

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav offers a very different reading of our verse. He writes,

When Torah teaches, “take some of *zimrat ha’aretz* in your baggage,” it does not refer to fruits of the land. Rather, the verse is saying, “take with you the song of the land of Israel,” take a tune or melody from its soil. And then, when you arrive in the land of Egypt, sing to yourselves that very same song from Israel and you will remember from where you came and the essence of your homeland and your birthplace. (HaCohen, *Likrat Shabbat* [in Hebrew], 42)

Although our chosen commentator makes a radical departure from the literal sense of our verse, his reading is poetic and insightful. Through the many dispersals of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel, it is song that has often been the bridge connecting them to their roots and powerful memories of home and of history. Too often, we underestimate the power of music. Melodies, songs, and hymns all have a mystical way of taking the listener on a journey. Musical composition moves the heart, jogs the memory, and awakens the soul. So perhaps, at the end of the day, Jacob knew precisely what he intended. Not only did he encourage his sons to bring gifts to the Egyptian vizier, but he also gifted his descendants with strength and *tzeidah la’derekh* (provisions for the way). Both the fruits of their land and the song of the soil would ensure that their roots remain firm, even when wandering far from home.

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מקץ תש"ף



## Letters Unopened

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Several years ago, during a period of intense dreaming, I started keeping what I lovingly referred to as a “luminous journal”. Immediately upon awakening from a dream, I would reach for a notebook on my nightstand and furiously transcribe all I had experienced, inclusive of dialogue, and mood—a verbatim *as if* recounting a real-life event. I had learned over time that otherwise, the intense narrative and video that had so vividly played for my one-person viewing audience would be lost. No record, no memory of my dreams.

Even in looking back at that notebook a few months later, it read to me like an absurdist novel, descriptions of my nighttime bird-like flights over NYC streets, and of conversations with people long gone from my life. It was mostly enjoyable, but sometimes quite disturbing—so much so that my recounts could be difficult to read. And yet, I labeled the notebook as a “luminous journal”, rather than a “dream journal”. Perhaps this was aspirational—I wanted to shed light and sparkle on the sometimes jarring images.

Parashat Miketz kicks off with Pharaoh’s dreams—of standing by the Nile, “ugly, gaunt cows” eating “handsome, sturdy cows” (Gen. 41:2–4), There is then a second dream: “seven ears of grain, solid and healthy” that were swallowed up by “seven ears, thin and scorched by the east wind” (vv. 6–7). Pharaoh’s “spirit was troubled” (v. 8) by his dreams, and was further rattled as no one could interpret their meanings for him, eventually telling Joseph, “I have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter for it, but I have heard it said of you [that] you understand a dream, to interpret it.” (v.15).

We often focus our discussions of Parashat Miketz on the serendipity and miracle of Joseph being in the right place in the right time, offering his spot-on interpretation skills to Pharaoh. We can then draw a bold, clear narrative line, connecting the dots from his support of Pharaoh to successfully predicting the dreams and thus saving Egypt from famine, to Egypt becoming the land to which Joseph's brothers travel for survival, eventually bringing Jacob to reunite with his son. The final connected-dot plot point is the eventual enslavement of Jacob's descendants in Egypt, leading generations later to our Exodus, emerging peoplehood, and entering the Promised Land.

However, this narrative thread gives short shrift to a brief description of the transition between the two dreams: "and Pharaoh awoke. He fell asleep and dreamed a second time" (vs. 4–5) —no action, self-reflection, or speaking aloud between awoke-asleep-second dream. What would have happened if Pharaoh had his own ancient, personal version of a "luminous journal", a way of recording his dreams in that liminal moment between awoke-asleep? Would he have become his own interpreter, rendering Joseph's skills irrelevant?

"Rav Hisda said: A dream not interpreted is like a letter not read" (BT Berakhot 55a).

Through this lens, the real miracle of the Miketz narrative is that Pharaoh rapidly returned to slumber after the first set of unsettling dreams, vividly dreamt again, and recollected all of his dreams upon reawaking—the entire, collective dreamscape process. Any of us who has ever attempted to recall a vivid dream after falling back to sleep knows that if we are lucky, we are at best left with a lingering feeling, perhaps a small glimmer of memory, but the details are most usually lost, never to be rediscovered. It would have been so easy for the dreams of cows and ears of grain to become 'letters not read'. And yet, Pharaoh weathered the fits and starts of a sleep-disrupted night and had the motivation, desire, and lucidness to ask for help in understanding what he had seen and experienced.

Miracles come in all sorts of packages, and sometimes we need to double-check to make sure that an unread letter is opened—what might be waiting for us inside? As we celebrate the final days of Hanukkah,

may we each recognize the miracles both small and large—of being in the right place at the right time, of finding something that we thought was lost, of hearing words of support and receiving actions of assistance right when we need them. May we experience a luminous *hag* and Shabbat.

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## A Taste of Torah



### Fruits of the Land, Song of the Soil

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The Joseph narrative continues its dramatic twists and turns as Joseph, through his talented dream interpretations, rises to become the second most powerful figure in the land of Egypt. More than that, he choreographs a masterful plan to save Egypt from a devastating and prolonged famine, and he becomes no less than a hero and savior to the Egyptian people. As Joseph's fortunes turn for the good, those of his family back in the land of Canaan take a turn for the worse. Severe famine plagues the land, and with it, Jacob turns to his remaining sons and urges them to make the long journey to Egypt to procure food. The brothers listen, journey to the south, find themselves accused of being spies (through a ruse executed by Joseph), return to Israel, and tell Jacob of the Egyptian ruler's demand to see Benjamin. Jacob acquiesces and tells his sons, as they are about to depart, "If it must be so, do this: take some of the choice products of the land (*zimrat ha'aretz*) in your baggage, and carry them down as a gift for the man--some balm and some honey, gum, ladanum, pistachio nuts, and almonds" (Gen. 43:11). Clearly, from the *peshat* (literal sense of the text), Jacob sought to appease a disgruntled Egyptian ruler so as to find favor in his eyes and protect his sons from the ruler's wrath. Is there another way of understanding Jacob's suggestion?