

Excerpted from
*This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared:
The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*
by Rabbi Alan Lew

Every year before the Days of Awe, the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism, held a competition to see who would blow the shofar for him on Rosh Hashanah. Now if you wanted to blow the shofar for the Ba'al Shem Tov, not only did you have to blow the shofar like a virtuoso, but you also had to learn an elaborate system of *kavanot* — secret prayers that were said just before you blew the shofar to direct the shofar blasts and to see that they had the proper effect in the supernal realms. All the prospective shofar blowers practiced these kavanot for months. They were difficult and complex. There was one fellow who wanted to blow the shofar for the Ba'al Shem Tov so badly that he had been practicing these kavanot for years. But when his time came to audition before the Ba'al Shem, he realized that nothing he had done had prepared him adequately for the experience of standing before this great and holy man, and he appled. He choked. His mind froze completely. He couldn't remember one of the kavanot he had practiced for all those years. He couldn't even remember what he was supposed to be doing at all. He just stood before the Ba'al Shem in utter silence, and then, when he realized how egregiously — how utterly — he had failed this great test, his heart just broke in two and he began to weep, sobbing loudly, his shoulders heaving and his whole body wracking as he wept.

All right, you're hired, the Ba'al Shem said.

But I don't understand, the man said. I failed the test completely. I couldn't even remember one *kavanah*.

So the Ba'al Shem explained with the following parable: In the palace of the King, there are many secret chambers, and there are secret keys for each chamber, but one key unlocks them all, and that key is the ax. The King is the Lord of the Universe, the Ba'al Shem explained. The palace is the House of God. The secret chambers are the *sefirot*, the ascending spiritual realms that bring us closer and closer to God, when we perform commandments such as blowing the shofar with the proper intention, and the secret keys are the kavanot. And the ax — the key that opens every chamber and brings us directly into the presence of the King, wherever he may be — the ax is the broken heart, for as it says in the Psalms, “God is close to the brokenhearted.”