

## ראש השנה תשפ"א

ROSH HASHANAH 5781

SEPTEMBER 19, 2020

RABBI PHILIP S. SCHEIM

The Talmud (Pes. 50a) tells us of Rav Yosef, the son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, who fell very ill and lost consciousness. Fortunately, he recovered, after which time, his father asked him: “מאי הזית - What did you see (when you lay on the brink of death)?”

“עולם הפוך ראיתי, Rav Yosef answers his father. “I saw a topsy turvy world. – עליונים למטה ותחתונים למעלה - Those exalted here - there, were lowly; those lowly here - there, were exalted. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi tells his son: “עולם ברור ראית” – בני. – you saw a clear world, a true world, the world the way it was meant to be.”

Rav Yosef, the son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, as his illustrious father interprets, achieved a glimpse of *Mashiah-zeit*, a glimpse of the world at a time when all of history's wrongs will have been made right, when the evil-doers of humankind will be brought to justice, and the innocent, the good, will be vindicated and exalted. That, according to Rabbi Yehoshua, was indeed עולם ברור, literally a world of clarity, where principles and values predominate, in which good overcomes evil, in which righteousness prevails. Sadly, we understand that too often, we are destined to endure עולם הפוך, the seemingly upside-down world of today's.

For worse, more than for better, these past seven months have represented *olam hafukh*, that topsy-turvy world of the Talmudic story. To a large extent, our lives have been turned upside-down. The pandemic has eliminated most of social interaction, forcing us to hide behind masks and keep our distance from each other, in order to safeguard our health and that of those around us. And

just as the vast majority of our fellow worshippers today are joining us on livestream, with our gratitude that technology makes that possible, we miss the presence of the many hundreds on past Rosh Hashanah days, when community was still able to be experienced in real time, when ברב עם הדרת מלך, when the large numbers gathered together added to the awesomeness of these holy days.

The eminent scholar of Yiddish literature and public intellectual, Ruth Wisse, opened a recent lecture with a line from the original Sholem Aleichem stories of Tevye the Dairyman, the basis for *Fiddler on the Roof*. In the classic Yiddish stories, Sholem Aleichem himself appears as the narrator. Tevye relates the story of his daughter Hodel, who is heading off to Siberia to join her imprisoned husband Feferel (in *Fiddler*, Perchik), a terribly sad and dramatic episode where father and daughter realize that they will most likely never see each other again. He then says: “Mr. Sholem Aleichem, let’s talk about something more cheerful – how about the cholera epidemic in Odessa?”

This throw-away line in the Tevye story reminds us of how so much in life, and in life today, is relative. We face a balancing act between our own life struggles and the deeply challenging events surrounding us, affecting the world. Sometimes we may be coaxed into feeling guilt for fixating on our personal *tzoris* when so many are suffering, but that is unfair. We are entitled to prioritize personal pain and not be pressured into suppressing those feelings when bad things are happening all around us.

In these recent difficult months, I have encountered young couples distressed at having to abandon long-standing wedding plans, either looking at arranging minimalist marriage ceremonies devoid of parties, or postponing the *simhah* to some undetermined future date. Ketubah designers are often leaving the wedding date blank because of the global uncertainties surrounding us. Likewise Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations are being virtualized or postponed, challenging adjustments for both parents and child. And bereavement itself has

been deeply compromised, with attendance at cemetery services severely restricted and limited options for in-person *shivah* visits, greatly exacerbating the loneliness that inevitably accompanies loss.

And of course life as a whole has made six months ago seem like ancient history, as we wrestle with questions the answers to which previously would have been self-evident. Do we send our kids to school? Do we risk an out-of-town trip? Do we return to the office or do we continue to work from home? Do we chance an evening night or do we safely stick with Netflix at home?

Close to a million Covid-19 deaths world-wide does not nullify the challenges facing those of us who have not suffered the worst. So we grant Tevye the right to grieve at his permanent separation from his beloved daughter, notwithstanding the greater tragedy of thousands of deaths in Odessa in 1899.

Remaining for a few moments in the comforting confines of great Yiddish literature, I turn to Y. L. Peretz's classic story באנטשע שווייג, *Bontsha Be Silent*, a story that, for years, I among many others misunderstood. Many of you are undoubtedly familiar with the story. Bontsha's death, like his life, is a non-event in a world that has subjected him to enormous cruelty. His family, his employers, society-at-large have inflicted continual abuse upon him. He suffers silently, never a cry of pain, never a scream of anger, never an expression of hurt. There are none to comfort him in life, none to mourn him in death. In Peretz's immortal words: שטיל געבוירן, שטיל געלעבט, שטיל געשטאָרבן, און נאָך שטילער : באַגראָבן "In silence he was born, in silence he lived, in silence he died – and in an even vaster silence he was put into the ground."

In the other world, the world of judgement after death, the story tells us, things are different. There, Bontsha's death has thundering impact. There he is greeted with great formality. There he matters. There his life of silent suffering

is rehearsed before the heavenly court. The defending angel shares the heartbreaking details of Bontsha's pain-filled existence, of the indignities heaped upon him from birth to death and every day in between. The prosecuting angel can say nothing against Bontsha. He, like Bontsha, is silent. The story reaches its electrifying climax as Bontsha is promised the reward that eluded him in this world.

“There, in that other world, no one understood you. You never understood yourself. You never understood that you need not have been silent, that you could have cried out and that your outcries would have brought down the world itself and ended it. דו אליין האַסט פון דיין פארשלאפענעם כוח נישט געוואוסט - You never understood your sleeping strength. For you there is not only one little portion of Paradise, one little share. No, for you there is everything. Take whatever you want!”

“טאקע? - Really?” Bontsha asks. “טאקע,” the judge and all the heavenly host answer. “Well then,” Bontsha answers: “What I would like is to have, every morning for breakfast, a hot roll with fresh butter.”

Yes, for years I misunderstood this story. In my use of this story in my early rabbinic years (and I have old sermons in my files to prove this point), I made Bontsha the hero, the role-model, whose meekness and humility, whose wanting so little in life seemed so honorable. But further study has led me to understand that that wasn't Peretz's intent. In his writings throughout, and here especially, Peretz cried out against Jewish passivity, against the downtrodden meekly accepting their fate. “You never understood that you need not have been silent,” the judge reprimands Bontsha, suggesting to him “that you could have cried out and that your outcries would have brought down

the world itself and ended it. פארשלאפענעם כוח נישט געוואוסט -  
You never understood your sleeping strength.”

Y. L. Peretz’s intended message: Don’t succumb to adversity. Don’t relinquish your right to a better life. Don’t resign yourself to abuse. Let others here your cry. Make others aware of your anguish.

In addition to the unending pandemic, this summer has borne witness to an upsurge in heated protest; primarily in the U.S., but here and elsewhere as well, in response to the seemingly constant stream of police harassment, shootings and killings of people of color. Racism in its many forms continues to infect our society, and all, including us in the Jewish community, need to take stock of our actions and our attitudes in the face of ongoing injustice inflicted upon the black community, and other minorities.

Look. The relationship between the Black Lives Matter movement and the Jewish community has not been without its tensions and points of conflict, especially where Israel and Zionism come into question. Even though there has been improvement, through dialogue, on these issues, the relationship is complex and challenging, and we have a right and an obligation to call out those elements in BLM who would deny us our right to a Jewish statehood.

But the nascent protest movement – at least the peaceful, non-violent component, deserves our sympathy and our support, as it represents a response to the symbolic voice of Peretz’s judge, who calls to mind the victim’s כוח פארשלאפענעם, his sleeping strength, that when awakened, deservedly gets the world’s attention. Far be it from us, who suffered so long through historical abuse, not to stand with those, whose lingering societal disadvantage stains all of us.

Sometimes, resistance to existing reality is required. We as Jews know that well. Sometimes carefully channeled anger is what the moment requires.

Just over two centuries ago, one of the most compelling voices, speaking from the depths of Jewish tradition, was that of the Hasidic Rebbe Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, of whom countless stories are told, in which this paragon of faith takes his anger at the relentless suffering of the Jewish people out on God. In one such story, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak notices a tailor davening on Rosh Hashanah with unusual fervor. After the prayers, he calls him over, and poses his question: "What did you ask of God today?" The tailor answers, somewhat sheepishly: "Rebbe, I said to God: 'You wish me to repent of my sins, but I have committed only minor offenses. I may have kept leftover cloth, or I may have eaten in a non-Jewish home where I worked, without washing my hands. But You, O Lord, have committed grievous sins. You have taken away babies from their mothers, and mothers from their babies. Let us be quits. You forgive me, and I'll forgive You!'" The Berdichever tells his Hasid: "Why did you let God off so easily? You could have forced him to redeem all of Israel!" <sup>1</sup>

A similar devout defiance in the modern period is reflected by Elie Wiesel in his first book, *Night*, when he describes *Erev Rosh Hashanah* in Auschwitz. He writes:

ברכו את ה' המבורך – "Blessed be the Almighty...." The voice of the officiating inmate had just become audible. At first I thought it was the wind.

---

<sup>1</sup> Noam Zion, Barbara Spectre, *A Different Light*, p. 87

“Blessed be God’s name...” Thousands of lips repeated the benediction, bent over like trees in a storm.

Blessed be God’s name? Why, but why would I bless him? Because he caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because he kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death?...

I listened as the inmate’s voice rose; it was powerful yet broken, amid the weeping, the sobbing, the sighing of the entire congregation.... In days gone by, Rosh Hashanah had dominated my life. I knew that my sins grieved the Almighty, and so I pleaded for forgiveness. In those days I fully believed that the salvation of the world depended upon every one of my deeds, on every one of my prayers.

But now, I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy. I was nothing but ashes now, but I felt myself to be stronger than this Almighty to whom my life had been bound for so long. In the midst of these men assembled for prayer, I felt like an observer, a stranger. <sup>2</sup>

Elie Wiesel remained a *shomer Shabbat*, an observant Jew, fully in sync with Jewish ritual, Jewish life and the Jewish world to the end of his life. It is clear from *Night*, and other of his early writings, that his Shoah experiences led to a period of estrangement from God. He considered God’s silence during the Shoah to have been unforgivable, and like Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, was unprepared

---

<sup>2</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, New York 2006, pp. 67-68.

to let God off the hook for His inaction, when millions prayed for Him to act.

Historian Jonathan Sarna describes his reaction to being diagnosed with esophageal cancer at a relatively young age, which thankfully he survived. He writes:

The Rosh Hashanah that followed [my diagnosis] was the most difficult of my life.... Never had the question “who shall live and who shall die” seemed so personally and painfully relevant.

One rabbi advised that even in the face of adversity, my job was to sanctify God’s Name. Just as so many Jews had countered powerful and oppressive religious adversaries with spiritual resistance, said he, I now needed to fight powerful and oppressive physical adversaries, like cancer, in the same way. “Resist!” he cried, “don’t give up.” Fighting and praying for life on Rosh Hashanah, he declared, is the best way of staving off death and living up to what Judaism teaches.<sup>3</sup>

We enter these *Yamim Noraim*, this holy season, balancing pain upon pain – from the uncertain present and future as we confront Covid-19, which has totally transformed our Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and all aspects of the precious rituals that keep us together – to the societal turmoil that, in these summer months, have called to question the moral underpinnings of the world in which we live.

Two lines, a thousand years separating the life-span of their authors, speak to us this Rosh Hashanah. The first, composed by the anonymous *payytan* of ונתנה תקף, that will be chanted moments from now: “ ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע ”

---

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, *A Time to Every Purpose*, 2008, p. 106

הגזירה – Repentance, prayer and charity alleviate the bitter decree.” The second, written by Peretz more than 120 years ago: “ דו אליין האָסט פון דיין פארשלאפענעם כוח – You never understood your sleeping strength.”

Peretz reminds us that we have the strength within us that can enable us to rise up against wrong, against evil, against adversity. And ונתנה תקף suggests that remaining close to tradition, holding on to faith and reaching out to those around us, helps all of us navigate the uncertainties that surround us with purpose, with determination, so that, in the words of Isaiah (60:20) may come closer to fulfillment: “ לא יבוא עוד שמשך וירחך לא יאָסף – Your sun will set no more, nor will your moon be withdrawn, rather – כִּי יְהוָה יִהְיֶה לְךָ לְאוֹר עוֹלָם – the Lord will be your everlasting light – וְשָׁלְמוּ יָמֵי אֲבָלְךָ – and your days of uncertainty, of mourning, of fear, will come to an end.