

CONGREGATION SCHARA TZEDECK

SUPPLEMENTARY
HIGH HOLIDAY
READER



CONGREGATION
SCHARA TZEDECK

September 2021

Dear Congregants,

Over the past several years Schara Tzedek has provided supplementary materials to enrich the High Holiday prayer experience. This tradition began with Rabbi Baumol and the binders he assembled. More recently, we prepared the High Holiday Workbook which remains a fixture of the literature we provide for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Many of our congregants have requested new and inspiring materials be distributed for use on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Two years ago we began the practice of collecting some of our weekly messages for a mini-book. Due to popular response, we are doing this again. Upon review, these messages seemed to have relevance beyond the specific week in which each was written. These messages span moments of our collective experiences over the last year and a half. We hope that this look back over the last 18 months will help provide perspective on the strength and resiliency of not only our traditions but of our Schara Tzedek community.

I am grateful to Dr. Terry Neiman and to Rabbi Shlomo Schachter for their contributions to this High Holiday Reader. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge that this printed reader is in loving memory of those members of our community who passed away in the preceding Jewish year*. We hope the merit of the Torah absorbed through this book is merit to their memory.

Sincerely and Ketivah v'Chatima Tova (May you be Written and Inscribed for good),



Rabbi Andrew Rosenblatt

*The list was complete as of the time of printing.

Our heartfelt condolences to the families who have lost loved ones during the past year. This project is presented in their memory.

May our learning be for an aliya for their neshamot.

Sally Goldberg z'l
Arnie Niederhoffer z'l
Claire Klein Osipov z'l
Benjamin Mammon z'l
Dianne Faber z'l
Edna Tolkin z'l
Debra Davis z'l
Stanley Jacobs z'l
Gloria Diane Zwicker z'l
Bluma Field z'l
Rose Parker z'l
Carla Abramowich z'l
Max Brown z'l
Sally Flader z'l
Dr. Garry Brody z'l
David Hesper z'l
Sam Karrel z'l
Lavie Boxer z'l
Kelly Posthuma z'l
Ora bat Mekoria Yona z'l

Ida Kaplan z'l
Wendy Nadine Woodward z'l
Steven Boroditsky z'l
Sally White z'l
Toto Rivera z'l
Lee Kramer z'l
Joseph Joselewit z'l
Kenneth Walter Freedman z'l
Jimmy (Haim) Robibo z'l
Jeffery Sachs z'l
Beverly Klein z'l
Jodi Schonfeld z'l
Kenneth Golden z'l
Eileen Louise Narod z'l
Marilyn Schreiber z'l
Larry Ku z'l
Rabbi Sidney Shanken z'l
Moshe Daniel Romano z'l
Ethel Stiller z'l
Murray Shapiro z'l

Not Missing the Point — October 23rd, 2020

Most of us think of Noah as the friendly shepherd of all Gd's creatures great and small. He built the world's first zoo, to serve as the first and greatest animal rescue operation of all times. If you visit today's Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem hoping to see all the animals, you will be disappointed. I wondered; which book of the Bible featured the wallabies, the small Australian Kangaroo, I saw there? Turns out they are not mentioned by name, but since Noah saved all the animals, a zookeeper can put anything they like into the zoo and call it "biblical."

All those animals notwithstanding, it is not clear what Noah thought of the human animals on his ark. Talmudic tradition understands that Noah saved all of humanity. He is, if you will, a second Adam. The Talmud refers to all humanity as B'nai Noach – the Children of Noah. The code of morality governing all humans is referred to as the seven commandments to the Children of Noah. Noah makes a covenant with Gd, one symbolized by the rainbow. This feature alone puts Noah in the rarefied company of Avraham and Moshe.

It seems that Noah was poorly situated to appreciate his own contribution to humanity. He was only able to immediately perceive the losses, not fully aware of the contribution that would be credited to him.

After crossing the threshold of the ark and setting foot back on dry land, Noah occupies a pregnant moment, but seems unaware of its potential. He is anything but prescient. The commentaries rush to elucidate the potential Noah holds in his hands the moment he steps off the ark. It is in that moment that humanity itself is rebooted.

Rabbi Yaakov Bal HaTurim, who lived in Toledo, Spain in the 14th century and who wrote the first code of law since Maimonides, notes the parallel in the Torah's language here with the language of its description

of the Garden of Eden; Gd planted a garden, Noah planted a vineyard. The great rabbi from Toledo says that Noah took the grapes from the Garden of Eden itself. Noah held in his hands the power to reverse the sin of the garden, or at least to avoid its pitfalls. He could have planted wheat, but he chose the plant that would allow him to make wine, to get drunk and forget, to be mind-altered.

Rashi is more direct, less metaphoric. The father of all commentators speaks to the fact that Noah saw himself as ordinary, or rather made himself so. Noah should have understood that being the object and the subject of a miracle makes you into a holy person, an instrument of Gd's plan. He was himself a sacred object, but he forgot that. He saw no need to be special after simply surviving.

Rashi's lessons are twofold. The first lesson is that surviving is not enough. One must continue to advance the cause. Noah's attempt at retirement in the vineyard with his aperitif is a rejection of the potential he had at that moment to shape the future of the world. He seemed unaware that all great evolutionary events emerge in tandem with great extinction events. The extinction was finished; it was time to be the agent of the evolution. The second lesson is that when you experience the provenance of Gd, when you and your family are saved in the – metaphorical - Ark, where it took Gd to close the door for you to make it safe, you have to treat yourself as sacred – at least in your purpose if not in your essence.

I think it was the great Bible professor Uriel Simon who pointed out that the difference between an ark and boat is that a boat has a rudder, a steering mechanism. An ark has none. Noah was rudderless, but not directionless. Gd showed him the way, just as Gd would later show Abraham the lamb, and Moshe the promised land. Gd still shows us the sacred today. Our generation knows that there is something sacred about the generation that survived the Shoah – in its wisdom, defiance, and its living testimony. By comparison, we may feel less sacred. Surviving today's strange time of pandemic and political rage

may make us feel every bit as adrift as Noah in the ark.

There are profound, sacred lessons to be extracted from our time. We are daily becoming more understanding of how important human relationships are. We see before us evidence of how the same money that could be spent in more travel-friendly times on vacations to far away places can be directed to the local food bank or the rabbi's charity fund. Imagine all the things that could have said about Noah, how he could have shaped his world if he stepped off the ark into the future of human destiny, instead of into happy hour in his vineyard.

I think it is important to imagine how this moment might be your/our opportunity to make a profound change in self and community. Here is something that I see along those lines.

In 2019, as in the 20 years beforehand, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs in our community were celebrated with the expense and scale that far exceeded the effort or the accomplishment of the one being celebrated. As the saying goes, 'there was more bar than mitzvah'. No elaboration is needed, because we all experienced this. In 2020, the entire effort has been blessedly shifted from what is going to be the party theme and décor, to how we can connect as many people as possible to the event. There are opportunities to be found, and made, now that we have licence to connect in new and innovative ways. With video conferencing standing in for business-as-usual, it is normal now for the grandparents living back east to see the ritual or ceremony on the west coast. It tells the Bar or Bat Mitzvah – who is a young adult, not an event – that keeping family ties is our greater concern and family and community are our greatest assets. The distractions of catering, lighting, entertainment are put in perspective.

Stepping off the ark was Noah's great missed opportunity. He survived the flood, and standing at the threshold went no further. In these unique, historic times, we, too, stand at a threshold. Let's not miss our opportunity.

Let's Demand Justice for the Uyghur People – January 22nd, 2021

In October 2020, Canada's government ruled that what is happening to Uyghur Muslims in China fits the international legal criteria of a genocide. In December, the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain and the Commonwealth concluded the same, and published in *The Guardian* a scathing criticism of the Chinese government's persecution of Uyghurs. On Tuesday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement that the United States has concluded that actions taken against the Uyghurs constitute genocide.

Genocide is both an extraordinary international crime, and an ordinary part of the local workings of government wherever it occurs. In law, genocide is unique because there must be proof of an intent to eliminate an entire group of people. Various means might be used: mass executions, forced removals that lead to deaths by disease and famine, and forced conversions under penalty of death to name a few. Genocide is part of the everyday business of government because it involves administration and commitment of resources on a massive, national, scale. Victims are uprooted, transported, and in most cases processed through facilities such as camps and prisons. In the modern era, there has never been a genocide that was not evident in the everyday routines of the societies where it took place.

Historically, one of the main factors that escalated a genocide was the smokescreen provided by a concurrent war. The first modern, large-scale example of this was the Armenian Genocide during World War 1. When millions were dying across Europe during World War 2, Soviet and Nazi rulers used the chaos and carnage as an opportunity to eliminate millions among their unwanted minorities, claiming them as casualties of war. Some were said to have merely disappeared, like so many others during war.

History has also shown that there are more insidious opportunities to carry out genocides than even the cover of war. This awareness has given rise to the notion of cultural genocide – which is less likely to fit the legal definition of genocide, but has the same effect. In cultural genocide, a group is not murdered off performance. Rather, people are coerced or forced to assimilate into the dominant culture. Here, it might seem acceptable to the mainstream of society to target a minority group in the name of patriotism, party loyalty, or social cohesion. However, as Canadians have learned from the devastating legacy of the residential school system, there are no justifications for forcing a group to lose its identity, language, culture, or history.

In Jewish life, we make our remembrance of the Egypt experience evident to us through our everyday routines. The Shema, recited three times daily, includes a reference to the exodus from Egypt. This remembrance is one of six mandatory conscious memory revisitations that the Torah demands. Furthermore, the holiday of Pesach not only demands that we remember Egypt, but that we revisit the experience and taste the bitterness. It is our most formative holiday and most character-defining element of the Jewish peoplehood.

Whether or not it fits the current legal definition of genocide, the Chinese government's treatment of the Uyghurs is wrong on every level. The openness of their campaign to wipe out Uyghur identity is stunning evidence of their hubris and xenophobia. In peacetime, they have escalated their program of extermination to levels previously seen under the cover of war. All the while they threaten to use their military and economic power against anyone who would oppose their use of re-education camps, prisons, and forced sterilization. As worldwide conditions of the current pandemic make countries more economically stressed, and more isolated physically, politically and culturally, things could get even worse for the Uyghurs. As it is, their treatment is unacceptable.

The Jewish response to this situation is clear. Ancient and modern commentators have understood that the Egypt experience is what instilled in the Jews a concept of xenophilia – an orientation to care for, respect, and give aid to the stranger. We understand this because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Throughout history we have been reminded of this lesson: from ancient Persia and Greece, to Nazi Europe and the expulsion of Jews from most of the Arab world.

The political rhetoric for persecution is often accelerated in times of war or other national challenges. In the Egypt context this was articulated as follows. הבה נתחכמה לו פן ירבה והיה כי תקראנה מלחמה ונוסף גם הוא על שנאינו ונלחם בנו ועלה מן הארץ - Let us deal wisely with them [the Hebrews] lest they multiply and should war be declared they will add to our enemies. These words were Pharaoh's call to persecution. The rhetoric in China is the same. While the persecution in China is not new, the umbrella of the pandemic and the additional suspicion cast on foreign entities puts the Uyghur population at greater risk.

We are commanded to raise our voices against these atrocities. Two of our congregants – Dr. Alan Morinis and Menachem Freedman - are participating in an interfaith initiative calling on the Canadian government to make a more forceful stand against the Chinese government for these persecutions. Please follow the link and join us in signing the B'nai Brith petition - "Let's Demand Justice for the Uyghur People." For more information, email ccfur21@gmail.com.

Monument for the Un-broken Home — December 4th, 2020

For Jews, memory is an omni-directional thing. Time does not go in a line from past to present - it cycles. Life, tethered as it is to our sense of time, spirals outward, stretches and contracts, and oscillates like a springy corkscrew in space, past, present, and future. We experience this at the Seder in the recital of the Haggadah as if each of us were now being liberated from Egypt. To tell the story is to enact it, to experience it in what we perceive to be the here and now. To tell a story, one has to begin somewhere. To the modern person of science, that would be the Big Bang. Equally, by following the coil of experience in the direction that contracts, the Jewish people come to Bereshit, "in the beginning of the creation." Mitzvahs - reading the Torah, reciting the Haggadah, caring for the sick and dying, etc., etc. - are the actions that we take to connect the different positions on the coil of Jewish space-time. They make memory – the process of retelling our story – a living thing. As memories bring the past to life, the act of remembering connects the present to the omni-directional coil of eternal life. Mitzvahs are our cosmic touchstones.

In the book of Bereshit, gravesites are established as key touchstones of our living memory. The most prominent example is the Cave of the Patriarchs, Mearat Ha'Machpelah, the heritage that Abraham bought as a memorial and gravesite for Sarah. The term machpelah means double in Hebrew. It refers to the fact that each grave has a double occupancy of patriarch and matriarch: Avraham-Sarah, Yitchak-Rivkah, Yaakov-Leah, and for the Midrashic enthusiasts Adam-Chavah. However, Rachel is not buried in this location. Her grave is on the road, literally, of Efrat-Beit Lechem.

Rachel's resting place is, in a sense, the exception that proves the rule. Her grave is a single-occupancy structure, designed for her alone. However, it provides a hyperlink from one narrative thread to the others. Having such a link comes to teach us that

the Cave of the Patriarchs represents a household where couples become complete, and generational. According to rabbinic tradition, Esav's head is buried there, too, because he showed exceptional respect for his father. The space is purchased by Avraham as a legacy, Achuzat Kaver, a long-term hold, a home for the remains of Sarah. The Talmud teaches that it is to Mearat Ha'Machpelah that Caleb returns as a spy for Moses to pray for the establishment of the Jewish people in their homeland. Caleb's journey is future-focused; the touchstone of the tomb lights his way. However, the scouting mission is to prepare the entire nation of Israel in its journey of return to the land of Israel.

Rachel's tomb represents the journey of return, not the home itself to which the people will return.

כה אמר יהוה קול ברמה נשמע נהי בכי תמרורים רחל
מבכה על בניה מאנה להנחם על בניה כי איננו כה אמר
יהוה מנעי קולך מבכי ועיניך מדמעה כי יש שכר לפעלתך
נאם יהוה ושבו מארץ אויב
ויש תקוה לאחריתך נאם יהוה ושבו בנים לגבולם

Thus says Hashem, "A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel cries for her children, she refuses to be consoled, for her children who are missing." Thus says Hashem, "Hold back your voice from weeping, and your tearful eyes, for there is reward for your efforts – declares Hashem. There is hope for your future, says Hashem, and your children will return to their homeland.

Jeremiah 31: 15-17

Jeremiah's words are inspiring in their own right, we could say dayenu, enough said. They can be applied to many times and places on the coil of Jewish history: from the Babylonian deportation of Nebuchadnetzar, through the 2,000-year diaspora that led to the modern State of Israel. However, the original context of Jeremiah's words pre-date both of those deportations. Jeremiah is speaking from Jerusalem, but he is speaking to his cousins in the

North of Israel. He is speaking to the vanquished and conquered tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who had been deported by the Assyrian emperor, Sargon II. Jeremiah lives in Judea – the land of the tribes of Yehudah. He speaks to the tribe Ephraim. The Northern Kingdom had split off from Judea some 300 years before and the relationship between the two was strained. Once upon a time the Temple had stood in the land of Ephraim, in Shiloh. The king heralded from that side of the Israelite family, from King Saul. Jeremiah was then based in the Temple of the competing tribe of Judah. He answers to a king of that same tribe. However, the symbols that he chooses are those of Rachel. These verses immortalize Rachel and her tomb as a symbol of transition and return. It is she who has cried over the rift in the family. It is she who sacrifices for its repair. And, it is her tomb, her memory that gives us the hyperlink to the rest of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

The story of Rachel's kindness is different from any of the other matriarchs specifically in her self-abnegation. The midrash understands that Rachel was party to the switching of the brides at Yaakov's wedding to her sister. It understands that concern for Leah motivated her to ensure that Leah would marry Yaakov, the man Rachel loved, because that was Gd's plan. The laws of Mesopotamia allowed for sisters to marry the same man. However, in the land of Israel - home of the Torah - marriage to two sisters, even in sequence, would be forbidden. Nachmonides says that this is the reason Rachel dies at this juncture – it preserves the family structure in its return to Israel. It is as if Rachel sacrifices a second time, giving her life so that the family can remain whole.

Jeremiah embraces this image of the mother uniting the family and eternalizes it as the symbol of the return of the Jewish people and the repair of the family. When we consider the original symbolism of the story of Rachel, it is as much about the distance created by the family as it is the distance created by the external oppressor. Jeremiah's insight helps us heal the self-inflicted wounds of our family struggles through the symbol of Rachel.

This is such an important lesson. Homes - literal and figurative - have strife, competition, fights, and fissures. We need the symbols of return. We need them as a touchstone every-where, every-time we recall our family fights, arguments, and differences. Also, as we recall our generational conflicts. The competition in the family line of those buried in the Cave of the Patriarchs will recur along the coil of Jewish time. The sale of Joseph and the tearful embrace in Egypt represent an iteration of the same cycle. So, too does the feuding in the time of the kingdoms when the temple stood. So, too do we find conflict and feuding in our time. However, the genius of the narrative and the monuments of Israel is that they guide us home, and guide us in how to repair our broken home. We can take comfort in connecting with our patriarchs and matriarchs – the biblical ones and our personal loved ones – for they are our touchstones.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Rosenblatt, with Dr. Neiman (in loving memory of Sheila Kasprzyk, z"l)

Attention Economy— February 5th, 2021

Michael Goldhaber is a theoretical physicist. From this perspective he offers insights about how we live our lives online. In 1997 he wrote an article in *Wired* called, *Attention Shoppers!* The currency of the New Economy won't be money, but attention – A radical theory of value. Goldhaber thinks of attention as a limited cognitive resource. He argues that there is a finite amount of attention that any human brain can meaningfully focus on information in a given day. However, the ability to receive information is nearly limitless. To understand this sentence, your eyes can only focus on the text you are reading at this moment, even though your eyes are taking in a whole page or screen and many other sights in the field of vision.

Now consider your awareness of ads that pop up, and the banners moving across the bottom of the video news feed you are watching, and you get the picture – literally. You get the picture, but you have to shift your attention to decide where to focus within the picture. Most of us are reminded of this as we try in vain to process all the emails we receive.

Our minds are vulnerable to another, related feature of perception. There is a famous “invisible gorilla” experiment in which audiences watched videos of people dressed in black or white pass basketballs around. They were asked to keep track of how many passes there were among only the black-clad players. While concentrating on that, half the viewers missed seeing a man in a gorilla suit walking around the set thumping his chest. We see what we want to see and miss what we are not looking for.

When we combine Goldhaber's insight on attention, with the “invisible gorilla” phenomenon, we see that our ability to take notice of what is important is a combination of attention and intention. Thus, people, media companies, and advertisers are competing for attention, while playing off of our innate tendency

to prefer to see the things we want to see. In that competition subtlety goes out the window. The flashier images – which tend to be those that speak to our desires, egos, and baser instincts – get noticed first, and with repetition have more traction. In Goldhaber's terms, “modesty or humility is hard to sustain.”

This sets up an impossible battle between the personal values we preach and the ones that the attention economy will demand.

News pundits are perhaps the most insidious players in the intention part of the attention economy. They rely on viewers' impulse to seek out the stories that make viewers most angry at their political foes. Here, the attention economy feeds people's need to confirm their biases, because the resulting fear and anger gives one an adrenaline rush. The problem is, that it also encourages the worst behavior.

Driven by their business model, media companies facilitate that same behaviour. Facebook and Twitter claim to be about connection. However their algorithms drive the impulse-based intention that feeds the same adrenaline rush – also called the fight or flight mechanism. The result of all that unfiltered bickering is that rather than connect us, they have become the most divisive corners of our culture.

Consumers of social media would be wise to heed Howard Rheingold – a favorite of Goldhaber – who wrote, “attention is a limited resource, so pay attention to where you pay attention.”

The attention economy is a fascinating thought model to apply to the 10th commandment, “you shall not covet your neighbor's house... etc.” It could be understood as an early directive reminding us that if we give our attention to the possessions and relationships of our neighbours we will be diverting the precious resource of our attention away from our true happiness.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has pointed out that this commandment is an injunction against defining

ourselves by those we see around us as opposed to the divine gifts we have been given. His lesson is even more important now that the new machinery of attention has us looking at the highly curated snapshots of other people's lives.

The Torah does in fact have its own hierarchy of attention. It works by directing our clarity of intention. In the Shema, we are told, “love Gd with all your heart, all your soul, and all your resources.” This is the Torah's way to say pay attention to where you pay attention. Furthermore, the Torah also guides our intention when it says, “do not close your heart to your sibling who is poor.” Our attention/intention nexus is part of a kind of moral-ethical economy. Our character and development will be the ultimate indicators of where we have directed, focused, and spent this precious resource.

Solutions with Less — April 30th, 2021

It is generally understood in engineering that as technologies evolve, they become more complicated. Things get added to the original design. The earliest bicycles had about 150 parts. A modern 10-speed has about 900 parts. Additions are often thought of as improvements. However, many kinds of added parts eventually clutter things up and can get in the way. Designers and managers alike also know that the best way to keep things efficient and effective is to occasionally re-visit the design and remove the parts and manufacturing steps that do not “add value” to the product or process.

An example of this can be found in bike riding. The two-wheeled bike works as a concept, but people first learning to ride – generally children – cannot keep balanced while pedalling. So, designers added training wheels. By solving the balance problem, this addition can be said to “add value” to learning to ride. An additive approach like this to problem solving seems to be the natural way our minds work to improve designs. However, once new riders develop the knack for riding, training wheels get in the way more than they help. They no longer “add value.” The remedy is to remove the training wheels.

Engineers at the University of Virginia noticed that design teams tend to add features to solve problems and overlook other solutions in which subtraction of a feature or apparatus is really the better solution. Maybe this is because in the evolutionary stages of things, technological improvements are mostly about adding parts and steps. We become accustomed to equating improvement with addition. We get used to working together that way, making improvements, and getting promoted for such contributions. It took about a century of industrial (r)evolution for the specialty of efficiency engineering to start focusing on re-visiting designs to get rid of unneeded and obsolete additions.

In contrast to human efforts, evolutionary solutions in nature are often subtractive. When an organism adapts to a challenge, it will delete genes rather than add new genetic material.

The engineers at U of V wondered why design teams favoured adding over subtracting if natural systems tended to work the other way. The engineer Liedy Klotz reached out to social scientists at the university to see if we have a social bias to add rather than subtract. This bias was confirmed through multiple data points, not least of which was that of the 651 suggestions submitted to a new University of Virginia administration, only 11 percent were to subtract a regulation, practice, or program. The researchers continued experimenting in different scenarios, often asking subjects to add or subtract Lego blocks to solve problems in toy building structures. Their research established that there is a human bias against using subtraction as a solution. The finding was significant enough to get published in the prestigious journal Nature.

The Torah has long known that subtraction is a preferred solution. Shabbat is a day when we create a special atmosphere by subtracting entire categories of work and transformation. We subtract the use of fire, cooking, transportation, and building. The effect is a day that frees people from distractions. That, in turn, reliably fosters the things that “add value” to everyday life, such as hard-to-come-by family and community time.

The holidays are also often solved by subtraction. Pesach, when we restrict our diet, solves the problem of preserving the memory of a formative event, the Exodus. We solve the problem of hubris and insensitivity by subtracting food on Yom Kippur. That adds value by making ourselves more aware of our own vulnerability and more sensitive to the hunger of others. It also helps us appreciate the blessing of food just a little more.

The Halacha also adds value to a marriage by subtracting from the calendar the number of days per month when spouses can be intimate. The subtraction

of two weeks of physical affection rekindles attraction with remarkable effectiveness. This subtraction also optimizes the biological rhythms of natural birth control.

The wisdom of subtraction is expressed in Pirkei Avot, or First Principles, in the Mishna as follows. מרבה נכסים מרבה דאגה – the more possessions the more worry. For example, before we had so many gadgets, we did a lot less worrying about whether or not we had just lost an expensive device.

There is a self-critical role in this addition-subtraction question. The Halacha says it is better to say a few prayers with much feeling than to say many with rote, mindless articulation. Rav Yitzhak Hutner is reported to have said that it is even better to say fewer prayers by rote mindless articulation than to say many in such a meaningless way. Sometimes, subtraction can be the best thing for meaningful moments in prayer.

Everyday life increasingly tempts us with additions: apps for your phone, appliances for your home, listserv emails for your inbox, communication media, super specialized clothing, watches, and modes of transportation – whether you drive a car with all the extras, or are tempted to upgrade from a ten-speed to a fifteen-speed bike. However, all those new bells and whistles are just so much noise. Both the Torah and the research show that we could all add more value to our lives by editing out, by restricting, and subtracting.

Applied Consistently— July 3rd, 2021

Two often-told jokes about Carnegie Hall go as follows.

The absent-minded maestro was racing up New York's Seventh Avenue to a rehearsal, when a stranger stopped him. "Pardon me," he said, "can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?"

"Yes," answered the maestro breathlessly. "Practice!" [from the syndicated column "The Wit Parade" by E.E. Kenyon on March 13, 1955]

A violinist is playing a concert at Carnegie Hall. He finishes the piece. Voices in the audience shout, "Again! Play it again!"

The violinist is pleased. He plays the piece all the way through a second time.

"Again!" the voices shout once more. "Play it again!" The musician's self-satisfaction knows no bounds: this is Carnegie Hall, and I'm asked to play not one, but two encores?

When he finishes, the voices rise yet a third time, and the same thing happens after several more repetitions.

Incredulous, the violinist finally walks to the front of the stage and addresses the audience: "Seven encores of the same piece at Carnegie Hall? It's unheard of! Am I that good?"

The audience members shout as one voice: "You'll do it until you get it right!" [<https://onstagemagazine.com/carnegie-hall/>]

Success is not earned overnight. In *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell argued that

one requirement for success was 10,000 hours of practice at a given skill. He cited, among others, The Beatles – who achieved that level of practice honing their skills in Hamburg – as a famous example. Critics of the book argued that many people practice as much and do not achieve the kind of success that The Beatles achieved. However, in a CBC interview Paul McCartney weighed in with the following: "there are a lot of bands that were out in Hamburg who put in 10,000 hours and didn't make it, so it's not a cast-iron theory," he says. "I think, however, when you look at a group who has been successful ... you always will find that amount of work in the background."

To achieve mastery and success one must also make practice habitual. In other words, one must practice daily, come rain or shine, in sickness and in health, so to speak. One cannot merely practice when it is convenient, or when the muse appears, and cash in when one reaches some magic number of hours. For example, Jerry Seinfeld is a master comedian who has achieved critical, popular, and financial success. He attributes it to consistency. He writes a joke every day without fail. He has one of those oversized calendars on the wall, and when he writes the joke for the day, he puts a large red X on that day.

We think it might work best if he takes the day off on Shabbat. However, in Seinfeld's interview in *Inc Magazine* describing his process, he did not say anything about Shabbat. Seinfeld began this practice before he had a hit TV show, and before his stand-up career. The discipline of practice and habit set him up for success in the long run. After all that, Seinfeld still thinks about the daily habit of writing jokes as something that simply preserves his comedic bandwidth. The consistent discipline ensures that his neural pathways remain robust, expanded.

In the 16th century Rabbi Yaakov Ibn Habib compiled all of the narrative and non-legal sections of the Talmud in a book titled the *Ein Yaakov*. The introduction cites a Midrash that says the rabbis argued over what constitutes the one great principle of the Torah.

Rabbi Akiva argued that the great principle is a derivative of, "love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Rabbi Ben Zoma argued that the great overarching principle is found in the book of the generations of Adam, specifically that Adam, and by extension all humankind, were created in the image of Gd.

Rabbi Ibn Habib introduced a third opinion not found elsewhere in rabbinic literature, that of Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi, that the overarching principle of the Torah is, "the morning offering shall be brought every morning, and the afternoon offering shall be brought every afternoon."

One might ask how the timing of the daily Temple offerings could compare as a wellspring of spiritual practice and fulfillment with reflexive lovingkindness, or seeing Gd in every human being. Ibn Habib's principle seems so pedestrian and procedural. However, the genius of his principle is the value of applied consistency. The discipline of studying Torah every day to sharpen the mind and reinforce personal ethics, the discipline of prayers and blessings to develop sensitivity and foster gratitude, the daily practice of putting money in the pushka for charity provide tangible gains that triumph over the lofty philosophies of Rabbi Akiva and Ben Zoma.

If ever there was a Torah lesson for the generation that lives on a diet of instantaneous information, and that invests as much as ours does in the veneration of instant success, it is the lesson of consistency. The lessons of McCartney's commitment to mastery, Seinfeld's consistency in his craft, and the Torah's commitment to the discipline of daily mitzvot is a reminder that there are no shortcuts, but there is always a path to both personal fulfillment and professional success.

Practice is not enough. It is not enough to 'get it right'. The success stories of Seinfeld and McCartney teach us that applied consistency gives us means to succeed. Torah, with its emphasis on love and godliness teaches

how to focus that ability to bring meaning to our lives whether or not we make it to Carnegie Hall.

Cities for Children — July 9th, 2021

Some religions reject material wealth. Judaism does not. In fact, the Mishna teaches us “if there is no flour there will be no Torah, if there is no Torah there will be no flour.” In other words, the separation between the holy and the everyday is only in our minds. This is reflected in the Torah’s guidelines for giving to the poor. Charity is a good thing – a mitzvah. However, there can be too much of a good thing. Giving is thus limited under normal circumstances to 20% of one’s income. One might say that Judaism believes that we can pursue wealth, and we must share it. We can also choose to live modestly. If so, we are equally bound to share in the same proportion. So, what is important is not so much the absolute value of what is given, but rather the way each of us balances the Torah-based financial parameters - i.e., the percentages.

An episode that brings this balancing act into focus is the petition of the two and a half tribes to settle the eastern bank of the Jordan without entering central Israel, west of the Jordan. The tribes profess their willingness to join the ranks of their fellow B’nai Yisrael in the conquest of central Israel and even to be at the forefront of battle. They are, in effect, more financially ambitious than the tribes who choose to enter the land. They are also, in effect, rationalizing the choice to be Israel’s first diaspora community – the first generation to live in chutz la’aretz. They tell Moshe, “we will build pens for our sheep, and cities for our children.” Moshe acquiesces, but re-orders the statement of their priorities, “build cities for your children and then pens for your flocks.”

This is classically understood as an instruction to prioritize family over profession, children over profit. However, some new social science research from the University of Bath adds a dimension to Moshe’s language. In eight different experiments, the lead researcher Dr. Lukas Wolf discovered that people were more likely to give money to panhandlers if children witnessed the transaction. Other experiments

demonstrated that even thinking about children produced more pro-social behavior.

What might be the reason for the focus on children as the inspiration for giving? Maybe it is future-oriented thinking, or that children generally need more assistance until they reach maturity, or our desire to be good role models for those children. All three of those possibilities are about considering the longer-term implications of our actions. Animal pens serve a dual purpose: to prevent livestock from escaping their keepers, and to shelter and protect them. By the same token, we are equally concerned with the safety of children and with keeping them in the fold, so to speak, for life. We are not only nurturing individuals, we are cultivating communities. By extension, we are sustaining a people, and a nation.

We are made to consider not just the child in front of us, but the future adult, and the community of adults. Moshe’s instructions about first building the cities for the sake of the children takes on deeper significance in light of the research on charitable giving. The tribes petitioning Moshe seem fixated on the land they are on now, and the livestock they have now. Moshe responds by telling them that the children represent their future. The future generations should be foremost in all levels of planning: family planning, business development, community growth, and nation-building.

Poised at the threshold of the Promised Land, the Children of Israel are moving along the arc of Jewish history and Jewish destiny. And, as the laws of charity remind us, each of us plays an equal part, regardless of our financial circumstances. All that remains to put Moshe’s words fully in context in that moment is to understand where that arc of Jewish destiny began.

This brings us to what Moshe says immediately after reversing the order of priorities between flocks and children. His full statement is, “build towns for your children and pens for your flocks, but do what you have promised.” There is a parallel with Moshe’s own journey leading the Jewish people. His ability

to shepherd them will come to an abrupt end at the east bank of the Jordan. He, like many parents, is all too aware that every word and action matters, and carries dreams of a mature child and nation. This is also incumbent on those of us who follow - we are the children of the family and of the nation. This was the first generation that had inherited the promise made by the entire nation at Sinai – na’aseh v’nishma – we will do and we will listen. Thus, by drawing from the past, from the covenant, Moshe’s words remind us that our every action – what we will do – plays a part in the ultimate journey of those who will follow us to inherit the Promised Land.

The Breath of Life — Rabbi Shlomo Schachter

As a general rule of thumb in Judaism, the more important something is to us, the more rules we have about it. Shabbat, for example, is the archetype of holiness in time and a central pillar of Jewish practice. We have an entire tractate of Talmud dedicated to the laws of Shabbat going into great detail about what is obligatory, what is permitted and what is prohibited. We even have another whole tractate on Eruvin, a Rabbinic enactment aimed to facilitate community by allowing us to carry... on Shabbat. Food is heavily regulated with complex laws about what foods are and are not kosher, what blessing to say before and after and how to conduct oneself during a meal. Accordingly our sages say (Brachot 55a) that today a person's table brings atonement like the sacrificial order did when we had a Temple. Sexuality is regarded as sacred, with the Cherubim in the Holy of Holies depicting angels in a lovers' embrace. Consequently there are 'family purity' laws which govern marital intimacy. Business, agriculture, clothing, the list goes on. Even the most seemingly trivial elements of life such as how to conduct oneself in the washroom and how to put on your shoes have rules. Having more laws about something draws our attention to it more closely and invites us to approach it with more intentionality. Halacha thereby allows us to engage even the most mundane, normative and those parts of our life not generally regarded as "religious" in a mindful and Holy way, thus elevating everyday occurrences by filling our actions with mitzvot.

Ok, then what about breathing? Breathing is the most mundane, common and unremarkable thing we do, and yet it's absolutely essential to life. We each take approximately 20,000 breaths a day without thinking about it. Wouldn't it make sense for the Torah to draw our attention to our breathing as a way of connecting to Hashem? Is not all breath a gift from The Creator? Wouldn't an injunction to conscious breathing be an essential ingredient in cultivating

spiritual consciousness? Conceptually there is clearly a connection between breathing and spirituality. In fact, almost all of our words for spiritual matters are breath related. The very word spirituality comes from spirit - breath, like respiration.

In Hebrew the innate connection between breath and spirituality is even more pronounced. The three words which the Torah uses that are usually translated as 'soul', Neshama, Nefesh, and Ruach are all words about breath. Neshama comes from נשימה Neshima which quite literally means breath, and more specifically to draw breath in. נפש Nefesh is closely related to the verb לנשוף which means to exhale. Ruach which can be translated as wind, spirit or breath is also used to describe being filled with the Spirit of God, like when Pharaoh meets Joseph and proclaims (Genesis 41:38) "Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?"

It is not accidental that breath is associated both with human respiration and the Divine presence. Looking back at the creation of Adam, we find (Genesis 2:7) "The LORD God formed Adam of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living creature". More on this verse later, but for the moment it is suffice to say that the very act of breathing inherently connects us to God. The mystical tradition takes this verse a step further, such as the Ramban who wrote, "The One who blew, blew some of his own essence". Meaning, the spirit which is blown into Adam was not only the breath of life, it is also God's Divine Spirit which is now permanently invested into each person. Our Neshama - the part of us which breathes - is a spark of Godliness.

This makes a lot of sense on an intuitive level. Just as we always keep breathing whether we are conscious of it or not, so too God is always with us, whether we are conscious of it or not. Even if we were to consciously choose to not breathe for a time, eventually we would lose consciousness, and our soul's innate will to live would take over and we'd breathe again, even against our conscious will. This is analogous to the statement of our Sages that

(Pirkei Avot 4:22) "Involuntarily you were created, involuntarily you were born, involuntarily you live..." The 'choice' to breathe and to live is not being made by our conscious mind, it is our Neshama, embedded within us by God, and like God, even when we neglect it, it continues to be there for us whether we like it or not.

Just because we can't control our Neshama doesn't mean we can't be active participants with it. The more attention we invest in our breathing, the more meaningful it becomes. Noticing one's breath is the cornerstone of nearly all meditative practices. Becoming conscious of our breath merely requires actively directing our mind to it. It is an act of mindfulness, and effectively places us in the presence of God, recognizing each breath as a summons to life from the Divine. In his book Jewish Meditation, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan z"l describes a basic meditation in which Hashem's Holy Name is spelled out in each breath. י Yod is a single point, potential without any expansion - the empty lungs between breaths. ה Heh is the expansion of the in-breath, bringing potential into actualization. ו Vav is the distribution of breath within the body and the exchange of gasses in the bloodstream. ח Heh is the contraction of the outbreath, giving vitality back to the world. With this meditation we fulfill the familiar verse, (Psalm 150:6) כל הנשמה תהלל יה, "All souls praise Hashem, Haleluyah!" However, with this understanding we can now translate it as "every breath praises Hashem" or "the entire breath praises Hashem, Haleluyah".

All this only further reinforces the question of 'if being conscious of our breath is so foundational to spirituality, why don't we have rules and rituals about breathing'?

The first level answer is that rabbinic jurisprudence has a principle that "we don't make a rule which the community cannot abide by". Breathing is so autonomic that making rules about when to breathe and when not to breathe would likely only serve to instill needless guilt among those of us who fail to live up to whatever standard was set. We Jews

have plenty of guilt already without being told that we're breathing wrong. That being said, there are a handful of instances when we do in fact have customs regarding breath. One well known example is that when reading the Megillah on Purim we customarily read the names of all ten of Haman's sons in one breath. Similarly, in the Yishtabach prayer there are fifteen articulations of praise, and it is customary to recite them all in a single breath. Neither of these customs are 'rules' per se, but they are instances in which our attention is being purposefully drawn to our breath. These two however are when not to breathe, and neither is of any halachic significance.

To the extent of my knowledge, there is but a single instance in all of halacha that specifically mandates taking a breath (according to Ashkenazi tradition). This singular moment of conscious intentional breath is during the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. The Shulchan Aruch, the most authoritative code of Halacha reads as follows (Orech Chayim 590:5): "The 3 shevarim must all be done in a single breath, but the shevarim and teruah, there are those (Ashkenazim) that say that they must be done in two breaths so long as there is no delay except to breathe..." The Rema, Rabbi Moshe Isserles who is the ashkenazi editor of the Shulchan Aruch adds, "And our tradition is to do it always in two breaths, and one must not deviate from it." The following paragraph states: "If one blew Tekiah-Teruah-Tekiah all in one breath, they have still fulfilled their obligation, but some (again, Ashkenazim) say you have not". Anyone who has blown the shofar before knows that it is not difficult to blow the shevarim-teruah in a single breath, and even the Tekiah Shevarim-Teruah Tekiah can also be done all in one breath without great difficulty. We see clearly from both of these halachot, that (at least for Ashkenazim) breathing during shofar blowing is not out of practical necessity, but is halachically mandatory and an essential part of the performance of this mitzvah.

Ok, why is this breath different from all other breaths? Why on Rosh Hashanah, and why during shofar blowing specifically is the halacha instructing us to intentionally breathe? Is there some inherent symbolic connection between hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah and breathing? Yes indeed there is!

The Midrash Rabbah (Vayikra 29:1) tells us that the creation of the world began on the 25th of the month of Elul. As such, Rosh Hashanah, is actually the anniversary of the sixth day of creation. The sixth day is when Adam and Eve were created, the day on which they sinned by eating the forbidden fruit and the day they were judged by God. In our Rosh Hashanah rituals we reenact that fateful day of creation. We eat apples (this time with honey), Stand before Hashem to be judged and hear the shofar. So what then is the shofar blowing reenacting?

Remember that verse we looked at earlier about Hashem blowing the breath of life into the dust of the Earth, imbuing Adam with the Holy spirit and bringing him to life? Yeah, that! By hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah we re-experience our initial creation and also remind God of his primal benevolent intent in creating Humanity. Chassidut goes even a step further. The Sfat Emet, Shem MiShmuel and several other Chassidic masters understand the moment of the shofar blowing to be not only a reenactment of the investment of the Divine spirit into Adam, but also the very moment when Hashem renews our souls for the coming year. If indeed this is the moment in which Hashem blows our souls into us, how perfectly fitting that this is the one and only time in which there is a specific halachic injunction to consciously breathe! We receive our soul anew and are essentially re-created every year on Rosh Hashanah. By the Torah mandating that the Shofar blower breathe at just the right moments, he essentially serves as the conduit for God's Holy Spirit to come into each of us through the shofar. While it's true that the halachah only specifically mandates that the one actually blowing the shofar must breathe between the various intonations, nevertheless it is an incredible opportunity for us all to be aware of our breath as we literally inhale Godliness.

The word Tekiah comes from the root תקיע which means to "insert", like a tent peg 'driven in' to the ground. The Tekiah then is the moment of being breathed into by Hashem, our souls perfectly unified with the Source of Life and yet fully invested in our earthly bodies. The Shevarim and Teruah sounds are different ways to mimic human crying (which is always done in an outbreath) and symbolize the suffering the world endures because we are alienated from Hashem and our own Godly souls. Then we always return to the Tekiah, breathing in, reconnecting to our souls and returning to Hashem. The Shofar blowing, as the one and only moment of commanded intentional breathing, assures us that throughout the entire coming year, Hashem will never be further from us than our own breath. Throughout the year, whenever you notice your breath, let it be an echo of the Shofar, a powerful yet gentle reminder that Hashem loves you and wants you to live. L'Chaim!

Reader at a glance

"By hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah we re-experience our initial creation and also remind God of his primal benevolent intent in creating Humanity."

"...we always return to the Tekiah, breathing in, reconnecting to our souls and returning to Hashem."

"Torah, with its emphasis on love and godliness teaches how to focus that ability to bring meaning to our lives..."

"you shall not covet your neighbor's house... etc... Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has pointed out that this commandment is an injunction against defining ourselves by those we see around us as opposed to the divine gifts we have been given."

"The second lesson is that when you experience the provenance of Gd, when you and your family are saved in the – metaphorical – Ark, where it took Gd to close the door for you to make it safe, you have to treat yourself as sacred – at least in your purpose if not in your essence. "

"I think it is important to imagine how this moment might be your/our opportunity to make a profound change in self and community. "



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וַיָּשׁוּבוּ בְּנֵי לְגְבוּלָם”

*“There is hope in the end, says
G-d, and her children will
return to their home”*

– JEREMIAH 31:17

May 5782 bring us a year of health, happiness, and reconnection.”

“Shana Tovah u'Metukah.”

Designed by Teagan Horowitz



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