

**A Reader for
the High Holidays**

The Days
of Awe:♦

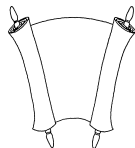
Nine Original Essays

**Nine Original Essays
by the Staff of the Cincinnati Community Kollel**

The Days of Awe

A Reader
for the High Holidays

5760



Our Mission:

*To enrich
the Cincinnati Jewish community
by creating an environment
of Torah study
and providing access
to our spiritual heritage.*



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In Praise of Confession

We identify the period surrounding Rosh Hashanah as a time for repentance and introspection. One way in which this is reflected is the daily recital of Viduy (confession)¹. This special recital of Viduy begins in the days before Rosh Hashanah and continues through Yom Kippur, when the Viduy is said at each of the services. Maimonides (*Laws of Repentance* 1:1) writes that confession is an essential element in the process of repentance and one who adds and expands his expression of confession is to be praised. It may come as a surprise, then, that no Viduy is said on the day of Rosh Hashanah itself.

To some this may come as a relief. Confession, when done in a meaningful way, is a very difficult experience. It is human nature to avoid either confronting our deficiencies and weaknesses or acknowledging our mistakes. Worse, when a confession is simply lip service, the process is tedious and tiresome. Either way, a pause from the daily Viduy would almost seem welcome if not for its perplexing implications. Why, on this day of Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, the day when we acknowledge G-d as King, the recorder of all our actions and ultimate decider of our fate,² should we now break from our pro-

¹ This Viduy is said in the Selichos (prayers for forgiveness), which are added during this period. According to the Sephardic tradition, a Viduy is said in the daily prayers of the entire year.

² The themes of the day are captured by the expressions of *Malchios*, *Zichronos*, and *Shofaros* (Kingship, Remembrance, and Shofar Blasts). The significance of the shofar is expressed in many different layers of meaning, among them the call of the ultimate judgement.

cess of repentance and expressions of confession?

A look at the *midrash* suggests a disturbing precedent. *Midrash Rabba* (Leviticus 29:1) recounts the hourly events of the sixth day of creation, which include the process of Adam's creation, G-d's warning not to eat from the tree of knowledge, Adam's violation, and his escape from harsh judgment³. G-d says to Adam, "This is a sign to your descendants. Just as you stood before me in judgement today and were discharged (from judgment) exempt (from harsh punishment), so too, in the future your descendants will stand before me in judgment this day and will be discharged exempt." That day is the day of Rosh Hashanah.

*Midrash Tanchuma*⁴ adds that prior to his judgment G-d engaged Adam in conversation, allowing him the opportunity to repent. G-d asked Adam, "Where are you? Who told you that you are naked? Have you eaten of the tree from which I have commanded you not to eat?" Instead of repenting, Adam shifted responsibility and placed the blame on Eve and on G-d Himself. "The woman that You gave to be with me - she gave me of the tree, and I ate." At this point G-d left him. Yet, even when G-d returned to punish Adam, He first hinted to him to repent, using a form of the word *shuvah* (return). Finally, after Adam's continued refusal, G-d chased him out of the Garden of Eden. It emerges that Adam experienced his day of judgment, the model for our Rosh Hashanah, without offering any expression of repentance.

Fortunately, Adam ultimately repented and left for us a lesson about the meaning of confession. A second *midrash*⁵ relates that Adam asked Cain how he had been judged for killing Abel his brother. "I repented and my punishment was reduced." (Cain

³ Initially, G-d warned Adam, "for on the day you eat from it you will surely die." In his mercy, G-d interpreted a "day" to mean one thousand years, as in the verse (Psalms 90:4), "For even a thousand years in Your eyes are but a bygone yesterday." We will soon explain that this was at least partially in deference to the honor of the Sabbath that was about to begin.

⁴ Tazriah 9

⁵ *Midrash Rabba*, Genesis 22:13; *Midrash Tehilim* 99

had initially evaded G-d's questions about Abel and was sentenced harshly. He then confessed, acknowledged the magnitude of his sin, and pleaded for forgiveness. G-d accepted Cain's words and lessened the punishment.) Upon hearing this, Adam slapped himself in regret and said, "Such is the greatness of repentance and I did not know it. Let all future generations learn from me that one who confesses will be saved from the judgment of *Gehinom*."⁶ To accomplish this he composed the psalm we recite on the Sabbath, □A psalm, a song for the Sabbath day. It is good to thank G-d..."⁷. (Apparently, the connection is based on a play on the word *lehodos* (to thank) and the similar *lehisvados* (to confess): it thus should be read, "It is good to confess to G-d...")⁸

There are at least two points here that need to be addressed. First, Adam seems to be taking the credit for Cain's innovation. Why should we learn the power of confession from Adam and not from Cain? Second, there seems to be a conflict as to Adam's inspiration for composing the psalm of the Sabbath. Here, the psalm is recited in praise of repentance, as exhibited in the judgment of Cain and the phrase "it is good to..." ends with a reference to confession. However, the *midrash* cited earlier, which recounts the events of the sixth day of creation, connects this psalm with Adam's initial judgment. According to that *midrash*, it was the day of the Sabbath itself that argued for Adam's acquittal. "No deaths occurred on any of the other days of creation. Shall it now first occur on the Sabbath? Is this my holiness, my blessing?" Recognizing that he had been spared for the sake of the Sabbath, Adam began singing its praises, "A psalm, a song for the Sabbath day." The Sabbath interrupted, "You are praising me? Let us both praise G-d!" and together they said, "it is good to thank G-d." According to this version, then, the psalm is recited in response to the intervention of the Sabbath in Adam's judgement and the phrase "it is good to..." ends as an

⁶ This last sentence is added in *Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer*, Chap.18.

⁷ Psalms 92:1,2

⁸ See commentaries to *Midrash Rabba*, *ibid*.

expression of gratitude for G-d's mercy. How can we reconcile this seeming contradiction?

Actually, the two different episodes that are said to inspire this psalm complement each other and represent a unified vision of mercy and repentance that coalesces in Adam's message to us. The ideas highlighted in each version, gratitude and confession are very much related, as suggested by the similarity of these two words in Hebrew. This connection is really expressed by *Midrash Tanchuma*⁹, which says, "There is no repentance before G-d greater than gratitude." This can be understood in the following way. We are the beneficiaries of G-d's mercy and kindness. When we offer gratitude, we are acknowledging Him as our creator and source of sustenance. Sin and acts of rebellion, on the other hand, are acts that deny or ignore this truth and sever, at least in our minds, our relationship with G-d. When we confess, we restore the reality of our existence to its true nature – that we are utterly dependent on G-d, and that we are the benefactors of this relationship. It is in our best interest to serve Him and we only harm ourselves when we sin and fail to live up to his expectations of us. Confession and gratitude are two expressions of the same awareness.

Our actions throughout our lives speak of our varying degrees of awareness of our relationship with G-d. A life of true service to G-d is actually a reflection of a sense of gratitude to him, while sin is only possible in the absence of such acknowledgment. Man, given the choice of free will, possesses a remarkable power to create for himself an alternate reality, where his actions, good or bad, exist independent of G-d's support. We, in our daily choices, slip back and forth between these worlds of truth and denial. When we are able to evaluate our actions objectively, we discover our inconsistencies, which we express in the form of confession. Confession, however, should not be viewed as an experience of self-flagellation; it is not meant to only highlight our mistakes and failings. Instead it can be viewed

⁹Tzav 6

¹⁰ Gate of Service of G-d, Chap. 3

as an expression of a positive thought process - the ultimate reality-check. It is a discovery of truth, concerning our existence and the nature of our relationship with G-d. This at once gives us much to be grateful for and even more to be honest about. *Chovos Halevavos*¹⁰ records that saintly people would repent every day because with each passing day they recognized and appreciated G-d's kindness to a greater degree.

With this new understanding, we can find much insight in Adam's encounter with judgment and repentance. As we saw, G-d did not abandon Adam during his judgment until Adam discredited the value of G-d's gift of Eve to him. Although abandoned, Adam nevertheless benefited from G-d's mercy. Although at first Adam evaded this truth and praised the Sabbath as the source of his salvation, ultimately he acknowledged G-d as the source of all kindness; yet, he did not confess. Not knowing the power of repentance, Adam did not consider utilizing confession as an expression of gratitude. Upon seeing Cain's successful repentance, Adam gained an insight, and confessed - not as Cain had, to escape punishment,¹¹ but as an expression of his awareness of G-d's continuing kindness. Our lesson, then, is from Adam's confession and not from Cain's.

It is only at this point that Adam, realizing that true confession is simply a form of praising and acknowledging G-d, incorporated the concept of confession into the psalm for the Sabbath. This is borne out in the full words of *Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer*, which synthesizes these two episodes and expresses both of the ideas, gratitude and confession:

Adam saw the importance of the day of the Sabbath, and said, "it was not for naught that G-d created the Sabbath," and he began to sing and praise the day of the Sabbath, A psalm, a song for the Sabbath day. It is good to thank G-d...."

¹¹ The *midrash* records that G-d was aware that Cain's words did not emanate from his heart and were expressed merely out of desperation. In contrast, Adam confessed long after his judgment had concluded favorably.

¹² Chapter 18. See earlier, note 8.

Said Adam, “let all future generations learn from me that one who sings and praises to G-d and confesses his sins to the court, and abandons them, will be saved from the judgement of Gehinom¹².

This returns us to our original observation. Rosh Hashanah is without confession because it is a day of pure and total acknowledgment of G-d as our Creator and the source of our being. This acknowledgment is the very essence of confession, but in a more positive form. We prepare for this experience with the Viduy on the days prior to Rosh Hashanah, and we continue with that Viduy infused with new meaning, in the days after. The day of Rosh Hashanah itself, however, is reserved for our expressions of praise and affirmation. We stand on our Day of Judgment just as Adam did, totally dependent on G-d’s mercy, yet with a much greater awareness and a deeper relationship, having learned the lesson passed on to us by Adam.

The Silent Sound of the Shofar

The legendary Chasidic saint, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, was once looking for just the right person to blow the shofar for him on Rosh Hashanah. He asked every person he interviewed what intent he would have while sounding the shofar. Each person responded with a list of various mental formulae prescribed by the Jewish mystical texts. The Rebbe of Berditchev was consistently unimpressed.

Then came a Jew who told the Rebbe, “I am a simple Jew with little mystical knowledge. I have four unwed daughters at home, all of marriageable age. When I blow the shofar, I think, ‘Master of the world! I am doing your will by blowing the shofar. Do my will in kind and help me find suitable husbands for my daughters!’” Rabbi Levi Yitzchok asked him to blow the shofar for him on Rosh Hashanah.

I have blown the shofar on Rosh Hashanah now for several years. It is always a struggle, trying to get the right sounds to come from the shofar to properly fulfill the *mitzvah*. Even the best musician, I believe, would have difficulty bringing forth sounds that would normally be described as inspiring. Yet I am annually faced with this dilemma: Our sages considered the shofar to be an instrument of inspiration.

Maimonides (*Laws of Repentance* 3:4) writes, “Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a divine decree, it contains an allusion [as well], as if to say, ‘Arise! Sleepers from your sleep! Slumberers, awake from your slumber, search

out your ways, return in repentance and remember your Creator...” Where, I ask, is the alarm of Maimonides to be found in our feeble attempts at fulfilling this *mitzvah*?

The centerpiece of the Rosh Hashanah service is the triad of expressions found in *Mussaf* (Additional Service), during which we sound the shofar. This trilogy is comprised of *Malchiyos* (statements about G-d as King), *Zichronos* (remembrances) and *Shofaros*. The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16a) quotes G-d, as it were, explaining the need for these prayers. “State before me, on Rosh Hashanah, *Malchiyos*, *Zichronos*, and *Shofaros*. *Malchiyos*, in order that you shall make me King over you; *Zichronos*, In order that the memory of you shall be positive; and through what [does this happen]? Through the shofar.”

What the Talmud has taught is that the shofar is the device through which we are remembered before G-d and through which we coronate G-d as King. How, though, does the shofar accomplish these two goals? How does it bring a favorable image of us before G-d, and how does the shofar proclaim G-d as King?

The next passage in the Talmud explains why the shofar raises a favorable memory of us. It tells how G-d wants us to blow a ram’s horn so as to remember the self-sacrifice of the patriarch Isaac, who was willing to offer his life to fulfill G-d’s command, only to be replaced at the last moment by the offering of a ram. By blowing a ram’s horn we connect with the self-sacrifice of Isaac, who was represented by a ram. According to mystical tradition, Isaac’s soul left his body and entered into the ram, so that Isaac himself *was* actually offered as a sacrifice, in spirit if not in body. Through the shofar, the Jewish people annually affirm their selfless commitment to act out G-d’s will in the footsteps of their ancestor, Isaac.

How, though, does the shofar proclaim G-d as King?

On the one hand, the relationship is obvious. The blowing of a horn has always been used to proclaim royalty. There is

even a Biblical reference to using a shofar for this purpose, when Solomon was proclaimed monarch (Kings 1:39). In this sense, we *are* using our shofar to proclaim G-d as King. But does our blowing the shofar sound very regal? We must delve deeper in order to see how appropriate our shofar blowing really is.

G-d is our King. What does this mean? Why is it so significant on Rosh Hashanah?

At the close of our daily prayers we recite a different selection from Psalms for each day of the week. On Friday we recite Psalm 93, which opens with the words, “G-d reigned” Maimonides (*Commentary to the Mishna*, Tamid 7:4) explains that the words “G-d reigned” are appropriate for Friday, because on Friday, the sixth day of creation, Man was created and G-d became his King. We may ask: There was already an entire universe, complete with great physical and spiritual beings. Why was G-d a king only with the creation of Man?

Being a king means being in control. G-d controls everything, from whether my cereal will be crunchy or soggy tomorrow morning, to whether the earth maintains its orbit or spins out of control. Yet having myriads of angels and galaxies at his disposal is not really relevant to us because there is nothing we can do about it. Our mandate in life is to concern ourselves only with those things which we can do something about.

Man, unlike any other creature in the physical or spiritual universe has the gift of free will. Our choices between good and bad are the playing field of life. How we choose determines how things will fare in the world. That G-d provides for consequences to our choices and is responsive to our actions is what makes him *our* King.

Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the first day of the world. Our tradition tells us however, that the first day was not Day One of the six days of creation. Rather, Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the first Friday, the day of Man’s creation.

The moment of Man’s creation is found in Genesis (2:7), “He blew into his nostrils the soul of life.” At the very moment

that man awoke, he recognized his Creator and Man's own corresponding ability to create reality through the consequences of his actions. Immediately he was able to proclaim, "G-d is King!"

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (*Pachad Yitzchak* 25) posits that what lies at the very depth of the *mitzvah* to blow the shofar is to grasp the meaning of G-d's blowing the soul of life into Man. G-d was creating a relationship in which his control would reflect our actions. By blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah we swear fealty to this relationship with G-d.

There is a hauntingly poignant part of the *Mussaf* service on Yom Kippur known as *V'aveesah Sehila* ("And You Desired Praise"). In it, we point out that in spite of the grandeur of the fiery angels and other heavenly hosts, G-d prefers the acts of lowly, mortal Man. It has always been the challenge of Man to see beyond the earthiness and mortality of his body to realize the potential of his eternal soul. The shofar blower of Berditchev understood this. He realized that despite how ordinary he seemed, G-d as King had afforded him the opportunity to affect the world through his *mitzvah* actions.

We must appreciate our relationship with G-d as did that man with four daughters. We must do His will so that He may do ours, and as we grow in the relationship, the two will become one. This is what I believe is the true, if perhaps silent, sound of the shofar.

Eat, Drink, and Be Merry

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the incredible beginning of the Second Temple Era. They tell the tale of Israel's leaders struggling to break the Jews free from the shackles of exile. Nearly a century had passed since the Babylonian armies destroyed the First Temple. Now the exile had finally come to an end. The Jews were granted permission to return to their beloved Jerusalem, and build the Second Temple. At first glance it seemed great, yet there was still much to be done. The Jews did not only face grave physical danger upon their return to Jerusalem, they also faced a much greater, spiritual hazard. The Jews strayed far from G-d during the exile. Intermarriage was rampant. Jews were publicly disgracing the holy Sabbath. Israel's leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, were faced with the challenge of bringing the Jews back. Nehemiah (chapters 8-10) describes the inspirational experiences which drew the Jews back to their faith. We will focus on one of those events, which actually took place on Rosh Hashanah.

Ezra gathered all the men, women, and educable children together. He began to read aloud from the Torah, intending to read the entire scroll. As he read, an amazing event occurred. One by one, the people of Israel began to cry, until (Nehemiah 8:9) "All the people wept when they heard the words of the Torah." Why was there not a dry eye left in the crowd? Rashi (the prime Torah commentator) explains that they wept be-

The author thanks Rabbi Ezriel Tauber, who helped him understand and truly opened up this Maharal for him.

cause they had not carried out the Torah's laws properly. The Ralbag ventures one step further, conjecturing that the crowd wept upon hearing the description of Rosh Hashanah as the Day of Judgment.

Can you imagine the elation Ezra and Nehemiah must have been feeling at this very moment. *This is it— we finally have them, they are all going to return to G-d!* What would you do at this crucial time if you were in their position? If I were in Ezra's and Nehemiah's position at this time, I would sound the shofar and ask everyone to repent, to never veer one iota from the Torah's laws again, and to pray and beg the Almighty for forgiveness.

What did Ezra do? It almost seems absurd! Word for word I will quote you the verse. "This day is sacred to the L-rd your G-d; do not mourn or weep..." And he said to them, 'Go eat rich foods, drink sweet beverages, and send portions to those unprepared, for this day is sacred to our L-rd; do not be melancholy, for rejoicing in G-d is your strength.'" Is this really what Rosh Hashanah is all about? Eat, drink, and be merry!? Isn't Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, a time to stand before G-d in fear? Why does Ezra ask the people to be joyous? What information are we missing about the essence of this day?

To answer these questions, we must delve into the Oral Law and gain an understanding of both the revealed and the mysterious (Kabbalistic) portions of it. Together, let us explore the great mysteries of the Torah.

First we must understand a section from the Talmud (Berachos, chapter 5). The chapter begins, "One should not rise to pray except amid an attitude of reverence." This means one should be in awe and fear of G-d while praying. The Talmud cites the Biblical source for this idea (Psalms, 2:11): "Serve G-d with fear and rejoice with trepidation." The Talmud then asks, "what does it mean to 'rejoice with trepidation'? [It means that] in a place where there is rejoicing there should also be trepidation." The Talmud recounts the following story to illus-

trate this point. Abbaye was sitting before Rabbah, when Rabbah noticed Abbaye was excessively cheerful. Rabbah said “It is written... Rejoice with trepidation...” To which Abbaye replied, “I am wearing tefillin (phylacteries).” This story leaves us with two questions. What is this concept of joy together with fear? How was Abbaye’s reply an answer to Rabbah’s question? To fully understand, we must delve into the works of the greatest Kabbalists, the Maharal of Prague.

In *The Eternity of the Jews* (chapter 23), the Maharal discusses the puzzling section of Talmud mentioned above. Before answering our questions, he asks yet another question. There is another, seemingly contradictory source from the same time period, a *baraisa*, stating “One should pray only out of joy.”

The Maharal explains that these statements are not a contradiction. There are two aspects to our relationship with G-d.

As we know, G-d is the source of all life. G-d is not only our creator, He is constantly infusing us with the ability to live. If for one moment He would cease to give this abundant flow of life to the world, the result would be catastrophic destruction. Man is like a scuba diver, totally reliant on his oxygen tank, as he explores the deep, dark, underworld. If his oxygen hose were suddenly severed he would die. Understanding this brings us to fear and be in awe of G-d.

The second aspect of our relationship with G-d is comparing ourselves to G-d’s servants. Obviously, a servant has a very close relationship with his master. This second aspect should evoke joyous emotions from us. We are extremely privileged to have such an intimate relationship with the Master of the World.

The following parable should help illustrate how the two aspects complement, and don’t contradict one another. Let us imagine it is a great privilege to spend time with the president of the United States of America, (Nowadays it may be difficult to see that as a privilege!) Let’s say you won a contest, and are now the president’s servant for one whole week. You will escort the president twenty-four hours a day. Never leaving his side, you

fly all over the world, dealing with earth shattering matters. Imagine the thrill you experience as you enter the White House for the first time. When you take that first step inside, you will probably be shaking with fear and trepidation, yet thrilled and electrified with the prospect of being so close to the most powerful man in America. This is how we should feel towards G-d, The King of all Kings, Master of the Universe, Creator of the World. Now we have an answer to our first question. How can you experience joy and fear simultaneously? That is precisely how you feel when you are close to the King.

Let's now answer the second question. In the story of Abba-ye and Rabbah, Abbaye was saying, "I know I have to fear G-d because he is the source of all life, but I'm wearing tefillin."

What are tefillin, and what do they represent? We place tefillin on our heads, and in them is written G-d's name. The tefillin are our crown, our badge of honor. The tefillin prove that we are G-d's servants. One of my mentors, Rabbi Eziel Tauber, explained an incredible idea to me. G-d is the source of all. He is the giver, who gives us life and everything we have. It is obvious that we need G-d. However, G-d wants to be a giver of endless goodness, as it were, so in a certain way G-d needs *us*. We allow G-d the ability to have someone to give to. There is a famous saying, "You can't have a king without a nation." We are G-d's nation. This is what tefillin represent, and this is why Abbaye was exceedingly happy. When he wore his tefillin he felt a unique closeness to G-d.

Recently we read in the weekly Torah portion the section of the curses. G-d describes the atrocities that will befall the Jewish people, if they do not keep His Torah properly. In the middle of these terrible curses, G-d reveals the cause for them, saying, "Because you did not serve G-d out of joy..." Rabbi Chaim Vital, a great disciple of the Arizal, learns from this that although you must fear G-d, you mustn't serve Him with sadness, or else you will not be able to grow. He cites that if a prophet weren't full of joy, he would be unable to receive a prophecy. All command-

ments must be fulfilled with joy, in order to bring us closer to G-d. The Arizal, who was perhaps one of the greatest Kabbalists of all time, once said, “The reason I am able to reach such a high level is because I perform all of the commandments with tremendous joy.” Now we know the secret—every commandment is an opportunity to meet with the King. How can we not experience overwhelming joy?

Now we can understand the essence of Rosh Hashanah. There are two different ways to view time: linearly and cyclically. The linear view means that time is one long line, forming a past, present, and future. The cyclical view is that we go around and around, forever cycling through time, so to speak. Our concept of time with regard to the holidays is cyclical. Just as each year we go through spring, summer, fall, and winter, similarly we experience Passover, Succos, and Rosh Hashanah. For example, Passover is the time of freedom. During the time of Passover one can comprehend and actualize personal freedom in a way that cannot be actualized during any other time of the year. What is in the air Rosh Hashanah-time? Rosh Hashanah is the time when G-d recreates the world and reigns King over it. Our job in this world is to attach ourselves to G-d, and that is the greatest joy. As previously explained, you can experience joy through feeling close to G-d, the King. Now we can better understand the Rosh Hashanah prayers. In the Rosh Hashanah service, we stress the idea of G-d’s Kingship. Rosh Hashanah, the day we inaugurate G-d as our King, is the most joyful day of the year. On this day we feel closest to G-d, because we proclaim him King.

In summary, we now understand why Ezra told the Jewish people “Eat rich foods, and drink sweet drinks...” Rosh Hashanah is a day filled with joy. On Rosh Hashanah we have a personal meeting with the King of all kings. Let us all merit to crown the King with tremendous joy, for “Rejoicing in G-d is your strength.”

Man and the Rooster

How to Prepare for Yom Kippur

When we were children, my friends and I used to play with a magnifying glass to set dry leaves on fire. We found that if we moved the lens around too much, nothing would happen. But when we focused it on a single spot for long enough, it could eventually start a roaring flame.

The way to light the fire of spirituality in ourselves is very similar: by focusing on who we are and what is our essence. The words of our Sages, of blessed memory, always help us focus on who we are.

During the Ten Days of Repentance, there is a custom to take a rooster, slaughter it as an atonement, and donate it (or its value) to the poor. There is a ceremony involved, in which we hold the rooster over our heads and say, “This shall be instead of me. This rooster shall go to death and I will enter... life.”

The halachic codifiers ask, why do we use a rooster, and not any other animal or bird? (Why are we so cheap? Why not use a cow? If that would be too heavy, use a sheep! Why a rooster?) They also ask, how is this custom allowed by Jewish law? Superstition is forbidden by the Torah, and this ritual certainly *looks* superstitious.

The codifiers answer that this is not just a superstition—there is a specific reason why we use a rooster: A rooster is the

perfect symbolic substitute for a person. The Talmud calls a rooster by the name *gever*, which also means “man.” Just as, in the time of the Temple, when a person brought a sacrifice he was supposed to learn from its symbolism, we now use a rooster for the message it expresses to us.

To fully understand this, we must explain how the Torah views the unique characteristics of the rooster.

The Talmud (Berachos) tells a story describing how Rabbi Akiva always thanked G-d for both the good and the apparently bad.

In his travels, Rabbi Akiva once stopped in a town to find lodging. He was turned away by every last person and establishment in the town. Rabbi Akiva nevertheless said, “Thank you, G-d. Everything you do is for the best.”

He left town and set up camp in a nearby field. He had with him a rooster, a donkey, and a candle.

Some time during the night, the wind blew out the candle, and Rabbi Akiva said, “This too is for the best.” Then a cat came and ate the rooster. Rabbi Akiva said, “This too is for the best.” A lion appeared and killed the donkey! Again Rabbi Akiva said, “Everything G-d does is for the best.”

Meanwhile, that same night, an army came and captured the entire town that had denied Rabbi Akiva hospitality.

In the morning, Rabbi Akiva saw what had happened, and he realized that if he hadn’t lost his belongings, the army would have found him, too—either by the light of his lamp or by the sounds of his animals.

Now, when our Sages tell stories, every detail is important. They do not tell us where Rabbi Akiva was, or when this happened, or what he was wearing. Why then are we told exactly what he had and lost?

The Maharal answers this by explaining that our Rabbis break down man’s essence into three parts—his physical body, his emotions, and his intellect. Man’s head is identified with spirituality (logic), his trunk (i.e., the heart) is connected to

emotion, and the loins and stomach are his body, with all of its desires. It is impossible to understand a human being unless one knows all three components.

It just so happens that both Adam and Noah had three sons, and each one of them embodied one of these components. Take Noah's sons, for example. Shem was an intellectual, hence his name, which literally means "name"—the ability to name things. Japheth, which means "beauty," represented the emotions, just as beauty speaks to the emotions. Ham, which means "hot," embodied passion, or the desires of the physical body.

In modern, secular thought, there are three schools of psychology. Sigmund Freud believed the basis of man's psyche to be his passions. Jung believed it to be his emotions. Later, Victor Frankel said it was that which man finds meaningful. However, through the teachings of our Sages we understand the basis of man to be all three of these aspects combined.

Let us return to our story. For whatever reason, G-d was willing to spare Rabbi Akiva from the fate of the town where he sought to lodge—but for a price. Rabbi Akiva did not have to be led away captive or, even worse, be killed, as this would completely destroy his intellect, emotions, and physicality. But he would have to lose a minute amount of each. He therefore lost his donkey, which in Hebrew is called *chamor*. The letters of *chamor* can be rearranged to spell *chomer*, which means "physical matter." (It also contains the letters of the name Ham, who symbolizes passion.) A candle, or light, gives us the ability to see and relate to things outside of ourselves; the intellect does the same for man—it allows him to relate to much more than just himself. Another Hebrew word for "rooster" is *sechvi*, which also means "heart." The rooster, therefore, represents emotion.

When people are asked to point to themselves, they point to their hearts. This brings out the idea that the real essence of a person is his heart or emotions. If you really want to understand a person, look at what drives him, see what inspires him, and watch his spontaneous responses. We cannot understand

man through his physical body because the body does not act of its own accord. We cannot define man by his intellect, either, for the brain is able to retain a great deal of information, much of which has no bearing on the essence of man.

What is the characteristic of the rooster that symbolizes emotions? In the morning blessings we say, “Thank you, G-d, for giving the *sechvi* (rooster) the ability to understand and differentiate between night and day.” The *Zohar* explains that the purpose of the *sechvi* is to wake us in the morning. The rooster reminds us to see the benevolence of G-d, Who has given us another day. It tells us to wake up and serve our maker.

The rooster symbolizes this important ability of man to give himself the emotional wake-up that lets him accomplish his goals. The heart is a life-giving source that can make us move. The rooster tells us that the facts in our brains do not move us - only our hearts and emotions do. This explains why this blessing uses the term *binah*, which means “understanding.” The rooster was not simply given *knowledge* of night and day; he was given *understanding* of its application. This understanding goes so deep as to affect the rooster’s heart, where it has an emotional outburst that erupts: “Cock-a-doodle-doo!” Any parent who wakes a child up for school knows that many people know the difference between night and day, but that does not mean they get out of bed (even after being reminded three times!). The rooster is the one animal that understands it so deeply that it has to announce its understanding to everyone else. It does not just remain an intellectual idea in the head of the rooster.

As mentioned earlier, the halachic codifiers stated that the rooster is the perfect symbolic substitute for man. Now we can explain this using the information we have discussed above. Neither a person’s thoughts, nor his physical desires alone, will determine whether he will be righteous or evil. Only his heart and emotions will do so, by inspiring and exciting the person to carry out the ideas in his brain. There is obviously a partnership between all three aspects of man - the intellect has an idea, the

heart internalizes this idea and forms it into an emotion, which then compels the physical body to act. But without the strong impact of the emotions, as symbolized by the rooster, man is nothing. This also explains why the word *gever* (man) is also used to mean “rooster,” since *gever* is of the same root as the word *g'vura*, which means strength.

There is one more aspect of the rooster that we can learn from. The Talmud says, “The most brazen of the nations is Israel. The most brazen of the animals is the dog. The most brazen of the birds is the rooster.” Obviously, brazenness here does not refer to physical might, because then Jews would excel at the Olympics, and dogs, rather than oxen, would pull plows. What, then, is this strength?

As we know, all three of these creatures make a great deal of noise. Jews, wherever they are found, are known to speak up, to be at the forefront of every social movement. Jews have the strength of character to speak up for what is right and wrong, and to give their opinion, regardless of the listener’s reaction. (That is how we came to be the moral conscience of the world—but I will save that for another essay.) For the same reason, dogs make excellent guards. Dogs have the ability to stand up for their territory and bark or yelp to scare off intruders and protect their charges.

The rooster, as well, lets everyone know when it has something to say about the loving-kindness of G-d. It will wake everyone up, even though it might become the most hated barnyard animal. It has the strength of character not to care what others think.

The word *sechvi* (rooster) in the morning blessings also means “heart.” The Hebrew word for “dog,” *kelev*, can also be read as *k'leiv*—“like a heart.” The Jews are referred to as the “heart of the nations.” This parallel shows that the ability of these three to stick up for their values stems from the emotional strength, or strength of heart, that they share. As a result of the emotional strength of Israel, the world cannot get rid of its moral

conscience. As a result of the emotional strength of the dog, its charges are protected and intruders are scared away. As a result of the strength of heart of the rooster, the world knows when it is time to rise and serve its Maker.

With this in mind when we take the rooster in hand on Erev Yom Kippur, we will have the ability to use this attribute to accomplish our goals in this world. We will have the emotional strength to let our knowledge affect everyone and everything around us, and to stand up against all odds. This will bring us to the clearest focus on ourselves, and nourish our personal sparks to grow into a roaring flame.

The Fast Before Yom Kippur

About ten years ago, I was walking with my Rebbe (primary teacher) to a *shalom zachor*¹ of a friend of mine. When we arrived at the *shalom zachor* the house was crowded with all different types of people with all different affiliations to Judaism. As we made our way to the proud father and mother, a man and his girlfriend, who probably had a little too much to drink, confronted us. The man rudely addressed my Rebbe saying: “Rabbi, I’m interested in learning Talmud. Could you please tell my girl and me something amazing from the Talmud?” The embarrassment I felt for my Rebbe at that moment was incomparable to any I had ever felt for anyone before. My Rebbe, who is a master of the Talmud, responded calmly. “The Talmud teaches us (Rosh Hashanah 9a), if one eats and drinks on the ninth day of Tishrei (the day prior to Yom Kippur), it is as if he has fasted on both the day prior to and the day of Yom Kippur itself.”

It is now ten years later, and I myself have become a Rabbi. Still, the depth of that response bothers me – what is so amazing about this passage in the Talmud that my Rebbe felt he should respond with it?

There are several questions we must ask about this piece of Talmud to uncover the answer to my question. The most obvious is: When were we commanded to fast on the day before Yom Kippur, which should allow us to say that eating on such a day makes it as if we fasted on that day?

¹ A party, given the Friday night before a baby’s circumcision.

² There is a lot of discussion as to the meaning of “mitzvah” in this law, but, again, Cincinnati Community Kollel ❧ 26 ❧ The Days of Awe: A Reader

Secondly, if it really is good to fast on the day before Yom Kippur, why should I not do so? Why should I rely on this leniency from the Rabbis?

A third question we should ask ourselves lies in the words of the Rabbis themselves. We know that whenever the Talmud uses extra words, or leaves out certain words, it is to teach us a lesson or a new approach to understanding a certain law in the Torah. With this premise in mind, we should ask ourselves the following question: If I eat on the ninth and I fast on the tenth, then all that the Rabbis would have to say is “It is as if he fasted on the day prior to Yom Kippur, as well.” Why do they include the words “It is as if he has fasted on both the day prior to *and the day of Yom Kippur itself?*” Of course he fasted on the day of Yom Kippur!

In no way, shape, or form does the immense topic of “Fasting on Yom Kippur” fit into this essay. However, to introduce the answers to our questions, I must give a brief background as to why we fast on Yom Kippur. The requirement of fasting on Yom Kippur is biblical in origin. Leviticus (16:29) states, “And on the tenth day of this seventh month (Tishrei) you shall afflict your souls.” The Talmud (Yoma 76a) teaches us that to “afflict” the soul means to abstain from food. Then the Torah tells us (Leviticus 23:32) “A Sabbath, celebrated by cessation of work, is given to you; you shall afflict yourselves on the ninth of the month. From evening to evening you shall celebrate your Sabbath.” This is the verse that the Rabbis use as the basis for the statement that “One who eats and drinks on the ninth day of Tishrei— it is as if he has fasted on both the day prior to, and the day of, Yom Kippur.” Without this statement of the Rabbis, I might have assumed that the verse means to actually fast on the ninth as well as the tenth of Tishrei.

It is only proper now to view this statement of our Rabbis first in the eyes of law and then homiletically. *Tosafos* explain (Rosh Hashanah 9b) that the Rabbis definitely do not mean that one should fast on the day before Yom Kippur. Actually,

Tosafos say, it is quite forbidden to fast on the day before Yom Kippur, for the Talmud (Pesachim 68b) teaches that the Sabbath and festivals are designed to be partially for us (with good food and rest) and partially for G-d (through intense prayer and study of Torah). The Talmud then proceeds to list other days when one should make sure not to fast, meaning that the day should be shared between G-d and us. One of those days recorded is the day before Yom Kippur, citing our Talmudic statement as its proof. *Tosafos*, therefore, come to the conclusion that it is completely forbidden to fast on this day, and so it is written in Jewish law (*Shulchan Aruch* 604:1): “It is a *mitzvah*² to eat on the day preceding Yom Kippur and to eat a festive meal.” The Rama adds, “And it is forbidden to fast.”

From this statement of the *Shulchan Aruch* we will proceed to immerse ourselves in the sea of homiletic responses as to the reason for such a *mitzvah*.

The Chofetz Chaim, in *Mishna Berura*, explains that the reason we are commanded to eat is that G-d is doing us a favor. G-d wants to give us reward for this eating, as if we are fasting. We know that the reward one receives for doing a *mitzvah* when it is not easy for him, or if he incurs pain because of the *mitzvah*, is not comparable to that of one who does a *mitzvah* out of rote. The one who does the *mitzvah* through discomfort will receive a much greater reward for the Rabbis teach us (Ethics of the Fathers 5:23), “Ben Hey-Hey said like one’s pain is his reward.” When we think about what the Chofetz Chaim has just taught us, it is mind-boggling. In essence, he wants to say that eating on the day before Yom Kippur is viewed in the eyes of G-d as a painstaking activity for which we will receive incredible amounts of reward.

The Maharal goes even further to say the reality is that the *mitzvah* of eating the day before Yom Kippur is truly to enable one to bear the fast of Yom Kippur itself. This, however, is not to be taken lightly. The Talmud teaches (Ta’anis 11a) that one who

such a discussion is beyond the scope of this essay.

fasts³ is considered holy. Yet, later on, the Talmud says that one who fasts is considered a sinner. In order to reconcile these two statements, the Talmud teaches that “When one is healthy and able to fast, he is considered holy; however, if he is not able to fast, he is called a sinner.” Therefore we see, says the Maharal, that one who eats on the day before Yom Kippur is called holy. To include the idea of the Chofetz Chaim, he is also blessed with the greatest reward for doing a *mitzvah*. How much more greatly could we prepare ourselves for this great day of Yom Kippur?

There are, however, those⁴ who vehemently disagree with all we have said so far. Not only that, but they go as far to say that to eat on the day before Yom Kippur is not a wonderfully blissful idea of becoming holy and reaping reward, but rather, one of true affliction. This is based on a statement of the Talmud (Ta’anis 27b). The Rabbis were very careful not to decree a fast on Sunday for it would be too difficult for one to go from eating so much food on the Sabbath to fasting. It could, G-d forbid, cause a weak person to die. This statement of these opposers seems to throw a wrench into all the beautiful things we have said until this point. Why would G-d command us to put ourselves into such a state of danger?

The answer, I believe, can be found in the words of the *Rosh* (Yoma 23), where he cites our statement of the Rabbis (about eating and drinking on the ninth of Tishrei) as the law. Neither the *Rosh*, nor the *Tur* (604) ever tell us to eat like one does on the Sabbath, where we are obligated to have three full meals, consisting of bread, wine, fish or meat, etc. The words used by the *Rosh* are just *l’harbos b’sueda* (“to increase one’s meals,”), which could mean “to add a little,” (as is the case in Mishnayos Shabbos 7:1). Therefore we can still observe the *mitzvah* to eat on the day before Yom Kippur, but this does not mean we have

³ This is not the Fast of Yom Kippur; rather, this refers to fasts that a congregation would conduct because of a drought.

⁴ Rabbi Boruch HaLevi Epstein, in *Torah Temima*, cites many, including Rabbeinu Hai Gaon.

to stuff ourselves like we do on the Sabbath.

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, as evident from his commentary on our verse in Leviticus, is quite opposed to this negative view of eating before Yom Kippur. He says, “This prohibition to fast on the ninth, on the day before Yom Kippur, may, to a very high degree, prove the moral, Jewish character of our fasting on Yom Kippur, and allow us to understand the words of our sages. If our Yom Kippur were the heathen idea of pacifying a wrathful god, and our fasting a heathen self-torturing castigation to satisfy its thirst for vengeance, how much greater would the *mitzvah* be, of a fast of two days! The law which requires eating and drinking on the day before Yom Kippur, and which forbids fasting on that day, comes to sharply oppose this immoral and un-Jewish way of looking at Yom Kippur.”

The last question that is still confronting us lies in the words of the Rabbis. Why did they have to include the words “... it is as if he has fasted on both the day prior *to and the day of Yom Kippur itself?*” For this we look to Rabbi Yechezkel Landau (in his commentary on Talmud, the *Tz’lach*). The Rabbis are trying to get the point across that the fast of Yom Kippur is raised and elevated from how it is viewed as a fast by itself. When one fasts two fasts in a row, the second fast becomes even more difficult.⁵ Therefore, the Rabbis informed us that it is as if one fasted on the ninth and tenth, for then the fast on the tenth becomes that much more intense.

So I return to the memory of my teacher and the question I posed to myself—why is this passage so amazing? I truly believe that the answer is simple, and self understood, especially after hearing the ideas set forth by the Chofetz Chaim and the Maharal. As I think about the simple way in which my teacher responded, I can truly appreciate his greatness, that he instilled within me this desire to uncover the meaning behind his every word.

Before this essay is brought to an end, I would like to share

with you a very special statement from the *Aruch Hashulchan* (604:5) concerning our topic.

Therefore it is a *mitzvah* to eat and drink on the day before Yom Kippur and to be happy on this day, and our hearts should be sure that it will be a good Yom Kippur for us, one of blessing and success. G-d should forgive all of our sins and inscribe for us a year of good health and blessing.

Rosh Hashanah

Analyzing The Day of Judgement

Rosh Hashanah's many facets help underscore its importance in the Jewish calendar. Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of the New Year. There are special Rosh Hashanah prayers and symbols¹ that express our hope for success in the coming year. A very important theme of the holiday is, "Behold, it is a Day of Judgement."²

Rosh Hashanah is a day when all of our actions and deeds are judged. G-d evaluates our performance of *mitzvos* and interactions with society. The consequences of this judgement are staggering; our state of affairs for the coming year is decided on the basis of our prior actions. Will we do well in our business dealings? Will we be healthy? In the aggregate, will we have a "sweet" new year?

While reflecting upon this important theme of Rosh Hashanah, a question arises. Why is Rosh Hashanah not only a day of awesome judgement, but also a day of feasting and joy?³ At first glance, these two ideas seem paradoxical. Feasting and rejoicing do not seem appropriate on a day when our success in the coming year is hanging in the balance.

I will outline the way my late Rosh Hayeshiva, Harav Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory, approached this question. Maimonides lists thirteen principles of Jewish belief. These thirteen principles form the building blocks of the Jewish faith. One who does not believe in these principles is, in the words of Maimon-

¹ Eating an apple dipped in honey is one symbol.

² Siddur, repetition of Mussaf prayer.

³ See Shulchan Aruch, O. C. 597

ides, a heretic. One of these principles is the concept of Divine reward and punishment. Rabbi Weinberg asked, why is it so important to know that G-d rewards our positive actions and punishes our sins? Could we not be practicing, accomplished Jews without knowing that there are consequences to our actions?

Rabbi Weinberg then explained, if there are no consequences to our actions, it means that G-d is indifferent to what we do. We cannot develop a relationship with G-d if He is indifferent to the way we act. Even the smallest things that we do make a difference to the Almighty. The following parable will help illustrate this point.

A young boy carelessly wanders into a busy intersection and is almost struck by a car. Upon reaching safety at the other side of the street, the boy is scolded strongly by a man. This man cares very deeply for the boy, because he is his father. A father who is *indifferent* to his son's fate and does not show concern for his safety is being cruel, not kind. Similarly, a G-d who does not react to our deeds is very distant from His people.

The realization that there is a system of reward and punishment can explain our joy on Rosh Hashanah. On Rosh Hashanah we should reflect on the deep, sublime awareness that what we do has cosmic significance. Our actions make a difference to the Almighty! This knowledge gives us a sense of purpose, which should permeate our whole life. It gives us something to *celebrate*.

This insight into the celebratory nature of the holiday can answer another apparent difficulty. Rosh Hashanah begins a period of repentance and introspection known as the Ten Days of Repentance, the climax of which is Yom Kippur. We are occupied on Yom Kippur with praying for the future, begging the Almighty for forgiveness, and committing to improve our errant behavior in the future. A question is raised by the commentaries. Would it not be more logical to have Yom Kippur prior to Rosh Hashanah, so that we could achieve forgiveness

prior to the day of judgement? Why be judged before we attempt to cleanse ourselves from sin?

The answer to this question may be as follows. True repentance can only be achieved *after* we realize the importance of our actions. Judgement on Rosh Hashanah reawakens us to the reality of how the choices that we make in our lives affect our destiny. If we treat our actions with their proper importance, we will take the repentance of Yom Kippur more seriously and improve our ways.

In Defense of Apples in Honey

Dipping apples in honey. Perhaps the earliest recollection the average Jew has of the Rosh Hashanah experience. Certainly the ritual most cherished by children and many a sweet-toothed adult.

Yet this delectable practice requires analysis. On the simplest level, the point of this routine is somewhat curious. A more sophisticated look at this custom yields further mystery. The Talmudic basis of this tradition projects an image of a practice which, it seems, should be prohibited by Torah standards!

In the Talmud (Horiyos 12a), the sage Abbaye says, “Now that we say [based on a preceding passage] that *simana milsa*—a “sign” is of consequence—on Rosh Hashanah one should be accustomed to eat *kara*, *rub’ya*, *karati*, *sil’ka*, and *tamrei*.”¹ This cryptic passage is codified in *Shulchan Aruch* (O. Ch. 583:1). In his glosses to this section of *Shulchan Aruch*, Rabbi Moshe Isserlis (a.k.a. Rama) brings the European parallel to this Middle Eastern tradition. He comments, “Some are accustomed to eat an apple sweetened in honey and they say ‘...That a sweet year should begin for us.’”

We now know the basis of our custom—a Talmudic dictum of *simana milsa*—a “sign” is of consequence. But what does this phrase really mean? Can the Talmud be telling us that by partaking of a sweetened apple our year will somehow become

¹ We leave these terms untranslated because there are multiple traditions as to their exact translations. All agree that the names of these foods or their physical attributes reflect concepts which are of relevance to us on Rosh Hashanah.

sweeter? Such a prediction would seem to be in direct conflict with the Torah prohibition against superstition. The Torah states (Leviticus 19:26) *Lo s'nachashu*—"You shall not practice *nichush*." In explaining this prohibition of *nichush*, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 65a-65b) tells us that we must refrain from attributing meaning to arbitrary omens. As an example, the Talmud relates that if one decides to embark on, or to refrain from, an endeavor because a particular animal crossed his path, he is in violation of this commandment. To suggest that sweet foods indicate sweet years would appear to be in conflict with this prohibition!

How can we reconcile our universally accepted and Talmudically mandated custom with this apparent violation of the Torah?

We will present two of the several approaches² used to resolve this intriguing dilemma.

The Me'iri, a fourteenth century Talmudic commentator, proposes the following understanding of *simana milsa*. As he explains, our sages would often recommend the use of physical objects to stimulate an emotion or to inspire a reaction. On Rosh Hashanah, in an attempt "to awaken the heart to good conduct," certain foods are added to the menu to remind us of the nature of the day. They help preserve our awareness that we are being judged and turn our dinners into extensions of our prayer services. When reflecting on the concepts of merit, judgment, Heavenly assistance, or even the potential for sweetness, which are reflected in these foods, we come to recognize that such matters are now hanging in the balance. We hope we will then remind ourselves to work on becoming personalities befitting a positive verdict and then turn to G-d, asking for His assistance. As the Me'iri notes, the sages recommended not only eating these "prayer-evoking" special foods, but they formulated brief supplications to accompany each. This, he explains, was done to prevent the foods from taking on an omen-like nature.

² Other interpretations can be found in the commentary of Maharsha and in the glosses of Chochmas Shlomo to *Shulchan Aruch*.

According to the Me'iri, when used properly, our Rosh Hashanah foods have no connotation. No cause and effect relationship exists between the foods per sé and the upcoming year. All is dependent on our prayer, repentance, and conduct.

A second, more mystical approach is suggested by the sixteenth century commentator and Kabbalist, Rabbi Yehudah Lowe, better known as the Maharal of Prague.

To understand the Maharal's approach, a brief introduction is necessary. When we use the term "reality," as seemingly objective a term as that is, we are in fact addressing a very relative issue. To the untrained eye, the reality of this paper is simply a smooth, white mass covered with black type. To a scientist, however, the reality of this paper includes the constant motion of vibrating molecules and whirling electrons. Just as the scientist perceives realities more *complex* than those recognized by the untrained layman, a mystic perceives realities more *profound* than those recognized by an untrained viewer. To the mystic, there are deeper dimensions of reality which underlie our world and give it greater meaning.

With this in mind, we can turn our attention to the Maharal's understanding of *simana milsa*. He explains that a food's name or physical character can represent certain traits or qualities. Using honey as an example, the sweetness of the honey represents a more profound sweetness, such as that of a "sweet year." On a mystical level, ingestion of a food yields an attachment to the trait represented in that food. Eating foods that connote the concepts of merit, judgment, and Heavenly assistance, creates attachments to these concepts. In the understanding of the Maharal, actual, positive benefit is derived even if no emotion of *teshuva* is inspired and no prayer is uttered. There is, in this mystical view, a cause and effect relationship between the foods that are eaten at the onset of the year and the quality of that year. There is no concern that this looks superstitious, however, because the association is not arbitrary. Albeit esoteric, the relationship between the foods and the traits they represent

is, to the mystic, very real.

Both of the approaches we have presented reveal important lessons, which can enhance our High Holiday experience. As we have seen in the commentary of the Me'iri, we have the wherewithal to bring the lofty themes of our prayer services to our dining room tables. We are empowered to transform our holiday meals into opportunities for spiritual growth. Complementing this, we have the insights of the Maharal. Even if full comprehension of his mystical comments eludes us, the lesson of a reality beyond the apparent is an important one. When viewing our relationship to G-d and His *mitzvos*, it behooves us to recognize that our actions have effects far beyond the physical reactions we perceive. Such a recognition can enhance our interest in Torah and our appreciation of its affect on our lives.

We have a lot to think about as we encounter the heretofore “simple” dip of the apple in honey. Whether bearing in mind the “rational,” inspiring approach of the Me'iri, the more mystical approach of the Maharal, or a combination of both, let us hope that we merit a sweet year in which we continue to merit enhanced appreciation and understanding of Torah.

Starting Over

Does *Teshuva* Simply Mean “Repentance?”

When it is difficult for you... in the end of days, you will return (v'shavta) to G-d, your G-d, and you will listen to His voice.

Deuteronomy 4:30

“Nothing is greater than repentance (*teshuva*),” reflects *Midrash Rabba*. (The Hebrew words *v'shavta* and *teshuva* are grammatically related.) Then the *midrash* tells a story:

Once, when some of the Sages were in Rome, the Senate passed a secret edict ordering that all Jews be executed in thirty days. One senator, who was a G-d-fearing man, confided in Rabban Gamliel and told him of the decree. The Sages were distressed at the news, but the senator reassured them that the G-d of the Jews would intervene.

Twenty-five days later, nothing had happened to reverse the decree. The senator, who until now had remained silent, finally told his wife what was going on. She was shocked. “Look! Twenty-five days have already gone by!”

“Don’t worry. There are still five more days. Something will happen.”

The senator’s wife was more pious than he, and she wasn’t content to wait for a miracle. “Isn’t it true that if the Senate passes a law, the law only comes into effect if all of the senators who passed it are alive? Suck on your ring—” Many Roman politicians wore poison rings, in case they should need

This essay is based on lectures by Rabbi Avigdor Miller and Rabbi David Lopian (Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Mikdash Melech), שליש.

to get out of a compromising situation. “The Jews will be saved! The Senate doesn’t have the momentum to pass another such decree so easily.”

The senator saw that she was right, and he committed suicide. The Jews were saved.

When the Sages heard what the senator had done, they visited his widow to pay their respect. “What a shame,” they sighed. “The ship set sail, and never paid the tariff!” They meant that the senator had missed his chance—he could have converted to Judaism before killing himself, and died (and gone to heaven) as a Jew.

The widow understood them. “But I swear,” she said, “The ship *did* pay the tariff!” She reached into a drawer and pulled out a pouch. In it were bandages and other evidence that the senator had been circumcised.

The senator had died a Jew.

The Sages then quoted a verse from Psalms (47): *The nobles of the nations gathered—people of the G-d of Abraham [who was also a convert]—for the defenders of the world are G-d’s; He is very exalted.*

The *midrash* uses this story as an example of the greatness of *repentance*. However, the question is this: Who repented? The senator wasn’t repenting when he converted to Judaism. He had done nothing wrong by being a non-Jew.

The answer is that the essence of *teshuva*, which we usually translate as “repentance,” or “returning,” is actually *change*—a fundamental change of personality, in which one becomes a new and better person.

Rabbeinu Yona, in *Yesod Hateshuva*, also makes this point. He writes that to begin repentance with contrition is counterproductive; a person will become depressed and lose the strength to move on. Instead, Rabbeinu Yona advises a person to “cast off his sins and *make himself as if he were born today*, with neither merit nor demerit...”

When the Roman senator converted to Judaism, then gave up his life for the sake of the Jewish people, he transformed

himself from a pagan to an elite member of the chosen people. That change is much more drastic than ordinary repentance, in which someone who is already Jewish simply renews his commitment to G-d. Therefore this story was chosen to illustrate the greatness of *change*, the cornerstone of repentance.

Changing our selves is very hard. Often it's impossible, or at least difficult, to break our habits without external help. Most people change their attitudes only after something *happens to them*—they live through an ordeal, or they meet a person who influences them.

One catalyst of *teshuva* is an encounter with G-d. At first that sounds like being pulled out of bed by aliens, or being struck by a prophetic vision, but for most of us encountering G-d is much more sublime than that.

A *midrash* in *Bereishis Rabbah* (*Tol'dos*, chapter 65) tells how a Jew who had collaborated with the Romans was sent into the Temple to remove one of its treasures. (The Romans understood that the defeat of the Jews could only be accomplished from within.) He emerged with a golden candelabra. The Roman general took it away from him, saying that a commoner would never have use for it, and ordered that he go back inside and take something else.

The Jew refused. "Isn't it enough that I have angered my Creator once?" he asked.

The Romans tried to change his mind, but could not. In his anger, the general had the Jew tortured, and the Jew died, crying, "Woe, that I have angered my Creator!"

How did this collaborator suddenly become so religious?

All we know is that this change of heart took place after the collaborator spent some time inside the Temple—the place where G-d's Divine Presence rested. The Temple wasn't filled with spirits and apparitions; it was simply a very holy place. Therefore, what probably happened to this Jew was that as he passed through the Sanctuary, he *felt* the Presence of G-d. That was enough to make him realize how wrong he was to loot the

Temple. His relationship to G-d *changed*.

Today we don't have a Temple, and the experience of that Jew is hard for some of us to relate to, although people do have similar feelings when they visit the Western Wall. But one doesn't have to travel around the world or back in time. All of us meet G-d now and then. We just don't notice it because we don't know what to look for.

Have you ever stood at an observation point, looking out on a mountain range? Have you ever been moved by the beauty of a rose? Or have you ever been to Niagara Falls, stood at the edge of the water, and felt its power as it thunders onto the rocks below?

When we see the glory of nature, it pulls at our hearts. Years ago, millions of people worshipped nature. Today, thousands of people are inspired to political activism out of a love of nature. But what we really are feeling when we see nature's beauty is love for G-d. Deep in our hearts, we know that G-d created this wonderful world, and that He wants us to enjoy it. We are overawed and grateful, and for that we love G-d.

In other words, when we are confronted with the spectacles of nature, we are actually confronted by G-d, in a way similar to the experience of the Jewish collaborator in the Temple. That can have a tremendous effect on us, if we take the time to understand it and feel it.

This concept, of catalyst and change, helps explain the relationship between Elul (the month before the New Year), Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is when G-d forgives the world for all its misdeeds. Why does forgiveness come only after judgement? Why must we risk a guilty verdict, only afterwards to be exonerated? Wouldn't it be better to simply be forgiven, or at least to have a chance to atone for our sins, *before* we are called to a final accounting? Another question: If *teshuva* is a process of renewal, and the Days of Awe are the season of renewal, then why are they observed in the fall? The fall is a

time of decline. Wouldn't spring be more appropriate?

The answer to all of these questions is that the progression from Elul to Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur signifies a growing confrontation with G-d.

In the summer, nature is out in full force. The sun shines. Plants blossom and issue fruit. All of the animals are out and about—even those that slept through the winter. The weather is warm, and we are able to go outside and enjoy G-d's creation. G-d wants us to do that, and He hopes that it will bring us closer to Him. Elul comes as the season winds to a close, while we are still “on a high” from the pleasures of the summer.

Then, on Rosh Hashanah, G-d asserts His role as King of the Universe. After basking in His grace during the summer months, we recognize His dominion and proclaim Him our King. The Rosh Hashanah service is so full of declarations that G-d is supreme that the judgement on Rosh Hashanah seems secondary. In fact, the judgement on Rosh Hashanah happens only *because we are standing in the presence of the King*.

We remain in that position throughout the Ten Days of Repentance, from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. G-d maintains His presence, asserts His monarchy—and subjects us to His scrutiny. However, G-d does not want to find flaws in His people. We know He only wants to do us good. G-d hopes that after allowing us to feel His presence, we will follow the example of the Jewish collaborator and *change*.

To that end, G-d commands us to “afflict” ourselves on Yom Kippur, to put aside our physical concerns, and to concentrate on our relationship with Him. If we have been insensitive to G-d's overtures throughout the summer months, and if going through the motions of recognizing His kingship hasn't woken us up, we are offered one last, climactic chance to discover G-d's presence, and to *change*.

Then G-d can readily atone for our sins, and we can assume the father and son relationship that He longs to have with us.

It would be a change for the better.

“What if I Didn’t Sin?”

The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are known as the Ten Days of Repentance. Though repentance is certainly a major theme of this period, there are many other facets that combine to define the character of these days (judgment, introspection, and reconciliation, to name a few). If our Rabbis chose a single label, *teshuva*, they must have felt it could sufficiently encapsulate the length and breadth of our divine service during this time. This being the case, perhaps there is more to *teshuva* than simply repentance.

Let’s begin with a look at the etymology. The word *teshuva* literally means “to return.” If one sins, i.e., he distances himself from G-d, it’s understandable that his regaining of G-d’s favor (his repentance) would be termed a “return.” Is sin, however, an imperative for *teshuva*, or is “returning” possible even in the absence of sin?

Rabbi Moshe Eisemann, of the Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, once provided me with an insight which compels an understanding of *teshuva* that transcends repentance. We are all aware that the culmination of the high holidays is Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur itself culminates with the Ne’ilah service, the “Closing of the Gates.” We replace the supplication “write us in the book of life,” which we had placed in our prayers beginning Rosh Hashanah, with the words “seal us in the book of life.” At the completion of the Ne’ilah service we cry out, “G-d, He is the L-rd,” seven times, hopefully having mustered all the spiritual energy at our disposal to propel our prayers to

the place they have to go.

What immediately follows this climax is Ma'ariv, the evening service. This Ma'ariv begins just as any other, with the preamble "He, the Merciful One, is forgiving of iniquity... G-d, save! May the King answer us on the day we call." Now, does anyone engage in "sinful" activity during the few moments between Ne'ilah and Ma'ariv, that he must proceed his prayer with a formula mentioning forgiveness? Of course not. Yet we still feel the need to cry out to G-d because of some undescribed "iniquity."

Asks Rabbi Eisemann further, we have just finished petitioning a whole day for G-d's forgiveness, and we are to believe that forgiveness we have achieved—why, then, must we engage once more in supplication? If all we want from G-d is His forgiveness, if indeed sin is our only iniquity, further supplication seems at best redundant. If, however, our job is more than achieving pardon—rather, to "return," (being distant itself an iniquity) then as long as there's space between G-d and us, there's more work to be done and further prayer is certainly in order.

It now behooves us to ask, "If it wasn't sin that distanced us from G-d, where did we go that our present status now necessitates a return?" What was our starting point? If we've strayed, what were the influences that caused us to move off the proper path?

The Torah tells us, "Do not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of [even] the wise." Here we are told that a bribe sets in motion a cause and effect relationship that will certainly affect the recipient, regardless of his stature. Even our great teacher Moses, whose wisdom and righteousness is without equal, was subject to this prohibition.

This law finds application not only in the lives of judges but in every life situation which requires judgment. We all understand that what we want to believe as true, for whatever the reason, can effect the clarity of our thinking and nature of our actions. Things that may appear obvious to an objective outsider can escape even the most intelligent insider simply be-

cause he has lost his objectivity.

Let's view a simple example that appears in our Torah, idol worship. The absurdity of ascribing divine power to a wood or stone figure is readily apparent to all of us. Yet we read of certain elements of the Jewish population, at a point earlier in our history, that placed their trust in these graven images. Were the people at that time in a state of delirium?

The Talmud tells us, no. The only reason Jews participated in idol worship, we are told, was in order to permit open sexual misconduct (i.e., "permissive" behavior, sanctioned in the service of the idol). Freedom in these areas justified whatever means necessary to achieve the desired end, however anti-intuitive those means seemed. It was this perversion of the monotheistic truth that Elijah the prophet was trying to combat in his famous confrontation with the priests of the idolatrous Ba'al on Mount Carmel.

Elijah was the only prophet in his time sufficiently influential to hold sway over a large portion of the Jewish people, compared to some 450 prophets of the Ba'al. After sending messengers to summon the nation to Mount Carmel, in Israel, Elijah told the idolatrous priests to prepare a sacrifice and cry out in the name of their god. They did, again and again—to no avail. Finally it was Elijah's turn to do the same, not in the name of an idol, but of the one true G-d.

Elijah approached his altar and said: "G-d, L-rd of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that You are G-d of Israel and that I am Your servant, and that I did all these things at Your bidding. Answer me, G-d, answer me! Let this people know that You are the L-rd G-d and You will turn their hearts back." With that, fire from G-d fell, and consumed not only the burnt offering that Elijah had prepared, but the wood and stones of the altar on which it was brought. When all the people saw this they prostrated themselves and said, "G-d is the L-rd, G-d is the L-rd!"

A great rabbi, Rav Doniel of Kelm, once asked, concerning

the response of the Jewish people, “Why did the people have to repeat the phrase ‘G-d is the L-rd’ twice?” (Remember that during every Ne’ilah service we repeat it seven times.) Wouldn’t one expression of the unity of G-d have been an adequate acknowledgment of the foolishness of idolatry? Answered Rav Doniel, the repetition of “G-d is the L-rd” was not in order to try to convince G-d of their fidelity, but to try and convince themselves. After all that the people had witnessed, they still needed to be convinced.

How much more so ourselves, we who live in an era of “*hester panim*,” a time when G-d’s involvement in the affairs of man is hidden. How much more must we struggle to maintain a clear picture of the correctness of the path of Torah. For us, it isn’t the molten image that is jamming our spiritual reception. All of us, in our moments of honest introspection, can name our Ba’al—be it the materialism of an affluent society, or the desensitization to the need for personal growth brought about by exposure to violence and promiscuity. To elaborate isn’t necessary. Anything that promotes desire as the determinant of our life’s course, as opposed to intellect, would be included in this.

Following our baser instincts, the Torah tells us, results in a clouded view of reality; it is from here that we are asked to “return” during the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rather than a specific transgression, we are addressing a state of mind.

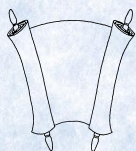
Beside what we have just mentioned, there is something even more insidious than spiritual apathy that excessive desire can work in us, and that is doubt. Maimonides, in his introduction to *Ethics of the Fathers*, tells us that our negative qualities create “walls” between ourselves and G-d. Naturally, the greater the number of walls, the more difficult G-d is to perceive. In the prayer *V’kol Ma’aminim* (“All Believe”), recited on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we find the phrase, “All believe that He was, is, and will be—The Sure One—and this is His praise.” Just as G-d is the one sure entity in the universe, so too He must

be praised as such. To do this properly we must break down the walls of separation.

This isn't as hard as it might at first seem. Every morning in our prayers we say, "My G-d, the soul You placed within me is pure." Judaism believes we all start out with a clear recognition of our spiritual mission in this world. That is why, says Rabbi Elchonon Wassermann in his famous work on Jewish ethics, *Koveitz Ma'amarim*, we can require bar and bat *mitzvah* children to believe in G-d and subjugate themselves to His Torah, a servitude even the great Aristotle, with all of his wisdom, was not able to accept. Unfettered by the rationalizations created later in life to justify spiritual inactivity, with a clear, simple vision of a Creator, they can embark on journeys of spiritual growth.

There are times in all of our lives when our spiritual journey can be halted or even derailed. The Torah tells us never to give up hope. In the "Ashrei" prayer (Psalm 150) we recite three times daily, we find the verse, "Close is G-d to all who draw Him close, to all who call to Him in truth." In Deuteronomy, we find the verse, "The thing (closeness to G-d) is exceedingly close to you; it is with your mouth and heart to do." May we all merit, on this and every Rosh Hashanah, to return closer and closer to our Source.

This booklet contains words of Torah.
Please treat it with respect, as you would a prayer book.



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