



Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dream by James Tissot 1902

There are two stories of Joseph as a dream interpreter. One from last week, when Joseph interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's two officials, the Wine Steward and the Baker, and one from this week, when Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams of the cows and stalks of barley. Let's compare:

| Vayeshev: Joseph and the Two Officials | Mikketz: Joseph and Pharaoh |
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| Joseph came to them in the morning and saw them, and here, they were dejected! (40:6) | But in the morning it was, that his spirit was stirred up, (41:8a) |

Joseph's encounter with the two officials takes place in jail. As senior prisoner, Joseph discovers the two officials in a sorry state. They are **זעפֿים-זעפֿים-*zoafim-dejected crestfallen, depressed and frustrated.*** In contrast, Pharaoh is alone. A palace is a different kind of prison. There is no-one to check up on him, no one to ask him *What's the matter?* About him it says, **וַתִּפְּעֵם רוּחוֹ-*va-tipa'em ruho-his spirit was stirred up.*** This is not the same kind of anguish as the two officials, rather, it is **deep worry and bewilderment.**

| Vayeshev | Mikketz |
|---|---|
| So he (Joseph) asked Pharaoh's officials who were with him in custody in the house of his lord, saying: Why are your faces in such ill-humor today? (40:7) | So he (Pharaoh) sent and had all of Egypt's magicians and all of its wise-men called. Pharaoh recounted his dream to them, but no one could interpret them to Pharaoh. (41:8b) |

Joseph, the outsider, initiates the conversation with the two officials out of curiosity and empathy. He speaks to them as

equals, despite his low status as a foreigner-slave. But because he is super talented, he has earned an elevated status even in jail. In contrast, the lonely Pharaoh must initiate an attempt to interpret the dreams all by himself. His immediate circle of advisers is inadequate. He is forced to go beyond the palace to the elite of Egyptian society, those with the greatest expertise in magic, occult and wisdom.

| Vayeshev | Mikketz |
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| They said to him: We have dreamt a dream, and there is no interpreter for it! But I have heard it said of you that you [but] need to hear a dream in order to interpret it! (40:8a) | Pharaoh said to Joseph: I have dreamt a dream, and there is no interpreter for it! But I have heard it said of you that you [but] need to hear a dream in order to interpret it! (41:15) |

Pharaoh and the two officials use the same formulaic phrase to elicit Joseph's response,¹ Pharaoh in the singular: **חֲלֹמְתִי וּפְתֹר אֵין אֵתוֹ-*I have dreamt a dream and there is no interpreter for it*** and the officials in the plural: **חֲלֹמֵנוּ וּפְתֹר אֵין אֵתוֹ-*we have dreamt a dream, and there is no interpreter for it.*** By speaking in the plural, the officials signal to Joseph that they have already discussed their dreams among themselves and noted their similarity: Three clusters of grapes, three baskets of bread; wine for Pharaoh, bread for Pharaoh. When Pharaoh adds **I have heard it said of you...** he signals to Joseph that he knows a great deal about Joseph: at the very least, why he was in jail, and how he successfully interpreted the dreams of the two officials, and most likely that he was a foreigner-slave for Potiphar. Since Joseph's predictions came true for the officials, Pharaoh was willing to take the risk of sharing the important personal detail of his dreams.

| Vayeshev | Mikketz |
|---|--|
| Joseph said to them: Are not interpretations from God? Pray recount them to me! (40:8b) | Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying: לֹא אֵין-<i>Not I!</i> God will answer what is for Pharaoh's welfare. (41:16) |

The moment where Joseph attributes the meaning of the dreams to God is pivotal in both stories. But look closely at the difference. In the story of the two officials, Joseph **elicits the dream from them.** He taps into their vulnerability and gets them to think that he is speaking for God. It is as if he is saying: **I am not like your Egyptian magicians or charlatans. I am a Hebrew, and in my world, dreams and**

¹ Formulaic phrases would not be uncommon in dream interpretation. They are structured interactions that create a momentary bond between the dream-teller and the dream-interpreter. Since the interpretation could entail either fortune or calamity, like what happens here to the wine steward and the baker respectively, the interpreter takes on considerable risk. The formulaic phrase symbolically indemnifies the interpreter against a reprisal in case the interpretation is flawed or doesn't come true. Psychics,

astrologers, Tarot card readers, and magicians all use formulaic phrases to initiate dialogue. Children's games, such as "Mother May I," or "Simon Says" or "I spy" all involve formulaic phrases to accomplish the same objectives, as does classic storytelling with "Once upon a time," "Long, long time ago," etc. All of these momentarily transform the mutual space of the participants into a temporary zone of timelessness in which transformative experience will take place or vital information will be transmitted.

their interpretations come from God. I have a connection to God. Tell me your dreams and perhaps God will reveal to me what they mean. With Pharaoh **Joseph does not elicit the dreams**, rather, he entices Pharaoh by dangling the idea that God will answer him. **בלעדי-Not I!**, he says. On the one hand, he is cleverly minimizing his role as interlocutor. Whereas in the first story he makes it sound as if God has all the interpretations packaged up and he has the unique ability to access them, in the second story he is saying, **בלעדי-it's not I** who will go and retrieve the meaning for you, **it is God who will answer you directly**. But **בלעדי** is a double entendre. On the one hand, **בלעדי-interpretations are not from me**. But on the other hand, **no one but me can do this. I am indispensable**.

Observation: In both stories the root **פ.ת.ר.** found in **פ.ת.ר. interpretation**, **פ.ת.ר. interpreter**, **פ.ת.ר. interpreted** (and others) occurs seven times. Obviously, dream interpretation is the key motif of both stories. But while in the first story, Joseph uses this word repeatedly himself, in the second story, it is used only by the narrator, the Wine Steward, the Baker and Pharaoh. Joseph never speaks of his activity with Pharaoh as interpretation-**פ.ת.ר.** Instead, he uses three other terms:

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| ע.נ.ה. | בלעדי אלהים יענה | Not I! God will answer what is |
| Answer | את שלום פרעה. | for Pharaoh's welfare. (41:16) |
| ה.ג.ד. | את אשר האלהים | What God is about to do, he |
| Tell | עשה הגיד לפרעה. | has told Pharaoh. (41:25) |
| ר.א.ה. | אשר האלהים עשה | what God is about to do, he |
| Show | הראה את פרעה. | has shown to Pharaoh. (41:28) |

By using these terms: **answer, tell, show**, as opposed to **פ.ת.ר. interpret**, **Joseph is shifting the discourse, ever so subtly, from the Egyptian orbit of magic, occult, and dream interpretation to the Hebrew orbit of God, prophecy and divine communication**. For Egyptians, dream interpretation is the purview of magicians and charlatans; for Hebrews, dream interpretation is done by people who are attuned to God: prophets and other uniquely endowed people like Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. All of them experience divine revelations through dreams in Genesis. And Pharaoh gets the point **that God is communicating to Joseph**. He makes three declarations: *

Declaration 1: The Palace and the People.

ויאמר פרעה אל יוסף אחרי הודיע אלהים אותך את כל זאת אין נבון וחסד כמוך. אתה תהיה על ביתי ועל פירי יושק כל עמי רק הכסף אגדל ממך. (מא:לט-מ)

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all my people be directed; only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you." (41:39-40)

Pharaoh notes Joseph's extraordinary wisdom **and affirms that this is divine revelation**, not human interpretation. It is because Joseph is such a remarkable human being that God has made his plan known to him. **The political import of this declaration is that Pharaoh entrusts Joseph to run the palace**

Today is day 449 of the captivity of the hostages. They are always in our thoughts. We pray for them and their families. May God comfort the bereaved and heal the wounded and shield Israel from the terror of the Houthi missiles.

and govern the people, making him the equivalent of White House Chief of Staff as well as Speaker of the House. Pharaoh still maintains the role of Head of State.

Declaration 2: JOSEPH IS TO GOVERN THE LAND.

ויאמר פרעה אל יוסף ראה נתתי אתך על כל ארץ מצרים. (מא:מא)
Pharaoh further said to Joseph, "See, I put you in charge of all the land of Egypt." (41:41)

This refers to infrastructure, resources, transportation, and all areas of land management.

*3 Declarations Interrupted by 3 Pairs of Symbolic Acts:

(1) ויסר פרעה את טבעתו מעל ידו (2) ויתן אותה על יד יוסף (3) וילבש אותו בגדי שש (4) וישם רבד הזהב על צווארו. (5) ויקרב אתו במרכבת המשנה אשר לו (6) ויקראו לפניו אברך ונתן אתו על כל ארץ מצרים. (מא:מב-מג)

And (1) removing his signet ring from his hand, (2) (41:41) Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; and (3) he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and (4) put a gold chain about his neck. (5) He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command, and (6) they cried before him, "Abrek!" Thus, he placed him over all the land of Egypt.

Look at the extravagant gestures that Pharaoh does to seal the deal. (1) and (2): He takes off his ring and gives it to Joseph. (3) and (4): He dresses Joseph in linen and puts a gold chain around his neck. (5) and (6): He has him ride him out in the Second Chariot in an official parade and has everybody call him "Abrek!" which is possibly an Egyptian for "attention!"

Declaration 3: The Chain of Command.

ויאמר פרעה אל יוסף אני פרעה ובלעדיך לא ירים איש את ידו ואת רגלו בכל ארץ מצרים. (מא:מד)
Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh; yet without you, no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." (41:44)

Pharaoh reasserts that Joseph is his subordinate. Joseph now has complete control over Egypt but it comes at a huge personal price: Pharaoh has complete control him. Joseph has lots of power, but very little freedom. **Joseph is the first Hebrew slave.**

Pharaoh's 7th and 8th Acts: Re-branding Joseph

ויקרא פרעה שם יוסף צפנת פענח ויתן לו את אסנת בת פוטי פרע כהן אן לאשה ויצא יוסף על ארץ מצרים. (מא:מה)
Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-phaera, priest of On. Thus Joseph emerged in charge of the land of Egypt.— (41:45)

The renaming (7th act) symbolically completes Joseph's transition (7, the biblical number of wholeness); the marriage (8th act) commences a new era of his life (8, the biblical number for new beginnings). Jewish tradition understands the new name, **Zaphenath-Paneah** to mean: **Revealer of the Hidden**. Egyptologists suggest that it means, **God speaks; he lives, or the sustenance of the land is he, the living one**. **The new name erases the private, personal significance of Joseph's life to his mother, and places him front and center on the national stage in a foreign land, subservient to a new, symbolic father.**

Shabbat Shalom and Hanukkah Sameah!

This Parasah Sheet is sponsored by Joan and Stuart Mitnick in honor of the Bar Mitzvah of their grandson, Eli Mitnick in Israel. Mazel Tov!