

## The Jewish view of dreams

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayeshev*, Joseph dreams and interprets dreams:

And Joseph had a dream and told his brothers...,  
"We were binding sheaves ... and behold, my sheaf arose and... stood upright, and... your sheaves encircled [it] and prostrated themselves to my sheaf."

So his brothers said to him, "Will you reign over us? Will you govern us?" And they continued further to hate him on account of his dreams and on account of his words.

And [later] he... said, "Behold, I have had another dream: ...The sun, the moon, and eleven stars were prostrating themselves to me." And he told [this] to his father and to his brothers. His father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream...? Will we come, I, your mother, and your brothers to prostrate ourselves to you to the ground?" [Gen. 37:5-10]

Later, when Joseph is in jail, he correctly interprets the dreams of other inmates, and news of his ability spreads fast. Pharaoh summons him and he correctly interprets Pharaoh's dreams. He is then put in charge of all of Egypt to manage the consequences of his interpretations. [Gen. 40:5ff]

Dreams. The Torah is full of them. Sometimes it says specifically that they convey a message directly from God:

-But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night. [Gen. 20:3]

-And [Jacob] dreamed, and behold! [there was] a ladder on the ground and its top reached to heaven; and behold, angels of God were going up and down on it; and behold, the Lord was standing over him. [Gen. 28:12-13]

-And God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night. [Gen. 31:24]

-The Lord appeared to [King] Solomon in a dream by night. [1Kings 3:5]

A man dreamed that Gideon, a Judge of Israel, would defeat the Midianites, and so he did. [Judges 7:13] The prophet Daniel successfully interpreted the dreams of the wicked king Nebuchadnezzar. [Daniel 2:1ff]

All cultures have a special niche for dreams, and Judaism is no exception. I searched the Tanach, Talmud, Midrash and Zohar, (electronically!) and found close to a thousand references to dreams. People were scared by them. There was even a custom of fasting to prevent bad dreams [Shabbat 11a]. But are all dreams significant? Do they all bear a message? Is God involved in all of them? Let's examine what our Sages say about them.

First of all, the Talmud notes that dreams are never completely fulfilled:

Rabbi Berekiah said: While part of a dream \*may\* be fulfilled, the whole of it is \*never\* fulfilled. How do we know this? From Joseph, as it [says in Genesis]: "The sun and the moon [and eleven stars bowed down to me], [meaning his father, mother, and brothers] [Gen.37:9]. But, at that time, his mother was dead, [so she could not possibly bow to him]. [Ber. 55a-b]

The Talmud also considers dreams to be a weaker form of prophecy:

A dream is one-sixtieth of prophecy. [Ber. 57b],  
implying that there is something to them, but usually not much:  
Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai:  
Just as wheat cannot be without straw, so there cannot be a dream without some nonsense. [Ber. 55a]

The Midrash amplifies this idea:

Rabbi Chanina bar Yitzhaq said: There are three incomplete phenomena:  
-The incomplete form of death is sleep;  
-The incomplete form of prophecy is dreaming;  
-The incomplete form of the World to Come is Shabbat. [Gen. R. 17:5]

Some even believed that a dream is no more than a crazy, disorganized, mixed-up assemblage of one's thoughts during the day:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonathan: A man is shown in a dream only what is suggested by his own thoughts during the day. [Ber. 55b]  
Freud said the same thing many centuries later: Dreams reflect nothing but the self.

One of these skeptics was 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Rabbi Meir, who said:  
Dreams neither help nor harm. [Hor. 13b]  
Another was Abbahu, 3<sup>rd</sup>-century rabbi:  
Dreams have no influence whatsoever. [Gen. R. 68:12]

In Jewish law, all information obtained in a dream must be disregarded.

A dream must not be the cause of profound changes. The Talmud says:  
If a non-Jew wants to embrace Judaism because he has been advised to do so in a dream, he is not accepted. [Yev. 24b]

But the dream itself is not enough. One wants to know: What does it mean? Some interpretation is always needed:

-Rabbi Chisda... said: A dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is not read. [Ber. 55a-b]  
-Bar Kappara taught: No dream is without its interpretation. [Gen. R. 68:12]

But the most far-reaching assessment of dreams by the Sages is their teaching that:

All dreams follow their interpretation. [Ber. 55b]

This means that what is suggested in the interpretation is what will actually happen. Call it auto-suggestion, psychological influence, or mind over matter, but it implies that the dreamer is so profoundly shaken by the alleged meaning of his dream that somehow he makes it happen:

Rabbi Bana'ah [said]: There were 24 interpreters of dreams in Jerusalem. I had a dream once and went around to all of them, and they all gave different interpretations, and all were fulfilled. This confirms that... "All dreams follow [their interpretation]"...

[for the Torah says in Genesis]... "And it came to pass \*as [Joseph] interpreted [the dreams] to us\*, and so it was."  
[Gen. 41:13] [Ber. 55b]

The decisive influence of the interpreter can have disastrous consequences, as this story from the Midrash shows:

A certain woman went to Rabbi Eliezer and said to him: "I saw in a dream that the loft of the upper story of my house was split open."

"You will conceive a son," he told her. And so it happened.

[Years later] she had the same dream, told it to Rabbi Eliezer, and he gave her the same interpretation. And so it happened.

She dreamed this a third time and went to him but did not find him, so she told his students... They told her, "You will bury your husband," and this did happen.

[They informed] Rabbi Eliezer... and he upbraided them, saying: "You have killed the man!" [Gen. R. 89:8]

The Talmud has a similar, chilling story:

[The Chaldean] Bar Hedyā was an interpreter of dreams. He used to give a favorable interpretation to those who paid him and an unfavorable interpretation to those who did not pay him. Abaye and Rava each had a dream. Abaye gave him a zuz, but Rava did not give him anything. [So, to Abaye he gave many good interpretations and to Rava many bad ones]...

One day Rava [learned the teaching:] "All dreams follow [their interpretations]". He [understood that the interpreter was \*making\* these bad things happen to him and] exclaimed: You wretch! It all depended on you and you gave me all this pain!...

May it be God's will that [you] be delivered up to the Government, and that they have no mercy on [you]!

Bar Hedyā said to himself: What am I to do? A curse uttered by a Sage, even when undeserved, comes to pass. How much more so this [one], which was deserved!

He [went] into exile, for a Master has said: "Exile procures atonement for iniquity". He... fled to the Romans [but refused to interpret dreams for them unless they paid him. They refused, bad things happened to them, so they executed him.] [Ber. 56a]

The Zohar, the book of Jewish mysticism, confirms this view:

A dream contains both falsehood and truth. The word has power over it. Therefore, it is advisable that every dream be interpreted in a good sense. [Ber. 1:183a]

The Zohar bases this on the Torah itself, from today's portion:

[The Torah says that Joseph] said to [his brothers], "Hear, I beg you, this dream I had... We were binding sheaves in the field, and my sheaf arose, and stood upright, and your sheaves... bowed to my sheaf". And his brothers said to him, "Will you reign over us? Will you govern us?" [Gen. 37:6-8] We see here how [Joseph's brothers, not Joseph himself, interpreted the dream negatively. If they had interpreted it positively, it would have been fulfilled accordingly.] But they said to him: "Will you reign over us? Will you govern us?" And with these words they sealed their own doom. [Zohar, Ber. 1:183b]

The Talmud even recommends a ceremony called "*hatavat chalom*", the improvement of a dream:

Rabbi Huna ben Ammi said in the name of Rabbi Pedath who had it from Rabbi Yochanan: If one has a dream which makes him sad he should go and have three people give it a good twist ... They should say to him, [Your dream is] good... May the All-Merciful turn it to good... May it be decreed from heaven that it should be good and will become good. [Ber. 55b] [Artscroll weekday siddur, pp 549-552]

So the Sages took pains to provide good interpretations to the dreams of the people, and even when the people dreamt that they committed terrible capital crimes, the Sages found ways to make it sound good, witness this very surprising Talmudic passage:

-If one dreams that he has intercourse with his mother, he can expect understanding, since it says [in the Book of Proverbs], "You will call understanding "mother". [Prov. 2:3]

-If one dreams he has intercourse with a woman who is engaged, he can expect knowledge of Torah, since it says [in Deuteronomy], "*Torah tziva lanu Moshe, morashah kehilat Yaakov* -- Moses commanded us [the Torah], an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob." [Deut. 33:4] *Morashah*, meaning inheritance, can also be read *Me'orasah*, meaning engaged.

-If one dreams he has intercourse with his sister, he can expect wisdom, since it says [in Proverbs], "Say to wisdom, you are my sister." [Prov. 7:4]

-If one dreams he has intercourse with a married woman [he does not know], he can be confident that he is destined for the "World to Come". [Ber. 57a]

There is not even a hint of a rebuke, because none of this actually happened, none of this was planned, and people are not responsible for their dreams!

So, opinions vary, and the final answer on dreams is still in the future.

Let me conclude with a prayer found in the Talmud. It is to be recited during the *Birkat Kohanim*, the priestly blessing. Many communities still recite it today. It is sufficiently broad to accommodate a wide range of positions:

Sovereign of the Universe, I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. I had a dream and I do not know what it is. Whether I have dreamt about myself, or my friends have dreamt about me, or I have dreamt about others, if they are good dreams, confirm 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 [King] Hezekiah of his sickness, and the waters of Jericho by [the prophet] Elisha. As You turned the curse of the wicked Balaam into a blessing, so turn all my dreams into something good for me. [Ber. 55b]

And let us say: Amen.

Shabbat shalom.