

# PHYSICAL OR SPIRITUAL - WHO'S IN CONTROL?

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

*"And Yaakov awoke from his sleep, and he said, 'Indeed, Hashem is present in this place, and I did not know!'" (28:17)*

The Ba'al Shem Tov had many illustrious grand-children. One of them was Rebbe R' Baruch of Mezhibuz zt"l, whose yohrtzeit will be on the eighteenth of Kislev. It is told that even as a young child, R' Baruch's great character and holy neshamah (soul) were already becoming apparent. Both the "Maggid," R' Dov Ber of Mezritsch, and the famed tzaddik, R' Pinchus of Koritz, great tzaddikim in their own right, remarked about the young R' Baruch: He is truly amazing - something special!

Once, R' Pinchus summoned a few of his students. "I have told you," he said, "that the lad Baruch is very special. Now let me show you something." He proceeded to take them to his room, where the young boy lay asleep in his bed. "Watch this," said R' Pinchus, covering the mezuzah with his hand. The young Baruch began to toss back and forth under his covers. When R' Pinchus removed his hand, he stopped. Again he covered over the mezuzah with his hand, and again the boy tossed. When the hand was removed, he slept peacefully. "This," said R' Pinchus, "is the sleep of the holy. Even as they lay asleep in their beds, they do not detach themselves from Hashem."

It says, "And he lay down in that place." Rashi, quoting Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 68:11), explains that the words "in that place" are an expression of exclusion - only there did he lay down, but during the fourteen years that he studied Torah in the Academy of Ever he did not lay down at night.

So engrossed was Yaakov in his Torah study that he did not lay down [in a bed] for fourteen years. When necessary, he would snatch a nap. Evidently, Yaakov felt that sleeping in a bed was a waste of time - an unnecessary luxury. Now he comes to Har haMoriah, and he has the sudden urge to lay down. While he sleeps, he has the most amazing vision - he communicates with Hashem. When he awoke, one can imagine his shock. Here he has been vigilantly avoiding laying down for years, and when he finally does so, he reaches new heights of spirituality! "Indeed," he exclaimed, "Hashem is present in this place, and I did not know!" I now realize that studying Torah is not the only way one can serve Hashem. Even sleep can be a holy endeavour! [Ohev Yisrael]

This is a very basic Jewish tenet. There are many ways to serve Hashem outside of study and prayer. Had Hashem so desired, He could have given the Torah to the malachim (angels), who would have served Him on an entirely spiritual plane. But He didn't. He gave the Torah to us, physical beings, flesh and blood, with physical needs and desires. Our task is to control our physicality and channel

its use to further enhance and strengthen our avodas Hashem (service of G-d); and not let our physicality control us.

When a Jew goes to bed at night, he shouldn't view it as the kind of self-serving "Aaah"-sleep which society portrays; but rather as a preparation for tomorrow's avodah. Eating is no longer a self-indulging exercise in taste-bud stimulation, but rather the organic revival of one's spirit. Even relaxation has its place; not a pleasure-seeking effort which maximizes self-gratification, but rather a break taken to rejuvenate and refresh. Even socializing and "shmoozing" can become tools which aid and enhance one's avodas Hashem.

It's all a question of intent. Two people can eat the same meal, and sleep in the same bed. The one who considers these physical indulgences as necessary stepping-blocks without which he would tire and wilt, brings himself closer to Hashem, while at the same time enjoying a delicious meal and a restful sleep. He, however, who perceives these acts not as a means to an end, but rather as an end in and of themselves, distances himself from his own spirituality, and declares that in essence man is not very different from the animal, but for the sophistication of his pleasures.

Further on in this week's parsha we read (31:17-18), "Yaakov arose [from the house of Lavan] and lifted his sons and his wives onto the camels. He led all his livestock and all his possessions that he had amassed... to come to his father Yitzchak, to the land of Canaan." Many people allow themselves to be controlled by their physical desires. They let their possessions, so to speak, lead them. Not Yaakov. "He led all his livestock and all his possessions." He was in control; they were merely tools to enhance and strengthen his ultimate goal - to serve Hashem. His possessions were the supporting cast, not the lead actor. [Divrei Yisrael]

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