

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Miketz

Yosef's Advice to Pharaoh

Background: From Dream Interpreter to Royal Advisor

The beginning of our parsha describes how Yosef was able to accurately interpret Pharaoh's dreams as forecasting seven years of plenty and a further seven years of famine, something that had eluded the wisest of Egypt's men. What is quite astounding is that, having successfully interpreted the dreams, Yosef does not stop there, but rather proceeds to offer Pharaoh advice as to how to deal with the impending situation:¹

וְעַתָּה יִרְא פַרְעֹה אִישׁ נָבוֹן וְחָכָם וְיִשְׂיִתְהוּ עַל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם... וְחָמַשׁ אֶת
אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁבְעַת שָׁנֵי הַשָּׁבַע.

And now, let Pharaoh choose a discerning and wise man, and appoint him over the land of Egypt... and he shall prepare the land of Egypt during the seven years of plenty.

These words of Yosef are simply dumbfounding. Let us remember: he is a young and unimportant slave who has been brought out of prison for one purpose only – to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, which he has just finished doing. On what basis does he then feel authorized to offer Pharaoh unsolicited guidance as to how to run his country? Many commentators over the ages have discussed this question.² A most interesting approach taken by a number of them is that Yosef's advice was in fact not extraneous to his role as interpreter; rather, the ideas he expressed were *also contained within the dreams*. Let us consider the words of two Acharonim who follow this approach.

First Explanation: Standing Over the Nile

The Torah introduces Pharaoh's first dream by stating:

¹ Bereishis 41:33.

² See e.g. Ramban to *ibid.* verse 4, and Abarbanel and Ohr Hachaim to our verse.

וּפְרָעָה חֲלֵם וְהִנֵּה עֹמֵד עַל הַיָּאֵר.

*Pharaoh was dreaming, and behold he was standing over the Nile.*³

What is the significance within this dream of Pharaoh standing over the Nile? We can appreciate the appearance of the Nile itself in the dream, as the years of plenty in Egypt predicted therein derived from water that comes from the Nile. However, the idea of Pharaoh standing over it seems somewhat extraneous!⁴

The Bnei Yissaschar⁵ explains as follows. As we mentioned, the agricultural wellbeing of Egypt is provided by the Nile in the form of the water that flows therein. By introducing the dreams with showing Pharaoh that he was standing over the Nile, Heaven was indicating to him that in the years ahead, he would need to take over and assume the role of the Nile in providing for Egypt! In the years when the Nile would no longer be providing water, it would be Pharaoh who would need to arrange for providing food for his country. Thus, when Yosef proceeded to advise Pharaoh to take action to provide for Egypt's wellbeing, it was in his role of interpreter regarding this part of the dream!

In fact, there is a further point here. We see that Yosef does not advise that Pharaoh himself oversee the organization of the crops during the coming years, but rather, that he appoint someone else to do so. This too, says the Bnei Yissaschar, was part of his interpreting Pharaoh standing over the Nile. The contribution of the Nile to Egypt's agriculture is not detailed or ongoing in nature. It consists of a single decisive gesture – water overflowing its banks – which then needs to be handled by others in order to provide for the country. Likewise, in placing Pharaoh over the Nile, the dream was indicating that his contribution, too, was to take the form of a one-time “Nile-like” gesture – in this instance, the appointment of someone who would then take over the ongoing management of the crops in the coming years.

³ Verse 1.

⁴ Indeed, in Pharaoh's retelling of the dream, he actually edits this opening part, stating instead that he saw himself standing “עַל שְׂפַת הַיָּאֵר” – on the banks of the Nile.” As the commentators explain, the Nile was worshipped as a deity by the Egyptians, and as such, Pharaoh was uncomfortable informing Yosef that he had seen himself standing over his god. However, Chazal inform us (Zohar 1:196a) that Yosef was aware, not only of the version of the dreams as told to him by Pharaoh, but also of the original version, including the fact that Pharaoh was in fact standing over the Nile.

⁵ Tishrei, maamar 2 sec 24.

Second Explanation: Waking Up in a Dream

A different approach to this discussion begins by asking a seemingly simple question: How many dreams did Pharaoh have? This question relates to the Torah's words after Pharaoh's second dream, which state: “וַיִּקַּץ פַּרְעֹה וְהִנֵּה חֲלוֹם – Pharaoh awoke and behold, it was a dream.”⁶ These words are somewhat mystifying:

1. Having prefaced the episode by stating that “Pharaoh was dreaming,” it seems redundant to state that when he finally awoke, everything beforehand was a dream!
2. Moreover, as the verses describe, Pharaoh had two dreams that night, in between which he woke up. This now makes it somewhat inaccurate to describe what he had seen that night as “a dream”!

These questions lead certain commentators to conclude that, in fact, Pharaoh had only one dream that night. When the verse states that he woke up after the first dream and then went to sleep again before the second, this, too, was all part of the dream: he dreamt that he woke up from the first dream and went back to sleep again. While he was dreaming, it felt as if he really had woken up in the middle; however, when he finally did actually wake up, he realized that “וְהִנֵּה חֲלוֹם” – the whole thing had been one dream!⁷

Indeed, this was one of the reasons Pharaoh rejected the interpretations of the Egyptian wise men. Verse eight states: “וַיְסַפֵּר פַּרְעֹה לָהֶם אֶת חֲלֹמוֹ וְאִין פִּתְרָהּ – Pharaoh related his dream to them, but none could interpret them for Pharaoh.” We note that the verse describes him relating “his dream” – implying one dream, but then states that none could interpret “them” – implying more than one. For this was a significant part on his dissatisfaction with their interpretations: they all insisted in related to them as two separate dreams, not realizing that they were all one dream.

⁶ Verse 7.

⁷ R' Eliezer Ashkenazi, Maaseh Hashem, Parshas Miketz.

This is true even though Pharaoh himself indicated this in his description of the dreams. After relating the first dream he said that he woke up,⁸ but did not then say that he went to sleep again before the second dream, stating rather: “I saw in my dream.”⁹ No one picked up on this nuance. No one, that is, except for Yosef. The first thing Yosef says upon hearing the dreams is: “חֲלוֹם פְּרָעָה אֶחָד הוּא – Pharaoh’s dream is one.”¹⁰ With these words, Yosef indicated that he understood that both dreams of Pharaoh were really part of one big dream. We can now appreciate that, already from this stage, Yosef has Pharaoh’s attention!

This brings us back to Yosef’s advice. If Pharaoh’s two dreams were in fact one big dream, in the middle of which he dreamt he woke up, that means that *Pharaoh waking up was part of the dream*. It was to this part Yosef responded when he advised Pharaoh to take action, for part of the message in the dream was for Pharaoh to wake up and make provisions for the years of famine!¹¹

Here too, there is a further point, for as we noted, Yosef did not advise that Pharaoh himself should deal with the logistics of the coming years himself, rather, that he should appoint someone else to do it. The Be’er Yosef explains that this, too, was part of the dream. As the verses describe, after dreaming that he woke up, Pharaoh dreamt that he went back to sleep again. The full message of the dream is therefore that Pharaoh does indeed need to wake up, but only to the extent that he can then go back to sleep! In practical terms, this means that Pharaoh needs to take action in the form of appointing someone who will take charge of the planning for the years ahead, allowing Pharaoh to return to a dormant state.

⁸ Verse 21.

⁹ Verse 22.

¹⁰ Verse 25.

¹¹ Chida, Nachal Kedumim, Parshas Miketz..