

Parashat Vayashav 5775, 2014:

What's in a Dream?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

On June 28, 1963, John F. Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, shared these famous words before a crowd in Dublin, Ireland: "The problems of this world cannot possibly be solved by skeptics or cynics whose horizons are limited by the obvious realities. We need men who can dream of things that never were." Kennedy, certainly at home in the rough and tumble arena of politics, was, nonetheless, a dreamer of dreams. Some of them were realized in his own lifetime. Most of them, however, were cut short by an assassin's bullet.

All of us dream. Why, however, do we dream? What function do dreams serve? Science does not have any solid answers to these basic questions – just theories:

The questions, "Why do we dream?" or "What is the function of dreaming?" are easy to ask but very difficult to answer. The most honest answer is that we do not yet know the function or functions of dreaming. This ignorance should not be surprising because despite many theories we still do not fully understand the purpose of sleep, nor do we know the functions of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, which is when most dreaming occurs. And these two biological states are much easier to study scientifically than the somewhat elusive phenomenon of dreaming. (Ernest Hartmann, Professor of Psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine and Director of the Sleep Disorders Center at Newton Wellesley Hospital in Boston, Mass, from his July 10, 2006, *Scientific American* <http://www.sciam.com/biology/article/id/why-do-we-dream/ref/rss.>)

While the Torah does not answer the question, “Why do we dream?” it does speak to the question, “What functions do dreams serve?” The answer to this question, as in most areas of Jewish thought, is multi-dimensional. On the one hand, *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) stated that a “dream is 1/60 of prophecy” (*Talmud Bavli, Berachot 57b*) and that Hashem continues to speak with us through dreams, even though He hides His direct presence from us (*Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 5b*). On the other hand, they also taught “Just like there is no grain without chaff, so, too, it is impossible to have a dream without nonsensical aspects (*devarim betalim*)” (*Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 8a-8b*). Moreover, Rebbi Meir stated: “The subject matter of a dream neither helps nor harms.” (*Talmud Bavli, Horayot 13b*). In other words, dreams held no efficacy whatsoever for Rebbi Meir.

The above statements of *Chazal* are very general in nature. They speak to the dreams that most of us may have. They do not reflect the dreams of the *Avot* (Patriarchs) and Yosef, nor of those whose actions directly impacted upon them. There are a number of instances in *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* (The Five books of the Torah) wherein Hashem directly speaks to man through the vehicle of a dream. Yosef, the protagonist of our *parasha* and the remainder of *Sefer Bereishit*, is directly connected to six of them. Two of these dreams appear in our *parasha* toward the beginning of chapter 37:

And Joseph dreamed a dream and told his brothers, and they continued to hate him. And he said to them, “Listen now to this dream, which I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the midst of the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright, and behold, your sheaves encircled [it] and prostrated themselves to my sheaf.” So his brothers said to him, “Will you reign over us, or will you govern us?” And they continued further to hate him on account of his dreams and on account of his words. And he again dreamed another dream, and he related it to his brothers, and he said, “Behold, I have dreamed another dream, and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were prostrating themselves to me.” And he told [it] to his father and to his brothers, and his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Will we come I, your mother, and your brothers to prostrate ourselves to you to the ground?”

So his brothers envied him, but his father awaited the matter. (Verses 5-11, these, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

As in all matters of *Aggadah* (non-legal classical Jewish thought), there are a plethora of interpretations of these verses. These explanations are often radically at odds with one another. At times, one feels compelled to ask oneself if the *meforshim* (Commentators) were writing about the same *pasukim* (verses). The arguments fly regarding the nature, timing, significance, and content of these dreams. Many ask why Yosef, who surely knew that his brothers held him ill will, was nonetheless so eager to share his dreams with them in the face of such manifest animosity. The answers are many and varied. One point, however, is not in contention: all agree that these dreams were prophetic visions from Hashem.

The Rambam (1135-1204) described the nature and process of dream-induced prophetic visions in the following passage found in *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 7:3:

When a prophet is informed of a message in a vision, it is granted to him in metaphoric imagery. Immediately, the interpretation of the imagery is imprinted upon his heart, and he knows its meaning. For example, the ladder with the angels ascending and descending envisioned by the patriarch, Jacob, was an allegory for the empires and their subjugation [of his descendants]. Similarly, the creatures Ezekiel saw, the boiling pot and the rod from an almond tree envisioned by Jeremiah, the scroll Ezekiel saw, and the measure seen by Zechariah [were all metaphoric images]. This is also true with regard to the other prophets. Some would relate the allegory and its explanation as these did. Others would relate only the explanation. At times, they would relate only the imagery without explaining it, as can be seen in some of the prophecies of Ezekiel and Zechariah. All of the prophecies come in the form of metaphoric imagery and allegories. (Translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, underlining my own.)

Based upon this statement, we can readily see that Yosef was no mere dreamer of everyday dreams. Instead, his dreams were prophetic visions granted to him by the Almighty. They were Hashem's way of communicating the future of *Klal Yisrael* (the

Jewish people) to him. Yosef's dreams, therefore, are in some ways our dreams. They contain, on a mysterious and mystical level, the hopes, desires, and longings of our people.

While we are not prophets and, therefore, do not receive prophetic visions in our dreams, we can, nonetheless, “dream of things that never were” but we fervently hope will be. We can dream of a time when all mankind will recognize the glory and hegemony of *Hakodesh Baruch Hu*. Perhaps most of all, we can dream of a time when *Mashiach ben Dovid*, the true Messiah, will bring authentic and lasting peace to the world. May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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