You have before you a bedside companion, drawn from ancient and modern Jewish texts and traditions that may help you better understand your dreams and enrich your life.

Perhaps you have been thinking about dreams for some time now, contemplating the insights they might hold and reveal. If you have been studying dream interpretation in diverse cultures or from a variety of psychological perspectives, you would be absolutely correct to surmise, “Surely a tradition both as ancient and as adaptive to modernity as Judaism must offer worthwhile insights into the nature of dreaming and dream interpretation.” It is that information you have before you.

Know for sure that there is no such thing as the Jewish approach to dreaming. Judaism, thousands of years old, holds within it the collected wisdom of many sacred texts, many scholars, and the experiences of many men and women who have lived in different places and have studied, practiced, and transmitted Judaism in creative ways. Thus, you will find a range of teachings and practices.

This book will help you explore and honor your own dreams by engaging in Jewish dream practices that are rooted in antiquity and have been updated in light of contemporary understandings about dreaming. The book is organized into two parts. The first part presents an overview of Jewish teachings on dreams and dream interpretation. The second part
offers a variety of dream practices with sufficient instructions to help you perform them. The concluding section of the book contains a selection of resources for further study as you proceed beyond this introductory guide.

We hope that in your own study and spiritual practice you will discover Jewish ways of having a dream life that is rich in insight and leads to spiritual growth.

How This Book Came to Be Written
I (Vanessa) share the story of how this book came to be written because, in part, it may parallel your own journey.

For a long time, much of my knowledge about what Judaism had to teach about dreams came from *Fiddler on the Roof*, with spirits of the dead appearing in dreams and bearing threats and predictions, folk beliefs of my great-grandmother’s world that I had sloughed off in favor of more rational thinking. Despite having rich exposure to Judaism in family life and academic study, I didn’t see resources for illumination in my own life when I thought about Jews and dreams.

Although I knew the important biblical dream sequences, I didn’t see them as resources for my own spiritual life. The dreams that made the most impression on me back in Hebrew school days were about Jacob and his dream of angels going up and down a ladder, and of Joseph and his dreams of dominating his brothers and his interpretations of Pharaoh’s dreams. However engaging the stories, I didn’t connect the male dreamers or the male dream interpreters of the Bible to my own dream life.

Biblical dreams didn’t inspire me to seek out Jewish resources on dreaming that could help me dream as a Jew or interpret my own dreams in Jewish ways. I never imagined I might have dreams that held visions within them, or that I

(Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye the dairyman pretends to wake up in the middle of the night from a terrible dream in order to convince his wife that their daughter should marry the tailor she loves, and not the old butcher whom the matchmaker has selected.)

“Oh my God, Tevye,” she says, “you’re delirious. It was only a dream. Spit three times against the Evil Eye, tell me what you dreamed, and you’ll see that it’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I’ll tell you my dream. But
might work to discern God’s presence in my dream world. Dreams came under the part of my life that I thought of as “private,” not subject to Jewish laws or teachings.

Would I have thought otherwise if the Bible recorded descriptions of important women dreamers? Had I read that God appeared to Sarah in her dream and told her to set off on a journey to a land of promise, I might have begun listening for the divine voice in my own dreams long ago. As it stands, God appeared only to Abraham in a dream and in visions, which set Abraham off on his journey to become the father of a great nation. Sarah is depicted as the wife who, along with the livestock, tags along.

Fortunately, I, like many others, have been inspired by the work of feminist biblical scholars, and have learned to read Jewish sacred texts in more expansive ways so that I can feel that the words include both women and men. I have learned to imagine the words God spoke to Sarah in her dreams, words that were never recorded. I have imagined dreams given to the other women in the Bible that prompted them to set forth on their own spiritual paths.

I also learned that there is no part of life that cannot be shaped and made sacred through Judaism—including dreams. As one who analyzes and develops new Jewish rituals, I have learned how to study practices performed by Jews in different settings, ancient and modern, in order to adapt them to our lives today.

Ultimately, it was the study of a particular volume of the Babylonian Talmud (the multivolume compendium of Jewish law and lore dating back to the period between 200–500 C.E.) that most deeply revealed to me that Judaism had a great deal to teach about dreams and dreaming that could be integrated into one’s life. (Talmud study among Jewish women is a fairly rare occurrence, although it is growing in the United States.) I’ll have to ask you, Golde, to control yourself and not panic, because our holy books say that no dream can come true more than 75 percent, and that the rest of it is pure poppycock, such stuff and nonsense that only a fool would believe in…and now listen. At first I dreamed that we were having some sort of celebration, a wedding or engagement party…. Then a door opened and in came your Grandmother Tsaytl, God rest her soul….

(Tsaytl congratulates them, pleased to hear her great-granddaughter is marrying the tailor, and not the butcher she’s been matched with. Then the butcher’s dead wife, Frume Soreh, appears bearing threats. Tevye tells the next part of his dream.)

“Frume Soreh grabbed me by the throat and began to squeeze so hard that if you hadn’t waked me when you did, I’d be in the world to come now.”

“Tfu! Tfu! Tfu!” Goes my wife, spitting three times…. “And if my grandmother, may she rest in peace, has taken the trouble of coming all the way from the next world to wish us a mazal tov, we’d better say mazal tov ourselves.…”

Sholem Aleichem

Introduction
new phenomenon, one chronicled in my book *Words on Fire*. Only in the last two decades have many women even had the opportunity, let alone the linguistic skills, to read these texts that form the bedrock of Jewish belief and practice.) I was studying the volume of the Talmud called *Brakhot*, meaning “blessings.” I learned that long after biblical dreamers such as Abraham and Joseph, who saw their dreams as encounters with God, and long before modern dream interpreters such as Freud and Jung, who saw dreams as insights into the unconscious mind, the best Jewish minds of antiquity were putting their heads together to make sense of dreaming. In the Talmudic period, dreams were considered a particular category of blessing, a gift that had to be opened in order to discern its blessing: instructions on how to better live one’s life or hints about what the future might hold. In *Brakhot*, the patchwork of insights into dreaming constitute a little “book of dreams,” comparable to the dream books of other traditions, both ancient and contemporary, offering both a general understanding about the nature of dreams and a manual for how to interpret dream imagery.

What serious attention the ancient Rabbis paid to their own dreams—so serious that their discussions merited inclusion in the Talmud, this compilation of sacred conversations across the generations! The Rabbis were not the only ones concerned about dreams. In addition to approaching their rabbis with questions about whether pots were kosher or how to observe Passover, ordinary men and women brought dreams to their rabbis (whose job description included dream interpretation) as well as to a group of ritual experts called dream interpreters. (How similar this is to the way contemporary people bring dreams to therapists.) Ancient dreamers, both rabbis and laypeople, had many of the same questions we still

Once Joseph had a dream that he told to his brothers, which made them hate him even more. He told them, “Hear this dream which I have dreamed: We were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright. Then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf.” His brothers answered, “Do you intend to rule over us?” And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.

(Genesis 37:5–8)
have about dreams. What does Jewish tradition have to say about the dream that I just had? How do I discern the voice of God in the curious assemblage of dream images that visit me in the night? If I had a nightmare, how can Judaism help me make sense of it and cope with the horrible feeling it has given me?

From the texts we have inherited, we can see that the sages of the Talmud, whose words help Jews live every single moment of their lives in sacred Jewish ways, appeared to believe there were distinctive ways we could go about sleeping, dreaming, waking, and thinking about our dreams. How moving to see the diverse ways the rabbis answered the questions brought to them about dreaming, affirming that Jewish tradition has long been capable of holding a wide range of perspectives. It struck me: if we paid as much attention to our own dreams as the sages and the Jews of antiquity paid to theirs, couldn’t we also experience our dreams as blessings, divine gifts of instruction and even of healing?

In Brakhot and elsewhere, I continued to study the Talmudic passages on dreams, first on my own, and then with my daughter Elizabeth, who was in high school at the time. She, too, was beguiled by the passages on dreams. (Having previously studied only those parts of Talmud that concerned matters of Jewish law, Elizabeth was delighted to discover a whole other face of Talmud, one that addressed her spiritual life.) We’d wake up in the morning and, over our Cheerios, would talk through our dreams with a Jewish consciousness, helping each other go beyond our dreams’ quirkiness and discover in them signs of wisdom and guidance.

For her friend’s birthday, Elizabeth made a handmade book of whimsical collages based on the texts on dreams we had studied, thus making the Talmudic Jewish teachings on dreams visible in her life, thus making the Talmudic Jewish teachings on dreams visible in her life.

As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him. And God said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not their own, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. But I will execute judgment on the nation they serve, and afterwards they shall go free with great wealth. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace and you shall be buried at a ripe old age.”

(Genesis 15:12–15)
dreams accessible for her friend Jesse. Watching Elizabeth create that book and seeing the delight and interest it inspired led me to invite her to collaborate with me on this book, which draws on a wide range of Jewish teachings and practices and emphasizes the Talmudic teachings on dreams that so inspired us. Elizabeth has assisted with research and written a number of the sections. Kristina Swarner, an artist beloved by us both for her elegant and fanciful dream-evoking imagery, joins us; we are honored to work with her.

“If you see a white horse, either moving at a gentle trot or galloping, something good will happen to you”

(Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 56b).