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Dear Friends,

As we enter our 3rd decade of YU *Torah To-Go*, I extend heartfelt gratitude to our dedicated editorial team — Rabbis Robert Shur, Josh Flug, and Jordan Auerbach — for their unwavering efforts to bring the Torah of YU & RIETS to our community. What began as a pioneering project has grown into a world-class publication, with over 1,000 articles published during that period, both in print and on YUTorah.org, reaching hundreds of communities worldwide.

We are indebted to our benefactors, Rabbi Hy z”l and Ann Arbesfeld, along with our edition sponsors and community partners, whose steadfast support makes this all possible.

We are also excited to share our *Likutei Moed* series, curated volumes that compile highlights from the finest Torah To-Go articles into book form, published by RIETS Press and available for purchase at www.rietspress.org. We warmly welcome you to explore these volumes, along with the many new sefarim and works of Torah scholarship recently published by our Yeshiva. Looking ahead, we also plan to bring the full *Torah To-Go* treasure trove archive online with an AI-powered search interface, making decades of Torah, authored by our esteemed roshei yeshiva, faculty, and staff, easier than ever to search and access.

This edition takes up a struggle that feels especially urgent today, as the demands of modern life pull us in a thousand directions at once while we search to remain whole and present. Our contributors explore this condition, known as *pizur hanefesh* — the scattering of the soul — from many angles in the pages that follow, though it is far from a new problem.

In *Sha’ar HaBitachon*, the *Chovot HaLevavot* relates that a *chasid* used to pray: *HaMakom yatzileni mipizur hanefesh* — “May the Almighty save me from the scattering of the soul.” When asked to explain his intent, he answered, the prayer is to avoid having possessions scattered across every river and town.

On the surface, having wealth everywhere hardly sounds like an affliction! But Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakuda is not describing wealth; he is describing what wealth does to a person. Money in a dozen places means a mind in a dozen places. The *chasid* was not afraid of owning too much—he was afraid of being owned in too many directions at once, of a *nefesh* spread so thin across so many concerns that none ever receives him whole. As the Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* teaches: *marbeh nechasim, marbeh de’agah* — increased possessions bring increased worry.

Dr. David Pelcovitz, professor emeritus at YU and RIETS, often observes that *pizur hanefesh* is no longer confined to material assets. Our minds are not only scattered along riverbanks; they are scattered across tabs, threads, and notifications, caught in the low, constant hum of suspecting that something else is happening somewhere else right now.

Contemporary psychology bears this out. In a landmark Harvard study, Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert sampled thousands of people at random moments and found that our minds are elsewhere for roughly half of our waking hours. Their conclusion was blunt: “A wandering mind is an unhappy mind.” We are, on average, only half-present to our own lives—and the half that drifts is the unhappier half.

The irony the *chasid* saw is now our native condition. He feared that affluence would fracture him; we have arranged that same fracture without needing the fortune. What he prayed for was a concentration of self—the very thing our generation finds hardest to come by.

This issue of *Torah To-Go* takes up that difficulty across multiple arenas. Contributors write about *kavanah* — what it means to stand before Hashem in tefillah when the mind will not stand still, and what our *mesorah* asks of us in *talmud Torah*, where depth demands the one thing we are least practiced at giving. Others take up distraction in its more familiar dress: the technology that has made every moment porous. These are all a single question in different clothing, and the *Chovot HaLevavot* already names the remedy: *bitachon* — the settled confidence that lets a person set down what was never his to carry, and so be entirely present for what is.

As we enter the Yamim Nora’im, that call to presence could not be more timely. On Rosh HaShanah we crown Hashem as One and ask to serve Him *b’levav shalem*, with a whole heart rather than a divided one; the shofar’s cry is a single, undivided sound. May all of us be gathered in—and written and sealed for a year of clarity, of shalom, and of every good berachah.

Wishing you and your family a שנה טובה ומתוקה.



Rabbi Ari Rockoff

David Mitzner Community Dean for
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Introduction



Before last Rosh Hashanah, I had the privilege of hosting social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in my new Great Conversations Series to discuss his bestselling book, *The Anxious Generation*. In our discussion, he shared how social media and phone usage by adolescents in the past fifteen years created alarming mental health challenges for the next generation. Depression spiked, anxiety rose and social isolation spread faster than ever. While so much of the public focus of Dr. Haidt's work has been focused on the mental health crisis to our youth, Dr. Haidt at the time said that there's an even scarier symptom of this technology wave.

He calls it "Attention Fragmentation" – and it affects everyone, not just children. After years of doomscrolling on social media, swiping between computer tabs, and glancing at phone notifications while we converse, we have decreased our

capacity to devote profound attention to work, family, and our inner lives. As we fill the gaps in our days with short-form videos, we lack the concentration to ponder crucial questions like how we focus our energies, what is our purpose, and to whom we owe our love.

While the modern lifecycle does not leave designated space to solve our Attention Fragmentation and start paying attention to the things that matter most, Judaism calls on us to engage in teshuva and refocus our commitments every autumn.

The most famous writings on teshuva are found in Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuva*. Here he presents two different models for how we reclaim our priorities.

The first two chapters of *Hilchot Teshuva* describe the retrospective Teshuva of Yom Kippur. In his introduction, Rambam writes that teshuva obligates a sinner to "repent from his sin before God



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and confess," defining the commandment as "abandoning one's sins, removing them from his thoughts and resolving in his heart never to commit them again" (2:2). Similarly, Rambam describes *teshuva gemurah*, or complete teshuva, as connected to absolving past sins. A person reaches "complete teshuva" when confronting the same situation of previous sin and abstaining from it. The Teshuva of Yom Kippur thus informs us how to distance ourselves from our misdeeds.

However, we are left wondering how we

A background image showing a group of young men, likely students, sitting at long wooden tables in a classroom or library. They are focused on their work, with some looking at books and others writing. The scene is brightly lit, and the atmosphere appears to be one of serious study and intellectual pursuit. The students are wearing casual to semi-formal attire, including button-down shirts and sweaters. Some are wearing kippot (skullcaps).

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should devote our time. Now that we've wiped our slate clean, how should we live a life full of purpose and meaning?

Rambam answers this question in the third chapter of *Hilchot Teshuva*. Here, he presents a forward-looking model of repentance: Teshuva of Rosh Hashanah. In this chapter, the emphasis is not on distancing oneself from a past sin but on creating a better future.

In this chapter, Rambam describes teshuva as performing more mitzvot, giving more charity and increasing one's good deeds.

In this context, Rambam writes that the practice for the Ten Days of Repentance is "to rise at night during these ten days and to pray in the synagogues words of supplication until the morning hours."

Rambam is not the first to mention this custom. The tradition of reciting Selichot during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur dates back to the period of the geonim. But when mentioned in this chapter, the custom takes on a new layer of meaning. The key image that Rambam employs to describe the Teshuva of Rosh Hashana is waking up, where the shofar essentially reminds us:

עורו ישינים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו
מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה
וזכרו בוראכם.
*Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and
you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds,
repent, remember your Creator.*

The blast of the shofar serves as a wake up call to all those who are living mindlessly and spending their days on futile

endeavors. This is the brilliant *chidush* of Rambam. Normally, when we think about teshuva, we focus on sin. But according to Rambam, the adversary to which the Teshuva of Rosh Hashanah responds is not sin but sleep.

This spiritual awakening on Rosh Hashanah is not a confession of one's sins or a path to fixing the past. It is about doing more with one's time and making more meaningful life choices. This is the source of the custom to not sleep on Rosh Hashanah and why reciting Selichot is a metaphorical act of teshuva, as it requires one to awaken and to "rise at night."

There are grave consequences for us if we do not heed this call to the Teshuva of Rosh Hashanah.

I remember, some years ago, during my tenure as a congregational rabbi, a distinguished, older gentleman met with me a few days before Rosh Hashanah. He was well-respected, comfortably married for forty-five years, blessed with loving children and grandchildren, and physically fit. When I asked whether he had any unrealized dreams, he recounted a bucket-list he still hoped to accomplish — none of it related to his professional life. But when I asked if he was devoting time to these goals, he said no; he was simply too busy at work to start any new projects. He laughed off my suggestion that he rethink his schedule, even though he was financially secure and physically capable of pursuing his deferred dreams.

Years later, after I had left my congregational position and moved to Israel, I was on a return trip to New York when I bumped into the same man on

the street. I was struck by the change in his appearance: his once healthy frame was now thin and weak, his face pale and gaunt, the result of a sudden, life-threatening medical emergency and long recuperation. I asked him how he was spending his time. He responded the same way he always had: he was extremely busy in the office.

Was this man violating any specific transgression? No. His was not a story of sin, but of missed opportunity — of attention poured entirely into the urgent at the expense of the meaningful, until an entire life's worth of "someday" would, almost imperceptibly, run out.

In an age of fragmented attention, when technology is designed to pull us away from thinking and living deeply, we risk devoting more and more of our time to trivial pursuits and less to the endeavors and people who matter most.

The Teshuva of Rosh Hashanah — the wake-up call of the shofar — is meant for all of us who can live more conscientiously and purposefully in a world of distraction.

To our benefit, the tefilot and introspection of the High Holidays grant us the chance to refocus our time commitments. Yes, the Teshuva of Yom Kippur and the accompanying *vidui* allow us to look back at our past misdeeds. But the Teshuva of Rosh Hashanah and the wake-up call of the shofar empower us to contemplate a better tomorrow. During these days, let us pause and consider how we spend the hours of our days and devote our time to a life full of sanctity and meaning.

May we all heed the call of the shofar, break free from our distractions, and awaken to a year of deep connections, mindful devotion, and profound purpose.



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REACHING FOR Calm & Focus

I believe that the one constant, all-pervasive reality in speaking about any topic involving human behavior is simply just that—we are all fundamentally human with all of our contradictions, dichotomies, limitations, and tendencies. For how long has man been saddled with this complicated and sometimes messy makeup? From the very beginning of his creation.

In the very creation of man, when HKB'H utters the famous words: ויאמר אלקים נעשה: אדם, *Let Us make man in our image and in our likeness*,¹ there was a foreshadowing of who we are and what we must contend with. For while Rashi famously says that when G-d said *na'aseh* it was a call to and a consultation with the lower heavenly bodies,² the Ramban said that it was, in fact, a statement of collaboration of sorts, with everything that was created before man. G-d calls to the earth and the animals to contribute a piece of their mortal, physical selves to combine with the eternal soul derived from G-d's essence to form this new,

unique *beriah* called man. Whether the formulation to express this fundamental complexity is that man has one essence, one soul, and that the soul (or self) must contend with certain internal competing elements, or, as the *Tanya*³ and other *sifrei chassidus* write, that man has two competing souls, the *nefesh Elokis* and *nefesh bahamis*, the end result is the same: man has been complicated from our very inception.⁴

While this complexity expresses itself in every corner of a person's life, I would like to address the topic of concentration and focus. It is both commonplace and accurate to identify and decry the impact of technology in challenging our ability to concentrate.⁵ However, it is clear that the challenge of concentration and distractibility goes back, once again, to the very beginning of time. Adam's failure to remain focused on G-d's words as he fell prey to the seduction of the *nachash*; the Torah's repeated need to place G-d's commandments and admonitions before our eyes; the concepts of *hesech hada'as*



Rabbi Josh Blass

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and *machshavos zaros*; and the injunction of *hafachta bo v'hafachta bo*—all these, and hundreds of other examples, point to the basic reality that man is highly distractible and has difficulty sustaining focus. Undoubtedly the source that comes most to mind is the mishna in *Avos* 3:7 that writes:

אמר רבי יעקב: המהלך בדרך ושונה ומפסיק ממשנתו ואומר, מה נאה אילן זה ומה נאה ניר זה, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו מתחייב בנפשו. *Rabbi Jacob said: if one is studying while walking on the road and interrupts his study and says, "how fine is this tree!" [or] "how fine is this newly ploughed field!," scripture accounts it to him as if he was mortally guilty.*

Many meforshim take this mishna in directions other than the simple explanation;⁶ however the simple peshat remains that a person who finds himself distracted by that which is in his environment faces condemnation.

While the current milieu didn't create the problem, undoubtedly the industrial revolution and the new technological era have taken the challenge of focus into a new and complicated chapter. What are some areas on which we might concentrate, and what tools are at our disposal as we navigate these complex waters?

Recognizing the Importance of Concentration

A good starting point would be a reminder of the significance of sustained focus. In every area of Jewish life we are exhorted to maintain focus. *Kavanah b'tefillah* is an obvious starting point. Reb Chaim Soloveitchik, in a famous comment on the Rambam,⁷ said that davening without a continued consciousness of being *omed lifnei Hashem* constitutes *misasek b'alma*, a fundamentally meaningless act. Of note is the Ramo⁸ who felt that in our days sustained concentration throughout all of Shemoneh Esrei is nearly impossible, but even the Ramo concedes that *kavanah* is necessary for at least a part of tefillah.

Similarly, Talmud Torah requires the same form of dedication and concentration. Stories of the Chazon Ish, Reb Chaim Shmulevitz and others who were reported to be able to sit for a full twenty-four hours focused on their learning set an unreasonably high standard, but the gist of concentrated focus remains. Rashi notably comments⁹ that the Torah's command of *bechukosai teileichu*—to walk in the ways of G-d's decrees—mandates the necessity of being an *amel ba'Torah*. The Ran in *Nedarim* (8a) believes that our baseline

obligation in *limmud Torah* is to know *kol ha'Torah kula*. Others disagree with that formulation,¹⁰ but regardless of what our obligation is, it can only be accomplished with prolonged focus and study. On a related note, the Rambam,¹¹ among others, believes that there is a mitzvah *leida*—to know—that there is a G-d who created the universe. The Rambam in the introduction to the *Moreh Nevuchim* writes that only through sustained concentration, study, and reflection can we come to fulfill this mandate of *yedias Hashem*.

Mitzvah observance is no different. The Meiri¹² notes the pasuk in Tehillim (119:126):

עת לעשות לה' הפרו תורתך.

There is a time to act for G-d, for they have violated Your teaching.

He writes that it can be understood in the following innovative fashion: there is a time to do the mitzvos, and when we perform the commandments simply out of rote, without feeling for the actions we are performing, and without intent and focus, just mindlessly going from action to action, then these potentially beautiful acts end up resulting in *heferu Torasecha*, an actual annulment of the Torah itself.

This necessity of sustained concentration applies to all areas of a meaningful Jewish life, including working on our character traits.¹³ Without the capacity of sustained focus we may be able to build a beautiful palace of a Torah life, but to some degree the soul of that life is fundamentally incomplete.

Practical Tips

Perhaps spend 15 minutes a day on sustained focus. Read a book, learn a sefer, take time during tefillah, have sustained conversations with a friend or family member etc. without looking at your phone or jumping to a different task.

Cultivating the capacity for the intellect to determine behavior, as opposed to falling into natural impulse:

The Chazon Ish writes¹⁴ that there is one fundamental positive *midda* that all other good *middos* emanate from, namely, the capacity for a person to prioritize the *regesh mussari* (the refined thoughtful impulse) over the *regesh ta'avani* (the natural need-based impulse). The Chazon Ish is advocating intentionality and mindfulness instead of simply allowing ourselves to become enslaved to a natural instinct. In a similar vein, the Alter Rebbe writes throughout the *Tanya*¹⁵ that all growth begins with the mind. The decision to act in accordance with our values and the capacity to connect with HKB'H starts with the intellect, and only once we have clarity of mind can that clarity extend to the heart.

The Sefas Emes writes in parshas Nasso about the purpose of tefillin:

היינו שהתפילין מסייעין לאדם לברר הדעת שלא יסיח דעתו.

That is to say that the purpose of tefillin is to help a person clarify his da'as and to not allow for distractions.

The Sefas Emes recognized man's basic propensity toward distractions and that the mitzvah of tefillin, among other elements of Jewish life, is geared toward allowing the head and brain to dictate and dominate.

This necessity for constant contemplation, reflection, and directed mindful actions is best reflected in two statements in Chazal:

אמר רבי לוי בר חמא אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש לעולם ירגיז אדם יצר טוב על יצר הרע.
Rabbi Levi bar Chama said that Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: One should always incite his good inclination against his evil inclination.

Berachos 5a

אריב"ל כל השם אורחותיו זוכה ורואה

בישועתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא שנאמר ושם
דרך אל תקרי ושם אלא ושם דרך אראנו
בישע אלקים.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Whoever appraises his ways in this world and contemplates how to act in the most appropriate way possible merits seeing the salvation of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is stated: "And to him who orders his way." Do not read it as vesam, who orders; rather, read it as vesham, and appraises. With this reading, the verse indicates that one who appraises his ways, him will I show the salvation of God.

Moed Kattan 5a

What's clear from these sources and many others is that despite our natural pull toward impulse, the demand on a thoughtful person is to act mindfully, intentionally and with engagement of the intellect.

Practical Tips

Pick an area to focus on being more intentional. Perhaps only eat late at night if you are, in fact, hungry, instead of instinctively migrating to the food pantry.

Take an extra moment to contemplate the eating process before habitually saying a beracha and then eating.

Take a moment to think whether or not you should talk about another person before giving in to your natural impulse. These are just a few of hundreds of similar examples.

Cultivating the capacity to enter into a different spiritual space:

Rav Schwab writes in his masterful work on tefillah that the ultimate goal of prayer is to "enter" into the *heichal Hashem*. All

of tefillah from *birchas ha'shachar* until the last words of davening is geared toward allowing man, step-by-step, to enter into a different and more rarefied space.

Almost every halacha of tefillah is geared toward this end. We put our feet together to mimic the *mal'achim* and take three steps forward to enter a different space as we face Yerushalayim or the *makom HaMikdash*. All of this is about leaving the world of the finite and entering a spiritual domain.

While most rishonim believe that the law demanding that we do not walk in front of, or to the side of a person engaging in tefillah is geared toward allowing the *mispallel* to have proper concentration, others believe that it is actually more philosophically significant. Namely, when we daven, we acquire around ourselves a space of four *amos* of kedusha. A person has created and entered into a different spiritual domain that needs to be felt by the supplicant and respected and acknowledged by those around the *mispallel*.

Echoes of this idea are found throughout our practices. The purpose of the shofar is to transport the listener into the *lifnei v'lifnim*, the innermost chamber of the Beis HaMikdash. Shabbos and Yom Tov, days of *kedushas ha'zman*, bring us into a different dimension of time. The *beis ha'knesses* and *beis medrash* bring us into a mikdash, with all of the halachos that reflect the space we have entered into. Even saying the tefillah before beginning a period of learning signals to us that we are leaving the world of the "outside" and is entering the *olam HaTorah*.

Consciousness of all of this is critical in developing a meaningful religious personality, and can help focus attention accordingly.

Practical Tips

Take a few moments before and during tefillah to concentrate on the words of Rabbeinu Yonah¹⁶ of *peshot gufecha mei'al nishmasecha*, removing the outer layers of your body to allow yourself to more fully feel the soul.

Take a few minutes before a learning seder to realize the important opportunity at hand.

While those of us in Chutz La'aretz have no siren announcing the beginning of Shabbos, pause for a moment to mindfully feel that a new dimension of *kedushas ha'zman* is upon us.

Cultivating a greater capacity for calm and yishuv hada'as

This is critical. The *Sefas Emes* writes that the Torah instructs that *shoftim v'shotrim titein lecha* means that we should not act out of *regilus*, habit, but rather that everything that we do should be animated by a spirit of *yishuv hada'as*, calmness of bearing. He comes back to this theme throughout his writings.¹⁷

Similarly, Rabbeinu Bachya in several places emphasizes the need to remove ourselves from a place of *pizur nefesh*, the sense of the soul being scattered, and to bring a greater sense of calm and thoughtfulness.

Tefillah as a time of *hisbonenus* (deep reflection) and inwardness as well as Chazal's admonition that we need to take a *sha'ah*, literally an hour, before tefillah speak to this same idea, especially elusive in our days, of calmness of heart and mind. The *hisbodedus* first mentioned by the rishonim¹⁸ and later made famous by Rav Nachman is an invitation to step away and connect with the gentler, more

internal, and perhaps more authentic parts of ourselves. The Ramo's opening to his commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch* with the reminder of *shivisi Hashem l'negdi tamid* is an encouragement to find calm and to be grounded in our priorities at the very beginning of our day before "life" takes over.

The impact of these moments in cultivating focus, attention, calm, groundedness, and faith cannot be overstated. While this was critical in the days of the Ramo and Rav Nachman, the necessity of seeking internal calm has only grown in importance with the harried, overworked, stressful and technologically focused times that we are living in.

Practical Tips

Set aside time every day, preferably the same time, to sit, breathe, perhaps meditate, and to set an intention for the day.

Before beginning Shemoneh Esrei take a moment to consciously breathe in calm and *yishuv hada'as*.

Before disciplining a child, or before any confrontation or difficult conversation, ground yourself and decide how you would ideally like to navigate the interaction ahead.

Conclusion

While I began these words alluding to the fundamental quagmire that man finds himself in from his very inception, the good news is that we are never stuck. As frustrating as it is to feel limited in our capacity for calm, focus, concentration, and achievement, these are areas that can improve greatly with sustained effort. Greater emphasis on focus, developing the capacity for the brain to be imposed on the impulse, working to be able to enter into the spiritual spaces that are created for us and that we create for ourselves, along with a daily focus on calmness of spirit, can pay great dividends in our ability to navigate our lives with focus, intention, productivity, and ultimately with a sense of both accomplishment and *shleimus ha'nefesh*.

Endnotes

1. Bereishis 1:26.
2. See Rav Wolbe on Chumash for an incredibly beautiful comment on this Rashi.
3. See *Likutei Amarim* Perek beis and beyond.
4. According to *Nefesh HaChaim*, Sha'ar aleph, chapter six in the footnote, and others, this complexity was only intensified with Adam and Chava's sin in which the yetzer hara was

transformed from an element outside of our consciousness and, through the sin, became enmeshed into man's spiritual makeup.

5. See Brain Drain, Ward et al, Journal of the Association for Consumer Research.
6. See a truly beautiful idea in the sefer *Avos al Banim*, a compilation of thoughts based on the teachings of the Alter Me'Slobodka. He writes that the issue is not being distracted by the tree, which he argues itself is a form of learning and connection to the Ribbono Shel Olam. Rather the issue at hand is that he is *mafsik* from his connection with learning and has separated himself, his essence from the endeavor of limmud Torah.
7. *Rav Chaim on the Rambam*, Hilchos Tefillah.
8. Ramo, *Orach Chaim* 101a. See the *Biur Halacha* there as well as the *Mabit* in *Beis Elokim* in his discussion about tefillah.
9. Vayikra 26:3.
10. See the *Ohr Sameach* in *Hilchos Talmud Torah*.
11. *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 1:1.
12. Introduction to his commentary on the Talmud
13. See the Vilna Gaon at the beginning of *Even Shleima*.
14. *Emunah U'Bitachon* beginning of the 4th perek.
15. See in particular the 9th perek.
16. *Berachos* 5th perek on his commentary to the Rif.
17. See Parshas Vayakhel 5651.
18. See writings of Avraham ben Ha'Rambam.

WAKING UP AT THE WHEEL

Check your mirrors, signal, turn. When you first learn to drive, every movement is deliberate. You grip the wheel, rehearse each manoeuvre, narrate each action. But after a few months, you can drive the same route home without noticing a single turn. You arrive at your destination with no memory of how you got there.

It's astonishing how quickly attention becomes autopilot, and how easily the same thing can happen in our spiritual lives. Practices that once felt new and weighty can fade into the background, becoming scenery, requiring no conscious thought.

How do we navigate this paradox at the heart of religious life? Repetition, the very rhythm that steadies and anchors us, can just as easily slip into complacency and tedium. And newness, for all its promise, can feel demanding and sometimes even overwhelming. Is there a way to let renewal energise rather than exhaust us?

I grew up religious. Tefilla was part of my life from birth.

“המלאך הגואל... וידגו לרב בקרב הארץ”
“goodnight, sleep well, love you lots.”

As a child, I couldn't tell where the tefilla ended and the bedtime routine began.

“בּוֹרָא מִיְּנֵי מְזוֹנוֹת ... crunch,” the bracha became part of the cookie.

I once admitted to a *ba'alat teshuva* friend that I struggle with *kavana*. She was surprised; when you learn tefilla as an adult, you make a point of understanding every word. But if benching is just a long nursery rhyme you've memorised, you can sing the whole thing without registering a word. Repetition can obscure awareness, but it can also be beneficial in building deeply rooted patterns of behaviour.

Seven years ago, my mother suffered a brain injury. When she finally awoke after two nervewracking weeks in a coma, she was temporarily unable to speak. She



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tried to communicate, whispering words we couldn't decipher. On the third day, my father and I were in her room, when a nurse offered her a banana. She peeled it open and said a bracha out loud: “בּוֹרָא פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה...” before eating it. We were momentarily stunned ... then answered the most *kavanadike* Amen of our lives! It was the first sign of her recovery.

How did her brain know how to say a bracha when she could say almost nothing else? Neuroscientists describe muscle memory as the brain's ability to encode motor sequences so deeply

that they can be performed without conscious attention.¹ That's exactly what had happened. The bracha was so deeply embedded that it surfaced even when ordinary speech could not. It was spiritual muscle memory. Even when her brain couldn't form words, her neshama still could.

There is a well-known story from the Holocaust that highlights this idea.² After the war, R' Eliezer Silver travelled from convent to monastery across Europe, searching for hidden children who no longer knew they were Jewish. Many had been baptised, renamed and raised as Catholics. He had no documents and no photographs, only a test. He would walk into a room full of children and softly say the opening words of Shema. And every so often, a child would instinctively lift their small hand to cover their eyes. They didn't remember their Hebrew name, their parents, or their home—but their body remembered *this*. A single gesture, buried deep in their earliest years, surfaced through layers of fear and forgetting. It was Jewish muscle memory, the kind that refuses to disappear.

Clearly, repetition has value even when it becomes habitual; the very act of showing up consistently builds stability and continuity, anchoring us when nothing else does. But habituation also carries a cost; it can dull our attention and hollow out intention.

In Birchos Hashachar we ask Hashem: שְׁתַּגְּדֵלנוּ בְּתוֹרַתְךָ וּבְדִבְרֵינוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ—make us accustomed to Your Torah. But how do we avoid becoming too accustomed? How do we stop Torah and tefilla from becoming background noise? Brush your teeth twice a day, daven three times a day ... repeat. Chazal anticipated this problem long before we did.

The Rambam explains³ that prior to the first destruction and exile people davened in their own words, expressing whatever was on their minds. But afterwards, Jews were scattered and their children grew

up speaking a jumble of languages, as Nechemiah describes.⁴ Since they no longer had a clear command of Hebrew, people struggled to pray coherently.

Ezra and his court feared that tefilla would become a lost art. Their solution was to compose the Amidah, a fixed text that every Jew could learn and recite, ensuring that even those who couldn't articulate their own thoughts fluently would still have a full, dignified way to pray to Hashem.

Whilst Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva discuss what format the Amidah should take,⁵ Rabbi Eliezer warns: “הַעוֹשֶׂה תְּפִלָּתוֹ קָבַע — אֵין תְּפִלָּתוֹ תְּהוֹנוּנִים.” One whose prayer is fixed, his prayer lacks the quality of supplication.⁶ The Gemara explains that “fixed” can mean praying feels a burden, something to get through as quickly as possible, without heartfelt language, or without expressing anything personal. One of my kids, in a very relatable moment of honesty, once said to me about davening, “It feels like I’m reading a script someone else wrote.” I reassured her that that’s exactly the case and that we all feel like that sometimes. Precisely for this reason, we can personalise our Amidah by inserting individual needs in *Shomea Tefillah*. The Amidah, by design, is both a shared national script and a personal, living prayer.

Routine isn't the enemy. Without it we wouldn't function well. There's something grounding about knowing how your day will go, planning around fixed points like mealtimes and minyanim. Just as the body needs regular nourishment, so does the soul. But just as we can't eat the same dinner every night, we can't feed our souls identical spiritual 'meals' either. The words of tefilla may stay the same, but *we* don't; our stresses, joys, worries, and hopes change daily. Those changing experiences become the raw ingredients of *kavana*, the “news” we bring into our conversation with Hashem.

And when we learn Torah, often Hashem speaks back to us, changing our monologue to a dialogue. A pasuk or *sugya* suddenly becomes exactly what we needed to make sense of our life. As I recently heard R' Menachem Leibtag say: “The point of a midrash is not to explain what's *peshat* in the pasuk, but what's *peshat* in your life.”

Renewal isn't an optional extra in Jewish life; it's built into the fabric of time itself. Every Rosh Chodesh, the moon disappears and returns. Chazal see in that cycle a model for the Jewish soul: “שֶׁהוּא עֲתִידִין לְהִתְחַדֵּשׁ כְּמוֹתָהּ,” Israel is destined to renew itself like the moon.⁷ The very words חידוש and חודש share a root, reminding us that the calendar expects us to bring something new into something familiar. Judaism depends on this interplay between קבוע and חידוש—the fixed structure that grounds us and the spark of newness that awakens us. Our task is not to abandon routine, but to let moments of renewal break through, allowing the familiar to come alive again.

A few years ago, I experienced just such a moment. I was on a Poland trip; we'd seen the Warsaw Ghetto, the Umschlagplatz and the crematorium at Majdanek. As we stood overlooking a mass grave, having just heard a survivor's testimony, we said Tehillim 121 (*Esah Einai*) and one line leapt out at me: הָהָה לֹא יָנוּם וְלֹא יִשָּׁן שׁוּמֵר הַיִּשְׂרָאֵל, He never dozes and He never sleeps, the guardian of Israel.⁸

How many times have I said those words? On autopilot. But in the context of everything I had just seen, suddenly the words meant something new; the collision of routine and reality forced me awake.

I had always read the pasuk as praise of Hashem's power. But what if it's describing Hashem's experience in terms we humans can relate to? Imagine never sleeping. Being unable to start again, to have a new day. Hashem, outside of time and space, experiences all of history at

once, every deportation, every murder, every crusade, every expulsion, every moment of Jewish suffering. It must be agony, *k'viyachol*. Yet simultaneously, every moment of joy: the sea splitting, receiving the Torah, every birth, every chuppah, every school and shul we rebuilt after exile.

I realised then that the whole of existence is one moment in Hashem's experience. And He felt the world needed each of us in that moment.

That is exactly what we are trying to find on the Yamim Noraim. One moment when the familiar words stop being background noise, when we stop counting how many pages we have left and suddenly tune in.

Once I'd seen history compressed into a single divine moment, the words of *Zichronos* in the Rosh Hashana Amidah suddenly made perfect sense.

אתה זוכר מעשה עולם ופוקד כל־יצורי
קדם. לפניה נגלו כל־תעלומות והמון נסתרות
שמבראשית ... הכל גלוי וידוע לפניך ה' אלקינו.
צופה ומביט עד סוף כל הדורות. כי תביא חק
זכרון להפקיד כל רוח ונפש.

In Your Presence are revealed all hidden things and the multitude of secrets from the beginning of creation... All is revealed and known before You Hashem, our G-d Who observes and looks until the end of all

generations. For You set an appointed time of remembrance, to consider every soul and being...

All of history and the entire future of mankind are held before Hashem all at once, as He considers each of us, one by one, on Rosh Hashana.

When you say that bracha this year, try to picture it... the entire sweep of world history condensed into the moment you are standing in. And then ask yourself, "Why am I here?"

Why did Hashem decide the world would be incomplete without us? Each ancestor of ours had to survive everything they endured, so that we would exist in this moment. Statistically, none of us should be here, yet here we are.

This is the moment on the Yamim Noraim to pay attention. Not to the page number, but to the fact that you are alive, now, on purpose. You, with your unique talents and circumstances, were placed here to fulfil a mission that only you can accomplish. What is it and how will you achieve it? You don't need to stay in that heightened state forever—no one can; you just need to let it plant a seed that changes the texture of your everyday life. And often, the smallest shift, simply recognising that today is not yesterday, that it's a new experience, is enough.

Even that one moment of real awareness can reshape the rest of your year, informing your choices and your sense of purpose. Take your life off autopilot, so you can live with intentionality—because in a world Hashem deemed incomplete without you, every moment counts.

כתיבה וחתימה טובה.

Endnotes

1. See Ayesha Perera, "Procedural Memory: Definition, Examples, and How It Works," *Simply Psychology*, updated April 19, 2025.
2. For a narrative account, see Hanoch Teller, *Heroic Children* (Feldheim, 2015) or for a musical retelling of this story, see Yaakov Shwekey's song *Shema Yisrael* (2002). For scholarly discussion of hidden children identified through their instinctive responses, see Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 2003), 254–255.
3. *Hilchos Tefillah* 1:4.
4. *Nechemiah* 13:24.
5. *Bavli Berachos* 28b.
6. *Ibid.* 29b.
7. See *Sanhedrin* 42a, in the discussion of *Kiddush Levana*.
8. *Tehillim* 121:4.

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Listening Well in a World Full of Noise

We admire good speakers. We hand them podiums and applause, and we quietly associate the ability to speak well with intelligence, confidence, even leadership. We do not extend the same admiration to good listeners. No one leaves a dinner announcing, "You should have seen how she listened." Why does one half of every conversation get all the credit?

Listening is acknowledged as important, but it is treated as an innate soft skill rather than something that can actually be studied and developed. Schools teach students to debate, present, and persuade, but almost never teach them how to listen. Communication training in healthcare and leadership tends to focus far more on how to speak than on how to listen.

Listening in Judaism

Judaism sends a different message. On Rosh Hashanah, when we crown Hashem as King and ask to be inscribed for life, the central mitzvah actually revolves around listening. One might assume the real religious act is blowing the shofar. The Rambam points in the opposite direction: "It is a positive commandment of the Torah to hear the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah" (*Hilchot Shofar* 1:1). The mitzvah is defined not as producing the sound, but as receiving it.

But why would the Torah frame its central mitzvah so passively, commanding us merely to hear rather than to act? Receiving the sound, it turns out, is not passive at all. Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik describes the mitzvah as having, in addition to its auditory component, a "*kiyum shebalev*," a fulfillment within the heart requiring a subjective emotional response. The



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more deeply a person understands the meaning of the shofar and is affected by its majesty and awe, the greater is the fulfillment of the mitzvah.

Shema Yisrael, the statement that unites us as Jews and is so fundamental to who we are, also calls on us to listen: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, ה' אֶלֶּהינוּ, ה' אֶחָד, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that the verb שמע (shin-mem-ayin) can mean to hear, pay attention, understand, internalize, and respond. The midrash teaches that saying Shema is really

accepting *ol malchut shamayim*, the yoke of Heaven. When we say it, we are internalizing the messages and values of Judaism and accepting Hashem as our King.

Clearly, listening is actually quite important.

Why Listening Matters

Picture describing something hard to a friend, such as a health scare, a fight with a sibling, a rough week. She says, "I hear you," gently, and the conversation moves on. Nothing was done wrong. But you leave feeling strangely more alone than before you spoke, because whatever you were feeling had nowhere to go. It was acknowledged and set aside.

This holds equally when the news is good. Research on what psychologists call capitalization has found that sharing good news benefits both people most when the listener responds with real enthusiasm and follow-up questions, not simply a polite "that's great" (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). A flat response to good news can leave someone feeling nearly as unheard as a flat response to bad news.

High-quality listening changes both people in a conversation, not only one. The speaker feels understood and less alone. The listener gains access to an experience beyond her own, and often becomes more willing to reconsider what she thought she knew. The philosopher Martin Buber had a name for this: meeting someone as an "I-Thou," a full person encountered directly, rather than an "I-It," a problem to manage. Something gets created that did not exist a moment before, and neither one leaves quite the way they arrived.

The effect is stronger than people expect. In a 2026 study of more than 1,600 people, those who felt they were listened to well during a disagreement reported greater well-being than those merely agreed with but listened to only moderately (Saluk, Itzchakov, Weinstein, & Amar, 2026). Agreement signals that you think alike; being truly listened to signals something stronger: that even when you don't agree, the other person still matters enough for your full attention. Separate research found that people who disclosed painful experiences of social rejection felt less lonely afterward when they were listened to well (Itzchakov, Weinstein, Saluk, & Amar, 2023). In today's world, one might expect listening to come more easily than ever, given how much we communicate. In fact, it has become harder. The pace of daily life and its endless distractions work against listening well. Between the constant updates and notifications on our phones and watches, and the many demands on our attention, real listening has to compete for space that used to come naturally.

How to Listen Well

There is now a substantial body of research on listening. One influential study defines high-quality listening as resting on three components: attention, comprehension, and positive intention (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). What does each of these mean, and how can they be put into practice?

Attention means being fully present with the person in front of you, not merely occupying the same room while your mind is elsewhere. It is also the prerequisite for everything else: comprehension and positive intention are impossible without it. Attention competes with everything else pulling

at us: deadlines, notifications, the reply we're already rehearsing. There are some simple ways to improve our attention in this busy world: check whether this is a good time to listen; choose a setting where you can actually hear each other; notice when the mind starts to drift and pull it back; decide, on purpose, that this conversation is the priority; and put the phone somewhere it can't compete.

Divided attention is nothing new, and it isn't always obvious, even to the person whose mind has wandered. The Mishnah makes a related point: someone walking behind a shul who happens to hear the shofar has fulfilled the mitzvah only if his heart was directed toward it in that passing moment (*Mishnah Rosh Hashanah* 3:7). To fulfill the mitzvah of shofar, one has to be paying attention and have the right intention at the same time.

That combination carries over to real conversations too. Attention only clears the space. Whether real feelings are invited in and accepted once that space exists depends on two further dimensions: comprehension and positive intention.

Comprehension and Positive Intention

Comprehension means understanding what an experience meant to the person living it, not just knowing the facts themselves. One way to learn more is to ask questions, and open-ended questions work better than closed ones: "What was the hardest part?" tends to open more than "What happened?" does. Small encouraging responses, like "Go on" or "Tell me more," signal there is still room to continue, while a quick reassurance can close a conversation before the speaker feels understood. Reflecting back what we think we heard

When someone trusts us with something real, "I hear you" can become not the end of the conversation, but its opening.

helps too: "It sounds like what hurts most wasn't what she said, but that no one else spoke up. Is that right?" This draws feeling to the surface and often helps the speaker find clarity she hadn't fully articulated herself.

Positive intention refers to the listener's underlying motive: are we listening in order to understand, or simply waiting for an opening to judge, correct, fix, or win? At its best, positive intention is the intention to help, to support, and to witness whatever the speaker is bringing, good or bad, without rushing to change it.

When the conversation involves a disagreement, staying in the moment and listening becomes hardest. It's easy to feel defensive when someone criticizes or challenges us, but defensiveness crowds out actual listening. The first step is noticing this defensiveness and taking a moment to process that feeling. If we are able to, asking a follow-up question or addressing the feeling directly, with a statement such as "I understand why you see it that way, even though I don't agree" can help reduce defensiveness. Intent matters more than technique. Often, we hold back from really listening because we assume that once someone shares a problem, we owe them a solution, and without one, listening feels useless. It isn't. What actually helps is usually not a fix but showing genuine care and bearing witness to the person's experience. Ask one or two honest follow-up questions

and invite the speaker to express themselves. For example, saying "I hear you" can create an opening for further exploration: Tell me more. What was that like for you? What feels most important about this to you? (Kasriel, 2025, pp. 294–295)

Listening to the Cry of the Shofar

The mitzvah of shofar stands out in one more way. Not only is listening the focus; rather than speaking; no words are even uttered at all. The Sefat Emet, citing the *Zohar*, writes that *yesh ze'aka balev*, "there is a cry in the heart," one that can pierce the heavens precisely because it was never put into words. Some of our hopes for the coming year can be spoken plainly. Others are embedded too deeply in the soul for words. The shofar exists for exactly those.

The shofar asks something not only of the listener. Even the one blowing it must, at the same moment, be listening: the halacha requires his own intention as a hearer, not only his intention to produce the sound (*Hilchot Shofar* 2:4). We listen to the shofar. And when its sound reaches the heart, when it stirs a wish to do better, a look back at the past year, a hope for the next one, Hashem is there too, listening to the cry underneath it. Who, exactly, is listening to whom? Perhaps, this time of year, the answer is both at once. Perhaps this is what Elul points to each year. It is

the acronym of אָנִי לְדוּדִי וְדוּדִי לִי, I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me (Shir HaShirim 6:3), a relationship that moves in both directions at once.

Just as listening creates this kind of relationship with Hashem, it can create the same with the people in our lives. This year, when someone trusts us with something real, "I hear you" can become not the end of the conversation, but its opening, and we may find that we are not the only one who leaves the exchange changed.

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כתיבה וחתימה טובה

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Adapted from a Sichas Mussar given at Yeshiva University

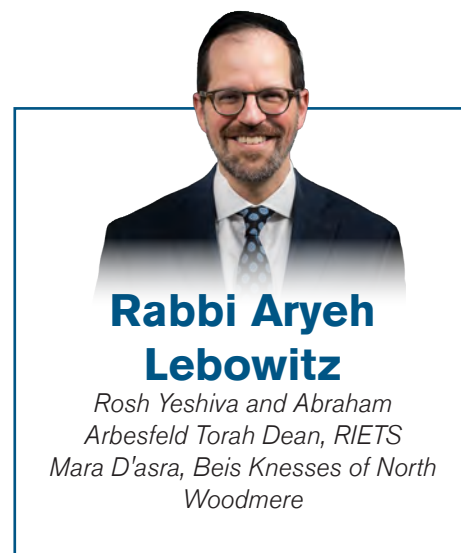
In my shul, each year before Ne'ilah I speak for about 2–5 minutes. The point is to say something that will energize a tired group of people and encourage them to use their remaining strength to produce their best possible tefilla. The ask for a new *hanhagah* has been delivered in the previous *derashos*, most likely on Shabbos Shuva. The message of sensitivity to Klal Yisrael and our responsibility toward them was delivered at the *derasha* earlier that day or the previous night. The pre-Ne'ilah *derasha* has the narrowest and most singular focus that any *derasha* ever has: to get people to shout *Hashem Hu haElokim* at the top of their lungs and float out of shul feeling like angels after Yom Kippur. In a sense it is the easiest *derasha* to prepare because you just need a one-minute burst of inspiration, which is readily available nowadays.

Let me share what I said last Yom

Kippur and explain how it changed my life.

Everyone knows how popular All Daf is. Almost no one knows that there was an anonymous donor behind the app. That man was Stephen Neuwirth a"h. I only met Steve once, at a wedding, when he was already very sick. I had heard a little bit about him before meeting him. He was the person who insisted on total anonymity in dedicating this incredible Torah platform. He was a successful lawyer and made a very nice living, but did not have the kind of wealth typically associated with a project of this size and magnitude. He stretched himself for Torah.

Despite starting his journey in Torah later in life, Steve was a *ben Torah*. He loved to learn. And so, wherever, whenever, and however he could, he learned. And he grew in his learning, which included a two-hour chavrusa



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of in-depth study every morning. Steve a"h, Shalom ben Peretz, tragically passed away at the age of 60 following a short, severe illness.

On the final Yom Kippur before his passing, Steve gave a speech thanking all the people who made a minyan for him at his home. In the speech, Steve reiterated his favorite message: *Gam zu l'tovah*, this too is for the good. What

follows are segments of Steve's speech:

I have one request to make, and that is that no one feel sorry for me. While I certainly wouldn't wish my illness on anyone else, through this illness Hashem, in his Greatness and Mercy has rescued me. Before I became ill, I had allowed my life to be filled with noise, distractions, and pressures, and focus on things that didn't matter.

But since I have faced this deadly illness of stage 4 pancreatic cancer, all of the noise, distractions and pressures have disappeared. I have realized in a way that I never could have imagined before that I am completely dependent on Hashem's Merciful Greatness. Only Hashem, our Father and King, can save me and all of us. And this realization has filled me with more simcha than I have ever had in my life. I genuinely spend every day filled with happiness. I have no fear. I only have the comfort of believing that the King of the World, in his Loving Mercy, has placed me where I am, and that this is where Hashem wants me to be. I don't know what will happen, and I take this situation day to day. But what I believe is that whatever happens is what Hashem has determined is for the best.

Without first achieving a sense of purity, whether from shmutz or simply from distractions and clutter, we will never get to fulfill our true tefikid in life.

Gam Zu L'Tovah.

I woke up on Rosh Hashanah morning so filled with happiness that I would have an opportunity to attend the coronation of the King of the World. I put on my finest clothes on both days of Rosh Hashanah, to show my joy at this occasion.

One of the great gifts that Hashem has bestowed on me through this illness has been to have the clarity to see that all Jews are great and have greatness within them. We are all connected. We all have different capabilities and talents, but in the end we all are equal as foot soldiers in Hashem's army.

He then went on to explain a Gemara in Rosh HaShanah and a passage in *Tomer Devorah*, which highlight the unity of Am Yisrael, and the connectedness we have with Hashem, before concluding:

I thank Hashem for helping me, through this illness, to see all of this so clearly.

I thank Hashem for cleansing me, and for providing me with the opportunity to be close to Hashem. I can only be filled with Simcha, and I hope this is a Simcha we all can celebrate together.

Ad kan devarav hakedoshim.

I then said to my shul, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we have one hour a year where there is nothing else on our minds, no clutter, no silliness, no pettiness, just perfect clarity about what truly matters. Let us have a Steve Neuwirth moment where we make a decision based on that perfect clarity."

I then walked away from the podium, covered my head with my talis, cried my eyes out and started Ne'ilah. I started to think to myself that while it was nice to have delivered Steve's message faithfully, I hadn't had any *hava amina* of how to apply it to my own life. I thought about

where there is extra fat to trim in my life (aside from the literal extra fat that I need to trim). What clutter was getting in the way of seeing life as clearly as Steve Neuwirth did?

I came up with the following: it is time to get off of Twitter. Not to take a Twitter break for a few weeks, not to pause my account, but to completely delete it. For those of you who are smart enough to never have been on social media, you may not understand why this even feels like a sacrifice. But if you have been careful to put out positive messages, convinced yourself that you are doing G-d's work on social media, and have thousands of followers—plus however many people will see screenshots and shares—you understand that it felt like a sacrifice.

So I went home after Ma'ariv, and before breaking my fast, I deleted my Twitter account. The vacuum it left was not huge. After all, at the advice of Rav Judah Mischel, I had deleted it from my phone a few years earlier, and I only followed a couple dozen accounts. I would only check my feed once or twice a day on my computer, usually last thing at night before going to bed.

How did I fill that void? At first, not with anything in particular. It still felt good not to have to see all of the hock and lashon hara, and not to have to answer the question, "Why does rebbe think it is a good idea to be on Twitter?" There is nothing quite as humiliating as doing an *aveirah* publicly and having everybody ask, "Why do you think your weakness is a good idea?"

Then, seven months later, *yedid nafshi* Rabbi Shay Schachter shlit"a, a person who makes things happen, arranged a meeting with a few of his friends and Rabbi Dovid Hofstetter, who runs and funds Dirshu. They said that the *Mishnah Berurah* Yomi cycle was

starting *chelek gimmel* on erev Shavuot. Rabbi Hofstetter noted that these shiurim had taken off in yeshivish and chassidish communities but had not yet really made headway in the Modern Orthodox community. Well, I was sitting on about 15 minutes of extra time every evening, having no idea what to do with it, so I started giving a nightly *Mishnah Berurah* shiur. I have to tell you, it has been life-changing. Instead of going to sleep with some inane meme or aggravating piece of lashon hara on my mind, I go to sleep with a three-point summary of that night's *Mishnah Berurah* on my mind. Instead of spending the time after a chuppah and before the first dance engaged in small talk (which is my absolute least favorite thing to do in the entire world), I get on Zoom and give the *Mishnah Berurah* shiur. The fact that there might be only one or two people on the shiur with their cameras off doesn't bother me in the slightest, because it's not about them. It's about me. I am not a *ba'al mofes*, but I turned Twitter into the *Mishnah Berurah*!

Why am I telling you this? Why would any of you care about this story? I can't imagine that I am the only one with clutter. In fact, I know I am not. This Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are a pivotal moment in Jewish history and likely a pivotal moment in your young lives. Being inspired is nice, but let's do better than being inspired. Let's do more. Let's come away with something. The best way to figure out what positive

change you can make in your life is to take a moment to remove the clutter and think clearly.

The removal of clutter is not only about what we take away, but about the purity that remains. My shiur has been learning *melech borer* in recent weeks, and there is a fundamental *kashya* on the entire concept. The *Beiur Halacha* points out that it seems that every single time somebody does *borer*, it is a *melacha she'einah tzericha l'gufah*, so nobody should ever be *chayav mid'oraisa* for *borer*! The definition of *melacha she'einah tzericha l'gufah* is when you are removing something that is unwanted. The paradigmatic example is taking a *meis* out of your house when somebody dies on Shabbos. You do this because the dead body in your house is a huge buzzkill and will scare the company. You aren't removing the *meis* from the house because you want it to be somewhere else, but simply because you don't want it to be here. This seems to be exactly what *borer* is!

The *Beiur Halacha* quotes a *Yeshuot Yaakov* that one must understand that *borer* is not about removing *pesoles*, but about *tikkun ha'ochel*. You are positively impacting the food by elevating it from an unusable mixture to the pristine kernels that will produce the highest quality bread. And perhaps the same is true when we remove the clutter from our lives. We aren't just removing what is unwanted; we are elevating everything that remains. You aren't just getting rid of Twitter, but turning it into

the *Mishnah Berurah*.

After Ma'ariv on the Yamim Noraim, we say (Tehillim 24):

מִי יַעֲלֶה בְּהַר ה' וְמִי יִקּוּם בְּמִקְוֵם קֹדֶשׁ. נָקִי כַפַּיִם וְבֵר לֵבָב אֲשֶׁר לֹא נִשְׂא לִשְׁוֹא נַפְשִׁי וְלֹא נִשְׁבַּע לְמַרְמָה.

Who shall go up on the mountain of Hashem? And who shall stand in His holy place? The clean of hands and pure of heart, who do not take oaths in vain by My soul, and who do not swear deceitfully.

If we are standing *bimkom kodsho*, and if we hope to be able to report to Hashem that *lo nasa lashav nafshi*, my life was not for nothing, we need to work toward *neki chapayim u'var leivav*, a certain purity in our lives.

The Chafetz Chaim raised the following question. Once we have identified a person deserving of ascending the *har Hashem* and standing *bimkom kodsho* as the one who is *neki chapayim u'var leivav*—a person with clean hands and a pure heart—why do we then need to elaborate *asher lo nasa lashav nafshi*, that he is also somebody that doesn't carry his soul in vain? Obviously, if he is purely righteous and clean of any sin, his existence is not a wasted life or a wasted *neshama*! Perhaps the answer is that without first achieving a sense of purity, whether from *shmutz* or simply from distractions and clutter, we will never get to fulfill our true *tafkid* in life. Without *neki chapayim u'var leivav* we are like *nasa lashav nafshi*, wasting some aspect of our talent and our ability to achieve.

You can turn Twitter into the *Mishnah Berurah*. I did it with fifteen minutes I didn't know I had. Whatever your fifteen minutes is, it is sitting there right now, underneath the clutter, waiting. With a little bit of *borer*, each of us can climb the Har Hashem as a *neki chapayim u'var leivav*.



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Filtering out the
Noise

Digital Detox as Teshuva



Do we need teshuva for our digital overuse? “Doomscrolling” doesn’t appear in Yom Kippur davening, no *al cheit* mentions carrying on conversations while glued to a device, and it’s hard to find a formal prohibition for checking WhatsApp 30+ times a day. So presumably, our tech habits don’t warrant religious concern—but is that really the case?

Our digital habits have clearly diverted us from the natural way of life. Hashem created us upright, but we walk down the street hunched over our phones. Hashem crafted our unique faces, but we choose LED displays in place of our spouse’s eyes. Hashem granted us a wondrous mind, but it sits idle as we consume short-form content.

Teshuva tivit (natural teshuva) is likely what Rav Kook would prescribe for us. As he describes in *Orot HaTeshuva*, this type of repentance is the organic desire

to realign with the rules of life after physical or psychological dysregulation. This is the most basic form of return, where we restore order “so that life may return to him with all its freshness.”

To be fair, it’s not entirely our fault. Billions of dollars have been invested to refine “recommendation engines” and prey on our psychological weaknesses. We were supposed to be the consumer, but we have become the product. This unnerving reality has been exposed in popular films and books, such as *The Social Dilemma* and Jonathan Haidt’s *The Anxious Generation*. Congress is beginning to regulate the tech companies who compete for our attention.

Ultimately, though, regulation won’t single-handedly solve our problems; we must take responsibility for our misalignment. But superficial resolutions won’t be enough either—how many times have we committed



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ourselves to some vague goal of cutting screen time? We need to translate the drive for *teshuva tivit* into practices that safeguard our attention. Those practices are called digital detox.

Tech Fasts

The most classic form of digital detox is a “tech fast,” involving a day or more without devices. Researchers highlight numerous benefits of such a practice:

more sustained focus, better sleep, and lower self-reported stress.¹

In March, my younger brother, Aiden, encouraged me to participate in a phone-free day organized by the Digital Detox Movement, a Yeshiva University club. The rules were fairly liberal: up to ten minutes of phone use and computer use for learning and schoolwork exclusively. It was important that my wife could reach me if needed, so I stored my phone in my backpack and began the day.

I was surprised how difficult the detox was. Every few minutes I felt my hand instinctively move towards my pocket. I needed to text a friend, set a reminder, look up a burning question or order something, and each time I had to restrain myself. I walked into the elevator and it felt like I was pushing against gravity as everyone pulled their phones out. While food fasts require physical stamina, the tech variant requires mental fortitude. But by the end of the day, after the mental marathon had concluded, I felt a distinct sense of freedom.

After that experience, I began to reflect on the “tech fast” of Shabbat. Every week we put our phones away with relative ease and (hopefully) experience that sense of freedom. How lucky we are to have a tech fast built into our weekly schedule. In previous generations, Shabbat competed directly with one’s livelihood and it was harder to see it as a gift. For our relatively wealthy and emotionally malnourished generation, the gift is overt. All we want is to return to our family, community, and Creator, but we can’t help but stay tethered to our devices. Shabbat is obviously far more than a 25-hour tech fast, but we must appreciate the kindness that Hashem has done.

As Rav Soloveitchik teaches, Hashem wants our full attention:

On the Shabbat, God tolerates no competition. He does not want to share man with anybody else, with society. Hence, He told man, “retreat from society.” The latter has no claims on him. Now we understand the words ‘V’yom ha’shevi’i Shabbat la’Adoshem Elokecha,’ the seventh day is up to the Lord.²

Shabbat is our return to Hashem and to life as it is meant to be lived. In other words, a weekly act of teshuva.

Integrated Detox

Tech fasts and Shabbat are important forms of digital detox, but are by no means the entire story. Tech fasting every day is likely not realistic, so how do we master our tech usage the other six days of the week? A commendable approach that many Orthodox Jews take is opting for a “dumbphone,” which has nothing but the basic functionality of a phone (sometimes plus Waze and WhatsApp). However, many of us may feel limited by that prospect. Smartphones are incredible tools and they afford tremendous opportunities—to learn on the go, connect with loved ones, and save time. The real challenge is learning how to integrate the blessings of modern computing into a life of *avodat Hashem* (service of God).

Therefore, the most effective forms of digital detox focus on techniques and skills to use our technology intentionally. Over the years, we’ve developed habits that govern when, where, and how we use our devices. For example, I might scroll through notifications immediately when I wake up, open YouTube when I sit on the couch, and “productively” check

emails in order to procrastinate. The key insight is that these habits are not immutable; I can rewire my digital behavior by designing my environment and creating systems for healthy tech use. For example, I could designate the bedroom as a phone-free zone, create a rule to only watch YouTube while standing, and timebox my email maintenance to fifteen minutes at 8:00 am and 2:00 pm. The result is that I can savor the first moments of my day, the couch is free for family time, and emails only occupy my attention for 30 minutes a day. It’s obviously not guaranteed that I’ll stick to these rules, so every week I could review my performance and modify the systems accordingly.

This distinction between the tech fast and “integrated” models of digital detox relates to the transition between Yom Kippur and Sukkot. Rav Kook explains that the intense teshuva of Yom Kippur can result in a feeling of weakness, akin to a patient revived through the electrical shock of a defibrillator. The complete denial of physicality on Yom Kippur is a necessary overcorrection for our misuse of the material world. Ultimately, Hashem wants us to take the gifts of His world and experience them within the framework of a relationship with Him. And that’s precisely the purpose of Sukkot: “Therefore, days of sacred joy and soul-gladness [Sukkot] return to re-establish the good will and the pure strength of life. Then, the repentance will be complete” (*Olat Reiyah*, Between Yom Kippur and Sukkot).

Tech fasts are good, but they do not constitute complete *teshuva tivit*. Full repentance comes when we design the structures wherein our digital blessings can enhance instead of distract.

Tech fasts are good, but they do not constitute complete teshuva tivit. Full repentance comes when we design the structures wherein our digital blessings can enhance instead of distract.



Experiment for Yourself

I challenge you to embark on this *teshuva tivit*. Adopt at least one of these strategies, take it on as a *kabbalah*, and tweak it as needed.

1. Delete apps that you don't need.

Social media may be a good place to start. I don't use social media apps because I've found that the minimal reward of entertainment and social connection is far outweighed by the dangers of doomscrolling and upward social comparison. Even if you deem a platform or service necessary, ask yourself, do I need this on the go or can I suffice with the desktop version? For me, not having email on the go would be a hindrance, but not having LinkedIn is fine. I had the LinkedIn app for years, but deleted it as I wrote this paragraph.

2. Organize your phone. Move distracting apps off your home screen, preferably into a folder in the second or third screen. The moment you see an app icon—especially with a notification dot—you risk mindlessly opening it. The visual stimulus is a trigger. I used this strategy for WhatsApp and email, which were the main culprits of obsessive refreshing and “warranted” diversions. Your home screen should be occupied with only essential and

enriching apps.

3. Set app limits. It's as simple as configuring Screen Time (iPhone) or Digital Wellbeing (Android) to disable apps at specific times of the day or after a certain amount of usage. You can always ignore the limit (which is helpful if you need the app for a few minutes), but that visual reminder and requirement to actively “ignore limit” can reduce mindless activity.

4. Timebox your digital errands. Set times during the day to check your email, send messages, or shop online. Instead of “I'm almost done sending a quick reply” being your family dinner refrain, pencil in 7:50 – 8:00 pm to reply to WhatsApps.

5. Phone box. Create a habit that when you walk into your home, shul, beit midrash, etc. you put your phone in a designated area. It doesn't have to be locked in the basement, but it shouldn't be in your pocket or on the dinner table. This has been helpful for me and by using a smart speaker I can play any shiur, audiobook, or music that I want while at home. Whenever I genuinely need my phone, I make sure to return it to the spot afterwards.

6. Grayscale your phone. Your phone is much more boring when it's black and white. My younger brother does this

and has had success, but I'll be honest, I can't bring myself to do it.

7. Set up a Filter. Distraction is not the only danger of our devices. Whether it's using the built-in parental controls or a third-party internet filter, we must ensure that we and our children are not exposed to spiritually harmful content.

8. Read the literature. Read books on digital detox and the psychology behind tech usage. Some of my favorites include *Indistractable* and *Hooked* by Nir Eyal, *Deep Work* by Cal Newport, and *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt.

May we learn to both let go of and live with our technology—realizing the full range of *teshuva tivit*.

Endnotes

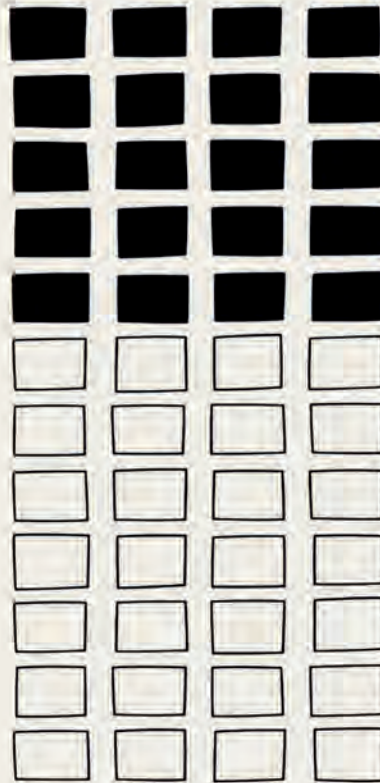
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The Ancient Problem of Distraction: What Pirkei Avot Teaches About Attention & Purpose



Smartphones and other digital technologies have made distraction more constant and more difficult to resist. Yet the underlying challenge is much older.

The sages of *Pirkei Avot* addressed many of the habits and pressures that divide our attention: excessive busyness, avoidance, misplaced priorities, and commitments that are not protected by structure. Read together, their teachings offer a framework for thinking about focus that extends beyond the problem of technology.

One of the most striking teachings related to this theme appears in the words of Rabbi Yaakov:

המהלך בדרך ושונוה ומפסיק ממשנתו ואומר,
מה נאה אילן זה ומה נאה ניר זה, מעלה עליו
הכתוב כאילו מתחייב בנפשו.

*One who is reviewing his Torah study
while walking on the way, and interrupts*

*his study to say, "What a beautiful tree"
or "What a beautiful field," is regarded by
Scripture as if he had endangered his soul.
Avot 3:9¹*

The mishna is difficult to understand. There is nothing inherently wrong with appreciating nature. On the contrary, the natural world can inspire wonder, gratitude, and awareness of God. Contemporary research also suggests that exposure to nature can improve attention, working memory, and emotional regulation.² Why, then, does Rabbi Yaakov describe the interruption in such severe terms?

Some commentaries understand the person's statement as idle chatter. Meiri and Abarbanel suggest that he has turned from Torah to something trivial or useless. Yet most commentators do not assume that appreciating the tree is itself without value. Bartenura notes



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that even if the person recites a blessing over what he sees, the interruption remains problematic. Rabbi Dr. Reuven Bulka explains the point clearly: "There is profound significance in everything, but not everything is the same. There is a scale of values; there are priorities and

levels of importance.”³

The person in the mishna does not choose something bad over something good. He chooses one good thing at the expense of something more important at that moment. The beautiful tree becomes a distraction not because it lacks value, but because he allows it to displace the Torah he is already learning.

This is one reason focus is so difficult. We often imagine distraction as a contest between what matters and what does not. Sometimes that is true. But many distractions are legitimate interests, responsibilities, or pleasures that enter at the wrong time. The problem is not always that we value the wrong things. It is that we fail to order our values and give priority to the task presently before us.

Technology has made this challenge more pronounced. A phone gives immediate access to work, news, family, friends, entertainment, and Torah. Much of what appears on the screen may be worthwhile. Yet the fact that something is worthwhile does not mean it deserves attention now. Rabbi Yaakov’s warning asks us to distinguish between the value of an activity and its priority in a particular moment.

A second teaching in *Pirkei Avot* addresses a different source of distraction. Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas warns that morning sleep, midday wine, childish conversation, and sitting among the ignorant “remove a person

from the world” (*Avot* 3:14). Once again, the examples require explanation. Sleep, wine, conversation, and recreation are not inherently forbidden. Why are they described so negatively?

Rabbi Moses Alashkar understands the mishna as warning about patterns that damage both body and soul: laziness, unhealthy indulgence, wasted time, and negative social influence. Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, drawing on his clinical experience with addiction, reads the examples as forms of escapism. When difficulties are not confronted, they usually grow worse. People may attempt to avoid reality through substances, sleep, daydreaming, idleness, or other activities that temporarily distract them from the problem at hand. These behaviors “remove a person from the world” because they prevent meaningful engagement with life and responsibility.⁴

This adds an important distinction. At times distraction comes from the outside. Something captures our attention and pulls us away from what we intended to do. At other times we seek distraction because we do not want to remain with a demanding task, uncomfortable emotion, or unresolved responsibility. The same activity can serve either function. Rest can restore us, or it can become a way to postpone what needs to be faced. Technology can help us accomplish meaningful goals, or it can offer an immediate escape whenever effort becomes difficult.

Rabbi Dosa’s warning is not an argument against leisure. Rest and recreation are necessary parts of a healthy life. The concern is that seemingly harmless habits can gradually consume more time and energy than intended. The central question is not only, “What am I doing?” but also, “What function is this activity serving?” Is it helping me return to my responsibilities with greater strength, or is it helping me avoid them?

Pirkei Avot also recognizes that a meaningful life will contain many legitimate obligations. Rabban Gamliel teaches that “it is good to combine Torah study with a worldly occupation, for the effort involved in both makes one forget sin” (*Avot* 2:2). Torah is not presented as requiring withdrawal from work and responsibility. Purposeful engagement can provide structure, financial stability, and protection from temptation.

Psychological research similarly distinguishes between harmful time pressure and what some researchers call a “busy mindset.” Feeling overwhelmed and rushed can impair self-control and decision-making. Yet perceiving ourselves as purposefully occupied, without feeling overloaded, can increase feelings of productivity and strengthen self-control. Busyness is not necessarily the problem. The problem arises when activity becomes fragmented, anxious, or detached from clear priorities.⁵

Rabbi Meir sharpens this point: “Limit your business activities and occupy yourself with Torah” (*Avot* 4:12). The mishna does not reject work. Maharal explains that limiting business is not a call to laziness, but an expression of longing for Torah. Rabbi Samuel de Uceda draws attention to Rabbi Meir’s choice of language. He does not warn against *melakha*, work



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Feeling overwhelmed and rushed can impair self-control and decision-making. Yet perceiving ourselves as purposefully occupied, without feeling overloaded, can increase feelings of productivity and strengthen self-control.

itself, but against *esek*, the mental and emotional preoccupation that can allow business to occupy the whole person. A person may leave the workplace while continuing to carry its pressures, ambitions, and unfinished concerns throughout the day.⁶

Rabbi Meir continues, “If you neglect the Torah, you will have many excuses to neglect it.” Meiri explains that when other pursuits are given priority, they demand increasing attention, making it progressively harder to return to learning. Distraction often develops in this way. It is rarely a single decision to abandon what matters. More often, one secondary concern is granted priority, then another, until the central commitment has been crowded out.

This does not call for a narrow life with only one concern. Work, family, community, health, rest, and Torah may all be genuine obligations. The question is whether they fit within a coherent hierarchy or continually compete for our attention.

Maimonides provides a broader framework in the fifth of his *Eight Chapters*, which he titles “Concerning the Application of Man’s Psychic Faculties Towards the Attainment of a Single Goal.” A person, he writes, should keep “his mind’s eye

fixed constantly upon one goal,” the knowledge of God, and should arrange his actions, conduct, and speech so that they lead toward that end. He connects this to the teaching, “Let all your deeds be for the sake of Heaven” (*Avot* 2:12).⁷

Maimonides does not mean that a person should engage only in explicitly religious activity. Eating, sleeping, working, and caring for the body all have a place. Their value depends partly on the purpose they serve. Physical health enables intellectual, moral, and spiritual development. Ordinary activities can therefore become parts of a unified life when they are directed toward a higher goal.

This distinction helps clarify the nature of focus. Concentration means sustaining attention on a present activity. Focus, in the broader sense, means ordering multiple activities toward a central purpose. A person can have many roles and remain focused if those roles reinforce a coherent set of commitments. Conversely, a person can concentrate intensely on a series of individual tasks while living without an integrated direction.

Rabbi Nehunya ben HaKanna expresses a related idea through the metaphor of a yoke: “One who takes on himself the yoke of Torah will be spared the

yoke of government and the yoke of worldly responsibilities” (*Avot* 3:5). The metaphor acknowledges that Torah requires discipline, sacrifice, and effort. Yet the yoke also provides direction.

Several commentators understand the removal of other yokes psychologically rather than literally. Rabbi Joseph Nahmias suggests that Torah cultivates contentment and reduces material craving. Rabbi Dr. Reuven Bulka explains that when Torah becomes primary, other concerns recede in relative significance. The Kotzker Rebbe notes that great Torah scholars still needed to work for a living. The mishna does not promise that responsibilities disappear. Rather, livelihood need not become an obsession when it is placed within an all-embracing commitment to Torah.⁸

Stephen Covey’s well-known Time Management Matrix distinguishes between what is urgent and what is important. Urgent demands, such as deadlines, messages, errands, and administrative responsibilities announce themselves and press for an immediate response. Important commitments, including Torah learning, reflection, relationships, and long-term growth, are often easier to postpone precisely because they do not always feel urgent. Accepting the yoke of Torah means deciding in advance that what is important will not always wait until everything urgent has been completed.⁹

Pirkei Avot therefore supplements its ideals with practical structures. Shammai teaches, “Make your Torah study a fixed habit” (*Avot* 1:15). Rabbi Israel Lipschitz identifies several meanings in the word *keva*, fixed. It can refer to seriousness, a peaceful

environment, depth of thought, and persistence. It can also mean finding and using small openings in the day. Focus is supported both by protected periods of sustained learning and by a consistent willingness to use the time that is available.¹⁰

The instruction of the Men of the Great Assembly to “make a fence for the Torah” provides another practical principle (*Avot* 1:1). The sages understood that good intentions are fragile. Behavioral researchers use the term “commitment device” to describe an arrangement adopted in advance to protect an intention from future temptation or insufficient self-control. Rabbinic fences cannot be reduced to psychological commitment devices, but both recognize that structure can support intention. Fixed times, appropriate environments, and boundaries around technology do not guarantee concentration. They create conditions in which concentration is more likely.¹¹

The High Holiday season invites a *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of our actions and character. The wisdom of *Pirkei Avot* suggests that this accounting should include not only what we did, but what repeatedly received

our attention. Which important commitments were displaced by secondary concerns? Which forms of rest restored us, and which became avenues of escape? Did the many responsibilities of our lives support a coherent purpose, or did they pull us in competing directions?

The forms of distraction we face may be new, but the underlying challenges are not. Rabbi Yaakov’s passerby noticed something genuinely beautiful. His mistake was not appreciation, but interruption. The other teachings of *Pirkei Avot* broaden that insight. Focus requires us to set priorities among the things we value, confront what we are tempted to avoid, and create structures that protect our central commitments. Silencing a notification may help, but the deeper task is to determine what deserves our attention and ensure that our habits reflect that priority.

Endnotes

1. The wording and numbering of the mishnayot are adapted from *The Koren Pirkei Avot*, trans. Jonathan Sacks, commentary by Marc D. Angel (Koren Publishers, 2015).

2. Annie Murphy Paul, *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), 95–102.

3. See Meiri, Abarbanel, and Bartenura to *Avot* 3:9; Reuven P. Bulka, *As a Tree by the Waters: Pirkey Avoth, Psychological and Philosophical Insights* (Feldheim, 1980), 111. For a broader discussion of the interpretations of this mishna, see Jeremy Benstein, “‘One, Walking and Studying...’: Nature vs. Torah,” *Judaism* 44, no. 2 (1995): 146–168.

4. See Moses Alashkar, *Merkhevet HaMishnah*, to *Avot* 3:14; Abraham J. Twerski, *Visions of the Fathers: Pirkei Avos with an Insightful and Inspiring Commentary* (Shaar Press, 1999), 168–169.

5. Jeehye Christine Kim, Monica Wadhwa, and Amitava Chattopadhyay, “When Busy Is Less Indulging: Impact of Busy Mindset on Self-Control Behaviors,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 45, no. 5 (2019): 933–952.

6. See Maharal, *Derekh Hayyim*, Rabbi Samuel de Uceda, *Midrash Shemuel*, and Meiri to *Avot* 4:12.

7. Moses Maimonides, *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics*, trans. Joseph I. Gorfinkle (Columbia University Press, 1912), 69.

8. See Rabbi Joseph Nahmias to *Avot* 3:5; Bulka, *As a Tree by the Waters*, 106; Yosef Stern, *Pirkei Avos: With Ideas and Insights of the Sfas Emes and Other Chassidic Masters* (Mesorah Publications, 1999), 175–176.

9. Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Free Press, 2004), 151–182.

10. Rabbi Israel Lipschitz, *Tiferet Yisrael*, to *Avot* 1:15.

11. Gharad Bryan, Dean Karlan, and Scott Nelson, “Commitment Devices,” *Annual Review of Economics* 2 (2010): 671–698.

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RIETS GRADUATE BIOETHICS & JEWISH LAW PROGRAM

Limitless

The Drug That Makes Hyperfocus a Reality

The rapid adoption of the internet both in work and social environments has also contributed to a general trend of shortening attention spans and a fragmented ability to sustain attention.¹ At the same time there is a nearly unprecedented number of diagnoses of focus and attention-related disorders.² To combat the growing incidence of these diagnoses, physicians have increased their willingness to prescribe medications to treat these conditions. These drugs, sold under the common names of Adderall or Vyvanse, are amphetamines that have the effect of increasing stimulation of the central nervous system and are the most common treatment for attention disorders.

Concurrently, our era is quickly becoming defined by the use and integration of artificial intelligence into nearly every discipline and field of study. The rapid pace of adoption and use of AI has increased the pressure on students and working people to demonstrate their value, creating ever-increasing levels of stress to outperform expectations and their peers. In today's academic institutions and workplaces, where success is increasingly difficult to attain and the barriers to entry are growing ever higher, the desire to

find ways to meet the demands is also breaching the guardrails of the law and common sense.³

One common approach is to gain access to amphetamines through inappropriate means. Needless to say, possession of drugs that are considered controlled substances is a violation of the law and of course should not be done. However, we cannot ignore the reality that many use amphetamines illegally in high-pressure workplaces and academic settings in order to increase productivity. The question we must address, aside from any halachic violations involved when a person violates the law of the land, is, what are the ramifications of using these drugs illegally on the individual and society at large?

Like many categories of drugs, amphetamines can pose significant health risks when used incorrectly. But context matters. Opiates, for example, can be life-threatening when used



Rabbi Kalman Laufer

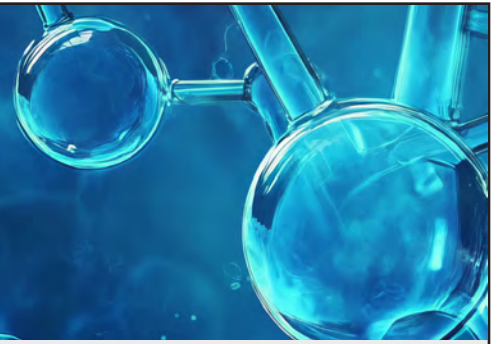
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recreationally and without proper medical supervision, yet they can also be used safely and beneficially in medical settings, such as morphine to control severe pain in the intensive care unit for the sickest of patients. Amphetamines are no different. When prescribed appropriately and taken under the care of a qualified medical professional, they can be life-changing for those who use them. Adderall and Vyvanse have dramatically improved the ability of some students and employees to succeed in school and in the workplace. They would never have



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The inability to feel anything and the hollowing out of a person's emotional state are major impediments to success and, more importantly, to *avodas Hashem*.



been able to accomplish their goals without the aid of these medications. In small amounts, amphetamines can even help people who don't need them. Someone struggling to focus on occasion, or someone who needs a few extra hours of serious focus, might, on occasion, be tempted by the boost that an amphetamine might give them.

Yet, I think that there are two concerns that even the occasional misuse of such a drug can still pose. The first is a physical concern: the feeling of focus while using these drugs and the subsequent feeling of accomplishment when you see just how much you were able to do is a powerful inducement to continue to use them. Sustained use of amphetamines, though, can lead to what some describe as a zombie-like state.⁴ The inability to feel anything and the hollowing out of a person's emotional state are major impediments to success and, more importantly, to *avodas Hashem*.

The second concern is the manner in which we become a more productive and effective person. Some people need medication to help them be their best selves, and in the care of proper medical professionals that is an admirable goal. But for those seeking a boost, they are essentially short-circuiting the process of accomplishment. The Gemara teaches that a person will reliably prefer the fruits of their own labor over someone else's, even if the other's work



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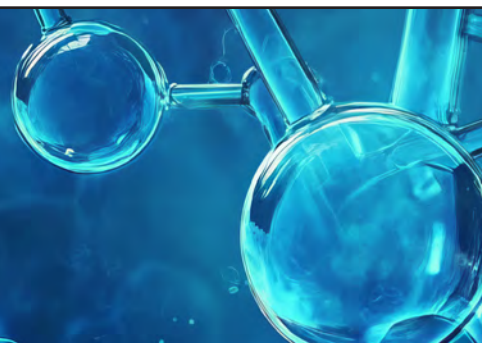


results in greater quantity.⁵

Additionally, one interpretation of the mitzvah of *Kedoshim Tihyu*, famously offered by Ramban, is that one should

be *mekadesh* themselves and not be a *naval* with the permission of the Torah. This can be interpreted as a call to opt for self-development rather than use other avenues to achieve success,

To focus solely on the metric of achievement at the expense of how we achieve it means we fail to evaluate our choices the way we should.



even if they are technically permitted.⁶ In a responsum, Rav Schachter shlita discusses the recreational use of other types of drugs and argues that use of drugs that lessen a person's ability to exercise rational choice is a failure of one's *avodas Hashem*.⁷ Abuse of amphetamines would certainly lessen a person's ability to choose to invest in their *avodas Hashem* (and may also reduce their ability to fulfill the precept of *Ivdu es Hashem b'simcha*).

Lastly, there is the impact that illegal use of amphetamines to accomplish professional goals has on others. The Gemara prohibits misrepresentation of one's intent when acting on behalf of their fellow as a form of theft: *geneivas daas*.⁸ Presenting yourself to your employer as more productive or efficient because of the illegal use of amphetamines is certainly a violation of *geneivas daas*. Ritva cites the opinion of the Baalei HaTosfos that this is a form of theft severe enough to constitute

a prohibition *mid'oraisa* even against a non-Jew.⁹ Presenting yourself to an employer as more capable, or presenting academic accomplishments that are not due to your own capabilities but rather to your use of a drug that should not be available to you, would be highly inappropriate. Rav Moshe Feinstein went so far as to argue that any money earned now and in the future because of that form of dishonesty is *gezel*.¹⁰

Ultimately, there are many ways to gain an advantage for yourself when measured against economic or scholastic achievement. To focus solely on the metric of achievement at the expense of how we achieve it means we fail to evaluate our choices the way we should. Our approach should be to ensure that our choices and methods of accomplishment ultimately bring us closer to serving the will of Hashem through a proper frame of mind, ironclad commitment, and hard work.

Endnotes

1. Firth, Josh A., et al. "Exploring the Impact of Internet Use on Memory and Attention Processes." *International journal of environmental research and public health* vol. 17,24 9481. 17 Dec. 2020
2. Abdelnour, Elie et al. "ADHD Diagnostic Trends: Increased Recognition or Overdiagnosis?" *Missouri Medicine* vol. 119,5 (2022): 467-473.
3. Bavarian, Niloofar et al. "The Illicit Use of Prescription Stimulants on College Campuses: A Theory-Guided Systematic Review." *Health education & behavior : the official publication of the Society for Public Health Education* vol. 42,6 (2015): 719-29.
4. Talbot, Margaret. "Brain Gain." *The New Yorker*, 27 Apr. 2009, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/04/27/brain-gain
5. *Bava Metzia* 38a.
6. *Vayikra* 19:2, Ramban *ibid*.
7. Published Responsa.
8. *Chullin* 94a.
9. Ritva *ibid*.
10. *Iggeros Moshe* CM 2:30.

Additional Questions to Consider:

- What role do communities play in managing recreational drug use? Are safe injection sites a Halakhically permissible idea?
- Are drugs that improve function from an acceptable baseline permitted at all? How are drugs like amphetamines different from stimulants like caffeine?
- Do neighbors have a right to prevent drugs and safe injection sites from being used or sold in their neighborhood?

RIETS GRADUATE PROGRAM BUSINESS ETHICS & JEWISH LAW

Stolen Moments

Distraction at Work in Halachah and Law

It happens to everyone. The afternoon slows, the task on the screen loses its urgency, and the phone sits within arm's reach.

A headline is checked, then a score, then a message—and ten minutes are gone before anyone, including the worker, has noticed. Nothing crashed; no one saw; the work will likely still be finished. It hardly feels like a moral event at all.

Most people would call it a habit. An employer might call it a policy violation. Halachah asks a sharper question: is it stealing? And the question is further sharpened when the phone is exchanged for a sefer. If a few minutes of browsing are a problem, what of a few minutes of Torah on the clock? Few questions reveal more clearly how seriously halachah takes the hours we sell to another person.

We begin not with distraction itself but with a brief introduction to the structure of Jewish employment law. *Hilchos Poalim's* (Laws of Workers) foundations rest on the principle of “everything follows the custom of the land,” *hakol k'minhag hamedinah*.¹ An employer who hires workers in a place where the custom is to begin late and finish early cannot compel

longer hours, even at a premium wage; the prevailing practice is read into the contract as though the parties had spelled it out.²

The presumption is remarkably strong. Rabbi Akiva Eger rules that when employer and worker disagree over whether their arrangement followed the local custom, we assume that it did, even against the party currently holding the money, ordinarily a decisive advantage in monetary law.³ The Chazon Ish explains that *minhag hamedinah* reflects the standing consent of the community, and communal consent bears the power of a formal enactment of *beis din*.⁴ In the modern business world, custom is shaped less by folk practice than by legislation, regulation, and written company policy⁵—which means the employee handbook and the labor code are the raw material for halachic discourse.

American law approaches workplace distraction in a similar fashion. No statute forbids checking personal email at work. The Supreme Court has held that violating an employer's computer-use policy is not even a federal computer crime; the matter belongs to policy and contract.⁶ Employers may permit personal use, restrict it,



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or discipline for it, and, with proper notice, may monitor it.⁷ The law's most direct contribution is the break: federal regulations require that short rest breaks of five to twenty minutes, where offered, be treated as paid work time, and New York's Labor Law mandates a thirty-minute meal period for shifts of more than six hours, with longer periods for factory and night workers.⁸

In halachah, the statute, the handbook, and the office norm all feed into *minhag hamedinah*, and together help define which breaks belong to the worker and which hours belong to the employer. Therefore, the contract, the handbook, and the law of the place set the terms. What remains is the substantive question: What does it mean to take back a part of an hour that belongs to the employer?

THE ETHICS EXCHANGE: A PROJECT OF THE RIETS GRADUATE HALACHA PROGRAM

The Rambam writes at the end of *Hilchos Sechirus*:

*Just as the employer is warned not to rob the wages of a poor worker and not to withhold them, so too the worker is warned not to rob the employer of his work—idling a little here and a little there until he has spent the whole day in deceit. Rather, he must be exacting with himself about time, for [the Sages] were particular even about the fourth blessing of Birkas HaMazon, that [a worker] should not recite it. Likewise, he is obligated to work with all his strength, for Yaakov the righteous said, “With all my strength I have served your father”; therefore, he was granted reward for this even in this world, as it says, “And the man increased exceedingly.”*⁹

The Rambam’s formulation—“idling a little here and a little there until he has spent the whole day in deceit”—captures the precise texture of modern workplace distraction, which accumulates in small, individually deniable increments rather than in any wholesale abandonment of one’s post. That accumulation the Rambam classifies as *gezel*, theft, in full parallel to the employer who withholds wages.¹⁰

Two elements must be factored into this halachah at once. The Rambam joins them in a single breath—“likewise, he is obligated to work with all his strength”—and the conjunction implies that the second part of the Rambam is also relevant to *Hil. Geneiva*. Yet the second clause reads in a different register. Exact timekeeping is monetary law, a question of whether a person is stealing, while laboring “with all his strength,” modeled on Yaakov, sounds moralistic; an ethic drawn



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from the conduct of the Avos, in which wholehearted work serves as a remedy for laziness, an improvement of the world, and a potential *kiddush Hashem*. Whether the second clause states strict *din* or a moral ideal is itself unclear.¹¹

The next question that must be asked is: what kind of worker is under discussion? Halachah recognizes two basic models. A *poel*, or *sechir yom* (“day-hire”), is hired for time. His hours are what the employer purchases.

A *kablan* is hired for a result—a finished garment, a delivered brief, or a functioning application.¹² Secular law draws a similar line. American wage law distinguishes hourly, non-exempt employees, such as construction workers, clerks and waiters, whose time is metered and protected by overtime and break rules, from exempt salaried professionals who are effectively paid for output and receive breaks only at their employer’s discretion.¹³ The *Aruch*

Even the highest value on our scale cannot be pursued with someone else's property, and paid time is someone else's property.

HaShulchan differentiates between the two kinds of workers in their accountability for time.¹⁴

For the *sechir yom*, the halachah is stark, and no one states it more forcefully than the Ramchal in *Mesillas Yescharim*:

*The general rule is this: one who is hired out to his fellow for any labor whatsoever—all of his hours are sold to him for the day, as the Sages said, “Hiring is a sale for the day.” Whatever he takes from those hours for his own enjoyment, in any manner whatsoever, is nothing but outright theft. And if [the employer] has not forgiven it, it is not forgiven, for our Sages said, “Yom Kippur does not atone for sins between man and his fellow until he appeases his fellow.”*¹⁵

The consequences are concrete. A *sechir* may not even stay up so late at night that his work will suffer the next day. Idle hours may be docked from his pay, and persistent idleness is grounds for dismissal.¹⁶ By this measure, surfing the internet or answering personal email during working hours presents no gray area for the *poel*: it is taking time that has been sold to someone else, unless it falls within a recognized break. During a lawful break the time is his own and scrolling over lunch wrongs no one. Outside it, the browsing runs on stolen minutes.

The *kablan* stands differently. The employer has not purchased his hours but his product. If he pauses mid-

afternoon and still delivers honest, timely, complete work, he has not stolen time—because time was never what he sold. Some well-known companies have built their cultures on precisely this model: results-oriented environments in which hours are not counted, only work delivered. But two limits remain. First, a *kablan* who reports hours he did not work is a thief like any other.¹⁷ For the lawyer, the American Bar Association's governing opinion on legal billing holds that a lawyer “is never justified in charging a client for hours not actually expended” and may not bill more time than was actually spent, beyond rounding to minimum increments.¹⁸ Accountants answer to parallel rules, and even unlicensed hourly billers are bound by contract and the law of fraud.¹⁹ Additionally, even where the letter of the law permits idleness, the wasted capacity offends the essence of the law the Rambam teaches. Permitted is not the same as aspirational.²⁰

The starkest application concerns Torah study itself. A hired worker may not learn Torah during the hours he has sold, and the *Mesillas Yescharim* states the reason in uncompromising terms:

Moreover, even if he performed a mitzvah during his work time, it is not accounted to him as righteousness but as a sin in his hand—for a sin cannot be a mitzvah... as [the Sages] said: one who stole a measure of wheat, ground it, baked it, and recited a blessing over it—

*he is not blessing but blaspheming.*²¹

We treasure Torah study above nearly everything, and precisely for that reason the ruling is so instructive: even the highest value on our scale cannot be pursued with someone else's property, and paid time is someone else's property. Contemporary poskim extend the logic to cases as striking as a worker attending Selichos when doing so will leave him too drained to work properly.²² If Torah itself can constitute theft in the wrong hour, lesser diversions require no separate verdict.

The *Aruch HaShulchan* concludes the topic with encouragement rather than rebuke:

*In any event, we learn how great is the worker's obligation to do his work faithfully, and workers must be exceedingly careful in this. But let the worker not be disheartened, for great is labor done faithfully. The Sages said: labor is more beloved than the merit of the forefathers, for the merit of the forefathers rescued property, but labor rescued lives.*²³

Faithful work is not a grudging concession to economic necessity; it is a religious achievement.

Endnotes

1. Mishnah, Bava Metzia 83a; Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 331:1–2.



2. Cf. *Teshuvos HaRashba* 2:268; *Aruch HaShulchan*, *Orach Chaim* 191:4.
3. Hagahos Rabbi Akiva Eger, *Choshen Mishpat* 331:1.
4. Chazon Ish, *Bava Basra* 5:4. To understand this principle in the Chazon Ish more fully, see Chazon Ish, *Kesuvos* 72:7 and 67:7; *Bava Kamma* 7:7; and *Choshen Mishpat*, Likkutim 5:7. Cf. Chazon Ish, *Bava Kamma*, end of Siman 23, concerning workers who strike and forcibly prevent others from working, for an instance in which he holds that *minhag hamedinah* should be overridden in favor of halachic considerations (cf. *Igros Moshe*, *Choshen Mishpat* 1:58–59). See *Dinei Mamonos* 3:1:7 (p. 33–34); R. Yisrael Ifrach, *Shuras HaDin*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 5755), 276–281. This account of *minhag hamedinah* stands opposed to other explanations, such as the argument that the foundational rule is rooted in *hefker beis din hefker* (*Teshuvos Be'er Sheva* 22).
5. For a dissenting view that puts more emphasis on practice, see *Pischei Choshen* 4:7:7 n.17 (p. 180).
6. *Van Buren v. United States*, 593 U.S. 374 (2021) (violating an employer's computer-use policy does not "exceed authorized access" under the federal Computer Fraud and Abuse Act).
7. Electronic Communications Privacy Act, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2510 et seq. (consent and business-purpose exceptions); N.Y. Civ. Rights Law § 52-c (written notice of electronic monitoring); *Smyth v. Pillsbury Co.*, 914 F. Supp. 97 (E.D. Pa. 1996) (a communicated email policy defeats an employee's expectation of privacy). However, to uphold an employee's privacy while tracking their internet use for accountability raises halachic difficulties of its own, since visibility into the exact content of an employee's browsing causes serious questions regarding violation of privacy. See Aaron Levine, *Moral Issues of the Marketplace in Jewish Law* (2008), 358–370; Jonathan Ziring, *Torah in a Connected World: A Halachic Perspective on Communication Technology and Social Media* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2023), 225–251; Shaul Moshe Alter, *Choshav Mishpat: Software and AI in Halacha*, (Adir Press, 2023) 222–226.
8. 29 C.F.R. §§ 785.18–19 (short rest breaks of 5–20 minutes, where offered, are paid work time; bona fide meal periods of 30 minutes or more may be unpaid); N.Y. Lab. Law § 162; N.Y. Dep't of Labor, Guidelines for Meal Periods (LS443).
9. Rambam, *Hilchos Sechirus* 13:7; quoted in *Shulchan Aruch*, *Choshen Mishpat* 337:20. It is unclear how this halachah coheres with another statement of the Rambam regarding the labor of the Avos. In *Moreh HaNevuchim* 3:51, the Rambam maintains that the Avos attained their intellectual and religious heights precisely because their thoughts remained bound to higher matters even while engaged in mundane activity and work — seemingly true of Yaakov in Lavan's employ as well. Cf. *Hilchos Sechirus* 13:6, which implies that any weakening of the mind that diminishes one's capacity to devote full thought to the work is a form of theft.
10. The Rambam's rulings here rest on several Talmudic sources: *Brachos* 16a; *Taanis* 23a–b; *Kiddushin* 33a is a possible source, though only possibly, because the Rambam (*Hilchos Talmud Torah* 6:2) implies that its exemption applies equally to a *kablan* and a *sechir yom*, since either way the honor shown would come at the cost of work otherwise performed; the Gra (*Choshen Mishpat* 337:19) attributes the ruling to *Bava Metzia* 91b. See further Rav Hershel Schachter *shlita's Eretz HaTzvi*, ch. 29; *Shemos Rabbah* 13:1.
11. *Minchas Asher*, *Bamidbar* §93, who adduces this halachah as a source that even after Matan Torah we derive moral lessons from the conduct of the Avos; whether the obligation is halachah or *mussar haskel* bears directly on whether it belongs on that list.
12. For the definitions, see Meiri, *Bava Metzia* 112a; Maggid Mishneh, *Hilchos Sechirus* 9:4; Rama, *Choshen Mishpat* 333:5 with Gra ad loc.; *Nesivos HaMishpat* 264:8.
13. 29 U.S.C. § 213(a)(1) (the "white-collar" exemptions); 29 C.F.R. § 785.18. Federal and state break protections attach to non-exempt (hourly) employees; exempt salaried employees receive breaks at the employer's discretion.
14. *Aruch HaShulchan*, *Choshen Mishpat* 337:25; cf. Rama, *Choshen Mishpat* 333:5, who reads similarly. Many authorities, however, do not draw the distinction—notably several contemporary business-halachah surveys—which does not necessarily mean they reject it.
15. *Mesillas Yesharim*, ch. 11, citing *Bava Metzia* 56b ("hiring is a sale for the day") and *Yoma* 85b.
16. *Dinei Mamonos* 3:1:7 (¶¶ 29, 32): a *sechir* may not stay up so late that his work suffers the next day — all the more so a teacher of Torah (cf. *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh Deah* 245:17); idle hours need not be paid, and persistent idleness is grounds for dismissal. On whether pay may be docked for work performed lazily and not completely abandoned, see R. Avraham Meisels, *Shuras HaDin*, vol. 16 (Jerusalem, 5769), 359–362.
17. Cf. Hagahos Maimonios, *Hilchos Sechirus* 9:5: work defined by completion of a task, rather than by a specific quantity of hired time, is *kablanus* even if the *kablan* charges by the hour for such a task. See note 12 above.
18. ABA Comm. on Ethics & Prof'l Responsibility, Formal Op. 93-379 (1993); see also N.C. State Bar, 2022 Formal Ethics Op. 4; D.C. Bar Ethics Op. 267.
19. AICPA Code of Professional Conduct (integrity, fee-disclosure, and acts-discreditable provisions). Unlicensed hourly billers are bound by contract law; knowingly billing unworked hours may constitute fraud.
20. Cf. *Aruch LaNer*, *Makkos* 24a, s.v. *holech*.
21. *Mesillas Yesharim*, ch. 11, citing *Bava Kamma* 94a and *Yoma* 86a; see also *Dinei Mamonos* 3:1:7 (¶ 30); R. Shemuel Pinchasi, *Chok U'Mishpat* (Jerusalem, 5778), 193–196.
22. *Yerushalayim B'Moadeha*—*Yerach HaEisanim*, 195 quoting Rav Avigdor Nebenzahl: a worker who will not work as well if he attends *Selichos* — or a rebbi who will not prepare as well — may not attend, seemingly whether his contract is structured as *sechirus* or *kablanus*, since either way he fails to do what he was contractually hired to do.
23. *Aruch HaShulchan*, *Choshen Mishpat* 331:3, citing *Midrash Rabbah*, end of Parashas Vayeitzei. Cf. Rav Yitzchak Breuer, *Nachliel: Yesodos HaChinuch L'Mitzvos HaTorah*, (Jerusalem, 1982: Mosad HaRav Kook) 353, who elaborates on this theme.

Remembering 9/11 in Our Tefilot

It is hard to believe that 9/11 occurred twenty-five years ago. It is difficult to forget the footage of planes hitting buildings on a bright blue morning full of promise. There was the outcry over the loss of life, the photos of people trying to find loved ones, and the ash and rubble all over New York City Streets. Those of us who lived through it can tell anyone where we were when we heard and saw the news as if it were yesterday.

The solemnity of tefila on those first Days of Awe blanketed every congregation. In tears and with a hushed sense of trepidation, the words were almost impossible to utter: “Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall live out his allotted time, and who shall depart before his time. Who by water, and who by fire?” The flames of the planes replayed in our minds as we thought of the firefighters, police officers, and volunteers who risked everything to rescue a life.

Since then the skyline of the City has changed as has our sense of fragility and security. And we have so much to pray for as Jews a quarter of a century later. On

It is difficult to forget the footage of planes hitting buildings on a bright blue morning full of promise.

this tender anniversary, we might turn to a different, very poignant tefila of this season of *teshuva* and *bakasha*, change and profound supplication, found at the end of the Musaf Avoda on Yom Kippur. It is a prayer recited by the Cohen Gadol, but it often gets eclipsed by our excitement to belt out the song Marei Cohen, where we recite in detail the way the Cohen’s face looked when he completed all of his tasks and achieved atonement for the nation, for his household, and for himself.

In that tefila, the High Priest asked God to provide a year of blessing and success, economic stability, and spiritual prosperity. He asked for happiness, deliverance, and independence. The buoyancy and hopefulness of the words, however, are not matched by its somber ending: “And for the people of Sharon, he would pray: ‘May it be Your will, God, our God, and God of our fathers, that their homes shall not become their graves.’”

The high note suddenly becomes a low note as we wonder what tribulations the people of the Sharon Valley faced. The coastal valley, it seems, was an area of flash floods where water pooled, and the poor residents of the area could not build permanent homes. This was enough of a crisis that at the most holy and dramatic

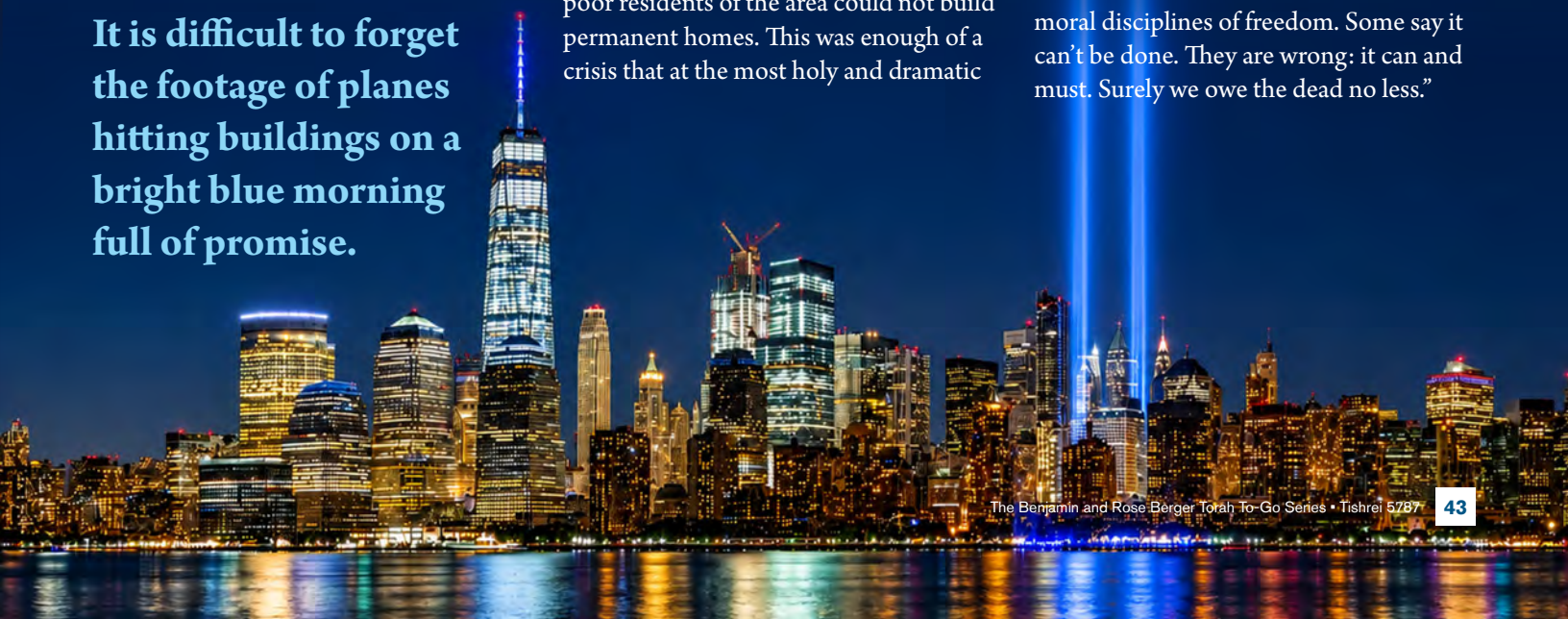


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of moments, the Cohen Gadol ensured that the whole community focus its attention on one region in peril and ask that their lives be spared.

September 11th is a reminder that no home or office should become a grave and that in times of holiday happiness, we can never forget those most vulnerable to terrorism, natural disasters, and unexpected upheavals. Our own tefilot cannot be complete unless we make room in our hearts from those in crisis, even when they are not close to us in time or space. Ten years after 9/11, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: “The only way to save the world is to begin with ourselves. Our burden after 9/11 is to renew the moral disciplines of freedom. Some say it can’t be done. They are wrong; it can and must. Surely we owe the dead no less.”



Twenty-Five Years Later: The Agunos of September 11

A World That Was Upturned

Twenty-five years ago, on the 23rd of Elul 5761, two planes were hijacked by Islamic jihadist terrorists and flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. As we reflect on the impact of 9/11 twenty-five years later, many of us think about the Simchas Torah attack on October 7, which many called "Israel's 9/11."

There is a Rashi at the end of Parshas Ki Seitzei that speaks to why this tragedy has resurfaced in our lifetime. Commenting on Amalek "*asher korcha baderech*," Rashi says *korcha*, can be read as *kor*, cold. Following the plagues heaped upon Mitzrayim, all the nations were terrified to make war with us; we were a boiling bath no creature would dare to enter, because anyone who would do so would be scalded alive:

שהיו כל האומות יריאים להלחם בכם, ובא זה והתחיל והראה מקום לאחרים. משל לאמבטי רותחת שאין כל בריאה יכולה לירד לתוכה, בא בן בליעל אחד קפץ וירד לתוכה, ואף על פי שנכווה, הקרהו בפני אחרים.

For all the nations were afraid to wage war against you, but this one came and started it, thereby showing the way to others. This can be compared to a boiling bath into which no one could enter. One wicked man came, jumped into it, and entered it. Even though he was scalded, he cooled it down for others.

In a certain measure that is what 9/11 did to the world. Within an hour and a half of the first impact, towers that stood for American strength and invincibility were dust and powder, and it became clear that terrorists could wreak this kind of havoc even in an otherwise civilized world. What happened on October 7 was arguably the continuation of the *ma'aseh*



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Amalek of September 11. The idea that you could walk into inhabited towns and massacre men, women and children, and burn their homes, and shoot them without any mercy had been unthinkable. The 9/11 attack, which burned down the two most renowned business towers in the world and many of the people inside them, had also been unthinkable, but it paved the way for similar acts of terror.

Before October 7, the Jewish people had not experienced this kind of inhumane

attack since the Holocaust. The one important difference is that the Nazis were careful not to publicize pictures of the camps, while the October 7 terrorists proclaimed theirs in videos and were proud of it, and found supporters even on American college campuses. That cooling down of basic morality, of the plain sense of the difference between right and wrong, began with 9/11.

Following the attacks of 9/11, it took a few days just to come to our senses; our entire world had been upturned. At the time, I was the director of the Beth Din of America and we realized the Beth Din had a major job to perform. Young men had been cut down in their prime, leaving behind their wives who were presumptively widows. However, halacha does not rely on presumption. It requires concrete proof of death, ordinarily consisting of identification using the remains of a body. When a person has been incinerated beyond identification, there are complex halachos that must be followed to properly determine death.

During my first years in Beth Din, I was very familiar with agunah cases of the modern-day kind, where the man is entirely alive and well and simply refuses to give his wife a *get*. Now we were dealing with the classical case the Gemora describes, where there is *shalom b'olam v'shalom beineihem*, a happy marriage, where the wife would be far happier if her husband were found alive and the marriage could continue, except that the unfortunate reality is that he is probably dead. On the strength of what testimony can we permit the bereaved wife to mourn the husband she loved and rebuild her future?

Halachic Issues

The rule we were leaning on is an ancient one: *mishum iguna akilu bah rabbanan*, namely that to help an agunah the Rabbis were lenient (*Yevamos* 88a). But the *Aruch*

HaShulchan (Even *HaEzer* 17:19–20) draws a distinction that governed everything we did. The leniency of the Rabbis applies to *sof edus*, the question of **who** may testify: for example, we accept a single witness, a woman, a relative, even the wife of the deceased herself, and a non-Jew speaking *mesiach lefi tumo*, telling the story naturally, without knowing he/she is giving testimony. Chazal relaxed the rules of testimony because this is *milsa d'avida l'iglu*, a matter bound to come to light, and because *isha daika u'minsiva*, a woman investigates thoroughly before relying on a heter, knowing the dire consequences (of adultery and illegitimacy of subsequent-born children) if her husband turns up alive.

Regarding *techilas edus*, the **substance** of what is testified, there is no compromise whatsoever. A majority probability is not enough. The Gemara (*Yevamos* 121a) rules that we can't rely on the testimony of a witness who saw a man fall into *mayim she'ein lahem sof*, water that has no visible endpoint, because the sea's current may have carried the man beyond the witness's sight. We may, however, rely on the testimony of one who saw him fall into a deep *kivshan ha'esh*, fiery furnace, because by natural means a person cannot climb out. We do not factor in the possibility of miracles. We may yearn for miracles, but halacha determines reality by the rules of nature.

One precedent was Rav Moshe Feinstein's ruling after the Holocaust (*Igros Moshe*, Even *HaEzer* 1:43), permitting the wife of a man known to have been in an extermination camp on the basis that the overwhelming majority perished there. Rav Moshe reasoned that the stringency of the Rabbis not to rely on probability of death alone only pertained to individual situations, and not to a probability regarding all the Jews in Eastern Europe who ended up in Nazi death camps. Similarly, Rav Gedalia Dov Schwartz zt"l, who was *av beis din* of the Beth Din of America when we were dealing with these

cases, emphasized that despite various precedents in halacha, none of the cases in halachic literature resembled buildings of this height collapsing with thousands of people more than eighty floors up.

Rav Ovadia Yosef zt"l, ruling for us on one of our cases (*Yabia Omer* 10, Even *HaEzer* 18), held, based on a similar analysis that the uniqueness of our situation made it even stronger than the usual *trei rubei* (compounded majorities) leniency also written about by the Rabbis. Here, fifty tons of jet fuel spread instantly across the width of the tower, leaving no escape for anyone above. As such we can employ the rule that if someone testified that the husband fell into a fiery furnace, we can presume that he is dead.

The two towers turned out to be two different halachic cases. The first plane struck the North Tower at 8:46 a.m. and severed it at the 93rd floor; the tower fell at 10:29 a.m. Anyone above the 92nd floor at impact was considered like one who fell into a fiery furnace. By contrast, the second plane struck the South Tower diagonally at the 78th floor around 9:02 a.m. (it collapsed at 9:59 a.m.) but did not sever it, and one stairwell remained passable. We established that at least eight people descended from above the point of impact. So even a husband known to be above the impact in the South Tower was only in the category of *mayim she'ein lahem sof*, and majority alone could not free his wife.

That forced us into questions of identification. Halacha recognizes three grades of *simanim*: a poor sign, like the color of a man's trousers; an intermediate sign, such as an unusual mark on a lost object, which suffices to return a lost object but not to permit a wife (an analogous case would be a missing husband who had a mole on his face); and a *siman muvhak* (ironclad sign of identification), upon which a wife may be permitted. The *Masas Binyamin* requires a sign found in no more than one in a thousand or two thousand people, and Rav Hershel Schachter *shlit"*a

observed that the threshold tracks the number of people in the place. With three thousand people missing, we needed to identify a sign no more than one in three thousand people would share. Fingerprints and dental records that matched remains found on the site of the attack certainly met this standard, but few bodies were able to be identified in this traditional fashion.

As time went on, many identifications of the remaining fragments of bodies were made by the New York City medical examiner's office through DNA. However, DNA was new and contested: Chazal's *simanim* are visible to the eye, while DNA is a genetic code. Is it a *siman* at all, and if so, is it one *siman muvhak* or a combination of intermediate signs, which do not join together according to many authorities (see Rema, *Even HaEzer* 17:24)? Rav Shmuel Vosner zt"l ruled it close to a *siman muvhak* where there are corroborating grounds; Rav Zalman Nechemia Goldberg zt"l, in his analysis of the 9/11 evidence, went even further and held it is admissible as a form of *tevias ayin* (*Chulin* 96a) — just as no two faces are alike and we recognize a man by his face, each person carries his own unique genetic signature. Thus, we were able to rely upon DNA evidence, certainly together with other corroborating evidence, in cases where identification was made in that fashion.

In certain cases, we were able to collect testimony from individuals who had spoken to husbands who worked on the upper floors of the North Tower (above the 92nd floor) where it was clear that they had no escape route and were essentially in a *kivshan ha'eish* situation from which no

person could be expected to emerge alive.

Where we lacked such testimony, we went to the records. In one case, nobody had spoken to the husband at all. We obtained his subway fare-card data from Times Square, including the time that he entered the subway station on 9/11, and Port Authority swipe-card records from the North Tower lobby. September's swipe-card records were destroyed with the building, but August's records had been backed up, and the trip from the subway station to the World Trade Center never took more than twenty minutes, as indicated by the August records. The arithmetic put him in his office on the 96th floor at the latest three minutes before impact. Eventually there were also remains of this husband that were identified through DNA.

We did not act alone. Where a heter rests on a single witness and other lenient considerations, an old *takana* requires that any lenient determination be done through a *beis din*, and the custom is not to rely on one posek, however great, without two others concurring. Rav Gedalia Dov Schwartz therefore withheld his ruling until he had the opinions of Rav Ovadia Yosef, Rav Zalman Nechemia Goldberg, Rav Nota Greenblatt and Rav Mordechai Willig, and we convened a special *beis din* under Rav Hershel Schachter to receive all the testimony that had been collected.

Aftermath

With the relentless collection of relevant testimony and evidence, most of the cases

were resolved within the first year. There was one case, in which a missing husband was determined to be in the South Tower but there was no physical evidence or DNA proving his demise, that took three years of research and consultation to find enough data to determine death according to halakhic standards.

The careful approach carved out by halakha was prominently borne out in a case where New York City authorities issued a death certificate for a World Trade Center sidewalk vendor who was missing after the collapse of the Twin Towers, but was then found alive six months later in one of the local hospitals.

In the aftermath of the horrific October 7 terrorist attack, the veteran Israeli army Rabbi Yaakov Ruzah, who had previously been involved in resolving agunah cases after the Yom Kippur War, was charged with identification of remains of victims, and he mentioned (*Times of Israel*, December 27, 2023) that the work done by halakhic authorities in the aftermath of 9/11 provided a precedent for identification on the basis of DNA evidence. There was ultimately a measure of comfort that was achieved in following time-honored halakhic processes in resolving the tragic agunah situations of 9/11 that not only provided a framework for the widows and their families to move forward but also helped develop protocols for resolution of the tragic cases that would unfortunately need to be addressed two decades later. We pray that in the future all these discussions will be purely theoretical in nature and that we will merit to experience *nechemas Tzion ve'Yerushayalim* speedily in our days.



This article is adapted from Rabbi Yona Reiss's "*Heter Agunos B'Ikvos HaPigua B'Migdalei HaTe'omim*," which appears in the newly released *Kanfei Yona*, Volume II, authored by Rabbi Reiss and published by RIETS Press. *Kanfei Yona* (Volumes I and II) is available at rietspress.org.

Making a Personal Akeidas Yitzchok by Blowing the Shofar

Is the mitzvah of shofar essentially the blowing or the hearing its sounds? The answer to this question could greatly impact our shofar experience on Rosh Hashanah.

Many Rishonim learn that the appropriate brachah to be made upon performing the mitzvah of shofar is “*lishmoa bekol shofar* (to hear the sound of the shofar),” and this is how Rav Yosef Karo paskins in *Shulchan Aruch* (O.C. 585).

The BaHaG (quoted by the Rosh at the end of RH 4:10) explains that the reason why we make the blessing “to listen to the sound of the shofar” rather than “to blow the shofar” or “on the blowing of the shofar” is because by hearing the sounds of the shofar one fulfills his obligation, and not through blowing it. Accordingly, the mitzvah is to listen to the sound of the shofar, not to blow it. While practically indispensable, blowing the shofar is not essential to the fulfillment of the mitzvah.

It is this approach that understandably lends itself to the famous statement of the Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuva* 3:4) that the

shofar’s voice resonates with the message, “wake up from your slumber, etc.”

Rabbeinu Tam (Rosh, Ibid), however, holds that the correct brachah is “*al tekias shofar* (on the blowing of the shofar).” While there are other possible explanations, if we take the rationale of the BaHaG into account, the implication would be that Rabbeinu Tam holds that the mitzvah is essentially to blow the shofar.

In fact, Rav Achai Gaon (*Sheiltos* 171) writes explicitly that the mitzvah is to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. This is also the opinion of Rav Moshe of Coucy (*Sefer Hamitzvos Gedolos* positive mitzvah 42), Rabbi Yitzchak of Corbeil (*Sefer Hamitzvos Katan* 92), and Rav Eliezer of Metz (*Yereim* 419).

How might these Rishonim understand the meaning of the mitzvah of shofar if the essence of the mitzvah is the blowing?

The Gemara (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a) states:

תניא א"ר יהודה משום ר"ע מפני מה אמרה תורה הביאו עומר בפסח מפני שהפסח זמן תבואה הוא אמר הקב"ה הביאו לפני עומר



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בפסח כדי שתתברך לכם תבואה שבשדות ומפני מה אמרה תורה הביאו שתי הלחם בעצרת מפני שעצרת זמן פירות האילן הוא אמר הקב"ה הביאו לפני שתי הלחם בעצרת כדי שיתברכו לכם פירות האילן ומפני מה אמרה תורה נסכו מים בחג אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא נסכו לפני מים בחג כדי שיתברכו לכם גשמי שנה ואמרו לפני בראש השנה מלכיות זכרונות ושופרות מלכיות כדי שתמליכוני עליכם זכרונות כדי שיעלה זכרוניכם לפני לטובה ובמה בשופר אמר רבי אבהו למה תוקעין בשופר של איל אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא תקעו לפני בשופר של איל כדי שאזכור לכם עקידת יצחק בן אברהם ומעלה אני עליכם כאילו עקדתם עצמכם לפני.

It is taught Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rabbi Akiva: For what did the

Torah say bring the omer on Pesach? Because Pesach is the time of grain, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: Bring the omer before Me on Pesach so that the grain in the fields will be blessed for you. And for what did the Torah say: Bring the two loaves on Shavuot? Because Shavuot is the time of fruits from trees, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: Bring the two loaves before Me on Shavuot so that the fruits from trees will be blessed for you. And for what did the Torah say: Pour water on Succos? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: Pour water before Me on Succos so that the rains of the year will be blessed for you. And recite before Me on Rosh Hashanah Malchios, Zichronos, and Shofaros: Malchios so that you will crown Me as King over you; Zichronos so that your remembrance will rise before Me for good; and with what? With the shofar. Rabbi Abbahu said: Why does one blow with a shofar of a ram? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: Blow before Me with a shofar from a ram, so that I will remember for you the binding of Yitzchok, son of Avraham, and I will consider it to you as if you had bound yourselves before Me.”

Rebbi Abbahu states that Hakadosh Baruch Hu requests that we blow our tekios from the shofar of a ram, so that He will invoke for us the merit of akeidas Yitzchok. But that is not where his statement ends. In fact, the word *zechus* (merit) does not appear at all. The reason for invoking akeidas Yitzchok is so it will be considered as if we have done our OWN akeidah! Akeidas Yitzchok is not being used as a merit, it is being used as a model. Apparently, on Rosh Hashanah, we are supposed to be making our own personal akeidah.

Similarly, the Gemara is clearly delineating a pattern: if you want brachah in something, you need to first sacrifice it to Hashem. Grain, fruit, water and man.

The midrash (*Psikta Rabasi*, Piska 40) brings a related drashah. By all other

sacrifices, the Torah uses the terminology of sacrifice, *v'hikravtem* (and you shall offer), whereas by the sacrifice of Rosh Hashanah (Bamidbar 29:2), the terminology used is *v'asisem* (and you shall make) an offering. The implication is that vis-à-vis Rosh Hashanah, we are not merely sacrificing the animal; we are making ourselves the sacrifice.

According to one explanation of the Rama, this process includes the preparation before Rosh HaShanah as well. The Rama writes (O.C. 581) that the minhag is for Ashkenazim to have a minimum of four days of Selichos prior to Rosh HaShanah. One reason for this (see *Mishnah Berurah* *ibid*, s.k. 6), is because it corresponds to the required time for *bikur mumim* (checking a sacrifice for blemishes) prior to its sacrifice. Since we are the sacrifice on Rosh HaShanah, it necessitates a personal *bikur mumim* four days prior.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are to accept the Malchus of Hashem by making our own personal akeidas Yitzchok.

With what? With the shofar.

Rav Moshe Wolfson *zt”l* (*Emunas Itecha* chelek 3, Rosh Hashanah) explains that our life force comes from the “breath” that Hakadosh Baruch Hu breathes into us, as it says by Adam HaRishon, “And He breathed into his nose the breath of life” (Breishis 2:7). With the blowing of the shofar, we are returning our breath of life to its source. He points out that the *gematria* of “*nishmas chaim*” equals “*yom teruah yehiyeh lachem*” (adding one to represent the *kollel*).

With the blowing of the shofar, we are rededicating our essence to Hashem. We are making our own akeidah.

I would like to suggest that this idea also permeates another minhag brought by the Rama.

The Rama (O.C. 585:1) writes that the minhag is to blow shofar on the bimah, in the location of *krias haTorah*, as opposed

to the location where the *shaliach tzibbur* davens. One could have imagined that the proper place to blow shofar would be next to the chazzan; after all, the shofar in *chazaras hashatz* of Mussaf would appear to be a function of our tefillos.

The *Mishnah Berurah* (*ibid*, s.k. 3) explains that we want the merit of our public Torah learning (*krias haTorah*) to protect us and allow us to be remembered before Hashem for good.

However, perhaps there is an additional meaning here.

The Rambam (*Hilchos Bais Habechirah* 2) writes that the location of the mizbeach in the Bais HaMikdash had extreme precision; it was the exact location of akeidas Yitzchok.

In a shul, the bimah is our mizbeach. A shul, a *Mikdash m'at*, mirrors the Bais HaMikdash. Every sefer Torah contains the luchos, says the Rambam (see *Hilchos STa”M* 10:10), and therefore requires an aron (see Devarim 10:1-2 and Rashi there). The paroches therefore separates our Kodesh HaKadashim from our Kodesh. The menorah expresses itself with the *ner tamid* and the *mizbeach haketoresh* with the amud from where the chazzan davens, as per the words of Dovid HaMelech, “let my prayer be pleasing to You as ketores” (Tehillim 141:2). The bimah, which stands apart from the front of the shul, is where we learn about—and thereby bring—the korban mussaf every Yom Tov (see *Menachos* 110a and *Yoma* 86b), and we encircle it with our lulavim on Succos. The bimah is our mizbeach.

It is therefore apropos for our blowing of the shofar, our personal akeidas Yitzchok, to be made on our personal mizbeach in each and every shul.

TESHUVA

NOW, OR IN 4,000 WEEKS' TIME?

In 2021, during the COVID pandemic, the British author Oliver Burkeman published his thought-provoking and creative bestseller *Four Thousand Weeks*.

Although not Jewish himself, Burkeman has Jewish ancestry and several of the ideas he presents, from a broad range of philosophical thinking and religious traditions, strike a chord with Jewish values.

His central objective is, “to confront the ultimate time management problem; the question of how best to use our ridiculously brief time on the planet, which amounts on average to almost four thousand weeks.”¹

I imagine this objective resonates with religious Jews in particular, thinking of how best to use their time in the service of God, conscious of the mitzvot that can be performed every day.

So too might Burkeman’s prescription not to attempt to get everything done, enslaved by an inbox that will never empty, and to-do lists that will never be fulfilled. Instead, he posits, focus fully on

the meaningful things now rather than perpetually postponing them, imagining that there will eventually be time to do everything. And stop beating yourself up about the things that are beyond your own limitations. Know your limitations, stay within them, and you will be happier.

By this stage, I am thinking what I imagine many communal rabbis will be thinking: Can I apply Burkeman’s ideas for a drasha during the Yamim Noraim, especially if I want to talk about *teshuva*?!

An attempt at answering this question first requires an attempt at understanding the development of the word *teshuva* and its impact on us.

For all its importance, significance and the central emphasis we place it on it daily, especially during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, the word *teshuva*, when meaning repentance, does not clearly appear in this form in the Tanach. Even though this concept of *teshuva* does exist, such as in Yehuda’s response to Binyamin’s imprisonment, David Hamelech’s reaction to the death of Uriah, and the dramatic repentance of King Menashe in



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the First Temple period, it lies underneath the text rather than explicitly present.

Even in Rambam’s *Hilchot Teshuva*,² as well as in the siddur and machzor, the words we find, such as *kaparah*, *vidu’i*, *taharah*, *selichah* etc., are expressions of what is necessary to achieve *teshuva*. The noun clearly missing is *teshuva*!

Instead, *teshuva*, when considering its meaning of repentance, is best understood as return, particularly to a physical place.³ In particular, as Ramban famously explains, *teshuva* has a national element to it, the return to the Land of Israel, when Moshe reassures Bnei Yisrael that despite their sins and exile, God

will return us to the Land once we have returned to him.⁴

Arguably, amongst the greatest figures who conceptualised *teshuva* into a noun for us and especially as individuals, were Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish (Resh Lakish). And what transformations they undertook! Rabbi Akiva, initially a shepherd and disdainer of scholars, became one of the primary exponents of *teshuva*. So did the great Resh Lakish, the bandit who became a sage. Both displayed incredible faith and determination to change their lives and reach beyond their supposed limitations in ways we could never have imagined.

With a tragic irony, the transformation displayed by Rabbi Akiva and Resh Lakish only happened after the first part of Moshe's words in Sefer Devarim had come to pass. The *Beit Hamikdash* was in ruins, Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel was no more, and enormous numbers of Jews were in exile, in Babylonia, Rome and elsewhere. The Land of Israel was to lose its dominant status as the most significant Jewish community.

It would have been tempting to feel that the game was up for Judaism, that without a *Beit Hamikdash* and *Kohen Gadol*, there was no way to seek forgiveness for our sins, so that we were destined to live with sin and guilt.

The impact of such views on the development of Christianity and early Christians, such as Paul, was highly significant and continues to this day.

By contrast, the success of Chazal in demonstrating how *teshuva* applies for individuals can help us move beyond sin and failure so that we can move positively into the future.

This, we can suggest, is an underpinning of the machzor texts on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, sustaining and challenging us as individuals, alongside our ongoing thanks to HaKadosh Baruch

Hu for the miracles and blessings of our national return to the Land and the establishment of Medinat Yisrael.

Burkeman's book appeared the year after Rabbi Jonathan Sacks passed away. Had he been alive, I am convinced that Rabbi Sacks would have responded to Burkeman's theories, most likely when teaching about the Yamim Noraim. In his article, *The Word 'Now': Reflections of the Psychology of Teshuva*,⁵ Rabbi Sacks cited the *pasuk*, "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you?"⁶ Chazal, sensitive to what the word 'now' teaches us, said it means "nothing other than *teshuva*."⁷

What is the connection between "*teshuva*" and "now," asks Rabbi Sacks?

*Of all mitzvot, indeed of all ideas in Judaism, teshuva brings us most unremittingly to the bedrock psychological truth; that we are precisely what at any given moment we will ourselves to be. No historian whose concern is to explain the past, no scientist whose business is to predict the future, can deliver this particular truth, which belongs to the radical present. Teshuva insists that we can liberate ourselves from our past, defy predictions of our future, by a single act of turning ... as long as we do it now.*⁸

Many years later, in private correspondence to a member of the British Jewish community seeking guidance on "how to reinvent yourself," he wrote:

*Constantly reflect on what you were put on this earth to do I have a principle that has served me well for many years. It goes: don't do what you do well. Do what only you can do. Many people fail to be what they could become because they do many things well, while ignoring what only they can do (what Milton called, "the one talent which is death to hide").*⁹

Rabbi Sacks' life mirrored these words, an ongoing focus on what he felt called to do rather than staying in the lane of comfort.

Burkeman's thoughtful thesis aims to

liberate people from the pressure and worry of always feeling behind. There is much to gain from his work.

This is good, but not good enough. *Teshuva*, especially as presented by Chazal, gives us the opportunity to find hope, dreams and a vision for the future. It has inspired countless individuals, amongst them some of our greatest figures, to live better and more accomplished lives even with the pressure and worry that this can sometimes bring. It urges us to act today, rather than surrender to the lure of procrastination.

Teshuva has given us an opportunity to engage with God on these matters daily through tefillah and especially at the *eit ratzon* (opportune time) of the Yamim Noraim. It has helped the continuity of the Jewish people.

It has also inspired, with our gratitude to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, the return of our people to the Land of Israel, as the words of Devarim chapter 30 appear to spring off the page and into life.

We beseech HaKadosh Baruch Hu for life in its fullest sense and span. And let us try to apply the lessons of *teshuva* right now, even if it means going out of lane.

Endnotes

1. Quoted from the back cover of the book. See also www.oliverburkeman.com/fourthousandweeks.
2. See examples in ch. 1.
3. See for example, *On Repentance, the thought and oral discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik*, Aronson, 1994, p88-91.
4. Devarim ch.30 and commentary of Ramban.
5. Originally published in *L'Eylah*, (Issue 20, 1985) and then later in *Tradition in an Untraditional Age* (ch. 11, first published in 1990, latest edition Maggid Books, 2023).
6. Devarim 10:12.
7. *Bereishit Rabba* 21:6. Also see Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuva* 7:2.
8. *Tradition in an Untraditional Age*, pp 203-204.
9. Email correspondence, April 25, 2001.

Choosing to See



Free Will as a Paradigm of Teshuva

Free will, the ability to choose, is one of the most powerful tools Hashem has given us for growth and teshuva. As we enter the Yamim Noraim, the opening pesukim of Parshas Re'eh offer a profound framework for understanding both the nature of our choices and the way those choices can transform our lives.

רֵאָה אֲנֹכִי נָתַן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה. אֶת
הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמָעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם...
וְהַקְלָלָה אִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ...

See, I place before you today blessing and curse: the blessing, if you heed the commandments of Hashem your God... and the curse, if you do not heed...

Devarim 11:26–28

These pesukim are among the most familiar in Sefer Devarim, yet upon closer examination they are surprisingly enigmatic. Several fundamental questions immediately arise.

First, why is this posuk necessary at all? Moshe Rabbeinu has spent the entire Sefer Devarim and much of Parshas Eikev delivering one of the Torah's most passionate demands for faithfulness, as we

can see from the second perek of Shema. Klal Yisrael has already been reminded repeatedly that obedience to Hashem brings blessing, while disobedience brings tragedy. Every young child knows that mitzvos are good and *aveiros* are bad. What does this brief introduction add?

Second, why does the Torah begin with the command "*re'eh*"—"See"? Throughout Sefer Devarim Moshe repeatedly implores the nation to *hear*: "Shema Yisrael." Why, here, is seeing emphasized instead of hearing?

Finally, what exactly are we being asked to see? The blessing and curse themselves are not visible objects. What is the Torah directing our vision toward?

These questions reveal that these opening verses introduce something far deeper than another review of reward and punishment. They invite us to reconsider what blessing and curse truly mean. More importantly, they force us to confront how we can make better choices to have a fulfilling and meaningful Yamim Noraim.



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There Are No More Stickers

One remarkable approach is offered by Rav David of Lelov,¹ who understands these verses not merely as a discussion of consequences, but as a description of spiritual maturity and how we make decisions.

Children require incentives. Chazal teach that education often begins *shelo lishmah*, as the Gemara in *Pesachim* 109a says, "They said about Rabbi Akiva that he would distribute roasted grain and nuts to children on Erev Pesach so that they

would remain awake and ask questions." In *Hilchos Teshuva* 10:5, the Rambam writes, "We teach children... to serve Hashem out of fear and in order to receive reward, until their understanding matures..."

We reward children for good behavior so that they develop positive habits and eventually learn to value goodness for its own sake. External rewards serve an important educational purpose. Since their power of *bechira* is not formed and their ability to make choices that are best for them is limited, we need to provide external incentives to encourage them along the path that is best for them. It is interesting to note that when the Rambam formulated this most fundamental principle in *Hilchos Teshuva* (at the beginning of chapter 5), instead of referring to freedom of will as *bechira chofshis*, as it is commonly called, he uses the term "*reshus*."

דבר זה עיקר גדול הוא והוא עמוד התורה והמצוה שנאמר ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים, וכתוב ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום, כלומר שהרשות בידכם וכל שיחפץ האדם לעשות ממעשה בני האדם עושה בין טובים בין רעים, ומפני זה הענין נאמר מי יתן והיה לבבם זה להם, כלומר שאין הבורא כופה בני האדם ולא גוזר עליהן לעשות טובה או רעה אלא הכל מסור להם. *This principle is of great importance, and it is the foundation of the Torah and the commandments, as it is stated: "See, I have set before you today life," and it is written: "See, I place before you today"—meaning that the choice is in your hands. Whatever a person wishes to do among human actions, he may do, whether good or evil. For this reason it is stated: "Would that they had such a heart as this," meaning that the Creator does not compel people, nor decree that they must do good or evil; rather, everything is entrusted to them.*

Hilchos Teshuva 5:3

Moreinu Rav Herschel Schachter shlita explained² that in one of his drashas for Aseres Yemei Teshuva, Rav Soloveitchik suggested that perhaps the Rambam meant to bring out the following idea: in

modern Hebrew, we refer to the elections as "*bechiroi*." At election time, we are presented with a fixed set of candidates (or parties) and we choose from among them. Man, however, not only has "*bechira chofshis*" to choose from among the various options that are presented to him, but he even has "*reshus*," i.e., the ability to choose a path in life that was never even presented to him as an option.

Moshe Rabbeinu, however, is speaking not to children but to a nation that has witnessed the greatest revelations in history. They saw the splitting of the Yam Suf, they ate the *mann* every morning, they drank from Miriam's miraculous well. They stood at Har Sinai and heard the voice of Hashem.

After forty years of unparalleled Divine providence, Moshe tells them, in effect: "*There are no more stickers for being a good boy.*" You have reached adulthood; now you must make hard choices about choosing *berachah* or *kelalah*.

Moshe is telling them: the issue is no longer merely whether mitzvos produce reward. The issue is whether you are prepared to do what is right because it is true, because it is Hashem's will, even when the reward is distant or invisible.

This insight has profound implications as Elul approaches.

There is an idea attributed to Rav Wolbe and other *baalei mussar* that a person should not ignore the physical self and that healthy spiritual growth includes acknowledging the needs of the body and, at times, even rewarding it for spiritual accomplishment. Even spiritual rewards are important but not the focus, as Chazal write in *Pirkei Avos* 1:3, "Do not be like servants who serve their master for the sake of a reward; rather, be like servants who serve without condition of reward, and let the fear of Heaven be upon you." Those rewards remain secondary. Mature *avodas Hashem* ultimately means doing what is right because it is right.

We all know the areas of life where this challenge appears. Sometimes it is a mitzvah between man and Hashem, sometimes it is between man and his fellow man. Sometimes it means having a difficult conversation that we continue postponing, sometimes it means apologizing, sometimes it means confronting a painful weakness. Sometimes, that difficult conversation is with Hashem Himself.

For example, Gustavo Razzetti writes³ of "conversation debt," the emotional burden created when necessary conversations are continually delayed. The longer they are postponed, the heavier they become. Relationships slowly deteriorate not because of one dramatic event but because unresolved issues are allowed to fester.

The same phenomenon exists spiritually. We know there are areas where we need to return, repair, and reconnect. Yet because the first step is uncomfortable, we delay it until the distance grows larger.

Moshe's message is that maturity means choosing *berachah*, not because someone is offering a reward, but because closeness to Hashem is itself the greatest reward.

Why "See"?

The second question concerns the Torah's unusual opening word. Why does Moshe say "See" rather than "Hear"? The Chasam Sofer on Parshas Re'eh, drawing upon the Gemara in *Kiddushin* 40b, offers a profound explanation:

לעולם יראה אדם עצמו כאילו חציו חייב וחציו זכאי... עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לכף זכות.

A person should always regard himself as though he were half liable and half meritorious ... If he performs one mitzvah, fortunate is he, for he has tipped the scales in favor of merit for himself and for the entire world.

According to the Chasam Sofer, this explains why the parashah begins with the singular "*re'eh*." Before Moshe speaks

to the nation collectively, he addresses each individual personally. See that your choices matter, that your actions are never insignificant and that every mitzvah has cosmic consequences.

This perspective fundamentally changes how we live. Many people never achieve greatness, not because they lack talent but because they underestimate the significance of their own actions. They convince themselves that someone else will solve the problem.

History repeatedly demonstrates otherwise. Every transformative institution begins with one individual who believes that one person's actions matter. That is Moshe's challenge to Klal Yisrael, *Re'eh*. See yourself as someone capable of changing the world and make the decisions that will get you there.

Learning to See Blessing

A second interpretation of "*re'eh*" emerges from the writings of Rav Menachem Ben Zion Sacks. He suggests⁴ that the Torah is teaching us not merely to choose blessing but first to recognize it. How we see the world profoundly shapes how we live within it. A person who views life exclusively through the lens of disappointment eventually loses hope.

A person who trains himself to recognize Hashem's blessings even amidst genuine hardship develops resilience, gratitude, and spiritual confidence. This does not mean denying suffering. Judaism has never demanded emotional dishonesty. On Tisha B'Av we mourn with complete sincerity. We cry over destruction that has not yet been repaired. Yet even mourning contains hope.

The Gemara in *Taanis* 30b teaches: כל המתאבל על ירושלים זוכה ורואה בשמחתה—Whoever truly mourns Jerusalem will merit **seeing** its future joy.

Rabbi Akiva could laugh when others cried⁵ because he understood that the

fulfillment of one prophecy guaranteed the fulfillment of the next. The foxes wandering through the ruins were not evidence that redemption would never come; they were evidence that history remained under Divine direction.

This perspective also echoes through our tefillos on Yom Tov: *Uvchein tzaddikim yir'u v'yismachu...* The righteous "see" and therefore rejoice. Their joy is not naïve optimism. It is the result of disciplined vision. They have learned to recognize Hashem's hand even when His purposes remain partially hidden.

Writing in 1977, Rav Menachem Ben Zion Sacks argued that one could not honestly observe the rebirth of Eretz Yisrael with its extraordinary agricultural flourishing, national revival, and miraculous survival through repeated wars without recognizing unmistakable expressions of Divine blessing. The ability to notice blessings is itself a spiritual achievement. During the Yamim Noraim season, perhaps one of the most transformative exercises is simply learning to identify the countless blessings already present in our lives.

What Is Berachah?

Having explored why Moshe commands us to "see," we can now ask a more fundamental question. What exactly is the blessing that Hashem places before us?

The answer depends on how we define one of the Torah's most familiar words. The Rishonim debate the precise meaning of the word ברוך. Among the most influential explanations is that of Rav Chaim of Volozhin in *Nefesh HaChaim*, (2:22) which connects the word *berachah* to the word *bereichah*, a reservoir or flowing pool of water.

When we "bless" Hashem, we are certainly not adding anything to Him. Rather, we are expressing our desire that His Divine goodness continue to

flow into creation without interruption. Accordingly, *berachah* is not simply material success. It is a continued connection to Hashem, the source from whom all blessing flows. If this is true, then the opposite also becomes clear.

The Gemara, *Sotah* 49a writes, "From the day the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed... every day, curses (*kelalah*) increase more than the previous day." The Ramban⁶ explains that these are the curses found in the "Tochacha," the rebuke found in Parshas Ki Savo. Rav Moshe Shapiro zt"l explained⁷ that the Ramban means to say that these curses affect every aspect of our physical day and are pervasive in our lives. It will only end when Mashiach comes and ends the current exile. Rav Shapiro writes: "[In exile] our lives are antithetical to what they should be in every aspect."

Kelalah is not merely punishment. It is distance, alienation, disconnection from the Source of life itself. The greatest blessing is closeness to Hashem. The greatest curse is living disconnected from Him.

This understanding transforms the opening verses of Parshas Re'eh. Moshe is not simply describing rewards and punishments. He is describing two fundamentally different ways of living. One life is oriented toward connection. The other toward separation. Every choice either deepens or weakens that relationship.

Endnotes

1. *Mayainah Shel Torah* p. 60.
2. https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2008/parsha/rsch_reeh.html.
3. Razzetti's approach is reviewed in Rodger Dean Duncan, "Conversational Debt: The Expensive Bill Many Teams Are Quietly Paying," *Forbes*, June 16, 2026, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rodgerdeanduncan/2026/06/16/conversational-debt-the-expensive-bill-many-teams-are-quietly-paying/>.
4. Menachem Tzion p.370.
5. Makkos 24b.
6. Devarim 16.
7. Re'eh, emunah, 12th Principle.

The Question That Never Ends

Why Sefer Yonah Is the Perfect Yom Kippur Reading

Sefer Yonah is one of the most unresolved books in Tanach. It raises far more questions than it answers, and it concludes not with a resolution but with a question posed by God Himself—a question left hanging for every reader to answer.

Perhaps that very ambiguity explains why the book has generated such an astonishing range of interpretations. Some have understood it as historical narrative, others as prophetic parable, while the Vilna Gaon famously interpreted it as an allegory for the journey of the human soul. Few books in Tanach have inspired such radically different readings, perhaps because the book almost demands interpretation while refusing to explain itself.

Its difficulties begin immediately. “*Vayehi devar Hashem el Yonah...*” The opening sounds as though we have entered the middle of a story. Who is Yonah? Why him? Although Sefer Melakhim identifies him and the Midrash fills in additional details, this book provides no introduction whatsoever. It exists in its own literary bubble. The surprises

continue. God sends a Jewish prophet not to Israel but to a foreign nation. When God calls prophets, they often hesitate. Moshe objects. Yirmiyahu protests his youth. Amos insists he is only a shepherd. But they answer. Yonah does something unprecedented: he runs away. Even more striking is the cast of characters. The pagan sailors display remarkable integrity and compassion. The people of Nineveh immediately repent. Ironically, the only character who consistently resists God’s will is the prophet himself.

And then comes the ending. Sefer Yonah is the only book in Tanach to conclude with a question rather than an answer. What is God asking of us? And why do we read this on Yom Kippur? Traditionally, the answer seems obvious. The *Machzor Vitry* explains that we read Yonah because the people of Nineveh repented. Radak similarly writes that the book serves as a rebuke to Israel: if a foreign nation can repent after hearing a single prophecy, how much more should Israel respond to generations of prophetic warnings. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* emphasizes God’s acceptance of Nineveh’s repentance, while



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the Avudraham sees the book as teaching that no one can flee from God. All of these are profound lessons. Yet perhaps there is another reason Chazal placed Sefer Yonah at the climax of Yom Kippur.

Notice something remarkable. Every time God calls Yonah, the prophet is silent. In Chapter One, God commands him to arise and go to Nineveh, and Yonah says nothing. After the fish, God calls him a second time, and again Yonah offers no response. This silence is startling. A prophet’s defining characteristic is speech. Prophets respond to God’s call—sometimes with “Hineni,” sometimes with protest. Moshe, Yirmiyahu, and Amos all answer before objecting. Yonah

alone remains silent. Only in Chapter Four does he finally speak, and all the words withheld from God pour out at once. His complaint is not really about the mission. It is about God Himself: “I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God...”

These words echo God’s own self-description after the sin of the Golden Calf. But unlike Moshe, who invokes God’s mercy as a reason to forgive Israel, Yonah cites those very attributes as the reason he fled. He cannot reconcile himself to a God who forgives people as wicked as Nineveh.

Daat Mikra suggests a striking explanation. Yonah’s objection is not political or personal—it is moral. How can justice permit forgiveness? Nineveh’s citizens murdered, oppressed, and exploited others. They don sackcloth, repent sincerely, and suddenly everything is erased? What about the victims? Where is justice? Suddenly Yonah’s anguish becomes understandable. He would rather die than live in a world where mercy appears to come at the expense of justice. Strikingly, when Yonah invokes these Divine attributes, he omits “*emet*”—truth—even though he is introduced as Yonah son of Amitai, a name rooted in truth itself. That tension captures the heart of his struggle: a prophet of “truth”

who cannot accept a world in which justice is complicated by mercy.

At this point, another feature of the book comes into focus. The parallels to the Flood are too numerous to ignore: violence (*chamas*), a boat, animals, forty days, Divine regret, and even a “*yonah*.” But Sefer Yonah is not simply echoing the Flood—it is reversing it. Both stories begin with societies steeped in violence. The crucial difference is that Noah’s generation refuses to change while Nineveh repents, showing that Divine judgment is never divorced from the possibility of transformation. Yonah seems to expect another Flood—a world in which justice demands destruction.

It is possible that this explains why the pagans are portrayed so positively. Usually, the moral contrast in Tanach is between righteous Israel and corrupt nations. Here the contrast is reversed. The sailors are decent. The Ninevites repent. Yonah, the lone Jew and prophet, struggles to accept God’s compassion toward them.

The final question God asks Yonah is therefore addressed to us as well: Can you rejoice when mercy triumphs over judgment? Can you accept a world in which repentance genuinely transforms people?



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This may be why Chazal chose Sefer Yonah for the closing hours of Yom Kippur. They could have selected countless passages about repentance. Instead, they chose the one biblical book that refuses to resolve its central tension. God’s final question to Yonah becomes God’s question to every one of us. How will we choose to live? Will we define ourselves and others by past failures, insisting that justice alone have the final word? Or will we make room for the possibility that people can change, that forgiveness can be real, and that compassion is one of justice’s highest expressions? Since the Flood, God has already shown that a world built on strict justice alone cannot endure. The question Sefer Yonah leaves us with is not what the answer is—but whether we are willing to live inside the question at all.

Will we define ourselves and others by past failures, insisting that justice alone have the final word? Or will we make room for the possibility that people can change, that forgiveness can be real, and that compassion is one of justice’s highest expressions?

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BOUND TOGETHER

What the Four Species Teach Us About Klal Yisroel

The lulav and esrog are the stars of Chag HaSukkos. The hadassim and aravos seem to play supporting roles. In truth, though, the four species stand as equals. The mitzvah of *arba minim* can only be fulfilled when all four are held together—not one substituting for another, not one more essential than the rest.

Four Species, Four Types of Jew

The Midrash in *Vayikra Rabbah* (30:12) teaches that each of the *arba minim* represents a different type of Jew. The esrog, which has both taste and fragrance, represents the Jew who possesses both Torah and *gemilus chassadim* (acts of lovingkindness). The lulav, which comes from the date palm, whose fruit has taste but no fragrance, represents the Jew who has Torah but lacks *gemilus chassadim*. The hadas, fragrant but tasteless, represents the Jew who has *gemilus chassadim* but lacks

Torah. And the arava, with neither taste nor fragrance, represents the Jew who seems to lack both.

Torah is the foundation of a Jew's life, which may be why the lulav and esrog take the leading roles among the four species. They both possess Torah, the very backbone of our existence. As the *Nefesh HaChaim* (4:11) writes, it is our *talmidei chachamim* who are the true builders of the world. And yet the Midrash insists we not forget the hadassim and aravos. They, too, are indispensable to the mitzvah's completeness.

Taken at face value, the Midrash seems almost extreme: could any Jew truly lack Torah and *gemilus chassadim* entirely? The Rebbe Rayatz (*Maamar Yom-Tov shel Rosh HaShanah*, 5710) explains that such a Jew does possess both — but neither is the defining focus of his life. Whatever nuance we bring to the Midrash's opening lines, its conclusion is unambiguous: "Bind them all together, and they will atone for one



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another." *Achdus* and teshuva come only when every type of Jew is joined to the others. None can be dismissed, not even the hadassim and aravos Jews we might be tempted to overlook. On Sukkos, they too must take their place bound with the others.

The Lesson of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai

The Gemara in *Shabbos* (33b) tells of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai emerging from the cave where he had hidden for

We do not beat the aravos. We beat with the aravos, joining ourselves to the simple, pure faith these Jews embody.

twelve years. He could not comprehend the value of Jews who seemed to live without Torah, and for this he was sent back into the cave for another year. When he finally emerged, he saw a Jew carrying two hadassim, one for *shamor* and one for *zachor*. It is no coincidence that the very species representing the Jew who may lack Torah but possesses *gemilus chassadim* became the vehicle for teaching him this lesson, layered with the depth of the mitzvah of Shabbos. Turning to his son, Rabbi Shimon said: "See how beloved the mitzvos are to the Jewish people." Recognizing the worth of the "hadassim Jew" was precisely the lesson father and son needed to learn. It is a lesson we, too, must internalize each time we lift the *arba minim*.

The Arava Takes Center Stage

On Hoshana Rabbah, the last day of Sukkos, the arava takes on a striking role of its own. It is almost startling: after all the introspection of the Yamim Noraim and the joy of Sukkos, we culminate the season by elevating the very species that represents the Jew who appears to lack

both Torah and *gemilus chassadim*. The message could not be clearer. We are called to accept every member of Klal Yisroel for what he or she contributes to the whole. This is a lesson that resonates powerfully when we recall that the Three Weeks call us to cultivate *ahavas chinam* (baseless love). Every Jew has a role, and only by binding them all together can we say we have truly accomplished the goals of the Yamim Noraim and Sukkos.

The Midrash's closing words, "each one atones for the other," declare that true teshuva is achieved only through this unity. Hoshana Rabbah, with its intense focus on teshuva, returns us to us a message we may have let slip. Every Jew is precious, and *achdus* does not mean that every Jew is the same; it means that different Jews come together, bound as one. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks put it, what matters is the "We" more than the "I." Our greatness as a people lies in our being a people—not merely a collection of individuals, but individuals bound into a whole.

A Living Lesson

In my years working in chinuch and

kiruv — including my ongoing work teaching JSS talmidim who often arrive at Yeshiva University with limited Torah background — I have seen this lesson play out in real life. Welcoming someone as a full member of our *agudah achas* (one unified community) is the only path toward genuine growth in Torah. Respect must come first; only then can we hope for real change. Perhaps this is why Hoshana Rabbah leads directly into Simchas Torah. It reminds us that only after we have recognized every member of the Klal can each person claim his own portion of Torah.

Rav Kook, as quoted by Rav Moshe Tzvi Neria (*Moadei HaRaayah* pg. 128), offers a beautiful reading of the arava: it represents the simple Jew whose connection to Hashem is natural and unaffected, as the Gemara in *Sukkah* (43b) describes. Rav Kook notes that we do not beat the aravos. We beat with the aravos, joining ourselves to the simple, pure faith these Jews embody.

Two Truths, Held Together

We live, always, in two truths at once. Torah is the foundation of Jewish life, and this is why the lulav and esrog stand at the center. But we must never forget the worth of every Jew and the way we are all bound together in pursuit of the goals of Tishrei. May we merit a true *zman simchaseinu*, a joy that carries us all together through the rest of the year.



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Rabbi Seymour Brickman and Devora Brickman A"H

WHY WE SEARCH FOR A BEAUTIFUL LULAV

Adapted by Rabbi Elly Deutsch from Rabbi Sobolofsky's shiurim

Few mitzvos are approached with the care we give the *arba minim*. We spend time looking over our purchase, comparing one lulav or esrog to the next. We want a beautiful set of *arba minim*. Where does this come from?

The Gemara (*Sukkah* 11b) rules that although we follow the opinion of Rabbanan that a lulav does not need an *eged* (binding) to be valid, there is nevertheless a mitzvah to bind it:

כמאן אולא הא דתניא לולב מצוה לאגודו ...
לעולם רבנן היא ומשום שנאמר זה א-לי ואנוהו
התנאה לפניו במצות.

Whose opinion is represented in the beraisa that says that there is a mitzvah to bind the lulav? It is the opinion of Rabbanan because it is written zeh Keili vi'anvehu (this is my G-d and I will glorify Him)—adorn yourself before Him with mitzvos.

The fuller version of the beraisa appears in *Shabbos* (133b):

זה א-לי ואנוהו התנאה לפניו במצות עשה לפניו
סוכה נאה, ולולב נאה, ושופר נאה, ציצית נאה,
ספר תורה נאה.

Zeh Keili vi'anvehu (this is my G-d and I will glorify Him)—adorn yourself before Him with mitzvos. Make before Him a beautiful sukkah, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, beautiful tzitzis, a beautiful sefer Torah.

This is the source of *hiddur mitzvah*, and the lulav sits at the head of the list.

But the source itself is surprising. *Hiddur mitzvah* is derived from a verse in *Az Yashir*, the song Klal Yisrael sang at the sea. What does the way we choose a lulav have to do with *kri'as Yam Suf*?

The Rambam (*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 2:2) writes that contemplating the greatness of Hashem's world produces two responses at once: love of Him and awe of Him. Seeing what He has made, a person is drawn toward Him and is simultaneously humbled before Him.

If contemplating the ordinary world



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produces both, an open miracle should do so even more. And at the Sea, the Torah records one of them explicitly:

וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת ה' וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ בֹּה' וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ.
The people feared Hashem, and they believed in Hashem and in Moshe His servant.
Shemos 14:31



See more shiurim and articles from Rabbi Sobolofsky at www.yutorah.org/teachers/rabbi-zvi-sobolofsky/

After the plagues and the splitting of the Sea, that awe is exactly what we would expect. What the Torah does not say is that they loved Him. And *yirah* alone is a precarious place to stand. A person who feels only awe keeps his distance; he is too frightened to come close. The awe that should have drawn Klal Yisrael toward Hashem could just as easily have kept them at a distance.

That is the work of *Az Yashir*. Moshe Rabbeinu opens the shirah to give voice to the love that awe alone would never have expressed. The word that expresses it is *vi'anvehu*.

Vi'anvehu is difficult to translate, and Chazal read it in four different ways. Remarkably, all four appear together in a single passage of the *Mechilta* on this verse:

ואנוהו. רבי ישמעאל אומר: וכי אפשר לבשר דם להנוות לקונו? אלא אנוה לו במצוות: אעשה לפני לולב נאה, סוכה נאה, ציצית נאה, תפלה נאה. אבא שאול אומר: הדמה לו — מה הוא חנון, אף אתה תהי חנון ורחום. רבי יוסה אומר: נוותיו ושבחו של מי שאמר והיה העולם, בפני כל אומות העולם. רבי יוסה בן דרמסקית אומר: אעשה לפניו בית מקדש נאה, ואין נאה אלא בית המקדש, שנאמר 'ואת נוהו השמו' (תהלים עט:), 'חזה ציון קרית מועדנו, ענין תראינה ירושלים נוה שאנן' (ישעיה לג:). רבי עקיבה אומר: אדבר נוותיו ושבחו של הקדוש ברוך הוא בפני כל אומות העולם.

Here is a summary of the four opinions:

1. Adorning the mitzvos. Rabbi Yishmael asks how flesh and blood could possibly beautify its Creator, and answers that we beautify Him through the mitzvos: a beautiful lulav,

a beautiful sukkah, beautiful tzitzis, a beautiful tefillah. This is *hiddur mitzvah*, and note which mitzvah he names first.

- 2. Becoming like Him.** Abba Shaul reads ואנוהו as *ani v'hu*, "I and He," be like Him: just as He is gracious and compassionate, so too you must be gracious and compassionate.
- 3. Declaring His praise.** Reading *vi'anvehu* from *noy*, beauty, Rabbi Yosi and Rabbi Akiva understand it as telling over His praise before the nations of the world. Rashi (Shemos 15:2) presents this as, *asaper noyo v'shivcho l'va'ei olam*, I will recount His beauty and His praise to all who enter the world.
- 4. Building Him a dwelling.** Reading *vi'anvehu* from *naveh*, a dwelling place, Rabbi Yosi ben Durmaskis renders it as building Hashem a beautiful Beis HaMikdash. Onkelos translates the phrase the same way, *v'evnei lei makdesha*, I will build Him a Mikdash.

In reality, they are one idea. Each of the four represents a different expression of love for Hashem.

- 1. Hiddur mitzvah.** A person whose only concern is to fulfill his obligation performs the mitzvah plainly; he has done what he was told. A person who loves Hashem is not satisfied with the bare minimum. He wants the mitzvah done in the best way it can be done. Beautifying a mitzvah is not a statement about the object, it is a

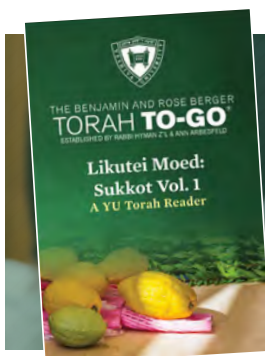
statement about the relationship.

- 2. Becoming like Him.** A young child says he wants to do whatever his father does. He does not say it out of fear. He says it because he loves his father and wants to be like him. When we tell Hashem that we want to resemble Him, we are saying that we love Him.
- 3. Praise.** Praise does not come out of *yiras Shamayim*. Fear produces silence. It is love that makes a person want everyone else to know what he knows.
- 4. Building a dwelling.** Someone who is only afraid of Hashem does not want Him close. Someone who loves Him wants Him near, and so he builds Him a place to dwell.

This is why the shirah is where *hiddur mitzvah* is born. At the sea, Klal Yisrael had *yirah* in abundance. The shirah supplied what was missing.

We come to Sukkos out of the Yamim Noraim, out of days built almost entirely on *yirah*. Sukkos is *zman simchaseinu*, and the first thing we do is pick up the *arba minim*.

That is not an accident. The mitzvah we reach for as the awe of the Yamim Noraim recedes is the very mitzvah Chazal chose to illustrate *vi'anvehu*. When we take a lulav we have searched for, try to live the way He acts in the world, praise Him with Hallel, and sit in a sukkah we have built, we are doing all four things at once, the same four things Klal Yisrael did at the Sea when *yirah* alone was not enough.



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Yom Tov Insights from the Rav:

Excerpted from Batei Yosef

The Role of the Makri

Rav Soloveitchik explained that the *makri*—the person who calls out each shofar sound before the *ba'al tokea* blows it—is not there merely so that the *ba'al tokea* will know what to blow and will not confuse the order. He serves as a *matir*, granting the *ba'al tokea* license to blow in the first place.

The Mishna at the beginning of the fourth chapter of *Rosh Hashanah* (29b) teaches that when Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbos, the shofar was blown only in the presence of a *beis din*, whose role was to rule that blowing was, in fact, permitted. Today we do not blow at all when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbos, so no special ruling is needed to permit the *tekios*. Even so, every year we have a *makri*, who in effect rules that the *ba'al tokea* should blow properly, and who serves as a *matir* permitting the blasts on behalf of the congregation. Rav Soloveitchik himself served as the *makri* in his congregation, and he made a point of calling out even the first blast (where one might otherwise argue that it constitutes a *hefsek*).

Nusach Practices

The *Tur* (*Orach Chaim* 591) writes that individuals do not recite *Hayom Haras Olam*. This implies that *Hayom Haras Olam* is recited only after the shofar blasts blown during *Malchuyos*, *Zichronos* and *Shofros*. Accordingly, it is not recited when there are no blasts—either in the

silent Amidah, according to those who do not blow then, or on Shabbos, even during the repetition of the Amidah. Rav Soloveitchik noted, in the name of Rav Chaim, that in the Rambam's siddur (*Seder Tefillos Kol Hashanah*, printed at the end of *Sefer Ahavah*), *Hayom Haras Olam* appears as part of *Malchuyos*, *Zichronos* and *Shofros*, implying that an individual says it as well. This was Rav Soloveitchik's own practice, even on Shabbos.

Rav Chaim further noted that the Rambam's siddur has *Ochilah La'Kel* at the beginning of the *Malchuyos* blessing, implying that this piyut too should be said not only in the repetition but in the silent Amidah. This differs from what is printed in our machzorim, following the *Tur*, that an individual does not say it because it is a form of *netilas reshush*—the shatz's request for permission. Rav Soloveitchik explained that no *netilas reshush* is needed at that point: the shatz says the piyut *Elokeinu Veilokei Avoseinu Heyei Im Pifiyos Shluchei Amcha* before *Ochilah La'Kel*, and that is his *netilas reshush*. As the Rambam's siddur indicates, *Ochilah La'Kel* is simply part of the tefillah for the individual as well.

Rav Soloveitchik also pointed out that the tefillah beginning *Al Kein Nekaveh* is the opening of the *Malchuyos* blessing. Since we are accustomed to say it immediately after Aleinu, it is proper to say *V'al Kein Nekaveh*, with the connective *vav*—it is, in fact, a continuation of Aleinu. On Rosh Hashanah, Aleinu serves as the



Batei Yosef (Hebrew) is a collection of insights into the laws and customs of the holidays through the rulings of The Rav as well as those of current Roshei Yeshiva at RIETS. Batei Yosef is available at RIETSPress.org.

introduction to *Malchuyos*, though it is not, itself, an essential part of the blessing. Accordingly, in the silent Amidah on Rosh Hashanah, one should begin *V'al Kein Nekaveh*, with the *vav*, just as one does when saying Aleinu at the end of the daily tefillah. In the repetition, however, where the tefillah is not adjacent to Aleinu because other tefillos intervene, one should begin *Al Kein Nekaveh*, without the *vav*, since there it is the opening of the *Malchuyos* blessing. If one does say *Ochilah La'Kel* in the silent Amidah as

well, then one should likewise begin *Al Kein Nekaveh* without the *vav* as well.

Vidui on Erev Yom Kippur

The Ramban, in his *Chiddushim to Yoma* (87b, cited in the Ran there, 6a in the pages of the Rif), holds that there is a mitzvah of *vidui* on erev Yom Kippur before nightfall, so that we enter the day already in a state of teshuva. We confess at the end of the day, close to dark, when there is no longer time left to sin.

This is how the Ramban reads the Gemara there, which speaks of a mitzvah of *vidui* on erev Yom Kippur “with nightfall.” It cannot mean the *vidui* of Maariv, which is already obligatory as part of the *vidui* of Yom Kippur itself, and would not require a separate statement in the Gemara. It must mean a *vidui* shortly before the day begins.

The Ramban does not give a source. The *Chayei Adam* (klal 143:1) proposed that the source is the phrase “before the Lord you shall be purified” (Leviticus 16:30), from which we learn that one is obligated to purify himself before Yom Kippur arrives. Before entering, as it were, to stand before Hashem on Yom Kippur itself, there is an obligation to purify oneself while it is still erev Yom Kippur. The act of purification at that hour is the *vidui*.

Our practice is to recite *vidui* at Mincha, before eating the *seudah hamafsekes*. Based on this idea, it emerges that we should confess a second time close to nightfall, immediately before Yom Kippur enters. The *Magen Avraham* (*Orach Chaim* 607:7) cites the Shelah that it is proper to take the Ramban's view into account and recite *vidui* again after the *seudah hamafsekes*, moments before the *kedushas hayom* (sanctity of the day) begins.

This is the basis for the widespread custom of saying *Tefillah Zakah*, composed by the *Chayei Adam*, which is a form of *vidui* (printed at the end of klal 144). In Chaslavitch, where Rav

Soloveitchik grew up, they also said the ordinary *vidui* before Kol Nidrei; and in his own congregation, he instituted that the entire congregation say the full text of the *vidui*, both the short and the long, together, before beginning Kol Nidrei.

Rain on the First Night of Sukkos

The rishonim disagree as to whether the exemption of a *mitzta'er*—one for whom sitting in the sukkah causes real discomfort—applies on the first night of Sukkos. The Rema (*Orach Chaim* 639:5) rules that on the first night one must eat a *kezayis* in the sukkah even if it is raining, in deference to the view that the *mitzta'er* exemption does not apply that night.

Rav Soloveitchik related that one Sukkos when he was a child, rain fell on the first night. They ate bread in the sukkah in the rain, as the Rema requires, and then continued the meal indoors. When they finished, the family went to sleep, but his father, Rav Moshe, sat up waiting for the rain to stop. [See *Ma'aseh Rav* 217, that according to the Vilna Gaon, one should stay up the whole night and wait for an opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah.] In the middle of the night, around four in the morning, the rain did stop, and Rav Moshe woke his sons to eat again in the sukkah, in deference to the rishonim who hold that a *mitzta'er* is exempt from sukkah even on the first night, and that their *achila* earlier in the rain therefore did not discharge their obligation.

Rav Soloveitchik asked: whichever way one looks at it, there would seem to be no need to return to the sukkah in such a case. If a *mitzta'er* is in fact obligated on the first night, as some rishonim hold, they had already fulfilled their obligation by eating in the sukkah while it rained. And if a *mitzta'er* is exempt even on the first night, as other rishonim hold, then they are *mitzta'er* now as well, since they got out of bed in order to eat in the sukkah. The Gemara (*Sukkah* 29a), the Rambam (*Hilchos Sukkah* 6:10) and the

Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 639:7) all state that if rain fell and a person already went indoors and lay down to sleep, we do not trouble him to go back up to the sukkah when the rain stops. What, then, did they accomplish by waking up to eat so late at night?

Rav Soloveitchik answered that the rule sparing a person the trouble of returning to the sukkah is not an instance of the ordinary *mitzta'er* exemption. In ordinary *mitzta'er*, the discomfort comes from sitting in the sukkah itself, as when rain is falling. In truth, even the rishonim who exempt a *mitzta'er* on the first night agree that there is a special obligation to eat a *kezayis* in the sukkah that night, and that the ordinary *mitzta'er* exemption of the rest of the chag does not apply to it. Their position is that sitting in a sukkah while it rains does not constitute an act of *yeshivas sukkah* at all, because a sukkah unfit to be sat in has no status of a sukkah—as the *Biur HaGra* writes explicitly on *Orach Chaim* 639:5.

The case of one who would be troubled by having to return to the sukkah is a different type of *mitzta'er*. There, the discomfort lies only in getting to the sukkah; there is no discomfort in the *yeshiva* itself. If he has already reached the sukkah and sat down to eat, that constitutes a genuine act of *yeshivas sukkah*. One could therefore propose that such a *mitzta'er* is obligated to eat in the sukkah on the first night even according to the rishonim who exempt a *mitzta'er* that night. Their exemption applies specifically where the *yeshiva* does not count as an act of *yeshivas sukkah*, as when rain is falling.

This is why Rav Moshe woke his sons and brought them back to the sukkah. According to the rishonim who obligate a *mitzta'er* on the first night, they had already discharged their obligation when they ate in the rain. But according to the rishonim who exempt him, that exemption holds only where the

discomfort is in the *yeshiva* itself. When the *yeshiva* involves no discomfort, one is obligated even on the first night.

The Hakafos of Hoshana Rabbah

The poskim disagree about the hakafos we make on Hoshana Rabbah: do we do hakafos with the lulav alone or also with the special aravos bundle? The Gemara in *Sukkah* (44b) records a similar dispute among the Amoraim as to whether the aravos of Hoshana Rabbah must be taken on their own or together with the lulav. Earlier (43b), the Gemara records a dispute as to what was done in the Mikdash when they circled the mizbeach each day: did they circle with the lulav or with the aravos? The Ran (*Sukkah* 22a in the pages of the Rif) noted that the Mishna (45a) states that on each day of Sukkos they would circle the mizbeach once, and on that day (the seventh, as Rashi explains), they would circle it seven times. Nowadays, we circle the bimah in

shul once each day and seven times on Hoshana Rabbah, and our custom on the first six days is to circle with the lulav. Therefore, it stands to reason that when we circle seven times on Hoshana Rabbah, we do so with the lulav as well, as on the other days. It seems that in the Mikdash, they also did hakafos with the lulav each day. If they had circled with the aravos alone, our daily hakafos with the lulav would be no *zecher* to the hakafos of the Mikdash at all. If they only did hakafos with the aravos, why should we circle each day with the lulav? Rather, the daily hakafa in the Mikdash must have been specifically with the lulav. This is what the Rambam writes in *Hilchos Lulav* (7:23). Our daily hakafos commemorate that hakafa, and so on Hoshana Rabbah too, one should presumably circle with the lulav alone.

The *Beis Yosef* (*Orach Chaim* 664), however, after working through this reasoning, concludes that on the seventh day one circles with both the lulav and the aravos. He suggests that the reason

is to satisfy every opinion. According to the view that one circles with the lulav, taking an arava along does no harm; and according to the view that one circles with the aravos, taking the lulav along does no harm. The Rema, in *Darkei Moshe* there, after citing those who took the aravos together with the lulav during the hoshanos, writes that it is preferable not to do so, since nowhere is it ruled that one should take aravos together with the lulav.

In the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 664:3), the Mechaber rules that although there is an opinion that even on Hoshana Rabbah one circles with the lulav alone, the custom is to circle with the aravos as well. The Rema (664:7) writes that it is better not to circle with both together, and the *Magen Avraham* there cites the Arizal that one should be very careful not to take both at once. Rav Soloveitchik was not concerned about this, and in practice circled with both together in order to satisfy all opinions, in accordance with the Mechaber.

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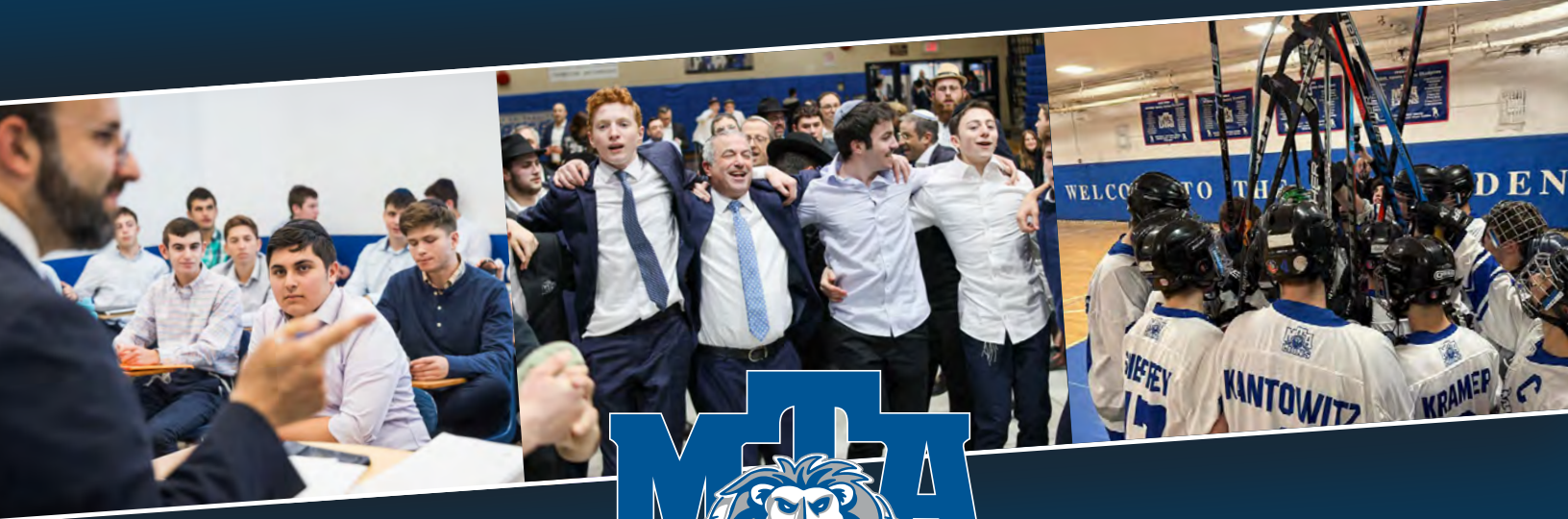
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