

Sensual Signals (Miketz)

“If real is what you can feel, smell, taste, and see, then ‘real’ is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.” -Morpheus, The Matrix

Do you ever taste sound? Hear a view? Smell a touch? See a scent? These combinations seem physically impossible, yet they are part of our everyday language. We speak of sweet sounds, loud lights, and other apparent confusions of the senses.

For some people, however, such mixtures are not merely linguistic. There is a condition known as synesthesia, in which individuals actually experience colors, sounds, textures, scents, or flavors in response to stimuli that would not normally evoke them, or even when no such stimulus is present at all.

Our patriarch Jacob uses a cross sensory metaphor when he “sees the food in Egypt,” despite sitting in Canaan and only hearing reports about it. Ibn Ezra, in his commentary on Genesis 42:1, notices this unusual language and offers an explanation that closely resembles what we now call synesthesia, centuries before modern medicine identified the condition.

Ibn Ezra explains that since all sensory input is ultimately processed and interpreted by the brain, the senses can sometimes blend. From this blending emerge the beautiful, artistic, and surprising cross sensory metaphors that enrich our language.

May we continue mixing metaphors, to the sharp consternation or bright delight of our listeners.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben Tzion

Dedication

To the memory of Linda Geller z”l. May her family be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.