



Night Table Dreams

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It is said that Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen of Radin — the famous Chofetz Chayim — kept a valise with his best suit next to his bed, so that he could be ready to greet the moshiach the moment he heard that he had arrived.

Next to my bed is a small brown night table: I bought it years ago when I still used to dream. Today, fifteen years, five children, and a mortgage later, things have changed. Now, the formica is chipped, the knobs are all missing, and the drawers no longer close with ease. A brief look inside reveals some of the following: an expired passport, a faded family portrait, some diapers and baby wipes, an unopened bottle of massage oil, scattered pieces of jewelry, and a broken pair of sunglasses.

Only God can fix the world using broken tools.

Moving on to the kitchen, I find a different yet similar set of items in the drawers and cabinets; so too in my work desk, in the garage, the basement, my e-mail inbox. Every corner of life seems to be filled with small and irrelevant things. It's no surprise, then, that looking inward, I find more of the same: years of lost hopes, false expectations, misplaced efforts — an accumulation of thoughts and emotions that seem only to take up space from real life itself. All of these feelings worthless yet seemingly undiscardable.


Amidst this *mélange*, the question continually arises: Are these the dreams of my youth? Where is the life of spirituality and enlightenment that I had envisioned, the hope of doing great things? When did those goals fade away so unnoticeably? At times, I recall Rabbi Nachman's words, that a person can waste his entire life in the pursuit of daily necessities. Logically — as though it were possible — I should empty out all these drawers and start again. Yet something inside of me realizes that this mess is the very stuff of my life. And if redemption is to come, it must be in the context of all these things, not in spite of them.

To me, this is the messianic vision. It is the hope that somehow, out of the very brokenness of this world, a whole greater than the parts will emerge. It is the belief that dreams do not simply vanish just because a person wakes up but

rather that they go underground, to re-emerge slowly, mysteriously, out of the very fabric of life that seems to contradict those dreams, transforming the myriad mundane things into the very soil out of which real dreams flourish and grow. The *moshiach* arriving on a donkey, not descending from heaven; the longed-for future that grows out of past failures. And it suggests that something deep moves beneath the surface of the world, waiting to arise.

Toward the end of the Book of Genesis, Jacob calls his sons to his deathbed: "Gather around, and I will tell you what will happen in the end of days," he tells them (Gen. 49:1). According to the midrash, Jacob wanted to reveal to them the secret of the last generation, the process of the final redemption. On this, the Baal Shem Tov commented: "I will tell you what will happen" — that is, the *moshiach's* coming will just seem to *happen*. Everyone will be going about their business as usual, when, suddenly, the *moshiach* will arrive."

Perhaps the Baal Shem Tov means not only that the *moshiach's* arrival will take us by surprise, but that from the very heart of the mundane — the turmoil, the endless grind, the ongoing sense of loss — the *moshiach* will come. He will come out of all that and because of that, and life itself will yield up something new and wondrous. This is the process of redemption, for both the individual and for humankind.

I do not expect to be greeting the *moshiach* in my Sabbath finest. More likely, I will stand there with my drawer full of damaged things — the chipped dishes and the torn hearts — and I will ask him to explain how each one of them played an indispensable role in his coming; how the world would have been less whole without them. And we will laugh over the saying of the Kotzker Rebbe, that only God can fix the world using broken tools. 

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