Urgent vs. Important

As we have explained yesterday, in Sephardic communities Selihot have already started. And as we will see BH in the coming days, the center of these prayers is the *viduy*or confession, and the recitation of the 13 attributes of Divine Forgiveness or 13 *middot*.

But there are also many *piyutim*, or religious poems in the Selihot. Poems that inspire us to return to God. The first, and one of the best known *piyutim* is "BEN DAM MA LEKHA NIRDAM" which I would like to explore today.

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""Son of man, why are you sleeping?! Get up and pray [to God] with supplications!

This *piyut* begins with an invitation to wake up. "Waking up" in two senses. On the one hand, since the Selihot are said early in the morning, this poem reinforces our commitment to sacrifice our sleep and go to the Synagogue earlier than usual.

But the deepest sense, and certainly the original meaning of this expression, is the invitation to the awakening of our conscience. Let me explain: Given the amount of material obligations we have, given the pace at which we live our crazy lives, and the great variety of distractions at our disposal, it is very possible that our consciences are "sleeping". How can we identify the sleeping of our consciousness? **Spiritual lethargy is manifested by the lack of deep thoughts.** If we do not think about God, and what He expects from us; if we do not ask ourselves why we are here in this world; if we do not reflect on the direction in which our life moves; if we do not reexamine our values and priorities, then our consciences are probably sleeping. Spiritual awakening means bringing to mind and refreshing these questions. Being "awake" means that the search for these answers becomes the purpose of our existence.

This beautiful expression in Hebrew *ma lekha nirdam* "why are you sleeping" is found in the book of Yona 1: 6. The captain of the ship, which is about to sink, rebukes the prophet Yona (Jonas) who was asleep, away from all worries, ignoring the dangers around him. Yona is in an "escape" mode, almost suicidal. He was literally getting away from God. Undoubtedly, these words also refer to our own existential escapism. A

stage we set for ourselves to avoid the commitment involved in asking ourselves the deepest questions. We opt to “escape”, by giving ourselves material distractions which keep us away from God. The first call of the Selichot is the call to wake up and avoid escapism.

How to wake up?

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Connecting with our Creator. The connection to HaShem is the beginning of the spiritual awakening.

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“Wash, purify yourself and do not procrastinate ! Do it before the days [of your life] will pass.

The next invitation this piyut is to act “NOW”. Without procrastinating. “Washing” and “purification” does not refer to physical cleanliness, but to the cleansing of the soul: that is, the absence of sins and negative thoughts that keep us away from God. Our goal is to “cleanse”, i.e., repent for what we did wrong, get rid of red “spots” from our records; and purify our thoughts, moving away from the values of the materialistic society.

To stimulate us to correct ourselves “NOW” we must bring to mind a simple, but usually repressed, idea: our mortality. The certainty that our lives will come to an end, and the uncertainty of not knowing when that end will come ….

This reflection is inspired in the explanation of our Sages to a verse in Qohelet 9: 8 that says □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□ □□□, “Let your clothes be clean at all times.” Our sages say that in this verse the garments are our actions. And we are urged to “clean up” our clothes as soon as they get dirty. In other words: we sold never delay repentance, asking forgiveness, and repair. We must remain clean, without “spots” permanently, since we do not know when we will be called by the Heavenly Court.