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Dream Interpreters in Exile: Joseph, Daniel, and Sigmund (Solomon)

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THE biblical Joseph and Daniel have much in common with Sigmund Freud, for all three experienced the powerlessness of exile and later attained the power they lacked by interpreting dreams. Unable to control historical destiny, exilic Jews have characteristically reinterpreted events, texts, and dreams; the interpretive successes of Joseph, Daniel, and Sigmund at once reflect and defy the Jewish condition. Although Freud made every effort to distance himself from his ancient forerunners, The Interpretation of Dreams indirectly responds to them.

While many adepts at dream interpretation appear in the Bible, in the Talmud, in the Sefer Chassidim, and in other Judaic sources, Joseph, Daniel, and Sigmund have special significance. Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, and yet saves them and the Jewish people after he gains authority in Egypt. In the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar exiles the Jews to Babylonia, and yet Daniel achieves such importance that he can influence both individual lives and Israel's collective future. Finally Sigmund Freud, also known by his Hebrew name Shlomo (or Solomon), emerges from obscurity to create an international movement. Beneath the subtle manipulation of signs and symbols, this triumvirate reveals an underlying relationship between power and interpretation.

Exile is a central theme in the Hebrew Bible, as it has been in recent Zionist thought. Especially since the fall of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., Jews have perceived themselves as a people in exile. The manifest reality of slavery and weakness has, however, been at odds with the belief that God benevolently guides the Jewish fate. Thus an intolerable discrepancy—between the promised divine covenant and the actual historical decline—inspired a vital tradition of commentary. Interpretation recreated history, and made everything seem possible; even the harshest poverty took on meaning, within a prophetic cycle of exile and return. In short, through biblical commentary and Talmudic debate, the Jewish people sought to transcend suffering and remain spiritually strong.
Leslie Fiedler has written shrewdly on the Jew as a "master of dreams." This is what Joseph's brothers call him—a ba'al ha-chalomot, a master of dreams or dreamer. At one point, Fiedler cites Juvenal, who, "describing the endless varieties of goods on sale in Rome...reminds that 'for a few pennies' one can buy any dream his heart desires from the Jews." From the Jews!"  Fiedler briefly speculates on what it means for Jews to have been chronically perceived as peddlers of dreams. Bereft of land and natural resources, Jews in the Diaspora have apparently learned a kind of alchemy, transforming dreams (or texts) into interpretations, and interpretations into power.

Joseph begins as a dreamer who wanders the fields wearing a "coat of many colors" (ketonet passim, Gen. 37:3). He loses his way; then his brothers strip him of his special garment and throw him into a pit. Afterwards, they sell him to Ishmaelite traders who are headed for Egypt. In spite of his initial powerlessness, Joseph rises to become Pharaoh's influential adviser.

Both a dreamer and an interpreter of dreams, Joseph is the quintessential Jewish figure who attains strength from a position of utter weakness. He initially tells this dream to his brothers: "Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright, and...your sheaves surrounded mine and bowed down to my sheaf" (Gen. 37:7). Psychoanalysts might view Joseph's dream as an expression of his ambition, but ancient dream interpreters customarily predicted the future through dreams. Consequently, Joseph's brothers are uneasy with the prospect his dream suggests. They mock him, saying "Shall you rule over us?" This disbelieving, rhetorical question later proves to be an interpretive prophecy, when the brothers indeed come before Joseph and bow down to him (Gen. 42:6). Their taunting language returns to haunt them.

When Joseph has his second dream, his brothers envy him, whereas his father Jacob takes its meaning more seriously and "guarded the matter" (Gen. 37:11). The second dream also suggests Joseph's special status: "Behold, I have again dreamt a dream; and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars are bowing down to me" (Gen. 49:7). Jacob now interprets the dream, employing the form of a question as did Joseph's brothers: "Shall I, your mother, and your brothers come to bow down to you to the earth?" (Gen. 37:10). Although Jacob phrases this prophetic interpretation as a question, he is more willing to consider it possible than are Joseph's envious brothers. In his youth, then, Joseph is a dreamer, not an interpreter of dreams; his family members act as the interpreters.

Joseph's extraordinary rise to power occurs only after he has gone into exile. Experienced as a dreamer, Joseph begins to serve as an interpreter of dreams as well. When he has been imprisoned on the incriminating testimony of Potiphar's wife, he comes into the company of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. Both of Pharaoh's servants dreamed a dream, each man his dream on a certain night, and each man according to the interpretation of his dream...Joseph came to them in the morning and saw that they were sad. And he asked Pharaoh's officers..."Why do you look so ill today?" And they said to him: "We have dreamed a dream and there is no interpreter of it." And Joseph said to them: "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me," [Gen. 40:5-8]

Joseph's self-assurance might be called either hubris or chutzpah. If interpretations belong to God, why should Pharaoh's servants tell their dreams to Joseph? What authorizes him to act as God's mouthpiece? Regardless of such questions, the narrative assures that Joseph will triumph as an interpreter.

Joseph's ascent occurs only after he spends two years in prison, when Pharaoh has a dream which none of his wise men can interpret (Gen. 41:1-8) and Pharaoh's cupbearer belatedly recalls Joseph's interpretive abilities. The cupbearer tells Pharaoh that he and the baker "dreamed a dream on a certain night...; [Joseph] interpreted to each man according to his dream. And it came to pass, as he interpreted to us, so it was" (Gen. 41:11-13). Here the plot thickens. What does it mean for the cupbearer to say, "as he interpreted to us, so it was"?

These words suggest two basic, and diametrically opposed, meanings. Their more obvious sense is that the interpretation accurately predicts what is destined to occur. Presumably the dreams signify imminent future events which Joseph successfully foretells. Yet rabbinic sources uncover a second level of meaning and contest the notion that a dream's prophetic meaning inheres in it. Instead, they indicate that the meaning of a dream follows its interpretation; interpretations can even produce meanings and cause events which were not predestined. One Talmudic opinion metaphorically asserts that "all dreams follow the mouth." This saying itself takes on diverse meanings in the mouths of interpreters. It is associated with an account of Rabbi Bana'ah, who had a dream and went to learn its meaning from twenty-four dream interpreters in Jerusalem. All of them gave different interpretations "all of them were fulfilled."2

The Midrash to the Joseph narrative tells another story that illustrates the potential influence of interpretation over a dream's meaning:
A certain woman went to R. Eliezer and said to him: "I saw in my dream that the second story of my house was split." He said to her: "You will conceive a male child."; she went away and so it was. A second time she dreamed this and went to R. Eliezer, who told her: "You will give birth to a male child"; and so it was. A third time she had the same dream and came to him again but did not find him. She said to his students: "I saw in my dream that the second story of my house was split." They said to her: "You will bury your husband," and so it was. [Some time later,] R. Eliezer heard a voice of wailing and said to them: "What is this?" They told him the story, and he said to them: "You have killed a man, for it is not written, "As he interpreted to us, so it was."" R. Jochanan said: "All follows the interpretation." 2

This tale characterizes one rabbinic approach to dream interpretation and may even help to explain the rabbi's associative manner of interpreting Scripture. Although not all commentaries are valid, any convincing interpretation may become significant, at least through its influence on hearers and readers. From one rabbinic standpoint, reading and interpretation are potential weapons, not means to escape from the social or political realm.

There is a direct link between Joseph's calling and the exilic condition. Only by being sold into slavery in Egypt is Joseph able to emerge as a potent interpreter of dreams. For only after being imprisoned can he victoriously interpret the dreams of his fellow prisoners and of Pharaoh. And only when Pharaoh accepts his interpretation does Joseph become a powerful leader. Exile promotes interpretation, which restores power. One way to deal with weakness is to reconstitute past and future events.

The Book of Daniel in many ways alludes to the Joseph narrative. 4 Like Joseph, Daniel begins his success story in exile. The book opens by describing a moment of collective defeat: "In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave King Jehoiakim of Judah into his hand" (Dan. 1:1-2). At the time of the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E., Nebuchadnezzar plunders Jerusalem; part of his loot is Daniel, who is then taught Babylonian languages and literature. Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar anticipates a need for translators, or perhaps he merely wishes to enlarge his retinue of wise counselors. As it turns out, he educates the prophet of his own destruction.

The strongest echoes of Genesis in the Book of Daniel occur when King Nebuchadnezzar, like Pharaoh, has a disturbing dream: "In the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed dreams, and his spirit was troubled" (Dan. 2:1). Here "his spirit was troubled" (titpa'em rucho) echoes a nearly identical and semantically indistinguishable phrase, titpa'em rucho, in Genesis 41. Troubled by dreams, both Pharaoh and King Nebuchadnezzar request interpretations from their wise men and are disappointed. Subsequently, both rulers learn of a Hebrew slave who performs dream interpretations. Both of them immediately accept the interpretation they receive and grant the interpreter immense power.

Through its language, the Daniel story underscores the conflict between human and divine strength. At several points in the story, for instance, a hand beyond human hands spells out the destruction to come. At the start of the Book of Daniel, the narrative explains that God gave King Jehoiakim of Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand (b'ya'do). The literal rendering of yad is "hand"; translators ordinarily interpret the verse to mean that God delivered Jerusalem into Nebuchadnezzar's power. The metaphor returns several times in the subsequent tale, for this story dramatizes the battle between opposing hands, between opposing modes of power. Nebuchadnezzar may be the strongest king on earth, yet this text asserts that he is impotent against the "hand" of God. In Nebuchadnezzar's initial dream, as retold by Daniel,

"You, O King, did watch, and behold, a great image. This image, which was mighty and of surpassing brightness, stood before you, and its form was awesome. The head of the image was of fine gold, its breast and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, and its feet part iron and part clay. As you watched, a stone was hewn out, not by hands, and struck the image on its feet of iron and clay and crushed them. Then the iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold were crushed, and became like chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that no trace of them could be found." [Dan. 2:31-35; emphasis added]

Nebuchadnezzar's dream image is destroyed by a stone that is cut out "not by hands," but by some mysterious, superhuman force (which Homer might have called by the name daimon). Again, the image of a hand suggests power, and the description of an action undertaken "not by hands" implies that divine guidance is at work.

Later, Nebuchadnezzar tries to improve on his dream by building a statue of solid gold. When three children of Israel refuse to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue, the king threatens to throw them into a furnace; "and who is the god," he rages, "that will deliver you from my hands (min-yadai)?" (Dan. 3:15). Daniel's friends answer that their God will deliver them from Nebuchadnezzar's hand. A transcendent force challenges human will when God's hand appears to annul Nebuchadnezzar's power.

Belshazzar, one of Nebuchadnezzar's successors, also learns of his
doom when it is spelled out by a supernatural hand. During a blasphemous debauch, in which he desecrates the vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from the Temple, Belshazzar suddenly becomes terrified: “In the same hour, the figure of a hand in human form appeared” (Dan. 5:5). This enigmatic hand produces the proverbial “writing on the wall” which Daniel interprets as a prophecy of the king’s destruction. Again, a hand that transcends the visible world points the way, and the interpreter claims to decipher the message by means of his special relationship to its divine source.

After passing through an apprenticeship in exile, Joseph and Daniel learn the ways of interpretation. Ostensibly weak, these interpreters nevertheless write the Jewish people into a new position of strength. Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar exert immense control over the waking world, but they cannot fully master the realms of imagination, dream, and sleep. Prophecy appears to be at work, and Jewish interpreters claim to grasp an otherwise ineffable power.

Sigmund Freud did not agree that higher powers are at work in dreams; he maintained that they arise from deeper processes of the mind. Nonetheless, as a dream interpreter he stood very much in the line of Joseph and Daniel. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud rejects Joseph’s intuitive methods, yet he admits that he identifies with him. His analogous position is most evident in one of his own dreams, which reveals even more than he was willing to acknowledge.

On about 6 January 1898, Freud reported what may be termed “the Passover dream.” Here, as in the stories of Joseph and Daniel, Freud’s activity as dreamer and interpreter is associated with his exilic condition. Although Freud was an assimilated Viennese physician, he was aware of his marginal position as a Jew and was sensitive to the current anti-Semitism. By analyzing Freud’s Passover dream in ways that Freud himself neglects, we discover that it aptly sums up the cyclical history of Jewish servitude and liberation, exile and redemption.

The Interpretation of Dreams explains the immediate source of Freud’s dream: a play by the Zionist leader Theodor Herzl, entitled The New Ghetto, which Freud was among the first to see in Vienna, possibly on 5 January 1898. Freud indirectly expounds this play’s intellectual content when he writes that it induced the dream’s manifestly Zionist “concern for the future of children, to whom one cannot give a fatherland; concern about educating them so that they may become independent [freiügig]” (Td 427/1D 478). Like Joseph and Daniel in Egypt and Babylonia, Freud and Herzl in Austria anticipated potential threats to future generations. Moreover, Freud’s dream and commentary, like the interpretive activities of Joseph and Daniel, respond to weakness.

The dream has its setting in Rome. Despite this specific geographical location, Freud’s imagination alludes to several episodes from Jewish history. His report of the dream begins with a crisis situation:

As a result of certain events in the city of Rome, it is necessary to evacuate the children, which also takes place. The scene is then in front of a gateway, a double door in the ancient style (the Porta Romana in Siena, as I am already aware during the dream). I sit on the edge of a fountain and am very dejected, close to tears. A female person—an attendant or nun—brings the two boys out and delivers them to their father, who was not myself. The elder of the two is clearly my eldest; I do not see the face of the other one. The woman who brought out the boys requests a kiss from him in parting. She is remarkable for having a red nose. The boy refuses her the kiss, but while reaching out his hand in parting says [to his Christian attendant]: Auf Geseres, and to both of us (or to one of us): Auf Ungeseres. I have the notion that the latter signifies a preference. [Td 426/1D 478]

Freud’s initial association to this dream is Herzl’s play. His second association is a biblical psalm, which Freud himself cites: “By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept.” This is one of the most famous expressions of exilic emotion in Hebrew Scripture, drawn from Luther’s translation of the first verse of Psalm 137. It also resonates with the Book of Daniel, which similarly takes place after the fall of Jerusalem and during the Babylonian captivity.

The most obscure moment in Freud’s dream involves his invented words Auf Geseres and Auf Ungeseres. His eldest son employs these words rather than the expected words of parting, Auf Wiedersehen. Freud wishes to show that, despite their superficial meaninglessness, these phrases actually bear significant messages from the unconscious. Freud’s own rather forced interpretation relates the dream to technical questions concerning his psychological theories. In view of the initial scene of exile and Freud’s associations to the Zionist leader Herzl and to Psalm 137, however, the dream may also be understood as searching for a solution to the so-called Jewish question.

To grasp the Passover dream’s significance, we should recall that Freud was himself raised with the assistance of a Christian governess, and that before his marriage he considered (and decided against) conversion to Christianity. Freud’s dream confronts the tense Jewish-Christian relations in fin de siècle Vienna by placing him in a state of crisis and his sons in custody of a Christian attendant. The dream enacts Freud’s response to this scenario, which more broadly refers to the disadvantaged standing of Jews in Europe.
Freud's further associations bring the Judaic background to the fore. Freud indicates that the “nonsense” words Auf Geseres and Auf Ungeseres acoustically remind him of a central symbol of the Exodus from Egypt, unleavened bread (ungesäuertes Brot). “During their hasty departure from Egypt,” Freud emphasizes, “the children of Israel did not have time to let their dough rise, and to this day, in memory of this, eat unleavened bread at Easter-time” (Td 427/1D 479). First a note about language. Freud never uses a Judaic term for “Passover” (Hebrew pesach or German Passah), but rather employs the euphemism “at Easter-time.” Despite this disguise, his association of the dream with Passover evidently alludes to Jewish exile. Passover is the holiday during which Jews reexperience the Egyptian servitude and bondage under a “new king,” before liberation by Moses. Freud's dream alludes to the exilic condition of Daniel in Babylonia and of Joseph in Egypt, and recalls their successes as interpreters. His numerous verbal associations to this dream may be summarized as follows:

- **Aramaic/Hebrew**
  - geseres (decrees)
- **Yiddish**
  - geseres (decrees, misfortunes)
- **German**
  - machen (ein) Geseres (to make a fuss)
  - gesäuertes Brot (leavened bread)
- **German**
  - ungesäuertes Brot (unleavened bread)

One of Freud's unconscious wishes, expressed indirectly by his dream, was to alleviate the modern Jewish exile. The language of Freud's dream report reveals a further link to Judaic experience. Freud recognizes that the mysterious word Geseres comes to him by way of Yiddish, following Aramaic and Hebrew sources. He writes that he has received information from rabbinic scholars who told him that the word Geseres signifies “imposed sufferings, doom” (Td 427/1D 478). More accurately, it refers to anti-Semitic decrees, pronouncements against the Jews. The most familiar anti-Jewish decrees in Europe were motivated by “blood libels,” in turn associated with the celebration of Passover. In 1421, for instance, the Jews were expelled from Vienna after being accused of ritual murder; this was called the “Wiener Geseraah.”6 Freud occasionally claimed that he had forgotten the Hebrew he learned as a child, yet he recognizes that the Geseres and Ungeseres in his dream have their roots in Hebrew and Yiddish.

Given the linguistic associations, then, Freud's dream verbally imposes counterdecrees on the Christian attendant, while it revokes such decrees in relation to himself. In the dream, his son's words Auf Geseres and Auf Ungeseres suggest this fuller meaning: “Upon you—un—Geseres, decrees and misfortune. Upon you—father—Ungeseres, the annulment of decrees and misfortune.” Reversing the familiar anti-Semitic decrees, Freud's son affirms Judaic traditions by employing a phrase that resonates with Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish. Once again, language is the medium of Jewish self-assertion. The dream places Freud's eldest son in a position to establish his continu­ity with Judaic traditions, recalling the Passover ritual with its references to harsh decrees and its four traditional questions ascribed to four sons.7 The verb gazar actually occurs in the Passover Haggadah, which was the one Jewish ritual maintained in the Vienna home of Freud's parents.8 Hence the Passover dream suggests the resolution of a problem, the future of Freud's children. In the midst of difficulties, like those caused by the Viennese anti-Semitism of Karl Lueger after 1897, Freud's eldest son can respond with an indirect affirmation of Judaism.9

Freudian psychoanalysis provides methods which uncover hidden meaning beneath the surface of our experiences; it presupposes that appearances are deceptive. Interpretation acts as a mode of power, capable of undermining and overcoming the manifest reality. Hence Freud's implicit answer to weakness and exile was interpretation, which potentially redefined the roles. As we have seen in the stories of Joseph and Daniel, even a captive slave can rise to prominence if granted the authority to interpret dreams. Incidentally, in Freudian practice the dream text plays much the same role as does Scripture in rabbinic thought. Freud himself comments that, in general, he treats the dream “as a holy text.”10

While Freud for the most part chose assimilation as his answer to the “Jewish question,” he never denied that he was Jewish, and sometimes even proudly asserted his difference.11 His residual malaise, a discomfort over the Jewish condition, was most evident in his uneasy relationship to Rome. Freud postponed his planned trip to Rome for many years and was painfully ambivalent toward its cultural wealth, because he could not forget the anti-Semitic decrees promulgated by the Romans. One scholar has even referred to this ambivalence as Freud’s “Rome neurosis.”12 When Freud finally reached Rome, the famed and feared center of the Christian world, he visited the most highly charged monument for a Jew who is aware of his collective
history: the Arch of Titus. This monument commemorates the triumphal march of Titus in 70 C.E., leading the Jews out of the fallen Jerusalem and into slavery. After visiting the site, Freud sent a picture postcard on which he expressed his sentiments to his friend Karl Abraham:

"Der Jude übersteht's!"

which means

"The Jew withstands it!"

"It" is the history of exile. Freud defiantly boasts that he has succeeded in withstanding the many decrees against the Jews.

Separated by centuries, Joseph, Daniel, and Sigmund (Solomon) were all dream interpreters in exile. All of them experienced weakness, and all found a way to assert themselves. Freud survived his struggle against a position of impotence, in part, by unconsciously aligning himself with his ancient forerunners Joseph and Daniel. Even when Freud disavowed his precursors and strained to assert his independence, he attested to their continuing authority. If they were able to rise to power by interpreting dreams, so could he. And so he did. Freud was far closer to the biblical tradition of dream interpretation than he cared or even dared to admit.

Notes


2. The Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 55b-56a.


7. Another relevant association might be the tenth plague inflicted upon the Egyptians, the plague of the firstborn (Exod. 11:1-5), which followed the Egyptian decrees against male children (Exod. 11:16-22).

8. Later in life, Freud's children became members of Zionist youth organizations.


10. Freud writes that "what according to the opinion of other authors is supposed to be an arbitrary improvisation, hurriedly brought together in the embarrassment of the moment, this we treated as a holy text" (TD 492-93/ID 552).
