Dvar mikeitz (December 20, 2019)

This parshah strangely appeared in a week when the NYT columnist Bret Stephens published a column claiming Ashkenazi jews were the smartest people on earth. He forgot to mention all the Asians now dominating our science depts in elite universities, but never mind. Joseph was smart enough to interpret dreams, although he modestly claimed that interpretations come from god. Not unlike Socrates, who modestly claimed his understandings came from his daimon. Or mohammed for that matter, or moses, both of whom credit the divine with the holy scriptures they recited or penned, as the case might be.

Joseph wasn’t being modest. In Mikeitz we find the image of a naïve youth who reported his dreams about ruling over his brothers and even his parents, to their annoyance. Presumably that reflected the brothers larger resentment over the favored treatment he received from his father, although all the Jewish patriarchs demonstrated their love and preference for one son over another, and had to be corrected again and again by some divine intervention, which set the path of the inheritance and lineage on its proper course. This post hoc reading of misguided favoritism versus the right choice is easily related to anthropological accounts of oral histories that I know in Africa, and no doubt can be found around the world, where the existing lineages and their founders had to be given an account that demonstrated that a divine hand was at play. In Africa’s most famous epic, that of Sundiata, the story is the same: the handicapped child, usurped by the wrong brother, must prevail with god’s help in the end.

The interpretations of Joseph’s dreams are made instantaneously by his brothers and father: “Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more. He said to them, “Hear this dream which I have dreamed: There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf.” His brothers answered, “Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?” And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.” Within his family, interpretation was taken for granted.

He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, “Look, I have had another dream: And this time, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him. “What,” he said to him, “is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground?” The meaning was apparent to them, and the sense that dreams were significant, to be taken seriously.

Joseph’s brothers were said to hate him because his father favored 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.” After the account of the dream, we learn: “So his brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind.” (37:14).

From there comes the sequence of events in which he is to be killed by his brothers (“here comes the dreamer”; “let us kill him and throw him in a pit”), saved by Reuben (“But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, “Let us not take his life.” « And Reuben went on, “Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves”—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father.” Later, in Egypt, Reuben will interpret the course of events for his brothers that led to their miseries, who understood his drift as did Joseph, despite their not knowing it was Joseph. The events unfurled as if a hand of fate directed them. Their “understanding” of the plight was accepted by all the brothers:

21And they said to one another, "Indeed, we are guilty for our brother, that we witnessed the distress of his soul when he begged us, and we did not listen. That is why this trouble has come upon us." 22And Reuben answered them, saying, "Didn't I tell you, saying, 'Do not sin against the lad,' but you did not listen? Behold, his blood, too, is being demanded!" 23They did not know that Joseph understood, for the interpreter was between them.”

Judah, like Reuben, had spoken up to save him” “Then Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed. Later both Reuben and Judah speak to Jacob to convince him that they must return to Egypt, and Reuben offers his two sons as bond: “You may put my two sons to death if I don't bring him (Benjamin) to you. Put him into my hand[s] and I will return him to you.". The same occurs when Joseph takes Benjamin hostage. Against the other sons, who collectively decided to kill Joseph, Judah now begins his famous plea:

14And Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, and he was still there, and they fell before him upon the ground.15And Joseph said to them, "What is this deed that you have committed? Don't you know that a person like me practices divination?"16And Judah said, "What shall we say to my master? What shall we speak, and how shall we exonerate ourselves? God has found your servants' iniquity, behold, we are my lord's servants, both we and the one in whose possession the goblet has been found."

Every one of these events is framed in terms of understanding, of interpretation of what is happening, and why; of who understands the words and motivations, of what the signals are, in dreams, in actions, in great events. The sons fool their father with the torn, bloodstained robe. Jacob does not recognize the trick; it is turned against him as the brothers get rid of their despised rival. They did not think that the dreams would be so real as to give them reason to rethink their actions; and neither did Jacob. For them, the affair with Joseph was over. Jacob mourned; his sons apparently indifferent to this, except for Reuben, prevailed.

Judah, too, is fooled next in the parshah, by his daughter-in-law, Tamar. She deceives him so as to conceive a child, and to force his hand to marry her to her brother-in-law, Judah’s son. She succeeds, she then conceives twins, and when the wrong one tried to come out first, the second prevailed. Perez. The world, what Heidegger calls the world picture, within which they operated, was one in which actions made sense to the extent that they conformed to the larger order within which they were set. This had to happen; that had to happen; there was a reason for this, a purpose. Even the world of dreams conveyed signs of the order, and when the wrong birth was about to occur, the wrong son elevated to the status of heir, of the one to be blessed, a trickster intervenes to set the world on its proper course. Even the great power Egypt was inscribed under the force of that order. So what good would intelligence play in such a universe where all choices were inevitably made under the sign of the divine order being worked out?

When Joseph is imprisoned, his value is recognized by Potiphar who elevates him to the high status of steward of his household. “The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master.” “He left all that he had in Joseph’s hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate. Now Joseph was well built and handsome.” But the necessary order of events was not to be put into effect under these circumstances. Joseph had to be steward of all of Egypt, so he is tricked, fated, into refusing his master’s wife. She was able to trick her husband about what had happened, and so Joseph wound up in prison, where, again he rose in position thanks to God’s favoring of him, the blessings in everything he did.

We read back to the brothers and the pit, and forward to the prison, the course of events, and can foresee where this will lead—even to the conclusion of the Joseph episode, with Jacob’s house being saved by Joseph, resulting in their forced exile in Egypt, we are prepared to extend this logic to the Exodus, with the departure of the Israelites and final trajectory of the Exodus. But all this fated course of events, this divine order, would seem to rely upon some movement of the trickster—to fool the father into giving the blessing unintentionally to the right son, to fool the pharaoh into having contest with god, to fool any obstacle to fate’s workings to fail. To fool performs this work, but so too does the act of interpreting the events, of understanding them, and then coming to agreement to their course.

The interpretations of the dreams of the baker and the pharaoh’s cupbearer were child’s play for Joseph. But their evident meaning was somehow too obscure for even the best of the Egyptians to understand: “8Now it came to pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled; so he sent and called all the necromancers of Egypt and all its sages, and Pharaoh related to them his dream, but no one interpreted them for Pharaoh.” 15”And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter for it, but I have heard it said of you [that] you understand a dream, to interpret it. And Joseph replied to Pharaoh, saying, "Not I; God will give an answer [that will bring] peace to Pharaoh." Why were they incapable of interpreting what Joseph found so obvious?

In the Sufi mystic tales in the Sahel, Birago Diop recounts the tales of Ahmadou Koumba, one of which involves the thin cow eating the fat one. In one of the tales the deer with three legs outruns the hunters. In the mystics’ world, appearance is not what it seems to be in the real world, top is bottom, up is down, mystery clothes its messages in that which contradicts appearance because the spiritual realm cannot conform to what our senses tell us is real. The older son is really subordinate to the younger; the stronger brother will not prevail over his weaker junior; even the three men who appear before Abraham at the terebinths of mamre are not who they appear to be. God cannot be seen by Moses, and even moses, who appeared in god’s presence on the mountain, cannot be seen by the children of israel, who must cover their eyes, or have him cover his glowing face. The divine order is not what appears in normal life, not in the Tanakh, not in the visions of the prophets, in any of the orders of israel’s children. Joseph says, “Not I; God will give an answer.” But this important point is lost once the mechanism is set in place, and all pharaoh knows is that he would do better to trust this man to run his affairs, rather than his own palace necromancers, since they can’t interpret events.

Joseph states it plainly, but no one seems to catch the full import of his statement: “28It is this matter that I have spoken to Pharaoh; what God is about to do He has shown Pharaoh.” Pharaoh thinks it is about cows and prosperity, about managing the drought, about how to organize his kingdom, in the face of the immediate demands of life, of the material order. If god has shown pharaoh, pharaoh hasn’t seen and understood what he was shown. So, he sets Joseph in place to handle the affair, as Potiphar had done.

But all this business of handling the good times and bad times is of importance only in that it sets in motion the action of completing Joseph’s initial dreams, now long forgotten by his brothers who were busy creating lives for themselves, or, in the case of Judah, for his sons. And old Jacob sits there in the background, like Kafka’s forgotten hunger artist, important as an actor only in the past, forgotten in all the seeming important stories, like Judah’s foolish act of taking Tamar for a prostitute—his own daughter-in-law!

So the mechanism is set in order.

Jacob sets the action in motion by telling his sons that they must go to Egypt: “Jacob saw that there was grain being sold in Egypt; so Jacob said to his sons, "Why do you appear satiated?" And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain being sold in Egypt. Go down there and buy us [some] from there, so that we will live and not die." The sons set off without Benjamin, none thinking, there was some reason for this drought, for our youngest brother to be left behind, or that it might have been linked to Joseph. Ten brothers left, doing, they thought, as their father had told them to do. And Jacob played his role, equally, without any second thoughts.

At every point, we are in a narrative where the audience will begin to make the most obvious of connections, without being told to interpret them as a dream. “Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; it was he who sold grain to the entire populace of the land, and Joseph's brothers came and prostrated themselves to him, with their faces to the ground.” At this point the act of interpretation, discernment of signs, returns and becomes central to the unfolding of events. One must understand, as Joseph did, the dreams; and the others, even if they dreamed it, not. The brothers now become like Pharaoh, dreamers without understanding—their mockery, “the dreamer,” now returning against them.

This is the central motif, the gift of understanding requiring others who were incapable of interpretation in order for the power behind the interpretation to exert itself, to work its magic. And to construct this story in this way, at this moment, consists in the magical turn of the story itself: “And Joseph saw his brothers, and he recognized them, but he made himself a stranger to them, and he spoke to them harshly, and he said to them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan to purchase food."

The key moment finally arrives: “Now Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.” We have no reason given for this, although we might make up many—about Joseph having become unrecognizable to him, to all his brothers, despite his giving them sign after sign, even to the point of seating them in the order of their age at the dining room table. We have to experience this moment of pleasure in seeing the special one, the one who can fool even his own brothers, not to seek revenge, but to work out what they should have accepted at the outset, that their father’s preference was not based on some maleficence but, despite them all, its opposite, and their own lucky place in the order. Nothing they had done meant they deserved to be saved by Joseph, after all they had done and he had experienced. The story proceeds as if Joseph understood the point—he had been sent to save them all, and the hardship was just a necessary part of it.

And this might have been all there was to this story, another transparent version of the rightness of power residing in the place of the winner. But another turn in the story pushes its affect and meaning on to the very level displaced by the obedience to the order. The human feelings intervene, as in the beginning when Jacob loved one woman especially, loved her and then her two children; mourned her passing, and mourned what he thought was his beloved son’s passing. Mourned, and later rejoiced at fortune’s reversal, again, after having suffered for many years. And fearing more suffering with the loss of Benjamin.

Joseph and his brothers, whom Joseph ought to have resented and hated, but instead loved. Fate here shifts away from the power of the parable to the affective side of the story. And nothing in this playing with their fate, their fears, their incomprehension is really needed to have forced Jacob and the clan to repair from Canaan to Egypt where life has become possible. The rest of this story must take us back to the human feelings involved, powerful forces seen less as the manipulations of a distant god than as the human factor that drives the story. After all, in the end, if Joseph suffered in prison because he refused to betray his master, what did Poliphar’s wife experience what with the humiliation of being refused by a household slave, and with the need that drove her to have to deceive her husband into punishing that slave. Who was Joseph that she should be refused? And when he got out of prison, to be elevated again, above all other Egyptians, including her husband, what might she have been thinking then?

What need for fate to imagine her feelings, especially when Joseph later marries: “50And to Joseph were born two sons before the year of the famine set in, whom Asenath the daughter of Poti phera, the governor of On, bore to him.”

Further, for all his success in overcoming adversary, Joseph too was caught up in feelings he could no longer suppress. Was the daughter of Potiphera a reminder? The biblical exegetes concern themselves only with the origin of the name of that father-in-law, not the woman who had been left behind in her regrets and anguish. Joseph’s own naming of his sons leaves him with the impossibility of forgetting where he had been, what he had been through. If he had become the new ruler of Egypt, what had been the price he had paid to have been chosen, to be the instrument of chosenness? “51And Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, for "God has caused me to forget all my toil and all my father's house." Only with his second born, the one he attempts to deprive of his father’s blessing, Ephraim, can he permit himself some pleasure in the working of fate: And the second one he named Ephraim, for "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." In the time after he had named Manasseh, and before the birth of Ephraim, what had he been reminded of each time he saw his baby son? Affliction. And what had his wife thought about the name, much less her husband’s past? How hidden from his past could things have been while he still observed the customary laws of not eating with the Egyptians as he was a Hebrew. A jew, out in the open.

The remainder of the story cannot be read without weeping. At the least, because of the miraculous affect of the story. It all reaches its conclusion, its impact, in turning around the question of interpreting the motivations of the others, of the hidden becoming known, and most of all, in the final understanding of some human bond and human side to where life’s sufferings can lead. “He inquired after their welfare, and he said to them, "Is your elderly father, whom you mentioned, well? Is he still alive?" Their response completes the prediction in the initial dream, but it isn’t enough: “And they said, "Your servant, our father, is well; he is still alive." And they bowed and prostrated themselves.”

Just as Achilles must weep, Achilles the most blessed by the gods, the invincible warrior, who still loses his beloved Patroclus, so too will Joseph have to weep again before the sight of his own brother. “And he lifted his eyes and saw Benjamin, his brother, the son of his mother, and he said, "Is this your little brother, whom you told me about?" And he said, "May God favor you, my son.” Completing his masquerade as trickster, he loses control, no longer able to control his emotions, or thus the course of events. “And Joseph hastened, for his mercy was stirred toward his brother, and he wanted to weep; so he went into the room and wept there.”

He returns, and completes his plan, but playfully revealing more and more, now to the reader, the audience, what he had originally kept hidden:

31And he washed his face and came out, and he restrained himself and said, "Serve the food."

32And they set for him separately and for them separately, and for the Egyptians who ate with him separately, because the Egyptians could not eat food with the Hebrews, because it is an abomination to the Egyptians.

33They sat before him, the firstborn according to his age, and the youngest according to his youth, and the men looked at each other in astonishment.

34And he had portions brought to them from before him, and Benjamin's portion was five times as large as the portions of any of them, and they drank and became intoxicated with him.

Jacob had said to his sons, why did you have to tell him about Benjamin; why did you have to tell him? And they said, he wanted to know about our father, our brother. No one suspected, not even Jacob, that they were being tricked, that some larger scheme of blessing was being operated on them. And of course, only in hindsight can the trickster’s scheme be seen as a divine scheme. At some point the story will be paused, as it is paused here, while the brothers have become drunk in the company of their siblings, and forgotten all that had passed between them.

For us that is the real story of Joseph and his brothers. No one wins in the end. They were once separated. Who knows why. Then, thanks to the machinations of one of them—he called it fate, when he told the story to his father—they were reunited and saved. They wept when they learned the whole story, they became reconciled to each other, and to the new order, with that younger one now in charge. Sometimes in life an original order gets shaken up. But what matters here, in this story? Not the enslavement by the Egyptians, and the children of Israel’s survival. Not Pharaoh’s small part in the survival of the children of a man called Israel. Not in the setting in motion of a dynasty of clans, of kingdoms, or of a universe, but the scene of brothers learning to eat and drink together, to become intoxicated with some elixir of life after they survived all that, all that their father’s favorite son had had to know: “God has caused me to forget all my toil and all my father's house." Affliction.

This is a special moment in the Tanakh, and should be treasured by us, as yet one more reminder of what we need to remember as Jews. There are a few others, as when Abraham’s hand is stayed, and Moses’s stands in the cleft of a rock to see what he couldn’t see.

The moment of revelation in a narration is its climax, when its meaning strives to emerge. Here is that moment: “You can see for yourselves, and my brother Benjamin for himself, that it is indeed I who am speaking to you. And you must tell my father everything about my high station in Egypt and all that you have seen; and bring my father here with all speed.” With that he embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; only then were his brothers able to talk to him.”

This is the moment where our story ends, and we are excluded from hearing what they said. We can imagine that the moment is ours to own, and to make of it as if it were ours to own.