Tefilla Insights from our Beis Medrash

Ideas from our rebbeim to help us connect to the davening of the Yamim Noraim.

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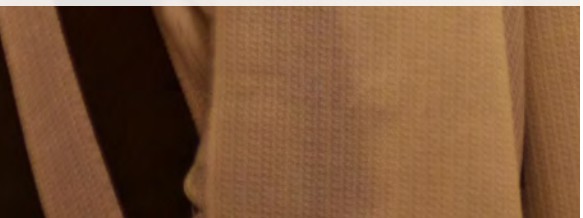

LeDovid Hashem Ori

Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

The first six *pesukim* of *LeDovid Hashem Ori* (the *perek* of *Tehillim* repeated daily throughout this season) describe a level of confidence and trust that we recite rather longingly. During this season we say:

לְדָוִד ה' אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי מִמִּי אִירָא ה' מָעוֹז חַיַּי מִמִּי אֶפְחָד. בִּקְרֹב עָלַי מְרֵעִים לֶאֱכֹל אֶת בְּשָׂרִי צָרַי וְאֹיְבַי לִי הֵמָּה כָּשְׁלוּ וְנָפָלוּ. אִם תַּחֲנֶה עָלַי מַחֲנֶה לֹא יִירָא לִבִּי אִם תָּקוּם עָלַי מִלְחָמָה בְּזֹאת אֲנִי בוֹטֵחַ ... וְעַתָּה יָרוּם רֹאשִׁי עַל אֹיְבַי סְבִיבוֹתַי וְאָזְבְּחָה בְאָהֳלוֹ זִבְחֵי תְרוּעָה אָשִׁירָה וַאֲזַמְּרָה לַה'.

Hashem is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? Hashem is the stronghold of my life, from whom shall I be frightened? ...my enemies...stumbled and fell ... if a war should rise ... in this I trust ... and now, my head will be raised over my enemies ... I will sacrifice ... sacrifices with joyous song, I will sing to and praise Hashem …

In the seventh *pasuk*, that uplifting faith suddenly gives way to an impassioned expression of helplessness and despair. Without a textual clue to allude to any calamitous event, we continue:

שְׁמַע ה' קוֹלִי אֶקְרָא וְחָנֵּנִי וַעֲנֵנִי ... אַל תַּסְתֵּר פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי אַל תַּט בְּאַף עַבְדֶּךָ עֶזְרָתִי הָיִיתָ אַל תִּטְּשֵׁנִי וְאַל תַּעַזְבֵנִי אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׁעִי.

Listen Hashem to my voice when I call out, and favor me and answer me ... do not hide your presence from me, do not turn me away with anger ... do not forsake me and do not abandon me.

What happened? What impending calamity confronted Dovid Hamelech?

Imagine yourself feeling that all is wonderful and that all your physical

needs are amply addressed, but one aspiration in life is disappointing: you are unable to spend countless hours in the *bais hamedrash* from morning to night, and you do not understand Hashem and His ways. Of course, in such a situation we would pray with genuineness and sincerity to Hashem that He should complete our lives with *bais hamedrash* time. But would this disappointment motivate us to scream out as one facing the ravages of a disease, begging Hashem not to abandon us? Would we plead as one who has been deserted by one's parents and has no one to whom to turn? Perhaps that is exactly the intent of the centuries old custom to have this *perek* carry us through each day of this introspective, yom tov season.

Indeed, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch understands that the intensity of Dovid Hamelech's focus is borne out of the supreme importance he places on his spiritual quests. In the very center of this *perek*, Dovid's heart shouts out to Hashem upon realizing that only his physical safety and comfort have been amply realized, but the sacred quests of his life have yet to be achieved. To Dovid Hamelech, disappointing his spiritual ambitions is far more devastating than any other shortcoming.

Interestingly, in the *perek* that we say before *Pisukei Dezimra, Mizmor shir chanukas habayis,* Dovid also shrieks out like someone in dreadful pain or frightened of an irreversible illness:

מַה בֶּצַע בְּדָמִי בְּרִדְתִּי אֶל שָׁחַת הֲיוֹדְךָ עָפָר הֲיַגִּיד אֲמִתֶּךָ. שְׁמַע ה' וְחָנֵּנִי ה' הֱיֵה עֹזֵר לִי.

Of what value will I be if I were to die ... please listen to my voice

This is after saying that Hashem has given him every reason to feel secure in His protection! Here, Rav Elyashiv zt"l points out that according to Chazal, Dovid Hamelech was praying to be allowed to build the *Bais Hamikdosh.* Once again Dovid felt that should his service of Hashem not live up to his expectations, his military and administrative achievements would not be meaningful at all.

Perhaps this is why Klal Yisrael adopted *LeDovid Hashem* to be the "*shir shel yom*" of Elul and Tishrei. It is during these days that we are appropriately focused on the blessings that we will hopefully earn through our teshuva and prayer. The health, prosperity, and companionship that we ask for are all well-articulated pursuits and prayers. Have we taken time, however, to articulate our aspirations as a friend, as a family member, and as one who has a place in the sacred mission of Bnei Yisrael? Have we given time to consider a plan of how we will grow these parts of our lives as we focus on plans to grow so many other parts of life?

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V'Chish Lanu Yesha

Rabbi Elchanan Adler

הרשענו ופשענו לכן לא נושענו, ותן בלבנו לעזוב דרך רשע וחיש לנו ישע ככתוב וכו' יעזב רשע דרכו ואיש און מחשבותיו וישב אל ה' וירחמהו ואל אלקינו כי ירבה לסלוח (קטע מתוך הסליחות).

We have sinned and transgressed; therefore we have not been saved. Place in our hearts the ability to abandon the path of wickedness and hasten our salvation as it is written, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the man of iniquity his thoughts. And let him return to Hashem, and He will have compassion upon him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon." (From the Selichos)

This tefillah consists of a rhyme scheme which is common to piyyutim: *Hirshanu, pashanu, noshanu, resha, yesha.*

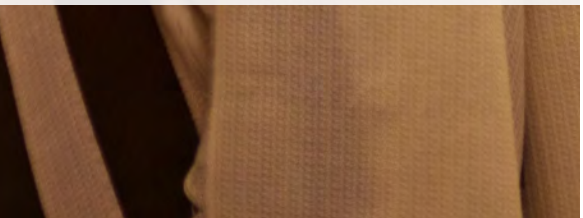
Its main idea is that our sins are hindering salvation; therefore, we beseech the Ribbono shel Olam that He place in our hearts the ability to abandon the path of wickedness, and through this He will hasten our salvation.

There are several points that require elucidation.

1. First, how do we beseech the Almighty that He place in our hearts the ability to abandon the path of wickedness, when Chazal have declared (*Berachos* 33b) "everything is in the hands of Heaven except for *yiras Shamayim*"? In truth, the same question can be posed regarding many such prayers found in our liturgy – e.g. *hashiveinu Avinu l'Sorasecha,* return us Our Father to Your Torah. The commentators have suggested various approaches. [See, for example, Maharsha to *Berachos* (10a) who suggests that we can pray for our own *yiras Shamayim* and ask for divine assistance in following the path of *yiras Shamayim* that we chose to follow; and *Emes L'Yaakov* (Ba'al HaNesivos) to *Berachos* (10a) who suggests that we can pray for divine assistance to provide us with proclivities and surroundings that are conducive to growth.]

2. With regard to the specific phrase "*ten*

HaShem doesn't need our permission or approval to enter the pischei olam, the entrances into the world, but we have the opportunity to open the gates for Him.



belibeinu" – "place in our hearts", it would seem to be based on a passage in the Gemara, *Avodah Zarah* 5a, commenting on the *pasuk* (Devarim 5:26) "*mi yiten v'ahaya levavam zeh lyirah osi*," Who can assure that their heart will come to fear Me etc. The Gemara explains that at Har Sinai, Hashem offered to place *yiras Shamayim* in the hearts of Bnei Yisrael if only they would say "*ten Ata*" – "give us [a G-d fearing heart]." Hence, we employ the words "*ten b'libenu*", as an explicit expression of this request.

3. Turning to the prooftext that we cite to support our request, it is clear that "***ya'azov rasha darko***" corresponds to the first part of our prayer – namely, "[*ten belibeinu*] ***la'azov derech resha***"; But what about the second part of the request, "*v'chish lanu yesha*" – "hasten our salvation" - where is this hastening alluded to in the *pasuk* that we cite in support of our request?

The answer would seem to lie in the unique syntax of the *pasuk* itself, in which each mention of Hashem as the focus of our teshuva – "*veyashov el Hashem*" and "*ve'ol Elokeinu*" - flows seamlessly into His favorable response - "*v'yirachameihu*" and "*ki yarbeh lisloach*". This linguistic juxtaposition implies a sense of immediacy, illustrating that Hashem's mercy and forgiveness are automatically and instantly engendered. This is how the paytan derived the concept of "*chish lanu yesha.*"

Si'u She'arim Rosheichem

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik z"l

On the nights of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we recite Tehillim ch. 24. This chapter contains verses that also appear in the beracha of *Malchiyos* on Rosh HaShanah:

שְׂאוּ שְׁעָרִים רָאשֵׁיכֶם וְהִנָּשְׂאוּ פִּתְחֵי עוֹלָם וְיָבוֹא מֶלֶךְ הַכָּבוֹד. מִי זֶה מֶלֶךְ הַכָּבוֹד ה' עִזּוּז וְגִבּוֹר ה' גִּבּוֹר מִלְחָמָה. שְׂאוּ שְׁעָרִים רָאשֵׁיכֶם וּשְׂאוּ פִּתְחֵי עוֹלָם וְיָבֹא מֶלֶךְ הַכָּבוֹד. מִי הוּא זֶה מֶלֶךְ הַכָּבוֹד ה' צְבָא-אוֹת הוּא מֶלֶךְ הַכָּבוֹד סֶלָה.

There are two pesukim that are almost exactly the same followed by a question *mi (hu) zeh Melech HaKavod*, who is the Glorious King? The verses provide two very different answers.

Rav Soloveitchik explained that this chapter is discussing HaShem entering the *pischei olam*, the entrances into the world. He doesn't need our permission or approval to enter, but we have the opportunity to open the gates for Him. The difference between the first two pesukim and the last two pesukim becomes clear when we realize the difference between *v'hinasu* and *s'eu*. In the first two pesukim, we do not actively invite HaShem in or welcome Him by opening the gates; rather, He enters by making sure that the gates themselves do not pose an obstacle (*hinasu* is passive).

In that scenario, how does the Glorious King reveal Himself? HaShem reveals Himself as a mighty warrior, and the world comes to recognize His authority after seeing the destruction that He is capable of unleashing on the world. In the second set of pesukim, the key word is *se'u*. We actively open the gates of the *pischei olam* and welcome Him in.

In this scenario, the Glorious King is seen as *HaShem Tzevaos*, the Lord of Hosts. We see and recognize His glory and splendor.

Rav Soloveitchik notes that these two approaches are reflected in the introduction to the berachos of *Kedushas HaShem* (*HaMelech HaKadosh*) and *Malchiyos* on Rosh HaShanah. The introduction to the beracha of *Kedushas HaShem*—which, according to Rav Soloveitchik, is based on the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Nuri that *Malchiyos* is recited within it—centers on the theme of HaShem revealing Himself through the destruction of evil. It begins with *UV'chen ten pachdecha*, You shall place your fear upon [the nations], and its ultimate goal is *ki sa'avir memsheles zadon min ha'aretz*, You will remove evil dominions from the earth. By contrast, following the view of Rabbi Akiva, the verses of *Malchiyos* are placed in the beracha of *Kedushas HaYom* (*Mekadesh Yisrael v'Yom HaZikaron*). In our version, the theme of *Malchiyos* is aspirational. We hope that the world will recognize HaShem's sovereignty, that it will open the gates. In *Malchiyos* we say *Al ken nekaveh … v'chol bnei basar yichre'u lishmecha*, we hope that the world will abandon idolatry and bow to You.

"Chaim" in the Insertions for Aseres Yemei Teshuva

Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Weinberg

During Aseres Yemei Teshuva, there are four insertions into the Shemoneh Esrei, all of which mention chaim, life. The Rishonim raise a fascinating question. If you look closely, the first two times we mention only *chaim*—plain life, without any adjectives attached. The last two invocations shift to *chaim tovim*—a good life. Why this change?

The *Tur* (582) cites the *Maharam of Rothenburg* that when a person makes a request, he should begin with something small, and only afterwards add on. So at first we simply ask for *stam chaim*—basic life itself. And then, as the prayer progresses and our confidence deepens, we begin to ask for more: *chaim tovim,* not merely life, but a good life.

What's the meaning of this progression? The *Maharam* seems to be teaching us that prayer is not just about making demands of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. If the goal is to cultivate a relationship with the Borei Olam, then there is a certain etiquette, a rhythm, to that conversation. One doesn't barge in and immediately request the greatest gifts. Rather, we begin humbly, and only later allow ourselves to articulate the fuller aspirations of our heart.

Yom HaZikaron Hazeh

Rabbi Michael Taubes

In the Shemoneh Esrei, we describe Rosh Hashanah as *Yom HaZikaron hazeh, Yom Teruah*, this Day of Remembrance, the Day of Teruah. Why do we identify Rosh Hashanah by mentioning the *teruah*, or more broadly, the mitzvah of shofar? We

generally do not refer to any Yom Tov in the Shemoneh Esrei by highlighting the mitzvah associated with it. Rav Soloveitchik suggested that the phrase *Yom Teruah* here is not a reference to the mitzvah of shofar at all, but rather to the fact that Rosh Hashanah is a day of *reius*, a day of friendship. We strive to develop a close relationship with Hashem on this day and by doing so, we can consider the relationship one of *reius*.

A similar idea appears in the *Bnei Yissaschar* (Tishrei no. 2). He suggests that the *simanim* eaten on Rosh Hashanah night are rooted in the idea that when you are truly close with someone, you can communicate without words—through signs and signals alone. While an outsider might not understand their meaning, those bound by a close relationship do. Likewise, then, the *simanim* express our closeness with Hashem, reflecting that we can communicate with Him using signs and not just words.

Unesaneh Tokef

Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky

Unesaneh Tokef is recited as an introduction to Kedusha. It seems that there is a very strong contrast. In one moment, we reflect on who will live and who will die, and the next we are singing almost triumphantly as we lead into Kedusha. How can we sing and recite Kedusha right after such an awe-provoking tefillah?

We enjoy a closeness with Hashem that breeds in us a sense of purpose. When we realize, as we hopefully do on the Yamim Noraim, that we are called on to live lives of *kedusha* filled with meaning and connection to our Creator it makes sense to sing joyfully even after the chilling tefillah of *Unesaneh Tokef*. Whatever fears are evoked through the recitation of *Unesaneh Tokef* are counteracted by that realization, that we live for something greater. And, once we understand that we live for a higher purpose we can proceed to Kedusha.

Yeshua VeRachamim

Rabbi Elchanan Adler

וגם את נח באהבה זכרת ותפקדהו בדבר ישועה ורחמים.

You also remembered Noach with love and You were mindful of him with salvation and mercy.

What is the significance of the juxtaposition of its two words — *yeshua* and *rachamim*? Why is this particular word combination used to describe the remembrance of Noach?

This unique word combination appears again at the conclusion of the bracha of Zichronos where we beseech Hashem *ufakdeinu b'fekudas yeshuva verachamim* — to remember us a with a remembrance of salvation and mercy — *mishmei shmei kedem* — from the ancient heavens.

The use of these two words in association with the ancient heavens is significant, as it appears to describe a transcendental, or "last resort," type of mercy that comes from the "most ancient of Heavens" (*mishmei shmei kedem*).

This phrase is also found in the Yaa'le VeYavo prayer, which, after many pleas for remembrance, ends with a request for this specific form of grace.

The question is, what makes this mercy so transcendent?

The answer may be found in the Ramban's commentary on the verse, "*Vayizkor Elokim es Noach*" (Genesis 8:1). The Ramban is puzzled by why God would "remember" animals, which, unlike humans, lack free will and therefore do not accrue merit. He explains that this remembrance was a manifestation of the primordial Will that originally brought the world and all its species into being. During the mabul, this aspect of Divine Will was dormant, but it reemerged at this pivotal moment to ensure the continuity of creation.

We can extrapolate from this that the manifestation of this primordial process extended not just to the animals but to Noach and humanity as a whole. This understanding provides a framework

Scan here to see a fuller presentation on this idea.

for the mercy epitomized by the phrase yeshua verachamim. This grace is not based on the recipient's worthiness or merit but is a unilateral and self-justifying act of Divine grace. It is the same boundless mercy that willed the world into existence in the first place.

Within Torah theology, the Jewish people are seen as indispensable to the world's existence. Their fidelity to God's commandments helps guide the world toward its purpose (*tikkun*), and their continued survival is therefore tied to the very act of Creation itself. The Ramban (Devarim 32:26) explains this concept in his commentary on *Shiras Ha'azinu*, where he equates the force that ensures Israel's continuity with the Divine Will integral to Creation.

Pieced together with the Ramban's own comments on the verse "*vayizkor Elokim es Noach*," it becomes abundantly clear that the latter verse embodies the extraordinary secret of Jewish survival; hence, the prominent place that it holds among the verses of Zichronos is most appropriate. Therefore, the following points emerge:

1. God's eternal concern for Am Yisrael is linked to his promise to never again destroy the world.
2. This promise was foreshadowed by his remembrance of Noach and the calming of the waters.
3. This remembrance is a manifestation of *yeshua verachamim,* a primordial mercy that stems from the "Ancient Heavens" and is synonymous with the Divine Will of Creation.
4. The survival of the Jewish people is essential to the world's continued existence.
5. Consequently, the same attribute of mercy that sustains the world is what sustains Klal Yisrael, and when all else fails, this can serve as the "mercy of last resort."
6. "*Vayizkor Elokim es Noach*" identifies Noach and the animals, despite their vast dissimilarities, as joint beneficiaries of the Divine grace The secret to becoming the beneficiary of special Divine grace may be the ability of a human being to suspend his sophisticated, rational faculty in favor of simple faith.
7. Accessing this mercy is not a function of merit, nor of erudition or cognition; it lies deep in the recesses of one's inner being — in the instinctual awareness of being a "creature of G-d" and in a feeling of utter dependence upon Him.

Kol Nidrei

Rabbi Meir Goldwicht

The Geonim disputed whether Kol Nidrei is even effective in annulling our vows. If this is true, why is Kol Nidrei so central to the Yom Kippur liturgy? Furthermore, why do we introduce Kol Nidrei with permission to pray with the sinner (*l'hitapalel im ha'avraynim*)?

There are two midrashim that discuss Moshe Rabbeinu annulling a vow of Hashem. The *Midrash Rabbah* in *Ki Tisa* states that *vayechal Moshe* (lit. Moshe prayed) can be interpreted to mean that although Hashem vowed to destroy the Jewish people after the *cheit ha'egel*, Moshe Rabbeinu annulled that vow. In contrast, we find (*Da'at Zekeinim*, Devarim 3:26) that when Moshe Rabbeinu sought to enter Eretz Yisrael, Hashem refused, explaining that he had already vowed that He wouldn't allow it. Moshe Rabbeinu asked to annul the vow, to which Hashem responded, "a student cannot annul the vow of his Rav." Why was Moshe Rabbeinu able to annul the vow that Hashem took at the *cheit ha'egel* and not the vow prohibiting him from entering Eretz Yisrael?

At the *cheit ha'egel*, Moshe Rabbeinu was representing *klal Yisrael*. He wasn't a student, but a partner in promoting the vision of Hashem. When he wanted to enter Eretz Yisrael, he was only representing himself. Kol Nidrei is about showing Hashem that we can bring together people from all walks of life who serve as a representation of all of klal Yisrael. We even include the sinners in our prayers and invite them to join us. In doing so, we are saying to Hashem that if You, Hashem, took any vows to punish us, we are here to annul them.

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