

High Holiday Reader

5781

Rosh Hashanah



Sponsored by Lisa and Jacob Buksbaum and Family
in memory of Lisa's father, Charles Honig, and brother, Gary David Honig

גרשון דוד בן יחזקאל חיים ושיינה

יחזקאל חיים בן רות

and Jacob's parents Moses and Sarah Buksbaum

שרה גיטל בת יוחנן וגולדה

משה בן נתן מרדכי ומלכה

Our community continues to mourn the passing of Moreinu v'Rabbeinu Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, zt"l and his beloved wife Mindy, zt"l. His insightful sermons and renowned oratory skill inspired our kehillah, and the entire Orthodox community, for so many years. In addition to Divrei Torah from other scholars connected to our shul, we have included two of Rabbi Lamm's sermons in this year's Rosh Hashanah Reader. We hope that these two sermons will bring Rabbi Lamm's teachings to the forefront of our Rosh Hashanah as we usher in the New Year. May their memories be for a blessing.

The Silent Shofar

Rosh Hashanah I: September 6, 1975

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, zt"l

The Shofar will be silent today. The Mishnah (*Rosh Hashanah 4:1*) teaches that, יום טוב של ראש השנה, if Rosh Hashanah falls on a Saturday, the shofar is not sounded. Now, this is not because the sounding of the Shofar is in itself a form of work or labor which constitutes a violation of the Sabbath. The Rabbis said that, תקיעת שופר חכמה היא ולא מלאכה, the sounding of the shofar is an "art" and not a form of "work."

Why then does the Halakah teach that one ought not to blow the shofar on Shabbat? The Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah 29b*) tells us that the man designated to sound the shofar may be inexpert, and גזירה שמא יטלנה בידו וילך אצל הבקי ללמוד ויעבירונו ד' אמות ברשות הרבים. He may carry the shofar to the home of one who is an expert in order to learn from him, and in the process of so doing discover that he had carried the shofar over four cubits in a public domain, and that is a violation of the law of Shabbat.

How strange! Consider how significant is the sounding of the shofar- this majestic symbol, filled with mystical meanings and sacred overtones and historical dimensions, so that anyone who is the least bit sensitive feels a shiver down his spine and a tremor deep in his own soul. And yet, today we will dispense with this shofar. Why?- because of the remote possibility that if the congregation was sufficiently careless to designate an incompetent to sound the shofar; and if he was so indolent as not to have practiced before the holidays; and if he lived in a community where there is a public thoroughfare; and if there is no eruv, and if there was an expert at shofar-sounding in the vicinity, and our incompetent shofar-blower forgot himself and carried his shofar to the expert, and in the process of so doing transported a shofar more than four cubits in a public thoroughfare... because of this, the Sages decided to cancel shofar at other times and places as well, and therefore we do without this beautiful and magnificent mitzvah!

Why so? Other than the technical Halakha, what deeper message can we uncover in the “silent shofar?”

In proposing a solution, permit me to refer to a tension between two values that cuts across all human thought, and is found, of course, in Judaism as well: the tension between the individual and society, between *yahid* and *tzibbur*, between the individual man and the collectivity. The problem is a universal one. How do we identify ourselves: as primarily autonomous individuals, who thereafter make up various communities and societies and other aggregates; or as differentiated members of such nations or ethnic groups? In other words, which is the authentic focus of our identity: the *yahid* or *tzibur*? Is our acceptance of communal and societal duties merely one of a list of responsibilities amongst others, or is it our primary relationship and the most fundamental source of our responsibilities?

Judaism affirms the values of both individual and society (in the sense of the Jewish people). It teaches respect for individual differences of opinion and personality: כשם שאין פרצופיהם של בני אדם דומים זה לזה כך אין דעותיהם שוות (or: personalities, characters, orientations) differ from each other.” The Torah teaches that man was created in the “Image of God,” which asserts implicitly the uniqueness and differentness of every single human being. All of Judaism maintains the individual’s holiness and the holiness of individuality.

At the same time, the community is exceedingly important in Jewish thought. כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה “all Israelites are co-responsible for each other.” Prayer can, of course, be uttered in the singular, but formal prayer, the kind that most classically expresses Jewish devoutness, is in and for the community. No individual may celebrate a personal joy on the national days of mourning, or mourn in personal bereavement on the national days of festivity.

The individual is confirmed in his innate value. So is the collectivity. And the greatest expression of this collectivity, of the *tzibbur*, of Israel’s significance as a community, is the *berit*, the covenant between God and Israel. For it is this covenant between God and Israel, as recorded in the Torah and expressed by means of the Torah that gives the Jewish collectivity its stamp of uniqueness.

In this manner we may understand the “silent shofar.” her so far is primarily a commandment concerning the individual. Each individual Jew is required to listen to the shofar, and it is not necessary for this Mitzvah to be performed in public, with a minyan. It is addressed to individuals, not to the community. In the well-known interpretation of the meaning of shofar by maimonides, we are told that it is a kind of spiritual alarm clock, one that urges the slumbering to arouse themselves; it is a call to *teshuvah* that penetrates the heart of every individual

Jew Whereas Shabbat, while observed by individuals, is fundamentally a communal celebration, a Mitzvah that devolve upon *Kelal Yisrael*. More, Shabbat is a *covenantal* obligation! It is an אות ברית, A sign of the covenant. Do we not say every Friday night- ושמרו בני ישראל את השבת לעשות את השבת לדורותם ברית עולם, “The children of Israel shall observe the Sabbath for their generations as an eternal *covenant*.” As such, the Shabbat is an exclusively Jewish expression. So do we read later in the same passage: ביני ובין בני ישראל אות היא לעולם, “It is an eternal sign between Me and the Children of Israel.” There is nothing wrong with a non-jew who sounds the shofar, or who attends the full Rush on a service. But for a non-Jew to observe the Shabbat in exactly the Jewish manner is considered wrong, for Shabbat is meant exclusively for בני ברית for those who are committed to and bound by the covenant. Therefore do we say in our Shabbat prayers: ובמנוחתו, לא ישכנו ערלים, גוי ששבת, חייב מיתה. hence, shofar represents the spiritual Ambitions of the individual, while Shabbat is the symbol of the Covenant obligations of the community or people of Israel.

That is why the sages and the Tradition went to such extravagant lengths to make shofar subordinate to shabbat, even such a comparatively simple violation of Shabbat as carrying (מלאכה גרועה) Based upon the remote possibility of an inexperienced functionary who will carry the shofar four cubits in a public thoroughfare.

The Tradition is telling us: the welfare of *Kelal Yisrael* really takes precedence over our individual ambitions, desires, and gratification. The individual is Holy; his significance is Transcendence. But when the two values are in conflict, his individual autonomy must give way to the greater and more historic and sacred claims of *Kelal Yisrael*. I do not mean to say that these two values, of individual and people, are always in Conflict. Certainly they are not. Usually their interests converge. But they are in tension. And when they do conflict, it is usually *Kelal Yisrael* that must prevail. for it is that which gives each of us his peculiar, special significance.

Thus did we read this morning in the special *piyyut* that is reserved for a Shabbat-Rosh Hashanah, the one that begins “שמו מפארים” that: שפרו מעשיכם וברית לא תופר, “Mend you ways (The word for “mend” is שפרו, which is etymologically related to שופר) and let not the covenant be annulled.” Keep the chauffeur silent, but practice the consequences of the shofar sounding, for in this manner we will preserve the covenant- the covenant of Shabbat.

I recognize full well that this thesis largely goes against the grain of most of us, immersed as we are in American culture. In our society, we are heir to the principles of capitalistic individualism; the Protestant ethic and its focus on the individual; a liberalism that nobly cherishes individual rights; and a social philosophy that which emphasizes the importance of the self, such as self-expression and self-fulfillment, almost to the point of narcissism. It is precisely because of this persistent bias at the silent shofar and it's teaching of the Jews responsibility to his people is

so important, if only in order to redress the balance. Where we living in a collectivist society, I would probably emphasize the other side of the equation- Judaism's affirmation of the *yahid*, the individual. For certainly Judaism does emphasize the importance of the individual. But, in our society especially, with the two values are in ultimate conflict, shofar must give way to Shabbat, and the individual Jew must yield to the more transcendent and inclusive demands of the Congregation of Israel.

This emphasis on Jewishness as a communal and covenantal obligation is more important today than ever before. The “modern era” began with the Emancipation, and at the beginning of this period of Jewish history, one of Napoleon's ministers said to the Jews: “To the Jews as individuals- everything; to the Jews as people- nothing.” We were granted our civil rights only as individuals, but we're told that effectively our existence of the community must come to an end.

To diss me answer with a resounding “No.” Each Jew is a unique, different individual, as every human being on the face of the Earth. Each Jew has a perfect right to express himself in ways that are not necessarily related to his fundamental religious commitment. Each Jew and Jewish may have interests that are artistic or scientific, aesthetic or professional, political or idiosyncratic. But we are people to a people who covenanted with the Creator and his people that is there for secret and unimpeachable.

Even after 3500 years in history, and 27 years of the state of Israel, the Christian world still does not understand this. At various conferences, here and abroad, I often come across the same lack of comprehension on the part of many distinguished and often sympathetic Christian personalities. They appreciate that Judaism is attuned to history. But they asked: Why are you so interested in geography? What does religion have to do with a political entity like the State of Israel? Why are you concerned with real estate? I often wonder why it is so difficult for the so-called people of the “New Covenant” to appreciate what the so-called “Old Covenant” means to us Jews.

But Christians can be forgiven for such views. After all, it is not unexpected for them to view Judaism through Christian lenses. What is unpardonable, however is the new Left and the Third World people. It is they who believe and stayed quite openly that every people can and should be nationalistic- except Jews. Every people has the right to its own self-determination- except Israel. Every group struggling for self-expression is to be accorded full recognition- except Jews in Israel. and how its aspiring that so many American and European fellow travelers of this group are- Jewish. They're the kind of Jews who would forgive Judaism the shofar, but are indignant and infuriated by the concept of *berit* as expressed by the observance of the Shabbat

This principle, implied in the “silent shofar,” has relevance to each and every one of us. It influences, for instance, the extent to which we act on behalf of the Jewish Community. Let me set a specific example of the relation of individuals to the community. This past summer, I was aghast upon reading in the New York Times about a national gathering of Jewish leaders who invited a woman Speaker who turned the conference into a platform for the advocacy of Jewish Women's Lib. fair enough, but she proclaimed that women ought not to volunteer for Community work unless paid, and that the present situation is one of sexist exploitation. I was doubly chagrined when I recognized the name of the speaker and remember that she had been a student of mine many years ago. My reaction was one of amused annoyance at what I considered thoughtless *chutzpah* compounded by inexcusable foolishness. Imagine if a male speaker had argued for men not to be involved in community work I must pay for it. “ Sexist exploitation” indeed! The community demands and needs the help of *all* of us- men and women, old and young, sick and healthy. Self-fulfillment and self-expression are virtues, yes. “ but the “self” is also part of the *tzibbur*, part of the community. Moreover, true Jewishness is such that the self must be subordinate to our responsibility to the Holy One, and our capacity as members of a people covenanted by Him. Were all volunteers to demand payment, the community would cease to exist.

Another example: the birthrate. Young couples must recognize that if they are to be fully committed Jews, it is not sufficient for them to satisfy the *halakhic* requirements on family size. One of the very greatest threats to our future, to our very existence in survival, is our decreasing population. It means that young people must make up their minds that they are going to sacrifice personal convenience for the purpose of the survival of the people as a whole; that even as shofar bows before Shabbat, so must our own wills and desires become secondary to the survival of the people of the covenant.

It is in place to mention as well what can often become a painful dilemma for many of us. I refer to a question that is often put to me: “I have been invited to attend the wedding ceremony of a Jew and non-Jew. Shall I attend? My answer is a clear “no,” given with what I believe is uncharacteristic rigidity. Personal friendship and affection and loyalty that business interests are important. there is no doubt about that. But you attend a mixed marriage is to condone by one's presence what is a grievous blow against the future of our people. Make no mistake about it: What you *say* hardly counts at all, what you *do* counts much more. Young people do not listen to what you say, they do pay attention to the signals of your conduct. Parents can preach endlessly against marrying out, but if they show by their conduct that they are not really that committed to the proposition that one ought to marry Jewish; if they allow themselves to be softened by familial sentiment; if they will attend the ceremonies of such marriages because they do not want to hurt a brother or a father or an uncle or cousin; then they are in effect signal into their children and grandchildren and nephews and nieces and neighbors and friends and relatives, that we

talked a great deal against intermarriage, but we do not really mean it! This is a serious bonding of the *covenant*, an easing of fundamental standards, a crime against the survival of *Kelal Yisrael*. Nothing Judaism stands for that is expressed by shofar- not repentance, and not spiritual elevation, not love of God or love of man, not faith and not loyalty, not Redemption and not a vision of a better society and a better world- nothing will mean anything if, Heaven forbid, this covenanted people disappears from the face of Earth. If we do not learn today the lesson of the “silent shofar,” then, Heaven forbid, in four generations it will be silent in this country forever for want of anyone to listen to it!

It is, then, the Continental aspect of Shabbat that accounts for the “silent shofar” when Rosh Hashanah falls on a Saturday. Perhaps the best proof is this:

The talmud teaches that the same principle that applies to the shofar applies to the *lulav* on Sukkot, and the reading of the *Megillah* on Purim. Yet there is one commandment to which the reasoning of שמא יעבירונו, the fear of carrying on Shabbat, ought to apply and yet does not. I refer to the observance of *milah*, circumcision. If we do not sound the shofar on Shabbat because we may carry it, by the same token ought we not permit a circumcision to take place on Shabbat for fear the knife may be carried? Yeah we certainly do permit circumcisions on Shabbat. The reason? -circumcision, like Shabbat, is an אות ברית, a sign of the covenant...

So, the conflict between shofar and Shabbat sharpens the basic question about our identity: Who am I? And the answer must come: I am a Jew, a “son of the covenant,” a member of the covenanted people. The “silent shofar” reminds us of the tasks we must accept; the pleasures we must forego; the pains you must Embrace; the duties we must assume- however reluctantly- because the welfare of the community requires it, because *kelal Yisrael* needs it, because the future of the covenant depends upon it.

If we bear this in mind, the Silence of the shofar this Shabbat will speak more eloquently and more meaningfully than ever before.

May the memory of this shofar, this זכרון תרועה, be our silent Prayer For All Mankind, for all of us as individuals, and above all- for all *Kelal Yisrael*, the community of the covenant, for your peace and complete redemption.

The Akedah- Again

Second Day Rosh Hashanah: September 18, 1974

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, zt"l

My theme this morning is the *Akedah*, which I shall treat subjectively, even autobiographically.

I confess that for a long time I have had difficulties with the Akedah story, the command of God to Abraham to bind Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice, saving him only at the last minute. The Akedah has always both fascinated and troubled me.

The disturbing element has not been the philosophical one, namely, how can God demand of man that he be prepared for such a horrendous sacrifice? I am satisfied that some causes are worthy of the greatest sacrifice. I think it is the glory of human beings that we cherish some things more than life itself, more than the greatest human love.

The imperative for such ultimate sacrifice is innate in man. At every stage of creation, the divine reaction was *ki tov*, "behold, it is good." But after man was created, which according to tradition took place on Rosh Hashanah, we read that the Creator beheld his creation, *ve'hineh tov me'od*, "and behold, it was very good." Whereupon the Midrash records a rather startling comment by Rabbi Meir: *Hineh tov me'od-hineh trove mavet*, "it is very good" refers to- death!

What could Rabbi Meir have meant by identifying the "very good" of man as death? A dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, has interpreted this to mean that only that for which you are willing to die, is it worth living. Only when there is something that is worth giving you life for, is life itself "very good." In his words, "For what shall a man live? For that for which he would die."

So I have no problems with the concept of the Akedah as such. It is quite human to sacrifice.

My difficulties with the Akedah are far different, and far simpler. I am frightened by how small it makes me feel. The demands it places on me are far too great for me to bear. When I measure myself against Abraham and Isaac, I feel inadequate, shallow, trivial. My ancestor Abraham gave more than his own life- the life of his precious son. But what about me? What have I ever done for Yiddishkeit? What have any of us ever done that approaches the Akedah, even remotely?

Of course, the mind spins out its rationalizations, some primitive, some sophisticated. I told myself that Abraham was remote, both chronologically and in cultural ambience, and that a man of ancient Mesopotamia cannot really serve as a model for twentieth century humans. I agreed

avidly with the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, who applied to Abraham the title of, “the Knight of Faith.” That placed Abraham in an altogether different category. He could make such sacrifices. I, however, an ordinary mortal, beset by the usual weaknesses and perhaps a few more- I am certainly not a hero. I therefore cannot aspire to the knighthood of faith. That remains the superhuman vocation of Abraham.

But I must tell you that all of my rationalizations are empty, all my excuses lame, all my sophisticated explanations ring hollow, and all my self-serving illusions are shattered and lie in ashes. Why so? Deep down, I knew all along that I was evading the Akedah. But something I read this summer forced it into my consciousness. Now I have no choice but to confront it directly.

In the course of preparing a series of lectures on “The Holocaust and The Halakha,” I chanced upon a *teshuvah* (responsum) written by a Rabbinic scholar, Rabbi Hirsch Meisels, who died in Chicago this past year.

The author was in Auschwitz in the 1940's. The question presented him concerned something that happened on Rosh Hashanah day in that death camp. In that section of Auschwitz there were sixteen hundred boys, aged fourteen to eighteen. The Nazi commandant of the camp decided that he needed a number of them for slave labor, and the rest would be put to death. And so he ordered one of those infamous “selections.” He set up what looks like a wooden Gallows, a vertical bar with a horizontal pole extending from it. He then had the boys walk past it. Whoever was tall enough, so that his head touched the horizontal pole, was considered strong enough to work, and would be kept alive. All those who were too short were to be sent immediately to a special bunker where they were denied food or water, and prepared for the Crematory that very night- the eve of the second day of Rosh Hashanah. The children quickly realized what was going on. Those who were too short stood tiptoe in order to reach the wooden beam. But when they did, not the guards with Robert Trent Jones rubber truncheons would bludgeon them to death. And so, the great majority of the children- at some fourteen hundred- would be sent to the bunker, there to await death that night.

When this became known, panic gripped the Jewish inmates of Auschwitz. Many had their children, their only children, or relatives or friends, in that group of fourteen hundred. The children were guarded by the Kapos, the Jewish police, who usually came from the lowest of society. They would not and could not release any of the children, because they had to produce the exact number of children for the SS; were any missing, the kapos themselves would be put to death. However, they were willing to accept bribes and exchange children! Some of the inmates had some money tucked away in an article of clothing, or some Jewels between their toes, and so parents and relatives rushed to the kapos in an attempt to redeem their children. However, before

taking a child out, the compost would hunt for a child not condemned to death, and pull them into the bunker so that the total number of condemned youngsters would remain the same. in other words, in order to save one child, you knew that another Jewish lad would surely be put to death

And so, a simple Jew from Oberland came to Rabbi Meisels and said to him: “According to the Torah, am I permitted to redeem my only child, whom I love more than life itself, who is now in that bunker? I have the means to Ransom him. But I know that if I do, some other hapless Jewish child will be killed in his place. Am I permitted to do so or not?”

The rabbi attempted every which way to evade the responsibility of having to give an answer. “ I can't,” he said “I can't give you an answer! It is the sort of question which is worthy of a Sanhedrin. I don't even have any books to consult here in Auschwitz.” But the Jew would accept no evasion. In his book, *מקדשי השם*, Rabbi Meisels quotes verbatim the remarks of this Jew. I now translate from the Yiddish in which they were spoken:

Rabbi, I have fulfilled my duty to which the Torah obligates me. I asked a question of a rabbi, and there is no other Rabbi here. And if you cannot answer me that it is permitted for me to rent a my truck, that is a sign that you are not at all certain that the Halakha permits me to do so; or if it would be permitted without any doubt, you of course would immediately tell me that I am allowed to save the life of my only son. I therefore accept this as your halakhic verdict, that according to the Halakhah I may not save my child at the expense of some other child. That is sufficient for me. Therefore my only child will be gassed and burned to death according to the Torah and the Halakhah. I accept that with love and with joy, and I will do nothing to redeem him, because that is what the Torah has told me.

Rabbi Meisels adds his own postscript:

That entire day of Rosh Hashanah, the father walk back and forth, talking to himself, and Euphoria, telling himself that he had the privilege to offer up his only son to the Lord even though he was able to redeem him; but nevertheless, he did not redeem him because he saw that the tower would not have been to do this, and therefore, let this act accepted before God like the Akedah on our Father Isaac, which also occurred on Rosh Hashanah.

So, nevermind the complexities of the Halakhah and the subtleties of the legal decision. The moral and ethical issues were clear enough- and so was the compelling love of this poor man for his only son, and his Sublime commitment to Torah and God and morality. And this happened

not to a Knight of Faith four thousand years ago in ancient Canaan, but- surprise of surprises! On this very planet, Europe, just thirty years ago! *The Akedah- all over again!*

Place is only one example of the Akedah during the Holocaust. But it happened not only then. It happens now too. It happened last year. It happened this year.

Just eight days ago, on Tuesday September 10th, we had a Sofer (scribe) here at The Jewish Center. You may recall that we announced that on that day a scribe would be here to examine and correct your *Tefillin* and *Mezzuzot*. A number of you brought these articles here for such examination. The scribe is Mr. Mechaber, a Sephardic Jew. He did not look well, and I inquired after the reason. His composure suddenly melted, and he broke down and told me: “The High Holidays are approaching, and that means the first *Yahrzeit* of my only son who was eighteen years old when he was killed on the Bar Lev line on Yom Kippur day.” He raised his eyes to Heaven, picked up his hands, and said, *Et hakol natati lamedinah*. “I gave up everything for the State!”

That was his Akeidah. Multiply that by twenty five hundred and you have the evidence of the Akedah this past year alone.

This is what shatters me, what makes me feel so trivial and petty and unworthy and insignificant. Because the Akedah is a recurring theme, *be'khol do vador*, in every generation. I am expected to be ready for it, and you are expected to be ready for it. The Torah considers that I am capable of it, and that you are capable of it. And that is what embarrasses me. And you. All of us! Because I look around me, and I look at myself, and I see how we live, and how tenuous are our convictions, and how our *Avodat ha-Shem* is done without *simchah*, how we practice our Jewishness so begrudgingly, as if we are doing God a great favor!

And what, after all, is it that we are asked to do on this Rosh Hashanah? To sacrifice our eldest sons, as did Abraham? No, not in America. In Israel, yes! But not in America. All we are asked to do is to be serious Jews, better Jews, sacrifice just a bit- and don't chafe and wear a martyr complex on your lapel because of it!

What are all those demands and restraints and sacrifices that we American Jews in 1974 consider so onerous and so taxing?

- That we continue to support Israel through the UJA and Bonds and travel there ven when it is not safe?
- That we support the synagogue both financially and by using for prayer and study?
- That in times of recession and inflation we do not single out charity as the first item in the budget to go?

- That occasionally we attend a rally for Russian Jews and invite a Russian Jewish family to our home?
- That men who, despite all busy schedules, find time religiously for tennis or bridge, should also find a little time religiously to attend a *Sheur*?
- That women not use their continuing education and career, after having children, as an excuse for abandoning the Jewish community, from Sisterhood to Mizrahi Women, from Hadassah to Federation to Yeshiva University?
- That we send our children to Jewish schools and Jewish camps?
- That we observe Kashrut and Shabbat, despite the ridicule of ignorant and self-hating Jews?
- That we abide by principles, instead of losing ourselves in our perpetual status-seeking, and our indulgence in a hedonistic frenzy?

Are these the things great acts of sacrifice on behalf of God and Torah and Israel and Judaism? How distressing when we measure such concerns against the Akedah which is being lived and relived and re-relived by so many others!

So, the whole point of the Akedah story is that we are the children of Abraham and Isaac, that we are capable of genuine greatness, that the capacity for ultimate sacrifice is in our genes and chromosomes, in our blood and in the very marrow of our bones. And it is therefore a scandal if we let ourselves become petty,, if we undersell and underestimate ourselves.

One of the great Hasidic luminaries, Rabbi Yitzhak Meir of Ger, author of *Hidushei HaRim*, and known by the name of that work, was once asked by some of his Hasidim: “Why is it that Jews cry (in the days when Jews would shed a tear during prayer without embarrassment...) when they recite the words of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur prayer, *Adam yesodo me’afar ve’sofo le’afar*, Man’s origin is dust and his end is in dust. If, they ask, man’s origin were gold or silver or platinum, and his end in dust, then we could understand weeping and wailing. But if he begins in dust and ends in dust, then the books balance, and there is no total loss. Why weep?”

The Rabbi answered: “It is true, man’s origin is in dust and he ends in dust. However, although his origin is in dust, he is endowed by his Creator with the capacity to raise the dust *ad lev ha-shamayim*, to the very heart of the Heavens. And when he fails in this mission, when he is born in dust and wallows in dust, and barely ever raises his head above the dust, and spends his life building his castles and palaces all in the dust, and forgets to reach upwards, and fails to try to raise the dust of the earth to the heart of the Heavens, then indeed there is something to cry about!

That is why I am so troubled by the Akedah, which is the central message of Rosh Hashanah, and the Shofar which symbolizes the Akedah as the horn of the ram that was offered in place of Isaac. It is precisely what Rosh Hashanah and Akedah and Shofar must do for us: it must accusingly remind us of the greatness that is within our grasp, of the heroism and the knighthood of faith, of the fierce loves and the sublime commitments which are our historic graces, our ethnic endowments, our individual gifts- whether on Mount Moriah or in Auschwitz, whether on the Bar-Lev line or on the West Side of Manhattan. It is a symbol of the the Heavens to which we can raise this paltry dust that is our body and our life- a symbol as long and as great as the distance between the heart of the Heavens and the dust of the earth.

And even as it is disturbing and accusing in pointing out the difference between our capacities and our realities, it is also an inspiration. It summons us to remember that, as the Rabbis put it, *Shofar* is related to the Hebrew *Shefer*, “beautiful.” *Shapru ma’aseikhem,*” act beautifully,” the Rabbis said, is the message of Shofar: be good Jews, be better Jews, be serious Jews, above all: be beautiful Jews- what once used to be called “*Sheini Yidden.*”

And just as the Shofar and the Akedah are a double symbol that speaks to us in accents of both accusation and inspiration, so is the Shofar a message that we send to God- a prayer, perhaps even a kind of accusation, and, yes, an inspiration. It is an inspiration: behold, O Lord, how Abraham and the Akedah still live! Behold your Jews so ready to sacrifice for You, for Your Torah, for Your people! Behold how this people of the Shofar are a people of Shefer! They are beautiful.

And it is a prayer: Almighty God, enough! No more Akedahs! No more Holocausts! No more Yom Kippur Wars or any other war! Even if You are worth it, even if we are ready for it, don’t ask for it!

So the sound of the Shofar is a wordless summons to us and a wordless prayer to God. It is the ultimate dialogue, though a word is not spoken. It is the ultimate dialogue, though a word is not spoken. It is wordless, silent, and speaks volumes; it says all there is to say- and much more.

Let us therefore listen most attentively to what the Shofar says to us, and in our minds let us, with that same sound of Shofar, send back our message to our Father in Heaven. *Alah Elokim bi’teruah.* When such a message is sent to God, He rises, as it were. And when such a message is sent to us, let us, in awe and reverence, in fear and trembling, in love and devotion, rise for the sound of the Shofar.

Apple - The Trillion Dollar Company And The Rosh Hashanah Ritual Rabbi Benjamin Blech

All my life I've observed the ritual on Rosh Hashanah, at the beginning of the Jewish New Year. Our meal is preceded with an apple - a symbol of success and blessing.

For the sages it alluded to a biblical verse: One of the fruits to which the Jewish people are compared in Solomon's Song of Songs is the apple. "As the apple is rare and unique among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved -- Israel -- amongst the maidens (nations) of the world."

For the stock market, Apple was in the spotlight for a totally different reason. Apple the company achieved something never accomplished before in American history. Apple became the first publicly traded corporation to be valued at \$1 trillion. It is a number so large that we can hardly begin to grasp its magnitude. Just how much is one trillion? And what could that amount of money buy?

For starters, let's spell that out. It's a 1 followed by 12 zeros: 1,000,000,000,000. With that kind of cash, Apple could buy one billion people a \$999 iPhone X and still have a billion dollars left in the bank. Or Apple could give all 325 million people in the United States a check for \$3,076.92. To get a true feeling of how much money \$1 trillion is you might want to know that there's just over a trillion dollars currently in circulation in the entire United States.

But here is probably the single most interesting thing about this incredible economic success, a fact that makes it highly relevant to every one of us as we contemplate our own financial standing: In 1997, Apple stood on the brink of bankruptcy and was just a short step away from going broke. Steve Jobs later revealed that the company was about ninety days away from total insolvency.

There's a message here that needs to be constantly remembered, whether we're talking about a major corporation or our individual finances, whether we're concerned with failure of a billion-dollar business or family disasters which seem to doom us to personal ruin.

Remarkably enough, years ago it was the very founder of Apple who verbalized that idea in such powerful manner that it is to this day considered one of the most powerful and inspiring commencement addresses ever given.

It was in 2005 that Steve Jobs was asked to address the graduates of Stanford University. He chose to tell them what he called simple stories. They had one underlying theme: the blessings we can accrue from struggles with adversity.

Jobs told the students how he started Apple in his parents' garage when he was twenty years old. In ten years Apple grew from two founders into a \$2 billion company with over 4000 employees. And then, just after he turned thirty, Jobs was fired. Fired from the company that he himself started. The Board of Directors sided against him and he had to endure public shaming as well as, it would seem, the end of his career.

In retrospect, here is the essence of what Jobs told his audience of graduates:

I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.

From there, Jobs turned to a theme which some might call morbid but in fact parallels - although he did not mention it - the exhortation of the rabbis that one should always remember "the day of death" and live with the realization of one's mortality.

My last story, he said - is about death. When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: "If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right." It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "No" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.

Steve Jobs returned to Apple years later and turned it into the giant it would become by way of his genius. He understood setbacks were merely stepping stones to greatness. Downfalls are not permanent; failures are trials meant to make us stronger. "For though a righteous man falls seven times, he will get up" [Proverbs 24:16] King Solomon declared in his wisdom. The first tablets of the law containing the Ten Commandments, written by God himself, were smashed and did not last; it was the second set, the one illustrating human effort and unwillingness to give up after the first failure, which remained.

The story of Apple and its success is a story of life after failure. It is the victory of hope over despair, of courage over anguish, of optimism over despondency and depression. In a very real

sense, as we come to the close of 2020-5780 and its horrific global pandemic, Apple can be an inspiration to every one of us as we struggle with seemingly insurmountable difficulties, as we face trials which appear unbearable, and as we are challenged by life's unbearable challenges.

The Talmud tells us that on Rosh Hashanah we are to make use of symbols as reminders of our hopes and our dreams. An apple was always a high holy day symbol. This year perhaps it may offer us yet another message: Apple was on the very precipice of ruin - yet today is financially perhaps the most successful company in American history.

Faith in God, in ourselves, and in our dreams will hopefully also bring us through difficult days to years filled with blessings.

Choose It or Lose It
Rabbi Mark Wildes

I want to welcome you all and hope you're enjoying the davening/service. On Rosh Hashanah we, of course, pray for a good year and please God many good years to come. They tell the story of an older man who on his 90th birthday visits his doctor for his annual physical. The man tells the doctor: "I think I'd like to make it to 100," "What do I have to do?" The doctor responds:

"Well, do you smoke"?

"No".

"Do you drink"?

"No".

"Do you like to drive fast cars"?

"No".

"Do you ever eat foods high in saturated fat"?

"No".

"Then why do you want to make it to 100?"

We all want to live a long life but today on Rosh Hashanah we're also praying for a good life, one filled with meaning and purpose. About 10 years ago on the last day of the MJE Israel trip, our group traveled to Hadassah Hospital to visit a victim of terror. We met an amazing young man named Keith. Originally from Bayonne, New Jersey, Keith made Aliyah at the age of 20 and went right into the army. Keith's base was attacked by a group of Palestinian terrorists who dressed up as Israeli soldiers, killing four Israelis and wounded a number of others, among them Keith. Someone from our crowd raised his hand and asked: "Keith: if before you made Aliyah and joined the army, you knew that you would have been shot, would you have still decided to come to Israel? Without flinching, Keith answered, "yes, I'd do it all over again if I had to". And then another person got up from the audience, someone not from our group who I did not recognize, stood up and said: "Y 'know, I just realized that the day I converted to Judaism was the day you Keith, were injured in that attack. I know this because when the Rabbi performing the conversion asked me if I really wanted to convert, since the Jewish people, he said, are still a persecuted people, and the rabbi said: "just today there was an attack on an Israeli base and four Jewish soldiers were killed and a number were injured - are you sure you really want to become Jewish?"

I realize now the Rabbi was talking about you.

Keith then turned back and asked: "well what did you answer the rabbi?" The gentleman responded: "I answered yes and one day maybe I'll be worthy".

Keith turned back to the convert and said: “welcome to our people”.

Keith chose to make Aliyah and to join the army. This other gentleman chose to convert to Judaism. Like all converts he is a Jew by choice. But what about all of us born Jews? Did we get to choose to be Jewish? Was there ever a time in our lives when we were asked if this is what we wanted? I don't know about you, but I was never asked. And yet we are somehow born with a special covenant with God and a whole unique lifestyle: Shabbat, kashrut, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur... How did that happen?

The Torah, in just last week's Parsha (portion) tells us: “For it is not with you alone I make this covenant...but whoever is standing here today and not here today” (D'vraim 29:14)

To whom does “and not here today” refer? It refers of course to generations not yet born. The Talmud tells us that we, the descendants of those who stood at Sinai are *mushba ve-omed mehar Sinai* - foresworn from Sinai, namely, our ancestors somehow obligated us in being Jewish, in living this life of Torah. But how could that have happened? How can we be bound by an agreement, a covenant with God to which we never consented? That goes against all the laws of contracts that the Torah itself established and gave to the world?!

There are many answers given to this question. The most famous answer is that we actually did consent to this and that we were there when God offered us this whole covenant at Sinai. True our bodies were not there, but our souls were. The Kabbalah teaches that the *neshamot* - the souls of every Jewish man, woman and child who would ever live, past, present and future, were present at Sinai when the Torah was given and all those souls joined into the well-known declaration of acceptance *na'aseh v'nishmah* - “we will do it and we will hear it!”. We're in! So our souls committed us to being Jewish!

Rabbi Isaac Arama (Rabbi Isaac ben Moses Arama, 1420 -1494) was not a fan of this approach. He asked: if we are a composite of both body and soul how can the soul alone obligate the body to follow the Torah? The Torah after all requires the body's involvement in the carrying out the *mitzvot* - in only eating certain foods, speaking in a certain way, observing Shabbat...How can the soul alone bind the body in this way?

The Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, 1809 – 1879) suggested a different approach: he wrote that the acceptance of the Torah into the lives of the Jewish people is ultimately a *zechut*, a merit that gives our ancestors the ability to accept for subsequent generations. There is a legal concept in the *halacha* (Jewish law) called: *zachin l'aadam shelo b'fanav*, which means : “one may cause a merit for another when not in their presence” - the idea that if something is in the best interests of another person, someone else can accept that on your behalf. For example, if a friend was offered the opportunity to accept a free apartment in

Manhattan on your behalf, your friend can legally accept the apartment for you and it legally becomes yours. Even if the apartment comes with some leaks and a monthly maintenance charge, since owning an apartment in Manhattan is valuable, another person can accept it on your behalf.

This is actually how we convert a child to Judaism. When Jewish parents, for example, adopt a child who was not born Jewish and they want to raise the child Jewish, they convert the child. However, one of the requirements for conversion is *kabbalat mitvot* or the “acceptance of the mitzvot” and a child under Bar/Bat Mitzvah age lacks the capacity to do that (in Hebrew it is called *da’as* or consent) and so the Jewish court has the authority to be the substitute for the *da’as* of the child. Why? Again, because of the principle of *zachin l’adam sheloa bafanav* – that the court may act in the best interests of the child. Since being Jewish is considered a benefit, a hugely positive thing for someone to have in their life, the Jewish court can substitute for the *da’as* (the consent of the child) and accept Judaism on his or her behalf. Ultimately, giving a child the opportunity to live a Jewish life, with the beauty of Shabbat, and a tight knit community that will look out for him is a *zechut*, a merit for the child. A child raised with the values and ethics of Judaism – to give charity, to perform acts of kindness, to look out for the widow, orphan and stranger...all of this will help the child feel happy and fulfilled. All of this is a *zechut*, a merit and therefore the court can do this for the child. Similarly, our ancestors were able to do this for us. Our ancestors understood how positive and awesome it is to be Jewish - how living a Jewish life is ultimately a merit, and so they too had the power to rope us into this whole thing on our behalf.

Thus, it seems like we don’t get to choose! Either, as the Kabbalists teach, our souls chose for us or our ancestors made that decision for us a long time ago - choosing a spiritual path that they believed would benefit us. But is that fair? Shouldn't we, like Keith or the convert, get to choose the path we want in life? How could Judaism simply be imposed upon us by our ancestors? The answer is that today in our world we do get to choose. Although on a strictly theological level the choice to be Jewish has already been made for us (either by our own souls or by our ancestors), on a sociological level we ourselves must make a choice. The way things are today - if you don’t choose to pursue your Judaism – it simply does not remain. You either chose it or you lose it. Today, even if we are born Jewish, unless we actively and proactively choose to do Jewish, we simply do not stay Jewish. All the studies demonstrate that the only American Jews who successfully transmit Judaism to the next generation are those who actively live a Jewish life.

The late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach once asked: how could it be that we continue to yearn for the Messiah today? How could the Messiah come in our generation when the righteous of previous generations were not able to bring it? Is our generation really so much greater that we could

merit to bring redemption, something our great-grandparents couldn't? Reb Shlomo answered that there is a big difference between our generation today and our great-grandparent's generation back in Europe. Back in Europe, if you didn't want to live as Jew, there was really no-where else to go. Jews were simply not accepted in society and so our ancestors remained amongst themselves. Staying Jewish back then was therefore pretty much a given. That was the way most of our great-grandparents were raised: they were expected to live as a Jew and there was really no life outside of the community. But today, it is so different. Today it is so easy not to be Jewish – not to have Shabbat, not to remain with Jewish values. Our world has changed so much in a very short period of time. Today, since we have become so accepted, it is much easier to simply follow the prevailing culture and simply do whatever everyone else is doing. Therefore, those who are staying Jewish today, said Reb Shlomo, are making a conscious decision to be Jewish. We have to make a choice our grandparents never had to. We have to choose to be Jewish and therefore our generation has a zechut, an additional merit to bring the Messiah that our grandparents never had!

I am privileged to see this every day at MJE - young men and women choosing to live active Jewish lives, making a conscious decision to observe the Torah in a variety of different ways. Individuals, who for example, never ate kosher food in their childhood, but became inspired to start keeping Kosher. Others who chose to follow the Torah's principles on appropriate speech - who try to refrain from speaking ill of other people and others who every Shabbat commit themselves to visiting the sick by walking across the park to visit patients at Mt. Sinai hospital. I've had the great zechut (merit) of seeing others choosing to integrate Shabbat into their lives. Leaving work on Fridays early or using their precious little vacation time to observe the holidays. Even though this may not have been part of their childhood, people are seeing the value in putting the cell phone down once a week, disconnecting so they can reconnect with Hashem and the community. That's also a choice.

Keeping Kosher, giving charity, and observing Shabbat were all givens back in our great, great grandparent's time back in Europe, but because they are not the norm today, we must choose to be Jewish. And given all the other choices we have, all the other things we could be doing on a Friday night (other than Shabbat), all the other places to eat (which are not Kosher) , all the other not so Jewish things to spend our time and money on - being Jewish today is the ultimate choice. But it's not just choosing Judaism for ourselves: if we want the Jewish people to be a force in the world for good, we also have to choose to make a difference for the greater community. Rabbi Shlomo Goren was for many years the Chief Rabbi of the Israeli Army. In his autobiography, he shares the following story: During Israel's War of Independence in 1948, as the city of Jerusalem was under siege by the Jordanians, Rabbi Goren was serving as both a combat soldier and a rabbi for the army. Early one Friday morning a jeep pulled up beside the rabbi and the driver said he was sent by General David Shaltiel to bring the rabbi to see him. When Rabbi Goren arrived, the

General told him the IDF has received intelligence confirming that the next day the Jordanian army will be sending in tanks to attack Jerusalem. There is only one route for the tanks to come in, the General said, and the only way to stop them would be to dig ditches and trenches but this could only be done in the dark of the night so the Jordanians wouldn't see. That would mean the only time to dig would be Friday evening and the only able-bodied men not serving in the army, available to do this, were the ultra-orthodox students in the Yeshivot, in the religious seminaries.

The General asked Rabbi Goren if he could recruit as many yeshiva students as possible to dig trenches on Shabbat to stop the tanks. You have to understand, that even under these dire circumstances, it would not be easy to get yeshiva students to do something which would otherwise be a complete desecration of the Shabbat, and to do so publicly.

Rabbi Goren went to the various Yeshivot pleading with the students to volunteer to dig the trenches on the Sabbath. In one yeshiva, where approximately a hundred students were studying, Rabbi Goren informed the students of the situation and asked them if they would help. The students were so moved by the rabbi's plea - there was not even one student who didn't raise his hand to volunteer. Rabbi Goren told the religious students to go home and pray the Shabbat service and meet at the assigned areas to begin the digging throughout the night. He told them he would make sure they would have wine to make Kiddush and that they should restrict their violation of the Shabbat to the digging alone. Rabbi Goren went from yeshiva to yeshiva making his case, and in the end, the good rabbi recruited over a thousand yeshiva students willing to dig ditches on the Sabbath to stop the tanks. The students dug trenches throughout the entire night along every road where the tanks could enter Jerusalem. They even managed to dig parallel trenches so if a tank wouldn't fall into the first trench, the second one would get them.

At exactly 11am Saturday morning, just as the intelligence information had promised, a column of thirteen tanks approached Jerusalem. Rabbi Goren, who was able to see all this from a rooftop, wrote that the tanks were advancing at a very high speed. Suddenly he sees the first two tanks roll over and come to a halt upside down. They had fallen into the trenches. After that a third tank crashed into the first two and turned over as well. When the remaining ten tanks saw what happened to the tanks before them, they turned around and headed back to where they came from.

The trenches the students dug saved Jerusalem and its 100,000 Jewish residents. Those students had a choice to make and they chose to act on behalf of the greater community.

We may think the choice to be a Jew has been made for us but it's not true. We also get to choose - whether to be active or to remain passive, whether to sit on the sidelines or pick up a shovel and start to dig. We get to choose whether to be a spectator or get our hands a little dirty by doing something positive for the Jewish people. Will we speak up and defend Israel when she

is unfairly maligned in the press or someone at work or in our circle of friends says something untrue about Israel? We get to choose whether to write an article, blog, speak up or remain silent so we don't create any waves.

In the coming year when we are asked to contribute to a cause we know is important - will we donate? Will we give to a friend who needs a loan or to someone that's fallen on bad luck or perhaps to our own community, to MJE so we can continue our mission to reach out to our less affiliated Jewish brothers and sisters? That my friends, is choosing to be Jewish; by caring about those who do not have a community and are at risk of being lost to our people.

And there are so many more areas in our lives to make that choice: from who we date to how we date, whether we will one day give our kids a Jewish education, how honestly we act in our business dealings and the chesed, the kindness we do for others - these are all opportunities to make real and authentic Jewish choices for our lives and our community in the coming year. That is what the Torah means when it says: ubacharta b'chayim - "and you shall choose life". I never understood that phrase; I mean, who wouldn't want to choose life? What it means is the good in life can only happen if we proactively choose it and pursue it. The Shofar we're about to hear is a wake-up call, meant to shake us out of our slumber and inspire us to be proactive. The sounds of the shofar remind us that by not making a choice in whatever part of our lives, we are making a choice to simply go along with whatever is going on around us. Our ancestors may have chosen Judaism for us, but today we also get to choose. On this Rosh Hashanah let us choose the Torah for ourselves and may we merit in the coming year to see the positive consequences of that choice - a year filled with blessing and joy, meaning and purpose.

Do You Believe?

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

Originally sent to the membership of Congregation Shaare Tefilla of Dallas, TX for Shabbat Chazon, Parshat Devarim 5780

Does God still love us, or is COVID a sign of divine wrath?

Has God removed His providence from the world, or is this merely a difficult stage in the birth-pangs of the redemption- a disrupter intended to spur our repentance and return us to the Land of Israel?

Is it our job to fend for ourselves using any means available to us, or must we place our faith entirely in God and not in the dysfunctional and failed economic, political and medical constructs of our world?

Whenever the true intent of God is concealed it serves as a test of our Emunah. In recounting the sin of the spies, Moshe levies a harsh accusation against the Jewish people.

וּבְדַבַּר הַזֶּה אֵינְכֶם מְאֱמִינִים בְּה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

In this matter, you do not believe in God.

How dare Moshe accuse them of lacking faith? To how many open miracles did they bear witness? Perhaps they were ungrateful at times, maybe they grumbled and *kvetched*, but they were certainly not faithless! In fact, the prophet Yirmiyahu praises them for their faith during the desert travels

לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בְּמִדְבַר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה

Oh how you followed Me in a desert, in a desolate land...

Based on the writings of the Maharal of Prague, Rabbi David Fohrman suggested that there are three stages of faith, corresponding to three iterations of the word *Emunah* in the Torah's exodus narrative -

The first time faith is mentioned is when Moshe turned to the elders of the Jewish people and apprised them of the impending exodus, sharing with them the signs God provided him.

וַיֵּאמְרוּ הָעָם וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ כִּי פָקֵד ה' אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִי רָאָה אֶת עֲנָנִים וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ.

The Israelites understood that God saw their suffering...

What did they believe at this juncture? They had been slaves for two centuries, with no overt sign of God in their lives. Remarkably, they believed it was possible there was a God who was aware of their travails. Perhaps they heard stories about God from their grandparents and for that reason the verse states וַיֵּאמְרוּ הָעָם. On its own, though, this is not enough to foster faith. After all,

just knowing that God watches us suffer does not render one into a believer. The real question is whether He is capable of doing anything about it. Many who lost faith after the Holocaust, or for whom human suffering represents a theological challenge, were at this stage of faith. It is not that they don't believe in God; it is that they are deeply angry at Him for a perceived lack of action on His part.

This brings us to the second, better known expression of *Emunah*. When the Jewish people approach the frothy waters of the Red Sea, the Torah tells us that finally, they achieved a new level of faith.

ויאמינו בה' ובמשה עבדו

What did they believe? They believed in a God who saw their pain and who had the capacity to do something about it. But this still does not represent full faith. Perfect and complete faith, according to the Maharal, was achieved on a third occasion- at *mattan Torah*, when God tells Moshe **וְגַם בְּךָ יֵאֱמְרוּ לְעוֹלָם** – The people will believe in **you**, as my “spokesperson,” forever.

Once Moshe was established as the middleman between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael, they believed that God understood Moshe, and that He was prepared to communicate with them in a way that would resonate in their hearts. It's one thing to have faith in an all-powerful God, and another to have faith in a God who speaks to you where you are. This level of faith proved unsustainable, and was the subject of Moshe's scathing rebuke: **וּבְדַבַּר הַזֶּה אֵינְכֶם מְאֱמִינִים בְּה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם**. They did not believe any longer in a God who understood them, and rationalized their lack of belief by asserting instead that God despised them. This was their lack of faith- not that they did not believe in God, but that they did not think He understood the uniqueness of their circumstances. Many of us struggle with this third level of faith - we know people who hear our cries, they may even have the ability to help us, but we don't think they can relate to our predicament. And if others can't understand me, maybe God also doesn't understand me! During the COVID crisis, we are all in the same same boat - we are under duress, living with some degree of anxiety about the future, contemplating what exactly God means by all this. When there is wholesale suffering, we tend to gloss over the specific stories, the nuances in each household and heart - one person experiences Covid with other health concerns very much in the foreground; another is overwhelmed by financial uncertainty; still others are worried about the mental, academic and intellectual well-being of their children and yet others are navigating *Shalom Bayis* tensions that are either created or exacerbated by enforced proximity. There is no “one size fits all” stimulus check for *emunah*; as believing Jews, this third level of faith is the most difficult for every one of us to attain. As long as God remains a mysterious entity who performs massive acts of salvation to a distant nation called “The Jews,” but acts capriciously toward individual Jews like me, we will continue to struggle with faith. *Emunah does not* mean believing that God will supply every miracle we need, or answer every prayer we utter for what we think we want. Instead, it means a

belief in a God who understands us and knows what is best for each of us even when His ways are entirely inscrutable.

This year, our thoughts have turned earlier than usual to the Yamim Noraim season, as we contemplate the logistical challenges of hosting a meaningful *tefillah* under safe conditions. Aside from considerations of space and numbers, many *poskim* are advocating for an abridged version of the davening to reduce the amount of time spent together in prayer. This involves removing some or many of the *piyyutim* that are such a familiar part of the Yamim Noraim experience, at the discretion of each Rabbi and each community. To be sure, some people will find these changes welcome, hoping for them to continue well after COVID is over; others will be irate that this is even being considered. Both groups must be aware that these changes are **temporary**. In considering which *piyyutim* are essential, we recall as a baseline the ruling of Rav Soloveitchik, who felt that there were only two *piyyutim* in the entire Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy that are non-negotiable: the *avodah* of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur, and *Ha'ochez Bemiddat Hamishpat*, aka *Vechol Ma'aminim* throughout. Keep in mind that, according to the Rav, in extreme times even the hallowed and emotionally charged prayer of ונתנה תוקף was expendable - but under no circumstance should a *tzibur* skip the *Avodah* and the liturgical poem about faith.

For us as well, these are non-negotiable. We must continue our *avodah*, our service of God, with the faith that He watches over us, that He has the power to assist us, and that He maintains an intimate understanding of our particular needs.