

## TORAH SPARKS

### DREAMS COME TRUE, NOT FREE

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Joseph dreams twice at seventeen. First he sees sheaves in a field, his standing upright while his brothers' sheaves bow. Then he sees the sun and moon and eleven stars bowing to him. The dreams are paired, their meaning seemingly obvious, so obvious that his brothers name it immediately for the **first dream**: הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּמְלֹךְ עֲלֵינוּ "will you rule over us?" and his father for the **second**: הַבּוֹא נִבּוֹא אֲנִי וְאִמִּי וְאֶחָיוּךָ לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לְךָ אֶרְצָה: "Will I, and your mother, and your brothers bow down to you?"

So the brothers take matters into their own hands, to ensure the dream can never come true. They enact its inverse. When Joseph comes to find them in Dotan, they throw him into a pit and sit down to eat bread. The gesture is precise. Joseph's dream showed his sheaf נִצְבָּה, standing upright, while theirs bowed. Now Joseph is down, and they are above. A counter-prophecy enacted through physical inversion. If dreams can be fulfilled, perhaps they can also be unfulfilled.

For a time, it seems to work. Joseph descends into the pit, into the caravan, into Egypt. But then Potiphar's house. Joseph rises. וַיִּמְצָא יוֹסֵף חֵן בְּעֵינָיו, he finds favor. Potiphar places him over his entire household. Everything Potiphar owns passes through Joseph's hands. The dream flickers: not brothers bowing, but authority nonetheless. Almost a reign.

Then Potiphar's wife. Accusation. Prison. The dream collapses again.

And yet even there, Joseph **rises**: וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה שָׁם הוּא הָיָה עֹשֶׂה, "everything done there, he was the one doing it". Another near-fulfillment. Another almost-reign.

This is the grinding engine of the story. Will the dreams come true? They keep nearly coming true. Joseph keeps rising to the edge of power and then being cast back down. Potiphar's house, then prison. Prison authority, then forgotten by the cupbearer for two more years. Each ascent sharpens the pain of the fall. Each almost-fulfillment makes the waiting harder to bear. It begs the question of whether Joseph's dreams are true, can become true.

So the narrative gives proof that dreams come true, with two more sets of parallel dreams. First, those of the cupbearer and the baker. Two nearly identical dreams, two interpretations, and, lo and behold, the dreams come true, and quickly.

Here, dreams behave cleanly. The cupbearer and baker cannot intervene in their fates. They are prisoners, powerless. They cannot flee execution or hasten restoration. They can only wait. And under these conditions, without human interference, the dreams work perfectly. Doubled dreams, arriving together, mean certainty. Fulfillment comes fast for them. But not yet for Joseph.

The final pair of dreams belong to Pharaoh. And now, Joseph gives an **explanation** for the doubling of dreams: וְעַל הַשְּׁנוֹת הַחִלּוּם אֶל-פִּרְעֹה פְּעֻמִּים כִּי-נִכְוֶן הַדְּבָר מֵעַם הָאֱלֹהִים וּמִמֶּהָר הָאֱלֹהִים: לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ: "And as for the doubling of Pharaoh's dreams, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and that God will soon carry it out." The dream was doubled because the matter is fixed, and because God is hastening to do it. Doubled dreams mean certainty. Doubled dreams mean speed. This is the theology Joseph has built, drawn from the cupbearer and baker, from dreams that came true in three days because the dreamers could do nothing.

Then Joseph does something Pharaoh did not ask for. Pharaoh wanted interpretation. Joseph offers a plan. Appoint a discerning man. Store grain during the years of plenty. Prepare for the famine. Joseph introduces human action into a dream he has just declared fixed.

The dream itself had already spoken with unsettling **precision**: וְלֹא-יִדָּע הַשָּׂבַע בְּאֶרֶץ מִפְּנֵי הָרָעָב, "the plenty will not be known in the land because of the famine." Not destroyed, but forgotten. Swallowed to the point of erasure.

Joseph's entire program resists this. He stores grain in every city. He counts until counting becomes impossible. He makes abundance visible, measured, remembered. The years of plenty, far from being forgotten, are remembered and provide for the people during the years of famine.

But survival has a shape. As the famine deepens, the people come to Joseph for grain. First he takes their money. When the money runs out, he takes their livestock. When the livestock are gone, he takes their land. Finally, they **offer** themselves: נְהִיָּה עֲבָדִים לְפִרְעֹה, "we will be slaves to Pharaoh."

Pharaoh's dream will indeed come true. Even Joseph's actions cannot make it vanish. Rather, it waits and in Exodus, it returns all at once. The livestock die in the fifth plague, fulfilling Pharaoh's first dream of the sickly cows. Hail and locusts destroy the grain, fulfilling Pharaoh's second **dream** of שִׂבְלִים דְּקֹחַ וְשִׂדּוּפֵת קִדְיִם, "thing grain scorched by an easterly wind." What Joseph postponed arrives in full force, hundreds of years later.

The Exodus story even **begins** with a sentence that echoes the dream Joseph tried to manage: וַיִּקָּם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ... אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדָע אֶת-יוֹסֵף, "and a new king arose who did not know Joseph." Joseph had explained Pharaoh's dream **saying**, וְלֹא-יִדָּע הַשָּׂבַע בְּאֶרֶץ מִפְּנֵי הָרָעָב, "and the abundance will no longer be known in the land on account of the famine." Joseph had changed the reality, had caused the abundance to be known through his actions. When he is forgotten, the dream fulfills itself. The abundance is no longer known because the one who knew is no longer known.

Three doubled dreams move through this story. When humans cannot act, dreams fulfill quickly. When humans intervene, fulfillment is delayed. But delay is not cancellation. The matter remains fixed.

Is this true also of Joseph's dreams? He too had doubled dreams. According to his own words, the doubling means that the dreams should come true, and quickly. Yet for twenty two years, the dreams were not fulfilled. The brothers had tried to revoke the decree. They succeeded only in delaying it.

There is one unresolved fracture. Joseph's second dream included the moon bowing before him. Jacob interprets it to mean Joseph's mother, Rachel: הַבּוֹא נִבּוֹא אֲנִי וְאִמִּי, "shall I and your mother come to bow?" And Rachel is already dead.

The brothers bow. Yaakov descends. The dream grinds toward fulfillment across decades. But the moon never arrives. Rachel lies buried by the road to Ephrath. The dream was fixed and still it contained someone who could not come.

And yet, centuries later, Joseph's descendants pass that same road on their way into exile. Jeremiah sees **Rachel** there, not bowing but weeping: רַחֵל מִבְּכָה עַל-בְּנֵיהָ, "Rachel weeps for her children."

The dream comes true, but not as Joseph imagined. It comes true at another scale, in another direction. The mother who could not bow returns to stand by the road, bent over, crying for her sons, for all that has happened to them. The dream is fulfilled.

The dreams are fixed. They are fulfilled slowly, partially, sideways. We intervene where we can. We delay what we are able. We store grain. We throw dreamers into pits. They can take decades and centuries. And in the end, Rachel is weeping.