

קול דממה

QUIETING OUR LIVES

דקה

A Digest of Derashas from Elul,
the Yamim Noraim and Sukkos 5779/5780

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קול דממה דקה

Quieting Our Lives to Hear the Sound of Silence

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Introduction

We are living in truly unprecedented times. Last year, during *מי במגפה תוקף* when we said the words *מי במגפה*, who will be struck by plague, absolutely nobody could have pictured these last six months nor anticipated what Rosh Hashanah would look like when we would say those same words just a year later.

While many parts of life have been put on hold until this pandemic passes, the arrival of Elul and the Yamim Noraim are non-negotiable and cannot be delayed or deferred. But we wouldn't and shouldn't want to delay exactly what we need, maybe this year more than others.

After many months of retreat, concern, and adjusting to survival mode, Elul and the Yamim Noraim arrive with an invitation and obligation to enter growth mode, to reinvent ourselves, restore our faith and march towards becoming our best selves yet.

As we all know, Elul is an acronym for, and a time to develop the mentality of, *אני לדודי ודודי לי*, I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me. We may have to distance from one another, but we are never far from Hashem. We may need to cover up with masks, but there is no barrier between us and our Creator.

For several years, I have offered derashos throughout Elul and the Yamim Noraim connected through a different theme each year. It is my great honor to present to you this Derasha Digest comprising derashos from last year, built around the theme – “קול דממה דקה: Quietening our Lives to Hear the Sound of Silence.”

As many remain unable to come hear derashos in person, and the derashos that are in this time must remain brief, I hope this digest will enable you to revisit a theme of the past in a way that inspires your present.

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. Special thanks to Rob Shur whose creativity

can be found not only in the layout and graphic design of all we do, but in content and ideas as well.

With berachos and wishes for a year of only good health, happiness, nachas, growth, success and the best of everything!

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Quieting Our Mind

SHOFTIM 2019

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says a third of us aren't getting the recommended seven hours of sleep we need. A growing number of scientists are calling our lack of sleep "an escalating public health crisis." Some aren't getting enough sleep because they are choosing to stay awake until deep into the night, some to work, others to talk, others to watch, and many because they just can't disconnect.

Yet, many others desperately want to sleep, but simply can't. It is estimated that ten to fifteen percent of adults in America have a chronic insomnia disorder. They toss and turn, count sheep, and ultimately many resort to taking Ambien or melatonin, insomnia aids that are part of an industry generating \$70 billion per year. Just a few months ago, however, the FDA required several popular types of prescription sleeping pills, including Ambien, to include a prominent "black box" warning slapped on the box describing the dangerous side effects. Pills are not a sustainable solution. So what can be done?

וְיִסְפוּ הַשְּׁטָרִים לְדַבֵּר אֶל הָעַם וְאָמְרוּ מִי הָאִישׁ הַיָּרָא וְרַךְ הַלֵּבָב יֵלֵךְ וְיֵשֵׁב לְבֵיתוֹ וְלֹא יִמַּס אֶת לֵבָב אֶחָיו כְּלָבָבוֹ.

Among those sent home from war is the individual described as *yarei*, fearful, *v'rach leivav*, soft or faint of heart. Who is this person? What disqualifies him from fighting on the front lines?

Rashi quotes the Gemara:

רַבִּי יוֹסֵי הַגָּלִילִי אוֹמֵר הַיָּרָא מַעֲבֵרוֹת שְׁבִיּוֹדוֹ.

Rebbe Yosi said, the one who is fearful is afraid of the aveiros, the mistakes or indiscretions in his hand, gets sent home.

Which *aveiros*? What *aveira* is so severe that it triggers a fear intense enough to disqualify someone from fighting for the Jewish people?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that when a person goes out to

war, is enlisted to the battle front, it is only natural to be scared, to say to oneself, what if I am unworthy to survive and to triumph? The mind naturally will take the soldier to a bad place, to have doubts and fear. He will think about aveiros, the mistakes he has made, the poor judgment he has shown, the violations, and how they are about to catch up with him. But why does Rebbe Yosi describe them as b'yado? Don't such thoughts and fears happen in the heart or the head, not the hand?

Rav Yosef Bloch, the Stanover Rebbe, in his *Ginzei Yosef*, explains creatively that the pasuk is telling us the following: When it comes to past mistakes and violations, we know we can always be מַהֲרֵר בְּלֵב, have regret, remorse, and make a commitment not to repeat them. We can do teshuva in our hearts and it repairs for the things we have done. However, that which is b'yado, in our hand, for example, if we have stolen, can't be repaired for without making the other person whole. That is what this person fears, aveiros b'yado, specifically the things that can't just be corrected in his heart.

The Imrei Emes, the fourth Gerrer Rebbe, gives another explanation. The Torah says the person who is רַךְ לֵבָב, soft of heart, must go home. He is carrying something in his hand. What is it? Says the Imrei Emes, look at the pesukim that come right before. The Torah tells of three individuals whom we send home from the battle front – someone who built a new home and hasn't lived in it, someone who planted a vineyard and hasn't harvested it, and someone who is in their first year of marriage.

When the later passuk says we send home the person who is soft-hearted and is carrying something in his hand, it means these three individuals referenced earlier. What they have in common is they are distracted, their thoughts are elsewhere. How can one be expected to fight, defeat an enemy, triumph in battle, how can they hear orders, let alone follow through on them, when they are thinking about the new house they didn't get to live in, the vineyard whose wine they never got to taste or their loved one who is back home?

We don't just send home someone who can't stop thinking about what they did wrong. The stakes are so high, the consequences so grave, that we also send home someone who can't stop thinking about something

they did right, but whose thoughts are extraneous to the battle. We need soldiers who can control and regulate their thoughts, who can quiet the noise and distractions in their mind and who can stay focused on the battle at hand, who can consistently execute on what they need to do.

This morning we begin our Elul Sermon Series for this year on the theme of *Kol Demama Daka*. Eliyahu HaNavi is described as witnessing an extraordinary scene on Har Chorev but he doesn't see Hashem until he finally hears a *kol demama daka* – and that is where God is found. A *kol demama daka* is literally the sound of silence, something you can only hear if you are listening closely. We are living in a time of unprecedented noise; we can hardly hear anyone or anything let alone hear our own inner voice. If we are to experience our revelation, if we are to have our breakthrough, be our best selves and have our greatest relationship with Hashem, we need to quiet so many of the distracting sounds and voices around us and in us.

Today we begin with the subject of quieting our mind. Like the soldier, each day we go to battle, we fight to succeed at work and in life. We confront enemies in the form of distractions, temptations, and our own sense of insecurities or unworthiness. Our minds run wild on overdrive all day long in ways that sabotage our own success. Some are constantly thinking about every possible problem that could arise, every reason they won't succeed, everything that could go wrong. For others, the mind is filled with the noise of trying to juggle a million things, emails to return, phone calls to make, people to visit, tasks to get done, people to make happy. For yet others, the mind is overloaded with keeping up with the news cycle, with social media, pop culture, work, home, and more. The common denominator is a cluttered mind, a distracted existence.

Who can find peace while awake or calmly fall asleep when your mind is in overdrive, constantly bombarding you with thoughts, worries, and things to do? A person with a scattered mind gets sent home from war and we are losing too many battles in our lives because of the inability to concentrate, to be present, to find peace. We struggle to disconnect and to simply shut it down.

A Chassid was once plagued by negative thoughts that relentlessly intruded upon him. He was sidetracked by temptations and fantasy; he

was distracted by worry and anxiety. One evening was particularly bad. He couldn't stop having negative and inappropriate thoughts. He couldn't take it any more so he went to his Rebbe's house to get advice. He knocked on the front door but nobody answered. He knocked harder, but still no response. Brazenly, he walked around to the side and looked through the window. He saw the Rebbe sitting at the dining room table learning and so he knocked on the window. But lo and behold, the Rebbe didn't look up and his efforts to get the Rebbe's attention continued to fail. Disappointed and frustrated, the Chassid went home.

The next morning after shul, he waited patiently until it was his turn and he finally had the attention of the Rebbe. Somewhat exasperated, he said, "Rebbe! I desperately needed you last night!" The Rebbe said. "I know. I know what you wanted to ask and I already gave you an answer." Bewildered, the Chassid said, "What do you mean? I knocked and knocked but you never answered and I didn't even get a chance to ask my question!" The Rebbe looked at him and explained: "Last night you came over to my house. You knocked on the front door, and then you knocked even harder. You came around and knocked on my window. You kept knocking, but the choice was mine whether or not to let you in. These thoughts, these questions, doubts, temptations, worries, they can knock all day on the door of your mind, but never forget, the choice remains yours whether or not to let them in."

I love this story because it is so much more than a story, it is a strategy, it is a solution. Thinking about our thoughts and mind in this way has helped me personally and countless others that I have shared it with.

My dear friends, like the Chassid, so many of us are plagued by unwanted and unwelcome thoughts. They could be of temptation, of doubt, of our unworthiness, or simply of being overwhelmed.

Never forget - we cannot control what knocks, but we absolutely can control what we let in and when, and that, too, is a powerful message of our parsha.

Shoftim begins:

שֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים תִּתֶּן לָּהֶם בְּכֹל שְׁעָרֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָּךְ לְשִׁבְטֶיךָ
וְשִׁפְטוּ אֶת הָעָם מִשִּׁפְט צֶדֶק.

Place judges and policemen at all your gates.

The Torah is not just talking to us as a people, a nation, or a community. The Torah is telling us that we can have judges and policemen at the gates, the entranceways into our soul, our eyes, our ears, our mouth. We can and must be judicious with what we let it in and when and we must police and regulate the gateways into our being to ensure we aren't overloaded, distracted or sabotaged from success.

Stop saying that you cannot control your mind from racing. You don't have to persevere, marinate, stew in a thought, fear, concern, or regret. I am obviously not talking about diagnosed, serious illnesses or challenges that need therapy and at times medication. I am referring to everyone else. You are the judge and you are the policeman of the gates into your mind. Decide what to let in, what to think about, what to focus on, what is productive, healthy and positive and what you are going to lock out, what is a distraction, destructive, negative, and unwelcome. Not everyone will fall right to sleep if they can learn to shut down their mind, but many or even most will.

The stakes are high. We cannot win—the battle to fall asleep, the battle to get ahead, the battle to get everything done—if we let any thought, image or idea storm our gates and take up precious real estate in our mind. *Shoftim v'shotrim*, let them come, let them knock, but make the conscious choice, the powerful decision, not to let them in. The thought comes, pivot, redirect, go to a different thought, a positive one, or train yourself not to think at all. Spend a few minutes each day with your technology off, working out your mindfulness muscles. Practice *hisbodedus*, meditation, sitting silently and growing comfortable not only in your own skin but managing your own mind. David Allen, the great architect and author of an amazing book and system called *Getting Things Done*, says, “Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them.” Let them go, put them down, control them, don't let them control you.

Make this your year to quiet your mind, to finally hear your *kol demama daka*. If you do, I promise you your biggest breakthrough yet, an enormous growth spurt in every area of your life, beginning with a good night's sleep.

Quieting Our Appetite

KI SEITZEI 2019

On February 11, 2012, a customer at a restaurant in Las Vegas suffered a heart attack. 9-1-1 was called and the customer was ultimately taken to the hospital, but not before other patrons in the restaurant snapped pictures on their smartphones. You see, the name of the restaurant is the Heart Attack Grill and the dish he was eating when he collapsed is called the Triple Bypass Burger. The other customers weren't cruel, they just assumed it was a publicity stunt.

At the Grill, customers weighing over 350 pounds eat for free if they weigh in with a waitress before eating. The only thing that's vegan on the menu is iced water. The marketing is cute, but, honestly, it isn't funny. On April 21, 2012, a woman fell unconscious while eating a Double Bypass Burger and in February of 2013, a daily patron of the establishment died of a heart attack while waiting at a bus stop in front of the restaurant. Several years ago, the restaurant's 575-pound spokesman died at the age of 29. And yet, somehow, the Grill remains open today.

וְאָמְרוּ אֶל זִקְנֵי עִירוֹ: בְּנֵנוּ זֶה סוֹרֵר וּמְרֵה, אֵינָנוּ שׁוֹמְעֵי בְּקִלְנוּ, זֹלֶל וְסָבָא:

They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is disloyal and defiant; he does not heed us. He is a glutton and a drunkard."

Our Parsha contains the story of the *ben sorer u'moreh*, the rebellious and wayward child whose behavior and attitude are so hopeless that he is executed by the court. What is his egregious mistake? What is so unforgivable about his behavior, past, present or even future? The Torah itself tells us: He is "זֹלֶל וְסָבָא." What does that mean?

The Ibn Ezra translates *zoleil* as gluttonous, someone who permits himself or herself whatever he or she desires. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 70) says in this context it is speaking specifically about food.

And what is *sovei*, his other crime? Listen to the words of the Ibn Ezra:

Sovei is someone who drinks excessively, to the extent that he gets drunk. Such a person resembles a follower of Epicurus, for he seeks from the life of this world only pleasure, through all kinds of food and drink.

We cannot allow the wayward son to just carry on. But, since when is having a voracious, undisciplined appetite a capital crime? There are so many other and frankly worse violations, why is this chosen to highlight what is irredeemable about this young person?

Rav Hirsch is bothered by this question and offers a critically important answer and insight. We know that in fact, there has never, nor will there ever be, a *ben sorer u'moreh* in practice. Why then does the Torah take up precious space telling us about him? Our rabbis (Sanhedrin 70a) answer, *דרוש וקבל שכר*, we have been given these lessons to study and receive reward.

Rav Hirsch understands that to mean that though legally we have never formally adjudicated an actual case of *ben sorer u'moreh*, the lessons and insights of this law remain relevant and therefore we study it and enjoy the reward of becoming better parents and better people.

Rav Hirsch suggests that central to the downfall of the *ben sorer u'moreh* is growing up in a home that placed disproportionate emphasis and focus on food and drink, on the pursuit of pleasure and on the goal of satisfying appetites and cravings. There is nothing wrong with having wonderful and delicious delicacies. We can and should take pride in a beautiful Shabbos table with a menu that includes a variety of courses, mains, sides and desserts. There is also nothing wrong, in my opinion, with enjoying wine or other beverages with the meal, responsibly and in moderation.

The fundamental question is would those who spend a meal at our table walk away saying the conversations, the *divrei Torah*, the positive atmosphere, the love, warmth, hospitality and generosity were extraordinary and delicious, and oh yeah, the food was also fantastic. Or, do they say, the menu was remarkable, the *décor* was amazing, the wine and drinks were the most expensive, and oh yeah I think someone said a *dvar Torah* at some point. Is our focus on the food or the conversation, is

our emphasis the spirits or the spiritual?

Do we also buy into clubs to “taste” the latest sefer, to imbibe the finest divrei Torah or only clubs to enjoy the best scotch or steak? If we raise children with insatiable appetites and the expectation that they always deserve to be satisfied, to have each craving fulfilled, to have the latest of each gadget, to experience the best of every pleasure, we should not be surprised when they emerge gluttonous. *Drosh*, study what went wrong with the *ben sorer u'moreh*, *umekabeil sechar*, and go reap the reward of being a family that strives for holiness, not just happiness, for purpose, not just pleasure, to satisfy the appetite of the soul, not just of the body.

Last week, we began our Elul sermon series for this year on the theme of *Kol Demama Daka*, quieting the noise so that we can hear our inner selves and become our greatest selves. We began by talking about quieting the mind and we continue this week with the importance of quieting our appetites.

Saadi, a medieval Persian poet, put it very well when he wrote, “He who is a slave to his stomach seldom worships God.” Do we control our cravings and direct our appetites, or do they control us, clouding our judgment, distracting us from what is most important and ultimately enslaving us so we make them our master?

It is a natural part of the human psyche to have cravings and urges. Though people experience them differently and are drawn to different desires, everyone has an appetite for something, or for a quantity of something, which is not healthy or good. And yet, the One who designed us to have cravings also empowered us to control them and overcome them.

Our Parsha begins with the story of the Jewish soldier who goes to war and falls in love with the *ishes yefas to'ar*, the beautiful non-Jewish woman he encounters. When describing the laws that govern the permissiveness of that unique relationship, our rabbis (Kiddushin 21b) comment, “*Lo dibra Torah ela k'neged yetzer harah*,” the Torah is not a utopian document but speaks directly to our drives and urges.

R' Yechezkel Abramsky points out that the Torah is providing a dispensation; it should say, *lo dibra Torah ela b'ad yetzer harah*, the Torah

is speaking here on behalf of the yetzer harah by allowing an otherwise forbidden relationship. Why does it say *k'neged* instead of *b'ad*? He explains the fact that this is the only place the Torah concedes that the yetzer harah cannot be defeated and therefore allows this unusual dispensation is indeed *k'neged* the yetzer harah, because it shows us that regarding every other circumstance and every other temptation, we can and we must persevere and overcome.

How do we find the strength, the courage, the conviction to be disciplined and to overcome urges and appetites? When we want to be *k'neged* yetzer harah, we need to let the Torah speak to us. Its values, lifestyle, mission and mindfulness provide the tools to triumph against whatever we are battling. Of course, we can and should employ other sources of help and support, be it groups, meetings or therapy, but it is not a coincidence that so many who have found success attribute it the emphasis on “submitting to a higher power.”

He who is a slave to his stomach seldom worships God, and he or she who works on worshiping God can find the strength and the courage not to be enslaved to his or her stomach. There should be a high correlation between caring about Torah and having the capacity to curb one's cravings and to be healthy.

Torah and Halacha are meant to be a system and a platform for learning discipline, and for gaining control of our appetites. For example, the Zohar writes that the Hebrew word for bread, *lechem*, is connected to the word *milchama*, war. Each time we sit down to eat we fight a war of self-control, discipline, and restraint. Food nourishes and sustains us, but when abused, can also compromise, or even kill us. Each confrontation with our appetite and each act of eating affords us the opportunity to worship God, eat kosher, make berachos, and feed our souls, not only our stomachs.

Not only must the content of our food be kosher, but the portion size of what we eat, the frequency of how often we eat, the health of the ingredients must consume, must also be “kosher.” Eating even kosher food in a gluttonous way is also unkosher.

Rabbeinu Yonah (in his *Yesod HaTeshuva*) quotes that the Raavad had a personal practice he used to quiet his appetite and to grow his discipline. He would leave over the last few bites of everything he ate. Doing so wasn't a waste of food, it was a way to show himself that he didn't need to finish the last bite, he didn't have to lick his plate, let alone go back for more. Eight hundred years later, Rav Aharon Kotler's talmidim noticed that he always left over a portion of whatever he ate or drank. When asked, it became clear he was observing what has become known as *Ta'anis Ha'Raavad*.

If we want to hear the *Kol Demama Daka*, the sound of silence that propelled Eliyahu towards Hashem, we need to continue to learn to quiet our minds, but we also need to learn to quiet our appetites, to be satisfied without getting everything we want, without needing to eat until the last bite, literally and figuratively. We don't need to follow the *Ta'anis ha'Raavad*, but, if we want disciplined, healthy lives, we do need to ensure that our Shabbos table menus and portions not resemble the Heart Attack Grill.

Quieting Our Schedules

KI SAVO 2019

On May 4, 2015, Cheryl Treadway was with her boyfriend, Ethan Nickerson. They were arguing throughout most of the day, and, as the afternoon approached, the fight turned violent. Ethan wouldn't let Cheryl leave. He took her phone away and essentially held her and her children hostage. Despite her please to let her leave, Nickerson was unrelenting. Finally, after asking many times, he finally gave in to one of Treadway's requests: she wanted to make sure her family had something to eat. She asked if she could order a pizza and Nickerson agreed, giving her back her phone momentarily. Through the Pizza Hut app, she ordered a large pepperoni pie, and then Nickerson immediately took the phone away again.

When the ticket came through to the local Pizza Hut, in addition to the usual pizza and topping order, there was a strange message on top. It said: "Please help. Get 911 to me." In the comments on the bottom of the large pizza order, the plea was reiterated -- "911 hostage help!"

The store's manager, Candy Hamilton, told ABC News that she had worked there for 28 years and had never seen anything like that appear on an order ticket. Treadway's pizza order was a secret message, begging for someone to send the police with that pizza. Pizza Hut employees called 911. The local police department dispatched a pair of officers, one of whom happened to be trained in crisis negotiations. The police were able to get Treadway and the kids out safely. Nickerson was arrested and charged with a litany of crimes, including kidnapping. It is unclear if the pizza was ever delivered.

אָרוּר אַתָּה בְּבֹאֶךָ וְאָרוּר אַתָּה בְּצֵאתְךָ:

Cursed shall you be in your comings and cursed shall you be in your goings.

Even before delivering the *Tochacha*, a list of 98 graphic and violent curses, our Parsha records a list of *berachos u'kelalos*, blessings and curses.

If we listen to Hashem's vision for us in His world, we are rewarded with blessing, and if we neglect it and dismiss it, Hashem tells us we will struggle. The curses are described as the mirror image of the blessings. Live properly and בְּרֹדֶף אֶתְּהָ בְּעִיר וּבְרֹדֶף אֶתְּהָ בְּשָׂדֶה, *you will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country ...* בְּרֹדֶף אֶתְּהָ בְּבֹאֶךָ וּבְרֹדֶף אֶתְּהָ בְּצֵאתְךָ, *You will be blessed in your coming and in your going out.* The curses are described as the exact opposite: אָרוּר אֶתְּהָ בְּעִיר וְאָרוּר אֶתְּהָ בְּשָׂדֶה, *you will be cursed in the city, cursed in the country ...* אָרוּר אֶתְּהָ בְּבֹאֶךָ וְאָרוּר אֶתְּהָ בְּצֵאתְךָ, *cursed in your comings and in your goings.*

What does being cursed “coming and going” mean? The Targum Yonasan Ben Uziel translates the pasuk:

לִיטִין אֶתוֹן בְּמַעְלָכוֹן לְבִתֵּי קִיאָטְרוֹנִיכוֹן וְקוֹרְקִיסְתְּכוֹן לְמַבְטְלֵי פְתֻגְמֵי
אוֹרֵייתָא וְלִיטִין אֶתוֹן בְּמִיפְקָכוֹן לְפְרַגְמִטְיִיכוֹן

“You will be cursed when you come in” means “you will be cursed when you come into the theaters and when you come into the circuses – because you wasted your time on frivolous entertainment rather than spending it learning Torah.” He translates, “You will be cursed when you go out” as “you will be cursed when you go out to make a living.”

The great Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Avraham Pam asks, perhaps we can understand being punished for wasting time on lewd and lascivious entertainment, but why should we be visited by curses for going out to make a living? After all, isn't making a living, supporting ourselves, contributing to the world, a noble occupation?

Rav Pam offered a beautiful insight. There is nothing in fact wrong with earning a living. True, the whole time we are working to make money, we could have been studying Torah, volunteering for chesed, pursuing a spiritual ambition, yet we are not accountable for neglecting those things, because earning a living is important and valuable.

The question is, however, what do we do when we aren't earning a living, in our down time? How are we occupied when we are not involved in our occupation? If we use our time well, fill it with meaning and purpose, time with family, doing good things, we show that we are justified not doing

those things when working. If we weren't spending time working, we'd be doing those things. However, if when we have free time, we neglect to use it well, we waste and squander it, or fill it with frivolousness, we are accountable not only for that time, but we show that even our time spent working is not inherently valuable because if we weren't working, we still wouldn't be doing good things.

It is about such a person that we say, "Cursed are you when you come in" to waste time in the theaters and circuses and "cursed are you when you go out," even to earn your living. We must earn a living. But, when we use our discretionary time well, we make the time used to earn a living noble. If we don't use our spare time well, the time we were earning a living would have likely been squandered too.

Our Elul series this year is on quieting the noise in our lives in order to realize our best selves. Two weeks ago, we spoke about quieting our minds by allowing thoughts, fears and pressures to knock, but controlling what we let in. Last week we spoke about quieting our appetites by learning to self-regulate, have self-control and to practice showing self-restraint. This morning, we continue by talking about quieting our calendars and our schedules.

Here's a simple test to see if what you claim are the most important relationships, people and activities in your life are actually priorities in your life. Pull out your calendar and review your typical day, week or month. Does your schedule reflect your priorities? Our real values are communicated in our schedule and what our calendar says is often frightening. Your calendar never lies. You can't say one thing and schedule another. Where you spend your discretionary time is where your values are. What you make time for shows what matters to you.

There are two quotes from Stephen Covey, author of the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, that are really powerful. He writes, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." We talk about our family being the main thing in our lives, or our Judaism, or some other value. But do we keep the main thing the main thing, or does what was supposedly the main thing become just another thing? If you want to know the answer,

look at your schedule or calendar and see how much time you allocate to the “main thing,” or if the “main thing” even appears on your calendar at all. Covey captured this well in the second quote when he wrote, “The key is not to prioritize your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.”

There are many things that legitimately take us away from the “main things” of our lives. We can’t spend as much time as we’d like with our children or expanding our minds or nourishing our souls because we are working, or shopping, or cooking. But what about when we aren’t, how do we use that time? Is it filled with meaning, or meaningless activities? Do we fill out our schedule with a purpose or is time taken up with purposelessness? Are we in control of our schedules, or are our schedules controlling us?

At the beginning of the Parsha, the Torah describes how the farmer would bring his *Bikkurim*, his first fruits, to Yerushalayim. When presenting it, he would recite the *Mikra Bikkurim* which included a short history of our people. In that context he would tell of our time as slaves in Egypt:

וּנְצַעַק אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת־קִלְנוּ וַיִּרְא אֶת־עֲנִינוּ וְאֶת־עֲמָלְנוּ
וְאֶת־לְחָצְנוּ:

We cried to Hashem, the God of our fathers, and Hashem heard our *anyeinu*, *amaleinu* and *lachatzeinu*. What are those things?

ענינו is personal, internal anguish. The Egyptians purposely separated husbands and wives to create loneliness and pain. *עמלינו* is hard work. The Egyptians had a strategy to literally break our backs with endless toil. What is *לחצינו*? *Lachat*, still today in modern Hebrew, means pressure. The Egyptians applied enormous pressure in an effort to break us. What was that pressure? Our rabbis say, they filled our time, occupied and preoccupied us, denied us the ability to even catch our breath. The greatest pressure is a packed schedule with no margin, no down time, no room to think, to experience, or to dream.

We may not have Egyptian oppressors and we may not be held hostage like Cheryl Treadway and her children, but we, too, are captives to busyness, to our crazy schedules, to noble and ignoble tasks and activities pulling us in so many directions and denying us the chance to even breathe, to

live, to experience, to dream. It is up to us to take control, to make the main thing the main thing, to have our schedules reflect our values. Greg McKeown, the author of “*Essentialism*,” says, “If you don’t prioritize your life, someone else will.”

My dear friends, Pizza Hut is not going to come to our rescue. The only one who can save us from ourselves is ourselves. Having our breakthrough year, our best year yet, begins with prioritizing our own lives.

Quieting Our Fears

NITZAVIM 2019

You all know the one about the classic text message from a Jewish mother:
“Start worrying. Details to follow.”

The truth is there is much to worry about these days:

- Worried about the stock market and a recession
- Worried about a hurricane
- Worried about a health crisis
- Worried about a car accident
- Worried plane will crash
- Worried about Israel, its enemies from without and from within
- Worried about the growth of antisemitism
- Worried about the divisiveness and polarization in this country
- Worried about Rosh Hashanah and Yamim Noraim.

Some are worried about coming before Hashem in judgment and others are worried about their seat, whom will they be sitting near, will they have an aisle or a middle, and yet others worried about how long the rabbi will speak.

We have so many things to be worried about, anxious over, and afraid of regularly and especially this time of year. You would have thought if we offered a prayer about worry and fear it would be to relieve us of our worries, to bring calm and peace, and yet we do the opposite.

Beginning Sunday night, we will introduce an expression into our prayers: *ובכן תן פחדך*, please Hashem, instill fear within us. Rabbi Soloveitchik describes that one year, an eminent psychiatrist said to him, fear is a major cause of mental illness and we should work to be free of fear, worry and anxiety, not be praying for more of it.

He answered: Everyone is struggling with a fear. Some are afraid they won't succeed in their careers, others about losing their wealth, other about status or prominence. Some are afraid of sickness, others are

afraid of heights, public speaking or the weather. Said the Rav, I am not a psychiatrist, but I do know that one major source of fear can wipe out all of these lesser fears and that is *yiras shomayim*, fear of Hashem. We daven that we see, feel, are in awe of, and yes fear of Hashem and that our fear of Hashem overtakes and uproots all other fears that lurk everywhere and upset our lives.

This morning, we are continuing our Elul Derasha series on Quieting the Noise in our Lives. We have spoken about quieting our minds, quieting our appetites, quieting our calendars and this morning I want to talk to you about quieting our worries and fears.

I was recently talking to someone I admire greatly about this subject and he said it well when he pointed out that essentially there are two types of anxiety and worry. We worry over things not in our control because they aren't in our control. We worry about illness, weather, traffic, delayed flights and more. Then there are things we worry about specifically because they are in our control. For some, having free will is both liberating and terrifying at the same time. We worry about how well we will perform, will we execute, meet expectations, surpass them, or fall short of them. Can we endure and handle whatever comes our way? What if we fail?

We need to silence both voices of worry and it starts with believing we can. We can begin by using the story and imagery I shared a few weeks ago that reminded us how thoughts can come and knock but it is up to us to decide if we let them in. And we can by choosing to replace these negative and anxious thoughts with confident and positive ones. How?

We are in the final days of the month of Elul, a month dedicated to getting us ready for the new year. We have heard many insights and divrei Torah based on the acronym Elul and the pesukim it stands for. But there is another layer of significance to the word Elul. When read backwards it spells לולא, which means "if not," or "if it weren't for." The word לולא only appears one place in the Chumash.

When the brothers are trying to convince Yaakov to send Binyamin with them back down to Yosef so that he would release Shimon, they appeal to him by saying:

כי לולא התמהמהנו כִּי־עָתָה שָׁבְנוּ זֶה פְּעָמִים:

For we could have been there and back twice if we had not dawdled.

Rashi explains, “we would have already come back with Shimon and you would not have had this anxiety all these days.” “*Lulei*” is associated with anxiety, with what if, what could have been, what will be.

There is another לולא, not in Chumash but in Tehillim, and we say it every day of Elul. לולא הֶאֱמַנְתִּי לְרֵאוֹת בְּטוֹבֵי־ה' בְּאַרְץ חַיִּים. - *Had I not believed in You Hashem and that I would enjoy Your goodness...*

We can quiet our worry by exchanging one לולא for the other. Instead of feeling “*Lulei*” this and “*Lulei*” that, if only this and what will be with that, we need to work on feeling לולא הֶאֱמַנְתִּי לְרֵאוֹת בְּטוֹבֵי־ה', seeing, feeling Hashem in our lives, knowing all is orchestrated from above, there is an infinite, omnipotent One choreographing our lives.

But what about the worry when it comes to ourselves and how well we will perform?

Our Parsha tells us when we start to panic and feel that getting done what needs to get done or being who we need to be is as far away as the heavens, on the other side of the ocean, we need to know כִּי־קָרוֹב אֵלַיךָ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ, *the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.* Hashem doesn't ask for anything that is beyond us. Yes, we will come before Him Sunday night, asked to reflect and holds ourselves accountable. But the very fact that He is *mocheil v'soleiach*, forgiving and forbearing, is reassuring and encouraging.

The Slonimer Rebbe says that those who panic with anxiety over appearing on Rosh Hashanah before the Heavenly court are picturing the court as occupied with harsh, cruel judges. But we need to remember the judge is indeed our Father. He understands our struggles and He wants our success. The Tur says that unlike others who are anxious in judgment, wear black, don't shave, can't eat, we wear beautiful white clothing, eat and drink are festive because our Judgment Day is a Yom Tov, it is the day we come before our Father.

So my dear friends, there is literally nothing to worry about. Mark

Twain once said “I’ve had a lot of worries in my life, most of which never happened.” Studies show that over 85% of the things we worry about don’t ever happen. And as far as the 15% that do, worrying never made them go away, never made them better, and never did anything other than compromise our own health and happiness. Quiet the worry by remembering that Elul is לולא האמנתי, all that happens is meant to be and we have what it takes to deal with it.

So, in the words of the great philosopher, don’t worry and be happy.

What's Your Brand?

ROSH HASHANAH 2019

When he was in his early thirties, Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb was consumed with a number of very pressing questions: Should I stay in Torah learning, or should I continue in psychology? How should I further my career? Should I move into private psychotherapy work or accept an offer from one of the county social service organizations in the area?

He described that he felt stuck, unsure what to do next, depressed and in a state of uncertainty. He spoke to various close friends, and one of them—a Chabad chassid—suggested that he visit the Rebbe. And so it was that in February of 1971 he called the Rebbe. The Rebbe's secretary answered the phone in English, with a simple "Hello, who's this?" As he was talking to the secretary, in the background, the Rebbe was asking in Yiddish, "Who's calling?" Rabbi Weinreb replied, "A *yid fun Maryland*, a Jew from Maryland."

He told the secretary that of the many questions he wanted to discuss with the Rebbe—questions about what direction his life should take, questions regarding his career, questions of faith—he explained that he was at a very uncertain stage in his life and he didn't know where to turn. Rabbi Weinreb heard the secretary paraphrase everything he was saying in Yiddish to the Rebbe. What the Rebbe responded shocked not only Rabbi Weinreb but the Rebbe's secretary who had never heard him say anything like it before.

זה היום תחלת מעשיך זכרון ליום ראשון כי חק לישראל הוא משפט לאלקי יעקב.

This day is the beginning of Your creation, a remembrance to the first day.

Today, Rosh Hashanah, we are marking the beginning of time, the creation of the world. Interestingly, Rosh Hashanah, the 1st of Tishrei, doesn't

correspond with the first day of creation, but with the sixth, the day man was created. The world gained significance and meaning, its purpose was only realized, when man was introduced to the scene.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וְיִרְדּוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הַרֹמֵשׁ הָרֹמֵשׁ עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

And Hashem said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth."

What did Hashem mean when He said, "let us make man." Who is the us? The Ramban says that Hashem was addressing the earth He had created earlier and said, "Nu, let us make man together, you provide the ingredients for the body and I will imbue that body with a soul."

The Ohr HaChaim explains that though Hashem created the entire world and everything in it, He was essentially using the "royal we" to model humility:

ואמר נעשה כי הוא מקור הענוה לזה דבר בלשון רבים כי כן ידבר יחיד
העניו.

Rashi explains that by saying na'aseh, "let us," the Ribbono Shel Olam was teaching us a fundamental lesson. Even a great person should consult with and seek the opinion of those who are less great. Hashem was teaching us derech erez and humility.

These lessons are all important, but didn't Hashem leave the door open for heretics and deniers to claim the Torah was written by more than one being? What lesson was so great, what message so important to communicate, that it was worth taking such risk?

Rabbi Weinreb describes that after asking his question, he heard the Rebbe say in the background, in Yiddish: "Tell him that there is a Jew who lives in Maryland that he can speak to. *Der yid hayst Veinreb*—his name is Weinreb." The secretary asked him, "Did you hear what the Rebbe said?" Rabbi Weinreb was shocked and couldn't believe his ears. He knew for

sure that he had not given the secretary his name, but the Rebbe had just said his name! He wanted to make sure he had heard correctly, so when the secretary asked whether he heard, he said no.

The secretary repeated the Rebbe's words to me: "There's a Jew in Maryland whom he should talk to. His name is Weinreb." Rabbi Weinreb replied, "But my name is Weinreb! And then he heard the Rebbe say, *"Oib azoi, zol ervisen zayn az amol darf men reden tzu zich*, If that's the case, then he should know that, sometimes, one needs to speak to himself."

The secretary also seemed stunned by what was taking place. He said, "The Rebbe said that sometimes it's best to talk to yourself. Isn't your name Weinreb?" "Yes, my name is Weinreb, but maybe the Rebbe means a different Weinreb." "No, the Rebbe's saying, 'Talk to Weinreb,' and he explained that you must to talk to yourself." The call ended with that.

Rabbi Weinreb describes that he hung up the phone and understood what the Rebbe was telling him. He was saying, "You're looking for answers outside yourself. You're not a kid anymore; you're a man. You are thirty years old, you are a father, you are a teacher of Torah. You have to have more self-confidence. It's time to grow up and listen to yourself. Don't be so dependent on others. Trust yourself."

To whom was God talking when five thousand, seven hundred and eighty years ago today He said, *na'aseh adam*, let us make man? Says the Zohar, He was talking to the man He was about to create, He was talking to each one of us, to you and to me and He was saying, let us, together make you. I will start, I will bring you into this world, provide you with personalities, predispositions and potential, but you need to partner with Me, you need to finish what I started and make yourself.

Hashem told us, you will be different from angels who are created perfect and holy. You are not like animals, who have only instincts and intuition. When you recognize the potential I have given you and you work to actualize it, to become the best version of yourself, to live the life you were meant to live, then you and I together will have made Adom. Being His partner in making ourselves and crafting our lives is what makes us different than all of creations, it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives.

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of *na'aseh adam*, we are still getting that call, receiving that invitation to stop feeling we are objects being acted upon, and realizing we are subjects, invited to forge our own lives and destiny. Stop being passive, fatalistic, a spectator to your own life, and start getting in the game, making choices, writing your next chapter and leading your best life.

You are not an actor in someone else's play, you are the director of your own. It is true that there are things that happen in our lives that are out of our control, things we would never write into our play given the choice. Those props, characters or plot lines are handed to us, but make no mistake, we still write the next scene, we determine where the play goes from here.

Many of us need to hear the same message the Rebbe was giving Rabbi Weinreb. It's time to grow up. It is time to not be so dependent on others. It is time to listen to ourselves, to trust ourselves, and to *na'aseh adam*, to be His partner in making ourselves.

What do we want our lives to look like? What difference do we want to make? How do we want to be thought of by others? Just like products, companies and institutions have brands, so do people. Today, as we accept the invitation to make ourselves, we have to ask, what's my brand?

Some people's brand is "he is always late," and others' is "she is always so helpful." Some people overcommit and underdeliver and others surpass expectations in everything they are involved in. These become our brands. Some people are the great davener, and others are the incessant talker, some are the big learners and others are the cynic and scoffer, some have a brand as a great volunteer and others never do for the community, some can't say no to giving tzedakah and others seem like they can't say yes. Some are the hands-on parent and others are the absentee mom or dad. Which are you? As you determine to make yourself and to write your script, ask yourself, what is your brand, what is your image, how are you thought of by others?

Most people's brand is developed by default, passively, it just sort of happens. We feel like we woke up and were just that person, living that

life, filling that role. We feel like victims of our genetics, our limitations, our backgrounds or our opportunities. But, my friends, make no mistake, *na'aseh adom*, we have a say in our own lives, we are responsible for the lives we are living. We cannot control the cards we are dealt, but we can control how we play them.

So, it is time to stop making excuses, and instead to finally make ourselves. How?

Why did Hashem say *na'aseh adom*, why not "*nivra adom*," let us create, a more appropriate verb? The Zohar says it isn't a coincidence the word *na'aseh* is used to invite us to partner, because it is an allusion the language we would use many years later to accept that invitation. When we stood at the base of Har Sinai, ready to accept the challenge to better ourselves, to live our best selves, to lead a mission-driven life, we answered the invitation of *na'aseh adom* with the declaration of *na'aseh v'nishma*. Hashem, we will take what you started to the next step, we will in fact work to complete ourselves. Our script must be written in the language of Torah, our brand must reflect our loyalty to *yiddishkeit*.

This morning, while listening to the shofar and celebrating our collective birthday, think about the day you came to be and the invitation – *na'aseh adom* – to be part of your ongoing creation. For the next ten days we will be evaluated by what we have done to answer that call, to respond to that invitation to not be spectators to our lives, but to craft them, to not make excuses but to get to the business of making ourselves and taking responsibility for our personal brand. Will your time and emphasis be spent on activities and priorities that pad your resume or on providing content for your eulogy? The Alter Rebbe encouraged us to spend Rosh Hashanah not only thinking about what we need, but thinking about what we are needed for.

Young or old, at the beginning of your career or retired, single, married, divorced or widowed, you write the next scene, the next chapter of your life, and it is never too late; you are never too old to partner in making yourself and forming your brand. Herman Wouk, who passed away this year, wrote and published his last book when he was 100 years old. This

past July, John and Phyllis Cook got married. He was 100 years old and she was 102. We are never done. Our play is not over until the final curtain comes down.

Our community conversation this past Selichos night dealt with addiction and recovery. One of the panelists, Laizer, described his journey growing up in a large, very religious family. The combination of losing his father at a young age and his struggle to belong, fit in, and meet expectations all contributed to his turning towards drugs to numb himself. He eventually found himself living in his car, lost and hopeless. One day, he decided he had enough, he wanted to know what it was like to be sober, to be awake and clear again and so for the first time in two years, he didn't get high that day. He went from being a victim, an object, a spectator, to deciding he was ready to take back the script and to own his story. He was tired of his brand being the drug addict, the drop out. He has been clean for a year and a half and has never been happier, more productive, more fulfilled. Now his brand is the *gibor*, the warrior who is confronting and conquering his demons.

As I sat listening to Laizer, it struck me how he had decided to listen to himself and decided to be Hashem's partner. He is writing the next chapter in his life. Maybe our story is not as dramatic, the changes needed not as drastic, but we, too, need to grow up, answer the invitation of *na'seh adom*. It is time to pick up a proverbial pen. The Torah provides the template, but it is up to us to write our next chapter, our best chapter yet.

May we rise to the challenge of “*Na'aseh*” and be worthy of the Divine accolade given to Adom:

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה-טוֹב מְאֹד.

May Hashem read the script we continue to write and say, wow, *tov m'od*, that is indeed very good.

The Right to be Forgotten

YOM KIPPUR 2019

In March of 2008, two brothers in their 70's had an argument about money at a seaside restaurant in the Italian coastal town of Pescara. One brother stabbed the other with a fish knife and was arrested. Alessandro Biancardi, a journalist in the small town, heard the details from the police and knew he had a hot story for his small news website. Fast forward a decade and that journalist is now unemployed and at the center of a huge debate over the internet's future. What happened?

Several years after the stabbing story was published, one of the brothers demanded that it be deleted. Biancardi refused. True, the brothers were arrested after the fight, but the assault-related charges against them were effectively dropped when the authorities did not pursue them.

The brothers sued Biancardi, claiming the article was damaging their reputation, and cited Europe's "right to be forgotten" law. The law goes back to the 90's and says a citizen can request that a company or website take down material considered old, irrelevant, inaccurate, or excessive. A few years ago, the European courts ruled the law could even be used to force Google to delist material from its search engine results.

In 2013, an Italian judge ruled against Biancardi and ordered him to delete the stabbing story, saying the information in it was old and the brothers had the right for it to be forgotten. Mr. Biancardi appealed the judge's decision to Italy's highest court. In 2016, the appeal was rejected. Last September, exactly 13 years after his news site was started, he had run out of money from all the litigation and had been ordered to remove so many stories, he had to shut down the site.

Just so you know, right here in the United States, lawmakers are looking at Europe's privacy laws, including the right to be forgotten, as a model and are considering similar legislation.

The right to be forgotten. Is that in fact a right? Does the Torah offer that

right, are we entitled to have our actions, our behavior, our conduct be erased and forgotten?

אף על פי שהתשובה והצעקה יפה לעולם. בעשרה הימים שבין ראש השנה ויום הכפורים היא יפה ביותר ומתקבלת היא מיד.

In the second chapter of Hilchos Teshuva, the Rambam tells us that even though we can do teshuva the entire year, these past ten days, culminating today, are designated times to reflect and feel remorse for mistakes we made and things we did wrong. If we do, our efforts are accepted immediately, says the Rambam, and we are granted forgiveness and pardoned; what we have done to Hashem is forgotten.

But then the Rambam qualifies his words:

אין התשובה ולא יום הכפורים מכפרין אלא על עברות שבין אדם... אבן עבירות שבין אדם לחברו... אינו נמחל לו לעולם עד שיתן לחברו מה שהוא חייב לו וירצה. אף על פי שהחזיר לו ממון שהוא חייב לו צריך לרצותו ולשאל ממנו שימחל לו. אפלו לא הקניט את חברו אלא בדברים צרידי לפיסו ולפגע בו עד שימחל לו. לא רצה חברו למחל לו מביא לו שורה של שלשה בני אדם מרעיו ופוגעין בו ומבקשין ממנו. לא נתרצה להן מביא לו שניה ושלשית. לא רצה מניחו והולך לו וזה שלא מחל הוא החוטא.

Teshuva and Yom Kippur are effective for the things you did to violate Hashem's trust and expectations, but the hurt you caused, the damage you did against other people, that requires you to not only ensure full compensation, but make sincere amends. If you make the effort and ask three times and the other person doesn't forgive, then they, says the Rambam, in fact become the transgressor.

We do subscribe to a right to be forgotten and forgiven. However, unlike the European law, that right has a condition, a prerequisite. There must be sincere remorse, genuine regret, true commitment not to repeat the mistake, and importantly, a heartfelt and authentic apology. Then and only then does the perpetrator have a right for his or her misconduct to be forgotten, so much so that after a sincere apology, the burden shifts to the aggrieved to forgive.

Moreover, the Mishna in Bava Metzia 58a states:

כשם שאונאה במקח וממכר כך אונאה בדברים... אם היה בעל תשובה לא
יאמר לו זכור מעשיך הראשונים

Just as there is a prohibition against exploitation in buying and selling, so is there ona'ah in statements, verbal mistreatment. If one is a ba'al teshuva, another may not say to him: "Remember your earlier deeds."

Judaism absolutely recognizes a right to be forgotten, but it is not a blanket entitlement, it must be earned. My dear friends, we can erase the parts of our lives we are not proud of. We can edit our history and we do have a right for our mistakes, poor judgment and bad decisions to be forgotten. But we have to put in the hard work. Teshuva is not as simple as deleting a post, clearing our browser history, or doing a hard reset on our device. It is about transforming ourselves, taking stock of our lives, using the feelings of shame and regret not to get stuck in the past, but to shape a brighter, better future. The best way to have parts of the past forgotten is to become a different person in the present, not the same one who did, said, or wrote those things.

That is exactly how the Rambam describes teshuva working:

...ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שחטא בו ומשנה שמו כלומר אני אחר ואיני
אותו האיש שעשה אותו המעשים ומשנה מעשיו כלן לטובה ולדרך ישרה:
[Teshuva occurs when] one distances himself exceedingly from
the thing wherein he sinned, to the point his identity changes, as
if saying: "I am now another person, and not that person who
perpetrated those misdeeds", to completely change his conduct for
the good and straight path.

It isn't enough to do the right thing going forward, we have to take responsibility and be accountable for what we did in the past. We have to find the people we have hurt with our nasty emails, nasty looks, or nasty behavior and we must ask forgiveness. For the behavior we regret to be forgotten, we need to find the people we injured in business, socially, online, or offline and we must make real and meaningful amends.

While there is no simple right to be forgotten or forgiven, the Torah

does provide and encourage the right to simply forget. We should be predisposed to forgive, let go, and look the other way.

The Gemara in Yoma (87a) tells us that if Rav Zeira was insulted by someone, he would pace back and forth near the person so that the offender would come and appease him. Rav Zeira didn't stand on ceremony, he didn't wait for the other person to approach him, he approached them, made himself available and sent the signal it would be easy to apologize, he was eager to forgive and forget.

Today, judgment day, the Navi tells us that Hashem looks back at Jewish history and reflects with nostalgia, fondness, and affection:

הָלַךְ וְקָרְאתָ בְּאֲזֵנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לְאֹמֵר כֹּה אָמַר ה' זָכַרְתִּי לָךְ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבַת
כְּלוּלֹתֶיךָ לְכַתֵּף אַחֲרֵי בְּמִדְבָר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה:

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.

Hashem fondly recalls the wonderful times we had in the Midbar, the love, loyalty and embrace we shared in the forty-year journey. While a lovely passuk and beautiful song, this memory hardly seems accurate. After all, those forty years were full of rebellion, complaining, and ingratitude. Perhaps the reason we invoke this passuk is because it represents Hashem modeling for us how to use selective memory, how to choose to forget. Of course Hashem knows and remembers every detail about those forty years in the desert. But He chooses what to remember and what to forget, what to hold onto and what to let go of.

We, too, have selective memory but too often in the opposite direction. We tend to overemphasize the bad, the shortcoming, the hurt, the times people didn't show up and we forget their virtues, their good, the times they came through. Recently on a Jetlbue flight that landed early, the flight attendant said, "Ladies and gentleman we landed 40 minutes early, please remember that next time we are running late."

It has been said, "Not forgiving someone is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." Forgiveness ultimately is about us, not

them. There is no undeserved right to be forgotten, but we always have the right to forget, even when it is not earned.

באין מליץ יושר - the biggest advocate for us is if we are an “*ein*,” and we make nothing of the hurts or insults. Chazal say *ha'maavir al midosav, ma'avirimi kol pasha'av*. If we expunge the negative from the files we have on others, Hashem will expunge from our own files.

You likely saw the video from last week of a hug felt around the world. A former Dallas police officer, Amber Guyger, was sentenced on Wednesday to serve 10 years in prison for the fatal 2018 killing of an innocent man she shot when she mistakenly entered his apartment believing it was her own. The victim's 18-year-old brother, Brandt Jean, took the witness stand and spoke to Guyger, saying, “I know if you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you... I personally want the best for you.” Brandt then asked the Judge if he could give Guyger, the woman who killed his brother, a hug. The judge said yes, Brandt stepped off the witness stand, they embraced and Guyger broke into tears.

If this man could forgive the person who killed his brother and give her a hug, we can forgive the small slights, hurts and injuries we have incurred. We can dig deep and hug the people who didn't really mean to hurt us, maybe they were insensitive or thoughtless because in fact they were just hurting themselves. So we weren't invited to someone's simcha or we were unhappy with our seating. So our birthday came and went and our children or grandchildren didn't even call. So we extended ourselves for a friend and it wasn't reciprocated. So someone walked by and didn't say hello.

There are so many broken relationships and so much dysfunction because we choose to remember instead of forget, and unlike Hashem we don't do it selectively. Don't hold a grudge or look for the fault, or shortcoming. Let go and move on, and you will feel a huge relief.

My dear friends, we don't have a basic right for our wrongs to be forgotten. We need to own up, seek forgiveness, and make amends. But we absolutely have the right and even responsibility to forget. Let's use it to let go of things that don't matter in the long run and to avoid drinking a poison that will only prove lethal to us.

Breaking Barriers in Our Lives

SUKKOS 2019

1:59:40

No, that isn't the length of my Shabbos Shuva derasha last week, though it isn't too far off. It is the record time that Eliud Kipchoge of Kenya ran this past week, breaking the two-hour barrier in a marathon for the first time ever. To put it in perspective, he ran a mile in 4 minutes and 33 seconds — 26 times in a row. He ran at a pace of 13 miles per hour, for two hours in a row. When he finished, Mr. Kipchoge compared what he'd just accomplished to man walking on the moon. How did he do it?

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרִי עֵץ הַדֶּרַךְ כַּפַּת תְּמָרִים וְעֵנָף עֵץ-עֵבֶת וְעַרְבֵי-
נָחַל וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים:

On the first day you shall take the product of hadar trees...

The Midrash wonders, what do you mean *bayom harishon*, take a lulav and esrog on the “first” day? It isn't the first day of Tishrei, it is the 15th? So what is the Torah alluding to by describing the mitzvah as beginning on the first?

The Midrash offers a cryptic answer – ראשון לחשבון עוונות, it is in fact the first day, the first day to be accountable for the mistakes and bad decisions. But how is that? Yom Kippur was over five days ago. There have been five days to go back to the way things were, to resume our poor behavior and bad habits. How is Sukkos the day our misbehavior “begins”?

The Shemen HaTov explains that from Yom Kippur until Sukkos, who has time to sin? We are so busy running to pick our lulav and esrog, to build and decorate our sukkah, to cook for Yom Tov. We remain on such a high from Neilah and we pour that energy and excitement into getting ready for the holiday.

But then Sukkos comes and somewhat paradoxically, when we finally encounter those mitzvos we were so excited for in anticipation, we lose

steam, run out of energy, and hit a wall. Maybe we are excited for a brief moment entering the sukkah but then it is hot, uncomfortable, and inconvenient. There was such joy and fun in inspecting our *arba minim* but it wasn't much fun having to carry them to shul and balance them with our siddur while walking in a circle for *Hoshanos*.

So Sukkos comes, the work is done, the high is over, and now we have an opportunity to sit with family and friends, we have long Yom Tov days. How will we spend them? Will we become the people we caught a glimpse of in Elul and over the Yamim Noraim, will we fulfill the pledges and promises we made ourselves about who we could become and the lives we could live? Will we be the best versions of ourselves and continue the growth spurt of coming more on time, talking less in shul, singing more, being better to others and to ourselves? Or, will we simply be relieved that the marathon of the High Holidays is over, pat ourselves on the back, take pride in getting through it and go back to exactly who we were, the habits, patterns and behavior, back to the un-lived life, underachieving who we could become?

Rishon l'cheshbon avonos, Sukkos is the time we truly take an accounting about the year we are going to have. Was it all lip service, pipe dreams, and empty aspirations? Or are we implementing and executing on what we promised ourselves, promised those around us, and most of all, promised the One above?

The true test of a person is not if he or she is satisfied with what they have accomplished, but whether or not they continue to push forward, to set goals, to implement resolutions.

Here is the amazing thing about Eliud Kipchoge. He already held the record for the fastest marathon. Last year he finished the Berlin Marathon at 2:01:39. So what made him push himself harder? Before the marathon in which he broke his own record, he said, "I don't know where the limits are, but I would like to go there." He wasn't satisfied with what he had already done, he was focused on what was yet ahead.

You likely recall, just a few days ago, on Kol Nidrei night when we got up to Shema we all proclaimed *Baruch sheim kevod malchuso l'olam va'ed* out

loud. Why? As we know, it is because we were on the level of angels. Yet, moments after Neilah, just after screaming *Hashem hu ha'Elokim*, we said Shema in Maariv and we went right back to whispering *baruch sheim*. I ask you – when are we more like angels, at Kol Nidrei when our bellies and bladders are full, when we roll into Shul at the very beginning of the Holiest day, or motzei Yom Kippur when we have just spent 25 hours free of physical needs and pleasures, unencumbered by the trappings of this world, having spent most of the day in deep prayer and song? Shouldn't we say *baruch sheim* out loud just after Yom Kippur instead of at its very beginning?

Rav Avigdor Neventzal explains so beautifully that being an angel is not about celebrating what you have just done, what you finished. Rather, being angelic means making a pledge and promise for what we are about to do, starting out on a noble and holy journey. True, on motzei Yom Kippur we have completed something extraordinary, but it is over, we have finished. Kol Nidrei night, we are just getting started, we are at the very beginning, but we are about to execute and implement a commitment, and that is when we are on the level to say *baruch sheim* out loud.

Sukkos is not a celebration of what we have accomplished, it is not the relief that the Yamim Noraim are over. The joy of Sukkos comes from what we are about to achieve. It is a focused opportunity to implement all that we had promised, to follow up on everything we committed to do. It is the beginning, not the end. It is prospective, not retrospective. When we sit in our sukkah and host others, when we have meaningful conversations, spend quality time, when we continue to implement the promises and resolutions we made just a few days ago, we feel the greatest simcha, the highest joy.

The happiness of Sukkos, the *v'samachta b'chagecha* is not from the relief of being finished, of having persevered or survived, but rather it is the satisfaction of pushing ourselves further, of knowing we aren't done, of believing that our best—our best at being a spouse, our best parenting, our best learning, our best davening, our best volunteering, our best in our profession—it is yet to come.

One of the most amazing parts of the story of Eliud Kipchoge breaking the record was the description of what happened towards the end of the marathon. When it got particularly tough, when he had to push himself to beat his own record, he started to smile. The greatest *simcha* comes not from reflecting on what we have already done, but from the authentic satisfaction of pushing ourselves to fulfill what we have pledged to yet do.

On Hoshana Rabba we will resume the Yamim Noraim *nusach*, the chazzan will wear a *kittel*. While Neilah may have felt like the finish line, it was only the halfway mark. The verdict on our aspirations and efforts comes not from how we behaved when standing in shul all day davening, but from who we are and how we use our time over the week of Sukkos. Are the changes we made permanent or were they just a fleeting fad? The minimum measure of a sukkah is big enough to hold *rosho v'rubo*, your head and most of your body. The Sefas Emes explains homiletically, we have to get our *rosho b'rubo* in the Sukkah, we have to get our head into what we are doing, to be present, to fully experience this Yom Tov.

Like Kipchoge, we don't know where our limits are, how much Torah can we learn, how much kindness can we show, how much better can we be. But like Kipchoge, let's be driven to go there and find out. We may just find ourselves smiling during the toughest parts.

The Joy of Admitting We Don't Know

SHABBOS CHOL HA'MOEID SUKKOS 2019

Mark Twain once said: “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.” Nobel prize winner Dr. Daniel Kahneman put it a little differently: “We’re blind to our blindness. We have very little idea of how little we know. We’re not designed to know how little we know.” Indeed, when asked what he would eliminate in the world if he had a magic wand, Kahneman answered with one word – overconfidence.

Overconfidence has been blamed for the sinking of the Titanic, the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, the loss of Space Shuttles Challenger and Columbia, the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008, the great recession that followed it, and the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, among other things. Overconfidence has brought personal financial disaster, imploded relationships and ruined lives.

One person who understood this was Shlomo HaMelech, the wisest of all men. In Koheles, which we read this morning, he describes his efforts to explore and understand. אמרתי אחכמה והיא רחוקה ממני, “*I said I will be wise, but it remained elusive to me.*” Shlomo confesses that he tried, analyzed, contemplated, but in the end of the day, he came up short, complete understanding was beyond his grasp.

What is Shlomo referring to? What did he try to apply wisdom to but was unsuccessful? Most say he is talking about the quintessential *chok*, the *parah adumah*, whose law is paradoxical. The impure person is purified from its ashes, but the pure person becomes impure. Shlomo tried to understand its mechanics, how and why it worked, but in the end, he concedes, *rechoka mimeni*, it is too distant.

Rav Yosef Shaul Natanson, the Shoel U’Meishiv, has a different interpretation. He says the word *v’hi* in “*v’hi rechoka mimeni*” refers to the entire Torah. He understands Shlomo HaMelech as telling us: After I saw that I could not comprehend the reason for *parah adumah*, I realize that

the reason for everything in the Torah was entirely beyond me.

Someone once challenged the Chazon Ish about the challenge of theodicy, how bad and painful things can exist in the world. He was driven to make sense and understand the suffering. The Chazon Ish showed him a Tosfos and asked him to explain it. The man tried but failed to interpret or understand the Tosfos. The Chazon Ish told him, "If you don't understand a few line of Tosfos, how do you expect to understand the ways of Hashem, which is concealed from all mankind."

We say in Tehillim, *מה גדלו מעשיך ה' כולם בחכמה עשית.. איש בער לא ידע וכסיל*, "How great are your ways, Hashem.. A fool doesn't understand them..." R' Meilech Biderman wonders why Dovid singles out the fool as not understanding them, when even the wise can't comprehend the ways of Hashem? He explains, what makes someone wise is that they know what they don't know. The fool suffers from overconfidence, thinks they understand and know everything. The fool thinks he or she has all the answers.

We live in a world that makes us feel if we say "I don't know" or "I don't have a strong opinion about that" we are uninformed, weak or unsophisticated. But we come from a tradition that says exactly the opposite. Humility, nuance and admitting we don't know are not signs of weakness, but strength. They don't display ignorance; they show we are informed enough to know that we can't possibly know absolutely.

The Gemara (Berachos 4a) states, *דאמר מר למד לשונך לומר איני יודע שמא תתבדה ותאחז* "Teach your tongue to say 'I do not know, lest you become entangled in a web of deceit.'" Our greatest scholars didn't hesitate to say "I don't know," causing us to think more, rather than less of them, and to place greater confidence in the things they did purport to know. Rashi, without whom the Talmud would be a closed book, is famous for the several places in which he writes, "*eini yodei'ah*, I don't know" regarding the meaning, interpretation, or relevance of a particular verse or statement.

I had the privilege to sit in *Mori V'Rabbi*, Rav Hershel Schachter's shiur for several years. I truly appreciated his greatness not when he quoted from the width and depth of all Torah by heart, but rather, when someone

asked him a question and he humbly and simply said, I don't know.

Perhaps this passuk is why we read Koheles on Sukkos, *zman simchaseinu*. Feeling entitled or capable of understanding everything only sets ourselves up for disappointment, brings about a failure of overconfidence, and leaves us feeling down, incomplete and unfulfilled.

Of course, we should pursue understanding, try to gain wisdom, and obtain insight. But we must admit and concede that we can't have the answers to everything and there are things we just can't understand. Listen to the advice of the wisest of all men: If you want to be happier in your marriage, at work, in your relationship with your children and with Hashem, learn to say, I don't know.

Don't Let Go of the Hand

SHEMINI ATZERES 2019

In addition to the regular Ushpizin that we proudly welcome each night into our Sukkah, our family has a beautiful minhag. We go around the table and I ask each person at the table to answer the following question: If you could invite anyone as your personal ushpizin, someone who is not alive anymore, from the recent past or from long ago, who would it be and why? Some mention members of their family, grandparents or great-grandparents. Others share personalities from Tanach or from Shas and yet others mention heroes of modern Israel.

The answers are fascinating and offer a great insight into what people are reading, thinking about, feeling, or whom they are missing. I am going to continue to ask this question, but as we enter the last day of this beautiful Yom Tov season, I want to ask it to all of you, but a little bit differently.

The last question at a recent Democratic presidential debate surprised everyone and even upset some. After two hours of sparring, Anderson Cooper asked the candidates: what friendship or relationship do you have with someone who thinks or believes differently than you do?

As we are wrapping up this long holiday season and beginning to transition into the real start of our year, I want to ask you, who would you invite to be your Ushpizin that thinks differently from you, that believes differently, observes differently, dresses differently? Do you have friendships, not acquaintances, but real friendships with people different from you?

שְׁבַע יָמִים תִּקְרִיבוּ אֶשָׁה לַיהוָה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם
וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אֶשָׁה לַיהוָה עֲצֻרָת הוּא כָּל־מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:

Seven days you shall bring offerings by fire to Hashem. On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering by fire to Hashem.

Many make a mistake of seeing today and tomorrow as the “last days”

of Sukkos, but the truth is they are an independent holiday: Atzeres, not Sukkos. Indeed, our rabbis label them a רגל בפני עצמו, an independent holiday. The rest of Sukkos, sacrifices are brought in the merit of the nations of the world, but on Shemini Atzeres, the sacrifices are exclusively on behalf of the Jewish people, Hashem's children.

Rashi quotes the Midrash that compares this holiday to a King who hosts all of his children for a party for several days and when the last day comes, he pleads, please stay with me one more day because קשה עלי פרידתכם. Classically this is understood to mean, it is difficult for me to separate from you.

However, the Imrei Emes has a phenomenal interpretation. What bothers Hashem is not our parting from Him; He will come with us. What bothers Him is פרידתכם, the idea that for the last month and a half we have been united, spent quality time together, worked together, celebrated together, focused on our sense of community with a shared destiny, together.

And now, the holidays will be behind us and we will go back to the usual divides, focusing on our differences instead of our commonalities, resuming the usual blame, finger pointing, name calling and hyper criticism. We will go back to local minyanim instead of gathering at the shul, will go back to our own interests, instead of focusing on community, go back to judging others based on what is on or not on their heads instead of what is in their hearts, go back to worrying about is the community going too far to the right or swinging to the left.

Hashem dreads that business as usual. The Yamim Noraim and Sukkos were so refreshing, so different, so unified, so happy. קשה עלי פרידתכם, says Hashem. Your *pirud*, your divisiveness, is *kasheh*, it is so difficult for me. Please spend one more day unified and together, transcending these differences and that *nahrishkeit*.

My friends, unity and togetherness are the essence of this holiday, Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah. The Targum translates the word Atzeres as בנישו, a gathering. Rashi and Tosafos (Kiddushin 6a) explain that *atzeres* means *asifah*, an assembly. The Beis Yisrael, the 5th Gerrer Rebbe, explains the passuk we will read and sing tomorrow:

וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא מֶלֶךְ בְּהַתְאָסֵף רָאשֵׁי עַם יִחַד שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Then He became King in Jeshurun, When the heads of the people assembled, The tribes of Israel together.

וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא מֶלֶךְ – is Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, עַם – is Sukkos, and יִשְׂרָאֵל – יִחַד שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל – when are we all together, united, that is Shemini Atzeres.

How will we spend this one last day, this *regel bifnei atzmo*? We will grab hands and dance in a circle, a circle that has no beginning and no end, no hierarchy or tier system, no head of the table or dais, no *mizrach* or lead position, just everyone dancing equally in a circle, united, together? There is not a circle for shtreimels, a different one for black hats, another one for *kippot serugot*. There isn't a circle for the old and one for the young or a circle for the Republicans and a circle for the Democrats.

One circle, one people, one community, one history and one destiny. That is the enduring image of this Yom Tov, that is the message we take with us into tomorrow, next week, into the dead of winter and beyond.

קשה עלי פרידתכם, it is hard for Hashem, it is hard for me and it should be hard for you. My dearest friends, I beg of you, don't stop dancing even when Simchas Torah ends. Don't go back to the usual *pirud*. Don't stop holding the hands of the person on your left and your right, literally and metaphorically.

Don't let go of the hands of your family, friends and members of the community. Don't let go of the hands of those who are here, and don't let go of those who are gone. Like the Ushpizin, we have felt the presence of our ancestors, our parents and grandparents, over these holidays. Our homes have been filled with the aroma and taste of their recipes, we have heard the tunes they sang, and we have been observing their minhagim. They have lived with us these last few weeks and we must not let them go.

In describing the special relationship of Dovid and Yehonasan, the pasuk says וּבְמוֹתָם לֹא נִפְרְדוּ, in their deaths they never separated, they were never apart. *Nifradu, preidaschem*, we don't let go of the living, and we say Yizkor this morning, because we also don't dare let go of those who are no longer here.

Reb Shlomo told how he had met an old Jew while visiting in South Africa, a man who was so warm-hearted. He asked this man, “Tell me, where did you get your warmth?” He told him that he left Poland when he was seven years old. The last Shabbat before they left, his father took him to the next town to the rebbe for a blessing. They stayed in the rebbe’s house, and he slept in the rebbe’s study. The air was so pure, the books were so holy, and he was so excited, that he couldn’t sleep all night. But in the middle of the night he heard a sound, so he pretended to be asleep. It was the rebbe. The rebbe came into the room, looked down at the young boy, and said to himself: “Such a sweet child.” Then the rebbe thought that perhaps he might be cold, so he took off his jacket and he draped it over him. And the old man said to R’ Shlomo, “I am now almost 80 years old. That was 73 years ago, and I am still warm from that jacket.”

Dearest friends, we are still warm from the jackets of those who loved us, who used to tiptoe in at night to see whether we were still asleep, and who put an extra blanket over us, who cared for us and invested in us, who loved us and made us who we are. We must not let go of them. We continue to hold on to them and they continue to keep us warm.



