

## Parshat Nitzavim 5779

### Rosh HaShana and the Akeida

One of the central themes of Rosh HaShana is Akeidas Yitzchak, which occupies a prominent position in the mussaf service and is the selected parsha read on second day Yom tov.

The Talmud in Rosh HaShana (16A) demonstrates a twofold rationale as to why the horn of a ram is specifically used as a shofar, namely to invoke memories of Akeidas Yitzchak and for our own personal Akeida.

What does this actually mean?

### Din on Rosh Hashana

To most people, the central motif of Rosh HaShana remains vague. Most view it as a day of repentance but a simple analysis shows this to be incorrect as there is no individual vidui in the Rosh HaShana liturgy – which leads to the conclusion that the day doesn't fully embody the theme of personal repentance. Contrast this with Yom Kippur which is easily identifiable as a day of personal repentance and is replete with examples of confessional prayers.

In truth, the theme of Rosh HaShana is a day of judgement – of din. It is a day when we accept the kingship of Hashem over us and His right to pass judgement over his creatures.

To understand the concept of din, we need to appreciate that din is the vehicle through which Hashem demonstrates His greatest chesed for mankind. Through His withdrawal from man's affairs, he allows us to make our own choices – choices with consequences. It is precisely these ramifications which lend meaning to existence. If we had freewill but our choices had no consequence, this would be a life without any meaning. Hashem's greatest chesed to mankind is to judge us through din, which gives us the ability to lead a life imbued with meaning and consequence.

The two main aspects of din are personified through our feelings towards Rosh HaShana. On the one hand, it is a day of great Simcha – we take time to appreciate that through giving us din, Hashem has injected meaning into our lives. However, on the other hand we also appreciate the ramifications of having that freewill – the reward and punishment that shadows our actions.

### The character of Yitzchak Avinu

We can take this analysis a stage further through the study of Yitzchak's character.

Yitzchak personifies laughter. The story surrounding his birth in parshas Vayerah records that Sarah laughed upon hearing the prophecy that at her advanced age she

would have a child. Even Yitzchak's name means laughter. What is it about laughter that characterises Yitzchak so well?

Laughter is caused by the incongruity of an event. A smartly dressed gentlemen tripping on a banana skin is humorous because of the unexpected absurdity of the situation. That is precisely the reaction that the Torah displays towards the birth of Yitzchak — barren old women are not typically known to give birth and the unexpected and incongruous nature of the event is illustrated in the Torah through the medium of laughter.

When Yitzchak goes to be slaughtered at the Akeida he sets a new precedent in spiritual heights. The test set by Hashem leads Yitzchak to the dawning realisation that not only does din mean that my actions have meaning, ramifications and are therefore subject to judgement but above that, I have no divine right to life. Hashem can judge me simply because he provides my right to live. This is why the Torah characterises Yitzchak's birth through laughter. Yitzchak realises that it was against the laws of nature that he was born and his entire existence is owed to Hashem. He is the first person to appreciate that he **not only needs to justify his actions but also his very existence before Hashem.**

This is why the middah associated with Yitzchak is gevurah – also known as din. He is the forefather who displayed through the Akeida that we need to justify our existence to Hashem, and that if Hashem demands that we sacrifice ourselves for His sake, then so be it.

### The essence of Rosh HaShana

The Teshuva process begins on Rosh HaShana and continues through to Yom Kippur. In order for us to undertake a meaningful repentance, we do not commence with the regret, remorse and resolve approach that serves us through the 10 days of repentance but rather, we begin with a day that serves to provide perspective and inspiration that will contextualise our repentance.

Rosh HaShana is the day where we not only remind ourselves that our actions have ramifications and by consequence meaning, but also that we have no divine right to exist and that we should echo the Akeida of our forefather Yitzchak, who literally offered himself to Hashem willingly upon realising this truth. This should provide enhanced insight to everyone, that the days of 10 days of repentance are not just regarded as days whereby we pray for mercy on account of our actions but rather, we pray for our very existence which is dependent on Hashem. This is exactly why the Akeida plays such a pivotal role in the Rosh HaShana service and the Talmud explains that we should all undergo our own "personal" Akeida.

*This dvar torah is based on a chabura given by Daniel Peters liluy nishmas Ester Nechama bas Shmuel. May this dvar torah also serve as an aliya for her neshoma.*