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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

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.

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated in loving memory of my dear parents Chayim Yitchak ben Yehudo Hakohen Paul Kahn and Mirjam bas Hachover R'Yehoshua Irma Kahn-Goldschmidt by Fernand Kahn

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

The Talmud (B'rachos 10a) relates the story of some hoodlums who were causing Rabbi Meir severe anguish, to the point that he prayed to G-d in order that they should die. [In Midrash T'hillim 104:27, rather than being described as hoodlums, they were heretics, with one of them constantly badgering him by quoting verses to back up his heresy. Although the two descriptions (hoodlums and heretics) are different, they aren't mutually exclusive, and both could be true. There might also have been more censorship of the Talmud, to the extent that the term had to be changed there, whereas it was kept intact in the Midrash. It should be noted that many of the questions asked on this Talmudic Aggada do not apply if Rabbi Meir's adversaries were heretics rather than hoodlums.] Rabbi Meir's wife, B'ruria, convinced him that rather

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than praying that they would die, he should pray that they would repent instead. [Interestingly, in the Midrash, Rabbi Meir only prayed that the one heretic who was badgering him should die, whereas after B'ruria convinced him to pray that he repent instead, he prayed that all the heretics would repent. This could explain why in the Talmud we are told that the hoodlums repented, while no such information about the heretics repenting is provided in the Midrash, as it's possible that only the heretic who was badgering Rabbi Meir repented, but not the other heretics he had prayed for.]

Maharsha asks how Rabbi Meir could pray that those causing him anguish should repent, if "everything is in the hands of heaven with the exception of fear of heaven" (B'rachos 33b). Since G-d has left room for us to have free will, and whether we choose right over wrong, good over evil, and truth over falsehood is left to each individual, how could the prayer of another impact the choice to repent? [Maharsha then differentiates between asking G-d to help us repent and asking Him to help others repent, based on G-d helping those who try to do the right thing. If we are working on repenting, and ask G-d to help us do so, He certainly will. These hoodlums, though, were not trying to repent, and only did so because of Rabbi Meir's prayer.] Doesn't repentance fall under the category of "fear of heaven," and therefore need to be done by the individual rather than imposed from an external source?

Although Maharsha doesn't proved an answer, he tells us that an answer can be given (something he does quite often). Ahavas Aysan quotes the Maharsha, and suggests that the answer he is alluding to is based on how Maharsha himself explains the "fear of heaven" that is not "in the hands of heaven," an intellectual fear that is more like "awe." The more natural "fear," on the other hand, when a person is scared of something and adjusts in order to avoid it, is not based on free will, and is therefore not excluded from being "in the hands of heaven." To prove the point, Maharsha (on 33b, quoted by Ahavas Aysan on 10a) quotes the Talmud elsewhere (Y'vamos 63b), which says that punishment only comes to the world so that it will scare (the nation of) Israel so that they will repent. Obviously, then, G-d does use external factors to "impose" repentance on people. True, a person must get the message and decide to change after receiving the wake-up call, but if this repentance is a natural reaction to being scared, then it is not a function of "free will," and could occur even if there is no conscious choice to do what's right. Therefore, when Rabbi Meir prayed that the hoodlums (or heretics) repent, he wasn't necessarily impinging on their ability to choose, and was not contradicting the notion that "everything is in the hands of heaven except for fear of heaven."

The implication is striking. We are familiar with the distinction made between "repenting out of love" for G-d, whereby sins, even those done purposely, are turned into good deeds, and "repenting out of fear," whereby sins done purposely are considered as if they were done inadvertently, but the assumption (at least the assumption I made) is that both were choices made through the use of free will (even if one was a better choice than the other). Based on this, though, it would seem that there is a concept of repenting without using our free will to do so (which is what enabled Rabbi Meir to pray that others would repent). The very concept of "repenting," which is more accurately translated as "returning" (but must still rely on "repentance" in order to "return"), need not refer to a "change of heart," where we become a different person in order to facilitate a change in our behavior, but may be a function of the person we already were, i.e. someone who reacts to situations that scares them by acting the way they already knew they really should be acting, but hadn't until now because they weren't really scared enough to do so. G-d provides the "scare" that brings this out in us, and Rabbi Meir was asking G-d to provide such a scare (or other external factors) to bring it about in those who were badgering him.

If changing the way we act can be called "repentance" even when we aren't exercising our free will to make such changes, the "formula" recited on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur (in U'n'saneh Tokef) for undoing harsh decrees (T'shuva, T'filla and Tz'daka) not only becomes more internally consistent, but also becomes much easier to attain. We can understand why a decree issued against someone who sinned is nullified if the underlying cause that led to the sin has been nullified through complete repentance (T'shuva), but why is that true of prayer (T'filah) and giving charity (Tz'daka) as well? And how are the three put in the same category if only the first one really undoes the damage done by the sin? However, if "repentance" means changing our ways even if we haven't really changed who we are, the three things in the formula are really on the same plane (and the question applies equally to all three). What we are being told by this prayer, then, is that even if we haven't attained the ideal level of complete repentance (it doesn't say that "complete repentance" nullifies the decree, just "repentance"), a harsh decree can be nullified by

changing our ways, even if we only change our ways to avoid having any harsh decrees that were issued remain in force.

Yom Kippur is a wonderful gift, providing us with the opportunity to press the "undo" button and start living our lives the way we know we really should. But aside from the opportunity to bring about real, meaningful change to who we are, we are apparently also given the opportunity to avoid harsh decrees from being carried out by merely changing our ways (and creating a connection with our Creator through prayer and helping others through charity).

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Moses' long and tempestuous career is about to end. With words of blessing and encouragement he hands on the mantle of leadership to his successor Joshua, saying, "I am a hundred and twenty years old today. I may no longer go out and come in, since the Lord has said to me, you will not cross this Jordan." (31: 2). As Rashi notes, he says, "I may not" not "I cannot." He is still in full bodily vigour, "his eye undimmed and his natural energy unabated." But he has reached the end of his personal road. The time had come for another age, a new generation, and a different kind of leader.

But before he takes his leave of life G-d has one last command for him, and through him, for the future: "And now write for yourselves this song and teach it to the children of Israel, put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me among the children of Israel" (32: 19). The plain sense of the verse is that G-d was commanding Moses and Joshua to write out the song that follows, that of Haazinu, (32: 1-43). So Rashi and Nahmanides understand it. But the oral tradition read it differently.

According to the sages, "And now write for yourselves" applies to the Torah as a whole. Thus the last of all the 613 commands is to write – or at least take part in writing, if only a single letter – a Torah scroll. Here is Maimonides' statement of the law:

Every Israelite is commanded to write a Torah scroll for himself, as it says, "Now therefore write this song," meaning, "Write for yourselves [a complete copy of] the Torah that contains this song," since we do not write isolated passages of the Torah [but only a complete scroll]. Even if one has inherited a Torah scroll from his parents, nonetheless it is a mitzvah to write one for oneself, and one who does so is as if he had received [the Torah] from Mount Sinai. One who does not know how to write a scroll may engage [a scribe] to do it for him, and whoever corrects even one letter is as if he has written a whole scroll.[1]

[1] Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah, 7:1

Why this command? Why then, at the end of Moses' life? Why make it the last of all the commands? And if the reference is to the Torah as a whole, why call it a "song"?

The oral tradition is here hinting at a set of very deep ideas. First, it is telling the Israelites, and us in every generation, that it is not enough to say, "We received the torah from Moses," or "from our parents." We have to take the Torah and make it new in every generation. We have to write our own scroll. The point about the Torah is not that it is old but that it is new; it is not just about the past but about the future. It is not simply some ancient document that comes from an earlier era in the evolution of society. It speaks to us, here, now – but not without our making the effort to write it again.

There are two Hebrew words for an inheritance: nachalah and yerushah/ morashah. They convey different ideas. Nachalah is related to the word nachal, meaning a river, a stream. As water flows downhill, so an inheritance flows down the generations. It happens naturally. It needs no effort on our part.

A yerushah / morashah is different. Here the verb is active. It means to take possession of something by a positive deed or effort. The Israelites received the land as a result of G-d's promise to Abraham. It was their legacy, but they none the less had to fight battles and win wars. Lehavdil, Mozart and Beethoven were both born to musical fathers. Music was in their genes, but their art was the result of almost endless hard work. Torah is a morashah, not a nachalah. We need to write it for ourselves, not merely inherit it from our ancestors.

And why call the Torah a song? Because if we are to hand on our faith and way of life to the next generation, it must sing. Torah must be affective, not just cognitive. It must speak to our emotions. As Antonio Damasio showed empirically in Descartes' Error[2], though the reasoning part of the brain is central to what makes us human, it is the limbic system, the seat of the emotions, that leads us to choose this way, not that. If our Torah lacks passion, we will not succeed in passing it on to the future. Music is the affective dimension of communication, the medium through which we express, evoke and share emotion. Precisely because we are creatures of emotion, music is an essential part of the vocabulary of mankind.

Music has a close association with spirituality. As Rainer Maria Rilke put it:

> Words still go softly out towards the unsayable.
> And music always new, from palpitating stones
> Builds I useless space its godly home.

Song is central to the Judaic experience. We do not pray; we davven, meaning we sing the words we direct toward heaven. Nor do we read the Torah.

[2] Antonio Damasio, Descartes error: emotion, reason, and the human brain, London, Pengiun, 2005.

Instead we chant it, each word with its own cantillation. Even rabbinical texts re never merely studies; we chant them with the particular sing-song known to all students of Talmud. Each time and text has its specific melodies. The same prayer may be sung to half-a-dozen different tunes depending on whether it is part of the morning, afternoon or evening service, and whether the day is a weekday, a Sabbath, a festival or one of the High Holy Day. There are different cantillation for biblical readings, depending on whether the text comes from Torah, the prophets, or the Ketuvim, 'the writings'. Music is the map of the Jewish spirit, and each spiritual experience has its own distinctive melodic landscape.

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it modulates into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. Music speaks to something deeper than the mind. If we are to make Torah new in every generation we have to find ways of singing its song a new way. The words never change, but the music does.

A previous Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, once told me a story about two great Rabbinic sages of the nineteenth century, equally distinguished scholars, one of whom lost his children to the secular spirit of the age, the other of whom was blessed by children who followed in his path. The difference between them was this, he said: when it came to se'udah shlishit, the third Sabbath meal, the former spoke words of Torah while the latter sang songs. His message was clear. Without an affective dimension – without music – Judaism is a body without a soul. It is the songs we teach our children that convey our love of G-d.

Some years ago one of the leaders of world Jewry wanted to find out what had happened to the "missing Jewish children" of Poland, those who, during the war, had been adopted by Christians families and brought up as Catholics. He decided that the easiest way was through food. He organized a large banquet and placed advertisements in the polish press, inviting whoever believed they had been born a Jew to come to this free dinner. Hundreds came, but the evening was on the brink of disaster since none of those present could remember anything of their earliest childhood – until the man asked the person sitting next to him if he could remember the song his Jewish mother had sung to him before going to sleep. He began to sing Rozhinkes mit mandlen ('Raisins and almonds') the old Yiddish lullaby. Slowly others joined in, until the whole room was a chorus. Sometimes all that is left of Jewish identity is a song.

Rabbi Yehiel Michael Epstein in the introduction to the Arukh ha-Shulchan, Choshen Mishpat, writes that the Torah is compared to a song because, to those who appreciate music, the most beautiful choral sound is a complex harmony with many different voices singing different notes. So, he says, it is with the Torah and its myriad commentaries, its "seventy faces." Judaism is a choral symphony scored for many voices, the written text its melody, the oral tradition its polyphony.

So it is with a poetic sense of closure that Moses' life ends with the command to begin again in every generation, writing our own scroll, adding our own commentaries, the people of the book endlessly reinterpreting the book of the people, and singing its song. The Torah is G-d's libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir. Collectively we have sung G-d's song. We are the performers of His choral symphony. And though, when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, because words are the language of the mind but music is the language of the soul.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And Moses called unto Joshua, and said unto him in the sight of all Israel: 'Be strong and of good courage; for thou shalt go with this people into the land which the LORD hath sworn unto their fathers to give them; and thou shalt cause them to inherit it"' (Deut. 31:7).

In previous commentaries on Rosh Hashana, the anniversary of the day on which the world was conceived, I explained the sighing-sobbing sounds of the shofar as the natural response of the Jew to an incomplete, imperfect world of evil as well as good, chaos as well as order. We are entrusted with the mission of bringing down the Divine attributes of loving-kindness and courage, of compassionate righteousness and moral justice, to suffuse society with freedom and peace in order to perfect and complete the world in the Kingship of the Divine. This is the message of the firm, exultant and victorious tekiya sound of the shofar, when we crown G-d as King of the Universe.

This task is not a simple one; it requires our becoming a holy nation and a kingdom whose every citizen is a successful teacher of morality to the world. Hence, Rosh Hashana begins a period of teshuva, or repentance, which must continue until it succeeds—however long that may take. It will require the cumulative commitment of many generations to the retelling and then reliving of the biblical narrative and to scrupulous observance of G-d's will.

Rosh Hashana is a joyous festival because we have G-d's biblical promise that we will eventually succeed. We recite those verses of our success again and again in our Yom Kippur liturgy.

But there is a second significance to the broken, crying sound of the shofar. It is the existential sound of the individual who is living life within a vale of tears, who often doubts that this world will ever be perfected in the Kingship of the Divine, who always

doubts that he will have the strength of will and character to make the world any better and who even doubts that the world had a Creator in the first place.

Although such a train of thought may initially release the questioner from certain ethical and ritual responsibilities, it can only lead to a dead end. If life is merely a "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," why go through the struggle? The specter of a Sartrean world to which there is no exit other than suicide hardly leaves one with a life worth living or worth reproducing. It only leaves one trembling in fear before a dark, black hole of nothingness.

These questions plagued the children of Israel in the wake of the sin of the Golden Calf. Having experienced the concern, the miracles and wonders of the Lord during the Exodus, as well as the riveting Revelation at Sinai at which they actually heard the Word of the Divine, how could they possibly have fallen prey to the orgiastic abandon of wild Dionysiac debauchery? Moses, the source of their connection to G-d, had seemingly disappeared; they felt bereft and abandoned and so they lost themselves in a momentary "escape from freedom" and responsibility.

Moses is so frustrated that he smashes the sacred tablets. He beseeches G-d first to forgive Israel and then to teach the next generations how to deal with probable recurrences in the future. He says, "Make Your ways known to me" (Ex. 33:13)—now the Israelites must act to find favor in Your eyes, and "Show me Your glory in this world" (Ex. 33:18)—what truly characterizes You and Your relationship to us.

G-d then tells Moses to stand in the cleft of a rock in the mountain range of Sinai, to ready himself for the second Revelation, the continuation of the Ten Commandments. G-d will reveal to Moses His Name, His face, as it were, the aspect of G-d that may be grasped by the human mind.

And this is the Divine Revelation on the 10th day of Tishrei, Yom Kippur: Havaya Havaya, the Ineffable Name of G-d, ofHavaya, which means literally "to bring into being, to create," and which the talmudic sages identify as the G-d of infinite and unconditional love. The name is repeated twice, and as our Sages interpret, "I am the G-d who loves you before you sin and I am the G-d who loves you after you sin"—unconditional love.

The first Havaya explains that since G-d's essence is love, His first human emanation, the human being, also has most fundamentally the transcendent power to love another and thereby to perfect himself and the world. The second Havayaexplains that although the human being will fail and will sin along the way, G-d will always be ready to forgive us as long as we seek forgiveness.

And G-d goes one step further. Yes, in our imperfect and incomplete world, it is often difficult to find G-d, to sense His presence and recognize His concern. It is even more difficult to bring the Divine Majesty to this often corrupt and evil world. But once a year, G-d will seek us, G-d will "come down" to us in His cloud of glory, G-d will knock on our door with His gift of unconditional forgiveness. All we need do is open the door for Him and let Him in—into our hearts, where He can already be found and into our homes and our families.

This is the magical gift of Yom Kippur, the day of consummate love.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The name of this week's Torah reading is taken from the first word of the parsha itself – vayelech. This word signifies movement, the action of going somewhere. The subject of this verb is a great teacher and leader Moshe. According to Jewish tradition and the words of the great commentators to the Torah, this parsha was recorded for us by Moshe on the last day of his presence on earth.

It is truly wondrous that on his last day on earth Moshe should be described as being in motion, going in strength and fortitude to further teach and guide his beloved people Israel. Perhaps in this word vayelech alone we discover the secret of the greatness and manifold achievements of Moshe during his lifetime.

Moshe was always going, always engaged in teaching and counseling Israel. We do not find in the Torah that Moshe ever rested from his mission or stopped working and striving towards his goal of raising the Jewish people to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Moshe, so to speak is in perpetual motion, always advancing, going, cajoling and instructing the people of Israel.

The Torah records for us that at the end of his life his physical strength and faculties were in no way diminished. That certainly was an exceptional and most unique blessing. But that was a gift from G-d, as health and longevity always are. The continued activity on behalf of Torah and the Jewish people was a gift from Moshe to Moshe. It was entirely dependent upon his attitude, commitment and vision for himself and his people. Therefore he is truly described in this week's Torah reading as being a person who is on the move, constantly going towards greater heights and more meaningful accomplishments.

This is also one of the messages that Shabbat Shuva teaches us. In order to return to G-d and to begin anew in our quest for holiness and sanctity, we must be proactive in our behavior and attitude. Being passive or apathetic certainly will not accomplish the goal of national and personal return to greatness and holiness.

The new year dawning upon us, with all of its blessings also brings with it all of its challenges as well.

The ability to face up to those challenges, to keep on walking so to speak, will truly be the measure of our accomplishments and the events of this new year. Moshe has taught us by personal example that it is never too late in life to keep on walking and attempting to fulfill our hopes, aspirations and visions.

Life is precious and fleeting and should be exploited to the fullest. Being in motion, physically and spiritually, is really the secret of successful longevity and lifetime achievement. Even the great Moshe is not granted physical immortality nor will he even be granted all of the wishes he had for himself on this earth. Yet, until his very last breath, Moshe devotes himself to accomplishing his goals and to leading the Jewish people. This short parsha, which should serve as an inspiration to all of us, should be well studied.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In the portion of Va-Yelekh, Moshe (Moses) declares that G-d has not permitted him to enter the land of Israel. (Deuteronomy 31:2)

There are specific reasons which explain why Moshe was denied this right. The classical approach is that Moshe sinned when he hit rather than talked to the rock. (Numbers 20:7-13) The Midrash points out that Moshe may have been denied entry for killing the Egyptian who had attacked a Jewish slave. (Exodus 2:11-12) Moshe, according to the Midrash, could have used less force to stop the Egyptian. But is there a more general message that can be learned from the decision to ban Moshe from setting foot into the land he longs to see?

The classic work on Jewish mysticism, the Zohar, stresses the spiritual growth from Noah to Avraham (Abraham) to Moshe and beyond. (Vayerah 218-220) While Noah remained silent when told by G-d that the world would be destroyed, Avraham engaged G-d in debate when hearing that the city of Sodom would be devastated. Moshe takes it to another level. Not only does he intercede when G-d tells him that the Jews would be "consumed" for building the Golden Calf, but throws his personal lot in with his people: If you do not forgive the people's sin, he says to G-d, "erase my name from the book You have written." (Exodus 32:32)

The message is clear. Avraham did what Noah could not do. Moshe reaches an even higher level than Avraham. But it can be suggested that even Moshe could not realize all of his dreams. He doesn't enter the land; this is left for his disciple Joshua and future generations.

"It is not for you to complete the task," says Rabbi Tarphon, "but neither are you free to refrain from it." (Ethics 2:21) We are all part of Jewish history, and the most crucial aspect of that history is that we are all part of a process.

Perhaps for this reason the Torah uses the expression, "and you will return until (ad) the Lord your G-d." (Deuteronomy 30:2) The word "ad" implies that as high as one reaches spiritually, as close as one comes to G-d, one never arrives, the goal is never completed, indeed, there are always more steps to be taken.

A delightful tale makes this very point. A rebbe once turned to his disciples and asked, "There is a ladder with 50 rungs. One Chassid is on the 25th rung, another on the 10th. Who is higher?" "Has our rebbe gone mad?" the students asked each other. "Of course, the one on the 25th." "No, my children," answered the rebbe. "It depends on which way you're going."

During these days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur whose central theme is growth and transformation, this message deserves consideration. It teaches that the most important element of teshuvah (repentance) is moving in the right direction—reaching higher, higher and higher still.

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"He said to them, 'Today I am one hundred and twenty years old. I can no longer go or come, and G-d said to me, 'You shall not cross this Jordan.'" (Devarim 31:2)

"What then is [the meaning of] 'I can no longer'? [Here it means:] 'I am not permitted,' because authority was taken from him and granted to Yehoshua." (Rashi)

Transitions are seldom straightforward. Even welcome change comes with risks because people become accustomed to the status quo, even negative ones. Just recall the Stockholm Syndrome. How much more so is this true when the entire universe is making the transition.

On its most basic level it was simply a matter of pulling one page off the calendar (before sundown on Erev Rosh Hashanah) and revealing another, and instead of seeing "5775," seeing "5776." It was simply the result of the 29th of Elul finally fading into the first of Tishrei at nightfall last Sunday night. It wasn't even the start of a new tax year.

I don't know if it is still true, but one of the highest rates of suicide in the Western world used to be on New Year's Eve. If I recall correctly, the explanation is that the coming of the new year made it too difficult for some to continue to deal with some painfully old

problems. R"L, they ended their lives instead. A person's pain is only magnified at times when he is supposed to have reason to celebrate, and most others do.

In China, that deadly day for many teenagers is the first of the new school year. They'd rather kill themselves, after a peaceful summer with their families, than go back and face the bullies that wait for them. The torment from day-to-day just becomes too much to emotionally bear. What an educational system.

All of that is tragically dramatic, but it occurs against a backdrop of mundanity. New Year's Eve is a human convention, just as is the first day of the school year. Change occurs, but not on the level of the entire universe. That only happens when one Jewish year ends and a new one begins, the time when the Divine Presence is at its yearly closest, and the Jewish people stand in judgment.

Many in the world know that Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish new year, and even the day of the year on which it occurs. Few outside of the Jewish people, or even inside the Jewish people, understand how it affects the entire universe. When the Talmud states:

"All punishment comes to the world because of the Jewish people." (Yevamos 63a)

it is making this very point. Whatever judgment the Jewish people receive at this time of year determines what is going to happen to the entire universe in the upcoming year.

Riding a subway is a good example. As long as the car remains on the same rails it is a relatively smooth ride. Sometimes, however, subway traffic requires a change of track, and you can tell when it happens. You can feel the car veering in a different direction. You can hear the screeching sound of metal wheels rubbing against mental rails. And, the car shakes back-and-forth, almost violently sometimes. If you're not ready for the change you can find yourself thrown against someone else.

With respect to the spiritual realm, it is more seamless. Great changes can occur spiritually but take time before they manifest themselves in the physical realm. Cause-and-effect can be and usually is immediate as in the physical world. However, the causes may be spiritual and beyond the spiritual sensitivity of the average person, only detectable when they show up in the physical world.

It's like a child throwing a baseball a mile, and then riding off on his bicycle before it breaks a window. The destiny of the window was decided the moment the ball left the boy's hand, but it was still undetectable to a man gardening next to the window a mile away. By the time he hears the crash of his window and looks in the direction of the ball, the perpetrator will be long gone.

When the guards change, so-to-speak, at the beginning of the new Jewish year, there is no observable Buckingham Palace type spectacle. There is no Presidential Inauguration type of event to witness. And yet, its impact on all of Creation is far more important, having a much greater effect on what happens the entire upcoming year.

A person can live safely the entire year and die in a car crash, G-d forbid, one month before Rosh Hashanah. It was decided the previous Rosh Hashanah. He can be poor an entire year, and win the lottery on the last day of the Jewish year. That too was decided the previous Rosh Hashanah. The deal with Iran was made towards the end of 5775, but it was decided that it should exist on Rosh Hashanah of that year. If it results in a major war, G-d forbid, that too will have been decided on the Rosh Hashanah of that year.

Yes, it is true that we have until Yom Kippur to impact our judgment, and even until Shemini Atzeres. Some say even until Chanukah. The actual judgment however was decided on Rosh Hashanah. Not knowing what it is, makes it difficult to work even harder during the rest of the Ten Days of Repentance to improve it. Out of sight, out of mind.

The great Chofetz Chaim said that everything functions in the physical world as it does to teach us about how things work in the spiritual world. For example, he said, the telephone shows us how what we say over here can actually be heard over there. Loshon hara said even in private, he warned, has its way of getting around.

Which physical reality can teach us about preparing for dramatic change? I can think of two specific examples that are very instructive: weather and earthquakes.

Both the weather and earthquakes can initiate dramatic change. A big difference between the two is that weather often provides signs about impending change, but earthquakes do not. We can track weather patterns and measure barometric change and warn people to take an umbrella to work or assure them that they won't need one. Earthquakes occur suddenly, without humanly detectable signs (the animals seem to know when one is coming), and a momentary occurrence can result in years of catastrophic damage.

The goal is the same with respect to both. We may not be able to change the weather or stop earthquakes. We can however learn to cope with each and minimize their impact on our daily lives. We can become smarter about how to limit their effect on human history.

To this end we have used technology to allow us to more accurately predict the weather and to protect ourselves from it. We have used experience and advanced technical knowhow to construct buildings that can better withstand the forces of an earthquake. We have voluntarily changed our lives in ways that we can accept to avoid involuntary changes in ways that we don't.

This, in essence, is what Rosh Hashanah is

about, and sin for that matter. There are the givens: the world as it has been created, and we can only do so much with it. There is mankind as he has been created, and we can only do so much with ourselves. And of course there is the purpose of Creation, and we can only do so much to accomplish this. On Rosh Hashanah we are evaluated for how well we accomplished the latter given the limitations and opportunities of the former two.

It's like a track race. There is the race track itself and its fixed conditions. By the time the runners take their marks, the track is what it is and what they will have to work with. They will not be able to change it, only run it.

Then there are the athletes themselves. By the beginning of the race they too are fixed values, for the most part. Their bodies have limitations. Their training had limitations. Their mindset has limitations. All of this will dictate what kind of race they will run, and who will place first, second, third, etc.

If everyone plays fair and does the best they can, then each finishes honorably. In the Olympics you only get medals for physically placing first, second, or third. It has nothing to do with how hard the person tried and what he had to mentally overcome to run the race.

In life it is different. "Medals" are given out by G-d based upon personal bests. The winners are the ones who did the best they could with what they had and the Divine Providence with which they had to deal. The losers are the ones who did not succeed by maximizing their use of free will, even if they get multi-million dollar contracts for what they do down here.

Then there are the "sinners." Those are the ones who want to win so badly at what they do that they break the rules to succeed. In track racing they take steroids. Or, they might knock one of the runners off stride. In life they do that which the Torah forbids, or avoid that which the Torah commands. In the language of the Talmud, they act like Zimri but want the reward of Pinchas (Sotah 22b).

Sinners are the people who refuse to change and instead try to make the world adapt to them. They don't conform to G-d, but make G-d conform to them by denying His existence. Or, they may accept the existence of G-d but they reject Torah from Sinai so they can use the world as they please. Or, they accept Torah from Sinai but reject rabbinical interpretation and application of halachah.

The thing about the weather is that we see that it is unmovable. We have no choice but to adapt ourselves to its demands. We have even less control over earthquakes and fear them. Consequently, they dictate to us where we live and our building practices.

When it comes to the spiritual world, we live with the illusion that we can make the world serve us, and get away with it. There is so much evil in the world, and so many people seem to act with impunity. Good guys seem to finish last while the bad guys speed ahead for the finish line. People cheat and don't get caught.

Day after day Jews eat treif and don't get sick. Week after week they break Shabbos and have a blast, while those who keep Shabbos either lose pay, or their jobs completely. Some of the wealthiest people are the nastiest while many of the nicest are dirt poor. Man seems to be having his way while G-d seems to be allowing it to happen.

Of course. At this stage it cannot be any other way. None of it is really true. It just appears that way for many deep reasons. The simplest of them though is because doing the right thing has to be a matter of choice, not of compulsion. We don't get reward for simply doing the right thing. We get rewarded for doing the right thing when we could have just as easily, or even more easily, done the wrong thing. No one does the wrong thing unless he thinks he can get away with it.

Global warming is a good example. Carbon emissions are not good for the atmosphere. Nobody can disagree with this. The point of disagreement is whether or not they have had, and will continue to have an impact on weather conditions. Those who say yes use global warming to explain the hotter summers and colder winters. Those who say no blame long term weather patterns for recent weather conditions.

It would seem to be something that should be an obvious yes or no. The reason why it is not is because the impact takes place behind the scenes and in small increments over long periods of time. It takes Nasa to prove the truth one way or the other, not the average person who drives to work or uses a motor boat on weekends. As a result, they continue to live with the illusion that their actions have no long term damaging effect.

The same people though are complaining about the hottest summers on record, or the coldest winters than anyone can remember. They decry the price of fruits and vegetables which are more expensive because entire crops are being wiped away by bad weather conditions. They make no connection between what they do and what is happening, even though the connection is completely there.

The spiritual world is resilient. It can survive our sins, but only so much. Our spiritual waste builds up over time and impacts the spiritual weather. Over time the conditions worsen until there is an all out reaction, either personally, nationally, or internationally. It is never a question of if, only of when. Rosh Hashanah was the time to become fully cognizant of this. By Yom Kippur we should have already integrated this idea and its meaning into our way of thinking.