

SLEEP FROM THE EYES, SLUMBER FROM THE EYELIDS

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The 15 blessings recited in the morning service are derived from a discussion in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Berakhot 60b, wherein the Amoraim teach that as a person encounters various phenomena in a new day he should offer a blessing of gratitude to God for having provided them. Each of the 15 expresses gratitude for what might be considered ordinary moments in life:¹ hearing a crowing rooster announce the dawn of a new day, stepping safely from bed onto the ground or floor, tying one's shoes, attaching one's belt while dressing, and so forth. One of the most intriguing of the 15 gives thanks to God for removing "sleep from the eyes, slumber from the eyelids." The talmudic discussion in Berakhot links this blessing with the moment when a person first washes his face in the morning, and it is probable that this is the way most Jews understand it as well. But the biblical context of "sleep" and "slumber" may indicate a much more important reason for thanks at the clearing of one's eyes early in the day.

Throughout the Bible, two Hebrew roots convey the idea of sleeping: "yashen," from which the noun "sheyna [sleep]" derives, and "radam," the root of "tardemet [deep sleep]." A third root, "shachav" indicates "lying down," in the sleep of death.² Sleep may be either a positive or a negative experience, depending upon several factors, as the following categories imply.

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN DURING SLEEP

1. A mighty warrior [Sisera] lost his life at the hands of a woman [Yael] because he fell asleep in her tent (Jud. 4:21).

2. An Israelite hero [Samson] lost his hair, his strength, his eyesight, and ultimately his life because he fell asleep on the knees of a deceitful woman [Delilah] whom he should never have trusted (Jud. 16:19).

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3. Saul's jealousy of David forms the backdrop for an episode of great intensity and pathos. Saul had already tried twice to kill David with his spear (I Sam. 18:11; 19:10), and his intention to pursue the matter to its lethal end was apparent. Wherever David fled, Saul followed, from the cave of Adullam (22:1) to a series of locations in the "wilderness" (Ch. 23). Ultimately, David and his men hid deep in the recesses of a cave somewhere in the area of Engedi. When Saul came to that cave to relieve himself, he was momentarily distracted enough that David was able to cut off the edge of his robe in secret (24:1-7). Seemingly touched that David had spared his life, Saul appeared to have called off his vendetta (24:16-22).

A short time later, he pursued him once again, this time heading into the wilderness of Ziph with 3,000 soldiers intent on killing David (26:1-2). But even a furious and jealous king needs to rest, and thus it was that David stood over his pursuer while he slept (26:7), holding his life once more in his hands. That Saul survived his ill-timed sleep was due only to David's respect for the Lord's *mashiach* [anointed one], even though the narrator disclosed that God Himself had cast the *tardemet* [deep sleep] over Saul (26:11-12).

4. Perhaps the most famous decree of King Solomon became necessary because one mother slept while another stole her live baby and replaced it with her own dead one (I Kg. 3:16-27).

5. The prophet Isaiah warned a sinful nation that the enemy swooping down on them, the Assyrian army, was unconquerable because it never slept (5:27).

6. The would-be runaway prophet Jonah *nirdam* [fell into a deep sleep] only to awaken to the fury of a great storm that threatened the lives of an entire crew of innocent men in addition to his own (Jon. 1:4-6). A simple reading of the story seems to indicate a man so emotionally drained by his flight from God that he falls asleep from exhaustion. But his was not merely "sleep," it was *a deep sleep*.

As noted in No. 3 above,³ the noun "*tardema*," formed from the Hebrew root "*radam*" used in Jonah 1:4, is often used to describe a deep sleep induced by the Almighty. If such be the case here, perhaps God brought deep sleep on the prophet while the foreign sailors were casting about frantically trying to determine on whom to lay the blame for the terrible storm. As the only person who was able to sleep during a disaster, Jonah stands apart from everyone else, leaving him already detached from the group when the casting

of lots began. In other words, his deep sleep both removes Jonah from the activities of the sailors and isolates him in preparation for his denotation by lot as the guilty party

7. The Book of Proverbs includes three opinions about excessive sleep. In 10:5, we learn that a son who works hard in summertime acts wisely, while the one who sleeps through harvest time acts shamefully. A similar sentiment is expressed in 19:15 with the notation that a lazy man in a deep sleep [*tardema*] is no less than an idle one who will go hungry. Then in 20:13, a link is made between the love of sleep and poverty, followed by an admonition to *open your eyes and be satisfied with food*.

8. In the Book of Daniel we see an example of the fact that questionable actions affect one's ability to rest properly, as King Darius was unable to sleep when his stern decree left Daniel to languish in the den of lions (Dan 6:18).

WHEN GOOD THINGS HAPPEN DURING SLEEP

1. A deep sleep [*tardema*] brought on by God provided for the creation of Adam's special partner in Genesis 2:21.

2. The prophet Ezekiel envisions a future day when God will end the punishment of His people, restore a Davidic king to power, and make a covenant of peace that rids the world of harmful beasts and renders it safe for humans to live securely in the wilderness and sleep in the forests (Ezek. 34:25).

3. The Book of Psalms offers three pictures of peaceful and secure sleep. In each case a person who is sustained by God can lie down to sleep, and awaken without fear (Ps. 3:6-7; 4:9), knowing that the Lord provides for those whom He loves even in their sleep (127:2).⁴

4. In a situation somewhat analogous to the inability of the Babylonian king to sleep (see No. 8 above), a description of another foreign monarch is found in Esther 6:1, where *the sleep of the king* [Ahasueras] *fled*. Awake in the middle of the night, the King did what many people do, and called for reading material; in his case, the official chronicles of his reign. It is the placement of this event that serves to advance the story line. Vashti had been replaced by Esther, acting with the support of her cousin and adoptive father Mordecai. The evil Haman had hatched his plan of extermination against all Jews to satisfy his hatred of Mordecai, and had received royal approval for

his murderous plan. At the advice of Mordecai, and backed by a praying and fasting Jewish community, Esther had hosted an initial feast the purpose of which had been to invite the King and Haman to a second occasion at which her true request would be made known. That no one yet knew the identity of Esther or her coming request is certified by the description of Haman's enormous pleasure with himself at being on the "A" list (Esther 5:9-14).

Had the King slept serenely through the night, he would never have known of the previous loyal deed of Mordecai, a member of the very people whom Haman intended to exterminate down to the very last Jew (3:13). Only because he was awakened – and surely not by chance! – did he learn that not all Jews were worthy of death; that at least one was a valuable and dependable subject. This knowledge was already swirling in his mind when he learned on the following day that his beautiful queen was also a member of the group hated by Haman.

WHEN A PROPHETIC OR APOCALYPTIC VISION COMES TO THE SLEEPER

1. Genesis 15 records the seventh in a series of ten trials of Abraham,⁵ a sequence of events involving the repetition of Divine promise to Abraham and Abraham's descendants through the yet unborn Isaac. The entire narrative is the record of a vision [*mahazeh*] of the patriarch (v. 1), linked to the deep sleep [*tardema*] that fell upon him in the course of his glimpse into the future Egyptian bondage of his descendants (v. 12). This is followed in the narrative by a formal ceremony of covenant-making between God and Abraham (v. 18).

2. A different context forms the background of a dream experienced by the Pharaoh in which the state of agriculture in his country for the coming 14 years was revealed to him (Gen 41:1-7). Unlike Abraham, who had no difficulty understanding the meaning of his vision, the Pharaoh needed the help of Joseph to capture the full significance of what he had seen.

3. One of the most distressing symptoms of the city of Ariel in Isaiah 29 was its loss of prophetic insight which had occurred when God poured out a *spirit of deep sleep* [*tardema*] and had shut the eyes of the prophets.

4. In Job 4:13, Eliphaz states that he gained insight that helped to explain Job's situation by means of a vision while in a deep sleep [*tardema*], and the youthful Elihu overcame his reluctance to speak out to his elders by explain-

ing that his views on Job's condition had come *in a dream, a vision of the night, when deep sleep [tardema] falls upon men* (33:15).

5. The Book of Daniel twice underscores the relationship between receipt of a vision and the deep sleep of the recipient. Once, Daniel reports, *I sank into a deep sleep [nirdamti] with my face to the ground*, when receiving a message from the angel Gabriel (8:18). A short while later, there came a vision of great warfare that Daniel alone among a group of men saw (10:7). When all the others fled in fright, Daniel stayed to hear the words of the exotic messenger, reporting that *as soon as I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a deep sleep*.⁶ It was in such a condition that the apocalypticist acquired *an understanding of what would happen to [his] people at the end of time* (10:14), this time aided by the angel Michael.

WHEN THE FINAL SLEEP BECOMES PERMANENT

Throughout the long narrative of Kings I and II, a standard phrase is used to describe the death of a King of Israel or Judah, from David (I Kg. 2:10) to Jehoiakim (II Kg. 24:6): He *slept [vayishkav] with his ancestors*.

Jeremiah's vision of Divine judgment uses a semantically equivalent phrase with the root *yashen* to describe the "perpetual sleep [*shenat olam*]" that God will bring upon wicked Babylonia (Jer. 51:39) at the time of His judgment on it.

DOES GOD EVER SLEEP?

Throughout the world of the ancient Near East, gods were presumed to possess human characteristics. They drank, ate, partied, danced, engaged in sex, and became joyous or angry. And they did these things to great excess, drinking and eating enormous quantities of wine and rich food, partying and having sex for months on end without rest. When they became angry, they sought to destroy the entire world, hold back rain, wither crops, and so forth, and when they were happy they made vines produce wine directly without the need for growth, cultivation, or harvesting.

And gods slept. In fact, in the Babylonian creation epic called *Enuma Elish*, the goddess Tiamat was angered and her husband, the god Apsu, was ultimately induced to destroy the second tier of deities in the Babylonian pantheon (known as "the divine brothers") because their noisy habits

disturbed his sleep. Likewise, in the Babylonian flood story given in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it was while Gilgamesh slept that the tricky snake stole from the legendary hero the buckthorn plant that ensured immortality. The Greek god Uranus fathered the Titans upon Mother Earth, and threw his rebellious sons the Cyclopes, into the gloomy underworld of Tartarus. As revenge, Mother Earth persuaded the Titans to attack their father, and armed Cronus (Saturn), the youngest of the seven, with a flint sickle. While Uranus slept, the merciless Cronus castrated him with the flint sickle.

Within the biblical text itself, in Elijah's stinging parody of the Canaanite deity Baal, he taunted Baal's prophets to pray louder in the attempt to awaken him (I Kg. 18:27). Elijah's taunt was probably related to the Canaanite belief that Baal was sometimes defeated by Mot, god of death, requiring his devotees to recite a series of cultic chants designed to arouse to life "the temporarily dead [sleeping] Baal."⁷

In the context of such beliefs, perhaps it was only natural to question whether God was ever asleep. And indeed, at least one troubled worshiper had felt himself so abandoned, his troubles so overlooked, the Face of God so hidden, that he cried out with a plea of desperation: *Rouse Yourself! Why are You sleeping, O Lord? Wake up!* (Ps. 44:24). Psalm 78, a historical summary of several major eras in Israel's past, portrays the Lord having *awakened as if from sleep* (v. 65) prior to His election of the Judahite David to leadership over the descendants of Joseph.

But the official theological affirmation about the eternal vigilance of God comes in Psalm 121:4: *The One who guards Israel will neither slumber nor sleep*. And this assertion is buttressed by a number of other biblical passages. Not only are the Eyes of God watching over the righteous (Ps. 33:18; 34:15), but they oversee the actions of rebellious and sinful nations as well (Ps. 66:7). In short: *The Eyes of God are in every place, watching over both evil and good* (Prov. 15:3; see also Amos 9:8).

THE BIBLICAL LINK BETWEEN "SLEEP" AND "SLUMBER"

The practical wisdom of Proverbs sets human sleep into its proper context. Chapter 6:4-11 is a poem set within the envelope structure of "sleep" and "slumber." It opens with the generic warning: *Do not give sleep to your eyes, slumber to your eyelids*,⁸ and advances with an earthy example of the lowly

ant, which through diligence and hard work, even lacking an elected leader, *prepares its food in the summer, and gathers its provision during harvest-time*. This elicits from the wise teacher a stinging rhetorical question: *How long will you lie down, lazy bones [atzel]? When will you arise from your sleep?* The poem then closes by repeating the two key words from the opening verse to teach the point: *A little **sleep**, a little **slumber**, a little folding of the hands to lie down, and poverty comes like a vagabond, lack like an armed soldier.*⁹

In the light of this biblical picture of sleep, we are entitled to ask about the significance of the thanksgiving given to God for removing "sleep from the eyes, slumber from the eyelids." Is this gratitude for awaking to a new day, for not having died during the sleep of the previous night? Here we note the statement in Berakhot 57b: "Sleep is one-sixtieth part of death," as well as the final prayerful request to be made by a person before going to sleep for the evening: "Enlighten my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death." Or is it an acknowledgement that even the strength to combat laziness and enter into meaningful pursuits derives from the goodness of God?

These questions are surely to be answered by "both . . . and" rather than "either . . . or." Of course the privilege of awaking to a new day is a Divine gift, but the ability to do the hard work of life that staves off poverty is crucial for each day as well. Thus gratitude to God is due for removing both the sleep of death and the sleep of laziness.

NOTES

1. Thus their designation as "everyday miracles" [*nissim bechol yom*].
2. The root "*num* [to be drowsy]" and its nominal derivative "*tenuma*" occur infrequently, usually as a poetic parallel to either "*yashen*" or "*tardema*" (see Prov. 6:4; 6:10; 24:33; 23:21).
3. See also example No. 1 in the next segment/section.
4. This verse is difficult in the MT, as indicated by the note to it in JPS. The final word *shana* must be an alternate spelling for the usual "*sheyna* [sleep]."
5. See Scott B. Noegel, "Abraham's Ten Trials and a Biblical Numerical Convention," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* XXXI:2:122 ((April 2003) pp. 73-83.
6. *Hayta nirdam* is the periphrastic usage of later biblical Hebrew that becomes common in the rabbinic dialect of the Mishnah.
7. See on the point Richard Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987) p. 118.

8. Because they are used in poetic parallelism to each other, it is difficult here to distinguish between the two words "*sheyna*" and "*tenuma*."

9. Literally, "a man [with a] shield." This final statement of comparison is repeated verbatim in Chapter 24:33, following the description of a vineyard that had been neglected by a lazy owner.



QUESTIONS FROM RABBI HAYYIM HALPERN'S BOOK TORAH DIALOGUES

1. Compare the wording in the commandment at the beginning of *Tetzaveh* that deals with the eternal light with earlier commandments for constructing the Tabernacle (esp. Ex. 25:2,8) and the altar (Ex. 20:21). Can you detect and explain the differences?
2. The Torah mentions two people who had short-lived skin leprosy. Who are they? (Hint: they happen to be brother and sister.)
3. The first day of the seventh month is celebrated as Rosh Hashanah (New Year). Why then do you think that the inauguration of the Jubilee began on Yom Kippur, the tenth day of the month (Lev. 25:9)?

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