Commentary, p. 1,645; Revised Edition, p. 1,448

D'VAR TORAH

Dream a Little Dream, and Then Interpret It
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

The entire story of Joseph, which spans three *parshiyot* in the latter third of the Book of Genesis, centers around dreams: their interpretation and the actions that interpretation then inspires. This week, we read the second portion in that series, *Mikeitz*.

The dreams begin in last week's *parashah*, *Vayeishev.* In the first dream, Joseph sees himself and his brothers, each binding a sheaf of grain. Then his brothers' sheaves encircle his sheaf and bow down to it. In the second dream, the sun, the moon, and 11 stars bow down to Joseph. When he relays these dreams to his brothers, they take them as a belittling affront to their status as elders. What's the ultimate outcome of their interpretation of his dreams? When Joseph goes in search of his brothers who are out tending the flocks, they throw him into a pit and then sell him to traders traveling to Egypt. (Gen. 37:6-9)

This week, in *Mikeitz*, the theme of dreams continues. Joseph, now a prisoner, is given a chance at freedom because of his seemingly miraculous ability to interpret the dreams of his fellow prisoners. This becomes known to Pharaoh, who has his own dreams that are keeping him awake at night.

Joseph is called before Pharaoh, who relates his dreams about seven fat cows that devour seven skinny cows, and seven healthy ears of corn that are swallowed by seven thin ears of corn. Joseph interprets them to mean that seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of famine. We read:

"Look — seven years are coming [of] great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. But seven years of famine are coming up after them, and all the plenty in the land of Egypt will be forgotten; the famine will consume the land." (Gen. 41:29-30)

Joseph chooses to interpret the dreams in a way that would make his own counsel invaluable to Pharaoh and insure a place of power for himself in the royal court.

He advises Pharaoh to appoint a wise leader to be placed in charge of the coming crisis. Plans and provisions should be implemented to store the abundant grain in the first seven years to provide a lifeline for the people in the years of famine to follow:

"And Pharaoh said to his officials, 'Is there anyone like this to be found, a man with the spirit of God in him?' Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one as discerning and wise as you! You shall be in charge of my household, and all my people shall obey your word; only I, The Throne, shall be greater than you.'" (Gen. 41:38-40)

In his new role, Joseph is made the second most powerful person in all of Egypt – second only to Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh places his ring on Joseph's hand, clothes him in fine robes and jewels, and parades him on a chariot beside him as they tour the Egyptian nation. Then Pharaoh gives Joseph a new name; Zaphenath-paneah meaning "He who explains hidden things." (According to Targum Onkelos, Paneah has no parallel in Scripture.)

This dream interpretation of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine in the entire region (biblical Israel included) ultimately leads Jacob to send Joseph's remaining brothers down to Egypt to purchase food for the family. A dramatic scene soon follows where Joseph encounters his brothers but does not reveal himself to them. He accuses them of being spies and holds one brother, Simeon, as hostage till they return with their youngest brother Benjamin.

All of this happens because of dreams.

Our modern view of dreams is influenced by the works of psychiatry pioneers such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Freud believed that dreams revealed a person's unconscious desires. Jung, who worked with Freud for a time, believed that dreams come from a person's unconscious and help regulate the psyche.

Both of these views diverge from the more mystical, spiritual approach of Torah in general, and this week's *parashah* in particular, which proceeds on the premise that there is some external influence (God/gods) that imparts prophetic or precognitive insights to people through the medium of sleep. As Rabbi Ismar Schorsch states:
"Nowhere does the secularization of the modern mind find more striking articulation than in the view that dreams are no longer regarded as an emanation from above but rather as an eruption from below" (Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, "The Power of Dreams," Jewish Theological Seminary, December 12, 1998).

By contrast, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Ramchal), the 18th-century kabbalist whose life preceded Freud and Jung's, concurred with their scientific approach that dream content is affected by the thoughts and emotions one experiences.

Yet, he also adopts the Talmud's assertion (Babylonian Talmud, *B'rachot* 57b) that our dreams can have prophetic significance or relate to things that only the spirit can experience (see *Derech Hashem* 3:1:6). Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman explains:

"According to Ramchal, when we sleep, our souls can on occasion interact with external spiritual forces. These interactions enter our subconscious awareness and affect the content of our dreams. Nevertheless, even such extraordinary dream experiences are tricky to decipher." ("Do our dreams have any meaning?" The Jewish Chronicle, January 12, 2017)

Whatever the actual nature of dreams is, we are still challenged to understand them. Our Talmudic Rabbis gave important guidance on this that has resonated for thousands of years: they held that the power of a dream lies with its interpretation and not with the dream itself (Babylonian Talmud, *B'rachot*, 56b).

In the Talmud, we read that, "a dream not interpreted is like a letter not read" (Babylonian Talmud, *B'rachot* 55a). As long as it is not interpreted it cannot be fulfilled — and we have an enormous personal responsibility regarding its outcome.

The term *dream* can also mean a "desired outcome." Two modern dreams of this kind come to mind when we think of their power to transform nations and inspire a community to action. One is Theodore Hertzl's "If you will it, it is no dream." This phrase from his book *Old New Land* would go on to become the slogan of the Zionist movement, manifest in the establishment of the State of Israel, and be celebrated in the choice of "HaTikvah" (The Hope) as Israel's national anthem. In "HaTikvah," we sing of this hope/dream of 2,000 years to return to our ancestral land a free people.

The second dream of this kind that moved a nation to action is Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, where he speaks of a time he hopes is not too distant when, "my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character ("I Have a Dream," Rev. Martin Luther, Jr., August 28, 1963).

For Joseph, Hertzl, and King their dream was not only their own. When shared with others, their dreams became calls to action. Such is the power of dreams, what wakes us from our sleep can also wake a nation and a people from their slumber, complacency, or indifference and enroll them in a shared dream of a better more hopeful future.

What is the power of dreams? It lies in their ability to inspire us to make our dreams a reality.

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