

The World that Isn't There

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Years ago, I read a book by the author Chuck Klosterman titled *But What if We're Wrong?* The premise of the book is to attempt to “think about the present as if it were the past,” or in other words, to consider whether despite our current devotion to rationality and the scientific method, there are aspects of our modern world about which we might be profoundly wrong?

In a chapter called “The World that Isn't There,” Klosterman explores the concept of dreaming:

“For most of human history, the act of dreaming was considered deeply important, almost like a spiritual interaction with a higher power The zenith of dream seriousness occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, defined by the work of Sigmund Freud (who thought dreams were everything) and his adversarial protégé Carl Jung (who thought dreams were *more* than everything—they were glimpses into a collective unconscious, shared by everyone who's ever lived.)”

But all that changed over the course of the twentieth century. As Klosterman explains, when science began to map the brain's electrical activity in 1924, “from that point forward, dreams increasingly mattered less dreams were just the byproduct of the brain stem firing chaotically during sleep. Since then, the conventional scientific sentiment has become that—while we don't *totally* understand why dreaming happens—the dreams themselves are meaningless. Which seems like a potentially massive misjudgment.”

In the Torah, dreams are anything but meaningless. The Joseph narrative (Gen. 37–50) is dominated by dream

motifs. At first, those dreams are the cause of Joseph's downfall—by sharing his two dreams in which he envisions his family bowing down to him, he raises the ire of his brothers, who conspire to kill him, saying:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו הֲגַה בְּעַל הַחֲלֻמוֹת הַלְזָה בָּא:

וַעֲתָה לָכֵן וְנַהַרְגֶהוּ וְנִשְׁלַחֵהוּ בְּאֶתֶד הַבְּרוֹת וְאִמְרֵנוּ חֵיה רָעָה אֲכַלְתֵּהוּ וְנִרְאָה מֵהֵיְהִי חֲלֻמֹתָיו:

They said to one another, “Here comes that **dreamer!** Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his **dreams!**” (Gen. 37: 19–20).

Later, in Chapter 40, Joseph's ability to interpret dreams moves the drama of the narrative further:

וַיַּחֲלֹמוּ חֲלוֹם שְׁנֵיהֶם אִישׁ חֲלֹמוֹ בְּלֵילָה אֶחָד אִישׁ כִּפְתָרוֹן חֲלֹמוֹ הַמִּשְׁקָה וְהָאֹפֶה אֲשֶׁר לְמֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר אֲסוּרִים בְּבַיִת הַסֵּהר:

Both of them—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—**dreamed in the same night, each his own dream and each dream with its own meaning.**

And lastly, this week's parashah, Parashat Miketz, begins with a dream sequence, this time of Pharaoh himself:

וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ שְׁנַתִּים יָמִים וַפְרָעָה חֲלֹם וְהָיָה עֹמֵד עַל־הַיָּאָר:

After two years' time, Pharaoh **dreamed** that he was standing by the Nile.

Ultimately, it is the cupbearer's remembrance of Joseph as someone who could correctly interpret dreams that leads to Joseph's (and his family's) salvation.

So how might we as moderns balance our scientific rationality regarding dream interpretation with the mystical potential that our dreams are glimpses into the future?

The Hasidic Rabbi Yosef Patzanovski (1875–1942) attempted to find just this balance in a comment he offers on this week's parashah.

בדבר החלומות אמרו חכמינו שיש חלומות המתהווים על ידי סיבות גופניות, כגון עיכול המזון, השפעת המזג, המצב הנפשי וכדומה, והם חלומות שווא ואין בהן ממש. אבל יש חלומות שהם הוראה והודעה מן השמים. וחז"ל אמרו (ברכות נז.) חלום אחד מששים לנבואה.

“On the matter of dreams, our sages said that there are dreams which come into being as a direct result of bodily functions, like digestion of food, changes in the weather, the state of one's mental health, etc. and these are dreams that are inconsequential and meaningless. However, there are other types of dreams which are forms of instruction and enlightenment from the Heavens. As our sages of blessed memory said (B. Talmud Berakhot 57a): ‘Dreams are one sixtieth of prophecy.’”

Undoubtedly, some of our dreams are simply the result of our brains staying active while our bodies rest. But what about those dreams, like Joseph's vision of his family's subservience, which feel like glimpses into the future or windows into the past? How can I explain the fact that humans often share the same dream? That one where the university you graduated from 25 years ago tells you that you are a couple of credits shy of graduating? Or what about dreams where we are visited by family members long gone, or friends long forgotten? And what about the Jew by Choice who tells you that they used to dream of their childhood home, but there was a secret door only they knew about, one that led them into a secret part of the home, one they always opened before the dream ended? Each of these dreams may be an echo of prophecy, a gift from God (or our subconscious?) which can offer insight, understanding, and truth; so why would we discount them as merely “the byproduct of the brain stem”?

Perhaps the answer to these questions can be found in Joseph's consistent approach to the delicate art of dream

interpretation. Each time Joseph is asked to interpret a dream, his response is always the same, a humble recognition that it is God, not Joseph, who provides the interpretation.

When the cupbearer and the baker ask Joseph to interpret their dreams he replies:

יֹאמְרוּ אֵלָיו חֲלוֹם חֲלַמְנוּ וּפְתָר אֵין אֵתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא לֵאלֹהִים פְּתָרָנִים סִפְרוּנָא לִי:

And they said to him, “We had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them.” So Joseph said to them, “Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams].”

And again, when Pharaoh brings Joseph out of prison to interpret his nightmares on the Nile, Joseph responds:

וַיַּעַן יוֹסֵף אֶת־פְּרִיעָה לֵאמֹר בִּלְעֲדֵי אֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶה אֶת־שְׁלוֹם פְּרִיעָה:

Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, “Not !! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare.”

In our modern times, let us not fall into the trap of assuming that our understanding of the world (and even our bodies) is complete and infallible. Instead, like Joseph, let us consistently surrender to mystery, and open our minds to the possibility of prophecy, each time we lie down to sleep.

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