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## Such stuff as dreams are made on

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It is perhaps the most mysterious of all common human experiences. Traversing a plethora of cultural divides throughout time, mankind has sought to make sense of our bizarre, night-time visions.

Although there are some who believe that dreams are nothing more than arbitrary images produced when our brains continue operating when we sleep, many neuroscientists and psychologists accept the growing body of evidence that our dreams are significant and influenced by our psyche, our experiences during waking life and from the food we eat or the medication we take.

The famous neurologist and forefather of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud viewed the content of his patients' dreams as a window into their primitive, unconscious desires. Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung who collaborated with Freud, felt that Freud's analysis of dreams was too limited. He viewed dreams as a communication from the unconscious as part of the self-regulation of the psyche.

While contemporary opinions still differ, modern studies support the theory that dream content is primarily related to the experiences a person has while awake. Known as the continuity hypothesis, our dreams are most likely to contain deep seated concerns or emotions which translate in to the bizarre visions and experiences we encounter during sleep.

One position that scientists agree on however, is that dreams originate internally. This diverges from the more mystical, spiritual approach which implies that there is some external influence which imparts prophetic or precognitive insights to people, through the medium of sleep.

Scientists dismiss reports of precognitive dreams for being statistically inevitable. Someone who dreams of a plane crash the night before waking up and finding that a real air disaster has occurred, could be forgiven for thinking that their dream was precognitive. But given the vast number of people globally who slept that night, a small number are bound to have dreamt of such a tragedy.

Nevertheless, from a Jewish perspective the Torah itself describes how God communicates with man through dreams. Having dreams and interpreting their meaning is one of the prominent threads that runs through the story of Joseph. Commentators have poured over the meaning of these dreams and whether dreams in the post-Prophetic era can also contain elements of prophecy.

The Talmud indicates that while some dreams are insignificant and meaningless (Horayot 13b) others have the potential to contain prophetic messages (Berachot 57b). Clearly the biblical dreams of Joseph, Pharaoh and Pharaoh's servants fall into the latter category. But before we try and interpret our own dreams, there is one fundamental snag.

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The Medieval commentator Rashi notes Jacob's response to Joseph when relating his second dream about the Sun, Moon and eleven Stars bowing down to him, representing his leadership over his father, mother and eleven brothers. Jacob asks (Genesis 37:10) "Will we come I, your mother, and your brothers to prostrate ourselves to you?" The primary reason for Jacob's question was that Joseph's mother Rachel had already died. Even prophetic dreams contain an admixture of truth and falsehood.

In light of Rashi's point, how then do we relate to our modern daydreams which the Talmud describes as a 'taste of prophecy' (Brachot 57b)?

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (known as Ramchal, d. 1746) concurs with the scientific approach that dream content is affected by the thoughts and emotions one experiences, as well as through food and other substances in the body. Yet he also adopts the Talmud's assertion that our modern daydreams can have prophetic significance or relate to things only the spirit can experience (Derech HaShem 3:1:6). According to Ramchal, when we sleep our souls can on occasion interact with external spiritual forces. These interactions enter our subconscious awareness and affect the content of our dreams. Nevertheless, even such extraordinary dream experiences are tricky to decipher.

However, this is where the Talmudic sages throw the proverbial spanner in the works, for they declare that the interpretation of non-prophetic dreams is more important than the dream itself (Berachot 56b). Rabbi Chaim Volozhin (d. 1821) explains that speech is the medium between the spiritual and the physical worlds and so the interpretation of a dream through speech has the power to bring matters from the potential dream-state into actuality.

One might conclude that the scientific view of dreams is far more rational and coherent than the spiritual approach. Yet in a recent article, Psychologist Dr. Patrick McNamara noted that a wide range of unexplained dream phenomena, such as shared dreams and precognitive dreams containing exquisite, incontrovertible detail are widely reported (Psychology Today June 2016). He admits that science has "no good explanations" for such astonishing phenomena for "science has no place to put them within its current worldview – but this is all the more reason to investigate them."

Quite true. But if a purely physicalist perspective of reality cannot answer such mysteries, perhaps we should resist writing off a spiritual explanation so quickly.

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