

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The Musaf (Additional) service on Rosh Hashana sets forth our most fundamental Jewish beliefs and aspirations. The Malkhuyot (Sovereignities) section of this prayer speaks of God's kingship, of an entire world under God. What this means, in effect, is that the only laws that can be promulgated for all of humanity are those that are in consonance with God's laws: the laws of the Ten Commandments, and the seven Noahide ethical laws that are biblical universal laws of morality, which the Bible calls "compassionate righteousness and moral justice."

There may be lesser rulers, whether they are called kings, emperors, prime ministers, or presidents, but they must likewise be subject to the moral laws that God has taught. He, after all, is the King of kings, the one Master God over the entire world. This also means that there is no room whatsoever in the world for a totalitarian or despotic leader who rules by force or terror and literally enslaves at least some significant number of the populace under his control. The absolute prohibition of slavery – that no human being is permitted to subjugate another – was taught by the Bible to the world when God Himself took the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, and that prohibition clearly wells up from the words of the Bible informing us that God created every human being in His image.

On Rosh Hashana, Malkhuyot is introduced by the Aleinu prayer. Aleinu concludes with the verse, "On that day [of the acceptance of God by the entire world] the God of Love will truly be One and His name One" (Zechariah 14:9). The God of Love will rule the world, against all totalitarianism and despotism. In the meantime, says the Aleinu prayer, we Jews came into the world accepting this concept of a universal God demanding compassionate righteousness and moral justice. Therefore, our role is to teach this idea to the world because we are mandated by God to be a "kingdom of teachers and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).

First and foremost, we must teach that God loves everyone, and so we must love everyone, too. That fundamental understanding is what will bring peace on earth – a world of wholeness, a world of love. This is the romance between God, the Jews, and the world. God, in His love, appointed us to deliver His message to the world: the loving parenthood of God must lead to the

loving siblinghood of human beings. From this perspective one begins to understand that democracy is built into the very fabric of the Torah. A government imposed autocratically by means of power and submission is antithetical to the kingship of God that we declare in Malkhuyot.

While Malkhuyot speaks of God and humanity, the next section of Musaf, Zikhronot (Remembrances), places before us God's special covenantal relationship with Israel, the mutual faithfulness and commitment that eternally unites us. The Jewish people promise that we will always keep the commandments, and God promises that we will always live as a nation and a separate peoplehood, return to Israel, and ultimately redeem the world (Genesis 15; Isaiah 2).

God's specific love for the Jewish people is part of Zikhronot's theme, quoting several verses that describe the great passion with which God initially embraced the Jewish people when He took them out of Egypt, and the ardor with which the Jewish people gave God their love. However, Zikhronot goes much further, describing God's loving relationship with all of creation, and emphasizing the notion that not only is the Jewish nation called upon to come close to God, but the nations of the world are also called upon to cast their lot with the one God. Zikhronot proclaims that God is mindful of all individuals and nations, each of whom will have a unique mission to fulfill on the road to redemption. Zikhronot proclaims that all individuals and nations are remembered by God on this day, and judged according to their actions.

The third and final segment of the Musaf service is Shofarot (Sounds of the Ram's Horn). This portion makes the connection between the two moments in history when the sound of the heavenly shofar was and will be heard: one event at Sinai when God revealed to us His Torah, which we accepted for all generations freely and joyously; and the second sound of the shofar – which will yet be heard and accepted not only by Israel, but also by the entire world – that will announce the ingathering of the exiles to the Land of Israel, and the final Redemption.

The God of Malkhuyot (Sovereignities) is first and foremost the God of creation of all of humanity and the world. The God of Zikhronot (Remembrances) is primarily the God of revelation and especially in His unique love relationship with Israel, expressed in a Torah that was originally meant for the entire world. The God of

Shofarot is ultimately the God of redemption, when everyone will be joined in a loving relationship with our universal God of Love in a perfected and liberated world. *The above article is adapted from a chapter on Rosh Hashana in Rabbi Riskin's recently published book, Judaism: A Love Story – A Theological, Ethical and Zionist Perspective, published by Koren and available [here](#).* © 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"l

Wein Online

The basis for Judaism and its value system can be summed up in one word: accountability. The gift of freedom of choice and action that God has granted to humans comes, as do most gifts, with a price. And that price is that all of us are completely accountable for our actions and behavior.

We each have an account sheet, so to speak, with columns for credits and debits. How our lifetime account sheet looks eventually determines our fate and our eternity. But there are temporary stock-taking times as well. The Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are such times. We pass in review, individually and without cover or pretense, before the Heavenly Court to have the account sheet examined.

The message of the Holy Days is a clear one. We are held accountable for our past deeds as well as for our budding intents. As responsible individuals our account sheet is of vital importance in determining our true- life status and future. Just as all publicly held firms must produce an annual report attested to by reputable accounting firms, so too during this season of the year we individually publish our own annual report; and it is attested to by the Heavenly Court that is aware of all of our thoughts and actions.

One of the ills of current society is its acceptance of unlimited freedom of choice and behavior coupled with its refusal to hold people answerable to the results of this uninhibited freedom. Another hallmark of our society is the inability to admit error in previous decisions, policies and behavior. No one is held accountable for all the colossal mistakes of past centuries. The moral and spiritual bankruptcy of Jewish organizations and individuals who fled from Torah and tradition is evident to all by now, but many of them- those still in existence, continue on their merry way as though there was no past to reexamine, no future to contemplate. But the law of accountability allows for no exceptions; eventually it overtakes everyone.

This pattern should be apparent to anyone with even rudimentary knowledge of the story of Israel throughout the ages. The parshiyot read in the synagogue during this season concern themselves almost exclusively with this idea of culpability- of reward and punishment, and the aspects of the covenant of Sinai between God and Israel. The Torah declares that this "covenant shall respond to them even till the end of

days." In a covenant- a contractual agreement- each side is held to its agreed upon terms and conditions. We are bound to our e, and the Lord, so to speak, states that He also is bound to His commitments. Accountability is the key to the entire covenantal experience and challenge.

One should feel that one is answerable not only to God, and to one's fellow human beings, but perhaps most importantly to one's own self. The primary questions addressed by Judaism are: "To what purpose is my life worth living? Why am I here? And what is asked of me in this life?" If these questions are never really addressed, or if they are sloughed off and defined in purely material or monetary terms, obviously life has little meaning. If there is no deep meaning, no accountability for our behavior can ever arise in our minds and hearts.

For life to have any sense of purpose, sincere goals must resonate within each person. And that resonance must inevitably lead to a realization of the imperative of accountability in our lives. This is why the prayers of the Holy Days stress not only God's greatness and man's relative puniness, but also the coming to terms of each with past deeds as well as future aspirations. True teshuvah – repentance- requires this simultaneous look backwards and forwards.

Rigorous accountability helps us formulate a meaningful plan for our goals and aspirations in life. It allows us to age and mature gracefully and it creates the proper backdrop for our future actions. It is the ultimate blessing in our lives.

Written by Rabbi Berel Wein ZT"l in his book "In My Opinion." © 2020 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The literal translation of Rosh Hashanah is "head of the year," but it's colloquially known as the Jewish New Year. There are many aspects to this holiday, but perhaps the overarching theme is of Rosh Hashanah being a day of judgement. In fact, another name for this holiday is "Yom Hadin " Judgement Day."

This attitude towards Rosh Hashanah can be traced to a passage from the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16b): Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, "On Rosh Hashanah three books are opened before the Holy One, Blessed be He: One book of wholly wicked people, and one book of wholly righteous people, and one book of middling people, whose good and bad deeds are equally balanced.

"Wholly righteous people are immediately written and sealed for life; wholly wicked people are immediately written and sealed for death; and middling people are left with their judgment suspended from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur, their fate remaining

undecided."

But there is an aspect of Rosh Hashanah that is often overlooked. Having grown up in an Orthodox community and attending religious schools from childhood all the way through rabbinical school, I can attest that this aspect of Rosh Hashanah is rarely mentioned, and never emphasized. But as I grew older and began to pay more attention to the actual words in the liturgy of the holiday it became so very clear to me.

I noticed that Rosh Hashanah being labeled the "Jewish" New Year, while technically accurate, is a little bit misleading. In calendrical terms, it is indeed the Jewish New Year. But the significance of Rosh Hashanah extends far beyond the Jewish community. According to the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16a): "On Rosh Hashanah everyone in the world passes before the Almighty " kibnei maron." According to one opinion in the Talmud, kibnei maron means that every living soul passes before the Almighty like a shepherd carefully counting his sheep, one at a time. Our sages are teaching us that it is the day that the ENTIRE world is judged " both Jews and non-Jews alike. This is why so much of the liturgy of the holiday repeatedly mentions all the world's inhabitants.

There is an opinion in the Talmud that the sixth day of creation was Rosh Hashanah. In other words, the day that Adam and Eve were created " and the day they sinned and were judged by the Almighty (Genesis 3:9-15) " was Rosh Hashanah. Thus, because they chose to sin " a character flaw that they would pass on to their children " this day was chosen as a day of judgement forevermore. (It should be pointed out that Adam and Eve were not the first Jews, rather our forefather Abraham is considered the first Jew. Adam and Eve are the forbearers of all of humanity.)

Based on the above teaching that on Rosh Hashanah there are three books open in front of the Almighty, one might easily conclude that on Rosh Hashanah we are quite literally praying for our lives. That would explain the feeling of dread and foreboding that is commonly felt on this particularly important day. However, if we take a closer look at this concept then we will see that it is simply not so.

Whether or not a person goes to synagogue and prays their heart out on Rosh Hashanah has little to do with him or her meriting another year of life. There are no actuarial tables definitively proving that those who plead for their lives on Rosh Hashanah have longer life spans. In addition, we all know that many wicked people are not immediately "sealed for death" or our prisons would suddenly be empty. So, what does this passage in the Talmud mean?

To answer this, we must ask ourselves a most critical question: What are we really trying to accomplish on Rosh Hashanah?

The primary mission that each and every person is supposed to achieve on Rosh Hashanah is to coronate

the Almighty as our King whose dominion spans all of creation; hence our pledge of fealty to Him. This is the day when we proclaim God to be our King and that our lives revolve around fulfilling His will, for us and all of creation. Thus, all the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah is about God as King of the entire world.

Hebrew is a holy language and has many layers of meaning. As discussed in prior columns, one of the indicators of meaning is understanding some of the esoteric attachments of the numerical values to the Hebrew letters (known as gematria). The Hebrew word for crown is keter and the numerical value of keter is 620.

To me, this indicates that the crown of the Almighty is only complete when the Jewish people keep the 613 commandments of the Torah, and the rest of the world observes the Seven Noahide Laws of social justice. A further proof: the sages teach that there are 620 Hebrew letters in the Ten Commandments " this too has been said to represent the 613 commandments and the Seven Noahide Laws (see Bal Haturim Exodus 20:14).

Once we begin to understand that our primary responsibility on Rosh Hashanah is to proclaim God as our King and place ourselves in a theocentric world, we can understand how we are immediately granted life.

Being connected to the Almighty means a connection to the infinite and everlasting life. By contrast, if we (unfortunately) choose to live in an egocentric world, one where everything revolves around ourselves instead of God, then we are choosing a finite reality, which means we are inexorably headed towards death and obliteration.

There is, in fact, a judgement that is made on Rosh Hashanah " the Almighty examines our deeds from the prior year and uses that as a basis for concluding whether we live in a theocentric world or in an egocentric world. Our goal on Rosh Hashanah is to reaffirm our allegiance to the Almighty and His goal for the world; a world unified under His sovereignty. This is what the judgement of Rosh Hashanah is all about. But even in judgment we find a unique forbearance from the Almighty.

The Talmud also makes a remarkable statement about how the Almighty, in His infinite kindness, actually grants people the benefit of the doubt " if they are so deserving. What makes a person deserving of this kindness? Our sages teach us an important rule regarding this based on a verse in the Torah: "With righteousness you shall judge your fellow man" (Leviticus 19:15). Rashi (ad loc) explains that this verse is referring to the obligation to give a person the benefit of the doubt. Thus, upon seeing someone engage in questionable behavior, we must presume that we do not know the entirety of the situation or that the person only has positive intentions for his actions. For example, if you see a Jewish neighbor driving on Shabbat, do not think "Ah, I knew he was falsely pious!" but instead think that

he is doing a good deed, "Wow, he's willing to set aside Shabbat to drive a friend to the hospital. I hope that person is okay."

One of the sources for this is found in the ancient book of Jewish ethics known as Pirkei Avot "Ethics of Our Fathers, which states that we must judge everyone to the side of merit (1:6). The Talmud (Shabbos 127b) takes this one step further and states, "anyone who judges his friend to the side of merit will be judged (by heaven) to the side of merit." Rashi in his commentary on Pirkei Avot likewise says that the Almighty judges favorably those who give others the benefit of the doubt.

This principle, that God gives us the benefit of the doubt if we accord it to others, is difficult to understand. After all, when we give others the benefit of the doubt it is because we do not actually know what the person's intentions were, nor do we know the entirety of the situation. However, the Almighty is omniscient and absolutely knows everything that everyone does and why they do it. How are we to understand God giving leniency and presuming innocence when He is all-knowing?

I am reminded of the time many years ago when a friend was telling me about an awful date he had gone on the previous evening. He started by complaining, "The minute I saw her I just KNEW she would be judgmental." I stared at him, astonished that the irony had somehow escaped him.

But, in truth, we all do this. When meeting someone new we open a case file as to their worthiness of our friendship. We wait until this new acquaintance justifies a relationship with us. We hardly ever give someone the benefit of the doubt or extend ourselves until we are sure that they "deserve" our friendship.

Herein lies the remarkable exception to God's system of justice; a system in which we must justify our existence. When a person judges others to the side of merit "when he gives other people the benefit of the doubt without making them justify their actions to him" the Almighty returns the favor.

God judging someone to the side of merit isn't referring to a specific act; He already knows the intentions behind every action. But if we are willing to suspend our judgement of others then God does the same for us. This is also the corollary to one of the most important principles in the Bible: "You must love your neighbor as you love yourself." Just as you treated your neighbor the Almighty treats you.

This explains why Rosh Hashanah is in fact a holiday. The opportunity for mortals to earn an eternal life; relegating one's physical death to merely a stage in one's progression is in fact a great kindness from the Almighty. Yes, it is a somber day, a day when we must focus on the coronation of our King, but it is also an opportunity to transcend our physical reality, and that is truly something worth celebrating.

May we, along with the entire world, merit a

sweet New Year filled with good health, prosperity, and world peace for ALL of God's creations. © 2026 Rabbi Y. Zweig and shabbatshalom.org

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

SICHOT ROSHEI YESHIVA

HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL ZT"l

Translated by David Strauss

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It is stated in Pesikta de-Rav Kahana (23:3): "Yehuda bar Nachman said in the name of Reish Lakish: "God has ascended with a blast," etc. (Tehillim 47:6). At the moment when the Holy One, blessed be He, ascends and sits upon the Throne of Judgment, He ascends in judgment, as it is written: "God has ascended with a blast." But when Israel take their shofars and blow them, the Holy One, blessed be He, rises from the Throne of Judgment and sits upon the Throne of Mercy, as it is written: "The Lord, with the sound of the shofar" (ibid.). He is then filled with compassion for them, and He has mercy upon them, and He transforms for them the attribute of judgment into the attribute of mercy. When does this occur? In the seventh month."

We do not have clear concepts of what exactly the attribute of judgment is or what the attribute of mercy is, nor how the blowing of the shofar transforms judgment into mercy. Nevertheless, it is clear that we are dealing with an exceptional case: the Amora'im speak explicitly here about the heavenly consequences of mitzvot, about divine attributes -- subjects they generally avoid and leave to the sages of the Kabbala.

This year, Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat, and therefore we suffice with the blessings of Malkhuyo t, Zikhronot, and Shofarot, without blowing the shofar. The Talmud Bavli discusses and explains this "substitution" (Rosh Hashana 29b): "If the festival day of Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat -- in the Temple they would blow, but not in the provinces... From where is this derived?... Rather, Rava said: From the Torah it is permitted, but the Rabbis decreed against it, following Rabba, who said: Everyone is obligated in blowing the shofar, but not everyone is expert in blowing the shofar. Therefore they decreed [not to blow the shofar on Shabbat], lest one take it in his hand and go to an expert to learn, and carry it four cubits in the public domain. And this is also the reason for lulav, and the reason for megilla.

"Thus, from the Torah it is permitted to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana that falls on Shabbat, but the Sages prohibited it out of concern that someone unskilled might carry the shofar in the public domain.

"Who were these Sages who had the courage to forbid blowing the shofar on Shabbat because of such a remote concern? In Midrash Sekhel Tov, it is stated in the name of Rabbi Zeira that the Men of the Great Assembly established the order of prayers for all

generations. This assumption is strengthened by what we know of their great sensitivity to the concern of carrying, and by the fact that due to this concern, they also issued decrees regarding the handling of objects that are muktzeh." (Shabbat 123b)

However, the comparison to the muktzeh decree raises a difficulty: The Gemara in Shabbat tells us that the decree of the Men of the Great Assembly regarding muktzeh underwent changes and relaxations three times: "[At first] they permitted [certain articles]. Then they permitted [other articles]. And then they permitted again [still more]." This was because the Sages saw that the people needed muktzeh objects for use on Shabbat. If so, the question arises naturally: Why is the shofar, whose function is to transform the attribute of judgment into the attribute of mercy, not considered important enough to override the decree about carrying?

The answer is that the Sages were confident that just as the Torah's commandment has an effect in heaven, so too their decree -- to suffice with the blessings of Malkhuyot, Zikhroneh, and Shofarot without blowing -- also transforms the attribute of judgment into the attribute of mercy. From where did they derive this confidence? One can see this idea in the following midrash (Jerusalem Talmud, Avoda Zara 2:7): "'For your love is better than wine' (Shir ha-Shirim 1:2) -- Rabbi Ba bar Kohen said in the name of Bar Pazi: Know that the words of the Sages are more beloved than the words of Torah. For Rabbi Tarfon -- if he had not read [the Torah], he would have transgressed only a positive commandment; but because he transgressed the words of Beit Hillel, he was liable to death, as it is stated: 'He who breaches a fence shall be bitten by a serpent' (Kohelet 10:8). Rabbi Yishmael taught: The words of Torah contain prohibitions and allowances, leniencies and stringencies; but the words of the Sages -- all are stringent... A prophet and a Sage -- to what may they be likened? To a king who sent two of his officers to a province: on one he wrote, 'If he does not show you my seal and my insignia, do not believe him'; on the other he wrote, 'Even if he does not show you my seal and insignia, believe him.' So with a prophet it is written: 'He shall give you a sign or wonder' (Devarim 13:2); but with a Sage it is written: 'According to the Torah that they teach you' (Devarim 17:11)."

From this midrash we learn that the community of Israel expresses love toward God by fulfilling rabbinic decrees, and it thereby transforms the attribute of judgment into the attribute of mercy. Indeed, this decree -- not to blow the shofar on Shabbat -- was accepted and spread throughout Israel.

Last Shabbat we read: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life... to love the Lord your God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave to Him." (Devarim 30:19-20)

The mitzvot are tools through which the people

of Israel express their love for God and their cleaving to Him. This is a love blended with awe and reverence. Remove the element of love -- the desire to connect to God, to cleave to Him and walk in His ways -- and the mitzvot become dry, lifeless acts. On the words "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord" (Yechezkel 37:4), Rabbi Yirmeya bar Abba says: "These are people who have no moisture of mitzva within them." (Sanhedrin 92b). Recognizing this principle that is found in all of the mitzvot, our Sages said: All our decrees come only from a desire to draw near to Him, from genuine concern that there not be, even in the slightest, a sin that separates us from God. Through their decrees, the community of Israel says to God: The essence is our love for You!

And here repentance enters (Rambam, Hilkhoteh Teshuva 7:7): "How exalted is the level of repentance! Previously, the transgressor was separate from God, the Lord of Israel, as it is stated (Yeshayahu 59:2): 'Your sins separate between you and your God.' He would call out to God without being answered, as it is stated (Yeshayahu 1:15): 'Even if you pray many times, I will not hear.' He would fulfill mitzvot, only to have them crushed before him, as it is stated (Yeshayahu 1:12): 'Who asked this from you, to trample in My courts,' and it is stated (Malakhi 1:10): 'O were there one among you who would shut the doors that you might not kindle fire on My altar for no reason! I have no pleasure in you, says the God of Hosts, nor will I accept an offering from your hand.' But now, he is clinging to the Shekhina, as it is stated (Devarim 4:4): 'And you who cling to God, your Lord.' He calls out to God and is answered immediately, as it is stated (Yeshayahu 65:24): 'Before, you will call out, I will answer.' He fulfills mitzvot and they are accepted with pleasure and joy, as it is stated (Kohelet 9:7): 'God has already accepted your works,' and it is stated (Malakhi 3:4): 'Then, shall the offering of Yehuda and Jerusalem be pleasing to God as in days of old and as in the former years.'"

The essence of repentance is closeness to God!

We say in prayer: "Purify our hearts to serve You in truth." What does "in truth" mean? It means that our every word and every act has substance; that our service of God is performed with deep faith, with love of Him, and with a genuine desire to draw near to Him and cleave to Him.

May we merit this in the approaching Days of Awe. *[This sicha was delivered by Harav Yehuda Amital, ztz"l, on Rosh Hashana 5761.]*

RABBI MORDECHAI WEISS

A New Beginning

The 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 ravmordechai@aol.com

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.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The 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

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Today is the birth(day) of the world." (Rosh Hashana prayers) These words are said after the blowing of the Shofar on Rosh HaShana. Chazal tell us that Hashem began Creation on the 25th of Elul and Rosh HaShana corresponds to Friday, the day that Man was created. We celebrate Rosh HaShana on this date because before Man was created, there was no purpose to the world yet. As Hashem says, "I did not create the world to be desolate, but formed it to be populated." (Isaiah 45:18)

Though this is the typical translation of the phrase, that this is the day the world was born, the word 'harah' doesn't mean birth, but conception. We find in numerous places (including the Haftarah of Chana on the first day of Rosh Hashana) the phrase, "vatahar vatailed bain," and she conceived and she gave birth to a son. If this is so, then what is meant by saying "this is the day the world was conceived"? The world was created; we should say, "Hayom Huledes Olam."

The truth is that the word used here is very precise. This is the day the world was conceived, when it began its journey to completion. Now that human beings existed, the world could come to its perfection. As R' Akiva told Turnus Rufus HaRasha, Hashem left things in Creation undone so that we might become His partners in it.

All people are born with a 'tzelem Elokim,' the form of Hashem. But we know Hashem has no form! To what, then, are we referring? We are referring to His role as a Creator. Each person is imbued with the ability to create, do, and achieve things in the world. We don't have to accept situations as they are; we can try to improve them.

That is why on Rosh HaShana, when we ask Hashem for a new year to accomplish things on this earth and in the Heavens above, we say this is the day

the earth was conceived. It was the beginning of a growth stage that would continue forward with each person adding what they could. Nothing is yet determined or set, and we can maximize the outcomes of our efforts. That is the type of year we can and should ask for: one that will give us opportunities to grow and achieve, and in which we commit to using it as such.

At an engagement celebration, the Kallah's father was asked to put into writing the financial commitment that he promised to the young couple. He did not want to do so, saying that they should take his word for it since he was a very dedicated father who always watched out for his children.

R' Elchonon Wasserman, who was present at the time, immediately answered the Mechutan's claim based on the Tefila we say in Shmoneh Esrei during Aseres Yimei Teshuva. "Zachreinu L'Chaim Melech Chafeitz BaChaim V'Chasveinu B'Sefer HaChaim."

We have already asked Hashem to remember us for life, why do we then say to inscribe us in the book of life? Hashem does not forget and is equally devoted to His dear children. Nevertheless, we ask to have it in writing. From here we see, said R' Elchonon, that as honorable a person may be... always get it in writing!
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RABBI YAAKOV HABER

Moral Heights

During this period, when our thoughts should be on teshuva (pen-itence), 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 scat-tered. 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 Tzoros, 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

