

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 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his 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. New: a limited number of copies of the first attachment will now be available at Beth Sholom on the Shabbas table!

With an especially busy and hectic period recently, I did not have time to compose a new message for this week. Rather, I am adapting a message I wrote a few years ago. I am posting a day early this week, because we have an obligation that will take up much of tonight and tomorrow until mid afternoon. Also, we shall be out of town much of the time between Rosh Hashanah and Kol Nidre, so I shall be unable to send my Devrei Torah packet next week.

Elul is the perfect time for Jews to do teshuvah, as we prepare for the High Holy Days. Rosh Hashanah is the time when we acknowledge God's kingship. Starting with Rosh Hashanah, until Yom Kippur, we replace "Kel HaGadol" with "Melech HaGadol" in our davening – further to emphasize our acceptance of God as our King. On Rosh Hashanah, God issues the (tentative) sentence of our destiny in the coming year; God seals this judgment on Yom Kippur. Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur are the time when God grants us forgiveness for our sins – but only if first we have resolved our obligations and sought forgiveness from our fellow humans.

Because we all interact with many people, it is impossible to seek forgiveness from everyone in a single day. For that reason, we have the entire month of Elul, the time when we have a daily reminder from the shofar, in which to seek forgiveness. This month is when yeshiva students ask everyone, "Will you mochel me?" (Will you forgive me for any sins I may have done to you during the past year?) Some rabbis recommend that one should limit the request for forgiveness to those one has actually harmed, to lessen the chance that excessive apologies could seem insincere or make one blase about the exercise. However, one can cause another pain without knowing that he or she has done so. With this perspective, it may be appropriate to ask forgiveness more broadly than only those one is certain to have harmed.

It is impossible for complex humans to live together or interact frequently without occasionally offending others. Good people often offend others without intending to do so. Another person interprets a word differently than intended, an innocent phrase triggers an unanticipated memory in another person – countless apparently little things can cause a person to brood over an assumed slight. In some cases, the person whose words caused the reaction is unaware of how he or she hurt the other person. Our religion obligates us to seek forgiveness from our fellow humans and to grant forgiveness when others request it of us. We must request forgiveness three times if necessary. Only after three spurned attempts have we met our religious obligation of seeking forgiveness. Daily Halacha adds, "one who is being asked to forgive should not be stubborn in granting Mechila (forgiveness); Because one who easily forgives will be granted forgiveness from Hashem for all one's sins, and if one doesn't forgive, one will not be forgiven. Shulchan Aruch w/Mishnah Berurah 606:1."

Seeking forgiveness from a relative or close friend can sometimes be especially difficult. For a difficult or especially painful hurt relationship, one might say that he or she would like to wipe any past hurts off the slate, start over with their history of a close relationship, not assess blame for the event that caused the split, and work on re-establishing a close relationship. I believe that a devout Jew must accept such a request as a religious obligation. Rabbeinu Yonah's classic work *Sha'arei Teshuva* considers this stage the first and perhaps most important stage in teshuvah. Positive teshuvah is an important aspect of what God looked for in accepting Avraham Avinu and his family to become a nation to teach other nations how to be worthy of living properly in God's world.

Nitzavim is the climax of the message of teshuvah in Moshe's instructions to our ancestors and a perfect introduction to Rosh Hashanah. When we accept God's command for us to be holy, meaning follows. When we seek to follow Hashem's mitzvot both physically and spiritually, we gain meaning and happiness in our lives. For many years, our family learned from our Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, on Yom Tov as well as Shabbat. Rabbi Cahan would start his service on Rosh Hashanah by asking for forgiveness from anyone whom he had harmed, knowingly or unknowingly, during the past year. He then allowed everyone in the congregation to approach others to ask and grant forgiveness before starting the davening.

To all my readers, friends, and family: If I have harmed you, especially if I have done so unknowingly, please mochel me – grant me forgiveness for any sins that I may have committed to you in the past year. I also grant forgiveness to all who request it of me, either directly, in writing, or by ESP. May we start the new year with a clean slate and seek to be better family members, friends, and members of the community in the coming year.

Shabbat Shalom and Kativah V'Chatimah Tovah,

Hannah & Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Yehoshua Mayer HaLevi ben Nechama Zelda, Mordechai ben Chaya, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, David Leib ben Sheina Reizel, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha, Ramesh bat Heshmat, and Regina bat Simcha, who need our prayers. I have removed a number of names that have been on the list for a long time. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Drasha: Nitzavim: To Life!
By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1996

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

Many difficult choices face us daily. Some are seemingly insignificant, and some are critical. Those choices require deep and careful analysis and we hope against hope that we make the correct decision. There is one choice, however, that any fool can make. It is the choice of life. Yet the Torah commands us this week that when faced with the choice of life or death it is incumbent upon us to choose life. "See — I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil... and you shall choose life, so that you will live — you and your offspring." Deuteronomy 30:15-19

The Torah is filled with 613 Mitzvos. Each and every one of them is imparted to us with a sense of urgency. We are commanded to observe the minor laws with the same fervor as the major ones. Yet the Torah is not content with its charge to keep individual commandments. It culls all the laws under the title of "life" and then commissions us with an additional Mitzvah — "choose life." Isn't the objective of this command another angle in which we are again prodded to observe all that has already been commanded? Why does the Torah repeat its original charges as one summary command? Why aren't the original 613 sufficient?

It is fascinating to note that in the entire Torah there is no overt reference to Olam Haboh — the world to come. To scoffers, it holds another opportunity to dismiss one of the greatest tenets of Jewish Faith. There are only veiled allusions to our raison d'être the world of eternity. Why?

The entire Oral Law, Mishnah, Talmud, etc., is replete with the concept of the world to come. The Sages in Pirkei Avos, explain that, "this world is just a corridor for the world to come. One must prepare himself in the hallway before entering the palace." If this great world was offered orally, why is it not openly discussed in the text of the Torah? I once heard that the Torah, unlike other religious documents, is telling us, "I am not only promising to deliver a reward in a place you can't understand. If you fulfill my commandments, I promise reward in this very world!" Hashem guarantees reward in this world. The world to come will be beyond our comprehension but this world will hold more than enough gratification when we act in accordance with his will.

Reb Ahron Kotler of blessed memory, * epitomized a life steeped in Torah study. After escaping the ravages of World War II, he established the Kollel (fellowship program) of Beth Medrash Govoah, at Lakewood, New Jersey. It is there that married scholars studied Torah day and night and received a small stipend. After two years of Kollel study one aspiring prodigy had a lucrative business opportunity in which he was guaranteed a very substantial living. He approached Reb Ahron. "Rebbe, is it true that if a businessman supports a Torah scholar in a contractual arrangement, then he shares the reward of the world to come with his partner? Reb Ahron answered in the affirmative, explaining the concept of Yissachar-Zevulun partnership. (Zevulun was a merchant and his brother, Yissachar, was a sage. They entered a business arrangement to share equally both financial and spiritual rewards.) "If that is the case," the student continued "I'd like to enter into an arrangement with a Kollel member. You see, Rebbe, I have a wonderful opportunity to make quite a bit of money and this way I'll still be guaranteed the world to come." Reb Ahron was stunned. "How can you leave learning?" The student responded meekly. "But won't I still enjoy the world to come?"

"Of course!" exclaimed the Rosh Yeshiva, "but if you leave learning, how will you enjoy this world?"

Reb Ahron understood this week's Torah's message to its fullest extent. Observance of Mitzvos is not just a life of extended ritual observance. It is life itself. The Torah has laid a path that if followed precisely will guarantee years of happiness. It will guarantee the ability to overcome perceived suffering. It will guarantee a certain sense of fulfillment way beyond any material gain. The Torah declares, "if you choose a life of Torah, you are not only selecting a set of rituals. You are choosing much more than Tefillin, Mezuzah and Shofar. You are choosing a sum total greater than all of its parts. You are choosing life!"

Good Shabbos!

* Reb Ahron Kotler (1892-1962) was the Rosh Yeshiva of Kletzk, Poland. After his escape from Europe during World War II he established Beth Medrash Govoah in Lakewood New Jersey. Reb Ahron was a prime force in the establishment of the day school movement in America as well as a Torah Educational system in Israel.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/drasha-5756-netzavim/>

God Is King. What Does That Mean for Us?

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2021

What is the meaning of Rosh HaShanah as a day of kingship?

The idea of kingship is central to Rosh HaShanah. In the third blessing of Shmoneh Eisei, starting with Rosh HaShanah and moving all the way through Yom Kippur, we say that God is not HaKel HaKadosh, "Holy God," but rather HaMelech HaKadosh, or "Holy King." And in the Mussaf of Rosh HaShanah, the central prayer of Rosh HaShanah, the first theme we mention is malchut: God as king. We quote ten verses elaborating on this theme, and conclude this section with a blessing that intertwines the theme of kingship with the very essence of the day: "Blessed are you God, King of the entire world, Who sanctifies Israel and the Day of Remembrance."

What is the meaning of God as king that we are supposed to bring to this day?

Growing up, for many years, I experienced Rosh HaShanah as a Day of Judgment. Zikaronot – God remembering us and judging us — was the focus of the day. “Malchiot,” kingship, prepared us for that. Once we recognize God as king, we are in a place to stand before God in judgment. God has power over us and God will judge us just as a king judges his subjects. Seeing it that way, the full weight of Rosh HaShanah as the Day of Judgement hits us hard. This orientation can be constructive. It can lead us to introspection and a process of directly confronting our sins and shortcomings, which in turn can be a prod to do teshuvah and to change ourselves for the better.

At the same time, this focus can sometimes have a negative effect. It may cause us to feel guilt-ridden in a counterproductive way – a way that leads to obsession, to being weighed down by our sins.

This coming Rosh HaShanah, I would ask that we think about the power of kingship independent of, and divorced from, the framing of the day as a Day of Judgement.

I would frame that in two ways. One, that as the day that God created the world, Rosh HaShanah is a day to celebrate God as King of all humanity, to feel the joy that comes with knowing that we are not alone, that reality is more than the pure physical and material, that God cares about us and our fate. And we rejoice in the fact that God is our king, that God has chosen us as God’s people. Every day, we give concrete expression to this unique relationship with God through a life of Torah and mitzvot, each day can be one of meaning and purpose. So it is on this one day, the first one of all the days of the coming year, that we celebrate that God is king over the world and that God is king over us: “King over the entire world, Who sanctifies Israel and the Day of Remembrance.”

It goes beyond that. The theme of kingship is that of a world in which evil and oppression are no more. This is what we pray for in the Aleinu introduction to the Melchiot blessing: “Li’takein olam be-malkhut Shaddai,” that God being about a new world, a world in which God is fully recognized, a world that is fixed, that is perfect, both ethically and religiously.

So this Rosh HaShanah, let us ask ourselves not how grievously we have sinned. Let us rather ask what it would look like to live in a world where God’s presence – God’s kingship – is fully recognized. What is a more Godly, more ethical, world that we can imagine, and what can we do in this coming year to make that an actuality? What are our unique talents and energy that we can bring to this holy task?

Such a question excites the imagination. It frees our creativity, and catalyzes self-actualization. By focusing outward and not inward, not on a kingship of judgement, but on a kingship of possibility and vision, we can make this a year of transforming and bettering the world and of transforming and bettering ourselves in the process.

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah.

<https://library.yctorah.org/2021/09/god-is-king-what-does-that-mean-for-us/>

Rosh Hashanah 5782 Message from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah **Crying on Rosh Hashanah: A ruling for Rosh HaShanah 5782** by Rabbi Zachary Truboff *

Though rarely spoken about, one of the more fascinating themes of Rosh Hashanah is that of tears. The haftarah of the first day recounts the story of Elkanah and his wives Chana and Penina. Each year, they make the trek to Shilo to bring offerings to God, and each year Chana is mocked by Penina for not having children. Eventually, Chana falls into despair and feels she has no hope. She turns to God, prays, and cries. The tears continue in the haftarah read from Jeremiah on the second day. The prophet describes that the various remnants of the Jewish people will be gathered in the Land of Israel. New fields will be planted and the mourning of exile will be turned into joy. But until that day, Rachel Imeinu continues to cry for her children. Her tears fall, and she will not be comforted. For some Jews, tears were not just part of the liturgy, but rather they were given a place of prominence in the prayer service itself. Chazzanim were hired based on their ability to rouse the congregation to tears at the proper moments. It is even said about the famed Roedelheim mahzor that at certain parts of the prayer service it instructed the reader to “bokhim kan” — cry here.

Are tears, however, appropriate for Rosh Hashanah? Is it not a yom tov, a day of rejoicing, and if so, doesn't the act of crying go against the spirit of the day? Rav Ovadia Yosef, one of the leading halakhic authorities of the 20th century, addresses this question in Yichaveh Daat (2:69) [see below]. These teshuvot were originally delivered orally in response to questions presented to him on Israeli radio and then later transcribed and published. For Rav Ovadia Yosef, the true character of Rosh Hashanah is revealed not through the haftaroth of each day, but through the narrative of Ezra and Nechemiah.

When the Jewish people return from exile, Ezra leads a religious revival and reads publicly from the Torah. In hearing the words of the covenant, the Jewish people realize they have deviated from the tradition, and they break out in tears. Ezra, however, tells them that tears are not appropriate, for the day is in fact Rosh Hashanah, a holiday. Instead, he instructs the people to go home and celebrate the day with food, drink, and rejoicing. From this, many halakhic authorities argue that it is not permitted to fast on Rosh Hashanah, and as a result, Rav Ovadia concludes that one should not cry on Rosh Hashanah. Instead, the prayers should be recited "pleasantly and with joy."

How, then, does Rav Ovadia respond to the custom of shedding tears on Rosh Hashanah, a practice done by many rabbis including the Ar"i, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria? He explains that crying is permitted on Rosh Hashanah, but only if it emerges naturally from the midst of one's prayers. One should not try to force it or seek to bring it about in an artificial fashion. While not stated explicitly, Rav Ovadia appears to acknowledge that outbursts of religious emotion are often performative and frequently done only to gain the admiration of others.

After the difficulties of the past year and the uncertainty of the year ahead, many of us may not quite be sure what to feel this Rosh Hashanah, and given this situation, Rav Ovadia's words are particularly relevant. We must do our best to focus on the meaning of the prayers and recite them pleasantly, and with joy. We must remember that Rosh Hashanah is, at its heart, a day of rejoicing. In doing so, we remain hopeful that we, along with the Jewish people and the world, will merit a good new year.

Rav Ovadia Yosef -- Yichaveh Daat 2:69

Question: Is it appropriate to recite the Rosh Hashanah prayer with joy and gladness, as it says, "Worship God with joy," or because of the fear of judgment it is appropriate to pray with tears because the gates of tears are never locked?

Answer: In the Book of Ezra it tells that when the Jewish people returned from exile, Ezra the Scribe read before them from the Torah on Rosh Hashanah. The entire people cried because they realized that in their ignorance, they had transgressed many of the mitzvot of the Torah. It says there (Nechemiah 8:9-11): "Nehemiah the Tirshatha, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were explaining to the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God: you must not mourn or weep,' for all the people were weeping as they listened to the words of the Teaching. He further said to them, 'Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the LORD is the source of your strength.' Then all the people went to eat and drink and send portions and make great merriment, for they understood the things they were told."

It is written in Or Zarua (2:257) that Rabbeinu Chananel ruled it is forbidden to fast on Rosh Hashanah [because of Nechemiah 8:9-11]: "He further said to them, 'Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the LORD is the source of your strength.'" So too wrote Rabbeinu Hai Gaon... And not like the words of Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon who permitted one to fast on Rosh Hashanah. Also Rosh (Rosh Hashanah 3:14) brings the words of Rabbi Sar Shalom Gaon that it is forbidden to fast on Rosh Hashanah because we act joyfully on Rosh Hashanah. As it says (Bemidbar 10:10): "And on your joyous occasions—your fixed festivals and new moon days." The rabbis interpreted this verse as referring to Rosh Hashanah... And so it was ruled in Tur (Orech Chaim 597) that one eats and drinks and rejoices on Rosh Hashanah and does not fast at all... and so ruled Shulkhan Aruch... According to this, one learns that it is not appropriate to cry on Rosh Hashanah. On the contrary, it is appropriate to say the prayers pleasantly and with joy. This was the practice in all Jewish communities and the one leading the prayers on Rosh Hashanah would use a special and pleasant tune in honor of the holiday. The kaddish is recited in the tune of selichot and the piyutim of the High Holidays in the fashion that it says in Berachot (30b), "Rejoice with trembling": Where there is rejoicing, there is trembling.

However, Rabbeni Haim Vital (Shaar Kavannah 90a) testified that the Ari (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria) had the practice of crying extensively during the prayers of Rosh Hashanah even though it was a holiday, and all the more so during the prayers of Yom HaKippurim. He would say that one who does not succumb to tears during these days, it is a sign that their soul is not whole and complete. So too it is brought in Kaf HaChaim (582:60). However, in Maaseh HaRav (207), it is said in the name of the Vilna Gaon that one should not cry on Rosh Hashanah as it says in Nechemiah (8:9)...It appears there is no contradiction between the words of the Ari and the verses in Nechemiah for even if one is not supposed to bring himself to tears and sadness because of the holiness of the holidays, it is still appropriate to be aroused to tears spontaneously and cry during the prayers because of one's enthusiasm for holiness according to the devotion and intention in the prayers of the High Holidays. This is not prohibited at all, as it is written in Taz (Orech Chaim 288:2): Rabbi Akiva's students found him reading Song of Songs and crying on Shabbat. He said to them that even though it is forbidden to cry on Shabbat, as it says, "You shall call the Shabbat holy," since it was enjoyable for him to cry it was permitted. Taz explains that because of Rabbi Akiva's extensive devotion for God, when he recited Song of Songs, he would understand the words in the depth of his great and holy knowledge, and this is why his eyes were flowing with tears. So too we find with righteous Torah scholars when they pray with intention...So too the ruling is for all people that if tears or crying falls upon a person on the High Holidays [of their own] because the holy prayers inspire wisps of divine flame, as if the flame rises on its own... however to bring oneself to tears through actively pushing oneself to cry is not permitted...

From all this we can say that one should not cry on Rosh Hashanah, and the prayers of Rosh Hashanah should be said with joy and a pleasant holiness with great intention because prayer without intention is like a body with a soul. Nevertheless, if one feels inspired to cry and pray with tears [without forcing oneself to do so] there is no prohibition in this and he should be blessed. May God receive our prayers and accept them, and we should all merit together with the entire house of Israel for a good and blessed year, to be inscribed and sealed for good.

* Coordinator of the International Beit Din Institute, which seeks to educate rabbis about halakhic solutions to the agunah problem. Sponsor: The Lindenbaum Center for Halakhic Studies at YCT.

<https://library.yct Torah.org/lindenbaum/crying-on-rosh-hashanah/>

Nitzavim -- The Power of Belonging

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine © 2021

It was a gathering you would not want to miss. Everyone was there. Men, women, children, elders, and laborers, all gathered to hear Moshe's final statement before his passing. At this august gathering Moshe described Arvus- The power of belonging and the responsibility that we each have to each other to remain strong and connected.

A few years ago, I had the occasion to be driving on a highway with my newly purchased GPS. Our family was on vacation, and we were excited to benefit from the traffic reports and constantly updated directions. The children found the colors particularly fascinating. When there was traffic, the GPS displayed yellow or red; when traffic was moving smoothly the display was in blue.

On one particular highway though, the GPS seemed to have gotten confused. The display was switching from blue to red and back again. We had entered the HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle) lane, which is reserved as a courtesy for vehicles that are carrying multiple passengers, thus cutting down on traffic and emissions. As the children observed the GPS display, they noticed that it was switching from blue to red every few seconds. For a gadget that seemed to be so smart and reliable all the time, this indecisiveness was really surprising. Was there, or was there not, traffic on the highway?

With time I realized what was causing the GPS fluke. The GPS "wisdom" is based on feedback from cars on the highway. The feedback was indeed a bundle of mixed messages. From the regular lanes in which the cars were sitting in traffic, the message was that traffic was at a standstill, thus causing the GPS to display red. But from the HOV lanes in which we were driving at a respectable speed the message was that traffic is moving smoothly, thus causing the GPS to display blue. As smart as this little gadget was, it did not differentiate between the lanes of the highway. Instead, it kept switching based on the signals it was getting: For some it was slow-go, for others it was smooth sailing. It really depended on whether or not you were in the HOV lane.

The Jewish attitude to Rosh Hashana as a day of judgment is quite similar. For some it is slow-go, an agonizing process. For others it is (relatively speaking) smooth sailing. It all depends on whether you ride in the HOV lane.

Jewish tradition places great emphasis on belonging. Even as we are judged as individuals, when a person is part of a group there is less scrutiny and certain courtesies are afforded. The Talmud teaches that one should pray as a Tzibbur (congregation), because then the prayer is more readily accepted. The Mishna in Avos emphasizes the importance of being part of the Tzibbur, especially, as the Talmud describes, when a person belongs to and plays some critical role within that congregation.

I recall on one occasion my parents were on line at the airport to fly to Eretz Yisroel when they were interrogated by some Israeli security officials. At the time there was a significant fear of terrorists dressing up as religious Jews and getting a “free pass” onto the plane. So, the security officials were asking probing questions. Where do you live? How long have you lived there? Where do you daven? Who is the Rabbi? Does he deliver long sermons or short ones?

At first the questions seemed odd, especially when asked by an official who did not seem to personally know much about the inner workings of the Jewish community. Did this man really know about or care if my parents davened at Rabbi Cohen, Rabbi Horowitz, or Rabbi Wein?

But as things developed, we realized what the officials were after. They wanted to see if we were really what we were dressed up as and portrayed ourselves to be. They wanted to see if we really belonged.

One of the great things we should all try to do is to make sure that we belong, and that we can ride in the blue, well moving, HOV lanes. We grow better when we are with likeminded people. We get treated better in judgment when we belong. It is nice to know — even as we are judged and valued as individuals — that we are part of a herd. May the great Shepherd view us favorably and inscribe us in the book of blessing and life.

With heartfelt blessings for a great Shabbos and a wonderful new year!

Thoughts About Thinking: Thoughts on Parashat Nitzavim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

The Torah calls on us to think, to evaluate, and to act righteously. It challenges us to serve the Almighty with our intelligence and personal responsibility; not from blind obedience.

In this week's Torah portion, we read: “For this command that I command you today is not a wonder to you, and it is not distant....For the thing is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, to do it.” The Torah is not an esoteric document that can be deciphered only by an elite group of prophets or sages; rather, it is the heritage of the entire people. Each of us has access to the truths of the Torah by means of our own intellectual and emotional efforts.

In his book, “The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture,” (Cambridge University Press, 2012), Dr. Yoram Hazony makes an impassioned case that the Bible is essentially a reasonable and philosophically sound literary corpus. While so many have mistakenly characterized the Hebrew Bible as a simplistic work that demands nothing but blind obedience to the word of God, Dr. Hazony demonstrates that the Bible is actually a very sophisticated intellectual enterprise. If one is able to study the Bible on its own terms, understanding its own literary and philosophical methods, then one will find it to be not only a magnificent collection of literature and laws, but also a profound exploration of ideas and ethics.

The Hebrew Bible includes a wide range of texts, with varying — and sometimes contradictory — viewpoints. Rather than presenting us with dogmatic “truths” in the form of a catechism, it offers historical narratives, laws, prophetic orations, wisdom literature. Dr. Hazony notes that “the purpose of the biblical editors, in gathering together such diverse and often sharply conflicting texts, was not to construct a unitary work with an unequivocal message. It was rather to assemble a work capable of capturing and reflecting a given tradition of inquiry so readers could strive to understand the various perspectives embraced by this tradition, and in so doing build up an understanding of their own....The reader who takes up the Hebrew Bible is thus invited and challenged to take up a place within this tradition of inquiry, and to continue its elaboration out of his or her own resources” (p. 65).

Judaism calls on us to engage in this “tradition of inquiry,” to be seekers of truth. Certainly, the Torah offers laws that we are commanded to obey. But it offers vastly more than this: it offers a spiritual context for life, a respect for our personal religious and philosophic strivings, a realistic and humble awareness of our strengths and limitations as human beings.

Judaism is at its best when its adherents are intellectually and emotionally engaged with its teachings. It is far below its best when its adherents sink into the abyss of blind obedience.

Several years ago, Forbes Magazine published a list of the 10 richest rabbis in Israel. The rabbis’ net worths ranged from 9 million dollars to 335 million dollars! It appears that all (or nearly all) of these rabbis have reputations as wonder workers, Sephardic kabbalists, Hassidic Rebbes of huge dynasties. These rabbis have amassed huge fortunes because the public is willing to pay them for their blessings, amulets, holy water etc. It seems that a considerable segment of the public does not believe in its own ability to pray to God, but wants the intercession of holy men who supposedly have an inside track with God. Many people aren’t interested in a “spirit of inquiry” — they want “truth” as promised to them by wonder working rabbis.

If these wonder working rabbis indeed have such magical powers and can control God, then why don’t they use these powers to disarm Israel’s enemies; to uproot anti-Semitism; to punish the wicked; to provide for all the sick, poor and hungry of the world?

A tendency has arisen in segments of the Jewish world that grants magical, even infallible, powers to certain “sages.” This tendency leads to a vast perversion of Judaism, and veers in the direction of superstition and cultic behavior. It fosters authoritarianism, obscurantism, and dogmatism. It undermines freedom of thought, religious inquiry, independence of spirit. The fact that cultic rabbinic figures can amass so many millions of dollars is an indication of how deeply this negative tendency has taken root.

It is essential that we reclaim Judaism as an intellectually vibrant, creative and dynamic religious way of life. This entails personal commitment, a sense of responsibility, and a commitment to the “spirit of inquiry” that characterizes a healthy Judaism. We need to have the self-respect and religious dignity to think...and to keep thinking.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/thoughts-about-thinking-thoughts-parashat-nitzavim>

For an outstanding collection of Devrei Torah for the holy days during the coming month, see:
<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/holiday-reader-institute-jewish-ideas-and-ideals>

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Rabbi M. Angel Replies to Questions from the Jewish Press

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Is it proper for one to be overly familiar and casual with his/her parents?

Jewish law and tradition emphasize the honor and respect due to parents. Being overly familiar and casual with parents; e.g., calling them by their first names, is a breach in proper conduct.

When I grew up among the Sephardim of Seattle, it was expected that children would not only act respectfully to parents, but that we would be deferential to elders and teachers. The traditional societal structure encouraged a hierarchical

system, where the younger generations were imbued with a sense of respect for the older generations. We were not “equals.”

As time has moved on, there has been an increasing societal pressure toward “egalitarianism,” where the traditional hierarchies have been challenged. We now find children addressing parents, teachers and elders by their first names. This isn’t only about names; it’s about an attitude: we are all basically equal, and no one has to defer to anyone else. While some loosening of the old hierarchical system has positive value, too much loosening leads to an erosion of respect for authority in general.

For a family—and society—to function optimally, it is vital for children and parents to enjoy positive and warm relationships. Austere and authoritarian parenting is not in the best interest of either parents or children. But neither is overly casual and informal parenting to be desired.

Maintaining a proper balance is not always easy...but it is the best way of fostering healthy families and a healthy society.

* * * *

Is it proper for a husband/father or wife/mother to leave their family for an extended period of time (say, over a month)?

Ideally, parents and children should live happily and peacefully in harmonious households. Extended separations from family are generally not in the best interest of the parties involved.

But we don’t live in an ideal world, and various non-ideal situations arise that may necessitate separations from the family unit. It sometimes happens that one must travel on extended business trips in order to maintain family financial health. While it would be nice to earn a living without having to travel, not everyone can manage this.

In unfortunate cases of physical or emotional abuse, it may be necessary for the victim to separate from the abuser until the situation can be ameliorated. Separation in extreme cases is not only proper, but absolutely necessary.

It is best to follow the advice of Hillel, as recorded in the Pirkei Avot: Don’t judge others until you find yourself in their same situation.

* * * *

Is it proper to give an aliya to one who has a seiruv issued against them by a reputable beit din? And generally how should one interact with such a person?

When issued a summons by a reputable beth din, one is obligated to show up. If the beth din ultimately issues a seiruv, the person should face communal disapproval unless there is good reason behind the refusal to appear. Each case needs to be evaluated on its own merits.

When it comes to the area of gittin, a “get” should never be used as a bargaining chip. Once a marriage has broken up, both husband and wife must arrange for a “get” promptly. Their issues of contention over children or property should be settled in a beth din or civil court.

A man who is summoned by a reputable beth din to issue a “get” must comply. If he refuses and the beth din issues a “seiruv,” the man should be treated as though in “herem.” He certainly should not be given an Aliyah or any communal honor. In my view, he should not even be allowed into a synagogue. He should be shunned in business and avoided socially.

It is especially painful to learn of men who attempt to extort money from their wife or her family before agreeing to give a “get.” Such reprehensible behavior not only reflects on the corrupt nature of the man, but casts discredit on the halakhic system that allows or tolerates such corruption.

The “agunah” problem could be ameliorated if all couples are required to sign a binding pre-nuptial agreement that stipulates that both parties will agree to a “get” if, Heaven forbid, the marriage ends in divorce. A recalcitrant party will face

heavy and expensive penalties. There are halakhically approved pre-nuptial agreements available from the Rabbinical Council of America and other responsible rabbinic groups.

If you have children of marriageable age, please make sure they insist on a pre-nuptial agreement before their wedding. Much suffering could be avoided if proper precautions are taken early.

* * * *

Is it proper to spend time on social media?

Assuming we live to age 90 and sleep an average of 8 hours per night, we spend 30 years of our lives asleep. We spend many additional years at work; and other years on our basic bodily needs, waiting on lines, shopping, going to the doctor and dentist, dealing with illness etc. If we spend one hour a day watching television or on social media, that's another 1/24th of our lives gone.

Time is our most precious commodity. It is limited and irreplaceable. If we keep this in mind, we will be very careful in how we utilize the time that the Almighty grants us.

Having said this, it is important for each person to decide for him/herself how much time to devote to social media. In many cases, people use social media to stay in touch with family and friends who live far from each other. Without this means of communication, these relationships would suffer. In other cases, people turn to social media to keep up with news, communal events, and items of general interest.

While each person should not squander precious time by overusing social media, neither should anyone decide what is or isn't proper for anyone else. Each person has the right—and responsibility—to use his and her time in the way that seems best in their personal judgment.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/rabbi-m-angel-replies-questions-jewish-press-0>

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Rosh Hashana – Can My Prayers Succeed?

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * © 2021

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 to 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. Note: because of my early deadline this week, Rabbi Singer kindly let me print his Rosh Hashanah Dvar Torah, which I was unable to print last year.

Tax Season for Rabbis By Rabbi Moshe Rube *

Every line of work has its season. For accountants and H&R Block employees, we know that in March and April, that's when they are at their busiest.

As I'm fond of telling others, this season is "tax season" for rabbis and shul workers. Of course it's a labor of love, but the people I've communicated this to seem to enjoy the comparison.

So with that in mind, I offer to you short and sweet versions of my direct emails.

For this one, I will send you a wonderful rendition of the Unetanneh Tokef prayer sung by the chief cantor of the IDF. I think it is definitely worth the 6 minutes of your time. (And it sounds even better if you listen to it as you prepare the apples and honey!)

IDF Chief Cantor Sings "Unetanneh Tokef" -- YouTube

Enjoy, Shabbat Shalom, and Shanah Tovah!

* Rabbi, Knesseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL.

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.)

http://www.ravkooktorah.org/ROSH_HAS58.htm

The World is Waiting for You (Nitzavim 5778)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

Something remarkable happens in this week's parsha, almost without our noticing it, that changed the very terms of Jewish existence, and has life-changing implications for all of us. Moses renewed the covenant. This may not sound dramatic, but it was.

Thus far, in the history of humanity as told by the Torah, God had made three covenants. The first, in Genesis 9, was with Noah, and through him, with all humanity. I call this the covenant of human solidarity. According to the sages it contains seven commands, the *sheva mitzvot bnei Noach*, most famous of which is the sanctity of human life: "He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God did God make man" (Gen. 9:6).

The second, in Genesis 17, was with Abraham and his descendants: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty. Walk before Me and have integrity, and I will grant My covenant between Me and you ... I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout the generations as an eternal covenant.'" That made Abraham the father of a new faith that would not be the faith of all humanity but would strive to be a blessing to all humanity: "Through you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

The third was with the Israelites in the days of Moses, when the people stood at Mount Sinai, heard the Ten Commandments and accepted the terms of their destiny as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Who, though, initiated these three covenants? God. It was not Noah, or Abraham, or Moses, or the Israelites who sought a covenant with God. It was God who sought a covenant with humanity.

There is, though, a discernible change as we trace the trajectory of these three events. From Noah God asked no specific response. There was nothing Noah had to do to show that he accepted the terms of covenant. He now knew that there are seven rules governing acceptable human behaviour, but God asked for no positive covenant-ratifying gesture. Throughout the process Noah was passive.

From Abraham, God did ask for a response – a painful one. “This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin. This shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you” (Gen., 17:10-11). The Hebrew word for circumcision is *milah*, but to this day we call it *brit milah* or even, simply, *brit* – which is, of course, the Hebrew word for covenant. God asks, at least of Jewish males, something very demanding: an initiation ceremony.

From the Israelites at Sinai God asked for much more. He asked them in effect to recognise Him as their sole sovereign and legislator. The Sinai covenant came not with seven commands as for Noah, or an eighth as for Abraham, but with 613 of them. The Israelites were to incorporate God-consciousness into every aspect of their lives.

So, as the covenants proceed, God asks more and more of His partners, or to put it slightly differently, He entrusts them with ever greater responsibilities.

Something else happened at Sinai that had not happened before. God tells Moses to announce the nature of the covenant before making it, to see whether the people agree. They do so no less than three times: “Then the people answered as one, saying, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do’” (Ex. 19:7). “The people all responded with a single voice, ‘We will do everything the Lord has spoken’” (Ex. 24:3). “The people said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do and heed’” (Ex. 24:7).

This is the first time in history that we encounter the phenomenon enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence, namely “the consent of the governed.” God only spoke the Ten Commandments after the people had signalled that they had given their consent to be bound by His word. God does not impose His rule by force.[1] At Sinai, covenant-making became mutual. Both sides had to agree.

So the human role in covenant-making grows greater over time. But Nitzavim takes this one stage further. Moses, seemingly of his own initiative, renewed the covenant:

All of you are standing today before the Lord your God — your leaders, your tribes, your elders and officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, the strangers in your camp, from woodcutter to water-drawer — to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God and its oath, which the Lord your God is making with you today, to establish you today as His people, that He may be your God, as He promised you and swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Deut. 29:9-12)

This was the first time that the covenant was renewed, but not the last. It happened again at the end of Joshua’s life (Josh. 24), and later in the days of Jehoiada (2 Kings 11:17), Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29) and Josiah (1 Kings 23: 1-3; 2 Chron. 34: 29-33). After the Babylonian exile, Ezra and Nehemiah convened a national gathering to renew the covenant (Nehemiah 8). But it happened first in today’s parsha.

It happened because Moses knew it had to happen. The terms of Jewish history were about to shift from Divine initiative to human initiative. This is what Moses was preparing the Israelites for in the last month of his life. It is as if he had said: Until now God has led – in a pillar of cloud and fire – and you have followed. Now God is handing over the reins of history to you. From here on, you must lead. If your hearts are with Him, He will be with you. But you are now no longer children; you are adults. An adult still has parents, as a child does, but his or her relationship with them is different. An adult knows the burden of responsibility. An adult does not wait for someone else to take the first step.

That is the epic significance of Nitzavim, the parsha that stands almost at the end of the Torah and that we read almost at the end of the year. It is about getting ready for a new beginning: in which we act for God instead of waiting for God to act for us.

Translate this into human terms and you will see how life-changing it can be. Many years ago, at the beginning of my rabbinical career, I kept waiting for a word of encouragement from a senior rabbinical figure. I was working hard, trying

innovative approaches, seeking new ways of getting people engaged in Jewish life and learning. You need support at such moments because taking risks and suffering the inevitable criticism is emotionally draining. The encouragement never came. The silence hurt. It ate, like acid, into my heart.

Then in a lightning-flash of insight, I thought: what if I turn the entire scenario around. What if, instead of waiting for Rabbi X to encourage me, I encouraged him? What if I did for him what I was hoping he would do for me? That was a life-changing moment. It gave me a strength I never had before.

I began to formulate it as an ethic. Don't wait to be praised: praise others. Don't wait to be respected: respect others. Don't stand on the sidelines, criticising others. Do something yourself to make things better. Don't wait for the world to change: begin the process yourself, and then win others to the cause. There is a statement attributed to Gandhi (actually he never said it,[2] but in a parallel universe he might have done): 'Be the change you seek in the world.' Take the initiative.

That was what Moses was doing in the last month of his life, in that long series of public addresses that make up the book of Devarim, culminating in the great covenant-renewal ceremony in today's parsha. Devarim marks the end of the childhood of the Jewish people. From there on, Judaism became God's call to human responsibility. For us, faith is not waiting for God. Faith is the realisation that God is waiting for us.

Hence the life-changing idea: Whenever you find yourself distressed because someone hasn't done for you what you think they should have done, turn the thought around, and then do it for them.

Don't wait for the world to get better. Take the initiative yourself. The world is waiting for you.

Shabbat Shalom

FOOTNOTE:

[1] Of course, the Babylonian Talmud argues that at Sinai God did impose the covenant by force, namely by "suspending the mountain" over the people's heads. But the Talmud then immediately notes that "this constitutes a fundamental challenge to the authority of the Torah" and concludes that the people finally accepted the Torah voluntarily "in the days of Ahasuerus" (Shabbat 88a). The only question, therefore, is: when was there free consent?

* 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. See

<https://rabbisacks.org/world-waiting-nitzavim-5778/>

The Value of Every Jew by Chaya Mushka and Nechama Krimmer *

This parsha, parshas Nitzavim, is always read on the Shabbos before Rosh Hashana. The Baal Shem Tov concluded that the interplay between Moshe and the Jewish people in this parsha took place on Rosh Hashana itself.

On the day of his death, Moshe gathered the Jewish people together to speak his final words. He reassured the Jewish people that the covenant established at Mount Sinai between Hashem and the Jewish people will remain intact after his passing and that Hashem is renewing His covenant with the Jewish people on that very day.

Moshe said to the Jewish people, "You stand upright this day, all of you, before the Lord, your G d: your heads, your tribes, your elders, your officers and all the men of Israel; your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water" (Devarim, 29:9).

Moshe admonished that, in the future, if the Jewish people fall prey to false gods or veer off the path of G dliness, there will be harsh repercussions for their actions.

In these dark times, however, the Jewish people may seem far from Hashem but, in truth, there is nothing that can sever the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people. The Jewish people are forever bonded with Hashem through the covenant established with the giving of the Torah and renewed on the day of Moshe's death.

Moshe continues his address to the Jewish people, saying "Not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath; but with those who stand here with us this day before the Lord, our G d, and also with those who are not here with us this day" (Devarim, 30:20).

Our Sages explain that, like at Har Sinai, the souls of the entire Jewish people, including future converts, were present on that day, regardless if the souls present were inhabited in physical bodies or not. That means that the souls of all Jews, from the past to those not yet born, were present on that day. It means you and I were there!

When Moshe addressed the Jewish people he empathized that he was speaking to both the holy leaders and chieftains of the Jewish people and the lowly water carriers and hewers of woods.

There is a story in Talmud Pesachim that a particular rabbi, Rav Yosef, was near death. When he recovered from his illness, he was asked what he saw. The Rav replied that he saw that the spiritual world was the reverse of the physical world, that the water carriers and hewers of wood had the loftiest of souls.

In the eyes of Hashem, regardless of our religious practices, our errors and transgressions, and our Jewish knowledge - or lack thereof - we are all equal. On a soul level, the loftiest Rabbi and the simplest, unlearned man or woman are equal as we are all infused with the essence of Hashem.

Furthermore, the Jewish people are compared to a human body. Our leaders may be the brains and the water carriers, the feet, but there is no hierarchy when it comes to the body. The feet are just as important as the brain, and the liver, just as important as the kidneys. Every Jew is needed for the celestial body to work properly.

Moshe concludes with the words, "The Lord your G d will return your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the nations amongst whom the Lord your G d has scattered you" (Devarim, 30:3).

This, of course, is a reference to the coming of Moshiach when the Jewish people will return to Eretz Yisroel with the building of an everlasting edifice, the 3rd and final Holy Temple, where all nations of the world can come to worship Hashem.

The previous Rebbe, also known as the Freidiker Rebbe, said during his reign that all preparations for Moshiach are complete. All we have to do is "polish the buttons," so to speak. The Lubavitcher Rebbe went further in saying that we are the last generation of galus, exile, and the first generation of geulah, redemption.

In some ways our current generation is a mirror of the generation in this week's parsha. We are both on the precipice of a whole new world.

May Moshe's words about the future redemption come speedily in our days. May we open our eyes and see that Moshiach is already standing in front of us!

Wishing you all a good and sweet new year full of wealth, health, inspiration, and a deeper relationship with Hashem!

LaShana Tovah!

Why Do We Dip the Apple Into Honey on Rosh Hashanah?

By Yehuda Shurpin * © Chabad 2021

One of the classic symbols of Rosh Hashanah is the apple dipped in honey. On the night of Rosh Hashanah, after we have made kiddush, washed, and dipped the challah into honey,¹ we dip a sweet apple into honey.²

Before eating the apple, we make the ha'etz blessing and then add:

Ye-hi ratzon she-ti-cha-desh alei-nu shanah tovah u-metu-kah—"May it be Your will to renew for us a good and sweet year."

This custom seems to date back to the Geonic period (c. 589-1038 C.E.).³

Some have the custom to specifically use a red apple (perhaps due to its sweetness) based on the writings of Rabbi Simcha of Vitri (d. 1105 C.E.), who in his classic work Machzor Vitri records that this was the custom in France in his day.⁴

Interestingly, although we eat many symbolic foods on Rosh Hashanah (see Why All the Symbolic Rosh Hashanah Foods?), the apple is the most prominent. It is eaten at the very beginning of the meal before we enjoy all the other delicacies. Furthermore, even those who have the custom not to say a short prayer before each food is eaten (such as Chabad) do recite it before eating the apple dipped in honey.

So what is the significance of the apple dipped in honey?

The basic explanation is that we should have a "sweet new year," but there are many deeper reasons given for this custom as well. Here are a few of them:

Jacob and the Scent of the Apple Orchard

When Jacob entered his father's tent to receive the blessings, Isaac commented, "Behold, the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field, which the Lord has blessed."⁵ The Talmud⁶ and Midrash⁷ explain that the fragrance of the Garden of Eden entered together with Jacob, and it had the scent of an apple orchard. Thus, the kabbalists often refer to the Garden of Eden as Chakal Tapuchin, the "Holy Apple Orchard."

On Rosh Hashanah we pray that we too should ultimately receive blessings, just as Jacob did.

Additionally, some opine that this event took place on Rosh Hashanah.⁸ Thus, to invoke the blessings, we eat apples on Rosh Hashanah.

Reminder of the Giving of the Torah

Rabbi Saadia Gaon explains that one of the reasons for blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is that when the Torah was given, there was a great shofar blast. Similarly, some explain that the verse in Song of Songs, "Under the apple tree I aroused you,"⁹ is a reference to the Giving of the Torah. So just as on Rosh Hashanah day we blow the shofar as a remembrance of the Giving of the Torah, we eat the apple at night.

This is another reason why we dip the apple into honey: the Torah is also compared to sweet honey, as the verse in Song of Songs¹⁰ states, "Your lips drip flowing honey, O bride; honey and milk are under your tongue . . ."¹¹

G d Should Answer Before We Call Out

The Talmud¹² relates: Why were the Jewish people likened to an apple tree? It is to tell you that just as this apple tree, its fruit [begins to grow] before its leaves,¹³ so did the Jewish people declare "We will do" before "We will hear."

Like the apple, which buds even before leaves are grown, our ancestors expressing their willingness to obey G d without even knowing what he would demand.

When we eat the apple, we are asking G d that he treat us in a similar manner, fulfilling our wants and needs even before we call out to Him.¹⁴

A Kabbalistic Reason: A Little Shade

The Tzemach Tzedek explains that every month corresponds to one of the 13 Attributes of Mercy. Tishrei, the seventh month (counting from Nissan), corresponds to the attribute of emet, truth. For in Tishrei, the divine essence (Atzmut) is revealed without any hindrance or contraction, and through our repentance and teshuvah in this month we reach Atzmut.

Song of Songs states, “As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the sons; in his shade I delighted and sat, and his fruit was sweet to my palate.”¹⁵ The Midrash¹⁶ comments on this verse that the apple tree does not give off shade, and the commentaries explain that its shade is very minute. The mystics say that shade represents a contracted level of Makif (i.e., the surrounding or the transcendental aspect of the divine emanation). All the fruit trees receive their divine energy from this level of revelation, with the exception of the apple tree.

The apple is rooted in Tiferet (“splendor”) and receives directly from the level of emet, which has no shade (i.e., contraction).

Thus, we eat an apple, alluding to the level of emet through which we can reach the essence of the divine.¹⁷

Luxuries, Not Just Necessities

In explaining the after-blessing “Borei Nefashot” (בּוֹרֵא נֶפֶשׁוֹת), which is recited after eating food not made from grain or the seven fruits with which Israel was blessed, Tosafot¹⁸ explains some of the wording as follows: “Blessed are You . . . Creator of numerous living beings and their needs” is a reference to our basic needs like bread and water. “For all the things You have created with which to sustain the soul of every living being” is a reference to things that are beyond our basic needs “such as apples and the like.”

Since apples are given as an example of things beyond our very basic needs, on Rosh Hashanah we pray that we are not only provided with the basics, but extras as well.¹⁹

To Have Children

The Talmud relates that on Rosh Hashanah, Sarah, Rachel and Hannah, who were all barren, were “remembered” by G d and conceived their children (Isaac, Joseph and Samuel).²⁰

The Hebrew word תפוח (tapuach, “apple”) has the same numerical value as the words פרו רבו (peru u’revu, “be fruitful and multiply”). And the Hebrew word דבש (devash, “honey”) has the same numerical value as אשה (ishah, “woman”). Thus, we are praying that women who need to be blessed with children should be blessed, just as Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were on this day.²¹

Remembering the Akeidah

One of the central themes of Rosh Hashanah is remembering the Akedah (“Binding of Isaac”) and the blessings that G d gives Abraham after he offered the ram instead of his son Isaac.

The Talmud tells us that the middle part of the altar, where all the ashes were piled up, was called the תפוח (tapuach, “apple”). Additionally, the words שֶׁהְאֵדָה (seh akedah, “the ram of the Akedah”) has the same numerical value as תפוח. Thus, we eat the apple to allude to the ram that was brought instead of Isaac, symbolizing how the seemingly severe judgement was transformed into positive—which we pray happens on Rosh Hashanah.²²

Sweeten the Severity of Wine

The Zohar²³ states that it was customary to eat an apple after drinking wine in order to prevent the wine from causing injury. Thus, we see that the apple serves to “sweeten” the wine, which comes from the attribute of gevurah, severity. Therefore, on Rosh Hashanah, when part of our focus is to sweeten any harsh judgment or severity, we eat an apple at the beginning of the meal to “sweeten all severities.”²⁴

Children, Health and Livelihood

Unlike some other fruits, an apple has a pleasant appearance, taste and fragrance. These three qualities correspond to the three main categories of blessings that we pray that G d grant us: children (nachat), good health, and ample livelihood.²⁵

The Merit of the Righteous Women

The Talmud²⁶ relates that when Pharaoh decreed that every baby boy be thrown into the Nile,²⁷ some men abstained from relations with their wives. What did the women do? They went to draw water, and G d ensured that half of their jugs were filled with water, and half with small fish. They would return home and place two pots on the fire, one for hot water and the other for the fish, which they would bring to their husbands in the field. There they washed their husbands, anointed them, fed them and enticed them to engage in intercourse, despite the enslavement and the forced labor.

When the time came for the women to give birth, they cast their gaze heavenward and said to G d: "I have done my part regarding what You said, 'Be fertile and multiply,' now You do Your part." The women would go to the fields to prevent the Egyptians from killing their sons and would give birth under the apple trees, as it says: "Under the apple tree I roused you; it was there your mother conceived you, there she who bore you conceived you."²⁸

Thus, we invoke the merit of our righteous women and ask that we be blessed for a sweet new year.²⁹

Honey

We've thus far mostly focused on the apple. Here are a few additional explanations for why we use honey on Rosh Hashanah.

It should be noted that some have the custom to actually use white sugar instead of honey since sugar comes from the attribute of chesed ("kindness") and honey from the attribute of gevurah ("severity").³⁰ However, as we shall see, honey is actually gevurah shebechesed, "sweetened severity,"³¹ and that itself is a reason to use it on Rosh Hashanah.

From Judgment to Sweetness

We use bee honey, for just as a bee stings but then gives sweet honey, so too we pray that we emerge from the attribute of severity and judgment into sweetness.³²

From Sins to Merits

There is an opinion (albeit halachah does not follow it) that if a halachically problematic food falls into and disintegrates in honey, the entire food is considered as if it is honey and is therefore permitted to be eaten.³³ So we dip the apple (and challah) into honey to allude to this opinion, praying that our sins be turned into merits.³⁴

Merciful Father

The numerical value of the word דבש (devash, "honey") is equal to the words אב הרחמן and אב הרחמים (Av Harachaman and Av Harachamim, "The Merciful Father" or "Father of Mercy"). Thus we eat the apple dipped in honey as we ask for G d's mercy on this day of judgment.³⁵

Pure Even From an Impure Place

The halachah is that food that comes from an unkosher animal is itself unkosher. Thus, for example, any egg that comes from an unkosher bird or milk from an unkosher animal is itself not kosher. An exception to this is honey. Although a bee is not kosher, honey is. Thus, on Rosh Hashanah we pray that although we ourselves may be unworthy and "impure," G d should still accept the prayers that come out of our lips as "pure."³⁶

May we all merit a happy, healthy, sweet new year!

Footnotes:

1. Some have the custom to do so before the hamotzi.
2. Tur, Orach Chaim 583; Rama, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 583:1.
3. See Sefer Haagudah, Rosh Hashanah, which quotes the Geonim as having this custom.

4. Machzor Vitri, p. 362.
5. Genesis 27:27.
6. Talmud, Taanit 29b.
7. Midrash Tanchuma (Buber), Toldot 16 (quoted in Rashi on Genesis 27:27).
8. See Biur Hagra on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 583 (based on the Zohar, Parshat Emor); according to others, however, (see, for example, Rashi on Genesis 27:) it was Passover.
9. Song of Songs 8:5.
10. Song of Songs 4:11.
11. Zichron Yosef, Rosh Hashanah, p. 216.
12. Talmud, Shabbat 88a.
13. See, however, Tosafot ad loc., which is of the opinion that this is a reference to the citron.
14. Pnei Hamayim, Dinei Tashlich, 19.
15. Song of Songs 2:3.
16. Shir Hashirim Rabah ad loc.
17. See Pelech Harimon, Vayeira 61d, quoting the Tzemach Tzedek; see also Ben Ish Chai, year 1. Parshat Nitzavim.
18. Tosafot on Talmud, Berachot 43a.
19. Lehorot Natan, Rosh Hashanah, p. 52.
20. Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 11a.
21. Zichron Shlomo Chaim, Rosh Hashanah, p. 87.
22. Imrei Noam, Rosh Hashanah; Moadei Chaim, Leil Rosh Hashanah, Divrei Aggadah, p. 24.
23. Zohar 3:40
24. Ben Ish Chai, year 1 Parshat Nitzavim 4.
25. Ben Ish Chai, year 1, Nitzavim 4.
26. Talmud, Sotah 11b.
27. See Exodus 1:22.
28. Song of Songs 8:5
29. Zichron Shlomo Chaim, Rosh Hashanah, pg. 87
30. See for example, Yifei Laleiv 3:1 cited in the Kaf Hachaim 583:17
31. See Torah Ohr 107b

32. Midrash Pinchas, inyanei Rosh Hashanah
33. Rabeinu Yonah on Talmud, Berachot 43a.
34. Lehorot Nosan, Rosh Hashanah, p. 52.
35. Bnei Yissaschar, Tishrei maamar 2:13.
36. Nachalat Avot.

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https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/591014/jewish/Why-Do-We-Dip-the-Apple-Into-Honey-on-Rosh-Hashanah.htm#utm_medium=email&utm_source=1_chabad.org_magazine_en&utm_campaign=en&utm_content=content

Moses and the Unexpected Converts

By Yossi Ives * © Chabad 2021

Sometimes, unexpected guests arrive. It seems that's what happened in the days before the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

Right before his passing, Moses brought the Children of Israel into a renewed covenant with the L rd. As with the original covenant they entered into at Sinai, this new covenant included the entire population:

You are all standing this day before the L rd, your G d – the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel, your young children, your women, and your convert who is within your camp from your woodcutters till your water drawers, that you may enter the covenant of the L rd, your G d, and His oath, which the L rd, your G d, is making with you this day...1

Who were the woodcutters and water drawers? Rashi explains:

This teaches us that Canaanites came to convert in the days of Moses just as the Gibeonites came in the days of Joshua. This is the meaning of the verse regarding the Gibeonites, “And they also acted cunningly...”2 [i. e., pretending that they had come from a faraway country. When they were discovered, Joshua made them woodcutters and water drawers for Israel]. Similarly here, Moses made them woodcutters and water drawers.

The Canaanites who approached Moses sought to convert, and there is no indication that their request was rejected. Now, the source for Rashi's comment is the Midrash Tanchuma, which states that “Moses did not accept” the Canaanite arrivals. Rashi omits this point, however, implying that he considers it more plausible that Moses did not reject them.

But what grounds does Rashi have for his view that Moses did allow those Canaanites to convert? After all, they are singled out as woodchoppers and water carriers and separated from the prior category of “your convert who is within your camp.” It seems more logical that they were not converts. Indeed, Rashi's own commentary on the Talmud³ states explicitly that the woodchoppers and water carriers were not converts – so why in his commentary to the Torah does he imply that they were?

Understanding Rashi's Approach

In his classic style, the Rebbe demonstrates how we need to reimagine what Rashi is saying. Rashi is not primarily out to explain who the woodchoppers and water carriers were, as one would assume. Rather, Rashi is mainly concerned with answering the more basic question of why we are being told about them in the first place. There were all manner of professions and occupations among the Israelites, so why specify just these two lines of work?

It must be, Rashi suggests, that the Torah mentions them to teach us something we would otherwise not know. But what could it be? To answer this, we need to conduct some careful detective work. Could they be regular Israelites? That's not

possible, for why would they be singled out from everyone else? Could they be converts? Also not, because, as noted earlier, the Torah already lists them amongst those who entered the covenant. Could they be non-Jews? That is entirely impossible, as they were listed among those who joined Moses to enter into the covenant of faith with G d to fulfill all the mitzvot (commandments). So, again, who were they?

Rashi directs us to take a closer look at the text: “Your convert who is within your camp, from your woodcutters till your water drawers.” It would appear that the woodcutters and water drawers are a subcategory of converts. This is a common Biblical form of expression. For example, when the Egyptian firstborns were smitten, the Torah says, “Every firstborn in the Land of Egypt, from Pharaoh’s firstborn who sits on his throne till the firstborn of the maidservant.”⁴ So it makes sense that they were a type of convert.

But this just brings us back to our original question: If they were merely a category of convert, why single them out? It must be, Rashi concludes, that the entire reason they are specified as a separate category is to teach us a historical fact, namely that just before Moses passed away, a group of Canaanites arrived to convert and that Moses accepted them and invited them to participate in the covenant renewal. In this way, we have an explanation for both things: who they were, and why they are mentioned separately. It also explains why they entered the covenant: because they had converted.

The Scriptural Clues

This makes sense, but how does Rashi know that this is what actually happened? Isn’t it a bit of a stretch to invent an actual event in history just because there are a few words that are difficult to explain? But Rashi is not done with the detective work. It turns out, he shows, that we have two pretty clear clues – one in our text and another in the story of the Gibeonites in the book of Joshua. Rashi draws attention to both.

In the book of Joshua, we read that a group of locals faked being distant travelers and duped Joshua into allowing them to join the Israelites. This caused great consternation, and Joshua appointed them as, you guessed it, woodchoppers and water carriers. This similarity seems too much of a coincidence. It is not a stretch at all to imagine that Joshua got his idea from his mentor, Moses.

Now to the second clue. The book of Joshua states “And they also acted cunningly.” “Also” implies this had happened before! But we know of no other recorded case. Unless, of course, this is exactly what the Torah is trying to allude to in our verse: that a group of people had come to Moses to convert, and now this was happening again with Joshua.

Of course, there is one big difference. In the story of Joshua, the text makes it clear that there was deception involved. In fact, we are told in detail how they pulled off their ruse. That is why Joshua refused to allow them to convert. In the case of Moses, however, we know of no such deception, hence they were allowed to join the covenant.

The Jewish People does not close ranks and reject all newcomers. On the contrary, if someone sincerely wishes to join the faith, they have a right to do so, and we have an obligation to welcome them in. The Canaanites were the people inhabiting the land that the Israelites were set to conquer as they prepared to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. Nevertheless, Moses waived those concerns and brought them into the covenant along with everyone else.

Adapted from Likutei Sichot, vol. 14, Parshat Nitzavim II.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Deuteronomy 29:10.
2. Joshua 9:4.
3. Yevamot 79a.
4. Exodus 11:5.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5226657/jewish/Moses-and-the-Unexpected-Converts.htm

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Nitzavim: Rising Above vs. Digging Deeper

By Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky © Chabad 2021

Moses told the Jewish people that after experiencing both G-d's blessings and curses, "You will return to G-d with all your heart and with all your soul." (Deuteronomy 30:2)

Whereas we are here commanded to return to G-d with all our heart and soul, we have been commanded previously to love G-d not only with all our heart and soul, but with "all our might." What is the reason for this difference between these two seemingly similar commandments?

Regarding loving G-d, we are asked to love Him not only with our heart and soul, but beyond this, drawing on the unlimited powers of connection to G-d that are rooted in our Divine soul. Loving G-d "with all our might" thus means being devoted to Him beyond what we consider "normal," i.e., beyond what makes sense logically.

Repentance, on the other hand, requires that we forge a stronger relationship with G-d than our present one. That relationship with G-d, after all, was too weak to keep us from wrongdoing and therefore from needing to repent. We therefore need to deepen our feelings toward G-d, in order for Him to mean more to us than the indulgences that we have learned to rationalize. We must then make this attitude into "the new normal," i.e., the basis of a new, stronger relationship with G-d, in order to keep ourselves from backsliding into our previous behavior.

Thus, whereas the Torah bids us to love G-d beyond what seems "normal," it bids us to repent by making what used to be "beyond" us into our new "normal." The processes associated with repentance and love are directly opposite, the first taking us beyond our innate limitations and the second bringing transcendence into limited consciousness.

* From *Daily Wisdom* #1

Gut Shabbos and a good and sweet new year,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman
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Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

Defeating Death - Only now, reaching Nitzavim, can we begin to get a sense of the vast, world-changing project at the heart of the Divine-human encounter that took place in the lifetime of Moses and the birth of Jews/ Israel as a nation.

To understand it, recall the famous remark of Sherlock Holmes. "I draw your attention," he said to Dr Watson, "to the curious incident of the dog at night." "But the dog did nothing at night," said Watson. "That," said Holmes, "is the curious incident." [1] Sometimes to know what a book is about you need to focus on what it does not say, not just on what it does.

What is missing from the Torah, almost inexplicably so given the background against which it is set, is a fixation with death. The ancient Egyptians were obsessed with death. Their monumental buildings were an attempt to defy death. The pyramids were giant mausoleums. More precisely, they were portals through which the soul of a deceased pharaoh could ascend to heaven and join the immortals. The most famous Egyptian text that has come down to us is The Book of the Dead. Only the afterlife is real: life is a preparation for death.

There is nothing of this in the Torah, at least not explicitly. Jews believed in Olam HaBa, the World to Come, life after death. They believed in techiyat hametim, the resurrection of the dead. [2] There are six references to it in the second paragraph of the Amidah alone. But not only are these ideas almost completely absent from Tanach. They are absent at the very points where we would expect them.

The book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) is an extended lament at human mortality. Havel havalim... hakol havel: Everything is worthless because life is a mere fleeting breath (Ecc 1:2). Why did the author of Ecclesiastes not mention the World to Come and life-after-death? Another example: the book of Job is a sustained protest against the apparent injustice of the world. Why did no one answer Job to say, "You and other innocent people who suffer will be rewarded in the afterlife"? We believe in the afterlife. Why then is it not mentioned – merely hinted at – in the Torah? That is the curious incident.

The simple answer is that obsession with death ultimately devalues life. Why fight against the evils and injustices of the world if this life is only a preparation for the world to come? Ernest Becker in his classic *The Denial of Death* argues that fear of our own mortality has been one of the driving forces of civilisation.

[3] It is what led the ancient world to enslave the masses, turning them into giant labour forces to build monumental buildings that would stand as long as time itself. It led to the ancient cult of the hero, the man who becomes immortal by doing daring deeds on the field of battle. We fear death; we have a love-hate relationship with it. Freud called this *thanatos*, the death instinct, and said it was one of the two driving forces of life, the other being *eros*.

Judaism is a sustained protest against this world-view. That is why "No one knows where Moses is buried" (Deut. 34:6) so that his tomb should never become a place of pilgrimage and worship. That is why in place of a pyramid or a temple such as Ramses II built at Abu Simbel, all the Israelites had for almost five centuries until the days of Solomon was the Mishkan, a portable Sanctuary, more like a tent than a temple. That is why, in Judaism, death defiles and why the rite of the Red Heifer was necessary to purify people from contact with it. That is why the holier you are – if you are a Kohen, more so if you are the High Priest – the less you can be in contact or under the same roof as a dead person. God is not in death but in life.

Only against this Egyptian background can we fully sense the drama behind words that have become so familiar to us that we are no longer surprised by them, the great words in which Moses frames the choice for all time:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil ... I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you and your children may live. (Deut. 30:15, 19)

Life is good, death is bad. Life is a blessing, death is a curse. These are truisms for us. Why even mention them? Because they were not common ideas in the ancient world. They were revolutionary. They still are.

How then do you defeat death? Yes there is an afterlife. Yes there is techiyat hametim, resurrection. But Moses does not focus on these obvious ideas. He tells us something different altogether. You achieve immortality by being part of a covenant – a covenant with eternity itself, that is to say, a covenant with God.

When you live your life within a covenant something extraordinary happens. Your parents and grandparents live on in you. You live on in your children and grandchildren. They are part of your life. You are part of theirs. That is what Moses meant when he said, near the beginning of this week's parsha:

It is not with you alone that I am making this covenant and oath, but with whoever stands with us here today before the Lord our God as well as those not with us here today. (Deut. 29:13-14)

In Moses' day that last phrase meant "your children not yet born." He did not need to include "your parents, no longer alive" because their parents had themselves made a covenant with God forty years before at Mount Sinai. But what Moses meant in a larger sense is that when we renew the covenant, when we dedicate our lives to the faith and way of life of our ancestors, they become immortal in us, as we become immortal in our children.

It is precisely because Judaism focuses on this world, not the next, that it is the most child-centred of all the great religions. They are our immortality. That is what Rachel meant when she said, "Give me children, or else I am like one dead" (Gen. 30:1). It is what Abraham meant when he said, "Lord, God, what will you give me if I remain childless?" (Gen. 15:2). We are not all destined to have children. The Rabbis said that the good we do constitutes our *toldot*, our posterity. But by honouring the memory of our parents and bringing up children to continue the Jewish story we achieve the one form of immortality that lies this side of the grave, in this world that God pronounced good.

Now consider the two last commands in the Torah, set out in parshat Vayeilech, the ones Moses gave at the very end of his life. One is *hakhel*, the command that the King summon the nation to an assembly every seven years:

At the end of every seven years ... Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the stranger living in your towns – so that they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. (Deut. 31:12)

The meaning of this command is simple. Moses is saying: It is not enough that your parents made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai or that you yourselves renewed it with me here on the plains of Moab. The covenant must be perpetually renewed, every seven years, so that it never becomes history. It always remains memory. It never becomes old because every seven years it becomes new again.

And the last command? "Now write down this

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song and teach it to the Israelites and make them sing it, so that it may be a witness for me against them” (Deut. 31:19). This, according to tradition, is the command to write [at least part of] a Sefer Torah. As Maimonides puts it: “Even if your ancestors have left you a Sefer Torah, nonetheless you are commanded to write one for yourself.”[4]

What is Moses saying in this, his last charge to the people he had led for forty years, was: It is not sufficient to say, our ancestors received the Torah from Moses, or from God. You have to take it and make it new in every generation. You must make the Torah not just your parents’ or grandparents’ faith but your own. If you write it, it will write you. The eternal word of the eternal God is your share in eternity.

We now sense the full force of the drama of these last days of Moses’ life. Moses knew he was about to die, knew he would not cross the Jordan and enter the land he had spent his entire life leading the people toward. Moses, confronting his own mortality, asks us in every generation to confront ours.

Our faith – Moses is telling us – is not like that of the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, or virtually every other civilisation known to history. We do not find God in a realm beyond life – in heaven, or after death, in mystic disengagement from the world or in philosophical contemplation. We find God in life. We find God in (the key words of Devarim) love and joy. To find God, he says in this week’s parsha, you don’t have to climb to heaven or cross the sea (Deut. 30:12-13). God is here. God is now. God is life.

And that life, though it will end one day, in truth does not end. For if you keep the covenant, then your ancestors will live in you, and you will live on in your children (or your disciples or the recipients of your kindness). Every seven years the covenant will become new again. Every generation will write its own Sefer Torah. The gate to eternity is not death: it is life lived in a covenant endlessly renewed, in words engraved on our hearts and the hearts of our children.

And so Moses, the greatest leader we ever had, became immortal. Not by living forever. Not by building a tomb and temple to his glory. We don’t even know where he is buried. The only physical structure he left us was portable because life itself is a journey. He didn’t even become immortal the way Aaron did, by seeing his children become his successors. He became immortal by making us his disciples. And in one of their first recorded utterances, the Rabbis said likewise: Raise up many disciples.

To be a leader, you don’t need a crown or robes of office. All you need to do is to write your chapter in the story, do deeds that heal some of the pain of this world, and act so that others become a little better for having known you. Live so that through you our ancient

covenant with God is renewed in the only way that matters: in life. Moses’ last testament to us at the very end of his days, when his mind might so easily have turned to death, was: Choose life.

[1] Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of Silver Blaze.”

[2] The Mishnah in Sanhedrin 10:1 says that believing that the resurrection of the dead is stated in the Torah is a fundamental part of Jewish faith. However, according to any interpretation, the statement is implicit, not explicit.

[3] New York: Free Press, 1973.

[4] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin, Mezuzah, VeSefer Torah 7:1.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

“Not with you alone do I establish this covenant and this oath, but with those who are here with us standing today before the Lord our God and with those who are not here with us today.” (Deuteronomy 29:13-14).

The Syrian refugee crisis has prompted public debate worldwide, especially in the U.S. presidential campaign, over the issue of immigration. Should a nation’s top priority be to meet the humanitarian needs of people attempting to flee a war zone? Or should it be to emphasize national security concerns stemming from the terroristic affiliations of a portion of those seeking refuge?

Given that most of the people whose fate hangs in the balance are Muslims, the critical question underlying this debate is, what is the nature of Islam? Are we speaking of a religion of prayer, charity, and belief in one God? Or are we dealing with a cult of death, conquest and jihad? The fact that both of these definitions contain an element of truth is the source of our dilemma. Islam is at war with itself, as Muslims on both sides of these two irreconcilable aspects of the religion’s identity vie for supremacy. And unfortunately, institutional Islam – Wahhabism, Sunni, Shia, and ISIS – believes strongly in Jihad and world conquest.

Does Judaism have a role to play in this debate? The answer to this question will explain several important questions on this week’s Biblical portion, and, more broadly, will teach a critical lesson about our moral responsibilities to the world.

The covenant referenced in this week’s biblical portion of Nitzavim is usually read on the Sabbath prior to Rosh Hashana (Talmud, Megilla 31b). To which covenant does the Torah refer? To whom does God refer when He includes in this covenant “those who are not here with us today”? And what is the connection between this covenant and Rosh Hashana?

This covenant, in contrast to the two prior covenants (at Sinai and Arvot Moab), features the writing of the universal laws of morality on twelve stones (Talmud, Sota 35b), to be translated in all seventy languages of the world

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(ibid, 32a), and to be erected at the points of entrance into and exit from Israel. For what reason would the Bible have its laws translated into all seventy languages, if not to teach this morality to the world precisely in the place from which foreigners would travel?

Israel must bear God’s message of morality and peace to the world and God, in turn, will guarantee Israel’s eternity. It is our task as a people to educate the world towards recognition of a God of morality, love, and peace. This is the content of the Third Covenant.

Everyone need not become Jewish or worship God in the way we do. But everyone must be moral and ethical, and must not violate any other innocent human being, if the world is to endure. In the words of the prophet Micah (4:5), “Let all the peoples walk each one in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever.” We believe in moral absolutism and ritual pluralism!

Regrettably, this is not the belief of institutional Islam today (see Bernard Lewis’ Islam: The Religion and the People), which divides the world between “Dar al-Islam” (states controlled by Muslims) and “Dar al-Harb” (states controlled by non-Muslims, to be conquered by the sword).

Fortunately, there is a precedent for a religion to alter its moral trajectory. For nearly 2,000 years, Christianity exploited its power to persecute non-Christians, especially Jews. Rivers of Jewish blood can testify to that ugly history. However, over the past 50 years, a change of historic proportions has taken place in the way Christianity has come to view Judaism, symbolized by 1965’s “Nostra Aetate”, the Papal Encyclical publication that affirmed the legitimacy of the Jewish covenant with God.

In contrast, a very different trend is taking place within Islam. Certainly there are millions of peace-loving Muslims who find the hijacking of their religion to be abhorrent. However, this silent majority has failed to prevent its co-religionists from co-opting Islam.

Judaism has a role to play in this debate. Our covenant of moral absolutism requires that we call upon Muslims to draft their own “Nostra Aetate”, a theological shift that would accept the legitimacy of other religions. Muslim spiritual and political leaders must declare – and then demonstrate – clearly and unambiguously, that Allah is a God of love, not of power, and that Islam is a religion of peace, not of jihad. This is an internal Muslim dispute, but it has global ramifications, and we have a vested interest in its outcome.

We now see the vital need for those who did not stand at Sinai and Arvot Moab – the

seventy nations of the world – to stand with us when God’s revelation, this Third Covenant, becomes universally accepted and realized. God’s covenant must encompass Jew and Gentile alike. And this is why it is appropriate that this biblical reading precedes Rosh Hashana, when Jews must realize our true mission: to turn the wicked of the world towards a God of morality, to perfect the world under the Kingship of the Divine.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Why Not Hire a Babysitter When Parents Go to Hakhel?

The middle of Parshas Nitzavim contains the pasuk “The hidden things are for Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed things are for us and for our children forever, to carry out all the words of this Torah.” [Devorim 29:28] While this is not the simple interpretation of the pasuk, I saw an observation in the sefer Milchemes Yehudah as follows: “HaNistaros (the hidden things) L’Hashem Elokeinu” means that which a person does in private is between him and the Ribono shel Olam. “V’Haniglos (that which is revealed)” – but that which one does in front of his children – that is “Lanu u’levaneinu ad olam” — something which makes an impression on our children forever and ever.

No one sees that which goes on in a person’s heart or in his private activities. That is between him and the Almighty. He will ultimately have to face his Maker on that score. But “haNiglos” – not only the “public person,” but even the person’s actions in the confines of his own home – how he talks, how he acts, how he reacts – these personality traits leave a profound and indelible effect on his children, and ultimately on their children, for all future generations!

We are constantly “on stage.” This is especially true when we have young children or young grandchildren, but it applies even with our older children. Our actions, for better or for worse, are modeling behavior that will be understood as acceptable and even normal “for us, and for our children, forever.”

The truth is that this idea is perhaps contained in the famous Gemara [Chagiga 3a] which discusses the mitzvah of Hakhel (in Parshas Vayeilech). The pasuk says “Gather together the people – the men, the women, the small children, and your stranger who is in your cities – so that they will hear and so that they will learn, and they shall fear Hashem, your G-d, and be careful to perform all the words of this Torah” [Devorim 31:12]

Everybody in the nation had to come to the Beis HaMikdash in Yerushalayim for the once-in-seven-year, Hakhel event. The Gemara asks: We understand that the men come to learn, and the women come to listen, however why do they need to bring the children? Rav Elazar ben Azaria answers “In order that those who bring them receive reward.”

This is a troubling exposition. Is there no point in bringing the children other than the reward the parents receive for bringing them? The correct understanding of Rav Elazar ben Azaria’s statement is not that the parents get reward merely for following G-d’s command, no different than they would be rewarded if the command was to schlep a bag of potatoes to Yerushalayim and they did that. Rather, he means to say that when parents expose their children to such a powerful spiritual environment, this is something they will reap reward for in the future. The children will see what is important to their parents. They will see that their father and mother are inspired and uplifted by the ruchniyus (spirituality) that was characteristic of Yerushalayim and the Bais HaMikdash. They will learn to be inspired by such environments as well. This is the reward that the parents reap by bringing their children to Hakhel.

The Mechilta ends off, “Happy are you, our Patriarch Avraham, that Elazar ben Azaria came from your loins.” What does Elazar ben Azaria have to do with Avraham Avinu? Why does having such a descendant make Avraham so happy?

The Torah says why the Almighty chose Avraham Avinu: “For I have cherished him, because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of Hashem, doing charity and justice...” [Bereshis 18:19] The Ribono shel Olam gave Avraham a mandate: I have chosen you so that you should pass on My Ways to your children after you and to their children after them. This is exactly the lesson Rav Elazar ben Azaria was stressing in teaching his lesson of “To bring reward to those who bring them.”

Rav Nosson Adler makes an interesting observation. Let’s be honest: Will the parents have a more uplifting and spiritual experience hearing words of Torah and being in Yerushalayim and the Bais HaMikdash environment by themselves or with their children who are always saying they are hungry and asking when it’s time to go home? Certainly, the father and mother will have a more elevated experience if the children are not there nagging them! Then why bring them? The answer is a basic principle in Judaism: You give up some of your own ruchniyus (spirituality) for the benefit of somebody else. This is part of the mitzvah of chessed.

Part of the mitzvah of chessed is “I am going to get less out of this, but I am going to have an effect on someone else.” Avraham Avinu was in the business of chessed. He had a restaurant. Couldn’t Avraham have achieved a higher degree of spiritual accomplishment on his own, were he not distracted by having to serve meals to every Arab and idolater that came through? Yes! But he sacrificed his personal ruchniyus for the benefit of others.

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This is exactly the implication of Rav Elazar ben Azaria’s teaching. I am going to schlep my kids to Hakhel and let them drive me crazy on the trip, and I am not going to get as much out of the experience. But that is worth it, because “haNiglos lanu u’levaneinu ad olam.”

Therefore, that which my children see me doing will impact them and their descendants forever. Therefore, happy are you Avraham Avinu that Elazar ben Azaria comes from your loins.

The Difference Between the Choice in Re’eh And the Choice in Nitzavim

I would like to explain a cryptic teaching of the Meshech Chochmah in this week’s parsha.

The Torah says in Parshas Nitzavim: “For this mitzvah that I command you today is not hidden from you and is not distant. It is not in the heavens, for you to say, ‘Who can ascend to the heavens for us and take it for us, and let us hear it, so that we can perform it?’ Nor is it across the sea, for you to say ‘Who can cross to the other side of the sea for us and take it for us, and let us hear it, so that we can perform it?’ Rather, the matter is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it.” [Devorim 30:11-14].

It is always amazing to me that on the last Shabbos of the year we read this parsha and we read these words. What is “this mitzvah” referred to in the pasuk? There is a difference of opinion amongst the classic Torah commentaries as to which mitzvah is being referred to here as “a non-distant mitzvah.” Ramban and other meforshim say it is referring to the mitzvah of teshuva.

Here we are, the Shabbos before Rosh Hashanah, and the Torah says that the mitzvah of teshuva is not wondrous and is not beyond our grasp. It is not in Heaven, but it is very close to us. It is within our mouths and our hearts to do it. What inspiring words to hear before the start of the Yomim Noraim: The mitzvah of teshuva is readily attainable!

The Torah continues, “See I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil” [Devorim 30:15]. The Torah lays out the matter before us in very stark terms. If we decide to do good, we will live, if we choose bad, we are going to die. It is a zero-sum game. The Meshech Chochma asks an interesting question about this pasuk: This pasuk is strikingly similar to a pasuk we read a few weeks ago at the beginning of Parshas Re’eh. “See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse” [Devorim 11:26].

But there the Torah is not as explicit. The pasuk is not as stark. We are merely told that we have a choice between blessing and curse. It is only in this week’s parsha that the Torah tells it like it is: It is not simply a question of foregoing blessing that is at stake. No. The “Good” means life; the “Bad” means death! “I have placed life and death before you, blessing

and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring” [Devorim 30 19]. This is literally, “putting it on the table.”

The Meshech Chochma [Devorim 30:11] asks why in Parshas Re’eh the Torah merely alludes to a vague and generic choice, whereas in Parshas Netzavim it is stark and as explicit as can be.

The Meshech Chochma gives a cryptic answer (as is his style) but I think this is what he means: We are familiar with the Rambam in the third chapter of Hilchos Teshuva where he writes, “Every person has merits and sins. One whose merits outweigh his sins is a tzadik (righteous). One whose sins outweigh his merits is a rasha (wicked). One whose merits and sins are equally balanced is a beinonee (intermediate category).” This is Perek 3 Halacha 1 in Hilchos Teshuva.

Perek 3 Halacha 2 says the following: “The calculation of this balance is not based on the number of merits and sins, but based on their magnitude. There are some merits that outweigh many sins, and some sins that outweigh many merits.” This is not a simple matter of mathematics, counting up the debits and credits. There are some actions that tip the scales and outweigh many other actions that would weigh in the other direction.

Perek 3 Halacha 3 says: “Just like this calculation is made on the day a person dies, so too each and every year a person’s sins are weighed for everyone in the world—on the New Year.”

This is what is going to happen for everyone next Shabbos. We will all stand before the Master of the World and He will make the calculation: He who is found righteous will be inscribed for life. He who is found wicked will be inscribed for death. Those in the intermediate category will have their fate suspended until Yom Kippur. If they do teshuva, they will be sealed for life, if not they will be sealed for death.

Everyone asks the question: If the definition of a beinoni is someone who is exactly balanced – 50/50 – then why is it necessary for the person to do teshuva? Let him merely do one mitzvah, which will tip the scale and put him into the tzadik category! Let him visit the sick, learn a little more, grab an extra mitzvah or two, and seal his fate in a positive fashion! Why is specifically teshuva essential to put him over the top? Many people ask this famous question on the Rambam.

The answer is, as the Rambam writes: Sometimes a person does a sin that is a real whopper and can really tip the scales no matter how many merits are on the other side. What is an example of such a “whopper of an aveirah”? When the Ribono shel Olam comes and knocks on our door and says, “here I am,

apologize” and the person does not do so. That is such an egregious sin that the person can lose all hope of emerging with a positive Judgement. In effect, this is a slap in the Face to the Ribono shel Olam.

He is coming. He is waiting. He is the aggrieved party. You do not do anything about it. That is a terrible sin. This is actually a famous Gemara [Yoma 87a]. The Amoraim had a custom that if someone insulted them during the year, they would go to that person on Erev Yom Kippur and avail themselves to that person, to give them the opportunity to repent and ask forgiveness. From where did the Amoraim learn this? They learned it from the Ribono shel Olam. “Seek out Hashem when He is to be found; call out to Him when He is near” [Yeshaya 55:6]. This, Chazal say, refers to the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Then the Gemara tells a scary story: Rav had an incident with a certain butcher. He had been insulted by the butcher during the course of the year. Rav came into the butcher shop on Erev Yom Kippur, not to buy meat for the Seudah HaMafsek, but to make himself available to the butcher so that he could apologize to Rav. The butcher in effect told him “bug off.” The Gemara relates that the butcher was chopping a piece of meat with a bone, the bone flew up and hit him in the head and he died.

The question is asked: What did the butcher do that was so bad that he was deserving of death? The answer is that when Rav comes to you and in effect says to you “Here I am. I am willing to forgive you, just say the words ‘I apologize’—and you do not react—that is a horrible aveirah.

That is what the Rambam means. If you do teshuva when you are “equally balanced” then you have rectified your past sins. However, if you do not do teshuva—you merely go around visiting the sick or seeking out other “mitzvah points”—that is still a slap in the Face of the Almighty! He is here, and you are not responding.

That is the answer of the Meshech Chochmah. The difference between Parshas Re’eh and Parshas Netzavim is that Parshas Re’eh is very bland, very vanilla. “Blessing and curse.” But in Parshas Netzavim, where the Torah is blunt and spells it out – “For the mitzvah that I command you today is not beyond your grasp and it is not distant from you...” The Ribono shel Olam is saying, HERE I AM – DO TESHUVA! Then the Ribono shel Olam says. “Guess what? I have given you this opportunity. Understand, I have given you this day the choice between Life and Death. Once you have the mitzvah of teshuva and you fail to take advantage of it, it is no longer vanilla. It is no longer generic “blessing and curse.” It is now a zero-sum game. You either do teshuva and get kapparah (atonement) and you will live—or the opposite.

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That, the Meshech Chochma says, is the difference between Parshas Re’eh and Parshas Netzavim.

Dvar Torah: World Mizrahi

The Vaccination Confusion

Rav Doron Perez

People today are so confused. We live in a confusing generation. We live in a post-modern era where everything can be contested and everything can be doubted. Everything is subjective, it is an era of moral relativism.

Also, we live in the generation of the internet. For the first time in history, children are exposed to any and every piece of information from every corner of the globe. Some of it constructive, while some is destructive and confusing.

This is a blessing, but also has within it a curse. That is one of the curses in last week’s Parasha, when in the long list of curses we are told G-d will smite us, G-d forbid, with “confusion of the heart”. Many of us might recognize this wording of ‘Timhon Levav’ from the Yom Kippur prayers, when in the Vidui, the confession, we say to G-d we have sinned out of confusion of the heart.

During this pandemic, there is so much confusion. Time and time again, the Prime Minister of Israel has openly called for the one million Israelis who have not yet received the vaccine to go and get vaccinated. It is mind-boggling that from three areas of society, people are being called to get vaccinated: from heads of government, heads of healthcare systems, and rabbinic leaders from all communities.

Yet, somehow, there is confusion of the heart, for whatever reason that might be – conspiracy theories, anti-establishment or individual views.

May we all have clarity not confusion of the heart, and be blessed in this coming year for moral and spiritual clarity in all areas of life, and to overcome the pandemic and to be able to live in a much better, healthier world together.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

Teshuvah, Kappara and Independence Rabbi David Kalb

In Parashat Netzavim (Devarim / Deuteronomy 29:9), the Torah states, “You are standing today, all of you, before the Lord your God ...” Verse 10 goes on to list several different categories of people within the Jewish nation, from the heads of the tribes to the water drawers, standing before God.

Verse 11 indicates that all of these different types of people are “passing into the Brit (covenant) of the Lord your God.” This asserts that the community must connect to God and

the mitzvot of the Torah directly. Moshe (Moses) cannot serve as an intermediary; every person has to enter into the Covenant directly.

The concept of a direct connection to God and the Covenant is further emphasized: “For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in Heaven that you should not say: Who shall go up for us to Heaven, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it? [30:11-12]”

A relationship with God is not far away from you, and every person has the potential to have that relationship without an intermediary.

This idea of standing before God directly also plays out during the upcoming period of the Yamim Nora'im, particularly on Yom Kippur.

At a 1973 lecture at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik asked what the main difference is between how kappara (atonement) is achieved today versus the way it was achieved in the times of the Beit Hamikdash, the ancient Temple in Jerusalem?

Rabbi Soloveitchik based his answer on Rambam's Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah (Laws of Repentance) Chapter 1, which points out that kappara was accomplished in Temple times through korbanot (sacrifices). However, if the sacrifices were not accompanied by teshuvah (repentance), kappara was not attained.

Today, without a Temple and sacrifices, the only thing that achieves kappara is repentance. Teshuvah, once a condition to achieving atonement, is now the sole means of doing so. As a result, one could argue that today our experience of teshuvah is more intense and direct.

Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel points out in his book, *Linvuechey Ha-Tekufah / Light for an Age of Confusion*, that one of the fantastic things about the Jewish approach to repentance and atonement is that it is carried out directly by the individual. No intermediary stands between the penitent and the person they wronged or before God.

Rabbi Amiel writes: “Repentance originates in the infinite intellect that transcends time and nature. One principle directs it: Nothing stands in the way of the will. ... One can instantly transform one's self, leaping from the deepest pit to the highest Heaven ... human beings can transform themselves at any moment, renewing themselves at will to become new people.”

He continues in this vein, saying that when we transform ourselves, it is akin to being reborn, almost as if we have given birth to ourselves.

Both Rabbi Amiel and Rabbi Soloveitchik understood the idea that atonement is to be

achieved without an intermediary. As much as the experience of atonement is more direct today, and we are not expecting a Kohen Gadol (High Priest) to make atonement for us, there is sometimes a tendency in some modern day synagogues to replace the intermediary of the Kohen Gadol with the intermediary of a rabbi or cantor.

Even in synagogues that are more participatory, where congregants are less dependent on a rabbi and cantor, the service itself can become an intermediary. To be sure, the service is integral to helping facilitate teshuvah, and the rabbi and cantor can be excellent guides in our teshuvah process. However, none of this can replace the experience of standing before those whom we have wronged, or to stand before God and asking forgiveness.

It is interesting we live in a DIY (Do It Yourself) society. People today are more directly involved in every aspect of their lives. We make our own investments and do our banking online. We can get directly involved in journalism and politics through social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.

The same direct involvement that people have in business, journalism, and politics needs to be applied to the teshuvah process on the Yamim Nora'im, and to Judaism in general. As we engage in the process of repentance, let us do so directly, without any intermediaries.

It is my blessing that this approach of direct involvement spills over into every aspect of our spiritual experiences in life. Shanah Tovah.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah

by Rabbi Label Lam

Giving to HASHEM Tzedaka

And He took him outside, and He said, “Please look heavenward and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So will be your seed.” And he believed in HASHEM, and He accounted it to him (Avraham) as (Tzedaka) righteousness. (Breishis 15:5-6)

There is something we can do for HASHEM that even HASHEM cannot do for Himself. Sounds almost like a heretical proposal but if I did not hear it from a great person, Reb Eziel Tauber zt., and with my own ears, I would be intrepid to say it myself.

How is it that Avraham Avinu was credited with Tzedaka? He believed in HASHEM! HASHEM is the essence of KNOWLEDGE. How can HASHEM then believe in Himself, or force others to believe in Him?! That would not be belief but coercion. That would not make HASHEM a King but rather a dictator.

A king, by definition rules with the consent of his subjects. That Talmud says, “There is no king without a people.” His reign is dependent upon the consent of the nation that pledges

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loyalty to him. A dictator must rule his subjects, even for their own good, by force. He can be a benevolent despot but it is with or without their approval. King David writes in Tehillim, The Kingdom is HASHEM's and he is ruler over all the nations. (Tehillim 22:29). It is HASHEM's desire to be a King and not a ruler. Who are His people? When is the election?

Election Day in Israel is called, “Yom Bechira”- Day of Choosing! We know that every day is “Yom Bechira” but some days are bigger and more important than other days. Rabbi EE Dessler ztl. writes that there are two types of Bechira—Free Choice. One is Bechira Pratis (detailed) and the other is Bechira Klalis (general).. One style of free choice is made up of the miniature moment by moment decisions we make daily.

They are not to be minimized because each moment of life is a slice of eternity and is cosmic in its impact. However, sometimes, it's obvious when we reach a giant fork in the road that the choice we make will effect a whole year or the entirety of our lives. That's called, “Bechira Klalis”.

When someone accepts to do a job and agrees to a salary then he is locked into that position. Each and every day and throughout every day he makes decisions that will impact whether or not that job or another job will be available for him next year. That first choice though is a grand and general choosing. Rosh HaShana is literally “The Head of the Year”! Everything in the year is contained in the head of that year! It is Election Day. The Shofar is campaigning and reminding, and urging, and encouraging we the Jewish People to get come to Shul and vote. This “voting” is much different than that democratic method of making voices heard.

My in-laws bless their souls were Holocaust survivors and they both became naturalized citizens. On Election Day they took their duty seriously. They made the great effort to come to the local polling station even when it was difficult. Now one was a republican and the other was a democrat. They each voted for the opposing candidate. When I heard about this, I wondered why they didn't just stay home?! They effectively cancelled each other's vote. Oy Vey!

When voting for HASHEM to be King over the World and the details of our lives, nothing, and no one can cancel our vote. It's absolute and real. Not only that! In a regular election you simply pull a lever but when electing HASHEM, as the Talmud tells us, “HASHEM wants the heart”. Each vote is extremely private and has endless depth. This is what we can do for HASHEM that even HASHEM can't do for Himself, and we are credited with giving to HASHEM Tzedaka!

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Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah
via the Internet

Ketiva V'Chatima Tova

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The Person in the Parsha

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Willing to Change

Sometimes even the corniest of old jokes has a profound lesson to teach us. "How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?" In case you haven't already heard the answer to this example of tired "light bulb" humor, it goes like this: "Just one. But it has to be willing to change!"

This witticism, if it deserves that name, recognizes an important limitation of the profession of psychotherapy. It can only be effective to the extent that patients or clients are motivated to cooperate with the process. Only if they are committed to doing the hard work of personal change can psychotherapists look forward to success.

Willingness to change is a rare trait among humans. People are frightened of anything new and adhere to the status quo even when it has brought them little benefit.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of the land of Israel, wrote a precious little book entitled *The Lights of Return*. In it he insists that the "human tendency to cling desperately to old ways and ancient habits is the sign of a spiritual malaise".

Rav Kook wrote this book early in his life. In his later years, he not only recommended it to others, but he studied it himself, especially at the time of year in which we now find ourselves.

For we are now in the waning days of the month of Elul with the High Holidays imminent. The theme of this period of the Jewish calendar is teshuvah, which, although usually translated as "repentance", is better translated as "return", or still better as "change".

A fundamental teaching of Judaism is the following verse from Ecclesiastes: "For no man is perfect in this world, doing only good and never sinning." We all need to improve, we all need to change. This is the central message of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur for the Jew.

The fundamental difference between optimists and pessimists is that the former believe that

change is possible, whereas the latter believe that attempts to change are futile.

"You can't change human nature." "The leopard cannot change his spots." "Once a fool always a fool." These are the mottos of the pessimists, and the assumptions they make are the very stuff of the entrenched resistance to genuine change in our behaviors and attitudes.

Books have been written and countless sermons sounded with all sorts of advice as to how to go about change. Some believe that it is a slow, gradual, step by step process. Others insist that change requires a dramatic leap of faith and can be done in a transformational moment.

Some believe that change happens because of external circumstances, or social pressures imposed by other people. Others maintain that, on the contrary, change can be intentional and purposefully initiated by every person himself or herself.

Jewish texts recognize that there are two types of change; one indeed, a slow, painstaking path, and the other, a rapid and sudden personality shift. Jewish tradition recognizes that others influence and mold our paths, but that the ultimate responsibility for spiritual change lies with each of us ourselves.

I would like to share with you all one fascinating example of two individuals working together in a purposeful but deliberately incremental change process. It is to be found in the writings of a man known as the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto. His name was Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro, and his career as an outstanding pedagogue and teacher of adolescent boys was tragically cut off by the horrors of the Holocaust.

Rabbi Shapiro wrote a book aimed at his young protégés, giving them the following piece of advice to be initiated at the beginning of the school semester. He asks the student to imagine, if his name, for example, is Reuven, what "Reuven" might look like a month from now, six months from now, a year from now.

Once the young man has some sort of image of what his future self might be he can consciously begin to take steps to approximate this image. He can set specific goals and objectives to come closer to his self ideal, step by tentative step.

And every so often, he can monitor his progress, accelerating the process, modifying it if necessary, or slowing it down if things are going too quickly. The Rebbe encourages the young man to collaborate with a friend or a mentor as he goes through this process of self change and self-development.

At this time of the Jewish New Year, as many do around the time of the secular New Year, we all tend to make resolutions. Rabbi Shapiro's technique is but one of the numerous methods which can assist us in formulating such resolutions and in successfully executing them.

The sanctity of this season inspires us, like the light bulb, to be willing to change. We must turn to the wise and the experienced among us, be they living friends, mentors, and spiritual guides, or past scholars, rabbis, and teachers, for suggestions of specific techniques as to how to really change.

Judaism always insists upon the utility and the importance of textual study. At this time of year study is no less important than prayer. Especially if our study focuses upon finding ways to achieve desired change, and to maintain that change in the face of challenge and ever shifting circumstances.

Every time we wish each other a Happy and Sweet New Year, we are really saying, "I hope that you are successful in your attempts to change yourself and improve yourself in the coming year." It is in that spirit that I wish each of you, dear readers, a Happy and Sweet New Year!

Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

A Wordless Blast

By Harav Yehuda Amital ז"ל

Remembrance before God - Happy is the nation that knows the blast of the shofar. O Lord, they walk in the light of Your presence. (*Tehillim* 89:16) The Torah does not explicitly command us to **blow** the shofar on Rosh Hashana. Rather, the Torah says, "It shall be for you a day of shofar blowing" (*Bamidbar* 29:1) as well as "a holy convocation with a

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remembrance of shofar blasts” (*Vayikra* 23:24). The simple meaning of “a day of shofar blowing” is a day entirely characterized by the shofar blowing. The blow leaves its signature on the entire day. The Ramban explains in his commentary to the Torah that “a remembrance of shofar blasts” means that the Jews are remembered before God, as it says, “And you shall sound the trumpets... and it shall be for you a remembrance before God” (*Bamidbar* 10:10). In other words, the remembrance of the Jews before God on Rosh Ha-Shana is brought about by the shofar.

The Bach (to *Tur* OC 625) suggests that regarding the commandments of *sukka*, *tefillin*, and *tzitzit*, the rationales for the commandments are inseparable parts of their fulfillment. He notes that regarding *tzitzit* the Torah says, “so that [*lema'an*] you will remember” (*Bamidbar* 15:40); regarding *tefillin* it says, “so that [*lema'an*] God’s Torah will be in your mouth” (*Shemot* 13:9); regarding *sukka* it says, “so that [*lema'an*] your generations will know that I caused you to dwell in *sukkot*” (*Vayikra* 23:43). In each case, understanding the rationale for the mitzva enables one to fulfill the commandment properly.

I believe the same is true regarding the blowing of the shofar. Both the blower and those hearing the shofar must keep in mind that by means of this mitzva, the Jewish people “remind” God and “are remembered” by God.

This understanding can resolve a question that the Ramban raised against Rashi. Rashi comments (*Vayikra* 23:24): “*Zikhron teru'a*” – A remembrance of the verses of *zikhronot* and the verses of *shofarot* (in the *Musaf* prayer of Rosh Ha-shana). The Ramban asked: How can this biblical verse be referring to the blessings of the *Musaf* prayer – are not these blessings a rabbinic (*de-rabbanan*) obligation? In light of the above, we can suggest that though mentioning the verses is a rabbinic rather than a biblical obligation, by saying the verses one fulfills the *mitzvot* of remembrance before God and “it shall be for you a remembrance of shofar blasts.”

The Language of the Heart - Why does the Torah command us to be remembered before God specifically by means of the shofar blasts? Why should we speak with a language of symbols and sounds and not words (the way we tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt)? The answer is that the shofar expands and deepens the human voice. Man puts as much energy into the shofar as he can, and a sound far greater than his own emanates from the shofar.

The *teki'a* and *teru'a* blasts express more than words can. Regarding the receiving of the Torah, the verse says, “and the voice of the shofar became continuously stronger; Moshe would speak and God would respond with a

voice” (*Shemot* 19:19); the ever-strengthening voice hinted at the endless proliferation of Torah throughout the generations.

A person who turns to God faces a dilemma. Generally, turning to God in prayer consists of using words. However, human language was created for dialogue between **people**, between one finite creature and another. There is something tragic about the fact that a person must use human language when turning to God. Human language limits, constricts, and distorts. It cannot express what is found in the chambers of our hearts. Human speech is fundamentally different from divine speech. God, after all, uttered “Remember the Sabbath” and “Keep the Sabbath” in one statement. This is an entirely different mode of expression than human speech; it is a completely different essence. The blast of the shofar solves the dilemma, at least to some degree.

Rav Saadya Gaon enumerates ten reasons for the blowing of the shofar, and they have been copied into some *machzorim*. We can study these reasons, ponder them, organize them, but do they really express what is in the depths of our hearts? In the heart, things are not set forth in an organized way. Images, feelings, and thoughts rage in our hearts and fill them! Sometimes, though not always, we succeed in arranging things in our intellect. However, in the heart, everything is mixed together: ancient memories of the creation of the world, the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the destruction of the Temple, the kingship of God, the fear of judgment, and the voices of the prophets. The heart is an entanglement of thoughts and feelings, and we have difficulty communicating the authentic message found in our innermost hearts. We are incapable of expressing this in words or organized speech. God gave us the commandment of shofar, and through it we communicate to God the feelings of our heart – “for You hear the voice of the shofar, and listen to its blast, and there is none like You” (*Amida* of Rosh Ha-shana).

The Cries of a Mother - The Talmud (*Rosh Ha-shana* 32b) derives from a verse regarding the mother of Sisera that the *teru'a* is the sound of a whimper. The obvious question is: What have we to do with the mother of Sisera? Can we really learn the laws of the shofar from the mother of that wicked man, the enemy of Israel? Rabbeinu Natan (*Arukh* 272) draws an even stronger connection, asserting that the one hundred shofar sounds blown on Rosh Ha-shana parallel the hundred whimpers of Sisera’s mother.

Even within a culture that is wholly false and repugnant, a mother worries about her son. Nothing is more natural than that. Our matriarch Sara and Sisera’s mother differ in innumerable ways. Nevertheless, there is point at which they meet. There is a common denominator between the hundred whimpers of Sisera’s mother and the six cries that Sara

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uttered when she heard about the binding of her son Yitzchak (*Vayikra Rabba* 20:2). Both expressed the natural fear of a mother for her child. This is also the power of the shofar blasts that come from the depths of the heart.

The Shofar of the Akeida - The origin of the shofar is that ram caught in the thicket by its horns. It is astonishing that Avraham is silent during the entire *akeida*. Aside from word “*Hinneini* – Here I am” at the beginning of the episode (*Bereishit* 22:1), the instructions to his lads, and his answer to Yitzchak, “God will show for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (*Bereishit* 22:8), Avraham does not utter a word. And then, at the climax of the *akeida*, the angel tells him, “Do not lay your hand upon the lad!” (*Bereishit* 22:12). What passed through Avraham’s heart at that moment? Where is the author, where is the poet who can describe it?! Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi (*Kuzari* 3:5) wrote that a righteous person should direct the power of his imagination to such lofty states such as the *akeida*, but we wonder: Where is the imagination rich enough to describe it?

Avraham seeks to express what is in his heart, but his power of speech fails him. Instead, “Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, a ram was caught in the thicket by its horns, and Avraham went and took the ram and brought it as a sacrifice instead of his son” (*Bereishit* 22:13). Avraham’s glance towards the horns caught in the thicket is laden with unimaginably tense energy. We blow that same ram’s horn, and thereby express the hidden thoughts and feelings that we cannot organize or put into words, “for You hear the voice of the shofar, and listen to its blast, and there is none like You.” [Adapted by Rav Yoel Amital; translated by Jonathan Ziring]

Is Teshuva Easy or Hard? Rav Elyakim Krumbein

Pay attention to the following statement, as well as to your instinctive inner reaction to it: “Teshuva is really easy!”

If, like most people, you have any sort of experience in the realm of teshuva, your reaction is probably one of disbelief (“Nonsense!”) or perhaps a cynical brush-off (“Anything else I should know?”)

But how are we to react to a verse from the Torah itself – a verse familiar to us – expressing exactly the same idea, only in fancier “biblical” language:

For this commandment which I command you today – it is not hidden from you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you might say, “Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?” Nor is it over the sea... For the word is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. (*Devarim* 30:11-14)

According to Ramban, the words “this commandment” refer to the commandment of teshuva.

The Rambam, in his Guide of the Perplexed, makes a similar claim regarding Divine service in general: it is not so difficult! According to the Rambam, this is precisely the message of Torah, distinguishing it from other religious approaches: “For this Divine Torah, which was commanded to Moshe... comes to ease the service of ritual and the tasks” (III:47). The verse cited above supports the Rambam’s view.

If the Torah says that it is not difficult, how is it that we mess up? The answer to this question is hinted at in the very same verse: “It is not in heaven, that you might say....” The whole point is what one “says” to oneself. If one’s perception is that something is difficult, then one will indeed find it to be so. There are some kinds of errors that become fixed in our thinking and which then become so difficult for us to let go of, that we are easily led to start finding ways to prove them. And once we have “proved” any aspect or element, we feel justified in asserting that we know, from experience, that the process of teshuva is exceedingly difficult.

However, more than the difficulty proves the perception of it, it turns out that the perception creates the difficulty. Because it is “supposed” to be difficult, we start off going about it in such a way that there is little chance of success: we try to force ourselves to undergo great or dramatic changes within a short time. Obviously, our measly measure of success then serves as further “proof” of how difficult teshuva is.

The truth is that trying to force something upon ourselves like this is an unripe form of teshuva that goes against human nature – it is “teshuva undertaken out of fear.” Real teshuva, the Torah tells us here, is “near to you:” it proceeds in harmony with a person’s nature; it is “teshuva undertaken out of love.” Teshuva is a gradual, orderly, organic process, like the growth of a tree.

Teshuva “in the heaven” and “over the sea” – The Torah then goes into greater detail. Where does our mistake occur? One possibility is that we think that Divine service is “in the heaven,” something transcendental and lofty that lies beyond the capability of flesh and blood mortals. Only angels are perfect, we tell ourselves, and if our Divine service or our teshuva is not perfect, it is not worth anything. Alternatively, we might imagine that the Torah is “over the sea” – in other words, a distant reality that cannot be realized in this world. Our world is a roiling sea, full of disorder, and the idea of truly serving God in the midst of this chaos is simply absurd. Society around us is a maelstrom of materialism and false values, doubts, cynicism, and the pursuit of wealth and pleasure. Any pretense that man can serve God in such a place can only lead to despair; it would require swimming against an unstoppable tide of apathy. All of this creates a mixture of imagined humility and self-pity: we

are far from teshuva, both in terms of our very nature as human beings, and in terms of our utter helplessness in view of the influences around us.

The message that Moshe conveys in the above verses is that such thinking is wrong: “You have adopted a picture of reality that is not relevant; it will not lead anywhere useful. The truth is that teshuva is here on earth, on this side of the ocean, very close by!”

This is the message that the Maggid of Dubnow conveys in one of his well-known parables, based on Yishayahu’s rebuke: “But you have not called upon Me, O Yaakov, for have you wearied yourself about Me, O Israel” (43:22). The situation may be compared to that of a postman who trudges along, carrying a very heavy parcel. He finally arrives at the address and knocks on the door. The homeowner opens, takes one look at the postman puffing and panting on his doorstep, and immediately realizes that there has been some mistake – the postman has apparently mixed things up and delivered the wrong package. He tells him, “This delivery is meant for someone else; the package I’m expecting is a small, lightweight item.” Similarly, the prophet declares in God’s Name: If you have “wearied yourself about Me,” then “you have not called upon Me.” You have heaped all these difficulties upon yourself; I never asked that of you.

Easy teshuva in practice – What is meant by the words “near to you”? It means that the Torah does not go against human nature; rather, it accords with it. When this principle is implemented, teshuva becomes “easy.” What does this mean in practice? An example might help illustrate.

What is achieved through difficult or intensive action, and what results from an easy action? We know that acting out of habit is easy, while breaking a habit is difficult. Instead of trying to break a bad habit, let us rather pay closer attention to our good habits. Our daily routine is full of them! Some of our automatic actions are in fact important mitzvot, from saying “Modeh Ani” upon awakening, to our daily prayers, our social interactions and relationships with family and friends, and so on. These are things that we do anyway, so they require no special effort on our part; the issue is just that we do them without thinking, and this is what our teshuva needs to address. Habit breeds uncalled-for disparagement and underestimation, and it is this attitude that must be corrected before anything else. That is the gateway to teshuva. Rav Charlap z”l explains (Ori ve-Yishi 1) that the first and most critical step in teshuva is entering this gateway. The idea that “a sin drags another sin in its wake” means, according to Rav Charlap, that a person is fundamentally good and holy, and it is in fact unthinkable that he could sin – were he not drawn in that direction by the influence of a previous sin. But then we must ask, where

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did the first sin come from? How could sin ever appear on the horizon of a person’s life as a real option? Rav Charlap’s answer to this is that the first sin is not a real sin; it is not even failure to perform a mitzva. It is merely a degree of negligence in performing a mitzva. In other words, the mitzva is done, but without the proper attention and enthusiasm, such that its practical execution is “sloppy.”

Correcting this deficiency is the key, and it is precisely this that is “near to us.” We are speaking here of mitzvot that are already ingrained in us; the problem is just that we give them no thought. All we need is a very simple thought: If I’m already doing this mitzva, then why not really invest myself and do a more complete job of it? That’s easy! And thus one small step is followed by another. The actions that are already deeply rooted in my life are harnessed as an engine for growth and progress.

Two sides to “teshuva out of love” – This is precisely the place of “teshuva that proceeds from love,” which includes two stages. First is our attention to the fact that this action that we repeat every day is actually a “mitzva”: a spiritual act expressing great value, which is part of our self-identity. This thought, if we place it “upon our heart,” arouses a feeling of identification and even spiritual elevation, and quite naturally we find ourselves performing the very same action with a more profound awareness. Then, once we appreciate the greatness of these seemingly routine actions, we are ready for the next stage. Now we must ask what we are able to do right now in a better way, easily, and without “going crazy.” For example, maintaining good spirits and acting with alacrity and vigor will lead to an improvement that will be readily apparent. The main thing is to be headed in the direction of repair. One small step is enough to count as part of our “teshuva.”

The mitzvot that come easily to us are those that are natural to us. They are already part of our routine, and they do not require any great change within us; all we need is to express that which already exists inside us. I certainly believe in the blessings that I recite all the time, so if I am already reciting them – why not try to enter the “soul” of the blessing, to concentrate on it and to experience it? When I am engaged in my job, too, I give expression to my world of values: I am making a contribution to society (“The world is built on kindness”); I am striving for excellence (“Great is he who enjoys the labor of his hands”), etc. Thinking about this arouses inner will and thankfulness, and encourages me to take care to perform each task in a more complete way.

As a different example, let us consider walking to the synagogue. What is there to see in this simple action? There are many possibilities, depending on a person’s orientation and way of thinking. One might view it as walking

towards a connection with God, joining the congregation, or connecting to the core of life. When one thinks about this, one's enthusiasm is aroused and this in turn will elevate and enhance one's prayer. The same approach and technique can be used to view chance personal encounters or other seemingly mundane situations in a new light.

Coping with "lows" - The nature of life is such that if a person enjoys a positive period of growth and fulfillment, a period of lethargy and heaviness is likely to follow. What is the purpose of these "low" times, when it sometimes appears to us that we are unable to uplift ourselves? During this time, a person remains just as he is, doing only what comes naturally to him – even in his spiritual efforts. Surprisingly enough, he discovers that his basic, "default" spiritual situation does not require maximal spiritual tension. He discovers that he is good even when he is not pushing himself to the limits. His regular, everyday lifestyle is already "as full of mitzvot and good deeds as a pomegranate," and he is within the category of "teshuvah" even in this state. This thought gives him joy and depth of meaning.

In order to be a "ba'al teshuva" – someone who "engages in teshuva" on a constant basis, one has to love it. And this becomes possible when we focus on the good within us, in order to extract the maximum from it. May the Holy One, blessed be He, restore us to Him with a whole heart and a willing soul. *[Translated by Kaeren Fish]*

OU Dvar Torah

Rabbi Abraham Twerski, MD

Why Is It So Hard to Change? The Six Obstacles to Teshuvah

"Of course a person should do teshuvah, but I am a bit puzzled. I observe Shabbos, I keep kosher and taharas hamishpachah. I daven every day, I attend a Daf Yomi shiur and I am honest in my business dealings. What exactly should I do teshuvah for?"

People may not actually say this, but some certainly think this way. Yet King Solomon said, "For there is no man so fully righteous that he always does good and never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20). Even the greatest tzaddik is not free of sin. How, then, can a person who is quite far from being a perfect tzaddik not feel a need to do teshuvah?

Several psychological defense mechanisms tend to discourage an individual from changing, from doing teshuvah. The obstacles to teshuvah are denial, rationalization, trivializing, projection, habituation and ego.

1} Denial - Throughout Tanach, the prophets repeatedly exhorted the Jewish people to abandon their errant behavior, but as is evident from the Scriptures, they were not very successful. Isaiah explains why. "Surely you hear, but you fail to comprehend; and surely you see, but you fail to know. This people is

fattening its heart, hardening its ears and sealing its eyes, lest it see with its eyes and hear with its ears and understand with its heart, so that it will repent and be healed" (Isaiah 6:9-10). No psychology text can improve on Isaiah's description of denial. Because people are intent on doing whatever they wish, they resort to denial, one of the best-known defense mechanisms so that they are unaffected by the reality of what they see and hear.

We are creatures of habit, and we are comfortable when we can do things without the need to exert much effort. Change is uncomfortable, and in order to avoid this discomfort, our minds block out those realizations that would call for change. The natural state of all matter—including human beings—is inertia, but one must force himself to overcome inertia in order to grow and change.

2} Rationalization - Denial enables a person to maintain the status quo. When reality threatens to overcome denial, the mind employs other defense mechanisms to reinforce the denial—such as rationalization. One of the themes in Proverbs is the tendency to rationalize. Ramchal says, "If a person is confronted with one's laziness, one will doubtless come back with many quotations culled from the sages and the Scriptures and with intellectual arguments, all supporting, according to his misguided mind, his leniency with himself" (Mesillas Yesarim, Chapter 6).

Denial is not always possible, so the mind is very clever in rationalizing; in other words, justifying one's actions by giving logical-sounding reasons for them. The Torah stresses the gravity of speaking lashon hara, for example, which requires both teshuvah vis-à-vis Hashem and forgiveness from the victim. Oftentimes one who speaks lashon hara may attempt to justify his behavior by claiming "But it's the truth!" Defamatory speech is lashon hara, even if it is true.

3} Habituation - The Talmud says that when a person does a forbidden act several times, it loses its opprobrium. Habituation enables one to think that these transgressions are permissible. His conscience is lulled into thinking, It's really not so terrible. Thus, even though the morning minyan begins promptly at 6:30 am and ends at 7:05, there are some minyannaires who habitually show up at 6:45 and leave before everyone else. They are so accustomed to arriving late and davening at breakneck speed, they see nothing wrong with it.

4} Projection - One who projects onto another will not be able to do genuine teshuvah. Sins committed against another person are not forgiven on Yom Kippur unless one has obtained forgiveness from the offended individual. The defense mechanism of projection turns things around: I did not offend him. He offended me. He should really be apologizing to me.

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5} Trivializing - The tendency to trivialize halachah is another impediment in the road to teshuvah. I missed Minchah, but I was so busy at the office. Anyway, it's not a big deal. Or, I chatted with my friend during the Reading of the Torah, but doesn't everybody? (This is the only sin for which the Shulchan Aruch says, "There is no forgiveness.")

6} Ego - Inasmuch as teshuvah for an offense against another person requires that one make amends and ask forgiveness, there is ego resistance to humbling oneself, apologizing and making restitution where required. One of the axioms of human behavior is that a person will always choose to do that which is most comfortable for him. We find that an addict will not agree to change until he hits "rock-bottom," i.e., that the pain incident to the addiction is greater than the pleasure it provides. This is equally true of the non-addict. Therefore, oftentimes individuals only agree to change when they have reached rock-bottom. But what can constitute rock-bottom for the non-addict? A person who contemplates his life goals and sees that his behavior is jeopardizing his reaching those goals may reach rock-bottom. But this requires giving serious thought to defining one's goals and purpose in life. Confronting death can usually lead to such introspection. I recently attended the funeral of a great talmid chacham. A man next to me said somewhat somberly, "Reb Z. is taking along with him much Torah and mitzvos. What will I be taking along?"

The first chapter in Mesillas Yesarim is entitled "A Person's Obligation in His World." The theme of Mesillas Yesarim is the refinement of one's character. Changing one's character traits is a major challenge and is usually met with great resistance. Many times real change won't happen until one realizes that unless one does so, his life is meaningless. Uncompromised honesty is necessary to see through the psychological defenses that are a barrier to teshuvah. Rosh Hashanah, the Ten Days of Penitence and Yom Kippur are days in which one should be inspired to evaluate the meaning of one's life. Only when we are aware that we need "fixing" will we do teshuvah. *[This article was featured in the Fall 2012 issue of Jewish Action]*

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky

Rosh Hashana and Sinai

Klal Yisroel's existence crystalized with the revelation at Sinai, and indeed two yomim tovim speak of Sinai. Shavuot, the holiday that focuses on the giving of the Torah, places the events at Sinai as its focal point. But Rosh Hashana also carries an extraordinary focus on Sinai, and that is rather puzzling.

In the Mussaf shemoneh esrei of Rosh Hashana we introduce the Shofros - undoubtedly the central feature of Rosh Hashana - via the shofar of Sinai. This is quite

surprising. For although there was the sound of a shofar at Sinai, the shofar seemed to play but a minor role in the Sinai revelation. [The Kaf Hachaim also says that that is the reason we blow at the bimah - to mirror Sinai.] If one were looking for an event to elaborate on in Shofros, one could have chosen the akeidah, where the ram and its horn, as well as the zechus of the akeidah, seem to play a major role.

The phrasing of that section of Shofros is that Hashem, "revealed Himself at Sinai to teach us Torah and mitzvos, and You let them hear the majesty of Your 'kol', and Your sacred words". There seem to be two communications here: the dibbur - sacred words - and the kol. One would venture to guess that these are two aspects of the revelation which express themselves in these two yomim tovim. But what are these aspects?

Let us first examine closely the concept of Malchiyos. At first glance Hashem's malchus is but a mere conceptual prerequisite, i.e. it is only because Hashem is boss that we are obligated to fulfill His dictates. Therefore, we first establish that Hashem is king, and as king He commands and judges us as to how well we have obeyed. But if we look at the bulk of the Malchiyos prayer, malchus is not a mere prerequisite; rather the prayer is all about establishing Hashem's malchus and realizing its fulfillment entirely.

One is therefore led to understand a much bigger picture of Hashem's malchus and His expectations of us. While there are detailed commands of what to do and what not to do, there is, more significantly, the sweeping vision of what it is that Hashem wants of the world. All the details of the various mitzvos come together to form a picture that integrates every element in creation. And that is malchus. Malchus is not so much the mere acknowledgement that Hashem is king; but more so that the world is His kingdom and it's meant to reflect in its entirety that vision that Hashem had for it when He created it. We, therefore, on the day of creation, start by expressing our yearning for the day that malchus will become totally revealed.

This grand vision was revealed to us at Sinai; for alongside the revelation of the particulars of Torah, Hashem revealed to us the big picture as well. When a person speaks, his dibbur-words define the specifics, but his voice-kol gives me the general sense of his emotions, etc. Hashem revealed to us at Sinai both the dibbur and the kol. The dibbur is the subject of Shavuot, and the kol is the focus of Rosh Hashana.

This adds another dimension to our cheshbon hanefesh on Rosh Hashana. It is not enough to merely ponder which details of the Torah am I following, and in which is my observance lacking. Perhaps, this is the point of Yom-Kippur, with its meticulously detailed vidui,

based on the aleph-beis. And indeed, the passuk urges us, "k'chu imachem devarim v'shuvu el Hashem- bring your words with you and come back to Hashem."

But on Rosh Hashana we ask ourselves, is our vision of our life in consonance with Hashem's vision? Is our life's yearning to be b'tzelem Elokim; Adam as he was meant to be? Is our vision of the world, a world of "l'saken olam b'malchus Shakkai"?

Let us first make sure that our "kol" is the "kol of Yaakov", and only then can we pay attention to each and every dibbur.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

In Tractate Brochos (29a), the Talmud says that on Rosh Hashana, we daven a Shmoneh Esrei (referring to the "standing prayer") of nine blessings (the standard opening three blessings, the standard closing three blessings, and the middle three special blessings of Malchiyos, Zichronos, & Shofros — the middle portions of the Rosh Hashana Musaf service dealing respectively with Kingship, Remembrances, and Shofar Blasts). The Gemara says that the source for the number of these blessings, nine, comes from the nine Azkoros — the nine times that G-d's Name is mentioned in the prayer of Chana [Samuel 2:1-10].

The story of Chana [Samuel 1:1-2:10] is the Haftorah on the first day of Rosh Hashana. Chana was barren. She came to the Mishkan (Tabernacle) every year to cry her heart out. (The Mishkan was originally built during the years in the Wilderness, and was located up in Shilo during the time of the story of Chana. It eventually gave way to the Beis HaMikdash.) Chana suffered the humiliation of her husband having a second wife who was blessed with children, and who taunted Chana over her inability to have children, though for a noble reason (because she wanted to inspire Chana to pray more). Chana's prayers were finally answered on Rosh Hashana. She eventually gave birth to a son who grew up to become the great prophet Samuel.

The story of Chana contains a lesson that is so vital and central to the message of Rosh Hashana that not only do we read this Haftorah on the first day of Rosh Hashana, but the whole Tefillas Musaf (Additional Prayer) on Rosh Hashana was structured around the nine mentions of G-d's name in Chana's prayer. What is so important about this episode that causes us to base the central prayer of Rosh Hashana on the prayer of Chana?

An analysis of Chana's prayer reveals that it emphasizes that life is full of changing fortunes. Chana says "...while the barren woman has born seven, she that had many children has been bereaved (2:5)".

Chana describes the fact that in the past she was barren and her co-wife, Penina had many

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children. But now Chana has 7 children and when each baby was born to Chana, Penina lost a child.

G-d makes some people poor and he makes some people rich. He makes the haughty low and the humble high. Fortunes keep changing.

Chana cautions and says (2:3) "Al Tarbu t'dabru gevoha gevoha..." (You mighty ones — don't speak with haughtiness) "...Keshes Giborim chatim, v'nichsalim ozru chayil" (because you may fall and the weak will be girded with strength) (2:4).

This is Chana's message to the Jewish People on Rosh Hashana: Life is so fickle. Fortunes are so fragile. Rosh Hashana is an unbelievably scary day!

Emotionally, Rosh Hashana is one of the most difficult days of the year. We can deal with Yom Kippur. We do not eat. It is a day of Mercy. We separate ourselves from the rest of the world and we pour our hearts out. But what are we supposed to do on Rosh Hashana? Rosh Hashana is the Yom HaDin (Day of Judgment). Everything is riding on this day. And yet there is an obligation to observe this day as a Festival — looking and acting and eating like a Yom Tov. How do we cope with this dichotomy?

Rav Tzadok HaCohen (1823-1900; Chassidic Sage and thinker; one of leading Torah scholars in the 19th century; author of Pri Tzadik) points out that the Shevarim and Teruahs, which are the broken sounds of the shofar (representing the crying out of a broken spirit), must always be sandwiched between two Tekiahs. The firm, unbroken, Tekiah sound represents Simcha (joy). This, Rav Tzadok says, captures the theme of the day.

On the exterior, we must act and feel like it is a Yom Tov. But on the interior — between the Tekios — we must have a terrible, terrible, fear: a fear that anything can happen.

If anyone doubts this for a minute, they just need to think back about these past few years. Think back on what happened in the world, what happened to individuals, what happened to communities. It is nothing less than frightening!

This is what Chana is trying to tell us. For some people, this year will bring the greatest sorrow... and for some people this year will be one of "the barren woman turning into a mother of seven".

Chazal say that the 100 Shofar blasts which we blow on Rosh Hashana correspond to the 100 cries that Sisro's mother cried on the day of battle (Shoftim 5:28-30, based on Medrash). Rav Schwab asked, what is the significance of associating our Shofar blasts to the wailings of Sisro's mother? Rav Schwab explained that the wailings of Sisro's mother represented the

uncertainty of the future. If Sisro would come back victorious, this would represent the greatest triumph of his military career. On the other hand, he might come back in a coffin. Sisro's mother did not know which scenario would occur, so she wailed out of uncertainty and fear.

Life and Death. Success and Failure. On Rosh Hashana, everything lies in the balance of Judgment — nothing less than totally changing out fates. And yet, we as Jews, have to surround these emotions with the Tekiah — the firm blast of confidence.

We cannot wear our emotions on our sleeve. But we must realize that what will be determined on this day is nothing less than the fate of our lives, of our family's lives, of our community's lives, and indeed the life of the entire world. Anything can happen. This is the message of Chana. There are no givens, there are no "Chazakas" (presumptions based on historical precedent), nothing can be taken for granted.

May it be G-d's will that we as a community, together with the entire House of Israel, be written for a good, lengthy, and peaceful life.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

The Haunting Sound of the Shofar Rabbi Ari and Laura Silbermann

The piercing sound of the shofar is our way of enthroning God, and is meant to inspire us to do teshuva (reflect on our actions, and literally, "return"). Jews around the globe, whether religious or secular, are struck by the sound. The Gemara (b.Rosh Hashana 33b) famously learns the nature of a teruah (one of the shofar blasts) based on the Aramaic translation in Bamidbar 29:1, of the word, yevava. This term refers to the sobs (vateyabev) of Sisera's mother. Sisera was an enemy of Israel who in The Book of Judges (5:28) dies at the hands of Yael. His mother awaits his triumphant return, only to realize he has died, and begins sobbing. By connecting the shofar's blast to that of an enemy of Israel sobbing upon her son's death, rabbinic commentators strike at the heart of the shofar's haunting sound. It is the sound of a mother's — any mother's — cry for her son. It is a sound that none of us ever wants to hear, but in Israel as elsewhere, we hear too often. It is a sound that turns the order of creation upside down. Mothers, creators of life, should not have to mourn their children. In this way, the cry of Sisera's mother reflects the universality of the shofar's cry, the striking sound that everyone feels deep down.

How can this help us to understand Rosh Hashana and properly experience the shofar and its call to repent? Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's insight into the meaning of hirhurei teshuva (thoughts of repentance) offers us part of an answer:

On the seventh day of Pesach, 5727 [1967], I awoke from a fitful sleep. A thunderstorm was

raging outside, and the wind and rain blew angrily through the window of my room. Half-awake, I quickly jumped to my feet and closed the window. I then thought to myself that my wife was sleeping downstairs in the sunroom next to the parlor, and I remembered that the window was left open there as well. She could catch pneumonia, which, in her weakened physical condition, would be devastating. I ran downstairs, rushed into her room, and slammed the window shut. I then turned around to see whether she had awoken from the storm or if she was still sleeping. I found the room empty, the couch where she slept neatly covered. In reality, she had passed away the previous month. The most tragic and frightening experience was the shock that I encountered in that half-second when I turned from the window to find the room empty. I was certain that a few hours earlier I had been speaking with her, and that at about 10 o'clock she had said good night and retired to her room. I could not understand why the room was empty. I thought to myself, "I just spoke with her. I just said good night to her. Where is she?"

Rabbi Soloveitchik is describing what the shofar should awaken within us. The raging storm of emotions, the sudden shock that our perceived reality has deceived us. Hirhurei teshuva is the realization that our world is actually upside down, not right. Added to this realization is the feeling of loneliness and distance from the purity and holiness which embodies the natural relationship with God. As Rabbi Kook explains (Orot Hateshuva 7:3), it is through hirhurei teshuva that we hear the voice of God calling to us. Truly, the experience of hirhurei teshuva begins with a window flying open and an estrangement from what we think to be normal but ends in a reunion with our true selves. Rabbi Soloveitchik also uses the imagery of a mourner to explain the process of teshuva. The sinner banishes God from within his midst, but like some mourners, may not feel the magnitude of the loss immediately. Like mourners, Jews will eventually realize the emptiness and disorder of the lost connection. Yet, unlike with a loved one who has passed, at any moment we can realize our longing for Hashem, and return to Him.

The haunting cry of the shofar embodies this. It urges us to wake up and feel how distant our true selves have strayed from He who gave us life. We are shaken to the core because the Shechina (God) cries over her sons who have strayed so far and reminds us that such actions run against the universal order.

However, it is precisely during Rosh Hashana that we can sense Hashem's closeness. Metaphorically, the King is in the field (המלך בשדה); but He is also our father waiting for his children to come home. We certainly need to do our part to return, but we should know that Hashem is waiting with His arms wide open for us to come running into them.

Likutei Divrei Torah

[This article was written as part of the "Journeys" series for Tishrei 5782]

An Opportunity to Begin Anew Rabbanit Deborah Evron

The commandment regarding Rosh Hashanah appears several times in the Torah, yet only one account in the Tanakh (in Nehemiah, chapter 8) states that it took place on the 1st of Tishrei, on Rosh Hashanah itself.

The chapter describes a national assembly in Jerusalem in which Ezra the Scribe read from the Torah and his aides explained what he had read to the assembled crowd who had come to hear him. Ezra and Nehemiah were active in the period of Shivat Tzion, during which a group of those exiled by the Babylonians returned to Eretz Yisrael and joined the Jewish population who had remained after the exile. Upon their return, the leaders began reorganizing the Jewish population administratively, financially, and religiously.

At the end of chapter 7 we read, "So the priests, and the Levites, and the porters, and the singers, and some of the people, and the Nethinim, and all Israel, dwelt in their cities. And the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in their cities" (7:72). By the month of Tishrei the children of Israel were in their cities, so it seems that the reorganization of the nation was successful.

Ezra and Nehemiah then gathered the nation on the 1st of Tishrei in Jerusalem. They built a special wooden platform for the event, on which Ezra the Scribe stood and read from the Torah to the entire nation, a reading that lasted several hours, from sunrise until midday (8:1-3).

The Torah reading caused the nation to weep (8:9). Most commentators understand that they wept because they had not been fulfilling the commandments correctly. The Malbim (a 19th century rabbi and commentator) is more specific and says that Ezra read the verses relating to the 1st of Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah. The people understood that that day was the Day of Judgment and so they wept out of fear.

According to the sages, based on the "Ten Ancestries" [Asara Yuchasin] chapter of Tractate Kiddushin, the group that returned from Babylonia did not include many leaders. Although there were priests, Levites, and mevinim (comprehenders) who returned to Eretz Yisrael — some of whom helped Ezra the Scribe make the Torah more comprehensible to the assembly — most of those who returned lacked a Torah education.

If so, when the nation heard Ezra the Scribe read from the Torah they experienced a double blow. They did not understand the language in which the Torah was written, and they were unfamiliar with the text that was being translated for them. They wept for the loss of their national and religious identity in the

broadest sense. They did not know how to fulfill the commandments of the Torah and they feared they had lost the opportunity to begin again.

Ezra and Nehemiah calmed the people in two ways, each providing solace for one aspect of the crisis. First of all, they sent them to eat and drink and care for those less fortunate (8:10-11). Based on these instructions, the people learned what to do on this festival and how to behave on a holy day. They prayed and read from the Torah and then ate and drank and provided for those who had not (8:12).

This is just as Maimonides decreed in Hilchot Yom Tov, (6:18-19):

“The children should be given parched grain, nuts, and sweetmeats; the womenfolk should be presented with pretty clothes and trinkets according to one’s means; the menfolk should eat meat and drink wine, for there is no real rejoicing without meat and wine. While eating and drinking, one must feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other unfortunates. However, he who locks the doors of his courtyard and eats and drinks along with his wife and children, without giving food and drink to the poor and the desperate, does not observe a religious celebration but indulges in the celebration of his stomach.... Rather, this is the appropriate measure: All the people rise up early in the morning to the synagogues and study halls to pray, and to read in the Torah about the topic of the day. [Then] they return home, eat, and go to the study hall, [where they] read and study until midday. And after midday, they pray the afternoon prayers and return to their homes to eat and drink for the rest of the day, until the night.”

After the people received an explanation on how to observe the holy day, both with regard to the actual timetable of this festival and the values that lie at its heart, they were given an insight from which to begin again – “Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Lord is the source of your strength” (8:9). Do not be sad, say the leaders, for you are Israel, not be God’s exhilaration and joy (according to Shir Hashirim Rabba, Parasha 1). This is your fortress, this is your base, this is what strengthens you, and this is the starting point for procuring Israel’s national and religious identity once again.

The story in Nehemiah teaches us that Rosh Hashanah is the ultimate opportunity to renew ourselves. This is the date on which we can begin anew even if everything has been forgotten. Therefore, it is not surprising that the 1st of Tishrei is the first day of the year with regard to shmita (the seven-year agricultural cycle) and yovel (the year at the end of seven cycles of shmita), as seen in the first Mishna in tractate Rosh Hashanah.

The renewal concept is especially prominent during yovel: “And you shall hallow the

fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family” (Leviticus 25:10).

Another connection we find between the yovel year and Rosh Hashanah is that one learns from yovel that the shofar is the vessel used for blowing on Rosh Hashanah. As we see in the Talmud, Tractate Rosh Hashanah 38b:

“The Sages taught: From where [is it derived that the soundings of Rosh Hashanah must be performed with] a shofar? The verse states: “Then you shall make a proclamation with the blast of the shofar”. From this I have derived only with regard to the Jubilee Year. From where do I derive that Rosh Hashanah [must also be with a shofar]? The verse states: “Of the seventh month.” Since there is no need for the verse to state: “Of the seventh month,” what is the meaning when the verse states: “Of the seventh month”? This comes to teach that all the obligatory soundings of the seventh month must be similar to one another”.

The Talmud learns from the words “the seventh month” – which are redundant, as the verse already says Yom Kippur, so clearly it is in the month of Tishrei – that all the blasts mentioned during the seventh month must be with a shofar, as is stated regarding the yovel. The shofar is the vessel that reminds us that now is the time to start from the beginning.

The Midrash on Vayikra Rabba states simply: “On the first of Tishrei the first man was created.” Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the first man. For all of us, all of humanity, this is the date that embodies the power of beginning, the possibility of starting again even if we feel we have forgotten everything; that we are beyond repair; that we are destined to continue in a direction that is not good for us.

Ezra and Nehemiah taught the people in Jerusalem, and teach us today that repair is always possible, that we always have the opportunity to begin anew. All we need is to help each other remember.

Torah.Org Dvar Torah:

by Rabbi Label Lam

The Beginning of a New Beginning

All beginnings are hard... Rashi
I once asked a young Rosh HaYeshiva about a phenomenon that I found to be at odds with a famous statement by Rashi. “All beginnings are hard”. Clearly Rashi says “all” and that means every beginning is open for examination. I asked him, “How come it is that we find at the beginning of the Yeshiva Zman, that start of the year there is great enthusiasm, everybody is psyched, and then after a while that energy begins to wane? It should be the opposite! The beginning should be unsteady and low energy and then the momentum and steam should build up after that!”

Likutei Divrei Torah

That was my simple question. He gave me an answer that was so sharp, that if I told you it was said by the Kotzker Rebbe you might be tempted to believe it, but it wasn’t. He said, “For many it’s not the beginning at the beginning, it’s already the end!” Ouch!

How often have we witnessed that the Bar Mitzvah, in spite of the enormous amount of money spent on the affair, rather than being a launching of a career of Torah and Mitzvos, ended up sadly being a goodbye party for G-d!? Tragically, a wedding can be the same, an end rather than a beginning. Rosh HaShana too is a big blast but we want it to last! How does one ensure that it’s a beginning and not an end?

Rebbe Nachman says, “A person should turn to his Creator and declare, ‘Today I begin to cleave to YOU!’”, because everything goes after the start. (Now even if he has disappointed himself before with many false starts) Either way, if before it was good then this time it will be better and if it has not worked out well before, then for certain he needs to make a brand new start.” In another place he says that a person has to begin and begin and keep beginning, sometimes many times in the same day.

Perhaps this is what is hinted at in the sound of Shofar on Rosh HaShana. Maybe this is the message. In order to have qualified as having fulfilled the Mitzvah of hearing the Shofar it’s not sufficient to hear one single long blast. One must also hear some combination of the two broken sounds which include three half note sobbing sounds and/or a nine beat short staccato sound and then that has to be followed and concluded by another long single blast. That is the series that is required to have heard the Shofar. What is the message implied in this Morse Code Message?

The beginning may be a blast but it is not enough to carry us through to the very end. One needs to start and start again and again, and sometimes many times in one day. Those are the short and broken sounds. Then after trying and trying and beginning again and again there is a breakthrough and the original beginning after stuttering and stopping and beginning again is finally realized. Then that initial blast, the launching, was not an end at all, but rather the beginning of a new beginning.

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PARSHAT NITZAVIM

Can man return to Gan Eden?

Even though Parshat Breishit may have left us with the impression that the Garden's gates (guarded by the 'keruvim' and a fiery sword / see Breishit 3:24) remain inaccessible to man forever, Parshat Nitzavim may allude to the possibility of 'return'.

To explain how (and why), this week's shiur discusses the significance of the speech delivered by Moshe Rabbeinu in Parshat Nitzavim, and how it fits beautifully into the rubric of Sefer Devarim.

INTRODUCTION

In case you hadn't noticed, Parshat Nitzavim contains yet another speech given by Moshe Rabbeinu, the last of his four speeches in Sefer Devarim. In fact, this final speech actually began at the end of Parshat Ki Tavo (see 29:1-8, noting how 29:1 forms the introduction to this speech).

In the following shiur, we first discuss how this final speech relates to the 'tochacha' (in Parshat Ki Tavo); afterwards we will focus on what's so special about its 'finale'.

FOUR SPEECHES

The following table will help clarify the location of Moshe Rabbeinu's speech in Parshat Nitzavim in relation to the rest of Sefer Devarim, as it summarizes his four speeches:

<u>CHAPTERS</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
1) 1->4	Introductory speech (why 40 years have passed)
2) 5->26	The main speech - the mitzvot to keep in the land
3) 27->28	Brit Har Eival and the tochacha
4) 29->30	The final speech = Parshat Nitzavim

Even though our shiur will focus on the 'final speech' (#4), to appreciate its content, we must first review the primary topic of speech #3.

Recall how chapter 27 described a ceremony that Bnei Yisrael are instructed to conduct on Har Eival, upon entering the land. That ceremony was to include both the teaching of the laws (i.e. those of the main speech) and some festivities. The Torah's description of that ceremony continued in chapter 28 with the tochacha, i.e. the 'blessing and the curses', as they were to be read in public at the conclusion of that ceremony.

Hence, the order of Sefer Devarim up until this point makes perfect sense. Speech #2 details the laws that Moshe taught, while speech #3 explains how these laws were to be taught once again when Bnei Yisrael enter the land, at a special ceremony that concluded with a public warning of both the reward and punishment should Bnei Yisrael obey / or disobey these laws.

However, when one reads the fourth speech, it appears to be superfluous, for in it we find once again Moshe's rebuke of Bnei Yisrael - in a manner which doesn't differ much from the numerous rebukes in his earlier speeches. [For example, compare 29:11-14 with 5:2-3; 29:4-5 with 8:4; and 30:1-3 with 4:26-29.]

However, if we take a closer look at its content, we can explain its function and the reason for its location.

THE STARTING & FINISH LINES

Our first step is to delineate more precisely where this speech begins and ends. Note how it begins at the end of Parshat Ki Tavo in 29:1 and concludes at the end of Parshat Nitzavim (as indicated by the sudden shift to third-person narrative right at the beginning of Parshat Vayelech (31:1).

Using a Tanach Koren, note as well how it contains five distinct 'parshiot': 29:1-8; 29:28; 30:1-10; 30:14 & 30:15-20.

Let's take a look at each one of these parshiot, and explain what is problematic about each. Afterward, we will explain the logic of their internal progression, and how each of these parshiot relates to the previous speech, and overall theme of covenant in Sefer Devarim.

PARSHIA #1 (29:1-8)

Moshe's opening statements in this 'parshia' raise numerous questions. To understand these difficulties, let's take a look:

"Moshe called together Bnei Yisrael and said to them: You have seen with your own eyes what I did to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt... **yet**, until this day, God has not given you a 'heart to know,' 'eyes to see,' or 'ears to listen.' I led you for forty years in the wilderness...[Therefore] observe faithfully the words of this covenant [**divrei ha-brit ha-zot**] in order that you succeed in all that you now undertake" (see 29:1-8).

First of all, why is he talking to this generation as though they themselves left Egypt? Granted, some of the elder members of the nation may have been under the age of twenty at the time of the Exodus (and hence not included in the punishment). However, the vast majority of the current generation did not witness those events. But even more puzzling is 29:3. How can Moshe possibly say, "Until this day, God has not given you a 'heart to know,' 'eyes to see,' or 'ears to listen'?" To what could Moshe Rabbeinu possibly be referring?

Finally, why does Moshe conclude these comments by once again reminding Bnei Yisrael of the 'brit' (see 29:8)? Was that not the topic of his previous speech? [See 5:2-3!]

PARSHIA #2 - see 29:9-28

In this section, Moshe reiterates the purpose of this gathering - i.e. to establish the covenant through which Bnei Yisrael are to become God's nation. He then emphasizes the eternal nature of this covenant, i.e. its mandatory application to all future generations as well (see 29:9-14).

But once again we must ask, is this not the same point that Moshe Rabbeinu had already stated in the opening remarks of his main speech? (See 5:2-3, read carefully.)

Furthermore, why does Moshe suddenly raise the possibility that an individual, family, or possibly an entire tribe may consider 'breaking out' of this covenant (see 29:17-25)?

PARSHIA #3 - see 30:1-10

Moshe now 'comforts' Bnei Yisrael, telling them that even in the event of exile, there will always remain the possibility for 'teshuva' and the nation's return to the Promised Land. Why would Moshe, while addressing the people prior to their entry into the land, prematurely inform them of their return to the land from exile? They haven't reached the land yet, and already they are being promised the ultimate gathering of the Diaspora? Furthermore, why aren't Moshe's earlier comments on this topic (see 4:25-31 & Vayikra 26:41-45) sufficient?

PARSHIA #4 - see 30:11-14

Here we find Moshe Rabbeinu's famous insistence that keeping the Torah is 'not as hard' as it seems. Again, although this constitutes a most critical message, the question remains: why now and why here in Sefer Devarim?

PARSHIA #5 - see 30:15-20

As we will explain in Part Two, these soul-stirring psukim depict life in Eretz Yisrael as comparable to the ideal, spiritual environment of Gan Eden. But once again, why is this topic mentioned specifically in this speech, and at its conclusion?

POTENTIAL 'CONCLUSIONS'

To resolve these questions, we must consider the centrality of the concept of 'covenant' [brit], which has emerged thus far as a primary theme in every speech thus far in Sefer Devarim.

Recall that Moshe Rabbeinu began his main speech by underscoring the relevance and application of the covenant of Sinai to the present generation:

"The Lord your God made with you a **covenant** at **Sinai**. It was not [only] with your fathers that God made this covenant, but with **us**, those of us who are **here, alive today...**" (see Devarim 5:1-3).

[Notice that the opening phrase of that speech (5:1) is identical to that of ours (29:1), thus suggesting a thematic connection between the two.]

In both his main speech and finale, Moshe Rabbeinu addresses the new generation as though **they** themselves left Egypt and stood at Har Sinai. He emphasizes their inclusion in the covenant of Har Sinai. Yet, in his third speech Moshe had instructed Bnei Yisrael to enter into a similar covenant at this time (see 28:69 - the final pasuk of that speech!). Why is another covenant necessary if 'everyone' was considered to have participated in the covenant at Har Sinai?

In fact, this 'extra' covenant at Arvot Mo'av, as detailed in chapter 27 in Parshat Ki Tavo, could easily lead Bnei Yisrael to several incorrect conclusions:

1) The necessity of a new covenant for this generation implies that the covenant at Har Sinai does not bind all future generations. Why else would they require a 'new' covenant at Arvot Mo'av?

Evidently, one could conclude, the laws of the Torah are binding only upon a generation (or individual) who formally accepts this covenant, but not upon subsequent generations (unless formally accepted)!

2) An individual (or possibly even a larger group) may decide that he doesn't want either side of the covenant - neither its reward **nor** its punishment! Some people may gladly forego any potential reward for keeping the mitzvot of the brit, so long as in turn they would not be bound by its strict demands or threatened by the harsh punishment for its neglect.

In other words, Bnei Yisrael may conclude that each person or family in any generation has the 'option' to either be part of the brit or to 'back out' ('chas ve-shalom!').

3) Just as any given individual may reserve the right to 'back out' of the covenant, God as well may be enabled to exercise His right to 'retract' His covenant should He see fit. In other words, Bnei Yisrael could potentially infer from the closing section of the tochacha in Ki Tavo that exile signifies the very annulment of this covenant. In other words, if exile is understood as God 'nullifying' His side of the covenant, then Bnei Yisrael (once in exile) could reach the logical conclusion that their 'special relationship' with God is over (chas ve-shalom!).

[See Yechezkel 20:32 and its context, where Bnei Yisrael in the Babylonian Exile raise this very possibility!]

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

With this background, let's now take another look at the various components of Moshe's final speech in an attempt to explain why they from this 'finale'.

In **Parshia** #1, Moshe Rabbeinu first explains **why** this 'new' covenant (as described in the third speech) is necessary. True, a covenant had already been made with the previous generation. However, because of their sins and subsequent demise in the desert, it is only now that the original intention of **brit Sinai** becomes applicable.

To emphasize upon this new generation that **they** must fulfill the destiny originally planned for their parents, God recreates the 'atmosphere' of Har Sinai, allowing the new generation to 'relive' the experience. Although most of them were **not** at Har Sinai, it is important that this entire generation feel as though they actually stood at the foot of the mountain. They will soon enter the land and face the challenge of establishing God's special nation, and they must therefore bring with them the Sinai experience and covenant.

As Seforno on 29:3 explains, it is only **now** that Bnei Yisrael are finally ready, for the first time, to fulfill God's covenant. Moshe thus explains to this generation that 'this is **the day**' for which He has been waiting. Now, God has a nation that can truly **know, see, and listen** (see 29:3, Seforno and Rashi).

Thus, there is nothing 'new' about this covenant. In fact, it serves an opposite function: i.e. to reaffirm the relevance and application of the original covenant at Har Sinai.

With this in mind, we can now explain the need for the second parshia.

Once this 'renewed' brit becomes necessary, Moshe Rabbeinu must disaffirm the possible conclusion that every generation and every individual has the option of accepting or refusing the terms of the covenant (as we explained above). Therefore, in **Parshia** #2 Moshe reminds Bnei Yisrael of the purpose of that covenant (to become God's nation, see 29:9-14) and then threatens severe punishment for any person or group considering the option of 'backing out' (see 29:17-25).

Afterward, in **Parsha** #3, Moshe Rabbeinu reassures Bnei Yisrael that just as this covenant is binding upon Bnei Yisrael for **all** generations, so is it eternally binding upon God Himself. Therefore, even in the advent of exile, God will (sooner or later) ensure Bnei Yisrael's return to their land to keep His mitzvot and become His nation. [Note that other religions (which evolved from Judaism) reject specifically this point!]

Moshe then proceeds to repudiate another likely conclusion of one who hears the terms of this covenant (and its almost innumerable obligations), the claim that it's simply 'impossible' to be an 'observant Jew.' Moshe Rabbeinu explains in **Parshia** #4 that in truth, it's not as hard as it may seem. For if one has the proper attitude of "ahavat Hashem" (the opening theme of the main speech), then the 'way of life' which the Torah demands lies well within his reach.

Finally, in **Parshia** #5, Moshe concludes his speech with the axiom of 'bechira chofshit' (freedom of choice), the God-given ability to choose the 'path of life' [or 'death'], which will now be discussed in Part Two.

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PART TWO - Between Gan Eden and Eretz Yisrael

Before we begin Part Two, review 30:15-20, and notice that this 'parshia' forms the concluding section of this speech. As you read, note how Moshe Rabbeinu summarizes in this conclusion some of the primary themes of the main speech (which we have discussed in previous shiurim):

"See, I set before you today **chayim** (life) and **tov** (prosperity), **mavet** (death) and **ra** (adversity).

For I command you today to **love** God and walk in His ways [referring to the **mitzva** section / 6-11] and to keep His **chukim u-mishpatim** [referring to the 2nd part of the main speech / 12-26] that you may thrive and increase and that God will bless you in the Land that you are about to conquer...

Should you turn your heart (not listen)... I declare today that you shall certainly perish and not endure on the Land... that you are to conquer." (see 30:15-18).

Clearly, Moshe refers once again to the two sections of the main speech. However, these verses may relate as well to a fundamental theme in Sefer Breishit, as suggested by several key phrases in this section. Let's explain.

Recall the usage of the terms '**chayim** and **tov**' and '**mavet** and **ra**' in 30:15, cited earlier. Let's identify the precise definition of these expressions in the final two psukim:

"I call Heavens and Earth to testify that I am presenting you the **choice** of **chayim** or **mavet** - the 'bracha' or 'klala' - and you should choose **chayim** in order that you live... on this Land that I promised to your ancestors..." (30:19-20).

In this beautiful finale, the Torah equates the concept of **bracha** & **klala**, as detailed by the tochacha (see 28:1-7,15-20!), with **chayim** & **mavet**:

Bracha = **chayim** (life); **klala** = **mavet** (death).

Recall, however, that the concepts of **chayim** & **mavet** as well as **tov** & **ra** were first introduced in the story of Gan Eden:

"And God brought forth from the ground every tree... and the **etz ha-chayim**

[the Tree of Life] in the middle of the garden, and the:

etz ha-da'at tov ve-ra

[the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil...]

and from the **etz ha-da'at tov v'ra** do not eat, for on the day you eat from it - **mot tamut** - you will surely die!"

(see Breishit 2:8-9, 2:15-17).

This textual parallel is strengthened by yet another resemblance to the story of Creation. Note that the Heavens and Earth - **shamayim va-aretz** - are called upon as witnesses to this covenant (see 30:19, as well as 31:28 & 32:1).

This special call upon 'shamayim' and 'aretz' to witness the brit may relate not only to the introduction of the story of Creation (Br. 1:1), but also to the opening pasuk of the Gan Eden narrative in Breishit - see 2:4!

A GAN EDEN CLOSE TO HOME

This textual parallel suggests a conceptual relationship between life according to the Torah's ideals in the Land of Israel and existence in Gan Eden. In fact, the spiritual environment of Gan Eden strongly resembles the spiritual environment that Sefer Devarim wishes to create in the Land of Israel.

Recall how the Gan Eden narrative described a special environment between man and God, with an emphasis on 'sachar va-onesh' [reward and retribution]. God promises Man a prosperous physical existence [**chayim**] should he **obey**, while threatening death [**mavet**] should Man **disobey** (see Br. 2:15-17). In a very similar manner, the tochacha describes a parallel reality in the land of Israel:

Should Bnei Yisrael keep the mitzvot, God will reward them with prosperity (see 29:1-14); if they sin, God will punish them severely (see 29:15-26).

[Note as well Devarim 11:13-20 (from daily kriyat shma).]

Furthermore, **exile** emerges in both settings as the most severe punishment. Adam is banished from the Garden as a consequence of his sin (see Br. 3:22-24). Similarly, the tochacha threatens that should Am Yisrael continue to sin they will be driven from the land by their enemies (see 28:64-68) and remain in Exile until they perform proper teshuva (repentance / see Devarim 30:1-10).

[Interestingly, God's original death sentence for eating from the Tree was translated into Adam's **exile** from the Garden (3:23) when he actually partook of the Tree's fruit.

Considering that Gan Eden reflects an ideal spiritual environment, exile may be accurately equated with death. Whereas the biblical purpose of **life** is to develop a connection with God, biblical **death** refers to life without any such connection, an exile into an environment characterized by God's absence.]

This parallel takes on additional meaning when we consider the location of these two sources: at the **beginning** of Chumash and towards the very **end** of Chumash.

One could suggest that in this manner Chumash underscores the basic nature of man's relationship with God. First, we are told of God's creation of Man and his placement in Gan Eden - the ideal spiritual environment. As punishment for his sin, God expels man from Gan Eden, appointing the 'keruvim' to guard against any attempt to return (see Br. 3:24).

Nonetheless, the presence of the keruvim who guard the 'way to the Tree of Life' does not necessarily indicate the permanent closure of this path. To the contrary, it becomes man's duty to **strive** to return. The keruvim do not restrict entry; rather they protect the Garden from the intrusion of those undeserving of return. But once man proves himself worthy, the **derech etz ha-chayim** - the **path** to the Tree of Life - no matter how formidable it may at first appear, suddenly opens and invites man inside.

Correspondingly, Sefer Devarim describes Eretz Yisrael as both a physical and spiritual environment where Am Yisrael can rebuild this spiritual connection with God.

For example, Parshat Ekev illustrates how the climate of Eretz Yisrael contributes to this environment:

"...always, God's **eyes** are upon it [the Land], from the beginning of the year until the end of the year."

(see Devarim 11:10-12)

FROM GAN EDEN TO 'JERUSALEM'

But perhaps the most meaningful parallel between Gan Eden and Eretz Yisrael arises in the **chukim & mishpatim** section. Recall that Parshiyot Re'eh, Shoftim, and Ki Tavo present numerous mitzvot relating to **ha-makom asher yivchar Hashem**, the bet ha-mikdash, which will be built on the site chosen by God. As explained in our shiur on Parshat Re'eh, Sefer Devarim demands that every Jew frequent that site regularly, be it for 'aliya la-regel' on the holidays, to offer korbanot or bikurim, to eat 'ma'aser sheni', to appear in court, etc.

Situated at the focal point of that site [i.e. the bet ha-mikdash] is the **kodesh kodashim**, the permanent location of the **aron**, covered by the **kaporet** and protected by **keruvim**, both on the **kaporet** and on the **parochet**! [See Shmot 25:16-22 & 26:31-34.]

Given that the concept of **keruvim** arises nowhere else in Chumash outside of these two contexts - the mishkan / bet ha-mikdash and Gan Eden - a thematic connection between the two is implied. Just as the **keruvim** of Gan Eden protect the path to the **etz ha-chayim**, so do the **keruvim** of the mikdash guard the path to true **chayim**: i.e. they protect the **aron** which contains the **luchot ha-eidut** - the symbol of the **Torah** and our covenant with God at Har Sinai.

By placing the **luchot** - a powerful symbol of **matan Torah** - at the focal point of our lives in Eretz Yisrael, Sefer Devarim urges us to strive to return to the environment of Gan Eden by observing the laws of the **Torah**.

This interpretation is supported by the famous pasuk in Mishlei, recited each time we return the **sefer Torah** to the **aron ha-kodesh**:

"**Etz chayim hi** - She is a Tree of Life - for those who hold on to her, and whoever holds her is fortunate." (Mishlei 3:18).

[Even though this pasuk seemingly refers to wisdom in general (see 3:13), in the overall context of the perek 'wisdom' refers specifically to Torah (see 3:1-8!).]

Thus, Chumash 'ends' with a theme which is quite parallel to the theme of its opening narrative. God's original intention may have been for man to enjoy a close relationship with Him in Gan Eden. Even though that goal seems to have 'failed' in Sefer Bereishit, Sefer Devarim concludes with the possibility that the Nation of Israel can indeed return to such an existence, in the Land of Israel. [For a similar explanation, see Sefer's introduction to Sefer Breishit!]

To better appreciate our discussion, I highly recommend that you study the Rashi on 30:19. His explanation of what man should learn from his contemplation of shamayim va-aretz (what we call 'nature') that surrounds us will definitely enhance your appreciation of Parshat Nitzavim. Furthermore, it is a most fitting Rashi to study in preparation for Rosh HaShana - the day marking God's creation of shamayim va-aretz.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN - on Part One:

A. The Midrash Tanchuma in Parshat Nitzavim relates that during the time of Yechezkel, a delegation of 'elder statesmen' came to Yechezkel and challenged the obligation to abide by the Torah. They asked the prophet, "If a kohen purchases a servant, does the servant partake from the kohen's teruma?" When Yechezkel answered in the affirmative, they inquired as to what would happen if the kohen then sold the servant to a Yisrael. The prophet replied that, of course, once the servant is no longer under the authority of the kohen, he has no further rights as far as teruma is concerned. "We, too", they said, "have already left His authority and we will no be like all the gentiles."

Yechezkel responds (20:32-33), "That which came to your mind shall not be at all; in that you say, 'We will be as the nations, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone.' As I live, says

Hashem, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with fury poured out I will be king over you!"

Explain the relevance of these psukim and their general context to Parshat Nitzavim and the above shiur.

B. One critical question we did not address concerns the 'legal' mechanism by which the covenant of Har Sinai becomes binding upon all generations. It would seem that one cannot be born into a binding agreement - he must first express his consent to the terms thereof! This question was posed by the 'scholars of Aragon', as recorded by the Abarbanel. See his comments in our parasha, and contrast with the Maharal, 'Netzach Yisrael' 11. According to the Abarbanel, this eternal obligation evolves directly from Bnei Yisrael's privilege of settling the Land. Needless to say, this beautifully explains the context of Parshat Nitzavim: the reenactment of brit Sinai on the eve of Bnei Yisrael's entry into Eretz Yisrael.

C. See Rashi's comments on 've-hu yiheyeh lecha l-Elokim' (29:12), and note its relevance to the bilateral quality of the brit as discussed in the above shiur. Rashi continues by citing a Midrash regarding Bnei Yisrael's sense of desperation upon hearing the curses of the tochacha. Moshe reassures them that by observing 'Atem nitzavim' - you have survived, despite many incidents of wrongdoing. Explain how this, too, relates to this above shiur. Additionally, how does this Midrash help explain the seemingly irrelevant historical review presented at the end of Parshat Ki Tavo (29:1-8)?

Explain how the final clause of 29:5 reinforces the equation between this generation and their parents. [See Shmot 6:7.]

D. Different mefarshim have come up with different approaches to explain 29:3: "Yet, until this day, God has not given you a heart to know, 'eyes to see,' or 'ears to listen.'" In the shiur, we mentioned the explanations of Rashi and Seforno. Other mefarshim explain this pasuk as a continuation of Moshe's 'mussar'. For example, Abarbanel places a question mark at the end of the pasuk. Before you see his commentary inside (which I suggest you do), how does his punctuation change the meaning of the pasuk? Others understand 'ad ha-yom ha-zeh' as meaning, 'even until...'. What does the pasuk mean according to this reading?

Other mefarshim, however, try to explain that Bnei Yisrael arrived at a unique awareness of Hashem's power on 'this day', the conclusion of their sojourn in the wilderness. Rav David Tzvi Hoffman explains that the forty years of wandering and the recent battle against Sichon and Og magnified this awareness far more effectively than the wonders and miracles of Egypt.

E. Moshe describes the potential attempt by an individual or group to breach the covenant as follows: "Perhaps there is among you some man or woman... When such a person hears the words of these sanctions, he may fancy himself immune [JPS translation; note the difficulty in interpreting these words] thinking, 'I shall be safe, because I follow my own willful heart'..."

Many mefarshim address the problematic word 'ki' (translated here as 'because') in this pasuk. Ibn Ezra [and JPS] translate 'ki' as 'even though', while the Ramban, in his first suggestion, interprets the word as similar to 'ka'asher'. How may we maintain the standard interpretation of 'ki' as 'because', based on the second erroneous conclusion Moshe feared, as we discussed in the shiur? See Ramban's second interpretation.

F. As we saw, the psukim in 30:11-14 remind the people that Torah observance is not as hard as it may seem. Nowhere do we find such an explicit reassurance to the generation of Yetziat Mitzrayim and Matan Torah. Why would this younger generation in particular require these words of encouragement?

G. Note the difference between the simple reading of 30:12 and that of the Gemara in Eruvin, as cited here by Rashi. Show how the Midrashic reading of the pasuk addresses the first two incorrect conclusions that, as we discussed, Moshe feared, and contrast this approach with our understanding in the shiur.

[Point of methodology: Explain the difficulty understanding the transition from 30:11 to 30:12 according to the Midrashic interpretation. On the other hand, what other difficulties does this Gemara resolve? Does the Gemara necessarily negate the simple understanding? How do your answers to these questions reflect the general relationship between pshat and drash?]

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FOR FURTHER IYUN - on Part Two

A. We mentioned above that the psukim at the end of Parshat Nitzavim (30:15-20) that allude to Gan Eden could be considered the denouement of Moshe's speeches in Sefer Devarim. Pay careful attention to the literary style from chapter 31 onward. In which person is the narrative written (1st or 3rd)? What about the previous sections of the sefer? Is the style of this concluding section more similar to Sefer Devarim or to Bamidbar? Might this unit be considered a continuation of Sefer Bamidbar? Explain your answer.

B. A famous dispute among the commentators surrounds the psukim just prior to these that we have discussed. To what does 'mitzva ha-zot' (30:11) refer? See 30:11-14, Rashi (on pasuk 14), Ibn Ezra (also pasuk 14), Ramban (pasuk 11) and Seforno (pasuk 11). If we view these pesukim as continuing the previous discussion of teshuva, then perhaps the pesukim discussed in the above shiur (30:15-20) also relate to this theme: the choice between 'life' and 'death' in the aftermath of sin. Explain how this enhances our association between these psukim and the return to Gan Eden. Bear in mind the Midrash that Hashem banished Adam from Gan Eden only after having first offered him the chance to do teshuva (Bereishit Rabba 21, Bemidbar Rabba 13).

Furthermore, compare 15-20 with the opening psukim of Parshat Re'eh. Note the difference in terminology: bracha and klala as opposed to chayim and mavet. [Notice that Moshe makes a point of associating bracha / klala with chayim / mavet in 30:19.] Try to explain this difference in light of our suggestion that our psukim refer to the situation after sin, rather than before sinning. [See Meshech Chochma.] What 'choice' is presented in Re'eh, and which does Moshe present here, in the aftermath of sin? Why is the wrong 'choice' in our context called 'death' (perhaps more accurately, the 'curse' translates into 'death') while in Re'eh it's merely a 'curse'?

C. The Sifrei in the beginning of Parshat Re'eh (54:27) associates the psukim there (as we cited in B.) with Hashem's comment to Kayin: "Surely, if you do right you will be forgiven [see Targum, as opposed to Ibn Ezra]; but if you don't do right, sin couches at the door" (Bereishit 4:7). Why would God have to impress this notion upon Kayin particularly in the aftermath of Adam's banishment from Gan Eden? Why must Moshe repeat this same message to Bnei Yisrael before they enter the land?

D. In 29:12-14, we find once again the concept of Bnei Yisrael's destiny to become a special nation. Relate this to our entire series of shiurim on Devarim. [Note as well the reference to God's promise to the patriarchs, and recall our shiur last week regarding 'mikra bikkurim' and 'vidui ma'aser'.]

E. Read the Rambam's comments concerning the laws of Hakhel in Hilchot Chagiga perek 3. Note particularly his remarks in halacha 6 concerning 'gerim'. (If you have a chance, read also the seventh perek of mishnayot Sota.) How do these halachot relate to the above shiur? Why do you think we skip from shma to ve-haya im shamo'a in kriyat shma? What is the final word read by the king at Hakhel? How might this be significant in light of this shiur? In halacha 6, why does the Rambam emphasize that davka the 'ger' must feel as though he is standing at Har Sinai during the hakhel ceremony?

F. Regarding the association of Torah with 'life' (end of the shiur), see Targum Yonatan on 30:20.

G. We noted the function of Torah as the 'Tree of Life', the means by which we 'return to Gan Eden'. See Midrash HaGadol in

Bereishit: "That tree from which whoever would eat would live - God hid it and gave us His Torah, the tree of life..." See also Tanchuma Yashan, Bereishit 25 that identifies the 'lahat ha-cherev' (the 'fiery sword'), which guarded the entrance to Gan Eden together with the keruvim, as Torah (based on Tehillim 149:7, which we say in Psukei DeZimra).

The parallel between Gan Eden and both the mikdash and Torah study becomes especially apparent in the Midrashim that interpret Adam's responsibility in Gan Eden of 'le-ovdah' in reference to korbanot and Torah study. See Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 12, Bereishit Rabba 16, and especially Sifrei Ekev 41.

Parshas Netzavim Vayeilech: Dimensions of Teshuvah

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. PARASHAT HAT'SHUVAH

The second half of Parashat Nitzavim (small as it is) focuses on national introspection and the consequent movement of religious renaissance – all of which will take place, the Torah (promises? – see Rambam, MT T'shuvah 7:5) (commands? – see Ramban on v. 11) us, as a result of our having experienced all of God's blessings AND curses:

1) When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where Hashem your God has driven you, 2) and you shall/will return to Hashem your God and hearken to His voice, just as I command you today, you and your children, with all of your heart and all of your soul 3) then Hashem your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom Hashem your God has scattered you. 4) Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there Hashem your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. 5) Hashem your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. 6) Moreover, Hashem your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.

7) Hashem your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you.
8) *v'Atah Tashuv v'Shama'ta b'Kol Hashem* (Then you shall again hearken to the voice of Hashem) , observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today,

9) and Hashem your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For Hashem will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors,

10) when you obey Hashem your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

11) Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away.

12) It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"

13) Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"

14) For the matter is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. (D'varim 30:1-14)

[Note: In this shiur, we will examine the problem raised by the "sequence of events" in this parashah. I hope to send out a special shiur for Yom haKippurim which will reexamine this parashah, focusing on a different set of issues.]

II. THE "SECOND TESHUVAH"

There are, of course, many deep and profound concepts embedded in this parashah. There is, however, a problem of "sequence" in this section the resolution of which will, hopefully, provide us with a greater understanding of the phenomenon of Teshuvah.

Following the order of events as outlined in the parashah:

1) We will reflect on the fulfillment of the blessing and curse – at that point, we will be spread out and (we assume) under foreign rule among the nations. (v. 1)

2) We will return "until" (Heb. *Ad*) God, listening to His voice (v. 2) – we assume that this refers to the process of "Teshuvah" – return/repentance, including a recommitment to observing Torah and Mitzvot.

3) God will restore our fortunes, returning us back to our Land from all corners of the diaspora (vv. 3-5)

4) God will purify our hearts to worship Him completely (v. 6)

5) God will curse our enemies (v. 7)

6) We will commit to observance (???) (v. 8)

7) God will make us prosper and take delight in us (v. 9)

The obvious problem with this sequence is Step #6 – the “repetition” of the promise/command that we will return to God. Since the “return” (which is the premise of the whole parashah) is presented in v. 2 as the result of our introspection while in exile – and is the cause of our return to former glory and God’s favor, what is the meaning of this second “return”?

III. S’FORNO’S ANSWER

As we have done before, we turn to Rabbenu Ovadiah S’forno for help. In his commentary to Sefer D’varim, S’forno suggests that the phrase *v’Atah Tashuv* in v. 8 is not to be understood as “you will return”, following the general theme of the parashah (open the original and note how many times that root is used in this parashah).

Rather, he explains that this occurrence of the word means “you will be at peace”, as in the verse: *b’Shuvah vaNahat Tivash’un* – (you shall triumph by stillness and quiet) (Yeshaya 30:15).

In other words, the promise of the “second Teshuvah” is not about commitment born of reflection – which is the Teshuvah in v. 2. Rather, it is a promise that after we recommit to God, and God restores us and our fortunes, defeating our enemies – at that point, we will be able to hearken to God’s voice and fulfill His Mitzvot in a calm and secure manner.

This works well within the sequence, since we are promised that God will “circumcise our hearts” just before this “second Teshuvah”. As Ramban explains (in his comments on v. 6), this “circumcision of the hearts” means that we will no longer be tempted to abandon our commitment to God or our intimate relationship with Him.

At that point, following S’forno’s explanation, we will move from the stirring, revolutionary movement of Teshuvah (upending our lives, in feeling, action and, ultimately, in geographic location and political reality) into a calm stasis of Mitzvah-observance.

This comment is most enlightening – but, as might be expected, there is room to challenge. There are two “technical” problems with this explanation of “Tashuv”.

a) The verb root *Sh*W*B, as mentioned earlier, shows up so often (7 times) in these 14 verses that it might almost be called anthemic of this parashah. To suggest that in this one instance it means something different – almost diametrically opposite – of the meaning ascribed in the other occurrences is not an easy theory to accept.

b) Although the noun “shuva”, meaning “calm” does show up in Tanakh, we have no instance of this root used as a verb to mean anything but “return”. S’forno’s prooftext is, therefore, an incomplete proof (to say the least).

IV. A NEW RESOLUTION: TWO STEPS IN THE TESHUVAH PROCESS

If we could find a way to maintain the meaning “return” in our verse, yet explain this “second Teshuvah” in a way that makes sense sequentially, we would both solve our problem and avoid the linguistic challenge to S’forno’s comment.

In order to explain this, we have to look back to the first instance of Teshuvah mentioned in the parashah – v. 2. Let’s compare the two verses:

FIRST TESHUVAH (v. 2) *v’Shav’ta ‘ad Hashem Elohekha v’Shama’ta b’Kolo* (you shall/will return to Hashem your God and hearken to His voice), just as I command you today, you and your children, with all of your heart and all of your soul.

SECOND TESHUVAH (v. 8) *v’Atah Tashuv v’Shama’ta b’Kol Hashem* (Then you shall *Tashuv* and hearken to the voice of Hashem), observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today...

If we look carefully at the first instance of Teshuvah, we note that there is no direct commitment to Mitzvot mentioned – just a readiness to “hearken to the Voice of God”. What does this phrase mean?

There is a wide range of circumstances that could conceivably cause someone – or a nation – to want to return to God. As outlined in the premise of our parashah (v. 1), the cause outlined here is the fulfillment of God’s blessings and curses. The nation will look at the events which have transpired and will understand that it is their distance from God which has

led them realize the awful curses – just as their intimacy with God was the source of those blessings they had previously enjoyed. Indeed, the Torah tells us that the people will say: “Surely it is because our God is not in our midst these evils have befallen us” (D’varim 31:17). The awareness of that “distance” (known as “Hester Panim” – the “hiding of the Divine countenance”), coupled with a realization of the terrible circumstances in which the nation is enveloped, will lead to a resolve to return “until God”.

Note that this odd phrase – *Shuva ‘Ad Hashem* – to “return UNTIL God” shows up in several passages, including ours (v. 2), earlier in D’varim (4:30) and in the famous passage from Hoshea (14:2). What does this mean?

Again – when the sense of desperation and hopelessness is coupled with the realization of how far from God we have moved – the immediate and (hopefully) instinctive reaction is to try to “come back” – to restore some type of relationship with God and to return to Him. It is the Divine embrace, the security of God’s Presence, which is the immediate and urgent goal of this type of “Ba’al Teshuvah”.

This is, indeed, the type of Teshuvah mentioned in the first instance – “you shall return UNTIL God and hearken to His voice”; there is no mention here of specific actions or even of commitments.

It seems that this theory cannot even withstand the rest of the verse: The end of the phrase implies a commitment to Mitzvot: “just as I command you today”. This phrase, however, should not be confused with the commitment to Mitzvot mentioned later. Here, the phrase implies that the Ba’al Teshuvah (in this case, the entire nation), will return and seek our a relationship with God, just as he {Mosheh – remember, this is Sefer D’varim] commanded them to do. In other words, the return to God is itself part of Mosheh’s charge to the people.

When we look ahead to v. 8 – what we have dubbed “The Second Teshuvah” – we note that the tenor of commitment has changed. No longer are we returning “UNTIL” (*‘Ad*) God – we are now returning to hear His voice – meaning “to observe all of His commandments...”.

In other words, whereas the first step in Teshuvah (we now realize that there aren’t two different types of Teshuvah – rather, there are two steps in the process) is exclusively the desire to return to God – to “reach Him” – the next step involves a full commitment to learning (hearkening to His voice – which here, by context, implies study of His laws) and observance.

We can now reexamine the sequence in our Parashah and find a remarkable statement about the power of Teshuvah (this is an edited cut-and-paste job from above; compare the two carefully):

- 1) We will reflect on the fulfillment of the blessing and curse – at that point, we will be spread out and (we assume) under foreign rule among the nations. (v. 1)
- 2) We will return “until” (Heb. *‘Ad*) God, listening to His voice (v. 2) – i.e. the nation will experience a desire to come close to God.
- 3) God will restore our fortunes, returning us back to our Land from all corners of the diaspora (vv. 3-5)
- 4) God will purify our hearts to worship Him completely (v. 6)
- 5) God will curse our enemies (v. 7)
- 6) We will return “fully” to God, studying His Torah and committing to complete observance of His commands (v. 8)
- 7) God will make us prosper and take delight in us (v. 9)

What an amazing statement: In order for God to restore us, to purify our hearts and to achieve peace and security in our Land, all we need is to desire to return to God – to seek out His voice. Once He has fulfilled the “intermediary” promises, then we are fully expected to step up the commitment to complete Teshuvah, as indicated in v. 8. Only then will God fully take delight in us and grant us prosperity.

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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 Abraham’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 legistically-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, Abraham 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 Abraham 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’lesheth (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

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**THE TANACH STUDY CENTER www.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
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**" & "**zichron**"

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 on 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 parsha (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 Tzefania, for example, uses the phrase 'yom **shofar u-tru'a**' to describe a day of terrible war and destruction. Tzefania'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 Tzefania 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 chatzotzrot. 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

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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-I 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.