Why Didn't Pharaoh Listen To His Wise Men?

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel

In Parashat Mikketz, Joseph rises to national prominence by interpreting Pharaoh's dreams and rescuing the country and the surrounding areas from starvation.

It is odd, though: Pharaoh had a court filled with wise men, educated in the finest institutions of the ancient world. They had offered their own interpretations, but Pharaoh rejected them, opening the path for Joseph: "Next morning, his spirit was agitated, and he sent for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men; and Pharaoh told them his dreams, but none could interpret them for Pharaoh" (Genesis 41:8).

Commentators wonder: How could Pharaoh have known that the interpretations of his wise men were incorrect?

Perhaps Pharaoh simply intuited that their interpretations were lacking. Upon hearing Joseph's interpretation, the truth resonated with Pharaoh. The Sages refer to this phenomenon as *nikkarin divrei emet*, truth is evident (Sotah 9b).

Several commentators, including Ramban and Abarbanel, submit that Pharaoh was certain that the two dreams really were manifestations of the same dream. Pharaoh's wise men erroneously understood them as two separate dreams, whereas only Joseph perceived that they were one (Genesis 41:25, 26, 32).

Rashi suggests that the wise men proposed negative interpretations that Pharaoh did not want to accept. He wanted to hear a more optimistic outlook.

I would like to offer an alternative possibility that is the opposite of Rashi's interpretation. Pharaoh's wise men were on Pharaoh's payroll, and no doubt benefited substantially for their services. As they needed to please their employer, they always were sure to interpret Pharaoh's dreams in the most positive possible manner.

This time, however, Pharaoh believed that his dreams carried an ominous note. He suddenly needed someone with vision and integrity, who would speak the truth. He could not trust his well-paid employees who always said just the right thing.

Enter Joseph, summoned from prison. To garner the Pharaoh's favor, he too could have constructed a positive meaning of the dreams, hoping Pharaoh would release him from prison. Instead, he humbly speaks in God's name, with complete integrity.

Pharaoh was thunderstruck. He was so used to hearing the same flattering drivel from those who benefited from the royal payroll, that he never encountered a person like Joseph who was humble and filled with vision and integrity. Joseph was a strikingly refreshing voice in Pharaoh's court: "And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, 'Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?'" (Genesis 41:38).

If this interpretation is correct, the episode resembles a later narrative in the Book of Kings. The wicked King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom wanted to go to war against Aram. He consulted his 400 court prophets, who all knew exactly what the king wanted to hear: "'March,' they said, 'and the Lord will deliver [Aram] into Your Majesty's hands'" (I Kings 22:6).

The righteous King Jehoshaphat of the South, however, was not deceived by the groupthink of these so-called prophets. Instead, he insisted on finding an independent prophet of God who would speak a true vision. Ahab begrudgingly conceded that there was one true prophet, Micaiah—but Ahab hated him because he always prophesied negatively.

Sure enough, Micaiah prophesied that Ahab would perish were he to go to war. But the king had a choice—he could heed the prophet and opt *not* to go to war! Sadly for the wicked King Ahab, he followed his court prophets and perished in that battle.

In our Genesis narrative, Pharaoh was wiser than that. Through his listening to Joseph's challenging interpretation, Pharaoh rescued his kingdom. Well-paid wise men on Pharaoh's payroll were unreliable interpreters of critical events. The visionary Joseph, willing to speak a potentially unpopular truth to an all-powerful ruler, prevailed.