

During our evening services we prepare for nighttime by singing *Hashkeivenu*. Nighttime can be described positively or negatively, either as security and repose--rest, sleep, peace, warm blankets, fluffy pillows. Or in terms of danger, fear, and vulnerability. The Mishnah goes so far as to say (Avot 3:4) that a person who goes out alone at night is held culpable for taking his or her own life! All of our fears come out at night. Children are scared of the dark, the monsters under the bed, and the boogy men in the closet. As we get older, other things about night time scare us. And it becomes harder and harder to turn off and power down to sleep.

The premise of a prayer to protect us during the night reflects the prescientific belief and the commonly held intuition of children that losing consciousness during sleep is dangerous. Believing that once you fall asleep there is no guarantee that we will continue living throughout the night and wake up the next morning.

Yet science, and our own personal experience of waking each morning, prove that sleep is not dangerous. Rather, it's just the opposite: sleep is a gift. So why do adults continue to say this prayer?

The *Haskivenu* was originally invented for the field laborers who feared nighttime bandits and wished to rush home from work as soon as darkness settled in. They would gather hastily together, say this prayer and then hurry home. Once times had shifted and people were leaving work earlier and praying in established synagogues in towns, the custom of reciting these verses remained.

Perhaps this prayer is a reminder of just how delicate life can be, and how miraculous it is that we are able to sleep and wake up. Blessings in Judaism often call attention to the mundane details of life, reminding us of their miraculous nature. Maz Kudushin, a late conservative rabbi and seminary professor, called this function of liturgy "normal mysticism." These prayers call our attention to large theological and moral meanings embedded in our everyday activities that could otherwise pass us by unnoticed.

Frankel reminds us that only in modern Western countries and then only really among the middle and upper classes do people go to bed at night and arise in the morning with a sense of relative physical security.

Even though we may suffer personal setbacks in the form of illness, economic reversal, or natural disaster, we do not tend to conclude from these experiences that the world has suddenly become inhospitable to human life.

But the world has always been a more perilous place than we like to imagine, for Jews, of course, but for others as well--rife with disease, drought, flood, famine, war, persecution, and exile. Especially in earlier times, when a person lay down to sleep it was often with a sense of dread, and still it is so in areas around the world where war is the normal state of things, and where one's final thoughts before falling asleep are likely to be, "what calamity will tomorrow bring?"

Perhaps this is why the *Hashkivenu* evokes the image of the *Shekhinah*, the feminine aspect of God. Just like a mother bird hovering over her chicks, sheltering her young underneath her wings, God is called upon to shield us beneath the shadow of the divine wings. Divine wings over us providing a canopy of protection. The two wings on either side of the bird provide balance, the "two wings" of the

Shekhinah are a metaphor for divine attributes that balance one another. For example, the attributes of Judgment and Mercy, need balance.

This shelter of peace which is spread over us is an adaptation of a biblical expression that evokes a sense of divine love and protection. It is used in Ezekiel and Ruth, when cloaks are spread over people to protect and care for them.

For 23 years I slept soundly. I would hit the pillow, close my eyes, and fall deep into sleep with virtually no effort. I slept more soundly before I had real responsibilities, and frankly when I was more naive. A certain naivety provides a level of comfort that diminishes with knowledge.

For 23 years the *Hashkivenu* was just a beautiful, soulful song. A nice melody, a cantor's solo piece. Three months after Adam and I married, I was thrust from my sound sleep by a monster next to me. Adam sat up in bed with a loud animal like roar of pain. I opened my eyes to witness his distorted face, a scary face I didn't even know a human being could make. With lightning speed I rushed to our landline, dialed 911 and told the dispatcher that we needed an ambulance; my husband was having a heart attack.

Fear surged through my body as I thought of my childhood friend's father who screamed out in the middle of the night as he died of a massive heart attack. The dispatcher calmly asked me questions, questions I knew he knew because I was calling on a land line. I had to look at our door to remember what apartment number we were in. Then he had me check on Adam who was shaking; oh, thank God you don't shake when you have a heart attack; a seizure, the dispatcher told me, was more likely.

The firemen arrived and I have never been so happy to see another human being. Adam was responsive but unable to recall the president, the day of the week, or my name. They took Adam to a near by hospital, and I followed in a car I could barely drive in an unfamiliar city, trembling all the way.

I pulled up and to my relief Adam was completely coherent. But the nightmare continued; the seizure was caused by a brain tumor. The tumor led to many tests, and brain surgery, where thankfully we were relieved to learn that the tumor was benign. Sleep deprivation doesn't even begin to explain my experience. When Adam came home I couldn't sleep. I was afraid he would stop breathing. I was afraid there would be another seizure. I was so very afraid... I would often rouse him to make sure he was ok. I needlessly woke him up more times than anyone could ever count. Since I couldn't sleep I would stay up, watch TV, which made the hours go by, and the night deep, and therefore the fear more prominent.

Only one thing helped. Singing *Hashkivenu*... "Shelter us beneath your wings... guard us from all harmful things, till I wake from mornings light... "

But nighttime is also a gift; there couldn't be life without rest. Our bodies and minds need sleep to recharge and rejuvenate. Nighttime is also the time when true healing happens. Walking through the halls of a hospital in the middle of the night, one is reminded of the miraculous nature of sleep. Scabs heal, bruises fade, aches and pains soften, hearts are mended, and time soothes.