

THE BENJAMIN AND ROSE BERGER TORAH TO-GO®

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Our Father Our King



Special Feature:
Homeland and
Holy Land: Teshuva
and October 7th
Reflections from
Rabbi Dr.
Ari Berman

**Dedicated in loving memory of
Dr. Harlan Daman by Carole,
Gila and Avi Daman**

**Dedicated in memory of
Bernice and Irby Cooper
by their Loving Family**



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Dear Friends,

This past year has been marked by a series of challenges and moments we will never forget. Chief among these are the horrific October 7th terror attacks by Hamas. Confronting that tragedy, the Jewish people came together in ways that reveal the depth of our unity and our bond as a people. Our *tefillot* — whether in our shuls or in those quiet, personal moments — have taken on new urgency, filled with heartfelt prayers for the safety of our brave IDF soldiers, for the healing of the wounded, and for consolation for the families of the fallen.

One prayer in particular, “Avinu Malkeinu,” traditionally reserved for the Yamim Noraim and fast days, has become a daily anthem in many communities since the outbreak of the war. At Yeshiva University, it is recited in our Beit Midrash, even on Shabbat. This powerful tefillah captures the dual relationship we have with Hashem — as both our compassionate Father and our sovereign King.

As we gather during these Days of Awe, we are reminded of just how profound and layered that relationship is. “Avinu Malkeinu” calls us to reflect on Hashem’s dual role — caring and guiding us with the love of a parent, while also commanding our respect and obedience as our sovereign ruler. This is not just an abstract idea; it is something we feel deeply, especially during these days of introspection and *teshuva*.

Our connection with Hashem also mirrors how we relate to each other. As children of the same divine Father, we share a responsibility to treat one another with kindness, respect, and empathy. The way we interact with each other has a direct impact on our relationship with Hashem, making the pursuit of unity — *achdut* — not just a lofty goal, but a daily practice in our spiritual lives.

This theme resonates in our liturgy. During the Musaf service, after the shofar blasts, we say “*HaYom Harat Olam*,” declaring, “*im k’vanim, im ka’avadim*”— whether we are to be judged as children or as servants. This mirrors the duality in “Avinu Malkeinu,” which highlights our multifaceted relationship with Hashem. That many congregations choose to recite “*HaYom Harat Olam*” to the tune of “Avinu Malkeinu” is truly powerful, musically reinforcing the connection between these prayers and their themes.

As we approach this year’s Yamim Noraim, the memories of those lost on October 7th and during the ensuing war weigh heavily on our hearts, reminding us to empathize with the ongoing pain of those affected by the attacks. Our prayers for Israel’s safety and security feel more urgent than ever, and the themes of “Avinu Malkeinu” resonate even more deeply, reminding us of our collective strength and our unwavering faith in Hashem’s protection and guidance.

As you read this publication, I hope it offers you inspiration and insight into the rich, beautiful complexities of our relationship with Hashem and with each other. May these reflections deepen your *tefillot* during these sacred days, and may we all be inscribed for a year of peace, safety, and unity.



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לעילוי נשמות בן ציון בן אפרים וברכה סימא בת שלמה הלוי

Ben & Betty Jakobovits

Ben Jakobovits, born in Szighet, Romania, emigrated to Israel after the Holocaust where he proudly served as a *chayal* in the War of Independence. He later moved to Los Angeles where he married his *eishet chayil* Betty Wiesel.

Betty Jakobovits was born in Czechoslovakia and survived the horrors of Auschwitz. Despite numerous challenges throughout her life, she excelled as a devoted wife, loving mother, and a true *ba'alat emunah*.

Ben and Betty's collective faith in Hashem and strength in the face of adversity established them as pillars of the Los Angeles Jewish community, where they built a beautiful life together. They are remembered with deep love and admiration by all who knew them.

Sheila and Ronny Apfel and Family



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**Rabbi Dr. Ari
Berman**

*President and Rosh Yeshiva,
Yeshiva University and RIETS*

HOMELAND & HOLY LAND:

Teshuva and October 7th

Initially we were shocked. We were confused. We were tormented and in profound pain. After October 7th, we walked the streets of Israel and of the Diaspora shaking our heads in disbelief. At the same time, we observed an unprecedented outpouring of love and compassion. After immense political disunity, Jews and Israelis came together in solidarity from across the globe and across the political and religious spectrum. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis returned from every corner of the earth to serve in the IDF. The response to terror was abounding love; people in Israel's center took in families from the South, volunteered in hotels, and did the laundry of strangers, week after week. Diaspora Jews came together united in support of Israel with a shared narrative of fate and destiny, the kind that only a family can experience. We witnessed virtue and goodness in action. We watched a young generation become leaders almost overnight. And, for many, this was itself a form of repentance for the polarization that had characterized the state of our people.

October 7th changed us.

We are not the same as we were at this time last year, not as individuals and not as a people. There were so many Israeli deaths and so many hostages that the wreckage in human life was mentally and emotionally inconceivable. October 7th revolutionized the world outside of us and then re-shaped the universe inside of us.

October 7th and its aftermath also exposed the profound hatred that terrorists and their supporters harbor. The disgust and cruelty to Jews and Israelis, in particular, that previously lay hidden in the hearts of many surfaced. Initially, there was unusually strong worldwide support for Israel. But this lasted for only a brief amount of time until compassion morphed into questioning and then into criticism. College campuses were acid playgrounds of polarization, where even those who knew little about this centuries-old conflict found community through vandalizing property and making Jewish students feel unsafe and unwanted. Jews that previously thought they were safe learned that antisemitism is alive and well.

October 7th certainly shook the foundations of my world. Early that morning, I was in a Jerusalem synagogue with my sons when I heard the blare of sirens. First once, then twice, then three times. People were walking the streets panicked. I ran to my mother's apartment to check in on her. My son, a combat reservist in the IDF, was ordered to his base. He quickly gathered his gear, and we sent him off to war.

That night, as we began to learn of the tragedies in Israel's South, the enormity and scale of what happened began to reveal itself. The horrific losses alone were incomprehensible and unbearable. But something else broke that day: our sense of Israel's existential security and that of our own in the Diaspora in the aftermath of October 7th.

Now, on the precipice of the Days of Awe, we look back on this year of trauma and what it demands of us. Maimonides advised that in times of crisis, we examine our ways and stake out a future path of religious growth and virtue. There is much reflective work to be done.

Every year, we seek to repair our relationship with God. Every year, we seek to improve our relationship with

"We are not the same as we were at this time last year, not as individuals and not as a people."

those around us. This year and every year after, let us also improve our relationship with Israel as a central part of our Jewish identity. For the attack that is happening today is not only a physical assault against the land of Israel but also an assault against the very idea of Israel. Israel is both a reality and a sustaining idea that has nourished the Jewish people for millennia. Although today it is a state among nations, since antiquity the idea of Israel has been at the root of hatred against the Jews.

"Place" in Jewish and Monotheistic Thought

From the beginning of Judaism's origin story, Israel as a geographic entity has embodied holiness and sanctity. Abraham was told to journey from his father's house to a new land in which God would appear to him. The sanctity of the land is manifest through the sanctity of its fruit, the special laws that govern its agriculture, and the virtuous behavior required of its inhabitants.

But Israel for the Jewish people is not just a holy land, it is also our homeland. "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession" (Gen. 15:7), God declared to Abraham. It was for him and Sarah and for all their descendants for eternity: "I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. I assign the land you sojourn to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God" (Gen. 17:7-8).

There are a number of Torah requirements that are contingent upon Israel as a homeland; these are often

clustered around several biblical words: *nahala*, an inheritance, *she'arekha*, your gates, and *ahuza*, your legacy. A land that is an eternal inheritance cannot be sold permanently in Jewish law. Similarly, there is a distinct prohibition of stealing another person's property in Israel because it is that individual's inheritance, *nahala*. Israel in the Torah must have a political and legal system so that it can serve as a just homeland; this includes a system of judges in every city's gates and a process to appoint a king, if the community wills it. In a homeland, the Jews are to create a society in which all are protected; this is expressed, for example, in the ritual of the *egla arufa* that expresses collective responsibility for loss of life in the land.

In Jewish law, holy land and homeland are at all times intertwined. The Jewish people's presence in the land unlocks the full force of the land's sanctity, as illustrated by the rules of the sabbatical and Jubilee years. It is *because* the land is holy that Israel must establish its homeland on the basis of the most elevated religious and ethical values or the land will be unable to tolerate its residents. The biblical and rabbinic ideals of economic and social justice, spirituality and virtue, all emerge from the correlation between Israel as both holy land and homeland. This dual understanding of Israel has been transmitted from generation to generation; Israel is imprinted on our souls and reflected in the actions.

The Monotheistic Revolution

While the duality of holy land and homeland is obvious to us, it was novel and misunderstood by other nations. In a world filled with idols and idolatry, every nation and every land had its own gods. In this context, the fact that Israel was the homeland of the Jews and their God was intuitively understood and accepted in the ancient Near East. In these cultures, someone visiting another country was expected to offer sacrifices to the native gods of that region. In the book of Jonah, for example, the sailors who experienced God's salvific powers sacrificed to Jonah's God, who clearly had power over the ocean.

What was not understood by these nations is why the Jews did not recognize and accept that other countries

were also holy lands for their gods. The distinguishing element of Judaism's practitioners from the adherents of idolatry is the universality of God as the one God of the entirety of the world, who cares for all of the inhabitants of the world. Jonah described his God as the God of the "sea and the dry land," an all-encompassing God who was invested in the souls of the sinning Ninevites, far from where the Israelites lived.

This aspect of Jewish belief was befuddling to ancient idolators. Our monotheistic belief proved infuriating to the enemies of the Jewish people as expressed by Haman and the other Persians in the Scroll of Esther. Mordechai and the Jews refused to recognize the local deities of Shushan and those throughout the Persian

"The great dream of national teshuvah — of return, hope and rebuilding — that has sustained the Jewish people throughout millennia is our current reality."

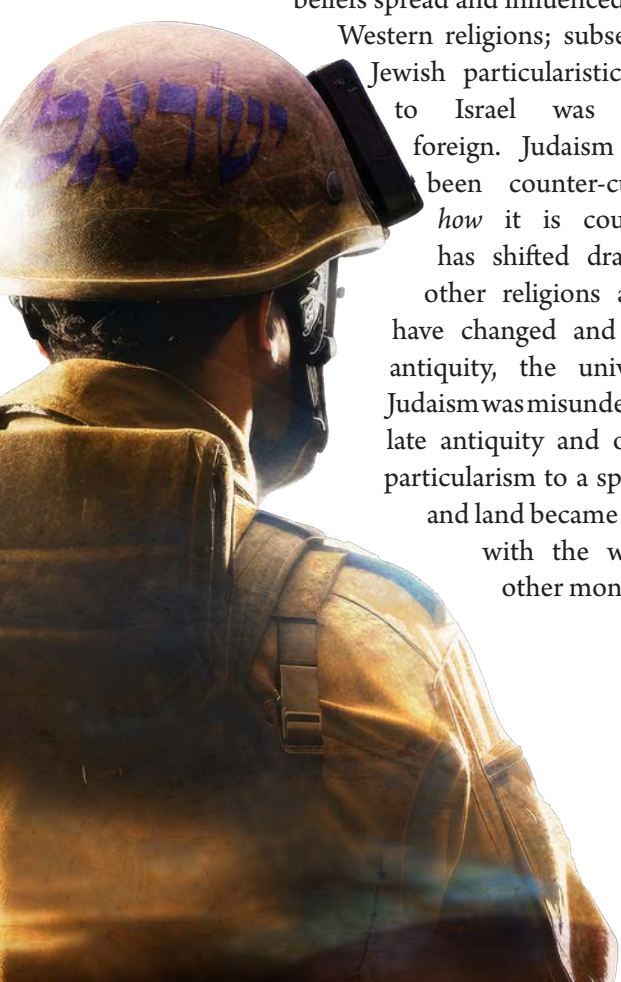
empire. This Jewish religious outlook was regarded as strange and threatening to members of the empire who worshiped other gods. They wondered why Mordechai refused to bow before the cult of Haman. After all, this was a normative practice for others at the time. That the Jews maintained their own traditions to the exclusion of others made their faith incomprehensible, and, in Haman's argument a danger to the country.

Similarly, the appellation Mordechai the Jew, *HaYehudi*, and the phrase "many members of the nations of the land became Judaized ('*mityahadim*')" (Esther 8:17),

conveys this subtle message of a universal religion. *Yehudi* is a title for one who lived in the region of Judea. To be a *Yehudi* in Shushan, and to welcome those into the fold as “*mityahadim*” is revolutionary; it implies a reach far beyond the land of Judea. That Judea was the homeland of the Jewish God was understood; that it was the sole holy land in the world and the place to which all prayers are directed even outside its borders was incongruent to the idolatrous world view.

The dissonance with other cultures moved in the opposite direction in the common era when the daughter religions of Christianity and Islam emerged from Judaism and adopted the universal element as their own. Christianity and Islam envisioned God as the ruler of the entire world, not residing in any one place. Along these lines, there is no single place in which all Christians and Muslims are called upon to live. Christianity and Islam have holy sites, like Rome and Mecca, but there is no one homeland for all Muslims and Christians in the way there is for Jews.

This new theological context profoundly overturned the earlier prevailing worldview. Judaism’s universal beliefs spread and influenced other major Western religions; subsequently, the Jewish particularistic attachment to Israel was increasingly foreign. Judaism has always been counter-cultural. But *how* it is counter-cultural has shifted dramatically as other religions and cultures have changed and evolved. In antiquity, the universalism of Judaism was misunderstood; from late antiquity and on, Judaism’s particularism to a specific people and land became incongruous with the worldview of other monotheists.



Judaism and Monotheistic Faiths on Repentance

This profound disconnect spilled over in some unexpected ways among the world’s largest and oldest religions. One such dissonance is the concept of repentance and return which is so central to monotheistic faiths. Islam and Christianity conceive of repentance individualistically. A person sins, feels remorse, repents, and is forgiven. These monotheistic faiths also promote a more global form of repentance that is linked to the messianic era. As part of a future eschatological period, they believe there will be a judgment day on which each person must give an accounting for his or her actions. Repentance involves a return to intimacy with God and improved relations with people who have been wronged. It ultimately results in the entire world serving one God.

"Our children must understand that even if we are not residents, Israel is both our holy land and our homeland."

Judaism offers a similar religious approach, but in the Torah, *teshuva* has an additional nationalistic element not found in Christianity or Islam. In Deuteronomy, repentance is conceived as a return to God that is interwoven with a return to the land. Once the Jewish people return to Israel, the next stage of *teshuva* is to create a just and holy society that brings together God, the land, and the Jewish people. As a direct outgrowth of Judaism’s tripartite theology, the Torah regards repentance as personal and collective, individualistic and nationalistic. The land’s sanctity demands that we form a society worthy of housing the presence of God.

This national conception of repentance cannot be achieved without Jews returning to the homeland, which involves *kibbutz galuyyot*, the ingathering of exiles to Israel. The personal and national identity of a Jew is always richly braided.

How different the comprehensive Jewish view of repentance is from other monotheistic faiths was a point brought home to me years ago when I was a student at Hebrew University. I was looking at a photography exhibit depicting the Old City of Jerusalem in the lobby of the University, and an Arab-Israeli university student happened to be standing next to me. We struck up a conversation. I introduced myself, explaining that I was originally from New York and had now moved to Israel. She was from East Jerusalem. We spoke about our very different perspectives on life, politics and security. The whole conversation was eye-opening; it surprised her that I moved to Israel. She could not understand why. She understood why Israelis who were born and raised in the country would live there, but why had I come to Israel if I was comfortable in America. Why would I move? And why have so many Ethiopians and over a million Russian Jews moved to Israel? "Why are you all here?" she wondered.

Her questions were sincere and not combative; they prodded me to think of the language to express the Jewish connection to the land. This conversation helped me better understand one of the ways in which Judaism is profoundly different from the other major monotheistic faiths. We believe that Judaism requires a homeland that is also a holy land for its fullest expression.

There are places that are sanctified in Islam, to be sure. Mecca is the place of Mohammed's birth and early years. Medina is the place of his ministry, and Al-Quds is the place from which Mohammed ascended in his nighttime ride to the heavens. These are holy places for every Muslim. But Israel does not occupy a special place in Islam in which Muslims are expected or destined to live. Israel, like Spain or any other country once ruled by Muslims, is considered *dar al Islam* as part of a once-dominant empire. But there is no one place that is a homeland for Muslims.

"The land's sanctity demands that we form a society worthy of housing the presence of God."

The language with which I naturally thought about Israel was alien to her. I have found a similar gap in conversations with members of other monotheistic faiths. This gap is not political but epistemic. The religious lens in which the world is viewed is different.

The internal narrative of the Jewish people that is reinforced all throughout our culture and tradition is that Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel are not just founding patriarchs and matriarchs but our great, great grandparents. Their story is our story. The journey that they began is our journey, and the years that generations of our family spent outside of Israel, reflecting two millennia of Jewish history, is the story of Jews in the diaspora. Israel, even for those not physically residing in it, has always remained the hope and the homeland.

This is core to Jewish identity historically. In truth, I have found this gap not only between Jews and members of other monotheistic faiths, but at times even between more traditional and very progressive Jews. If one is not reared with this deep sense of Jewish family and an intergenerational notion of personal identity that is viscerally connected to Israel as a Jewish homeland, then the current Western culture which reinforces the ideas of individualism and universalism can easily become defining categories. From this perspective, Jews who have a deep attachment to Israel seem nationalistic and tribal.

The charge that links the Middle Eastern enemies of Israel with the progressive protests on college campuses is colonialism. That Jews are colonialists in Israel is at the core of the charter of Hamas, a centerpiece of the UN resolution that Zionism is racism and the driving force behind the international effort to delegitimize the

existence of Israel. Sadly, universities in this country and beyond are filled with professors who see the world through this colonialist prism. They place Jews as oppressors to an indigenous population. This is a modern iteration of the centuries old challenge to the premise that Israel is the eternal homeland of the Jewish people.

While the central assault of October 7th was a massacre against the Jewish people the likes of which we have not seen since the Holocaust, the new antisemitism it unleashed is undergirded by the fundamental challenge to the Jewish idea of a Jewish state.

It is not just the State of Israel that is under attack, but the Zionist identity of the Jewish people that is also under assault. While it is intuitive to the majority of Jews that anti-Zionism is antisemitism, there is an international effort underway to delink Israel from Judaism.

As such, inherent in our response during this season of repentance and return is to strengthen the ways we transmit our multi-valanced commitment to Israel to our children, within our communities, and to the broader society.



*"October 7th changed us.
It reminded us
that all Jews
are deeply
connected to
one another."*

Our children must understand that even if we are not residents, Israel is both our holy land and our homeland. We must give them the tools to internally withstand the ideological assault that is taking place. We must help them become effective advocates in their places of study and work environments so that they can communicate the richness and complexity of Judaism and its roots in the land and the State of Israel. But more importantly, for their own development as fully developed Jews, we must teach the centrality of loving Israel viscerally and unconditionally.

Teshuva means return — a return to the wholeness of a covenantal commitment. Let it be an emotional return, not only because Israel is suffering, but because Israel is a great gift that enriches our lives and ennobles our purpose.

October 7th changed us. It placed the Jewish language of heritage, home, family, values, commitment, and love at the core of our consciousness. It reminded us that all Jews are deeply connected to one another. An event that happens on one side of the world, affects all of us in all parts of the world. And it inspires us to not only combat antisemitism but to spread to all of our society the positive values on which Israel is built.

Since that fateful day, my son has served two tours of duty as a combat soldier in the IDF and my daughter has finished two years of national service to the country. Their commitment is a living embodiment of the tradition that was passed down through the generations from Abraham and Sarah to my grandparents who survived Nazi occupied Europe to my parents who raised their children in America and made aliyah later in their lives. We are living today in miraculous times. The great dream of national teshuvah — of return, hope and rebuilding — that has sustained the Jewish people throughout millennia is our current reality. On these days of contemplation and teshuva, may we commit ourselves to move history forward and bring in the time foretold by the ancient prophecies, when Israel will be infused with peace and the love of Hashem felt throughout the world.

Reimagining

THE AVINU MALKEINU OF 5785

Remotely

“Avinu Malkeinu... rescind difficult decrees from upon us... dismantle the ideas of our enemies... bring an end to all those who cause hatred and impose pain... grow salvation for us in the near future... raise up the pride of those whom you have anointed... do on behalf of those who were butchered due to their faith... Avenge the spilt blood of your servants...”

This sampling of the Avinu Malkeinu prayer will, this year and for years to come, project vivid and graphic images in our minds and undoubtedly deeply charge our recitation of this prayer during the Yamim Noraim. These phrases and many others will no longer send us back to earlier centuries but rather to eyewitness reports and personal recollections that are all painfully fresh in our minds.

Furthermore, we will be poignantly reminded how the Avinu Malkeinu prayer coalesced the rulings of Harav Schachter shlita, alongside many other roshei yeshiva and the rulings of the *admorim* of Satmar and Klausenberg and united in prayer so many yeshivos and batei medrashim. Together we all followed the centuries-old teaching of the *Chasam Sofer*. At that time, the Pressburg community was displaced by the invading Napoleonic forces and the *Chasam Sofer* instructed his community to recite Avinu Malkeinu daily until the residents returned to their homes.

Presumably, this teaching was based on the many “fast day protocols” recorded in *Mesechta Taanis* that accompany Chazal’s mandate to fast and increase teshuva and communal davening when beset with an acute temporal disaster such as drought, an epidemic, famine, a plague or a war.



**Rabbi Yaakov
Neuburger**

*Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS
Mara D'asra, Cong. Beth Abraham,
Bergenfield, NJ*

Yet the Avinu Malkeinu prayer takes us even further back to Rabbi Akiva, who formulated it in a successful plea after the prayers of the community had gone unanswered:

שוב מעשה בר' אליעזר שירד לפני התיבה
ואמר עשרים וארבע ברכות ולא נענה ירד
רבי עקיבא אחריו ואמר אבינו מלכנו אין לנו
מלך אלא אתה אבינו מלכנו למענך רחם
עלינו וירדו גשמים הווי מרנני רבנן יצתה בת

קול ואמרה לא מפני שזה גדול מזה אלא שזה מעביר על מדותיו וזה אינו מעביר על מדותיו *There was another [long lasting drought], and Rabbi Eliezer led the community in prayer and recited twenty-four [communal fast day] blessings, but he was not answered. Rabbi Akiva followed him and the communal prayer and recited, Avinu Malkeinu, we have no king other than You. Avinu Malkeinu, for Your sake, have mercy on us. And rain immediately fell.... A Divine Voice emerged and said: It is not because this Sage [Rabbi Akiva] is greater than that one [Rabbi Eliezer], but that this one is forgiving, and that one is not forgiving. (Taanis 25b)*

Our renewed appreciation that Avinu Malkeinu is the prayer for an “eis

It becomes abundantly clear that Avinu Malkeinu is the appropriate way to address Hashem, as we recognize our lapses and take responsibility for our rebellious and detached moments.

tzoro,” a crisis such as a war or illness, helps us appreciate the nature of the Yamim Noraim. They too are no less an eis tzoro. After all, it is these days during which all that is to be in the coming year hangs in the balance. Indeed, last Yamim Noraim were the days that did not find us worthy of protection from the gezeiros of Oct 7. Though the phrases of Avinu Malkeinu became alive for us after yom tov, they were all being weighed at the outset of the season.

Unworthy Yearning

What was the insight of Rabbi Akiva? What did he invoke which, coupled with his accepting and unselfish demeanor, won the favor of the A-mighty? What was so impressive about Rabbi Akiva’s appeal to the seemingly discordant “faces” of divine being; the biased and accepting Father on one hand and the coercive demands of a distant Sovereign on the other?

Perhaps Rabbi Akiva’s wisdom was born out of the text that we recite thrice daily. It seems that the phrase “Avinu Makinu” is first found at the outset of the Shmoneh Esrei. To position ourselves favorably and perhaps even become worthy of our requests, we implore the A-mighty to help us in doing teshuva and to grant us forgiveness. We do that turning to Avinu Malkeinu:

הַשִּׁיבֵנו אֲבִינוּ לְתוֹרָתְךָ. וְקַרְבָּנוּ מִלְּכָנוּ לְעִבּוּדְךָ.

Return us, our Father, to your Torah, and bring us closer, our King, to Your service.

סָלַח לָנוּ אֲבִינוּ כִּי חָטָאנוּ מִחַל לָנוּ מִלְּכָנוּ כִּי פָשַׁעְנוּ.

Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned, pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed.

It becomes abundantly clear that Avinu Malkeinu is the appropriate way to address Hashem, as we recognize our lapses and take responsibility for our rebellious and detached moments. Apparently, when we seek pardon and tolerance, when we feel less than worthy, Chazal lead us to appeal to the infinite patience of a Father while swearing fealty to Hashem’s sovereignty. Thus, we express where we want to be, and from there repair and recovery can begin.

No wonder the common minhag has us sign off the entire Aveinu Malkeinu list, reciting:

אֲבִינוּ מִלְּכָנוּ חַנּוּנוּ וְעֲנֻנוּ כִּי אֵין בָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ צְדָקָה וְחֶסֶד וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ.

Avinu Malkeinu, be gracious to us and answer us though we have no deeds that render us worthy of all that we ask; Be charitable and kind to us and save us.

And this expression of unworthiness is perhaps the only way to explain the otherwise unbalanced and discordant piyut that accompanies the sounding of the shofar:

היום הרת עולם, היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים, אם כבנים, אם כעבדים. אם כבנים, רחמנו כרחם אב על בנים. ואם כעבדים, עינינו לך תלויות, עד שתחננו ותוציא לאור משפטנו, איום, קדוש.

Today Hashem will judge all of His creations, as children or as subjects. If as children, be compassionate with us as a father is compassionate with his children. If as subjects, we recognize that we are hanging until You are gracious to us.



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I am always struck by the dissimilarity between our two presentations. Apparently, there is nothing that compares to the compassion we can appeal to as “subjects.” We cannot call upon earlier moments of loyalty nor can we solicit His responsibility as a Sovereign being. Rather, we recognize that the tank is empty, the relationship is broken, and the prayers more uncertain than usual.

I imagine that Rabbi Akiva, as he took his position as *shaliach tzibur*, looked at whom he was representing. They were enduring a punishing and relentless drought, but far worse was that their prayers went unanswered — whether from the common people or the leading Sage, Rabbi Eliezer.

Speaking on behalf of a dejected group with nothing to offer, Rabbi Akiva taught us two timeless lessons. The second lesson is that, like the sacrifices of old, we can offer the insults we’ve swallowed and the offenses we’ve let go. Just as Rabbi Akiva did, we can present those defining moments when we put relationships ahead of ego, allowing the connections of the past to erase the

disrespect of the present. With that we can ask the same from the A-mighty. But the first lesson that we learned is that when we feel distant and dispirited, unentitled and unworthy, that is an Avinu Malkeinu moment!

Reimagining

Now, whereas the Avinu Malkeinu prayer may be borne out of despair and dejection, out of a relationship with Hashem that seems unpromising, the prayer’s substance is altogether uplifting.

Far from expressing unworthiness, HaRav Yaakov Moshe Charlop zt”l, the towering student of Harav Kook zt”l, explains that the seemingly paradoxical relationships in Avinu Malkeinu are both the catalyst and reservoir of strength from which we can renew and deepen our closeness to Hashem.

Recognizing Hashem as a seemingly distant and demanding Sovereign at times gives us the space to be awed by His might, captivated by His providence, and mesmerized by

His infiniteness. That empowers our devotion to His will.

Reflecting on the closeness of Hashem, our Father, adds joy, a sense of belonging, and a natural desire to bring His will into our world. It legitimizes our highest aspirations of discovering life and joyous spirituality in His service.

By predicating our requests for the safety of our people, for peace and contentment, for personal health and productive lives, and for the full restoration of the position of Torah and the Jewish people with Avinu Malkeinu, we recognize that we are far from deserving of these blessings.

At the same time, by wholeheartedly asserting that we are His children, we take ownership of our spiritual aspirations and moral entitlements. As we enthusiastically submit to His Sovereignty, we open ourselves to be moved by His limitlessness. Together, we have all the tools we need to build passionate, deeply rich and profoundly genuine spiritual lives that will find favor in His eyes.

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TRANSFORMING **DAYS OF AWE** INTO **DAYS OF LOVE**

Imagine the following scene: a man leaves home on a Purim morning only to shortly thereafter return in the guise of a bear. His young son, failing to recognize that it is none other than his own father, fearfully runs to his mother to inform her of the “bear” that is lurking in the adjacent room. The mother attempts to soothe the child by revealing that the “scary bear” is none other than “Abba.” In an ironic display of childish understanding mixed with unresolved fear, the child swiftly returns to his father in costume, and cries out with a heartfelt and desperate plea: “Abba, Abba! Father! Please save me from the bear!”

I have often thought of this humorous yet poignant anecdote as so perfectly capturing the complexity and range

of our emotions in the months of Elul and Tishrei.¹ It is difficult to precisely define the essential nature of these days. Yamim Noraim, literally awe-filled days, project a heaviness of the impending judgment. And yet upon closer inspection, one marvels as the *middas hadin* curiously blends with the tender embrace of Hashem in these aptly called *Yimei Ratzon*.

The early 11th-century Spanish paytan, Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, in his piyyut “*Keser Malchus*”² poetically captures this paradoxical posture. As one struggles to approach Hashem during these precious days of teshuva, he describes the feeling of, *evrach Mimeka Eilecha*, — “I flee from You, to You.”³ Fear of acknowledging our shortcomings and failures while simultaneously dreaming



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of new beginnings pulls our heart and our very being in opposite directions.

The *halachos, minhagim* and liturgy of Elul, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur seek to guide us through conflicting emotions and varied expressions.

Should we fear or rejoice? We shudder from the piercing cry of the shofar yet dress in pure white garments projecting our confidence in the outcome of our trial. Should we feast or should we fast? Is a tear-drenched siddur commendable or at least justifiable?

The path to teshuva appears contradictory. The Torah presents the teshuva process as easily accessible, inviting and within reach. Hashem cajoles us with His words:

לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לְאֹמֵר מִי יַעֲלֶה לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם
וְיִקְחֵהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֵנוּ אֶתְּהָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה. וְלֹא מֵעֵבֶר
לַיָּם הוּא לְאֹמֵר מִי יַעֲבֹר לָנוּ אֶל עֵבֶר הַיָּם
וְיִקְחֵהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֵנוּ אֶתְּהָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה. כִּי קְרוֹב
אֵלֶיךָ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ.

It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. (Devarim 30:12-14).

On the other hand, Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuva* 2:2) sets the bar incredibly high when he codifies proper teshuvah as a transformation of self to such a degree that, "He Who knows the hidden will testify concerning him that he will never return to this sin again." One wonders if anyone can rise to endure such a level of spiritual scrutiny.

Ultimately, we are left grappling with the question: How are we expected to see ourselves throughout this process? In an oft-quoted refrain from the Rosh Hashana davening we verbally raise this very question: *im ki'banim, im ki'avadim* — are we seen as beloved children, as indentured servants or perhaps a strange hybrid of both?

While this inner disharmony certainly

can create discomfort, one need not seek to "solve" or resolve this feeling of mixed emotions. A wholesome Jewish heart has the wherewithal to contain multiple emotions, sometimes even conflicting ones. The *Zohar HaKadosh*⁴ acknowledges that for a spiritually mature spirit, it is entirely possible to live authentically with "Weeping lodged in one side of my heart, and joy lodged in the other."⁵ This is perhaps, in part, the intent of the Mishna (*Berachos* 9:5) in explaining the Torah's directive to serve Hashem with "All of our heart" (*Devarim* 6:5, 10:12).⁶

Nothing captures the potency of this duality quite like the emotionally charged tefillah of Avinu Malkeinu — our Father, our King. It was in fact Rabbi Akiva (see *Taanis* 25b) who invoked this description of Hashem when petitioning Hashem for much-needed rain to end a stifling drought. While the Gemara attributes the success of Rabbi Akiva's tefillah to his refined character, particularly his forgiving nature, one cannot overlook the fact that it was specifically the use of the term Avinu Malkeinu which enabled him to stir the heavens.⁷

While the phrase Avinu Malkeinu paints an image of a steady balance between a loving parent and a demanding king, it is ultimately the parent-child relationship that creates the possibility of spiritual recovery through the teshuva process.

The *Bnei Yissaschar*⁸ (Rav Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov zy" a [1783-1841]) cites a midrash⁹ which notes that teshuvah is only effective for the Jewish

people and not for any other nation of the world.¹⁰ In explanation of the midrash, *Bnei Yissaschar* highlights a critical distinction: while a Jew relates to Hashem as a child to a parent (i.e. Avinu), the remainder of humanity relates to Hashem solely as King. Our sages teach that while a king cannot forgo his honor,¹¹ a parent is granted such authority by the Torah to exempt a child from the expected displays of honor.¹² As such, the forgiveness and pardoning that teshuvah offers is viable only in the context of a parent-child relationship. As children of Hashem (*Devarim* 14:1; *Shemos* 4:22) we are uniquely granted this privilege of having our sins erased and our "script" rewritten. Make no mistake: we too serve as subjects in Hashem's palace and vast kingdom of creation. Yet it is Avinu, rather than Malkeinu, that opens the door to restoring ourselves and rectifying the tainted relationship.

When we turn our attention to the concluding Mishna of *Meseches Yoma* (8:9), we are not surprised to once again encounter the centrality of the parent-child relationship in the cleansing process of teshuva. Rabbi Akiva returns, with his positive and hopeful outlook, to remind us of the blessing and privilege of being the children of Hashem.

אמר רבי עקיבא: אשריכם ישראל, לפני מי אתם מטהרין, ומי מטהר אתכם? אביכם שבשמים.

Rabbi Akiva said: How fortunate are you, Yisrael; before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? It is your Father in Heaven!

A wholesome Jewish heart has the wherewithal to contain multiple emotions, sometimes even conflicting ones.

With the resounding cry of “*Ha’melech!*” from the Rosh Hashana davening still echoing in the distance, it is “*Avinu She’ba’shamayim*” who lovingly purifies His children as the sun sets on the horizon in the closing moments of Yom Kippur.

Similarly, in the end of days, as Chazal speak of a chaotic downward spiral and a crumbling societal world order, we recognize that there is but one relationship that will shield us and protect us until *geulah* arrives: *Avinu She’ba’shamayim*.

בעקבות משיחא חוצפא יסגא, ויוקר יאמיר
 ... והמלכות תהפך למינות ... בית ועד יהיה
 לזנות ... והכמת סופרים תסרה, ויראי חטא
 ימאסו, והאמת תהא נעדרת. נערים פני זקנים
 ילבינו, זקנים יעמדו מפני קטנים. (מיכה ז)
 בן מנבל אב, בת קמה באמה, כלה בחמותה,
 אויבי איש אנשי ביתו. פני הדור כפני הכלב,
 הבן אינו מתבייש מאביו. ועל מי יש לנו
 להשען? על אבינו שבשמים.

In the times of the approach of the Messiah, impudence will increase and high costs will pile up... the monarchy shall turn to heresy... The meeting place of the Sages will become a place of promiscuity... And the wisdom of scribes will putrefy, and people who fear sin will be held in disgust, and the truth will be absent. The youth will shame the face of elders... Normal family relations will be ruined... A man’s enemies will be the members of his household. The face of the generation will be like the face of a dog; a son will no longer be ashamed

before his father. And upon what is there for us to rely? Only upon our Father in heaven. (Sotah 9:15)

As we navigate the final chapters of world history and transition from a year marked by the pain of loss and the hardship of war to a year we hope will be filled with revealed blessing, *Avinu Malkeinu* “reminds” Hashem (and more importantly ourselves), that just beneath the surface of the “scary costume” is our loving Father longing for our closeness and connection. May we merit this year to remove the mask once and for all and bask in His warm embrace.

Endnotes

1. Rav Shimshon Pinkus *zt”l* (*Sichos R. Shimshon Pinkus zt”l, Galus UNechama* pg. 33) shares this story to expound on the pasuk, “*He is a lurking bear to me, A lion in hiding*” (Eichah 3:10) when discussing the palpable absence of the Shechinah in our midst resulting from the loss of Beis Hamikdash. See as well *Sichos R. Shimshon Pinkus zt”l, Elul* pg. 11 where he discusses a conversation between Rav Yisrael Salanter and an inquisitive Jew who asked Rav Salanter why he feared Elul so greatly. “Is Elul a bear that you should fear?” Rav Salanter explained (based on pesukim in both Shmuel I and Tehillim) that days of Divine judgement are in fact more frightening than a bear!
2. Recited by some communities, primarily Sefardim, on Yom Kippur.
3. See the Rambam, *Peirush HaMishna* to the Mishna, *Rosh Hashana* 32b who similarly writes: לפי שהם ימי עבודה והכנעה ופחד ומורא

מהשם ויראה ממנו ומברח ומנוס אליו. Some suggest the Rambam had the words of Ibn Gabirol in mind when using such a phrase.

4. Zohar Vol 2, daf 255a; volume 3, daf 75a.
5. This passage is referenced and discussed in the *Tanya* (end of Chapter 34; *Iggeres HaTeshuvah* chapter 11).
6. See *Berachos* 61a which compares the evil inclination to a fly that sits between the two entrances of the heart. This suggests, allegorically, that the *yetzer hara* seeks to divide the heart and create tension between the seemingly opposite emotions of weeping and rejoicing. There is much nuance to be explored here in defining *yirah*. See Rav Soloveitchik’s *And From There You Shall Seek* (p. 67) who notes that, “fear and love are mutually contradictory, but awe and love do not negate each other.” A full treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay.
7. We are reminded as well of the story of Rabbi Akiva and his contemporaries (*Makkos* 24b) overlooking the destruction of the Second Beis Hamikdash. As his fellow tannaim wept at the sight of a fox emerging from the Kodosh Hakadoshim, Rabbi Akiva’s broad soul and deeper perspective allowed him to laugh amidst the tears.
8. *Maamarei Elul*, 1:6
9. He cites *Sifrei*; see *Midrash Tanchuma* to *Haazinu*.
10. One might suggest, in light of the story of *Sefer Yonah*, that while a superficial degree of teshuva is indeed possible for gentiles, the fullest fulfillment of teshuva is only offered to the Jewish people.
11. *Kesubos* 17a.
12. *Kiddushin* 32a.

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 and meaning of *Avinu
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If I Were a Prophet

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur represent two great and eternal themes. Rosh Hashanah is the *yom ha-din*, the day of judgment and justice. Yom Kippur is the *yom ha-rahamim*, the day of love and compassion and forgiveness. Din (justice) is harsh, demanding, unswerving. *Rahamim* (love) is patient, gentle, forbearing. Both are aspects of God, and both must be ever-present in life.

Just as the two qualities are separated in time, with Rosh Hashanah emphasizing *din* and Yom Kippur expressing *rahamim*, so are they incorporated in two types of personality in Jewish history: the *Navi* or Prophet, and the *Kohen*, the Priest.

While their functions sometimes overlap — in real life the *Navi* was somewhat of a *Kohen*, and the *Kohen* sometimes a *Navi* — in essence they are totally different; prophecy and priesthood often stand at opposite poles. The Prophet, as the man of *din*, is a radical: like Moses, chief of

Prophets, he holds fast to his root-ideals, and insists upon the complete and immediate application of his pure principles without compromise. The Priest, as the bearer of *rahamim*, is a realist: like Aaron, first High Priest, he knows the conditions in which his ideals are to be lived, he appreciates the stubbornness of circumstances, the failings of flesh, and the frailty of human nature. The Prophet is the angry critic, while the Priest is the tolerant teacher. The Prophet summons man to God, while the Priest pleads with God for patience with man. Moses, the man of *din*, of justice, hurled at his people the historic divine challenge. Aaron, the man of *rahamim*, the fatherly guardian of Israel, practiced love and mercy and compassion — even while his people danced about the Golden Calf. In his passion for justice, Moses smashed the Tablets to bits. In his love and forbearance, Aaron picked up the broken pieces of his people and tried to refashion them into a self-respecting nation of God.



Rabbi Norman Lamm zt"l

This sermon was delivered by Rabbi Lamm at the Jewish Center on Rosh Hashanah 5726 (1965). Reprinted with permission from The Lamm Heritage Archives www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage

The rabbinate is heir to both traditions — of *din* and *rahamim*; it has historically been expected to combine both functions: that of Moses, and that of Aaron, of *navi* and *kohen*. The Rabbi, as interpreter of *all* of Torah, was expected to reproach his people and encourage them; criticize them

and inspire them; judge them and love them.

Most of the time, *din* has been in eclipse. Rabbis have usually allowed the prophetic dimension of their vocations to be muted. They have in them much more of Aaron than of Moses; they teach, encourage, socialize, visit — but much less often do they raise their voices in harsh criticism or indignant protest. *Rahamim*, especially in modern America, brings more results than *din*. It is more attractive and also more effective. More is accomplished with friendship than with reproach, in love than in anger. Besides, Prophecy is much too dangerous: prophets are usually killed by their resentful people.

Yet the Rabbi is true neither to himself nor to his congregation nor to his God if he eliminates entirely the prophetic element from his personality. Rosh Hashanah, as the *yom ha-din*, is the day that calls this prophetic dimension to mind.

On Rosh Hashanah, therefore, I wonder aloud, with you, about the great theme of *din*, and the role of prophecy. Have I done justice to the historic blend of judgment and compassion, of *Kohen* and *Navi*? If I should don the mantle of the Prophet, would my people understand? Would I bring them closer to Judaism, or alienate them from God? What, indeed, would I say to you if I were more of a Prophet? What would I tell you if I were driven by a divine passion and had the fortitude to overlook amenities and ruffled feelings; if I were willing to ignore the consequences and to tell the truth as God has allowed me to see it; if I were willing to step on toes in order to elevate hearts and raise souls? Dare I, indeed, silence this spirit that agitates me?

O, if I were a Prophet! If I had the courage of an Isaiah and the fearlessness of a Jeremiah! I would turn to the higher social classes of American Jews and tell them that they cheapen and vulgarize themselves when they nurture as their most powerful and most secret ambition — to become Jewish WASPs, Jewish counterparts of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. I would accuse — without concern for this or any other season's fundraising campaigns — many of our great national organizations of pious fraud for their myopic obsession with anti-Semitism and pleading with the Pope, when the really great danger to Jewish existence is ignorance and assimilation. I would thunder against those who have made of our *holy-days* mere *holidays*, abandoning the synagogue during the most sacred festivals. I would be indignant mostly towards those who do come to the synagogue — who come and find nothing better to do than discuss the market or their neighbor's clothing, thereby desecrating the synagogue and making a mockery of Judaism.

Those are some of the things I might say if I were a Prophet. And they should be said, especially on this *yom ha-din*. But the Prophet is not the only authentic personality in Judaism. As a Rabbi, Jewish tradition bids me to incorporate as well the role of the Priest and find genuine sources of *rahamim*, of encouragement. *Hanah la-hem le'Yisrael*, do not be too harsh with the Children of Israel, our Rabbis counseled. *Im einam neviim, benei neviim hem* — they may not be Prophets, but they are the children and grandchildren of Prophets (*Pes. 66a*). Despite all, we are God's covenanted people, the children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and generations of the lovers of God and Torah. We may

occasionally fail, but we bear within us the genes and chromosomes of spiritual greatness. Every cell in our body contains a summary of Jewish history, a recapitulation of generations of Jewish nobility. Some of us may aspire to be Jewish WASPs, but most of us would love to be better Jews if only we were a bit stronger. It is true that we should spend many times more on education than on defense against anti-Semitism; but who can blame Jews who are still frightened only one generation after Auschwitz? Yes, people desecrate the service by their foolish conversation — but as long as they come, maybe they will learn and mature. *Hanah la-hem le'Yisrael* — let us be happy over and not too critical of our fellow Jews! They can certainly be redeemed!

If I were possessed only of *din*, I would castigate all those who pay tribute to Judaism and then arrogate to themselves the honorific title of “a good Jew” — the *shomer shabbat* who is delinquent in *tzedakah*; the philanthropist who has abandoned the Sabbath; the Jew who comes to the synagogue only rarely and feels that he has thereby done his duty; and the Jew who comes daily but is a failure in *middot*, in character, forgetting that God demands a clean hand and a pure heart. I would repeat to them the abrasive words of the Prophet Isaiah: *mi bikesh zot miyedkhem remos hatzerai*, who asked this of you that you trample my courtyard underfoot (*Is. 1:12*); that you act disloyally in home and marketplace and then dare to invade the sacred precincts of the House of God with spiritual smugness and self-righteousness!

But I am not a Prophet. I am a Rabbi, and have been taught that God combines *din* and *rahamim*, and that man must do likewise. I therefore prefer to address to them the words of the

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Psalmist: *Barukh ha-ba be-shem ha-shem, berakhnu khem mi-bet ha-shem* (Ps. 118:26), no matter who you are, how infrequently you come, how badly you have failed to measure up to your Jewish destiny: if you come in the right spirit, then blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord; we bless you from the House of the Lord — bless you and welcome you most cordially, and invite you to come again and again and again. For you are our brothers and sisters and we are all children of our Heavenly Father. No child of God is ever rejected, ever unwelcome in the House of God.

If I were a Prophet I would thunder against Jewish writers who see nothing but ugliness in Jewish life; against Jews with Jewish-sounding names who seek to subvert all decent society by being the chief purveyors of pornography and smut; against Jews who do not shrink from becoming slumlords; against Jewish groups who sponsor banquets serving foods that are abominations in the eyes of God; against Jewish parents who have been derelict in their duty and have raised a generation of uninspired self-centered materialists. A recent survey of college students reveals that most Catholics and half the Protestants regard as their highest ambition to serve God and their church — whereas most Jewish students consider their greatest goals the achievement of economic security and advancing their careers. No God, no Torah, no Israel, no mankind! All they can do is repeat that dull litany of selfishness, centered about the unholy trinity of I-Me-and-Myself. I would say, with Isaiah, *Hashmen lev ha-am ha-zeh* (Is. 6:1-0), the heart of this people is coarse, its spirit dead, its eyes blind, its soul insensitive.

The Prophet, in his passion for justice, sees all the faults and the failings. But spiritual leadership embraces both

the functions of *mokhiah* and the *melamed zekhut*, the critic and the defender; and the element of *rahamim* and priesthood lets me see redeeming features too. I cannot condone what the Prophet in me repudiates, what I know is unjust, in violation of *din*. But I know that this is a rootless generation, whose Jewish education was sorely neglected; that it is not in conscious revolt against God, but only acting out its ignorance, imposed upon it by the past. Its sins are *shogeg*, unwitting errors, not *mezid*, malicious rejection of God and Torah. I see certain sanguine, positive factors: a marvelously generous generation that, despite its professed egotism, has created a UJA and JDC; idealists who help underdeveloped countries and volunteer to assist backward peoples; Jews who have little idea what Torah is all about and yet give unstintingly to Yeshivot, whose functions and significance they do not truly comprehend. With the Sages of Israel I see them as *rahamanim benei rahamanim*, merciful and compassionate people. And this compassion and goodness confirm me in my optimism and confidence about the Jewish future of Jews! R. Elimelech of Lizensk offered this comment on a well known verse from the 23rd Psalm: *akh tov ve-hassed yirdefuni kol yemei hayyai, ve'shavi be'vet ha-Shem I'orekh yamim*, usually translated, “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever.” The word *yirdefuni*, R. Elimelech said, means not “follow” but “pursue” or “drive”; and the “goodness and mercy” refers not to pleasant things happening to me from without, which would make this a plea for the soft life, but the goodness and mercy we possess within ourselves. This, then, is the meaning of the verse: surely the goodness and mercy that are

within us, the benevolence and decency and charitableness that distinguish the “Jewish heart,” these will drive and inspire the Jew to dwell in the House of the Lord forever, to return fully and completely to God and Torah and Synagogue!

But this is not merely a professional dilemma for Rabbis; for the Rabbi is nothing more than a teacher. It is the Torah itself which speaks to us in two voices — that of the *Navi* and *din*, and that of the *Kohen* and *rahamim*. Some of us respond better to the direct remonstrance of the Prophet, others to the fatherly plea of the Priest. Both are the authentic voices of Judaism. Were there only the unconditional demand of *din*, some might be shocked into resentment and despair, and totally alienated from God. Were there only the gentle plea of *rahamim*, others might be lulled into paralyzing complacency, smugness, and self-righteousness. Few can bear only the white heat of the *Navi*; none ought to be exposed only to the pink cloud of the *Kohen*.

God has given us two ears; let us open both, one to the bitter but vital truths taught by the *Navi*, the other to the encouraging and patient coaxing of the *Kohen*. Indeed, let us listen with both ears to the call of the Shofar. For it denotes two different themes — and both are valid and relevant.

The Prophet urges us to hide in fear and trembling at the mighty sound of the ram's horn. How did the Prophet Amos put it: *Im yitaka shofar be'ir va'am lo yeheradu*, shall the Shofar be sounded and the people remain unafraid (Amos 3:6)? As surely as the sound of Shofar brought down the walls of Jericho, so the *teruah* today strips us before God, rips off our disguises, tears away our vacuous excuses for trying to avoid our Maker, exposes our sham to the



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searing light of justice, and leaves us like Adam and Eve in Eden — uncovered, ashamed, afraid, and embarrassed, as the voice of God, in the form of the Shofar, thunders deafeningly in our conscience: *ayeka*, where art thou? What have you done with your life? Where are you going? What is your purpose? When you were a youngster, you had great, idealistic dreams; what happened to them? Why do you flee your destiny? As we stand before God on this *Yom Hadin*, the Shofar should send a shiver down every spine as it confronts us with the Truth we have been evading.

But there is also a view of Shofar that accords with the other tradition — that of compassion and gentleness. Shofar represents not only the awesome demand of the Lord, but also — the sound of weeping: of God — as it were — crying! *Be'mistarim tivkeh nafshi*, “in the secret places doth My soul weep,” says the Lord. Why does He weep? The great Hasidic teacher, the Maggid of Mezeritsch, once met his young grandson who was crying. “Why do you cry, my child,” he asked the youngster. “Because, grandfather, I was playing hide-and-seek with my friend, and I was hiding and waited and waited and waited — but my friend never came to look for me.” “Ah,” said the Maggid,

“that is why God too weeps. For He waits for us to seek Him out, and He waits and waits and waits ... and we, His children, fail to search for Him.”

Be'mistarim tivkeh nafshi — the Shofar is the weeping voice of God Who waits vainly, in His secret places, for us to look for Him. That is Shofar — God is not angry, but sad, pleading with us to put aside our distracting trivialities, our foolish preoccupations, and lovingly to look for Him, not to disappoint Him; for if we look, He will let Himself be found.

Shofar means both things; both must penetrate our hearts. Which will be more effective depends upon the individual constitution of each of us. But we must listen to both with all our hearts and with all our souls.

We stand at the brink of a New Year, a new life, a new world. The Prophet commands us to be loyal *avadim*, servants of the divine Judge. The Priest urges us to act like loving *banim la-makom*, children of our Heavenly Father. It depends upon each individual whether he will react as servant or as son; whether aroused by the Shofar as a mighty blast, or attracted by the Shofar as a divine sobbing; whether we respond to the steel of *din* or the velvet of *rahamim*. *Hayom harat olam*, today a

new world is born; the destiny of each of us is decided anew. *Im k'vanim im ka'avadim*, some will go forth from this day as children of our Heavenly Father, coaxed by the *rahamim* and tenderness of the Kohen; and others will walk fearlessly, driven to obey the Will of the divine King as His servants, challenged by the ideals of justice of the Navi. Each of us must resolve this fateful day to answer the call of God, whether it is addressed to us in the majestic and awesome idiom of the Prophet, or the patient and encouraging accents of the Priest.

And we, in turn, in both capacities implore God for a blessed New Year. *Avinu Malkenu*, God is both our loving Father and our just King; *im ke'vanim, rahamenu ke'rahem av al banim*, if we be like children to Thee, then treat us lovingly, as befits a Father; *V'im ka'avadim, lekha enenu teluyot ad she'tehanenu ve'totzi ka-or mishpatenu*, if we be servants to Thee, O divine King, we look to Thee for a judgment as clear and as shining as light itself. In either case and in both cases, bless us with a year of personal happiness and universal justice, a year of dedication to both peace and truth, a year of joy and gladness for us. for all Israel, and for all the world.



Some will go forth from this day as children of our Heavenly Father, coaxed by the rahamim and tenderness of the Kohen; and others will walk fearlessly, driven to obey the Will of the divine King as His servants, challenged by the ideals of justice of the Navi.



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Ani le-Dodi ve-Dodi Li:

The Relationship Between Hashem and the Jewish People

The *gemara* cites R. Elazar's comment that whenever a *zivug rishon* (first marriage) ends in divorce, the Temple altar sheds tears:

אמר ר' אלעזר כל המגרש אשתו ראשונה
אפילו מזבח מוריד עליו דמעות.

R. Elazar says: *Anyone who divorces his first wife, even the altar sheds tears over him.*¹

What is the connection between a first marriage and the altar that accounts for this emotional response?

Maharsha offers a very technical explanation:

הוא משל כאלו המזבח בוכה עליו שהמגרש
אשתו אשת נעורים ממעט אכילת זבחים

דאשת הנעורים מצויה שמביאה קיני זיבה
ולידה למזבח.

*It is as if the altar itself cries, because one who divorces the wife of his youth (eshet ne'urim) diminishes the amount of sacrificial offerings, as it is common for the wife of one's youth to bring childbirth and zavah offerings on the altar.*²

A first marriage is more likely to produce children; a divorce thus likely reduces the quantity of childbirth and *zavah* offerings. In this respect, the altar is "upset," as its activity is diminished when a first marriage concludes in divorce.

While technically sound, this is obviously not a particularly inspirational interpretation. Elsewhere, Maharsha provides a more edifying



**Rabbi Michael
Rosenzweig**
Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

explanation.³ The *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* often invoke the relationship between a husband and wife as a metaphor for the relationship between Hashem and *Kenesset Yisrael*, the Jewish People. Maharsha explains that *zivug rishon* and *zivug sheni* (a second marriage) parallel the First and Second Temples. The degree of sanctity and quantity of sacrificial activity in the First Temple far surpassed that of the Second Temple. This decline, which is emblematic of the very quality of this lofty relationship, prompts the altar to "weep."

In parallel fashion, it can be suggested that the altar bemoans the tragedy of the *egel ha-zahav*, the golden calf, which marred the initial idealistic bond between the Jewish People and God. At Sinai, the Jewish People accepted the Torah, and the building of the *Mishkan* was intended to be the marital *huppah* and their shared dwelling place. In the midst of the wedding itself, the Jewish People sullied the fledgling relationship and desecrated that exclusive bond by constructing the golden calf.⁴ In this metaphor, the distinction between *zivug rishon* and *zivug sheni* is a consequence of the sin of betrayal at the golden calf.

The Broken Relationship

The idea that discord between a husband and wife is symbolic of a disconnect – even a rupture – in the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish People resonates throughout Jewish theology. The poignant metaphor of a wayward wife repentantly returning “*le-ishah ha-rishon*,” to her first husband – symbolically casting *Klal Yisrael* as the wife who has betrayed Hashem, her faithful husband – is quite prominent throughout *Tanakh*.⁵

The marital bond paradigm of Hashem’s relationship with the Jewish People is, of course, the dominant metaphor of *Shir ha-Shirim*.⁶ It is therefore unsurprising that this *megillah* is also perceived as a source that calls for introspection and *teshuvah*, centering on the demands and opportunities of that relationship. In this context, we encounter a passionate declaration and articulation of devotion:

אני לדודי ודודי לי.

I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.
(*Shir ha-Shirim* 6:3)

Avudraham’s insight, which was popularly cited by subsequent halakhic

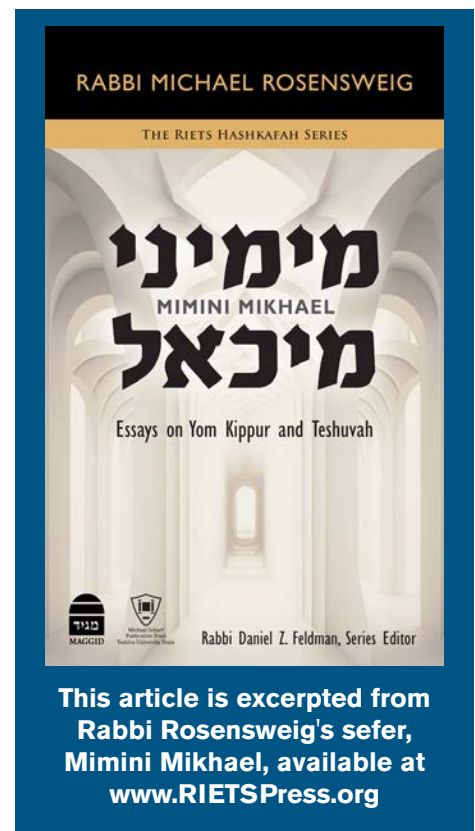
thinkers, is that the first letters of each word in this phrase form an acronym for לולא, the period that initiates intense reassessment of this special bond, thereby reinforcing this theme.⁷

Furthermore, the conceptual basis for the halakhic construct of *teshuvah mei-ahavah* (repentance motivated by love) is patterned after this seminal theme of *Shir ha-Shirim*.⁸ Rambam explains that *ahavat Hashem*, love of God, is the highest level of religiosity that one can attain. This ideal is depicted dramatically as an all-encompassing, even (constructively) obsessive relationship between a husband and wife, whose mutual devotion is absolute. That intensely single-minded admiration, devotion, and longing models how *Kenesset Yisrael* are to cultivate their feelings toward God.⁹ Indeed, *Bah* cites the verse “*Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li*” as reflecting the *teshuvah mei-ahavah* performed during Elul.¹⁰

Thus, the casting of the relationship between *het* and *teshuvah*, sin and repentance, in terms of returning to one’s first husband is a notion that deserves further attention and examination.

The Marital Relationship Between the Jewish People and Hashem

Let us begin by examining in greater depth the nature of this marital relationship. Following the pattern reflected by the numerous verses of *Tanakh*, metaphors describing this kind of marital relationship between the Jewish People and God abound in *Hazal*. *Hazal* understood the relationship between God and the Jewish People as a marriage in which the Torah serves as the marriage contract. Thus, for example, the *mishnah*



explains that “*be-yom simhat libo* – the day of his heart’s rejoicing” (*Shir ha-Shirim* 3:11) refers to the giving of the Torah,¹¹ and the *gemara* conflates the term “*morashah*” in the verse “*morashah kehillat Yaakov* – the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov” (*Devarim* 33:4) with the term “*me’orasah*,” connoting betrothal.¹²

The verses in *Hoshe’a* 2:21–22 also relate to this theme:

וארשתוך לי לעולם וארשתוך לי בצדק
ובמשפט ובחסד וברחמים. וארשתוך לי לעולם
וידעת את ה’.

*And I will betroth you forever; I will
betroth you with righteousness and justice,
and with goodness and mercy. And I will
betroth you with faithfulness; then you
shall know God.*

These verses, recited daily in the final phase of donning *tefillin* and constituting the denouement of *Sefer Hoshe’a*, further confirm the betrothal

motif. This is the foundation for the Jewish People's commitment to the Torah; sin constitutes betrayal of this commitment. The altar itself shedding tears reflects the lost potential of the unrealized ideal, an ideal and a commitment characteristic of a fully realized marital relationship.

However, the metaphor of "*Eilkhah na el ishi ha-rishon* – I will return to my first husband" (*Hoshe'a* 2:9) demands closer scrutiny. While the marital paradigm is suggestive, its application here, when assessed by normative Halakhah, seems problematic. After all, betrayal of the marital bond, as in the instance of *sotah* (marital infidelity), precludes resumption of the marriage. Furthermore, there is an equally important and related distinction between the relationship of God and the Jewish People and even the most idyllic bond between a husband and wife: There is no capacity for *gerushin* (divorce) between *Klal Yisrael* and God, but notwithstanding the tears of the altar, divorce is at times a necessary option in the human domain.

R. Soloveitchik expounded on this important discrepancy and suggested two explanations.¹³ First, although the partners in a human marriage aspire to become one entity (per *Bereishit* 2:24), the most personal dimensions of man's existential being cannot be fully shared with others.¹⁴ The unbridgeable gap that remains provides the philosophical justification or basis for divorce. Even the most ideal marriage does not provide complete unity, and an imperfect union can therefore be dissolved. This restriction does not exist in man's relationship with God, as there is no distance between Creator and creation that cannot be spanned through service of God. Although philosophically the chasm is greater

and the gulf more unbridgeable, Torah study and observance are the divinely ordained guide and mechanism to bridge this gap.

We perceive the Torah as a divine gift "*le-zakkot et Yisrael* – to give merit to Israel."¹⁵ Man's *devekut ba-Hashem* (cleaving to God) will by metaphysical and philosophical necessity always be circumscribed, but this gap is not a function of man's inability to share, but rather a fundamental theological reality of God's transcendence and infinitude. This is one distinction between human relationships and the relationship with God that precludes termination or divorce in the latter context.

The Rav advanced a second reason that the divine relationship is irrevocable. A meaningful physical human relationship is contingent upon sanctity, which is subject to desecration and destruction. For example, the Halakhah addresses the specific parameters of *ervat davar*, the grounds for divorce that constitute desecration in a framework of a marriage.¹⁶ However, when it comes to God's relationship with the Jewish People, that bond is suffused with sanctity to such an extent that it withstands any abuse or challenge that taints or compromises it. This singular bond is hypersensitive to impropriety, dysfunction, and desecration, but simultaneously invulnerable to permanent breach or irrevocable disrepair. This relationship is more easily damaged and disappointed, but it can never be absolutely profaned or irrevocably tarnished.

Rashi explains this phenomenon in his commentary on *Shir ha-Shirim*, where he explains that the impression of darkness is sometimes only superficial. The sanctity that is the basis of the relationship between God and the Jewish People is permanent, and there

therefore can be no *gerushin* between them.¹⁷ This idea is expressed by *Yeshayahu* (50:1) when he remonstrates with the nation, reminding them that God never divorced them; it was their improper behavior that alienated them from Him.

This relationship endures even in a time of destruction, when Jerusalem and *Klal Yisrael* are referred to figuratively as "*ke-almanah* – like a widow" (*Eikhah* 1:1), but never as a *gerushah*, a divorcee.¹⁸ Furthermore, the Jewish People is only compared to a widow: "*ke-almanah*"; they are not really widowed. Rashi, quoting the interpretation of the *midrash* based on a careful reading of this verse, explains that it is possible for the Jewish People to return to God precisely because the nation's situation also differs from the actual *almanah* analogy.¹⁹ In any case, irrespective of the transgression/desecration, there is certainly no equation to divorce. Indeed, even as the prophet *Hoshe'a* invokes the imagery of the marital paradigm of *erusin*, he declares unequivocally the divine promise that this particular betrothal is permanent: "*Ve-erastikh li le-olam* – And I shall betroth you to Me forever" (*Hoshe'a* 2:21).

In light of these explanations, the atypical elements and departures from classical marriage do not detract from the metaphor; they merely reflect an even more intense marital relationship. The discrepancies magnify further the characteristics associated with a marriage here.

Preserving the Relationship for the Long Term

There are consequences to the fact that the relationship between God and the Jewish People cannot be broken.

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On the one hand, the permanence of God's relationship with the Jewish People means that there is always the possibility of return; the door is always open. That is, of course, a very good thing. But this positive consideration also heightens the expectations and raises the stakes of this bond, magnifying even minor grievances within this treasured exclusive relationship. If two people share a lesser, casual relationship, neither will be particularly sensitive to a petty offense; damage to the relationship would require a more grave or acute transgression. Such relationships are typically conducive to a wider latitude of perceived insults that likely inflict less pain. In contrast, longer-term, higher-stakes relationships require far greater existential investment and effort. They demand a greater appreciation of context, and they necessitate some compromise or, at minimum, coping mechanisms to overcome or integrate differences. Absent the luxury to simply withdraw and abandon the relationship, a long-term perspective must be cultivated, especially since the capacity to inflict pain and exacerbate conflict is heightened.

This is one way to interpret the verse in *Amos* (3:2):

רק אתכם יעדתי מכל משפחות האדמה על כן
 אפקד עליכם את כל עונותיכם.
*You alone have I singled out of all the
 families of the earth; that is why I will call
 you to account for all your iniquities.*²⁰

There are several levels of meaning to

this *pasuk*. First, as *Hazal* frequently explain, the stakes are not as high for the other nations of the world as they are for the Jewish People, because God does not supervise or scrutinize the conduct of other nations as extensively.²¹ As such, there is rarely an intermediate level of palliative or corrective punishment. Particularly egregious or degenerative transgressions typically engender severe punishment or even destruction, while relatively minor infractions are ignored or treated benignly. In sharp contrast, God scrutinizes *Klal Yisrael's* conduct and holds them extensively accountable. *Hazal* perceive this as an extraordinary kindness reflecting the depth of the bond, even as high expectations concomitantly may also imperil the relationship.²² Indeed, the constant supervision constitutes a further kindness in that it enables the neutralization of lesser offenses before they cascade into unmanageable, unforgivable offenses. Ultimately, this approach secures the Jewish People's future by providing a defusing mechanism and a safety net to protect the precious relationship.

It is common wisdom that the key to a successful marriage is to stay on top of petty misunderstandings, differences, or offenses, preventing them from festering. If one tarries too long in addressing minor but vexing issues, divisions and distances eventually grow and become unbridgeable and irreparable. The verse in *Amos* accentuates our good fortune by

telling us, “*Rak etkhem yadati mi-kol mishpehot ha-adamah.*” We alone, *Klal Yisrael*, have this special relationship with God. Therefore, “*efkod aleikhem et kol avonoteikhem*” – God is going to supervise us more closely.

An additional motif accentuated in this verse articulates the delicacy and high spiritual stakes of the relationship as a factor in dictating ubiquitous scrutiny. This scrutiny enables constructive accountability, which determines that even relatively peripheral violations of trust may constitute an act of *begidah* (betrayal).

The marital paradigm reflects this perspective acutely. This theme is conveyed by the Talmud's discussion of “*hikdiah tavshilo*” (she burned his food) and “*matza islah na'ah heimenah*” (he found a more beautiful woman than her) as stimuli for divorce. The *zivug rishon* should be preserved at almost all costs. One method of accomplishing this is to make sure that small matters are neutralized and are not conflated with larger issues.²³ At the same time, apparently minor infractions, and even petty annoyances like *hikdiah tavshilo* or superficial distractions like *matza islah na'ah heimenah*, may be valid grounds for divorce precisely because the standards defining this ideal relationship are lofty indeed. The fact that trivial factors and mercurial considerations sufficiently exacerbate what should be an existential, loyal, and substantive bond is inconsistent with these standards of sanctity. It reflects that the relationship is already deficient and has deteriorated.

Another implication of this verse from *Amos* is that strict halakhic accountability and the concrete threat of punishment for halakhic dereliction are actually advantageous for the Jewish People, as they encourage the critical



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process of *teshuvah* and repairing one's deeds. This is more important for the Jewish People's relationship with God than it is for the bond between God and the gentile nations. While repentance also applies to non-Jewish violations, its central role in Judaism defies comparison. *Teshuvah* for Jews is not merely the neutralization of outstanding sin; it is an indispensable process of *avodat Hashem* that entails broader introspection and enables a transgressor to redefine and elevate his relationship with God.²⁴

The bond with the Jewish People is marked by a history of disruption and reconnection, and it is, by definition, one that is irrevocable, no matter how intolerable present circumstances are.

This unique relationship between God and the Jewish People is further highlighted by Mabit's controversial assertion that notwithstanding the story of Yonah's mission to Nineveh, the obligation and parameters of *teshuvah* are unique to *Klal Yisrael*.²⁵ Mabit explains that Yonah does not actually call upon the people of Nineveh to repent; he simply informs them of the consequences of their transgressions. They take the initiative on their own to do *teshuvah* when they declare, "*Yashuvu ish midarko ha-ra'ah* – Let every man

repent from his evil ways" (*Yonah* 3:8). Yonah hesitated to go to Nineveh because he thought *teshuvah* would be ineffective, since the comprehensive concept of *teshuvah* is restricted to *Klal Yisrael*. Of course, this assumption about the effectiveness of *teshuvah* for non-Jews was an error. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that the obligation to repent and the scope and centrality of *teshuvah* derives from the singular bond with the Jewish People. Certainly the category of *teshuvah mei-ahavah* – which has the capacity to transform willful transgressions into merits²⁶ – is a special prerogative for the Jewish People alone.²⁷

The restriction of *teshuvah mei-ahavah* to the Jewish People stems from the dialectical nature of *teshuvah mei-ahavah*. The transformational power of *teshuvah mei-ahavah* appears to be a very surprising and even mystical idea. How could willful transgressions ever turn into merits? Upon further consideration, however, it reflects an intense and profound relationship that transcends particular moments and actions. The bond with the Jewish People spans thousands of years and includes inspiring highs, spiritual attainments, abysmal failures, and cataclysmic setbacks. It is marked by a history of disruption and reconnection, and it is, by definition, one that is irrevocable, no matter how intolerable present circumstances are.

Again, the marital paradigm is instructive. An acute sense of alienation that stems from and accentuates distance and separation can also serve as a powerful catalyst for greater appreciation of one's absent partner, which can facilitate the urgency to strengthen the bond. The crisis of impending profound loss can turn willful transgressions into merits,

particularly when there is a long and intense history that reinforces the absolute conviction of a future joint destiny. For this reason, a marital bond that is irrevocable, which survives even betrayal and precludes any kind of termination, certainly exemplifies this motif even more forcefully.

Understanding Teshuvah

The significance of the long-term underlying relationship also pertains to the components of *teshuvah*: *haratah* (regret), *bushah* (shame), and even *kabbalah al ha-atid* (commitment for the future). Although we become acquainted with these components of *teshuvah* at a formative age, reflecting upon them reveals that they are challenging to implement, contemplate, and even to comprehend.

True regret, for example, differs from a mere expression of "sorry." It requires profound, tortured regret and authentic humiliation, even mortification.

The goal is not simply to assuage one's guilt and move forward, but to powerfully experience the magnitude of one's transgression, stimulating an existential crisis. The *teshuvah* process entails a core assessment of purpose and meaning that is completely incompatible with a superficial disavowal of transgressions that retains a trace of ambivalence regarding the sinful experience. Ideal *teshuvah* requires *haratah* – an unequivocal rejection of past experience as well as a clear future commitment. The sense of profound regret relates not only to one's self-perception, but also to one's image and reputation in the eyes of those who command one's love and respect, stimulating *bushah*. Even more so, the sinner can hardly tolerate the fact that there is no refuge from divine omniscience.

Authentic agonizing over the implications of an aberrant past, coming to grips with one's capacity for egregious conduct, constitutes not only a vehicle to neutralize past infractions, as repentance is typically understood, but also a transformative cathartic act of *avodat Hashem* that elevates the true penitent.

Kabbalah al ha-atid similarly goes beyond even a sincere resolution about the future. It requires that the penitent thoroughly reinvent his persona and reorder his values so that his present status will conform to his enlightened new reality and his commitment will preclude any predictable future lapse. One might question how *kabbalah al haatid* can be required for *teshuvah*, inasmuch as it entails a commitment absent knowledge of what tomorrow will bring and what influences will come to bear. Indeed, even if one can make a *kabbalah la-hoveh*, a commitment for the present, can one really sincerely undertake a *kabbalah al ha-atid*? While *kabbalah al ha-atid* can be understood narrowly as a sincere commitment for the future, it too can encompass much more.

The rigorous *teshuvah* program, comprised of these steps, is significantly facilitated by a national relationship with God that is very intense and complex, that is deeply rooted in the past and that will confidently stretch forever into the future. The Rav spoke extensively about Halakhah's dynamic view of time. Time in Halakhah is not static,²⁸ and the boundaries of the past and the future are rather blurry. Halakhic time consciousness defines how we relate to our national history as well as to pivotal halakhic institutions. This is true of the catastrophic events of destruction and mourning, and is equally applicable to the foundational

experiences of Jewish life, such as the revelation at Sinai, which is referred to in the Torah in the present tense, and the exodus from Egypt, whose memory is ubiquitous.

This is further reflected in Moshe Rabbeinu's introduction of God to *Klal Yisrael* as the God who transcends time, as reflected in the Tetragrammaton (*Shemot* 6:6). For God, in a metaphysical sense, the past, present, and future converge; they are all one reality. His name connotes omnipresence in time – that He always was, is, and will be. The precise nuances of this concept are inherently beyond our cognitive grasp, but the Jewish People's relationship with God partakes of this permanence and timelessness. For this reason, the institution of *teshuvah* can redeem the past and even elevate it. The very notion of *kabbalah al ha-atid* would be more tenuous if the bond between God and the Jewish People could be terminated. However, this relationship is governed by the promise of “*ve-erastikh li le-olam* – I will betroth you to Me forever.” Because of the irrevocability of the relationship, which determines that at worst we will be *ke-almanah* and no more, because the relationship is enduring and timeless, it can withstand our limited knowledge and control of the future, enabling *kabbalah al ha-atid* to become a rigorous and integral part of *teshuvah*.

The Opportunity of Elul

The eternal nature of the relationship between God and the Jewish People has profound implications for the special *teshuvah* opportunity of the month of Elul. Avudraham's acronym explaining the name of the month has much more significance than is commonly thought; it reflects not only reciprocity, but also and especially the marital relationship

described in *Shir ha-Shirim*. It thereby reflects the breadth and depth of *teshuvah* as a process of *avodat Hashem* that stems from that special relationship. Bah's claim that *teshuvah mei-ahavah* is specifically connected to the *teshuvah* of Elul and precisely the theme of “*ani le-dodi ve-dodi li*” reinforces this motif.

This should motivate us to seize the opportunity of Elul. This period is dedicated not only to the narrow pursuit of merits that secure our physical survival, but is even more an opportunity to focus on this special bond that undergirds the purpose of existence and the concept of *teshuvah*.

Endnotes

1. *Gittin* 90b; *Sanhedrin* 22a.
2. *Hiddushei Aggadot*, *Sanhedrin* 22a.
3. *Hiddushei Aggadot*, *Gittin* 90b.
4. For an exploration of the significance of the *het ha-egel*, see my “*Chet ha-Eigel: A Catastrophic Theological and Ideological Lapse*,” available at torahweb.org.
5. See, for example, *Hoshe'a* 2:9: “*Eilkhah ve-ashuvah el ishi ha-rishon* – I will go and return to my first husband.”
6. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:3.
7. Avudraham, *Seder Tefillot Rosh ha-Shanah*, 260.
8. *Yoma* 86a.
9. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:2.
10. Bah, *Orah Hayim* 581:2.
11. *Ta'anit* 4:8.
12. *Pesahim* 49b; *Sanhedrin* 59a.
13. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships* (NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2000), 63.
14. In the history of creation, Havah was created from Adam (*Bereishit* 2:21). The *gemara* (*Ketubot* 8a) debates the details of this process, including whether man was created “*du partzufin*” or “*partzuf ehad*,” with two

faces or one. Ra'avad (introduction to *Ba'alei ha-Nefesh*) and Ramban (commentary on *Bereishit*) identify these factors as relevant to the respective capacities to facilitate an existential bond and forge a united identity with a spousal partner. This important conclusion is not incompatible with the Rav's insight that, in the final analysis, human beings cannot completely bridge this gap. Indeed, this manifestation of existential loneliness as part of the human condition is a prominent theme in the Rav's writings.

15. *Makkot* 3:16. Presumably, this merit transcends the means for reward and establishes the system of Halakhah as a Torah value system and as a methodology for bonding with God.

16. See *Gittin* 90a and *Family Redeemed*, 63–65, for the Rav's discussion of legitimate halakhic grounds for divorce. I hope to address elsewhere the relationship between the definition of *ervah* grounds for divorce and Halakhah's singular approach to the sanctity of marriage.

17. Rashi, *Shir ha-Shirim* 1:6, s.v. *she-shezafatni ha-shamesh*.

18. Note also Rambam's view in *Hilkhot Beit ha-Behirah* 6:15–16 that the sanctity of the *Mikdash* and Yerushalayim always remains because it is the sanctity of the *Shekhinah*.

19. Rashi, *Eikhah* 1:1, s.v. *haitah ke-almanah*. For the original *midrash*, see *Midrash Eikhah* 1:1:3.

20. The word “*yadati*” here has not only an intellectual connotation, but also an intimate connotation, consistent with its use throughout *Tanakh*. Interestingly, Rashi and *Metzudat David* interpret *yadati* as “*ahavti*,” “I have loved.”

21. This less ambitious spiritual expectation is, of course, also reflected in the differences between the seven-mitzvah and the six-hundred-thirteen-mitzvah system. It can be demonstrated that the discrepancy is qualitative and fundamental. Noahides are obligated to observe only a very basic and broad system of human religious values, while Halakhah is comprehensive and is intended to elevate all dimensions of Jewish life. Moreover, precisely when the two systems address the same broad obligation, the different spiritual orientations and

agendas are acutely evident; for example, see *Sanhedrin* 56b. I hope to address this topic more extensively elsewhere.

22. See *Yevamot* 121b and *Bava Kama* 50a: “*Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu medakdek im sevivav ke-hut ha-se'arah* – God is scrupulous with those around him even to the extent of a hairsbreadth.” On the one hand, this reflects a higher expectation that triggers greater disappointment and disillusionment, but it also and especially reflects appreciation, generosity, and reward.

23. To be sure, a case could be made that if one has a closer relationship, one will be more forgiving with one's partner. Certainly this dialectic characterizes any intense, defining, authentic relationship. In one respect, greater flexibility is warranted, as one is loath to discard or abandon a precious and primary relationship that is rooted in the past and inspired by a vision of a common future. However, this is also offset by greater expectations and the increased sting of perceived disloyalty and betrayal. A long-term relationship, and even more so a permanent bond, requires a strict code of conduct and core rules of engagement to safeguard and nurture the relationship for the long term. See Rashi, *Devarim* 29:12: “Because He has promised it unto you and has sworn unto your fathers not to exchange their descendants for another nation, for this reason He binds you by these oaths not to provoke Him to anger since He, on His part, cannot dissociate Himself from you.” Rashi accentuates the need for meticulous boundaries to ensure the continuity and evolution of the bond. See also Radak, *Amos* 3:2, who emphasizes that the closer bond establishes that transgressions constitute a greater crime and that they engender greater pain given expectations and the emotional and historical investment that links the parties.

24. For a more extensive discussion of this topic, see the chapter “*Teshuvah and Viduy: The Ambitious Method of Coming Closer to Hashem*,” in *Mimini Mikhael*.

25. *Beit Elokim, Sha'ar ha-Teshuvah*, 13. While Mabit's approach is somewhat innovative, the existence of qualitative differences and distinctions between Jewish and non-Jewish repentance is a more mainstream notion that is acutely reflected in the Midrash and

other sources. See, for example, *Midrash Tanhuma, Devarim* 32:4. Mabit also presents the interesting suggestion that because of *Klal Yisrael's* added obligation of 613 *mitzvot*, they need the obligation of *teshuvah*, as they are bound to sin. Mabit discusses other distinctions between the repentance of Jews and that of non-Jews as well (*ibid.* 14), noting that for Jews, *teshuvah* is effective both in this world and the next, whereas for the rest of the nations, it merely wards off punishment in this world. Mabit further argues that for the Jewish People, a mass *teshuvah* by the public (partially) atones even for individuals who do not participate in that *teshuvah*, whereas for other nations, *teshuvah* benefits only those who actually perform it.

26. *Yoma* 86b.

27. This is explicit in Mabit. See also the chapter “*Teshuvah and Viduy*,” in *Mimini Mikhael*.

28. See R. Soloveitchik's discussion of time consciousness and Henri Bergson's notion of time in his essay “Sacred and Profane,” in *Shiurei ha-Rav*, ed. Joseph Epstein (New Jersey: Ktav, 1994), 14–25. Also see the many sources cited in Jeffrey Woolf, “Time Awareness as a Source of Spirituality in the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,” *Modern Judaism* 32:1 (February 2012), 54–75.

29. For many, this concept is also the foundation for free choice, as it neutralizes the dilemma of divine foreknowledge. Free choice is the centerpiece of *teshuvah*, as reflected by Rambam's devotion of a chapter to it in the middle of *Hilkhot Teshuvah* (chapter 5). It should be noted that this is not Rambam's own solution to the quandary of divine foreknowledge.





Teshuva:

The Blueprint of Creation and the Path to Redemption

In the beginning, G-d created... teshuva. The *Medrash Rabba* tells us that teshuva is among the list of seven things that were created before the creation of the world.¹ *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* states further that not only did teshuva precede the creation of the world, it was built into its blueprint, since without it the world is not viable.² The reason for this prerequisite of teshuva is reflected in Rashi's third comment in his *Commentary on the Torah*:

ברא אלקים - ולא אמר ברא ה', שבתחלה
עלה במחשבה לבראתו במדת הדין, ראה
שאין העולם מתקיים, הקדים מדת רחמים
ושתפה למדת הדין.

[In the beginning] Elokim created — It

does not say Hashem created because in the beginning, G-d thought to create the world with the attribute of justice. He saw that the world would not last and He promoted the attribute of mercy and made it a partner with the attribute of justice.

Rashi, Breishit 1:1

Rashi explains that while the Torah begins with the term Elokim for G-d, the name "Hashem" is introduced in the second perek only once man and women are created. Rashi explains that G-d's initial thought was to create the world with only *din*, judgment, which is what the term Elokim represents. He realized that with the introduction of man, however, that the world could not exist on judgment alone, and therefore introduced the term Hashem,



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representing His merciful attribute. The term Hashem (mercy) then merges with the term Elokim (judgment), which is what enables man to be forgiven for his sins and thus allowing the world and man to continue to exist.³

The theme of teshuva as a crossroad in the history of man appears throughout Sefer Breishit. It represents a pivotal point for the individual who will choose to either take advantage of doing teshuva or not. Both Adam and Kayin, who together with Chava are the very first sinners in the history of man, are

given the opportunity by G-d to do teshuva immediately following their sin before they are punished. G-d asks Adam rhetorically, “*ayeka*”—“where are you?” and similarly asks Kayin, “*ay hevel achicha*” — “where is Hevel your brother?” In both instances Rashi points out the obvious question. Of course, G-d knows where Adam is and of course He knows what happened to Hevel. Why is He even asking? Rashi answers that G-d is opening the dialogue and giving them both an opportunity to take responsibility, confess their sins and do teshuva.⁴ “*Likanes imo b’devarim*” — “to enter him with words,” Rashi explains in response to G-d’s question to Adam. Interestingly, when Rashi explains the question, “*ay hevel achicha*,” to Kayin, he offers the same explanation but adds the word *nachat*, “*likanes imo b’divrei nachat*,” — “to enter him into pleasant words.” Perhaps the additional adjective “pleasant” is a result of Kayin’s state of mind. While neither Adam nor Kayin fully take responsibility for their actions, Adam shows some sense of guilt, as evidenced from his attempt to hide from G-d after his sin. Although he shifts the blame to Chava, he at least acknowledges that a wrongdoing occurred. In contrast, Kayin neither admits his guilt nor expresses any remorse; instead, he goes so far as to blame G-d for the outcome. G-d is demonstrating His desire for man to do teshuva implying that it should come not from fear but from a place of love. In both of these instances, the opportunity offered by G-d to do teshuva and the decision of man to take advantage of it affects the outcome of not just the individual but of mankind as well.

Throughout Tanach there are many examples of this teshuva crossroad for both individuals and entire nations. Teshuva plays a pivotal role in Sefer Yona. Read at Mincha on Yom Kippur

and one of the highlights of the tefilla service over the course of the day, the story demonstrates the transformative power of teshuva. A key statement of Chazal to help shed light on this enigmatic process of teshuva is a passage found in the Talmud Yerushalmi:

שאלו לחכמה חוטא מהו עונשו אמרו להם
[משלי יג כא] חטאים תרדף רעה שאלו
לנבואה חוטא מהו עונשו אמרה להן [יחזקאל
יח ד] הנפש החוטאת היא תמות שאלו
לקודשא בריך הוא חוטא מהו עונשו אמר להן
יעשו תשובה ויתכפר לו.

They asked wisdom, what is the punishment of one who sins? Wisdom responded, “evil will pursue the sinners.” (Mishlei 13:21). Prophecy was asked, what is the punishment of one who sins? Prophecy responded, “the soul that sins must die.” (Yechezkel 18:4). They asked Hashem, what is the punishment of one who sins? Hashem responded, he should do teshuva and will be forgiven.

Talmud Yerushalmi, Makkot 2:6

According to this passage in the Yerushalmi, without Hashem’s magnanimous offer of teshuva, there is no opportunity to change one’s fate and be forgiven. These various approaches to *cheit*, sin and failure, as described in the medrash, frame the entire sefer.

Sefer Yona presents the story of the navi Yona who is commanded to warn the people of Ninveh of their upcoming destruction. Popular belief dictates that this story is read on Yom Kippur because it depicts a story of evil people (the people of Ninveh) who ultimately do teshuva and are, as a result, forgiven and escape punishment. Some add that Yona himself, after attempting to run away from G-d’s instructions, finally does teshuva and fulfills his G-d-given job after his encounter with a large fish. The problem with that understanding is that according to this perspective, the sefer should end after the third perek. In

the first perek, Yona is commanded by G-d to go to Ninveh, and he runs away. In the second perek he is swallowed by a fish, prays to G-d from inside, and is then spit out to safety. In the third perek Yona travels to Ninveh and delivers the message as he was commanded. Had this book just been about people doing teshuva, it would have ended here. However, the story continues with the fourth perek, which presents a somewhat strange series of events that lead to a very abrupt ending to the story.

The fourth and final perek begins with Yona feeling extremely angry. He prays to G-d, explaining that he was compelled to flee because he knew that G-d is, קל חנון ורחום ארך אפים ורב, “חסד ונחם על הרעה” — “... a gracious and compassionate G-d, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and relenting of punishment. He will turn away from his burning wrath so we will not perish.”⁵ This hardly seems like a reason to run away from his mission to help the people of Ninveh do teshuva. It is precisely, though, because he is afraid that they will be granted clemency and allowed to do teshuva, which he believes is a falsification of G-d’s judgment. He describes G-d here using some of His thirteen attributes, clearly omitting the attribute of *emet*, truth, which usually follows *rav chesed*, abundant kindness. This is not an inadvertent omission on Yona’s part. Yona’s anger here is rooted in his belief that G-d is not “*emesdik*,” or truthful. The people of Ninveh sinned and deserved punishment. Actions have consequences. It is not truthful or fair that they can do teshuva and then have their sins magically disappear. If one drinks poison (physical or spiritual), one will die. One cannot “undrink” that poison, or make it simply disappear, which is exactly what teshuva does to sin. Yona is a man of truth. When the

boat on which he has escaped from G-d is overcome by a storm and about to sink, the sailors ask him with genuine concern what to do to escape from the storm.⁶ Yona, as a man of truth, calmly tells the sailors to throw him overboard. He knows very well that he is at fault and, therefore, must pay the consequences of his sin.⁷ He cannot comprehend the concept of G-d's *midat hadin*, attribute of judgment, being overtaken by teshuva, in which consequences disappear. He believes that his placating G-d's *midat hadin* and accepting the consequences of his actions is G-d's will, and indeed this calms the sea. When he survives, because G-d chooses to save him, and prays to G-d from within the fish in the second perek, he is not taking responsibility for his actions. He remains a man of rigid truth, stating his personal predicament and despair⁸ and expressing belief that G-d will save him, but only because he will now fulfill his obligation:

ואני בקול תודה אזבחה לך אשר נדרתי אשלמה ישועתה לה'.

And I, with a voice of thanksgiving, will offer a sacrifice to You. That which I promised, I will fulfill for salvation which is of Hashem.

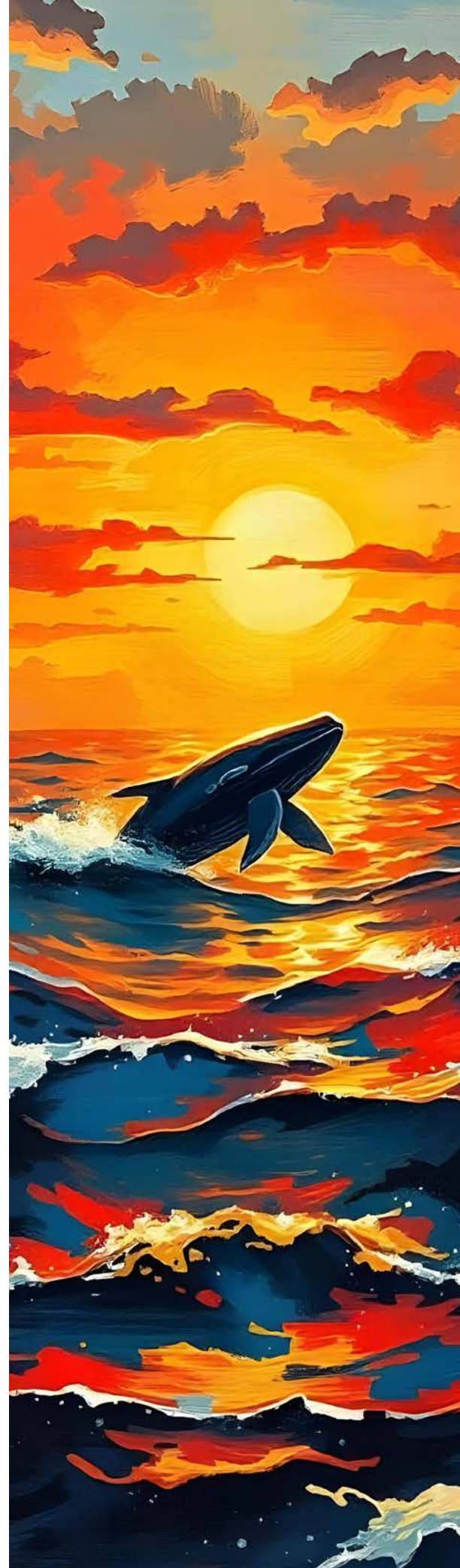
Yona 2:10

To Yona, this is all about truth and fulfilling obligation, not the deep irrational love G-d has for His creations that can erase sin and override punishment and natural consequence. Yona's essence, his *raison d'être*, is truth, which is evident in his name, יונה בן אמתי. He is so distraught in the fourth perek at the lack of G-d's truth that he wishes to die. The rest of the perek demonstrates to Yona, and to us, the purpose of teshuva and G-d's motivation for the allowance of teshuva. Yona needs to learn that G-d's gift of teshuva to mankind, and to all His creations, does not contradict truth, but transcends truth, and is rooted in His abundance of love for His creations. This is in fact the greatest example of G-d's true *emet* in the world.

While Sefer Yona ends abruptly with G-d asking Yona a rhetorical question, most meforshim explain this as *sh'tikah k'hoda'ah*, meaning, Yona's silence at the end of the story proves his acceptance and comprehension of G-d's message. The *Otzar Midrashim*, *Medrash Yona*, offers a deeper glimpse into Yona's epiphany by describing Yona's emotional reaction to G-d's message in its epilogue to the sefer. The medrash describes Yona, with tears streaming down his face, bursting forth with his newfound awesome revelation of G-d's *emet* and *rachamim*, both stemming from His deep love for His creations:⁹

באותה שעה נפל יונה על פניו לפני הקב"ה ואמר לפניו רבש"ע כלום היא לפניך מדת הדין? במדת רחמים תנהיג את עולמך ונאה לך תהלה ... גבורות רחמיה הרבים לא הייתי יודע וחסדיך הרבים לא הייתי מגיד, שאין מי יעשה כמעשיך וכגבורותיך, יפה עשית יפה פעלת יפה רחמת, יפה חננת יפה סלחת, יפה קרעת להם שטר חובתם יפה נחמת על רעתם.

At that time, Yona fell on his face before G-d and said before Him, Master of the Universe, do you not consider that attribute of justice? You run Your world with the attribute of mercy and You should be praised for it . . . I did not know the strength of Your great mercy and I did not mention Your great kindness. There is nobody who matches Your actions and Your might. Your actions were splendid, Your performance was splendid, Your mercy was splendid, Your kindness was



splendid, Your forgiveness was splendid, Your tearing of their document of debt was splendid and Your forgiving of their evil was splendid.

The story of Yona is specifically read at Mincha on Yom Kippur perhaps because Mincha, which was established by Yitzchak, who was a man of *din*, is the time of day when judgment is strongest. We are beseeching G-d to follow His *rachamim*, as opposed to His *din*, which allows opportunity for teshuva. At this pivotal point in the day, immediately preceding the final prayer of Neila, we are reminding G-d of His mercy and His purpose in giving us the gift of teshuva.

In a characteristic pattern of preserving a personality across narratives in Tanach, Chazal identify Yona as the son of the Shunamit woman, whom Elisha haNavi resurrected from the dead.¹⁰ Ironically, Yona's entire existence is based on G-d's love and allowance for teshuva, since in his understanding of *emet*, resurrection of the dead would not be possible. Perhaps this theory is a metaphor for our own resurrection on Yom Kippur. G-d's gift of teshuva, stemming from His love, allows us to be reborn and begin anew.

The concept of teshuva is such a foundational pillar of Judaism that not only does the Torah begin with references to teshuva, it ends with teshuva as well. In Sefer Devarim, which takes place during the fortieth year of the desert, Moshe addresses the second generation of Jews as they stand on the threshold of entering the Land of Israel. With his death imminent, this is Moshe's last lecture. He is desperate to impart the most fundamental messages to the Jewish people before he dies, cementing their connection to G-d and to Torah and ensuring their successful entrance into the Land of Israel. Before

he begins reviewing the Torah, which represents the crux of the sefer, Moshe describes a future where there will be generations of Jews who turn away from G-d and choose a life of sin:

כי תוליד בנים ובני בנים ונושנתם בארץ והשחתם ועשיתם פסל תמונת כל ועשיתם הרע בעיני ה' אלקיך להכעיסו.

When you beget children and grandchildren and will have been long in the land, you will grow corrupt and make a carved image, and you will do evil in the eyes of Hashem your G-d to anger Him.

Devarim 4:25

The description of destruction that ensues is detailed with the Jews being kicked out of their land, scattered among the nations, becoming a minority and losing their identity. In the end, however, G-d promises,

ובקשתם משם את ה' ומצאת כי תדרשנו בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך.

From there you will seek Hashem your G-d and you will find Him if you search for him with all your heart and all your soul.

The message is clear; after living a life of sin, the opportunity to return to G-d remains. These pesukim are read as the Torah portion on Tisha B'Av, our national day of mourning; amid the remembrance of the suffering throughout the history of the Jewish people emerges the message of teshuva — that it is never too late to return to G-d.

The underlying message of teshuva is evident throughout the sefer. What does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Moshe asks Bnei Yisrael rhetorically, after describing the events surrounding matan Torah and the ensuing sin of the golden calf.

מה ה' אלקיך שואל מעמך כי אם ליראה את ה' אלקיך ללכת בכל דרכיו ולאהבה אותו ולעבוד את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך

לשמור את מצוות ה' ואת חקותיו אשר אנכי מצוך היום לטוב לך.

What does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem your G-d, to follow in all His ways, to love Him and to serve Hashem your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul to observe the commandments of Hashem and His decrees which I command you today for your benefit.

Devarim 10:12-13

Rashi clarifies the message here that despite everything Bnei Yisrael did wrong, G-d still loves them and desires a relationship with them, and for that reason, He enables them to do teshuva and return to Him even after sinning.

Moshe's final message to Bnei Yisrael not only begins with teshuva, it also ends with teshuva. After completing the review of Torah that he articulated throughout Sefer Devarim, Moshe ends his discourse in Parshat Nitzavim with the final mitzva — the mitzvah of teshuva:

והיה כי יבאו אליך כל הדברים האלה הברכה והקללה אשר נתתי לפניך והשבת אל לבבך בכל הגוים אשר הדיחך ה' אלקיך שמה, ושבת עד ה' אלקיך ושמעת בקולו ... ושב ה' אלקיך את שבותך ורחמך ושב וקבצך מכל העמים אשר הפיצך ה' אלקיך שמה.

It will be when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you, then you will take it to your heart among all the nations where Hashem your G-d has dispersed you, and you will return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice ... Then Hashem your G-d will bring back your captivity and have mercy upon you and He will return and gather you in from all the peoples to which Hashem your G-d has scattered you.

Devarim 30;1-4

Moshe ends the description of this final mitzvah promising abundance of blessings:

כי ישוב ה' לשוב עליך לטוב כאשר שש על אבותיך.

When Hashem will return to rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your forefathers.

Devarim 30; 9

The motivation for the allowance of teshuva is G-d's love for His people and His desire to rejoice in them as He rejoiced in the avot.

Immediately following this last mitzvah completing the review of Torah, Moshe concludes with one final impactful message:

כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא נפלאה היא ממך ולא רחוקה היא ... כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפין ובלבבך לעשותו.

For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you and it is not distant ... Rather, the matter is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it. (Devarim 30;11-14)

While many commentators interpret that this concluding message is referring to the accessibility of all the mitzvot Moshe just reviewed throughout the sefer, others, including the Ramban believe it specifically pertains to the mitzvah of teshuva that was just enumerated. The Ramban explains that teshuva is clearly intimated in the words, "b'ficha uvilvavecha" referring to the two facets of repentance: confession with one's mouth (Vayikra 26;40) and returning to

G-d with one's heart. (Devarim 30;2)

The message throughout the sefer is clear; Hashem's desire for Bnei Yisrael to do teshuva stems from His deep love for His people, and that love is the underlying theme throughout the Torah. Rashi, in his commentary, introduces each of the Five Books of the Torah by referencing the theme of G-d's love for the Jewish people, framing the message of the entire Torah.¹¹

Just as he begins the Torah with this message, Rashi ends with this message as well. Following the death of Moshe, the Torah concludes by summarizing what Moshe accomplished:

ולכל היד החזקה ולכל המורא הגדול אשר עשה משה לעיני כל ישראל.

And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Israel.

Devarim 34;12

Rashi explains that this refers to the breaking of the luchot with G-d's endorsement, which Moshe performed before the eyes of Israel.

שנשאו לבו לשבור הלוחות לעיניהם... והסכימה דעת הקב"ה לדעתו שנאמר י"ש כח ששברת.

That he decided to break the luchot in front of them ... And the Holy One, Blessed be He, concurred as it says "[asher shibartra] You did a great thing (yasher koach) by breaking [them]."

This concludes his commentary on Torah.

This final message, the same message that is disseminated throughout the Torah, is that despite the sins of Bnei Yisrael, despite the broken luchot, G-d's love for His people prevails, enabling them to repent and the relationship endures.

Recognizing the source of the gift of teshuva and understanding the place of deep love from whence it comes, should inspire us to take full advantage of this tremendous gift that G-d offers us year after year.

Endnotes

1. Breishit Rabbah 1:4.
2. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer ch. 3.
3. Rashi on Breishit 1:1.
4. Breishit 3:9 and 4:9 and Rashi there.
5. Sefer Yona 4:1-3.
6. Sefer Yona 1:11.
7. Sefer Yona 1:12.
8. Sefer Yona 2:4-7.
9. Thanks to Dr. Shneur Leiman who pointed out this medrash in a shiur on Sefer Yona he gave in his home.
10. Melachim 2, (4:18-37).
11. See Rashi on Bereishit 1;1, Shmot 1;1, Vayikra 1;1, Bamidbar 1;1 and Devarim 1;1.

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On Jewish Peoplehood in the American Orthodox Community

Following the Six-Day War in Israel there was an incredible upswell in Jewish identity within the entire Jewish community. Rav Shlomo Wolbe, himself a baal teshuva and a leader in the Israeli chareidi community, began giving lectures to secular Jews that were later published as the works *Bein Sheishes Le'asor* and *Ohr LaShav*. As Herbert Danziger explains in his book *Returning to Tradition: The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism*, “The Six-Day War powerfully brought home to Jews, even peripheral Jews, their connection to the Jewish people and provided an

impetus to explore Jewish identity and Judaism as a lifestyle.” It seems to me that since October 7th there has been a similar resurgence in Jewish identity. Particularly within the American non-Orthodox community, amid months of intense international focus on Israel and the Jewish people — marked by debates over Israel’s right to exist, anti-Zionist protests on college campuses, and a surge in antisemitism the likes of which younger generations have never seen — American Jews have begun an unprecedented period of soul-searching not experienced in over half-a-century. And yet, at least within the American Modern/



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Centrist Orthodox, it does not appear to me that we have truly met the opportunities of this moment. After the Six-Day War, the Jewish community rallied human and financial resources to reintroduce Judaism to a previously alienated public, giving rise to what is now known as the kiruv movement. However, it seems that the American

Orthodox community has not launched a similarly focused and concerted effort in recent times. And my question is, why?

There are several answers or explanations. Some would likely argue with my premise: Was there really such an upswell and effort following the Six-Day War? Others could question whether there has, in fact, been a surge in Jewish identity following Oct. 7, which certainly lacked the miraculously neat, optimistic and fast conclusion that was witnessed following the Six-Day War. Or, perhaps the relative strength of our community has changed — we have already established the institutional infrastructure to handle such spiritual seekers. Let Aish HaTorah deal with soul searching, we are busy trying to pay yeshiva tuition.

I don't find any of these points convincing. The current resurgence in Jewish life and identity is clear to anyone who interacts with the non-Orthodox world. In fact, I think some of the most poignant reflections have emerged from those circles. Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, a reform rabbi, has openly and publicly called upon members of his movement to ask why so many reform Jews are anti-Zionists. A part of me can't shake the persistent suspicion that something else has changed since the Six-Day War, and I believe the biggest shift has occurred within us, the Orthodox community.

The story of the American Orthodox community is nothing short of a miracle. It was not entirely clear in the 1940's whether it would be able to survive on American soil. People like my bubbe, with a nominal Jewish education who kept kosher but barely kept Shabbos, had to be actively convinced that Orthodoxy was moderate and sustainable. There was no "Yeshiva League" and most of those who sent their kids to yeshiva had to be begged in order to do so. People like Mrs. Miriam Nadoff of Pittsburgh or Dr. Joseph Kaminetsky would actually knock on doors to convince Jewish families to send their children to yeshiva. Today, some kids don't get accepted by any yeshiva. Orthodoxy began as a movement deeply integrated within the rest of the American Jewish community, carving a place for itself that most had to make an active decision to join. It is very different now. People are born into a thriving Orthodox community, a world that can essentially sustain itself.

The relative strength of the Orthodox community has come at a very real cost. Our community has become increasingly isolated from the broader American Jewish population, losing much of the understanding we once had of the larger Jewish world. As a result, we rarely educate or influence those who grow up outside the Orthodox community. In my Jewish Public Policy class at Yeshiva University, I

ask my students if they have any non-Orthodox relatives, up to and including first cousins. For most students, especially those who grew up in major Jewish communities, the answer is overwhelmingly no. In some ways, that should be greeted as good news — more Jews who are affiliated with the Orthodox community likely means more Jews who are within communities that cultivate serious commitment and practice. But that is not the entire story. The Orthodox community is forgetting, in many ways, the larger landscape of American Judaism. And that does not just affect those whose Yiddishkeit could potentially be enhanced through interactions with frum Jews, it can negatively affect the very character of the frum community itself.

Since October 7th, many shuls, based on the guidance of Rav Schachter, have been reciting the prayer *Avinu Malkeinu* during the daily prayer services. We relate to God, as the prayer indicates, as both a King and a Father. There are many superlatives that we can use to relate to God — why are Father and King specifically juxtaposed in this prayer? I would like to suggest that the imagery of Father and King reflect the dual nature of Jewish identity. The Jewish people are both a part of a religion and a family. When we perform religious rituals, like brachos, we relate to God primarily as King — the language of a bracha is "*melech ha-olam*," not "*av ha-olam*." A King has rules,



The story of the American Orthodox community is nothing short of a miracle.

regulations, and specific protocols that govern how to approach Him. This is the world of mitzvos and halacha, the formal structure and process through which we bring divinity into this world and into our lives. But Judaism is not just a religion. One of the central tenets of Judaism is the chosenness of the Jewish People. Even Jews who are lax, ignorant, or outright hostile to the tenets of God's royal sovereignty still retain their Jewish identity insofar as they are still a part of the Jewish People — they are still children within the Jewish family. A child, even a rebellious one, cannot sever their relationship with a parent. The relationship can be strained or difficult, but even a disappointing child is still a child. And, as Rav Shlomo Fischer zt"l points out in his *Beis Yishai* (#9), before Judaism became a religion at Sinai, we were first, and remain, a family.

And here is my blunt assessment: Over the past half-century the Orthodox community has carefully focused its efforts and attention on cultivating our relationship with God as King and we have neglected our relationship with God as Father. There's a lot of Malkeinu, not so much Avinu. There are so many incredible achievements we should be proud of as a community — the Torah learning, Daf Yomi renaissance, our Yeshiva-day school system, and the flourishing of mitzvah observance. But what about our siblings? What about our larger family? What about our commitments to the very real belief that the Jewish People, Knesset Yisroel, is a chosen, divine family? I am concerned that our connection to this idea has frayed. It is easier to focus on halachos of mayim achronim than to figure out how to introduce Torah and mitzvos, the very existence of God, to Jews who otherwise have never had that opportunity to learn. It is easier to

view non-Orthodox and secular Jews as “nebuch” at best, or with outright disdain at worst. But who is really at fault? It is easy to blame unaffiliated, secular, or non-Orthodox Jews for their approach — it is much harder to really believe in God's relationship with the entirety of the Jewish people, and to figure out how to address the religious alienation that is rampant throughout the Jewish community. Surely, some of that alienation is the fault of the Orthodox community.

It is time for the Orthodox community to reacquaint itself with God as Father and the Jewish People as an extended family. It is time for the Orthodox community — that includes the Modern Orthodox, Yeshivish, Hassidic, a little too much to the left, a little too much to the right — to really start taking the divinity expressed through the Jewish people seriously.

How, practically, can this be done? I would like to suggest three areas:

(1) Family Must Triumph over Triumphalism

Maybe I hang out too much on social media. Actually, not maybe, I know I do. But one of the most painful things I see on social media is the glee with which some members of the frum community mock and deride those who are not Orthodox. We have indeed achieved incredible things in this country. But our triumphalism, aside from being outright gross, is factually incorrect. When we cheer on the institutional demise of the non-Orthodox community are we celebrating the growth of Torah or witnessing a generation that could potentially be lost to any spark of connection to Yiddishkeit? As if we have a better plan. As if we are doing anything to

reach these Jews. As if somehow, if all non-Orthodoxy disappears, everyone will pick up and move to Bergenfield, Boca, and the Five Towns. Where is our sense of responsibility? Where is our very real pain for the assimilation of American Jewry that happened under our watch as we were thriving? We need to reintroduce ourselves to the larger Jewish community and perhaps reexamine and imagine ways in which we can, without religious compromise, reunite with our family.

(2) Education without Borders

Our best and brightest don't want to be rabbis and educators. They want to be able to pay full tuition. And those that do want to be rabbis and educators overwhelmingly want to do so within major Orthodox communities. I want to be a rabbi/ rebbe — but only in the tristate area. Ok fine, I'll consider Chicago, Boca, and LA — but that is it! We have abandoned small-town Jewry. This was the world of my grandparents who lived respectively in Portland, Maine and North Adams, Massachusetts. I remember when Rav Nota Greenblatt zt"l visited Yeshiva University, he made fun of this sentiment. “People are afraid that if they don't live in Lakewood, oy vey, my son won't finish mishnayos at his Bar Mitzvah!” He rolled his weary eyes. Bringing Yiddishkeit outside of major Jewish communities doesn't just strengthen those communities — it strengthens our Yiddishkeit. We sometimes lack faith in our belief system. Is anyone going to buy this? What about all the women's issues? What about the LGBT issues? Generations ago, people like my grandfather, Rabbi Moshe Bekritsky, and Rabbi Lamm, Esther Jungreis, and

others, embodied a real faith in the Jewish People because they didn't give up on small communities that maybe did not have all of the accouterments that have become so synonymous with Orthodoxy. Real belief in God and His Torah is a belief that every Jew is a part of our covenant and has the ability to participate in some way. Efforts to reach such Jews should be applauded rather than looked down upon or, even worse, outright discouraged. If our contemporary Orthodox life can only be sustained or even imagined in major Jewish communities, what does that say about our vision, our very definition of Yiddishkeit? The moment we give up on the larger Jewish community we run the risk of becoming a socio-economic status, a country club membership, rather than a family or even a religion. We need to strengthen our belief — not in Torah or even God, but in the Jewish people.

(3) Fall in Love with the Jewish People

How does one fall in love with the Jewish People? Not just with our tzadikim and talmidei chachomim — but really fall in love with the entirety of the Jewish people? I would like to submit that the best vehicle to fall in love with our people is through the study of Jewish history. We have forgotten our story — how did we even end up here? Too many within our community are woefully ignorant of Jewish history. We are woefully ignorant of our own history. Only one person in my most recent Jewish Public Policy class could name more than one president of Yeshiva University. Even more troubling was how dismissive some in the class were about why that should even be important. I tried explaining to them that people like Dr.

Revel, Dr. Belkin, and so many others in that generation created so much of the Orthodox world we take for granted today. During a visit to a very Zionist camp, I asked staff and students who the Chief Rabbi of Israel was when the country was founded. No one knew. The story of our survival through exile, Rav Yaakov Emden writes in the introduction to his siddur, is a greater miracle than the splitting of the sea. And the only way to appreciate the miracle of our story is by learning it! Let's learn to fall in love with the story of the Jewish People by learning our history.

And this brings us back to October 7th and our response. For the first time in my lifetime, the very existence of the State of Israel is being questioned. This generation, I hope, does not want to be the generation that loses, God forbid, the Jewish homeland. But in order to ensure our connection to Israel we must reexamine our connection to the Jewish People.

In 1976, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik gave an address to the Conference of Jewish Communal Service in Boston that was later republished in *Tradition* under the title, "The Community." In this moment, it is worth returning to his words there:

The community in Judaism is not a functional-utilitarian, but an ontological one. The community is not just an assembly of people who work together for

their mutual benefit, but a metaphysical entity, an individuality; I might say, a living whole. In particular, Judaism has stressed the wholeness and the unity of Knesset Israel, the Jewish community. The latter is not a conglomerate. It is an autonomous entity, endowed with a life of its own. We for instance, lay claim to Eretz Israel. God granted the land to us as a gift. To whom did He pledge this land? Neither to an individual, nor to a partnership consisting of millions of people. He gave it to the Knesset Israel, to the community as an independent unity, as a distinct juridic metaphysical person. He did not promise the land to all of us together. Abraham did not receive the land as an individual, but as the father of a future nation. The owner of the Promised Land is the Knesset Israel, which is a community persona. However strange such a concept may appear to the empirical sociologist, it is not at all a strange experience for the Halachist and the mystic, to whom Knesset Israel is a living, loving, and suffering mother.

And I pray to God, as both King and Father, that our connection to Knesset Israel — the true recipients of the promise of Israel, never frays. We still await the full fulfillment of that promise, and it begins with us and our connection to each other. Avinu Malkeinu, may Your children experience the fulfillment of that promise, speedily in our days.





Rediscovering Achdus: Transforming the Cliché into Something Real

There is a fascinating paradox that impacts many areas of life: increased awareness leads to decreased appreciation. The more we know something — often — the less we value it. An excellent example of this phenomenon is the concept of *achdus*; everybody knows the importance of unity and everyone declares their fidelity to it. And yet, it is precisely for this reason that I am afraid that we tend to ignore the truly central role that *achdus* should play in our religious lives. It is mentioned so ubiquitously that it tends to become a cliché, devoid of meaning.

One way to counter this damaging trend is by highlighting examples where commitment to our fellow Jews and sensitivity to others' needs and feelings plays a clear role in a religious experience or mitzvah. Instead of viewing *achdus* as a vague concept,

we must internalize that it carries real obligations, requiring us to act in concrete and meaningful ways.

The Yamim Noraim — a uniquely intense period on the Jewish calendar — provide several opportunities to demonstrate this essential truth.

A core message of Rosh Hashana is that we are “*mamlich*” Hashem, we proclaim His kingship over the entire world. Our Musaf prayers are structured around three themes, the first of which is *malchiyus*, where we elaborate on ten verses that each declare the monarchy and majesty of Hashem (see *Rosh Hashana* 16a, 34b).

R. Simcha Zissel, the Alter of Kelm, a prominent disciple of R. Yisroel Salanter and a leading mussar authority in his own right, strikingly noted that there is a link between coronating Hashem and *achdus*. After all, he reasoned, any monarchy depends, to a



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large extent, on the unity of the king's subjects in loyal service of the Crown. If we are not unified then we cannot fully proclaim Hashem's dominion.

Remarkably, as a result of this insight, R. Simcha Zissel would hang up a notice on door of the Kelm Talmud Torah every year for the entire month preceding Rosh Hashana, which reminded his students of this vital truth. The note emphasized to the students that without first committing unreservedly to each other, their declared commitment to Hashem would be inauthentic (“*dover shekarim*”). R. Simcha Zissel, the quintessential educator, ultimately

boiled this lofty idea down to its practical essence: “*achdus ha-avadim hu kiyum ha-malchus*,” the fullness of the monarchy is sustained by the unity of the servants.

Throughout the Yamim Noraim we say *Avinu Malkeinu*, proclaiming our relationship with Hashem as both a Father and a King. That we have a common Father is an obvious call for *achdus*. Yet what emerges from R. Simcha Zissel is that genuine *achdus* among the Jewish people is integral to proclaiming Hashem as *Malkeinu*, a prerequisite for truly observing Rosh Hashana.

As we move through the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva*, eventually culminating with Yom Kippur, teshuva and the need to repent takes on added urgency. Here too *achdus* plays a critical and concrete role — in two ways.

When it comes to repentance, we distinguish between sins against Hashem, *bein adam la-Makom*, and interpersonal transgressions, *bein adam la-chavero*. To achieve atonement for a *bein adam la-Makom* sin you must regret your past actions, commit to not repeating the transgression in the future, and then verbalizing your confession. However, when it comes to a *bein adam la-chavero* sin, you must first ask forgiveness from the person that you hurt and only then can you begin the process of being forgiven by Hashem (*Shulchan Aruch*, O”C 606:1).

While this basic halacha indicates the importance of interpersonal

relationships, some authorities, such as the *Birkei Yosef* (O”C 606:1), go even further and assert that all atonement — even for transgressions *bein adam la-Makom* — is only possible after you have been forgiven by all individuals you have sinned against. Incredibly, according to this view, no teshuva — for any sin — is possible without first properly repenting for interpersonal sins.

The implication of this position is truly breathtaking: repairing ruptured relationships and creating social harmony is a linchpin for restoring our connection with Hashem.

A third, related, example of the importance of *achdus* is the wholesale impact it can have on our judgement during the Yamim Noraim.

Aside from the responsibility to repent for specific sins that we have transgressed, the *Meshech Chochma* (Vayikra 8:7) suggests that connecting to the community so intensively that we essentially merge our identity with the collective identity of the *tzibur* may itself allow us to “purify” ourselves from all of our individual inadequacies. As a source for this seemingly radical and novel idea, he cites a ruling from the agricultural laws of *orlah*. Even though fruit that grows in the first three years is prohibited, if a branch from such a tree is grafted onto an older tree, the fruit that subsequently grows from that branch is permitted because the branch loses (“*batlah*”) its identity and is now viewed as part of the larger — and older — tree (*Sotah* 43b).

Similarly, argues the *Meshech Chochma*, if we “graft” ourselves to the larger community, we can take on the identity of the community and thereby “cleanse” ourselves from our individual sins and shortcomings. The *Shev Shmatsa* (Introduction) suggests a similar idea, rooted in the laws of “nullification” (“*bitul*”) of non-kosher foodstuff (see *Zevachim* 78a): “submerging” ourselves in the larger community can “nullify” all of our sins — in one fell-swoop — in the larger whole of the Jewish people.

It thus emerges that during the period from Elul through Yom Kippur there are multiple instances where we can actualize the value of *achdus* — and related principles — in a tangible way. We must be unified to properly coronate Hashem as King on Rosh Hashana; we must make peace with each other before we can be granted full atonement, and total identification with the broader community can help us be “cleansed,” allowing us to escape a more severe, individualized judgement.

Far from an empty cliché, *achdus* properly understood and practiced is the key to our relationship with our fellow Jews and with Hashem.

Repairing ruptured relationships and creating social harmony is a linchpin for restoring our connection with Hashem.



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One Big Happy Family?

The month of Elul and the ensuing Aseret Yemei Teshuva direct our focus toward our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, but defining the exact nature of that relationship is complex. Throughout the liturgy of the High Holy Days and in texts about teshuva, two distinct paradigms of this relationship repeatedly emerge: that of “*avadim*,” servants to a king, and “*banim*,” children to a father.

Though these two paradigms may seem contradictory, we find ourselves embracing both. Prayers such as Avinu Malkeinu and the petition “סלח לנו... מלכנו מלכנו... אבינו...” simultaneously express both roles. Similarly, when we sound the shofar, we invoke the

consequences of both relationships: “If we are like children, treat us as a merciful father would... And if we are like servants, then our eyes are fixed on You until You favor us, and bring forth our judgment as the light...”

The basis for viewing ourselves as Hashem’s “children” is found in the verse from Malachi (2:10), “*halo Av echad l’chulanu*” — “Have we not all one Father?” Of course, in the context of teshuva, we would prefer the warm relationship children have to a parent over the cold detachment a servant has to his King. We are taught that “*ha’av shemachal al kevodo, kevodo machul*” — that specifically, “a parent may forgo their honor” and overlook transgressions, making a forgiving



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and merciful posture possible. Even if punishment is necessary, we would prefer it to be delivered with the regretful lament of a father who had no choice but to admonish his children.¹

Seeing ourselves as children of Hashem should lead to more unity and less divisiveness. The Ritva² explains that the prohibition of *lo titgodedu*,³ understood to forbid factions and

discord, is rooted at the beginning of that verse which reads *banim atem LaShem Elokeichem*, You are children of Hashem, your God. Recognizing that we all share one Father and belong to a single "family" should reinforce our sense of unity and the importance of living harmoniously together.

The Chafetz Chayim echoes this idea. He writes:⁴

איך יוכל האדם לפעול בנפשו לשנוא את מי שהוא אהוב לה', הלא בודאי יהיה להקב"ה תרעומת עליו עבור זה.

How can a person hate someone who is loved by God? Surely God will have a claim on him for this.

He elaborates:

ולמשל, הנה בטבע כל אב לאהוב את בנו אהבה עזה, וכל עמל האדם אך לטובת בניו אחריו, וכשימצא אחד שיהיה שונא לבניו, הלא תהיה לו תרעומת גדולה על אותו האיש. כן הדבר בעניינינו, כל מי שיש לו שנאה על חבירו, בודאי יש להקב"ה תרעומת עליו, ומי הוא האיש הסכל והפתי שירצה לשאת עליו תרעומת ה' יתברך, ומה אם תרעומת בשר ודם קשה לשאת, ומכל שכן תרעומת מלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה שמאד מחוייבים להיזהר מזה.

It is in nature for every father to love his son with intense love, and all man's labor is only for the benefit of his sons after him, and when he finds one who hates one of his sons, wouldn't he have a great grudge against that man? So, in our case, anyone who has a hatred for his friend must surely be punished. God will be angry with him, and who is the foolish and gullible man who would want to bear the wrath of God, blessed be He? And what if the wrath of flesh and blood is hard to bear, and even more so the wrath of the King of Kings, the Holy One, who is very much obliged to beware of it.

How can we treat poorly those who are children of Hashem? We see from here that viewing ourselves as "children" of

Hashem not only provides reassurance about how G-d sees us, it also imposes responsibilities on how we view and treat others. Elsewhere,⁵ the Chafetz Chayim offers a powerful parable about family and peaceability:

ולמה הדבר דומה, לאיש שבניו מסובין על שולחנו, וחלק מנות לכל אחד ואחד מבניו, וחטף אחד מיד חבירו. והלך הבן הנגזל אצל אביו ואמר לו, אבי, בקשתי מאחי שיחזיר לי חלקי ולא רצה, ואני יודע שאין רצונך שנכה איש את אחיו ואף לא נריב יחד, על כן בבקשה ממך תן לי מנה אחרת. וכשמוע אביו את הדבר נישק אותו ונתן לו מנה אחרת גדולה. ואמר לו עתה מצאת בני חן בעיני עבור מדתך הטובה. אחיך השוטה יחזיק את חלקך, והיה לסעודה אחרת אתן לך בכפלים, ולו לא אתן כלל. אבל אם הבן הנגזל לא יעשה כן, אך יריב עם אחיו, ויכו זה את זה לעיני אביו עד שיוצא בלעו מפיו, אף שהאמת עם הבן הנגזל הזה, אעפ"כ בודאי יהיה דבר זה למורת עיני אביו וישנא את שניהם יחד, באמרו, היה לך לבקש ממני מנה אחרת והייתי נותן לך ברוב שמחה, ולא להכות ולריב איש את אחיו לעיני עבור דברי הבלים כאלה.

This is similar to a man whose sons are gathered at his table and who distributed portions to each and every one of them, and one brother snatched a portion from the hand of the other. The son who lost his portion approached the father and said, "Father, I asked my brother to give me back my share, and he refused. I know that it is not your wish that we should hit our brothers, nor should we fight, so please give me another portion." When his father heard this, he kissed him and gave him another large portion. He said to him, "You have now found favor with me because of your good character. Your foolish brother will keep your share, and if there were another feast, I would give you double, and I will not give him at all." But if instead the wronged son does not do so but quarrels with his brother, and they fight each other in front of his father, upsetting him, even though the

truth is with the wronged son, nevertheless, this thing will undoubtedly be to the displeasure of his father, and he will be upset with both of them, saying, "Had you asked me for another portion, I would have gladly given it to you, and not [see you] beat and fight your brother in front of me over such silly things."

And so the Chafetz Chayim continues,

אמר להם הקב"ה לישראל בני אהובי כלום חסרתי דבר שאבקש מכם, ומה אני מבקש מכם אלא שתהיו אוהבים זה את זה ומכבדין זה לזה וכו' ולא ימצא בכם עבירה וגזל. *Hashem says to the Jewish people, "My beloved children, I lack nothing that I need to ask of you, except that you love each other, respect each other, and that there be no wrongdoing among you..."*

If we truly see ourselves as the children of G-d, then we need to see each other as siblings who have the ultimate parental Referee who can do anything to solve the problems we have between us. Our arguments are not zero-sum. G-d promises a way out if we focus on our relationship first.

This is undoubtedly a beautiful sentiment, and being considered children of Hashem offers tremendous opportunities for every Jew. However, it also comes with significant challenges. After all, family is never simple.

The Torah is replete with stories of complex family dynamics, beginning with the tragic conflict between Kayin and Hevel. Nearly every sibling relationship in the Torah involves some level of strife or rivalry. It isn't until we reach the book of Shemos that we find Aharon and Moshe, siblings who demonstrate mutual support despite their differences.⁶ The designation of the Jewish people as "children" of Hashem implies that despite the closeness, as "siblings," we face these same challenges.

Family relationships are inherently complicated, a fact acknowledged by the halacha that disqualifies relatives from serving as witnesses in legal cases. Surprisingly, the Torah presents this law as “Fathers should not die by the hands of sons,” describing a case where one relative would incriminate another. Wouldn’t we be more concerned about family testifying falsely towards an acquittal? The *Sefer HaChinuch*⁷ explains that, on the contrary, the suspicion of family members incriminating one another is very real:

עוד נמצא לנו תועלת אחר בדרך, כי מהיות
הקרובים שוכנים תמיד זה אצל זה, ושיבתם
וקימתם יחד, אי אפשר להן להנצל שלא
יתקוטטו זה עם זה לפעמים, ואלו יאמינו
בידותן זה על זה, אולי בכעס תמיד אלו עם
אלו תעלה חמתם לפי שעה ויבואו לפני הדין
ויחייבו את ראשם למלך.

Since relatives always dwell close to each other... it is impossible for them to avoid quarreling, one with the other. And if we were to believe their testimony against one another, perhaps in their constant anger [of] one against the other, their anger would momentarily rise and they would come in front of the court and condemn their heads to the king...

The *Sefer HaChinuch*'s insight highlights the unsettling truth that sometimes family members may be more likely to lie to the detriment of one another than in each other's defense. Family conflicts can arise from jealousy, competition for parental attention, or comparisons of success. The intimacy of shared origins and close quarters often breeds the most intense antagonism. It is particularly tragic when families become so estranged that they rarely speak, lose touch, or disappear from each other's lives entirely.

Ironically, despite their importance, acts of kindness in family life are usually not about grand gestures;

they are instead found in daily, often hidden acts of consideration, patience, and sacrifice that strengthen familial bonds. The repetitive nature of these acts, performed without expectation of reward, makes them a true expression of chesed.

R' Eliezer Papo⁸ emphasizes the importance of chesed within the family:

וכל האמור בענין יגדל החיוב עשות חסד
עם הוריו ועם יוצאי חלציו ועם קרוביו הקרוב
הקרוב קודם.

The obligation to perform kindness with one's parents, offspring, and close relatives takes precedence...

Charity begins at home, and while proactive kindness within a family is undeniably essential, forgiveness for slights presents a unique challenge, as we have seen above and have undoubtedly experienced ourselves. The deep bonds of family relationships mean that wounds inflicted by loved ones often cut far more profoundly than those caused by others. These relationships are shaped by long histories, shared experiences, and significant expectations, making the pain of betrayal, conflict, or misunderstanding especially acute. The very intimacy that fosters great love and support within a family also creates fertile ground for resentment and hurt.

The implications of *halo Av echad l'chulanu* widens this responsibility. Have we considered what it might mean to consider that together, we are all children of the same Father? Does that attitude shape how we think or speak of other Jews? Sure, as we have seen, the opportunities of being Hashem's children are great, but we must remember that those around us are His children as well.

What can we expect of a merciful Father when we cannot bring ourselves to be

a merciful brother or a forgiving sister? Have we allowed ourselves to become strained with or estranged from family members? Do we have the right, or the gall, to expect the mercy of a father when we cannot similarly provide similar mercy or forgiveness?

While family relationships can be complex and challenging, they hold immense significance. As we use this High Holiday season to deepen our connection as children of Hashem, it's important to remember our responsibilities toward the broader family of Klal Yisrael. However, we should also recognize that the most crucial — and often most difficult — lessons and challenges of family life will likely be found within our own homes.

Endnotes

1. מה לו לאב שהגלה את בניו (ברכות ג.)
2. Yevamot 13b.
3. Devarim 14:1.
4. *Ahavat Yisrael* ch. 4.
5. *Chafetz Chayim, Shemirat HaLashon, chelek 1, Sha'ar HaTevunah*, ch. 11.
6. See Shemot 4:13
7. Mitzvah 589
8. *Pele Yoetz*, “Chesed.”



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Yishmael's Lessons of Repentance

For me, one of the most emotive texts in the Rosh Hashana prayers is Hayom Harat Olam. This small paragraph follows each of the three sets of shofar blasts during Musaf. Many remember it fondly through the tunes they grew up with in their childhood shuls. The paragraph reads as follows:

היום הרת עולם. היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים. אם בְּבָנִים. אם פְּעֻבָּדִים. אם בְּבָנִים רַחֲמֵנוּ כְּרַחֵם אָב עַל בְּנָיִם. וְאִם פְּעֻבָּדִים עֵינֵינוּ לְךָ תְּלִיזוֹת. עַד שֶׁתְּחַנְּנֵנוּ וְתוֹצִיאַ כְּאֹר מִשְׁפָּטֵנוּ אֲיוֹם קְדוֹשׁ:

On this day the world was conceived. On this day all creations stand in judgement — whether as children or as servants. If as children, have mercy upon us as a father has mercy on his children. If as servants,

our eyes depend upon You, until You favor us and bring our judgement forth like the light of day. Revered and Holy One!

When one pays a little more attention to the words, it is striking that we address Hashem as both children and servants. That is to say that we see him both as a Father and as a Master. Now, if I were crafting the prayers for the Day of Judgement, I would have instinctively chosen to address Hashem solely as our Father. After all, it is a time we are seeking mercy. The father figure may have rules and use discipline but ultimately, He loves his child unconditionally. The master figure inherently demands stricter justice and has less patience for the frailties of the servant's mistakes. Why do we even



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mention Hashem as a Master at such a critical moment of the year?

It turns out that this short paragraph is retelling a story we have heard before in Jewish history. It describes someone who was both a son and a servant and who prayed for his life in both capacities. Understanding who that person was and the situation he experienced are central in framing our

Rosh Hashana davening, especially this year during the continued war in Israel.

I would like to expand upon an idea from the work of R. Shimon Schwab, *Maayan Beit Hashoeva*, Bereishit 21:9. He argues that there is a character in Tanakh who closely aligns with the figure described in this paragraph in our Rosh Hashana machzor. His name was Yishmael. Born as the first son to Avraham and Hagar, this young man was indeed a complex character. Sarah had initially suggested the union between Avraham and Hagar as a form of surrogacy after her inability to conceive with Avraham. But the relationship was ill-fated. Upon Hagar's conceiving, Sarah soon demanded the expulsion of the pregnant Hagar and later, after the birth of Yishmael, she ordered Yishmael and his mother to be sent from their home again. Part of the complexity of Yishmael stems from his identity as both the son to Avraham and the servant to Sarah, since he was born to Sarah's maidservant. Here is our son/servant model that the paragraph in our machzor seems to refer to. But there must be more meaning in this prayer than this dual son or servant identity. Our machzor would not include the prayer of such a person unless it had significant theological import to us on Rosh Hashana.

A closer examination of Yishmael's exile from his father's home reveals why he was chosen as the model for this prayer. Let us review the facts of this story, found in Bereishit 21. It should be obvious that this story requires attention on Rosh Hashana, since it is the kriyat HaTorah of the first day of Rosh Hashana. In this chapter, the Torah teaches of the birth of Avraham and Sarah's son, Yitzchak. The parents recognize this long-awaited moment as a miracle from Hashem. Upon weaning Yitzchak, Avraham throws a large feast

in appreciation of the milestone. It is after this that we hear of concerning behavior demonstrated by Yishmael.

וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת בֶּן הַגֵּר הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה
לְאַבְרָהָם מִצִּיחָק.

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing.
Bereishit 21:9

We are not explicitly told what it is that Yishmael says to Yitzchak as part of his “laughter” or playing. Whatever it was, Sarah responded swiftly and firmly to Yishmael's actions.

וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרְשׁ הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת בְּנָהּ
כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בֶּן הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת עִם בְּנֵי עַם יִצְחָק.
She said to Abraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

Bereishit 21:10

Her actions seem somewhat drastic for what seems to be a simple case of sibling rivalry. But her words to Avraham indicate that it was more than a joke. Whatever Yishmael said had implications on the inheritance of Yitzchak — her son and the true heir to Avraham. That is why she emphasizes Yishmael's exclusion from inheritance. Somehow it is imperative for her to remove Yishmael so that his plan to inherit instead of Yitzchak fails. What kind of joke could lead to such a conclusion? Why does Sarah take this so seriously? I believe the Torah already explained Yishmael's joke a few pesukim back.

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צָחַק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹקִים כָּל הַשְּׂמֵעַ
יִצְחָק לִי.

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

Bereishit 21:6

Yitzchak is a boy born to a 100-year-old father and 90-year-old mother after decades of a childless marriage. The idea that they could bear a child at this stage

in their lives was simply incredulous. The name “Yitzchak” means laughter, because of the sheer improbability of the miracle. When Sarah and Avraham named him Yitzchak (“he will laugh”), their laughter expressed joy and happiness. Yishmael also laughed about the birth of his younger half-brother. But his laughter expressed scorn and denial. It was too strange to be true. Sarah must have picked up the infant boy on the doorstep. He must have been the product of an unwanted pregnancy or an adoption from a local orphanage. Yitzchak was not really the child of Avraham and Sarah, joked Yishmael. That was Yishmael's laughter. That was his joke. Such a false narrative had no place in the house of Sarah. It threatened the legitimacy of Yitzchak's future and Sarah therefore demanded an immediate expulsion of Yishmael.

It is at this moment that the question of Yishmael's identity emerges. He was, after all, Avraham's son. Sons who misbehave can be punished but generally not banished. Yet he was also Sarah's servant. Servants who disobey are sent away. Avraham did not feel comfortable sending away his son. Hashem intervened to tell Avraham to listen to Sarah. Yishmael was deemed more servant than son.

We know the rest of the story. Hagar and Yishmael wander in the desert for a while until their supplies are depleted and they are hopelessly lost. At such a time Hagar leaves her dying son under a bush knowing that he will shortly expire. She prays for him, and he too prays for his own life. It is at that moment that Hashem answers. But Hashem does not answer the prayers of Hagar.

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶת קוֹל הַנְּעִיר וַיִּקְרָא מִלְּאָף
אֱלֹקִים אֶל הַגֵּר מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה לָּךְ
הַגֵּר אֵל תִּירָאִי כִּי שָׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶל קוֹל הַנְּעִיר
בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא שָׁם.

God heard the cry of the boy, and a messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is."

Bereishit 21:17

Hashem hears the prayer of the lad himself. Why? What about his prayers were so compelling right now?

One can imagine what Yishmael must have been thinking throughout this narrative. He just made a few jokes at the expense of his half-brother, but Sarah would not let it go. You can imagine him begging his father not to send him away, but to no avail. He could not prevail as a son. He suffers as a refugee and has no place to go. As the rations disappear, his mother, all he has left, also abandons him under a bush. He is left by both his parents to die an ignoble death. As he lay there with his vision starting to blur, one thought must have crossed his mind — "This is exactly what I tried to claim about my brother Yitzchak." Yishmael had spread a rumor that Yitzchak was an orphan left on the doorstep, an unwanted pregnancy, abandoned by both parents. Now he was abandoned by both his parents, Avraham and Hagar. At this crucial epiphany, Yishmael grasped the damage he had done and the pain he had inflicted by his rumors about Yitzchak. Only once he experienced it for himself could he feel the shame fully and beg Hashem for mercy. Hashem answered that prayer of heartfelt shame and contrition.

To approach our Father in Heaven and earn the right to call Him our Father, we must first respect and honor other Jews as fellow children of Hashem.

Perhaps this is why we read this section as the Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashana, and why the paragraph of Hayom Harat Olam appears in our machzor. We, too, stand in front of Hashem on Rosh Hashana at a time of great uncertainty about our future and much shame about our past actions. We did not live up to our calling in the last year. We did not take our mission seriously enough. We, like Yishmael, beg our Father to have mercy on us and not reject us. But we also beseech Hashem that if we do not merit to be rehabilitated as a son, that as a servant our judgement be made clear as day to us, so we, like Yishmael, can truly repent and ourselves. That is exactly what the paragraph of Hayom Harat Olam presents as our two arguments of defense on our Day of Judgement. This may explain why in L'David Hashem Ori, Tehillim 27, the midrash (*Vayikra Rabbah* 21:4) describes Rosh Hashana as *ori* — my light. It is a day we hope to see the light of clarity in our lives so we can move forward.

I believe the relevance of this story has even more import for Rosh Hashana 5785. In Tanakh, the Jewish people

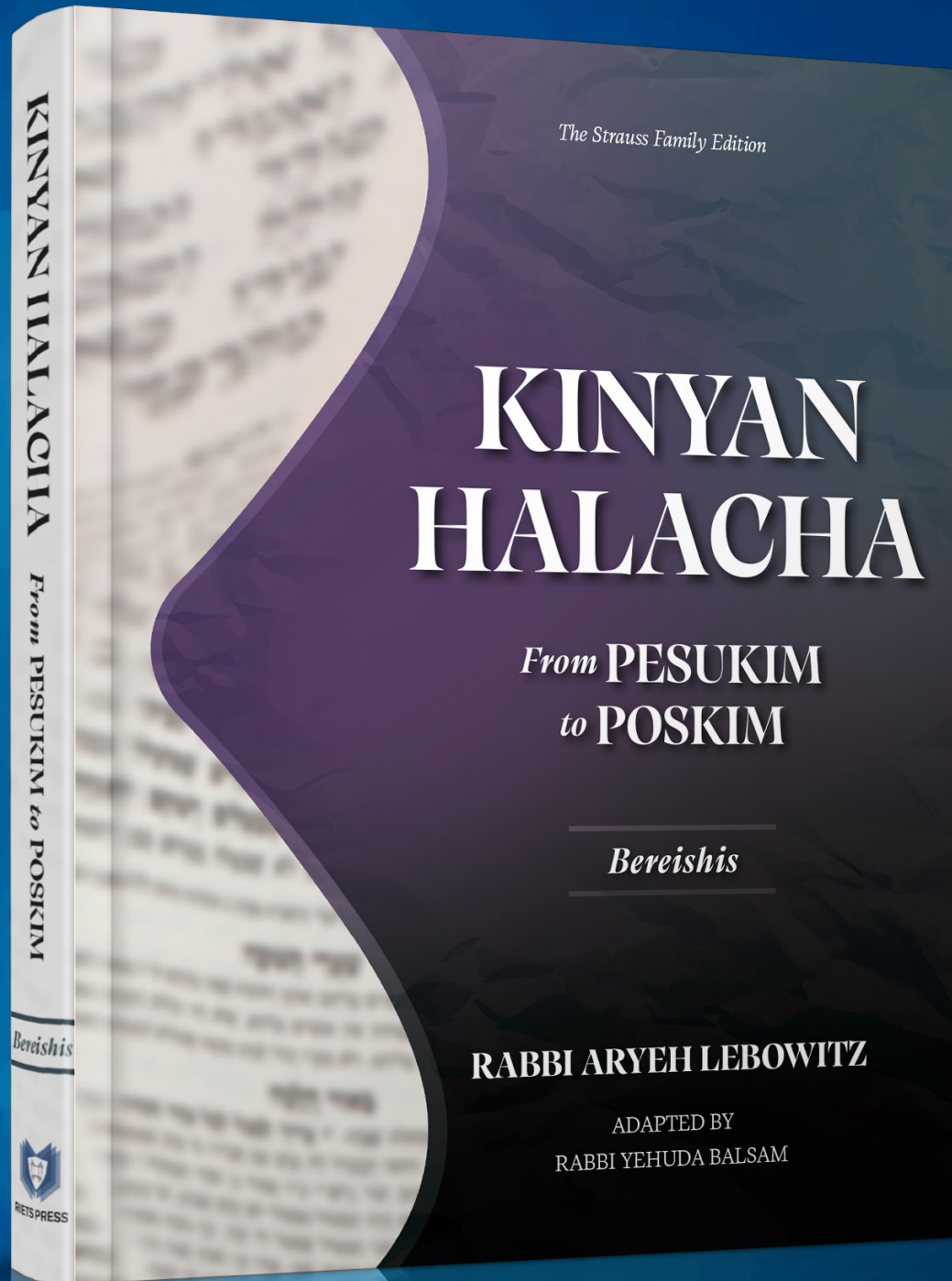
are called both children and servants of Hashem. We address Hashem as Avinu Malkeinu — our Father, our King. What is the determining factor that might shift us from being Hashem's child to being Hashem's servant? Is there a way to control which model of relationship we are in? How can we have Hashem in our lives as a parent and not a master?

Perhaps the distinction also goes back to this story with Yishmael and Yitzchak. Yishmael lost his rights as a son when he undermined the legitimacy of Yitzchak as a son. One cannot be considered a son if one's brother is not a son. Once we reject their legitimacy, then we downgrade our relationship, too. Without extrapolating this to Israel and other nations, this is a telling lesson for Jews today. To approach our Father in Heaven and earn the right to call Him our Father, we must first respect and honor other Jews as fellow children of Hashem. Although the last 11 months of war have been incredibly challenging and painful, one of the beautiful nuances to emerge is the *achdut* of Jews — across country divides, across religious divides, across political divides and across cultural divides. That spirit of *achdut* we have seen and expressed is what allows us the divine mercy we so desperately pray for on Rosh Hashana. May we all be deemed children of Hashem in our eyes and in His eyes, and may that lead to a true and complete salvation.



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TABLE TALK:

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on the Blessings & Challenges of Unity

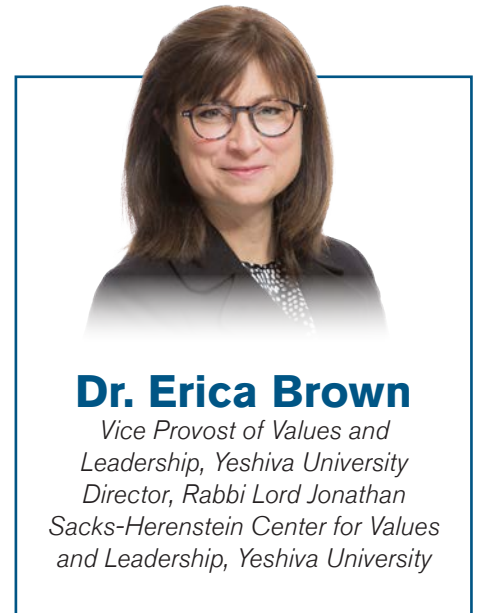
The word unity – *achdut* - communicates spiritual harmony, togetherness, shared values, a commitment to collective history, and a promising future together. Unity imparts feelings of belonging to a community of hope and a society joined by fate and faith.

This past year, we witnessed a tidal wave of Jewish unity in response to the terrors of October 7th and global antisemitism. Jews across the religious and political spectrum dropped their differences in Israel to grieve, to volunteer, to protect each other, and to rebuild from the ashes of that day.

But the emotional strength of unity post-October 7th has begun to unravel as the war continues. Political disagreements in Israel about security, the hostage situation, and the direction of the war chipped away at

the compassion and closeness in the immediate aftermath of October 7th. Progressive attacks on Israel in the Diaspora met with right-wing anger. Right-wing violence has produced new, unprecedented levels of anxiety. Service in the IDF pitted religious Zionists and secular Israelis against the Ultra-Orthodox with alarming levels of polarization. The noise about judicial reform that fired up protests in the summer of 2023 has returned. The public mechtza crisis in Tel Aviv of 2023 that some said would precipitate a civil war has resurfaced. A looming presidential election in the United States is splintering the Jewish community once again.

This fragmentation makes us wonder if unity is an impossible aspiration or a comfortable patina that masks true ideological divisions that make it hard to live together peaceably. Perhaps unity is



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hard to sustain long-term. Since October 7th, many wonder what guidance and hope Rabbi Sacks would have offered to help us navigate these difficult issues. In this “Table Talk” we present some of his thinking on unity in general, with questions for further thought.

Unity Without Uniformity

“The proposition at the heart of monotheism is not what it has traditionally been taken to be: one God, therefore one faith, one truth, one way. To the contrary, it is that unity creates diversity. The glory of the created world is its astonishing multiplicity: the thousands of different languages spoken by mankind, the hundreds of faiths, the proliferation of cultures, the sheer variety of the imaginative expressions of the human spirit, in most of which, if we listen carefully, we will hear the voice of God telling us something we need to know. That is what I mean by the dignity of difference.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2003), p. 2.

Questions for Discussion:

- What do you think Rabbi Sacks meant by a unity that creates diversity?
- How would glorifying difference change our approach to unity?
- Within the parameters of a halakhic life, how can we practically encourage, inspire, and protect more singularity and less uniformity?

Unity at What Cost?

“Unity is undeniably a Jewish value, but not necessarily and in all circumstances a supreme and overriding one.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *One People* (Maggid, 2024), p. 39.

“...the division of the Jewish people into Orthodoxy and others, deeply tragic though it is, does not sanction the pursuit of unity at the cost of other values. Creating unity in the short term, if it involved abandoning covenantal imperatives that traditionally constituted Jewish peoplehood, would be both impossible and undesirable: impossible because it would mean abandoning values that are non-negotiable, undesirable because pluralism might result in greater disunity in the long term.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *One People* (Maggid, 2024), p. 39.

“Jewish unity is a cause that is not advanced by the advocacy of one point of view over another. It demands the difficult but not impossible exercise of thinking non-adjectivally as a Jew: not as a member of this or that group, but as a member of an indivisible people.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *One People* (Maggid, 2024), p. x.

Questions for Discussion:

- Is Jewish unity a cause?
- What can you do personally to break down divisions and labels within the Jewish community?

The Impact of Politics on Jewish Unity

“Politics and religion do not mix. They are inherently different activities. Religion seeks salvation, politics seeks power. Religion aims at unity, politics lives with diversity. Religion refuses to compromise, politics depends on compromise. Religion aspires to the ideal, politics lives in the real, the less-than-ideal. Religion is about the truths that do not change, politics is about the challenges that constantly change. Harold Wilson said, ‘A week is a long time in politics.’ The book of Psalms says, ‘A thousand years are in your sight as yesterday when it is gone’ (Psalm 90:4). When religion becomes political or politics becomes religious, the result is disastrous to religion and politics alike.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (Schocken, 2014), p. 228.

“To be sure, many elections in the past have been raw, rude and raucous in their rhetoric. That is part of the competitive spirit of electoral politics. But something new is happening: the sense that the other side is less than fully human, that its supporters are not part of the same moral community as us, that somehow their sensibilities are alien and threatening, as if they were not the opposition within a political arena, but the enemy full stop.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (Basic Books, 2020), p. 222.

“When religion becomes politicised, or politics becomes religionized, bad things happen, and we must avoid that if we can. Politics speaks to our conflicting interests. Religion should speak to our shared responsibilities.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “*Religion Should Speak to Our Shared Responsibilities*,” (Feb. 1, 2008). <https://rabbisacks.org/archive/religion-should-speak-to-our-shared-responsibilities/>

Questions for Discussion:

- In what ways have you seen religion become politicized?
- In what ways have you seen politics become influenced by religion?
- Why does Rabbi Sacks strongly advocate a separation of these two domains?
- As we approach another heated presidential election in America, how can you model unity in place of the divisions that politics cast on our community today?



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Sukkot Insights

Messages of *Achdus* in the Mitzvos of Sukkos

Although the joy of last Sukkos was certainly overshadowed by the horrific events of Shemini Atzeres/Simchas Torah and the ensuing war, Sukkos remains *zeman simchaseinu*, and it is incumbent upon us to find ways to rejoice during this time. Reflecting on some of the positives that have come from last year's trials and tribulations may help us to do so. One of the most obvious positive outcomes of the challenges faced by klal Yisrael has been the profound sense of *achdus* displayed by the Jewish people in countless ways. This idea of unity is woven throughout the mitzvos we perform on Sukkos. A famous example of this is found in the *Midrash Rabbah* (*Emor* 30:12) that each of the four *minim* represents a particular type of Jew, ranging from the learned and pious to the unlearned

and unrighteous. Each of these Jews must be represented for the mitzvah to be fulfilled. Although the Rambam (*Hil. Lulav* 7:9) rules that one fulfills the mitzvah by taking each item individually, everyone agrees that it is preferable that they be taken together. In addition, the Gemara (*Sukkah* 11b) cites a *machlokes tanaim* as to whether the species must be bound together or not (*lulav tzarich egged*). Although the halacha is that one is *yotzei* if they are not bound, the Gemara concludes that one should bind them *lechatchilah*, since binding the four *minim* together is a fulfillment of *hiddur mitzvah*. Indeed, the message behind this resonates. When the Jewish people bind themselves together as one entity, it is a great *kiyum* of "zeh Keili vianveihu" — this is my God and I will glorify Him.

The *egged* that is used to bind the *minim* together is important to this message as well. One might have thought the since



Rabbi Yehuda Balsam

*Rosh Beit Midrash,
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the purpose of binding the *minim* is to beautify the mitzvah, any nice-looking binder or bow would suffice. However, the *Shulchan Aruch* (651:1) rules that one should tie them together with a double knot, as this is the best manner to fulfill the *hiddur mitzvah*. This can be understood from the perspective of *achdus* as well. While it is certainly meaningful if the Jewish people can come together in a manner that appears beautiful, if we bind ourselves together superficially — with a bow or a single knot — we have not truly performed a *hiddur mitzvah*. It is only when we tie ourselves together with a *keshel shel kayamah* that we have truly glorified the name of our creator.

The sukkah itself contains a similar



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message of unity for the Jewish people. The Gemara (27b) learns from the words of the Torah (Vayikra 23:42), *kol ha'erzrach B'Yisrael* (each citizen of Israel) that כל ישראל ראוי לישב בסוכה אחת — the entire Jewish people are fit to reside in a single sukkah. Chazal understand that the prototypical sukkah that is described by the Torah is one that houses the totality of klal Yisrael. This obviously requires an astounding level of *achdus*, and serves as a vision for what we can achieve if we focus on putting aside our differences in the

fulfillment of Hashem's mitzvos.

One additional symbol of *achdus* (although there are many more) that can be found in the mitzvos of the chag is the circle. Throughout the holiday, we form many circles, whether during the *hoshanos* or dancing on Simchas Torah. The circle is a unique symbol of unity — no point is more important than another, and each point is equidistant from the center. Rav Soloveitchik related this to the Gemara at the conclusion of *Maseches Taanis* (31a), which relates that in the future

Hashem will make a circle of tzadikim and will reside in the center, and all of the tzadikim will point to Him.

Indeed, the secret to true unity is realizing that we are all here for the purpose of serving Hashem and getting closer to Him. If we use the sukkah and the *daled minim* to achieve this goal, we will find it easier to connect to our fellow Jews, sharing space in the sukkah, and merit finding our place on this circle, where we will point to the center and proclaim קוינו לו נגילה ונשמחה בישועתו זה ה'.

Sukkot: A Taste of Eretz Yisrael

Eretz Yisrael is unique in many ways, from its rich history and the spiritual significance Hashem ascribes to it throughout Tanach, to the deep connection between Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael, and the mitzvot *ha'teluyot ba'aretz*. However, one aspect, explained in the Gemara, particularly stands out. At the end of *Masechet Ketubot* (111a) it states:

כָּל הַמְהַלֵּךְ אַרְבַּע אַמּוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל מוֹבְטָח לוֹ שֶׁהוּא בְּן הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

Anyone who walks four cubits in Eretz Yisrael is assured of a place in the World to Come.

The Rambam in *Hilchot Melachim* (5:11) paraphrases this Gemara:

אֲפִילוּ הִלְךָ בָּהּ אַרְבַּע אַמּוֹת זֹכָה לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

Even one who walks four cubits there will merit the World to Come.

And additionally, the Rambam states:

אָסוּר לְצַאת מֵאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְחוּצָה לְאֶרֶץ לְעוֹלָם. אֲלָא לְלַמֵּד תּוֹרָה אוֹ לְשֵׂא אִשָּׁה אוֹ לְהַצִּיל מִן הָעֶבֶר"ס. וְיִחְזֹר לְאֶרֶץ.

It is forbidden to leave Eretz Yisrael for the Diaspora at all times except to study Torah; to marry; or to save one's property from the gentiles. After accomplishing these objectives, one must return to Eretz Yisrael.

The Gemara and the Rambam are addressing not one specific mitzvah that is applicable in the Land of Israel. Rather, they are touching on an aspect of Eretz Yisrael that is unique, namely, that it is a mitzvah to simply exist there. The Gemara does not state that one who performs a specific deed merits the World to Come, rather that one who



walks in the land merits the World to Come. While this seems like a nice idea, it seems strange. You are not actually doing anything, aside from strolling in a specific land! And further, the Rambam in his earlier statement seems to solidify this point by stating that one should not leave the land, and if he must for a very pressing reason, he should return as soon as the need has dissipated. This



seems to be different from all our other mitzvot.

However, to one who has had the merit of stepping foot in the Land of Israel, there is an understanding of what the sources were emphasizing. To exist in Eretz Yisrael is to exist in *kedusha*, holiness. To walk the streets is to be enveloped in a sense of meaning and purpose. There is a feeling that one is in a place of Hashem, where Judaism permeates the air. It is not just the bus signs bearing greetings for the upcoming yom tov, or signs affixed to store walls stating that *terumot* and *maasrot* have been taken that remind us that we are in the Jewish homeland. Rather, there is an indescribable feeling of religious significance to being present in the Land of Israel. This is what the sources were addressing — that beyond the individual mitzvot of the Land of Israel, there is the idea that living, being, existing in the land is itself a mitzvah. One that is all encompassing, engaging our entire being whenever we are present in the Land.

Throughout this past year, since the horrific events of Simchat Torah, many of us have felt a yearning to feel that feeling. To throw our full selves into the Land of Israel and to connect in any way to the Land, even if we could not physically be there. It has been so difficult to be elsewhere. Our limbs ache constantly to walk the land that we know and love. How does one connect to Eretz Yisrael when we are so far away?

To understand how to connect, one may look at the sukkot filling Jewish communities around the world. There are many parallels and connections between Eretz Yisrael and Sukkot. If one looks at the Gemara in *Masechet Sukkah* (2a):

בְּסוּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שְׁבַעַת יָמִים. אָמְרָה תּוֹרָה:
כָּל שְׁבַעַת הַיָּמִים צָא מִדִּירַת קִבְעַ וְיָשֵׁב בְּדִירַת
עֵרָאִי.

The Torah said: For the entire seven days, emerge from the permanent residence in which you reside year-round and reside in a temporary residence.

The word “עראי” is the word used to mean “temporary.” However, it is also an acronym for the borders of Eretz Yisrael as listed in the Mishna in *Masechet Gittin* (1:1-2):

”הַמְבִיא גֵט מִמְּדִינַת הַיָּם, צָרִיף שְׂיֵאמֶר, בְּפָנֵי
נִכְתָּב וּבְפָנֵי נֶחְתָּם... רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר, מֵרֶקֶם
לְמִזְרָח, וְרֶקֶם מִמְּזֻרָה. מֵאַשְׁקֶלֶון לְדָרוֹם,
וְאַשְׁקֶלֶון כְּדָרוֹם. מֵעֵבֹר לְצָפוֹן, וְעֵבֹר כְּצָפוֹן.

*An agent who brings a bill of divorce [get] from a husband to his wife from a country overseas, i.e., from outside of Eretz Yisrael to Eretz Yisrael, is required to state the following formula ... Rabbi Yehuda says: With regard to the borders of Eretz Yisrael, from **Rekem** eastward ... From **Ashkelon** southward ... Likewise, from **Akko** northward ...*

The first letters of *Yam, Rekem, Akko,* and *Ashkelon* spell “*arai*.” This suggests that when one builds a sukkah, it is as though he is constructing a “mini Eretz Yisrael” — a space where the entire

body engages in a mitzvah simply by entering and dwelling there, allowing one to bask in Hashem’s presence. Eretz Yisrael and sukkah are two of the only mitzvot that provide this immersive experience.

Additionally, in Sefer Tehillim, King David refers to Eretz Yisrael as Hashem’s sukkah:

יְהִי בְשֵׁלֶם סִכּוֹ וּמִעוֹנָתוֹ בְּצִיּוֹן.

G-d’s Sukkah is in Shaleim (Jerusalem) and His dwelling place is in Zion.

The sukkah is not a space for comfort or earthly pleasure; it is intentionally exposed to the elements, making us fully aware of our vulnerability to nature. While inside the sukkah, our entire body participates in the mitzvah, immersing us in a spiritual experience. This exposure reminds us that our true protection comes from Hashem, not from the physical structure of a roof or walls. This experience is designed to strengthen our emunah, reinforcing the belief that Hashem is our ultimate protector. So, too, in Eretz Yisrael. There are many challenges that the inhabitants of Israel face. However, along with these challenges, comes an acute awareness of the Divine Providence over the land. We have never been more aware of this than this year — our safety and the protection of the land falls solely in the hands of Hashem.

This year, as we bring our full selves into our sukkot, may we feel as if we are entering into, and connecting to Eretz Yisrael in a way that we so yearn. May we feel the comforting embrace of Hashem’s presence, and be comforted by the knowledge that we are guided by Hashem’s Divine Providence. And may we merit this year to see the *sukkat Dovid ha’nofalet*, in a rebuilt Jerusalem.



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Beyond Walls: Cultivating Safe Spaces in our Sukkah and in Education

Children need a safe space. Research shows that safe spaces can boost student aspirations and motivation to learn.¹ Safe spaces can take many different forms.

A safe space can be literal — like a physical location that offers protection from inclement weather, war or other violence. It could be anything from a steel-reinforced structure to a bench under a shady tree or a simple shelter from the rain.

But a safe space can also be emotional or intellectual — a place where people can be themselves without fear of bullying or assault. It could be a welcoming room that invites learners in, or a campus where all feel included and valued.

Safe spaces are not a modern invention. When David HaMelekh was running away from his enemies, he sought physical refuge in the caves in the wilderness of Judea, as well as spiritual refuge in the sukkah of Hashem, for which he proclaims gratitude in Mizmor 27.²

When Bnai Yisrael followed Moshe out of Egypt into the desert, Hashem provided them with a safe space in the form of sukkot, which the Rabbis interpreted to be either actual huts or a

series of protective clouds known as the Ananay HaKavod.³ We recognize and thank Hashem for His protection by observing the holiday of Sukkot.⁴

The Ananay HaKavod, given in the merit of Aharon, were one of three gifts, according to the Gemara, that Hashem provided for us in the desert.⁵ The others were water [in the merit of Miriam] and food/manna [in the merit of Moshe]. No holiday derives from those gifts. Why do we have a holiday, then, that commemorates the Clouds?

HaRav Ovadyah Yosef, in his talmudic commentary *Meor Yisrael*, quotes the 16th-17th-century Rav Chaim Kesufi of Alexandria and Cairo⁶ that there was an intrinsic difference between the Ananay HaKavod and the food and water that were also provided for Bnai Yisrael in the desert. It is impossible to survive in a desert without food and water, so after commanding Bnai Yisrael to leave Egypt and follow Him into the desert (Jer. 2:2), Hashem was obligated to provide those for their needs. The Ananay HaKavod were not strictly required in the same way, much appreciated as they obviously were, and reflect *ahavat Hashem*, the love that Hashem has for us and His desire to protect us. Hashem wanted to give us more than we needed. He wanted to make sure we had a space that was safe.

It is the very image of the love that Hashem has for us and His protection over us that we recall in the brakha after Shema during Maariv, when we ask



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Hashem: *pros aleinu sukkat shelomekha*, to spread over us a sukkah/canopy of peace and to direct us with good counsel and to save us.

Sometimes we take our safe spaces for granted, and sometimes we mistakenly believe we are safe. We tend to consider our homes to be safe spaces, but the COVID pandemic showed us otherwise. It highlighted the concern for children whose homes were not truly safe.

We feel it acutely since October 7, 2023 when people were attacked or burned in their homes; when others had to flee their homes in order to stay safe; when so many are still displaced from their homes.

For those of us who are teachers, we need to think as never before how to provide physically safe and emotionally safe places for our students, while not shrinking from teaching or discussing difficult issues, appropriate for the age level.

We can and should properly structure our physical environment. We can and should arrange the furniture in our room in a way that is inviting and welcoming. We can and should use natural light when possible and think about the sounds and smells that



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permeate the room. We can and should be there as class begins to greet every student as they enter the classroom, and make them feel welcome and special.

We can and must structure our educational environment. We can and must establish norms in the classroom that allow students to make mistakes and to learn from them. We can and must encourage creativity. We can and must encourage reflection and self-expression. We must never forget that students learn in different ways and can demonstrate what they have learned in different ways.

We can and will structure our social environment in schools and on college campuses. We can and will work with the students to establish norms of behavior where respect rules the day — respect between the teachers and the students, respect among the students, respect that each student should have for him or herself.

It has been a year since the safe spaces of those who live in Azza were violated; it has been a year of living on edge for all sensitive souls.

More than ever, we pray to Hashem *prosaieinu sukkat shelomekha*, to spread His sukkah of shalom over us and *ve-hagen ba'adeinu, ve-haser me-aleinu oyev*, to

We can and must establish norms in the classroom that allow students to make mistakes and to learn from them.

protect us and to remove our enemies, and *be-tzel kenafekha tastireinu*, to shelter us in the shadow of His wings.

Endnotes

1. Ward, N. et al. (2011). Creating a safe space to learn: The significant role of graduate students in fostering educational engagement and aspirations among urban youth in *Community Psychol.*44(1): 33–36. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4123117/>. See also Zins, J. E., Payton, J. W., Weissberg, R. P., & O'Brien, M. U. (2007). Social and emotional learning for successful school performance. In G. Matthews, M. Zeidner, & R. D. Roberts (Eds.), *The science of emotional intelligence: Knowns and unknowns* (pp. 376–395). Oxford University Press. Actually, we all need safe (and quiet) spaces particularly in our world where social media and other news and cultural updates continually impose themselves on our attention. I use the phrase “safe space” unironically in spite of the controversy (and ridicule in some quarters) that it has been subjected to. Of course, some have abused the notion of “safe space” to infantilize young adults or to push (or bully)

others to accept a particular position with no chance of discussion. That is not the sort of space any of us should need.

2. See Tehillim 27, 5: *כִּי יִצְפְּנֵנִי בְּסִכַּח בְּיָוִם רָעָה: יְסִתְרֵנִי, בְּסִתְרֵי אֶהְלֵי*, *He will hide me in His sukkah in times of trouble, He will hide me under His tent.*

3. The *Sifra* on Vayikra 23, 43 cites two opinions about the sukkot. Rabbi Eliezer says the sukkot were actual huts in which Bnai Yisrael lived. Rabbi Akiva maintains that the sukkot were special protective clouds known as the Ananay HaKavod. The *Midrash Tanchuma* on Parashat Beshalakh explains that there were seven protective clouds: four that buffered Bnai Yisrael from each of the four directions, one that traveled above them, one that traveled below them. The last cloud, the seventh, traveled ahead of Bnai Yisrael to level the road.

4. Vayikra 23, 43 *לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם, כִּי בְּסִכּוֹת אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּהוֹצִיאֵי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּהוֹצִיאֵי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם*, *so that your generations will know that I made the Children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.*

5. TB *Taanit* 9a.

6. <https://halachayomit.co.il/he/Default.aspx?HalachaID=4083&PageIndex=59>



From Golus to Growth: The Sukkah as a Sanctuary for the Soul

When sitting in the sukkah, my zayde, Rav Shmuel Shmidman zt”l, would often quote the passuk from *L’Dovid Hashem Ori*, which states *כִּי יִצְפְּנֵנִי בְּסֻכָּה בְּיוֹם רָעָה*, “For He will hide me in His sukkah on the day of evil.” He would then ask, what is the passuk referring to? What day is called “*yom ra’ah*,” the day of evil, and what does it mean that Hashem hides us in the sukkah? How does that provide the appropriate shelter on the *yom ra’ah*?

My grandfather suggested an approach based on the story in the Gemara in *Taanis* 24b, telling of Rava’s father suggesting that he leave his bed to escape from the *malachei chavalah*, the angels of infliction, who were upset that he “bothered” Hashem by requesting rain in a time of drought. Similarly, Hashem hides us in the sukkah to prevent a *yom ra’ah*, a day of destruction from the angels upset that we have been “bothering” Hashem by beseeching Him for forgiveness and bracha over the course of the Yamim Noraim.

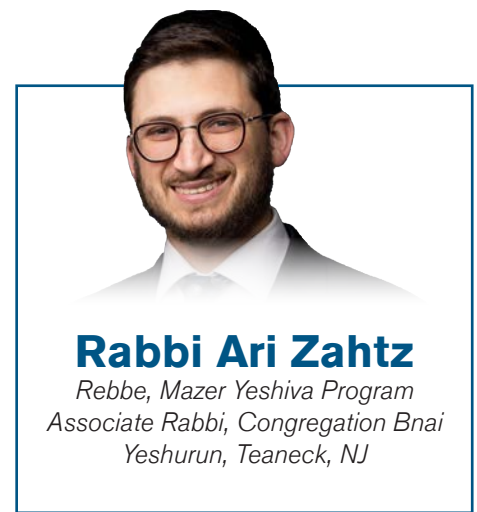
Perhaps we can suggest an additional approach based on the *Yalkut Shimoni* (Vayikra 23:653). The *Yalkut* explains that on Rosh Hashanah, Hashem sits in judgment over all living beings, and on Yom Kippur, He seals that judgment. Sometimes, the judgment against Bnei Yisrael is that they must be sent into

exile. However, Hashem, in His infinite mercy, provides a remedy: the mitzvah of sukkah. He commands us to leave our homes and dwell in temporary shelters, and this act is likened to being exiled to Bavel. But how can leaving our homes for the sukkah be compared to the Jews being sent into exile?

At first glance, the comparison seems tenuous. Yes, we step outside, but obviously, exile is far more severe than moving into a sukkah for a week. To understand this connection, we must explore the broader concept of *golus*, exile, within Jewish tradition.

Golus is not just a national experience; it has also been a personal spiritual practice throughout the ages. There are numerous stories of great pious Jews who voluntarily placed themselves into a state of exile, wandering anonymously from city to city, concealing their identities. One of the most famous is the Vilna Gaon, who exiled himself and traveled as a poor man for several years. What motivated such behavior? What was the purpose of self-imposed exile?

Similarly, there is a fascinating story about Rashi, one of our greatest Torah commentators, and his personal *golus*. It is said that Rashi once exiled himself, and during his travels, he arrived in Toledo, where he sought to meet the esteemed Rabbi Yehuda Halevi. Unfortunately, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi was not home, and after Rashi left, the servants discovered a damaged garment. They wrongly accused Rashi



of the damage and forced him to pay five gold coins. Before leaving, Rashi wrote his name, Shlomo (שלמה), five times on the door. When Rabbi Yehuda Halevi returned, he was intrigued by the mysterious inscription and ordered his servants to find the stranger. They brought Rashi back, and after discussing Torah thoughts, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi realized he was speaking to a true *gadol b’Torah*. When asked about the inscription, Rashi punctuated the words to read, “*she’lama Shlomo salma shleima shilma?*” — “Why did Shlomo pay for a whole garment?”

This story not only highlights Rashi’s genius, but it also leaves us with the same fundamental question: Why did great scholars like Rashi and the Vilna Gaon voluntarily choose to experience *golus*? And how does this connect to the experience of dwelling in the sukkah?

As with all divine decrees, the purpose of exile is not purely punitive. The goal is to improve us, to serve as a *kaparah*. *Golus*, whether imposed by Hashem or self-imposed, refines us in two key ways: it reveals that we are not yet worthy to live in the Land of Israel, and it pushes us to grow spiritually. Being in a foreign land, away from our homeland, forces us to confront our weaknesses and improve ourselves.

In this light, self-imposed *golus* can



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serve a similar purpose. The Rambam writes in *Hilchos Teshuva* (2:4) that going into *golus*, even voluntarily, atones for sins. But why is this the case? How does exile lead to atonement? The answer lies in the humility that exile engenders. When we leave behind our possessions, our status, and our comfort, we are no longer relying on our reputation or material wealth. Instead, we must rely on the kindness of others, and this experience fosters humility.

However, I believe there is a deeper aspect to this as well. If we truly desire spiritual growth, as these tzaddikim did, the way to achieve it is by stepping out of our comfort zone. Abandoning what is familiar, leaving behind the comforts of home, forces us to look inward and engage in honest self-reflection. This is difficult to achieve when we are surrounded by the routines and habits of daily life. However, when we break away from these routines — whether by going on vacation or entering a self-imposed exile — we have the opportunity to think deeply about who we really are.

This is the essence of the *kaparah* found in self-imposed *golus*: it teaches

humility by stripping away the external distractions, allowing us to connect with our true selves. This, in turn, was a key element in the spiritual development of these great scholars.

If we truly desire spiritual growth, the way to achieve it is by stepping out of our comfort zone.

Perhaps this is also the deeper meaning of the *golus* of the sukkah. It is not merely a symbolic gesture that mimics the exile of Bnei Yisrael; it is a genuine opportunity to reflect on the root cause of the *gezeirah*. We have just emerged from the intense period of *teshuva* culminating with Yom Kippur. Sukkos immediately follows, providing us with the gift of time — time free from *melacha*, time that can be spent in reflection.

But sitting in our comfortable homes makes it hard to focus. We are accustomed to our surroundings, so

Hashem commands us to move out into the “exile” of the sukkah. This new, unfamiliar space may be just outside our homes, but it is distinct enough to break our routines. In the sukkah, we have the chance to think deeply about the changes we committed to on Yom Kippur. We can reflect on the blessings Hashem has bestowed upon us and contemplate what is truly important in our lives.

In our fast-paced world, deep reflection has become a lost art. Sukkos gives us the precious opportunity to pause and reflect, free from the usual distractions. And it is through this process of reflection that the decree of *golus* can be undone. If the purpose of *golus* is to repair our relationship with Hashem so that we can return to Him, then the *golus* of the sukkah can accomplish the same goal. It allows us to reset, refocus, and emerge spiritually stronger.

In this way, the sukkah becomes more than just a temporary dwelling. It is a space for spiritual rejuvenation, a place where we can reconnect with our true selves and with Hashem. It is a reminder that, even in exile, there is always a path back to the Divine.



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**May 5785 be a year of peace
and hope, unity and strength.**

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