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“A dream not interpreted is like a letter not read” (bBer 55a)

Isaac Abravanel on Dreams and Dream Interpretation

By Kristin Weingart*

Abstract

Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508), Bibelausleger und Philosoph des späten Mittelalters, diskutiert in seinen Kommentaren zu Gen 37–50 bzw. zu Maimonides' „Führer der Verwirrten“ das Phänomen des Träumens. Abravanel greift dabei auf ein breites Spektrum älterer Erklärungen aus der Bibel, der rabbinischen Literatur und der aristotelischen Philosophie zurück. Mit seiner Traumtheorie versucht er nicht nur, das Wesen und Zustandekommen von Träumen zu erhellen und zu klären, ob sie einen Blick in die Zukunft erlauben, sondern unternimmt darüber hinaus den Versuch, die verschiedenen älteren Erklärungen zu einer stimmigen Theorie zusammenzuführen.

Der Beitrag stellt Abravanel's Theorie des Träumens und der Traumdeutung vor, bietet einen Überblick über seine Quellen und den Umgang mit ihnen und fragt nach den Hintergründen für Abravanel's Interesse an Träumen und ihrer Deutung.

Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) – the great Jewish Bible commentator and philosopher of the late Middle Ages – discusses the phenomenon of dreams on two occasions, in his commentary on Genesis 37–50 as well as his commentary on Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed. Using a wide array of different opinions and reflections on dreams from Scripture, Rabbinic literature and Aristotelian philosophers he not only tries to explain the nature of dreams and to answer the question whether dreams convey knowledge of the future, he also tries to integrate the different accounts and opinions which lay before him into a consistent theory.

The paper outlines the main points of Abravanel's treatment of dreams, gives an overview over the sources he used and asks why dreams and dream interpretation were so important to Abravanel.

1. Introduction

Do dreams contain information on future events? Do they connect man with the Divine? Or are they mere tricks of the human mind best to be ignored? Herodotus already knows different answers to these questions and recounts them in a small anecdote: After Xerxes, king of Persia, had contemplated an invasion of Greece and, persuaded by his uncle Artabanus, had decided to cancel the expedition, he was visited by a recurring dream. In his nightly visions, he saw a tall and godly man who urged him to march

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against Hellas. Highly disturbed by his dream, Xerxes called Artabanus for counsel and the latter offered a naturalistic explanation. “This is none of heaven’s working,” he said, and “those visions that rove about us in dreams are for the most part the thoughts of the day.” Xerxes was not convinced; he had Artabanus wear the king’s robes and sleep on the throne. To the latter’s great surprise, the same dream appeared to him, proving him the divine character of dreams and Xerxes the need to march against Greece.¹

The question of the significance of dreams is older still, and the answers given are as different as ancient oneirocriticism and modern psychoanalysis can be. Philosophers could not ignore such an interesting phenomenon. Different theories have been brought forward since the time of Plato and Aristotle. Among those, investigating the curious question of dreams was also Isaac Abravanel.

Abravanel, financier and statesman, philosopher and biblical exegete lived from 1437 to 1508, served at no less than four European courts and left a variety of works whose number and extent would have been amazing even if he had not held important political and communal posts and travelled as extensively.² Abravanel investigates the question of dreams on two occasions, in his commentary on Genesis, completed in 1505, and in his commentary on Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, probably finished in 1507/08 but begun much earlier. The biblical story of Joseph (Gen. 37–50), the famous dreamer and interpreter of dreams, seems to have prompted his interest. Thus, before commenting on the biblical text proper, he engages into a philosophical discussion, in order to – as he puts it – solve the general problems before going on to a discussion of particular verses.³ In the commentary on Maimonides’ *Guide*, the question of dreaming is a part of the discussion on prophecy.

This paper offers a survey of Isaac Abravanel’s dream theory (mainly based on his Commentary on Genesis with occasional glances at his commentary to Maimonides’ *Guide*), looks at the philosophical predecessors to which he refers and investigates the reasons for Abravanel’s apparent interest in dreams.

1 HERODOTUS, *Historiae* (Loeb Classical Library, 1920), VII. 12-17.

2 The fullest biography and intellectual profile is still BEN ZION NETANYAHU, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman & Philosopher*, Philadelphia 1953. To the name Abravanel and its variants, see Netanyahu’s Appendix A, pp. 261-263. The subsequent biographical data is taken from this work.

3 DON ISAAC ABRAVANEL, פירוש על התורה, reprint Jerusalem 1964. All further references to Abravanel’s Commentary on Genesis (*Comm. on. Gen.*) are taken from this edition. Here, p. 380, col. 1.

Before going on to discuss Isaac Abravanel's account of dreams, some preliminary remarks on the usage of the term *dream* are in order. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "dream" as "a series of images, thoughts, and emotions, often with a story-like quality, generated by mental activity during sleep".⁴ Dreaming is thus a certain mental activity and we normally distinguish between the thoughts, images and fancies contained in the dream and the dream itself. Thus, we would say that we had a dream, experienced a dream or saw certain events *in* a dream, and would not regard a certain persona or item of the dream sequence as the dream itself. The same holds true for the usage of the Hebrew חלום, which is related closely to having a vision.⁵ Persons or things are seen, heard or come to the sleeper *in* a dream.⁶

The Greek nouns ὄναρ, ὄνειρος and ἐνύπνιον for "dream" describe in most cases a visit to the sleeper of a single dream figure that exists objectively and independently from the dreamer.⁷ The focus is more on this dream figure, be it a god, ghost, messenger or some other image, than on the dream narrative. Accordingly, the predominant usage is not to "have" a dream but to "see" a dream, ὁράω / βλέπω ἐνύπνιον. It is in light of this background, that Aristotle treats dreams mainly as remnants of sense perception, which the imaginative faculty receives and changes. Dreams stem thus – even in the most naturalistic account of Aristotle and so for Abravanel – not solely from an activity within the mind, but involve some kind of perception.

4 OED³ 2014, s. v. "dream".

5 Cf. M. OTTOSSON, s. v. חלום, in: *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, vol. II, Stuttgart 1977, cols. 992-998. For biblical dreams and visions, see already E. L. EHRLICH, *Der Traum im Alten Testament* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, vol. 73), Berlin 1953, pp. 3-2. For examples, cf. Job 7:14, 33:15.

6 Cf. Gen. 28:11ff; Gen. 40:9 or Jdg. 7:13; Gen. 20:6, Gen. 31:11 or 1 Sam. 3; Gen. 20:3 or 1 Kgs. 3:5.

7 E. R. DODDS, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkley / Los Angeles 1968, p. 105. In a modern classification, this would be an external approach to dreams, because "the content of the dream may be assumed to originate from independent existence, outside the dreamer" (I. LEWIN, "The Psychological Theory of Dreams in the Bible," in: *Journal of Psychology and Judaism* 7 [1983], pp. 73-88, here p. 74). In the external approach, dreams can be passive, i.e. the dreamer sleeps while external forces impose the contents of the dream into his mind, or active, i.e. the dreamer's soul leaves the body and engages in various experiences (*Ibid.*). Both variants are present in Greek literature (DODDS, *Greeks* [note 7] pp. 102ff.).

2. Abravanel's Dream Theory

2.1 Questions and Topics

Abravanel begins his discussion of dreams with a series of introductory questions defining the topics which are about to be covered. In addition, these questions contain a varied collection of material and pave the way for the formulation of his own theory.

As usual, Abravanel reaches his conclusions by what Sara Klein-Braslavy termed "the diaporetic method".⁸ He shows different solutions to a problem, which are all true, but also conflict with each other (like a thesis and an antithesis). The synthesis is then found by including the different contentions into a greater structure and thus arguing that they are all true but each within its own framework or all together within a greater one. Whether a contention is true depends for Abravanel on the sources backing it up. While arguments that stem from experience or from biblical texts are considered to be sure proofs of truth, rabbinic statements⁹ and the opinions of philosophers qualify in a more limited sense.¹⁰

His treatment of dreams starts with three general questions, two on the nature of dreams and one on dream interpretation.¹¹ He raises four main

8 S. KLEIN-BRASLAVY, "Gersonides on the Mode of Communicating Knowledge of the Future to the Dreamer and Clairvoyant," in: A. L. IVRY / E. R. WOLFSON / A. ARKUSH (eds.), *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, Amsterdam 1998, pp. 171-199, here p. 172.

9 Regarding rabbinic statements, Abravanel generally prefers what he considers to be the *Peshat* over the *Derash* (E. LAWEE, "The 'Ways of Midrash' in the Biblical Commentaries of Isaac Abarbanel," in: *Hebrew Union College Annual* 67 [1996], pp. 107-142, here p. 104).

10 Abravanel, however, does not introduce any opinion, which is diametrically opposed to his own view, but rather collects true contentions; the doubts that arise result more from unclear relations between these statements than from their contents.

Thus, in his first question e.g. he confronts the thesis that *all* dreams are the results of a higher emanation and contain knowledge about the future with the antithesis that *all* dreams are false and lies and treacherous images (*Comm. on Gen.*, p. 380, col. 1). The solution/synthesis consists of a classification of different types of dreams, according to the strength or lack of a received emanation and the perfection of the imaginative faculty (*ibid.*, p. 384). When treating only philosophic opinions and holding them against each other, Abravanel feels free to enter in a more content-oriented discussion and to refute certain concepts; as he does concerning the knowledge of the Active Intellect in his second question (*Comm. on Gen.*, p. 381).

11 The following eleven questions focus on the text of Gen. 41 and will not be dealt with here.

topics: (a) the veridical character of dreams, (b) their position within the cosmological framework, (c) their psychological characteristics, and (d) dream interpretation.¹²

a) The Veridical Character of Dreams

Abravanel asks in the beginning, “whether all dreams are from the highest overflow and are its message or not”.¹³ Supposing that they are, he finds the statement contradicted above all by experience; there are more meaningless dreams than true ones.¹⁴ The Talmud and the Bible provide further evidence against true dreams. As an opposite position, he offers a naturalistic explanation of dreams – they are no higher emanation, but combinations of the imagination itself according to the bodily disposition and the thoughts of the dreamer.¹⁵ However, this cannot be said of all dreams either, for experience also teaches that some dreams come true. In addition, the Bible and the Talmud tell about true dreams as well. In favor of divination in sleep, Abravanel also refers to Aristotle and attributes to him the statement that “the elders believed that prophecy comes from God, the dreams come from angels and magic comes from demons.”¹⁶

Both contentions – dreams are veridical and dreams are not veridical – seem to be true, experience, the Bible and rabbinic statements back both. The contradiction, however, seems to be somewhat forced, for it depends mainly on Abravanel’s emphasis that *all* dreams should be one or the other. The doubts that he raises against each of the alternatives do not prove the possibility / impossibility of divination in dreams but rather give evidence in each case for the existence of the other class of dreams.

12 *Comm. on Gen.*, pp. 380-383.

13 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 380, col. 1: אם החלומות כלם הם משפע העליון והודעתו אם לא

14 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 380, col. 1.

15 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 380, col. 1: וכל זה מורה שהחלומות אינם משפע עליון כי אם מהרכבות הדמיון עצמו כפי הליחות המחשבות.

16 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 380, col. 2: היה דעת הקדמונים שהנבואה תבא מהאל והחלומות מהמלאכים. והקסם מהשדים. ARISTOTLE does not say this anywhere. The closest statement would be: “The fact that all, or at least many, suppose that dreams have a significance inclines one to believe the theory [i.e. divination in dreams]” (*De Divinatione* 462^b14-16). Abravanel probably quotes Ibn Tibbons translation of Averroes’ Commentary on Aristotle’s *Parva Naturalia*: וזה דבר ידוע, כי הם יסברו (AVERROES, *Epitome of Aristotle’s Parva Naturalia*, Hebrew Version of Moses ibn Tibbon, edited by H. BLUMBERG, Cambridge 1954, p. 43.

b) Cosmology and Dreams

Abravanel then raises doubts about the sources of true dreams. Assuming they convey information, where does the information come from? Al-Ghazzālī¹⁷ and Maimonides point to the Active Intellect, yet this is difficult. As experience shows, dreams usually contain information on particular, temporal, and contingent events;¹⁸ but the Active Intellect being concerned with the general order cannot know them. It does not have any knowledge of particulars, it is outside the boundaries of time; and – probably most disturbing – it cannot provide information on contingencies, because this would involve a logical impossibility. Contingencies are neither determined nor ordered, for if they were, they would no longer be contingent. However, for the Active Intellect to be able to give notice of them, it would have to know them and contain them within its general order, which would make them bound to happen and, thus, necessary instead of contingent.¹⁹

As a second possibility, Abravanel introduces the opinion of Gersonides who believes that the heavenly bodies are the source of knowledge provided in true dreams. Here, he acknowledges that they do have knowledge of particular and temporal events, for they order and determine these according to the astral situation at the individual's birth. However, the difficulty concerning contingent future events remains unsolved.²⁰ The problem is a serious one; assuming that foreknowledge is possible for all future events one would have to accept that everything is determined and necessary, and possibility or contingency would not exist.²¹

Once again, he presents two contentions, which are both problematic. Here, however, Abravanel cannot have recourse to biblical or rabbinic treatments of the topic, but remains within in a purely philosophic discussion. The contradiction lies not so much between the views of Gersonides and Averroes whether the Active Intellect or the heavenly bodies are the direct source of foreknowledge. Abravanel is rather concerned about the conclusion that follows, namely the strong determinism, which seems to contradict human experience and would be implied by the announcement of contingent events in dreams.²²

17 Abravanel errs in attributing this position al-Ghazzālī; see below.

18 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 381, col. 1.

19 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 381, col. 1.

20 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 381, col. 2.

21 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 382, col. 1: ואלו היה הדברים המקריים בפרטיותם מסודרים ומוגבלים מהמערכת . לא ימצא כאן אם כן דבר אפשרי מצד עצמו אבל יהיה כן הדברים אשר אצלינו מחוייבים לגמר

22 Surprisingly, Abravanel does not return to the problem of general determinism

c) The Psychology of Dreams

Intertwined with the cosmological problem, is the one of the human soul. If knowledge is conveyed, how does the soul receive it? There is no doubt for Abravanel that dreams are related to the imaginative faculty.²³ However, since this faculty is concerned with particular material images, how can it receive the emanation that Abravanel had made out, as the source of true dreams – be it the Active Intellect or the heavenly bodies? The question is closely related to the doubts concerning the Active Intellect's or the heavenly bodies' knowledge of particulars; in fact in most philosophical inquiries into the problem, it is the same question only treated from a different perspective. Abravanel also gets into a philosophical discussion and turns to two possible solutions. He reiterates the view of Averroes that the separate intellect emanates general forms, but the human imagination receives them as particulars.²⁴ As an alternative, he presents the opinion of Narboni that the knowledge of future particulars is actually a matter of intuition and conjecture.²⁵ Abravanel raises strong objections against Narboni, because he holds that one could not know from where the knowledge originates. Therefore, there is no certainty at all. So one is left with Averroes' view. Surprisingly, Abravanel does not introduce Gersonides' solution of the problem, which comes closest to the view, he will bring forward later on.

d) Dream Interpretation

Concerning the interpretation of dreams, Abravanel once again offers a number of possible explanations. Dream interpretation can be accomplished by conjecture; it might resemble a certain kind of prophecy or simply be pure coincidence.²⁶ All three contentions are seen as questionable. Interpretation by conjecture would try to trace the dream images back to the original impression into the soul, i.e. the information provided by emanation. Therefore, the great skill of the interpreter lies in the ability to detect resemblances and to know how the imagination forms certain images out of other ones.²⁷ This way of interpreting may be applied in two manners.

in his later account. A reason might be that he himself subscribed to a deterministic world outlook, cf. NETANYAHU, *Abravanel* (note 2), pp. 119 and 130f.

23 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 381, col. 1.

24 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 381, col. 1.

25 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 381, col. 1.

26 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 382, col. 1.

27 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 382, col. 1; cf. ARISTOTLE, *De Divinatione*, 464^b6ff.

When using a formalized technique, one assumes that specific dream images always correspond to particular events in life regardless of the personal background of the dreamer.²⁸ The second approach is the one of Averroes who stresses that the interpreter has to know the laws, customs, beliefs and tastes of the people to whom the dreamer belongs, which means that he does not believe in the universal applicability of the first technique.²⁹ Abravanel cannot accept either of those approaches unconditionally, because they contradict biblical statements, and therefore must have some qualitative fault, and because none of them is free of the suspicion that the interpreter introduces his own will into his explanation.³⁰

Both Joseph and Daniel see dream interpretation as a work of God.³¹ As Abravanel understands this notion, a divine spirit endows the interpreter with the right understanding. However, this assumption also is problematic, because dream interpretation would then be a kind of prophecy. Here Abravanel opens the door to the wider question of the relation between dreams and their interpretation and prophecy. His choice of biblical references already hints at his objection to an identification of dreams with prophecy.³² Nevertheless, Abravanel makes clear that there has to be some kind of supernatural component in dream interpretation whose nature remains to be investigated.

2.2 *Abravanel and his Philosophic Counterparts*

Especially in his introductory questions and to a lesser degree throughout his treatment of dreams Abravanel has recourse to various sources. Predominantly he uses material from the Bible and rabbinic literature (esp. from the so-called *Talmudic Dream Book* bBer 55a–57b which deals mainly with dream interpretation), but – as seen above – also mentions six philosophers and scholars who preceded him in discussing the phenomenon of

28 This technique was prominent in the so-called dream books. One example of these books, which contain long lists of images and their expected links in the real world, is the Talmudic one in bBer 55a–57b. The most famous ancient dream book is probably ARTEMIDORUS DALDIANUS' *Oneirocritica* (cf. R. J. WHITE, *Artemidorus: The Interpretation of Dreams*, Park Ridge 1975).

29 AVERROES, *Epitome of the Parva Naturalia*, English translation by H. BLUMBERG, Cambridge 1961, p. 50.

30 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 382, col. 2.

31 Cf. Gen 41:16 and Dan 2:28.

32 *Comm. on. Gen.*, p. 383, col. 1. He refers to the sceptical attitude of Jeremiah towards dreams in Jer. 23:28.

dreaming: Aristotle, al-Ghazzālī (1058–1111), Ibn Rušd (Averroes, 1126–1198), Mose b. Maimon (Maimonides, 1138–1204), Levi b. Gershom (Gersonides, 1288–1344), and Mose b. Joshua of Narbonne (Mose Narboni, d. 1344). In many cases, however, it is difficult to determine which texts Abravanel could use, and whether the texts extant today are identical with the ones he read. The same applies of course to translations, upon which Abravanel, who probably did not understand Greek or Arabic, depended.³³

Abravanel usually discusses thinkers that deal with the question of dreaming within the framework of a more or less Aristotelian worldview. Only al-Ghazzālī does not fit into this group. However, in the statement Abravanel ascribes to him he misrepresents al-Ghazzālī's opinion referring in fact to an assertion made by Avicenna.

According to Abravanel, al-Ghazzālī (like Maimonides) viewed the Active Intellect as the source of information in veridical dreams.³⁴ Abravanel seems to refer to al-Ghazzālī's notes on the question of dreams in his 16th problem of the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, i.e. the "refutation of their theory that the souls of the heavens are aware of all the particulars which originate in the world."³⁵ Here, al-Ghazzālī presents Avicenna's theory of dreams as one of the false assertions of the philosophers: "In sleep one sees what will happen in the future. This is so, because of his contact with the Preserved Tablet, and the perusal of it. Sometimes, that which he discovers at that time sticks to his memory in its original form. But sometimes, the faculty of the Imagination quickly transforms it into a symbol. [...] Thus, the real percept disappears from the memory, leaving behind an imaginary form. Consequently, there is need for the interpretation of what has been represented by the Imagination through a symbol."³⁶ For al-Ghazzālī himself, there can be no emanation from the spheres which transmits knowledge, because he does not believe that there is a constant overflow at all that moves the spheres continuously and emanates further into the sublunary world. Instead, he is convinced that a universal will for movement suffices to move the spheres. Since there is no particular will to move the sphere, the sphere can have no representation of any particular, and cannot pass on knowledge of future particulars.³⁷ What matters to him, is Divine knowledge alone, which includes knowledge of particulars but differs essentially from human knowledge.³⁸

33 NETANYAHU, *Abravanel* (note 2), p. 14.

34 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 380, col. 2: כשנודה שיש בחלומות הודעה אלהית מי הוא הפועל אותה באמת. האם הוא השכל הפועל שישפע על הכח המדמה וכמו שהוא דעת אבוחמ"ד ונמשך אחריו הרב המורה.

35 al-Ghazzālī, *Tahafut al-Falasifah: The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, translated by SABIH AHMAD KAMALI, Lahore 1958, p. 172.

36 al-Ghazzālī, *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (note 35), p. 174.

37 Cf. al-Ghazzālī, *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (note 35), p. 176-178.

38 al-Ghazzālī, *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (note 35), p. 179.

All the predecessors mentioned by Abravanel acknowledge the existence of false or meaningless dreams and call for caution to various degrees. They focus on why and how dreams can be a means of meaningful communication and how veridical dreams relate to prophecy as another channel of conveying divine knowledge. Given Aristotle's highly sceptical attitude toward divination in dreams, this focus is somewhat surprising.

Aristotle treats dreams in depth in *De Insomniis* and in *De Divinatione per Somnum* within his *Parva Naturalia*.³⁹ His interest in *De Insomniis* is mainly psychological, looking at the causes of dreams; in *De Divinatione* he discusses and refutes the widespread belief in divination through dreams. As seen above, the Greek understanding of *dreaming* focuses more on the dream image than the experience of the dreamer; thus Aristotle also treats dreams as a special kind of perception. However, a dream cannot be sense perception in the regular sense, i.e. perception in the waking state, because the external senses and the common sense, the heart, do not function during sleep.⁴⁰ Dreams cannot be a function of opinion either, because judgments depend on perceived images.⁴¹ Having excluded these two faculties, Aristotle concludes that dreaming must be an affection of the imaginative faculty.⁴²

39 All references to the *Parva Naturalia* are taken from W. D. ROSS, *Aristotle: Parva Naturalia: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*, Oxford 1955.

40 *De Somno*, 455^a12-455^b13.

41 *De Insomniis*, 458^b11-13.

42 *De Insomniis*, 459^a11-22. What are the capacities of the imaginative faculty? Ross describes it as "intermediate between sense-perception and knowledge" (W. D. ROSS, *Aristotle: De Anima: Edited, with Introduction and Commentary*, Oxford 1961, p. 40; cf. D. GALLOP, *Aristotle on Sleep and Dreams: A Text and Translation with Introduction, Notes and Glossary*, Peterborough 1990, p. 20). M. Schofield proposes a more narrow definition of the imagination as "a capacity for having [...] non-paradigmatic sensory experiences" (M. Schofield, "Aristotle on the Imagination," in: M. C. NUSSBAUM / A. OHSENBERG RORTY (eds.), *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, Oxford 1992, p. 252. It is thus mainly concerned with perception, but is to be treated sceptically and cautiously, for it is prone to err.

The imaginative faculty seems to have two functions: (a) It is connected to sensory experiences as "an activity set up by actual perception" (*De Anima*, 429^a2) in which it determines how things appear (Cf. 428^a28-30). (b) It is the ability to visualize sensible objects in their absence. "If 'imagining' be used not in a metaphorical sense, but in the sense of that in virtue of which we say we have an image [...]" (428^a1). In light of the first function, imagination can be said to be the same as the sensitive faculty. They are the same, however, only with regard to their function in the limited scope of dreaming. What Aristotle wants to stress, is probably that in dreams, the imagination does not (b) visualize absent sensibles but rather (a) determines how the sensibles which are perceived appear. But while in the waking state, judgment controls the interpretations which the imaginative faculty gives to perceived objects - for imagination

If the imaginative faculty is supposed to act in its sensitive capacity, it needs sensory stimuli; but where do these come from, when all the senses are disabled while sleeping? Aristotle's basic argument in this context is: "With reference to our original inquiry, one thing that follows from what has been said is that when the object of perception has departed the sensations are still experienced."⁴³ Remnants of earlier perceptions, whose stimuli are always some kind of movement,⁴⁴ are saved within the senses, and they are the main source of 'dream material' as interpreted by the imagination. These residues are always there, but remain unnoticed in the waking state, because of the stronger impression of new perceptions.⁴⁵ In sleep, however, "the images and residual movements arising from sensations are sometimes extinguished by the greater movement [sc. of the bodily liquids], and sometimes are confused, monstrous, and incoherent."⁴⁶ Because of the distortion of the original movements of the sense impressions, they may appear as something totally new to the imagination, thus it is sometimes hard to recognize their source. Nevertheless, all images seen in dreams have their origin in those remnants of sense perception during the waking state.⁴⁷ There is no supernatural influence whatsoever. Accordingly, dream interpretation consists in the reconstruction of the original sense-impressions, and the most skilful dream interpreter is the one who "can see resemblances".⁴⁸

For dreams to contain knowledge of the future, they "must be either causes, signs, or accompaniments of events – all, two, or one of these things."⁴⁹ In the following, he discusses all three of these possibilities. Dreams can be causes of one's actions (and thus of future events): "As before, during, or after our actions we often witness or do these in a vivid dream (the reason being that the way has been prepared for this by beginnings in waking life), so (conversely) phenomena of sleep must often be origins of our actions by day, because the thought of these has been prepared for in our nightly visions."⁵⁰ In a similar way, dreams may be signs of future events. Aristotle gives here the example of illnesses that begin with small

is likely to be false (428^a17 and *De Insomniis* 461^b5ff.), in dreams "it simply fails to oppose them, so that the appearances presented to the subject gain acceptance by default" (GALLOP, *Sleep and Dreams* [note 42], p. 21), and the dreamer is not aware of these misperceptions and takes them for real (*De Insomniis*, 461^b29-31).

43 *De Insomniis*, 460^a32-460^b3.

44 Cf. *De Insomniis*, 459^a28ff.

45 *De Insomniis*, 460^b32-461^a4.

46 *De Insomniis*, 461^a18-22.

47 True perceptions of e.g. sound, light, flavour or touch which occur while sleeping do not contradict the theory, because they do not count as dreams (Cf. *De Insomniis*, 462^a15-31).

48 *De Divinatione*, 464^b6-7.

49 *De Divinatione*, 462^b26-28.

50 *De Divinatione*, 463^a23-30.

signs, which sometimes are perceived in dreams. While sleeping the senses are free of outside influence and more perceptible to movements within the body, which can be the small beginnings of an impending illness.⁵¹ In both cases, however, the connection lies in an inner disposition of the dreamer and not in an outside influence; in both cases dreams do not even qualify as having a purpose⁵² and much less to be divinatory. Most dreams, which resemble certain events, however, are neither causes nor signs but coincidences.⁵³

Although he does not accept the attribution of dreams to emanation,⁵⁴ Aristotle does not want to rule out completely the possibility of a certain foreknowledge. Some dreams can be a side effect of the natural causation from movement to movement. “As, when water or air is set in motion, this moves something else, and the motion continues when the original mover has ceased to act, so a movement or perception ... may reach the mind of the dreamer. Such movements are more perceptible at night, because in the quiet of night the air is less disturbed, and people perceive small internal movements better in sleep than in waking life.”⁵⁵ Even then, he remains consistent within his understanding of dreams as remnants of sense perception. The movements concerned are internal ones and the dreamer receives no new information from outside. Ordinary men who do not engage in much intellectual activity during the waking state are more apt to absorb these movements, for they do not exercise their senses and keep them occupied. In this context, Aristotle introduces another strong argument against divination in dreams; if indeed God had been the sender of true dreams, he would have opted for greater efficiency: “It would have occurred by day and to wise people if God had been the sender.”⁵⁶ Thus while not completely disclaiming future knowledge in dreams; Aristotle adopts a highly sceptical attitude towards this possibility. Instead, he offers a strictly naturalistic explanation of dreaming.⁵⁷

51 *De Divinatione*, 463^a3ff.

52 Aristotle has not identified any final cause or purpose for dreams, they seem to be a mere by-product of waking perception and the movement of bodily liquids while sleeping. This is a bit surprising in view of his usually teleological concept of nature. Both notions of dreams as causes or signs do not count as functions or purposes. A purpose would imply that one could dream at will in order to diagnose an illness or promote a certain action and that a certain dream would always bring a certain outcome. Both propositions are not true (GALLOP, *Sleep and Dreams* [note 42], p. 27).

53 *De Divinatione*, 463^b1.

54 *De Divinatione*, 464^a5-6.

55 *De Divinatione*, 464^a6-16.

56 *De Divinatione*, 464^a20-22.

57 There is evidence that Aristotle did not always hold a negative opinion of the possibility of veridical dreams. In a fragment (Fr. 12) from the lost *Περὶ φιλοσοφίας*, he seems to assume inspiration and prophetic power of the soul in dreams (W. D. ROSS, *Aristotelis: Fragmenta Selecta*, Oxford 1970, p. 79: ἀλλ' ἀπὸ μὲν τῶν περὶ τὴν ψυχὴν συμβαινόντων διὰ τοῦς ἐν τοῖς ὕπνοις γινομένου ταύτης

Abravanel refers to Aristotle⁵⁸ on a number of occasions and presents him as a proponent of the possibility of divination in dreams. In addition to the statement mentioned above⁵⁹ Abravanel attributes the following opinions directly to Aristotle:

Also according to the opinion of the philosopher, as we shall explain, man does not dream of peoples, kingdoms, and other countries, but details reach the dreamer of his relatives, loved ones and his people. He also says that man does not dream of events distant in time and many years away, but rather of imminent ones.⁶⁰

There are among them false dreams that the philosopher calls confused dreams, for in them the imaginative faculty is working alone, and there is no emanation at all from outside.⁶¹

This is the opinion of Aristotle in *De Sensu et Sensato* that true dreams come from the reason and else ones come from the confusion of the imaginative faculty and of combinations.⁶²

In addition, Abravanel mentions Aristotle in the context of dream interpretation (as the guessing of resemblances).⁶³ Most of the aforementioned statements are hard to identify as belonging to the Aristotelian view. The first one bears a possible resemblance to one example that Aristotle brings: "The reason why some people have veridical dreams, and why they foresee better something that is to happen to their acquaintances, is that acquaintances think more about each other; as they recognize them far off, so they recognize what is happening to them."⁶⁴ The third statement, however,

ἐνθουσιασμοὺς καὶ τὰς μαντείας). In addition, a passage from the *Eudemian Ethics* suggests that veridical dreams are related to God (*Eudemian Ethics*, 1248^a24-^b3) a view that he in *De Divinatione* flatly denies (Cf. 462^b20-22 or 463^b12-18.).

58 Abravanel calls Aristotle הפלוסוף or mentions his name. The work he refers to is החוש והמוחש, which apparently included more than *De Sensu et sensato*. Ibn Tibbon called his translation of Averroes' commentary on the *Parva Naturalia* by this name (M. STEINSCHNEIDER, *Die hebräischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters und die Juden als Dolmetscher: Ein Beitrag zur Literaturgeschichte des Mittelalters meist nach handschriftlichen Quellen*, Berlin 1893, p. 154).

59 Cf. p. 133 and note 16.

60 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 382, col. 1: וגם שכפי דעת הפלוסוף כמו שנתבאר לא יחלום אדם חלומות כוללים לעמים ומליכיות וארצות אחרות כי אם פרטיים מגיעים לחולם או לקרוביו אוהביו ועמו. וגם יאמר שלא יחלום אדם דבר לזמן רחוק ושנים רבות כי אם לזמן קרוב.

61 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 385, col. 2: יש מהם חלומות השוא שקורא הפלוסוף חלומות משובשים: שהפועל בהם הוא הכוח המדמה בלבד ולא יחות בהם שפע כלל מחוץ.

62 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 386, col. 1: וזהו דעת ארסטו במ"ב מחוש ומחוש שהחלומות הצודקים הם: מהשכל והכוזבים הם משובש הכח המדמה והרכבות.

63 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 382, col. 1.

64 *De Divinatione*, 464^a25-33.

clearly contradicts Aristotle; he does not connect dreams to the rational faculty, but limits them to the realm of the imaginative faculty.

With his perception of Aristotle's attitude toward divination in dreams, Abravanel obviously follows the path laid out by his predecessors. Averroes as well as Gersonides, Maimonides and Narboni base their reflections on a similar view of the Aristotelian position. Unlike Aristotle who could not make out any convincing final cause for dreaming, they see a final cause, i.e. providence, or more generally, the well-being of individuals and humankind, but are then confronted with the problem Abravanel points out in his second question: how can one accept the existence of veridical dreams without ascribing to a highly deterministic worldview? The solution is difficult, regardless of whether one tries to deal with the question from an epistemological, cosmological or psychological angle.

In his extensive commentaries on Aristotle's works, *Averroes* also treats the treatises of the *Parva Naturalia* available to him; he speaks of three books, which were known in Andalusia.⁶⁵ His *Epitome* is not organized according to Aristotle's sequence of arguments; he rather freely rearranges the material in order to summarize and present Aristotle's opinion on the topic treated.⁶⁶ Concerning the question of dreams, he describes his task as follows: "We shall therefore treat of these things and say that dreams are of two kinds: false and true. We must first inquire as to which of the parts of the soul each one of these two kinds of dreams is related; which is the cause that produces each of these two kinds of dreams, that is, the true and the false; why true dreams occur; how they may occur; how many different kinds there are; under which class of knowledge they come; why they are peculiar to the period of sleep; why some people are superior to others in the matter of dreams, for some see true dreams for the greater part, while others see false dreams; why some people can interpret dreams while others cannot interpret them."⁶⁷ Averroes presupposes without further doubt the existence of veridical dreams which he sees as a very common phenomenon⁶⁸ and as belonging to the same category as divination and prophecy.⁶⁹ Therefore, Averroes faces a series of mainly epistemological questions,

65 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 4. The arrangement of the Arabic translation of Aristotle's works used by Averroes was different from the Greek editions known today. In the *Epitome*, Averroes comments on the contents of what we know as six treatises: *De Sensu et Sensato*, *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, *De Sompno et Vigilia*, *De Insomniis*, *De Divinatione per Sompnum*, and *De Causis Longitudinis et Brevitatis Vitae*.

66 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. xiv.

67 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 40.

68 "There is not a person who has not at times had dreams that warn him of that which will happen to him in the future" (AVERROES, *Epitome* [note 29], p. 39).

69 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), pp. 40, 43. Although prophecy has a certain

for if true dreams are more than mere coincidences one has to inquire into the nature and causes of the knowledge transmitted. As its source, he makes out the Active Intellect, because the endowment of knowledge is a perfection of the material intellect, the actualization of its potential. According to Averroes, acquiring knowledge in the waking state involves conception and affirmation. Conception is the process of abstraction, i.e. the acquisition of abstract intelligibles out of data from the senses through perception of a number of material and particular individuals. In short, it is the process of forming thoughts. Affirmation gives those intelligibles their universal status; as such, it is a function of the Active Intellect.⁷⁰ Since true dreams are a way of acquiring knowledge, albeit a different one, and thus perfecting the intellect the same agent must be involved.⁷¹

Averroes strongly denies that the transmitted knowledge is theoretical, for if theoretical knowledge could be achieved by dreaming, i.e. without previous knowledge of the primary propositions, these would be as useless as – using Averroes' example – feet, if one could walk without them.⁷² Dreaming would be a shortcut to the acquisition of universal principles without the long and strenuous training necessary to arrive at those concepts by speculative reasoning, involving e.g. perception, abstraction, and memory. Yet, this causes a dilemma: “[...] Theoretical knowledge in itself is one and not subject to change, whether it is acquired by training or it is acquired without training. Now if it were acquired by both means together, training would not be included in the definition of theoretical knowledge nor would training be necessary for the acquisition thereof.”⁷³ This kind of knowledge could not be the same as human knowledge for which training is necessary, but that is impossible due to its universal nature. Alternatively, it must have different causes, which is also impossible, because “the relationship of the thing to its causes, whereby it has its existence, would not be a necessary relationship”.⁷⁴

For Averroes dreams convey information on the future, especially on future contingencies concerning the particular dreamer.⁷⁵ This poses new difficulties, for how can the Active Intellect being devoid of matter transmit knowledge on particulars, and wouldn't foreknowledge of particulars contradict the principle of free

purpose, i.e. it brings information concerning „the nature of happiness“, it belongs substantially to the same kind of transmitted knowledge.

70 For Averroes, “the Agent Intellect is that repository of universal forms, intelligibles, which is believed to give the individual intellect both its ability to think abstractly and the very contents of its action, the abstract ideas themselves” (A. IVRY, “Gersonides and Averroes on the Intellect: The Evidence of the Supercommentary on the *De Anima*”, in: G. DAHAN [ed.], *Gersonide en son temps: Science et Philosophie Médiévales*, Louvain / Paris 1991, pp. 235-251, here p. 244).

71 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 40.

72 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 51.

73 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 52.

74 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 52.

75 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 43.

choice? The solution to the first question lies for Averroes in the role of the imaginative faculty, which is the only one continuously functioning regardless of whether the dreamer is sleeping or awake and which produces image after image.⁷⁶ It also builds a bridge between the material sense perceptions coming together in the common sense and the intellect thereby forming an immaterial image of the material input received. This connection between imagination and matter is very important to Averroes: “[...] the separate intelligence endows the imaginative soul with the universal nature that the individual that comes into being possesses, that is to say, with a comprehension of its causes, and the imaginative soul will receive it as a particular by virtue of the fact that it is in matter.”⁷⁷ The imagination is the particularizing element in the process of transmitting knowledge in dreams as matter is in the endowment of forms. The Active Intellect provides universal knowledge, and the imaginative faculty of the individual dreamer relates it to particulars. In Averroes’ theory, the imagination is not a blank slate. The acquisition of knowledge in dreams is in fact a verification that requires prior perception.⁷⁸ The necessary knowledge does not have to be especially developed; in fact, preparatory knowledge suffices,⁷⁹ but one cannot have information in a true dream about someone or something one has never known. On the other hand, man is especially apt to dream about persons or things one is well acquainted with.⁸⁰

Averroes is aware of the implications of his theory concerning the question of free choice; he notes: “Be that as it may, generally, this kind of endowment is very noble and is attributed to a principle that is higher and nobler than the principle of free choice. Indeed it is through the divine element and full of solicitude concerning

76 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 41. When the external senses are disabled due to sleep, the imagination is not occupied with the impressions they convey, but is more spiritual and as such more perfect (AVERROES, *Epitome* [note 29], p. 48). It is of course involved in false dreams as well. Like Aristotle, Averroes sees the cause of false dreams in remnants of sense-impressions, which remain in the common sense. The imagination mixes them with notions from other faculties of the soul to produce meaningless images. As a second cause, he notes desires of the animal soul. The imagination forms images of the desired things. Physicians learn from these dreams about certain bodily conditions (AVERROES, *Epitome* [note 29], pp. 52-53).

77 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 46.

78 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 47. This presupposition implies the necessary connection of the imagination to material sense perception. Aristotle had stressed as well that in dreams the imaginative faculty works as a sensitive faculty.

79 “Even though it is not a condition for the existence of that knowledge [sc. the knowledge endowed by the separate intelligence] to be preceded by an actual knowledge on the part of man, it cannot but be a condition for its existence that it should be preceded by a prior preparatory knowledge” (AVERROES, *Epitome* [note 29], p. 47).

80 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 44.

man that man acquires this kind of knowledge of many things.”⁸¹ Accordingly, he favours determinism and explains that everything comes into being through some specific causes. These causes might not be known to man in the moment of making decisions, but they are nevertheless present in human behaviour, be it as „ingrained natural characteristics“ or be it „through habit and men’s opinion.“⁸² This deterministic tendency points to the teleological nature of dreams. They are a means of providence, giving notice of upcoming harmful events, so that man can prepare for them.⁸³ A capable interpreter needs to know the dream images, which are universal due to the immaterial agent, which is the source of true dreams. The interpreter must also be acquainted with the specific appearances, which dream images take in the imaginative faculty according to its prior perceptions. As seen above, these are determined by the situation of the dreamer and account for variable imagery: “It is a requisite condition that the interpreter knows those dream-images that are common to all peoples and the dream-images that are peculiar to each and every people and to each class of individuals among that people, for peoples differ in this matter [...] according to the faculties of their souls and [...] according to the dream-images and opinions in the tradition of which they have been raised and in which they have been accustomed to believe since birth.”⁸⁴

Abravanel’s view on Aristotle shows that he saw Aristotle through the eyes of Averroes. The questions Abravanel raises (knowledge of contingencies vs. determinism, the relation of true dreams to prophecy) provide further proof for his dependency on Averroes’ *Epitome*.⁸⁵ In the Aristotelian treatment of dreams there is no need to address these issues because within the

81 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 43.

82 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 46.

83 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 49. Aristotle was at loss to find any final cause of dreaming. He treated them as mere side effects instead.

84 AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), p. 50.

85 Sh. Pines argues convincingly that Averroes’ Arabic recension of *De Divinatione* was different from the one extant in Greek today. It may have contained additional material and expressed a view favourable to veridical dreams. Therefore, Averroes does not deviate consciously from Aristotle, but presents the philosopher’s view, as he knew it. Pines finds it improbable that the Arabic recension reflects a more authentic Aristotelian text; instead he proposes two possible explanations: “1. The Arabic recension of Aristotle’s *De Divinatione* is a Hellenistic, perhaps Stoic, adaptation or amplification of an authentic Aristotelian text, which was different from that found in the extant Greek recension of the treatise, and may have contained an expression of belief in the ‘divine’ origin of mantic dreams. 2. Or, it is, as far as the explanation of veridical dreams is concerned, wholly of Hellenistic origin and has been substituted for the Aristotelian text which denies the divine origin of these dreams” (SH. PINES “The Arabic recension of *Parva Naturalia* and the philosophic doctrine concerning veridical dreams according to *al-Risala al-*

offered naturalistic explanation and without the possibility of divination in dreams a connection to the Active Intellect is excluded from the outset.

Abravanel's presentation of Aristotle as being in favour of divination in dreams is also in line with Gersonides' reception of the latter. He, too, reacts to Averroes' *Epitome* and not to the reflections contained in the Greek text. In the beginning of his treatment of dreams, divination, and prophecy in the second book of *The Wars of the Lord*, Gersonides states: "What is mentioned in Aristotle's *On Sense and Sensible Objects* [...] does not provide an adequate account of these phenomena, and many of the things it does say are indeed false."⁸⁶ Like Averroes, he focuses on the communication of 'divine knowledge', but although he asks similar questions and accepts the general grid of causes, Gersonides differs in some decisive points from Averroes' theory. He widens the scope of the transmitted knowledge, distinguishes dreams sharply from prophecy and applies a prominent role to the heavenly bodies as instruments in the process of transmission.

According to Gersonides, human experience provides sufficient evidence for the existence of true dreams; they even occur so frequently that one cannot view them as happening by coincidence.⁸⁷ If veridical dreams are no coincidences, the transmitted knowledge must be connected to the events revealed. In fact, such a connection is only conceivable if the events as well as the knowledge are determined.⁸⁸ Gersonides has to cope with the same problems that had vexed Averroes, i.e. the determinism implied in the foreknowledge of future events, and the mode of communication from the immaterial agent to the human imagination.⁸⁹ However, while Averroes had tried to solve the problem through a psychological explanation, Gersonides turns to astrology.

Manamiyya and other sources," in: *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 [1974], pp. 129-153, here pp. 152f.).

The contextual and textual closeness to Averroes' *Epitome* speaks against the possibility that Abravanel was using a different text of Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia*.

86 GERSONIDES, *מלחמות השם*, ספר מלחמות השם, Riva de Trento 1560; reprint Jerusalem 1977. All subsequent references to the Hebrew text of the *Wars of the Lord* are to this edition. English translations follow GERSONIDES, *The Wars of the Lord*, translated by S. FELDMAN, Philadelphia, PA 1987, here p. 27.

87 GERSONIDES, *מלחמות השם* (note 86), p. 16b, col. 1: "וכב' התפרסם ונגלה בזמננו זה שקצת ... וכב' יראה ג"כ מענין החלומי הצודקים וזה שכבר אנשים יגידו העתידות בהרבה מהדברים מהזמני". "יראה בכם דמיונים רבים יחד יסכימו כלן אל מה שימצא בעתיד".

88 GERSONIDES, *מלחמות השם* (note 86), p. 16b, col. 1.

89 Gersonides makes clear that in dreams and divination the receiving faculty is the imaginative faculty, as opposed to prophecy in which knowledge is transmitted to the intellect (Book II, chapter 6 = GERSONIDES, *מלחמות השם* [note 86], p. 19b).

Gersonides uses his ontological theory and applies it to the epistemological question at hand:⁹⁰ The Active Intellect is the source of the knowledge conveyed in true dreams, but it cannot transmit this knowledge directly to the imaginative faculty, because the latter is not capable of receiving universal intelligibles but rather forms images out of particular sense perceptions.⁹¹ For Averroes the particularization happens in the imaginative faculty according to prior knowledge stemming from particular perceptions. Gersonides does not accept Averroes explanation, but how does he bridge the gap? In book I, he had explained how the Active Intellect uses the stars as intermediaries for endowing forms to the sublunary world. The stars are responsible for the different compositions and mixtures of existents in the material world; they take part in the coming into being of particulars. The transmission of knowledge to the dreamer functions analogously. Here, the Active Intellect also uses the stars as intermediaries, because they not only influence the coming into being of certain events, but their movers in the spheres also know the pattern of their activity.⁹² Therefore, they can transmit these patterns. Through their influence, the particularization happens in the cosmological and the psychological level. Cosmologically, the stars affect the human composition, i.e. the temperament that in turn – and psychologically – influences the ability to have certain images or thoughts.⁹³ Hence, “the plan [sc. the general plan of the Active Intellect] is particularized by the recipient’s *Sitz im Leben*, by his own unique situation in

90 Cf. KLEIN-BRASLAVY, “Gersonides” (note 8), p. 173. Gersonides presents his theory in a condensed form in chapter 6 of book II of *The Wars of the Lord* (GERSONIDES, מלחמות השם [note 86], p. 19b, col. 2).

91 “For the imagination is not capable of receiving the activity of the [Active] Intellect except through the material intellect by virtue of the intimacy between it and the material intellect” (*Wars of the Lord*, p. 61). H. Kreisel traces this assumption of Gersonides back to Ibn Sina (H. KREISEL, “Veridical Dreams and Prophecy in the Philosophy of Gersonides,” in: *Da’at* 22 [1989], pp. 73-85).

92 Each star, however, knows only the pattern of its own activity and not the influence of the other stars, but the composition of human beings and their disposition is affected by different stars together. Each star affects the part of the disposition that corresponds to the star’s dominion within the composition, so Mars e.g. dominates the element of fire and the Moon the element of water (Cf. KLEIN-BRASLAVY, “Gersonides” [note 8], p. 180f.).

93 “From the Agent Intellect there arises the knowledge of that pattern pertaining to this individual from [the aspect determined by] the heavenly bodies, not insofar as it pertains to the individual as a definite particular. Rather, it pertains to this individual insofar as he is any arbitrary member of a class of individuals who were born when the heavenly bodies occupied the [zodiacal] position in the horizon at the time of his birth. [...] The imagination [too] receives the individual from the Agent Intellect in the same way. Now it will turn out that the imagination will apprehend *this* individual [as definite particular] because at the moment when the receiver obtains this communication there is present with him no other person of this attribute” (*Wars of the Lord* [note 86], p. 51).

which he lives and functions.”⁹⁴ This *Sitz im Leben* includes the socio-political, cultural or religious environment of the dreamer, diviner or prophet. Like the stars, it sets the disposition to have certain thoughts and images. ‘Thought’ is in the present context not speculation on propositions and universal intelligibles, but the concrete “thought with sensible images, thought of particular things, people, acts or events”.⁹⁵ Therefore, a certain knowledge is the prerequisite for any form of divination, because this kind of knowledge requires that its recipient already has been thinking about it.⁹⁶ Yet, these reflections do not lead Gersonides – unlike Averroes – to the exclusion of theoretical knowledge from divination. He sees it as sufficiently testified by experience, especially in dreams concerning medical matters, but remains at loss to find a rational explanation.

Regarding the problem of the possibility of free choice, Gersonides ascribes to a strong astral determinism but allows for the existence of free choice as a miraculous gift of God. Experience teaches, “Dreams, divination, and prophecy communicate information only about human circumstances and chance events”.⁹⁷ Yet, information on future events presupposes that they have determinate causes and are, thus, not contingent but necessary, i.e. no longer chance events. Even without considering the possibility of foreknowledge, Gersonides sees determination evident in nature and the life of man. What appear to be chance events have a certain underlying pattern.⁹⁸ He concludes that these things like all human affairs and the entire terrestrial world are ordered by the heavenly bodies in accordance with the general teleology in nature, which strives to preservation and perfection. If astrology sometimes seems to lead to faulty pronouncements, this is to blame on inadequate procedures and difficulties in obtaining the necessary knowledge, not on the science as such. According to Gersonides, genuine contingency cannot be a result of some inner worldly situation, God provides for it as a means of his providential

94 FELDMAN, *Wars of the Lord* (note 86), p. 52, note 6.

95 KLEIN-BRASLAVY, “Gersonides” (note 8), p. 179. This is consistent with M. Kellner’s view of the role, which Gersonides ascribes to the Active Intellect in ‘normal’, i.e. waking human cognition. The Active Intellect does not emanate ready knowledge-contents on to the material human intellect. Instead, the material intellect acquires knowledge by abstracting it from sensory impressions, i.e. it collects properties. The role of the Active Intellect is to inform the material intellect which of the variety of features constitute the general nature of the apprehended object. Therefore, “the acquisition of that knowledge which constitutes our perfection, felicity, immortality depends ultimately upon sensation” (M. KELLNER, “Gersonides on the Role of the Active Intellect in Human Cognition,” in: *Hebrew Union College Annual* 65 [1994], pp. 233-259, here p. 244).

96 GERSONIDES, מלחמות השם (note 86), p. 18b, col. 1: שזאת ההודעה תצטרך תאופן מה אל: השתיהיה המחשבה בענין ההוא למי שיגיע לו ונאמר שכבר יראה שאיננו נמנע הגעת. Cf. also: המושכלות הראשונות בחלום בסתותיהם ר”ל בשקרה שהועמדו הצורות הדמיונות הצרכות בהקנאת המושל.

97 FELDMAN, *Wars of the Lord* (note 86), p. 30.

98 FELDMAN, *Wars of the Lord* (note 86), p. 33.

care.⁹⁹ In this light, the obvious purpose of dreams is providence, too. In warning man of coming misfortunes, true dreams enable him to escape from it by means of choosing otherwise, and thus things are no longer bound to happen as decreed by the heavenly bodies.

Dream interpretation is not a problem that greatly concerns Gersonides. All the dreams he gives as examples are perfectly clear and understandable as they are. He holds that the quality of veridical dreams depends on the perfection of the imaginative faculty, because “the imperfection or perfection of the representation made by the imagination will correspond to the imperfection or perfection of the cognition it receives”.¹⁰⁰ Imperfect cognition produces riddles and parables. As a result, useful dreams are in most cases self-evident.

In his commentary on Genesis Abravanel mentions Narboni without really explaining his theory, which the latter had developed in his commentary on Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*.¹⁰¹ Abravanel discusses Narboni in more detail in his own commentary on the *Guide*.¹⁰² The issue in question is once again the possibility of a transfer of knowledge of particulars from the Active Intellect to the human soul.

As Abravanel notes, Narboni follows Averroes in arguing that the particularization of the general forms contained in the emanation from the Active Intellect happens in the soul of the receiver: “Therefore, he [sc. the prophet or dreamer] receives knowledge about things that he already knew or fixed his attention upon, not about what was not known to him.”¹⁰³ For Narboni, this is a question of causation. Events in the sublunary world can be results of determination or can be accidents. Determined events have universal and particular causes, and the Active Intellect has knowledge about the universal component in causation. Therefore, this kind of information can be transmitted through its emanation. Since accidental events

99 GERSONIDES, מלחמות השם (note 86), p. 17a, col. 2: ולפי שכבר יקר' מזה שיהיו קצת האנשי' רע' להשיג קצתם רעות הנה השגיח השם ית' בזה בששם בנו שכל בעל תכלית להניענו אל זולת מה שהוא מוגדל מפאת הגרמים השמימיים לתקן המעוות במקרה כפי מה שאפשר.

100 FELDMAN, *Wars of the Lord* (note 86), p. 57.

101 MOSHE NARBONI, ביאור לספר מורה נבוכים, נדפס בשלשה קדמוני מפרשי המורה, Jerusalem 5721 (= 1961).

102 Cf. A. J. REINES, *Maimonides and Abravanel on Prophecy*, Cincinnati 1970, pp. 124-136. Abravanel claims that Narboni misunderstood Maimonides in this point, because the latter would agree with al-Ghazzālī that God has knowledge of particulars (pp. 128f.). As it seems, Abravanel and not Narboni is on the false track, even if God has knowledge of particulars (cf. *Guide* III 20), Maimonides does not say that he transmits it to any individual in the sublunary world. The emanation reaching the sublunary world is rather the one of the Active Intellect that is concerned with general forms.

103 MOSHE NARBONI, באור (note 101), p. 43: ולכן תגיעה לו זאת הידיעה באישית אשר כבר קדם וידע אותם אשר תדבק בהם השגחתו לא במה שלא היה ידוע אצלו.

or things brought about by free choice or will have only particular causes, the Active Intellect cannot have any knowledge about them.¹⁰⁴ The particular element in the knowledge received in prophecy or true dreams – which he (like Maimonides) considers to be essentially the same – is provided by the prior disposition of the recipient, i.e. the prior thoughts of the prophet or the dreamer. But not all that appears accidental to man is really so, because a strong natural determination exists whose universal aspect is known to the Active Intellect.

2.3 Abravanel's Dream Theory

After raising his questions and relating the various opinions of his predecessors, Abravanel goes on to propose his own theory of dreaming. It is predominantly a synthesis of the opinions discussed before, putting them in a greater framework and thus reconciling contrasting views. Abravanel distinguishes between three kinds of dreams, dreams formed by the imagination alone, dreams caused by the heavenly bodies, and dreams resulting from an emanation from the Active Intellect.¹⁰⁵ He describes dreams of the first kind as follows:

There is a kind of dreams, which is completely imaginary and caused by the imaginative faculty, which itself combines images and imagines figures. In this kind, there is no outside emanation whatsoever, but those are the dreams that result from foods and wines, the seasons of the year, the temperaments of the dreamers, their health and sicknesses. Like I said, these are all senseless dreams and like the dreams that animals dream.¹⁰⁶

Here, Abravanel comes back to his first question. There are dreams, which are not true, but they are only a special kind of dreams. Interestingly, he does not want to attribute any significance to them, not even their possible

104 MOSHE NARBONI, באור (note 101), p. 33.

105 This classification of dreams bears a certain similarity to the one of Thomas Aquinas, who mentions two groups of dreams: Dreams with inward causes like the thoughts or the bodily disposition of the dreamer are only related accidentally to future occurrences. Outward causes of dreams are either corporeal or spiritual, i.e. the cause is “corporeal as far as the sleepers’ imagination is affected either by the surrounding air, or through an impression of the heavenly body, so that certain images appear to the sleeper, in keeping with the disposition of the heavenly bodies. The spiritual cause is sometimes referable to God, Who reveals certain things to men in their dreams by the ministry of the angels” (THOMAS AQUINAS, *The Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, London 1922, II-II Q. 95 Art. 6, p. 205).

106 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 384, col. 2: יש מין החלומות שהם כלם דמיוניים ומפועל הכח המדמה שהוא מעצמו מרכיב הרכבות ומדמה דמויים ובמין הזה אין בו שפע מחוץ כלל ומאלה הם החלומות הבאים מהמזונות והיינות ופרקי השנה ומזגי החולמים ובריאותם או חליים כמו שזכרתי הם כלם חלומות שאין בהם ממש כחלומות שחולמים הבע"ח בעת שינתם.

use in medical diagnostics, although he recognizes their connection to bodily dispositions, health and sickness. He does not discuss either where the images themselves come from which the imaginative faculty is processing while dreaming.

The heavenly bodies cause a second kind of dreams. Such dreams are possible because while sleeping the imagination is free from sense-impressions and able to receive higher knowledge, i.e. the forms embodied in the celestial substances.

For during sleep, the soul is free from the workings of the senses and from the hindrance, i.e. the thought about that which the senses provide; it is able to adhere to the celestial substances, even more, for what relates to the desire of the soul and the wanderings of its thought. What transpires is similar to the transfer of an image from one mirror to another when the partition between them is removed.¹⁰⁷

Therefore, it seems that an overflow from the heavenly bodies reaches the soul. Curiously, Abravanel is talking here about the soul, while he had pointed out earlier that all dreams are the work of the imaginative faculty.¹⁰⁸ Does the imagination, dealing here with particular images as it does while thinking about them, receive the „forms of the things“? This seems to be difficult because – at least in Aristotelian epistemology – the imaginative faculty is unable to deal with universal forms. The notion that the soul is impressed by forms which fit with its passions and thoughts suggests that Abravanel did not think that the imagination in fact receives pure forms. Instead, it connects their impressions with its own somewhat material contents and modifies them. The comparison of the relation between the human soul and the heavenly substance with two mirrors showing exactly the same image once a partition between them is removed remains difficult.¹⁰⁹ Dreams caused by impressions of the heavenly bodies, convey limited foreknowledge of the events determined by the stars.

107 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 385, col. 1: כי בהיות הנפש בשינה פנוי מעסקי החושים בהסתלק ממנה המונע שהוא המחשבה במה שהביאו החושים אליה הוכנה להתדבק בעצמים העליונים ויטבעו בנפש מה שבואתם העצמים השמימיים מצורות הדברים כ"ש מה שנתחסם לתשוקת הנפש ושוטטות מחשבתה ותהיה הטבעת אותה הצורה מהם בנפש האדם באותו דבקות בהטבעת צורה ממרא אחת למראה אחרת תקבל אותה מהסתלק המסך מבין שתיהן.

108 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 380, col. 2.

109 NETANYAHU, *Abravanel* (note 2), p. 115, suggests that Abravanel's understanding of the soul (e.g. regarding its immortality) was more Platonic than Aristotelian. This identity of forms in the heavenly substances and the human soul is also reminiscent of the Platonic doctrine of ideas.

The heavenly bodies cause such dreams, and their knowledge is not about coincidences but about future events as the heavenly bodies order them over man according to their situation at the time of his birth and over each people according to its fate.¹¹⁰

For Abravanel, the stars are agents of God's providence for man, while providence means guidance and protection from harm by prompting man to behave in the right way.¹¹¹ It is, however, a general providence more concerned with the preservation of humankind than with a single person. True dreams caused by the heavenly bodies are a side effect of this providence. They are an effect of the same influence, which the stars exercise when ordering the fate of men.¹¹² Like Gersonides, he thinks that true dreams of this kind enable someone to avoid the misfortune the heavenly constellations might have in store for him.¹¹³

The third kind of dreams is caused by an overflow of the Active Intellect and contains information on accidents in the future.

In addition, there is a third kind of dreams, and it comes to man as a divine providence through a separate intellect, be it the Active Intellect as the philosophers say or any other intellect. In this kind of dreams, accidental events are made known – complete coincidences, particular things and temporal limits, for the divine knowledge includes particulars. And providence happens according to the knowledge and events that are accidental for us, but in themselves – either to the good or the bad – they follow His, blessed be He, providence, because for us as receivers they are accidental, but for the one causing them they are known, like a reward for His servants and punishment for those breaking His will.¹¹⁴

110 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 385, col. 1: והחלומות אשר כאלה שהם מפועל הגרמים השמימיים והודעתם אינם מהדבריים המקריים כי אם מהדברים העתידין לבא כפי מה שסודרו מהגרמים השמימיים על האדם כפי מצבם בעת מולדתו וגם על עם ועם כפי מזלם.

111 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 385, col. 1: כי הנה הגרמים השמימיים לשמורת האדם והנהגתו ישפיעו: ההודעות האלה בחלומות.

112 Abravanel discusses astrology in his commentary on Deut. 4:15. His conclusions are that though man's fate is ordered by the stars in ordinary matters, there remains the possibility of free choice. Therefore, the stars can determine, whether someone will be in good or bad health, will have a long or a short life and the like, but whether a man is righteous or wicked depends on his own choice, or is at least not determined by the heavenly bodies (cf. NETANYAHU, *Abravanel* [note 2], p. 118ff.).

113 Abravanel applies the Talmudic sayings, which Maimonides uses to back his theory of the essential identity between dreams and prophecy to these astral inspired dreams (cf. note 144). The point of comparison is the value of the information provided which is perfect in prophecy and imperfect in dreams (*Comm. on Gen.*, p. 385, col. 1).

114 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 385, col. 1-2: ויש הנה מין שלישי מהחלומות והם המגיעים לאדם מפאת

With this third kind of dreams, Abravanel leaves all the philosophical models he had presented. He introduces a new kind of overflow, which is not mediated by spheres or heavenly bodies but reaches man directly.¹¹⁵ It does not have to emanate from the Active Intellect but could come from any intellect, and as it seems what he really has in mind is a direct overflow from God to man. It is an emanation of divine knowledge conveying information of future particulars in their temporal setting as a means of special providence relating to the effects of free choice.¹¹⁶ Therefore, Abravanel's way of coping with Averroes' and Gersonides' problem of how knowledge of particulars can be transmitted, consists in moving it to the realm of the miraculous. Abravanel's God – unlike the one of most of the Aristotelians – interferes directly in the lives of men.

As Abravanel points out, there are no true dreams that do not suffer from disturbances by the imagination, which adds its own images consisting of remnants of sense perception and supplements the emanation where it appears incomplete.¹¹⁷ Especially educated people whose imaginative faculty is trained to prepare images for the rational faculty are susceptible in this regard. Their imagination is prone to complete and change the emanation received with its own images out of its memories or perceptions. For this reason, children and fools have veridical dreams more often, because their imagination is not as trained and as busy as in the wise who exercise it all day long.¹¹⁸ Hence, dreams are to be treated with caution; but there are

ההשגחה האלהית ע"י שכל נבדל יהיה השכל הפועל אם מציאתו כאשר אמרו הפלוסופים או שכל אחר ולכן יודעו במין הזה מן החלומות והדברים המקריים מקרה גמור והדברים הפרטיים ובהגבלת זמן לפי שהידיעה האלהית מקפת בפרטים וההשגחה תהיה כפי הידיעה והדברים שהם מקריים אצלינו כפי עצמם הן לטוב הן לרע הם נמשכים מהשגחתו יתברך כי בערכנו המקבלים הם דברים מקריים מפני שבאו אלינו בלי כוונה אבל בערך הפועל אותם הם דברים מושגים ע"י שכר לעבדיו או עונש לעוברי רצונו.

115 These dreams are, according to the present discussion, closely related to prophecy. As Abravanel explains: כי בהיותו יתברך יודע דרכי בני אדם בפרטיותם ומשגיה בהם לתת לאיש לדרכיו וכפרי מעלליו יהיה מהשכחתו להודיע מה שיעשה עם לעבדיו הנביאים בנבואה (Comm. on Gen., p. 385, col. 2).

116 This kind of providence presupposes direct and miraculous interventions of God in man's life, nature, and the course of history. This understanding of God differs, of course, from the Aristotelians' view of God as prime cause. With this kind of foreknowledge, Abravanel actually eliminates the possibility of free will, because choices cannot be free if they are known before. He holds that to man things appear accidental while they are in fact ordered; therefore choices may also appear free, because one does not realize their causes.

117 Comm. on Gen., p. 385, col. 2.

118 Comm. on Gen., p. 386, col. 1.

two signs to distinguish a false dream, consisting of combinations of the imagination only, from a veridical dream. True dreams have an orderly structure due to the influence of the overflow received.

A true dream comes ordered and ready, for it is emanated. Even if the imaginative faculty completes the emanation and imitates it in parables and other images, there is no doubt, that it always comes in an order and ready and points at what it is aimed. But the senseless dreams come without order, confused with a mixture of strange things.¹¹⁹

The second sign is a strong emotional and physical reaction that accompanies the dream, a feature which it shares once again with prophecy.

The second sign is that the dreamer of true dreams feels within himself a great astonishment which does not happen in false imaginations, for it is like the prophetic dream that causes a great impression and astonishment in the prophet.¹²⁰

Abravanel believes that these explanations clear all doubts concerning the appearance of dreams and their nature.

2.4 Abravanel on Dream Interpretation

In light of the conviction that dreams can be a means of providence and convey divine communication, their interpretation becomes an important task, especially regarding the danger of being deceived by the interference of the imagination with the dream contents. Accordingly, Abravanel treats the question at length and develops his own technique of dream interpretation.

Abravanel likens the interpretation of dreams to the diagnostic techniques of a physician. He refers to Avicenna and explains that a physician has to have general knowledge about the functions of the human body and the causes of illnesses and specific knowledge of the case of the patient he is treating and the circumstances of his life. The interpretation of dreams functions similarly.¹²¹

Therefore, we say that the matter of interpretation is also completed in two things. The first is wisdom which means that the interpreter knows the parables appearing in dreams and at whom they point, and the combinations of the imagination and the character of its transfers [...]. The second necessary condition for interpretation

119 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 386, col. 2: החלום הצודק יבא מסודר ונכון כי להיותו מושפע עם היות שהכח המדמה יגשים השפע ההוא ויחקקו במשלים ודמיונים אחרים אין ספק שיבא תמיד בסדר נכון ומוכן יורה על מה שיוורה אמנם חלומות השוא יבואו מבלי סדור מבולבלים עם ערוב דברי זרים ממנו

120 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 386, col. 2. As an examples Abravanel points to the dreams of Pharaoh (Gen. 41:4,7) who woke up because of his dreams and was unable to sleep any longer (*Comm. on Gen.*, p. 386, col. 2).

121 Abravanel basically adopts Averroes' view of dream interpretation; cf. AVERROES, *Epitome* (note 29), pp. 49-50.

is an estimation and a conjecture regarding the dreamer, [...] for not all dreams are fit to be interpreted identically for all men.¹²²

Especially the second condition is a matter of talent, because the ability to guess the right thing is a disposition like courage or cowardliness. Therefore, one finds expert interpreters as well as ignoramuses in this regard. The dreamer himself is the best judge of the interpreter's ability, because "he recognizes the right interpretation in his heart".¹²³ This implies that the dream comes with a certain subconscious knowledge of its interpretation, which the dreamer remembers once he hears the correct interpretation. Nevertheless, even an interpreter with perfect intuition will not be able to understand a dream completely. Abravanel enumerates four reasons:¹²⁴ (a) almost no dream is free from the interference of the imagination, therefore the interpreter is confronted with truth mixed with lies which he would have to distinguish; (b) even in the true parts of a dream, the instruction takes on the form of parables, and it is always hard to find the exact relation of a parable to reality;¹²⁵ (c) in some instances the overflow can remain without changes and presented in the dream as received, but the interpreter does not know to which parts of the dream this applies; and (d) dreams are not always limited to the direct circumstances in the life of the dreamer, they can also contain information of far-away lands and concern the distant future. In such cases, the interpreter has no possibility to determine correctly, to which events the dream is related.

For these reasons, Abravanel explains Joseph's statement that not he "but God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace" (Gen. 41:16), and introduces a supernatural component as necessary for perfect interpretation. He holds that the Holy Spirit guided the best interpreters, like Joseph, Daniel or R. Yishmael.

Therefore, because it is in God's faithful testimony that there were dream interpreters saying true things in great perfection within their interpretation [...] we

122 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 387, col. 1: וכן נאמר אנחנו בענין הפתרון שהנה יושלם בב' דברים ג"כ. הא' בחכמה והוא שידע הפותר המשלים הנראים בחלומות ועל מי יורו בכלל והרכבות הדמיון ואופני העתקותיו [...] והתנאי הב' ההכרחי בפתרון הוא אומד וההשערה בענין החולם [...] כי לא כל החלומות ראוי שיפתרו בשוה אצל כל אנשים.

123 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 387, col. 2: ואולם שאמרו שם שכל החלומות הולכים אחר הפה אין הכוונה שכפי מה שידבר הפותר לרצונו יתקיים תמציתו אלא שכאשר הפותר יפתור החולם כפי אמתתו והצודק שבו אז החולם יתן אל לבו אותו פתרון וידע ויכיר בקיומו.

124 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 388, col. 1f.

125 Following this statement, Abravanel quotes Maimonides' description of parables from the Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

should not think that their interpretations were according to conjecture or swindlers' tricks, for the tales show their ability. But in fact, it was the holy spirit that accompanied them, enlightened the eyes of their intellects to see and to grasp these true things [...] Just as true information in dreams comes from God according to His comprehensive knowledge, so comes the interpretation in great perfection and always and time after time without any error or mistake.¹²⁶

Abravanel does not claim to possess himself the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit he depicts, which in any case does not change the method of dream interpretation but only endows it with supreme clarity and certainty; but he applies the technique he describes when explaining dreams in the biblical texts upon which he comments.

ולכן כשמצאנו בעדות י"י נאמנה שנמצאו: 1: Comm. on Gen., p. 388, col. 2 - p. 389, col. 1: פותרי חלומות יגידו ענינים אמתיים בשלמות רב בפתרונם [...] אין ראוי שנחשוב שהיה פתרוןם כפי ההשערה ותחבולות הרמאין כי הנה הגדותיהן מורים על כחם אבל היה ענינם באמת רוח הקודש שהיה מלווה אותם ומאיר עיני שכלם לראות להשיג אמיתות ההן [...] כן כמו שההודעה הצודקת המגעת בחלום היא מאת י"י כפי ידיעתו המקפת כן פתרונה השתגיע ממנו יהיה בשלמות גדול ותמיד פעם אחר פעם מבלי טעות ושגיאה כלל.

128 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 389, col. 1.

dream. Almost every symbol in the dream is connected to something in Joseph's life. The sheaf standing up on its own and not falling reveals that he will rise out of his own power and rule for a long time. The other sheaves surrounding him mean that his brothers will try various kinds of schemes to hinder his rise to power, but just like the sheaves, the brothers will eventually bow down to him; and he goes on in this manner.¹³⁰ These images especially concern Joseph and reveal his fate. A capable interpreter of dreams could have guessed their meaning if he had taken into account the circumstances of Joseph's life. Abravanel's task is considerably easier, for he already knows the outcome. But Joseph's brother can also interpret dreams, or they can at least understand the general images the dream contains as their reaction demonstrates – "Shall you indeed reign over us?" (Gen. 37:8).¹³¹ General images are e.g. the word 'to arise' (קום) pointing at kingship;¹³² and the standing up of a sheaf (קימת אלומתו) resembles המלכות והממשלה.¹³³

According to Abravanel's interpretation, the dream contains a number of general images, which appear in a special form, so that they can have a particular meaning for the dreamer. In this case, the notion of kingship or dominion is expressed by the standing sheaf, which carries for Joseph the additional meaning that the basis of his rise to power will involve grain.

A second example for Abravanel's technique of interpretation and his stress on the personal circumstances of the dreamer is Jacob's dream in Bethel (Gen. 28:11ff.). Abravanel classifies this vision as prophetic dream, but being a parable it also requires interpretation.¹³⁴ The dream has been interpreted by many different commentators and scholars resulting in various explanations. Abravanel, however, is not satisfied with any of them. He misses the direct relation to Jacob's situation.¹³⁵

Abravanel goes on to describe Jacob's mental state as anxious and afraid because of the uncertainty regarding his future. Accordingly, the dream carries a message of consolation and assurance; hence, it is an excellent example of individual providence.¹³⁶ In the dream, God renews the promise he made to Abraham and Isaac and thus justifies Jacob's stealing of Isaac's blessing. The images proper point to the temple as a place where the divine overflow is very strong. According to Abravanel, the angels resemble on the one hand the offering of sacrifices, for they ascend with their odour; on the other hand, they stand for the divine emanation. In this dream, not the contents relate directly to the dreamers life, but the manner of their presentation and the timing of the dream have a strong personal component. For this reason, Abraham or Isaac did not have such a dream even though they were granted similar promises.

130 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 365, col. 1.

131 For Abravanel their reaction proves that the patriarchs already knew the symbolic method of oneirocriticism (*Comm. on Gen.*, p. 389, col. 1).

132 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 365, col. 2.

133 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 387, col. 1.

134 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 315, col. 1.

135 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 316, col. 2.

136 *Comm. on Gen.*, p. 317, col. 1.

3. Dreams and Prophecy – or The Virtues of Dreaming

In his commentary on Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, Abravanel argues against the former's identification of dreams and prophecy as being essentially the same and differing only in degree, because he objects strongly to the naturalistic account of prophecy in the *Guide*.

Maimonides treats the question of dreams within his inquiry into the nature of prophecy in *The Guide of the Perplexed* II 32–48. Unfortunately, he sees no “need to explain what a *dream* is” and focuses on prophetic visions instead.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, he does make a number of remarks in his discussion on prophecy, which should allow a tentative exploration of Maimonides' understanding of dreams. In *Guide* II 36, he defines prophecy¹³⁸ as follows: “Know that the true reality and quiddity of prophecy consist in its being an overflow overflowing from God, may He be cherished and honoured through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty.”¹³⁹ The prerequisites for becoming a prophet are numerous but not supernatural; they include perfection of the rational and imaginative faculties, flawless morality, courage, the ability of divination and a capability to guide the masses.¹⁴⁰ Once one has attained all these perfections – though that happens only rarely –, one ascends to the highest degree of perfection, i.e. prophesying, lest God prevents it according to his special will in a miraculous intervention.¹⁴¹ The Active Intellect's overflow into the sublunary world is a constant emanation, not directed to any particular or chosen individual; therefore, the emergence of prophets is a natural event. Therefore, prophecy requires perfection and is itself a further perfection, or as Maimonides puts it, “the highest degree of man and the ultimate term of perfection that can exist for his species; and this state is the ultimate term of perfection for the imaginative faculty”.¹⁴² In order to strengthen his naturalistic understanding of prophecy, Maimonides relates it to dreams: “You know, too, the actions of the imaginative faculty that are in its nature, such as retaining things perceived by the senses, combining these things, and imitating them. And you know that its greatest and

137 MOSES MAIMONIDES, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by SH. PINES, Chicago 1963, p. 385. All subsequent references to *The Guide of the Perplexed* are taken from Pines' translation.

138 The following discussion relates only to Maimonides' discussion of non-mosaic prophecy.

139 *Guide* (note 137), II 36, p. 369.

140 Cf. *Guide* (note 137), II 32, II 36 and II 38.

141 *Guide* (note 137), II 32, p. 361.

142 *Guide* (note 137), II 36, p. 369. Cf. also: „prophecy is a certain perfection in the nature of man. This perfection is not achieved in any individual from among men except after a training that makes that which exists in the potentiality of the species pass into actuality, provided an obstacle due to temperament or to some external cause does not hinder this“ (*Guide* [note 137], II 32, p. 361).

noblest action takes place only when the senses rest and do not perform their actions. It is then that a certain overflow overflows to this faculty according to its disposition, and it is the cause of the veridical dreams. The same overflow is the cause of prophecy. There is only a difference in degree, not in kind.”¹⁴³ A difference in degree implies an identity in essence.¹⁴⁴ Maimonides explicitly mentions the same overflow, i.e. the overflow from the Active Intellect as the cause of veridical dreams as well as prophecy. So the difference in degree can only be a result of different receptive capabilities. Therefore, a closer look at the faculties involved is necessary.

As seen above, prophecy involves a perfection of both, the rational and the imaginative faculty; both actualize their potential through the emanation of the Active Intellect.¹⁴⁵ Both are also necessary, because a perfect rational faculty alone makes good philosophers; and a perfected imagination is the prerequisite for “the legislators, the soothsayers, the augurs, and the dreamers of veridical dreams”, but none of these faculties is sufficient by itself for a prophet.¹⁴⁶ A perfected rational

143 *Guide* (note 137), II 36, p. 370.

144 Maimonides tries to back his contention with two rabbinic statements (*Guide* [note 137], II 36, p. 370). Both are difficult because taken out of their context. The first one, *a dream is the sixtieth part of prophecy* is taken from the Talmudic dream book, here bBer 57b. It reads in context: חמישה אחד מששים אלו הן אש דבש ושבת שינה וחלום אש אחד מששים לגיהנם דבש אחד מששים למן שבת אחד מששים לעולם הבא שינה אחד מששים למיתה חלום אחד מששים לנבואה (Five things are a sixtieth part, they are fire, honey, shabbat, sleep, and dream. Fire is the sixtieth part of hell. Honey is the sixtieth part of Manna. A Shabbat is the sixtieth part of the world to come. Sleep is the sixtieth part of death. A dream is the sixtieth part of prophecy). As it seems, the Talmudic sayings do not imply a mere quantitative relation, for who would say that 60 Shabbatot amount to the world to come? In each sentence, a qualitative difference is suggested as well.

The same can be said about the second statement, *dream is the unripe fruit of prophecy* (BerR 17:5: רבי חנינה בר יצחק אמר ג' נובלות הן נובלת מיתה שינה נובלת נבואה חלום) (R. Hanina bar Yitzhak said, there are tree unripe fruits. Sleep is the unripe fruit of death; dream is the unripe fruit of prophecy; Sabbath is the unripe fruit of the world to come). Abravanel in his commentary on chapter 36 explains that the unripe fruit is essentially different from the ripe one, because it was never endowed with the form and therefore the potential to become a ripe fruit (REINES, *Maimonides* [note 102], p. 117).

145 According to REINES, *Maimonides* (note 102), p. xliii-xliv, Abravanel understood the Maimonidean definition of prophecy as follows: “Prophecy is an effluence that emanates from the Active Intellect primarily upon the rational faculty, which the effluence brings to an actualized state, and then, from the perfection of the rational faculty produced by the effluence of the Active Intellect, an effluence emanates upon the imagination, which, while under the influence of the continuing emanation from the rational faculty, is reduced to intellectual control, and during the time produces rational phantasy.”

146 *Guide* (note 137), II 37, p. 374.

faculty, i.e. an actualized intellect is able to understand theoretical speculations. It is concerned with general intelligibles, things that are universally true or false instead of things good or bad, i.e. accepted contentions.¹⁴⁷ Accordingly, a prophet grasps such speculative matters almost intuitively without having to contemplate their causes.¹⁴⁸ It is important to notice, however, that the overflow does not provide the human intellect with the contents of knowledge; it rather enables him intellectually to understand them himself. As such, it lifts the veil, the special way of looking at things that Adam and Eve had brought on humankind by giving in to the desires of the imagination.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, it perfects the ability for theoretical speculation as well as the ability to think practically about particulars.¹⁵⁰

From the rational faculty the emanation goes on to the imaginative faculty perfecting it as well: “For the very overflow that affects the imaginative faculty – with the result of rendering it perfect so that its act brings about its giving information about what will happen and its apprehending those future events as if they were things that had been perceived by the senses and had reached the imaginative faculty from the senses.”¹⁵¹ The imagination sticks to its foremost task – to provide the images with which the intellect works – in prophecy as well. Now it does so under the guidance of the emanation from the rational faculty, i.e. it focuses completely on matters that the intellect strives for, namely knowledge of universals in order to attain intellectual perfection. It concentrates on apprehending the divine, and if perfect, produces images so vivid that they cannot be distinguished from regular sense perceptions. “Now there is no doubt that whenever – in an individual of this description – his imaginative faculty, which is as perfect as possible, acts and receives from the intellect an overflow corresponding to his speculative perfection, this individual will only apprehend divine and most extraordinary matters, will see only God and His angels, and will only be aware and achieve knowledge of matters that constitute true opinions and general directives for the well-being of men in their relations with one another.”¹⁵² To see God and his angels is for Maimonides just another way of saying

147 Cf. *Guide* (note 137), I 2, pp. 24f.

148 *Guide* (note 137), II 38, p. 377.

149 Cf. *Guide* (note 137), I 2, p. 25. Maimonides illustrates the notion of overflow with Ps 36:10: “In the same way the remaining portion of this verse, *In Thy light do we see light*, has the selfsame meaning - namely that through the overflow of the intellect that has overflowed from Thee, we intellectually cognize, and consequently we receive correct guidance, we draw inferences, and we apprehend the intellect” (*Guide* [note 137], II 12, p. 280).

150 Cf. L. STRAUSS, *Philosophie und Gesetz: Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer*, Berlin 1935, p. 107.

151 *Guide* (note 137), II 38, p. 377. Abravanel points out that the description of the overflow coming from the rational faculty to the imagination does not indicate any temporal difference; it rather points to the direction of the overflow and shows that the rational faculty is primarily affected (cf. REINES, *Maimonides* [note 102], pp. XLI-XLII).

152 *Guide* (note 137), II 36, p. 372.

that the imaginative faculty is concerned with matters of the intellect.¹⁵³ Maimonides stresses repeatedly that non-mosaic prophecy always occurs in a dream or a vision and always through the agency of an angel even when it is not explicitly stated.¹⁵⁴ Instead of dealing with ordinary data obtained by the senses, the imagination receives in prophecy an overflow from the Active Intellect, but it presents it to the intellect like ordinary sense data out of which the intellect, if perfect, forms theoretical knowledge.¹⁵⁵ The imagination mediates; and as Leo Strauss points out, it assumes in the process of receiving the emanation the role of the human intellect. Just as the practical intellect, it apprehends future *particularia*, while like the theoretical intellect, it deals with speculative truths (visualizing them, however, because it cannot deal with purely theoretical matters and leaving the understanding to the intellect). Therefore, a prophet has perfect practical and theoretical knowledge.¹⁵⁶ He “will not only know what is going to happen, he will know why it is going to happen”.¹⁵⁷ The practical perfection is necessary in order to communicate the knowledge to the masses, since, eventually, prophecy is aimed at the “well-being of men”.¹⁵⁸

The difference between prophecy and dream lies in the lacking perfection of the rational faculty: “If again the overflow only reaches the imaginative faculty, the defect of the rational faculty derives either from its original natural disposition or from insufficiency of training, this is characteristic of the class of those who govern cities, while being the legislators, the soothsayers, the augurs, and the dreamers of veridical dreams.”¹⁵⁹ Thus, in dreams the imaginative faculty is under the influence of the Active Intellect, but not guided by the rational faculty. This only happens while sleeping, because during the waking state, an unguided imagination is always preoccupied with sense perceptions and bodily matters, which distract humans from acquiring perfection.¹⁶⁰ Is the rational faculty completely excluded? If we take

153 „Accordingly, *Midrash Qobeleth* has the following text: *When man sleeps, his soul speaks to the angel, and the angel to the cherub*. Thereby I have stated plainly to him who understands and cognizes intellectually that the imaginative faculty likewise is called an *angel* and that the intellect is called a *cherub*” (*Guide* [note 137], II 6, pp. 264-265).

154 *Guide* (note 137), II 41, pp. 385ff. Cf. also the degrees of prophecy in II 45.

155 *Guide* (note 137), II 38, p. 377. Cf. O. LEAMAN, “Maimonides, Imagination and the Objectivity of Prophecy,” in: *Religion* 18 (1988), pp. 69-80, here p. 73.

156 STRAUSS, *Philosophie* (note 150), pp. 100 and 106f.

157 LEAMAN, “Maimonides” (note 155), p. 71.

158 *Guide* (note 137), II 36, p. 372. Strauss dealt with the notion extensively. According to him, the prophet in a Maimonidean sense is a “philosopher / statesman / seer (miracle-worker) in one” who reveals the divine law that is aimed at the perfection of man (*Philosophie* [note 150], pp. 108f.). He also argued convincingly that *The Guide of the Perplexed* is in fact a work of political philosophy (L. STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Westport 1988, p. 44).

159 *Guide* (note 137), II 37, p. 374.

160 For this reason, a vision constitutes a higher degree of prophecy than dreaming. Visions happen in the waking state, and they require a higher degree of

the notion seriously that dreams only differ in degree and not in essence from prophecy, it should still be a part of the process. Leo Strauss argues that it is; in dreams, too, the overflow reaches the imagination only through the rational faculty, but if the latter is not perfect enough, the emanation passes by unnoticed.¹⁶¹ Dreaming is therefore a result of the imagination turned loose and, hence, to be treated with caution.¹⁶² Nevertheless, it can provide a certain knowledge, namely practical knowledge, while the apprehension of theoretical knowledge – as seen above – cannot be accomplished by the imagination alone. Yet, practical knowledge of what is going to happen (but not *why*) lies in the reach of the imagination. As Leo Strauss observed, that which unites politicians, legislators, soothsayers, augurs, and dreamers of veridical dreams is that all these phenomena are caused by influence on the imaginative faculty alone, and all these activities are practical.¹⁶³ Veridical dreams represent the practical side of prophecy, as philosophy represents its theoretical side.¹⁶⁴

For Abravanel, prophecy is a miracle performed by God, which does not require perfection of imagination and intellect on the side of the prophet. God chooses whomever he wants as a prophet and provides him with all the knowledge he needs. With regard to dreams, Abravanel stresses that dreams and prophecy are not similar psychic events, but that prophecy, being a miracle is something totally different.¹⁶⁵

perfection from the imagination, so that it can distance itself from its usual desires in the waking state and turn its attention to the overflow of the Active Intellect (Cf. *Guide* [note 137], II 41, p. 385).

161 STRAUSS, *Philosophie* (note 150), p. 101, note 5.

162 Maimonides warns: “hence you will find that certain groups of people establish the truth of their opinions with the help of dreams [...]. Therefore, one ought not to pay attention to one whose rational faculty has not become perfect and who has not attained the ultimate term of speculative perfection. For only one who achieves speculative perfection is able to apprehend other objects of knowledge when there is an overflow of the divine intellect toward him (*Guide* [note 137], II 38, p. 378).

163 STRAUSS, *Philosophie* (note 150), pp. 107f.

164 Non-veridical dreams do not apply, because they do not presuppose a perfect imaginative faculty.

165 ISAAC ABRAVANEL, *Commentary on the Moreh Nevukhim*, part 2, Prag 1832, p. 35r, col. 1. He explicitly treats the question in his commentary on *Guide* (note 137), II 36 and, in contrast to the discussion in his commentary on Genesis, focuses more on dream psychology: “This proposition [sc. that dream and prophecy belong to the same species], according to the fundamental principles of the divine Torah, is clearly false, because dream, in its combinations and formations, is the work of the imaginative faculty. Thus if at times it (the imagination) is found to be powerful, this is due to the fact that it is regulated and because the intuitive faculty is itself powerful. This is what Maimonides calls ‘the effluence of the

Abravanel's main critique is that dreams are situated in the human imaginative faculty while prophecy comes from God; therefore, they differ substantially. The fact that similar images occur in prophetic visions as well as in dreams and that, for ordinary prophets, the prophecy comes in sleep like the dream to the dreamer, does not suffice to regard both as belonging to the same species.¹⁶⁶ But what happens in dreams? According to the present explanation, dreams result from a powerful imaginative faculty. The emanation of the Active Intellect does not convey any specific information, but perfects the faculty itself within the limits of its current disposition. The contents of the dream are produced by the imaginative faculty. As a further criterion to distinguish prophecy from dreams, Abravanel turns to the prophet's self-awareness.

It is clear in this (passage) that the prophet envisions nothing by himself and hears nothing through the action of his imagination; they are, rather, the words of God that come to him. Therefore, he has no doubts concerning them. If, however, what he envisions were the work of his imaginative faculty, he would have doubts concerning his prophecy.¹⁶⁷

Therefore, in his *Commentary on the Guide of the Perplexed*, Abravanel shows a highly sceptical attitude towards dreams. He does not rule out the possibility of getting information on the future through dreams thanks to a powerful imagination and intuition, but dreams remain at best a doubtful means of prediction. Psychologically, he holds on to a naturalistic explanation. Dreams are combinations of thoughts in the imaginative faculty, which is set free due the senses being incapacitated during sleep.

Does Abravanel contradict himself? Both portrayals differ considerably, but they are also located in different contexts. In the *Commentary on*

Active Intellect', namely, that the form which is poured upon it (the imagination) at the beginning of its formation is the mean, in accordance with a proper disposition, – which is the reason that the Active Intellect there poured a proper form upon it. But while there can be no doubt that the action of such a particular dream is produced by the imaginative faculty, not so prophecy, which is divine revelation that comes to the soul of the prophet in such measure as His supreme wisdom sees fit" (translation by REINES, *Maimonides* [note 102], p. 115). Cf. also Reines' interpretation, pp. LXIV-LXXX.

166 ABRAVANEL, *Commentary on the Moreh Nevukhim*, part 2, p. 35r, col. 1 and p. 35v, col. 1.

167 ABRAVANEL, *Commentary on Moreh Nevukhim*, part 2, p. 35r, col. 2: גלה בזה שהנביא לא יראה דבר מעצמו ולא ישמע דבר מפעל דמיוני, אבל הם דברי השם מגיעים אליו, ולכן אין בהם אצלו ספק. ואם היה מה שיראה מפעל כחו המדמה היה מספק בנבואתו. Translation: REINES, *Maimonides* (note 102), p. 116f.

the Guide of the Perplexed, Abravanel presents a naturalistic view of dreams as a negative foil for his theory of prophecy as a miracle. Accordingly, he focuses on psychological explanations and locates dreams firmly in the imaginative faculty. Although he predominantly describes false dreams, this does not disagree with the theory brought forward in the *Commentary on Genesis*. There, too, all three kinds of dreams are located in the imaginative faculty, but they differ with regard to the ‘material’, which the imagination uses to create its images. While in false dreams it only has remnants of sense perceptions at its disposal, it can work with the contents of an emanation in the case of true dreams. In the commentary on Genesis, Abravanel has an emanation in mind that conveys specific contents, i.e. information on determined events in the emanation from the heavenly bodies or information on contingent events in the overflow of the Active Intellect.

The key to a reconciliation between both descriptions as well as the motivation for Abravanel’s interest in dreams lie in the relation of dreams to prophecy. In both depictions, Abravanel distinguishes between the two phenomena, but in the commentary on Genesis dreams of the third kind are very close to prophecy. Abravanel does not make it totally clear whether the Active Intellect or even God himself is the source of the overflow. He also describes the emotional impact of true dreams and repeatedly points to prophecy as an *analogon*. At the same time, he never identifies both phenomena. Thus, true dreams are no prophecy, not even prophecy of a lesser degree. However, they are a divine miracle of a different albeit somewhat similar kind.

Abravanel generally sees humankind in decline ever since man’s evil inclination brought about the end of a life in happiness and felicity in the Garden of Eden.¹⁶⁸ In the course of history, humankind distanced itself more and more from God. In the process, God’s providence forsook the nations and even in Israel it seldom becomes manifest. Prophecy has long ceased to occur. However, true dreams as a means of divine providence are among the rare occasions when it can still be experienced.

Therefore, when he distinguishes dreams from prophecy, Abravanel still finds a way to leave this means of providence and of direct contact between God and man open for his own time – though not as ordered and as indubitable as prophecy –, when other ways are no longer accessible.

168 Cf. NETANYAHU, *Abravanel* (note 2), p. 147.

Compared to Maimonides who – as Leo Strauss wrote – „attempted to harmonize the teachings of Jewish tradition with the teachings of philosophical tradition“¹⁶⁹ one could say that Isaac Abravanel tried the opposite: he attempted to harmonize the teachings of the philosophers with the Jewish tradition. Familiar with both traditions (and especially with Maimonides), he integrated philosophic opinions into his commentaries on the Bible, but the supreme criterion of truth always remained what he saw as the literal meaning of the biblical text. The same holds true for Abravanel's theory of dreams. He combines the opinions of philosophers who stand in the Aristotelian tradition with the treatment of dreams within the Jewish tradition. The latter is not homogenous with regard to this question, which allows Abravanel to introduce a greater order capable of integrating different conceptions. The result is a mixture of rational-naturalistic and spiritual-supernatural elements, whereby the supernatural comes in when the philosophers fail to explain what Scripture and experience are teaching. Therefore, with his world outlook Isaac Abravanel may well be – as Strauss puts it – “the last of the Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages [...] as far as the framework and the main content of his doctrine are concerned,”¹⁷⁰ but he surely was not the last one who saw his community deeply in need of divine providence.

169 L. STRAUSS, “On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching,” in: L. STRAUSS, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by H. MEIER, vol. II, Stuttgart / Weimar 1997, pp. 195-227, here p. 195.

170 STRAUSS, “On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency” (note 169), p. 195.