

Thinking About Elul

Re'eh 5781

In the spirit of the Torah tradition called *Maaseh Rav*, or the idea that stories about great people are spiritually, intellectually and even halachically instructive, I'd like to share two stories with you this morning. I've been waiting for the right moment to share them with you and I think today, the eve of Rosh Chodesh Elul, is that moment. I've shared with you my relationship with the family of Donny Morris z"l, the young man from Bergenfield, New Jersey, who was killed during the catastrophe in Meron. At his funeral his teachers told two stories about him that illustrate what a remarkable young man he was.

Donny studied last year in Yeshivat Shaalvim in Israel; as is the custom in Yeshivot, the year begins on Rosh Chodesh Elul, ushering in a month of intense spiritual preparation, introspection and study. On the first day of Yeshiva, Donny made an unusual request of his roommate: "I want you to wake me up every morning by blowing the shofar."

"Why do you need a shofar?" His friend wondered.

Donny replied, "I want to wake up with a feeling of Elul."

In describing the mitzvah of shofar, the Rambam points out that, while the reason we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is that it is biblically commanded, there is an important symbolism attached to it as well.

אף על פי שְׁתַּקִּיעַת שׁוֹפָר בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה גְּזֵרַת הַכְּתוּב רָמַז יֵשׁ בּוֹ כְּלוֹמַר עוֹרוּ יְשָׁנִים מִשְׁנֵתְכֶם וְנִרְדְּמִים הִקִּיצוּ מִתְרַדְּמֵתְכֶם וְחִפְּשׂוּ בְּמַעֲשֵׂיכֶם וְחִזְרוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה וְזָכְרוּ בּוֹרְאֵכֶם.

Notwithstanding that the blowing of the ram's horn trumpet on Rosh ha-Shanah is a Scriptural statute, its blast is symbolic, as if saying: "You that sleep, stir yourselves from your sleep, and you who are slumbering, emerge from your slumber, examine your conduct, turn in repentance, and remember your Creator!

In his description of the shofar, the Rambam, the ultimate rationalist, acknowledges that the Torah simply telling us to do something won't guarantee our compliance. The Torah itself acknowledges this when it gives us the choice, at the beginning of this week's Torah reading, between blessings and curses, and later on, between life and death. How appropriate it is that we are reading this during a time when the pandemic is returning with a vengeance, particularly among those who chose not to become vaccinated. Aside from the halachic obligation to vaccinate, the notion of an illness for which there is something that is at least a mitigating factor that reduces its impact, yet people don't take advantage, is one that should powerfully move any religious Jew who is even remotely attuned to loftier matters. Sin is a spiritual pandemic that affects everyone, and repentance is the key to preventing it- yet we

rarely take advantage. Thank God, when it comes to Teshuvah- unlike illness- it is never too late. What *does* it take, therefore, to motivate us to Teshuvah? An experience, an emotional feeling, something to jolt us from our spiritual somnambulism and commit to change. Donny Morris woke up every morning fulfilling this Rambam; from the moment the shofar sounded above his bed in the morning, he was surrounded by the thoughts and prayers of Elul, and it motivated his extreme diligence and discipline in his learning- every second was accounted for in his day, in a schedule he made for himself that was widely disseminated, and emulated, after his death. His community Rabbi, Rabbi Yaakov Neuberger, who is also a Rosh Yeshiva at RIETS, described him as a *sho'ef legadlus*, a young man who aspired to and attained greatness in his tragically short lifetime.

But Donny was not just remembered for his spiritual sensitivity or his love of learning. The second story about Donny was shared by his Rebbe, Rav Noam Koenigsberg. At the beginning of the year, the young men in Rav Koenigsberg's shiur convened to decide what goals they would work on, as a group, in the coming year. Each member of the shiur suggested ideas for areas in which they could grow. Some suggested that they should work on Tefillah; others suggested that they focus on reviewing the material they learned, thus mastering it. Still others suggested a certain amount of ground they would cover, or various commentaries they should study, and on and on. When they were done, Donny Morris raised his hand.

“Guys, I think we missed the most important one: *middos*! When we return home at the end of the year, we won’t be having intricate talmudic discussions with our parents. It won’t matter as much to them whether our *shemoneh esrei* is five or ten minutes long. But they *will* know if we are kind, patient, respectful and loving people. We need to work on *derech erez*.” Of course, Donny’s suggestion was voted in unanimously.

Donny understood what Elul was about, and from his life and example, we can too. Let us use Elul as a time to awaken ourselves and create experiences that promote an Elul feeling. Changing our routine to add more spirituality, more Torah, and in general, something different from the rest of the year will surely help us enter the right frame of mind to approach the King on Rosh Hashanah. But let us also use Elul as an opportunity to change who we are. All of us possess character traits that are less than attractive, that affect our interpersonal relationships- anger, dishonesty, arrogance, gossip, stinginess, cynicism and a host of others. Maybe Elul is the time to pick *one* and make it a priority to work on improving it. Of course, it won’t be easy. Rav Yisrael Salanter reportedly said that it is easier to master the entire Talmud than to eradicate one anti-social character trait. But we will never know unless we try.

Elul is upon us in just a few short hours, and with it, the exciting opportunity to create an elevating and transforming Elul feeling. Who’s ready?