

Jews, Dreams and Psychiatry
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Dr. David Cohen, the psychiatrist, welcomes his first patient of the day. The patient, Moshe, sits down across from Dr. Cohen and immediately blurts out, “Dr. Cohen! Last night I had a truly strange dream. In the dream I was talking with my mother. But suddenly . . . she had your face! I was startled awake in a sweat. I couldn't get back to sleep. I tossed and turned until seven o'clock. Finally, I just could not stay in bed for another minute. I got up, grabbed a quick breakfast of a Coke and a few crackers, and came straight here to you. Tell me, please, what do you make of this strange dream?”

Dr. Cohen looks at Moshe for a long moment, then says, “One Coke and a few crackers?! You call that a breakfast?!”

Our Torah portion today begins with a dream. In the previous portion, Jacob's parents, Isaac and Rebecca, have each instructed him to go to Haran, to the home of his uncle Laban, Rebecca's brother, in order to find a wife.

Jacob sets off from Beer-sheva to go to Haran. On the first night of his journey, he lies down to sleep. He has a dream. He sees in his dream a ladder or stairway with its foot on the ground reaching up to the heavens. Angels of the Lord are going up and down on it.

God appears to Jacob in the dream. God assures Jacob that God will be with Jacob and will protect him and will grant him the land that God promised to his grandfather, Abraham. Jacob awakes and says, “God is in this place and I – I did not know it.”

Later in Genesis we encounter another famous dreamer. Joseph, the first-born son of Jacob and Rachel, dreams when he is yet a young man that his brothers and parents eventually will bow down to him and he will rule over them.

Later in our story, Joseph becomes in effect the first psychiatrist. While Joseph is in prison, he interprets the dreams of other prisoners, including Pharaoh's chief baker and chief cup-bearer. According to Joseph's interpretation, Pharaoh will pardon the cup-bearer but execute the baker.

The dreams come true. The cup-bearer leaves prison, and promptly forgets his promise to remember Joseph. So Joseph remains in prison.

Two years later, Pharaoh has disturbing dreams that his magicians cannot interpret. These are the dreams you will recall, the ones about the two groups of seven ears of corn and seven cattle. One group is healthy and well-fed, the other sickly and dying.

The chief cup-bearer belatedly remembers Joseph and his remarkable skill as an interpreter of dreams. Pharaoh has Joseph brought out of prison.

Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams persuasively. They are harbingers of seven years of rich plenty to be followed by seven years of devastating famine.

Pharaoh rewards Joseph. He places Joseph in charge of all the land of Egypt. Pharaoh says that by Joseph's command, all the Egyptians shall be directed, excepting only Pharaoh himself.

So Joseph was the first Jewish psychiatrist. But he was by no means the last.

Many millennia later, the entire field of treating psychiatric disorders by talk therapy was revolutionized by the first Jewish psychiatrist of the modern era, Sigmund Freud. The history of psychiatry that led to Freud and beyond has been summarized succinctly by Dr. Steven Reidbord, a psychiatrist who has been active in clinical psychiatry and psychiatric education for more than two decades. He is the chair of the Continuing Medical Education Committee at California Pacific Medical Center, and sees patients in his private office in San Francisco. Here is Dr. Reidbord on the early history of psychiatry:

Psychiatry got its name as a medical specialty in the early 1800s. For the first century of its existence, the field concerned itself with severely disordered individuals confined to asylums or hospitals. These patients were generally psychotic, severely depressed or manic, or suffered conditions we would now recognize as medical: dementia, brain tumors, seizures, hypothyroidism, etc. As was true of much of medicine at the time, treatment was rudimentary, often harsh, and generally ineffective. Psychiatrists did not treat outpatients, i.e., anyone who functioned even minimally in everyday society. Instead, neurologists treated "nervous" conditions, so named for their presumed origin in disordered nerves.

Around the turn of the 20th century, one of these neurologists, Sigmund Freud, published theories on the unconscious roots of some of these less severe disorders, which he termed psycho-neuroses. These disorders impaired relationships and work, or produced odd symptoms such as paralysis or mutism that could not be explained medically.

Freud developed psychoanalysis to treat these "neurotic" patients. However, psychiatry, not neurology, soon became the specialty known for providing this treatment. Psychoanalysis thus became the first treatment for psychiatric outpatients. It also created a split in the field, which continues to this day, between biological psychiatry and psychotherapy.

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We all know that Freud was Jewish. He was also famously non-religious and even ardently secular. So did he identify as a Jew?

Yes, very strongly. He said of himself in a 1931 letter that he is “a fanatical Jew.” Around the same time Freud became strongly sympathetic with Zionism. His son Ernest was also a Zionist. As a further indication of Freud’s Jewish identity, none of his children converted to Christianity or married gentiles, even in Europe in the years shortly before World War Two when it was fairly common for Jews to choose one or the other of these paths.

Freud’s early books included one published in 1899 titled The Interpretation of Dreams and an abridged version published two years later titled On Dreams. In these books Freud presented detailed interpretations of his own dreams and his patients’ dreams and described the theoretical model of mental structure (the unconscious, pre-conscious and conscious) on which he based his interpretations.

A year or so later Freud formed a group of physicians who shared his views. The original group included five doctors. All of them were Jews. The group grew to include sixteen doctors. All of them except Carl Jung were Jewish.

The predominance of Jews in the field of psychiatry began with Freud and continues today. For example, a study published in 1971 called The Fifth Profession: Becoming a Psychotherapist by authors Henry, Sims and Spray found that 62% of their sample of over 4,000 American psychoanalysts identified themselves as having a Jewish cultural affinity, compared to only 17% Protestant and 3% Catholic.

That study was published more than 40 years ago. I have not found more recent data. Still, I believe, partly on the basis of anecdotal evidence and my own experience, that it remains true that Jews are represented among psychiatrists in a proportion that far exceeds our share of the general population or even our share of learned professions.

So the question naturally arises: why is this?

The answer that is not serious is that Jews want to be doctors, and particularly Jewish mothers want their sons and daughters to be doctors, but we can’t stand the sight of blood, so we become psychiatrists rather than medical doctors or, God forbid, surgeons.

But of course we also do become surgeons. The cardiac surgeon who saved my life fourteen years ago by performing a triple by-pass operation was Jewish and proud of it.

Here is a more serious answer.

In the first place, we are learners. Jewish culture strongly values education and achievement. A hugely disproportionate number of Nobel prize winners from many fields have been Jewish.

So we tend to be over-represented in any field requiring many years of graduate training. Psychiatry is no exception.

Beyond that, psychotherapy as developed by Freud and his mainly Jewish colleague meshes very well with Jewish culture. Freud based his rules of therapy on the rabbi-student relationship in orthodox Jewish culture.

Freud and his wife descended from Hasidic rabbis. In the Jewish world he knew, the rabbi was revered as a person with special knowledge. Jews would go to the rabbi for advice and would tell the rabbi in confidence their most painful memories and dilemmas. The rabbi in turn would dispense sagacious advice based on his special knowledge and insight. This is similar to the relationship between patient and psychoanalyst. The patient tells the analyst his most intimate secret thoughts and the analyst uses knowledge and insight to help him see and interpret the patient's unconscious conflicts.

There is also a more ancient answer. Dreams and their interpretation were a topic that fascinated the rabbis of the Talmud. In Masechet Berachot there are pages and pages of discussions of dreams and what they mean.

The Talmud says that Rav Hisda said, "A dream which is not interpreted is like a letter which is not read."

After that opening statement, we read about a wide variety of dreams and what they meant, according to the Talmud. One rabbi says that there cannot be a dream without some nonsense. Another says that a part of a dream may be fulfilled, but the whole of the dream is never fulfilled. Still another says, "If one has a dream which that makes him sad, he should go and have it interpreted."

A rabbi said also, "There were 24 interpreters of dreams in Jerusalem. Once I dreamt a dream and I went round to all of them and they all gave me different interpretations, and all were fulfilled, thus confirming the that which is said, namely, 'All dreams follow the mouth.'" That phrase, "All dreams follow the mouth," appears often in the Talmud's discussion of dreams. In our time that sentence could mean that, once a dream is interpreted persuasively, the dreamer recognizes the truth of the interpretation because it is as though he had said it himself. In the context of the Talmud, it seems to mean that there were established methodologies for interpreting dreams, usually by relying on biblical verses. It also meant that, once interpreted, the situation implicit in the dream would actually occur in reality because of the power of speech to become reality.

One of my favorite dream interpreters in the Talmud is a man named Bar Hedyā. The Talmud says of him, "To one who paid him, he used to give a favorable interpretation, and to one who did not pay him Bar Hedyā gave an unfavorable interpretation." I suppose in our modern context the advice to us would be to hire a psychiatrist in a regular patient-therapist relationship where we pay for each session and don't try to corner a psychiatrist at a party and ask him or her to tell you for free what your dreams mean.

We see that Jews have been interpreting texts for more than 2,000 years. The work of the psychiatrist resembles this ancient practice. In the case of the psychiatrist, the text is the dream rather than a passage from Torah or Talmud. But the work is the same: to investigate the meaning that lies below the surface and bring it out for the enlightenment of the student or the dreamer.

So, my dear friends, I wish for you tonight that you sleep tight and have sweet dreams.