ELUL: How Can You Tell That You Are Awake?

בֶּן אָדָם מַה לְּךָ נִרְדָּם

Today is the second day of the month of Elul. We are less than 40 days away from Yom Kippur, a day entirely consecrated to do Teshuba, repent, ask for forgiveness, confess our faults, and make the decision to act better with God and with our peers.

Yom Kippur is such an important day that we can not get to it unprepared. That is why we began the process of Teshuba 40 days before Yom Kippur.

Among Ashkenazi Jews,the Teshuba of Elul is expressed through the sound of the Shofar, at the end of the morning prayer (Shaharit). While Sepharadic Jews beginning on the 2nd of Elul —today— recite the prayers known as Selihot before the morning Tefilla. This means that from today until Yom Kippur, we wake up an hour earlier than usual. One hour less of sleep, that will be dedicated to absorb the important message of Selihot.

The center of the Selihot is the viduy (confession), and the recitation of the 13 Attributes of Divine Forgiveness or Middot.

In the Selihot we also find piyutim, religious poems, that inspire us to repent and return to HaShem. The first poem that we recite in the morning begins with the words: ben adam ma lekha nirdam, Son of man, why are you still asleep? Wake up, pray and beg to God.

These words, בֶּן אָדָם מַה לְּךָ נִרְדָּם “Why are you sleeping?” are found in the book of Yona 1:6. The captain of the ship that was about to sink by the fierce storm calls Yona. The prophet was sleeping, deliberately ignoring the dangers around him. Yona was in a psychological state of denial, seeking to ignore the reality in front of him. In this case, the possibility of his own death.

These words, “Why are you sleeping?” were chosen by our Rabbis to initiate the Selihot to remind us of the risk of escapism. Many times we too choose to ignore the reality of our mortality and the finitude (“end”, in the sense of “purpose”) of our existence instead of facing it. The first call of the Selihot is the call to wake up. These words, apart from

reminding us that during the month of Elul we will sacrifice an hour of sleep, invite us to find out if our consciences are awake or asleep. Now, how can we tell that our consciences are asleep ? By the absence of deep thoughts. When we DO NOT think about God, and what He expects of us; or why are we here; or in what direction our life is progressing; or what values we hold sacred, or what priorities we have, etc. then our consciences are asleep.
Spiritual awakening consists of refreshing these questions in our mind.
We are awake when we are aware of our goals in life. We are awake when searching for these answers becomes the main objective of our existence.
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