A Few Thoughts on Parashah Vayeishev (Genesis 37:1 - 40:23; Amos 2:6 - 3:8) December 12, 2025

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Dreams feature prominently in the entire TaNaKh, especially in the Book of Genesis. Some dreams are prophetic, but most dreams are symbolic and must be interpreted with great wisdom and insight. Dreams often function as a medium for HaShem to express providence, demonstrate sovereignty, and warn. And dreams can steer historical events and foresee political upheaval. In Parashah Vayeira, HaShem appears to Avimelech in a dream to disclose Sarah's true relationship to Abraham and prevent him from committing adultery. In Jakob's ladder dream in Parashah Vayetze HaShem promises him protection and renews the covenantal blessings; and in his nocturnal wrestling match with that mysterious entity in last week's parashah, which some commentators suggest was a dream, he receives the additional name of Yisrael. Overtaking Jakob and his family as they flee Padan Aram, Lavan tells Jakob that although he has the power to harm him, HaShem had warned him in a dream to beware of speaking with him either with good or with bad intent (31:24-29). In Judges 7:13-15 a Midianite soldier dreams that a loaf of barley rolls into the Midianite camp and destroys a tent, which another soldier interprets as the sword of Gideon, who will prevail over the Midianites. In I Kings 3:5-15 when HaShem appears to Solomon in a dream asking what he wishes to receive, Solomon asks for wisdom, which pleases HaShem enough to add wealth and honor to the requested wisdom. In I Kings 13:1-5 a "man of God" sent to prophesy against the altar at Bethel and predict the rise of King Josiah dreams that the altar splits and the ashes spill out. And in Daniel 2:1-49 and 4:4-37, Nebuchadnezzar experiences two significant dreams containing divine messages. The first prophesies a succession of empires, beginning with his own in Babylonia, while the second foresees his downfall and later restoration after he repents. But nowhere in our TaNaKh are dreams more prominent than in this week's and next week's parashiot, honing Joseph's character and guiding him toward his true calling. This week Joseph appears first as dreamer, and only later as interpreter of dreams, a talent that will eventually propel him into the second highest office in Egypt. When we meet him, Joseph is the quintessential spoiled brat, strutting around in the extravagant coat Jakob gave him and bringing back slanderous tales about the sons of Jakob's concubines, the brothers he is closest to. When he does not hesitate to tell his family about his dreams of superiority over them, his brothers have had enough. We know what happens next. And we also know that Joseph ascends from the darkness of the pit into which his brothers throw him to a position of responsibility in the house of his Egyptian master, only to be thrown into prison due to the slanderous accusations of his master's wife. Our commentators make it clear that at this juncture in his life he is still very immature, flaunting his good looks and oblivious to the danger of his master's wife. The *shalshelet,* that wavering Torah cantillation sign of indecision over "he refused" (39:8) is revealing. Midrashim vary on whether he actually succumbed to her wiles, but most say he did not, crediting a vision for saving him from sin. "At that moment his father's image came and appeared to him in the window. It said to him, 'Joseph, the names of your brothers are destined to be written on the stones of the ephod, and you are to be included among them. Do you desire your name to be erased from among them, and to be called an associate of promiscuous women?' … because of Joseph's ability to withstand this trial, he merited to become a shepherd of the Jewish people." (Tractate Sotah 36b) He still descends into the darkness of prison, where his ability to interpret dreams finally emerges. His first dreams might have made him dimly aware of HaShem's presence in his life, but it is not until his confrontation with Potiphar's wife that he actually acknowledges this: "… Now how can I commit this great evil and sin against God?" (39:9) It is noteworthy that the word used here is *elohim*, not יהוה. That word first appears in verse 21: "יהוה was with Joseph, and He was benevolent and gave him favor in the eyes of the prison warden." The word *elohim* denotes a general sort of divinity and power, whereas the unpronounceable יהוה is deeply personal and all-encompassing. It means that Joseph is slowly beginning to recognize his enormous talents and their divine origin. He readily and accurately interprets the dreams of his fellow inmates, Pharaoh's cup bearer and chief baker. When he finally reemerges, he is ready to use his gifts with wisdom and humility. These two dream-filled parashiot fall at the darkest point of the year here in the northern hemisphere, and they usually coincide with Chanukah and the winter solstice. The overarching theme of these parashiot and of Chanukah and the winter solstice is the movement from darkness to light, and from despair to action, renewal, and redemption. Dreams, powerful flashes of divine inspiration, are the catalysts in Joseph's rise to power and in the unlikely victory of a tiny band of guerilla warriors over the powerful Greek army. In the darkness of prison, Joseph's youthful vanity gives way to humility and mature responsibility. In the darkness before the decisive battle, Judah Maccabee receives a dream that will propel his men to victory. And in the dark days of Roman oppression our Talmud sages invent the story of the "oil miracle" (Shabbat 21b), cleverly shifting the focus of Chanukah from military victory to HaShem's miraculous intervention. Divine light can penetrate the darkness of prison, of desecration, of brutal occupation, and of the longest night of the year. Our world desperately needs this light to dispel the darkness of greed and hatred that is causing so much unnecessary pain.

Shabbat shalom!