

The Source of Wisdom: Thoughts for Parashat Mikkets

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By

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mikkets

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When Joseph was summoned to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph said: "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace" (Bereishith 41:16). Later, when Joseph did interpret the dreams—seven years of abundance to be followed by seven years of famine—he not only explained the dreams but offered a practical plan of action. His plan was so impressive that Pharaoh appointed him to implement it. "And Pharaoh said to his servants, can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the spirit of God?" (41:38)

Clearly, both Joseph and Pharaoh detected God's role in the interpretation of the dreams. Yet the text makes no mention of God intervening by giving Joseph a prophetic message. What role did God play in this story?

Before answering this question directly, let us first examine several other texts. In our morning prayers, we bless God "Who teaches Torah to Israel His people." How exactly does God teach us Torah? Do we receive prophetic instruction from Him? Don't we actually learn from human teachers?

To understand how God teaches us Torah, we may turn to a verse in Psalm 144, in which David blesses God "Who teaches my hand for battle and my fingers for war." How does God teach David or any other warrior how to do battle? Don't soldiers learn from veteran military people who share their experience and training? When God is blessed as the One who teaches (ha-melamed), we need to understand how He teaches. Ha-melamed must be understood not as God directly teaching, but as endowing us with the propensity to be taught. God makes us sensitive and receptive to receiving instruction in Torah from human teachers. God enables soldiers to learn military skills from their officers. Stated another

way, God gives us the potential to learn; in that sense, He teaches us Torah and He teaches soldiers how to engage in warfare.

Going back to the Joseph story, God did not interpret the dreams for Joseph. Rather, God gave Joseph the intelligence and insight to be able to decipher the meaning of the dreams and to envision a sound plan of action. Joseph, in his piety, realized that his personal gifts were given to him by God. He was humble and wise enough to know that God is the source of all wisdom; it was God who “taught” Joseph to interpret dreams and to develop strategies. Pharaoh, being impressed with Joseph’s wisdom, also came to feel that Joseph’s wisdom was a gift of God.

The essence of an enlightened religious worldview is a deep recognition of our dependence on God. Whatever we are able to learn and accomplish derives from God having implanted within us the necessary abilities. In the story of Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph was able to make sense of the dreams; as important—or even more important—was his ability to offer a sensible plan of action to ward off future disaster. God “taught” Joseph to foresee problems and to overcome obstacles.

God is the ultimate Melamed, teacher. He teaches by enabling us to learn, to think carefully, to analyze, to overcome obstacles. When we realize that indeed it is God Who so endows us with our ability to learn, we reach a profound religious insight. It is an insight that is at the very root of an enlightened religious worldview. The first blessing of petition in our Amidah prayer praises God for endowing us with the gracious gift of knowledge and for teaching understanding to human beings. “We bless You, Lord, Who bestows the gracious gift of knowledge.” Our responsibility is to use this gracious gift wisely.

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