

העלוי'ת

Elul and Rosh Hashana

A Collection of Essays and Shiurim

הוצרת החוץ לאזכר דעת

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I **Elul**

Five thousand seven hundred and seventy one years ago, G-d founded a corporation. He organized a board of directors, a mission statement, and a corporate framework. He analyzed a list of possible employees and placed each person in their most appropriate and effective position.

Each year on the anniversary of this day, G-d reviews the progress of the world and of each individual. Based on past performance and future expectations, He sets the next year's assignments.

"All pass before G-d like sheep. As a shepherd examines his flock, G-d inspects, counts, appoints, and determines the fate of every living. On Rosh Hashana it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed" (High holiday prayers).

We begin each year with high hopes and excitement. Like anyone starting a new project, we are determined that this year will be THE year. We plan to do everything right, or, at the very least, better than ever before.

Many of us are successful. We make resolutions and follow them through to new heights and. Even so, as the year reaches its conclusion and the time of G-dly restructuring is imminent, none of us can be completely sure that we will be allowed to retain our positions. We set aside Elul, the last month of the year, as a time of Teshuva and introspection.

Towards the end of Deuteronomy (30:6), the Baal Haturim (1270-1343) finds a hint to the month of Elul. The Torah describes that at end of days, *"G-d will bring back your exiles and He will have mercy on you and he will bring you to the land that He has promised you and He will remove the impurities from your hearts and from the hearts of your children"* The first letters of the last four words "es Levavcha v'es Levav" spell the word Elul.

The Baal Haturim is not just playing word games. There is a significant connection between the end of days and the end of the year:

According to Kabbala, every person has times when he or she experiences an "*Isarusa*" (awakening). An *Isarusa* is defined by a deep desire to right a wrong, to grow as a person, or to come closer to G-d. An *Isarusa* may come as a result of intense sorrow, a feeling of emptiness, or a profound feeling of joy. It is imperative that we grab that *Isarusa*, and channel it into action and commitment before it fades away. As time goes on and the individual grows, the commitment will grow as well. This process is called growth.

As we progress along this path of growth, it becomes increasingly difficult to recall the excitement that was its original catalyst. We accept Mitzvos upon ourselves with excitement and we continue to do them, but they slowly become habit, rote, and something we do because we did it yesterday. We lose our spark of excitement, our *Isarusa* and feel as if we have reached the end of our growth path.

The Torah describes this condition in its description of the End of Days (Deut. 4): "*When you shall give birth to children and grandchildren and you will grow old in the land*". 'Growing old' refers to a lackadaisical and bored attitude toward the Mitzvos and good deeds that we do. Growing Old is potentially the first step toward the abandonment of Mitzvos altogether, and the verse ends "... *you will commit despicable acts and worship other gods*".

It seems that every *Isarusa* and growth spurt is eventually followed by a 'low'. The energy that woke us up will eventually run out. The Torah (30:6) tells us that there is only one solution to this problem: "*And G-d will bring back your exiles and He will have mercy on you and he will bring you to the Land that He as promised you and He will remove the impurities from your hearts and from the hearts of your children*".

G-d appreciates the good deeds that we do, He remembers us, and He will help us repent, reform, and reconnect to the original spark of inspiration that started us on our journey.

The Torah was referring to the end of days, but the same cycle takes place every year: We begin anew at Rosh Hashana full of excitement and determination to make this "The Year". We have visions of a year with less fighting, more smiles and more time for G-d. We translate those yearnings into realistic commitments and we turn to G-d and to provide us with the means and circumstances to honor our commitments. We are granted the opportunity for growth and are able to change.

Over the course of twelve months we experience highs and lows, but when the month of Elul comes we are in need of assistance. G-d is preparing to judge us again just as we are becoming 'old' and unexcited about our growth. We possess actions, but we no longer have the spark of excitement that sent us sailing through the judgment day last year.

G-d does not let us fizzle out. For a full month preceding Rosh Hashana, He helps us remove our impurities and bare our souls He gives us an opportunity to renew our excitement be our very best as He evaluates us and sets our roles for the coming year.

May we all emerge victorious in judgment and maintain our spark of enthusiasm throughout the entire year. (Based on the Afikei Mayim)

II

Retrospection

We are the product of our experiences. If Hashem gives us a test it is specifically so that we can develop the character traits need to make it through. Just as someone training for a marathon learns to push herself to the limits, a person who has had a tough experience and prevailed has presumably developed himself or herself more completely as a person.

On the other hand, past performance is no guarantee of future results. People forget the lessons that they learned and often forget where they came from.

My father grew up in Buffalo, NY. At one point he decided that he would like to become a Rabbi in Buffalo. He went to Israel and studied in Jerusalem for many years until he was ready to go back and become a Rabbi. Everyone thought he was crazy. "You're leaving Jerusalem and going to Buffalo? – There are no religious Jews there!"

Imagine if a young man in Africa decided that he would travel abroad, study, become a doctor and return home to treat Malaria in his hometown. After many years of study we could see his fellow medical students telling him the same thing: "You're going to North Africa? – There's Malaria there!"

Unfortunately, many people forget where they came from and why they started out.

The Torah tells that every king had an obligation to write two Torah scrolls. He would keep one Torah with him at all times and read from it when he judged, when he rested and while he ate. The other Torah would remain in the Bais Hamikdosh.

As he carried the smaller Torah around with him there was a danger that the Torah would lose some of its original message. Words could fade, letter could crack and portions could become damaged. Once a year the king would personally go to the Bais Hamikdosh and consult with his backup Torah Scroll. He would fix the cracked letter and rewrite the faded words; he would renew his personal Torah and make sure that it was consistent with the Torah he had begun with.

This Mitzvah is a way for the king and for every person to make sure that they remain on task and that don't forget their original goals and how they started out.

When a young person begins their life, he or she has a good idea of what she wants to look like in coming years. Many people are privileged to have parents, grandparents and other role models who can help them write their own personal mission based on thousands of years of knowledge and experience.

What separates the men from the boys, and the girls from the women, is the ability to look back at that message, that goal, and that determination and purity one year, five years and even twenty years later. Every person needs to be able to pull out their original goals and compare them with their life today. They need to take the time to fill in the blanks, rewrite the faded letters and fix the cracks. Life takes many twists and turns and those who successful are those who able to adapt but not lose sight of their basic goals. It is easy to get caught up in day-to-day living and go years and years and years without looking back at that original set of goals and aspirations.

Yogi Berra said that if you don't know where you are going – you are sure to get nowhere quickly. We are fortunate to know where we are coming from and where we are going. If we can stick to our ambitions and never lose sight of our goals, we will go even further and make the world a better place.

We begin the year saying that this will be THE year. All too often, twelve months later we find that it has been 'just another year'. True greatness for ourselves and for the Jewish people comes when the end of year and who we have become matches the beginning of the year and what we aimed for.

III **Mussar**

When Moshe rebuked the Jewish people his goal was to get them to think. That was enough.

In Parashas Devarim, the Jewish people had just spent forty years travelling in the Desert. They were standing in Arvos Moav, on the banks of the Yarden (present day Jordan) ready to enter the land of Eretz Yisroel. Moshe, who would not be coming with them, rose to speak to the Jewish people for the last time before his death.

Although he would go on to review virtually the entire Torah with the Jewish people, Moshe chose to begin with some words of rebuke. His

style of rebuke is quite instructive. Moshe did not tell the Jewish people anything that they did not already know. Rather than teach the Jewish people new philosophical concepts or explain the enormity of their actions, Moshe chose to simply hint to some of the worst sins committed by the Jews in their travels. He began with a list of place names: The desert, the Aravah, the Yam Suf, Paran, Chatzeiros... These were the locations where the Jewish people had rebelled ungratefully toward Hashem, threatened to return to Egypt, participated in the rebellion of Korach, and listened to the words of the spies. Moshe hinted to these sins and the sin of the golden calf, but he did not elaborate – he left it to the people to draw their own conclusions.

R' Aharon Kotler and others explain that that this is the essence of Mussar. Mussar (often translated as rebuke), is not about more information and more guilt; Mussar is about examining our actions. Before we act we need to think: Why am I doing this? Should I be doing this? Is this action rooted in anger, revenge, arrogance and despair, or in the desire to do the will of Hashem? We need to train ourselves to think before we act and before we speak, but the only chance we have of fixing our mistakes is if we can train ourselves to think after we act. True Mussar is the examination of our own actions. Moshe's only goal in rebuking the Jewish people was to get them to rethink and reexamine their actions. That was enough.

The Medrash points out that the words of Moshe are introduced with the words "אלו הדברים", the same words that precede the Ten Commandments. This is to show that self-improvement and Mussar are on the same level as the Ten Commandments.

Shlomo Hamelech writes in Mishlei (4:13): "Grab Mussar and do not let go. Guard it – for it is your life".

The Vilna Gaon writes, "Mussar is our life, because the purpose of our existence is to "break that which we have not yet broken". Our job is to be on the constant lookout for character flaws that we have not yet

conquered. A person must constantly improve himself because if he does not 'What is the purpose of living?'

Reb Aharon concludes: Torah on its own is not enough of a reason for us to be in this world - we study the entire Torah even before we are born. Our purpose in entering this world is to complete our Torah with Mussar by constantly looking backward and evaluating our actions.

IV **Be a Tzaddik!**

Before you were born, you knew everything that you needed to know.

When you were born you had a clear idea of your needs: Food, Oxygen, Love. You knew how to cry when you didn't have what you needed. Life was very simple but very efficient.

As we grow older and more intelligent, we become more and more confused. Nurture competes with nature and by the time we grow up, we have no idea what we really want. Even if we are in touch with our needs, we have trouble asking - we forget how to cry.

The Talmud tells us that before we are born, we are taught the entire Torah. And then an angel comes, taps us on the lip, and makes us forget Torah. He takes the Torah out of our conscious mind and puts it into the fiber of our being. He doesn't take the Torah away from us; he puts it into us. At that point our mission and our purpose in life are clear.

Right before we are born the angel speaks to us: "Be a Tzaddik", he says. "And don't be a Rasha. Even if the entire world tells you that you are a Tzaddik, you still need to be able to look at yourself and say: I am a Rasha".

The angel is telling us retain our purity and our connection to Hashem even as we enter the big and confusing world. We need to remain Tzadikim.

What is a Tzaddik? The Talmud tells us that if, on his wedding day, the groom says to the bride, "I will marry you on the condition that I am a total Tzaddik" - the marriage is valid. Even if the groom was a serial killer ten minutes earlier - we assume that he has repented.

A tzaddik is not about what we do or have done, it is about who we are now and where we are headed. A Tzaddik knows the needs of his soul.

Someone once called the Kollel for a Chavrusa. He wanted to study Torah because he was a fan of Kirk Douglas. Kirk Douglas, in his old age, had begun studying Torah. I did some research into Kirk Douglas, read his book, and even met the rabbi who studies with Kirk.

As you may know, Kirk Douglas was born as Issur Danielovich to an Orthodox family. He writes that as he grew older, suffered losses, and almost died, he realized that there was more to him than Kirk Douglas. He realized that deep inside of him there still was a little frum kid named Issur Danielovitch. That little kid was more focused, more driven and less superficial than he was. Kirk found himself a Rabbi and began to learn Torah again. He put on Tefillin, davened and learned how to connect to Hashem, again.

"Hayom Haras Olam". Rosh Hashana marks the Herayon - the birthing of the world. Hashem created us pure. Once a year we shed the superficiality that grows up around us and become that smart little baby boy or girl that we used to be. We can return to the Torah and internalize its' message. We speak to Hashem and we know what to ask for.

Rosh Hashana is the day that we press Reset. We take the knowledge that we have gathered over the past twelve months and we start again. (It's like installing a new program). We find the focus of our lives and connect to Hashem. Hashem looks deep into our souls and gives us our assignment for the year.

The Rosh Hashana liturgy makes no mention of forgiveness and there are almost no prayers asking Hashem for a good year. The exercise of Rosh Hashana is to refocus and reconnect.

The angel made us promise to remain Tzadikim before we entered the world. Each Rosh Hashanah we renew that promise.

There is an exercise from Rabbi Leib Chasman that one of my teachers taught me and that I teach all of my students: Take a moment over Rosh Hashana to look at yourself honestly and choose five small things that you can change. You can stop wasting a certain hour every week. You can start calling someone every month. You can stop watching a certain program or reading a certain magazine. You can add an extra Tefila or mitzvah to your daily routine.

Take your list of five small items and select the four hardest ones. Cross those out. Choose the smallest, simplest, easiest promise that you can - and keep it. That Mitzvah will be your yearlong reminder of the purity and focus that you achieved on Rosh Hashana.

One realistic promise is worth more than hundreds of dramatic ones. Stand in front of Hashem next Rosh Hashana and say "I have changed" - at least this small and tiny way". You will look back at who you've become and realize that the change was not so small after all.

May we merit to find ourselves this Rosh Hashana and to carry the inspiration with us for an entire year.

May we all be written in the Book of Tzadikim Gemurim - truly righteous people. May Hashem hear our personal and communal words to Him and fulfill all of our desires in the best possible way. May we learn to appreciate one another and appreciate ourselves. May we be written and sealed immediately in the book of good, long and peaceful lives.

V

The Other Type of Judgment

Addendum to essay IV

The Rambam writes:

"On Rosh Hashana three books are opened before G-d The book of life, the book of death, and the book of in-betweens. Those more merits than

demerits they are inscribed in the book of life and will live. If the opposite is true he or she will die immediately (the Raavad challenges this). If his or her deeds are equal, that person is in limbo until Yom Kippur. If Teshuva is done they will live; if not they will be inscribed in the book of death.”

This seems very strange. We are taught that G-d will reward us for every smile that makes someone feel better and for every muscle that we exert in producing that smile. Yet here the Rambam seems to be saying that despite our efforts everything gets lost if the bad things we have done outweigh the good ones. Doesn't this fly in the face of everything we know about G-d being fair?

Rabbi Moshe Shapiro asks an additional question on the Rambam. We are told in the Talmud that only four people died because of the G-d's curse to Adam. Everyone else, including Moshe, Joshua, King David etc., died because of their sins. Are we to assume that the bad deeds of these great people outweighed their merits? In the case of Moshe we know that his sin was the hitting of the stone. Does that outweigh leading the Jewish people at the most pivotal point in our history, giving us the Torah and 120 years' worth of greatness?

Rabbi Shapiro explains the Rambam by presenting a more accurate view of Rosh Hashana, the Day of Judgment:

When we speak of Books of Life and Death, we are not speaking of reward and punishment; we speak of quality of life. During the Days of Awe G-d looks at the world and decides where each person fits in the grand scheme of things. Which people will be the givers and which will be the takers? Will we be the Garbage men or the professionals? Will we be studying Torah or just paying someone else to do it for us? When we talk about life, we talk about living life. We talk about how we will look as spiritual fulfilled beings in one year's time.

In regular Judgment, G-d rules, rewards and punishes on a case-by-case basis. That ruling could result in longer life and sometimes, G-d forbid, in death. Rosh Hashana is not a day of regular judgment.

On Rosh Hashana, G-d doesn't look at our actions at all. Rather than judge us by what we do, He judges us according to what we are. More

importantly he looks at our aspirations and desires for the next year. On Rosh Hashana we are at a job interview begging G-d to give us a good placement. G-d decides on this day how spiritual our existence will be and what type of people we will be guided to become.

We become who we are through our actions. The Mitzvos are G-d's instruction manual, teaching us how to be better people. Every action that we do is deeply rooted in our souls; every action that we do affects our souls. We are products of our actions and thoughts.

The Rambam continues:

"By regretting good deeds that we have done, those deeds are annulled".

The Talmud tells us that the same is true of bad deeds¹. It is possible to become a different person just by changing our focus on life. Rosh Hashana is about what we are and what our souls are.

We all had an angel who taught us the entire Torah while we were still in our mother's womb. The Talmud writes that as the child is born the angel makes the baby swear, *"be a tzadik (righteous) and do not be a Rasha (wicked). Even if the whole world sees you as a Tzadik view yourself as wicked and constantly 'correct' yourself"*.

The Tanya explains that the angel is not admonishing the child to keep the Torah. He has already taught us the Torah and it is understood that we will keep it. The angel is telling us that keeping the Torah is not enough – we need to be Tzadikim, we need to be driven and motivated by spirituality. A person could be a Tzadik with many bad deeds. The bad deeds are not him. A person could be a Rasha with many good deeds. The good deeds are not him. The angel tells us: whatever you *do*, be a Tzadik.

If a man sins but knows that the sins are not him, he is a man who listened to that Angel. On Rosh Hashana we tell G-d, I may not look it but I'm still a Tzaddik. The Chassidim like to call these people "hidden saints".

¹ The Talmud tells us that if someone eats a slice of bacon and then tells a woman "I marry you on the condition that I am a complete Tzadik", the marriage is valid because he may have regretted what he has done.

An alternate name for the Tanya is "Sefer Shel Beinonim". The book of the people who are in the middle – the in-between people who are given a chance until Yom Kippur to let the tzaddik or (Chas Veshalom) the Rasha in them win so that they can be inscribed in the appropriate book. Life is a constant battle between our internal Tzadik and Rasha. Before Rosh Hashana we need to make it our business to make our inner Tzadik win that battle so that we can show G-d that (at least on the inside) we are Tzadikim. G-d will then inscribe us for Life in the true sense. He will inscribe us for a life in which our actions and full personality reflect who we really are. G-d will help us become and remain the Tzadikim that we expect to be.

The Rambam concludes that although The Torah does not give a reason for Shofar we can have a partial understanding. The Shofar is an alarm clock, if not a call to arms. It is telling us to wake up, to "get with it", and to look within ourselves and find the Tzaddik within.

May G-d answer our prayers and inspire us to pray for a year of life.

VI **The Cry of the Shofar**

The [Talmud](#) tells us that the pattern of shofar blowing in each congregation evolved over time. The long, trumpet-like tekiah was used by all, but the teruah took on many different forms, varying with time and geographic location. Amazingly, after several generations the result was invariably corresponded to one of three basic sound patterns. Every congregation independently arrived at either the wailing, three-part shevarim, the pleading whimper of the teruah or a combination of the two.

The Talmud reports that upon witnessing this incredible phenomenon Rabbi Avahu instituted [these](#) three basic patterns worldwide. Rabbi Hai Gaon (939-1038) explains that this ruling was not the result of compromise (in a case of halachic disagreement). Rather, it was intended to promote unity and solidarity in the global Jewish community. In

addition to our “personal” shofar sounds, we include those of the entire nation as well.

Our desire is for the feelings and yearnings of every Jew to be heard. A Jew is never left to cry alone.

The story is told of a young boy who people noticed standing alone in the synagogue on Rosh Hashana. Although no one recognized him, he was quite obviously troubled. They watched as the poor child tried unsuccessfully to articulate his problems. Becoming increasingly frustrated and upset, the boy began to cry. Finally, in desperation the boy removed a whistle from his pocket and began to blow it with all his might. The congregation stood still and watched as the boy blew with all his heart and soul, releasing pent up emotions and conveying his pain with more clarity than any words could have. When he was done, the boy turned, and with a shining face and a bounce in his step left the sanctuary, [mission accomplished](#).

We have all experienced moments of extreme emotion, whether in joy, pain, relief, fright or sorrow. At these instances our feelings are so powerful that we can do virtually nothing other than scream. Similarly, the blowing of the shofar is not a logical expression of thought, but an emotional one. It has the potential to convey prayers that are too complex and deep for words or even song.

King David wrote (Psalms 89:16) “Fortunate is the nation who knows the shofar blasts.” We are fortunate when we are in touch with our own hearts and our personal shofar blasts. We are even more fortunate when we are united enough to anticipate the needs of another.

This Rosh Hashanah as we listen to the shofar being blown, let us remember that these blasts are the vehicle with which we offer up our deepest emotions, those that words cannot verbalize. And let us pray that the sounds of the shofar carry not only our feelings but the suffering and yearning of Jew everywhere whose heartfelt “shofar sounds” may be different than our own.

This article first appeared in the Debut issue of [NickNacks](#), a publication of the Norfolk Area Community Kollel.

VII

Be Matir Neder

I had lived in Norfolk for a while when I met a “frum looking” Jew that I had never seen before.

After the usual greetings, I asked my new acquaintance if he would like to spend some time learning with me once or twice a week. He responded in the affirmative and soon he was coming to my house two evenings a week to learn Mishnayos. It turned out that he had spent some time in yeshiva, was observant, wore a Yarmulke, kept all of the mitzvos, davened three times daily and learned regularly. The odd thing was that he never came to shul. Not once.

As we became friends I mentioned that I had never seen him in what was the only Orthodox shul in town. He gave me a vague answer. I suspect that there was another answer too, but not wanting to pry I didn't pursue the issue.

We continued to learn every week, always at my home. Rosh Hashana came and went. My friend was very much in the High Holiday spirit and had blown the Shofar and davened, but he had still not come to shul.

A day or two after Rosh Hashana as we got together for our learning session, my Chavrusa asked me a favor. “Could you get a Beis Din together for me? I need to annul a vow”. (A Beis Din is a court of law, in this case three adult males). We set a date and place and I promised to be there with my fellow Kollel members. It turned out that my Chavrusa had made a genuine Neder never to step foot into shul!

As a Halachic Jew he felt that he needed the dispensation of a Court of Jewish Law to *allow* him to come to shul on Yom Kippur.

We indulged him, and with a ‘Mutar lach, mutar lach, mutar lach’ the vow was annulled.

A few nights later at “Kol Nidrei”, as a large crowd gathered at Bnai Israel to recite the prayer nullifying any vows made in the past year, I took a peek out of my Talis to see someone whose religious landscape had changed with the rejection of a vow.

I still don’t know what kept my Chavrusa away from our shul. I do know that he got over it.

We all have our hang-ups and Mishegassen that are stunting our growth. Sometimes we need to take a step back and say ‘that’s not me – it’s just a vow that I have made’. We need to be “Matir Neder”.

VIII **The Door**

The [Gemara](#) tells the story of [Nikanor](#). Nikanor was a special man who was determined to create something special for Hashem. He undertook to craft the world’s finest copper doors and transport them from Egypt to Yerushalayim. The doors were his project, [his contribution to history](#), and his way of coming close to Hashem.

After months of work, Nikanor loaded the finished doors onto a ship and headed through the Mediterranean. As he was traveling, the ship encountered a storm and was in danger of sinking. In an effort to save the tanking ship the panicked seamen threw one of Nikanors beloved doors overboard.

Nikanor took solace in his one remaining door, but before long that door too was slated to be thrown overboard. In an act of desperation, Nikanor clung to the remaining door. Life did not seem worth living if his dreams were to be dashed to the sea. Finally, Hashem had mercy and the storm subsided. When Nikanor reached the port in Akko he was pleased to find that his lost door had miraculously remained in the undertow of the boat and followed him to the port. Both [doors](#) successfully made the journey across the sea.

[Reb Shalom Schwadron](#) points out that this story happens more often than we might think. We all have ambitions, goals, and grand plans.

Often, we are successful in seeing our goals through to accomplishment. But sometimes a storm breaks out, turbulent times strike and we have no choice but to surrender our dreams to the winds and the waves. We struggle just to survive. Nikanor worked hard but his plan became unfeasible. After weeks of work and months of dreaming he was forced to throw his precious doors out to sea.

Lofty goals are hard to attain and easy to lose. Like Nikanor, we need to show determination and a willingness to sacrifice for even just one part of our dream. If we can do that, Hashem will open His storehouses for us and allow us to access all of our aspirations in the coming year.

IX **Do It Right**

One of my Yeshivos decided that their dinner isn't worthwhile. They are sending out nice letters asking everyone to match last year's donation. The assumption is that nobody was really interested in Dinner anyway.

Meanwhile, two guys in Norfolk had a face-off this week to see who could sizzle the best steak. They prepared the marinade on Friday and spent the entire shabbos among friends, talking trash and feeling manly. They had a Native Texan taste the steaks and rate them expertly based on Taste, Texture and Presentation.

As I followed my friends' barbecue, I couldn't help but hear a voice from my (now dinnerless) yeshiva yelling "ELUL!!" in protest. My heart told me that the carnivorous competition was good, but my memory told me that T-bones and Teshuva do not usually go together.

My fellow Norfolkians ended their personal drama in a tie, but I think that when it comes to Elul activities, they won against the foodless fundraiser without question.

Anything worth doing is worth doing right. If you don't think that your dinner is worthwhile, make it worthwhile - or skip it. Why ask people

to pretend that you had a dinner if it wasn't worthwhile anyway? The focus of the Bar-B-Q may have been dead meat, but at least the goal was perfection.

I believe that Hashem wants to see our best steak. In ancient, holier, times men would spend their entire year raising cows, slaughtering them, preparing them and finally bringing the creme de la creme (so to speak) to the Bais Hamikdosh. They would eat in holiness, put a portion on the Mizbe'ach and donate cuts to the Kohanim. It was known as the Korban Shelamim. Bikurim were not very different: the First Fruits would be proudly presented in fancy baskets and placed on Oxen with gold-plated horns and elaborate necklaces. Proudly and joyously, they would march up to Yerushalayim. Nobody sent a check or skipped the food and entertainment portion of the event. The spiritual and the mundane worked very well together to create a spiritual experience.

Of course there is a very big difference between a BBQ in the Backyard and Bikurim in the Beis Hamikdosh. The point is that we need to train ourselves to do things right. If something is worthwhile, it is worthwhile to do right.

X **Change**

On Rosh Hashana Hashem decides what our role will be in the world, in our families and in our communities. We all have quotas and requirements for ourselves and for our accomplishments. Rosh Hashana is the day to make a Cheshbon Hanefesh: we review our past growth and try to show that we can perform well in the year to come. At the same time, we often need to come to terms with the fact that we have not lived up to our own expectations.

The phenomena of not accomplishing all that we wished to can be attributed to three major factors, each of which three challenges can be dealt with:

The first challenge is Changing Times. What was important a year ago might not be important now. As long as remember that Hashem does not change, we have hope. Hashem is the constant and he is always

there to draw close regardless of our situation. There is always a way for us to reach Hashem.

The second challenge is that we ourselves change. This is a real challenge, but just knowing about it and recognizing that we have changed is half the battle.

Finally, we are lazy. Our laziness is the main obstacle between ourselves and growth, but it is not as bad as it seems.

The truth is that most people are not lazy. We do not lie in bed all day and refuse to go out in the cold (or heat). Shlomo Hamelech and, more contemporarily, the Piacetzner characterized our condition as Hisrapus – weakening. We lose our tight grip on the Torah. We don't need to start again; we just need to continue what we are doing and hold on a little bit tighter.

Shlomo Hamelech writes that the garden of a misrapeh is unkempt. It is neglected, overgrown and suffocating.

Torah growth is never easy. It demands determination and concentration. We need to grasp and climb from level to level in our attachment to Torah.

The Sefarim write that every person has one Mitzvah that grabs him or her in a way that cannot be mistaken. This mitzvah can take over a person's heart and soul and allows his or her enthusiasm to grow strong. If we can find 'our' Mitzvah and hold onto it tightly, we will remain strong in the face of any storm that comes our way.

According to Talmudic Law, a person only needs to perform a small action to take possession of a field. By digging a hole or building a fence he can make the thousand acres into his own property.

A person who is a Misrapeh is like a stakeholder who has all of the keys to the safe deposit boxes but cannot get into the bank. He feels like he has no stake in the property. If a person is enthusiastic about

even one Mitzvah, he can take ownership of his Yiddishkeit, gain access to the building and unlock all of those doors.

There are so many areas of Yiddishkeit that could become our passion. If we find something that enthuses us, we will become inspirational to the people around us.

If you can't do it, fake it. The Mesillas Yesharim writes that outward actions inspire and trigger spiritual growth. We need to start somewhere even if (initially) we are not "up to it".

Most importantly, we cannot fall into the trap of being satisfied with what we have. Reb Tarfon's mother commented on her son's exemplary Kibud Av V'em, But Rabi Akiva said that Reb Tarfon had not yet fulfilled even half of his requirement. Rabi Akiva recognized that Reb Tarfon could grow even in this mitzvah and prayed that he live to teach his entire generation about Kibud Av V'em.

We need to realize that our work is not done. Like Nikanor we need to maintain a death grip on our Mitzvah. Our attitude needs to be that until the day we die we have not lived up to half of our requirement.

May we merit to stand before Hashem and tell him as Dovid Hamelech did: "I rushed and I did not tarry to keep your righteous laws"

XI

Breaking The Rules

On Rosh Hashana we beg G-d to rise from His throne of Judgment and sit on His throne of Mercy.

What's up with that?

Didn't Hashem make rules? Didn't he tell us what will happen if we don't follow the rules? How do we have the Chutzpa to stand before G-d and ask for special treatment after He clearly stated and restated the rules?

At best we are asking for trouble.

I spent the last few hours of last year at the Enterprise car rental agency. You need a credit card to rent a car, and I had the good fortune to get in line behind an angry marine who was trying to rent a car without a credit card. (Most marines are nice guys, but this one was not). The Marine tried cash, debit cards, and ID tags, but the clerk just kept repeating the rule: You Need a Credit Card to Rent a Car.

As I stood and watched this exchange, the marine finally lost his patience. He took his entire wallet, closed it and *threw* it at the clerk.

"Take whatever you need", he said, "Just give me a car"

Everyone in the store was aghast at the man's behavior and the clerk refused to serve him.

A supervisor came out a few minutes later and calmed him down. She said that she could get him a car. She would need to check his credit record, his driving record, and his personal history. She began drilling the Marine: Who is your employer? (U.S Marine Corp) How many years have you been with the Corp? (Twenty five years) What is your rank? (Sergeant) Who can we call for a recommendation? Do you have any outstanding debts and to which banks? Do you have a criminal record?

The tough marine was embarrassed and humiliated. Only after a full interrogation and extra paperwork was he allowed to take a car.

At first I looked condescendingly at this antithesis of the Wisdom of Ben Zoma: "Who is Strong? He who conquers his emotions." Apparently, a man can rappel from helicopters into enemy fire and still be a wimp when it comes to conquering his own anger.

A few minutes later, it occurred to me that I might not be much better than this Marine. What is the difference between his behavior at Enterprise and our own behavior on Rosh Hashana? Don't we ask Hashem to ignore the rules and make an exception for us? Don't we just 'throw everything we have' at Hashem and demand that He make it right? Are we really looking to be interrogated and judged like the Marine was judged? Why would Hashem bypass the rules that He Himself set up? How do we have the Chutzpa to ask?

Many great thinkers have asked this question and they all seem to agree on one basic answer: Mercy is not a way to bypass judgment; it is a form of judgment.

Hashem judges us as we judge others. If we are unwilling to bend our will and our desire for others, Hashem will (chas veshalom) act in kind and not veer at all from the rules that he has set forth.

On the other hand, if we are merciful when considering the actions of others, Hashem will be merciful when considering our actions as well.

Enterprise rent-a-car isn't sophisticated enough to change their policies on a case by case basis. Hashem, in His infinite wisdom, is able to base His Judgment on each person's individual approach to justice.

The last line of Avinu Malkeinu was composed by Rabi Akiva. The Jewish people were desperate for rain and Rabi Akiva asked Hashem to have mercy upon us. He was answered immediately with torrents of rain. The students wondered why Rabi Akiva had been answered so quickly while Rabi Eliezer's many Tefillos had gone unanswered. A

heavenly voice explained that Rabi Eliezer was a student of Shammai. He was always strict and unforgiving on the Torah's behalf. Rabi Akiva was a student of Hillel and he was being judged in the way that he judged others.

If we are merciful in judging others; Hashem will be merciful when He judges us.

XII

Rav Mordechai Feinstein

Who was Rav Mordechai Feinstein?

Sadly, we will never know.

Rav Moshe Feinstein was a well-known tzaddik and one of the foremost Halachic authorities of his generation. He wrote thousands of brilliant Teshuvos (responsa) and published seven volumes of Igros Moshe during his lifetime. An eighth volume was published several years ago and a ninth volume of Igros Moshe was published this month.

The ninth volume includes a section of responsa by Rav Moshe's brother, Rav Mordechai Feinstein. It is twelve pages long.

I read the letters of Reb Mordechai and was mesmerized by their style. I was treated to a glimpse of Reb Mordechai's scholarship and his clever and encompassing approach to issues. It was easy to get a feel for Reb Mordechai's love of Torah and his burning desire to fulfill the will of Hashem.

I did some research into the Feinstein family and learned that at the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution both Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Mordechai Feinstein led communities in Russia. They possessed a level of scholarship that, according to Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzensky, belonged to previous generations. They were throwbacks to earlier times. They were also Rabbis at a time when Judaism was all but

illegal. Rav Mordechai ran a secret yeshiva in Shklov and Rav Moshe worked secretly to make the local municipal pool into a Kosher Mikva. Both brothers represented a level of sacrifice and love for Torah that we can only aspire to reach.

As it became apparent that there would not be another generation of Jewish Education in Russia, Rav Moshe Feinstein left the country and immigrated to New York. Over the next five decades, he was a source of halachic decisions, guidance, and advice to hundreds of thousands of Jews around the world. He was instrumental in teaching American Jewry how to apply ancient rules to modern shores. By the time of his passing in the 1980's, he was considered by many to be the last word in Halacha. His volumes of responsa have become classics and can be found anywhere that Halacha is studied.

Reb Mordechai Feinstein did not come to America. He remained in Russia where he continued to teach Torah in secret. Many of his students did not survive the revolution and the war. Almost nothing remains of his teachings beyond the twelve pages in ninth volume of Igros Moshe.

One of the letters that we have from Rav Mordechai was written just before Rosh Hashana in 1923. It was written to Reb Mordechai's uncle, Rabbi Yaacov Kantrowitz, and he alludes to some of the difficulties that they were facing in Russia. Knowing what I know, I couldn't help but cry as I read Rav Mordechai's concluding words to his uncle:

"May Hashem grant you and your family a year of health of the body and soul and clarity of mind. May you have a year of happiness, peace, and true peace. May you see Nachas from your children in Kletzk and may you watch them become truly great people..."

"May Hashem increase the honor of the Torah and those who study it, thus increasing the honor of His entire nation."

Signed,

Mordechai Feinstein"

We now know that many of the prayers of Rav Mordechai were not fulfilled: Rabbi Kantrowitz's son Yitzchok Yechiel was murdered by the Nazis outside Vilna. His daughter, Cheina Gittel, never left Leningrad and did not survive the war.

Rav Mordechai Feinstein himself was arrested not too long afterward. The Yevsetsia took him from his table while he was celebrating the holiday of Shavuos. They sent him to Siberia for the "crime" of teaching Torah and he was never heard from again.

Both Rav Moshe and Rav Mordechai lived holy lives that are worthy of our envy, but we can't help but wonder what could have been if Rav Mordechai had lived long enough to parallel the great life of his brother.

We cannot question the ways of Hashem, but we can appreciate the questions that we ask ourselves on Rosh Hashana: Who will live? Who will prosper? Who will make a difference in the lives of others? Who will see nachas from their children? Who will celebrate Simchos with their friends? Who will realize their aspirations and who will have the chance to accomplish all that they can in this world?

This is the time of year when we need to think about what was and what could have been. We need to ask Hashem for the strength and opportunity to achieve everything that we are capable of.

May we all merit a year of true peace and prosperity. May we realize all of our dreams and experience only happiness and nachas. Most importantly, may we learn to take nothing for granted.

Kesiva V'Chasima Tova.

XIII

Unesaneh Tokef

i

Rosh Hashanah marks both the creation of the world and our personal judgment day.

Over the centuries, the haunting words of Unesaneh Tokef have become a focal point of our perception of Hashem's judgment and love on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Many Machzorim record the ancient story of Rav Amnon of Mainz who, as reported in the Ohr Zarua eight centuries ago, was tortured for adhering to Judaism and composed the Unesaneh Tokef just before he died.

Rav Amnon is a mysterious character. Nothing more is known of him or anyone named Amnon from that period and location. His Siluk was popularized by his contemporaries and became a part of the Ashkenazi Machzor.

It is unfortunate that some contemporary Jews are troubled by the "quandary" of Unesaneh Tokef. They recognize the brilliance and centrality of the prose; yet they refuse to believe it. They question the origins of the poem and the very existence of Rav Amnon.

To my mind, the origin and authorship of Unesaneh Tokef are irrelevant to the message. Every line of the Unesaneh Tokef is based on a Pasuk or a Mishna or a Gemara or a Medrash. It isn't a presentation of new ideas, it is a remix done to heighten our perception and feeling during the Yamim Noraim.

This essay is an appreciation of Unesaneh Tokef and an attempt to capture its meaning.

ii

Rav Amnon begins his 'Siluk' by describing the holiness of the day. He writes of the awe that is felt in heaven as Hashem prepares to judge mankind. The poem is set in Kedusha where we contemplate the Kingship of Hashem, His awesome power and His control over everything. In Kedusha we declare that 'There is no place where Hashem is not', and it is on this realization that Rav Amnon bases his U'nesaneh Tokef.

We are given to understand that when the time of judgment comes, even the angels tremble. When the moment of decision comes a shofar blows, and the earth is silent.

The Zohar records that the Satan is given but one day a year to process his claims before the Heavenly court. On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem sits on his throne of judgment and prepares to hear the words of the Satan. He has a list of names and a host of angels waiting to testify. We line up to be evaluated one at a time. Suddenly, a shofar blows and Hashem rises from his seat of Judgment and moves to His seat of Mercy. He doesn't cancel judgment, but he changes the way in which he judges us.

iii

"Hashem opens up His Sefer Hazichronos and begins to read from it". What is the Sefer HaZichronos? We know that there are three books opened on Rosh Hashanah. There is a Book of Tzadikim, a Book of Beinonim, and a Book of Reshaim. Are these the book Hashem opens? It seems to me that the Sefer Hazichronos is the one mentioned in Pirkei Avos (based on Tehillim) "And all of your actions are recorded in a book".

The Sefer Hazichronos that is read is the sum total of our own actions. It is the portrayal of who we are and what we are after everything is said and done.

The language "ume'eilav Yikarei" used by Rav Amnon is reminiscent of the Sefer Hazichronos in Shushan which, the Gemara teaches us, was read practically on its own. It forced itself to be read.

In the same way, the actions which are written in our own books do not disappear; everything makes a mark. Our deeds become habits and attitudes and the way we treat and represent ourselves to those around us. At some point those actions surface and they have no choice but to be 'read'.

There was a Rav in Buffalo named Rav Zukerman. Before he came to Buffalo he was supposed to be a Rosh yeshiva in Torah V'daas, but he got stage fright when he entered the Beis Medrash for the first time and everybody stood up. He was not ready to deal with the reality of the great man who he had become. Moshe Rabeinu was reluctant to go and take the Jewish people out of Egypt, Yonah did not want to go to Ninveh, and Sarah laughed when she heard about Yitzchak. Sometimes our actions hit us in the face and we need to deal with their reality. We all have a mission in this world. Sometimes the only way to fulfill that mission is to come to terms with our reality and to recognize how our actions have molded us.

The sefarim teach us that Avraham was the first person to contemplate himself honestly. Hashem began asking "Ayekah" – "Where are you", at the time of Adam Harishon, but Avraham was the first to take life by the horns by answering 'Hineini'. This was his final test in preparation for the Akeidah.

We are all asked to do other people favors and to step into roles that we did not plan on stepping into. We question whether we are worthy or whether a particular favor, phone call, or acceptance of responsibility is worth our while.

We are sometimes upset by how we are perceived, by what people see as our purpose, and by the things people ask us to do. We need to consider how much of that perception is of our own making. We need to realize that our actions and thoughts gradually morph into who we are.

Rav Amnon writes that our own signatures are written in the Sefer Hazikaron.

This seems strange, but it is true: We sign our own fate and we are given the ability to disagree with whatever is written there. We can refuse to sign. We can say "No! That isn't me – that's not how I want to be described or portrayed.

We can change the entry on us in the book, but it will always be a composite of who we actually are.

Rosh Hashanah is the day of first impressions. It is our hearing. The Jury will be out making decisions until Yom Kippur or even Hoshana Rabba, but the way that we represent ourselves is the way that we are represented today.

A Divine 'Google search' will give a picture of us that we may or may not enjoy. We can play with it and fudge, but ultimately the picture will show through over and over.

Emes Yoreh Darko: Truth Finds its way.

v

Even if our composite portrait is, G-d forbid, bad, we need to understand that Hashem is not happy either. Rav Amnon writes that 'Hashem does not desire 'Mos Ha'mes' - the Death of the Dead ones". Most commentaries explain that Hashem does not desire death of those who are destined to die, but a comparison to other sources shows that Yechezkel seems to interchange the word 'mos' - death with the word 'rasha' - evil. An evil person is considered dead even in his lifetime because he is no longer growing. A righteous person is always growing – he is alive. Toward the end of Nach Hashem promises Yehoshua the Kohein Gadol that he will continue to grow even after his departure from this world. Hashem doesn't want the 'dead person' to remain stagnant. He wants him to do Teshuva and live. We can be dead while we are alive, but we aren't grateful dead – we are aiming for Tachiyas Hameisim.

One of the Brachos of Rosh Hashanah is the newness that comes with it. Hashem recreates the world every Rosh Hashana. On the first Rosh Hashanah Hashem breathed a breath of life into Adam. The Sochatchover writes that on each Rosh Hashanah when Hashem blows His shofar he blows a breath of fresh air into every one of us.

How we accept that breath and how deeply we let it penetrate is largely up to us. We can choose to carry on as we did before, barely noticing the new breath of fresh air that we have received, or we can assimilate the new energy into our systems to become new and better people, to do things that we never before thought possible.

The challenge of Unesaneh Tokef is that we haven't yet changed. We stand before Hashem on the Day of Judgment and feeling completely inadequate. We are trembling. We know who we are and that Hashem is judging and that there is nothing to do. Rav Amnon guides us with the Midrash of Rav Yudan: Teshuva, Tefilla and Tzedaka can nullify a decree. By changing our attitudes "Praying before Hashem, beholding His kindness and turning from our evil ways" (Tehillim 17:15), we can change the way that we are perceived.

vi

My earliest memory of Unesaneh Tokef was in Buffalo, NY. I was young enough to be sitting next to my mother, and she had me read the translation in my Machzor. Who will live and who will die? Who by fire? Who by water? Who by strangulation? Who in their proper time? Who before their proper time? Who will be troubled and who will be peaceful?

My mother explained to me that our Chazzan was crying because he had been walking with his two sons during World War II when the Nazi soldiers shot them because they couldn't keep up. I think of that Chazzan and his tune every single year.

Unesaneh Tokef is a time to stand in true awe before Hashem. Thankfully, most of us do not have images of brutal death in front of our eyes. It is hard for us to comprehend Hashem's judgment, His reward and His punishment. but we have all seen suffering and we

have all seen joy. There is more to the Unesaneh tokef than just binary life and death and we are all capable of comprehending and striving for a better life. We are all capable of comprehending Hashem's expectations of us and we have it in us to ask that He guide us in a way of Tzadikim.

Teshuva is a multi-stepped process that takes advance planning and years of work. It is very hard to change our entire lifestyle or even one action on Rosh Hashanah as we are standing before G-d. The best we can do is to get the process started in a solid way. We do this by breathing in the new breath of Rosh Hashana and allowing it to change us.

Even if we do not change what we do or how much we do, we can make a split second decision to change the way we do things. We can take the new Neshama that we are given and apply it to the parts of us that have stagnated. We can put more Neshama into our Tefillos, into our Shabbos, into our relationships, and into everything moment of our lives. We can become enthusiastic about our Yiddishkeit and our roles in this world. We can remind ourselves of what inspired us to do every Mitzvah in the first place.

vii

The story is told of a little boy sitting on a roof top waiting for the President to pass in Marine One. He claimed that the President would be looking out the window through binoculars and that the president would wave back to him, smile, and perhaps drop presents. He was confident in his claims because he was the President's only son.

Hashem is our King, but He is also our father. He cares about us like a father but has the power of a King.

On Rosh Hashanah we contemplate judgment as we stand before our Father, our King.

May we all merit to make the most of the fresh breath of life that we receive on Rosh Hashana. Even if we change nothing at all, may we

merit to infuse everything that we do with life, neshama, and meaning.

May this be a year that we look back upon with fondness and satisfaction.

Kesiva V'Chasima Tova.

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