

# Parashat Vayeshev

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## Only a Dream?

This week we embark upon our annual reading of the riveting epic of Joseph and his brothers. This is a story that can be read on many levels. It describes in vivid detail the inner strengths and weaknesses of each of the individuals concerned. It examines the family unit of the Jacob clan; volatile and impossibly fragmented, but the story closes in unified togetherness. And let us not forget that behind this story, the entire destiny of the future “Children of Israel” lies in the balance. This story will take the Children of Israel into Egypt, “the house of bondage” and will transform them from a family to a nation.

In our shiur this week we are going to focus upon the multiple meanings contained within Joseph's famous dreams. Through this analysis we shall attempt to examine a little of the personality of the youthful Yoseph, and some of the family politics too!

### Chavruta Study

1. Read the opening Parsha 37:1-11

\* How is Yoseph described in our parsha?

\* Why is he singled out from all the other brothers?

\* Trace through the pesukim, the development of the brothers' hatred towards Yoseph.

2. The personality of Yoseph: See especially v.2-3.

- Rashi on "vehu na'ar" and "ben zekunim"

- See the Ramban too.

What do these mephareshim see as the reason that Yoseph is singled out from all the brothers?

Why should this arouse hatred?

3. Were Yoseph's dreams prophetic?

- What is implied from the simple peshat of the pesukim here (and what you know from the story later?)

- See Rashi on passuk 10

- See Radak on v.9 and Ramban on v.10. They have opposite views as regards the dreams. To your mind, who is nearer to the truth?

4. What do the dreams symbolise?

How do the brothers and Yaakov interpret the dreams?

5. Read the commentary of Seporno on this parsha. He views Yoseph as a naive youth. Do you agree with this assessment of Yoseph's personality?

## Shiur:

### INTRODUCTION

The initial stated cause of the hatred that the brothers feel towards Joseph is a Joseph's favoured status:

“And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.”

Joseph is given the special coat which they later tear from him with relish. It is not a secret that in this family that there are favourites. The brothers could see openly that their father “loved him more”. He was, after all, the firstborn son of Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel.

The classic commentaries abound with comments about Joseph's personality. They decipher the clues in the verses - an extra phrase here, a strange wording there - in order to build up a technicolour image of the young man. The phrase “na'ar – youth,” is taken to indicate Joseph's obsessive pre-occupation with his physical appearance (Rashi). Others see it as a certain naivety; Joseph fails to understand that he cannot act with an air of superiority in front of the brothers without arousing their hatred - he is immature and untested in life (Seporno). He is seen by some as victimised from a young age by the sons of Leah, the tension in the family being built into the system (Hirsch).

Others suggest that Yaakov used him as the director of the family's sheep business. That is why he was sent to check on his brothers and that is the meaning of the phrase “son of his old age”. He helped Jacob with his affairs in his old age (Ramban). But this aroused jealousy and suspicion. The Abarbanel insightfully points out that when the brothers saw Jacob drawing this child close to him, they became suspicious that this meant that he would be chosen and they would be ejected from the family. After all, in every generation until now, there has been only one heir to the legacy of Abraham. Maybe Jacob has Joseph “in training”? There could not be a greater inducement to loath Joseph than this.

All these comments contain a large measure of the truth and the complete picture would most probably tend to look something like a mosaic of all these views together. However, if we are to describe Joseph accurately and understand the nature of this filial hostility, we must look at one further aspect of Joseph's personality. We shall soon see, that more than anything else, Joseph is a dreamer.

### JOSEPH THE DREAMER

Dreams play an important role in Joseph's life. It seems that significant turning points in his life are the results of dreams. His brothers' hatred is the product of dreams. It is his ability to interpret and decode a dream that ensures his initial introduction to Pharaoh and his subsequent appointment to the position of Governor of Egypt. Indeed, it is specifically his dreams rather than anything else that seems to have aroused the greatest indignation amongst his brothers:

“They saw him from afar, and before he came close, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes that dreamer! Come now let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits ... We shall see what will become of his dreams!” (37:18-20)

The dreams are what they focus on. It is the dreams which make them want to kill him. Let us examine these dreams. Are they so dangerous, so threatening? Maybe they are in some way blasphemous? Or are they simply pompous, contemptuous self-aggrandisement? What are these dreams?

#### FROM SHEAVES TO STARS.

“Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brothers: and they hated him yet the more. He said to them, ‘Hear this dream which I have dreamed: There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf arose, and remained upright; and your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf’. And his brothers answered, ‘Do you mean to reign over us? Are you going to rule over us? And they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, ‘Look, I have had another: And this time the sun and moon and stars were bowing down to me.’ And when he told it to his father and his brothers, his father berated him: ‘What,’ he said to him, ‘is this dream that you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and brothers, and bow down to you to the ground?’ His brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind.”(Genesis-Bereshit 37:5-11)

That the dreams concern themselves with leadership - Joseph's leadership - no one can doubt. We will have to examine the symbolism contained within them, whether they are reflective of his own personal ambition and are therefore a reflection of self, or prophetic in nature, and if they are prophetic, the extent to which they actually came true.

Let us look at the dreams: They second is grander than the first. In the first, the setting is a work field. The sheaves of the brothers bow down to Joseph's sheaf. His is the only sheaf which is upright; his sheaf stands and they all bend to him. What is the dream saying? It states that Joseph is leader. But it might say far more; that Joseph will control his brothers in the sphere of agriculture, of food gathering, of material wealth.

In the second dream, the scene is set against a cosmic backdrop. This is a dream with a far wider scope. The entire universe, the sun, moon, stars, all pay homage to Joseph. In the first dream, the sheave bowed to Joseph's sheaf. Everyone was represented symbolically. But here, it is not Joseph's star that they bow to; here they bow down to him. He is the only human in the dream. The entire universe salutes Joseph.

“The entire world needs the sun and the moon. When one sees the sun and moon bowing to a person, it indicates that just as the sun and moon apparently in need of that person and so they pay homage to him, so the entire world is reliant and dependent on that person.” (Bechor Shor)

#### PROPHECY? THE SUBCONSCIOUS?

Are these dreams the result of Joseph's personal ambition surfacing in ever more ambitious ways or are these dreams messages from God.

On one hand we have seen God send messages to people through symbolic dreams. We only have to cast our minds back to Jacob's vision of the ladder. Dreams are assumed to be from God. Indeed, all the dreams that we see in the Joseph story come in pairs: “As for...having the dream repeated, it means that the matter has been decided by God and that God will act swiftly to carry it out.” (41:32)

When we think about it, this dream does come true; it is a herald of future events. Does Joseph not rise to power through food procurement, especially grain? And when Joseph, as Viceroy of Egypt, sees his brothers bowing to him with respect and not a little fear, we are told: “Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground.... Then Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them...” (42:7,9) The brothers bow to him in the context of their search for grain. It fits perfectly.

The Midrash makes a comment on Jacob's reaction to the dreams. We are told in the verses:

“His father berated him: ‘What,’ he said to him, ‘is this dream that you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and brothers, and bow down to you to the ground?’ His brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind” (37:10,11)

The Midrash writes:

“ HIS FATHER KEPT THE MATTER IN MIND: Rabbi Levi said .... He took out a pen and wrote the precise day, the precise time and the place (where the dreams would find their fulfillment)” (Bereshit Rabba 84:12)

But these very verses could easily prove that the opposite is true. Why does Jacob berate Joseph? Some commentators suggest that Jacob believed the dreams but that he had to lower the family tension so he told Joseph, in front of his brothers, that he thought the dreams were nonsense; but the truth was otherwise.

The Ramban does not follow this approach. He suggests that the dream was self created, a product of an over-inflated ego and overstretched ambition:

“How dare you dream such a dream? It is but your conceit and youth that bring up such matters in your heart, as it says (Daniel 2:38) concerning dreams, ‘YOUR thoughts came to your bed’.”

Indeed, the dreams never did come true in a literal sense. We never see ALL eleven brothers bow to Joseph. We certainly never see the brothers and Jacob bow down to him. Maybe the dreams are nothing more than a reflection of Joseph's high aspirations?

All the commentators discuss this issue in the light of Jacob's comments (above v.10) about Joseph's mother bowing down to him. Joseph's mother is dead! Does this prove that the dream is false? In one reading, that is what Jacob says to Joseph; “Just like your mother cannot bow down to you, so the entire dream is nonsense” (Rashi) But then we are reminded of the Rabbinic statement: “There is no dream without some nonsense” (also in Rashi) - maybe the insertion of his mother is a wild detail but could the rest be true?

As we have mentioned above, the sun, moon and stars do not have to correspond to the father, mother and brothers;

they might be a metaphor for the entire universe bowing down to Jacob; however, this exchange between Jacob and his son does raise questions as to the seriousness of these dreams.

## LEADERSHIP OF THE NATION

Would you kill for a dream? However arrogant and self righteous, however spoilt, precocious and full of himself Joseph may be, is that a reason to kill him? The brothers may have found him tiresome - so avoid him, keep away; don't speak to him. Where does this story undergo the transformation from a difficult family situation, to become serious enough to enter the realm of murder?

Maybe Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's interpretation of the dream gives us the beginning of a direction:

"It is remarkable that he should have dreamt of binding sheaves. That was something with which ordinarily they had no connection, they were shepherds. To become an agricultural people lay for them still as their destiny in the distant future. If agricultural was so much in his mind that he even dreamt of it, the brothers were justified in thinking that could only be due to the teaching and information given to him by his father Israel over the expected national destiny of the house. All the more then, could the brothers believe themselves justified in saying; Will you indeed in the future be king over us, or perhaps even now already rule over us? (v.8) Such a thought should not occur even in a dream!"

Rav Hirsch in his incisive comment notices that the brothers never bound sheaves. They were sheep farmers. The only time when we are to become agriculturalists is when the days of wandering will cease and we will have our own land. When we have a nation state. It is about this reality that Joseph dreams and it is precisely in the arena of political leadership of a future Jewish State that Joseph sees himself as leader. Joseph is putting down his own nomination for national leadership.

The struggles of this household are not your regular family quibbles. They are not arguing about who can use the telephone in the evenings or who gets to wash the dishes. The twelve sons of Jacob, from all that we hear about them, seem fully aware that they are not just any family. They know that this is a family who will become a nation. It is with this story that they have grown up since the cradle. They will become the fulfilment of the blessings of Abraham; "To your seed will I give this land." One day, there will be a country and a nation to lead. Who will be in control? Who will be the Prime Minister, the President, the King? The leadership of the nation is at stake.

Now Joseph is the pretender to the throne. That is a reason to raise the brothers' blood to boiling point. They are up in arms. As they say to him "Are you really telling us that you intend to take the leadership for yourself?" (v.8) Who are you? Who do you think you are? What about the Leah faction of this family? And as we are reminded so frequently in this painful world of ours, power struggles do not bring out the best in people. Rather, they often lead to conflict and bloodshed. This was no exception.

## THINKING AHEAD.

But Joseph is not simply an arrogant upstart. Joseph is actually a very talented and capable leader. He certainly has the personal charisma, charm, efficiency. He would appear to have the magic touch. Everything he touches turns to Gold! He is the favourite in Jacob's home. No sooner than he arrives as a slave in Egypt does he rise to the top of the ladder in the home of a prominent Egyptian official, running his entire business. He is attractive and attracts the attention of women. His personal charisma and organisational skills are exceptional. People in power are attracted to him and he is unusually successful at managing their affairs. He organises Potiphar's house and later he manages the Prison where he is held and all this is but training to run the entire Egyptian infrastructure through seven famine years and to emerge with a profit and increased strength! In every situation Joseph seems to shoot to the top with effortless ease.

Maybe we can suggest that his dreams form another link, not in a personal ambition of ego and power, but rather, in a responsible leadership role.

One detail in the passage about the dreams springs out of the page. The brothers hate Joseph before we even hear the details of the dreams. The brothers do not merely hate Joseph because of WHAT he is dreaming. They hate Joseph BECAUSE HE DARES TO DREAM! "Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brothers: and they hated him yet the more."(v.6) Before we are even told about the content of the dream (which intensifies their hatred another degree) we are told that they hated the very fact that he dreamed.

Joseph is a man who has a dream. He is a step ahead, He has a vision for the future. He has ideas for the direction the nation should take. Do his brothers share his long-sightedness? Do they share his vision? Rav Soloveitchik, in a public lecture expressed this idea in the following way:

"What did Joseph seek? To what did he aspire? What foreboding troubled him? The answer is: an obscure feeling of insecurity frightened him. What were the elements of this insecurity? - The Biblical Joseph was not persuaded that "Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's wanderings" (31:1) would endure for long. The words "Your seed shall be strangers in an alien land" (15:3) kept tolling in his ears. He saw himself and his brothers in an alien environment, far from the land of Canaan, in new circumstances and under new conditions of life. In his dream he saw "behold we are binding sheaves" ; we are no longer in Canaan, we are in the land of Egypt and we can no longer be shepherds. We are integrated into a new economy with new styles of living, characteristics and laws.... Basically he dreamt of a new framework within which the unity of the family could be preserved, even in the far flung places where the Creator of the Universe would scatter them. His constant preoccupation was the continuation of Abraham's tradition amidst a new economic structure and civilization.

The brothers did not understand him, for they looked upon the future as a continuation of the present. They perceived all problems from within the framework of their life in Canaan... In the traditional surroundings, in the thoroughly familiar habitat of the Patriarchs, they did not need new frameworks or novel economic methods.

The Biblical Joseph relates: "and behold the sun and the moon and the eleven stars bow down to me" - there is secular, great and powerful technology creating wonders and changing the foundations of our life. Even if it is true that in Canaan we can get along without it - his secular culture entails destructive elements, many negative and perverse aspects... - finally we will have to relate to it. The confrontation will not take place in Canaan, however, where the tempo of life flows serenely but in a new and alien land... God's decree: "Your seed will be strangers in a land not their own" will be fulfilled sooner or later. In "a land not their own", I fear, we will not be able to maintain the separation between us and the surroundings. If we will not be prepared for new conditions, the environment will swallow us! ... On the other hand, if we think of the future, we can plan..." (The Rav Speaks: Five addresses by Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik pg.27-29)

Rav Soloveitchik describes Joseph's forward thinking. He is a dreamer, a man of the future, or maybe a man who can intuit future events. He is the decoder, the interpreter of dreams. He pictures a future situation and wants to plan for it. The brothers, on the other hand, are happy with the status quo, happy to continue as shepherds in Canaan:

" Why do you meddle in the secrets of the All-Merciful? Why do you get involved in the secret plans of God?... We do not have to worry about the future - we will get by.."

The brothers disagree with Joseph. They argue with him and the ideology that he proposes. There is passionate discussion and debate within the family. They argue and put forward their positions. But in these delicate matters of family policy, emotions are sensitive, tolerance is minimal and defences are high. Joseph stands his ground but the brothers hate him and resent him for attempting to change their lives and the destiny of the family:

"...In this dispute in the name of heaven, Divine Providence decided in favour of Joseph, and the house of Jacob was saved from destruction only due to Joseph's dreams."

Indeed, Joseph supports the House of Jacob materially, physically. But he also shows them how to be Israelites, how to survive spiritually in a land which doesn't share their value system and beliefs. Joseph teaches them the art of spiritual survival in exile. In the final analysis, Joseph's "dreams" provide the family with the way to survive famine and exile.

## CONCLUSION

We have looked at the dreams, as source of family enmity, as prophetic prediction, as expression of leadership, and as ideological argument. It is interesting that the same dreams can be viewed in such different ways.

Dreamers are fine, but they are frequently unrealistic, detached from reality. Joseph's dreams cause upheaval and friction. It would be well to remember that this story ends in harmony. Joseph is creative, forward thinking and ambitious, but he must learn how he can take those God given talents and use them to advance his family and nation, in harmony with them rather than in conflict. At this stage the dreams cause conflict. In the long run both Joseph and his brothers will have to learn to live, together.