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by Beginners

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בראשית

THE HIGH HOLIDAYS: REALITY AND PERCEPTION

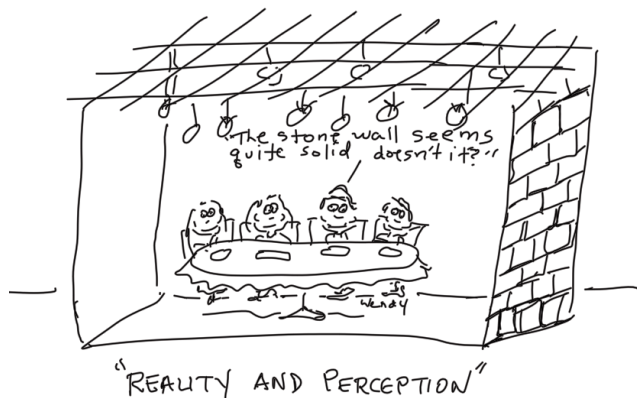
Rabbi Ron Wittenstein

What is “reality” and how does it differ from “perception?” We usually explain the difference by noting that “reality”—whether a thought, action, or thing, etc.—actually exists, while “perception” is something that is subjective and is often connected to an idealistic or notional idea.

I grew up in a very interesting home. We were Orthodox Jews, and my father, an aerospace engineer, worked in a scientific field (primarily for NASA) his entire life. Science and religion did not clash in our home. In fact, science was always used to support and beautify the Torah.

One of my favorite examples of this duality is my father’s yearly D’var Torah on the first night of Sukkot. He loves to share this specific idea connecting the laws of physics and the mitzvah of dwelling in the sukkah; it is also an idea that is very revealing about the concept of reality. Before I share his D’var Torah, let me explain that, for many years, we lived in an apartment in Jerusalem, where our sukkah was on a porch off of the living room. The building itself was a cement structure with Jerusalem stone facade.

While sitting in the sukkah, my father would ask, “This stone wall seems quite solid, doesn’t it?” The obvious answer is, yes. *(cont. on p. 2)*



RENEWAL THROUGH SYMBOLS

Daniel Lasman

Let’s start with a few free associations for the new year: *Chag Samayach*, happy holiday. *Shana Tova*, good year. Rosh Hashana, head of the year. An apple, a pomegranate. Sweet new year, honey.

I learned many new ideas, words and connections this past year. “The land of milk and honey,” Israel. The said honey refers not to “bee honey,” but to the syrup of dates. Date palms, a staple of ancient Israel, once thought to be extinct, have been rejuvenated from a handful of seeds found in the archaeological excavations at Masada.

Those rejuvenated date palms should remind us all that each day we are born anew, with a new “lease” on life from *Hashem*. Our life has continued so that we may continue our individual service by fulfilling our purpose in life. Rosh Hashana, at the head of the new year, is our rebirth for the year ahead.

A couple of years ago, I flew home to California for Rosh Hashana. I had missed visiting a few years in a row and was looking forward to sharing the new year with my parents, siblings, and particularly my 99 year old grandma.

(cont. on p. 2)

WHY WE UNITE - A MESSAGE FROM MADRID

Joshua Kleiner

Five years ago, just as I began reconnecting with my Jewish roots, I noticed the unexpectedly strong anticipation and excitement that preceded the High Holidays (Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur).

Weeks in advance, conversations over the Shabbat table or even quick chats on the street, would ultimately lead to some mention of plans for the *Yamim Noraim* (the Days of Awe). The Jewish community was abuzz with an eagerness usually reserved for an upcoming wedding or vacation. Why all the fuss over the Jewish new year? My curiosity inspired me to investigate what all the hype was about. So I went to my first Rosh Hashana service.

Fast forward five years. I made Torah observance a central priority in my life. But, I am still floored by the heady anticipation of the *Yamim Noraim*. There has to be something more than the soul-stirring sound of the shofar that gets people so amped. Just recently, while abroad in Madrid, Spain, I gained insight into the power of Rosh Hashana and its role in uniting the Jewish people.

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HIGH HOLIDAYS (cont. from p. 1)

If there are any doubts about it, it can be proven with the simple test of banging one's head against it. Even though the wall is perceptively solid, the reality is that on a molecular level the wall is actually mostly empty space!

What is the connection between the physics fact and the holiday of Sukkot? My father points to the sukkah itself. Sukkot is, on one level, a very agrarian holiday. We are reminded that every year we hope to have a bumper crop, so that there will be plenty to sustain us through the winter. But all blessings have an aspect of a character test. Sometimes when we do have a year of plenty, there is the possibility that we may ignore or forget G-d's hand and involvement in this bounty, and we may attribute too much to our own handiwork. Therefore, we physically exit our homes and go outside to a place that is open to the elements, to remind us that we always need His help in all that we do; to be shielded from rain and cold, and for Him to bless our handiwork in the field.

When we enter the sukkah, we remind ourselves of this dependence on G-d. That even though we perceive with our senses that there is a difference between a strong, sturdy stone structure and a simple, flimsy wooden booth, that is only our limited perception at work. On a deeper level, there is actually no difference between them except for the use the Creator designated for them in making our world--His will. It is, after all, the will of the Creator that desires stones to have one physical attribute and for wood, cloth, or plastic to have other attributes.

This can be seen in many areas of our lives, as I will share in another personal example: When my wife and I moved from Jerusalem to Santa Fe, New Mexico, four years ago, one of the most common questions we were asked was, "Have you experienced culture shock?" The truth is, that we were so busy setting up our new life, that for the most part we had no time to undergo a culture shock. But there was one area that really surprised us, which has to do with what realities are.

Living in Israel, I was always aware of planning our holiday preparations in advance. Overcrowded stores and Jewish business owners who also needed to get home early for the holiday were our reality. We used to shop for the holidays well in advance. Also, I was very hesitant to go shopping right before the holiday, since it could potentially be a long and stressful activity on a day when there is so much else to do. After living in Santa Fe for a year, I noticed that I was still hesitant to go shopping close to the onset of a Yom Tov, and realized that it was because I was projecting the reality of Jerusalem onto the grocery stores of New Mexico, where for most New Mexicans Erev Rosh Hashana is just another regular day.

What I realized was that as a Jew, the reality I have is based on the cycle of the Jewish year and its holidays. This may be expressed in mundane matters like going to the store, or it may be expressed by sitting in a sukkah.

At times, it is conveyed through the actions we Jews do (e.g. eating matzah) and at other times through our commitment to Torah study. Even though our realities are seemingly based on

matters that may seem ideal, or an abstraction, they are nonetheless a spiritual reality which is as real as anything in this world. In the same way that we recognize that what we perceive may not be 100% real, our spiritual endeavors that may seem ephemeral and abstract, are indeed reality.

This is how we connect and grow. It is in this manner that we develop our spiritual character, thereby allowing our relationship with G-d to mature and flourish.

Ron Wittenstein is the rabbi of Kol BeRamah, Torah Learning Center of Santa Fe, NM. Raised in Atlanta, GA, at age 11, he and his family moved to Yerushalayim. He loves teaching Torah and also enjoys exploring the beauty and history of the American Southwest with his wife, Rivkah, and their son.

RENEWAL (cont. from p. 1)

I called ahead, as usual, to discuss logistics, pre-holiday errands, dinner dates, and most importantly, the menu. Even if I'm not hungry or thrilled by the prospect of menu-planning two weeks ahead of time, I still try to request my favorite foods--chicken soup, avocados, cold borscht, perhaps, if it's hot.

I was astounded to discover that my brother-in-law had already put in a request for latkes for the family Rosh Hashana meal. That's correct, he wanted latkes (potato pancakes) along with the other traditional Rosh Hashana foods. Latkes are commonly eaten during the Hanukah holiday, because the oil that is used for frying is customarily associated with the miracle that occurred with the oil of the menorah. Foods with oil are a symbol for us of the victory in Israel of the Hebrew traditionalists over Hellenistic philosophy, a great example of national rebirth and rejuvenation. In other words, latkes are not customary for Rosh Hashana--but surely we could make a connection.

I was thrilled with the idea of finding a way to make latkes relevant and even accepted as a symbolic Rosh Hashana food. The "eureka" moment came to me soon thereafter. Add the apple, chopped up for uniform consistency, to the latke mix and fry them as one, in a unified pancake. Why not? Apple sauce and sour cream usually accompany latkes, so apples within the latkes would obviously be delicious. I was correct. Adding caramelized apple sweetness to the savory potato onion latke made it exceptional. So a new tradition was born, fusing the yearning for good old-fashioned Jewish comfort food with a spirit of renewal, rejuvenation and rebirth.

So if oil is symbolic of Hannukah, what about the apple for Rosh Hashana? Apples are a traditional food of Rosh Hashana as they symbolize the Garden of Eden. Eden, some traditions mention, had apples growing in it. If you picture it in your mind's eye, you most likely envision an apple being shared by Adam and Eve. So, by eating the apple, we remember our first Garden, where the animals were named, where our story on Earth all began. In this act of birth, of life springing forth, we remember the love shared between Hashem and His creations.

In contemporary times, apples are known to be healthy. Healthy habits promote longevity, enhancing our ability to learn, share, and serve one another by performing good deeds and acts of kindness. In short, by eating the apple, we are physically

(cont. on p. 4)

WHY WE UNITE (cont. from p. 1)

On my way to Shacharit (morning) services today, I sat on a bench and took a moment to admire Madrid's cityscape. It was before sunrise, and the streets were dimly lit by the emerging dawn and abating street lights. Silence hung in the dry summer air between the momentary growl of a commuter bus and the occasional thud of newspaper bundles being delivered to curbside vendors.

It is good to be back in Spain. Not only do I get to appreciate this beautiful city and visit my wife's family, but I am also reunited with the surviving Jewish community in Madrid and the storied legacy of Spanish Jewry. I lingered for too long on that bench and needed to pick up the pace so I could make it to davening on time. This wasn't just the early minyan, it was the only minyan in Madrid. I needed to hustle.

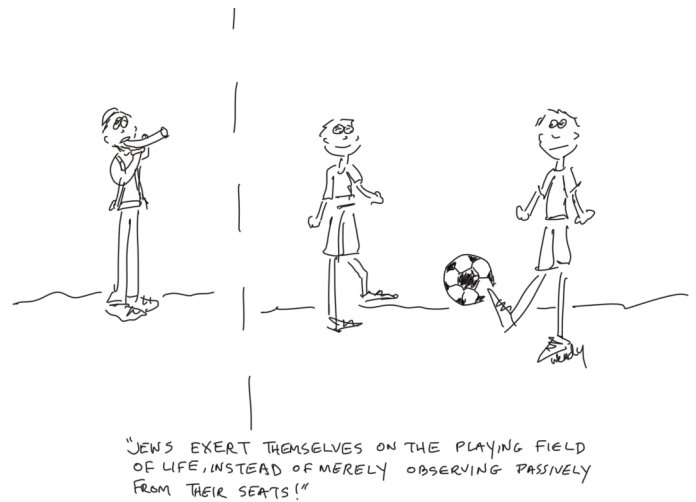
After settling into my usual seat in shul and seeing a few familiar faces, it felt like I had never left. The rabbi welcomed me with a warm smile and greetings in Spanish, English, and Hebrew. We embraced for a moment, then he got to the burning question, "Where will you be for Rosh Hashana?!" A smile overtook my face; it was only eight weeks until all Jewish people would unite across time and space to celebrate G-d's creating the universe.

By the time I headed home from Shacharit, the morning commute was pumping life into the city. Metropolitan areas have a well-earned reputation for being impersonal and individualistic, simultaneously feeling overcrowded and lonely. On most days, Madrid fits this description, but today was noticeably different. A nearby newsstand revealed the source of Madrid's warm buzz--the final match of the 2018 World Cup soccer championship.

The rest of the way home, I noticed café televisions tuned in to the pre-game show, along with handwritten "closing early" signs taped to shop doors, and balcony railings draped with the flags of World Cup contenders. The most striking realization, however, was hearing impassioned discussions on the street about plans to watch the game. World Cup fever had created a warmth tinged with enthusiasm, that was somewhat reminiscent of the look on the rabbi's face in shul this morning.

Around 4:00 pm that afternoon, Madrid grew silent. Within an hour, locals and tourists abandoned the street--game time turned this capital city into a ghost town. More than 1.2 billion people are expected to tune in for this year's final; ten times more than the average Super Bowl audience. There is no doubt that the World Cup is more than a sporting event, it is a part of the global culture. There is something deeply human about the desire to unite for a common purpose and share an experience. In Judaism, this quality is represented by the concept of *malchut*, kingship.

Malchut transcends language, location, and even generations. It conjures up suspense and intrigue that unites the world. A soccer match that occurs once every four years offers a modern example of the concept that embodies Rosh Hashana. Rosh Hashana is much more than the beginning of the Jewish calendar; it is essentially a celebration of *malchut*. The yearly cycle of Jewish life begins with the call of the shofar. Just as



G-d commanded the Jews in the wilderness to blow silver trumpets to gather the Jewish nation for joyous events (Bamidbar 4:2), so too, we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana to unite the Jewish world. It was the call of the shofar that reunited me with our Jewish heritage five years ago.

Leaving shul this morning, I realized that the cycle of unity and disunity is part of the framework of life. Although the Shacharit minyan disbanded, we will be reunited for Mincha (afternoon prayer). The Inquisition banished Jews from Spain, but a Jewish community returned to the Iberian Peninsula and steadfastly continues to live Jewish lives in Spain to this day. This year in mid-September, this community will unite with Jews around the world and anoint G-d as their King. We, as the King's subjects, participate in the coronation via our prayers on Rosh Hashana. However, unlike the World Cup, Judaism is not a spectator sport. Jews exert themselves on the playing field of life, instead of merely observing passively from their seats.

For all its excitement and global intrigue, today's match is still a two-hour game. The only thing at stake for those watching from the stands or at home is unearned pride and momentary bragging rights. In shuls around the world on Rosh Hashana, however, Jews participate in a timeless global event that connects Jews through the generations back to the actual moment of creation.

When the shofar is blown on Rosh Hashana, we are reminded of the privilege and responsibility we have as Jews. With this perspective, there is no question why we look forward to the *Yamim Noraim* with such excitement. Perhaps no aspect of Judaism embodies *malchut* better than the shofar service--individuals unite into a congregation, congregations become a community, and local communities become the singular Jewish nation.

Shana Tovah.

Joshua Kleiner currently lives with his wife in Baltimore, where he teaches high school part-time and is earning a graduate degree in Counseling Psychology from Johns Hopkins University. He learned Torah full-time for three years in Jerusalem.



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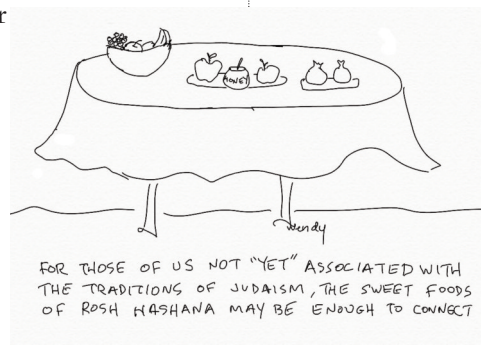
RENEWAL (cont. from p. 2)

...memorializing our wish for a sweet and healthy new year, nourishing our life force with the potential for positive growth--spiritually and physically--at the same moment.

Perhaps less popular, and certainly harder to work into fried foods, pomegranates are also customarily eaten on Rosh Hashana. Simply opening a pomegranate reveals its hidden abundance, a fleshy cup overflowing with luscious red seeds, which can be seen as a symbol of the promise of rebirth. Indeed, since prehistoric times, this fruit has been an obvious symbol of fertility. The Temple of Solomon was

decorated with pomegranate motifs on the pillars, perhaps an allusion to the bounty of Israel, and the offerings that were brought to the Temple, season after season.

According to tradition, the number of seeds found in the pomegranate are 613, corresponding to the number of mitzvot. The fruit is popular too in the Song of Songs, used as a metaphor for flawless beauty; and the irresistible, transcendent attraction of love. When eating the pomegranate, we connect to the ancient, yet still vibrant, love between Hashem and His creations. We celebrate the miracle of life, witnessing, firsthand, the cup overflowing with earthly bounty, sweet nourishment, and the power of love.



For those of us perhaps "not yet" associated with the traditions of Judaism, the sweet foods of Rosh Hashana may be enough to connect us with family, the Jewish community, and the garden of earth where our nourishments grow and ripen.

On deeper levels, if we care enough to search, to learn, we will surely find transcendent meanings that connect us to our past, help us savor the miracle of the present moment, and even remind us of future generations and lives yet to come.

For those of us too ashamed or embarrassed by our ignorance to attend communal services, the family New Year meal may be our only taste of rebirth and renewal.

In whatever way you choose to observe the Hebrew New Year, may it be a sweet year that brings you continued health, learning, and of course, renewal.

Dan Lasman was born in Berkeley, CA, and is a first generation American. His parents and grandparents were born in Lodz, Poland, and now reside on the West Coast. After completing his BA in Literature and History at UC Santa Cruz in 2007, Dan moved to NYC. He later earned his MS in Real Estate Development at NYU. Dan enjoys reading non-fiction, writing poetry, painting, cooking and is a trail-blazing outdoorsman. He shares his love of Judaism and outdoor hobbies with his wife, Lea.

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