

## REALITY CHECK

*Rosh Hashanah Day One, 5771 (2010)  
West End Synagogue, New York NY  
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When people learn that we have a two year old and three month old twins, they usually inquire about our sleep, or lack thereof. Sometimes I sense they are asking with genuine sympathy; other times I imagine a bit of *schaudentfreude* from people who spend weekends leisurely resting in bed until 10 a.m. and reading the Times until it's time to go out for brunch and mimosas. The truth is that while our sleep situation is much better than people usually imagine, I'd happily do with a few more hours every night.

Of course, millions of Americans suffer from significant sleep deprivation, whether or not they have infants and toddlers. Many of my friends who don't have kids or whose kids are grown complain of how often they can't sleep and are awake in the middle of the night or at the crack of dawn, surfing the net, watching TV, answering email. I'm tempted to let them know that as long as they're awake, they are very welcome to come over to feed the babies or read some books to our daughter at 5:30 a.m. while I go back to bed.

In this 24/7 society, more than 20% percent of Americans report sleeping less than an average of six hours a night, a number that grows annually, while fewer and fewer of us sleep for eight hours or more. We all know the reasons for this decline – technological distractions like cable TV and internet mesmerize us, and the constant accessibility to work email keeps too many of us up way past our preferred bedtime. Studies link sleep deprivation with poor work performance, fatal accidents, relationship issues, anger, depression, heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. Insufficient sleep obviously impairs our judgment and ability to operate at our full capacity.

We can track the same phenomenon in the Torah and Haftarah texts of the High Holidays. Today's Torah portion leads me to wonder how those new parents Sarah and Avraham might have behaved had they been sleeping better after Isaac's miraculous birth. Maybe sleep deprivation contributed to their decision to expel Hagar and Ishmael from their home, condemning the defenseless mother and son to likely death in the wilderness. Likewise, in tomorrow's reading, maybe Avraham's rising before dawn contributed to his willingness to sacrifice his precious son Isaac. Maybe had Avraham and Sarah been better rested and fully aware of their options, they might have found a way to coexist with Hagar and Ishmael and avoid generations of recrimination; maybe Abraham would have sought out life-saving alternatives sooner. After all, the Torah itself repeatedly points out that we make our best, most wise and compassionate decisions when we are fully awake in any given moment.

Physical exhaustion is but one source of distraction. We can be perfectly well-rested, and yet disconnected from reality. For some of us, inattention is just a physiological reality to be treated medically. For others, distracting ourselves is just a habit we can't put down. We have a great capacity for tuning out unpleasant realities. On Yom Kippur we'll read the story of Jonah, the prototypical avoider. Facing the task of urging the citizens of Nineveh to repent, Jonah flees aboard a ship bound for Tarshish. When his presence prompts a storm threatening the ship, rather than facing the truth Jonah goes below to nap in the hold, until the crew shakes him from his siesta.

There is some Jonah in every one of us. Who among us, when faced with responsibilities or circumstances or emotional truths we'd rather not deal with, has not booked

his or her own trip to Tarshish, distracting ourselves with more pleasant activities, or telling ourselves that the situation is not so bad, or pretending that the issue can be dealt with later.

How many of us ignore medical or dental problems until the symptoms become undeniable, often having become much more difficult to treat? How many of us avoid coping with financial issues until our lives become unmanageable? How many of us have persisted in destructive addictive behaviors until the consequences have grown so disastrous they can no longer be ignored? How much evidence do we need of society and even the world's tendency to bury our head in the sand when faced with issues which feel enormous and intractable, like global warming or nuclear proliferation or global poverty or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Like Jonah, individually and collectively too often we would rather not face that which we find unpleasant or undesirable in ourselves, in others, and in the world. We'd rather turn over and hit the snooze button. But Jonah teaches us that ultimately we cannot hide, deny, avoid or outrun the truth. **Reality always catches up.** It must be met with courage and honesty.

In today and tomorrow's Torah readings, our Biblical forebears manage to awaken from denial and distraction despite major life challenges. When the exhausted, despairing Hagar abandons her son Ishmael to imminent death, she nevertheless remains alert enough to discern a voice telling her שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרַב בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא שָׁמָּה, that God hears the voice of the child "where he is" -- that is right here, right now, even in this terrible place and time. Hagar opens her eyes to discover a life-saving solution that had been there all along, but to which until now she'd been blind -- a well of water to sustain her son and herself.

And in tomorrow's reading, when Avraham raises his arm to slay his son Isaac, it is most striking that even in extremis, despite a presumably sleepless night and having risen before dawn, he remains alert enough to hear an angel call his name and to respond *hineini* -- here I am, fully present in this moment. In a moment of complete attentiveness to his surroundings Avraham raises his eyes and suddenly notices what he had missed: a ram caught by its horns in a nearby bush, a life-saving alternative.

Had either Avraham or Hagar been completely distracted at the moment their children's lives were endangered, neither Isaac nor Ishmael would have survived. Each of them displays the capacity to remain alert, and fully awake even in the midst of personal anguish. Life is sustained only because at these critical moments neither of them spaced out. The question for us is whether we -- as individuals, as a people, and as a society -- possess Hagar and Avraham's willingness to stay present in the faces of harsh realities, to face the truth and discover within ourselves and around us the resources by which we might sustain life.

When Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit in the Garden and become aware of God's Presence, they hide among the trees. "Ayeka," God calls out. "Where are you?" This Divine, existential reality check echoes throughout the rest of the Bible, through each generation, a question pressing on us at each moment and especially today: "ayeka, where are you?"

"[I]n so asking," Martin Buber taught,

God does not expect to learn something [God] does not know; what [God] wants is to produce an effect in [us] which can only be produced by such a question, provided ... that [we] allow it to reach [our] heart. ...

[We hide] to avoid rendering accounts, to escape responsibility ... Every [person] hides for this purpose, for every [person] is Adam and finds him/[her]self in Adam's situation. To escape responsibility for [our] life, [we] turn existence into a system of hideouts. ...

The question is designed to awaken [us] and destroy [our] system of hideouts; it is to show [us to what pass [we] have come and to awake in [us] the great will to get out of it. Everything now depends upon whether [we] face the question.<sup>1</sup>

In every human being, says Buber, there is a still, small voice – the Voice of God – which endlessly tries to stir us from sleep, rousing us from our tendency to escape, deny and hide. Despite our inclination to hit the snooze button and pull the covers over our head, to avoid reality through food or drink or sex or drugs or work, the question echoes in our ears and our souls.

To the eternal question *ayeka*, where are you, Torah suggests an answer: *hineini*, here I am. When Avraham raises his knife and hears the angel's call, he responds, "*hineini*." When Moshe stands at the burning bush and hears a voice urging him to leave the safety of his new life in exile and return to confront Pharaoh in Egypt, he responds, "*hineini*." When Jacob is called to leave the comfort of Haran and return home after 20 years to face his murderous brother Esau, he responds, "*hineini*." When Jacob asks Joseph to find his brothers, who burn with hatred towards him, Joseph responds, "*hineini*." When the elderly Jacob is told to leave Canaan and live his final days in exile in Egypt, he responds, "*hineini*." In each case, the one who says *hineini* faces a challenging, even traumatic situation – and yet remains present and meets reality with honesty, courage, and wisdom.

Judaism can be understood as a daily practice of maintaining this capacity to say "*hineini*," to sustain a state of wakefulness, to rouse ourselves, over and over, from denial and avoidance. *Hineini* practice means a total commitment to facing the truth of our lives and our world. Our *brachot* are exercises to sustain gratitude for that which we once found miraculous but to which we have become habituated. Our *tefilot*, our prayers are guided meditations helping us cultivate important qualities, lest they atrophy – critical attributes like wonder, love, courage, forgiveness, hope, and honesty. Our *mitzvot* are actions intended to wake us up in the moment to do the right, just, and generous thing, no matter how oblivious we may be, no matter how resentful we might feel.

To "awaken oneself," to respond "*hineini*," involves more than shaking off the cobwebs. It means paying attention to anything that causes us to shut down and disconnect from reality. A Hassidic commentary on the Shlchan Aruch puts it this way:

When a person feels distant from God, and sins and spiritual deficiencies have separated that person from any good, this [too] is a state of sleep. But when one seeks out one's positive points and takes heart from the fragments of good inside, the joy and arousal one experiences ... are themselves waking up from sleep. It is through leaning to the quality of loving-kindness and judging oneself in the scale of merit that one is able to rouse oneself from 'sleep.' (*Rabbi Natan of Bratslov, Likutei Halachot, Orach Chayim Hilchot Hashkamat Haboker 1*).

Excessive self-shaming says this teaching, also puts us to sleep. And for this variety of distraction, the prescription isn't a Red Bull or double espresso – it's practicing compassion, self-acceptance, and joy.

We begin this New Year, each of us, sitting here in a bunker of our own making: our hiding place of excuses, denial, resentment, self-delusion, excessive shame. We distract ourselves from amends we need to make, from hard internal work we have postponed too long, from personal and social problems which seem overwhelming. We avoid the truth about

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, Hasidism and Modern Man (Harper Torchbooks, 1966 ), pp. 133-134.

ourselves, our lives, and our world. Wait till tomorrow, says the voice of distraction. Let's sail to Tarshish and take a nap.

The **fundamental purpose of Rosh Hashanah is to wake us up to the truth**, to see things as they actually are. **Rosh Hashanah is a reality check for the world.** Torah describes today simply as *yom teruah* -- a day of blasts. Maimonides interpreted the shofar, the horn of the ram Avraham found in the thicket, as an alarm for which there is no snooze setting, a siren intended to pierce our fortified bunkers of denial, delusion and distraction: "*Wake up you sleepers from your sleep, you slumberers from your slumber; search your deeds and return in teshuvah.*" (Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4). For us as Americans, as a Jewish people, and as individuals, the shofar challenges us to cultivate our capacity to say *hineini*, to be present and -- **no matter how uncomfortable, no matter how much we'd prefer to tune out -- to be brutally honest with ourselves, to face the truth.**

As Americans, the shofar says wake up to the incalculable physical, emotional, and mental toll on the men and women who, in our name and for so many years, have been fighting two wars which ask no sacrifice from most of us. Wake up to this nation's huge and growing wealth gap. Wake up to the deep and dangerous wells of fear and resentment towards American Muslims and immigrants, the growing willingness to scapegoat anyone who doesn't match a mythical prototype of American authenticity. Wake up to the steady erosion of basic civil rights and liberties most of us have taken for granted. Wake up to the catastrophic consequences of our addiction to consumption and our unchecked propensity to abuse our planet's finite resources. Wake up to how a prolonged recession or worse could feed a fire that could engulf us all.

As a people, the shofar insists that we wake up to the reality that many of the inherited structures of Jewish life – including synagogues – don't effectively address the wants and needs of a new generation. Wake up to the reality that the cost of Jewish life is out of reach of so many Jewish families. Wake up to American Jewry's increasing disengagement from the State of Israel and its fate. Wake up to Israel's deepening demographic challenge to remain both democratic and a state in which the majority of citizens are Jews, and to the threat of ultra-Orthodox hegemony. Wake up to how habitual despair and cynicism blinds us to even small but achievable, meaningful steps by which Israelis and Palestinians might move towards the just peace both peoples desperately need.

As individuals, the shofar calls us to wake up and listen attentively to family and friends the way we'd like to be heard. Wake up and practice *hineini*. Put down the iPhone and Blackberry. Shut down the computer. Click off the TV. Show up for family. Wake up to the signs of problems with our spouse or our partner or our kids or our friends. Wake up to self-destructive habits. Wake up to the reasons for gratitude and joy in life. Wake up to the miracle accompanying each breath, even when life seems dark. Wake up to the healing action we could take right now. Be present. Be honest. Get real. Lift your eyes and see the possibilities which were invisible to us – until this moment.

*Hayom harat haolam.* Today – right now, in this moment, and this moment, and this moment -- the world is being created anew. This is one of Judaism's most powerful teachings: each moment is an opportunity to wake up, each is gateway to awareness of new possibilities. If, like Avraham and Hagar, we awaken to what is happening within us and around us, we might raise our eyes discover choices to which we've been oblivious. Like Avraham and Hagar, we might find life-saving alternatives in the brambles, discover wells where we imagined only parched wilderness.

The shofar is the cry of the universe, the song of every soul. It sings in every human being, in every moment, in every place – sometimes as unmistakably as a siren, sometimes

disguised as a still, small voice. In the tumult of our daily lives, amidst the constant roar of this city, may we still ourselves enough to hear the shofar within us awakening us to the blessing inherent in each moment. May we hear the shofar within reminding us to look hard in the mirror, to see ourselves as we actually are -- foibles, frailties and all -- and to accept all of ourselves, with compassion. May we face our life challenges without flinching, with total commitment to honesty with ourselves and others. And may we hear the shofar within us calling us to see clearly the true injustices within our community and our world.

As we sit here today preparing to walk out these doors into a new year, may we resolve, each of us and together, to listen carefully for the song God has planted in us, and to hear it -- over and over, in each moment -- reminding us to lift our eyes and -- like Avraham and Hagar before us -- to find another way to live, to chart a better course, to discover a holy path through the *midbar* stretching before us.