

Shabbat Kodesh: A Weekly Reader from Kodesh Press

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HOW DID YOSEF INTERPRET THE DREAMS?

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Yosef twice acts as an interpreter of dreams – once in prison, and once for Pharaoh. In both cases, one is forced to ask why no one else was able to interpret the dreams. Was it really so difficult to understand that if the cupbearer dreamed of serving Pharaoh again, that he would be returned to his job? Could the magicians and astronomers of Egypt not understand that skinny and fat sheaves and cows symbolized famine and abundance?

Yosef's innovation was not in the symbols, but in understanding the meaning of the numbers. Pharaoh's servants could not decipher the symbolism of the number three, and Pharaoh's magicians could not explain why there were seven cows and sheaves. Yosef's wisdom was in explaining the meaning of the numbers.

As everyone was preparing for Pharaoh's birthday, Yosef figured out that there were three days left until the event. A royal birthday was an occasion for clemency. Yosef begins his interpretation with this understanding: "The three branches are three days" (40:12); "Yosef answered, 'This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days'" (40:18).

Having learned the importance of numbers in dreams, he was able to understand Pharaoh's dream as well. The royal astronomers did not understand that seven objects represented seven units of time. Since famine and bounty are measured in years, Yosef was able to explain the dream. Again, he opens his interpretation with his unique understanding:

And Yosef said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same: God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do. The seven healthy cows are seven years, and the seven healthy ears are seven years; it is the same dream. The seven lean and ugly cows that followed are seven years, as are also the seven empty ears scorched by the east wind; they are seven years of famine." (41:25–27)

Yosef's intelligence here is combined with God's help. Yosef's intelligence allows him to interpret dreams; God gives him opportunities for interpretation.

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Uriel Simon (Bar-Ilan University) surveys approaches to Joseph's treatment of his brothers, and why Joseph never contacted Jacob after rising to power in Egypt.

Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor suggests that when the brothers sold Joseph, they made Joseph swear that he would never return or let Jacob know that he was alive. Joseph agreed in order to save his own life. He also addresses the question of Joseph's cruelty: Since Joseph had been sworn to silence, he needed leverage. Therefore, he manipulated events so that Benjamin would come and get captured, so that his brothers would have to tell Jacob themselves.

Rabbi Yehudah he-Hasid alternatively suggests that Joseph never contacted Jacob in order to preserve family unity. It was preferable to build up his case gradually to make his brothers feel guilty for selling him. Premature revelation would destroy the family forever, since Jacob would figure out what had happened. Although psychologically appealing, Joseph could not have known that he ever would see his brothers again. Therefore, it is still difficult to understand why

Joseph would not contact Jacob once he had risen to power in Egypt.

Regarding why Joseph never wrote home, Ramban (thirteenth-century Spain) rejects the idea that the brothers forced Joseph to swear, and instead suggests that Joseph wanted to

ONKELOS CORNER

Rabbi Jack Abramowitz

14. Pharaoh called and sent for Yoseif. He was rushed from the prison; his hair was cut, he changed his clothes, and he came in to Pharaoh. (Genesis 41:14)

The Torah says *va-yegalach*, which Onkelos translates as *ve-sapar*, "his hair was cut" as opposed to being translated as "he was shaved."

— Adapted from *The Complete Targum Onkelos*

help realize his original dreams. This required his family to prostrate themselves before him, but Benjamin and Jacob were missing in the brothers' original trip to Egypt. Joseph also wanted to test to see if the brothers had improved after 22 years. Joseph therefore acted the way he did to force the others to come to Egypt and prostrate themselves.

Abarbanel rejects Ramban's approach, since Joseph clearly was ruling over them already, and hardly needed Benjamin's physical prostration. Abarbanel suggests that Joseph's cruelty to his brothers was fitting punishment for their original cruelty to Joseph. They had accused him of spreading bad reports, and now Joseph accused them of being spies. They had thrown him into a pit (bor), and now Joseph threw Simeon into prison, also called a bor. He took Benjamin as slave, as they had sold him into slavery. Joseph was encouraged when the brothers admitted guilt for selling Joseph, but he still was

unsure how they would relate to Benjamin, Rachel's other son. Therefore, he hid the cup in Benjamin's sack to test their loyalty to him. Were Joseph to have revealed his identity earlier, he could not have implemented a full reconciliation.

From Rabbi Hayyim Angel, A Synagogue Companion

INTERESTING WORDS IN PARSHAT MIKETS

Mitchell First

אברך : This word appears only at Gen. 41:43 (*va-yikreu le-fanav avrekha*). Most of our commentators see the letters בְּרֵךְ and translate it as something like: "bend the knee." (But Rashi takes a different approach.) There is a widely quoted suggestion that the word is of Egyptian origin and means "attention!" Hayim Tawil, in his *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew*, mentions this suggestion but would rather use Akkadian to explain the word. He points to the Akkadian word *abarakku*, "steward." אברך eventually became a title for young rabbinic scholars. This is based on the statement of R. Yehudah quoted in Rashi: *av be-chakhmah ve-rakh be-shanim*.

חנוך : grass or reed (as food for cattle). This word appears twice in *Parashat Miketz*. It only appears one other time in Tanakh, at Job 8:11. It is a word of Egyptian origin.

אמהתָה : bag, sack. This word appears 15 times in Tanakh (in various forms). But all of its appearances are in *Parashat Miketz*! There is a verb ח-ת-ה that appears one time in

Tanakh (at Isa. 40:22) and means "spread out." Some relate אמהתָה to this verb. The suggestion is that it is a sack that spreads over two sides of the animal. But Tawil relates אמהתָה to an Akkadian word that means "carry, pick up."

תִזְמַרְתָּ : At verse 43:11, Jacob tells his sons to take from *zimrat Haaretz* as a present to Joseph. We all know that the root ז-מ-ר means "to sing." There are also a few occasions in Tanakh where the root means "to cut, prune, trim." (See Lev. 25:3-4 and Isa. 5:6.) But neither of those two meanings fit Gen. 43:11. (Yes, we could force the "cut" meaning into the term, but it is a stretch.) How do we solve this difficulty? We all know the verse in אז ישיר אז where God is described as עזיז וּזְמַרְתָּ (Ex. 15:2). The second word should be understood as if it were written זְמַרְתִּי. Now we would ordinarily translate the entire phrase as, "The Lord is my strength and my song." But in the early 20th century the ancient language of Ugaritic was discovered (based on excavations in Syria). Then we realized that in this Semitic language, the root ז-מ-ר could also mean "strength." Now Ex. 15:2 makes much better sense! It is a poem with two parallel words for "strength. We can use this "strength" meaning in Gen. 43:11 as well. Jacob is telling his sons to take from the strongest, i.e., best, produce of the land.

חרטמים : This word is found in Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel, and is always in the plural. Some relate it to the Hebrew root ט-ר-ח, "engrave." But most likely, the word is of Egyptian or Akkadian origin and meant something like "soothsayer priest," "magician," or "interpreter of dreams."

טפָח : child. This word appears in *Parashat Miketz* and throughout Tanakh. Its root is טפָח. (See Isa. 3:16.) But what does that three-letter root mean? It means "to toddle" (= to walk in an abnormal way.) So we see that it is not only in English that children are called "toddlers." They are called this in Biblical Hebrew as well!

*From Mitchell First,
Roots and Rituals Insights into Hebrew,
Holidays, and History*