

False Dreams in the Thought of Menahem Shalem

Tamás Visi

Kurt and Ursula Schubert Center for Jewish Studies
Palacky University, Olomouc

Abstract

Menahem Shalem (Prague/Central Europe, ca. 1350 – ca. 1420) formulated theoretical positions about dreams and imaginations on the basis of Maimonides and Narboni, which can be read against the background of the Hussite revolution as a critique of religious phantasmagorias and fanaticism. Shalem identified a mechanism of symbolic institution that takes place in dreams: the “prior opinions” (or prejudices) of human beings leave traces in their imaginative faculties; these traces impact the dreams they have, and the dreams lend a semblance of objective reality or truth to their prior opinions. As a consequence, their prior opinions are engraved in the mind and become firm convictions that cannot be refuted by rational arguments.

Introdcution

The late fourteenth century was a time of visions and prophecies in the territories of the Holy Roman Empire.¹ On the eve of the Hussite revolution, visionary texts that predicted the coming of the Antichrist and the Last Judgement circulated in the Kingdom of Bohemia in Latin, German, and Czech.² A significant proportion of society was strongly convinced of the authenticity and trustworthiness of dreams, visions, and ecstatic experiences. A celebrated example is the correspondence between Jan Hus and Peter Mladoniowitz (Petr z Mladoňovic) about a dream that the former experienced during his imprisonment in Constance in 1415, a few months before he was executed.³ During the days of the Hussite revolution, Bohemia

¹ See Frances C. Kneupper, *The Empire at the End of Time: Identity and Reform in Late Medieval German Prophecy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

² See Pavlína Cermanová, *Čechy na konce věků: Apokalyptické myšlení a vize husitské doby* (Bohemia at the end of times: Apocalyptic thought and visions of the Hussite period) (Prague: Argo, 2013), esp. 116–25 and 142–84.

³ Cf. František Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce*, (The Hussite revolution) (Prague: Univerzita Karlova, 1993), vol. 2, 11–12.

attracted groups of visionary fanatics from far-away Belgium, who were referred to as Picards. Radical Hussite groups expected the end of the world to occur in February 1420.⁴

Visions, dreams, and other kinds of religious phantasies were not merely private affairs, but acquired social and political significance in late medieval Bohemia.⁵ Visionary literature contributed to the emerging ideologies of religious dissent, which eventually crystalized into several forms of Hussitism. Religious phantasies became especially important factors in social and political life during the turbulent years of the Hussite wars, but their role was not limited to that period only: visionary texts were widely read both before and after the Hussite wars.

Menahem Shalem (ca. 1350 – ca. 1420), a significant Jewish philosopher in early fifteenth-century Prague, had a profound interest in dreams, hallucinations, and the ways humans can be deceived by them.⁶ The Maimonidean theory of prophecy enabled this Jewish contemporary of Jan Hus to make sense of the reality that he encountered. Shalem identified the dangers inherent in religious phantasies and warned his contemporaries, including his beloved friend and intellectual peer, Avigdor Kara, about the perilous effects of unleashed religious imaginations. In this context, philosophy acquired a social function that Shalem believed to be crucial: mobilizing the resources of reason, philosophy resisted religious phantasies and guarded philosophers from their destructive impact.

Menahem ben Jacob Shalem: The First Ashkenazi Philosopher

Menahem ben Jacob Shalem was the first Jewish intellectual in medieval Ashkenaz who can be called a “philosopher” with no exaggeration. His works were probably composed in Prague, where he lived for most of his life. As Ephraim Kupfer has argued, he was also

⁴ Cermanová, *Čechy na konce věků*, 169–84.

⁵ See Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–6.

⁶ I have attempted to reconstruct the broad historical and intellectual contexts of Shalem’s work in two studies: Tamás Visi, “The Emergence of Philosophy in Ashkenazic Contexts – The Case of Czech Lands in the Early Fifteenth Century,” *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts/Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 8 (2009): 213–43, and Visi, “On the Peripheries of Ashkenaz: Medieval Jewish Philosophers in Normandy and in the Czech Lands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century” (Habilitation thesis, Palacky University, Olomouc, 2011).

called “Menahem Agler”; the name “Agler” probably alludes to the city of Aquileia in Northern Italy.⁷ In 1413, Shalem was a member of Prague’s rabbinic court of justice (*beit din*) together with Yomtov Lippmann Mühlhausen and Avigdor Kara. The latter was one of his close friends, and they referred to each other as “my brother” in their writings. This phrase indicates a close relationship, but it is not to be taken literally: in fact, the two had different fathers and there is no reason to believe that they were related in any way. Nevertheless, misled by this phrase, some modern historians refer to Shalem as “Menahem Kara,” despite the fact that the latter name is not attested in any primary sources.

Shalem wrote long glosses on Narboni’s commentary on the *Guide* and on Hanokh al-Konstantini’s *Marot Elohim*, which is a commentary on the Account of the Chariot and related prophetic visions. The glosses often contain cross-references to passages in the *Guide* or to Narboni’s commentary and other relevant sources. Shalem also wrote an extensive commentary on the twenty-five premises summarized at the beginning of the second part of the *Guide*, summarized Gersonides’s proofs for the immortality of the soul, and composed a philosophical compendium on attaining the Active Intellect and earning individual providence in a work that also outlines a program of intellectual-spiritual perfection. Thus, in Shalem, we encounter a full-fledged post-Maimonidean philosopher whose mastery of the literary genres, conceptual and argumentative techniques, and ideas of the Maimonidean tradition reached heights that were hitherto unprecedented in Ashkenaz.

Recent research by Milan Žonca has shed new light on Menahem Shalem’s family background and biography. The name “Shalem” may indeed indicate a sojourn in Jerusalem, as Moshe Idel suggested; however, Žonca points out that Menahem inherited this sobriquet from his father, Jacob ben Samuel Shalem, who might be identical with a Jacob ben Samuel known from colophons of manuscripts copied in Jerusalem in the 1380s. Some of these texts are philosophical, which indicates that the interest in philosophy probably began with the father. Žonca also considers the possibility that the same Jacob ben Samuel copied the so-called Norsa Codex, which is dated to 1349 making it the earliest dated copy of

⁷ Ephraim Kupfer, “Towards a Cultural Portrait of Ashkenazic Jewry and Its Sages in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 42 (1972): 113–47, esp. 114–17.

Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* in an Ashkenazi hand Accordingly, Menahem Shalem may have learned Maimonidean philosophy first and foremost from his own father, Jacob Shalem.

Another Ashkenazi scholar of the same name mentioned in a commentary on the *Guide* by Solomon ben Judah ha-Nasi written around 1368 could be identical with Jacob Shalem, the father of Menahem Shalem. Solomon ben Judah ha-Nasi was probably of Provençal origin; he dedicated his commentary to Jacob ben Samuel and mentioned that he had spent two years with him “in the land of Ashkenaz.” This commentary was later utilized by Mühlhausen, and this fact suggests that the text was disseminated in Prague and perhaps even composed there.⁸ On the other hand, Judah ha-Nasi's commentary on *Guide* 3.7 does not contain any discussion pertaining to the problem of the sounds of the celestial bodies, which was disputed by Mühlhausen and Shalem.⁹ Both Shalem and Mühlhausen cite Moses Narboni's commentary as the standard commentary on Maimonides's *Guide*. It seems that Judah ha-Nasi's commentary was eventually supplanted by that of Narboni in early fifteenth-century Prague.

In sum, if Žonca's suggestions are correct, then the following story can be reconstructed. Around 1348–1349, there was a scribe in Germany called Jacob ben Samuel who was interested in philosophy, and he acquired a copy of the *Guide* and made his own copy of it in 1349. During or after the persecutions of the Black Death, he moved perhaps first to Northern Italy, to the city of Aquileia (hence his son's byname “Agler”), but the family eventually ended up in Prague, following the migratory pattern of many other Ashkenazi Jews of this period. Around 1368, Jacob ben Samuel received a guest from Provence, Solomon ben Judah ha-Nasi, who was well-versed in the Maimonidean-Tibbonide philosophical tradition and wrote a commentary on the *Guide*. Later, Jacob may have traveled to the Holy Land, earning the sobriquet “Shalem” (“the Jerusalemite”). His son, Menahem ben Jacob Shalem, probably grew up in Prague, where he studied with Avigdor Kara in the 1360s or 1370s or perhaps as late as

⁸ Milan Žonca, “Menaḥem ben Jacob Shalem and the Study of Philosophy in Late Medieval Prague” in Ota Pavlíček (ed.), *Studying the Arts in Late Medieval Bohemia: Production, Reception and Transmission of Knowledge* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 27–48; here 31–36.

⁹ Cf. Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, MS Heb. 38*7407 (olim London, Beth Din & Beth Hamidrash Library, MS 52), fols. 174r–178r.

the 1380s. He probably learned Maimonidean-Tibbonide philosophy from his own father, and perhaps also from Solomon ben Judah ha-Nasi. Moreover, he must have learned Talmud in a yeshiva and he eventually developed into a renowned scholar, becoming a rabbi of Prague by 1413; he must also have seen the rise of Hussitism in the Kingdom of Bohemia during the first two decades of the fifteenth century.

Apocalyptic Thought versus Philosophy: Shalem's Commentary on an Eschatological *Barayta*

Apocalyptic thought was at the center of Hussite ideologies and propaganda, but it was by no means limited to them: the Hussites' opponents also utilized the semantic codes of Christian eschatological traditions in order to send their message home. Interpretations of the relevant New Testament texts, first and foremost the book of Revelations, was an important vehicle of self-expression for theologians and preachers of the age. However, there were also post-biblical prophetic texts, such as Johannes de Rupescissa's *Vade mecum in tribulacione* ("A vade-mecum in tribulation"), a text composed in Latin before 1365 that was later translated into German and Czech, with rewritten versions of it circulating in the fifteenth century that updated the content in light of recent events.¹⁰ Texts written by or attributed to Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), and others had a similar reception. This received literature was augmented with new texts and authorities of the Hussite movement and its predecessors, such as Jan Milíč of Kroměříž (ca. 1320–1374), Matthias of Janov (Matěj z Janova, ca. 1350–1394), Jan Hus (1369–1415), Jakoubek of Stříbro (1372–1429), and others.

We do not know whether any of Shalem's works are contemporary to any of the aforementioned texts, since we cannot

¹⁰ See Kneupper, *The Empire at the End of Time*, 127–36; Pavlína Cermanová, "Jiná apokalypsa: Prorocké texty v husiství" (Another apocalypse: Prophetic texts in Hussitism), in *Husitské re-formace: Proměna kulturního kódu v 15. Století*, ed. Pavlína Cermanová and Pavel Soukup (Prague: NLN, 2019), 144–72, here 148–60; Robert E. Lerner, "'Popular Justice': Rupescissa in Hussite Bohemia," in *Eschatologie und Hussitismus*, ed. Alexander Patschovsky and František Šmahel (Prague: Historisches Institut, 1996), 39–51; Martin Pjecha, "Hussite Eschatological Texts (1412–1421): Introduction and Translations," in *Early Modern Prophecies in Transnational, National and Regional Contexts*, ed. Lionel Laborie and Ariel Hessayon (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1:23–83.

ascribe an exact date to any of his writings. Some of his works may have been written as early as the 1380s, while some of them may have been produced as late as the 1420s or even later. The eschatological fervor in Bohemia began to diminish after the second decade of the fifteenth century, and apocalyptic thought gradually became routinized and developed into a conventional symbolism during the course of that century. Nevertheless, some of the apocalyptic texts of the earlier period were copied, adapted, and read with great interest even during the second half of the century.¹¹ Therefore, the apocalyptic thought of pre-Hussite and Hussite Bohemia may be relevant for understanding Shalem's works, even if we cannot be certain whether he wrote them before, during, or after the Hussite period.

Shalem's untitled philosophical compendium includes a long explanation of an eschatological passage of the Mishnah, tractate *Soṭah* 9:15, which is a post-tannaitic addition. This text can be seen as a Jewish equivalent of the Hussite commentaries on the book of Revelations and similar texts. However, the actual content of Shalem's work is diametrically opposed to the conventions of eschatological literature. Although he certainly saw his own age as being sunk in deep crisis, he refrained from any speculation about the near or distant future. Instead, he interpreted the eschatological passage in the Mishnah as an allegory for human perfection, or its absence. In other words, Shalem's interpretation of this apocalyptic text is profoundly *non*-eschatological. The revelations involved were meant to instruct us in spiritual development and philosophical studies.

According to Shalem, attachment to the Active Intellect opens a new dimension of reality. Whoever manages to quit the dominion of the great celestial machine and enter the dominion of the Active Intellect will find him- or herself in a new world in which emanations are distributed in a just way according to one's merits. Shalem identifies this redeemed world, where justice rules, as the Messiah, while he identifies the prophet Elijah, who is depicted as the forerunner of the Messiah in traditional Jewish literature, as several phases in one's spiritual-intellectual development, which precedes the "Messiah"; that is, the attainment of the Active Intellect. Many talmudic stories relate how several great rabbis met the prophet Elijah; in Shalem's interpretation, the "Elijah" appearing in the

¹¹ Cf. Cermanová, "Jiná apokalypsa," 154.

talmudic stories can stand for prophetic emanation, individual providence, and also the immortality of the soul, depending on the context.¹² Shalem interprets a number of talmudic texts about the Messiah and Elijah accordingly in order to posit that these texts speak about the ways to quit this world and find the next one.¹³

Did Shalem intend this exegetical direction as a deliberate response to the eschatological fervor of his age? He does not comment on the political events of his days in any of his extant writings. Polemical remarks against Christianity are occasionally inserted into his works, and he penned a short text to refute the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. We do *not* find any specific reaction to Hussitism in these texts: on the theoretical level, Shalem was apparently unconcerned by Hussitism as it hardly presented a genuinely new theological challenge to Judaism in addition to the “standard” challenge that he *did* address. However, we can find evidence in his writings that he was concerned about the religious imaginations and fervor of his fellow Jews. It stands to reason that some of the Bohemian and Moravian Jews were influenced by the eschatological fervor of the Hussites and/or their predecessors and began to indulge in eschatological speculation.

This last point has been debated by scholars for several decades. In a landmark essay, Ruth Kestenberg-Gladstein collected textual evidence for the speculations of Jewish intellectuals concerning the end of the days in early fifteenth-century Bohemia and Germany and suggested that they were influenced or inspired by Hussite apocalyptic thought.¹⁴ In another landmark essay, Israel Jacob Yuval pointed out that the primary sources that Kestenberg-Galdstein utilized as evidence are dated before 1419 and as such cannot reflect

¹² Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 585, fol. 41v: הנה כבר התבאר שעניין אליהו על הרוב: יורה על השגחה הפרט' באדם [...] ואולם יורה על השפע הנבואי, גם עניין אליהו בהרבה מקומו' יורה על ההשגחה הפרט' באדם [...] ואולם עניין אליהו במקום הזה יורה על השארות הנפש אחר המות

¹³ Thus, for example, the talmudic sentences about the sufferings that precede the coming of the Messiah are interpreted as referring to the difficulties that precede the attainment of the Active Intellect; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 585, fol. 35v. On similar interpretations, see Dov Schwartz, *Messianism in Medieval Jewish Thought* [Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan, 1997), 119.

¹⁴ Ruth [Kestenberg-]Gladstein, “Eschatological Trends in Bohemian Jewry during the Hussite Period,” in *Prophecy and Millenarianism: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Reeves*, ed. Ann Williams (Harlow: Longman, 1980), 241–56.

any Jewish reaction to the Hussite wars, which began later.¹⁵ Yuval's argument is certainly conclusive; however, there are two further considerations that have to be taken into account. First, as has been mentioned, the eschatological fervor in Bohemia did not begin in 1419; the first significant apocalyptic thinker was the aforementioned Jan Milíč of Kroměříž, who had attracted much attention and a large following as early as the 1360s, and there is plenty of evidence for the circulation of apocalyptic texts and ideas in both Bohemia and Germany before 1419.¹⁶ Thus, although Yuval is right to point out that Kestenbergl-Glasner's evidence predates the Hussite wars, the thesis that earlier Hussite or pre-Hussite propaganda influenced Jews is by no means refuted by this argument. Second, Yuval's objection is not conclusive with regard to the writings of Menahem Shalem: we cannot be certain that they were all written *before* the Hussite wars, although this is certainly a possibility.

The most interesting piece of evidence that was discussed in this debate comes from the writings of Yomtov Lippmann Mühlhausen, who was Shalem's rabbinic colleague in Prague. The *Sefer ha-nitsahon*, Mühlhausen's most famous writing, contains two different predictions for the end of the world: in section 332, he speculated that the end would come in 1402, while in section 334, he modified the prediction to 1410. In a later work, a tract on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet composed between 1413 and 1416, he put the end of the world to the year 1430. Copyists of his works occasionally "updated" these dates in accordance with their own expectations.¹⁷ In other words, there was a prominent member of the Prague circle who was engaged in eschatological speculation.

Therefore, Shalem's choice to write a non-eschatological interpretation of an apocalyptic passage of the Mishnah may very well have been a deliberate attempt to oppose the eschatological speculations of his colleague, Yomtov Lipmann Mühlhausen, and

¹⁵ Israel J. Yuval, "Juden, Hussiten und Deutsche: Nach einer hebräischen Chronik," in *Juden in der christlichen Umwelt während des späten Mittelalters*, ed. Alfred Haverkamp and Franz-Joseph Ziwes, *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, Beiheft 13 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1992), 59–92, see esp. 63 n. 16.

¹⁶ See especially Kneupper, *The Empire at the End of Time*, and Cermanová, *Čechy na konce věků*.

¹⁷ The evidence is cited in detail by Yuval, "Juden, Hussiten und Deutsche," 63 n. 16. Cf. also Yuval, "Kabbalisten, Ketzer und Polemiker," 159–60.

perhaps other Jews who followed in his footsteps.¹⁸ Shalem also mentions a kabbalist whom he personally knew and another man, a righteous Jew, who told him about revelations that the prophet Elijah had told him in a vision, but which were “contradicting the truth.”¹⁹ Shalem’s criticism of Kabbalah and his emphasis that dreams and hallucinations could easily mislead people were certainly meant to counter such phenomena within the Jewish communities.

The commentary begins with an interesting remark on the manuscript transmission of this passage of the Mishnah. The last section of the text, a saying attributed to Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair, was not attested in the manuscripts available to Shalem, but was found in a manuscript and copied for him by his “brother” Avigdor Kara. According to modern philologists, this saying of R. Pinhas ben Yair is only included in the Babylonian version of the Mishnah, which was apparently poorly represented among the manuscripts available in late medieval Central Europe.²⁰ Shalem identified this sentence as a later addition to the Mishnah and proposed a textual emendation: instead of זריזות (“promptitude,” though Shalem understands it as the Aristotelian virtue of “courage,” the midpoint between cowardice and recklessness), we should read זהירות (“attentiveness,” though Shalem takes it as a term for “moderation”), because the former is an

¹⁸ A possible example of the latter was the anonymous author from Cheb (Eger), who wrote a kind of epilogue to Mühlhausen’s book on the alphabet in the early 1430s. This short text includes speculation about the year of salvation; see Yuval, “Kabbalisten, Ketzer und Polemiker,” 158–60. Another possible example was Eizik Tirna of Brno, who referred to Jan Hus as “Dan Husham”; see Abraham David, “R. Itzhak Isaac Tirna and His Polemical Tract *Answer to the Christians* – Preliminary Clarifications” [Hebrew], in *Ta Shma. Studies in Judaica in Memory of Israel M. Ta-Shma*, ed. Avraham (Rami) Reiner et al. (Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 2011), 1:257–80. While this phrase may be just a copyist’s mistake for “Jan Hus,” the biblical name Husham does occur in rabbinic eschatological texts: the list of the Edomite kings in the Bible, where Husham occurs (Gen 36:34–35), was read as a prophecy about the future Roman emperors in *Midr. Gen. Rab.* 83:3.

¹⁹ Oxford, Bodleian, MS Opp. 585, fol. 36r: וכבר פגשתי איש תם וישר ירא אלהי והגיד לי איך אליהו ז"ל היה אצלו והגיד לו מה שהיה סותר האמת

²⁰ On the various versions of the end of tractate *Sotah* in the manuscripts, see Ya’aqov Nahum Epstein, *Mavo le-nusah ha-Mishnah* (Jerusalem: Self-published, 1948), 976–77. Note that the famous Munich manuscript of the Talmud (mid-fourteenth century) does not attest the sentence attributed to Pinhas ben Yair either (ibid., 976). Parallels are found in b. ‘Abod. Zar. 20b and y. Šabb. 1:6 3c, y. Šeqal. 3:4 47c; cf. also Heinrich W. Guggenheier, ed. and trans., *The Jerusalem Talmud: Second Order: Mo’ed, Tractates Šabbat and ‘Eruvin* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), 57–58.

exclusively political virtue (להנהגה המדינית לבד), while the latter is an intellectual virtue, and as such fits the context better in his opinion.

Despite the fact that Shalem's interpretation of the rabbinic text goes against the eschatological trend in early fifteenth-century Bohemia, there is an important common trait between his work and that of the (pre-)Hussite interpretations of the book of Revelations. The commentators did not take the words of the sacred texts in their literal meaning or in their usual referential functions, and thus, semantic laxity was unavoidable. For example, Christian exegetes disagreed about such a fundamental question as whether "Antichrist" referred to a single person or whether the word was to be taken as a metaphor or emblem of all those forces that opposed Christ. Some believed that the actual Roman pope was the Antichrist, while others believed that the corrupted clerics and worldly leaders collectively were the Antichrist, but in either case, a significant amount of creativity was required in order to apply the word "Antichrist" to the historical reality in which the commentators were embedded.²¹ Similarly, the nonliteral interpretation of the end of tractate *Soṭah* that Shalem advanced demanded semantic laxity as well as abstraction from the usual senses of the key terms that occurred in the text. Shalem warned his contemporaries about deceitful dreams and hallucinations, but he decoded and interpreted the mishnaic text as if it were a dream.

Shalem's Theory: Hypnosis and Symbolic Institution

Shalem describes the human mind's encounter with the Active Intellect in four steps. We will discuss each of them in more detail below; a brief list follows:

- (1) Separating the mind from the external world. This may take place during sleep, hallucinations, or very strong mental concentration.
- (2) The senses and the faculty of imagination, once they are separated from their external objects, are reoriented toward different types of objects. These may include written texts, dreams, desires, and intellections.

²¹ Cf. Cermanová, *Čechy na konce věků*, 21–77.

- (3) The Active Intellect may become attached to the human mind and intensify the mental processes.
- (4) The process may have two different results. If the intellect is a strong component of the mind, then the Active Intellect will make it even stronger, and it will supervise the work of the senses and the faculty of imagination. Under such conditions, the mind will see veridical dreams or prophetic revelations, or it may receive correct intuitions about the future and providential help from astral spirits or the Active Intellect. However, if the intellect is weak, then the Active Intellect will intensify the senses and imagination without the supervision of reason, and consequently, the mind will see false dreams and insane hallucinations that reinforce its prejudices (see Maimonides's "third kind" of people in *Guide* 2.37).

Shalem viewed the kabbalistic ideas of his Jewish contemporaries as instances of this last kind of encounter between the human mind and the Active Intellect: when the human recipient of the emanation has a weak or unprepared intellect, but a strong faculty of imagination, the result will be an excess of vivid phantasies without intellectual content and control, which will lead to erroneous opinions and insane actions. Shalem refers to a saying attributed to Rabbi Akiva (*b. Sanh.* 65):

[Talmud,] chapter "Four kinds of executions" in [tractate] *Sanhedrin*: "As has been taught: *Or that consulteth the dead* [Deut 18:11]; this means one who starves himself and spends the night in a cemetery, so that an unclean spirit [of a demon] may rest upon him [to enable him to foretell the future]. And when R. Akiba reached this verse, he wept: If one who starves himself that an unclean spirit may rest upon him [has his wish granted], he who fasts that the pure spirit [the Divine Presence] may rest upon him – how much more should his desire be fulfilled! But alas! our sins have driven it away from us, as it is written, *But your iniquities have separated between you and your God* [Isa 59:2]."

That is to say, due to the sins that they did not learn sciences [*hokhmot*] and the rational [faculty of the soul] diminished and the emanation reached only the imaginative [faculty of the soul]. And this is the "third kind of people" whom the Master

[= Maimonides] mentioned in chapter 37, part 2 [of the *Guide of the Perplexed*].²²

Rabbi Akiva's complaint indicates that no matter how much one desires to attain the Active Intellect, it may happen that an "unclean spirit" is received instead of the redemptory emanation.

Shalem identified the trap more precisely on the basis of a passage in *Guide* 2.37. In this chapter, which belongs to a larger section on prophecy, Maimonides mentions that an overflow from the Active Intellect may reach the imaginative faculty without first perfecting the intellect.²³ Such people will see extraordinarily strong visions, and they may also have the capacity to communicate them to other people. However, these visions will be false images, contrary to reason, and may lead to delusion both on an individual and a social level if such a visionary indeed manages to influence the masses. Here, Maimonides obviously had in mind false prophets, founders of other religions, and fanatical political-religious leaders, as well as poets.

For Shalem, the possibility that the imaginative faculty could receive an emanation from the Active Intellect and become stronger than the intellect was the major challenge of inventing an escape route from this world. When the self was emptied, the consequence was not necessarily the desired attachment to the Active Intellect. One could lose good common sense, but instead of gaining the superior intellect, fall victim to the delusions of false visions that originate from one's own imperfections (that is, the intellect's imperfect control of the imaginative faculty) being magnified and intensified by the influence of the Active Intellect, which has now become perilous.

Shalem moves the discussion to a general level when he comments on the sentence from the apocalyptic text at the end of

²² Oxford, Bodleian, MS Opp. 585, 23r זה דורש אל המתים, ופרק ד' מיתות בסנהדרין תניא: "דורש אל המתים, וזה המרעיב את עצמו ולן בבית הקברות כדי שתשרה עליו רוח הטומאה. וכשהיה ר' עקיבא מגיע למקרא זה היה בוכה ואומ': ומה המרעיב את עצמו שתשרה עליו רוח הטומאה, המרעיב את עצמו כדי שתשרה עליו רוח טהרה על אחת כמ' וכמ'. אבל מה אעשה שעונותינו גדלו לנו שנ': כי עונותיכם היו מבדילים ביניכם ובין אלהיכם". ר"ל בעונות שלא למדו החכמ' ונתקצר הדברי ולא יהיה השפע רק על המדמה לבד, והם הכת השלישית שיאמ' הרב פל"ז ח"ב

²³ On Maimonides's theory of prophecy as well as its broad intellectual context, see Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Thought 8 (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001).

tractate *Soṭah*, “the kingdom turns into heresy, and there is no rebuke” (והמלכות תהא מינות ואין תוכחת):²⁴

“And the kingdom will be heresy” – by “kingdom,” he means the extraordinary measure of emanation that arrives from the Great King who guards the species [i.e., the Active Intellect] to whom the intellectual emanation is attached, who is greater than all the flesh and blood kings, even greater than David and Solomon.²⁵

“...will be heresy” – because due to the diminution of the logical [faculty], the emanation (which is meant by “kingdom”) will all be “heresy,” since only imaginations will come to [mind] from it, imaginations that do not correspond to any reality at all, but are fanciful creations of lies, which their imagination created, and there is no greater heresy than this.

“And there is no rebuke” – that is to say, no disputation will help against these things, since they came to their [minds] from the wondrous imaginations in a dream or from a frenzy while they are awake, as if Elijah of blessed memory told them the opinions that they had possessed before. And their traces remain engraved in their imagination with all the things that are in their faculty of imagination, and as the multitude of imaginations cease and disappear, only the “places” of those opinions remain [in the senses during sleep], and it seems to them [in their dreams or hallucinations] that they are newly created and they are coming from outside.²⁶

²⁴ On the Jewish concept of heresy in this age, see Yuval, “Kabbalisten, Ketzner und Polemiker,” 162–63.

²⁵ Cf. Maimonides, *Guide* 3.52, translated in Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 2:629.

²⁶ Oxford, Bodleian, MS Opp. 585, fol. 35v: והמלכות תהא מינות ר"ל במלכות שפע שעור הנוסף המגיע מהשפעת המלך הגדול המחופף על המין הנדבק בו השפע השכלי שהוא גדול מכל מלך בשר ודם, ואלו היו דוד ושלמה. תהא מינות כי לקצור [כת] הדברי יהיה השפע המכונן במלכות כלו מינות כי לא יגיע ממנו רק ענייני דמיוניים לא יאותו לשום נמצא כלל, אך בדויי השקר אשר יבדהו דמיונם ואין מינות גדול מזה. ואין תוכחת ר"ל אין שום ויכוח יועיל נגד אלה למה שהגיע להם מן הדמיונות הנפלאות בחלום או מן הטרופי' בעת היקיצה כאלו אליהו ז"ל הגיד להם הדעות שהיו להם קודם. ונשאר רשומיהם חקוקים בדמיונם עם כל מה שבכחם המדמה וכאשר בטלו דמיונות רבות והשביתום נשאר מקומות הדעות ההם לבדם ויראו להם כאלו הם דברים מתחדשים ועניין בא מחוץ

In the continuation of the text, Shalem cites Maimonides's *Guide* 2.36 to the effect that the false prophets see dreams that reflect the opinions they hear while they are awake. Maimonides probably had Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, in mind, although he never mentions him explicitly in the *Guide* (in this context, it is justifiable to apply Leo Strauss's notion of "persecution and the art of writing"). The problem for Maimonides was how Mohammed could receive revelations that were – at least partly – accurate reflections of the truth if he was a false prophet. His answer was that Mohammed must have heard some true opinions (such as the oneness of God) during the daytime which had left a mark in his imagination and then, at night or during a frenzied waking state, his faculty of imagination had presented these opinions as if they had been revealed to him by the Archangel Gibril.

Shalem follows Maimonides's theory, but he was considering a different problem, and therefore, the theory acquired a new meaning for him. For Maimonides, the question was how a false prophet can speak truth, while for Shalem, the question was how opinions and/or prejudices can be so entrenched in the human mind that no argument or persuasion can remove them. For Maimonides, the big emanatory machine of the Active Intellect could produce some residues of truth even in the mind of a false prophet, who was not adequately prepared to receive the emanation (in *Guide* 2.36, he hints at the fact that Mohammed had wives, while sexual life hinders prophecy). For Shalem, the big emanatory machine of the Active Intellect *produced lies* in the mind of the unprepared recipients of the emanation, and these lies were formidable enemies of the truth, since they were enthusiastically believed and fanatically defended and spread. How could this happen?! How could the kingdom become heresy?!

Shalem's answer is that dreams and hallucinations carry out a blind repetition of acquired opinions. These opinions will be removed from the context of the normal world and relocated in a new symbolic system that is instituted in dreams and which is *different from the symbolic order of reason*. The normal resources of human cognition – namely, sensual perception and rational thought – are both switched off during this process, and for this reason, they cannot exercise any control over it. Instead of cognition, we observe a double process of "engraving": the imaginations of the daily routine engrave traces into the faculty of imagination, and then, at night during sleep, or during the time of "frenzy" in the case of hallucinations, the senses, which

are isolated from the external world and free to receive impressions from different sources, will be determined by the traces in the faculty of imagination. In this way, a second “engraving” takes place: this time, the faculty of imagination engraves the traces left in it into the senses that are isolated from the external world. As a consequence, the senses will show the “traces” left in the faculty of imagination as a kind of objective truth, “coming from outside,” to the dreamer. This theory is probably based on Averroes’s interpretation of Aristotle’s ideas, or on Narboni’s summary of it in his commentary on *Guide* 2.36, which Shalem certainly read.²⁷

Furthermore, according to Shalem, a symbolic system emerges in dreaming and therefore, we can describe dreams as cases of symbolic institution. As has been mentioned, Shalem considered the predetermined content of the dream to be encoded into visual symbols during the process of dreaming. The visual symbols may include, for example, the prophet Elijah, as happened to a man whom Shalem knew personally (see above).²⁸ Dream interpretation was a widely practiced art in the Late Middle Ages: there was a general belief that the visual and aural elements of dreams could be decoded and thus that dreams could be “read” as a kind of text.²⁹ Thus, a symbolic system, a visual language, is activated in the process of dreaming.

Through this symbolic encoding, the content of the dreamer’s consciousness will recur in a more intensive manner and without the slightest possibility of criticism or control by reason or experience.³⁰ Dreams are symbolic systems that create authorities without control. In this way, dreaming is a “king” or a religious authority like the

²⁷ See Averroes, *Averrois Cordubensis compendia librorum Aristotelis qui Parva naturalia vocantur*, ed. Henry Blumberg (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1954), 44–46; cf. Alexander Altmann, “Gersonides’ Commentary on Averroes’ Epitome of *Parva Naturalia*, II.3: Annotated Critical Edition,” *PAAJR* 46–47 (1978/79): 1–31, here 11–12. On the reception of Gersonides’s commentary in Ashkenaz, see Tamás Visi, “Gersonides’ Reception in the Ashkenazi Tradition,” in *Gersonides’ Afterlife: Studies on the Reception of Levi ben Gerson’s Philosophical, Halakhic and Scientific Oeuvre in the 14th through 20th Centuries*, ed. Ofer Elior, Gad Freudenthal, and David Wirmer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), 264–76.

²⁸ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 585, fol. 36r.

²⁹ A good introduction to high and late medieval dream interpretation and dream theories is Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, esp. 7–16 on the various types of dream books.

³⁰ Averroes emphasizes that choice and cogitation are excluded from the process of dreaming, see Averroes, *Averrois Cordubensis compendia*, 44–45.

prophet Elijah. The terrifying conclusion, for Shalem, was that these authorities worked to spread falsehood. Rational arguments or persuasion had no chance to refute the errors once they were engraved into the mind through dreams or hallucinations. The symbolic institution proves to be stronger than reason, and its consequences are perilous.

Marc Richir described symbolic institution as a mortifying power in human life: symbolic systems can isolate us from reality, stigmatize us or part of our experiences, and block our concerns, desires, and aspirations and relocate them in a symbolic world.³¹ Shalem apparently faced the same mortifying power of symbolic institution when he encountered the problem of deceptive dreams. This is evident from the following passage, where he finds a connection between the “places” that the preconceived opinions engrave for themselves in the faculty of imagination and the sophistic “places,” that is to say, *topoi*, figures of inferences, known from Aristotle’s *Sophistic Refutations*. Nicole Oresme (ca. 1320–1382) related a long debate between Arithmetic and Geometry that he had supposedly heard in a dream; perhaps Shalem had similar experiences in mind.³² However, it is more likely that Shalem means to say that the argument stating that “my opinion was reinforced by a dream, therefore it is true” is a fallacy, a sophistic *topos*:

And this is one of the misleading “places” (inferences) that bring about death, and how many have died because they held themselves to be wise! And this is why you find men who justify their opinion through dreams that they see, and they believe that what appears to them while they sleep differs from the opinion that they believed or heard while they were awake. And the commentator, Magister Vidal [i.e., Moses Narboni], said, “and this is a divine mystery, immensely wondrous” and by this, he alludes to the fact that even a prophet needs to be free of prejudice [*da’at qodem*, “earlier opinion”] lest the [thing] that appears to him while he sleeps will be merely an opinion which he already believed in when he was awake, and which may contradict the truth. That is why the Master [i.e., Maimonides] said, “one should not listen

³¹ Marc Richir, *Phénoménologie et institution symbolique* (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 1988), 41–43, 114–17, 179, and esp. 133–35.

³² See Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, 140–49.

to someone whose rational faculty has not been perfected, and who has not reached the completion of cognitive perfection.”³³

One cannot but recall the correspondence about Jan Hus's dream in the prison at this point. In his dream, Hus saw the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, where he used to preach, and saw the pictures of Christ on the walls being destroyed during the night; however, the next morning, painters came and repainted them more beautifully than before and the people rejoiced, including Hus himself. A friend of Hus, Peter Maldoniewitz, consulted the “doctor of Biberach,” who interpreted the dream on the basis of a “place” (*locus*) in the “vision of Daniel” (*visio Danielis*); he probably meant the *Somniale Danielis*, a widespread medieval book on dream interpretation.³⁴ The pictures of Christ on the walls of the Bethlehem Chapel meant the life of Christ which was to be imitated by Christians. The people who demolished the paintings were the enemies of Christ. The painters were preachers, who restored the Christian doctrines to their audiences and who would be saved by Christ, Hus being one of them. The interpretation refers to a goose (*auca*) lying on the altar, which is taken as a reference to Hus himself, as *husa* means “goose” in Czech.³⁵ Hus died at the stake a few months later.

We do not know whether Shalem ever had any occasion to comment on Hus's dream, but we do have sufficient information to reconstruct the implications of his approach. Shalem would probably have said that the doctor of Biberach may have correctly interpreted the meaning of the dream, but that Hus's dream was by no means a message from God. Hus had a preformed opinion, a prejudice: he believed himself to be a righteous preacher of divine teachings, and he believed that his opponents were the enemies of God. He was obviously greatly concerned with these thoughts, so it is hardly

³³ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 585, fol. 36r: וזה מקום מן המקומות המטעים ומהממיתים, וכמה מתו מן המחזיקים עצמם כחכמי' ומפני זה תמצא אנשים אמתו דיעותיהם בחלומות שחלמו אותם, ויחשבו שזה הנראה בשינה הוא דבר מבלתי הדעת אשר האמיניה או שמעוהו בעת היקיצה, ואמ' המפרש מגי' וידל וזהו סוד אלהי נפלא מאד ובו רמז על שצריך שלא יהיה אף לנביא דעת קודם שלא יהיה הנראה בשינה הדעת שכבר האמינו בעת היקיצה סותר לאמת, ולכן אמר הר' ולזה צריך שלא ישגיח אדם למי שלא ישלם כמו בדברי ולא הגיע לתכלית השלמות העיוניות

³⁴ See Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, 10–11.

³⁵ Václav Novotný (ed.), *M. Jana Husi Korespondence a dokumenty* (Jan Hus: Correspondence and documents) (Prague: Komise pro vydávání pramen náboženského hnutí Českého, 1920), 250–51.

surprising that they left a trace in his faculty of imagination. At night, when he slept, his senses were undetermined by the external world, so the strong trace of his preformed opinion began to determine his senses. The same opinion that he had in the daytime returned to him in the dream in an encoded form and created the mistaken impression that it reflected an objective reality or a message from God. The dream corroborated Hus's prejudice about himself and contributed to his death. This is the mortifying power of symbolic institution.

Conclusion

We cannot know exactly when Shalem's works were written besides the fact that none of them was composed earlier than 1380 or later than 1430, though it is most likely that he wrote them between 1390 and 1420. Thus, he was a contemporary of the incipient Hussite movement. We can justifiably read his work against this historical background, but we would not be justified in treating it as a direct response to Hussitism, as he never explicitly refers to the Bohemian reform movement. Nevertheless, the theoretical positions that he formulated on the basis of Maimonides and Narboni acquire a new and vivid sense once they are read against the background of the Hussite revolution. Shalem utilized the intellectual resources at his disposal to struggle against the religious phantasmagorias and fanaticism of his age.

Shalem identified a mechanism of symbolic institution that takes place in dreams: the "prior opinions" (or prejudices, *de'ot qodmot*) of human beings leave traces in their imaginative faculties; these traces impact the dreams they have, and the dreams lend a semblance of objective reality or truth to their prior opinions. As a consequence, their prior opinions are engraved in the mind and become firm convictions that cannot be refuted by rational arguments. Shalem emphasizes that the consequences can be deadly: "How many have died because they held themselves to be wise!"³⁶ This comment may also have summarized Shalem's opinion about the death of Jan Hus.

³⁶ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 585, fol. 36r: 'וכמה מתו מן המהזיקים עצמם כחכמי'