

Our Prison or Our Home

Rosh Hashanah I 5779

I.

THE MOST POPULAR REASON for why we blow the shofar today is given by the Rambam, Maimonides, in his laws of repentance. The *shofar* cries to us:

עורו ישנים משנתכם! ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם! וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו
בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם.

Awake, sleepers, from your sleep, and slumberers from your slumber! Search your actions and repent and remember your Creator! (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:4)

The purpose of the *shofar* is to wake us up – to jolt us from our comfortable ways – and force us to confront our failures of the past year and steel our resolve to be better this year. But the *shofar* is not the only commandment that the Rambam believes has this effect, and this is fascinating. Two other laws in Judaism, he claims, also wake us from our slumber and ignite our repentance.

The first is death, which isn't so surprising – it makes a lot of sense. There is something about death that strikes us, that makes us take stock of our own lives, and contemplate whether we are living the way we wish to and consider the necessary change.

But it's the other *mitzvah* that the Rambam claims wakes us from our slumber and causes repentance that I find fascinating. In his laws of *mezuzah*, the Rambam states:

וְכָל זְמַן שִׁיכַנְס וְיֵצֵא יִפְגַּע בְּיַחֲוֹד הַשֵּׁם שְׁמוֹ שֶׁל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, וְיִזְכֹּר אֶהְבְּתוֹ
וְיַעֲזֹר מִשְׁנָתוֹ וּשְׁגִיזוֹתָיו בְּהַבְּלֵי הַזְּמַן.

Whenever one enters or leaves a home with a *mezuzah* on the doorpost, one will be confronted with the declaration of God's unity, and remember the love due to God, and will be woken from their slumber and their foolish absorption in temporal vanities (*Hilkhot Mezuzah, Tefillin, and Sefer Torah*, 6:13).

Whenever we go past a *mezuzah* and see the tiny scroll upon which is written the first two paragraphs of the Shema, we get a little theological reminder of our obligations to God and our failure to observe His laws. The purpose of the *shofar* today is the same purpose every day of our *mezuzot*: to remind us of our duties to God and consider changing our ways. But, what I find amazing is that this is not the only connection the simple *mezuzah* has to the High Holidays. It was one of the most important objects of Yom Kippur in the times of the Temple.

II.

When we think of the Yom Kippur service in the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, the Temple, we have an idealized image of what it was. Unfortunately, this depiction did not always match reality. In particular, not everyone who held the office of *Kohen Gadol*, High Priest – the central figure of the service – was as righteous and pious as the original *Kohen Gadol*, Aharon, the brother of Moshe. Sometimes the office was bought by those who were unworthy but wanted the title and prestige. And, for this reason, the Talmudic Sages instituted a week-long training program before Yom Kippur, in order to make sure that whoever was High Priest was fit for service:

שְׁבַעַת יָמִים קָדָם יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים מִפְּרִישֵׁין כֹּהֵן גָּדוֹל מִבֵּיתוֹ לְלִשְׁכַּת פְּלִהָדְרִין

Seven days before Yom Kippur, we sequester the *Kohen Gadol* from his house to the Palhedrin Chamber [of the Temple] (*m. Yoma* 1:1).

That's an excerpt from the first *mishnah* in *Yoma*, the tractate that deals with the laws of Yom Kippur. And, as the other *mishnayot* explain, the purpose of this week was a Priestly boot camp: which included the repeated practice of several parts of the service, together with an accelerated education on the ins and outs of what needed to be done.

Which brings us to the comment of the *gemara* regarding the High Priest's sequestration in the Palhedrin Chamber:

כל הלשכות שהיו במקדש לא היו להן מזוזה חוץ מלשכת פלהדרין ... ומדרבנן הוא דתקינו לה שלא יאמרו כהן גדול חבוש בבית האסורין.

None of the chambers in the Temple had a *mezuzah* except the Palhedrin ... and this was because the Rabbis decreed that no one think that the *Kohen Gadol* was sat in a prison (*b. Yoma* 10a-b).

There's some important background here. The only places that need a *mezuzah* are residential ones. Homes need a *mezuzah*, but not places in which you don't live. And so, the *gemara* has a long discussion concerning the Palhedrin Chamber: it was only lived in for one week during the *Kohen Gadol's* boot camp – otherwise it was just a random room in the Temple's administrative block – and so it didn't need a *mezuzah*. But they made an exception: because the Rabbis did not want it to seem like a prison, neither for others going to the *Beit ha-Mikdash* nor crucially for the *Kohen Gadol* himself, they put a *mezuzah* on the doorpost. The Palhedrin Chamber had a *mezuzah* to make it feel homey – the halakhic equivalent of a nice welcome mat and some throw pillows.

But could this have really worked? Was one simple *mezuzah* able to change the *Kohen Gadol's* perception? It's hard to believe. Imagine you are the *Kohen Gadol* and, because *Chazal* don't consider you worthy, you have to go to this intense, miserable boot camp, which, as a different *mishnah* explains, would have included nights when you were not allowed to sleep! The *mezuzah* couldn't

have changed the pain! How could the *Kohen Gadol* not see his room as anything other than a prison?

III.

I think the answer lies in the Rambam I quoted earlier. The point of the *mezuzah*, he claims, is to reorient our priorities: “to remember our love due to God and wake us from our slumber and our foolish absorption in temporal vanities.” When we see it, it reminds us that we are supposed to be serving God, not ourselves. That our duty is to Him.

The priestly boot camp wasn’t designed for a worthy *Kohen Gadol*. It was meant for one who had bought his title for the grandeur and prestige – his foolish absorption in temporal vanities. But, upon seeing the *mezuzah* on his room he had a reminder: he was here to learn to be the *Kohen Gadol*. Yes, it was going to be an unpleasant, onerous time and the training would be grueling, but this was his opportunity to be the Jewish people’s representative before God in the holiest place on the holiest day!

He could look at the Palhedrin Chamber and see a prison. A place he had no choice to enter. But he could also see it differently – providing he noticed the *mezuzah* on the doorpost. There was no need for the *mezuzah* to be there from a legal perspective, but it had to be there to give him the opportunity to consider his priorities.

IV.

You will notice that we have *mezuzot* on all the doorposts of this *shul*. And, here’s the thing: they’re completely and utterly unnecessary. *Shul*’s don’t need *mezuzot*, we aren’t a residential building. There is no rhyme, reason, purpose or point to them being here.

Except there is. Because they’re here to reorient our priorities. If we’re being honest, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the least pleasant days to be in *shul*. Rosh Hashanah is a slog to get through: two days where *davening* takes an inordinate amount of time — and there is no day in which the service is longer than Yom Kippur! And all the standing! It’s a nightmare! Yes, they’re holy, special days, but the service can very often feel onerous. We might all too easily see this sanctuary as our prison.

And that’s why it’s important to notice the *mezuzot*. Because they offer us a choice: Will we let this be our prison, or our home? Will we use our time here for our spiritual development, or spend the entire time watching the clock? This is why the *mezuzot* are here: to encourage us to make the best of our time.

And so, I want to encourage you all, when you’re feeling down about how long this service is taking, when you’re sick of all the standing, to remember that we have *mezuzot* on the doors even when we don’t need them. Because this is our opportunity, on the holiest days of the year, to stand before God. The *shofar* is about to call to us, and the *mezuzot* will underscore: this is an opportunity like no other – do not waste it.