“The Real Dream”

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One of the longest-standing controversies in Biblical commentary centers on whether Joseph was merely interpreting the Pharaoh’s macabre dream, or whether he was actually giving the Pharaoh advice. And likewise, whether he was promoting himself for the job of Chief Minister to Pharaoh and Uber-Administrator of the national famine relief program.

Most commentators agree that it would have been *chutzpadik*, presumptuous, for Joseph to dare to offer advice to the most powerful ruler on the planet, especially only moments after he was freed from two years in the dungeon.

Some say, therefore, that since Joseph could not have been *chutzpadik*, he most certainly was not offering advice. Some say that even though he most certainly was *chutzpadik*, his advice was part and parcel of the dream he’d been given to make sense of. In other words, it wasn’t about Joseph. It was about the dream, and about the Pharaoh, and therefore what could he do?

It doesn’t matter. It comes out the same either way. Either way, the Pharaoh feels listened to and understood, and he immediately appoints Joseph to that high position, whether or not Joseph was suggesting as much. Either Joseph is surprised by the offer, or he is elated that he managed to get into the Pharaoh’s head. But either way, he becomes responsible for carrying out a gargantuan effort to save the Middle East from starvation.

It seems to me that most people concentrate on the obvious details of Pharaoh’s dream, and therefore assume that Joseph does, too. The obvious – and memorable – details involve the seven fat cows being swallowed up by the seven lean cows, followed by the seven healthy ears of grain being consumed by seven emaciated ears. Joseph’s interpretation, therefore – at least the part that everyone agrees is interpretation and not editorializing – is that seven years of prosperity will be followed by seven years of famine.

The great Torah teacher Nechama Leibowitz, in discussing this passage, gives us an out-of-the-box commentator to shift our thinking about the entire affair. She quotes Rabbi Jacob Zvi Mecklenberg, the chief rabbi of Konigsberg, Germany until his death in 1865, who points out what appears to be a superfluous detail in the Pharaoh’s account of his dream.

The detail, which for you and me is merely narrative motion, but for Joseph is the all-important part of the recounting, is that Pharaoh twice reports “waking up.” He tells the first dream about the cows, then says “and I awoke with a start” – *va’ekatz.* He tells the second dream about the stalks of grain, then says again *va’ekatz*, “I awoke with a start.”

Why, asks Rabbi Mecklenberg, would anyone care about whether Pharaoh awoke? Wouldn’t it suffice to concentrate on the two bizarre tales?

Here is the rabbi’s answer: “Joseph understood from this that it was Pharaoh’s duty to arouse himself, awake to action in order to forestall disaster, by making all the necessary preparations in the period of plenty that would minimize the consequences of the forthcoming calamity.”

In other words, Joseph could see that to the extent that Pharaoh’s dream was prophetic, it was a message from on high for him to wake up. To get “woke,” we would say today. To come to his senses and realize that disaster was knocking at the door, and that he, the leader of his society, was the only one who could save himself, his country, and perhaps the entire world.

In this regard, the final part of Joseph’s speech to Pharaoh could be called “deep interpretation” or “advice.” But the “waking up” was part and parcel of the dream. It was, in fact, the only really crucial component of it.

What’s the lesson? Persons in positions of responsibility need to be fully awake to the situations over which they hold sway. They need to take stock, to assess, and to act compassionately and efficiently, sensitively and rationally, to head off disaster and to bring about prosperity and wellbeing. For Pharaoh, and for Joseph, the waking up *was indeed the dream*.