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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.  *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. Contact him at ravmordechai@aol.com*

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**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L**

## 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 God 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 God 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]

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 God'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. 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

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

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

dimension – without music – Judaism is a body without a soul. It is the songs we teach our children that convey our love of God.

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 God's libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir. Collectively we have sung God'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. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* 

**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"' (Deuteronomy 31:7). 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 God 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 God's will.

Rosh Hashana is a joyous festival because we have God'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 God, 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 God 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" (Exodus 33:13)—now the Israelites must act to find favor in Your eyes, and "Show me Your glory in this world" (Exodus 33:18) – what truly characterizes You and Your relationship to us.

God 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. God will reveal to Moses His Name, His face, as it were, the aspect of God 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 God, of Havaya, which means literally "to bring into being, to create," and which the Talmudic sages identify as the God of infinite and unconditional love. The name is repeated twice, and as our Sages interpret, "I am the God who loves you before you sin and I am the God who loves you after you sin"—unconditional love.

The first Havaya explains that since God'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 Havaya explains that although the human being will fail and will sin along the way, God will always be ready to forgive us as long as we seek forgiveness.

And God goes one step further. Yes, in our imperfect and incomplete world, it is often difficult to find God, 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, God will seek us, God will "come down" to us in His cloud of glory, God 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 AVI WEISS**

# Shabbat Forshpeis

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook explains that teshuvah does not deal with a specific wrong. Rather, it relates to a general feeling of despondency and estrangement from God. Teshuvah means a return to the self, to the godliness inherent in every human being. Of course, we must assume responsibility for our actions, but, on a spiritual level, the human being possesses inner purity (Rabbi Kook, Orot Hateshuvah, ch. 15).

Not coincidentally, the instrument used to rally us to repent is the shofar. The sound of the shofar comes from the inner breath; it is a reversal of the breath God breathed into Adam – "And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). The shofar sound releases the breath of God that breathed into Adam and breathed into each of us. In the words of Sefat Emet: "The mitzvah of shofar [is the following]…through teshuvah, we can stir the inner voice found in the souls of the Jewish People" (Rosh Hashanah 5651).

A beautiful legend reinforces this idea. A short apple tree grew aside a tall cedar. Every night, the apple tree would look up and sigh, believing that the stars in the sky were hanging from the branches of its tall friend. The little apple tree would lift its branches heavenward and plead, "But where are my stars?"

As time passed, the apple tree grew. Its branches produced leaves, passersby enjoyed its shade, and its apples were delectable. But at night, when it looked to the skies, it still felt discontented, inadequate; other trees had stars, but it did not.

It happened once that a strong wind blew, hurtling apples to the ground. They fell in such a way that they split horizontally instead of vertically. At the very center of each apple was the outline of a star. The apple tree had possessed stars all along; it just required a different approach to find them. The inner core had always concealed the celestial.

If this is true for apples, it is all the more so for human beings, who are created in the image of God. Every person has an inner star, an inner nitzotz (spark), if we can only find the way to ignite the light.

Once a person finds his or her inner godliness, Rabbi Kook explains, one can return to God. In his words, "The primary role of penitence is to return to oneself, to the root of one's soul. It is only from that place that the individual can then return to God" (Orot Hateshuvah, ch. 3).

Many centuries earlier, Joseph Ibn Saddiq presented a similar principle this way: "By man knowing his own soul, he will know the spiritual world from which he can attain some knowledge of the Creator" (Olam Hakatan).

Thus, teshuvah contains two steps: the move inward (the return to one's inner goodness and godliness) catapults the person to move upward to God, to encounter Him.

This idea is based on a passage from Deuteronomy: "When all these things befall you – the blessing and the curse that I have set before you – and you take them to heart.… And you will return to the Lord your God, and you and your children will heed His voice and all that I command you on this day, with all your heart and soul" (Deuteronomy 30:1, 2).

The first part of the sequence of teshuvah describes how one returns inward to one's heart. Only then does the Torah speak of returning to God. 

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**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

# Wein Online

The parsha of Vayelech is the parsha that contains the smallest number of verses – only thirty – of any other parsha in the Torah. It also is the parsha that usually coincides with Shabat Shuva, the holy Shabat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The words of the parsha are part of the last testament of Moshe uttered on the day of his passing from this earth.

As is his want, Moshe minces no words regarding the fate of the Jewish people in its future story. Thus the shortest parsha of the Torah is also one of the most powerful of all of the parshiyot of the Torah. In effect Moshe warns his people Israel that the Lord will hold them accountable to the terms of the covenant of Sinai and that that covenant is irreversible and unbreakable.

It will take a long time and much twisting and turning by the Jewish people before they accept that reality of covenantal responsibility. But Moshe assures them that eventually the message will set in and that this will be the basis for the Jewish return to God and His Torah. This is the essence of the parsha's content and the brevity of the parsha only serves to enhance the power of its message.

There are certain self-evident truths that need no extra words, explanations or language. This parsha especially gains in power and relevance as Jewish history unfolds over thousands of years. Every deviation from the covenant of Sinai has eventually brought with it angst and pain, if not even disaster. Just look around at the Jewish world and its history. Moshe's words are clearly vindicated by circumstances and events.

Personal repentance and return is far easier to achieve than is national repentance and return. The Jewish people, or at least a significant part of it, has strayed very far away from the covenant of Sinai. The situation here in Israel is far better than it is in the Diaspora where intermarriage, ignorance, alienation and false gods have eroded Jewish faith, family, self-identity and values. How is it possible to hope for a national return to the covenant of Sinai under such circumstances?

Our short parsha seems to indicate that it will be a process and not a sudden epiphany. The prophet in the Haftorah indicates that such a process will be incomplete without the recognition that the false gods and temporarily popular ideals all have led nowhere. He echoes Moshe's words in our parsha, that return and repentance in a national sense can only occur if there is a realization how badly we have gone astray.

The great challenge, of the modern culture upon us, is how pervasive it is in every facet of our lives. The confusion that this engenders in the Jewish people prevents clear thinking, accurate judgment and honest assessments of true Jewish values versus current faddish correctness.

Our parsha is short but our way back is long and rigorous. In this good and blessed year that has just begun let us start - and continue that journey that leads back to Sinai and forwards to complete national redemption. 

**RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

# Resurrection, Reward

The concept of the Resurrection of the Dead is not mentioned directly in the Torah but our Rabbis tell us that the Torah hints at this concept in the pasuk, "Hashem said to Moshe, behold you will lie with your forefathers but this people will rise up and stray after other gods of that which is foreign in the land in whose midst it is coming and it will forsake Me and it will annul My covenant that I have sealed with it." If one divides the sentence slightly differently it can be read: "Behold you will lie down with your forefathers and rise up."

Our problem here is that the word "v'kam, and rise up" both stylistically and using the trop, the note connotations through which the Torah is chanted, belongs to the words which follow it: "but this people will rise up and stray after other gods of that which is foreign in the land." The interpretation caused by dividing the pasuk differently, is found in Gemara Sanhedrin (90b) and is part of a discussion of the Messianic Era.

Many Rabbis argue that "v'kam, and rise up," as we find in this pasuk, is an inappropriate term in discussing a rebellion against Hashem. A more appropriate term would have been "yeridah, going down," not rising up. The Kli Yakar brings an interesting approach to this problem. He quotes from the Gemara Yevamot (97a) that when a student quotes a law in the name of the Rabbi who taught that law, "the Rabbi's lips move in the grave." According to the Kli Yakar, a Rabbi does not rest in his grave, for he is constantly worried about the actions of his students, that they should grow in Torah and not stray. Certainly, Moshe was of this level as the greatest teacher, and his students were the entire nation of the B'nei Yisrael. Thus, when the people would stray, as the pasuk indicates, Moshe would rise and continue to warn them and be concerned for them while in his grave. In this way also, it is as if the students (B'nei Yisrael) rise up against their teacher and awaken him and trouble him in his grave.

Hashem warns that He will turn away from the people because they will have turned away from Him.

"My anger will flare up against it (the nation) on that day, and I will forsake them and I will conceal my face from them and they will become prey, and many evils and distresses will encounter it and it will say on that day, 'is it not because my Elokim is not in my midst that these evils have encountered me'. And I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that it did for it had turned to the gods of others." Hashem will not initiate this action but it will be a reaction to the people's abandonment of Him. Th is will take place in two stages: (1) the people will become fat in the land and (2) they will turn to foreign gods that are not part of that land. Many of the meforshim, commentators, ask about our p'sukim: the words, "and it (the nation) will say on that day is it not because my Elokim is not in my midst that these evils have encountered me." It appears from these words that the people are at the stage of Teshuvah where they recognize what they have done wrong and verbalize it. Our Rabbis ask why the next pasuk then says that Hashem will hide His face on that day. It would seem that Hashem would offer assistance to the people as we know He does for us when we turn to Him. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin quotes the Kohein HaKadosh in reading the pasuk differently. The pasuk says, "And I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that it, (the people), did for it had turned to the gods of others." He understands that this means that when the people turn back to Hashem and realize that they had done wrong in turning to these other gods, that Hashem will hide His face from all the evil that had happened because of the people, and He will renew His covenant with them.

We see from the example given of Moshe that being a teacher is a double-edged sword. When a student learns from the teacher and appreciates what the teacher has given to him, the teacher not only receives the reward for the good that he himself has done, but also receives a reward for the lessons that have been incorporated into the life of his student. At the same time a teacher can make mistakes just as any human does, and when his mistakes cause a student to turn away from the lessons of the Torah, he receives punishment not only for his own shortcomings but the shortcomings of his students. This is true for parents also. As a parent, one tries to give over the proper lessons and the proper love of Hashem and His Torah to each of his children, but he is governed by the same possibility of making a mistake in judgment as anyone else. He too is rewarded and punished for the acts of his children, if not actually punished directly at least through the pain and anguish that he feels.

How can one possibly then become a parent or a teacher with such a serious responsibility hanging over his head. For our answer we must turn to Hashem. Hashem suffers when His people turn away from the Torah which He has given them, and at times He is forced to punish them. He too is excited by our performance of each mitzvah and in anguish when we stray. Throughout all of this time, however, He continues to shower His people with His love. He cannot cause us to do His mitzvot, but as we realize His love, we are bound to turn towards Him. This is what constantly brings us back, an undying love that we feel when we recognize all that He does for us. The same is true for children and students. If we shower our children and our students with our love, the message gets through, and even in the darkest times, our children and our students know that they can change their behavior, and we will accept them without question.

May we each grow to show our love to our children, our students, and our fellow man. In that way we will emulate Hashem and bring the entire world closer to that ideal which Hashem desires of us.



**RABBI AVI SHAFRAN**

# Name of the Holy Land

A time will come, the Torah warns, when Hashem, as a result of Klal Yisrael's actions, will seem to "abandon them and hide My countenance from them" and "many evils and troubles will befall them" (Devarim 31:17).

And "on that day," the people will say: "Surely it is because Hashem is not in our midst that these evils have found us" (ibid).

That common translation, however, isn't literal. What the pasuk really says is "because my Hashem is not in my midst that these evils have found me."

The straightforward understanding of that expression of anguish is that Hashem's "hidden face" will cause the Jewish people to doubt His love for them. The singular possessives and object would then simply be personifications of a collective feeling of abandonment.

But the use of the singular may point to a source of behavior that can lead to the "many evils and troubles," a singularly personal attitude: Jewish individuals - as individuals - imagining that Hashem, although He is "my Hashem," isn't truly in me.

That, in other words, there isn't within me inherent holiness and the attendant ability to unlock it.

And, indeed, Torah-study and mitzvos, so many Jews think, just aren't them. They're fine and doable, but for others.

For rabbis.

"Orthodox" ones.

And the delusion that we don't have momentous potential isn't limited to Jews estranged from their religious heritage. Dedicated observant Jews are vulnerable, too, to feelings of despondency born of feeling "unholy," incapable of what they may know the Torah asks of them, but feel just "isn't them."

None of us, though, is "unholy." Hashem took the trouble, so to speak, to grant each of us existence, and that means His plan includes us as essential players, capable of holiness.

Each and every single one of us. *© 2022 Rabbi A. Shafran and Ami Magazine*

**RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

# Migdal Ohr

"And Moshe called to Yehoshua and said to him, before all of Israel, "Be strong and resolute…" (Devarim 31:7) One reason Moshe spoke to his disciple Yehoshua in front of the Jewish People was so they would accept him as their leader, as they had Moshe. It is difficult to accept the passing of a leader and the rise of one who is not as great in our eyes. Therefore, Moshe wanted them to see that Yehoshua had his blessing and was appointed in his stead so they would obey Yehoshua. We similarly find that Eliyahu appointed his successor, Elisha.

If Moshe wanted them to see Yehoshua as a leader worthy of their respect, though, why did he tell Yehoshua not to be afraid? Why put the thought in their minds that Yehoshua was not a fearless leader they could rely on?

The truth is, the idea of an infallible, fearless leader is not a Jewish one. At least, not in the sense that he is self-assured and confident that he can do no wrong. On the contrary, a Jewish leader, like any Jewish individual, should be concerned that he may err, and therefore consider each decision carefully.

By encouraging Yehoshua to be strong in front of the entire nation, Moshe was teaching us several important lessons. First of all, there is no one, no matter how great, who can't benefit from chizuk and encouragement. We all benefit from outside support, and one never outgrows that.

Secondly, there is nothing to be embarrassed about in needing chizuk. It is something built into Creation by Hashem which not only helps the person receiving the reassurance, but enables each of us to have a share in the success of others by strengthening them in what they are doing. Of course, one must be careful, as the Navi Yeshaya (41:7) says, "A man strengthens his friend and tells his brother, "Be strong,"" but there it was speaking of idolators encouraging each other to persist in making idols. We must be sure we're encouraging the right and proper behavior, not aiding and abetting the wrong kind.

Additionally, Moshe taught us HOW to encourage someone. He told Yehoshua that he would come with the Jews to the Land of Israel, instead of saying he would bring them to it. The word Moshe used, "Tavo," connotes that Yehoshua will be part of it but not the one actually effecting their entrance to the land. Some explain this to convey that he would be aided by the elders. However, the Ohr HaChaim says Moshe told Yehoshua: "Hashem will bring the Jews to the promised land; you just have to march at their head."

In essence, the encouragement Moshe taught us to give is that the pressure is not on us to perform or achieve or conquer. Those results lie in Hashem's hands. Our job is to make our best efforts and leave the rest to Him. We do not have to finish the work, but neither are we free to neglect it. So it is, that we come to Yom Kippur on the heels of this advice. We cannot cleanse ourselves; only Hashem can wipe the slate clean. However, we must head in that direction and do all we can to move the process forward, and BACK to Hashem.

*A Rav once came to R' Moshe Feinstein zt"l asking about the kosher status of a certain product. R' Moshe advised the rabbi to oversee the plant and provide the certification himself.*

*The man paled. He asked, "Rebbe, how can I pasken (rule) on such matters? To have people depending on me for Kashrus is such a great burden. I might make mistakes. I am so afraid of this!" R' Moshe lovingly patted his hand and smiled.*

*"So tell me," R' Moshe asked, "who then should pasken, one who is not afraid to err?" © 2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr*

**SHLOMO KATZ**

# Hama'ayan

"Hashem said to Moshe, 'Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, and this people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the Land,... and it will forsake Me and annul My covenant... My anger will flare against them on that day and I will forsake them; Ve'histarti/ and I will conceal My face from them and they will become prey, and many evils and distresses will encounter them. They will say on that day, "Is it not because my Elokim is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?" But Hastair Astir / I will surely have concealed My face on that day...'" (31:16-18)

Many have asked: These verses seem to say that Moshe will die, the Jewish People will stray from Hashem, He will be angry and will turn away from them ("Ve'histarti" / "And I will conceal My face"), the Jewish People will recognize that it was a mistake to stray from Hashem ("Is it not because my Elokim is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?"), and Hashem will respond by again concealing His face. Will Hashem not accept the Jewish People's repentance? Moreover, why will the post-repentance concealment be greater than before (first, "Ve'histarti"--one degree of concealment; then, "Hastair Astir"--double concealment)?

R' Yaakov Moshe Charlap z"l (1882-1951; rabbi of Yerushalayim's Sha'arei Chessed neighborhood and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Mercaz Harav) explains: The

Jewish People's statement, "Is it not because my Elokim is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?" implies a belief that Hashem watches over us when we are righteous and ignores us when we are not righteous, that a person can, at times, be outside of Hashem's Hashgachah, that "because Hashem is not watching over me, random bad things happen to me." But, that is not correct, and Teshuvah cannot be predicated on that mistaken premise. There is never a time when Hashem is not watching over a Jew. When Hashem conceals His face, He simply makes it harder for us to recognize His hand in our lives. But, to return to Him in Teshuvah, we must recognize that He is always there. (Mei Marom: Sha'arei De'ah, Vol. 19, p.509-510)

R' Shlomo Alkabetz z"l (1505-1584; author of the Friday night hymn Lecha Dodi, among other works) explains differently. He writes: Certainly, the Jewish People's confession ("Is it not because my Elokim is not in my midst...") is a sign of true repentance. To understand Hashem's response, we need to know that there are two kinds of Yissurin / suffering in this world: those whose purpose is to awaken us to repent, and those whose purpose is to cleanse. The first concealment of Hashem's face in these verses is meant to awaken us, so it comes dramatically, all at once ("Ve'histarti"). After we repent, Hashem brings us Yissurin that cleanse us, but, in His kindness, He breaks them into smaller units ("Hastair Astir"). (Kitvei Ve'chiddushei Rabbeinu Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz Mi-Ktav Yad) 

**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.  *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.*