

A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And the Children of Israel went on the dry land, in the midst of the sea. (14:29)

The Mishnah in the sixth chapter of Pirkei Avos delineates the "Forty- eight qualities through which Torah is acquired." One of these qualities is, "Be-miḥput sheina, through limited sleep." Indeed, the tzaddikim (righteous) of previous generations were famous for their ability to get by with a minimal amount of sleep. The Vilna Gaon used to sleep one and a half hours each night, which were divided up into three shifts of half an hour each. (Even as he slept, it is said, his lips murmured words of Torah.) During the day he would sleep for another half an hour, bringing his 24 hour total to a paltry two hours of sleep. The holy Sanzer Rav, who also slept for no more than two hours every twenty-four, is said to have once remarked, "Do not think I sleep so little because I am trying to inflict myself; rather I do so out of great love for serving Hashem and studying Torah!"

The rebbitzen of the holy Rebbe R' Shmelke of Nikelsbourg once came to her husband's contemporary, the Rebbe R' Elimelech of Liezensk with a desperate plea: The doctors had warned her husband that he was sleeping far too little, and that his health was deteriorating as a result. Yet their warnings had fallen on deaf ears: Her holy husband absolutely refused to change his gruelling schedule to allow for more sleep. It was a situation of pikuach nefesh, a question of life and death, she said. Perhaps, she pleaded, R' Elimelech would be able to convince her husband to allow himself a little more rest!

Soon afterwards, R' Elimelech arrived in Nikelsbourg with a group of his disciples. They were told to go about arranging a seudah, a festive meal, in honour of the Rebbe R' Shmelke. R' Elimelech personally invited R' Shmelke to the seudah, an honour which he could not refuse. At the meal, the Rebbe R' Elimelech took out a bottle of very rare whisky, poured a glass for himself and for R' Shmelke, and made a le-chaim. R' Elimelech then seemingly sipped from his schnapps, as did R' Shmelke. In truth, however, R' Elimelech did not drink from his whisky, for it was spiked. Even a small amount was enough to put R' Shmelke to sleep on the spot. R' Elimelech had R' Shmelke carried off to his home, where he was put to bed for the night.

The next morning, the Rebbe R' Shmelke awoke, startled to have slept through the night, but with an invigorated spirit. Upon arriving in shul to pray, he was joined by a large group of Chassidim, who did not fail to notice the unusual energy of the Rebbe's prayers. They too felt energized by the Rebbe's powerful spirit, and that day's Shacharis took on a special quality. Indeed, it is told that on that day, when the Rebbe reached the Shiras Ha-Yam, the Song at the Sea, the entire congregation was

swept away by the powerful vision of the Jews crossing the Sea of Reeds with Moshe Rabbeinu at their helm, to the extent that R' Shmelke actually picked up his bekitsche (traditional chassidic coat) as he stepped into the raging waters. The Chassidim too followed suit. This was not pretentiousness - that day they truly satisfied the obligation of our Sages that, "Each person should imagine that he himself was redeemed from Egypt."

That evening, the Rebbe again sat with his disciples. When R' Elimelech arrived, a place was made for him at the head-table, next to the Rebbe. Once seated, R' Elimelech again took out his now infamous "bottle," and poured a glass for R' Shmelke. "Perhaps you think" said the Rebbe, "that I am a fool? It was enough that yesterday you robbed me of my entire night. I can't recall ever spending a whole night sleeping. Mark my word: I'm not going to make the same mistake twice!"

"But the Rebbe himself saw," argued R' Elimelech, "the power of his tefilos (prayers) this morning. We all felt as if we were truly traversing the Sea of Reeds!"

"Indeed," said R' Shmelke, "when Shmelke spends all his nights immersed in Torah study, and once in his life he sleeps through the night, that indeed was a wonderful experience. But can you imagine what would become of Shmelke if he will begin to allow himself 'a good night's sleep' every night? Shmelke will become just another farshluffenne Yid (sleepy Jew)!"

Sometimes, says R' Tzvi Hirsch of Liska (Darkei haYashar ve- haTov), the truly righteous can be, "on the dry land" - yet through their powerful tefilos they feel as if they are "in the midst of the sea." Perhaps we can add that this is only true of those who, in general, lead their lives "on the dry land" - i.e. they minimize their physical indulgences. They can, from time to time, attain the level of feeling as if they are crossing over "in the midst of the sea."

This insightful story plays itself out in everyone's life at one time or another. One takes a break from one's usual schedule, and feels invigorated, physically and spiritually. Imagine, we tell ourselves, what it would be like if I could do this every day! This is a false vision. A "break" only takes on meaning when it is surrounded on either side by hard-work. Otherwise life becomes one big vacation - and that itself can become a burden.

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