Hi everybody, this is Rabbi David Fohrman and welcome to Parshat Miketz. You are watching Aleph Beta. Last week I left you with a bit of a puzzle. We were talking about how God might be able to speak to us without actually speaking. And we were looking at how it was that Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream. Joseph says it is God who tells him what the dream means, and yet God didn't say anything.

Might God have been speaking as it were, without speaking? The key to understanding is an equation; the cows that Pharaoh was dreaming about, they’re years. Once he has that piece of information, he can piece together all the rest but the question is, how does Joseph know that? We suggested that maybe God was communicating through embedded motifs in the dream - images, words, ideas, that resonated with Joseph's own experience and maybe once you add up those details, somehow they equal this idea that cows equal years.

# Ways That

God

# Speaks To Us

Let's start at the beginning of the story: “Vayishlach Par’oh vayikra et Yosef, vayaritzuhu min habor”– So Pharaoh calls for Joseph and has him hauled out of the pit. Okay, wait a second! Before we actually ready anymore, what did that verse say? He was taken out of a pit? But he wasn't in a pit. Joseph was actually in jail. The word for jail in Hebrew had actually been ‘beit hasohar’ . That is where he was put. But now that he was taken out, doesn't say he was taken out of the ‘beit hasohar’ - he was taken out of the pit, but he wasn't in a pit. Well he wasn't in a pit now, but was Joseph ever in a pit? He certainly was. Thirteen years before that, his brothers had thrown him in one.

Strange. It almost seems like the Torah is purposely messing with you here, blurring the lines between these two stories. Back to the story. Joseph is hauled out of this bor, this pit, “vayegalach vayechalef simlotav”, he takes a haircut and then he gets a change of clothes. He gets out of his prison clothes and puts on nice new clothes. Does that remind you of anything earlier in Joseph's life? What happened right before the brothers threw Joseph in a pit? The event that takes place immediately before that, is “vayafshitu et Yosef et kutanto” – they stripped Joseph of his beautiful coat. Right after Joseph gets out of the pit, he gets to put on nice new clothes.

Now, I want you to take a look at what's happen here so far. Look at what we've just seen. It's not just that there are connections, there is a pattern in the connections. What's the pattern? First of all, it's the reverse chronological order. The last time around, the first thing that happened was the stripping of the coat and then he was thrown into the pit. And now, the first thing that happens is being taken out of the pit, and the second thing that happens is getting new cloak. But it's not just reverse chronological order, it's also the reverse significance of the event. The first time around he was stripped of his coat, now he is getting a beautiful new coat to wear - the opposite. And, the first time around he was thrown into a pit; now, he's been taken out of the pit. What there really is, is a reverse of on two levels: the chronological level and the level of significance. Does that pattern continue? If it would, the next event that we would expect to happen in our story involving Joseph and Pharaoh, should be the reverse of something that happened in that story thirteen years ago, before he was stripped of his clothes. Let's see if we can find it.

So Pharaoh calls for Joseph, takes him out of the pit, he gets this change of clothes - very next words

“Vayavo el Par’oh” – and he was brought, he came to Pharaoh. Okay, so Joseph goes to a man, a kind of authority figure. The opposite of going to a man or being brought to a man, would be being sent away from a man, wouldn't it? Does something like that happen thirteen years ago back in the Joseph and the pit story? Before Joseph is thrown into the pit, before he lost his clothes, he was sent away from a man, from an authority figure. His father had sent him away from him to go meet his brothers in Shechem.

Now let’s us just pause here for a second and consider this, because if this parallel really is true, if it is not just the figment of our imagination here, then what is the text suggesting here? Who is Pharaoh representing in this new story? Pharaoh is matching up with the role played by Joseph's father. Right?

That's the reverse. Joseph's father had sent him away; Pharaoh now is bringing him close.

So we actually explored this idea that Pharaoh is acting almost like a father figure to Joseph in much greater depth in last year's [Miketz](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/why-didnt-joseph-write-to-jacob) and [Vayechi](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/who-was-josephs-real-father) videos, try to take a look. But in the meantime, let's come back to Joseph. The point of the matter, at least for our purposes, is that Joseph going into Pharaoh's interpretation of the dream, he's seeing these Déjà vu events that reminds him, in backwards fashion, of his life in the pit. It's almost as if God is leading Joseph to an understanding of what might occur as he hears the dream. My theory is going to be, that as he continues to see these parallels in the dream, it would help him interpret the meaning of what God is trying to tell Pharaoh.

But maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves, maybe it's just still a coincidence. You’d want to see more if it's really true, more of the pattern. The next event that happens in the Pharaoh and Joseph story should be the reverse of what had happened before Joseph was thrown into the pit, - before he lost his clothes and before his father sent him to check on his brothers in Shechem. Well, let's continue with our story of Joseph and Pharaoh and see what we find.

# Does

God

# Speak

Through

# Coded

Messages?

After Pharaoh has Joseph pulled out of the pit, after he gets a change of clothes, after Joseph comes to Pharaoh, the very next words are “vayomer Par’oh el Yosef” – and Pharaoh says to Joseph, “chalom chalamti ufoter ein oto” – I had this dream, but no one can interpret it. The dream is inscrutable, impossible to understand. What's the opposite of a dream that's so inscrutable, that's uninterruptible and impossible to understand? A dream whose meaning is so obvious that no one even needs to interpret it, it speaks for itself. That was the exact event that occurred right before Jacob had sent his son Joseph off to Shechem. Joseph had a dream, the second of a set of dreams in which the sun and the moon and the eleven stars had all come bowing to him; a dream whose meaning was self-evident. Jacob as incensed, “havo navo ani ve-imcha va-achecha lehishtachavot lach artza”", he said – me and your mother and your eleven brothers, should we all come bowing down to you? Is that what this is about?

And now look at the reverse thirteen years later. In the Joseph and Pharaoh story, Pharaoh, the father figure had the dream and told it to Joseph. In the Joseph and Pharaoh story, how is Pharaoh relating to Joseph? He wants to tell him this dream. Thirteen years ago, Jacob didn't want to hear anything about dreams. It's the reverse. And here is one last intriguing detail. In Hebrew, when Pharaoh tells Joseph the dream, the language is “chalom chalamti” – a dream I dreamt. You know what the language was

thirteen years before? “Chalamti chalom” – I dreamt a dream. It's the same thing backwards.

So when you add all this up, it doesn't really seem like a coincidence. It seems like there is something there, but what does this mean? With this reverse parallel of events? It suggest that whatever happens thirteen years ago - on some level, it's getting undone now. Thirteen years ago, everything was falling apart; now, it's all coming together. It's now getting redeemed somehow. We've seen a remarkable pattern, correspondences between Joseph's life thirteen, and the events leading up to Pharaoh telling over his dream to Joseph. Now the question is, the very next thing that's going to happen in the text of Joseph and Pharaoh is that Pharaoh will tell over his dream and the question is - do the correspondences continue? Will we continue to see echoes of Joseph's life thirteen years ago? If the parallels do continue as Pharaoh begins to tell the dream, then maybe God is playing that little dinner table game I was talking to you about before. Maybe these parallels that we've seen in Joseph's life, are priming Joseph - the resonannce, the sense of Déjà vu, it's already there. So when Joseph gets to the dream, he is ready to see the further Déjà vu patterns that are embedded within it. Let's come back next week and see if and how the patterns continue.

Hi everybody, this is Rabbi David Fohrman and welcome to [Parshat Vayigash](https://www.alephbeta.org/weekly-torah-portion/parshat-vayigash). You are watching Aleph Beta. We've been wondering about this question, could there be such thing as non-prophetic communication between God and man and what would it look like?

# How

Does

# Joseph

Interpret Pharaoh's Dreams?

We've been looking at Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream as a possible model. If you haven't seen the last couple of week's Parsha videos, I recommend you go back and take a look.

What we have known in the last week is that in the run-up to Pharaoh's re-telling of his dream to Joseph, the events that have taken place, seem to mirror events that took place 13 years earlier back [when](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/joseph-from-pit-to-palace) [Joseph was thrown into a pit](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/joseph-from-pit-to-palace). As a matter of fact, the events that are taking place now seem to be the reverse of those events both in chronological order and in the significance of the events, everything that happened back then, the opposite is happening now. And we asked, does that pattern continue as Pharaoh begins to tell his dream?

# Understanding Pharaoh's Dream

Vayidaber Paroh el-Yosef, so Pharaoh says to Joseph, bachalomi, 'In my dream', hineni omed al-sfat haYeor, 'I was standing by the side of the river', vehineh min-haYeor olot sheva parot briot basar, 'and then, out of the river, came these seven beautiful cows', v’yifot toar, 'they were beautiful of form'. If you were Joseph, what would v’yifot toar remind you of?

There are only two people in the entire Five Books of Moses, ever described as yifat toar or yifat mareh or yafeh toar or yafeh mareh; it is Joseph himself and Rachel, Joseph's mother. So if you are Joseph, you are thinking, 'Oh my goodness! These cows, they remind me of my mother, they remind me of me!' This is really weird, what are they? Joseph cows, Rachel cows?

But let's continue, vatir'eynah ba'achu; roeh can mean to shepherd or it can mean to graze, depending upon whether you are talking about person or whether you are talking about an animal. Here we are talking about an animal. So these seven beautiful cows, they were grazing but where were they grazing? They were grazing in an achu, well, what's an achu? Turns out that the word never appears elsewhere in the entire Five Books of Moses, but Rashi guesses that it means swamp. So these seven beautiful cows, they were grazing in the swamp land, next to the river.

But you can imagine there might be another possible interpretation of the word and in fact, there is. Onkelos, an even earlier commentators than Rashi, translates it differently. Alef-chet-vav, echav, the other way of reading this is vatir'eynah b'echav, they were grazing with their brother cows. These seven beautiful cows, they had other cows too. Remember the ugly cows. They were grazing with their brother cows. But if you were Joseph, what would that remind you of? Remember roeh, resh-ayin-heh, can mean two things, depending on who the subject is. If it is talking about people, it doesn't mean graze, it means shepherd. Now what does it remind you of?

The yafot toar cows, the Rachel cows, the Joseph cows, they were shepherding with their brothers. Was

Joseph ever shepherding with his brothers? Yes, that's the very first verse of [the Joseph story](https://www.alephbeta.org/the-joseph-story). Before Joseph was thrown in the pit, before he was stripped off of his cloths, before his father sent him away, before he had [those dreams](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/josephs-sun-moon-stars-dream), before all that Yosef ben shva esreh shanah, he was 17 years old, hayah roeh, he was shepherding et-echav, with his brothers, b’tzon, the sheep.

So it is crazy right? I mean there are these two sets of cows, these Joseph cows and then there are these brother cows, right? Joseph's brothers. I mean if we are right then those brother's cows, those ugly cows, right who are those be? They would be the children of Leah cows. But you know that seems pretty far- fetched. You’re telling me these were Leah cows? Is there any other evidence for this? Does the text give us any other indication of that there might be so?

It turns out that it does

Pharaoh keeps on speaking. Vehineh sheva-parot acherot olot achareihen, so after this, seven really ugly cows came out of the river too. Raot toar, they were really ugly, v’rakot basar, they were thin and gaunt. Rakot, where have you heard that before? Spelled differently but it is a homonym. Phonetically, it is the same sound. The only other time it's used, describes a woman. The only physical description that we ever get of Leah, is v'einei Leah rakot. Her eyes were thin or her eyes were soft. They really are Leah cows! Rachel cows and Leah cows, grazing together.

If you are Joseph, it is like this is my life! But then, continue with Pharaohs dream because the next event that happened must have made Joseph's blood run cold. The next thing that Pharaoh says, is that the ugly cows devour alive the beautiful ones.

Now, if you are Joseph, what are you thinking now? When did that happen in your life? Its the disappearance of the Rachel child. Its the pit. The realization must have hit Joseph like a ton of bricks. I dreamt that my brothers would come bowing to me. But that’s not what happened. Pharaoh’s dream is what happened. Those brothers, children of Leah, they swallowed me alive.

And then listen to what Pharaoh says, the ugly cows don't even look any different after swallowing the beautiful cows. They looked exactly the same, it is the perfect crime. I was gone without a trace. I vanished and the brothers come back to father looking exactly like they did before and Joseph was wiped clean off the map of the family. This dream, it retells his life. But now, let's stand back and think about all of this. It is very intriguing theory but there is only one problem with it, it is a problem that actually must have bothered Joseph, too, if Joseph had seen these patterns. It is the number of cows.

You see if those beautiful cows really represent my mother, or they’re yifot toar cows, so they represent

me, Joseph. There shouldn't have been seven of them. There should be one of them, two of them, and if the ugly cows, if they represent the children of Leah, there shouldn't have been seven of them either. I only have six brothers from the children of Leah. Why two sets of seven? Seven cows and seven cows.

# Joseph's

Key to

# Interpreting Pharaoh's Dream

So let's go back to one verse that actually is the key to interpreting Pharaoh's dream. It is the verse back in

[Parshat Vayetze](https://www.alephbeta.org/weekly-torah-portion/parshat-vayeitzei)

that gives the physical descriptions of Rachel and Leah. V'einei Leah rakot. The eyes of Leah were soft,

or were thin. v'Rachel hayetah yefat toar vifat mareh, and Rachel was beautiful of form and had beautiful

appearance. Yefat toar, rakot. Right there, in one verse, it is the key for Joseph to understand how everything in the dream mirrors his own life.

And now, the very next words, vaye'ehav Yaakov et-Rachel and Yaakov loved Rachel, vayomer, so he said to Laban, e'evadcha sheva shanim beRachel bitcha haktanah, I will work for you for seven years, for Rachel, your younger daughter.

He worked for seven years. But Rachel was switched under the chuppah for Leah, so he worked another

seven years and got both Rachel and Leah. Two sets of seven years and so it finally dawns on Joseph, the

cows are years. The beautiful cows don't represent me or my mother. The ugly cows don't represent my brothers, the children of Leah.

The two sets of cows, they represents years, the years that my father worked for Rachel and Leah. When I was out in the field, shepherding with my brothers, we were the fruits of those years. It was as if the seven long years that my father worked for Rachel, they were out in the fields those years shepherding with the seven long years that my father worked for Leah, and when they swallowed me, it is like one set of years swallowed the others.

It was like my father had worked for naught for those seven years for Rachel because the fruits of those

years, I vanished. And then Joseph understands, yes pharaoh, the dream means something for me but it also means something for you. The dream is telling me about my past life and I connect the dots of that life until I come to the inexorable conclusion. I understand what the cows are and then I understand what the dream means for you. Your life is all about Egypt's welfare, the dream means something for you too. There is going to be seven beautiful years, those are the seven beautiful cows, and there's going to be seven terrible years, the years of famine that will make us forget that there were even seven wonderful years. We better start saving now. And so it actually seems true. God is using Joseph's life as the key that unlocks the meaning of Pharaoh's dream.

When pharaoh is talking to Joseph, God is speaking too, but only Joseph can understand.

# Was

God

# Speaking to

Joseph

# Through

Pharaoh's Dream?

It turns out though as remarkable as this is, there is yet a third layer of meaning in Pharaoh's dream because as we have seen, on the one hand the dream refers to Joseph's past and once Joseph understands that he can connect the dots and understand the meaning of the dream for Pharaoh's present. But I also believe that once Joseph understands the meaning of the dream for Pharaoh's present, it unlocks the meaning of Joseph's future. He won't be able to understand it yet, but nine years later he will.

Let's go back to the interpretation that Joseph gives to Pharaoh of this dream. In essence he told Pharaoh

do not despair in your dream. The fact that the ugly cows swallow the beautiful cows, it doesn't mean that we are doomed, that the famine is destined to wipe us out. We can survive because those beautiful cows, just because no one remembers them, doesn't mean they can't have an impact, they have a job to do.

The job of the beautiful cows, the beautiful years is to sustain everyone despite the fact that no one remembers them. During the years of famine, you are going to ask your average Egyptian on the street, you remember the good years? He is going to say, what good years? All I remember is starvation, but the crust of bread that he is holding in his hand, the good years are keeping him alive even though they have forgotten. The good cows can still have an impact even after they vanished. The beautiful cows, the beautiful years have to give their bounty to the bad years, to the gaunt cows. Then they have done their job.

Nine years later his brothers will show up at his door in Egypt, they do not recognize him, but Joseph recognizes them. And Joseph's first response is vayitnaker aleihem, he estranges himself from them, he wants to have nothing to do with them, he is going to send them home.

But then something happens, vayizkor Yosef et hachalomot, Joseph remembered the dreams. Maybe one of the dreams he remembered, was this dream, Pharaoh's dream. And if he did he would have remembered how that dream characterized the people standing in front of him now. They are the rakot cows, they are the products of the gaunt cows, the gaunt years, and in the language of the dream, who is he?

Joseph, the product of the yifat toar cows, the beautiful cows, the beautiful years and what did he tell Pharaoh the job of the beautiful cows, the beautiful years are – to sustain the terrible years. The job of the beautiful cows is to take care of the ugly ones. He looks at the brothers and as angered as he is, as chagrined as he is, he stays in conversation with them and when he sends them home, he sends them home with food.

When the brothers come back again, he sends them home with food and when he finally reveals himself, the first thing he says is don't be upset about what happened. I know why God put me here, to sustain you. How did he know that? He knew it from Pharaoh's dream. He hears about his own past in that dream. He sees the meaning of Pharaoh's present in that dream and finally he understands the meaning of his future, why God put him there – to take care of his brothers.

# Does

God

# Speak to

Us, like He Did with

# Joseph?

Look at the kindness of Joseph. You know kindness is one of those things that makes you feel all fuzzy inside but sometimes chesed, kindness, doesn't make you feel warm. What happens when someone’s estranged you from your own family when they have forgotten about you? When you don't matter to them. But then, years later they are in need. Can you find it within yourself to take care of them?

Anonymously, when they don't even know who you are. Joseph fulfills not just warm, fuzzy kindness but the painful kind too.

And now, I ask you, might it be that even in our own day and age, when we have no prophecy, that we have that too – God speaking without speaking? I cannot prove it to you, but I will speculate with you after hundred and twenty years, after we die, we go up to heaven and you say to God, God I prayed to you, I talked to you and you know, sometimes, I wasn't really concentrating but there were times that I really reached out to you in moments of pain, where were you, where was your response? Did you ever say anything back to me?

I wonder what God's answer might be, did you ever look at your life? Did you ever watched for the patterns? As you were going through events, that feeling of déjà vu, that this has happened before, one time, two times, three times just that string of events, did that ever happen to you? It’s like we have this private message board me and you. This slate that no one else can understand. The set of our shared experiences, your life. Its the way I talk to you.

And you may not always understand the messages that I’m writing out to you, on this little blank slate that we have together, but you still have to learn how to listen, even Joseph didn't understand immediately, it took him nine years after he heard all this to finally, really understand. And you too, may not understand but you understand enough sometimes to know it is not a coincidence. To know that I am tapping you on the shoulder and even if you don't know what I mean, if you know that I am speaking to you, sometimes that's enough.

It is almost like we all have this private communication channel with the Divine. Sometimes we understand and sometimes we really don't. Bbut the slate is our own life. It is a personal kind of language that means something only to us, the same way Pharaoh's dream meant something only to Joseph. The communication comes from the most unlikely of sources, who would have thought that God speaking to Joseph was less through his own dreams than through Pharaoh's. But Joseph was wise enough to hear the echoes resonate in his life to discern the voice of God. Maybe we can pick up a little bit of that wisdom, too, and be ready to hear his voice in the most unlikely of places.

Hi everybody, this is Rabbi David Fohrman and welcome to [Parshat Vayechi.](https://www.alephbeta.org/weekly-torah-portion/parshat-vayechi) You are watching Aleph Beta. This week wraps up a four part series. If you haven't seen the last couple of weeks Parsha videos, I recommend you go back and take a look. I just want to come back with you and discuss a couple of the loose ends here, in the story of Joseph and Pharaoh's dream and I also want to talk personally with you in terms of what this might mean for us, if any of this theory is in fact true.

# Understanding

How

God

# Speaks with Us

So first I want to just get one thing out of the way right now and it is this: in looking back when everything we said about Pharaoh and Joseph's dream, you need to distinguish between what it is that we hear as a reader of the Torah, and what it is that Joseph heard in encountering Pharaoh. The Torah is written in Hebrew. Pharaoh and Joseph probably weren't talking in Hebrew, they probably were talking in Egyptian. The exact language that we see in our text is probably a paraphrase, and if so, you might say well, if you didn't use the words ‘yifat toar’, then doesn't match up with Rachel, right?

The Torah is using these connections to speak to you as a reader. It is a literary device that God is employing in the Torah as a way of communicating to you what it was like for Joseph to listen to these dreams. In other words, the Torah uses the word ‘bor’, pit, to describe the prison. It is a literary device that gives you a sense that as Joseph was being pulled out of prison, there was some sense of Déjà vu, that it just feels like I’m being [pulled out of the pit](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/joseph-from-pit-to-palace). And as I am getting these new clothes, it just feels like that moment that the clothes were taken off of me 13 years ago and now I have been brought to this person. And then later, you know there is something about the way that Pharaoh is describing these cows, they just reminds me of my mother. The Torah is cluing you in, the reader through the use of these words that help you make the connections. But the connections are going on in Joseph's mind because the events just seem so uncannily similar.

# How Do

We Know If

God

# Is Speaking with Us?

What does all of these mean in our own personal lives? I mean does this ever happen to any of us that we get these kinds of taps on the shoulder? Like, what would it look like to see these patterns in your own life? And what are the implications of these? Am I supposed to go around in my life searching for this patterns and trying to interpret its meaning? What if I get it wrong?

A while ago I spent a day in Cleveland and I was actually just giving this talk about Pharaoh and Joseph's dream to a group of about 16 people. And at the very end of the talk, somebody raised his hand and said, have you, Rabbi Fohrman in your own personal life ever received one of these taps on the shoulder, the kind of thing that you are talking about? And I have to admit, I was kind of taken aback by the question, I wasn't really prepared for it. I said, let me tell you something about my own interest in this topic.

It goes back when I was about 10 or 11 years old. My father was struggling with cancer and in his struggle with cancer, he was pretty convinced that he had these kinds of taps on the shoulder a lot. I will give you an example. He was in remission from cancer for about two years, and then one night he had this dream. He saw these two monsters, these like dinosaurs that were battling each other, and in the background of the dream there were these scenes from places that he'd lived - San Francisco, Miranda

and other places. And the last scene was the house in Berkley, California where we were living right then, and in that scene one monster killed the other monster. The last thing he saw was the time - 5:31 - and then he woke up and then looked at his watch and it was 5:31 in the morning. He thought maybe this dream is telling me something, that this is the last act, either I am going to win it or it is going to win me right here and maybe it is time to go to my doctor and see what's going on.

He went to his doctor and found that in fact cancer was back. And these sorts of things happens a lot, these kinds of taps on the shoulder. And I really felt that I needed to talk with somebody about it. I mean, maybe my father was just grasping at straws and maybe was kind of desperate, certainly reality did this and what does it really mean? I was in 5th grade and so I approached my 5th grade Rabbi and talked with him about it. So I asked him, I said, you know these dreams, is it really possible, could there be any meaning in this kind of stuff? And he said to me, dreams don't mean anything, we don't believe in any of these stuff. And he quoted me some suitable Jewish sources to back up the thought and I went back to my father and said, you know, I was talking to my Rabbi and he says this is all kind of nonsense, you know God can't speak to people in ways like these. And my father just smiled and said, you know, he is not going through what I am going through, right now. I wouldn't expect him to say anything different but you know, I can't deny my experience, this is my experience.

And a few years later, my father, olav hashalom, died. I guess it had always been something that preoccupied me. I mean was this real, was my father like grasping at straws because he was desperate and wanting to see something when really, nothing was there? I always thought it was an unresolved issue for me. Were these taps on the shoulder real, could they be real? And then I concluded to my audience in Cleveland, I said I guess that kind of explains my interest in this subject, andit was why it was personally meaningful to me, to find after all of these years this Joseph story and in which the Torah seems to be saying yeah, [God can talk non-prophetically to you](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/what-do-dreams-mean). These kinds of taps on the shoulder could be real.

# Should

We Believe That

God

# Speaks with Us?

And then I left and I went in the car to my last talk of the day. And as I got into the car, it struck me that I actually evaded this fellow's question. He asked me do you feel these taps on your own life? And I haven't talked about my own life, I talked about my father's life. I wonder why it was that I have done that. Why did I evade his question? Was it because I was too embarrassed to admit that I didn't really feel any of these kinds of taps on shoulder in my own life? Whatever the case was, I was off to my next talk and my next talk wasn't in front of 16 people, it was one in front of like 300 people and I was late. And I was supposed to talk about something else but I was too exhausted, I thought let me talk about Joseph and Pharaoh's dream again. Anyways I am getting into the hall, I am late, I am trying to get my computer to hook up to the projector because my PowerPoint isn't showing. Everyone is waiting for the talk to begin and you know, in these kinds of situations, there is always somebody there, hey Rabbi Fohrman, do you remembered me? And so, there is this guy who says this–I am thinking, no just leave me alone–but he says it again, hey Rabbi Fohrman, do you remember me? And I look at him, I say, one second, I do remember you. You are my 5th grade Rabbi from Berkley, California.

It was 25 years later, I haven't seen this man in ages and there he is. After I gave the talk an hour later, I

sat with him, I said, here you were evading questions about taps on the shoulder and it is almost like God is saying to you, why – because you think you haven't have enough taps lately? So, I will give you a tap on the shoulder. The guy who says there is no such thing as taps, he is going to be the one to tap you on the shoulder. What does it mean, what it the grand significance of that moment in my life? I don't know but even if I don't understand the meaning of that, the fact that I felt that, I just couldn't deny that God was right there in my life, that mean something to me.

You know, if you ask somebody do you have a sense in your everyday life, that God is right there with you? I think most of us, if we have to answer honestly that question, I mean like no, you know? I go about my everyday life, carpools, this and that. And I think part of the reason why we feel that way is when we think about God, it is like God has so many better things to do than worry about little old me. I mean, who am I? I am one person in a city of a million people and a galaxy with a hundred billion stars, who knows how many planets, and like God is going to take care of the whole thing. I am just such a small, little piece, you really think that the master of the universe is going to be taking his time, walking with me in my life? It seems so remote. But what would happen if at least one moment in your life, you knew it was true? God really was walking with you. The evidence was just stacking up, it just seemed

too remote a coincidence, and it was like there was God. It seems to be that can be a life-changing

moment. If I mattered in that moment, then the theory that I don't count because I am too small just doesn't hold water anymore. Maybe God is always walking with me but that's just the moment I happened to glimpse it to be true. A life in which you feel accompanied is very different than a life in which you feel all alone.

# The Dangers of

Misinterpreting

How

God

# Speaks to Us

And now, I just want to conclude this series with you by considering the other side of the coin here. I think that these taps on the shoulder are significant in so far as they suggest to us, God's presence in our lives, but not necessarily significant in so far as they demand from us the kind of interpretation.; bBecause that effort to interpret - especially when not all of the facts are on the table can be very, very dangerous

and can lead you into great trouble., Joseph and Pharaoh story.

aAnd for this I want to come back with you one last time to the

Pharaoh had two dreams, not just one. All of the resonances that we have seen that take Joseph back to his own life, those are all in the dream about the seven beautiful cows and the seven ugly cows. But he has another dream that we haven't treated at all, that there is none of these resonances in, and that's the dream with the seven sheaves of wheat, seven beautiful sheaves and seven ugly sheaves. Why does Pharaoh have two dreams? Why does only one of them resonate with Joseph's life?

So I am going to share with you a fascinating theory developed by my friend Jonathan Grossman. Jonathan remarked to me, said, you know if you are Pharaoh and you are going to have a dream that was going to talk to you about the gross domestic product of Egypt, could it be more logical to express that in terms of sheaves of wheat or in terms of cows? Egypt was an agrarian society, the Nile overflowed each year, it was the only place in the arid Middle East where you could reliably plant crops. They ate wheat, they didn't eat cows. So the dream about cows would have been a strange dream for Pharaoh to

have. And now remember, it was the dream about cows that holds the resonance with Joseph's own life.

Perhaps that would have confirmed to Joseph, looking at that dream, you know one second, when Pharaoh was dreaming about sheaves of wheat he was dreaming about him. But the cows? I am the cattle rancher around him, my family was involved with herds and cattle, and in that dream there is all these resonances to my own life. The dream about the cows - that was a dream about me. That dream about me provided a key so that I can help interpret the dream about him. But then if that's true, Joseph must look back on his own life and said, one second when I was 17 years old, I also had two dreams.

Now, [one of those dreams was about the sun, the moon and the eleven stars](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/josephs-sun-moon-stars-dream) but I had another dream about sheaves of wheat. I had all these sheaves of wheat, my brothers had sheaves of wheat and then their sheaves were bowing down to my sheaves. What was I doing dreaming about wheat? I am a cattle- rancher, I am not a wheat farmer. Pharaoh is the wheat farmer. And then perhaps that lead Joseph straight to the following conclusion: One second... when Pharaoh was dreaming about cows, he was dreaming about my past, right? Maybe when I was dreaming about wheat, I was dreaming about Pharaoh's future. It never meant that I was supposed to rule over my brothers back then when I was 17 years old. It was talking about the future. One day my brothers would be desperate and I would be in charge of all the wheat. They would come bowing to me, desperate for food. But then, I also had another dream too - a dream whose meaning seemed so self-evident, the sun, the moon and the eleven stars, would all come bowing to me. We all thought we knew what that meant. [The sun – my father; the](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/josephs-sun-moon-stars-dream) [moon – my mother; and the eleven stars – obviously my brothers,](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/josephs-sun-moon-stars-dream) they are all going to come bowing to me. But maybe we were all wrong.

Maybe the self-evident dream wasn't so self-evident. Because what did Pharaoh's dream teach me? That things don't always represent things like cows, they can represent time and the units of time they can represent are years. What if I take that lesson and apply it now to my own dream? How many heavenly bodies were there in my dream? The sun and the moon and the eleven stars, that's 13. How old was I when I had that dream? I was 17 years old. The text tells us Joseph was 30 years old when he stood before Pharaoh. Both dreams mean the same thing. In 13 years, the entire universe is going to come bowing to you, you are going to be in charge of all the wheat of the world. It took Pharaoh's dream 13 years later to be able to have the key to understand, in retrospect, with Joseph's own dreams really meant.

In the end, Joseph and his whole family made an error. They were correct that Joseph's dreams weren't coincidence, that they were a product of the divine. But then they made a leap, when they didn't really have all the facts. And that leap is so tempting, if God is talking to me, why is he talking to me? Clearly to communicate a message, I have to understand the message and if I don't have all the facts, let's see what do I think the message is? That's a dangerous game to play.

You don't always know what it means. Yes, in retrospect, later sometimes you figure it out, sometimes you never do. Sometimes all you know is that you got a tap on the shoulder and that's okay, and you have to have the humility to say I don't understand. But what I do know is that I am not alone, and because of that my life is profoundly different.

Hi everybody, this is Rabbi David Fohrman and welcome to Parshat Vayeishev. You are watching [Aleph](https://www.alephbeta.org/) [Beta](https://www.alephbeta.org/).

Over these next weeks, the Parshiyot will be dealing with the epic Joseph story, and what I thought I'd do is to try to put together a four-part series with a more comprehensive view. If you miss a week in the middle, just back up and watch last week's and then just continue on with what you are up to. But let's dig in right here. Let me begin with a question that's much larger than the Joseph story but I think the Joseph story has a lot to say about it: Does God speak with us today?

# How Do

We Know When

God

# Is Speaking with Us?

Prayer is a really important part of the game in the relationship between people and God, but the problem is, we spend all this time talking to God, does God spend any time talking back to us? And let me be clear, I don't mean like kind of God talks to you because I feel like so inspired, and I think that that's God talking to me. Yeah, you could say that, but that's a very subjective thing. I am talking about something a little bit more concrete that you could really stand up and say, "God is really talking to me". Can you be a rational person and believe that God is talking to you? We don't live in an age of prophecy anymore - there were prophets. So does that mean God doesn't talk to us, or in an age where prophecy is absent, can God speak to us non-prophetically too? And if so, what would that look like?

That is what I want to explore with you in the context of the Joseph story, and here is why. If you would look throughout the [book of Genesis](https://www.alephbeta.org/torah/genesis) for some sort of model for God to communicate with mankind in a way that is not prophetic, that would be very hard to find. When God speaks to Adam, that's like a prophecy. When God speaks to Noah, that's a prophecy too, to Abraham, to Isaac to Jacob; these were all prophecies. There is one generation in the Book of Genesis where there doesn't seem to be any prophecy at all, and it's Joseph's generation. You will never find the words, “and God spoke to Joseph, saying”; “and God spoke to Judah, saying”. You never find that with Joseph and his brothers. God seems to be silent in this generation. So the next question is: Was God absolutely silent, or did God find a way to talk to someone like Joseph without really talking to him? Are there any moments in which Joseph seems pretty convinced that God has been speaking to him, that he has some sort of unique insight that no one else has into God's plan? Does that ever happens? And the answer is I think it does, at least twice.

# Does

God

# Use Dreams to

Speak to

Us?

Now, before I get to those two times, let me just actually dismiss one possibility out of hand. What you might is obviously the first time that God communicates with Joseph is his dreams in this week's parsha. The first one that he and his brothers are gathering wheat and the stalks of wheat belonging to his brothers start bowing to his stalks of wheat. Then he had this other dream, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars all bowing to Joseph. So maybe this is God's way of talking to Joseph; maybe this is God's way of talking to us, through dreams.

The problem is that Joseph's dreams don't really do much for him, do they? As a matter of fact, the only

thing they really do is they get him thrown in a pit, and sold of f as a slave. It's almost like, well if that's how God talks to us, well then no thanks, I am not interested.

So let's leave Joseph's dreams aside for a moment and let me ask you, are there any other times that Joseph seems to be privy to sort kind of divine communication? God talking to Joseph so to speak, without really talking to him. So here are the two cases that comes to mind.

The first is Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream. It's a dream about these seven beautiful cows that are swallowed alive by these ugly cows, and Pharaoh knows it means something but he can't figure out what it means and all his astrologers can't figure it out either. One of Pharaoh's servants remembers that back in prison there had been this Hebrew fellow who knew how to interpret dreams. They haul out Joseph, and Pharaoh basically says, "so I hear you know how to how to interpret dreams?" “Biladai”, he says, it's not me, “Elokim ya'aneh et-shlom Paroh," it is God who will answer Pharaoh.

The next thing that happens is that Pharaoh tells his dream over to Joseph and Joseph just goes and interprets it. It doesn't say that God spoke to Joseph and said "here is what the dream meant". So now the question is, how seriously should we take Joseph when he says, "God will interpret the dream for you"? On the one hand, it might just be that Joseph is being kind of humble about it. But maybe God did speak to Joseph without speaking to him somehow. It wasn't like, "And then God said to Joseph…" it wasn't a prophecy, it was something else.

# Does

God

# Speak to

Us Directly or

# in Our Minds?

The next time something like this happens, is years later. Joseph of course, rose up through the ranks of Egyptian royalty to become second in charge to the King, now he is in charge of all the grain of the land during times of famine, and along come the brothers, and the brother's don't recognize him but he recognizes them. Finally, he reveals himself, ani Yosef achichem, "I am Joseph your brother who you sold down to Egypt, but now," al-te'atzevu, "do not be upset," al-yichar beineichem, "do not be angry at one another," ki-mechartem oti henah, "that you sold me here," ki-mechartem oti henah ki lemichyah shlachani Elokim lifneichem "because God did it so that I could provide for you during these times of famine." He continues, v'atah, and now, lo-atem shlachtem oti henah "It wasn't you that sent me here to Egypt," ki-haElokim "it was God." And he says it again years later, after Yaakov, the father of Joseph and his brothers had died, Joseph say look, atem chashavtem alai ra'ah, "it's true that you thought to do evil to me in throwing me into the pit", Elokim chashavah letovah, "but God made it work out okay." Lema'an asoh kayom hazeh, "God had his own plans to bring us to this day", lehachayot am-rav, "when I could take care of you and make you into a great nation by feeding you during this time of famine".

So Joseph has this great insight into the Divine plan. I understand why all this happened, it was providential. Now, one more time, we don't have any record of God coming down and telling Joseph this is my plan. So how did Joseph know? Is it possible that this too is an example of God speaking to Joseph without actually talking to him? Is there a way for God to speak without speaking? That's the question of non-prophetic communication. If it could exist in the generation of Joseph, maybe it could

exist in our generation too. Maybe there is a way that God speaks to us and maybe the story of Joseph provides a model.

# The Ways of

How

God

# Speaks with Us

Pharaoh asked all of his astrologers, his chartumim, and none of them can successfully interpret the dream. But when he tells the dream to Joseph, Joseph immediately knows what it means. The seven good cows, those are seven good years, the seven really ugly cows, they’re seven really terrible years of famine. When the seven bad cows devoured the seven good cows, it means that the seven years of famine is going to be so bad that it's going to make people forget that there were ever seven years of plenty. Pharaoh seems to know intuitively that this interpretation is correct. He is so impressed that he sets him up as second in command and charges him with administering the grain in Egypt during those crucial fourteen years.

And now to the question of how Joseph knew this. God never whispers in his ear, we don't have any record of that in the Torah. If there is some sort of hidden communication between God and Joseph lurking in this text, what might it look like? What exactly are we searching for here?

If you were God and you wanted to impart the meaning of this dream to Joseph, you don't actually have to tell him the whole long spiel about these seven cows represent, what the other seven cows represent, and what it means when this one eats that one. There is really one key piece of information. If you give him that one key piece, he will just be able to extrapolate the rest logically. What is that key piece of information? It's that cows equal years. The commentaries talk about how Pharaoh's astrologers they had so many wrong ideas about this: maybe the cows mean types of crops, or maybe they mean daughters of Pharaoh, or maybe they represent cities? Joseph's key insight is that what they represent is time, and the units of time are years.

You see, once you know that cows equal years, then obviously seven beautiful cows is going to equal seven beautiful years, and seven bad cows is going to be seven bad years. Seven bad cows' swallow seven good cows, it means that seven bad years are going to be so bad, you're not going to remember seven good years. All that is logical once you know that cows equal years. Could God have found a way to somehow convey that one little piece of information to Joseph? And if we replay the story in slow motion, we kind of find out where that happened.

So Pharaoh hauls Joseph out of the pit, says "I hear you know how to interpret dreams", Joseph says "it's not really me, it's God", and the next thing that happens is that Pharaoh just tells him his dreams, and Joseph just somehow knows how to interpret it. The only one who said anything to Joseph was Pharaoh. Was there something in Pharaoh's words that tipped Joseph off? Maybe the interpretation of the dream was embedded in such a way that only Joseph would have understood its meaning. How could you put something in the dream that only Joseph would understand?

# How Do

We Understand the Messages

God

# Speaks to

Us?

Let's imagine you have a whole bunch of family and friends around your Shabbat table. So the first thing you do is you ask for a volunteer - that volunteer is going to play God. Now that volunteer, let's call him Bob, Bob gets to look around the table and nominate his good friend, he is going to play Joseph.

Everybody else around the table, they get to play Pharaoh's astrologers.

Now here is how the competition works: You are going to come up with a secret message and you are going to whisper it to Bob. Now, maybe the secret message is "peach pie is for desert". Now Bob's job is to somehow communicate that message to Joseph who is at the other end of the table without any of these astrologers figuring out what he is trying to say. It's not an easy task, but it can be done. Bob and Joseph have one thing going for them - they know each other. Bob gets to nominate a friend of his, so he and his friend, they would have had experiences together that he and others would not have shared.

And maybe he can somehow leverage those experiences to communicate something new to Joseph.

So imagine you are Bob and three years ago you went on a ski trip with your friend playing Joseph at the other end of the table, and you pack some peaches for a snack, so you might say, "Remember when we were on this ski trip, the snack that we had." And maybe when you were kids, you were in geometry class, so you say hey, "remember when we were back in Mr. Albertson's class and we couldn't figure out that strange Greek letter thing." Cobbling together a new message by piecing together your prior experiences, and if you did you could talk just to him without anybody else around the table understanding you.

Might the real God have been doing something similar with the real Joseph? Could it be that embedded in the dream were certain things that were in sort of the set of shared experiences that God knew about and Joseph knew about? God makes use of that shared experience to communicate something new, to communicate cows' equals years. Let's take a closer look next week.