

Rabbi Daniel Berman

Rosh Hashanah Day One 2017

Kehilat Reyim 5778

Shalom chaverim metukim. Hello my friends. L'shanah tovah.

It is, as always, uplifting to be here with you.

What a gift this year has been, strengthening our friendships, welcoming so many new families, and learning and praying together at the most important moments in our lives.

To those who are new, welcome. We're so glad you're here.

To those who have been here a year - or 50 - thank you for who you are, and for all you do for this loving community.

We are doing our best to fulfill our mission of a strong Jewish identity, traditional observance, spiritual openness and creativity, kindness, and generosity. We will never be perfect, but the qualities of compassion and forgiveness are alive and well in our community, and for that I am very grateful. It has been a joyful, meaningful year for my wife Sarah, for our kids Elie and Mica, and for me. Thank you for your trust, your openness, your partnership and your forgiveness.

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I have shared with you in prior years a little about my process of preparing for our High Holy Days.

Throughout the year, I keep a journal with notes, thoughts, and questions, reactions to events around the world, and reflections coming out of our community conversations. I review my journal in the spring and summer, hoping to find the themes and questions that feel the most immediately alive for us.

What emerged - consistently - in many of our conversations this year, was that we feel fatigued and disoriented; worn out by having to *constantly* respond, organize, rally, and protest to correct for the lack of

clear moral conscience in the world around us, which has seemed to unravel a bit this year; disoriented by the seriousness of expressions of hatred and violations of basic human decency. This takes a toll on the human spirit.

Staring at these reflections in my journal, my question this year became clear: *when we need strength, are we looking to and relying on the right sources to energize and uplift us? What is available to us that we're not we're yet tapping into - but could help us live with purpose and meaning?*

The question actually crystallized for me just after my family and I returned from Israel this past summer. During a particularly intense few days, when residents of Jerusalem were dealing yet again with violence and conflict, a friend sent me a beautiful column that was buried in the back pages of a small, local Israeli newspaper.

The writer of the column asked a question that I loved, and which broke my heart:

"Yesh od makom lachlom ba'olam hazeh?" she asked. Is there still space left to dream in this world?

I loved it because it made me feel, and think, and hope.

It broke my heart because the question had to be asked. The state of Israel, after all, was imagined and made real by dreamers. As relentlessly practical and socialist as my grandparents were, they left their families in Poland to move to Palestine in the 1930s because they believed in a dream.

Dreaming has always been such a rich, vital and life-giving and affirming part of human experience.

Throughout history, dreaming has been a force for perseverance, social change, human and civil rights, and strength in the aftermath of devastation. A few weeks ago, pastors in Charlottesville continuously turned to the language and images of the dream of Martin Luther King to offer people comfort and hope. Dreams help us envision a better, more deeply felt, more just life. They create new worlds, opening us up to wonder, mystery, beauty and grace, creativity and possibility.

I'm worried we've lost touch with dreaming as a source of insight and inspiration. We live in our heads most of the time; in the rational, practical, reasoned, political, strategic, intellectual and analytical. Thank God. We draw on each of these frames of mind to move the world forward. But "*yesh od makom lachlom ba'olam hazeh?*" ***Is there still space for us to dream in this world, without feeling too uprooted?*** Can we look to *dreams* to help us refine our communal moral conscience and live with a deeper sense of purpose?

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To begin to address this question, it's worth examining the *nature* of dreams, both conscious and subconscious - daydreams, and night dreams.

Because they are so full of wonder and creativity and possibility, there is a childlike quality to dreams. In fact, everything I know about dreams I actually learned from my son, Mica, many years ago.

Sarah and I knew fairly soon after Mica was born that he was an existentialist.

What gave it away was that he was constantly extending his arms forward and pointing his legs straight behind him, as if flying. He'd stay in that position, stiff as a board, even when we picked him up.

After flirting with the idea that we had given birth to a superhero, which we, disappointingly, decided was not the case, we brought him to his pediatrician, who reassured us that he was fine. Maybe it's his personality, he told us. He'll be independent and determined.

While the pediatrician wasn't completely off, I had a different interpretation. It seemed like Mica was constantly reaching for something. I imagined that at the moment of birth, his very first thought was, "what is all this light?" and stretched towards it, trying to touch the heat of illumination.

I got this one right. Mica constantly asks questions that could, as our dear Tevya sang, cross a rabbi's eyes, contemplating the meaning of our existence, and questioning and challenging our basic understandings of reality.

When he was five years old, getting ready for bed, Mica pulled on my arm, and, unprompted, said to me: "Aba, I'm not sure our lives are real."

"What now?"

"Maybe," he said, "we're actually inside the dreams of an entire other world of dreamers."

I remember I was blown away by the comment, but also a parent trying to do what parents do: tuck in your children, the laundry and dishes and lunches and scheduling, while catching up on the world and checking in with family and friends, so I said that time-honored parent's response to the profound wisdom of their children: "nice idea, buddy. Your pajamas pants are on backwards, go brush your teeth." He didn't seem to mind his pants on just the way they were, or his teeth not clean, and turned around and fell asleep.

I didn't push it - I sat there watching him fall asleep with his arms up over his head and legs extended out. I wondered what he'd dream about, and who would be visiting him that night.

Mica's insight has stayed with me all these years.

It is, in fact, the *ikar*—that is, the essential idea— of our High Holy Days.

It's all a dream. All of it - it's all a dream.

One of our most central prayers today, which we will soon chant, is called the *unetannah tokef*. It begins with words you know: “on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die.” The end of the prayer ends on a similar note, offering us images to shake us: our lives are like a fragile vessel, like the grass that withers, the flower that fades, the shadow that passes, the cloud that grows faint, the wind that blows, the dust that floats and “*k'chalom ya'uf*” – like a dream that vanishes.

These images, of course, serve to remind us of the fleeting nature of our lives.

But they do more than that. They also offer an amazing insight: to live meaningfully is to live as if we're inside a dream.

To live as if we are inside a dream is to be open to aspects of ourselves that are far outside our lived experience; to live imaginatively, and passionately, relentlessly dedicated to the possibility . . . of possibility.

Wisława Szymborska is a Polish poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996.

She wrote a poem entitled Dreams.

In dreams, she wrote,

“We can fly unfledged,

we light dark tunnels with our eyes,

we wax eloquent in unknown tongues,

talking not with just anyone, but with the dead ...
So what can they tell us, the writers of dream books,
the scholars of oneiric signs and omens,
the doctors with couches for analyses—
if anything fits,
it's accidental,
and for one reason only,
that in our dreamings,
in their shadowings and gleamings,
in their multiplings, inconceivablings,
in their haphazardings and widscafterings,
at times... a clear-cut meaning
may slip through."

Yes it's in the dreams where we might just discover purpose and meaning, and encounter aspects of ourselves we don't yet know.

We have dreams that are vivid and moving, and dreams that are terrifying, which stay with us for a day, a week, a life.

How many times have I dreamt of someone I knew years ago, and wake up longing to be in touch, feeling an unusual closeness.

In my dreams, I occasionally visit with my grandparents, who died many years ago. We're just together.

Though the images are chaotic and the storyline is incoherent if not preposterous, somehow, what counts is miraculously clear: faces, smells and intonation of voice. We are in a full embrace, unwilling to let go. For many years, I understood these dreams as an expression of mourning. In time, I came to experience them differently: they had visited me - touched down, spent time together. They were curious about all these extra people in my life, Sarah and Elie and Mica, whom they never met. When I awaken, I take a moment to say good-bye. Until next time.

Those dreams are holy ground.

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When we think about our dreamers in Torah, we often think first of Joseph, his dreams having been given center stage by Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical about a technicolor dream coat. But Joseph is more interpreter than dreamer. For dreamers, we look to his father Jacob.

Jacob's dream is a biblical story of transformation. After stealing the spiritual blessing of the firstborn from his brother Esav, Jacob flees from his family, and comes upon an unnamed place. The sun had set already, so he stays there for the night. He takes a stone, places it under his head, and lays down to sleep. He dreams of a ladder, its bottom on the earth, its top reaching to heaven. Angels of God are ascending and descending on it. God stands beside Jacob, and says, "I am Adonai, the God of Abraham your grandfather and the God of Isaac, your father. I am with you...by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you."

The passage is one of the most mysterious – and most widely interpreted - in Torah.

It's here, in his dream, that Jacob first feels God's presence. He awakens and cries out, "*Adonai is in this place; and I did not know it.*" This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

For Jacob, the worlds of reality and dream become fluid; his conscious life opens to the religious possibilities offered to him by dreams.

Until now, he has stolen, deceived, and fled from conflict.

Now he awakens to a new consciousness and purpose. He looks to reconcile with his brother Esav, make peace, and share the gifts he has inherited.

Jacob's experience of dreaming has shaped Jewish thought and theology. It's a story of illumination and discovery, told as an encounter with the Divine. Drawing on this story of Jacob, who calls out, "*Adonai is in this place; and I did not know it,*" our ancient rabbis observed: dreams reveal insights we otherwise would not even know were *available* to us. We can't rely on our lived experiences alone for purpose and meaning. Dreams help us glimpse the Sacred.

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What's truly radical about dreaming is that it's not necessarily an individual experience alone. If a group of people can have a psyche and think of itself as an organic being, as we often describe the historical experience of the Jewish community, then we should also be able to dream together as well. (inspired by Lawrence Kushner's *River of Light*, p. 13).

The collective dream has a rich Jewish history. In fact, the Jews of Eastern Europe had a special dream-book, a Yiddish translation of the 15th century Jewish mystic Solomon Almoli's comprehensive book of dreams called "*Pitron Chalomot*." It is the most important Jewish book ever written on dreams, cited even by Freud and Carl Jung many years later. It records generations of dreams, and offers insights of their meaning and pathways to fulfillment.

We come from dreamers. Dreams are a rich part of our spiritual heritage.

So what are our dreams as a community this new year?

This is not a rhetorical question.

I have here with me our own *Pitron Chalomot*, a Reyim dream-book, not yet inaugurated and sanctified by its first dream. We will keep it here, at Reyim, on the table in the front of the shul.

This Rosh Hashanah, let's pay attention to our dreams: the dreams from our subconscious when we sleep; the dreams in our minds when we're awake. Dreams contain hopes, fears, wishes, and prayers - yes, all of that - but they are also a portal to mystery, wonder, chaos, fantasy and light.

Come here, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and write your dreams in this book. You don't need to include your name. If you can't get here, email your dream to dreams@reyim.org.

We'll collect them and print them, again without your name if you prefer, and include them in the book.

Let's see what we are dreaming about.

Why take the time to do this? Ki tzarich lihiyot malom lachlom b'olam hazeh. There has to be space to dream in this world right now. We may feel cautious about allowing ourselves to dream - concerned about feeling disappointed of dreams unfulfilled. But just as we have the courage to love, knowing we will

inevitably experience loss of those we care for, so too, we need to dream. Dreams are the language of our souls. They stir us to a deeper and more imaginative dimension of our lives.

Most importantly, when we pay attention to our dreams, we can more fully appreciate the spiritual insight that *the world is real only in the way that dreams are real*. We see it and we hear it and we live in it. And in an instant, it is gone. (Kushner, River of Light).

When we get that - truly get that - we will discover a deep, meaningful, purposeful life.

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Let me close with a blessing.

The blessing comes from an ancient story. After dreaming at night, the rabbis Mar Zutra and Rab Ashi would say: *Ribono Shel Olam*, Holy One of Being, *Ani shelcha, v'chalomot sheli shelcha*, I am yours and my dreams are yours. *Chalom chalanti*. I have dreamed a dream. *V'ay'nayni yodea mah hu* – And I do not know what it means. (Talmud Brachot 55b).

Based on this Talmudic passage, a special ceremony was developed to transform dreams into blessings. The person who had the dream would say to three other people:

Chalom chalanti. I have dreamed a dream. *V'ay'nayni yodea mah hu* – And I do not know what it means.

And then the three would reply together:

Tov hu / v'tov yihiyeh / HaKadosh Baruch Hu ya'aseh oto l'tov.

“It is good. Let it be good. May God make it for good.”

This year, may we live imaginatively.

May we stretch out, arms forward, legs straight behind us, and reach for the light amidst the darkness.

May we dream.

Tov hu / v'tov yihiyeh / HaKadosh Baruch Hu ya'aseh oto l'tov.

This dream that we live in:

It is good.

Let it be good.

May God make it for good.

Lshanah tovah.