Yoseif HaTzadik

The only two examples of Jews interpreting dreams in Tanakh are of Yoseif and Daniel: both in the courts of non-Jewish kings. To me, this is all one needs to know about Judaism’s stance on dreams; but, this is not to say that Judaism does not recognize the importance of dreams. Both Avraham and Yaakov anticipated and dreamed of the day when their progeny would become a nation and worship the one God. Yoseif, on the other hand, dreamed of the day when he would rule his family. Either this dream is the product of an egotistical youth not yet weathered by the vicissitudes of life, or the Torah is submitting to us a crystal clear window into Yoseif’s heart and vision.

In truth, even from his youth, Yoseif was a leader. This can be seen from the fact that the Torah states that Yoseif brought negative reports regarding his brothers to their father Yaakov. While one can slander Yoseif and call him a tattle-tale (even according to the Midrashim that claim the brothers only seemed to be sinning), in truth he was acting as his father instructed. Yaakov commanded Yoseif to bring these reports: “And Israel said to Yoseif: ‘Your brothers are pasturing in Shechem, are they not?’ Come, I will send you to them.… Go now, look into the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock, and bring me back word” (37:13-4). True, the Torah calls the reports bad. But, that is just describing the nature of the reports: the brothers were acting improperly, hence they were bad. In fact, the three biblical stories regarding the brothers, independent of Yoseif, taken literally are: 1: Shimon and Levi executing all the males of Shechem, 2: Reuvein sleeping with his step-mother, and 3: Yehudah marrying a Cnaanite and frequenting prostitutes. Not exactly stories that evince righteousness. Yoseif’s reports could not have been much worse than the Torah’s reports! Also, Yoseif did not go out to the pasture with his fellow shepherd brothers. Instead, he remained with his father. It must be that he stayed behind because he was part of the managerial staff. In fact, some commentators explain that the ketonet passim was a garment that indicated his choice status among his brothers. Also, his father sent him to check on their well-being and that of the flock. He was a leader even in his youth.

Throughout Yoseif’s life, everything he did was blessed. But, as opposed to the Avos who have direct interactions with God, and the occasional miraculous intervention, like Esther HaMalka, God is never found openly in Yoseif’s life. In fact, the only time God is even mentioned is when Yoseif attributes interpretations of dreams to Him. While God may be the source of blessing, the nature of God’s interaction in the world from the Yoseif perspective is indirect. In fact, not only is Yoseif the dreamer, but he is also the realizer of the dreams. In the following, I will argue that Yoseif is a highly skilled and intelligent socio-economic political leader who always ensures that he fills leadership vacuums, all the way from the top of his life until he dies at the age of 110. The dreams come true because he ensures as much.

The most important catalyst in Yoseif’s life, the cause of much family strife and personal promotion was dreams. While it is not hard to understand the root of Yoseif’s youthful dreams, how are we to understand Yoseif’s ability to interpret the dreams of the baker, of the butler and of Pharaoh? How did he know how to interpret dreams in the first place? Does God ensure that Yoseif’s interpretation comes to pass or is his prowess a level of prophecy? Really, one needn’t appeal to either of these options to understand Yoseif’s supernatural ability. Let us start with Yoseif’s first successful dream interpretation as his personal dreams were solely interpreted (mostly correctly) by his father and brothers, without him ever uttering a word either way regarding their meaning. While in jail for allegedly raping Potifar’s wife, Yoseif interpreted two separate dreams: one indicating that the offender would be vindicated and returned to his previous post in three days time, and the other sentenced to death also in three days. While Yoseif’s degree of precision and accuracy in his interpretations seem to prove he was blessed with a unique gift, there is actually more taking place behind the scenes than simple dream interpretation. For example, Pharaoh’s birthday – the only birthday mentioned in Tanakh - was well known to be the annual ‘Day of Judgment’ for those incarcerated in Egyptian jails. In other words, independent of the two dreams, Yoseif already knew that the two would be judged in three days time. Furthermore, Yoseif was the head foreman of the jail for many years, possibly as many as twelve. It would be silly to misjudge Yoseif and claim that he did not know, at least, the basic rules of Egyptian jurisprudence. Before the two stood before Pharaoh for judgment, Yoseif already knew their future. It is quite possible that the two also already knew their own fates as well, but as many incarcerated individuals remain optimistic, and hope that the standard punishment need not apply to him, for some reason or another, they were unable to see their fates for what it truly was: sealed. Here, Yoseif is not a prophet, not a mystical dream interpreter, but simply a man who can ‘*ro’e et hanolad*,’ foresee the obvious consequences, when others are blinded by subjectivity.

When we analyze Yoseif’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams, we find many suspicious elements ingrained in Yoseif’s interpretation. First, before Pharaoh even has a chance to comment on its validity or worth, Yoseif continues, apparently as though it were part of the interpretation: “Now let Pharaoh seek out a discerning and wise man and set him over the land of Egypt…. so that the land will not perish in the famine” (41:33-6). Part of the interpretation was the establishment of a new economic vizier who would be the savior of the country and region. Now, is there any reason that this new appointment should be an element of the interpretation? No one asked him for advice! In truth, Yoseif was establishing a leadership role for himself through the interpretation. And Pharaoh and his servants fell right into his arms.

If it is true as we have hypothesized so far, that Yoseif’s gift to interpret dreams is more a consequent of his intellectual abilities than his spiritual capabilities, then how do we account for the famine? How did Yoseif know that there would be one? First we should note that Yoseif announced that there would be seven years of abundance and seven of famine. But did that ever happen? Rashi explains that only two years of famine ravished the land. Once Yaakov arrived in Egypt, the famine instantly ended. There is no textual reason to deny this claim. So, while there were seven years of abundance, the seven years of famine never materialized. Nonetheless, everything else went so well up to then, there was no reason to hold Yoseif accountable for this failing. In fact, we could be sure that Pharaoh and the Egyptians were quite happy that there was a sudden cessation to the famine. Also, the verse states: “The earth produced during the seven years of abundance by the handfuls” (41:47), there are two ways to read this: 1. A tremendous amount was collected. But, when the Torah wants to say ‘a lot,’ it usually uses a word or a phrase like ‘uncountable’ or ‘without number.’ 2. Accordingly, the fact that it says “handfuls” seems to imply that the human element is what made the amount so much. The Egyptians made sure to gather every grain, every drop, during those years of abundance, and that is what made it into years of abundance.

But, how could Yoseif ensure that there would be years of famine following these years of abundance. The Torah commands that the Israelites leave their land fallow every seventh year, to uphold the Shmittah year. As the Torah commands not only for the perfection of the individual/society, but also for the benefit of surroundings, the Torah must be telling us that working a land for seven straight years will damage the land. As Egypt controlled the Levant during Yoseif’s reign, the Egyptians were able to overwork the land for seven years, ensuring that all the Egyptian and surrounding lands would be depleted of the soil nutrients for a normal crop in the eighth year and not produce a harvest, thereby guaranteeing a year, or more, of famine. This explains why Yaakov can command his sons to take of “the land’s glory,” including “balsam, honey, wax, lotus, pistachios and almonds,” (43:11) as these items would be unaffected by overworking the land.

If it is Yoseif that implemented a plan that would lead to himself lording over others, why was it necessary for him to torture his brothers? Some commentators like pointing out that Yoseif actively attempted to make sure that every aspect of his dreams come true. This is intellectually repulsive. Why would he care? He was already on top of the food chain, he did not need to rub their noses in it. Furthermore, as Rashi points out, Yoseif’s mother was dead so it was unlikely that Rachel would be prostrating before him any time soon. In order to understand why Yoseif mentally tortured his brothers, we must look at the formation of Bnei Yisrael. As is made clear in several places, a nation, in the Torah is started by twelve men, so when Yaakov fathered twelve sons, clearly that was meant to be the beginning of the nation. This is in stark contrast to Avraham and Yitzchak who both fathered two main sons, one of which would officially pass on the tradition. But, were the twelve sons meant to be the nation or were the grandchildren of Rachel meant to be the Israelites? Let us remember that Yoseif had two sons and Benjamin had ten: twelve in total. Clearly, the Torah is telling us that Yoseif and Binyamin might have just been another rung in the family tree before the nation was formed, like Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov was. Obviously, had this situation materialized, the other ten tribes would have been thrown into the group of potentially important, but in the end failed offspring of Avos, like Yishmael and Eisav. Also, the Midrash points out that Yoseif should have had ten more sons, but lost them when he desired Potifar’s wife. This Midrash also means to convey the idea that, as opposed to Rachel’s offspring of both Yoseif and Binyamin representing the start of the nation, Yoseif could have been one of the four Avos, and the Israelites would have been his twelve sons.

Yoseif was testing his brothers to see whether they were so far gone that they had to be excluded from Klal Yisrael or was there still hope for them. When Yehuda took responsibility for his brother, and openly displayed his penitent heart, it was made clear once and for all, that it was unnecessary to jettison the other ten brothers from Klal Yisrael. Had Yoseif not tortured the brothers, they would not have had the chance to prove themselves and become re-included in Klal Yisrael.