



How Do You Climb Out of a Pit?

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Parashat Mikeitz teaches that dreams hold immense power: the power to bring downfall or renewal, life or death, destruction or creation, war or peace. This means that the way we, as human beings, pursue a dream—whether out of spiritual emptiness or fullness, with an expectation that it will disconnect or connect—places before us both choice and responsibility.

Dreams mark turning points in Yosef's life. Yosef falls into the depths because of dreams, and he is lifted from those depths for the same reason. He is thrown into the pit on account of his dreams:

בראשית לז:יט-כ

¹⁹וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו הִנֵּה בָעַל הַחֲלֻמוֹת הֵלֵךְ בָּא: ²⁰עַתָּה לְכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ וְנִשְׁלְכֵהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת וְאָמְרֵנוּ חֲזִיהַ רָעָה אָכְלָתָהּ וְנִרְאָה מֶה יְהִי חֲלֻמֹּתָיו:

Genesis 37:19-20

¹⁹They said to one another, “Here comes that dreamer! ²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his dreams!”



And he rises from the pit because of a dream as well:

בראשית מא:יא,יב,יד

¹¹וַנְחַלְמָה חֲלוֹם בְּלַיְלָה אֶחָד... ¹²וַנִּשֶׂם אֶתְנוּ נָעַר עִבְרִי... וַנְּסַפֵּר לוֹ וַיַּפְתֵּר לָנוּ אֶת חֲלֻמֵּינוּ... ¹⁴וַיִּשְׁלַח פָּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא אֶת יוֹסֵף.

Genesis 41:11,12,14

¹¹“We had dreams the same night.... ¹²A Hebrew youth was there with us... we told him our dreams, he interpreted them for us.”... ¹⁴Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Yosef.

How Does One Get to the Bottom of a Pit?

The description of the pit into which Yosef is thrown reveals, according to the *midrash*, something significant about the spiritual state of those who took part in the act. The verse states: “The pit was empty; there was no water in it” (Genesis 37:24). The *midrash* reads this as a critique of Yosef’s brothers, who acted against the Torah by selling their brother:

בראשית רבה פד:טז

אין בו מים, אין בו דברי תורה שנמשלו למים, היה מה דאת אמר (ישעיה נה, א): הוי כל צמא לכו למים, כתיב (דברים כד, ז): כי ימצא איש גנב נפש מאחיו, ואתם מוכרים את אחיכם.

Bereishit Rabbah 84:16

“There was no water in it”—there were no words of Torah in it, for Torah is compared to water. As it says, “All who are thirsty, go to the water” (Isaiah 55:1). And it is written, “If a man is found kidnapping one of his brothers...” (Deuteronomy 24:7). But you[, Yosef’s brothers,] are selling your own brother!

This interpretive reading suggests the brothers were spiritually wanting water—wanting for Torah. Reading it raises a similar question about Yosef himself: perhaps he too was in a

spiritually waterless place—devoid of Torah. It is unclear whether this emptiness is the state into which he is cast, or the state that led to his being cast there. Either way, the empty pit represents the low point, also spiritually, to which Yosef the dreamer descends as a consequence of his dreams.

Yosef's brothers hate him: "And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him" (Genesis 37:4). And the dream severs connection, and adds yet another layer to the unraveling of their relationship: "Once Yosef had a dream that he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more. He said to them, 'Hear this dream that I have dreamed'" (37:5-6).

R. Isaac Samuel Reggio,¹ in his commentary Be'ur Yashar on the Torah, adds a harsh description of Yosef's initial descent into the pit—one that makes clear the depth of estrangement among the brothers, an estrangement expressed as a refusal to listen:

ביאור ישר בראשית לז:כד

וישלוכו אותו הברה ... והנה אין ספק שיוסף בכה וצעק הרבה בעת ההיא ובצר לו התחנן אליהם שיחמלו עליו ויפדו את נפשו מרדת שחת, וכן כתוב להלן בפירוש אשר ראינו צרת נפשו בהתחננו אלינו ולא שמענו (לקמן מב:כא).

Be'ur Yashar on Genesis 37:24

"They threw him into the pit..." There is no doubt that Yosef cried and screamed greatly at that moment, and in his distress begged them to have compassion on him and save his life from descending to the grave. As it is later written explicitly: "we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us" (Genesis 42:21).

¹ Italy, 1784-1855.

The scene is heartbreaking: Yosef is a victim at the hands of his own brothers. They choose not to listen—they hear the dream, but not the dreamer.

How Does One Climb Out of a Pit?

Indeed, something significant begins with the choice to listen. The verse describes: “Midianite merchants passed by, and they pulled Yosef up out of the pit” (Genesis 37:28). The Hizkuni² explains: “The Midianite traders passed by the pit into which Yosef had been thrown and heard him crying and weeping.” In contrast to the brothers, here there is a choice to hear.

While Yosef’s own dreams are the backdrop for his brothers’ abuse, closed ears, and their separation from him, the dreams of the royal officials—and ultimately Pharaoh’s dream—initiate a process of attentiveness and relationship. Yosef chooses to notice and respond. Once again Yosef finds himself in a pit, this time in Egypt. With him are Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker, who have also been imprisoned: “Yosef **came** to them in the morning, **saw** them, and behold—they were troubled. And **he asked**...” (Genesis 40:6-7). Yosef does not ignore his surroundings, as he may have earlier when faced with his brothers’ hatred. He sees the faces of his fellow prisoners and responds. Out of this connection, Yosef can also make a request: “Please, do kindness with me...” (40:14).

A dream used as a bridge to relationship is one step toward emerging from a pit. Now it seems that Yosef is in a different spiritual state —unlike the emptiness that marked his initial fall. In interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams, Yosef presents himself as someone grounded in connection to God, and this becomes the basis for his ability to interpret the dreams. This self-description is effectively Yosef’s own testimony about his spiritual condition: “Yosef answered Pharaoh, saying, ‘Not !! God will see to Pharaoh’s welfare!’” (Genesis 41:16). This

² R. Yehezkel ben Manoah (France, 13th c.).



framing is absent from his earlier interpretations of the cupbearer's and baker's dreams. Now Yosef is ready to emerge from the pit.

Conclusion

The pattern of Yosef's emergence from the pit mirrors the pattern of his descent into it. Yosef is cast into the pit amid a spiritual low and as a result of a dream that severs relationships. The break is so profound that it becomes the foundation for an inability to hear.

In contrast, his ascent from the pit takes place when listening returns—when there are those who hear Yosef's cry, and when Yosef himself chooses to listen. Now, the dreams are dreams that connect. The insistence on giving the dream serious space—not dismissing it, but attending to it within reality—is accompanied by spiritual fullness, a connection to God.

May we find the courage to listen and hear, to encounter connecting dreams, and to engage them with generosity of spirit.

