

Dreaming Together

רבנו של עולם אני שלך וחלומותי שלך

Great One of the universe, I am Yours, and my dreams are Yours.¹

Introduction

These are the opening words of a prayer recorded in the Talmud: a prayer to say if one has had a dream and does not understand what it means. The ancient rabbis suggest whispering this prayer privately when the *kohanim* lift up their hands to give the priestly blessing during the Amidah. At that moment, when the separated fingers of the *kohanim* channel the oldest blessing in our tradition, words from the Torah itself, we appeal to Gd about our ambiguous dreams.

I don't know about you, but for me, many times in the past year felt fragile and uncertain. I imagine I'm not the only one. It was a difficult year. One of the practices I've relied upon in this time is reciting this prayer, so I wanted to share it with you.

Sometimes all I needed to say was the first two words—אני שלך “I am Yours”—and sometimes the first four words: אני שלך וחלומותי שלך “I am Yours and my dreams are Yours.” It was grounding and reassuring to remind myself there is One to Whom I belong and One to Whom my dreams belong. At times, my eyes teared up, and I stopped. Other times, I went on.

This morning we're going to talk about dreams. We use so much language about dreams in English: “a dream come true,” “the American dream,” a “dream job.” We talk about dreams in our liturgy too. The psalm we sing during Birkat HaMazon, grace after meals, Psalm 126, begins by saying that when Gd causes the *teshuvah*, the return, of Zion, היינו כחלמים, “We will be like dreamers.”² In this season of *teshuvah*, let's be like dreamers.

Let's dream together.

I imagine you are here on Rosh HaShanah for many different reasons. Some of you may be here daring to dream of a new year with new possibilities; some of you may be here because your dreams shattered in the past year, and you pray for healing; some of you may be here wondering whether the dreams of the Jewish people still mean something—seeking assurance that being “like

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 55b.

² Ps. 126:1. There are different translations and interpretations of this verse. The medieval commentator Rabbi David Kimhi, Radak, interprets the word שיבת (*shivat*) as תשובה (*teshuvah*); the words share a Hebrew root.

dreamers” is something that we can find our way toward collectively, here in this community. We’ll talk about those three things: daring to dream; dreams that require healing; and collective dreams.

1. Daring to Dream

We’ll begin with daring to dream. In these times, it may feel courageous or even radical to entertain good dreams. Although the ancient rabbis faced challenges in their own lives and challenges for the Jewish people, they gravitated toward dreaming for the good. Remember, the dream prayer in the Talmud is for when we don’t understand our dreams. Facing these ambiguous dreams, the prayer does not begin with fear or loss. It begins with dreams for the good:

Great One of the Universe! I am Yours and my dreams are Yours!

May it be Your will, HaShem, my Gd, and Gd of my ancestors, that all my dreams regarding myself and regarding all of the people Yisrael be for the good: those I have dreamed about myself, and those I have dreamed about others, and those that others have dreamed about me.

If they are good dreams, strengthen them and fortify them, and may they be fulfilled through me and through others, like the dreams of Joseph, the righteous.³

The first thing I noticed is that it refers not only to dreams about the dreamer’s own life, but also to dreams about and by others: dreams about the whole Jewish people, and dreams others have dreamed about oneself. Our dreams, specifically our dreams for good, are not only about us as individuals. In our dream lives, we are in relationship: with the Jewish people collectively and with other people individually. This description invites us to see dreams as a means to connect in relationship.

In the Torah, and also for the ancient rabbis, dreams are how Gd talks with us. As Gd explains to Moses, Gd speaks to prophets in dreams.⁴ We also learn in the book of Genesis that Gd interprets dreams. The Hebrew word לפתר, which we usually translate as “interpret,” has a distinct meaning in Biblical and rabbinic texts: it also means “solve.” When people seek to have their dreams interpreted, it generally means they want to solve a difficulty the dream has brought up. They want the interpretation to make the dream positive.

³ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 55b.

⁴ Numbers 12:6.

The first dream of one of our ancestors recounted in the Torah happens when Jacob flees his parents' home, fearing for his life after stealing his brother Esau's birthright. Alone on his journey, not knowing his future, he sleeps on the side of the road. In his dream, he sees a ladder to the heavens, with angels ascending and descending.⁵ This is the first ambiguous dream recorded in our tradition.

To settle the ambiguity, Gd appears directly in the dream. Gd promises Jacob many descendants: as many as the dust of the earth. Gd tells him: הנה אנכי עמך
“Look, I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go, and I will return you to this land. I will not abandon you.” Gen. 28:15.

Here, Gd makes it clear this is a dream for the good: for the good of Jacob, who will later receive the name Yisrael in another dream, and for the good of his descendants, the people Israel as a collective. The dream means: You will survive and thrive. You will have many descendants. “I am with you.” “I will protect you.” “I will not abandon you.”

Unlike for Jacob, for most of us, or at least for me, Gd does not usually appear as a character in our dreams to interpret them or to solve their difficulties for us. That's where the prayer comes in. By praying about our ambiguous dreams, we acknowledge the possibility of interpretation: understanding more about our dreams, Gd's way of speaking to us; and understanding more about the arc of our lives.

We may look to the Divine, praying for the reassurance Jacob received: “I am with you”; “I will not abandon you.” But as the dream prayer teaches, although our dreams belong to *Ribono Shel Olam*, the Great One of the Universe, we share responsibility for making them happen. It says, “If they are good dreams, strengthen them and fortify them, and may they be fulfilled through me and through others.” We are not Jacob, whose dreams Gd promises to fulfill. Our dreams for the good can be fulfilled, we pray, through our own selves and through those around us. Knowing that we do not hold our dreams alone, we pray that we will be able to fulfill them. And we remind ourselves that it is our responsibility to move toward their fulfillment.

Over the past few years, I have felt uniquely and extraordinarily privileged to be taking steps every day to fulfill one of the most cherished dreams of my life: the dream of becoming a rabbi. My patient and loving family, my caring teachers, and the presence of the Divine in my life all make it possible for me to pursue this dream. In the breathtaking moments and in the day-to-day, I

⁵ Genesis 28:10-16.

am grateful to all of them.

But I've come to understand that I'm wrong about part of what I just said. The privilege of fulfilling this dream is neither unique nor extraordinary. Dreams are not reserved for Olympic athletes or for young people in caps and gowns. No matter how much awe I feel at the blessings in my life, they are certainly not reserved for me!

Dreams are for all of us. They are an opportunity to reach toward the sacred and ongoing possibility of both moving our lives forward and returning to our true selves. As I began to study texts about dreams earlier this year, I also began to notice, all around me, people fulfilling their dreams: people who dream of new relationships or newly repaired relationships; people who dream of learning new things; people who dream of uncovering their potential to reach a professional or personal goal, or of spending more time with their loved ones, or of taking steps to forgive themselves and extend grace to others. Dreamers, everywhere!

As Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum teaches, these dreams for the good are necessary: "As is the case with the Torah itself, there is no point to all these hopes if they are never transformed into reality, just as there is no point to a reality devoid of the dreams that sustain its movement forward."⁶ Holding onto our good dreams, and finding the strength to transform them into reality: this is essential to being human. It is essential to moving forward as a people, and to finding our *teshuvah*, our return home.

2. Healing

As we know, and as the rabbis of the Talmud also knew, not every dream is for the good. Because you have shared with me, and because of my own experiences, I know that for many people in this room, dreams have been shattered in the past year. This is the part about dreams that require healing.

After describing dreams for the good, the dream prayer in the Talmud moves on to dreams that challenge us: *If the dreams require healing, heal them like Hezekiah, king of Judah, who was healed from his sickness; like Miriam the prophetess from her tsara'at [her skin affliction]. . . .* The prayer in the Talmud continues with more examples of healing. But I'd like to look with you at those two examples, Hezekiah and Miriam.

⁶ *Pirkei Avot Lev Shalem*, Rabbinical Assembly, 2018, p. 50.

Hezekiah was king in the 8th century BCE. You might guess from his name, related to the word *hazak*, strong, that King Hezekiah was a hero. He is praised in Tanakh, and later by the rabbis, as a righteous leader who restored traditional ritual to the Temple in Jerusalem.⁷

Once, Hezekiah fell terribly ill. He was so ill that the prophet Isaiah prophesied that he would die. Despite that devastating news, Hezekiah prayed to Gd for healing. Remarkably, Gd got back in touch with Isaiah and changed the prophecy to one of complete healing.⁸

This is a story of stellar morals; it seems Hezekiah can do no wrong. When he is healed, it is the healing of one who fell sick through no fault of his own.

In other stories in Tanakh, illness can be a metaphor for moral flaws. People fall sick because they have made a poor choice or a terrible mistake. The second healing in the list is one example: the prophet Miriam heals from *tsara'at*, a skin affliction. In the book of Numbers, Miriam and Aaron criticize their brother Moses. They criticize his marriage and his leadership, asking why he is treated so uniquely by Gd. After all, they argue, they are prophets too!

Miriam's criticism does not go over well with Gd. While Moses is praised for his *anavah*, his humility, Miriam falls sick with an illness that requires her to quarantine outside the camp for seven days. Ultimately, she heals.⁹

This episode with Miriam is generally taught as a caution against *lashon ha-ra*, negative speech. There is a strong norm in Jewish tradition against speaking negatively about others. While the Torah and the ancient rabbis praise Miriam in many other contexts, the sources agree she made the wrong decision here.

Sometimes, like Miriam, we hold some responsibility for our suffering; sometimes, we make mistakes. For Miriam, that accountability does not outweigh the overall positive arc of her life: the language of the prayer still recognizes her as a prophet. From this we learn that even if we bear some responsibility for our problems, our mistakes do not define us. Instead, we are invited to seek healing.

⁷ See 2 Chronicles, Chapter 30.

⁸ See 2 Kings, Chapter 20. For more about Hezekiah's reign, see 2 Chronicles, Chapters 29-32.

⁹ In Numbers, Chapter 12, Miriam speaks out against Moses and is stricken with *tsara'at*, a skin affliction. Moses prays to Gd, "*E-l na, r'fa na lah*" ("Please Gd, please heal her!"), but her healing takes seven days.

At other times, like Hezekiah, we suffer even though we're not at fault. We cannot imagine anything we've done to bring about such suffering. It is part of life, including the lives of those devoted to goodness.

When we seek healing, we appeal in prayer to both models at the same time: Hezekiah and Miriam. We don't even have to know which one we are, or whether we fall somewhere between. Shattered dreams take different forms. Regardless, the possibility of healing is there.

3. Collective Dreams

The psalm in Birkat HaMazon, grace after meals, remember, opens: "When Gd causes the *teshuvah*, the return of Zion, we will be like dreamers." Ps. 126:1. Here, in this season of *teshuvah*, are we dreaming together? What are our collective dreams?

The dream prayer in the Talmud refers both to dreams about our own individual lives and dreams about the Jewish people. After the section about dreams for healing, the final section of the prayer reads: *As You transformed the curse of the wicked Bilaam from a curse to a blessing, so may You transform all my dreams regarding myself and regarding all of Yisrael for goodness.*

In the Torah, Bilaam was a prophet hired by a wicked king to curse the Israelites. He tried three times, but each time he opened his mouth to utter a curse, Gd transformed his words into words of blessing, including the words carved above the main entrance to our sanctuary: *Mah tovu, ohalekha Ya'akov, mishk'notekha Yisrael*: How lovely are your tents, Jacob, your sanctuaries, Israel.¹⁰ The prayer in the Talmud understands that dreams, in particular our dreams about the Jewish people, may similarly require transformation: from curse to blessing, from skepticism to wonder, from despair to hope.

It has been a year of challenging questions and thoughtful conversations about what it means to be American Jews right now, and about our connections and obligations to our siblings in Israel and to our neighbors in the United States. We have talked about these questions in settings formal and informal, at kitchen tables and in workplaces, on the sidewalk and at school drop-off. We've talked with our families and our friends and with strangers. We have talked through tears in our eyes, and we have sat bereft when we've run out of tears.

¹⁰ Numbers 24:5.

We care so deeply about these questions. To me, this is the seed of potential transformation. The dream is not that we will all come to a shared, unified vision about what it means to be part of a Jewish community today. The dream is that as we ask questions, insisting that we care not only about answers but that we also care deeply about each other, we will turn into something new.

In grappling with all of these questions about what it means to be a Jewish community today, we can learn from Jacob's next dream. One night, years after his dream about the ladder, he was consumed with anxiety about his upcoming reunion with his brother Esau. It was the first time they would see each other in at least twenty years. In that dream, Jacob wrestles with a Divine messenger, and he receives the name *Yisrael*, Gd-Wrestler.¹¹

As part of *Am Yisrael*, the Gd-wrestling people, the Jewish people, we are dreaming together as we grapple with questions that probe our souls. We dream that our questions matter and our tears matter and our hopes matter. We dream that even as we disagree, even as we make mistakes and sometimes allow anger or fear to consume us, *teshuvah* can bring us home to our collective dream. *B'shuv HaShem et shivat tzion hayinu k'holmim*. "When Gd causes the return of Zion, we will be like dreamers." Ps. 126:1.

To be part of a collective dream is a privilege and an obligation. As you have probably noticed, it's not always easy to be part of the Jewish community! It's not easy. Yet, we are drawn toward each other and toward our collective dream, praying, in the words of the Rosh HaShanah liturgy, *Please, God, instill in us awe of all Creation, and make us into a single group, so we can carry out Your will with a whole heart*.¹² Two years ago, I stood here and spoke about those words "a single group," *agudah ahat*, which the rabbis interpret to mean people who are different coming together for a shared purpose.¹³

We are different. And we come together. Especially in these Days of Awe, we are drawn toward each other, our sanctuaries oriented worldwide in concentric circles around Jerusalem, standing together with a single, whole heart. In the words of the Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai, "The greatest desire of all / Is to be in the dream of another / To feel a light pull, like reins, / To feel a heavy pull, like chains."

¹¹ Genesis 32:25-30. GJC member Rabbi Arthur Waskow coined the term "God-wrestler" as a translation for the name ישראל.

¹² This is in the *U'v'khein* piyyut in the Amidah for the High Holidays. See, e.g., Mahzor Lev Shalem, 13.

¹³ My Rosh HaShanah 5783 sermon, [Connection](#).



Conclusion

For many years, I worked in the Curtis Building in Center City, where the lobby features a 1915 stained glass mural called the Dream Garden. It's a collaboration between Louis Comfort Tiffany and Maxfield Parrish. My father, a stained glass artist, loves to visit this mural, and he taught me to appreciate it. The Dream Garden is made of over one hundred thousand pieces of hand-forged glass in 260 different shades, including colors tinged with metal for iridescence. Indeed, the mural shimmers with depth and detail. In certain light and only from a certain angle, you can see the moon glowing behind a tree.

It is also tremendously heavy. This shimmering, beguiling Dream Garden weighs at least four tons.

Dreams, the way Gd talks with us, can lift us into the infinite colors and shapes of possibility, carrying us along toward the future and illuminating our true selves. Dreams can also present us with weighty responsibility: the path of *teshuvah*, the challenges of healing, being part of a collective. Dreams connect us to others, through "a light pull, like reins" and "a heavy pull, like chains."

We pray, "If they are good dreams, may they be fulfilled through me and through others." When we invite others into the process of fulfilling our dreams, we are no longer alone in transforming something cherished into our reality. It can require courage to share our dreams with others. But, as I've learned, it can also be life-changing. One way to transform the color of this new year, to make it shimmer, might be to share one of your dreams with those around you, and invite them into the process of fulfilling it.

The ending to this sermon felt different when I wrote it this summer. I wrote the ending on a summer afternoon at the pool, while children played and the water sparkled. Shimmer in the new year seemed so possible then.

Today, maybe like you, I feel less certain. I'm not sure. Can we dare to dream of a healed world? Are we naive to cultivate hope in the beauty of what could be?

But Rosh HaShanah is precisely that: a time to contemplate what could be, in our own lives and as a collective. When we pray, we "dream of the highest form of existence that can be, and ask that it come to be."¹⁴ Psalm 126, in grace after meals, continues, "When Gd causes the return of Zion, we will be like dreamers. Then our mouths will be filled with laughter, and our lips will be filled with song." Ps. 126:1-2.

Ken y'hi ratzon. May it be so. Let's be like dreamers. This year, please Gd, may we return to dreaming, and laughing, and singing together.

L'shanah Tovah!

¹⁴ Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum in *Pirkei Avot Lev Shalem*, Rabbinical Assembly, 2018, p. 95.