

IN YOUR DREAMS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

With famine increasing in Canaan, Yaakov insists that his sons go to Egypt to procure grain that will secure his family's temporary wellbeing. Yosef, of course, is second in command in Egypt, and is in charge of apportioning the produce. He recognizes his brothers immediately, but they don't recognize him. Nor does he let on. In fact, he gives them a hard time, insisting they are spies, and insisting that Binyamin come down too. The Torah seems to be describing his motive for doing so when it writes (42:9):

Yosef recalled the dreams he had dreamed about them, so he said to them, "You are spies! You have come to expose the land's weaknesses."

It seems that the Torah's saying that he acted because he remembered his dreams. How did remembering his dreams lead him to take this tack? Ramban explains that Yosef knew his dreams had an element of prophecy, and must be fulfilled. The first dream called for all his brothers to bow down to him (independent of Yaakov), and thus he had to do something to ensure Binyamin's compliance.

The Chasam Sofer questions this: By accusing them of being spies, and imprisoning them for 3 days, Yosef was delaying food from reaching his father. Even if we accept that he couldn't reveal himself unless Binyamin came first, let him not cause his father undue hunger and discomfort.

He also asks: Why did Yosef dream two dreams which were, except for minor details, essentially the same - that his family would bow to him, rely on him, and recognize his authority? Also, in the first dream, the brothers are stalks of grain and so is Yosef - just that his stalk is straighter and stronger. In the second dream, the brothers are stars, his father and (step-) mother are the sun and the moon, and Yosef is himself. Why wasn't he a star too?

The Gemara (Beitzah 32b) remarks that one who relies on the support of others, "the world is dark for him." Why, asks the Chasam Sofer, does the Gemara refer to the world being dark. Perhaps his reliance on others makes things dark and uncomfortable for him, but not for the world!

Normally, it is the people whose lives are dedicated to Torah study and dissemination that must rely on other people's support. His supporters spend their days toiling in the dark recesses of the material world, far away from the light of the Torah and the Study Halls, while he spends his time enlightening himself and others with the Torah's infinite brightness. What the Gemara means, he says, is that the outside world is darkened for them - i.e. while they bask in the Torah's light, the rest

of the world, with great self-sacrifice, dwells in relative darkness in order to make sure they'll continue to be able to do so.

In the second dream, Yosef saw his brothers and parents as luminaries, because once Yaakov came down to Egypt, he and his sons were destined to set up Yeshivos and Study Halls in Goshen, while Yosef took care of all their needs. They were the stars and the sun that brighten the Earth, while he was "left in the dark" to take care of them.

In the first dream, they are all stalks of grain, as is he. At this stage they are still taking care of their own needs. Yosef realized that if his dream had them as stalks of grain, albeit imperfect ones, there must still be food left at home. Indeed this was the case. On their first trip, Yaakov sends the brothers not out of desperate need for food, but because he was concerned that while they still had enough to eat, others did not, and this could be the cause of great jealousy and animosity. He sent them to "make a show" of needing food, but for the time being the need was not yet pressing (see Rashi 42:1). Yosef knew this from his dreams, and was thus not concerned about delaying them for three days.

This explains why he wasn't concerned about keeping them a bit longer. It does not seem to explain what his motivation was for doing so. Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetsky zt"l explains that we first must understand that the brother's decision to kill Yosef, and then to sell him into slavery, was not a rash decision. There is no doubt that they considered Yosef a challenger to the autonomy of their fledgling family, and ultimately to K'lal Yisrael. With his dreams and his grandiose manner, they felt he was trying to push his way to the head and destroy their peaceful existence. Of course once the Torah was given, there are very specific circumstances under which the death penalty can be administered, but at this stage, they felt that his attempts to "stir the pot" of discord between father and sons was reason to have him killed. Perhaps even years later, they still considered themselves justified in what they had done.

Yosef needed to find a way to demonstrate to them that even when things seem so crystal clear, it's still possible to err gravely. Yosef as viceroy was clearly recognized as a wise and discerning person, yet clearly here he (appeared to have) made a grave mistake: They knew full well that they were not spies, even though circumstantial evidence might seem otherwise. Yet try as they might, they could not seem to convince the otherwise prophetic viceroy of their innocence.

Later, once Binyamin arrives, Yosef has his goblet placed in Binyamin's sack, and accuses him of stealing it. The brothers protest his innocence. But according to the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 92:8), they too are eventually convinced that he has nicked the infamous goblet! Once again they had jumped to conclusions, and mistakenly judged yet another brother based on extenuating circumstances.

Ultimately the truth is revealed. "I am Yosef!... His brothers could not answer him because of their uncomfortableness before him. (45:3)" The Midrash speaks of Yosef's revelation as a chastisement of his brothers, yet no where in his words do we find him chastising them. When he reveals himself,

says R' Yaakov, it at once becomes apparent to them just how far off the mark they had been. The viceroy hadn't mistaken them for spies; Binyamin was not a thief; and Yosef had never tried to pit them against their father. They realized their "objectivity" was no more than a cloak with which to cover up their judgementality; Yosef's point had been made.

It's enough to send a chill down your spine. If such wise and righteous men can so blatantly err in their judgement, how are we to be sure that the conclusions we reach about the conduct of others are based in fact, and not just circumstantial evidence, however incriminating? We can never be. Realistically, we must at times form opinions about others based on our perception of fact - after all we don't live in a vacuum. At least we can humbly remain aware of the frailty of our viewpoint, and always be willing to admit we've erred.

Have a good Shabbos.

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