

# WAKING UP IN TIME

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

*I am asleep but my heart is awake... (Song of Songs)*

I consider it a gift from heaven. I don't know where it came from or why I was fortunate enough to be able to retrieve it. That year, I had an ambitious study partner that had me up early in the morning at a time bordering on late night. I'm still a little tired from that epoch, though I don't regret the learning a bit. We agreed to allow ourselves to sleep a little later on the Eve of Rosh Hashana so we can be rested and calm to deal with our families in the important days ahead. The inner alarm clock, however, woke me at the usual holy hour, and I immediately pressed the inner snooze alarm, thankful I still had plenty of time.

While I lay there in a state of half sleep, I became aware of a thought that was percolating there in the back of my brain. Had I fallen back asleep it would have gone as geese and flown away. At that moment, amazingly a thunderstorm whipped up outside and with a brief crackle there followed an explosive boom that rocked the whole house. Everyone was shaken awake. The children started to cry and I was sitting up in bed consciously aware, now, of a new idea, not knowing, yet, what it really meant: "Rosh HaShana is the Krias Shema Al HaMita (The bedtime reading of Shema Yisrael) for the entire year!" Later that morning I shared what I thought it meant with one of my teachers who patted me on the back and said earnestly, "It's the real truth, Label!" I didn't dare argue with him.

The Code of Jewish Law begins with the requirement to "wake up like a lion" hungry for life's important tasks. The only problem is that the law is directed at a sleeping man. How does one wake up in the morning like a lion? Simple! Go to bed like a lion! If one goes to sleep like a lion, he stands a fighting chance to wake up like a lion. If one goes to bed like a slug, he'll probably wake up like a slug. Therefore, before we go to bed at night, we have a custom to say a "bedtime shema". This helps set our mind on what we are getting up for. If we go to sleep with a sense of purpose we wake up on purpose.

If you were in a hotel in some far off city and the next day there was an important early morning business meeting, before retiring for the night you might do two necessary things: 1) Set that alarm clock there on the night table, and 2) Set off the alarm. Why set off the alarm clock at night? Two reasons: 1) To see if it actually works; 2) To tune your ear to the sound you will need to respond to in the morning when you are deep asleep.

That's what the evening "bedtime shema" is meant to accomplish, and it could be what the blast of

the Shofar on Rosh Hashana is doing as well. On Rosh Hashana we are arousing our consciousness, if even temporarily, to be clear and intensely aware of our sublime mission here on earth collectively and individually. In accepting The Almighty as our sovereign authority, we are simultaneously crowning ourselves with a supreme sense of purpose. The Shofar, playing the conscience, hauntingly articulates the urgency implied by its potential.

Then (no cynicism intended) we are apt to fall asleep for the rest of the year, losing consciousness of the original who, what why, where, when, and how did we get into this, anyway? The Shofar installs that signal that will stir us from slumber, no matter how deep the exile of sleep. Just as Rosh Hashana impacts the whole year so too the Shofar. It has something strong to say almost all and every day.

Just where do we hear that call and cadence in the course of our daily lives? It's no mistake that emergency vehicles know just how to get our attention. The tender infant has a song that opens a mother's heart. Buzzers and birds nudge with a similar subtle urge. Even as I write, workmen saw and hammer. Elsewhere the traffic jams and a chorus of cars clamor. What one person can do to stall or advance the flow of history! Ask not for whom the phone rings...

When the ear and heart are properly sensitized on Rosh Hashana we may merit to hear the ubiquitous and poetic message of the Shofar speaking directly to us at any time, and hope to wake up just in time.

Have a good Shabbos

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