BS"D
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Potomac Torah Study Center
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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning almost 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his recent untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah.

The Blumenthal family sponsors the Devrei Torah for Rosh Hashanah in loving memory of their father and grandfather, Herbert Blumenthal, a"h, Chaim ben Hillel, a"h, whose yahrzeit is 7 Tishrei.

Consider a High Holy Day donation to the Chabad of the University of Delaware, victim of arson by anti-Semites who burned the Chabad building in late August. UDFireRelief.com or 262 S College Ave, Newark, DE 19711.

While 5780 started out very well, the coronavirus situation turned everything around over the winter – as early as December or January in some areas and by Purim in our community. May the FDA soon permit Americans the option to select vaccination against this dangerous disease. Hopefully improved treatments and vaccination will soon enable us to return to more normal lives.

I had not planned to write a special message this week, because I have numerous obligations and so little time. I finally decided to share some thoughts from looking over the materials I am sharing. What comes below is truly a first draft – written as if Hashem is guiding my fingers over the keyboard.

Elul is our month of teshuvah, as we prepare to face our Creator. Rav Kook reminds us that our individual teshuvah prepares for the ultimate universal teshuvah that can repair the universe. This year, with Rosh Hashanah coming on Shabbat, especially with many forced to daven silently at home (or at greatly abbreviated services at shuls with much lower attendance than normal), a major part of the message is silence. The silence of this Rosh Hashanah, with no shofar blowing on the first day, and with much silence at scaled down services, should remind us that God often appears with a still, small voice. God is in the High Holy Days in our memories, occasions when we rejoiced with family and friends, shared with dear friends in crowded shuls, and looked forward to the renewal of those new years.

This year, as we daven silently at home, or feel the pain of much reduced services in mainly empty shuls, we must find a way to use the strange silence. Rosh Hashanah this year will be a time to reflect, to find new ways to connect with family and friends. While reflecting, we must realize that the still small voice is God's way of telling us that He is always with us, always waiting for us to open a conversation with Him, always waiting for us to make Him a part of our lives.

Rabbi Rhine reflects on the Akeidah, when Avraham and Yitzhak looked to a mountain that seemed the same as always to their servants but for them was full of God's presence, in a cloud surrounding the top that only they observed. A tzadik sees what others do not permit themselves to see. Rabbi Marc Angel relates a story of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (of the Talmud), whose son experienced a view of death and the afterlife before recovering. The son said that in the world to

come, things are not as they seem in our world. Rabbi Angel says that as we approach Rosh Hashanah, we should use prayer and reflection to gain spiritual insight to transform our lives, hopefully to make our world a better place. May these messages put us in an appropriate mood for the High Holy Days.

I am attaching by E-mail a packet of Devrei Torah for the next three weeks from Rabbi Angel and the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Yeshivat Chovevei Torah also has a Machzor for the High Holy Days, geared to those davening at home, with beautiful poems and short Devrei Torah. It is too large a file to attach here, but one may download it from: https://www.yctorah.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MachzorCcompanion2020-e3-1.pdf

Time has gotten away from me, especially during a very hectic week, and I have not had the time I needed to contact most of my friends. I have been thinking of many of you – hopefully we can make contact during the next three weeks. Please know that I have many of you in my mind. Meanwhile, after six months of going almost nowhere, we hope to be able to drive to Dayton, OH to spend Sukkot with our son Evan and his family (if we can do so safely during this pandemic). As the time comes close, Hannah and I recall many wonderful High Holy Days with our beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, his family, and congregation. Rabbi Cahan was always inspiring, always available during our times of need, always interested in our lives and family – a true friend as well as mentor. Without his starting me on the path, I could not be where I am now. For all these reasons, I must dedicate my Devrei Torah packages to his memory.

Kativa V'chatima Tovah!

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Nossan ben Pessel, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Eli ben Hanina, Yoram HaKohen ben Shoshana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tziviah, Reuven ben Masha, Moshe David ben Hannah, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhok Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Ramesh bat Heshmat, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, Miriam Chava bat Yachid, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers. Note: Beth Sholom has additional names, including coronavirus victims, on a Tehillim list.

Hannah & Alan

Drasha: Rosh Haashanah: Holy Smokes!

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 2009

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

Every Holiday has its particular observances. Most of them are clear and finite mitzvos and rituals. On Pesach we abstain from eating chametz. We make a Seder, drink the four cups of wine and eat matzoh. On Sukkos we take the lulav and esrog and sit in the Sukkah. But the period of the High Holidays is different. In addition to the rituals performed on Rosh Hashanah, the blowing of the shofar and the various customs of eating certain fruits, the ensuing days are replete with a variety of nuances, that seem to pop up at different hours of the day and affect us some subtly and others more overtly at varying times of the day. Morning, noon and night there are activities that keep the spirit of the holidays sustained – all the way to Yom Kippur and beyond.

Walk into the synagogue. It looks different. It is bedecked in white. The bima. The ark. The Torahs. The alarm clock rings at least a half hour earlier for slichos — additional supplications. And that is not enough. The daily weekday prayers have insertions and acts that constantly remind us of the days of awe. Smack in the middle of the prayers, even before the shema, we open the Aron to say a verse of Psalms. The Shemoneh Esrei itself contains insertions and substitutions that refer to Hashem as King as opposed to His usual title G-d; forgetting certain of these changes can render the entire recitation of the prayer invalid! And, of course there are insertions in the tefilah that remind us about G-d's power as a

Judge and Purveyor of life. The Kadish is altered with seemingly subtle amendments that bear the weight of fundamental change.

Our foods are different as well. We abstain from tart and sour substances, replacing acidic foods with sweet ones. Those of us who are less stringent with eating bread baked by gentiles during the rest of the year are told that they should only eat bread baked by Jewish bakers. And though I can understand the reasons for these insertions and nuances, I often wondered: What is the objective of these insertions? Will they change our attitude toward life. Will they accomplish more than the prayers and tears and the shofar blasts of Rosh Hashanah and fasting and praying all day on Yom Kippur?

In the mid 1920s a chasid once approached the Imrei Emes, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter of Ger: "Rebbe, I am traveling to Paris on a ten day business trip. Would the Rebbe give me a bracha (blessing) that I be successful in my venture?"

After a warm blessing the Rebbe continued to make his own request. "In Paris they sell an exclusive cigar brand that is reputed to be the best in all of Western Europe. I would appreciate if you would find that brand and bring me back a box."

The chasid was puzzled by the request, but responded enthusiastically.

"Of course, Rebbe! No problem. I will find out which is the best brand in all of France and bring you back two boxes!"

The men went on his trip and indeed returned two weeks later. He visited the Rebbe to thank him for his blessing.

"Do you have the cigars?" asked the Rebbe.

The man blushed. "Rebbe, you have to forgive me. When I was in Paris, I was so immersed in business that I totally forgot about your request. But do not worry. On the way back I made a special stop in Belgium and got you the best Belgium cigar available. I was assured that it is of equal quality to the French cigar if not better!"

The Rebbe shook his head. "My dear chasid, I did not need cigars. The reason I asked you to get me the cigars while you were in France is because I wanted those cigars to be on your mind. In that manner you would remember during your stay there that you have a Rebbe."

Of course each one varying nuances may represent an important symbolism and each insertion of prayer or change of language may offer a powerful supplication, but I believe that there is something more. During these days we must keep on inserting tiny wake up calls that shout to us, "Remember the rebbe!"

Switching words, opening the Aron Kodesh, watching our foods all may be minor acts but in the greater view they are reminders that we are living in a very spiritual and holy period and the King is waiting for us to remember him.

We live in a world that is fraught with distraction. We become immersed in our mundane world and often forget about the greater spiritual picture. During the ten days of penitence it is so important to have subtle roadblocks inserted in the daily rote of our mundane lives and even in the middle of our spiritual ones. We have to insert an extra booster of spirituality in all that e do. Because during this period we have to ensure that even the search for the perfect cigar is indeed the quest for a holy smoke.

Happy and Healthy Sweet New Year

Listening to the Silence In the Time of Coronavirus

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2020

Rosh HaShanah is referred to as a zikhron teruah, of remembrance of shofar blasts, and when it falls out on Shabbat, as it does this year, we only have the memory of the blasts, not the blasts themselves. On one level this is a loss: we will be

denied the stirring, powerful sounds of the shofar. But it is also a presence, a felt silence that can heard when there are no blasts to overpower it.

In U'ntaneh Tokef, we recite: u'bi'Shofar gadol yi'takah, vi'kol demamah dakah yishama, "and the great shofar shall be sounded, and the sound of a thin, still silence shall be heard." This phrase evokes the verse from Kings, where God appears to Eliyahu with a great wind, earthquake and fire and declares: God is not in the wind, God is not in the earthquake, God is not in the fire. God is in the still, small voice that can barely be heard. God is in the silence.

We spend so much of our lives – or at least we did, prior to COVID-19 – running around, occupying ourselves, seeking distraction, entertainment, stimulation, and challenge. The shofar pulls us out of that noise, lets us listen to the silence, to the small voice of our inner soul, to the voice telling us who we really are and how we can become our best selves. It lets us listen to the small, silent voice of the world, the voice that is telling us – here is what needs to be fixed, here is a change that you can make in the world for the better. It raises us above the din of our family dynamics, and lets us hear the voices that are saying, "I need your attention, I need your love, I need your support."

When there is noise and busy-ness, we need the blast of the shofar. But when there is quiet around us, when it is Shabbat, we can embrace the silence directly. We can hear the small still voices of our heart, the world, and our loved ones because our ears are attuned and the world is quiet.

In many ways, this year has been an extended Shabbat for the world. So much of the energy, productivity and noise has been silenced. What are we hearing in that silence? Some of what I've been hearing in the silence is that we are all interconnected, that global events will affect us all, that with the acceleration of climate change, we will need to work together to face the natural disasters and profound challenges to come. I've been hearing the voices about race, and healthcare and inequality. And in the silence and remove from the hubbub of the office, I've been able to hear the voices of my coworkers, the voice that says, "Empower me. Give me space. Allow me to spread my wings."

Let us all take a moment and reflect: What are the small, still voices that I've been hearing, or that I haven't been hearing but should have been listening for, these last 6 months? And on this much quieter Rosh HaShanah this year, let us embrace the silence. Let us structure our time, the time that we are not in shul, to reflect and to get in touch with that small voice within and the whispers of the world. Let us listen closely to the unarticulated feelings of our spouse, our children and our parents, so that we may connect with their hopes and aspirations for themselves and for the family for the year that is to come. Let us make time to sit, to be enveloped by the silence, and to hear its powerful voice.

Shanah Tovah!

To download a copy of the YCT High Holy Day companion, go to https://www.yctorah.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MachzorCompanion2020-e3-1.pdf
This file is too large for me to attach with my E-mail package.

To See a Smile

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine © 2020 Teach 613

The Torah reading for the second day of Rosh Hashana is the story of the Akeida, the "binding of Yitzchak," as his father Avraham thought that he was expected to sacrifice his son. In reality, it was a test, a test to show that Avraham was willing to "bring up his son on the Altar." Avraham's test paved the way for us, his descendants, and how we pass tests in every generation.

As Avraham neared the place that would one day be the Temple Mount, he saw a mountain with a remarkable cloud wrapped around its top. He recognized the Shechina, Hashem's presence, and he turned to Yitzchak and asked him if he saw the cloud as well. Yitzchak did, and Avraham realized that Yitzchak was worthy of whatever great mission was expected of them. Then Avraham turned to his servants and asked if they saw the cloud. They said, "No."

I wonder: If the servants did not see the cloud "wrapped" at the top of the mountain, what did they see?

Presumably, they saw the mountain. Since they did not see the cloud, none of the mountain was obscured, so to them it appeared that they were seeing the whole picture. As the saying goes, “What you see is what you get.” No more, and no less, than what we see.

Avraham’s greatness demonstrated by this incident was in knowing that he did not see the whole picture. He knew that some of the mountain that he needed to climb to complete his test was obscured. Only trust in Hashem’s plan kept him on task. Avraham understood that his vision was obscured, and that a significant part of life and destiny is known to G-d alone, but is out of our view.
One of the greatest personalities in Judaism is Rabbi Akiva, a man who was able to see beyond typical human vision. When his colleagues saw the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash and cried, Rabbi Akiva laughed because he was seeing the fuller plan, as described in the prophets, including the eventual redemption. Rabbi Akiva knew that the intense rebuke would be followed by benevolence.

The Jewish people, as the entire world of today, are getting a good share of “masking up.” Masks cover much of the face, and in the midst of these uncertain times, we feel as if Hashem, too, is hiding His face. Yet, beneath the mask, and beneath the challenges, we have every reason to believe that Hashem is smiling benevolently. It is just too odd. For weeks we lived as if in a warzone. But it was the most benevolent warzone ever known to mankind. We had meat, chicken, tofu, pineapple, and even mandarin oranges. The only thing that we were notably short of was tissues, a soft and gentle way to remind us of our humanity.

The losses to many were, and remain, very great. Yet, the fortitude of the Jew comes from the perspective that there is a holy cloud obscuring some of the picture at the top of the mountain. As we climb our own personal mountain in life, we are inspired by Avraham, who was able to say with confidence, “I do not see the whole picture. There is something holy at its top. Behind it is G-d’s smile.”

We are living through wondrous times. The status of “untouchable” companies is being rearranged. The status of unending enmity between nations is being reassessed. We watch as Hashem rearranges the “chess pieces” as He sees fit. And through it all we live with a clarity that the top of our mountain is obscured, and only Hashem is privy to that.

The climb of Moshe to the top of Mount Sinai was the climb of national greatness into a cloud of holiness. The climb of Avraham on a mountain “wrapped” at its top in a cloud, is the climb of personal greatness, the climb of life. Avraham had the clarity to see that his vision was obscured. He was able to live in confidence of G-d’s benevolent plan. Avraham was able to see the smile behind the mask, as Rabbi Akiva did. And, so can we.

Rosh Hashana is a day of judgment and reassessment. It is a day of prayer and reconnection. May we be blessed with the opportunity to experience it well. May we be blessed with a wonderful, safe, happy, and healthy, new year.

Searching for Ultimate Clarity: Thoughts for the High Holy Day Season

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel*

The Talmud (Pesahim 50a) tells a remarkable story. The great sage, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, had a promising and learned son who took ill—and died. The grief at the loss of this young man was immeasurable. But then, amazingly, the son somehow revived. And the joy at his coming back to life was no doubt even greater than the grief at his supposed death.

Rabbi Yehoshua realized that his son had undergone a unique experience, having tasted death but then having been returned to life. So the father asked the son: what did you see on the other side? What is the nature of the world after death? The son responded: “olam hafukh ra-iti,” I saw a topsy-turvy world. Those who are great here are small there; and those who are small here are great there. Rabbi Yehoshua told his son: “olam barur ra-ita,” you saw a clear world; you saw things the way they really are.

In this world, we cannot easily judge who is actually great or insignificant. We live in a world of illusions and shadows, and we are easily deceived. How can we know the real essence of anyone, if they are truly great or not, if they are truly good or not? How can we see things here as they ultimately are in the eyes of God? Only in the next world, the world of spirit

and truth, does clarity prevail. In this world, not only are we not able to clearly understand others, but we often have difficulty even evaluating our own true selves.

But how can we attain clarity of insight? How can we see things with the lucidity of genuine truth? Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has found that when people reach the last stage of life, when they have accepted their impending death, they often become infused with remarkable clarity. There is no more reason for deception; one has nothing to lose by being totally honest. At this last stage of life, a person can give a clear evaluation of his or her life.

In his studies of individuals who underwent near-death experiences, Prof. Raymond Moody has found common elements in the experiences of all his subjects, regardless of their gender, race, or religion. Having "gone to the other side" and returned, they all tended to reach two conclusions: one must love others; one must learn as much as possible. This extreme experience jarred them into a world of spiritual clarity; they somehow learned to focus on what is truly important in life, on what has ultimate value for our souls.

But all of us want to gain clarity of insight without having to wait until the very end of our lives! Very few of us will undergo a near-death experience. So how are we to gain this insight here and now?

It seems to me that the High Holy Day Season plays a special role in this regard. It attempts to place us, albeit symbolically, into a crisis mode. The imagery of these days is that we are, in fact, on trial for our lives. We come before God and plead with Him to inscribe us in the Book of Life. Yet, we know fully that He may decide otherwise.

Each of us experiences this season differently, because each of us is a different person. We respond to the prayers and the rituals to the degree that we bring our knowledge, feelings and sensitivity to them. If we spend Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in serious contemplation and prayer, we can gain much. Each of us has the opportunity to enter the mood and spirit of these days.

Rabbinic tradition speaks of "teshuvah sheleimah," a complete repentance. This entails not merely repenting for this sin or that sin, or asking forgiveness for this transgression or that error. Complete repentance means transforming our personalities, transforming the way we lead our lives, seeing our lives organically, comprehensively, clearly.

This is the challenge of the High Holy Days—to judge ourselves truly. Through this exercise of prayer and meditation, we may gain the spiritual insight which leads us to a dynamic self-transformation.

We should be moving ahead, raising our lives to a higher level. May we merit to see "olam barur"—a clear world, a true world. And with this clarity, may we have the merit to make our lives and our world a better, more spiritual, wiser place for all of us.

* Jewishideas.org. **The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic.** The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website jewishideas.org or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Instutite for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.

For a package of excellent short articles for the High Holy Days, through Sukkot, go to https://www.jewishideas.org/article/holiday-reader-institute-jewish-ideas-and-ideals I am attaching this package by E-mail, and I encourage you to download it to enjoy over the next three weeks, through the week of Sukkok.

Rosh Hashana – Can My Prayers Succeed?

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer*

This Rosh Hashana comes during a most difficult and trying period. Our preparations for the Days of Awe have gone from a study of mitzvos and character development to a study of current regulations and medical updates. Rather than

preparing and planning for inspiring services and meals with family and friends, we are preparing and planning for minimal services and quiet meals alone.

As we approach this unusual Rosh Hashana I begin to imagine how our ancestors must have felt after the first Tisha B'Av. Weeks after the destruction of our Temple, the first Yom Tov they approached without a Mussaf offering was Rosh Hashana. How devastated they must have been, how broken and fearful, approaching the Days of Awe without the Temple service. Their only hope for the Day of Judgement lay in the prayers. Many of us now approach the Day of Judgement wondering how we will even have prayer to help us. A quick service, minimal singing and minimal speeches – how meaningful can it be before G-d?

Yet, we know that G-d tells us that He always hears our prayers. We know that every minimal effort we make is of great significance to G-d. The basis for the Mussaf prayer on Rosh Hashana, the highlight of the service, expresses the strength of our prayers. The Gemara Rosh Hashana 16a tells us that Hashem instructed us on how we are to receive a good judgement on Rosh Hashana. We are to say verses declaring Hashem's monarchy, to declare Him as King over us. We are then to say verses highlighting G-d's remembering humankind for good, that our mention should be brought before Him in a good light. We then conclude with verses referencing the sound of the Shofar, indicating that the merit of the shofar should ensure our mention is brought before G-d in a good light. This simple prayer of listing verses highlighting these concepts is enough to ensure a good verdict for our lot in the coming year.

The Gemara on 16b continues to illustrate the power of our prayers. Rebi Yitzchak tells us that any year that begins impoverished will end wealthy. Rash"i explains that Rebi Yitzchak is not referring to actual poverty, but rather to our attitude, that we feel impoverished. Why does our feeling of poverty lead to a year of wealth? Rash"i explains that if we make ourselves feel impoverished on Rosh Hashana then we are able to properly pray to G-d. When we recognize how deeply we need G-d, we can sincerely supplicate before G-d. Once our prayers are sincere, then the year is guaranteed to end with wealth.

However, in context this Gemara does not appear to be so simple. The Gemara continues and states that one who is meticulous in his prayer and prays with great focus and effort brings severe and strict judgement upon himself. Similarly the Gemara in Berachos 54b tells us that one who davens a lengthy and meticulous prayer will bring himself to heartache, for his prayers will not be answered and his desires will not be met.

Reading these Gemaras together one would begin to think that the Talmud is telling us short and meaningless prayer is far better than a lengthy prayer and supplication before G-d. How are we to understand these Gemaras, and what message are we to apply to ourselves and our own approach to prayer?

Rash"i provides an insight into these Gemaras which can change our entire understanding of prayer and is particularly relevant for this year. Rash"i explains that the Gemaras which state that lengthy prayer is unwanted are referring to a specific form of lengthy prayer. There are two reasons why one would be meticulous and focused in prayer. One reason is because he deeply desires that which he is praying for, and therefore pleads with G-d to grant his request. The second reason is because he knows prayer works, and that G-d does answer our prayers. He therefore is meticulous in praying to ensure he does it properly so that his prayers will be effective. The Gemaras are referring to an individual who, recognizing the power of prayer, approaches G-d with the conviction that his prayers will be answered. It is this attitude which causes his prayers to fail.

This answer is difficult to understand. After the Gemara has explained that G-d has told us that a simple formula of prayer guarantees a good verdict and that any year that we begin by feeling impoverished is a year when we will be blessed with wealth, why shouldn't we feel that our prayers will be answered?

Perhaps we can understand better through a parable. Imagine a king who is a just and kind-hearted monarch, who deeply loves his country and his people. He wishes that his subjects should truly understand and feel his love for them. He speaks with his ministers and decides that he will establish a time and a place where anyone can come to share their personal lives and their needs with the king. All who come to share their personal lives with the king at that time and place will be granted their wishes as an expression of the king's love. When the people hear of this decree, they rejoice and look forward to this opportunity o connect personally with their beloved king and to receive his beneficence. The day arrives and everyone comes to humbly and gratefully approach the king to share their simple stories and needs with this powerful and benevolent king. As the people take their turns, each one leaves the king's presence relieved of their burdens and buoyed by the warmth, love and concern of the king. One man later in line, watches everyone else leaving

laden with gifts, and begins to realize that the king is truly giving whatever one asks for. He starts to think beyond his basic needs and imagine what his life could be if he were to truly take advantage of this opportunity. After all, the king has declared he will give whatever people ask of him. When this man's turn arrives, he proudly steps before the king and begins to express carefully and clearly to the king all the wealth and success he has ever dreamed of. As the king listens he recognizes that this man has no thought of nor recognition for the king's love, nor for a relationship with the king. He has come only to take advantage of the king's benevolence. Infuriated, the king throws the man out and sends him off without a single gift.

This parable is the message that Rash"i is telling us. The Gemara never intended to teach us that prayer is a tool with which we can receive what we want. Rather the Gemara was teaching us that G-d's love for us is so complete, that G-d deeply desires to grant our requests. It is not the power of prayer that we should rely upon, but rather the power of G-d's love and concern for each and every one of us.

This is reflected in the formula for the Rosh Hashana Mussaf. Before we ask that we be remembered in a good light, we must first recite verses declaring that G-d is our King. Only then can we ask that we be remembered in a good light, and only then can we discuss our mitzvah of Shofar. First, we must recognize G-d, and Who it is that we are speaking with. This is the message as well of Rebi Yitzchak. Any year that we come before G-d with true supplication and with an attitude as though we have nothing, truly and genuinely asking G-d for help out of pure reliance on Him, and on Him alone, any such year is guaranteed that G-d will respond and shower His love upon us. The key to prayer is in truly recognizing our relationship with G-d and that He loves each of us as His child.

As we find our prayers minimized this year, perhaps that itself is the greatest gift. We can approach G-d this Rosh Hashana knowing that we are not seeking that He answer us based on our merits, or the sincerity of our prayers, nor any other reason. We are approaching G-d this Rosh Hashana feeling somewhat alone even when we're together, concerned for ourselves and others, with no clarity of what is to come. We approach G-d this year with a sense that we truly need Him. We turn to G-d from that perspective knowing also that He cares and wants us to share our burdens with Him, knowing that He wishes us to feel His love and lovingly cherishes our prayers and our wishes. May G-d shine His love upon all of us in this coming year, and may we all be blessed with a year of health, security, wealth, prosperity, peace and all good things.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

Blessings for the Coming Year

by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

Usually I gloss over facebook posts and spend a second looking at them before I scroll down. And I never have copied a facebook post and sent one out as an email. But lo and behold, one of my facebook friends posted something so wonderful (and halachically accurate) that I felt I had to share it. It is from a man named Teddy Cohen who detailed all the ways that the year 5781 is a unique year with many things happening in the Jewish calendar that rarely come about.

Enjoy and may you and all your loved ones be blessed with a happy, healthy, and sweet year!

The uniqueness of the year 5781 תשפ"א*

This coming year תשפ"א is the most rarest of occurrences. I will give a quick introduction: There is a total of 14 various ways of how the yearly Jewish calendar can be set. 7 of them are regular years, and 7 of them are leap years - 14 in total.

Each of these 14 ways has a 3 letter code. By knowing this code, one can figure out the entire year; exactly what day of the week each Yom Tov will fall out, when Rosh Chodesh will be, whether it's a leap year or not, which Parsha will it be each week, etc, etc.

The code for this coming year is זח"א. I will not bore everyone as to explaining what this code means, but suffice to say that it is arguably the rarest of all 14 methods. The last time this occurred was 20 years ago and the time before that was 44 years ago.

I will list here some of the rare phenomena which we will be witnessing this coming year:

#1
תפילת ותודיענו 5 פעמים בשנה אחת
This year we will be making Kiddush & Havdala together, a total of 5 times throughout the year:
1 - 2nd night of Rosh Hashanah ליל שני של ראש השנה
2 - 2nd night of Sukkot ליל שני של סוכות
3 - Simchat Torah Night ליל שמחת תורה
4 - First night of Passover ליל סדר ראשון של פסח
5 - Last night of Passover ליל אחרון של פסחr

#2
אין שבת חול המועד כלל No Shabbat on Chol Hamoed (Intermediate Festival Days)
This is good news for the children: No Shabbos Chol Hamoed this year - not Succos nor Pesach. This means more time to go to the zoo, the bumping cars, or the merry-go-round...

#3
שבת מקץ אינו שבת חנוכה Shabbat Mikeitz is not Shabbat Channukah
This year is the rare occurrence of Channuka starting on a Friday - which means that Parshat Mikeitz is not Channuka anymore - which causes the reading of the weekly Parsha Haftorah, which is almost never read, since the Haftorah of Shabbat Channukah almost always supersedes it. But this year is an exception. If you ever wondered why a Haftorah for Miketz is printed in our Chumashim since it's never said anyway - the answer is it's printed there for this year. Remember the wisdom of King Shlomo ordering to cut the baby in half in order to determine who the real mother is? That's the story of Haftorat Mikeitz which we haven't gotten to read for 20 years...

#4
עשרה בטבת שחל בערב שבת The Fast of the Tenth of Teves is on Friday
The only fast which can occur on a Friday is Asarah B'Teves (The Tenth of Tevet). This fast cannot be pushed off for a later date as other fasts are, since the Pasuk refers to Asarah B'Teves as "Etzem Hayom Hazeh" (On exactly this day) which Chazal interpret as meaning that this fast must be on the 10th day of Teves no matter what day of the week it falls out. This causes the rare occurrence of fasting until after Kiddush. This is when everyone will be making an early Shabbos - in middle of the winter...

#5
שבת זכור שחל בפרשת תרומה (Shabbat Zachor is Shabbat Parshat Terumah)
In a regular year - not a leap year, the Shabbat when we read Parshat Tetzaveh is always the Shabbat when we read Zachor except for this year when we will read Zachor when we read Parshat Terumah. While this has no practical ramifications, it is nevertheless an extremely rare occurrence.

#6
פורים שחל בערב שבת (Purim falls on Friday)
If Purim every year is not hectic enough, we will now have the rare occurrence of Purim on a Friday - and yes - it is still before the clock is moved - so you better be ready to light Shabbos candles at 5:00 - by hook or by crook... Better start the day at the crack of dawn, in order to pack into this short Friday the reading of the Megilla, sending Mishloach Manos, eating a Seudas Purim, manage to get a bit drunk as well, plus running around to all the teachers and family... If your head is starting to spin already - you have an option - buy a ticket to Israel. If you're in ארץ ישראל - then it's a different story - as we will now explain:

#7
פורים המשולש Purim Meshulash (Triple Purim)
If you ever planned to go to Eretz Yisroel for Purim - this is the year to go. Why? Because since Purim in Jerusalem is always a day later then by us - namely on the day we call Shushan Purim - therefore when Purim is by us on Friday - then by them it's on Shabbos - which results in the phenomenon of פורים המשולש litteraly meaning "The Triple Purim". What this means is as follows:

Just like we have now Rosh Hashana falling on Shabbos, as well as Succos on Shabbos, where the Shofar is not blown and the Lulav is not shaken - as the Gemara explains the reasoning - the same reasoning applies when Purim falls on Shabbos as well - the Megilla is not read. What happens is - Purim instead of being 1 day - ends up being 3 days instead!

How so? - This is how it works:

The 6 Mitzvos of Purim are divided into 3 days:
On Friday we read the Megillah and give gifts to the poor., On Shabbos we say Al Hanissim and read the Torah reading for Purim and Sunday is the Purim meal and we send Mishloach Manot. Yerushalayim is clearly the place to be this year!...

#8
ערב פסח שחל להיות בשבת* Erev Pesach is on Shabbat*
But the Yom Tov which has the most Halachic ramifications is the phenomenon of Erev Pesach occurring now on Shabbos. Here are some aspects of Pesach which will now be different than every year:
בדיקת חמץ (Checking for Chametz)
Cannot be the night before Pesach as usual since it's Shabbos, so it must be on Thursday night instead.

שריפת חמץ (Burning Chametz)
Can obviously not be on the day of Erev Pesach, and must instead be on Friday morning. But Kol Chamira is said, and no Chametz is nullified. Why? Because while every year, there is of course no Chametz to be had after the burning, this year however, not only is Chametz permitted afterwards - but one is actually obligated to eat Chametz afterwards. Why? Because on Shabbos one must eat both at night and day some bread. One cannot substitute Challa for Matza, as it is forbidden to eat Matza on Erev Pesach. But how the Challa is eaten is a bit complicated...

בוקר שבת ערב פסח Erev Pesach Shabbat morning
Everyone must daven Shachris on Shabbos at the crack of dawn, in order to be finished eating Challa before the latest time we can eat Chametz at 10:00 in the morning. Any Chametz left over afterwards must quickly be flushed down the toilet before סוף זמן ביטול חמץ at 11:00 as burning is not possible on Shabbos and only then is כל חמירא said. Anyone who wishes to eat 3rd meal afterwards, cannot eat Challa nor Matza, and must eat other foods instead. After Shabbat, we then prepare for the Seder.

תכלה שנה וקללותיה!
תחל שנה וברכותיה!
May the curses of this year be done and may the blessings of this year begin

* Rabbi, Knesseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL

The 'New' of the New Year

By Rabbi Dovid Green *

[Last] week's parsha deals with the period of time just prior to the death of Moshe. It was a scene like that of a father giving his last instructions to his beloved children. He gave his final plea to the Jewish nation to heed his instructions and follow the ways of HaShem's Torah.

To paraphrase from the book Lilmode U'Lilamade on the weekly Torah portion: (J.E.P.-Feldheim Publishers):

Return while there's still time.

Moshe informed the Jewish people that even if the time will come when the majority of the nation will abandon the ways of the Torah and calamities will therefore occur, they can still return to their Father in Heaven through the means of repentance. Repentance consists of several stages. One must declare the past negative behavior as wrong and unproductive. One must actively take on correct behavior, setting ones goals in a new, positive direction and then resolve not to go back to the old negative habits.

This can often be a difficult and lengthy process complete with challenges and the inevitable "three steps forward, two steps back". One must focus on one aspect of ones personality at a time and refuse to give up when faced with slow progress. This applies to those well off and those who are not, those who are young and those who are no longer young. One's position and stage in life has no baring here as we learn from Rabbi Yisroel Salanter.

Rabbi Salanter once went to a shoemaker in his town in Europe to have a pair of shoes repaired. Since it was already nearing the end of the day he felt that the lack of light might cause the shoemaker difficulty. Rabbi Salanter therefore suggested that the shoemaker wait till the next day to start on the job. "Do not despair" came the shoemakers reply. "I'll just light a candle. As long as the candle is lit, it is still possible to do the repairs".

Rabbi Salanter saw these simple words as significant and took them to heart. Upon his return to the yeshiva he repeated the shoemakers words to his students, while shedding his own Torah "light" on them. The lesson he wanted passed down reads like so: As we learn Torah commentary we see time and again that the human soul is compared to a candle. The shoemaker has given us a beautiful parable. One must never resign oneself to spiritual despair. As long as the candle burns, one can effect the necessary repairs. No matter what "time" of life one starts from, as long as the Jewish soul flickers, it is possible to return the Torah's path.

What greater message for us at this time with the eve of Rosh HaShana being this coming [Friday] night. Let's put a truly "new" face on our New Year.

It says in the Gemorah, tractate Yoma: "Great is (the effect of) repentance as it brings healing to the world".

Have a great Shabbos and a productive year full of good physical, mental, and spiritual health.

*J.E.P. is the Jewish Education Program which offers ongoing introductory classes for Jewish adults and children. There are many branches. For more information find the one nearest you.

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter was the founder of the system of ethical studies which was adopted as a regular part of the curriculum in yeshivos world-wide. He lived in the 19th century.

Thanks to Mrs. Miriam Green for writing this week's dvartorah.

 [] indicates editor's changes to reflect the different days of the week for Rosh Hashanah this year.

Rav Kook Torah
The Teshuvah of Rosh Hashanah

The major theme of the month of Elul and the High Holiday season is teshuvah — repentance and return to God. Yet if we examine the Rosh Hashanah prayers, there is no mention of sin or penitence. We do not recite any confessional prayers, nor do we make any promises to improve. Instead, the Rosh Hashanah prayers deal with a completely different theme: the entire world accepting God's sovereignty.

How does this aspiration fit in with the overall seasonal theme of teshuvah?

From My Straits

Before blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, we recite the verse from Psalms:

> *"From my straits I called out to God. He answered me, and set me in a wide expanse ."* (Psalms 118:5)

The verse begins with narrow straits, and concludes with wide expanses. What are these straits? These are our troubled, even suffocating, feelings of failure and disappointment with ourselves. However, with God's help we are able to escape to "wide expanses." Our sense of confinement is eased and our emotional distress is alleviated.

This progression from the narrow to the wide is also a good physical description of the principal mitzvah-object of Rosh Hashanah — the shofar, which gradually expands from a narrow mouthpiece to a wide opening.

From the Individual to the Community

Rav Kook, however, did not explain this progression from narrow to wide in a psychological vein. Rather, he likened it to the contrast between the prat and the klal, the individual and the collective. There are the narrow, private issues of the individual. And there are the broad, general concerns of the community and the nation.

Teshuvah takes place on many levels. We all try to correct our own personal faults and failings. The nation also does teshuvah as it restores itself to its native land, renewing its language, culture, and beliefs. And the entire world advances as it learns to recognize God's moral rule and sovereignty.

The shofar, with its gradually widening shape, is a metaphor for these ever- expanding circles of repentance and spiritual progress. The order, however, is significant. Our individual teshuvah must precede the universal teshuvah of the klal. During the month of Elul, we are occupied with rectifying our own personal faults and errors. But on Rosh Hashanah our outlook broadens. We yearn for the teshuvah of the Jewish people and the ultimate repair of the entire universe. We aspire "to perfect the world under the reign of the Almighty, when all humanity will call out Your Name" (from the Aleinu prayer in Musaf of Rosh Hashanah). From the narrow straits of personal limitations, we progress to the wide expanses of universal perfection.

(Silver from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Mo\'adei HaRe\'iyah, p. 60.)

The Challenge of Jewish Repentance © 2017

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Former UK Chief Rabbi,*

The Ten Days of Repentance are the holy of holies of Jewish time. They begin this Wednesday [Friday this year] evening with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and culminate 10 days later with Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement. At no other time do I feel so close to God, and I suspect the same is true for most Jews.

These days constitute a courtroom drama like no other. The judge is God himself, and we are on trial for our lives. It begins on Rosh Hashanah, with [remembering] the sounding of the shofar, the ram's horn, announcing that the court is in session. The Book of Life, in which our fate will be inscribed, now lies open. As we say in prayer, "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die." At home, we eat an apple dipped in honey as a symbol of our hope for a sweet new year.

On Yom Kippur, the atmosphere reaches a peak of intensity in a day of fasting and prayer. Repeatedly we confess our sins, whole alphabetical litanies of them, including ones we probably had neither the time nor the imagination to commit. We throw ourselves on the mercy of the court, which is to say, on God himself. Write us, we say, in the Book of Life.

And at the end of a long and wrenching day, we finish as we began 10 days earlier, with the sound of the ram's horn—this time not with tears and fears but with cautious yet confident hope. We have admitted the worst about ourselves and survived.

Beneath the surface of this long religious ritual lies one of the more transformative stories of the human spirit. The sociologist Philip Rieff pointed out that the movement from paganism to monotheism was a transition from fate to faith. By this he meant that in the world of myth, people were pitted against powerful, capricious forces personified as gods who were at best indifferent, at worst hostile, to humankind. All you could do was try to propitiate, battle or outwit them. This was a culture of character and fate, and its noblest expression was the literature of Greek tragedy.

Jews came to see the world in a completely different way. The book of Genesis opens with God making humans "in his image and likeness." This phrase has become so familiar to us that we forget how paradoxical it is, since for the Hebrew Bible, God has no image and likeness. As the narrative quickly makes clear, what humans have in common with God is freedom and moral responsibility.

The Jewish drama is less about character and fate than about will and choice. To the monotheistic mind, the real battles are not "out there," against external forces of darkness, but "in here," between the bad and better angels of our nature. As the religion writer Jack Miles once pointed out, you can see the difference in the contrast between Sophocles and

Shakespeare. For Sophocles, Oedipus must battle against blind, inexorable fate. For Shakespeare, writing in a monotheistic age, the drama of “Hamlet” lies within, between “the native hue of resolution” and “the pale cast of thought.”

The trouble is, of course, that faced with choice, we often make the wrong one. Given a second chance, Adam and Eve would probably pass on the fruit. Cain might work a little harder on his anger management. And there is a straight line from these biblical episodes to the destruction left by Homo sapiens: war, murder, human devastation and environmental destruction.

That is still our world today. The key fact about us, according to the Bible, is that uniquely in an otherwise law-governed universe, we are able to break the law—a power that we too often relish exercising.

This raises an acute theological dilemma. How are we to reconcile God’s high hopes for humanity with our shabby and threadbare moral record? The short answer is forgiveness.

God wrote forgiveness into the script. He always gives us a second chance, and more. All we have to do is to acknowledge our wrongs, apologize, make amends and resolve to behave better, and God forgives. It allows us to hold simultaneously to the highest moral aspirations while admitting honestly our deepest moral failings. That is the drama of the Jewish High Holy Days.

At the heart of this vision is what the post-Holocaust writer Viktor Frankl called our “search for meaning.” The great institutions of modernity were not constructed to provide meaning. Science tells us how the world came to be but not why. Technology gives us power but cannot tell us how to use it. The market gives us choices but no guidance as to which choices to make. Modern democracies give us a maximum of personal freedom but a minimum of shared morality. You can acknowledge the beauty of all these institutions, yet most of us seek something more.

Meaning comes not from systems of thought but from stories, and the Jewish story is among the most unusual of all. It tells us that God sought to make us His partners in the work of creation, but we repeatedly disappointed Him. Yet He never gives up. He forgives us time and again. The real religious mystery for Judaism is not our faith in God but God’s faith in us.

This is not, as atheists and skeptics sometimes claim, a comforting fiction but quite the opposite. Judaism is God’s call to human responsibility, to create a world that is a worthy home for His presence. That is why Jews are so often to be found as doctors fighting disease, economists fighting poverty, lawyers fighting injustice, teachers fighting ignorance and therapists fighting depression and despair.

Judaism is a supremely activist faith for which the greatest religious challenge is to heal some of the wounds of our deeply fractured world. As Frankl put it: The real question is not what do we want from life but what does life want from us.

That is the question we are asked on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. As we ask God to write us in the Book of Life, he asks us, what have you done with your life thus far? Have you thought about others or only about yourself? Have you brought healing to a place of human pain or hope where you found despair? You may have been a success, but have you also been a blessing? Have you written other people in the Book of Life?

To ask these questions once a year in the company of others publicly willing to confess their faults, lifted by the words and music of ancient prayers, knowing that God forgives every failure we acknowledge as a failure, and that He has faith in us even when we lose faith in ourselves, can be a life-changing experience. That is when we discover that, even in a secular age, God is still there, open to us whenever we are willing to open ourselves to Him.

This article was first published in The Wall Street Journal on 16 September 2017.

* https://rabbisacks.org/challenge-jewish-repentance/ Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar. [] indicates my changes because of Rosh Hashanah on Shabbat this year.

Changing G d's Mind

By Mendel Kalmenson* © Chabad 2020

Does G d ever break the rules? Does He ever violate laws that He enacted? Once His mind is set, can it be changed?

Far from abstract philosophy or theology, these questions are practical.

You should have asked them the last time you prayed for a miracle. There are laws of nature, aren't there? This world does have structure, does it not? A system set in place by G d, not to be broken. A natural order which stipulates that the terminally ill will likely pass on, that a soldier kidnapped by terrorists is unlikely to return, and that a man unjustly incarcerated for life will probably never again walk the earth freely.

And there's a religious order as well, one which specifies that perfectly devout and moral behavior alone—i.e., the observance of G d's will as laid down in the Torah—earns special treatment, and that the lack thereof merits none.

You went ahead and prayed for the supernatural, notwithstanding the fact that on both accounts the odds were (possibly) stacked against you.
So, to be frank, if you did pray in circumstances similar to the ones outlined above, it would mean that—unless you gave prayer no thought at all—you have answers to the aforementioned questions. And that the answer to all three of them is yes.

You would be of the opinion that G d does break the laws He instituted at the beginning of creation and established at Sinai, and that you have the means to get Him to do so.

A tad presumptuous, wouldn't you say?

First Prayers

The first-ever prayer recorded in the Bible was offered by Abraham. Isaac was second, and Jacob third. This led Rabbi Yose to remark that "the prayers were instituted by the Patriarchs."1

Just pages from Rabbi Yose's statement, the Talmud elaborates on many fundamental laws which pertain to prayer. What's surprising to note, however, is that these laws of prayer are derived from a much later instance of prayer, that of Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel. In the words of Rabbi Hamnuna, "How many most important laws can be derived from these verses relating to Hannah!"2

Why were the prayers of the Patriarchs overlooked? Doesn't it make sense to look back to the first biblical instance of prayer when classifying prayer and writing its laws?

We must conclude that there is something so striking about Hannah's prayer—it must contain some element that is critical to the definition of prayer—because of which her prayer was chosen as the archetype after which all prayer is modeled.

Here is an abridged version of Hannah's story, as recounted in the Book of Samuel.3

> *There was a man whose name was Elkanah, who had two wives; the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the second was Peninah. Peninah had children, but Hannah had no children, for G d had shut up her womb.*
>
> *Year by year, they went up to the house of G d to bring sacrifices. Peninah would anger Hannah, and she wept and would not eat.*
>
> *Hannah arose and went to the House of G d. She was bitter in spirit, and she prayed to G d and wept. She vowed a vow, and said: "L rd of Hosts, if You will look upon the affliction of Your maidservant, and You will remember me and You will not forget Your maidservant, and You will give Your maidservant a man-child, then I shall give him to G d all the days of his life . . ."*

There you have it. Hannah's prayer. Unremarkable, it seems.

Unremarkable, but for the fact that this was the first recorded prayer to achieve that which only prayer can.

A Brazen Request

Hannah's request was outlandish.

She was a barren woman—created just so by the Master of the world. She had no chance of conceiving and bearing a child according to the natural order of things. At least that's what Mother Nature said, and there's no use arguing with Mother Nature.

Yet argue she did.

"Give your maidservant a man-child," she pleaded with the Creator of the world. "Break Your law just this once!" she beseeched.

She would not accept the fate handed her by G d Himself!

Her boldness was even greater when she asked for a particular type of child—a "man-child"—which, according to the sages,4 refers to a tzaddik, a perfectly righteous person!

Here she attempted to compromise yet another of G d's rules, of a more serious kind. She attempted to breach a Torah principle, and a fundamental one at that:

> *The name of the angel who is in charge of conception is called "Night." He takes up a drop [of semen] and places it in the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He, saying, "Sovereign of the universe, what shall be the fate of this drop? Shall it produce a strong man or a weak man, a wise man or a fool, a rich man or a poor man?" Whereas "wicked man" or "righteous man" he does not mention . . . For Rabbi Chanina stated: "Everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of G d, as it is said, 'And now, Israel, what does G d, your G d, ask of you, but to fear . . .'"*5

This passage essentially makes the case for the basic Jewish principle of free will. The "fear of G d" mentioned in this passage, which is outside of G d's jurisdiction, so to speak, is a reference to the sphere of moral and religious choice. This is one area of our lives which is not determined by G d—by His own design. "Wicked man or righteous man he does not mention." Saints are not made in heaven, but here on earth.

This tenet is so central to Jewish faith that Maimonides calls it "the foundation of all of Torah and mitzvahs."6

Tell that to Hannah. See if she cared. "Give me a man-child, dear G d," she requested. Nothing less than a perfect tzaddik will do.7

This type of chutzpah was unprecedented.8 But it was precisely the inconceivably audacious nature of Hannah's prayer that placed it at the center of the Jewish definition of prayer.

Hannah behaved counterintuitively. She understood what most do not.

The essence of prayer is not the giving of thanks; that's better described as showing appreciation. It's also not a marketplace for negotiating our needs and desires through the currency of good behavior; that's what we call doing business.

It's what happens after a guilty verdict was passed in the heavenly court, and after all appeals were rejected.9 Prayer is the act of begging the President of the world for a pardon.10

Real prayer thus begins when there is no conceivable end in sight. In the compelling words of Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Elazar:11 "Even if a sharp sword rests on a man's neck, he should not desist from prayer, as it says,12 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.'"13

In other words: Prayer is the light at the end of all tunnels. Turn-on-able only through sincere calling of the heart.14

What's in It for Me?

There's a good reason why Hannah's story is read as the haftorah on Rosh Hashanah. What better inspiration and encouragement to pray could there possibly be?

At some point in the prayers, an honest person is likely to ask himself: "Who am I to pray? I know my shortcomings better than anyone, save for G d; I am aware of how little I truly deserve based on my actions."

If your synagogue involvement is limited to that of a "Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Jew," your sense of hypocrisy and skepticism probably runs deeper.

Says Hannah, "This is not about your past behavior, but about your present interaction with your soul and Creator. Open up the gates of your heart, let go of the cynical voice asking whether or not there is a point in praying, return to your innocence, to your pure faith in G d, and ask Him for your heart's every desire.

"Do as I did, and you can be blessed with a child like Samuel the Prophet . . ."

FOOTNOTES

1. Talmud, Berachot 26b.

2. Ibid., 31a.

3. I Samuel ch. 1.

4. See Rashi, ad loc., from Yalkut Shimoni.

5. Talmud, Niddah 16b.

6. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 5:3.

7. To top it all off, she requested not only a tzaddik in potential, born with the spiritual inclination and orientation to be one (see Tanya ch. 14), but for a tzaddik in action. She wanted assurance that her son's unique potential would be realized: "And I shall give him to G d all the days of his life . . ."

8. Others before Hannah had requested from G d that He abrogate the laws of nature, the laws that He instituted for the management of the world (e.g., Isaac successfully entreated G d to grant children to his barren wife Rebecca). Hannah, however, was the first to ask G d to suspend the rules of the Torah—which are infinitely higher than the laws of nature, rooted in the divine wisdom and will which transcend all of creation.

9. It's important to note that we do not really "change G d's mind," for the divine will provides, from the very beginning, that prayer can evoke (what appears to be, from the human perspective) a change Above. For more on this complex topic, see Prayer and Change and Averting Decrees.

10. For this reason, many (in fact most, see Tzemach Tzedek in his Shoresh Mitzvat Hatefillah) Jewish codifiers (see Semak, Rashbatz, Ramban, etc. quoted in Chinuch) maintain that the biblical mitzvah of prayer is not the daily prayer, which (they opine) is rabbinic, but applies only in moments of dire need. Their reasoning closely relates to our discussion.

11. Talmud, Berachot 10a.

12. Job 13:15.

13. When Hezekiah, king of Judah, suddenly fell mortally ill, the prophet Isaiah came to him and told him to prepare for death. With G d's prophet telling him to make his will and prepare to die, a lesser man might have given up the fight. Not

Hezekiah. He prayed instead. And he recovered (Berachot, ibid.).

14. Based on the teachings of the Rebbe, recorded in Likkutei Sichot, vol. 29, p. 182.

***** Rabbi of Beit Baruch and Executive Director of Chabad of Belgravia, London.

The Rebbe's 1972 Public Letter for Rosh HaShanah

By the Grace of G-d
Chai (18th) Elul, 5732
Brooklyn, New York

To the Sons and Daughters of
Our People Israel, Everywhere,
G-d bless you all!

Greeting and Blessing:

. . . .Rosh Hashanah is the "head" (Rosh) of the year. At the same time, however, each Rosh Hashanah is new and unique -- each inaugurates specific and new forces and qualities.

Particularly unique is a Rosh Hashanah, ... when it coincides with Shabbos, that is, when the first day of Rosh Hashanah occurs on Shabbos, as this year. In this event, the holiness of Rosh Hashanah becomes one with the holiness of Shabbos, giving this Rosh Hashanah a new dimension and content, which -- in view of Rosh Hashanah being the "head" of the year, as mentioned above -- must influence the daily life throughout the year.

***

The general difference between the weekdays and Shabbos, particularly insofar as man is concerned, is that the weekdays are work days ("Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work"), whereas Shabbos is a day of abstention from work ("thou shalt do no work"), a day of rest.

At first glance this leads to an anomaly: From birth a man's destiny is linked to work, as the Torah declares, "A man to toil is born" (with intervals of rest, sleep, etc., in order to recuperate for further toil). Yet, when Rosh Hashanah occurs on Shabbos, its emphasis -- as "head" of the year, setting the tone and pace for each and all the days of the year -- would be on the idea of abstention from work. How is this to be reconciled with the principle of "man to toil is born"?

One of the explanations, which removes the contradiction, is as follows: A human being is a composite of a variety of things and qualities -- broadly speaking, he consists of body and soul. Consequently, all his affairs and activities likewise contain the elements of "body" and "soul", or, in other words, the material and spiritual. It follows that also in the human destiny of "man to toil is born" both elements are present, namely, physical toil and spiritual toil, or, as our Sages of blessed memory express it: the toil of work and the toil of Torah. More specifically: The material-spiritual composition is to be found in both kinds of toil: In the "toil of work" (as also in the "toil of Torah") there is the physical as well as the spiritual toil, for in each of them there is a spiritual side and a material side.

On Shabbos a Jew fulfills his destiny of a "man to toil is born" by dedicating the day to the "toil of Torah." In this sense, Rosh Hashanah that occurs on Shabbos conveys also the message that in all the coming days of this year, a special emphasis should be put on the "toil of Torah (and Mitzvos)" and that also in the realm of "toil of work" (mundane affairs) one should bring out and accentuate the spiritual side of it.

By way of a simple illustration: A person holding a job, or engaged in business, and the like, is generally motivated by the income and desire to earn a living. Yet the underlying spiritual aspect, the "soul" of these mundane affairs, must be the recognition that "all your actions should be for the sake of Heaven." Instead of being motivated solely or mainly by material gains, a Jew should be motivated by higher incentives: to be able to give Tzedoko generously, to be able to study the Torah without worry about Parnosso, to be able to pay tuition for the children's Torah education, and so forth. And it is to attain these higher goals in life that he engages in the "toil of work."

To repeat and in other words: It is expected of every Jew, man or woman, young or old, that he (or she) bring in "Shabbosdikeit" (the spirit of Shabbos) into all his toil, including also the mundane activities; to bring in spirituality and holiness also in the ordinary and mundane activities of the daily life, until they are thoroughly permeated with the spirit of Shabbos.

And when a person is permeated with spiritual motivations, his toil will obviously not interfere with his learning Torah, the fulfillment of a Mitzvah, giving Tzedoko generously and wholeheartedly, and so forth.

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Should the question be asked: How can everyone attain such a high level, and maintain it consistently each and every day of the year? The answer is simple, and everyone can understand it: Inasmuch as G-d, the Creator of man, set this guideline for each and every Jew, it is certain that everyone, regardless of upbringing and station, has been provided with the capacity to carry it out in actual life, and, indeed, to do so with joy and gladness of heart.

And so we say with David: "(Because) On Thee, O G-d, I rely -- (it is certain that) I will not ever be put to shame."

All the more so, since this trust and this commitment derive from Rosh Hashanah, when Jews celebrate the "Coronation" of G-d, and willingly accept His Kingship. Moreover, "The King's servant is (also) royalty," and on Rosh Hashanah every Jew becomes the King's servant anew.

With the blessing of Kesivo vaChasimo tovo for a good and sweet year-

/Signed/ Menachem Schneerson

– **Kehot Publication Society**

***** Excerpt from **To the Sons and Daughters of Our People Israel, Everywhere - Letters by the Lubavitcher Rebbe on the Jewish Festivals**.

Gut Shabbos,
Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
Kehot Publication Society

Likutei *Divrei* Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah via the Internet

Ketiva V'Chatima Tova
Shabbat Shalom

Volume 26 **Rosh Hashana Issue** **5781 B"H**

Covenant and Conversation
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Ten Ideas for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the start of the Jewish year, here are ten short ideas which might help you focus your davening and ensure you have a meaningful and transformative experience.

Number one. Life is short. However much life expectancy has risen, we will not, in one lifetime, be able to achieve everything we might wish to achieve. This life is all we have. So the question is: How shall we use it well?

Number two. Life itself, every breath we take, is the gift of God. Life is not something we may take for granted. If we do, we will fail to celebrate it. Yes, we believe in life after death, but it is in life before death that we truly find human greatness.

Number three. We are free. Judaism is the religion of the free human being freely responding to the God of freedom. We are not in the grip of sin. The very fact that we can do teshuva, that we can act differently tomorrow than we did yesterday, tells us we are free.

Number four. Life is meaningful. We are not mere accidents of matter, generated by a universe that came into being for no reason and will one day, for no reason, cease to be. We are here because there is something we must do; to be God's partners in the work of creation, bringing the world that is closer to the world that ought to be.

Number five. Life is not easy. Judaism does not see the world through rose-tinted lenses. The world we live in is not the world as it ought to be. That is why, despite every temptation, Judaism has never been able to say the messianic age has come, even though we await it daily.

Number six. Life may be hard, but it can still be sweet. Jews have never needed wealth to be rich, or power to be strong. To be a Jew is to live for the simple things: love, family, community. Life is sweet when touched by the Divine.

Number seven. Our life is the single greatest work of art we will ever make. On the Yamim Noraim, we step back from our life like an artist stepping back from their canvas, seeing what needs changing for the painting to be complete.

Number eight. We are what we are because of those who came before us. We are each a letter in God's book of life. We do not start with nothing. We have inherited wealth, not material but spiritual. We are heirs to our ancestors' greatness.

Number nine. We are heirs to another kind of greatness: to Torah and the Jewish way of life. Judaism asks great things of us and by doing so makes us great. We walk as tall as the ideals for which we live, and though we may fall short time and again, the Yamim Noraim allow us to begin anew.

And number ten. The sound of heartfelt prayer, together with the piercing sound of the shofar, tell us that that is all life is – a mere breath – yet breath is nothing less than the spirit of God within us. We are dust of the earth but within us is the breath of God.

So, if you can remember any of these ideas, or even just one, I hope it will help you to have an even more meaningful experience over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Together with Elaine, I wish you and your families a ketiva v'chatima tova. May we, and all of Am Yisrael, be written in God's Book of Life for a year of blessing, fulfilment and peace. Shana tova u'metukah to you all.

"**BUILDING THE FUTURE" - Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur During the Coronavirus Pandemic**

A shana tova, a good New Year to you, to your family, and to the Jewish people throughout the world.

There's something very strange about Rosh Hashanah. I wonder if you've noticed. Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Penitence, culminating in Yom Kippur. Therefore, you would have though we should begin that process of penitence with penitence: confessing our sins; ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu; al cheit shechatanu; slach lanu avinu ki chatanu; slach u'mechal etc.

And yet, of course, if you look in the prayers for Rosh Hashanah, there isn't a hint of any of this, none of it, not one real word about teshuvah. What there is, is talk about malchiyot, zichronot and shofarot, that's the basic structure of Musaf: God's kingship and sovereignty over the universe, His remembrance of things past, and the Shofarot, the clarion call of the ram's horn. Those are the basic structures of the Musaf Amidah, and they're about God, they're not about us.

When we try and define Rosh Hashanah, in terms of the machzor, we see hayom harat olam, today's the anniversary of creation. It's the birthday of the world. Nothing about teshuvahin that, so little hints here and there, little hints. Zochreinu lechayim, kotveinu lechayim, write us in the Book of Life. Avinu malkeinu chadesh aleinu et ha'shana hazot letova, hazireinu b'teshuvah sheleima lefanecha, bring us back with perfect repentance. But we say that at other times of the year. So there is virtually nothing about penitence on Rosh Hashanah.

Why not? Why leave the penitents to Yom Kippur, the very last moment? "Please, God, I've just thought about something. I've sinned, I've committed," etc.It's an extremely strange thing. And I worried about this,I thought about it for years. There's something missing here. What am I missing?

In the end, I discovered the answer through the people who I came to know, who became my mentors in moral courage, and that is the Holocaust survivors. Now every Holocaust survivor had a different story and had a different way of coping. But by and large, there was a general pattern, which is that they did not talk about what had happened to them.They didn't talk about it to their spouses or to their childrenFor years and years, sometimes many decades, they just avoided the subject.

What did they do? They set about making a home in a new country. They set about having a family, getting married, having children, because most of them had lost their families in any case. They set about having a job, building a career, building a life. They set about helping and strengthening one another. And only much, much later, often fifty years later, did they tell their story, sometimes wrote their story or got somebody else to write their story. Many of the survivors that I knew went around schools, non-Jewish schools, as well as Jewish ones telling their story to the pupils because they really wanted them to understand how precious and how fragile freedom actually is. And I suddenly realised that there was a simple structure to what they did. First, build the future. Then you can remember the past.

I knew a very, very successful businessman who was struck by some very savage blows of bad luck. The result of which was that he lost almost everything he had built. Would have been a devastating blow, I think for anyone, but he was a man of iron will and he worked day and night for ten years to rebuild what he

had lost. After ten years, he happened to be giving a talk and he said, "I'm going to spend the next minute saying something I haven't spoken about for ten years." And he referred very briefly to that blow of bad luck and he said, "I haven't spoken about this because I knew that if I spoke about it before ten years had passed, I simply would not be able to carry on."And from him too, I learned first you build the future and then you can remember the past.

And that is when I understood the relationship between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is about the future. It's about the shana tova. It's about the Jewish future because what do we read about on the first day of Rosh Hashanah? The birth of the first Jewish child, Isaac, and the birth of the prophet and King maker, Samuel, to the previously childless Hannah. Children are the symbol of the Jewish future, and that is what we choose to read about on Rosh Hashanah. Then once we have prayed for the future and thought about the future and our responsibilities for it, then once we have secured the future, on Yom Kippur we can remember and lament the past. Sometimes the past is so difficult that if you focus on it, you fall into depression and despair. And the Jewish way is to say no, just look forward and build a future, and then when everything is secure, you can turn back and look at the past.

That to me is the message for this very, very challenging year. We have just passed through a year of the coronavirus pandemic, which has been, in many ways, the worst crisis the world has faced since the end of the Second World War. It's been very, very challenging. It's been hard for everyone. It seems to me that the most important thing to do is to focus on the future, not on the past. I don't think we should spend particularly ,these precious moments of spirituality lamenting the past, when the first thing we have to do is secure the future. We actually have to ask and pray for God's help to be able to mend what has been broken, to rebuild what has been destroyed, to heal what has been harmed, and to begin to build the future together. That is the spiritual imperative of this moment.

Just a few weeks ago, we lost one of the great figures, leaders, and teachers of our generation, the late RabbiDr. Norman Lamm, z”l. Rabbi Lamm, President of Yeshiva University, one of the great thinkers of our time, one of the great speakers of our time, one of the great institution rescuers of our time– because when he took over as President of Yeshiva University, the university was facing almost certain bankruptcy. He lifted it from bankruptcy to the most remarkable financial health. I don't know how he was so good at fundraising, but he was exceptional. He rebuilt Yeshiva University, but he really sustained the whole Torah Umadda philosophy of the university by what he wrote and what he organised through things like The Orthodox Forum.

I want to tell you a little story about Norman Lamm because it taught me so much. I knew Norman Lamm quite well. The first time I met him, he didn't know me a tall. It was fifty-two years ago. It was 1968. I had gone to America in 1968. That was the year that Simon and Garfunkel counted the cars on the New Jersey turnpike; they all came to look for America. I wasn't counting the cars on the New Jersey turnpike. I was counting the rabbis in America, going round to visit as many as I could. I wanted to meet Rabbi Lamm. I had heard about him.

So with my typical polite English understatement, I phoned him up and I said, "Rabbi Lamm, I've just travelled 3000 miles to meet you. Do you think you could fit me in?" Well, chutzpah works says the Gemara. So he said, "Yes." He didn't know who I was. I was 20 years old. I was a sophomore. I was a nobody. And this man who was already rabbi of the Jewish Centre and professor of Jewish Philosophy at Yeshiva University sat with me in his office in the Shul for an hour, for an hour, talking me through the various approaches to Torah Umadda and the difference between Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch’s approach to Rav Kook’s approach and how he preferred Rav Kook’s approach and so on. I have never kept a diary. I've never made notes so I'm remembering this from fifty-two years ago.

And then he did something that I actually found extraordinary. He said to me, "Where is your next appointment?" So I told him, "It's the other side of Central Park." He said, "Let me take you there." And this man got up from his office and drove me to my next appointment. Sorry, forgive me...I don't know anyone who would do something like that in the middle of Manhattan on a busy day for a student, 20 years old, that he never met before and had no reason to see in the first place! This was menschlichkeitin capital letters. It was absolutely extraordinary.

But on one occasion he said to me, "Jonathan, you know, there's only one joke in the Mishnah." I said, "What's that?" He said, "Well, talmidei chachamim marbim shalom b’olam, rabbis increase peace in the world." He said, "That has to be a joke, right? The more rabbis, the more rows, that must be a joke." I said, "Rabbi Lamm, if I may suggest, it isn't actually a joke.But to understand it, you have to go to the end of the sentence. It says, marbim shalom b’olam shene’emar, as it is said, v’chol bonaich limudei Hashem v’rav shalom bonaich, the verse from Isiah, all your children should be learned of the Lord and great shall be the peace of your children, al tikrah banaich, don’t read it your children, elah bonaich, call it your builders.”I said, "If rabbis are children, they do not increase peace in the world. But if they are builders, they do.”And the proof is Moshe Rabbenue because when he got the Israelites to build the Mishcon, there was no argument between them, absolutely none. There was perfect peace. Why? Because they were building. Rabbi Lamm was supremely a builder. It's what he dedicated all his life to. It was a privilege, a privilege, to know him. And it was a privilege for our generation to have a man like that in our midst.

I have to say that is our challenge in the coming year, so much has been lost, so much has been destroyed. We have to become builders. We have to build that future. Then we can go back and think about the past, but not now, not yet. That is not the tzav hasha’ah, the command of our time. First, let us build that future. Let us repair everything that has been damaged. Let us build something even more beautiful in place of that which has been lost.May Hashem give us the strength to build, and in that building may we find peace. Shana tova

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Rosh Hashana

What is the essence of our faith, the purpose for which the Jewish people have been placed in the world? Fascinatingly enough, the answer is to be found within the central prayer of our Rosh Hashana liturgy: the three blessings, uniquely found within the Additional (Musaf) prayer of Rosh Hashana, of Malchuyot (kingship), Zichronot (remembrances) and Shofarot. These blessings are each punctuated by the sounds of the shofar and, according to the 14th century theologian Rabbi Yosef Albo as well as the 19th-century Franz Rosenzweig, contain the essence of our faith.

The first of these blessings, Malchuyot, begins with the more familiar Alenu prayer. This prayer teaches that the God whom we now accept as the one Lord of the Universe, the God of love, morality and peace, will eventually be accepted by the entire world.

This axiom of our religion, this prophecy of the ultimate endgame, is especially comforting in the face of the dangerous global village in which we live, a global village in which the specter of nuclear proliferation looms.

This blessing affirms that it is the God of compassionate, righteousness and moral justice who will eventually emerge supreme over the totalitarian trinity of Nazi fascism, Stalinist Communism and Islamic fundamentalism. Our broken world will eventually be perfected under the Kingship of the God of righteousness; through the teachings of Abraham “all the families of the Earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3) with a world of peace.

The second blessing, Zichronot, which is a Hebrew term for history, opens with: “You remember the activities from the beginning of the world, and you are mindful of the deeds [or the potential functions, from the Hebrew tafkid] of every creature from earliest times.”

Here is a ringing declaration of faith in the process of history; the clear sense that historical time is on the side of humanity, and that individuals and nations have a unique role to play in the cumulative march of history toward redemption. Israel alone of the nations of the world enjoys a special relationship with God, a covenant which ensures its eternity and defines its mission as the messenger of ethical monotheism to all of humanity.

This blessing guarantees that there is an overarching purpose to history, which is not a cyclical, repetitive cycle leading nowhere, but rather a linear pathway leading to peace. Redemption will come about in the fullness of historic time as a result of the cumulative merits of all preceding generations.

How will we carry out our covenantal task of imparting our message to the world? This is told to us by the third blessing, Shofarot, which reminds us of the revelation at Sinai, the 613 commandments which God presented to Israel and the seven commandments of morality, centering around "Thou shalt not murder," which God presented to the world.

Maimonides, the great codifier of Jewish law, insists that just as God commanded Moses to bequeath 613 commandments to Israel, "similarly did He command Moses to coerce the nations of the world to accept the seven laws of morality" (Laws of Kings 8:10).

This is an immensely significant message, especially in our postmodern, relativistic, "everything goes" society, which denies any absolute concept of morality.

"Situation ethics" dominates our conventional wisdom, and the most heinous crime can become transformed into a sacred act "when seen from the perpetrator's point of view." (Hence a suicide bomber who murders innocent children is called a "freedom fighter.") Shofarot tells us that the Seven Laws of Morality which must be accepted by the nations are not options, but absolutes, since – especially in our global village – the lives of all humanity hang in the balance of their acceptance.

Hence the Rosh Hashana Musaf Amida teaches that the nation of Israel must and will teach fundamental morality, or ethical monotheism, to all the nations of the world. Only when this message is accepted, when "this Torah comes forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem," only then will "nation not lift up sword against nation and humanity not learn war anymore"(Isaiah 2:4) and "everyone will sit under his vineyard and fig tree and no one will have reason to fear" (Micah 4:4).

Each of these blessings is punctuated by the shofar sounding. After God's kingship we sound the shofar, the means by which the king in the ancient world was crowned. Take note: It is we, the Jewish people, who must bring God down into this world and crown Him.

After Zichronot, we sound the shofar as a reminder of the aborted sacrifice of Isaac in favor of the ram whose horns were caught in the thicket. Isaac, the future of the Jewish people, was slated for slaughter, but was set free.

The shofar sound after Zichronot reminds us that the Jews will continue to live despite exile and persecution.

We must live so that we may remain God's witnesses and "a light unto the nations of the world" (Isaiah 42:6).

Finally, we sound the shofar after Shofarot since the method by which we must reach out to the world is by teaching our Torah – a teaching revealed at Sinai amid the sounds of the shofar.

And it will ultimately be that when the Almighty Himself will sound the shofar that all of the dispersed will return to Israel, the Temple will be rebuilt and the nations will come to learn from us to beat their swords into plowshares and to live together in peace.

Dvar Torah
Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Our Covid-19 responsibility this Rosh Hashana

Rosh Hashana is an anniversary. But of what? According to our tradition it was on this day that God created Adam. It was the sixth day of creation. No wonder therefore that our liturgy takes us back to the dawn of all time. And it is in this context, at the beginning of the book of Genesis in Chapter 3, that we read the very first question on record. It was a question posed by God to Adam. God said to him, "אַיֶּכָּה" – "Where are you?"

Adam had just eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree. Of course, Hashem knows everything, so what He implied with "אַיֶּכָּה" – "Where are you?" was,

"Where are you standing? What is your מדריגה, your spiritual level? How responsible are you being to yourself and to your future?"

This was followed up by another question one chapter later in Chapter 4. This time God posed a question to Cain who had just killed his brother Abel. God's question was, "אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ" – "Where is Abel, your brother?"

It was as if to say, "How responsible have you been towards another?" And Cain's answer was,
"לֹא יָדַעְתִּי" – "I don't know."
"הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי" – "Am I my brother's keeper?"

I believe that these questions are as pertinent and relevant to us today as they were to those original dwellers on earth – particularly during Covid-19 times. Hashem is saying to each and every one of us "אַיֶּכָּה" – "Where are you?" Literally, physically, are you too close to other people at a time when you should be socially distancing? Are you standing at events and in places where the law is being flouted? How responsible are you being to yourself?

In addition Hashem is saying to us "אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ" – How responsible are we being towards others? Because if we're neglecting our health we could be posing a danger to the lives of others.

Over the High Holy Days we ask God for forgiveness for our sins, our trespasses, and our transgressions during the past year. According to our tradition, for sins between ourselves and the Almighty, we go straight to God but if we have sinned against others, we must first appease them before God will hearken to our prayers.

If this is the case with regard to regular situations, in which we're hurting the feelings of others, offending others, disappointing them, how much more so does it apply to situations in which we might be presenting a threat to their very lives?

As we enter into the forthcoming High Holy Days, sadly here in the UK, as is the case in many other places around the globe, cases of Covid-19 are on the rise and this is primarily due to irresponsibility – the responsibility that people have towards themselves and towards others. We pray that Hashem will bless us all with a שנה טובה – a good, happy, peaceful, fulfilling and most of all a healthy new year. But this can only happen if none of us ever again gives the shameful reply of Cain:

"Are we our fellows' keepers?"

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Can You Hear Me? Multiple Meanings of the Sound of the Shofar
Rabbanit Sally Mayer

...the shofar is a medium to send a message from Hashem to the Jewish people. It might be heralding His awesome presence, reminding us to repent, or even calling us to come home, but in all of the above explanations, Hashem is speaking to us through the shofar.During the coronavirus pandemic, we have all been plagued by questions. What is Hashem trying to tell us? Why is this happening? Why all the suffering and loss — physical, emotional and financial?

The sound of the shofar is always shocking at first, piercing the synagogue during the month of Elul, reminding us that Rosh Hashanah is near. It seems like ages since last Rosh Hashanah, when our homes were filled with guests and our shuls were overflowing. What does the sound of the shofar mean?

There are many answers to this question. The Rambam famously explains that the shofar is a call to repent: "Wake up, sleeping ones, from your slumber! Investigate your actions, repent, and remember your Creator" (Hilchot Teshuvah, 3:4). Rabbeinu Bechayei echoes the Rambam, describing the shofar as a frightening sound, inducing the fear of the Day of Judgment. In the Shofarot section of the Musaf prayer, we see the shofar as a sign of God's presence on Har Sinai: בקולות וברקים עליהם נגלית ובקול שופר עליהם הופעת", You revealed Your presence with sounds and lightning, and You appeared to them with the sound of the shofar." The prayer also represents the shofar as the herald of the ultimate salvation of the Jewish people and the ingathering of the exiles.

Rav Saadia Gaon mentions these and other symbolisms of the shofar, including reminding us of Akeidat Yitzchak (the binding of Isaac) and inspiring us to be willing to sacrifice for God.The explanations above share a common thread: the shofar is a medium to send a message from Hashem to the Jewish people. It might be heralding His awesome presence, reminding us to repent, or even calling us to come home, but in all of the above explanations, Hashem is speaking to us through the shofar. During the coronavirus pandemic, we have all been plagued by questions. What is Hashem trying to tell us? Why is this happening? Why all the suffering and loss — physical, emotional and financial?

In a way, the shofar is as enigmatic as this time — a sound, evocative but unclear, frightening and humbling. Other sources, however, take a different view of the shofar. The Talmud in Rosh Hashanah (16a) states: "Say before Me on Rosh Hashanah… Malchuyot, so that you shall coronate Me; Zichronot, so that your memory will come before Me; And how? Through the shofar." In this Gemara, the shofar is an instrument we use to remind Hashem of His relation-ship with us. Additionally, the Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 21a) rules that we may use the horn of any animal as a shofar, except for that of a bull.

Why? The Gemara explains that the sound of the shofar goes up to God, and is considered as if it enters the Holy of Holies; just as the High Priest does not wear golden clothing to go into that sacred space on Yom Kippur because it evokes the Golden Calf, so too it would be inappropriate for us to use another symbol of that terrible sin as an instrument to communicate with Him on the Day of Judgment.

The shofar is our means of communicating with God, not the other way around. Furthermore, the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 26b) debates whether a bent or straight shofar is preferable, and relates that argument to whether a person's mindset should be "bent over" in submission, or straight and confident. And finally, when describing the sounds we are to produce with the shofar, Rabbi Abahu wondered whether the middle sound should be 3 longer sounds or 9 short sounds. The Gemara parallels these sounds to different types of crying — sobbing and wailing, and in fact says that we need not put the short teruah sounds before the longer shevarim blasts as one of the combinations, because people simply don't cry that way. These explanations of the shofar are the polar opposite of the first set.

The shofar here represents our entreaties to God, our bent and wrenched emotions, our sobbing and begging for mercy. The shofar is our wordless, primal scream, asking Hashem to heal His world and bring an end to suffering. During the pandemic, at times, it has been hard to pray. It's been hard to even know what to say, as we find ourselves confused in an ever-changing world, where so much of what we took for granted, simply going to shul or having guests, has now become elusive.

Perhaps it's no accident that this year Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, when the shofar is silent on the first day. It echoes the silence of the quiet homes where people suffer loneliness, the silence of those we have lost, and even the sense of distance from Hashem that we may experience. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the shofar will be even more piercing, expressing our pent-up anguish and humble pleas for help and healing. And may those shofar sounds that we express be met by the shofar that Hashem uses to call us — to return to Him and to herald His healing and salvation for the world.

Praying Like the Poor
by Rabbi Shaul Robinson

We approach the Yemei HaDin and Yamim Noraim in a manner that would have been completely unthinkable last year. Around Purim time the world as we know it came screeching to a halt and has in no way returned to normal. Erev Rosh Hashana 5781 the world is divided into two spheres – places where the virus has returned, and places that live in fear of the virus returning.

The statement of chazal תכלה שנה וקללותיה seems particularly appropriate this year. In the Tochacha of Parshat Ki Tavo we read that terrible suffering come to the Jewish people תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָבַדְתָּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוּב לֵבָב מֵרֹב כֹּל׃
What does Moshe Rabenu mean, particularly with the two seemingly extraneous words – 'mirov kol'? Although there are hundreds of answers to this question, I believe that this year we have all learned what the pshuoto shel mikra is. Because we had everything – every imaginable kind of blessing – precisely because we had so many blessings, we did not see them as blessings at all. We took them for granted, and never stopped to be grateful for them.

Psychologists speak about 'baseline happiness'. The idea that even people blessed with tremendous fortune soon begin to take everything for granted. A person may feel that if, for example, they win the lottery, they will be happy, and that happiness will last for the rest of their lives. But countless studies show that, in a matter of months a new 'baseline' begins to assert itself. The new found fortune is taken for granted -and no longer contributes to a general sense of happiness in the winner's life.

We were, at least until a few months ago – a world of 'mirov kol'. When was the last time you felt intense wonder, gratitude, for being able to get on a plane? To hug your parents or grandchildren? To be able to go to an office, or to be able to go to school? For millions of Jews in Chutz L'aaretz unable – for the first time in our lives – to be able to set foot in Eretz Yisrael, it is humbling, almost shaming to think how we took some of the greatest miracles in Jewish history for granted.

Health, wealth – even the social fabric of the Western World, have shown themselves to be flimsy, tenuous concepts.

Yet when I think of last Rosh Hashanah , of the countless hours I spent in Shul davening, I realise that I did not take a moment either to express gratitude for these things, and certainly not to be able to enjoy them in the coming year.

It did not occur to any of us to be able to pray that we should be able to go to a store without worrying about being infected, able to see family or friends, able to pray with a minyan or millions of things that together made us the most blessed generation in human history, but failed to make us even in the slightest bit grateful or full of joy.

But that perhaps can be the source of tremendous strength and hope as we enter into a New Year. The Gemara in Rosh Hashana (16b) tells us that
וא"ר יצחק כל שנה שרשה בתחלתה מתעשרת בסופה
Any year that is 'poor' at the beginning will be 'rich' at the end. Rashi explains
שישראל עושין עצמן רשין בר"ה לדבר תחנונים ותפלה כענין שנאמר תחנונים ידבר רש
This Rosh Hashanah we go before Hashem as 'rashin' poor people. Not in the sense that we do not have enough for our daily needs. But a poor person knows how much money – down to the penny – he has in his pocket. He knows how much food remains in the pantry, and how much he needs to get through the month. A poor person doesn't overlook or take for granted what he does have.

And that is what Chazal mean – if we enter Rosh Hashanah, as we did every year, incredibly blessed, but oblivious – and therefore ungrateful – for what the Almighty does for us – then we make ourselves vulnerable. There may be painful, unwelcome, but very important lessons for us in the coming year. We have experienced such a year.

But this year – we enter Rosh Hashana as rashin – as people acutely aware of our needs, of our vulnerabilities, and of our blessings. Will there be a Jew anywhere in the world who recites the 'shekheyanu' blessing on Rosh Hashana without tears in their eyes this year? Of gratitude for simply being here – for having lived, in the midst of a pandemic, to see another year? Will any of us take for granted the roof over our heads and the food on our plates? And if we are blessed to have another person present to say 'Amen' – there should be no end to our gratitude.

There is no question that we enter Rosh Hashanah this year as 'rashin'. Let us use this seering, humbling, scary year to find ways to pray to Hashem with sincerity, express longing, gratitude, heartfelt supplications for a year of health, love, closeness, restoration, redemption and return to Eretz Yisrael. And may he Answer us with abundant rachamim!

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

A Special Perspective on Life

Is it not strange that Hashem should give Moshe Rabbeinu the blessing of physical agelessness even as He brings him to publicly declare, in our parsha, "I can no longer take the lead in Torah matters, the traditions and the wellsprings of wisdom have been closed to me...Is there any value to my life?" (see Sotah 13b, Rashi and Sifsei Chahomim, 31:2). What possible purpose is served in imposing and recording that enormously painful one day chapter of his life? The inability to access one's own legacy and the loss of one's life-sustaining creativity all at once would crush someone of lesser measure, much the same as it drove Moshe, all the while busy with establishing his successor, to question the plan ahead.

A different perspective is offered by HaRav Moshe Shternbuch, leader of Jerusalem's Edia Chareidis. The "wellsprings", he argues, are the apt description of deeply religious life, that ceaselessly aspires for greater spiritual awareness and enjoys refreshing energies with no end. The lock-downed wellsprings signaled to Moshe that he had indeed mastered all the trials and tests that were intended for him, and his soul was ready to move on to the next world. Thus this brief description guides us with a life lesson: a life continuously seeking new spiritual growth, that incessantly finds the ever-present divine stroke in every encounter, is a life abundantly charged with presence and meaningfulness.

As we make our final preparations for our Yom Hadin that will usher in 5781 with all its blessings, allow me to share some of the "wellsprings" of these upcoming days. Hopefully they will help us focus and articulate so much more of what is already inside our hearts.

Our Shofaros are silent on the first day. This kind of a Rosh Hashana attracted the attention of Harav Yaakov Ettlinger, one of the leading rabbonim of nineteenth century Germany and author of the oft quoted Aruch La'ner. He suggested that on this kind of a yom tov when our concern to protect Shabbos silences our shofar, our judgement heavily depends on our observance of Shabbos. In fact, he traces many a decisive year for our people to have been years that began with Shabbos and not with the shofar. He submits that those years that brought blessing beyond belief were years where Shabbos was well and meaningfully practiced.

Our Malchuyos will once again, as in every year past, ask Hashem to "reveal yourself in majestic grandeur...let all that has been made know that you are its maker". We are certainly closer this year to that humility than in many a recent year. Yet, how much would we give to have absorbed that humility from Hashem's majesty rather than His hiddenness and our precariousness.

Our Zichronos ask every year that "your mercy suppress your anger from upon us" but this year the phrase captures our deepest prayers. And here is how our zochreinu lechayim sounds: "Ribbono Shel Olam, we mask with great discomfort, we sit apart from our friends, we may not have hugged our grandchildren in over half a year, we did not dance at so many smachos, we quarantined, we send our children to school in pods, capsules and masks...all because we want the health and the life to do Your bidding and bring goodness to Your world...zochreinu lechayim tovim..."

May our prayers be accepted upon High and may our days and years be long and healthy, so that we can fill them growth and goodness.

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

Certainty and Doubt Regarding the Akeida

By Harav Yaakov Medan

I. The poignant questions - Who among us can evaluate the depth of the faith of the father of believers, Avraham Avinu? Based on our human judgment, Avraham should have experienced great confusion when he heard God's command to offer his son for a burnt-offering. First of all, God's command seems to contradict that which God Himself had promised Avraham when he sent Yishmael away: "For in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you" (Bereishit 21:12). Second, God's command appears to contradict the prohibition of bloodshed that is binding upon all of the descendants of Noach, as well as the severe prohibition of human sacrifices. Third, the command contradicts "the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice" (Bereishit 18:19), for what righteousness and justice is there in the slaughter of Yitzchak, who did nothing wrong?

These serious difficulties might have raised doubts in Avraham with regard to the command itself. We refer to two key doubts: The first doubt is whether he could be sure that, in fact, it was the Lord, his God, who spoke to him. Perhaps the voice he heard calling him to slaughter his son might have come from somewhere else (the voice of the satan or his wild imagination). The second doubt is whether he could be sure that he properly understood God's command, even if was convinced that it was God who spoke to him. Perhaps God's intention when he said "and offer him as a burnt-offering" was not that he slaughter and sacrifice him, but simply that he bring him up on the altar.

These two uncertainties raise a more fundamental question: To what extent can a person be certain that he has heard the voice of his Maker and that he has properly understood what He said?

The answers to these questions are exceedingly lengthy, and we will run out of ink before we exhaust the issues. These matters have been discussed by the greatest of minds, Jewish and non-Jewish, from the masters of Midrash, biblical exegesis, and Chassidut to the philosophers of recent generations. We will briefly address certain aspects of these questions.

II. the certainty of prophecy - R. Yehuda Aryeh Alter of Gur, author of the Sefat Emet, noted that at first Avraham felt that it was possible that the command to slaughter his son was not God's command. This command seemed very strange, and he did not have the same feeling about it that he usually had about the word of God: For certainly one who serves God out of love, his heart and gut are drawn to do the will of his Maker, to the point that all of his organs are drawn by their nature to do the will of their Maker… Indeed, it is true that it was not the desire of the Holy One, blessed be He, that he slaughter Yitzchak, and Avraham's heart did not feel closeness or love in this service, since in fact this was not the desire of the Holy One, blessed be He. This was the test. And therefore it says: "And he saw the place [ha-Makom, which can be understood as a reference to God]" – the Holy One, blessed be He; "from afar" – without inner closeness. (Sefat Emet, Vayera 5641, s.v. be-pasuk ata yadati)

Already in the midrash we find the view that the satan tried to raise the doubt in Avraham that perhaps it was not God who spoke to him, but rather "the Seducer" [mastin]. Avraham, of course, did not surrender to this doubt of the satan: The old man [the satan] said to him [Avraham]: That is not so; I was present when the Holy One, blessed be He, ordered you to take your son. Why should an old man, who begets a son at the age of a hundred, destroy him? Have you not heard the parable of the man who destroyed his own possessions and

then was forced to beg from others? If you believe that you will have another son, you are listening to the words of the Seducer. And furthermore, if you destroy a soul, you will he held legally accountable for it. He [Avraham] answered: It was not the Seducer, but the Holy One, blessed be He, who told me what I must do, and I shall not listen to you. (Tanchuma, Vayera 22)

The doubts that Avraham harbored in his heart regarding whether it was the satan or God himself who had spoken are reflected in the words of the Jewish philosopher and great humanist of recent generations, Martin Buber: When the issue is the suspension of the moral, the question of questions that takes precedence over every other is this: Are you really addressed by the Absolute or by one of his apes? (Martin Buber, Between Man and Man)

Buber himself decides in favor of Avraham, but he sees his as an exceptional case, which could never provide an answer to another person were he placed in the same situation: Avraham could never mistake another voice for that voice that had said to him: "Go you forth out of your country and from your kindred and from your father's house," which he recognized then as the voice of God without the speaker having identified himself.

In contrast to Avraham, the fitting guidelines for any other person are: God himself demands of a person, not of Avraham His chosen one, but certainly of you and me, only "to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." That is to say, not much more than fundamental morality.

Martin Buber argues in Avraham's favor that he could be certain of the truth of the harsh decree, but in his opinion, there was only one Avraham, and this is not the proper path for the rest of the world.

In contrast to Buber, Immanuel Kant, the greatest philosopher in modern times, asserts that even the actions of Avraham himself had no justification: That I am forbidden to kill my good son – that is absolutely certain. But that you who appear to me are God I am not certain, and I cannot be certain about that even if the voice echoes from heaven. (The Conflict of the Faculties)

Kant's remarks indicate that he concedes that were it possible to reach the word of God with certainty, obedience to it would be more important than the principle of justice and morality. But such certainty is almost impossible to achieve, whereas certainty regarding justice and morality and the negation of Yitzchak's bloodshed is unequivocal.

Other philosophers went even further than Kant in rejecting the act of the Akeida, arguing that Avraham would have had no justification to violate what is just and moral, even had God commanded him to do so. In this forum we will not take the matter in that direction.

The Rambam in his Guide for the Perplexed proposed that the whole idea of the Akeida was to answer the argument regarding doubt concerning the truth of prophecy. The Rambam endorses the view that prophecy imposes its full certainty on man, and there is no room for uncertainty regarding the word of God that was told to him, as stated by the prophet:

And if I say: I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name, then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I weary myself to hold it in, but cannot. (Yirmeyahu 20:9)

Is not My word like as fire? says the Lord; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? (Yirmeyahu 23:29)

The Rambam explains as follows: As for the story of Avraham at the Akeida, it contains two great notions that are fundamental principles of the Law… The second notion consists in making known to us the fact that the prophets consider as true that which comes to them from God in a prophetic revelation. For it should not be thought that what they hear or what appears to them in a parable is not certain or is commingled with illusion just because it comes about in a dream and in a vision, as we made clear… Accordingly, Scripture wished to make known to us that all that is seen by a prophet in a vision of prophecy is, in the opinion of the prophet, a certain truth, that the prophet has no doubts in any way concerning anything in it, and that in his opinion its status is the same as that of all existent things that are apprehended through the senses or through the intellect. A proof for this is the fact that Avraham hastened to slaughter, as he had been commanded, his son, his only son, whom he loved, even though this command came to him in a dream or in a vision. For if a dream of prophecy had been obscure for the prophets, or if they had doubts or incertitude concerning what they apprehended in a vision of prophecy, they would not have hastened to do that which is repugnant to nature, and Avraham's soul would not have consented to accomplish an act of so great an importance if there had been a doubt about it. (Guide for the Perplexed III:24)

We find a similar view in Midrash Ha-Gadol: "And Avraham rose up early in the morning." Scripture teaches the power of prophecy, for even though this was told [to Avraham] in a nocturnal dream or during the day in slumber, whatever a prophet sees is absolute certainty, with no doubt or question. Since the matter was true, and there was no doubt about it, Avraham hurried to slaughter his son, his only son, without hesitating or thinking that this prophecy wasn't true or that it was just the nonsense of dreams. (Midrash Ha-Gadol Vayera, p. 320)

III. understanding the command - Even if we accept Avraham's certainty that what he heard was the voice of God speaking to him, there is room to ask whether Avraham could be certain that he properly understood the word of God, which might transcend human understanding. As stated above, this is a fundamental question, but it has a special element in the context of the Akeida, because God's wording was, in fact, not entirely clear: "And offer him there for a burnt-offering" (Bereishit 22:2) – what is the meaning of this "offering up"?

The midrash (see Rashi, Bereishit 24:12) struggled with this issue and attributed to Avraham a question in which he points out the contradiction in God's words. God had already promised him: "For in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you" (Bereishit 21:12), while on the other hand, He is now asking that he offer him up as a burnt-offering. It is, however, important to emphasize that Avraham went to Mount Moriya unhesitatingly and without question. Only after he was commanded to take his son down from the altar did he try to understand God's way and raise questions. When he went to Mount Moriya, any question could have been interpreted as his conditioning his observance of God's commandment on his understanding it. Avraham's willingness to fulfill the word of God was absolute, and therefore in real time he asked no questions.

In any case, after Avraham spelled out his questions, God answers him as follows: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Avraham, I will not profane My covenant or change the utterances of My lips. When I said to you: "Take now your son," I did not say "slaughter him," but rather "and offer [literally, bring] him up as a burnt-offering." Bring him up, and now take him down. (Bereisht Rabba 56:8)

This possibility is expressed in even sharper fashion in one version of another midrash: And it is further written: "Which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it to my mind" (Yirmeyahu 19:5): "Which I commanded not" – this refers to the sacrifice of the son of Mesha, the king of Moav… "Nor spoke it" – this refers to the daughter of Yiftach. "Neither came it to my mind" – this refers to the sacrifice of Yitzchak, the son of Avraham. (Ta'anit 4a)

Is this understanding, to bring Yitzchak up to the altar as a burnt-offering and then bring him down without giving of his blood to the altar, a reasonable understanding of God's command? Perhaps yes. In the case of an animal sacrifice, there is no point in bringing it up to the altar without actually sacrificing it:

Only be steadfast in not eating the blood; for the blood is the soul (nefesh)… And you shall offer your burnt-offerings, the flesh and the blood, upon the altar of the Lord your God; and the blood of your sacrifices shall be poured out against the altar of the Lord your God, and you shall eat the flesh. (Devarim 12:23, 27)

Animal sacrifice means offering the blood, which is the soul of the animal. But in relation to man we find in the words of the prophet: And Chana answered and said:… But I poured out my soul before the Lord. (I Shemuel 1:15)

The blood of an animal is poured upon the altar, because the blood is the soul, and the soul belongs to God. But a person can pour his soul before God in prayer before His altar; he does not have to pour on it the blood of his soul. In fact, prayer always corresponds to an offering. Offering Yitzchak up as a burnt-offering can thus refer to his crying before God while the knife was being held over his throat when he was on the altar. This was the pouring of his soul on the altar.

In fact, Chana's words before the altar in Shilo suggest another possible way to offer a beloved son to God: And she vowed a vow, and said, “O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your handmaid, and remember me, and not forget Your handmaid, but will give to Your handmaid a man-child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.” (I Shemuel 1:11)

Similarly, in relation to the story of Yiftach, many have explained that his commitment to offer up as a burnt-offering whatever comes forth out of the doors of his house did not mean actual sacrifice, but setting aside for the service of God (see, for example, Radak, Shofetim 11:31).

However, if we accept this approach, the objection raised against Avraham's conduct becomes even stronger: It would have been possible to understand that God wanted to bring Yitzchak up to the altar, and nothing more. How, then, was Avraham convinced that the intention was full sacrifice with a knife and fire? The Malbim argues that indeed Avraham erred in his understanding of God's command:

Chazal have already said: "Which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it to my mind" (Yirmeyahu 19:5) – this refers to Akeidat Yitzchak. But surely He commanded him: "And offer him up there as a burnt-offering"? And furthermore, how did He issue a command and then retract it? However, had Avraham been more precise, he would have understood that God had no intention whatsoever that Yitzchak be a burnt-offering… This proves, that that which He said: "Which I will tell you of" (Bereishit 22:2), does not refer to the mountain, but rather to "and offer him up there." That is to say, offer up that which I will tell you of, that is, the ram… From all of this, he should have understood the truth. But God spoke to him in a manner which he mistook to mean that Yitzchak himself was to be offered as a burnt-offering. And because of his great love and his great desire to fulfill His commandments and His great joy that his son merited to be a burnt-offering to God as a sweet savor, he did not investigate the matter, and he did not probe deeply, and he ran like a deer to quickly fulfill His commandment to the point that the angel had to stop him. (Malbim 22:2)

As opposed to the Malbim, we find one view that argues just the opposite: Avraham himself knew that it was not God's intention that he slaughter his son. R. Elimelech of Lezhensk writes as follows:

And it seems that we should explain that Avraham and Yitzchak actually knew that it was not God's intention that he be slaughtered, and that Avraham, whose attribute was the attribute of lovingkindness, went off in confidence that the two of them would return, as it is written: "And we will worship, and come back to you" (Bereishit 22:5). Nevertheless they went with total dedication as if to actually slaughter him. (No’am Elimelech, Vayera, s.v. va-yomer hineh ha-esh ve-ha-etzim)

Similarly, we find in the midrash: At that time, the holy spirit was enkindled within him, and he prophesied that the two of them would return whole. (Midrash Ha-Gadol, Vayera, p. 352)

Avraham and Yitzchak were expected to demonstrate total dedication, even though it was clear to them that they would both return.

The two positions presented here are extreme and exceptional. The commentators who dealt with the issue generally claimed that that while it is possible to interpret God's command as not requiring Yitzchak's slaughter, this is an exceptional interpretation of God's intention only after Avraham was explicitly told not to lay a hand upon his son. At the beginning, Avraham, in the purity of his heart and soul, was correct to understand God's words in their plain meaning – that offering Yitzchak up on the altar included his slaughter.

If this is the meaning of God's command, all of the questions that accompanied Avraham return: What will be with Sara? What will happen to the promise: "For in Yitzchak shall seed be called to you"? Avraham did indeed ask these questions, but as was already explained, the Akeida expresses the innocence of his faith. As the midrash puts it: And I overpowered my passions and did not argue with You. (Tanchuma, Vayera, 23)

Avraham does not condition his fulfillment of God's command upon his understanding, but rather suppresses his questions.

R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner, the Admor of Izbica, presents an even deeper level of Avraham's faith. According to him, Avraham did not suppress his questions, but rather rose up above them. He knew that the command regarding the Akeida contradicted God's promise, but nevertheless, he continued to believe in the truth of all of God's words, as he had heard and received them:

What was tested at the Akeida was the magnitude of Avraham's faith in God. For even though He had said to him: “So shall your seed be” (Bereishit 15:5), and "But My covenant I will establish with Yitzchak" (Bereishit 17:21), and now he was told: "Offer him up as a burnt-offering" (Bereishit 22:2), nevertheless he believed the first words as before, giving up nothing. This is faith – human reason cannot reach it. (Mei Ha-Shiloach, Vayera)

[Translated by David Strauss]

Weekly Parsha NITZAVIM – VAYELECH 5780
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The very two words that signify the titles of the two portions of the Torah that we will hear in the synagogue this Shabbat are, at first glance, contradictory. Nitzavim signifies a solid stance, and unwavering presence, and a commanding appearance. It reflects an unchanging nature, and the necessary ability to stand one's ground. no matter what the circumstances of life.

On the other hand, the word Vayelech signifies motion, progress, change and a forward thrust in behavior and concepts. It seems that these two Torah readings cancel each other out, for one signifies unchanging steadfastness while the other champions progress, change and motion. Such an understanding of Torah and Judaism is very superficial and erroneous.

Rather, the two traits indicated in the opening words of these two Torah readings essentially complement each other. They do not come to point out a disagreement, one with another, but to point out that Judaism requires both traits to be present within every Jewish individual and the Jewish people as a whole, in order that Torah and tradition will survive and prosper in Jewish society.

An important and necessary part of our Jewish character and that of Jewish society, is our stubbornness – our refusal to abandon what we have been commanded by the Lord to observe and practice. This commitment can never be modified or adjusted, acceding to the passing social norms, and changing human mores.

We are witness, in our times, how quickly acceptable human behavior and ideas can rapidly change, so that what was unthinkable and perverse a few short decades ago is today not only acceptable, but behavior that should be championed, admired, and, in some cases, even enforced legally against ones wishes.

At the same time, Jewish society cannot remain eternally frozen and incapable of adjustment to new situations and differing societal changes. Our recent experience with the Coronavirus, with the various halachic responses to it concerning prayer services, study sessions and personal behavior, testify to the adaptability that the Torah and Jewish tradition, dating back to Sinai, has built-in in order to be able to deal with all possible situations, no matter how unforeseen.

The only question that remains is how to achieve a proper balance between Nitzavim and Vayelech. We are witness to the fact that helter-skelter progress and the adoption of new norms leads to spiritual destruction and is an enormous danger to Jewish survival. On the other hand, we certainly need to recognize that 21st-century Israel or the United States is not the same as 19th century eastern and central Europe. Every individual, as well as every group within Jewish society, must feel its way slowly and carefully, to try and find the proper balance that fits them, and allows them to retain the blessings of tradition and faithfulness, while still dealing with current problems and situations. Understandably, this process is an ongoing one, and it is one of great delicacy and nuance. Nevertheless, it is part of our drive for eternity and the enhancement of our religious society.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

In My Opinion ROSH HASHANA
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

I believe that all of us can agree that this year the awesome days of Rosh Hashana will be different than in past years. Many of us may not even be allowed to attend the synagogue for public worship. Others will pray and assemble in open, outside areas. There is a rhythm to our holidays that this coronavirus has interrupted. Nevertheless, Rosh Hashana will take place and Jews worldwide will commemorate it according to our halachic and traditional customs. But perhaps most importantly, I feel, and I certainly hope that it will be a more introspective Rosh Hashana than we perhaps have experienced in past years.

The prayers for life and family, success and prosperity, peace and tranquility, accomplishment and productivity, purposefulness and meaning, will have a more intensive, personal tone. This year it requires little imagination to realize that we stand before the heavenly court and pass, in single file, to be judged and blessed. There are those who because of circumstances in their synagogues or community may curtail the prayer service and omit certain of the paragraphs that are ordinarily so much a part of the holiday service of the day. I respect the opinion of rabbis who chose to follow this route because of the local situation in which they find themselves, however to me every word of the holiday prayer book now takes on even greater meaning and relevance.

I cannot imagine that under the present circumstances that exist here in my synagogue, that we will omit any prayers. We can all do without sermons and other additions but the holy words that have been sanctified over the centuries by the tears and even the blood of millions of Jews who stood before their creator for judgment and blessing should not be absent from our lives and lips. We need to remember that wherever we are it is Rosh Hashanah and that it should be treated and observed as such.

The Talmud records that we passed before the heavenly court as soldiers in the army of King David. It also compares us to the sheep that exist around Mount Meron. Sheep and soldiers, at first glance, seem to be opposite descriptions and scenarios. Soldiers stand erect and march proudly, while sheep always have a low profile and are not given to represent strength and firmness. Yet, I believe that we can well understand that the Talmud did not present us here with an either/or choice – soldiers or sheep. Rather, it meant to teach us that all human beings are both at the same time. We have within us enormous strength and capability, potential and firmness of purpose and behavior while at the same time we are but dust and ashes, putty in the hands, so to speak, of the Holy One who has fashioned us.

It is the challenge of life, its experiences and events that confront us as to when we should stand erect and firm as soldiers or whether we should be humble and adopt a low profile, as do sheep. Rosh Hashanah brings us face-to-face with this challenge. As far as Torah values and the Jewish people are concerned, we are certainly to be soldiers in the army of King David. But as far as our own personal wants and desires, social behavior, and communal responsibility, we should lower our egos and allow ourselves to be counted as the sheep of Mount Meron.

I send you my blessings for the new year and for a ktiva v'chatima tova.
Rabbi Berel Wein

How to Renew a Nation (Nitzavim – Vayelech 5780)
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The Talmud gives an ingenious reading to the line, "Moses commanded us a Torah, as a heritage of the congregation of Israel." Noting that there are 613 commands, and that the numerical value of the word Torah is 611, it says that in fact Moses gave us 611 commands, while the other two – "I am the Lord your God," and, "You shall have no other gods beside Me," (the first 2 of the 10 commandments) – the Israelites received not from Moses but directly from God Himself.[1]

There is a different distinction the Sages might have made. Moses gave us 611 commands, and at the very end, in Vayelech, he gave us two meta-commands, commands about the commands. They are Hakhel, the command to assemble the people once every seven years for a public reading of (key parts of) the Torah, and "Now write for yourselves this song" (Deut. 31:19), interpreted by tradition as the command to write, or take part in writing, our own Sefer Torah.

These two commands are set apart from all the others. They were given after all the recapitulation of the Torah in the book of Devarim, the blessings and curses and the covenant renewal ceremony. They are embedded in the narrative in which Moses hands on leadership to his successor Joshua. The connection is that both the laws and the narrative are about continuity. The laws are intended to ensure that the Torah will never grow old, will be written afresh in every generation, will never be

forgotten by the people and will never cease to be its active constitution as a nation. The nation will never abandon its founding principles, its history and identity, its guardianship of the past and its responsibility to the future.

Note the beautiful complementarity of the two commands. Hakhel, the national assembly, is directed at the people as a totality. Writing a Sefer Torah is directed at individuals. This is the essence of covenantal politics. We have individual responsibility and we have collective responsibility. In Hillel's words, "If I am not for myself, who will be, but if I am only for myself, what am I?" In Judaism, the state is not all, as it is in authoritarian regimes. Nor is the individual all, as it is in the radically individualist liberal democracies of today. A covenantal society is made by each accepting responsibility for all, by individuals committing themselves to the common good. Hence the Sefer Torah – our written constitution as a nation – must be renewed in the life of the individual (command 613) and of the nation (command 612).

This is how the Torah describes the mitzvah of Hakhel:

"At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the strangers in your towns—so they can listen and learn to revere the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this Torah. Their children, who do not know, shall hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess." (Deut 31:10-13).

Note the inclusivity of the event. It would be anachronistic to say that the Torah was egalitarian in the contemporary sense. After all, in 1776, the framers of the American Declaration of Independence could say, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," while slavery still existed, and no woman had a vote. Yet the Torah regarded it as essential that women, children and strangers should be included in the ceremony of citizenship in the republic of faith.

Who performed the reading? The Torah does not specify, but tradition ascribed the role to the King. That was extremely important. To be sure, the Torah separates religion and politics. The King was not High Priest, and the High Priest was not King.[2] This was revolutionary. In almost every other ancient society, the head of state was the head of the religion; this was not accidental but essential to the pagan vision of religion as power. But the King was bound by the Torah. He was commanded to have a special Torah scroll written for him; he was to keep it with him when he sat on the throne and read it "all the days of his life" (Deut. 17:18-20). Here too, by reading the Torah to the assembled people every seven years, he was showing that the nation as a political entity existed under the sacred canopy of the Divine word. We are a people, the King was implicitly saying, formed by covenant. If we keep it, we will flourish; if not, we will fail.

This is how Maimonides describes the actual ceremony:

Trumpets were blown throughout Jerusalem to assemble the people; and a high platform, made of wood, was brought and set up in the centre of the Court of Women. The King went up and sat there so that his reading might be heard … The chazzan of the synagogue would take a Sefer Torah and hand it to the head of the synagogue, and the head of the synagogue would hand it to the deputy high priest, and the deputy high priest to the High Priest, and the High Priest to the King, to honour him by the service of many persons … The King would read the sections we have mentioned until he would come to the end. Then he would roll up the Sefer Torah and recite a blessing after the reading, the way it is recited in the synagogue … Proselytes who did not know Hebrew were required to direct their hearts and listen with utmost awe and reverence, as on the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Even great scholars who knew the entire Torah were required to listen with utmost attention … Each had to regard himself as if he had been charged with the Torah now for the first time, and as though he had heard it from the mouth of God, for the King was an ambassador proclaiming the words of God.[3]

Apart from giving us a sense of the grandeur of the occasion, Maimonides is making a radical suggestion: that Hakhel is a re-enactment of the Giving of the Torah at Sinai – "as on the day the Torah was given," "as though he had heard it from the mouth of God" – and thus a covenant renewal ceremony. How did he arrive at such an idea? Almost certainly it was because of Moses' description of the Giving of the Torah in Va'etchanan:

The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, "Assemble [hakhel] the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children." (Deut. 4:10).

The italicised words are all echoed in the Hakhel command, especially the word Hakhel itself, which only appears in one other place in the Torah. Thus was Sinai recreated in the Temple in Jerusalem every seven years, and thus was the nation, men, women, children and strangers, renewed in its commitment to its founding principles.

Tanach gives us vivid descriptions of actual covenant renewal ceremonies, in the days of Joshua (Josh. 24), Josiah (2 Kings 23), Asa (2 Chron. 15) and Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 8-10). These were historic moments when the nation consciously rededicated itself after a long period of religious relapse. Because of Hakhel and covenant renewal, Israel was eternally capable of becoming young again, recovering what Jeremiah called "the devotion of your youth" (Jer. 2:2).

What happened to Hakhel during the almost 2000 years in which Israel had no king, no country, no Temple and no Jerusalem? Some scholars have made the intriguing suggestion that the minhag Eretz Yisrael, the custom of Jews in and from Israel, which lasted until about the thirteenth century, of reading the Torah not once every year but every three or three-and-a-half years, was intended to create a seven year cycle, so that the second reading would end at the same time as Hakhel, namely on the Succot following a sabbatical year (a kind of septennial Simchat Torah).[4]

I would suggest a quite different answer. The institution of the reading of the Torah on Shabbat morning, which goes back to antiquity, acquired new significance at times of exile and dispersion. There are customs that remind us of Hakhel. The Torah is read, as it was by the King on Hakhel and Ezra at his assembly, standing on a bimah, a raised wooden platform. The Torah reader never stands alone: there are usually three people on the bimah, the segan, the reader and the person called to the Torah, representing respectively God, Moses, and the Israelites.[5] According to most halachists, the reading of the Torah is chovat tzibbur, an obligation of the community, as opposed to the study of Torah which is chovat yachid, an obligation of the individual.[6] So, I believe, keriat ha-Torah should be translated not as "the Reading of the Torah" but as "the Proclaiming of Torah." It is our equivalent of Hakhel, transposed from the seventh year to the seventh day.

It is hard for individuals, let alone nations, to stay perennially young. We drift, lose our way, become distracted, lose our sense of purpose and with it our energy and drive. I believe the best way to stay young is never to forget "the devotion of our youth," the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place. Hakhel was Moses' parting gift to us, showing us how it might be done.

Shabbat Shalom

Shabbat Shalom: Nitzavim-Vayelech (Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30)
Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "Behold, I give before you this day the life and the good, the death and the evil… blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your seed…" (Deut. 30:15, 19)

What does it mean, to choose "life"? Is it really an individual choice as to whether one lives or dies? I believe it worthy of note to raise another linguistic curiosity within this context: the Hebrew word hayyim (life) is a plural noun, ending in the two Hebrew letters yod and mem to signal the plural case. I do not know of any other language in which the word for "life" is a plural form; Why is it so in the Hebrew language? Hassidim have a cute play on words which provides an interesting

insight explaining the composition of the Hebrew word for "life": on an occasion of joy such as an engagement, marriage or birth it is customary to celebrate with a "drink," but only when drinking wine or liquor do we call out, le'hayyim, "to life." Why not also say le'hayyim when drinking water, which is so basic to the formation of life (remember the amniotic fluids which "break" before an impending birth) and to the continuity of life which is impossible without water ?!

They answer that the Hebrew word for wine, yayin, has two yods, as does the Hebrew word for liquor, yash (literally yayin saraf, "fiery wine"). The Hebrew letter yod is phonetically and homiletically tied to Yid (Yehudi), or "Jew"—a toast usually being invoked to celebrate two Jews coming together in marriage, in joining for a birth celebration, or generally within the familial context of kiddush on Friday evening. The Hebrew word for water, mayim, has only one yod, and God Himself has declared that "it is not good for the human being to be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

Hence, say the Hassidim, the Hebrew word for life consists of four letters, the exterior letters being het and mem, spelling hom, warmth, love—surrounding two yods completely together and not separated by any other letter. And the beverages which go along with the toast also require two yods (Jews) together as in the Hebrew words yayin and yash.

Despite the sweetness of this explanation, allow me to present an alternative interpretation, which proves a profound theological truth at the same time. In attempting to pictorially describe the creation of the human being, the Bible states: "And the Lord God had formed the human being [Adam] of dust from the ground, and He exhaled into his nostrils the soul [breath] of life, making the human a living being" (Gen. 2:7) Apparently the Bible is here explaining in more graphic language the difficult term tzelem Elokim, image of God, used in the first creation chapter, "And God created the human being [Adam] in His image, in the image of God created He him…" (Gen. 1:27). The Sacred Zohar adds a crucial dimension to the imagery of God's exhalation into the nostrils of the clay-dust form: "Whoever exhales, exhales from within himself," from the innermost essence of his existential being.

What this teaches us is arguably the most important insight into the essence of the human being defined by the Bible, the one element which qualitatively separates the human from all other creatures of the earth: a "portion" of God from on High resides within every human being, to which the Tanya (written by Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, late 18th century, known as the Alter Rebbe, founder of the Chabad movement) adds: mamash, really, palpably, within the very physical human being "resides" the spiritual essence of the Divine, the eternal and transcendent soul.

This idea has enormous ramifications as to how we see the human being, as to how we look upon ourselves. The human being is indeed a composite creature; homo natura and homo persona (see R. Soloveitchik, Family Redeemed), a part of the natural world with many of the instincts and limitations of the other physical creatures, but at the same time apart from the natural world, endowed with a portion of Divinity which enables him to create, to change, to love, to transcend both himself as well as the physical world into which he was created; the portion of God within the human being lives eternally just as the God without and beyond is eternal, and empowers the human being to perfect God's world and redeem God's world.

The challenge facing each of us is which aspect of our beings we choose to develop, the bestial or the celestial. Idolatry idealized the physical, the bestial: power (Jupiter), speed (Mercury), physical beauty (Venus), a golden calf; Judaism commands that we idealize the spiritual, the celestial: love, compassion, loving kindness, truth… The good news is that to help us in this existential struggle within ourselves is that very portion of God from on High who dwells within us, and that the human being is never alone, that God is always with us, within us, the still small voice which we must listen for and hearken to. Yes, God is Above, but even more importantly God is also Within!

That is why the Hebrew word for life, hayyim, is a plural noun; the "soul of life" is the God who resides within each of us, the essence of our personalities to whom we must return and with Whom we must live our conscious lives if we are to realize our truest human potential, if we are to truly live eternally, together with our partners and progeny in a perfecting world.

Shabbat Shalom!

Insights Parshas Nitzavin-Vayelech Elul 5780
Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University
Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of our parents, Daniel bar David & Esther Miriam bas Yaakov and Noach Yaakov ben Chaim & Dvora Esther bas Moshe.

"May their Neshamos have an Aliya!"

The Real You

...there among the nations that I have banished you, you will reflect on the situation. You will then return to Hashem your God and you will obey him [...] You and your children (will repent) with all your heart and soul (30:1-2).

Ramban understands the verse, "This commandment that you are charged (to obey) isn't hidden nor far off from you" (30:11), as referring to the mitzvah of teshuvah that is introduced above (30:1-2). Ramban continues; "this mitzvah is, in fact, not hard to do and it can be done at all times and in all places."

Ramban's description of the mitzvah of teshuvah as rather easy can be difficult to comprehend. After all, year after year, we seem to find ourselves in the same situation and repenting for the same sins as in previous years. Ramban's comment on the ease of teshuvah is reminiscent of the not-yet-reformed smoker who says "quitting smoking is the easiest thing in the world - I have done it a hundred times."

This becomes even more troubling when we examine Maimonides' description of teshuvah (Yad Hilchos Teshuvah 2:2): "What constitutes teshuvah? A sinner must abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again [...] Similarly, he must regret the past. He must attain a level that he knows (that the Almighty) will testify for him that he will never return to this sin again [...] He must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart."

Clearly, the objective is to regret the past and pledge to never again commit those sins again. How can anyone honestly come back year after year and say the exact same words, asking forgiveness for the same sins time and time again? At what point is it no longer believable? Even in the case of the truly penitent, how can he look himself in the mirror after resolving to no longer commit the sins that he knows he'll be repenting for again next Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? What kind of teshuvah is this? What honest commitment can one possibly make? The answer to this question is probably the key to understanding what we are trying to accomplish during these "ten days of repentance."

In all likelihood you, or someone you know, has struggled with their weight at some point. Imagine, for a moment, someone who is very overweight, but has committed to a strict diet, suddenly facing a crucial test: a pizza pie with all the toppings, accompanied by two extra-large orders of fries, has "miraculously" been delivered to them. Obviously, some people will be able to overcome their urge to inhale this pizza and fries (we call them weirdos). But others will likely succumb to their desires. Why?

Most people that succumb to the "pizza test" are thinking, "Let's face it - I weigh 300 lbs., who am I kidding?", and proceed to devour the entire pizza and fries. In other words, the reason they continue down the same path is because they look at themselves as overweight. Their diet was rooted in trying to change their behavior - when they really should have been focused on trying to change themselves. Therefore, they aren't dealing with this as a new situation; they are, in reality, succumbing to their past mistakes and accepting that as their reality. This new eating indiscretion is rooted in their past behavior, which is why they fail.

This is exactly what teshuvah is supposed to address; when we commit to doing teshuvah we have to 1) regret the past 2) resolve to no longer commit this transgression. In other words, we commit to making a real change. While it is true that we must distance ourselves from how we

behaved in the past, our commitment isn't merely a behavioral change, it is a change of self definition. We must say, "In the coming year I may be faced with a test of the same sin, and hopefully I will be able to restrain myself because I truly do not want to be that type of person."

"But even if I fail, it will be because I couldn't control myself, it will absolutely not be a transgression based on my past behavior." At that point one's transgressions are not a repetition of past sins. This is why Ramban says it is not hard to do. One has to merely decide to be the person he wants to become, and commit to leave who he currently is behind. At that point Hashem will help him find the true path to teshuvah (see Ramban on 30:6).

What Are Kids Good For?

Gather together all the people - men, women, small children...so that they will hear and so that they will learn and they will fear Hashem... (31:12)

This week's parsha contains the mitzvah of hakhel - the gathering of the entirety of the Jewish people on the holiday of Sukkos following the shemitta year. The king at that time would read from different sections in the Chumash of Devarim from an elevated platform. The Gemara (Bavli Chagiga 3a) explains that the men came to study and the women came to hear. The Gemara then asks; "Why did the very small children come? To give reward to those that brought them" (ibid).

Maharsha (ad loc) explains that the Gemara wonders why the Torah discusses the children in this verse and then mentions the children again in the very next verse. In fact, the next verse clearly explains that the children are coming to learn from the experience. So, explains Maharsha, the first verse must be talking about children who are too young to gain from the experience. Therefore, the Gemara explains they are only coming in order "to give reward to those that bring them."

Simply understood, the Gemara seems to be saying that the extra strain of bringing the very young children will bring some kind of reward to their much beleaguered parents. Perhaps this can be understood along the lines of the Talmudic dictum (Avos 5:26) "commensurate to the pain is the reward." But notwithstanding the fact that children can inflict exquisite discomfort on their parents, this cannot be the sole reason for bringing them. First of all, older children can be even more painful to drag to a speech that they can hardly understand. Second, if it is simply to make the experience more difficult, why shouldn't even people without young children have to do something to make the experience more trying? Why are only parents of very young children worthy of this added aggravation?

Obviously, there has to be another reason why we bring very young children to such a gathering. Have you ever noticed that some sports crazy fans bring their one year old children to baseball and football games decked out in baby sized team jerseys and other team themed items? What possible purpose can there be in such an effort? Clearly, the child will have no recollection of the event or of his parents' single-minded obsession; so, why would someone go to all that effort?

The answer has to be that it is an internalization, for ourselves and our children, that we want our legacy to be connected to this ideal. There are families who take great pride in being multigenerational fans of certain teams. So too, by the mitzvah of hakhel we are expressing the ideal, that our deepest desire is for our children to be connected and bound to the values of the Torah and the Jewish people. The reason these parents earn special reward isn't because of the added aggravation; it is because they are making the greatest expression of their personal commitment to Hashem and his Torah: They want their children to follow in their footsteps and the legacy of the Jewish people.

Did You Know...

The first night of Rosh Hashanah is also when we eat the first meal of the year. This special meal is marked by the tradition of creating simanim (signs) through the consumption of certain foods. There are many that are universally accepted as customary to eat; karsi (leek) so that our enemies may be "cut down," silka (beet) and tamri (date) for the removal and obliteration of our enemies, and rubia (black-eyed peas) in order for our merits or assets to increase in the coming year.

The Geonim mention the age-old custom of eating additional items not mentioned in the Talmud. This includes eating the head of an animal (customarily head of a lamb or a fish), as a request that Hashem place us in a position of leadership and not servitude.

Another ancient practice is eating fatty meat and sweet beverages as a sign of a prosperous and sweet new year. The Geonim traces this custom back to the second Beis Hamikdash, when Ezra and Nechemia instructed the people on Rosh Hashanah to "go and eat fatty dishes and drink sweet drinks" (Nechemia 8:10).

The Tur remarks that Jews have always added to the list of simanim (often using wordplay). Many people eat carrots since the Yiddish word for carrot is mehren, which is similar to the word mehr or "more." In Morocco, they serve boiled lungs as a siman since the Hebrew word for lungs reaya resembles the word riya (vision).

There's also a siman by some in France to eat bananas because the French word for banana, banane, sounds just like the words for good year in French, "bonne année."

Many years ago, Rav Heinemann Shlita introduced a now famous Baltimore siman to take lettuce, half a raisin, and celery as an indication to "let-us-have-a-raise-in-salary."

Although it is not mentioned in the Gemara, the Tur also records eating apples and honey as an old Ashkenazic custom. Maharil (Darkei Moshe 583:3) says that the apple reminds us of the sweet aroma that accompanied Yaakov Avinu when he appeared before Yitzchak to receive the brachos (according to Midrashim, this occurred on Rosh Hashanah, see Biur HaGra). Moreover, honey represents an additional significance in that the Gematria of honey (d'vash) is equivalent to "Merciful Father" (Bnei Yissosscher 2:13).

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For the week ending 12 September 2020 / 23 Elul 5780
Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com
Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech
Let It Go!

"You are standing…" (29:9)

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that one of the great things about having been part of Ohr Somayach for more around three decades is that I have met some people who are clearly living on a different level to the rest of us mere mortals. One of these great souls distilled the essence of one's relationship with one's fellow into three principles: His first principle is, "I was created to serve others, and no one was created to serve me."

The second is, "I wouldn't do it to you. But if you do it to me – it's okay." This doesn't mean that a person should be a doormat and invite the world to trample on him, but post facto – if you did something to me that I could really take you to court for and get back at you — and I give up on that — I get forgiven for all my sins.

The source for this is the Gemara that says, "Anyone who 'passes over on his character traits,' meaning one who resists the knee-jerk reaction that many have to resent and want revenge — and just lets it go - so, concomitantly, Hashem lets go on all our sins.

It's true that this level of saintliness is beyond the letter of the law, but it sure sounds like a good deal to me. All of my sins? Another source for this idea is the Tomer Devorah, which says that even though we constantly flout the Will of Hashem and use our G-d-given abilities to go against His Will, nevertheless, He constantly continues to give us the power to continue to do this and doesn't "hold a grudge."

During this week, before Hashem opens the Books of Judgment, I can think of no better exercise than to think of someone who has wronged us — and remove all resentment from our hearts. And with that we may approach the Heavenly Throne.

Parshas
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb
Forgiven, but not Forgotten

He was one of the greatest Talmud scholars of the last century, but outside of a small circle of disciples, he was never well-known. He was a tragic figure in many ways, and although few have heard of him today, he has not been totally forgotten.

Interestingly, forgetting was one of the central themes of his many teachings.

His name was Rabbi Arye Tzvi Fromer, and he hailed from an obscure town in Poland named Koziglov. He served in the rabbinate of several towns with equally obscure names. His extreme modesty mitigated the spread of his reputation.

Late in his life, he experienced the unique frustration of being called upon to succeed an individual who was unusually charismatic and world-famous. He was asked to fill the shoes of a great man, and his accomplishments were constantly compared, usually unfavorably, to the achievements of his glorious predecessor.

The man he was called upon to succeed as the head of the great Talmudical Academy in pre-World War II Lublin, Poland, was Rabbi Meir Shapiro. Besides being the founder of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, an innovative school for prodigious young Torah scholars, Rabbi Shapiro was an author, an orator of note, and a composer of Chassidic melodies. He was a member of the Polish Parliament and is remembered best as the person who introduced the concept of Daf Yomi, the daily study of the same page of Talmud each day by Jews all over the world.

Rabbi Shapiro died of a sudden illness while a relatively young man in his early 40s. The search for a successor was not an easy one, and the reaction of most people to the choice of Rabbi Fromer was one of astonishment. "Who is he," people asked, "and how could he possibly follow in the footsteps of the multitalented Rabbi Shapiro?"

Destiny did not give Rabbi Fromer much time to prove himself worthy of his new position. Within several years, World War II broke out. He suffered the deprivations of the ghetto and was brutally murdered by the Nazis.

We do have some of the writings he published in his lifetime, and those few of his disciples to survive the Holocaust published some of his teachings on the weekly Torah portion. I have become enamored with these writings and am particularly taken by the fact that he returns again and again to the theme of forgetting.

In this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayelech (Deuteronomy 31:1-30), we come across the following phrase: "This song (the Torah) will proclaim himself as a witness, for it will never be forgotten from the mouths of his descendants..." Here, the Almighty assures us that despite the vicissitudes of Jewish history, the Torah will never be forgotten.

Rabbi Fromer relates this assurance to an interesting phenomenon. The reader of this column may not be aware that many passages of the Talmud were censored by the Roman Catholic Church over the centuries and are today absent from most editions of this fundamental text. Jews have struggled in various ways to preserve these censored passages, and some modern editions do incorporate them, but by and large they have been forgotten.

Rabbi Fromer was once asked by a student who had just completed studying a tractate of the Talmud whether he could make a siyum, a festive meal celebrating that completion. "After all," the student argued, "I didn't really complete the entire tractate. I did not study the censored passages because I had no access to them."

Rabbi Fromer responded, consoled the student, and encouraged him to go through with the festive celebration. "You must understand," he argued, "that we have a guarantee in the Bible that Torah will not be forgotten. If some words were indeed forgotten, that is ipso facto proof that they were not authentic Torah to begin with."

Many will take issue with this concept and find it too radical. But the message is one which we can all affirm. That which is not Torah can be forgotten. What is trivial is ephemeral. Torah is not forgotten. Sanctity is eternal.

This lesson carries over to the wondrous day which typically follows the reading of the Torah portion of Vayelech. I refer, of course, to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Even Jews who have forgotten the rest of their Jewish heritage remember Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur does not allow us to forget who we are.

Stories abound about individuals who were on the threshold of apostasy, but who returned to our faith because of their experience of Yom Kippur. That fascinating Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, is just one example of this phenomenon and writes in his memoirs of his readiness to accompany his close cousin to the baptismal font, only to reconsider after spending a Yom Kippur in a small synagogue somewhere in Germany, nearly one hundred years ago.

"Israel, and the Torah, and the Holy One Blessed Be He, are one." This statement of the mystical holy Zohar says it all. All three are bound together forever.

"Forgive and forget." That is a cliché with which we are all familiar. One of the messages of hope which pervades this season of the Jewish year is that the Holy One Blessed Be He forgives but does not forget.

He does not allow his two most cherished objects, His Torah and His people, to be forgotten.

Zvi Arye Fromer could easily have been forgotten, given the horrible circumstances in which he perished. But the Almighty did not allow him to be forgotten. Nor did He allow the Torah he taught to be forgotten.

The Yizkor service, one of the prominent features of the liturgy of Yom Kippur, is a method by which we do our part to see to it that those souls whom we knew personally are not forgotten.

And our regular Torah study is the method by which we each see to it that the words of the Torah are not forgotten.

For four years now, these weekly columns on the parsha have helped so many of you, in an admittedly small way, to prevent the forgetting of Torah. I take this opportunity, at the beginning of this New Year, 5773, to thank each of you for reading my words, for taking them seriously, and for responding every week in so many wonderful ways to what I have to say.

May the Almighty bless you with a new year filled with peace and health, sweetness and joy, and much success. Ketiva Vachatima Tova to you and yours.

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Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message
Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5780-2020
"An Exclusive Covenant with an Inclusive Philosophy"
(Revised and updated from Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5760-2000)
Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In parashat Nitzavim, the first of this week's double parashiot, Nitzavim-Vayeilech, we encounter the great Moses, on the last day of his life.

Moses has gathered all the Jewish people from the lowliest to the most exalted, old and young, men and women, to bring them into the final covenant with G-d. This covenant is intended to serve as a powerful affirmation of עֲרֵבוּת-a'ray'vut, reflecting the profound concept of every Jew assuming responsibility for their fellow Jews.

In Deuteronomy 29:9-14, Moses says to the Jewish people, אַתֶּם נִצָּבִים הַיּוֹם כֻּלְּכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱ־לֹקֵיכֶם, רָאשֵׁיכֶם שִׁבְטֵיכֶם, זִקְנֵיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם, כֹּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל. "You are standing today before the L-rd your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers–all the men of Israel. Your small children, and your wives, and the proselytes who are within your camp, from your woodchoppers to your water-drawers. For you to enter in to the covenant of the L-rd your G-d and His oath which the L-rd your G-d is sealing with you today. In order to establish you today as His people and that He be your G-d, just as He spoke to you and as He swore to your forefathers–to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Not with you alone do I form this covenant and seal this oath. But, with those who are here standing with us today before the L-rd our G-d, and with those who are not here today."

These bold verses continue to dramatically reverberate with us, even to this day, as if they were being pronounced to the People of Israel at this very moment.

In the name of G-d, Moses declares: אַתֶּם נִצָּבִים הַיּוֹם כֻּלְּכֶם לִפְנֵי הַשֵּׁם אֱ־לֹקֵיכֶם, "You are standing here today, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d!" The commentators see in the nuance of the language, in the use of the word, אַתֶּם–"Ah'tem," that this covenant is being exacted with a broad constituency. It is not a contract with the nobility of Israel. Israel has no nobility who are granted special advantages, nor can there be special representatives or privileged proxies before G-d. This gathering is not intended to be a gathering of Priests, Prophets or Holy People. This covenant is not to be concluded only with those of esteemed pedigree or of exalted birth. Judaism, after all, is not a sect or a cult. This covenant is meant for the entire people of Israel. In an unprecedented act in human history and in the history of religions, Moses declares in the name of G-d, that all the people of Israel, without regard to gender, age or status, from the leaders, to the water-drawers, are welcomed into this covenant.

Not only is this covenant historic in that it is totally inclusive of all those who are present at this time, but it actually transcends time to include the past, present and future members of Israel. Deuteronomy 29:14 boldly proclaims, כִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר יֶשְׁנוֹ פֹּה עִמָּנוּ עֹמֵד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי הַשֵּׁם אֱ־לֹקֵינוּ, וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֵינֶנּוּ פֹּה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם, "Not only with you who stand here with us today before the L-rd our G-d, does G-d seal this covenant, but also with all those who are not here with us today!"

At this critical juncture in Jewish history, and from this crucial vantage point of Jewish destiny, not only are all the tribes of Israel joined together, but all Jewish generations are seen as if they are standing before the L-rd our G-d. At this singular moment, we all stand together as one Jewish people–past, present and future.

Yes, this covenant is intended to be all-embracing, to be executed with the entire people, with those who are with us and those who are not with us. And yet, for G-d, even this is not enough. For the Al-mighty it must be even more inclusive. Not only is this covenant intended for those who are not with us at this time, but even for those who are not with us in spirit, in thought, in mind and in belief. It includes even those who recoil and say: "We do not want any part in this covenant today, הַיּוֹם–Ha'yom. This is not for us. We seek alternative religious experiences. We are off to the Himalayas, to embrace our personal Gurus, to dwell in the Ashram. We reject your concept of Heaven, we relate only to Earth." There are always some who relate only to the Heavens, to the metaphysical, and reject the concept of "Earth." But, for G-d it is Ha'yom, only today. G-d knows that these attitudes cannot, and will not, be permanent. With time, with love and with infinite patience, attitudes can change.

From this covenant which Moses executed with the people of Israel in Arvot Moav, in the Wilderness of Moab, with the G-d of Israel, with the G-d of reality, with the G-d of existence–no one is excluded. Everyone is here. Everyone is included!

It is with this same heightened sense of inclusiveness that we are to begin the preparations for the rapidly approaching High Holidays. As we read in the introductory meditation for the כָּל נִדְרֵי–Kol Nidre on Yom Kippur night, we say, בִּישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַעְלָה, By the authority of the heavenly court, by the authority of the earthly court, with the consent of the Omnipotent One, and with the consent of this congregation, we declare it lawful to pray with the sinners. This exclusive covenant is totally inclusive, anyone wishing to be part of it, is welcome to join.

That is why during this propitious time of the year, we must think about the myriads of Jews who are estranged from Judaism, who consider themselves outside the covenant. Yes, our grandparents prayed for a "Melting Pot" in America, but, unfortunately, we've wound up with a "meltdown" instead. But, we dare not write off any Jew, and we dare not give up hope on our brothers and sisters, our sons and our daughters. As we read the prophetic words in Deuteronomy 30:4, in this week's parasha, אִם יִהְיֶה נִדַּחֲךָ בִּקְצֵה הַשָּׁמָיִם, Even though your dispersed be at the far ends of Heaven, מִשָּׁם יְקַבֶּצְךָ הַשֵּׁם אֱ־לֹקֶיךָ, וּמִשָּׁם יִקָּחֶךָ, from there the L-rd will gather you in, and from there He will take you.

It is during this very special High Holiday season that we are called upon to redouble our efforts, to reach out to those of our brothers and sisters who are not yet connected to Jewish life, and are waiting longingly for a hand to be extended to them, so that they too may be welcomed back into the Jewish fold. We must not fail them. We will not fail them.

Rosh Hashana 5781 is observed this year on Friday evening and all day Saturday and Sunday, September 18th, 19th and 20th, 2020. The Fast of Gedaliah will be observed on Monday, September 21st from dawn until nightfall.

May you be blessed.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah: Nitzavim Vayelech

What is the significance of every single letter of the Torah?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe gave a beautiful explanation. In Parshat Vayelech, which we'll be reading this coming Shabbat, the Torah presents us with the last of the Mitzvot. Mitzvah number 613 states "וְעַתָּה כִּתְבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָההַזֹּאת וְלַמְּדָה אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׂימָה בְּפִיהֶם" – and now, write for yourselves this song, which is the Torah, and teach it to the children of Israel. Place it in their mouths".

Why is there a mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah? We can fulfil this Mitzvah by writing just one letter of a Sefer Torah and it's attributed to us as if we've written the whole Sefer. But why this imperative to be engaged in the writing of letters of the scroll?

The Rebbe explained, there is a Halacha which we learn from the Gemara in Mesechet Mehachot, Daf 29a. There Chazal tell us that all the letters must be "גויל מוקף – surrounded by blank parchment". That is to say that no letter can be connected to any other letter. At the same time there is also a Halacha that each letter must be visibly part of its own word – and visibly separate from all other words.

Each letter represents an individual. The message of the letters of the Torah, is that each one of us should know that we are unique people. As a result, everyone should respect our own individuality, our unique nature and personality. At the same time, none of us should ever forget that we are an integral part of our nation and as a result, we have an 'areivut' – a responsibility, to selflessly care for others and reach out to them.

In addition, if one single letter of the Torah is 'passul' – rendered unfit, then the entire Sefer Torah is passul. From here we learn that if there is something with just one of us, then every single one of us is affected as a result.

This is such a beautiful message for us and so apposite on the eve of the commencement of Slichot – a time when we're just about to usher in a new year and when we're engaging in 'Cheshbon Hanefesh' – introspection.

At this time, therefore, let us never forget how important each and every one us is and how we should develop ourselves and excel in our own personal way as individuals. At the same time, we should never forget that everybody depends on us and is looking for us to pull our weight for the sake of our nation and for the sake of the world.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

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Egocentric Theology (Nitzavim-Vayelech)

Ben-Tzion Spitz

The egoism which enters into our theories does not affect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief. - George Eliot

Moses is near the end of his monumental discourse, conveying the word of God to the nation of Israel about to enter the Promised Land. He touches on multiple themes and a plethora of commandments, but also repeats certain points, each time with a different nuance.

An oft-repeated theme is the need to obey God with one's entire heart and soul, as well as the ability to return to God when we fail to do so, as per the following verse:

"Since you will be heeding the Lord your God and keeping His commandments and laws that are recorded in this book of the Torah—once you return to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul." - Deuteronomy 30:10

The Meshech Chochma wonders why in this verse, is a person heeding God and the laws written in the Torah only after they return to God. Presumably, just reading the Torah and being familiar with its precepts should be enough to encourage, convince, and instruct a person as to what their divinely ordained responsibilities and obligations are.

The Meshech Chochma explains, that reading the Torah, or even being familiar with it is often not enough. It is human nature to read into things. To read things and understand it according to our notions. It's possible to read the Torah and come to conclusions that support our personal ideals and philosophy, but have nothing to do with Judaism. In short, our powerful egos are often the ones interpreting the Torah in a way that satisfies our vision and thinking, but is far removed from the truth.

That is why, the Meshech Chochma states, we first must return to God. We first have to accept, embrace, and be open to true divine instruction. We need to cease the worship of our egos and in turn worship God. Once we have placed our egos in their proper place, then we may have a chance to understand the truth that has been staring us in the face. Then we can be open to what the Torah is truly saying. Once we check our egos at the door, once we return to God, to our spiritual source, then we can start to understand what he's been saying to us for millennia.

May we remove the blinders of our egos.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova

Dedication - For the Bar-Mitzvah of Eden Yechiel Spitz. Mazal Tov!

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

Jerusalem Post

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayelech - A moment of honesty

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Teshuva is primarily an emotional process that has practical implications.

'And that the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and a burning, that it is not sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger, and in His wrath' – Deuteronomy, Nizavim 29:22

'For this commandment which I command you this day," Moses tells the Jewish people in his farewell speech, "is not concealed from you, nor is it far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?' Rather, [this] thing is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it" (Deuteronomy 30: 11 – 14).

What commandment is he talking about? Why would we think it is far away, in the heaven, or beyond the sea? What is this thing that is very close to us, according to Moses?

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According to some of the most important commentators, the commandment he is referring to is none other than teshuva, repentance.

Is repenting easy? If we were asked, many of us would probably say it isn't. If there is one difficult commandment that is especially challenging, it would be teshuva. The expectation that a person will change his habits, adopting a new outlook and new lifestyle, is perhaps the most far-reaching expectation possible. So how can we explain what Moses said?

We're used to thinking about teshuva in practical terms: What have I been doing until now, and what will I do from now on? This is correct, but only partially. Teshuva is primarily an emotional process that has practical implications. Sometimes it is a single, solitary moment when a person faces himself honestly, looks himself in the eye and asks: "Is this who I want to be? Is this how I want to live?"

That one moment is a pivotal juncture. It is a turning point whose results will be recognized only in hindsight, but which already serves as a watershed moment. Maimonides, in Mishneh Torah, wrote the halachot (Jewish laws) of teshuva in several chapters that should be read and learned.

There he writes, "Teshuva atones for all sins. Even a person who was wicked his entire life and repented in his final moments should not be reminded of any aspect of his wickedness."

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In dramatic language, Maimonides describes the change that occurs in the relationship between a person who did teshuva and God: "Teshuva is great for it draws a man close to the Shechina (the Divine Presence).... Teshuva brings near those who were far removed. Previously, this person was hated by God, disgusting, far removed and abominable. Now, he is beloved and desirable, close and dear." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 7: 6)

Try to think of person who you might describe as "disgusting, far removed and abominable." What did this person do? This wouldn't be someone who failed once, or someone who sins occasionally. This would be someone for whom sinning is characteristic, who is immersed in the squalor of sin. This is a person who is addicted to ugly behavior.

Now let's think what we would demand of such a person in order to remove the negative label attached to him. Maybe a process of recovery. Maybe he would have to prove he has changed over a period of time. We would not be quick to purify him from all his sins.

This is not the teshuva that Judaism is talking about. "Previously," says Maimonides, just recently "this person was hated by God, disgusting, far removed and abominable; and now," today, even one day later, this person we denounced has become "beloved and desirable, close and dear."

How did this happen? What changed from one day to the next? One moment of introspection, one minute without masks, when a person reveals to himself his true desire to be good, pure, exalted. That one moment is etched into the soul forever and it changes a person into being beloved and desirable, close and dear.

During this period of time called the "Days of Awe," Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are all called upon to find that moment of teshuva; that most crucial moment in our lives that will never be forgotten, that moment when we will merit being "beloved and desirable, close and dear."

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Nitzavim-Vayeilech

פרשת נצבים-וילך תש"פ

Nitzavim

ושבת עד ד' אלקיך

And you will return unto Hashem. (30:2)

Teshuvah means return. One returns to his source, his beginning, from where it all began, so that he can start over again and repair what requires restoration. This is not consistent with the objective of society, which focuses on the future, ignoring the past. What happened, happened. Forget about it. Move on. What society ignores is the dross which envelops us. Unless we expunge it, it accompanies us wherever we go. Focus on "Why? "Where? How did it all start?" A pathologist searches for the sources, the etiology. *Teshuvah* is a pathology, searching for the beginning, "Why? How? Where did it all

begin?" Once he has researched the source, the penitent has the opportunity to map out and begin his journey home.

A German Jew from the city of Danzig came to the saintly *Horav Pinchas Koritzer, zl*, to seek counsel concerning his daughter who had suddenly lost her eyesight. He had traveled to the greatest doctors, to no avail. No medical reason explained her sudden blindness. The holy *Rebbe* said, "She is unable to see, because her father does not see. Her illness has been passed on to her from the previous generation. The man looked at the *Rebbe* in surprise. "*Rebbe*, my eyesight is perfect. I do not even need glasses," he said. The *Rebbe* explained, "One who is truly blind is the sinner. The *Navi Yeshayah* says, *Am iveir v'einayim yeish*; 'The people are blind, though they have eyes' (*Yeshayah* 43:8). The *Mishnah* (*Sotah* 1:8) teaches, 'Shimshon followed his eyes, therefore, the Philistines pierced his eyes.'" The *Rebbe* concluded that the danger of loss of vision was imminent to every member of his family who stared at him. Although the man had assimilated into western culture, he still remembered his Orthodox upbringing. He began to weep profusely, knowing quite well that the *Rebbe's* admonishment was warranted. He promised to change his ways. Upon returning home, he changed his home to observe the laws of *kashrus*, and *Shabbos* observance became his family's way of life. Shortly thereafter, his daughter's eyesight returned.

The penitent must open his eyes and take a penetrating look into the contrast between who he had been and who he has become. The variance should impel him to search for a way to return, but, until he expunges the spiritual smut that envelops him, he will just carry it around. When he performs *teshuvah gemurah*, complete repentance, he can expect it to disappear. *Teshuvah* achieves something unlike no other purifying agent, as indicated by the following story.

A boy was having difficulty participating in class, mostly because he was almost never present. He was extremely wild and, as a result, he was "invited" by his *rebbe* to leave the classroom since his unruliness was having a detrimental effect on everyone. His parents had tried everything, from different *rebbeim*, to transferring him to another school, to educational and psychological specialists, all to no avail. Finally, they were referred to a *rebbe* who claimed that he could help, but it would take time. How long? It would depend on their son. What did they have to lose? He had already hit rock bottom.

Their son arrived at the new *rebbe's* office with a smirk on his face, manifesting his usual attitude. The *rebbe* sat him down and said, "As far as I am concerned, I will commence my teaching obligation only when you decide that you are prepared to learn. In other words, you will have no learning until you decide that you are ready. At the end of each day that no learning occurs, I will bang a nail into my wall. The boy laughed at the offer. The next day, he showed up and smirked, paid his respects to the *rebbe*, whom he thought was strange (after all, what *rebbe* would not demand that his student learn?) and went along his merry way. At the end of the day, true to his word, the *rebbe* banged nail number one into the wall. This continued daily: no pressure; no learning; another nail. Week after week, the boy came to "school," checked in, refused to learn, and earned another nail in the wall each day.

It took an entire year for the *rebbe* to wear the boy down. Everyone needs a challenge. When the parents/*rebbe* challenge a recalcitrant child, he will often rebel, fight back, actively or passively, but he will do something negative to demonstrate his reluctance to allow anyone to dominate him. This boy could not accept the fact that no one was challenging him. As he was about to celebrate his one-year anniversary of doing nothing, he took one long look at the nail-studded wall; all 365 nails were in perfect sequence, and the stark realization of one wasted year hit him squarely in the eyes. He broke down in tears. The amount of learning he could have achieved, the year of Torah that he had lost, began to penetrate his mind, his heart, his psyche. He wept and wept, and, when he was finished, he told the *rebbe*, "I am now ready to learn."

The boy and the *rebbe* studied every day, all day, because the boy had to make up for all the time that he had needlessly wasted. At the end of every day, the *rebbe* took his claw hammer and yanked one nail out of the wall. This continued for an entire year, until all of the nails had been dislodged. It should have been a joyous first anniversary. After all, all the nails were gone. The boy took a look at the wall and, once again, as he had one year earlier, he began to cry. The *rebbe* looked at the scene and asked, "Why are you crying?" The boy looked up at his *rebbe* and, with great remorse, replied, "I am crying because now I have a wall with 365 holes in it."

Every hole cannot be filled; the void remains once the nail is removed. Every blemish leaves a mark, a taint, a deformity. Not so with *teshuvah*. Not only does *teshuvah* remove the "nails," but it also fills the holes; it builds a new wall. The *Mesillas Yesharim* writes (*Perek* 4), "Truthfully, how can a person repair what he has corrupted when the sin has already been committed? If someone has murdered his fellow or committed adultery, how can he remedy the matter? Can he remove the performed deed from existence? The Attribute of Mercy tempers the Attribute of Strict Justice, however, and it catalyzes a reversal: first, by granting the sinner time to repent; second, by exacting a punishment that is not too severe; and finally, by offering the opportunity for repentance, purely out of Hashem's kindness." *Teshuvah* fills the holes.

החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובחרת בחיים

I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life. (30:19)

One would think that choosing life is a decision that requires little to no mental effort. Why would the Torah exhort us to choose life? This question has inspired much commentary. Obviously, the meaning of "life" in Torah-speak is different than the mundane, physical existence to which many have become accustomed. Furthermore, as *Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl*, observes, the Torah implores us to choose life, so that our children will live. The message is clear: the decision we make for ourselves affects our families. What our children will be in twenty years, their demeanor – moral, ethical and spiritual – will be on us. Our decision to live properly determines whether they will live.

After reading an inspiring article by *Rav Yehudah Adler, zl*, I was very moved. He penned this article while he was a patient in the oncology department. He was in tremendous pain, suffering from the effects of his rapidly progressing disease. He was a *kollel* fellow who took great satisfaction from his *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty. He spent the day learning, after arising early in the morning to *daven k'vasikin*, at sunrise.

Rav Adler writes that, at first, when he confronted his dread diagnosis, he was emotionally broken. A young man with a young family, the last thing on his mind was his mortality. Hashem, however, has a way of reminding us of our transitoriness. *Rav* Yehudah was emotionally devastated. Why did he deserve this? He was trying so hard to rise early to *daven* with exceptional *kavanah*, devotion. He did not waste time from his learning. His spiritual life was soaring, and now this. Suddenly, he came upon a revelation which changed his outlook and gave him the strength to confront his pain and mortality.

The answer to his questions was simple. He was not doing Hashem a favor. It was quite the other way around. He wondered why Hashem made it so difficult for him to learn, to *daven*, to think clearly. It was because Hashem does not need us to serve Him at our convenience. He wants us to serve Him the way He decides. One might counter, "I could do much better and much more, if I were not in pain." Well, Hashem wants you to serve Him as you are – now! He has enough members of *Klal Yisrael* who serve Him amid good health, wealth and satisfaction, etc. He wants to see how you *daven* when you are in pain, with an IV in your arm. How you manage to go to *shul* when it is hard to walk, to breathe, to stand. He knows that you are unable to rise from your bed, go to *kollel* and learn all day. He wants to see how you will learn in bed, hooked up to all the monitors. This is the meaning of fulfilling *ratzon Hashem*, the will of G-d. We serve Him on His terms.

Many of us think that after we have had a good day – *davened*, learned, gave *tzedakah*, reached out to our fellow –we deserve a big thank you; Hashem is in our debt. After all, we extended ourselves. Wrong! Hashem has many people who serve Him. He wants you to serve Him – not as a favor, but because it is His will. If He makes it easy

for you, i.e. great health, economics, no family issues, life is going your way, then you owe Him for allowing you to serve Him in comfort.

Hashem is exceedingly kind to us. When we survive troubles, we should express our gratitude with boundless joy. *Horav Yechezkel Abramsky, zl*, said the following to his *talmidim*, students: "Let us open the *siddur* to see how we are supposed to *daven*. We begin with *Mah Tovu*, 'How goodly are Your tents,' and continue with *Vaani b'rov Chasdecha*, 'As for me, with Your abundant kindness.' Is this correct? Hashem's kindness? Go to the dormitory and see how many are still sleeping. 'But I came to *Shacharis* early, you claim. 'I deserve a big thank you.' It should say, *b'rov chasdi*, 'with my kindness'"! *Rav* Abramsky stopped for a moment to allow his question to sink in, and then he said, "Go to the hospital and pass between the beds and see how many would give their last penny away just to get up from their bed. How many cannot go to *shul*? This is why we say, *b'rov Chasdecha*, 'with Your abundant kindness.'"

We owe Him everything, and as soon as we realize and acknowledge this verity, our plea of *Zachreinu l'chaim*, "Remember us for life," will have so much more meaning.

Vayeilech

ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא

But I will surely have concealed My face on that day. (31:18)

Hashem will conceal His Presence from us. Indeed, many times Jews feel that Hashem has "disappeared" from their lives. They should know that the Almighty is always present. At times, however, He conceals Himself, making it that much more difficult for us to perceive Him. This only means that we must look harder. Why does the Torah repeat itself – *hasteir astir*, double concealment? Concealment, by its very definition, is absolute. Something is either hidden, or it is not. If one can easily locate it, it is not really concealed. *Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl*, explains that this concealment is unique, in that Hashem will conceal the actual *hester panim*, concealment. People will experience troubles, adversity, economic havoc, unexplained illness. Do they attribute it to Hashem, or do they "blame" everyone and everything, while refusing to stop and think that Hashem might be communicating with them?

Finding fault in everything but the true Source of the adversity is our way of avoiding the truth: Hashem is speaking to us, warning us that enough is enough. It is time to change. Hashem will conceal the concealment. He will not make it obvious for us to sense that He is manipulating the circumstances that affect our *tefillah*, prayer, and *teshuvah*, repentance, so that we own up to our faults and do something to counteract them.

ויאמר ד' אל משה הנך שכב עם אבתיך וקם העם הזה וזנה אחרי אלהי נכר הארץ ... ועזבנו והפר את בריתי אשר כרתי אתו ... ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא ... ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת ולמדה את בני ישראל

Hashem said to Moshe, "Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will arise and stay after the gods of the nations of the land… and they will forsake Me and annul the covenant that I formed with them… I will distance them and make Myself oblivious to them. So now, write this song for yourselves and teach it to *Bnei Yisrael*. (31:16,18,19)

The above *pasukim* paint a stark picture of the spiritual deterioration that will occur in the period following Moshe *Rabbeinu's petirah*, passing. While it did not happen immediately, the dynamics that led to the nation's freefall from their *igra ramah*, spiritually-elevated perch, to a *bira amikta*, nadir of depravity, were apparent. During certain moments in history – even in the last two hundred years, leading up to the present – we have observed an acute distancing from positive spiritual activity. For many, assimilation has almost become a way of life. Within the observant camp, a spiritual tug of war has ensued between those who are committed to strengthening Torah study and *mitzvah* observance and those who seek to "open up" Orthodoxy and water it down to the letter of the Law. (The latter have rejected the spirit of the Law and the accompanying traditions and customs, which are not only considered law, but have maintained our spiritual integrity throughout the generations.)

While this situation is certainly depressing, we have hope. I quote a vignette, a conversation that took place between *Horav Shlomo Lorincz, zl*, and the *Brisker Rav, zl*. *Rav* Lorincz lamented the reality (60 years ago) of the nation's spiritual degradation; the *Brisker Rav* assuaged him with hope. *Rav* Lorincz was a distinguished Torah activist, who represented Agudah Israel in the Knesset. He came to the *Brisker Rav* depressed and dejected, following the defeat of a bill that he had worked on for a while that was almost certain to pass. It did not. Despite all assurances to the contrary, his bill prohibiting the raising of *davar acheir*, pigs, failed. He poured out his heart over the low spiritual state of the country, and his fears that they had not yet reached rock-bottom. It would get worse.

The *Brisker Rav* said, "Let me teach you a lesson in *Chumash* in the manner that I used to teach my sons. He opened a *Chumash* and read from *Devarim* (31:16), 'And Hashem said to Moshe, "*You will (now) lie with your forefathers, but this people will arise and stray after the gods of the nations of the land*." Speaking in *Yiddish*, the *Rav* explained, "To stray after the gods of the nations of the land does not mean that they would not *daven Shacharis*. It means that they literally worshipped idols. If that were not (bad) enough, the *pasuk* continues, *And they will forsake Me*. This does not mean that they would not *daven Minchah*; it means that they will not even serve Me (Hashem)… And if this were not enough, the *pasuk* continues, *and annul the covenant that I formed with them*. This does not mean that they would not *daven Maariv*; it means that they did not perform circumcision. And it concludes with the words, *I will distance them and make Myself oblivious to them*.

"*Nu*," the *Brisker* Rav said, raising his eyes, "I am certain that you will agree that the situation described here is much worse than the one you just described, but let us continue learning: 'So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to *Bnei Yisrael*…' Torah study is the antidote for all spiritual deterioration, even idol worship and the abandonment of *Bris Milah*. It will return Hashem's People to Him. All that we are relegated to do is take care of teaching it to *Bnei Yisrael*. In that case, you have no reason to despair."

What is it about studying Torah that literally transforms a person? I write this *Isru Chag Shavuous*, the *Yom Tov* dedicated to Torah. Due to the various restrictions, the majority of *minyanim* were held outdoors. After *davening vasikin* in a large tent, I was walking home and passed my gentile neighbor who was outside enjoying the early morning air. While he is well aware that his Jewish neighbors attend prayer services in the synagogue, he never realized what this meant until he observed us *davening* outdoors, across from his house. I explained to him what had taken place during the night, how fifty men and many young boys had studied Torah together. He, of course, did not understand the concept of studying a book as part of a religious service. He asked me, "Rabbi, what is so special about this book?" I told him that this Book was the word of G-d, and, through it, the Almighty speaks to us. "In other words," I said, "we are not simply studying a book. We are listening to the Almighty speak to us."

This is what Torah study does for a Jew. It affords him the opportunity to listen to Hashem. When a person listens to Hashem, the experience is transformative. Obviously, the degree of listening, and the depths of comprehension, will determine the change that will transpire. *Teshuvah* stories abound which demonstrate the amazing spiritual regeneration that ensues within the person who commits to *teshuvah*. We have varied understandings of the meaning of *teshuvah* and what one must endure in order to succeed. I, therefore, have selected the following vignette, which is both timely and illuminating.

Horav Naftali Ropshitzer, zl, was one of the first *Admorim*. He was learning in his room one day when Zevulun, a member of the Jewish community, came to him, obviously very distraught. "*Rebbe*, I cannot live with myself any longer. I have committed numerous transgressions, a number of which are very serious. *Rebbe*, I must know what to do in order to repent to expunge these *aveiros*, sins." With that, he presented a list of sins that were quite egregious. (We must underscore that many people in those times [mid-eighteenth century] did

not have the luxury of a *yeshivah* education, and they suffered from economic hardship, as well as the influence of a society that was antagonistic to religious observance.)

The *Rebbe* reviewed the list and declared, "There is no question. For such sins, there is only one resolution. You must forfeit your life! There is just no other way." With a tear-filled voice, Zevulun accepted his fate. "It is better that I die having received Hashem's forgiveness than to live the life of a sinner. I want to leave this world with a clean *neshamah*, soul."

"If so, then we can proceed with your *teshuvah* ritual. I will prepare the molten lead that will be poured down your throat. This will serve as the process that expunges all of your sins."

Zevulun nodded in agreement. He was prepared to die if that is what it would take to purify his soul. As soon as the lead had melted, *Rav* Naftali laid Zevulin down on the bed, tied him up and blindfolded his eyes. "Now, my dear friend, recite *Viduy*, Confession, in preparation for your death."

Zevulun recited *Viduy* and declared, "*Rebbe*, I am ready. I feel good that I will leave this world as I entered it – pure." "If so," the *Rebbe* said, "Open your mouth." Zevulun opened his mouth, prepared for the searing pain of burning lead to melt his innards. Instead, he received the shock of his life. Instead of hot molten lead being poured down his throat, the *Rebbe* had poured sweet honey down his throat!

"Do you think that the Almighty really wanted me to take your life?" the *Rebbe* asked. "*Chas v'shalom*, Heaven forbid! When a person commits such grave sins that warrant his death, do you think that Hashem wants him to die? Absolutely not! Hashem wants him to live. All the Almighty asks of us is remorse, a broken heart. Forgiveness is not about death; it is about life with contrition. When I saw how deeply pained your heart was, how much you really regretted your sinful behavior, to the point that you were prepared to renege on your life, I realized how utterly broken you were. Therefore, I had nothing to do. You had already achieved forgiveness."

Zevulun never forgot the day that he received a new lease on life. He changed his past life's trajectory and became a serious penitent, wholly committed to *mitzvah* observance. All Hashem asks of us is spiritual integrity, not a manifestation of religious observance solely for the purpose of impressing others. The only One we have to impress is Hashem.

Va'ani Tefillah

מעולם קוינו לך – *Mei'olam kivinu Lach.* (As long as we can remember) We have always hoped for You.

The fact that we continue to hope for salvation, despite having survived some of the most difficult periods in history, is in and of itself one of the greatest *chassadim*, kindnesses, bestowed upon us by Hashem. We have maintained *tikvah*, hope, amidst challenge and adversity. *Horav Shimon Schwab, zl*, notes that the words *tikvah* and *kivinu* both find their origin in the word *kav*, which means a piece of string or rope, which binds/attaches two objects. This is the meaning of hope: connection. As long as one knows that he is firmly anchored in place, the winds that blow him all over will not prevail in blowing him away. He is connected. This is the underlying meaning of *mei'olam kivinu Lach*: Throughout history we have maintained an unbroken and undiminished attachment to Hashem via our unswerving hope that He would respond to our sincere prayers, even when the outlook has appeared tenuous and hopeless. A Jew should never give up hope.

In memory of a dear friend on the occasion of his yahrzeit
החבר הרב צבי בן החבר ר' משה ז"ל נפ' ד' תשרי תשע"ג
Mr. Bjorn Bamberger

prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

Is That Shofar Kosher?
Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Shofars come in many different sizes and prices, and they can be bought in many different places. But is that shofar on sale at Amazon.com fit for use on Rosh Hashanah? And if a shofar does need a hechsher, what should that kashrus certificate cover?

Yossi had always hoped to follow the family tradition of becoming a baal tokei'ah. But even though he had spent many hours during the summer months practicing on his grandfather's shofar, he couldn't manage to produce anything more than a weak sound. Then one day he was walking through the Arab shuk in Yerushalayim and his eye was caught by a beautiful shofar.

"Try it," said the Arab shopkeeper, thrusting the shofar into Yossi's hands.

Yossi did try it – and to his amazement, the tekiyos not only sounded loud and clear, but they took almost no effort. After some haggling, the shofar didn't cost that much, either. Yossi was so excited by his purchase that when he got home he immediately called his family to listen to a recital.

"I'm sure it's a very beautiful shofar," said his brother, "but are you sure it's kosher?"

"A shofar has to be kosher? What could be the problem? I am not going to eat it!"

Soon enough, Yossi learned that the potential for problems is far from negligible. And although we can't repeat every detail of such a discussion in this article, we can look at a few key factors that go into making a shofar not only beautiful, but also kosher.

Beyond the Minimum

Most shofaros sold today in frum stores are made in one of numerous small, family-operated factories scattered around Eretz Yisrael. While some shofaros have no hechsher, others have one that covers the minimal standard: It certifies that the shofar is manufactured from a ram's horn. Since all halachic authorities rule that a ram's horn is preferred and that a horn from a different, kosher, non-bovine animal may be used only when there is no alternative, there is some value to this minimal hechsher. In addition to the concern that the shofar might have been made from the horn of a cow or a bull, which is not acceptable, there are commercially available "shofaros" made of quality plastic that but look, feel, and blow like a shofar. Thus, the "minimum standard" hechsher should hopefully ensure that the shofar is a genuine ram's horn.

By the way, here is a simple, non-scientific way to verify that a shofar is plastic. Look at many available on display in the Arab shuk. Carefully examine them and you will notice that they all have their "natural" markings in exactly the same place. Some are oriented to the left and others to the right, and the color varies from shofar to shofar, but it is quite clear that they were poured into the same mold.

Boiled, Buffed, and Beautiful

The majority of rams' horns used to make shofaros are imported from abroad. When they arrive at the factory, they are not a pretty sight. Not only is the horn's exterior rough and lacking a pleasing shine, but the bone is still inside.

Although it is perfectly kosher to use a shofar by drilling a hole through the bone on its inside, commercial manufacturers remove the bone. The first step, therefore, is to boil the horn for several hours to soften it and make it more malleable, allowing for easy removal of the bone.

A hechsher that guarantees only that the shofar was originally a ram's horn does not address problems that occur to the shofar during the manufacturing process. (While those problems may not occur with great frequency, my opinion is that someone giving a hechsher should assume responsibility for the product's complete kashrus.)

Returning to our description of the process: After the skull bone has been removed, the wider end of the horn is hollow, whereas the narrower side of the horn, that is attached to the head, is not hollow. Since the horn grew thick on this side, it must be drilled and cleaned out to create an empty "tunnel" that reaches the hollow part of the horn. In addition, a usable mouthpiece on the narrow part of the horn has to be fashioned. In order to accomplish all of this, the narrower section of the horn is straightened. This creates the difference in appearance between the complete shofar, which is straight at this end, and the natural ram's horn, which is curved along its entire length. Take a look the next time you are this close to a ram.

As part of this process, the factory might shorten an over-long shofar or trim its sides. This does not invalidate the shofar, which, unlike an esrog, doesn't have to be complete. However, a shofar cannot be lengthened, not even by using material from another kosher shofar.

Overlaying the mouthpiece with gold invalidates the shofar, because that puts an intervening substance between the mouth of the baal teki'ah and the shofar, meaning that he is not blowing the shofar itself. Even an overlay, such as gold or silver, on the external surface of a shofar invalidates the shofar if it modifies its sound.

On the other hand, there is no halachic problem with shaping the mouthpiece to whichever shape is comfortable to blow, provided one reshapes the shofar's natural horn material and doesn't add other material to coat it. In fact, a shofar's mouthpiece is always created by opening a hole where the horn is naturally closed.

Buff and polish

The next step in the processing of a shofar is to sand, buff, and polish the exterior of the shofar. Sometimes a lacquer is added to give it a nice sheen. According to all sources I spoke to, the lacquer doesn't modify the sound in a discernible way, so it does not invalidate the shofar.

Still, a shofar can be rendered unkosher if a hole is created during the manufacturing process (other than the hole for the mouthpiece). When that happens, the status of the shofar becomes a whole new story.

Hold the Super Glue

This article is not long enough to cover all the details of opinions concerning a shofar that is cracked or has a hole. Instead, I will summarize briefly those opinions:

(1) The most stringent opinion contends that any lengthwise crack in the shofar requires repair.

(2) The moderate opinion rules that any crack more than half the shofar's length requires repair.

(3) The most lenient opinion states that one may ignore a crack that is less than the full length of the shofar.

Assuming that a cracked shofar is invalid until it is mended, does it make a difference how the crack is repaired?

There is a dispute among early authorities as to whether the shofar will be kosher if repaired by gluing it together. Some, such as the Ramban, contend that since coating the inside of the shofar with foreign material invalidates it, gluing a hole in a shofar with a foreign substance also invalidates it. Those who advocate this approach contend that the only way to repair a cracked shofar is by heating the horn at the point of damage until the horn is welded together.

The Rosh disagrees with this approach, contending that there is a difference between plating a shofar with foreign material — which means that one is in essence combining a non-shofar material with the shofar — and glue, which becomes totally inconspicuous in the finished product. Although the halachah follows this last opinion, one should rely on this only if the crack did not affect the sound of the shofar and if the crack is not so big that the glue is obvious. Otherwise, one will be required to weld the horn as described above, so that the shofar is repaired with shofar material.

Herein then lies an issue. If we need to be concerned about the possibility that the shofar was cracked, do we need a guarantee that it was repaired by welding and not by gluing?

If we do, we have a problem. There is no reason to assume that a non-Jewish, nonobservant, or unknowledgeable shofar crafter would repair itby welding. To compound the concern, shofaros made for sale are always polished to provide the beautiful, but unnatural, sheen that the customer expects to see on his shofar. This polish may mask any damage and repair that was made when the shofar developed a crack; only a highly trained expert might be able to notice such a repair.

Unfortunately, few shofar crafters are that halachically concerned. The assumption is, therefore, that most shofar makers would simply take an acrylic or similar glue and fill the hole. Therefore, enter the potential need for a more reliable hechsher. We will return to this question later.

Holey Shofaros!

Another potential problem is if a hole was inadvertently made in the shofar during the drilling process. The Mishnah states: If a shofar has a hole in it that was subsequently plugged, if "it" affects the sound, then the shofar is invalid, and if not, the shofar is valid.

There are three critical questions here that impact on our discussion:

(1) Does the Mishnah mean that the shofar is invalid because it has a hole? Or is the shofar invalid because the hole was plugged, but the hole itself is not a concern?

(2) Does it make any difference what material is used to plug the hole?

(3) What is the "it" that affects the sound? Does the Mishnah mean that the hole changed the sound of the shofar, or that the plugging changed the sound?

If the Mishnah means "because" the hole was plugged, the Mishnah is teaching that a shofar with a hole is kosher, and the plugging of the hole creates the problem.

But why might this be true? It seems counterintuitive that the hole in the shofar does not present a problem, but plugging it does.

The answer is that this opinion contends that any natural shofar sound is kosher — even if the shofar has a hole (Rosh, Tur). Although the air escaping through the hole may affect the sound the shofar produces, the sound produced is from the shofar and not from anything else. However, when the shofar's hole is plugged, the sound is now partially produced by the plug. Therefore, this opinion rules that a plugged shofar is no longer kosher if it produces a different sound from what it produced before the shofar was plugged.

As a matter of fact, this is the way the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 586:7) actually rules. Following his approach, if a shofar develops a hole, it is best to do nothing to the shofar, since the unplugged hole allows the shofar to be perfectly kosher.

Although this solution is halachically acceptable according to many authorities, it does not provide us with a practical solution. A shofar manufacturer will not leave a hole in a shofar because customers won't purchase such a shofar. In other words, customers want a holy shofar, not a holey one.

In addition, not all authorities accept this understanding of the Mishnah. The Rambam, in his Commentary to the Mishnah, rules that a shofar with a hole is not kosher; the Biur Halachah (586:7 s.v. Sh'ein) notes several other rishonim who agree with this conclusion. The Rema (Orach Chayim 586:7) concludes that one should not use such a shofar unless he has no other.

At this point, we should address a second question: The Mishnah states that a shofar with a plugged hole is not kosher. Does it make a difference which material plugs the hole?

The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 27b) quotes a dispute between the Tanna Kamma and Rabbi Nosson whether the Mishnah's plugged shofar is invalid regardless of what one used to plug it, or only if it was plugged with non-shofar material. Rabbi Nosson contends that a shofar repaired with shofar material remains kosher even though its sound changed. The Tanna Kamma disagrees, contending that regardless of whether the hole was plugged with shofar material or with non-shofar material, the shofar is invalid if its sound changed. Most rishonim rule according to Rabbi Nosson, which means that a "holey" shofar subsequently plugged with pieces of shofar is kosher.

We've now come to a third question: Does the Mishnah mean that the hole changed the sound of the shofar, or that the plugging changed the sound? According to the Rambam (Hilchos Shofar 1:5), a shofar with a plugged hole is kosher only if it sounds the same after the repair as it did before the hole developed and was repaired. If the shofar sounds different after the repair, the shofar is invalid. It is also invalid if the repair was with non-shofar material, even when the repaired shofar sounds identical to how it sounded before the damage. The Rosh, on the other hand, rules that the shofar is kosher if it sounds the same after the repair, even if it was repaired with non-shofar material. It is also kosher if it was repaired with shofar material, even if the sound changed as a result.

This dispute is mentioned in Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 586:7), who rules, like the Rambam, that one may not use a shofar plugged with non-shofar material, unless there is no other shofar available.

Do We Need To Worry?

Halachah makes a general assumption that there is no need to be concerned about a problem that is unusual. Do shofar cracks fall into this category? Just how frequently does a shofar develop a hole during its production?

Since no one has conducted a survey on the subject, and it would be almost impossible to perform one, we cannot answer this question definitively. A friend of mine who has attempted to visit shofar factories tells me that they usually do not allow visitors, and are probably not likely to reveal the type of information we are asking. We certainly do not know the track records of the Arab craftsmen, nor those of the shofaros made in China.

Despite this lack of information, I think we can assume that, since the people making shofaros are indeed craftsmen, and since it is highly disadvantageous to drill an extra hole while cleaning out the horn, the majority of shofaros are made without creating unwanted holes during the processing.

Thus, technically speaking, a shofar might not require a hechsher to guarantee that a hole did not develop in the shofar during its manufacture. However, is there a simple way to ascertain that the shofar you purchase was not damaged during the manufacturing process?

Some rabbanim do provide a "hechsher" for the manufacturer, stating that he is a halachah-abiding Jew who would not sell a shofar that has developed a crack or hole in the course of production.

What might the concerned manufacturer do when a shofar develops a hole? I asked this question of a particular manufacturer, and was told that he sells the damaged, rough shofar to a non-Jewish manufacturer. Many shofaros are sold to non-Jews who have a Biblical interest in blowing them. (I had hoped that the plastic variety mentioned above is also marketed exclusively to the same audience. However, I subsequently discovered otherwise, much to my chagrin.)

Unfortunately, most shofar manufacturers do not meet this standard. Although the person who began the business usually was an observant Jew, who may have been knowledgeable enough to merit this hechsher, often, the current business operators are not very observant. Therefore, a hechsher on the manufacture may have limited value, unless it is issued by a well-known rav.

There is yet another kind of hechsher, which has a different standard. In this case, the distributor or store interested in selling a particular shofar has it checked by a highly skilled rav or mashgiach who knows how to check a shofar for signs of damage or repair. A shofar that shows such signs is rejected.

Does a hechsher add significantly to the price of the shofar? The answer is that it does not. In some instances, the hechsher adds a small, non-significant premium to the price of the shofar — but the price is almost always primarily linked to its size and the particular retailer's markup.

So what would I do if I wanted to buy a shofar for Rosh Hashanah? I would either ask for a hechsher that meets the last standard mentioned or, alternatively, ask for

a letter from a known rav verifying that he knows that the manufacturer of this shofar is a halachah-abiding and knowledgeable Jew.

Outwitting the Satan

The shofar is blown to remind us of many things, including a wakeup call to do teshuvah and/or to herald Moshiach. The Gemara explains that the repeated blowing of the shofar — that is, both before the Shemoneh Esrei and then again afterward — is in order to confuse the Satan and to prevent him from prosecuting us (Rosh Hashanah 16b). This is surprising. Is the Satan so easily fooled? Most of us have firsthand experience with the Satan, and have found him to be extremely clever. Does he not remember that we pulled the same prank on him in previous years, when we blew the shofar twice?

Tosafos explains the Gemara on a deeper level. The Satan is constantly afraid that Mashiach will come and put him out of business. Therefore, every time the shofar blows, the Satan leaps up, terrified that Mashiach has come, and forgets to prosecute us! Then he realizes, too late, that it is just Rosh Hashanah again. By that time, Hashem has reached our verdict without the Satan's input.

How nice it would be if we would sit on the edge of our chairs waiting for Mashiach with the same intensity as the Satan!

לע"נ
שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה

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THE TANACH STUDY CENTER www.tanach.org
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Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

****

for ROSH HASHANA shiur

To our surprise, the holiday that we call **Rosh Hashana** is never referred to as such in Chumash! In fact, Chumash tells us very little about this holiday that we are told to celebrate on the 'first day of the **seventh** month' (see Vayikra 23:23).

So how do we know that this day is indeed a 'day of judgment'?

And why should this day mark the beginning of a 'new year'?

In the following shiur, we attempt to answer these fundamental questions from within Chumash itself.

INTRODUCTION

The laws of **Rosh Hashana** are discussed only twice in Chumash, once in Parshat Emor (Vayikra 23:23-25), and once in Parshat Pinchas (Bamidbar 29:1-6). Therefore, we must begin our shiur by taking a quick look at these two sources, noting how scant the Torah's detail of this holiday appears to be:

1) In Parshat Emor -
> "On the **seventh** month, on the first day of that month, you shall have a shabbaton [a day of rest], **zichron tru'a**, mikra kodesh [a day set aside for gathering], do not work, and you shall bring an offering to God" (Vayikra 23:23-5).

2) In Parshat Pinchas -
> "On the **seventh** month, on the first day of that month, observe a 'mikra kodesh', do no work, it shall be for you a **yom tru'a**..." (Bamidbar 29:1-6).

Note that Chumash never refers to this holiday as Rosh Hashana! Instead, we are told to make a holiday on the first day of the **seventh** month [that's closer to '**mid**-year' than '**new**-year'].

Furthermore, the Torah never tells us **why** this day is chosen. Instead, we are instructed to sound a **tru'a** [yom tru'a], or to remember a **tru'a** [zichron tru'a], but it is not clear at all precisely what these phrases - yom tru'a and zichron tru'a - imply.

> [Note that the Torah provides reasons for all of the other holidays, either explicitly: chag ha-matzot is to remember Yetziat Mitzrayim, shavuot for the grain harvest ('chag ha-katzir') and Sukkot for the fruit harvest ('chag ha-asif'); or implicitly - Yom Kippur for it marks the day on which Moshe Rabbeinu came down from Har Sinai with the second Luchot & God's **midot ha-rachamim**" (based on the three groups of 40 days in the account of those events in Sefer Devarim chapter 9).]

Finally, nowhere in these psukim in Parshat Emor or in Parshat Pinchas do we find even a hint that this day should be considered a 'day of judgment'.

So what's going on? How does this enigmatic biblical holiday become the **Rosh Hashana** that we are all so familiar with?

To answer this question, we must explore other sources in the Bible where these very same topics are mentioned, namely:

A) the cycle of the agricultural year in Chumash, and
B) the biblical meaning of the phrases:
"**yom tru'a**" & "**zicharon"**

TISHREI - NOT THE 'JEWISH' NEW YEAR

To understand what is special about the seventh month, we must return to the two parshiot of the chagim in Chumash, i.e. Parshat Emor (Vayikra chapter 23) and Parshat Pinchas (Bamidbar chapters 28->29).

First, quickly review the internal progression of each of these two units, noting how they both list the entire set of holidays - in an order that begins in the spring. Most likely, this 'spring start' is based on God's earlier command in Parshat Ha'Chodesh to count the months from the first month of **spring** - corresponding to our redemption from Egypt. [See Shmot 12:1-2; 13:2-3 & 23:15.]

Hence, there seems to be every reason in Chumash to consider **Nissan** as the **Jewish** New Year, and not Tishrei! What then is special about the **seventh** month, and why do we refer to it as Rosh Hashana?

> [Even though it is commonly assumed that the first of Tishrei marks the anniversary of the creation of the world, this specific point is a controversy in the Talmud between R. Eliezer (created in Tishrei) and R. Yehoshua (created in Nissan). [See Mesechet Rosh Hashana 11a]
>
> According to R. Yehoshua who claims that the world was created in Nissan and not in Tishrei, could it be that there is nothing special about this day? Furthermore, even according to R. Eliezer, why should the anniversary of the Creation provoke a yearly 'Day of Judgment'? In any case, Chumash never states explicitly that the Creation began in Tishrei.]

To answer this question, we must take into consideration the basic cycle of the agricultural year in the Land of Israel.

THE END OF THE AGRICULTURAL YEAR

In addition to the biblical year that begins in Nissan (see Shmot 12:1-2), we find another 'calendar' in Chumash, which relates to the agricultural cycle of the year. Take for example the Torah's first mention of the holiday of Sukkot, noting how it explicitly states that **Sukkot** falls out at the **end** of the year:

> "Three times a year celebrate for Me... and the 'gathering holiday' [**chag ha-asif**], when the year goes out [be-**tzeit ha-shana**], when you gather your produce from the Land..." (see Shmot 23:14-17).

From this pasuk we can infer that Chumash takes for granted that we are aware of a 'year' that 'goes out' when we gather our fruits. If this 'agricultural' year 'goes out' when the produce is harvested, then it must begin when the fields are first sown (in the autumn).

When Sukkot is described in greater detail (in Parshat Emor), we find the precise 'lunar' date for this 'gathering' holiday:

> "On the 15th day of the **seventh** month, when you **gather the produce** of your Land, you shall observe a holiday for seven days..." (see Vayikra 23:39).

From these two sources it becomes clear that Chumash assumes that there is an 'agricultural year' that ends in Tishrei.

This assumption is confirmed when we examine yet another agricultural mitzva that requires a defined yearly cycle - the laws of **shmitta** [the sabbatical year].

In Parshat Behar the Torah describes a cycle of six years when we work the land, and the seventh year of rest (see 25:1-7). Clearly, this implies that there must be a certain date when the year of this **shmitta** cycle begins. And sure enough, the Torah informs us of this date when it describes immediately afterward the laws of the **yovel** [Jubilee] year, celebrated after each seven **shmitta** cycles:

> "And you shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, and then you shall sound a **shofar** tru'a on the **seventh** month, on the tenth of the month..." (see Vayikra 25:8-9)

Here we are told explicitly that the years of the **shmitta** cycle begin in the **seventh** month.

> [One could assume that the year actually begins on the first of Tishrei, but on the yovel year we wait until Yom Kippur to make the 'official declaration'. This may be for a thematic reason as well, for on yovel land returns to its original owners & we annul all debts, etc. [like starting over with a clean slate]. Therefore, we pronounce yovel on Yom Kippur, at the same time when we ask God to annul our sins.]

Finally, the mitzva of **hakhel** (see Devarim 31:10-12) provides conclusive proof that the year of the **shmitta** cycle begins in Tishrei. We are commanded to conduct the **hakhel** ceremony 'be-mo'ed shnat ha-shmitta be-chag ha-Sukkot' - at the appointed [or gathering] time of **shmitta** (i.e. the time of year when cycle increments) on Sukkot. This clearly implies that the **shmitta** cycle increments in Tishrei.

THE BEGINNING OF THE AGRICULTURAL YEAR

In addition to the above sources that assume the existence of an 'agricultural year' that ends in Tishrei, another source in Chumash informs us more precisely when this agricultural year begins. In fact, this source is the **only** time in Chumash where we find an explicit mention of the word '**rosh'** in relation to the beginning of a year!

In Parshat Ekev, the Torah explains how farming in the 'land of Israel' differs from farming in the 'land of Egypt' (see Devarim 11:10-12). Unlike Egypt, which enjoys a constant supply of water from the Nile River, the Land of Israel is dependent on 'matar' (rain) for its water supply. Hence, the farmer in the land of Israel must depend one the rainfall for his prosperity. But that rainfall itself, Chumash explains, is a direct function of God's 'hashgacha' [providence]. In this context (i.e. in relation to the rainfall in the land of Israel), we learn that:

> "It is a Land which your Lord looks after, God's 'eyes' constantly look after it - mi-**reishit shana** - from the **beginning** of the year - until the end of the year" (11:12).
>
> [Recall that in the land of Israel it only rains between Sukkot and Pesach, hence the cycle begins in Tishrei.]

Here, God assures Am Yisrael that He will look after the 'agricultural' needs of our Land by making sure that it will receive the necessary rainfall. To prove this interpretation we simply need to read the following parshia (which just so happens to be the second parsha of daily 'kriyat shma'):

> "[Hence,] should you keep the mitzvot... then I will give the **rain** to your land at the proper time... [but] be careful, should you transgress... then I hold back the heavens, and there will be no **rain**... (see Devarim 11:13-16!).

In this context, the phrase 'reishit shana' in 11:12 implies the beginning of the rainy season. Hence, the biblical agricultural year begins with the rainy season in the fall - **reishit ha-shana** - i.e. the **new** (agricultural) **year**.

A CRITICAL TIME

But specifically in the land of Israel this time of year is quite significant, for in Israel it only rains during the autumn and winter months. Therefore, farmers must plow and sow their fields during those months in order to catch the winter rain. In fact, the rainfall during the months of Cheshvan & Kislev is most critical, for the newly sown fields require large amounts of water. If it doesn't rain in the late autumn / early winter, there will be nothing to harvest in the spring or summer.

> [Note that in Masechet Ta'anit (see chapters 1 and 2) we learn that if the rain is not sufficient by mid-Kislev, a series of 'fast-days' are proclaimed when special prayers for rain are added, including a set of tefillot almost identical to those of Rosh Hashana (see II.2-3). This may explain why Seder Moed places Masechet Rosh Hashana before Masechet Ta'anit, rather than placing it before Yoma (where it would seem to belong)!]

From this perspective, the fate of the produce of the forthcoming agricultural year is primarily dependent on the rainfall during the early winter months. Should the rainfall be insufficient, not only will there not be enough water to drink, the crops will not grow! [See Masechet Rosh Hashana 16a!] A shortage of rain can lead not only to drought, but also to famine, and disease throughout the months of the spring and summer. Furthermore, a food shortage is likely to lead to an outbreak of war between nations fighting over the meager available resources.

Consequently, it may appear to man as though nature itself, i.e. via the early rainy season, determines 'who will live' and 'who will die', who by thirst and who by famine, who by war and who by disease...'. [from the 'netaneh tokef' tefilla on Rosh Hashana]

NATURE OR GOD?

Even though it may appear to man that nature, or more specifically - the rain - will determine the fate of the forthcoming agricultural year, Chumash obviously cannot accept this conclusion. As we discussed (or will discuss) in our shiur on Parshat Breishit, a primary theme in Chumash is that the creation of nature was a willful act of God, and He continues to oversee it. Although it may appear to man as though nature works independently, it is incumbent upon him to recognize that it is God, and **not** nature, who determines his fate.

Therefore, in anticipation of the rainy season (which begins in the autumn) and its effect on the fate of the entire year, the Torah commands Bnei Yisrael to set aside a 'mikra kodesh' - a special gathering - in the **seventh month** in order that we gather to declare God's kingdom over all Creation. In doing so, we remind ourselves that it is He who determines our fate, based on our deeds, as explained in Parshat Ekev (see Devarim 11:10-19).

Now that we have established why the **seventh** month should be considered the beginning of a **new year**, i.e. the new agricultural year, we must now explain why the Torah chooses specifically the **first** day of this month to mark this occasion.

THE OVERLAP

Based on the Torah's definition of **Sukkot** as 'be-tzeit ha-shana' (the end of the year / see Shmot 23:16), it would seem more logical to consider **Shmini Atzeret** - which falls out immediately after Sukkot - as the first day of the New Year. After all, it is not by chance that Chazal instituted 'tefillat geshem' - the special prayer for rain - on this day. Why does the Torah command us to gather specifically on the **first** day of this **seventh** month, before the previous year is over?

One could suggest very simply that an overlap exists, as the new agricultural year begins (on the first day of the seventh month) before the previous year ends. However, if we examine **all** of the holidays of the **seventh** month, a more complex picture emerges.

A SPECIAL MONTH

Note that in Parshat Emor and Parshat Pinchas, we find four different holidays that are to be observed in the seventh month:

> On the first day - a **Yom tru'a**
>
> On the 10th day - **Yom Ha-kippurim**
>
> On the 15th day - **'Chag Sukkot** for seven days
>
> On the 22nd day - an '**Atzeret**'
>
> [Note how all these holidays are connected by the Torah's conspicuous use of the word '**ach**' in 23:27 & 23:39.]

Why are there so many holidays in the **seventh** month? For Sukkot, the Torah provides an explicit reason: it marks the end of the summer fruit harvest [**chag ha-asif**]. However, no explicit reason is given for the celebration of any of the others holidays on these specific dates. Nonetheless, based on our above explanation concerning the biblical importance of the forthcoming rainy season, one could suggest that **all** of the Tishrei holidays relate in one manner or other to the yearly agricultural cycle that begins in the **seventh** month.

More conclusive proof of an intrinsic connection between these three holidays of the **seventh month** - Yom Tru'a, Yom Kippurim, and Shmini Atzeret - can be deduced from their identical and unique korban mussaf, as detailed in Parshat Pinchas. Unlike any other holiday, on each of these holidays we offer an additional **ola** of 'one bull, one ram, and seven sheep' for the mussaf offering.

[See Bamidbar chapter 29, note that no other korban has this same korban mussaf. See TSC shiur on Pinchas. See also further iyun section in regard to the double nature of the mussaf of Sukkot, which may actually include this offering as well.]

But why are three holidays necessary to inaugurate the New Year?

One could suggest that each holiday relates to a different aspect of the anticipation of the forthcoming agricultural year. In this week's shiur, we discuss the meaning of **yom tru'a**, which we are commanded to observe on the **first** day of this month. In the shiurim to follow, we will discuss Yom Kippur and Shmini Atzeret.

YOM TRU'A

As we explained in our introduction, according to Chumash the only unique mitzva of this holiday is that we are commanded to make a **yom tru'a** according to Parshat Pinchas (Bamidbar 29:2), or a **zichron tru'a** according to Parshat Emor (Vayikra 23:24).

Each of these two phrases requires explanation. Why would 'sounding a **tru'a**' have any connection to the beginning of the rainy season? Likewise, what does "zichron tru'a" imply?

YOM TRU'A IN THE BIBLE

To understand these phrases, we must consider how a **shofar** was used in biblical times.

Today, a **shofar** is considered a religious artifact. If you are shopping for a shofar, you would inquire at your local "seforim" store or possibly a Judaica shop [or search the internet].

However, in Biblical times, its use was quite different. Back then, if you were shopping for a shofar, you would have most probably gone to your local 'arms dealer' - for the shofar was used primarily in war, as a shofar was used by military commanders and officers to communicate with their troops.

[See for example the story of Gideon and his 300 men, each one sounding a shofar to make the enemy think that there are 300 commanders, and hence thousands of soldiers / see Shoftim 7:16-20.]

Similarly, civil defense personnel used the shofar to warn civilians of enemy attack and to mobilize the army. [See Amos 3:6 & Tzefania 1:16.]

Now, there are two basic types of 'notes' that the **shofar** blower uses:

1) a **teki'a** - a long steady note (like DC current);
2) a **tru'a** - a oscillating short note (like AC current).

Usually, a **teki'a** long steady sound was used to signal an 'all clear' situation, while the oscillating **tru'a** signal warned of imminent danger (like a siren sound today). This distinction between a **teki'a** & **tru'a** is easily deduced from the mitzva of the 'chatzotzrot' (trumpets) explained in Parshat Beha'alotcha (see 10:1-10 / highly suggested that you read these psukim inside). According to that parsha, the teki'a was the signal for gathering the camp for happy occasions (see 10:3-4,7,10), while the tru'a was used as a signal to prepare for travel in military formation and war (see 10:5-6,9).

[Note, both a 'shvarim' and 'tru'a' are examples of **tru'a** (AC). The difference between them is simply an issue of frequency / 3 per second, or 9 per second.]

Hence, in biblical times, if someone heard a **shofar** sounding a **tru'a**, his instinctive reaction would have been fear, preparation for war, and/or impending danger. [Sort of like hearing sirens today.]

Elsewhere in Tanach, we find many examples. The prophet Tzfania, for example, uses the phrase 'yom **shofar** u-**tru'a'** to describe a day of terrible war and destruction. Tzfania's opening prophecy speaks of the forthcoming 'yom Hashem', a day in which God will punish all those who had left Him. Note how the following psukim relate **shofar** & **tru'a** to God's providence ['hashgacha']:

"At that time ('yom Hashem') I will search Yerushalayim
with candles and I will punish ('u-pakadeti') the men...
who say to themselves 'God does not reward nor does He punish..."
The great day of the Lord is approaching...
it is bitter, there a warrior shrieks.
That day shall be a day of wrath,
a day of trouble and distress ('tzara u-metzuka'),
a day of calamity and desolation....,
"**yom shofar u-tru'a** ..."
a day of blowing a shofar and tru'a..."
(see Tzfania 1:12-16).

Here, 'yom **shofar** u-**tru'a**' clearly implies a day of imminent danger and war - a day in when God enacts judgment on those who have sinned. [See also Yoel 2:1-3,11-14 & 2:15-17!]

The strongest proof that the sound of a shofar would cause intuitive fear is from Amos:

"Should a shofar be sounded in the city, would the people not become fearful?!" (see Amos 3:6).

With this background, we can return to Parshat Pinchas. The Torah instructs us to make a **yom tru'a** on the first day of the seventh month (29:1-2). Obviously, the Torah does not expect us to go to war on this day; however, we are commanded on this day to create an atmosphere that simulates the tension and fear of war. By creating this atmosphere in anticipation of the new agricultural year that is about to begin, we show God our belief that its fate - and hence our fate, is in His hands (and not nature's).

Therefore, to create this atmosphere of a 'day of judgment', to help us feel that our lives are truly 'on the line' - in God's Hands, the Torah commands us to sound a tru'a with the shofar.

ZICHRON TRU'A

Now we must explain the phrase **zichron tru'a**, which is used to describe this holiday in Parshat Emor. The key to understanding this phrase lies in the same psukim mentioned above concerning the chatzrotrot. There, we find the link between tru'a, war, and zika'ron:

"Ve-ki tavo'u milchama be-artzechem... va-**harei'otem** be-chatzotzrot, ve-**nizkartem** lifnei Hashem Elokeichem..." -
When war takes place in your land... you should sound a **tru'a** with your trumpets that you will be **remembered** by (and/or that you will **remember**...) Hashem, and He will save you from your enemies" (see Bamidbar 10:8-9).

Here we find a special mitzva to sound a **tru'a** prior to, and in **anticipation** of, impending battle. To show our belief that the outcome of that battle is in God's Hands, and not in hands of our enemy, we are commanded to sound a **tru'a**. Obviously, it was not the tru'a itself that saves Bnei Yisrael, rather our recognition that the ultimate fate of the battle is in God's Hands.

We can apply this same analogy from war to agriculture. Just as the Torah commands us to sound a **tru'a** in anticipation of war - to remember that its outcome is in God's Hand; so too we are commanded to sound a **tru'a** on the first of Tishrei in anticipation of the forthcoming agricultural year - to remind ourselves that its outcome is in God's Hand as well.

Therefore, Rosh Hashana is not only a yom tru'a - a day of awe on which our lives are judged, but Chumash defines it as a day of zichron tru'a - a day on which we must sound the tru'a so that we will remember our God, in order that He will remember us. On this day, we must proclaim His kingdom over all mankind in recognition of His mastery over nature and our destiny.

In summary, we have shown how the most basic aspects of Rosh Hashana, which at first appeared to be totally missing from Chumash, can be uncovered by undertaking a comprehensive study of the biblical importance of the seventh month. Obviously,

our observance of Rosh Hashana is only complete when we include all of its laws that have been passed down through **Torah she-ba'al peh** (the Oral Law). However, we can enhance our appreciation of this holiday by studying its sources in **Torah she-bichtav** (the Written Law) as well.

In today's modern society, it is difficult to appreciate the importance of an agricultural year. Rarely do we need to worry about our water supply and other most basic needs. Nevertheless, especially in the Land of Israel, we are faced with other serious national dangers such as war and terror. Even though we must take every precaution necessary against these dangers, the basic principle of the above shiur still applies, that we must recognize that the ultimate fate of the forthcoming year is in God's Hands, and that He will judge us based on our deeds.

Even though all the nations are judged on this awesome day, Am Yisrael's custom is to sound the **tru'a** specifically with the shofar of an **ayil** (a ram), a symbol of 'akeidat Yitzchak' - a reminder to the Almighty of our devotion and readiness to serve Him.

With this shofar, together with our tefillot, our heritage, and our resolve to conduct our lives as an 'am kadosh' should, we pray that God should not judge us like any other nation, rather as His special Nation.

shana tova,
ve-ketiva ve-chatima tova,
menachem

==========

FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. In Chodesh Tishrei, the 'seventh' month, we find many chagim that relate to nature, especially the 'seven' days of Sukkot marking the culmination of the harvest season of the previous year. We also find three days of 'Judgement', Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur, and Shmini Atzeret.

1. Compare the korban mussaf of each of these three chagim. (one par, one ayil, seven kvasim and one se'ir le-chatat).
2. In what way are these chagim connected?
3. According to Chazal, when are we judged for water? How does this relate to the above shiur?
4. Relate this to the tefilla of the kohen gadol on Yom Kippur! (it's in your machzor at the end of seder avoda)

B. Why does Hashem need Am Yisrael to proclaim him king? The one thing Hashem, ki-vyachol, can **not** do, is make Himself king. A kingdom is meaningless if there are no subjects. A king becomes king when and because he is accepted by his subjects. Similarly, only when God is accepted and recognized by man does He become Melech.

1. Relate this to our davening on Rosh Hashana.
2 Explain changing 'E-l HaKadosh' to 'Melech Hakadosh' according to this concept.

C. The Jewish New Year, the New Year special and unique to Am Yisrael is actually Nissan - Ha-chodesh ha-zeh lachem rosh chodashim rishon hu lachem le-chodshei ha-shana (Shmot perek 12/v1-2). Yetziat Mitzrayim which took place in Nissan marks the birth of the Jewish Nation.

1. What aspects of Pesach and Chag HaMatzot emphasize that we are a special nation, different from other nations.
2. What aspect of the chagim in Tishrei relate to all mankind. (Note 70 parim on Sukkot etc. - see also Zecharya chap 14)

D. In the shiur of the '13 midot' you may recall our explanation that Hashem's hashgacha over Am Yisrael after brit Sinai was broken due to chet ha-egel and defaulted to 'u-veyom pokdi u-pukadti' (Shmot 32:34). As opposed to immediate punishment, God will punish them from time to time, allowing for good deeds to balance out the bad deeds. In the manner, Bnei Yisrael would be judged no different from other nations. Note the Ibn Ezra on that pasuk - there he explains - 'from Rosh Hashana to Rosh Hashana'!

1. Relate this peirush by the Ibn Ezra to the above shiur!

E. Note that from the story of the flood in Parshat Noach, we could also deduce the year begins in Tishrei, i.e. according to the agricultural year. The heavy rains of the flood began to fall on the 17th day of the **second** month, which would correspond to Cheshvan. (See Breishit 7:11.) However, this specific point is a controversy among the commentators.

Avraham and the Day of Judgement: An Analysis of the Torah Readings for Rosh HaShanah

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. THE TANNAIM: TWO OPINIONS

The Mishnah (3rd or 4th chapter of Megillah – depending on which version you are looking at) lists the special Torah readings for each of the holidays and unique days during the year. Regarding Rosh haShanah, the Mishnah states:

"On Rosh haShanah, we read "And on the seventh month, on the first of the month…" (Vayyikra 23:24 ff.)"

The Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) cites a second Tannaitic opinion as to what should be read on that day (at this time, there was still only one day of Rosh haShanah):

On Rosh haShanah, we read "In the seventh month" (Vayyikra 23)…"others" say [we read] "and God remember Sarah" (B'resheet 21)… (BT Megillah 31a)

The second alternative – to read about the story of Sarah's miraculous birth at the age of 90 – is a bit disarming of a choice. All of the other "special" readings focus around either the laws pertaining to that day (e.g. the Sukkot readings focus on the offerings of each day, as well as the full treatment of the calendar) or of an explicit historical reference (e.g. Pesach and the Exodus story).

What connection is there between the story of Sarah's birthing Yitzchak at an advanced age and the "Day of Remembrance" (Rosh haShanah)?

The conventional understanding is that the Sarah association is based on the Gemara in Rosh haShanah (11a), which states that both Sarah and Hannah were "remembered" on Rosh haShanah. (see, e.g., commentary of Ran to Megillah ad loc.)

There are, however, several problems with this explanation – as will become clear when we look into the Gemara to discover the roots of our practice vis-a-vis the Torah reading on the two days of Rosh haShanah.

II. THE GEMARA: THE "TWO DAYS" SOLUTION

The Gemara, in assessing how to "resolve" these two opinions, makes a startling statement. We would normally expect the Gemara to "compromise" and assign each of the readings to one of the days – let "the seventh month" reading take place on the first day and "God remembered Sarah" take place on the second day (or vice-versa).
This is, by the way, exactly how the Gemara (ibid) resolved a dispute regarding the reading on Shavuot – now that there are two days (outside of Israel), we "fulfill" one opinion on the first day, and the other on the second day.

Regarding Rosh haShanah, however, the Gemara does not take this "path of compromise":

Now that there are two days, on the first day we follow the "others", on the next day, "And God tested Avraham…" (B'resheet 22)

Where did the "Akedah" (binding of Yitzchak) story come from? Why is it suddenly introduced into the range of possible readings here?

Keep in mind that the first two opinions were rendered by Tannaim – and it is highly unlikely and somewhat enigmatic for the Gemara to "overrule" a Tanna, especially when both opinions could have been maintained!

Besides the difficulty with this Gemara, there is an additional problem with the "God remembered Sarah" reading, based on the way that we practice.

The text of the Sarah-Yitzchak-Hagar-Yishma'el story is 21 verses long – which is enough for a complete reading, even if Rosh haShanah falls on Shabbat. Why then do we read the rest of Chapter 21 (vv. 22-34), detailing the covenant between Avraham and Avimelekh? What relevance does that story carry for Rosh haShanah?

To sum up:

We have two questions about the reading on Rosh haShanah:

a) Why is the Tanna's opinion ignored in favor of the "Akedah" story?

b) Why is the Avraham-Avimelekh story also read?

To this, we could add a third question:

c) What is the significance of the Akedah story to Rosh haShanah? (keep in mind that according to the Midrash, that terrifying event took place on the date that would eventually be Pesach – in the spring – and not in the fall).

Regarding this final question, there is no question that the ram, brought in place of Yitzchak, is associated with Rosh haShanah (the Shofar) – but, again, is that enough to justify "overruling" the first Tanna (and the only opinion cited in our Mishnah) as regards the reading?

III. REEVALUATING THE "OTHER'S" OPINION

We generally assume, as mentioned above, that the association between the story which begins with Sarah's miraculous conception and birth and Rosh haShanah lies at the beginning – in that she was "remembered" on Rosh haShanah. There is another way to understand the association – one that is not subject to the challenges raised above.

If we understand the second Tannaitic opinion ("others") as relating ONLY to the birth of Yitzchak – then, indeed, our questions stand. If, however, we understand the second opinion as relating to the entire narrative of the birth of Yitzchak, the covenant with Avimelekh and the culmination of Avraham's life – the Akedah, then we understand the "solution" of the Gemara:

The first opinion is that we read from Vayyikra – a Halakhic section which details the laws of special times in our calendar – including (among others) the day of Rosh haShanah. In other words, the focus of the reading should be similar to that on other holidays – the "practice" of the day.

The second opinion, contradistinctively, is concerned that we read a piece of narrative – (Chapters 21 and 22 of B'resheet – later on we will address the significance of these two chapters). In other words, this opinion maintains that the focus of the reading should be on the "experience" of the day (i.e. narrative), rather than the "practice" of the day (i.e. legislative).

The Gemara's solution was that, now that we have two days, we accept the second opinion and divide that reading into two parts – one for each day – so as to preserve the thematic continuity throughout the two-day holiday.

This already answers the first question – why the first Tanna's opinion was ignored. There was no solution of "one day this, the other that" such as the Gemara effects for Shavuot. On Rosh haShanah, there is a basic dispute as to whether the reading should be legastically-oriented (Vayyikra) or narrative-oriented (B'resheet). Once the Halakhah decided in favor of the second opinion – that reading was simply split into two parts.

Now, we have to address the other two questions, which can be combined into one mega-question: What is the relevance of these two chapters (and now, we have to include the story of Sarah's miraculous conception and birth) of B'resheet to Rosh haShanah?

IV. ROSH HASHANAH – THE INDIVIDUAL STANDS BEFORE GOD

Unlike the tenor of the rest of the holidays of Tishri – Yom haKippurim, Sukkot and Sh'mini Atzeret – Rosh haShanah seems to place the individual and his/her relationship with God at the core of the experience of the day. Even though we are crowning God, declaring Him to be King over "all that draw breath into their nostrils" (from the liturgy) – and this declaration is made as a community as well as by each individual – the sense of "judgment" which drives the day is focused on each person as he or she stands alone before the Creator.
Note the Mishnah's statement about the day:

On Rosh haShanah, they all pass before Him like "B'nei Maron" (Rosh haShanah 1:2; see the Gemara – Rosh haShanah 18a for the various interpretations of that phrase).

The Gemara explains that this means (regardless of what the phrase specifically depicts) that each person passes before God – to be judged – as an individual.

This is not the experience of Yom haKippurim, where, although each person confesses his sins before God in a private manner and does Teshuvah to the best of his ability, much of the focus of the day is on community (note the oft-repeated "Ki Anu Amekhah" which depicts the relationship between God and the Jewish people via various real-world analogues).

It is certainly not the same experience as Sukkot – where the focus is almost totally on the community (and the agricultural seasons). Rosh haShanah literally "stands alone" as a time for individual reflection, introspection and solitude – where the individual stands before God in judgment.

When we look through our history, we find that there was only one individual whose entire life calling approximated that which we experience on Rosh haShanah. Unlike Yitzchak, who was trained in the "way of God" by his father; unlike Ya'akov, who had two generations of righteousness and loyalty to God as a model, Avraham was the true trail-blazer of our national (pre-)history. In order for him to succeed at his mission, he not only had to "ignore" his father's lessons (and those of his kinfolk), he had to actively get up and leave the entire environs of his youth (and middle age) and follow God's directive to a "Land that I will show you". If there is anyone whose life is a model for the Rosh haShanah experience, it is Avraham Avinu.

This would help to explain an enigmatic phrase in the chapter of T'hillim which is recited 7 times before the blasting of the Shofar (Ps. 47):

“The great of the peoples are gathered together , the nation of the God of Avraham, for the guardians of the earth belong to God, He is greatly exalted.”

Why is God referred to as “the God of Avraham” in this chapter – which is otherwise devoted to God being crowned via the blast of the Shofar (see infra)?
Again – it is Avraham’s path of solitude and isolation which is the one we must attempt to walk through the Rosh haShanah experience – as will be explained below.

V. “ECHAD HAYAH AVRAHAM”

Although we will look at this in much greater detail in the upcoming shiurim on Sefer B’resheet (especially Parashat Lekh-L’kha and Parashat Vayera), a thumbnail sketch of Avraham’s life is in order.
Not only did Avraham have to leave his comfortable and familiar environs in order to receive God’s blessing – but the demand for repeated isolation and separation from loved ones was the hallmark of his life.

A brief chart will clarify this:

Chapter – Separation from…

12- Father’s house, birthplace, land

12- Sarai (see Ramban here – it’s fascinating!)

13- Lot

16- (temporarily) Hagar (carrying his seed)

20- Sarah (again!)

21- Hagar & Yishma’el

22- (almost) Yitzchak

As you can see, every step of his life was marked by separation from family – from parents, from his wife (four times, counting Hagar twice), from children (twice – and nearly a third time) and from his beloved nephew.

Note also that every one of these separations is accompanied by an increased blessing:

(see 12:2-3; 13:2; 13:14-18; 16:10; 17:5-8; 20:14-16; 21:20; 22:17-18).

In other words, it is when Avraham demonstrates this tragic heroism – the ability to leave everything near and dear for the sake of God and for His promise – that he succeeds.

We can now understand why a segment of the life of Avraham is appropriate to read on Rosh haShanah (the 11 chapters which make up the bulk of the “Avraham narrative” comprises too much text for the purpose). Why then this part – why Chapter 21 (the birth of Yitzchak, the exile of Hagar and Yishma’el and the covenant with Avimelekh) and Chapter 22 (the Akedah)?

VI. RASHBAM AND THE AKEDAH

In order to understand the particular relevance of this section of the narrative to Rosh haShanah., we turn to an ancillary question posed by the Rishonim on the first verse of Chapter 22:
It came to pass after these matters…

This introduction seems to indicate not only a juxtaposition in time between the (upcoming) Akedah and the events just mentioned (the covenant with Avimelekh) – but also a causal relationship. To wit, it seems that the covenant had something to do with the Akedah.

Rashbam (R. Sh’mu’el b. Me’ir, 12th century France) suggests that the Akedah was, indeed, a Divine (punitive) reaction to Avraham’s signing of the covenant. His reasoning is that since the land of P’leshet (present day Ashdod south to Azzah) is part of the Land which God promised to give him, God was angry at Avraham for signing a pact of mutual non-aggression (which is either unnecessary or makes it impossible to properly take the Land.) Rashbam suggests, based on the Midrash, that the reason that we were later unsuccessful in wresting that part of the Land from the P’lishtim was due to this earlier covenant.

I would like to suggest a slight variation on Rashbam’s approach – which will also support the rationale for reading specifically these three sub-narratives on Rosh haShanah.

Avraham’s entire path was to be tread on alone; since he was truly “The Lonely Man of Faith”. Every time that he tried to become attached to a family member, that loved one was (almost?) taken away – if not permanently, at least for a time.

Now that Avraham and Sarah had their own child (and God approved of sending Hagar and Yishma'el away), it seems that Avraham started "banking on" his future. Note the wording of the covenant with Avimelekh:

"Therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my grandchild…" (21:23 – these are Avimelekh's words). Since Avraham agreed to the oath, it seems clear that he (now) felt in a position to be able to make promises about the future and about future generations.

This led to the Divine response of the Akedah – "You think that Yitzchak is yours, is so surely going to be here that you can make covenants and oaths regarding his loyalties???" asks God,;

"Take your son, your only son, the one that you love….Yitzchak!" (22:2).

The inspiration to be found in these lessons is a microcosm – and the apex – of Avraham's spiritual adventure. When he finally gained the beloved son of his old age with Sarah, he immediately was called to exile his other, beloved son (see Rashi on 22:2); when he felt confident that he could pinpoint the one through whom God's promises would be realized, he made an agreement and projected that son's future. At that point, God called him to reject that future and to place all of his faith in God – not in allies, not in this son or the other – but only in God.

That lonely path, the one blazed for us by Avraham, is the one we must each walk when we face God on Yom haDin – the day of Judgment.

We are doubly blessed:

We have the reserves of Avraham's strength on which to draw to enable us to stand alone, if atremble, before the Throne on Remembrance Day.

Our second blessing is that we are not confined to that path; as we leave the path less taken and join the communal "celebration" of Yom haKippurim, approximating Yitzchak's offering – and then join the entire House of Ya'akov in the Sukkah (hint: B'resheet 33:17).

K'tivah VaHatimah Tovah to all of our Haverim

Holiday Reader of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals

By Rabbis Marc and Hayyim Angel
The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals
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Eyes Open, Eyes Shut: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Paul Gaugin, the famous 19th century French artist, commented: “When I want to see clearly, I shut my eyes.”

He was referring to two different ways of perceiving reality. With our eyes open, we see surface reality—size, shape, color etc. But with our eyes shut, we contemplate the context of things, our relationship to them, the hidden meanings.

With our eyes open, a dozen roses are 12 beautiful flowers. With our eyes shut, they may be full of memories and associations—roses given or received on our first date; roses at our wedding; roses growing in our childhood home's back yard; roses on our grandmother’s Shabbat table.

How we see fellow human beings is also very different with open or closed eyes. With our eyes open, we see their physical features. With our eyes shut, we remember shared experiences, friendships, happy and sad moments. When we want to see clearly—comprehensively—we shut our eyes.

Mircea Eliade, a specialist in world religions, has written in his book, The Sacred and The Profane, about the pagan view of New Year. For them, human life is a series of recurring cycles, always on the verge of chaos. On New Year, people descend into this primordial chaos: drunkenness, debauchery, chaotic noise.

The Jewish view is radically different. For Jews, reality isn’t a hopeless cycle of returns to chaos, but a progression, however slow, of humanity. Rosh Hashana is not a return to primeval chaos, but a return to God, a return to our basic selves. Our New Year is observed with prayer, repentance, solemnity, and a faith that we can—and the world can—be better.

The pagan New Year is an example of seeing reality with open eyes. Things really do seem to be chaotic when viewed on the surface. Humanity does not seem to improve over the generations. We always seem to be on the verge or self-destruction.

The Jewish New Year is an example of viewing reality with our eyes shut, of seeing things more deeply, more carefully. While being fully aware of the surface failings of humanity, we look for the hidden signs of progress and redemption. We attempt to maintain a grand, long-range vision. This is the key to the secret of Jewish optimism. While not denying the negatives around us, we stay faithful to a vision of a world that is not governed by chaos, but by a deeper, hidden, mysterious unity.

The problem of faith today is not how to have faith in God. We can come to terms with God if we are philosophers or mystics. The problem is how can we have faith in humanity? How can we believe in the goodness and truthfulness of human beings?

With our eyes open, we must view current events with despair and trepidation. We see leaders who are liars and hypocrites. We see wars and hatred and violence and vicious anti-Semitism. We are tempted to think that chaos reigns.

But with our eyes shut, we know that redemption will come. We know that there are good, heroic people struggling for change. We know that just as we have overcome sorrows in the past, we will overcome oppressions and oppressors of today.

Eyes open and eyes shut not only relate to our perception of external realities, but also to our self-understanding. During the season of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we focus on penitential prayers. We confess our sins and shortcomings. But as we think more deeply about our deficiencies, we also close our eyes and look for our real selves, our deeper selves, our dreams and aspirations.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, noted that the high holy day period is symbolized by the shofar. The shofar must be bent, as a reminder that we, too, must bow ourselves in contrition and humility. But shortly after Yom Kippur comes Succoth, with the lulav as a central symbol. The lulav must be straight, not bent over. The lulav teaches us to stand strong and tall, to focus on our strengths and virtues. The holiday season, then, encourages us to first experience humility and contrition; but then to move on to self-confidence and optimism. Our eyes are open to our shortcomings; but when we shut our eyes, we also can envision our strengths and potentialities.

Rosh Hashana reminds us to view our lives and our world with our eyes open—but also with our eyes shut. We are challenged to dream great dreams, to seek that which is hidden, to see beyond the moment.

Rosh Hashana is a call to each individual to move to a higher level of understanding, behavior and activism. Teshuva—repentance—means that we can improve ourselves, and that others can improve, and that the world can improve.

This is the key to Jewish optimism, the key to the Jewish revolutionary vision for humanity, the key to personal happiness.

Changing the Channel: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In his short story, “The Last Channel,” Italo Calvino portrays a man who has been deemed to be insane. When this man watched television, he kept clicking his remote control button without watching any program for more than a few seconds. At some point, he started to take the remote control panel outside his house. He clicked it at buildings, stores, banks, neon signs, and at people.

But this man claimed that he was not at all deranged. In his defense, he stated that he kept clicking the remote control button because he did not like what he saw! He was looking for the “true” program, a program without drivel and artificiality and hypocrisy. He asserted: “There is an unknown station transmitting a story that has to do with me, MY story, the only story that can explain to me who I am, where I come from and where I’m going.”

This man flashed the remote control button because he was looking for the “real” program, the “real” city, his “real” self. He wanted to turn off the chaos and senselessness around him and was certain that if he kept clicking the remote button he would at last find the “right” channel.

While the man in Calvino’s story seems to have crossed the line between sanity and insanity, his desire for self-understanding and for the perfection of the world were not insane at all. Don’t we all wish we had a remote control button that we could click and make everything right, find the “real” picture, the “real” world that makes sense to us. When we confront lies and hatred, violence and injustice, hedonism and meanness—wouldn’t it be nice to have a button to click to change the channel to a better picture?

In some ways, the shofar of Rosh Hashana serves as our remote control button! It evokes a world yet in progress, a vision rooted in antiquity, fixed in the present, and arching into the distant future. It alludes to a “real” world, a finer world.

The original shofar dates back to the story of the Akeidah, when Abraham was called upon to bind Isaac on a

sacrificial altar. The story teaches that God does not want child sacrifice. We are to demonstrate our faith not by murdering our children but by strengthening them in life. At the end of the episode, Abraham noticed a ram caught in the brambles by its horns. He offered the ram as a sacrifice in lieu of Isaac. The shofar blown on Rosh Hashana evokes memories of the Akeidah.

At the conclusion of the Akeidah narrative, the Torah informs us that Abraham and his retinue "rose up and went together to Be'er Sheva." Why is this detail provided? Why do we need to know where Abraham went after the Akeidah?

If we look at the passage just before the recounting of the Akeidah, we find that "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Be'er Sheva, and he called out there in the name of God Lord of the Universe." The Akeidah was a setting of trauma, terror, spiritual confusion. Such a crisis could have broken anyone. But Abraham clicked his remote control button. He went back to Be'er Sheva and reconfirmed his faith in God Lord of the Universe. He found inner serenity, the power to transcend the vicissitudes and trials of life. He clicked on to a better channel! When faced with overwhelming crisis, it is right and proper to return to our starting point, to our essential selves, to our rootedness in our faith. The shofar prods us to seek a firm and grand framework for life.

Just as the shofar harks back to the Akeidah story, it also reminds us of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. That dramatic occasion was accompanied by "thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the sound of a shofar exceedingly loud." The voice of God was heard by the trembling assembly. But we might ask: with all the thunder and lightning and voice of God, what need was there for the sound of a shofar?

The shofar's essential sound is a teruah. The Torah refers to Rosh Hashana as Yom Teruah. The shofar is alluding to something mysterious and profound.

A teruah is a sound without words, a crying plaintive sound that does not verbally articulate anything. The shofar is symbolic of human feelings and thoughts that are too deep for words. The teruah transcends glibness; it pushes away banalities and pretenses. In a sense, it is a remote control button that allows us to penetrate beyond surface successes and failures, prompting us to think more carefully about our lives, about the world we live in. The teruah is the sound of self-understanding…and the sound of protest against an imperfect world and an unjust society.

And yet another symbol: the messianic age will be introduced with the sounding of the shofar. The shofar calls to mind the utopian vision of Judaism. We do not believe humanity is condemned to live forever with injustice, corruption, hatred and war. We may look at our contemporary world and be overcome with discouragement. The shofar reminds us: click the remote control button! A better time will surely come, redemption will emerge, a messianic age beckons to humanity.

The shofar suggests a grander, truer vision of who we are and who we can become. It cries out to us to keep striving for a better society and a better world. It invites us to strengthen our faith in the Almighty…and in ourselves. One day, we will find the right channel.

Shofar So Good: Thoughts for Rosh Hashana

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Shofar plays a central role in the Rosh Hashana liturgy and invariably is one of the highlights of the synagogue service. Its primordial sounds are meant to awaken us from spiritual slumber; and to evoke thoughts and emotions relating to the Akeida story, the Revelation at Sinai, and the Messianic Redemption.

The laws relating to the ritual propriety of a shofar can be understood to convey moral lessons. A shofar must be fashioned from one horn; a shofar that is patched together using different pieces of ram's horn is not kasher for use. The moral: we need to be "whole" human beings, true to ourselves, strong with personal integrity. If we are merely a patchwork of other people's ideas and values, we are not fulfilling our responsibility as autonomous human beings.

The shofar is not to be plated with gold in such a way as to alter its authentic sound. The moral: we are not to allow material prosperity to falsify our authentic voices. Nor are we to be impressed by wealthy individuals whose "voices" have been altered by their riches e.g. who arrogate to themselves rights and privileges simply because of their wealth. A person's human worth is not to be determined by how much or how little "gold" he/she has.

If the sound of the shofar is the result of an echo i.e. the person blew the shofar in a cave or through a microphone, then this does not satisfy the religious requirement of hearing the shofar. The moral: we need to concentrate on the real thing, not on echoes or artificial magnifications. The shofar serves its role not by how loud a noise it can make, but by how natural and authentic a sound it emits.

The shofar is supposed to be bent over into a curve. The moral: we are to be contrite when we come before the Lord, bowing in humility and with honest recognition of our weaknesses.

Thus, the shofar is imbued with important symbolic messages to help us be better human beings and more devoted Jews. May we all be sensitive to the messages of the shofar. May we all be blessed with a meaningful holiday season. May the Almighty bless us and our loved ones with a year of good health and happiness, peace for America, Israel, and the world.

Deeper Meanings: Thoughts for Shabbat Teshuva and Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Eleanor Roosevelt once noted: “Do not hesitate to do what you think you cannot do. Dare to reach beyond your perceived limits. Do not let yourself be trapped within the narrow confines of narrow thinking. Do not let past defeats and failures drag you down."

Yom Kippur is the ultimate day of Jewish optimism in our ability to grow, change, and redefine ourselves. It is a day to cleanse ourselves of our past failings and sins, and to
imagine ourselves beginning a new phase in our lives.

Yom Kippur aims at our spiritual selves. It calls for a transformation in the way we see things and the way we experience things. It wants us to confront reality more clearly than we have done in the past. Young or old, this is a time for renewal and re-invigoration.

There is a famous story about a shohet (ritual slaughterer) who came to a new town and wanted to be employed by the community. As was the custom, he came to the town’s rabbi and sought approval. The rabbi asked the shohet to demonstrate how he prepared the knife for the slaughter of animals. The shohet showed how he sharpened the knife; and he ran his thumb up and down the blade checking for any possible nicks. When he completed the demonstration, he looked to the rabbi for validation.

The rabbi asked: “From whom did you learn to be a shohet?”

The shohet answered: “I learned from the illustrious Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov.”

The rabbi replied: “Yes, you have performed the task of sharpening and checking the knife very well. However, you did not do so in the manner of the Baal Shem Tov. When the Baal Shem Tov checks the knife, he always has tears in his eyes.”

Yes, the shohet had learned the technical skills of his trade—but he did not plumb the depths of his work. He had not internalized the emotional, psychological and spiritual elements that were the hallmark of his teacher. He was technically proficient—but he had no tears in his eyes.

Religious life (and life in general!) can sometimes be technically correct; but at the same time it might be missing the inner spiritual content, the tears in the eyes. A synagogue service might be conducted with great accuracy, and yet fail

to produce a real religious experience. A person might fast and pray all day on Yom Kippur, and yet be exactly the same person at the end of the day as he/she was at the beginning of the day.
If Yom Kippur is observed without our realizing the deeper significance of the moment, then it is just another lost opportunity.

Yom Kippur offers us purification, a fresh start, a revived spirit. It reminds us of who we are and who we can yet become. It dares us to transcend our past limits. If we experience Yom Kippur deeply and clearly, we will face the adventure of life with renewed strength and wisdom.

The MIshnah (Taanit 4:8) quotes Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel that Yom Kippur was one of the two happiest days on the Jewish calendar (the other being the 15th day of Av). We should draw on this spirit of optimism as we observe Yom Kippur, recognizing that this day offers us a unique gift: the gift of personal renewal.

Thoughts for Shabbat Teshuva and Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Although we popularly refer to the upcoming fast day as Yom Kippur, the Torah calls it Yom haKippurim—the day of atonements (in the plural). The plural form reminds us that there are many roads to atonement. Each person is different and is on a unique spiritual level; each comes with different insights, experiences, memories. The roads to atonement are plural, because no two of us have identical needs.

This season of Teshuvah and Kapparah—repentance and atonement—provides us with a special challenge and opportunity. We are granted a yearly period of time for intense evaluation of our lives. This period should serve as a springboard to deeper understanding and personal growth.

The first step in the process of spiritual renewal is to become humbly aware of our frailties. No matter how successful we think we are, we are mortal! We have limited physical capacities and a limited time of life on this earth. Aside from our physical limitations, we have moral and religious shortcomings that must be confronted. The Spanish thinker, Ortega y Gasset, suggested that a person grows only after confronting deep existential crisis. “These are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce. He who does not really feel himself lost, is without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality.” The first goal of this season is to feel “shipwrecked.”

But when we do “come up against our own reality” we often reach a point of perplexity. How are we to make ultimate sense of our lives? How are we to understand the vagaries of human existence—disease, wars, injustice? How are we to deal with all the social and professional pressures? How can we cope with problems in our families and communities? How can we advance beyond the quagmire of fear and self-doubt?

The famous Hassidic Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once asked: Where is God? And he answered: Where ever a human being lets Him in! If we want to feel the presence of God, we need to open ourselves to that experience. The season of Teshuvah and Yom haKippurim is a time to restore our relationship with the Almighty, to express our perplexities. This genuine experience of relationship with God gives us the inner strength to cope with our problems and perplexities.

A further step in the process of Teshuvah and Kapparah is balancing the feelings of alienation and belonging. We say to the Almighty: ki ger anokhi imakh; toshav kekhol avotai, I am a stranger with You, a sojourner as were all of my ancestors. What does this mean? I feel as though I am a stranger, alienated from God; there are barriers between me and You. But I want to be a sojourner, a permanent resident in Your presence, not a stranger or a passing visitor. I want to come home to the teachings and traditions of my ancestors who have maintained faith and courage for the past 3500 years.

A parable: A person tries to cut down a tree with a dull edged saw. He works very hard but makes little progress. A passerby sees this and asks: why don’t you sharpen the saw? The person responds: I don’t have time, I can’t stop

working, I need to cut down this tree. The passerby says: But if you would stop working for a few minutes to sharpen the saw, you would actually save time and effort, and you would better be able to accomplish your goal! The person replies: No, I don't have time to stop working, I must keep sawing.

Without the proper tools, we exert great energy but achieve inadequate results.

In spiritual life, too, we need proper tools. If we work with old habits, with stubborn attachment to stale and futile patterns, we will not grow. We need to think more clearly about our goals and how we can best attain them. Yom haKippurim provides a day when we take off from our usual routine. It is an entirely different kind of day from any other day of the year. It is a time to sharpen ourselves spiritually; to humbly face our limitations; to cope with our perplexities; to seek atonement and purification, to return to our spiritual core.

The season of Teshuvah and Kapparah provides us with a unique spiritual opportunity. Happy are they who can experience this season with an acute mind and alert spirit.

Thoughts for Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Fasting and praying are important ingredients of Yom Kippur and are signs of repentance for our transgressions against God. But, as is well known, Yom Kippur does not provide atonement for sins committed against human beings.

Maimonides teaches (Laws of Repentance, 2:9): "Repentance and the Day of Atonement only atone for sins between human beings and God, but interpersonal sins are never forgiven until a person has made restitution and appeased the one whom he has wronged….Even if he merely belittled a person with words, he must appease him and go to him until he is granted forgiveness."

Rabbinic tradition has it that a person can expect to be judged by God with the same standard of judgment that a person applies to others. If one is mean-spirited and unfair in treatment of fellow human beings, these same qualities will be applied by the Heavenly court.

The Haftarah on the morning of Yom Kippur is drawn from Isaiah, where the prophet reminds the Israelites that God wants purity of behavior, compassion to the poor and downtrodden. God rejects outward shows of piety and insists on genuine righteousness. God chastises those who "bend their heads as a bulrush and spread a couch of sackcloth and ashes" when in fact they conduct their lives immorally. "Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose, to loosen the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bonds of the yoke, sending the oppressed free and breaking every yoke? Is it not to break your bread for the hungry, and that you bring to your house the outcast poor…?"

It is said of the great 16th century sage, Rabbi Isaac Luria, that he would not recite his afternoon prayers until he first paid his workmen for their days' labor. He reasoned: how can I appear before God if I do not meet my moral obligation to pay my workers on time? It is hypocritical to mouth pious words to God while at the same time being guilty of improper behavior and slander toward one's fellow human beings.

It is customary among pious Jews to pay their debts on time, and certainly in advance of Yom Kippur. It is customary to make peace with those whom one has mistreated, disrespected, maligned or betrayed. It is customary to increase charitable contributions to those institutions that foster proper Torah values and that provide assistance to the needy.

Maimonides provides another very important lesson in his Laws of Repentance (2:10): "It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and to withhold forgiveness. Rather, one should be easy to pacify and difficult to anger. When a sinner asks forgiveness, one should grant it with a full heart and willing soul. Even if the other had sinned greatly against him and caused him much anguish, he should not take revenge or bear a grudge."

Yom Kippur can be just another external show of piety; or it can be a transformative occasion. The decision is ours to make.

Am Yisrael Hai: Thoughts for Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Some years ago, my wife and I visited Rome. Among the historic sites we visited was the Arch of Titus--a monument to the Roman conquest of Judea in 70 C.E. The Romans destroyed Jerusalem, razed the Temple, killed and enslaved many thousands of Jews--and sent our people into an Exile that lasted until the rise of the State of Israel in 1948. On the inner wall of the Arch of Titus is a depiction of the Roman victory over the Jews, with the Romans carrying off the Menorah which had graced the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

This is a somber "tourist attraction" for Jews, recalling one of the most horrific times in the history of our people. How painful to see enemies gloating over our downfall! How heart-wrenching to see our Menorah carried off into captivity!

The day we visited the Arch of Titus, we saw a small bit of grafitti which someone had managed to write onto the monument. We obviously do not condone grafitti, but I confess that we derived some inner satisfaction from this particular grafitti. It was written in Hebrew letters, and it said: Am Yisrael Hai, the people of Israel lives.

The great Roman Empire declined and fell, and is no more. The Jewish people are here, alive and well. The Arch of Titus in its arrogant glee over the destruction of the Jews has, in fact, become a symbol of the decadence of the Roman Empire and the ultimate victory of the Jews. Titus, and his Empire, are long gone; the Jews are here: Am Yisrael Hai.

A central feature of the Yom Kippur synagogue service is the description of the rituals performed in the holy Temples in ancient Jerusalem. These structures served as spiritual centers for the people of Israel. They symbolized the unique covenant between God and Israel. The Temples do not exist today; yet, when we read about the services that were conducted in them--we feel the power of the words: Am Yisrael Hai.

The people of Israel has found a way of living and flourishing and transmitting our teachings through the generations--even without these physical structures. Instead of animal sacrifices, we have prayers; instead of a central Temple, we have synagogues; instead of priestly spiritual leadership, we have Torah scholars.

We have not forsaken our covenant with God, nor has God abandoned HIs people Israel. While all of our ancient enemies have vanished, we continue to tell our story, to live and to build.

The Talmud reports that Rabbi Elazar ben Yosei visited Rome during the period following the Bar Kokhba rebellion in the second century C.E. Rabbi Elazar, aside from being a Torah sage, was well-versed in Roman culture; he served as a diplomat of the Jewish people to the government of Rome. While in Rome, Rabbi Elazar saw some of the artifacts that the Romans had stolen from the Temple in Jerusalem. “I saw the Parokhet (the curtain that covered the ark in the Temple) in Rome, and on it were several drops of blood from the Yom Kippur offering.” (Yoma 57a)

What was Rabbi Elazar thinking at that moment, when he stood face to face with a tangible vestige of the Temple, when he saw the drops of blood recalling the awesome Yom Kippur Temple ceremonies? What was he thinking at that moment, when he was serving as a representative of the remnant of Israel that had recently been vanquished by the mighty Roman Empire?

I imagine that Rabbi Elazar may have been thinking: Od Avinu Hai, Am Yisrael Hai. The God of Israel lives, the people of Israel lives--and we will ultimately prevail in bringing our message of ethical monotheism, compassion and justice to the entire world.

And that is the faith that has carried us through the generations. And that is the faith that will carry us into the future,

proudly and confidently.

Happiness: Thoughts for Succoth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Torah informs us that the festival of Succoth commemorates God's providence over the Israelites during their years of wandering in the wilderness. An old question is: why was this holiday scheduled to begin specifically on the 15th day of Tishri? The dates for Pessah (15 Nissan) and for Shavuoth (6 Sivan) are clearly linked to historical events—the day of the Exodus and the day of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. But the wandering in the wilderness was ongoing for 40 years, with no particular historic connection to Tishri 15?

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, in his Torat Hayyim al ha-Moadim, suggests that the Tishri 15 date was specified by the Almighty so as to be parallel to the Nissan 15 date of Pessah. Since the Exodus from Egypt is so central to Jewish thought and observance, Pessah and Succoth were set exactly six months apart, to the day, in order to ensure that we experience the power of the Exodus on a regular basis every six months.

The great 18th century sage, Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (known popularly as the Hidah), offers a different explanation in his Midbar Kedeimot. He notes that the lives of our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob overlapped for fifteen years. When Abraham died, his grandson Jacob was 15 years old. In rabbinic tradition Abraham is identified with Pessah, Isaac with Shavuoth, and Jacob with Succoth. (See Tur O.H. 417). Because of the merit of these extraordinary 15 years, the holy days of Pessah and Succoth were both set for the 15th of the month.

The Hidah is alluding to something deeper than the clever confluence of numbers. He suggests that the 15 years of shared lifetime among Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were a period of extreme happiness for the world. These three luminaries literally changed the course of history and brought humanity to a better understanding of the One God. Succoth, which is known in our tradition as the season of our happiness (zeman simhateinu), commemorates the extraordinary happiness and enlightenment that emerged at the founding of our nation.

Since Pessah (symbolized by Abraham) and Succoth (symbolized by Jacob) both occur on the 15th day of the month, this highlights the special link between grandfather Abraham and grandson Jacob. When grandparents and grandchildren share ideas and ideals, this is a sign of continuity, love…and genuine happiness. When there is a "generation gap," there is sadness and alienation. Just as Pessah and Succoth are linked together by sharing the date of 15, so Abraham and Jacob are bound together by their shared 15 years of life.

Pessah and Succoth celebrate the Exodus from Egypt in ancient times. The relationship between Abraham and Jacob suggests the key to the future redemption of Israel—when the traditions are shared, loved and experienced by the generations of grandparents and grandchildren. A teacher of mine once quipped: Who is a Jew? Someone with Jewish grandchildren! While this is not an objectively true statement, it underscores a vital principle in the Jewish adventure: the importance of transmitting our teachings and values through the generations.

The genuine happiness that derives from family and national continuity does not just happen by chance. It is the result of deep devotion, strong commitment, and many sacrifices. There is a vast difference between happiness and amusement. Happiness entails a genuine and deep sense of wholeness. It is not attained casually. Amusement, on the other hand, is a passing sense of enjoyment. It is shallow and ephemeral. We laugh at a joke, we enjoy watching a sports event—but these amusements do not touch our souls in a lasting way. Happiness is achieved through active and thoughtful involvement; amusement is essentially a passive experience in which we sit back and wait to be entertained. Succoth, the festival of our happiness, reminds us to strive for genuine happiness, to be committed to transmitting our traditions through the generations, to distinguish between real happiness and shallow amusement.

Thoughts for Succoth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Interesting insights about Succoth have come from the pen of Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), the First Earl of

Beaconsfield. Disraeli was of Jewish birth, whose family had been associated with the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation in London. Although his father had Benjamin baptized to Anglicanism at age 12, Disraeli never denied his Jewish roots. He rose to become the first—and thus far only—British Prime Minister of Jewish ancestry.

Anti-Semites never forgave Disraeli's Jewishness and constantly identified him as a Jew in spite of his conversion to Anglicanism. In response to a vicious anti-Semitic comment made in the British parliament, Disraeli famously retorted: "Yes, I am a Jew, and when the ancestors of the Right Honourable Gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the Temple of Solomon."

Disraeli writes about Succoth in his novel, Tancred, originally published in 1847. Tancred was a young British nobleman who had a spiritual longing to visit the Holy Land. When he arrived, he spent time with a Jewish family and became acquainted with Jewish religious life. His visit coincided with Succoth, and he was told that this is a great national festival celebrating the harvest. He was shown the lulav and etrog, symbols of the autumn harvest. Tancred was deeply impressed.

Disraeli writes: "The vineyards of Israel have ceased to exist, but the eternal law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persist in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards. What sublime inexorability in the law! But what indomitable spirit in the people!"

Disraeli notes that it is easier for "the happier Sephardim, the Hebrews who have never quitted the sunny regions that are laved by the Midland Ocean," to observe the festival, since they can identify with the climate and setting of the early generations of Israelites who celebrated Succoth. "But picture to yourself the child of Israel in the dingy suburb or the squalid quarter of some bleak northern town, where there is never a sun that can at any rate ripen grapes. Yet he must celebrate the vintage of purple Palestine! The law has told him, though a denizen in an icy clime, that he must dwell for seven days in a bower…."

He continues with a description of the ignominies which Jews suffer in their ghettos in Europe "living amid fogs and filth, never treated with kindness, seldom with justice....Conceive such a being, an object to you of prejudice, dislike, disgust, perhaps hatred. The season arrives, and the mind and heart of that being are filled with images and passions that have been ranked in all ages among the most beautiful and the most genial of human experience; filled with a subject the most vivid, the most graceful, the most joyous, and the most exuberant…the harvest of the grape in the native regions of the vine."

The downtrodden Jews, in observance of Succoth, find real joy in life. They decorate their Succahs as beautifully as they can; their families gather together to eat festive meals in the Succah. The outside world may be cruel and ugly; but their inner life is joyous and noble. Their external conditions may not seem too happy, but their internal happiness is real.

The Jews, while remembering the glories of the Israelite past, also dream of the future glories of the Israelites when their people will be restored to their ancient greatness.
Disraeli points to an important truth: happiness is essentially an internal phenomenon, a matter of one's attitude and interpretation of reality. External conditions are less vital to genuine happiness than one's internal state of mind.

By celebrating Succoth over the many centuries of exile, the Jewish people was able to maintain an inner strength and happiness, a vivid sense of the past and a powerful vision for the future. We are fortunate today to be living at a time when the sovereign State of Israel has been re-established. We may celebrate Succoth with the added joy of knowing that our historic dreams have begun to be realized.

We have regained our vineyards…we must aspire to the day when we may enjoy our vineyards in peace and security, free from the threats and hatred which continue to be aimed against our people. "A race that persist in celebrating their vintage…will regain their vineyards." A people who persist in dreaming of a messianic era will ultimately see that dream fulfilled.

Succoth: Transience and Permanence

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Sometimes it takes a crisis to remind us of the transience of life. It might be an illness, the death of a loved one, an accident, a shocking and tragic news report. At these crisis moments, we suddenly and starkly remember that we are mortal, that life on this earth is temporary.

When people confront their own mortality, they often come to the realization that time is precious; that life is too valuable to be frittered away on nonsense; that it is self-destructive to engage in petty feuds or egotistical competitions. It can take a crisis to help us live on a higher, happier level. Facing the transience of life, we take our living moments more seriously.

Succoth is a festival tuned in to the issue of life's transience. The succah is a temporary structure, reminiscent of the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness in ancient times. It doesn't have a roof, reminding us that we are subject to the vicissitudes of nature. The lulav, etrog, aravot and hadasim remind us of the harvest, of the recurring cycles of nature, the cycles of birth, growth, decline and death.

Interestingly, Succoth is known in our tradition as Zeman Simhateinu, the time of our rejoicing. On one level, this refers to the rejoicing of the harvest. On a deeper level, though, it may be alluding to the joy and inner freedom we attain when we confront the transience of life.

If we sulk in gloomy thoughts of the ephemeral quality of life, we can become grim and depressed. Succoth teaches that thoughts of life's transience actually lead to happiness—not self-pity. It is our very mortality which provides the intensity and excitement of life.

That being said, we are strengthened when we turn our minds from human mortality to God's eternality. There is an all-encompassing, undying Power that embraces and transcends all time and all change.

In Psalm 121, the Psalmist muses: "I lift my eyes unto the mountains, whence comes my help? My help is from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth." Why does the Psalmist look to the mountains? What do mountains have to do with the Psalmist's call for help?

Most natural phenomena reflect change. The sun rises and sets. The moon goes through its phases. The stars sparkle at night, but are not visible during the day. Oceans, rivers and lakes are in constant motion. Mountains, though, are steady and unchanging (at least to the human eye). The Psalmist is crying out for help, and is seeking an image of something with permanence, something that can be depended upon: mountains.

In a similar vein, one of the names attributed to God is Tsur—Rock. In turning to the Lord, we seek an image of something powerful and unchanging.

While Succoth highlights the transience of life, it also turns our thoughts to the Eternal God who is not transient. The succah recalls the wanderings of the Israelites—but also the Divine Providence that watched over them for forty years. The lulav and etrog remind us of the changing seasons; but also of the Eternal God who created nature and the natural rhythms. We wave the lulav and etrog in all directions, as a symbol that God's presence is everywhere, all-encompassing, and complete.

There is a story of a man who was given one wish by God. The man said: "I don't want to die suddenly. My wish is that You give me fair warning before I die." God agreed to this request.

Years later, the angel of death came to the man and said his time had come. The man objected, and called out to God:

“But You promised that I would not die suddenly. You agreed to give me warning before I would die.”
God replied: “I gave you plenty of warnings. Look at your hair; it is all gray. Think of how your body has weakened and declined over these past years, how you walk so slowly, how your hands tremble when you write. All of these were warnings. You are not dying suddenly.”

The man bowed his head, and gave himself over to the angel of death. He realized that he had been given many warnings, but had never taken heed.

Succoth reminds us to pay attention to the warnings, to keep things in perspective, to appreciate the transience of life and the Eternity of God. It is the time of our rejoicing in the beauties of life, and the meaning of life.

Religion: Public and Private: Thoughts for Succoth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Most of our religious observances are indoors--in our homes, in our synagogues. We generally do not like to create a public spectacle of our religious experiences, but we behave modestly and try not to call attention to ourselves as we perform mitzvoth.

There are some exceptions to this. On Hanukkah, it is a particular mitzvah to publicize the miracle by placing our hanukkiyot where they can be seen by the passers-by. Succoth also has some aspects of taking our religious observances into the public square. The Talmud records the custom in ancient Jerusalem where people carried their lulavim into the street when they went to synagogue, when they visited the sick, and when they went to comfort mourners. Even today, many Jews carry their lulavim in public. When it comes to the succah itself, this structure is generally in view of the public: it's built on a patio, or yard, or courtyard etc. i.e. where Jews and non-Jews can see it

Although so much of our religious life is indoors--in the private domain of family and friends--we are sometimes obligated to make a public demonstration of our religious commitments. On Hanukkah, we want to remind the entire world that the Jews heroically defended themselves against the Syrian Hellenists and won independence for the Jewish people. We want everyone to know that, with God's help, we were victorious against powerful and far more numerous enemies.

On Succoth, we also want to convey a message to the general public. The lulav and etrog are symbolic of weapons; they indicate that we are proud of our faith and we are prepared to fight for the honor of our Torah and for our people. The succah is a symbolic statement that although we wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, God's providence protected us, and we ultimately entered the Promised Land. The public demonstration of these mitzvoth indicates our pride and commitment in who we are and what we represent. If we have respect for ourselves and our traditions, we can expect that the nations of the world will also come to respect Judaism.

Sometimes it is necessary for us to stand up in public on behalf of our faith and our people. When Jews betray their faith and their people in public, this undermines the entire Jewish enterprise. If Jewish storekeepers open their shops on Shabbat and holidays, why should non-Jews respect our Sabbath and holy days? If Jews ignore the laws of kashruth, why should non-Jews respect our dietary laws? If Jews don't live up to the high standards of Torah ethics, why should non-Jews admire the Jewish way of life? If Jewish political figures hold press conferences and public meetings on Jewish holy days, why should non-Jews show any deference to our holy days?

Succoth is an important reminder that being Jewish also entails a public stance, the courage to be who we are and stand for our traditions without embarrassment or apology. If we do not stand up for ourselves, who will stand up for us? And if we do stand up for ourselves, we will be worthy heirs of a great people who have given so much--and have so much more to give--to our world.

Lies, Cries, Arise: Thoughts for Shemini Hag Atsereth

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Psalm associated with Shemini Hag Atsereth/Simhath Torah seems to be a strange choice. It is Psalm 12, a Psalm that Martin Buber has described as a prophecy "against the generation of the lie." The Psalmist cries out: "Help, O Lord, for the pious cease to be…They speak falsehood each with his neighbor, with flattering lip, with a double heart they speak." The generation is led by oppressors who say "our tongue will make us mighty," who arrogantly crush the downtrodden.

Buber comments: "They speak with a double heart, literally 'with heart and heart'…The duplicity is not just between heart and mouth, but actually between heart and heart. In order that the lie may bear the stamp of truth, the liars as it were manufacture a special heart, an apparatus which functions with the greatest appearance of naturalness, from which lies well up to the 'smooth lips' like spontaneous utterances of experience and insight." (Good and Evil, New York, 1953, p. 10)

The Psalmist is not merely condemning his "generation of the lie," but other future generations that also will be characterized by lying, bullying, oppressing; that will be led by smooth talking and corrupt demagogues. But the Psalmist turns prophet in proclaiming that God will arise and protect the victims of the liars. Truth will prevail. "It is You, O Lord, who will guard the poor, You will protect us forever from this generation." And yet, the Psalm ends on a realistic note: "But the wicked will strut around when vileness is exalted among humankind."

Although God will ultimately redeem the world from the "generation of the lie," this will not happen right away. As long as people submit to the rule of the wicked, the wicked will stay in power. In the long run, God will make truth prevail over lies. In the short run, though, it is the responsibility of human beings to stand up against tyranny, lies, and arrogant smooth talking liars. If the wicked are not resisted, they will continue to strut around and feel invincible.

What does this Psalm have to do with Shemini Hag Atsereth/Simhath Torah, known in our tradition as Zeman Simhateinu, the time of our rejoicing? On a simplistic level, the Psalm might have been chosen because it opens with Lamnatseah al ha-Sheminith, to the Chief Musician on the Eighth (the "eighth" being a musical instruction). Since it mentions eight, it is thus connected with Shemini Hag Atsereth, the eighth day closing festival.

It would seem, though, that our sages must have had something deeper in mind in choosing Psalm 12 to be associated with this festival. In the Amidah of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we include prayers asking the Almighty to inspire awe in all His creations and to have humanity acknowledge Him as Ruler of the universe. We pray for a time when "iniquity shall close its mouth and all wickedness vanish as smoke when You will remove the rule of tyranny from the earth." On Succoth, our ancestors offered 70 offerings in the Temple, symbolically praying for the well-being and harmony of all humanity (understood by the rabbis to be composed of 70 nations). Psalm 12 is an appropriate continuation of these themes, and is a fitting reminder at the end of the holiday season that we depend on God to bring truth and peace to humanity.

But Psalm 12 adds an important dimension. Although we certainly must pray to the Almighty for redemption, we also bear responsibility for the sad state of human affairs. Prayer alone isn't enough to solve our problems. We need to muster the courage to stand up against lies and tyranny, to uproot "the generation of the lie."

Throughout the world, we see examples of simple people rising up against harsh and powerful tyrants. They risk their lives, their livelihoods, their families—but they have reached the breaking point where they can no longer tolerate the unjust tyrannies under which they live. Many suffer and die in the process—but ultimately, it is hoped that the masses of good people will prevail over the dictators and demagogues. People in power rarely cede their power peacefully and gracefully. The entrenched powers will do whatever they need to do to maintain their control.

Fortunately, we live in free societies. Although we certainly have our share of imperfect rulers and leaders, we also have a system that allows for change and peaceful transition. The people can take control by voting, by peaceful protests, by peaceful strikes. Many people are not willing to stand up and be counted. They are happy to pray for God to bring peace and truth to the world. They are comfortable letting others take the risks of fighting the establishment's power base. Psalm 12 comes at the end of the holiday season to remind us: yes, God will make truth and justice prevail; but in the meanwhile, evil will persist as long as we let it persist.

Unless we are willing to stand up against the tyrants and demagogues, they will continue to crush us. They will continue their lies and p.r. spins and political manipulations. The concluding lesson we should take from this holiday season is: building a true, just and moral community and society depends on us.

Thoughts for Shemini Hag Atsereth and Simhat Torah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

On August 21, 1911, Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," one of the world's most famous paintings, was stolen right off the wall of the Louvre museum in Paris. The crime wasn't discovered until the next day. The Louvre was closed for a week due to the police investigation.

When the Louvre was re-opened, a line of people visited the museum to stare solemnly at the empty space on the wall where the "Mona Lisa" had once hung. One visitor left a bouquet of flowers. Indeed, until the painting was ultimately returned to the Louvre on December 30, 1913, throngs of visitors came to the museum to gaze at the blank wall! More people seem to have come to see the blank wall than had come in the previous two years to see the actual painting.

What motivated so many visitors to come to see the blank wall?

Perhaps it was sadness at the loss of a great art treasure.

Perhaps it was due to regret. Why hadn't we come to see it more often while it was hanging? Why was security at the museum so lax?

Perhaps it was concern for the future. Will the "Mona Lisa" ever be found and returned?

Whatever the motivation, thousands of people came to the Louvre to stare at an empty space.

I think this episode can be understood as a parable of life.

Our lives are a collection of pieces of art—our family, friends, experiences, careers, successes.

We come to a blank wall: failures, losses.

We are struck with sadness. We have lost possibilities, opportunities, relationships.

We are struck with regret. We could have and should have done better with our lives.

We are concerned for the future. Can we restore our losses, or can we at least learn to live with our losses and failures?

We have come to the closing days of our holy day period. Rosh Hashana is a time to tour events of our past year and to re-examine the artwork of our lives. Yom Kippur is a time to recount sins and errors and to think about what we could have done better. Succoth is a time to celebrate our accomplishments in a spirit of happiness.

Then we come to Shemini Hag Atsereth—a blank wall. This is a holiday with no frills, no shofar, no fasting, no lulav, no

succah. The blank wall symbolizes our sadness, regrets, possibilities, hopes, and aspirations.

After what we have experienced during the holiday season, we now reach a blank wall; we are called upon to start working on our new masterpiece—the life still ahead of us. It is time to rally our strength, our wisdom, our sensitivities to the needs of others.

The “blank wall” attracts us because it is latent with opportunities, it opens new challenges, it calls on us to imagine what we can be and what we can create in the year and years ahead.

It is fitting that Simhat Torah is associated with Shemini Hag Atsereth. This is a reminder that the art of the blank wall can be meaningfully restored if we ourselves rejoice in our Torah heritage. The spiritual power of Torah has infused the Jewish people for thousands of years—and it has the power to help each of us develop our lives into a new, beautiful masterpiece.

Above Tragedy: Thoughts for Simhat Torah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

We have spent many months reading about the life of Moses. Today, in one of the most dramatic episodes of the Torah, we read about his death—a very agonizing scene. Moses, the great leader, teacher, and prophet, climbs to the summit of Mount Nebo and looks out over the horizon at the Promised Land. As he stands silent and alone, God tells him: “You are beholding the land that I have promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob saying, ‘I shall give it to your descendants.’ See it with your eyes. You shall not cross into the land.”

What thoughts must then have tortured Moses! What anguish must have filled his soul! To dream, to work a whole lifetime for something and then to be told in final terms that your hopes would never be realized…Is this not the heart of tragedy?

Most commentators seek a reason for such a tragic ending to Moses’ life. They look for a sin committed by Moses to explain his punishment. Some say it was the breaking the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Others suggest that it was his striking the stone with his staff, rather than speaking to it.

I could never understand these commentators. Certainly, Moses sinned; but which human being has never sinned? Moreover, his sins were really not serious. He had good reason to be enraged when he found his people worshiping the golden calf. And the difference between striking the stone and speaking to it is, after all, insignificant. The event was still miraculous. Certainly, Moses did so many great things for which he deserved reward. He was the only human being to see God “face to face.” He was the greatest prophet, the greatest teacher, the most dedicated leader. Certainly, he was worthy of entering the Promised Land.

Moses was not being punished for a sin. Rather, the Torah is describing in a very vivid way something about the human predicament. Death is a built-in part of human existence. Though we may have noble ideals, though we may work hard, we cannot expect to fulfill all of our ambitions. Moses, perhaps the most ideal character in the Bible, was plagued by being mortal; and great mortals simply cannot realize all of their hopes. This is a profound truth of the nature of humankind.

Today, we are also introduced to another biblical character, Adam. I think it is very ironic that the birth of Adam and the death of Moses are juxtaposed in today’s Torah readings. Adam was given paradise. He was a man who had no dreams or ambitions, for he had everything he wanted. He was complacent, satisfied, and untroubled by ideals. Existing in such a state, though, is problematic, because there is no motivation for living. If there is no place for one to

advance, he must fall back. And so, Adam fell. But whereas Moses was a tragic hero, Adam was just plain tragic. Whereas Moses had lived his life working toward a dream so that when death came it tragically cut off a living force, Adam never knew the value of life; his fall from paradise is far less climactic.

Ultimately, being mortals, we each have the choice of being either tragic heroes or simply tragic. In which category do we belong?

Unfortunately, many of us are satisfied with ourselves, with our wealth, with our social position. We are especially complacent in the realm of our religious attainments. We think we practice our religion properly and do enough mitzvoth.

Today, on Simhat Torah, we completed the reading of the Torah. We could have said that we have finished our study, we are content. But we did not do these things. We began immediately to read Bereishith. We started the Torah all over again. We know that we will never fully comprehend the Torah or fully realize its sacred dreams—but we move forward and onward. We cannot rest from the Torah; to rest is to become tragic.

As Jews, therefore, we are part of a tradition that not only thrives on noble ideals, but which loves noble actions. Like Moses, we should seek to keep our religious ideals and practices on fire within us, so that they give light not only to ourselves but to all who come near us. We should devote our lives to attaining religious perfection for ourselves and for our society; and though we may never enter the Promised Land, we will be able to stand on a summit and see our dreams realized in the future through our children. We may never walk into the land, but we will have led an entire generation to the point where they can enter.

Extremely Religious Without Religious Extremism: The Binding of Isaac as a Test Case for the Limits of Devotion[1]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Introduction

The Akedah, or binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:1–19),[i] is a foundational narrative in Jewish tradition. It plays a prominent role on Rosh Hashanah, and many communities include it in their daily morning liturgy.

The Akedah is a religiously and morally challenging story. What should we learn from it with regard to faith and religious life? Perhaps more than any other narrative in the Torah, the Akedah teaches how one can and should be extremely religious, but also teaches how to avoid the dangers of religious extremism. This essay will consider the ideas of several modern thinkers who explore the religious and moral implications of the Akedah.

Why Did Abraham Not Protest?

Although the idea of child sacrifice is abhorrent to us, it made sense in Abraham's historical context. Many of Israel's neighbors practiced child sacrifice. When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Abraham may have surmised that perhaps God required this of him. Of course, God stopped Abraham and went on to outlaw such practices as a capital offense (Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5). We find child sacrifice abhorrent precisely because the Torah and the prophets broke rank with large segments of the pagan world and transformed human values for the better.[ii]

In its original context, then, the Akedah highlights Abraham's exemplary faithfulness. He followed God's command even when the basis of the divine promise for progeny through Isaac was threatened.[iii]

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was deeply troubled by the Akedah. He maintained that nobody is certain that he or she is receiving prophecy, whereas everyone knows with certainty that murder is immoral and against God's will. Therefore, Abraham failed God's test by acquiescing to sacrifice Isaac. According to Kant, Abraham should have refused, or at least protested.[iv]

However, the biblical narrative runs flatly against Kant's reading. After the angel stops Abraham from slaughtering Isaac, the angel proclaims to Abraham, "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me" (Gen. 22:12). God thereby praises Abraham's exceptional faith and commitment.[v]

Adopting a reading consistent with the thrust of the biblical narrative, Rambam draws the opposite conclusion from that of Kant. The fact that Abraham obeyed God demonstrates his absolute certainty that he had received true prophecy. Otherwise, he never would have proceeded:

[Abraham] hastened to slaughter, as he had been commanded, his son, his only son, whom he loved…. For if a dream of prophecy had been obscure for the prophets, or if they had doubts or incertitude concerning what they apprehended in a vision of prophecy, they would not have hastened to do that which is repugnant to nature, and [Abraham's] soul would not have consented to accomplish an act of so great an importance if there had been a doubt about it (Guide of the Perplexed 3:24).[vi]

Although Rambam correctly assesses the biblical narrative, there is still room for a different moral question. After God informs Abraham about the impending destruction of Sodom, Abraham pleads courageously on behalf of the righteous people who potentially lived in the wicked city, appealing to God's attribute of justice (Gen. 18:23–33).[vii] How could Abraham stand idly by and not challenge God when God commanded him to sacrifice his beloved son?

By considering the Abraham narratives as a whole, we may resolve this dilemma. Abraham's actions in Genesis chapters 12–25 may be divided into three general categories: (1) responses to direct commands from God; (2) responses to promises or other information from God; and (3) responses to situations during which God does not communicate directly with Abraham.

Whenever God commands an action, Abraham obeys without as much as a word of protest or questioning. When Abraham receives promises or other information from God, Abraham praises God when gratitude is in order, and he questions or challenges God when he deems it appropriate. Therefore, Abraham's silence when following God's commandment to sacrifice Isaac is to be expected. And so are Abraham's concerns about God's promises of progeny or information about the destruction of Sodom. The Torah thereby teaches that it is appropriate to question God, while simultaneously demanding faithfulness to God's commandments as an essential aspect of the mutual covenant between God and Israel.[viii]

The Pinnacle of Religious Faith

Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz suggests that Abraham and Job confronted the same religious test. Do they serve God because God provides all of their needs, or do they serve God under all conditions? Both were God-fearing individuals prior to their trials, but they demonstrated their unwavering commitment to God through their trials.[ix]

Professor Moshe Halbertal derives a different lesson from the Akedah. God wishes to be loved by us, but pure love of God is almost impossible, since we are utterly dependent on God for all of our needs. We generally express love through absolute giving. When sacrificing to God, however, we always can hold out hope that God will give us more. Cain and Abel could offer produce or sheep to God, but they likely were at least partially motivated to appeal to God for better crops and flocks next year. What can we possibly offer God that demonstrates our true love?

Through the Akedah, God gives Abraham the opportunity to offer a gift outside of the realm of exchange. Nothing can replace Isaac, since his value to Abraham is absolute. As soon as Abraham demonstrates willingness to offer his own son to God, he has proven his total love and commitment. As the angel tells Abraham, "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me" (Gen. 22:12).

Halbertal explains that Abraham's offering a ram in place of Isaac becomes the paradigm for later sacrifice. Inherent in all sacrifice in the Torah is the idea is that we love God to the point where we are prepared to sacrifice ourselves or our

children to God. The animal serves as a substitution. The Akedah thereby represents the supreme act of giving to God.[x]

The ideas explored by Professors Leibowitz and Halbertal lie at the heart of being extremely religious. Abraham is a model of pure, dedicated service and love of God. Such religious commitment is ideal, but it also comes with the lurking danger of religious extremism. We turn now to this critical issue.

Extremely Religious Without Religious Extremism

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) composed a classic work on the Akedah, entitled Fear and Trembling. He argued that if one believes in religion because it appears reasonable, that is a secular distortion. True religion, maintains Kierkegaard, means being able to suspend reason and moral conscience when God demands it. Kierkegaard calls Abraham a knight of faith for his willingness to obey God and sacrifice his son.

Although Kierkegaard did not advocate violence in the name of religion, his view is vulnerable to that horrific outcome. In his philosophy, serving God must take precedence over all moral or rational concerns. A fatal problem arises when the representatives of any religion claim that God demands violence or other forms of immorality.

In a powerful article written in the wake of the terrorist attack on New York City on September 11, 2001, Professor David Shatz addresses this urgent question.[xi] He observes that in general, one must create a system that balances competing ideals in order to eliminate ideological extremism. For example, one may place law against liberty, self-respect against respect for others, and discipline against love. In religion, however, there is a fundamental problem: Placing any value against religion, especially if that competing value can prevail over religion, defeats religious commitment.

Professor Shatz suggests a way to have passion for God tempered by morality and rationality without requiring any religious compromise. One must embrace morality and rationality as part of the religion. The religion itself must balance and integrate competing values as part of the religion. This debate traces back to Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, who insisted that God chooses moral things to command. In contrast, the medieval Islamic philosophical school of Ash'ariyya maintained that whatever God commands is by definition good.[xii]

Kierkegaard's reading of the Akedah fails Professor Shatz's solution to religious extremism and is therefore vulnerable to the dangers of immorality in the name of God. In fact, Kierkegaard's reading of the Akedah fails the Torah itself: God stops Abraham, and then repudiates child sacrifice in the Torah. Whereas Kierkegaard focuses on Abraham's willingness to suspend morality to serve God, God rejects immorality as part of the Torah's religion. The expression of religious commitment in the Torah is the fear of God, which by definition includes the highest form of morality.[xiii] There must never be a disconnect between religious commitment and moral behavior, and Israel's prophets constantly remind the people of this critical message.[xiv] Thus, the Torah incorporates morality and rationality as essential components of its religious system.

In a similar spirit, Rabbi Shalom Carmy maintains that the Akedah teaches religious passion without fanaticism, and that even when a God-fearing individual keeps God's commandments, he or she remains responsive to the validity of the ethical.[xv]

It also is important to stress that people who act violently in the name of religion generally are not crazy. Rather, they are following their religious system as they understand it and as their clerics teach it. Such manifestations of religion themselves are evil and immoral. Postmodernism thinks it can relativize all religion and thereby protect against the violence generated by religious extremism. In reality, however, postmodernism achieves the opposite effect as its adherents no longer have the resolve to refer to evil as evil and to battle against it. Instead, they try to rationalize evil away. This position empowers the religious extremists.[xvi]

Professor Shatz acknowledges that, lamentably, there are negative extremist elements among some Jews who identify themselves as religious. However, their attempts to justify their immorality with Torah sources in fact do violence to our

sacred texts.[xvii] Such Jews are not extremely religious, but rather pervert the Torah and desecrate God's Name. Similarly, all religions must build morality and rationality into their systems so that they can pursue a relationship with God while avoiding the catastrophic consequences of religious extremism. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has remarked, "the cure of bad religion is good religion, not no religion."[xviii]

Conclusion

The Akedah teaches several vital religious lessons. Ideal religion is about serving God, and is not self-serving. We aspire to be extremely religious, and Abraham serves as a paragon of the ideal connection to God. The Akedah also teaches the key to avoid what is rightly condemned as religious extremism. Morality and rationality must be built into every religious system, or else its adherents risk lapsing into immorality in the name of their religion.

One of the best means of promoting our vision is to understand and teach the underlying messages of the Akedah. We pray that all faith communities will join in affirming morality and rationality as being integral to their faiths. It is imperative for us to serve as emissaries of a different vision to what the world too often experiences in the name of religion, to model the ideal fear of Heaven that the Torah demands, and ultimately to sanctify God's Name.

Notes

[1] This article appeared in Hayyim Angel, The Keys to the Palace: Essays Exploring the Religious Value of Reading the Bible (New York: Kodesh Press, 2017), pp. 132-142.

[i] The Hebrew root for Akedah appears in Gen. 22:9, and refers to binding one's hands to one's feet. This is the only time that this root appears in the entire Bible.

[ii] Samuel David Luzzatto suggests that this legislation was in part an anti-pagan polemic, demonstrating that the Torah's idea of love of God does not involve the immoral sacrifice of one's child.

[iii] Cf. Lev. Rabbah (Margaliot) 29:9.

[iv] Kant was not the first person troubled by the moral implications of the Akedah. In the second century BCE, the author of the non-canonical book of Jubilees (17:16) ascribed the command to sacrifice Isaac to a "satanic" angel named Mastemah, rather than God Himself as presented in the Torah. Adopting a different tactic, Rabbi Eleazar Ashkenazi b. Nathan Habavli (fourteenth century) maintains that the Akedah must have occurred in a prophetic vision. Had the Akedah occurred in waking state, he argued, Abraham surely would have protested as he did regarding Sodom (in Marc Shapiro, Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History [Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015, p. 70]).

[v] See Rabbi Yonatan Grossman, Avraham: Sippuro shel Massa (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2014), pp. 300–301.

[vi] Translation from The Guide of the Perplexed, Shlomo Pines, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 501–502.

[vii] See especially Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha?" in Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice, ed. Marvin Fox (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 62–88.

[viii] See further discussion in Hayyim Angel, "Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith: The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Abraham Narratives and Commentary," in Wisdom From All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim, 2003), pp. 192–212; reprinted in Angel, Through an Opaque Lens (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 127–154; revised second edition (New York: Kodesh Press, 2013), pp. 99–122.

[ix] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State, ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 48–49, 259. Cf. Michael V. Fox, “Job the Pious,” Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 117 (2005), pp. 351–366.

[x] Moshe Halbertal, On Sacrifice (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 22–25.

[xi] David Shatz, “‘From the Depths I Have Called to You’: Jewish Reflections on September 11th and Contemporary Terrorism,” in Contending with Catastrophe: Jewish Perspectives on September 11th, ed. Michael J. Broyde (New York: Beth Din of America and K’hal Publishing, 2011), pp. 197–233. See also Marvin Fox, “Kierkegaard and Rabbinic Judaism,” in Collected Essays on Philosophy and on Judaism, vol. 2, ed. Jacob Neusner (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), pp. 29–43.

[xii] See Howard Kreisel, Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), p. 38.

[xiii] See, for example, Gen. 20:11; 42:18; Exod. 1:17, 21; Deut. 25:18.

[xiv] See, for example, Isa. 1:10–17; Jer. 7:9–11; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21–25; Mic. 6:4–8.

[xv] Rabbi Shalom Carmy, “Passion, Paradigm, and the Birth of Inwardness: On Rabbi Kook and the Akeda,” in Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday, ed. Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997), pp. 459–478.

[xvi] For a chilling study of the virtual elimination of the very concept of sin and evil from much of Western literature, see Andrew Delbanco, The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

[xvii] See Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, “Ploughshares into Swords: Contemporary Religious Zionists and Moral Constraints,” Tradition 34:4 (Winter 2000), pp. 39–60.

[xviii] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Great Partnership: God, Science, and the Search for Meaning (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 11.

THE MEANING OF THE BOOK OF JONAH[xviii]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

The Talmud ascribes the composition of the Twelve Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly (Bava Batra 15a). Rashi explains that the books were bound together in one scroll because each was so short that some might get lost if not combined into a scroll of greater size.

Together they span a period of some 250-300 years. Jonah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah were eighth century prophets; Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Obadiah prophesied in the seventh-early sixth century; and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesied in the late sixth century. Of the twelve, Joel is the most difficult to date, and we will discuss him in the fourth chapter on the Twelve Prophets.

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to find a comprehensive theory to explain the purpose of the book, or why Jonah fled from his mission. For millennia, great interpreters have scoured the Book of Jonah's forty-eight verses for their fundamental messages.

One midrashic line suggests that unrepentant Israel would look bad by comparison were non-Israelites to repent.[xviii] Another proposes that Jonah was convinced that the Ninevites would repent and God would pardon them. Jonah feared that he then would be called a false prophet once his prediction of Nineveh's destruction went unfulfilled.[xviii]

Abarbanel does not find either answer persuasive. Perhaps Israel would be inspired to repent in light of Nineveh's repentance. Moreover, since the Ninevites did repent, they obviously believed Jonah to be a true prophet. Nowhere is there evidence of Jonah's being upset about his or Israel's reputation. It is unlikely that Jonah would have violated God's commandment for the reasons given by these midrashim.

Abarbanel (followed by Malbim) submits that Jonah feared the future destruction of Israel by Assyria, of which Nineveh was the capital (cf. Ibn Ezra on 1:1). Rather than obey God's directive, Jonah elected to martyr himself on behalf of his people. However, the Book of Jonah portrays Nineveh as a typological Sodom-like city-state, not as the historical capital of Assyria. Jonah's name appears eighteen times in the book, but nobody else—not even the king of Nineveh – is named. Additionally, there is no mention of Israel or its king in the story. The Book of Jonah appears to have a self-contained message that transcends its historical context.[xviii]

Seeking another approach, the twentieth century scholars Yehoshua Bachrach,[xviii] Elyakim Ben-Menahem,[xviii] and Uriel Simon[xviii] cite Jonah's protest from the end of the book:

He prayed to the Lord, saying, "O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. (Jon. 4:2)

These scholars understand Jonah's protest as a rejection of the very idea of repentance. To support their reading, they cite a passage from the Jerusalem Talmud:

It was asked of wisdom: what is the punishment for a sinner? She replied, Misfortune pursues sinners (Prov. 13:21). It was asked of prophecy: what is the punishment for a sinner? She replied, The person who sins, only he shall die (Ezek. 18:4, 20). It was asked of God: what is the punishment for a sinner? He replied, let him repent and gain atonement. (J.T. Makkot 2:6 [31d])

From this point of view, there is a fundamental struggle between God on the one hand and wisdom and prophecy on the other. Jonah was not caught up in the details of this specific prophecy; rather, he was protesting the very existence of repentance, preferring instead that God mete out immediate punishment to sinners.

Although this approach is more comprehensive than the earlier interpretations, it remains incomplete. Much of the book

has little to do with repentance or God's mercy – particularly Jonah's lengthy encounter with the sailors in chapter 1 who never needed to repent, and his prayer in chapter 2 where Jonah likely did not repent. Aside from downplaying the role of the sailors in chapter 1, Uriel Simon sidesteps Jonah's prayer by contending that it was not an original part of the story.[xviii] Regardless of its origins, however, Jonah's prayer appears integral to the book, and likely contains one of the keys to unlocking the overall purposes of the narrative.[xviii] Finally, most prophets appear to have accepted the ideas of repentance and God's mercy. Why should Jonah alone have fled from his mission?

Although these interpreters are correct in stressing Jonah's protest against God's attribute of mercy in 4:2, Jonah also disapproved of that attribute particularly when God applies it to pagans. It appears that this theme lies at the heart of the book, creating an insurmountable conflict between Jonah and God. Jonah was unwilling to accept God's mercy even to the most ethically perfected pagans because that manifestation of mercy was antithetical to Jonah's desired conception of God.

CHAPTER 1

Although they were pagans, the sailors were superior people. They prayed to their deities during the storm, treated Jonah with respect even after he had been selected by the lottery as the cause of their troubles, and went to remarkable lengths to avoid throwing him overboard even after he confessed. They implored God for mercy. When they finally did throw Jonah into the sea, they made vows to God.

Jonah, on the other hand, displays none of these lofty qualities. He rebelled against God by fleeing and then slept while the terrified sailors prayed. Remarkably, the captain sounds like a prophet when addressing Jonah— "How can you be sleeping so soundly! Up, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will be kind to us and we will not perish" (1:6)—while Jonah sounds like the inattentive audience a prophet typically must rebuke. The captain even uses the same words in 1:6 (kum kera) that God had in commanding Jonah to go to Nineveh in 1:2 (kum lekh…u-kera).

When Jonah finally does speak in the text, the narrator divides the prophet's words between a direct quotation and narrative:

"I am a Hebrew! (Ivri anokhi)," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made both sea and land." The men were greatly terrified, and they asked him, "What have you done?" And when the men learned that he was fleeing from the service of the Lord – for so he told them . . . (1:9-10)

Although Jonah told the sailors what they wanted to know, that his flight from God had caused the storm, it is the narrator who relates those crucial words rather than placing them into Jonah's direct speech. Moreover, Jonah's statement that he was a Hebrew who worshipped the true God appears tangential to the terrified sailors' concerns. Why would the narrator frame Jonah's statement this way?

The term "Ivri (Hebrew)" often is used when contrasting Israelites with non-Israelites.[xviii] In this vein, Elyakim Ben-Menahem notes that Jonah's usage of Ivri in 1:9 is fitting, since he was contrasting himself with pagans. Jonah's perceived dissimilarity to the pagan sailors is the main emphasis of chapter 1. Ben-Menahem further suggests that the text does not report Jonah's response to the captain so that his dramatic proclamation in 1:9 could appear as his first words recorded in the book.[xviii] This contrast with the sailors was most important to Jonah; therefore, the narrator placed only these words in his direct quotation.

To explain the bifurcation of Jonah's statement, Abarbanel advances a midrashic-style comment: "The intent [of the word Ivri] is not only that he was from the Land of the Hebrews; rather, he was a sinner [avaryan] who was transgressing God's commandment." Abarbanel surmises that the sailors deduced from this wordplay on Ivri that Jonah was fleeing! For Abarbanel's suggestion to work as the primary meaning of the text, of course, the sailors would have to have known Hebrew and to have been as ingenious as Abarbanel to have caught that wordplay. Though not a compelling peshat comment, Abarbanel's insight is conceptually illuminating regarding the overall purpose of chapter 1.

Jonah emphatically contrasted himself with the pagan sailors; however, the narrator instead has contrasted Jonah with God. In chapter 1, Jonah was indeed Abarbanel's Ivri—a prophetic hero of true faith contrasting himself with pagans, and an avaryan—a sinner against God.

CHAPTER 2

After waiting three days inside the fish, Jonah finally prayed to God. Some (for example, Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel and Malbim) conclude that Jonah must have repented, since God ordered the fish to spew Jonah out, and Jonah subsequently went to Nineveh. However, there is no indication of repentance in Jonah's prayer.[xviii] One might argue further that God's enjoining Jonah to return to Nineveh in 3:1-2 indicates that Jonah had indeed not repented.[xviii] In his prayer, Jonah was more concerned with being saved and serving God in the Temple than he was in the reasons God was punishing him (2:5, 8).

Jonah concluded his prayer with two triumphant verses:

They who cling to empty folly forsake their own welfare, but I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You; what I have vowed I will perform. Deliverance is the Lord's! (2:9-10)

Ibn Ezra and Radak believe that Jonah was contrasting himself with the sailors who had made vows in 1:16. Unlike their insincere (in Jonah's opinion) vows, Jonah intended to keep his vow to serve God in the Temple. Abarbanel and Malbim, however, do not think that Jonah would allude to the sailors. In their reading of the book, the sailors are only tangential to their understanding of the story, which specifically concerns Nineveh as the Assyrian capital. Instead, they maintain that Jonah was forecasting the insincere (in Jonah's opinion) repentance of the Ninevites.

One may combine their opinions: the sailors and Ninevites both are central to the book of Jonah, each receiving a chapter of coverage. They were superior people—the sailors all along, and the Ninevites after their repentance—but Jonah despised them because they were pagans. Jonah's prayer ties the episodes with the sailors and Ninevites together, creating a unified theme for the book, namely, that Jonah contrasts himself with truly impressive pagans. It seems that Rashi has the smoothest reading:

They who cling to empty folly: those who worship idols; forsake their own welfare: their fear of God, from whom all kindness emanates. But I, in contrast, am not like this; I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You. (Rashi on Jon. 2:9-10)

As in chapter 1, Jonah's contrasting himself with pagans is the climactic theme of his prayer in chapter 2. To paraphrase the prayer in chapter 2, Jonah was saying "Ivri anokhi [I am a Hebrew]" (1:9)! I worship the true God in contrast to all pagans—illustrated by the sailors, and later by the Ninevites. At the same time, Jonah still remained in his rebellion against God; he still was an avaryan [sinner]. According to this view, God allowed Jonah out of the fish to teach him a lesson, not because he had repented.

CHAPTER 3

Did Jonah obey God when he went to Nineveh? Radak assumes that he did. In contrast, Malbim believes that Jonah rebelled even as he walked through the wicked city. He should have explicitly offered repentance as an option, instead of proclaiming the unqualified doom of the Ninevites.

The Ninevites, on the other hand, effected one of the greatest repentance movements in biblical history. The king of Nineveh even said what one might have expected Jonah to say: "Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from His wrath, so that we do not perish" (3:8-9). We noted earlier that the same contrast may be said of the captain of the ship, who sounded like a prophet while Jonah rebelled against God.

Nineveh's repentance might amaze the reader, but it did not impress Jonah. Abarbanel and Malbim (on 4:1-2) suggest that Jonah was outraged that God spared the Ninevites after their repentance for social crimes, since they remained pagans. This interpretation seems to lie close to the heart of the book. Jonah did not care about the outstandingly ethical behavior of the sailors nor the impressively penitent Ninevites. Jonah still was the Ivri he proclaimed himself to be in 1:9, sharply contrasting himself with the pagans he encountered, and thereby remaining distanced from the God he knew would have compassion on them.

CHAPTER 4

This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to the Lord, saying, "O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live." (4:1-3)

Outraged by God's sparing of Nineveh, Jonah revealed that he had fled initially because he knew that God would not punish the Ninevites. In his protest, Jonah appealed to God's attributes of mercy, but with a significant deviation from the classical formula in the aftermath of the Golden Calf:

The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness . . . (Exod. 34:6)

For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. (Jon. 4:2)[xviii]

Jonah substituted "renouncing punishment (ve-niham al ha-ra'ah)" for "faithfulness (ve-emet)." Jonah's God of truth would not spare pagans, yet God Himself had charged Jonah with a mission to save pagans! Thus, God's prophecy at the outset of the narrative challenged Jonah's very conception of God. Jonah would rather die than live with a God who did not conform to his religious outlook. Ironically, then, Jonah's profound fear and love of God are what caused him to flee initially, and to demand that God take his life.

In an attempt to expose the fallacy of Jonah's argument, God demonstrated Jonah's willingness to die stemmed not only from idealistic motives, but also from physical discomfort:

"O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish . . . . Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live." The Lord replied, "Are you that deeply grieved?" (4:1-4)

And when the sun rose, God provided a sultry east wind; the sun beat down on Jonah's head, and he became faint. He begged for death, saying, "I would rather die than live." Then God said to Jonah, "Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?" "Yes," he replied, "so deeply that I want to die" (4:8-9)

God added a surprising variable when explaining His sparing of the Ninevites. Although it had seemed from chapter 3 that the Ninevites had saved themselves with their repentance, God suddenly offered a different reason[xviii]:

Then the Lord said: "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!" (4:10-11)

God had been willing to destroy the Ninevites for their immorality, but forgave them once they repented. Although the Ninevites had misguided beliefs, God had compassion on them without expecting that they become monotheists. After

all, they could not distinguish their right from their left in the sense that they served false deities. For Jonah, however, true justice required punishing even the penitent Ninevites because they still were pagans.

To paraphrase God's response: You, Jonah, wanted to die for the highest of ideals. However, you also were willing to die rather than face heat. Your human limitations are now fully exposed. How, then, can you expect to understand God's attributes?[xviii] God has little patience for human immorality, but can tolerate moral people with misguided beliefs. Jonah's stark silence at the end of the book reflects the gulf between God and himself. He remained an "Ivri" to the very end.

CONCLUSION

The story of Jonah is about prophecy, the pinnacle of love of God, and the highest human spiritual achievement. But prophecy also causes increased anguish, as the prophet apprehends the infinite gap between God and humanity more intensely than anyone else. Jonah's spiritual attainments were obviously far superior to those of the sailors or the people of Nineveh – he most certainly could tell his right hand from his left. The closer he came to God, the more he simultaneously gained recognition of how little he truly knew of God's ways. This realization tortured him to the point of death.

God taught Jonah that he did not need to wish for death. He had influenced others for the better and had attained a deeper level of understanding of God and of his own place in this world. Despite his passionate commitment to God, Jonah needed to learn to appreciate moral people and to bring them guidance. He had a vital role to play in allowing God's mercy to be manifest.

The Book of Jonah is a larger-than-life story of every individual who seeks closeness with God. There is a paradoxical recognition that the closer one comes to God, the more one becomes conscious of the chasm separating God's wisdom from our own. There is a further challenge in being absolutely committed to God, while still respecting moral people who espouse different beliefs. A midrash places one final line in Jonah's mouth: "Conduct Your world according to the attribute of mercy!"[xviii] This midrash pinpoints the humbling lesson Jonah should have learned from this remarkable episode, and that every reader must learn.

[xviii] This chapter appeared in Hayyim Angel, Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim (New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 163-172.

[xviii] See, for example, Mekhilta Bo, J.T. Sanhedrin 11:5, Pesahim 87b, cited by Rashi, Kara, Ibn Ezra, and Radak.

[xviii] Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 9, cited by R. Saadyah (Emunot ve-De'ot 3:5), Rashi, Kara, Radak, and R. Isaiah of Trani.

[xviii] See further discussion and critique of the aforementioned views in Uriel Simon, The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), introduction pp. 7-12.

[xviii] Yehoshua Bachrach, Yonah ben Amitai ve-Eliyahu: le-Hora'at Sefer Yonah al pi ha-Mekorot (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: The Religious Department of the Youth and Pioneering Division of the Zionist Organization, 1967), p. 51.

[xviii] Elyakim Ben-Menahem, Da'at Mikra: Jonah, in Twelve Prophets vol. 1 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1973), introduction pp. 7-9.

[xviii] Simon, JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah, introduction pp. 12-13.

[xviii] Simon, JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah, introduction pp. 33-35; commentary pp. 15-17.

[xviii] See further critique of Simon in David Henshke, "The Meaning of the Book of Jonah and Its Relationship to Yom

Kippur," (Hebrew) Megadim 29 (1998), pp. 77-78; and see response of Uriel Simon to Henshke, "True Prayer and True Repentance," (Hebrew), Megadim 31 (2000), pp. 127-131.

[xviii] See, e.g., Gen. 39:14, 17; 40:15; 41:12; 43:32; Exod. 1:15, 16, 19; 2:7, 11, 13; 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3. Cf. Gen. Rabbah 42:13: R. Judah said: [ha-Ivri signifies that] the whole world was on one side (ever) while [Abraham] was on the other side (ever).

[xviii] Ben-Menahem, Da'at Mikra: Jonah, pp. 6-7. In his introduction, pp. 3-4, Ben-Menahem adds that chapter 1 is arranged chiastically and Jonah's proclamation in v. 9 lies at the center of that structure, further highlighting its centrality to the chapter.

[xviii] Cf. Rashi, Kara, and R. Eliezer of Beaugency. Even Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel, and Malbim, who assert that Jonah must have agreed to go to Nineveh, grant that Jonah was unhappy about this concession. Adopting a middle position, Sforno suggests that Jonah repented, but the prayer included in the book is a psalm of gratitude after Jonah already was saved. Rob Barrett ("Meaning More than They Say: The Conflict between Y-H-W-H and Jonah," JSOT 37:2 (2012), p. 244) suggests additional ironies in Jonah's prayer: Jonah proclaims that he has called out to God (2:3), but in fact has refused to call out to Nineveh or to God while on the boat. Jonah states that God saved him because he turned to God, while he is fleeing God's command.

[xviii] Ibn Ezra counters that Jonah specifically stayed near Nineveh so that he would be ready to go with a second command. Alternatively, Ben-Menahem (Da'at Mikra: Jonah, p. 13) suggests that Jonah might have thought that God had sent someone else.

[xviii] For further analysis of the interrelationship between Joel, Jonah, and Exodus 34, see Thomas B. Dozeman, "Inner Biblical Interpretation of Y-H-W-H's Gracious and Compassionate Character," JBL 108 (1989), pp. 207-223.

[xviii] For fuller exploration of this and related disparities, see Hayyim Angel, "The Uncertainty Principle of Repentance in the Books of Jonah and Joel," in Angel, Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 148-161.

[xviii] See further discussion in Bachrach, Yonah ben Amitai ve-Eliyahu, pp. 66-68.

[xviii] Midrash Jonah, ed. Jellinek, p. 102, quoted in Simon, JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah, introduction p. 12. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests that during the entire episode, Jonah needed to learn important lessons in becoming a prophet. God therefore sent him on this initial mission to Nineveh. Only after this episode did God send him on a more favorable prophetic mission to Israel (II Kings 14:23-27). "Commentary on Jonah" (Hebrew), HaMa'ayan 51:1 (Tishri 5771-2010), pp. 8-9.

KOHELET: SANCTIFYING THE HUMAN PERSPECTIVE[xviii]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

INTRODUCTION

Tanakh is intended to shape and guide our lives. Therefore, seeking out peshat—the primary intent of the authors of Tanakh—is a religious imperative and must be handled with great care and responsibility.

Our Sages recognized a hazard inherent to learning. In attempting to understand the text, nobody can be truly detached and objective. Consequently, people's personal agendas cloud their ability to view the text in an unbiased fashion. An example of such a viewpoint is the verse, "let us make man" from the creation narrative, which uses the

plural “us” instead of the singular “me” (Gen. 1:26):

R. Samuel b. Nahman said in R. Jonatan’s name: When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, “And God said: Let Us make man,” etc., he said: “Sovereign of the Universe! Why do You furnish an excuse to heretics (for maintaining a plurality of gods)?” “Write,” replied He; “And whoever wishes to err will err.” (Gen. Rabbah 8:8)

The midrash notes that there were those who were able to derive support for their theology of multiple deities from the this verse, the antithesis of a basic Torah value. God would not compromise truth because some people are misguided. It also teaches that if they wish, people will be able to find pretty much anything as support for their agendas under the guise of scholarship. Whoever wishes to err will err.

However, a second hazard exists, even for those sincerely seeking the word of God:

It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together seventy-two elders and placed them in seventy-two [separate] rooms, without telling them why he had brought them together, and he went in to each one of them and said to him, Translate for me the Torah of Moses your master. God then prompted each one of them and they all conceived the same idea and wrote for him, God created in the beginning, I shall make man in image and likeness. (Megillah 9a)

This narrative reflects the concern that by popularizing the Torah through translation, less learned people may inadvertently derive the wrong meaning from the “plural” form of “Let Us make man.” For this anticipated audience, God inspired the elders to deviate from the truth and translate with the singular form so that unwitting people would not err.

While this educational discussion is central to all Tanakh, Ecclesiastes probably concerned our Sages and later commentators more than any other biblical book. By virtue of its inclusion in Tanakh, Ecclesiastes’ teaching becomes truth in our tradition. Regarding any book of Tanakh, if there are those who wish to err in the conclusions they draw, they will do so. However, our Sages worried that Ecclesiastes might cause even the most sincerely religious people to draw conclusions antithetical to the Torah, thereby causing greater religious harm than good. and consequently they considered censoring it from Tanakh:

R. Judah son of R. Samuel b. Shilat said in Rav’s name: The Sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory; yet why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching. (Shabbat 30b)

Our Sages discerned internal contradictions in Ecclesiastes, but they also worried that Ecclesiastes contained external contradictions, that is, verses that appear to contradict the values of the Torah. They addressed this alarming prospect by concluding that since Ecclesiastes begins and ends with religiously appropriate teachings, those verses set the tone for the remainder of its contents. If one reaches anti-Torah conclusions from Ecclesiastes, it means that something was read out of context. A striking illustration of this principle is a midrashic teaching on Ecclesiastes 11:9. The verse reads:

O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth. Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes—but know well that God will call you to account for all such things.

To which our Sages respond:

R. Benjamin b. Levi stated: The Sages wanted to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, for they found in it ideas that leaned toward heresy. They argued: Was it right that Solomon should have said the following: O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth (Ecc. 11:9)? Moshe said, So that you do not follow your heart and eyes (Num. 15:39), but Solomon said, Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes (Ecc. 11:9)! What then? Is all restraint to be removed? Is there neither justice nor judge? When, however, he said, But know well that God will call you to account for all such things (Ecc. 11:9), they admitted that Solomon had

spoken well. (Lev. Rabbah 28:1; cf. Ecc. Rabbah 1:3)

Were our Sages genuinely worried about people not reading the second half of a verse and consequently adopting a hedonistic lifestyle? Based on the midrashic method of reading verses out of their natural context, this verse likely posed a more serious threat in their society than it would for a pashtan who reads verses in context. The best defense against such egregious errors always is good peshat. This chapter will briefly consider the challenges of learning peshat in Ecclesiastes, and then outline a means of approaching Ecclesiastes as the unique book it is.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the level of derash, many of our Sages' comments on Ecclesiastes appear to be speaking about an entirely different book, one that is about Torah. The word "Torah" never appears in Ecclesiastes. Such midrashim appear to be radically reinterpreting Ecclesiastes to make it consistent with the rest of Tanakh. Similarly, many later commentators, including those generally committed to peshat, sometimes follow this midrashic lead of radical reinterpretation of the verses they find troubling.

This approach is rooted in the dual responsibility of our commentators. As scholars, they attempt to ascertain the original intent of the biblical text. However, they also are students and teachers of Jewish tradition. Their educational sensitivities often enter the interpretive arena, particularly when the surface reading of Ecclesiastes appears to threaten traditional values.[xviii]

For example, Kohelet opens by challenging the enduring value of the two leading manifestations of human success: wealth and wisdom. That Kohelet focuses on the ephemerality of wealth and physical enjoyment is not surprising, but his focus on the limitations and vulnerability of wisdom is stunning:

For as wisdom grows, vexation grows; to increase learning is to increase heartache. (1:18)

Sforno is so uncomfortable with this indictment of wisdom that he reinterprets the verse as referring to the ostensible wisdom of heretics. I often wonder if the parshan himself believes that a suggestion of this nature is peshat, that is, does he assume that Kohelet cannot possibly intend what he appears to be saying; or is he reinterpreting primarily to deflect such teachings from a less learned readership, as did the authors of the Septuagint in the Talmudic passage cited above.[xviii]

Some commentators attempt to resolve certain internal and external contradictions in Ecclesiastes by attributing otherwise troubling (to these commentators) statements to other people—generally evil people or fools. Take, for example, one of Kohelet's most life-affirming declarations:

Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God. Let your clothes always be freshly washed, and your head never lack ointment. Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun—all your fleeting days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the means you acquire under the sun. (9:7-9)

Ibn Ezra — the quintessential pashtan—writes, "This is the folly that people say in their hearts." Ibn Ezra maintains that Kohelet's own view is the opposite of what this passage says.[xviii] However, such attempts to escape difficult verses appear arbitrary. Nothing in the text signals a change in speaker (particularly if Kohelet wishes to reject that speaker's views), leaving decisions of attribution entirely in the hands of the commentator.[xviii]

Commentators also devote much energy to reconciling the internal contradictions of Ecclesiastes. See, for example, the lengthy discussions of Ibn Ezra (on 7:3) and Mordechai Zer-Kavod (introduction in Da'at Mikra, pp. 24-33). Some reconciliations are more textually convincing than others. Regardless, it is critical to ask why there are so many contradictions in the first place.[xviii] That so many strategies were employed to bring Ecclesiastes in line with the rest of Tanakh and with itself amply demonstrates that this Megillah is unusual. Ecclesiastes needs to be understood

on its own terms rather than being reinterpreted away. Pashtanim also developed a methodology for confronting Ecclesiastes' challenges directly, as will be discussed presently.[xviii]

ATTEMPTING A PESHAT READING: GUIDELINES

In order to approach Ecclesiastes, we must consider a few of its verifiable features. Ecclesiastes is written about life and religious meaning in this world. The expression tahat ha-shemesh (beneath the sun) appears twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, and nowhere else in the rest of Tanakh. Tahat ha shamayim (under heaven) appears three additional times, and Rashi and Rashbam[xviii] maintain that this expression is synonymous with tahat ha shemesh. In the same vein, people are called ro'ei ha-shemesh (those who behold the sun) in 7:11. The word ani (I) appears twenty-nine times, and its appearance is not grammatically necessary. The emphasis on tahat ha-shemesh demonstrates a this-worldly perspective, while the repetition of the word ani highlights the personal nature of the presentation. Michael V. Fox notes the difference between how 1:12-14 is written:

I, Kohelet, was king in Jerusalem over Israel. I set my mind to study and to probe with wisdom all that happens under the sun.—An unhappy business that, which God gave men to be concerned with! I observed all the happenings beneath the sun, and I found that all is futile and pursuit of wind.

Fox then imagines how these verses could have been written without the focus on the personal narrative:

Studying and probing with wisdom all that happens under the sun is an unhappy business, which God gave men to be concerned with! All the happenings beneath the sun are futile and pursuit of wind.

Without the personal reflections that are central to Kohelet's thought, we are left with a series of dogmatic pronouncements. Kohelet's presentation invites readers into his mind as he goes through a personal struggle and process of reflection.[xviii]

Given this starkly anthropocentric perspective, Ecclesiastes should reflect different perspectives than the theocentric viewpoint of revealed prophecy. All people perceive the same reality that Kohelet does. On the basis of this observation, R. Simeon ben Manasia maintained that Ecclesiastes was not inspired altogether:

R. Simeon ben Manasia says: The Song of Songs defiles the hands because it was composed with divine inspiration. Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands because it is only Solomon's wisdom. (Tosefta Yadayim 2:14)[xviii]

Though his minority view was rejected by our tradition (which insists that Ecclesiastes is divinely inspired), Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of human wisdom.

The word adam appears forty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, referring to all humanity (except for one instance in 7:28, which refers specifically to males). Kohelet speaks in a universal language and does not limit its discourse to a Jewish audience. Torah and other specifically Jewish themes do not appear in Ecclesiastes, which focuses on more universal hokhmah (wisdom) and yirat Elokim (fear of God).

Similarly, God's personal name—the Tetragrammaton—never appears in Ecclesiastes. Only the generic name Elokim appears (forty times), signifying both the universalistic discourse of Ecclesiastes and also a distant, transcendant Deity, rather than a close and personal relationship with God. In Ecclesiastes, God appears remote, and it is impossible to fathom His means of governing the world. For example, Kohelet warns:

Keep your mouth from being rash, and let not your throat be quick to bring forth speech before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth; that is why your words should be few. (5:1)

Since God is so infinitely superior, there is no purpose and much harm in protesting against God (cf. 3:11; 7:13-14).

Moreover, Kohelet never speaks directly to God; he speaks about God and the human condition in a sustained monologue to his audience.

Tying together these strands of evidence, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) attempts to explain why Ecclesiastes is read (primarily by Ashkenazim[xviii]) on Sukkot:

It is written in Zechariah chapter 14 that in the future the nations of the world will come [to Jerusalem] on Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot to bring offerings…. And this was the custom in King Solomon's time. This is why Solomon recited Ecclesiastes on Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot in the presence of the wise of the nations…. This is why it contains only the name Elokim, since [non-Jews] know only that Name of God. (Harhev Davar on Num. 29:12)

Needless to say, this means of justifying a custom is anachronistic from a historical vantage point. Nonetheless, Netziv's keen perception of Kohelet's addressing all humanity with universal religious wisdom captures the unique flavor of this book.

From a human perspective, life is filled with contradictions. Ecclesiastes' textual contradictions reflect aspects of the multifaceted and often paradoxical human condition. Significantly, Ecclesiastes' inclusion in Tanakh and its consideration as a divinely inspired book elevates human perception into the realm of the sacred, joining revelation and received wisdom as aspects of religious truth.

While Ecclesiastes contains truth, it is but one aspect of truth rather than the whole truth. For example, Kohelet considers oppression an unchangeable reality:

I further observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors—with none to comfort them. Then I accounted those who died long since more fortunate than those who are still living; and happier than either are those who have not yet come into being and have never witnessed the miseries that go on under the sun. (4:1-3)

Kohelet never calls on God to stop this oppression, nor does he exhort society to stop it. He simply laments that human history repeats itself in an endless cycle of oppression. Kohelet sets this tone in 1:4-7 by analogizing human existence to the cyclical patterns in nature (Ibn Ezra).

In contrast, prophecy is committed to changing society so that it ultimately matches the ideal messianic vision. While a human perspective sees only repetitions of errors in history, prophecy reminds us that current reality need not mimic past history.

Kohelet grapples with the realities that wise/righteous people do not necessarily live longer or more comfortable lives than the foolish/wicked and that wisdom itself is limited and fallible:

Here is a frustration that occurs in the world: sometimes an upright man is requited according to the conduct of the scoundrel; and sometimes the scoundrel is requited according to the conduct of the upright. I say all that is frustration…. For I have set my mind to learn wisdom and to observe the business that goes on in the world—even to the extent of going without sleep day and night—and I have observed all that God brings to pass. Indeed, man cannot guess the events that occur under the sun. For man tries strenuously, but fails to guess them; and even if a sage should think to discover them he would not be able to guess them. (8:14-17)

Kohelet maintains both sides of the classical conflict: God is just, but there are injustices manifested in the real world. While Kohelet cannot solve this dilemma, he discovers a productive response. Once a person can accept that the world appears unfair, one can realize that everything is a gift from God rather than a necessary consequence for righteousness.[xviii] We ultimately cannot fathom how God governs this world, but we can fulfill our religious obligations and grow from all experiences. Wisdom always is preferred to folly,[xviii] even though wisdom is limited and the wise

cannot guarantee themselves a more comfortable life than fools, and everyone dies regardless.[xviii]

On a deeper level, the human psyche is profoundly attracted to being godlike. This tendency lies at the heart of the sins of Eve (Gen. 3:5, 22) and the builders of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9).[xviii] Kohelet blames God for creating us with this desire while limiting us, rendering this innate drive impossible (7:14; cf. Rashbam, Ibn Ezra on 1:13). Confrontation with our own limitations leads to the extreme frustration manifest in Ecclesiastes. However, once we can accept that we cannot be God, this realization should lead to humility and awe of God:

He brings everything to pass precisely at its time; He also puts eternity in their mind, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass. Thus I realized that the only worthwhile thing there is for them is to enjoy themselves and do what is good in their lifetime; also, that whenever a man does eat and drink and get enjoyment out of all his wealth, it is a gift of God. I realized, too, that whatever God has brought to pass will recur evermore: Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it—and God has brought to pass that men revere Him. (Ecc. 3:11-14)[xviii]

Michael V. Fox summarizes Ecclesiastes' purpose as follows:

When the belief in a grand causal order collapses, human reason and self-confidence fail with it. This failure is what God intends, for after it comes fear, and fear is what God desires (3:14). And that is not the end of the matter, for God allows us to build small meanings from the shards of reason.[xviii]

While Kohelet challenges us at every turn, he simultaneously provides us the opportunity to find meaning beneath the unsolvable dilemmas.

Similarly, the universality of death tortures Kohelet. Once Kohelet accepts the reality of death, however, he concludes that it is preferable to attend funerals rather than parties, since focusing on our mortality will encourage us to live a more meaningful life:

It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting; for that is the end of every man, and a living one should take it to heart. (7:2, cf. Rashbam)

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik expands on this idea, and says that it is not that there can only be meaning in life if there is death:

The finite experience of being arouses man's conscience, challenges him to accomplish as much as possible during his short life span. In a word, finiteness is the source of morality…. For orgiastic man, time is reduced to one dimension; only the present moment counts. There is no future to be anticipated, no past to be remembered.[xviii]

Certain paradoxes and limitations are inherent to human existence, and not even the wisest of all men can make them disappear. Instead, Kohelet teaches us how to confront these challenges honestly and then embark on a process of intense existential frustration that ultimately leads to a greater recognition of the infinite gap between ourselves and God, leading in turn to humility and fear of God, leading in turn to living more religiously in every sense.[xviii]

CONCLUSION

A further word: Because Kohelet was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He listened and tested the soundness (izzen ve-hikker) of many maxims. (12:9)

Kohelet relentlessly challenges received wisdom rather than blindly accepting it. This process is accompanied by formidable dangers and responsibilities; but ignoring that pursuit comes with even greater dangers. Kohelet never abandons his beliefs nor his normative sense of what all God-fearing people should do; yet he also never abandons nor

solves his questions and his struggles with human existence. By presenting this process through a personal account with inspired wisdom, he becomes the teacher of every thinking religious individual.

One midrash suggests that Solomon made the Torah accessible in a manner that nobody had done since the Torah was revealed. He taught those who were not prophets how to develop a relationship with God:

He listened and tested the soundness (izzen ve-hikker) of many maxims (12:9)—he made handles (oznayim) to the Torah…. R. Yosei said: Imagine a big basket full of produce without any handle, so that it could not be lifted, until one clever man came and made handles to it, and then it began to be carried by the handles. So until Solomon arose, no one could properly understand the words of the Torah, but when Solomon arose, all began to comprehend the Torah. (Song of Songs Rabbah 1:8)

Tanakh needed prophecy so that we could transcend ourselves and our limited perspectives to aspire to a more perfected self and world, and to reach out across the infinite gulf to God. Ultimately, however, it also needed Ecclesiastes to teach how to have faith from the human perspective, so that we may grow in our fear of Heaven and observe God's commandments in truth.

Notes

This article appeared in Hayyim Angel, Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim (New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 288-300.

[xviii] Throughout this chapter, "Ecclesiastes" refers to the name of the book, and "Kohelet" refers to the author. This chapter is adapted from Hayyim Angel, "Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective," Sukkot Reader (New York: Tebah, 2008), pp. 39-54; reprinted in Angel, Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 190-204.

[xviii] For a survey and analysis of some of the distinctions between the readings of Rashi and Rashbam on Ecclesiastes, see Robert B. Salters, "The Exegesis of Rashi and Rashbam on Qoheleth," in Rashi et la Culture Juive en France du Nord au Moyen Age, ed. Gilbert Dahan, Gerard Nahon and Elie Nicolas (Paris: E. Peeters, 1997), pp. 151-161.

[xviii] For a discussion of the interplay between text and commentary regarding the faith of Abraham, see Hayyim Angel, "Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith: The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Avraham Narratives," in Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003), pp. 192-212; reprinted in Angel, Through an Opaque Lens (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 127-154.

[xviii] It should be noted that Ibn Ezra suggests an alternative interpretation for these verses. Precisely because he is so committed to peshat, Ibn Ezra occasionally resorts to attribution of difficult (to Ibn Ezra) verses to other speakers instead of radically reinterpreting those verses. See, e.g., Ibn Ezra on Hab. 1:1, 12; Ps. 89:1; Ecc. 3:19.

[xviii] Beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some critical scholars employed the opposite tactic, i.e., that Eccelesiastes was a work that denied beliefs found elsewhere in Tanakh, and a later "Orthodox glossator" added to the text to correct those errors. One traditional rabbinic commentator—Shadal—actually adopted this argument in his commentary (published in 1860) and expressed the wish that our Sages would have banned Eccelesiastes from Tanakh. Four years after publishing his commentary, however, he fully regretted and retracted that view and expressed appreciation of Eccelesiastes' religious value. For a discussion of Shadal's initial interpretation of Eccelesiastes in light of his anti-haskalah polemics, see Shemuel Vargon, "The Identity and Dating of the Author of Eccelesiastes According to Shadal" (Hebrew), in Iyyunei Mikra u Parshanut 5, Presented in Honor of Uriel Simon, ed. Moshe Garsiel et al. (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2000), pp. 365-384.

[xviii] Ibn Ezra and those who followed his approach assumed that intelligent people do not contradict themselves: “It is known that even the least of the sages would not compose a book and contradict himself” (Ibn Ezra on Ecc. 7:3). However, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik considered this perspective Aristotelian. Jewish thought, in contrast, accepts dialectical understandings of humanity and halakhah (Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah, ed. Eli D. Clark et al. [Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2007], p. 29). Cf. Michael V. Fox: “Even without systematically harmonizing the text, the reader tends to push Qohelet to one side or another, because the Western model of rational assent regards consistency as a primary test of truth. But Qohelet continues to straddle the two views of reality, wavering uncomfortably but honestly between them” (A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes [Grand Rapids: MI, Eerdmans, 1999], p. 134).

See also Shalom Carmy and David Shatz, who write that “the Bible obviously deviates, in many features, from what philosophers (especially those trained in the analytic tradition) have come to regard as philosophy… Philosophers try to avoid contradicting themselves. When contradictions appear, they are either a source of embarrassment or a spur to developing a higher order dialectic to accommodate the tension between the theses. The Bible, by contrast, often juxtaposes contradictory ideas, without explanation or apology: Ecclesiastes is entirely constructed on this principle. The philosophically more sophisticated work of harmonizing the contradictions in the biblical text is left to the exegetical literature” (“The Bible as a Source for Philosophical Reflection,” in History of Jewish Philosophy vol. 2, ed. Daniel H. Frank & Oliver Leaman [London: Routledge, 1997], pp. 13-14).
[xviii] See further discussions in Gavriel H. Cohn, Iyyunim ba-Hamesh ha-Megillot (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 2006), pp. 253-258; Fox, A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up, pp. 1-26.

[xviii] The commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on Qoheleth, ed. and trans. by Sara Japhet and Robert B. Salters (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985).

[xviii] Michael V. Fox, The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), introduction p. xvii.

[xviii] See discussion of sacred scriptures ritually defiling the hands in Sid Z. Leiman, The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991), pp. 104-120.

[xviii] In Tractate Soferim chapter 14, the practice of reading Ecclesiastes is not mentioned when the other Megillot are. The first references to the custom of reading Ecclesiastes on Sukkot are in the prayer books of Rashi and Mahzor Vitry (eleventh century).

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7; 11:9.

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 7:12, 19; 8:1; 9:18; 10:12.

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 2:13-15; 6:8; 7:15-16, 23; 8:17; 9:1, 11, 16.

[xviii] In relation to the introduction of this chapter, Lyle Eslinger (“The Enigmatic Plurals Like ‘One of Us’ [Genesis I 26, III 22, and XI 7] in Hyperchronic Perspective,” VT 56 [2006], pp. 171-184) proposes that the “plural” form of God that appears three times in Genesis expresses the rhetorical purpose of creating boundaries between God and humanity. The first (“Let Us make man”) distinguishes between God and the godlike human; the other two occur when the boundaries are threatened by Eve and then the builders of the Tower of Babel.

[xviii] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 5:6; 8:12; 12:13.

[xviii] Fox, A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up, p. 49.

[xviii] Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah, p. 33.

[xviii] In this regard, Eccelesiastes resembles the Book of Job. While a rigid system of direct reward and punishment is refuted by empirical evidence, this belief is replaced by an insistence on humble submission to God's will and the supreme value of faithfulness to God. Suffering has ultimate meaning even if we cannot fathom God's ways. See Michael V. Fox, "Job the Pious," ZAW 117 (2005), pp. 351-366.