

"ASLEEP"

The great Hasidic teacher, R. Pinhas Koretzer, taught a charming <sup>thought</sup> ~~idea~~: in every object in creation there is an element of shenah or sleep. That is, there is a passive element that counterbalances the active element. Water, for instance, can be stormy; then we say it is "awake." But it is also calm at times, and then we say it is "asleep." This holds true for every object, whether natural or artificial. It is especially true for man who, because he has the <sup>greatest</sup> capacity <sup>in all creation</sup> to be most awake ~~of all creation~~, in the sense of mental and spiritual alertness, is also the deepest sleeper. The purpose of sleep is to refresh the organism and allow the individual to be more awake, more alive later.

That is why, another Hasidic sage adds (Benei Yisaskhor, Tishri), we say that shenah be'Shabbat taanug, that it is a pleasure to sleep on Saturday afternoon. For on Shabbat, the Jew receives a neshamah yeterah, an extra soul -- that is, he is twice as sensitive and awake spiritually -- and he therefore needs more sleep. What a pleasure to sleep when such sleep is a sign of more soul, more spirit, more insight!

But of course, too much sleep is dangerous. It is often a sign of fatal illness. A coma is not refreshing; it is deadening. Indeed, the Rabbis declared that sleep as such is a sixtieth part of death: shenah ehad mi-shishim le'mitah. Sleep is the time we are insensitive, dead to the world, indifferent. When we sleep we are not rational, we are not involved with humanity, we are unresponsive and irresponsible. Too many of us sleep without closing our eyes and without going to bed. We simply waste our time and our lives in trivialities. Though we are physiologically awake, we are spiritually asleep: insensitive, indifferent, irrational, irresponsible, uninvolved. We are, too many of us and for too long a time, spiritual somnabulists.

It is to this dormant condition of man that the Shofar, according to Maimonides, addresses itself. Uru yeshenim ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ mi-shenatkhem, wake up, O ye slumberers, from your sleep. Snap out of your perpetual, year-long trance, and become alive to that which usually escapes you: God, <sup>He is</sup> and meaning, a neshamah, a destiny. The shofar is an alarm clock for the heart: it is time to get up and emerge from your slothful somnolence.

Men and nations ~~xx~~ both have to pay a heavy price for the ~~luxury~~ luxury of oversleeping. The Western nations were for too long asleep to the rightful aspirations of the developing nations of other continents. Now we are, in too many places, considered colonialists and imperialists. The United States for a full century was asleep to the indignities imposed upon the colored races. We are now paying for it in the <sup>e</sup>greatest domestic crisis of the century. If only we had heard the Shofar earlier: uru yeshenim mi-shenatkhem!

This holds no less true for the State of Israel. In the beginning one could not blame the leading citizens of the state for seeking to avoid the religious problems of Israel. They were busy with building the apparatus and security of a state, and one may sleep for a while in order to prepare for the waking hours. But the Shofar now sounds for Israel as well. It is time to wake up to the real perils of building a state so secular, so devoid of spiritual import, that we shall lose any contact with the past of our people. If Israel today will consider religion only a political party, or as the ideas of an obstreperous minority, or identify it as a lunatic fringe that hates the State, if it will remain asleep to the larger religious dimensions of Jewish statehood -- it will be in very serious trouble indeed. The Torah warned about it: ki tolid banim u-vanot ve'noshantem ba-aretz, if you bear sons and daughters and fall asleep in the land -- for modern philologists relate the word ashen to yashen -- then



ve'hishchatem, you will deteriorate spiritually, and cannot survive long. The survival of the people of Israel in the Land of Israel is predicated upon -- staying awake, alert to God, sensitive to our sacred mission. Only disaster follows in the wake of ve'noshantem, of spiritual drowsiness, while we are just "normal" - ki tolid banim uvanot.

But of course, this principle is equally, or even more, true of us as individuals. We study hard, earn our degrees, become professionals -- and sluggishly, we soon forget to "keep up" with our work. If we fail to heed the Shofar we soon ~~deteriorate~~ <sup>lose our reputation</sup> and lose our competence. We marry in a burst of love and enthusiasm. Before long we begin to take husband for granted, we ignore the pleasant incidentals that let a wife know we still consider her beloved. When we become inert to each other, ~~we are in danger~~ our marriage is in danger of becoming comatose. We are thrilled beyond words when God gives us the supreme gift of children. But if we then are insensitive to their wants and needs and problems while we are preoccupied with a hundred and one other, and lesser, things, then we are committing a grave sin. Uru yeshenim, the Shofar calls out: do not ignore your children and let them grow up by themselves, without guidance.

It is fair to ask ourselves how awake we've been to Almighty God and His Torah since we last heard the alarm of the Shofar a year ago. I hope it stirred us then; but did we stay awake? Jacob woke up from a deep sleep and he was a changed man -- he saw God where he noticed nothing before. Pharoah woke up -- but vayikatz Paroh, va-yishan, he fell right back to sleep. Which pattern have we followed? Is there here one individual so smug that he thinks he cannot stand some improvement in his life as a Jew? How many of were sufficiently bestirred to come to shul -- both weekday and Shabbat -- more regularly, to attend another class, to accomplish something in charity?

Of course, it is the rare Jew who is completely asleep. Recently scientists have made marvelous progress in sleep research and have discovered that even while we are unconscious, there is tremendous activity going on within us. There are different levels of sleep; it comes in different intensities. That is true of spiritual sleep as well. The beloved, in Solomon's Song of Songs, sings: ani yeshenah ve'libi er, I am asleep but my heart is awake. How true this is of the Jew! Our Rabbis put it this way: yeshenah min ha-mitzvot, <sup>ve'libi</sup> er li'gemillat hassadim, I may be asleep to the mitzvot -- to Kashrut and Shabbat and prayer -- but my heart, my inner Jewish sensitivity, is still very much alive: I hear the cry of the poor man, I respond to the ~~the~~ call of a Yeshivah, I do not ignore my neighbor in his hour of need.

We are <sup>not</sup> ~~are~~, Heaven forbid, in a religious coma. We are, to some extent, awake and alive. But it is not enough to have the heart awake and the rest of the body asleep. Hasidim used <sup>to</sup> ~~pray~~ rather late -- sometimes too late. One Rabbi explained: prayer should be, according to King David, kol atzmotai tomarna, all my bones cry out to God; one must be completely awake when he confronts God. And since we rouse ourselves from our sleep a little bit at a time, we must wait until we are fully awake before beginning to pray.

That is what Torah should mean to us: a call to <sup>total</sup> alertness, to complete sensitivity, to full consciousness. One way of awakening a sleeping person is to call out his name. So, every day we recite Shema Yisrael, "Hear O Israel." We remind ourselves who we are, what our name is: "Israel." We remember the kind of greatness we are born into, the magnificent and rich heritage that is ours, the legions of martyrs and thinkers, of sages and saints, of poets and students who constitute "Israel." What a name, what a reality! Shema -- listen closely: do you know who you are? You are Yisrael. That should be enough to bestir



the deepest slumberer amongst us to new and fresh undertakings in Jewish living. But for some people, so deeply enmeshed in the trivialities of everyday existence, so very unconscious of a redeeming Jewish purpose in life, it is not enough to call their names <sup>daily</sup> in order to ~~wake~~ rouse them. For them only a powerful alarm must be used. So on Rosh Hashanah we listen to the sound of the Shofar. And it must grasp us by the heart and send shivers down our spines and make us tremble from head to toe with the challenge and the call: uru yeshenim mi-shenatkher wake up, be done with this foolish indifference to the word of God, bestir yourselves and rouse yourselves -- before it is too late!

What do I mean when I say that if we fail to wake up in response to Shofar's call it may be "too late?" Let me explain <sup>by way of</sup> in a quite bold metaphor used by the Rabbis. In the Psalms (44) King David cries out, Urah, lamah tishan, "Awake, why sleepest Thou, O Lord?" But can this be, ask the Rabbis (J.T. M.Sh.5), ve'khi yesh shenah lifnei ha-Makom? Can we dare to say that God sleeps? Did not David himself say that hinei lo yanum ve'lo yishan shomer Yisrael, that the Guardian of Israel never sleeps? Isn't this <sup>ascry</sup> implication of slumber to God akin to the blasphemous doctrine of those who deny life to Him? They answer that David means this, of course, only metaphorically: ka-veyakhol k'ilu lefanav shenah be'shaah she'Yisrael be'tzarah v'umot ha-olam bi'rev ahah, that when Israel is in distress while her enemies prosper, then as it were we depict God as asleep. Hence David's tearful plea: Urah, <sup>lamah</sup> tishan.

Certainly, when we are beset by all kinds of trouble, hounded by insoluble problems, haunted by terrible fears, bereft of dear ones, at a time of this sort we pray mightily and often we hear no response, and we feel inclined to cry out: urah, lamah tishan, wake up, O God!

...in Russia suffer slow spiritual strangulation.

Two generations have grown up in enforced ignorance of anything Jewish. To circumcise a child or to attend a service means to jeopardize your income and your freedom. Old Jews who survived Hitler broken in body and spirit are subjected again to the cruelties of anti-Jewish persecution. Urah!, lamah tishan -- God, it is time to arise, why sleep, O Lord?

Collectively and individually there are times when we seek to bestir, as it were, God who is impervious to us and our fate.

But that is precisely the point about the Shofar. Our Sages, especially of the Kabbalistic tradition, have seen it as a "reminder" both for man and for God. This ancient Jewish alarm rouses both man and God. This is, then, what it tells us: get up, wake up -- for if not, O mortal man, God will act asleep to you! If you will not respond to the call of uru yeshenim mi'shenatkhem, then you cannot expect God to react to urah, lamah tishan. God will be alert to us only as we alert to Him. No wonder the Cantor, in his Hineni he-ani, recited the divine Name Eheyeh asher Eheyeh -- "I am what I am", for this was translated by the Midrash as "I shall be to you as you are to Me!"

Let us heed that majestic and mighty call as we enter this new year. Let us remain alive and alert -- like those road signs in some states which counsel the driver "STAY AWAKE AND LIVE." As we set out on another lap of life's journey, let us stay awake -- to God, to Torah, to our people and all mankind -- and truly live. <sup>and responsive to us</sup> And then He will be awake.

In the words of the poet in the Lekah Dodi: Hitoreri hitoreri  
 Bestir yourself, bestir yourself, for your light has come; arise and shine! Awake, awake, utter a song -- for the Lord's glory is about to be revealed upon us.