

The
CHASSIDUS
PERSPECTIVE
with Reb Yoel Kahn



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PURPOSEFUL SLEEP

The Midrash relates that the Jews slept during the night preceding *Matan Torah*. "The sleep of *Atzeres* (Shavuos) was sweet, the night was short, and even the insects didn't bite." When Hashem arrived in the morning to give them the Torah, He was dismayed, asking, "Why have I come and no one is here? Why have I called and there is no one to answer?" and he then proceeded to wake them.

This is one of the reasons for the custom of remaining awake and learning Shavuos night. This is known as "*tikun leil Shavuos*," literally translated as "rectifying the night of Shavuos," since we are correcting the wrong that occurred this very night, in which the Jews slept before *Matan Torah*.

CULMINATION OF A COUNTDOWN

This story seems quite odd. How can it be that the Jews went to sleep immediately prior to receiving the Torah?

This is even more surprising when reflecting on the state of the Jews at that time. The Ran explains the background of the *mitzvah of sefiras ha'omer*: when the Jews discovered, once leaving Egypt, that they would be receiving the Torah in fifty days, they eagerly counted the elapsing days, due to their great yearning to receive the Torah. How can it be that as the Jews concluded the countdown, when they were about to experience what they had been waiting for, they went to sleep?!

Additionally, the Jews had radically refined themselves as the giving of the Torah approached. We see this from the *posuk*, in which we are instructed to count fifty days. This seems problematic, as we only count forty-nine. Chassidus explains that while there are "fifty gates of *binah*," a human can only comprehend forty-nine "gates" with his own efforts. Each day of *sefiras ha'omer* corresponds to

another "gate," reflecting an added level of refinement. After reaching the forty-ninth "gate," our achievements are crowned by receiving the fiftieth "gate" from Heaven.

This is all in reference to contemporary *sefirah*; we can only imagine the spiritual refinement of the Jews at that time! And so, between their lofty level and their intense anticipation, how is it that they went to sleep?!

LOFTY SLUMBER

We must therefore conclude that the sleep was intended as a form of preparation for the Torah. How so?

Sleep is a process by which the soul partially departs from the body. The Gemara says that "sleep is a sixtieth of death," and that's intended in a good way as well. Our souls are ordinarily confined within our bodies, no matter how refined they are; even the souls of perfect *tzaddikim* are restricted by their bodies while vested there. But "when we sleep, our soul rises to Heaven and draws life." Leaving the body allows the soul to attain spiritual levels it would otherwise be unable to achieve.

There are numerous tales of *tzaddikim* who, after placing effort during the day to comprehend a certain concept in Torah, absorbed that concept specifically when asleep. This is because the soul is only capable of maximizing its potential once it is (somewhat) separated from the body.

This is why the Jews slept the night before *Matan Torah*. They reckoned that since the giving of the Torah, the fiftieth level, was so sublime and beyond their reach, the best preparation would be to achieve the greatest heights humanly possible. This would be accomplished by going to sleep, enabling the soul to be unfettered by the physical body. In this way, the soul would be able to reach the extent of its capacities, and thereby be ideally positioned for the experience of *Matan Torah*.

This is the meaning of the Midrash's statement that "the sleep of *Atzeres* was sweet," referring to *spiritual* sweetness.

The Jews reckoned that the best preparation would be accomplished by going to sleep, enabling the soul to be unfettered by the physical body.

Furthermore, “the night was short.” “Night” represents darkness and concealment. Since the “night” was “short” due to their refined state, they decided to go to sleep, to leave behind whatever little bit of darkness remained.

We can now understand why they the insects did not bite them. This was a miraculous phenomenon, in defiance of nature. Had their sleep simply been a straightforward case of apathy and carelessness, then there would be no basis for the insects miraculously not biting them. However, this was not the case: this was a noble, “sweet” sleep, to the extent that it even affected the creatures in their vicinity.

DON'T ESCAPE!

However, no matter how good their intentions were, Hashem ultimately was unhappy about their act, and we repair it until this day.

What was wrong with what they did? Based on the above, sleeping is the ultimate preparation!

One of the accomplishments of *Matan Torah* was the phenomenon of physical *mitzvos*. Although the *Avos* observed the entire Torah, they did so in a spiritual sense. The Zohar explains that Yaakov's sticks were the equivalent of *tefillin*, and channeled the spiritual force of the *mitzvah*. However, the sticks themselves did not become holy. Today, once *tefillin* are written properly, they become sacred articles, and when they are wrapped around the arm, the arm itself becomes refined.

The fact that a physical article like *tefillin* can acquire holiness was made possible by Hashem's descent during *Matan Torah*. Theoretically, Hashem could have lifted us to Heaven and given us the Torah there. But He did not do so, because the goal is for Torah to transform the physical world down here. If someone today were to do as Yaakov did, his efforts would be worthless,

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because it is crucial to perform *mitzvos* with physical objects. In fact, our physical *mitzvos* achieve more today than what the *Avos* accomplished with their spiritual *mitzvos*.

This is why sleeping as a preparation for *Matan Torah* was incorrect. Since *Matan Torah* was all about elevating the physical, the Jews’ preparation should have reflected that as well—not to go to sleep and escape the world, but instead to stay up, allowing their souls to remain inside their bodies. We therefore engage every

year in “*tikun*,” rectifying the night of Shavuos.

SPREADING THE WARMTH

A person may think that the ultimate goal is to disengage from the world around him. “I will devote myself to studying deep, lofty concepts of Torah,” he may say. “My ‘sleep’ is ‘sweet,’ and I am working on making the ‘night’—concealment—‘short!’”

Such a person is (as the saying goes) like “a ‘tzaddik’ in a fur coat.” He doesn’t care about what’s going on around him, as long as he remains warm.

Additionally, a person may claim that he is unworthy of such a task. “Who am I to influence others?” he may ask.

However, Shavuos teaches us that this approach is incorrect. Hashem *descended* during *Matan Torah* so that the Torah will transform the world. We must likewise reach out to other Jews and encourage them to observe Torah and *mitzvos*. And as to our misplaced humility, in addition to the fact that to be honest, we typically think we know a lot, we must take the little that we do know and share it with others.

For further learning see *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 4, pp. 1024ff.

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