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שמע בקולה

Dreaming in the Dark: *Miketz* and the Menorah

By Erin Leib Smokler

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Rabbinic holidays tend to come with their own narrative guideposts toward meaning. Purim has *Megillat Esther*. Tisha B'Av has *Megillat Eikhah*. Hanukah, however, lacks a scroll of its own. The *Book of Maccabees* was, after all, excluded from the canon. How, then, are we to discern the meaning of the holiday? What public reading is to shape our experience? The weekly portion of *Miketz* is read every year on or around Shabbat Hanukah—and therefore offers one important lens through which to interpret the holiday of light. Paying close attention to the story of Egypt's anticipated darkness, we can hear a message about Hanukah's power of illumination.

Parshat Miketz famously opens with an account of Pharaoh's dreams. In the first, seven fat, healthy cows are happily grazing in the reeds. Along come seven other cows—ugly, skinny, and sickly—and consume them completely. In the second dream, seven ears of healthy grain are growing on one strong stalk. Another seven ears then spring up, thin and scorched by the wind. Once again, the underdog wins, and the meager ears devour the hefty ones.

Agitated by these unnatural images, Pharaoh calls upon all of the magicians and wise men in his land to decipher for him their meaning. When they fail, Joseph is called out of captivity to accomplish the difficult task. Brought before Pharaoh, Joseph listens as the Egyptian monarch describes his dreams.

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The *Tanakh* understood long before psychoanalysis that the way we recount our dreams often discloses more than dreams themselves. What we choose to accent, what we add or subtract, speaks volumes about our unconscious desires or struggles. As Freud said, "[W]hatever the dreamer tells us, must count as his dream."[1] So let us pay close attention to the way that Pharaoh retells his nighttime tales to Joseph.

The content of the images remains largely the same as the "objective" narrative version, but their descriptions get substantially more colorful. The skinny cows go from being "ugly and gaunt"—"רעות מראה ודקות בשר"—to "scrawny, ill-formed, and emaciated—never had I seen their likes for ugliness in all the land of Egypt," says Pharaoh (Genesis 41:19). The seven ears of grain go from being just "thin and scorched" to "shriveled" ("צנומות") as well (Genesis 41:23). The greatest departure, however, between image and narrative—between the dreams as they were and the dreams as they are recounted—comes in Pharaoh's grotesque telling of cows consuming cows. In contrast to the matter-of-fact event described in the dream itself (Genesis 41:4), Pharaoh presents the following account:

> (כ) ותאכלנה הפרות הרקות והרעות את שבע הפרות הרשאונות והבריאות. (כא) ותבאנה אל קרבנה ולא נודע כי באו אל קרבנה ומראיהן רע כעשר בתחילה ואיקץ.
>
> (20) And the meager, foul cows ate up the first seven cows, (21) and they were taken into their bellies, and you could not tell that they had come into their bellies, for their looks were as foul as before, and I awoke. (Genesis 41:20–21)

Even with food in their sunken stomachs, says Pharaoh, no change could be detected in these sickly cows. They were stuck in their condition of malnourishment, no matter how much they consumed. This horror, this image of immitigable

[1] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966), p. 104.

misery, of irreversible pain *even in the face of plenty*, is what stirred Pharaoh from his sleep. An unpleasant dream had become a surreal nightmare.

Like a good psychoanalyst, Joseph's interpretation of the dreams follows from his patient's account of them. Asserting that both dreams convey the same message—"חלום אחד הוא"—he determines that Egypt will experience seven years of fat and fullness followed by seven years of famine and hunger. But the key interpretive move, I think, is less the description of *what* will be, and more the description of *how* it will be experienced. In Joseph's telling, the objective facts of שבע and רעב, of abundance and depletion, will yield to a terrifying subjective, inner reality. After the seven years of plenty, he says,

> (ל) וקמו שבע שני רעב אחריהן ונשכח כל השבע בארץ מצריים וכלה הרעב את הארץ (לא) ולא יודע השבע בארץ מפני הרעב ההוא אחרי כן כי כבד הוא מאד
>
> (30) And seven years of famine will arise after them *and all the plenty will be forgotten* in the land of Egypt, and the famine will ravage the land, (31) *and you will not be able to tell there was plenty* in the land because of that famine afterward, for it will be very grave. (Genesis 41:30–31)

This is the real curse of the coming famine: Not the loss of the food; not even the anxiety of starvation. No doubt, those would be devastations, too. The greatest challenge, according to Joseph, would be the curse of forgetfulness, the blinding of hopelessness. Seven full years of satiety will be obliterated in the consciousness of the Egyptian people the very instant trouble hits. "ולא יודע השבע בארץ מפני הרעב ההוא—And [they] will not be able to tell that there was plenty in the land because of that famine afterward." Pain, alas, has a terribly sad way of erasing memory. Overwhelmed by present suffering, one often forgets that it was once—and might again be—otherwise. Countervailing experiences simply disappear. As Rashi points out, this is the dire, decoded meaning of Pharaoh's bovine nightmare of "ותבאנה אל קרבנה ולא נודע כי באו אל קרבנה—[T]hey were taken into their bellies and you could not tell that they had come into their bellies" (Genesis 41:21). When circumstances feel hard enough, one can take in a heavy dose of nourishment and still find oneself starving.

Joseph truly understood, through Pharaoh's retelling of his dreams, what the challenge of the Egyptian people would be, and he met it head-on. He proposed a preemptive strike, not only against famine, but against hopelessness itself. During the seven years of plenty, he suggests, food should be collected and stored under Pharaoh's authority, not to be touched until such time as it is necessary. When the famine hits, there will thereby be sustenance at the ready. Prepare for the crisis, and you will avoid it, Joseph seems to indicate. Insist upon the solution even before the onset of the problem. Most importantly, inject a reminder of past glory into present suffering and you will safeguard that rosy memory. You will recall what was, accept what is, and perhaps conjure hope for what might yet be. Remnants of plenty will enable people to imagine its future possibility.

> והיה האוכל לפקדון לארץ לשבע שני הרעב אשר תהיין בארץ מצריים ולא תכרת הארץ ברעב.
>
> And the food will be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine that will be in the land of Egypt, that the land may not perish in the famine. (Genesis 41:36)

With "reserves" to rely on, neither the people nor their spirits will crumble with the help of Joseph's plan.

Midrash Rabbah (89:1) on the opening line of our *parsha*—"ויהי מקץ שנתיים ימים"—hears resonances of the verse from Job 28:3, "קץ שם לחשך"— God puts boundaries on, or an end to, darkness. The Midrash continues, "זמן נתן לעולם כמה שנים יעשה באפלה." Roughly translated: Some years are given to the world to linger in shadows, but know that there is an end.

The story of *Miketz* is the story of the end of Joseph's darkness. Years after being thrown into a pit, he now rises to power. He has traversed the shadows. From the scorn generated by his

own early dreams to the triumph generated by his interpretation of Pharaoh's, the divinely orchestrated circle closes, and he emerges as second-in-command over the Egyptian empire. But it is also the story of Joseph's own assertion of "קץ שם לחשך." Before the darkness even descends, he puts its end in place. He establishes a "פקדון," a reserve of hope, to stave off the stings of starvation and to assure the people that light and life will return, even when memory fades, even when it is hardest to see.

This, I think, is also the message and the imperative of Hanukah. For eight days, during the darkest part of the year and during the darkest part of the night, we light candles. As one interpreter, quoted in *Iturei Torah*, says so beautifully, commenting on the halakhic prescription to light the menorah after sunset:

> מצות הדלקת נר חנוכה נחוצה בעיקר בזמן שקיעת החמה, בזמן שהחושך מכסה ארץ וערפל לאומים והלב מתכווץ מבדידות ויאוש, ונדמה שאין קרן של תקוה וניצוץ של אור וכולו כל הקיצין–דווקא אז מצוה להדליק נר חנוכה, להעלות אור, לרגש את היאוש, ולשאוב ביטחון ואמונה.
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> The commandment of candle-lighting on Hanukah is necessarily and essentially at the time of sunset, at the time when darkness covers the land and a fog [descends on] the nation; when the heart contracts from loneliness and despair and it looks like there is no ray of hope or spark of light, and like brighter times have ended. Just then must Hanukah candles be lit to raise light, to banish despair, and to draw in confidence and faithfulness.

When we've forgotten the brilliance of summer days and the warmth of sunnier times; when the natural world around us hides its life and grows thin and shriveled; when we've despaired of the bounty of blossoms and rebirths, we are called on to create light—joyfully and publicly. Instead of yielding to the erasure of those sweet memories, on Hanukah we are charged to audaciously assert, precisely when it is most difficult to assert, that an end to the darkness will come.

Indeed, it will always come. With the help of a reserve of light, a glimmer of the glory of times past, the shadows will pass, our tradition teaches, "קץ שם לחשך." There are built-in limits to all darkness, this holiday reminds us, if we are willing, like Joseph, to actively and preemptively seek light.

Hag urim sameah!
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