



“There was thunder and lightning on the morning of the third day” HKB”H Aroused Yisrael at Har Sinai from Their Spiritual Slumber with Thunder and Lightning as a Symbolic Gesture for All Future Generations

In honor of the auspiciously approaching Chag HaShavuos, we will focus in this essay on the time-honored Jewish minhag to stay awake the entire night of Shavuos studying Torah. This minhag is to make amends for the fact that Yisrael slept on the night of Matan Torah. Here is a pertinent excerpt from the esteemed possek, the Magen Avraham (O.C. 494): **It is taught in the Zohar (Emor 98a) that the early Chassidim would stay up the entire night studying Torah. It has become customary for most of those who study Torah to do the same. It is possible to provide a simple rationale for this custom. It is because Yisrael slept that entire night, and HKB”H had to arouse them, as it is taught in the Midrash. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to make amends for this (negligence/lapse).**

HKB”H Aroused Yisrael with Thunder and Lightning and the Sound of the Shofar

To begin with, we will introduce a source for this scenario. Let us refer to the narrative in parshas Yisro related to the revelation at Har Sinai (Shemos 19, 16): **”ויהי ביום השלישי בהיות הבוקר ויהי קולות וברקים וענן כבד על ההר וקול שופר חזק מאד ויחרד כל העם אשר במחנה—it was on the third day, in the morning, that there was thunder and lightning. A heavy cloud enveloped the mountain, and there was a very loud sound of the shofar. All the people in the camp trembled. Rashi comments: This teaches us that He (HKB”H) arrived before they did, which is not the**

proper behavior for human beings—for the teacher to wait for the student. We will endeavor to explain this odd sequence of events. Why did HKB”H come to Har Sinai ahead of Yisrael?

Additionally, why was HKB”H accompanied by thunder and lightning and the powerful sound of a shofar? As per the narrative, this was so terrifying that it caused the entire camp to tremble. We cannot suggest that the thunder, lightning, and sound of the shofar were the phenomena that accompanied the giving of the Aseres HaDibros, because as the passuk states explicitly they appeared in the morning prior to Yisrael’s arrival at Har Sinai. And it says immediately afterwards (ibid. 17): **”ויוצא משה את העם לקראת האלקים מן המחנה ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר—Moshe took the people out of the camp toward G-d, and they stood beneath the mountain.** So, why, indeed, did HKB”H opt to arrive at Har Sinai in the morning accompanied by thunder and lightning?

We find a fascinating explanation from Chazal whose every teaching is rooted in “ruach hakodesh.” They assert that on the night preceding Matan Torah, Yisrael slept soundly until HKB”H aroused them in the morning with these terrifying phenomena. Here is a pertinent passage from the Midrash (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1, 57):

Rabbi Pinchas said in the name of Rabbi Hoshaya (Shir HaShirim 1, 12): “While the king was at his feast (Matan Torah)—while the King of Kings, HKB”H, was at

His feast, in the firmament—He arrived early, as it is stated: **“It was on the third day when it was morning.”** [This is analogous] **to a king who announced: On such and such day, I will enter the province. Yet, the residents of the province slept through the night, and when the king arrived, he found them asleep. He positioned trumpets, horns, and a shofar, and the governor of that province awakened them and brought them out to greet the king. Thus, the king walked before them until he reached his palace.**

So, too, HKB”H arrived early, as it is written: **“It was on the third day when it was morning,”** and it is written (Shemos 19, 11): **“For on the third day, Hashem will descend before the eyes of the entire nation.”** Israel slept through that entire night, because sleep during (the time of year of) Shavuot is pleasant and the night is short . . . HKB”H arrived and found them asleep. He began positioning trumpets. That is what is written: **“It was on the third day when it was morning, there was thunder and lightning.”** And Moshe was awakening them and taking them out to greet the King of Kings, HKB”H. That is what is written: **“Moshe took the people out of the camp toward G-d.”** HKB”H was walking before them until He reached Har Sinai, as it is written (ibid. 18): **“Har Sinai was completely enveloped with smoke.”**

Notwithstanding, the commentaries find this scenario perplexing. After all, HKB”H had instructed Moshe Rabeinu to prepare Yisrael with extreme measures of kedushah in anticipation of receiving the Torah. As it is written (ibid. 10): **“ויאמר ה' אל משה לך אל העם וקדשתם היום ומחר וכבסו שמלותם, והיו נכונים ליום השלישי כי ביום השלישי ירד ה' לעיני כל העם על הר סיני—Hashem said to Moshe, “Go to the people and prepare them today and tomorrow, and they shall wash their clothing. Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day, Hashem shall descend before the eyes of all the people on Har Sinai.”** If that was the case, then how was it possible or imaginable, that after all of their preparations, they would sleep so soundly on the night prior to this momentous revelation to the point that it was necessary for HKB”H to come and arouse them with thunder and lightning and a powerful shofar-blast?

HKB”H Caused Them to Fall into a Deep Slumber to Create a Symbolic Gesture for Future Generations

I would like to propose a wonderful explanation. HKB”H, in His infinite mercy and kindness, wanted to establish a vital precedent for all future generations. Whenever Yisrael would lapse into a spiritual slumber on account of the hardships of galus, HKB”H would arouse them and inspire them to perform teshuvah.

Support for this notion can be found in the narrative related to Matan Torah in parshas Vaeschanan (Devarim 5, 19): **“את הדברים האלה דיבר ה' אל כל קהלכם בהר מתוך האש הענן והערפל קול גדול ולא יסף”**—these words Hashem spoke to your entire congregation on the mountain, from the midst of the fire, the cloud and the fog—a powerful voice that was never-ending. Rashi interprets the end of this passuk as the Targum does: **“קל רב ולא בסק”**—a powerful voice that never ceases. The words spoken by HKB”H are eternal, constant and do not stop even for a second. Thus, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the thunder, lightning, and shofar-blast that were instrumental in awakening Yisrael from their slumber are also eternal. Their function is to arouse Yisrael at all times from their bouts of spiritual slumber.

It appears that this explains very nicely why the first halachah presented by the michaber in the Shulchan Aruch is (O.C. 1, 1): **“יתגבר כארי לעמוד בבוקר לעבודת בוראו שיהא הוא—מעורר השחר—one should strengthen himself like a lion to get up in the morning to serve his Creator, so that it is he who awakens the dawn.** The source for this notion is the Tur, who writes the following:

“צריך האדם להתגבר כארי לעמוד בבקר לעבודת בוראו, ואף אם ישיאנו יצרו בחורף לאמר, איך תעמוד בבוקר כי הקור גדול, או ישיאנו בקיץ לאמר, איך תעמוד ממטתך ועדיין לא שבעת משנתך, התגבר עליו לקום, שתהא אתה מעורר השחר, ולא יהא הוא מעירך, כמו שאמר דוד ע”ה עורה כבודי עורה הנבל וכנור אעירה שחר, אני מעיר השחר, ואין השחר מעיר אותי.” A person needs to strengthen himself like a lion to stand in the morning for the service of his Creator, even if his yetzer taunts him in winter, saying **“How can you get up in the morning when the cold is so great?”** or taunts him in summer, saying **“How can you get up from your bed when you have not had enough sleep?”** He should

strengthen himself to rise, for you should awaken the dawn, but it should not awaken you, as David, a”h, said (Tehillim 57, 9): “Awake, my soul, awake, O harp and lyre; I will awaken the dawn.” I awaken the dawn; the dawn does not awaken me.

The Turei Zahav (ibid. 2) explains the meaning of the Tur regarding David’s declaration: **“I will awaken the dawn.” I awaken the dawn; the dawn does not awaken me.** He refers to the teaching in the Zohar hakadosh (Vayikra 21b) that the appellation **“אילת השחר”** (morning star; gazelle of the dawn) alludes to the holy Shechinah associated with the congregation of Yisrael.

Now, the light of dawn that awakens a person in the morning alludes to the holy Shechinah that awakens a person from above to with renewed strength and vitality to serve his Creator. David, however, due to his extreme kedushah, did not require the dawn or the Shechinah to awaken him. On the contrary, as he declared, **“I will awaken the dawn.”** By means of his Torah studies below, he provided the Shechinah pleasure from above.

Thus, it is explicit that HKB”H awakens us every morning with the light of day—the dawn. The goal is to preempt HKB”H, so to speak, to awaken the dawn. This is the message conveyed by the michaber: **One should strengthen himself like a lion to get up in the morning to serve his Creator. He should get up early enough to welcome in the dawn.** In keeping with our current discussion, this phenomenon began at Matan Torah. HKB”H induced Yisrael to fall into a deep slumber on the night prior to Matan Torah, so that He could arouse them in the morning with thunder and lightning and a powerful shofar-blast. Thus, He performed a symbolic gesture for all future generations to awaken the light of dawn every morning to inspire Jews from above to arise to serve the Creator.

The Rambam Asserts that the Shofar Is Sounded to Arouse Those Who Are Asleep

I would now like to present to our royal audience a precious gem I was privileged to receive from Hashem. It concerns a well-known yet enigmatic teaching of the Rambam’s that I have struggled with for years. In Hilchos

Teshuvah, he explains at length the rationale for the mitzvah of **“tekiat shofar”** on Rosh HaShanah. Here is what he writes (Hilchos Teshuvah 3, 4):

Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah is a decree from the Torah, it contains an allusion. It is as if it (the sound of the shofar) is saying: “Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator.” Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year, devote their energies to vanity (foolish, worthless endeavors) and emptiness which will not benefit or save. Look to your souls; improve your ways and your deeds, and let every one of you abandon his evil path and negative (improper) thoughts.

I have always found this bewildering: (a) Why did the Rambam see fit to insert this explanation in Hilchos Teshuvah rather than in Hilchos Shofar, which would seem to be the more appropriate place? (b) Indeed, we find many sources stating that the purpose of **“tekiat shofar”** is to arouse Yisrael to perform teshuvah; yet this phrase—**“wake up you sleepy ones from your slumber”**—does not appear anywhere.

In keeping with our current discussion, however, we can suggest that the Rambam deduced this fact from the passuk related to Matan Torah: **“It was on the third day, in the morning, that there was thunder and lightning. A heavy cloud enveloped the mountain, and there was a very loud sound of the shofar. All the people in the camp trembled.”** As we learned from the Midrash above, they fell into such a sound, pleasant slumber that it was necessary for HKB”H to wake them up with thunder and lightning. We explained that HKB”H arranged for this to happen, so that He could perform a symbolic gesture for all future generations—to arouse them from spiritual lethargy and slumber.

In this manner, let us explain why HKB”H commanded us to blow the shofar on Rosh HaShanah. We know that Rabeinu Saadia Gaon gives ten reasons for the mitzvah of **“tekiat shofar.”** For his third reason, he writes: **“להזכירנו”** מעמד הר סיני שנאמר בו וקול שופר חזק מאד, ונקבל על עצמנו מה שקיבלו

אבותינו על עצמם נעשה ונשמע—to remind us of the revelation at Har Sinai of which it says (Shemos 19, 16): “And the sound of the shofar was very powerful”—and so that we will accept upon ourselves that which our ancestors accepted with the proclamation “na’aseh v’nishma.”

Furthermore, Rosh HaShanah is Yom HaDin—the day on which we are held accountable and judged for all of our transgressions during the past year. Apparently, we were not attentive to the powerful, unceasing sound of the shofar throughout the past year. As explained, its function is to arouse us from our spiritual lethargy and slumber, just as HKB”H aroused Yisrael prior to Matan Torah. Therefore, to make amends for this lapse, we blow the shofar on Rosh HaShanah to recall the shofar sounded at Matan Torah, and to renew our commitment to heeding the sound of the shofar every day that awakens us from our spiritual slumber.

With immense joy, we have shed some light on the profound words of the Rambam. We asked why he placed the halachah and rationale for “tekiat shofar” on Rosh HaShanah in Hilchos Teshuvah. So, although we perform this special mitzvah specifically on Rosh HaShanah; nevertheless, it is designed to be heard and arouse us on a daily basis throughout the year, incessantly. Thus, we constantly remember the revelation at Har Sinai and our renewed commitment not to succumb to spiritual lethargy.

Since we are discussing the Rambam, it behooves us to add an intriguing idea. The Rambam, Rabeinu Moshe ben Maimon, was well-versed in all aspects of the Torah. As such, he was able to compile and arrange all the mitzvos and halachos of the Torah. Of him it was said: **From Moshe (Rabeinu) to Moshe (the Rambam), no one has risen like Moshe.** In fact, the Tikunei Zohar teaches (Tikun 69): **“ואתפשטותיה דמשה בכל דרא ודרא ובכל צדיק וצדיק”—an extension of Moshe (Rabeinu) is present in every single generation and in every single tzaddik!**

Thus, if Moshe Rabeinu exists to some degree in every tzaddik, without a doubt he existed within the Rambam, who was also named Moshe. This should be evident from what the Noam Elimelech writes (Lech Lecha): **“שלפעמים”**

שמה גורם, היינו השם שהוא נקרא כשם אדם כשר וישר, זה גורם לאדם שיהיה צדיק, למשל מי ששמו אברהם ורוצה לעבוד השם יתברך ברוך הוא—sometimes a name influences (a person’s personality and actions); this means that a name of a proper, upright person can influence a person with that name to be a tzaddik. For example, someone whose name is Avraham and wishes to serve Hashem, his name will have a positive influence and assist him to become a tzaddik.

Now, we learned in the aforementioned Midrash: **“And Moshe was awakening them and taking them out to greet the King of Kings, HKB”H. That is what is written: ‘Moshe took the people out of the camp toward G-d.’ HKB”H was walking before them until He reached Har Sinai.”** Accordingly, we can suggest that just as Moshe Rabeinu responded to the thunder and lightning and shofar-blast of HKB”H on the day of Matan Torah by arousing the people of Yisrael who were sound asleep; so, too, the Rambam was privileged to convey to us in Hilchos Teshuvah the necessity to awaken from our spiritual slumber by heeding the unceasing, perpetual sound of the shofar of Matan Torah.

The Thought-Provoking Question Posed by the Tiferes Shlomo

It gives me great pleasure to introduce an anecdote from a mundane lesson of the great luminary, the Tiferes Shlomo, zy”a. He once entered the Beis Midrash and found a particular Torah-scholar that had dozed off during his learning. The esteemed Rabbi approached him and woke him up. He asked him the following question: You are a diligent scholar, perhaps you know the answer to the ship-captain’s question. This confounded the scholar; he did not know how to respond, because he had never heard of such a question. So, the Tiferes Shlomo explained that he was referring to the question that the ship’s captain asked Yonah HaNavi (Yonah 1, 6): **“ויקרב אליו רב החובל ויאמר לו מה: “לך גרדם קום קרא אל אלקיך”—the ship’s captain approached him, and said to him, “How can you sleep so soundly? Arise! Call to your G-d!”**

To clarify his question, we will refer to the Arvei Nachal (Yom HaKippurim, Drush 2). Yonah is a “remez”

to the congregation of Yisrael, who are compared to a dove (“yonah”). The ship’s captain alludes to HKB”H, Who arouses Yisrael to perform teshuvah. Here is a loose translation of what he writes:

Our blessed sages compared our situation in this prolonged, bitter galus to a ship in a turbulent sea that is liable to sink at any moment. Its only chance of survival is to hope for the rachamim of Hashem. It has no other options. So are we in this galus—one lamb among seventy wolves. Every day, they devise plots to put an end to us. Our only hope is to pray for Hashem’s rachamim to save us. We have no other choice. This is the blatant message of the passuk (ibid. 5): “But Yonah had descended to the ship’s holds, and he lay down and fell fast asleep.” The congregation of Yisrael is compared to Yonah. The Holy Spirit is shouting at him, “How can you sleep so soundly?!” This is not an appropriate time to sleep! “Arise! Call to your G-d! Perhaps, G-d will think of us (heed our prayers), and we will not perish.”

Let us embellish this thought to better understand the profundity of the Tiferes Shlomo. The question he posed to the scholar—**“How can you sleep so soundly** (at a time like this or under these circumstances)”—coincides fantastically with the enlightening words of the author of the Tanya in Likutei Amarim (end of Chapter 37). He explains why our blessed sages refer to Torah-study as “קריאה”. As we see in the Mishnah, for example (Berachos 13a): **“היה קורא בתורה”—if one was reading (“korei”) from the Torah.** This is meant to teach us that by studying Torah, we are actually calling (“korei”) HKB”H to come to us. Here are his holy words:

Studying Torah is referred to as a form of “calling” (“kriah”), such as “korei baTorah.” This means that by engaging in the study of Torah, a person is calling to HKB”H to come to him, so to speak. It is analogous to a person calling to his friend to come to him, or to a small child calling to his father to come to him to be together with him, so that he should not be separated from him and be left alone, chas v’shalom. This is the meaning of

the passuk (Tehillim 145, 18): “Hashem is close to all that call upon Him, to all that call upon Him in earnest (with ‘emes).” And there is no “emes” other than the Torah. Thus, the person is calling to HKB”H specifically by means of the Torah. This comes to exclude someone who calls Him not by means of Torah-study, but merely cries out: “Father! Father!” As the navi laments over Him (Yeshayah 64, 6): “There is no one to call out in Your name.”

We can now interpret the question the ship’s captain posed to Yonah: **“מה לך נרדם”—addressing the congregation of Yisrael, He is asking them why they are lethargic, and inactive; “קום קרא אל אלקיך”—under these circumstances, you should be calling to HKB”H through Torah-study, like a son calling his father to come be with him. This goes hand in hand with what we have been discussing: On the night prior to Matan Torah, HKB”H induced Yisrael to slumber; He then awakened them with thunder and lightning and the blast of the shofar. Thus, He performed a symbolic gesture for all future generations—indicating that whenever they sink into a state of spiritual slumber, chas v’shalom, HKB”H would arouse them with thunder and lightning.**

“Thunder was created only to straighten out the crookedness within the heart”

Now, let us apply what we have learned to gain a better understanding of the following teaching in the Gemara (Berachos 59a): **“אמר רבי אלכסנדר רבי יהושע בן לוי, לא נברא רעמים אלא לפשוט עקמומית שבלב, שנאמר והאלקים עשה שיראו מלפניו”—Rabbi Alexandri said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: Thunder was created only to straighten out the crookedness within the heart, as it says (Koheles 3, 14): “And G-d has acted so that man should stand in awe of Him.”** The Maor Einayim explains the matter in the name of the Ba’al Shem Tov as follows: Sometimes a person is in such a deep slumber that it is difficult to arouse him delicately or softly. In these situations, it becomes necessary to raise one’s voice or even shake the person forcefully in order to arouse him. The same holds true for large groups of people or communities. They may sink into a spiritual slumber, because they are consumed by an endless pursuit of the meaningless, worthless temptations

of Olam HaZeh. Hence, to shake them out of this state, HKB”H will occasionally arouse them with a thunderous, penetrating voice. As a result, they will recognize man’s powerlessness to control the forces of nature. Then they will remember that the Creator, blessed is He, manages and runs the universe as He desires.

This is the point Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi makes by citing the passuk: **“And Elokim has acted so that man should stand in awe of Him.”** The passuk employs the name **Elokim**, the name of “din.” In other words, HKB”H did not create “midas hadin” to mete out punishment to a sinner, but rather to instill in him “yirah”—fear of Hashem—to motivate him to perform teshuvah. As a result, it will no longer be necessary to actually punish him. This then is the interpretation of the passuk: **“והאלקים עשה—HKB”H created the midah of “din,” represented by the name Elokim, only “שיראו מלפניו”—so that they would fear Him and would not sin but not to actually mete out punishment, chas v’shalom.**

In keeping with this discussion, this is the message Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi wished to convey: **“Thunder was created only to straighten out the crookedness within the heart.”** He was alluding to the thunder and lightning of Matan Torah that HKB”H used to awaken Yisrael from their deep sleep, so that they could receive the Torah. As we have learned, those phenomena are eternally present to stimulate Yisrael and arouse them from spiritual apathy and slumber.

We can now truly appreciate the time-honored Jewish minhag to stay awake the entire night of Shavuot. It demonstrates our strong desire and willingness to arise on our own to study Torah and serve Hashem—to emulate David HaMelech, who proclaimed proudly, **“I will awaken the dawn.”** Clearly, this is the ideal! By awaking on our own from spiritual slumber to study Torah, we will not require frightening thunder or other injurious forces to arouse us, chas v’shalom. On the contrary, in the merit of the Torah, HKB”H will bestow upon us divine “chesed” and “rachamim,” as it is written (Mishlei 3, 16): **“אורך ימים כימינה בשמאלה עושר וכבוד”—length of days is at its right; at its left is wealth and honor.**



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