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A Dream Within a Dream: The Prism of Imagination in Jewish Mysticism

In this evening's lecture, I will focus on three aspects of the dream that may be elicited from kabbalistic and ḥasidic sources: (1) the portrayal of the *dream as text*, (2) the dream as *fictional truth*, that is, the truth whose truth it is to be false, and (3) the dream as an *event of self-nullification*.

1. Dream as Text

The first of the three topics that I will discuss concerns the identification of the dream as a text and the corollary proposition that dream interpretation is a form of exegesis. According to an oft-cited tradition preserved in Berakhot 56a, a section of the Babylonian Talmud that has been characterized as the center-piece of the rabbinic dreambook, relates that Bar Hedyā, an interpreter of dreams, would offer felicitous interpretations to those who paid him a fee and ill-fated ones to those who would not pay. The tradition is supported by an account concerning Abbaye and Rava, two celebrated fourth-century Amoraim: the former was willing to compensate Bar Hedyā and thus he received favorable interpretations, whereas the latter was not willing to do so and thus the interpretations he received were unfavorable. In the end, Rava mended his ways, and by offering to pay Bar Hedyā, the fate of the interpretations of his dreams were modified accordingly. The change of fortune is encapsulated in Bar Hedyā's assurance that miracles would happen to Rava.

At this juncture of the talmudic tale, the redactor includes a narrative that substantiates, but also in some sense subverts, its didactic point: Bar Hedyā was once traveling with Rava in a

boat, and he calculated that since he had predicted that miracles would occur to this sage, if the boat would sink, the latter would be the one to be saved. Bar Hedyā decided, therefore, to disembark, and as he did so, a book—most likely a manual of dream interpretation—fell from him. Rava finds the book and discovers that it was written therein *kol ha-ḥalomot holkhin aḥar ha-peh*, “all dreams are consequent to [literally, follow after] the mouth,” which led him to exclaim: “Wicked one! It all depended on you, and you caused me all this suffering.” The maxim “all dreams follow the mouth” may be viewed as the most important comment in the talmudic dreambook, since it encapsulates the quintessential aspect of the rabbinic hermeneutic related to deciphering dream symbols. If the point of the story was to portray dream interpreters negatively, the discovery of what was written in Bar Hedyā’s book complicates the picture and leaves the criticism somewhat more ambiguous. The tactic employed by Bar Hedyā is precisely the one promulgated by the sages in their approach to scriptural texts.

The insinuation of the words “all dreams follow the mouth” is not only that every dream demands an interpretation, for a dream that is not interpreted, in the language of another tradition recorded in the name of R. Ḥisda, is like a letter that has not been read, but that the upshot of the dream is determined by its interpretation—this is the implication of Rava’s comment “It all depended on you,” *be-didakh qayyama*. To say that dreams depend on interpretation does not mean merely that the interpretation retroactively bestows sense on the dream, but that the interpretation protentively endows reality upon the dream and, as a consequence, the dream shapes reality. The saying in the Babylonian Talmud “all dreams follow the mouth,” therefore, is parallel to R. Yoḥanan’s statement in the Palestinian Talmud *kol ha-ḥalomot holkhin aḥar pitroneihen*, “all dreams follow their interpretations.” We can speak here of a hermeneutical

circle: the stuff of the dream is determined by its interpretability, though the latter is determined by the stuff of the dream.

We are reminded of this wisdom as well in the statement passed on in the name of Bar Qappara, *leit ḥalom she-ein lo pitron*, “There is no dream that does not have an interpretation.” This maxim does not simply imply the trivial fact that every dream has an interpretation, but the more radical notion that the interpretation is constitutive of the dream; to speak of a dream without interpretation is as meaningless as speaking of a text without a reader, that is, the text has no existence without a potential reader. Interpretation fulfills the same purpose vis-à-vis the dream: there is no dream without an interpreter. Consider the following passage in the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 55b [text # 1]:

There were twenty-four interpreters of dreams [*potrei ḥalomot*] in Jerusalem. One time I dreamt a dream and I went to all of them, and what one interpreted for me was not what the other interpreted—yet all of them were fulfilled in me, to substantiate what is said, “all dreams follow the mouth.” Is the statement that “all dreams follow the mouth” scriptural? Yes, as stated by R. Eleazar, for R. Eleazar said: Whence do we know that all dreams follow the mouth? As it says, “as he [Joseph] interpreted to us, so it was” (Gen 41:13). Rava said: This is only if he interpreted it in accord with one’s dream, as it says, “according to each man’s dream did he interpret” (ibid., 12).

The teaching that all dreams follow the mouth is offered as the rationale to legitimate the multivalency of the dream, which, in the talmudic context, means not only that manifold interpretations of a dream are possible but that they all will be fulfilled, a harder thing for the human mind to comprehend. The example of Joseph, the paradigmatic interpreter of dreams in

Jewish lore, is cited as the biblical basis for this principle, the wide-ranging repercussions of which may be adduced by the qualifying remark ascribed to Rava: it is valid to say that the meaning of the dream is made real by the interpretation only in the case that the interpretation corresponds to the content of the dream. Rava's caveat notwithstanding, the rabbinic idea bespeaks an audacious hermeneutic that endows the interpreter with the power to make the images of the dream come true.

The capability of interpretation to actualize the dream, and in so doing to shape reality, is not limited to a situation where there is ostensible accord between the interpretation and the dream content as Rava argued. To insist on this qualification is to miss the significance of the rabbinic approach. That the various interpretations are all valid implies that the dream, when divested of any interpretative cloak, is hermeneutically neutral. This neutrality is well captured in the teaching—attributed alternatively to R. Meir, R. Abbahu, or the Rabbis more generally—that the words of dreams are inconsequential, *divrei ḥalomot lo ma'alim we-lo moridin*, literally, “the words of dreams do not raise up or bring down.” In several talmudic passages, the statement is cited to underline that one cannot rely on information divulged in dreams to settle legal or ritual matters. But in other midrashic contexts, the intention is not so restricted and the point is, rather, that the content of dreams in general has no ultimate consequence or meaning apart from what is imparted by the act of interpretation that makes intelligible the ascription of the properties “true” and “false” to the dream images, which are intrinsically neither true nor false. There is no way to comprehend the dream but through the veil of interpretation.

The implications of the rabbinic teachings are made explicit in several passages in *Sefer ha-Zohar*, the anthology of kabbalistic lore that began to circulate in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in fragmentary units, whence, through an extensive process of scribal transmission, the

manuscript witnesses were redacted into the printed versions of the Mantua and Cremona editions, the prototypes for all subsequent editions. Let us turn to **text # 2**:

It has been said, “All dreams of the world follow the interpretation of the mouth,” and it has been established, as it written “As he explained it to us, so it was” (Gen 41:13).

What is the reason? Because there is deception and truth in the dream, and the word rules over everything, and hence the dream requires a good interpretation. Rabbi Judah said: Because every dream is from a lower gradation and the word rules over it, every dream follows its interpretation. ... R. Ḥiyya and R. Yose were in the presence of R. Simeon. R. Ḥiyya said: We have learned that a dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is not read. Is this because it exists and he did not know it or did it not exist at all? He said to him: It exists but it was not known, for the power exists over that dream but it is not known, and he does not know if it exists or not. There is no matter in the world that is not dependent on the dream or on the messenger before it comes into this world, as it is said that prior to each and every matter that comes into the world there is a decree about it from heaven and from there it disseminates into the world and it is given by the messenger. And all of this because it is written “the Lord God does not do anything if he does not disclose his secret to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7)—this is when prophets are found in the world, and if not, even though prophecy no longer resides, the sages are preferable to the prophets, and if not, it is given in a dream, and if not, the matter is found with the birds of the sky (Zohar 1:183a-b).

As we find often in zoharic homilies, this passage is a tapestry woven from the threads of various rabbinic dicta. The cord that ties the disparate sources together is the belief that nothing in the

terrestrial world materializes except through a divine decree that can be delivered in the form of prophecy, a dream, or the chirping of the birds. What is of particular importance to mark for our purposes is that the talmudic maxim that all dreams follow the mouth is explained by reference to another rabbinic view that the dream comprises both truth and deception. Interpretive prowess, therefore, is required to separate the wheat from the chaff. Precisely because there is this admixture of truth and falsity, the dream can portend either good or evil and thus its result will be dependent on how it is interpreted. The creative potency of dream interpretation to mold events in time is related to the larger kabbalistic premise that the word rules over everything. The remark may be taken as confirmation of the primacy accorded to language, an essential postulate of Jewish esotericism through the ages; insofar as the word is the instrument of creation, it continues to execute control over the things that were created through it. More profoundly, for the kabbalists, the word is not only the agency of divine creation; it is the very substance of that creation. After decades of study, I have not discovered any kabbalist who would not assent to the view that what exists in the world, examined subphenomenally, are the manifold permutations of the twenty-two Hebrew letters, themselves enfolded in the Tetragrammaton, identified as the mystical essence of the Torah.

In a second passage from the zoharic anthology [**text # 3**], from the literary unit known as the *Sabba de-Mishpaṭim*, we can discern an effort to distinguish the dream from scriptural exegesis:

The words of the Torah are concealed, and in each and every words of the Torah there are hidden matters of wisdom, and they are known by the wise, who know the ways of the Torah. For the Torah does not consist of the matters of the

dream, which are given to one who interprets them and they follow the mouth, even so they must be interpreted according to their way. How much more so with respect to words of the Torah, which are the delights of the holy King, must one go in a truthful way, as it is written “For the paths of the Lord are upright” (Hosea 14:10) (Zohar 2:98a).

After stating categorically that the Torah does not consist of “words of a dream,” whose meaning is determined by the mouth that interprets them, but which nonetheless must be interpreted in a manner that corresponds to the dream, the zoharic author—through the voice of the elder—insists that with respect to scriptural words, the “delights of the holy king,” it is even more imperative that they be rendered in concurrence with the “way of truth,” even though each one embraces multiple “words of wisdom.” The contrast between the dream and the Torah only underlies the element that ties the two together: just as a dream has a manifest and a latent meaning, so the literal word of Scripture comprises hidden meanings that must be extracted through skillful exegesis, a point made later on in this zoharic section with the claim that the wise ones, who are “full of eyes,” can see the light of the divine mysteries radiating through the garment of the letters, *mi-go levusha*, that is, one apprehends the secret through the garment and not by removing it.

In the exact language of this text, the meaning of the dream is determined by the interpretation of the mouth (*pishra de-fuma*)—an amalgamation of the dicta that appear respectively in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds—for the words that issue from the mouth correspond to the divine word, which is superior to the level of the dream. Put more technically, the “word” is a symbolic allusion to Shekhinah, the divine gradation that is also

referred to as the “vision” (*mar’eh*) of prophecy, the “speculum that does not shine” (*aspaqlaryah she-einah me’irah*), the prism (*heizu*) through which all the colors are seen, whereas the dream (*halom*) is one sixtieth of prophecy, according to another rabbinic dictum, which translates in the zoharic symbolism to the sixth level from the gradation of prophecy, which is the level of Gabriel, the angel appointed over dreams. What is most important to emphasize is the incongruity between dreams and prophecy, which is specified in even sharper terms in the following passage [texts # 4]:

What is the difference between prophecy and the dream? Prophecy is in the world of the masculine, the dream in the world of the feminine, and from one to the other there is a descent of six gradations. Prophecy is on the right and the dream on the left. The dream is divided into several gradations below, and therefore the dream is in the whole world, even though one sees in accord with one’s gradation, one’s gradation is in accord with the person. Prophecy does not spread forth except in its place (Zohar 1:149a).

The prophetic vision belongs properly to the sefirotic pleroma, *alma di-dekhura*, the “world of the masculine,” a term that usually refers either to Binah or to the sefirotic potencies from Binah to Yesod, whereas the dream vision is assigned to *alma de-nuqba*, the “world of the feminine,” a technical designation of Shekhinah or the angelic potencies beneath it. The two types of vision are further distinguished in the zoharic homily on the grounds that prophecy is on the right and left, perhaps alluding respectively to the seventh and eighth emanations, Neṣaḥ and Hod, while the dream is aligned exclusively on the left, which is linked to Gabriel, the angel whose power derives from the aspect of strength (*gevurah*) on the left side. Finally, a topographical distinction

is made: prophecy is said to be limited to its place—just as the rabbinic teaching restricted prophecy (with a few notable exceptions) to the land of Israel, so the kabbalists confined the prophetic influx to the divine realm, and especially Shekhinah, the theosophic correlate to the geographic space—and the dream, by contrast, is dispersed over the world. Given the ubiquity of the dream, it is emphasized that each person sees the nocturnal vision in conformity with his or her level of attainment. As we learn from another homily [text # 5], Daniel is upheld as someone who was not a prophet but who was nevertheless granted dream visions that are correlated with, or better replicate, the supernal emanations:

What is written of Daniel? “The mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision” (Dan 2:19)—*in a night vision*. What is “in the night vision?” This is Gabriel, for he is a vision [*hezwa*], a prism from a prism [*heizu min heizu*]. Come and see what is written “And there, coming from the east with a roar like the roar of mighty waters, was the glory of the God of Israel, and the earth was lit up by his glory” (Ezek 43:2). And what is written after it? “The vision was like the vision I had seen when I came to destroy the city, the very same vision that I had seen by the Chebar Canal, and I fell in my face” (ibid., 3). All of these visions added up to six, for they are the visions [*mar’ot*] and the prism of vision [*heizu de-hezwa*], the prism through which the colors above are seen and they are seen in that prism, and there is a prism of the prism [*heizu de-heizu*—a prism of the prism, one above the other! All them exist in gradations that are known, and they reign, and they are called the “prism of the night” (*heizu de-leilya*), and through them all the dreams of the world disseminate, and these are in the pattern of those above them (Zohar 1:196a).

The role of Gabriel as interpreter of dreams is affirmed in the book of Daniel itself (8:16, 9:22), but for the author of the zoharic passage this angel does not just fulfill this task; he is the agency that brings about the appearance of dreams, and thus he is referred to as the vision (*hezwa*)—it is likely this identification reflects the fact that *gavri'el* and *mar'ah* (or *mar'eh*) both equal 246—or more specifically, in the language of the verse, the “night vision” (*hezwa di-leilya*), and demarcated as the “prism from a prism” (*heizu min heizu*). Through this vision/prism the mystery was revealed to Daniel. The nature of the mystery, the mystery of the mystery, can be ascertained by attending to the dual connotation of the term *heizu* in the zoharic lexicon as vision and prism, and its symbolic application to Shekhinah, since this divine potency is both the speculum through which the upper sefirotic potencies become visibly accessible to the human imagination and the psychic faculty by means of which the visualization is achieved. To speak of Gabriel as the “prism from the prism” (*heizu min heizu*) or, alternately, as the “prism of the prism” (*heizu de-heizu*), signifies that dreams are visions by which one can glimpse the sefirotic images as reflected in Shekhinah, the “prism of vision” (*heizu de-hezwa*), the prism through which the invisible supernal colors are seen. Dreaming, on this score, is a triple mirroring, beholding the forms in the mirror of the mind that mirrors the angelic mirror of the divine mirror.

The zoharic texts we have discussed, and many others that could have been cited, ratify the rabbinic conviction that after the demise of the institution of prophecy the matter of prophetic inspiration is the patrimony of the sages, although it is found as well in dreams and in the speech of birds. What all of these divinatory phenomena share in common is the need for interpretation, which is connected to the last of the sefirotic potencies. To cite one final zoharic passage that drives the point home [**text # 6**]:

Why is it written “So Joseph said to them, ‘Do not interpretations belong to God [*le’lohim pitronim*]? Tell me, please!’”(Gen 40:8). What is the reason? Because this is how the one who interprets dreams should allocate the interpretation to the blessed holy One, since the foundation of everything is there, and the interpretation subsists there. Come and see: It has been said that the gradation of the dream is below, and it is the sixth gradation, for from the place where prophecy abides until the gradation of the dream there are six gradations. The interpretation ascends from the gradation of the dream to another gradation. The dream is the gradation below and the interpretation stands above it, the interpretation exists in the word, and hence the matter is established by the word [*be-dibbur qayyema millah*], as it is written “Do not interpretations belong to God?”—to God [*le’lohim*] certainly! (Zohar 1:191b)

The interpretation rises from the dream, which is six degrees below in the angelic realm, to its source in the aspect of the divine marked as the word (*dibbur*), a term that is associated, as I noted above, with Shekhinah, the speech that makes audible the as of yet inaudible voice (Tif’eret), which emerges from an even more inaudible voice (Binah), everything ultimately murmuring forth from infinite silence. This is the esoteric import of Joseph’s retort to Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker, *le’lohim pitronim*: explication of dreams draws its efficacy from the gradation to which the name *elohim* is assigned, that is, the tenth emanation. Joseph’s relation to this dimension is tied to his symbolic association with Yesod, the phallic potency that showers light upon Shekhinah. Zoharically, this place, referred to as the “foundation of everything” (*qiyyuma de-khola*), is the source whence interpretation of the dreams comes forth. Joseph incarnates that potency and thus while he can proceed to interpret dreams only once he is

confident that he has imparted to those who have sought his services the wisdom that the faculty to explicate issues from Shekhinah, in fact, his hermeneutic agility is sustained primarily by Yesod. [texts # 7-8]

2. Dream as fictional truth

Joseph epitomizes the interpreter of dreams because he represents the mundane embodiment of the phallic energy. In a reversal typical of kabbalistic symbolism, the hermeneutic empowerment of Joseph is augmented not through satisfaction of sexual passion but through its renunciation exemplified in his withstanding the temptation and advance of the wife of Potiphar. Only the mind that displays ascetic control can separate the truth of the dream from the false images within which it is enfolded, an idea that can be traced to the teaching attributed to Simeon ben Yoḥai and transmitted in the name of R. Yoḥanan [text # 9], “Just as wheat cannot be without straw, so there can be no dream without nonsense [*devarim beṭelim*].” This maxim is presented in the Babylonian Talmud as an exegetical explication of the verse “Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream; and let him who has received my word report my word faithfully! How can straw be compared to wheat?—says the Lord” (Jer 23:28). These words occasion a query on the part of the redactor, “What is the connection of wheat and straw in relation to the dream?” If we attend carefully to Simeon ben Yoḥai’s response, we notice that the rabbinic interpreter inverted the scriptural intent. The prophetic utterance seeks to establish a clear boundary between the true reception of the divine decree and the false dream, the former

compared to wheat and the latter to straw, but the rabbinic interpretation presumes that the verse instructs us that every dream is composed of straw and wheat, truth and untruth.

An adaptation of the talmudic dictum is found in the several zoharic passages. I will translate and analyze two examples [texts # 10-11].

“[When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make myself known to him in a vision] I will speak with him in a dream” (Num 12:6). This is one sixtieth of prophecy, as it has been established, and this is the sixth gradation from that gradation of prophecy, and this is the gradation of Gabriel, who was appointed over the dream, as it has been said. Come and see: every dream that is appropriate issues from that gradation, and thus there is no dream that is not mixed with false matters, as we have established, and hence some of them are true and some of them are false, and there is no dream that is not both from this side and from that side. Since everything is in the dream, as we said, all dreams of the world follow the interpretation of the mouth, as it has been established with respect to what is written “as he interpreted to us, so it was” (Gen 41:13). Why? Because in the dream there is deception and truth, but the word rules over everything, and therefore the dream needs a good interpretation (Zohar 1:183a).

R. Yose began to expound and said “Just as a dream comes with much brooding, the voice of the fool come with many words” (Eccles 5:2).”Just as a dream comes with much brooding,” it has been established that there the dream has various powers and agents, gradations upon gradations, so that some dreams are entirely true and some in which there is truth and falsehood. But to the truly righteous fabricated matters are not

revealed, only that which is entirely true. Come and see what is written of Daniel, “The mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision” (Dan 2:19), and it is written “Daniel saw a dream and a vision of his mind in bed; afterward he wrote down the dream” (ibid., 7:1). If there were false matters in it, why was it inscribed among the Writings? However, when the souls of the truly righteous ascend, only holy words are conjoined to them, to instruct them about true words, enduring words that are never uprooted. ... Come and see: when a person is asleep on his bed, his soul departs and wanders in the world above, and it enters the place that it enters. Several troops of alluring [demons] come forth and go about in the world, and they strike that soul. If it is virtuous, it ascends above and it sees what it sees. If not, it cleaves to that side and they inform it of false matters or of things that are about to happen soon. When he awakens, the soul that is within him informs him about what it has seen. Therefore, a person who is not worthy is shown a good dream that is not true, all in order to lead him astray from the path of truth. Since he has swayed from his path, the path of truth, they defile him. For whoever comes to purify himself, they purify him, and whoever comes to defile himself, they defile him (Zohar 1:199b-200a).

One can detect two principal interpretations of the rabbinic maxim that there can be no dream without nonsense in the zoharic homilies, either that some dreams are true and others are false or that there is no dream that is not a mixture of truth and falsity. In the aforementioned passages, there is an echo of both explanations, but the predominant drift seems to be to stress the latter option. In the first passage, the admixture is related to the idea that dreams are consequent to the interpretation of the mouth. Since the dream contains both guile and truth, it can be either true or

false based on its interpretation. In the second passage, a distinction is made between worthy and unworthy souls. The dreams of the former (personified by Daniel) are exclusively truthful, whereas the dreams of the latter comprise both true matters, limited to what will take place in the proximate future, and false matters imparted by demonic forces that seek to tempt the soul with their illusive shimmer, so that it will swerve from the way of truth.

Another dimension of the kabbalistic interpretation of this rabbinic tradition can be elicited from the following passage from *Sefer ha-Niqqud* by Joseph Gikatilla, a Spanish kabbalist with close ideational ties to the zoharic compilation and possibly an active member of one of the circles responsible for a part of its literary invention [text # 12]:

Know that if not for the fact that combined together with dreams is a mixture of the corporeal residue, how great would they be for human beings, for the name *halom* ["dream"] intimates that a human being comprehends more than what matter comprehends, and this is the subject of dreams. One can mentally concentrate [*mitboded*] in concurrence with the dream of prophecy, even though there are some parables [*meshalim*] in it, but with respect to the rest of the dreams, if not for the straw and the refuse mixed in with them, they would be a great thing. And this is what the rabbis, blessed be their memory, said, "Just as there is no wheat without straw, so there is no dream without false matters." They informed us that if not for the false matters compounded with the dream, even the dream of a commoner would be one sixtieth of prophecy. The person who comprehends more than what the body comprehends is called *holem* ["dreamer"]. ... You will find that the name *holem* alludes to the comprehension of people in the lower world when they ascend to comprehend a level

superior to what the bodies comprehend. If the dreams are not perfect, their deficiency is only due to the abundance of the mixture It is impossible for a dream to be entirely true, as we have explained, but part of it of necessity will be true. ... From all of these words we can learn that when an ordinary human comprehends more than his matter comprehends, that comprehension is called *halom* from the language of *holem*, for from the vowel of the *holem* thousands of myriads of lights burst forth, and the [dreamer] merits that some of the lights that burst forth from the vowel of the *holem* will be revealed. Therefore, according to the power of the light that bursts forth in the one who sees the dream from the emanation of the vowel of the *holem*, so will his dream be true; if it bursts forth minimally, a small part of his dream will come to be, and if maximally, the dream will be fulfilled to the end of its matter. According to the bursting forth so shall the measure of the dream be realized. The one who knows the secrets of these mysteries hidden in the matter of the *holem* will know the secret of the comprehension of the dreams [*sod hassagat ha-halomot*]. ... Now contemplate well and you will see the secret of the rank of the *holem* over the rest of the vowels, and you will already know in these places the secret of the dreams, and how they are dependent on the *holem*, which is the secret of the supernal vowel, and according to the efflux that descends from it the comprehensions will come following their types, whether of prophecy or of the rest of the matters (*Sefer ha-Niqqud*, p. 16).

Every dream is a fusion of vain matters and truth—even the dream of prophecy, which is distinguished from commonplace dreams insofar as it is completely truthful, employs figurative language that is literally false (with the exception of Moses)—because of the inherent limitations

of the material body, but the knowledge that we access through dreams transcends those very limitations. Indeed, the dream is a means to reach the highest level of knowledge, which is in truth an unknowing, a gnosis that is an agnosis, the thought that cannot be thought but as what cannot be thought, represented orthographically by the *holem*, the vowel that symbolizes the emanation of Keter, since it is positioned on the top of the consonants.

In light of the connection between the dream and the first of the sefirotic gradations, the act of dreaming is mystically conceived as a state of contemplation (*hitbodedut*) that facilitates the mental ascent of the soul separated from the material body and its absorption in the divine nothingness (*ayin*). As Gikatilla emphasized, moreover, the contemplative ideal is related to the rabbinic dictum that there is no dream without false matters insofar as the source of the dream is Keter, the infinite will, the “world of mercy” (*olam ha-raḥamim*), wherein opposites coincide, and hence there is no truth that is not also untrue and no untruth that is not also true. In the state of conjunction (*devequt*) with the nothing, the dreamer is endowed with the capacity to turn one thing into its opposite, the prototypical illustration being the transposing of judgment into mercy, manifest in the quality of forgiveness on the part of the divine and that of repentance on the part of the human. The point is elucidated in a comment transmitted in the name of Phineḥas ben Abraham Abba Shapiro of Korzec, a close companion of Israel ben Eliezer, the *Ba‘al Shem Tov* [text # 13]: “All of the dreams [*ḥalomot*] come from the vowel *holem*, and from this vowel they can do what they want to do and they can overturn [*lehithappekh*], and this is like the hylic matter [*ha-hiyyuli*] through which they can do what they want, and hence the righteous can transform the attribute of judgment to the attribute of mercy, and this is the meaning of ‘tear up our evil decree,’ and this is the essence of repentance [*iqqar ha-teshuvah*], for repentance transforms the attribute of judgment to the attribute of mercy” (*Imrei Pinḥas ha-Shalem*, 1:423-

424). The use of the philosophical notion of hylic matter is meant to underscore that the dream originates from the void wherein everything possible is actual because what is actual is nothing but the possible. Translated psychologically, this image denotes the annihilation of the dreamer's self and the assimilation into the infinity where it is no longer possible to differentiate antinomies. The dream, consequently, is the supreme mode of knowledge, which is the absence of knowledge, an unknowing that destabilizes the distinction between sense and nonsense.

3. Dream as Unio Mystica and a Prolepsis of Redemption

This leads us to the third topic, the dream as an occasion for mystical union and a prolepsis of redemption. To illustrate this confluence of ideas, I will turn to the teachings of Shneur Zalman of Liadi and some of the subsequent masters of the Ḥabad-Lubavitch dynasty, a literature that preserves one of the most sophisticated accounts of the nexus between imagination, dream vision, nocturnality, exile, redemption, and mystical annihilation.

The first passage is from *Torah Or*, the anthology of Shneur Zalman of Liadi's homilies on Genesis and Exodus compiled by his grandson, Menaḥem Mendel, better known as the Şemaḥ Şedeq. The pertinent text appears in the context of Shneur Zalman's attempt to explicate the celebrated dreams of Joseph [text # 14]:

“A song of ascents. When the Lord restores [the fortunes of Zion]—we will be as dreamers” (Ps 126:1). The dream joins two opposites in one subject and it combines two contradictory matters as if they were one, for during sleep the brain of the intellect that makes distinctions [*moaḥ ha-sekhel ha-mavḥin*] is removed and all that remains is the imaginative faculty [*koaḥ ha-medammeh*], and the imaginative faculty can combine two contradictory matters [*yakhol leharkiv shenei inyanim hafkhayyim*] ... but when

one is awake, the intellectual faculty is aroused and it rules over the imaginative faculty and it does not permit it to combine since one sees with the eye of one's intellect that these are separate things and they are not at all unified. Similarly in the matter of the exile, the divine spark that is in the human soul is in the aspect of sleep and the removal of consciousness [*bi-veḥinat sheinah we-histallequt ha-moḥin*], so it can combine two opposite things (*Torah Or*, 28c-d).

The opening verse from Psalm 126 forges a connection between the hope for redemption, the restoration of Zion, and the act of dreaming. But, as we are quick to learn, the dream is also aligned with exile, since the latter is depicted metaphorically as sleep, and the dream occurs during sleep when the intellectual faculty, which is marked by the facility to distinguish one thing from its opposite, retreats and the imagination, which is characterized by the tendency to combine one thing and its opposite, dominates. Sleep, therefore, should be understood metaphorically as a topos for exilic dormancy, submergence of the soul in the darkness of matter.

In the continuation of the passage, Shneur Zalman offers further clarification of the incongruent images combined in the dreamscape. Utilizing the symbolism of Lurianic kabbalah, the nature of exile is described as the enclothing of the pneumatic spark in the garment of the body, a union that impels the soul to carry on the gnostic drama of liberating through the act of purification (*berur*) the light that is entrapped in the physical world. The overcoming of body is achieved through transformation rather than obliteration of the physical. This basic tenet of Ḥabad—a specific application of the doctrine of *avodah be-gashmiyyut*, “corporeal worship,” often singled out as a distinguishing element of the East-European pietism traced back to the Besht—is expressed by Shneur Zalman in his insistence that even when one is enwrapped in

liturgical worship, love of God of necessity is realized through the love that one enacts with and in the body. To appreciate this point, it should be borne in mind that Shneur Zalman distinguishes two kinds of worship. The first is the form of ecstasy (*hitpa'alut*), which is designated the “great love” (*ahavah rabbah*), that is so intense that the heart cannot contain it and hence the soul yearns to leave the body; the second is a form of ecstasy that can be contained by the vessel of the heart and its primary purpose is to draw down the divine surplus from above into the material world. Worship consists of two phases, self-annihilation (*bitul ha-yesh*) that results from the conjunction of the soul to the infinite light (*or ein sof*) and the drawing down of that light through the fulfillment of Torah and ritual commandments to sustain the cosmos. From a chronological perspective, the latter is consequent to the former, however, from the perspective of the incorporation (*hitkallelut*) of all things in the infinite essence (*asmut ein sof*), the two must be viewed as expressions of a single phenomenon. Worship may be compared to the dream, for it, too, partakes of the paradoxical collusion of polarities: only the one divested of corporeality is in the position to sustain the corporeal. I will cite an extensive portion of Shneur Zalman’s articulation of this point [**text # 15**]:

But, in truth, the root of the aspect of the dream is above and its foundation is in the mountains of the supernal holiness. ... Exile is the aspect of sleep and the removal of consciousness [*histallelut ha-moħin*] ... and then his soul draws life from above and there it is in the aspect of circles, which have no above or below but rather everything is in one equanimity [*ha-kol be-hashwwa'ah aħat*], the containment [*hitkallelut*] and unification [*hitahadut*] of all the matters without any separation or division, as the dictum of the rabbis, blessed be their memory, “these and those are the words of the

living God,” is known. When it is drawn forth by way of the lines, then there is division ... which is not the case with the aspect of the circles wherein there is no division at all, and there all the things that are separated below are joined and comprised together and there does not appear to be any separation or division amongst them. However, for this aspect to be revealed below, it is only by means of the aspect of sleep and the removal of consciousness in exile. Concerning this it says “I will clothe the heavens in blackness” (Isa 50:3). The heavens are the aspect of the circles and they are arrayed in the aspect of blackness and darkness, which is the concealment and hiddenness [*he‘lem we-hester*], for then it shines and radiates from the supernal world above, which is the aspect of the circles in the aspect of the dream, the faculty of the imagination to combine two opposites in one subject [*lehabber shenei hafakhim be-nose ehad*] as if they were actually one, since in truth they are conjoined and unified in their source in the supernal world, for there is the aspect of circles, as was mentioned above. Only below is there a division of the lines [*hithallequt ha-qawin*] by means of *Hokhmah* and *Da‘at*, so that one line will be like this and the other like that, and then will the opposite be seen and be revealed, for the one is the opposite of the other, and consequently they are separate and distant from one another. Therefore it is impossible for there to be a revelation of the aspect of integration [*gilluy behinat ha-hitkallelut*] in the aspect of the disclosure of *Hokhmah*, which is the beginning of the division of the lines, but in the aspect of sleep and the removal of consciousness in exile, then the supernal light shines and radiates. It is hidden and concealed in the aspect of blackness and darkness, that is, in the aspect of the investiture of the concealment [*hitlabbeshut ha-he‘lem*] and not in

the aspect of disclosure, for the disclosure is the aspect of *Hokhmah* and *Da'at*, which is according to the lines (*Torah Or*, 28d).

A positive valence is accorded exile and sleep as it is only through the removal of consciousness (*histallequt ha-moḥin*) associated with them that the mind can reach the level beyond duality. The root of the dream, therefore, is in the “mountains of the supernal holiness,” that is, the aspect of the light of infinity positioned in the interiority of *Keter*, the “incomposite will that is above intellect and comprehension” (*raṣon pashuṭ she-lema'lah me-ha-sekhel we-hassagah*), the “essential concealment” (*he'lem aṣmi*) that is the “actual nothing” (*ayin mammash*). The matter is expressed as well in the portrayal of the source of the dream as a circle (*iggul*), the geometric figure that symbolizes the property of equanimity (*hashwwa'ah*), the integration (*hitkallelut*) and unification (*hitahadut*) of all things in a nondifferentiated unity. By contrast, the line (*qaw*), which begins with the attributes of *Hokhmah* and *Da'at*, demarcates the division of the divine pleroma into right, left, and center columns. In the circle opposites converge, and there is thus no way to distinguish beginning from end, and the dream, which arises as a result of the imagination's ability to combine dissimilar images, is assigned supreme value as the channel through which one can reach the light beyond discrimination, the supernal light (*or ha-elyon*) so luminous that it is described as “blackness” (*qadrut*) and “darkness” (*ḥoshekh*), the circular indifference of the infinite essence as opposed to its linear division into dichotomies in the constellation of the sefirotic potencies in all of their permutations. By means of the dream, therefore, one can attain the mystical state of (dis)integration in which all difference is overcome and the semblance of existence independent of the essence—the nothing that is everything in virtue of being nothing—is annihilated. The propensity of the dreaming imagination to combine

opposites is the psychological analogue to the ontological *coincidentia oppositorum*, the “great mystery” that is encapsulated in the cliché often reiterated in Habad teaching, “two opposites in one subject” (*shenei hafakhim be-nose ehad*). Analogous to the dream, prayer draws one upward to the summit of the *scala contemplativa*, the place of no-place, where limitlessness and limitedness intersect and collude in the identity of their (in)difference, where nothing becomes something and something nothing. To cite Shneur Zalman again:

For the one who sees in a dream it is possible that two opposites will be in one subject actually ... By way of comparison, the community of Israel in the time of exile are called “dreamer,” as it appears that opposite things in contrast to one another in the extreme are united, and the one is not a contradiction to its opposite, as all the effort of Israel in commerce and matters of this mundane world, which is the opposite and conflicting greatly in relation to the aspect of the nullification of holiness that is found in Israel during the time of prayer when the saying of the Shema is recited with intention, “Hear O Israel [the Lord, our God] the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4), and “there is no other apart from him” (ibid., 4:35). Since there is none apart from him, how it is possible afterward to be involved in mundane matters, in the needs of this world, issues of material sustenance with which one toils greatly in heart and soul? And if it is said that since one’s engagement is with matters of this world all day, it is necessary that one does not pray with intention, and one should not direct one’s heart in truth, this, too, is not the truth, for even so, one must direct one’s heart in truth through prayer, and this is not contradictory, for even though this is a matter and its opposite in actuality, it is like the dream in which one dreams of a thing and its opposite in one substance ...

The root of the dream is in the aspect of the supernal perimeter [*ha-maqqif elyon*] that comprises all the opposites in one union [*ha-kollel kol hafakhim be-ḥibbur ehad*], for it encompasses from every side in an equanimity without a linear division at all [*she-maqqif mi-kol sad be-hashwwa'ah ahat beli hithallequt qawin kelal*]. Before him the darkness and light are equal, everything is considered as equal, and he renders equal the small and the big, all things are esteemed as one in the aspect of nullification before him ... he surrounds and encompasses all the worlds equally and he is entirely removed from the category of division. Therefore, he comprises all the opposites together in one unity (*Ma'amerei Admur ha-Zaqen 5565, 1:184-185*).

The dream is enrooted in the “supernal perimeter” (*maqqif elyon*), the aspect of the Godhead that precedes division into binaries, the place of equanimity (*hashwwa'ah*) where opposites coincide. The description of the dream as combining opposites is inspired by the zoharic view discussed above. As we have seen, the dream is characterized as an admixture of what is true and what is untrue. This, I surmise, is the kabbalistic underpinning of the emphasis in Shneur Zalman on the power of the dream to combine discordant images. Support for my conjecture may be elicited from the following comment of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yosef Yiṣḥaq Schneersohn, the Raayatz [**text # 17**]: “In the time of sleep one dreams a dream, for in the dream two opposites come together in one subject in actuality to the point that it is possible that the foundation of the matter or of the edifice that he sees is a true foundation and upon it the matter is constructed or the opposite matter entirely, for this is the substance of the dream, the combining of two opposite matters, one truth and the other falsehood, and both of them appear as

one, and from this example worship at the time of prayer can be comprehended” (*Sefer ha-Ma’amarim* 5689, p. 244).

Prima facie, the final assertion is startling, since it implies that prayer, like the dream, is a compound of truth and deception. But how can this be? To grasp the secret implied here, we must recall that for the Ḥabad masters, the highest rank of worship is the complete eradication that ensues from the worshipper being bound to the infinite light, a nullification so absolute that not only worshipper but worship and worshipped, too, are annihilated in the total (dis)integration of all being and nonbeing into the void that is the essence, what is designated as *biṭṭul ha-meši’ut*. Yet, even this form of veneration requires verbal gesticulations and bodily gestures of an incarnate nature. Just as the truthful elements of the dream are enmeshed in what is patently false, so too in the matter of worship in the exilic state, one’s continued sense of autonomy as an embodied being in a finite universe thought to be independent of the infinite divinity is the dissimilitude—in the formulation of the Raayatz, the dream is the deceit that dissimulates as truth (*sheqer nidmeh la-emet*) as opposed to the deceit that covers truth (*sheqer mekhasseh al ha-emet*)—that is necessary for one to see through the veil of concealment (*he’lem*) that is the world (*ha-olam*), according to the wordplay that appears repeatedly in Ḥabad teaching, and in so doing one can discard the concealment of the veil by carrying out the purification of the light in all worldly matters. To cite the Raayatz again, “This is [the intent of] ‘we will be as dreamers,’ to combine two opposites as one, for if his worship in prayer was authentic, then all day long [he will fulfill] ‘In all your ways know him’ (Prov 3:6), for the trace of the prayer will remain with him and he will be mindful of divinity constantly in all affairs and activities.”

The implications of the Ḥabad perspective are made explicit by his son, Dov Baer, who commented that the root of dreams [text # 18]

is extremely high in the aspect of the circles and the perimeters of the aspect of the chaos [*bi-vehinat iggulim u-maqqifin di-vehinat ha-tohu*] ... for in the dream there are two opposites, as when he dreams that he is very uplifted and then he immediately dreams that he is greatly downtrodden, a thing and its opposite are as one like life and death are as one. Analogously, with regard to the disclosure of divinity in the soul of Israel in exile, which is called "sleep," there are two opposites, the submission of self [*mesirat nefesh*] in reciting the Shema and then, immediately, one is engaged [in loving God] with all one's heart, through commerce [*be-massa u-mattan*], but this is not a thing and its opposite at all as in the dream, for each is a true matter unto itself, and their coming together as one is from the aspect of dreams that join together two opposites. That they come as two opposites, mercy, which is a true matter unto itself, and judgment, which is a true matter unto itself, instructs about the aspect of chaos. In the aspect of the circles of chaos [*ha-iggulim de-tohu*], everything comes together as one without any division at all [*ba'im ha-kol ke-ehad beli hitallequt kelal*], and it is comparable to the time of sleep when all the faculties of the intellect [*koḥot ha-sekhel*] and the properties of the essence of the soul [*middot be-ešem ha-nefesh*] in the aspect of *yehidah* withdraw in elevation after elevation, and there remains only the aspect of the faculty of the imagination in the mind. Even though the aspect of the imagination of dreams is very low, its source is in the supernal perimeter [*be-maqif ha-elyon*] of *yehidah* to which all the intelligibles [*sikhliyyim*] and desires [*reṣonot*] ascend, the source of all the intelligible desires in the supreme elevation of the integration as one precisely [*maqor kol ha-reṣonot sikhliyyim be-illuy muflag be-hitkallelut ke-ehad*

dawqa] ... Thus the potency of dreaming that is in the imagination is in *yehidah*, for there everything comes as one without division of the will and intellect ... like a circle in which there is no division at all.

Although the withdrawal of intellect during sleep and the exclusive role accorded the imagination places the dream at the lowest end of the gnoseological spectrum, its root is implanted in the highest level, which has both a theosophical and a pneumatic correlate, the encompassing circle (*maqquf*) of the world of chaos that precedes the dichotomization of the indivisible essence and the dimension of the human soul that is called *yehidah*, as it denotes its indissoluble unity and consubstantiality with God. Worship may be compared profitably to the dream, since it, too, imbibes the paradox of combining divergent images. The paradigmatic demonstration of the point is the recitation of the Shema, the traditional confession of Israel's monotheistic faith. Transposed esoterically, the avowal of God's oneness is an expression of the mystical truth that the divine essence is the sole reality. For the enlightened adept, then, to proclaim that God is one means to give witness to the insight that all existence, including one's own self, is rendered as nothing in relation to the light of infinity. The nullification is so thorough that one has no feeling of oneself at all, not even the sense of being nullified—the ultimate annihilation, perforce, is the annihilation of the annihilation (*biṭṭul ha-biṭṭul*). And yet, the mandate of the Shema is to express the love of God with one's full embodied presence in the world, and consequently, the quietistic ideal of abnegation, which is the most perfect implementation of the pietistic virtue of love, betrays “the image of the dream that blends two opposites.”

Judged by reason the dream is “most impossible” (literally, the “impossible of the impossible,” *nimna ha-nimna‘ot*), since it occasions the manifestation of the essence (*gilluy ha-ašmut*) that is essentially beyond manifestation, and thus it anticipates the messianic future in which there will be a disclosure of the essence without any obstacle, an idea that is anchored exegetically in the eschatological predictions “and your master will no longer be covered and your eyes will see your master” (Isa 30:20) and “for every eye shall behold the Lord’s return to Zion” (ibid., 52:8). The seeing without a garment is the mystical import as well of the verse “on that day the Lord shall be one and his name shall be one” (Zech 14:9), the prophetic promise, as Shneur Zalman put it, that “he will not be attired and covered in an encasement, and he will be called as he is written,” that is, the name YHWH will no longer be pronounced through the epithet Adonai but it will be vocalized as it is inscripted. This, too, is the meaning of the opening verse of Shneur Zalman’s discourse, “When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion—we will be as dreamers” (Ps 126:1), that is, “this gradation and aspect of the dream will be revealed to the point that everyone will fathom, know, and comprehend the vitality [*hiyyut*] that emanates upon them in the time of exile, which is the aspect of the dream. Therefore, it says ‘we will be as dreamers’.”

The dream is a prolepsis of redemption, a seeing of the essence without any garment (*beli levush*), beholding the real, one might say, beyond the veil of metaphor. But Shneur Zalman, and those who followed his path, appropriated and elaborated the dialectic of disclosure and concealment enunciated by previous kabbalists, and thus they discerned that there can be no disclosure that is not concomitantly an occlusion. What is revealed is the infinite essence, but the infinite essence cannot be revealed and remain the essence that is infinite unless it is concealed;

hence the seeing without a garment amounts to seeing that there can be no seeing without a garment.

By way of summary, we can say that the oneiric imagination is privileged as the way to reach the unknowable and unnameable essence, as it is the mental faculty that combines opposites and thus points to the mystery of equanimity, the state of indifference wherein opposites are identical in their opposition. Restoration to infinity—the mystical nuance of the traditional notion of repentance, *teshuvah*—is predicated on the removal of consciousness, which is indicative of exile, but also on the illumination of the supernal light, the vestment of concealment, since it is only by being concealed that the concealment can be revealed as concealed. Through the dream, therefore, the schism between sleep and wakefulness, exile and redemption, is itself transcended in the luminal darkness where the disparity between dark and light is no longer operative.