

HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU'RE AWAKE?

There is an old, graphic Yiddish expression of the sense of sad and wise weariness: **חלום איז אַ לעבן**, "life is but a dream."

Often, indeed, it does seem that life is nothing more than a dream! However, Rabbi Israel Salanter, the great father of the Musar movement, commented on this expression as follows: **נאָר אז מען שלאָפט אַ גאנץ לעבן**, "only if you sleep away a whole life!"

Indeed so! But -- how do you know if you're awake?

Now, that sounds like a silly question, inviting even sillier responses. However, I do not mean it simplistically. Nor do I mean the question philosophically -- for there were a number of philosophical schools in England and on the continent which questioned whether or not we exist objectively, and by what criteria we can judge that we actually exist, except in someone else's dreams.

Rather, I mean the question existentially and spiritually and psychologically: How do we know if and when we are alert, fully alive, totally conscious, engaged?

Alertness or insensitivity, being asleep or awake, are relative terms. I have met people going through the motions of life -- the conversations, the pleasantries, the business, the professions -- and yet I know for sure that they are asleep. In fact, I know people who I believe never have been awake!

So, how do you know if you're awake?

Permit me to offer a Jewish answer by referring to the **ברכות השחר**, the morning blessings.

The last on the list of these blessings is one in which we say: Blessed art Thou, O Lord... **המעביר שנה מעיני ותלומה מעפעפי**, "Who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids." However, of all the blessings in this group, this is the only one that is not recited in isolation. That is why, instead of answering "Amen" after it, we proceed immediately to the next blessing, which begins:

יהי רצון מצפניך ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו שתרגילנו בתורתך

"And may it be Thy will, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, that You habituate us to Thy Torah..."

These two blessings or prayers are treated as one. Why is that?

One answer is that we ought to intend to sleep well in order to have the strength to study Torah. The famous author of "**טורי זהב**" (to Sh.A., E.H., 25) says, in the name of Maimonides, that if scholars sleep in order to study, **שכר על השנה**, "they receive reward for their sleeping." This is a beautiful answer, but not completely satisfactory, for the question remains that the blessing is recited not on sleeping, but on awakening!

Permit me to suggest another answer, namely, that if we do not study Torah, if there is no **שתרגילנו בתורתך**, how do we know in the first place that we are awake? Without Torah, we must always confront the basic question of what criteria we have to know that we are not really asleep. With *talmud torah*, we know for sure that we are awake.

Hence, the blessing of **המעביר שנה**, that God removes sleep from our eyes, is intimately connected with the request to God to habituate us to a life of the study of Torah. It is Torah which determines if we are in slumber or aroused.

In a general sense, I would say that the criterion of wakefulness is the ability to get out of oneself. It must be the most basic answer to all those who wonder if they really are awake, who are perplexed by their own persistent superficiality, who complain of the feeling that life seems to be passing them by, who worry that they seem to be skimming over the surface of life like some excellent but unwilling water-skier, who never seem to taste deeply of the cup of life.

The egocentric, the narcissist, the boy or girl or man or woman lost in daydreams, always feeding his or her own ego, caught up in reveries of self-indulgence -- is **נאִרְטָאָפֶן**, asleep, at most semi-conscious. It is only when you get out of yourself, when you are engaged with others, that you can consider yourself awake.

When that famous boat was sinking and all the passengers except Jonah were praying, the captain rightly reproached Jonah with the famous and sharp words, **מַה זָכְךָ נֹרָדִים**, "what are you doing sleeping?!" He should have done as the others did -- be concerned with the safety and security of his fellows, but instead he was not. One who is involved only in himself is a somnabulist who may give the illusion of being awake, but really is not.

It is not easy to stay awake. As a speaker, I know that as a persistent fact and a professional challenge. You need something to pull your interest away from dead center -- namely, you self -- and activate it, and engage it to some great cause or compelling ideal or transcendent goal or profound love. And what is it that, for the Jew, combines all these things -- cause, ideal, goal, love? Clearly, it is Torah.

That is why the Tradition teaches us that there is a custom to study all night on Shavuot and not to sleep -- and I am pleased that about 100 people did so here at The Center this Shavuot -- in order to make up for a rather startling occurrence. That is, that the People of Israel, who used to get up at the crack of dawn in the desert of Sinai, slept late on the morning that they were to receive the Torah at Sinai. God had to wake them with **קוֹלוֹת יְבִרְקִים**, thunder and lightening, a kind of celestial alarm-clock. So, Tradition informs us of the relationship of sleep and Torah -- that they are in contrast with each other!

How, then, shall we keep ourselves awake, alive, and engaged, according to the Torah?

First, the Torah teaches us that we are part of a continuum of generations, and thus breaks the cocoon of our selfishness by forcing us to attach ourselves to the past. When we remember the relationships that link us to parents and grandparents, when we are forced to confront the fact that history was not born on our birthdays, then we can begin to avoid the moral drowsiness and psychological languor that comes from being an isolated monad. In this sense, Yizkor does more for those who remember than for those who are remembered.

Second, to become alive and alert one must reach out to others, in the horizontal or contemporary sense, and assume responsibility for his fellow Jews.

Of God Himself we are told:

הִנֵּה זֶה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְזֶה יֵשֶׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' יִשְׁמְרֶךָ ה' צִלְךָ עַל יַד יְמִינֶךָ

"Behold the Guardian of Israel doth neither sleep nor slumber, the Lord shall watch over you and be your shadow over your right hand." God's sleeplessness, His quality of alertness -- **זֶה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְזֶה יֵשֶׁן** -- is expressed by His **שְׁמִירָה** or care and concern for others: He is the **שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל**, the Guardian of Israel.

So is it for us. If we wish to live fully, deeply, we must live for others as well as for ourselves.

As Jews, we must do that by responding to the call of UJA and Federation, especially on this weekend devoted to the "Mobilization for Survival" campaign. It is not enough

merely to issue a deep Jewish groan and say, "the world is against us." Neither is it enough to take any momentary delight from the disunity of the Arab States -- which at worst is only an illusion of good news for us, and at best a deferral of the crisis. We must do something to help Israel defend itself, and to help it strengthen its own inner fiber.

Finally, we are back to our original statement: the study of Torah is the best way to be awake. Without it, life for the Jew is full of voids and vacuums, and life can be one long yawn occasionally interrupted by brief periods of semi-consciousness. But with the study of Torah, with the awareness of its summons and demands, its promises and consolations, its intellectual stimulation and moral challenge -- we are fully and deliciously alive.

Permit me to offer an interesting historical footnote from my own research. There is an interesting literature about an odd phenomenon that is peculiarly Jewish: that of many saints and scholars who experienced creative ideas in the study of Torah during dreams, while asleep! Now, during the period which saw the emergence of Hasidism, we find two opposite views. The Gaon of Vilna tells us that Torah which is studied and achieved during one's sleep is not genuine study. The Hasidim had the reverse point of view: if you study Torah during your sleep, then that is proof that it is not genuine sleep! Either way, both agree that sleep and Torah study are antonymous, they are in direct opposition to each other.

So, on this Shavuot when we remember the revelation of Torah at Sinai, we must determine that we shall help God, as it were, **שתרגילנו בתורתך**, to become "regulars" in the study of Torah. In that manner, we shall have good reason to thank the Lord in the words of the conclusion of that blessing,

ברוך אתה ה' הגומל חסדים טובים לעמו ישראל

"Blessed art Thou O Lord, who bestows gracious lovingkindness upon His people."