

Episode 10 Miketz

“The man who said, ‘I’d rather be lucky than good,’ saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how great a part of life is dependent on luck. It’s scary to think how much is out of one’s control. There are moments in a tennis match, when the ball hits the top of the net, and for a split second, it can either go forward, or fall back. With a little luck, it goes forward, and you win. Or maybe it doesn’t, and you lose.”

This is the opening to Woody Allen’s 2005 film *Match Point*. With poor-quality opera music playing in the background, the audience sees a tennis ball being hit back-and-forth over a net. At the end, the ball hits the top of the net and hangs in the air for a moment and freezes. It is one of those moments where the tennis ball can go in either direction, forward or backward.

I saw this film in theaters when it came out, now fifteen years ago. I was fascinated by the scene at the time. And it has stayed with me ever since. I always sensed that there was something special about this idea, but I never really worked out what it meant. Until I read this week’s parsha. It was after I read this week’s *parsha* that I really grasped the full philosophical potential of this scene with the tennis ball. The idea of a tennis ball hanging in midair over a net, ready to fall on either side, is, indeed, philosophically *packed*—just as much as Eve’s bite from the apple, or as Plato’s Allegory of the Cave.

Joseph, as we know, is a dreamer. In last week’s parsha, Vayeshev, he has a dream in which eleven stars are bowing down to him. This dream will eventually become reality, as when Joseph’s eleven brothers bow down to him in Egypt. But Joseph not only has dreams of his own, but also has the power to accurately interpret the dreams of others. At the end of last week’s parsha, Joseph is in a dungeon with the pharaoh’s personal waiter and the pharaoh’s baker. The waiter and the baker tell Joseph their dreams. From these dreams, Joseph concludes that the waiter will be restored to his position. The baker, however, will be hanged. On both counts, Joseph is proved correct. Before the waiter is to be freed, Joseph tells the waiter: listen, I just predicted your dream for you. Can you, at the very least, tell the Pharaoh about my powers? So he will free me from the dungeon? Please don’t forget me. But, as so often happens, the cupbearer became busy with his own life and, it is said in the Torah, “forgot about Joseph.”

This week’s Torah reading, *Miketz*, kicks off with two dreams of the Pharaoh himself. The Pharaoh dreams that he is standing by the Nile. Suddenly, out from the Nile come seven cows who are healthy, handsome, beautiful cows. But then come seven more cows out of the Nile, who are skinny, ugly, and malnourished. Then, what happens? The seven skinny cows eat the seven beautiful cows. At this point, the Pharaoh wakes up. Pharaoh then goes asleep again and has a second dream. This time, the same thing pretty much happens, although instead of cows, it is with stalks of wheat grain in the field. The seven unhealthy wheat plants eat up the seven healthy wheat plants.

The Pharaoh cannot figure out what his dreams mean. And moreover, none of the magicians and the fortune tellers in his kingdom can interpret the dreams. At this point, the waiter *remembers* Joseph. And he says to the Pharaoh: you must know. In your dungeon, there is a Hebrew who can interpret dreams. The Pharaoh calls Joseph out of the dungeon. Joseph hears the Pharaoh’s dreams and immediately recognizes what they mean. The seven healthy cows and seven healthy wheat plants stand for seven years of an abundance of food in Egypt. But the seven unhealthy cows and the seven unhealthy wheat plants symbolize something terrible. The next set of seven years will be years of famine and starvation. And these seven years of starvation will

wipe out all of the good years which came before. Joseph says: we must save the wheat from the first seven years so that we have something to eat in the next seven years. The Pharaoh is so grateful for this prediction that he makes Joseph his second-in-command. Joseph becomes in charge of storing and distributing wheat and grain once the famine hits.

Where do dreams come from? Why do we dream about certain things and not others? Do dreams have predictive power? These are not trivial questions.

Whenever someone tells Joseph about his dreams, Joseph's response is automatic: your dreams come from God. Your dreams come from God, he says. God is going to show you what he will do. Joseph's answer, it seems to me, is rather insufficient. Maybe I am just too much of a cynic, but I can't imagine that all of our dreams are direct messages from God.

Allow me to provide an example from my personal life. In Berlin, it's very difficult to find deodorant made with natural ingredients which isn't roll-on deodorant. There's no Tom's here. And honestly, who the @\$@ likes roll-on deodorant? So yesterday, I was at an organic grocery store, and I found non-chemical deodorant which was a stick and not roll-on. But, of course, it was drastically overpriced—seven euros. But I sucked it up and bought it. Well, last night I had a dream about the deodorant. Someone was telling me—I think it was my brother, Jordan—that I had spent way too much money on that deodorant, that no one should ever pay that much for deodorant. That was the dream. I just don't see how this dream could have come from God and is going to predict my future in any meaningful way. Now, I suppose I could go to an expert and ask what this dream will predict, but whatever they tell me would probably just be a bunch of @\$#%.

Sigmund Freud had a slightly different take on dreams than did Joseph. In 1900, Freud published his landmark work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, or in German, *Die Traumdeutung*. This book is considered by many experts to be a masterpiece and a breakthrough in Freud's thought. Freud theorized that our dreams give us a gateway into our deepest unconscious wishes and desires. But even while we are asleep, a process of censorship goes on in our minds. The deep underlying meaning of the dream is distorted and altered by our mind's censorship. What we get are dreams which are highly symbolic codes. And these codes need to be interpreted by Freud or by a psychoanalyst. What made Freud's text so groundbreaking was its emphasis on the unconscious mind, which I've discussed in previous lectures. Freud's theory of the unconscious already had sent shockwaves through Europe's intellectual community. Now he was telling us exactly where our *unconscious* can most easily be discovered: in our dreams. Today, Freud's theory of the unconscious has become so imprinted in our culture that it is no longer controversial or shocking. But at the turn of the nineteenth century, these were explosive and revolutionary ideas.

Today, Freud's theory of dreams, like many of his theories, are seen as highly flawed. Psychology has made so many advances since Freud's life that many of his ideas have become pitifully outdated. Freud generally highly exaggerated and overemphasized the significance of sexuality in our psychology. While sex is definitely a major drive for humans, not everything we think relates back to the penis. Sure, a lot does. But not everything. In Freud's interpretation of dreams, almost without fail there was some deep-seated sexual interpretation behind the dream. The wish was for something sexual, and the mind then censored this wish, resulting in some oddball dream which needed to be interpreted.

Freud was correct, however, in showing that dreams have something to teach us about our inner-most selves. From our dreams, we can learn what's really going on inside of our psyche. We can learn something about ourselves which mere self-reflection or conversation

could not teach us. I've noticed, for example, that I have a recurring dream. Actually, I have quite a few, but I will only talk about one on this episode. In this dream, I need to go back to my high school to complete one final course in order to graduate. But I am already my current age when I am in the dream. Even though I already have my college degree and other degrees, I am terrified in my dream that I still haven't graduated high school. Well, a Google search shows that millions of people have this same dream. Where does it come from? Why do so many people have it? In my case, I remember when I was a senior in high school, shortly before graduation day, there was some old teacher, an assistant to the principal slash gym teacher slash whatever. I remember he was screaming in the hallway that we had to return all of our course books before graduation. He was screaming, if you don't return these books, you won't graduate. He was holding a cardboard box that maybe had a few textbooks tossed inside that rumbled around a bit each time he yelled. Well, I knew that I still had some old textbooks at home. Moreover, I knew that I probably would never return them because there were just too many hidden around my room and I was just too lazy to deal with it. When he screamed this, I didn't actually worry that I wouldn't graduate. But on a deep level—an *unconscious* level—I believe I thought: what if there is a chance, however slim, that I don't graduate? On an unconscious level, this screaming got to me. What if there is that one credit I never completed or that one form I didn't fill out or that one class I failed? But why do millions of others have this same sort of dream? It is because, as my brother Jordan once pointed out to me, our culture has so many of these tedious requirements we need to fulfill before we can advance to the next stage of our lives and our careers. On some level, I think we all live with this deep-seated paranoia that we might have forgotten to check some critical box along the way. This unconscious fear resurfaces in our dreams.

Without Freud, though, I would never have come to this insight. I would never have looked to dreams as the gateway to our unconscious.

Here, actually, I would like to pause for a moment. On the Schriber, I also promise to weave in a “life tip” during each episode. Well, in thinking more about Pharaoh's dream, it struck me that his dream was awfully vivid—seven cows, the Nile River, grains of wheat. And he remembered these details so accurately. When we look at the ancient world, we tend to hear people talking about their dreams in great detail, far more than we do today. I remember there was a time in my life where I never had dreams. And I have often asked people about dreams and they tell me they don't dream. People just don't talk about their dreams like they used to. Why? Why is it that people dream less today and dream less vividly today? This is just speculation, but I think it has to do with our diet. The vitamin B6 causes us to dream. This is a critical vitamin which used to be plentiful in our food but now is scarce. My theory is that people consumed much more B6 in their food than they do today. Here are the foods highest in B6: eggs, salmon, tuna, chicken liver, carrots, spinach. These are what we might call “paleo” foods—food eaten by ancient civilizations and hunter-gatherer civilizations. Even our grandparents ate far more chicken liver than we do today. And probably the wheat which Joseph would have eaten was loaded with vitamins instead of pesticides. And the chickens and eggs they would have eaten were all free-range, organic, humanely-raised, etc. I changed my diet several years ago along these lines, and now I remember my dreams and dream much more vividly. In short, if you're not dreaming, you're missing something. You're probably low in serotonin or in B6 or in natural sunlight, all of which contribute to vivid dreaming and dream recall.

Back to the lecture: so dreams come from the unconscious. Even my dream about the organic deodorant probably had something to do with my unconscious. It probably shows I have some unconscious fear of one day having no money and having debt collectors chasing after me.

But sometimes dreams really do seem to be random and to just come from nowhere. Two nights ago, I had a dream that I looked outside my window and saw all of these zoo animals walking around outside. I specifically remember seeing a giraffe. Probably, on some level, these animals also can teach me something about my unconscious. But, in a way, these animals just kind of “popped in” to my mind. I didn’t *have* to dream about these animals.

I used to think that dreams were the only forum for these absolutely random thoughts which come from nowhere. Until I started meditating. There is a specific meditation called mindfulness of thoughts, in which you *observe* your thoughts without reacting to them or even analyzing them. You just watch them. It’s almost like going to a movie theater, in which your stream of thoughts *is* the movie. Before I began meditating, I basically assumed I only had thoughts about those things which were important or which concerned whatever I was doing at a particular time. Yet, through meditating, I realized that my mind is sending me thoughts of all kinds, some important, some unimportant, some relevant, some totally random. In a five-second period, you could think about a campfire you were at when you were fourteen, and then an instant later, about a recipe you would like to try out for dinner, and then a split second later, about some shirt you bought once at the mall. Usually, even these thoughts are sending us a message of some sort—something relating to the needs of our bodies or the needs of our ego. But, sometimes, these thoughts really don’t have much significance. They just appear. I can’t say for sure whether the brain has some mysterious reason for giving them to us—maybe there is a “method to the madness,” if you will. But what is absolutely true is that those thoughts *didn’t need* to come. Had circumstances been different, had you been less hungry, or been in a room with a different color sofa, or had your head tilted at a slightly lower angle, different thoughts would have arisen.

In short, our dreaming mind works very much like our mind when it’s awake, just sending us a stream of thoughts of all kinds. It’s just that in our dreams, these ridiculous thoughts take center stage, and we don’t have the ability to control them or to stop them. The Jewish writer from Prague, Franz Kafka, tapped into this idea in his fiction. His fiction describes real-life situations but with what he would call “dream logic.” His stories are a continual blending of dream and reality. It is as though Kafka wishes to say, dreaming and consciousness are not separate realms, but rather intertwined.

In a sense, then, our minds and our thoughts are like the tennis ball hanging above the net, able to go in either direction. Although with our thoughts, they can seemingly go in an *infinite number* of directions, rather than only forward or backward. Sometimes, our minds are blank. But eventually, we will have a thought. What will it be? We can’t know. We can’t control what it will be. It’s like the tennis ball. So, when we have this random thought, who gets the credit for it? Where does it come from? Who is its creator? We don’t know. Just this morning, for example, I was meditating, and out of nowhere, I had the idea to write about the deodorant story mentioned above. The brilliant idea to talk about organic German deodorant just came in. I didn’t ask my brain to send me this thought. I wasn’t staring at the deodorant when I had this clever idea. We have many words we use for this phenomenon. We may call it inspiration, the muse, eureka moments. But in a way, those random thoughts we have—about some game of Scrabble we played twenty years ago or whatever—are just as inexplicable and just as miraculous. This goes back to the line from *Match Point*: “It’s scary to think how much is out of one’s control.” And nowhere is this more true than with our thoughts, and perhaps even more so, with our dreams.

Immanuel Kant once said that he “had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.” Kant is considered to be the most representative philosopher of the belief that Reason can solve all philosophical problems. Yet, Kant acknowledged that Reason can only take the human mind so far, that so much of life is unknowable to the human mind, no matter how much reason we apply. For matters of religion, God, morality, and free will, Kant boldly stated that Reason will always fall short to provide a conclusive answer. We must cultivate *faith* in order to answer these unanswerable questions. We have the *choice* to decide how we answer these questions. But we cannot prove whether they are absolutely true or not. We just have to believe in them.

The tennis ball over the net, our dreams, our thoughts, in which direction they will go is, in a sense, not up to us. So what makes this decision? If we were to ask Woody Allen, who is, among other things, a notorious atheist, we know what his answer would be. For him, it is *luck* which decides in which direction the ball will go. *Luck* decides what our dreams will be and what our thoughts will be, when they must go in some undetermined direction. But what *is* luck? Luck is just a word meaning that something decided for us which we cannot explain and which was outside our control. Now, here you’re probably expecting me to sound like some preacher and say, “God is that luck.” I’m not going to go there. Maybe it is just “luck.” I, as some mere human, cannot know what “luck” is or where it comes from. But I think we need to acknowledge that “luck” isn’t something which just “happens.” Luck is something quite mystical, otherworldly, beyond human comprehension. The tennis ball hangs above the net, and seems to decide on its own where to go. And by the way, this is not just with tennis balls, or thoughts, or even dreams. All the time, decisions are being made that decide the fate of our lives and the fate of our world, based largely on “luck” or whatever you want to call it, based on this kind of empty space where things can go in any direction. There are millions of these “tipping points” in our daily lives, in our universe, in our cells, in our atoms, in which fate hangs in the threshold, in which something outside of ourselves seems to decide whether the “tipping” will occur. The tennis ball is merely the most salient example.

Our society’s conception of God as a man in the sky with a long beard makes the idea of “luck” as “God” laughable. But if we can view God as something beyond human comprehension, something otherworldly, then suddenly “luck” and “God” seem to become uncannily similar concepts. If we think of God as a man in the sky with a beard, then of course the idea that it was “God” who made the ball go over the net sounds ridiculous. Right, God is sitting up there, watching your tennis game, and decides, yeah, I decree that the ball will go over the net. So people conclude that it was “luck” which made the ball go over, oblivious to the fact that they may have just provided God with yet another name.

Perhaps now we are ready to return to Joseph and his interpretation of dreams. Joseph says that dreams come from God. But he doesn’t mean that God is hanging around in heaven and deciding what dreams we will have. Rather, it could be that Joseph means that dreams occur in an empty space, in which, through “luck,” infinite configurations of stories and thoughts are possible. Yet, somehow, this particular dream emerged, without explanation. *You* didn’t decide the dream. The dream decided the dream. Luck decided the dream. God decided the dream. The universe decided the dream. Nature decided the dream. Whatever you want to call it. Like Kant, it is our choice how we wish to explain the inexplicable. Some would just say “luck” or “randomness.” Joseph would call it, instead, “God.” But it may be that they are all just saying the same thing without realizing it. Or maybe not. It’s not for me to decide.

In football, when a wide receiver catches the ball for a touchdown, he will often kneel to the ground afterward and thank God for allowing him to catch this pass. I used to make fun of

these gestures and mock them, saying to whomever would listen, “Oh yeah, like God really cares if you catch that pass or not. I think he has more important things to do than help you score a touchdown.” But, in fact, when a pass is thrown in the air, there is always a sense in which forces outside our control decide whether it will be caught by the player sprinting across the field. Every football player—every athlete—knows that they need a bit of luck to win a game. It may be that when a wide receiver kneels in the end zone, he is simply elevating the mysterious concept of luck to its most transcendent level.

You’ll remember that it was because of the Pharaoh’s waiter that the Pharaoh learned of Joseph. The waiter had forgotten about Joseph, even though Joseph had perfectly interpreted his dream while they were in the dungeon together. Joseph tells the waiter to please remember him and to mention him to the Pharaoh. But the waiter, caught up with his own business, forgets. But then—poof!—the waiter has a “thought” one day about Joseph. Now, this thought did not necessarily come from “nowhere,” as the Pharaoh was desperately searching for someone to interpret his dreams. But we cannot deny that luck played a role here. The waiter did not *intend* for this thought about Joseph to surface in his mind. The thought could have just as easily never surfaced. But, because of luck, or whatever you want to call it, it surfaced. Without the waiter’s lucky thought about Joseph the dreamer sitting in the dungeon, Joseph would never have met the Pharaoh, and Joseph would have never reunited with his brothers, the Hebrews never would have ended up in Egypt, and on and on. This is the power of a lucky thought.