

Satanic Verses

Rosh Hashanah 5778

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If there is one state that can be described as the center of our nation's opioid epidemic, it is Ohio. And in Ohio, the town named Portsmouth, on the Kentucky border, is ground zero. Portsmouth was once a vibrant industrial city, whose population peaked at 40,000 in 1940; it is about half that now. While there are neighborhoods there that are well kept and people are doing well, living in Portsmouth means coming face to face with the ravages of this pernicious social cancer every single day. Particularly on the east side of town, every block features run down apartment buildings whose inhabitants are on unemployment and Supplemental Security Income. Portsmouth has become known as the "pill mill of America"¹ due to the deeds of the unscrupulous doctors who prescribe pain medication in exchange for bribes, and their so-called patients. In 2010, local activists mounted a campaign to combat this scourge. A bipartisan bill was passed unanimously, prohibiting doctors from dispensing pharmaceuticals from their clinics, and that made it illegal for a convicted felon to run a pain clinic. While politicians did their work in the corridors of power, local activists in Portsmouth felt that a grand gesture was needed to change the

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/may/17/drugs-opioid-addiction-epidemic-portsmouth-ohio>

culture. In the book *Dreamland: The True Tale of the Opiate Epidemic*, Sam Quinones tells the story of a man by the name of Tom Rayburn, a member of one of the local churches who was charged with formulating a plan. He resolved to recreate the march of Yehoshua and the Children of Israel who were instructed to march seven times around the impregnable walls of Jericho. “The Lord said, ‘Have seven marches,’” Rayburn said. “Seven is God’s number.” Two of the marches went around notorious housing projects, and one of them circled seven times around a local pill mill. The marchers blocked the door and began singing hymns. A local pastor pulled out a shofar just like the one used by Yehoshua, and in a triumphant gesture of defiance, he blew for all to hear. “That afternoon, it grew dark and the skies delivered a cold rain on the hundred marchers as they snaked through the East End. But as the march ended, the torrents ceased. Marches stood there shivering and drying off...’People were coming out of their doors, said a local activist named Lisa Roberts.’We had been a town in constant mourning Every week there was another death. Now the flood was over, this flood of pills....It was as if this devil, this evil was lifted.”

Who is the central character of R”H? Is it Avraham or Sarah, Hagar or Yishmael? It may not be any of them. A case can be made for a less virtuous character who manages to insert himself everywhere in the character and

rituals of the day. Please allow me to introduce him: His name is *Sama'el*, better known as the Satan. Just how pervasive is the Satan on the Yom HaDin? Consider the following:

1. On the day before Rosh Hashanah, we don't blow the shofar. One of the common reasons given is to confuse the Satan - כדי לעררב את השטן
2. In fact, this is also the reason given for the two sets of shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah- those before Mussaf, for which we must stand, and those after, during which one may sit. Having two sets of shofar blasts will confuse the Satan.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ראש השנה דף טז עמוד א-ב

למה תוקעין ומריעין כשהן יושבין, ותוקעין ומריעין כשהן עומדין? כדי לעררב השטן.

3. The verses we say before Shofar blowing form the acrostic *Kara Satan*, or “destroy the Satan.”
4. The Chazzan for mussaf on Rosh Hashanah even makes mention of it, just as he is beginning his work as *shaliach tzibbur*. One of the lines he says silently in the Hineni prayer is לבל ישטינוי - *banish the Satan, so he may not lead me astray.*

Today is a day we coronate God and declare his dominion over the world. It is a day for introspection, as we reflect on blessings and challenges of the past year and express our aspirations and anxieties regarding the upcoming year. In what world is this a day to dwell on some amorphous demon, and pretend that its eradication will resolve our challenges? Besides, is the

eternal adversary really so easily outfoxed by our little rituals- and every year, at that? Wouldn't the Satan have gotten the idea already?

Maybe an answer can be uncovered by examining the writings of our Sages, who paint a compelling backstory of the *akeidah* which prominently features the Satan. The Medrash Tanchumah relates that the Satan appeared to Avraham as an old man, and engaged him in conversation.

“Where are you going?”

Avraham replied, “I’m going to pray.”

“If you are going to pray, why is there a large knife and a torch in your hand, and firewood on your shoulder?” Avraham responded - “Perhaps I will remain there for several days and I will require the wood for cooking.” But the Satan persisted, and said “Do not lie to me, I was there when God commanded you to take your son Isaac and to offer him as a sacrifice! Are you really going to kill the son for whom you waited 100 years?” After a conversation that grew increasingly contentious, the Satan left Avraham, seeing that Avraham was impervious to his wily designs. Perhaps Yitzchak would be a better target, so he appeared to Yitzchak in the guise of a young man.

“Where are you going,” he said.

“I’m going to study Torah.”

“Oh really!?” The Satan asked. “When you go to the Beis Medrash, do you plan on doing so alive or dead? You are a young man. You have your life ahead of you. Are you really going to follow passively as that old man murders you?”

Here, too, the Satan found no quarter. In frustration, the Satan left Yitzchak and tried one last ditch effort. He appeared as a raging river and tried to stop them both.

Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, also known as Rav Shagar, has posthumously become an influential thinker in the religious Zionist community in Israel, whose teachings attempt to synthesize traditional Jewish sources with postmodern thought. In an essay entitled “Uncertainty as the Trial of the *Akeidah*,” Rav Shagar postulated that the Satan is not a one dimensional external antagonist tasked with preventing Avraham and Yitzchak from following through with their mission. Instead, the Satan takes on many forms, as he manifests our internal anxieties and knows how to appeal to us on our own terms. As the Talmud (Bava Batra 16a) says, “the *Satan* and the evil inclination are one and the same.” For each protagonist, the Satan appeared in the form of their greatest fears. His message of defeatism is custom tailored to prey upon the recipient's insecurities. As such, the Satan appeared to Yitzchak as a young person, and to Avraham as an old one. Avraham turned and saw an old man, who told him he was no

longer relevant in this world. Avraham never doubted God's promise of *כי ירע*, but many fathers and mothers are concerned about the continuity of their Yitzchak. Perhaps their children have not followed in their footsteps, and they are wondering whether the endless emotional energy and countless tuition dollars have been worth it. Maybe the children don't live nearby, *or the spouse will not allow them to visit for Yom Tov*. We hope that our golden years will be spent in the company of loved ones, *einiklach* bouncing on each knee reveling in our company and thirsting for our wisdom. The Satan reminds us that it could easily be the reverse; we could end up dependent on others, and that possibility is terrifying to contemplate. No wonder Dr. Zeke Emanuel struck a nerve when he said in The Atlantic in 2014:

Seventy-five. That's how long I want to live: 75 years... living too long is also a loss.²

In addition to physical fatigue, there is also such a thing as spiritual fatigue. Satan taunts the elder and convinces him to declare, "I've done enough good in my life- it's someone else's turn." Or to be the defeatist who says "I am too old to learn anything new, to change bad habits or develop good ones."

The Satan releases his grip over Avraham and suddenly assumes the visage of a young man, as he begins his appeal to Yitzchak. Yitzchak is the *Millennial*

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/10/why-i-hope-to-die-at-75/379329/>

looking for belonging: bouncing from one profession to the next, one cause to another, leaving the world of kindness and taking up the mantle of justice- forsaking the ways of his parents even as he is far more likely to be living with them. The Satan whispers into the ears of the young man that organized religion is irrelevant, that Jewish tribalism is a form of bigotry and that the Jewish homeland is an apartheid state. His generation lacks an affirmative vocabulary about foundational issues like the State of Israel, Zionism, religious observance and even marrying within the faith. Children are living in a world with vastly different values than the ones upon which their parents were raised, and the Satan knows exactly the flashpoints of controversy to seize upon.

Or maybe the Satan appeared to Yitzchak as a young child who is being bullied, a young woman struggling with body image or an adolescent zoned out in front yet another screen, communicating with everyone but connecting with no one. And when she does ask her father, she gets nothing but empty answers, because the older generation is at a loss about how to address the tough issues. The unanswered questions and superficial answers echo in his young and agile mind, leading him to seek acceptance and resolution elsewhere. Its no wonder that he no longer aspires to climb Har haMoriah. In defiance he declares - "This may be your *nisayon*, Dad, but it's not mine."

And all this, and so much more, is going through their minds as they reach the summit of Har HaMoriyah. Father and son, each so filled with their own demons, and so distant from one another at the same time. Their *emunah* is left hanging by a thread. At that moment, they see something encouraging in the distance that restores their soul; it is the horn of the ram, caught in a thornbush; it's the horn was sounded on Har Sinai, it's the horn that brought down the walls of Jericho and the cursed pill mills of Portsmouth, and the one that will herald the Moshiach's arrival. *This* was the rejoinder to the Satan. The shofar provides us with blessed relief because with all of the terrible cries, all of the challenges we face as a people and as individuals, the shofar reminds us in that moment to hang on. The pernicious underbelly of Rosh Hashanah is pessimism- the haunting notion that the world is being judged harshly and deserves nothing better than destruction, which can be visited upon it at any time by a North Korean madman with his finger on a button, or a widespread ideology of terror and ever metastasizing hatred. The Shofar's piercing sound tells us that this pessimism is misplaced.

With all the *shevarim*, all the brokenness, there is a complete and unbroken sound that awaits us. It is true; we blow the shofar at times of war, upheaval, drought and judgement. But we also await and long for the *tekiah gedolah*. This is the goal of Rosh Hashana - the message that Satan does not have

dominion over our hearts. It is to replace instant cynicism with patient optimism.

We put in our time and sacrificed all of our money, clearing our bank accounts for tuition. We struggle with illness and the challenges of being in the sandwich generation. And yet, we know we should be waking up early and forcing ourselves to attend minyan, we try consistently to uphold the standards of Taharat HaMishpacha, and to honor an aging parent, even though it creates tension and complexity. There are and will be moments of שבר, of breakage- points at which our efforts will seem futile. There will be שברים and then the ever so frightening תרועה שברים, those days in which we are hit relentlessly with hardship, battered by hurricanes and earthquakes of the literal and metaphorical variety. Today we look up from the crisis and anxiety and find the horn caught in the distance, reassuring us that there will be a dividend at the end.

Reb Leibel Bistritzky was a legendary and universally beloved Lubavitcher chassid who shared a close and personal relationship with both Rav Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, known as the Frierdiker Rebbe, and his son in law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe of blessed memory. Reb Leibel came to the United States from his native Hamburg, escaping Germany with his family in 1939. He started a number

of business ventures, but was best known as the proprietor of Leibel Bistritzky's Kosher Gourmet Foods on the Lower East Side, known as much for the quality of the cheese as it was for closing every day at 4 PM to daven Mincha. Before he became the New York legend that he was, he and his wife were in the chicken business, and their business was on the verge of collapse. Reb Leibel turned tearfully to his Rebbe and asked for a blessing in his hour of desperation. He wrote the details in a note (known as a *pidyon nefesh*) and handed it to the Rebbe), As Reb Leibel put it³,

The Rebbe read my whole letter and said, "Leibel, G-d will help you." This was reassurance, but it was not enough for me. "Rebbe," I pleaded with tears in my eyes, "doesn't it say in the Talmud, tzaddik gozer v'Hakadosh Baruch Hu mekayem – when a righteous person makes a decree, G-d carries it out." Again, the Rebbe said, "G-d will help you," but I couldn't hear it. By then I was sobbing and insisting, "I will not leave here until the Rebbe issues a decree."

He looked at me and, seeing my despair, finally said, "It should be as you say."

What happened in the end? I didn't find a lottery ticket, I didn't find a million dollars in the street. But, bit by bit, I clawed my way out of the hole, and I became successful. It took a long time; my wife and I slaved for many

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http://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/2248639/jewish/Rabbi-Yehudah-Leib-Bistritzky-Provider-of-Physical-and-Spiritual-Sustenance.htm

years until I was able to stand on my own two feet. But I can say this: With the passing years, we saw the Rebbe's blessing fulfilled.

R' Leibel found himself plagued by the Satan that was his inner voice of doubt and pessimism, as many people have in their lives. But what distinguished this particular Jew is that he was able to see the Shofar caught in the thicket.

Appropriately enough, when the Rebbe wanted to honor someone with holding his shofar prior to *tekiat shofar*, there was no better person than his beloved disciple, Reb Leibel Bistritzky. He understood that salvation doesn't come עין בהרף, but it does eventually happen. Today we recall the brokenness but we await the wholeness. We wistfully declare תקע בשופר גדול, Today we don't just introduce the Satan- we also meet his nemesis: hope. It's the sight of a ram's horn caught in the distance, it's the clean and unwavering sound of the tekia. Let us hear its voice loud and clear.