

ARE DREAMS SIGNIFICANT?

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel | February 25, 2019

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Everyone has dreamed at one time or another and all who have dreamed are curious about the meaning of the dreams. After many years of research, scientists are still not sure if dreams have the great significance that Freud claimed, little significance or no significance at all. What does Judaism believe?

In the Torah, dreams play a very prominent role in many major stories. Jacob has a symbolic dream about angels and ladders in which the promise to Abraham and Isaac about the land and the future Jewish people is affirmed.¹ Joseph's numerous dreams predict his future as leader, draw the wrath of his brothers and father upon him, and earn him a nickname as "the dreamer," which changes the course of Jewish history as the dreams cause the brothers to eventually sell Joseph which, in turn, eventually leads the Jewish people to enter the Egyptian Diaspora and slavery.² In Egypt, Joseph develops the ability to accurately interpret dreams³ that eventually frees him from jail and casts him as second only to the king.⁴ There are other dreams by non-Jews such as Avimelech⁵ and Bilaam⁶ in which G-d appears to each. All these dreams affected the events in the Torah. And yet, the Talmud does not make it clear if all dreams have significance. Though the Torah dreams certainly portend the future or change the course of Jewish history, it is not apparent how Judaism views the dreams of the common man.

There are many Talmudic sources showing how all types of dreams have specific meanings. An entire chapter of a Talmudic tractate is filled with discussions on how to interpret each detail of every dream.⁷ For example, it states that three specific types of dreams which will actually occur in reality.⁸ Other statements point to the significance of dreams. When it says that dreams are one sixtieth of prophecy,⁹ it certainly means that dreams are to be taken seriously. Part of the Shema prayer that a Jew recites before retiring at night, contains a blessing asking G-d to protect him or her from bad dreams.¹⁰ On each Jewish festival, during the Priestly blessing, there is a custom to say a prayer that asks G-d to fulfill all the dreams that a person is unaware of, if they are good, and to convert bad dreams to good dreams.¹¹ Clearly, these and many other sources indicate that the rabbis as well as the Torah attached significance to dreams, both in their Talmudic statements and the prayers they composed.

On the other hand, there are clear, unambiguous statements in the Talmud stating that dreams are totally worthless and not to be taken seriously, indicating that there was absolutely no significance attached

¹ Genesis 28:12-14

² Genesis 37:5-28

³ Genesis 40:8-13

⁴ Genesis 41:15-20

⁵ Genesis 20:6-7

⁶ Numbers 22:9-13

⁷ The ninth chapter of the Babylonian tractate Berachot

⁸ Berachot 55b

⁹ Berachot 57b

¹⁰ *Hamapil* prayer in the Siddur

¹¹ *Ribono Shel Olam* prayer found in the Machzor in the Priestly Blessing at the end of the Musaf prayer

to anyone's dream in the time of the Talmud as well as today.¹²

A third set of sources gives some significance to dreams, but modifies their importance and impact. One statement says that not all the good in dreams are fulfilled totally but that not all bad dreams are fulfilled totally either.¹³ Rashi,¹⁴ basing himself on this statement and other Talmudic statements, writes that every dream has some nonsense in it.

Therefore, all three types of sources exist simultaneously: all dreams have significance, parts of dreams have significance and no dream has significance. How are these major contradictions resolved? Which is the authentic Jewish approach? Samuel in the Talmud¹⁵ raised this very question. He cites the contradiction about the significance of dreams from two verses. A verse in Zechariah¹⁶ states that dreams have no significance. And yet, G-d says¹⁷ that He speaks to man (in prophecy) through dreams: how can both be correct, asks Samuel? His answer is somehow not satisfying to us, when he says that those dreams that come from an angel have significance and those that come from a demon have no significance. This obviously does not help resolve the issue. Even if we knew what a *Shed* (demon) was and how it affected dreams, we still would have no clue telling us the cause of each dream. Which dreams are demon caused and which are angel caused? Thus, we have not resolved the issue. How are we to know which dreams have significance and which are meaningless?

If we turn to Halacha (Jewish law), we might be able to see if a dream can have impact on Jewish action or specific Jewish laws, and, hence, be significant; or if it will have no impact on Jewish law, and, hence, be meaningless. Here, too, we are met with contradiction. The Talmud¹⁸ records an incident in which a person's father died and the son could not find some missing money. The father then came to the son in a dream and told him where the missing money was, but then added that it was designated as Second Tithe money and had to be used in Jerusalem. The son woke up and found the money in the precise place the father had indicated. Must he now spend that money in Jerusalem according to Jewish law? The Talmud says no, indicating that although the dream gave accurate information, it is not legally significant and thus the money has no special status. In codifying this concept, the Shulchan Aruch¹⁹ records this incident as final Jewish law and states that even if the father had said the money belongs to a certain party, and that person then claimed the money in a Jewish court, there is absolutely no obligation to return the money to the other person. This reaffirms the apparent concept implied in the story in the Talmud, in the dream about money: dreams have no authority in determining Jewish law, and, hence, have no real meaning or significance.

On the other hand, the same Code,²⁰ forty-five chapters earlier, records another law that seems to draw an opposite conclusion. If a man dreamed that he made a certain oath, the Shulchan Aruch offers two opinions as to how a person should react to this dream. One opinion says that he should ignore such a

¹² Horayot 13b and Gittin 52a

¹³ Berachot 55a

¹⁴ Rashi on Genesis 37:10

¹⁵ Berachot 55b

¹⁶ Zechariah 10:2

¹⁷ Numbers 12:6

¹⁸ Sanhedrin 30a

¹⁹ Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 255:9

²⁰ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 210:2

dream and the other opinion says he should go to a Jewish court to have the oath annulled by judges. Then the Shulchan Aruch states we should follow the second opinion and have the oath annulled. Apparently, we do give authority to dreams in Jewish law. How are both this contradiction and our basic question to be resolved?

All the commentaries try to resolve the issue by dividing up the dreams into categories. The Abarbanel,²¹ for example, says that dreams that are pure fantasy lack cohesion because the details that defy human experience are not real and have no import. However, dreams in which a person can see a clear meaning and message are to be taken seriously. Rabbeinu Bechaya²² says that there are three types of dreams. One type is caused by bad food and indigestion. Another type of dream is caused by man's thoughts during the day that are recreated in the dream at night. Both of these dreams have absolutely no significance. But the third type of dream comes from the soul and has merit and significance. Both of these distinctions and similar differences cited by others, do not help resolve the contradiction cited in Jewish law, but are helpful in trying to determine which dreams have significance or do not have meaning. The Responsum of one noted fifteenth century scholar of Majorca, known as the Tashbetz,²³ discussed this entire issue at length. He also distinguishes between some dreams that have significance and some that do not. He then concludes that Samuel's statement in the Talmud about demons is not to be taken literally, but refers to insignificant dreams. Then, he posits the halachik (Jewish law) status of all dreams, stating that since we do not know if a particular dream has significance, there is doubt about its legal status. According to Jewish law, in a case of doubt, we can never take away money from one party to give to another²⁴ since in monetary matters, we adopt the lenient view that leaves possessions in current ownership. Therefore, a dream cannot force the son to give back the money to the claimant. However, when it comes to laws of man to G-d, any case in doubt is ruled more stringently (since there is doubt). Therefore, in the case of vows (which is a man to G-d issue), we take the more strict view and force the person to annul the vow. This, then, resolves the difficulty in the Code of Jewish law.

Others disagree with this view of the Tashbetz, and make the legal distinction differently. For example, one opinion is that we always treat dreams as insignificant except in cases of danger, which are looked upon as even more stringent than Jewish law itself.²⁵ Only in the case that is categorized as a potential danger, such as the case of vows, would a person give significance to dreams and annul the vow.

This concept of potential danger may help explain two other areas of Jewish law that give weight to dreams, even if they seem very strange in the twenty first century context. If a person is bothered by a dream that he thinks has significance, he should perform a ritual of reciting certain verses in front of three of his closest friends, in order to nullify the impact of the dream.²⁶ Since this ruling is subjective and applies only to those who are bothered by a particular dream, we may say that for this person, he considers the dream to be potentially harmful and dangerous, and should follow the ruling in the Shulchan Aruch of what he should do. In a similar kind of ruling, Maimonides²⁷ concludes that if a person experiences a bad dream he should fast the following day, even if it is the Sabbath, and should try to examine his ways and repent.

²¹ Abarbanel on Genesis 41

²² Rabbeinu Bechaya on Genesis 41:1

²³ Responsa of Tashbetz, Part 2, no. 128

²⁴ Pesachim 9a and many other places in the Talmud

²⁵ Chulin 10a

²⁶ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 220:1

²⁷ Maimonides, Hilchot Taaniyot 1:12

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Here, too, one may use the underlying reason of potential danger as the concept that led to this ruling. Since it is, once again, subjective (what is a "bad dream" to one person may not be to another), the ruling may be based on the idea of potential danger in the mind of the person.

In summary, although all dreams in the Torah had significance, today some dreams may have significance and some may not. There is disagreement on what constitutes a dream of consequence and what the proper reaction is, but if a particular person is bothered by a particular dream, Judaism says he should act upon such a dream.

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