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### Mapping Dreams: The Force Behind Mobility in the Joseph Narrative

In Hebrew, the name Joseph means “Jehovah shall add; God will give; to increase.” The definition of Joseph’s name sets the stage for his movement upwards as he receives what God bestows on him in the form of dream interpretation and opportunity. Joseph’s story in the book of Genesis opens with an introduction that characterizes Joseph as a dreamer. Dreams are an essential aspect of the Joseph narrative as he is not only characterized by his dreams and ability to interpret them but because his dreams serve as a propelling force in moving both Joseph and his story forward. However, this movement forward happens only on the condition that Joseph takes active responsibility in applying the resource of his ability to interpret dreams to his circumstances. Approaching the Joseph narrative with an emphasis on dreams enables the ability to analyze the dreams as a guiding force that pushes his geographical and social movement. He progresses from a boy, whose identity is rooted in the favor of his father, to a slave and prisoner, whose identity is found in the people in power above him, and finally, to the second in command of Egypt, whose identity is established in the gifts he has been given by God. A transformation in the foundation and source of his identity allows Joseph to use his dreams as a resource with which to determine his actions. Through the presentation of the interpretation of dreams, the Joseph narrative reveals that in order for social mobility to occur, an individual must establish the basis of their identity while also assuming active responsibility for the resources at their disposal.

The story of Joseph (Genesis 37, 39-47) is situated as a stepping stone between the Jewish forefathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and the Israelites' exodus from Egypt into the land that God promised their family would inhabit. Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob's twelve sons, which caused his father to make him a coat of many colors, earning the jealousy of his brothers. As a result of their jealousy, Joseph's brothers throw him into a pit and then sell him to Ishmaelite slave traders bound for Egypt; they inform their father that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. When Joseph arrives in Egypt, he is bought by Potiphar, Pharaoh's captain of the guard, and earns his favor until he is falsely accused of a crime and thrown into jail. After many years in prison, Joseph is summoned to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, which then results in Pharaoh making Joseph second in command of all of Egypt. Eventually, Joseph is reunited with his brothers in Egypt and the entire family of Jacob migrate to Egypt, where they remain until the Exodus story.

The scholarly conversation surrounding the Joseph narrative is arguably just as rich and detailed as the story itself. Generally, analysis of Joseph's story follows one of two strands, the first being emphasis on Joseph and the Israelites' migration as a historical event. Scholars who study Hebrew and Biblical Studies, like Dr. Amy Chase, view the Joseph story as a transitional piece between the Israelite forefathers and the Exodus. Using a historical lens to view the Joseph story creates focus around Joseph and the Israelites' movement as a diaspora, which is dispersion from one's homeland. With this perspective, the specific details of the narrative become lost in a broader history. The second of the strands analyze dreams as allegories that function as the hub of the Joseph narrative that create cohesive unity within the story. Centering analysis around dreams generates a more ambiguous perception of the story, as scholars like Dr. Jonathan Grossman and Dr. Hillel Chiel, explore differing interpretations of whether the dreams

themselves or Joseph's responses to his dreams are the basis for the outcomes of the narrative. While scholars tend to lean on historical analysis of migration or literary analysis of dreams, the overlap between these concepts is where I will position my essay because dreams and migration are intermingled within the story, creating a causal relationship. I will argue that the dreams presented in the Joseph narrative serve as the catalysts for Joseph's actions that ultimately cause his geographical and social movement.

Genesis 37 outlines Joseph's first pair of dreams, which provide the backbone of the narrative as they serve as a prediction of the future, but remain ambiguous as to how that future will become a structured reality. In the first set of dreams, Joseph's brothers are represented as sheaves of wheat and then as eleven stars that bow down to him as he is elevated above them. When Joseph describes his dreams to his father and brothers, he offers no interpretation for his dreams, demonstrating his lack of responsibility in taking ownership of what has been given to him. Even Joseph's father offers a rebuke in response to Joseph's dreams, asking Joseph, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall...your brothers indeed come to bow [them]selves before you?" (Genesis 37:10). Jacob posing this question to his son leads to speculation of the weight and validity of Joseph's dreams because Joseph offers no interpretation for them. Jacob doesn't directly invalidate the dream itself but questions Joseph's claim of precedence over his brothers without evidence as to how or why that would occur because he has done nothing to take responsibility for his dreams that would make them a reality. Additionally, Joseph has done nothing to receive favor or respect from his brothers that would provoke them to honor him through the physical act of bowing to him. Furthermore, Joseph's dreams reflect, "the tension and conflicting interest of the members of the household," (Grossman, 722), as his dreams spark

further division between himself and his brothers, as he offers a glimpse into the future that seems improbable.

The ambiguity surrounding the reality of Joseph's first set of dreams points to the idea that Joseph's strained relationship with his brothers prior to his dreams resulted in his forced movement into slavery. Before Joseph's identity as a "dreamer" is stated, Joseph's identity in his family is highlighted. Although Joseph grew up alongside the 10 sons of his father's other wives, there was a stark divide between them because Jacob "loved Joseph more than any other of his sons" (Genesis 37:3). Joseph held a high position of power and favor within the confines of his family, granted to him because of his father's favoritism, not his own merit, ultimately breeding a sense of carelessness with his actions. He takes advantage of the gift of his father's favor as he speaks disfavorably of his brothers when he, "brought a bad report of them to their father," (Genesis 37:2), demonstrating the existence of a strained relationship with them prior to his dreams. Joseph's actions against his brothers highlights his lack of responsibility in acknowledging that his actions revoke a response from them that prevents his dreams from coming to fruition, as he has not earned their respect but rather their animosity. While his dreams further exacerbated and impacted his brothers' perception and attitude towards him, Joseph's actions and speech fed the disparity that their father's favoritism created because he did not take responsibility for the role he played in their lives. Long before Joseph's dreams were given to him, he contributed to laying the foundations for his brothers to hate him to the extent that they, "could not speak peacefully to him," (Genesis 37:4). Joseph constructed his identity around the favor of his father, which bred false confidence that is demonstrated in his insinuation that his brothers will bow down to him not just once, but twice. The dreams serve as the final straw, not

the catalyst, that motivates his brothers' decision to rid themselves of him by selling him into slavery.

Because of Joseph's forced migration to Egypt through the pathway of slavery, he experiences a dramatic fall from power, which results in the first steps toward taking responsibility for his actions. Although his enslavement reflects geographical movement from Beersheba to Egypt, slavery also indicates Joseph's loss of power as he moves from the favored and beloved son of his father to a foreigner and slave in the house of Potiphar. This fall is necessary because through Joseph's removal from the comfortability and security of the world he knows, which his father had built for him, he is first exposed to formulating his own identity. Through the formulation of his identity, Joseph is able to identify what resources he has that are specific to him and how they can be used, leading to the necessity of taking an active role in moving upward instead of passively being forced into movement. Because Joseph entered Egypt as a slave, "integration into Egyptian society was the only viable option," (Marzouk, 72), causing Joseph to strive to prove himself, which directly contrasts his unearned position as favored son. Although slavery was movement away from power, Joseph gains a sense of purpose as Potiphar, "made him [Joseph] overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had," (Genesis 39:4), which ultimately demonstrates that Joseph had to work to make himself worthy of Potiphar's favor. Additionally, Joseph's fall from power is used to cultivate a dependence on God as the giver of favor instead of man, as Genesis 39:3 states that, "the Lord caused all that he did to succeed", which leads to Joseph developing responsibility for his actions as a response to the favor bestowed on him by God and man.

Although Genesis 39 stands in stark contrast to the other chapters that center around the interpretation of dreams, it marks Joseph's second fall from power but unlike his first fall, Joseph

stands as innocent and upright. In Genesis 39, Potiphar, Pharaoh's captain of the guard, appoints Joseph as overseer of the house because he saw that, "the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands," (Genesis 39:3). Because Joseph was, "handsome in form and appearance," (Genesis 39:6), Potiphar's wife takes notice of him and repeatedly asks him to sleep with her, which he denies. Finally, Potiphar's wife takes advantage of a day when no other men were in the house and attempts to seduce Joseph but he responds by, "leav[ing] his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house," (Genesis 39:12), causing Potiphar's wife to tell her husband that Joseph tried to assault her. Potiphar immediately throws Joseph into prison in response, without investigating the claims of his wife further. While this second fall from power could've been a bitter disappointment for Joseph, who had obtained success in the house of Potiphar, it marks significant growth in his character. When Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery, he bears partial responsibility for his brothers' animosity towards him because of his blanket statement that his brothers would bow to him, their younger brother. In this case, Joseph continues to resist Potiphar's wife, not only because he recognizes his actions can be harmful to the people around him but because they are against the commands of his God, stating, "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God," (Genesis 39:9), demonstrating his recognition that his actions shape the trajectory of his life. Although Joseph appears to do everything right by any moral measurement, this setback is necessary because it continues to strengthen his identity as separate from what position others assign him. John McFadyen, a professor of Old Testament theology, argues that, "before Joseph is worthy to occupy a seat beside the throne of Pharaoh...his nature must be braced by battle, he must learn to know life and men..." (295). This emphasis on Joseph "knowing men" is essential to his ability to tactfully

embrace his gift of dream interpretation because he must evaluate what he chooses to reveal based on the predicted responses of those around him.

In Genesis 40, Joseph begins taking responsibility and ownership for his God-given gift of dream interpretation, resulting in a slow but steady ascent upwards, as he begins to establish his reputation. While Joseph is in prison, Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker are thrown into prison for angering Pharaoh and the prison warden puts them under Joseph's care. One night, both of them have dreams, which they themselves cannot interpret, prompting Joseph to interpret them. While this set of dreams is still regarded as a pair, the dreams do not mirror the same outcome in the way that Joseph and Pharaoh's dreams do but instead present two different outcomes: the cupbearer's dream represents life and the baker's dream represents death. It may appear that Joseph's interpretation of the cupbearer and baker's dreams do not present any implications for him but his interpretations are a clear sign that Joseph was taking ownership of his ability to interpret dreams, while acknowledging that the gift comes from God, stating that: "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams," (Genesis 40:8). Rather than disregard the dreams presented before him, Joseph turns from external focus to the internal turmoil of those in front of him, which in turn is eventually rewarding to him, as his reputation is established before Pharaoh's cupbearer. The cupbearer is restored to his position after Joseph interprets his dream and is the one that informs Pharaoh about Joseph's ability to interpret dreams two years later. Through this interpretation of dreams, Joseph demonstrates that he can, "differentiate between a dream signifying that its dreamer's head will be lifted up, and one signifying that its dreamer's head will be lifted off," (Grossman, 276), which signifies the difference between life and death. This distinction is necessary in Joseph's dream interpretations because it demonstrates that he has the capability to undertake responsibility for the lives of the people around him, which

occurs on a larger scale when he interprets Pharaoh's dream regarding a severe famine in Egypt. The responsibility that Joseph assumes to interpret the cupbearer's dream and know whether the future holds life or death aids in establishing his active role in making use of the resources at his disposal, leading to his advancement upwards.

While Joseph's social mobility does not change instantly as a result of his dream interpretations, he has begun to establish the building blocks of his identity, which ultimately prepares him for his role as a leader of Egypt and of his family. Contrasting Joseph's focus in Genesis 38, Joseph has started to shift away from self-focus and towards his responsibility to the people surrounding him and how he can be of service to them. This reflects how Joseph's internal character has been transformed by the humbling fall from favored son to slave and from favored servant to prisoner. Humility is one of the building blocks upon which Joseph constructs his identity, marking a shift in his actions as he makes use of his position to serve those around him and to establish his reputation, which is seen when he asks the cupbearer, "to remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison." (Genesis 40:14). Additionally, Joseph's newfound humility and attitude of service illustrates that Joseph sees his dreams as a tool from God that can be used to guide his actions and that his gift of interpretation is not based on his own merit. He realizes that dreams are, "messages from God that can guide human action, not portents of fate that cannot be changed," (Chiel, 7), leading him to use the interpretations of the dreams as a means to fulfill the role of responsibility given to him in whatever sphere he occupies at the present so that he is better equipped for the next set of circumstances he encounters.

In the final pair of dreams in the Joseph narrative, Joseph is presented with the opportunity to use the resource of dream interpretation, which places the responsibility for his



upward movement in his hands. Two years after Joseph interpreted the cupbearer's dream, Pharaoh has two dreams that none of his wisemen can interpret, leaving Pharaoh extremely disturbed. The cupbearer remembers Joseph, prompting Pharaoh to bring Joseph before him to interpret his dreams. Pharaoh's need for Joseph's gift lays the scene for Joseph to demonstrate his ownership of his dreams and agency and use them as resources. This is first reflected in the fact that Joseph, "shaved himself and changed his clothes," (Genesis 41:14) before being brought to Pharaoh, which demonstrates Joseph's recognition of how crucial this opportunity is through his outward preparation. Additionally, Joseph's response to Pharaoh's claim that Joseph is an interpreter of dreams runs in direct opposition to Joseph's response to the first pair of dreams in the narrative, marking his shift in assumption of responsibility. Joseph states that the ability to interpret dreams, "Is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer," (Genesis 41:16), revealing that Joseph acknowledges that it is not his own merit that has earned him the ability to interpret dreams and his assurance that he will receive an interpretation. His ability to recognize that dream interpretation comes from a source greater than himself allows him to use the gift as a resource. Furthermore, Joseph is fully confident that he will receive an interpretation to Pharaoh's dreams, which is seen through his use of the word "will" in verse 16. His confidence in receiving an interpretation, "leads to his integration in a foreign country," (Marzouk, 76), which proves that Joseph knows that his ability to interpret dreams is an asset that will allow him to maneuver through the opportunities placed before him.

Following Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, his offer of a solution to save Egypt from starvation during the 7 years of famine demonstrates a further assumption of responsibility as Joseph solidifies his identity as a dream interpreter. According to Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, God will provide Egypt with 7 years of a surplus of food,

immediately followed by 7 years of severe famine. He notes the precarious position of Egypt, stating that, “The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe” (Genesis 41:31), which illustrates Joseph’s use of his dreams as indicators of what actions should be taken because he immediately notes that the solution is for Pharaoh to, “select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt,” (Genesis 41:33). This communicates that Joseph recognizes that with the gift of dream interpretation, comes a responsibility to act in a way that will function in tandem with the dreams, acknowledging with certainty that the famine will occur but because of his insight, he can curb its effects on the people of Egypt. Joseph’s offer of a solution to the famine demonstrates that he is confident in his identity as a dream interpreter because he believes that the arrival of famine is indisputable. Not only does Joseph embrace this identity but he also assumes responsibility, not only of his own life, but of the lives of every soul in Egypt through his solution to famine. Because of Joseph’s use of his resources, his mobility is launched forward as Pharaoh recognizes Joseph’s gifts and identity, seen by his promotion of Joseph to second in command of Egypt.

The parallelism presented between Joseph’s purposeful removal and bestowing of favor on his brothers and his personal rise and fall from favor serves to reflect how Joseph uses his power as a means to achieve movement. Joseph’s testing of his brothers forces them into action, in order to test their character. When famine strikes, Joseph’s brothers travel to Egypt because they have heard of the surplus of food. They encounter Joseph but do not recognize him and Joseph does not immediately reveal himself to them. Upon their second arrival to Egypt with Benjamin, his mother’s other son, Joseph pours out his favor on them, inviting them to dine with him in his home, running directly parallel to Potiphar’s response to Joseph as Joseph worked in his household. Furthermore, Joseph’s accusation of a crime that was not truly committed by his

brothers mirrors how Joseph himself was unjustly accused of assaulting Potiphar's wife. Because of his own experience, "with Potiphar's wife, Joseph knew how it felt to be innocent, framed, and publicly humiliated," (Chiel, 11), Joseph inflicts the same experience on his brothers to produce movement from them that will reveal their character in the same way that his movement into prison further exposed his character. In this way, Joseph takes ownership of his power, which is a resource, granting him the ability to ask the same of his brothers, as his shifting favor on them invites them to take responsibility for Benjamin's life, as Judah, one of Joseph's brothers, is willing to give up his life for Benjamin's, to remedy their lack of responsibility for Joseph's life. Joseph has been refined through his movement from favored son to slave to prisoner to second in command of Egypt, resulting in his ability to create forced movement, as he prompts action from his brothers, instead of becoming a victim to their actions.

Through Joseph's testing of his brothers, it is revealed that he has taken full ownership of his actions as a response to his God-given dreams, while also demonstrating his reliance on the sureness of his identity as a dream interpreter. Joseph has his silver cup purposefully planted in Benjamin's sack of grain when his brothers leave Egypt to return home. Upon his brothers' return after the silver cup was found in Benjamin's sack of grain, he asks them, "Didn't you know that someone like me can discover God's plans?" (Genesis 44:15b), which reflects his assurance that he has been provided with insight into the future to the extent that he is willing to use the unpredictability of his brothers' presence in Egypt to discern how they too have changed. Joseph is not threatened by how his brothers will react to testing but instead presses in, insisting that, "Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my servant," (Genesis 44:17), knowing full well that the cup was found in Benjamin's sack, which demonstrates his confidence that despite the unpredictability of his brothers' response, his dreams are guiding his actions.

This indicates a shift in Joseph's attitude as he has taken full ownership of his dreams in the sense that he understands them, "Not as an irrevocable decree but as an invitation for human action and initiative," (Grossman, 732), which invites him to employ his ability to interpret dreams as a resource that motivate his actions. However, this is only possible because Joseph is rooted in his identity as a dream interpreter, which enables him to take full responsibility for the gifts he has been given. Without the recognition of who he is and what he has been given, Joseph would stand in the same position he had been in as a young boy in Beersheba: a victim to circumstance instead of an active player.

When Pharaoh promotes Joseph to second in command, he is given the name Zaphnath-Paaneah, which means, "the man who discovers hidden things," in Egyptian. Joseph's new name adds to his established identity as an interpreter of dreams and reflects his progression from a boy, who had been given much, to a man, who had earned much. Upon Joseph's first interaction with dreams, the question is posed of how his dream would become a constructed reality when he had done nothing to earn the favor bestowed on him. Tracing the narrative of Joseph, we see that it is not so much the degree to which favor is bestowed or gifts are bequeathed but rather the amount of responsibility one is willing to take for what resources are at their disposal if they desire to advance upward. Joseph's variety of positions, favored son, servant, slave, and second in command, reflect the internal progression of a man who determines how to steward what he has been given. Recognizing the movement of Joseph calls for internal rumination of how each individual can build their corner of the world with the resources and the gifts that are in their possession. The question is, how will you construct your world with what is already yours?

## Works Cited

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