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# Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality; Rosh Hashana

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*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

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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 they 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

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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*

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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:

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*“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.*