

Dear Community,

When my brother and I were kids, our biggest treat was going alone on the bus to spend Shabbos at our grandparents in Queens. On Shabbat morning, after some Swiss cheese and Triscuits with my Dedushka, we walked down Queens Boulevard to the little shul where he usually prayed. One congregant, an elderly man named Sid, had a penchant for painfully unfunny jokes. As a Holocaust survivor, he felt that he had a right to make jokes comparing the cantor's repetition to certain labor camp experiences he had endured. People around him would gasp, and my brother and I would giggle uncontrollably as his wife yelled at him across the mechitzah.

One year, Chaim and I happened to be in Queens on Parshas Vayeshev, this week's Torah portion. When the Bal Koreh read the passage describing the sale of Joseph, Sid leaned over to us and whispered "Last year I felt bad for him, but if he still has not learned his lesson, he has only himself to blame". We thought that this was the height of humor (nine-year-olds are not the most sophisticated demographic). As we tried to stuff our fists in our mouths Sid smiled proudly and proceeded to retell his pearl of brilliance to the next victim.

While we re-read this Torah portion every year, when was the last time we attempted to learn something new? Have we all been simply contenting ourselves with the narrative of the annoying younger brother being dealt with in an extreme fashion by his jealous older siblings? To read the portion this way is ok for a day school child, but as adults we can not satisfy ourselves with so facile a conflict.

This is not the forum for an in-depth discussion of the various commentaries illuminating the deep debate raging between Joseph and his brothers (come to shul for that!). But I would like focus on the centrality of dreams to the narrative. Joseph receives the prophecy of his future royalty in a dream, Pharaoh dreams about the future catastrophe facing Egypt, the vintner and baker have their fates revealed to them while asleep. As the brothers discuss throwing killing Joseph, they focus on his dreams, not his slander. Dreams permeate this episode of the story of the creation of the Jewish people.

The Talmud (Brachot 55) discusses the properties of dreams. While most dreams are merely an echo of our waking lives, there are dreams and even elements of dreams in which we transcend our physical limitations and wander the heavens. These dreams can contain prophecy-- weak, blurry, and clouded, but prophetic none the less. While the ideal prophecy is when one is awake, dreams can confer G-d's presence on one in circumstances that would normally prevent this sort of connection.

The first forefather given a prophecy in a dream was Jacob as he was fleeing from his murderous brother and headed into an unknown exile. As he lay in the dark of night, on a bed of earth and stone, he dreamt. His dream revealed that he was not alone, nor abandoned. As the dark of his exile consumed him, his dreams illuminated his true state, his true closeness to a G-d who had seemed so far away.

Why was Jacob given this vision in a dream? According to the Sfas Emes of Ger, Jacob is "the forefather of exile" (this is reiterated throughout the commentaries, but I chose the Gerrer Rebbe due to the presence of Gerrer Chasidim in our community). It is through Jacob and, similarly, through Joseph that we are taught about being a Jew in exile. Exile is metaphorically compared with the night, redemption with the dawn. As we exist in exile, we fall ever deeper asleep, ever

further distant from G-d and the true nature of reality. The dream of Jacob was a message through out the ages that no matter the depth of our exile, G-d can be found, if only we dream. Joseph dreamt dreams of exile, dreams of a people who were soon to be subjugated but to whom G-d would give a leader to enable their survival. The story was permeated with dreamers because in the state of exile -- it is the dreamers who will save us.

As we celebrate Chanukah, a festival of light during the darkest part of the year, we celebrate a small group of Jews who dared to dream, dared to hope, dared to fight against all odds: and G-d rewarded them with light. As we light our menorahs, as we read about Joseph and his brothers, we need to ask ourselves if we are dreamers. Are we content to sleep blissfully thorough our lives without thinking of our spirituality, our growth, and the future of the Jewish nation with the coming of the Messiah? Or are we ready to dream, to believe, to bring light to a dark world?