

ופרעה חלם והנה עמד על-היאר: (מא:א)	בחלמי הנני עמד על-שפת היאר: (מא:יז)
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Biblical texts are amazing because they draw us in. They demand to be read closely. They ask that we examine them in minute detail to notice patterns, subtleties, anomalies, and shades of meaning. When we read the story of Pharaoh's dreams

<i>and Pharaoh dreamt: now here, he was standing on the Nile. (41:1)</i>	<i>In my dream— here, I was standing on the bank of the Nile. (41:17)</i>
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closely, we notice that the way Pharaoh recounts his dream to Joseph is slightly different from the way the dream is recounted in the opening verses. For example, in the first version of the dream at the beginning of the parasha, Pharaoh was standing **על-היאר** - *on the Nile*, that is, in the actual **middle of the Nile**. But, when Pharaoh gives his version of the dream, he was standing **על-שפת היאר** - *on the banks of the Nile*.¹ This may seem like a picayune observation, but it signals a shift on Pharaoh's part. By moving his vantage point from the middle of the river to its banks, Pharaoh is humanizing himself. In the first version of the dream, Pharaoh is presented as a mythological colossus standing over the water.² But in his own retelling of the dream, he comes off as just another man strolling on the banks of the river, observing the strange sight of the seven fat cows and seven skinny cows who eat them, and not being able to understand what is going on. He presents himself as a mortal, vulnerable human being, who, in this instant, is dependent on the advice of others.

מרצה ותאר - Form and Appearance; Appearance and Form

והנה מן-היאר עלת שבע פרות בריאות בשור ויפת תאר ותרעניה באחוי: (מא:יח)	והנה מן-היאר עלת שבע פרות יפות מרצה ובריאות בשור ותרעניה באחוי: (מא:ב)
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Whenever the Bible conveys extraordinary beauty it uses a word pair that denotes both physical **תאר** *form* and **מרצה** *appearance*.³ In the narrator's version, the cows are **יפות מרצה** *beautiful in appearance* but Pharaoh's, they are **יפת תאר** *beautiful in form*. To some these two terms are just synonyms. But a closer reading suggests that **מרצה-appearance** is **subjective** while **תאר-form** is

objective. When Pharaoh relates the dream he wants to come off as compelling as possible. He wants to be perceived as relating the **objective** facts of the dream, i.e. the **form** of the cows, and not his **subjective** interpretation, their **appearance**.

<i>and here, out of the Nile, seven cows were coming up, beautiful of appearance and well-nourished of flesh, and they grazed in the reed-grass. (41:1)</i>	<i>and here, out of the Nile seven cows were coming up, well-nourished of flesh and beautiful of form, and they grazed in the reed-grass. (41:18)</i>
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¹This according to Bar Ilan professor, Yonatan Grossman in his groundbreaking book, *Joseph: A Tale of Dreams*, Jerusalem, 2021. יוסף: סיפורים של הלומות.

²Remnants of ancient Nile colossi still exist near Luxor overlooking the Nile. The Colossus of Rhodes (3rd century BCE) is another famous example from antiquity, albeit later than our story. And of course, the Statue of Liberty is a modern river colossus. Could Pharaoh have been imagining himself as a colossus overlooking the Nile? Plausible.

³Joseph is described as **יפה-תאר ויפה מרצה** - *beautiful in form and beautiful in appearance*. (Gen. 39:6). He is the masculine equivalent of Rachel who is also, **יפת תאר ויפת מרצה** - *beautiful in form and beautiful in appearance* (Gen. 29:17). Interestingly, Rebekah is only described in terms of **appearance** but there is no mention of her **form**: **והנער טבת** **מרצה מאד** - *the girl was exceedingly good in appearance*. But the careful reader will note that she is carrying **water jug on her shoulder** - **על-שקמה** as she approaches the well (Gen. 24:15). What's that about? It's a clever ploy that juxtaposes the stunningly beautiful Rebekah with a shapely representation of the feminine **form** (i.e. the vessel). The scene is told from the masculine perspective to convey how much awe (and attraction) the servant has when he sees this astonishingly pulchritudinous and stunning young woman approaching. The text doesn't have to say that she is **beautiful of form** because that is already hinted by the vessel. Esther is also described as **יפת תאר וטובת מרצה** - *beautiful of form and good in appearance* (Esther 2:7) as opposed to Vashti who is only described in terms of her **appearance** - **טובת מרצה היא** and not her **form** (Esther 1:11). David is first described as being **a man of form- תאר ואיש** (1 Sam. 16:18) and when Goliath looks at him, he is described as **יפה מרצה** - *beautiful appearance*. (1 Sam. 17:42) Avigayil (the wife of the scoundrel Naval, who ends up marrying David) is described as being **יפת תאר** - *objectively beautiful in form*. But not necessarily in subjective **appearance** (1 Sam. 25:3). Like Rebekah, Bat Sheva is **טובת מרצה מאד** - *exceedingly good in appearance*. But not **form**. David was attracted to Avigayil by her **form** (and her intellect) and to Bat Sheva by her **appearance** (and her character).

The Brothers' First Encounter with Joseph

ויאמרו אליו לא אדג ועבדיך באו לשבר-אכל: בלנו בני איש-אחד גחנו בנים אנחנו לא-הינו עבדיך מרגלים: ויאמר אליהם לא כי-ערות הארץ באתם לראות: ויאמרו שנים עשר עבדיך אחים אנחנו בני איש-אחד בארץ קנעו והנה הקטן את-אבינו היום והאחד איננו: מב-יג	<i>They said to him: No, my lord! Rather, your servants have come to buy food-rations. We are all of us the sons of one man, we are honest, your servants have never been spies! But he said to them: No! For [it is] the nakedness of the land that you have come to see! They said: Your servants are twelve, we are brothers, sons of one man in the land of Canaan: the youngest is with our father now, and one is no more.</i>
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This is biblical storytelling at its finest. There is the tension between Joseph and his brothers. There is the irony of claiming to be **honest** when of course, we know the truth: they are liars of the highest order! And then there are multiple layers of dramatic irony: Joseph recognizes them, but they don't recognize Joseph. We know what's going on, but the brothers do not. And we know more about Joseph's emotional turmoil more than he does himself. He is not aware of how emotional he will get as everything unfolds, but we are. But notice what gets repeated here: **we are sons of one man**. Why do they repeat that? It's a clue to the most salient piece of information about their lives. By repeating that detail, they are signaling to

Joseph that while they all share the same father, they may not in fact share the same mother. In other words, they are saying, we come from a complicated family. They don't go into details, but an astute listener would be able to get the hint and deduce that despite their appearance of unity, there are deep rivalries and divisions among them.

We are Guilty.

In last week's parasha, when Joseph appeared in the distance, the brothers conspired to

kill him. Reuben convinces them not to do so. He pleads, **Do not shed blood! Throw him into this pit** (37:22) seemingly unaware of how ridiculous and ironic it is to be so piously concerned about his life, yet unable to exercise his "moral" authority as the first-born son, to spare him from violence, humiliation, and danger. When they end up stripping Joseph of his tunic and throwing him naked into the pit, they **sat down to eat bread** (37:25). Surely this is one of the cruelest moments of the story. They feast while he is forced to fast. But the text in last week's parasha is silent about what Joseph is going through. Not a word about his pleading, his screaming, or his

ויאמרו איש אל-אחיו אכל אשמים אנחנו על-אחינו אשר ראינו צרת נפש בהתחננו אלינו ולא שמענו על-כן באה אלינו הצרה הזאת: מב: כא	<i>But they said, each one to his brother: Truly, we are guilty concerning our brother! — that we saw his heart's distress when he pleaded with us, and we did not listen. Therefore, this distress has come upon us! (Gen. 42:21)</i>
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distress. And that's the point: by focusing on their **pain** (French for bread) and not his **pain** (bi-lingual pun!), the text emphasizes how oblivious the brothers were to Joseph's suffering. All these guilt-laden years later, when Joseph subjects them to harsh questioning and incarceration, and then insists that they fetch and bring their youngest brother down to Egypt, they remember that in his hour of distress **they did not listen** to Joseph's screams and that **they weren't attentive** to torment they caused him. And now, they express their guilt. But what exactly are they guilty for?

Here is Ramban's comment on **אנחנו | אשמים we are guilty:**

חשבו להם האכזריות לעונש גדול יותר מן המכירה, כי היה אחיהם בשרם מתחנן ומתנפל לפניהם ולא ירחמו.	<i>They thought among themselves that their cruelty (towards him) deserved a greater punishment than their sale (of him as a slave), because their brother, their flesh, was pleading with them and begging them and they did not relent with compassion.</i>
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*The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.
The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.
The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.
And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.*

Elie Wiesel

They committed a great crime in selling him as a slave to Egypt. **But the greater crime was their cruelty and indifference to his suffering. SHABBAT SHALOM!**



