



THE SILBERBERG EDITION

ROSH HASHANA

DISCOVERING THE ESSENCE OF THE DAY

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לכתב אהרי

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Essence of the Day: Breaking Free from the Shackles

The newness of Rosh HaShana is almost palpable. While we are acutely aware of the fear inherent in the day, we simultaneously relish the opportunity for a fresh start. We all yearn for *hischadsbus* – renewal, a new beginning.

While the most significant *hischadsbus* of Rosh HaShana is הרת עולם – the birth of the world itself – the Gemara in Rosh HaShana 10b recounts other pivotal events that occurred on this day:

תניא, רבי אליעזר אומר: בתשרי נברא העולם. בראש השנה יצא יוסף מבית האסורין.

“It is taught in a beraita that the Tanna'im disagreed about this point: Rabbi Eliezer says: In Tishrei, the world was created...on Rosh HaShana, Yosef was released from prison.”

The Chiddushei HaRim asks: מאי דהוה הוה – what was, was. Why does the Gemara find it necessary to tell us the exact date of Yosef HaTzaddik's release from prison? And now that we know this, what is the connection between Yosef's freedom and Rosh HaShana?

The Chiddushei HaRim offers a profound insight into this teaching. The *sefarim hakedoshim* relate that the *nekudah* of *klal Yisrael* is represented by Yosef. The inner strength we all have access to is that of Yosef HaTzaddik. He endured countless tests, but the very first one was when he was sold into slavery by his own brothers. From there, he was imprisoned, a young man all alone – cast away, frightened, and with every reason to give up.

The Gemara is not simply telling us a random fact that

Yosef was freed on Rosh HaShana. Nor is it a coincidence that it happened then. Hashem, in His divine orchestration, specifically chose Rosh HaShana as the day of Yosef's release to serve as an eternal reminder for those of us who feel like Yosef. To some extent, we all do – even if we aren't physically behind bars – because in life, we all feel bound at times.

We feel shackled – constrained, confined. Prisoners to the *yetzer hara*, to our bad habits, negative traits, and inclinations. Prisoners to our past failures. We feel chained by the belief that our future is sealed by our past trials, our weakness, and our mistakes.

But this is all a facade. In reality, we are free people. We can choose our destiny. We always have the ability to begin anew, to restart. The world is constantly being recreated, with new life, new opportunities, and new hope being ceaselessly infused into the *briyah*. We can always capitalize on that.

Sadly, we often don't. We fail to see it or feel it. However, there is one day each year when we all know it's happening. We can all sense the newness in the air. Even then, we may feel fear or doubt in ourselves, hesitant to set new goals or commitments in the face of past failures. But deep down, we know it's there – we can almost touch it. This is the *hischadsbus* that comes with Rosh HaShana.

On this day, Hashem reminds us of Yosef HaTzaddik – the one who was truly abandoned, with no one and nothing. He was redeemed on this day. So too, we, like our forefather, can experience the same. Rosh HaShana has the power to redeem, to unlock, and to allow us to restart.

Tefillah: A Humble Heart

We come into Rosh HaShana knowing that our fate for the year depends on this day. Therefore, while it is always important to strengthen our *tefillah* and work on our connection to it, there is no greater time than today, the foundation for the rest of the year.

We all want and need many things. What we should daven for and how we should approach it is not a simple matter. The question of asking for personal requests on this day is a significant discussion and should be considered individually by each person. However, as we spend the next dozens of hours clutching our *machzorim*, pleading for mercy, the approach and the tone of our *tefillah* – no matter what we are davening for – should be in line with what Chazal teach us.

The Gemara in Sotah 5b relates:

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: בא וראה כמה גדולים נמוכי הרוח לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, שבשעה שביית המקדש קיים אדם מקריב עולה – שחר עולה בידו. מנחה – שחר מנחה בידו. אבל מי שדעתו שפלה, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו הקריב כל הקרבנות כולם...

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: Come and see how great the lowly in spirit are before the Holy One, Blessed be He. For when the beis hamikdash was standing, a person would sacrifice a burnt-offering and the merit of a burnt-offering would be his; he would sacrifice a meal-offering and the merit of a meal-offering would be his.

But with regard to one whose spirit is lowly, the verse ascribes him credit as if he had sacrificed all the sacrificial offerings...”

Throughout Elul, it is commendable – and indeed the

essential *avodah* of this time – to accumulate *zechuyos* and prepare for the יום איום ונורא, this mighty and awesome day. We want to show Hashem that we care, that we take this day seriously, and that we understand its potency and its far-reaching impact on the future. Everything is shaped from here.

However, when we are standing before Hashem on Rosh HaShana, with our lists – whether they are written in our machzorim or etched in our minds – our approach must be different. It should not be, “Hashem, look how much I’ve done, look how much You owe me.” On the contrary, the mindset should be, “Hashem, I have done much for You, yet I am still in tremendous need of *rachamei shamayim* – Your boundless mercy. I am nothing, my actions are nothing, and despite all the merits, mitzvos, and *ma’asim tovim* I have accrued, I am still drowning in debt. Only You can save me.”

As Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi teaches us, the key to *tefillah* is to come before Hashem with a broken heart, filled with reverence and humility. A person who approaches Hashem saying, “I am empty, worthless, completely reliant on You,” is regarded as if they have offered all the sacrifices. Their prayers are always accepted by Hashem, for true humility is more precious than any offering.

Underscoring this approach to *tefillah*, Rav Meilech Biederman quotes Rav Shlomo Kluger *zt”l*, who taught that one should daven before Rosh HaShana to be able to cry on Rosh HaShana. He explained that this idea is hinted at in the pasuk from Tehillim (42): “...ל-א-ל-ה-י-ם צמאה נפשי לאלקים לא-ל-ה-י-ם.” Rav Shlomo Kluger explained: “צמאה נפשי – my soul thirsts,” “ל-אלקים – on the Day of Judgment,” “היתה לי דמעתי – that I should be able to cry.”

I believe we can elucidate on this teaching. We say in *selichos*, “קומה עזרתה לנאנחים ונאנקים – arise and assist those who sigh and those who groan.” But a person who feels לי מגיע – that they are entitled or owed – will struggle to cry. They can’t shed tears from such a lofty stance, as they almost question why others are moaning or crying, wondering, “What’s wrong with them?” Rav Shlomo Kluger is teaching us that Dovid HaMelech, the wisest of all men, is alluding in Tehillim to the proper mindset for Rosh HaShana. On this day,

there is no “high horse,” and even if there is, we are certainly not on top of it. The only One above is Hashem. We are below, and we must approach Him with utmost humility and brokenness, pleading for a favorable judgment.

Rav Meilech encapsulates this idea with a beautiful *mashal*:

A young girl walked into a jewelry store and spotted a necklace that immediately caught her eye. “Is that a real necklace?” she asked the merchant. “It’s real gold,” the merchant replied. “Can I see it?” she asked eagerly. The merchant, aware the girl likely couldn’t afford it, decided to humor her and handed over the necklace. Her face lit up with excitement. “How much does it cost?” she inquired. “It’s very expensive – too much for someone your age,” he responded. “I want to buy it,” she insisted, “and I have money.” She opened her purse and carefully counted out seven dollars and eighty cents.

Taken aback by her resolve, the merchant asked, “Why do you want this necklace so much?” She explained, “Our mother passed away last year. My older sister has been taking care of us ever since, and today is her birthday. I know she would be so happy to get this necklace. I want to buy it for her.” “But the necklace costs far more than \$7.80. I’m sorry, there’s nothing in the store for that amount,” replied the merchant. Tears welled up in the girl’s eyes, and she began to cry.

Touched by her story and moved by the love she had for her sister, the merchant softened. “You can have the necklace,” he said, accepting her \$7.80 as payment. Later that day, the older sister came into the store. “Did my younger sister buy this necklace from you today?” she asked. “Yes,” the merchant confirmed. “How much did it cost?” she questioned. The merchant smiled and said, “In my store, we don’t have fixed prices. I name a price, the customer suggests one, and we negotiate until we reach an agreement. Your sister negotiated very well and convinced me to sell it for less.”

Today, we are like the little girl approaching the merchant. We have no money, we can’t afford the price, and we have no one to call for help. All we have is one thing – something more powerful than anything else: a heartfelt *krechitz*, a flowing tear, and a broken heart.

Shofar: Because He Said So

Famously, Rav Saadya Gaon enumerates 10 reasons behind the mitzvah of blowing the shofar, and while we hear the various *kolos* and should try to reflect on them (they are probably conveniently listed in your machzor), it is very important

not to become overwhelmed with the *kavanos*. Instead, we should focus on the fact that *tekiyas shofar* is the *mitzvas hayom*, and by doing so, we are fulfilling the *ratzon Hashem*.

This isn’t a cop-out or an excuse for the fainthearted, as

Rabbeinu Bachya, a *mekubal* from the 13th century, himself writes in his sefer Kad HaKemach:

וכן מצות שופר שנצטינו לתקוע בו ביום הזה מן הכתוב האומר ובחדש השביעי באחד לחדש וגו' יום תרועה יהיה לכם. והנה הפ' הזאת סתומה. והתקיעה הזו לא נתפרשה במה היא אם בשופר אם בחצוצרות או בשאר כלים גם לא נתפרש הסעם למה צוה בתקיעה, גם בכתוב לא נתפרש שהוא יום הדין, והסעם בזה שלא ישתבשו הפתאים ותשאר הידיעה ליחידים.

...The reason for this blowing is not clarified...the reason for this is so that the simple-minded do not become confused, and the knowledge remains for the few.

The Briskers relate a story of a *baal tokei'a* who approached his rebbe months before Rosh Hashana to learn the *kavanos* for *tekiyos*. The rebbe told him, "We have more time." This happened again, and the rebbe repeated, "We have more time." Finally, on Rosh HaShana, just before the *tekiyos*, the *baal tokei'a* asked, "Rebbe, as the representative, what should I have in mind?" The rebbe answered, "Have in mind what the Gemara says in Rosh HaShana 16a: רחמנא – Hashem said, blow."

This approach wasn't only accepted in the 1300s by Rabbeinu Bachya or passed down in one of the rare Brisker stories. A nearly identical story happened with the *heilige* Baal Shem Tov.

One year, Reb Zev Wolf Kitzes, one of the closest disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, had been assigned the role of *baal tokei'a* in the beis medrash in Medzibuzh. In preparation for this tremendous mitzvah and its immense responsibility, Reb Zev delved deeply into the study of *kavanos*, the Kabalistic intentions that unveil the profound layers of *tekiyas shofar*. To ensure that he would perform them accurately, he crafted a "crib sheet" that he could refer to during the blowing of the shofar.

When Rosh HaShana arrived, the moment of awe approached. The entire community, men, women, and children filled the room in eager anticipation of the sacred sound of the shofar. Standing beside the shofar blower was the Baal Shem Tov himself, ready to serve as the Makri, guiding the order of the shofar notes.

After a stirring niggun was sung in preparation for *tekiyas shofar*, Reb Zev Wolf reached into his pocket for his notes and placed them on his lectern. He closed his eyes

and recited the blessings on behalf of the congregation, who responded with a resounding "Amen!" Just as he opened his eyes to glance at his notes, the Baal Shem Tov swiftly took the paper and concealed it from his view.

Reb Zev's heart skipped a beat, and he stood there, frozen with panic. The Baal Shem Tov then called out, "Tekiyah!" Having already recited the blessings, Reb Zev had no option but to blow the shofar without the profound intentions he had prepared. He felt exposed before his revered teacher and the King of the Worlds, lacking the wisdom and insight expected of him at this crucial moment. The entire town depended on the spiritual success of his shofar blasts.

Overwhelmed with tears, silently pleading for guidance, Reb Zev struggled to produce the sounds. They emerged raw and desperate. When it was over, he bowed his head, weeping and drained.

After Mussaf, as he addressed the congregation, the Baal Shem Tov smiled warmly at Reb Zev. "Today, we heard a most extraordinary shofar blowing! You see, there are numerous gates leading into the King's chamber, and each gate has its unique key. Throughout the year, these gates remain locked, and only on Rosh Hashana, during the shofar blowing, are we granted access to the innermost chambers of the King. The *kavanos*, the meditations, serve as keys, each one capable of unlocking a specific gate to reach the King's inner chamber. But there is one master key that opens all the gates: that master key is pure simplicity and the heartfelt prayer of a broken heart."

This powerful anecdote serves as a poignant reminder, not only for the upcoming mitzvah of *tekiyas shofar* but indeed for all mitzvos and avenues of *avodas Hashem*. It highlights the profound truth articulated in the Gemara in Sanhedrin: "רחמנא ליבא בעי" – Hashem desires our heart." While our preparations, intentions, and actual *avodah* are important, ultimately, it's the raw purity of our heart and our connection that matter most.

We often perform outward acts and aspire to attain lofty intentions, yet ultimately, the authenticity of our heart and our connection with Hashem is what truly matters. As the Gemara in Berachos states: "ובלבד" – אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט, ובלבד – שיכוין לבו לשמים – whether it's much or little, what matters is the intention for the sake of Heaven."

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