

Polysemy, Dream Interpretation and Midrash

1. דברים פרק כב

(ו) כי יקרא קן צפור לפניך בדרך בכל עץ או על הארץ אפרחים או ביצים והאם רבצת על האפרחים או על הביצים לא תקח האם על הבנים: (ז) שלח תשלח את האם ואת הבנים תקח לד למען ייטב לד והארכת ימים:

If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life.

2. דברים רבה פרשת כי תצא

ד"א שלח תשלח, אמ' הקב"ה אם קיימת מצות שילוח הקן אני מצילך מאותו שמזיק ועף כעוף, שנא' לא תירא מפחד לילה וגו'
ד"א שלח תשלח, למה שני פעמים, שאם אירע לך המצוה הזו פעם שנייה, לא תאמר כבר יצאתי ידי חובתה, אלא כל זמן שתארע לך את צריך לקיים אותה.
ד"א מהו שלח תשלח, רבנין אמרי אם קיימת מצות הקן את זוכה לשלח עבד עברי, מנין, שנא' וכי תשלחנו חפשי מעמך לאתשלחנו ריקם וגו'.
ד"א שלח תשלח, אמ' הקב"ה אם קיימת מצוה הזאת ממהר לבוא מלך המשיח, מנין, דכתי' משלחי רגל השור והחמור.
ד"א א"ר תנחומא אם קיימת מצוה הזו אתה ממהר לבוא אליהו שיבא, שכתו' בו הנה אנכי שולח לכסאת אליה הנביא, והוא יבא וינחם אתכם, שנא' והשיב לב אבות וגו'.

3. איכה רבה בומר פרשה ג

דוב אורב הוא לי. זה הקב"ה. אריה במסתרים. אריה כתיב, המד"א אריה שואג מי לא יירא (עמוס ג ח).
ד"א דוב אורב הוא לי, זה אספסינוס,
ארי במסתרים זה טריגיאנוס שחוקי עצמות.

HE IS UNTO ME AS A BEAR LYING IN WAIT (III, 10): this refers to the Holy One, blessed be He. AS A LION IN SECRET PLACES: *aryeh* is written. As it says, "A lion roars, who will not be afraid (Amos 3:8).

Another explanation: A BEAR LYING IN WAIT refers to Vespasian;
A LION IN SECRET PLACES refers to Trajan, may his bones be crushed.

Polysemy and Prophecy

4. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 34a

אמר אביי: דאמר קרא: (תהלים סב: יב) אחת דבר אלהים שנים זו שמעתי כי עז לאלהים - מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים, ואין טעם אחד יוצא מכמה מקראות.
דבי רבי ישמעאל תנא: (ירמיהו כג: כט) וכפטיש יפצץ סלע, מה פטיש זה מתחלק לכמה ניצוצות - אף מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים.

Abaye said: The verse says, "Once God has spoken, but twice I have heard" (Ps 62:12). A single verse has several senses, but no two verses ever hold the same meaning.

It was taught in the School of R. Ishmael: "Behold, My word is like fire, declares God, and like a hammer that shatters rock" (Jer 23:29). Just as this hammer produces many sparks [when it strikes the rock], so a single verse has several meaning.

5. Tosefta Sota 7:11-12 and Babylonian Talmud, Hagiga 3a

The masters of assemblies: these are the disciples of the wise, who sit in manifold assemblies and occupy themselves with the Torah, some pronouncing unclean

and others pronouncing clean, some prohibiting and others permitting, some disqualifying and others declaring fit.

Should a man say: Why (Bavli – “how”) in these circumstances shall I learn Torah? Therefore the text says: ‘*All of them are given from one Shepherd*’. One God gave them; one leader uttered them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He; for it is written: ‘*And God spoke all these words*’. Also do thou make thine ear like the hopper and get thee a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who pronounce unclean and the words of those who pronounce clean, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit.

Polysemy and Dream Interpretation

6. בבלי ברכות נו, ב

חלום - אחד מששים לנבואה.

7. Artemidorus, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 3:28

A weasel signifies a cunning, treacherous woman and a lawsuit. For the word lawsuit (δικε) is equal in numerical value to the word weasel (γαλη).

8. בראשית יד, יד

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם בִּי גִשְׁבָּה אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָק אֶת־חֲנִיכָיו וַיִּלְדְּי בֵיתוֹ שְׁמֹנֶה עָשָׂר וַיִּשְׁלַח מְאוֹת וַיִּרְדֹּף עַד־דָּגָן:

בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) פרשת לך לך פרשה מב
שמנה עשר ושלוש מאות ר' שמעון בן לקיש אמר אליעזר לבדו היה, מניין אליעזר שי"ח.

9. Artemidorus, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 4:24

A certain military commander dreamt that the letters ι, κ, and θ were written on his sword. The Jewish war was being waged in Cyrene and the dreamer gained the highest distinction in that war. This was just what I predicted. For the *iota*, signified the Jews, the *kappa* signified the Cyrenaeans, and the *theta* signified death.

10. Babylonian Talmud Baba Kama 55b

א"ר יהושע: הרואה טי"ת בחלמו - סימן יפה לו. מ"ט? אילימא משום דכתיב טוב. אימא: וְטָאטְאִיָּהּ בְּמִטְאָטְא הַשְּׁמֵד (ישעיהו יד. כג) ! חר טי"ת קאמרינן. אימא: טומאתה בשוליה (איכה א. ט) ! טי"ת בי"ת קאמרינן. אימא: טבעו בארץ שעריה (איכה ב. ט) ! אלא. הואיל ופתח בו הכתוב לטובה תחילה. שמבראשית עד וירא אלהים את האור לא כתיב טי"ת.

11. 1QpHab 7:1-5 – Peshar Habakuk

וידבר אל א אל א חבקוק לכתוב את הבאות על
{על} {על} הדור האחרון ואת גמר הקץ לוא הודעו .
[[]] ואשר אמר למען א ארוץ א הקורא בו
פשרו על מורה הצדק אשר הודיעו אל את
כול רזי דברי עבדיו הנבאים.

1. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 55b

R. Bizna b. Zabda said in the name of R. Akiba who had it from R. Panda who had it from R. Nahum, who had it from R. Biryam reporting a certain elder — and who was this? R. Bana'ah: There were twenty-four interpreters of dreams in Jerusalem. Once I dreamt a dream and I went round to all of them and they all gave different interpretations, and all were fulfilled, thus confirming that which is said: All dreams follow the mouth. Is the statement that all dreams follow the mouth Scriptural? Yes, as stated by R. Eleazar. For R. Eleazar said: Whence do we know that all dreams follow the mouth? Because it says, “And it came to pass, as he interpreted to us, so it was.” Raba said: This is only if the interpretation corresponds to the content of the dream: for it says, “to each man according to his dream he did interpret.”

2. Midrash Haggadol Beresheet

Behold it says, “כי בא החלום ברב ענין” - A dream carries much implication” (Kohelet 5:2). Now by using the method of *kal vahomer* we reason: If the contents of dreams which have no effect may yield a multitude of interpretations, how much more then should the important contents of the Torah imply many interpretations in every verse.

Law and Polysemy

3. Talmud Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 4:2, 22a

[A] Rabbi Yannai said: Had the words of Torah been given as clear-cut decisions, it would not have a leg to stand on.

[B] What is the source? “*God spoke to Moses...*” (Num 2: 1).

[C] He [Moses] said before Him, “Master of the universe, inform me what is the halakha.”

[D] He responded, “*Incline after the majority*” (Ex 23: 2). If those who declare innocent are more numerous then declare innocent. If those who declare guilty are more numerous then declare guilty.

[E] So that the Torah can be interpreted in forty-nine ways to declare impure and forty-nine ways to declare pure.

[F] From where do we know this? “*His flag (ve-diglo)*” (Ct 2: 4).

[G] And so the verse says, “*The words of the Lord are pure words, silver purged in an earthen crucible, refined sevenfold*” (Ps 12: 7).

[H] And it says, “*Straightly do they love you*” (Ct 1: 4).

4. Talmud Bavli Menahot 29b

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab, When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters. Said Moses, ‘Lord of the Universe, Who stays Your hand?’ He answered, ‘There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiba b. Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws’. ‘Lord of the Universe’, said Moses; ‘permit me to see him’. He replied, ‘Turn around’. Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [and listened to the discourses upon the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master ‘Whence do you know it?’ and the latter replied ‘It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai’ he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, ‘God of the Universe, You have such a man and You give the Torah by me!’ He replied, ‘Be silent, for such is My decree’.

Then said Moses, ‘God of the Universe, You have shown me his Torah, show me his reward’. ‘Turn thee round’, said He; and Moses turned round and saw them weighing out his flesh at the market-stalls. ‘God of the Universe’, cried Moses, ‘such Torah, and such a reward!’ He replied, ‘Be silent, for such is My decree’.

Reader Response Theory

5. Pesikta d’Rav Kahana, Bahodesh Ha-sheishi, Piska 12:25

Said Rabbi Yose bar Rabbi Hanina (ca. 250 CE): The Divine Word spoke to each and every person according to his capacity. And do not wonder at this. For when manna came down for Israel, each and every person tasted it according to his capacity – babies according to their capacity, young men according to their capacity, and old men according to their capacity... Now if each and every person tasted the manna according to his particular capacity, how much more so did each and every person hear the Divine Word according to his particular capacity. David said: “The voice of God is in strength” (Ps 29:4) – not “The voice of God in His strength” but “The voice of God is in strength” – of each and every person. The Holy One said to them: Do not be misled when you hear many voices, but know that it is I (alone): “I am the Lord your God” (Ex 20:2).

6. Genesis Rabbah 1:1

R. Oshaya commenced [his exposition thus]: Then I was by Him, as a nursling (amon); and I was daily all delight (Prov. 8, 30).

’Amon’ means tutor; ’amon’ means covered; ’amon’ means hidden; and some say, ’amon’ means great. ’Amon’ is a tutor, as you read...

Another interpretation: ’amon’ is a workman (uman). The Torah declares: ‘I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He.’ In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED (I,1), BEGINNING referring to the Torah, as in the verse, The Lord made me as the beginning of His way (Prov. 8, 22).

There is no outside-text. — Of Grammatology

A text remains [...] forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception. — Plato’s Pharmacy