masa leadership & impact center | masa מסע ISRAEL JOURNEY Celebrating 20 Years | Jonathan Sacks THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY | Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta

Unit 8

Systems Thinking: Seeing the Bigger Picture

Facilitator's Guide

Maya Bernstein & Sarah Mali

SYNOPSIS

Systems Thinking: Seeing the Bigger Picture

Effective leadership involves being able to see from multiple perspectives. In this unit, we will explore the importance of thinking systemically. How might we interpret what is happening around us in ways that are more consistent with larger systemic patterns that capture the heart of the problem? We will analyze differences between individual versus systemic interpretations, and the role that plays in leadership work.

Rabbi Sacks was a master at seeing things systematically and calling for greater perspective in order to move things forward. In his book, Sacks opens with a call to seeing the larger picture:

> ***What I sense(d) is missing is the larger picture, the historical perspective, the connection of the dots into a portrait that would show us the who and what and why of the Jewish situation against the backdrop of the human and historical landscape. In the heat of the moment, people do what they did last time. They revert to type. They choose the default mode. In the present instance that is the wrong reaction. Things change; the world in the twenty-first century is not what it was in the twentieth or the nineteenth.***
>
> Rabbi Sacks
> (Future Tense, a Vision for Jews and Judaism in the Global Culture, p. 4-5)

One way of thinking about leadership is that it involves mobilizing and inspiring people to go from the current state to a desired future state - from the "depressing world that is" to the "hopeful world that might yet be." This unit aims to explore the question: how might we better grasp the future that can potentially unfold? How might we imagine the paths that can get us from here to there? What is the connection between leadership and perspective? How might we widen and broaden our perspective, so that we can be more likely to successfully inspire others to go from here to there?

We will explore the story of Joseph in Genesis Chapter 37 and analyze the opportunities and challenges of thinking systemically; it will help guide us to deploy systems thinking more effectively and bring that skill to our leadership work.

EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Learners will emerge from this session with the following enduring understandings:

- Systems Thinking is the act of zooming out and getting on the balcony to look at all of the various parts of what might be contributing to the challenge, and how they work together, rather than at individual pieces
- Leadership work involves interpretation: analyzing and crafting views on what might be going on
- Leadership involves "taking a history" - understanding the past factors that are contributing to the status quo - and "dreaming big" - imagining what might be
- Pushing people to think and interpret systemically is, in and of itself, an act of leadership

NOTE TO FACILITATOR

Leadership is the act of mobilizing a group to move from the current reality to an aspirational state. In this session, leadership involves facilitating seeing the bigger picture, making connections between parts and the whole and taking the future into account! We invite you to encourage participants to move between three areas that can help their learning:

1. Their personal and professional experiences outside the room
2. The dynamics of the group - what is unfolding before their eyes
3. The context of the texts

Encourage them to begin to see the patterns that reveal the challenges and opportunities of diagnosing what is occurring. The learning in the group becomes an activity of both leaning in and creating space for the facilitator and participants alike. Learning in this sense is a form of leadership. Strive to balance the needs of the learners with the need to get through the material.

It is recommended that the total running time for this session is 2 hours, roughly divided up as follows:

- Introduction – 20 minutes
- Framing – 10 minutes
- Hevruta Learning & Reflection– 60 minutes & 10 minute break
- Integration & Practice – 20 minutes

If the purpose of this session for your learners is more focused on practice and application, plan to spend more time on the integration exercises. If it is more theoretical, and focused on Jewish learning, plan to spend more time on the Jewish texts and discussion.

You might also choose to facilitate a 60 minute session; in which case, simply halve each of the recommended times.

For younger learners, take breaks between each section.

For those unfamiliar with Jewish texts, frame the excerpts as Jewish texts, not as religious texts.

INTRODUCTION



Watch the following clip from the TV show "House," in which the ingenious doctor "magically" works out the solution to a repeated problem. In this clip, a teenage boy brings his toddler brother to the doctor because the toddler is having trouble breathing. Nobody has all of the information, and the young child is not yet able to talk and explain what happened. The doctor needs to figure out what is going on based on the clues that are before him. The older brother keeps coming back with the young child, and, eventually, Dr. House notices a pattern. Note how he doesn't get it right the first few times. He's learning how to see and think systemically & getting better at it. While this clip, in the end, is sort of funny, & reveals that the toddler has a sense of humor as well as a sense of how the world works, it is also deeply metaphoric and resonant for our challenge of trying to see the big picture & make sense of the systemic nature of the problems we face in our leadership work.

Reflection Questions

1. What does Dr. House have to do differently to reach the correct diagnosis?

2. What truths does he have to suspend to gain clarity?

3. Think of a time in which you were convinced you had the solution to a problem and were wrong. What piece of the puzzle (or part of the whole) were you missing? How did the connection change your analysis?

4. Think of a leadership challenge you're currently facing. How would you define the challenge? Use the metaphors from the poem: are you looking just at the policeman? The fireman? The firetruck? What else do you think might be going on? What might the cat represent in your case?

FRAMING

> ***There is a myth that drives many change initiatives into the ground: that the organization needs to change because it is broken. The reality is that any social system is the way it is because the people in that system want it that way. In that sense, on the whole, on balance, the system is working fine, even though it may appear to be "dysfunctional" in some respects to some members and outside observers, and even though it faces danger just over the horizon. As Jeff Lawrence poignantly says, "There is no such thing as a dysfunctional organization, because every organization is perfectly aligned to achieve the results it currently gets.***
>
> Ronald A. Heifetz (The Practice of Adaptive Leadership:
> Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World)

Thinking systemically requires us to realize that all systems are designed towards homeostasis. Even if people grumble and complain, the gravitational force of any organization or group of people is bent towards keeping things the same. When problems arise, the tendency is to interpret them from a technical perspective - like the doctor in the clip did at first - assuming that the immediate pain (the policeman, the fireman, etc) is the only problem. Even if we repeatedly find that challenges arise, we keep dealing with them, and avoid looking more closely at what might be at the heart of the matter.

In his article, Daniel Aronson brings our attention to the fact that thinking systemically is necessary for what we call "adaptive challenges," those that are:

- ***"Complex problems that involve helping many actors see the "big picture" and not just their part of it***
- ***Recurring problems or those that have been made worse by past attempts to fix them***
- ***Problems whose solutions are not obvious"***

Daniel Aronson (Overview of Systems Thinking)

These kinds of challenges, which Aronson says "plague us today," are "complex, involve multiple actors, and are at least partly the result of past actions that were taken to alleviate them. Dealing with such problems is notoriously difficult..."

It requires that we focus on how the problem "interacts with the other constituents of the system...of which it is a part. This means that instead of isolating smaller and smaller parts of the system being studied, systems thinking works by expanding its view to take into account larger and larger numbers of interactions as an issue is being studied."

We use the metaphor of "getting on the balcony" above the "dance floor" to depict what it means to gain the distanced, systemic perspective necessary to see what is really happening. If you stay moving on the dance floor, all you will see are the people dancing with you and around you. Swept up in the music, it may be a great party! But when you get on the balcony, you may see a very different picture. From that vantage point, you might notice that the band is playing so loudly that everyone is dancing on the far side of the room, that when the music changes from fast to slow (or back again), different groups of people decide to dance, and that many people hang back near the exit doors and do not dance, whatever the music. Not such a great party after all. If someone asked you later to describe the dance, you would paint a very different picture if you had seen it from the balcony rather than only from the dance floor. This ability to take a step away from the frenzied momentum of the dance is critical for thinking systemically, and for effective leadership work. Leadership work often involves making the unseen seen and requires a new perspective and way of thinking to see what might be hidden.

> ***Engaged in the dance, it is nearly impossible to get a sense of the patterns made by everyone on the floor. Motion makes observation difficult. To discern the larger patterns on the dance floor – to see who is dancing with whom, in what groups, in what location, and who is sitting out which kind of dance – we have to stop moving and get to the balcony.***
>
> Ronald Heifetz (Leadership Without Easy Answers)

Here are some ways to begin to cultivate Systems Thinking Habits of Mind

I. **Don't Lead Alone**: who are you partnering with? Are you getting representatives of the "whole system" in the room?

II. Look for **Patterns and Trends**: what are the recurring issues that keep coming up no matter what you try? What do those issues represent? Do you notice cause and effect relationships? How might you identify and make links between people, behavior, and the issues?

III. Treat **Problems & Conflicts as Data and lead with curiosity not certainty**: Instead of shying away from the challenging issues, can you approach them as "fascinating" information, that helps you understand more of the system as a whole?

IV. What Role is **Structure** Playing in the System? How might the set-up be indicative of the systemic patterns and values? Is the structure fluid or set?

V. **Surface and Test Assumptions**: What is accepted as a "given" in the system? Is it threatening to speak about unspoken assumptions? What might happen if you explored the assumptions? Can you help people shift from immediate and technical interpretations to more adaptive, systemic interpretations?

These Systemic Habits of Mind can help prevent us from jumping to quick conclusions, which prevent us from taking swift actions that ultimately solve only small pieces - technical pieces - of the problem.

HEVRUTA LEARNING & REFLECTION

Find a learning partner, a Hevruta.
Spend 15 minutes reading and discussing each text cluster.



Thinking systemically is an act of leadership because it helps us make interventions that are more likely to cause lasting, meaningful change. Dreamwork is often a way to enter into thinking more creatively and systemically. In the Torah, Joseph is the dreamer and dream interpreter. He can see things that others can't, as if he resides on the balcony while others are stuck on the dance floor. He perceives the dysfunctionality of the systems around him, and in one case, with his brothers, the sharing of that perspective lands him in the pit, while in another, with Pharaoh, it gets him out of the pit and into a position of great power. We will explore together how Joseph thinks systemically and shares that perspective with others, in order to better understand how we can bring a systemic perspective into our leadership work in an effective way.

Text Cluster I

Genesis 18:20-33

וְיִשְׂרָאֵל֙ אָהַ֣ב אֶת־יוֹסֵ֔ף מִכׇּל־בָּנָ֖יו כִּי־בֶ֣ן־זְקֻנִ֑ים הוּא֙ לֹ֔ו וְעָשָׂ֥ה לֹ֖ו כְּתֹ֥נֶת פַּסִּֽים׃

Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons—he was his "child of old age"; and he had made him an ornamented tunic.

וַיִּרְא֣וּ אֶחָ֗יו כִּֽי־אֹתֹו֙ אָהַ֣ב אֲבִיהֶ֔ם מִכׇּל־אֶחָ֖יו וַיִּשְׂנְא֣וּ אֹת֑וֹ וְלֹ֥א יָכְל֖וּ דַּבְּרֹ֥ו לְשָׁלֹֽם׃

And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.

וַיַּחֲלֹ֥ם יֹוסֵ֖ף חֲלֹ֑ום וַיַּגֶּד֙ לְאֶחָ֔יו וַיֹּוסִ֥פוּ עֹ֖וד שְׂנֹ֥א אֹתֹֽו׃

Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; & they hated him even more.

וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֲלֵיהֶ֔ם שִׁמְעוּ־נָ֖א הַחֲלֹ֥ום הַזֶּ֖ה אֲשֶׁ֥ר חָלָֽמְתִּי׃

He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed:

וְהִנֵּ֣ה אֲנַ֗חְנוּ מְאַלְּמִ֛ים אֲלֻמִּ֖ים בְּתֹ֣וךְ הַשָּׂדֶ֑ה וְהִנֵּ֤ה קָֽמָה֙ אֲלֻמָּתִ֣י וְגַם־נִצָּ֔בָה וְהִנֵּ֤ה תְסֻבֶּ֙ינָה֙ אֲלֻמֹּתֵיכֶ֔ם וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶ֖ינָה לַאֲלֻמָּתִֽי׃

There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf."

וַיֹּ֣אמְרוּ לֹ֔ו אֶחָ֖יו הֲמָלֹ֣ךְ תִּמְלֹ֑ךְ עָלֵ֙ינוּ֙ אִם־מָשֹׁ֣ול תִּמְשֹׁ֔ל בָּ֖נוּ וַיֹּוסִ֥פוּ עֹ֛וד שְׂנֹ֥א אֹתֹ֖ו עַל־חֲלֹמֹתָ֥יו וְעַל־דְּבָרָֽיו׃

His brothers answered, "Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?" And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.

וַיַּחֲלֹ֥ם עֹ֛וד חֲלֹ֥ום אַחֵ֖ר וַיְסַפֵּ֣ר אֹתֹ֑ו לְאֶחָ֔יו וַיֹּ֣אמֶר הִנֵּ֔ה חָלַ֖מְתִּי חֲלֹ֣ום עֹ֑וד וְהִנֵּ֣ה הַשֶּׁ֗מֶשׁ וְהַיָּרֵ֛חַ וְאַחַ֥ד עָשָׂ֖ר כֹּוכָבִ֥ים מִשְׁתַּחֲוִ֖ים לִֽי׃

He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: And this time, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

וַיְסַפֵּ֣ר אֶל־אָבִ֔יו וְאֶל־אֶחָ֑יו וַיִּגְעַר־בֹּ֣ו אָבִ֔יו וַיֹּ֥אמֶר לֹ֖ו מָ֣ה הַחֲלֹ֣ום הַזֶּ֔ה אֲשֶׁ֥ר חָלָ֖מְתָּ הֲבֹ֣וא נָבֹ֗וא אֲנִי֙ וְאִמְּךָ֣ וְאַחֶ֔יךָ לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹ֥ות לְךָ֖ אָ֥רְצָה׃

And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him. "What," he said to him, "is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground?"

וַיְקַנְאוּ־בֹ֣ו אֶחָ֔יו וְאָבִ֖יו שָׁמַ֥ר אֶת־הַדָּבָֽר׃

So his brothers were jealous of him, and his father kept the matter in mind.

Berakhot 55a:15

Rav Ḥisda said: A dream not interpreted is like a letter not read. As long as it is not interpreted it cannot be fulfilled; the interpretation of a dream creates its meaning.

Reflection Questions

1. How would you define what Joseph's dream reveals about his family?

2. We know that Joseph's interpretation of the dream - that he would rise to power and his family would bow down to him - occurred. In this sense, it was a correct interpretation. But the very act of sharing the dream, and interpreting it the way he did, was ineffective and harmful. This shows us that systemic interpretations can be dangerous. What else could Joseph have done with this dream? How else could he have made change in his family system?

3. Joseph's ability to "see differently" is a strength and also endangers him. As Rav Hisda implies, the interpretation of the dream creates its meaning. How else could Joseph have interpreted the dream?

4. Can you share something in your life or work that you're able to see that others can't perceive? How have you managed to bring attention to it in ways that aren't too harmful to you?

Text Cluster II

Genesis 40: 23- 41: 25

וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיְרִיצֻהוּ מִן־הַבּוֹר וַיְגַלַּח וַיְחַלֵּף שִׂמְלֹתָיו וַיָּבֹא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה:

וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל־יוֹסֵף חֲלוֹם חָלַמְתִּי וּפֹתֵר אֵין אֹתוֹ וַאֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי עָלֶיךָ לֵאמֹר תִּשְׁמַע חֲלוֹם לִפְתֹּר אֹתוֹ:

וַיַּעַן יוֹסֵף אֶת־פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר בִּלְעָדָי אֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶה אֶת־שְׁלוֹם פַּרְעֹה:

וַיְדַבֵּר פַּרְעֹה אֶל־יוֹסֵף בַּחֲלֹמִי הִנְנִי עֹמֵד עַל־שְׂפַת הַיְאֹר:

וְהִנֵּה מִן־הַיְאֹר עֹלֹת שֶׁבַע פָּרוֹת בְּרִיאוֹת בָּשָׂר וִיפֹת תֹּאַר וַתִּרְעֶינָה בָּאָחוּ:

וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע־פָּרוֹת אֲחֵרוֹת עֹלוֹת אַחֲרֵיהֶן דַּלּוֹת וְרָעוֹת תֹּאַר מְאֹד וְרַקּוֹת בָּשָׂר לֹא־רָאִיתִי כָהֵנָּה בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לָרֹעַ:

וַתֹּאכַלְנָה הַפָּרוֹת הָרַקּוֹת וְהָרָעוֹת אֵת שֶׁבַע הַפָּרוֹת הָרִאשֹׁנוֹת הַבְּרִיאֹת:

וַתָּבֹאנָה אֶל־קִרְבֶּנָה וְלֹא נוֹדַע כִּי־בָאוּ אֶל־קִרְבָּנָה וּמַרְאֵיהֶן רַע כַּאֲשֶׁר בַּתְּחִלָּה וְאִיקָץ:

וָאֵרֶא בַּחֲלֹמִי וְהִנֵּה | שֶׁבַע שִׁבֳּלִים עֹלֹת בְּקָנֶה אֶחָד מְלֵאוֹת וְטֹבוֹת:

וְהִנֵּה שֶׁבַע שִׁבֳּלִים צְנֻמוֹת דַּקּוֹת שְׁדֻפוֹת קָדִים צֹמְחוֹת אַחֲרֵיהֶם:

וַתִּבְלַעְנָה הַשִּׁבֳּלִים הַדַּקּוֹת אֵת שֶׁבַע הַשִּׁבֳּלִים הַטֹּבוֹת וָאֹמַר אֶל־הַחַרְטֻמִּים וְאֵין מַגִּיד לִי:

Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was rushed from the dungeon. He had his hair cut and changed his clothes, and he appeared before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it. Now I have heard it said of you that for you to hear a dream is to tell its meaning." Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, "Not I! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare." Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream, I was standing on the bank of the Nile, when out of the Nile came up seven sturdy and well-formed cows and grazed in the reed grass. Presently there followed them seven other cows, scrawny, ill-formed, and emaciated—never had I seen their likes for ugliness in all the land of Egypt! And the seven lean and ugly cows ate up the first seven cows, the sturdy ones; but when they had consumed them, one could not tell that they had consumed them, for they looked just as bad as before. And I awoke. In my other dream, I saw seven ears of grain, full and healthy, growing on a single stalk; but right behind them sprouted seven ears, shriveled, thin, and scorched by the east wind. And the thin ears swallowed the seven healthy ears. I have told my magician-priests, but none has an explanation for me."

Genesis 41: 25-41

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־פַּרְעֹה חֲלוֹם פַּרְעֹה אֶחָד הוּא אֵת אֲשֶׁר הָאֱלֹהִים עֹשֶׂה הִגִּיד לְפַרְעֹה: שֶׁבַע פָּרֹת הַטֹּבֹת שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים הֵנָּה וְשֶׁבַע הַשִּׁבֳּלִים הַטֹּבֹת שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים הֵנָּה חֲלוֹם אֶחָד הוּא: וְשֶׁבַע הַפָּרוֹת הָרַקּוֹת וְהָרָעֹת הָעֹלֹת אַחֲרֵיהֶן שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים הֵנָּה וְשֶׁבַע הַשִּׁבֳּלִים הָרֵקוֹת שְׁדֻפוֹת הַקָּדִים יִהְיוּ שֶׁבַע שְׁנֵי רָעָב: הוּא הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֶל־פַּרְעֹה אֲשֶׁר הָאֱלֹהִים עֹשֶׂה הֶרְאָה אֶת־פַּרְעֹה: הִנֵּה שֶׁבַע שָׁנִים בָּאוֹת שָׂבָע גָּדוֹל בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: וְקָמוּ שֶׁבַע שְׁנֵי רָעָב אַחֲרֵיהֶן וְנִשְׁכַּח כָּל־הַשָּׂבָע בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְכִלָּה הָרָעָב אֶת־הָאָרֶץ: וְלֹא־יִוָּדַע הַשָּׂבָע בָּאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵי הָרָעָב הַהוּא אַחֲרֵי־כֵן כִּי־כָבֵד הוּא מְאֹד: וְעַל הִשָּׁנוֹת הַחֲלוֹם אֶל־פַּרְעֹה פַּעֲמָיִם כִּי־נָכוֹן הַדָּבָר מֵעִם הָאֱלֹהִים וּמְמַהֵר הָאֱלֹהִים לַעֲשֹׂתוֹ: וְעַתָּה יֵרֶא פַּרְעֹה אִישׁ נָבוֹן וְחָכָם וִישִׁיתֵהוּ עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: יַעֲשֶׂה פַרְעֹה וְיַפְקֵד פְּקִדִים עַל־הָאָרֶץ וְחִמֵּשׁ אֶת־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשֶׁבַע שְׁנֵי הַשָּׂבָע: וְיִקְבְּצוּ אֶת־כָּל־אֹכֶל הַשָּׁנִים הַטֹּבוֹת הַבָּאוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְיִצְבְּרוּ־בָר תַּחַת יַד־פַּרְעֹה אֹכֶל בֶּעָרִים וְשָׁמָרוּ: וְהָיָה הָאֹכֶל לְפִקָּדוֹן לָאָרֶץ לְשֶׁבַע שְׁנֵי הָרָעָב אֲשֶׁר תִּהְיֶיןָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וְלֹא־תִכָּרֵת הָאָרֶץ בָּרָעָב: וַיִּיטַב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי פַרְעֹה וּבְעֵינֵי כָּל־עֲבָדָיו: וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל־עֲבָדָיו הֲנִמְצָא כָזֶה אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בּוֹ:וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל־יוֹסֵף אַחֲרֵי הוֹדִיעַ אֱלֹהִים אוֹתְךָ אֶת־כָּל־זֹאת אֵין־נָבוֹן וְחָכָם כָּמוֹךָ: אַתָּה תִּהְיֶה עַל־בֵּיתִי וְעַל־פִּיךָ יִשַּׁק כָּל־עַמִּי רַק הַכִּסֵּא אֶגְדַּל מִמֶּךָּ:

And Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same: Pharaoh has been told what God is about to do. The seven healthy cows are seven years, and the seven healthy ears are seven years; it is the same dream. The seven lean and ugly cows that followed are seven years, as are also the seven empty ears scorched by the east wind; they are seven years of famine. It is just as I have told Pharaoh: Pharaoh has been shown what God is about to do. Immediately ahead are seven years of great abundance in all the land of Egypt. After them will come seven years of famine, and all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. As the land is ravaged by famine, no trace of the abundance will be left in the land because of the famine thereafter, for it will be very severe. As for Pharaoh having had the same dream twice, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and that God will soon carry it out. "Accordingly, let Pharaoh find someone who's discerning and wise, whom you can set over the land of Egypt. And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority as food to be stored in the cities. Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will come upon the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine." The plan pleased Pharaoh and all his courtiers. And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, "Could we find another like him—a man with the divine spirit?" So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all my people be directed; only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you.

Rabbi Sacks (Lessons in Leadership, p. 49-50)

From Joseph, therefore, we learn three principles.

The first is: dream dreams. Never be afraid to let your imagination soar. When people come to me for advice about leadership, I tell them to give themselves the time and space and imagination to dream. In dreams we discover our passion, and following our passion is the best way to live a rewarding life.

Dreaming is often thought to be impractical. Not so; it is one of the most practical things we can do. There are people who spend months planning a holiday but do not give even a day to planning their life. They let themselves be carried by the winds of chance and circumstance. That is a mistake. The Sages said, "Wherever [in the Torah] we find the word vayehi, 'And it came to pass,' it is always the prelude to tragedy."[4] A vayehi life is one in which we passively let things happen. A yehi ("Let there be") life is one in which we make things happen, and it is our dreams that give us direction.

Theodor Herzl, to whom more than any other person we owe the existence of the State of Israel, used to say, "If you will it, it is no dream." I once heard a wonderful story from Eli Wiesel. There was a time when Sigmund Freud and Theodor Herzl lived in the same district of Vienna. "Fortunately," he said, "they never met. Can you imagine what would have happened had they met? Herzl would have said: 'I have a dream of a Jewish state.' Freud would have replied: 'Tell me, Herr Herzl, how long have you been having this dream? Lie down on my couch, and I will psychoanalyse you.' Herzl would have been cured of his dreams and today there would be no Jewish state." Thankfully, the Jewish people have never been cured of their dreams.

The second principle is that leaders interpret other people's dreams. They articulate the inchoate. They find a way of expressing the hopes and fears of a generation. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech was about taking the hopes of Black Americans and giving them wings. It was not Joseph's dreams that made him a leader; it was Pharaoh's. Our own dreams give us direction; it is other people's dreams that give us opportunity.

The third principle is: find a way to implement dreams. First see the problem, then find a way of solving it. [...] Good leaders either are, or surround themselves with, problem-solvers. It is easy to see when things are going wrong. What makes a leader is the ability to find a way of putting them right. Joseph's genius lay not in predicting seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, but in devising a system of storage that would ensure food supplies in the lean and hungry years.

Dream dreams; understand and articulate the dreams of others; and find ways of turning a dream into a reality – these three gifts are leadership, the Joseph way.

Reflection Questions

1. Pharaoh's dreams are pretty clear - they're not rocket science. Why do you think that all of the Egyptian magician-priests and sages couldn't figure them out? Why might it have taken an outsider, who literally came to the court from jail, to speak truth to power?

2. Joseph's leadership was not simply in thinking systemically, in interpreting the dreams and seeing things from the balcony. It was also about his process of learning how to share that perspective with others. What did he learn from his experience with his brothers that may have helped him with Pharaoh?

3. You can think about Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams as a model of Systems Thinking. He saw the links between what may have otherwise been interpreted as two disparate dreams; he was able to inspire Pharaoh and his courtiers, and then the people of Egypt, to think oment, but with an eye towards the future. What strategies did Joseph employ in this conversation that helped him be effective?

4. One lesson Joseph might have learned from his dream interpretation experience with his brothers is that it is dangerous to put oneself in the center of the plot. In interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph made himself ancillary to the plot but still relevant. How might you intervene in your leadership challenge in a way that reveals the systemic issue but that doesn't make you the focus?

INTEGRATION & PRACTICE

Leadership Exercise

Share a leadership challenge with your partner.

Invite them to help you interpret it from the balcony, from the dream-space. You may want to explore this list of "systemic questions" to help you see the systemic nature of the leadership challenge you are facing.

- For what is the current situation a good solution?
- What are unintended consequences of the status quo?
- What time frame/interval are we operating in? What are the benefits of that? What are the drawbacks?
- If the behavior of a certain person bothers you, ask yourself what function this person fulfills for the system by showing this behavior.
- How come you are the person looking at this situation? Whose role or what need are you fulfilling for the system when you do this?

Closing Circle

- ***What feels natural and good to you about thinking systematically?***
- ***What feels risky or hard for you about thinking systematically?***

TAKE-AWAY EXERCISE







Come back to the leadership challenge you are facing and begin to name some of its parts. What might be represented by the policeman, the fireman, and the fire truck?



From the balcony/systemic perspective, what do you think the "cat" is in this matter? What's the larger, systemic adaptive challenge? Whom else might help you understand this?

Commit to talking to at least two people who may have a different perspective on the challenge.

Keep exploring until the "cat" at the heart of the challenge becomes more apparent.

UNIT LESSON SUMMARY:

Leadership involves thinking systemically: stepping onto the balcony and attempting to make progress on the whole rather than solely on its parts. The way we share our systemic perspective is a key element in our potential to make progress on the issue.