



SIX PERSPECTIVES ON THE YAMIM NORAIM

Carving Out our Teshuva Journey

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Following the sin of the Egel HaZahav, and the destruction of the first set of the luchos, Hashem commands Moshe Rabbeinu to carve for himself a new set of luchos and then ascend up Har Sinai for Hashem to inscribe them.

בַּעַת הַהוּא אָמַר ה' אֵלַי פְּסַל לִי שְׁנֵי לוחֹת
אֲבָנִים כְּרָאשׁוֹנִים וְעִלָּה אֵלַי הַהָרָה וְעָשִׂיתָ לִּי
אֲרוֹן עֵץ.

Thereupon the Lord said to me, "Carve for yourself two tables of stone like unto the first, and come up unto Me into the mount and make an ark of wood."

Devarim 10:1

This command was an essential

component of the process to rectify the sin that the Jewish people had committed. Unlike the first set of the luchos, which Hashem carved and inscribed for Bnei Yisrael, the second set of luchos was to be carved by Moshe Rabbeinu *himself* on the first of Elul. The process of rectifying the relationship between Bnei Yisrael and Hashem required Moshe's effort on behalf of the nation. *In the process of communal teshuva toward Hashem, human effort was necessary.* Indeed, it was only after Moshe carved this new set of luchos that Moshe was permitted to approach Hakadosh Baruch Hu, and to ascend up the mountain to continue the teshuva process.

The necessity of human effort as part of the process to ascend back up the mountain is a message that was not only relevant to Moshe Rabbeinu, but is critical to understanding our

personal teshuva processes during this time as well. The Rambam explains in *Hilchos Teshuva 5:1*, "*reshus l'chol adam nesunah*" — every man is endowed with free will — namely that everyone has the choice to choose to be a *tzaddik* or a *rasha*. Hashem gave each of us this capacity, and the teshuva process gives each of us the chance to utilize this capacity to improve our ways and our relationship with Hashem.

In other words, the opportunity to ascend up the mountain is there for each person, but we have to choose it. The message of "*pesal lecha*" teaches us that during this time period, we need to first invest our own effort to improve and to make the choices that raise us up, so we can ascend up the mountain, coming closer to HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

Rosh Hashana is the day where we crown Hashem as king. It is the day

we recommit ourselves to embracing the relationship of “*anu amecha, v'ata malkeinu*” — that we are Your nation, and You are our King. During the month of Elul, a month in which “*HaMelech basadeh*,” the King is in the field, we know that Hashem is extra close, waiting for us. And yet, each person’s relationship with the King is dependent on his or her own choices. The King is there, the King is waiting and we have the amazing potential during this time to choose to ascend up the mountain by carving our own tablets through the choices that we make.

It is always possible to get on board and improve, even now. It is never too late. That’s exactly the message for this unique moment that occurs just once a year. You can always improve, no matter where you’ve been all of last year. It does not matter what your Elul looked like. In just another moment we will hear the shofar, and together we will coronate G-d.

Sculpture and Sculptor: Rosh Hashana Musings on our Inner Landscaping

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We will preface our *tefillas musaf* on the first day of Rosh Hashana with a haftara drawn from the opening chapters of sefer Shmuel. This haftara tells the story of Chana’s painful

struggle with infertility and of her tearful prayers at the Mishkan which are ultimately answered with the birth of her son Shmuel. The haftara concludes with *shiras Chana*, her poetic response of joy and gratitude for this Divine gift.

Why does the Gemara¹ prescribe this haftara for Rosh Hashana? The classic explanation² relates to the **narrative** portion of the haftara: Rosh Hashana is the day that Chana’s prayers for a child were answered, as was the case³ for Sara as well (whose childbirth is the topic of the day’s *kerias ha-Torah*).

Perhaps there are timely connections as well between the major themes of Rosh Hashana and the **lyrical** section of the haftara. *Ein tzur kei-lokeinu*,⁴ Chana tells us at the outset of her *shira*, there is no Rock like Hashem. Simply put, *Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu* is the ultimate Source of strength and stability in our lives. The Gemara⁵ adds an additional level of interpretation: *ein tzayyar kei-lokeinu*, no sculptor can compare to Him. As the Gemara continues to explain, the Divine artistry that is apparent in the internal scheme and intricacy of human beings is singularly remarkable and inspiring.

The Gemara and several midrashim⁶ suggest various aspects of the Divine design of humans which may have particularly inspired Chana. One significant aspect⁷ might be the uniqueness of each person. As the Gemara poetically notes elsewhere,⁸ the fact that no two people have absolutely identical features reflects a deeper reality that each person is unique within; no two of us share an identical inner landscape.

This singularity and uniqueness of each of us is central as well to Chazal’s earliest thematic sketches of Rosh

Hashana. The Mishna⁹ describes Divine judgement on Rosh Hashana as *kol ba’ei olam overin le-fanav ki-vnei maron* — every person on Earth passes before Him like a flock of sheep. Although we are all judged simultaneously, He relates to each one’s inner life and specific situation and circumstances. *Haftaras Chana* can serve to reinforce this central notion. In line with our belief and recognition that Hashem is fully aware of our unique situations and our most private thoughts and decisions, our preparation for *Yom ha-Din* ought to stress not only the need to upgrade our adherence to His **behavioral** expectations of us, but as well our drive to revitalize our **inner** spiritual lives and reawaken our sense of connectedness to Him in our wishes, plans, and priorities.¹⁰

Especially in this singular time, as so many of find ourselves unable to perform the **activities** of *avodas Hashem* as we normally might — many of us may read *haftaras Chana* ourselves without the benefit of the physical presence of a minyan — it is critical to recognize the genuine significance of undiminished **inner avoda** of the mind, the heart and the will. As Rav Mayer Twersky has shared in the name of the rebbes of Ger, *ein lecha davar ha-omeid lifnei ha-ratzon* may well mean “nothing can stop us from **wanting**,” genuinely and deeply desiring to live in accordance with Hashem’s will.

כתבנו בספר החיים למענה.

Endnotes

1. *Megilla* 31a.
2. Rashi, *Megilla* 31a, s.v. *Maftirin*.
3. Ran, *Megilla* (11b in the Rif pages) based on *Rosh Hashana* 11a, quoted in *Beis Yosef* (end of siman 584).

4. Shmuel I 2:2.

5. *Berachos* 10a. See also Maharsha, *Chidushei Agados s.v. ve-Ain Tzayar*.

6. See *Mechilta* end of *Beshalach* (*Shira* no. 8); *Midrash Tanchuma* beginning of *Tazria* and *Derashos Ibn Shu'ib* there.

7. Perhaps based on the idea in the *Mechilta*.

8. *Berachos* 58a. See also Maharsha *s.v. ve-Ain*.

9. *Rosh Hashana* 16a. See also, the Gemara further end of 18a.

10. For more on the centrality of our “inner landscape”, the *chovos ha-levavos*, please check “What I Do vs. Why I Do: A Surprising Insight about Intentions and *Penimiyus*” (<https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/963084/>) and “Inner Work: The Power of *Penimiyus* and Heart” (<https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/965233/>).

B'Onnes UV'Ratzon: What is True Duress?

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The special *vidui* that we recite on Yom Kippur begins with the following confession:

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך באונס וברצון.
For the sin that we sinned before You under duress and willingly.

It is somewhat enigmatic that the very first confession we make is for transgressions that we violated under duress. We have a rule, “*onnes Rachmana patrei*” — the Torah exempts us from violations that occur under duress. Why, then, do we need to confess for these violations?

The Vilna Gaon (cited in *Machzor HaGra*) suggests that we can be held accountable for not looking ahead. We may actively create a situation that prevents us from perform a mitzvah

later, or we passively allow such a situation to happen. While we might be under duress at the time of the violation, if we would have had some foresight, the duress could have been avoided. For that lack of foresight and advanced preparation, we need atonement.

R. Meir Dan Plotzki, *Kli Chemdah* (Moadim Vol. I no. 91), notes that there are additional situations of duress that would require atonement. First, if we were forced into a situation that we really wanted to be in. What if, for example, you have a strong desire to eat a cheeseburger. You then find yourself in an unusual life-threatening situation that requires eating a cheeseburger. Although you may eat a cheeseburger to save your life, if you are pleased to be in this situation then atonement is required. Second, if you were initially forced into a situation that required violating the Torah, but as it developed, you became a willing participant, that too requires atonement. Both of those situations involve duress but they also involve *ratzon* (desire), either at the outset or as the process developed. That is why we say *b'onnes uv'ratzon* — under duress *and* willingly. We need atonement for situations that involve *onnes* combined with *ratzon*.

We approach this Yom Kippur with a very legitimate “*onnes pass*.” As a result of COVID-19, there were many mitzvot this past year that we couldn't perform and perhaps we still cannot perform. However, our “*onnes pass*” requires that it truly be *onnes* and not *onnes* mixed with *ratzon*. If our inability to perform certain mitzvot led to a sense of relief rather than agony, we have the ability to rectify that when we say “*al cheit shechatanu lefanech b'onnes uv'ratzon*” and accept

upon ourselves that when the crisis passes, we will enthusiastically participate in all of the mitzvot that were affected.

Home Shuling: Patience in a Pandemic

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Many people will not be in the synagogue this Rosh Hashanah. Others will likely attend abbreviated services and will find themselves home for the bulk of the days. Transitioning from a Rosh Hashanah centered around synagogue service to a Rosh Hashanah centered at home can be difficult. It has been more than a decade since I was last in shul on Rosh Hashanah for more than a brief visit to hear the shofar with little babies or young children in tow. While davening remains part of my Rosh Hashanah service, my central “*avodah*” of the day is not confined to the Mahzor.

There is a well-known idea that our actions and attitudes toward others can affect how Hashem judges us. My “*avodah*” on Rosh Hashanah is to try to imitate Hashem and to remain patient. Be it with children, parents, a spouse or roommate, “Don't get angry,” is the mantra. We do not want our missteps to “anger” Hashem. We hope our past insolence will be overlooked, that our shortcomings and even outright disregard for His commands can be forgiven. In turn, we must overlook the actions or inactions of others that might otherwise anger us. Surely, the sights

and sounds of services in shul more easily inspire, but earthly interactions also hold an opportunity to elevate.

The pandemic and lockdown have revealed the obvious. Extended exposure to people in confined spaces can lead to increased friction, but on Rosh Hashanah it is especially important not to let the pandemic get the better of us. This is the challenge of spending Rosh Hashanah at home, but not alone.

Remaining patient is not only pragmatic on the Day of Judgement, but a first step in the process of character perfection outlined by the kabbalist R. Moshe Cordovero, in his 16th-century ethical work, *Tomer Devorah*. The first of the 13 Divine Middot, or qualities of Hashem that we should emulate, is patience. As described by *Tomer Devorah* on the words מִי אֵל כְּמוֹךָ (Michah 7:18), Hashem is so patient that even in the moments when we sin against Him he does not cut us off, but “endures” the insult of our sins, and continues to provide us with life and the bodily wherewithal to perform the very acts that signify our disregard for Him! “Who is like You Hashem?” we proclaim. To swallow such insolence and to still lovingly provide. Every parent, caregiver, and friend has experienced such moments. The pain of being mistreated by those we provide for the most. As humans created in the Divine image we are meant to learn from Hashem’s endless patience. To tilt the scales in our favor we too need to be “slow to anger,” patient and loving in the face of complaints and non-compliance from those closest to us, and committed to rising to the challenge of providing for those who depend on us, even in their worst moments.

The Sons of Korach: It’s Never Too Late

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It is a very special moment: before the blowing of the shofar, the Psalm, chapter 47, is sung seven times, “To the conductor of the sons of Korach, a psalm.”

It is at this very moment that we must remember who Korach's sons were. Korach led a rebellion against Moshe and Aharon. Honor, haughtiness and political interests all fueled the rebellion that ended with bitterness and tragedy. Korach and his followers were swallowed by the earth and died. What happened to the children of Korach? They didn’t die. At the last minute, they changed their minds. They teach us that even today, at the last possible moment, we can repent and be saved.

Did we properly prepare for this moment of blowing the shofar? Have we all been in an atmosphere of learning and repentance and contemplation during Elul? For many of us, the first of Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah, arrives and boom! Rosh Hashanah is here. What do we do? What do we do just before the shofar? To the conductor of the sons of Korach, a psalm!

It is always possible to get on board and improve, even now. It is never too late. That’s exactly the message for this unique moment that occurs just once a year. You can always improve, no matter where you’ve been all of last year. It does not matter what your Elul looked like. In just another moment

we will hear the shofar, and together we will coronate G-d.

Why Seven Haftorot?

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A seven-week transition marked by Sefirat HaOmer links Pesach to Shavuot. Notably, there is also a seven-week transition from Tisha B’av to Rosh Hashana that draws less attention. Prior to Tisha B’av, three weeks of haftorot — *shalosh d’puranuta* — are the gloomy prophecies of churban. Beginning with Shabbat Nachamu, however, we reverse our direction with *sheva d’nechemta* — seven consecutive haftorot of consolation and redemption.¹ We are familiar with the preparatory nature of Sefira, engaging us in self-reflection and anticipation of *kabbalat HaTorah*. Likewise, if we explore the seven weeks following Tisha B’av, we will find that their Haftorot indeed poise us for the Yomim Noraim.

Why seven haftorot of *nechama*? If we signify reversal of the progression of destruction, wouldn't three corresponding positive prophecies suffice? True, Chazal teach us, “*midah tova merubah*,” Divine generosity extends further than Divine retribution.² But couldn't that be symbolized with four *haftorot*?

Many explain that “*nechama*” means more than consolation. It denotes a change of mind or perception.³ In our context, Hashem reversed His direction, as it were, from one of *din* (judgement) to one of *rachamim* (mercy). However, there is also potential for a reversal of *our*

perceptions; what we viewed as pure *din*, can now, following Tisha B'av, be understood through the prism of *rachamim*. In retrospect, we can consider even the tragedies in our history in a new light. For example, Chazal emphasize that the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash was in essence a kindness for the Jews, for the alternative would have been their own destruction.⁴

In this light, perhaps four haftorot would not suffice. True, four might indicate Hashem's *midah tova merubah*. But the additional three *haftorot d'nechemta* demonstrate that we can even look back at the original *shalosh d'puranuta* and adjust our lens to perceive their prophecies more favorably. In hindsight, our personal and communal travails are also orchestrated through the loving providence of Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

If so, it is most appropriate for the final four of these haftorot to serve as haftorot of the month of Elul. The name Elul hints to “*Ani l'dodi v'dodi*

li,”⁵ the expression of mutual love between Hashem and Klal Yisrael.⁶ Indeed, the essence of this theme empowers us to discern the *midah tovah merubah* and the love of Hashem inherent in how He guides our lives — even when, at the moment, their events seem bleak. When we gain this perspective, we set the stage for the highest level of repentance, *teshuva me'ahava* — teshuva that emerges from love for Hashem.

This insight adds new meaning to our minhag of reciting *Shir hama'alot mima'amakim k'raticha Hashem* (Tehillim 130) between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. This psalm of repentance beseeches God “from the depths” — generally understood as a call to Hashem from the depths of suffering and humility. So pervasive and compelling is this human state, halacha considers it a definitional attitude of prayer.⁷

Homiletically, Rav Eliyahu Lopian reveals another layer that brings our point to the fore. We can avert

the depths of suffering if we call out to Hashem from the depths of contemplation instead. *Mima'amakim*, a prayer emerging from deeper consideration and deeper perception of the kindness and blessings in our world and in Divine Providence; these ignite a love for Hashem and a realization that they are all bestowed upon us in His love. Upon that background, this psalm of teshuva is a tool to bring us to *teshuva me'ahava* during the Yomim Noraim.⁸

Endnotes

1. *Shulchan Aruch*, OC 428:8.
2. *Yoma* 76a.
3. See, for example, R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, *Beraishit* 5:30.
4. *Medrash Eicha Rabba* 4:14. See Rashi, *Kiddushin* 31a and *Ben Yehoyada*, *ibid*.
5. *Mishna Berurah*, 581.
6. *Shir HaShirim* 6:3.
7. See *Brachot* 10b and *Taanit* 23b.
8. *Kol Dodi Dofek* (Elul), pg. 51.



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