

I WAS ASLEEP BUT MY HEART AWOKE
Rosh Hashanah Drash 5780, Rabbi Hannah Dresner

In acknowledgment of Rabbi Sara Bracha Gershuni's creative English translation of the Song of Songs verse, and Rabbi Sam Feinsmith's meditation teaching on spiritual sleep and wakefulness for the Clergy Leadership Program of The Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

From the Song of Songs, Chapter 5

**אני ישנה וליבי ער, וליבי ער
קול דודי דופק פתחי לי**

**I was asleep but my heart awoke, my heart awoke
Is that my Dear One, knocking on my door?**

**I was asleep but my heart awoke, my Lover spoke
Is that my Sweetheart, calling out to me?**

Riding through emerald farmland toward the Baltimore airport, sharing an Uber with my meditation teacher, modern Orthodox rabbi Sam Feinsmith – he looked out at the verdant landscape and exclaimed: “Doesn’t this just wake you up?”

After we’d taken the landscape in for a few silent moments, he continued: “You know, I once heard Tich Nhat Hanh teach that after this life ends, there is only an infinitesimal chance that we will ever again be manifest in human form. *This* is our highest life-form, so we’d better make the most of it.”

And I would add: *Al achat kama va-chama* – how much the more so, if you don’t believe in reincarnation! *This*, this life, is the great deployment of our souls, the great opportunity, the great adventure, and sometimes I get the sense we’re sleeping through it.

We’re prone to holding ourselves in just enough darkness to passively maintain what we believe is a manageably small reality. We dull our awareness so that an automatic life can run a course uninterrupted by painful truths – both from within and without. We engage in activities that keep us too busy to think disturbing thoughts or to feel the ache of deep desire - activities that may be pleasurable but are meaningless in the ultimate scheme of our flourishing, activities that keep us from doing what we might long to do, or being who we might yearn to be.

We are prone to mislead ourselves with a blurred vision that allows us to imagine things that are not real, believe we have proof of the fictions we hold fast to without testing them, justification for our habits. We are prone to distract ourselves such that we don’t see pitfalls, and we end up making some making some terrible mistakes. And self-absorbed, somnambulant, we don’t always notice the magic that does exist, right in front of our eyes.

Don't get me wrong: I know full-well that there is pain in life that's too profound to take in fully. And there's health in the mind's filters, holding at bay the magnitude of some truths so that we process bit by bit. A healthy grief process unfolds in stages, and this is good. But it's not what I'm talking about.

Our daily liturgy offers words of gratitude that our souls have returned to our bodies after the little-death of sleep, embracing the possibility that, as Hassidic master *Reb Nachman of Bratzlav* teaches, every exhalation is, potentially our last, the breath *wanting* to remain God – the soul needing to actively return to life in the body with every in-breath. *Talmud Brachot* considers sleep 1/60th of death. After all, if we don't die a little, we can't be reborn in the new day.

Ecclesiastes Chapter 5 exclaims:

”המיתים אינם יודעים מאומה” - “The dead know nothing.” And the Talmud asks: Who are these *meitim* - these dead, who know nothing? Answering: They are *reshaim* – which we generally translate as “wicked” ones, but by which the Talmud means careless, un-mindful people who do tremendous damage because they're numb to the *Malchut* – the Majesty, reckless because they are insensitive to the beauty and potential for vitality in every lived moment. Today, as we sort through our lives, separating particles of evil from *nekudot tovot* - the particles of good, let's understand that, here, the Talmud equates evil with lack of conscious attention to life, and equates good with mindful awareness.

Warning against psycho-spiritual sleep, the Italian Kabbalist Moseh Chayyim Lutzatto, the *RamKal*, quotes from Psalm 104:

”תשת חשך, ויהי לילה” – “You bring darkness, and behold: ...night!” The *RamKal's* gloss? If you cultivate darkness in your mind, in your heart, in your third eye, you will *bring on* the “Night” with a capitol “N”.

In today's Torah narrative Hagar experiences a dark night of the soul, but she breaks through her darkness, providing us with an indispensable touchstone of volition. Dispirited by rejection and faint with hunger, she sets her son aside, out of her sight, wanting, as it were, to sleep though his death. But then, God calls out to her asking: “*Ma lach?*” “What's the matter, Hagar?” The question wakes her up, “opening her eyes so that she sees a spring of water.” The imminence of death woke the sleeping God-voice inside, sharpening her perception and arousing the prospect of hope, so that she sees the well of water she had not noticed, but was, perhaps, always there.

When God initiates contact with humans in the Torah, often it takes the form of a question. Clearly, God knows where Adam and Eve are when God cries out: “*Ayeka?*” – “Where are you?” and God knows what's the matter with Hagar and Ishmael. The question is rhetorical, aiming at awakening them to their inner states of alienation. The questions are God's way of asking them to reflect on the place they've retreated to inside themselves. The questions are the Torah's way of expressing the emergence of an internal God-voice, knocking at the sleeping hearts.

Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches that “Where are you?” and “What’s the matter” are wake-up calls that go out again and again in Torah, as in our own lives. They are echoes, he says, of a still small voice of ineffable, mysterious glory, coming from within. Some remnant, some echo of the glory of the world, of Spirit, was still alive in Hagar, even as she faded, and that liveliness of spirit woke her up.

The very first *halachot* codified in the canon of Jewish law is the category of how a Jew is to conduct herself upon waking in the morning. It opens: “Rise up like a lion, to serve your Creator!” Riffing on this, *Reb Nachman’s* disciple *Reb Noson* teaches - in the name of his Master, that even in psycho-spiritual “sleep,” there is a part of us that clings to the life-force, knock-knock-knocking at the heart’s door, urgent as a lover, and fierce as a lion in rousing us to embrace faith, hope, and *joie de vivre*.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow calls Hagar an activist, willing a solution, *crying* the life-giving water she and her son need. In desperation she changes her attitude, *creates* the well, and in its salvation, a salvation she initiates by rousing herself, she discovers *Shechinah’s* present accompaniment; she discovers that *Shechinah* was with her all along. And the narrative goes on to tell us that, awake to her life and her agency to direct it, Hagar acts, reviving her son, seeking safety and community, raising her son to a high-dream of greatness.

Reb Zalman used to tell that his young daughter Shalvi once asked him: “*Aba*, if when we’re asleep we can wake up, can we wake up *more* when we’re awake?”

Ani yeshena – I am [as if] asleep, *v’libi er* – but my heart wakes up, aroused by the sound of my Beloved – *kol dodi, dofek* - knocking on my door. *Pitchi* – open it! Respond! Wake up to the wellspring that’s been there all along, to the grandeur of the cosmos, to relationships calling out to be enjoyed, to the tremendous permission to be, to feel, to express, to give, to heal, that this life affords!

And wake up to this one life’s need of you. Wake up to the realities it would be easier to sleep through. In other words, be Woke to your longings and your deeper longings, the ones you don’t dare name, and be Woke to the terrible inequities it will take the conscious behavior of every one of us to re-balance.

When I die, the Talmud teaches, the measure of the Holy Court will be: was I the best Hannah Dresner I could be? Did I live into my potential? Did I fulfill the aspect of perfecting our world that none but me can contribute?

It’s a tall order, but the point of the High and Holy Days is to wake up, acknowledge the tallest order, break down what needs to be broken down so that we see with more truth and more compassion, and build up what needs to be built up so that we might stay awake more of the time, know our own hearts more of the time, respond to the heart of humanity more of the time, respond to despair of Gaia, more of the time.

On Rosh Hashanah we declare: *Hayom harat olam!* – Today the world is created! Anew! And we sound the Shofar, the plaintive call of alert that provokes us anew. We began the year past with honest resolve, but we’ve become tired or injured and we have devolved to placating ourselves with avoidance and self-soothing. Still, here we are today, gathered because we *want* to refresh. The particle of *chi* that’s still awake yearns to be nurtured.

That surviving *nekudah tovah* - that particle in us still in service of Spirit even after the misadventures of the year past, remembers how good it feels to unlock our hearts in the company of community as we redevelop a collective energy of good intentions. And we inspire one another with our communal prayer-song, *notnim rishut ze la ze* – fostering one another’s renaissance.

Reb Zalman, *zochrono l’vracha*, taught our quote from Song of Songs: “*Kol dodi dofek*” – “My Beloved is knocking” asking us to find our pulse. And I ask you to put a finger on your own wrist till you find yours... Be patient with yourself till you find it, and when you do, let’s just sit, feeling the knock...

“That’s it!” he’d say. That’s the Beloved knocking inside you.

In the knock of our own pulse we might be able to feel the surviving particle I imagine to be God knocking at the heart’s door, a small agitation from within that we can return to, and pay attention to, during these days we’ve set aside away from the din and lull of every-day routine. Here, in the safety and stimulus of this company of friends, our yearning hearts shake us, breaking through our haze, calling out, asking: *Ayeka* – Where *are* you! *Ma lach?* What’s the matter? Wake up!

Waking up is the stuff of *teshuvah*. May we return to our aliveness on this, the day the world is reborn.

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