

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS**

### A New Beginning

**T**he cycle of the Jewish year has already begun. We've approached Almighty G-d and asked him for forgiveness, beseeching Him for a year of health and prosperity. For the Jewish People, the High Holy days represents a time of renewal; a time for a new beginning.

I often wonder how we are able to approach Almighty G-d with the same yearly requests, given the fact that we are essentially the same people we were a year ago and probably didn't change much over the course of the year. Yet we approach G-d as if our slate has been wiped clean and we can begin anew, fresh and invigorated as if this was the first day of our lives. What a remarkable thought!

The possibilities are endless, and the opportunities allow us to envision for our families and ourselves the possibility of erasing our past and starting fresh. This ability to look ahead and not necessarily to look back at the past is truly a G-d given talent; To somehow forget the past and to believe that the future will bring new and exciting possibilities without the influence of our misdeeds of the past; To see a person as good despite his/her past actions; To give them a second chance knowing full well that they might ultimately fail again.

We find this same concept in Jewish Education as well. When we begin the year educators should project the theme of Rosh Hashanah to all their teachers and students- the theme of a new beginning; a chance to start fresh and to right the past. Teachers tend to label children at a young age. Most times this label remains with the children throughout their lives, frequently stifling their growth and more importantly, their ability to change. I often overheard teachers talk negatively about students as early as the first day of school. Remarks such as "Oh yes I know him very well, he's a handful and he never does his work" resonate when they receive their student rosters. While their comments are meant as friendly warnings to their co-workers, their statements have a profound negative effect on any possibility that there is any hope for change in the future for this child.

Though we know our children intimately, and we know who are studious and who are discipline problems, we owe it to ourselves and our students to look at each student as beginning a new slate. In the past, when I

began my first Staff meeting of the year, I often told my teachers that this is the approach we should have when starting the school year. As difficult as this sounds, given the past record of a particular child, it nevertheless becomes incumbent on all educators to make the attempt and to allow the child to feel that he/she is given a new beginning, to start fresh and forge a new path for their future.

Though Judaism holds accountable the past deeds and misdeeds of an adult, they are nevertheless given the opportunity to assemble on Yom Kippur and ask Almighty G-d for forgiveness. Children, as well, must be allowed to feel that there is a chance for them to change despite their past actions. As Teachers and Educators we owe it to them to attempt with all our passion, love and understanding to give them this chance. ©2014 Rabbi M. Weiss. Rabbi Weiss was involved in Jewish education for over forty years, serving as principal of various Hebrew day schools. He has received awards for his innovative programs and was chosen to receive the coveted Outstanding Principal award from the National Association of Private Schools. He now resides in Israel and is available for speaking engagements. He can be contacted via email at [rvmordechai@aol.com](mailto:rvmordechai@aol.com)

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### Wein Online

**R**osh Hashanah marks the beginning of a reflective period in the Jewish calendar year. At one and the same time we look back at the accomplishments and failures of the past year and we also look forward to our lives and hoped for achievements in the coming good year now dawning upon us. The prayers of Rosh Hashanah represent this duality of outlook.

They also represent the constants in our lives and souls. The malkhiyot section tells us of God's ever present rule over his world and its creatures. It is this constant that surpasses time and space, calendars and timepieces. Life is too random and unstructured for human society to begin to understand and to cope with in the absence of this constant.

It is only because of this omnipresent constant that we retain the ability to glimpse the past and foresee the future simultaneously. We are all aware of the famous Hebrew quip that says that the past is gone, the future has not yet arrived and the present is but a wink of the eye. Yet the present is always with us with its demands and challenges. It is the constant reminder to us of God's eternal sovereignty, always omnipresent

even if sometimes hidden.

The Lord ordained for us so many commandments so that in every step in life that we take we are reminded of His presence and sovereignty. We are never really alone in our existence in this world. This is one of the great sublime messages of Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah is called, in our liturgy and rabbinic literature, the day of remembrance. God, so to speak, remembers us for good and for life and we remember our entire history from the binding of Yitzchak till today. The most painful of all conditions, as we are all so aware of today in our time is the disappearance of memory. The person we loved and cherished is gone even if the body of that person is still present and functioning.

If this is true regarding individual human beings how much more so does it apply to national memory? We ask God not to forget and forsake us but we are also bidden to remember our story and ourselves. Heaven, so to speak, holds up a mirror to us, and as we move, so does our reflection in Heaven.

If we are not diligent in remembering then we are prone to be forgotten as well. Rosh Hashanah is the tool to reinforce our memory of people gone and of past events, of family traditions and ancient customs and of the core events of Jewish history. On Rosh Hashanah the entire sweep of humanity is remembered and assessed. In a flash, the past becomes the present. That is the tremendous aspect of memory, for by being able to evoke the past we recreate it as part of the present. The zichronot section of the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah provides us with this gifted ability.

But Rosh Hashanah is also a holiday of optimism and of looking forward and ahead. We resolve to become better people, more humane and Godly in our attitudes and behavior. The echo of the shofar of Sinai that we hear, or our own sounding of the shofar, inspires us to strive to become a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. That echo has never diminished and the challenge it conveys has also never lessened. Rising to that challenge is the goal set for us in the new year. The sounds of the shofar remind us again of Sinai and its eternal covenant and strictures. Just as our past was governed by it, so too will our future be determined by its structure and parameters.

So too, to a certain extent, our future can be assessed and can become more predictable on Rosh Hashanah. The more we are able to hear the echo of the shofar of Sinai, as we strain to listen to the faint strains of the shofar of redemption, the better the new year will be for us individually and nationally. The shofar represents our trumpet call to national and spiritual greatness.

All of the verses of the liturgy of shofrot combine these two soundings – Sinai and redemption – in their message and import. The great army of God's eternal people is being summoned to arms, to face the

challenges of the new year. We have to hear those shofar soundings in our souls and not only in our ears.

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### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

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

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

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

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

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

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

This blessing guarantees that there is an overarching purpose to history, which is not a cyclical,

repetitive cycle leading nowhere, but rather a linear pathway leading to peace. Redemption will come about in the fullness of historic time as a result of the cumulative merits of all preceding generations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, we sound the shofar after Shofarot since the method by which we must reach out to the world is

by teaching our Torah – a teaching revealed at Sinai amid the sounds of the shofar.

And it will ultimately be that when the Almighty Himself will sound the shofar that all of the dispersed will return to Israel, the Temple will be rebuilt and the nations will come to learn from us to beat their swords into plowshares and to live together in peace. ©2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

### ADINA CIMENT

## Evil Decrees

One of the most famous prayers in the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur davening is the prayer of “Unesaneh Tokef.” The prayer describes exactly what God writes on Rosh Hashana, and what He seals on Yom Kippur. The words provide a menu of ways to die – from stoning to drowning, from plague to hunger – and a description of other negative events that may befall you. Your fate for the year is pretty much written in the books during these high holy days.

The final line of the prayer, though, reminds us that nothing is set in stone: Repentance, Prayer, and Charity can avert the evil decree. It’s a simple three-step process to making sure we are written in the Book of Life, and that whatever decree was meant for us can be averted through our good deeds.

At least, I used to think that was what the prayer was about.

Maybe it was a bit of confirmation bias and the years of Yeshiva Day School that always taught me what the final line said. But this year, I actually read it carefully and noticed that the last line of the prayer does not say anything of the sort. Translated exactly, the final line reads: Repentance, Prayer, and Charity can avert the evil of the decree. We’re not averting the decree itself, just the evilness of it.

It’s a subtle difference that changes the entire meaning. Looking back into the text at the list of ways to die, the new reading seems to imply that there is no way to escape the decrees of death and destruction. But it isn’t as fatalistic as it sounds. The text doesn’t say “You might drown. You might die by plague.” It says that God decides “who” that will happen to, me and you being two of those possibilities. The poem is simply stating an obvious idea. Death, pain, suffering – these are things that we are all going to experience this year. We can’t escape it. If it is not us, it will be someone we know. Something we will witness.

The last line then, the one about repentance, prayer and charity, is not a line giving us a recipe to make it all go away. Bad things will always exist in this world. Instead, it’s giving us tools for how to cope with the evil that we may experience. It’s telling us that to get rid of the evil of the decree, we need to do three things: look inward to ourselves, look up to God, and give back to our community. By looking inward, I can examine what this experience has done to me, what I can get out of it. How

I can change from it. By looking up to God, I have someone to rail at, to duel with, to question. And by giving to my community, I can turn my experience into a positive. I can create a legacy. I can turn tragedy into positive action.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are days that focus on those relationships. It's a communal meditation on ourselves, God, and our friends. What the poet is telling us in this universal prayer is that we are not going to escape trauma and pain. We can't stop that from happening. But those experiences do not have to destroy us, our relationships, and our connections.

I have seen that happen to people I love who have experienced tragedy and pain. I have also been on the other side, the receiver of evil decrees, and I know the struggle to make sense of hardships when there is no answer for suffering.

It isn't easy.

The prayer for the new year is not a message of false hope, of a year without pain, but rather a guide for that weariness, a reminder of the tired expression that while pain is inevitable, suffering is a choice. These inescapable painful decrees can lose their destructive evil nature, and instead become catalysts for change and growth, if we heed the words of the poet: look inward, reach upward, branch outward. ©2020 A. Ciment. As president of The Raven Writing Company, Adina Ciment has been helping students improve their writing since 1994. Her essays have been published by various outlets including HuffPost, Kveller, the Jewish Press, Aish.com and Tailslate. You can follow her on Twitter, Instagram and on her personal blog, [writingelves.com](http://writingelves.com).

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**T**he Torah urges us to return to God. One prominent term describes God's hope that we, the Jewish People, will "lishmo'a b'kolo" (hearken to His voice; Deuteronomy 30:20). The word kol (voice) resonates with deep meaning.

The term kol first presents itself in the Garden of Eden story, where the Torah states that Adam and Eve heard the kol (voice) of the Lord God (Genesis 3:8). Kol is, therefore, not necessarily an auditory voice but the voice of God, reminding us to reconnect with God, to feel His presence, to hear His voice.

Kol also appears prominently in the revelation story. There, the Torah states that the Jews heard the kol of the shofar (Exodus 19:19). This time, however, the voice was a call to commit to God's laws as revealed at Sinai.

Kol is found again in the prophetic descriptions of the return to Jerusalem, proclaiming the beginning of the Messianic era (Isaiah 40:3). In the liturgy, we echo this prophecy with the words "kol mevaser," the voice that announces redemption is near. This, kol speaks to the challenge of not only adhering to God's commandments but harnessing the energy of these

messages into repairing the world.

These three messages of kol are echoed in the mitzvah of shofar blown on Rosh Hashanah during this season. It is the shofar blasted as God created the world, the shofar sounded at Sinai, and the shofar that will announce the coming of the Messiah.

No wonder the shofar is blown after the central paragraphs of the Rosh Hashanah Amidah – Malchuyot, Zichronot, Shofarot – giving its themes greater meaning. In Malchuyot, we declare God's Lordship; in Zichronot, we begin to recall revelation; in Shofarot, we dream of a world redeemed.

It ought to be noted that the shofar blessing does not state litko'a kol shofar but lishmo'a kol shofar. While Litko'a means to blast, lishmo'a means to hear, truly to listen, to internalize the sound of the shofar, drawing us to God, His commandments, and the continuous yearning for redemption. ©2023 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

#### **BRIJNET/UNITED SYNAGOGUE - LONDON (O)**

## **Daf HaShavua**

by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l

**T**here are many lovely explanations for why we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, but one of the most powerful is given by Moses Maimonides, whose 800th yearzeit we will commemorate in the coming year (this was written in 2020 – editor). For Maimonides the shofar is God's alarm clock, waking us up from the "slumber" in which we spend many of our days. What did he mean?

God's greatest gift to us is time, and He gives it to us on equal terms. Whether we are rich or poor, there are still only 24 hours in a day, seven days in a week and a span of years that is all too short. Often we spend our time on things that in Maimonides' words "neither help nor save." How many people looking back on a lifetime, say, "I wish I had spent more time at committee meetings"? By contrast, how many say, "I wish I had spent more time with my children, or helping others, or simply enjoying being alive"? Sometimes we can be so busy making a living that we hardly have time to live.

Experts on time management speak about two types of activity, the urgent and the important. Often our days are spent on the urgent, and we lose out on the important. I remember a conversation with someone who had been a workaholic, busy seven days a week. As a result of a personal crisis he decided to keep Shabbat. He later told me it was the best decision he ever made. "Now," he said, "I have time for my wife and child and for my friends. Going to Shul has made me part of community. The strange thing is that the work still gets done, in six days not seven." Shabbat teaches us to take time for what is important even though it isn't urgent.

Thirty years ago, when technology was less advanced, most people who wrote about the future saw it as an age of leisure when we would have far more free time. It has not happened that way. We seem more pressurised than ever and less relaxed. Mobile phones, e-mails and pocket computers mean that we are constantly on call. As Wordsworth said, "The world is too much with us; late and soon/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." The Psalmist put it best: "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are when we number our days. Asking to be written in the book of life, we think about life and how we use it.

In this context the three key words of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer are fundamental: teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah. Teshuvah is about our relationship with ourself. Tefillah is about our relationship with God. Tzedakah is about our relationship with other people.

Teshuvah means not only "repentance" but also "returning"—to our roots, our faith, our people's history and our vocation as heirs to those who stood at Sinai more than three thousand years ago. Teshuvah asks us: did we grow in the past year or did we stand still? Did we study the texts of our heritage? Did we keep one more mitzvah? Did we live fully and confidently as Jews? Teshuvah is our satellite navigation system giving us a direction in life.

Tefillah means prayer. It is our conversation with God. We speak, but if we are wise we also listen, to the voice of God as refracted through the prayers of a hundred generations of our ancestors. Tefillah is less about asking God for what we want, more about asking God to teach us what to want. A new car? A better job? An exotic holiday? Our prayers do not speak about these things because life is about more than these things. It is less about what we own than about what we do and who we aspire to be. We speak about forgiveness, and about God's presence in our lives. We remind ourselves that, short though our time on earth is, by connecting with God we touch eternity. Tefillah is our mobile phone to heaven.

Tzedakah is about the good we do for others. Sir Moses Montefiore was one of the great figures of Victorian Jewry. He was a wealthy man and devoted much of his long life to serving the Jewish people in Britain and worldwide (he built the windmill in Jerusalem, and the area of which it is a part— Yemin Moshe—is named after him). He was also highly respected in British society and The Times devoted leaders to him on his ninety-ninth and hundredth birthday. Someone once asked him how much he was worth, and he gave him a figure. "But," said the questioner, "I know you own more than that." "You didn't ask me what I own but what I am worth. The figure I gave you was how much money I have given this year to charity, because we are worth what we are willing to share with others." That is tzedakah.

Certain mitzvot in Judaism are rehearsals for a time to come. Shabbat is a rehearsal for the messianic age when strife will end and peace reign. Yom Kippur—when we do not eat or drink or engage in physical pleasure, and when there is a custom to wear kittel like a shroud—is a dress rehearsal for death. It forces us to ask the ultimate question: what did I do in my life that was worthwhile? Did I waste time or did I share it, with my faith, with God, and with those in need? Knowing that none of us will live forever, we ask God for another year: to grow, to pray and to give. That is what Maimonides meant when he called the shofar God's alarm call, asking us not to slumber through life but to use it to bring blessings. May the Almighty bless us, our families and the Jewish people, and may He write us all in the Book of Life. © 2003 Produced by the Rabbinical Council of the United Synagogue - London (O) Editor Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, emailed by Rafael Salasnik

### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

"In the seventh month, on the first of the month, shall be a complete rest for you, a holy day commemorated with loud blasts." (Vayikra 23:24)

The Maftir of Rosh HaShana can be found in Parshas Pinchas, where it is referred to as, "Yom Teruah, the day of blasts." In Parshas Emor, however, the Torah refers to this day as, "Zichron Teruah, a commemoration of the blasts." The Gemara in Rosh HaShana (29b) explains the discrepancy. In a year when Rosh HaShana falls on a weekday, and we blow the shofar, that's Yom Teruah. When it falls on Shabbos, like this year, and the shofar is not sounded, then the applicable phrase is, "Zichron Teruah."

It would make sense to say that the "remembrance of Teruah" applies to Shabbos when the shofar isn't blown, so we only have a memory of the shofar, except that the commentaries offer various explanations of what the remembrance is. Some explain it causes Avraham's devoted act of binding Yitzchak as a korban to be recalled in Heaven, or that through the sound of the shofar, Hashem, "remembers" Klal Yisrael. In such a case, it would seem that the remembrance would be when we actually blow it.

Then, there are other explanations which flow towards what we initially understand from the Gemara, that on a day when we don't blow the shofar, we need to say verses that recall the shofar blasts. According to these, the remembrance is not of the people, but of the blasts themselves. If so, the memory of the shofar applies on Shabbos, and we can ask why we need to read the verses on days when we actually blow the shofar.

What we see from this vagueness is that it is possible to construe the meaning in different yet important ways. Perhaps this is done because the call of the shofar, or lack thereof, is intended to jog our

memories in several aspects.

On the one hand, it recalls the self-sacrifice of Avraham and Yitzchak to do Hashem's will. On the other hand, it recalls the powerful mitzvah which we all long to fulfill by hearing the loud, clear blasts of the shofar, straightening our crooked hearts and awakening us to serve Hashem. However, the fact that we don't blow it on Shabbos, a decree made by the Rabbis lest people violate the Shabbos by carrying a shofar where it isn't permitted, is ALSO a reminder of self-sacrifice. Not on the part of our forefathers, but on our own parts.

We have a tremendous opportunity to achieve inscription in the Book of Life by blowing the shofar, yet we give that up so the Shabbos, which is a testimony to Hashem's creation of the world, is not defiled. On Rosh HaShana, we have many things to remember, and they all work together to help us be worthy of another sweet new year.

On Rosh HaShana, the practice is to give each other brachos, blessings for a sweet, new year and more. This is despite the fact that we historically didn't ask for our own needs on this day, as the focus is on coronating Hashem.

Perhaps we do so to show that this is the practice of our King. He constantly bestows blessings and goodness on his subjects, and on Rosh HaShana, we emulate Him to display that this is the way of this Kingdom, to be concerned with what everyone else needs and to give it to them.

*An old woman stood in shul Rosh HaShana night, eagerly awaiting the end of the prayers. Not because she was anxious to get home, far from it. Her husband had passed away and her children didn't live close by. Instead, she was waiting to wish people a sweet new year.*

*Alas, as the people smiled and wished each other well, no one took notice of the solitary woman, until she was left alone in the shul. Biting her lip, she bravely said, "Master of the world! If I can't wish anyone else a good year, I can wish You one."*

*"But what can I wish you? Everything is Yours." She paused a moment, and then her face lit up with joy. "Ribono Shel Olam," she cried out, "Zolst du hoben nachas fun deine kinder! May you have pleasure from Your children!" ©2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr*

**RABBI YAAKOV HABER**

## Moral Heights

**D**uring this period, when our thoughts should be on teshuva (pen-ance), I want to quote an appropriate passage from this week's parsha. "When all these things befall you -- the blessing and the curse that I have set before you—and you take them to heart amidst the various nations to which the L-rd your G-d has banished you, and you return to the L-rd your G-d ... (Deut. 30:1-3, trans. JPS). We may ask: what a strange place to do teshuva, among the

gentile nations to which we have been scattered. A more appropriate place for teshuva would seem to be Jerusalem, or even New York! In an attempt to explain this, let me quote from a midrash on Bereishis.

It concerns a certain Yosef Misisha, who was one of the "Misyav-nim" (assimilationists) at the time of the Greek occupation of Israel. The Greek authorities decided that the Temple in Jerusalem should be desecrated, and, moreover, that this should be done in a dramatic way by getting a Jew to do their dirty work. For this purpose they chose Yosef Misisha, and told him to go into the Temple, into the holiest part, and remove any of the holy objects he saw, for his own keeping. He agreed, entered the Holy Sanctuary, and seeing the Menora, decided that that would look good in his home. (Remember, this was the real thing, large, wrought in gold and decorated, not a "chanukia"! ) So he removed the Menora from the Temple and took it home. This did not, however, satisfy the Greeks. They thought that the Temple Menora in a private house would not quite do it. After all, everyone had some kind of candelabrum in his home. Something else was needed to make the desecration really spectacular. So they told Yosef to go back into the Temple and remove something else to keep. But this time he refused, and he stuck to this re-fusal, even under torture, from which he died.

The same Midrash gives another story, about a certain Yakum Ish Tzroros, an assimilationist during the Roman occupation of Isra-el. His brother-in-law, R' Yosi ben Yoezer, was sentenced to death by the Roman authorities for teaching Torah, performing in this way a Kiddush HaShem. As R' Yosi was led into the town square for the execution, Yakum rode up and shouted at him: "Do you see now what happens to you for performing mitzvos?" R' Yosi shot back: "In that case, you can imagine what is going to happen to you for not performing mitzvos!" These words entered Yakum's soul "like a serpent's poison", and he immediately jumped off his horse and did teshuva.

What is the common theme of these two stories? In each story, the central figure stooped about as low as one can, and then did teshuva. In the first story, the person violently desecrated the Temple, and this experience apparently led him to teshuva and a refusal to repeat his sin. In the second story (leaving aside the issue of performing mitzvos versus assimilating), the person was humiliating someone who had been sentenced to death, and in spite of (or perhaps because of!) this disgusting behavior, he was receptive to his brother-in-law's rebuke.

It seems that when someone is in a low enough moral state, he may "bottom out", and derive inspiration from his situation, so as to rise to moral heights. As a matter of fact, one cannot do teshuva unless one has first sinned, by definition.

But we must be careful here! I am not

suggesting that we should deliberately sin, in order to do teshuva afterwards! As a rule, the more one sins, the harder it is to extricate oneself from one's situation.

What I am suggesting is that in this period of teshuva, one should not become overly despondent by brooding over all one's sins. As these stories show, it may be possible to use one's sinful state as a springboard to a higher state.

This is perhaps the reason the Torah speaks of teshuva taking place while we are scattered about the nations of the world. We will repent not in spite of this situation, but actually because of it.

It is my prayer that by performing teshuva, we may all rise to moral heights. © 1987 Rabbi Y. Haber

### **RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**R**osh Hashanah begins this upcoming Friday evening, September 15th. Rosh Hashanah is a two-day holiday and begins on the first day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei, marking the Jewish New Year. Unlike the secular New Year that is celebrated in many parts of the "enlightened" world by partying, drinking to excess, and watching a little ball descend a tower in Times Square, the Jewish New Year is celebrated very differently.

Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance, which culminate on Yom Kippur – The Day of Atonement. Typically, Rosh Hashanah is observed by Jews all over the world who attend synagogue to pray, hear the sound of the shofar (ram's horn), listen to the rabbi's sermon, reflect upon the past, commit to correct one's mistakes, and praying for a healthy and sweet year. This is followed by celebrating with festive holiday meals.

Sadly, many people – if not most – only make an effort to attend synagogue on the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is therefore only natural that most synagogues charge enormous amounts for "tickets" to attend – it is their one opportunity to raise the needed monies to fund the operations of the synagogue. (Reflecting on this I realize that if I only came to synagogue three times a year and had to spend most of the day there in prayer services and listening to the rabbi while paying an exorbitant sum for that privilege, I also wouldn't want to attend more than three times a year.)

Still, whether we manage to make it to synagogue or not, it is important that we understand the essence of Rosh Hashanah and how to observe it.

According to Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment. The Talmud states that (Rosh Hashanah 8a) this is derived from a pair of verses in Psalms, "Sound the shofar at the new month, at the time when it is covered, for the day of our festival. For it is a statute for Israel, a (day of) judgment for the God of Jacob" (Psalms 81:4-5). Thus, we pray that we are

inscribed in the Book of Life for life, health, and sustenance.

Many years ago, I attended a trial of a good friend who was wrongfully charged with some very serious crimes and, if convicted, would spend decades behind bars. The feeling in the courtroom was one of dread and palpable apprehension. I remember being very afraid for him and I could barely eat or sleep. Indeed, for many this is what Rosh Hashanah feels like. But this perception is a mistake.

According to the Book of Nehemiah – found in the section of Torah commonly referred to as Scriptures – Rosh Hashanah is a time when we celebrate with elegant clothes, festive meals with family and friends, and by sending gifts to the needy.

"He said to them, 'Go eat fat foods and drink sweet beverages, and send gifts to anyone for whom nothing was prepared, for today is holy to our Master. Do not be sad, for the joy of Hashem is your strength'" (Nehemiah 8:10).

The (very brief) background to that story: After the seventy-year exile in Babylon (in which the story of Purim takes place) the Jews are given permission to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, the leaders – namely Ezra and Nehemiah – of those whom returned found that the people of the Judean community were wholly ignorant of the Torah and Jewish customs. They spent most of Rosh Hashanah day reading them the Torah and informing them what it means to live as Jews. The people became both saddened and frightened when they realized how far from Judaism they had strayed.

So they were reminded by Ezra and Nehemiah that Rosh Hashanah is a holiday and that they must celebrate it with festive meals and by gladdening the hearts of those who are needy.

But this is an extremely different perspective from how we are usually taught to view Rosh Hashanah. After all, how can we celebrate when our very lives hang in the balance? While we must trust in the kindness and mercy of the Almighty – that He knows our hearts and our intentions and judges us with love and the knowledge of what is best for us – there is also a much deeper lesson to understand here.

In a typical court of law, when a person is being judged, what is the best result he could possibly hope for? The best possible outcome is that he be restored to the life that he had prior to entering the courtroom. In other words, he can only lose, he has no possible upside. In fact, after paying his attorney and court costs he is already far poorer than when he began. Essentially, he already lost; it's only a question of whether he also loses his freedom. That is a devastating situation in which to find oneself.

But Rosh Hashanah, our "Day of Judgement," is very different. According to Jewish tradition, the world was created on the 25th day of Elul and man was created

on the first of Tishrei. Thus, man was actually created on Rosh Hashanah! Why is this important?

The great medieval philosopher, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, explains in his classic work *The Way of God* that God created the world in order to bestow kindness on mankind. The very purpose of creation was a gift so that man could experience the most amazing life.

But God, in His infinite wisdom, understood that ultimately a gift is never fully appreciated. As we know, a person often feels ashamed to accept a gift, and in fact a person only feels fulfilled when he has acquired something that he has earned through his efforts. Thus, man was given the opportunity to earn existence.

Every Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of mankind's creation, we are given an opportunity to earn our existence. This is the EXACT opposite of a typical courtroom judgment. We can absolutely hope for an improvement in every aspect of our lives, and we have much to gain on our Day of Judgement. This is why Rosh Hashanah can be a day of amazing fulfillment and joy, one to be celebrated with friends and family.

Now, everyone wants to have a more meaningful and fulfilling life. We want God to bless us with an amazing year filled with every blessing imaginable. How do we begin to achieve this?

We start by actively accepting God as our king and the ruler of everything in existence. If we look at the liturgy on Rosh Hashanah this theme of God as our king is clearly evident as the major focus of the day. Our job is to define ourselves as living in a theocentric world, a world in which we are committed to living by His laws and bringing Him into our daily lives and into the lives of others.

Rosh Hashanah is much less about begging forgiveness from God than it is about establishing a relationship with Him and creating the rightful place for God in our lives. The process of teshuvah (repentance) can only begin once a relationship is in place. (We will discuss the process of repentance further in next week's column.)

A key element to understanding Rosh Hashanah is that life is a gift from the Almighty and it is therefore quite precious. Consequently, we are charged with making it meaningful and making sure that we live up to our potential and earn our continued existence.

I am going to end this week's column by reprinting a list of questions that appeared in a previous column by our teacher and mentor, Rabbi Kalman Packouz, of blessed memory:

When do I feel closest to God?

When do I most feel that my life is meaningful?

How often do I express my feelings to those who mean the most to me?

Are there any ideals I would be willing to die for?

What would bring me more happiness than anything else in the world?

What are my three most significant achievements since last Rosh Hashanah?

What are the three biggest mistakes I've made since last Rosh Hashanah?

What project or goal, if left undone, will I most regret next Rosh Hashanah?

What is the most important decision I need to make this year?

What important decision did I avoid making last year?

If I could change only one thing about myself, what would that be?

What one thing can I do to markedly improve my spirituality?

Wishing you and yours a sweet New Year, one filled with blessings and the good health and peace of mind to enjoy it all! ©2023 Rabbi Y. Zweig and [shabbatshalom.org](http://shabbatshalom.org)

### **RABBI MORDECHAI WOLLENBERG**

## **Weekly Thoughts**

**R**osh Hashanah, according to the Sefer Hachinuch, is the day on which the creatures of the world are judged, both as a whole, and as individuals. But why have a Day of Judgment if the ruling won't be final until Yom Kippur, which is 10 days later? If the judgment isn't final until Yom Kippur, then Yom Kippur should be the only Judgment Day, and thus Rosh Hashanah has no real purpose!? In addition, of all things, why did G-d choose the Shofar (ram's horn) as the tool to inspire our repentance. The Ben Ish Chai tells the story of a man who had a ring made especially for him. He engraved the words "This too shall pass" on the ring. If he was troubled or pained, he would look at his ring and remember that his suffering would eventually end. Likewise, during times of happiness, he would gaze at the ring as well and realize that his wealth and good fortune could change for the worse in an instant. "This too shall pass." The ring reminded the man that his life must be put in perspective, and that one should never live life either complacent or despondent. We too can use the Shofar to represent joy (as we did when we won a battle), and it can represent sorrow (since it sounds like crying).

Now we can use this logic to understand Rosh Hashanah better. Rosh Hashanah is in no way the finish line, but rather the starting line that G-d has graciously provided for us. Instead of getting to the finish line without knowing when the race actually began, G-d "shoots the gun" on Rosh Hashanah, telling us that we'd better start running. This "gun" is the Shofar, which has the potential to be a positive step, or a negative one, depending on which way we choose to run. This Rosh Hashanah, if we commit to make even one small step toward being a better Jew, we'd already be on our way to winning the race, and on our way to a triumphant year! ©2003 by Rabbi M. Wollenberg and [weeklytorah.com](http://weeklytorah.com)

