

Torah Talk - מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Vayetzei
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פרשת ויצא
ט' בכסלו תשע"ט

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* (Genesis) 28:10-32:3

In this *parasha*, Yaakov flees to his uncle Lavan's household and lives there for several years, marrying Lavan's daughters, Leah and Rachel, and establishing a large family.

This is the beginning of a section of the Torah about which we can quote Bible scholar Andrew Lloyd Weber: "Strange as it seems, there's been a run on crazy dreams..."

The *parasha* opens with Yaakov dreaming of a ladder "set up on the earth with its top reaching into heaven, and behold, angels of God ascending and descending on it." This dream will be followed in coming weeks with Yosef's dreams of sheaves of wheat bowing down to his sheaf, and the sun, moon, and 11 stars bowing down to him. We will also soon read about the butler's and the baker's dreams about grapes and loaves of bread, and Pharaoh's dreams of thin ears of corn swallowing fat ears of corn and thin cows swallowing fat cows.

Yaakov's dream of the ladder is not the first dream in the book of *Bereshit*. In *Parashat Vayera* (20:3-7), God comes to Avimelech in a dream to tell him that Sarah is Avraham's wife and he should return her to her husband. This dream, however, is of a very different quality than the dreams that follow it. In Avimelech's dream, there is a clear message given directly to him. In the dreams of Yaakov, Yosef, the butler and baker, and Pharaoh, the messages are given through a series of symbols and allegories. This is a much more complex type of dream.

Human beings, as part of our higher cognitive skills, view many things symbolically. A piece of white cloth is just a piece of white cloth, but sew onto it thirteen stripes

and fifty stars, and it becomes the symbol of our country, to be treated with reverence and respect. (Note how symbolically we think: I am sure you got the allusion immediately, despite the fact that actually there are only seven red stripes and a background of blue with fifty cut-outs of stars sewn onto a white background.)

What becomes difficult in the case of allegorical dreams is not recounting the dream; it is interpreting what the dream means. Show the following symbol to a Washingtonian, and the majority will know immediately what it means:



But show it to a foreign visitor, and it is likely that they will find no meaning in it, or perhaps misinterpret the symbol as representing Walmart or some other enterprise.

The talents of Yaakov and Yosef (and for that matter, the Biblical Daniel, known as *ish chamudot* [a man greatly beloved] due to his ability to interpret dreams) lay in their ability to understand the meaning behind the symbolism of the dream.

Are dreams a message from God? Are they induced by our subconscious? Are they in response to our own psychological make-up and needs? People have debated these questions for many years, and there is no way to verify the answers.

A long discussion about dreams occurs in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Berachot* 55. Says R. Hisda, "A dream which is not interpreted is like a letter which is not read." How right he is! Many people report having their dreams of the previous night color everything that happens the following day. At least part of that disturbance is not being able to understand what the dream meant and what it is trying to tell us.

The Talmud continues:

Mar Zutra and R. Ashi were once sitting together. They said: Let each of us say something which the others have not heard. One of them began: If one has seen a dream and does not understand what he saw, let him stand before the *cohanim* at the time when they spread out their hands, and say as follows: 'Sovereign of the Universe, I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. I have dreamt a dream and I do not know what it is. Whether I have dreamt about myself or my companions have

dreamt about me, or I have dreamt about others, if they are good dreams, confirm them and reinforce them like the dreams of Yosef, and if they require a remedy, heal them, as the waters of Marah were healed by Moshe, our teacher, and as Miriam was healed of her leprosy and Chizkiyahu of his sickness, and the waters of Jericho by Elisha. As you did turn the curse of the wicked Bilaam into a blessing, so turn all my dreams into something good for me.’ He should conclude his prayer along with the *cohanim*, so that the congregation may answer, Amen! If he cannot manage this, he should say: You who are majestic on high, who abides in might, You are peace and Your name is peace. May it be Your will to bestow peace on us.

Whether dreams are messages from God or not, our traditional sources suggest that we turn to the Divine to help us understand them and to turn them into good omens for us and for those we love.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Do you remember any of your dreams? If you do, what do you think they meant?
- What is the difference between a dream one has while asleep and a “daydream”?
- Where do you think dreams come from?