

Kol Nidre 2020

Rabbi Benjamin David

It was early on in the pandemic and, one night at bedtime, my youngest asked for a dream catcher.

If the weight of it all rests heavily on our adult shoulders, it rests like a mountain on the shoulders of our children.

Maybe we have some experience when it comes to dealing with uncertainty. Maybe we've faced illness or changed schedules or substantial disappointment before. But what about our kids? What exactly is the state of our world doing to them? How is it changing them?

What's going through those little brains of theirs at night while thousands die each day? What are they thinking that they won't say out loud? Do they wonder if they'll make it? Do they wonder if we'll make it? Are they aggravated, afraid, more quiet than usual?

Are they pretending hard to be unaffected?

Is all of their buried emotion taking them to a place of solitude or confusion or maybe just a lot of sadness?

'Well maybe a dream catcher would help take your nightmares away,' I said to him.

But then he said that he wanted the dream catcher not to just stop the nightmares but so he would stop dreaming altogether. 'I don't want dreams anymore,' he told me.

'If I don't have dreams,' he said, 'then I won't have nightmares either.' He sat up in his bed and said it as clearly as he could: 'I need to stop dreaming.'

I didn't have much to say to that, at least nothing he didn't already know. Seven-year-olds are smart. Eventually he drifted off. I stayed at the side of his bed for a while, as if I were his dream catcher now. I bet you know the feeling.

While Sammy slept I thought about how I could encourage him, this precious little guy who signed up for none of this. How could I tell him to keep dreaming at a time when dreaming seems utterly futile? Why should he dream of peace or simple pleasures, school recess, summer camp, or birthday parties, the most basic joys of life, all those uncomplicated seven-year-old dreams, when such things feel so distant and out of reach now?

They are in fact only dreams.

But I wasn't ready to tell Sammy to stop dreaming. And today I tell you: Please keep dreaming.

We Jews are dreamers and always have been. We are dreamers, you and I. Against all odds I would suggest that this is precisely the time to dream, that if ever there were a time to dream and to dream vividly, to dream without apology, this is that time.

Think of the stories of our Torah:

Before reuniting with his brother Esau, Jacob dreams of wrestling an angel until the angel finally relents and changes Jacob's name to Yisrael, 'the one who wrestles God.' Jacob will also dream of a ladder with angels ascending and descending. He wakes up startled and says: 'God was in this place and I didn't know it.'

Jacob's son Joseph will also be a dreamer of course and an interpreter of dreams, as he'll do for the mighty pharaoh when the time comes. It's dreaming that saves Joseph, and by extension the Jewish people. Because of Joseph's propensity to dream and his constant thinking about dreams, Joseph will be granted a place at the Pharaoh's side and the Jewish people will be granted a home in the land of Egypt for generations.

Centuries later, in 1902, Theodor Herzl, living in Eastern Europe and feeling the effects of ever-increasing Antisemitism all around him, authored *Old New Land*, a novel designed to help bring the aspiration of a Jewish Homeland to life at last. It's there that he wrote what would become a slogan not only for the modern Jewish state but for the Jewish people as a whole.

If you will it, it is no dream.

It was holding onto that dream, even stubbornly, that led Herzl to gradually lay the groundwork for the place we now call the State of Israel.

Throughout history our people were forever dreaming, allowing ourselves to hold onto a vision of a better tomorrow, that what we are enduring now is temporary, and thus we have to hold onto the idea of tomorrow, and the very idea of possibility itself. This is what we've always done.

In Nazi Europe we dreamt once and again of safe haven, a life finally unburdened by hate and cruelty. Mothers and fathers cowered in quiet anguish at the bedside of their children, dreaming of the life their young ones might live when the dark night finally ended. Children dreamed of sunshine. They dreamed of peace. They dreamed of being kids again.

Pavel Friedman, writing from the ghetto in the spring of 1942, could only dream of butterflies since, as he put it, 'butterflies don't live here.'

Our history has been so marred by pain that dreaming became our lifeblood. We held onto dreams and, generation by generation, endeavored to live those dreams out.

We sang: Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.

Dreaming in time crept into our shared consciousness. We American Jews talked about dreaming and spoke in the language of dreams. We dared our kids to dream bigger. We did our best to live out the long-held dreams of our grandparents, the schools they never went to, the jobs they never had, the goals they never accomplished, the places they never went, the lessons they never learned.

Our dreams shaped us and galvanized us. Go further. Aim higher. And we came to be known as dreamers, a people whose anthem is all about a better tomorrow, as *HaTikvah* notes: 'We still haven't abandoned our two-thousand-year hope.'

Our dreams have saved us, shaped us, moved us, mended us.

Who could ever forget that it's Tevye's supposed dream in Fiddler on the Roof that allows for the marriage of his daughter Tzeitel to Mottel the Tailor and thus not Lazar Wolf.

And Fiddler wouldn't be the only Broadway show that dabbles in dreams of course. Les Miserables is not a Jewish story overtly, but certainly carries Jewish themes of fortitude and survival, striving for a world of greater mercy.

Heartbroken, Fantine will sing:

I dreamed a dream in times gone by

When hope was high and life worth living

I dreamed that love would never die

I dreamed that God would be forgiving

Then I was young and unafraid

And dreams were made and used and wasted

There was no ransom to be paid

No song unsung, no wine untasted

So let's say it. Maybe you feel like Fantine these days. You feel like Sammy David, that you too were once a dreamer. You dreamed back then, 'when hope was high.' You used to dream of love and God and forgiveness. You used to dream of a colorful, sun-filled future. You used to dream of a serene tomorrow for you and those you love.

Be honest: Have you too stopped doing that? Have you stopped dreaming? Or at least blunted your once glossy dreams? Has the endless frustration of 2020 so enveloped you that now it's somehow deadened your once lofty hopes, your prayers?

Have you finally thrown your hands up at all the political gamesmanship and corruption, the total abandonment of integrity, the downfall of longstanding institutions, the widespread banner of ignorance that hangs over our country like a stain?

Have you finally found yourself fully overcome by the racism and sexism and anti-Semitism, the homophobia, Islamophobia, Xenophobia?

Have you finally been broken by our collective rejection of asylum seekers or how we've turned our backs on the most needy by denying them healthcare, or how we've decided that a pandemic is inconvenient and not to be taken seriously, at least not anymore?

Have you finally given yourself over to the myopic and ruthless rendering of human lives and human hearts, the human stories ended by endless civil war, those lives lost because of the color of their skin or the God they pray to, where they live, how they dress, the language they dare speak, the dignities they dare cling to?

Have you finally been so engulfed by all of it that, somewhere deep down inside, you've started to think that it's all for naught and we can give up on the sheer notion of tomorrow, let alone a brighter tomorrow? That the best we can hope for now is to survive, to just be, to retreat to a place of defeated half-hearted contentment, at least you have your health, at least you have a roof over your head.

Have you given up on your dreams? Have you given up on that deeply spiritual aspect of your Judaism, your relationship with God, your belief in something eternal, your faith in humanity?

And have you given up, in the dark of the night, on yourself?

I have.

Like you, I feel so discouraged. Like you, again and again I feel so helpless, even hopeless. I feel and have felt all of that and I know you have too. Overcome, overwhelmed, overstressed, over the breaking the point, over and over and over and over and over.

And then I get to work every day to undo that. I spend my day undoing all of it. All day everyday. There's no other way. To fight it. To fight it back.

I spend some time in study. I turn off the news. I read history. I log off and lean in.

I take a deep breath and tune out shallowness and hate speech. I work to get the vote out with our Social Action Committee. I hold my kids' hands. I listen to them and try to be patient, try not to force it, try to comfort them at bedtime.

I go out of my way to find joy out there and roll up my sleeves to help those in need, and I know you do all these things too, or your version of these things, but you forget you do because the bleakness can be so bleak, so you need me to remind you to keep going so here I am reminding you. Keep going.

Maybe you need me to remind you to dream. Maybe I have to give you permission to be a dreamer, still, to have thechutzpah to dream in the fall of 2020. So here it is. You have to keep dreaming. For your sake. For your kids' sake.

To you I say on this Kol Nidre night: Dream on. Like the Jews before you, dream on.

The Talmud teaches that our dreams are 1/60th prophecy. That a tiny portion of our dreams are indicating our future, or at least showing us what could be possible. They're a mini window into a world that could be.

For Jacob and Joseph they served to inform future decisions. For Herzl, dreams kept him going. Anne Frank dreamed. And your grandparents dreamed.

And so you can and should keep dreaming even against all odds, even through these endless days and interminable nights of uncertainty and mayhem, even if those dreams feel far-fetched, let's dream together of more peace and less violence, of more understanding and less animosity, of more education, of more compassion, of more opportunity, of love and unity, of new beginnings and second chances.

Let's dream of a world that's more artistic, more soulful and less sour, more forgiving, more appreciative, because I believe that dreaming it is the first step to making it so.

And then, in the coming year, let's make it so, together. Amen.