



## Torah portion – Miketz / Gili Katz

Illustration: Inbal Weissman

The weekly Torah portion opens with Pharaoh, king of Egypt, dreaming troubling dreams and seeking someone to interpret them. After consulting all his advisers and despairing of their answers, the chief cupbearer suggests turning to Joseph—an enslaved Hebrew who had been cast into a prison pit two years earlier, and who had correctly interpreted the cupbearer’s own dream back then.

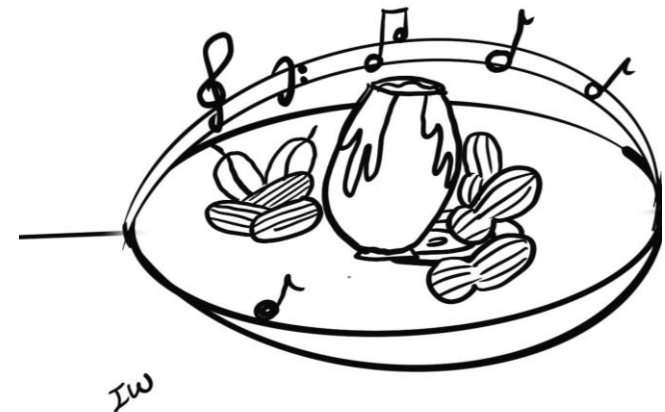
For us, who know Joseph’s lineage and abilities, this seems like a reasonable idea; from Pharaoh’s perspective, however, it is a bold—perhaps even desperate—move. Here we are given a vivid illustration of the Holy One’s ability to transform a person’s fate from one extreme to the other. In this portion, Pharaoh becomes an emissary teaching us that there is truly no despair in the world at all.

The dramatic reversal in Joseph’s status is summarized by the commentary of Shemuel:

“It may be explained that because his lowliness was at the very lowest rung and he was exceedingly humble, this caused him to rise to such greatness; the depth of elevation corresponds to the depth of descent.”

Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dream and is appointed “*the provider*”—the official in charge of the food supply for the entire land of Egypt. When the years of famine arrive, he oversees the distribution of food. Egypt’s preparation for the years of famine turns it into a great power, since the food is not given for free but in exchange for money, land, and eventually the enslavement of the people to Pharaoh.

There is also famine in Canaan, and Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to obtain food. Ten of Jacob’s sons go down to Egypt; Benjamin remains with Jacob in Canaan. Jacob clings to Benjamin after having lost his wife Rachel and his son Joseph. When the brothers arrive in Egypt and encounter Joseph, he recognizes them, but they do not recognize him. I suggest reading the portion directly from the Chumash—it is moving and full of tension.





בס"ד, כסלו תשפ"ו

**"Evening, morning, and noon I speak and sigh, and He hears my voice."** (Psalms 55)

Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies and forces them to reveal that they have two more brothers: one who has died, and another who has remained with their father in Canaan. In order to pressure them to bring Benjamin, he imprisons them for three days, then releases all of them except for Simeon (remember why? See the previous portion), and sends them back to Canaan with food, promising that if they bring Benjamin, he will release Simeon.

Our study begins at this point: ten sons set out from Canaan to Egypt, and now only nine return. The nine sons must tell Jacob what happened to them—will they tell the truth this time? Jacob is angry with his sons: **"Why did you bring trouble upon me by telling the man that you still have another brother?"** (Genesis 43:6).

The brothers explain to their father that **"the man, the lord of the land,"** compelled them to speak honestly and in detail. For a long time, Jacob and his family live off the food the brothers brought back, and throughout all this time Simeon remains imprisoned in Egypt.

The course of the sons' lives was disrupted by Jacob's preference for Joseph over his brothers, and by the jealousy and hatred they felt toward him. Even now, that preference persists: Simeon is imprisoned in Egypt because Jacob refuses to allow Benjamin to go with his brothers to **"the man, the lord of the land,"** and thus prove that they are telling the truth. Will the brothers learn something about themselves from this? Will they come to resent Benjamin because of it?

The food runs out and the famine grows severe, and the brothers persuade Jacob to allow them to take Benjamin with them to **"the man, the lord of the land."** Jacob agrees only after Judah pledges himself as a guarantor for Benjamin's safe return to Canaan.

Jacob instructs his sons to take a gift to the ruler of Egypt:

*"And Israel their father said to them: If so, then do this—take from the choice products of the land in your vessels and bring the man a gift: a little balm, a little honey, spices and myrrh, pistachios and almonds."*  
(Genesis 43:11)

### Family discussion:

1. Notice that, unlike the earlier expression *"the man, the lord of the land,"* from this point on they refer to him simply as *"the man."* Why do you think that is?



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2. What would you send as a gift to the ruler of Egypt? What do you bring to someone who has everything, when you want to find favor in his eyes—so that he will agree to sell you food and release your brother from prison?

**What does the gift that Jacob sends include?**

*A little balm, a little honey, spices and myrrh, pistachios and almonds*—which of these ingredients do you recognize?

The commentators try to identify the components of the gift, and remind us that we have already encountered some of them in the previous portion:

*"They sat down to eat bread, and lifted up their eyes and saw: behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, their camels carrying spices, balm, and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt."*  
(Genesis 37:25)

*Spices, balm, and myrrh* are plant derivatives—such as resins—and perhaps perfumes based on plant products, or medicinal oils prepared from these plants.

Jacob instructs the brothers to include honey in the gift as well. Why honey? We are familiar with a saying about the effect of honey when combined with the incense spices:

*Bar Kappara also taught: If even a small measure of honey had been added to it, no one could withstand its fragrance.*  
(Keritot 6a)

*Pistachios and almonds*—the pistachios refer to pistachio nuts or another fruit of the terebinth tree that grew in Canaan at that time, and almonds as we know them today.

3. Notice that Jacob instructs the brothers to bring *a little* of these items: *a little balm, a little honey, spices and myrrh*. Is it respectful to bring *only a little*? What do you think? Consider the following commentary.

**Sforno's commentary:**

"But when bringing a gift to a nobleman for whom money is of no account, it is fitting that it be small in quantity, yet chosen from rare and select items—things found only in small measure, and worthy of a king's palace."



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**4. "Take from the choicest produce of the land in your vessels"**

Another component of the gift that Jacob's sons bring to the ruler of Egypt is called "*the choicest produce of the land*" (*zimrat ha-aretz*). The term *zimrat* is unusual and can be interpreted in several ways.

**Rashi:**

*"From the choicest produce of the land"*—as translated in the Aramaic: "*from that which is praised in the land,*" meaning things that people praise and celebrate when they come into the world (Genesis Rabbah 91:11). In other words, items that are highly esteemed. This interpretation fits well with the idea that Jacob sent precious perfumes or medicinal oils—special, choice, and highly valued products.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov offers a different interpretation:

*Know that when our father Jacob sent his sons—the ten tribes—to Joseph, he sent with them a melody of the Land of Israel... For sustenance is drawn down through melody, as explained above. Therefore our father Jacob, even though at that time he did not know that it was Joseph, but only according to what the tribes told him about the conduct and ways of Joseph, sent him a melody fitting for a ruler such as he, in accordance with what he heard from his sons about Joseph's character and behavior. For Jacob wished to act upon him through melody in whatever way was needed; therefore he sent him that melody of the Land of Israel. This is the meaning of what he said to his sons: "Take from the zimrat of the land in your vessels."*

(Likkutei Moharan, Torah 63)

Rabbi Nachman reflects on the word *zimrat* and sees within it the word *zemer*—a melody, the tune of a song. What do you think is *the melody of the Land of Israel*?

**An additional explanation:**

The word *zimrat* also recalls the words *zemorah* (vine branch) and *lizmor* (to prune). *Lizmor* is the agricultural act of pruning a vineyard. The *zemorot* are the branches of the vine that are cut back so that the remaining branches will grow stronger and produce large, juicy clusters of grapes. The decision of which branches to prune, and how much to cut, takes into account both the past—what the branch has produced before—and the future—how one plans for the plant to grow.

With other trees this work is called *to prune* (*ligzom*), but with the vine—because it requires delicacy, resolve, and precision—it has its own special term: *lizmor*, just as the melody of a song is its unique defining feature.



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**"Evening, morning, and noon I speak and sigh, and He hears my voice." (Psalms 55)**

Perhaps Jacob sent the ruler of Egypt vine cuttings from the Land of Israel—shoots that could be planted in Egypt. This too would be something of great value, and would also create a living connection between Jacob's family and the ruler of Egypt.

*For Jacob wished to act upon him through melody in whatever way was needed.*

What message do you think Jacob is conveying?

Let us remember that from Jacob's perspective, and that of his family, they are sending a gift to a man who is in charge of Egypt's storehouses of food.

**In summary:**

Jacob's sons arrive in Egypt with a gift that includes: fine spices and oils, almonds and pistachios, choice vine cuttings, and a melody (unique knowledge and a spiritual message). What effect might these offerings have on the ruler of Egypt?

**The brothers are invited to a midday meal in the house of the ruler of Egypt (Joseph).**

They bring the gift with them:

*They prepared the gift until Joseph arrived at noon.*

(Genesis 43:25)

**Ralbag (Gersonides):**

*"They prepared the gift"* — they placed it in fine vessels and arranged it in the most complete and fitting manner possible.

**Let us consider Joseph's experience:**

He encounters Benjamin, who does not recognize him. He invites the brothers to a meal, yet he does not eat together with them, so that they will not suspect the identity he presents as Egypt's viceroy:

*They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves—for the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.*

(Genesis 43:32)

**Family discussion:**

Joseph is still testing his brothers—seeing how they behave, whether they have changed, whether they treat Benjamin kindly, and whether he



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himself wishes to return to being part of the family. Since we know how the story ends—Joseph revealing himself to his brothers—it seems obvious to us that he would want to do so. But if we try to imagine that we do not know how the story develops, is this really so obvious?

Let us read the verses describing the renewed encounter the next morning, in chapter 43, verses 16–24, and we will see that Joseph's behavior is restrained and even somewhat distant.

When the brothers arrive for the midday meeting, at Joseph's invitation, they bring with them the gift.

Joseph receives the gift: spices and oils whose fragrance reminds him of the land of Canaan, foods that recall his childhood home, and a melody of the Land of Israel.

*Joseph came home, and they brought him the gift that was in their hands into the house; and they bowed down to him, to the ground.*  
(Genesis 43:26)

Let us read verses 27–34, which describe the encounter, and observe the wealth of emotions that rise and surface within Joseph toward his brothers.

### **What is the difference between the morning meeting and the midday meeting?**

The gift.

Do you remember that it is impossible to resist the fragrance of the incense? The sense of smell is extremely powerful: it connects us immediately to our memories and evokes deep emotion. Joseph's feelings change, and he is no longer distant toward his brothers. He will subject them to the test of the goblet, to see how they will treat Benjamin. Joseph still does not reveal his identity to his brothers, but his attitude has changed. He will no longer remain only the viceroy of Egypt; he will also hold on to his identity as the son of Jacob. This is not self-evident.

The turning point in the story of Joseph and his brothers begins **at noon** (*ba-tzohorayim*, Genesis 43:25)—the time when the sun stands at the midpoint of the sky, slightly before and slightly after midday. For this reason it is expressed in a term implying *duality*, since part of it carries the light of morning and part the light of evening (Ralbag), a time of peak illumination.

Perhaps this hints at the hope associated with the days of Hanukkah, when we add light during the darkest days. The portion of *Miketz* is always read on the Sabbath of Hanukkah.



דקום בפרשה

בס"ד, כסלו תשפ"ו

**"Evening, morning, and noon I speak and sigh, and He hears my voice."** (Psalms 55)

*Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.  
And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them.*

Has Joseph's dream been fulfilled? Not yet.

True, the brothers bow down to him, but they do not know that he is Joseph; to them, he is the ruler of Egypt. The story of Joseph and his brothers does not end in this portion. We will need a little patience until next week.

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