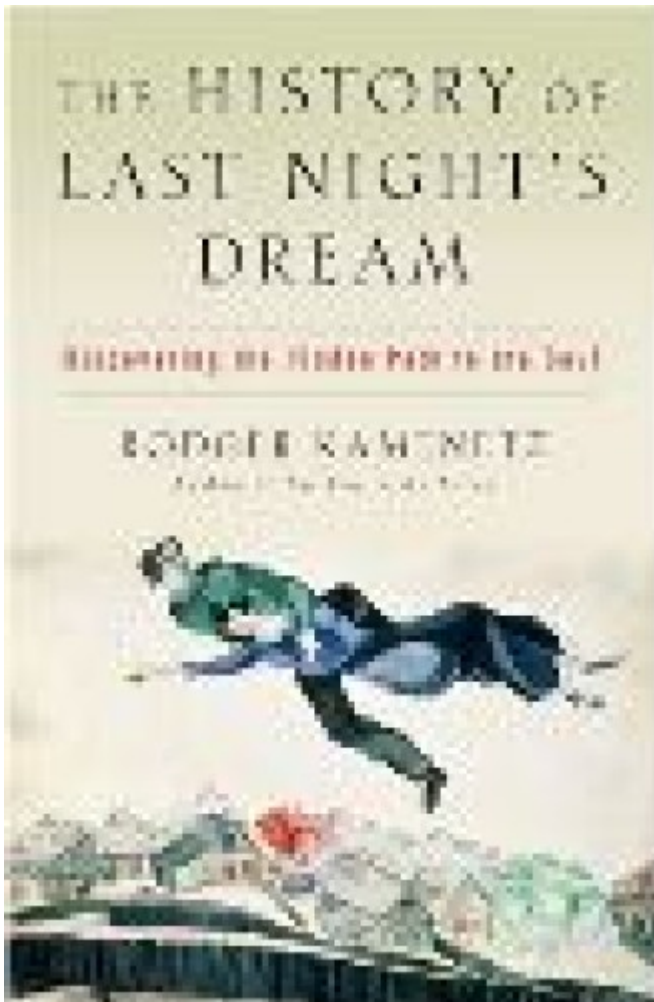


The History of Last Night's Dream

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The History of Last Night's Dream: Discovering the Hidden Path to the Soul

Rodger Kamenetz
HarperCollins

Rodger Kamenetz's vividly honest and well-researched book on dreams in Western culture is extraordinary—in part for its defiance of genre, a defiance that will no doubt make some readers uneasy. Before I read it, I had heard Kamenetz refer to it as a memoir, but it is as much an argument for a paradigm shift in dream interpretation. It is also part self-help book and part detective story about the lost dreams of the monotheistic traditions. And none of these categorizations touches on the fact that it is also a study of the human heart and an appeal for its transformation.

Kamenetz is known for his 1995 book, *The Jew in the Lotus*, about his physical and spiritual journey as part of a historic visit between Jewish rabbis and a Tibetan delegation that included the Dalai Lama. Some years later, Kamenetz, who has been called a formidable Jewish poet, began to research dreams in the Western tradition, starting with Genesis and every commentary ever written on it. Meanwhile, he encountered Colette Aboulker-Muscat, whose dream work for healing purposes in Jerusalem had become legendary.

As Kamenetz worked on dreams, he discovered the transformative power of images. In the first part of the book, he sets dreams in the context of art, religion, psychology and science, as well as personal experience. Kamenetz argues that though Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been known as “religions of the book,” there is another aspect of these faiths that has had many episodes: the conflict between words and images. Words—which represent orthodoxy and inherited certainty—have almost always won.

In the second part of the book, “Interpretations,” Kamenetz hits his stride. He begins with what he calls the three seminal dreams of Genesis: Abimelech's warning dream, Jacob's promise dream and Joseph's identity dream. He devotes a chapter to each one, exploring the dimensions of each kind of dream. He then turns to how the dream is lost through interpretation, making the figure of Joseph fundamental to this shift. When Joseph, as a young man, dreamed of a shaft of wheat standing erect while 11 other shafts bowed, Joseph's brothers did the malicious interpreting and the image remained ambiguous. But later, Joseph was the dream interpreter extraordinaire and all dreams became formulas.

As Kamenetz traces the religious tradition of dream interpretation, he finds an anxiety about the disturbing nature of dreams and a desire by religious authorities

to overwrite and ameliorate dreams through various kinds of textual and ritual performances. To explore this, he looks at the rabbinic tradition, considers the Gnostic conflict in Christianity and—in what was for me one of the most fascinating chapters of the book—boldly takes on Freud, the father of modern dream interpretation, and rereads Freud’s own dreams.

The third part of the book, called “Dreams,” is the most deeply personal exploration as Kamenetz takes the reader through images in his own dreams that had powerfully transformative effects. Kamenetz repeatedly says that his own relationship to dreams stems from a 2001 encounter with a particular teacher, and he now brings that relationship into full focus. When Kamenetz met Mark Bregman, Bregman was a rural Vermont postman by day and a dream teacher by night. Bregman’s theories of dreams owe a great deal to Jung, and Kamenetz explores this relationship in some detail, but they are also uniquely Bregman’s own. For Kamenetz, the process of working through dreams becomes a very individual, religious sort of practice. “This dream practice has no fixed ceremonies, no creeds or beliefs—just dreaming and waking, and learning what is in the heart.”

This comment suggests a familiar anticlerical and self-focused practice that we know perhaps too well from a multitude of self-help literature. But it conceals the metaphysics that lurk in the background. By the time the full metaphysics of this dream work arrives in the text, the reader is mostly prepared. I was surprised to see that the themes of divine grace, dying to self, and compassion still play prominent roles in the dream work laid out by Bregman. The purpose of dream work, according to Bregman, is not self-actualization but to demonstrate the state of the soul in relation to God and to teach the soul through an increasingly open and compassionate heart how to enter into a relationship with God. Besides offering that insight (and here Bregman will no doubt make many a modern reader uncomfortable), the main purpose of dream work is obedience: “Obedience means to be. To be what? To be other than your ego. To have died.” That is what our dreams teach us.

At this point, Kamenetz returns to the three dreams of Genesis. Through Abimelech, Jacob and Joseph, we see the three main kinds of dreams at work in Bregman’s theory: dreams reveal our predicament (Abimelech), teach us who we are (Joseph) and help us explore the realm of the soul (Jacob). All of this exploration requires a lot of hard work and sustained attention, and Kamenetz is honest about his own struggle to have faith. He also confesses that dreams have worked on him and

transformed him. Readers are left to struggle with the implications, but no one who reads this book will ever understand dreams the same way again.