



IDEAS, INSIGHTS & INSPIRATION

TISHREI, 5781

A COLLECTION OF DIVREI TORAH
FROM OUR COMMUNITY

Sarah Emerson Helfand

The *Yamim Noraim* bring to the forefront the age-old discussion about free will vs. predeterminism. How much of our fate and destiny in life is predetermined by God at birth and how much of it can we change? How much of what befalls us for the coming year can we decide ourselves?

One dimension of this question relates to whether a person's character traits (such as how smart one is) and capabilities can be determined based upon the constellations. Although I have never taken horoscopes very seriously, they are a fun diversion for me. I always find it interesting to read about them in a magazine and see where I fit in. My birthday makes me a Capricorn, so I am supposedly pre-disposed to possess certain traits such as being ambitious, a workaholic, enjoying giving to others, being dependable and caring, moody and suspicious. Although I don't fit the bill on all of these traits, I have always felt like the horoscopes were written in a vague enough manner that anyone could find a little piece of themselves in each one.

What does the Torah have to say about horoscopes? Does Judaism give any truth to their predictions? Interestingly, the Gemara in Shabbat (156a) does present astrological predictions for people based upon which day of the week they were born, according to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, or even based upon the time of day of their birth, according to Rabbi Chanina. Regardless of the day or hour determination, these

opinions seem to be assuming that it is not a question of whether any of these factors determine one's fate, but rather which planet alignment or day will dictate the prediction.

But after a detailed outlining of the planet alignments and predictions for those born during those times, the Gemara quotes Rabbi Yochanan as disagreeing with these principles and declaring *אין מזל לישראל* – there is no constellation that dictates the fate of the Jewish people. If so, though, the entire Gemara is difficult to understand. If Rabbi Yochanan believes that the astrological predictions have no bearing over the Jewish nation, what is the point of the whole discussion in his opinion? Does he think that those statements be relegated back to the pages of People Magazine? Are they meant to tell us only about the rest of the world aside from the Jews? Rashi explains that even Rabbi Yochanan believes that the predictions are indeed sound. However, by engaging in *Tefila* and *Tzedaka* (see Rashi, s.v. *v'yesh*), the Jewish people **can** change their destiny from what the planets dictate for them: - "אין מזל לישראל" דעל ידי תפלה וזכות משתנה מזלו לטובה."

Rashi here is telling us that we have two lifelines, if you will, that can change our predetermined *mazal* in life. These two lifelines also correspond with two of the three tenets of how to avert a Heavenly decree against us for the coming year found in *Unetaneh Tokef* (one of the central

components of the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur *davening*). We declare toward the end of that *Tefila* that we can “avert the harshness of the decree” by engaging in *Teshuva*, *Tefila* and *Tzedaka*. We will return to this point shortly.

It is interesting to note that astrology and prophecy appear to share certain characteristics in common concerning how they relate to the future. Just as astrology dictates certain predetermined aspects of our personalities but can still be changed through *Tefila* and *Tzedaka*, so too the Jewish prophets foretold the future but did so to inspire people to do *Teshuva* and avoid the destiny predicted in the prophecy. The book of Yonah that we read on Yom Kippur reminds us of this fact, where Yonah prophesizes that the city of Nineveh will be “overturned,” meaning destroyed – a prediction that led the people of Nineveh to do *Teshuva* and change their destiny. Indeed, had his prediction come true, he would have failed at his mission to enable them to change their ways.

The Torah in *Parshat Shoftim*, which we read during this past month of Elul, also discusses the role of prophets in observing the Torah and encourages us to follow his calling: “Hashem your G-d will raise up from your midst, from your brothers, a prophet like me [Moshe], you shall listen to him” (Devarim 18:15). But as we learn from the story of Yonah, if a *navi* foresees punishment due to our sins, we do not have to take the prophecy lying down -- we can stand up and fight it -- with *Teshuva*. We can see this as

well from the Gemara in *Rosh Hashana* (17b) that declares that *teshvua* is so great that it can cause a person’s decree to be torn up if one repents before one’s fate is sealed on Yom Kippur for the year.

How does any of this discussion about prophets, astrology, predetermined fates, and good will, help us nowadays, given that we don’t have any prophets and we Jews are not subject to astrology? And is there any way that these ideas can help us prepare for the upcoming *Yamim Noraim*? I think that both the Gemara in Shabbat regarding astrology as well as the prophecies related in *Sefer Yonah* provide us with the confidence and inspiration to enter the season of the *Yamim Noraim* knowing that we have the ability to change our fate. *Teshuva* allows us to change our prophecies, and *Tefila* and *Tzedaka* save us from our astrological predilections. Taken together, these three methods serve as the optimal activities to focus on before Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur -- *Teshuva*, *Tefila* and *Tzedaka* together - remove the evil decree!

We have no planet alignment or prophecies to hide behind, no horoscopes to blame, no predetermined astrology charts to consider - - we are coming to G-d, beseeching him to change our decree. It’s nice to learn what the planet alignment at the date or hour of your birth says about your personality and your potential, and it sure might be nice to hear from a prophet regarding where your life is headed, but ultimately we have the power within ourselves to change our attitude, control our own actions and

influence our fate. As the Rambam (*Hilchot Teshuva* 5:2-4) explains so eloquently, Hashem does not decree upon a person when he is born that he will be either righteous or wicked, and nothing forces a person to conduct themselves in specific

ways. Rather, it is all up to us to decide how we want our lives to look.

And even if our fate is not changed, we can still use *Teshuva*, *Tefila* and *Tzedaka* as vehicles to change our attitude.

Aaron Korda

This past year has been difficult. Though we have so much to be grateful for, there is also profound confusion, destruction and sickness. Can we do anything to help make 5781 a sweet year of revealed blessings?

On Rosh Hashana, we declare, loudly, that “Through **Teshuvah** (Repentance), **Tefilah** (prayer), **Utzedaka** (charity) we can rip up the bad decree.”¹ One can change the evil decree into a good decree by occupying themselves in these three activities on the 10 days of repentance, in between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Similarly, “Shimon the Righteous was from the remnant of the Men of the Great assembly. He would say, The World stands on Three Things: **Torah**, **Avodah** and **Gemilut Chasadim**.”² In other words, if we are not engaged in these three things consistently, according to Shimon, we are contributing to the world falling down. What

are these three things and how do we strengthen them?

Torah. Teaching of Hashem

“God's instruction is pure, it revives the soul.”³ There is a connection between Torat Hashem and **Teshuvah** of the soul. Torah is compared to water. Just like water sustains the body, Torah revives the soul. Just like water is essential to the world, Torah is elemental to existence.

We ask Hashem every morning to please make the “Words of Torah sweet in our mouths... so that we can know your name.” We eat apples and bread with honey on RH, a symbolic gesture for our hope of a sweet new year of appreciating & learning more Torah, which is sweeter than honey, with all our hearts, which will bring us closer to Hashem!

Rashi comments that the world was created for Reishit, another name for the people of Israel and Torah⁴. The Midrash tells us that Hashem looked at Torah and

¹ RH machzor at the end of Unetaneh Tokef

² Pirkei Avot 1:2

³ Psalms 19:8. This Psalm juxtaposes creation and Torah. It is interesting that this verse is the exact middle pasuk of the chapter

⁴ Rashi on the first word of the Torah, “Bereseheit,”

Created the world. We are given the plans for the construction of the world! As we build our families & communities, we must study the plans, ask questions and constantly search for meaning. A beautiful Rashi on Leviticus 1:10, says, sometimes there are new paragraphs in the Torah, so that even Moshe can pause, contemplate and find new meaning.

We have a teaching that "Torah Scholars increase peace in the world, as it says, "And **all** your *children* will be students of Hashem and your children will have peace." Do not read *Banayich*, your children, but rather *Bonayich*, your builders."⁵ We are all Hashem's children & can all be Torah Scholars. By learning Torah, we can help the Creator build a world of peace!

There is an infinite amount of Torat Emet available. It's gone viral with zoom classes and Sefaria. By learning Torah, we can help our souls return to a happy equilibrium.

Avodah. Service.

Avodah can be translated as Temple service but it can also mean prayer⁶ and observance of Mitzvot. Shimon was a celebrated Kohen Gadol in the second temple period during the height of the Greek Empire under Alexander. Tradition records the daily miracles that happened in the Holy Temple during the period of his Service and that he rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, and repaired damage done to the Temple. A true servant of Hashem. Today we can Serve Hashem by building up our

Shuls, Jewish institutions and through Prayer.

How powerful is prayer? We say daily in our prayer "You are the Holy One, enthroned upon the prayers of Israel!"⁷

Our 3 tefilot are in place of the Korban Tamid which was brought on behalf of all of Israel to forgive their sins. Korban comes from the root Karov – to be close. The remaining letter of Korban- Nun- numerically equals 50. There are 50 letters in the 12 tribes⁸. We pray in the plural, as we join on a spiritual plain with the entire nation of Israel to praise and thank Hashem on Rosh Hashana and beseech forgiveness on Yom Kippur.

Our prayers can strengthen the entire world and cause blessings from Hashem– as we say daily in the second paragraph of Shema. Even if we are not in a minyan, we can pour out our hearts to the Master of the Universe in our own words or from the siddur!

Avodah, also means Mitzvot. Every time we do a Mitzvah and make a blessing, we are declaring that Hashem created the world and still runs the show. We can also learn the laws of korbanot and the temple – truly Torah study for its own sake!

Gemilut Chasadim. Act of Kindness.

When we realize that everything comes from Hashem, we will be inclined to share a bit of all we have with others. Olam Chesed Yibaneh.⁹

The numerical value of all, (*Kol*), is 50, the same as all the letters of the 12 tribes

⁵ (Isaiah 54:13). Berachot 64a

⁶ (Tannit 2a) service of the heart

⁷ (Tehillim 22:4).

⁸ The 12 tribes were on the Avnei Shoam, the stones affixed to the shoulders of the High Priest's Apron

⁹ Psalms 89:3

combined. All Jews are responsible for each other - Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh lazeh. We are likewise responsible to help all the needy of the world.

The entire exodus saga is given as the reason for many of our commandments involving helping the needy, so we can understand what they are going through and remember how invigorating it felt to be redeemed after so much subjugation.

When my Grandma Mathilda Battino Pardo, A"H, a survivor of Auschwitz, was asked what she would like to pass on to her children and grandchildren about her experiences and about being a Jew? She answered – "I want to tell them that I'm proud of the Jewish people and I like my faith and they should be proud [of] what they are and they should continue our faith. They should have their children and grandchildren and they should teach them and respect each other... what else I can say."

My Grandmother was a Romaniote Jew from Ioannina, Greece, one of the oldest Jewish communities on record, dating back to the second temple period, when Alexander the Great was in power and Shimon was the Kohen Gadol! So, she says simply, love your faith, practice it and respect each other. That's how her family and community survived, relatively intact, with this tradition for over 2,300 years.

"The beginning of wisdom is the fear of HASHEM — good

understanding to all their practitioners"¹⁰ - the purpose of learning Torah is Teshuvah and Maasim Tovim for their own sake. If one's pursuit of Torah wisdom is not to perform acts of kindness but to put others down it is preferable for him had he not been created.¹¹

It is also taught, "One moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is worth more than the entire world to come."¹²

Micha (6:8), tells us, "What does Hashem require of you? Merely to do justice and love Chessed." Not just to do Chessed, but to love chesed.

There is so much opportunity now to help our brothers and sisters daily. Our Father in Heaven receives the most joy when his kids are getting along. We can help a friend learn, we can do mitzvot together and for each other, and give of our own money and time to those in need. The Torah explicitly promises that one who gives charity will see increased blessings.

The Rabbis teach that one who forgives his friend will be forgiven. One who has the capacity to show his friend kindness even when they don't deserve it. But if we can't forgive, we awaken the divine attribute of judgement and Hashem will look at our deeds more closely.

May we all merit a year of blessing, health, and redemption!

¹⁰ Psalms 111:10

¹¹ Berakhot 17a

¹² Pirkei Avot 3:16

Communal Responsibility in Covid Times

Tali Jacobson Koschitzky

The Shabbat before Rosh Hashana we read the Parashiot of Nitzavim and Vayelech. Both of these parshiot deal with Moshe coming to terms with the fact that he will not be entering Israel and his subsequent preparation for this transition. In Parshat Nitzavim, In one of Moshe's last speeches to Bnei Yisrael, Moshe states:

לֹא אֶתְכֶם לְבַדְכֶם אֲנִי כֹרֵת אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת
וְאֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֹּאת: כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יֵשְׁנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ
עֹמְדֵי הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי ה'
אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם

"I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the LORD our God and with those who are not with us here this day."

Who are the people who are "not with us here on this day?" Are they the members of the generation who have already died? Or are they all of us-- the generations who came after the people who were just about to enter the Land of Israel? Rashi, Sforno, and Ibn Ezra all comment that Moshe is referring to future generations of Am Yisrael. Though that idea brings along with it many complicated issues, chief among them, how can one make a promise on behalf of an, as yet, non-existent being, it does enforce the idea that one generation's actions are responsible not only for what happens for themselves, but, for future generations as well. In doing so, Moshe

cements in the ethos of the nation the idea of collective responsibility.

Parshat Vayelech begins with:

וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל־כָּל־
יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And Moshe went and spoke these things to all of Bnei Yisrael.

But where did Moshe go? Wasn't he already in front of all of Bnei Yisrael saying his final speech to them? The Ibn Ezra explains that Moshe went to each Shevet, one by one, and informed them that he was going to die, in order that they not be frightened and in order to ensure that they had respect for Yehoshua, his replacement. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch says that these words emphasize how much of an עניו, a humble person, Moshe was. Moshe, in effect, lowers himself by going to each tribe, one by one, to speak with each of them. Moshe, who is already facing the impossible reality of not being able to enter Eretz Yisrael, steps out of his own struggle and makes extended effort to contact and connect with each shevet individually and enable a smooth transition into Eretz Yisrael, albeit without his physical presence. This theme of collective responsibility and personalized connection continues with the mitzvah of Hakel-- when all are commanded to come together and hear the Torah:

הִקְהֵל אֶת־הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׁים וְהַטָּף וְגֵרְךָ
אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלְמַעַן יִלְמְדוּ וְיִירָאוּ

אֶת־הַ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְשָׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרַי
:הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת

“Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—so that they may hear and learn to revere the LORD your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching.”

Here, Moshe stresses the importance of bringing people in. Gather those in your community in order to spread and teach Torah. Don't rely on other people to come to you, rather make the effort to bring others in.

The Covid pandemic has created a remarkable truth. For the first time, since creation, every human being in the world has something in common besides their humanity. And for the first time, since the giving of the Torah, all of us as Jews are experiencing the same event. Ironically,

though we all now have something in common--something, that in normal times, would bring with it the opportunity to make connections, the pandemic forces us to retreat and to burrow more into ourselves and into our families than ever before. Elul and the Yamim Noraim are a naturally introspective time. When we stop to think about what we have done and how we can improve on ourselves. This year, let's make an effort to realize our commonalities and think of creative ways to leave our own individual bubbles and make a conscious effort to give people comfort and support in these unprecedented times. As Moshe's actions show us, we have a responsibility both on the communal level and on the personal level. We have spent the past seven months in isolation - now is the time to step out of our own introspection and focus on how we can elevate ourselves and others. Ketiva V' chatima Tova.

Daniel Lapson

The month of Elul is commonly broken down to stand for 'Ani L'Dodi V'L'Dodi Li' which means 'I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me.

One must ask themselves, “Am I only doing this act (presumably a mitzvah) in order to get that 'L'dodi' back? In other words, are my intentions pure and am I doing it out of

the goodness of my heart or do I have an ulterior motive?

Parashat Re'eh begins with רְאֵה אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרִכָּה וּקְלָלָה – “Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse. The Bracha (blessing) is that you should listen My Mitzvot. The Klalla/curse is if you do not listen to 'My Mitzvot' and go off the Derech,

but go on a more selfish path where you serve your personal desires.

The Netivot Shalom points out that the Pasuk mentions what the Bracha and Klalla are but now how to get them. So what is the Bracha?

In Mesechta Megilla – Perek Rishon/Sheni there is an Agadatta of a blind man walking around his town at night holding a torch. In those days, people used a torch to see, so why was this blind man using a torch. It was not for himself to see, it was for others to see him/he wanted to be seen. Each of us can relate to the blind man, we are always looking for that 'L'Dodi Part'.

Often times in our lives we are faced with various challenges, whether it is Bein Adam L'Makom or Bein Adam L'chaveiro and we are constantly searching for answers. A lot of the time we decide to take the path that is best for ourselves, i.e. the selfish path – which may distance you from what is actually the right thing to do.

So what is the Bracha?

By doing the Miztvot, by doing the right thing without thinking about how it benefits 'me' – you get the Bracha of getting closer to Hashem, you get that L'dodi back that you seek so much. This Rosh Hashana should bring us all the Bracha of strengthening that relationship with Hashem

Adam Lewis

Yom Kippur is a *chag* of opposites. It wins the prize for the most time we spend standing in prayer, yet it is also the day when we bow down lowest to the ground (during the *Avodah*). We are bent over in contrition as we *klap* our chests hundreds of times over the course of 25 hours, yet we are exultant as we sing about the *Kohen Gadol* exiting the Holy of Holies.

In a word, Yom Kippur is about Balance. And there is a hint in the Torah that Aharon Hakohen was aware of this balance starting with the very first Yom Kippur.

Years ago, I attended a shiur by Rabbi Nehemiah Langer at the home of Marty and Evey Pollack. We were studying *Sefer Hachinuch* and had just started learning the mitzvot in *Acharei Mot*. The third verse of the parsha begins, "With this (בזאת) shall Aharon come into the Sanctuary." The next verse explains that "this" refers to the sacrificial offerings that Aharon brought with him. But perhaps Aharon entered the Sanctuary with something else besides a bull and a ram.

Rabbi Langer quoted a source that explained that the gematria of "זאת" (this) is 408.

There are three words that are often associated with Yom Kippur: *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah*.

Teshuvah is represented by our צום (fast).

Tefillah is recited with the קול (voice).

Tzedakah is given through ממון (money)

Each of these words has a gematria of 136. When all three numbers are added up, the total is 408:

Teshuvah	Fast: צום 40 + 6 + 90 =	136
Tefillah	Voice: קול 30 + 6 + 100 =	136
Tzedakah	Money: ממון 50 + 6 + 40 + 40 =	136
		408

Just as Aharon entered the Sanctuary with “this”, so too, we should make sure that we approach Yom Kippur with equal amounts of *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah*. We can’t donate a bit more money and shave an hour or two off of our fast (although that might make for a highly successful shul fundraiser). We can’t *daven* a little longer and decide we’ll give a little less. And we

can’t fast for 30 hours so that we can skip over *Mussaf* and *Mincha* and jump straight to *Neilah*. We need to be balanced in our observance of Yom Kippur.

And what we do on Yom Kippur propels us through the rest of the year. In the world of COVID, many of us find ourselves spending much of our day at home. Most of us are working from home. Many of us are davening at home. And as the year progresses, we may find ourselves schooling from home. When our homes become all-purpose, it’s possible that we’ll struggle to find any purpose. This year, more so than any other, I think we need to be intentional about balance in our lives. We need to not just protect our physical lives, but we must also safeguard our emotional and mental well-being.

God was giving Aharon a hint when he told him to enter the Sanctuary בַּזָּאת (with this: balance). Now, more than ever, balance may play a critical role in how the world unfolds over the coming months. May we all have a *Shana Tovah Umetukah* and be blessed with a peaceful equilibrium in the year ahead.

Dan Luxenberg

We're so blessed.

I'll admit: a strange (privileged) feeling to have in the fall of a year such as 2020. But blessed, nonetheless. A common sentiment in the early months of this pandemic was that society is going to experience 10 years of change in just 10 weeks. And while that may seem scary on the surface, it's actually the light at the end of this tunnel.

Most of our institutions are well behind on their updates: *access to education*, *environment*, *government bureaucracy* and *workplace diversity*. Unlike iPhones, however, when these institutions fail to update, they also fail to properly represent the people they serve. (iPhone's just start operating on dial-up speed.) Here's where our being blessed comes into play. As Rabbi Norman Lamm notes in a sermon delivered in 1967, "Torah and Halakhah are revolutionary in nature" (Lamm, 10).

Change is scary - no doubt. But, Rabbi Lamm writes, "[t]o be against change is to be against life." "[B]ecause," he continues, "we are always moving, always changing...[s]o we do not deny that life does change, and we do not even piously wish that it would not change" (Lamm, 2).

In Tishrei of 5781, we're looking towards a US election and (hopefully) a vaccine. We're also waiting to have regular Shabbat meals and minyans again; share a handshake with the Rabbi, hug a loved one, or lend a shoulder to cry on. *An honest translation: 1) we're living in an incredibly divisive political atmosphere, 2) we're not sure if and when a vaccine will arrive, and 3) we can't pray, eat or*

hang with loved ones without masks or distance.

We're living in this moment of uncertainty and transition. But the truth is, we kind of always have been... it's just amplified now. Clichés exist because they're true: life is about the journey and not the destination. We should be a guiding light to our neighbors in how to ride this out because we've been here before. The reason I truly believe that we're blessed *right now* is because for the past three thousand years, the Torah has acted as our anchor to guide us through the worst this world has to offer, and we're still here to tell the story. Jews have seen upheaval our entire peoplehood. To quote the rapper, Infra-Red, "nothing can stop us, we're all the way up." We've seen it all, and our open secret to survival is Torah and tradition.

Year after year, colleagues of mine light-heartedly bid me adieu as September and October roll around. And while I smile and wave in response, I know the journey on which I'm about to embark is by no means a vacation. We take Tishrei to start our new year by reminding ourselves that we cannot hide from God when it comes to our thoughts and sins. HaRav Yagil Tsaidi of Shalhevet pointed out in a recent sermon the words in Kol Nidrei, אָנוּ מְתִירִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל אִתְּךָ עִם הָעֹבְרִיִּים, *we hereby grant permission to pray with transgressors*. Are we really calling our fellow congregants sinners, transgressors? Rabbi Tsaidi reminds us that we are in fact those transgressors. We sit in the pews of our synagogues, non-leather shoes and all, look up to God and say *this is*

us. This is what we've done. We're sorry and we're looking to do better. Because anything less would be a waste of time. We can't hide from you, and we know that if we stay with you... we'll make it another year.

The Rabbis of the midrash taught that “*ein melekh ha-mashiah ba ela le'lamed l'umot ha-olam sukkah...* the King Messiah will come to the world only to teach the nations of the world about the sukkah”(Lamm, 5). Not in an effort to explain the viral tweet of why we carry around a “giant asparagus and lemon,” but as Rabbi Lamm teaches, to dive into the term *dirat arai*, a temporary abode. Inked into the laws of building a Sukkah is the inherent flimsiness and impermanence of this dwelling.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are easy to explain. Every people have their own new year and form of repentance. Only then do we get to walking the streets with that

“giant asparagus and lemon,” and sitting outside our homes in huts regardless of the night's chill or mist. But then again it's these actions that speak louder than simply beginning a new year and atoning for our sins; it's being uncomfortable and different, all-the-while knowing that we're clinging on to something greater than ourselves - it's knowing that not if, but when the walls around us crumble, we're not alone.

Over 100 years ago, Mark Twain asked what the secret of Jews immortality is? “All things are mortal but the Jew,” Twain writes, “all other forces pass, but he remains.” Mr. Twain, it's simple: God blessed us with a blueprint 3500 years ago.



True Confession

Dr. Jennifer Pollak

In Parshat Ki Tavo we read about a declaration made by a Jew twice during the shemita cycle. In 26:13 it says "ואמרת לפני ה' אלקיך בערתי הקדש מן הבית" "then you shall say before Hashem, your G-d, 'I have eliminated the holy things from the house...'" In this declaration he states that he has fulfilled his shemita obligation. Rav Soloveitchik, zt"l, in his lecture entitled "Shechorah Ani V'nava" notes something confusing about this declaration. He states that in several places in the Mishna and Gemara this is referred to as **מעשר וידוי**

- the ma'aser confession. The Rav further explains the problem being that a confession is typically a statement acknowledging our errors and sins, whereas the viduy maser involves expressing all that we have done right. So how is **מעשר וידוי** a true confession?

The Rav uses this as an opportunity to explain that teshuvah, repentance, has two components. One is man's ability to see his own flaws and sins through introspection, but the other equally important component is man's ability to recognize his own potential and to use that understanding to grow spiritually. He elaborates that the second is as necessary as the first for real teshuva. Just as man must have the boldness to condemn himself and experience regret, so too must he be able to see his own potential and talents so that

he believes in his ability to truly repent and change for the better.

Rav Soloveitchik continues and refers now to Shir HaShirim 1:5 where it says "שחורה אני ונאווה" "I am black and I am beautiful." We can now understand this pasuk through the lens of viduy. When confessing, one must be able to say that they are both black AND beautiful because if we cannot see one then we cannot truly see the other. A person must be able to see themselves through both of these opposing perspectives.

With this understanding The Rav wants us to revisit a story from Parshat Vayakhel. In 38:8 the Torah says "ויעש את הכיור נחשת" "He made the Kiyor of copper, and its pedestal of copper, with the mirrors of those who produced legions." Rashi on this pasuk explains that the mirrors were donated by the Jewish women and it was these same mirrors that the women used back in Egypt to beautify themselves for their husbands. Rashi goes on to say that Moshe wanted to refuse these donations as they represented the evil inclination, but Hashem declared that he should accept them as they are most dear to Hashem for they helped ensure the continuity of the Jewish people in Egypt. Rav Soloveitchik, with our new understanding of viduy/confession, further

explains this pasuk in Vayakhel. The kiykor-sink was located right next to the altar upon which one would confess their sins. Contrary to what it seems, according to Rav Soloveitchik there is no trouble in reconciling the beauty of the kiykor with the somber and heavy feelings that go along with approaching the altar to confess. It is again the duality of what we are - the black and the beautiful- that allows us to most meaningfully confess. Someone like the women of Egypt, who embraced their beauty and utilized its power for good, when it is their time to confess will also embrace the experience and do it with meaning and sincerity.

Too often, when we take the time to reflect on our lives and choices we may see only our flaws and weaknesses. This can overwhelm us with guilt, as well as with hopelessness at our ability to change. But this is not the purpose of the viduy. An inherent requirement of real confession is that we also recognize our strengths and triumphs so that we can see in ourselves the potential that Hashem has always seen. With this clarity of vision of our dual nature, our blackness and our beauty, we can accomplish real teshuva so that we can do better and be more.

Never Stop Beginning

David Sacks

Rosh Hashana stands atop a wonderful riddle. On the one hand, it's the beginning of the year. And yet, Rosh Hashana takes place in Tishrei the seventh month.

That's curious, isn't it?

Hashem in His infinite wisdom, placed the Jewish new year in the middle of the year.

I think there is a secret contained here. People reach the middle of a project, or even deeper, the middle of their lives, and they think that meaningful change is impossible. To remedy this, I would like to suggest that Hashem puts Rosh Hashana in

the middle of the year to teach us that it's never too late to begin again.

The Kotzker Rebbe says that people would come to him and ask how to find God. But their efforts are for naught, because "[God's] glory fills all the earth" (Isaiah 6:3). In other words, you're looking for G-d? But He's already everywhere! Rather, the Kotzker teaches, for whom must people search? For themselves.

The Midrash (Kohelet Rabba 1:3) comments that "one who grows old is like an ape." The Kotzker Rebbe explains that the nature of an ape is to imitate. "Just as it is the way

of an ape to imitate humans, so too, a person, when he has become old, imitates himself, and does what was his manner previously.”

In other words, at some point in life, either consciously or not, we become satisfied with who we are and what we’ve become. At that point, we cease to strive toward attaining greater spiritual heights, and we live out the remainder of our lives as nothing more than imitation of ourselves.

From this we see that “growing old” in Torah is not a function of years. A twenty-five year old can be old, and a 90 year old can be young, because everything depends on our commitment to growth. The moment we stop, old age begins. And if we never stop, we remain young forever. As it says, the Torah is a Tree of Life for all who hold fast to it.

Therefore, the question we must ask is: Have I become an imitation of myself? And if so, when did it happen and what factors are to blame? Is it a crisis of belief, anger at God, or simply laziness? Unless we identify the problem, how can we hope to uproot it?

This leads us to the next, perhaps even bigger question. Hillel teaches, אָם אֵין אֲנִי לִי (Perkei Avos 1:14) Given what we’ve just learned, we can understand these words to mean, “If I am no longer content to stay my present self, then לִי לִי Who exactly would I like to become?”

Rosh Hashana is the ideal time to contemplate this. Because on Rosh Hashana the entire universe is being renewed. The DNA for the year is being formed, and God looks to us to be dynamic partners in its creation.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz cautions us not to miss this opportunity and gives the following example: Imagine you’re an architect sitting in front of a blueprint. Think about how much easier it is to change the position of the windows *before you construct the building* than it is after the house is already built.

Now, while the world is being recreated, is the time to envision your new self. Don’t wait until the books are sealed.

Take the time to dream the greatest dream of yourself, and structure a timetable for achieving your goals. For some reason, we never think in terms of deadlines when it comes to spirit growth. But why not? As Hillel concludes, “If not now, when?” “Now” that I have envisioned the new me, “when” will I bring it into being?

Great days are coming. Let’s use them to make a breakthrough, for ourselves, our families, all of Israel and the whole world.

Every Blessing,
David Sacks
Torahonitunes.com

Rabbi Dr. Yosy Schames

In Bereishis 6:9 the Torah states, "*Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generation (BeDorosov)*". Rashi cites Tanchuma 5, Bereishis Rabbah 30:5, and Sanhedrin 108a that the Sage Rabi Yochanan stated that because of the extra word *Bedorosov – in his generation*, Noach was only considered to be a righteous man as compared to the people of his generation, however, if Noach lived in other generations, (such as in Abraham's generation) Noach would not have been singled out as righteous.

The Sage, Raish Lakish looked at the word *Bedorosov* as a unique praise of Noach, because Noach was still able to stay a Tzadik in such an evil environment, and he was not influenced by his societal peer pressure.

What bothered Rabi Yochanan so much that he was picking on the word *Bedorosov – in his generation* to denigrate the righteousness of Noach? If only the Torah would say such wonderful words about any of us! If God is complimenting Noach, why try to take away from such a fantastic compliment?

Rabi Yochanan was troubled as to how was it possible for Noach to be called a Tzadik, when Noach made no influence what-so-ever on those around him. It is troubling for anyone to comprehend how a righteous person cannot have any influence on other

people in their immediate environment. Just greeting your fellow man everyday with a gracious wide smile and being kind to others can make a small change in another person's disposition and influence them to be a better person.

In Yiddish, a Tzadik who has no influence on others is called a "*Tzadik in Peltz—a Tzadik in his own overcoat*." Rabi Yochanan questioned how could a Tzadik have absolutely no influence on anyone at all?

My saintly, Rebbi, Rabbi Simcha Wasserman Z"TL explained to me that in our present generation in America, even the most religious person is considered in halachic terms to be a *Tinok Shenishbah – a baby that was captured by pirates*. A young baby that was captured by pirates and then when was redeemed returning as an adult to his home has no idea what Shabbos is and has no idea of Judaism at all. He is not to be blamed and it is not his fault if he commits a halachic sin.

In the Mishnah in Rosh Hashanah 16a it states every person passes before God to be judged, as it states, "*On Rosh Hashanah, all creatures pass before Him like sheep*."

Rosh Hashanah 18a states, "*Rabba bar Bar Hana restated what Rabi Yochanan said: And they are all scanned in a single scan*."

My saintly Rebbi, Rabbi Simcha Wasserman Z"TL explained on Rosh Hashanah God judges us individually, and with Rabi Yochanan's explanation we also understand that simultaneously at the same moment that He judges each of us as an individual, God also judges us in relation to the rest of the people of our generation.

We now see the continuity of Rabi Yochanan's statements. Rabi Yochanan states that judgement by God is to contrast every individual against all the other people of his generation. Therefore, if Noach would have lived in the generation of Avraham, Noach would not have been judged so righteously.

My Rebbi explained that in our generation we may consider ourselves fortunate that we did not live in the past generation, with the great Tzadikim like the Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, HaCohen Z"TL. Then, we would have been judged in comparison to the Chofetz Chaim. We are fortunate, because in our generation, even a simple Jew is judged like Noach in his generation.

It is perplexing to people that the reading from the Torah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is about how Yishmael and Hagar were cast out of Abraham's home and how Yishmael was saved by Hashem from perishing in the desert. What is the importance of this portion of the Torah for us to reflect on Rosh Hashanah?

Bereishis 21:17 states that Hashem judged Yishmael, " BaAsher Hoo Sham--as he is there."

In tractate Rosh Hashanah 16b, the Sage, Rav Yitzchak states that we learn from this passage that even though God knows how one will act incorrectly in the future, when a person is judged, one's judgement is determined how he or she is acting at that particular present moment.

What a true act of mercy for each of us!

When one repents from his or her incorrect improper behavior, one truly intends to change one's ways. However, in most cases, each of us will falter again in the future. God judges us at the time of our repentance with mercy as we are, right at this moment, even though He knows that our act of repentance may not change our ways in the future.

Rav Yisroel Salanter Z"TL notes that the resolution to forsake our sins is the hardest aspect of the service of Yom Kippur. The Rambam as well as Rabbenu Yonah, in his book, "Gates of Repentance", include the forsaking of one's sin as being among Teshuva's most basic aspects.

The Sifsei Chaim asks an obvious question. When we truly resolve, in the deepest recesses of our being, that we will never commit that sin again, doesn't Hashem consider us to be completely cleansed and forgiven? What if immediately after Yom

Kippur, or even months or years later, we stumble, and repeat that sin? Does it mean, retroactively, that our teshuva was insincere?

The answer is "no."

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Hashem is looking into the recesses of our beings far more deeply than we are able to look, and He knows the sincerity of the resolution that we made. And if one does repeat that sin, it is as a new person, with a new sin, for which the person, once again, must do teshuva. God, in His mercy, judges us as we are now, in our present sincerity, even though God knows what our actions will turn out to be in the future.

The Sefer HaMussar v'HaDa'as discusses that the Saba from Novordok Z"TL used to speak out regarding those who go through the motions of repentance simply by reading the words in the Yom Kippur prayers and striking their fists upon their chests as they read the verses of "Al Chet."

The main element of repentance is for a person to correct the particular character flaw which allowed him or her to sin in the first place, and then to try to eradicate the evil tendency. A person who performs the mere pounding of his or her chest can be compared to a person who is traveling on a

boat that is headed in the wrong direction. In order to be headed in the proper direction, the person quickly turns around and faces the back of the boat. This foolish gesture obviously indicates an inadequate appreciation of the true problem and how to deal with it.

The Saba once met with Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik Z"TL, where they discussed the topic of repentance. The Saba commented that as long as a person does not develop a specific plan to overcome their improper motivational desires in the future, then the process of repentance is not yet complete. How can one seriously feel that one has reconsidered and regretted one's sins if one has no methodical plan to try to prevent his or her earlier failures?

Reb Chaim agreed with the Saba, and pointed out that the Rambam confirms this in Hilchos Teshuva (2:2), stating that the teshuva process is achieved when
"the One who is all-knowing (God) can testify on his behalf that he will no longer return to this sin ever again."

After planning and considering a methodical plan to overcome one's improper motivational forces, then God will judge the person as he or she is at that moment, and testify on one's behalf that the sin will no longer be performed and the Teshuva is complete.

Rabbi Benjy Spiro

The Torah Reading for Mincha on Yom Kippur states in פרק יח, פסוק ה:

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־חֻקְתִּי וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטֵי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה
וְהוּא / אַתֶּם הָאָדָם וְנָתִי בְהֵם אֲנִי יְהוָה
observe my statutes and my laws, which a
man shall do and live by them; I am
Hashem.

The word choice of נָתִי בְהֵם is quite strange, but as we know, the Torah is nothing but deliberate, so there is obvious meaning to the wording here. The גמרא in יומה explains on דף פה: that this is the origin of the concept of Pikuach Nefesh - that we should live by the laws, and not die by the laws.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, who was the founder and first Rebbe of the Ger dynasty writes in his Sefer, החדושי, that נָתִי בְהֵם really means that we should get a life through them; meaning that through partaking in Mitzvos, we are able to live a fulfilling and worthwhile life. While many Mitzvos can appear to be challenging and perhaps even cumbersome, they are really there to enhance our lives, and give us a sense of fulfilment and accomplishment, and truly add joy to our existence.

A few minutes after reading the Torah, we read Sefer Yonah, which appears to be seamlessly intertwined with the earlier Torah reading. Early on in Sefer Yonah,

Yonah is stuck on a boat experiencing a traumatic weather calamity, and the sailors were unsure of what to do.

When the sailors turn to him and say: מַה־נַּעֲשֶׂה לָךְ וַיִּשְׁתַּקֵּךְ הַיָּם מִמַּעַלְיָנוּ / What must we do to make the sea calm around us, Yonah responds: שְׂאוּנִי וְהִטִּילְנִי אֶל־הַיָּם / Throw me overboard and the seas will relax.

Rabbi Haim Jachter from Teaneck, NJ in his book "The Depths of Yonah" noted that it is not clear whether Yonah is willing to sacrifice himself for the Jewish people, or rather sacrifice himself due his struggle with Hashem. Even at the apex of his rebellious stage, Yonah was still unwilling to commit suicide, but rather remains passive. He was willing to leave his fate up to the other sailors on board, in line with the Halachic guidance that it can be permissible to kill someone who is endangering the lives of others. We can see that Yonah was not suicidal at all! Rather, he was an extremely disciplined person, who was conscientious not to violate the guideline of נָתִי בְהֵם.

Yonah is a wonderful example of someone who shows extreme dedication to Torah and Mitzvot, and even perhaps the most dangerous point of his life, his unwavering dedication to Hashem was personified here, and is a very fitting way to end the Yom Kippur davening. As we ask Hashem to be sealed in the ספר החיים, we are

reminded of the importance to live via Mitzvos, and hope that our prayers are fulfilled, and our upcoming year will be one filled with Mitzvos, that bring us joy and

fulfilment, and that we are truly able to do Mitzvos, as the Torah intended, by living through them.

Z'MAN SIMCHATEINU - "The Time of our Joy"

David N. Weiss

Let's begin with my favorite song of the season.

Dei, dei, aynu...
Dayenu, Dayenu!

Sure, there are those who hold this is really a Passover ditty. But I think *Dayenu* is the perfect song for *this* or any season. You'll see why in a moment, but first, let's look at my favorite mitzvah of these holidays -- the commandment in to rejoice during Sukkot (*Vayikra 23:40*).

This year, forced rejoicing may seem trickier, given the pandemic, wildfires, riots, and shortage of men's navy casual shorts (32 waist) on Amazon. Nevertheless, though our Rabbis have allowed foregoing shul, selections of prayer, and other bits of normal Jewish life, there has been *no* leniency in our obligation to be happy. We *must* rejoice during Sukkot. So... *be* happy, dammit.

God famously never commands us to do anything that can't actually be done.

Devarim 30:11 promises that the law is not too difficult to keep. And much has been written about ways to pursue happiness. David Sacks, of the aptly named *Happy Minyan* – delighted me years ago with a teaching of R' Shimon Green that demonstrate one's influence over their emotional state.

R' Green says "state" rather than "mood," because a mood might seem beyond our control. "I'm *in* a bad mood." Nothing to be done but hope it goes away. "State" suggests alterability. Try R' Green's popular exercise in the mirror. Smile at yourself, wave and say "Hi!" Chances are, you'll laugh. And for that moment, you'll have lifted your state to a happier one. By your own effort.

Rosh Hashanah, two years ago, was one of the saddest days of my life. Nine months into the end of a 25 year marriage, it was the first New Years "celebrated" without my family. Trudging alone to a friend's house for first night dinner, I was near tears. So... I began to sing. I sang a

"gratitude list," naming things I still had. Silly things. Important things... "I have these trees... I have my eyes... a home... my kids ("though that's a bit bumpy at the moment" -- I sang that)... a fun car... friends... great sibs... beautiful community (YICC), etc. By the end of my 20 minute "singing trudge," I had a hint of peace, and a faint smile. By the time Sukkot rolled around, my grief was beginning to lift. And that, *in itself*, brought a wisp of happiness.

The key to this for me, is *Deyanu*.

"Enough." I have enough. I do enough. I *am* enough. And to believe that, I need to *know* G-d has my back. So I start each morning *meditating on Modeh Ani*. (Thanks do I give!) I repeat it, staying in bed until I *mean and believe* each word... The King, Living Eternal, has given me back my soul... *with compassion* – which means He knows *this* day, "the day the Lord has made" (*Psalm 118:24* -- more rejoicing) is *good* for me. Not the day I *wish* he'd made. *This* day (even if it hurts), because... "GREAT is his faith in me."

I used to think *Job 1:21* (Naked I came in, naked I will return) was a sober reminder that we really have nothing. But now, I read it differently. God brought us in with *all* we need. Complete. We're born "*enough*." And at 120 we're *still enough*. *Deyanu*. And that makes me happy.

My being "enough" depends on trust in G-d. And *that* takes practice and work. The prayer, *Aleinu* instructs us to "*Take and put*

in our heart" that Hashem is God. To quote the Red Hot Chili Peppers, "You gotta' take and put it in you." Rabbi Abraham Twersky, renowned for his 12 Step recovery work, would direct us to "*improve our conscious contact with God*" by "*prayer and meditation*" (*Step 11*). King David points us to Torah study, which "rejoices the heart" (*Psalm 19:8*). And our *Selichot* quotes *Eicha* (3.41): "Let us *lift up our hearts with our hands*." In other words, happiness is heavy lifting.

We're commanded this season to rejoice. Yep, there's corona. I lost my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Nachman Morgan (obm) to Covid. And yep there's divorce, and wildfires, and social unrest, addictions, unemployment, Amazon delays and more. But... if we smile in the mirror and sing of what we *do* have... air, lungs, a voice, a mirror, gravity to keep us before the mirror (the list is actually infinite), soon, with only a flimsy sukkah over our heads, we can see we really do have "enough." And that we *are* enough. And that can make us truly happy. So...*Chag Semeach*. Rejoice. And... *Deyanu!**

*Unless you're a stickler, in which case *fine* -- only six more months to Pesach. *Happy now?*