

Do Dreams have Hidden Meanings? Can They Predict the Future?

Parshat Miketz

Genesis 41:1 – 44:17



Dreams play an important role in the story of Joseph. Not only is Joseph a dreamer; he is also an interpreter of the dreams of others. Using his insight and his keen knowledge of human nature, Joseph turns his unfortunate circumstances into an opportunity. As Pharaoh's chief minister he quickly rises to a position of power and authority unrivaled by anyone else in Egypt. Years later when his brothers show up in search of food during the years of famine, Joseph faces a new challenge. Should he reject his past and wreak vengeance upon his brothers or should he forgive them for the mistake. Joseph is torn between forgiveness and anger, the need for family and the desire to reject his parental home. In today's study we will explore the significance of dreams in the Jewish tradition.

Genesis 41:15-16, 25, 32

And Pharaoh said to Joseph: "I have a dream but no one can interpret it. Now I have heard it said of you for you to hear a dream is to tell its meaning." Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, "Not I! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare."

And Joseph said to Pharaoh: "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do...As for Pharaoh having had the same dream twice, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and that God will soon carry it out.

1. What does Joseph mean when he says: "Not I! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare." What is he saying about his interpretation of dreams?
2. Joseph speaks of God as a powerful force in the world to several people: Pharaoh, the cup bearer, the baker and later to his brothers. Yet he never personally experiences the God in the way that his father and grandfather did. How does Joseph know that dreams are a message from God?
3. How did Joseph become an interpreter of dreams? Why do you think he was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams while Pharaoh's wise men couldn't?
4. To what extent is Joseph's interpretation simply shrewdness and to what extent does he really believe what he is telling Pharaoh?

The JPS Torah Commentary on Genesis "God will see to Pharaoh's welfare:" The precise meaning of Hebrew *Ya'aneh shalom* is unclear. If it is connected with the phrase *sha'al shalom* "to pray for the welfare of" then it implies "God will respond (to me and grant) Pharaoh's welfare. It is not that Joseph knows the interpretation of the dreams in advance; rather, he is convinced that the sudden turn of events that has brought him from the dungeon into the presence of Pharaoh is providential for him. And he believes that he will receive a dream interpretation from God that will entirely satisfy Pharaoh. (Page 283)
(By Dr. Nachum Sarna)

The Encyclopedia Judaica, Dreams: The biblical view of dreams agrees substantially with that held by almost all ancient peoples. Dreams are visions of things actually transpiring on an ultra mundane plane, where persons are not bound to bodies nor events to specific moments and places. This plane is indistinguishable from that of the gods (or God), and dreams are therefore considered to be divine communications. (By Theodore Gaster)

1. Dr. Sarna suggests that Joseph's life experience has led him to conclude that God has big plans for him. He is now convinced that God will provide him with the means to interpret Pharaoh's dream. How does this interpretation reflect the Joseph we met earlier before he was sold into slavery?
2. Do you believe that God has a plan for you in your life? Can a person believe that God has a special plan for him without being (or at least sounding) egotistical?
3. Do you believe that dreams contain a message for us or are they simply a product of biological activity in our brains while we are asleep?

Babylonian Talmud Berachot 55b

A man is shown in a dream only what is suggested by his own thoughts.

A Talmudic prayer recited during the priestly benediction:

Sovereign of the Universe, I am yours and my dreams are yours. I have dreamt a dream and do not know what it is. Whether I have dreamt about myself, or my companions have dreamt about me, or I have dreamt about others, if they are good dreams, confirm and reinforce them like the dreams of Joseph, and if they require a remedy, heal them, as the waters of Marah were healed by Moses our teacher, and as Miriam was healed of her leprosy and Hezekiah of his sickness, and the waters of Jericho by Elisha. As Thou didst turn the curse of the wicked Balaam into a blessing, so turn all my dreams into something beneficial for me."

1. How are the attitudes in these two passages from the Talmud different from the comments above?
2. How can our knowledge of our own dreams help us understand ourselves?
3. Share a dream that you have had with someone close to you.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

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