Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Mikketz

View PDF



Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Mikketz:

Interpreting the Dreams of the Cupbearer and the Baker

The Torah narrates the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker in parallel, inviting readers to compare their imagery and outcomes. Both officials "dreamed a dream on the same night, each according to his own interpretation" (Genesis 40:5). Yet with all their similarities, subtle distinctions guide the reader toward opposite fates.

The cupbearer sees a vine budding and flowering, its clusters ripening into grapes—a process of vitality and growth. The baker, by contrast, dreams of loaves already baked and ready for consumption. The cupbearer is active in his dream, squeezing the grapes and serving Pharaoh. The baker is entirely passive, watching as birds devour the bread from the baskets on his head. In the first vision, Pharaoh receives wine from his servant's hand; in the second, Pharaoh receives nothing at all. The contrast points toward one dream signifying renewal and restoration, the other loss and destruction.

Commentators such as **Radak** note that even from the imagery alone, one can infer the positive message for the cupbearer and the negative one for the baker. Yet, as **Abarbanel** observes, the precision of Joseph's interpretations still requires divine insight. Human observation might discern tone and trajectory, but not the exact outcome or timing. We can never fully know where human wisdom ends and divine assistance begins.

The Torah further deepens the psychological and linguistic unity of these episodes. Both the narrative and the characters present the two dreams almost as one: "The cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt both dreamed a dream (*halom*) in one (*ehad*) night… And they said to him, 'We dreamed a dream (*halom*), and there is no one to interpret it (*oto*)'" (40:5–8). Their shared distress arises precisely because they perceive their experiences as a single, fused dream of shared destiny.

When Joseph interprets the cupbearer's vision favorably, the baker immediately follows: "When the baker saw how *tov* (well) he had interpreted it, he said to Joseph…" (40:16). Commentators differ on the meaning of *tov*. **Sforno** and **Shadal** understand that Joseph gave the dream a *favorable* interpretation; **Rashbam** and **Hizkuni** interpret *tov* as "correctly"—that Joseph had interpreted *well*. But how could the baker know that Joseph had interpreted correctly before Pharaoh's birthday revealed the result? Rashbam explains with the rabbinic maxim *nikarin divrei ha-emet*—truth is recognizable. Hizkuni adds that Joseph's confidence itself was proof: his prediction concerned an event only three days away. A charlatan would not risk such precision.

If the two officials perceived their dreams as one, they likely assumed their outcomes would be identical—either both would be reinstated or both executed. Joseph, however, recognized that although the two dreams appeared similar, they differed deeply in content and outcome.

In this sense, the story of the cupbearer and the baker mirrors and reverses Pharaoh's later experience. Pharaoh dreams two dreams but knows instinctively that they are one; his interpreters insist on dividing them (see **Ramban,**

Abarbanel). The imprisoned officers, by contrast, experience two separate dreams but assume they are one; Joseph must teach them to distinguish between them. The divine message lies not only in the content of dreams but in the human ability—or inability—to discern unity within diversity, or multiplicity within unity.