

Shabbat Miketz
Last Shabbat of 2000
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"Dream a little dream of me"

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I had a really incredible dream last night. Don't worry - I'm not going to try to describe it to you. When I tried with Tracy this morning she said something like, "I'm sure that was amazing for you, dear, but I have to go to work"

So I won't share, except to say I could see my whole day and night yesterday wrapped up in that dream. But what did it mean?

Those of us who grew up with the influence of Freud sifting everywhere - in our awake and our asleep dreams - can hardly avoid attempts to interpret them. But then, as it turns out, Freud himself comes from a long tradition of Jews who seek out the interpretation of dreams.

The Talmud talks much of dreams and their interpretation, including the statement from Rav Chisdah that "An uninterpreted dream is like an unread letter!" [Berakhot 55b]

The good Pharaoh, the one who ruled in Joseph's time, says to Joseph in this week's Torah portion, Miketz, "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." [Genesis 41:15-16] It turns out that God apparently sees not only to Pharaoh's welfare here, but also to Joseph's, who interprets Pharaoh's dreams, and in doing so, becomes 2nd in power only to Pharaoh [41:40].

Last night at Torah study, as we mulled over Joseph's powers to interpret the dreams no one else could make sense of -- we talked about dreams and their power. Sydney recalled a Jewish custom revolving around dreams that I had to go look up last night (delaying my going to sleep and hosting any longer dreams of my own!). In the Talmud, in tractate Berakhot - Blessings - a long discussion of dreams occurs. Here is a passage, have a look for yourselves [LISA hand it out. JEREMY READ IT]:

R. Huna b. Ammi said in the name of R. Pedath who had it from R. Johanan: If one has a dream which makes him feel sad he should go and have it interpreted in the presence of three others. He should have it interpreted! [For] Has not Rav Chisdah said: An uninterpreted dream is like an unread letter!

Rather say: [Don't have it just interpreted] Have it made better in the presence of three people. Let the person gather three people and say, "I saw a great dream!" Let them respond by saying, "It is a great dream. May it turn out well. May the Merciful One make it turn out well. Seven times may it be decreed from heaven that it should turn out well. It will most assuredly turn out well." Then, let them recite three Bad-Things-Turned-Good verses [hapak] [from Scripture], three Redemption [padah] verses, and three Peace [shalom] verses. Then the

person who has had the dream makes a donation to tzedakah. Then the three people recite, "Shalom to you, Shalom on us, Shalom for all Israel." [Berakhot 55b whole passage is on p. 335-356 in Soncino trans.]

My colleague, Rabbi Debra Judith Robbins, points out that this is not just some magical incantation or ritual to change the dream's meaning from bad to good. [Women's Torah Commentary, Miketz, p. 103]. So you tell me, what have we got going here? [Lisa: Let them read and answer, list steps 1,2,3,4,5 and their significance. You can add what's in next paragraph if you want:] First, the dreamer shares the dream with three other people - sharing our worries and our woes and even our hopes brings us into relationship with others. Second, they pray that it turn out well - prayer helps heal. Third, they recite verses of Torah together - a little Torah study never hurt anyone (right, Torah students?). Fourth, the dreamer gives tzedakah - don't just dream of a better world, take action. Finally, the three people ask for shalom - for peace, for wholeness.

Rabbi Robbins calls up this Talmud passage in discussing this week's Torah portion. She notes that not only does this Talmud ritual ask dreamers to take action, so does Torah. Think about the dreamers and dream interpreters in Torah - Joseph in particular. A dreamer, she notes, exhibits three attributes that other people might not exhibit: "First, dreamers remember their dreams. Second, dreamers interpret the dreams. Third, dreamers act on their dreams" ["In Search of Dreamers - Miketz" in The Women's Torah Commentary, p. 102]. In other words, dreamers say, don't just lie there and dream, make the good stuff come true and with the bad stuff, try to get yourself out of the jam.

Is there, for the Rabbis of the Talmud, the possibility that a dream really is the portent of dire things to come, as some of the dreams in the Joseph story seem to be? Well yes and no. The Rabbis are into second opinions in their world of dream interpretation. Don't like the first interpretation? Ask someone else. In fact, the same Talmud passage, a little later in the discussion, quotes Rav Bana'ah, who says, "There were 24 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 follow their interpretations]. [Berakhot 55b, p. 341].

So you could just keep asking until there's no one left to ask. But what about, as in Pharaoh's court, when no one could give an interpretation except for Joseph? Well, in that case be careful "to do the right thing by" your dream interpreters: The Talmud passage continues with the story of "Bar Hedyah [who] was an interpreter of dreams. To one who paid him he used to give a favorable interpretation and to one who did not pay him he gave an unfavorable interpretation." [56a, p. 342] This statement is followed by a long story about Abaye and Raba dreaming the exact same dreams - one paid Bar Hedyah to interpret, the other did not. You can guess which one got the favorable dream interpretations and which got only predictions of dire distress and sorrow.

Are we, as Shakespeare's character Prospero said, merely [LISA: put your fingers together - poof] "such stuff as dreams are made on?" [in The Tempest IV, i, 175], or are we made of "the right stuff," the stuff that can make our dreams come true?

Our friend Rav Hisda also said: "Neither a good dream nor a bad dream is ever completely fulfilled." [55a, near the end]. Need I add, neither is it ever fulfilled without our taking part in its fulfillment?

A new year is nearly upon us. Around the time of the Jewish new year, back in the autumn of the year, we really have our work cut out for us. And given the work of tshuvah - repentance, tefilah-

prayer, and tzedakah-just acts, we don't have all that much time - then - just for dreaming. But since the secular new year - the one we celebrate this weekend just to be good sports, just to show that Jews do live in the same world everyone else does - since the secular new year assigns us no particular responsibilities, perhaps we can use it to dream. Only thing to remember though, is that we can't stop with the dreams - Joseph didn't, nor did his dreaming father Jacob, before him, nor our dreamy sages of the Talmud: When they dream and when they interpret dreams, they spur the dreamer and themselves on to action - make your own dreams come true.

So why not do a little dreaming, now, tonight, this weekend. Afterall, the turning of a year, no matter how arbitrary the boundary between one year and the next, ought to feel auspicious, potentially transforming, don't you think? Why else distinguish time, if not for time to make its mark in our lives?

The following prayer, presented in our same Talmud passage on dreams, actually appears still in traditional prayerbooks, in the morning service: I offer it now, for all of us, on this last Shabbat of the year 2000:

'Sovereign of the Universe, I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. I have dreamt a dream and I do not know what it is. Whether I have dreamt about myself or my companions have dreamt about me, or I have dreamt about others, if they are good dreams, confirm them and reinforce them like the dreams of Joseph, and if they require a remedy, heal them, as the waters of Marah were healed by Moses, our teacher, and as Miriam was healed of her leprosy and Hezekiah of his sickness, and the waters of Jericho by Elisha. As You did turn the curse of the wicked Balaam into a blessing, so turn all my dreams into something good for me. You who are majestic on high, who abides in might, You are peace and Your name is peace. May it be Your will to bestow peace on us.'

[Berakhot 55b, 339-340 in Soncino; in Women's Torah Commentary, p. 105]

And I add, May this new year be a year in which we make our dreams come true. And let us all say: Amen

Shabbat Shalom, Happy New Year.