

Communication with the Dead in Jewish Dream Culture

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Mortals are immortals and immortals are mortals,
the one living the others' death and dying the others' life.

—*Heraclitus of Ephesus*

The frequency with which dead people appear in dreams and act and associate with us as though they were alive has caused unnecessary surprise and has produced some remarkable explanations which throw our lack of understanding of dreams into strong relief.

—*Sigmund Freud*

1

Dreams are visual experiences that are necessarily transformed into words in order to turn them into meaningful communication, not just among individuals, but also between the dreaming individual and her/himself. Their presence in culture is thus characterized by a semiotic complexity of levels in which the seen and the heard, the spoken and the shown, are intensely interrelated, but also marked in their difference. Defying Lessing's taxonomy of media and Kantian categories of perception, they seem to elude both time and space, while turning the elements of both into categories that are radically transformed by the cognitive and expressive uniqueness of the phenomenon of dreaming. Thus they resemble other states in which numinous and supernatural experiences occur.

As visual vehicles of meditation, memory, and interpretation, they present themselves doubly: snapshots from an internally generated *terra incognita* but also

stylized maps of the same; metonyms as well as metaphors of inner journeys. They thus invite interpretation both as fragments of a whole never to be completely perceived and as synecdochic keys to a comprehensive symbolical code. It is this mental, communicative, and semiotic indefiniteness of dreams that has turned them into an enigmatic epicenter of interpretative praxis in many cultures.

This essay is about the nexus of dreams and death in Jewish textual tradition. Although it is not possible to characterize “the Jewish way” of dreaming or interpreting dreams, some themes are persistent enough to be regarded as central, or as keys. Death, one such key theme, powerfully focuses the existential and epistemological potential of dreams. Its manifestations in Jewish dream culture problematize other central concepts and practices of the culture, among them monotheism, visual representations of the sacred, divination, and the afterlife.

Dreams have been given a privileged position in Jewish culture since biblical times. The tension and oscillation between totality and utter fragmentation that are implicit in dreaming correlate them strongly to human experience vis-à-vis the divine as articulated in Hebrew religious literature since its emergence.

Leo Oppenheim’s comprehensive study of dream interpretation in the ancient Near East bears ample witness to the fact that dream interpretation carried an enormous weight in the birthground of Hebrew culture.¹ Dreams gained importance far beyond the domain of private life—for example, in major decisions of a political character; this pervasiveness is intricately interwoven with the expressive articulation of the presence of holiness in the world of humans. The centrality of dreams in early Sumerian and Semitic texts enabled Oppenheim to delineate one of the terminological constructs still governing much of the discussion of dreams in the Bible and in rabbinic literature, namely prophetic dreams and symbolic dreams, or the dream as prophetic vision, as riddle or enigmatic message.

It should thus not surprise us that dreams have a special, marked position in biblical texts, and are inserted into them in a way which reflects their central status in the construction of religious fantasies and norms.

While the text does not inform us if Abraham’s initiation into the unity of the one God included a dream vision, Jacob—the patriarch who fathered the tribes of Israel—did have a major dream experience. Jacob’s dream of the ladder and the angels portrays a formidable *axis mundi* through which the building blocks of Israelite identity—patriarchy, electedness, and the land of Canaan—traffic between heaven and earth.

The dream texts of the Hebrew Bible concern, in general, leaders and kings (Jacob, Joseph, Gideon, Solomon, and Nebuchadnezzar). Two lacunae call for attention: there is no dream dreamt by a woman, and there is no appearance of a dead person in a dream. The correlation between the two omissions may be understood by recalling the visit of Saul to the witch of Endor, who conjures up an apparition of the dead Samuel. The practice she specializes in is absolutely forbidden and practically extinguished by the monarch himself. To attain communication with the dead, Saul has to transgress a prohibition ordered by his own authority, and to conceal his own identity.

The story of Saul's visit to the necromancer is inserted in the sequence of narratives describing David's preparations for his future position as a king. "Now Samuel was dead and all Israel had lamented him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. And Saul had driven away the necromancers and magicians from the land" (1 Sam. 28:3). The information about Samuel's death is redundant, since it was already mentioned (1 Sam. 25: 1). Its reappearance in the verse about Saul's puritan measures against the mediators of the world of the dead is thus of special significance. It is precisely the death of Samuel—who anointed Saul but also kept chastising him, and who was Saul's main source of information about God's will—which seems to have motivated Saul's drastic reform. Saul tries to free himself from Samuel's patronizing presence even as a dead soul. Thus he drives away the necromancers very much like the father of Briar Rose (*Sleeping Beauty*), who orders the destruction of all the spindles in his kingdom. Saul's ambition to prove his personal autonomy is, however, doomed to fail in the crisis that has befallen him: the Philistines are preparing for war and David recruits popular support against the king. Moved by fear caused by the sight of the mass of Philistine soldiers, Saul tries to establish communication with God via all the legitimate mediators—through dreams, by *Urim* (a divinatory device managed by the high priest), and through prophets—but with no success. The technique of *Ovot*—necromancy—is his last hope. Tragically for Saul, the apparition of the dead prophet Samuel can only reinforce what already seems obvious: God has abandoned the king.

The precise mode of mediation between Saul and Samuel—and through Samuel with God—is presented in the story in a regrettably unclear way. It seems, however, that only the conjuror herself sees the dead person, whereas the client only hears him. The separation of sensory systems in communication with the dead echoes the strong sense of detachment and fragmentation that is the hallmark of the perception of the dead by the living in Jewish culture.

One particular verse in the Endor narrative has caused the interpreters severe trouble: "And the king said unto her, do not fear, what have you seen, and the woman said: I saw gods rising from the earth" (1 Sam. 28:13). Two pieces of linguistic information are essential. First, "Do not fear, what have you seen" is actually a paronomastic conundrum (*al tirei ki ma rait*) in which fear and seeing are equated. Saul, who only hears and does not see the vision, articulates the paradox, "Do not see what you have seen." Even though the primary meaning of Saul's words is clear, they also convey the awe of the numinous, visual experience embodied in the dead and the divine. Second, the word translated in English as "gods" has the exact form of the word usually translated as God—*Elohim*. It is from the plural form of the verb "rising" (*olim*) that the subject's identity as gods rather than God may be derived, and even then the *pluralis majestatis* is also a possibility. The Aramaic translation, Targum Jonathan, quotes the woman as follows: "I saw the angel of God rising." Rashi's medieval commentary elaborates as follows: "'I saw gods rising from the earth'—two angels (or messengers) Moses and Samuel, because Samuel feared [the same verb as in verse 13] that he was summoned for trial, so he brought up Moses along with him."² The commentator

Radaq (Rabbi David Qimchi) mentions the Talmud passages but actually prefers the metaphoric understanding, “Big as gods (or God?),” whereas a later interpreter (Metsudat David) glosses the above-mentioned plural form as *pluralis majestatis*, that is, the One.

This whole discussion points to the complexity and paradoxicality of the status of the visual numinous experience in Israelite, and later Jewish, culture. God’s words to Moses, “There shall no man see me and live” (Exod. 33:20), and the ailing king Hezeqia’s self-pitying words quoted by the prophet Isaiah, “I shall go to the gates of Sheol . . . I shall not see Yah, Yah in the land of the living” (Isa. 38:10–11), as well as the description of the revelation at Sinai, “And all the people saw the voices” (Exod. 20:18)—all this suggests an unresolved contradiction concerning visual communication with the divine. If a living man who sees God will not live, are the dead in the presence of God—and can they see him? Can Yah not be seen in the land of the living? Or perhaps He is only in the land of the living? The complexity of the relationship of being alive, being dead, seeing, and God is a knot in the depth of the textual web.

That there are no dead in dreams in the Bible stems from a general apprehension toward the dead, which permeates the cultural registers of ancient Israel represented in the biblical corpus. Communication with the dead is relegated to the domain of folk religion, stamped as pagan, or rather idolatrous. When a glimpse of such traffic is shown, it is practiced by a woman, to point out its dubious status.

The communication of women with death and the dead is not restricted to this one instance in the Hebrew Bible. Lamentation for the dead is a feminine practice in biblical culture, as it had been in ancient Greece and in the Mediterranean area for generations.³ Moreover, it is the creation of woman in Genesis 2 that provides the narrative incentive for turning the Edenic immortal Adam into a mortal man. She becomes his woe-man, so to speak.

Hava, the name of the first woman, is associated with life, which is given to her by Adam. This resonates both with his own being, “a living soul” (*nefesh haya*, Gen. 2:7) and the totality of living creatures (Gen. 1:24, 2:19) as well as with the description of the snake as one of “the living creatures of the field” (*hayat ha-sade*, Gen. 3:1). The verbal inscription of her name thus places her in the domain of life and foregrounds that part of her cultural meaning. In the narrative, however, she both embodies and contradicts the fantasy of eternal life invested in Edenic existence.

The term for Adam’s “deep sleep” (*tardema*) is taken up by Elihu in his oration directed to the suffering Job. Elihu’s use of the word suggests the intimate relationship between living and sleeping, or rather living and dreaming: “In a dream in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men. . . . He keepeth back his soul from the pit and his life from perishing. . . . He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see light. . . . To bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living” (Job 33:15, 18, 28, 30). Significantly, Elihu extends the life-giving power God invests in humans from the preventive measure of “keeping back from the pit” (*yahsokh nafsho mini shahat*) to

“delivery from going into the pit” (*padah nafshi me’avor ba-shahat*) to the explicitly redemptive “to bring back his soul from the pit” (*lehashiv nafsho mini shahat*). Elihu thus provides a powerful articulation of the idea that, although sleep resembles death, human beings need dreams for their well-being, perhaps even for their survival.

2

Whereas Elihu in his speech proposes that dreaming vitalizes the dreamer her/himself, in Jewish dream culture from late antiquity onward, in marked contrast to biblical texts on dreams, dreaming serves as a major vehicle to revitalize dead others as actual presences in the lives of dreamers.⁴

There are numerous and varied appearances of the dead in dreams in rabbinic literature. Such an appearance may be presented as having a perfectly practical function. One such instance is actually the textual hook on which the lengthy passage on dreams in the Palestinian Talmud (*Ma’aser Sheni* 4–5) hangs. The Mishna portion being discussed states:

Whosoever tells his son that the second tithes [which he reserved] are in this nook and he finds them in another nook, they are [declared] ordinary; that he left a hundred [coins] and he finds two hundred, the difference [the other hundred] is ordinary; two hundred and he finds one hundred, all of it is tithes.

It seems quite evident that the reason why the father himself cannot be consulted is that he has departed for a distant place or, more likely, that he is dead.

The following Talmudic discussion elaborates on the issue:

There was a man who was worried about his father’s money. His father appeared in his dream and told him the sum and the location of the money. It was brought before the rabbis who said: What is said in dreams does not weigh in either direction. (Ibid.)

The initial reaction of the rabbis sounds completely acceptable from a rational point of view. On the other hand it is followed by a long passage with examples which, at least to some degree, prove the opposite. These texts clearly indicate the complexity of rabbinic views on dream interpretation.

This complexity reflects the formal aspect of the multivocal structure of rabbinic literature of late antiquity. Rabbi So-and-So says one thing, Rabbi Somebody Else says another thing: the very structuring of the text as dialogue and as a chain of tradition embodies a dialogical interaction that presents itself to us as a true celebration of disagreement. Significantly, the categorical rejection of the halakic significance of dreams, or even of their significance in general, is in this case attributed to a collective voice, “the rabbis.” Its initial position in the sequence of dreams

in *Ma'aser Sheni* perhaps overstates its normative, representative, and authoritative character, and presents the other views quoted (from individuals) as subversive. As our knowledge of the intricate procedure of turning the oral traditions of the Talmudists (*Amoraim*) into a written work is still very incomplete, it is difficult to judge whether this seeming opposition between authority and subversion stems from the dynamics of the oral tradition itself or if it has been superimposed by the editorial organization of the materials.

The discussion initiated by the example of the man who dreamt the place where his father had deposited his tithes leads to the presentation of additional dreams:

A man came to Rabbi Yossi ben-Halافت and told him: I saw in my dream that I was told: Go to Cappadocia and you will find your father's fortune. He [Rabbi Yossi] asked: Did that man's [the dreamer's] father ever go to Cappadocia in his lifetime? He answered: No. He [Rabbi Yossi] said to him: Go and count ten rafters in your house and you will find your father's fortune under rafter *kappa*. (Ibid.)

The interpretation of Rabbi Yossi seems to refer to the position of the Greek letter *kappa* in the alphabet as tenth, rather than to its numerical value, twenty, paralleling the numerical system practiced in the Hebrew alphabet. (In the Babylonian Talmud version, *Berakhot* 55b, "*kappa*" is interpreted as the term for the rafter and the number ten is derived from the end of the word "*docia*"—"deka").

I have elsewhere discussed the central motif of both the above dreams: a father who leaves a fortune to his son who is compelled to complete a task, often to solve the riddle, in order to inherit it.⁵ The motif reflects the father-son relationship between God and Israel, which is widely represented in rabbinic narratives, especially in parables. The relationship is thus constantly tested in numerous narrative renderings. But in this case the issue is also the basically enigmatic character of the individual's identity, which seeks reaffirmation in a mode paralleling it in its elusiveness. Knowledge about the legitimacy of lineage is reached in a dream.

The second dream text presents in an extremely condensed form—characteristic of the poetics of rabbinic literature in late antiquity—the semiotic complexity of the aural and the visual, in line with our earlier remarks. Thus the dream is a hybrid of a message dream and a symbolic dream, the classical categorization of Artemidoros, which has become a standard division in European folk interpretation of dreams as well as in the scholarly discourse on the subject. The dreamer sees a dream, but its contents are verbal, almost like a realization of the sacred, synesthetic metaphor applied in the description of the revelation at Mount Sinai: "And the people saw the voices" (Exod. 20:18). This cognitive process seems to proceed in an implied, almost automatic manner. The hypostatization of the heard voice as a visible entity, which is simultaneously to replace the visible and to eradicate it, represents a level of theological epistemology that problematizes the whole perception of visual reality. The synesthetic construction questions sensory experience by distorting its usual framework. Likewise dreams very often employ the power

of the senses but also belie this same power. The mixture of sensory systems, like the above-mentioned separation between them, is common to dream experiences and experiences of the numinous.⁶

The sequence of dreams in the Palestinian Talmud tractate *Ma'aser Sheni* continues with some examples in which dreams are interpreted to communicate incestuous wishes or wish-fulfillments (the two possibilities are within a fairly sensible interpretative range of the text). These texts have been especially central for understanding the rabbinic influence on Freud's theory of dream interpretation, based on dreams and interpretations such as, "I saw an olive tree watered by olive oil . . . he knew his mother; I saw one of my eyes kiss the other . . . he knew his sister."⁷ However, the perspective of this essay leads us to halt at another dream: "A man came to Rabbi Yishmael ben Rabbi Yossi and told him: I saw in my dream a star being swallowed. He said to him: May his spirit leave him [an extremely powerful curse], he has killed a Jew, as it is written: 'There shall rise a star out of Jacob'" (Num. 24:17; the blessing of Bileam). This is the only dream from the sequence in the Palestinian Talmud passage that employs a biblical verse as an interpretative key for a dream. In the much more extensive passage on dreams in the Babylonian Talmud (*Berakhot* 55a–57b), this technique is presented as a standard procedure of conversions. The dream may also be understood to imply an ethnic opposition between Jew and non-Jew.

The interpretation of the symbol is quite simple and does not differ in principle from the earlier ones in the passage in which no verse was applied. The fact that a verse is employed here may be a mere coincidence, but it may also be there because this dream, unlike the others, has moved from the area of tabooed sex and social status (in dreams I have not quoted) to that of death. It is the revelation of this subject that, more than others, either needs corroboration from a biblical source or, by association, leads the discourse to a text from the sacred corpus.

The dreams that have been discussed until now all lack the part which for most people who submit their dreams to interpretation must seem the most important—the realization of the interpretation in reality. In systematic dream books there are, as a rule, no such moments. The question of realization arises in the context of dream narratives, that is, when people tell their dreams not for the purpose of interpretation, but in order to construct a past reality, or even a biography, in which a dream, its interpretation, and its realization all play an important role. In such narratives the direction of the discourse turns from the future—which dominates some, but not all, dream-interpretative discourses—to the past; and the mode shifts from prescription to description.⁸

In the context of the legal discourse of the Talmud, which leaves most cases unresolved in the strictly pragmatic sense, thus open to future interpretation and extrapolation, the lack of solutions to enigmatic dreams is not surprising. This seems to me to reveal the speculative character of the rabbis' intellectual activity, despite the prevailing view of their interests as mainly pragmatic. Whereas the referential aspect of the text predominantly addresses the past, interpreting and reinterpreting Scripture, the conative aspect—focusing on the recipient—actively

turns toward future generations.⁹ The dialogical character of the rabbinic corpus is not limited to internal textual relations, which abound in the varieties of dialogue, but also evolves in an openly self-reflexive manner into the process of future-oriented interpretation.

The dreams in the passage from the Palestinian Talmud discussed above, where the result in reality is accounted for, present powerful examples of what is best characterized, I believe, as word magic. The magical effect of the interpreter's words is further stressed by the next account, where a woman comes to Rabbi Eliezer (variants: Elazar) and tells a dream—in which a rafter of her house was broken. His interpretation predicts the birth of a son, which indeed occurs. The symbolic aspect of the interpretation resonates with a standard metaphor in rabbinic language: a man's wife is called his house. The interpretation of birth in terms of breaking a rafter reveals an intimate knowledge of the connection between giving birth and rupture, danger and death.

After a while, however, the woman dreams the same dream again. She returns to ask for an interpretation. When she arrives for the second time, Rabbi Yishmael happens to have left his students alone; they do their best to replace him as dream interpreter. This proves to have fatal consequences as their interpretation reveals a much more one-dimensional understanding of the symbol of the broken rafter—so that death alone is projected, and the subtle and vital connection with giving birth is overlooked. The students interpret the broken beam as predicting the death of the dreamer's husband, which soon occurs. Upon hearing the wailing of the widowed dreamer, Rabbi Yishmael teaches his disciples an important lesson in dream interpretation: "You have killed a man. The dream follows its interpretation, as has been said: 'And it came to pass as he interpreted to us'" (Gen. 41:13; the master of butlers to Pharaoh concerning Joseph).¹⁰

More than any theoretical formulation in rabbinical texts, the dreamer's return to Rabbi Yishmael clearly states a rejection of static interpretations of dreams based on lists of symbols and their meanings. The interpretation proves to be absolutely dependent on a specific context of interpretation, on the personality of the participants, their knowledge, wisdom, and maturity, and their choice of those fate-laden words in which they choose to formulate their interpretation. It thus strongly resembles the hermeneutical praxis of Midrash, in which numerous, contextually recreated interpretations may grow out of reading one and the same biblical text. Interpretation of dreams, like the interpretation of sacred texts, is thus seen as the specific dialogue of a given individual in a personalized context.

Rafters seem to carry special significance in ancient dream lore. In one of the best-known dreams of antiquity—Penelope's in *Odyssey* 19, line 544—the eagle (interpreted as Odysseus himself) perches on the rafter of the gabled roof. The dream itself is followed by the most articulate version of early Hellenic oneiric theory, built around the famous image of the gates of ivory and the gates of horn. The rafter, however, connects the dream with intimate experiences inside the house, within the family and the married couple. In both the Greek and the Jewish examples, the rafter is interpreted as a male element which, together with the

female image of house, constructs the union of man and wife (in rabbinic language *beta*—house—is explicitly also a term for wife; the Homeric term *melathron* may also mean “house” in later usage). In all the rafter dreams mentioned here, the dynamics of fragmentation of the whole, and the construction of a whole from fragments, seem to be central. Birth, which complements the structure of the family, occurs through a break in the female body. The death of the husband obviously truncates the wholeness of the family. And Odysseus’s interpretation of his wife’s dream (*before* she has recognized him) signals the imminent end of the long separation between them.

3

The passage on dream interpretation in the Palestinian Talmud, which has supplied the examples discussed above, is “recycled” (in a reformulated version) in *Midrash Rabba* on the Book of Lamentations. Many cultures privilege the theme of death in the discourse of dream interpretation. I hope that the discussion above has introduced some of the specific issues that arise in the context of a culture wrestling with the complexity and paradoxes of monotheism, and also laboring to shape meaningful connections between the latter and the human experiences of separation, fragmentation, individuality, and insecurity. In the Palestinian Midrash on Lamentations, *Eikha Rabba*, the theme of death in the text of dream interpretations echoes the central historical subject of the book—death and suffering caused by the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem and Roman oppression. The dream narratives foreground the metaphysical as well as the universal aspects of this historical narrative.

Eikha Rabba presents a succession of riddle tales and dream tales. This sequence naturally stresses the interconnectedness of both genres and, in the process of reading, projects one genre onto another. Thus both the oneiric flavor of riddle images and the enigmatic character of dreams are highlighted.

The dream of the swallowed star, cited above, is also interpreted as the murder of a Jew in *Eikha Rabba*, on the basis, however, of a different Biblical verse, the image of the innumerable stars in God’s promise to Abraham (Gen. 15:5). Both verses set the murder of an individual Jew in the context of a collective prophecy of a bright future for the people. While, on one hand, the transcendence of the group over individual mortality may be understood as a source of consolation, it also sharpens the total loneliness of the individual, most clearly embodied in each individual death. Similarly to death, which is inevitably experienced individually, dreams are a cultural practice rooted in a radically isolated experience; this experience can, moreover, only be communicated secondarily—unlike death, which usually cannot be communicated at all.

The most extensive text on dream interpretation in rabbinic literature is the passage of almost three folio pages in the Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 55a–57b

ff. This passage displays striking variety in form, contents, and genres as well as in ideological and epistemological approaches.

The text moves from a total denial of the ontological value of dreams to the view that a dream is a diminutive prophecy; from examples of how interpretation is the one and only factor that determines how the dream is going to be fulfilled in reality, to lists of dream symbols and their standard interpretations. This wide range of ideas is again possible because of the chorus of voices—or rather, the host of expressive solos—representing informants of at least three centuries (first century C.E. to fourth century C.E.), two countries (Palestine and Babylonia), and several cultural environments (late Hellenistic, Roman, Persian, Byzantine).

This text understates the role of dreams as conveyors of messages from the dead in comparison with other texts, both in the Palestinian sources already discussed and in the Babylonian Talmud itself. On the other hand, it includes a horror tale about the death of the wife of Rava (a Babylonian Jewish sage) as the result of a dream interpreter's negative interpretation—given because Rava did not pay him. Here again the magical power of the interpretative formula is highlighted. Since Rava's dreams, like those of his colleague Abaye (who paid the interpreter and therefore received benign interpretations), are mostly scriptural verses, the exposition of the inherent polysemy of the biblical text emerges as a by-product of the story.

4

This section of *Berakhot* masterfully expresses the delicate balance between psychological motivations and magical powers in the story of two Jewish sages, Rabbi Yehoshua ben-Hanania (Palestinian) and Shmuel (Babylonian), who are approached by two kings, a Roman emperor and the Persian king Shapur. The two rulers provoke the sages to enact Jewish wisdom by demanding that they predict what the emperor and the king will dream the next night. The sages recite two striking pictures, paralleling and mirroring each other, in which the ruler is captured by adversaries (the Roman by the Persians and vice versa) and forced to perform a menial task using a golden tool. The picture reminds us of Harold Bloom's remark about Rieff's commentary on the relationship between the dream and its message according to Freud: ". . . what matters is some protruding element, some element that seems hardly to belong to the text."¹¹

The consecutive appearance of the two scenes as dreams is doubly coded in this context. One possibility is that the Jews are indeed able to foresee dreams, and thus their wisdom is of a magical character. The other is that the wisdom of Rabbi Yehoshua and Shmuel is psychological: they apply the device of suggestion, thereby determining the contents of the dreams rather than predicting them.

The double perspective of psychological and magical motivations lies at the center of the multifaceted picture of dream interpretation in rabbinic sources. It would be false to try to trace that ambivalence back to a sociological dichotomy such as popular (magical) and elite (psychological)—a solution sometimes offered

by scholars. In the context of the paradoxes of monotheism in its correlation to human experience, the need to contain epistemological ambivalence may be a major reason for the central position of dreams. Along these lines, dreaming and dream interpretation may be understood as one of the expressive arenas in which a human and a superhuman perspective meet, communicate, and clash. Other such arenas are sacred texts and rituals.

5

The rites of the dead are conducted by the living. Often, however, eulogies and lamentations use the desperate second-person form, to prolong the liminal phase of parting, to halt the final detachment. The image of dreaming is suggestive of that fluid stage. By introducing it the rabbis present a possible bridge over the clear division between the living and the dead:

R. Shimon ben Laqish said: The difference between us and the [dead] righteous is only in speech. R. Ishian [said]: The dead person hears his praise as if in dream.

R. Shimon ben Laqish said: Those who are alive know what those who are dead do, and those who are dead know nothing about what those who are alive do.¹²

In a long passage in the Palestinian Midrash compilation *Bereshit Rabba*, from which the above is quoted, Ben Laqish deals with hindrances in communication between the living and the dead (he is discussing the immortality of the righteous). One of these hindrances is the inability to speak. In the Babylonian Talmud (*Berakhot* 19a), the same is said in the context of the question of whether the dead can hear eulogies. The discussion introduces a detailed list of the different stages of the decomposition of the body and the varying degrees of ability of the dead to hear during those stages.

The power of the text lies in its intense ambiguity: the dead are dreaming those alive—who are in a dream—and the dead appear in the dreams of the living. R. Ishian proposes the dream as a possible bridge between the worlds. His intuition correlates the dead with dreams, since that is where mortals are able to encounter them. A dead person is portrayed as sleeping and dreaming of those alive who are praising him. Thus those who are alive are the dream of the dead. R. Ishian's image comes quite close to the widely known notion of life as a dream. Ben Laqish's second sentence—"Those who are alive know what those who are dead do, and those who are dead know nothing about what those who are alive do"—may be seen as a reaction to the idea expressed by R. Ishian: since the dead dream the living, the living constitute for them the unknown sphere of the dream. It remains unclear what Ben Laqish means with the beginning of this sentence—"Those who are alive know what those who are dead do"—unless he is referring to the physical condition of the corpse.

One of the most compelling dream narratives about the communication be-

tween the living and the dead appears in the Babylonian Talmud (*Mo'ed Qatan* 28a):

Rav Seorim, the brother of Rava, was sitting [and studying] in front of Rava. He saw him [Rava] “fall asleep” [dying]. He [Rava] said: Tell [the angel of death] not to cause me pain. The other answered: Are you not a “best man” [an important man] yourself? He answered: Once man’s fortune is in the hands [of the angel of death] he does not mind him. He said: Please appear to me [in a dream, after death]. He appeared to him and asked: Were you in pain? He said: Like the piercing for bloodletting.

Rava was sitting [and studying] in front of Rav Nahman. He saw him [Rav Nahman] “fall asleep” [dying]. He [Rav Nahman] said: Tell [the angel of death] not to cause me pain. Answered the other: Are you not an important man yourself? He answered: Who is important, who is safe, who is strong [facing the angel of death]? He said: Please appear to me [in a dream, after death]. He appeared to him and he asked: Were you in pain? He said: Like pulling a thread out of milk. But if God would tell me “Go back to the world where you were,” I would not want it, since the fear is great.

This dream narrative presents the distance between the living and the dead as unusually close. The dying teachers and their disciples are even able to arrange a dream rendezvous across the border between here and eternity. The narratives are, however, permeated with feelings of insecurity and fear in the face of the moment of death. Both teachers reveal their weakness, turning to their disciples in a desperate attempt to alleviate the pain of death. According to the rabbinic ethos, disciples learn from their teachers by close observation and imitation, even of most intimate and quotidian behaviour. The function of the doubling of the narratives seems to be at least partly to show that even the manner of dying is transmitted from teacher to disciple, from R. Nahman to Rava. Rava, who occupies a special position in Babylonian Jewish magical tradition (the making of the Golem, Bab. Talmud *Sanhedrin* 65b), serves as the connecting link of the tradition; he learns from his teacher and teaches his own disciple the tradition of bridging over the limit of death and life—by dreaming.

Unlike Ben Laqish, the narrator of the double tale seems to think that the only ones who know what dying is really about are those who have already experienced death. The concluding words of R. Nahman remain enigmatic, and even the lexical choice for the word “fear” is unusual (*b'twty*). One could interpret the concluding sentence according to Stoic philosophy: death is where calm is, and returning to this world and its anxieties is undesirable. On the other hand, the enigmatic formulation at the end of the story conveys a countermessage to the story itself. Whereas the story seems to tell us that dreams are a possible channel of communication between the dead and the living, the final sentence reinforces the emotional presence of the impenetrable, unknown domain of death.

As in many other dreams in ancient Jewish sources, here, too, there is a striking visual component, although the dreams are primarily staged as audial communication. The two metaphorical descriptions of the pain of death function

at first “sight” to familiarize the utterly unknown and to reassure the listener about the unthreatening proportions of the awesome moment. On the other hand the symbolic significance of blood and milk connects these fluids with a mystery of no less power than the moment of death—namely, that of birth. The red and white of the vital fluids introduce the perspective of the beginning into dreams dealing with the anxiety of the end. Thus a heightened sense of transformation is created that leads in (at least) two directions. Birth and death are the harmonious frame of a meaningful unit—life. The meaning lies in its very framing as a linear process. On the other hand, the occurrence of blood and milk in the description of death also transposes the departure from one life into birth in another one. Strangely, the introduction of the perspective of a new life into the story does not create a tone of consolation, but rather disrupts the equilibrium achieved by the framed span.

In Jewish culture of late antiquity, as in many other periods and places, midwiving and lamenting are both womanly arts. Thus the appearance of blood and milk, representing labor and nursing, may be seen as representatives of the “exotic” world of women in the all-male reality of teachers and disciples (especially in Babylonia). On the other hand, the relations between the men in these two narratives represent an alternative mode of intimacy, that of studying together, from which women are excluded. The pictures of blood and milk in these two dreams are carefully detached from the archetypal context of birth and nursing: bloodletting occurs in rabbinic texts as a perfectly acceptable male occupation (Abba Umna in Bab. Talmud *Ta’anit* 21b–22a). The lifting of the thread or the net from the milk brings to mind the preparation of cheese, which in the Middle East until this day may be done by men, unlike the preparation of other kinds of food. White and red are also the dominant colors in the passage called “the tractate on the gestation of the child” (Bab. Talmud *Niddah* 31a). There the vital fluids are blood and semen, and there is an operative collaboration—rather than separation—of female and male in conjunction with God. In contrast to the image of wholesomeness in the relationship man-woman-God projected in “the tractate on the gestation of the child,” the two short stories about Rav Seorim, Rava and Rav Nahman also introduce fragmentation into the sphere of the divine by associating the process of dying with the ambiguous agent called the angel of death, rather than with God himself.¹³

An earlier passage of the *Niddah* text elaborates another aspect of the transcendental potential of dreams:

Rabbi Simlai presented the text: What does the child look like in his mother’s womb? He rests like a folded writing board [*pinax*], his hands on both temples, both forearms on both knees, both heels on both buttocks, and his head rests between his knees, the mouth sealed and the navel open; he eats from what his mother eats, drinks from what his mother drinks and does not excrete so as not to kill his mother, and when he has seen daylight the sealed opens and the open is sealed, otherwise he cannot live even for an hour. And a candle is lit on his head and he looks from one end of the world to the other, as it is said “When

his candle shined upon my head and when by his light I walked through darkness” [Job 29:3]. And you should not wonder, since man sleeps here and sees a dream in Ispamia [Spain] and there are no days in which man has such pleasure as those days, as it is said “Oh that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me” [Job 29:2]. Which days consist of months only and no years? The days of pregnancy. And he is taught all of Learning [Torah] as it is said . . . and when he goes out to the world an angel comes and hits his mouth so that he forgets all of Learning . . .” (Bab. Talmud *Niddah* 30b)

The comparison between the child in the womb and a dreaming person reaches beyond the simple technicality of explaining the ability of the unborn to see all of the world—exactly like a person who can dream about distant lands. The unborn is to R. Simlai like one who dreams the entire world, much like the dead are to R. Ishian in the *Bereshit Rabba* text quoted above. The dream of the unborn expands to include the entire Torah, which is then forgotten, in a Platonist manner, with the help of the angel’s finger.

The framing of human life as a dream in rabbinic culture may well reveal the influence of other cultures, such as Greece or India. The distribution of the idea among the rabbis should in any case not be overrated, since it has been synthesized here from two separate texts of separate origin. The following, later text presents a somewhat inconsistent variation on the same theme:

Rabbi Zecharya says: sleep at night is like this world, and awakening in the morning is like the world to come. And as at night man lies down and sleeps and his soul roams around in the world and tells him in the dream everything that comes along, as it is said “In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls upon men, in slumberings upon the bed; then he opens the ears of men and seals their instruction” [Job 33:15–16], likewise the souls of the dead roam in the world and tell them everything that comes along. . . . There are six whose voice runs from one end of the world to the other and their voice is not heard: when a tree which bears fruit is felled . . . when the skin of the snake falls . . . when a woman is divorced from her husband . . . when a woman is with her husband for their first intercourse . . . when the child comes out of his mother’s womb . . . and when the soul leaves the body—the voice runs from one end of the world to the other, and the voice is not heard. And the soul does not leave the body until it has seen the divine Presence [*Shekhina*] as it is said “For there shall no man see me and live” [Exod. 33:20].¹⁴

This text is somewhat later than the classical rabbinic period (approximately eighth century C.E.) and is characterized by a typically didactic tone. The ideological proposition which states that this world is sleep, and the world to come the awakening, is consistent with the view that life is a dream. But that view is soon followed here by the comparison of death with sleep. The motif “Sleep is one sixtieth of death” (and Bab. Talmud *Berakhot* 57b, and “a dream is one sixtieth of prophecy”) is widened to include the world as the dream of the dead. It seems as if the author(s) conceptualize separately the experience of dying and death and

the idea of the world to come, as if it were not the dead who are supposedly populating the world to come.

The passage on the worldwide sounds that are not heard constructs a group of phenomena united by their deep and truly tragic pathos. They are all irreversible transformative changes, involving loss and some violence. In this context it makes sense that first mating and birth, as well as the molting of the snake, which are all in principle positive changes, are grouped together with the falling fruit tree, divorce, and death. The cluster highlights on one hand the violent, hurtful side of apparently positive changes and, on the other, the liberating, generative aspects of the sadder ones. The inherent ambivalence of the total human process is made very concrete.

The tree felled while it carries fruit is to me the most enigmatic image of the six. Unlike the others, it arouses an empathy that is perfectly disinterested, as it describes an experience which we never have and will never be part of. It thus activates an almost purely poetic-aesthetic sense of compassion (even if environmentalists may see here an ancient prefiguration of some of their ideas).

The three first images echo the world of Eden: the tree, the serpent, and the expulsion (the Hebrew word for divorce is identical to the word for expulsion); the last three express the human condition after Eden—sex, birth, and death. The rabbinic configuration can no longer separate the two stages. Thus the beings of Eden are tainted by loss, whereas dreaming serves as a re-creation of possibilities which are experienced as lost, that is, as having existed in the ideal past.

What does the oxymoronic universal, unheard sound signify? Probably something similar to the sound of the atomic explosion as described by a deaf and mute survivor in the Swedish poet and Nobel Prize laureate Harry Martinson's dystopian epic poem "Aniara": "One mute as stone began to describe / the worst noise he ever heard, / soundless."¹⁵

The oxymoron is an intensification of synesthesia. Synesthesia, mixing the senses, puts the concept of sensory reality, and especially the possibility of representing it in words, into a state of insecurity and ambiguity. Oxymoron, made of impossible sensory connections and combinations, explodes the distinction of separate sensory systems. Both are part of the intricate mechanism by which dreams condense and distort reality. They also are means of uttering the ineffable, of giving form to the transcendent. Along these lines the passage in *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer* ends: "And the soul does not leave the body until it has seen the divine Presence" (*Shekhina*).

6

Medieval and premodern Jewish culture transmitted rabbinical dream lore in various modes of expression. One such is the creation of handbooks, similar to the adaptations made of Artemidorus's *Oneirocritica* in almost every European language.¹⁶ These Hebrew dream books, which are still reproduced in almost unchanged form, organize some of the rabbinic texts, mainly large portions of the passage from

Berakhot, in an alphabetic—or some other systematic—order. They are composed as dictionaries where the dream symbol is presented as a word in a foreign language, and its traditional interpretation as the definition in translation. The emergence of dream books that standardize the relationship between dream symbols and their meaning introduces a radical change into the communicative process and therefore to the cognitive status of dream interpretation. Whereas rabbinical literature, as we have seen, highlights the interpersonal context of interpretation, dream books seem to contract the contextual connotations into conventionalized denotations. The *Berakhot* passage is the nearest to a dream book that classical rabbinic culture produced. Although not exactly a standard list of interpretations, its frequent reference to biblical texts, which appear both in dreams and as interpretative devices, serves as a more stable textual framework for dream interpretation than most other rabbinic texts on the subject, which interpret dreams contextualized in narratives. But even in the *Berakhot* passage, the fact that the rabbis see texts as eternally open to reinterpretation generates a potential for the recontextualization of the interpretations of dreams.¹⁷

There are, however, numerous other instances of oneiric creativity in Jewish culture after the end of the classical rabbinical period (after the eighth century C.E.). One that has been central for the construction of the tradition of dream interpretation both in the responsa literature and in folklore is the rich and varied corpus of dream narratives as well as discussions on dreams in the context of Ashkenazi Hassidism—German Jewish Pietism—of the twelfth century.¹⁸ It is significant that the twelfth century constitutes a real peak in the articulation of the return of the dead in Western Christianity, as Jean-Claude Schmitt has recently shown.¹⁹

Much of the Ashkenazi Hasidic material, which has since been endlessly recycled by rabbis all over Europe and the Mediterranean countries, discusses or portrays the appearance of the dead on a level of quotidianity that seems quite rare in the rabbinical literature. Rabbis in the sixteenth century are asked what to do when a dead person comes in a dream and asks to be removed from his grave because he is buried next to a heavy sinner. One dead man is said to have asked in a dream that his clothes be buried with him. In this case the rabbi showed special resourcefulness by suggesting that the clothes be distributed to the poor, so that the dead man's soul be clothed with charity in its eternal abode. There is no doubt that dreams serve in this cultural sphere as the major mode in which the dead are believed to communicate with the living—more so than the living with the dead.

Modern Jewish dream culture in its Israeli manifestation draws upon a variety of traditions. The main features of rabbinic dream interpretation now coexist with a variety of other components of dream culture acquired through centuries of cultural interactions.

Moroccan Jews, as well as other ethnic groups in Israel today, construct the cult of deceased holy men and saints upon oneiro-biographies of the worshipers and their objects of worship, creating networks of oneiro-communities.²⁰ Communication with the dead is accepted, matter-of-factly. Important collective and

private events are communicated through dreaming. In a recently published folk book containing a Sephardi woman's repertoire of dream narratives, the dreamer herself writes in her introduction that dreams are, for her, signs of a world in which life and death exist in harmony without pain. They open up the possibility of meeting her dear ones, both the living and the dead. In her own words, "They have made me believe in a life after this one."²¹

7

At that moment I was not selective. After having locked the door of the bathroom behind me, I took off my clothes and mounted my bed, that is I entered the bathtub and prostrated myself in it. Rabbi Nahman of Braslav used to say, The Holy Name Blessed be He conducts His world with mercy every day better and better. For me it is not so. Every new day which the Holy One Blessed be He gives me is harder.

But still I fell asleep and slept. How do I know that I slept? From the dream that I had. What did I dream, I dreamt that a great war came upon the world and I was called out to war. I swore an oath to the Lord that if I return home in peace from the war, whatsoever comes forth from my house to meet me, when I return from the war, I shall bring as a burnt offering. I returned home in peace and lo, here I myself come forth to meet me.²²

The story in which this dream is recounted opens with the narrator's landlady in Berlin dreaming that he—the narrator—will bring back her son who has disappeared at the front in World War I. The story was written by Agnon in 1949, after World War II and after the Holocaust. The narrator-protagonist, a Polish Jew who has left his home in Palestine, is moving from one place to another in Germany, mostly by trains. The story has been criticized for "not having a center which holds."²³ It is, however, a story about the destruction of the inner center and becoming a Wandering Jew, upon whom others project dreams of omnipotent, miraculous rescue, and who himself dreams about exorcising an immense guilt—that of survival—by becoming a burnt offering. The crossing point between life and death is, in this dream, moved into the self.

Agnon lived in an intellectual milieu in which psychoanalysis had an integral place. His stories are replete with psychoanalytic insights and motives. The German context of this specific story may have triggered a heightened articulation of psychoanalytic discourse (although some stories that occur in Poland are also like this, for example, "A Simple Story"). It is, however, the despair of the Holocaust that resonates through the reality of the First World War, a displacement of ineffable mass death transformed back into a "normal" war. The disappearance into total invisibility of an entire Jewish culture positions ideas of transcendence on an extremely sharp edge. Collective nightmares can truly melt the center of the self with sacrificial flames.

Even if Agnon had not mentioned Rabbi Nahman of Braslav in the paragraph

leading to the dream, the dream itself might have reminded the reader of one of Rabbi Nahman's own dreams:

And I saw in the dream that it was the Day of Atonement [*Yom Hakippurim*], and it was clear to me that every Day of Atonement one person is sacrificed, and the high priest sacrifices him. They were looking for one for the sacrifice, and I agreed to be the sacrifice. And they asked me to make a written commitment, and I did so. Later, when they wanted to sacrifice me, I regretted it and wanted to hide. But then I saw that the crowd surrounded me, so how could I hide? I left the town and while I was leaving I turned back and entered into the town. And I looked around and saw that I was back in the town! So I wanted to hide among the non-Jews. I thought that if the community will come and ask them for me, they will certainly hand me over to them. Another one to be sacrificed in my place was found. And yet I fear the future.²⁴

The religious imagery of sacrifice links ritual and dream as stages of the enactment of the battle between the identity of the individual and the need to destroy the uniqueness of individuality—and this in the face of the monotheistic conduct of a world that often presents itself as chaotic and senseless. Both Rabbi Nahman and Agnon seem to accept the despotism of the One, but their dreaming rebels against the violence of that despotism as it reaches into internal space.

The relationship in Jewish culture between the human and the divine is rooted in radical separation and division. It is thus not surprising that the act of creation itself is structured as a series of divisions, between high and low, wet and dry, man and woman, and, finally, mortal and immortal. Jewish dream culture echoes this basic structure: dreams become very complex means of bridging the division, even of transposing it in paradoxical ways, such as changing roles between dreams and dreamers, the living and the dead.

Notes

1. Oppenheim 1956.
2. Based on a passage in Palestinian Talmud *Hagiga* chapter 2, paragraph 2 and Babylonian Talmud *Hagiga* 2b.
3. Alexiou 1974; Nenola-Kallio 1982: 97–111; Hasan-Rokem 1996a: 121–140.
4. Kristianpoller 1923; Stemberger 1976; Niehoff 1992; Hasan-Rokem 1996a: 101–120. For comparative perspectives, see also Lewy 1978; Cox Miller 1994.
5. Hasan-Rokem 1987; 1996a: 50–77.
6. Chapter 5, this volume.
7. Bakan 1958; Bilu 1979; Miller 1981; Handelman 1982; Hasan-Rokem 1996a: 141–154.
8. Bowersock 1997 claims that whereas Artemidorus was mainly interested in dreams as omens, his contemporaries who wrote fictional prose presented mainly “Freudian” dreams that express fears, anxiety, and other similar states of mind.
9. Jakobson 1960.
10. When I told one of the senior administrators at the Hebrew University about the

topic of our symposium at Hubertusstock, she reacted as follows: "You know, a neighbor on David Yellin Street where I lived when I was young had a dream about the roof falling down. She went to a rabbi (whose name I don't know) and he told her that her husband would die. She came frightened to Rabbi Arye Levin who lived nearby and told him in panic the dream and the rabbi's interpretation. He said: 'That rabbi killed your husband, because as the dream is interpreted you get it.' This is a true story that I can tell you. He really died within a year or so."

11. Bloom 1987: 5.

12. *Midrash Rabba* for Genesis, *Bereshit Rabba* Vatican MS version, Theodor-Albeck edition p. 1237; Variants: Pal. Talmud, *Avoda Zara* ch. 3 paragraph 1 *Midrash Zuta* Ecclesiastes, *Qohelet Zuta*, ed. S. Buber, ch. 9.

13. In the Palestinian version of the "gestation" theme, in the *Midrash Rabba* for Leviticus, *Vayiqra Rabba* 14, 2–3 (Margalioth–Margulies ed. esp. pp. 302–305), the interaction is exclusively between God and the woman.

14. *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 34 in the Warsaw edition with the Luria commentary, and in the Horowitz edition; ch. 33 in the Higer edition. I thank Dina Stein for the insight and the reference.

15. Martinson 1954: 45.

16. See chs. 7 and 8 in the present volume.

17. For the relationship between the rabbis' interpretation of texts and their dream interpretations, see Lieberman 1962; Kugel 1986; Niehoff 1992; Hasan-Rokem 1996b.

18. Harris 1963; Dan 1971; Trachtenberg 1974: 230–249.

19. Schmitt 1994.

20. Prof. Yoram Bilu, Hebrew University, Jerusalem; personal communication.

21. Raymond 1995: 54.

22. S. J. Agnon 1968, "Ad Henna," 7:76. (my translation)

23. Prof. Dan Laor, Tel-Aviv University; personal communication.

24. Sadeh 1983: 117.

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