Shabbat Mi-ketz: Bereshit 41:1-52

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Shabbat shalom!

This is the phase in the cycle of parshiot when we play many of our greatest hits, and today is no exception.

Parashat Miketz recounts one of the most familiar stories in Genesis: Joseph's interpretation of Pharoah's dreams that a famine is coming after a few good years, and his elevation to the highest position in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself, to manage the food stores and avoid mass starvation. The action in this parasha moves beyond a mythic past when the earth and living things were created and humanity spread, beyond narrow family and tribal dramas, to politics and economics on a grand scale, in a very specific time and place.

The scene opens with Pharaoh waking from a dream – in fact a pair of dreams with similar structure. He first dreams of seven healthy cows grazing by the Nile, who are consumed by seven scrawny cows. In his second dream, seven solid and

healthy ears of grain are consumed by seven deadbeat ears that were “scorched by the east wind.”

There’s a beautiful literary device at work here - a parallel to Joseph’s earlier pair of dreams in Genesis chapter 37, likewise with similar structure. There, Joseph first dreams that he and his brothers were binding wheat in a field, when his brothers’ sheaves suddenly bowed down to his. In his second dream, it is the sun, the moon and eleven stars that bow down to him. These dreams were not well-received by his brothers, and after some complicated plot mechanics, Joseph winds up in an Egyptian prison at the beginning of this week’s parasha.

The themes common to all four dreams are striking: a familiar natural phenomenon - grazing cows, grain in the field, stars in the sky – doing something entirely unnatural and unexpected. Cows do not eat cows, grain does not bow or consume other grain, and who knows what a bowing star even looks like. These bizarre images cry out for interpretation.

The author was apparently so taken with the narrative device of parallel dream-pairs that he (or maybe she?) even used it a third time. The next morning Pharoah wakes up in a state of agitation (“ve tifa-em rucho” – translated by Uri Alter as “his

spirit pounded"). He sends for his magicians and wise men (hartumim ve hachamim), who are at a loss to help him.

His chief cup-bearer then tells the story of his time in Pharoah's prison, when he and the chief baker had dreams - once again: a pair of dreams - which were interpreted by a "Hebrew youth" – Joseph, of course. Joseph correctly prophesied that the chief cup-bearer would be restored to his post, but that the chief baker would be "impaled." As a side note, this last detail seems to be an unnecessarily gory account of the end of the baker. But it does serve an important narrative purpose: Pharoah has an aggressive approach to personnel management, and is not to be trifled with.

So what about these dream pairs, and Joseph's interpretation of them? That they come in pairs with similar structure indicates that they are not accidental – God is sending a message that should not be mistaken. Later on Joseph says so directly, in verse 32: "As for Pharaoh having the same dream twice, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and that God will soon carry it out."

And Joseph's interpretation of them is confirmed to be correct, immediately for Pharaoh with the cup-bearer's story, and in later chapters for us as listeners and

readers when the story plays out as prophesied. The text systematically provides evidence that Joseph's interpretations are divinely inspired – Pharoah and we don't need to take it just on faith, so to speak. Its approach is like a structured legal argument – almost modern in that regard.

So Pharaoh calls for Joseph, who is freed from jail and brought into the court, and asks Joseph to interpret his dreams. Pharoah's second recounting is more elaborate. Verse 19: "Presently there followed them seven other cows, scrawny, ill-formed and emaciated - never had I seen their likes for ugliness in all the land of Egypt. And the seven lean and ugly cows ate up the first seven cows, the sturdy ones; but when they had consumed them, one could not tell that they had consumed them, for they looked just as bad as before."

Too much information. Pharaoh in his agitated state has become a chatterbox. He seems to realize that something is off, and appears to be desperate for an explanation. Joseph sees an opportunity.

Here is where Joseph tells Pharoah that God was speaking to him through his dreams. Let's spend a moment on this. It may be that Joseph is framing his forthcoming interpretation in a way that Pharoah can accept. A short while ago

Joseph was a slave languishing in a jail cell, and now here he is, about to recommend economic policy to an absolute dictator. We have a good word for such an approach: “chutzpah.” By Joseph framing his interpretation as simply transmitting the intentions of God, he softens the imbalance so Pharoah will find it easier to listen to what he has to say.

As another side comment: I was struck here by the parallel of the stories of Joseph and Esther, both of whom rose from nothing to speak truth to power – founders of a great chutzpadick tradition. But that’s another drash.

Joseph then predicts a famine after a few good years of harvest. This was not a difficult prediction to make. Since time immemorial, agriculture along the Nile had relied upon the yearly flood, which brought both water and the silt that fertilized the soil. But the flooding was uncontrolled – some years too much water, which killed all the crops, some years too little, bringing drought – both of which resulted in famine. Remarkably, this uncertainty persisted in the Nile Valley until the completion of the Aswan High Dam in 1970. The natural phenomenon that drives this ancient story was still very much a fact of life in Upper Egypt well into the twentieth century.

Joseph then does something that Pharoah didn't ask for: he recommends specific action. Verse 34: "Let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered….Let that food be a reserve…for the seven years of famine." Pharaoh agrees.

Joseph's proposal to store up grain during years of plenty in order to avoid later famine is extraordinary - chutzpadick. The theology of Pharaoh's magicians and wise men would have sent them in a different direction. They would have told Pharaoh to make another offering or build another temple to appease the intercessory gods that they worshipped, who would then intervene to stave off famine.

In contrast, Joseph's proposal requires looking at the world in a different way – that there are natural phenomena which we cannot influence, and against which we need to take practical action to protect ourselves.

Let's rephrase Joseph's proposal in more general terms: pay a cost now to mitigate damage in the future. Nowadays we have a name for that: hedging a risk.

The mitigation of collective risk is at the foundation of good governance and modern society. It's the concept behind social security, fire insurance, and vaccinations. It's how ethical societies organize themselves. In Parashat Miketz we are seeing - for the first time in our tradition - a proposal for organized good government: action by the collective for the good of the collective, rather than each family, encampment, or tribe looking out for itself.

A final observation: one aspect of the Joseph story that is often overlooked is his frequent wardrobe changes. The story of his multi-colored coat and how it annoyed his brothers is well known. However, there is more in this week's parasha. Verse 14 says "Thereupon Pharoah sent for Joseph, and he was rushed from the dungeon. He had his hair cut and changed his clothes," and then verse 41 says "And removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharoah put it on Josephs' hand; and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck."

The way the text tells it, Joseph is a passive recipient of the nice cloths and bling that others are laying on him. However, this happens frequently to Joseph but never to anyone else, so I wonder how accidental it really is.

Joseph seems to realize that, in order influence people, it's best to look sharp. We can all learn. Parashat Miketz shows us Joseph's genius at work – he was the first Jewish economic policy pioneer, investment advisor, and fashion icon.

My big-picture lesson about our tradition from today's parasha is that we are responsible for our own fate. Rather than waiting for or trying to influence divine intercession to make things right, our tradition tells us that it is up to us, by our own practical actions - in the real world as we find it - to figure out what needs to be done and to do it, so that we, our community, our country, humanity, can protect ourselves and live well together.

Shabbat shalom!