

Grounding in Our Dreams

It was the same dream every night just as I went to sleep . . . It was like drums beating so loud that you think they are your heartbeat. It was the Presence, whatever that means . . . The Presence was all around.

—Patricia Bulkley¹

The earth speaks to all of us, and if we listen we can understand.

—Hayao Miyazaki²

Spring 1997, Jerusalem. In a dream, I find myself moving through a temple crowded with people. On the ground floor of the temple, there are ancient marble carvings. When I ascend to the top floor, I find, to my surprise, a weapons stockade. In the outer courtyard, there is a pile of stuffed animals for sale.

Then I venture into the stone tunnels under the temple. I come to caves with rock formations, and then to an underground river. The river bubbles as hot water spurts up through vents in the rocks.

Now I am with other companions, journeying together, but still I am afraid of becoming lost in the winding passages. My companions and I make our way down the river, deep into the earth, until we find a wide place like a delta, where the river branches in many directions.

Then the scene changes. I am looking at a beautifully drawn map of the caves and the underground river, a map that shows all the river's branches. The branches of the river look to me like lava vents around a volcano.

This dream, which I dreamed when I was studying in rabbinical school, provides a map of the dreamworld. The temple represents the human-made world. We find here expressions of human civilization: art and history (the carvings), violence and war (the weapons) and the emotional and sentimental realms (the stuffed animals). When we go beneath these objects, we find the elements that our creations are made from. We find stone and water. An

underground river winds into the darkness and branches in many directions. This temple of the elements is much older and vaster than the temple up above. At this level of reality, in this place of wonder and terror, I connect to the power of the subconscious mind.

Then I am looking at a map—a record of the terrain I have just walked. This map shows the journey through the caves to the underground river, indicating that I am learning to navigate these layers of consciousness and chart them out for others. The map also shows me something I haven't yet seen: that the river is like lava vents stemming from a great volcano. The dreamworld, even in its vastness, has a single energy at its core: an elemental Presence that enlivens the dreamworld from below. We might say this Presence is the life-world in which the dreamer's consciousness is embedded. The fire of the volcano, the stone and air-filled tunnels of the caves, the water of the river—these are all signs of this Presence, which is Being itself.

The fact that the cave, the river, the heat all lie beneath the temple teaches me something important: that the sacred extends beyond the realms of human life. It precedes and surpasses us. The Great Temple is not a human-made building, but the cosmos itself, branching off into diverse realities, forging and reforging the elements that make life possible. In that elemental temple, that Place with a capital P, dwells the Presence that infuses the universe with life and meaning. Our dreams speak to us from that temple. We often dream in its elemental language, the language of the unconscious mind and the cosmic forces it senses within its depths.

New York City, 2011. I am sharing an apartment with my mother and a photographer I know. The two of them are lying in their beds. In a corner of the bedroom, I am writing notes, preparing a theology lecture for a class I am

to give the next day. The title of the lecture is "Magmatheism." I intend the lecture to repair a belief system that is broken.

By the time I receive this dream, I am a rabbi and a mother. I have cofounded, with Taya Mâ Shere, the Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute, an organization that trains ritual and spiritual leaders in earth-based, embodied, feminist Jewish leadership. At the Kohenet Institute, we regard dreams as messengers of the sacred. I know when I wake up that an important dream has come to me, and that it is a sequel to the underground temple dream.

If magmatheism were a word, which it isn't, its meaning would be something like "belief in the divinity of molten rock." It sounds like a religion, or a type of faith. The dream tells me that magmatheism is meant as a healing for a broken way of thinking. Perhaps it is a repair for centuries of disembodied theology, a turning back toward the bedrock of embodied existence. The dream includes a mother (one who nurtures) and a photographer (one who sees), both in beds. One might say the dream invites the nurturing of dream images, a rekindling of relationship with the realms of sleep that connect us and direct us toward our origins.

When I wake up, I go immediately to Facebook and ask my friends to define magmatheism.

One says: "Magmatheism is the belief that divinity dwells below the ground and every once in a while erupts out gloriously."

Another says: "By studying the ways in which rock is liquid, we can understand the oneness of all things . . . Our separation is an illusion. We are part of the whole."

A third says: "Honoring the magnetic pull to earth."

A fourth says: "The unmanifest that creates the foundation of all life."

All of these visions of my dream are true. They remind me that the images we encounter in our dreams are from a wild, unfettered landscape—a kind of "underground," a deeper-than-ordinary

reality where we can perceive directly what we only know dimly in our waking lives.

The message of “magmatheism” is that the wider cosmos is alive, and it is part of our extended selves. Our separation from nature is an illusion, and in dreams, where the ego’s structuring consciousness is not so strong, we are able to transcend this illusion. We can see how our external worlds are ready and waiting to guide us along our paths, ultimately leading us back to the Source. Nature is ever guiding us home.

All of our encounters are meaningful. But the encounters we have in dreams are differently meaningful: wilder, unbridled. All realms of fantasy and imagery are possible in them. What appears in a dream doesn’t have to appeal to reason. Dream imagery guides us, through the many streams available to it, to our purposes and paths. It hints to us of a conscious universe that connects and enlivens us, a fire under the mountain, a molten core. My encounter with this core offered me healing and transformation, a repair to my own belief system, and a renewed interest in and understanding of the power of dreams to guide us along the journey to our Source.

THE DOOR THAT DREAMS OPEN

What is a dream? A dream consists of images, emotions, and sensations that occur in the mind during sleep, often in the form of a story. Most dreams occur during what is known as REM (or “rapid eye movement”), a period of sleep characterized by flickering eye motion, faster pulse, and dreaming. People generally dream three to six times per night, but many dreams are forgotten. It is said that dreams are more likely to be remembered if an individual awakens during the REM stage. Many have found that their dreams are easier to remember when they establish a practice of recording them upon waking. Recording dreams on a

regular basis stimulates our ability to remember them more often and more clearly. But this requires intention and discipline.

What are dreams for? Science suggests that dreams help us regain emotional health and peace.³ Other studies suggest dreams help us creatively solve problems we couldn’t solve while awake.⁴ Still others suggest that dreams allow us to generalize our learning and think more flexibly.⁵

These things may be true. But why would running our recent memories and feelings through a kaleidoscopic image-generator give us inner peace or solve our problems? And why do dream images, no matter how strange and unlikely, often turn out to be so apt and prescient? Dreams sometimes speak from an intelligence that seems wiser than our waking selves.

Science supports the observation that dreams have a visionary quality. Science journalist Alice Robb notes that “when we dream, the logic centres of our brain—the frontal lobes—go dark, and chemicals associated with self-control, like serotonin and norepinephrine, drop. At the same time, the emotion centres light up: we have a perfect chemical canvas for dramatic, psychologically intense visions.”⁶

We can think of this deepened visionary faculty as something we drop into naturally when we dream—the same way that we drop into a deeper state when we engage in spiritual practices like prayer, chant, or meditation. We might call this deepened vision a gift—a way to stay in touch with our Source.

I think of dreams not only as internal perceptions generated by my consciousness, but also as teaching and healing from Spirit sent to us during sleep. Dreams are part of the human spiritual faculty—that is, the innate human ability to perceive ourselves as part of something larger. The fluid imagination of the dreamworld allows us this wider perception.

Indigenous people have long known that dreams communicate wisdom and have preserved that living knowledge when other cultures have forgotten it. Many Native Americans work with dream

presences as manifestations of spirit; some refer to powerful presences in dreams as *manitous* (guardian spirits or tutelary spirits).⁷ Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) people understand dreams as “messages of the god within.”⁸ Indigenous Mexicans report sharing dreams around the breakfast table, while the Guajiro people of Colombia begin their day with the question: “How were your dreams?”⁹

In my own Jewish tradition, mystical texts tell that a dreamer’s soul journeys to heavenly realms, contacts angels and demons, and receives counsel or admonishment. As we’ve noted, the Zohar, a thirteenth-century kabbalistic work, relates that “when a person is asleep in bed, the soul leaves and roams above . . .”¹⁰ In other words, the dream is a journey of the soul, in which the soul encounters beings, places, and images that offer truth.

In my experience, a dream can offer advice—but rarely in a direct way, the way a friend or therapist does (though that sometimes happens). Mostly, dreams express themselves through images, bending characters and narratives into strange shapes we wouldn’t see in waking life. The dream’s images don’t quite make sense, and yet they do. We might say that a dream communicates like e. e. cummings’s poem “maggie and milly and molly and may”:

. . . milly befriended a stranded star
whose rays five languid fingers were;

and molly was chased by a horrible thing
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles:and

may came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone.

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
it’s always ourselves we find in the sea¹¹

A dream is like the sea in the poem: a place where we find ourselves. It has elements that are decipherable and others that don’t make literal sense (like “as small as a world and as large as alone”) but nevertheless each phrase offers a felt sense, a current of meaning. The oddities and enchantments of dreams create a current that one can follow and open up to. When we follow these currents, as I followed the underground river in my dream, we learn how to live in touch with ourselves and a greater living universe. In the words of the poem, “it’s always ourselves we find in the sea.”

We might say that dreams are the poems we and the Divine send one another.

THE GARDEN IN OUR DREAMS

In order to understand what a dream is trying to tell us, it is important to pay attention to the setting (something we will explore in much greater depth further on). While dreams are often very personal, many dreams have common elements, and certain settings tend to appear and reappear in the dreams of numerous people throughout history. For example, generations of people have recorded dreams that are set in a lush garden.

In sixteenth-century Tzfat, in the Galilee, a Jewish woman named Merchavah dreamed of walking in a garden. Rabbi Hayyim Vital, her teacher, recorded her dream, in which he also appeared. He wrote: “The trees there smelled of myrrh and aloe wood . . . Pools of water flowed in the garden and ornamental fountains emerged from them, flowing with water . . . She looked up and saw a noble woman, lovely and voluptuous, sitting in a high attic . . . The dreamer saw me standing next to her, and I was saying to her: ‘Here, this is the true place.’”¹²

This gorgeous dream is connected to the beliefs of the kabbalists. For Merchavah and for Hayyim Vital, it would have been clear that the garden in the dream was the divine world, and that

the woman in the high attic was Shekhinah, Divine Presence. Hayyim Vital also records his own dreams of that woman and her garden. In his dream, a woman “as beautiful as the sun” helped him climb a ladder, step through a fiery portal, and enter “a wondrous yard with flowing rivers and fragrant, lush, verdant groves of fruit trees and tall shade trees.”¹³

This image of the woman and garden who together embody Divine Presence is central to the Jewish mystical imagination. For the kabbalists, God has multiple aspects with different energies. One of the most important forms of God is the Presence, or the tangible divine energy within all physical substance. In Hebrew, this Presence is called Shekhinah (literally, Indwelling). Kabbalists understand this Presence as a feminine facet of God that receives the energy of all of the hidden realms and manifests that energy as the abundance of forms in the physical world. “The Shekhinah is in charge of all the blessings of the world, and from Her flow blessings for all.”¹⁴

What the kabbalists are expressing, in contemporary terms, is an ecological view in which the world is a divine manifestation—a conscious, loving container within which life can unfold. Some contemporary Jewish mystics, like Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Rabbi Leah Novick, have compared this way of thinking to Gaia consciousness—the notion of a sentient world that has a consciousness of itself as a whole being.¹⁵

What I find most powerful and compelling about the Presence of the kabbalists is that She (or He, or They, since gender doesn’t fully apply here) is not only an Entity but also a Place: the ground of being within which we live and move. Kabbalists speak of this Presence/Place as the Beloved, or the Bride, of the transcendent God. She is mother, garden, orchard, sea, temple, earth itself. She is the body of creation, the web of life, and “all things are united in Her.”¹⁶ I imagine the mystics who encounter the Shekhinah are experiencing something very much like what I experience when I leave my house and walk in Central Park. I see that the trees,

water, stones and light are all uniquely themselves, and yet they are all part of a greater unity: a life-world that surrounds and informs me at every moment. This world is alive and seeks to be in dialogue with me. And this is how I read dreams: as a seeking-toward-dialogue from a Presence embodied in the whole of being—and perhaps also our seeking back.

Dream images show us our fundamental connection to Being—to the world of plants, animals, earth and stars, what David Abram calls the “more-than-human world.”¹⁷ We can never fully perceive the Being that holds us: we can’t see the electrons or touch the stars that send their light to us from such a great distance. Nor can we see the cosmos inside us, the inner workings of our neurons, blood, muscle, and bone. These things are what author and ecologist Stephan Harding calls “the scientific ‘invisibles’—the atoms, microbes and feedback relationships that make up the astonishing body of our living Earth.”¹⁸ Yet somewhere within us we viscerally know the truth of our origins: that we are an organic particle of a vast living cosmos we can barely comprehend. As mystic and dreamworker Catherine Shainberg has written, “Dreaming is the language of the body.”¹⁹ And our bodies are interwoven with the world’s larger body.

Usually we think we are separate from that “natural world,” but when we dream, it is as if someone has opened a back door through which we can circumvent our ordinary isolated consciousness and touch the life force of which we are a part. And when we do touch that great power, it touches back: we often feel a sense of love and desire, coming from what David Abram calls an “enigmatic cosmos” that speaks to us in “a myriad of tongues.”²⁰ The Zohar teaches that “at the time of sleeping . . . every person’s soul goes out and rises up, and the souls conceal themselves inside Shekhinah.”²¹ The Place of the dream, its landscape as well as its creatures, is a communication from the All.

In the contemporary West, we often think of dreams as the language of one’s own personal psychology, the “psyche” or the

“soul.” Every character in a dream, we are told, is a reflection of us. For example, Michael Lennox writes: “Dream work . . . is entirely about self-investigation.”²² If we subscribe to Jungian theories, we might also see dreams as reflections of a collective human psychology: the realm of archetypes.²³ All of these dream levels have power. But what if dreams are not so self-centered? As dreamworker Stephen Aizenstat writes, “Dream figures and images do not necessarily originate within the personal psyche of the dreamer.”²⁴ Dreams also open up our connection to what is larger than us. Aizenstat calls the cosmic aspect of dreams the “ecological consciousness” or the “world unconscious.”²⁵ We might call this the elemental aspect of the dream, where we encounter the great and mysterious powers within and all around us.

THE SEARCH FOR DREAM HEALING

A dream is a powerful experience in and of itself. It doesn't need to be analyzed, categorized, or understood to make an impact. We don't need our dreams interpreted as much as we need them witnessed. And yet it's beneficial to consider what gifts a dream has brought us, because dreams have the power to change our lives in the waking world. As dreamworker Rodger Kamenetz and many others have noted, the images in dreams are a kind of medicine.²⁶ Because dreams help us perceive ourselves as part of something larger, they are a balm for the things that ail our egoic selves: fear, resentment, inhibition, apathy, regret. And because they are a “back door” out of our ordinary consciousness, they can grant us a fuller vision of ourselves. They come to us when we are asleep, in a state of surrender, open to suggestion, and they offer us new ways of being that we can then try to integrate into our lives. Dreams, with their visionary quality, bring to light what is wounded, broken, or forgotten in us and our world, and show us paths to repair, remembrance, and healing.

Let me explain by sharing a dream from a woman I'll call Sasha, who is a healer and a kohenet ordained by the Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute.²⁷ Sasha shared this dream with me because I was the teacher in her dream. There is a talmudic tradition that dreams others dream about you have a message for you.²⁸ This dream of Sasha's taught me a great deal about dream healing.

My teacher has called me to meet her at a cathedral in the middle of the night because, she says, “it has the best access to the fields.” She tells me that there are tangles or disruptions in the fields we work with. She raises her hands and pulls down a series of large screens, like the maps or projection screens from school; they are maps of the nine layers of being/time/space. She says the ninth layer, which is the top, is the easiest to read because it is just constellations—lines and dots—but you can see from this layer that there is a major disruption.

I say that I often work in the second and third layers, which are the pipes and ductwork. We both agree that when something seems off, the issue is usually located there, in the second and third layer. She says: “Go.”

I dive underground, through dirt and rootlets to a layer of time and space with very low ceilings and a dirt and stone floor. I know I am in the foundations of somewhere very sacred. There are hordes of people wandering around, muttering and lost. I take a breath and then begin to push them away with my hands, saying: “Out!

Out! Out! Return! Return!” Then I find what looks like a finger sticking out of the ground, and a hump of someone’s back, just barely visible under the earth. I talk to my teacher in my mind, saying that there is a being stuck between the worlds. He is in Shtiyah, I say.

This being has stuck his finger in a hole and it is affecting the flow of the energies. Nothing can come in or out of the hole. I know I need to dislodge this massive creature, but first I need to understand him. This being is not exactly malevolent, but certainly disregulated and disregulating. I need to pull him out but I know he is much too heavy for me. The being is waterlogged and dense with the eating of earth. My heart is racing. It feels urgent, but I don’t know what to do. I wake up in a sweat. I write down the word Shtiyah.

In this dream, the teacher invites Sasha to a cathedral where there is good access to the “fields”—the energetic maps of reality. In Jewish mystical tradition, one of the names for Shekhinah is the Field, and the interpenetrating realms of space, time, and sentience are explicitly described in an ancient Jewish book known as the Book of Creation, or *Sefer Yetzirah*.²⁹ Just as Jacob dreamed of a ladder connecting all elements of reality, Sasha dreams of a series of cosmic fields, each one only reachable from the other, like steps. She dreams her own version of the Place.

The teacher begins with the highest field: the ninth field, where Reality appears as simple dots and dashes. On this level, the teacher indicates a disturbance that must be repaired. Sasha then identifies herself as someone who works on levels “two and three,” levels where hands-on work can be done, where there are “pipes

and ducts”—energy channels that might be clogged. The dreamer then dives underground and finds herself in a “sacred foundation” beneath the earth, another vision of the underground temple. First, she sees lost people wandering around and attempts to expel them. Then, she finds a being stuck between the worlds. She identifies this between-place as *Shtiyah*.

The term *Shtiyah* is a real term, though Sasha didn’t know this until she looked the term up later. In Jewish legend, the *Even Shtiyah*, or Stone of Foundation, is the stone from which God began to create the world. It is the place where all things arise from one thing. A legend relates:

Just as the fetus in its mother’s womb starts at the navel and spreads out this way and that way to the four directions, so too the Holy One made the world, making the Stone of Foundation first and from it spreading out the world. It is called the Stone of Foundation for from it the Holy One began to create the world.³⁰

According to the Talmud, this stone sits beneath the Holy of Holies. It is the foundation of the Temple, the elemental root of all. On that spot, the stone holds back the primordial waters. It is a portal to the deep. This stone appeared in Sasha’s dream as an embodiment of the human predicament of living between worlds: the mundane realm and the realm of the cosmic whole.

In Sasha’s dream, someone has gotten into this passageway and blocked it. His finger is stuck in the hole, like the finger of the Dutch boy in the dike. Sasha doesn’t know what to do to remove the blockage, but she knows that the entity cannot remain in the passage between the worlds. She understands it is her task to clear the way so healing flow can happen. This is true in her waking life: she is a healer, of herself and others, and the dream has given her a picture of her work in the world. She is to remove

blockages, help lost pieces of the self return home, and coax our stuck selves out of their hiding places.

In the dream, there are multiple levels of reality. On Level Nine, there are archetypal patterns. This is the layer of “constellations”—of webs of related phenomena. On Levels Two and Three, there is “plumbing”—the messy details. This is more or less true of our dreams, and our lives as well. Dreams can show us both Level Nine—the larger patterns we are part of—and Levels Two and Three—the particular problems and blockages that face us. Dream healing can happen on a “broad” level via images that express the essence of our souls and the cosmos of which they are a part, and on a “close-up” level via images that show us what is broken, or what is in need of healing in our lives.

Sasha learns that in order to dislodge the being stuck between the worlds, she first needs to understand it. This is also dream wisdom. When we try to understand the story dreams tell us, we may be able to enact the healing they offer. We can try to understand the dream by asking ourselves what it is that we perceive, or by asking others for help. If we lived in a society that took dreams seriously, we would be looking to dreams to show us solutions for the small and large problems we live with but don’t know how to address.

Meredith Sabini, a Jungian psychologist who works with dreams and the earth, writes: “Were we living in a viable traditional culture during a time of upheaval such as our own, we would be gathering regularly to hear and discuss dreams . . . Dreaming itself is a natural resource, abundant and self-renewing.”³¹ Yet even though many of us have lost the art of sacred dreaming, we can return to our ancestors’ dreaming practices and receive wisdom in our own time. Dreams can and must be an ally to us as we struggle with a changing and challenged world.

We have help in doing this work: dream guides, healers, and teachers who invite us, provoke us, and let us be vulnerable. We have help from dream places—the “temples” in the dream, which

evoke our awe and curiosity. Even when a dream is scary or troubling, there may be places in the dream that connect us to the healing Place and its abundant Presence. Even when the culture around us disconnects us from the earth and each other, the dreams show us another way. We are all connected at our root to the power and sanctity of the animate cosmos. The underground temple is never far away. We can remember and return.