



Chapter Three

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Your Soul and How to Take Care Of It

Body and Soul—You Have a Body, You are a Soul.

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Q) Is it a mitzvah to eat right and exercise?

A) Taking care of your body is a mitzvah! Your body is the home for your soul; so if your body is not taken care of, your soul will not be able to fulfill its mission in this world. The rabbinic sage Rambam was a physician and wrote extensively on matters of food, health, exercise and healing. He writes that if you feel sick all of the time, you can lose your focus on spiritual growth.

The Torah tells you to be “especially careful to guard your body” from all harm. If you eat unhealthy food and do not exercise, you will have physical aches and pains. If you ever had any serious pain in your life—back pain, or a toothache perhaps—you know how hard it is to focus on anything, let alone a connection to God. So Judaism tells you to constantly care for your body and treat it with respect, exercise regularly and not overindulge.

As the Rambam writes: “As long as you exercise vigorously, don’t eat your fill, and have a soft stool, you will not become sick; you will feel robust, even if you occasionally eat less healthy foods.”

Overeating is like poison to the body! It is the possible cause of many illnesses and ailments, even if the foods are relatively healthy. The Rambam recommends that you eat enough, but only until you feel three-quarters full, not completely full. Before you eat, you should do some physical work or exercise until your body warms up.

Q) Does Jewish tradition really say that chicken soup is good for you, or is that just a myth?

A) Writing a thousand years ago, the Rambam said that drinking chicken soup should be done regularly, as it has the property of alleviating certain physical complaints. He also warns you to stay away from eating fowl that have been fattened by force-feeding.

In 2000, scientists at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha studied the effect of chicken soup on the inflammatory response in vitro. They found that some components of chicken soup inhibit neutrophil migration, which may have an anti-inflammatory effect that could lead to temporary ease from symptoms of illness.

Either way, chicken soup tastes great, just the way your grandmother used to make it, so have some whether you’re feeling fine or under the weather. As Grandpa used to say, “It can’t hurt!”

Q) Does Judaism permit smoking cigarettes?

A) Anything that hurts or harms your body is forbidden in Judaism. Smoking cigarettes can be harmful to your body;

you just have to read the warning labels on cigarette boxes to confirm that.

Pretty much everyone agrees that the health impact of smoking on a healthy man or woman is not great. You may argue that drinking alcohol or overeating are just as bad or worse, and that may or may not be true. Judaism teaches that your body is on loan to you from God, Who created you, so you are obligated to take care of it. You do not have the right to abuse it. Rabbis in our generation have ruled that it is forbidden to smoke cigarettes, even though breaking the habit can be very difficult.

So before doing anything, you have to think hard as to how you will function: will it make you better or worse as a productive member of society?

Q) Is getting a tattoo against Jewish law?

A) The Torah specifically forbids getting a tattoo and includes it as one of the 365 negative commandments. A possible reason that tattoos are forbidden is because they were used as a way of depicting or expressing a commitment to the various idols that people used to worship. Although people don't put tattoos on their skin anymore for that reason, Judaism still forbids it.

Q) If I already have a tattoo, am I required to remove it?

A) Once you have the tattoo, you are not required to remove it. But I have met plenty of people who regretted their decision later on in life and opted to have the tattoo removed.

Q) I heard that if I have a tattoo, I cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Is that true?

A) No, it's not true. A person with a tattoo can certainly be buried in a Jewish cemetery. The myth has been around for

quite a while, and may have begun for the following reason: In order to be buried in the local cemetery of your Jewish community, you needed to be a part of that community. When you left the community, you may also have left behind your right to being buried in their cemetery. Having a tattoo may have been a sign that a person felt distant from the community and therefore did not wish to be buried with the rest of the Jews. So it wasn't the tattoo that stopped you from being buried in the cemetery per se, but the person who had the tattoo already may have been disowned by the community and was not accepted by the burial society.

Q) Is lap band surgery okay according to Judaism?

A) Obesity and heart disease kill more people in the US today than any other disease. Judaism views life, and especially long life, as very precious. If you have unsuccessfully tried all the conventional ways to lose weight, having lap band surgery would be permitted.

Q) I am very self-conscious about the size of my nose; can I have plastic surgery to make my nose smaller?

A) If you are self-conscious about an aspect of your body which is impacting your self-esteem in a negative way, cosmetic surgery is permitted. This is especially true on a part of your body that is seen by all, such as your nose. The trend we are seeing nowadays of people having their entire faces and parts of their bodies totally changed may be taking things a little too far.

The Soul and Afterlife—So What Happens When I Die?

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Q) Does Judaism believe in heaven and hell?

A) If I asked you to close your eyes for a moment and picture heaven, what would you see? I have asked groups of Jewish men and women this question many times over the years, and the answers are all fairly similar: “I see clouds with people sitting on them, playing harps,” or they say, “I see flying babies with wings,” and maybe even angelic figures floating around in long white robes. As for hell, the images also come from popular culture—fires burning, a devil with horns, a pitchfork and a long tail. I can assure you these images are most definitely not the Jewish concept of heaven and hell. Maybe it’s Christian. Maybe it’s Hollywood!

Heaven in Hebrew is called Shamayim (also Gan Eden) and hell is referred to as Gehennom. Neither are physical in any way, shape or form. They are spiritual places, where your soul goes after leaving your body. After a lifetime of work in this world, your soul is judged and asked certain questions. Because you have shed not only your body, but also the lies, falsifications and rationalizations that are human inventions, you are able to see the truth, the whole truth, about your life and your relationships with others and with God. In fact, this aspect of the afterlife is known as the Olam Ha’emet, the World of Truth, for in God’s presence, deception is impossible. Your soul cannot lie, and it wants only to unite with God in perfect truth. So it relives your whole life, like watching a DVD of your entire time on earth, so to speak, truthfully exhibiting all the good and all the bad you sowed in your lifetime. This can cause your soul an immense amount of shame,

as it stands before God without any filters covering the actions of your life.

Based upon how your soul is judged, God rewards or punishes you. Gehennom is a spiritual purification that some souls need to experience, for a maximum of twelve months. It is not pleasant, for the soul endures a very painful decontamination, now fully aware of the ramifications of its wrongdoing. But it wants to go through this stage and be cleansed of its imperfection.

Gan Eden, what we would call Paradise, is not a meeting place for angelic harp rehearsals. It is a spiritual realm where the soul blossoms and reaches higher and higher levels of closeness to God. The pleasures of that experience so far outweigh all the pleasures of our physical world that it is unimaginable to the human mind.

There is also an element of a family reunion! When the Torah says that a person died and was “gathered to his people,” we take that literally. The soul naturally gravitates to the souls of ancestors and is enfolded by loved ones that preceded them. So yes, you will see Grandma again, and you will be utterly delighted by how lovely, tranquil and happy she looks. She’ll be glad to see you too!

Q) What determines when a person is destined to die?

A) As Benjamin Franklin once said, nothing is certain in this world except death and taxes! Although death is a scary proposition for most people, it is viewed in Jewish thought as a transition from the physical to the spiritual world. That’s because we firmly believe that humans are partly physical and partly spiritual. In fact, it is that blend that makes you uniquely human. The spiritual core of every individual is the soul. Unlike the physical body, your soul is eternal, for it is actually rooted in God’s essence.

When you live out the days appointed to you in a spiritually meaningful fashion, you die without terror or suffering, much like a lamp that goes out when the oil is depleted. Living a full life is considered the greatest blessing. Your life could be increased because of your merit, or decreased because of sin.

Although you have a set life span that was determined before you were born, through your actions or by putting yourself in dangerous situations you may be taken out of this world prematurely. Put simply, God may remove His protection from you if you indulge in reckless behavior. Your own actions remove the Providence to prevent worldly accidents from claiming your life.

Though we cannot understand God's inscrutable calculations, every life that He terminates is planned so that it will have the opportunity to maximize its achievements in this world. Because God knows the future, He may take a life knowing full well that if He doesn't, this person will only bring pain and suffering (physical or spiritual) to him or herself, and/or the rest of the world. It may be that you do many foolish things with your life, but thankfully God is very patient, and gives you time to improve your ways.

Since everyone dies, the best thing we can all do is make sure that the short amount of time we have in this world is used to further God's will for the maximum benefit to ourselves and those around us.

Q) What happens to my soul after I die?

A) Although your body dies, your soul lives on forever. The Torah itself does not explicitly mention life after death because the Torah is an explanation of how we need to live in this world, so it doesn't go into the nature of the soul, or what happens to the soul after it leaves the body. The Talmud and Kabbalah do discuss the nature of the soul. The soul first

attaches to the body at the moment of conception, and it remains together with the body until the moment of death. This is the reason that death is referred to in Hebrew as yetziat haneshamah, the departure of the soul.

The soul goes through great confusion as it leaves the body. This is the reason why it is important for someone to be with a dying person, if possible, so that he or she doesn't die alone. Once the soul leaves the body, it is intensely aware of the body that housed it for its entire life; it is also cognizant of its surroundings, until the body is buried in the ground. It can see, hear and perceive without the physical organs that facilitate these functions in life.

The soul mourns the body for seven days, until the body begins decomposing. For the first twelve months after death, until the full decomposition of the body, the soul learns to focus without a body and eyes. The soul can however remain disorientated. The souls of truly righteous people go straight to Gan Eden in the spiritual realm.

The soul is judged during the first twelve months after death. This is the reason that children of the deceased say Kaddish for the entire year. The fact that the deceased has offspring who make it a point daily to publicly praise God (that is what Kaddish does) gives them great satisfaction and increases the merits of the soul.

Q) What are the first questions a person is asked during that judgment?

A) Everyone faces a heavenly tribunal when they leave this world. Your entire life is played back to you and you must account for the decisions you made. The Talmud however, lists six questions that everyone is first asked:

1. Were you honest in business? This includes all matters dealing with finances and other people. To what degree did you act with honesty and integrity in business? We must show respect towards other people's money as though it were ours.
2. Did you set aside fixed time to study Torah? Torah needs to be studied on a fixed basis; otherwise, you will not know how to do the mitzvot. Studying Torah at a fixed time every day, or even every week, ensures that you don't neglect your study by being too involved in your other affairs.
3. Did you have children? This question may not only be asking whether you tried to have children, which is a very important mitzvah, but also whether you helped other people find their mates and get married so they could have children.
4. Did you anticipate the coming of the Messiah every day? The coming of the Messiah is a principle of Jewish faith. We should eagerly await his arrival and pray for the Final Redemption and the total peace that will reign over the entire universe. The Mashiach can come at any time. Our sages tell us that through our actions, specifically promoting harmony in our relationships, we can speed up the coming Redemption.
5. Did you delve into wisdom? You should apply yourself to study and become a wise person through your learning. Did you take advantage of opportunities to learn Torah from others?
6. Did you increase your knowledge? You are expected to be not only wise, but also increase your da'at (knowledge of the world around you) in order to understand deeply and have a wide knowledge of Torah. Seeking knowledge and understanding of God's creation and

the amazingly beautiful world you live in is part of your Torah education.

These six questions should be thought about and meditated upon during our time in this world.

Q) Are the dead aware of what is happening in this world?

A) The Talmud goes into a long discussion about whether the dead are aware of what is going on in this physical world. Opinions and proofs are brought in favor, and then nearly each proof is rejected. One of the stories involves a pious man who ends up spending the night in a cemetery and hears the spirits of two young women who had died talking to each other. Somehow, they discovered that they had been overheard by a living individual. The Talmud concludes that this is not a proof they were aware of what was occurring on earth, for perhaps they learned it from another spirit—someone who had died in the interim.

About 1200 years after the completion of the Talmud, an eighteenth-century sage named Rabbi Yehonatan Eybschutz suggested a compromise. (One of the beauties of learning Torah and Talmud is that commentators living centuries apart can debate one another as though they are sitting at the same table. And we get to listen in!) He concludes that only some people are aware of what is occurring in this world after they die. If you are righteous during your lifetime and spent your days helping others in need, after you die you remain aware of people who are still alive and of their plight. However, if you are selfish and only concerned with yourself, if the lives of others do not matter to you in this world, you will not have access to the living when you die.

It appears that even the righteous lose their interest in this world after they die, but they can be informed of important

occurrences by the living or by those recently deceased. A fascinating Midrash recounts that when the Holy Temple of Jerusalem was in flames and the surviving Jews were being pressed into exile, God instructed the prophet Jeremiah to ‘wake up’ our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as Moses, and inform them of the horrific events taking place. Apparently they did not know! When they were told, they cried and mourned for their children.

Does this principle hold true for “regular” people who are not prophets? We don’t exactly know to what extent there is awareness, but from many personal accounts there seems to be some indication of contact with people who have passed over to the other side.

Q) So what about that business of resurrection? Will dead people one day come out of the earth alive? Does Judaism believe in zombies?

A) The only zombies we know about are the ones who can’t get out of bed on a Monday morning for work!

We do, however believe in resurrection, which according to the Rambam is one of the thirteen basic principles of our faith. We have two basic opinions regarding resurrection, one is from the Rambam (pronounced RAMbam); and the other is from the Ramban (pronounced RamBAN). Yeah, read it again. The first ends with an “m” and is known as Maimonides (lived in twelfth-century Spain, later fled to Egypt); the other ends in “n” and is known as Nachmanides (thirteenth-century Spain, later fled to the Holy Land). Both had remarkably gifted intellects and wrote books that are studied to this day.

Much of what I explained in the questions above is based on the Ramban. He maintains that the Olam Haba, World to Come, is the world that will exist after resurrection, and that it will be a world that includes both the body and the soul.

This is the opinion of many other major Torah sages as well. According to this opinion, since you are made up of a body and a soul, you cannot attain maximum perception of God without your body as well as your soul. When you die, your soul goes to the World of Souls where it has a certain perception of God, and it waits there until the Messianic resurrection. After resurrection, in the Olam Haba, this perception reaches its ultimate ability.

The Rambam's opinion is that the Olam Haba promised in Torah literature, involves only the soul, and is completely spiritual. It is the place the soul goes immediately after death.

Resurrection, says the Rambam, involves a temporary return to the physical plane. This is necessary so that all the people who passed away in previous generations will have the satisfaction of seeing the Messianic world with their physical eyes. Soon after their resurrection, they will die and return to the World to Come.

Either way, at some time after the Messiah comes, the resurrection of our bodies is a key element in God's ultimate reward for mankind.

Q) I feel like I have lived previous lives before this one. Does Judaism believe in reincarnation?

A) Many Jewish scholars, especially the Kabbalists, have written on the topic of gilgul neshamot, transmigration of the soul or reincarnation. Although reincarnation is not a principle of our faith (which means you don't have to believe it if you don't want to), it has been accepted and described in great detail by many eminent Jewish scholars. The idea behind reincarnation is that the soul enters a physical body before it is born into this world. After the soul has completed its journey through this world, the person dies, and like every soul, is judged by God. One of the judgments that can be given to

the soul is that it needs to reenter this world in another body in order to fix something it never managed to complete in its past life.

Three possible reasons are given as to why your soul may have been returned to this world, and given another chance, so to speak.

Past sins: You may have done some sins in your past life which you need to return to this physical world to correct.

Lack of mitzvot: You may have done mitzvot in your past life, but many more are needed for your soul to reach its ultimate perfection. Since you may never have had the opportunity to do them, God permits you to return and do those mitzvot.

To help others: It may be that you perfected your soul in a past life, by performing many mitzvot and truly working on your character. You may have fulfilled your unique mission on earth. Now you need to return to this world in order help others be perfected!

Q) Can a person be reincarnated as an animal?

A) In his book *Pele Yoetz*, the renowned scholar and Kabbalist, Rabbi Eliezer Papo (who lived in early nineteenth-century Constantinople) explains that a person can return to this world as an animal, or even an insect depending on what the person did in this world. Returning to this physical world in the form of a non-human can elevate the soul of the person. We are not aware, however, which animal may or may not have such a soul inside it.

Q) Can a man be reincarnated as a woman or vice versa?

A) A person can be reincarnated as the opposite gender, according to the Kabbalist Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (also known as the Ari) as recorded by his student Rabbi Chaim Vital in *Sha'ar Hagilgulim*.

Only God can decide and know what, who or why a person should return to this world and in what form. We humans are not privy to that information. We know only that it is always for the best, allowing the soul to fulfill its maximum potential in this world.

Q) I heard you speak once and you mentioned that we have five souls! Did I mishear you?

A) No, you did not mishear me. To be clear, you have five levels to your soul. Maybe the best way to envisage it is to think of those wooden Russian nesting dolls that fit one inside the other. Although I am not a big fan of Russian dolls—they are so full of themselves! Anyway, each one of these five layers has a different attribute and purpose. Combined, they make up the human personality. Let's go through each of them.

Starting from the lowest level of the soul:

1. The *Nefesh* is the “animal” part of your soul. This controls your physical desires and drives. The need to eat, drink, sleep, and procreate are all found in the *Nefesh*. The *Nefesh* is located in the blood (i.e. the physiological processes of your body). When you can't get out of bed on a workday morning, your *Nefesh* is probably preventing you from action.
2. Next is *Ruach*, the “spirit.” (Literally, the word *Ruach* means wind). This is the source of your emotions, such as anger, happiness, joy and sorrow. When you feel an emotion welling up inside you, it's your *Ruach* at work. The fact that you are able to speak is thanks to your *Ruach*. The *Ruach*, as you probably figured out, is located in your heart.
3. Next is *Neshamah*. The word *Neshamah* is often used to describe all five levels of your soul, probably because

it is the source of your thoughts, intellect and understanding. Reading something incredible, or learning an idea that really impacts you is really impacting your *Neshamah*. And you probably realize that the *Neshamah* is located in your brain.

In Kabbalistic thought, these first three levels are referred to as NaRaN. They comprise the three main parts of your soul and your personality.

The final two levels of your soul are linked like a chain to God and the spiritual world, outside of your body. You are virtually unaware of their workings during your lifetime.

They are *Chayah* (from the word *chai*, meaning life), which is your life force. And finally the highest level of your soul is called *Yechidah*, which refers to the “Oneness” and uniqueness of your soul. It is man’s closest link to God, Who is a single entity.

Q) Is martyrdom considered a good thing in Judaism as it is in other religions and cultures?

A) Nothing is more precious to a Jew than life! Every second of being alive in this world is an incredible blessing and you are forbidden to shorten your or anybody else’s life for even a second. In a world where “pulling the plug” is almost a daily occurrence, for the Jew, removing life support from a living human being is an act fraught with danger for the one deciding and the one carrying out the act. (Instances where medical issues present this challenge must be discussed with a rabbi with expertise in this area of Jewish law. He will guide you through these agonizing decisions.)

For this reason, committing suicide is considered one of the most grievous sins. If God gives you the blessing of life, shortening it purposefully is considered going against God’s

plan for you. Since it is God who keeps you alive in the first place, you do not have the right to reject this gift. By removing even a moment of it, you are rebelling against Him.

Some people consider dying for God a great and wonderful spiritual act. For the Jew, dying for God is not the purpose of life: living for God is. Anyone can blow himself up in a plane or restaurant thinking “this is what God wants,” but in truth, God wants us to live, not try to reach heaven by casting away His precious gift of life. Our patriarch Abraham spent his entire life telling the people of his pagan world not to sacrifice their children for God. This message has still not sunk in, and we must continue reminding the world of the sanctity of life, and especially the sanctity of innocent children’s lives.

That is why the Torah itself permits (actually mandates) that, when necessary, all mitzvot and rules can be broken order to increase life for yourself or others. Even Shabbat laws can be broken in order to save a life. For example, if a woman goes into labor on Shabbat (as happened with two of my children!), it becomes a mitzvah to break the Shabbat to help her safely reach the hospital where she can deliver her baby. If a room is full of non-Shabbat observant Jews and a rabbi, Jewish law mandates that the rabbi must be the one to make the call for the ambulance, demonstrating to everyone the enormous mitzvah of saving a life.

The three “cardinal sins” are exceptions—rather than transgress them, a Jew must give up his or her life. These three sins are: sexual immorality, idol worship and murder. If someone holds a gun to a Jew’s head and tells him that he will be spared if he kills another person, that Jew must give up his own life rather than spill someone else’s blood. The same holds true for idol worship, and sexual immorality, such as incest.

Sleep and Dreams

To Sleep, Perchance to Dream . . .

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Q) If all aspects of God's creation are purposeful, why did He create the need for sleep? Why should I spend such a big part of my life in a semi-conscious state?

A) Sleep is good for your health, especially if you get the right amount. Imagine if you didn't have to sleep and you were able to stay up for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, busy with work, recreation or whatever else. You would have no separation from one day to the next. So if you were to have a bad moment in your life, you couldn't move on from it, because it happened today! By having days, separated by sleep, you are able to begin each day as new. If you had a bad day yesterday, go to sleep; tomorrow is a completely new day! What a great gift—life allows you to wake up and start all over again.

Q) Do dreams have any relevance in Jewish thought?

A) In Hebrew, a dream is called a *chalom*, which relates to another word: *hachlamah*, a cure. Dreams are important, and can have a curative impact on your mind. The word *chalom* is also related to the word *chalon*, Hebrew for window, as a dream can act as a window into your soul.

Dreams played a very important role in our foundation as a nation. Ten episodes in the Torah involve dreams in some form. Our patriarch Jacob puts his head down to sleep and dreams of a ladder going into the heavens. When he awakes, he realizes he had been sleeping on very holy ground, the location of the future Holy Temple of Jerusalem. Jacob's son, Joseph, dreams that sheaves of wheat are bowing down to one regal sheaf, and then about the sun, moon and stars bowing down to him. Joseph's brothers, taking this as a sign that he

wants to rule over them, sell him into slavery. Joseph finds himself in an Egyptian jail and ends up interpreting dreams for two imprisoned officers of Pharaoh. His dream analysis is totally accurate, effectively foretelling their futures. He eventually becomes dream interpreter to Pharaoh himself, and accurately interprets his dreams too. This leads Joseph to become the viceroy of Egypt, and eventually allows him to establish his father, brothers and their families safely in Egypt during a famine many years later. The families of the twelve sons of Jacob (also called Israel) became the Jewish nation in Egypt. Eventually, the “Children of Israel”—our ancestors—were released from Egyptian slavery by God and were given the Torah soon after.

Without dreams, the Jewish People would never have become a nation!

The Talmud explains that dreams can be “a sixtieth” of prophecy. Although direct prophecy does not exist anymore, dreams may contain a lower level of Divine spiritual revelation.

Q) Why do dreams exist?

A) One possible reason dreams exist at all may be to teach us a lesson through a metaphor. We live in a physical world for a lifetime. We know, however, that this physical world isn’t the “real” world. The spiritual world, where our souls were before we came into this world and where they return to after we leave this world, is the true existence. This can be a difficult concept to wrap our minds around because all we see is the physical world around us.

So God created a device: dreams allow us to experience what seems like reality, but we quickly learn that it wasn’t real. When you go to sleep and dream, you are convinced that what’s happening is real. When you wake up the next

morning, you are sometimes delighted, other times devastated, that your dream was actually just that, only a dream!

So now you have a real life metaphor for the existence of the spiritual world. Just as you were dreaming last night and felt that was the real world, when it wasn't, so too this entire life that surrounds you now is like a dream state too. The process of dying is very much like waking up from a long sleep.

Are you sure you're awake right now?

Q) Do all the dreams we have contain meaning?

A) Not all dreams are the same. Dreams come in three varieties:

1. Regular dreams: These are merely your mind thinking of things that you experienced during the day or are concerning you. They are devoid of any meaning and are usually easily forgotten. So dreaming about a friend you saw that day or are planning to meet the next day would most likely fall under this category.
2. Divinely inspired dreams: These are extremely rare, and come to very holy and spiritual people. These dreams are usually repeated multiple times, and are not easily forgotten. The dream that Jacob had of angels ascending and descending the ladder falls under this category. If you dream you met your friend and he was an angel descending a ladder, forget it because you're probably not that holy.
3. Indirectly inspired dreams: These are a mix of the first two types. A spiritual revelation may be interwoven with mundane thoughts you've had on your mind recently. Even meaningful dreams are a mixture of "wheat" and "chaff," so the dream mixes in meaningful elements with flights of imagination. So if you dream your angelic friend descended a ladder and told you to

study Torah, maybe you should look up the number of your nearest rabbi.

Q) Someone told me that the way a dream is interpreted affects the outcome of the dream. How can that be if all dreams have a given interpretation?

A) The Talmud famously declares that the meaning of your dream follows the way it is interpreted. As well as this, the Talmud also states that a dream that has not been interpreted is like a letter that has not been opened and read! This is a challenging concept to understand, because if all dreams depend upon their interpretation, then no one can ever have a “bad” dream, as it always depends upon how your dreams are interpreted by another person.

To reconcile this problem, a great rabbi and Talmudist, Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, also known as the Maharsha, who lived Poland during the late 1500s and early 1600s, divided dreams into three categories:

1. 1) Dreams with no single objective meaning. Some dreams carry a multiplicity of potential meanings. For example, you could dream that you saw a head of lettuce. This image could mean two very different things: you may be having bitter experiences coming your way, just like the leaves of lettuce, which if chewed for a while become bitter, or your business profits will double like the leaves of a lettuce are doubled. So the actual dream remains meaningless (like an unopened letter) until someone comes and gives it an interpretation. From here you can see the power of speech. The way the dream is interpreted, by someone speaking about it, can actually make the dream come true to some extent!

The Talmud tells the story of a certain elderly sage who once had a dream. He knew of twenty-four dream interpreters who were living in Jerusalem at the time. He approached all twenty-four of them, and asked them to interpret his dream, and each one gave a different interpretation. What was incredible is that all the interpretations that he was given by each of the twenty-four dream interpreters materialized!

2. Dreams that have one basic meaning. Some dreams are visions that have one meaning, which is either positive or negative. However, these dreams are also open to interpretation, and the dream's given meaning can be reversed according to the interpretation you give them. The Talmud gives a list of visions you can have in a dream that can mean something positive or negative depending on what you say after seeing it. For example, if you see a river in a dream, it's a sign you will have peace in your life, unless you say something that could connect that vision to challenges that flow like a river, which you don't want to do! Don't know what to say or do? Be careful to go only to a knowledgeable rabbi to speak about your dreams!
3. Dreams that are prophetic and their interpretation cannot be changed. This final category is a dream that has a meaning that is absolute, and cannot be swayed by interpretation. One of the great Talmudic scholars, Rava, describes such dreams as being delivered by angels. The dream Joseph had of his brothers bowing down to him, which did eventually transpire, is an example of such a dream.

Q) I have a recurring dream that really scares me. What should I do about it?

A) If a dream really upsets you, that could be good, because the dream itself is meant to be a “wake up call” to get your life together! The anguish suffered by having that dream may have been all that was needed for you. The Talmud explains that this is one of the ways a person is led to repentance, by being upset about a dream, and that suffering wipes away negative experiences you would have had to deal with in real life. This is why a sage from the Talmud called Rav Chisda would say that a negative dream is better than a positive one!

However, if you did feel very upset, and you can't shake it, the Talmud recommends something, which is actually the custom in many communities. You should go to the synagogue at a time when the Kohanim bless the people. In many communities outside of Israel the blessing is bestowed on the major Jewish holidays. In Israel, it happens every day. When you reach the part of the service when the Kohanim cover themselves with a tallit and raise their hands to bless the people, you should say the following prayer, which is printed in most holiday machzorim (prayer books). Here is an excerpt:

“Master of the world, I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. I have dreamed a dream, but I don't know what it means. May it be Your will, Hashem my God and the God of my forefathers, that all my dreams regarding myself and all the Jewish People be good ones. Whether they are dreams I dreamed about myself, those I dreamed about others, and those that others have dreamed about me. If they are good, strengthen them, and make them endure like the dreams of Joseph. If they require healing, heal them like King Hezekiah who was healed from his illness, and Miriam the prophetess was healed from her illness . . . may You transform all of my

dreams regarding myself and all the Jewish People for goodness. May You protect me, may You be gracious to me, may You accept me, Amen.”

Below is a list of dreams that are related by the Talmud, and the interpretations various sages gave them:

Q) I have a recurring dream that a snake is trying to bite me. I try to kill it in my dream, but I can't. Is that a bad sign?

A) Snakes are great things for you to dream about! Dreaming of snakes is known in Judaism as a very good sign that you will be receiving money soon. Getting bitten by the snake is an even better sign, and means you will make even more money. Lucky you didn't kill the snake, which means a money loss may be coming your way. Or maybe you saw a snake on television or online during the day and your dream means nothing at all!

Q) I keep dreaming that my teeth are falling out; is that bad?

A) If in your dream your teeth come out whole, that's a good sign. If your teeth come out crumbling to pieces, maybe not so good. Could be you are grinding your teeth in your sleep.

Q) I dreamt an elephant was chasing me! Very scary!

A) The Talmud mentions elephants. The Hebrew word for an elephant is a pil, which is related to another Hebrew word peleh, which means a wonder. So dreaming of elephants is a great thing and means you are going to have a wonderful thing happen to you!

Q) I dreamt both my hands were cut off! What does that mean?

A) It means you shouldn't be playing with chainsaws! Actually, the Talmud does mention such a dream and it's a good

one. It means you won't have need for the labor of your hands, and you are going to make money.

Q) I dreamt my nose fell off my face. Please tell me that's good.

A) That means you were angry, and you will be calm very soon. A nose relates to anger and actually the word nose in Hebrew, *af*, can also mean anger. This may be because when you are angry, your nostrils flair out.

Q) What if there's an ox in my dream?

A) Different ways this could be understood:

If it was eating meat—you will make money soon.

If goring—you will study well.

If it bit you—trouble could be coming.

If it kicked you—you are going on a long journey.

If you were riding it—you are riding to greatness.

Q) I saw a camel in my dream; is that good?

A) Yes, it means that death could have been decreed against you, but you managed to escape it.

Q) I dreamt I was sitting in an olive tree, eating olives.

A) You will be seeing or having children.

Q) I dreamt I saw a field of barley.

A) Your sins have left you.

Q) I dreamt I saw a field of wheat.

A) It means you will be experiencing peace.

Q) I saw a goat in a dream.

A) Dreaming of goats is good! You will see blessings this year!

Q) I dreamt I was drinking from a glass of water, and the glass broke!

A) Your wishes will be fulfilled, as the glass is broken and the contents were revealed.

Q) I dreamt I was climbing up onto a roof.

A) That's a good sign! Climbing down from a roof? Maybe not so great; try not to dream of that!

Q) I dreamt I was saying Kaddish for my father. But he passed away many years ago.

A) A wonderful dream. It means you will inherit the next world; you've earned eternal reward.

Q) I dreamt I was saying the Shema prayer. Is that good?

A) Yes, it means you will be enjoying God's presence.

Q) I dreamt I was stabbed and blood was coming out of my body! That can't be a good sign!

A) The Talmud disagrees; it's a great sign. It means your sins are being forgiven.