

Parshat Miketz

Understanding Yosef's Interpretations: Bringing *Hilkhoh Ta'arovev* into the Mix Sarah Pincus - Class of 2026

In this week's *parsha*, Pharaoh awakens from dreams that leave him feeling unsettled. First, he dreams that seven thin cows eat seven well nourished cows. However, after eating the cows, the thin cows don't appear to be physically changed. Next, he dreams that seven thin and shriveled ears of grain swallow seven ears of healthy grain. Hoping to find some insight and comfort, he consults the greatest magicians in Egypt, but they are unable to interpret the dreams. Pharaoh's cupbearer then speaks highly of Yosef's interpretation skills, and suggests that Pharaoh seek out his advice. To Pharaoh's delight, Yosef is able to make sense of both of Pharaoh's dreams.

When reading Bereshit 41, in which this narrative is recounted, the repetition of the root (*shoresh*) פתר stands out. Often translated as "to solve" or "to decipher" in modern Hebrew, in the context of our *parsha* this word is understood as meaning "to interpret." It appears seven times in the chapter.

This root may sound familiar because in Chapter 40, at the end of last week's *parsha*, the *shoresh* also appears seven times when recounting Yosef's interpretations of the cupbearer's and the baker's dreams while they were imprisoned. Upon further investigation into the root פתר, it becomes even more apparent that this is a curious word choice. Breishit chapters 40 and 41 are the *only* places in Tanakh in which this root appears. And not only that, it is striking that it appears seven times in each chapter! The act of פתר-ing seems to reflect something unique about Yosef. What is the essence of Yosef's ability to לפתר?

In *Lekutei Halakhoh* ([Orach Chayim, Hilkhoh Chanukkah 3:7](#)), Reb Nosson describes what differentiated Yosef and gave him the capacity to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. The first interpreters allowed the bad elements (i.e. the seven years of famine) to overtake the good elements (i.e. the seven years of plenty). Their inability to see the "truth and the good" contained within the dream prevented them from being able to understand the meaning of the dreams. Yosef, on the other hand, understood that a dream is "מערב עם דברים בטלים"-- that is, a dream is filled with good and bad elements intermingled with mundane thoughts or "idle matters." Yet, he did not allow the fear of the impending years of famine to subsume the delight of the anticipation of seven years of plenty. Because Yosef was able to nullify the bad elements within the dreams, he was able to understand the truth hidden in the dream, and take proactive measures to mitigate the harm caused by the seven years of famine.

Reb Nosson alludes to the ninth chapter of Masechet Berakhoh in which the function of dreams is elucidated. Rabbi Yoḥanan teaches in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, "Just as it is impossible for the grain to grow without straw, so too it is impossible to dream without idle matters" ([55a](#)). Seemingly, intrinsic to dreams is that they contain multitudes, and the process of interpretation is identifying the significance in the details. The Gemara also teaches ([55b](#)) that "all dreams follow the mouth of the interpreter," indicating that the person who is interpreting the dream is essential to defining the dream. Similarly, Rav Hisda ([55a](#)) teaches that "a dream not interpreted is like a letter not read," which Rashi understands to mean that the interpretation of a dream is what creates its meaning.

Conceptually, Reb Nosson's application of Masechet Berakhot's understanding of dreams echo many of the core principles underpinning *Hilkhot Ta'arovet*, the laws of mixtures in the laws of *kashrut*. In fact, he explicitly refers to dreams as being a *ta'arovet*, a mixture!

In describing Yosef's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, the *Akeidet Yitzchak* (29:1), a 15th-century Spanish scholar, highlights the role of the interpreter in making meaning of a dream, as described in Masechet Berakhot.

Since every person has a chance to receive revelations of such minute proportions... The fact that all kinds of subject matter may be contained in the dream, creating a picture of confusion, prompts the dreamer to consult an interpreter to sort it out for him... The art of the interpreter is to separate the message from the trivial contained in all dreams. It is this that Pharaoh referred to when he said to Joseph, "You hear a dream (with a view) to interpret" (Genesis 41:15).

Just as is the case with the interpretation of dreams, the credence given to one's own experience and the subsequent halakhic implications is foundational to *Hilkhot Ta'arovet*. While not typically applied in practice, early halakhic literature relies on an individual's ability to discern the taste of a forbidden substance within a mixture in determining the *kashrut* status of the mixture. Similarly, the Rosh ([Masechet Chullin 7:37](#)), a 13th-century scholar, claims that the required standard for nullification is dependent on the moment of human consciousness in which the individual identifies the foods as being a mixture. In other words, a person's awareness or interpretation of the status of the mixture carries great significance in determining the halakhic mechanisms available to neutralize the status of the mixture in question.

The *Akeidet Yitzchak* also invokes the ratio of 1/60 when discussing dreams. This is notable because the principle of nullification of 1/60 is one of the most fundamental concepts in *Hilkhot Ta'arovet*. The idea is that if something non-kosher mixes in with a kosher mixture, if the volume of the kosher substance is sixty times greater than that of the non-kosher substance, it is assumed that the taste of the non-kosher substance is no longer detectable, and therefore the entire mixture is permissible to eat. In relation to dreams, he writes,

In some cases, an insignificant part of the dream contains something meaningful. In others, the proportion of the meaningful part may be very substantial... When our sages state that dreams equal 1/60 of prophecy (Berachot 57), they mean that the element of truth in a dream may be as insignificant as the amount of *issur*, forbidden ingredient, that can be assimilated in a large mass of permissible material.

After exploring the interpretation of dreams in this week's *parsha* through the lens of *Hilkhot Ta'arovet*, it seems that Yosef's unique ability to *לפתר*, to interpret dreams, lies in his capacity to make sense of the confusion and not allow the bad to subsume the good. While the first interpreters viewed the dream as being equal parts good and equal parts bad, rendering the entire "mixture" of the dream bad, Yosef was able to identify the neutral elements of the dream, the "דברים בטלים". He understood that when those elements join with the good, together they are of sufficient quantity to nullify the bad. Though Yosef was able to make space for the good, the bad, and the neutral, he allowed the good to take center stage, instead of giving the bad the time in the spotlight.



Since Parshat Miketz is always read on Shabbat Chanukah, the *Lekutei Halakhot* concludes by connecting this manner of understanding dreams with the holiday.

ועל-כן קורין פרשת מקץ בחנכה, כי כל זה הוא בחינת שמונת ימי חנכה שמדליקין בהם נרות חנכה, כדי שיאיר 'אור האהבה שבדעת' בשבעה ימים כדי לגלות בחינת שבע שני השבע שהם בחינת ימי טוב וכו', כנ"ל:

And this is why we read Miketz on Chanukah, because all of this [interpretation] is like the eight days of Chanukah in which we light the Chanukah candles, so that the 'light of love contained within knowledge' should shine, which is the true meaning of the seven years of plenty, which represent years of goodness.

Chanukah is a story of *ta'arovet*, of mixture, of a combination of both good and bad. Yes, oil was found to enable the Maccabees to light the menorah. But this oil was found amidst the ruins of the Holy Temple. Yes, we celebrate the military victory of a small group of people who despite the odds, win over the mighty Greeks. But this was also a time of Civil War in which Jews were fighting each other. Though we often glorify the story of Chanukah, we are actually celebrating very humble, and deeply complicated miracles. Perhaps our celebration of Chanukah is a manifestation of Yosef's skill of interpretation in which he did not allow the bad to subsume to good.

May this Chanukah help us recognize the *ta'arovot* in our own lives, making space for the good, the less good, and the neutral. And in these moments of complexity, and often confusion, may Yosef's unique ability to לפתר inspire us with the strength and insight to ensure that the good within the mix shines most brightly.



After spending a year studying at Midreshet Lindenbaum, Sarah attended Binghamton University where she earned a BA in Politics, Philosophy & Law, and a Master's in Public Administration. She has taught and has held administrative positions in a variety of educational settings including Camp Stone, Friendship Circle, Brandeis' Genesis Pre-college Program, the Drisha Institute, and the Maimonides School. Sarah has spent the past few years working in a variety of political, advocacy and education spaces, including organizing for political campaigns for a year and a half organizing for political campaigns leading up to the 2020 election in Nevada, Texas and Arizona. Sarah is excited to be relocating to New York City to begin the Core Semikha Program at Yeshivat Maharat. In her free time, Sarah loves taking long walks, listening to podcasts, trying new recipes, and spending time in nature.