

Servant Leadership: The Lesson of the Dreams

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Our Haftorah, which is rarely read since it is usually supplanted by the Haftorah for Channukah, tells the story of Shlomo HaMelech's famous case of the two women and the baby. The two women argue over whose baby has lived and Shlomo suggests splitting the baby in half revealing the true mother based on their reactions to this suggestion. In Melachim Alef, this story comes directly after we are told about Shlomo's dream where Hashem offers him anything he wants and Shlomo asks for wisdom and understanding (*lev lishmoah*) to judge the Jewish people properly. Hashem is so impressed with this selfless request that He gives Shlomo much more. The court case follows immediately afterwards, seemingly as a demonstration of this gift to Shlomo that cemented him as a wise king in the eyes of the people (see Rashi Melachim Alef 4:1 & Radak 3:16).

Interestingly, the Haftorah begins with the last line of the previous story. "And Solomon awoke, and behold (it was) a dream. And he came to Jerusalem and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings, and offered peace offerings, and made a feast for all his servants" (Melachim Alef 3:15). Only then does the Haftorah launch into the episode of Shlomo's judgment of the court case. There is a clear connection between the language of this pasuk and the beginning of the parsha when Paroah awakes from his own dream. However, this doesn't really solve the problem of this odd starting point. If the connection to the Haftorah is the dream then why not have the section before where Shlomo's dream is discussed be the one that is read as the Haftorah, rather than the judgment? What is the purpose of just including this line and then telling the story of the judgment?

Dreams of Yosef & Paroah

If we examine some of the dreams in our parsha (*Mikeitz*) and last week's parsha (*VaYeishev*) I think we can suggest an answer to this puzzle. Last week begins with Yosef dreaming about himself lording over the brothers. He shares his dream of the brothers bowing to him with them and, not surprisingly, it is poorly received. Yosef is described as being overly concerned with his looks (Rashi's interpretation of *Na'ar* – Bereishit 37:2) and preoccupied with gossiping about his brothers. He is not yet ready to be the person he dreams about. Let's fast forward to this week.

This week Paroah has a dream that defies interpretation. Rashi (Bereishit 41:8) explains that explanations were offered, but Paroah did not accept them. This is why the pasuk says that "there was no explanation to Paroah" – explanations were offered, but none that he would accept. The explanations were about him personally and he felt that, as a king, if he was dreaming it must be germane to the entire people. This dream (and attitude) is in significant contrast to Yosef's dreams. Yosef's dreams have him at the center. He may be said to be a ruler in the dreams (insofar as others bow to him deferentially) but there isn't really any leadership. Paroah on the other hand dreams of events that will affect his whole country and, in fact, he isn't even in the dream.

In our parsha, Yosef has changed from how he was depicted when he had his dreams in last week's parsha. He is no longer the dreamer focused on self that we met last week. He does not exhibit the immaturity that is described in the beginning of last week's parsha. Instead of being preoccupied with himself and gossiping about others, he is humble and helpful to others. He deflects Paroah's praise for his abilities ("it is G-d who will respond with Paroah's welfare" 41:16) and offers advice about the challenging circumstances that are foreseen. Ironically, the dreams of last week that seemed to predict Yosef's rise to a position of prominence do no such thing (in the short term), while this week's dreams, that do not even indicate a role for Yosef, propel him to a high position.

Servant Leadership

The message of this contrast in dreams about ruling and leadership seems clear. Leadership that focuses on the other will succeed and leadership that is self-centered will fail. When Yosef expresses his dream and leadership as others serving him it is a sign of his immaturity and it does not end well for him. When Paroah seeks to understand how his dream prepares him to lead his people he finds success. Yosef too has grown into a selfless leader and is now ready for a high position. In 1970, Robert Greenleaf coined the term "servant leadership" in an essay as a way to describe leadership that is focused on those one is leading – the other. It is this type of leadership that is depicted here in Paroah's dream but not in Yosef's early dreams.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l, in his 2017 TED talk¹ pointed out that, in our modern age, we have become overly focused on the self. Perhaps we are reflecting the behavior of an immature Yosef. We too should strive to grow out of this stage. At the end of this talk, Rabbi Sacks gives a suggestion that we do a "search and replace on the text of our minds" and replace "self" for "other" in popular ideas like self-esteem, self-respect etc. Through this, the hope would be that we could become other-focused, ultimately strengthening ourselves as individuals, peoples and as humanity.

Shlomo's Dream

I believe the message of the Haftorah is how to use our talents in a way that is other-focused as a lesson in leadership. The message of the Haftorah is that Shlomo's vision for leadership is other-focused and, as such, prepare him to lead well. The Haftorah records Hashem's reaction to his choice, a direct and explicit message of approval, meant to illuminate this same implied message in our parshiot.

The choice to only include only the final line of the earlier story and the judgment as the Haftorah instead of the Haftorah featuring the dream itself is also instructive. Perhaps the message is that the realm of intentions is not where other-focused leadership will truly be determined. We can see the true colors of a leader, not in how they intend (or promise) to lead, but in how they utilize their talents and actually lead. Shlomo makes an other-focused, servant-leadership, choice in his dream and is lauded for it by Hashem. However, the spotlight of the Haftorah begins only as the intentions end and the leadership begins. For Shlomo, the spotlight is

¹ His 2017 TED talk can be found [here](#)

trained on the case where Shlomo reunites a family and delivers a just verdict. The very fact that King Shlomo is judging a case that may involve two prostitutes² is noteworthy. The paradigm for a king of Israel is one who is involved with bringing justice to the people by being involved with them³, true servant leadership.

This message of servant leadership, and focusing on the other, is the message that unites the Haftorah with the dreams in our parshiot. May we merit to take the advice of Rabbi Sacks and redouble our efforts to be other-focused in our lives. Like Shlomo, may we be granted so much to support this worthy goal of focusing on others.

² See Abarbanel and 2nd explanation of the Ralbag. Even if Zonot is translated as innkeepers in this instance, Shlomo is still involved with the common people in a capacity where he is focused on their needs.

³ See T.B. Bava Metzia 59a where from Dovid's complaint it seems that he studied Torah with the people. Shlomo does not seem to be the exception in terms of the paradigm for positive leadership.