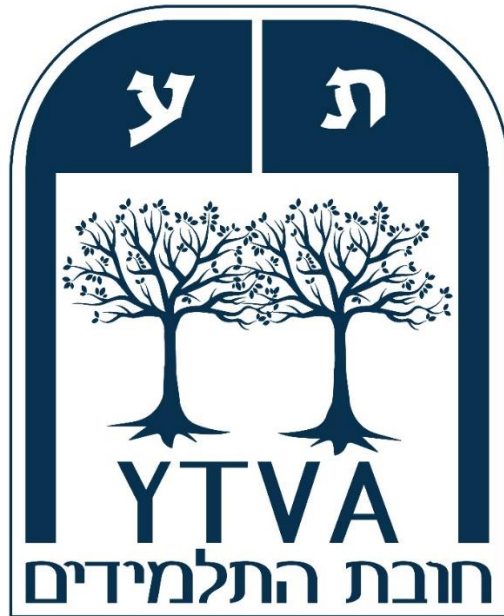




A GUIDE TO ROSH HASHANA

Yeshivat Torah v'Avodah

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Introduction

During the Yomim Noraim- Elul, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur- a person is filled with many deep questions and struggles. What is teshuva? How can I overcome my imperfections and become a better version of myself? What does it mean to make Hashem the King? What is the meaning of the Shofar? What are the deeper meanings behind all the customs such as going to the mikvah on Erev Rosh Hashana or dipping apple in honey?

However, without a guidebook for life, without a manual for living, a person often feels lost and directionless. Just as the Torah is a guidebook for life, so too, allow this booklet to be a guide for your Rosh Hashana.

Who is this book written by? The rabbis of Yeshivat Torah v'Avodah. Who is this book written for? The past, present, and future students of YTVA, as well as any Jew who is seeking a more meaningful Rosh Hashana.

May Hashem bless us all with a new year filled with health, happiness and a deep connection to our Creator. Shana Tova U'Metuka!

Elul: Returning to What Hashem Actually Wants

Rabbi Shaul Feldman

Rosh Chodesh Elul begins one of the most extraordinary forty-day periods in Jewish history.

After the sin of the Golden Calf, the breaking of the first *Luchot*, and Moshe Rabbeinu's pleading on behalf of Am Yisrael, Moshe ascended Har Sinai once again on Rosh Chodesh Elul. Forty days later, on Yom Kippur, he descended with the second *Luchot* the enduring sign that the covenant between Hashem and Am Yisrael had been restored. These forty days became for all generations ימי רצון ורחמים days of Divine favor, mercy and *teshuvah*.

But perhaps the connection between Elul and the Golden Calf is deeper than simply the fact that these were the days in which Hashem forgave us. Perhaps the sin itself teaches us what *teshuvah* is really about.

When Serving Hashem Becomes Avodah Zarah

The Rambam begins *Hilchot Avodah Zarah* with a remarkable description of how idolatry began. The first idolaters did not deny God. They knew that Hashem had created the world. Their mistake was that they reasoned that because Hashem had created the stars and heavenly bodies to serve Him, honoring those servants would itself be a way of honoring the King. In other words, *avodah zarah* began as an attempt to get closer to Hashem.

Only over generations did that mistake deteriorate into actual denial of God. This is a frightening idea because it

means that *avodah zarah* does not always begin by rejecting Hashem. Sometimes it begins with a sincere desire to serve Him but on our terms instead of His. The Golden Calf represents precisely that danger.

In every generation there can be a different Golden Calf. It does not have to be an actual idol. It can be anything we substitute for what Hashem truly asks of us even something that we convince ourselves is spiritual, religious or holy.

That may be the deeper question of Elul. We normally ask: *What did I do wrong this year? Where can I improve?* Those are essential questions. But Elul demands something even deeper: Have I understood what Hashem actually wants from me? And collectively: Have we understood what Hashem wants from Am Yisrael?

Why Was the Torah Given?

Before Matan Torah, before Hashem gives even one of the Aseret HaDibrot, He tells us what this entire project is supposed to create:

“וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֵת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ”

“You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (*Shemot 19:6*).

Every word matters. Hashem does not say merely that He wants holy individuals. He does not even say that He wants a holy religious community.

He says וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֵת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ a *kingdom* of priests and a *holy nation*. Torah is the tool through which an entire nation can live in the presence of Hashem. A nation has

an economy. It has agriculture. It has courts and government. It has an army and foreign policy. It deals with poverty, wealth, technology, security and power. The Torah's revolutionary vision is that all of those things are part of *Avodat Hashem*.

This is a central theme in the writings of Rav Kook. The ultimate Jewish ideal is not to escape national and material life in order to become holy. It is to be holy through national life itself to create a society in which the spiritual and physical, Torah and statehood, are not opposing worlds. That requires Am Yisrael. It requires Torah. And it requires Eretz Yisrael.

Turning Away from Hashem

This helps explain a striking expression in Parashat Matot. Reuven and Gad have enormous herds and see that the land east of the Jordan is particularly suited to their economic needs. They approach Moshe and ask to remain there rather than cross into Eretz Yisrael with the rest of the nation. Their reasoning is practical. But Moshe's response is theological. He warns them:

”כִּי תִשׁוּבָן מֵאַחֲרָיו”

”For if you turn away from following Him...” (*Bamidbar* 32:15).

Moshe describes their potential decision not to enter the Land as turning away from Hashem. Why? Because Eretz Yisrael is not simply where Am Yisrael happens to live. Entering the Land is part of the Divine mission for which the nation received the Torah. Remarkably, the issue resurfaces generations later in Sefer Yehoshua. When

Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe return to the eastern side of the Jordan and build a large altar, the rest of Am Yisrael prepares for war. They assume that these tribes are establishing an alternative place of worship and accuse them:

”מה המעל הזה אשר מעלתם באלקי ישראל לשוב היום
מאחרי ה'”

“What is this betrayal that you have committed against the God of Israel, turning away today from following Hashem?” (*Yehoshua 22:16*).

The tribes explain that the opposite was true: they built the altar as a witness to preserve their children's connection to Hashem and to the rest of Am Yisrael. But the language is revealing. Again, we encounter לשוב 'turning away from Hashem. National unity, Eretz Yisrael and faithfulness to Hashem are intertwined.

Can You Have Torah Without the Land?

Perhaps this is the background to one of the strongest statements Chazal ever make about Eretz Yisrael.

The Gemara in *Ketubot 110b* teaches:

”לעולם ידור אדם בארץ ישראל אפילו בעיר שרובה גויים, ואל
ידור בחוצה לארץ ואפילו בעיר שרובה ישראל”

“A person should always live in Eretz Yisrael, even in a city whose majority is non-Jewish, rather than outside the Land even in a city whose majority is Jewish.”

Then the Gemara says:

”כל הדר בארץ ישראל דומה כמי שיש לו אלוה, וכל הדר
בחוצה לארץ דומה כמי שאין לו אלוה”

”One who lives in Eretz Yisrael is as one who has a God,
while one who lives outside the Land is as one who has
no God.”

And ultimately:

”כל הדר בחוצה לארץ כאילו עובד עבודה זרה”

”One who lives outside Eretz Yisrael is considered as
though he worships idolatry.”

Obviously, Chazal are not saying that Jews outside Israel
literally do not believe in Hashem. Some of the greatest
Torah communities and greatest Torah scholars in our
history flourished in exile. Rather, perhaps Chazal are
pointing us back to the original purpose of Torah. A
Judaism confined to individual religious observance even
extraordinarily committed religious observance cannot by
itself realize the entire vision of **קדוש וגוי** **ממלכת כהנים**.

That vision requires a nation. And a nation requires a
land. That is why Chazal can say something so
counterintuitive: better to live in an Israeli city whose
population is largely non-Jewish than in an entirely Jewish
city in *Chutz La'Aretz*. Because Eretz Yisrael is not simply a
place with more Jewish neighbors. It is the place where
the Torah's national vision can become reality.

מלכה ושריה בגויים — אין תורה

This gives extraordinary depth to the words of Eicha:

”מַלְכָּה וְשָׂרִיָּה בְּגוֹיִם — אֵין תּוֹרָה”

"Her king and her princes are among the nations — there is no Torah" (*Eicha* 2:9).

The Gra explains the connection between the two halves of the verse. When מלכה ושריה בגויים when the Jewish king and leadership are among the nations, when Am Yisrael has lost its independent national existence then אין תורה: there is a dimension of Torah that is lacking. Torah certainly does not disappear in exile. Two thousand years of extraordinary Torah creativity prove the opposite. But the *full expression* of Torah requires more than individuals keeping mitzvot. The Torah was given to create a nation whose national life itself reflects Hashem's will.

ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש.

And at the center of that kingdom stands the Beit HaMikdash.

The Bridge Between the Palace and the Mikdash

One of the most beautiful illustrations of this idea appears in the story of Shlomo HaMelech. The Queen of Sheba travels to Yerushalayim after hearing reports of Shlomo's extraordinary wisdom and kingdom. She sees his wisdom, his palace, the food on his table, his servants and ministers, and the extraordinary organization of his kingdom. And then the pasuk says:

"וַעֲלֶתָּ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲלֶה בֵּית ה' וְלֹא הָיָה כָּה עוֹד רוּחַ"

"And the ascent by which he would go up to the House of Hashem — there was no spirit left in her" (*Melachim I* 10:5).

The commentators explain that she saw the special ascent or passage connecting Shlomo's royal complex to the Beit HaMikdash. And she was overwhelmed. Why was this detail so extraordinary? Perhaps because she suddenly understood what Shlomo's kingdom represented. She had seen wealthy kings. She had seen powerful governments. She had seen magnificent palaces. But here was something different. There was a bridge from the palace to the Beit HaMikdash. On one side stood political power, economics, government and sovereignty. On the other stood the House of Hashem. And Shlomo connected them. That bridge is almost a physical representation of:

ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש.

The Torah does not dream of a palace without a Mikdash. But neither does it envision a Mikdash disconnected from the life of the nation. The Jewish vision is the bridge between them.

The Shofar Has to Be a Shofar

And this brings us back to Elul. The sound that defines these days is the shofar. The Mishnah in *Rosh Hashanah 26a* teaches:

”כל השופרות כשרין חוץ משל פרה, מפני שהוא קרן”

“All shofarot are valid except that of a *parah* a cow because it is a *keren*, a horn.”

The Rishonim ask an obvious question. If it is a *keren* and not a shofar, why does the Mishnah even need to teach us that it is invalid? The Ramban explains that physically the horn of a cow possesses the characteristics that could

allow it to qualify as a shofar. But the Torah calls it קרן a horn and does not give it the identity of *shofar*. That changes everything. There is a profound message here. We can have an object that looks like a shofar. It can function like a shofar. Human logic can tell us that it ought to be a shofar. AI will say it's a Shofar. But the instrument that awakens Am Yisrael has to be the instrument Hashem calls a shofar. That takes us directly back to the Rambam's description of *avodah zarah*.

Judaism is not ultimately about constructing the religious life that feels right to us. It is about discovering what Hashem calls right. The shofar therefore calls us back from every Golden Calf including the Golden Calves created with the best intentions. It cries: Wake up. Return. But make sure you know where you are returning to.

Rav Kook, the Omer and Shabbat

Rav Kook develops a related idea in discussing one of Chazal's great battles with the Baytusim. The Baytusim rejected the Oral Torah's interpretation of מַחֲרַת "מחרת השבת" regarding the Omer. Chazal therefore deliberately emphasized publicly that the Omer was harvested according to the Torah Shebe'al Peh even when the harvesting occurred on Shabbat.

The Mishnah in *Menachot* describes the ceremony. The messenger would ask the assembled crowd:

"שבת היום?"

"Is today Shabbat?"

They would answer:

"הן!"

"Yes!"

Again he would ask.

Again they would answer.

Then:

"אקצור?"

"Shall I reap?"

And they would answer:

"קצור!"

"Reap!"

The Mishnah explains that this elaborate public demonstration was performed "מפני הביתוסים" because of the Baytusim. Rav Kook asks us to appreciate the significance of this confrontation. The Omer is not taken from a synagogue. It comes from the new barley harvest of Eretz Yisrael. It represents agriculture, physical productivity and the material national life of the Jewish people in their Land.

One might think that these belong to a lower realm. Torah and Shabbat are holy; farming, economics, building and national development are merely material necessities. Rav Kook teaches the opposite.

When Am Yisrael lives properly in Eretz Yisrael, its material and national life can itself become part of the service of Hashem.

The field is holy. That is why the Omer is so significant. And that is why Chazal made such a public point of

cutting the new barley even on Shabbat. The message is not that national life competes with holiness. The message is that the national life of Am Yisrael, when lived according to Hashem's Torah, is itself sanctified. The field and the Beit Midrash do not have to be enemies. The palace and the Mikdash do not have to be enemies. They need a bridge.

The Shofar We Will Not Hear

And this year, that idea takes on a particularly powerful meaning. The first day of Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat. And therefore, throughout the Jewish world, we will enter our synagogues on the first day of Rosh Hashanah and we will not hear the shofar. But that was not always true. In the Beit HaMikdash, the shofar was sounded even when Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat. That means that this year we will experience the absence of the Beit HaMikdash not merely as something we read about or mourn historically.

We will hear its absence. Or more precisely: We will hear the silence created by its absence. We will have Rosh Hashanah. We will have a congregation. We will have a shofar. But we will not hear its voice. Because we do not have the Mikdash. Perhaps that silence should itself become a kind of shofar. A shofar without a sound.

A reminder that as extraordinary as the Jewish return to Eretz Yisrael has been, our return is not yet complete. We have rebuilt cities. We have rebuilt agriculture. We have rebuilt an economy. We have rebuilt an army. We have rebuilt Jewish sovereignty. We have witnessed an

extraordinary renaissance of Torah in Eretz Yisrael. But the bridge is not yet complete. The center is still missing.

מארץ אשר עיני ה' אלוקיך בה

Perhaps we can now understand more deeply the Torah's unique description of Eretz Yisrael:

”אַרְצָא אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ דֹרֵשׁ אֹתָהּ, תָּמִיד עֵינֵי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ בָּהּ,
מֵרֵאשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרִית שָׁנָה”

“A land that Hashem your God seeks; the eyes of Hashem your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year” (*Devarim 11:12*). Rashi, based on Chazal, explains: The Torah could have simply said that Hashem's eyes are upon the Land always. Instead, it says:

”מֵרֵאשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרִית שָׁנָה”

“From the beginning of the year until the end of the year.”

The language inevitably directs us toward Rosh Hashanah. Everything is decided on Rosh Hashana. Perhaps the idea is further. The world stands before Hashem in judgment, but the Torah describes the year itself through the Land upon which His eyes constantly rest. Because Eretz Yisrael is the stage upon which Hashem's vision for Am Yisrael is meant to become reality.

Teshuvah Means Returning

This brings us to Rav Kook's profound understanding of *teshuvah*.

Rav Kook writes in *Orot HaTeshuvah* that when a person forgets the essence of his own soul, everything becomes confused. The first and most fundamental *teshuvah* is therefore for a person to return to himself, to the root of his soul and through that, to return to God.

That idea applies not only to an individual. It applies to Am Yisrael. *Teshuvah* literally means return. To do *teshuvah* is to rediscover who we really are. For the individual, that means returning to the Divine soul within us and to the purpose for which Hashem placed us in this world. But national *teshuvah* means that Am Yisrael must return to the core of our identity.

Returning to Hashem. Returning to Torah. Returning to Eretz Yisrael. Returning to Jewish sovereignty lived according to Torah. Returning ultimately to the Beit HaMikdash at the center of our national life. Returning to:

ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש.

Maybe We Are Closer Than We Think

And perhaps, after everything Am Yisrael has experienced over these past three years, we can allow ourselves to feel that something extraordinary is happening.

We should never presume to know Hashem's timetable. But look at what has been revealed within our people. We have seen extraordinary *mesirut nefesh*.

Young men and women have left their homes, families, careers and studies again and again to defend Am Yisrael. Families have carried burdens that are difficult to comprehend. Communities have mobilized for one another. Jews throughout the world have discovered

depths of connection to Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael that perhaps even they did not know were there.

We have disagreements. Serious ones. There is pain and division, and there is much work still to do. But we should not allow those challenges to blind us to what has also been revealed: The Jewish people care deeply about one another.

The commitment to Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael that has been demonstrated through sacrifice, courage and responsibility should give us enormous hope. Maybe a generation capable of this level of commitment is being prepared for something greater. Maybe we are closer than we think.

Listen to the Silence

Elul begins with the memory of the Golden Calf and ends with the second *Luchot*. It begins with human beings creating their own substitute for God's will. It ends with receiving God's Torah anew. And between those two moments stands the shofar. The shofar tells us: Do not substitute what you think Hashem wants for what Hashem actually asks of you.

Return to the original vision. Torah. Am Yisrael. Eretz Yisrael.

ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש A

A nation whose fields can be holy. Whose army can be holy. Whose economy can be holy. Whose government can be holy. Whose palace has a bridge leading to the Beit HaMikdash. And this year, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, there will be no shofar. When that moment

arrives, perhaps we should not simply move on with the *tefillah*. We should listen to the silence. Because that silence is telling us: We are not home yet.

So much has returned. But something is still missing. And if that realization creates within us a genuine longing not merely for a building, but for the complete Torah vision that the Beit HaMikdash represents then perhaps the shofar we do not hear can awaken us as powerfully as the shofar we do.

These forty days are our opportunity for *teshuvah* not merely to become better people, but to return to the deepest truth of who we are and why Hashem gave us the Torah. And perhaps our prayer this year should be especially simple:

יהי רצון שנזכה במהרה לשמוע שוב את קול השופר במקדש.

May we merit, speedily in our days, to hear once again the sound of the shofar in the Beit HaMikdash. May the bridge between the palace and the Mikdash finally be rebuilt. And may Am Yisrael return completely to its calling:

”וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ”

“You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Write Me In

Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Seif

Honest question: are you excited for Rosh Hashana?

Nobody asks that, because the expected answer is no. Pesach gets a seder. Purim gets a party. Rosh Hashana gets... judgment. Books of life and death lying open, angels trembling, every one of your choices from the past year under review. That's not a holiday; that's a subpoena.

And yet the same tradition insists this day is the world's birthday: hayom harat olam, today the world was conceived. Sit with how strange that combination is. Imagine throwing a seven-year-old a birthday party and announcing that this year, instead of games, the adults will file in wearing black robes to review his behavior and decide whether he continues into next year. No child is coming back to that house. So why would God celebrate our planetary birthday that way?

Here's a second strangeness, one you can check yourself this year in shul. If Rosh Hashana were really a trial, you'd expect the prayers to read like a defense. Some bargaining: I'll be better about lashon hara, just give me a good year. Some lawyering: let me highlight my accomplishments. At minimum, an apology. But open the machzor: there's no viduy on Rosh Hashana. No confession, no requests for forgiveness, no plea deal. All of that waits ten days, for Yom Kippur. What kind of judgment day forgets to include the part where the defendant speaks?

I heard an idea from Rabbi David Fohrman that untangles both puzzles at once. It starts with the Torah itself, which surprisingly never calls this day a day of judgment at all. It gives it one cryptic name: Yom Zichron Teruah, a day of remembering a shofar blast. Remembering? Which blast, exactly?

The machzor tells you, right before the verses of Shofarot: Atah nigleita ba'anan kevodecha, You revealed Yourself in a cloud of glory... on Mount Sinai. The blast we're remembering is the one the entire nation heard at Sinai, the supernatural shofar that grew louder and louder before God spoke a single word. In this reading, Rosh Hashana is Sinai day. Not the anniversary of getting the law (that's how we frame Shavuot), but of hearing the Voice.

And the Voice matters. Notice what Sinai wasn't: a light show. The Torah goes out of its way to say it was dark. Cloud, fog, nothing to see. Forty years later Moshe underlines it: you heard the sound of words, but saw no image, nothing but a voice. If you could pick one sense for meeting the Creator, you'd probably pick sight. God deliberately shut that door and left only sound. Why? Because a picture shows you a thing, but a voice carries a person: the warmth, the intent, the presence underneath the words. It's why a song from when you were nine can flatten you in the middle of a supermarket. Voice reaches something older than thought.

Which is exactly the point, because Sinai wasn't the first time humanity heard that Voice. The first time was in a garden. They heard the sound of God moving through the garden, and the first humans hid. Listen to Adam's

reason: not "I was afraid of You," but "I was afraid because I was naked." We weren't really hiding from God. We were hiding from ourselves, from being fully seen right after we'd blown it. Sinai is the same scene, replayed: a Voice, growing louder, and human beings afraid. Except this time we didn't hide. We stood at the foot of the mountain and answered: everything God says, we will do. That answer crowned God as King, because there's no such thing as a king without a nation that accepts him. It's what Malchuyot re-enacts every single year. Rosh Hashana isn't the anniversary of a coronation. It is the coronation.

So where does judgment fit? Follow the logic one more step. Standing before the King raises an uncomfortable question: next to the Creator of everything, does your little life even register? Here R. Fohrman offers an image I can't shake. Your life has a soundtrack you can't hear. You know your own version of your story: the achievements, the plans, the highlight reel. But if there's an Author, there's a larger story being told, and you don't get to know which of your moments the violins swell over. The afternoon you sat with a friend who was falling apart, the thing you did when no one was watching: in the Author's telling, that may be where the music rises, more than anything on your résumé.

That's what Zichronot means. God remembers: He weaves your moments into His story, and He decides which ones carry weight. And that is what the judgment of this day actually is. Not a prosecutor building a case against you; an Author deciding how to write you into the next chapter of the biggest story there is. The question on the

table isn't what do you deserve? It's what part will you play? Which explains, finally, why the shofar, and not an apology, sits at the center of the day. You're not entering a plea. You're answering His Voice with yours, and what your voice is saying is: write me in.

The one Rosh Hashana actually recorded in Tanach proves it. In Nechemia's day, a battered remnant gathers in a Jerusalem street to hear the Torah read, and they start crying, overwhelmed by how far they've fallen. Nechemia shuts the crying down: this day is holy; go home, eat well, send food to people who have none. The joy of God is your strength.

So here's the takeaway. For maybe the first time in your life, nobody is grading you this year. No GPA, no transcript, no acceptance letters. You stepped off that treadmill when you got on the plane. Which leaves exactly one evaluation on your calendar, and it's nothing like the ones you left behind. Rosh Hashana asks only one thing: don't hide. When the shofar sounds, it's the Voice coming close again, and you have Adam's choice. Sometime before yom tov, name the one place you've been hiding: the apology you owe, the conversation you keep dodging, the version of yourself you perform because the real one feels too naked. Then answer the Voice with yours. No defense, no lawyering, just here I am. Write me in. This was never a trial you might fail. It's a casting call, and this year, for once, you have nothing else on your calendar but showing up for it.

What Should We Be Praying About on Rosh Hashana?

Rabbi Yair HaLevi

The greatest thing to ask is Mah Nishtana? When we go into the Seder night, we say Mah Nishtana Ha Layla HaZeh? And the theory, the educational theory behind it, is that if you can recognize what's unique, then you can fall in love. Once I know what's different, once I know what's unique, then it doesn't just become another one; it becomes "The."

And for many of us, Rosh Hashana is another Yom Kippur. I'm sure you have a little bit of food, but I don't actually identify. There isn't anything unique about Rosh Hashana.

And the one thing I would say is unique about Rosh Hashana is that the moon is gone. In Gemara Beitza it speaks about the concept of Eizeh Hu Chag? What is the only holiday? This is another way of saying: Mah Nishtana? Zoh Hu Chag, She HaLevana Mitkasa Bo.

The moon is gone. There is no light. If there is no moon, it's scary. What is the holiday that opens up with more darkness than light? The answer is Rosh Hashana.

And I think the story of Rosh Hashana is that the moon is concealing itself, just like we're concealed from the year. We don't know. We don't know what this year is going to look like. We didn't know in the year of October 7th and we didn't know in the year that we killed Nasrallah and we will not know in the year that the Beit HaMikdash will be built. We don't know.

Everything is so concealed. Rosh Hashana comes along and teaches us that whatever is concealed is unique because it creates surprise. It creates creativity.

And I think the goal of prayers on Rosh Hashana is to actually recognize how many things are unknown. So many of the things that we take for granted are actually unknown. The food we eat, the relationships we have, the Torah we learn, the land we have. We take these things for granted.

And when we come with that approach, and we open up that door, that everything that we think is a given is actually not a given, we suddenly become people that start to get more involved. The main question that we need to be asking ourselves is: Can we stop taking things for granted? Can we stop thinking things are a given? Otherwise you are just going to be a spectator.

Once you realize that it's not a given, suddenly your prayers are going to come from a different passionate place. You will be able to say: I actually don't know how everything is going to turn out, and therefore I need to start thinking, and I need to start getting immersed, and I need to start taking this step forward.

My prayer for everyone is that we have the blessing of "Mah Nishtana HaRosh Hashana HaZeh?" "What is different about this Rosh Hashana?" We should have the opportunity to look at the moon, to see that it is concealed, and to recognize that this is relevant to our lives. Indeed, so many things are concealed throughout the year, and we need to utilize this perspective to become much more involved.

Teshuva: New or Better?

Rabbi Tzvi Wohlgelernter

The concept of Teshuva (repentance/return) presents a logical paradox. What is in the past is a factual reality, and nothing can alter what has already transpired. While our current decisions shape our present and future, past actions cannot be undone. Yet, Teshuva claims not only to repair damaged relationships, but seemingly to rewrite the past itself. As the Talmud states in Yoma 86b:

אמר ריש לקיש: גדולה תשובה, שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות

"Reish Lakish said: Great is Teshuva, for intentional sins are transformed for him into unintentional errors."

We are told that we can not only fix our mistakes, but even transform them into merits. How is this possible?

Rav Kook, in his seminal work *Orot HaTeshuva*, illuminates this process:

כשעוסקים בתשובה צריכים להגדיר ביותר את מהותם של הטוב והרע, כדי שהחרטה וזעזוע הרצון מחויב לשלילה יפלו רק על הרע ולא על הטוב. ועוד יותר, שצריך לברר את הטוב הנמצא בעומק הרע ולחזק אותו - כאותו הכח עצמו שבורחים מן הרע, כדי שתהיה התשובה כח פועל לטובה, המהפכת ממש את כל הזדונות לזכויות

"When engaging in Teshuva, one must precisely define the essence of good and evil so that regret and the shift of will from positive to negative apply only to the evil and not to the good. Furthermore, one must clarify the good

hidden in the depths of evil and strengthen it—using the very same force with which one flees from evil—so that Teshuva becomes an active force for good, literally transforming all intentional sins into merits."

There are two distinct paths to Teshuva. The first is the more intuitive approach: cutting oneself off completely from the past, severing all old ties, and being reborn as a new person. This aligns with how the Rambam describes the process in Hilchot Teshuva 2:4:

מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד לפני השם בבכי
ובתחנונים ועושה צדקה כפי כחו ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר
שחטא בו ומשנה שמו כלומר אני אחר ואיני אותו האיש
שעשה אותן המעשים

"Among the paths of Teshuva is for the penitent to constantly cry out before God in weeping and supplication, give charity according to their means, distance themselves greatly from the sin, and change their name—as if to say, 'I am another person, and I am not the same individual who committed those acts.'"

While this is a powerful vision of self-reinvention, it carries a severe drawback. By severing the past so completely, any positive attributes tied to one's former life are discarded as well, throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. The passion and vital energy that fueled the person, even while sinning, end up completely drained. Therefore, Rav Kook proposes a second model: Teshuva as self-refinement rather than erasure. Instead of discarding the old self entirely, one removes only the

negative elements while preserving and redirecting the positive ones. If someone previously poured immense zeal into deceit or theft, that same energy can be redirected toward righteous pursuits rather than surgically eliminated.

This idea aligns with the Ramchal's distinction in the third chapter of Mesilat Yesharim between pishpush (checking) and mishmush (scrutinizing) one's actions. Pishpush means examining actions to distinguish good deeds from bad ones, while mishmush involves examining even good actions to ensure the underlying motivations were entirely pure. If we must audit our good deeds for subtle flaws, we must certainly audit our past misdeeds to salvage any underlying strength or vitality hidden within them.

A major barrier to Teshuva is the fear of losing one's identity in the process. Under Rav Kook's framework, this fear is dissolved, as one is explicitly instructed not to sever connection with who they were.

Rav Kook's approach stems directly from Reish Lakish's teachings on transforming willful sins into merits. Reish Lakish himself lived a rebellious early life as a bandit before redirecting his formidable physical strength and drive into Torah study, ultimately becoming one of the greatest scholars of all time (as recounted in Bava Metzia 84a). This embodies the ultimate power of Teshuva: may we all merit not merely to distance ourselves from past mistakes, but to channel our foundational strengths into a transformative force for good.

Apple in Honey

Rabbi Yitzchak Steinberg

What is the significance of the siman (symbol) of an apple in honey? Is it merely the sweetness to symbolize a good and sweet new year? If that were the case, we could simply eat a spoonful of honey or find any other sweet food. Why do we need these two specific foods for this symbol? Wonderful depth can be found in this symbol of an apple in honey.

A few years ago, one of my children returned from kindergarten with two cardboard finger puppets—an apple and honey—along with a small note containing the following dialogue: The apple said to the honey: "Look what a wonderful creation I am—colorful, delicious, juicy, available in the market year-round, and healthy!" The honey replied: "You indeed have many great qualities, but there is one problem—sometimes you are sour." The apple asked: "You're right, what can I do to fix that?" The honey answered: "Spread a little of me on the sour apple, and it will be delicious." End of note.

We can add a continuation to this dialogue: The honey approached and said to the apple: "Look what a wonderful creation I am—sweet and delicious to everyone, golden-colored, flowing elegantly." The apple said to it: "Indeed wonderful things, but there is one problem—you are too sweet. If someone eats more than three spoonfuls, they feel nauseous." The honey replied: "You're right, what can I do to fix that?" The apple

answered: "Mix a few pieces of my sour kind into yourself, and people will be able to enjoy eating a lot of you!"

It turns out there is mutual completion here that leads to perfection. The strengths of one compensate for the weaknesses of the other, and vice versa. Even more so—the apple's deficiency (sourness) becomes an advantage relative to the honey, and the honey's deficiency (excessive sweetness) becomes an advantage relative to the sour apple. This is the deeper symbol of an apple in honey on Rosh Hashanah: that we learn to complement our shortcomings through others from whom we can gain, and complement others through our strengths [husband and wife, parents and children, among friends, different perspectives, different ethnic backgrounds, different nations, etc.]. And sometimes, we can even utilize our shortcomings for good by using them in the right place and time.

This deep connection between us is the key to overcoming our enemies. A hint to this can be found in the psalm of Psalms we recite during these days—"Of David: The Lord is my light and my salvation" (Psalm 27). King David reassures us with the words: "If an army should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; if war should rise against me, in this I trust" (Verse 3). The big question is—to what "this" did David refer? What does he trust in? The early commentators offered various explanations:

Rashi: "In this I trust"—in what was stated above, "The Lord is the stronghold of my life."

Ibn Ezra: Some say that "in this" refers to the request mentioned immediately after.

Malbim: "In this"—in what he explains next, "that He will hide me in His tabernacle."

We can offer an additional possibility that connects us to our topic here. Aside from war against enemies, there are unfortunately internal Jewish conflicts. The two are intertwined: if there are internal wars and struggles among us, our enemies gain power over us, God forbid. Therefore, King David says, "If war should rise against me"—meaning a war from our enemies resulting from division and lack of unity within us—"in this I trust." In what? In "One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek"—I trust in the fact that I strive for and request the "One" [perhaps also an allusion to the soul, which is called "one," the soul of every individual drawing from the collective soul of Israel]—the unity among us, the connection of every individual and group to the single soul of the nation of Israel. When unity and internal love prevail among us, we will overcome our enemies and triumph over them.

How do we achieve this ideal? Only if we realize that we all complement one another, finding the strengths in others precisely in what appears to us as a shortcoming—just like the parable of the apple in honey. Another wonderful hint to this overarching principle is explained by later commentators on the Gemara in Tractate Rosh Hashanah (26a): "The Torah said one shofar, not two or three shofars."

In the commentary *Daf Al Daf*, it is written: It is brought down in holy books that our greatest tragedy is that we are split and divided into endless numbers of "shofars," each blowing, calling, and demanding something else. But "the Torah said one shofar, not two or three shofars"—our only salvation is "one shofar," one general Jewish aspiration, unifying actions for the great, general Jewish cause. This is the intent of the prophet's promise: "And it shall come to pass on that day that a great shofar shall be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were banished in the land of Egypt shall come" (Isaiah 27:13). Gathering the "lost" and the "banished" is impossible unless a "great shofar" is blown—if, instead of many different shofars, one single "great shofar" comes forward.

It must be emphasized that this does not mean every single Jew and the entire Jewish nation must hold only one single opinion regarding life and beliefs. Not at all! A multiplicity of opinions is a blessed and fruitful thing, as Rav Kook (of blessed memory) teaches us in *Olat Ra'ayah* (his commentary on the prayer book) on the end of the Morning Prayer—"Abundant peace to those who love Your Torah." If peace meant everyone agreeing on one opinion, how could it be described as "abundant" (many)? Rather, Rav Kook explains that true peace consists of a variety of opinions and ideas that together form a magnificent mosaic or a huge puzzle, creating a grand overall picture through the understanding that every opinion is needed when placed in its right position.

In this way, we expand our "self" beyond the boundaries of our self-centeredness toward the feeling that the other person is also part of ourselves! We begin with our spouse, through our children, through our extended family, and up to every Jew wherever they may be, God willing.

Let us conclude with the uplifting words of Rabbi Reuven Sasson: "Let us not look merely at the external appearance of our generation. Let us delve deep into its interior and heart, understand the secret of its longings... and stand upon their nature and the great message hidden within them... We must strengthen our faith in the generation and its potential... Anyone who degrades the perspective, even out of thoughts of supposed righteousness, causes great harm to the flight of the soul and its ability to manifest." (Tallei Chaim, Hakitzu Ve'ranenu, pp. 115-116)

"Even the movement present in our generation, seeking the individual's spiritual perfection and self-actualization, is not a retreat from the general spirit... For when a person reaches internal precision... he will find that in his heart there is nothing but the entire nation of God, and the depth of his self-actualization is nothing other than the life of a complete nation... For the completed fruit of individual maturation will be finding the light of his true life, which exists only within the greatness of the nation." (Tallei Chaim, *ibid.*, p. 84)

May we merit this!

Tekiat Shofar: The Nuts and Bolts

Rabbi Daniel Thwaites

The central mitzva of Rosh Hashana is undoubtedly the blowing of the Shofar. There are endless discussions regarding the symbolic nature of the tekiot, what they are meant to cause us to think and feel and many other elements of the mitzva. However, I would like to briefly explain how the accepted custom has become the sounding of 100 kolot. What exactly is the source of this number?

So it all starts with the pasuk in Bamidbar

ובחדש השביעי באחד לחדש מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל
מלאכת עבדה לא תעשו יום תרועה יהיה לכם (במדבר כט:א)

"In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded."

So we see that Rosh Hashana is a day of teruah, of blowing a shofar, but what does that mean? Are we supposed to stand all day and just blow the shofar?

The gemara in Mesechet Rosh Hashana לג. explains that there is another pasuk that is important to defining the mitzvah

והעברת שופר תרועה בחדש השביעי בעשור לחדש ביום
הכפרים תעבירו שופר בכל ארצכם (ויקרא כה:ט)

"Then you shall sound the horn loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month—the Day of Atonement—you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land".

The pasuk is talking about the commandment to sound the shofar after Yom Kippur after the yovel year. From the fact that the pasuk uses the word 'teruah' we connect it to the pasuk of Rosh Hashana, so we know the teruah of Rosh Hashana and the teruah of the yovel has to be the same. The gemara also deduces from the pasuk that every terua note should have a tekia sounded before and after it, since the word "ta'aviru," which implies an extended sound, i.e. a tekia, is cited both prior and subsequent to the word "terua. Therefore, on Rosh Hashana, we must blow a tekia, or a peshuta (a straight, flat sound), both before and after the terua. This pattern is called a תר"ת, or a "tekia-terua-tekia.

Chazal further further learn out (לד.) that the תר"ת pattern must be sounded three times since the term "terua" is specified three times in the Torah, and every terua, as we have established, must be preceded and succeeded by a tekia. So, so far we have 9 notes.

So the issue came about when it came to defining what a teruah is. The torah wants us to have a teruah, but how do we actually define what a teruah is? In Rosh Hashana 33b, it is written:

"It is a day of sounding [terua] the shofar to you"
(Bamidbar 29:1), and we translate this verse in Aramaic as:

It is a day of yevava to you. And to define a yevava, the Gemara quotes a verse that is written about the mother of Sisera: "Through the window she looked forth and wailed [vateyabev], the mother of Sisera" (Shoftim 5:28). One Sage, the tanna of the baraita, holds that this means moanings, broken sighs, as in the blasts called shevarim. And one Sage, the tanna of the mishna, holds that it means whimpers, as in the short blasts called teruot."

The Gemara defines the teruah as a human cry, and the Gemara discusses whether it is similar to wailing ("yelulei yalil") of weeping (i.e. a terua, or nine short blasts), or the slow, deep sobbing ("genuchei ganach") of someone heavily burdened (i.e. a shevarim, or three medium blasts), or whether it is like a sobbing which naturally turns into a wailing (i.e. a shevarim-teruah).

So accordingly when sounding a teruah, one could do 3 sets of a tekia teruah tekiah תר"ת, or 3 sets of a tekia shevarim tekia תש"ת, or 3 sets of a tekia shevarim-teruah tekia תשר"ת. But which one is the right one?

The gemara goes on to explain that Rabbi Abbahu confronted this question and enacted in Caesarea (around 300 C.E.) that one should blow all different possible variations. This is because the biblical terua is supposed to reflect human weeping, and weeping can be both wailing and sobbing, or both together, so better to do everything.

This takana of Rabbi Abahu became the accepted halacha. For the first set of tekiot, we do 3 sets of tekia

shevarim-teruah tekia, which is defined as 12 notes, because a shevarim teruah is two notes. Then 3 sets of tekiah shevarim tekia, which is another 9 and then another 3 sets of a tekia teruah tekiah which is another 9 notes, so we end up with a total of 30 notes.

This number is assumed to be the fulfilment of the deraita obligation, which is why when blowing shofar for someone who was unable to attend Shul, we blow 30 kolot. But how did 30 kolot turn into 100?

The Gemara (RH 16a-b) asks this question as well, and explains that this is a rabbinic legislation to sound extra kolot designed "to confuse the Satan." Therefore, Chazal established that we sound the first thirty kolot after the Torah reading - tekiot de-meyushav, i.e. the tekiot for which one can sit (even though one may sit for these tekiot, the custom is to stand) - and thirty kolot in tefillat Musaf - tekiot de-meumad, i.e. tekiot for which one must stand (since one must stand while in the midst of the amida prayer). These kolot are dispersed throughout the three sections of the Chazzan's repetition and are blown following the order of: a tekia shevarim-teruah tekia, tekiah shevarim tekia, tekia teruah tekiah. Those who have the custom to blow during the silent Shemoneh Esrei also follow the same order.

Accordingly, the first set of thirty kolot is the primary mitzva of shofar, whilst the second set of thirty is a rabbinic addition in order לערבב את השטן.

Therefore, we began with 9 kolot, which becomes thirty, which was then doubled to 60, but where do the other 40 come from?

The Tosfot on לג. quoting the Aruch, says that some people blow 100 tekiot to parallel the 100 sighs of Sisera's mother. As mentioned above, the fact that the Teruah is a crying sound is learned from the word ותיבב that describes Sisera's mother as she tearfully waited for her son to return from battle. Because of this connection between crying and the sound of the shofar, we blow the shofar one hundred times.

This minhag, although mentioned by the Tosfot almost a thousand years ago, it isn't mentioned in the Shulchan Aruch or many other halachic works. The Shulchan Aruch talks about 61 tekiot, the Rema mentions 42 required and 30 optional and there are many more options suggested. It seems that until relatively recently, 100 was still not accepted by everyone and the Kol Bo machzor printed in Vilna in 1925 only lists 60 sounds. It was really the Shelah, who was a 17th century kabbalist and posek, who encouraged blowing 100 kolot for two reasons. Firstly, he believed that there was a need for 100 kolot because of Kabbalistic reasons. Furthermore, he felt that halachically in order to cover your bases you would have to blow more than the required amount. This is because he followed a particular opinion of Tosofot with regard to the two sets of tekiot and the way in which they are blown.

Now that the custom has become accepted to blow 100 kolot, many places will blow the various different sets in slightly different ways in order to follow a range of different halachic approaches of the Rishonim as to how they should be blown. Pay close attention and see if you can notice how the kolot may differ from set to set.

So to review, we said you need three sets of 3 tekia teruah tekia which gives us 9. We aren't sure whether a teruah is a shevarim, a teruah or a shevarim teruah so we do all three options, which gives us 30. We do another 30 to confuse the Satan and then we complete the set to a hundred as a result of the connection to the story of Sisera's mother.

To finish, the most important thing is to remember why we blow the Shofar on Rosh Hashana as the Rambam states:

"Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah is a decree, it contains an allusion. It is as if [the shofar's call] is saying: Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator!" (Hilchot Teshuva 3:4).

Rekindling the Romance

Rabbi Eli Weinstein

A lot of people associate the time of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur with fear and pain. Certainly, the fasting of Kippur is not easy. Yet we have this acronym that Elul is "Ani LeDodi VeDodi Li," "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me." In addition, the Gemara says that Yom Kippur is the happiest day of the year. Everything leads towards Yom Kippur, and then there's a celebration of Sukkot afterwards. In the middle is the primary object of the month of Elul and the end is Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

There is a beautiful idea—and this also explains what confession is, which is the main thing on Yom Kippur—that every relationship needs a trip every year. A honeymoon.

When you are married for a while, it's good to go on a date every week. It's good to go and spend two hours at a restaurant. It's really good for a relationship to have a period of realignment when you refocus on the goals that you have with each other. Sometimes it's planned, and sometimes it's spontaneous, where a single conversation or a single trip will be able to really open things up and help things in a way that may have been holding things back for a while. And now they can finally be let out and shared.

The month of Elul is similar to this. You have the crack, an incredible crack of the heart, which is the Shofar. "Wake up from your sleep." The Shofar is this crazy, startling noise. And all of a sudden, the heart, which had been covered by layers and layers, is cracked open a little bit.

We say, "Open a small crack for me." Hashem, open me a little bit of the door, and I'll widen it. The shofar is the opening of the door. It allows us to feel and reach out. And in that process, we're able to be honest with Hashem and realign. We realize that we have been focused on a lot of different things, and we have been distracted from the core.

But then during Elul, we show that we are refocused. This is about the relationship. This is about our love for each other. Hashem loves us, and we love Him, and we don't want anything between us.

The worst thing in a relationship is when you hide something, especially when you did it to someone else. The Vidui is the ability to open up with Hashem and say, "Look, I did this. I don't want to hide it from you. I know you know anyways, but I don't want to hide it from you. Let's be open about this together. I want to share it with you."

Even though this is a painful experience and it's not something you want to do every day, after you do this, the relationship is in such a deeper and more loving place because we were so open with each other.

This then leads to incredible joy and celebration, which is Succot, where it is so exciting to be together. This is what we call a Succah, the “Tzel DeMeheimanuta,” which is the shadow of Hashem. We have a loving relationship with Hashem, giving thanks and dancing all the time. We are in such a place of romance after the hard work of developing a relationship and being honest and open.

And this is why the entire process is called: “Ani LeDodi VeDodi Li,” “I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me.” In other words, we are together, we are committed. It is sometimes difficult, but this leads to tremendous love and closeness.

This is the journey from Rosh Chodesh Elul all the way until Succot—a period of realignment.

The Shofar as a Cry of Love

Rav Yaakov Faratci

Every single time I listen to the shofar, I actually feel like I am listening to myself. There is the voice of the soul that gets so muddled by everything else in the world. I'm so used to listening to everybody else's voice, but I'm not sure what my own voice sounds like. To me, the shofar is the soul crying out to us. It's the language of the soul. It happens in tears.

There are some people who say that the shofar is really Hashem crying. The Gemara says that the shofar sounds are based on Sisera's mother's crying. Now, what do I care about what Sisera's mother was doing? She was a part of the enemy of the Jewish people. Sisera's job was to wipe us out. The answer is that there's nothing like a parent crying for their child. The parent never stops crying for them, even in moments of silence. The parent is still crying for their child.

Some people think heaven and hell are two different worlds. Yet really, heaven and hell are in this world. Heaven is the life that you know you could be living, and when you know you're living that life, you feel it. Hell is watching the life you could have lived slip away.

This is the cry of both our soul and the soul of Hashem. They are both crying and wanting to be in unison. They felt distant the whole year. But now the parent wants to

be close to the child, and the child wants to be close to the parent.

The parent is saying to their child, "Please live a heavenly life. I want to give you a heavenly life. I want to give you that so badly, because every parent wants you to live the best life."

The child is crying to their parent and saying, "I miss you so much. I want to be close to you." When does a child cry? When the child is alone. When the child is sitting there alone, sniveling and so dark.

The shofar is a real opportunity to hear our own voice crying out to Hashem, as well as Hashem crying out to us.

Positive and Negative Regret

Rabbi Ari Ze'ev Schwartz

In today's generation, we often hear people say things like: "I have no regrets in life," "I don't regret anything I have ever done," or "I don't believe in regrets."

What these statements often mean is that a person doesn't want to spend their life stuck in the past, wallowing in the pain of:

"I should have done this," "If only I would have done that," "I was so close. Why didn't I just say..."

In this sense, yes, too much regret can be a negative thing, since it keeps a person stuck in the past in a passive and inactive way. Indeed, much of New Age spirituality encourages a person to be more present and to let go of the past.

And so, this is the question of the spiritual seeker: Why does the month of Elul, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur all center around feelings of charatah/regret? Indeed, according to the Rambam, "How should one confess? A person says: "God, I sinned, I made mistakes, and I misbehaved... I regret my actions." (Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 1:1).

Why does the Jewish tradition want us to focus on regret? What benefit does the Torah see in regret? Indeed, why not live our lives with no regrets, as the modern generation so often encourages us to do?

Regret as a Positive Force in Our Lives

According to Rav Kook, when regret is experienced in a mature and healthy way, it can actually have a positive impact on one's life and improve one's present and future life.

In Ein Aya, Rav Kook writes:

"When a person elevates themselves from the pit of destruction they begin to feel guilt when doing negative actions. The bitter pain of guilt increases their disgust for negativity and leads to a stronger desire for positive actions that were previously lacking" (EA Berachot 1 1:169 pp. 66-67).

In this piece, Rav Kook explains how regret can be a positive force of change in one's life. Positive regret enables a person to critique a past action, determine a new way forward, and thereby enhance the quality of one's life.

For example, a person looks back at their life and regrets not focusing enough effort and time on their health. This regret can be a catalyst for better dieting, increased exercise, and better sleeping habits.

A person looks back at their life and regrets staying too long in a toxic and abusive relationship. This regret can motivate them to be more selective in their relationships, recognize red flags earlier on, and create healthier boundaries.

A person looks back at their life and regrets not reaching out enough to loved ones, such as parents, siblings and good friends. This regret can awaken within them a desire to reach out more regularly to those people they love—either in person, on the phone, or even just through messaging.

In all of these examples, we can see how regret can be a positive force for change in one's life. Whereas negative regret is when a person gets stuck in the past and feels sorry for themselves, positive regret is when a person feels the sting of the past and makes a decision that one wants to make a change in one's present life.

Negative regret keeps you in the past, positive regret helps you improve your future.

Regret and Salt

A good way to think about this is by comparing regret to salt. Negative regret is like putting too much salt in your meal; it overpowers the taste of the food and ruins the meal. In contrast, positive regret is like putting a pinch of salt in your meal; it adds flavor to the taste of the food and enhances the meal.

In this sense, it is possible to say that the modern generation that wants to live a life without regrets is partially right and partially wrong. On the one hand, the modern generation is right, since a person should not spend their life stuck in regrets, emotionally paralyzed by the weight of their negative past. On the other hand, the modern generation is wrong, since a small dose of regret

is actually good for one's life since the sting of regret can be a powerful motivation to make changes and thereby improve one's present and future quality of life.

This was something that was clear to Rav Kook: a person who lives a life without any regrets is unable to free themselves from their bad habits.

"Sometimes negative actions can become so entrenched in a person's nature that this negativity becomes one with the person. In such a situation, the person doing the negative actions no longer even feels any guilt" (Ibid.).

For this reason, the Jewish tradition encourages a person to use the power of regret, a small pinch of salt, to wake themselves up. Usually, a person cooks their meal and only adds salt at the end. In a similar way, if, for the majority of the year, a Jew was busy cooking the meal of their life, then at the end of the year—Elul, Rosh Hashana, and Yom Kippur—a person must have the self-awareness to add a pinch of salt to enhance the overall flavor of their life.

Positive regret—when done correctly—helps a person look back at their past year, feel the sting of missed opportunities and bad decisions, and thereby make the necessary changes to improve the upcoming year.

The Voice of the King

Rabbi Albert Katz

The Baal Shem Tov told a parable about a king who sent his only son away from the palace. The prince wandered for years, traveling farther and farther from home, until eventually he wanted to return. He made his way back to the palace, but somewhere along the way he had forgotten the language of the king. He stood outside the gates, wanting desperately to come in, but he no longer knew how to speak to his father. He couldn't explain where he had been or what had happened to him, and he didn't know how to ask to come home.

So he cried out. The king heard the voice and recognized his son.

The story captures something essential about the shofar. The prince doesn't return with a speech or a perfect explanation. He doesn't have the right words to explain himself or make a convincing case for why he should be allowed back inside. He simply uses the voice he still has, and the king recognizes it. That is a strange way to begin Rosh Hashana. The day is filled with words. We spend hours describing Hashem's kingship, asking Him to remember us, and recounting His relationship with the Jewish people. And then, in the middle of all those words, we stop speaking and blow a shofar.

The Torah calls Rosh Hashana "זְכוֹרֹן תְּרוּעָה," a remembrance of the shofar. The Mishnah describes the

day as the time when "כל באי עולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון," when every person passes before Hashem in judgment. Yet when Chazal describe the heart of the day, they don't put Vidui at the center. They give us Malchuyot, Zichronot and Shofrot. If this is the Day of Judgment, why is the central mitzvah of the day a sound rather than words of confession? What is the shofar saying that we cannot say ourselves?

The King

The first Mishnah in Rosh Hashana describes the first of Tishrei as a beginning: a new year for years, for the shemitah and yovel cycles, for planting and for vegetables. Then, almost immediately, the Mishnah tells us that on this day the entire world is judged. The two ideas belong together. Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of creation, making it the natural time to stop and ask what we are doing with the life we have been given. Judgment is not only about looking backward at everything we did wrong. It is also about looking at the life in front of us. What am I doing with another year of being alive? What am I becoming? Where is my life going?

That may be why the day begins with Malchuyot. The Gemara says:

"אמרו לפני בראש השנה מלכיות זכרונות ושופרות. מלכיות כדי שתמליכוני עליכם, זכרונות כדי שיעלה זכרוניכם לפני לטובה, ובמה? בשופר."

Say before Me on Rosh Hashana Malchuyot, Zichronot and Shofrot. Malchuyot, so that you will make Me King over you; Zichronot, so that your remembrance will rise before Me for good; and through what? Through the shofar. The order is important. Before we ask Hashem to remember us, we talk about who He is.

Recognizing Hashem as King also means recognizing that I am not ultimately in control. We want to know what is going to happen, we want other people to behave a certain way, and we want our lives to follow a plan that makes sense to us. Even when we know that we aren't really in control, we spend a lot of energy trying to feel that we are. Malchuyot asks us to step back from that. I am responsible for my choices, but I am not responsible for controlling everything that happens. There is a bigger picture that I don't see.

The Gemara in Rosh Hashana 32a gives three different sources for Malchuyot. Rebbe derives it from the pesukim of Hallelukah, Rabbi Yosef from the Aseret HaDibrot, and Rabbi Yochanan from the Maamarot, the statements through which Hashem created the world.

It is striking that Chazal look for Malchuyot in such different places. The idea of Hashem's kingship is present in creation, revelation and praise. Before we begin thinking about ourselves, Rosh Hashana asks us to remember the larger story that we are part of.

Hashem created the world. He revealed Himself to us. And somehow, within that enormous story, He asks us to

recognize Him. The fact that Hashem created us means that our lives matter. We have freedom and responsibility, and our choices have real consequences. But that same freedom makes it possible to forget the One who gave us that freedom in the first place. We can become so absorbed in our own lives that we start living as though we are the center of the story. Rosh Hashana pulls us back through a sound.

The Voice

The shofar naturally returns us to Sinai. The Torah describes that moment with thunder, lightning, a heavy cloud and "קול שופר חזק מאד," the sound of a very strong shofar. The sound keeps getting stronger:

"ויהי קול השופר הולך וחזק מאד".

But perhaps the most unusual part of the revelation is what the Jewish people do not see. Moshe later tells them:

"קול דברים אתם שומעים ותמונה אינכם רואים זולתי קול".

You heard the sound of words, but you saw no image, only a voice.

We usually think that seeing is clearer than hearing. At Sinai, however, Hashem does not give the Jewish people an image to hold onto. He gives them a voice. And their response is also about listening: "ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו: " בקולי." If you will listen to My voice.

The covenant at Sinai begins with hearing. That is why Shofrot takes us back there. When we hear the shofar on Rosh Hashana, we remember the moment when the Jewish people stood together, heard the voice of Hashem and accepted Him as their King. The Kedushat Levi describes the shofar as bringing us back into the experience of Matan Torah itself.

The shofar is also a sound without language. The Gemara says "התוקע לשיר יצא," that even someone who blows the shofar simply for its sound has fulfilled the mitzvah. The shofar doesn't need to communicate a sentence. It does not need to be translated. That matters on Rosh Hashana because there are things that are difficult to say.

The Shelah HaKadosh speaks about the shofar as the "קול פנימי," the inner voice of the soul. There is a cry that comes from a place deeper than words. When we have no language for what we are feeling, there is still a part of us that knows how to call out. We spend much of Rosh Hashana speaking to Hashem, but the shofar allows us to come before Him without having to explain ourselves first. The prince in the Baal Shem Tov's story had forgotten the language of the palace. He had not forgotten how to cry out. The shofar is that kind of voice.

When the Walls Come Down

The shofar appears in another famous story in Tanach. In Sefer Yehoshua, the Jewish people circle Yericho. The shofar is sounded, the people shout, and the walls

collapse. It is hard not to think about the walls that can develop between us and Hashem.

Some are created by our choices. We do things that take us further away, and after enough time the distance becomes real. Others are created in our own minds. We start thinking that we have gone too far, that we have already been this way for too long, or that a certain part of ourselves simply cannot change. After a while, it becomes easy to confuse "this is where I am" with "this is who I am." The shofar challenges that assumption.

Chazal connect the sounds of shevarim and teruah with crying. There is something broken in the sound, and that is not accidental. On Rosh Hashana, we don't need to pretend that everything is fine. There are things we did this year that we wish we could take back, habits that have followed us for years, and parts of ourselves that we know need to change. Yet the same teruah is also the sound of joy and coronation: "בחצוצרות וקול שופר הריעו" "לפני המלך ה'." The sound can carry both. It can express what is broken while still moving toward something whole.

The Ba'er Mayim Chaim develops the pasuk "מן המצר" through the shofar. The sound begins in a narrow place and then expands outward. It starts in constriction and opens into space. That is a beautiful image for teshuvah. We may be in a narrow place, but we don't have to remain there.

Chazal carry this idea further in their analysis of the shofar's blasts. They connect the sounds of shevarim and teruah with crying, even tracing the rhythm of the teruah to the tears of Sisera's mother. However we understand the details, the basic idea is striking: the sound of crying itself becomes part of the sound we bring before Hashem on Rosh Hashana. Even an inarticulate, broken cry can become part of our tefillah.

The Torah says, "ה' אלקיו עמו ותרועת מלך בו" — Hashem his God is with him, and the teruah of the King is within him. The Seforno understands the language of teruah as connected to friendship and closeness. The sound of the King is not only something we hear from far away. It is described as being within us. The same idea appears in the shofar of Yovel. The Torah commands that the shofar be sounded on Yom Kippur of the fiftieth year, when freedom is proclaimed and people return to their ancestral possessions. The shofar announces that what has been lost does not necessarily have to remain lost. The walls can come down.

Wake Up

The Rambam gives the shofar another dimension. He writes that although the mitzvah of shofar is a "גזירת הכתוב," a Divine decree, it contains a message:

"עורו ישנים משנתכם... הקיצו מתרדמתכם... חפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם."

Wake up from your sleep. Search your deeds. Return in teshuvah. Remember your Creator.

The Rambam doesn't describe the shofar primarily as a reminder that we are bad. He describes it as something that wakes us up. A person can spend an entire year living comfortably, doing nothing overtly wrong, and yet remain completely asleep. Life becomes routine. We get used to ourselves and stop asking questions that once seemed important. Then the shofar interrupts the routine. It doesn't give a speech or explain what needs to change. It simply demands that we listen. The Rambam ends with "וזכרו בוראכם" — remember your Creator. That brings us back to Malchuyot. Before we get lost in the details of everything we did or didn't do this year, the shofar asks us to remember where we came from and who our lives belong to.

Rav Kook describes a similar idea in Orot HaTeshuvah. He contrasts a lower teshuvah, focused on itemizing specific missteps, with a higher teshuvah that springs from a more primal longing to reconnect with our source. Before a person has worked through every individual problem, something deeper can stir inside him: a desire to return to where he belongs. That is a different way of thinking about Rosh Hashana. There is certainly a place for accountability. We have to look honestly at what we have done and take responsibility for it. But the first movement of the day can be much bigger than a list of mistakes. It can be the simple realization that I want to be closer to Hashem than I was yesterday. The shofar wakes up that desire.

The Akeidah

There is another memory hidden inside the shofar: the Akeidah.

Rabbi Abahu asks in the Gemara why we specifically use the horn of a ram. His answer is that Hashem should remember the Akeidah of Yitzchak and consider it as though we had bound ourselves before Him.

We aren't simply asking Hashem to remember what Avraham did. We are asking to be remembered through that story. The Akeidah is also a story about letting go of control. Avraham is asked to place the most precious thing in his life completely into Hashem's hands. That doesn't mean that accepting Hashem as King means becoming passive. We still have to make decisions, work hard, apologize when necessary and change what needs to change. There are things that are ours to carry.

But there are also things that aren't. We cannot control everything that happens to us, what other people do, or how every story in our lives turns out. Rav Itche Meir Morgenstern writes about the strength that can come from letting go of the need to control everything, and Rebbe Nachman speaks about placing our burdens onto Hashem.

The Akeidah gives that idea a much deeper expression. Avraham does what he can do, and then he has to surrender the outcome. Perhaps that is part of what it means to crown Hashem. We take responsibility for our lives without pretending that we are running the world.

Another Rosh Hashana

There is a strange scene in the eighth chapter of Nechemiah.

The Jewish people have returned from exile, and on Rosh Hashana the entire nation gathers together. Ezra brings the Torah and reads from it for hours. He stands on a wooden platform, opens the Torah "לעיני כל העם," before the eyes of the entire nation, and the people respond "Amen, Amen." The Levi'im then explain the Torah to them.

The scene sounds almost like Sinai. At Sinai, the entire Jewish people stood together and received the Torah. Here, generations later, a nation that has experienced destruction and exile stands together and hears the Torah again. And then, hearing how far they have strayed, the people begin to weep. But Nechemiah tells them to stop.

"אל תתאבלו ואל תבכו."

Do not mourn and do not cry.

Instead, they are told to eat good food, drink sweet drinks and send portions to people who have nothing prepared.

"כי חדות ה' היא מעוזכם."

The joy of Hashem is your strength.

Nechemiah isn't telling them that their mistakes don't matter. He is telling them that there is another way to experience this day. They have heard the Torah again.

After exile, after destruction, after everything that happened, they are standing together and listening to the voice of Hashem once more. They have been given the opportunity to begin again. This helps explain why Vidui isn't the center of Rosh Hashana. There is certainly a place for regret, accountability and teshuvah. But Rosh Hashana begins by reminding us of something that comes before all of that: Hashem is King, He remembers us, and He is still speaking to us. The relationship has not disappeared.

The Voice We Still Have

The shofar carries all of these memories at once. It takes us back to creation and to Sinai. It reminds us of the walls of Yericho and the freedom of Yovel. It recalls the Akeidah. It wakes us from the sleep of an ordinary year. It can sound like crying, and it can sound like joy. But underneath all of those memories is a simple idea: the shofar gives us a voice. Not necessarily a voice that can explain everything. Not a voice that can defend every decision we made this year. Sometimes it is simply the voice of someone who knows that he wants to come home.

That is why the shofar fits so naturally into the strange combination that is Rosh Hashana. We are standing before a King who judges the world, but we are also standing before a Father who knows our voice. We are asked to take responsibility for our lives, while remembering that we are not in control of everything. We

are reminded of what needs to change, while being told that change is still possible.

The prince in the Baal Shem Tov's story had forgotten the language of the palace. But he had not forgotten his father. And the king had not forgotten him.

We may not always know how to speak to Hashem. Sometimes we don't even know exactly what we want to say. But we haven't lost the voice with which we can call out to Him. The shofar doesn't require us to have everything figured out before we come home. It simply asks us to use the voice we still have. And the King still knows it.

Going to the Mikvah During Yomim Noraim

Rabbi Moshe Abrams

The Rambam in Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvot Aseh 109, lists the following mitzvah:

”היא שצונו שנטבול במי מקוה ואז נטהר מאיזה מין ממיני
טומאות שנטמאו בה והוא אמרו יתברך ”ורחץ במים”

“That is that He commanded us that we immerse in the mikveh waters, and that we then become pure from one of the various types of impurities with which we have become impure.”

Based on this, one might assume that there is a mitzvah to purify one’s self, and to remain in a state of purity. The Rambam disabuses us of this idea, and continues:

”ואין הכוונה במאמר הטבילה מצות עשה שיהא חייב כל טמא
שיטהר על כל פנים כמו שהוא חייב כל מי שיתכסה בכסות
שיעשה ציצית או כל מי שיש לו בית שיעשה לו מעקה. ואולם
הנרצה בזה דין טבילה והיות התורה אומרת לנו כי מי שירצה
ליטהר מטומאתו הנה לא ישלם לו זה אלא בטבילה במים ואז
יטהר.”

“The intention of the statement that immersion is a positive commandment is not that anyone impure is obligated to perform be purified, in the same way that anyone covered by a cloak must make tzitzit, or anyone with a home must make a parapet. Rather what is intended is the law of immersion - and that is that the

Torah told us that anyone who wants to be purified from his impurity will only complete it with immersion in water; and he will then be purified."

We see that the intent of this mitzvah is that a mikva is a source of tahara, not that you actually have to use it. However, that does not mean you shouldn't - it just means that you don't have to.

To be sure, going to the mikvah will not make you completely tahor - everybody today is tamei met, for which mei chatat (parah adumah water) is needed to fully purify. Nonetheless, you still can, and should, go to the mikvah to achieve whatever level of purification is possible.

The Rambam in Hilchot Mikvaot (11:12) says the following:

”דבר ברור וגלוי שהטמאות והטהרות גזירת הכתוב הן, ואין מדברים שדעתו של אדם מכרעת אותן, והרי הן מכלל החוקים. וכן, הטבילה מן הטמאות מכלל החוקים היא, שאין הטומאה טיט או צואה שתעבור במים, אלא גזירת הכתוב היא, והדבר תלוי בכוונת הלב, ולפיכך אמרו חכמים טבל ולא הוחזק כאילו לא טבל:

ואף על פי כן, רמז יש בדבר, כשם שהמכוון ליבו ליטהר, כיון שטבל טהר, ואף על פי שלא נתחדש בגופו דבר, כך המכוון ליבו לטהר נפשו מטומאת הנפשות, שהן מחשבות האוון ודעות הרעות, כיון שהסכים בליבו לפרוש מאותן העצות, והביא נפשו במי הדעות, טהר. הרי הוא אומר 'וזרקתי עליכם מים טהורים וטהרתם מכל טמאותיכם ומכל גלוליכם אטהר אתכם' (יחזקאל ל"ו:כ"ה).”

"It is a clear and apparent matter that the concepts of purity and impurity are Scriptural decrees and they are not matters determined by a person's understanding and they are included in the category of chukim. Similarly, immersion in a mikvehto ascend from impurity is included in the category of chukim, because impurity is not mud or filth that can be washed away with water. Instead, the immersion is a Scriptural decree and requires the focusing the intent of one's heart. Therefore, our Sages said: "When one immersed, but did not intend to purify himself," it is as if he did not immerse.

Although it is a Scriptural decree, there is an allusion involved: One who focuses his heart on purifying himself becomes purified once he immerses, even though there was no change in his body. Similarly, one who focuses his heart on purifying his soul from the impurities of the soul, which are wicked thoughts and bad character traits, becomes purified when he resolves within his heart to distance himself from such counsel and immerse his soul in the waters of knowledge. And Ezekiel 36:25 states: "I will pour over you pure water and you will be purified from all your impurities and from all your false deities, I will purify you."

We see that the Rambam considers all of Hilchot Tahara, including the purification of a mikva, to be "chukim" - and the mikva is symbolic of purification from sins and negative character traits.

There are, however, other opinions. The Ramban in various places in Sefer Vayikra writes that the reasoning

behind the laws of tumah is that it gets in the way of your perception of God. The Ramban also agrees that the impurity isn't a physical dirt that will wash off in the mikva - rather, being close to sources of impurity (death, etc.) will dull one's sense of elevation and spirituality. We aren't in tune with this state - and therefore we don't even realize how our senses have been dulled. Therefore, even if one cannot become completely tahor, it is still a worthy thing to go to a mikvah in order to achieve whatever level of tahara you are able.

There is an ancient minhag to go to the mikvah on Erev Yom Kippur (Tur and Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 606:4). Two reasons are given for this minhag (Mishnah Brura 606:21). One is because of taharah, following the reasoning mentioned above in the name of the Ramban, that it heightens your senses to spirituality and perception of God. The second reason is that we go to the mikva to do teshuva, connected to what the Rambam says at the end of Hilchot Mikvaot - that even though there is no explicit reasoning for the laws of mikvaot, none the less, we can learn that just as one who enters the mikva instantly becomes tahor, one who immerses themselves in Torah, Mitzvot and Teshuva will also instantly be atoned.

When going to the mikva on erev Yom Kippur, we should have both intents - that the mikva should be a vehicle that puts us in the mind set of holiness and purity, and also that is one of the many steps we take in returning to Hashem when doing Teshuva.

When Rosh Hashanah Falls on Shabbat

Rabbi Yotam Erlich

In the book *Kedushat Levi*, an important insight is derived from the wording of the Mishnah: "The festival of Rosh Hashanah that falls on Shabbat..."

The *Kedushat Levi* learns from this that when Rosh Hashanah coincides with Shabbat, it is actually a good and positive thing. After all, the Mishnah could have simply written "Rosh Hashanah that falls on Shabbat." By intentionally including the words "Yom Tov" (literally: "Good Day"), it implies that the very fact that Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat is inherently good and positive.

However, this assertion seemingly contradicts an explicit Gemara in *Masechet Rosh Hashanah*, which states: "Any year in which the Shofar is not sounded at its beginning, evil will befall it at its end. Why is this? Because the Satan was not confused." In other words, when the Shofar is not blown at the start of the year, it serves as a negative sign for that year. Although the *Tosafot* commentators qualify this by saying it does not apply to a year when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, we still need to understand why, in the view of the *Kedushat Levi*, this is not merely a missing element, but actually a spiritual advantage.

In the book *Shem MiShmuel*, it is explained that the sound of the Shofar—as stated in the Gemara above—confuses the Satan and weakens his prosecution on the

Day of Judgment. On Shabbat, however, by virtue of the inherent holiness of the Sabbath, the Satan has no power to operate whatsoever. Consequently, when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, the Satan's power to prosecute is neutralized naturally and effortlessly, completely independent of the actions of the Jewish people. This is superior to the blowing of the Shofar, which depends on human intent and the proper execution of the mitzvah (where even when performed, it is never fully guaranteed to confuse the Satan). But when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, the weakening of the Satan happens on its own from Above. Therefore, the Kedushat Levi teaches that it is a profound advantage when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat.

A similar concept can also be found in Chabad Chassidic philosophy: The Alter Rebbe once said: "What is accomplished on Rosh Hashanah through the sounding of the Shofar can be accomplished on Shabbat through the eating of kugel." One of the listeners asked him: "If so, why do we need to blow the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah at all? Let us just eat kugel instead, and that will be enough." The Alter Rebbe replied: "Indeed, that is exactly what we do. For when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, we eat kugel and we do not blow the Shofar."

Several explanations have been offered for these words, and they can be understood as a direct continuation of our previous discussion. The holiness of Shabbat is what protects the Jewish people from prosecutors when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat. Therefore, it is fitting to invest

special effort into honoring the holiness of the Sabbath, which is expressed through Oneg Shabbat—manifested, among other things, in the special foods and festive meals of Shabbat and Chag. This physical enjoyment, rooted in holiness, serves as a good sign for the New Year.

Teshuvah: Who Do We Return To?

Rabbi Gabi Katz

The Torah describes teshuvah with two different phrases.

והיה כי יבאו עליך כל הדברים האלה הברכה והקללה אשר "נתתי לפניך, והשבות אל לבבך" - "And it will be, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse that I have placed before you, and you will return it to your heart."

And then, in the very next pasuk: "ושבת עד ה' אלקיך" - "And you will return to Hashem, your God."

It seems that there are two stages of teshuvah. First, "ושבת עד ה' אלקיך", returning to Hashem. Then, "ובבבך", returning to your heart.

But what does it mean to return to your heart? And why is that something that has to happen before returning to Hashem?

Returning to Your Heart

The word lev in Tanach is not simply referring to our emotions. It represents our inner world, our thoughts, feelings, desires and the way we experience ourselves. Rabbi Norman Lamm explains that when the Torah tells us to serve Hashem "בכל לבבך", it means serving Hashem with both our yetzer tov and our yetzer hara. The goal of teshuvah is therefore not to destroy the yetzer hara or

pretend that our negative drives do not exist. The challenge is to take those same powerful forces and use them for something good. As Rabbi Lamm writes:

“Our challenge is not to repress the yetzer hara, but to sublimate it, to use the enormous powers of the yetzer hara for ends and goals determined by the yetzer tov.”

The yetzer hara can give a person enormous koach. It can give someone passion, creativity, determination and energy. The question is where those kochot are being directed. A person who is extremely passionate can use that passion for things that are destructive. But he can also take that same passion and bring it into Torah. A person who is extremely creative can use that creativity to find ways to sin. But he can take that same creativity and find new ways to learn, grow and serve Hashem.

The goal is not necessarily to become a different person. The goal is to become the person you are, but to use your kochot correctly. That may be what the Torah means when it says: “והשבֹּת אל לבבך”, return to your heart. Return to the deepest parts of yourself. Understand who you are and what drives you. Recognize the powers that Hashem gave you and learn how to use them correctly. Only after that can we get to: “ושבת עד ה' אלקיך”, and return to Hashem.

כבולעו כך פולטו

There is a similar idea in the halachot of kashering keilim. When a kli needs to be kashered, simply cleaning the outside is not enough. There can be something absorbed inside the kli that needs to be removed. The basic principle is: "כבולעו כך פולטו", the way something was absorbed is the way it is removed. This can be a powerful way to understand teshuvah.

There is an external part of teshuvah, which is vidui. I have to say what I did wrong. I have to acknowledge it. I cannot just pretend it never happened. But there is also a deeper part of teshuvah. I have to figure out what happened inside me. What kochot did I use in the wrong way? And how can I now use those same kochot in the right way?

If I used my passion in the wrong direction, I need to take that passion and put it into Torah. If I used my creativity to find ways to get myself into trouble, I need to use that creativity to find ways to grow. If I was extremely determined when it came to an aveirah, I need to take that same determination and put it into avodat Hashem.

כבולעו כך פולטו

The same kochot that allowed something to be absorbed can be the kochot that allow it to be removed. The Chazon Ish discusses different ways that the yetzer hara can manifest itself. Sometimes a person is hot and passionate. Other times a person is cold and apathetic.

The person who is passionate has to learn how to redirect that passion. The person who is cold can sometimes use that coldness in the opposite direction, to cool himself down when he is faced with an aveirah. This is why real teshuvah requires us to know ourselves. The way I fell is not necessarily unrelated to the way I need to get back up.

If I was creative enough to find ways to stumble, I need to become creative enough to find ways to grow. If I had enormous energy for the wrong things, I need to find a place to put that energy into the right things. That is והשבות אל לבבך.

Moral Teshuvah and Religious Teshuvah

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, in Return and Renewal, describes two different dimensions of teshuvah. The first is what he calls moral teshuvah. This is when I look at the sin itself. I recognize that what I did was wrong. It damaged other people. It damaged the world around me. It damaged me. If I spoke lashon hara, I need to confront the fact that I spoke lashon hara. This type of teshuvah is primarily focused on the past. I am looking at what I did and saying that I don't want to continue living that way.

But there is another dimension of teshuvah, which is religious teshuvah. This focuses on my relationship with Hashem. Every aveirah is ultimately about more than just the action itself. There is a deeper question behind it.

Whose will is going to prevail? Mine or Hashem's? When I choose to do something that Hashem does not want me to do, I am saying, in that moment, that what I want is more important than what Hashem wants. That creates a distance between me and Hashem. And that is why religious teshuvah is not only about looking backward. It is about looking forward. It is about wanting the relationship back. It is not only: "I don't want to do that again." It is: "I want to be close to Hashem again."

The Three Things That Need Repair

Rav Lichtenstein explains that when we confront an aveirah, there are different things that need to be repaired. There is the sin itself. There is the relationship with Hashem. And there is ourselves.

The first step is to recognize the wrong itself. "Return, return from your evil ways." I need to stop doing what I am doing. But that is not the whole story. I also need to rebuild my relationship with Hashem. "ואני קרבת אלקים" - "For me, closeness to God is good."

The ultimate goal is not simply to become someone who sins less. The goal is to become someone who is closer to Hashem. And that requires working on myself as well. I need to change my actions, my habits, my thought process and the way I use the kochot that Hashem gave me.

Who Do We Return To?

So when the Torah talks about teshuvah, who are we actually returning to? The answer is both. We return to our heart, and we return to Hashem. First: "והשבות אל לבבך." I have to look inside myself. I have to understand who I am, what drives me, where I went wrong and what I can do differently. I have to take the kochot that Hashem gave me and learn how to use them properly.

And then: "ושבת עד ה' אלקיך." I take that person and bring him back to Hashem. The two are not separate. They are connected. Teshuvah is not about becoming somebody else. It is about returning to the person Hashem created me to be, taking all of the kochot that I have, even the ones that I have sometimes used for the wrong things, and redirecting them toward Hashem. Return to your heart. Understand yourself. Change yourself. And then: "ושבת עד ה' אלקיך." Return to Hashem.

Rosh Hashana: Yom HaDin V'Beracha

A Commentary on Gemara Rosh Hashanah 16a–16b

Rabbi Avichai Berkovits

Mishnah: "At four points in the year the world is judged..."

When we read the Mishnah, the immediate feeling it produces is fear. Every festival is a time of judgment; each festival carries its own distinct judgment; and on Rosh Hashanah stands the most central judgment of all, the one before which "all who come into the world pass... like sheep."

The Mishnah establishes for us the (rather novel) idea that the festivals are not merely times of joy, as a plain reading of the text might suggest, but that each festival carries within it an element of judgment — and therefore also an element of prayer. On Pesach there is the blessing for dew (some even wear a kittel); on Sukkot there is Hoshana Rabbah, and on Shemini Atzeret the prayer for rain, also said in a kittel.

Rosh Hashanah, of course, is the ultimate day of judgment. One might add that the judgment embedded in the other festivals draws its very quality of "judgment" from Rosh Hashanah — after all, this Mishnah appears in tractate Rosh Hashanah. And naturally, Rosh Hashanah sits in the middle of the Mishnah, like a central pillar (the Mishnah is also, of course, arranged in chronological sequence).

There is much more to say about a deeper reading of the Mishnah (why does the judgment always fall just before the peak of development of the thing being judged, rather than after? The grain on Pesach is judged just as it is about to flourish, and likewise for the fruit of the tree...) — but let us settle for this: the feeling that arises from the Mishnah is one of dread and fear. The festivals are times of judgment, and certainly so is Rosh Hashanah. It's worth noting that the Mishnah offers no "second chance" — there is one judgment, and that's that. What, then, of Yom Kippur? What of repentance? It seems this is part of the Mishnah's very message: the judgment is absolute, with no games being played. (Though one could argue the Mishnah is already tinged with a touch of mercy, in that not everything is judged in a single day, but the judgment of the world is spread out across different times... and a hint suffices for the wise.)

The Gemara, true to form, probes and delves into the depths of the Mishnah, raises difficulties and questions, and presents an entirely different conception of the festivals — and of Rosh Hashanah itself — thereby uncovering, as we will see, different layers of depth and blessing.

Gemara: "Which grain [is meant]?... for by the time it comes up for its [second] judgment, it will already have grown tall."

The Gemara opens with a question that seems, at first, to receive a simple answer — but immediately afterward brings a baraita that introduces two innovations to the

Mishnah. "The first innovation is that there are, in fact, two judgments for grain: one before its sowing, and one before its harvest."

. This, in effect, allows a person to "play" with the judgment, or to succeed with his crop despite it, as Abaye suggests — because once there is more than a single judgment, there is always more room to succeed.

The second innovation presented in the baraita is that Yom Kippur, too, is a day of judgment — meaning a person does not have only one judgment, but, like the grain, two, if not more (there is a judgment on Rosh Hashanah, and a judgment on Yom Kippur). This stage sets up the next one, which presents a baraita with an approach very different from the Mishnah's — one that holds, according to all opinions, that there is more than a single judgment.

Gemara: "Whose view is the Mishnah?... the case of 'a person' is difficult!"

At this stage the Gemara sets the Mishnah and the baraita against one another (the obvious question being: why does the Gemara press the Mishnah to align with some particular opinion? One could simply say the Mishnah stands as its own, independent view, disagreeing with the baraita. It seems the Gemara is steering toward a reinterpretation of the Mishnah, and we need to understand why).

The baraita presents four approaches. What they share is that a person is subject to more than one judgment per

year. The most extreme view, that of Rabbi Natan, holds that a person is judged every single hour.

We should ask, regarding the first approach, that of Rabbi Meir: if everyone is judged on Rosh Hashanah, why is there a sealing of the verdict on Yom Kippur? Wasn't the judgment of Rosh Hashanah enough? Why is there an additional judgment, or "sealing"? The Mishnah, after all, showed no sign of a further judgment after Rosh Hashanah! What do the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur give to the heavenly court — or to the person himself? The simple answer, of course, is teshuvah — an opportunity to make amends. Even though a person is judged on Rosh Hashanah, this is not a final verdict; the Court on High (God) does not wish to judge a person only once, but wants to give him the opportunity to correct himself. In other words, in some sense, the judgment of Rosh Hashanah is a judgment of reminder — a judgment meant to rouse the person to repent, so that he may be found meritorious by the time the judgment is finalized. A judgment that carries kindness within it.

It would be worth delving further into the dispute between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehuda, but let us move on to Rabbi Yosei's position. What is the logic in a person being judged every single day?! What of Rosh Hashanah? What of the Day of Judgment?! (This question has indeed troubled many commentators.) On the surface, being judged every day sounds frightening — God's eyes are always upon you, judging you. But surely, based on what

we've learned so far, we can say the opposite: if a person is judged every day, then every day he is given yet another opportunity for correction, for teshuvah. Even more extreme is Rabbi Natan's position, which allows a person, in effect, to change and correct himself at every single moment.

Gemara: "Rava said: This [Mishnah] follows the school of Rabbi Yishmael..."

Even so, the Gemara's conclusion is that our Mishnah indeed follows the school of Rabbi Yishmael, and that the Mishnah spoke only of the beginning of the judgment. But surely, even according to the Mishnah, the judgment is not final — it is only the beginning of a judgment that allows for the sealing of the verdict on Yom Kippur.

And here we see the great innovation of the Gemara. The Gemara essentially softens the Mishnah: on its plain reading, the Mishnah speaks of a single, absolute judgment; the Gemara explains that the judgment of Rosh Hashanah is not final and dread-inducing, but only the beginning of the judgment — a judgment meant to rouse the person to teshuvah so that he may emerge meritorious in the judgment sealed on Yom Kippur. This is, in essence, as we said, a judgment that carries mercy within it.

Gemara: "Rav Chisda said: What is Rabbi Yosei's reasoning?..."

This whole section is significant and warrants deep study, but for the purposes of this piece we won't go into it

now. The most significant stage of the sugya is its conclusion — the baraita that follows, in the name of Rabbi Akiva!

Baraita: "Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rabbi Akiva: Why did the Torah say, 'Bring the Omer on Pesach'?..."

To summarize the baraita in Rabbi Akiva's name: God commanded us in various, specific mitzvot for each festival — the Omer on Pesach, the two loaves on Shavuot, the water libation on Sukkot, and the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Akiva introduces here a tremendous innovation: the reason God commanded us in these mitzvot is because there is a judgment at these times. In other words, the Judge Himself tells us how to be acquitted in the judgment! Had God not commanded us in these mitzvot, perhaps we would not have been found meritorious in judgment — and moreover, perhaps we would not even have known that a judgment existed at all! Which is to say, on a deep level, we learn of the judgment itself from this very "bribe": the very fact that God told us how to be found meritorious is itself what teaches us that a judgment exists! The root of the judgment lies in the very possibility of emerging from it meritorious; the root of the judgment lies in kindness; the root of the judgment lies in the blessing embedded within it.

If we're precise, there is no language of judgment at all in Rabbi Akiva's formulation — only the language of blessing: "so that it may be blessed for you"...

It's also worth noting that in this baraita, Rosh Hashanah appears at the end of the list of festivals — meaning there is a sense in which Rosh Hashanah itself belongs to the list of days of blessing. In the Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah stands in the middle, sending its judgment out to the other festivals; in the baraita, Rosh Hashanah stands at the end of the list, drawing its blessing from the festivals! In the Mishnah, the innovation is that the festivals are a time of judgment; in the baraita, the innovation is that the festivals are a time of blessing — and Rosh Hashanah itself is also part of that list!

And here an even deeper question comes into focus: How did the Mishnah know there was a judgment at the festivals in the first place? How do we know there is a judgment on Rosh Hashanah at all? The Torah never states outright that there is a judgment on Sukkot concerning water, or a judgment on Pesach concerning grain — regarding Rosh Hashanah, the Torah only says to sound the shofar. Rather, we derive it from within the very same law itself: from the fact that the Torah told us there is a shofar on Rosh Hashanah, we learn that God revealed to us how to find favor with Him, so that we might be blessed — and from this we infer, in turn, that a judgment exists. So too for the other festivals: if God commanded us to pour out water libations on the Festival, it seems there must be a judgment on Sukkot; and if there is an Omer offering on Pesach, it seems there must be a judgment concerning the grain! The judgment itself is derived from the "bribe."

A More Precise Formulation of this Last Point

Here a deeper question emerges still: how did we even know there was a judgment at the festivals in the first place? The Torah itself never states explicitly, "there is a judgment on Sukkot concerning water," or "there is a judgment on Pesach concerning grain." All the Torah says is a command regarding specific mitzvot: bring the Omer on Pesach, bring the two loaves on Atzeret, pour out water on the Festival, sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. So how, then, do we know there is a judgment at all?

And this is precisely the innovation: we do not learn of the judgment's existence from some separate source, such that only afterward do we understand the mitzvah to be a response to that already-known judgment — rather, it's exactly the reverse. From the very fact that the Torah gave us a mitzvah defined in the language of "so that you may be blessed," specifically in that very domain (the Omer — blessing in the grain; the two loaves — blessing in the fruit of the tree; the water libation — blessing in the year's rains; the shofar — a rising to good remembrance), we infer, retroactively, that a judgment must necessarily exist in that domain. For if there were no judgment there, there would be no purpose to a mitzvah that "blesses" — there is no need to bless something that isn't subject to a decision in the first place. In other words: the mitzvah itself — that same "bribe" we spoke of, the means given to us in order to merit acquittal — is

itself the very source from which we learn that a judgment exists, and not the other way around.

And this is fundamentally different from the Mishnah. The Mishnah opens by stating directly: "At four points the world is judged" — the judgment is presented as a given fact, requiring no proof from an outside source (aside from the verse hinted at regarding Rosh Hashanah itself). The Mishnah's direction runs from the judgment to the mitzvot: first there is a judgment, and prayer and mitzvot that respond to it follow naturally. In Rabbi Akiva's baraita, the direction is entirely reversed: we begin with the mitzvot themselves, and from their character as "blessing-mitzvot," we infer that a judgment exists. The Mishnah teaches us about the judgment directly; the baraita teaches us about it indirectly — through the "bribe" itself.