

Dreaming the Dream

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The great and revered R. Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, single handedly revived and reestablished the religious yeshiva world of Ponovezh in Israel. A renowned Torah and Talmudic scholar, R. Kahaneman spent his life travelling the world, fundraising for the many Torah and charitable organizations he helped establish.

In a recently published memoir, Rav Shlomo Riskin recalls visiting the elder rabbi as he lay ill at a hospital bedroom. Rav Riskin writes of the visit:

“It seemed to me, whilst standing at his bedside, that he was depressed, and I said to him, “I hope the Rosh Yeshiva understands what a *zehut*, what a merit it is for me to have gotten to know the Rosh Yeshiva. After all, everyone dreams, but how many people are able to realize as many of their dreams as the Rosh Yeshiva was able to realize? What was accomplished at Ponevezh is a glory to behold. Most people are fortunate if they realize 10 percent. The Rosh Yeshiva must have realized 90 percent. The Rosh Yeshiva must have had great merit to have had such accomplishment.”

He looked at me and he smiled. He then took my hand and said to me, “*Nein, Nein*, Rav Riskin. True, for most people only 10 percent of their dreams are ever realized. No one dies unless 50 percent of his desires remain unrealized, is what our sages of the Talmud say. But in my case, it was only 10 percent that was realized. I just had greater and loftier dreams.””

In this room tonight, each of us has greater and loftier dreams. As individuals, in our life’s path and in our relationships, to what extent have we been able to realize our dreams? As members of this community and as members of the people Israel, to what extent have our dreams been

fulfilled? Tonight, like Ran Kahaneman on his sickbed, we are compelled to ponder and reflect, have we simply settled on 10 percent of our original dream?

Midrash Tanhuma interprets one of Jacob's most exalted dreams in a deeply challenging way. Jacob, as many of us recall, dreams of angels ascending and descending a ladder stretched out between the heavens and the earth. According to Midrash Tanhuma, the angels represented the major nations of the world. Accordingly each and every nation has its moment of ascension, its time of political rising. Each has its fifteen minutes of fame, as it were. But that period is then followed by political, cultural, and historical descent. The midrash then teaches that at that very moment **ונתירא אבינו יעקב**, at that moment our father Jacob was filled with fear. **ואמר** **אם אתה** – **כשם שיש לאלו ירידה, כך אני יש לי ירידה** – Jacob thought to himself, 'Just as these nations ultimately fall, so too, I will one day fall.' The Holy One blessed be He said to Jacob, **ולא האמין ולא עלה** – **עולה אין לך ירידה** – But Jacob didn't believe and so he didn't ascend the ladder.

According to Midrash Tanhuma, the lofty and exalted vision of Jacob our father has not yet been realized. Jacob didn't believe. Jacob never ascended the ladder. Jacob's dream remained only a dream.

Depressing as this may be, on a certain level, this midrash actually contains an exciting invitation for our generation, for Jews living today.

Let me explain.

According to some, the period of our biblical ancestors represents the heyday of Jewish history. The exodus, the revelation at Sinai, the period of judges, prophets, and kings, even the rabbinic period, capture Judaism's most ultimate moments. With that however, Judaism has reached its peak, and until the time of Messiah, all generations yet to come are in a process of descent and

retreat. At worst, Judaism is solely about its past. At best, Judaism is trying to recreate its past in the present.

The midrash however takes a different approach: Judaism is either not yet on the ladder or Judaism is on the ladder but still only at its very first rung. In this approach, Judaism cannot be about the past because the past has not yet been fully fulfilled. Judaism is therefore most concerned about fulfilling its future.

For a moment, imagine that like Jacob in the midrash, the Jewish people have not yet ascended the ladder. Or perhaps we simply only reached its very first rung. Imagine that as Jacob's inheritors, we as a people have only seen the fulfillment of 10 percent of the original dream?

The midrash powerfully challenges us: Is our understanding of Judaism filled with nostalgic images of the past or bold visions for the future?

The great Rav Kook dared to continue to dream. In an article outlining his vision for Judaism's future, Rav kook wrote: "We [the Jewish people] have begun to say something great to ourselves and to the entire world, and we have not yet completed saying it. We are in the middle of the speech and we don't want to stop, nor can we. Even if we stutter in our speech, even if we fail to realize what exactly it is we intend to say, even if we fail to identify the means to realize this great vision, even still, our confidence in the rightness of our path is never diminished. Only a nation that has completed its work can descend from history's stage, only a culture that has fully actualized itself can agree to descend. We however, despite all our labors and accomplishments, we still have a great vision in our heart and for us there is still a long and wondrous journey ahead" (Orot, Erech HaTechyiah).

Imagine if our approach to Judaism did not settle on the path already travelled but on the journey still ahead? How would we respond differently to the major questions vexing our world today if we believed there are still rungs to climb on the great Jewish ladder?

This evening, let's begin with our very own shul.

Less than a year ago, our family began contemplating our future here in Berkeley. I was on my way to completing five years of service. My predecessor R. Silverman had served for six years. My teacher and mentor R. Saul Berman, our shul's first rabbi, had also served for that amount of time. Yet Frayda and I felt sure of our path and our choice. We knew that our life was here. That there are things that our beloved community still needed to accomplish.

At the time, many people still insisted on offering unsolicited advice, speaking to us as though we were at a critical juncture or crossroads.

Some suggested that it was time to move ahead. There were larger, bigger, better communities out there. It was time to think about a return to the East Coast or at least Southern California.

Others responded with seeming words of comfort that offered no comfort at all. "Perhaps," I heard several say, each in their way, "you have already accomplished what you had set out to achieve. What else is left for you and us to realize?" Perhaps, this was a gentle way of letting me know that it was okay for us to go. (Or maybe, this or that person simply doesn't like us).

But, as I said, Frayda and I were very sure of our path and choice. Five years ago, when we set out on our journey to Berkeley, we didn't only come because of what was, but also because of what we believed could become. Reality only made it possible for us to consider coming. Our dreams, dreams that we now share with you, compelled us to come, and still now, force us to stay.

Only half a decade ago, a group of dreamers founded this shul. A few years ago, one of our community's founders took me to the side and said, "Rabbi, one day we will look back on this moment and remember it as Beth Israel's golden era."

But I beg to differ.

What if I told you, that in Beth Israel's fifty years as a shul we only managed to accomplish %10 of our original dream? That is how I feel and I want to invite all of us to feel this way with me.

No, I want even more. I want you to dream the dream with me.

Let's ascend Jacob's un-used ladder of dreams and explore the %90 we have yet to accomplish.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah I described who we are:

We are a Shabbat community, whose collective spiritual, religious, and ethical experience goes beyond any of our perceived differences.

We are a community seeking the presence of God in our midst. And while we maintain theological humility, we nonetheless insist on the possibility of experiences imbued with transcendent meaning.

And we are a community devoted to justice. Our ultimate commitments compel us to err on the side of action and speech than on the side of silence and passivity.

As a community we are also on a path of vision, something we spoke about on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.

As a community we believe that we will see more if we give more, we will see more if we see with each other more, and we will see more if we will close our eyes more.

So tonight, I am asking you all to close your eyes: ascend the ladder and dream with me.

If you have a dream that you have not yet shared with our community, now is the time to share it. If you have a hidden talent, not yet shared with our community, now is the time to share it. If you have any gift or a major gift that you have not yet made to our community, now is the time to make it. Dream the dream today and together let us ensure that our shul will dwell in the future tense and not in the past.

Our ultimate message is simple: Judaism is real and not a relic. Judaism is more than reality. Judaism is about making real that which we dare to dream.

In a note written for his grandchildren Rav Riskin, who I quoted earlier, wrote: “Remember that you may not complete the process, but you must assume a share in its development. Not everyone who dreams sees their dream fulfilled, but if you do not have a dream, it surely will not be fulfilled. And, sometimes, if God truly wills it and you listen to His subtle messages, the fulfillment of the dream may be greater than the dream itself. I like to think that if you believe in a God who is invisible you will have the inner vision to dream the impossible; only those who dare dream the impossible have a chance at achieving the incredible...”