

Dreams

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There are lots of dreams in the book of Bereishit (Genesis). Last week we read about Jacob's dream as he ran away from his brother. This week we read about Joseph and his dreams as well as those of the Egyptian Pharaoh and his head baker and his sommelier. Dreams are an important part of all of our lives. But are they significant?

They have always played a very important role in ancient civilizations as oracles, used to predict the future. The Talmud devotes a lot of space to explaining the significance or other wise of dreams. Some rabbis are skeptical. They say dreams depend entirely on interpretations. But these are often either biased or dependent on how much money one is prepared to pay for a good interpretation. Some even say that every dream contains some nonsense. Others give detailed explanations of what the significance is of events, animals, objects and situations in dreams. Some consider them predictors of the future. People were always on the lookout to take advantage. For opportunities to make money playing on the pain, the insecurity and credulity of simple folk.

The Torah was written long before anyone had heard of Freud and his "Interpretation of Dreams." But we can apply some of his ideas to explain the dreams mentioned here. Jacob's angels climbing up to heaven and down clearly reflected his anxiety at leaving the security and protection of his family and his land.

Joseph's dreams of leadership were fostered by Jacob appointing him as his successor and encouraging his sense of exceptionalism. The butcher and the butler were dreaming about how they had failed in their tasks and were desperate for another chance to prove themselves. And Pharaoh as monarch of a troubled land was worrying about supplies of food for his starving masses and will have been thinking about good years and bad years.

Joseph's gift was not just for interpretation. His advice was crucial. He might have used his psychological skills to get to the bottom of the dreams. But he used his brain and logic to devise a practical and effective way of dealing with the anxieties and of those who told him their dreams. That was his success. When he says that it is God who is responsible for revealing meanings. What he is saying is that if you are open to the Divine, you have additional skills and ways of seeing things, that others might not.

Dreams tell us a great deal about ourselves. They tell us about things we fear but are reluctant to express. Often dreams of things in the future are no more than our brains describing what we want to happen nor fear happening. They release suppressed anxieties and wishes. Freud taught us not be afraid of them but to use dreams therapeutically to understand ourselves better.