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## Essence of the Month - 011 Kislev | The Power of Sleep

Our Sages state that the month of the Kislev contains the power of “sleep”.<sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[1]</sup>

This concept needs understanding. How is “sleep” an *avodah* for us?! True, the winter is a time where people sleep more, so we see that there is a connection between sleep and the winter, where the month of Kislev falls out in. But how does that make “sleep” into an *avodah*?

When we learn Torah or when we daven, it’s clear that we’re doing an *avodah*. When we eat, we are able to elevate this act for *Avodas Hashem*, because we can sanctify our eating, in various ways.<sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup> But how can sleep raise us spiritually? How can sleep be a holy *avodah*?

The simple answer that people say to this is because when we go to sleep, we can have the intention that we are refreshing ourselves to be able to serve Hashem better. Although this is true, this is only the superficial answer, and it does not explain the depth that is behind the *avodah* of “sleep”.

### ***The Beis HaMikdash and Sleep***

The *Vilna Gaon* writes that the *avodah* [of the *Kohanim*] was performed in the *Beis HaMikdash*, and that the *Beis HaMikdash* is called a place of “sleep”. These are ambiguous words, and we will try to understand it, so that we can understand how “sleep” can be an *avodah*.

Simply speaking, “sleep” can be an *avodah* when we go to sleep in order to become refreshed and thereby be able to serve Hashem better. However, here will explain a deeper understanding how sleep can be an *avodah*, and how sleep, in and of itself, can reveal more spirituality.

We will need to understand: What does the *Vilna Gaon* mean, that the *Beis HaMikdash* is a place of “sleep”? Doesn’t the *Gemara*<sup>[3]</sup> <sup>[3]</sup> state that on *Succos*, everyone stayed up all night from all of the festivities of the *Simchas Beis HaShoeivah*, and they were fending off sleep, so that they shouldn’t fall asleep in the *Beis HaMikdash*? How then can the *Vilna Gaon* say then that the *Beis HaMikdash* is a place of “sleep”?

### Prophecy and Sleep

All of the prophets, except for Moshe Rabbeinu, received their prophecies in their dreams, as they slept. Prophecy could only come when there is sleep; this shows us that sleep is a time in which a person can reach a very spiritual high level. Prophecy is the highest level one can achieve, so there

must be something very special about sleep, if prophecy only happens during sleep. It shows us that sleep is not just something we do to refresh ourselves to serve Hashem better; sleep itself has its own purpose.

What is the loftiest *avodah* that we have? A person can attain certain high levels of closeness to Hashem through his davening (prayer) which he doesn't get through learning Torah. This is a more well-known concept to us. Yet, even *davening* isn't the highest level we can reach, because prophecy was attained precisely through sleep, not through prayer. How, indeed, does sleep raise a person to such high spiritual levels? How can it be more spiritual than prayer?!

The *Arizal* and the *Vilna Gaon* both wrote that sleep is a time in which a person receives the highest comprehensions, even more than during the daytime. However, although this is true in concept, we still need to know how exactly we make sleep can be an "*avodah*" for a person. What exactly is so special about sleep?

What's even more difficult to understand about this is that the *Vilna Gaon* elsewhere writes that when a person sleeps, he loses his *seichel*/intellect, and instead, his imagination takes over. What then is so spiritual about sleep? A person loses his *daas* (his rational thinking abilities) when he sleeps. Man is gifted with the quality of *daas*; man has the title of "*bar daas*" and that is his greatness. But when we sleep, we lose our *daas*; our intellect is not working and instead our imagination is dominant. So it is difficult to understand how sleep can give spiritual elevation to a person.

The Depth of How Sleep is a "Sixtieth of Death"

The answer to this lies in a statement of Chazal, that sleep is called a "sixtieth of death".<sup>[4]</sup> <sup>[4]</sup> This hints to us something special about sleep. It is a time where the soul leaves the body; we leave our body's hold upon us when we sleep. In this sense, sleep is an opportunity for us to become elevated spiritually. Soon we will soon explain how exactly sleep can elevate us, but this is the outline of the concept.

Earlier, we brought from the *Vilna Gaon* that the *Beis HaMikdash* was a place of "sleep". We raised the question that this is very difficult to understand. Making the question stronger, it is written, "*For from Zion comes forth the Torah, and the word of Hashem from Jerusalem.*"<sup>[5]</sup> <sup>[5]</sup> The *Beis HaMikdash* is known as the place where the Torah rulings issued forth from. How, then, can the *Vilna Gaon* say that the *Beis HaMikdash* is a place that epitomizes "sleep"?

The answer lies in the following.

The *Beis HaMikdash*, Binyamin, and "Sleep"

The *Vilna Gaon* wrote that the month of Kislev is the revelation of the power of "sleep", which was epitomized through the *Beis HaMikdash*. The site of the *Beis HaMikdash* was in the tribe Binyamin's portion of land. This shows us that there is a connection between sleep, the *Beis HaMikdash*, and the tribe Binyamin. What, indeed, is the connection between these three?

The Torah recounts how Rachel Imeinu died in childbirth as she gave birth to Binyamin. Chazal state that the birth of Binyamin was very difficult for her and it depleted her all of her strength, and that is why she died in childbirth. But there is more to this matter. It wasn't simply that Binyamin's birth simply drained her of all her physical strength. It was really because it took *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice, or altruism) on Rachel Imeinu's part to give birth to Binyamin. Therefore, Binyamin represents the power of his mother's *mesirus nefesh*. If the *Beis HaMikdash* is in Binyamin's portion, and Binyamin represents *mesirus nefesh*, it shows us that *mesirus nefesh* is required in order to acquire the *Beis HaMikdash*.

Yitzchok Avinu showed *mesirus nefesh* by being willing to give up his life for Hashem at the site of *Akeidah*<sup>[6]</sup> [6] which was at the future site of the *Beis HaMikdash*. The hint of this is because *mesirus nefesh* is the power that is necessary to have the *Beis HaMikdash*.

Now we can understand the mysterious words of the Vilna Gaon that the *Beis HaMikdash* is a place of “sleep”: it is because when a person goes to sleep, he is exercising the power of **mesirus nefesh** - by giving his soul back to the Creator. The soul leaves the body when we sleep, for sleep is a “sixtieth of death”, thus, sleep is a manifestation of the power of *mesirus nefesh*.

The Avodah of Mesirus Nefesh – Before We Go To Sleep At Night

Now that we have explained that the *avodah* of “sleep” is really a use of *mesirus nefesh*, what we need to understand is how we show *mesirus nefesh*. When do we ever exercise *mesirus nefesh*?

When we recite the *Shema* twice a day, by the prayers of *Shacharis* and *Maariv*, it is brought in *sefarim hakedoshim* that a person should have the intention to be willing to die *al kiddush Hashem*, upon finishing the word “*Echad*”.<sup>[7]</sup> [7] However, this is still not yet an **active** use of *mesirus nefesh*; it is only potential *mesirus nefesh*. The only time that a person actively has *mesirus nefesh* is when he goes to sleep, for sleep is when we give back our soul to the Creator.

In the *Kerias Shema Al HaMittah* (the recital of the *Shema* which we say before we get into bed at night), a person says the verse, “*Into Your hand, I give over my spirit.*”<sup>[8]</sup> [8] When a person is going to sleep, he is giving over his soul to Hashem – he is actually giving it away! We should be aware of this before we go to sleep. When we are saying *Kerias Shema al hamittah*: “*I am giving away my soul to Hashem!*”

This opportunity usually goes lost. Usually when people go to sleep, they get into bed very tired and exhausted, and sleep is usually viewed as just a means to relieve tiredness. But sleep is really an *avodah*. It is an *avodah* of actively having *mesirus nefesh* for Hashem: to feel that we are giving away our soul to Him for the night.

During the rest of the day, we do not have this opportunity. Even if we had the intention of *mesirus nefesh* as we say *Kerias Shema* during the prayers of *Shacharis* and *Maariv*, it is only a potential kind of *mesirus nefesh*, and it is not active *mesirus nefesh*. The only time during the day that we **actively** exercise *mesirus nefesh* is at the recitation of *kerias shema al hamittah*, which is at nighttime, before we go to sleep.

Animals also sleep, but they sleep only because they’re tired. A Jew, however, is able to sleep with a higher intention, *mesirus nefesh*, by being ready to give away his soul to Hashem for the night, before going to sleep. Of course, our body needs to sleep because it is simply tired and exhausted. But if a person goes to sleep just because he’s tired, then his sleep is no different than how an animal sleeps. Our existence is that of a body and a soul; our body needs sleep so it won’t be tired, but our soul needs sleep for a different reason – so that it can have *mesirus nefesh*.

Thus, even our soul “sleeps” at night. How can our soul sleep? Don’t we know that there is no sleep in Gan Eden? Is there such a thing as sleep in the spiritual realm? Our soul “sleeps” by giving itself itself away to Hashem, when our bodies go to sleep.

This is the ideal intention to have in mind before we go to sleep at night: “I am really giving away my soul to Hashem”. It is the opportunity we have once a day to be able to have *mesirus nefesh* for Hashem!

(This is also the depth behind the *mitzvah* to sleep in the *sukkah*. We aren’t just sleeping in the

*sukkah* in the physical sense. We are sleeping in the *sukkah* because we are giving ourselves away to Hashem in the *sukkah*, and that is the message of taking shelter in the *sukkah*).

Now we can understand why prophecy could only happen during sleep. It was because only someone who is willing to really give himself up for Hashem can attain prophecy, for sleep is the act of giving oneself away to Hashem.

Now we can also understand why the *Beis HaMikdash* was a place of “sleep,” as the Vilna Gaon says. It is because *mesirus nefesh* was required in order to have the *Beis HaMikdash*, and our sleep is a time in which we can reveal our power of *mesirus nefesh*. The *Beis HaMikdash* served this entire purpose: it showed us that a person has to dedicate his entire life to Hashem - to have *mesirus nefesh* for Hashem.

In Conclusion

We should realize that once a day, we have the opportunity to have active *mesirus nefesh*: before we go to sleep at night, each night, we can utilize *mesirus nefesh*. It is active *mesirus nefesh*, as opposed to potential *mesirus nefesh*; thus, right before we go to sleep at night is the prime time where we can utilize the power of *mesirus nefesh*. One should feel then that he is actually giving himself away to Hashem.

If a person lives like this, his whole life will change - he will go to sleep very differently, and he will wake up an entirely different person.

When Yitzchok Avinu had *mesirus nefesh* by the event of the *Akeidah*, he was clearly not the same Yitzchok as before the *Akeidah*. He was not the same person anymore, after he utilized *mesirus nefesh*. Using the power of *mesirus nefesh* transforms you into a whole new person. Thus, if we go to sleep at night with the intention of *mesirus nefesh* beforehand, we will wake up in the morning an entirely new person.

Each person, according to his own level, needs to absorb this point, and to feel before he goes to sleep at night that he is giving himself away to Hashem.<sup>[9]</sup> [9]

May we all receive the strength to do this and merit the future, when all death will be removed from the world, where the dead “will get up and rejoice.”

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<sup>[1]</sup> [10] *Sefer Yetzirah* 5:4

<sup>[2]</sup> [11] *The avodah of “eating” is in the month of Shevat. See **Rosh Chodesh Avodah\_011\_Shevat - Eating***

<sup>[3]</sup> [12] *Sukkah* 53a

[4] [13] Berachos 57b

[5] [14] Yeshayah 2:3

[6] [15] *The Altar on “Har HaMoriah” (Moriah Mountain), where Avraham Avinu performed “the binding of Yitzchak”*

[7] [16] *Zohar Mishpatim 119b, Chayei Adam I:21:11*

[8] [17] Tehillim 31:6

[9] [18] *For more on this avodah of practicing “mesirus nefesh” before going to sleep at night, see **Tefillah #0141 - The Fear of Death and Its Purpose**, and **Tefillah #0153 - Protecting Our Souls From Harm**. For more on the avodah of “sleep”, see **Tefillah #0154 - Society and Your Self**. On another occasion, the Rav has explained the avodah of “sleep” in the context of analyzing our dreams– see **Rosh Chodesh Avodah\_009\_Kislev\_Sleep and Dreams***

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**Source:** <https://www.bilvavi.net/english/essence-month-011-kislev-power-sleep>

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