

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Gedalyah *ben Shmuel a”h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Sleep: Spiritual Pros and Con PARSHAS BEREISHIS 5776

– “And Hashem Elokim caused slumber to fall upon the man, and he slept; and He took one of his sides... And Hashem Elokim fashioned the side... into a woman” (*Bereishis 2:21,22*). This verse marks the first instance in the Torah in which we encounter the institution of “sleep”; and from here Chazal derive that it must be approached with great caution. Commenting on this *passuk*, the Medrash states: “Sleep is the beginning of downfall” (*Bereishis Rabbah 17:5*).

Sleep as a Wake-up Call

It seems that Chazal here were referring to the chain of tragic events that played themselves out in the ensuing narrative. The (literally) utopian situation of Adam and his mate was shattered through the temptations of the serpent, who induced the woman to partake of the forbidden fruit. She subsequently shared it with her husband, which led to their banishment from Gan Eden and the introduction of death to the world. What was the item that set in motion this process of deterioration in the first place? “... Slumber fell upon the man, and he slept.” Thus: “Sleep is the beginning of downfall.”

R’ Eliezer Gordon, venerated Rav and Rosh Yeshivah of Telshe in Europe, used this teaching of Chazal as the basis for the proper approach to sleep. As daily experience testifies, many people embrace and relish this “activity.” But R’ Gordon wondered how such an attitude is possible. “Would anyone go so willfully to his own downfall?” he would ask. And therefore he would advise people to minimize their sleeping time to whatever extent possible. This sentiment is reflected in the Mishnah in Avos (6:6) that lists the attributes required for Torah mastery:

התורה נקנית בארבעים ושמונה דברים, ואלו הן, בתלמוד, בשמיעת האזן... במעוט תענוג, במעוט שנה...

“The Torah is acquired through forty-eight items, and these are they: diligent study, a listening ear... minimizing (one’s indulgence in) pleasure, minimizing sleep...”

The saintly R’ Yitzchak Zev Yadler, in his commentary *Tiferes Tzion* on the Medrash, understands Chazal’s characterization of sleep as a portent for downfall in quite a literal sense. That is, he sees the episode of Adam as a model for any similar occurrence in the future. Thus, whenever a person discovers that he has drifted off to sleep, there is cause for concern. If his slumber can be attributed to bona-fide fatigue – for example, from a general lack of sleep – then he need not worry. But if, for no apparent reason, a person suddenly dozes off – this may actually be a Divine warning. Just as with Adam, a “*tardeimah*” has been placed upon him, signaling some imminent peril, *rachmana litzlan*. It is a “wake-up call” to repent.

This is not to say that the danger will necessarily strike during the course of this particular sleeping session. In fact, the Radbaz asserts that – contrary to popular conception – there is actually no such thing as a person departing in his sleep. He explains, based on the Zohar, that even if the appointed time arrives while the individual is sleeping, he will first reawaken. The *passuk* states: “*B’yadcha afkid ruchi* – I place my soul in Your hand for safekeeping” (*Tehillim 31:6*). Hashem serves as the most faithful “*Shomer*” (Watchman) for a person’s soul while he sleeps. As such, when it is entrusted into His care, Hashem does not simply

“withhold” the guarded item. Even if one’s time has arrived, Hashem will first return the *neshamah* to the body; the individual awakens and only then departs.

Sleep and Torah

It is important to note that sleep, of course, has its positive side as well – a facet also derived from this week’s *parshah*. During the Creation narrative, at the end of each day’s creation, the *passuk* comments on Hashem’s satisfaction with His work: “*V’hinei tov* – And behold, it was good.” On the sixth day, the assessment increased in magnitude: “*V’hinei tov me’od* – And behold, it was very good” (*Bereishis 1:31*). Which item of creation was responsible for the heightened praise? Chazal identify it as none other than sleep: “*V’hinei tov me’od* – This refers to sleep... For with some minimal sleep, a person can arise refreshed to toil extensively in Torah” (*Yalkut Shimoni 1:16*).

The benefits of sleep for Torah are obvious; as Chazal stated, it grants a person the necessary strength to learn. But there is also a very direct relationship to Torah – during sleep itself. R’ Chaim Volozhiner, prime disciple of the Vilna Gaon, wrote an introduction to his *rebbe’s* commentary on the *Safra D’tzni’usa*. In this classic essay, in which he speaks extensively of the Gaon’s life and accomplishments, he quotes the Gaon as stating that the primary purpose for which sleep was created is for attainments of Torah wisdom. There are numerous things that a person cannot grasp while he is awake, as his soul resides within his body. This is a result of the limitations of his physicality, as his body serves as an obstacle for further enlightenment. Thus, when he sleeps and his soul is unfettered by the body – clothed, instead, in a sublime, ethereal casing – the individual is granted revelations of a wondrous order. R’ Chaim states there how the Gaon himself was privy to such remarkable nighttime revelations, having been visited by such distinguished personages as Eliyahu Hanavi and Ya’akov Avinu, who shared with him Torah secrets.

In a number of places throughout the Talmud, we encounter a *halachic* dispute between the Amora’im (Talmudic scholars) Rav and Rav Sheshes. This in itself is nothing out of the ordinary; what is unusual, however, is the manner in which Rav Sheshes chooses to express his disagreement. At first glance, it almost seems disparaging of the other sage. As stated, for example, in *Yevamos (24b)*: אָמַר רַב שֵׁשֶׁת אָמִינָא כִּי נִיִּים וְשָׁכִיב רַב אָמַר לְהָאִי שְׁמַעְתָּתָא – “Rav Sheshes said: ‘I say, Rav must have been asleep when he related this teaching of his!’” Certainly, such elevated individuals debated the issues but refrained from personal insults!

In his introduction to his treatise, the *Imrei Binah* states that far from insulting, Rav Sheshes’s true intent was one of praise. He explains the statement along the lines of the above: namely, a reference to the remarkable attainments of wisdom that are possible during slumber. In fact, as related by the Gaon, these are often of a caliber that cannot be grasped by regular, awake individuals. What Rav Sheshes meant is that Rav’s teachings are of such an exalted level that they cannot be fully comprehended by ordinary scholars. “It must be,” he exclaimed, “that Rav attained such lofty wisdom through revelations of the night; this is why regular people have difficulty grasping it.”