SELIHOT and our awakenings

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AWAKENING # 1.
Today is the second day of Elul. We are less than 40 days away from Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The day consecrated to do Teshuba, to repent, asking forgiveness, confess our sins, and make the decision to be better. Yom Kippur is a very important day. And we can not arrive at that day unprepared. That's why during the month of Elul we train ourselves in the mood of Teshuba and begin to be more aware of our actions, values thoughts.
Among Ashkenazi Jews, once Elul begins the Shofar is blown. Among Sephardic Jews once Elul begins (actually 2nd Elul, "today"!) we begin reciting the Selihot. Selihot is a daily prayer said before the morning Tefilla (Shaharit) which lasts about an hour. This means that from today until Yom Kippur, we will have to "wake up" an hour earlier than usual. One hour less of sleep, which will be dedicated to reciting this important Tefillot.
As we will see BH in the coming days, the center of Selihot is the Viduy or confession, and the recitation of the 13 attributes of Divine Forgiveness or 13 Middot. But there are also many piyutim, religious poems that inspire us to return to HaShem. The first and one of the best known of these poems is "BEN ADAM MA LEKHA NIRDAM" which I would like to present below.
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"Son of man, why are you sleeping? Arise and pray [to God] with supplications!
This piyut begins with an invitation to wake up. "Awakening" in a double sense. On the one hand, being that Selihot is said early in the morning, this poem reinforces our commitment to sacrifice our sleep and go to Bet haKeneset an hour earlier than usual.

AWAKENING # 2.
A deeper meaning, and probably the original meaning of this expression, is the invitation to the awakening of our

consciousness. Let me explain: Given the amount of material obligations we have, given the pace at which we live, and the huge variety of distractions at our disposal, it is quite possible that our consciences are “asleep.” How can we identify the lethargy of our consciousness? Spiritual lethargy is manifested by the absence of deep thoughts. If we are not thinking about God and what He expects of us; if we do not ask why we are here in this world; if we do not reflect on the direction in which our life is progressing; if we do not re-evaluate our values and priorities, then our consciences are asleep. The spiritual awakening consists in refreshing these questions. Moreover, being “awake” means that the search for these answers becomes the main objective of our existence.

This beautiful expression in Hebrew *ma lekha nirdam* “why are you sleeping?” is from the book of Yona (1: 6). The captain of the ship that is about to sink rebukes the prophet Yona (Jonas), who was asleep, away from all worries, ignoring the dangers around him. Yona was in a situation of “escaping”, in an almost suicidal mood. He was literally getting away from HaShem. In the Selihot, these words refer to our own existential escapism. A stage we set for ourselves (involuntarily) to avoid the commitment involved in formulating the deeper questions in life. We choose to “escape” from these questions, which would usually lead us to God, and we get ourselves involved in our work, our routine or our material distractions. The first call of the Selihot is the wake-up call to leave our denial and escapism.