Preface Early to Rise

Day 1

Readiness to serve God

Maran Harav Yosef Karo began his monumental *Shulhan Arukh*, the guide to life, with, ''One must gird one's strength in the manner of a lion to rise in the morning in order to serve one's Creator.'' The fact that he chose this as the very first halakha is indicative that rising from one's sleep in a timely manner is a fundamental aspect of one's spiritual duties.

Indeed, the wicked magician/prophet Balaam praised the people of Yisrael for this very attribute: ''They are a nation that rises like a lion whelp and rears itself in the manner of an adult lion'' (*Bemidbar*). Rashi interpreted this as follows: ''When they rise from their sleep in the morning they rush like a lion to capture mitzvot – wrapping themselves in *tallit*, donning tefillin and reciting the *Shema*.''

No sane person would consider remaining in bed and as a result arriving late at the office, especially if he has an important meeting scheduled for first thing in the morning to close on a million-dollar deal. As soon as his alarm clock rings, he would jump out of bed invigorated and smiling, already feeling the profits in his hands. The fact that he went to sleep late the night before doesn't faze him in the least; he is immediately awake and alert, rushing to get ready to become that much wealthier. This is how we all act regarding monetary profits, but when it comes to spiritual gains, too many of us feel lethargic, their heads spinning with weariness and their legs leaden with sleep. It takes a lot of training to make it a habit to jump up and run to the synagogue.

The *sefer Sha'are Tefilla* (Rakah) explained that in every war, the initial battle is crucial; it sets the pace for each subsequent engagement. In our war against the *yetzer hara*, our first battle of each day is getting up in the morning and performing the morning mitzvot in a timely fashion. If we win that first battle, it is likely that God will help us make the rest of the day go the same way. If we lose that battle, however, we are ensnared in the *yetzer hara's* trap and it will be doubly difficult to shake it off afterward.

Harav HIDA (*Birke Yosef* 1:2) cited his great grandfather, author of *Hesed le'Avraham*, explaining that this is alluded to in our Sages' teaching (*Midrash Tanhuma Pinehas*), ''If someone is on his way to murder you, rise early and

kill him.'' The *yetzer hara* wishes to destroy us, but by rising early in the morning to serve God we can overcome him. The *Ben Ish Hai* (*parashat Vayishlah* prologue) added that the strategy for ''killing'' the *yetzer hara* is to study Torah from midnight until dawn. The Hebrew word for *night* – *layla* – alludes to this, since the initial letters of the words *haba lehorgakha hashkem lehorgo* – If someone is on his way to murder you, rise early and kill him – spell the word *layla*. Fortunate is the person who takes this advice and devotes his time every night from midnight until dawn to Torah study. The holy *Zohar* explains at great length the virtues and profits gained from such a habit. Later in this *Siman* this concept is clarified – for many people, especially in modern society, it is preferable to maintain a schedule of remaining awake studying Torah till late at night but rising at a reasonable hour in the morning.

God told the serpent (*Bereshit* 3:15), ''He (mankind) will strike you on the head, while you will strike him on the heel.'' Harav Hayim Vital explained that this verse is a description of the battle between man and his *yetzer hara*. The Hebrew word for head – *rosh* – alternatively means beginning. Man can strike at the *yetzer hara* and overcome it by concentrating on the *rosh*, the beginning of the day. The *yetzer hara* will most likely win the battle, however, if man is at the heel, always late in beginning his spiritual activities. This parallels our Sages' teaching, ''All beginnings are difficult.'' One must be stubborn as nails to begin things on the right foot and bear all sorts of difficulties, but once one gets over the hump the rest of the road allows for smooth sailing. See more on this subject in *sefer Hatikkunim* (preface, page 8b), *sefer Devash Lefi* (*ma'arekhet He*, #13) and the *Kaf Hahayim* Palachi (3:14).

The famed *mashgi'ah*, Harav Eliyahu Lopian, rose very early in the morning each day. When he was asked why this was so important to him, he explained when a person is brought to the Heavenly Court upon passing from this world, he will be asked whether he fulfilled the Torah and its mitzvot. The judges will bring forth a *Shulhan Arukh* and go through it, one halakha after the other, questioning the soul on trial. Obviously, the proceedings will begin with the very first halakha in the *Shulhan Arukh* – ''One must gird one's strength in the manner of a lion to rise in the morning in order to serve one's Creator.'' It would be awful to have to say, ''No, I did not fulfill this halakha,'' starting from the very first question. That is why, Rav Eliyahu concluded, he made sure to always rise early in the morning. (*Lev Eliyahu* preface)

Our Sages often emphasized the importance of beginnings. Balaam declared (*Bemidbar* 23:9), ''I see it from the apex of the cliff faces; I observe it from the hilltops.'' Rashi explained that he meant, ''I see their beginnings and origins and I understand that their foundation – the Patriarchs and Matriarchs – is as mighty as the mountains.

Elisha ben Avuya, who was a leading Torah scholar among the Tanna'im in the time of Rabi Akiva, eventually changed drastically, discarding all Torah values and credos. The Talmud Yerushalmi (cited by Tosafot to *Hagiga* 15a) attributes his downfall to the fact that his father pushed him as a child to study Torah for the sake of gaining the honor and prestige of Torah scholars, but not for the sake of the Torah itself. Since his beginnings were flawed, he eventually lost it all.

After the Flood, No'ah began rebuilding the world. The first thing he did was to plant a vineyard, as the Torah states (*Bereshit* 9:20). This was a misjudgment. It was the wrong way to begin a world and it resulted in tragedy, affecting the world's entire history.

Another example of the importance of beginnings is the Hanukka miracle of the Menorah. The *Pene Yehoshu'a* (comment to *Shabbat* 21b) pointed out that, technically, this miracle was unnecessary. Although the people were all rendered impure by their physical contact with the war's victims, they should have been allowed to perform all the daily sacrifices, including kindling the Menorah, despite the fact that they and the oil had been defiled. God granted us a miracle – the undefiled oil lasted for eight days until it could be replaced – because this was the beginning, the rededication of the *Bet Hamikdash*. The special virtue of being the beginning is displayed to us likewise by the mitzvah of sanctifying the firstborn of man and animals, and by the mitzvah of *bikkurim*.

The tzaddik Harav Elimelekh of Lyzhansk instructed his followers to give God special thanks each morning for the mitzvot of *netillat yadayim* and *tzitzit*, since our very first acts of the day are to fulfill these two mitzvot, thereby dedicating each day to serving God. Our first thoughts each day should be of God's great kindness in restoring our souls to our bodies after a night's sleep. Our first steps are toward fulfilling the morning mitzvot. Our first words are ones of gratitude to God, prayer and Torah study, while our first acts are to fulfill the morning mitzvot. The rest of the day follows suit. This is alluded to in the verse (*Kohelet* 2:14), "הֶחָכָם עֵינָיו בְּרֹאשׁוֹ – the wise man's eyes are directed forward (to the beginning)." One must see to it that the beginning of each day, of each week and each month, is dedicated to Torah and infused with the fear of God.

The Midrash (*Pirke deRibbi Eliezer* 30), expounding on the verse (*Bereshit* 22:3), "Avraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey," comments that this was the same donkey that Moshe Rabbenu rode when he traveled to Egypt to redeem the people of Yisrael (some 360 years later) and the Mashi'ah will arrive riding on that very donkey. What this means for us, the *sefer Yalkut Eliezer* (Vol. I, page 21a) explains, is that Avraham exercised complete control over his physical strengths and desires. The Hebrew word for donkey – *hamor* – has the same letters as the word *homer* – physicality.

Avraham Avinu overcame all his physical instincts to go wherever God instructed him to go and to do whatever God commanded him to do. Likewise, Moshe Rabbenu overcame any physical inclination to refuse to carry forth his monumental mission and he went forward with all his strength to fulfill it. Avraham Avinu was the paradigm of faith and trust in God, while Moshe Rabbenu was the paradigm of a Torah personality. The Mashi'ah will personify absolute obedience to God and His Torah, conquering his *yetzer hara* completely and permanently. This is what the Midrash means by saying that these three personalities ride the same *hamor*, controlling their bodily *homer*.

Harav HIDA (*More Ba'etzba* #3) stated that since the very first halakha found in the *Shulhan Arukh* is to rise from one's sleep early in the morning, anyone who fails in this primary test is certain to have difficulties overcoming the *yetzer hara* in all his affairs. Therefore it is imperative to place great effort to succeed in this first battle. One must internalize the lesson of Rama in his first gloss to the *Shulhan Arukh*: ''One must be conscious of the concept that God is always watching us, that He is present everywhere in the entire world.'' If someone is lazy to get up early in the morning for his prayers, God is fully aware of it. Therefore one must leap like a gazelle and run to serve God. It is recommended that one refrain from speaking any mundane conversation in the morning until one has prayed and blessed his Creator. One must certainly avoid any lengthy conversation until then.

The *sefer Pele Yo'etz* (entry *Hashkama*) cites our Sages' teaching – ''If someone wishes to murder you, beat him to it and kill him first.'' Since the *yetzer hara* fully intends to kill people with its wiles, we must stand fast in self defense. If we fight this battle first thing in the morning, God will give us assistance all day long. Therefore, one must make sure to rise before dawn.

The *Hesed La'alafim* (*Siman* 1) states: One must display the strength of a lion to rise early in the morning to serve one's Creator. One's entire connection to Judaism depends on rising early and beginning the day by performing good deeds and avoiding all evil. It takes great effort to break one's desires and overcome the *yetzer hara* that fights to drag one down. One must fight this battle during all hours of the day, but the struggle is fiercest when one first wakes up and one's mind is still foggy with sleep. At that time, the *yetzer hara* pounces upon the person, persuading him to go back to sleep in the winter because it is cold and in the summer because the night is short. Its goal is to make sure that the person at least misses the opportunity to pray with the congregation, or at best to make him sleep through the entire morning. If it succeeds in this, it will continue to hound the person throughout the day, as each sin precipitates another.

Therefore, anyone who wishes true life should employ strategies to win this battle. He must make sure to rise early in the morning to serve God, at all