

Beit Midrash Zichron Dov
ROSH HASHANAH READING
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ROSH HASHANAH THOUGHTS
 BY RABBI SAMMY BERGMAN &
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ROSH HASHANAH DERASHOT
 BY RABBI MORDECHAI TORCZYNER

ROSH HASHANAH ARTICLES
 FROM PAST ISSUES OF THE
YU ROSH HASHANAH TO-GO
 BY RABBI MORDECHAI TORCZYNER



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*For the full text of Rabbi Torczyner's derashot and articles,
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Caught in the Thicket

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The story of “*Akeidat Yitzchak*”, “the binding of Yitzchak”, plays a central role in the *Rosh Hashanah* service. We allude to the *Akeidah* throughout davening; in various *piyyutim* (unique additions to the prayer service recited on the festivals), and in *Zichronot*, the unique blessing in the *Mussaf Amidah* of *Rosh Hashanah*. On the 2nd day of the holiday, we publicly read Genesis Chapter 22 which also features the story.

On a simple level, featuring *Akeidat Yitzchak* on the day of Judgement makes perfect sense. On the day *Hashem* judges us for our actions, and determines our fate for the next year, we mention the incredible devotion of the forefathers. We hope that in their merit, *Hashem* will be merciful toward us. This idea is expressed in the conclusion of *Zichronot*. At the end of the blessing, we ask *Hashem* to allow “his compassion to suppress his anger against us” just as Avraham suppressed his compassion for his son Yitzchak and bound him as a sacrifice.

However, one aspect of the *Akeidah* which we focus on during the service on *Rosh Hashanah* requires further reflection. According to the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a), we use a ram’s horn to fulfill the commandment of blowing the *shofar* so that *Hashem* “remembers the binding of Yitzchak the son of Avraham”. In the story of the *Akeidah*, (Genesis 22:13), after an angel stops Avraham from slaughtering Yitzchak, Avraham “lifts up his eyes” and sees a ram “caught in the thicket by its horns”. Avraham takes the ram and offers it as a sacrifice “instead of his son”. Therefore, by using a ram’s horn as the *shofar*, we remind *Hashem* of the sacrifice Avraham brought after he was prevented from sacrificing Yitzchak. We also mention this theme during the *chazzan*’s repetition in one of the stanzas recited during the morning *Amidah*: “O King remember the one who was caught by the horns for those who blow to you today with a horn”.

Why do we focus on the sacrifice Avraham brought after the *Akeidah*? At first glance, Avraham’s offering of the ram caught by its’ horns seems like an afterthought. It’s unclear why the sacrifice was even necessary. Furthermore, why does the Torah specify that the ram got “caught in the thicket by its’ horns”?

The *Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 56:9)* offers an interpretation which I believe provides the key to fully understanding the story of the *Akeidah*. According to the *Midrash*, the ram caught in the thicket symbolizes the Jewish people mired in a state of spiritual stagnation. Avraham’s sacrifice represents their ability to emerge from that state, and experience redemption. Seen through the *midrash*’s perspective, the Jewish people originally get caught by their sins and stumble through periods of exile and subjugation by the kingdoms which rule over them. However, they eventually are redeemed through the sound of the *shofar*, both on a yearly basis on *Rosh Hashanah*, and at the end of times during the final redemption.

With the idea of the *midrash* in mind, we can appreciate the meaning of Avraham’s sacrifice. Avraham harnessed incredible courage and devotion to perform the *Akeidah*. Not only did he agree to carry out the unthinkable task of the bringing Yitzchak as a sacrifice, but Avraham performed each task with love and dedication. In that final moment, as Avraham lifted his knife to slaughter Yitzchak, he had reached the ultimate level of commitment to G-d. But in an instant, G-d abolished the whole initiative! Avraham and Yitzchak were told that they should not perform the sacrifice. Imagine the emotional complexity of that moment! Although obviously relieved he didn’t have to slaughter his son, Avraham faced the reality that the courage, resolve, and commitment he had mustered to perform this incredible task had been for nothing.

Suddenly, a ram miraculously appeared stuck in the thicket. Avraham understood that although he would be unable to perform the mission he set out to accomplish, *Hashem* did desire an expression of his devotion. The *midrash* explains that during each step of the sacrificial process Avraham said: “let G-d consider it as if I had done this to my son Yitzchak”. Avraham saw in his sacrifice his ability to reach his spiritual destination, albeit in a different way than he had intended.

On *Rosh Hashanah*, we look back at the various missions we set out to accomplish the past year. Inevitably, during this process of introspection, we conclude that although we succeeded in many respects, many of our pursuits have failed. Through the many struggles of life, we can get caught in the thicket; stuck with the knowledge that despite our sincere resolve to achieve our dreams, we continue to come up short.

Therefore, on *Rosh Hashanah*, we blow a ram’s horn. We remind ourselves not only of Avraham’s unthinkable devotion in originally binding his beloved son to the altar as a sacrifice, but also of *Hashem*’s rejection of that plan, and the ram Avraham offered in its place. As we are encumbered by our own failures, we pray to *Hashem* that he “remember the one who was caught by the horns for those who blow to you today with a horn”. As we embark on a new journey during the year ahead, we ask *Hashem* to appreciate our struggles and failures, and provide us with a way to redeem ourselves just as he provided the ram to Avraham.

On *Rosh Hashanah*, we recommit to living as *Hashem's* devoted servants. It's critical to reassess the ways we can improve. We should identify the areas in which we have been deficient. We should think of strategies we can use to bolster our strengths and address our weaknesses. However, it's equally important to recognize that regardless of our sincere desire to improve, life will always present obstacles which obstruct our path. Nevertheless, as we remember *Akeidat Yitzchak*, we can be confident that *Hashem* will provide us with a way to reach our destination, even if the path differs from our original plan. May *Hashem* grant each of us a year of health, happiness, and fulfillment of our dreams.

Does G-d Want Us to Sin?

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Adapted from a 5779 Pre-Selichot Shiur

Does G-d want us to sin? This seems like a silly question; the fact that G-d forbids certain actions indicates that He does not want us to engage in them! However, the Talmud presents two cases in which G-d “set up” people to sin, who would not have done so otherwise:

- The generation that left Egypt was on such an exalted spiritual level that worshipping the Golden Calf would be unthinkable. However, G-d tempted them to commit this sin.
- King David had conquered his evil inclination, and thus would not have committed the act with Batsheva, had G-d not caused him to desire her.

Why did G-d lure these righteous people to act as they did? The Talmud answers that G-d wanted them to serve as proof that He accepts sincere repentance, lest anyone think that repentance and forgiveness are unattainable. (Avodah Zarah 4b-5a)

Even though a person who has strayed from G-d can fully repair the fractured relationship (Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 7:4), we would think that someone who has not sinned in the first place would have a stronger relationship with Him.

However, the Talmud says that “in the place where penitents stand, [even] the completely righteous do not stand.” (Sanhedrin 99a) In fact, we are told that G-d considers repentance as a favour to Him! (Yoma 86b)

Why does G-d seemingly give preferential treatment to the repentant sinner, going as far as to consider his repentance as a favour?

Rambam explained that one who has enjoyed the taste of sin, and nevertheless separates from it, is given greater reward than one who has never sinned, because the former struggled harder to conquer his desires. (Hilchot Teshuvah 7:4) Rabbi Yehudah Loew (Maharal) said that this is considered a favour to G-d because “the sinner [in his own estimation] has placed himself [so to speak] outside the jurisdiction of the Almighty...He therefore [subjectively] has no obligations and whatever he does resembles a voluntary action, and G-d treats it accordingly.” (Netiv haTeshuvah, quoted in *Strive for Truth* p. 118, Feldheim)

Furthermore, failure can be a catalyst for growth that may not have been pursued without the shock of descent. In an address to students of the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz described how sin can serve as the lever to elevate a person: “The primary impediment to self-improvement and growth is the lethargy of routine and inertia. Not only does it hamper a person's spiritual growth, but it renders him totally insensitive as well...habit and routine can turn even the fear of G-d into a mechanical reflex!...It is only the shock of the clear perception of one's downfall that awakens and rouses one to action. The impact of this realization when fully harnessed can elevate one to new heights.” (Sichot Mussar, Maamar 93)

While these teachings arguably do not indicate that G-d *wants* us to sin, they reassure us that repentance is always possible, and that the process of recognizing our errors and correcting them can be one of tremendous growth. Finally, even if we have not sinned, and are careful in our observance of mitzvot, we must never become complacent; rather, we must always strive to improve ourselves and strengthen our relationship with G-d.

In Every Generation (5773)

R' Mordechai Torczyner - torczyner@torontotorah.com

Avraham held the blade aloft, prepared to slaughter a son, a dream, a nation. The inspiring exodus, the revelation at Sinai, the Mishkan hosting G-d in a home of human construction, the union of Jew and Land and Torah, the civilization of King David, the prophets and exile and redemption, the Messianic era, the very purpose of the heavens and earth - all of Creation hung in the balance while the old man steadied his hand...

...And a voice broke the silence: "Avraham! Avraham! Don't do it!"

A midrash asks: "Why does it say Avraham twice? Why not just say it once?" To which I would have simply replied, "This is too important a moment to trust to Avraham's 137-year old ears; call him twice." But the midrash sees further layers of meaning; R' Chiya says G-d repeated Avraham's name to demonstrate urgency, or perhaps love. Another thought, recorded in a Tosefta, says it was to show that Avraham was loyal both before and after this Divine call.

But the most moving answer I have seen comes from Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov. Noticing that the same double-call happens in Tanach to Yaakov, Moshe and Shemuel, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov presented a frightening, but inspiring guarantee.

Writing two thousand years ago with foresight encompassing the 21st century Jew, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov declared, "אמר לו ולדורות, אין דור שאין בו כאברהם ואין דור שאין בו כיעקב ואין דור שאין בו כמשה ואין דור שאין בו כשמואל." G-d called these men twice because, "G-d spoke to them and, in the second mention of their names, to subsequent generations. There is no generation which lacks an Avraham, there is no generation which lacks a Yaakov, there is no generation which lacks a Moshe, and there is no generation which lacks a Shemuel."

Do not misunderstand Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov's words – he is not simply pledging that every generation will have righteous leaders or great prophets. Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov promised far more; let's look at the circumstances in which these four men were called.

Avraham's case is the one we just read – He is a patriarch who declares openly to G-d, "All of Your gifts mean nothing to me, without a son." He is married to Sarah, who wanders with him in pursuit of their dream, who puts her marriage on the line to provide a son, and who is finally rewarded for her patient righteousness at the age of 90. Avraham and Sarah have invested their lives in this child, their only child, their beloved child, Yitzchak – and now they are to give him up, the only gift that ever mattered now sacrificed to G-d.

G-d calls out to Avraham at his moment of sacrifice and tells him he need not sacrifice – and in doubling Avraham's name, He calls out to us, to our dream-sacrificing Avrahams, as well.

Yaakov spent most of his life on the run, in exile. First he was pursued by his murderous brother Esav, then he spent 20 years performing hard labour in the house of Lavan. He returned to Israel only to lose his beloved wife Rachel, have his daughter Dinah taken captive, lose his son Yosef, have his son Shimon imprisoned – even at home, he was not permitted to settle down. Finally, Yosef was restored, but at a price: Yaakov would need to enter exile yet again, to descend to Egypt.

At this moment G-d calls to Yaakov, "Yaakov! Yaakov! מצרימה אל תירא מרדה מצרימה Don't be afraid to go into exile; it will not be a true exile. I will be with you!" And in doubling Yaakov's name, Hashem calls to us, to our exiled Yaakovs, as well.

And then Moshe, the Egyptian prince who turns fugitive after saving the life of a Jew. A price on his head, he flees to Midian, where he builds a small family with his wife Tziporah, until G-d tells him, "Go back to Egypt, back to the land of a despotic Pharaoh, of slavedrivers and beatings and quotas. Leave your safety and security. I know you don't want to do it, but I am charging you to return to Egypt and rescue your nation."

G-d calls to Moshe at this moment of danger and rescue, "Moshe! Moshe! I am standing beside you!" And by doubling Moshe's name, G-d cries out to every Jew who has ever launched himself into danger on behalf of others, declaring, "You are not truly in danger; I am standing beside you!"

And finally Shemuel, young Shemuel, brought to the Mishkan at the youngest possible age to apprentice to Eli, the Kohen Gadol, the religious giant of the generation. Shemuel is raised by Eli, who is his surrogate parent and mentor. Eventually Eli appoints him to serve in his household. But Eli's sons have sinned horribly, abusing their power, and G-d calls to Shemuel, of all people, to convey a message of harsh rebuke: "Go give your employer, your mentor, your surrogate father, a message that will make his ears ring. For his children's sins, for his own failure to instruct them properly, I am going to destroy his household entirely; they will be cursed forever, and they will never be forgiven." The entire priesthood is to be overturned, and the deaths will number in the thousands. Go, Shemuel, and give that message of rebuke and revolution to the man who is every authority figure in your life rolled into one.

G-d opens that mission by calling to Shemuel, "Shemuel! Shemuel! I am with you, I am the true author of the revolution and Eli will accept it; do not fear!" And by doubling his name, G-d calls to the Shemuels in every generation, saying, "Do not fear to speak the unpopular truth and revolt against authority; I am with you."

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov saw in these doubled calls a message deeper and more far-reaching than the individual conversations of G-d with these patriarchs.

There are two Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov's, and I'm not sure which is the author of this midrash, but it hardly makes a difference – because both knew well the missions of the aforementioned men.

- The first Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov lived through the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, saw the starvation and disease of siege, followed by Jewish blood running in the streets.
- The second Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov was a student of Rabbi Akiva, and he survived the fall of the Betar fortress to Hadrian's brutal forces.

The author of our midrash knew the bitter truth of Jewish history: Avraham and his sacrifice, Yaakov and his exile, Moshe and his dangerous rescue, Shemuel and his revolution, are not one-of-a-kind.

- Every generation will see Jews charged with a mission of revolt against authority, whether the deposing of Rabban Gamliel in Mishnaic times or the condemnation of poor leadership in the modern age.
- Every generation will see Jews face danger to save other Jews, whether by rescuing captives of the Romans or Jews living in danger in Ethiopia or Moscow or around the Middle East.
- Every generation will see Jewish families descend into exile, whether the refugees of 1st century Jerusalem or the refugees of 20th century Germany.
- And yes, Avraham, every generation will see Jewish mothers who send their sons into danger, whether in 2nd century fortresses or today's IDF.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov's read of the akeidah is horrific – it is a promise that the sacrifices are not over, that every generation will know this pain.

But, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov also reassures us with a pledge: That in every generation, Hashem will be by our side, as He stood with Avraham, Yaakov, Moshe and Shemuel. We may not always see the protection as Avraham and Moshe and Shemuel did; Yaakov did not see the end of the story in his lifetime. But Hashem will be there by our side, Hashem sees all and He stands with us.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov's message is more than a prophetic vision, though – it is also an imperative. If G-d will stand with these righteous people, then we are obligated to stand with them as well.

When we daven on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, even as we think about each member of our family, our friends, people who are sick and needy, we should also see those modern Avrahams and Yaakovs, Moshes and Shemuels in our minds:

- When we hear the shofar, as we will momentarily, we should daven for the mothers who continue Avraham's work, sending their children off to fight for the land and people of Israel.
- When we hear the shofar, we should daven for the Jews still at Moshe's work of rescuing other Jews, whether working for a government or for outreach agencies around the world.
- When we hear the shofar, we should think of Jews in Yaakov's exile, including ourselves in Toronto.
- When we hear the shofar, we should think of people who are carrying on the mission of Shemuel of rejecting the status quo and rebuking irresponsible leadership. [I recognize that this requires some fleshing out, but this is a *de-rashah* and not the venue for exploring the question.]

These are the people called by Hashem in that midrash, and on Rosh Hashanah, having just read the story of "Avraham! Avraham!" we daven for them, declaring "We are with you," and appealing to Hashem to be with them.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov's message is about more than davening, though; Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov's message is also about responsibility and leadership. The person who sacrifices, who is in danger, who is in exile, who is charged with revolution, isn't always a "them" – It can also be us.

When we hear the shofar, we ought to ask ourselves what it is saying, what is it demanding. Is it only reminding us to stand with the Avrahams and Yaakovs? Or is it also summoning us to become Moshes and Shemuels? The midrash said it: Sacrificing and dangerous rescue, exile and revolt are not historical phenomena, they are modern and current and real.

When summoned by G-d, all of the biblical figures Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov cited offered the same response: הִנְנִי, "Here I am, ready to serve." Avraham said it. Yaakov said it. Moshe said it. Shemuel said it. When it is our time, when we are called, when we hear the sound of the shofar momentarily, let us make sure we say it as well. Hineini.

Existimare Aude (5774)

R' Mordechai Torczyner—torczyner@torontotorah.com

About two weeks ago, I received a long email from a man who described himself as thirty-something, a professional, yeshiva-educated in a Modern Orthodox community. In the last ten years, he wrote, a friend had worked to undermine his belief in Judaism – and had succeeded.

As he wrote of his friend, "He showed me how the Torah is filled with mistakes, anachronisms, self-contradiction, outright disagreements with established facts. He showed me how the Torah was simply cobbled together from pre-existing Near Eastern religions, with a good smattering of Egyptian influence. He showed me how every supposed argument for Torah's authenticity was blatantly false, logically absurd, or scientifically and historically untenable... "

The man continued to describe how he had sought answers, studying Jewish sources as well as secular science. He sincerely wished he could believe. He wrote, "I am desperate to return to the frum world where I once belonged... I miss shul, Shabbat, holidays, and most of all, the faith that kept me, and keeps most of us, functioning through the difficult times. My heart wants desperately to believe, but I can only go with what my intellect tells me, and it tells me that this is just an evolutionary adaptation, we are wired to want to believe... I am truly lost, and have no idea where to turn..."

This young man read a blog post I published a few years ago on the challenges of faith, and it brought him to email me, looking for advice. I won't go into how I responded here – not because it's a great secret, but because I wrote this *derashah* on the night I received the email, so as I wrote this I had no idea what I was going to say to him. But I quote his email because I think it has a lot to teach us about the purpose of the shofar.

2100 years ago, the Roman poet Horace coined the Latin phrase, *sapere aude*. It means "Dare to be wise", or "Dare to know". For centuries leading up to his day, there was a movement to know for one's self, to cease trusting received wisdom and instead dare to figure things out. Like Avraham rebelling against the idolatrous received wisdom of his day, להבדיל אלהי הבריות, along came Anaximander, Pythagoras, Socrates, Aristotle, Epicurus, with their own explorations. These were the famous Greek philosophers, and they lived by the belief that the human mind, working hard enough, will be able to solve every mystery and uncover every truth. Don't trust – dare to know.

Fast-forward to 17th century Europe - skipping important history in the interest of time - and we find the Age of Enlightenment, founded on that same slogan of *sapere aude*. Spinoza. Voltaire. Kant. These men of letters taught that human beings needed to grow up and stop believing things simply because others had said them. Dare to figure it out for yourself! And they gave us modern science, modern philosophy, modern politics, modern university, the modern mind itself.

Our sages' response to each of these two groups was identical: Stay away from them. By and large, the earlier generation banned the study of Greek philosophy, and the later generation banned attendance at enlightened universities. Not because the Sages ignored the mishnah of דע מיה שתשיב, that one must know how to respond to heresy. Not because they could formulate no responses to particular claims made by Greek and Enlightenment philosophers. Rather, it was because they saw a threat in accepting the premise that underlay the concepts those philosophers proposed: The idea that the human mind can fathom everything.

In truth, our sages were not the only ones to reject the Enlightenment-era primacy of the brain; it's not the 18th century anymore, folks. The Enlightenment ended as philosophers came to embrace other isms, and as history proved the bankruptcy of ideologies that emphasize the dominance of the "civilized" mind.

But to return to Judaism, and the reaction of our sages:

Even though Judaism survives on the intellectualism of Torah study,

Even though the Rambam contended that intellectual growth is the true barometer of a Jew's closeness to G-d,

Even though we have the ability and obligation to deduce and comprehend great intellectual truths,

Nonetheless, our sages saw great danger in the confident assertion that we can all "dare to know" everything.

Our sages believed that emphasizing supremacy of the mind would lead to a hegemony of intellectualism, and when intellectualism would come up with ideas that denied religion, Jewish intellectuals would leave Judaism in droves, without cause. Seeing dinosaur fossils and textual anomalies in the Torah does lead to certain conclusions, but those conclusions may not be correct. As anyone who has ever worked with someone smarter than him can attest, our answers, however well-researched and thought-out, are not always right.

The legitimacy of intellectualism is limited by the intellect itself.

What, then, does Judaism propose in place of "dare to know"? *Existimare aude*, dare to feel. Dare to use your heart – because in moments of great feeling, our more Vulcan side is dampened, and we can hear what our soul is saying. At times of our hearts' sincere emotion and passion, with patient contemplation, as Rav Klonymus Kalman Schapira wrote a century ago in his בני מחשבה טובה, the drumbeat of the dominant intellect is drowned out by the heart, and we are

awakened to the messages of our souls.

Our souls declare that we were created by G-d and placed here with a Divine mission. That we are immortal and pure. That the world does not begin and end with that which the intellect can grasp; there is a greater depth and dimension than the mind can fathom.

We can achieve this sensitivity with experiences that inflame the heart with authentic emotion. A waterfall cascading from a mountainside after a long hike. A baby's laugh. A beautiful poem, a concerto, a rock anthem, a subtle painting. An athletic performance. A meaningful book.

So it is that Judaism is structured with an emphasis not only on the intellect, but also, as a complement, on experience.

- We recite Maggid, but we also lean and drink wine and play-act at the Seder.
- We read the megillah, but we also have a feast and give out celebratory gifts.
- We say shemoneh esreih, but we also stand at attention and speak in a whisper.

We say על חטא and think of our sins, but we also strike our heart.

These moments of the heart do not prove anything about G-d or Torah. None of these moments have anything to say, intellectually, at all. But at these times, our radical, splendid faith shines forth. The brain is exposed for the pallid gray calculator it is, while the soul reigns triumphant.

I should be careful to make this clear: We do not seek to flee from the world of the mind, but to balance it; Intellect must work in tandem with Heart. For all of our Jewish emphasis on the intellect and its calculation, our faith is known only in the soul, and comprehending it happens when we arouse the heart.

Which brings me to shofar, because it wasn't until I received this email that I truly understood the role of shofar in our musaf amidah. For decades I have been troubled: Our musaf features a berachah called Malchiyot which talks about the grandeur of G-d and accepts Him as our King. It then features a berachah called Zichronot which talks about G-d remembering our merits in His judgment. Both of those have simple, clear themes. But then we arrive at Shofarot, and that's just a list of disjoint verses about shofar blasts! Where is the message?

Even the machzor itself seems confused – For malchiyot we have two whole introductory paragraphs spelling out the theme of Divine monarchy, for zichronot we have three paragraphs on Divine judgment, and then for shofarot we get just 3.5 sentences saying that there was a shofar at Sinai and people trembled. Doesn't the machzor have a message for shofarot?

The answer, perhaps, is that shofarot offers a different kind of message, which isn't conveyed by verbal exposition. It's not an intellectual message about a relationship with G-d or a day of judgment. Rather, shofarot is an experience. The point of shofarot is that there was a shofar and people trembled. וגם כל העולם כלו הל מפניך. The whole world shook! The point of shofar is the moment when we are taken aback by a mighty blast, when our hearts stir even if we know the sound is coming, when our hearts are caught up and we suddenly feel.

Look at the pesukim of shofarot: ויהי קול השופר הולך, ויחרד כל העם אשר במחנה, the entire nation in the camp trembled! והזק מאד, the shofar's voice was very mighty! וירא העם וינעו, the nation saw and shuddered! And it continues with the shofar of song and celebration and redemption and war! The shofar is the answer to my email correspondent, the shofar dares to challenge the modern hegemony of *sapere aude* with its own cry of *existimare aude*! Don't devote yourself entirely to intellectual debate and proofs and rebuttals; there is a deeper truth to be found, but you need to awaken yourself to an entirely different type of knowledge.

Intellect is very important for us, as Jews and human beings. We are meant to use our minds, and to explore. Nonetheless, I believe that if the Jewish community is to survive in a world of universities and scientific achievement, a world which declares that all exists in the province of the mind, then the Jewish community must do one of two things: Either it must completely shut out the world of science and philosophy and take its chances on self-sustenance, or it must teach its children to listen to the shofar, to stir their hearts with experiences of passion and beauty, and to listen to their souls in those moments of emotion and hear what they have to say.

We are about to blow the shofar. In a few moments, I will make the announcements that I make every year, about not interrupting with speech because of our halachic obligation to hear the shofar. This year, though, I would like to change that announcement. Don't interrupt – but not only because of the technical issue of *hefsek*. Rather, don't interrupt because this is a time to listen with our hearts and to dare to be moved.

This is our chance. I pray that my email correspondent is having the same chance today. This is our opportunity to transcend *sapere aude*, and to choose *existimare aude*, and so to come to *credere aude* – to transcend "dare to know", to choose "dare to feel", and so to come to dare to believe.

Are You My Mother? (5775)

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Several years ago, researchers at Baylor University in the US published a study entitled, "American Piety in the 21st century". They asked Americans to identify what kind of G-d they believed in. The five choices were:

- Authoritarian (meaning that G-d is highly involved in day-to-day life, in punishing ways),
- Benevolent (meaning that G-d is highly involved in day-to-day life, in helpful ways);
- Critical (meaning that G-d is not involved in the world, but G-d watches and judges and will reward and punish eventually);
- Distant (meaning that G-d started the world, but doesn't care about it or run it);
- And atheist.

When the results were broken down by religion, Evangelical Protestants largely believed that G-d is authoritarian. Main-line Protestants and Catholics were split. And among Jews, the dominant choice was D – 41.7% of respondents who identified themselves as Jewish believed that G-d is distant – not watching, not caring, what happens in our universe.

Tanach presents the story of a man who came to agree with that 41.7%, a man who lived in a place called Utz; his name was Iyov.

You might have heard of Iyov; here's a quick outline of his story:

- Iyov enjoys a large family and magnificent wealth, and is extraordinarily devoted to G-d.
- Off in heaven, a malicious malach charges that Iyov only serves G-d because G-d protects him. G-d permits the malach to test Iyov; the malach takes almost everything away from him.
- Iyov is visited by various people who try to justify his suffering. He rejects their claims; he curses the day he was born, arguing that there is no justice, that G-d has outsourced the running of the universe and isn't paying attention. He demands to sue G-d for negligence.
- G-d then addresses Iyov personally, challenging him: What do you know about running a universe? Where were you when I created the world? What are your powers?
- At which point Iyov apologizes for his words, accepting G-d's response. G-d then gives Iyov a new start in life, with great rewards.

The book invites many questions – I intend to discuss more about it in a class during the break on Yom Kippur – but for now I want to ask just two:

- First: How does G-d's "answer" to Iyov address his questions, and why does Iyov accept it?
- And Second: Iyov seems to reject G-d throughout the book, proving that the malach was right. So why does G-d reward him at the end?

I would like to re-write the book of Iyov, and answer Baylor's 41.7%, with an idea that goes to the heart of Rosh Hashanah and the mitzvah of shofar.

People usually believe that the sole problem of the book of Iyov is Iyov's question to G-d: "Why do good people suffer?" But as we have seen, that question is barely answered in the book! Instead, Professor Yaakov Klein of Bar Ilan University suggests that a second central problem of the book of Iyov is the malach's question to G-d: "Why do people follow G-d?" Do human beings revere and serve their Creator to win fabulous prizes, or for something else? And this is answered in the book, by Iyov himself.

The book makes clear that Iyov is loyal because he believes he has a relationship with G-d. When he suffers without apparent reason, he assumes there is no relationship; like the 41.7%, he decides that the Creator is allowing proxies to run the world. Angry and hurt, he rejects this distant G-d. Then G-d responds that He is indeed watching and running the universe, that He is aware of a man named Iyov and his fortunes and misfortunes. G-d declares, "I halt the oceans where they are, I harness the mightiest beings in existence, and I still have time to pay attention to you. I won't tell you how justice works, but I will tell you that I am watching, and I care." That's G-d's response to Iyov.

Iyov accepts G-d's declaration because that's all he ever wanted – it confirms what he believed at the start of the book, that G-d is watching. Iyov didn't need great rewards, and he didn't need to know the mechanics of Divine justice. What Iyov needed was to know that G-d was watching, listening, caring, at all. Whether G-d is Authoritarian, Benevolent or Critical is irrelevant; once Iyov knew that G-d was not Distant, he was satisfied.

And because Iyov was satisfied with that response, because Iyov showed that what mattered to him was not fabulous prizes but the existence of a relationship, G-d rewarded Iyov – because with his actions Iyov answered the malach's question in the most positive of ways. The malach had claimed that human beings revere G-d for selfish reasons, and Iyov answered him: We do it because we believe in a relationship. We do it because we believe that G-d cares about the

events of our lives. Because even if G-d is **מונה מספר לכוכבים**, able to number the stars, He is first **לרופא לשבורי לב**, the healer of broken hearts.

Iyov is not the only human being in the Torah to want G-d to see us, to be near us; the biblical narrative is replete with such people:

- Avraham serves G-d not for reward, but as **אוהבי**, the one who loves G-d.
- After the Golden Calf, when G-d indicates He is going to separate from the Jews, Moshe dictates to G-d: **אם אין פניך, אל תעלנו מזה** If You won't be our intimate, leave us here in the wilderness!"
- In our haftorah this morning, Chanah warns us, **אל תרבו לדבר גבוהה גבוהה**. As Abarbanel explains, she insists, "Don't say that G-d is elevated and far away from us; G-d is near at hand!"

Our need for proximity to G-d is fundamental to Judaism. To borrow a phrase from the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, this is one of the "irreducible and stubborn facts" of Judaism, a first principle which must be accepted in order for us to discuss anything Jewish: being one of the 41.7% is to be out-of-step with Jewish theology. The Jew demands Divine immediacy, that G-d pay attention.

And in parallel, it is an irreducible and stubborn fact of the Torah's conception of G-d, that G-d longs to be near us; G-d does not want to be of Baylor's 41.7%.

- Thus Hashem commands the Jews to build a **משכן**, a sanctuary in their midst, in which He will dwell. And so the Kinot of Tishah b'Av describe the effect of the loss of the Beit haMikdash not only in terms of our human suffering, but in terms of G-d suffering, **כביכול**, as a newly homeless, rootless being, **על גג** like a lone and lonely bird perched upon a roof.
- Thus Hashem commands us not only to perform mitzvah actions, but **ואהבת**, to love G-d, to contemplate G-d, to draw near to G-d.
- Thus the Talmud tells us that when a single person is studying Torah, G-d is present. When just one individual grieves for the death of a good person, G-d counts and stores the tears. When a single person prays in silence, G-d listens. **הקב"ה מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים**. G-d longs for our prayers.

If this relationship is not the reason we were created, it is, at the least, fundamentally necessary to, and inextricable from, the Divine plan.

This is the way G-d planned our existence, from the beginning – to live with G-d, in Gan Eden. When Hashem created the plants and animals and people of this world, He used the same terms to describe all of them. But He did not address the plants and animals. He only addresses humanity. As Rav Soloveitchik explained, "G-d takes [this] man-animal into His confidence, addresses him and reveals to him His moral will."

Indeed, this need for human-G-d proximity is a major reason why large numbers of people, Jewish and non-Jewish, wander the earth searching for G-d, migrating from philosophy to philosophy trying to find G-d. It's like the classic children's story, "Are you my mother?" The baby bird knows he has a mother, wants his mother, and travels the world trying to find her.

It's also one of the causes for angry atheism. Like Iyov, people have sought G-d, and they have been disappointed and frustrated. They are turned off by perpetual Divine absence and perceived Divine abuse - and they are also frustrated by the gross improprieties of human beings who claim to represent G-d, and this drives them the other way, to insist that there is no G-d at all. They have been hurt and let down.

And as a tangent – this one is not only on G-d, it's also on us. Us, the rabbis, us, the parents and aunts and uncles and role models, and us, the visibly observant Jews. If our behaviour isn't beyond reproach, or if we conflate the laws and lessons of Torah with superstition, or if we are self-satisfied and arrogant, if we fail to inspire the confidence and faith of those around us, then we are the reason why people are unable to find their mother, we are the reason why people become hostile, we are the reason why people choose Option D. They believe G-d is distant in part because people who visibly select Options A, B and C portray a relationship with G-d that is repugnant. But I digress.

Torah is meant to be a way for us to find that relationship with G-d. As the Talmud Yerushalmi says, the goal of Torah is to bring us into that relationship with G-d. It's what G-d wants. It's what we want. And it's what Iyov wanted, all along – not to have his material needs met, but to enjoy a relationship.

To return to Rosh Hashanah: This relationship with G-d is a central theme of the day; Rosh Hashanah is the day that tells us that there is a relationship.

- It's not a human-centred day of self-analysis, for us to review our pasts and make resolutions for our future. We

spend our day in **מלך הכתר** crowning G-d, in human consideration of the Divine.

- It's not a G-d-centred day of distant decrees, taking place in some throneroom up in the heavens. It is a **יום הדין**, a day of Divine consideration of human beings in judgment.

In the very structure of our musaf of Rosh Hashanah, our liturgy sends this message:

- We remember our King – **מלכויות**
- And our King remembers us – **זכרונות**
- And as the Talmud says, **ובמה? בשופר**? Nowhere is this more clear than in the shofar, forever the symbol of the encounter between human being and G-d. From the ram substituted for Yitzchak on the altar, to the shofar blast when the Torah was given at Har Sinai, to the shofar blasts of Yovel every fifty years, to the shofar of Mashiach, the ram's horn represents human and G-d meeting together.

When we hear the shofar blown in a few minutes, let us remember that this is the central point of Rosh Hashanah: rejecting Option D. During shofar, we occupy these moments alongside G-d, because G-d is here, and listening, and thinking of us.

Last year at this time, I proposed that shofar is not about verbal exposition; rather, shofar is an experience; *existimare aude*, "dare to experience." For some of us, the mood of that experience will be apologetic. For some it will be grateful. For some it will be mournful. For some it will be a moment of petition. That's up to each of us to formulate; the key is that we recognize within ourselves that which our ancestors saw when they canonized the book of Iyov in Tanach: That the irreducible and stubborn fact of our Jewish existence is against the 41.7%. Our Creator connects with us, and we connect with our Creator.

May we merit to connect with our Creator, to build that relationship, today and for the rest of the year, to live lives which convince others that there is such a relationship, and so merit a **כתיבה וחתימה טובה**, to be inscribed and sealed for a great year, and then to live a great year.

The Voice in the Shofar (5776)

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If today is the birthday of humanity, then we have two obligations: 1) To thank G-d for our existence, as we do in the davening, and 2) To ask ourselves: Why are we here? What is the purpose of the brilliant, inventive, moody, creative, ambitious, bizarre creature that is the human being?

Fortunately, we don't need to start on this question from scratch – this is a 14-minute derashah, not a shiur. I want to show you three sources, which carry a message of such power that it has changed my life, and which I believe can change our Rosh Hashanah birthday for all of us.

First, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, with words that are among the most inspirational I have ever heard.

Rav Chaim Volozhiner was the greatest student of the Vilna Gaon, toward the end of the 18th century. He founded the Volozhin yeshiva, the top yeshiva in Europe, famed for training intellectual geniuses; it is reported that the entrance exam included putting a pin through a gemara and telling the examiner, without looking, what word the pin had pierced on every page. Rav Chaim started the great Brisker dynasty, which produced the brilliant Soloveitchik family.

And Rav Chaim's son, Rav Yitzchak, wrote the following about his father:

וכה היה דברו אלי תמיד, שזה כל האדם: לא לעצמו נברא, רק להועיל לאחריו ככל אשר ימצא בכחו לעשות.
This is what my father always told me: "This is a person's entire purpose. A person is not created for himself. A person is created only to benefit others, with whatever power is in his possession."

The uber-intellectual declared to his son: You are not here on earth to be a genius. You are not here on earth to ace the pin test. Not to minimize the importance of learning Torah, but to maximize the importance of chesed: You are here on this earth to look at the person beside you and ask yourself, "What can I do to make his life better?"

Second, Rav Yerucham Levovitz, expanding on an idea stated by Rav Simcha Zissel Broide, also known as the Sabba miKelm.

Rav Simcha Zissel Broide was a brilliant talmid chacham. My Beit Midrash is learning Eruvin this year, and we have the newest edition of the Meiri on Eruvin, a fairly technical and esoteric text – and it comes with scholarly footnotes from Rav Simcha Zissel Broide.

As far as Rav Levovitz, he was the Mashgiach Ruchani (spiritual leader) of the Mir Yeshiva in the first decades of the 20th century. The Mir Yeshiva is another institution famed for its Torah scholarship, and Rav Levovitz is honoured as one of its greatest leaders.

And this is what Rav Levovitz wrote:

גדול כ"כ ענין של נושא בעול עם חבירו מפני שזה כל התורה כולה, היינו איחוד הנפשות להרגיש זא"ז. וכל לימוד התורה, הלימוד והמעשה, הגה סוף המטרה שיתאחדו הנפשות להיות מרגישים זא"ז שיהיו אחד ממש.
Bearing a burden with others is of such importance because this is the entire Torah: the joining of souls, to feel what each other feels. All of Torah study, all of the learning and all of the deeds - the final goal is that all souls should be joined, to feel each others' feelings, to truly be one.

Faced with identifying the purpose of the entire Torah, with all of its laws and rituals, Rav Levovitz, leader of one of the major European yeshivot, identified not our personal connection with G-d, and not Torah study, but bearing each other's burdens with them! Not that he was diminishing the importance of Torah study, or saying that it is sufficient to just "be a good person". Just the opposite – it is critical that we practice all of our mitzvot, and that we examine them to gain an understanding of how they will help us to benefit others, and to bring people to greater empathy. Hashem gave us the Torah in order to instill empathy in our hearts and lives.

And third, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, one of the greatest kabbalists of the past 500 years. He was a leader of the community of kabbalists in Tzfat, and a Rebbe of the Ari z"l. One of his great works is Tomer Devorah, "The Palm Tree of Devorah", which speaks of the ability of a human being to emulate G-d.

In Tomer Devorah, Rabbi Cordovero wrote that when the Torah says a human being is created in the image of G-d, this means that we hold within our hearts, our minds, our limbs, the capacity to emulate the actions of G-d in our relationships with others.

He wrote, “האדם ראוי שיתדמה לקונו” A person is suited to resemble his Creator.” Not that this is something we need to leap for, to struggle to achieve – we are suited for this. And specifically, to resemble our Creator in the way we relate to the human beings around us, the way that G-d reached out to save Yishmael in this morning’s Torah reading – with mercy, with generosity, with empathy, with love.

And he added powerfully, אילו ידומה בגופו ולא בפעולות, if a person were to have the physical capacity to reach out to others, if a person were to have the emotional capacity to love, and a person would not employ it in action, הרי הוא מכזיב, 'צורה נאה ומעשים כעורים', ויאמרו עליו 'צורה נאה ומעשים כעורים', that person would be making a lie of our form! They would say of such a person, “What a pleasant form, but what ugly deeds!”

Summary

Three voices, three of the greatest minds Judaism has ever known. Not cherry-picked – there are others I could bring. But three voices which unite to answer our birthday question: The brilliant, inventive, moody, creative, ambitious, bizarre creature that is the human being was put here on this planet on this day, in order to help other people. In order to unite with others in empathy and carry their burdens. In order to emulate G-d’s aid for Yishmael with generosity, empathy and love for other human beings.

Of course, a good derashah requires nuance; there must be another side of the coin, and there is. We face two limits to our empathy: Biology, and Knowledge.

First, biology – The saying goes, “One death is a tragedy, one million deaths is a statistic.” We have trouble relating to too large a circle of human beings.

British anthropologist Robin Dunbar studied the brains of primates and the size of their societies, and came up with a formula that predicted that human beings would only form social networks of up to 150 or so people. Malcom Gladwell made the theory famous in his *The Tipping Point*, where he marshalled evidence for it.

And it’s not only Dunbar and Gladwell - halachah limits its demands upon our empathy. We have a principle of עירך קודמים, that our tzedakah should go to our families first. Granted, that same talmudic passage includes the warning that those who only help their own will soon find themselves in need of aid from others – still, the rule is that our own do come first.

Another example from halachah: The Torah describes our obligation to help others load and unload their animals, and to restore their lost property. But the Torah says כי תפגע this is only when you encounter a need. The sages explained that only upon encountering a need up close are we obligated to help; they defined a distance limit of about 150 meters. Halachah is aware that we respond best to what it calls ראייה שהיא פגיעה, to a personal encounter, and it does not obligate us to go looking to help those we don’t know and we don’t see.

So how can Rav Chaim of Volozhin expect me to walk around all day thinking of helping people? How can Rav Yerucham Levovitz expect me to carry the burdens of so many people? How can Rav Moshe Cordovero demand that I emulate the Divine embrace for everyone around me?

To this, I respond with an article published in the New York Times this past summer, by three research psychologists. Darryl Cameron, Michael Inzlicht and William Cunningham wrote a piece called *Empathy is Actually a Choice*. They said, “While we concede that the exercise of empathy is, in practice, often far too limited in scope, we dispute the idea that this shortcoming is inherent...We believe that empathy is a *choice* that we make whether to extend ourselves to others. The ‘limits’ to our empathy are merely apparent, and can change, sometimes drastically, depending on what we want to feel.” And they demonstrated, with research studies, that humans are actually designed with the ability to expand the empathetic capacity of our hearts. Dunbar’s Number does not prevent us from expanding our hearts to care about, and extending our arms to carry the burdens of, a world of human beings.

The other hypothetical limit is knowledge.

Here is a powerful blog post I saw back in 2007. The writer is anonymous:

I write to you today as one of the Unseen. It hurts to not be seen. It hurts even more to suffer alone and in silence. I have a mental illness... I hide it well most of the time. Today I did not hide it. I cried openly in shul... surrounded by some two hundred people during the kiddush luncheon that followed, and still you did not see me. I stumbled out of the social hall, blinded by tears I could not control and sobs that left me unable to breathe, and still no one saw me. I took refuge in the chapel and sobbed aloud... People came into the chapel for various reasons: to look for

a lost tallis, read the newspaper, find a book in the library. Even still, I remained Unseen. When my sobs exhausted themselves and I found my peace in emotional numbness, I rose to leave the chapel, falling onto a chair in my weakened state. One man remained in the chapel, facing me. He did not even bother to look up. I left the chapel, Unseen.

I don't believe that people ignored a crying person in shul because they didn't care, and weren't moved. Rather, I think it's because they didn't know what to do. Perhaps they were afraid to make her uncomfortable by approaching her. So they left the room.

But our ignorance is easy to eliminate – and looking around our minyan, I see so many people who have taken the steps to do that, who have become involved in chesed causes and who have pioneered chesed causes. So we know how to eliminate ignorance: Good parents do research to learn how to take care of their children. Good teachers study how to teach well. Good first responders train in the latest CPR techniques. And good human beings, like us, find out how to help other people.

This is what we celebrate today: **נעשה אדם !**

- The Divine decision to populate His universe with the brilliant, inventive, moody, creative, ambitious, bizarre creature that is the human being.
- The Divine decision to create a human being who would look to help others beyond Dunbar's 150, beyond the halachic minimum of **פגיעה בה שיש בה פגיעה**, as Rav Chaim Volozhin wrote.
- The Divine decision to create a human being who would overcome ignorance and train herself to bear the burdens of others, as Rav Yerucham Levovitz wrote.
- The Divine decision to create a human being who would emulate Divine mercy and love and empathy, as Rav Moshe Cordovero wrote.

The Talmud teaches that the shofar's sound replicates different types of crying. These might be our own cries of repentance before our King, but these may also be the cries of other people – even the wicked mother of Sisera, as the gemara teaches. As we fulfill this mitzvah momentarily and hear the moaning tekiah, the groans of the shevarim, the shuddering teruah, let us expand our empathy, our image of G-d, and ask ourselves whose cries we are hearing.

Who do we hear in the shofar? Is it the panhandler at the corner of Bathurst and Steeles? Is it a socially awkward person who is more easily ignored than greeted? Is it someone who lacks a family and is rarely invited for a meal? Who do we hear crying with the shofar? And what will we be moved to do about it?

- Let us hear the shofar and reach out because Rav Moshe Cordovero says that is a fulfillment of our Image of G-d.
- Let us hear the shofar and reach out because Rav Yerucham Levovitz says that's what Judaism is for.
- Let us hear the shofar and reach out because Rav Chaim of Volozhin says that's why we were created on that first Rosh Hashanah.

Let us hear the shofar and reach out as G-d did for Yishmael – and **האדם ראוי שיתדמה לקונו**, we can do it as well.

Chaggai the Optimist (5777)

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Once upon a time, Jews lived as a minority, subject to the whims of the regnant majority. Impoverished and unpopular, they began to fall away from Torah; they stopped speaking Hebrew, they stopped observing Shabbat and Yom Tov, and they married out. Then, suddenly, unbelievably, that regnant majority granted the Jews permission to return to Israel and build up their land, we even held Jerusalem again – but most of the Jews did not take advantage of the opportunity, unable to believe that their redemption had arrived. Those who did go encountered nasty neighbours as well as difficult living conditions; the febleness of their settlement was taken as evidence that this was no Messianic time, and their leaders failed to inspire the majority of Diaspora Jewry to join them.

This sounds a lot like the early years of the State of Israel, but as I suspect many of you recognize, it is actually a story that is 2500 years old. It is the history of the Jews who were allowed by the Persians to return to Israel and build the second Beit haMikdash.

We were small in number, and without resources, relying on the generosity of the Persian government. We lacked the sacred relics of the first Beit haMikdash – the Aron, the Tablets, and so on. The walls of Jerusalem were in ruins; we were without defenses, so that we needed to allocate precious manpower just to stand guard protecting those who were trying to build. The local Samaritans objected to our plans, and successfully lobbied the Persians to halt our construction of the Temple. The Jews still in Babylon sent a disheartened and disheartening inquiry: “Should we still fast on Tishah b'Av? It doesn't look like your Redemption is happening so fast.”

And on to this depressing stage stepped one man, who would electrify the Jewish people and change history. His name was Chaggai, and here is the story of his four inspiring prophecies.

- Recall that on the first day of Elul in the Jews' first year in the *midbar*, Moshe ascended Mount Sinai to acquire the second set of tablets, replacing the first, broken Luchot.
- And on another first day of Elul, Chaggai proclaimed a message of equal renewal: Just as the original tablets were destroyed but replaced, so our Beit haMikdash, brutally shattered, will yet be replaced.

But Chaggai did not merely put forth a message of potential rebirth; the prophet declared rebirth our obligation! He proclaimed, “So declares G-d, Master of Multitudes: This nation says, ‘The time has not yet come, the time for the House of G-d to be built.’... Tell me something: Is it the time for you to dwell in your homes, while this house is in ruins?”

In other words: Don't think that the default is to sit at home, and there is a particular time for building. Just the opposite: Sitting at home is only for a particular time! You are natural born builders, the default is to build, not to sit at home, so go do it!

Chaggai then followed up with a stirring second message which to me is the most important of his four prophecies: Don't overthink it, don't overanalyze your options and methods and particulars. Just build! “So declares G-d, the Master of Multitudes: Pay attention! Go up the mountain, bring wood, and build the house!” It's that simple: just bring the materials, and ignore the static.

And unlike the experience of so many biblical prophets, the Jews listened to Chaggai. ביום עשרים וארבעה לחדש בששי, On the 24th day of the sixth month, the 24th day of Elul, the day before the anniversary of Creation of the World, the Jews began a new act of preparation for Creation, preparing wood as well as stone for the construction.

But Chaggai was not done. On the 21st day of the seventh month, the 21st of Tishrei, Hoshana Rabbah, Chaggai proclaimed a third message.

Hoshana Rabbah is the last day of Succot, the last day of prayers for rain, a time when the first Beit haMikdash saw שמחת בית השואבה, the great water-drawing. The Talmud states that one who never saw שמחת בית השואבה has never seen true joy; there were jugglers of torches, there was ecstatic dancing and singing! But there were neither jugglers nor dancers for these Jews, who had only sticks and stones and an altar, and they must have been a most forlorn band on that Hoshana Rabbah.

Chaggai played the cheerleader for this dejected group, declaring: “Who among you saw this house in its former glory, and what do you see now? It seems like nothing on your eyes, I know. But G-d declares: חזק, be strong Zerubavel [the governor of Judea], and חזק, be strong Yehoshua, Kohen gadol, and חזק, be strong, O nation! עשו, just do! For I, G-d, Master of Multitudes, am with you.”

This was the third message: Despite your descent, G-d will be with you. If you build it, He will come.

And then there was one more message, בעשרים וארבעה לחדש, on the 24th day of the ninth month. The 24th of Kislev, Erev Chanukah, to us. For the Jews of that time, who would not know the Greeks for centuries, it was significant for another reason: it was the end of the season for bringing בכורים, the offering of their first produce.

The process of bringing Bikkurim, dedicating the first of our crops to G-d, could not happen for those Jews in the first years of the second Beit haMikdash. And to them Chaggai offered one last message, a charge of responsibility. This message may be understood on many levels, but here I am following the approach of Rabbi Meir Leibush, Malbim.

Chaggai asked: “If you were to take meat from a korban inside your garment, and the garment were then to touch bread, stew, wine, oil or some other food – would that communicate holiness to the bread, etc.?” And the answer was No; holiness cannot be communicated that way.

Then Chaggai asked: “If someone who was impure would touch any of these things, would that communicate impurity?” And the answer was Yes; impurity can be communicated with that kind of contact.

What in the world was Chaggai talking about?! All of the other messages were clear, but what is this riddle about sacred items and impurity? Malbim explains Chaggai’s message to those Jews who were distressed at the lack of Bikkurim: Impurity is highly contagious, communicated easily. But holiness, like that of a korban? That isn’t transmitted easily. It takes prolonged and direct exposure.

These are Chaggai’s messages:

- On the first of Elul I told you that you must build, this is your basic nature.
- I also told you that you shouldn’t overthink it – just take the materials, go up the mountain, and do the job.
- On Hoshana Rabbah I told you not to be depressed at your insufficiency, for G-d is with you.
- And at the end of the season of the first fruits I tell you that you will need to persevere, to overcome obstacles and fight your way through challenges, in order to produce those fruits and parade with them to Jerusalem once more.

In context, of course, Chaggai’s message is about returning to Zion and building the Beit haMikdash – but it is equally applicable to each of us on the first of Tishrei.

I asked one of my classes last week, “What do you want to hear about on Rosh Hashanah?” To which one thoughtful participant replied by email, “I would want to hear a wise person discuss the topic: What does it mean to start a new year? What are man’s obligations? What should we hope for from ourselves?”

I have been Mordechai Torczyner for too long to think myself wise - but Chaggai was most wise:

- To start a new year means to recognize that we are builders by nature, that it is time not to sit in our homes but to act.
- Man’s obligations at the new year are to take wood, go up the mountain, and build the house. Don’t overthink teshuvah and self-improvement, the way you can change yourselves and the world; we know our weaknesses and the needs of our community and our world, and we know the way to correct the weaknesses and fill the needs. We don’t need intricate plans and we certainly don’t need fear of failure. Our King is with us.
- And what should we hope for, from ourselves? The perseverance to see the process through, catalyzing the communication of holiness by prolonged exposure and endeavour, so that when we come back here next year, we will be witnesses to a fine building perched atop that mountain.

Just about fifty years ago, on December 10, 1966, the Nobel Prize for Literature went to S. Y. Agnon and Nelly Sachs. In an outstandingly Jewish Nobel acceptance speech, Agnon introduced himself to the King of Sweden with these words: “As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem.”

Agnon saw in himself a child of a nineteen-hundred-year exile, employing that age-old perseverance to return to our land. As he explained, “At the age of nineteen and a half, I went to the Land of Israel to till its soil and live by the labour of my hands.” He took wood, he ascended the mountain and he built a house – simple, but powerful. And oh, was G-d ever with him, and oh, did he ever succeed!

All of us are exiles of Jerusalem. And on Rosh Hashanah, we remember that we are also exiles of our own souls, driven out by the foolishness of the year past. But we also remember Chaggai’s eternal words – We are builders by nature. We only need to take simple steps. And when we persevere, Hashem will be with us, and grant us a כתיבה וחתימה טובה.

The Most Brutal Woman in the World (5778)

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Over a period of 16 years, from 1833 to 1849, Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote a long poem in memory of his beloved friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. It's called "In Memoriam A.H.H.". The best-known line from the poem is probably, "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." But I want to focus on a different passage today. In describing his own faith in the face of this bereavement, Tennyson wrote:

Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last—far off—at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.

So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry.

Tennyson describes his cry as that of an infant; he hears the voice of a baby in the emotions of a grown, worldly, sophisticated man grieving for his friend. Keep that image in mind, please, as we look at a very odd element of the mitzvah of shofar.

Shofar is a surprisingly vague mitzvah; the Torah describes the first day of the seventh month as **יום תרועה**, a day for trumpeting, but it doesn't define what exactly a *teruah* is. How do we know what sound to make? The Talmud deduces the nature of the shofar's *teruah* based on the crying of a particular woman in Tanach.

More: We blow 100 shofar blasts each day of Rosh Hashanah, even though 60 should cover all of the possible permutations of sounds. Why 100? Tosafot quotes the 10th century sage, Rabbi Natan baal ha'Aruch, explaining that we want to match the cries of that same woman in Tanach. She cried 99 or 100 times, depending on your version of this idea, and we cry as she did.

So there you have it. How do we know that *teruah* is a crying sound? That crying woman in Tanach. Why do we blow 100 blasts? Same woman in Tanach. And my problem is this: That woman in Tanach ranks as one of the coldest, most heartless human beings in Jewish history. That woman was the mother of a Canaanite general named Sisera.

Go back in time about 3200 years. After the Jews left Egypt and entered Canaan, Yehoshua led them for 28 years. After he died, we were governed by a series of Shoftim/Judges for centuries, during an up-and-down period in which we were often under the thumb of local tribes. About 120 years into this period, the Canaanites come to dominate us; they have iron, horse-drawn chariots, and they force us up into the mountains. Their lead general is a man named Sisera.

To make a long story short, our shofeit at the time is a woman named Devorah, and she leads us in rebellion against Canaan. Miraculously, the Canaanite chariots are routed. The soldiers flee east, to go home; their general, Sisera, deserts and heads west, looking for shelter. He is intercepted by a woman named Yael, who kills him. Devorah composes a poem about the victory, and at the end of the poem she describes the scene back at Canaanite headquarters, where Sisera's mother anxiously awaits her son's return. To quote:

"At the window, the mother of Sisera gazes out and cries at an ornately decorated window. She cries, 'Why is his chariot delayed in coming? Why are the hoofbeats of his chariots late?' The wise noblewomen answer her, and she also gives this statement to herself, 'Have they not found and distributed spoils, a womb, two wombs to every man, spoils of dyed [fabric] for Sisera, spoils of dyed embroidery, dyed embroidery around the neck of the despoiler?'"

This is the mother of Sisera – a woman who comforts herself with the thought that her son is assaulting women and stealing spoils. And her language – a womb, two wombs to every man – it's vulgar, obscene! How grotesque! What a mockery of maternity! Sisera's mother may have cried for her son, but why in the world would I want to model my shofar on Rosh Hashanah on the grief of the most abominably cold-hearted human being imaginable?!

I'm not the only one with this question. Rav Eliyahu Ki-Tov asked this question in Sefer haTodaah, and decided that we are not looking at her villainy, but at our own goodness. We are contrasting ourselves with Sisera's mother. She wept with cruelty; we weep with humanity. There is a logic to this, certainly.

Another answer is to look past her cold villainy, and see her as a bereaved mother. As Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider wrote in a column on the OU website last year, "[S]o great is the grief of any parent for the loss of a child, that we all are left com-

pletely bereft. The universality and commonality of suffering over the loss of a child transcends names and identities.” Rabbi Goldscheider knows what he is talking about; he lost a child. And I accept his point. But I don’t understand – do we really need to demonstrate our compassion for a bereaved parent by invoking this particular bereaved parent? Do we not have enough bereaved parents in our history, on whom shofar could have been modeled?

I would suggest that the answer is not to ignore her villainy, but to embrace it, to understand that her lack of a heart is precisely the point. We invoke her because she is so unsympathetically heartless. This merciless human being, who reassures herself that all is well by imagining her son viciously violating prisoners – even she can crack. And that unadorned cracking of the cold, yielding sincere emotion below, is what matters in shofar.

Rav Yehudah Amital also emphasized the sincere cry, in an essay regarding Akeidat Yitzchak. He quoted a manuscript of the midrashic Avot d’Rabbi Natan which describes the fateful scene on the mountain. In contrast to the classic image of the stoic father and son, pure in their devotion to G-d, in this version Avraham says to himself, “I am old, and he is young, perhaps Yitzchak could escape!” And Yitzchak says to himself, “Who will save me from my father? I have no aid other than Hashem!” Rav Amital explained, Avraham was no malach, and Yitzchak was no seraph; neither of them wanted to go through with this, and they were looking for something, pleading with Hashem, to prevent Yitzchak’s death. They cracked - and as we say in our Selichot, Hashem answered Avraham. It’s true that Hashem never wanted Yitzchak to die, but even had Hashem wanted Yitzchak to die, He would have halted the akeidah because of Avraham’s plea for Yitzchak’s life – because the most valuable prayer to Hashem is that simple, sincere cry, like that of Avraham, for that which we love the most.

This is what shofar is about – expressing the sincere cry. Returning to the beginning, I think this is what Tennyson described in his own grief for his beloved friend: “An infant crying in the night: An infant crying for the light: And with no language but a cry.” Simple. Sincere. Lacking artifice and style, and all the more beautiful for it. Even Sisera’s mother, at her moment of crisis, releases this pure voice from inside of her.

We may not like to admit it, but we nurture within ourselves the seeds of the cold brutality of Sisera’s mother - and for good reason. A soul open to every emotion, a heart with strings that can be plucked by every circumstance, would drown in a sea of passion. We would suffer depression at every hurricane and shooting and car accident and famine. We would ride a roller coaster of joy with every birth and marriage and success we saw on Facebook or LinkedIn. We would spend our last pennies on helping people around the world in need. We would overload in reaction to every news headline and private conversation, and we would be left gasping for air, for emotional space, for survival.

So we develop a necessary shell, but we pay a price in doing it. I become much more at ease snapping my fingers to an upbeat tune than contemplating loss. I become more comfortable reading a book of intellectual essays about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur than intensely contemplating what I did for the past year, and why I did it. I would rather go home to a delicious lunch than remain here asking, a la Tennyson, whether spring will truly follow winter for me, for my family, for my friends.

But on Rosh Hashanah, with the shofar, we are meant to penetrate to just those fears that inhabit the pit of our stomach. To imagine what it would mean to lose that which we love and treasure more than anything on earth – and to cry like Tennyson’s infant. Toward that end we summon the image of the coldest, crudest human being imaginable, Sisera’s awful mother, cracking, and we know that if she can, then so can we. And our cry, at the moment when our cold is cracked, is gorgeous in its purity, in its simplicity, in its sincerity.

Along the same lines, the Talmud Yerushalmi says we blow an animal horn because our own cry on Rosh Hashanah is that of an animal. The shofar has no words, only an animal, or perhaps infantile, sound that emerges with our breath, from our core. May we crack, and find that cry inside of ourselves this morning, for just a little while. May we call out to Hashem sincerely, for the sake of our parents, our siblings, our spouses, our friends, our children. And may Hashem respond to us, as Hashem responded to Avraham, with a verdict for a *הת'מה טובה*, to be inscribed and sealed for a year of berachah and shalom.

The Wounded Prayer (5779)

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Berachot from tzaddikim are commonplace in certain circles – but not generally in YU circles. In YU, the normal story is of the fellow who went to Rav Soloveitchik and asked him for a berachah, and Rav Soloveitchik responded, “What are you, an apple?” So that makes the following story, which I will abbreviate somewhat, remarkable.

It was 2001, and Rav Herschel Schachter was in Israel with his son, Yummy, with whom I verified this story. On the night before they were leaving Israel, they forgot a suitcase in a taxi. They didn't know what to do – but it worked out. A later passenger recognized Rav Schachter's name on the tag, and told the driver that Rav Schachter is “the Baba Sali of American Ashkenazim.” The driver contacted an Anglo he knew, who happened to be in the same Miluim unit as a relative of Rav Schachter, and so the bag came back. But that's not the important part of the story.

When the driver brought the bag, he wanted a moment with Rav Schachter. The driver grabbed his hands and started crying; he said, “Rabbi, my wife and I have been married for 14 years and we have no children. Please give us a berachah for a child.” Rav Schachter holds the driver's hands, cries with him, and says to him, “You are going to be blessed with a child within the next year.”

The driver leaves, and Yummy demands of his father: “How could you say that to him? You have no idea! They've been married for 14 years!” To which his father replies, “Yummy, we're going to daven for him.”

About a year later, it's Simchas Torah. During the dancing, Yummy sees a young man trying to approach his father. Yummy asks what he wants. The young man says he had just been in Israel, and on a cab ride the driver had heard him speaking English. The driver asked if he knew Rav Schachter, and when he said Yes, the driver asked him to pass along a message: He and his wife had just had a baby boy.

Yummy asks his father, “Did you daven for him?” And his father replied, with tears in his eyes, “Every day. Three times a day.”

I bring this story as neither prescription nor consolation; I am well aware that tefillot are not always answered positively, and that people who are experiencing difficulty having children will not necessarily find comfort in this event. I bring this story because I think it says something important about tefillah, and why and how we daven.

Let's go back more than 3000 years, to yesterday's haftorah. Chanah, the outstandingly righteous wife of Elkanah, has no children; her husband, Elkanah, marries a second wife, Penina. Penina produces children, and torments Chanah for being unable to do the same. And every year, they go through the same routine: the family travels to the Mishkan, they bring korbanot, and Chanah sits at the family feast without an appetite.

But one year, the narrative changes. After the feast ends, Chanah davens – and it's not your standard tefillah. As the gemara explains based on cues in the text, Chanah launches an aggressive assault on G-d. She calls G-d by the sacred name **מַלְאֲכֵי הַקָּוֹת**, Master of Multitudes - she is the first person in the Torah to do so! But in the talmudic read, she means “Master of Multitudes” not as an honour, but as an assault. She argues angrily, “Master of Multitudes! Of all of the multitudes of multitudes You created in Your world, why are You too stingy to give me just one child?”

And Chanah, with her aggressive, angry demand, succeeds; on Rosh Hashanah, Hashem remembers Chanah and grants her a child, Shemuel.

And a third story of unusual tefillah accepted, this one from 2100 years ago. It was a year of terrible drought; Succot came and went, as did Cheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, Adar, and still there was no rain. The people sent for Choni haMe'agel – Choni the Circle-Drawer. He davened for rain, but nothing happened. Then he drew a circle and stood inside it, and swore by G-d's Name that he would not leave the circle until Hashem displayed mercy. Rain began to drizzle, just enough to free him from his oath – but Choni remained in the circle, saying, “That's not what I asked for; I want rain that will fill cisterns.” The rain then poured down with destructive force, and Choni again complained, “That's not what I asked for; I want rain of berachah.” And beneficial rain then fell – but to the point that it created dangerous flooding, and so Choni davened once more, “This is not the rain Your people need!” And the rain relented. Like Chanah, Choni was answered with **יְיָ** from Hashem.

Three stories of accepted prayers, and I don't understand: Why does Hashem listen to any of them?

- Why does Hashem honour Rav Schachter's guarantee?
- Why does Hashem accept Chanah's demand?
- Why does Hashem go along with Choni's very-specific tailorings of the rain he received?

I believe an answer lies in understanding what davening is all about. Why are all of us here, right now, beyond a sense of obligation – what are we doing when we daven?

Rambam cast davening as an act of devotion; the Torah says we are to serve Hashem with our hearts, and this refers to prayer. So we humble ourselves before the Creator of the Universe, in sincere service. But within that view, the point is for me to express devotion, not to guarantee people success, or make aggressive demands, or stipulate exacting specifications on a wish list!

But there is another vision of why we are all here in this room. Ramban argued that if tefillah is a biblical mitzvah at all, it is actually a mitzvah of expressing emunah. When we have trouble, when we experience a need, when we are in pain, we are summoned to faith, to the trust that Hashem has the capacity to help us, and to turn to Hashem for that assistance. Even though we all know of prayers that have not yet yielded berachah, tefillah is about having that emunah that Hashem can assist us.

This brand of tefillah is not a display of praise or requests, per se; this brand of tefillah is a demonstration of a profound relationship with G-d which sees through the world we observe with our eyes and finds inspiration in our heart's awareness of our Creator.

- This is what Rav Schachter expressed, with his guarantee; he channeled the certainty of Ramban that Hashem possesses the ability to help.
- And this is what Choni did; his demands were remarkable, but they also rested on the bedrock of unshakable faith that G-d could help them in their state of need.

But one more step, because Chanah's prayer requires additional explanation. How do anger and aggression express emunah? In a religion of *ahavah* and *yirah*, of love and reverence for G-d, of *shevach* and *hodaah* – thanks and praise – where is there room for anger and aggression?

I think it depends on where the anger and aggression originate.

- A tantrum, venting frustration with a universe that does not comply with our expectations, is not about emunah.
- But anger that comes from wounded emunah, faith in a vision of G-d that is not visible in the world around us – that's still faith.

When a Jew holds the Torah's religious view of Hashem as the G-d of Justice and Mercy, and events around her do not meet the standard set for G-d by the Torah itself, then a sense of betrayal can set in. Where is the G-d who protected Yosef? Where is the G-d who took us through Yam Suf? Where is the G-d who led our ancestors into Eretz Yisrael? And then the Jew has two options: To reject and walk away, or to faithfully appeal to the G-d described by the Torah.

I believe there is no contradiction between love of G-d, and anger when the G-d we love is not visible in our lives. I believe there is no contradiction between reverence for G-d, and an aggressive demand that G-d's own values should be manifest in our world. Chanah's *ahavat Hashem* and *yirat Hashem* are intact.

The proof of that *ahavah* and *yirah* is that Chanah chooses not to walk away; instead, she faithfully appeals to the G-d described by the Torah - a G-d who would want, who should want, to give her a child. She cries out לצבקה! She recognizes G-d as not only the Master of multitudes, but the Creator of those multitudes. Axiomatically, from the start of Bereishit, G-d is on the side of life, generating it and perpetuating it. Chanah believes that it is inconceivable that G-d should deny her request to bring more life into this world to serve G-d. And so she leans in assertively because she knows G-d, and she knows what G-d should do to create life.

This is why we are here – as Ramban said, as Rav Schachter and Choni displayed, we are here to express our emunah that Hashem can give us a good year ahead, that Hashem wants to give us a year of berachah ahead.

For some of us, life this past year has been good, full of simchah; we have every reason to believe, and we gratefully daven to a G-d who has met and exceeded our expectations. But for some, life has been hard; emunah in G-d has been pushed to its limit, and perhaps beyond. Then we face Chanah's choice – do we walk away, or do we lean in? G-d's feelings are not so easily bruised; let us coronate Hashem as befits this day, but let us also express our sense of pain and betrayal, even as we assert that we know Hashem can give us what we need.

Even on the day of Divine coronation, seemingly the least likely day for aggression to be acceptable, Hashem answered Chanah's aggressive prayer positively, and the same will be true for us – if our emotion is not simply a matter of venting frustration, but rather it bespeaks faith that our vision is in line with Hashem's vision.

- If we want parnasah in order to be able to feed our families and support the needy, causes which Hashem claims to

endorse -

- If we want health in order to be able to fulfill mitzvot and improve our world, causes which Hashem claims to endorse -
- If we want friendships in order to be able to build community and create chesed, causes which Hashem claims to endorse -

Then we need not limit ourselves to a meek plea; we can make a demand. We can be aggressive. We can say, "This is what You want, too!"

The Shofar

We are about to blow the shofar. In Tanach, the shofar plays multiple roles, all related to our emunah:

- ד' אלקיו עמו ותרועת מלך בו - It is the horn declaring Divine majesty and honour;
- היתקע שופר בעיר ועם לא יחרדו - It is the siren making us tremble in fear as we are called to reckoning;
- But it is also קול שופר שמעת נפשי תרועת מלחמה, the trumpet of battle, summoning us to aggressive war.

If we believe our requests for the coming year are justified and faithful, then let us sound the trumpet of battle, putting forth our tefillah with forceful faith, and as He did for Chanah, perhaps Hashem will respond to us. May we be blessed with a טובה וחתימה טובה for health, of blessing, of peace and security in Israel and the world over, of nachat and fulfillment and Torah and mitzvot, for the year to come and beyond.

Bein Kodesh l'Chol (5780)

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Amir Daddon is a very successful Israeli musician and singer in his 40s; he's been a part of various bands; in recent years he has released three solo albums. He identifies as secular.

Shuli Rand is a popular, 57-year old Israeli singer who grew up Religious Zionist, left observant Judaism, then became a Breslover chassid. You may know him as author of, and an actor in, the movie *Ushpizin*.

Last week, Daddon and Rand released a song together; it's called *Bein Kodesh l'Chol*, "Between sacred and secular." The video shows the two of them standing in an alley in what may be the Old City. They take turns singing, and as they sing they pace and turn, but constantly face each other. Their actions, facial expressions, and most of their words mirror each other's, and they are only about a meter apart for most of the song. They nod at each other's words, sighing, conveying a deep, empathetic comprehension. Both are clearly distraught, exhausted, frustrated, their expressions intense, their arms flung out and gesturing. To me, it's the rare case of a video that makes a song better.

Daddon, looking strung-out in a black t-shirt, with defeated eyes and a deep 5 o'clock shadow, sings first about his feelings of unrest in his secular life, and his frustration with the sense that he doesn't belong in that life:

Between sacred and secular I live, with the truth that wreaks havoc inside of me, with a thousand habits, with every scar on my face, I go forth to scatter these words.

Between reality and fantasy, it all comes back to me. There, in the place from which I come there is no peace, and this burden is heavy, and a little too big for me.

I need to grow out of this and be done with it, to grow out of this and be done with it.

And Rand, the chassid, in white shirt, black pants and a long beard and the same expression of pain and defeat, sings almost identically in response, questioning his comfort in his religious life:

Between sacred and secular I live, between the truth that wreaks havoc inside of me, with a thousand habits, with all of the fear on my shoulders, I go forth to scatter these words.

Between reality and insanity, it all comes back to me. There, in the place from which I come there is no peace, and this burden is heavy, and a little too big for me.

I need to grow out of this and be done with it, to grow out of this and be done with it.

The two musicians express a struggle between *kodesh* and *chol*, between sacred religion and secular attractions, between the scars of the secular and the fear of the religious, between what they each consider the poles of reality and insanity, as perceived from their opposite points of view. The two use nearly identical words to describe their own unsettled feelings where they are, their attraction to where the other is, and their wish they could "grow out of" this attraction and be done with it. The struggle of living *bein kodesh l'chol* exhausts them. It's a dramatically, gorgeously honest song.

I'm not sure how many of us regularly feel the religious exhaustion that Daddon and Rand express. Many of us are at a stage where we have our peer groups, our work and our histories; we made the big religion and lifestyle decisions years ago. But some of us do, even within a mainstream, observant community like ours. We have people who are still making those decisions, and whose family members are still making those decisions:

Whether to go clubbing or to shul on Friday night;

Whether to invest in sending their children to Jewish day school and high school;

Whether to go kosher, or to stay kosher;

What sort of romantic lifestyle to pursue;

Whether to seek meaning in religion at all.

And even for those who aren't wrestling with major religious decisions, we face personal decisions which test our ethical strength – exhausting decisions of relationships, of work, of chinuch. We search for clarity between right and wrong, but even if we find it, we strain to develop the strength to follow through. My point is not the specifics of religious struggle; my focus is the exhaustion of having that struggle. Like Daddon and Rand, we shake our heads, we fling out our arms, we cry and we turn this way and that, in search not so much for an answer as for a way out of searching.

How can a Jew navigate this exhaustion? Burned out and frustrated, wanting just to stop thinking about these choices, how does a religiously drained Jew move forward from *chol*? And while the song doesn't take sides and doesn't favour religion, I do; I want to choose *kodesh*. How does the religiously drained Jew move forward from *chol*, and find firm footing in the world of *kodesh*?

An answer may lie in Rosh Hashanah, and its emphasis on recognizing Hashem as *Melech*. A deep understanding of *Mel-ech* can energize all of us, whether facing the Daddon/Rand exhaustion or our own.

The act of recognizing Hashem as *Melech* sometimes reminds me of the scene in the movie, *My Fellow Americans*, in which a former American president talks about how every time they played *Hail to the Chief* for him, he would sing to himself, "Hail to the Chief, he's the Chief and he needs hailing." But Hashem doesn't need hailing, and that's not what we are doing when we recite malchiyot. Far from it – on Rosh Hashanah, when we say the malchiyot berachah coronating G-d, we are actually empowering the human being.

The Zohar coined a phrase, **לית ליה מגרמיה כלום**. It means: "He possesses nothing of his own."

- The Zohar uses it to refer to the Moon, which offers no illumination of its own.
- It also applies to Shabbat, a day when nothing is created; we prepare for it beforehand, and then, as the Zohar says, it communicates the reward for those preparations in the form of berachah to the ensuing six days.
- And in the Zohar and many other works of Jewish mysticism, **לית ליה מגרמיה כלום** also describes a king. Far from being "the owner of all", the monarch is an owner of nothing.

The Zohar's point is logical. The monarch receives whatever the nation provides via taxes, and whatever a predecessor bequeathed from a previous generation's taxes, and the monarch's job is to distribute that wealth for the benefit of the nation. The monarch is a conduit.

Kohelet said it: "The benefit of a land, anywhere, is in a king who is enslaved to the field." He isn't out there plowing, but his role is to be a conduit, making sure that the benefits of the economy reach the nation.

And the Rambam said it, in his Laws of Kings: "Just as the Torah assigned great honour to the king, and all are obligated to honour him, so the Torah instructed him to keep his heart humble... He must be generous and merciful for small and great, he must exit and enter at their desire and for their good, and he must care for the honour of the smallest of the small." The king's role is to look after the nation.

In sum: In Judaism, a king is an enabler, a facilitator.

The same is true for Hashem, whom we declare King on Rosh Hashanah. Of course, the phrase **לית ליה מגרמיה כלום**, that a king owns nothing, can't apply directly to G-d; Hashem created everything, and possesses everything. But in terms of what Hashem's monarchy means for us, in that sense, yes, **לית ליה מגרמיה כלום**, He has nothing. Because Hashem's goal in this world is to enable us to achieve, to grow, to choose **חולקודש**.

Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, who served as Rosh Yeshiva in Yerucham and the Rabbi of Ofakim, spelled out this concept beautifully. He explained that a king, elevated above the narrow concerns of normal life, is positioned to act on his best impulses to benefit the entire population. And then he wrote, "This is the meaning of *Malchut* for Hashem. When we yearn and daven for Hashem's monarchy to be revealed before the world" – like in **וּבְכַן תִּן פְּחָדְךָ** we are davening for Hashem, in all His exalted glory, to become involved in a practical way in our world," acting as a facilitator for us, enabling us **הדרו בכל העולם בעולם** to live a life which demonstrates the Unity of G-d, in all its glory, for all the world to see.

In other words – on Rosh Hashanah, the day of Creation of humanity, we mark the ultimate, ongoing empowerment of humanity. We call Hashem our **מלך**, but we aren't only talking about Hashem as King and Owner; we are talking about Hashem as Empowerer, whose monarchy has the ultimate goal of facilitating our spiritual work.

This is the ultimate realization of the romantic reciprocity envisioned by the Torah and elaborated upon by our sages – "את ד' האמרת היום להיות לך לאלקים וללכת בדרכיו" You have embraced Hashem on this day, to be Your G-d, to walk in His ways," promoting His agenda, "וד' האמירך היום להיות לו לעם סגולה", Hashem has embraced you on this day, to be a special nation for Him."

What a gripping, resonating vision – the Jew not as an anonymous, struggling citizen of the Divine empire, but the focus of that empire, and the Divine Emperor personally focused, entirely, on our spiritual success! What a vision! What a responsibility!

In their *bein kodesh l'chol* existence, caught between the sacred and the secular, Amir Daddon and Shuli Rand have two problems.

- First, they are spiritually torn; one lives in the reverence of the sacred and is drawn toward aspects of the secular, the other bears the scars of the secular world and is drawn toward aspects of the sacred. It's hard to live in both worlds; Hashem is *mavdil bein kodesh l'chol*, Hashem has divided the two dimensions, and their souls are straddling that division.
- But second, they are exhausted, burned out, from the intensity of this struggle. They feel too weak to pursue this

intense struggle to its end and to make the hard choices that come with it.

No one can answer the first problem for us; in a world of Free Will, no one will force a person from the camp of *chol* to the camp of *kodesh*. But for the second problem, the sense of helplessness, Rosh Hashanah asserts that help is on the way! Hashem is Melech!

- Like the melech that is the Moon, reflecting the light of the Sun.
- Like the melech that is Shabbat, channeling berachah to the week ahead.
- Like the melech that is a human king, distributing the wealth of a nation to benefit the land, and caring for “the honour of the smallest of the small.”

Hashem is here to enable and empower us!

- If Shuli Rand feels burnt out, the Melech will give him the strength to keep going!
- If Amir Daddon feels exhausted, the Melech will grant him the energy to keep seeking!
- And if you or I feel like our personal struggles *bein kodesh l'chol* – whether Kashrut and Shabbat or Minyan and Tzedakah – are too hard and not worth the strain and struggle, Rosh Hashanah’s Melech declares, “This is the top of My agenda, this is why I created the universe, all those Rosh Hashanah’s ago!” You are not small; you are the reason I am Melech.

In a moment, we will blow shofar. As the shofar blasts ring in our ears, we should have in mind that we are fulfilling a mitzvah – and we should also have in mind the closing words of the song: “רק שלא יכשלו רגלי” שמור נא עלי, Please, watch over me; just don’t let my feet stumble.”

The ambiguity of the song and video allows us to think that the singers could be addressing each other or G-d, but on Rosh Hashanah, during shofar, we voice this plea directly to Hashem, our Melech.

- **שמור נא עלי!** Tekiah, a straight sound, erupting from the shofar with pride and strength – Hashem, You are our Melech!
- **שמור נא עלי!** Shevarim, a groan, three tired breaths pushed through the shofar – Hashem, please invest energy in me!
- **שמור נא עלי!** Teruah, a staccato series of gasps frenetically jolted from the shofar anxiously - Hashem, let me see and feel how You are here for me, enabling me!

This year, may we merit to see and feel Hashem’s **שמירה**, Hashem’s help for all of us, how our Melech is working and manipulating our world to enable us to find our spiritual path. **שלא יכשלו רגלי**, may our legs never falter, but instead may we march into the future with a **כתיבה והתימה טובה**.

The Drama of Tashlich (YU Rosh Hashanah To-Go 5770)

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For the original article, with footnotes, please click

<http://download.yutorah.org/2012/1053/Rosh Hashanah To-Go - 5770 Rabbi Torczyner.pdf>

Many of our yamim tovim incorporate reenactment; witness the biblical Pesach seder and the rabbinic Chanukah menorah lighting, as well as the minhag of holding a simchat beit hashoevah celebration on Succot. Some of these rituals call forth feelings of gratitude for miracles past; the succah is an example of this genre. Other replications of the past, like the Pesach seder, are principally educational. And sometimes we collectively re-live seminal events from our national memory as a means of tefillah. This last idea may explain both the location and the script of Tashlich, and understanding it may deepen and enrich our Tashlich experience.

The Components of the Tashlich Drama

The origins of Tashlich are unclear, possibly traceable to early medieval references to praying near water. By the end of the thirteenth century, though, Tashlich was an established practice in Ashkenazi lands. As the Maharil explained, Jews would “walk to seas and rivers on Rosh Hashanah, after the meal, to cast all of our sins into the depths of the sea.”

Other early sources included recitation of pesukim from the close of the book of Michah:

Who is a G-d like You, Who pardons iniquity and overlooks transgression for the remnant of His heritage? He does not maintain His wrath forever, for He desires kindness. He will once again show us mercy, He will suppress our iniquities. You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. Grant truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham, as You swore to our forefathers in days of old.

Michah 7:18-20

מי קל כמוך נושא עון ועובר על פשע לשארית נחלתו לא
החזיק לעד אפו כי חפץ חסד הוא ישוב ינחמנו יכבוש
עונותנו ותשליך במצלות ים כל חטאותם תתן אמת ליעקב
חסד לאברהם אשר נשבעת לאבתנו מימי קדם.
מיכה ז: יח-כ

This combination of a riverside venue and Michah’s concluding message may be viewed as a unique tefillah for G-d’s mercy. We offer this tefillah not so much in formal prayer as in drama, a performance highlighting three major components of our national search for forgiveness: the merit of our ancestors, the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy, and the Divine promise of future redemption.

The Merit of our Ancestors

The first component is zechut avot, the merit of our ancestors. Since the day G-d pledged the land of Canaan to Yitzchak because of “the oath that I swore to your father Avraham,” Jews have known that the righteousness of our ancestors would pay dividends for their descendants. The sages assert that even Moshe Rabbeinu’s post-Eigel prayers were not accepted until he invoked the merit of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. Today we cite our ancestors’ greatness in the thrice-daily amidah, and emphasize it in the musaf amidah of Rosh Hashanah.

Tashlich, too, emphasizes that ancestral merit, reenacting Avraham’s walk to the akeidah.

This is a memorial for the akeidah in which Avraham Avinu passed through a river until his neck, and he said, ‘Save me, G-d, for the water has come to my life!’ This was the Satan, who became like a river in order to keep him from the akeidah.

Maharil Minhagim Rosh haShanah 9

זכר לעקדה שעבר אברהם אבינו בנהר עד צוארו, ואמר הושיעה
ד' כי באו מים עד נפש והוא השטן שנעשה כמו נהר לעכב אותו
מן העקדה
מהרי"ל מנהגים ראש השנה ט

We walk to the river on Rosh haShanah to remind G-d of that historic willingness of the Jew to sacrifice his life at Divine command. However, we do not simply **mention** the akeidah and its river; we **reenact** it, demonstrating our personal commitment to following in our ancestors’ footsteps. We claim their legacy of martyrdom as our own, and so enhance the appeal of our tefillah.

This enhancement is necessary because we cannot make infinite claims on the basis of our predecessors’ deeds; the sages asserted that the merit of our ancestors has ended. Therefore, at Tashlich we do not seek aid in the merit of what our ancestors did. Rather, we seek aid in the merit of **our own readiness** to continue their legacy. We do not merely *mention* Avraham – we *are* Avraham.

This is one part of the Tashlich tefillah: G-d, please forgive us in the merit of our readiness to give our lives for Your commands, as Avraham was ready to give his own life long ago.

Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy

Having established our merit as a new generation of Avrahams, we then adopt the petitionary words of the prophet Michah as our own, to pray for forgiveness. Our choice of Michah’s words for Tashlich is unusual, and this selection of-

fers a further example of reenactment.

Our choice of Michah's prayer is surprising because G-d provided us with the definitive prayer for forgiveness, the list of thirteen attributes of Divine mercy, in a dialogue with Moshe after the Golden Calf:

Hashem, Hashem, powerful G-d, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, great in kindness and truth, who guards kindness for thousands of generations, who forgives sin, rebellion and transgression, and who cleanses.

Shemot 34:6-7

ד' קל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת נצר
חסד לאלפים נושא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקה
שמות לד:ו-ז

Per the sages, this was meant to be a timeless prayer:

G-d cloaked Himself like a shliach tzibbur and demonstrated the order of prayer for Moshe. He said: Whenever Israel sins, let them practice thus before Me, and I will forgive them.

Rosh Hashanah 17b

מלמד שנתעטף הקב"ה כשליח צבור והראה לו למשה סדר
תפלה אמר לו כל זמן שישראל חוטאין יעשו לפני כסדר הזה
ואני מוחל להם
ראש השנה יז:

Indeed, all through the selichot preparation for Rosh Hashanah we employ G-d's words to Moshe, and on Yom Kippur we repeat that original text many times over.

Why, then, do we employ Michah's words rather than G-d's text, at tashlich? The Zohar does identify Michah's pesukim as another version of those thirteen attributes of Divine mercy, but why quote a later prophet instead of the Divine original?

An answer may lie in our motif of reenactment, of re-living the actions of our ancestors in order to enhance our tefillah.

G-d, not the sinner, narrates the original list of attributes. Further, the petitioner addressed by G-d was Moshe, not a sinner but a spiritual broker seeking forgiveness on behalf of his client, the Jewish people. Moshe was not even present when the nation built the Calf. G-d even wished to save the innocent Moshe and destroy those who had sinned. We are not Moshe.

Michah, on the other hand, presented his version of the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy as a part of the sinful nation despite his personal innocence, speaking in the first person for much of the chapter in which those words appear:

"Woe is me, for I am like the last pickings of the summer fruit," Michah begins the chapter, declaring his personal pain. "As for me, I put my hope in G-d and await the G-d of my salvation; my G-d will hear me," he continues, expressing his trust in G-d. "Do not rejoice over me, my enemy, for though I fell, I will rise! Though I sit in the darkness, G-d is a light unto me," Michah cries, putting his faith in G-d despite his guilt. And, "I shall bear the fury of G-d for I have sinned unto Him," Michah acknowledges, performing tzidduk hadin: The sin is mine, I am guilty, I have trespassed.

Michah's concluding declaration of the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy is that of a personal penitent, and so this is an ideal selection for our reenactment. We are Michah, and we reenact his petition to earn forgiveness.

History of Divine Forgiveness

Finally, after playing the role of Avraham to demonstrate our merit, and after emulating Michah to plead for forgiveness, we take on a third role, that of Nechemiah, to daven for future redemption.

Rav Reuven Margoliot pointed out that our waterside Tashlich evokes the image of Nechemiah addressing the Jews who returned for the second Beit haMikdash, by the Shaar HaMayim, the Water Gate on the Temple Mount. On Rosh haShanah, Ezra held a public reading of the Torah, and the nation, reminded of their flaws, acknowledged their shortcomings and wept. Nechemiah then told the nation not to weep, and he declared by the Water Gate:

Go eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and send portions to those who have none prepared, for today is sacred to our Master. Do not be sad; the joy of G-d is your strength.

Nechemiah 8:10

לכו אכלו משמנים ושתו ממתקים ושלחו מנות לאין נכון לא כי קדוש
היום לאדנינו ואל תעצבו כי חדות ד' היא מעוזכם.
נחמיה ח:י

This pasuk is generally cited to support our practice of feasting, rather than fasting, on Rosh haShanah. There is more to

this image at Tashlich, though, for Nechemiah specifically chose to gather the nation at the Water Gate for this moment.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov explained that this gate was known as the Water Gate because, “There the water trickles, and it will exit from beneath the threshold of the House.” Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov was referring to Zechariah’s prophecy of a messianic day, in which a great flow of water would emerge from the Beit HaMikdash. This spot, then, is associated with more than forgiveness; it is associated with future redemption.

At Tashlich, we place ourselves in Nechemiah’s shoes, standing by a river just as that ancient leader stood by the Water Gate, site of future miracles. There, we declare our hope for the ultimate forgiveness and redemption.

One More Reenactment: Yishmael

These then, are our three Tashlich models: Avraham’s willingness to serve, Michah’s appeal for Divine mercy, and Nechemiah’s prophecy of redemption. But there is a fourth model: Yishmael.

Yishmael was an adolescent when he was cast out of his home for his behavior toward his half-brother, Yitzchak. Yishmael and his mother, Hagar, wandered in the desert, and eventually collapsed with thirst. Yishmael cried out to G-d, and G-d responded by saving his life.

As Rabbi Yitzchak explained, by this time Yishmael was already guilty of heinous sins against Yitzchak, and he – as well as his descendants – would yet incur guilt for far more. Nonetheless, G-d chose to view Yishmael “as he was,” there and then. Yishmael was fully righteous at the moment of his prayer, and so G-d rescued him.

Even as we stand by a river at Tashlich and declare our hope that G-d will cast our sins into the sea, G-d is well aware of what we have done, and of what we are likely to do again. Nonetheless, like Yishmael, we create a space of righteousness in the moment, and daven that this will be enough.

May our evocation of Avraham, Michah and Nechemiah, in a moment seized, Yishmael-style, this Rosh Hashanah, earn us an inscription for a shana tova.

The Teshuvah of Yishmael (YU Rosh Hashanah To-Go 5771)

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<http://download.yutorah.org/2012/1053/Rosh Hashanah To-Go - 5771 Rabbi Torczyner.pdf>

ויאמר אברהם אל האלקים לו ישמעאל יחיה לפניך

And Avraham said to G-d: If only Yishmael would live before You!

Only on Rosh haShanah's second day do we read of Avraham and Yitzchak's superhuman sacrifice at the Akeidah. For the first twenty-four hours of the Day of Judgment, our biblical source for edification and inspiration is that story's prequel: Hashem's merciful response to Sarah, the birth of Yitzchak, and the epilogic eviction of her dissolute, violent stepson, Yishmael.

Certainly, we choose this latter Torah reading because an instance of the Creator of the Universe recalling human merit on Rosh haShanah suits the day on which we seek to move Hashem from the throne of justice to the throne of mercy. But why do we append Yishmael's story on a day when we identify Hashem as our Father? At best the account is irrelevant; at worst, it tells a tale which denies paternal love, as a sinner is heartlessly evicted from his father's home!

One could argue that this is precisely the Rosh haShanah point – Yishmael is denied the mercy of “father figures” Hashem and Avraham, but we are זרעו של אברהם, protected by a covenant. However, the story of Yishmael's eviction might also provide a more positive message: This event is understood by some as the turning-point in a life previously characterized by unbridled sin. Beginning immediately after Yishmael's eviction from the home of Avraham and Sarah, our sages see signs that the villain took his exile to heart and committed himself to a path of repentance.

Yishmael's Path of Teshuvah

The Torah offers us the first sign of Yishmael's repentance as he lies beneath a bush, dehydrated and, apparently, near death:

וישמע אלקים את קול הנער ויקרא מלאך אלקים אל הגר מן השמים ויאמר לה מה לך הגר אל תיראי כי שמע אלקים אל קול הנער באשר הוא שם:

And G-d heard the voice of the youth, and a messenger of G-d called to Hagar from the heavens and said, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; G-d has heard the voice of the youth, as he is there.'

The sages were troubled by the last few words of Hashem's emissary; what is the meaning of, “as he is there?” Rabbi Yitzchak explained:

אין דנין את האדם אלא לפי מעשיו של אותה שעה שנאמר כי שמע אלקים אל קול הנער באשר הוא שם

A person is judged only based on his deeds of that moment, as it is written, 'G-d has heard the voice of the youth, as he is there.'

Another midrash amplified Rabbi Yitzchak's account:

קפצו מלאכי השרת לקטרגו, אמרו לפניו רבון העולמים אדם שהוא עתיד להמית את בניך בצמא אתה מעלה לו באר? אמר להם: עכשיו מה הוא, צדיק או רשע? אמרו לו: צדיק. אמר להם: איני דן את האדם אלא בשעתו! קומי שאי את הנער.

The angels leapt to argue against his survival, saying, 'Master of the Universe! You would provide a well for this man who is going to murder Your children with thirst?'

G-d replied: What is he now – righteous or wicked?

They said: Righteous.

He told them: I only judge a man based upon his moment. Rise, and take the youth...

This passage is remarkable not only as a lesson in Divine justice and omniscience, but also as a lesson regarding Yishmael himself. Just that morning, the teen had been evicted for idolatry, murder and sexual immorality - and now he was righteous, deserving of Divine intervention? This is the first sign that the post-exile Yishmael executes an about-face, righting his wrongs.

Further evidence of repentance comes from the Torah's mention of two anonymous “youths” who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the Akeidah. A midrash unmasked these youths for us:

א"ר איבו, למדתך תורה דרך ארץ שלא יהא אדם יוצא לדרך בפחות משנים שאם יצא סופו נעשה עבד לעבדו, דא"ר איבו שני בני אדם נהגו בדרך ארץ, אברהם ושאוּל. באברהם מהו אומר? וישכם אברהם בבקר ויקח את שני נעריו עמו. ומי היו? ישמעאל ואליעזר. בשאוּל מהו אומר...

R' Eivo said: The Torah teaches you proper conduct, that one should not travel with fewer than two escorts, lest he ultimately become his servant's servant. Two people conducted themselves properly, Avraham and Shaul. Regarding Avraham it says, 'And he woke early in the morning and took his two youths with him' – Who were they? Yishmael and Eliezer. Re-

garding Shaul...

How did Yishmael end up in this picture, accompanying his father and half-brother – and in the role of a servant no less – to the Akeidah? According to the traditional chronology, he had been evicted some thirty-five years prior! Perhaps this may be taken as further evidence that Yishmael repented upon his eviction, and ultimately returned to his father's home.

Finally, the gemara saw evidence of Yishmael's teshuvah in the biblical account of Avraham's burial. After noting that the Torah uses specific language to describe the passing of the righteous, and that the Torah employs this language regarding Yishmael's death, Rava explained:

ישמעאל עשה תשובה בחיי אביו, שנאמר ויקברו אותו יצחק וישמעאל בניו. ודילמא דרך חכמתן קא חשיב להו? אלא מעתה, ויקברו אותו עשו ויעקב בניו מאי טעמא לא חשיב להו דרך חכמתן? אלא מדאקדמיה אדבורי אדבריה, ומדאדבריה שמע מינה תשובה עבד בימיו.

Yishmael repented during his father's lifetime, as it is written, 'And Yitzchak and Yishmael, his sons, buried him.' [Placing Yitzchak first indicates that Yishmael showed respect to his righteous younger brother.]

But perhaps the Torah simply listed them based upon their wisdom [and, in fact, Yishmael showed no such respect to Yitzchak]? If that were true, then [at Yitzchak's burial] why did the Torah say, 'And Esav and Yaakov, his sons, buried him?' Why did it not list them based upon their wisdom?

Rather, from the fact that the text put Yitzchak first, Yishmael must have placed him first. We learn from here that he repented during his father's lifetime.

This combination of sources – Hashem's declaration that Yishmael was righteous, Yishmael's pre-Akeidah return and his display of respect for Yitzchak at Avraham's funeral – presents a tantalizing idea: That Yishmael learned from his eviction. Perhaps, what seemed like a hard-hearted case of justice was actually an example of successful tough love.

Or perhaps Yishmael did not repent?

Admittedly, some sources indicate that Yishmael did not repent.

In the context of a discussion about a list of historical figures who were excluded from *olam haba*, the gemara stated:

אבא לא מזכי ברא, דכתיב ואין מידי מציל, אין אברהם מציל את ישמעאל, אין יצחק מציל את עשו.

A father cannot assign merit to his son, for it is written, 'None can rescue from My hand.' Avraham cannot rescue Yishmael and Yitzchak cannot rescue Esav.

In itself, this talmudic passage need not be taken as evidence that Yishmael lived out his life in wickedness. Nonetheless, a Tosafist, Rabbeinu Elchanan, understood it in this way.

Rashi also saw evidence of Yishmael's lifelong delinquency in the following passage of gemara:

למה נמנו שנותיו של ישמעאל? כדי ליחס בהן שנותיו של יעקב.

Why were the years of Yishmael's life enumerated in the Torah? In order to calculate the years of Yaakov.

Rashi there explained that the gemara was asking, "מה לנו למנות שנות הרשעים", Why would we count the years of the wicked?"

Chatam Sofer, too, took as given that Yishmael did not repent. As part of a legal discussion regarding exempting a woman from performing *yibbum* if her husband was a *mumar*, Chatam Sofer identified Yishmael as a *mumar* and an exile from the family of Avraham.

Does Yishmael's teshuvah matter for me?

Yishmael's religious fate has implications for our own lives in two limited practical areas and in a third, more broad area of philosophy.

Yishmael's possible repentance affects the question of excluding sinful heirs from one's estate. The Sages weighed in against altering the biblical order of inheritance, but then how did Avraham assign all of his property to Yitzchak? Some suggest that Avraham's action was justified by Yishmael's wickedness, indicating that a modern parent could do likewise. If Yishmael actually repented, though, then this rationale for re-distributing one's estate disappears.

Another application is in the matter of using a name which also belonged to a wicked biblical figure. Based upon Shlomo haMelech's statement, "The name of the wicked should rot," the Sages taught that we are not to use the names of wicked people, and that people who bear such names may even meet dire ends. How, then, did a great *tanna* go by the name of

Yishmael? Some suggest that this supports the view that Yishmael repented, and that the names of other biblical sinners ought not be used. However, within the view that Yishmael did not repent, Rabbi Yishmael's use of his name may imply that names which are commonplace, or which preceded Shlomo haMelech, may be used despite their wicked former bearers.

The broadest application of Yishmael's teshuvah, though, is in the realm of our own growth and repentance. This adolescent was on a path of such corruption that the Creator who identified by thirteen unique attributes of mercy ordered him evicted from his home and left to wander in the wilderness. The next stop in Yishmael's life was Egypt, where he married an Egyptian woman. How, then, did Yishmael, cast out of his own Eden and rejected by his family, find the wherewithal to repent?

Yishmael's repentance may have been stimulated by his father, Avraham, who pleaded with Hashem on behalf of Yishmael's future righteousness, and who is described in a midrash as seeking Yishmael's repentance in later years. However, we may also suggest that Yishmael is a human being who learned from his punishment and managed to correct his path and find his way to G-d. In this sense, Yishmael is a potent model for Rosh haShanah.

Many of us have difficulty relating to Yitzchak, who went willingly to be bound and slaughtered, who needs not the privilege of repentance for he is an עולה תמימה, a perfect offering. Yitzchak's death sentence was handed down in response to no sin of his own, and so he is a distant role model. Yishmael, on the other hand, evicted from his father's home with Divine approval, may resonate with the child of Avraham who arrives at Rosh Hashanah on the heels of a monthlong personal audit that has turned up more red ink than black.

The heart of our Torah reading on the first day of Rosh haShanah is still the story of Sarah, but on the Day of Judgment let us be edified and inspired by its epilogue, the exile of a young man into a harsh world, and his ultimate return.

It's the Thought That Counts (YU Rosh Hashanah To-Go 5772)

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הרצון הטוב הוא הכל, וכל הכשרונות שבעולם אינם אלא מלוואיו

The will to goodness is everything; all of the skills in the universe are only the means of completing it.

(Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook, Orot haTeshuvah 9:1)

Is teshuvah in my thoughts, or in my speech?

Lulav. Matzah. Talmud Torah. Tzedakah. Teshuvah.

When the Rambam adopted Rabbi Meir's phraseology, describing a process of "performing teshuvah," he framed our understanding of the mitzvah as action-based. This is cemented by his description of *viduy* as a verbal enumeration of our failings. Just as we wave a lulav, ingest matzah, study Torah and give tzedakah, so we perform teshuvah with our speech, listing our sins and articulating our regret.

Of course, speech is crucial: Speaking our sins aloud makes the admission concrete, and compels us to confront the reality of our criminal record. But is there no intrinsic value in the thoughts which lead to these words? Is my regret merely a *hechsher mitzvah*, preparation and catalyst for the declaration which is the mitzvah? Or are my thoughts also an "act" of teshuvah?

The Talmud itself indicates that thoughts can constitute teshuvah:

על מנת שאני צדיק אפילו רשע גמור מקודשת שמא הרהר תשובה בדעתו

If a man proposes, "Marry me on condition that I am a tzaddik," then even if he is fully wicked, she is married; perhaps thought of teshuvah in his mind.

(Talmud, Kiddushin 49b)

אמרו עליו על ר"א בן דורדיא שלא הניח זונה אחת בעולם שלא בא עליה... הלך וישב בין שני הרים וגבעות אמר הרים וגבעות בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו... אמר שמים וארץ בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו... אמר חמה ולבנה בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו... אמר אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי הניח ראשו בין ברכיו וגעה בבכיה עד שיצתה נשמתו יצתה בת קול ואמרה ר"א בן דורדיא מזומן לחיי העולם הבא

They said regarding Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya that he omitted no zonah in the world.... He then sat between two mountains and hills and asked, "Mountains and hills, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!"... He then asked, "Heavens and earth, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!"... He then asked, "Sun and Moon, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!"... He then asked, "Stars and constellations, pray for mercy for me!" They replied, "Before we ask on your behalf, let us ask for ourselves!"... He then said: The matter depends only upon me. He placed his head between his knees and cried out in tears until his soul departed. A voice emerged and declared, "Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is prepared for life in the next world!"

(Talmud, Avodah Zarah 17a)

But these sources are puzzling: The transforming effect of verbal confession is clear, but why should the cycling of a synapse suffice to translate "fully wicked" into "tzaddik"? If a listing of sins is critical to teshuvah, how could Elazar ben Durdaya earn the next world, not to mention ordination, for repentance which amounted to internal thought and an animal wail?

Teshuvah: A return to greatness

Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook proposed a concept of internal teshuvah, repentance played out on a stage within the heart. While Rav Kook acknowledged our obligation to speak in confession and act in correction, he emphasized that our first step is to think in contrition.

As Rav Kook explained, we are created as pure souls, but entry into a material realm dulls our sensitivity to the sacred and so makes us vulnerable to sin. We are challenged to assert our spirit over our material trappings, strengthening our holiest aspect and committing ourselves to life on a higher plane. This is the process of repentance:

ההיות מתגלות בתור ירידה מאלקיות לעולמיות, שהיא כמו השפלה ו"מיתה" נוראה, אשר כל הירידות שבעולם... לא ישוו לה. וכל זה מעשה על פי המשקל העליון של שפיטת הצדק המשערת את משפט ההיות בטרם כל יציר נברא... אמנם ירידה זו הלא יסוד העליה העליונה גנוז בה... בטרם הרים ילדו ותחולל ארץ ותבל ומעולם עד עולם אתה קל תשב אנוש עד דכא ותאמר שובו בני אדם

Entities come into existence as a descent from the Divine realm to worldly realms – a form of descent and of terrible “death” – to which no earthly descent... can compare. This is engineered on the higher calculation of justice, which gauged the justice of existence before anything was created... But this descent has the foundation for greater ascent stored within... as it is written, “Before mountains were birthed and earth and foundation were formed, You were G-d for all eternity. You laid man low, and declared, ‘Return, sons of men!’”

(Orot haTeshuvah 11:4)

Our pure thoughts are our return to greatness

Within this philosophy, perfection is always present, albeit hidden, within the human being. As Rav Kook promised, "Teshuvah always resides in the heart; it is stored in the heart even during the sin itself." This pledge did not originate with Rav Kook; its roots are in the talmudic statement that repentance was created before the universe itself. Embedded in the Divine schematic is our pristine core, and the route via which we restore it as our identity.

Certainly, the journey back to this truest nature of our soul involves actions, as described by the Rambam, but it is not defined by those actions. Rather, teshuvah – literally "return" – is a spiritual quest during which we retrieve the ethereal identity hidden beneath material layers. We seek the Divine message, and this search, taking place in our thoughts, is itself a revelation of our purity:

על ידי הרהורי תשובה שומע האדם קול ד' הקורא עליו מתוך התורה, ומתוך כל רגשי הלב, מתוך העולם ומלואו וכל אשר בו... הרהורי התשובה הם הם מגלים את עומק הרצון, והגבורה של הנשמה מתגלה על ידם בכל מילוי הודה, ולפי גדלה של התשובה כך היא מדת החירות שלה.

Via thoughts of teshuvah, one hears the voice of G-d calling to him from within the Torah, from within his heart's emotions, from within the world, its fullness and all therein... Thoughts of teshuvah reveal the depth of one's desire, and the strength of the soul is revealed in all of its glory through those thoughts. The greater the thought of teshuvah, the greater its liberation.

(Orot haTeshuvah 7:3-4)

הרצון הטוב הוא הכל, וכל הכשרונות שבעולם אינם אלא מלוואיו, נעשה תוכן מוטבע בנפשו על ידי אור התשובה הקבוע בו, וממילא חל עליו שפע גדול של רוח הקדש בתדירות, ורצון נשגב בקדושה, למעלה מהמדה הקבועה של בני אדם רגילים, הולך ומתגבר בו.

The will to goodness is everything; all of the skills in the universe are only the means of completing it. The content of one's will [to goodness] is imprinted upon his soul by the light of return that is affixed within, and as a result, the great flow of Divine inspiration is manifested upon him continually, and a will which is great in its holiness, beyond the trait embedded in other human beings, grows powerful within him.

(Orot haTeshuvah 9:1)

This may explain how a man can declare himself righteous and be granted that status instantly, such that his proposal of "Marry me on condition that I am a tzaddik" is accepted on the basis of an intellectual decision – he has revealed his unsullied core, and therefore he is now a tzaddik.

This may also explain how Elazar ben Durdaya could, in the words of Rebbe, "acquire his world in a single moment," despite a career of immersion in immorality. The sinner had done nothing to correct his sin, but his immense regret displayed his native character.

To cite the words of Rav Kook:

וכל המרגיש בעצמו עומק נחם התשובה והתמרמרות המחשבה לתקון פגמיו, בין אותן שתקונם כבר עולה בידו בין אותם שתקונם אינו עולה עדיין בידו והוא מצפה עליהם לרחמים, יכול את עצמו בזה בכלל הצדיקים.

One who feels within himself the depth of regret of teshuvah, and the exasperated desire in his thoughts to mend his flaws – those he is already capable of mending and those he is not yet capable of mending but for which he anticipates Divine mercy – can already count himself among the righteous.

(Orot haTeshuvah 8:6)

Using our thoughts to create our tongues anew

This idea can help answer a challenge put forth by the Chida, regarding the acceptability of our verbal viduy.

We are taught "אין קטגור נעשה סניגור", that a prosecutor cannot switch sides to serve as a defense attorney. Based on this principle, gold may not be used for the garments worn by the Kohen Gadol when he enters the Holy of Holies to appeal for forgiveness; gold represents the sin of the Golden Calf. How, then, can a mouth which has spoken lashon hara offer acceptable viduy before G-d – is this not a case of the agent of sin becoming a defense attorney? If gold represents ancient idolatry and is therefore ineligible before G-d, then a tongue which was used for evil should certainly be unacceptable for viduy!

The Chida sought to resolve the problem by explaining that once a person repents, he becomes a new creature. Therefore, the tongue in his mouth is no longer the same tongue that sinned, and it may be used for viduy. However, others objected to this answer: If teshuvah is effective only via the viduy declaration, then the conversion of sinner to tzaddik does not take place until the viduy is complete!

Rav Michael Yaakov Yisrael, a 19th century Turkish Rav and author of *שנות ימין*, answered the objection, explaining that once a person produces thoughts of teshuvah, he is already recreated as a new person. Therefore, the tongue is "new" before we ever arrive at the viduy declaration. This mirrors Rav Kook's conception of teshuvah: Our thoughts of repentance are our return to greatness, restoring us to our spiritual greatness.

First, then, we engage ourselves in thoughts of repentance, returning to the pristine spirit inside, removing obstructions and awakening our spiritual talents. Only afterward do we embark upon the process of actualizing those thoughts through the speech of viduy and through the actions of correction.

We are promised that when we commit ourselves mentally to a path of repentance, G-d will take this as a down payment, and eases the remainder of our journey:

כיון שהרעיון קשור לקדושה ולחפץ התשובה, אין מה לפחד כלל, ודאי יזמין השי"ת את כל הדרכים, שהתשובה הגמורה, המאירה את כל המחשכים באור חייה, היא נקנית על ידם.

When one's thoughts are bound to holiness and to the desire for teshuvah, one should not fear at all. Certainly, Hashem will prepare all of the paths via which complete teshuvah – illuminating all of the dark spaces with the light of its life – is acquired.

(Orot haTeshuvah 7:5)

May we commit ourselves to return to internal purity, and follow up with practical steps, and so merit a *כתיבה וחתימה טובה*.



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