

## Rosh Hashanah 5774 (2013) – Second Day

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### Our Responsibility to Dream

Once Amemar, Mar Zutra and Rav Ashi, were sitting together. They said: Let each of us say something that the others have never heard. One of them began: If a person has seen a dream and does not remember what he saw, let him stand before the *kohanim* at the time when they spread out their hands in blessing for the congregation, and let him say as follows:

*Ribbono Shel Olam*, Master of Time and Space: I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. *Chalom chalamti, v'ayni yode'a ma hu* – I have dreamt a dream, and I do not know what it is. Whether I have dreamt about myself, or others have dreamt about me, or I have dreamt about others, if they are good dreams, strengthen them and reinforce them like the dreams of Yosef. And if they require healing, heal them, as the waters of Marah were healed by Moshe our teacher, and as Miryam was healed of her leprosy... and turn all my dreams into something good for me. He should conclude his prayer along with the *kohanim*, so that as congregation answers “Amen” to them, they are answering “Amen” to the dreamer as well.

We all admire people who are dreamers. We are inspired by those who envision something large in the world, who give their voice to it and devote all their energy to making it come true. There are people whose names become associated with certain dreams – just last week we commemorated fifty years since Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. articulated his famous dream of equality, the dream he devoted his life for, and gave his life for.

And when we think of such people, we wonder – what's so different about the dreamer? Why can't that be me? And like the rabbi in the story, the answer might be: *Chalom chalamti, v'ayni yode'a mah hu* – I have a dream, but I don't know what it is. I am a dreamer, but what is my dream?

We live at a time in history when it seems hard to dream the big dreams. We listened last week to the replays of the “I Have a Dream” speech, and perhaps we thought – what chance would there be of such a march today, such a speech, such a following for a bold dream for a country or humanity. If there were a dreamer to match Dr. King, he would surely be ignored or ridiculed, because people are too cynical, too polarized. The gap between that world and ours seems to great.

Or perhaps we interpret the Talmud's story a bit differently – *chalom chalamti, v'ayni yode'a* – I think I'm a dreamer, but I don't know how to do that. Dreamers, after all, are larger than life, and I am just a mere mortal.

I've had that feeling myself. It was with a great deal of idealism that I went off to rabbinical school, and as part of my preparations I studied Talmud for a good part of the year in college with two of my friends. One of them, Rabbi David Rosenn, founded one of the most exciting Jewish organizations I know, called Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps. Beginning in New York, and now in four cities, AVODAH gathers small groups of Jews in their 20s, to live communally and work in urban anti-poverty organizations. They receive training about advocacy and study Jewish texts about justice, and figure out how to bridge their Jewish diversity to create a home together. The alumni of his program have gone on to work or volunteer in social justice organizations, they are conscious about the products they buy, they give tzedakah, they are involved in Jewish communities, they eat Shabbat dinners, because of their involvement in AVODAH.

It's pretty hard to hold up against that standard, to say “I have a dream.”

But probably the biggest reasons we wonder whether we too can be dreamers, are our doubts about the durability of dreams. That's just a dream, we say – the very word suggests the opposite of being wide-awake. Dreaming isn't clear-eyed. I often read the Akedah, this morning's Torah reading, in that light. Surely, as he walked those days toward Mt. Moriah, Avraham wondered whether the dream he had been following had been a pipe-dream, a cruel hallucination. His descendents, teachers of justice and right in the world, a blessing to all the nations of the earth?

There are all kinds of reasons not to dream. Not to think of our lives as connected to a larger project, a vision of a world more perfect in some way that it is now. So many obstacles, in our world and in ourselves.

And yet, Judaism asks us to dream. Even when we say *chalom chalamti, v'ayno yode'a mah hu* – I have dreamt a dream but I have no idea what it is. Dreaming, putting our lives in service of a dream, is one of the most Jewish things there is.

Judaism, after all, was born in the most incredible dreams of all. It came first from the craziness of Avraham our father. Everyone around him, literally everyone down to his own family, believed in idols and kings, in riches and materialism, so he and his wife Sarah took off, to search for truth and build a community and a nation around it. God showed him a sky, and told him to dream of a time far off, when his descendents would

be as infinite as the stars, and become the guiding stars for all the families of the earth.

The Jewish people as a nation were born in the most ludicrous dream of the Exodus. In the idea that the most degraded and dirty and humiliated people on earth, torn off of their land, would someone become a people beloved by God, chosen by God to be the unique partners who would bring a message of freedom and potential out into the world. The dream that the most frozen-in-place power in the world, the dynasty of Pharaoh after Pharaoh after Pharaoh, would have to give way. That God could care so much about the world, and see something world-changing in those who everyone else left behind.

That's the Jewish story. It is the story of dreams that come right out of darkness, of hopelessness, of sheer craziness. Of dreams that carry us through great suffering and loss. Because as surely as Judaism is a dream, it has also been that Akedah, that loss of the dream over and over. And yet, when the Jewish dream seemed to be a mockery, overturned by the powers of the world, we kept it – that dream of returning to the land, of one day being free, and look now how those dreams have come true.

There are times we dream out of clarity and hope and excitement. And there is also a time to dream, out of disappointment and sadness and disillusionment. I think of Ted Kennedy, who lost two brothers gunned down because of their dreams, standing up even as he lost his campaign to be president, and declared, “The dreams shall never die.”

One of the Jewish dreamers I admire the most today is Ruth Messenger. She leads an organization called the American Jewish World Service, which brings funding and expertise through the Jewish community to partnerships throughout the poorest parts of the world. During the time when the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, was at its height, she was the leader of the Jewish community, summoning us to stand by people enduring what we had experienced during the Shoah. I heard her speak about it a few years later, and she said that her commitment had come out of a shame she had felt before. In 1994, when the genocide in Rwanda began, she was President of the Borough of Manhattan – a person of influence and power, she reflects – and she did nothing. And she resolved that if ever again something happened like that in the world, she swore that she would stand up. And she did, as a partner with some of the most unlikely allies, to lead our country not to stand by and do nothing as humans were being slaughtered in Darfur.

Out of our visions come dreams, and out of our shame, and also out of times when we are shattered. We need dreams in our lives. Big dreams. I bet you have them. Even the dreams you may have talked yourself out of, surely they are there somewhere still. Even the dreams you know only in a vague, general sense, can have a power in your life.

How do we tap into that, and connect our lives to dreams?

In the Talmud, Rabbi Bana'ah said: There were twenty-four interpreters of dreams in Jerusalem. Once I dreamt a dream and I went round to all of them and they all gave different interpretations, and all were fulfilled. Dreams are not private possessions. They come alive when we speak them, when we share them and open them up for comment, when they blend with others or inspire them.

The most famous dream in American history is something we almost didn't hear about. As Rev. King came to the end of his prepared remarks, you can see in the videos a kind of quiet in the crowd, no real energy at the end of this famous day of the March on Washington. And the singer Mahalia Jackson, who had just before electrified the crowd, was sitting behind him, and she said, "Tell them about the dream, Martin."

Imagine if Dr. King hadn't told us about the dream. This is a small thing, but I remember one of the first times I heard the speech, when I was maybe ten years old, the way he ended: *When we let freedom ring...we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands...* And I felt that I was included in his dream. As a Jewish person, a minority, with a struggle parallel in some way to the blacks he mentioned. And as a partner in his vision, who could make this dream come true.

Rabbi Bana'ah's insight is that each of us may have a dream, but we can't understand it entirely on our own. One of my insights about a community like ours is that we have the possibility of being the interpreters of each other's dreams. Five years ago on Yom Kippur, I issued a challenge about *tikkun olam*, about the work we do to repair the world, and offered to provide seed money and teaching for any group that wanted to start a giving circle, a tzedakah collective. That fall a group formed, which calls itself now the Jewish Women's Giving Circle.

One of the first things the group had to do was to define its goal – what would the group give tzedakah for? In the first year, the seven women wrote a mission statement: to help mothers in need and their children in the local Nashua area. What has been remarkable is how each year, the members of the group have gone back to that statement to interpret their dream. What did we mean by it? What could it mean? And the process of working together has led in so many directions. To individual reflections, learning about our own lives and priorities. To ways of involving their children, several of whom had Bar Mitzvahs in the past year, and to bringing programs to our Religious School.

I see a Jewish community like ours as a place where people can talk about dreams, or the

seeds of dreams. Where we expect to hear not only the mundane from one another at Kiddush, but also the visions. Where we find people eager to respond to dreams, to ask questions, share ideas, flesh them out with each other. There are ways to structure that, and I would be delighted to help anyone put together yet another Giving Circle, and I know the women in the first one would too.

Sometimes, the connection to dreams comes differently. Not everyone is the initiator of a dream; sometimes, we play an important role in the dream of someone else.

I often think of being a rabbi as my own dream, but it's not only that. When I started rabbinical school, I was twenty-three years old, just out of college. I applied for and received a fellowship from the Wexner Foundation, which was a new organization started in the late 1980s, dedicated to training young new leaders to fix everything wrong in the Jewish community. At the orientation for the eighteen of us in New York, we were introduced to the head of the Foundation, Rabbi Maurice Corson. He had been the rabbi of one of the largest Conservative congregations in the country, then worked in the field of community relations, where he was especially active in the struggle to free Soviet Jews. He had personal experience at the highest level, and with the highest accomplishments, in what all of us young people were hoping to do. His talk, as I remember it, was the talk of an authority, and truth be told I was a bit frightened of the man.

But at dinner that night, at Lou G. Siegel's Restaurant near Times Square, Rabbi Corson came down around dessert to the end of the table where I was sitting, along with Mark Koplick, another of the youngest new rabbinical students in our group. And Maurice sat down next to us, and he leaned over on his hand to talk to us, and as he asked us about ourselves, he was literally looking up at us. And I realized that this man had bet his dreams, his professional dreams, his hopes for the Jewish people, entirely on a group of people twenty-three to twenty-eight years old.

As much as I might be living my own dream, I am living Rabbi Corson's. Maybe some of you are thinking: I am too old to embark on new dreams. But the prophet Joel said: *And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and ...your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions...* Your role may be to help others cultivate their dreams. Or to see the role they play in fulfilling dreams that began earlier in your life.

I know that for many people, it's hard to think of dreaming when you're at a time in life when it is hard enough just to meet the demands of today. There are people now, in our congregation, mourning the loss of dreams and the end of dreams in your own lives –

because of a loved one no longer here, the partner in your dreams; or the end of the dream of a happy marriage, or worries over health or wellbeing, for yourself or someone you care about.

But I can't tell you how many times people have come to me at times of great need, and asked what they can do for our community. People at times of great financial hardship, or as their marriage is ending, have come to talk to me about what's going on in their lives. But precisely at that moment, they reach out toward someone's dream. To find a role to play in the visions I have or we have for our synagogue and our community.

Whenever I come to synagogue to pray, I'm particularly aware of others whose dreams I am a part of. I mention to you every Shabbat the alternative version of the Amidah that comes after the standard one in our *Siddur*. I love it, because it talks at the start about how we are the distant descendents of Sarah and Avraham, and we still reach for what they are reaching for. And in this Beit Avraham, this house of Avraham and Sarah, I know that I am actually a part of part their still unfinished-dream, to build this Jewish people who will bring blessing to all the families of the earth.

And the purpose of our religious life is to connect us, always, to dreams. In the Talmud, Rabbi Zeira says that one who has not dreamed for seven days is called “evil.” I think he means that when we go an entire week without connecting to a dream, we bring harm into the world. Every Shabbat we get together to reconnect to our own dreams and those of the Jewish people from all time. Our words of prayer bring us down into Egypt, and out again to Mt. Sinai; to Jerusalem, where it is foretold that all the nations will one day gather to hear Torah and beat their swords into ploughshares. When a week goes by when we might be tempted to sink into despair about this world, we return here for an infusion of the vision, of the dream.

People ask me sometimes, “How can you say these prayers: that God feeds everyone, that God heals the sick?” But I see especially these prayers as dreams of how the world should be. Like Avraham, I take these words as dreams even to challenge God with. Each story, each prayer for peace, each praise for food and safety, reminds us of worthy dreams, of the possibilities for the world that aren't here now, that require us to fulfill them. And at our best, we talk to each other about what the great responsibilities are that come with dreaming dreams.

And so the challenge of the new year is to find our places in dreaming.

For some, it is the challenge of being disillusioned, and reconnecting with the core of what you care about.

For some, it is opening up the possibility of hope, of seeing your life as attached to something bigger than the daily routine

For some, it is thinking about how to be an inspiration, by sharing your dream with other people and younger people.

For some, the challenge this year is to be controversial, to talk about a dream that you know other people are reluctant about or opposed to or cynical about.

*Ribono shel olam, ani shelcha v'chalomotai shelcha* – Master of the Universe, I am yours and my dreams are yours. *Chalom chalamti, v'ayno yode'a mah hu* – I have dreamed a dream, and I yearn to know what it is. May it be worthy of being one of your dreams. Whether I have dreamt for myself, or for my friends, or whether my friends have dreamt a role for me, if they are good dreams, strengthen them and give us the courage to live toward them. And they require healing, help me heal so that I may have my place among Your people of dreamers. May this prayer be like the prayer of the *kohanim*, a dream worthy of standing in front of your people, worthy of everyone responding “Amen.”