

וְהֵנָּה אֲנִיחֵנוּ מֵאֲלֵמִים אֲלֵמִים בְּתוֹךְ הַשָּׂדֶה וְהֵנָּה קָמָה אֶלְמָתִי וְגַם נִצְבָּה וְהֵנָּה תִּסְבֶּינָה אֶלְמֵיכֶם וְתִשָּׁחֲקִינִי לְאֶלְמָתִי. (בר' לז:)

Now here, we were binding sheaf-bundles out in the field, and here, my sheaf arose, and it was standing upright, and here, your sheaves were circling round and bowing down to my sheaf! (Gen. 37:7)

Commentators, scholars, and ordinary people like us who read the story of Joseph from year to year, tend to regard the seventeen-year-old Joseph's dreams as an arrogant kid's foreshadowing of his elevation to power in Egypt. To all of us armchair analysts, it's obvious that he thinks very highly of himself. Regarding the sheaf-dream, Nahum Sarna writes, *The agricultural motif here hints at the circumstances that will occasion Joseph's rise to greatness.* Here are two commentaries that make a similar point:¹

Ramban:	Sforno:
הָרְאוּהוּ שְׁעַל יְדֵי אֲלֵמוֹת וְתִבּוֹאָה יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לוֹ	הוֹרָה שֶׁתִּהְיֶה מְמִשְׁלָתוֹ קִימָה זְמַן אָרֶךְ
<i>The dream showed him that they would eventually come to bow down to him because of the sheaves and the harvest.</i>	<i>The dream purports that his position of power will be sustained for a long time.</i>

But maybe there is a deeper message in the details of that dream. After all, the brothers are shepherds, not farmers. They are part of a family tradition going all the way back to Abraham. Given the predominance of shepherds in the Bible's founding stories, (let us not forget that Moses and David were shepherds too) the Bible has defining predilection for shepherds over farmers. Why? The short answer is because in the biblical world-view:

Farming = wealth, power, and subservience.

Shepherding= innovation, independence, and iconoclasm.

The great powers of antiquity, like those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, developed their wealth and power because they were large agricultural societies.² For agriculture to sustain a large population, large numbers of people need to farm large areas of land. To plow, plant, irrigate and harvest, requires tremendous labor. To organize the production, processing and delivery of food, and to protect the land from enemies, requires a central power and a highly developed apparatus of state. It also requires the people to submit to the power of the sovereign in return for their

security and sustenance. In the biblical world-view, the shepherd, who roams in open grazing areas, and subsists off the land and its resources in relative freedom, while also interacting minimally with others, stands outside that structure. The shepherd is an independent, iconoclastic anti-authoritarian actor. **Generally speaking, while farmers are subservient to sovereigns, shepherds are their own masters.** Perhaps it is because of that ethos, that shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians, as we will see later.³ Moreover, those ancient agricultural societies were idolatrous. Idolatry is the exercise of human effort and imagination to influence and even attempt to gain control over the forces in nature so that people would survive and flourish. Those societies organized their rituals, worship and annual festivals around deities connected to the orderly functioning of the seasons. Thus, if you lived in Egypt and your survival depended on the orderly annual flooding of the Nile, you were going to want to do everything in your power religiously to find favor with the deity responsible for that. On the other hand, in the land of Israel, where survival depended on rain, it was more complicated. *The difficulties intrinsic in raising crops in Israel constantly tempted the farmer to turn to the idol worship of the Canaanite farmers and thus to break away from the belief in one God.*⁴ Bottom line: farming societies are fertile for idolatrous religions. But for shepherds, who operate independently or in confraternity with other like-minded shepherds, monotheistic religion in which *the Lord is your Shepherd*, is a more conducive fit. *Joseph's dream of the sheaves is situated on the boundary between two cultures and two religious world-views: shepherds and farmers.* When the brothers appear as harvesters in his dream, Joseph is symbolically stating to them that they have already traversed the boundary between shepherds and farmers. On the surface, this would have been a huge insult. Next thing you know, they are going to start worshipping idols! Add to that the humiliation of being subservient to Joseph - as symbolized by the brothers' sheaves bowing down to Joseph's sheaf - and it is no wonder that when they heard this dream, *וַיִּוָּסְפוּ עוֹד שָׂנְאוּ אֹתוֹ עַל חֲלֹמָתוֹ וְעַל דְּבָרָיו—they hated him still more—for his dreams, for his words.*⁵ On the other hand, maybe Joseph's dream revealed the brothers' secret desire, to break from their past, discard the nomadic

¹ Nahum Sarna, *JPS Commentary*, p. 256. See also the commentaries of Bahya, Hizkuni, Reggio, and Malbim.

² This idea is developed at length by Yoram Hazony in *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, (Cambridge, 2012), Chapter 4: The Ethics of the Shepherd, p. 103-139.

³ *They served him by himself and them by themselves and the Egyptians who were eating with him by themselves, for Egyptians will not eat bread with Hebrews—for that is an abomination for Egyptians.* Gen. 43:32.

For every shepherd of flocks is an abomination to the Egyptians, Gen. 46:34.

⁴ Nogah Hareuveni, *Desert and Shepherd in our Biblical Heritage*, p. 21-23.

⁵ Ramban has a beautiful comment on this verse: שְׂחִי שֹׂנְאִים אוֹתוֹ עַל הַחֲלוּמוֹת, וְגַם עַל הַסְּפֹר שֶׁהוּא מְסַפֵּר אוֹתוֹ לָהֶם כְּמִתְהַלֵּל—they hated him not only for the dreams but because he told them to his brothers in such a boastful manner. Storytellers beware of overdramatizing the tale! The audience will take it out on you.

life of shepherding altogether, and create a farming life that leads to wealth and power. Maybe they hate him not only because of his narcissism but because he touched a nerve when he revealed their truth!

וַיְהִי עוֹד חֵלֹם אַחֵר וַיְסַפֵּר אֹתוֹ לְאֶחָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה חֵלְמֵי חֵלֹם עוֹד וְהִנֵּה הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְאַחַד עָשָׂר כּוֹכָבִים מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לִי. (בר' לז:ט)

But he dreamt still another dream, and recounted it to his brothers; he said: Here, I have dreamt still [another] dream: now here, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me! (Gen. 37:9)

How are we to imagine what Joseph describes here? How does a star **bow**? Is this a group of stars, a made-up constellation organized around a mythic celestial Joseph, (like Orion or Aquila) bowing in unison, or are these stars streaming in the sky like comets or meteors **bowing** separately in sequence? Jacob, seeing himself and the family in this dream, caustically rebukes Joseph: *What kind of dream is this that you have dreamt! Shall we come, yes, come, I, your mother and your brothers, to bow down to you to the ground?* (37:10) Question: To whom is Jacob referring when he says **your mother**? Sarna: *Since she (Rachel) was long dead (Gen. 35:19), this is either a distortion, which is not an uncommon element in dreams, or a reference to Joseph's stepmother, Bilhah.* Perhaps. But couldn't we offer another interpretation? Maybe Rachel was still alive! Yes! Maybe her death while giving birth to Benjamin happened **after** this episode! But if that were the case, then there should have been ten stars in the dream, not eleven, because the eleventh brother, Benjamin, would not have been born yet! Here is my attempt to explain this: When Joseph dreams of the **sun, the moon and the eleven stars**, Jacob sees himself as the **sun**, Rachel as the **moon**, and the brothers as **the eleven stars**. But since there are only ten brothers at this point (Rachel still being alive) the dream is not only a

portent of Joseph's future power, **but also a prophecy that there will be an eleventh son!** When Jacob says, *What kind of dream is this that you have dreamt!* he is not only referring to Joseph's arrogance, brazenness and chutzpah, **but to the audacity of Joseph's prediction that he and Rachel will be having another son!**⁶ This explains why later on in the story, Joseph would be so interested in seeing Benjamin. When the brothers return with Benjamin on their second journey to Egypt, Joseph was overwhelmed with emotion because that



was the first time he ever saw his brother! Benjamin would have been in his early 20's.⁷

Joseph goes to Dotan. When Jacob sends Joseph to look for his brothers, Joseph travels quite a distance from Hebron to meet them in Shechem (red line on map) where they are pasturing their flocks. We know that Shechem is an important place for the brothers because of the Dina incident (Gen. 34). Were they going there to commemorate their rescue of Dina? Were they going there to build their solidarity in opposition to their father's favoritism of Joseph? Or were they just going there just for a change of scenery? Joseph looks for his brothers in Shechem but encounters a man in a nearby field who asks him what he's looking for. Joseph replies, *I seek my brothers, pray tell me where they are tending-sheep* (Gen. 37:16). To which the man replied:

They have moved on from here; indeed, I heard

them say: Let us go to Dotan. Joseph then goes to Dotan (blue line). Dotan was a located on the main highway that extended all the way from Mesopotamia to Egypt. Situated just at the edge of the central hill country and the very fertile Jezreel Valley it was a transportation hub that straddled the boundary between cultivated farmland and uncultivated pastureland, symbolic of the existential boundary that the brothers were straddling between farming and shepherding. Why would the brothers have gone there? They could have been looking for new pastureland; they could have been looking for the "action" of a big town, or they could have been looking to get involved



TEL DOTAN

in trade with the merchant caravans that often passed through there on their way to and from Egypt. After they threw Joseph into the pit, *they sat down to eat bread. They lifted up their eyes and saw: now here, a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilad,* (black line on map) *their camels carrying balm, balsam, and labdanum, traveling to take them down to Egypt.* (Gen. 37:25). It's at that moment that Judah proposes his

first foray into trade: selling Joseph as slave instead of killing him. After all, Judah reasoned, *he is our brother, our flesh.* There are so many different boundaries in the story of Joseph's dreams and his search for his brothers: the boundary between farmers and shepherds, pastoral nomads and itinerant traders, grazing hills and verdant valleys, dreams and reality, present and future. Maybe also the boundary between the hidden hand of God and the sequence of individual decisions that bring God's plan into being.

Shabbat Shalom!

Today is day 442 of the captivity of the hostages. We pray for them and their families. May God heal the wounded, and shield Israel from terror.

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Kim Pimley in honor of the 50th anniversary of Rabbi Malomet's Bar Mitzvah. Mazal Tov!

⁶ Maybe she had just gotten pregnant, or maybe she was already in an advanced stage of pregnancy, or maybe she would get pregnant after the whole episode. Who knows?!

⁷ Joseph was 17 when the story begins and 37 when the brothers first come down to Egypt. If Benjamin was born after Joseph was sold to Egypt, he would be in his 20's.