

The Night of Potential



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The middle of the night. The time when it's quieter. When most things aren't moving as quickly. The time where there is less light, or no light at all. The middle of the night can be seen as a time of great danger, where demons are lurking and we need to be afraid of walking alone, or speaking to people. But it is also the time of potential, a time where we are interacting with God in a way that is not possible when the sun is shining.

When looking in Tanach about the "middle of the night," it seems to be this time of change. Be that when God started to take the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 12:29) or when Ruth goes to lie at Boaz's feet, marking the change of their relationship (Ruth 3:8). According to Bamidbar Rabbah (20:12) all miracles which were done for Israel to save them from the wicked took place at night, and goes on to quote different instances, such as God warning Laban not to harm Jacob (Genesis 31:21), God warning Avimelech to keep his hands off of Sarah (Genesis 20:3), or that a cloud was there at night to protect the Children of Israel as they waited to cross the Red Sea (Exodus 12:29).

The night is also a time of connecting with God in a way that one cannot usually do during the daytime. For David, it was a time when he would "praise God for the judgments of charity" (Psalm 119:62). And according to Bamidbar Rabbah and other sources, the night time was when most prophets received their prophecy. It was the time when they were able to hear and connect with God in a more personal way.

The night is also a time of danger: We shouldn't walk around alone (Pirkei Avot 3:4). We shouldn't talk to strangers (Megillah 3a). Anything could happen. We

can get taken away to the places we are not meant to be. It is a time where we can easily be distracted. It is a time where we can get lost.

There is a debate in Eruvin (65a): "Rabbi Judah said: The night was created only for sleep. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: The night was created only for Torah study." The rabbis continue to debate this. Shir HaShirim Rabbah (5:10) comes to a conclusion that the night is both. It is not that we are sitting and learning all night long, but the night is as Shimon ben Lakish said: While I would labor in Torah study during the day, at night it [i.e., Torah study] would become clear to me, as it says, "And you shall meditate on it day and night." It is the time where we are able to actually take in what we have been learning all day. It is in the time of the quiet, without the hustle and bustle of the day. In that time, that we are able to digest and separate the wheat from the chaff of all, we have been learning.

It is said (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:56) that our ancestors fell asleep, and needed to be awakened in the morning to receive the Torah. It is not clear what was so wrong about falling asleep, but perhaps by falling asleep it seems like we lost the opportunity for a personal connection with God. It could have been a time where, as a nation, we were also able to experience God in the dark and quiet. Although prophecy comes at night, it seems like this sleep was not one of connection; rather, it was sleep that cut God short. Sleep that did not let us wake up in the morning on time. Sleep that held us down instead of rising up.

It is because of this, we have the tradition to stay up all night learning, interacting with God—God's words,

interpretations of God's words, noticing God in the silence and darkness, so that we are ready to receive the Torah in the sunlight.

In any moment of great potential, there is an element of danger, we see that here, too. The night has the potential to be dangerous and full of demons or a time of a deep connection with God. May we be able to find ways to have nights of deep connection with God. ☸

