What is Judaism’s Stance on Dreams?



This piece first ran on our Substack, Reading Jewish History in the Parsha. We’re pleased to share it here on our website.

The beginning of Parshat Mikeitz likely numbers among the more widely famous stories in the Tanach due to its inclusion in the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Pharaoh, distressed by his dream in which seven sickly looking cows eat seven robust ones, combs the populace for someone to help him understand what this means. Finally, a household servant tells him about a curious Hebrew slave he’d previously met while imprisoned who showed great prowess at interpreting dreams. When Joseph is summoned, he tells Pharoah what the dream means, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Dreams have beguiled human beings for as long as they've been sleeping, which is to say forever, and Judaism has as much to say on the subject as psychoanalysis. The topic of dreams arises a number of times in the Talmud, which states famously that just as sleep is 1/60th of death, dreams are 1/60th of prophecy. Still, on balance, it finds plenty of reason to be neutral towards dreams, assessing (rather correctly, in my opinion) that even a dream that *will be* fulfilled in the future contains at least some amount of gibberish. Sometimes the Talmud is outright skeptical of dreams. For example, in the course of researching my book on conversion, I learned that a beit din should not accept someone to whom the idea of converting came in a dream.

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Though often nonsensical in content—anyone who has had to sit through a long-winded synopsis of a friend's dream can attest to the fact that dreams are very often only interesting to the person who dreamt them—they're frequently seen as the key to unlocking deep and mysterious secrets, or revealing things about our waking reality that we are unable to grasp while conscious. Countless poets including John Berryman and William Blake have extolled the powers of what Freud called "day's residue," and visionaries from Terry Gilliam to David Chase have taken advantage of their trippy qualities to great cinematic effect.

Add to this list, somewhat surprisingly, several prominent rabbis of medieval Ashkenaz. Though their Sephardic counterparts were largely steeped in the rationalism championed by Maimonides, certain noteworthy Tosafists of 12th and 13th century France and Germany allowed their dreams to help clarify when local ritual and Talmudic wisdom conflicted, provide new intel that compelled them to overturn previous rulings, and even create the basis for new liturgical rituals or prayers. Sometimes these insights were invited via the Kabbalistic process of *she'elot halom*, or ceremonially preparing for and then asking a question meant to be answered in a dream, such as in the case of R. Jacob ha-Levi, of 13th century Provence, whose work *She'elot u-Teshuvot min ha-Shamayim* chronicles his attempt to prompt angels to answer more than 70 halakhic queries. Other times, the appearance of a spiritual interlocutor (often Eliyahu haNavi, sometimes departed rabbinic mentors known to the dreamer) was spontaneous and jarring. Not surprisingly, the rabbis who were most open to the power of dreams were those who had proximity to or an affinity for mysticism.

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For the sake of brevity, here are two of the more straightforward stories from this time that involve dreams. In the first, R. Eliezer of Mainz, known as Raban, was eating at a Shabbat meal with his son-in-law, Elyaqim. Elyaqim asked his father-in-law about a stoneware vessel that had been used to draw wine from a barrel and bring it to the table, since Elyaqim knew that a non-Jewish household member had previously consumed wine straight from this vessel, potentially rendering it *treif*. Raban wasn't bothered: after his son-in-law confirmed no residue of the gentile's wine remained in the vessel, he decreed the wine kosher. But afterward, while napping, Raban had a dream in which he encountered his departed father-in-law, himself a rabbi and mentor, who began quoting passages of Nevi'im regarding wine and pork gentiles consumed. When Raban woke up, he realized his father-in-law had been warning him that the vessel used at the earlier meal was, in fact, not sufficiently clean, and when Raban confirmed this by testing the vessel, he prohibited the remaining wine and fasted for two days, encouraging the others who'd been present at the meal and drank the wine to do so too.

A similar, contemporaneous incident occurred when the German Tosafist R. Ephraim b. Isaac of Regensburg ruled that it was fine to eat a particular species of fish, confirming the precedent of two of his rabbinic mentors. But then, in a recounting by two of his own students, R. Ephraim had a dream that he was being presented with a plate overflowing with shrimp, octopus, and other non-kosher seafood. A friendly elderly man bid R. Ephraim to partake of the bounty, but he refused. "These are as permitted as the non-kosher species you allowed today," the elderly man said. Upon waking, R. Ephraim realized this figure had been Eliyahu and that he had made a mistake in allowing the balbuta. He never ate it again.

As the esteemed Professor Ephraim Kanarfogel ends his paper on the subject of these medieval rabbis and their dream lives:

As leading students and teachers of Talmudic law, the Tosafists were surely cognizant of the principle "*lo ba-shamayim hi*" (it is not in heaven). As religious authorities of their age, however, they were more than willing to entertain the possibility that heavenly, dream-like contra-texts could nonetheless contribute to the halakhic enterprise, and to Jewish life and practice more broadly.

Prof. Kanarfogel suggests in his work that in addition to being influenced by Jewish mysticism exported from Babylonia, these rabbis were possibly also affected—consciously or not—by the ideas of their Christian pietist neighbors.

For many Orthodox Jews such as myself, it isn't all that surprising that Jews of earlier periods engaged in activities that look odd or woo-woo or un-Jewish to us now. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once said in conversation with the eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, all religions have a "folk penumbra" which "include practices which are frowned on by the mainstream but nonetheless happen." But a number of the rabbis Kanarfogel highlights who were engaged in the practice of dream interpretation for halakhic ends were the opposite of fringe dwellers. (So is the folk penumbra actually everywhere, like the Matrix? Am I inside it *right now?)*

To a degree, we lean on the historical context ("It was a different time!") to explain away beliefs and rituals that would likely incite skepticism or outright ridicule today in most mainstream spheres. But I wonder if, instead of feeling confused or instinctively put off by the ways in which Jews of other places, other eras, and other denominations practice, maybe instead we ought to let the dreaming rabbis of the medieval era serve as reminders of the ways Judaism is a landscape vast, fascinating, and sometimes mysterious, and how even its major figures were—and are—far more flexible and creative than we sometimes imagine them to be.