

**Better Than Normal**

Rosh Hashanah 5782 Day 2 -- September 8, 2021

Rabbi Jonathan Spira-Savett, Temple Beth Abraham

It was two years later, and one night Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing on the edge of the River Nile. He saw seven beautiful and healthy cows grazing. And suddenly, seven thin and gaunt cows rise up from the Nile and eat the first ones, but it's like they didn't; they are just as thin as before. Pharaoh woke up, and realized it had been a dream.

Pharaoh fell back asleep and he dreamed again: seven ears of grain, beautiful and healthy, and then seven skinny ones sprout up behind them and swallow them up. Pharaoh awoke again, it was still night time, and when he finally rose and entered his court he was clearly agitated.

Pharaoh for some reason couldn't figure out what his dreams meant. He asked his usual advisors, and they couldn't tell him. Not with their common sense, not with their wizardry, not with any of their tools for accessing the realms beyond the conscious. Maybe they couldn't tell him, or maybe they were just too afraid to. One of them finally spoke up -- his chief cupbearer, his wine steward, sommelier. He said I have an idea for you, but to tell you first I have to bring up my own sins, some bad history between us, you Pharaoh and me. *Et chata-ai ani mazkir hayom*. You threw me in prison and I met there a Hebrew who was himself a prisoner, but he was helping the head of the prison. This Hebrew knew how to interpret dreams; in fact he explained a dream I had and predicted that you would release me and restore me to your service, O Pharaoh, and you did. I wish I could help you myself, but I can't; what I can do is recommend this Hebrew.

So Pharaoh had Yosef, the Hebrew, summoned from prison, and told him his dreams. Yosef said something that should have been obvious to everyone -- the cows and the grain, fat then thin, means you are concerned about the economy, about plenty and famine.

He said something not so obvious, which is that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine.

Then Yosef said something that Pharaoh hadn't even asked for. Yosef spelled out a plan for dealing with the upcoming famine during the time of plenty, so that the famine would not be so deadly and in fact Egypt would come out the other end better organized and better off.

And Pharaoh immediately said this is right, and on the spot freed Yosef from prison and made him his right-hand man.

Why could only Yosef speak to Pharaoh? Why couldn't anyone else respond to his dreams?

Credit where it is due -- we were learning this story last December at the start of a meeting of the Ritual Committee, where we discuss religious policy for the synagogue, and our committee member Mara Friedman observed some parallels between Pharaoh's situation the night of his dreams and our own situation, and asked some questions I want to pursue here.

Like Pharaoh's Egypt, we are a prosperous society that has been looking at shortage and scarcity for some period of time. Last fall it was medicine and medical supplies, for a time last winter it was Covid-19 vaccines, and throughout there have been

economic hardships for many. We have been going through political shortages, of goodwill and good leadership and justice.

Mara pointed out that the solution Yosef proposed for the upcoming famine did more than just feed Egypt as it had been fed before. It provided food even for people from other lands, like Canaan, where Yosef's own family was in danger of starving, though Yosef wasn't in touch with them and no one in Pharaoh's entourage would have given a thought to them.

There is a phrase we hear a lot: *back to normal*. I don't like it. I want to challenge that phrase and that framing. In fact, I think the whole point of Pharaoh's dream and of Yosef's wisdom was their rejection of *back to normal*.

What was it about Yosef that got Pharaoh to listen to him, over all his regular advisors and his magicians? An outsider, an immigrant, as Mara pointed out -- an immigrant detainee, I would add.

Where did Yosef's credibility come from?

Yosef didn't just clarify the subject of Pharaoh's dreams. He didn't just describe accurately what was going on and what would probably be coming next. As Mara said, and as a lot of the traditional commentators have observed, Pharaoh didn't need that. He knew already.

Yosef outlined a plan that would get Egypt through the famine in a way that would leave them better than they were before. Not just better off, more prosperous, and better organized -- but a better nation. A nation that could, for instance, feed itself as well as other nations.

Yosef said to Pharaoh: You have a land of plenty, and you should view it that way even when you are thinking about a particularly challenging year or seven difficult years. Don't let Egypt be defined by what's temporarily missing. This Nile may flow more or less, but it is never stopping. If you organize with trust in that fact, the plenty will still be there for the years when the Nile is not as full for crops and grazing. *And* the famine years won't just be holding the line, but they will also be years with good in them too.

That's what Pharaoh deep down wanted to hear. He was a god whose vision was blocked. His advisors were not gods, and they only knew the best they had seen to that point. I think Pharaoh had had other dreams. Dreams where seven beautiful cows were grazing and multiplying, into fourteen and twenty eight and more; dreams where seeds from seven ears of grain were blowing into seven new fields and planting even more, feeding more people. It wasn't the dreams about the thin cows and the thin grain that threw Pharaoh off. It's when those other, better dreams stopped that he became afraid.

Anyone could see that Pharaoh was worried about the upcoming shortages. Yosef was graced by God with the ability to see that Pharaoh's fundamental dreams about his realm were on the line.

Back to normal wasn't going to be enough. Pharaoh's existing group of advisors were trapped in normal. Even Pharaoh's creative ones, his artists -- look at so much ancient Egyptian art in the museums, and you see how much never changed for centuries.

But Yosef was the master of dreams. *Ba'al ha-chalomot*. He had his own dreams of sheaves of grain, and he knew that a dreamer has to seek actively the meaning of his dream, has to see a dreamy outcome in all its daylight detail. More than that, Yosef and Pharaoh were two of a kind in knowing that dreams were part of the *practical* need of that moment. Yosef knew that the only thing harder than getting through a famine would be getting through it without dreams. Most people would put the dreams aside for the time being. But without them, with just self-doubt and no national self-confidence, without a vision of something more than the missing food -- getting through the shortages would be so much harder to pull off.

Yosef paired an interpretation of a dream with a plan for action that would in some way transform Egypt. His advice to Pharaoh was that back to normal simply wouldn't work. It would be wearying, and it would be the more risky and dangerous thing to do.

I know this from the past year. The work of operating and guiding the synagogue during the pandemic has had wearying parts and also energizing parts. When the work has been limited to simulating the old normal, it's been wearying -- hours lost discussing plexiglass placement. But when we've asked how our hybrid services can become a vehicle for connecting to more people, like today -- that's when it's been energizing, and even the work of plexiglass positioning gives me a bounce in my step.

My work is easier when we are reaching beyond just the extra steps it takes to do what used to be easy. When we're talking about going the extra mile, like putting together the High Holy Day bags which we didn't do before, for instance. It's more work, objectively harder; it requires coordination between more people and a lot of

phone calls and e-mails -- but it's lighter and it's better even so, and it makes the next thing easier even while the pandemic continues.

Yosef and Pharaoh clicked in a shared realization that working at *better than normal* would actually be easier than working at *back to normal*.

Part of that is the nature of dreams, and part of it is an honest assessment of the old normal.

When things were last normal in February 2020, did you think it was good enough? I don't know anyone who did.

If you've cared about isolation in our society, how much loneliness there is even where there is surface togetherness, that there are people left out even in our congregation -- then early February 2020 isn't the world you want post-pandemic.

If you've been working in political or civic life, I think in any role and in any part of the ideological spectrum, you didn't think the normal of winter 2020 was nearly good enough.

When back to normal seduces us, it takes an outsider like Yosef to remind us of these things. An outsider, a prisoner, someone not advantaged at all by the way things used to be.

This doesn't mean that what used to be has no value. Yosef said to Pharaoh: When we think about food, let's think about where it's always come from and who has always been eating, but at the same time let's think about new people to feed and

new ways to collect and distribute. Let's purpose differently and expansively what was part of normal before.

I think about eating and singing together again in the synagogue, but not just the way some of us used to. I think of how to make ourselves more welcoming, how to unleash the warmth and tribal wisdom there is among us. How to do it not just in one place here for Shabbat lunch, but to help people create gatherings of the special not-exactly-friends thing that I think is the magic of Jewish community.

I've been banging my head on ShulCloud, the synagogue database and web system, which is not fabulous -- because in it I see new ways to remind myself what you in particular care about, who your favorite speaker was or what your favorite of my blog posts was. Ways to connect you with someone who lives near you or has something in common. I know better than to rely on my own memory. So the system from back when is worth building on for dreams ahead.

This was the year we dreamed of a different attitude toward membership in this shul, a different relationship between Judaism and money. We could have put that on hold, but we didn't. Because we knew how much judgment inherited from past normals was holding us back as a synagogue and holding us apart from each other, and we believed that there is so much plenty, so much need for connection, so much generosity -- and there has been, even during the pandemic.

Sarit and I have been thinking about education as a path to purpose and agency, to a place where young people are seen in their fullness and uniqueness and quirkiness, to inspiration grounded in our history and Hebrew and ethical heroes, using the incredible modern tools we have. Purposing our tremendous tradition

and resources, of Judaism generally and Beth Abraham in particular, toward people we've never reached and for goals we've only intermittently worked toward.

I have used this past year to push forward on the things I had dreamed of writing and the podcast ideas I had put on hold. I want to be a better justice ally in the community and see more affordable housing. It's more work in a way, but when I'm in it doesn't feel that way at all.

I could go on. I think you know that.

Yosef said to Pharaoh: Let's use what we have in normal times to make the time after the famine better than normal. Let's even start doing some of those things during the famine. It will still be a famine and that will be incredibly hard, and even when things start to ease up the transition back will be stressful. Yosef figured out that it would be important even during a famine to feed new people, and in the same spirit we have found ways through the Temple to nourish new people, and even nourish ourselves in new ways while we struggle with what we are short of and what is missing. There are storehouses of grain. There are animals that generate and feed and extend our own power, even now.

Just aiming for back to normal, in our lives and in our synagogue and in our wider community, is already all kinds of work, and hard work. If we're going to work that hard, let's use the same energy for better than normal, and then the work can even be light and energizing. Thoreau wrote: "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

We are not out of our own period of lean cows, and we don't know exactly when we will be. But our storehouses are full in many ways, and they can feed more than a small community and our old spiritual hungers. So when you find yourself longing for back to normal, and saying those words, I ask you to think also about what you dream of beyond that. And I invite you to take part in the dreams of the wider community, and of a Jewish community that has always been a master of dreaming. Find your own dreams or a place in ours -- then when we find ourselves past the pandemic, it will be better than normal ever was.