



# אהבת כלולות יד

**A Digest of Divrei Torah  
on the Yamim Noraim**  
in honor of the engagement of  
our daughter Rachelli to Mikey Pearl



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# אהבת כלולותיך

A digest of Divrei Torah on the Yamim Noraim in honor of  
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## Introduction

הָלֹךְ וְקִרְאתָ בְּאָזְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לֵאמֹר כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה זְכַרְתִּי לָךְ  
חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבַת כָּלֹלְתֶיךָ לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרֵי בְמִדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא יְרוּעָה:

*Go proclaim to Jerusalem: So said Hashem: I remember the devotion of your youth,  
your love as a bride, how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.*

(Yirmiyahu 2:2)

**W**hen Hashem wants to wax nostalgic for a time that the Jewish people showed unwavering devotion to Him, why evoke the metaphor of a loving bride?

Since Talmudic times, Rosh Hashanah has been called *Yom HaZikaron*, a day of remembrance. Indeed, the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 34b) instructs us to dedicate an entire section of the Mussaf Amidah on Rosh Hashanah to remembrances. Hashem's taking inventory of the past is clearly consistent with the theme of judgment, but that is not what *Zichronos* refers to. *Zichronos* is not a catalog of incriminating memories or an enumeration of our past misdeeds in an effort to hold us accountable. The Gemara says the purpose of reciting *Zichronos* is so that memories come before Hashem for our good. But how?

Rav Shimshon Dovid Pinkus (*Galus U'Nechama* p. 48) writes that when we stand before Hashem in judgment, we cannot succeed on our own merit. The memories we stir in Hashem are of our ancestors, and we argue their *mesirus nefesh*, self-sacrifice, and worthiness should serve on our behalf. We say to Hashem, look at where we come from, from whom we descend, the spiritual fortitude that is in our very DNA, and have faith that we have a bright future. We invoke Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, we blow the shofar to elicit an association with the ram of the Akeida, and we read of the faith of Sarah Imeinu and Chana. We are the product of who came before us, we contend to Hashem, and He should therefore be optimistic and confident about our future.

It comes as no surprise, then, that part of *Zichronos* includes the recitation of this pasuk in Yirmiyahu. When we stand in judgment before Hashem,

we ask Him to see us as a young bride standing under her Chuppah with a rich past and a still-undetermined future. In a few days we will appear before the Ribono Shel Olam and submit that He should have faith in our future because of our past.

I am proud and honored to share this collection of sermons I have been privileged with Hashem's help to deliver at Boca Raton Synagogue during the Yamim Noraim. I want to thank my brother-in-law Binyamin Muschel for his help in editing this digest and all of my writings. His contribution extends well beyond commas and spelling and is a source of invaluable feedback, further ideas, references, and much more.

This digest is dedicated in honor of the engagement of our precious daughter Rachelli to our wonderful future son-in-law, Mikey. Rachelli and Mikey inspire all who know them with their devotion to Torah learning and Torah living. They share a *simchas ha'chaim*, a joy for life and an amazing capacity for bringing happiness to their family and friends through their selfless personalities. Hashem has blessed each of them with tremendous talents and skills and we know in combination they will produce a Torah home that will make great contributions to Klal Yisrael.

As a young chosson and kallah, their future is yet unwritten. However, like the Zichronos section of our davening, I believe we can be so confident about their future because of their past. Rachelli and Mikey are tremendously blessed and privileged to have their past very much part of shaping their present. Their grandparents and great-grandparents, bli ayin ha'rah, are all wonderful role models and examples that continue to positively shape both of them and our entire families.

Rachelli and Mikey – we pray that you will look back at this time in your lives with a sense of אֶהְבֶּתָּ כְּלוּלֹתֶיךָ , a fondness for the kindness you have experienced from so many in your youth who love you and believe in you and the love you feel as a bride and groom. May Hashem shower you with *beracha*, *hatzalacha*, *siyata dishmaya* and a long life together in happiness, good health, and the pursuit of His vision.

With Torah blessings,

**Rabbi Efreim Goldberg**

# Accepting the Gift of the Present

**ROSH HASHANAH 2006**

One of the hardest parts of traveling significant distances is the time change. But the truth is, even without going anywhere, all of us in this room are living in three different time zones: the past, the present and the future. The past is what just happened, the present is this very moment, and the future is about to arrive.

If I asked you to associate Rosh Hashanah with one of these time zones, which would it be? There are persuasive reasons to say it is about the past. After all, today we gather to introspect on the previous year—our successes, our failures, what we are proud of, and what we wish we could have done differently. However, one could equally argue that Rosh Hashanah is about our future. Perhaps the theme of today is to identify where we want to go and how we are going to get there.

According to the Gemara in Rosh Hashanah (16b), while both of these answers may be compelling, they are wrong.

וא"ר יצחק אין דנין את האדם אלא לפי מעשיו של אותה שעה שנאמר  
(בראשית כא, יז) כי שמע אלהים אל קול הנער באשר הוא שם.

Hashem judges us according to our actions at that moment, based on the passuk describing how God judged Yishmael “where he was.”

What does the Gemara mean that Hashem looks at us and evaluates us “at that moment.” In contrast to when? Our Gemara tells us, ואפילו הוא עתיד להרשיע לאחר זמן, even if Hashem knows that we will become wicked in the future, he nevertheless judges us on the present and not the future. The Talmud Yerushalmi provides a different explanation, explaining that Hashem judges us in the present and not based on our past.

What? He doesn't judge us on the past? Isn't the entire point of these ten days, isn't the goal of the process of teshuva, to look back on our past with regret and remorse, and vow to improve? If Hashem is not judging us on our past and He is not evaluating us based on our future, then what is He holding us accountable for?



Henry S. Haskins once said, “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” In other words, the past no longer exists and the future has not yet happened. All that matters, all that is real, is our present, and all that counts is what lies within us, meaning who we are and how we are in our present state. Certainly the past contributes cumulatively to our present, but it is only any particular moment that counts, until it, too, becomes the past.

העבר אינ, והעתיד עדיין, וההווה כהרף עין. The past is gone, the future has not yet occurred and the present passes like the blink of an eye. Believe it or not, today, Rosh Hashanah is not about the past. Nor is it about the future. It is simply about our present. It is about how we define ourselves, what resolve we have **right now**, what our values and priorities are **right at this very moment**. Not last week or last year, and not next week or next year. All that counts today, on Rosh Hashanah, is this very moment.

This morning I would like to ask you, if Hashem is going to evaluate us based on our present, shouldn't we be in it and not off somewhere in the past or the future? There is an epidemic taking place in our lives. It is creating tension, anxiety, and discomfort that are totally unnecessary. I speak of the plague of dwelling in the two time zones that don't exist in reality, the past and the future, and by so doing totally dismissing the only thing that is real, the present.

The present is not only the way Hashem judges man, but it is to be the way that we judge each other as well. The Gemara in Kiddushin presents us with a person eating a cheeseburger at McDonald's and an hour later we find ourselves under a chupa only to discover that person is the groom and then hear him declare to the bride, *harei at mekudeshes li al m'nas she'ani tzadik*, we are hereby married on condition that I am a perfectly righteous person. The Talmud concludes that they are indeed to be considered married, as the past is irrelevant since in the present the groom may have repented. שמא הרער בתשובה, perhaps he felt regret in which case his present state is pure and they are thereby married.

Living in the present is much more complicated and challenging than it seems. It is so tempting to dwell on the past, reflecting with guilt, pain, or a host of different emotions. It is just as easy to get lost in the future, including our dreams, hopes, aspirations or fears, anxieties and worries.



And yet, if we make those mistakes we sacrifice the most precious thing, our present, which passes with the blink of an eye. The danger and the damage from not being present in the moment is inestimable.

Christopher Reeve once described his terrible accident that left him a quadriplegic. He was riding a horse in an equestrian race and the horse fell on top of him, changing his life forever. He said that before the race he knew one hurdle was particularly difficult. The accident, though, didn't occur on that difficult hurdle. It happened on the hurdle just before the difficult one because, Reeve explained, he was so focused on and concerned about the difficult one that when he jumped the earlier one he wasn't present in the moment.

He went on and said that when he was falling, he focused on how he would get right back up on the horse and recover in the race. Because he wasn't focusing on the moment, on how to brace for the fall, he snapped his neck and wound up quadriplegic. Imagine, Superman himself lost the use of his body simply because he was so focused on the future that he failed to be in the present.

The Gemara in Chagiga tells us that if a person dwells on four things – what is above, what is below, what was before and what is after – it would have been better had he not been born. **A person whose only concern is what was and what will be, loses what is.** And since the present is all that is, it would have been better had he never come into the world.

There is a great book written by Spencer Johnson called The Present. It is an engaging story of a young man's journey to adulthood and his search for the present, a mysterious and elusive gift he first hears about from a great old man. Later, when the boy becomes a young man, disillusioned with his work and his life, he returns to ask the old man, once again, to help him find the present. The old man responds, "Only you have the power to find the present for yourself." So the young man embarks on a tireless search for this magical gift that holds the secret to enjoying work and life. It is only after the young man has searched high and low and has all but given up his pursuit that he at last discovers the present, and all of the promises it offers. The present he discovers, is the satisfaction of living in his present, something only he controls.

עולם היום, we will read momentarily. Today, the world was created. Our world, our very existence, only finds meaning and purpose if we live in the Hayom, we are present in the today. When we are doing homework with our children, but our mind is still at work, we aren't there. When we are at work and our mind is at dinner with our spouse, we aren't there. When we are in shul and our mind is watching a game, we aren't present. If we aren't able to live in the moment, we have nothing because we are neither where our body is or where our mind is.

A chassid of Reb Moishele Kobriner once visited the Kotzker Rebbe. Different Rebbes were known for different things. Some excelled at chesed, others at tzedaka, others at davening. The Kotzker asked this chassid, what is your Rebbe's greatness? The chassid answered, "my Rebbe's greatness is whatever he is doing at that moment." The Kotzker was so moved by that answer that he would often repeat it. Imagine, always being present in the moment, that truly is the mark of greatness.

The key to achieving serenity, tranquility, and peace within ourselves is to be entirely submerged in whatever we are doing at a given moment. It is when our fears and anxieties of the future creep in, or our memories of the past rise up, that we feel fragmented from the present and therefore uneasy and unhappy.

The Vilna Gaon is quoted by his student Rav Chaim of Volozhin as saying something I find magnificent and awesome. He encourages us to imagine that there is no one in the entire world but us. And he then tells us to think as though there is only one hour left to live. Could we possibly be distracted from that hour? Would we possibly lose focus from that activity? Every moment of our lives, says the Gaon, must be as rich, as focused, as lived as if it is our last one on earth.

Today is called Rosh Hashanah, the head of the year. The Ba'al Shem Tov says that we are wherever our head, wherever our mind is. This year, may our "Rosh" be in the "Shana," may our head be present where our body is found. As we begin Mussaf, as Hashem judges us in this moment, let's not dwell on the past and let's not fantasize about the future. Rather, let's make the most out of our present.

As the saying goes: Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift from above and that is why we call it the present.

# The Matter Rests With You Alone

**ROSH HASHANAH 2009**

**T**he older I get, the less I enjoy looking at pictures of myself. I much prefer to see myself as having a full head of hair, no grey, thin, no wrinkles or black pouches under my eyes. Looking at pictures and seeing the way I truly appear to others forces me to abandon my distorted view of myself and confront reality in a way that is simply too uncomfortable. And so, rather than face the reality of my aging, I choose not to look at pictures of myself, unless they are from a long time ago.

כי זוכר כל הנשכחות אתה הוא מעולם ואין שכחה לפני כסא כבודך.

*For it is You Who eternally remembers all forgotten things, and there is no forgetfulness before Your Throne of Glory."*

The section of *zichronos*, remembrance, concludes with this statement of acknowledgement that Hashem remembers all that is forgotten. But if God is omnipotent, infinite, and perfect, He remembers it all, absolutely everything, then why do we emphasize that He remembers specifically that which is forgotten?

One of the most influential and comprehensively researched theories in social psychology is cognitive dissonance. The theory refers to our reaction to the discomfort caused by holding onto two contradictory ideas simultaneously. Put simply, we struggle to live with the tension created by truly addressing our deficiencies and faults and so we choose, consciously or subconsciously, to ignore and dismiss them instead.

There are countless examples of the hypocrisy and duplicity we live with regularly by simply employing the handy tool of cognitive dissonance. We know eating unhealthily is bad and yet we do it. We know intellectually we should be more patient, kind, honest, and accepting and yet we don't always practice those qualities. We see ourselves as non-judgmental and yet we criticize our family members regularly and fail to give them the benefit of the doubt. The most obvious example may be smokers, who

rationalize and justify their smoking despite cognitively understanding the risks. At the end of the day, we are better at rationalizing than at being rational.

My friends, when it comes to our assessment and judgment of others we are brutally honest, but we are rarely honest and truthful when it comes to seeing ourselves. How many people say, “I hate the way I look in pictures.” I have news for you – that’s the way you look, you just don’t want to accept it. Some say, “I hate the way I sound on a video or recording” – that’s the way you sound. What is true for our voice or our appearance is certainly true for our souls and our personalities. We simply distort in our minds our bad practices and habits rather than recognize we need to change and improve them.

זוכר כל הנשכחות – He remembers all that is forgotten. The Modzitzer Rebbe explains that Hashem does not concern Himself with that which we are aware of and remember. When we confront our lives and engage in self-awareness and self-reflection, Hashem is satisfied. It is the *nishkachos*, the things that we dismiss and disregard, the things we choose to ignore and pretend don’t exist about ourselves that He *davka* remembers and holds us accountable for. The Modzitzer is telling us something remarkable. As long as we confront ourselves genuinely, Hashem is content and no further review is necessary. It is when we engage in selective memory and cognitive dissonance that Hashem must step in to be *zocheir kol hanishkachos*, remember and remind us.

Incredible evidence to the truth of this insight is the story of Rebbe Elazar ben Durdaya related by the Gemara in Avodah Zara. Rebbe Elazar had led a life of promiscuity, moral depravity, and corruption. One day, he received rebuke from of all places an accomplice of his to his immoral behavior. She said, “Through your actions you have rejected your Godly soul.” Rebbe Elazar was shaken by the straightforward way in which he was addressed, unprecedented in his experience. He recognized the veracity of the reproach and desired to change. The Gemara records that he went and sat between hills and mountains and asked them to plead for mercy on his behalf. They replied, “We stand in need of it ourselves.” He then turned to heaven and earth: Plead for mercy for me. They too replied, “We stand in need of it ourselves.” He then exclaimed: Sun and moon, beg on

my behalf! But they too rejected his request. Finally, he sat down, placed his head between his knees, he cried and he exclaimed, אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי – the matter depends on me alone. At that moment his soul departed and a heavenly voice proclaimed Rebbe Elazar ben Durdaya is destined for life in the world to come.

How did he earn the title of “Rebbe” and, more significantly, a share in the world to come, when he didn’t even repent, he simply said *ein ha’davar taluy elah bi*? The answer is Hashem holds us accountable for that which we deny about ourselves. When we recognize *elah bi*, it is me, I know my deficiencies, my faults, my shortcomings, my mistakes and I must change them, Hashem is satisfied and our place in the world to come is secure.

This is the task and the charge of Rosh Hashanah. *Hayom haras olam* – today mankind was created and we celebrate our birthday by looking in the mirror and confronting the truth of who we are without any cognitive dissonance, rationalization or justifications. We confront the good, the bad and the ugly so that we can take pride in the positives in our character but more importantly, we can correct the deficiencies that are inevitably and invariably there as well.

On your seat this morning you found a bookmark. The mirror on top of the bookmark that sticks out of the machzor is not to check out your makeup or adjust your tie – it is a reminder to look at and into ourselves. The bookmark contains a series of questions to take seriously today and to provoke the process of an authentic self-discovery and assessment.

You have been provided with the questions, but it is up to each of us to provide the answers. Indeed, that is the charge of the day: *teshuva*. The word *teshuva* literally means an answer or answers as in *she’eilos u’teshuvos* – questions and answers. We need to shut out the world around us and use these questions as investigative tools into who we really are, what we need to change and what we can be proud of. We then need to give answers. Sometimes the *teshuva* is easy, a minor adjustment or no adjustment at all. Other times the *teshuva* may involve an overhaul. If we are sincere and genuine in the process of responding to the questions, then we have done *teshuva* – given answers.

Take one of the questions as an example – “What do I want to be

remembered for?” If God forbid a truck ran me over today, what would I want them to say at my funeral tomorrow? Would I be proud if they said he never left work before 10 pm or he always came in first in his fantasy football league, or she made more money than any of her siblings or she cooked the most amazing potato kugel? If not, then I need to consider the question - what do I want to be remembered for, what will be my legacy and how do I create it. There is no right or wrong answer; it is personal, individual, and unique. One thing I know is the process of reflecting on the question and giving a *teshuva*, an answer, will lead to *teshuva*.

It occurs to me that perhaps this is the reason for *tashlich* as well. We go to a body of water and read a moving liturgy about forgiveness. Why must we stand specifically opposite a body of water for this exercise of *teshuva*? When you look into water, what do you see? You see your reflection. *Tashlich* obligates us to look in the mirror, to examine ourselves, and to confront what we see.

We tend to think this process is nearly impossible – how can I really examine my life and change? The Torah promises us that in fact, not only is it not impossible or inaccessible, it is right under our noses to do.

יֵאָמֵר כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת, אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מֵצֵוֶה הַיּוֹם--לֹא-נִפְלְאָתָה הוּא מִמֶּךָ, וְלֹא רִחְקָה הוּא. יֵב לֹא בִשְׂמִימִים, הוּא: לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה-לָנוּ הַשְּׂמִימָה וְיִקְחָהּ לָנוּ, וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ, וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה. יֵג וְלֹא-מֵעֶבֶר לָיִם, הוּא: לֵאמֹר, מִי יַעֲבֵר-לָנוּ אֶל-עֶבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחָהּ לָנוּ, וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ, וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה. יֵד כִּי-קָרוֹב אֱלֹהֵי הַדָּבָר, מְאֹד: בְּפִיד וּבִלְבָבָךְ, לַעֲשֹׂתָּ.

The Ramban understands the mitzvah “HaZos” to be *teshuva* – giving answers and by extension meaning to our lives. It isn’t far off, it isn’t out of reach, it is right in front of us to embrace and enrich our lives and ourselves. It is in our power and control to change if we simply are willing to be honest with who we are and what needs to be adjusted.

In one of her top-rated shows on January 5<sup>th</sup> of this year, Oprah Winfrey made a public confession – she had regained all the weight that she so publicly lost. “I am embarrassed,” she said. “All the fame and all the attention and the glamorous life and the success doesn’t mean one thing if you can’t control your own being,” she said. This episode and



her statement left many puzzled – why can't America's self-help queen help herself? She has a personal trainer, a personal chef, a staff of people. Every day she interviews the next great motivational speaker, author, guru, expert or self-help coach.

Steve Salerno, author of "SHAM: How the Self Help Movement Made America Helpless" explains that this is simply a symptom of the greater phenomenon that self-help actually seems to hurt more than help. He explains that "the culture of self-help teaches people to rely on things that don't provide any answer. Hope, Trust the Universe, Believe it, Achieve it. In fact, the majority of people who buy self-help books tend to buy similar books on the same topic over and over. The hope is that one day, something is going to click."

When we place our hope in self-help books, speakers, gurus, or coaches, we are seeing the process of giving teshuva, answers to our lives, as outside of ourselves. I know people that are constantly going to the next workshop, the next seminar, reading the next self-help book, hiring the latest coach, or listening to the latest motivational speaker. Statistics show that these people are actually the least likely to change. The reason is because they see the stimulus to change as everywhere but internally. Steve Salerno articulates what the Torah taught us thousands of years ago – real change will only occur when we accept *b'ficha u'vilvavcha la'asoso* – it is inside ourselves and up to us to give an honest look in the mirror, to ask ourselves tough questions and to formulate meaningful and tangible answers.

The old Elazar ben Durdaya was the classic example of a self-help addict. He turned to the mountains, to the sun and moon, to the stars and thought the solution was there. It was only when he recognized – *ein ha'davar taluy elah bi* – it is dependent on me – that change occurred.

And so my friends, today, Rosh Hashanah, instead of trying to find happiness through self-medicating on our addictions, on food, on work, or on fads, let's find happiness through self-discovery. Let's proclaim together *ein hadavar taluy elah bi* – it is up to us to look inside ourselves. Let's look in the mirror and let's be honest with ourselves for our sake. On the whole, I believe we will and should be proud of what we will see. But



if we confront the imperfections we will discover, we will be well on our way to a more meaningful, purpose-driven and satisfying life.

# *It's Just Not Me*

## **ROSH HASHANAH 2012**

A few years ago, I was sitting in my usual seat in Shul and from a distance I heard a man breathing heavily as if asleep. I looked over expecting to find him nodding off, but to my surprise, he was wide awake. I realized that this individual was overweight, out of shape and not taking care of himself. I went over to him that day and suggested gently that I was concerned about his health and well-being. "Thanks Rabbi, but really I am good." "What do you mean you are good," I asked, "don't you think you should exercise or be more careful with your lifestyle?" "Rabbi, I said I am not interested." And with that we ended the conversation.

A few days later, I was still bothered and concerned for this individual and felt compelled to try again. "Listen," I told him, "I think you should go for a walk a few times a week. Thank God you are retired, you have the time and it would have remarkable health benefits if you just walked the circle a few times a week." Again, the individual told me politely, "Rabbi, thanks but no thanks, I am not interested." A few more days passed and I couldn't stop thinking about this man. I had heard his labored breathing a week earlier for a reason and I continued to feel obligated to encourage him to take better care of himself. And so, I gave it one last shot.

I approached him with an offer I thought he could never refuse. "I have an idea," I told him. "I will come to your house three times a week and the two of us will go for a walk together." He looked at me, smiled and said, "No thanks, I am not interested." I couldn't understand. "What do mean not interested? Don't you want to take care of yourself?" I will never forget his response: "It's not me." "Not you?" I asked, "What do you mean it's not you? It's not you to improve your health, extend your life, make sure you have the energy and vigor to play with your grandchildren?" "Exactly, Rabbi, it is not me to do those things. Give up on trying to change me, it is just not me."

Those words have haunted me since he said them. At first I thought to

myself, who thinks such a thing let alone says it? What does that mean it's just not me. But the more I have thought about it, the more I realize that to some degree or another, every one of us thinks or says, concerning some aspect or area of our lives, I am not going to change, I am not going to start making that improvement or changing that thing, because it's just not me.

I want to talk to you this morning, Rosh Hashanah morning, about the "it's just not me" syndrome and how we can break out of it.

בראש השנה יכתבון וביום צום כיפור יחתמון.

Ask any child, what is Rosh Hashanah all about? What is the theme of the day and they will answer - *teshuva*. Ask anyone why do we blow shofar, the mitzvah of the day, and they will likely quote the Rambam without even knowing it. The sound of the shofar is to awaken us from our slumber, stir us from our sleep, and arouse us to do *teshuva*, to repent.

Assuming the shofar is successful in sounding the alarm within our souls and inspiring us to engage in this process of reflection and growth called *teshuva*, what's next? How is it done? The process is well-defined. The Rambam in Hilchos Teshuva explains that we must regret the past indiscretion, confess exactly what we did wrong, and commit to not allow it to recur in the future. *Teshuva* is about identifying our *chata'aim*, our mistakes and missed opportunities, offering a confession and resolving to be better.

There is only one problem. If Rosh Hashanah and the shofar are about the call to *teshuva* and *teshuva* is about confessing and confronting our *chata'im*, why is there virtually no mention or reference to sin or forgiveness in the Rosh Hashanah davening? As we sit here this morning, if you follow the Machzor closely, you will notice the startling omission of any reference to the essence of what *teshuva* is all about. We don't recite *selichos* and we don't say *vidui*. Some even have the custom of omitting the first *Avinu Malkeinu chatanu lefanecha* because of its explicit reference to sin, something we are clearly avoiding highlighting on this day.

Put simply, if Rosh Hashanah is about doing *teshuva*, how can *teshuva* take place without reference to sin, to mistakes, to indiscretions or poor judgment?

Rabbi Soloveitchik offered a simple answer that contains a phenomenal insight into what today is all about and how we can break out of the “it’s not me” trap. Said the Rav, there is a preliminary stage of *teshuva*, even before we confront our mistakes, confess and pledge to change in the future. The preliminary stage is called *hirhur teshuva*, the awakening of *teshuva*. This stage is not nearly as defined as *teshuva* itself, but it is equally important and in fact is a prerequisite to *teshuva*.

Explained the Rav, before we can change, we must believe that we have the capacity to change. Before we can create a new me, we must let go of the natural tendency to feel, “it’s not me.” Before we can grow, we must believe that we can yet grow.

Talk to any pediatric endocrinologist and you will learn something amazing. As a result of all of the hormones in our food, milk and shampoo, children’s growth in this century is being highly affected. Some children are maturing too slowly and many are maturing too fast. There is a great increase in the number of children taking growth hormone to stimulate their development.

How do doctors know how much of the hormone to give them? Doctors do a bone age study by x-raying a child’s left wrist. They can examine the growth plates and predict with a very high accuracy how much time the child has left to grow. They may find there are 8 months or 12 months or two years left for this child to reach the height that they will live at the rest of their lives. Doctors then prescribe a dose based on the finding to maximize the child’s height in the time that he or she has left to grow.

Now consider this: what is true for our bodies is not at all true for our souls. We have a finite amount of time to grow physically. Indeed, if you are sitting here right now listening to me, you are likely done growing. You may want to be 7 feet tall and dunk a basketball. You can take all the growth hormone in the world, but it is too late. You are as tall as you are going to get.

That is not true for our souls. There is no window that closes. We have the potential to grow spiritually and emotionally at any point in our lives. It is never too late. We are never done growing. A person can be 95 years old and on his death bed, and experience an incredible growth spurt if he simply decides to be different, to become better, to look at something a

different way, or to change a belief he has held for many years.

Today, Rosh Hashanah, is not about *teshuva*. For the next 10 days culminating in Yom Kippur, we will engage in rigorous *teshuva*. We will reflect, identify what needs improvement, and get to work. But today, today is about *hirhur teshuva*, it is about believing that we can change, that we are not done growing, that we are not fixed in a “me” that cannot be altered. Today is about believing that the best is yet to come.

Throughout this time of the year, we repeat the phrase **אל תשליחנו לעת זקנה**. It is normally translated as “do not cast us away in old age; when our strength gives out, do not forsake us.” But if that is the case, it should say **b’eis zikna**, don’t cast us away during the time of old age. It doesn’t say **b’eis**, it says **l’eis**.

Listen to how the Tzitz Eliezer, Rav Eliezer Waldenburg understands this sentence and you will never say it the same way again. He explains that our impression is that young people are filled with energy and vitality. They have their whole life ahead of them to grow, mature, develop, and change. Older people, however, are set in their ways, fixed in their behavior and unlikely to change.

We ask Hashem, **אל תשליחנו לעת זקנה**, don’t cast me away or give up on me as if I can’t change, as if I am old, and set in my ways. Don’t forsake me when I don’t believe I have the strength to change. Help me recognize, Hashem, whether I am young or old, healthy or infirm, that I have the capacity to change, that I can be different, that I am not stuck in my ways and that it ‘is me’ to be better.

As we listen to the sound of the shofar momentarily, recognize that “it’s not me” must never be part of our vocabulary. We must never fall into the trap of thinking I am part of a particular chevra, I fit into a specific mold, I have been doing it this way for years and I can’t change, it’s just not me.

Some think of themselves as falling into a category of people that go to Shul on Shabbos and not during the week and I am not going to change now because, well, that’s just not me. Some go to Shacharis every day, but never to Mincha/maariv, because it’s just not me. Some are careful with kashrus at home, but eat out and won’t stop because it’s just not me. Some aren’t careful about making berachos before or after eating, or cut corners on income taxes, or are easy to anger or lose patience with a spouse or

children, because being otherwise is just not me. Some don't go to a shiur or learn daf yomi or greet everyone they pass because 'its just not me.'

On selichos night we had a community conversation on change we can believe in and heard from three remarkable people about the incredible changes they have made in their lives. One of them, a man sitting in this room right now, described that before any of us knew him, almost 30 years ago he weighed over 300 pounds and was a raging alcoholic. Family members and friends had approached him many times begging him to take care of himself, but he always rejected and rebuffed their countless efforts to change. "It's just not me," he used to tell them. "I am the fat guy, the one who enjoys a good drink, or two, or three." But then something happened. He had an epiphany, an amazing awakening, he had a moment of what the Rav would call *hirhur teshuva*. He realized that society, his upbringing, the chocolate cake and the beer were not holding him back. The only thing holding him back from change was his own self-imposed limitation of "it's not me."

He went on to tell us about how he lost 200 pounds and conquered his alcohol addiction. When asked, how did you do it? How did you go from an obese alcoholic to a healthy, sober person his answer was incredible: "When I realized it can be me to be healthy, it can be me to be clean, I decided to go outside and take my first step. The step turned into a daily walk. After a few weeks, the walk turned into a daily jog. After a few more weeks, the jog turned into a daily run which ultimately turned into finishing two iron man triathlon competitions including a 2.5-mile swim, followed immediately by a 112-mile bike ride, followed immediately by a 26.2-mile run. A 350-pound alcoholic lost 200 pounds and ran two triathlons simply because he decided to say "it is me."

My friends, it IS you, it can be you; you can be whatever you want. There is no box or mold holding you back. There are no limits or ceilings holding you in place. We don't have a finite window to grow. We have the capacity to grow, change and improve ourselves at any time in our lives; we just need to believe in ourselves. There is an iron man and an iron woman in each and every one of us if we can just break through and realize it can be me.

You can be the affectionate father, the patient nurturing mother, you can be the Shul guy or the Daf Yomi guy, you can be the *chessed* woman or the

one who always is first to volunteer. You can be the guy who never talks in Shul or the lady who is always careful about lashon hara. You can be the loving, thoughtful husband or the appreciative wife. You can be the good student or the respectful teen or the serious learner.

There are no limits to who we can become if we simply subscribe to *hirhur teshuva* and believe in our capacity to change. Judaism teaches 'אין דבר העומד בפני הרצון', nothing stands in the face of our will.' The Ohr Gedalyahu, Rav Gedalya Schorr, explains that our actions and reach are limited. Our speech is finite as there is only so much we can say. But our will, our desire, our ability to dream about who we can become and what we want to accomplish is limitless and therefore nothing stands in its way.

Right now, on Rosh Hashanah, as we hear the shofar, I invite you to dream with me and use your imagination. Dream about a better you. Imagine becoming a brand new me. Know that your future is not written; you write your future.

In this election season the candidates keep raising a question – are you better off than you were before? We will regroup here in 10 days for Yom Kippur. We will then be asked a question that sounds similar, but is in truth very different. The real question is not are you better off, but are you better? Now is when we make the decision that we can be better and begin the process of *hirhur teshuva*, belief in our capacity to change.

If asked, “are you stuck in your ways, unable to change, fixed in who you are” – may we all answer proudly: Sorry, that’s just not me.



# Feeling Shame in a Shameless World

**ROSH HASHANAH 2013**

Ashlyn Blocker was 8 months old when her parents took her to the eye doctor because they noticed her eye was red. “When they put the dye in her eye, everyone kind of gasped,” John Blocker said. “She had a big corneal abrasion across her eye. They were just astonished that she wasn’t in pain.” Other babies cried from hunger or a diaper rash, but Ashlyn never cried.

Their friends were envious and thought, “what a good baby, why can’t our baby be more like Ashlyn,” but her parents knew something was wrong. Ashlyn has a rare genetic disorder called congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis (CIPA). She is one of about 100 cases of individuals who simply cannot and do not feel any pain at all. While an inability to feel pain might sound attractive, consider that many people with the disorder suffer terribly because they have no alert system that something is wrong. Some pass away from undetected appendicitis, others have bone infections or internal bleeding and never know anything is wrong before it is too late.

Ashlyn is now 12 years old and she has learned to live with her disorder, but her toddler years were very difficult for her parents. She burned her hand, bit her lip, bruised her body and all the while didn’t stop what she was doing because she didn’t feel the pain and therefore didn’t know anything was wrong. While parents desperately want to protect their children from pain, the capacity to feel pain may just be what our children need most.

In the seventh chapter of Hilchos Teshuva, the Rambam writes:

בְּעָלֵי תְּשׁוּבָה דִּרְכוֹן לִהְיוֹת שְׂפָלִים וְעָנּוּיִם בְּיוֹתֵר. אִם חָרְפוּ אוֹתָן הַכִּסְיִלִּים  
בְּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם הָרָאשׁוֹנִים וְאָמְרוּ לֵהֲן אָמֵשׁ הֵייתָ עוֹשֶׂה כֵּךְ וְכֵךְ וְאָמֵשׁ הֵייתָ אוֹמֵר  
כֵּךְ וְכֵךְ. אֵל יִרְגִּישׁוּ לֵהֲן אֲלֵא שׁוֹמְעִין וְשׁוֹמְחִים יוֹדְעִין שְׁזוֹ זְכוֹת לָהֶם. שֶׁכָּל  
זְמַן שֶׁהֵם בּוֹשִׁים מִמַּעֲשֵׂיהֶם שֶׁעָבְרוּ וְנִכְלָמִים מֵהֶן זְכוֹתָם מִרְבָּה וּמַעֲלָתָם  
מִתְגַּדֶּלֶת.

*The manner of Baalei Teshuvah is to be very humble and modest. If fools shame them because of their previous deeds, saying to them: "Yesterday, you would commit such and such. Yesterday, you would commit this and that," they are not bothered by them. On the contrary, they will hear this abuse and rejoice, knowing that it is a merit for them. Whenever they are embarrassed for the deeds they committed and ashamed because of them, their merit increases and their level is raised.*

In this Halacha, the Rambam suggests something remarkable. If a true ba'al teshuva is inappropriately reminded of their past indiscretion or lifestyle, they will not feel angry or upset. The ba'al teshuva, the individual who has undergone an authentic process of change and improvement, will embrace the feelings of shame and embarrassment and recognize them as virtues.

The Rambam makes one other reference to shame in the very beginning of Hilchos Teshuva. He writes:

כִּיצַד מִתְנַדֵּין. אֹמֵר אָנָּה הָשֵׁם חָטֵאתִי עֲוִיתִי פָשַׁעְתִּי לִפְנֵיךָ וְעָשִׂיתִי כֶּךָ וְכָךְ וְהָרִי נִחְמָתִי וּבִשְׁתִּי בְּמַעֲשֵׁי וּלְעוֹלָם אֵינִי חוֹזֵר לְדַבֵּר זֶה. וְהוּא עֲקָרוֹ שֶׁל וְדוּי. וְכָל הַמִּרְבָּה לְהִתְנַדֵּוֹת וּמֵאַרְיֵה בְּעִנְיָן זֶה הָרִי זֶה מְשַׁבַּח.

*How does one confess? He proclaims, "Behold, I regret and am embarrassed for my deeds. I promise never to repeat this act again."*

For the Rambam, busha, feeling ashamed, is a necessary component of teshuva. Shame is a prerequisite to real change and without it, change is inauthentic, counterfeit, and short-lived.

The question I would like to ask you today, on Rosh Hashanah, is what virtue is there in shame? In fact, don't we see shame as a negative attribute? Shame paralyzes, it incapacitates. Shame makes people feel despondent or defeatist. Shame can undermine self-esteem and self-worth. Indeed, every Shabbos mevarchim hachodesh we daven that we be spared shame as we ask for "חיים בושה וכלימה", a life that has no shame or humiliation." Friday nights we sing "לא תבושי ולא תכלמי", feel not ashamed and be not humiliated."

So why does the Rambam celebrate shame as a positive quality? The truth

is our question is not on the Rambam, it is on the Talmud itself which goes even further when it says in Berachos: “כל העושה דבר עבירה ומתבייש בו מוחלין לו על כל עוונותיו and embarrassed by it, is forgiven for all of his transgressions.” Now, I understand if reacting with shame atones for the particular indiscretion or mistake one is ashamed of. But, why should someone who feels shame for one act become forgiven for all of his or her past mistakes?

It seems to me that in truth there are two types of shame. Unhealthy shame, in which we beat ourselves up over that we cannot control or be responsible for, is indeed incapacitating and destructive. But does that mean that we don't need shame at all? Would we really want to live in a society that is shameless? Would we want to be around people living shamelessly?

Steven Pressfield is an author of historical fiction who has published many books, some of which you undoubtedly have heard of. To be honest, I haven't read any, but I did read an article he wrote about shame that I believe eloquently articulates and captures exactly what makes shame such a virtue in our lives. He writes:

*Shame is good. Shame is a tremendous weapon against resistance... What is shame? Shame is the emotion we feel when we are guilty of acts that are unworthy of us... When the threshold of shame has been crossed, self-respect kicks in. Self-respect is good. We want self-respect. When we feel self-respect, we say to ourselves, “This act is unworthy of me. I’m better than this.” Shame steps up and slaps us across the face...*

*Reality TV shows are all about shamelessness. The spectacle of contestants eating worms and bugs to gain their fifteen minutes of fame is like a car crash that we can't look away from. The producers contrive situations whose aim is to produce from real people, not actors, acts of shamelessness—lying, cheating, back-stabbing another contestant—which can be taped and broadcast for our delectation. It's nauseating, isn't it? Real work, of course, is the opposite of a reality show. Real work is not a stunt. It's not a cheap shot or a shortcut. Shamelessness gets us nowhere in the world of real work. We need real, old-fashioned shame.*

Teshuva is the world of real work, perhaps the hardest work we ever do and that is the work of change. We cannot hope to change and we cannot begin to change if we don't acknowledge that what we did was beneath us, unworthy of us, and deserving of feeling ashamed. Our parents and grandparents had an expression – “*pas nisht*” – to describe behavior, conduct, an appearance or a personal choice that is unworthy and unacceptable.

If we don't feel a least a tinge of shame, if we don't sense at least a hint of personal embarrassment for mistakes we have made and errors in judgment we have displayed, how can we know that we truly regret the misdeeds? Shame is the affirmation that a line has been crossed, a boundary has been violated, and that such conduct was simply unworthy of me.

But shame goes even further. Shame means knowing that some things are out of bounds and when we do them, or they are done in our presence, we are uncomfortable, agitated, and perhaps even embarrassed.

Chazal tell us שכל הוא הבושה והבושה הוא השכל. Discernment and embarrassment go hand in hand. A discerning individual feels a natural sense of discomfort and disgrace when a boundary of appropriateness has been violated.

In her book “A Return to Modesty,” Wendy Shalit writes, “Embarrassment is actually a wonderful thing, signaling that something very strange or very significant is going on, that some boundary is being threatened – either by you or by others.” “Without embarrassment,” she writes, “kids are weaker, more vulnerable to pregnancy, disease and heartbreak.”

Just as pain, while unwelcome and unappreciated, is a necessary component of protecting the body, so too shame and the capacity to blush are necessary components of protecting the spirit and the soul. Shame is the pain of the *neshama*, alerting us to something being wrong, a line being crossed, a boundary being violated. Ashlyn's life is in danger because her pain sensors are broken and she doesn't know if something is wrong or threatening her well-being. Our lives are in danger if our spiritual pain sensors are malfunctioning and failing to alert us to something morally wrong, behavior that is indecent that threatens our spiritual well-being.

Perhaps when we exhibit embarrassment about an indiscretion, when we feel a sense of shame in having committed an error in judgment, we are forgiven for all our sins because we proclaim that our spiritual nervous system is intact and working. Shame is the acknowledgment of boundaries in our lives and the recognition of the danger that arises when they are crossed.

My friends, we are living in what to a large degree could be described as a shameless society. Salacious and humiliating scandals don't prevent a shameless politician from running for mayor. A formerly beloved, supposedly pure child actress behaves disgracefully on stage at an award show shamelessly. But shamelessness is not reserved for politicians, celebrities, and athletes alone.

I fear shamelessness has crept into our lives and our sensitivities have become frayed and dulled. When we post to Facebook with a link we should be embarrassed to have seen, let alone to share publicly, we are acting shamelessly. When we forward emails that contain inappropriate images, or an offensive joke, or language that we should not use or be associated with, we are acting shamelessly.

Shame is something we should feel, even for something we ourselves are not doing. The Torah's commitment to innocence and purity are designed to refine us to the point that we should recoil if we hear explicit curses we would never say, and we are to be repulsed by images of licentiousness or people acting lewdly. Once upon a time, we actually blushed just by being in the presence of behavior that was indecent.

Today, we must ask ourselves, if we are in the presence of someone speaking lewdly or cursing explicitly, do we react with antipathy and indifference? Does it even faze us? If we don't recoil with disgust we must be concerned with our sense of shame. What has become of our sense of decency?

When is the last time we have seen or heard something so disturbing, so indecent that it made us blush? Shame and embarrassment are not qualities we should run away from or try to avoid. They are virtues that we should embrace and recognize as healthy for us and for our children.

New research from the University of California, Berkeley found that people who are easily embarrassed are more trustworthy and more generous. Dr. Matthew Feinberg, the author of the study, writes, “Moderate levels of embarrassment are signs of virtue. Our data suggests embarrassment is a good thing, not something you should fight.”

The world we live in embraces and promotes shamelessness. Countless websites and even mental health professionals today endorse a shameless lifestyle: Never be ashamed – dress as you want, live as you want, behave as you want, appear as you want, do what you want, with whom you want, anywhere you want and never, ever feel ashamed. Shamelessness, they say, is liberating and cathartic.

While the rest of the world moves towards shamelessness, we must remember that we, the Jewish people, are to distinguish ourselves specifically through the quality of shame and the capacity to feel ashamed. The Talmud in Yevamos states: “הבנים הכשרים, הבושה נראה על פניהם כי מי” שהוא ביישן הוא סימן שהוא מזרע אברהם יצחק ויעקב.

We the Jewish people can be identified by our natural inclination towards blushing when something is *prust*, inappropriate or improper. Let me be perfectly clear: a byshan is not a prude. Rather, he or she is one who has maintained a pristine quality, a natural alert system of when a boundary has been crossed and when a border has been violated.

Today we are celebrating the birthday of man, the anniversary of our creation. Human beings are unique in many ways, and one of them is that homo sapiens are the only species on the planet that wear clothing. When anthropologists studied primitive tribes in even the warmest climates they saw that people covered their private areas in virtually every human society. Clothing is intrinsically connected to the concept of shame and of basic dignity. This is expressed by the very etymology of the Hebrew words for clothing.

The Hebrew word for garment is *levush*. This comes from the word *bush* which means to be ashamed. The very structure of the Hebrew language indicates that clothing is worn to protect us not only from the elements, but more importantly from the natural, God-given feeling of *busha*, of the shame of being uncovered. *Levush* protects us from feeling *busha*,



the crossing of an inappropriate boundary like overexposure. We would never walk around without our *levush*, uncovered or fully exposed, and we must not walk around with our *neshamos* fully exposed to every form of speech, every image, every joke, and everything the world throws our way.

The basic human qualities of decency and dignity as protected through *busha* – shame, are threatened in our society today. There is another Hebrew word for a garment and that is a *begeid*. *Begeid* comes from the word *bogeid* – to rebel or revolt. Sometimes people, particularly children, instead of using clothing as *levush* to protect ourselves from the *busha* of crossing the line of decency, use clothing as a *begeid* to rebel against boundaries and rules altogether.

We cannot and must not lose the trait that identifies us as the children of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the trait of *busha*, of shame and of embarrassment. We must not become desensitized and numb to the distortion of *levush* into *begeid* and by a culture that assaults us with the message that we never have anything at all to feel embarrassed or ashamed about.

The culture today encourages us to share the intimate details of our life with friends over coffee or with coworkers at the water cooler or in real time over Facebook. What happened to modesty, to privacy, and to a sense of shame that some things are not meant to be shared with the world?

If we become numb and oblivious to the distortion of decency, if we lose our *busha*, then we lose our *seichel*, our ability to discern between right and wrong, correct and incorrect, between appropriate and inappropriate.

Rav Nachman of Breslov explained that shame and teshuva are inextricably linked as evidenced through the letters of the two words. *Boshes* is spelled *beis, shin, tav*, which are the same letters that spell *tashuv*, to return. Said Rav Nachman, when the ba'al tokeia is blowing the shofar, in the effort to produce the sound, his face turns red, like a person who is embarrassed or blushing. As we hear the sound of the shofar today, we are to be reminded of the capacity to feel shame, we are to be embarrassed by our past indiscretions and be inspired to teshuva, to grow and to change.



Today, on this Rosh Hashanah, let's make a new year's pledge to recalibrate our moral compasses. Let's repair and renew the feeling in our spiritual nerve endings. Let's recapture the capacity to blush and reinstate the very trait that makes us proud descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

# Maintaining Balance Step by Step

**ROSH HASHANAH 2014**

**D**r. James Fallon, a forensic psychiatrist, is one of the world's experts on reading brain scans. Advancements in neuroscience have led to our ability to identify various parts of the brain that are responsible for specific emotions, behavior, and choices. Fallon's understanding of neuroanatomy allows him the ability to use brain imaging to diagnose brain dysfunction in disorders such as schizophrenia, psychopathy and even depression. Fallon has traveled extensively to testify on behalf of serial killers at their sentencing and to explain that their actions were not really the result of a choice as much as their brain being wired for them to kill.

In 2005, Fallon decided to study brain scans related to Alzheimer's, beginning with those belonging to his own family. One afternoon in October of that year he was looking through a pile of his family's brain scans when he saw something terribly startling. The scan read like the brain of a psychopath. There was very low activity in the areas of the frontal and temporal lobes linked to empathy, morality, and self-control. He was terribly upset to see this scan among the members of his family so he checked his PET machine for an error but found it to be in perfect working order. He then challenged his research assistant, accusing him of mixing up the pile of scans of on his desk.

The assistant was insistent that there was no mistake and that the scan Fallon was so disturbed by indeed belonged to a member of Fallon's family. Fallon was alarmed and worried. He felt that he needed to unblind the scan and identify the person whose brain showed these signs. After all, this individual was predisposed to malevolence. What if this person were to harm or even murder an innocent victim? They needed to be stopped before they could act. Fallon looked up the code for the scan and what he found was beyond unsettling.

ד"ר ר' חנינא בר פפא אותו מלאך הממונה על ההריון לילה שמו ונוטל

טפה ומעמידה לפני הקב"ה ואומר לפניו רבש"ע טפה זו מה תהא עליה גבור או חלש חכם או טיפש עשיר או עני.

*At the time of conception an angel appointed over pregnancy brings the seed of pregnancy before God who decrees the physical strength, wisdom, and socioeconomic status, the artistic ability and athleticism, the creativity, and psychological profile that this future person will have.*

This observation of the Talmud resonates deeply for many of us. After years of resistance, countless attempts to change and adjust different aspects of our lives or personalities, many of us feel powerless, hopeless. We feel utterly wired towards certain behavior. Some of us are predisposed to be lazy, others to be quick to anger, yet others to lack self-discipline. Some of us are prone to be loudmouths, others to be emotionally closed, some to be underachievers and others to be ruthlessly ambitious.

The Talmud just confirms what some of us have suspected our whole lives. That seed, presented before the Almighty before we ever came into the world, was programmed and wired in a way that would determine our lives, leaving us feeling utterly helpless to change in a lasting and sustained way. Maybe we should stop fighting who we were predetermined to be and just accept who we are with all of our deficiencies, shortcomings, failings, and flaws.

Maybe, but only if the Gemara had stopped there. However, it continues:

ואילו רשע או צדיק לא קאמר כדר' חנינא דא"ר חנינא הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים.

Yes, through genetics and environment God has preprogrammed much of our health, our intelligence, our abilities, our appearance; however, notes the Gemara, the angel does not inquire about perhaps the most important component of this new person's future. The angel does not ask will they be righteous or wicked, will they be good or be bad. This is in accordance with the statement of Rebbi Chanina, who says that *everything* is in the hands of Hashem, everything except *yiras shamayim*, the spirituality and righteousness of the person.

When Dr. James Fallon un-blinded the brain scan he was greeted by an exceedingly unsettling revelation. The psychopathic brain pictured in the scan was none other than his own. The man who had dedicated his life and career towards the notion that psychopaths are wired that way and are not accountable for their behavior discovered that, in fact, he was wired to kill and yet he hadn't.

Most of us would immediately hide such a discovery, not tell a soul, and carry on. But, perhaps because psychopaths are wired to lack inhibition, Fallon went in the opposite direction. He published a book called "The Psychopath Inside" in which he seeks to reconcile how a happily married family man, an accomplished scientist such as him, could demonstrate the same anatomical markings of serial killers.

At first he thought that maybe his original hypothesis was wrong and that you can't tell from brain scans how people are predisposed to behave. So he underwent a series of genetic tests and it went from bad to worse. The tests showed a variant of the MAO-A gene linked with aggression, violence and low empathy. He took further neurological and behavioral tests, all of which confirmed that indeed, he is a certifiable psychopath.

When he reflected on his life he began to realize that he in fact has some psychopathic behavior. He is obnoxiously competitive, not even letting his grandchildren win board games. He can be verbally aggressive, offensive and come on strong without realizing it. Yet, with all of his predisposition and being wired as a psychopath, he has never killed, never raped, and never been violent.

He was haunted by the question: why? Why has he been able to temper his behavior while others with the same genetics and brain end up in prison? Fallon gives a few answers. Firstly, he suggests, he was very loved and nurtured as a child and that contributed tremendously to shaping him. His mother had a series of miscarriages before having him and gave him a heavy amount of attention in his younger years. He believes that played a large role.

But much more significantly, Fallon boils down his ability to overcome his predisposition and genetic bias to two words – free will. He used to believe that people were roughly 80 percent the result of genetics and 20

percent the result of their environment, but that has now changed. “Since finding all this out and looking into it, I’ve made an effort to try to change my behavior.”

The Rambam begins Hilchos Dayos by stating that we all have personality traits we are born with and significant predispositions.

וְכָל הַדְּעוֹת יֵשׁ מֵהֶן יְדָעוֹת שֶׁהֵן לְאָדָם מִתְחַלֵּל בְּרִיָּתוֹ לְפִי טֵבַע גּוֹפּוֹ. וְיֵשׁ מֵהֶן  
דְּעוֹת שֶׁטִּבְעוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם זֶה מִכֵּן...  
...

For instance, he writes, some people are by nature cruel and others merciful, some by nature are arrogant and some are modest.

Yet in the fifth perek of Hilchos Teshuva, the Rambam is emphatic that a person’s nature does not cause him to be righteous or wicked, kind or cruel, wise or foolish, generous or miserly.

אֶל יַעֲבֹר בְּמַחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ דָּבָר זֶה שְׂאוּמֵרִים טַפְשֵׁי אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם וְרַב גְּלָמֵי בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁהִקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא גּוֹזֵר עַל הָאָדָם מִתְחַלֵּל בְּרִיָּתוֹ לִהְיוֹת צַדִּיק אוֹ  
רָשָׁע.

So which is it, are we preprogrammed, predisposed, are our lives predetermined, or do we have free will?

Fallon, in an interview discussing the book, said the following: “After all of this research, I started to think of this experience as an opportunity to do something good out of being kind of a jerk my entire life. Instead of trying to fundamentally change—because it’s very difficult to change anything—I wanted to use what could be considered faults, like narcissism, to an advantage; to do something good.”

The Rambam is not contradicting himself. The answer, I believe, is that we most certainly are born with predispositions and predilections. Our genetics play an enormous role in shaping who we are and the lives we will lead. However, our genetics just provide the boundaries of our limitations. They give the parameters of our intellect, our bodies and even to a degree our souls. Our genetics deal us a set of cards. It remains up to us how to play them and that is the most important factor in determining our future.

None of our attributes or qualities is inherently bad, rather all are neutral; it is up to us to endow them with value based on how we use them. The Gemara in Shabbos states that a person's nature is greatly influenced by his or her astrological sign. Rav Chanina says, for example, an individual born during the hour when Mars is "dominant" is destined to spill blood. Rav Ashi interjects that this does not necessarily mean that he will be a murderer. If he wishes, he can channel his natural tendency for spilling blood for productive purposes and can choose a career as a surgeon, *shochet*, or *mohel*.

Our character traits are to a large degree predetermined, but how they are controlled, what we dedicate them towards, how we use them and towards what end is entirely up to us and our free will.

In discussing the various barriers and obstacles to teshuva, to change, Rabbeinu Yonah suggests that perhaps the greatest barrier is a lack of optimism, a failure to believe in our capacity to change.

My friends, my message to you today, Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of a new year and a fresh start, is that we absolutely can change if we want to. Yes, we have predispositions, and yes, we have predilections, but they don't have to define us; we can do whatever we want with them. We can overcome the negativity within what we see as our faults and channel those same qualities towards positive outcomes. However, it begins with believing in our ability to do so.

In the interview with Fallon he explains how he has changed his life and made a huge difference to his family and friends. "...every time I started to do something, I had to think about it, look at it, and go: *No. Don't do the selfish thing or the self-serving thing.* Step-by-step, that's what I've been doing for about a year and a half and they all like it."

The Sefer Tiferes HaYehudi by the Yid HaKadosh tells the story of Rav Chaim Krasner, a Chassidishe Rebbe, who went with his followers to visit an acrobat in the town of Krasny. The acrobat was scheduled to balance himself on a very high tightrope and walk across a river in the town.

Like the rest of the townsfolk, the Rebbe appeared to be fascinated and stared with great intensity as the man made his way across the river.

The crowd was gaping below. When the tightrope walker was finished, the Chassidim asked their teacher, “Rebbe, why was this so interesting to you?” And Rav Chaim responded, “You might think that the acrobat crossed the river because of the financial reward offered to the person who would do it. And indeed he might have started with that motivation. But once he was up on the tightrope, if he had thought about that reward for even an instant, he would have fallen. While he was on the tightrope, the only thing he could think about was the next step and the step after that to keep his balance and from falling to the ground.”

Step-by-step, little by little is how Fallon describes his positive changes and it is exactly how we can make our own. That is what today is all about. Take that first step and then go slowly, incrementally, step by step after that, like the acrobat who can’t afford to look too far up and cares only about the next step.

Sitting here today, recognize that nobody is condemned by his or her genetics. That is critically important for ourselves, our relationships, and for the way we parent our children.

We can channel whoever we are and however we are programmed to do good, to be good, to feel good, and to have good. If you are a fighter, great, there are no shortage of things to fight for. If you tend to indulge, great, indulge in chessed and be insatiable. If you have a fire in your belly, don’t scream and rant in anger, be a passionate leader of a worthwhile cause. If you are a narcissist, like Fallon use the need for attention to motivate you towards positive behavior that is worthy of attention.

Take advantage of this Rosh Hashanah. Shana means year, but it also means *shoneh*, to change. So much change has happened to us. Our world is radically changed this year from the past. Some of us have lost loves ones. Some of us have lost money.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let’s not just allow change to happen to us, let’s be the catalyst for change. Act like the person you want to be and you will become that person. Let’s usher in Rosh Hashanah, a new beginning, and *Rosh HaShoneh*, the beginning of a new attitude from powerlessness and hopelessness to fortitude and determination.



# *Are You a Cheftza or a Garra?*

**ROSH HASHANAH 2015**

**I**t was an ordinary day in Judge Mindy Glazer's Miami-Dade courtroom when forty-nine-year-old Arthur Booth appeared before her for his bond hearing. He had been arrested the previous day for breaking into a home, stealing a car, and running from police. He caused two accidents before crashing the stolen car and being arrested.

What happened next was unbelievable. My description cannot even do it justice; I encourage you after Yom Tov to see it for yourself. As she shuffled papers on her desk, Judge Glazer turned to Booth and said, "I have a question for you — did you go to Nautilus (middle school)?" Booth looked up at her, recognized her, then covered his face with both hands and, overwhelmed with emotion, cried "Oh my goodness! Oh my goodness!" seven times.

The judge then said to him, "I'm sorry to see you here. I always wondered what happened to you." She turned to the court and continued, "This was the nicest kid in middle school. He was the best kid. I used to play football with him, all the kids, and look what has happened." Glazer set his bond at \$43,000 and closed the hearing by saying, "Good luck to you sir. I hope you are able to come out of this okay and just lead a lawful life."

Booth's cousin was interviewed by the news right after the hearing and was asked why she thought he was so emotional. She answered, "He probably was thinking, 'Wow, I had those opportunities and those abilities. That should have been me up there'... He was overwhelmed with emotion because he was filled with remorse and the thoughts of what could have been."

היום הרת עולם היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים.

Today is the birthday of the world. Today all creatures of the world stand in judgment. This morning, like Booth, we appear before the Judge who

recognizes us, who knows us since our childhood and beyond. Like Booth, as we appear before the Judge of Judges, we are overwhelmed with a sense of what could have been. This morning, as we confront the reality of the many mistakes we have made, the poor judgment we have shown, the self-destructive behavior we have engaged in, the opportunities we have wasted and the potential we have not realized, we are filled with a profound sense of remorse, an intense regret, and an acute awareness of who we could be.

Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian writer, once said, “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” I disagree. I think we do want to change. We want to become the people we were meant to be, the people we are capable of being. Many of just don’t know how.

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi writes in one of his poems: “The world at large is a prison and every man is a prisoner.” We often feel trapped, confined by the self-imposed limitations we set on ourselves or by the habits, practices and behaviors that we think we cannot break out of or change. According to the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, as many as 40% of our daily activities are driven by habit.

Will we be late or on time, will we get angry or keep our cool, will we eat healthy or let ourselves go, will we be distracted by technology or disconnect, will we make it to minyan or daven at home or not daven at all, will we say a *bracha* with *kavana* before we eat or when we come out of the bathroom, say it in a meaningless way, or not say it at all – all of these and many more have been programmed into our daily lives such that we are practically on autopilot. We feel imprisoned and trapped by the habits we have formed and the momentum that carries our lives forward.

We are familiar with the first part of the *passuk* in Tehillim (81) that is part of our prayers and our Kiddush today: תִּקְעוּ בַחֲדָשׁ שׁוֹפָר בְּכֶסֶה לַיּוֹם חֲגֹגֵנוּ: כִּי חֶק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא מִשְׁפָּט לְאַלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב עֲדוֹת בִּיהוֹסֵף שְׁמוֹ בְּצִמְתּוֹ. But it continues, עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, it is a testimony for Yosef when he went out over the land of Egypt.

Our rabbis teach us (Rosh Hashanah 10b) that today, Rosh Hashanah, is the anniversary of the day Yosef was released from prison in Egypt.

According to Chazal, Yosef's release from prison specifically on this day is not a mere coincidence, but it is a reflection of the power and potential for becoming free on this day. Chazal understood that when we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah it is "a testimony for Yosef," as it commemorates his leaving prison on that very day.

As we listen to the sound of the shofar this morning, as we celebrate Yosef's release from prison, it is time to recognize that today, Rosh Hashanah, it is time for **us** to break out of **our** prisons, today is the day to finally attain freedom from that which restricts and restrains us.

In one of his letters, the Rambam draws an analogy between teshuva, the exodus from our previous selves, and the exodus from Egypt. On Pesach, we tell the story of our national exodus from Egypt. On Rosh Hashanah, we write the story of our personal exodus from that which holds us back and enslaves us.

A fundamental analysis often offered in Brisker *lomdus* is the distinction between the *cheftza* and *gavra*, the object and the person. In an incredible teshuva derasha from 1974, Rav Soloveitchik applied *cheftza* and *gavra* to describe two components of the mitzvah of tekias shofar. We don't have time to review his entire thesis now but I want to share the Rav's application to the impact shofar is designed to have on us.

Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that human beings have the potential to be objects or subjects. When our lives are on autopilot, when we become creatures of habit, we have allowed ourselves to essentially become objects. When we are mindful and spiritually conscious, when we are driving our lives instead of being driven by them, we are subjects.

It is not a coincidence that when the Jewish people fail, make mistakes and come up short, such as with the *cheit* of Chava, the *cheit haeigel*, Shimshon, and others, the Torah describes them with the word "falling." An object is affected by gravity. It descends and falls. Similarly, when we allow our lives to be objects, we fall. In contrast, when the Torah wants to describe someone who is growing, changing, or doing teshuva, as the Torah uses the language of ascending, going up. When we choose to be subjects rather than objects, when we are disciplined and in control of our lives, we can overcome the force of gravity and lift ourselves up.

The Rambam famously writes, “Although the shofar blowing of Rosh Hashanah is a Torah law, there is an allusion in it, as if the shofar were saying ‘Awake, sleepers from your sleep! Arise, slumberers from your slumber! Scrutinize your deeds... Remember your Creator.’”

When we are sleeping, we are objects. We are just unconscious bodies. When we wake up, we become subjects again, animated, thoughtful people making choices. Many of us are sleeping even while awake. We are living life as objects. The shofar is the alarm that screams: wake up! Be a subject not an object, ascend don’t descend, set yourself free from the prison of your life.

The Rama, Rav Moshe Isserles, in his gloss on Shulchan Aruch quotes the Yerushalmi:

נוהגין שלא לישון ביום ראש השנה ומנהג נכון הוא.

*We have the practice not to nap or sleep on Rosh Hashanah day and this is a worthy custom.*

Rosh Hashanah is not a time to be an object; it is the day to be subjects, to wake up and finally make the lasting changes to become the people we know and the Judge knows we were meant to be. But how?

Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, hy”d, also known as the Piaseczno Rebbe, was a Chassidic Rebbe in Poland who served as the Rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto and, after surviving the uprising, was later shot dead by the Nazis in the Trawniki labor camp. He had such incredible human insight and advice, you may have thought he was trained as a psychologist or motivational speaker.

In his spiritual diary called Tzav V’Ziruz he has the following entry:

*If you want to know if you you’ve progressed on your spiritual path over the years, the way to judge is to look at your resolution – at your inner drive – and not at your wishes. Only the inner drive with which you work to attain your desired goal is called resolution. But if you don’t work but rather just want, this is not called resolution. It is just some wish that you wish for yourself to be blessed with that desired objective. For example, the pauper who works to sustain*

*himself, this is a drive, because he is doing something constructive toward it. But the wish that he'll find a million dollars is just a wish to be rich and not a resolution. Every Jew would like to be a tzadik, but this is no more than a wish; he'd like to wake up in the morning and suddenly find himself a tzadik. Only the level and state of being that you seriously work toward can truly be called a resolution.*

The secret to real change, says the Rebbe, is to be honest with ourselves and to distinguish between our wishes and actually making resolutions. There are countless things we claim to want to change about ourselves. We want to eat more healthy, be more patient, spend more time with our children, find time to volunteer, attend Daf Yomi, go to minyan more often, learn what the words of the siddur really mean, do chessed, stop speaking lashon hara, and so on.

We claim to want to do them, but the truth is they are just wishes. We wish to wake up one morning, as the Rebbe said, and find ourselves suddenly doing those things or living that way. The real secret to change is to stop wishing and to start making real resolutions. Personal growth is the result of making a plan, spelling it out and holding ourselves accountable to keeping to it.

I was recently talking to Daniel Gibber, Rabbi Gibber's brother, who lives in Teaneck. He is spiritually on fire and sounds more like a young man who just got back from his second year of studying in Israel than a middle-aged father far removed from yeshiva. Just talking to him and hearing his energy, passion, and excitement for Torah and learning is contagious. He told me about how he is waking up early every morning, going to Daf Yomi shiur, and staying for minyan. He listens to inspiring classes on the way to and from work and has arranged a weekly shiur in his neighborhood on emunah. Naturally, I asked him how it happened.

He shared the following: He had been a disaffected, typical day school graduate living life, working hard, paying the bills, and though he was doing his best to be a good husband, father, and person, he was totally disconnected from anything spiritual. His life was the grind of family life, coaching basketball, and professional ambition; he had drifted so far he

wasn't davening at all, let alone attending minyan.

On August 1, 2012, everything changed. He attended the 12<sup>th</sup> Siyum HaShas at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey along with 90,000 other people. He hadn't learned Daf Yomi and was mostly there out of pride for his grandfathers who had learned the Daf numerous times. There were many speakers that evening in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English.

Deep into the night, Rabbi Yissocher Frand took the podium and delivered an impassioned 22-minute speech that electrified the stadium. He spoke about the *Bas Kol*, the heavenly voice that asks each one of us why we aren't doing more to learn and to strengthen our relationships with Hashem. Rabbi Frand was adamant in suggesting that in response to the proverbial *Bas Kol*, "every one of us must leave here with a plan." He challenged the attendees to "learn a Daf a day. If you can't learn a Daf a day then make it an Amud a day, or a Daf of Mishna Berurah a day or a Mishna a day."

He then yelled out - "But SOMETHING a day!" For some reason, at that moment, those words pierced Daniel Gibber's soul and touched him in a way nothing else ever had. "Something a day." Why not do something a day. Surely he is capable of doing something a day.

The next day he started learning Daf Yomi, but soon after he missed a day here and there. He realized that he needed a plan, it couldn't just be a good intention, and so he joined a Daf Yomi shiur every morning at 5:30 a.m. Once he was going to shul that early, he realized he might as well stay for Shachris. A few months later he realized that it is silly that he goes to shul for Shachris every day but doesn't even daven Mincha so he started davening Mincha and Maariv and a few months later, thought to himself, why not go back to shul for Mincha and Maariv each evening.

It all started with a plan. He made it a priority to go to the early Daf, which turned into staying for minyan, which turned into a love of Torah learning, which resulted in a deepening of emunah and a life on fire. It all began with a plan, it all began with a resolution to do something each day.

When you make a resolution, when you formulate a plan, you need to know where the pitfalls lie and what is likely to try to knock you off your



course. The passuk says in Tehillim (119:98) מאויבי תחכמי, from my enemies I became wise. Rav Yankele Galinsky explains *mei'oyvai* means I need to gain wisdom and strategy from studying my *yetzer ha'rah*. Only when I identify the obstacles and hazards can I plan to avoid them and circumvent them.

An indispensable part of the Rambam's formulation of teshuva is *kaballah al ha'asid*. A personal kabbalah is not a wish, it is a resolution, it is a pledge to keep to a plan.

Last summer, Yocheved and I were both very inspired from some of the people we met and conversations we had. When we returned to Boca we decided to each make a list of *kabalos*, things we were taking upon ourselves to do differently. We each made our list and then met for lunch one day to exchange lists and talk about how we can in a loving way hold one another accountable so that the *kabalos* last and stick. I am proud to say that they are still going well and I credit it to the fact that on our way back to Boca, we didn't talk about wishes – I wish I was more like him, or I wish our home were more like that. We made real resolutions, not just a wish list.

A plan, a resolution, has to be articulated to be serious. We can put it down on paper, set it as a reminder in our phone or simply repeat it out loud to ourselves over and over but it isn't real, it is just a wish, not a resolution unless it is formally verbalized, articulated or recorded in a way that will make us more likely to follow through.

Share your kabbalah, your resolution, and plan with your spouse, a family member, or a trusted friend. Ask them to help you formulate a plan and hold you accountable to your commitment.

Leadership expert Robin Sharma once said, "Don't live the same year 75 times and call it a life." Let's not sit Rosh Hashanah after Rosh Hashanah and fill our hearts and minds with wishes that will dissipate as quickly as the sound of the shofar. Let's not sit before the Judge who knew us since we are born and knows what we are capable of, crying because of the missed opportunities and what we could have been. Today, right now, like Yosef, let's walk out of prison and set ourselves free to become the people we know we can be.



This year, when people ask you how was your Rosh Hashanah – tell them, I am not sure yet, I will let you know in six months after I implement my plan.

# Where is Your Mesirus Nefesh?

**ROSH HASHANAH 2016**

**T**his past summer, Yocheved and I were in a remarkable supermarket. The supermarket was larger than our local Publix. It had all the same sections as any other supermarket - meat, poultry, fish, fresh produce, prepared foods, groceries, frozen items and much more. What made this supermarket incredible is that it is entirely under kosher supervision. There was a complete aisle of kosher vitamins. There was even a *keilim mikvah* in the supermarket so that if you buy any vessels that need immersion you could do it on the spot. As I stood in the enormous store with an endless variety of kosher food, Jewish newspapers, kosher vitamins and even a board game called "Monseyopoly," I thought to myself we are living in a time in which it is more comfortable than ever to be an observant Jew.

Every aspect of Jewish living has been rendered easier, more comfortable and requiring less sacrifice. We have pop-up Sukkahs and pre-packaged *hadassim* and *aravos*. We purchase complete Chanukah sets already pre-assembled and ready to use. Endless potato recipes for Pesach have been replaced by *kosher l'pesach* bagels, cereal and pancakes. We buy 10 pieces of bread labeled for *bedikas chametz*.

Artscroll has revolutionized learning, making what were once closed texts accessible to the masses for study. We have diverse kosher restaurants, an app to help us find *minyanim* within proximity to our exact location. We have Shabbos clocks and Shabbos lamps and Shabbos alarm clocks. In some ways, fidelity to Halacha requires less sacrifice, less compromise and less effort than ever.

And it is not just halachic conveniences, it is simply easier to function in the world today than it ever was. Remember Disney's "Carousel of Progress"? It had a display showing inconceivable technology like programmable refrigerators and ovens, voice command, video conferencing, and inconceivable video games. I remember seeing it as a child and thinking

how creative this showcase was and how unlikely it would or could ever come true. Well, somewhat sadly Disney has not updated that carousel, and when I saw it with my family a couple of years ago, my children wanted to know why things that exist in their past are being described and celebrated as the future.

We now FaceTime with people around the world, program our smart houses and will soon rely on our self-driving cars. The increasingly comfortable world, Jewishly and technologically, is making us progressively uncomfortable with discomfort. We expect everything to be easy, compatible, pleasant, and convenient.

To be honest, I am worried about our generation, a truly privileged generation's capacity for *mesirus nefesh*. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with all of the wonderful progress. We should enjoy and celebrate the abundance of options and the ease of being an observant Jew and a blessed member of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, what happens when we encounter that which is inconvenient, uncomfortable or incompatible? Do we have the interest let alone the strength to persevere, to overcome, to endure?

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נָסָה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם  
וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי

*And it happened that God tested Avraham and said to him, "Avraham," and he replied, "Here I am."*

Momentarily, we will use a horn of the *ayil*, a ram, for a shofar. The Shulchan Aruch writes (586:1), "It is best when the shofar of Rosh Hashanah is from an ayil... although all shofros are kosher." The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 16) wonders, "Why do we blow shofar specifically with a ram's horn?" It answers, "Hakadosh Baruch Hu says, 'Blow for Me with a ram's shofar so I will remember akeidas Yitzchak and I will consider it as though you were bound on the akeida before Me.'"

This morning, when we want to persevere and triumph in judgment, when we want to be worthy of being written and ultimately sealed for a year of prosperity and blessing, we think about and invoke the story of the akeidah. It is what we literally read for *Kerias HaTorah* on one of the days,

and it is the reason we use the shofar of a ram on both days.

I would like to suggest to you that the akeida and Rosh Hashanah go together because it is the power of "*hineini*," of being tested and answering the call, that should be on our minds as we sit here in shul this morning. As we think about coronating God as our King, we are to consider - Have we answered the call like Avraham? Have we been prepared to make sacrifices in our lives and lifestyles? Have we passed the tests that we have confronted and persevered in the face of the adversity, temptation, and seduction that has come our way?

Some are tested with maintaining faith during a health crisis or a financial collapse or infertility or a failing marriage. Some are tested with being loyal to the Torah's view of the world when it conflicts with Western culture and values and others are tested observing Jewish laws that are inconvenient or even incomprehensible to them. Some are tested with coming to shul while others are tested with paying attention while there. Some are tested when submitting their income taxes and others are tested when surfing the web.

When it is our turn and our time, when *v'ha'Elokim nisa es...*, when God tests us, do we care enough and are we strong enough to say "*hineini*," I am here, I am prepared to sacrifice, to struggle, to compromise, to forfeit and to submit? Or do we believe that life should be comfortable, easy and convenient, so when we encounter conflict we disappear, we check out, and we drop whatever necessary to get our comfort level back up?

Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l famously said that we must not tell our children "*t'iz shver tsu zeyn a yid*," it is difficult to be a Jew, but instead, we must tell them "it's geshmak to be a yid," it is amazing to be a Jew. He was right and remains right. We need to show our children the beauty of our tradition, how it enriches and enhances our lives and brings deep meaning and great joy.

But you know what – with that said, let's admit for a moment that it isn't always geshmak to be a yid. It is sometimes shver. When you have to wake up early for selichos and you are exhausted, when you lose a business opportunity because of Shabbos, when you are stuck somewhere with nothing kosher to eat, when the Torah law doesn't fit neatly with the

mores of the time, it is shver, it is difficult. And yet, at those times, in those moments, are our “*hineini*” opportunities. That is our chance like Avraham to say, I don’t only show up for a Judaism which I perceive as pleasant and pleasurable, but even when it is hard and challenging and makes me work – “*hineini!*” – I am here, I am in, I am ready.

Willingness to compromise, sacrifice and submit is a critical part of religious experience. We like to show how compatible Judaism and Torah are with science, with our liberal values, with the world we live in. But religion is not about compatibility with what is convenient for us to believe and with how we prefer to behave. At its core it is about a willingness for submission. Today is about being *mamlich* Hashem, coronating God as our King and with it, *kabalas ol malchus shamayim*, accepting and surrendering to the will and dominion of our King, even when it takes sacrifice and submission. Today we coronate God with our words but when we leave this room and go to our homes, our work places, our gyms, and our recreational activities, we truly coronate God by standing the tests we face.

In a famous footnote in Halakhic Man, Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote:

*This popular ideology contends that the religious experience is tranquil and neatly ordered, tender and delicate; it is an enchanted stream for embittered souls and still waters for troubled spirits... This ideology is intrinsically false and deceptive. That religious consciousness in man’s experience which is most profound and most elevated, which penetrates to the very depths and ascends to the very heights, is not that simple and comfortable. On the contrary, it is exceptionally complex, rigorous and torturous.*

If we use the ram to invoke Akeidas Yitzchak why do we specifically use the horn? If our goal is to remind Hashem of Akeidas Yitzchak, couldn’t we have used any part of the ram that was ultimately brought instead of Yitzchak? Why specifically the horn?

Perhaps we can answer with an insight from R’ Meir Shapiro in his Imrei Da’as. The passuk says he set out on the first day and arrived on the third. What happened in between? The Midrash (*Tanchuma, Vayeira* #22) says that when Avraham set out to bring his son as a sacrifice, along the way the

Satan, the dissuading voice tried numerous times to discourage Avraham from going through with his mission. Avraham persevered each time and ignored the voice seeking to dissuade him.

When he finally raised his hand to strike his son Yitzchak, an angel instructed him to stop. Wonders Rav Meir Shapiro, how did Avraham know that the voice of the angel was authentic and legitimate? How did he know it wasn't the Satan one last time? He answers that the text tells us that Avraham notices the ram *ne'echaz basvach*, struggling in the thicket. Only upon noticing the ram struggling was Avraham convinced to in fact put down the knife. Explains Rav Shapiro, falsehood and temptation come easy. Truth and meaning are connected to struggle and effort. Avraham noticed the struggle of the ram after hearing the angel's voice. When he saw struggle, he knew he was in the presence of truth.

Perhaps we specifically use the horn of the ram because it was the horn that was entangled and caught. The ram struggled to escape but its horns were caught in the bush and it couldn't get out. The shofar represents challenges and struggles. It was chosen today because Hashem cherishes our struggles. He values our efforts and cares deeply about each and every moment of perseverance.

The Gemara (Pesachim 113a) tells us there are three types of Jews that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is *machriz alleihem kol hayom* and therefore, *hizharu bo*. Three people that Hashem announces their great value all day and therefore we should be careful with them. The Maharsha explains – be careful with them means they look unimpressive, even vulnerable, but be careful because they are at the *merkaz*, the center of His heart.

Hashem publicly lauds them, they are at the center of His heart, they must be extraordinary. Who are the three?

1. A single person who lives in a city and isn't *choteh*, he doesn't sin.
2. A poor person who returns a lost object. Imagine a person who has a hard time making a living who finds a lost object and nevertheless chooses not to keep it despite desperately needing it.
3. A rich person who takes care of his *tzedaka* in a private way. He gives a lot but without fanfare.

I understand why the rich person is precious to Hashem. He is entitled to give publicly and take credit. What he did is tremendous. But the poor person is not allowed to keep the lost item and the single person is forbidden from sinning. They didn't do anything special, they simply did what they are supposed to. Why does God love them and cherish them?

The Ba'alei Mussar explain that God is *machriz*, meaning at the *merkaz*, at the center of His attention, is when a person is able to hold back and achieve even a small victory. What we do matters to the Almighty. It doesn't only make a difference to Him if we cure cancer or donate a million dollars or finish Shas. What matters to Him the most is when we were tempted to transgress something, to give in and yet we hold back, we overcome, and we do what is right.

When we find the will to still believe even when we have every excuse not to, it matters to God. When we go hungry because we weren't entirely sure of the hechsher, it makes a difference to God. When we hold back from looking at something we shouldn't look at or saying something we shouldn't say, even when nobody else knows, He notices and He cares deeply. When we hold back from talking during davening or find the strength to answer Amen with all of our being, we have sent God a love note and He cherishes it.

Picture it – Hakadosh Baruch Hu is announcing in Heaven all day long, He is screaming loudly and celebrating our small victories. He yells – my beloved angels, check out Yaakov, he made it to shul even though he is exhausted. Look at Sarah – despite the crazy heat and humidity she makes the effort to dress modestly. Notice Jon – he was about to look at that website and he clicked the mouse to go elsewhere instead. Pay attention to Carol – she had a juicy piece of gossip she wanted to share so badly but she held back because she didn't want to hurt another person.

Seemingly small accomplishments but the results of sometimes superhuman effort, restraint, and self-control. Our toil, struggle and efforts matter. They mean everything to Hashem and at the end of the day, they bring us our greatest satisfaction and fulfillment.

Throughout Tanach, when devash, honey is mentioned it generally refers to devash temarim, date honey. Yet, when the Shulchan Aruch quotes the



practice we observe of dipping apples in the honey on Rosh Hashanah, it means devash devorim, bee honey. Why?

We dip the apple in the honey to ask for a *shana tova u'mesuka*, a good and sweet year. Date honey is not a good sweet. It is easy to retrieve. The sweetness flows from the date. Bee honey is the opposite. It takes a lot of preparation, determination and even pain to retrieve. Rav Reisman explains that genuine sweetness results from effort, exertion and struggle. True sweetness comes with *mesirus nefesh*, with work, and maybe even a few stings along the way.

There is a family living on an island in the Caribbean that wants to convert to Judaism. They have been mentored by their local rabbi and have studied diligently with a rabbi in Israel. I went to visit them a few weeks ago to meet them in person and see the small local Jewish community. Just before Rosh Hashanah I got the following email from him:

*We have made a lot of changes in our lives just to be a part of HaShem's people. These changes have not been easy but have been worthy, and even more when we complete the process. You saw our commitment, as you expressed that you were impressed.*

*Our desire to finish the process is not just for the sake of getting to be called Jews. Being a Jew is very hard, takes courage and dedication. We are willing to continue to make sacrifices and take this path all the way. For this we need your help.*

When we welcome someone to the Jewish people they stand in the mikvah about to undergo an enormous transformation and we ask them a series of questions. One of them, the Gemara tells us, is do you know that it is really difficult to be a Jew? Are you aware that keeping Jewish law is complicated, keeping kosher and Jewish schools are expensive, anti-Semites want to kill us? Are you prepared to make the necessary sacrifices to be a Jew? Only when a candidate says yes, do we welcome them to our people.

The ram's Shofar asks us those same questions this morning. Do we answer the call of the *akeida* like Avraham Avinu? In the coming year,

are we willing to remember that avodas Hashem is called “*avodah*” for a reason, because it takes work and effort.

Robert Browning, the 19th century English poet, put it well when he said, “When the fight begins within himself, a man’s worth something.” Let’s make our lives worth something. When inevitably called upon to struggle spiritually or theologically or in our lifestyle, let’s determine right here and right now, on this great day of judgment and awe that we will answer *hineini*, here we are.

# Move On and Let it Go

**YOM KIPPUR 2010**

In his bestselling book *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal recounts his work camp experience of being brought to a dying Nazi soldier's bedside. The man turned to Wiesenthal and confessed his crimes and horrific wrongdoings against the Jewish people. He then asked Wiesenthal to serve as a representative of all his victims and begged forgiveness. Wiesenthal describes that he could not grant the soldier his wish because some things are simply too heinous and atrocious to forgive. Wiesenthal describes that the rest of his life, he remained tortured by that request and by his reaction to it.

Tonight, as we seek our own forgiveness for the many ways we have failed and disappointed our Creator, it is worth asking, are there indeed things that are unforgiveable? Or, should every sincere, genuine, remorseful appeal for forgiveness be granted? Is forgiveness exclusively for the perpetrator, or does forgiveness grant something to the victim as well?

כול המעביר על מידותיו, מעבירין לא כל פשעיו – whoever is forgiving, God is forgiving of them. Too many of us are accountants...not by training or trade, but in practice. We are constantly balancing the books of our relationships with others. “We invited them 3 times and they only invited us once,” or “they didn’t give my son a bar mitzvah gift even though they attended, so I am not giving their kid a gift either.” “I am always calling him or asking to go to lunch, he never initiates so I am done with this friendship.” “Would you believe he walked right by me in Shul and shook hands with someone else without even acknowledging my presence... forget him, it’s over.”

With family, the accounting usually goes more like this – “I always call her on her birthday, she didn’t call me this year so I am angry.” “I can’t believe they sat me at the table with those cousins and not with the people I wanted to sit with.” “Three years ago, we didn’t get a card for our anniversary so we are no longer sending them cards.”

“כל המעביר על מידותיו, מעבירין לא כל פשעיו.” With this statement the Talmud provides the secret wisdom to receiving forgiveness from the Heavenly court. The Gemara says I will let you know the biggest *segulah*, the greatest thing we can do to merit divine favor. God, says the Gemara, approaches us with the same attitude and philosophy with we approach the people in our lives. He judges us with a mirror. If we are exacting, accounting and unforgiving to those around us, He is exacting, accounting and unforgiving of us. If we instead choose to dismiss, minimize and ignore the slights, snubs and slurs that people have perpetrated against us, then Hashem chooses to dismiss and ignore our slights and snubs of Him. We have the ability to determine and influence how Hashem looks at us. Hashem has conceded the ground rules to us. Whether or not Hashem will bear a grudge against us is exclusively determined by whether or not we hold grudges against others.

The biggest *segulah* to earn *parnassah*, to have *nachas* from our children, to have health and longevity, is to be a magnanimous, forgiving person. To be forgiven today, we must be willing to forgive. And there are plenty of opportunities through the petty affronts and offenses that are committed against us regularly.

You see, when we walk around with the accounting books, when we keep track of everything everyone around us has done that is hurtful both intentionally and unintentionally, the one who suffers the most is ourselves. I believe that forgiveness is not about the perpetrator of the act and absolving him or her of their misdeed alone. Yes, we hope they will be remorseful. Yes, we wait for them to apologize and take responsibility. Yes, we wish they would simply say I am sorry.

However, I submit to you today, Yom Kippur, that there is a second type of forgiveness. There is a forgiveness for the victim, the one who has been hurt or harmed. It is exhausting and burdensome to carry and harbor negative feelings and negative memories. Forgiveness gives us the license to let go, it gives us the tools to move on.

Today, for our own sake, it is time to let go. A professor once held up a beaker filled with water before the class and asked how much do you think this weighs? One student said 2 ounces, another 6 ounces, another 2

pounds. The professor looked at the class and said they are all right. How could they all be right, the students asked, when they are saying different things? The professor answered, they are all right, it just depends how long I hold onto it.

When our grudge is formed, it seems somewhat light, small and insignificant so it is easy enough to carry around with us. The longer we hold onto it, however, the heavier it becomes and the greater the energy, effort, and focus necessary to carry it on forward. It is time to let go, to be willing to forgive and forego even what is due to us.

Indeed, it is only when we have the capacity to let go, to move on, to not absorb the negativity and toxicity of a strained relationship, to be a forgiving person, that we have the capacity for greatness. The Rambam identifies as one of the defining characteristics of a *Talmid Chacham* that he must be a *mevateir*, a forgoer, one who is forgiving and does not hold a grudge.

Right now, right here, decide to be a *mevateir*, transform yourself into the kind of person who lets things go. Because, I can tell you with certainty as we stand here in judgment, the Almighty loves a *mevateir*. Don't be concerned with rights, honors, privileges and entitlements. Let's not focus on what we are due and what we deserve. Being a *mevateir* means being humble, modest and forgiving, and these are traits that the Almighty has revealed that He loves.

אין העולם מתקיים אלא בשביל מי שבולם את עצמו בשעת מריבה, the Gemara in Chullin 89a tells us, the world exists only in the merit of one who controls himself during a dispute. What does it mean, *ha'olam miskayeim*, the world exists? I would submit to you that we are each an *olam kattan*, a world in miniature. Our world only exists, is only balanced and whole when we can stay in control, avoid arguments and be forgiving. Have a generous and magnanimous spirit, for our very mental and physical health depend on it.

What Simon Wiesenthal was unable to grant in the death camp, he granted in the extreme, later in his life. In 1966, Albert Speer, minister of armaments and war production for Hitler, after having served the full 20-year sentence of the Nuremberg court, published his memoirs which contained an apparently sincerely statement of remorse. Wiesenthal wrote

in response – “This man has served his sentence, he has admitted his guilt, he has shown contrition – more than this cannot be demanded of him, and he is therefore acceptable.” The forgiveness he could not bestow upon the soldier, he later offered to one of Hitler’s closest advisors.

I close with a final story of a supernatural ability to forgive. Yocheved’s grandfather was an extraordinary man, whom I had the privilege to know and feel close to. Long before I came into the picture, many years ago, her grandparents joined her parents in coming to summer camp on visiting day. Yocheved’s Zeidy was walking with my father-in-law when they passed an elderly man. They stopped, nodded to one another and everyone kept walking. My father-in-law was very puzzled and asked his father, “Who is that man; I’ve never seen him before?” Her Zeidy answered, “He was my chavrusa and my best friend in Hungary before the war.” My father-in-law responded: “Then how come you didn’t say hello, hug, or spend any time talking. I know all of your survivor friends and have never seen him” Listen to what Yocheved’s grandfather answered. He said, “When the deportations were beginning and things were getting bad, I managed to get visas for me, my wife and our baby. It wasn’t time to use them yet and so I hid them in a safe place and only told one person in the world, my chavrusa. When it came time to go, I went to get the visas and they were gone.” That man used them to save his family while Yocheved’s grandfather lost his first wife and child in Auschwitz. My father-in-law was astounded and asked his father, how could he be so calm, how could he not want to kill that man? Her grandfather responded, “It was a different time and a different place. People did whatever they could to save their families. While I cannot be friendly or talk to him, I cannot judge or be angry with him either.”

Yocheved’s grandfather had a superhuman ability to be *mevateir*, to move on and to let go. I am not suggesting we would or perhaps even should. All I know is if he could forgive what was done to him, it is time for us to forgive what has been done to us that utterly pales in comparison. Just let go and move on. Not later, not another time, not in the future. Right now, for your sake, let go and you will realize how much lighter you will feel.

# Are You Mocheil Me?

**YOM KIPPUR 2013**

**T**his is not an apology. I am not asking you for forgiveness. I will not be saying publicly, "Please be mocheil me."

Normally, I stand before you and from this pulpit I plead from the bottom of my heart – "If I neglected to call you back, didn't check in with you often enough, said something insensitive, or offended you in any way – please be mocheil me, please forgive me."

I will not be saying that this year and I here is why: Standing in front of a room with hundreds of people and reciting a generic formula of apology accomplishes almost nothing. Sending group text messages, impersonal mass emails, and turning to people one by one and mumbling "are you mocheil me, are you mocheil me, are you mocheil me," is an empty and superficial gesture.

Now, I understand that I may have just upset many of you and recognize that I might as well have just told you that the tooth fairy doesn't exist. Of course the image of people on the eve of Yom Kippur using the terms "mechila and "forgive me" with one another creates a lovely setting and a heartwarming backdrop to our most sacred day. But, to be totally frank and honest with you, I fear it doesn't do much more than that. Let me prove it to you and suggest an alternative for us this year instead.

Today we read the story of the *asarah harugei malchus*, the ten heroic and courageous scholars who were murdered by the Romans. The moving passage describes the horrific and brutal manner in which these outstanding Rabbis, teachers, and community leaders were murdered. Though they didn't live contemporaneously, all ten were among our greatest sages whose teachings, lessons, and legal interpretations we continue to study and observe until today.

We read their story as part of selichos, the portion of davening in which we are seeking forgiveness and reflecting on what we have done wrong,



suggesting that these great scholars died for something we need to think about and improve. Why did they meet their demise in such a horrific way? What did they do wrong?

The Midrash Eileh Ezkera tells us that a Roman emperor came across the story of how Yosef's brothers sold him into slavery, a crime punishable by death. He noticed that the brothers were never put to death so the Roman emperor decided to execute the rabbis in their place.

Something about the story doesn't add up. If you go back to Chumash you will remember that after their heartfelt reunion, Yosef reassures his brothers that he bears them no ill will and wishes them no harm. So how is it possible that generations later, 10 great Torah scholars could be punished, seemingly with the consent of the Almighty, for something the victim himself seems to have forgiven?

The great Spanish commentator Rabbeinu Bachya shares a critical insight:

והנה אחיו בקשו ממנו מחילה, ולא באר הכתוב שמחל להם, וכבר בארו רז"ל: (ב"ק צב א) שכל מי שחטא לחברו ועשה תשובה אינו נמחל לעולם עד שירצה את חברו, ואף על פי שהזכיר הכתוב: וינחם אותם וידבר על לבם, שנראה בזה שהיה להם רצוי מיוסף, מכל מקום לא ראינו שיזכיר הכתוב מחילה ביוסף ולא שיודה להם שישא פשעם וחטאתם, ואם כן מתו בענשם בלא מחילת יוסף ואי אפשר להתכפר עונם רק במחילתו, ועל כן הוצרך העונש להיותו כמוס וחטום להפקד אחר זמן בענין עשרה הרוגי מלכות. ([רבינו] בחיי בראשית פרק נ)

Though the text says that Yosef reassured his brothers, he never actually forgave them. They never achieved mechila because their entire exchange was superficial and shallow. You see, the brothers didn't seek forgiveness as a form of sincerity; they pursued forgiveness as a strategy for continuity and to avoid consequences. Saying sorry as a strategy, rather than as a genuine, personal desire to repair and make amends is counterfeit and falls short.

Sorry is not a strategy and it is not a policy or protocol. For a long time doctors who made a mistake were counseled not to apologize, lest it create liability. More recent studies and literature argue that an apology will in fact make it less likely that there will be a lawsuit. In fact, in 2006

Harvard University-affiliated hospitals established a policy. If a mistake or error was made it must be disclosed to patients and the disclosure must contain three elements: The provider must take responsibility, apologize, and discuss preventive measures with the patient or the family.

Don't get me wrong; instituting a policy that includes taking responsibility and apologizing is a fantastic development. However, it is dangerous and runs the risk that "sorry" will remain a policy and a strategy rather than a heartfelt expression of remorse, regret and responsibility.

The purpose of an apology is not to achieve amnesty or a pardon relieving us of any consequence or accountability. The most genuine apology comes with an understanding that saying sorry may bring with it consequences. Too many are only willing to say they are sorry if you promise it won't hurt and you give me your word that nothing will happen as a result. But that isn't a real sorry. True apologies come with remorse, regret, and acceptance of responsibility and accountability.

We live in a litigious society in which saying sorry and admitting guilt can be risky. Organizations, institutions, universities, even yeshivas, doctors, rabbis, and professionals are all counseled when an allegation of wrongdoing or malpractice is made, don't apologize, it is an admission of guilt and brings great liability.

But isn't accepting the liability exactly what saying sorry and apologizing is all about? Is sorry without liability really an expression of responsibility, remorse, or regret? Like it or not, saying sorry is an admission, and sometimes admissions require making meaningful amends and even providing restitution to right a wrong.

Saying "you were wronged and hurt, but my lawyers have counseled me that I can't say more," is not an apology and doesn't repair the damage that was done. Not repeating behavior for 10 or 20 or 30 years is not an apology and doesn't take away years of hurt or pain if no restitution is made or there is no effort to make amends.

A true apology is therapeutic and healing to the recipient because it validates their experience of hurt and tells him or her that you recognize their pain and accept accountability for what you have done and are fully

prepared to make things right. The brothers' apology to Yosef fell short because it was a strategy and a policy and therefore Yosef never truly forgave them or granted real mechila.

In his Alei Shor, Rav Wolbe, the great Mashgiach of Yerushalayim, tells an incredible story. Rav Eliyahu Lopian was a great Rosh Yeshiva of Yerushalayim. A man once came up to him and asked mechila. Rav Lopian insisted on knowing what was the mechila for, what did the man say about him. The man repeated the lashon hara he had told about Rav Lopian. Listen to what Rav Lopian told him: "That is a very harsh thing you said, I don't know if I can forgive you. Come back to me in two weeks, I will study lots of mussar and work to accept your apology with a full heart." The man came back in two weeks and Rav Lopian greeted him with a huge smile and said, "I have learned a lot and thought hard and I have been able to forgive you fully and with a whole heart."

Rav Wolbe concludes that true mechila is an avodah, it is hard work and requires great effort. True forgiveness is not superficial and shallow and pretend. It is not a strategy or a policy. It is demanding, difficult, painful and most importantly genuine.

We live in a culture of superficial apologies. "So sorry, please forgive me." "Are you mocheil me? I am mocheil you." "Please forgive me if I said or did anything that bothered you." "If I said or did anything?" If? Does that sound like validation, accountability, remorse or an attempt to repair?

Mass text messages or group emails or Facebook posts that say "I know I probably hurt some of you and I hope you are mocheil me, I am mocheil you" don't validate, don't take accountability, don't express remorse and don't repair anything. They may make us feel good or sometimes make us look good but they don't accomplish the goal of asking for forgiveness and don't meet the requirement of teshuva on Yom Kippur. How do I know that? Because the Chafetz Chaims says it explicitly, that's how.

יחזור וילך - ויפייסנו בכל פעם במין ריצוי אחר ובשעת בקשת מחילה צריך לפרט מה שחטא לחבירו אם לא כשיודע שחבירו יתבייש מזה כשיפרט החטא אזי לא יפרט אותו ומי שהוא מבקש מחילה מרבים בכלל אינו יוצא אם יודע שעשה לאיזה יחיד בפרט: (משנה ברורה תרו:ג)

The Shelah HaKadosh, Rav Yeshaya Horowitz, writes something insightful. He says that one should not ask mechila flippantly or generically or at all unless they know that they have done something specific to hurt someone and are ready to take responsibility. He writes if we just turn to one another and casually say, "Are you mocheil me" someone may go home and think, why did he or she ask if I am mocheil them, I wonder what they said about me, or did to me.

In other words, says the Shelah, casually and superficially throwing around "are you mocheil me, do you forgive me," is a selfish act that makes the person saying it feel better but could easily have the unintended consequence of hurting another person. Hurting others is not what saying sorry is all about.

I want to be clear - from the perspective of the victim of wrongdoing, we should be quick to forgive. The Gemara in Rosh Hashanah 17a tells us

אמר רבא כל המעביר על מדותיו מעבירין לו על כל פשעי.

Furthermore, every night when we go to sleep, we recite a formula forgiving others:

רבונו של עולם הריני מוחל לכל מי שהכעיס והקניט אותי או שחטא כנגדי.

We should be eager and quick to forgive for if not, we are the ones weighed down and we suffer by carrying that grudge which only grows heavier with every passing moment.

But while we should be quick to receive forgiveness, we should be sincere, genuine, and real when we ask for it. I came across a book by best-selling authors Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas called "When Sorry Isn't Enough, Making Things Right." The table of contents contains the formula for forgiveness and the art of saying sorry:

Chapter One: I'm Sorry, Expressing Regret

Chapter Two: I was wrong, accepting responsibility

Chapter Three: How can I make it right, making restitution

Chapter Four: I want to change, genuinely repenting

Chapter Five: Can you find it in your heart, requesting forgiveness

Many of us like to skip right to chapter five. We go past the first four steps and head straight to can you find it in your heart, please forgive me. But as they poignantly—and, I believe, accurately—argue, requesting forgiveness is the last step and only means something if we first express regret, accept responsibility, offer to make restitution, show we want to change and only then request forgiveness.

I know it is already Yom Kippur today but it is not too late. There are people in this room or on this campus or in our family or part of our circle of friends whom we have hurt. We have said or written hurtful things about them. We have given them poor advice or didn't treat them correctly. We have not been honest or faithful or loyal to them. Let's commit right now to offer a real apology. Let's say I am sorry, not as a strategy or policy but because we mean it. Let's take responsibility for our actions, be willing to be held accountable, make meaningful amends, which may include restitution.

I respect you and I respect forgiveness too much to stand up here and superficially ask it from all of you collectively. But I do wish you and your families and all of us a gmar chasima tova. May we be signed and sealed for a year of good health, prosperity, beracha, nachas, peace and meaningful relationships.

# *Holding on to the Sacred Trash*

**YOM KIPPUR 2015**

**I**n a small room high above the women's balcony in the Ben Ezra Synagogue of Cairo sat an enormous pile of trash. The geniza, or sheimos room of this ancient shul housed thousands and thousands of discarded documents and worn books piled high. The room remained that way for the better part of a thousand years. The Jewish population moved to another part of Cairo and ultimately migrated from Egypt altogether. All the while, the geniza room at the Ben Ezra Synagogue was home to a gigantic pile of trash... or so it was thought.

After centuries of remaining hidden, preserved by the dry climate of the region, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, stray items found in the pile of "trash" started to be sold to curious Western buyers. In 1896, Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson—widowed Scottish sisters from Cambridge who were remarkable scholars of Arabic and Syriac—bought a few fragments on their way through Cairo. When they got home, they shared their purchases with their friend Solomon Schechter, who immediately understood their incredible significance.

In the autumn of 1897, Schechter went to Cairo where he developed a relationship with the Grand Rabbi and was allowed to enter the Ben Ezra synagogue. For the next four weeks he sifted through papers waste deep, with insects everywhere and clouds of dust rising with each movement he made. He ignored the printed books and focused on the manuscripts. Schechter filled four trunks and with the help of Lord Cromer, the de facto ruler of Egypt, he shipped the trunks back to Cambridge.

Since then, for more than a century, scholars have analyzed and deciphered those trunks of "trash." As it turns out, in that geniza dump sat 331,351 of pieces of writing, *kisvei yad* dating from as early as 870 C.E. Among the treasure trove of documents was a letter signed by the Rambam as well as a draft of the Rambam's *Mishna Torah* that he himself hand-corrected.

In their book, "Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo

Geniza,” historians Adina Hoffman and Peter Cole tell the story of this remarkable discovery and how it has transformed our understanding of Jewish history, literature, economics, marriage, prayer, Hebrew grammar, Halacha and every subject you can imagine.

Others saw garbage - Solomon Schechter saw sacred trash.

גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות, great is teshuva for because of it, premeditated sins are accounted as mistakes. והאמר ריש לקיש, גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכויות, but didn't Reish Lakish say that great is teshuva for because of it premeditated sins are accounted as merits? לא קשיא כאן מאהבה כאן מיראה.

It is understandable that through the process of repair, correction and improvement we are able to transform the status of our intentional indiscretions into unintended accidents. But merits? How, even through the most sincere and intense teshuva, can mistakes, shortcomings or failures be transformed into *zechuyos*, into merits and virtues?

In 1968, 3M Laboratories was working to create super strong adhesives for use in the aerospace industry in building planes. Spencer Silver, a researcher, accidentally managed to create a weak, pressure-sensitive adhesive agent. They tried putting it on a bulletin board but nothing would stick to it. 3M management had no use for it and nobody, including Silver himself, could think of a marketable use for it. The mistaken discovery was shelved.

Five years later, Art Fry, a chemical engineer at 3M, had an idea. Art sung in a church choir in St. Paul Minnesota. A pet peeve of his was how the song page markers in his hymn book kept falling out in the middle of singing. He had an idea. He went to Silver and suggested they were using the adhesive backwards. Instead of sticking it to the bulletin board, they should put it on a piece of paper and then one can stick the paper to anything and later remove it. The idea took off and today 3M sells more than 50 billion Post-It notes every year.

Post-It notes is one example of many of the discoveries that yielded breakthroughs that we benefit from every day that were found by accident or were the result of a mistake. Mistakes are not meant to be discarded,



erased, or forgotten. They are meant to be teaching tools that enable correction and empower discovery, breakthrough, and growth.

In Al HaTeshuva, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes:

*Sin is not to be forgotten, blotted out or cast into the depths of the sea. On the contrary, sin has to be remembered. It is the memory of sin that releases the power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than even before. The energy of sin can be used to bring one to new heights.*

*The Talmudic sage, Reish Lakish was renowned as a man who sinned grievously and repented. According to Rabbeinu Tam (Baba Metzia 84), Reish Lakish was an accomplished scholar before he became a thief. מכאן אמר ר"ת דריש לקיש מתחילה ידע (הרבה אלא שפרק עול תורה ונעשה עם הארץ ועסק בלסטיות) After he fell to thievery, Rav Yochanan succeeded in convincing him to repent of his ways and thereafter, Reish Lakish became "even greater" than he had been before. How did this happen? Certainly, while he was out thieving and robbing, he wasn't engaged in the study of Torah! What, then, made him greater after he sinned than he had been before? Sin itself!*

*The penitent who does not wipe out the past nor tear the pages of sin from his memory, but rather makes a point to use the memory of his sins to enhance his longings for holiness that are bursting forth from inside of him – such a person achieves the quality of repentance which elevates evil to a state of goodness.*

Before ever seeing this explanation from the Rav, my brother once suggested understanding Reish Lakish's statement in the following way. When we are in neutral, in a state of status quo, we have confusion how to get close to Hashem, what is the next step, what do I need to do. But when we have made a mistake, we have carved a path backwards. Of course, the negative is that we have become distanced in our relationship with Hashem. The potential positive, however, is that we now have a clear path before us of what we need to do next, of how to draw closer. ודונוג נעשות לו. בזכיות, that mistake ironically carved a clear path and that path is a zechus.

This phenomenon is true in all relationships. If I did something that aggravated my spouse, I have created some friction. However, that mistake has revealed for me something important for our relationship and if I choose to learn from it, the relationship can go to new heights it has not seen previously.

Esther Perel, a prominent psychotherapist, gave an extraordinary Ted Talk that I think every couple should watch whether happily married or struggling. It is called “Rethinking infidelity ... a talk for anyone who has ever loved” and she says the following:

*So how do we heal from an affair? Desire runs deep. Betrayal runs deep. But it can be healed. And some affairs are death knells for relationships that were already dying on the vine. But others will jolt us into new possibilities. The fact is, the majority of couples who have experienced affairs stay together. But some of them will merely survive, and others will actually be able to turn a crisis into an opportunity. They'll be able to turn this into a generative experience.*

*... But because I think that good can come out of an affair, I have often been asked this very strange question: Would I ever recommend it? Now, I would no more recommend you have an affair than I would recommend you have cancer, and yet we know that people who have been ill often talk about how their illness has yielded them a new perspective.*

As the Gemara says, when approached mi'yirah, if the goal is to eliminate the consequences, with hard work the mistake can be erased and be treated like an accident. But if approached mei'ahava, with tremendous dedication and effort, the friction can be the catalyst for major revelation and breakthrough in the relationship, yielding a closer, more authentic, genuine and loyal relationship than ever existed before.

My friends, we are here today because we have practiced infidelity with the Almighty. We have made mistakes. Some have been minor and some more egregious breaches of trust and acts of ingratitude. With each *al cheit* that we beat our chest to, if we are motivated only out of yirah, by a desire to avoid being punished, we can turn our intentional acts into

accidental ones. But if with each al cheit we come mei'ahava, with a deep love and profound desire to use our mistake to draw closer, we can turn this crisis into an opportunity and today can be the first day of a renewed relationship of faith and love.

Today, Yom Kippur, is the anniversary of Moshe coming down with the second set of tablets, the whole luchos that would endure. And yet, the Talmud tells us that לוחות ושברי לוחות מונחים בארון, both the whole tablets and the broken pieces sat side by side in the Ark. The broken pieces, the symbol of a great mistake and a terrible act of infidelity were not discarded, trashed, or forgotten. They were saved, remembered and placed right next to the whole luchos in the holy aron. Sacred trash.

Our Rabbis tell us at the end of Maseches Taanis that Yom Kippur is the happiest day of the year. Most explain this is because on Yom Kippur we achieve forgiveness but I have always wondered, if that is the case, only Motzei Yom Kippur, only the night we breathe a sigh of relief and exhale from a month of intense prayer, should be the happiest day. Why Yom Kippur? זדונות נעשות לו בזכות – having the path laid out in front of us and the clarity of what we need to do, is in fact a source of incredible happiness and joy.

As you say al cheit this year, don't think about it in terms of what went wrong in the past as much as each al cheit revealing exactly what we need to work on to turn our mistakes into opportunities going forward.

When Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, he tried over 2000 experiments before he got it to work. A young reporter asked him how it felt to fail so many times. He said, "I never failed once. I invented the light bulb. It just happened to be a 2000-step process."

The Gemara (Nedarim 39b) teaches that teshuva was created before the world itself. God knew that we would make mistakes and He provided a tool to recover from them. Everyone makes mistakes. We all come up short and disappoint the ones we love, including the Ribono Shel Olam. The question is not whether or not we will make mistakes. It is what will we do with them. Our broken luchos and our sacred trash belong in our ark, as part of our live journey, teaching, enabling and empowering us to personal discovery and breakthrough.

אהבת כלולותיך

# *Our Favorability and Trustworthiness*

**YOM KIPPUR 2016**

**U**nfavorable. Untrustworthy. Poor judgment. Inauthentic.  
No, tonight I am not going to talk about the election or the latest salacious scandals.

I don't want to address whether or not the candidates are authentic and real.

I will not discuss the unfavorable and untrustworthy poll numbers of the candidates.

These 24 hours are not only a time to NOT talk politics, campaigns, or controversy, they are a most welcome reprieve and refuge from the gross imperfections of our world and the angst of where we might be heading.

Tonight I am going to talk about *our* favorability and trustworthiness. I want to address our authenticity. On this day, our focus is not on questioning the judgment of others, but reflecting on the type of judgment we have shown. If our emails, conversations and inner thoughts were hacked, what would they show?

The Gemara (Yoma 85b) tells us that this day has a categorically different quality and capability than any other. על כל עבירות שבתורה בין עשה תשובה בין לא עשה תשובה יום הכפורים מכפר. For all the transgressions, errors in judgment, and poor decisions we have made during the year, whether we do teshuva or not, simply through experiencing Yom Kippur we achieve atonement and forgiveness.

What does it mean that Yom Kippur, simply going through a day on the calendar, can bring absolution and forgiveness, even without real remorse or repentance? The Tosfos Yeshanim in his commentary on that passage asks an even more compelling question. Just a short time ago, we sat on the floor mourning the destruction of the two Batei Mikdash, our two sacred temples. We know they were demolished because we had

perpetrated egregious behavior towards the Master of the Universe. Asks the Tosfos Yeshanim:

למה חרב הבית בשביל עוונותינו כיון שיום הכיפורים מכפר?

*Why were they destroyed and why where we exiled? What happened to the fact that Yom Kippur wipes our slate clean, provides atonement and forgiveness?*

His answer is so critically important, not only to resolve the specific question and to help us understand this day, Yom Kippur, but it is fundamental to every relationship in our lives.

There are two levels of interacting with others. We can be superficial, shallow and concerned simply with the external etiquette, the rules and terms of the relationship. What are the dos and don'ts and what are the consequences and punishments for doing the wrong thing? How do we stay out of the proverbial doghouse? Alternatively, we can experience depth in our relationships. We can aspire towards closeness and true connection, not just avoiding consequences. We can seek intimacy and affection, not just escaping penalties and punishments.

Says the Tosfos Yeshanim, what is true in all relationships is most certainly true in our connection with Hashem. When we neglect or violate Hashem's will, there is a consequence. But the relationship is also damaged, a distance is created. Yom Kippur has the ability to atone. Remarkably, the tenth of Tishrei is designated as a day of annual clemency where we receive a Divine pardon for what we have done wrong. But while it automatically erases punishment, Yom Kippur can't restore a relationship. That requires our effort and initiative.

It is really quite simple. We have a choice. Our connection with Judaism and with God can be a set of dos and don'ts and rewards and punishments or it can be a genuine relationship. The choice is ours. Yes, Yom Kippur atones and erases the punishment. Nevertheless, the destruction of the Batei Mikdash, says the Tosfos Yeshanim, was not reflective of punishment, but a reflection of our dysfunctional relationship with Hashem. He could forgive our violations and transgressions, but our relationship became damaged. Forgiveness doesn't repair a relationship. A relationship needs

nurturing, it demands effort and it requires attention.

The Sefas Emes and others quote an insightful Tikkunei Zohar. We know the following passuk from when Moshe sees an Egyptian persecuting a Jew – וַיִּפֶּן כֹּה וָכֹה, he looked both ways, וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ, and he saw there was nobody, וַיִּךְ אֶת-הַמִּצְרִי, so Moshe struck the Egyptian. The Zohar, however, homiletically applies the verse differently and says: וַיִּפֶּן כֹּה וָכֹה, God turns and looks, koh, on Rosh Hashana, and v'cho, on Yom Kippur – the shul is packed with people. And yet, וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ, it is as if nobody is there.

We are physically present, we are turning the pages of the Machzor, we are *klapping al cheit*, *shuckeling* back and forth, getting through the words, but are we really there? Are we in a relationship with God? Are we having an intimate conversation, sharing what is in our hearts, confiding our deepest fears and worries and sharing our dreams and aspirations? Do we admit wrongdoing and offer sincere and authentic apologies? Or are we just saying what is necessary to avoid punishment?

In the framing of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, do we see Hashem as an “it,” an object or entity and have an “I-it” affiliation, or do we feel God as “thou,” a confidant, a father, a spouse, a friend and engage in a genuine, loving, “I-thou” relationship?

Of all of the amazing contributions that Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel a”h left us, to me his greatest is his modeling and publicly displaying a very real, intense, dynamic connection with the Almighty. He wrote music and brought tunes of this time of year from Sighet to America. Every year he led the Fifth Avenue Synagogue in *Ohr Zarua La'tzadik*. In October, 1997 he wrote an open letter to the Master of the Universe in the New York Times called “A Prayer for the Days of Awe.”

*Master of the Universe, let us make up. It is time. How long can we go on being angry?*

*More than 50 years have passed since the nightmare was lifted. Many things, good and less good, have since happened to those who survived it. They learned to build on ruins. Family life was re-created. Children were born, friendships struck. They learned to have faith in their surroundings, even in their fellow men and*



women. Gratitude has replaced bitterness in their hearts. No one is as capable of thankfulness as they are. Thankful to anyone willing to hear their tales and become their ally in the battle against apathy and forgetfulness. For them every moment is grace.

What about my faith in you, Master of the Universe?

I now realize I never lost it, not even over there, during the darkest hours of my life. I don't know why I kept on whispering my daily prayers, and those one reserves for the Sabbath, and for the holidays, but I did recite them, often with my father and, on Rosh ha-Shanah eve, with hundreds of inmates at Auschwitz. Was it because the prayers remained a link to the vanished world of my childhood?

But my faith was no longer pure. How could it be? It was filled with anguish rather than fervor, with perplexity more than piety. In the kingdom of eternal night, on the Days of Awe, which are the Days of Judgment, my traditional prayers were directed to you as well as against you, Master of the Universe. What hurt me more: your absence or your silence?

In my testimony I have written harsh words, burning words about your role in our tragedy. I would not repeat them today. But I felt them then. I felt them in every cell of my being. Why did you allow if not enable the killer day after day, night after night to torment, kill and annihilate tens of thousands of Jewish children? Why were they abandoned by your Creation? These thoughts were in no way destined to diminish the guilt of the guilty. Their established culpability is irrelevant to my "problem" with you, Master of the Universe. In my childhood I did not expect much from human beings. But I expected everything from you.

Where were you, God of kindness, in Auschwitz? What was going on in heaven, at the celestial tribunal, while your children were marked for humiliation, isolation and death only because they were Jewish?

These questions have been haunting me for more than five decades. You have vocal defenders, you know. Many theological answers

were given me...

*I reject all these answers. Auschwitz must and will forever remain a question mark only: it can be conceived neither with God nor without God. At one point, I began wondering whether I was not unfair with you. After all, Auschwitz was not something that came down ready-made from heaven. It was conceived by men, implemented by men, staffed by men. And their aim was to destroy not only us but you as well. Ought we not to think of your pain, too? Watching your children suffer at the hands of your other children, haven't you also suffered?*

*As we Jews now enter the High Holidays again, preparing ourselves to pray for a year of peace and happiness for our people and all people, let us make up, Master of the Universe. In spite of everything that happened? Yes, in spite. Let us make up: for the child in me, it is unbearable to be divorced from you so long.*

That is what a conversation with God sounds like. That is what a relationship with Hashem looks like. It is raw, it is real, it is authentic. It is filled with ups and downs, disappointments, frustrations, forgiveness, joy, satisfaction and gratitude. Most of all it is built on faith, trust and love.

Elie Wiesel, a man who became synonymous with survival of the greatest atrocity in history, a man who lost his family and suffered unimaginably, made up with Hashem. Despite all he had been through, he saw Yom Kippur as a time to reset and reinvigorate his relationship with the Almighty, and so should we.

We know a bride and groom fast on their wedding day. The bride wears a white gown and the groom a white kittel. We have a tradition that a wedding day is a personal Yom Kippur, an opportunity for a fresh start and a new beginning.

But less appreciated is that the opposite is also true. If our wedding day is like Yom Kippur, Yom Kippur is meant to be experienced like our wedding day. In Shir HaShirim (3:11), Shlomo HaMelech refers to an event which occurred “בְּיוֹם חֲתָנָתוֹ וּבְיוֹם שְׂמֻחָתוֹ לָבֹ” – on the day of his wedding and on

the day of his heart's rejoicing. The Gemara at the end of Taanis tells us when was this wedding day – it was Yom Kippur.

We always think of Neilah as the gates of Heaven about to close and be locked so we need to get our heartfelt prayers in now. Rav Shlomo Carlebach said that is the wrong understanding. Neilah is not about Hashem locking the gates and keeping our prayers out. Neilah is the culmination of Yom Kippur, it is the end of the official wedding ceremony. It is when each of us go into the Yichud room with Hashem, lock the door behind us and experience an intimate rendezvous. Use this time, without distraction from food or material pleasure and, like Elie Wiesel, write your letter to the Almighty. Tell Him what is on your mind and what's in your heart.

But Yom Kippur is not just about resetting our relationship with Hashem, it provides an opportunity to reflect on all of our relationships and to ask: do our spouses, our children, our friends feel *va'yifen koh v'choh, vayar ki ein ish*, we are physically present in those relationships, but we are not actually there? Is all we want from our relationships to not have done anything wrong and to not be “in trouble”? Don't we want and deserve more – connection, communication, camaraderie, love, affection, and intimacy?

Resolve today to find the energy, time, and interest in nourishing the most important relationships in your life. Don't be satisfied with going through the motions and just obeying the rules. Trust, invest, and make yourself vulnerable to Hashem and to those closest to you. Share what is really in your heart and make a safe space for those you care about to share and connect with you without fear of rejection, judgment, or cynicism.

If we are authentic, real, genuine, and trustworthy with Hashem and with those most important to us, we will be found favorable and will be elected to enjoy the most meaningful and deeply satisfying relationships we can imagine in the year ahead.

# Which Book of Life?

**YOM KIPPUR 2017**

**Y**ocheved's grandfather passed away just shy of his 99th birthday. When he was already deep into his 90's I asked him once, *ba'meh ha'arachta yamim*, why do you think you merited to achieve longevity? Without hesitating he responded: "When I was in the concentration camp, I didn't tip my cap properly to an SS guard who walked by, not out of rebellion but because I didn't notice him. It didn't matter, the guard beat me senseless. [In fact, he was blind in one eye as a result.] I went back to the barrack, broken, despondent and in severe physical and emotional pain. I decided to give up. I decided that night I would leave this world. But in the same barrack was the Chuster Rav, Rav Yosef Greenwald. He saw how hopeless I was and he stayed up the entire night giving me chiz-zuk. He told me that if I can make it through the night, he gives me a beracha that I will survive, and while Hitler and the Nazis will become a distant memory, I will live a long life and merit to see children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, all shomrei Torah u'mitzvos. That, he said, is why I have achieved *arichus yamim*, longevity."

The Chuster Rav himself lost his wife and nine children, but he, too, survived and rebuilt the illustrious Pupa community. When preparing for our Poland trip in June, Yocheved and I watched the interview we did with her grandparents and I was reminded of another remarkable story.

When it was Yom Kippur in the concentration camp, the Chuster Rav found an empty barrack and invited anyone who wanted to join him for Kol Nidrei to come. They obviously didn't have Machzorim, kittels, they didn't hold Sifrei Torah, but he knew the entire davening by heart and everyone else was going to listen. Before he began, he said I want to say something. The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 32b) says that on Yom Kippur ספרי חיים וספרי מתים פתוחין לפניו, the books of life and the books of death are opened before the Almighty. Why, he asked, does it say books of life and books of death in the plural? Isn't there one book for those who will

merit life and one book for those who won't?

The Chuster Rav looked out at the skeletons, the broken souls who had gathered with him to daven that inauspicious night, and he said, I will tell you why. Because there is not one way to live and one way to die. You can live with freedom and prosperity or you can live in a camp like this being tortured, beaten and forced to work. You can die at an old age in your bed, or you can die in the gas chamber. You can be buried in the Jewish cemetery, or you can be burned in the crematorium. Let us say Kol Nidrei, he told them, and daven that we not only merit life, but that we merit a real life, a life outside of this camp, and that if we must die, that we merit a dignified death and a proper Jewish burial. With that he began to say Kol Nidrei and all of those gathered were crying, sobbing. The window of the barrack was open, Yocheved's grandfather described, and an SS officer heard the cries. He came in and started screaming, what are you crying about? You have no reason to cry, I will give you a reason to cry. He screamed for the windows to be closed, but instead, Yocheved's grandfather anticipating what was to come, jumped out the window. He later heard that the SS beat those inside, some of them to death.

The question of the Chuster Rav was asked before him by the Alshich HaKadosh (Parshas Emor) and others, but I am sure the answer was never given as powerfully as it was that night.

The question is a good one – why the plural, why multiple books of life? I would like to suggest to you that not only is there more than one way to live based on the outside influences on us, but there is more than one way we can choose to live our lives. Will we see the blessing in our lives, or see the hardship? Will we be grateful for what we have, or resentful and bitter for what is missing? Which book of life will we write ourselves into, given that there is more than one?

Rabbi Yitzi Hurwitz lies in bed unable to move anything but his eyes. Yitzi suffers from ALS, but it doesn't prevent him from using his eyes to type a blog post every week. Listen to what he wrote in his blog this week:

*It is now over 5 years since Hashem gifted me with ALS. But this week we celebrated a milestone, it is 3 years since I had a tracheostomy. It was the day after Rosh Hashanah, I had been*

*using a machine called a bipap to help me breathe, still I seemed to be fading. My wife Dina took me to the hospital, where I was diagnosed with pneumonia, and my oxygen level was dangerously low.*

*It was at that point, that I was given the choice to have the tracheostomy and live, or not and put an end to the suffering and difficulties. Legally and halachically it was my choice, with Dina's support, I chose to live. The simple fact is, that if I would not have had it then, I wouldn't be here today and possibly wouldn't have lived through the week...*

*Being able to see my children grow is one of the greatest pleasures. It is incredible that with all the hardships, they found a way to function as normal and healthy kids should. And I get to see them, talk to them, and experience their personalities and talents...*

*After having the tracheostomy, I lost the use of my right hand, and with that went my ability to communicate. Before that I would type on an iPhone for communication and writing blog posts. For those 9 days in the hospital, I couldn't communicate and I just let go and put my trust in Hashem, and my wife made sure I was taken care of.*

*I am blessed to live at a time when there are technologies that keep me alive such as the ventilator that breathes for me, and the incredible computer that reads my eye movements, so I can communicate.*

*While life is full of difficulties, pain and suffering, there is so much to be grateful for. While I understand the hardships, I choose to focus on the positive parts of my life and that keeps me going. There is my wife, my children, family, friends and you. I have the opportunity to learn and teach Torah. There is the hope that in the future a cure will be found or perhaps a miracle even sooner.*

*Each of us has so much good in our lives, even within the suffering and difficulties there is so much good to be found. Focus on the positive in your life now, see all the love that is around you, there is*



*so much you can do, and so much more you can give.*

*May you have a good and sweet year, and may Moshiach come and put an end to all the suffering. The time has come.*

My friends, will you put yourself in the book of life of R' Yitzi Hurwitz, will you see the good in your life, even with the suffering? Or will you inscribe yourself in the book of negativity, of bitterness, of being dead, even while yet being alive?

There is not one book of life and one of death. God decides if we live or die, but we decide **how** we will live, and even to an extent how we will die. Today, we are on our best behavior. We have transcended the physical creature comforts and needs. We are spending the bulk of these 25 hours in heartfelt prayer, sincere introspection, filled with gratitude and love. We have made amends in anticipation of today and we feel a profound sense of *agudah achas*, we are one Jewish people.

The Tur quotes the Midrash Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer (chapter 15) who says that today, the Satan, the prosecuting angel, turns to the Almighty and points out how righteous and virtuous the Jewish people are on Yom Kippur. He comments, Ribon Ha'Olam, they are just like us angels. They stand with feet together, they don't eat or drink, they are free of sin, they have peace and unity among them. God hears them, concludes the Midrash, and forgives them.

Did the Satan change sides? Why is the prosecutor acting as the defense attorney? Why is he defending us when he is supposed to be indicting us?

R' Itzele Peterburger, a student of Rav Yisroel Salanter, explains that the Satan hasn't switched his role, he isn't actually advocating for us, he is advocating against us. You see, says the Satan to Hashem, look at them today. They are angelic. They are living up to all that you want from them. They are united, elevated, spiritual. If they could do it today, why aren't they always like this? If they could behave this way for 25 hours, why can't they behave this way a whole week, or a whole month, or a year?

My friends, the Satan is right. We have revealed our potential today, that which is hidden within us. And now we are obligated to live up to it beyond just today. We can get along, we can feel united. We can show



up to daven, we can turn to Hashem. We can be mindful of how we speak and how we act. We have shown it to Hashem and ourselves today and now we must continue to show it beyond today.

The Klausenberger Rebbe was once sitting with a *yungerman*, and in the course of their conversation, the young man said, "I promise that from today I will do all that I can." Said the Rebbe, "Be careful with what you say. Are you aware of what you are truly capable of? Do you have an inkling of the tremendous power that you possess?" The Rebbe went on to tell a story.

"In my younger years, when I was Rav in Klausenberg, I had a yeshiva there. When I prepared for the shiur klali, I needed about ten books. In those days, books were printed in a large format and on very thick paper so they were quite heavy. I didn't have the strength to carry ten books from the bookcase, so before the shiur, I'd give one of the *bochrim* a list of the books I needed, and he prepared them for me on my shtender. Years later, when I was in a German concentration camp during the Holocaust, they forced me to carry stones and other heavy items weighing 30, even 40 kilos. I carried them on my back while climbing tall buildings for more than 12 hours a day. That's when I discovered what awesome power I possessed. Years before, I'd thought that I couldn't carry the Gemara and the Rashba; was that really the case? So, when you say you'll do all you can, remember that you don't really know the limits of your own strength!"

The possibilities, the potential, the opportunities are great. We don't have one book, we have many. There is the book of our complacency, apathy, excuses, and regret or the book of the Klausenberger Rebbe, the book of possibility, no matter what age or stage of life. There is the book of misery and bitterness, or the book of Rav Yitzi, of feeling blessed and grateful, even when paralyzed in every muscle of your body but your eyes.

Dear friends, ספרי חיים וספרי מיתם פתוחין לפניך, the books of life and the books of death are opened right now, which one are you signing up for?

