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6. Talmudic Dream Interpretation, Freudian  
Ambivalence, Deconstruction\*

*Ken Frieden*

A short chapter cannot do justice to three such unwieldy phenomena as talmudic dream interpretation, Freudian ambivalence, and deconstruction. In any event, this pyramid of catch phrases is not intended to suggest a direct continuity between ancient rabbinic commentary and recent literary criticism. The diversity of talmudic and midrashic texts, not to mention the variety of so-called "deconstructive" writings, should unsettle any claims of full-fledged influence. Nevertheless, there are passages in the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah that do anticipate certain aspects of contemporary literary studies. For example, some rabbinic approaches to dreams are pertinent to the way in which deconstruction, under the influence of Freud, rejected hermeneutics.

Freud's basic assumptions about interpretation resemble those of nineteenth-century philology. Freud even compares the interpretation of a dream to the translation of an ancient text; beneath the surface of the reported dream, he claims, is another layer of meaning. A dream is like a difficult passage in Greek or a message in Egyptian hieroglyphics, elusive yet open to interpretation.

From several standpoints, however, and despite his reliance on philological models, Freud's methods of interpretation differ from nineteenth-century European norms. First, Freud utilizes the dreamer's free associations, insisting that by a circuitous route they guide him back to the hidden meaning of the dream. Second, Freud's interpretations place great emphasis on puns and other wordplays. Third,

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\*This essay, presented in December 1990 at the Modern Language Association Convention in Chicago, expands upon certain elements in my book entitled *Freud's Dream of Interpretation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).

Freudian theory creates the modern myth of the unconscious mind, which he claims is indirectly expressed through dreams.

Freud had more in common with ancient dream interpreters than he was prepared to admit. He does acknowledge that his dreams associate him with Joseph, the central biblical dream interpreter (*Td* 466).<sup>1</sup> Yet when Freud actually addresses Joseph's interpretive approach, in chapter 2 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he rejects it as a symbolic method that relies upon the interpreter's insight and intuition. Before turning to Freud, it is helpful to survey the talmudic and midrashic literature on dreams.

Several talmudic opinions and anecdotes relate to dream interpretation.<sup>2</sup> One memorable saying is attributed to Rabbi Chisda: "a dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is not read" (*Berakhot* 55b). This analogy suggests several meanings. It indicates that dreams have a hidden message, like the contents of a sealed letter. It also suggests that dreams may be interpreted, as a letter may be opened. Yet Rabbi Chisda neither tells us who is the sender of the dream letter, nor assures us that such letters always contain good news. In some cases, then, it may be advisable to leave the symbolic letter unopened, or the dream uninterpreted.

According to a basic talmudic view, meaning is not merely within the dream, framed as an abstract idea. Rather, the meaning of a dream follows it, in the form of actual events. Hence interpretation may make a great deal of difference—not only to *understanding* what a dream means, but to *influencing* the future. Dream interpretation as depicted in the Talmud is commonly aimed toward the future, attempting to reveal the significance of dreams by discovering their implications. This may be called future-oriented dream interpretation. It is not always *prophetic* because it does not necessarily predict the future, but it is *future-oriented* because it deals with potential consequences.

The biblical model for future-oriented dream interpretation is Joseph. Imprisoned in Egypt, Joseph successfully interprets the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. Subsequently, when Pharaoh needs an interpreter for his own dreams, the cupbearer recalls: "there was with us a Hebrew boy, a servant to the officer of the guard; and we told him, and he interpreted our dreams to us, to each man according to his dream he interpreted. And as he interpreted to us, so it was" (*Gen.* 41:12–13).

A rabbinic inquiry reinterprets the story of Joseph. This surprising interpretation, or rather association, is contained in *Genesis Rabbah*, in the midrashic commentary on the biblical passage just quoted.

This midrashic passage deals with *Genesis* 41:13, in which the cupbearer tells Pharaoh about Joseph, stating that "as he interpreted to us, so it was." The rabbinic text narrates the following story:

A certain woman went to R. Eliezer and said to him: "I saw in my dream that the second story of my house was split." He said to her: "You will conceive a male child"; she went away and so it was. A second time she dreamed thus and went to R. Eliezer, who told her: "You will give birth to a male child"; and so it was. A third time she dreamed thus and came to him again but did not find him. She said to his students: "I saw in my dream that the second story of my house was split." They said to her: "You will bury your husband," and so it was. R. Eliezer heard a voice of wailing and said to them: "What is this?" They told him the story, and he said to them: "You have killed a man, for is it not written, 'As he interpreted to us, so it was'?" R. Jochanan said: "All dreams follow the mouth, except for wine."<sup>3</sup>

This passage sheds old and new light on the dynamics of dream interpretation. According to a more traditional view, Joseph's interpretations are prophetic in the sense that they predict what is going to occur. The midrashic account diverges from this by stating that "dreams follow the mouth" [that is, it seems, the mouth of the interpreter]. In other words, the interpreter has an active power to change events, the outcome of dreams. If this is the case, then it may be possible to damage a person by offering a negative interpretation. This is the gist of the most extensive story in the chapter on dreams in the Babylonian Talmud.

Bar Hedaya is an interpreter of dreams. He makes a business of his talent: "To one who gave him a fee he interpreted for good, and to one who did not give him a fee he interpreted for evil." The mercenary, ancient interpreter thus enables his clients to purchase favorable futures. Raba and Abaye, famous rivals, come to Bar Hedaya, the interpreter, saying that they have dreamed identical dreams. In fact, Raba and Abaye most often recount scriptural verses, rather than dream images. Since they claim to have dreamed Scripture, the interpreter's work underscores the parallel between dream interpretation and biblical commentary.

The rabbis present the same dreams, or verses from the bible, but Abaye pays the interpreter while Raba does not. Following his customary practices, Bar Hedaya interprets Abaye's dreams favorably and Raba's dreams unfavorably. The dream interpreter appears to make dreams mean virtually anything he wishes, and influences the dreamer's future for better or worse. His successes are neither questioned nor explained. Calamities begin to overtake Raba, who has

skeptically declined to pay the interpreter's fee. As a result, he changes his tune and starts to believe in the power of dreams and interpretation. After many of Bar Hedaya's unfavorable prophecies have been realized, Raba returns to the interpreter alone. This time he pays the customary fee, and at last he receives favorable interpretations. According to the interpreter's final statement, "miracles will happen to you."

Subsequently Raba and Bar Hedaya travel by boat together. Aware that he has acted badly toward Raba, the dream interpreter suddenly fears divine reprisal. His most recent prediction foretold that miracles would happen to Raba; now he worries that the boat might sink, and that only Raba will be miraculously saved. Trying to make a quick escape, Bar Hedaya drops a book—presumably a manual of dream interpretation. The treatise opens to a page from which Raba reads: "All dreams follow the mouth." After he reads these words, Raba bursts out, "it is all because of you!" He blames the interpreter for the misfortunes that have befallen him, believing that he now knows the secret of Bar Hedaya's destructive interpretations. Raba evidently understands the metaphorical image, "all dreams follow the mouth," to mean: "all dreams' consequences follow their interpretation." According to Raba's way of understanding it, then, "all dreams follow the mouth" implies that the dream interpreter can make a dream mean whatever he says, and so change the dreamer's life.

These biblical, talmudic, and midrashic traditions suggest that although the interpreter may wish to appear unbiased, his work always furthers or hinders vested interests. Biblical dream interpreters such as Joseph and Daniel rise to power through their interpretations, even when the dreamer (as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar) does not benefit from them.

This does not leave us with a single, monolithic rabbinic attitude toward dream interpretation, but with several conflicting opinions. The differences between Raba and Abaye exemplify this. On the one hand, some rabbis express their conviction that dream interpretation can be powerful and effective, even if it is willful and arbitrary. On the other hand, there are intimations that some dream interpreters are mercenary quacks who should not be trusted. Interpretations can be *made good* in spite of their arbitrariness. And this is not always for the best.

Freud was concerned to show underlying meanings beneath the superficial content of dreams. Although he recognized innumerable meanings, calling the dream text "overdetermined" by multiple dream-thoughts, he insisted that he could discover the dream's latent

content. On the other hand, Freud employed the method of free association, which at times seems to be as arbitrary as the prophetic mouth of the dream interpreter Bar Hedaya. The talmudic saying, "all dreams follow the mouth," would take on another sense today. In orthodox Freudian doctrine, it might signify that the meaning of a dream follows the dreamer's mouth, through the associations provided by the dreamer.

For a number of reasons, Freud was compelled to repudiate his Judaic forerunners; he both consciously ignored them and unconsciously repressed their insights. On one level, this was part of Freud's effort to gain acceptance for a medical practice that was already being met with considerable resistance. Moreover, Freud associated biblical dream interpretation with simplistic prophecy based on divine inspiration, which would not advance his search for a pragmatic, verifiable method. Finally and most significantly, Freud may have felt threatened by his rabbinic precursors. There was real "anxiety of influence" in his case, and not merely because of Freud's status as a latecomer to the Jewish tradition. Freud the skeptic met his match in talmudic and midrashic passages that deal with dream interpretation. Especially tractate Berakhot shows the dream interpreter, Bar Hedaya, for what he is: a dangerous charlatan who ruins the lives of innocent people. Freud had reason to keep his distance from such an opposing opinion.

How much did Freud know about dream interpretation in the Talmud? Enough to feel uneasy over what he knew. Freud's most provocative reference to dream interpretation in the Jewish tradition occurs in a footnote, which he added to the third edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1914. Reviewing the prior, "scientific literature on the problem of dreams," Freud writes: "Almoli (1848), Amram (1901), Löwinger (1908), and most recently—with consideration of the psychoanalytic standpoint—Lauer (1913) deal with dream interpretation among the Jews" (*Td* 32). While the latter references to essays by Löwinger and Lauer are easily traced, the first two are enigmatic. Solomon Almoli published his important Hebrew work, *Interpretation of Dreams* (*Pitron chalomot*), in about 1516. Why does Freud refer to an 1848 edition that he almost certainly never read? What is his source for this reference? The reference to Amram is even more obscure; which text does Freud mean, and why does he cite it? This bibliographical footnote turns out to be a smokescreen.<sup>4</sup>

Freud's primary source of information on Judaic dream interpretation was apparently the short essay by Chaim Lauer, published under Freud's editorship in the first volume of the *International Journal for Psychoanalysis* and "Imago" of 1913. Lauer hedges his bets when



he writes at the outset: "In the following treatise, we wish only to show that—from the standpoint of the historical development of the doctrine of dreams—already in the talmudic-rabbinic literature, views find expression that are in part similar to the Freudian direction of thought, and in part contradictory" (Lauer 1913, 459). He also makes a point of dismissing the issue of originality, apparently so as not to offend his editor, Freud. He states that the laurels go not to the person who "conceived a new scientific theory" but to the one who brings it to prominence. Lauer then reviews the central rabbinic positions concerning dreams and their interpretation. It is significant that in or before 1913 Freud was aware of these rabbinic thoughts on dreams; yet he never quoted them or responded to their contributions. Among numerous references to the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Berakhot, and to the Palestinian Talmud, Ma'aser Sheni, Lauer cites the following opinions:

1. "R. Hisda says: an uninterpreted dream is like an unread letter";
2. "The fulfillment of the dream rests in many ways upon a suggestion by the interpreter";
3. "All dreams are fulfilled in accordance with the interpretation and, in this manner, from a single dream 24 interpretations may be correct";
4. "Talmudic dream interpretation is often based on wordplay, as in the story of Cappadocia." (Lauer 1913, 462–65)

The final assertion is especially relevant, since Freud himself relied heavily upon wordplay as one of his interpretive techniques. Lauer specifically alludes to a talmudic dream that mentions the city of Cappadocia. In tractate Berakhot, after hearing several unfavorable interpretations, a dreamer reports, "I dreamed they were telling me: Your father has left you money in Cappadocia" (Berakhot 56b). R. Ishmael first confirms that the dreamer has no money in that city, and that his father never went there. He then treats *kapadokia* as a bilingual signifier, and interprets on the basis of linguistic clues. *Kapa* means either "beam" in Aramaic or "twenty" in Greek. *Dokos* means "beam," and *deka* means "ten," both in Greek. R. Ishmael interprets: "*Kapa* means 'beam' and *deka* means 'ten.' Go and examine the beam [*kapa*] which is at the head of ten, for it is full of coins." Freud interprets numerous dreams in exactly this fashion. For example, he explains his dream of the nonsense-word *Autodidasker* by separating it into *Autor* (author), *Autodidakt* (autodidact), and *Lasker* (a proper name).

Adolf Löwinger, in his 1908 essay mentioned by Freud, also discusses the element of wordplay. He refers to examples in which homonyms facilitate rabbinic interpretation, and he remarks that the rabbis also rearranged letters: "As needed, they had recourse to separation of the word, the so-called *notarikon*, or they combined two words to form one, which produced a certain sense" (Löwinger 1908, 31). Löwinger compares this rabbinic strategy to the method employed in a legendary Greek story concerning Alexander the Great. After the military leader dreamed of a satyr, his interpreter Aristander reportedly explained this dream by dividing *satyr* into the composite words, *sa* and *tyros*, meaning "Tyre is yours." Alexander then attacked the city and conquered it. Freud, in a 1911 footnote to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, calls this "the most beautiful example of a dream interpretation that has been handed down to us from antiquity" (Td 120). Yet Freud conspicuously omits the similar rabbinic examples provided by Löwinger.

Freud owed at least two specific debts to Löwinger's article. First, Löwinger's analysis of *notarikon* refers to the work of Almoli (Löwinger 1908, 28), which is one of Freud's mysterious references. Second, Freud probably drew what he called "the most beautiful example" of wordplay in ancient dream interpretation from Löwinger's book on *Jewish* dream interpretation. It seems that Freud was impressed by this element of rabbinic dream interpretation, but he chose to ascribe *notarikon* solely to the Greek tradition.<sup>6</sup> Freud's footnote on the Judaic background of dream interpretation remains entirely general, lacking specific examples of the kind that are most relevant to his own techniques.

I am less concerned with Freud's borrowings from ancient sources than with his persistent efforts to avoid such influence—or to avoid the appearance of such influence. In other words, my work deals with textual strategies of evasion, which Harold Bloom discusses from a more psychological standpoint in his book *The Anxiety of Influence*. I emphasize the anxiety—discernible in textual evasions—rather than the overt influence.

In some respects, Freud was not skeptical enough about his operative methods. The irony is that, while Freud was skeptical about ancient Jewish dream interpretation, in fact the Talmud contains sophisticated methods as well as highly skeptical opinions. Had Freud carefully studied the talmudic discussion of dream interpretation he might have been forced to take more seriously its challenges to the presumed validity of interpretation. Freud believed that he had surpassed his forerunners in every respect, but tractate Berakhot shows

itself to be even more sensitive to the hazards of interpreting dreams. For instance, Berakhot shows an awareness of the power of interpretation over the dreamer's future. This power is intrinsically related to what Freud viewed as the therapeutic value of dream analysis. An inevitable element of future-orientation characterizes even the most scientific interpretations attempted by psychoanalysts. Freud had to renounce this quasi-prophetic style while still claiming to play a future-oriented, curative role.

Freud was an unwitting mediator between rabbinic and deconstructive interpretation: his ambivalence toward ancient Jewish dream interpreters enabled Jacques Derrida and others to discover these fore-runners indirectly. Freud himself denied or disavowed them, thus preparing the way for a return of the repressed. Hence deconstructive readings sometimes make explicit what was implicit in Freudian dream interpretation.

Freud's radical method of free association derives virtually endless meanings from texts grafted upon texts in a series of displacements. Post-structuralist critics among Derrida's followers draw from this approach without always realizing that it is the oblique expression of a Freudian denial, Freud's avoidance of the rabbinic tradition.

### Notes

1. *Td* refers to Sigmund Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* (*Td*) in the edition of the *Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, James Strachey (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fishcher, 1972). All translations are my own.

2. Most of these references come from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Berakhot, and will be indicated by standard page numbers.

3. Genesis Rabbah 89:8. This translation is based on the second critical edition of Chanoch Albeck, *Bereschit Rabbah* (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1965). An alternative English translation is contained in *Midrash Rabbah*, 3d ed., ed. and trans. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1983), 2, 825.

4. For Freud's 1925 and 1930 revisions of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, most pertinent of all would have been a note to Alexander Kristianpoller's bilingual edition of many talmudic passages pertaining to dream interpretation. It was printed in Vienna in 1923.

5. Compare Gen. Rab. 68:12, Lam. Rab. 1:1:17, Sanhedrin 30a, and the Palestinian Talmud, Ma'aser Sheni 4:6; all contain versions of this popular Cappadocia story. Compare Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (1903;

reprint edition New York: The Judaica Press, 1971), 288 and 1398. The preceding paragraph is modified slightly from my book, *Freud's Dream of Interpretation*, chapter 3.

6. Freud is not alone in this; Saul Lieberman makes a similar ascription in his book, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), 47–82.

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