

Joseph Remembered the Dreams

A D'var Torah on Parashat Mikeitz (Gen. 41:1 – 44:17)

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“Vay’hi mikeitz sh’natayim yamim uFaroh choleim.”
“Two full years passed. Then Pharaoh had a dream.”

“Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. He remembered what he had dreamed about them.” Understand this as, “Joseph recalled the dreams that he had dreamed about them — **and all that the dreams represented.**” This was the turning point in Joseph’s life. It was that peak moment, often during stress or challenge, when the world stops — when the past, present and future become one, when challenge is clear and a person stops to ponder and reflect. It is when goals and problems, stress and conflict, vision and experience call out to be reconciled. It is a time of solitude and freedom of choice, when one makes key decisions — to take needed action or retreat, to rise to the occasion or remain passive, to speak out or forever hold one’s peace.

Joseph was troubled. His life was a roller coaster. His father loved him and grieved his “death.” Joseph’s brothers hated him and had considered killing him. He was separated from his family. His family had problems, including manipulation and deception, stagnant leadership and the wounds of guilt and grief from his brothers’ dealings with him. Joseph had lost and regained his freedom several times, been bought and sold and had already spent a goodly part of his life as a slave and in prison. He was industrious and gifted, yet his personal results were mixed at best. He had a track record of provoking negative feelings in others: his father, his brothers, Potiphar, Potiphar’s wife, the baker, the cupbearer — all had troublesome relationships with Joseph.

In “remembering the dreams,” Joseph confronted multiple problems, including his knack for making people angry. Joseph brought bad reports about his brothers, which could have been a responsible thing to do, *lashon harah* (idle gossip) or *hamotzi shem rah* (character assassination by telling falsehoods about a person), depending on the circumstances. The Rabbis speculate whether the reports were true, but we have no reason to believe Joseph told falsehoods. Joseph was loveable — he was his father’s favorite, for which his brothers hated him. He was open and accurate in relating his dreams to his family. He shared a dream with his brothers (their sheaves bowed to his), which made them hate him even more. He shared a second dream with his brothers and father (the sun, moon and eleven stars bowed to him), further irritating his brothers and incurring his father’s displeasure. Later, in refusing the seductive advances of Potiphar’s wife, Joseph showed moral character, loyalty to his employer, adherence to his commitments, and

self-control. This infuriated Potiphar's wife, who told lies about Joseph and resulted in Potiphar's imprisoning Joseph for years. In prison he correctly interpreted the chief baker's dream, as a result of which the chief baker lived for three days with the knowledge and terror of his impending beheading and impalement. Joseph accurately interpreted the chief cupbearer's dream, ultimately resulting in the chief cupbearer guiltily confessing his "offenses" to Pharaoh of failing to inform Pharaoh of Joseph's correct interpretation.

Peoples' responses to Joseph's responsibility, accuracy, loveable nature, good looks, honesty, openness, high moral stature, adherence to commitments, self-control and loyalty was to hate him, want to kill him, sell him into slavery, tell slanderous lies about him, imprison him, live in terror, feel guilty, and forget him!!! What was wrong with this picture? Joseph had much to learn about himself and about people.

In remembering his dreams, Joseph not only remembered his specific youthful dreams about his father, mother, brothers and himself, but also considered key events leading up to these dreams. His life flashed before his eyes, as did his family's history. Having grown up to with his family, Joseph would have known his family stories about his ancestors. He reflected on his own personal and his family's strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, status quo and future challenges. He remembered and pondered over the lessons found in his family and personal experiences and pondered over their importance to the present.

From family history Joseph remembered and learned: Abraham recognizing God (belief and monotheism); Abraham's treatment of the three strangers (hospitality); Abraham negotiating with God about Sodom and Gomorrah's fate (the interactive nature of man's relationship with God, responsibility for others, and the ability of one man to make a difference). The binding of Isaac taught faith and the welfare of your own family. Abraham purchasing the Cave of Machpelah taught fairness and win-win business relationships. Abraham representing Sarah as his sister taught flexibility to survive and thrive among hostile strangers. From extracting the birthright from Esau, Joseph learned aggressive contract management and manipulation juxtaposed on placing family leadership into competent hands. From Rebecca guiding Jacob in tricking Isaac and obtaining his blessing, then arranging for Jacob's safety from Esau's wrath, Joseph learned recognizing a woman of valor and women's abilities, taking effective action, and teamwork. From Jacob purloining Isaac's blessing, Joseph learned trickery juxtaposed on achieving goals. From working twice-seven years for Rachel, Joseph learned working hard to achieve one's goals and delayed gratification, trickery in business, honoring social custom, and adhering to a contract. From Jacob negotiating with Laban, Joseph learned working through difficult business relationships. From Jacob wrestling with the stranger, Joseph learned struggling "with beings divine and human" and

prevailing to shape and define oneself. From the rape of Dinah by Shechem, subsequent killing of all males of Shechem's family and city by Simeon and Levi, and plundering by Jacob's other sons, Joseph learned improper sexual relations and family anger. From Reuben lying with Bilhah (Rachel's maid and Jacob's concubine), Joseph learned improper sexual relationships and family politics. From Jacob reconciling with Esau, Joseph learned healing troubled relationships and forgiveness.

Joseph's lessons from family history were Values and Character: Religious (belief, faith, monotheism, man's struggle with self and God, and God and man's interactive relationship); Personal and Social (hospitality, responsibility for others, honoring social customs, survival, flexibility, healing troubles, anger, relationships and forgiveness); and Business (fairness, win-win relationships, contracts, trickery, manipulation, hard work, and difficult business relationships).

From his personal history Joseph remembered: Jacob favoring Joseph (jealousy, sibling rivalry and being set apart from the group); Joseph's youthful preening (narcissism and ignoring the feelings of others). Joseph's first dream (sheaves) taught hatred; Joseph's second dream (sun, moon, stars) taught challenging the status-quo in a vacuum; Joseph's first and second dreams taught vision without direction, missed leadership opportunities, and ignoring people's feelings and reactions. The debate of what to do with Joseph (Simeon and Levi, by tradition, wanted to kill him, whereas Reuben and Judah spoke to spare him) taught small-group dynamics, divisiveness, and identifying positive leaders. Being sold to the Ishmaelites/Midianites then to Potiphar taught a person's value and slavery. Joseph's rise to manage Potiphar's house taught competence, hard work and faithfulness as stepping stones to upward mobility. Potiphar's wife's attempt to seduce taught keeping focus on one's goals and values, facing temptation, self-control, and the challenges of virility and beauty. Potiphar's wife's wrath taught frustrating another's goals, abuse of power, false testimony, gossip; managing "people problems," and defending oneself. From the Chief Cupbearer's dreams, Joseph learned achieving goals by working with others. From Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph learned competence, faithfulness and vision as stepping stones to upward mobility and freedom. From recognizing his brothers, Joseph learned understanding his family members as people with strengths and weaknesses in need of leadership and love. From "remembering what he had dreamt about them" Joseph learned understanding himself as a person with strengths and weaknesses in need of leadership and love.

Joseph's lessons from personal history were Leadership Development: Jealousy, being aware of the consequences of his actions, getting the message across without causing anger, the threatening nature of challenging

the status quo without a game plan, vision without enrollment and direction, small-group dynamics (leadership, decision making, consensus development and planning), and the value of competence, loyalty, dedication and hard work. Joseph learned avoiding seductive distractions, treading carefully when frustrating others' goals (especially those in power), how to work with others and use relationships to mutual advantage, the importance of vision and working with people in understanding problems and solutions, understanding himself and others as people with strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement, and using this understanding to align business, family and personal goals. Finally Joseph understood himself to be an indispensable force in his family's survival and well-being.

In remembering the dreams, Joseph's life flashed before his eyes. He realized that a competent person must be aware of the consequences of his actions. A good leader relates to people as humans, speaking to their sensitivities and needs. An outstanding leader is not only aware of people's humaneness, but also inspires others and is an individual in whose presence others grow, become competent, and achieve their own dreams.