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Shedding Light on the Days of Awe

A Journal of Torah Thoughts

Featuring Members of
The Avraham HaLevi Isralight Rabbinic Enrichment Fellowship

Shedding Light on the Days of Awe

is dedicated to the memory of

**Liba Golda bat Hodel and Shlomo of blessed memory,
beloved mother of Rabbi David Aaron.**

A survivor of the Holocaust, Liba Golda Wilenski took great pride in her son's life-work, Isralight, which enables Jews to embrace their heritage and celebrate their Judaism.

**Binyamin Aharon ben Daniel ve'Yehudit, Benji Hillman, h'y'd, of blessed memory, a Company Commander in Golani's elite Egoz unit who fell in battle on the 24th of Tammuz 5756 (July 20th, 2006)
and**

Captain Daniel Gomez, son of Patrick and Miriam, h'y'd, an Israeli Air Force helicopter pilot who was shot down over Lebanon while on a mission to aid his comrades, on the 19th day of the month of Menachem Av, in the summer of 2006, two dear cousins of Rav Binny Freedman.

Stanley "Corky" Poskanzer, Reb Shalom Melech ben Shimon Leib v'Eeda, z'l. A leader of the Albany, NY Jewish community and beloved uncle of Rabbi Sam Shor who dedicated his life in service of the Jewish people and all humanity.

May this Journal of Torah thoughts be an *aliyat neshama*, an elevation for their souls, and may their memories bring blessing and comfort to their families, loved ones and all *Klal Yisrael*.

Yehi Zichronam Baruch.

Dear Friends,

I am delighted to introduce *Shedding Light on the Days of Awe*, Isralight's inaugural journal of *divrei Torah* and inspirational words, from many of the gifted rabbis who have participated in the **Avraham HaLevi Isralight Rabbinic Enrichment Fellowship**.

The Avraham HaLevi Isralight Rabbinic Enrichment Fellowship provides continuing education, mentoring, annual professional conferences in Jerusalem and in New York, and resources to a select group of young rabbinic leadership. Three years since its inception, this unprecedented program has developed on-going relationships with a substantial and diverse representation of rabbinic talent from the United States, Canada, Israel, England and South Africa. This fellowship provides participating rabbis with personal enrichment, educational materials and content, and valuable mentoring with senior Isralight Rabbinic Staff. The networking and camaraderie that has emerged has proven to be immeasurably supportive to each of our Rabbinic Fellows.

Each carefully chosen Avraham HaLevi Isralight Rabbinic Fellow has the ability to impact hundreds of individuals annually, as a congregational rabbi, an Educational/Program Director or faculty member for a leading Jewish school, or outreach and educational organization.

It is our hope that the enclosed words of wisdom will enrich your High Holiday experience, as well as showcase this unique program and the wonderful young rabbis who we have gladly welcomed into our growing Isralight family. Additionally, we've included three articles from our Isralight rabbis which you will find at the conclusion of the journal.

In closing, I must personally thank our dear colleague Rabbi Aaron Levitt of Boca Raton, FL, for serving as chair of this inaugural journal, for gathering the articles from several of our Rabbinic Alumni, and for his vision in dedicating this publication in memory of several special individuals. Great thanks must be expressed as well to my Isralight colleagues Susan Rotsztajn and Mindy Kofman Rosengarten for their tireless efforts in editing, layout and design of this entire journal, and for all they do day in and day out on behalf of Isralight.

With warm wishes for a *Shana Tova Umetuka* - a happy, healthy and sweet New Year,

Rabbi Sam Shor

Director of Community and Leadership Development, Isralight

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Thoughts on the Book of Jonah

Rabbi Gur Berman

Faculty, Hillel Day School, Boca Raton, FL

There is a difficult story recorded in Kings I Chapter 17 Verse 17-24:

And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him. And she said unto Elijah: 'What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?' And he said unto her: 'Give me thy son.' And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into the upper chamber, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed. And he cried unto the LORD, and said: 'O LORD my God, hast Thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?' And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said: 'O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come back into him.' And the LORD hearkened unto the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back into him, and he revived. And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the upper chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother; and Elijah said: 'See, thy son liveth.' And the woman said to Elijah: 'Now I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth.'

A young boy, an only child, experiences a near death experience even though he seems to be completely innocent. In fact, the careful reader of the preceding verses in this chapter senses that this near-death experience occurred not because anything that this young boy had done but rather because of something Elijah, who was staying in the boy's house at the time, did. Earlier in the chapter we are told that Elijah decreed a drought over the land because many of the people followed the lead of their king Ahab and became involved in idolatry. Hashem, **Rashi** explains on verse seven quoting the Talmud, was unhappy that Elijah had decreed a drought. The people had sinned; strict judgment demanded that these sinners experience a drought and the resulting hunger. That is why

Hashem fulfilled Elijah's decree. And yet Hashem wanted the hunger to stop; He wanted to convince Elijah that the drought and ensuing hunger was causing more harm than good. And so He forced Elijah to confront the results of the hunger Elijah had decreed in the body of a lifeless child and the pained words of the child's mother. It is interesting to note that Elijah's first prayer on behalf of the child does not result in Hashem reviving the child. It is only after Elijah prostrates himself on the boy and literally comes face-to-face with the destruction that his drought has wrought that Elijah is able to muster a tefilah sincere enough to cause Hashem to listen. Having confronted the results of the famine that he decreed, Elijah is no longer interested in maintaining his attitude of strict judgment towards Bnei Yisrael; he is ready to battle the people's sins with mercy and kindness. It is only then that the mother of this child with whom Elijah has been living for at least a year tells him that she knows he is a man of God and that the words that he speaks on behalf of God are true. In the more symbolic word of the Talmud Sanhedrin 113A:

When God saw there was suffering in the world on account of the drought and that Elijah was not inclined to let the drought end God commanded Elijah saying "Arise go to Zarfath. And it was after these events that the son of the woman who was the mistress of the house took ill. When the boy died, Elijah asked God that He give him the key of resurrection so that Elijah could revive the dead child. God said to Elijah: There are three keys that were not entrusted to an agent—the key of childbirth, the key of rain and the key of resurrection. I have already made an exception and gave you the key to rain. Now you request a second key, the key to resurrection? Is it proper that two keys are in the hands of the student and one in the hand of the teacher? Bring back the key of rain and take in its place the key of resurrection. Elijah was forced to give up his control of rain in order to resurrect the child. Then, God decreed an end to the drought.

And still we are puzzled. Why couldn't Hashem teach Elijah this important lesson in a way that

would not traumatize a blameless boy? He is all-powerful; surely he could have conceived of a less painful manner in which to teach Elijah about the importance for a prophet to balance a sense of strict judgment with feelings of love and mercy. There is one more piece of the puzzle which may help us understand why Hashem used this boy as the messenger through which to teach Elijah the importance of mercy. According to the midrash (as quoted by **Radak** and others) the women in whose home Elijah stayed was the mother of Jonah and therefore the women's only child must be none other than the prophet Jonah. It is Jonah, whose own struggles with balancing mercy and judgment we read about on Yom Kippur that was the recipient of Elijah's new-found respect for the efficacy of using more compassion and less anger in convincing *Bnei Yisrael* to abandon idolatry. Or in other words, Jonah owes his life to Elijah's realization that mercy must sometimes trump strict justice- the very same realization that will be necessary for Jonah's ultimate success as a prophet. A prophet, as Hashem attempts to teach Jonah throughout the book of Jonah, must be able to forgive and be merciful. He must be able to relate to the Jewish people and all of mankind compassionately because that is the way Hashem relates to mankind. Although much of the story of Jonah is about Hashem teaching Jonah this important lesson, Jonah's experience as a child

should make it easier to embrace and celebrate this lesson. After all, strict judgment would have called for the famine to continue and for Jonah's life to have been lost as an unintended but natural consequence of the sinning of the people during Jonah's youth. Jonah owes his life to the fact that the world can only exist when Hashem and his prophets strike a proper balance between strict judgment and mercy. No doubt Jonah's earlier near-death experience makes it easier for him to embrace that message as an adult prophet.

Our life-goal is to be true to who we are: an image of God. And yet there are life experiences which seem to make it difficult to fulfill our mission. We experience sickness or loss and the resulting malaise and we wonder what purpose such pain could possibly serve in our life. We can learn much from the life of Jonah. His life mission was to be an agent for Hashem's mercy and kindness in this world. No doubt he and those who loved him wondered what if any benefit would result from his painful childhood experience. He could not have known then that as an adult, the lesson of that experience would empower him to carry out his life's mission. We must believe that all of our life experiences come from Hashem and that they will ultimately empower us to carry out our life mission: to be true to our divine self and to be the messengers of God's word and will in this world.

Neilah – Too Excited to be Scared

Rabbi Ira Ebbin

Congregation Beth Zion, Montreal

It is Neilah time- The Closing Act for Yom Kippur, where we imagine the heavenly Gates of Repentance slowly closing in front of us. For many years I approached Neilah with the traditional anxiety and unease. I have this clear childhood memory of the Rabbi in my shul, emphasizing that at this moment we should be filled with fear, as this is our final chance to change our fate. I recall the seriousness and serenity in his low voice as if he were speaking to me personally. He was pleading with me to finally seize the moment. Even if I had failed to do *Teshuva* up until right now, even if I had just woken up and realized the significance of the day just for the first time, the “All-Mighty” will accept my penitence, as long as I somehow I find the strength and drive to approach Him with sincerity.

So now I’m the Rabbi, and I’m supposed to take that role of scaring everyone in the moments before Neilah. But, in reality, it is hard for me to be scared during this so called time of our national trepidation. Granted, if I had waited until the very last minute to try to change my ways - yeah, I guess I would be scared, and anxious. However, I would hope that here is nobody in this room who has procrastinated until this point, and that none of us find ourselves in that very grave situation.

I would expect that most of us have not just boarded the train, but rather that this has already been a very long journey. We have spent the last forty days preparing for this moment, the last ten days priming ourselves for right now, and the last 24 hours immersing ourselves in prayer and personal thought, abstaining from nearly all physical needs in order to maintain that constant reminder of the seriousness of the task in front of us.

So, how should we be feeling at this moment before Neilah? If not fear, which emotion is appropriate during the closing moments of Yom Kippur? Rather than a feeling of fear of what’s to come, perhaps during Neilah the focus should be the present moment. Perhaps the ninety minutes of this prayer should be filled with enjoyment and appreciation, as we absorb and savor every single second of this incredibly special time.

In **Rabbi Soleviitchick**’s work “*Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified*” he shares a beautiful story from his childhood.

Not far from where our family lived there was a Modziter shtiebel where I would occasionally go for shalosh seudos. The Hasidism would be singing Bnei Heikhala, Hashem Ro’i Lo Ehsor, again Bnei Heikhala, again Hashem Ro’i Lo Ehsor. It occurred to me that they weren’t singing because they wanted to sing, they were singing because they did not want to allow Shabbat to leave....

I remember an encounter in this shtiebel as a small child. One of the men, who had been singing most enthusiastically, wearing a Kapota consisting of more holes than material, approached me and asked if I recognized him. I told him that I did not, and he introduced himself as Yankel the Porter. Now during the week, I knew Yankel the Porter as someone very ordinary wearing shabby clothes walking around with a rope. I could not imagine that this individual of such regal bearing could be the same person. Yet on Shabbos he wore a Kapota and a shtreimel. That is because his soul wasn’t Yankel the Porter, but Yankel the Prince.

Well, after nightfall, I naively asked him “When do we daven Ma’ariv?” He replied, “Do you miss weekdays that much, [that you can’t wait to daven Maariv?]”

You see, as much as I try, I really can’t be scared. – I’m just too excited to be scared. As we have talked about numerous times during the last month or so, the role of repentance goes way beyond saying ‘I’m sorry’ or even changing our ways. As Rabbi Soloveitchik explains, part of the punishment of sin, is the sin itself. The sin itself creates an impediment in the sinner’s personal relationship with G-d. As Dovid Hamelech cries in Psalm 51 following his sin with Batsheva – “*Al Tashlicheynu Milfanecha, Veruach Kadshicha al Tikach Me’menu.*” Please G-d, don’t send me away from You, and don’t take Your Holy Spirit from me. We

have spent the last forty days trying to clean our hearts to make them pure once again, to reestablish the Lev Tahor that G-d had once given to us. Only then can we feel that closeness to Hashem, the warmth of being embraced by Him.

And now, as Rav Soloveitchik conveys in his story, now that we have it, now that we've gotten there after challenging ourselves for the last forty days, now is the time to enjoy it. Now is the time to embrace the incredible feeling of being watched, being cared for, and being loved by Hashem. When we blow that shofar, we will follow it with singing and dancing, my personal favorite moments of the year. It is these euphoric moments that are so other-worldly that we will continue to celebrate just a little bit after sundown, since we never really want them to end.

But as beautiful as these moments are for us right now, as incredibly spiritual and connected as we feel presently, it will ultimately have to end. The dancing and hugging will stop, the kittels will fly off, and we'll be rushing through Maariv and then breaking our fast. This, I think, is the other purpose for our Neilah.

In his beautiful work *Kaddish*, **Leon Wieseltier** shares with us some of his personal discoveries while observing one of G-d's more enigmatic creatures, the firefly.

“When I left shul this evening, I walked over to the park. The heavy summer air was filled with fireflies, hundreds of them, burning and vanishing, burning and vanishing. The park was a field of

floating passing intensities. I sat for a while and watched the little eruptions of brilliance. Whenever I looked, there was the beginning and ending of light. No light lasted long, but there was not a moment of total darkness. This, I thought, is another ideal of illumination. The glow passes, but the afterglow need not pass. The problem is that its survival is in our hands. Unlike the glow, the afterglow is not an experience; and we prefer an experience.

I have read of people whose lives are transfigured in an instant. I do not believe that such a transfiguration can happen to me. For what changed those people was not only the instant, but also their subsequent fidelity to that instant.”

In our forthcoming Neilah prayer, perhaps our purpose is to find a way to capture how we feel today, and transfer that into how we are tomorrow. These moments, so often, like the firefly, are so fleeting, shining for a moment then gone the next. If we hope to translate this incredible feeling into something genuine, if we hope to incorporate this *Dveykut* into our daily lives, right now is the time to make that real.

These are the closing moments of Yom Kippur, the Final Act. But I am not afraid; - I'm way too energized and excited. Enjoy every bit of this time, and make commitments to yourself to ensure that the emotions that you feel now will endure. For me, these are my favorite moments of the year. I'm looking forward to sharing them along with you.

The Physical and Spiritual Light of Yom Kippur: *Reinstating a Lost Tradition to Enhance the Spirituality of Today's Synagogue*

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider

Mt. Kisco (NY) Hebrew Congregation

With Rabbi Barry Kornblau

Introduction

“*Or Zarua la'tzadik – Light is sown for the righteous*”. Each year, we begin our Yom Kippur prayers with these repeated, resounding words which *Aruch Hashulchan* tells us refer to “*great matters that are beyond explanation*.” If there is one evening of the entire Jewish year when we most seek the great, inexplicable light of God’s *Shechina*, it is Yom Kippur eve. We enter the synagogue with great expectations, to feel close to the Divine, and to feel the warmth of His light and presence. As we say throughout the penitential season, *Hashem ori ve'yishi* – God is my light and salvation.

And yet for so many, it is difficult to feel that sense of God in our midst, to experience internally the light we speak of so often in our prayers.

What if there was a way to create a more spiritual atmosphere in our synagogues on Yom Kippur eve? What if we could somehow transform the physical space of our synagogues so that one who enters there would immediately sense the heightened spirituality and sanctity of *Kol Nidre* eve? What if each individual could help to create that atmosphere by a simple act of his or her own hands?

Below, we shall see that rabbinic literature prescribes the lighting of candles in the synagogue on Yom Kippur eve. We believe that, for many, reinstating this practice could enhance the spirituality of Yom Kippur eve.

An Ancient Practice

The practice we seek to reinstate is neither the kindling of *Yahrzeit* candles, nor the lighting of candles lit by women at home on each Shabbat and

Yom Tov evening, including Yom Kippur eve. Rather, it is a third practice – usually not seen here in the United States – that dates back nearly two millennia, to the Mishna. Let us consider the Mishna in its entirety, which begins with the custom of candlelighting in the home:

מקום שנהגו להדליק את הנר בלילי יום
הכפורים – מדליקין;
מקום שנהגו שלא להדליק – אין מדליקין.¹

*A place where they have practiced
to kindle the light on Yom Kippur
eves – they kindle. A place where
they have practiced not to kindle –
they do not kindle.*

The *Tosefta* and both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds all explain that these differing practices regarding whether to kindle lights in private homes are both intended to prevent marital relations on the night of Yom Kippur, when that activity is forbidden. The custom to kindle was intended to remind a couple to refrain from marital relations on Yom Kippur eve by creating a lit setting in which such relations are forbidden by Talmudic law, and in which people would be naturally sexually reticent.² The custom *not* to light on Yom Kippur eve, on the other hand, was intended to diminish the husband’s desire for relations with his wife by eliminating the light which allows him to see her and thereby desire her.

Having considered differing practices regarding lighting in private homes, the Mishna goes on to

¹ Mishna Pesachim 4:4

² Interestingly, this reasoning assumes that the prohibition to have marital relations by candlelight was more widely known and observed by the people than the prohibition of marital relations of Yom Kippur itself.

discuss the uniform practice of lighting in public venues – the main focus of this paper:

ומדליקין בבתי כנסיות ובבתי מדרשות.
ובמבואות האפלים, ועל גבי החולים.

They kindle in synagogues, study halls, and dark alleyways, and near the ill.

The *Tosefta*³ expands this list to include other public places such as inns, bathhouses, and restrooms (or, according to one interpretation, *mikvaot*.) The need to illuminate these various public locations is strictly practical: so people can see where they are going, what they are doing, do not trip, can relieve themselves, immerse themselves in a *mikvah*⁴, and the like. Since sources the *Mishna* generally rules on halachic, not practical matters, the *Jerusalem Talmud* explains that this last phrase of the *Mishna* teaches a halachic point, as well: namely, that even where kindling in private homes is forbidden, kindling in public venues is permitted since there is no concern for marital relations occurring in such settings.⁵

The *Mishna*, *Tosefta*, and *Talmuds*, then, note the uniform practice of kindling lights in synagogues and study halls on Yom Kippur eve. It is a practical matter, whose halachic background relates to the specific issue of the prohibition of marital relations on Yom Kippur. This was true beyond the Talmudic period, as well. *Rambam*, for example, codifies these Talmudic sources and mentions the two varying practices regarding kindling in one's house, but entirely omits discussion of kindling in all public venues⁶. *Magid Mishneh* explains *Rambam*'s omission in a manner similar to the Jerusalem Talmud's comment (above), noting that the practice *not* to kindle in private venues never extended to public ones since couples are not secluded there.⁷

Similarly, writing in Vienna at the turn of 13th Century, *Or Zarua*⁸ elaborates at great length upon many familiar *minhagim* of Yom Kippur eve, yet entirely omits mention of kindling lights in

synagogues. On the other hand, writing at the same general time in Germany, *Sefer Ravyah*⁹ states explicitly that his community did follow the Talmudic custom to kindle lights in synagogues and study halls, relating this kindling to the Talmudic concerns.

Rosh and the Establishment of a Halachically Mandated Lighting

The halachic works of French Jewry, however, invest the kindling of lights on Yom Kippur with symbolic, ritual, and mandatory meanings. In 11th Century France, for example, *Machzor Vitri*¹⁰ describes the formal *minhag* in his community to kindle lights on Yom Kippur, and provides a Midrashic basis for this custom. The Midrash¹¹ asserts that God does not require the mitzvot of Man, and that the light of the menorah in the Temple is therefore for Man's benefit – to protect him – and not for God's benefit. Similarly, since Proverbs 20:27 likens a person's soul to a candle, *Machzor Vitri* concludes that kindling lights on Yom Kippur protects. However, *Machzor Vitri* does not detail that protection or how it connects to Yom Kippur.

In 13th Century France, *Rosh*¹² also recognizes this *minhag*, indicating that an abundance of candles were typically lit in synagogues. Unlike *Machzor Vitri*, however, *Rosh* places this custom into a broader and more familiar halachic framework, namely, *kavod Yom Tov*. To do so, he begins by citing the Talmud's requirement to wear clean clothes on Yom Kippur to honor the day in the absence of food and drink through which one honors other holidays.¹³ Then, he cites *Targum Yonaton* to Isaiah 24:15 to show that kindling lights is a form of honoring God. Therefore, he concludes, “*yesh le'chavdo* (one should honor it)” through all means considered to be honor. For *Rosh*, kindling lights on Yom Kippur eve fulfills this halachic requirement to honor the day. *Rosh*'s son, the author of the *Arba'ah Turim*, follows the approach of his father in this area.¹⁴

³ Pesachim 3:11

⁴ According to some opinions, a *ba'al ker*i was permitted to immerse himself on Yom Kippur, despite the general prohibition to wash or immerse oneself on Yom Kippur.

⁵ Pesachim 4:4.

⁶ Hilchot Shvitat Asur, 3:10.

⁷ An early, standard commentator on *Rambam*'s *Mishneh Torah*.

⁸ R. Yitzchak b. Moshe of Vienna

⁹ R. Eliezer b. R. Yoel haLevi; section 528.

¹⁰ *Seder shel Yom Hakippurim*; *Machzor Vitri* is traditionally attributed to a student of Rashi.

¹¹ Tanchuma 24, P. Emor

¹² Yoma 8:9

¹³ bShabbat 119a

¹⁴ Other sources prescribe that beautiful tablecloths should be set out in synagogues and study halls.

Kol Bo (early 14th Century France and Spain)¹⁵ introduces two further practical considerations favoring this kindling. First, the recitation of the less familiar Yom Kippur prayers “all day and night” necessitates lighting candles in synagogues. Second, such a candle can be used to fulfill the special halachic requirement of *ner she’shavat* for the havdalah candle used at the close of Yom Kippur.¹⁶

Mordechai Equates the Lighting with the Judgment of One’s Soul

Rosh’s immediate contemporary, *Mordechai*, provides an entirely different basis for this kindling.¹⁷ As we shall see, his rationale will take us far away from the issues of honoring Yom Tov and the practical considerations we have seen so far. It is noteworthy that *Mordechai* prefaces his novel explanation by stating his conscious intent to strengthen this *minhag*. As we shall see, *Mordechai* succeeded in this regard, perhaps beyond his own expectations.

Mordechai begins by quoting a statement from the Talmud¹⁸ indicating that if one wants to see if he will live out the year, he should light a candle and place it in a windless room from Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur. If the flame lasts, then he will live out the year.¹⁹ *Mordechai* rules that “in our time, the practice is to kindle a candle on Yom Kippur for every person since it is the *gmar din* (the final Day of Judgment).” Apparently, *Mordechai* means that, since Jews in his time no longer lit candles during the entire period of judgment from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur, we symbolically include that entire time period by lighting a candle at its close, on Yom Kippur.

In late 14th Century Germany, *Mahari*²⁰ cites *Mordechai*, suggesting that the lighting is a personal obligation that symbolizes the soul of man standing before God on the Day of Judgment, Yom Kippur. He also notes that the practice was for

¹⁵ Section 68.

¹⁶ Havdalah at the end of Yom Kippur should include a blessing over a candle that burnt throughout the day. For other holidays and Shabbat, the candle may be lit just before the blessing is recited.

¹⁷ *Mordechai* b. Hillel Ashkenazi, comment #723 to bYoma.

¹⁸ bHoriot 12a, bKritut 5b

¹⁹ Below, we will discuss this practice in light of the Torah prohibition of *nichush* (divination).

²⁰ *Hilchot erev Yom Kippur*, R. Yaakov Moelin, 13-65 - 1427, Germany

only men and boys to light but not women or girls, providing a number of homiletic and halachic suggestions for why this might be so. The simplest of them is that a married woman fulfills her obligation through her husband’s lighting. *Maharil*’s student *Mahariv*²¹ also elaborates on these matters, and prohibits the then common practice of instructing a gentile to rekindle one’s candle that went out on Yom Kippur.

Codification in Shulchan Aruch, Rema and Beyond

How are the differing traditions of *Rosh* and *Mordechai* reflected in the voices found in the standard code of Jewish Law, *Shulchan Aruch*? *R. Yosef Karo* cites *Mordechai*’s approach in his *Beit Yosef*, but his final codification in *Shulchan Aruch* reflects the tradition of *Rosh*; i.e., there should be lights in the synagogue and elsewhere, not that there is an individual obligation to kindle such lights.

In his glosses to the *Beit Yosef* and the *Shulchan Aruch*, however, *Rema* (R. Moshe Isserles) codifies the approach of *Mordechai*, mandating an individual lighting. As he does so, he adds further stringencies to this kindling. For example, *Rema* rules that if one’s light is extinguished on Yom Kippur, one must relight it at the conclusion of Yom Kippur and allow it to burn down completely. Similarly, although one whose light burned throughout Yom Kippur could extinguish it out at the end of Yom Kippur, one whose candle went out during Yom Kippur must accept upon himself that neither he nor others will ever extinguish his candle at the end of Yom Kippur. Apparently, these build upon an implication of *Mordechai*’s Talmudic source; namely, that it is a bad sign if one’s candle goes out on Yom Kippur.

A century later, *Levush*²² accepts these rulings of *Rema*, and adds a further stringency based upon the reasoning of *Machzor Vitry*. First, he sharpens *Machzor Vitry*’s reason of “protection” by indicating that the Yom Kippur eve light kindled in the synagogue atones for the soul of the one who lights it. Therefore, he (and subsequent authorities, as well) prohibits lighting a candle for a *meshumad* (an apostate) so that his soul cannot gain an atonement which it does not deserve.

²¹ Responsa Mahiri Weil 192.

²² R. *Mordechai* b. Abraham Jaffe, 1535-1612

These varied codifications of the practice to light candles in the synagogue by *Tur*, *Beit Yosef*, *Shulchan Aruch*, *Rema*, and *Levush* both reflected and contributed to its spread to all of world Jewry. Indeed, in his comments to the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Magen Avraham*²³ notes that concerns about fire safety had prompted a widespread practice to hire a Gentile to guard the synagogue throughout the night of Yom Kippur. That, in turn, prompted him to decry infractions of the regulations pertaining to what such a Gentile may be instructed to do in the context of the laws of Yom Kippur.

So far, then, we have seen at least six separate reasons to kindle candles on Yom Kippur eve in addition to one's *Yahrzeit* and Yom Tov candles: to protect (*Machzor Vitri*) or gain atonement (*Levush*); to fulfill the halachic obligation to honor Yom Kippur day (*Rosh*); to dramatize the final judgment for the forthcoming year that is given for each person on Yom Kippur (*Mordechai*); and to address practical issues of having a *ner sh'shavat* and to provide adequate illumination for the extended, unfamiliar nighttime prayers of Yom Kippur (*Kol Bo*).

A Theoretical Problem Becomes a Practical One

Before continuing to follow this practice's further development, let us return to a problem in *Mordechai*'s Talmudic source. It indicated that if one lights a candle at Rosh Hashana time which remains lit until Yom Kippur, then this is a sign that one will live out the year. In his comments to *Horiot 12b*, *Maharasha* (16th C) states the problem succinctly: "This practice is apparently forbidden by the prohibition of 'You must not practice divination' (Vayikra 19:26). For what reason is this [and other similar practices mentioned in the *Talmud*] permitted...?"

Maharsha's answer is that this practice of lighting is permitted because it is an act symbolizing one's hope for a future good (a *siman tov*) which does not reflect the inverse belief that the absence of that sign will negatively affect the future with certainty. Correspondingly, the Talmud only states the positive sign of the candle remaining lit but does not mention the significance of its going out.

However, the widespread popularity of *Mordechai*'s approach as well as its intensification over time through the successive stringent rulings of *Rema*, *Levush*, and others, created a

corresponding intensity about this matter in the minds of Jews. Apparently, the Jewish masses did not maintain *Maharsha*'s caution about the non-significance of their light going out. Put simply, it appears that ordinary people considered this flame to bear a heavenly sent message regarding their very lives in the forthcoming year. If their flame was extinguished before the end of Yom Kippur, then this implied they would not live out the year. *Aruch Hashulchan*²⁴ and *Mishna Berura*²⁵, for example, both write that the Jewish masses were distraught if their candle went out on Yom Kippur. As a result, what was a theoretical problem for *Maharsha* became a practical problem for these later halachic authorities.

They address this problem in three distinct ways. First, they provide practical ways to avoid seeing whether one's light goes out. *Aruch Hashulchan* suggests lighting one's candle amidst those of others so that one's own candle is no longer specifically identifiable.²⁶ Similarly, *Mishna Berura* suggests having a shul representative light all the candles so that people cannot identify their own candle. Second, while still encouraging individuals to light their candles, *Aruch Hashulchan* exhorts the people to be "whole with your God," and that "it is not becoming for the Holy People [of Israel] to walk in the ways of divination."

Finally, *Aruch Hashulchan* also extends the reasoning of *Rosh*, writing that the lights are not only to honor the day of Yom Kippur, but that "the practice is to honor the King with great lights and this, indeed, is the practice of all Israel, to multiply lights to honor this holy day... in all of the rooms of one's home, in synagogues, in study halls, in dark alleyways, near the ill, in order that the light should be great and found in all places..."

Where Did This Centuries Old Minhag Go in the US?

It is clear, then, the preponderance of standard halachic works from the *Mishna* to the *Mishna Berura* consider the kindling of candles on Yom Kippur in the synagogue to be the standard, widely practiced, custom. *Mateh Ephraim* even records its Yiddish moniker, *dos gezunteh licht* – the light of health and well-being²⁷. And yet in America, this

²³ R. Avraham ha'Levi Gombiner, Poland, 1637-1683.

²⁴ OC 610:6

²⁵ OC 610:14

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 603:8

practice has fallen by the wayside²⁸. Where did it go? We don't know for sure. We can conjecture that electric lighting and fire safety concerns in American synagogues displaced it.

Reintroducing a Lost *Minhag*, and Practical Implementation

We believe that the rabbis and synagogue lay leaders should consider reintroducing this beautiful practice to their sanctuaries. This is opportunity for even the most traditional synagogue to do something new and unexpected that is, at the same time, an ancient tradition of our people, practiced for millennia across all the lands of our dispersion. A synagogue already adorned with a white *parochet*, white *kittels* and white *talitot* can now be aglow with the flames of candles lit by each and every member of the synagogue. This will create a unique setting of purity and awe that is conducive to prayer, introspection, and distinct holiness of Yom Kippur itself.

Here are some recommendations for those interested in introducing this practice to their synagogues:

- Dim the electric lighting for Yom Kippur eve if technically possible.
- Each synagogue will need to think creatively about how to arrange the candles to be lit, given the layout of its sanctuary. Note that a wide variety of candle holding devices are available for sale today through the Internet and other venues.
- In keeping with the ruling of R. Yosef Karo, candles can be arranged without any correspondence to the number of individuals or families in the synagogue.
- Alternately, in keeping with *Ashkenazic* tradition, lighting can be done by each individual man on behalf of himself and his

family. Women, too, can light their own candle if they wish²⁹. It will be necessary in advance of the holiday to encourage those who will be lighting of the need to participate in this practice. Presumably, this could be done by a letter, a class, at the time of ticket distribution, or in other ways. To accommodate the concern first articulated by *Maharil*, time would also need to be scheduled for people to do this in an orderly and safe manner prior to the onset of Yom Tov. Coming to synagogue earlier might also encourage congregants to enter Yom Kippur in a more reflective manner, recite *tefillah zaka*, etc.

- Of course, as *Magen Avraham* pointed out, each synagogue will need to attend to fire safety concerns within the confines of halacha, as well.

²⁸ We have seen a practice in some American synagogues that seems related to the tradition we have delineated; i.e., women light their Yom Tov candles for Yom Kippur in synagogue, instead of at home. There are many reasons, however, why this is not the lighting we are advocating. First, since the days of *Maharil*, only men have done the lighting we describe, but not women. Second, these women are reciting the blessing for Yom Tov kindling over these candles. Unlike most other Shabbat and Yom Tov evenings, women on Yom Kippur are not at home but rather in synagogue. It would seem, then, that they light where they will be while their candles are lit. Indeed, they may feel it unsafe to leave unattended candles lit at home.

²⁹ *Match Ephraim* 603:8.

Yom Kippur: Learning To Forgive...Ourselves

Rabbi Aaron Levitt

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Yom Kippur – The Day of The Great Cover-Up

If I asked most of you to choose one word that best summarizes Yom Kippur what would it be? Atonement? Forgiveness? What's the theme of Yom Kippur, of this Day of Atonement? What does the word *Kippur* / *Kapparah* really mean anyway?

The answer might surprise you. *Kaparah* doesn't mean Atonement (which is a Christian term). It means to cover or protect:

- Noach covered the Ark with *Kofer* to keep it waterproof:

“*V'Chafarta Otah Mibayit U'Michutz BaKofer*” (*Breishit* 6:14)

- Yaakov sends Eisav gifts to appease him and thereby protect his family:

“*Achapra Panav BiMincha HaHolechet Lefana*” (*Breishit* 32:21)

- The Kaporet covered the Holy Ark:

“*V'Asita Kaporet Zahav Tahor*” (*Shemot* 25:17-22)

So what does that mean when it comes to translating Yom Kippur? **The Day of the Great Cover-Up?** Is that what Yom Kippur is, just some cover up? We'll just sweep all our sins under the rug and pretend they never happened?

No. What it means is that all year long we spend so much time going undercover, making up excuses. Our job on Yom Kippur is to wash off the make-up, to uncover the truth, to beat our chests until we get beneath the surface, to reveal everything we've been in denial about, and to let our true selves come out.

But after we expose ourselves to the light and make ourselves vulnerable, Hashem promises us that He will cover us up, that He will protect us. **The more we uncover ourselves, the more He will cover us up.**

It's like a photographer developing pictures. He has to go into a dark room before he develops the images, because otherwise, if he exposes them to too much light, they will be destroyed. So Yom Kippur is this magical day where Hashem takes us under his *Tallis* and helps us develop our images by protecting us and by sheltering us.

God's Tallis

One of my favorite memories of the holidays growing up is standing with my father during the blessing of the *Kohanim*. I always remember feeling so safe and protected when my father would take me with him under his *Tallis*. It's a beautiful custom, but what's the reason for it? Why must we go under the *Tallis* during the priestly blessing?

It's not just that we are not supposed to see the *Kohanim* blessing us. I think it's to remind us that the blessing is that God will keep us under His Tallis, that He will shelter and protect us, so that we can develop ourselves in His image.

And maybe that's the meaning of the *gemara* (*Rosh Hashana* 17b) that says that after the sin of the Golden Calf, God wrapped Himself in His Tallis and showed Moshe the 13 *Middot HaRachamim*, the 13 Attributes of Mercy. The *Tallis* symbolizes protection. And God is showing Moshe that it's not too late. That He is waiting to embrace us and to protect us with Mercy.

Let me share with you an unbelievable story from the Talmud (*Yoma* 39b) about the *Kohein Gadol* on Yom Kippur. And here too we find the symbolism of God's *Tallis*:

The story is told about Shimon Hatzaddik, one of the last *Kohein Gadols*, (High Priests). One year, on his way out of the Temple after Yom Kippur, he turns to the people and he says that this will be his last Yom Kippur. He will not live to see the next Yom Kippur. How does he know this, the people ask? Listen to what he answers them:

“Bechol Yom HaKippurim Haya Mizdamen Li Zaken Echad Lavush Levanim V’Atuf Levanim, Nichnas Imi V’Yatza Imi”.

Because every year, on Yom Kippur, I see an old man draped in a white Tallis, who escorts me in and out of the Kodesh HaKodashim, of the Holy of Holies.

“VeHayom Nizdamen Li Zaken Echad Lavush Shechorim V’Atuf Shechorim, Nichnas Imi V’Lo Yatza Imi”.

But this year the old man was draped in black, and he escorted me into the Kodesh Hakodashim, but not out.

And sure enough, the *gemara* concludes, one week after Sukkot, Shimon Hatzaddik passed away.

What is the symbolism of the Old Man in the White Tallis? And how did Shimon Hatzaddik know that this was going to be the year that he would die?

I would like to suggest that the Old Man in white represents God. When Shimon Hatzaddik saw that the Man was draped in black instead of white, when he saw that the Man came in with him, but didn’t escort him out, he knew that this would be his last Yom Kippur on this earth. Because he felt that God no longer believed in him or had confidence in him as a leader. And so he felt that it was only a matter of time before he died.

But the truth is that maybe it wasn’t God who stopped believing in Shimon Hatzaddik. Maybe Shimon Hatzaddik stopped believing in himself.

And if the *Kohein Gadol* can stop believing in himself, on Yom Kippur, in the Kodesh HaKodashim, then don’t you think it’s possible that we sometimes stop believing in ourselves too?

God Never Gives Up On Us

I think on some level we all struggle with this. We feel like it’s too late. This is who we are. This is what we know. This is what we do. And we don’t allow ourselves the chance to improve because we think God has given up on us as well. We think of God as Godzilla, an angry God, who is disappointed in us and wants to punish us. We think of Him as a God wrapped in black instead of white. We think of Yom Kippur as a scary day, when it’s

really one of the happiest days of the year (*Taanit* 31a).

But the truth is that God hasn’t given up on us at all. We have given up on ourselves.

You see, a parent never gives up on their child. No matter what, we always believe in our children, that they can do better, that they have great potential.

God is our Father, and He never stops believing in us.

No one knew this better, that it’s never too late, than the great Rabbi Akiva, who didn’t start learning Aleph-Bet until the age of 40, and went on to become one of the greatest sages. Listen to the words of Rabbi Akiva, who describes the idea that it’s never too late (*Yoma* 85b):

Amar Rabbi Akiva, Ashreichem Yisrael Lifnei Mi Atem Mitaharin? Mi Metaher Etchem? Avichem Shebashamayim.

*Said Rabbi Akiva, How fortunate you are Israel, before whom do you purify yourselves? Who purifies you? **YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN**.*

You know why it’s never too late, why God never gives up on us, no matter how long it has been, no matter how many chances we have missed? Because He is our father and He loves us.

I heard a story about Reb Shlomo Carlebach. During the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* he would walk around with a smile on his face, whistling a happy tune. And his students would ask him, how can you be so calm and happy? Aren’t you scared of the *Din*, of the judgment of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur? You know what he answered them? He said “I’m happy because the judge is my father.”

Reb Shlomo understood, that yes, we have to do Teshuva. We have to beat our chests and uncover all the spiritual plaque that has been building up over the year. But that ultimately, the point of Yom Kippur is not to punish us – it’s to give us a cleaning. He understood the meaning of *Avinu Malkeinu*, that God is not just our King, but He is also our Father.

The Danger of Yiush

So yes, Yom Kippur is all about Forgiveness. It’s about God forgiving us. It’s about us forgiving

others. But there's a 3rd type of forgiveness which I'd like us to think about, a type of forgiveness which is central to this Day of Atonement. A type of forgiveness which I think often gets overlooked. And that is forgiving ourselves.

Because if we truly feel remorse for past mistakes or missed opportunities, then our friends will forgive us, and God will forgive us. The question of Yom Kippur is will we forgive ourselves?

You know, there's a mitzvah in the Torah known as *Hashavat Aveida*, returning a lost object. Rather than say Finder's Keepers, the Torah says that we should do our best to find the owner and return the item he lost.

But the *halacha* says that once the owner has *Yiush*, once he gives up hope of ever retrieving his lost object, the object becomes ownerless, and anyone can keep it.

Says the **Izbitcher**, one of the great Chassidic Masters, you see from here such a powerful idea! That when a person has *Yiush*, when a person gives up hope, he loses everything!

And this isn't just true when it comes to losing one's property. It's true about losing oneself! So many of us give up on ourselves! We have *Yiush*! We don't think we can change! We think it's too late!

Says the Torah "*V'Hashevoto Lo*," there is a mitzvah to return. *Hashava* comes from the same *shoresh*, the same root, as *Teshuva*. It means to return! *Teshuva* tells us not to give up! Don't have *Yiush*! It's not too late!

Chutz M'Acher

One of the most tragic stories in the entire Talmud is the story of Elisha Ben Avuya, of Acher. Elisha Ben Avuya was one of the greatest of the sages. He was the teacher of the great R' Meir! And yet, something happened and he went off the *derech*. He stopped believing and he stopped practicing.

He became a *Kofer*, a heretic, which by the way is also from the same root as *Kaper*, to cover. Because when a person denies God he is really just covering up his own feelings of guilt or inadequacy. It's a defense mechanism, because sometimes a person feels that if it's all about God

then where do I fit in to the picture? And that's what happened to Elisha Ben Avuya.

But that's not even the real tragic part of the story. The gemara tells us (*Chagigah* 15a) that Elisha Ben Avuya's student R' Meir kept trying to bring his Rebbi back, to help him return to the right path. He didn't give up on his Rebbi. He still believed in him.

The problem was that the Elisha Ben Avuya didn't believe in himself. He said to himself, since I've already lost my share in the World to Come I might as well live it up in this world and do whatever I want. He goes to a prostitute and offers to pay her for her services. She recognizes him and says, "aren't you the sage Elisha Ben Avuya?" In response, he uproots a radish from the ground on Shabbat, to show that he's not that person anymore. And you know what she responds? She says "*Acher Hu* – this must be someone else." The Elisha Ben Avuya that I heard of would never act this way. And that phrase, "*Acher Hu*," sticks with him. It becomes a nickname. He is known simply as "*Acher*," as someone else.

One day, Acher hears a *Bat Kol*, a voice from heaven that says "*Shuvu Banim Shovavim Chutz M'Acher* – Return wayward sons, except for Acher." And he says to himself, "You see? I knew there was no hope for me. Even if I wanted to do *Teshuva*, I have been rejected by God." And Acher dies, never having returned to his true self.

It's a tragic story. But it's also such a hard story to come to terms with. How can it be that a voice from heaven announces that everyone can do *Teshuva* except for Acher? Haven't we been saying that it's never too late? That God loves us and always believes in us? Could it really be that God gave up on Acher?

Says **Rav Aharon Soloveitchik**, no. God never gave up on Acher, and He never gives up on any of us. "*Shuvu Banim Shovavim Chutz M'Acher*" doesn't mean everyone can do *Teshuva* except for Acher. It means "*Shuvu Banim Shovavim*" – Return Wayward Sons. "*Chutz M'Acher*" – Leave Acher! Go out from Acher. Stop being this other person, and go back to being your true self, Elisha Ben Avuya.

It's never too late to do *Teshuva*. We can make mistake after mistake, and still come back. But we have to believe in ourselves. And we have to be

able to forgive ourselves. If we don't believe in ourselves, if we have *Yiush* and think there's no hope, then we'll be lost.

Learning To Forgive Ourselves

Yom Kippur is about forgiveness. But it's not just about forgiving others. It's about forgiving ourselves as well. Because we can't move forward if we're still stuck in the past.

You know, we usually translate the word *Aveira* to mean sin. But *Aveira* comes from the word *Avar*, the past. It means that a Jew should look at mistakes as the past. It's history. We have to learn from past mistakes. But today is a brand new day, with brand new choices and possibilities.

And now let me share with you an amazing *Midrash Tanchuma*. The Midrash asks, why is it that when it comes to someone who does a mitzvah we call them a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, but when it comes to someone who sins we call them a *Baal Aveira*? Bar/Bat means a son or daughter. But Baal means an owner. Why the difference?

Says the Midrash, because when it comes to a mitzvah it's like the relationship of parent and child. No matter what, it can never be broken. But when it comes to a sin, you're not stuck. You can disown the sin, and move away.

The story is told about a teacher holding up a glass of water in front of his students and asking them how heavy they think it is. They all give different guesses (2 ounces, 5 ounces, 10 ounces). But he says you're all wrong. The answer is that it depends how long you hold onto it. The longer we hold onto something the heavier it gets.

It's true. We've made mistakes. We have hurt people, sometimes on purpose, and sometimes because we were so self-absorbed. We have settled for average in our relationship with God. And for those mistakes we have to make amends. But at some point, we have to put the glass down and move on. We cannot dwell on the past, because if we do we will sacrifice our future.

The word *Teshuva* means Response. It's ok to slip up. We all do. We're only human. The question of Yom Kippur is how will we respond when we fall? Will we be stuck in the past, or will we pick ourselves up off the mat and move forward?

As Long As The Candle Is Still Burning It's Still Possible To Mend

The story is told about **Reb Yisrael Salanter**, the great founder of the Mussar Movement. Rabbi Salanter is staying at an inn one night and he can't sleep. So he gets up to go for a walk. And he sees down the hall a shoemaker working by candlelight on a pair of shoes. Reb Yisrael approaches him and he says, "It's so late at night, and you're still hard at work?" And listen to the answer that the shoemaker gives him. He says "As long as the candle is still burning it's still possible to mend."

Reb Yisrael used to say that he learned such a powerful lesson that night from that shoemaker working late into the night. As long as we haven't given up hope, as long as we still believe in ourselves, as long as our candle is still burning, it's not too late.

Yizkor—Lighting Our Candle From The Candle Of Our Ancestors

Before Yom Tov began we light a *Yizkor* Candle in memory of our departed. Maybe part of what lighting the *Yizkor* candle is all about, is reminding ourselves that our candles burn bright because they are fueled by the candles of our ancestors who came before us.

Think of all the people who have impacted our lives and are no longer with us. Each of us can think of people who have influenced us and are no longer with us. It can be a grandparent, an uncle, and aunt, or even a teacher.

What did you learn from them? What did they teach you?

I think maybe when a person dies their flame doesn't just go out. Perhaps they pass it on to all their loved ones. Their flame combines with our flame. It gives it more fuel, and it helps it burn brighter.

That means that our candle is made up of the fuel from so many other people who came before us, and who brightened our lives. And it means that when we go to *shamayim*, after 120 years, we will light the flames of those whom we have impacted and influenced. The flame of our loved ones continues to shine brightly through us. We are the *Yartzeit* Candle.

And so, as we say *Yizkor*, and we remember all the candles that have given light to us over the years, we are reminded as well of our own flame. We are reminded of how bright it shines, of how much potential it has.

And we are reminded that “As Long As The Candle Is Still Burning It’s Still Possible To Mend.” Our ancestors believed in us. They still do. And maybe part of *Yizkor* is reminding ourselves to believe in us as well.

Conclusion

This Yom Kippur, as we wrap ourselves in our *Tallis* and pray, let’s remember that God is wrapping us in His *Tallis* today as well.

Let’s remember that the Judge is our Father who loves us.

Let’s remember that we should never have *Yiush*, because it’s never too late.

Let’s remember that God believes in us, our ancestors believe in us, and that we should believe in ourselves as well.

And let’s remember that our candle burns brightly, and that “*as long as the candle is still burning it’s still possible to mend.*”

The Essence of Neilah: Patient Process vs. Radical Transformation

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The *Neilah* prayer which we recite at the close of Yom Kippur has the potential to be the most concentrated, intense prayer of the year. *Ki fanah yom*, the day is turning away, and our collective and individual fates hang in the balance. On the other hand, however, what is left to accomplish? As the end of the process which began forty days prior at the beginning of the month of Elul draws near, what more can we really do? Everything that we could have and should have done is done.

The story is told of how Alfred Nobel founded the eponymous prize, which carries his name. Nobel was the inventor of dynamite and from that creation he earned his fortune. It is told that after his brother died tragically in a car accident, the local papers mistook him for his brother and published his obituary in his brother's place. On that fateful morning, Alfred Nobel read his own obituary...

What is the intent of the word *neilah*? According to one opinion in the Talmud, it reflects the locking of the gates of the Temple as the Yom Kippur services came to an end; according to another it reflects the locking of the gates of heaven. We feel this, we know this. We can see the opportunity of Yom Kippur fading away. But what is it in the experiential sense?

In the *Machzor*, *neilah* stands in opposition to the other prayers of Yom Kippur in two major ways:

- 1) In all of the other prayers, we recite two *viduyim*, confessions. The *viduy hakatzar*, the short confession which only includes the *ashamnus*, general categories of misdeeds, and the *viduy ha'aruch*, the long confession, which includes the detailed delineation of the different mistakes we have made and missteps taken. Paradoxically, at this critical moment, as the gates close, we only recite the short confession, the *ashamnu*. It seems counterintuitive. We should not be abbreviating; we should be elongating. Is this not our last chance?
- 2) A second notable difference is the addition of a remarkable, reflective, self-deprecating passage. We cry out, "*Mah anu, What are*

we?", "*Meh chayeinu? What are our lives?*" We acknowledge and accentuate the futility of our lives, of our existence. There is no counterpart to this passage in the other prayers of the day. Why now? And, after 40 days of preparation and 25 hours of angelic purity and prayer, don't we know this already?

In order to appreciate both differences and, consequently, the experiential nature of the *neilah* prayer, we need to investigate two paradigms of *teshuvah*, repentance, and the way each was accomplished.

Oftentimes what precipitates repentance is a gnawing sense that our beliefs and values are not true. We question our patterns, we reassess our priorities. Change begins and continues piece-meal and fragmented. For example one starts to watch how he speaks, what he says and gradually reduces his *lashon hara*, slowly. This is the model of *Avraham Avinu*. The **Rambam**, Maimonides, in the *Laws of Idol Worship* describes how Avraham Avinu started to probe, to analyze, and to wonder and over the course of a decades-long process arrived at the belief in one God who created and continues to create and guide the world.

The other paradigm of repentance is sudden and spontaneous. There is a sudden, frightening awareness that our lives are not the way they should be. It is dramatic and intense. There is no process. The model for this *teshuvah* is Reb Elazar ben Durdaya. The Talmud tells us that Reb Elazar ben Durdaya had been with all the prostitutes in the world. When he found out that there was one remaining at a distant location, he traveled there and paid a large sum of money to be with her. As he was about to be with her, he passed wind. The prostitute said to him, "Just as this wind will not return its place, so too Elazar ben Durdaya will never have his repentance accepted." This shocked him. It sent him in to a frenzy. There was no process; rather, a chaotic upheaval of his internal world.

One other distinction between the Avrahamic and Durdaiic paradigms is the impetuses that lead each

toward change. Avraham looked outside himself, calmly appraised and assessed his surroundings and knew that there was God. He found *external* objective truth. But, *teshuvah* often evolves looking internally. Who are we? Who ought we be? Reb Elazar ben Durdaya scrutinized himself. He looked internally. The Talmud there continues that he reached out to the world to help him repent, but ultimately concluded, “*The matter is solely dependant on me. He placed his head between his knees and exhausted himself with crying until his soul left him.*”

The obituary in the French newspaper read, “Le marchand de la mort est mort, The merchant of death is dead, - Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday.”

Perhaps he asked himself, “Is that who I am? Is that the life that I lead? Is that what my legacy will be?” It was dramatic and it was internal. He decided that his legacy must be different. This was not who he was. Ultimately, he bequeathed in his

will the 2007 equivalent of over \$100,000,000 to the founding of the Nobel Prize.

It has been a slow, deliberate, 40 day ascent from *Rosh Chodesh Elul* to the climactic moment of *Neilah*. Indeed, all the gates, below and above, are about to close. There is no more time for process. There is no long *viduy*, no delineated confession. That is too specific and it belongs to the realm of piecemeal *teshuvah*. This *viduy hakatzar*, short confession, bespeaks the Reb Elazar ben Durdaya model of wholesale *teshuvah*. And that leads us to the second expression as well, an expression of self-discovery. We look inward and painfully, poignantly and powerfully ask, “What are we? Who are we?” We strip ourselves of our delusions of grandeur. We cease to flatter ourselves, “What really are our kindnesses?” And, after 40 days of process and one intense moment of transformation, we hope that the potent combination of preparation and process will sustain the intense introspective instant and continue to impel us toward becoming whom it is that we really can be throughout the year and throughout our lives.

A Business Plan For Life

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In almost every job that I have ever had, I was asked at the beginning of the year to present a business plan on what I hoped to accomplish. My supervisor often reviewed it with me and then evaluated my progress quarterly. It was a useful tool to determine and clarify what my goals and objectives were and if I was achieving them. When we greet each other on Rosh Hashanah with the famous phrase, “may you be written into the book of life,” I always think about that business plan and I feel compelled to write and present my life-plan. I figure that if I have to justify my salary to my boss, maybe I need to justify my life to the Boss of the Bosses. Each year as I celebrate the creation of the world with my family and friends, I take the opportunity to start anew, to re-create and re-build my world. I reflect on my relationship with my wife and my children, and dream about how I can enrich those relationships making them more meaningful and fulfilled. I think about how I can participate and help in the community, and contribute to *Klal Yisrael*. I work out my Torah learning goals, financial strategies, some vacation ideas, and of course how I am going to take care of my health. I write these goals down and I take them with me to shul during the holidays, and take it out from time to time during the year when I am praying. I find that it keeps me on track and lets me know if I am living up to the great blessing of my life and the people in it.

We are currently in the month of Elul, the last month of the year. This leads us to Rosh Hashanah, through Yom Kippur and culminates with Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret which is a process that prepares us for the upcoming year.

The Rabbis metaphorically compare the High Holiday period to visiting the palace of a king. On Rosh Hashanah we enter into the King’s palace, we blow the shofar, which is befitting of royalty and we awaken ourselves to the importance of the place we stand. On Yom Kippur, we are invited into the inner chambers of the King and are escorted to the King’s throne room. And in the afternoon as the Ark is opened for the Neilah service (Closing Gates) we have our private audience with the Creator of the Universe.

The Ba'al Shem Tov added to the parable, suggesting that Elul (the month preceding Rosh Hashanah), is compared to the King leaving his palace to visit us in the field. What exactly is this teaching us about the time period of Elul?

When you visit the king’s palace, the guards and the beautiful décor awe you. There is formality and structure to the palace itself and the guards and ceremonial procedures that accompany the king. However in the month of Elul, the King comes out into the field and anyone, regardless of whatever predicament they may be in, can approach the King directly, without having to justify themselves to guards or ministers, without feeling inhibited by the ceremonial procedures or the awe of the castle.

When we get to Rosh Hashanah, we are asked for our life-business plans. The books are opened. We present to the King why he should consider giving us life this year. Everything is formal from the prepared feasts to the calling out of the shofar blasts. We can work on the plan a little during the week, but there are formal procedures and of course, the Yom Kippur deadline, when the book is sealed. Elul is the time to dream your dreams. To come to an empty white board and fill it with your hopes, passions and aspirations. In business terms, it’s an informal brainstorming session.

Whenever a great project is envisioned, a host of preparations must be made before the goal can be achieved. The first step is to create a mission statement, express important values and create goals that can help you reach your ultimate potential. During the month of Elul we blow the shofar at shul every morning. This should awaken us to the incredible opportunity that we have. Elul is the time to dream your dreams, to formulate for yourself a life mission statement, to consider your family values and contemplate your unique purpose. Are you achieving meaning and fulfillment in your life? If you take time to work this out prior to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, perhaps you will recognize that you have the ultimate partner in making the business of life profitable.

Final Thought for the Last Shabbat of the Year

The End Insight

Rabbi Moshe Rothchild

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Why do something now that you can put off until later? This is the way that many people live but unfortunately sometimes later never comes. This is why it is important to finish strong and not wait. An example comes to mind from my days of running marathons. It is extremely difficult to complete the 26.2 mile run without some motivational tools. It is very helpful to have a mantra that you recite in your head over and over as the miles churn by under your feet. I used to tell myself "It's not what you have at the beginning but it is what you have at the end." Everyone begins the marathon with lots of energy, strength and enthusiasm but all of that dissipates with each passing mile. An endurance event demands that you conserve for the finish and when you are coming close to the finish you spend whatever energy you have left. By the time I ran my third and fourth marathons I was a much smarter runner as I had learned to pace myself properly and really pour it on at the end.

Similarly, a few years ago I was installing, with the help of my brother-in-law, blinds in my apartment. There were a lot of windows and the job took almost the whole day. As we were installing the last set of blinds they were not fitting properly. It looked okay but it was not great. I said to my brother-in-law, "Look we are both tired let's just leave it and maybe someday we will come back to it-it's good enough." My brother in law responded with a thought from his father: "You should do the last 10% of a job the same way that you did the first 90%." We stayed until the job was completed properly.

As we are winding down the last few days of the year we need to exert whatever energy that we have

left and put all our efforts in to the last few days. Our Sages tell us that the last days of the year have the power to fix the previous year. If we have an extraordinary Shabbat on this final Shabbat of the year, we are making a statement about all of our previous Shabbatot. We demonstrate that this past year may have had ups and downs but over all we are heading in the right direction. It is like the stock market beginning the year at 10,000 and rising and dipping all year long but finally on the last days of the year the market exceeds the level where it began. By celebrating this Shabbat with joy we will conclude our year on a high note and set the tone for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. It will be very beautiful if we all make an extra effort this Shabbat and together as klal Yisrael-the Jewish community-we will draw strength from each other.

One final thought. In addition to this final Shabbat of the year, we also have a few more days before we transition into the New Year. Let's make an extra effort to do more mitzvot-we can give more *tzedakah*, perform acts of kindness, go to *shul* for *minyan*, study Torah, refrain from gossiping, be more careful about *kashrut*, call our parents, apologize to people that we have offended etc.

I am confident that when we cross the finish line of this year we will have finished strong and be ready to take on the marathon again next year!

High Holiday Lessons Learned from Livestock

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What is the deal with Jews and sheep?

Hevel, the better and seemingly more religious son of Adam, is a shepherd. Then we have Yaakov Avinu, who did wonderful things with genetics in acquiring a huge herd of cattle. Yaakov's children arrive in front of Pharaoh and declare, "*We are all shepherds who have emigrated to Egypt to raise cattle in the wake of the famine in the Land of Canaan.*" Moshe follows suit and even meets his *bashert* at the local sheep's watering hole. And, of course, it was only due to a stray sheep that he ever encountered the Burning Bush. We can say, quite literally, that the Jewish people owe our very existence to that one cute, little animal.

The sheep imagery has come to include the Jewish people who are referred to as, "*Tzon Yisrael – the Israelite flock,*" and we refer to Hashem as "Ro'ee – my Shepherd."

There is a story about a contest that took place in England over 100 years ago at the turn of the 20th century. One of the most common types of contests in England was one in which individuals competed for who could recite a work of poetry in the most compelling, compassionate and articulate way. In this particular competition, after many people had been eliminated, five finalists remained. The work of poetry that they had to recite was one of the greatest masterpieces of world literature, Psalm 23, written by King David, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want..."

One young man stood amongst the group. With a soft and crisp English accent, he recited Psalm 23 with great devotion. He completed the Psalm and the entire crowd rose from their seats and burst into applause. He was awarded the first prize for his recitation. As he was accepting his honor, there was an older Jewish man, with a long white beard, sitting in the back of the crowd. He raised his hand and said "Gentlemen. May I please have an opportunity to recite this Psalm?"

The old man stood up and began to recite the Psalm. For the first few moments, as he was reciting the Psalm in his heavily accented, broken English, everyone looked around the room awkwardly. Why would this man want to recite the Psalm? He could barely read! He continued without any improvement as the people were fidgeting in their seats. By the conclusion of the recitation, however, the entire crowd was in tears. The initial winner came forward and said, "Sir, YOU deserve this prize!" The elderly gentleman turned to the young man and said "No thank you. I was not doing this for any sort of honor". Then the young man said, "I have a question for you. Why was everybody cheering when I finished reciting the Psalm, and they cried after your recitation?" And the old man turned to the winner and said, "Young man, your English was beautiful, but I know the Shepherd....I have a relationship with the Shepherd".

We Jews have a relationship with our shepherd, and the imagery is quite apt in describing our relationship with God. Of course, the sheep and flock imagery is a major part of the High Holiday liturgy. One of the most moving examples of this imagery can be found in *U'Nesaneh Tokef*:

וכל באי עולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון. כבקרית רועה
עדרו, מעביר צאנו תחת שבטו, כן תעביר ותספור ותמנה,
ותפקוד נפש כל חי...

All mankind will pass before you like *bnei maron* – which we translate as sheep. Like a shepherd pasturing his flock, making sheep pass under his staff, so shall You cause to pass, count calculate, and consider the soul of all the living...

The source of this imagery is the *Mishnah* in *Maseches Rosh Hashanah* (16a):

בראש השנה כל באי עולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון

The Gemara, however, is not really sure what *ki'venei maron* refers to. It asks:

מאי כבני מרון?

What are “*benei Maron*?” Three answers are offered:

1. Reish Lakish says that *Bnei Maron* refer to, “*Ma'alos Beis Maron*,” which Rashi describes as an ascending path that is only wide enough for one person to climb at a time. So, too, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, all of humanity pass before God single-file as you would ascend a narrow staircase.
2. Rav Yehuda says in the name of Shmuel that *Bnei Maron* are like the “*Chayalos shel Beis David*.” Rashi comments that, according to this explanation, the *Bnei Maron* are the lads of the master, and they line up the way soldiers in King David’s army would march in formation. God examines each of us this season as a king would inspect his soldiers as they march off to battle.
3. In Bavel, *Bnei Maron* was translated as “*Amarna*.” Rashi explains that this refers to sheep that pass before the shepherd one at a time in order to be counted. This is the classic sheep metaphor we are so familiar with for the High Holidays.

All of us are compared to climbing a stairway, soldiers, and sheep. Three explanations that seem to convey the same point: namely, that Hashem judges each of us individually on Rosh Hashanah. We’re all classified based on our own individual merits. Why, then, are three interpretations necessary?

These three images represent distinct ways in which to view ourselves. They represent three different aspects of who we are and who we want to be during these *yamim noraim*.

“*Bnai Maron*” refers to a staircase that could only be climbed single-file. This year, did we climb our individual stairways? Have we challenged ourselves to do more or settled for the status quo? Are we moving up, standing still, or sliding down? Imagine two people on a ladder. One is close to the top, and one is at the bottom. Which one is higher? It seems like a ridiculously obvious question. The

one on top is higher! But it really depends on which direction each is going. We need to ask ourselves: “Have I grown as a Jew, as a parent, a son or daughter, a spouse - during the course of this past year compared to the year before? How will I ensure continued growth in the New Year? As we stand *k'bnei maron*, on our staircase, and ask ourselves which way we are going.

K'bnei maron also means, “*Like the legions of King David’s army*.” Each of us is a soldier. As a child I belonged to a youth group called *Tzivos Hashem*, the Army of God. Back then, I never made it past private. But in life, we’re all fighters. There are causes that are dear to our hearts. There are issues in which we strongly believe. As we conclude one year and begin a new one, we have to ask, “What did I go to the mat for this past year? What battles did I choose? Did I win? Did I lose? Do I volunteer and participate in causes that I find to be worthwhile?” We are judged whether we fought the good fight remaining true to our principles and challenged to identify what is most important to us.

Lastly “*K'bnei Maron*” was explained in Babylon as sheep. A shepherd must account for each and every sheep. Sheep are generally allowed to graze over huge expanses of land. At the end of the day, the shepherd must gather his flock up and count the sheep, one by one. This is especially crucial for those shepherds who do not own their flocks and are working for someone else. It takes a special kind of person to be a shepherd. One must be patient, caring, and meticulous. That is why our greatest Biblical heroes began their careers as shepherds. The Midrash recounts that it was Moshe’s compassion towards a lost sheep that demonstrated that he was the right person to lead the Jewish People.

I would like to suggest a postscript to that story. After Moshe hoisted the tired lamb onto his back and returned it to the flock, that particular sheep stood out from all of the others for a long time. This sheep had a connection with Moshe forged at that special moment at the Burning Bush. Over time, each sheep becomes precious to the shepherd- each one reminds him of an incident or story.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are compared to sheep being counted to impress upon us the fact that Hashem loves each and every one of us. Each Jew counts. And that is why each Jew passes before Hashem.

By identifying ourselves as “*K’Bnei maron*,” our Rabbis have taught us three important lessons. We must remember that our life is like a staircase and we must always strive to climb higher and be better. We need to choose our battles, and at times take a stand on issues that matter. We can draw strength and motivation for these two actions by reminding ourselves of the simple yet profound

truth - that Hashem loves us and is rooting for us to succeed. As we stand on the threshold of Rosh Hashanah, let us not be afraid to honestly ask ourselves where we stand and what we have accomplished. Let us embrace the idea that, as a Shepard to his flock, God loves us. And with this, welcome the opportunity to greet a New Year.

Who is G-d to Judge?

How to Celebrate a Day of Judgment

Rabbi David Aaron

Founder and Dean, Isralight

I did not grow up in a religious home but we did go to *shul* (synagogue) every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I remember one Rosh Hashanah the rabbi got up and said, “We’re about to open the ark. It is customary for the congregation to stand while the ark is open, but it will be open for quite some time. So if you get tired, you can sit down.”

I thought to myself, “I only come here twice a year, so if standing and going through a little torture is going to take away my sins, then why not stand for the whole thing?” When they opened the ark, everyone stood and then everyone sat. I was the only one who remained standing. I figured, how long could it last, five minutes, ten minutes? I stood there in terrible pain for an hour and a half, figuring ‘OK. I guess --no pain, no gain’. I was scared and ready to do whatever it took to appease G-d’s wrath and escape His punishment.

The next morning at my high school locker, the boy next to me glared around the locker door and said, “You had to stand!” He did not speak to me for the rest of the year. I found out later that he was sitting behind me in *shul*, feeling terribly guilty for sitting while I stood. For many people, guilt and torture is their image of Rosh Hashanah.

If people knew the truth about Rosh Hashanah, they would anticipate it rather than dread it. The Torah idea of judgment is not about guilt or pain. It is about compassion and empowerment.

However, when I was a teenager I would often feel resentful towards G-d, especially on Rosh Hashanah – the Day Judgment.

I thought, “Who is G-d to judge *me*? Does G-d have to deal with temptation? Does G-d live in this seedy world, where magazines of half-clad models grace the aisles of every supermarket checkout? What right does He have to criticize especially when He created me this way?”

Your Inner Adversary

The Torah teaches that every human being has an inner adversary (referred to as the *yetzer hara* – the

evil inclination) that tries to keep us from doing the right thing and actively tries to persuade us to do wrong. And what is so conniving about the *yetzer hara* is that we think it is really our true selves talking.

Take dieting, for example. When most of us decide to start a diet, we hear a little naughty voice that says, “Eat it, eat it—just one bite!” It certainly happens to me. And when I try to start a morning exercise regimen, that same voice says, “This morning you need to rest in order to exercise better tomorrow.” I’m sure most of you can relate.

As soon as we decide to do something positive, our inner adversary tries to get us to do exactly the opposite of what we really want to do.

When I first began learning Torah and was introduced to this truth, I was shocked to discover how real the *yetzer hara* is. It is as if we all struggle with a split personality. On one hand, we have an inclination to do good (which Torah calls the *yetzer tov*), and on the other hand, we have an opposing inclination to do what’s not so good.

The power of the *yetzer hara* is quite amazing. The Torah says that the *yetzer hara* increases its strength with every passing day. This means that it does not become easier to fight, and once we do fight it, it renews itself. Therefore, the tactics that it used to make us stumble yesterday are completely different from the ones it will use today. For this reason, the sages warn us, “If not now, when?” In other words, it is better to deal with it now because tomorrow your *yetzer hara* will be even stronger and the challenge even greater.

The Talmud Yerushalmi teaches that as soon as G-d gives us a *mitzvah* (commandment), the *mitzvah* actually creates its own *yetzer hara* against performing it. Therefore, as soon as we are commanded to do something, we are concomitantly inspired with the desire not to do it. Conversely, if we learn that G-d wants us not to do something, suddenly we want to do it.

And to make matters worse, even when you make positive changes in our life, you may be surprised to find that your *yetzer hara* is no less easy to manage. The Talmud teaches, “The greater the person, the greater his evil inclination.” It is logical to assume that holy people do not have to deal with their evil inclination and all the drives that try to pull them away from the right path. But the Talmud says, no, our *yetzer hara* just grows with us.

Challenging G-d

Like it or not, the fact is that G-d created us with drives that are often difficult to use properly. He also gave us an ever-strengthening evil inclination whose sole purpose is to get us to fail. And He put us in a world that only excites and incites these drives.

The Torah teaches, “Do not judge your friend until you are in his place.” In other words, “Don’t judge a person until you are in his shoes.” How can G-d judge us if He has never been in our place? G-d is in His perfect Heaven, and we are down here on earth, struggling with our *yetzer hara* and the plenty of distractions to entice it. What right does G-d have to judge us?

I once read a challenging story set during the time of the Holocaust. I read it as a teenager, during the first Shabbat that I ever kept. I did not know how to fill my time on Shabbat, so I followed someone’s advice to read books. Since I did not particularly like reading, I decided to read something short and Jewish. I picked up this short novel and I had no clue what I was getting myself into. By the end of Shabbat, I was very angry at G-d. In the book, a little child gets hung by the Nazis. The father, in his anger, challenges G-d and says, “Let’s switch places. You become man and we will become G-d.” They switch places, and, when G-d asks to switch back, the father refuses.

Who is G-d to Judge?

The truth is that, according to the Torah, G-d is incredibly impressed with us. In fact, although we praise G-d through prayer, there are many sources that indicate that G-d is praising us. There is a story in the Talmud that metaphorically describes G-d as wearing *tefillin* (phylacteries). Inside our *tefillin* is an excerpt from the Torah that acknowledges G-d’s oneness. In the Talmudic story, inside G-d’s *tefillin* is an acknowledgement of our own unity. There is also a verse in the Shabbat afternoon prayers that attests to our unity: Who is like you, Israel, who

stand united in the world? For G-d to be one in heaven is easy. But for people to be one in the world, with all its challenges, is a true accomplishment.

What really happens on Rosh Hashanah?

Rosh Hashanah is referred to as a Day of Judgment. For most people the idea of being judged seems to connote that G-d is being critical and judgmental of us, as if He could do better than us. When you think of G-d’s judgment in this way it does not feel like it’s coming from a place of compassionate. But the theme of Rosh Hashanah is really about G-d’s compassion because He is “our Father, our King.” But in truth Rosh Hashanah is a Day of Assessment because it is actually an annual review.

Think of it as a work performance evaluation. A boss would not judge his employee by saying, “Well I can do better, and therefore you are fired.” In fact, the main reason that bosses hire people is because they cannot do what the employees can do.

So too, G-d’s assessment of us on Rosh Hashanah is not a criticism and judgment of who we are as people. Rather, it is a compassionate evaluation of what we have done and how we have used our potential that year. From there, He determines what corrective measures must be taken to get us back on track to fulfill our potential. When G-d makes a judgment, He makes it with tremendous love for us and respect; with enormous sensitivity and consideration for our challenge.

Sinner or Loser?

However, seeing Rosh Hashanah as an annual review and assessment does not mitigate the seriousness of the day.

The idea of Rosh Hashanah being a day of assessment is actually more daunting than simply a day of judgment. Because then, it is not about determining whether we are sinners or saints; it is about whether we are losers or winners. As it says in the prophets, “G-d says to the Jewish people, ‘Return, for you have failed in your sins.’” In other words we did not just sin -- we failed. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik points out that when we transgress, we are existential failures—we failed at the very purpose for our existence.

For most people to be a loser is much harder to handle than being a sinner. In fact, we live in a society where it is actually fun and glamorous to be

a sinner. A song by Billy Joel aptly describes this attitude:

*They say there's a heaven for those who
will wait
Some say it's better but I say it ain't
I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry
with the saints
The sinners are much more fun...*

When I was growing up, there were clear distinctions between the bad guys and the good guys, and people always rooted for the good guy. Today, there are movies that persuade us to root for the bad guy. We admire the guy who is trying to pull off an incredible theft. We marvel at his engineering, planning, decision-making and courage. And we hope he will get away with it. To be a sinner is macho and hip.

Torah, however, is not trying to protect us from being a sinner. It protects us from something much worse –from being a loser and existential failure.

Recently while waiting in the airport I saw on the television a show about a famous rock star called, “The Fabulous Life of” I had never heard of the young man, and frankly I was intrigued at how fabulous his life could be. As they gave an inventory of his various prize possessions, all I could think was, “Where is the fabulous life?” They talked about his \$200,000 watch collection, highlighting the diamond-studded piece. Next came his many cars, worth \$1, 000,000. Then came a shot of his game room and views of his several mansions, the first of which he was too young to legally purchase without his parents’ co-signature. Finally came a shot of all the women he has dated and his lavish, lewd and lustful parties. The only noble thing on the show was the one-minute coverage of his charities, showing that the boy is not totally hedonistic. Imagine all the kids watching this show and believing that this young man lives the ultimate dream, that materialism and hedonism is the path to a fabulous life. That there is any promise to promiscuity.

For many to be naughty and sinful is glamorous but for Torah it means you are a loser and downright failure at what you have come to planet Earth to do.

From G-d with Love

With great love and compassion G-d built into the year an annual review to evaluate our performance. It is meant to be a very empowering time for us. It should not depress us or make us angry with G-d for being critical or judgmental. G-d is not out to get us. He knows that He created us with much inner conflicts and put us in a world full of challenges. The annual review is only there to help us achieve our optimal personal performance and protect us from becoming losers. He is evaluates and assesses us with love, compassion, empathy and forgiveness. All G-d wants is for us to do better next year, actualize our potential, be the best we can and choose life.

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality; Rosh Hashana

Rabbi Binny Freedman

Director, Isralight

She had been shopping with her mom in Walmart. She must have been six years old, this beautiful red-haired, freckle-faced image of innocence. It was pouring outside. The kind of rain that gushes over the top of the rain gutters, so much in a hurry to hit the earth it has no time to flow down the drains.

We all stood there under the awning just inside the Walmart doors. We waited, some patiently, others irritated, because nature had conspired to slow down their hurried day.

I am always mesmerized by rainfall. I got lost in the sight and sound of the heavens washing away the dirt and dust of the world. Memories of running, splashing, as a carefree child came pouring in as a welcome reprieve from the worries of my day.

Her voice was so sweet it broke the hypnotic trance we were all caught in.

“Mom, let’s run through the rain”, she said.

“What?”

“Let’s run through the rain!” she repeated.

“No, honey. We’ll wait until it slows down a bit”, her mom replied.

The young child waited another minute and repeated:

“Mom, let’s run through the rain.”

“We’ll get soaked if we do. Mom said.

“No we won’t Mom, that’s not what you said this morning.” the young girl said as she tugged at her mom’s arm.

“This morning? When did I say we could run through the rain and not get wet?”

“Don’t you remember? When you were talking to Daddy about his cancer, you said: ‘If G-d can get us through this, He can get us through anything!’”

The entire crowd stopped dead silent. I swear you couldn’t hear anything but the rain.

We all stood silently. Her mom paused and thought for a moment about what she would say. Most people would probably laugh it off and chide her for being silly. Some might even ignore what was said. But this was a moment of affirmation in a young child’s life. A time when innocent trust can be nurtured so that it will bloom into faith.

“Honey, you are absolutely right.” Mom said.

“Let’s run through the rain. And if G-d lets us get wet, well, maybe we just needed washing.”

Then off they ran. We all just stood there watching, smiling, and laughing as they darted past cars and yes, through the puddles. They held their shopping bags over their heads just in case. They got soaked. But they were followed by a few who screamed and laughed like children all the way to their cars.

Sometimes, life can seem pretty dark. It makes you wonder whether the sun will ever shine again. At times, it seems that whenever the clouds clear a bit the thunderstorm just comes back even more powerful than before.

Once again, as we bring in the New Year, we will sit down at our tables and dip our apples in honey and wish each other a sweet New Year. But for some, the honey will be mixed with tears, and the sweet blessings will ring hollow.

How will families who have lost loved ones, be able to think of sweetness, and block out the pain of a parent who passed away, or a son who will never

again walk through the door in his dusty army uniform on a Friday afternoon?

How will they make the *She'he'cheyanu'* blessing thanking G-d for having sustained us and allowed to reach this moment, while still struggling with all this pain?

There is a powerful prayer, a psalm, which we recite on Rosh Hashanah, which addresses this question, and offers perhaps, a recipe for finding that light amidst the darkness and pain.

The **130th Psalm** (Tehillim, *Kuf Lamed*) is actually part of a group of fifteen psalms, all of which begin with these same words: *Shir Ha'ma'a lot, A Song of Ascents*.

The Talmud tells us that there were in fact fifteen steps leading up to the *Beit HaMikdash* (the Holy Temple), and that every morning, the Levites would begin their service by singing one of these psalms as the ascended each step.

Today, two thousand years after the destruction of the Temple, we have come back to these steps, and you can sit and recite this psalm opposite the exact place where they sang it all those years ago.

Outside the Temple Mount is another set of steps, actually described in the Talmud where too, Jews recited these psalms all those thousands of years ago. And, courtesy of Jordanian shellfire in the Six Day War, we have actually rediscovered these exact steps, where Jews used to walk up through the Chulda gates into the Temple, the *Beit HaMikdash*.

They are exactly as described, these steps; some large and some small, some high and wide, and some low and narrow. They were built this way so a person could not run up the steps. There are some places in this world you don't just run into; you have to take a moment to appreciate what a blessing it is to be able to walk into such a place. This leads us to this *mizmor* (Psalm), which we begin reciting daily every year on Rosh Hashanah. Why is this psalm so central to the beginning of our year as well as the forgiveness, introspection and growth we are trying to achieve around this time of year?

Hidden between the lines of this short *mizmor* lie some powerful ideas connected to the essence of what Rosh Hashanah is all about. A closer look at the opening lines of the text of Psalm 130 reveals some questions that need to be addressed:

1. *Shir Ha'ma'a lot:*
MiMa'amakim Keraticha' Hashem.
A song of Ascents:
I call out to you, Hashem, from the depths.

2. *A-do-nai, Shim'ah Bekoli*
Te'hiyena Oznecha Kashuvot
Le'Kol Tachananunai'.
G-d, hear my voice,
let your ears be attentive
to the sound (voice) of my supplications.

Why is this called a song of ascent? Especially when noting that we call out to G-d from the depths? In fact, what does it mean to call out to G-d? We call someone in order to attract their attention; to let them know we need them. But this makes no sense when it comes to G-d, because one would suppose G-d knows you need Him even before you do, so why do we need to call Him?

And why are we calling Hashem from the depths? Why not call Him from the heights? Indeed, we should be relating to G-d from everywhere!

Even more perplexing, is the second verse, wherein we are asking G-d to hear our voices, even asking Him to be "attentive" to our pleas. How can Hashem not be attentive? Indeed, asking Hashem to listen almost implies a current assumption that Hashem is not listening, which makes no sense. The very definition of an all-knowing, all-seeing unlimited G-d, precludes the very possibility of Hashem not listening; after all, Hashem hears everything; Hashem hears our prayers even before we do, knowing the future and being above time. So what does it mean that we ask G-d to listen? Even taking into consideration that we use terminology that we humans can relate to, this is a concept that needs to be understood, and that seems to be central to the Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur experience, as well as to prayer in general.

So what does it mean, to call out to G-d from the valley? There are, suggest many of the commentaries (The Ramban, the Ramchal, and even Rav Dessler, to name a few...) two types of experiences in this world: experiences of the valley, and experiences of the mountain.

When you are up high on top of the mountain, it becomes much easier to see where you are going; everything seems so clear, and often the view is breathtaking. In the valley, on the other hand, the

high walls of the mountains obscure where you really are, and it is much easier to get lost.

In the army, when studying navigation, you learn very quickly that you have to navigate in the valleys. It would make sense to be up on the mountaintops, as you could always keep your eye on your distant destination, and you would never get lost. But the amount of effort and sheer exhaustion that would be the inevitable result of climbing up and down all those mountains would also mean you would never get there. Your distance would be multiplied ten- fold, and you would probably pass out long before ever reaching your goal. Mountaintops are beautiful, but they are also exhausting.

Mountains are also very limited and defined in nature; you can't walk endlessly on mountaintops. Peaks are by definition, very defined. Valleys, on the other hand, can seem to go on forever, like the Great Rift of which Israel's Jordan Valley is a part, which stretches from Russia all the way down through Africa.

Sometimes we are privileged to experience life's mountains, like the joy of the birth of a healthy baby. I remember the moment when our eldest daughter, Maayan, was born. It is a moment that will stay with me forever. One minute there were two of us in the room, and suddenly there were three of us. The wonder of meeting and seeing such a new little person has to fill one with awe. It allows you to realize that there are great things at play in this world, and (at least for me) that we are not alone, and indeed are part of something much greater. You see Hashem a little bit more clearly, and life's purpose seems so much clearer. I remember feeling at that moment, that if I was to accomplish nothing else in this world, but to have had the privilege of being a part of bringing that life into the world, that would be all right.

Many are the mountains we see and sometimes are blessed to experience in this world. Some of them are towering giants, like the day a person gets married, or marries off a child, the achievement of a life's dream such as seeing an organization grow into a real force for good in the world, or even changing someone's life. And some of them are hilltops, like an A+ on a college paper, the girl who says yes when you ask her on a date, the boss who agrees to your request for a raise, or perhaps the beginning of a new friendship. And whenever we experience these peaks, they are a chance to see life a little more clearly, and take stock of our direction, making sure we are still on course.

And then there are the valleys; life's low points, where things often seem so lost and confused, you wonder whether you will ever climb out, and whether you are so lost you are really walking away from your destination instead of towards it.

These are the moments that challenge us and give us pause; the child, heaven forbid, lost in a senseless car accident, the indiscriminate bombings and acts of terror that have claimed so many lives in Israel and all over the world, and perhaps the infant who sleeps the sleep of the innocent and the pure and one day just never wakes up.

And again, there are many valleys. Some are deep ravines surrounded by cliff walls, like the painful breakup of a marriage and the pain of the loss of a person you may have thought was your best friend, or the cold lonely emptiness of a hospital hallway or surgical waiting room. And again, some are the day-to-day valleys we navigate all the time, like the monsoon-like rainstorm that appears just when you have a meeting across town, with no cabs available because the President is visiting the U.N. that day! Or the unexpected bill in the mail, the sprained ankle or flu, or even the unspeakable horror: the coffee machine that breaks down....

And just like the mountains, we navigate them as best as we can, and hope and pray that soon we will arrive at the mountain top, and see things clearly again.

But here is the catch: nothing grows on the mountaintop; life grows in the valley. It is not accidental that nature's most fertile places are the valleys (indeed 70% of Jordan's agricultural produce comes from their small strip of land in the Jordan valley).

It is almost as if the valleys represent both our greatest challenges, as well as the moments in which we can achieve our greatest potential.

To be absolutely clear, I am not suggesting that this is the 'answer' to the age old question of why so many good people suffer in this world. Moses himself could not fathom the answer to this question (Tractate *Berachot* 5a), and it would be extreme arrogance to presume to understand the unfathomable.

But sometimes we are blessed to see the people of the valley who succeed not just in climbing the mountains, but also in bringing the valleys with them.

Like the case of S'derot (Israel) resident Avichai Seli who on Yom Ha'Atzmaut (Israeli Independence day) in 2001 participated as one of the contestants from around the world, in the International Bible Competition, the Chidon HaTanach in Jerusalem. Even more incredible was his induction, after an almost two year battle with army officials who did not want to accept him, into the Israel Defense Forces. Passing all the tests and overcoming all the other hurdles thrown his way, he refused to be denied. You see, Avichai is deaf and blind; he received the questions in the competition in Braille.

He was born in the valley; only someone forgot to tell him, so he heaved the entire valley onto his back and climbed up for the view.

Perhaps this is the meaning of calling out to Hashem from the depths. Maybe the first stage of changing who we are and the way we look at the world, which seems to be the goal of Rosh Hashanah, is whether we can call out to Hashem even from the depths. Can we succeed, somehow, in harnessing our greatest challenges and our deepest pain, allow Hashem into our lives?

Take Christopher Reeves, the movie superstar who played Superman, who was paralyzed from the neck down in a tragic riding accident. I remember once catching a segment of a Larry King Live interview with Mr. Reeves. King asked Reeves how he manages; after all, he was Superman, and now he will, it seems, never be able to even teach his five-year-old son how to catch a ball.

I will remember forever Reeves' answer: he said:

"I learned one thing from this entire experience: it's not about what you do; it's about who you are."

Christopher Reeves traveled across the country visiting kids who had become paraplegics, offering them hope and compassion in their struggle to adjust to a very different life. He helped a number of these kids (and adults) choose life over suicide, and he was an inspiration to millions across the globe, even visiting Israel to express his solidarity with victims of terror.

Now, at the risk of getting myself in trouble here, I remember when Superman and subsequent films came out. Reeves was in my humble opinion a good actor, but I doubt he was on his way to becoming the next Humphrey Bogart, and did not seem to be G-d's gift to the film industry.

That terrible accident, as tragic as it was, (and as much as I am sure all of us, most of all Mr. Reeves himself, wished medicine could find a cure and allow him to jump out of his wheelchair) gave the world a gift, because of what Christopher Reeves decided to do with it. And that, in my eyes, is when the star became a superstar.

I wonder, if when we are standing before the open ark reciting the words of this challenging *mizmor* (Psalm), we are not really asking G-d; we are *telling* G-d first of all, that we are willing to call out to Him, even from the depths, and we need a little help. And I wonder, if perhaps we might consider that these depths, for each of us, each in our own way, contain the most fertile ground of all, if we could only find the enormous strength to dig just a bit deeper.

This brings us to the second point: what is the *Kol*, the voice, we call out to G-d with, and what does it mean that we ask Him to listen?

There is an idea that in order to understand a concept, one needs to see the first time it appears in the Torah, as that is its basic identity. As an example, the Talmud says:

"Ha'Roeh Tet Be'Chalom, Yetzapeh Le'Tov."
"If one see the letter Tet in a dream, one can expect goodness to come in to his life."

The basic understanding of this is that the word *Tov* (good) begins with the Hebrew letter *Tet*. So seeing this letter means good is coming your way. But, asks the Vilna Gaon, why do we assume the letter stands for good (*Tov*), when there are so many other words that also begin with the letter *Tet*, like *Tumah*, impurity? His answer is that the first time the letter *Tet* appears in the Torah, is in the word *Tov* (good), so that is the paradigm of what that letter represents in its ideal form.

So where do we first come across the word *Kol* in the Torah?

"Va'Yishme'u Et Kol Hashem Elokim Mithalech Ba'Gan Le'Ruach Ha'Yom."
"And they heard the sound of G-d walking in the garden in the spirit of the day." (Bereishit 3:8)

Adam and Eve, having just eaten from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, have become aware of their nakedness, and, hearing the sound (voice?) of G-d in the garden, are 'hiding' amidst

the trees. And, when G-d asks them where they are, Adam's response, again (3:10) is:

"I heard your Voice in the garden and became afraid (in awe?) and hid."

So what is this sound, this voice of G-d that Adam hears, and how does it connect to the voice we are crying out to G-d with as well?

Note that Adam does not hear this voice, this sound, until after he eats from the Tree of Knowledge. One understanding of what happens in that moment is that the consequence of doing something that Hashem really doesn't want me to do is first and foremost that it separates me from G-d. Once, we were close to G-d, living together almost as one, in the Garden. And the consequence of our mistake was that we inevitably became distant from Hashem, ultimately needing to leave the Garden. Leaving the Garden of Eden was not a punishment, it was an inevitable consequence.

If a husband, G-d forbid, cheats on his wife, she is not punishing him by telling him to leave the house; it is simply the inevitable consequence. After such a betrayal of their relationship, and of the G-dliness within him, he has inevitably distanced himself from the person he loves. This in fact is the secret of exile: we can, as a people, so distance ourselves from G-d as to no longer live in the place where we are most capable of feeling His presence.

The voice we then hear, is the same 'voice' that was there all along, only now it appears as an 'other', as separate from that one-ness with Hashem we so long for.

Indeed, the voice they are hearing is not the sound of Hashem walking in the Garden, but rather, allegorically, the sound of Hashem that was always deep within them. Only now it seems as though that voice is speaking a different language, because Adam and Eve have done something which, for whatever the reason, did not resonate from the voice of Hashem within, so G-d's voice becomes separate from themselves, perhaps even seeming like noise, rather than the voice of G-d from deep within as it was always meant to be.

So perhaps this is what we are asking Hashem as well in this *mizmor*: Most of all, we want the voice from within, to really be the voice of Hashem. The greatest question we can ask ourselves in our daily lives is, "Is what I am about to do really going to bring Hashem a little bit more into this world?" If

You, Hashem can hear my *Kol*, it is because I have succeeded in speaking (and thus acting) from a good place, at one with G-d.

The most famous example of *Kol* is the well-known statement of Yitzchak, before blessing his sons. Yaakov has disguised himself as Esav, by wearing sheepskins on his arm to replicate the hairy arms of his brother. But he can't disguise his voice, the essence of who he is. And so Yitzchak, sensing this dissonance, says:

"Ha'Kol Kol Yaakov, Ve'Ha'Yadayim Ye'dei Esav."

"The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Esau."

Sometimes in this world, we need to wear the hands of Esav, and be willing to do what is necessary. But we must always be sure we still carry, from deep within, the voice of Yaakov.

'Hearing' is not an action; unlike seeing or touching, hearing is generally not something we do, but rather it is the decision to let go of and filter out all the things that normally prevent us from hearing, and all the distractions that get in the way of really hearing what we need to hear.

Like when your child says "*Abba! (Dad) You're not listening!*" It isn't that you can't hear him/her; it's just that you are letting all the other distractions keep you from really listening. The act of really listening, then, is a decision as to what is really important. And if the voice we hear is really the voice of Hashem that we all carry within ourselves, we know we have made the right decisions. And this is our fervent hope on Rosh Hashanah: that as the New Year begins, maybe we will succeed with Hashem's help, in really accessing that inner voice and reconnecting with who we were always meant to be.

And if in hearing the voice within ourselves, and thus reconnecting to G-d, we succeed in hearing as well the voice within every other human being, then maybe this year, at long last, we will achieve that high moment, described at the end of this 130th *Mizmor*:

"Ve'Hu' Yifdeh' Et Yisrael...."

And He (Hashem) will redeem Israel...."

Best wishes for a sweet, happy, healthy and above all, peaceful New Year.

Rosh Hashana: Transforming Our Simple Words to the Purest of Prayer

Rabbi Sam Shor

Director of Community and Leadership Development, Isralight

There is an interesting teaching in the important Chasidic work, *Sefat Emet* (Language of Truth), written by **Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter**, zt'l, the Gerrer Rebbe. The Rebbe wrote:

“The essence of Rosh Hashana is prayer. There are four mitzvot which form our daily routine; the recitation of the Shema, the wearing of tefilin (phylacteries), the donning of tzitzit (fringes), and tefila (prayer). It is written in many holy works that these four mitzvot correspond to the four letter Divine name. Also, the various holidays each parallel one of these four mitzvot. Pesach is representative of the tefilin which we bind to our arm, recalling the “outstretched arm” that redeemed us from Egypt; Shavuot is linked to the recitation of the Shema, which includes the passage: ‘I have instructed you on this day’ (recalling the giving of the Torah at Sinai); Sukkot recalls the mitzva of tzitzit, as the Sukka, much like the tzitzit garment, represents being enveloped by Divine protection. The days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are in essence all about prayer...”

Let us take a closer look at this piece. The *Sefat Emet* suggests that there are four common daily rituals that are each symbolically paralleled by the essence and nature of one of our four Biblical Holiday periods. One might infer that the Rebbe is suggesting that the extra spiritual fervor, inspiration and joy that are often easier for us to experience during each of our festivals, should somehow inspire us and help us to experience its parallel daily ritual, and really all of our daily conduct, in a more meaningful, and spiritually conscious way. Given that we are on the eve of Rosh Hashana, let us explore further the parallel daily mitzva of *tefila* (prayer), which the *Sefat Emet* viewed as the essence of the entire ten day period between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

One of the interesting phenomena of the High Holidays is that so many people are moved to attend synagogue services. Our synagogues that are often quite empty throughout much of the year are

suddenly filled to capacity. What is it about the various benedictions and readings we recite together on Rosh Hashana that is supposed to carry over into our entire year, and inspire us to seek a deeper connection, to reach a heightened spiritual consciousness? Why, if the essence of Rosh Hashana is prayer, as the *Sefat Emet* suggests, is there such a disconnect for so many people who find their way to the synagogues on these three important dates, only to return to their year long anonymity until the following Rosh Hashana?

In order to attempt to answer these challenging questions, I believe first we must clarify just how much transformative potential exists within the experience of prayer in its purest form.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohein Kook, zt'l spoke the following words in a public discourse on prayer (As cited in the work *Mishnat HaRav*, pg 72...):

“The difference between an individual who prays and one who does not pray, is not that one sets aside time each day to pray and the second does not set aside time for this purpose. Rather, there is a profound fundamental difference. The quality of life of each of these two is completely different! That time set aside for prayer, makes a profound impact on the entire day.”

According to Rav Kook, *tefila*, is much more than taking time out of our day to recite some Hebrew words as quickly as we possibly can, and *tefila* is much more than an opportunity to make requests, or plead our case before G-d, as so many people envision as the prime objective of our high holiday prayer, and prayer in general. Rav Kook is suggesting that the experience of *tefila* somehow has the capacity to transform our entire outlook, our entire daily routine, our entire quality of life.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt'l wrote that many perceive prayer as a conversation, a dialogue with the Divine. Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that *tefila*

is much more than a conversation, or a dialogue between acquaintances. *Tefila*, said Rabbi Soloveitchik should be experienced as though we have come so close to the Divine within each of us that we feel the collision, of colliding with G-d's presence. *Tefila* is not a random discussion between two distant acquaintances, rather the most intimate of conversations between man and Hashem.

How are we to understand the words of Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik within the context of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur? If the goal of *tefila* is not to petition or make any requests, rather to enter into a pure, loving, intimate discourse with G-d; and as the *Sefat Emet* suggests the very essence of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is *tefila*, how are we to make sense of the many liturgical references to forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and judgment? It seems quite clearly from much of the traditional liturgy, that indeed we have gathered to make many, many pleas, both personal and communal, unto G-d...

There is a well known verse from Psalm 118 (verse 5), that is recited as part of the *Hallel* which we recite on *Rosh Chodesh* (beginning of each month) and Festivals, which is also one of the many verses recited immediately before the *Shofar* is sounded on *Rosh Hashana*.

The verse: "*Min Hameitzar Karati Ya, Ananani bamerchav Ya...*"

"From the depths I called out to God, with Divine relief he answered me..."

Rabbi Kalonimos Kalman Shapira zt'l, the Rebbe of Piascezne, in his incredibly moving work on the Torah and Holidays- *Aish Kodesh* wrote the following words regarding this verse:

"For people like us, especially in such terrible, bitter anguish, it is impossible not to cry out and pray to G-d, even on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, about our pain and suffering. This in itself is a source of distress, and our soul cries out bitterly that even during such holy days as these we are reduced to praying 'Give us life! Give us food!' instead of loftier, altruistic prayers for the needs and sake of heaven..."

...This is the meaning of the verse 'From the depths I called out to G-d, with Divine relief he answered me.' At present, I am calling from the depths of my pain, but please G-d, respond with divine relief, so that I am able to pray from comfort and plenitude,

so that I can pray properly, unselfishly, for the sake of G-d."

The Rebbe, from the depths of the Warsaw Ghetto, where he ministered to so many amidst the devastation of the ghetto, is teaching us a very profound idea regarding the experience of prayer. Prayer, as it is most often experienced by man in our human frailty, is often very self centered-either out of a sense of obligation, or as an outgrowth and response to a personal need or challenging circumstance. But *tefila*, prayer in its purest form, says the Rebbe, and echoed by the words of Rabbi Soloveitchik, is the experience of calling out to G-d, not from the depths of despair and pain, but rather from a space of comfort, heightened spiritual consciousness and love.

Perhaps, now we can better understand the words of the *Sefat Emet*, "*the days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are in essence all about prayer...*"

If, as we discussed earlier, the heightened sense of awareness, enthusiasm, and joy we feel during each of the holidays is supposed to inspire within us similar fervor and emotions for it's symbolic parallel *mitzva*, then perhaps the opportunity that Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur present us with is the ability to move up the ladder, to be inspired to leave behind our mundane, even commonly self-centered prayer, and begin to view *tefila*, as a regular opportunity to speak with, feel, and embrace G-d's presence in our daily lives.

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, in a recent public discourse, explained that throughout the year we may be very particular about the minutiae of many of the rituals, we might even spend much time analyzing complicated Rabbinic texts. But, as Rav Weinberger so honestly acknowledges, sometimes in all our efforts we lose sight of the very reason we are actually taking the time to do the particular ritual act. Often, Rav Weinberger points out, we are "circling around" the various *mitzvot*, and missing the very purpose that is behind each of the *mitzvot*. On Rosh Hashana, we take a step back, and remember that in all our "circling around," in all the many concepts and rituals associated with Torah, that each of these *mitzvot* are opportunities for us to strengthen our connection with Hashem, to converse, embrace and "collide" with Hashem, in the purest of ways. Our prayers on Rosh Hashana allow us to transition from the many requests that emanate out of this confusion of circling around the *mitzvot*, and enter into prayer in its purest form, of a sincere, intimate conversation with G-d. Our

tefilot on Rosh Hashana, therefore serve as the ideal paradigm through which every mitzva should be viewed, as opportunities to once again feel, rejoice with, and embrace G-d's presence in each of our lives.

So, in reality, our prayer throughout the entire High Holiday period is an amazing opportunity for growth, for a deeper awareness, and heightened consciousness of G-d's presence in our lives. It is this very idea that lies at the foundation not solely of prayer, but of each and every mitzva; which becomes evident when we stop "circling around" focusing solely on the specific details, and begin to simply open our minds and hearts.

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