III. Sweet Sleep: On Dreams

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On Dreams

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Introduction to the Soul of the Matter

For the longest time, I rarely remembered my dreams. It was unfortunate, for I was aware that visions of the night offered great insight. This belief is foundational to modern psychotherapy and is on display in sacred Jewish text. Starting with the Bible, dreams are transformational. Abraham, Abimelech, Jacob, Laban, and Joseph all have dreams that are prophetic. They each receive Divine messages that are as if spoken, clear and direct. Beginning with the tales of Joseph, interpretation is needed to decipher the symbols of dreams. The rabbis will differ as to the value of such visions of the night in their day, with three possibilities: meaningless, prophecy, or a combination. This hybrid position, which describes dreams as “a mix of wheat and chaff,” will dominate Jewish thought, although shifting across time and place between more rational or mystical emphasis.

My appreciation for the power of the unconscious to convey insight emerged from years of directed wakeful-dreaming with Colette Aboulker-Muscat and Marielle Fuller. Each employed guided journeys as a tool of transformation. Each was deeply spiritual. Each was influenced by Robert DeSoille, a 19th-20th century, French pioneer of “directed wakeful dream” to evoke unconscious material. Each saw clients until days before their respective deaths at the age of 94 and 93, respectively. My introduction to Colette came through Eve Ilsen, a former student of Colette’s who presented workshops at a Rabbi’s convention. Her skill was new to me. I was fascinated by the experiences that emerged by spontaneously filling in the blanks in dream-like stories. I held on to the name of her teacher and my curiosity. Soon afterwards, I received a call from a rabbi’s wife who described the work of Marielle Fuller, the oldest volunteer at the AID’s clinic in Laguna Beach, California. I made an appointment with Marielle, curious about her life and craft. I was so drawn by her warmth and apparent wisdom that I engaged in weekly guided-journeys with her for several years, separated by a year in Jerusalem.

Marielle would direct a client to close eyes, relax, suspend judgment, and then she would set up a scene, inviting the participant to spontaneously fill in the details. She might lead me up a mountain trail to a castle, where with her direction, I would enter different rooms, meeting guides who might present me with a package or answer my questions. The imaginary guides included a wizard, witch, jester or an angel: archetypes for foundational inner qualities. Marielle had developed her techniques of wakeful dreaming by working and teaching for two decades at the UCLA Medical Center. In retirement she worked with groups of cancer and AIDS’ patients. Repeated guided visualizations developed my confidence of going inwardly trustingly, from where I would draw material that both offered intuitive insight and contributed to feeling more whole. Guided imagery was soulful work because it took energy to open to the unknown, sometimes tinged by vulnerability. Soul is a religious term describing a core wisdom that knows what I need and that expresses my most authentic self. “Soul,” to quote poet Rodger Kamenetz, is “imaginal, but not imaginary.”

The year following my initial immersion in wakeful dreaming with Marielle, I spent a Sabbatical in Jerusalem. Soon after arriving, I sought out Colette Aboulker-Muskat. I learned that on Saturday nights she opened her apartment as a salon for both her regular students and a diversity of guests. On those evenings, Colette shared an original guided-meditation in honor of a chosen theme, such as an approaching holiday. Colette referred to her technique in her heavily accented French as “shock,” explaining that surprise was essential to getting around the defenses of the psyche. “Breathe out three times,” she would say to begin a short vignette. “See your self descending on an elevator in an old house. The door opens. What do you see?” “Breathe out and open your eyes.” “Describe.” My wife and I also joined her weekly Thursday seminar for select students. Colette would also meet with clients who came to her home during the week seeking imaginal prescriptions. For instance, a person who wanted to lose weight might be told, “Before eating, breathe out and see your self coming through a pasta machine becoming squeezed and thin.” She believed that the mind’s script could effect dramatic inner and outer change.

Colette had a rule for clients: you could only ask one question per visit. My wife and I once brought
our eight-year-old son, Joey, to meet Colette, who was then close to ninety.

Joey immediately said to Colette, “How old are you?”

“I will answer,” she replied, “but you only get one question.”

In that case, he said, “I will wait.” He patiently listened in on our conversation, as he scanned the room. He noticed a pillow on her couch with the embroidered words, “Tell me your dreams and I will tell you who you are. Maimonides.”

“I have my question now,” he said. “What are your dreams?”

“I am too old to dream,” she replied evasively. She deeply believed that to reveal dreams was an act of enormous self-disclosure and she was not prepared to do so at that moment. She later told others about our son and his perceptive, probing question.

Yes, to dream is to discover more of who we are: to uncover our painful vulnerabilities, as well as our hopes; the images that serve as sources of healing and direction; and open us to an inner realm that offers surprise and wholeness-making wisdom. When our defenses are down during sleep, the material of the inner life emerges. I have learned that people cannot guide themselves in a wakeful dream, for to access intuitive material requires letting go of conscious control. Likewise, the sages of the Talmud teach that a person is unable to interpret his or her own dreams (Yoma 28b). We have defenses that surround our inner secrets and blindspots that obscure what is before us. And yet, our dreams—whether as visions during sleep or as directed wakeful dreams—can evoke what is otherwise hidden. Examining that material with fresh eyes allows for an understanding that offers healing and greater transparency, enhancing spontaneity, vitality, and wholeness.

Most of the material that I will share on dreams and their meaning comes from the Jewish tradition, the area that I know best. I will also offer the differing modern perspectives of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Fritz Perls. It is my hope that this exploration of dreams will open us to a greater awareness of our dreams and their meaning in our lives. When we dream sleep, our brains are as busy as when we are awake. When dreaming our eyes move as if we are watching a movie. I recently asked an eight-year-old about her dreams. She immediately began to describe an elaborate story. Her older brother interjected a correction and she wisely said, “You cannot know what is going on in my dream. It is mine.”

And so in the section ahead we will examine dreams, the role of interpretation once recounted, and how the Jewish tradition suggests sweetening a bad dream.

The Talmud states that the most significant dreams are those that occur close to awaking. Jungian analyst, Joel Covitz writes, “It makes sense to me that the unconscious would select specific dreams for the dreamer’s attention in this way. Sometimes patients bring to analysis a dream that occurred in the middle of the night and that was remembered simply because the dreamer happened to be awakened by a passing fire engine or some other disturbance. I usually feel that such dreams were not designed for analysis.” Covitz explains that where traditional text spoke of God as the source of dreams, the modern parlance is to use words like Higher Self or the subconscious. And yet, both are describing dream material that arises as if from a source of Wisdom beyond normal consciousness. Likewise, I would add that the traditional language of angels and demons finds a parallel in contemporary accounts of accessing the Dream Guide or being confused by the energy of repression and fear.

As for my own dreaming, it changed during the course of writing this manuscript. I consciously sought to more actively remember my dreams. I placed a beautiful, unlined book near my bed along with a pen. As I turned off the lights, I did so with the intention of remembering a dream. And I did. As I awoke, I was aware of dreaming. I quietly reached for my book—half awake, no light, and hoping that the pen’s ink flowed. The dreams have just kept coming. I was so happy after recording that first dream. And two days later, another dream as I awoke; and so it has continued, not every night, but on a regular basis. A dream offers our original script presented for a nightly, private screening.

2 The words are a paraphrase of Maimonides, who wrote not in his commentary to the tenth chapter of the Mishnah of Sanhedrin that how a person envisioned the end of days, rather feasting or simply basking in the Divine presence, revealed who they were.

3 Berakhot 55b.

4 Joel Covitz, Visions of the Night: A Study of Jewish Dream Interpretation (Boston: Shambhala, 1990), 72
Rabbinic Diversity on the Meaning of Dreams

A man says to the 19th century Hasidic master, the Kotzker Rebbe, "I should be a rebe (a rabbinic leader). For my father came to me in a dream." The Kotzker smiled and replied, "If your father would have come to three hundred people and told them you were to be a rebe, it's a different story. If he came just to you, it's nothing." There are dreams and there are dreams.

Already among the early rabbis there are differences as to how much to invest in a dream. As an illustration of that diversity, the following story is told of two sages of second century Israel, Rabbis Meir and Nathan, who misbehaved toward their teacher, Simeon ben Gamliel. Soon afterwards, both Meir and Nathan had the identical dream conveying the need to apologize. Nathan did so, but Meir refused, saying, "Dreams are of no consequence" (Horayot 13b). Rabbi Meir was not alone in utterly dismissing the demands of dreams, although most sages believed that dreams may contain prophecy. The Babylonian Talmud, edited around 500 CE, presents discussions spanning six hundred years. Comments on dreams are scattered throughout the corpus, with a block of several folio pages that examine the nature of dreams and their interpretation (Berakhot 55a-57b). Opinions reflect both differing dispositions of the sages and the awareness that there are differing kinds and layers to dreams. The following offers an overview of those Talmudic opinions, plus a sampling of later rabbinic views that return us to the opening story of the Rebbe.

Skepticism: Rabbi Yonatan (1st century, Israel) said, "a person is shown in a dream only what is suggested by his own thoughts" (Berakhot 55b). On the next page of the Talmud this position is illustrated by two royal stories:

The Emperor [of Rome] said to Rabbi Joshua the son of Rabbi Hananyah, “You Jews profess to be so wise. Tell me what I shall see in my dream. He said to him, “You will see the Persians making you do forced labor and despoiling you by making you feed unclean animals with a golden crook. He thought about it all day and in the night he saw it [the predicted scene] in his dreams. King Shapor once said to Samuel, “You profess to be so wise, Tell me what I shall see in my dream.” He said to him, “You will see the Romans coming and taking you captive and forcing you to grind date-stones in a golden mill.” He thought about it the whole day and in the night saw it in a dream.

In this skeptical orientation, dreams are simply a replaying of events and thoughts that occurred during the day and even prompted by immediate physical sensations. Rabbi Abbahu would sum up, “Dreams mean nothing for good or ill” (Eikhah Rabbati 35:7:4).

Prophecy: And yet, there were other sages like Rabbi Hanina ben Isaac who held that “a dream is the unripe fruit of prophecy” (Genesis Rabbah 17:5). Dreams had practical consequences for Rabbi Joseph, holding that when a person dreamt that he was placed under a rabbinic ban, the dreamer needed to appear before ten peers to lift that punishment (Nedarim 8a).

Hybrid: The majority perspective was a hybrid. Rabbi Ashi would say, “Just as there can be no grain without straw, so there can be no dream without nonsense” (Nedarim 8a). Seeing that dreams could contain “straw,” prophecy, Rabbi Ashi would even base a legal decision on the content of his dream (Sanhedrin 102b). The power of dreams to anticipate the future is judged by some as real, but limited. Rabbis Berakhiah and Hisda agreed that although dreams are never fully actualized, they may contain elements that are fulfilled (Berakhot 55a). Rabbi Yohanan pointed to specific kinds of dreams as bearing predictive power, including those of the early morning, dreamt by a friend about you, and a dream within a dream (Berakhot 55b). The importance and limitation of dreams is conveyed in the quote, “A dream is one-sixtieth of prophecy” (Berakhot 57b).

Source: Even more, the source of the dream mattered: angel or demon, a concept that will get much more elaboration in the Zohar, but begins with the Talmud. When Samuel had a bad dream, he used to say, “The dream speaks falsely” Zecharia 10:2). When he had a good dream, he used to say, “Do the dreams speak falsely? For it is written, ‘I [God] speak with him in a dream?’” (Numbers 12:6). Raba pointed
out the [Biblical] inconsistency—“It is written, ‘I do speak with him in a dream’ and ‘the dreams speak falsely.’” There is no contradiction: in one case the dream speaks through an angel and in the other through a demon (Berakhot 55b).

**Interpretation:** In the oft-quoted words of Rava Hisda, “A dream uninterpreted is like a letter unopened” (Berakhot 55a). For most of the Talmudic sages, there was an art to deciphering the symbols of a dream, often linking their meaning to a Biblical verse. The interpretation itself had power to determine whether a dream would lead to a good or a bad outcome. In the words of Rabbi Bana’ah, “All dreams follow the mouth” (Berakhot 55b). The Talmud records that there were twenty-four professional interpreters in Jerusalem (Berakhot 55b) and will recount Babylonian sages who even employed a non-Jew, Bar Hedya, to interpret their dreams. The Talmud will state that the dreamer as a rule is unable to interpret his or her own dreams (Yoma 28b).

In sum, the Talmud presents three approaches to dream material—nonsense, prophecy, and sometimes both, with interpretations having great power. These views will shift in emphasis in the generations that follow.

In the Middle Ages, Maimonides (Spain, 1135-1204) would hold as a matter of law that when a person is told in a dream lacks legal significance: “ Upon dreaming that tithes of your father which you have sought are located in such a place, even if he finds the money there it is fully his and not [holy] tithe; for matters of a dream neither raise up or bring down.” Maimonides relates to dreams naturalistically as the product of the dreamer’s earlier thoughts. And yet, he retained a belief in the possibility of prophecy during sleep. For when asleep, he wrote, the intellectual faculties [analytic thinking] shut down enabling the imaginative faculty [intuition] to receive symbolically coded, divine messages that warrant interpretation. He emphasized that the receipt of such prophecy is only limited to those rare few who had trained themselves to let go of their appetites and analytic thoughts while having attained a very high level of knowledge. Abravanel (Spain, 1437-1508) expanded the potential recipients, saying that God could convey a prophecy in a dream to whomever God wants.

Jewish mystics sought wisdom in the Zohar, which contemporary scholars attribute to Spain of the 13th century and quickly became accepted in the Jewish world as a sacred text. Traditionally identified with Shimon bar Yohai and Israel of the 2nd century, the Zohar interprets the Biblical text allegorically to describe the nature of God. The Zohar will state that when a person sleeps his soul leaves the body. If the dreamer is worthy, he returns with images and wisdom from the Heavenly realms, but if unworthy demons may convey misleading or even harmful material.

Historically, Jews traditionally did not write their dreams down, let alone share them publicly for they were seen as quite personal and hard to decipher. An exception is that of the mystic Chaim Vital, Isaac Luria’s scribe, who was a prolific collector of dreams. He recorded them in his *The Book of Dreams and Visions*. In one dream, Elijah the prophet leads Vital to a “beautiful garden with large rivers flowing through it. At the center of the garden he saw a tall attic. Vital climbs the ladder and goes through a door. There he saw God sitting in a chair with the appearance of the Ancient of Ancients, with a beard as white as snow and sitting in infinite splendor” Honoring a dream as potentially a Divine message and seeking symbolic interpretation would grow in popularity with the rise of the mystically-inspired Hasidic movement that began in the 18th century, as reflected in the opening story. Solomon Almoli (16th century, Turkey) would write *Pitron Halamot*, a book on dream interpretation that decoded many symbols in a large array of categories. This book gained broad popularity in its Yiddish translation (1694), particularly among mystically inclined Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The rabbis analysis of dreams across Jewish history offers both a foundation for skepticism and an appreciation for the wisdom of a dream. Contemporary dream interpretation parallels the insights of those sages, including the following: content is often prompted by an immediate stimulus or lingering
thought; dreams may contain prophetic-like wisdom; and that the aid of an objective, skilled dream interpreter is essential for the dreamer to discern the fullness of meaning of a dream.

Reflections: Of the topics mentioned in this overview, what evokes your curiosity to further explore? What for you is the significance of a dream?
Abimelech: Warning as the First Biblical “Dream”

The first time the word “dream” (halom) appears in the Torah is in regard to Abimelech, a local sheikh. When God spoke with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden or addressed Abraham with a call of service, those communications were direct. In this case, the Divine message is explicitly by dream, but a dream of such clarity that it needed no interpretation. In the Bible, you need not be of the covenantal clan to receive communications from God.

Abraham had needed new pastureland. He proceeded southward to the area of Gerar, where he was an unprotected stranger. Fearful for his safety with a beautiful wife, he publicly proclaimed that Sarah was his sister. Indeed, his fears were vindicated. King Abimelech found Sarah attractive and had her brought to his harem. The word “dream” then appears:

God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, “You are to die because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman.” Now Abimelech had not approached her.

He said, “O Lord, will You slay people even though innocent? He himself said to me, ‘She is my sister!’ And she also said, ‘He is my brother.’ When I did this, my heart was blameless and my hands were clean.”

And God said to him in the dream, “I knew that you did this with a blameless heart, and so I kept you from sinning against Me. That was why I did not let you touch her. Therefore, restore the man’s wife—since he is a prophet, he will intercede for you—to save your life. If you fail to restore her, know that you shall die, you and all that are yours” (Genesis 20: 3-7).

Abimelech heeded the dream. He spoke with Abraham who conceded the ruse, spoke of his fear, and explained that Sarah and he had in fact the same father. Abimelech gave Abraham and Sarah much livestock, slaves, silver, and an invitation to stay in the area. Abraham prayed for Abimelech, reversing a punishment of infertility and enabling the birth of children with his wife and concubines.

This dream is stark and redounded to Abimelech’s favor. Dreams that offer a Divine warning of danger finds parallels in the Sumerian tale of Gilgamesh and the Iliad and Odysseus of Homer. Yet, as the Bible unfolds with the tales of Joseph and later in Rabbinic tradition, “dreams follow the mouth,” namely dreams will depend on interpretation to unlock their meaning.

Reflection: In your own dreams, have you ever had a warning dream? If so, describe. Was the warning evident or did it depend on interpretation to fathom its meaning?
Abraham’s Dream of an Enduring Covenant

In the Torah, the following is the only case where Abraham encounters God explicitly while asleep.

As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep, dark dread descended upon him. And God said to Abram, “Know for sure that your offspring will be strangers in a land not their own for four hundred years. They shall be enslaved and oppressed. But I will execute judgment on the nation who they served and afterwards they shall go free with great wealth. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace and you will be buried in a ripe old age. (Genesis 15:12-15)

When Abram is initially called, “Surely go from you land, your birthplace, your parent’s home to the land that I will show you,” (Genesis 12:1) no mention is made of the nature of the revelation. Likewise, when Abraham toward the end of his life is so dramatically tested by God’s command “Take your son, your only one, the one that you love, Isaac, and surely go to the land of Moriah and place him there as an offering on one of the mountains that I will tell you” (Genesis 22:2), we are not told if the words were communicated while awake or asleep. Just before the explicit dream above, we are told “After these matters, God’s word came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Fear not Abram, I am your shield. Your reward is very great.’ He then took [Abram] outside and said, ‘Look at the sky and count the stars. See if you can count them.’ [God] then said to him, ‘That is how [numerous] your descendants will be’ (Genesis 15:1,4-5).

The four hundred years in which his “offspring will be strangers in a land not their own,” does not match the 430 years stated in Exodus 12:40 as the sojourn in Egypt. The consensus of commentators is that 400 is a rounded-off number. At the same time, there is great specificity in this prophecy: banishment; punishment of the oppressive host; the promise of redemption and with wealth; an assurance of full life for Abraham. The future is laid out with clarity. This is a dream of words, a Divine message, rather than a symbolic dream.

This dream occurs after Abraham’s victory against a group of foreign kings and yet, Abraham is feeling uncertain as to his safety. The kings might seek revenge. The first words of the chapter are God’s assurance of protection, “Fear not, Abram, I am a shield for you; Your reward will be very great.” Abram then expresses his disappointment in not having any offspring, despite earlier promises, and God says, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them, so shall your offspring be” (Genesis 15:4). God also states that the land in which Abram dwells will become his. And Abram responds, “O Lord God, how shall I know that I am to possess it?” (Genesis 15:8). God directs Abram to bring specific animals with instructions to cut each in half, which will later be used in a ritual of covenant. The deep sleep and God’s promise immediately follows. This back and forth between Abram and God due to Abram’s insecurity and God’s repeated assurances is surprising. The vision during sleep is prophetic, containing ominous news of the exile of his offspring, along with a happy ever after promise.

Reflection: If God usually speaks to Abram in a wakeful state, why now a revelation while asleep? Does the nature of the revelation add or subtract from its significance? How might Abram have felt upon waking?
Jacob’s Transformative Dreams

Dreams transform Jacob. His life is punctuated by dreams as encounters with God. They are of such clarity that they do not require interpretation. These dreams serve to protect, prosper, and point. Jacob’s Divine encounter with an angel is so profound that it evokes a change in name and identity; an encounter that for some leading commentators is actually a dream. Jacob’s last “vision of the night” describes his future, including his death.

1. The Ladder to Heaven and a Promise of Protection

Jacob’s first encounter with God is explicitly in a dream. It occurs when Jacob is on the run from his brother, Esau, who has threatened to kill him. Jacob had deceived his blind father to wrest away his brother’s blessing. Now, the young man’s future is uncertain, including whether he will ever see his parents again. Alone and in the dark wild, Jacob places a stone under his head and he reclines. Asleep, he sees a ladder reaching to the sky with angels going up and coming down. He becomes aware that God is beside him and hears God make an enduring promise: “Remember, I am with you, and will protect you in all the places that you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you” (Genesis 28:15).

“Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Wow, the Lord is present in this place and I, I did not know it.’ Awestruck, he proclaims, ‘How amazing is this place! This is none other, than the house of God and this is the gateway to Heaven’” (28:16-17). Jacob vows: ‘If you God return me to this place whole, I will give ten percent of my accumulated assets as an offering” (28:20-22).

The vision offers hope and transcendence. The ladder is both grounded and uplifting. The angels that are first ascending signify the protection of accompanying angels. This dream is Jacob’s first encounter with God and prompts an exclamation of wonder. And yet, the vow of giving ten percent of his future assets is as much insurance as assurance. Jacob is apparently still uncertain whether God’s promise is real and unconditional. He is simultaneously elevated and earth-bound following this profound vision of the night.

2. God Provides Prosperity and a Path

With the birth of Joseph, Jacob tells Laban, his father-in-law boss, that the time has come to leave. Laban pleads with Jacob to stay, asking what it would take to keep him in his employ. As wages, Jacob asks for all future streaked, speckled and spotted sheep. Laban agrees. Jacob prospers and jealousy by Laban’s sons ensues. The text continues, “Then the Lord said to Jacob, ‘Return to the land of your ancestors where you were born and I will be with you” (Genesis 31:3). Jacob recounts to his wives, Rachel and Leah, a fuller description of his dream: “Once, at the mating time of the flocks, I had a dream in which I saw that the he-goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled, and spotted. And in the dream an angel of God said to me, ‘Jacob!’ and I responded, ‘Here I am.’ And the angel said, ‘Note well that all the he-goats that are mating with the flock are streaked, speckled, and spotted; for I have noted all that Laban has been doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now, arise and leave this land and return to your native land’” (Genesis 31:10-13). Jacob’s wives respond, “Now then, do just as God has told you” (Genesis 31:16).

Jacob’s dream offered both a path to prosperity and the timing to return home. The dream has a quality of clarity that convinces Rachel and Leah that Jacob is in communication with God and that it is time to move.

3. A Warning to Laban.

Laban is outraged. Jacob departed without saying goodbye. He pursues him for seven days. Ready to overtake him, a dream puts on the brakes: “But God appeared to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, ‘Beware of attempting anything with Jacob, good or bad’” (Genesis 31:24). The next morning Laban catches up to Jacob and confronts him over his abrupt departure and the theft of a household god. After a fruitless search, as Rachel has kept the idol well-hidden, Jacob and Laban gather stones and erect a pillar, share promises and food, and make an offering to God. They depart from each
other in peace.

Like Abimelech’s warning dream concerning Abraham, the message to Laban’s is quite clear. Laban heeds the message by never resorting to violence against Jacob and ultimately parting from him on good terms.

4. Wrestling with an Angel

As a result of this final enigmatic experience, Jacob will limp into the future as Israel. It begins with a frightened Jacob preparing to reunite with his brother, Esau, who had threatened him as an enemy. Jacob sends gifts ahead of much livestock; divides his family into two camps; and prays for safety; finally, retreating to the far side of the Yabbuk River. The Biblical account continues:

Jacob remained alone. An individual wrestled with him until just before dawn. When he saw that he could not defeat him, he wrenched Jacob’s hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.”

But he answered, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”

“What is your name?”

“Jacob.”

“Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human and have won.”

Jacob asked, “Pray tell me your name.”

He replied, “You must not ask my name!” And he took leave of him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, “I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip. (Genesis 32: 25-32).

The new name “Yisrael” conveys multiple meanings in Hebrew: the one who wrestles with God; straightforward with God; an officer of God. By contrast, the name Jacob in Hebrew meant heel or circuitous. For Jacob had held on to his twin brother’s heel at birth and had circumvented his father’s awareness in acquiring the birthright. Confronting his past on the eve of meeting his older brother, Jacob wrestles with an elusive figure, somehow both human and divine. Most of the classic commentators identify the opponent as Esau’s angry angel, while others as a positive angel who symbolizes Jacob’s engagement with the spiritual. Spanish-born, medieval commentators- Maimonides and Gersonides suggest that the incident occurred as a dream. Alone at night, Jacob wrestled with his conscience and self-identity. In that struggle, Jacob taps great inner strength and a newfound capacity to honestly confront his past and shoulder responsibility for the future. Imbedded in this new name is God’s name. And yet, Yisrael limps away.

As for the injury, Rabbi Isaac Abravanel (Spain-Turkey, 1437-1508), notes, “There are things which become so fixed in a person’s mind that they leave a physical effect.” Jacob’s transformation comes with a price, a dislocated hip. The name Jacob represents the engagement with life’s earthy, daily challenges and Yisrael the aspiration to serve God with directness and duty. The two identities will be used back and forth as the Biblical narrative continues, suggesting that this patriarch combines qualities of earthiness and soulful elevation.

Yisrael’s life unfolded as a journey of personal and spiritual growth, marked by transformative dreams. The dreams are revelatory offering protection and paths to personal elevation. For Jacob and those before him, dreams are a Divine communication marked by clarity. Henceforth in the Bible, dreams will need interpretation.

5. Jacob’s Vision of the Future

Jacob’s final encounter with God is called a “vision of the night:”

So Israel set off with all that was his and he came to Beer-sheba, where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. God called to Israel in a vision by night: “Jacob,
Jacob!"

He answered, “Here I am.”

And He said, “I am God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph’s hand shall close your eyes” (Genesis 46:1-4).

Reflection: Which of the four dreams most intrigues you? What is the lesson of that dream for you and how did it transform Jacob? What would you have asked Jacob about that dream? What would you ask God?
Joseph’s Dreams
Joseph in his youth is a dreamer. His visions foretell his own supremacy. He unabashedly tells those visions to his family, culminating in a violent reaction from his brothers: “When they saw him for a afar and, and before he reached them, they were plotting to kill him. ‘Here comes the dreamer!’ they said to one another....” (Genesis 37:18-19). The Bible offers a fuller context for the hatred and describes Joseph’s two dreams as follows:

“Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age and he had made him a coat of many colors. 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” (Genesis 37:3-4). Such is the painful start to the tales of Joseph, which will get more lines in the Torah than the accounts of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. And Joseph exacerbated the rift by tattling on his brothers and then recounting the following:

“Listen to the dream I had,” he said to them. “We were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright. Your sheaves gathered around, and bowed low to my sheaf.”

Do you want to be a King over us?” responded the brothers. “Do you intend to rule over us?” Because of his dreams and words, they hated him even more.

He had another dream and told it to his brothers. “Look, I just had another dream,” he said. “And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars were bowing down to me.”

When he told it to his father and brothers, his father scolded him and said, “What kind of dream did you have? Do you want me, your mother, and brothers to come and bow low to the ground to you?” His brothers became very jealous of him, but his father kept the account in mind (Genesis 37: 5-11).

Commentators are divided over what motivates this seventeen-year-old to share his dreams, despite the foreseeable upset:

- Naïveté: Hizkuni (Hezekiah ben Manoah, France mid-13th century) states that Joseph naively thought that his family would respect him more if they knew that God had willed his importance; Rabbi Obadiah Sforno (Italy, 1470-1550) concurs that Joseph’s behavior was a product of innocence; Samson Rafael Hirsch (Germany 1808-1888) explains that Joseph’s immaturity is due to growing up without a mother.

- Self-absorption: Avivah Zornberg (Scotland-Israel, contemporary) comments that Joseph is “behaving with the narcissism of youth, with a dangerous unawareness of the feelings of others.”

- Prophetic duty: Vilna Gaon (Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, Lithuania, 1720-1797) supports Joseph action for the dreamer is duty bound to share a message from God regardless of personal consequences.

The Zohar, the Jewish mystical commentary to the Torah, links the dream and its later fulfillment to Joseph’s abiding memory: “‘Joseph remembered the dreams’ [he had dreamt about them] (Genesis 42:9). He remembered them because there is no forgetfulness in the presence of the blessed Holy One. Joseph remembered his dream, so that it would be fulfilled, which he awaited constantly.4

Reflections: Which of these three explanations do you relate to the most? What guidance would you has given the adolescent Joseph? His dreams unfold as true. To what degree do dreams foretell the future? Have you had a dream anticipating the future? To what extent did that dream actually foretell your future? How much of that fulfillment was due to your abiding investment in your expectation of
fulfillment?
Joseph the Dream Interpreter: Empathic, Confident, and Humble

Joseph never speaks directly with God and yet, his dreams and the dreams shared by others with him will foretell the future. With Joseph, a new Biblical phase begins, a phase that will persist for the rabbis and for us. “Dreams,” the sages will say, “follow the mouth.” Dreams will need interpretation. This entry is about the character traits needed to uncover the meaning of dreams.

Joseph as a young man tattles on his brothers and recounts two dreams in which they bow down to him. These dreams prompted their hatred. In time, they would also prove true. Joseph will endure much suffering, including his brothers selling him into slavery and his master’s wife accusing him of attempted rape. Languishing in jail, Joseph will reveal a distinctive talent in responding to the dreams of the royal baker and wine steward. The Torah text recounts:

When Joseph came to them [the baker and wine steward] in the morning, he looked at them and beheld they were upset. He asked these royal staff members who were imprisoned with him in his master’s house, “Why are your faces so awful today?” And they replied to him, “We had dreams and there is no one to interpret it.” So Joseph said to them, “Surely it is for God to interpret! Please tell me [your dreams]” (Genesis 40:6-8)

Joseph’s conduct exemplifies empathy, confidence and humility, the ingredients that enable dream interpretation and more broadly, how to sensitively meet the needs of others:

- **Empathy**: Joseph pays attention to the faces of the two men, noticing that they are distraught. He acknowledges his observation and asks what is bothering them?

- **Confidence**: Despite his youth and status as a foreign servant, and the daunting task of understanding dreams, Joseph says, “Please tell me your dreams.” Confidence, psychiatrist Abraham Twerski teaches, is the honest self-assessment of abilities that can help others. Grandiosity is acting with inflated self-importance, often rooted in feelings of inferiority. In order for a person to fully actualize responsibility, Twerski emphasizes, a person must act from an awareness of genuine worth.

- **Humility**: Before Joseph offers to interpret the dreams he acknowledges his limitation. For the ultimate meaning of the dreams comes from a far greater source of power: “Do not interpretations belong to God?” (Genesis 40:8). As the 15th century, Italian commentator Sforno emphasizes that God enables reason and intuition, “A human can interpret a dream only because he is formed in God’s image. Consequently, even a despised slave in prison may be God’s agent to interpret it.”

**Reflections**: As applied to a surgeon what is the role of empathy, confidence, and humility? In your own life, how do these three ingredients factor in when providing care? Which of the three is your greatest challenge? How could you strengthen this quality?
Daniel as Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream Interpreter

Besides Joseph, the prophet Daniel is the premier dream interpreter of Hebrew Scripture. Like Joseph, Daniel praises God as the source of his wisdom (Daniel 2:19-21) and others say of him “he has the spirit in him of the living God” (5:11). Like his predecessor, Daniel interprets for no less than the ruler of his day, Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, and later for his son, King Belshazzar. And like Pharaoh, the Babylonian monarch had first summoned the kingdoms “magicians, exorcists, and sorcerers” who had failed. Actually, Daniel and the local dream interpreters had even a greater challenge.

The King not only wanted an interpretation, he demanded that the interpreter first describe what occurred in the dream. Daniel began by giving God credit for all that he knew, explained that the dream foretold the end of days, and recounted the dream in vivid detail. He then interpreted the symbols of the dream as a description of the three kingdoms that would follow the King’s reign, with the final one enduring eternally by the will of God (2:29-45). And like in the Joseph account, the King is so taken by the wisdom that he acknowledges God as the ultimate solver of mystery and elevates Daniel as governor of the whole province of Babylon.

Daniel’s subsequent interpretation is remarkably frightening. King Nebuchadnezzar recounts his own dream this second time:

4:7 In the visions of my mind in bed
I saw a tree of great height in the midst of the earth;

4:8 The tree grew and became mighty;
Its top reached heaven,
And it was visible to the ends of the earth.

4:9 Its foliage was beautiful
And its fruit abundant;
There was food for all in it.
Beneath it the beasts of the field found shade,
And the birds of the sky dwelt on its branches;
All creatures fed on it.

4:10 In the vision of my mind in bed, I looked and saw a holy Watcher
coming down from heaven.

4:11 He called loudly and said:
‘Hew down the tree, lop off its branches,
Strip off its foliage, scatter its fruit.
Let the beasts of the field flee from beneath it
And the birds from its branches,

4:12 But leave the stump with its roots in the ground.
In fetters of iron and bronze
In the grass of the field,
Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven,
And share earth’s verdure with the beasts.

4:13 Let his mind be altered from that of a man,
And let him be given the mind of a beast,
And let seven seasons pass over him.

4:14 This sentence is decreed by the Watchers;
This verdict is commanded by the Holy Ones
So that all creatures may know
That the Most High is sovereign over the realm of man,
And He gives it to whom He wishes
And He may set over it even the lowest of men.’
Daniel listens and is perplexed and troubled, so much so that the King says, “Let the dream and its interpretation not alarm you.” Daniel replies, “My lord, would that dream were for your enemy and its meaning for your foe! (4:16). Daniel then explains that mighty tree, so strong, tall, and abundant in foliage is you, the King. The “holy Watcher” is an agent of God who will cut you down unless and until you acknowledge God’s supremacy. Until then you will be driven away and wander for seven seasons. Not unlike Joseph, Daniel offers a way to avoid that awful outcome, “Therefore, O king, may me advice be acceptable to you: Redeem your sins by beneficence and your iniquities by generosity to the poor; then your serenity may be extended” (4:24).

The King did not heed the guidance and the prophecy unfolded as described: The king was banished, he ate grass like cattle, and his hair and nails grew wild. “When the time had passed, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason was restored to me. I blessed the Most High, and praised and glorified the Ever-Living-One” (4:31) and soon after, his companions and the nobles sought him out and he reestablished his kingdom with even added greatness (4:33). The king learned a lesson in humility the hard way. Daniel had offered him a path to avoid that suffering. The role of a true interpreter is to interpret honestly and to guide so as to change the predicted negative outcome. Solomon Almoli, the author of a guide for professional dream interpreters, cites Daniel’s conduct as exemplary:

I propose that when a person comes seeking an interpretation of a dream, it is proper to tell him or her the truth, however it may appear to the interpreter. If it is a portent of foreboding, he should tell the dreamer to strive to alter this dire progression of events and to seek mercy; if it is good news, he should urge him to strive to attain its fulfillment.  

The Daniel story is a hopeful description of the nature of a dream: a Divine message intended to correct an error, a correction if heeded that can avoid the foretold harsh outcome. Later in the Book of Daniel, Daniel himself will have elaborate, riveting dreams. Angels will help him decipher the message; another reminder of need of a guide to help us uncover the true meaning of our dreams.

Reflection: Nebuchadnezzar was so powerful and manifested such enormous harshness that before Daniel’s success in interpreting the first dream, he had ordered the death of all the unsuccessful dream interpreters. Afterwards, he set up a huge statue and ordered that everyone in his kingdom bow down to it. The second dream displayed his extreme egotism and the verdict that he needed to be cut down to size. Do you know any extreme narcissists? What are the qualities that so warrant that label? What if any advice or life experience might change him or her?
Visions of God by Isaiah and Ezekiel

When the prophets spoke on behalf of God they were often met with resistance and sometimes violence. Depending on the situation, the prophet chastised or comforted, but the kernel was consistent: a covenantal people needed to act fairly and compassionately. This Divine-mandated speech was a compulsion, rather than a choice. Abraham Joshua Heschel showed in his book *The Prophets* (1962) that each prophet spoke with a distinctive voice and emphasis. God’s message was filtered through the personality and life experiences of the messenger. At the same time, the Torah cautioned against self-serving, charismatic, false prophets: “When a prophet or a person who has visions in a dream arises among you, he may present you with a sign or a miracle, saying ‘Let us try out a different god’...do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer....” (Deuteronomy 13:2-3).

The Biblical prophets conveyed “the word” that they had received, which endure as challenging and comforting across the generations. Isaiah and Ezekiel described visual epiphanies of the Divine that endure in Jewish collective memory. The rabbis would insert Isaiah’s description into the daily prayers as the *kedushah*, a “sanctification” of God by echoing the words of the Heavenly choir. And Ezekiel’s images would become the focus of ongoing mystical speculation. Those descriptions read in part as follows:

**Isaiah:**

In the year that King Uzziah died, I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple. Seraphs stood in attendance on Him. Each of them had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his legs, and with two he would fly. And one called to the other, “Holy, holy holy! The Lord of Hosts! His presence fills all the earth!” (Isaiah 6:1-3)

**Ezekiel:**

In the thirteenth year on the fifth day of the month when I was in the community of exiles by the Chebar Canal, the heavens opened and I saw visions of God...I looked, and behold, a stormy wind came sweeping out of the north—a huge cloud and flashing fire, surrounded by a radiance; in the center of it, in the center of the fire, a gleam as of amber. In center of it were also the figures of four creatures and this was their appearance: They had figures of human beings, but each of them had four faces and each of them had four wings...each of them had a human face [at the front]; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right...an ox on the left...an eagle [at the back].... As I gazed on the creatures, I saw one wheel on the ground next to each of the four-faced creatures....Wherever the spirit impelled them to go, they went...for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels. When they moved, I could hear the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters...Above the expanse over their heads was the appearance of a sapphire-like throne, and on top, upon this semblance of throne, there was the semblance of a human form...Like the appearance of the bow which shines in the clouds on day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the Lord. When I beheld it, I flung myself down on my face. And I heard the voice of someone speaking. (Ezekiel 1:1;4-6;10;15,20,24,28; also see Ezekiel 10:1-22)

These dream-like images allude to elusive, lofty Divine attributes. Most of us hold a variety of images of God that emerge from a favorite Biblical tale or an aspect of relationship with the Divine. I once explored such images in an exercise with Peter Pitzele, the American founder of Biblio-drama. In a workshop with my congregants, we focused on mask making. To convey their image of God, Peter asked participants to spontaneously tear construction paper and glue the pieces on to a whole sheet. A table was filled with diverse looking masks. Peter asked the makers to describe their work, which usually revealed a specific moment in the Bible as a prompt. He then began to sequentially survey those key moments “as if” God by picking up one mask and
describing what he felt. He then picked up a second mask that he used as the representation of God’s unspoken thoughts in the same moment, which he then succinctly articulated. The exercise was a powerful reminder that there are multifaceted images of God that we conjure when reading the Bible or in prayer.

The prophet Joel described an upcoming time of collective closeness to God with the Divine promise, “After that, I will pour out My spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy; your elderly shall dream dreams and your youth shall see visions” (3:1). Yet, for the rabbis who lived in the early centuries of the Common Era, prophecy had ceased hundreds of years before with the destruction of the First Temple. Joel’s words, they taught, would only find fulfillment in a future messianic era. Until then, we are bidden to discern the will of God from study, life-experience, reflection, and tapping the intuition of our deepest selves. The images of Isaiah and Ezekiel and the words of the Biblical prophets prompt reflection on our own images of God as descriptions of our own relationships with God. The other worldly images of Isaiah and Ezekiel underscore that God is most profoundly Other.

Reflection: Is there a prophetic passage that stirs you? In the images of Isaiah and Ezekiel, what stirs or surprises you? What endures for you in having such an image? Consider making a mask of God as described above. If you do, when you are done reflect on the moment and emotions that you chose and consider why and how that image can be a source of comfort and guidance to you.
Biblical Verses as Dream Image Sweeteners

Latching on to a key image in a dream and reciting a related Biblical verse helps assure a dream for good, so the Talmud teaches (Berakhot 56b). There are many examples of the need to act quickly in choosing an appropriate verse to recite upon awaking, whether by reciting out loud or even in one’s mind. The following are some examples from many offered in Talmud verses, some positive and others negative, that are tied to a symbol:

- **River**: “One who sees a river in a dream should arise and recite: ‘Behold, I will extend to her [Jerusalem], prosperity like a river’ (Isaiah 66:12); rather than, ‘for [God] shall come like a hemmed-in river’ (Isaiah 59:19).
- **Bird**: “Like flying birds, so will [God] protect [Jerusalem]” (Isaiah 31:5), rather than, ‘Like a bird that wanders from its nest [so is a person who wanders from his home].” (Proverbs 27:8).
- **Grapes**: “I found Israel [pleasing] like grapes in the desert” (Hosea 9:10), rather than, ‘their grapes for them are poison’” (Deuteronomy 32:32).
- **Shofar**: “It shall be on that day that a great shofar will be blown” (Isaiah 27:13), rather than “Sound a shofar in Givah” [identified with marauding troops] (Hosea 5:8).
- **Well**: “A well of living water” (Genesis 26:19), rather than “As a well flows with water, so she flows with evil” (Jeremiah 6:7).

The premise of choosing a well-suited Scriptural verse is that the impact of a dream follows its interpretation. Also, implicit is that we may prepare how to respond to a potentially negative prompt. This is indeed the foundation of cognitive behavioral therapy: the approach to reducing anxiety by preparing us to challenge the negative, berating thoughts that arise in the mind with a rational, balanced response.

**Reflection:**

*What is the power of interpretation in shaping how you see wakeful events and the likelihood of similar events occurring?*

*In interpreting dreams, what is the impact of how you first interpret the dream’s key symbol?*

*What is your favorite Biblical verse and how might that serve as a lens for interpreting dreams and events in your life?*
Dream Symbols

Giving meaning to symbols is an important aspect of dream interpretation. What a symbol means may vary from person to person and culture to culture and yet, there are commonalities across cultures, archetypes, that are worth considering. The Talmud usually describes dream symbols as foretelling the future, often relying on a related Biblical verse (Berakhot 55a-57a). For instance, a river, a bird, or a kettle predicts peace. And yet, a symbol may prove either positive or negative depending on context, such as the activity of the animal. Below in italics are examples of Talmudic interpretations and several varying cultural takes on the same symbol.

Animals:

Elephant: if saddled- wonders will be performed for you; if unsaddled, an ominous sign. In the Hindu tradition, the elephant is identified with Lord Ganesha who represents success and wisdom, as a result of moving formidable obstacles out of the way and having a good memory. In Buddhism, the white elephant is identified with the incarnation of the Buddha as Buddha’s mother dreamt that a white elephant had entered her womb. Aristotle wrote that elephants symbolize chastity for the male elephant remains faithful for the two years that his mate is pregnant.

Cat: depends on the local name for “cat”- either a beautiful song is being composed for you or a change for the worse is coming. In contemporary dictionaries of dream symbols a cat’s significance likewise ranges from the positive (an independent spirit, female sexuality, power, and creativity) to the negative (bad luck, untrustworthy, and misfortune). The nature of the symbol depends on the dreamer’s feelings toward cats in a wakeful state and the specific activity of the cat during the dream.

Snake: you will make a good living; if the snake bit him, then his livelihood will be doubled; if he killed the snake, his livelihood will be ruined and another sage disagrees saying that here too your livelihood will be doubled (others challenge the last interpretation as self-interest as the rabbi so claiming had seen such an image in his own dream). The snake is almost uniformly seen negatively in classic mythology, such as the seductive, trouble-making snake in the Garden of Eden. In colloquial English, the expression “a snake in the grass” describes an untrustworthy person. By contrast, Sigmund Freud saw the snake as a symbol of repressed sexual desire and Carl Jung, focusing on the snake’s nimble and agile movement, saw the snake as offering a direct path to intuitive wisdom.

Horse: if a white horse trotting or galloping, then something good will happen; if a red horse gently trotting, favorable, but if galloping, a harsh sign.

Camel: death decree from Heaven was suspended.

Goose: you will attain wisdom.

Hen: you will have a beautiful garden and reason to rejoice.

Ox: portends salvation; if you are eating ox meat-you will become wealthy; if gores you- your sons will engage in vigorous scholarly debates; if kicks you- a long journey awaits you; if rides on you- you shall die.

Male chicken: you will have a son.

Goat: if only one- many blessings for you during the coming year; multiple goats-many years of blessings.

Young donkey standing near your head and braying: you will become a king of the head or the head of a school.

Situations:

Praying in a dream: a good omen, but only if you do not complete the prayer before awaking.

Reciting the Shema: fit to have the Divine Presence rest upon you

Standing naked: If in Babylonia, then you stand without sin; but if in the Land of Israel, you stand lacking the merit of mitzvot (righteous deeds).

Wrapped in chains: you will be protected, but only if actual chain; it does not apply for ordinary rope.
Cohabiting: with his mother, sister, betrothed: will attain Torah wisdom; with a married woman
The walls of your house collapses: you will acquire boundless property. If everyone comes to take away bricks from your fallen house: your teaching will spread widely.
Riding on a boat: If small- you will achieve a good name; if large- your entire family will gain respect, but this applies only if the boat is lifted up high on the wave.
Going up on a roof: you will rise to prominence; descending from the roof conveys that you will descend in prominence.

**People**
Yishmael- your prayer has been heard by God
Pinchas- a wonder will be performed for your benefit
King David: you will become pious
King Solomon: you will become wise

**Objects**
A reed: you will become wise
Symbols of Sukkot (lulav-the palm frond or the etrog, citron): you are especially beloved by God
The Book of Esther: a miracle will be performed for you
Wheat: you have beheld peace
Gourds: only shown to those who fear God
Barley: your sins are forgiven
Eggs: the fulfillment of your wish is uncertain, but if the eggs are broken your wish will be fulfilled.
Olives: your business shall endure successfully, others say it signifies a good name; olive tree- you will have many children; olive oil- you will bask in the light of Torah.
Pomegranates: if small- your business will prosper; if split, your knowledge of Torah shall increase.
Vine laden with grapes: your wife will have healthy children.
Branch of a vine: may expect the coming of the Messiah.

**Reflection:** In looking at the Talmudic interpretations, which one draws your imagination? What symbols have you seen in a recent dream? What does it mean to you?
Spotlight on REM

During the dream phase of sleep the brain is quite active, overall more than when awake. During sleep some parts of the brain are turned off and others are cranked up. A chemical cocktail is produced that promotes image making. The following are elements of the physiological changes during dream sleep:

- **Deactivation:** The part of the brain that makes conscious decisions and asks “Where am I and what am I doing?” (the dorsal-lateral prefrontal cortex) is disconnected. Internally generated stimuli are treated as if originating from an external source adding immediacy and realness to dreams. Moment-to-moment recall and spatial orientation are all but eliminated due to turning off another part of the brain (the precuneus, located to the rear of the space between the two cerebral hemispheres). In sum, ego and identity plus space and time are suspended during dreaming, thereby amplifying the emotional power of dream’s imagery.

- **Hyper-engagement:** Those parts of the brain that govern emotions and memory (the limbic system, which includes the amygdala and hypothalamus) are greatly stimulated. During dream sleep, auditory and visual stimulation increase. Conscious control goes down; feelings and sensation go up. Changes occur in neurotransmitters that in a wakeful state are responsible for hallucinations. When we sleep it is as if we digested magic mushrooms.

- **Immobility:** Our diaphragm continues to move enabling breath, our eyes can move, and there is an occasional twitch. Otherwise, our main muscle groups are disconnected. Linking our body and brain, we may experience paralysis when an attacker comes after us or we are unable to scream. Our attention is on the screen of image making. In this dream state, our minds are freed from the constraints of morality, time-space, and self-interest.

When evolutionary biologists ask how these adaptations helped survival, the answers are incomplete. Current research does show that during dream states we may consolidate memory and clean out some of the stored anxiety and accumulated chemicals. Science continues to examine the brain for the physiological impact of sleep and dreaming.

A poet, psychologist, or religious personality looks at dreams as a window into the inner life. Even more remarkable than our ability to see the world around us is our capacity to look inwardly. Dreams can have an important role to play in our lives. Their images are complex, emotionally charged, and often nonverbal. More than information, dream material may enable a transformative change from the inside out.

And yet, REM sleep does not necessarily mean dreaming. Dr. William Domhoff of UC Santa Cruz, a major investigator of dreams, states that “awakenings of children under age 5 in the sleep laboratory reveal that they only report dreams from REM sleep awakenings 20-25% of the time, so REM sleep does not automatically equate to dreaming. In addition, REM sleep can be found in all mammals, and it is unlikely that they are imagining a world or story in which they are taking part and interacting with others. Dreams, as the pre-eminent American psychologist on dreams, David Foulkes, likes to say, are a ‘cognitive achievement.’ We only gradually develop the ability to dream.” And yet, Domhoff emphasizes that dreams have meaning: “We have shown that 75 to 100 dreams from a person give us a very good psychological portrait of that individual. Give us 1000 dreams over a couple of decades and we can give you a profile of the person’s mind that is almost as individualized and accurate as her or his fingerprints.”

Whether in looking at traditional Jewish approaches or modern psychology, how to interpret dream symbols differs. We are also left to ponder if dreams are so important why do we tend to forget them. In what sense are dreams more or less real than wakeful experiences? Zhuang Zhou, a Chinese philosopher of 2400 years ago, dreamed that he was a butterfly happily floating in the air. When he awoke he wondered, “Do I dream of a butterfly or does the butterfly dream me?”

**Reflection:** Have you noticed that when you awake in the morning, you are completing a dream? Have you recorded dreams in the past? Have you found a pattern?
The Power of Interpretation: “All Dreams Follow the Mouth”

What is the Biblical evidence of the efficacy of dream interpretation? R. Elazar asks and then answers his question with the verse, ‘And it was, just as he interpreted it for us, so did it happen’” (Genesis 41:13). The wine steward spoke those words when recounting to Pharaoh the talent of the young Hebrew, Joseph, whom he had met in prison. The Talmudic text immediately sets a limitation by 3rd century, Babylonian sage, Rava who emphasized that the interpretation must fit the dream, citing the Biblical verse before the steward spoke, “each in accordance with his dream he did interpret.”

And yet, the Talmud soon launches a lengthy portrayal of a professional dream interpreter Bar Hedya, a non-Jewish Chaldean, who displayed great power and apparently great freedom in how he interpreted. A dozen stories are told of Abaye and the earlier cited Rava bringing identical dreams to Bar Hedya. In each case, Abaye paid the professional and Rava did not. Abaye consistently received positive interpretations and Rava decidedly negative. The following is the first example: “In our dream [we heard the following verse]: ‘Your ox will be slaughtered before your eyes [but you will not eat from it]’ (Deuteronomy 28:31). To Rava, [Bar Hedya] said, “Your business will fail and due to your heart’s sadness, you will have no desire to eat.” To Abaye, he said, “Your business will profit and due to your heart’s joy, you will have no desire to eat.” The interpretations proved accurate for the series of dreams, which included the prediction of the death of Rava’s wife.

Eventually, Rava paid Bar Hedva handsomely and the interpretations became positive. When Rava described a dream in which the wall of his house was collapsing, Bar Hedva foretold, “You will acquire boundless property.” When Rava added, “I saw that the mansion of Abaye had collapsed and I was covered in its dust,” Bar Hedya interpreted, “Abaye will die and his Academy will come to you.” And so it transpired.

As the story unfolds, the Talmud will also emphasize the power of a sage’s words to curse. Later Rava and Bar Hedya were traveling on a boat when Bar Hedya decided to disembark short of their destination. As Bar Hedya was scrambling off, one of his books fell. Rava picked it up and then saw the statement, “All dreams follow the mouth.” Rava erupted, “Wicked person! Those dream interpretations caused me so much pain. I forgive you for all except your interpretation of the death of my wife. May it be the will of God that this man be handed over to a regime that will have no pity upon him.”

Bar Hedya was frightened. He understood that the spoken curse of a sage would gain fulfillment. The only solution he could foresee was exile, because the sages had taught that exile atones for sin. He went to Rome, where he sought business as a dream interpreter by standing around the offices of the Master of the Treasury. This important government official recounted to Bar Hedya a couple of disturbing dreams. The professional interpreter said, “Pay me and I will interpret.” But, no payment was forthcoming and Bar Hedya remained silent. After the Master of the Treasury recounted a third dream, “I saw that a worm had fallen upon my whole hand,” Bar Hedya spoke: “Worms have fallen upon all the silk garb” [that is under your control.] Soon after, the Master of the Treasury was sentenced to death for his failure to protect the valuable silk. Just before execution, he protested, “Why me? Bring [that dream interpreter] who knew and failed to warn me earlier.” After investigating, the authorities concluded that for the lack of a coin “the silk of the Ruler has been destroyed!” As punishment they tied each of Bar Hedya’s thighs to a cedar tree, pulled the trees apart and when the attached ropes were unleased, the trees whipped back into place, tearing Bar Hedya’s body into two.

The dangers of a selfish dream interpreter offer a colorful testament to the Rabbis’ belief in the power of words. Rabbi Bana’ah had recounted, “There were twenty-four interpreters of dreams in Jerusalem. Once I dreamt a dream and went to each of them and each provided a different interpretation. Yet, all of the interpretations materialized for me, fulfilling the statement, ‘all dreams follow the mouth’ [Berakhot 55b]. Likewise, when the Talmud had stated that “a dream without an interpretation is like a letter unread”, Rashi, the influential 11th century, French commentator, explained that a dream by itself lacks power for good or evil until it is interpreted [Berakhot 55a].
Solomon Almoli in the 16th century wrote his influential book on dream interpretation, *Pitron Halomot*, in which he would comment: “all dreams follow the mouth was not intended to convey the idea that a dream interpreter can randomly alter the meaning of a dream. Rabbah writing in the Talmud, as to this statement the following: “This is true only in the interpretation corresponds to the content of the dream” (*Berakhot* 55b). In other words, the interpretation must fit the dream, point at what the Master of Dreams intended. But if the interpreter reads what is brought to him in an untruthful manner, there is no question but that the dream will still be fulfilled [as originally intended]. Therefore, the interpretations that Pharaoh’s advisors derived from his dream were not fulfilled.”

**Reflection:**

*In what ways does a dream interpretation determine outcome?*

*If yes, there are at least two distinct possibilities:*

- **“Self-fulfilling prophecy:”** The psychological concept that what we anticipate we notice and reinforce, which predispose us toward certain actions that determine the expected outcome.
- **Words actually have energetic power and the curse or blessing of certain charismatic people produce results.**

*What is your experience with these two possibilities?*
Zohar on Prophecy and Dreams
The Zohar interprets the Torah allegorically to reveal the nature of God and the supernatural human connection to the Divine. This mystical work presents the author as the second century, Israel sage, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. Modern scholars have convincingly shown that the book emerged in 13th century Spain by the hand of Moshe de Leon. Much of the material probably existed as part of an oral mystical tradition, enabling the books widespread acceptance by both the elite and the folk as a sacred text. The Zohar is composed in Aramaic, like the Talmud, and creatively weaves and expands statements of the tradition. This is certainly true for the descriptions of the soul’s journeys during sleep, including encounters with angels and demons, and the nature of dreams and prophecy. Below are three salient excerpts taken from Daniel Matt’s translation and commentary.

The goal in sharing these excerpts of Zohar with you is to give you a feel for the images of the Zohar and how the foundation for the Zohar’s imaginings are not of whole cloth, but are a weave of previous Biblical and Rabbinic statement. As for prophecy, the mystical orientation saw revelation as ongoing. In the middle of the night, the righteous could access the Divine, although with less clarity than for the earlier prophets, especially Moses. And yet, arising at midnight to pray was the opportunity to both commune with God and to even effect God’s inner life. What follows is such a mystical taste.

The Soul Soars during Sleep:

[Rabbi Yose said] “Come and see: Even in this world, as has been explained, when a person sleeps in his bed and souls have to wander the world- leaving the body- not every single soul ascends, soaring to gaze upon the splendor of the Countenance of Days [the face of God]. Rather as one is habitually drawn, according to his deeds, so his soul ascends.

“If he is defiled, he sleeps, his soul departs, and all those impure spirits seize her. She cling to those lower rungs roaming the world, who divulge to her imminent events, sometimes conveying deceptions, toying with her, as has been established.

“If one is worthy, when he sleeps and his soul departs, she soars- penetrating these impure spirits, who all proclaim: ‘Make way, make way! This is not one of ours!’ Then she ascends among those holy ones [angels], who divulge to her a word of truth. As she descends, all those ravaging bands of truculent stingers seek to grasp the word- divulging other words- and that word she absorbed amid those holy ones lies among the others like grain mingled with straw. What can attain more while existing in this world?” (Zohar 1:130 a,b)

Foundational sources:

- “It was said in the name of Rabbi Me’ir: ‘This soul fills the body, and when a person sleeps she ascends, drawing down life from above’” (Bereshit Rabbah 14:9)
- “Countenance of Days” - a title for God found in Daniel (7:9)
- Angels convey prophetic dreams, while demons convey misleading material (Berakhot 55b)
- “Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shim’on son of Yohai, ‘Just as there cannot be wheat without straw, so there cannot be a dream without nonsense” (Berakhot 55a).

Prophecy and Dreams:

“In ancient times prophecy rested upon humans, so they knew and contemplated supernal glory. When prophecy ceased, they consulted an echo of the voice. Now prophecy has ceased and the echo has ceased, and human beings consult only a dream. Well, a dream is a lower rung outside, for we have learned: ‘A dream is one-sixtieth of prophecy.’ Why so? Because it comes from the sixth rung below.

“Come and see: A dream is visible to all, since it comes from the left side, descending various rungs, becoming visible even to the wicked, even to nations of the world. For
sometimes those evil species snatch a dream and hear it and inform human beings—some of them toy with humans, conveying false information, and sometimes true information that they have heard. Sometimes they are sent to the wicked, telling them lofty matters.” (1:238a).

Foundational sources:

- Prophetic inspiration ceased, according to the Talmud, after the final biblical prophets (Bava Batra 12a).
- A *bat kol*, an echo of a heavenly voice, endures as a form of Divine communication for the rabbis of the Talmud.
- Gabriel is identified as an interpreter of dreams in the Book of Daniel (8:16; 9:22). In the Zohar the angel Gabriel will be called the prince of dreams, but because he stands outside of the purely divine realm demonic forces in the vicinity can smuggle false images into the dream material. Prophecy, for the Zohar, is higher up the chain of Divine emanation than dreams.
- “1/60th of dream is prophecy” (Berachot 57b), related to the image of the sixth rung below.

Zohar’s Night: Demons and midnight study reprieve

“Come and see: When night arouses, openings close; dogs and donkeys [demonic forces] prevail, roaming through the world, and permission is granted to destroy. All inhabitants of the world sleep in their beds, and souls of the righteous ascend to delight above.

“When the north wind arouses and night is split, holy arousal rouses in the world. Happy is the share of that human being who rises at that moment and engages in Torah! For as soon as he opens with Torah, he casts all those evil species into the hollows of the great abyss and binds the donkey among subterranean marshals in a filthy cage” (1:242b).

Foundational sources:

- “Rabbi Shim’on the Hasid said, ‘There was a harp suspended above [King] David’s bed. As soon as midnight arrived, a north wind came and blew upon it, and it played by itself. He immediately arose and engaged in Torah until the bread of dawn” (Berakhot 3b).

Reflections: Which of these three sources most resonates with you? In what ways has the Zohar expanded on the earlier traditional statements? Do you relate to these mystical descriptions as tall-tale or as a window into the mystery that is part of life?

Solomon Almoli’s Classic Dream Guide, *Pitron Halomot*

Solomon Almoli wrote the most-widely studied, Jewish book on dreams: *Pitron Halomot*, “Solution of Dreams.” Written over 500 years ago in Constantinople, it explains the need for professional dream interpreters and offers the meaning of an extensive list of symbols, grouped by topics. At the time that Almoli lived, such dream books were popular among Moslems and Christians. Almoli gathered all the older Jewish material and also cited non-Jewish sources, including Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle and the Moslem Avicenna. The combination of Yiddish translation in 1694 and the rise of the populist Hasidic movement that believed that dreams were Divine revelations turned a somewhat scholarly book into a popular classic beginning in the 19th century. Joel Covitz, a Jungian analyst translated *Pitron Halomot* into English, *Visions of the Night: A Study of Jewish Dream Interpretation,* and considered how Almoli’s
approach was relevant for modern psychology. The following describes the approach of Almoli’s Pitron Halomot.

Dreams are messengers from God seeking to help individuals navigate their way through the complexities of their personal destiny. A dreamer is unable to interpret his or her own dream, because of the need for objectivity. For as stated in the Talmud, “It is difficult to simultaneously be on the ground and on the roof” (Yoma 28b). The Jewish dream interpreter was a sacred technician, who like Joseph derived both meaning from the dream and a plan of action. Only the prophets received a direct, clear message from God in a dream, but even normal dreams had an element of revelation. People control their fate by heeding a warning and thereby avoiding a negative outcome.

Almoli cites the 14th century, Spanish Rabbi Hasdai Crescas that the difference between ordinary and prophetic dreams is the strength of the images. With a prophetic dream, those images have the force of waking reality and are so intense that they cannot be forgotten. In contrast, the images of ordinary dreams are weak, and often forgotten. Images arise for ordinary dreamers in an altered state, which Almoli explains: “So dreams do not come during the waking state, when the body’s power is overwhelmingly oppressive of the soul. Dreams occur during sleep, at a time when the sensations and the body power is null.”

Dreams are usually recrafted in their telling. Almoli cites as an example the change from the narrator’s account of Pharaoh’s dream, which he reads hyperliterally as “he was standing on the river” (Genesis 41:1) to how Pharaoh retold the dream to Joseph. Almoli comments, “this image [of the river] was not essential to the dream, but referred to his thoughts during the prior day, in that he considered himself to be a god, who therefore could walk on the river. Pharaoh probably said to himself that it was his river and that he had created it, thinking of himself as a great fish in his own river. But when he related this dream to Joseph, he revised this part, saying instead that he was standing “upon the brink of the river” (Genesis 41:17), presumably being too embarrassed to reveal his megalomania to Joseph.”

Some of Almoli’s advice to a professional dream interpreter follows:

- There is a need to distinguish the essential from the inconsequential, sorting out the straw from the chaff. Inconsequential material is derived from thoughts during the day and all dreams contain some such mundane material.
- Dreams that repeat, such as in the stories of Joseph and Pharaoh, are dreams of added significance.
- The significance of a dream correlates with the intensity of the emotion experienced by the dreamer.
- The dream interpreter is obligated to tell the truth, revealing a bad forecast to enable a behavioral change to avoid the negative outcome and to relate a good forecast in order to motivate proper behavior for its fulfillment.
- The same dream image can have different meanings depending on the nature of the dreamer: a powerful horse may indicate bodily strength for a physical worker and wisdom for a scholar.

Almoli described dream interpretation as combining careful listening, an understanding of the life of the dreamer, common sense, and intuition. Joseph gives credit to God for a wisdom that emerges from naturally developed skills. He identifies this methodology in Joseph’s interpretation of the dreams in jail:

The process of divining the future of the dreamer thus involves not only the interpreter’s skill but also his special knowledge of the dreamer’s life, with all its implications. Joseph likewise accurately read the dreams of Pharaoh’s servants, which could quite plausibly have been interpreted as having the same reading, for the Scripture says, “And they dreamed a dream of both of them.” (Gen. 40:5) Joseph nonetheless gave each his separate interpretation based upon what he knew of them previously from
spending time in their company, as well as what he knew of the differences in their professions and the relative closeness to the king. Joseph knew that the butler was closer to the king than the baker, since the butler was always in the presence of the Pharaoh when the latter was drinking, while the baker never entered there. Joseph also knew the difference between the offenses for which they had been arrested.

Therefore Joseph intuited the punishment that the servants’ offenses would incur. In the case of the butler, where a fly was discovered in Pharaoh’s goblet, he should have been forgiven, as it could not have been in his power to prevent such a mishap. What could he have done? The fly fell into the goblet all on its own!” Joseph therefore pronounced that the butler should be restored to his former position. But in the case of the baker, where a pebble was discovered in Pharaoh’s cake, this was clearly due to the negligence of the baker... The “three days” within which Joseph predicted the dreams would be fulfilled was plausible, in that he knew that three days remained until Pharaoh’s birthday, at which time it was customary to call forth all the worker and give them presents and money, as well as to bring up all the prisoners from the dungeon and decree who was to live and who was to die. So Joseph, with his knowledge of these pertinent factors, was capable of recognizing the difference between the two dreams, although they seemed to refer to quite similar circumstance. This it is with all genuine and wise interpreters.” [45-46]

The Talmud tells a tale of a man who received multiple interpretations of his dream and all came true. Almoli rejected this claim, which would undermine the abiding need for dream interpretation, as a person would either only seek positive interpretations or none at all.4 Mahzor Vitry, the influential prayerbook composed by the students of the 11th-century-sage Rashi, specified that only the first interpretation is binding. Almoli’s emphasized this first interpretation rule.4 Dream interpretation for Almoli was essential to direct a person’s fate and relied on developed talents that were ultimately a gift from God.

Reflection: To what degree is objectivity essential in dream interpretation? Are you surprised that the classic, Jewish guide to dream interpretation is so naturalistic in its orientation? What dream have you had that you would want Almoli to help you interpret?
How Freud and Jung Differ

Both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, pioneers of dream interpretation would have endorsed the Talmudic statement of Rav Hisda, “A dream uninterpreted is a letter unread” (Berakhot 55b). And yet, each differed in how to read a dream.

For Freud dreams offered the unconscious processing of repressed material. The manifest dream disguised underlying wishes. Dream interpretation needed to pierce the surface story to disclose the real issues of the latent dream. Freud taught that “a dream begins with the event of the previous day that set it in motion....This view is confirmed by every dream I look into whether my own or anyone else’s.” His approach to dream analysis was similar to rabbinic midrash, freely taking a detail out of context, whether a word or an image, and free-associating from it to elaborate and uncover meaning. At the same time, Freud described his approach with scientific terminology: memories were “the day residue” at the bottom of the dream, as if sunken particles in a test tube.

Rodger Kamenetz wrote *The History of Last Night’s Dream: Discovering the Hidden Path to the Soul* (2007). The poet-author describes his personal exploration of dreams. He uses a key dream from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* to demonstrate how Freud and Jung understood dreams differently.

Dream of July 23-24, 1895

A large hall- numerous guests, whom we were receiving. – Among them was Irma.

I at once took her on one side as though to answer her letter and to reproach her for not having accepted my “solution” yet. I said to her: “If you still gets pains, it’s really only your fault.” She replied: “If you only knew what pains I’ve got now in my throat and stomach and abdomen- it’s choking me.” I was alarmed and looked at her. She looked pale and puffy. I thought to myself that after all I must be missing some organic trouble. I took her to the window and looked down her throat and she showed signs of recalcitrance like women with artificial dentures. I thought to myself that there was really no need for her to do that.... She then opened her mouth properly and on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs.

Now he calls in several colleagues to examine Irma in turn: a senior colleague identified as “Dr. M,” also his “friend Otto” and his “friend Leopold.” Dr. M’s diagnosis confirms Freud’s, although he makes some strange comments. Then we learn that Otto has given her an injection of a mix of chemicals, “a preparation of propyl,...propionic acid...trimethylamin.”

Freud finds that Irma’s physical complaints and the remedies that his colleagues offered are nonsensical, precisely because the essential impetus of any dream is a hidden, unacceptable wish. That wish, Freud would emphasize, is “derived from the past in every sense.” Dream material does not foretell the future, as in Joseph’s interpretations, but only describes unconscious yearnings.

Freud writes, “I wondered why I decided upon this choice of symptoms in the dream.” He then explains Irma’s pains in her throat and abdomen as not his fault, because his treatment is only for the psychological problem of “hysteria.” Freud writes, “I had a sense of awkwardness at having invented such a severe illness for Irma simply in order to clear myself.” He then examines the second part, which describes his colleagues’ collaboration coupled with far-fetched comments. Freud concludes that these physicians humiliated themselves, so that he, the dreamer, could express his revenge for having annoyed him, in the case of Otto as recently as earlier that day. Freud is convinced that he has solved the puzzle: Exoneration in part one and humiliation in part two. And yet, Jung will work with other assumptions in how to find the wisdom of a dream.

Carl Jung, the son of a pastor, saw dreams as containing wishes and fears, but believed that they also presented memories, plans, collective truths, and even telepathic visions. Jung understood dreams as more than disguised, repressed material that needed decoding. In his words, “Why should they mean something different from their contents? Is there anything in nature that is other than what it is? The dream is a normal and natural phenomenon, and it does not mean something it is not. The Talmud even
says, ‘The dream is its own interpretation.’” For Jung, the content of dreams transcend our own ego needs. More than reading a dream to intellectually discover its meaning, the dreamer needs to face the images and feel what the dream is seeking to convey and will then gain transformative wisdom.

Rodger Kamenetz describes many of his own dreams and the insights of his Jungian-oriented dream interpreter, Marc Bregman. In contrast to Freud, this approach takes seriously the dream at its manifest level and approaches the dream as a whole. The question then becomes, who is Irma and what is she trying to tell Freud in his dream? In the dream, Irma tells Freud, “I am choking.” Freud ignores her pain, which seems logical to him. For Marc Bregman, Freud’s failure to acknowledge and feel Irma’s pain is the essence of the dream, its “belly button.” Bregman explains that Irma is saying to Freud, “By ignoring me, you are choking me.” The dream says to Freud what is missing in your professional care giving is humility and empathy. That is your error. As for the second part of the dream, Bregman explains, that once “Freud” fails “Irma,” the dream mocks his attitude of callous superiority by sending in his colleagues with silly diagnoses.

Marc Bregman speaks of the personal gains in heeding a dream’s core as a wisdom teaching from beyond the Self: “You can trace a dream back to the point where you make a mistake: at that point everything goes to shit. Basically you can completely change your dreams just by being a good student. If you do the right thing, no matter how hard it is, if you do exactly what they tell you, you will grow.”

Reflections: Have you tried to interpret a significant dream? Did someone help you? What insight did you gain? How would Freud and Jung’s approaches help you in gaining insight to the nature of your dream?
Creative Breakthroughs

Dreams have offered creative breakthroughs in music, sports, math, and science. I love these stories for they offer me the hope that while asleep I too might receive the gift of an enduring insight. In most cases, the “revelations” have emerged to a person fully prepared with expertise, talent, and a persistent, wakeful question. Before I share some riveting stories, two thoughts on the nature of dream wisdom.

“In visions of the dark night, I have dreamed of joy departed; but a waking dream of life and light, Hath left me broken hearted,” begins Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Dream.” The poet of the “Raven” and many frightening short stories attributed much of his creativity to nightmares. In an 1839 essay entitled, “An Opinion on Dreams,” Poe wrote that some dreams have natural causes and others the supernatural, explaining:

    dreams, or, as they were then generally called, visions, were a means of supernatural instruction, if we believe the bible at all, is proved by Jacob’s dream, the several visions of Ezekiel and other prophets, as also of later date, the Revelations to Saint John; and there appears no reason why this mode of divine communication should be discontinued in the present day.4

Arthur Koestler, the great 20th century psychologist, fiction writer, and essayist emphasized more naturalistically that dreams emerge from an incubation of ideas:

    “the displacement of attention to something not previously noted, which was irrelevant in the old and is relevant in the new context....The creative act is not an act of creation in the sense of The Old Testament. It does not create something out of nothing: it uncovers, selects, re-shuffles, combines, synthesizes already existing facts, ideas, faculties, skills.”4

Whether a dream’s content emerges from our subconscious minds or like Biblical prophecy from a source beyond our selves is open to debate. What is uniformly agreed is that dreams offer surprising visions of the familiar in unfamiliar, revelatory ways. And now for some remarkable examples:

Music: The melody of Paul McCartney’s “Yesterday,” emerged in 1965, when the Beatles were in London filming Help! McCartney slept in a small flat at the top of house, with a piano next to his bed. He awoke hearing a classical string ensemble. And now, his words:

    I woke up with a lovely tune in my head. I thought, “That’s great, I wonder what that is?” There was an upright piano next to me, to the right of the bed by the window. I got out of bed, sat at the piano, found G, found F sharp minor 7th- and that leads you through hen to B to E minor, and finally back to E. It all leads forward logically. I liked the melody a lot, but because I dreamed it, I couldn’t believe I’d written it. I thought, “No, I’ve never written anything like this before.” But I had the tune, which was the most magic thing!4

McCartney added, “for about a month I went round to people in the music business and asked them whether they had ever heard it [the melody] before. Eventually it became like handing something in to the police. I thought if no-one claimed it after a few weeks then I could have it.”4 Lennon and McCartney wrote lyrics to the melody. As a newly released single, the song would stay at number one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart for four weeks and since more artists have performed cover versions than any other song according to the Guinness Book of Records.4

    John Lennon: His solo “#9 Dream” repeats a nonsensical phrase he heard in a dream: “Ah! Bowakawa pousse, pousse,” coupled with lyrics on dreaming: “So long ago/Was it in a dream, was it just a dream/?Seemed so very real, it seemed so real to me.”

Sports. Jack Nicklaus in 1964 was in a golfing slump, routinely hitting in the high seventies. After regaining his championship caliber mid-sixty scores, he explained his improvement to a writer for the San Francisco Chronicle as follows:

    Wednesday night I had a dream and it was about my golf swing. I was hitting them
pretty good in the dream and all at once I realized I wasn’t holding the club the way I’ve actually been holding it lately. I’ve been having trouble collapsing my right arm taking the club head away from the ball, but I was doing it perfectly in my sleep. So when I came to the course yesterday morning I tried it the way I did in my dream and it worked. I shot a sixty-eight yesterday and a sixty-five today.”

**Machine design:** Elias Howe (1819-1867) improved previous designs of a sewing machine with an innovation of the placement of the eye of the needle, receiving the first U.S. patent for a sewing machine using the lockstitch design. His colorful dream is recorded in a family history:

He almost beggared himself before he discovered where the eye of the needle of the sewing machine should be located...His original idea was to follow the model of the ordinary need, and have the eye at the heel. It never occurred to him that it should be placed near the point, and he might have failed altogether if he had not dreamed he was building a sewing machine for a savage king in a strange country.

Just as in his actual waking experience, he was perplexed about the needle’s eye. He thought the king gave him twenty-four hours in which to complete the machine and make it sew. If not finished in that time death was to be the punishment. Howe worked and worked, and puzzled, and finally gave it up. Then he thought he was taken out to be executed.

He noticed that the warriors carried spears that were pierced near the head. Instantly came the solution of the difficulty, and while the inventor was begging for time he awoke. It was 4 o’clock in the morning.

He jumped out of bed, ran to his workshop, and by 9, a needle with an eye at the point had been rudely modeled. After that it was easy.

**Math:** Srinivasa Ramanujan, self-taught, Indian math prodigy produced close to 4,000 math theorems and equations, including the infinite series for Pi, before he passed at the age of 32. He said that many of his insights came from the Hindu goddess Namagiri in dreams. He describes one such experience, “There was a red screen formed by flowing blood as it were. I was observing it. Suddenly a hand began to write on the screen. I became all attention. That hand wrote a number in elliptic integrals. They stuck to my mind. As soon as I woke up, I committed them to writing.”

**Chemistry:** Dr. Otto Loewi (1873-1961), German-born physiologist, earned the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1936. In 1903 he questioned the commonly held belief that nerve impulses were only electrical, anticipating that there was a chemical component. Not knowing how to prove his idea, he put it aside for seventeen years, when he had the following dream:

The night before Easter Sunday of that year I awoke, turned on the light, and jotted down a few notes on a tiny slip of paper. Then I fell asleep again. It occurred to me at 6 o’clock in the morning that during the night I had written down something important, but I was unable to decipher the scrawl. The next night, at 3 o’clock, the idea returned. It was the design of an experiment to determine whether or not the hypothesis of chemical transmission that I had uttered 17 years ago was correct. I got up immediately, went to the laboratory, and performed a single experiment on a frog’s heart according to the nocturnal design.

Loewi’s dream led to a decade of scientific experiments to firmly establish the chemical transmission of the nervous impulse.

Some other creative discoveries through dreams:

- Russian Inventor, Dmitri Mendeleev (1834-1907) organized the Periodic Table of Elements, then numbering 65: “I saw in a dream a table where all the elements fell into place as required. Awakening, I immediately wrote it down on a piece of paper—only in one place did a correction later seem necessary.”
- German chemist, Friedrich August Kekule (1829-1896), demonstrated the chemical structure of the benzene molecule when he dreamed of a snake eating its own tail. This image led him to understand that the molecules of certain organic compounds are ring-like in structure, rather than open.4
- Mary Shelly’s “Frankenstein,” called by some the first science fiction novel, emerged from a core image of a “hideous phantasm of a man...show signs of life” in a dream during an overnight at the Lake Geneva home of poet Lord Byron.4

Reflection: There are many other examples of creative solutions found in dreams. Which of these examples most fascinates or delights you? Why? Have you ever gained a sought-for-solution in dream?
Seeking Answers from Dreams

Intentionality invokes dreams, which may offer insight into our inner life and some believe, foretell our future. Divine messages were sought in antiquity by “incubation,” sleeping at a sacred shrine in order to receive messages from the resident god. This widespread practice is attested to in ancient Sumerian and Hittite inscriptions. Some interpret the story of Jacob going to Beersheva in the same vein. Jacob’s grandfather, Abraham, had named the place after entering into a treaty there with Abimelech (Genesis 21:31-33). Abraham lived there with Sarah and Isaac and would commune with God, including hearing the command to bring his son as an offering. As Jacob prepares to leave Israel to reunite with Joseph in Egypt, he travels to Beersheva and offers a sacrifice “to the God of his father Isaac.” And the next verses read:

God called to Israel in a vision by night: “Jacob, Jacob!” He answered, “Here I am!”
And God said, “I am God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph’s hand shall close your eyes (Genesis 46:2-4).

Likewise, in the Greco-Roman world, apocalyptic dreams were believed as gifts from the gods. Remarkably, the Jewish teacher of that era, Ben Sira, would come out cautioning against dreams as reliable vehicles of wisdom. Although the writings of Ben Sira would not find a place in the canon of Hebrew Scripture, he was so admired by the early rabbis that his book is cited twenty-two times in the Talmud. He describes the limitations of dreams is as follows:

Vain and false hopes are for a person lacking understanding and dreams give wings to fools.
As one that catches a shadow and follows after the wind, so is a person that sets his mind to dreams.
The vision of dreams is as this thing against that, the likeness of a face over against a face.
Of an unclean thing what shall be cleansed? And of that which is false, what shall be true?
Divinations and soothsayers and dreams are vain and the heart fancies, as a woman’s in labor.
If they be not sent from the Most High in your visitation, give not your heart to them.
For dreams have led many astray and they have failed by putting their hope in them.
Without lying shall the Law be accomplished and is perfection to a faithful mouth.

And yet, throughout Jewish history, people actively sought answers to their most pressing questions through dreams, including prominent rabbis seeking legal guidance. A methodology evolved involving fasting, purification, and meditation on a text. In the Middle Ages, this quest was called she’elat halom—“a dream question” and hundreds of ritual prayers were composed calling on God to offer answers in a dream and for aid in remembering. Such prayer formula needed an element of flexibility so as to personalize the request. The following is one such recipe:

Write this [Divine] Name on [a piece of] parchment, put it under your head, and thus address the Angel of Dreams: I adjure you with the great, mighty, and awesome Name [of God] that you visit me this night and answer my questin and request, whether by dream, by vision, by [indicating] a verse from scripture, by speech... or by [showing me some] writing, in a manner that I should not forget but remember [on waking] my question and
Joel Covitz, a contemporary Jungian therapist and Jewish scholar on dreams, recommends evoking dreams before sleep, by setting the stage by consciously entering into a relaxed state so that your mind will be more receptive to messages from the higher self (also called in his writing, the inner healer or “the Master of Dreams”). He notes the importance of intentionality, infused by an attitude of humility: expressing your dependency on the dream for insight, affirming your commitment to remember the dream by recording it, and the seeking of an understanding of the gifted message. He shares his own dream-question petition, as follows:

“Master of Dreams and Psychic Equilibrium, I have been struggling with the following situation and have not been able to find the wisdom and insight to assist me in resolving the problem [State your problem]. I, your humble servant, who feel at the mercy of your greater power and wisdom, place myself in your hands for the night. I beseech you - the fountain of wisdom, insight and healing- to help me find my path. However you appear, whether in the form of an allegory, or in any other manner that you want to communicate with me, I will record your communication when I wake, so that it will stay with me and enable me to work at understanding your communication.”

And yet, there were cautions offered about the reliance on dream questions. The influential Sefer Hasidim, composed in the Rhine in the 12th-13th century by Judah ben Samuel of Regensburg stated: “If a man decides, I will put a ‘dream question’ to find out which good wife I shall take, he will never be successful.” Through dreams we may gain intuitive insight, but dreams need interpretation and contain material of daytime anxiety along with deeper wisdom. The rabbis warned against easy answers to foundational decisions that lacked the balance of analytic mind.

Reflection: What would you want to have answered through a dream question? Have you ever tried? If so, what was the value and limitation in such a process?
Telepathy Amidst Dreams

Telepathy is the gaining of knowledge by means other than the five senses. Freud, who saw himself as a scientist and religious skeptic, wrote two papers dealing with telepathic communication. In “Dreams and Telepathy,” Freud considered whether telepathy could occur while dreaming. He sought a “strictly impartial” approach and concluded that it was “incontestable...sleep creates favorable conditions for telepathy.” In “Psycho-Analysis and Telepathy” he described a fortune teller’s “thought transference” by “unknown methods.” He compared his “favorable prejudice in favor of telepathy” to “a private affair like my Jewishness and passion for smoking.” He would later explain in an interview, “Merely all my life I have learned to accept new facts, humbly, readily. I believe that telepathy is a psychical event in one man causing a similar psychical event in another man.”

While asleep our analytic mind is disengaged, and yet our brain is still active. Telepathy posits that the brain can serve as a receiver for information, analogous to how a television picks up airwaves and translates them into images. Just as at night we can see the stars, otherwise hidden by the light, so during sleep our intuitive faculties are able to discern what is otherwise hidden. The Talmud will say of prophecy, first quoting Scripture:

“And I will certainly conceal My face in that day [for all the iniquity that he did and because he turned to other gods’] (Deuteronomy 31:8). Rava said, ‘The Holy One, Blessed One, said, ‘Even though I concealed My face from them, I will speak with him through a dream.’ (Hagigah 5b)

The classic commentator, Rashi (France, 1040-1105) will remark, “Since the verse states ‘in that day,’ it implies that God will conceal [God’s] face only by day, but not at night. The verse teaches that God will reveal the evils that the nations plan to do to the Jewish people through a dream, to awaken them to repent and pray concerning the matter.”

There are also stories in the Talmud of encounters with the deceased in the form of a dream. The story is told of Rava in Babylonia of the 4th century that as he was nearing his death he said to his friend Rav Seorim to use his influence with the angel of death not to hurt him. Rav Seorim agreed and asked that Rava appear to him after he died. After death, the following exchange occurred: “Did you feel any pain?” He [Rava] answered him, “Like a puncture from a [bloodletter’s] lancet.” Suggesting that the final passing had little pain. Rashi, the influential commentator of France of the 11th century, states that this final encounter occurred in a dream. For it is in dreams that the sages believed there was both access to the departed and knowledge of the precise moment of death at a distance.

As a rabbi, people often tell me their “spiritual stories” that often touch on the supernatural, hoping that I will listen respectfully and validate what feels like a powerful experience. In that regard, I wrote a book entitled Does the Soul Survive: A Jewish Journey to Belief in Afterlife, Past Lives & Living with Purpose (Jewish Lights, 2000, 2015), which explores the nature of survival of the soul in the Jewish tradition and modern accounts including those shared with me. As I did book talks, audience members often shared their tales. I have grown accustomed to hearing stories of knowing the moment of the passing of a loved one or receiving messages from the other side as a vivid, sensual experience that often leads to awaking in a start.

The following is an example from my book:

A woman in her fifties working on her doctorate in a literary field called to make an appointment to discuss her studies. She is a serious student, a particularly organized woman who is self-described as rational. In the course of our conversation she said, “Rabbi, I had an experience that I want to tell you about. One night I had a very vivid dream in which my brother, who died several years before, appeared to me and said that something important was going to happen. I was so startled by the intensity and vividness of the dream and the message that I awoke and sat on the edge of my bed. Soon the phone rang. It was my family thousands of miles away. They told me that my father had
just died of a sudden heart attack. Neither they nor I had any indication that he had even been sick.4

When a visiting cantor to my community learned of my writing on the afterlife, he described the night before his father’s funeral when he slept at his parent’s home. His father appeared vividly to him in a dream with specific instructions for the funeral and the need for certain tasks afterwards. He awoke and restlessly remained in bed until the morning. At the breakfast table with his mother and sister, he recounted his dream. They both looked startled and each said, “We had the same vivid dream.”

And finally, a couple of stories most recently told to me, by a congregant just a few weeks before this writing:

   My mother knew of her sister’s death from a dream. Although her sister had not been particularly ill before, the dream and its meaning was very clear to her.

   My mother had always said to me, “If someone from the other side appears to you in a dream, pay close attention and remember the dream.” Years after my mother died, one of her closest friends was weakening in a hospice setting. In a dream, I saw my mother happily cooking with her friend. It conveyed to me that they would soon be reunited. I called the woman’s daughter and told her of my dream. She found comfort. Her mother passed within a week.

I have grown to believe in the reality of telepathy and survival of the soul’s consciousness, a much bigger topic than this entry. I share these accounts to emphasize that in a dream state there is the possibility of gaining information that transcends our five senses. In the related words of Ramchal, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Italy, 18th century):

   “God manipulates man’s natural power to dream and uses it as a means to transmit a prophetic vision. And yet, this does not mean that a dream and a prophetic vision are in the same category. God’s wisdom merely deemed that a dream could be an adequate vehicle for prophecy. When our Sages teach us that ‘a dream is a sixtieth prophecy,’ they do not mean that the two are the same. What they are teaching us is that both contain information that a person could not attain with powers of reason alone.”4
Divine Mercy and Restorative Dreams

The Hebrew word for dream, *halom*, is composed of three consonants (*םחל*). The nuances of meaning of a Hebrew word are reflected in the use of a similar three-letter stem with a different meaning. As you will see in the Talmudic discourse below, the Hebrew letters for dream is also used in a verse from Isaiah to mean “you have restored me to health.” There is also a close verbal connection, another source of rabbinic comparison, between *halom* (dream) and *halon* (window), for dreams are a window into our inner life.

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Three things require God’s mercy: a good king, a good year, and a good dream.

A good king, as it is written (Proverbs 21:1): “Like streams of water is the heart of a king in the hand of YHVH.”

A good year as it is written (Deuteronomy 11:12): “The eyes of YHVH, your God, are always upon it [the land], from the beginning of the year to year’s end.”

A good dream, as it is written (Isaiah 38:16): “May You make me dream [*ותחלימני*] and give me life” (BT Berachot 55a).

Rav Yehudah and Rav were sages of 3rd century, Babylonia. Rav, the teacher, engages in a word play using the verse from Isaiah to point out that a good “dream” [*حلم*] has the same root to mean, “you have restored me to health.” The verse before and the full verse read, “What can I say? [God] promised me and [God] wrought it. All my sleep had fled because of the bitterness of my soul. My Lord, for all that and despite it My life-breath is revived; You have restored me to health and revived me” (Isaiah 38:15-16).

A good dream can offer hope and enable rest, serving to restore emotional and physical health. It is fascinating to see how a good dream is elevated in the threesome alongside good governance and crops. For Rav Yehudah, a dream is foundational to living a healthy life. When dreams reflect and elevate how we experience our future than indeed a good dream is as essential as physical stability and sustenance.

Reflection: What is the link between a good dream and restoration of health for you- both as a barometer and as a healer? In what sense is that an act of Divine mercy?
Dream Interpretation as a Cooperative Effort

In watching mediums “convey messages from the other side,” they usually say, “Just give me a yes or no answer. When I see a symbol, I need your help in understanding the message.” In the following story from the Talmud, Rabbi Yishmael listens to a dream, begins with a literal interpretation and when that does not seem productive, gets creative. Dream interpretation is a cooperative effort.

BT Berachot 56b

[A Sadducee] said to [Rabbi Yishmael]: “In my dream I saw them saying to me, ‘Your father has left you property in Cappadocia.”

[R. Yishmael] said to him: “Do you have property in Cappadocia?”

[The Sadducee] replied to him, “No, I do not.”

[R. Yishmael then asked him], “Did your father go to Cappadocia [perhaps dying there]? He replied to him, “No.”

[Taking another approach, R. Yishmael bisects the word Cappadocia to look for meaning]: [In Greek] Kappa is a “beam” and Deka is “ten.” Go look at the beam with is atop ten [beams] for it is full of coins.

[The Sadducee] went and found that [the predicted beam] was filled with coins.

Dream interpretation is a cooperative effort: the dream, the dreamer, and the interpreter. How much of interpretation is dependent on knowledge of and personality of the dream-er? How much information is revealed by the symbols of the dream? What is the nature of the “aha” when interpreter and dream-er feel that the interpretation is correct?
Nightmares.

A boisterous child is often referred to in Yiddish as a *vilde chaya*, a wild creature. Maurice Sendak grew up in New York with Yiddish-speaking immigrant parents. At the age of thirty-two, he wrote and illustrated *Where the Wild Things Are*. This story of only 338 words tells how young Max dresses in a wolf costume and creates havoc throughout his home. Sent to bed without his supper, Max finds his bedroom mysteriously transformed into a jungle and he sails off to an island inhabited by the "Wild Things." After fearlessly looking into the eyes of the frightening-looking creatures, Max is hailed as the king of the Wild Things and enjoys playing with them. And yet to the Wild Thing’s dismay, Max chooses to return home. Once again in his bedroom, Max finds a hot supper waiting for him.

*Where the Wild Things Are* would go on to sell over twenty million copies. Yet, when it came out in 1963, the book was widely banned from public libraries. Parents objected to the scary illustrations, fearing that it would cause nightmares for their children. In an interview later in life, Sendak explained that children already saw scary figures in their dreams, which was part of the book’s popularity, and that Max shows that if we can look at our inner monsters without fear we can tame them.

A “mare” is the Old English term for a demon who torments people with frightening dreams. Nightmares are not uncommon. The majority of children between five and eight will have a disturbing dream, with a quarter in this age group experiencing a nightmare once per week. Dream images are vessels for feelings, such as physical or emotional vulnerability or stress. Children know that there are dangers and that they are small and relatively defenseless, which leads to dreams of feeling chased by monsters. Although less prevalent than for children, adults have dreams intense and disturbing enough to wake them, with 5-10% of adults reporting nightmares at least once a month. The negative emotions prompting nightmares include anger, guilt, sadness, fear, and anxiety. Disturbances of the body, ranging from an uncomfortable bed to drugs, medications, or illness might also induce nightmares. Research has shown that men more commonly than women have frightening images of natural disasters, while women tend to focus on conflicts in relationships. Nightmares may offer insight into what is disturbing us. In the words of Jungian therapist, Jane White-Lewis, nightmares “bring up issues in bold print.”

Nightmares are different than night terrors. Nightmares tend to occur during the later cycles of sleep when dreams are more elaborate and intense. Screaming or moving during the dream is uncommon. When the person awakes, he or she is aware of having had a bad dream. Night terrors occur during the first couple of hours of slumber. The sleeper may thrash about and scream, while continuing to sleep thickly and awaken with no more than a recollection of a single scene or remain with an overwhelming negative feeling. Children who have night terrors usually stop having them by puberty. The causes of night terror for adults are varied and uncertain, although often linked to stress. Medical or psychological intervention may help.

A person suffering from nightmares should consider a physical exam, as the source of persistent disturbance often emerges from physical causes. There is also a blood-pressure medicine, Prazosine, which has shown efficacy in reducing nightmares. When the source of the vulnerability is ongoing stress or an unresolved issue, counseling is also advised. Replaying a traumatic event- whether an accident or the loss of a loved one- is a natural part of the psychic healing process. When recovery is progressing the nightmares will diminish in frequency and intensity. Nightmares persist more strongly with those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The rate is as high as 90% of victims of rape or combat veterans experience a nightmare at least once a week. Research has shown that close to half of people who have regular nightmares either view them as very interesting or dismiss them as “just dreams.” Nonetheless, nightmares for most people are a source of disturbed sleep and anxiety that takes a physical and emotional toll.

Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT), a form of Cognitive Therapy, is helping sufferers of bad dreams gain control. The patient is asked to select a nightmare, but one that is not too distressing so as to first learn the process. Guidance is given to “change the dream anyway you wish” (cognitively rescript) and
then rehearse the “new dream” in one’s mind (mastery) and to ignore the old nightmare. This allows for
the creation of a different dream, which is usually much less disturbing. Dr. Barry Krakow, a leader in the
field of IRT, tells of one of his first patients, Roberta Barker, age 55. Earlier in her life while teaching English
as a second language in Japan, she was kidnapped and tortured and raped over three days before
escaping. She suffered physical disability and even more excruciating a replaying of the horror night after
night until on the verge of suicide. She was skeptical when Dr. Krakow told her that dreams were to a
great degree a learned habit that could be stopped. Some patients work to change the plot of their dreams
directly, such as another rape victim of Dr. Krakow’s who scripted a dream in which she challenged her
assailant with a baseball bat. But, Ms. Barker said that she preferred an entirely different dream and chose
birds. She explained, “I’ve always loved birds, wild birds, doves and pigeons and starlings, mountain blue
jays. I had fed birds, the images were solid, I could hear them flying and talking. Now, instead of waking
up screaming, I wake up knowing I’ve dreamed of birds.”

The stories that we tell ourselves- whether wakefully or while asleep- have great power over our
wellbeing. We can script to some degree while awake the dreams that we have at night. And whether
asleep or awake, as Maurice Sendak has taught us, when we look calmly and confidently at that which
might frighten us, we may well find that we can tame and even befriend the beast.
Preventing and Transforming a Bad Dream

Disturbing dreams not only reduce rest, the sages of the Talmud believed that they had predictive power. They counseled prayer to avoid bad dreams (Berakhot 60b). And as a protection from the outcome of an evil dream, the sages of the Talmud demanded a “dream fast” (תענית חלום). This act of self-contrition amplified prayer. The giving of charity augmented the fast. For Maimonides, the “dream fast” served to prompt reflection, so “that the person may reexamine his actions and analyze them and repent.” The rituals to alter a bad dream were seen by some as a kind of incantation, a magical formula, and by others as more psychological in impact.

With the recognition that a bad dream normally prompted a fast, some Jews of Minsk crafted the following Yiddish statement before sleep: “Got is hare, Der holem is a nar; Wos vet mir zich haintige nacht holemen. Wei ich morgen nit fasten” - “God is Master; the dream is a fool. Whatever I may dream tonight, I will not fast tomorrow. The assumption is that the angel responsible for bad dreams finding that he could not force a fast would avoid the trouble of sending a bad dream.”

When a person awoke with the inkling of a bad dream, reciting a well-chosen Biblical verse tied to a symbol in the dream helped assure a positive outcome (see separate entry). When the dream had an uncertain meaning, there were proscribed words to recite during community prayers the next morning. The transformational formula emerged from a conversation between three Babylonian sages of the 4th and 5th CE:

A person who has seen a dream, but does not know what he has seen [whether it is good or bad], should stand before the Kohanim [the priests] at the time that they spread their hands [to bless the community] and he should recite the following:

“Master of the Universe! I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. I have dreamt a dream, but I do not know whether I have dreamt about myself, whether my companions have dreamt about me, or whether I have dreamt about others. If these [dreams] are good, strengthen them and fortify them like the dreams of Joseph. But if they require healing, heal them like the water of Marah [miraculously having made the bitter waters sweet- Exodus 15: 22-25] through the hands of Moses our Teacher; and like [You healed] Miriam from her scaly skin [Numbers 12:1-15] and like [You healed] the waters of Jericho through Elisha [curing the dangerous waters with salt-I Kings 20:1-6]. And just as You transformed the curse of the wicked Balaam into blessing [Deuteronomy 23:6], so may You transform all of my dreams regarding myself for goodness” (Berakhot 55b).

And finally, there was the power of dream interpretation by a group of three witnesses, a symbolic court having the power to annul an oath. “Hatavat halom” - “the improvement of a dream,” turns a private, anxious memory into a publicly-supported, neutral experience. The Talmud describes the process as follows:

“If a person has a disturbing dream,” says Rabbi Huna ben Ammi, “let him go and have it interpreted in the presence of three.... Giving it a good turn in the presence of three. Let him bring three and say to them, ‘May the Source of Mercy turn it to good; seven times may it be decreed from heaven that it should be good and may it be good.’” (Berakhot 55b).

The text for hatavat halom is found in a variety of traditional prayerbooks. When I lived in Israel during a Sabbatical, a scholar of Jewish mysticism asked if I would serve in such a “court.” He explained that he had a bad dream the night before and wanted to neutralize it. I had not heard of this ceremony before. It was a little weird, but I was touched by the opportunity to transform a private experience into a public encounter and to offer a feeling of release and relief for my friend.

Reflection: Have you shared your disturbing dreams with a friend? How did the sharing impact on how you felt about the dream? Would you have liked more ritual to neutralize a disturbing dream? Would any of the suggestions from the Talmud been welcomed by you?
Transforming Prayer of an Ambiguous Dream

*BT Berakhot* 55b

*Stated in a conversation between Ameimar, Mar Zutra, and Rav Ashi, but ironically, it is unclear which of the three said the following:*

A person who has seen a dream, but does not know what he has seen [whether it is good or bad], should stand before the Kohanim [the priests] at the time that they spread their hands [to bless the community] and he should recite the following:

“Master of the Universe! I am Yours, and my dreams are Yours. I have dreamt a dream, but I do not know whether I have dreamt about myself, whether my companions have dreamt about me, or whether I have dreamt about others. If these [dreams] are good, strengthen them and fortify them like the dreams of Joseph. But if they require healing, heal them like the water of Marah [miraculously having made the bitter waters sweet- Exodus 15: 22-25] through the hands of Moses our Teacher; and like [You healed] Miriam from her scaly skin [Numbers 12:1-15] and like [You healed] the waters of Jericho through Elisha [curing the dangerous waters with salt-II Kings 20:1-6]. And just as You transformed the curse of the wicked Balaam into blessing [Deuteronomy 23:6], so may You transform all of my dreams regarding myself for goodness.”

And the sage instructs that these words are to be said during the priestly blessing and when the people respond “Amen,” his prayer will be reinforced as well.
Wakeful Dreams

Awake, we may conjure dreams and reinterpret them. I had the privilege to learn with two masters of wakeful dreaming, Colette Aboulker-Muscat and Marielle Fuller. Rodger Kamenetz, who authored The History of Last Night’s Dream: Discovering the Hidden Path to the Soul (2007) was also a student of Colette’s and in his book describes how she set him on the course for exploring his nightly dreams, too. That journey inward he describes as a descent into consciousness: for some a dark fog to pass through, for others a clear path downward.

Dreams were a tool of inner exploration for psychological pioneer Robert DeSoille who in 1925 wrote of “directed waking dream” (reve eveillé dirige). His technique was to place clients in comfortable physical space to concentrate “on the interior universe of his images- reclining, relaxed, silent and in half-light. He suggested a starting image and encouraged the client to describe more fully- shape, color, feeling. Then guides the client to move upward in degrees- first to follow a road, then to climb a mountain path and then to alight on a path into the clouds or to ride the wings of a bird. Calm, serene, hopeful, the upward journey should lead to images of light.”

Colette studied with DeSoille in Paris after World War II. Her technique branches off from her mentor. She wrote her own visualizations with an emphasis on the power of short, surprising images, seeking “shock” in order to circumvent the defenses around the subconscious. A couple of examples are as follows, which I have titled:

“Renewal”
Breathe out three times. See and feel that you are standing in front of a wall.” Breathe out. Walk up to the wall and you will see a door.
Breathe out: You will find a way to open and pass through the door.”
Breathe out: See yourself on the other side wearing new, clean clothes and hearing a new name.”
Breathe out. Sense the essence of this day, of this moment, of this instant before you were named.” Breathe out and open your eyes.

“Reversing a Trauma.” Collette advised vividly visualizing the painful incident and then wiping the whole scene clean with a sponge from right to left, from the present to the past.

Physician Gerald Epstein, Fritz (Frederick) Perl’s gestalt (“wholeness”) therapy used roleplay to gain insight. That roleplay might have meant placing yourself in a chair and responding as if you were your mother, enabling empathic perspective. He also used such acts of imagination to complete dreams. For Perls, “all the different parts of the dream are fragments of our personalities. Since our aim is to make every one of us a wholesome person...put the different fragments of the dream together.....Instead of analyzing and further cutting up the dream, we want to bring it back to life. And the way to bring it back to life is to re-live the dream as if it were happening now.” You can ask questions of characters in your dream, including inanimate objects, as if positioned opposite you in a chair and then you can sit in the chair and empathically respond, simultaneously completing the dream and gaining personal insight.

Imagine is to see images. Images are more primal than words, more replete with meaning as powerful messages. Connecting to those images is to become more self-aware, more attuned to our wounds and strengths. Dreams reveal ourselves when we are open to watch and engage. We can change ourselves from the inside-out.

p.13. “Everyone wants a revelation, but no one wants to be revealed.”

Reflections from Rodger Kamenetz
Soul- a religious term that refers to deep consciousness, an inner awareness that guides us: imaginal but not imaginary (RK-230). Dream understanding: encounter your pain (predicament and see your opposition); your soul- evidenced by a primal image; explore the inner realm- with fresh openness to the inner space and the wisdom of the archetypes. (Inspired by RK-230).

Jung’s dream:
On an ocean voyage to America in 1909, Jung reported to Freud a dream of exploring a two-story house. The upper story was a European bourgeois home; the lower floor seemed older, with medieval furnishings. Then he “discovered a stone stairway” to the cellar, where he saw vaulted walls from the Roman period. On the floor was a stone slab. Pulling on a iron ring, Jung found another stairway “down into the depths” and “entered a low cave cut into the rock” with “remains of a primitive culture.” He saw “bones and broken pottery” and “two human skulls...very old and half disintegrated.”

Freud looked for the latent wish and pointed to the skulls, pressing Jung on “who do you want dead?” Jung said his wife and mother-in-law. Jung would later write in his memoir, “I did not feel up to quarreling with him, so I told him a lie.”

For Jung the meaning of the dream was more apparent on its surface, its manifest level. The dream offered an architectural presentation of consciousness, and it led down into the depths. The dream guided him “for the first time to the concept of the ‘collective unconscious.’

“The ground floor stood for the first level of the unconscious. The deeper I went, the more alien and the darker the scene became. In the cave, I discovered remains of a primitive culture, that is the world of the primitive man within myself- a world which can scarcely be reached or illuminated by consciousness.” (Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 158-160.

Jung began to research archaeology and mythology for an objective confirmation of a collective unconscious, work that continues for many Jungians. (RK 212-213).

Can’t do guided imagery alone- need to let go. Like dream interpretation- beyond analytic mind- we have habit and guarded, blind spots.

Rashi on Genesis 1:27- God created Adam with God’s image.