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SHEMA KOLEINU IS GENEROUSLY DEDICATED BY

Jani and Arthur Cooperberg
In loving memory of our parents
Claire Kind Ḥayyim
Louis Kind Ḥayyim
Meyer Cooperberg Ḥayyim

Sheri and Richard Feldman and Family
In memory of
Judith Feldman
הרענן מלכה בת דניאל טאה

Harold and Sharon Lipsky
In honor of our grandchildren
Reva, Yael, Sarelle, & Ella Lipsky
Rochel, Yosef, Ephraim & Basya Abbe

Gila and Bob Margulies and Family
In loving memory of
שריה טאלו בת יודה, חây"ה
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יורידה בת צוחק הלב ופרנסוב ע”י

Sharon & Harold Sokel and family
In loving memory of
Sol Pollock
שלמה זלמן בן ע’י שמעון, ע”י
On his Yahrzeit, א’ ראש השנה

Ira and Leah Steinmetz
Jake, Ita, Chana, Basya, and Aharon Dov
Jamie, Ezra, Yosef Shalom, and Eliyahu Baruch
Jesse, Sheva, and Shmuel Elimelech
Becky, Jack and Raizy
In loving memory of our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents
Jacob Hass (Yaakov ben Moshe Nachum)
Roza Weissman Hass (Raizel bas Shmuel Elimelech)
Ann Leffenfeld Steinmetz (Chana bas Yizchok Zvi)
David Steinmetz (Dovid ben Meir)

Rhonda Weiss
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In memory of David and Evelyn Poppick and Larry Bergman
PREFACE

One of the central mitzvot of Rosh Hashana is the blowing of the shofar. Each day, we blow 100 kolos (sounds), unless one of the days of Rosh Hashana happens to be Shabbos. Rav Saadiah Gaon lists numerous reasons as to why we blow the shofar on this extremely holy day; one of the reasons is that the shofar on Rosh Hashana reminds us of the shofar that was heard on Har Sinai when the Jewish people received the Torah.

Rabbi Yecheil Spero explains that at Har Sinai, Hashem Himself blew the shofar. The Torah was hidden away and protected from the beginning of time, separated from the Jewish people by an intangible divide. The act of Hashem blowing the shofar at Matan Torah on Har Sinai broke down that barrier and allowed us to receive the holy Torah, which, going forward, would serve as the manual and blueprint for our lives.

As we hear the shofar today on Rosh Hashana and reflect on how fortunate we were to receive the Torah at Har Sinai, we share this good fortune and happiness with the community as we present this year’s Shema Koleinu publication, a compilation of divrei Torah by members of our own community. We hope that the essays found here will inspire our kehillah and make our collective Yamim Noraim more special and meaningful.

Sisterhood would like to thank all of the contributors to this year’s Shema Koleinu booklet who crafted beautiful divrei Torah filled with thought-provoking messages meant to enhance our Yom Tov. Special thanks to Rabbi Goller for all of his guidance in this project, as well as to our chairperson, Rachel Fryman, editors Channie Stein and Elana Rand, and typesetter, Shira Zwiren.

In this first year in which our shul is without the spiritual leadership and guidance of our Morah D’asrah, Rabbi Kelemer, zt’l, we feel the tremendous loss of his inspiration throughout our kehillah. We would like to dedicate this issue to Rabbi Kelemer,
zt’l, as well as to the many holy neshamos from our West Hempstead community whom we have lost over the past year. May the Torah learning from this booklet elevate their neshamos.

Wishing everyone a shana tova!

Gari Ann Harris and Tova Isseroff
YIWH Sisterhood Presidium
RABBI’S MESSAGE

One of the most often recited tefillos of the Yomim Noraim is Chapter 24 of Tehillim. It makes its first cameo on the night of Rosh Hashana and it returns once again to cap off the maariv service on Yom Kippur. It is recited in a very melodious, deliberate and somber tone. While it is a beautiful chapter of Tehillim, there are many others that might have had a tighter connection to the Yomim Noraim. Why was this specific chapter chosen and given such a prominent role in the Tefillos of the Days of Awe?

The Satmar Rebbe, in his Divrei Yoel, explains that the Gemara (Shabbos 30a) is the key to understanding the center stage afforded to this chapter. It develops the idea that this particular chapter is the one dedicated to the forgiveness of Dovid Hamelech. After the incident with Batsheva, Dovid did some serious introspection and teshuva. Then he asked for a sign that he was forgiven and absolved of all wrongdoing. Hashem responded that the sign would not be given in his own lifetime but rather in the lifetime of his son, Shlomo. Indeed, the fascinating story of the gates in the Beis Hamikdash, the subject of this chapter, is the story of Dovid’s absolution. Therefore, the Satmar Rebbe posits, this chapter needs to be given much importance.

There are two crucial ideas that are often lost on people who are in the process of doing teshuva. One is that great people do not have to go through the same rigorous process that the average person has to endure. They don’t have to endure our challenges nor the laborious process of returning to Hashem after a misstep. The other misconception is that teshuva is a grand process that is only granted to special people, but the average person on their own cannot embark on such an ambitious journey.

Chapter 24 of Tehillim serves to lay both of those misunderstandings to rest. Here we have a tzaddik like Dovid Hamelech who goes through the same process that the average person does. He does so as an individual. It is his story that we
highlight by saying this chapter. It is this encouragement that this chapter gives each and every one of us. We can each introspect, reflect and work on ourselves to achieve complete *teshuva*. We can each erase the distance from Hashem that some of our mistakes have caused, just as Dovid Hamelech did. It is for this reason that chapter 24, this chapter, 1/150 of all the chapters *Tehillim*, was given such crucial time and space at this auspicious time of the year. Because it is needed to encourage each and every individual in his own odyssey.

Each of us has our very own journey in *teshuva*. We have a unique smorgasbord of mistakes, challenges and items to improve. It is important to recognize that while each process may differ, at the core, the process and goal are the same for one and all. Wishing all of you great success on your unique journey. May Hashem grant you a healthy, happy, sweet, meaningful and successful year ahead.

On behalf of myself, Dr. Rachelle and family, warmest of wishes for a *kesiva v’chasima tova*.

Rabbi Joshua Goller
A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

This year has been a very difficult year for our kehilla. The loss of our Mora D’asra Rabbi Kelemer, ZT”L, has impacted all of us in many different ways. Each one of us had a very special relationship with our Rav. His passing has left a void in all of us that will be felt for many years to come. Additionally, we all had the challenge of managing through the pandemic. Not having the ability to spend time with family and friends while being forced to be socially distanced made the year that much harder.

My first article in the Shema Koleinu two years ago was a message to the community about our tefillot on Yom Kippur. I discussed that when we say Kol Nidrei, our voices cry out to Hashem to pray for mercy and to give us a year of good health and happiness. I pointed out that when we as a tzibbur cry out to Hashem, we do it with one voice.

An acquaintance of mine recently told me a story with an extremely powerful message about understanding the love Hashem has for His children. As we all know, we are called Banim Lamakom, which means children of Hashem. This is the story he related to me.

Every parent's dream is to marry their kids off at a suitable age. A close friend of my acquaintance was not blessed with that brachah. Years had passed, and still his son was single. At the age of 31, he met his match. A little less than a year and a half later, four weeks before Rosh Hashanah, he was blessed with a child. That year on Rosh Hashanah, during the repetition of the Musaf Shemonei Esrei, the man burst out crying during tekiat shofar. After davening, the friend asked him what happened. The man's answer was instructional and poignant. He explained that we know that after the blowing of the shofar we say, “Hayom Haras Olam...Im Kevanim, Im Kavadim.../ if we are like children to You, Hashem, have pity on us like a father has pity on his children." That was the first time in his life that he fully understood the meaning of those words: Have mercy on us as we have mercy on our children. Everything we do as parents is for our children, to provide for them, to make sure their needs are
fulfilled and that they are happy. We feel the love we have for our children. That is the love Hashem has for us, His children. Hashem wants the best for us even though it may not always seem that way. Sometimes Hashem disciplines us just as we, as human parents, discipline our own children.

Now is the time to ask mechilah for all that we do wrong as children to our Heavenly Parent. Hashem, as a parent to a child, always does what’s best for us, even though we may not understand it. Now is the time for us to pray to “Father” to guide us and bless us and give us all we need in the year ahead.

We have been through very difficult times this past year as a community with the loss of our leader. My wish for this year is that we regroup as a community. Let us come together as Rabbi Kelemer taught us and daven for a year of health, happiness, and prosperity for all.

Wishing everyone a G’mar Tov!

Arthur Cooperberg
President, YIWH
IN THE MIDST OF MY PEOPLE
Rabbi Mel David

A dialogue between the Prophet Elisha and the Shunamit woman in the era of the Kings offers us a timeless lesson today. The Prophet Elisha traveled throughout Israel delivering Hashem’s word to all of Bnei Yisroel. A Shunamit woman, in consultation with her husband, built a “guest room” in her attic so Elisha would have a place to stay during his travels. At one point, Elisha wanted to show his gratitude to this Shunamit woman for this kindness:

And it was on that day that [Elisha] came there ... “What can I do for you? Can something be said on your behalf to the king or to the army commander?” She replied, “I dwell among my people.” (Kings II 4:13)

Interestingly, the Shunamit’s response does not seem to answer Elisha’s question. What message lies in this response? What great significance lies in “dwell[ing] among my people”?

The Zohar Hakadosh, commenting on the expression "ויהי היום/on that day,” posits that this is a reference to Rosh Hashanah, and the king cited is the King of kings.

The halachot of the blowing of the shofar; and the sounds that emanate from it, all conceptually reflect the same idea expressed in the Zohar, the idea of being part of the whole:

לَا בֵצֵאת דָוִדְךָ לֵיל יְשֵׁנָהוּ בִּאֲלָול בַּחוּךְ בָּךְ חַיָּם. מֵאָנָא דְּעִיָּל
רֵישָה בֵּין עָמָא (כָּלָא) לֹא יְשֵׁנָהוּ עָלְּיָי לַמֶּדֶר לֹא לְבֵית

Anyone asking to be judged not as an individual, but as one of the people, is never judged unfavorably. (Zohar Parshat Noach)

The Rambam states that the mitzvah is not observed by blowing the shofar, but rather by hearing the emergent sounds, creating an actual person-sound connection. Rambam compares the blowing of the shofar to the building of a sukkah, a necessary
preparatory step enabling one to actually observe the *mitzvah* itself. This can also be compared to buying the *lulav* and *etrog*: If one does not take them in hand on Sukkot and recite the blessing over them, one has not fulfilled his obligation. A person who blows a *shofar* into a pit, who hears only the echo but not the original sound, has not fulfilled the obligation of hearing the sound of the *shofar*.

What specifically is contained in the clarion call of the *shofar* that is meant to evoke *achdut*, unity, of sitting among one’s people? The blowing of the *shofar* and the trumpets signaled a call to action on a myriad of occasions. While sometimes the Torah seems to mention trumpets and at other times mention the *shofar*, *Tehillim* 98:6 seems to conflate the two; Rambam therefore says that while both cannot be used at the same time, sometimes the silver trumpets were sounded and sometimes the ram’s horn was sounded: “*With trumpets and shofar sound, call out before the King, Hashem.*”

These instances are either overtly specified or alluded to in the Torah:

- … proclaiming the freedom of the jubilee year (*Vayikra* 25:7-13)
- … to stir the heart to repentance, “*zychron teruah*” (*Vayikra* 25:23-25)
- … a call to journey (*Bamidbar* 10:4-5)
- … announcing a religious convocation and the holidays (*Bamidbar* 10:7)
- … a call to arms (*Bamidbar* 10:9)
- … a call to prayer for rain, or to be saved from an impending calamity (Rambam claims these purposes are alluded to in *Bamidbar* 10:9)

Finally, *Yeshayahu* 27:13 prophesies that on that day “*yetokah bashofar gadol,*” the great *shofar* blast will herald the coming of Moshiach and the ingathering of the exiles, who will all come to worship Hashem on the Holy Mountain in Yerushalayim.

Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveichik, *z’t”l*, in his seminal essay “*Kol Dodi Dofek,*” distinguishes between the unbroken sound of
the tekiah, representing strength, majesty, freedom, and religious convocation; and the wailing, sobbing sound of the teruah, marking danger, calamity and anguish. He further distinguishes between the terms machaneh (camp) and the terms eidah and kahal (congregation) in reference to Bnei Yisroel. The Rav proposes that people are often united merely by being subject to a common fate. In contrast, some communities are bonded by lofty purposes and aspirations – a common destiny.

Let us examine the major passage in the Torah where Hashem commands Moshe to fashion the silver chatzotzrot (trumpets) and shofar, and when they are to be used:

... And they shall be yours for the summoning of the assembly and to cause the camps to journey. When they sound a tekiah [long blast]... the entire eidah [assembly] shall assemble to you... When you sound truah [short blasts], the camps resting to the east shall journey... short blasts shall they sound for their journeys. Behakhilchem et hakhal/When you gather together the congregation, you shall sound a tekiah [long blast] but not a teruah [short blast]... When you go to wage war in your Land against an enemy who oppresses you, you shall sound teruah [short blasts] from the trumpets and you shall be recalled before Hashem your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies. On a day of your gladness and on your festivals and on your new moons, you shall sound the long blasts on the trumpets...

(Bamidbar 10:2-10)

The machaneh (encampment) in the desert concerned itself first and foremost with self-preservation, survival, and protection from its enemies. They were united through their common fate. At the first sign of danger, the teruah blast would summon the
masses to action. However, through their acceptance of the Torah at Sinai, *Bnei Yisroel* was transformed into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, a nation united by destiny, an *eidah* and *kahal*. The revelation at Sinai was marked by the long, piercing sound of the *tekiah*, the sound that would also announce the beginning of the holidays and of festive, religious gatherings, all leading to the ultimate *tekiah*, heralding the arrival of Moshiach.

The Ramban associates the *tekiah* with the *tzaddik* evoking Hashem’s attribute of mercy; the wailing *shevarim* with the masses, the *beinoni*, those who are neither exemplary nor iniquitous; and the staccato *teruah* with those souls who have so strayed off the *derech* and are subject to the attribute of judgment. The *shofar*-blowing ritual follows the order of *tekiah, shevarim, teruah, tekiah* – all are sounded. We begin and end with the long, unbroken sound of *tekiah*. All types of Jews, represented by all of the sounds, are embraced within that sequence, beginning and ending with the *tekiah*. All are part of my people.

Moreinu Harav Chaim Shmulevits, zt”l, *rosh yeshivah* of Mir and rebbe of our esteemed Rabbi Kelemer, zt”l, notes that while collections for various other functions and utensils in the *Mishkan* could vary based on an individual’s generosity of spirit, the donations for the *adanim*, the sockets into which the wall beams were inserted, the very foundation of the *Mishkan*, had to be a half-shekel for each individual. No one could give either more or less. For the very foundation of *Bnei Yisroel* is in its unity, in its being together as one.

Hashem wanted to build a *Mishkan* for the purpose of “dwelling among them/veshochanti betocham.” An abode for Hakodosh Boruch Hu can only exist in the midst of “My people,” when we are united. Then, as a family, an *eidah* and a *kahal*, we can never be judged unfavorably. This Rosh Hashanah, may Hashem judge our *kehillah* and all of *Bnei Yisroel* favorably.
STRENGTHEN YOURSELF
Ellen Abberbock

During the long months of Covid, when I didn’t think I could take another Shabbos without going to Shul, or another Yom Tov without seeing my great nieces and great nephews, or another month of working alone at home, I found great comfort in the last pasuk of Tehillim 27:14:

“Kaveh el Hashem, ḥazaq v’yaametz libekha, v’ kaveh el Hashem.”

“Hope to Hashem, strengthen yourself, and He will give you courage. Hope to Hashem.”

This Perek is said twice each day, from Rosh Chodesh Elul through Shemeni Atzeret. I have heard it explained that the perek contains the name of Hashem 13 times, and we say it twice per day so that Hashem’s name is said 26 times each day, equaling the numerical value of the four lettered name of Hashem, His name of mercy, Yud Kay Vav Kay. This serves as a reminder that Hashem’s mercy is always with us no matter how difficult the circumstances.

My interpretation of pasuk 14 is that our relationship with Hashem is a two-way street. If I feel hope toward Hashem and strengthen myself, Hashem will give me the courage to get through not only the difficult Covid moments, but also other life challenges. I must take the first step and believe I can attack the problem or difficulty, and Hashem will provide me with the courage to complete the task.

Rebbetzin Adina Schmidman of the Women’s Initiative Project of the Orthodox Union explains that a kav is a line, a lifeline. Pull yourself together and Hashem will be a lifeline for you. Believe in yourself and Hashem will give you courage, hence, the lifeline of hope, kaveh el Hashem.

Over the past 16 months, we’ve had to deal with many problems, but often our solutions just didn’t work. Schools tried to re-open, but then had to close and re-open again. Rabbi Pesach Krohn
advises that you attack your difficulty once, and if it doesn’t work, or you feel you’ve tripped and can’t get up, strengthen yourself and Hashem will give you courage. As Rashi comments on the pasuk: hope to Hashem, and if your prayer is not accepted, reinforce your hope and pray again. There is always another opportunity to correct, to improve and to grow.

The idea of strengthening oneself is mentioned in the daily morning bracha of Hanotein La’ya’ef Koach. We use the words of Yeshayahu 40:29 as we bless Hashem, Who gives strength to the weary. Rabbi Muskat, the rabbi of the Young Israel of Oceanside, in his 11/18/20 Take Two for Tefillah WhatsApp message, states that the Radak comments that Hashem will give strength to Klal Yisrael because they are in galus and weary, a condition which may lead to a lack of fearing Hashem. This bracha was added to our liturgy in the Middle Ages when the Jewish people needed encouragement from oppression and persecution. In the bracha, we are praising Hashem for giving us the ability to strengthen ourselves, even in very difficult times, and for giving us the strength to serve Hashem for another day.

Hashem will give us strength, but, as we discovered during Covid, we must act and fight through the problem. Rabbi Dan Ornstein of Congregation Ohav Shalom in Albany, in a Times of Israel blog dated 10/4/19, has the following interpretation of our verse:

“Imagine the author of this biblical psalm facing down a crisis or moment of extreme emotional or physical danger where he could easily crumble in total paralysis. In that moment, he is talking to himself, screwing up his strength and courage, chanting repeatedly a spiritual mantra: ‘You’ve got this. You aren’t alone. You possess the power to fight back, to fight through and win, and this is a part of Hashem’s power which transcends you and fills you, if only you would give yourself the chance to discover it. Don’t give in to the abusers, the haters, the dictators, the Pharaohs, the personal taskmasters who
would enslave you again and again if they could. Don’t...lose...hope.’
“There is nothing sunny, optimistic and passive about this kind of hope: this way of experiencing hope is demanding, active, relentlessly pushing us out of despair, out of paralysis, out of soul-murdering apathy and into action, change, transformation of the self and of the world... reminding us we’ve got this, we can do this, we shall overcome...if only we would keep hoping...against hope.”

*Hashem* will give us strength and courage, but we must act.
Moshe also had to strengthen himself and act when erecting the *Mishkan*. *Shemos 39:33* says, “They brought the Tabernacle to Moses, the Tent and all its utensils; the hooks, the planks, its bars, its pillars and its sockets.” The Artscroll *Chumash*--Stone Edition comments that *Klal Yisrael* could not erect the *Mishkan* because it was too heavy. *Hashem* wanted Moshe to have the privilege of erecting the *Mishkan* because Moshe had not had a share in the actual work of the *Mishkan*. Moshe asked *Hashem*, how can anyone erect the *Mishkan* when it was so heavy? *Hashem* told Moshe to make the attempt and use his hands, and the *Mishkan* would stand up by itself as if Moshe had erected it. “Therefore, the Torah states in the passive voice...the Tabernacle was erected... (*Shemos 40:17*) to imply although Moses tried to erect it, it stood up by itself miraculously (*Rashi*)”.
Moshe acted and the *Mishkan* was built.

Once we begin acting, we must act with hope that our difficulty will be resolved. However, we must also remember not to let the difficulty so overwhelm us that it overtakes our heart, our personality, and our essence. Rabbi Dr. Eliyahu Safran in his *Times of Israel* blog from 8/14/18 views our pasuk as a call to optimism:

“The second set of verses, verses 7-14, are a call for help on behalf of all Jews. It is a call reminiscent of the sign put up by Breslaver chasidim on the gate to their ghetto
during the Second World War: ‘Yiden, zeit zich nisht m’yaesh – Jews, don’t give up!’ That is not pessimism. That is strength and hope! That is looking at half a glass and seeing fullness, not emptiness. Pessimism is not Jews who daven, fast and keep the Sabbath. Pessimism is Jews not davening, not learning. Pessimism is Jews who are assimilating and intermarrying.”

Rabbi Safran writes about a student with a disability who was in the top of his class. One day, a fellow classmate asked the student about his disability. The student responded that he was born with it. The classmate then asked how he could face the world so confidently with such a disability. The student responded that he never let the disease touch his heart. Rabbi Safran concludes:

“The world is filled with problems and challenges. There are serious issues that we must resolve, difficult questions to answer, and seemingly impossible crises to tackle – but let us be as the student and not let those things touch our hearts. For the Jew, the glass is always half full, for it is Hashem who has poured it.”

Don’t let your difficulties touch your heart, the essential you. Rather, strengthen yourself, remain optimistic, hope to Hashem, and He will provide you with the strength and courage to overcome your difficulties.

The recent lifting of most Covid restrictions reminds us that none of our difficulties are permanent. Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom, in an article on Torah.org from 2014, says the following about our pasuk:

“To the proud marcher in the Independence Day parade of 1968 and to the mourning relative outside of Sbarro’s; to the confident trader on September 10 and to the despairing relative with a picture titled ‘Missing’ on September 11; to the one and to the other the psalmist
turns and exhorts: Kaveh el Hashem. Never lose your hope and expectation and your awareness that all of this may not last; and never give up hope, falling into the despair of accepting your isolation as permanent. Kaveh el Hashem.”

Our hoping to Hashem for strength to accomplish a difficult or impossible task reminds me of the story of Pharaoh’s daughter, Batya, when she tried to draw the basket carrying baby Moshe from the Nile. Shemos 2:5 says, “Pharoh’s daughter went down to bathe by the river and her maidens walked along the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and she sent her amah, her maidservant, and she took it.”

The Artscroll Chumash--Stone Edition comments that the term “amah/maidservant” means, on a simple level, that Batya sent one of her maids to get the basket. However, the word amah can also be translated as her arm. Batya “extended her arm and miraculously it became long enough to reach the basket (Rashi). Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk commented homiletically that her example teaches us that one should never assume that a task is impossible: “She was far from the basket, yet she reached out for it, and Hashem enabled her to attain her goal.”

Further, on seeking to achieve the impossible, Rabbi Kalman Packouz, in Shabbat Shalom Weekly Shemot 5768 on Aish.com, quotes a d’var Torah from Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin:

“Many communal activists were at a meeting led by Rabbi Meir Shapiro, the Rosh Yeshiva of Lublin. They were discussing saving people’s lives. Those at the meeting said what needed to be done was impossible and that there was no way they would be successful.

“Rabbi Shapiro reminded those present of the miracle of Batya’s arm extending to reach Moshe and save him. ‘Why did she stretch out her arm in the first place? Didn't she realize that it was impossible for her to reach Moshe?’ asked Rabbi Shapiro.”
“He replied that a person must always try to do everything he can to save someone. Even if you think that your efforts on behalf of others cannot possibly succeed, still make a sincere effort to try anyway. You will be surprised to find that you will frequently accomplish much more than you imagined. ‘This applies to us,’ said Rabbi Shapiro. ‘We must do everything we can, even if we do not really believe that we will be successful. The Almighty often helps and the efforts put in prove to be fruitful.’”

The challenges we face throughout the coming year may be difficult, if not impossible, but if we, like Moshe and Batya, strengthen ourselves, take action, stay optimistic and hope to Hashem, Hashem will provide us with the courage we need to overcome our challenges and achieve the impossible.

May we, our community and Klal Yisrael be blessed with a year of unimaginable accomplishments.

G’Mar Kasima Tova!
Rosh Hashanah: A Reflection on Parenthood
Aliza Donath-Weinryb

Rosh Hashanah, that awe-inspiring and celebratory overture to the Jewish year, is filled with contradictory moods and sentiments. On the one hand, we approach the Divine with a sense of fear, penitence, and self-reflection. On the other, we dress in our finest clothes and eat elaborate meals as befits the happiest of holidays. Even the time of year appears equal parts appropriate and head-scratching. It is a changing of the seasons to be sure, but it comes at the end of the summer, a time of year when the days begin getting shorter, darker, and colder, when the flowers die and even our food gets less fresh and more canned. It is a day that comes at the intersection of hope and dread, where the possibilities are laid out before us, and much of our approach toward it depends on our own sense of optimism, confidence, and gratitude.

It is much like any other beginning in the life cycle: starting a new school or job, moving to a new town, getting married, or having children: equal parts excitement and anxiety. We know that whatever step we are taking, there is no turning back. Whatever happens in this coming chapter of our lives will leave us forever altered, for better or for worse. We could find our best friends or true calling, or come away bitter, disappointed, and unfulfilled. We could build the beautiful, loving family of our dreams, or find those hopes dashed by circumstances beyond our control. In all of these cases we are aware that SOME of the outcome depends on our doing our best, but that most of it will be shaped by unseen forces: luck, possibly, or G-d. Perhaps no topic better explores this theme of the Yamim Noraim than parenthood.

All four Tanakh texts of Rosh Hashanah (both Torah readings and Haftarot) are stories about parents and children. They touch on both the highs and lows of the experience, and feature many of the hallmark feelings that come with having children: elation and disbelief at the birth of Yitzchak, panic and helplessness with Hagar and Yishmael in the desert, immeasurable conflict and
relief at the Akeida, deepest pain of infertility and gratitude at the miracle of a successful conception and birth in Shirat Chana, and despair with boundless love at Tefillat Rachel. All of these stories center on aspiring or experienced parents and their relationship, not so much with their children as individuals, but with parenthood. It seems especially fitting when paired with one of the identifying Tefillot of Rosh Hashanah: Avinu Malkeinu, wherein we call out to Hashem first as our Parent and only second as our King.

Even the time of year is no accident when viewed through this lens. Rosh Hashanah comes during the beginning of the year’s final gathering of crops, occurring a mere two weeks before Sukkot, Chag HaAsif, the holiday of the harvest. In Ancient Israel, where most of the population made their living through farming, this was an exciting and highly stressful time of year. The nation was literally about to enjoy the fruits of their labor, but first would come the anxiety: “Now is when we find out if our prayers and efforts of the previous year pay off. Soon we will look at our completed harvest and see if it will be enough to get us through the winter, to sell and ensure our family’s survival until the next growing season.” That mixture of pride at seeing the mature grain they worked hard to grow, excitement to taste the fruit off the vine, and fear that, in the end, all efforts will have turned out to not quite be enough, echo parenthood as well.

All of this comes together to offer an interesting perspective of the Jewish New Year. We enter the year with nervousness, self-reflection, and excitement, of course, but perhaps also with a sense of empathy for our Creator. If we are setting out on our year’s journey with the mixed feelings of a new or aspiring parent, our Father/Sovereign may be seeing us through the lens of the experienced One. Hashem’s children have worked hard through the past year, made many mistakes and possibly had a few victories, and now bring their test results/completed projects/new children to present to the older generation. Perhaps there is pride, or maybe disappointment, and it is up to God to decide on the next steps: fitting reward or punishment, methods to do better next time, or to open a new path that may guide the
children to greater purpose or to better decisions in the future. What we hope for most is that He continues to give us the endless empathy and love of a parent in the capacity only the Parent of us all is capable of.
According to the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 16b), there are three books opened on Rosh Hashanah: The tzadikim gemurim are written and signed immediately for life; the resha’im are written and signed immediately for death; and for beinonim, it depends: if they “merit,” they are written for life, but if they don’t “merit,” they are written for death. Without addressing what “life” and “death” mean in this context¹, let us try to understand what it means to be a tzadik, a rasha, and a beinoni, and what it means to “merit.”

Rashi tells us that a rasha has “majority sins” and that a beinoni is “half and half.” Presumably, Rashi would explain that a tzadik is someone who has “majority merit.”

Rashi seems to be relating our gemara to a gemara in Kiddushin 40b, which states that a person should always see him or herself as “half and half”; one mitzvah will tip the scale for merit, and one transgression will tip the scale to demerit. The gemara states:

¹ See Tos ibid. and Sifsei Chaim, Moadim Vol. 1, pp. 71-76 for an extensive discussion on this question.
According to Rashi, the question of whether one is a tzaddik, rasha, or beinoni deals simply with the number of merits or sins. If one, therefore, wants to “merit” changing from a beinoni to a tzadik, he/she has to do one mitzvah to tip the scale.

The Rambam, however, seems to have a different understanding of how one changes status from a beinoni to a tzadik. The Rambam (Teshuva 3:3) writes that only if a beinoni does teshuvah during the aseres yimei teshuvah then he/she is signed for life:

In the next halacha, however, the Rambam (Teshuva 3:4) then states that every person should see him/herself on Rosh Hashanah as having an equal amount of merits and sins, and that one act can tip the scales. He goes on to explain that this is the basis for the custom to do extra acts of kindness, mitzvos, and prayer during the aseres yimei teshuvah:
It is difficult to understand why the Rambam says in Halacha 3 that a beinoni has to do teshuvah to reach the status of tzadik if any mitzvah should suffice to tip the scale. The Rambam even says so himself in the next halacha! So what does the Rambam mean by his statement that only “if one does teshuvah,” he/she can reach the status of tzadik?

This question is asked by one of the great leaders of the Mussar movement, Rav Yitzchak “Itzele” Blazer. Rav Blazer, zt”l, provides an answer that delineates two different aspects of the judgment on Rosh Hashanah. He explains that, in addition to the judgment regarding the number of merits and sins that one has accumulated over the course of the year, there is a simultaneous but separate judgment regarding whether the person is doing teshuvah. Even if a person has many merits, if he doesn’t take advantage of the invaluable opportunity of teshuvah—cleansing oneself from sin by feeling remorseful and determining to not commit the sin again—then the ability to be included in the realm of tzadik is not available. This is why the Rambam says that doing teshuvah during aseres yimei teshuvah is a prerequisite for being in the camp of tzaddikim. Rav Blazer implies that neglecting to perform teshuva may be so grave that even if one adds many merits during aseres yimei teshuvah, the transgression of not repenting will outweigh all of the good deeds.

Rav Yisroel HaKohen Rappaport, zt”l, provides a different approach to answer our question on the Rambam. He explains that when the Rambam in Halacha 4 encourages each person to add more mitzvos during the aseres yimei teshuvah, that’s not merely to “tip the scales” to ensure the merits outweigh the sins. Rather, performing more mitzvos expresses that one is
establishing a new way of serving Hashem. It’s making a statement that a person is doing teshuvah and is interested in being more cognizant of the mitzvos that he/she is commanded and required to fulfill. This change in attitude is consistent, therefore, with what the Rambam states in Halacha 3, that one has to do teshuvah to reach the level of tzadik. There has to be an outward expression of the inner will to be a better servant of God.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner, zt”l, takes this idea one step further. Rav Hutner explains that when the Talmud, Rashi, and Rambam speak of a person with “majority merit” or “majority sin,” they are not speaking quantitatively. Rather, they are referring to character traits. A “majority merit” person is someone whose essence is in line with Torah, mitzvos, and what God wants, even though he or she may make mistakes here or there. On the contrary, a “majority sin” person is someone who is not in line with the will of God, even if he or she may do mitzvos from time to time. What, then, is a beinoni, “mechtzeh al mechtezeh,” meaning “half and half”? Rav Hutner explains that a beinoni is someone who lacks identity and is in “no man’s land,” sometimes in line with what God wants but then at other times is not so. It therefore is clear why a beinoni would have to do teshuva to change his/her status to tzadik. It is not a matter of merely adding merit to tip the scales, but it is rather a fundamental change of attitude. Adding more mitzvos during aseres yimei teshuva is a behavioral manifestation of an internal perspective shift. This is the teshuvah of the beinoni. It is a decision that he or she is no longer going to be “sometimes in and sometimes out,” but rather begins to identify as someone who is “all in” to do the will of God.

The Rambam tells us that we should all enter into Rosh Hashanah thinking of ourselves as beinonis, but throughout aseres yimei teshuvah, we should come out of the High Holiday season as tzaddikim. May we use this auspicious time for proper self-reflection, and may we all be zoche to reach the status of tzaddikim as people with the attitude of “majority merit” and be written and signed in the Book of Life.
THE POWER OF EREV CHAG
Jordy Gross

One of the crazy, wonderful things about having been in religious academic institutions for so many years is that without my even noticing, my actions and activities were always guided by the Jewish calendar. Whether it was the model Pesach Seder in preschool (yes, I even fell asleep during that one), learning Megillat Esther in preparation for Purim in high school, or things like having time off to prepare for Pesach, or having the halachot of each holiday incorporated into the curriculum, it was reassuring to know that no matter what time of year was coming up, I’d be prepared by my teachers and friends for its arrival. Frankly, it was awesome.

But what happens when we no longer have the Jewish calendar embedded into our academic, professional, or personal schedules? We find that the Shabbat Queen comes each week, whether or not we prepare for her arrival. The New Year doesn’t ask us if we’re ready. It pulls us in head first, and it’s up to us to make sure we’re prepared when it does.

The Gemara in Avodah Zarah (3a) is often quoted in the context of being prepared; it tells us:

"מי שטרח בערב שבת יאכל בשבת"  "One who toils on the eve of Shabbat will eat on Shabbat.”

We can easily understand this in a physical sense. One who cooks before Shabbat has food to eat on Shabbat. The same can be said for any preparation we do for any festival. Many of our halachic obligations are indeed dependent on our having prepared for them in advance. For example, we cannot sit in a sukkah if we have not already built one; we cannot shake a lulav if we have not yet acquired one.

This holds true in a more spiritual sense, as well. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was known to articulate one manifestation of this in his urging of us not to limit ourselves to being Shomer Shabbat, but to be Shomer Erev Shabbat, as well. He suggests that we not allow Shabbat to stumble upon us, but that we
actively go out and greet her, whether that be by reviewing *Parshat Hashavua* in preparation for hearing it read in synagogue or even by just taking a few moments to reflect before approaching *Shabbat* each week.

Everyone has a different way of injecting meaning into their own religious experiences. Some people get satisfaction out of the oftentimes intricate physical preparations for *chagim*. Others find it uplifting to spend time learning about the details of each chag. In fact, this is actually the recommendation of the Alter Rebbe in his *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* (429:1-3), where he writes that it is a *mitzvah* for each person to learn the *halachot* of each chag before it arrives. This is based on a practice from the time of the *Beit Hamikdash* when the Jewish people were instructed to learn and teach the laws relating to each festival and its corresponding sacrifices during the 30 days prior to the holiday itself. This served a very practical purpose. People should learn how to do things so that they will then know how to do them properly when the actual time arrives. A novel idea, don’t you think?

However, this achieves more than just filling in the gap in people’s knowledge of Jewish law. The very act of preparing for a festival--or any experience--not only serves a practical purpose but also gives us some spiritual ownership over our *chag*, as well. By virtue of expending energy into making a *chag* meaningful, we give ourselves a greater feeling of involvement and appreciation for it. This is what Rabbi Sacks describes as the IKEA effect: we value what we create with our own time and efforts--regardless of how that manifests for each person. Rabbanit Chana Henkin, for example, suggested last year that we take the time before a festival to research the songs/tunes that speak to us. I, myself, like to take an hour or two before *Yom Kippur* to sit silently and write about my past year and my hopes for the year to come. In the words of *Kohelet* (9:10), "כל אשר תמצא ידך להעשות בך עשה". Whatever it is that speaks to you, do it with your all!

Returning for a moment to our text in *Avodah Zarah*, the phrase "מי שתרח בשרף שבת יאכל בת척ה" holds much significance in itself.
However, its context in the Gemara can teach us something more. The Gemara there relates a conversation that will take place between Hashem and the gentile nations after the coming of Mashiach. In it, the other nations ask Gd to grant them the Torah anew, so that they may demonstrate their commitment to it and thereby merit in the World to Come. It is there that Gd responds to them telling them it is too late. One who toils on Erev Shabbat will eat on Shabbat. In other words, only one who has put in the work in This World will merit in the World to Come; there are no shortcuts.

The Gemara goes further, but if we pause here, we can already note that even these other nations recognize that they can truly value what is given to them only if they can have even a small part in working for it. They thus do not ask for a part in The World to Come. Rather, they ask for the opportunity to feel that they have earned it.

Thank God, we are all blessed with opportunities that inevitably present themselves each year. The ten day time period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, a period designated as a time when we are meant to focus on atonement, is just one example. The question that remains is how each of us makes use of that time, which things can we focus and capitalize on that will make this time worthwhile? It becomes our responsibility to find those things, invest in them, and take pride in them. May we all continue to find meaningful ways to make the most of the opportunities we have for ourselves and for others.

Written in memory of Rabbi Yehuda Kelemer zt”l, may his legacy be a blessing.
GOD, THE ULTIMATE GARDENER
Yafa Lamm

This year is a *shemitah* year, a year in which the land in Israel (including potted plants and rooftop gardens) must remain fallow, unplanted and unworked in any capacity. This, therefore, is a good time to explore the role of the land and of agriculture in our lives.

Mankind has always worked hard to control our environment, to create a better life for ourselves, for our families, and for the people we care about. In *Bereishit* 2:15, the Torah tells us that Hashem put Adam in Gan Eden “*le’ovdah uleshomrah,*” to work it and to guard it. The purpose of man was to work and preserve the land. At the very beginning of creation, we have the first record of the ideal of conservation. Part of that preservation process is allowing the land to rest. In this context, we may better understand the commandment of *Shemitah.* Hashem’s promise to us is that we will increase our land’s yield provided that we follow this *mitzvah.* Numerous scientific studies on leaving the land fallow have found a marked increase in land’s fertility for many years after a fallow period.

In the beginning of our national history, we started out as cattle ranchers. Joseph’s brothers identified themselves as such when they descended to Egypt. In our modern, industrialized high-tech world, however, we do not usually think much about ranching. However, as shepherds and cattlemen, we were very aware of our dependence on the rains to produce grazing land for our flocks. Once we conquered the land of Israel, we developed a new occupation, farming. This was the main means of survival, as the land had not been fully settled yet. *Shemitah,* while being a blessing from Hashem, was also a test of faith in a time when fifty percent of our survival depended on farming and agriculture. Having spent time with both ranchers and farmers, I have learned that this group of people have a deeper understanding that their livelihood is in God's hands than do most of those living in the cities and suburbs.
The increase in technology moves us forward when it comes to modern conveniences, but it has also caused us to be further removed from the natural world. It’s almost as if we have lost touch with the natural world around us and entered a virtual world.

Because of the social distancing rules in place in the last year and a half due to Covid, we were forced to keep company with ourselves and turn inward, to really get to know ourselves. This isolation made us better able to understand how the outside world shapes us, and how we shape the outside world.

The pandemic has forced many of us to look beyond our interpersonal relationships and look into both our relationships with ourselves and our relationship with G-d. It has also been a catalyst for a tremendous number of people to discover, and for some to rediscover, the beauty of nature. Garden nurseries couldn’t keep up with the demand. Now more than ever, people are taking walks and going on hikes, biking, visiting botanical gardens, and even gardening themselves. Could it be that we are becoming a nation of gardeners? “There are certain very stabilizing forces in gardening that can ground us when we are feeling shaky, uncertain and terrified,” writes Joel Flagler, a professor of plant biology at Rutgers University. “It’s these predictable outcomes and predictable rhythms of the garden that are very comforting right now.”

There are plenty of articles and magazines that discuss the mental and physical health benefits of gardening. The same can be said for taking some time to relax and to get to know ourselves. Shemitah in essence does both, and the pandemic, while an incredibly trying time in our history, also gave us the opportunity to do both.

Now that we are coming into a shemitah year, it is a time for us to let go of our efforts to master the land and remember Who really runs the show. It is very easy for us to falsely credit ourselves and our efforts with our success. Yet the fact remains
that, ultimately, a successful yield, whether in land or in business, is and always has been in G-d’s hands.

We are all tired, unsettled, and anxious, and I think it’s time we keep reaching back to our roots of אמונה and ברוך, to our faith in הקדוש ברוך הוא and trust in the ultimate Gardener of the world, to set things right in His own time. Walk, stop, and smell the roses. Perhaps even plant a garden of your own. Then you will be able to see and appreciate the handiwork of the Almighty.
CAN SHEMITTAH BE OBSERVED REMOTELY?
Rabbi Meir Finkelstein

The past year taught us much about living remotely. During Covid-19, working remotely, learning remotely, and teaching remotely became facets of everyday life. Having seen the advantages of online platforms, some schools have now even incorporated remote learning days into their schedules to take the place of what would have normally been vacation days. But can remote activity truly become a durable staple of life? Is every endeavor transferable to such platforms, or are there some things which need to remain in person? This article will explore this question in light of one, specific example - the mitzvah of shemittah.

Rosh Hashanah 5782 introduces not only a new Jewish year, but a year in which Jewish farmers are forbidden from working their land and from maintaining private ownership over their crops. This agricultural-based mitzvah applies only in the land of Israel and, as such, members of Chutz La’Aretz do not participate much in the observance of shemittah. But is this entirely true? Is shemittah indeed a mitzvah that one must be present to observe, or is there perhaps a remote platform available for those who reside in Chutz La’Aretz, outside of the Land of Israel?

Let us analyze this topic in light of a commonly discussed question regarding the mitzvah of shemittah: is there a value for people who live in Chutz La’Aretz to purchase a small portion of land in Israel temporarily, for the duration of the shemittah year, in order to fulfill the mitzvah of shemittah? The question is two-fold: firstly, does one gain anything by such effort or does the mitzvah apply only to one who regularly owns land in Israel? Secondly, if we assume that there is value to such an acquisition, does the halachah require, or even recommend, that one make such a purchase?

The background for analyzing this topic is found in Masechet Avodah Zarah (15a - 15b). The gemara there prohibits selling
working animals to non-Jews as a gezeirah, lest one rent or lend the animal to a non-Jew and the non-Jew will work with the animal on Shabbat. This would constitute a violation of the prohibition of "למען ינוח שורך ותומרך" (Shemot 23:12), which mandates that a Jew’s animal rest on Shabbat. The gemara then states that if one can reasonably assume that the non-Jew will not work the animal on Shabbat, such as if he purchases it for the purpose of slaughtering it, then it is permitted to sell it to him. The gemara compares this to selling one’s land to another Jew during the shemittah year. If one can reasonably assume that the buyer will not work the land during shemittah, then this is permissible. If not, it is prohibited.

Ritva (ibid s.v. אמר לי) explains that the two prohibitions are compared because they bear great similarity. Just like one is commanded to give his animal rest on Shabbat, so, too, he is commanded to give his land rest during shemittah. Tosafot Rid (ibid s.v. אמר לי), however, takes issue with the gemara’s comparison. He contends that there is no mitzvah for one to ensure that his land rest during shemittah; rather the mitzvah is that he may not work the land. Selling the land to another Jew, then, would not constitute any violation whatsoever. Even if the other Jew decides to work the land, the buyer will not violate any aveirah. The only issue to contend with here is the aveirah (sin) of lifnei iver, which prohibits one from facilitating another Jew’s violation of an aveirah. This, however, cannot be put on the same level as a proper mitzvah, like ensuring that one’s animal rests on Shabbat. That mitzvah does not just entail that one not work with his animal, but he must also make sure that the animal rests, no matter who is taking care of it. In light of this, Tosafot Rid questions the gemara’s comparison between the halachot of having one’s animal rest on shabbat and not working the land during shemittah.
Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger\(^2\) notes that there seems to be a fundamental difference of opinion between Ritva and Tosafot Rid as to the nature of the *mitzvah* of *shemittah*. According to Ritva, the *mitzvah* is on the *land* - i.e. the land must rest during *shemittah*. According to Tosafot Rid, the *mitzvah* is on the *individual* - i.e. man must not work the land during *shemittah*. Rabbi Neuburger notes that this point is classically formulated as a *machloket* (dispute) between the Minchat Chinuch and the Chazon Ish. Minchat Chinuch (*siman* 326) develops the idea that the *mitzvah* is that the *land* rest during *shemittah*, while the Chazon Ish (*Hilchot Shevi’it siman* 17, *ot* 25) maintains that the *mitzvah* is that *man* should not work the land during *shemittah*.

Rabbi Neuburger further notes that this analysis can shed light on our question. If the *mitzvah* is for *man* to abstain from working the land during *shemittah*, then there should be no difference between one’s own land and land owned by another. There is a blanket prohibition to work land during *shemittah*, regardless of ownership. As such, there would be no value in purchasing land for the purpose of leaving it fallow during *shemittah*. But if the *mitzvah* is for one to give his *land* rest during *shemittah*, then perhaps this applies only to one’s own land. The *mitzvah*, according to this formulation, would be that one give rest to his own land during *shemittah*. According to this second approach, there is room to discuss whether it is of value to purchase land for the purpose of letting it rest during *shemittah*.

There is an apparent inconsistency in the Rambam’s presentation of this topic. In his presentation of *hilchot shemittah*, the Rambam indicates, like Tosafot Rid and the Chazon Ish, that the *mitzvah* is that people abstain from working the land during *shemittah*. For example, the Rambam begins that set of *halachot* by stating:

> מצות עשה לשבות בשנה שביעית משבות הארץ ושבות האילנות שנ’’ו שבת

> נאמר שבת לה’ ושמירת בק inversión שבת

\(^2\) All quotations from Rabbi Neuburger in this article were heard from Rabbi Neuburger in his *shiurim* on *hilchot shemittah* given in Teaneck, New Jersey summer, 2021.
“It is a positive commandment to rest in the seventh year from working the land and from performing work on trees, as the pasuk says, ‘And the land shall rest a shabbat for Hashem.’ And it says, ‘From plowing and harvesting, you shall rest.’” (Hilchot Shemittah V’yovel 1:1)

However, in his introduction to those halachot, the Rambam writes that one of the mitzvot of shemittah is “שתשבות הארץ – that the land should rest from work during the seventh year.” Which formulation is correct? Is the mitzvah for man to abstain from working the land or for the land to rest? Rabbi Neuburger suggests that the Rambam can be explained with a more precise formulation of the Chazon Ish’s opinion. Earlier, we cited the Chazon Ish as maintaining that shemittah is a mitzvah on man. This is implied by the Chazon Ish’s statement that:

“ plaats geldt omdat de arbeider de verbod niet verschaft”

“It is implied from Tosafot in Masechet Avodah Zarah that the prohibition which mandates that a field rest does not depend upon ownership, rather one who works the land violates the prohibition which mandates that the land rest.” (Chazon Ish ibid) However, immediately afterwards, the Chazon Ish seems to contradict this. He writes:

“שהאיסור של שביתה בקרקעTELOR לשביתת השדה ושל בשיתת השדה ושל בשיתת השדה ושל בשיתת השדה ושל בשיתת השדה绿色”

“That the prohibition mandating that the land rest depends upon the land and the prohibition is violated with the land.” (ibid)

Here the Chazon Ish indicates that the mitzvah is that the land should rest. To complicate matters further, the Chazon Ish writes next:

“אבל אם תשב בתכונת מעודר ושביתת ישראל ושל בשיתת השדה של בשיתת השדה ושל בשיתת השדה ושל בשיתת השדה ושל בשיתת השדה(ArrayList)

“But if a non-Jew is hired to work the land, the Jew does not violate the prohibition which mandates that the land rest.” (ibid)

How is this to be understood? If the mitzvah is that one allows his land to rest, why should it matter whether the work is done by a Jew or by a non-Jew?
Rabbi Neuburger suggests that the Chazon Ish is hinting at a more precise definition of the mitzvah of shemittah. The mitzvah is neither exclusively on man nor on the land, rather it is a mitzvah that the land rests from Jewish work. In other words, the mitzvah is indeed that the land rests, but only that it rests from a specific type of work: namely, that which is performed by a Jew and not a non-Jew. Perhaps, this is the intention of the Rambam, as well. His varied formulation of the mitzvah perhaps indicates at this nuanced definition that the mitzvah is to have the land rest from Jewish work.

Perhaps we can support Rabbi Neuburger’s understanding of the Rambam based on comments of the Rambam elsewhere. It is not uncommon that the Rambam defines a mitzvah differently in the halachot pertaining to that mitzvah than he does in the introduction to those halachot. Take the following examples. The Rambam introduces hilchot teshuvah by stating that these halachot contain one mitzvah: namely, "שישוב החוטא מחטאו לפני ה' ויתודה" - “That the sinner repent from his sin before Hashem and confess.” However, in Hilchot Teshuvah, the Rambam writes, "כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו חייב להתודות לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא" - “When one repents from his sin he is obligated to confess before God Who is The Blessed One.” (Hilchot Teshuvah 1:1) Here the Rambam presents teshuvah as a mere prerequisite, while the mitzvah is confession. Similarly, when it comes to the mitzvah of

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3 Rabbi Neuburger developed this idea in light of a comment of the Ramban that Eretz Yisrael only gives forth its fruits when Jews work the land. According to this, we can formulate the Chazon Ish’s position as being that the land must be given rest from the normal way of working it. For Eretz Yisrael, this means that the work is performed by a Jew. Rabbi Neuburger pointed out that this is merely a mashal, but not an exact parallel, because history has proven that although the land indeed only responds to work performed there when Jews control Eretz Yisrael, it responds even to work performed by non-Jews at such a time. However, the notion that the mitzvah is for the land to rest only from significant forms of work is supported by other sources. Rabbi Neuburger cited Ritva (Moed Katan 3a s.v. מה זריעה מיוחדת) and Chidushei HaRan (ibid) who include only significant forms of work in the prohibition of shemittah.
tefillah, the Rambam introduces those halachot by stating that there is a mitzvah “ל逓ה את ה’ בתפלה בכל יום” - “to serve Hashem with prayer every day.” However, in the halachot, the Rambam writes “מצותעשהלהתפללבכל יום” - “It is a positive commandment to daven every day.” (Hilchot Tefillah 1:1) What happened to the aspect of serving Hashem, which was mentioned in the introduction?

Rabbi Soloveitchik (Al Hateshuvah - “kocho shel viduy”) explains that with respect to most mitzvot, the act and fulfillment of the mitzvah are one and the same. For example, when one performs the act of taking a lulav, that is the fulfillment of the mitzvah. However, for some mitzvot, there is a prescribed act that is not the essence of the fulfillment of the mitzvah. Teshuvah and tefillah are examples of such mitzvot. The essence of these mitzvot are fulfilled internally. Teshuvah is an internal experience of repenting from one’s ways and tefillah is an inner acceptance of Hashem’s kingship. The halachah, however, prescribes objective, external acts of prayer and confession through which one is to conjure up these experiences. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that when the Rambam speaks about the halachot of a given mitzvah, he describes the act that the mitzvah mandates. But in the introduction to the halachot, he presents the essential fulfillment of the mitzvah. Perhaps this idea can explain our Rambam, as well. The essential fulfillment of the mitzvah of shemittah is that the land be given rest. In practice, the way in which to ensure that this happens is by mandating that man refrain from working the land.4

4 Perhaps this is consistent with the Rambam’s approach to the reason for the mitzvah of shemittah. Sefer Hachinuch (siman 84) writes that the reason for this mitzvah is to train people to have bitachon in Hashem. According to that, the essential fulfillment of the mitzvah lies in man’s rest, not in the land’s rest. However, the Rambam explains in Moreh Nevuchim (vol. 3 ch. 39) that the reason for the mitzvah is in order to benefit the poor. Throughout shemittah, produce is accessible to all men equally, regardless of how much one owns. Furthermore, allowing the land to rest for a year increases its future productivity. According to this, the mitzvah’s fulfillment does not lie in any individual’s abstaining from work, rather in the land’s collective rest.
The definition we have developed for the Rambam allows for the legitimacy of the practice of buying land in Eretz Yisrael in order that it should lie fallow during shemittah. If the mitzvah is on the land, perhaps one must own land in order to fulfill the mitzvah. However, Rav Asher Weiss\(^5\) objected to such a practice for three reasons. Firstly, although halachah encourages obligating oneself in mitzvot that he would not otherwise be obligated to observe,\(^6\) this is only true for certain types of mitzvot. It applies to mitzvot aseh, such as tzitzit and birkat kohanim, which serve a ritual purpose, but not to mitzvot aseh that are goal oriented nor to mitzvot lo ta’aseh. Shemittah contains both an aseh and a lo ta’aseh, but its aseh is goal oriented--abstaining from working the land is for the purpose of having the land rest during shemittah. It is not an act that has inherent ritualistic significance, and, therefore, one should not proactively obligate himself in such a mitzvah.

Rav Weiss further noted that the mitzvah of shemittah does not seem to depend upon ownership. Although the pasuk states “לֹא תַעֲנֹ֥שׁ וְלֹא תַזְּרֵֽעְתֶּ֖ךָ” - “you shall not plant your field and you shall not prune your vineyard,” (Vayikra 25:4), everyone agrees that one violates this aveirah even by working land that is not his own. If that is the case, then when it comes to fulfillment of the mitzvat aseh of shemittah, regarding which the pasuk makes no mention of ownership - “וּשְׁבַתתָּ הָאָרֶץ שְׁבַת לֵלָ֖ה” - “and the land shall rest a shabbat for Hashem,” (ibid:2) - one certainly need not own land.

Finally, Rav Weiss expressed that the spirit of the law does not seem to condone this practice. The spirit of the mitzvah of shemittah is that a Jewish farmer relinquishes his land for one year and demonstrates great strength in his reliance upon Hashem. For one to proactively purchase land in order to have it lie fallow, while still engaging in his business as usual back at

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\(^5\) Heard in a shiur delivered in Teaneck, New Jersey on 7/9/21

\(^6\) See Menachot 41a, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 24:1, and Beur Halachah 128:4.
home, seems to run counter to the whole idea this mitzvah means to communicate.

In conclusion, then, is there no way to observe shemittah remotely? Is shemittah indeed a mitzvah only for those who live in Eretz Yisrael? Rav Weiss suggests that there is one way for B’nei Chutz La’aretz to fulfill this mitzvah. The gemara (Menachot 110a) teaches that if one studies the sections of Torah that pertain to korbanot (sacrifices), it is considered as if he offered those korbanot. Although the gemara makes such a statement only with reference to korbanot, the Acharonim⁷ apply it to all mitzvot. Whenever one cannot fulfill a mitzvah, he should learn the Torah pertaining to that mitzvah and it will be considered as if he performed the mitzvah.

As we enter shemittah year 5782, we should think about how we will take part in this mitzvah. Those in Eretz Yisrael can fulfill the actual mitzvot pertaining to working the land, while those of us in Chutz La’aretz can access the remote option of learning the halachot of shemittah.

Whichever way we choose to fulfill this mitzvah, we should appreciate this opportunity that comes only once every seven years. In the zechut of our observance of this shemittah year 5782, may we be zoche to fulfill the mitzvah in its fullest sense when the Beit Hamikdash is rebuilt, bimheyra biyameinu.

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⁷ See Mabit (introduction to Kiryat Sefer and Beit Elokim Sha’ar Hateshuvah siman 8) and Sh’lah (introduction).
ORGANIZING YOUR LIFE: MARIE KONDO MEETS HALACHA
Bracha Rutner

How do we organize our lives? A popular method that has arisen in the last few years is to “Marie Kondo” your life--aka organize according to Marie Kondo’s method. This method consists of 6 steps:

1. Commit yourself to tidying up.
2. Imagine your ideal lifestyle.
3. Finish discarding first. Before getting rid of items, sincerely thank each item for serving its purpose.
4. Tidy by category, not location.
5. Follow the right order.
6. Ask yourself if it sparks joy.

This method works for many, but this is only one way to approach organizing. There is an alternate framework to organizing presented to us in the Gemara. Let us first look at the Gemara in Menachot on דף סד עמוד ב.

The Mishnah there teaches us that the barley for the korban omer should be brought from fields close to Jerusalem. However, if the barley from those fields were not ripe, the omer could be brought from any fields in Eretz Yisrael. Why should the barley for the omer meal offering be brought from fields proximate to Jerusalem? The Gemara provides us with two explanations: there is a pasuk that indicates that the grain should be soft and fresh. Consequently, it should be brought from close by, not from a place where it might become stale and hardened during a long journey. Alternatively, the Gemara states that the principle of אין מעבירין על המצות - that one does not postpone the performance of the mitzvot. When presented with the opportunity to perform a mitzvah, one should perform it at the first possible opportunity. The first opportunity may present itself due to its proximity.
What is the rule of אין מעבירין על המצוות? We learn the Gemara here that we should perform mitzvot as soon as possible. From an organizational perspective, we are taught that actions or tasks that we need to perform should be done as quickly as possible.

This rule of אין מעבירין appears in 5 other places in shas and has slightly different applications in each case.

While we are taught in the Gemara in Menachot to perform mitzvot at the earliest opportunity, we see that sometimes this is not the case.

In the Gemara in Megillah on דף ו עמוד ב, we learn about the debate between Rabbi Eliezer b'Rabi Yossi and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel about a leap year during which there are two Adars.

The question is posed - during which Adar do we read the Megillah?

Rabbi Eliezer b'Rabi Yossi prefers to read it during Adar I, due to the rule of אין מעבירין; this is an opportunity in time to choose when to perform the mitzvah, and we do it at the earliest possible time. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel brings an alternate explanation, which is that we want to connect the Geulah of Purim to the Geulah of Pesach, and so we read the Megillah during Adar II.

This is a case where a mitzvah can be done either at the earliest possible time, or it can be done later. There are compelling reasons in this case to do it at the earliest possible time. But the Gemara tells us that there might be reasons to wait and not complete something at the earliest possible time. In practice, we follow the opinion of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel: sometimes...
tasks should be done immediately, but sometimes in life, we may need to take into account other factors and therefore delay a task to a later point in time.

If we read the Gemara in Yoma on page 58b, we see another application of this rule.

In this source, we encounter the avodah of the Kohen Gadol in the Beit Hamikdash on Yom Kippur. The Gemara describes a debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yossi as to where the Kohen Gadol begins to sprinkle the blood on the altar. According to Rabbi Akiva, he begins on the northeast corner, and according to Rabbi Yossi, on the northwest corner. Rabbi Akiva bases himself on Reish Lakish’s rule of *eyn maaverin al hamitzvot*- the Kohen Gadol should perform the *mitzvah* at the first possible location. In this case, he is standing near the northeast corner.

This is a situation in which a person has to complete a task, and needs to ask themselves what is the best way to complete it? Is there a guide as to how to start it and complete it? Based on this Gemara, we see that according to our framework, it would seem best to start the action in the first place they encounter it. For example, if a person is cleaning their room and is uncertain where to begin, they should start at the entrance to their room and make their way to the other parts of the room that are farther away. This can make a task that might seem overwhelming, easier, as often what paralyzes people when encountering a task is where to begin.
In the Gemara in Pesachim, Masechet Pesachim on דף סד, we also learn about the *avodah* of the Kohanim on Pesach.

When the *Korban Pesach* was offered, each priest would receive a full bowl of blood and return an empty one. The Gemara infers that the opposite was not done; the priest would not first return an empty bowl and then receive a full one. This supports the opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, as Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: one must not postpone the performance of *mitzvot*.

When one is presented with the opportunity to fulfill a *mitzvah*, he must do so immediately and not delay for any reason. In this case, since bringing the blood to the altar is a *mitzvah*, the priest should first fulfill the *mitzvah* at hand and receive the full bowl of blood, and then return the empty bowl, which is not technically a *mitzvah* but rather a “*hechsher mitzva*,” something that enables a *mitzvah* to be completed. In this case, there are two actions - one is a *mitzvah* (the receiving of the blood), and the other, an action in preparation for a *mitzvah* (the returning the empty bowl). The Kohen must first fulfill what he is commanded to do. He will be able to complete both actions, but the one that is more important must be completed first. This is another way to organize ourselves--look at the actions that we must do as well as those that are optional, but important. First we complete that which we must do and then we complete the optional tasks.

Once again in Yoma, page 33a, we see the rule of דינא מטבירה על המצות. In this case, on page 33, we learn about the removal of ashes from different locations in the Beit Hamikdash by the Kohanim.
In this case, there are two actions a Kohan must complete: removal of ashes from the inner altar and removal of the ashes from the fire of the seven lamps of the candelabrum. Everyone agrees that the ashes from the altar must be removed first, but only Rava is able to explain why. The reason is in accordance with the statement of Reish Lakish, as Reish Lakish said: one may not forgo performance of any of the *mitzvot* in order to perform another *mitzvah*. The Gemara then continues with another example—that of *Tefillin*. There is a debate in this situation as to what the Gemara is referring to here. Is it that one must put *tefillin* on their hands first and then their head? That when it is put in the bag, the *tefillin* of the hand must be put in last so that the next day, it is the one the man reaches for first? Or, alternatively, is it that when *tefillin* are touched during various points in *davening*, the hand is touched first? (This is beyond the scope of this article, but is often the classic example discussed of *אין מעבירין על המצות*).

Let us examine this situation. We have two *mitzvot*—the removal of the ash from the altar and the removal of ash from the lamps of the *menorah*. As in life, when we are organizing our priorities and all that we have to do, we need to make choices. What gets done now? What gets done later? What might we miss out on altogether in order to accomplish all that we both need and want to get done? It would seem, according to this Gemara, that when two actions are equally important, we would perform the first one we encounter. We take the first opportunity that comes to us. This is one way to begin to organize our lives.

Let us now turn to the sixth and final case, the Gemara in Yoma, page 70a:
The mishnah describes events that take place on Yom Kippur. The Kohen Gadol slaughters a bull and a lamb, and while it is being burnt on the altar, he changes locations and reads from parts of the Torah for the general community. People have the opportunity to participate in either one of these actions, but, we are informed, they cannot participate in both. The Gemara emphasizes that they are permitted to do both but physically can’t be in both places. The question is posed as to why the Gemara needs to teach us this rule. We learn that the Gemara is concerned about the rule of אין מעבירין על המצוות, even if it is in order to perform a different mitzvah. The people near the altar are fulfilling a mitzvah. Perhaps by leaving to hear the other mitzvah, they are violating the rule of Reish Lakish.

Here, again, we have two mitzvot--watching the burning of the korban and listening to the reading of the Torah. This Gemara seems to suggest that when we have begun one action, we don’t leave it to complete another, even if this may mean we cannot complete the second task. When organizing our tasks, we need to be single-tasking--complete one task first and then begin another. If we leave the original task, it may never get done or may not be completed in the proper fashion.

What emerges from these sources is the following framework:

1. Tasks should be performed at the first possible opportunity.
2. Sometimes, it may be necessary, if there is a compelling reason, to wait. When deciding on one action, complete it in the most logical fashion--to begin at the place that you encounter the action first.
3. When deciding on two actions, do the one that must be completed first and the optional one later.
When deciding between two actions, complete the first one you encounter.

When one has started an action, they should complete it first before engaging in other actions, even if this may mean the second action is never completed.

There are several different explanations for the rule ofאין מעבירין, which may influence our 6 approaches to organization. What emerges from the Rishonim and Achronim is a slightly different approach to the rule and a slightly different way to organize ourselves.

According to Rashi in Yoma, הפוגע במצוה לא יעבור ממנה... לא תמתין - we want to complete a mitzvah without delay. This should be our overarching principle. According to Rashi, then, it would make sense to look at everything we do through this lens--we perform an action quickly, we start with the one we encounter first, and we complete all of our actions before starting anything new. There may be exceptions to the rule, but this should be our general framework.

The Meiri in Yoma agrees with Rashi, but has a subtly different approach. רמי לדור המ שמחות במצות: "שמרו על המצות, כי ביז - 'מצות', ר"ל כל שאר מצות, מת ברוחה, שלא תמתין spd מתשים.iamo שלד במצות, והיה משה קדימה. Every mitzvah should be special to us, and, therefore, we should not delay its performance, as perhaps we will lose the opportunity to complete the mitzvah, causing us to feel frustrated and preventing us from completing it later. Sometimes, if we delay an action, there may be negative, unintended consequences. This may then snowball into a situation where we don’t end up completing the action at all. If we prioritize and do the action at our first opportunity and in the most logical way, we are more likely to complete the action.

The Divrei Malchiel, Rav Malchiel Zvi Tenenboim, from Russia in the early 20th century, has a completely different approach to Ain מעבירין על המצות. According to him, דעיי מעבירים דאינ מעבירין ha. Мы учимся на примерах.
משום שהוא בזון להמצוה. If a person delays a mitzvah or begins a new mitzah before completing the mitzvah they were engaged in, this reflects their personal negative attitude toward mitzvot. They are disgracing the mitzvah. If we think about this from an organizational standpoint, our actions are reflective of our priorities. If something is important to us, we will do it immediately and complete it in full. But if it is not, we may forget about it and never complete it. And so we need to look at actions, decide what our priorities are, and complete those. If something is not a priority to us, we likely will not do it.

However, there are times when we upend the rules and may need to organize in a different way. What are those situations? Tosafot in Yoma applies a rule for when a person is faced with two mitzvot and can complete both, but must choose the order in which to complete them:

In this case, he or she completes the first mitzvah they encounter. However, in a situation where they have to choose and can only complete one, we apply another halachic rule – תדיר והשאינו תדיר – we complete the mitzvah that is more regularly performed and leave for later, or put aside, the mitzvah that is less common. For example, when making Havdalah on Saturday night, we make the bracha on the wine first, as it is the most common bracha. This would mean that if we have a choice between two opportunities, according to Tosafot, we should complete the less novel one, the one that we might do most often, as opposed to the new and exciting one, even if it means we may lose out on the opportunity to complete or to engage in this new and exciting task.

But the Radbaz, Rav David ben Ibn Zimri, a scholar from Spain and Safed during the 15th and 16th centuries, in his שות הרדבז, disagrees. He cites an interesting case – a man is in jail and
has the opportunity to leave one day a year. Which day should he choose? Should it be Yom Kippur or Purim to fulfill mitzvot or at the first opportunity? The Radbaz concludes that the man should leave on the first day he can in order to do mitzvot at the first possible opportunity. Regardless of which mitzvah presents itself to us first, we should appreciate each and every opportunity we have to perform a mitzvah without waiting for a seemingly more important mitzvah opportunity to come along.

This may be unique to mitzvot, but I think we can translate this concept to our organizational outlook also – that when we have the opportunity to complete a task, we should jump at that opportunity. For ourselves, we have to decide when that opportunity is – do we follow Tosafot? Or do we make a decision based on other factors in our lives?

The Chacham Zvi disagrees with the Radbaz. He says that there are priorities in mitzvot based on what is more serious – for example, fulfilling the Korban Pesach might take priority over the mitzvot of Purim. He cites an additional rule. Often, we push off kiddush levanah until motzei Shabbat and do not say it during the week. Why? Because there are likely to be more people present on motzei Shabbat, and it is better to perform the mitzvah in a large group. This can sometimes be a reason to push off an action and not do it immediately – because doing it in a group or with others may make the task more meaningful or easier to complete.

And finally, we have the approach of the Chayay Adam. He presents several different ways to approach mitzvot. Certainly, if we can perform multiple mitzvot, then we complete the first one we encounter. However, if we have to make a choice
and can only complete one mitzvah, we apply other rules. We might choose the more strict mitzvah, or the one that is done more frequently. Then he adds something unique. If a person has the opportunity to do a mitzvah today, but it will inhibit his ability to perform a mitzvah tomorrow, he should not complete the mitzvah today. This is a bit surprising, but is also creative and can help us prioritize and think not only about right now but also about the future. How will my actions today impact my tomorrow? Will they enable me to complete other tasks? Or will my decisions today inhibit me from doing other things that might be a priority to me tomorrow?

So now, we may want to rethink a bit our 6 organizational rules with some caveats, some of which might be very personal. We need to take certain steps and ask ourselves certain questions before we organize ourselves.

1. First, we need to decide what needs to be done - make a big giant brain dump and see all the must-haves, needs, and wants.

2. What must be done now? Those are the easiest actions to put down, and we can create a timeline for doing them. If it can be done now and poses no conflict with other actions, complete it asap.

3. What might warrant more time? More time to think about it, consult with others and perhaps perform in tandem with others? Consider this question while remembering we can’t put these actions off for too long, lest we forget about them.

4. Complete actions in the most logical fashion.

5. Complete one action before we begin another action.

6. What happens when I have to choose between two actions? In those situations, there might be different guidance depending on what the situation is.

What emerges from these different sources is that there is not a one size fits all approach to organization and determining what needs to get done, how it needs to get done and when it needs to
get done. Each person needs to find the approach that works best for them. We do learn that the Torah gives us a meaningful guide as to how to prioritize, and as we head into the new year where we often take stock of what we have accomplished and look ahead to what we can accomplish, let us take heed of the advice of Chazal.
This past August marked the 18th anniversary of my becoming a Jew. In the beginning of my life as a Jew, I would receive well-meaning questions about what brought me to Judaism. Prior to my conversion, close friends knew of the longings I felt. We discussed these feelings periodically. I sensed that my Jewish friends knew about a world that existed beyond the everyday. I had wanted to know this world, this Jewish world, for as long as I could remember. The books on Judaism I read began to cast light on my wonderings. Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, in his book *The Bedside Torah*, gives a profound insight about Judaism in his writings on *Parsha Tetzaveh* that strikes at the heart of my search:

“The Torah is telling us that the God of Israel is a passionate God, a God who loves, cares, and gets involved. While ultimately beyond containment in human language or human concepts, the Jewish notion of God requiring human love and human relationship lies at the very core of Judaism through the ages. It was God’s love that created the world. It is our love for God that sustains it and fills our lives and communities with meaning. Over the millennia, Jewish people the world over have cultivated that special affection through deeds of holiness, through acts of loving-kindness, and through the ongoing study of the accumulated record of our relationship with God, our sacred writings.”

It is this relationship, this call to action, going back to the antiquity of human experience, that gives life its purpose. I longed to be part of this purpose and live to the potential God wants by aligning my will with His. The way to do this, to live a life of purpose in tandem with the Almighty, I was certain, for me, was through Judaism.

At the time, I lived in the Chelsea section of New York City. Our city, our country, had recently been attacked by the hijackers of September 11th. Our innocence had
crumbled along with the towers. Our resolve, however, as Americans, was never stronger. We “grew up” that year. We became purposeful. Life, we knew, can be fragile, and time is not to be wasted. Not long after, I was walking crosstown through Gramercy. It was Sukkot time and I passed by the most beautiful sukkah outside the Brotherhood Synagogue. As I looked beyond the gate, I noticed a sign showing class offerings. Among these was a class entitled “Everything You Wanted to Know About Judaism but Were Afraid to Ask.” I called the very next day to sign up for the class, beginning in a few weeks.

I arrived early that first day. When I sat down in the library where we were meeting, I looked around and knew that I was home. This is where I was supposed to be, about to learn what I am supposed to know. The sessions lasted a few months and, at the final session, I asked my teacher if it was possible to speak to the Rabbi about a conversion. His answer was yes, and I was on my way.

Why become a Jew? Why couldn’t I just learn and be satisfied with knowledge about Judaism? Learning in the Jewish way is not something to gain, to possess, to check off the list and proceed to the next thing. Learning and becoming, for me, are mutually inclusive when it comes to the Jewish way. It has been said that the Torah is a blueprint for living as a Jew. Further, as our lives change, the Torah’s words carry an evolving meaning for us as we grow. The Torah links learning with becoming, as learning Torah is a life-long endeavor. A Jew learns Torah constantly, year-round. Rabbi Artson refers to an inner listening to Torah, as it is chanted aloud, time and again. Rabbis aid this listening with their drashot, or commentaries on the Torah. Rabbi Artson suggests:

“Drashot...should build on the often-dormant emotional link between Jew and Torah,
awakening the slumbering soul to a sense of wonder in the words that live again.”

Learning, believing, and becoming a Jew also calls one to action. A Jew serves God by serving others. God commands us through the mitzvot, and, by the actions that the mitzvot require of us, we are thereby connected to the Almighty. It is this service, this purpose and this connection, not only to God, but to God’s community, that I was seeking.

The Talmud concludes that we turn our eyes to earth but our hearts to heaven. Others may turn not only their eyes to heaven but their hearts, as well, focusing on the World to Come. My Judaism teacher frequently said that God is a player in the human arena. A Jew must be concerned not only for the spirit and the connection to the God of heaven, but must also be “hands-on” here, on Earth, in the human arena. This is what I always “knew,” in my mind and in my heart. It is what called me to become a Jew. Yes, it is for the World to Come, but it is also for right here and right now, in my life amidst God’s creation. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz wrote, “We must develop the ability to think and care about exalted heavenly subjects without neglecting their connection to reality, even when we cannot reach the heavenly ideal.”

What does God want from me here on Earth? In the Haftorah on parshat Balak, the Prophet Micha, says “He has told you, O man, what is good, and what Hashem seeks from you: only the performance of justice, the love of kindness, walking humbly with your God.” I take this to mean aligning our will with the will of God. Once we do this, our lives and our relationships follow. To do what is right and just is natural when we are doing what Hashem expects of us.

This curiosity, this longing, I felt, was really a calling. Through action, through aligning my will with Hashem’s will, becoming a
Jew was the way I could answer the calling. I think we can intuitively feel when we are following what God wants for us. Even as we look back over the events of our lives, there is evidence of God’s plan unfolding. We meet the right person at the right time, and everything falls into place. We marry, and now we are three: you, me, and Hashem. A career opportunity seems to appear just at the perfect juncture. We take it and we are even more in tune with God’s plan for us. It has been said that “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.” We owe enormous gratitude to each and every being that brings this teaching to us.

And when we feel we have lost our way? There are times when the clouds come in, the rain falls steadily, all appears dark, and we start to believe it will always be this way. Take a moment to remember that Hashem promises us that day follows night, spring and summer follow winter. It has never, ever been otherwise. A Jew has the Torah, and in it are the answers to all our questions. Lose your way, and the Torah will bring you home again. This is as true for a Jew from birth as it is for a “choosing” Jew. The Torah will bring you home.
Every one of us has undoubtedly sat in the sukkah at night and, looking upward, has seen the stars shining through the schach. Having spaces and holes in the “roof” of the sukkah so that the heavens and the stars are visible, although not absolutely mandated or binding by halachah, is a “worthy suggestion” (Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotovsky) and an accepted characteristic of a kosher sukkah (Talmud Yerushalmi). There is an almost visceral connection between seeing the heavens, including the stars, and the impact of the sukkah experience. I would like to explore that connection with you.

First, let us reference the source of the mitzvah of sitting in a sukkah: “You shall dwell in sukkot (booths or huts) for a seven-day period; every native in Israel shall dwell in booths. So that your generations will know that I caused Bnei Yisroel to dwell in sukkot when I took them out of the land of Egypt; I am Hashem, your God” (Vayikra 23:42-43).

Our Sages ask, what was the nature of these sukkot? While Rabbi Akiva considers these to be actual booths, Rabbi Eliezer maintains that the Torah is referring to the Clouds of Glory that surrounded Bnei Yisroel in the desert, clouds that offered protection and created a safe path for the nation to follow. Either way, we are to remember the experience of living in the desert and of following Hashem’s directions, of relying on Him to provide all of our needs for that entire forty years. Perhaps the desert sukkot were not huts or booths as we would perhaps envision them today, but actually tents, as Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks, zt”l, pointed out in one of his lectures on the JBS Network. Discussing the prophet Bilaam’s reference to the “goodly tents of Yaakov,” Rabbi Sacks made an additional interesting point in this context. While Bnei Yisroel may not have lived in actual huts in the desert, Hashem Himself lived in a temporary dwelling, in the Mishkan. Calling it a Tabernacle in English is misleading, as “Tabernacle” implies a grand structure. The Mishkan, just like the homes Bnei Yisroel dwelt in, was a temporary structure that would be taken apart whenever Bnei...
Yisroel moved and rebuilt wherever Bnei Yisroel camped. Nevertheless, the lessons for future generations remain the same. We may indeed learn some of those lessons when we can see the stars through the spaces of the roof over our heads.

Interestingly, the source for this widely accepted and preferable custom is not in any of our halachic writings, but in Sefer Bereishit. After Avraham Avinu saved Lot and the people of Sodom in the war of the four kings against the five, and after Avraham refused to take any part of the spoils of the victory, Hashem appeared to him and affirmed the covenant He had made with Avraham in Lech Lecha. Then, Hashem had promised the land to Avraham as an inheritance. In the process of this second dialogue, Hashem takes Avraham outside and says, “Gaze outside toward the heavens and count the stars - u’refor hakochavim - if you are able to count them… Thus shall be your offspring” (15:5).

How are the stars connected to Hashem’s promise to Avraham, and indeed to the terrifying vision of Jewish history that Hashem is about to reveal to him? According to a midrash, when Hashem took Avraham outside, He lifted him above the stars. Symbolically, the message was that Avraham’s offspring would be above the natural order of the world, not ruled “by the stars.” This promise is actualized already with the conception and birth of Yitzchak. According to natural biology, Sarah was infertile and should have been unable to conceive. In fact, through all the decades of her marriage to Avraham, she had not conceived. Only through Divine intervention did she conceive and bear a son at the age of 99. Further, this dialogue between Hashem and Avraham Avinu was the introduction to Brit bein habitarim, the Covenant Between the Halves. Here Hashem tells Avraham to cut various animals in half but not to cut up two birds. These animals, according to tradition, represent the various nations who would subjugate Bnei Yisroel over the course of history. But the birds, representing Bnei Yisroel, would survive.

Hashem then revealed the first element of this allegorical dream with the prophecy of Israel’s enslavement in Egypt. Bnei Yisroel
survived that enslavement, as prophesied. What continues to defy the natural order is the survival of Bnei Yisroel through the millennia, most of the time without a land, through multiple subjugations and exiles, through horrendous conditions and inhuman persecutions. In the interim, all these ancient civilizations and empires have disappeared except for the Jews. Even modern day empires are not what they were. What has become of the Prussian Empire or of the Soviet Union? There is a well known anecdote about King Frederick the Great asking his physician for a proof of the existence of God. The succinct response was simply, “Your Majesty, the Jews.” What further proof do we need that Bnei Yisroel exists outside the normal laws of nature, above the stars whose positions and orbits influence all of creation? Like the stars, Bnei Yisroel are under Hashem’s direct supervision.

But there is more to this supervision than the superficial caring of a paid caretaker. While our verse speaks of counting the stars, let us compare that verse to the verse in Tehillim 147: “He counts the number of the stars, to all of them He assigns names.” Imagine Hashem checking each of us by name, “Yankele, Sarahle…” Hashem validates each and every one of us by name. We are not merely a number in a series of other, similar numbers. Each of us is unique. It is this idea at the core of the Names Not Numbers projects that interview and record the distinct experiences of Holocaust survivors. In spite of the numbers that may be tattooed on their arms, we validate their humanity and their inestimable worth as individual human beings.

The Torah uses several different words for counting, each with a different connotation: Pekod – count for the purpose of assigning missions; naso – lift them up by tracing their lineage; and manoh – count to keep track of the numbers. Here, Hashem uses the word sefor – count them individually, tell their sipur, their story.

Interestingly, the Torah itself takes a census and records the numbers of the entire nation and of individual tribes multiple times, most notably twice in Sefer Bamidbar. It is in these various censuses that the Torah uses a different word depending
on the purpose of the count. On some level and in some circumstances, the people can in fact be counted. But the numbers are not the essence of our Nation. In fact, we have always been just a small percentage of a percentage of the world’s population.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that we cannot count the stars. Not only are they too numerous to count, but they are also too far-flung to count accurately. So when Hashem declared, “Thus will be your offspring.” He must have been giving us other messages about the descendants of Avraham Avinu, about ourselves.

Perhaps if we analyze what functions the stars serve, we may get a better understanding of why Hashem chose to compare Bnei Yisroel to stars. The two best known functions of stars are probably to provide light in the darkness of night and to serve as a method of navigation, especially to sailors. In this context, the stars are indeed an apt metaphor for Bnei Yisroel. In our national history, indeed even in our personal lives, when the times are darkest, the stars still shine. Focus on the light and know that the stars endure forever, even in the darkness. Hold fast to our inner light. Further, when the world is in moral darkness, we are charged with providing a moral compass by which the world’s inhabitants can navigate. We must use the precepts of the Torah to help humanity, all created in the image of God, to tap into the inner light they too possess and to actualize their potential. We must show the way, not become one with the darkness that fills the societies and cultures that may surround us. We must not become the dust of the earth at those times.

In a fascinating essay, Rabbi Yehudah Shurpin discusses the two forms of Divine energy and how we experience them through the sukkah (Chabad.org). Transcendent energy, ohr makif, surrounds all of creation, but it does not necessarily penetrate creation, as not everything or everyone is capable of absorbing or containing it. (For example, liquid requires a solid-sided container if it is to be contained.) Ohr penimi, internal energy, can enter and be absorbed by any recipient according to his personal capacity. The
The schach of the sukkah represents the encompassing energy that surrounds and encompasses everyone under it. However, the transcendent energy is represented by the distant stars, visible through the schach. When one sits in the sukkah, recites the blessing, and fulfills the other mitzvot of Sukkot, one brings down and reveals that transcendent light and energy. By sitting in the sukkah under the stars, one is thereby re-experiencing both the huts Bnei Yisroel lived in for the forty years in the desert, and the celestial Clouds of Glory that surrounded them during that era of our history.

In an interesting observation, several of our commentators suggest that Hashem took Avraham outside while it was still day. “Can you count the stars?” Avraham Avinu couldn’t even see the stars, let alone count them. “Thus will be your offspring.” Hashem was giving Avraham another message. Even when Bnei Yisroel seem to be invisible, few and oppressed, or when the world is truly spiritually enlightened and need not turn to Bnei Yisroel for guidance, know that Bnei Yisroel will continue to exist, just as the stars exist even when we cannot see them, even when the skies are overcast, even when it is day.

As Hashem resided among us in a simple, temporary structure in the desert, so does He wish to reside among us once again. In our Birkat Hamazon (Grace After Meals) on Sukkot, we paraphrase the verse from Amos 9:11, “May Hashem raise up the fallen sukkah of David.” We pray that Hashem will reestablish the monarchy of David through Moshiach, who will unite the entire nation, and indeed the entire world, in recognition of Hashem’s sovereignty. In his final prophecy, Bilaam sees the end of days. At that time, “Dorach kochav miYaakov…! A star has issued from Yaakov and a scepter has risen from Israel.” According to Ramban, this star will be the Moshiach descended from King David.

May we internalize the lessons of the Sukkot stars. May we act among ourselves and with all people as a light of Godly behavior and thereby hasten the coming of Moshiach ben Dovid bimheirah biyomeinu, swiftly, in our day.