



SHORT VORTS FOR YOUR TOM TOV MEALS

1) Feeling the Fear

“A great shofar is sounded ... and the angels, quaking with fear, declare: ‘The day of judgment is here...!’ For even they won’t be acquitted.” (*Rosh HaShanah liturgy*)

Rosh HaShanah. Our annual day of judgment. Life and death, sickness and health, prosperity or destitution — every aspect of our lives in the coming year is decided on this great and holy day. As Rosh HaShanah approaches, we should be shaking in our shoes. Yet many of us aren’t. We go about our business, largely oblivious to what lies ahead. How can we rouse our dormant souls to feel the fear of imminent judgment?

The Brisker Rav offered the following incisive parable.

Crossing the Border

Wartime. Shortages. Contraband smuggled from one country into another. The black market flourished, but the stakes were high: There was much money to be made, but anyone

caught smuggling was a dead man.

One enterprising merchant hired a wagon driver to sneak him and his goods across the border in the middle of the night. No sooner had the two men set out than the merchant’s heart began pounding. The nearer they drew to the border, the more he feared for his life.

As they approached the border, the wagon driver panicked as well. For if apprehended, he’d face a stiff fine. But of course he wasn’t as terrified as the merchant, whose life was in danger.

As they raced through the night, the only ones blissfully unaware of any threat were the horses. They just galloped on.

So too people’s varied reactions to Elul, the month before Rosh HaShanah. Right from the start of Elul, the righteous and G-d-fearing are already trembling, feeling their lives hanging in the balance. The closer they get to Rosh HaShanah, the more frightened they are.

But most people aren’t on this level. Only as Rosh HaShanah nears do they get nervous.

And then there are those whose heart never skips a beat. The High Holy Days come and go without making any impact on them.

Man or Beast?

“When man doesn’t repose in his glory, he is compared to the silenced animals” (*Tehillim* 49:13). Hashem has compassion on all His creations, but only man is privileged to have a relationship with Him. If we opt out, ignoring our Creator, we’re no better than animals.

So let’s make the most of Elul, using it to actualize our glorious potential. Let us tremble in fear and awe of Hashem. And on Rosh HaShanah, our day in court, may we not have to be asked, “Are you man or beast?” (Rabbi Elyahu Schlesinger, *Eileh Heim Moadai*, vol. 1, *Aggadah*, p. 11)

2) Going for the Gold

“Today is the beginning of Your handiwork, a remembrance of the first day [of Tishrei].” (*Rosh HaShanah liturgy*)

Rosh HaShanah is called “the beginning of [Hashem’s] handiwork,” because on this day man was created (*Rosh HaShanah* 27a). Though other creations preceded man, the Kingdom of Heaven began with him. As the Gemara (*Rosh HaShanah* 31a) states: “What psalm would they recite on the sixth day of the week [when man was created]? ‘Hashem has reigned, donning majesty’ (Tehillim 93:1), because Hashem completed His work and ruled over them [i.e., people].” Hashem’s Kingship became relevant only with man’s creation, for all other creatures lack free will, whereas man alone can choose life or death, and by choosing wisely, he crowns Hashem over himself.

The *Shelah* (*Toldos Adam*, introduction) writes that if man cleaves to Hashem and emulates Him, he is called Adam as in “*adameh l’Elyon* — I will resemble the Most High” (Yeshayahu 14:14) and “on the image of the [Divine] throne was an image like the appearance of Adam” (Yechezkel 1:26). But if man separates from Hashem, he’s called Adam as in “the *adamah* (ground) from which he was taken” (Bereishis 3:23) and to which he will return (ibid. 3:19). Yet *adameh l’Elyon*, resembling Hashem, is man’s essential purpose.

The *Or Gedalyahu* (*Moadim, Rosh HaShanah*, “*Imru LeFanai Malchiyos*,” note 2) adds that Adam encompassed the entire creation. He was created from dust in order to elevate the earth to the loftiest heights. For despite his lowly origins, he can emulate Hashem. He’s even commanded to do so. As the Torah says, “you shall walk in His ways” (Devarim 28:9). Here Chazal expound, “Just as He is merciful, so too you should be” (*Shabbos* 133b).

Dust to Dust

We say in Musaf on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, “Man’s origin is from dust and his end is to dust.” As the holy Alter of Vorka explained, man’s “origin,”

his purpose, is to *distance himself* from dust, yet his end is to dust, for he’s drawn to that.

The *Chiddushei HaRim* was once asked why people cry when they say, “Man’s origin is from dust and his end is to dust.” If man’s origin were gold and his end dust, there’d be reason to cry, but since he begins as dust, what’s so sad about his ending up that way? The Rebbe answered: From this dust we could make gold! We could raise up the dust until it was gathered before Hashem, like the ashes of ram sacrificed in Yitzchak’s stead at the *Akeidah* (*Berachos* 62b). But we don’t. We end up just like we started, as nothing but dust. Can there be any greater tragedy?

3) Consider It Done!

“Remember us favorably ... and may the image of Avraham Avinu’s binding of his son Yitzchak — suppressing his compassion in order to do Your will with a perfect heart — appear before You.” (Musaf, Rosh HaShanah)

Rabbi Saadiah Gaon writes that the shofar reminds us of *Akeidas Yitzchak*, in which Yitzchak Avinu gave over his soul to Heaven. We too must be willing to sacrifice ourselves in sanctification of Hashem’s name, and in that merit, we ask that He remember us favorably on Rosh HaShanah and bless us with another year of life.

The *Akeidah* teaches us a tremendous lesson about the importance of our thoughts.

The only reason it’s ever necessary to do anything, rather than just think it, is that there’s almost always a gap between thought and deed. As much as we may *think* ourselves capable of certain actions, we can’t really know until we’ve done them. Though we may *think* we’d do the right thing if called upon, we

still haven’t done it. As vividly as we may *picture* ourselves acting with self-sacrifice, it’s not the same as doing so. There’s a big difference between theory and practice.

But not for Avraham. In his heart, he sacrificed his son so sincerely and completely that actually doing so was superfluous. For Avraham, the ram he offered instead of Yitzchak *was* Yitzchak. (*Or Gedalyah, Moadim, Likkutei Dibburim al Inyenei Rosh HaShanah*, sec. 4)

Virtual Reality

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Hy”d*, also known as the Piaseczno Rebbe, served as the rabbi of the Warsaw ghetto. After surviving the uprising there, he was shot dead by the Nazis in the Trawniki labor camp. *Tzav VeZiruz*, his spiritual diary, contains the following entry:

If you want to know if you’ve progressed on your spiritual path over the years, look at your resolve — your inner drive — and not at your wishes. Only the drive with which you work to attain your goal is called resolve. If you don’t work but rather just want, that’s not resolve. It’s just some wish that you wish for yourself... For example, the pauper who works to sustain himself is driven, because he’s doing something constructive toward his goal. But if he simply wishes he’ll find tremendous wealth, that’s just a wish to be rich, not a resolution. Every Jew would like to be a tzaddik, but this is no more than a wish... Only the level and state of being that you seriously work toward can truly be called resolve.

The secret to real change, says the Rebbe, is to be honest with ourselves and distinguish between our wishes and our resolutions.

There are countless things we claim to want to change about ourselves. We want to be more patient, spend more time with our children, learn more

Torah, go to *minyán* consistently, learn what the words of the *siddur* really mean, volunteer for charitable causes, stop speaking *lashon hara*, and so on.

But all these “wants” are just wishes. We wish to wake up one morning and find ourselves suddenly living that way.

The key to change is to stop wishing and start resolving. Personal growth results from making a detailed plan and holding ourselves to it.

Closing the Gap

“A person is where his thoughts are,” says the Baal Shem Tov. The *Akeidah* challenges us to harness the incredible power of our thoughts, to close the gap between ideal and reality, to *create* reality — and perfect it — through our will.

Man is influenced by his actions (*Sefer HaChinuch*, *mitzvah* 324), but Avraham went beyond that. He transformed himself solely from within. May we all strive to reach that level.

4) Postdated Mitzvos

“Our Father, our King, pardon and answer us, though we have no meritorious deeds. Treat us with charity and kindness...” (Avinu Malkeinu)

For ten days straight, from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, we plead that Hashem grant us life despite our many shortcomings. How do we have the *chutzpah* to do that?

I.O.U.

In his *Eileh Heim Moadai* (ch. 27), Rabbi Eliyahu Schlesinger introduces us to an earnest Russian named Avraham, newly arrived in Eretz Yisrael and learning all kinds of new things. For instance, Avraham was amazed at how different it was to shop in his new country. In Russia one had to pay cash, but in Israel there were banks, and you could write a check. Not only that, but

you could postdate it! Even if you had no money at the moment, as long as you probably would later, you could get by on credit. Incredible!

As for Judaism, Avraham was learning about Yom Kippur, when one’s judgment for the coming year is sealed. He knew he needed to daven for so many things: a place to live, a community, a job, a wife, health, etc. But how could he “pay” for all that? He’d kept Shabbos only five or six times and put on tefillin maybe fifty. He felt as if he were in an appliance store, needing a washer, dryer, oven, stove, and dishwasher but getting to the checkout counter and having no money.

In shul during the Ten Days of Repentance, Avraham heard everyone sing the last stanza of Avinu Malkeinu: “Pardon and answer us, though we have no meritorious deeds. Treat us with charity and kindness...” Then he understood. “Who said I need to ‘pay cash’? I can ask Hashem for everything I need and pay for it over the next year by doing mitzvos. So I wrote 365 postdated checks to Hashem on Yom Kippur, and now I do mitzvos every day to make sure those checks clear.”

“Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah: one for the completely evil, one for the completely righteous, and one for those in between” (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b). The *Nesivos Shalom* notes that all three are opened before each one of us, so we can inscribe ourselves in whichever one we’d like. Even if a Jew hasn’t done the mitzvos needed to earn a good judgment, the book of the righteous is opened before him, and he can write himself in “on credit,” pledging to be a *tzaddik* from now on.

What Love Means

Rabbi Goel Elkarif relates the following beautiful and touching story:

One day, a nine-year-old girl walked into

a jewelry store in Eretz Yisrael to buy a bracelet. Scanning the glass display cases, she pointed to a bracelet costing three or four thousand dollars. “You want to buy that bracelet?!” the man behind the counter asked. “You have very good taste.” “It’s for my big sister,” the girl explained. “We don’t have a mother or father, so my sister takes care of us. That’s why we want to buy her a present.” She then pulled out of her pocket a handful of coins totaling 7.80 shekels, a little less than two dollars.

The jeweler thought a moment. “Well,” he said, “that’s exactly what the bracelet costs.” Wiping away a tear, he handed the girl her “purchase.”

A few hours later the sister came in. “I’m terribly embarrassed,” she began. “My sister shouldn’t have come here. She shouldn’t have taken this bracelet without paying.” “What are you talking about?” said the jeweler. “This bracelet costs thousands of dollars, so she obviously didn’t pay for it.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong. She paid me in full – with a broken heart. When your sister walked in, for the first time since my wife died years ago, I once again felt what love means. So I gave her the bracelet and wished her well.”

Says Rabbi Elkarif: We come to Hashem seeking to buy something very expensive: life. But we cannot afford it. We don’t have the merits. So we empty our pockets, turning up various resolutions we’ve made: “I’ll keep *chalav Yisrael* during *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*. I’ll phone someone lonely. I’ll learn an extra five minutes. I’ll be kind. I won’t speak *lashon hara* for two hours.”

Then Hashem says, “You don’t know how long it’s been since I’ve felt what love means!” He sees how much we’re willing to do, how much we love Him, and He says, “You know what? You’ve touched My heart. So I’ll give you life, paid in full.”