



Learning to Re-Read Our Dreams

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Parashat VaYigash 5785

As he approaches the man that he thinks is the viceroy, entrapped in the massive lie that Yosef has arranged, Yehudah begins to tell the truth.

It has been a long road to this moment. For so long, the brothers have been committed to a lie, the vision of their family as they wished it was, in which their father loved all of them, in which there was no favorite—most beloved wife and her favorite, most beloved sons—the family they tried desperately to create the day they sold Yosef, and that, as they saw Ya'akov cry for years over Raḥel's beloved son and refuse to be comforted, they must have understood they would never have.

That is the story of their family that they told the man they think is the viceroy, when they first came to Egypt.

בראשית מב:י-יא

¹⁰ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו לֹא אֲדֹנֵי וְעַבְדֶּיךָ בָּאוּ לְשִׁבְרֵךָ אֲכָלִי: ¹¹ כָּלֵנוּ בְנֵי אִישׁ אֶחָד נָחֲנוּ כְּנִים אֲנַחֲנוּ לֹא הָיָה עַבְדֶּיךָ מִרְגָּלִים:



Bereishit 42:10-11

¹⁰But they said to him, “No, my lord! Truly, your servants have come to procure food. ¹¹We are all of us sons of the same man; we are being honest; your servants have never been spies!”

Echoing the reality the brothers wished for, they told Yosef simply that they are ten brothers, sons of the same man, completely ignoring the existence of Ya’akov’s two favored sons by Raḥel.

But gradually, as Yosef pressured them, this account unraveled. When Yosef accused them of being spies, the brothers acknowledged that they are, in fact, twelve brothers, although the youngest is at home and one is “no more”:

בראשית מב:יג

וַיֹּאמְרוּ שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר עֲבָדֶיךָ אֲחִים אֶנְחֵנוּ בְּנֵי אִישׁ אֶחָד בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְהִנֵּה הֶקְטַן אֶת אֲבִינוּ הַיּוֹם וְהָאֶחָד אֵינָנוּ:

Bereishit 42:13

And they replied, “We your servants were twelve brothers, sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more.”

The brothers still refused to acknowledge the painful differences between them. They did not mention that they have multiple mothers, much less mothers with different ranks within the family. Explaining that Binyamin is at home, the brothers simply referred to him as the youngest, emphasizing his age rather than his treasured status as Raḥel’s only remaining son. They described themselves as they wished Ya’akov saw them: all as children of one father, equally valuable regardless of which mother they come from.



Only now in Parashat VaYigash, in their final encounter with Yosef, after he has accused Binyamin of stealing, do the brothers change their narrative to one that more fully reflects their complicated, painful reality. Yehudah explains:

בראשית מד:כ

יֵשׁ לָנוּ אָב זָקֵן וְיֵלֵד זְקֻנִּים קָטָן וְאֶחָיו מֵת וַיִּזְתֵּר הוּא לְבָדּוֹ לְאִמּוֹ וְאָבִיו אֲהָבּוֹ:

Bereishit 44:20

“We have an old father, and a young son of his old age, but his brother died and he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him.”

Here, for the first time, Yehudah explains that Ya’akov’s sons have different mothers, and that two of those sons were special to Ya’akov because of their mother. He describes Binyamin as Ya’akov’s “*yeled zekunim*,” echoing the phrase “*ben zekunim*” that long before indicated Yosef’s status as Ya’akov’s favorite son, implicitly acknowledging that, in Yosef’s absence, Binyamin is now Ya’akov’s most beloved.¹ Everything the brothers have done—the terrible crime they committed to try to change their family, to try to make their father into someone different, someone who could love all his children—has failed.

After decades of denial, Yehudah tells the truth about their family as it is, instead of clinging to the dream-lie about the family as he wishes it were. Their father had a favorite wife, and sees that wife’s children as his primary sons. Yehudah goes so far as to quote his father’s words to them: “You know that my wife gave me two sons” (Bereishit 44:27). These words are doubly painful: they refer to Raḥel simply as “my wife,” not “one of my wives,” and states simply “my wife gave me two sons,” with no mention of Ya’akov’s ten other sons. They are, in effect, the inverse of the brothers’ original report to Yosef, in which they described themselves simply as

¹ Bereishit 37:3.



ten sons of the same man, excluding Rahel's children entirely. Ramban, in his commentary on Yehudah's statement, expands on Yehudah's painful admission:

רמב"ן על בראשית מד:כז

וְזֶה טַעַם "יִלְדָּה לִי אִשְׁתִּי", כִּי לֹא נִוְלְדוּ לִי מֵאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר הָיָא אִשְׁתִּי בְרִצּוֹנִי רַק שְׁנַיִם, וְשְׁמִתִּי אֶהְבֵּתִי בָהֶם כְּאִלוֹ הֵם יְחִידִים לִי, וְהִשָּׂאֵר כְּבִנֵּי פִילְגָשִׁים הֵם אֵלַי, "וְאַחִיו מֵת", וְזֶה לְבַדּוֹ בְּנֵי יְחִידִי אֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֵּתִי.

Ramban Bereishit 44:27

This is the sense of the words, "my wife bore me": "for from a woman that was my wife of my own will there have been only two sons born to me, and I have bestowed my love upon them as if they were my only ones, the rest being to me as if they were children of concubines. And with his brother Yosef dead, this one alone is my only son whom I have loved."

This admission is what Yosef has been waiting for all these years, ever since he dreamed his first dream. His brothers have come to him and admitted his central place within the family while literally bowing down before him. They have acknowledged what Yosef has always known: that his father loved him best.

We might have expected Yosef to use this moment to assert his dominance over his brothers, now bolstered by his position as Pharaoh's second-in-command and his access to the food his family desperately needs. Instead, however, Yosef greets this moment not with triumph, but with tears. And as he reveals his identity, Yosef also proposes a new position for himself within the family—not as its privileged center, but as its caretaker:

בראשית מה:ז-ח

⁷ וַיִּשְׁלַחֲנִי אֱלֹקִים לְפָנֶיכֶם לְשׁוֹם לָכֶם שְׂאֵרֵיט בְּאֶרֶץ וְלִהְיוֹת לָכֶם לְפָלִיטָה גְדֹלָה: ⁸ וְעַתָּה לֹא אֶתֶם שְׁלֹחֲתֶם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִּי הָאֱלֹקִים וַיְשִׁימֵנִי לְאָב לַפְּרָעָה וּלְאֲדוֹן לְכָל בֵּיתוֹ וּמִשָּׁל בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:



Bereishit 45:7-8

⁷“God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. ⁸So, it was not you who sent me here, but God—who has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt.”

When Yosef hears Yehudah talk about his father’s love for Rahel’s children—and his lack of love for his others—Yosef finally understands his dream differently. What he thought his dream was about, what he thought he wanted all these years—his proper place at the center of the family—seems meaningless in the face of Yehudah’s courageous truth-telling and its accompanying pain.

Suddenly, Yosef realizes that his destiny, his dream, was never about a coat or rulership or who bows to whom. It was always about the responsibility of standing in the center and providing for the whole, of making sure that all were fed and counted and loved. Yehudah shows Yosef who all the brothers truly are: men who have longed all their lives for a father’s love in a family where they know they will never have it. That truth allows Yosef to understand his own life and dreams differently. In the face of Yehudah’s revelation, Yosef undergoes a revelation and transformation of his own.

Dreams, hopes, and longings are tricky things. For us, as for Yosef, understanding what our dreams mean depends on our ability to see the people around us as they truly are, rather than the projections we so often imagine them to be. When we cannot see others as fully human, it is all too easy to interpret our dreams too quickly; to imagine that they place us at the center, waiting for our greatness to be acknowledged. But when others tell us the truth about who they are, and when we are brave enough to listen, those dreams can change—and along with them, we change as well.



Dream interpretation is not easy. It requires a willingness to constantly re-read and reinterpret those around us and ourselves. It requires that we be ready to reimagine what our roles might be, and what possibilities the world might present. It requires, above all, a willingness to admit that our first reading might have been wrong, and that other, better readings might be possible.

And in a world where we're so invested in our first and loudest interpretations, that task of re-reading our own dreams, our own texts, our own lives, in ways that honors others as fully human, may be the most difficult religious work of all.

