

# FOCUS

---

## *A High Holidays Reader*

Reverberations of the Shofar Blast

*Rabbi Menachem Spira*

The *Weltanschauung* of Jewish Timekeeping

*Rabbi Joey Felsen*

Celebrating While the Jury is Still Out

*Rabbi Dani Kermaier*

The Strange Nature of Free Will

*Rabbi Moshe Adatto*

Of Apples, Honey and New Year Wishes

*Rabbi Yaacov Benzaquen*

Feast or Fast: The Day Before Yom Kippur

*Rabbi Avi Lebowitz*

On the Recovery of Opportunities Lost

*Rabbi Yisroel Gordon*

In Honor  
of  
**ERIC & SIMMIE  
BAUM**

Randy & Betsy Baum  
and Family

לעילוי נשמת  
יהושע בן מושלה

A gift to the Jewish Community  
from  
**THE BUTRIMOVITZ FAMILY  
JEWISH LEARNING FUND**

# FOCUS

No. 2 Fall 2004

*A High Holidays Reader*

---

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Preface</b>                                  | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b>                             | <b>5</b>  |
| <i>Essays:</i>                                  |           |
| <b>Reverberations of the Shofar Blast</b>       | <b>7</b>  |
| <i>Rabbi Menachem Spira, Rosh Kollel</i>        |           |
| <b>The Weltanschauung of Jewish Timekeeping</b> | <b>14</b> |
| <i>Rabbi Joey Felsen</i>                        |           |
| <b>Celebrating While the Jury is Still Out</b>  | <b>19</b> |
| <i>Rabbi Dani Kermaier</i>                      |           |
| <b>The Strange Nature of Free Will</b>          | <b>24</b> |
| <i>Rabbi Moshe Adatto</i>                       |           |
| <b>Of Apples, Honey and New Year Wishes</b>     | <b>31</b> |
| <i>Rabbi Yaacov Benzaquen</i>                   |           |
| <b>Feast or Fast: the Day Before Yom Kippur</b> | <b>37</b> |
| <i>Rabbi Avi Lebowitz</i>                       |           |
| <i>Text Study:</i>                              |           |
| <b>On the Recovery of Opportunities Lost</b>    | <b>48</b> |
| <i>Rabbi Yisroel Gordon</i>                     |           |

# FOCUS

*A Publication of the Jewish Study Network*



*Editors:*

DANI KERMAIER

YISROEL GORDON

*Consulting Editors:*

AARON PLATT-ROSS

LAWRENCE GALLANT

No. 2 FALL 2004

Focus is a forum for the rabbis of the Jewish Study Network to present the community with a sample of their teachings in writing. The JSN is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to raising the level of Jewish literacy in the greater San Francisco Bay Area.

General inquiries and correspondence are welcome. Send to:  
Jewish Study Network 2584 Leghorn St. #A Mountain View, CA 94043  
Fax: 650-961-4572 Email: [focus@jsn.info](mailto:focus@jsn.info).

© Copyright 2004 The Jewish Study Network. All rights reserved. Printed in the USA. Visit the Jewish Study Network on the web at [www.jsn.info](http://www.jsn.info).

# Preface

For several years now, the Jewish Study Network has engaged audiences across the Bay Area with stimulating classes on Judaism. Our educational and social activities have invigorated local institutions and breathed new life into local communities. But it is our journal Focus that brings the JSN rabbis together and provides them with a forum for sharing their teachings with the broader Jewish public.

When we inaugurated this periodical six months ago we had no idea what the response would be. How many people would be interested in a rabbinic journal? But the Bay Area Jewish community, thirsty for an intellectually stimulating Judaism, embraced Focus. Acclaimed for successfully capturing the spirit of Passover, Focus inspired mind and soul alike to the profound significance of the holiday. People read it cover to cover, sent copies to friends and relatives, and quoted it at their Seders. Due to the increased demand, the Jewish Study Network has increased Focus's distribution five-fold.

From the inarticulate cry of the Shofar to the intricate legalities of a forgotten mitzvah, from the culinary symbolism of apples and honey to the cultural significance of the Jewish calendar, from the psychology of repentance to the mystery of free will—the essays in this holiday reader come together to generate a new appreciation for the Days of Awe. The disparate voices complement, contrast, and even conflict. But as a result, a clearer and deeper perspective ultimately emerges. In the pages of Focus, the excited tumult of a Jewish study hall is heard and a virtual *Beit Midrash* comes to life.

On these Days of Awe, may G-d bless the Bay Area with a strengthened Jewish community, Israel with peace, and the Jewish people with unity, pride and answered prayers.

Wishing you and yours a happy, healthy New Year.

Rabbi Joey Felsen  
Founder  
Jewish Study Network

Rabbi Dani Kermaier  
Founder  
Jewish Study Network



# Introduction

This year, the High Holiday season begins with Rosh Hashanah on Wednesday night, September 15<sup>th</sup> and ends with Yom Kippur on Saturday, September 25<sup>th</sup>. As with any of the finer things in life, learning to appreciate the High Holidays takes some effort. The more we prepare ourselves for the High Holidays, the more we will recognize their timeless quality.

The road to the Jewish heart is through the mind, so our spiritual quest must begin with hard questions, deep learning, and fresh perspectives. Engaging our minds will awaken our souls to the powerful relevance of the Days of Awe.

It is certainly appropriate that the High Holiday season, otherwise known as the Ten Days of Repentance, would culminate with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. We regret our failings, admit that we were wrong, and resolve to be better. If we are sincere, G-d accepts our efforts at self-improvement and forgives us on Yom Kippur. This makes sense.

But why does the High Holiday season begin with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year? Wouldn't it make more sense to clean up the old year before we start the new one? Shouldn't the Day of Atonement come first?

Instead of offering solutions, a look at tradition only exacerbates the problem. The Rosh Hashanah service is clear—Rosh Hashanah is the "Day of Judgment." Every year on Rosh Hashanah, G-d reviews our record, reevaluates His investment in us, and then decides our fate for the New Year. Happiness or misfortune, wealth or poverty, life or death—all are inscribed by G-d on Rosh Hashanah.

Now things are really backwards. What is the sense of having the Day of Judgment first and the Day of Atonement last? Wouldn't it be logical for G-d to allow us the opportunity for forgiveness before He judges us?

The answer to this question, says Rabbi Aaron Kotler, provides the key to understanding the High Holiday season. The structure of the Days of Awe is very deliberate, and it is guided by the nature of both G-d and man.

The fact is, nobody could ever survive G-d's exacting judgment of who we are and what we have done. G-d, by definition, forgets nothing and overlooks nothing. According to the Rosh Hashanah service, even the angels tremble before the judgment of G-d. But there is one approach that works. On Rosh Hashanah we make no mention of sins at all; we don't even repent in the service. Instead we say to G-d, 'Forget the past. All I have done wrong, my mistakes and failings, the bad and the ugly—that's not the real me. Look at the present. Look at me now!' And we make Rosh Hashanah a day of renewal.

We make the first day of the year the most beautiful day of the year. We demonstrate our inner goodness and we insist that our shortcomings are merely superficial aberrations. We make Rosh Hashanah a day of prayer, a day of celebrating with family and friends, a day of being our very best in our relationships with our fellow man and G-d. We show G-d how good we can be, and we hope He will base His judgment on that.

But it is not only for G-d that we are presenting our true selves. We need to see it too.

The Ten Days of Repentance begin with Rosh Hashanah because we need to get a taste of our forgotten potential before self-improvement can begin. We must recognize our inherent greatness before we can embark on the journey to fulfillment. So we begin the New Year with a Rosh Hashanah in which we strive to be our best. We follow it through with ten days of repentance and introspection and we devise a practical plan for implementing Rosh Hashanah into our daily lives. In this way we grow and develop as people and inspire G-d's infinite compassion on Yom Kippur.

Such is the magnificent structure of the Days of Awe.



# Reverberations of the Shofar Blast

*Rabbi Menachem Spira*

The Jewish New Year is colloquially known as “Rosh Hashanah,” meaning “the head of the year.” Most commonly it is thought of as a day of judgment and reckoning—with the ultimate pronouncement being sealed on Yom Kippur. Yet the Torah refers to the Jewish New Year either as “*yom teruah*,” “Day of [Shofar] Blasts” (Numbers 29:1), or “*zichron teruah*,” “remembrance of the [shofar] blasts” (Leviticus 23:24). Being that Hebrew names capture the essence of the objects they signify, it is curious that the Torah focuses on the use of the shofar, rather than the idea of judgment when referring to Rosh Hashanah. It must be, then, that the blowing of the shofar represents the essence of Rosh Hashanah. A careful examination shows there to be several aspects of this complex, spiritual instrument that work in concert to define the sanctity of the day. We will see that the day of Rosh Hashanah is appropriately named the “Day of Shofar Blasts” by the Torah, for it is the shofar alone that unites all of the elements that make this day holy.

The ability of the shofar to startle and awaken is perhaps its most familiar characteristic. Rosh Hashanah is a new beginning and the shofar is the alarm clock that awakens us to our purpose in life. It startles us out of our routine, forcing us to refocus our goals and re-channel our energies. This is the reason for the custom to blow shofar daily during the month leading up to Rosh

## REVERBERATIONS OF THE SHOFAR BLAST

Hashanah—in order to awaken our spirit before Rosh Hashanah arrives. The medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides<sup>1</sup> imagined the cry of the shofar enjoining us to “Awaken! Awaken! O sleeping ones from your slumber!”

Not only does the sound of the shofar awaken us, it is also the instrument through which we reach toward heaven in prayer. The Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 26b) implies as much when it discusses whether it is better for a shofar to be straight or bent. The Talmud states that the shofar should model itself on the preferred stance for prayer. If one should pray standing straight then the shofar should be straight and if one should pray bowing down then the shofar should be bent. The fact that the Talmud determines the shape of the shofar based on the ideal stance for prayer indicates that the shofar too is a vehicle for prayer.

The shofar’s wordless cry can, in fact, be the most powerful prayer. There is an old Jewish story that illustrates this idea. A shepherd boy attended an inspiring Yom Kippur service but was unable to join in the prayers due to his inability to read Hebrew. His ignorance of formal prayer, however, would not stop this boy from expressing himself. The boy picked up his trusted whistle, and blew with all his heart. The congregation was aghast, but this boy’s uneducated, unsophisticated blasts flew straight up to the Heavenly Throne. The sincerity and yearning of the inarticulate whistle blowing was a most beautiful prayer before G-d. The shofar is our whistle. Although we have a prayer service, we humbly recognize our limitations as mortals and our inability to properly address G-d on this Day of Awe. We therefore resort to the inarticulate cry of our shofar. As we say in the service following the shofar blasts, “...understand and listen, look and hear, to the voice of our shofar blasts.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Acronym for Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (1135-1204), also known as Maimonides.

## REVERBERATIONS OF THE SHOFAR BLAST

As we have seen the name “*yom teruah*,” “Day of Blasts,” appropriately expresses the shofar’s leading role prior to and on the day of Rosh Hashanah. Yet that still leaves us with the shofar’s other name—“*zichron teruah*,” “remembrance of blasts”—to understand. Ramban<sup>2</sup> explains that on Rosh Hashanah we are remembered by G-d through the shofar. Remembrance is part of the judgment process. In order to judge us individually, G-d scrutinizes, *remembers*, each one of us in turn, and determines the nature of our behavior. The name “remembrance of blasts” is an accurate description of the day, since judgment requires remembrance. Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, and the shofar is the tool which evokes G-d’s memory.

What is it about the shofar that has this extraordinary ability? How does a shofar evoke the memory of G-d? When man stands in the presence of G-d, G-d focuses on every detail of his personal history. And when we blow the shofar we are standing before G-d in a virtual Holy of Holies. This is evident from the following Talmudic discussion. The Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 26a) addresses the question of which type of shofar is appropriate for use on Rosh Hashanah. It rules that the horn of a cow is unfit for use by comparing our situation to the situation of the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) on Yom Kippur. A High Priest is proscribed from entering the Holy of Holies while wearing his usual golden garments, because gold evokes the memory of the sin of the golden calf. This is an application of the Talmudic principle, “a prosecutor can not become the defender.” In other words, gold, the prosecutor, cannot play a role in our defense on Yom Kippur. Similarly, the Talmud rules that a cow’s horn, which also evokes the golden calf, cannot be used on Rosh Hashanah. However, this rule is clearly limited to the Holy of Holies, for the High Priest

---

<sup>2</sup> Acronym for Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (1194-1270), also known as Nachmanides. Author of a classic biblical commentary.

## REVERBERATIONS OF THE SHOFAR BLAST

may wear golden garments while performing the service elsewhere in the Temple. Why then would this principle apply to the shofar which is not being brought into the Holy of Holies?

The Talmud answers that blowing shofar has the status of standing inside the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies is the place where G-d's presence is manifest. The shofar is no different. To be in judgment is to stand before G-d because in order to evaluate us G-d must approach us.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the blowing of the shofar is comparable to entering the Holy of Holies. Being in the presence of the omniscient G-d evokes His memory of all that we have done and causes Him to focus on us in judgment.

Why the shofar functions as the harbinger of G-d's revelation still needs to be explained. The answer to this question is the secret of the shofar's power. The shofar is a royal trumpet that heralds the coming of the King. And indeed we find that whenever there is a revelation of G-d a shofar blast is heard.

The Rosh Hashanah service documents biblical occurrences of shofar blowings, such as the shofar blowings at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16) and the final redemption (Isaiah 27:13). Although they are not directly connected to Rosh Hashanah, they all deal with momentous revelations of G-d's presence. At the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai G-d made His voice heard, and at the future redemption G-d's presence will likewise be clearly manifest. To further emphasize this point, the service continues with the following prayer: "Our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, sound the great shofar for our freedom and raise the banner to gather our exiles." The essence then of Rosh Hashanah is revelation, which is brought to us through the call of the shofar.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Talmud *Rosh Hashanah* 26a, also Rabbi Yisroel Salanter in *Or Yisroel*, letter 7.

## REVERBERATIONS OF THE SHOFAR BLAST

The shofar can now be viewed as the vehicle that brings a revelation of G-d, a necessary component of the judgment process. Yet, the choice to blow the shofar is ours; why blow at all and invite the painful process of judgment upon ourselves? Further, we find that the book of Psalms praises the Jewish People as “the nation that knows to blow the shofar” (89:16). The Psalmist is not talking here about the mere knowledge of the mitzvah to blow shofar. He is referring to something much deeper. What insight do the Jewish people have into the shofar that other nations lack?

The Midrash explains that the Jewish People know how to use the shofar to transform the divine attribute of strict justice into kindness. But what does this mean? Is this some kind of magic? Our answer is found in the Midrash, which cites the verse “what nation is so great that they have G-d close to it...?” (Deuteronomy 4:7). These words are the key to solving the enigma of the shofar.

We have the choice to blow the shofar, and rather than retreating from the challenge, we fearlessly blow, inviting judgment upon ourselves. We do this because we, the People of Israel, desire revelation. This is why shofar blowing is so unique and praiseworthy. We value our close relationship with G-d, even though it entails the risk of judgment. We willingly blow in order to experience revelation, and to deepen our relationship with G-d.

Unlike others who would be nervous prior to a court case, we approach Rosh Hashanah with assurance, because we know that even though we will be analyzed and brought to an accounting, our Creator is among us. That is the magic that changes G-d’s attitude of exacting strictness to benevolent compassion. The fact that we actually ask for it, that we risk the danger of judgment to ensure our closeness, is what we are praised for.

The power of the shofar goes even further. The Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a) states that one should use the horn of a ram to remind G-d of the Binding of Isaac and channel that merit on

## REVERBERATIONS OF THE SHOFAR BLAST

our behalf. When Abraham was about to sacrifice his only son Isaac, G-d stopped him and provided him a ram to sacrifice instead (Genesis 22:13). The connection here is deeper than the ram. Abraham was willing to give up everything—a beloved son he had waited for so many years to sire, his reputation for kindness, and even the entire future of the Jewish people—all in order to fulfill G-d's will and thereby achieve closeness to G-d. On Rosh Hashanah we follow our forefather's lead. By blowing the shofar and bringing about judgment, we jeopardize our own security to attain the closeness we so dearly seek. It is the shofar that connects these two events, because the shofar is always present to signal the closeness and presence of G-d.

Being that Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, we expect that it should be a solemn and almost frightening day. Yet the prophet Ezra describes Rosh Hashanah in the following words: "for rejoicing with G-d is your strength..."(Nehemiah 8:10). The prophet is telling the Jews that our strength on Rosh Hashanah is our ability to rejoice with G-d. Indeed, the spirit of the day is unlike that of Yom Kippur, when we deny ourselves pleasures and pray in the synagogue all day. Rather, on Rosh Hashanah we dress up in our finest clothing, and we have festive meals with special delicacies. We treat the day as one of celebration. This is in keeping with what we have learned about the shofar. Since we are entering a virtual Holy of Holies and acquiring a special closeness to G-d, we therefore treat the day as a source of joy and strength. It is this ability to feel the joy of closeness to G-d that successfully transforms strict justice to divine compassion.

The Talmud states: "Any year that we don't blow shofar in the beginning will not be a good year" (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b). At first glance this is a puzzling and perhaps shocking statement, but in light of our new understanding of the shofar we can appreciate it. The Talmud is saying that in order for the New Year to be truly blessed we must blow shofar. By awakening to the call

## REVERBERATIONS OF THE SHOFAR BLAST

of the shofar, inviting the revelation of G-d, and rejoicing in the holiness of the day, we replace G-d's justice with compassion and our year will be blessed.

May we all merit to follow the path that the shofar blazes for us, and bask in the glow of G-d's presence amongst us.

# The *Weltanschauung* of Jewish Timekeeping

*Rabbi Joey Felsen*

**R**osh Hashanah may be the Day of Judgment but let us not forget that it is also the Jewish New Year. The Jewish conception of time has deep theological underpinnings, and the renewal of the Jewish year brings our perceptions of G-d and time to the fore. We will see that, in fact, these two basic elements of the day, judgment and the Jewish New Year, are inexorably linked.

The western world uses the Gregorian calendar. Its year is 365 days long, the amount of time it takes the earth to orbit the sun. The year is divided into twelve parts called months. This calendar does not take the lunar orbit into consideration. On the other hand, the Islamic world uses the Hijri calendar. This system uses only the moon as its guide. Each month begins with the new moon and a year is twelve lunar months long. The Hijri year is eleven days shorter than the Gregorian year. As the years go by, the Islamic months drift through the seasons.

The Jewish calendar is different. It is a lunisolar calendar. The Jewish months begin with the new moon, but the Jewish year is calibrated by the sun. This calibration is accomplished by adding a thirteenth month to the year seven times in a nineteen year cycle.

“Praiseworthy is the nation that knows the blasts of the shofar...” (Psalms 89:16). This verse praises the Jews for their observance of the mitzvah of shofar, but the Midrash states that it



## THE WELTANSCHAUUNG OF JEWISH TIMEKEEPING

also refers to the Jewish court's establishment of the new month (*Vayikrah Rabbah* 29). This was an ongoing process in which eyewitnesses reported their sighting of the new moon to the court. Based on their testimony, the court would declare the beginning of the new month.

The Midrashic explanation of the verse is troubling. What is so praiseworthy about having judges who can calculate calendars? And what is the connection between the calendar and the shofar blasts? Furthermore, why does this verse make its way into the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah?

Taking a closer look at the mechanics of the Jewish year, we will see that there is great significance to the Hebrew names for the segments of time. The Hebrew word for "year" is "*shanah*." The Hebrew word *shanah* shares the same root as the Hebrew verb which means "to repeat." This is because a year is a cycle that repeats itself. The seasons, which follow the sun, continue in a constant pattern. Calling the year a *shanah* attests to the fact that things run a constant course and that the year is cyclical.

The Hebrew word for "month" is "*chodesh*." The word *chodesh* has the same root as the word *chadash*, which means "new." Every month the moon appears to be new. It waxes and it wanes. From our perspective, there is nothing constant about the moon.

There is a fascinating correlation between culture and calendar. In the Western world, the calendar year is guided by the revolutions of the earth around the sun. The calendar is static. The relationship that the Western world has with spirituality also seems to be static. People accept that the world is going to look the same next year as it did this year. The seasons will continue in their usual pattern and life will progress predictably.

In the Islamic world, however, they look up at the moon and see an object in a constant state of flux. As a result, their relationship with G-d takes on a completely different reality.

## THE WELTANSCHAUUNG OF JEWISH TIMEKEEPING

“May it be G-d’s will...” is a common phrase that peppers even the most mundane conversation. In a world where there is change, it makes sense to expect the unexpected and to revere the divine intervention of G-d. Each month brings with it new opportunities and new hopes. This gives a new understanding of the Islamic passion for prayer.

What about Judaism? In Judaism, we live a pragmatic life that is grounded in the reality of nature. At the same time, we believe that there is divine intervention and ultimately G-d controls the way events in the world transpire. However, G-d’s hand is hidden. If G-d’s intervention were manifest, there would be no room for us to execute our free will and choose between good and evil. There would be a necessary compulsion to do the will of the revealed Creator. Our lunisolar calendar reflects this coexistence between the natural order and divine providence.

How does Rosh Hashanah fit into the picture? In order to have a proper appreciation of Rosh Hashanah, one must start by examining the name of the holiday. *Rosh* means “head” and *hashanah* means “the year.” The implication is that there is a head or a starting point to the year.

However, this contradicts the Jewish conception of time. The Jewish calendar is cyclical, not linear. As we have seen, the word *shannah* comes from the root verb “to repeat” because the year is repetitious. If the calendar is cyclical, how could the year have a starting point?

Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment. In the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah we pray to be inscribed in the Book of Life. On this very day, G-d is deciding who will live and who will die. Not only are decisions being made about our longevity, even the quality of our lives is also being decided. Just as the “head” is that which directs the body, decisions made on this day determine what will happen in the coming year.

## THE *WELTANSCHAUUNG* OF JEWISH TIMEKEEPING

We are now confronted with a paradox. On the one hand, we are held accountable for our actions because we have free choice to make decisions in this world. But at the same time, G-d lays out a plan that we are compelled to follow.

We will respond to this paradox with another one. The central story that makes its way into the service of Rosh Hashanah is that of the Binding of Isaac. The storyline seems rather simple. Abraham is told to take his son, Isaac, and bring him up as a sacrifice on an altar to demonstrate his devotion to G-d. Abraham runs to fulfill the command. He brings his son to Mount Moriah, binds him atop an altar, and prepares to slit his throat. An angel appears and tells Abraham not to proceed and Abraham substitutes a ram in place of his son. G-d then blesses him for his commitment and devotion.

What was Abraham thinking? How could a man murder his son? In light of a little background from earlier in the text, this question becomes even more disturbing. Abraham has already been promised that this particular child would continue his name and mission in the world and father the Jewish nation. Now he is being told that he must sacrifice this child. Furthermore, we credit Abraham with founding Monotheism. He spent his life challenging paganism and idol worship. One of the practices that he condemned was child sacrifice. Now G-d asks him to commit the crime that he so vehemently opposed. How could Abraham do it?

The answer to this question lies in the acceptance of G-d as not only omniscient and omnipotent, but even capable of doing the impossible. Abraham could not answer how G-d could command the sacrifice of Isaac and still create the Jewish nation through Isaac, but Abraham felt no need to answer the question. Simply put, it was not his problem; it was G-d's problem. If G-d wanted it to work out, it would. The perceived impossibility is a product of our limited conception of time, space and spirituality.

## THE WELTANSCHAUUNG OF JEWISH TIMEKEEPING

On Rosh Hashanah we crown G-d as the King of the Universe. This coronation does not include anointing oils and parades; it consists of a clear recognition of G-d as the Creator of the Universe and His existence beyond time and space. The coronation of G-d means coming to terms with the reality that we cannot fully understand the mechanics of the world or its history.

The Rosh Hashanah service focuses on this idea. The shofar blasts have a specific pattern. Each set must begin and end with a long, straight blast known as a *tekiyah*. In between each *tekiyah* is a set of several short blasts. The straight blast symbolizes the reality of our world that appears as if it is on a linear course. The short middle blasts acknowledge that within that linear course, the hand of G-d makes changes in the world and in our lives. We close with a straight blast because we know that this divine influence must remain imperceptible.

Rosh Hashanah is the time that the Jewish calendar begins anew. The Jewish hybrid calendar reflects the paradox of a static, natural world coexisting with divine intervention. We therefore use this day to recognize G-d's unfathomable nature and accept His reign.

We can now understand why the Midrash praised the judges who set the calendar. It is they who unite the two competing worldviews; the static solar with the dynamic lunar. This is the message that the shofar blasts deliver. And this is the fundamental message of Rosh Hashanah.

# Celebrating While the Jury is Still Out

*Rabbi Dani Kermaier*

*The great shofar will be sounded and a still thin sound will be heard. The angels will hasten, a trembling and terror will seize them, and they will declare, 'Behold it is the Day of Judgment to assemble the heavenly host for judgment!' For they cannot be vindicated in Your eyes in judgment. All mankind will pass before You like members of the flock. Like a shepherd inspecting his flock, making the sheep pass under his staff...*

**T**his passage from the Rosh Hashanah service expresses the high strung emotions of the Jewish heart on the High Holidays. “Trembling and terror,” “for they cannot be vindicated in Your eyes,” and many more such passages reflect the significance and magnitude of passing before G-d for judgment. The days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are so aptly described as the Days of Awe. The task laid out before the Jewish people is daunting; we are called before G-d for an end of the year assessment.

The Psalmist, however, sees Rosh Hashanah in a different light. “Blow the shofar at the moon’s renewal, at the time appointed for our festive day” (Psalms 81:4). (Rosh Hashanah is

## CELEBRATING WHILE THE JURY IS STILL OUT

the only holiday which falls out on the first day of the lunar cycle, so the festive day in this verse must be Rosh Hashanah.)

This puzzling statement that Rosh Hashanah is considered to be a festive day is not a lone reference. In fact there was a major incident canonized in the book of Nehemiah (chap. 8), which underscores this very notion.

The people all gathered together... and asked Ezra the Scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses, which G-d had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the Law before the congregation, both men and women, and anyone that could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month [Rosh Hashanah]. And he read it ... from early morning until midday ... and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the Law.... And Nehemiah... said to all the people: 'This day is holy to Hashem your G-d; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had wept when they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them: 'Go your way, eat fatty foods, drink sweet drinks, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared. For this day is holy to our G-d; you shall not be depressed, for the joy of G-d is your strength.'

...And all the people went their way to eat, to drink, to send portions, and to celebrate, because they had understood the words that were spoken to them.

At that time in Israel there was a general lack of Jewish literacy, which created a lull in observance. Nehemiah gathered

## CELEBRATING WHILE THE JURY IS STILL OUT

the people on Rosh Hashanah and read to them from the Torah. They began to weep, as the recognition of what they had done with their spiritual lives set in. The fire of the Torah warmed their souls and they cried.

We would expect that the Israelites crying, repenting and feeling remorse over past misdeeds would be appropriate behavior on the Day of Judgment. But Nehemiah thought otherwise. He silenced the people, and informed them that it is forbidden to be saddened on the day of Rosh Hashanah. Nehemiah set the record straight; this shall be a day of rejoicing with fatty foods, wine, gifts and celebrations.

G-d sends mixed signals as to the character of this day. On the one hand the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah describes it as a day of “trembling and terror,” a day of judgment. On the other hand, the Psalmist and Nehemiah describe Rosh Hashanah as a festive holiday, a day of celebration. How can we reconcile this contradiction?

During the Rosh Hashanah service, we repeat after each segment of shofar blasts, “Today is the birthday of the world, today all the creations in the world will stand in judgment.” There is a connection being made here between the birth of the world and the judgment of all the creations in it. When G-d created the world, He had a clearly defined master plan for the universe in which each creation has a role to play. G-d examines each and every creature and decides if it still has the potential to accomplish its job in this world. This isn’t a review of the past, rather a look into the future.

The function of the Rosh Hashanah service is to coronate G-d as king. In the current state of the world we cannot perceive the majesty of G-d because His presence is veiled. The Rosh Hashanah service is dedicated to awakening us to the reality that G-d is the king of kings. The truth is that Rosh Hashanah is a

## CELEBRATING WHILE THE JURY IS STILL OUT

festive and joyous holiday. The fear and awe we find in the liturgy are only being used as a medium that helps us recognize the hidden G-d as the supreme ruler over all creations.

It is for this reason that Nehemiah told the people to cease their crying and mourning. The people were wrought with grief, filled with remorse for their misdeeds and for having forsaken G-d. They were mourning over the fact that they couldn't turn back the clock and correct their mistakes. To this Nehemiah admonished them, responding: Do not weep over your past misdeeds, for Rosh Hashanah is not a revisiting of your past failings, it is an assessment by G-d of your potential to fulfill your personal roles in the master plan.<sup>1</sup>

The prophet Nehemiah has defined for us the essence of the judgment of Rosh Hashanah. It is not a judgment of our past sins, as evident by the fact that there is no confession of sin in the Rosh Hashanah service.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, every creation, even animals are judged on Rosh Hashanah. It is implausible that G-d would judge the past actions of animals in order to punish them. Animals are not responsible for their actions, they act on instinct alone. Rather, Nehemiah teaches us that the judgment of Rosh Hashanah is a review of our viability to be a part of the master world plan.

Instead of crying, we celebrate G-d's reign over the world. We rejoice and coronate Him as our King. And we pledge allegiance to G-d Himself, for this will secure our destiny.

The Rebbe of Slonim, Rabbi Shalom Noach Brozofsky, illustrated this point with an analogy. Once there was a soldier whose job was to be stationed at a forsaken bridge in the middle of

---

<sup>1</sup> The judgment of the actions of our past is the judgment of Yom Kippur, not Rosh Hashanah.

<sup>2</sup> This is in stark contrast to the Yom Kippur service which is replete with confessions.



## CELEBRATING WHILE THE JURY IS STILL OUT

nowhere. His sole duty was to be there when the king would pass by on his tour of the countryside and salute him. Weeks and months passed and the king still hadn't arrived. The soldier, unversed in Murphy's Law, disrobed and went into the river to bathe. Only moments after sliding into the cool water, the soldier heard the king approaching with his entourage. What should he do? Should he run out to greet the king as is, or hide in the water and allow the king to pass without honoring and acknowledging his presence? After only a moment's thought, the patriotic soldier jumped from the water, scrambled up the muddied banks of the river, and stood at attention saluting as the king approached. The king took notice of the missing uniform, yet quickly surmised what had transpired. The king was so moved by the loyalty of this soldier that he bestowed upon him a medal of honor.

The soldier was clearly not prepared to honor the king on that day, but the self-sacrifice demonstrated by dropping everything to honor the king was the most moving expression of commitment and respect.

The Jews in the day of Nehemiah were unprepared for Rosh Hashanah. Upon hearing the Torah, they recognized it and that's why they cried. But Nehemiah told them that crying over the past doesn't prove allegiance to G-d. Celebrating his Kingship does.

This is the lesson that Nehemiah taught the people of his time, and this is the message of Rosh Hashanah. In our nakedness we are unprepared to stand before G-d, yet we stand at attention and honor the King. It is our allegiance to G-d and our celebration of His reign which earns us our place in G-d's divine plan.

# The Strange Nature of Free Will

*Rabbi Moshe Adatto*

The High Holidays are here again. Judgment... Atonement... Repentance... We talk about these concepts, struggling to come to terms with them. However, all of these concepts would be meaningless without the foundation upon which they are built: *bechirah*, or free will.<sup>1</sup> Without *bechirah* there is no judgment, there is no reward or punishment, no possibility of improvement, and certainly no need to repent or seek forgiveness. And yet we rarely stop and analyze how *bechirah* impacts our High Holiday experience.

## **A matter of life and death**

The Torah presents the concept of *bechirah* in a very dramatic way: “Behold I have placed before you life and goodness, and death and evil... and you shall choose life!” (Deuteronomy 30:15,19). This description of our choices as choosing between life and death seems to be hyperbole. However, the Torah does not usually speak in such exaggerated terms. A deeper understanding

---

<sup>1</sup> As will be explained later, the concept of *bechirah* comes with certain limitations, and is not as broad as its English counterpart. Therefore, in order to keep the discussion focused on the Torah’s definition of free will, we will use *bechirah* instead of free will throughout this article.

## THE STRANGE NATURE OF FREE WILL

of *bechirah* will lead us to recognize that the Torah's description is amazingly accurate.

### **What *bechirah* is... and what it isn't**

By describing *bechirah* as a choice between good and evil, the Torah limits its definition. *bechirah* only describes a situation where a person must choose between good and evil. Neutral choices, such as which cereal to have for breakfast, or even situations where it is not clear what is 'good' and what is 'evil', are irrelevant to the concept of *bechirah*. This is the meaning of the emphasis "Behold I have placed *before you*," in the Torah verse, implying that it is clearly laid out before you what is good and what is bad, and your sole job is to choose 'life'. Additionally, from the context of the Torah's discussion of *bechirah* it is clear that it is speaking in a situation where good and evil are clearly defined.

Such is the human condition that despite clear knowledge of good and evil and right and wrong, it is still possible for a person to choose to do the wrong thing. Aside from our experiential knowledge of this phenomenon, this is seen clearly in the Torah many times, the most obvious being the Jews sinning with the Golden Calf immediately after the Revelation at Sinai. We understand this phenomenon by factoring in desire; if a person has a strong desire for that which is wrong, he might choose it despite his awareness of its being wrong.

### **Smoking**

However, even human desire is not enough to explain the mind-boggling dynamic that Rabbi Eliezer Eliyahu Dessler (1892-

## THE STRANGE NATURE OF FREE WILL

1953) exposed by analyzing the *bechirah* of the habitual smoker.<sup>2</sup> Often times, in the midst of extremely painful coughing spasms, a smoker will decide to quit smoking. And the commitment will last... for a while, until the urge for a cigarette begins to gnaw at him. After a while he finds himself rationalizing, “Let me have just one cigarette. After all, one cigarette can’t hurt me!” And he has one cigarette, and only one cigarette... until the urge gnaws at him, and he rationalizes again. This pattern repeats itself until the person finds himself back to smoking two packs a day.

Rabbi Dessler points out that in this scenario it is impossible to say that the individual’s desire to smoke overcame his desire to be healthy, because if that were true he would have no need to rationalize that one cigarette won’t hurt him! Rather, instead of rationalizing, he would admit that once he smoked one, he would be back to two packs, but he would say straight out that it doesn’t matter because he *really* wants to smoke! It must be that in reality the desire to live healthfully is stronger than his desire to smoke, hence the need for rationalization.

Now the paradox is overwhelming! If the person wants to live healthfully more than he wants to smoke, what makes him choose the weaker will? It must be, Rabbi Dessler asserts, that the human being in the middle, torn between these two desires, has the option of grabbing hold of the lie. He deceives himself by saying that he will only smoke just one cigarette thus allowing the satisfaction of both of his desires at the same time. And the person does all this *despite the fact that deep down he knows that it’s a lie!* Thus, deep down at its roots, a *bechirah* choice between good and evil is a choice between truth and falsehood.

---

<sup>2</sup> Michtav M’elياهو, vol. 1, pp. 111-113. Similar dynamics have been documented amongst alcoholics. By focusing on a case that is not directly related to mitzvah performance, Rabbi Dessler is illustrating that *bechirah* spans all areas of our lives where we choose between good and evil.

## THE STRANGE NATURE OF FREE WILL

### Life and death revisited

One modern psychologist<sup>3</sup> has noted that this ability to choose whether or not to be true to ourselves, in the sense of admitting that, “we know what we know,” is a uniquely human attribute. Animals function by instinct; the gazelle does not have the choice of deciding that she likes the grass that she is eating so much that she would like to ignore her sense that a lion is about to attack her (possibly by rationalizing that the lion might not be hungry).<sup>4</sup>

The repercussions of this idea are enormous; when a person is faced with a *bechirah* situation, ultimately he is choosing whether or not to exercise his humanity by being honest with himself. While Dr. Branden does go far in expressing the relationship between these principles and self-esteem, it is possible to take it one step further. When a person is not expressing his humanity, his sense of his own humanity is diminished, causing him to feel unworthy *as a person*.<sup>5</sup>

The Torah accurately refers to this as a choice between life and death, exhorting us to “choose life!”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* (Bantam 1994) pp. 29-32

<sup>4</sup> Even in humans this unique ability to choose whether or not an organ functions is limited to the brain. “We are not responsible for controlling the activities of our heart, lung, liver, or kidneys... but our minds operate differently... We do not begin to think ‘instinctively’ merely because nonthinking, in a given situation, would be dangerous to us,” Branden, pg. 30-31.

<sup>5</sup> Branden’s definition of low self-esteem, pg. 28.

<sup>6</sup> This description is obviously only relevant to human beings. As people who have the ability to exercise an option of thinking, non-thinking is death; for an animal that is not faced with such a choice, this is life. Indeed, on a purely technical level a non-thinking person is in a worse situation than an animal. Because an animal does not have the choice whether or not to think, it instinctively will avoid danger; a person who

## THE STRANGE NATURE OF FREE WILL

### The perils of inaction

Life requires sustenance for its continuity; death happens automatically. This is one of the most humbling aspects of the fast of Yom Kippur. We tend to take our lives for granted; we exist because we exist. When we abstain from food for a period of time we are faced with the fact that we are in a constant state of dying, and it is only by eating that we create the illusion of uninterrupted life. Forced to recognize our mortality, we turn towards G-d as the continuous source of the gift of life.

*Bechirah* is also comparable to life in this way. Choosing good, being true to what we know, requires active effort; choosing evil does not require an active choice, it happens automatically when we don't make the effort. *Pirkei Avot*<sup>7</sup> exhorts us, "Run after [even] a 'light' mitzvah, and flee from a sin." The wording of this *Mishnah* is difficult. Assuming that a person is equidistant from the mitzvah and the sin, it would be more accurate either to say, "Run after a mitzvah, but not after a sin," or "Flee from a sin, but not a mitzvah." The inference, asserts Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner, is that we are not equidistant from mitzvot as we are from sin. A mitzvah does not happen naturally, we must run after it if we want it to happen. A sin, on the other hand, happens naturally; if we want to avoid it we must flee from it.

Although one is making the choice not to act, sins that happen as a result of inaction are often experienced as something that was destined to happen, creating the illusion that there is no free will. The irony here is that without *bechirah* it would be impossible to choose evil, but after *bechirah* exists evil becomes the default choice!

---

chooses not to think can even make this choice in the face of danger, refusing to recognize the dire situation in which he finds himself.

<sup>7</sup> Ethics of Our Fathers, the Mishnaic tractate of ethics (4:2).

### The Day of Judgment

With this insight into the life and death associated with *bechirah*, we are now poised to gain new understanding of the judgment on Rosh Hashanah. On Rosh Hashanah we are not judged by what we have done or will do, but by who we are. This is based on two separate proofs: Firstly, if we combine the statement from the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b) that we are not judged based on our future actions, with the statement from the Jerusalem Talmud<sup>8</sup> that we are not judged based on our past actions, that would leave us with a judgment on who we are at present.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, the Mishnah in Rosh Hashanah (18a), which states that there are four times during the year when we are judged. But the Mishnah only goes into detail about the judgment of Rosh Hashanah. Each of us pass before G-d in single file. Commenting on the textual anomaly, some commentators assert that the Mishnah is in fact teaching us on what we are judged during Rosh Hashanah. We are judged on how we walk before G-d as individuals, who we are in essence, when stripped of all external falsities and social pressures.<sup>10</sup>

This means that we are judged on how we are doing as human beings. Do I live in a way that is consistent with what I know? Do I choose to think or not to think? In this regard we are all equal, no matter how much we know or don't know, we can all be held responsible for how we are doing at being true to what we know. This is a judgment which applies to all human beings.

---

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in the commentary of Rabbeinu Chanel ad loc.

<sup>9</sup> See Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur* vol. 1, pg. 44.

<sup>10</sup> See *ibid* vol. 2, pg. 419.

## THE STRANGE NATURE OF FREE WILL

### Change

This understanding of *bechirah* also impacts how we relate to the concept of self-improvement, which is the subtext of everything we talk about during the High Holidays. Although change in any area of one's life is laudable, change in the crucial area of *bechirah* has an exponential impact.<sup>11</sup> When a person makes his life more attuned to his understanding of reality he becomes a different person in all areas of his life. His relationship with his family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, G-d, and even himself has drastically improved, and all because of change in his *bechirah*!

### The Book of Life

At this time of year, when we ask G-d to inscribe us into the Book of Life, it is imperative that we engage in introspection to see where we stand in regard to *bechirah*. When we take the time to determine to what extent we are alive, in the sense of implementing that which we know to be true into our lives, we show G-d that we appreciate the gift of life and intend to maximize it. We can then feel confident that we have done everything in our power to merit continued life. When exercising *bechirah* we are following G-d's commandment in its most literal form: "Choose life!"

---

<sup>11</sup> This brings to mind Thoreau's famous words: "For every thousand hacking at the leaves of evil, there is one striking at the root."



# Of Apples, Honey and New Year Wishes

*Rabbi Yaacov Benzaquen*

**T**raditional Jewish foods are usually associated with important events in Jewish history. On Pesach we eat matzah to commemorate the Exodus, on Chanukah we eat latkes to commemorate the miracle of the menorah, and on Purim we eat hamentaschen to commemorate the fall of Haman. However, Rosh Hashanah is different. The Talmud instructs us to eat foods because of their symbolism, unconnected with any historical event. It is through these traditional foods that Jews throughout the ages expressed their New Year's thoughts, feelings and prayers.

## I

### **The Traditional Rosh Hashanah Menu**

Even though the Talmud doesn't outline an actual menu for the Rosh Hashanah feast, it does recommend certain foods.

#### **Talmudic vegetable platter**

The Talmud states:

...Now that we have established that symbols are significant, people should make it a habit to eat at the

## OF APPLES, HONEY AND NEW YEAR WISHES

start of the year pumpkin, fenugreek, leek, beets and dates. (*Horayot* 12a)

Rashi explains that these foods grow in abundance, and are therefore symbolic of the prosperity that we wish for the coming year. According to Rashi, all of these vegetables share the same symbolism. Other commentators explain that these foods' Hebrew or Aramaic names phonetically resemble some of our basic wishes for the coming year. According to these commentators, each of these vegetables serves as a different symbol. In fact, rabbinic literature records prayers specific to each of these foods. The Abudraham,<sup>1</sup> quoting Geonic Responsa, describes the common practice among the scholars of those times:

They would bring to the table a basket containing gourds, dates and other boiled vegetables. They would then place their hands on each one of them and extract symbolic meaning for the New Year from their names. On the gourd (*krah*) they would say “our bad decrees should be torn up” (*yikrah*), on the fenugreek (*rubya*) they would say “our merits should be numerous” (*sheyirbu*). Some would preface, “May it be your will, G-d, that....

### **Lamb's head and fish**

The Rosh Hashanah menu continues:

Some bring to the table the head of a lamb, fish... On the head of a lamb they would say “we should be

---

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi David Abudraham lived in Spain during the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

## OF APPLES, HONEY AND NEW YEAR WISHES

heads and not tails,” and [they brought fish] because fish multiply rapidly.

The *Shulchan Aruch*<sup>2</sup> adds that we eat from the head of a lamb to remind G-d of the ram that was sacrificed instead of Isaac. This evokes the everlasting merit of Abraham's and Isaac's extraordinary resolve to perform G-d's will.<sup>3</sup>

### **Apples, honey!**

The *Rama*<sup>4</sup> cites the custom of eating apples and honey for a sweet New Year. Clearly, honey represents sweetness, but what does the apple represent?

King Solomon writes, “as an apple tree in the midst of forest trees, so is my beloved among the children” (Song of Songs 2:3). The Midrash explains that the apple tree symbolizes the Jewish nation. This implies that each apple represents a Jewish person. When we dip the apple in honey, we express our wish that G-d immerse us in a year as sweet as honey.

### **Fats and sugars**

Ezra the Scribe led the Jewish people back to Israel after the Babylonian exile. Due to assimilation during the exile, the people were unversed in the Torah. Upon hearing its laws they became aware of how much their lifestyle had deviated from the

---

<sup>2</sup> The Code of Jewish Law, written by Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575).

<sup>3</sup> The binding of Isaac is a central theme on Rosh Hashanah. The Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Hashanah is the story of the Binding of Isaac. It is also an important part of the *mussaf* service.

<sup>4</sup> Acronym for Rabbi Moshe Isserles, chief rabbi of Krakow (1530-1572).

## OF APPLES, HONEY AND NEW YEAR WISHES

Torah's guidelines and they were very distressed. Ezra told the people to rejoice on this day of Rosh Hashanah, "Go your way, eat fatty foods, drink sweet drinks, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared. For this day is holy to our G-d; you shall not be depressed, for the joy of G-d is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). The custom to eat fatty and sweet foods stems from this verse.

### No nuts

The *Rama* cites one practical and one symbolic reason for abstaining from eating nuts on Rosh Hashanah. Practically, nuts are not easily digested and can interfere with one's concentration while praying. And symbolically, the numerical value of *egoz*, Hebrew for nuts, is equivalent to the numerical value of *chet*, Hebrew for sin.<sup>5</sup>

Although Jews have expanded it throughout the ages, this pretty much concludes the traditional Rosh Hashanah menu.

## II

Each of these food symbols represents a different aspect of our lives, both as individuals and as a community. Through these signs, we express our concern about our enemies and our mistakes, and we hope for a happy and healthy New Year. By eating these foods we materialize and strengthen our faith in G-d on this holy day of Rosh Hashanah.

---

<sup>5</sup> In the Hebrew alphabet, letters are also numbers. For example, an *Aleph* is one, *Bet* is two, *Gimel* is three and so on.

## OF APPLES, HONEY AND NEW YEAR WISHES

The *Meiri*<sup>6</sup> was fond of the rational Maimonidean approach to Judaism. He insists that these symbols are not superstitious omens. Rather, they serve to set our priorities straight and awaken our hearts to the important things in life.

The *Meiri's* list of symbols and their respective prayers relate more directly to G-d. In the *Meiri's* rendition of the short prayers, "our enemies" does not refer to the persecutors of the Jews; rather, it refers to the character traits and behaviors that distance us from G-d. We say over the [food], "our attackers and our enemies and all who pursue our downfall should be excised." This is not a plea for the physical destruction and annihilation of our enemies. We are asking G-d to excise the enemies of our spiritual growth: our arrogance, our anger, our materialism. The *Meiri* warns us not to make the mistake of thinking that eating certain foods and reciting incantations will make you a better person. Repentance and consciousness of G-d's sovereignty, mitzvot and good deeds are the true keys to a successful New Year. The symbols only serve to remind us of our values and goals.

By relating to our negative traits as enemies we can begin to work on changing them. It is important to understand that people are essentially good. As the Talmud states, "it is revealed and known to the Almighty that it is our desire to do Your will" (*Berachot* 17a). It is the evil inclination and the negative impulses in man that prevent us from doing what's right. By asking G-d to remove these negative impulses we begin the process of overcoming them.

---

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Menachem ben Solomon Meiri, a 13<sup>th</sup> Century Talmudist.

### III

#### **The Rosh Hashanah nap**

There is another, perhaps less known, custom on this day. The *Rama*, quoting the Jerusalem Talmud, mentions the custom of not taking a daytime nap on Rosh Hashanah. The Talmud writes that “he who is asleep on this day, his *mazal* (fortune) will also be asleep.”

The recognition of this day as a Day of Judgment should be enough to make us lose sleep. This is especially true since we can affect the outcome with repentance and good deeds. How could we waste precious Rosh Hashanah minutes sleeping?!

#### **Angry?**

The *Tur*<sup>7</sup> states the obvious when he writes that avoiding anger is more fundamental than eating symbolic foods. Firstly, anger is a sin. Secondly, peace of mind is the best way to usher in the New Year. And this itself serves as the greatest sign for a year of serenity, happiness and trust in G-d.

There is another important point here. G-d relates to us in the same way He sees us relating to our fellow man. By restraining our anger and being kind to others we inspire G-d’s patience and awaken His mercy on this Day of Judgment.

---

<sup>7</sup> A precursor to the *Shulchan Aruch*, the *Tur* is a legal code authored by Rabbi Yaacov Ben Asher (1275-1340).

# Feast or Fast: The Day Before Yom Kippur

*Rabbi Avi Lebowitz*

*“And you shall fast [lit. pain your soul] on the ninth of the month, in the evening” (Leviticus 23:32). Do we fast on the ninth of the month? We fast on the tenth of the month!<sup>1</sup> Rather, the verse means to say that anyone who eats on the ninth, it is as if he fasted both on the ninth and on the tenth.*

Talmud, *Yoma* 81b

**I**t has become a well accepted tradition to eat more than usual on the ninth day of *Tishrei*,<sup>2</sup> the day prior to Yom Kippur. Although the Talmud’s statement, “... as if he fasted both on the ninth and on the tenth,” seemingly implies that it would be proper to fast on the ninth day as well, *Tosafot*<sup>3</sup> interprets the phrase to mean, *as if we were commanded* to fast on both the ninth and tenth. However, not only are we commanded to eat on the ninth, we are forbidden to fast on that day. In fact, the Talmud even identifies a sage who fasted every day of the year, but on the day before Yom Kippur he made a special effort to eat.

---

<sup>1</sup> As the verse states explicitly, “The tenth of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement for you. It is a sacred holiday when you must fast...” (Leviticus 23:27).

<sup>2</sup> *Tishrei* is the name of an autumn month in the Jewish calendar.

<sup>3</sup> A compilation of Talmudic commentaries (12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries).

## FEAST OR FAST: THE DAY BEFORE YOM KIPPUR

This essay analyzes the key issues surrounding this obscure mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur.

### I

#### **Why does the Torah want us to eat on the day before Yom Kippur?**

*Rashi*<sup>4</sup> explains that the very source of the mitzvah reveals the purpose for the mitzvah. The Talmud understands the words “Fast on the ninth of the month” as an instruction to *prepare* on the ninth of the month so that you can fast on the tenth. According to this interpretation, the mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur is a preparatory mitzvah in advance of fasting. The purpose of the mitzvah is to take precautions on the ninth to satiate and hydrate ourselves so that we will have the strength and energy to complete the fast on the tenth.

The *Rosh*<sup>5</sup> builds on *Rashi's* explanation by offering a parable. Imagine a man who has an only child who is dear and precious to him. Due to a rare disease, the child must fast one day every single year. His father insists that he eat and drink on the day before so that the fast won't harm him. Similarly, G-d requires us to fast on Yom Kippur for our own benefit, so that we may receive a proper atonement for our sins. G-d therefore demands of us to eat on the day before, to ensure that our health will not be threatened by the fast.

---

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105), the preeminent biblical and talmudic commentator.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel (1250-1328), author of a halachic commentary on the Talmud and chief rabbi of Toledo.



## II

### What is the minimum amount that one is required to eat?

We have established that the words “you shall fast on the ninth of the month” actually describe a mitzvah to prepare for Yom Kippur by eating the day before. In light of this surprising choice of words, the *Minchat Chinuch*<sup>6</sup> (mitzvah 313) suggests that the amount of food that one is required to eat on the day before Yom Kippur parallels the amount that is prohibited to eat on Yom Kippur itself. So what does this suggestion imply about the minimum amount we are required to eat? When the Torah instructs us to fast on Yom Kippur it uses the expression, “pain your soul.”<sup>7</sup> The Talmud (*Yoma* 79a) explains that one is in violation of eating on Yom Kippur only if this state of “pain” is interrupted. The Talmud maintains that this interruption occurs by consuming as little food as the volume of one large date. Since the mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur is referred to as a “fast,” it would follow from the *Minchat Chinuch*’s argument that the minimum amount that one is required to eat is also the size of a large date.

Upon closer inspection, the *Minchat Chinuch*’s theory is not convincing. Even if we assume that the amount of food that we are required to eat on the day before Yom Kippur reflects the amount of food we are not allowed to eat on Yom Kippur, it is still impossible to draw an exact parallel. The Talmud maintains that only by eating an amount of food equal to a large date in a relatively short amount of time (approx. 3-9 minutes) is one going to interrupt the requisite state of “pain” (to use the Torah’s

---

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Yosef Babad (1801-1874), chief rabbi of Tarnopol.

<sup>7</sup> See Talmud, *Yoma* 74b for a discussion on how we determine that this “pain” refers to eating and drinking.

## FEAST OR FAST: THE DAY BEFORE YOM KIPPUR

terminology), since the volume of a large date is considered by the Talmud to provide some degree of nourishment. Certainly if one consumes the volume of a large date in the morning of Yom Kippur, they would undoubtedly return to the state of “pain” within a few hours. Nonetheless, since they interrupted their state of “pain” on the day of Yom Kippur, they are in violation of the prohibition against eating on Yom Kippur. However, if one could fulfill the mitzvah of eating on the day before Yom Kippur by simply eating the volume of a large date at some point during the day, it would not prepare him for the fast of Yom Kippur, since by the time Yom Kippur begins he will certainly return to a state of hunger. The opinion of the *Minchat Chinuch* does not conform with the rationale that we mentioned from *Rashi* and the *Rosh*, that we eat on the day before Yom Kippur in order to properly prepare ourselves for the fast of Yom Kippur.

It appears far more likely that there is no absolute minimum amount that one is required to eat on the day before Yom Kippur. The reason for eating on the day before Yom Kippur is to prepare oneself for the fast of Yom Kippur. Therefore, the amount that one should eat on the day before Yom Kippur is whatever would best suit his or her needs in preparing for the fast of Yom Kippur.

### III

#### **Is the mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur a preparatory mitzvah?**

Rabbi Akiva Eiger<sup>8</sup> defines the mitzvah of eating on the day before Yom Kippur through Talmudic principles. The Mishnah in *Kiddushin* (1:7) states that time-bound positive

---

<sup>8</sup> A leading Talmudist and chief rabbi of Posen (1768-1838).

## FEAST OR FAST: THE DAY BEFORE YOM KIPPUR

commandments are not universally binding.<sup>9</sup> [Time-bound mitzvot are commandments that are specific to a particular time.] The Talmud derives this principle from the mitzvah of Tefillin, which is operative only during the week, not on Shabbat.<sup>10</sup> Although the mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur is certainly a time-bound mitzvah, Rabbi Akiva Eiger argues that it is universally binding. The fast of Yom Kippur is universally binding.<sup>11</sup> Since the mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur shares the phrase “you shall pain your soul” with the mitzvah to fast on Yom Kippur, it follows it should also be universally binding (*Teshuvot Rabbi Akiva Eiger*, no.16).<sup>12</sup>

Rabbi Akiva Eiger used a technical argument to conclude that the mitzvah of eating on the day before Yom Kippur should not be classified as a time-bound positive commandment. However, in light of *Rashi* and the *Rosh* who explain that the mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur is in order to enable one to fast on Yom Kippur itself, we do not need to use a technical argument. It is self-evident. The mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur does not stand by itself, it is the preparation for the next day’s fast. Therefore, anyone who will be fasting on Yom

---

<sup>9</sup> See Talmud *Kiddushin* for listing of those who are exempt from time-bound mitzvot.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion, see *Igrot Moshe* O.C. 4:49

<sup>11</sup> See Talmud, *Sukkah* 28a for a biblical source that the fast of Yom Kippur is universally binding despite the fact that it is a time-bound mitzvah.

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Akiva Eiger’s argument is reminiscent of a similar Talmudic teaching. The requirement to make *kiddush* on Shabbat, despite the fact that it is time-bound is not treated as such. This is because in addition to the time-bound positive commandment, Shabbat is also reinforced with a negative commandment, and negative commandments are universally binding even when they are time-bound. We therefore treat all the mitzvot of Shabbat as universally binding negative commandments.

## FEAST OR FAST: THE DAY BEFORE YOM KIPPUR

Kippur is required to prepare himself properly on the day before Yom Kippur by eating and drinking adequately.

### IV

#### **To what degree is one obligated to prepare oneself for the Yom Kippur fast?**

An ailing woman once asked Rabbi Moshe Feinstein if she is required to have an intravenous tube inserted prior to Yom Kippur to enable her to fast.

Based on what we have established above, that the mitzvah of eating on the day before Yom Kippur is preparatory in nature, it should follow that this mitzvah includes whatever measures necessary to prepare for the fast of Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Feinstein does not consider this argument to be conclusive. He explains that the Talmud understood the mitzvah in a limited context, to “eat” on the day before Yom Kippur so that you can fast on Yom Kippur. This mitzvah does not include all possible preparations that would enable one to fast on Yom Kippur. Even if the underlying nature of the mitzvah is to eat so that one can fast, as stated by *Rashi* and the *Rosh* above, the specific parameters of the mitzvah are still only to eat, and not to prepare for Yom Kippur. Rabbi Feinstein therefore ruled that this woman need not have an intravenous tube inserted in order to fast on Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Feinstein takes his argument one step further. He suggests that even one who will not be fasting on Yom Kippur because of life threatening illness is still required to eat on the day before Yom Kippur. This is because the reasons we deduce or understand for the existence of a mitzvah only afford us a partial insight into the mitzvah; these reasons have no legal ramifications. In other words, we cannot limit a mitzvah in any way based on our

## FEAST OR FAST: THE DAY BEFORE YOM KIPPUR

superficial understanding of its purpose or reason. In this situation, we are required to eat on the day before Yom Kippur regardless of the reason we give for doing so. Whether or not one is preparing for the Yom Kippur fast or not, one is required to eat the day prior. It is not in our power to differentiate between those who will be fasting and those who will be eating on Yom Kippur (*Igrot Moshe* O.C. 90).

Although Rabbi Feinstein is certainly correct regarding most other mitzvot, perhaps this mitzvah is different. The Torah itself describes the mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur in a way that implies that the very nature of the mitzvah is to prepare for the following day. As *Rashi* comments, the Torah should be read as if it wrote, “Prepare yourself on the ninth so that you can fast on the tenth.” According to this reading of the Torah, it is as if the Torah stated explicitly that the mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur applies only when it is in preparation for Yom Kippur, and it is inapplicable to one who will not be fasting on Yom Kippur.

### V

#### **Alternate reasons for the Mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur**

Rabbi Yosef Caro<sup>13</sup> offers an alternative explanation of the mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur. Often people associate the mood of Yom Kippur with mourning and depression. Fasting tends to convey a sad and depressed state of mind. In truth, when properly observed, Yom Kippur is a happy day. We begin the Yom Kippur service by reciting the blessing thanking G-d for

---

<sup>13</sup> Lived in Spain and Safed, Israel (1488 -1575) and authored the authoritative code of Jewish law, the *Shulchan Aruch*.

## FEAST OR FAST: THE DAY BEFORE YOM KIPPUR

bringing us to this special day. Yom Kippur should be perceived as a gift from G-d, a day we look forward to as an opportunity to receive atonement for our sins. If on the day of Yom Kippur itself we must fast and are therefore unable to properly express our joy and excitement, we must use the day before Yom Kippur to feast and express our excitement for the upcoming day of Yom Kippur (*Beit Yosef* O.C. 604).

Another reason for the mitzvah of eating on the day before Yom Kippur is offered by *Rabbeinu Yonah*<sup>14</sup>. *Rabbeinu Yonah* echoes the words of the *Rambam*<sup>15</sup> who advocates performing mitzvot with joy (Laws of *Lulav* 8:15). We therefore have a festive meal before Yom Kippur as an expression of our joy and excitement to perform the difficult mitzvah of fasting on Yom Kippur (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 4:8-10). Whereas Rabbi Caro suggests we express joy for the opportunity of atonement, *Rabbeinu Yonah* proposes we express joy for the actual mitzvah of fasting on Yom Kippur.

A fourth reason for the mitzvah of eating on the day before Yom Kippur is offered by the *Ritvah*<sup>16</sup> in his commentary on Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 9a). Many people abstain from food throughout the year for health reasons. We want to be absolutely clear that we are refraining from eating purely for the sake of the mitzvah. We want to show that there is no other reason for our fasting on Yom Kippur other than the fact that G-d tells us in the Torah to fast. Therefore, we go out of our way to eat prior to Yom Kippur to create a strong contrast between our diet on Yom Kippur

---

<sup>14</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> century Talmudist and author of the ethical work, *Shaarei Teshuvah*.

<sup>15</sup> Moses Maimonides, considered one of the greatest Jewish philosophers and codifiers of Jewish law (1135-1204).

<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Yom Tov ben Asevilli, a late 13<sup>th</sup> century Talmudic commentator.

## FEAST OR FAST: THE DAY BEFORE YOM KIPPUR

and our diet before Yom Kippur. This contrast makes it clear that our fasting on Yom Kippur is attributed solely to the service of G-d.

### VI

#### **Is the mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur a biblical commandment or a rabbinic institution?**

Rabbi Yosef Caro rules that if one took an oath not to eat on Shabbat or the holidays the oath is not binding since it conflicts with the nation's oath at Sinai to eat on Shabbat and holidays.<sup>17</sup> However, an oath not to eat on Chanukah or Purim is binding since the requirement to eat on those holidays is rabbinic and no earlier oath to the contrary was ever taken. Rabbi Yosef Caro continues, "It seems to me that if one took an oath not to eat on *Rosh Chodesh* (the first day of the Jewish month), or on the day before Yom Kippur, the oath would be binding since the requirement to eat on these days is also rabbinic. However, the *Rambam* indicates that the requirement to eat on *Rosh Chodesh* and on the day before Yom Kippur is actually biblical, and accordingly the oath would not be binding" (*Shulchan Aruch* O.C. 570:2).

The *Mogen Avraham*<sup>18</sup> (O.C. 570:9) supports the opinion of the *Rambam* that the requirement to eat on the day before Yom Kippur is a biblical mitzvah. He bases his support on the aforementioned passage of Talmud which interpreted the verse "pain your soul on the ninth of the month" to mean that one who eats on the ninth is considered as if he had fasted on both the ninth and tenth. The Talmud has an alternative use for this verse to

---

<sup>17</sup> The acceptance of the Torah by the Jews at Mt. Sinai has the legal status of an oath. See Talmud, *Shavuot* 25a

<sup>18</sup> Halachic commentary printed on the margin of the *Shulchan Aruch* authored by Rabbi Avraham Gombiner (1634-1682).

## FEAST OR FAST: THE DAY BEFORE YOM KIPPUR

teach the mitzvah of extending the day of Yom Kippur. Furthermore, the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 9a) strongly indicates that the verse is indeed a biblical mitzvah to eat on the day prior to Yom Kippur.

### VII

#### A mitzvah to indulge?

The *Tur*<sup>19</sup> records the following story found in the Midrash. There was once a non-Jewish governor who told his servant to go to the market and purchase some fish. After arriving at the market the servant found only one fish left for sale. There was a Jewish tailor in the market who was also interested in purchasing the fish. A bidding war for the last fish began and eventually the Jew won by offering an enormous sum of money for the fish. When the servant returned to the governor and told him what had transpired, the governor summoned the Jewish tailor. He asked the Jew, “What do you do?” The Jew responded, “I am a simple tailor.” The governor then asked, “How can you afford to pay for the fish five times its fair value and why did you outbid my servant?” The Jew humbly answered, “How can I not buy the fish for even ten times its market value?! G-d has commanded us to eat and drink on this special day [it was the day before Yom Kippur] to express our trust that He will grant atonement for our sins.” The governor was impressed by the sincerity of this simple Jew and sent him home peacefully.

*Tosafot* (*Chulin* 83a) writes that it was customary in their time to eat fish and fowl on the day before Yom Kippur, as opposed to beef. Perhaps this can be attributed to an implication in

---

<sup>19</sup> A precursor to the *Shulachan Aruch*, the *Tur* is a legal code authored by Rabbi Yaacov Ben Asher (1275-1340).



## FEAST OR FAST: THE DAY BEFORE YOM KIPPUR

the Talmud (*Bechorot* 10a) that fowl was a more expensive delicacy than beef.

Although one may be able to fulfill this mitzvah of eating on the day before Yom Kippur with the simplest of foods, our Midrash indicates that one should try to obtain delicacies and gourmet foods for the meal prior to Yom Kippur. Why is it important to spend extra money on this meal?

We live in a materialistic world where people spend large sums of money trying to raise their standard of living. At the end of a year spent indulging in all the luxuries available to us, we stand before G-d on Yom Kippur pleading for atonement. We are in a vulnerable state, as our financial ledgers give the impression that our priorities are not focused around spiritual growth.

The day before Yom Kippur is given to us as an opportunity to prove that we are not superficial people who only spend on our own pleasures. G-d presents us with the opportunity to serve him on the day before Yom Kippur with indulgence as opposed to abstinence. It enables us to prove that we do not only indulge for our own pleasure, but we are also willing to spend extra on delicacies in the service of G-d and use the best of foods for the performance of a mitzvah.

We have much to learn from the obscure mitzvah of eating on the day before Yom Kippur. It prepares us for the Day of Awe. It gives us an appreciation of what Yom Kippur is about. And it provides deep insight into the emotional feelings appropriate for the Day of Atonement.

# On the Recovery of Opportunities Lost

*Rabbi Yisroel Gordon*

There is one mitzvah that is so fundamental it literally encompasses every other mitzvah in the Torah. It reveals the depth of G-d's love for man, and it creates the possibility for man's relationship with G-d. Everyone knows its name, but few plumb its depths.

The opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of *teshuvah* (repentance) is always before us. The gates of heaven are open for business 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. But with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur upon us, *teshuvah* is literally the call of the hour.

Repentance is a daunting task, and many don't even bother to give it a shot. For starters, there's always the fear of a close look in the mirror. But beyond that, our understanding of *teshuvah* is fraught with basic misconceptions.

What does it mean to “do *teshuvah*”? Can repentance be quantified? What exactly does it accomplish? Can people really change? Is it undone by a relapse? These are just a few of the hard questions of the High Holiday season. What we need is a sharp, clear definition of this enigma called *teshuvah*.

For centuries, Jews have turned to the Rambam<sup>1</sup> for direction. His Talmudic definitions of mitzvot enjoy unparalleled popularity. But despite his scientific classifications and precise

---

<sup>1</sup> Acronym for Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (1135-1204), also known as Maimonides.

## ON THE RECOVERY OF OPPORTUNITIES LOST

wording, the writings of the Rambam are far from transparent. His tersely stated ideas are often misunderstood, and the casual reader, unaware of the Talmudic context, is often left with more questions than answers. The Rambam's legendary genius is a treasure buried beneath the surface of his text; we will read him carefully and with reverence.

In the first chapter of his "Laws of *Teshuvah*," the Rambam writes that one who does *teshuvah* properly is forgiven for his sins. This is nothing new; everyone knows that G-d forgives the penitent. However, in his second chapter, the Rambam asserts that there is a second form of *teshuvah* called *teshuvah gemurah*, "complete repentance." The meaning and purpose of this higher form of repentance will be the focus of our study:

### **Maimonides, Laws of *Teshuvah*, chap. 2**

1. What is *teshuvah gemurah* (complete repentance)? This is when someone is presented with the opportunity [to transgress a commandment] that he has transgressed before, and he is fully capable of going through with it, but as a result of his *teshuvah* he abstains and does not do it. [If his abstinence is out] of fear [of being caught] or physical weakness then he has not [yet achieved complete *teshuvah*].

To illustrate: A man had an adulterous relationship with a woman and some time later he finds himself alone with her again. The intensity of his love for her, his physical strength and even the setting are all the same as they were the first time, yet he abstains and does not sin. Such a man has attained complete *teshuvah* [for his original sin]...

2. And what is *teshuvah* (ordinary repentance)? This is when the sinner abandons his transgression, puts it out of his mind, and resolves to never do it again, as the verse states, "Let the wicked one forsake his way and the iniquitous man his thoughts" (Isaiah 55:7)... [The

## ON THE RECOVERY OF OPPORTUNITIES LOST

sincerity of his repentance must be so great that] the Knower of the Hidden [i.e. G-d] testifies that this man will never sin again in that way.

The Rambam has divided *teshuvah* into two different legal categories. There is ordinary *teshuvah* and then there is *teshuvah gemurah*, “complete teshuvah.” The meaning and significance of this *teshuvah gemurah* is a mystery that has troubled scholars through the ages. Many theories have been propagated, but questions remain. There is certainly room for an original take.

## II

Long ago, the *Ran*<sup>2</sup> took issue with this idea of a higher level *teshuvah*. He directed his question at the Talmud:

There is something here in need of explanation. The Talmud states (*Yoma* 86b): Who is a *baal teshuvah* (one who achieves [complete] repentance)? Rav Yehudah taught, ‘When the opportunity to sin comes before him once, twice, three times and he is [still] saved from [sin]. Rav Yehudah stipulated further: ‘With the same woman, in the same situation and at the same location.’ But now we have a problem. How can an old man [who lacks desire] do complete *teshuvah* [for the sins of his youth]? And if you’ll claim that his *teshuvah* is indeed incomplete, this is contradicted by the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 40b): ‘Even a man who was evil all his life, if he does *teshuvah* at the end, no mention is made of any of his crimes, as

---

<sup>2</sup> Acronym for Rabbenu Nissim ben Reuven of Gerondi, Spain (1308-1376).

## ON THE RECOVERY OF OPPORTUNITIES LOST

the verse states, 'He will not stumble on his evil on the day that he repents from his wrongdoing' (Ezekiel 33:12). [According to the teaching of Rav Yehudah, this man should be incapable of achieving complete *teshuvah*, since] at the end of his life he is not in the same situation [of vitality as he was in his youth] (*D'rashot HaRan* 8).

The *Ran* is pointing out a Talmudic contradiction. How can the Talmud say in one place that an old man is capable of achieving atonement for the sins of his youth when the Talmud states elsewhere that *teshuvah* is incomplete as long as you haven't passed the test on a retake? Old men don't have the passion of their youth so they are simply incapable of being tested again in the same way. It should follow that old men are incapable of ever achieving complete atonement. The Rambam, who accepts both Talmudic teachings in his code, reinforces the problem. The Talmud is a compendium of many voices and Talmudic statements are, at times, irreconcilable. By contrast, the Rambam wrote a legal code that is, by definition, always consistent. The Rambam must have had some way of reconciling these conflicting teachings.

As is commonly the case, our question rests on an assumption, and the first thing we need to do is reject it. The existence of "complete repentance" does seem to imply that ordinary repentance does not provide complete forgiveness for sins. But if this were indeed the case, it would be more than disturbing; it would be inconsistent with the Rambam. The Rambam wrote explicitly in the first chapter of the Laws of *Teshuvah* that ordinary *teshuvah* provides forgiveness, and he did not qualify that statement. Old men can be fully forgiven for their youthful transgressions with ordinary *teshuvah*. But now we are confronted with a bigger problem.

What does *teshuvah gemurah* do?

## ON THE RECOVERY OF OPPORTUNITIES LOST

This is the white elephant of our Rambam. If ordinary repentance does the job of erasing sins from the record books, what then is the function of “complete repentance?” The ordinary *teshuvah* process has already cleansed the soul of sin; all is forgiven and forgotten. What could *teshuvah gemurah* possibly add to that?

Things are going to get worse before they get better.

### III

The search for an answer is really a search for the right question. There’s something basic that we’re missing here and as long as we fail to put our finger on it, the Rambam will remain sealed. We need a question that will pry the Rambam open to the light of day.

Taking a second look at our text, the Rambam seems to set an impossible standard for *teshuvah*:

[The sincerity of his repentance must be so great that] the Knower of the Hidden [i.e. G-d] testifies that this man will never sin again in that way.

G-d’s testimony that this guy will not be a repeat offender is a prerequisite for forgiveness? Does the Rambam actually mean to say that if the *baal teshuvah* (the repentant) ever commits the sin again then his *teshuvah* was ineffective, and the original sin was not forgiven? That’s both depressing and hard to believe.

An anomaly in language provides the key to our Rambam. Commentators have long pointed out the use here of “Knower of the Hidden” as a substitute for the usual “G-d.” This is significant; nowhere else in the Rambam’s code is G-d referred to in this way.

The Rambam’s choice of words is quite deliberate: It is not G-d in His capacity as the “Knower of the Future” that needs to

## ON THE RECOVERY OF OPPORTUNITIES LOST

testify to the sincerity of *teshuvah*, rather it is only G-d in His capacity as the “Knower of the Hidden.”

The hidden recesses of man’s heart are fully revealed before G-d. When the sincerity of repentance reaches the point where this man, *in his current state of piety*, could never again commit this particular sin, then *teshuvah* is achieved and the sin is forgiven. What the future actually holds does not matter. Man’s evil inclinations, his desires and impulses, are always at work and man may fall and sin again the very same sin. However, that would be a new chapter in his spiritual life and it would have no bearing on the validity of the *teshuvah* of his past. It is only G-d as “Knower of the Hidden” that matters here; G-d’s knowledge of the future is perfectly irrelevant.

Be that as it may, by the Rambam’s own definition, ordinary *teshuvah* requires a personal resolution of such force that G-d Himself testifies that this person will never commit that sin again (that is, as long as he maintains his current spiritual high). What then is the qualitative difference between ordinary *teshuvah* and complete *teshuvah*? Why is complete repentance achieved only after not doing what G-d already knows you won’t do?

Indeed, *Rabbenu Yonah*,<sup>3</sup> a contemporary of the Rambam, disagrees with him on this very point:

The sages taught, “Whose repentance reaches the throne of glory? This is one who is tested with the same situation, in the same setting and with the same woman, and he comes out clean” (*Yoma* 86b).

... But one who is never presented with a second chance to prove himself, should [strive to] increase his awe of G-d every single day. Eventually, the intensity of his awe of G-d will reach the point where it would be sufficient to restrain his passions. The

---

<sup>3</sup> *Rabbenu Yonah HaChassid ben Avraham of Gerondi, Spain (d. 1264).*

## ON THE RECOVERY OF OPPORTUNITIES LOST

One who understands the heart and created the soul will know that if this man were to be tested again in the same way, he would successfully protect his soul from his desires. Such a person has reached the highest level of *teshuvah* before G-d. (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 1:49)

*Rabbenu Yonah* makes good sense. You qualify for complete *teshuvah* by being able to pass the test; there is no need to actually go through with it. The Rambam's insistence that the test be passed is hard to understand. But the trouble with the Rambam's position runs deeper than that.

*Teshuvah* is the rectification of and atonement for a spiritual or moral failing. It must therefore be solely concerned with the state of the *neshamah* (soul), and as soon as man purifies his soul, *teshuvah* should be complete. How could any form of *teshuvah* be contingent on an act of abstinence that is merely an external demonstration of a preexisting internal reality?

### IV

We have arrived at a theological difficulty that extends far beyond the mitzvah of *teshuvah*. Why does G-d bother to test us at all when He knows in advance how we will perform? G-d is well aware of each person's spiritual level and moral strength, so what is the purpose of divine trials and tests? This is, no doubt, a disturbing problem. Fortunately, Jewish philosophers tackled this one long ago, and their answer reveals a profound insight into the nature of man.

"And it was after these events, and G-d tested Abraham" (Genesis 22:1). Thus begins the ultimate test, the *Akeidah*. G-d commanded Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, only to



## ON THE RECOVERY OF OPPORTUNITIES LOST

stop him at the very last moment. It is here that the commentators first discussed this issue.

The Ramban,<sup>4</sup> in his classic Biblical commentary, writes the following:

...The Tester, may He be blessed, challenges [man] to activate his latent potential, so he can earn reward for his good deeds and not merely for his good heart. Know that “G-d tests the righteous” (Psalms 11:5). When G-d knows that a righteous person will do His will, and G-d wants to give him that merit, then He challenges him with a test. G-d does not test the evil who won’t listen.<sup>5</sup>

In the *Ramban’s* view, the advantage of actions over potential is that actions earn more reward.

On the face of it, this teaching of the *Ramban* doesn’t really help us. Our question did not get answered; it just got shifted. Why should passing tests earn man extra reward, when G-d was perfectly aware that this man would pass the test? As soon as man reaches the level that he would do the right thing in a given circumstance, he should be just as rewarded as if he had done it. What is added by the act itself?

The *Ramban* can be understood with a little help from his first cousin, *Rabbenu Yonah*.

The Talmud teaches that whenever a person successfully withstands a moral challenge he is rewarded as if he had fulfilled a mitzvah (*Kiddushin* 39b). *Rabbenu Yonah* explains this surprising

---

<sup>4</sup> Acronym for Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (1194-1270), also known as Nachmanides.

<sup>5</sup> In *Shaar HaGemul* the *Ramban* offers an alternative approach. There he writes that tests sanctify G-d’s name by providing a model of strength. Maimonides, in *Guide of the Perplexed* (3:24), writes the same.

## ON THE RECOVERY OF OPPORTUNITIES LOST

statement with an insightful observation. The ability to rise above natural instincts and do the right thing is a uniquely human ability. What is it within man that gives him the extraordinary ability to overcome personal desires and agendas? Where does man get his strength? The answer is fear (or awe) of G-d. Every time man withstands a moral challenge he is fulfilling the Biblical mitzvah to “Fear the Lord your G-d” (Deuteronomy 10:12). This explains the spiritual advantage of action over potential and it is for this reason that man receives reward for the fulfillment of a mitzvah every time he controls his negative desires.

But there is an alternative approach.

Rabbi Yosef Albo,<sup>6</sup> author of one the great classics of Jewish religious literature, has an original take on our issue (*Sefer HaIkkarim* 4:13):

Every human act instills the soul with an attribute,  
and that attribute is acquired more powerfully than it  
would be without the act.

Our hearts are the product of our behavior. It is our actions that make us great, not our potential. It is for this reason, says Rabbi Albo, that G-d tests us even though He knows we will pass. G-d is not interested in abilities; He wants to see us grow through achievement.

With Rabbi Albo’s thesis, we have a new understanding of the heavenly reward for passing a test. Reward is earned for withstanding a moral challenge not necessarily because a mitzvah was done, but simply because you have developed yourself into a better person. After all, this is what tests are for.

---

<sup>6</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> century theologian and philosopher. Albo was a participant at the famous Tortosa disputation in 1413-1414.

## ON THE RECOVERY OF OPPORTUNITIES LOST

### V

Armed with a new appreciation for divine tests, we return to our Rambam.

Yes, the Rambam believes that ordinary teshuvah works fine all by itself. Man performs teshuvah, G-d erases the sin from history, and all is forgiven and forgotten. Mazal Tov.

There is just one little thing that we have conveniently forgotten.

The sin of failure may be forgiven, but the fact remains that this man failed a divine test and missed an opportunity for spiritual growth. At the time of his sin, this man was being tested. He was given an opportunity to grow by overcoming temptation and he failed to live up to it. *Teshuvah* might erase the spiritual damage caused by the sin, but the opportunity for growth was still lost and this man's potential remains unrealized. This is an inescapable reality that ordinary *teshuvah* cannot change.

G-d may know that the *baal teshuvah* will not sin again, but as long as he has not had a chance to act on his *teshuvah*, he remains essentially the same man. The only way to rectify the personal loss inherent in every missed opportunity is to succeed at the new opportunity of *teshuvah gemurah*. By facing the trial of his past once again and successfully mastering the impulse to sin, man retrieves his lost opportunity and reaches the spiritual height that is his destiny.

Our Rambam makes perfect sense. The function of *teshuvah gemurah* is defined and clear. While ordinary *teshuvah* fixes sins, *teshuvah gemurah* fixes man.

We have arrived at a new understanding of the *teshuvah* process and its message is filled with hope. The end goal of *teshuvah* is not forgiveness; it is fulfillment. *Teshuvah* is a mitzvah to change our behavior and achieve our potential, and if G-d commands us to do it that must mean that our lives can always be

## ON THE RECOVERY OF OPPORTUNITIES LOST

fixed. This unbounded faith in man is testimony to the incorruptibility of the human soul. No matter what failings might be in our past, we never lose the ability to rise above physical nature and develop into the spiritual beings we were created to be.

Focus is a publication of

**THE JEWISH STUDY NETWORK**

an association of rabbis dedicated to raising the level of Jewish literacy in the Bay Area. Among its many educational activities, the JSN offers stimulating classes, holiday celebrations and weekend retreats.

The Jewish Study Network proudly serves as a resource pool of Jewish educators for local schools, synagogues and institutions.





JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

2584 Leghorn St. #A

Mountain View, CA 94043

[www.jsn.info](http://www.jsn.info)

[info@jsn.info](mailto:info@jsn.info)