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Rosh Hashanna

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**LEAVE IT UP TO THE KING**

*By Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

One of the anomalies pointed out by the commentators regarding Rosh Hashana is that nowhere in the Torah is Rosh Hashana ever mentioned in connection with Yom Ha-din/A Day of Judgement; Scripture speaks only of a Yom Teruah/Day of Blowing the Shofar. It is only through the oral tradition of our Sages that we know that on the Universe's anniversary, its Creator takes stock and makes His allocations and allotments for the coming year. Why does the Torah seemingly go out of its way to conceal the concept of Judgement? And why is it specifically the theme of the Shofar that receives the overwhelming focus in the Torah's description of this day, when in fact the sounding of the Shofar is but a small, if very important, ingredient in the overall scheme of Rosh Hashana?

In the book of Nehemiah (8) we find a description of an ancient Rosh Hashana:

Then all the people gathered together as one man at the plaza before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the Torah scroll of Moshe, which Hashem had commanded Israel. So Ezra the Kohen brought the Torah before the congregation... on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it... from first light until midday, and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Torah scroll. They read in the scroll, in G-d's Torah, clearly, appreciating the wisdom; they helped the people understand the reading. Then Nechemia, Ezra the scribe, and the Levi'im who were helping the people understand, said to all the people – who were weeping as they heard the words of the Torah – “Today is sacred to Hashem, your G-d; do not mourn and do not weep. Go eat rich foods, and drink sweet beverages, and send portions to those who have not prepared – for today is sacred to our Lord. Do not be sad – Hashem's pleasure is your strength!”

When the people listened to the Hashem's word being read to them, they were overwhelmed by feelings of remorse and inadequacy, and began to weep. At first glance, this would seem to be most appropriate and praiseworthy – something we might all strive for on the most serious and introspective of days. Yet they are rebuffed. Rather, they are told to go eat lavish meals, because “Hashem's pleasure is their strength.” We are left wondering what indeed is Hashem's pleasure – from which they are to derive strength – if not their sincere reaction to hearing the Torah?

The Tur (Orach Chaim 581) describes a Jew's preparation for the Day of Judgement: Normally, a person who knows he is to be judged, dons black clothing, lets his beard grow unkempt, and doesn't cut his nails. [He does so because he is overcome with anxiety] over not knowing the outcome of his judgement. Yet [before Rosh Hashana] we don't do so. We don white clothing, trim our hair, and cut our nails. On Rosh Hashana, we eat, drink, and are happy, for we know that the Almighty will perform miracles with us...

Why shouldn't we stand in trepidation before the mighty Yom Ha-din – instead of running around getting haircuts and preparing luxurious meals? What is the source of our assuredness that we will merit a good verdict – all the more so if we approach the Day of Judgement with such seeming nonchalance?

The holy Zohar (see Tikkunei Zohar 22a regarding Yom Kippur) criticizes those who cry out on the Days of Judgement, pleading for their needs. “Give! Give!” they cry, “like a dog begging for food.” What is so wrong if, recognizing the seriousness and imminence of the day's judgement, we plead for our needs?

Perhaps we can understand the correct approach to Rosh Hashana with a parable:

*A great and mighty king let it be known that on a given day, he would be passing through a certain city. During his stay, he would grace the inhabitants with an audience, during which he would deliver a royal address. He would then entertain requests and supplications from his subjects. Those who wished were to prepare their requests on the highest quality parchment, upon which they should write what it is they were asking of the king, and why they felt the magnanimous king should grant their wishes. They could ask for up to three things.*

*The city's inhabitants busily went about preparing a royal welcome. Of course there was also much excitement about the prospect of a private audience, and the possibility of one's most-longed-for dreams being granted by the king himself. The king arrived amidst much pomp and circumstance, and was duly impressed by the extravagant preparations made on his behalf. After delivering his royal address, a huge line formed in front of him. Each person held in his hand a carefully written parchment to present to the king, with the hope that his dreams would be granted.*

*The king was indeed magnanimous, and graced his subjects by granting any and all reasonable requests. One by one the people had their turn and made leave of the king's presence, all with the satisfied looks of one whose dreams have come true. The entire time, the king had been observing that one lone maidservant stood at the back of the palace, modestly observing the goings-on, yet never approaching the line. Even now as the line was already empty, she still did not approach. Intrigued, the king had her called before him. "Tell me," he said, "why is it that you stand there quietly, while all your townsmen come and go, each of them having their wishes granted in a most generous manner? Do you not trust that I have the ability to grant your desires?"*

*"Oh no," she said sharply to the king. "It's just that – well – I simply didn't have the time to prepare a parchment with my requests. You see, when I heard the king would be visiting, I immediately became preoccupied with making sure everything would be ready to receive the king. Draperies needed to be sewn, rugs weaved, floors cleaned, swept, and polished... There was so much to do to make sure the city was ready for the king's arrival, and I so busy, that I simply never got around to preparing my wish-list. Today, as I stood before the king, I realized it was already too late. Instead, I chose to spend my time in the presence of your highness, as he graciously dealt with his subjects."*

*The king's face now glowed with a radiance that awed the simple maidservant. "My dearest maiden," the king said, "if there is anyone who is truly deserving of having their wishes granted, it must surely be you, who have put my honour before all else. I will not trouble you to ask, for in your modesty your requests would likely be simple ones. Rather, I will grant you the blessings of my hand – the royal hand. I have no doubt they will satisfy you beyond your wildest dreams."*

In the weeks and days before Rosh Hashana, Jews are busy cleaning up (teshuvah cleanses sins), and preparing ourselves to receive the King of Kings. Although of course Hashem is our King all year long, on Rosh Hashana His dominion is underscored by the fact that it is then that He sits upon the Throne of Judgement and judges the world. It is on Rosh Hashana that Hashem says, "Call out before Me with the blast of the Shofar – to demonstrate your acceptance of Me as your King (Mishna Rosh Hashana 4:5)," like the king who enters the palace amidst trumpet blasts.

The Torah stresses the theme of Rosh Hashana as being a day of Shofar blasts, and down-plays the aspect of judgement, in order to keep us focused. The nature of a man being judged is to become self-absorbed; his mind is consumed with thoughts of what he can do to assure himself a favourable verdict. Or, if he feels there is no hope, he falls into self-pity and stops caring. Either way, all he's thinking about is himself, and that misses the whole point of the day. Our focus on Rosh Hashana should not be on "what's in it for us" and "how's this going to turn out for me" but rather on accepting Hashem as our King, and being the best servants we can.

That's why, when the people began mourning and crying, they were told to stop. It's good that they were aroused by the reading of the Torah, but the Navi (Prophet) guided them to take that arousal and use it to celebrate the day that Hashem brought the world into being, thereby becoming its King, and on which He renews its lease each year.

With what will they merit a good judgement? Why are we so self-assured that we will be judged favourably that we get dressed up in our finest clothing, and, as the Zohar suggests, we spend the day celebrating rather than groveling before Hashem to forgive our sins and grant our wishes? It's not because we arrogantly believe we deserve it, but because of what we're doing instead.

As Hashem sits upon His throne to judge the world, He finds us in the synagogues, listening to the Shofar and reciting the prayers whose focus is that we accept Hashem as our King, and pray that one day the entire world will also recognize His dominion. We're too "busy" to even take the time to contemplate where we fit in the picture, and what Hashem has in store for us. Seeing this, Hashem's countenance glows, and no doubt He inscribes all His faithful servants in the Book of Life and the Righteous that they may indeed merit another year of health and prosperity. And He bestows upon them blessings far more numerous and generous than they ever could have thought to ask for.

## On Rosh Hashanah God Sees Your Potential. Why Don't You?

by Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Have you ever felt like a fraud that will eventually be exposed? You're not alone. Studies show that 40% of successful people do not believe they deserve success. As many as 70% of people have felt like an imposter at some time or other. People who suffer from imposter syndrome, coined in 1978 by two clinical psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, feel that they don't deserve success. They attribute any success not to their effort and ability but to luck, timing, or to deceiving others into thinking they are better than they actually are. They feel like they're making it up as they go, in contrast to everyone around them who really know what they are doing. A feeling of faking it on the outside while imprisoned by a gnawing feeling of unworthiness on the inside.

On Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of humanity, we remember the truth that God knows us, loves us, and believes in us. We aren't defined by our worst moments, our worst thoughts, actions or attitudes. God sees the best in us, holds on to our best moments, our glimpses of greatness. We mistakenly think the real us is the one who loses our cool with our spouse or children, the one who looks at the wrong things when nobody is looking or indulges the urge to say the wrong thing to curry favor with the listener.

We mistakenly think that when we show up despite our shortcomings that this makes us imposters. But that thinking is wrong. The truth is that when we are able to stay calm and be patient with those we love, when we have the discipline to do the right thing despite being tempted to follow our urge, that is who we really are, this is in fact the true us.

In the Rosh Hashanah machzor we say, "He [God] looks for and sees the hidden on judgment day." Rabbi Avraham Zvi Kluger, a leading contemporary Torah scholar, understands it as, "He longs, looks, digs up our purest intentions." Similarly, in the Mussaf prayer of Rosh Hashanah we say that we can't hide things from God for He remembers all that we have conveniently chosen to forget. But Rabbi Kluger says we are misreading and misunderstanding what Rosh Hashanah is about. The Torah doesn't call Rosh Hashanah *Yom Hadin*, a day of judgment; it calls it *Yom Zikaron*, a day of remembrance, not only a day to remember there is a God, but it is a day for us to remember *who we are* and who we could be, to recognize we aren't imposters but are leading lives filled those good moments that represent who we truly are.

We may feel like imposters, we may sometimes feel useless or invisible, we may look back and see mistakes and have regret but from God's vantage point there is no forgetting – we are each unique and here for a specific reason, and God sees all of our best moments that comprise who we really are. Those shining moments are the real us. We are defined by our strengths, not our weaknesses. We are our best moments, not our worst. While we have to take ownership and responsibility for our failures, we deserve the success and achievements we have earned. They are not fraudulent.

Rabbi Isaac Abraham Kook writes: "The primary role of *teshuvah*, repentance...is for the person to return to their true selves, to the root of their soul. Then we will at once return to God, to the Soul of all souls."

### *Hidden Strength*

In 1977, Laura Schultz, 63, was in the kitchen of her home in Tallahassee, Florida, when she heard her six-year-old grandson screaming from the driveway outside. Schultz ran to the door to find her grandson pinned beneath the rear tire of a full-size Buick. Giving no consideration to limitations or barriers, Schultz ran to the car, used one hand to lift the rear of the vehicle and used the other hand to drag her grandson to safety.

For years, Schultz refused to speak about the incident. After finally agreeing to an interview with peak performance coach Dr. Charles Garfield, Schultz was asked why she had remained silent about her miracle. Schultz revealed that the incident had actually scared her and reminded her that she'd wasted most of her life living far beneath her true potential. If she had that strength inside her all along, why hadn't she realized it or utilized it more often or more fully?

With a little coaching from Garfield, Schultz returned to college, earned her degree and went on, at nearly 70 years of age, to fulfill her long-held dream of becoming a college professor.

Like Schultz, we often deny our strengths, we think the rare moments where we shined, we thrived, we excelled as parents, spouses and in our relationship with God, they are aberrations, they aren't true, we shouldn't speak about them. But we are wrong! See in yourself what God sees, know who you are and what you are capable of. Don't ignore the strength that is inside you. Your best moments as a mother or father, as a husband or wife, that *is* the real you. Believe it, embrace it, nurture it, and grow it.

Whatever you may now be telling yourself that you can't do, do it! It's never too late to summon forth the full extents of your God-given potential. Your best moments are the real you, the gift that you are to the world.

## Praying for What?

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

The Gra, in his introduction to the *tfilos* of Rosh Hashana, notes a powerful and fundamental idea. The *mishna* in Rosh Hashana (16a) teaches:

"At four times during the year the world is judged ... on Rosh Hashana all of mankind is judged individually, like young sheep who pass through a small opening in the coral."

The seriousness and scope of the judgment is underscored in the *Nesaneh Tokef* prayer, authored by Rav Amnon of Mayence, wherein we are reminded of the nature of this judgment:

"How many will die, how many will be born, who will be at rest, who will wander about, who will become poor and who will become wealthy."

One would have imagined that in response to such a reference to judgment, one would pray on Rosh Hashana to be pardoned and forgiven, for life for our children and sustenance. Moreover, at first glance the *amidah* of nineteen *brachos* that we recite daily would have been most appropriate for Rosh Hashana. The listing of thirteen requests, personal and communal, would precisely articulate the needs of all on Rosh Hashana. Indeed, having offered the specific personal and communal needs on Rosh Hashana, the Shemoneh Esray for the rest of the year could well have been, "Reign over the whole universe in your glory," the theme of all the prayers of Rosh Hashana.

The Rosh Hashana *machzor* therefore teaches us a very basic principle regarding prayer. As Rav Chaim Volozhiner in Nefesh HaChaim (2:11) teaches, the main thrust and component of all prayer is Hashem, His kingship, glory and honor in this world. The personal needs of man are inconsequential in contrast and hence omitted on Rosh Hashana. Moreover, even during the rest of the year, when we do articulate our needs, one learns from the Rosh Hashana liturgy, that the primary purpose of our asking for health, wealth and religious growth is to serve Hashem. We are to channel these bounties to His service. Only then can we be rewarded.

The Tiferes Yisroel notes that this concept is found in his commentary on the last *mishna* in the third chapter of Rosh Hashana. The Torah informs us (Shemos 17:11), "And it came to pass when Moshe raised his hand that Israel prevailed." The *mishna* asks, "Was it Moshe's hands that won or lost the battle against Amalek? Rather, the Torah teaches you: As long as Israel looked heavenly and subjected their heart to their Father in heaven they would prevail, but when they did not, they would fail." Similarly, Hashem instructs Moshe (Bamidbar 21:8): "Go make a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole, and whoever was bitten looked at it and lived." The *mishna* rules again that it was not the serpent that killed or gave life. Rather, when Israel looked heavenward, and subjugated their heart to their Father in heaven they were healed, but when they did not, they perished. The Tiferes Yisroel notes that we learn from the above that whether one is praying for success in a new venture such as the war against Amalek, or even a business venture, or whether one is praying to be spared from an impending tragedy such as in the case of the serpents, or sickness, man's prayer is only effective if the primary objective is to serve Hashem. Benei Yisroel's subjugating their hearts to Hashem enabled them to prevail.

In reality, *tefillas* Chana, which is the *haftarah* for the first day of Rosh Hashana, teaches us a great deal about prayer, and in particular, highlights the above concept. The gemara in Berachos teaches that the *mussaf amidah* on Rosh Hashana has nine *brachos* instead of ten because Chanah used Hashem's name nine times in her prayer. (Instead of the regular seven *brachos* of the Shabbos or Yom Tov *amidah*, plus the three extra's- *malchuyos*, *shofaros*, and *zichronos*, we only have six plus three.) She prays for a son and is finally granted one.

The first chapter in Shmuel recounts how Chanah used to accompany her husband Elkanah annually when he went to Shiloh to pray. One would have imagined that once the child was born she would have been the first to go to Shiloh to say thank-you to Hashem. The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe zt"l notes that Chanah does not go, saying: "Until the child is weaned, then I shall bring him; my responsibility is to raise him to best serve Hashem." She asked for a child- *l'maancha*- for your sake, Hashem.

May we be privileged to have our *tefillos* answered, and to word them correctly.

## Dipping Apple into Honey: The Deeper Meaning

by Rabbi Meir Bier

Eating an apple dipped in honey on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is a universal Jewish custom symbolic of our desire to have a sweet new year.

What are the origins of this custom, and why in particular are apples and honey used to express this point?

The Talmud records a teaching of the sage Abaye that “as a good omen a person should be accustomed to eat at the beginning of the year a gourd, fenugreek, leek, beets, and dates.”

Some explain the reason these particular foods are used as omens for a good year is because they either grow quickly or are particularly sweet, and symbolize our desire for a successful, happy year. Others understand the meaning behind Abaye's practice is that the Hebrew words for these foods have positive associations, such as fenugreek which is *rubia*/רוביא, similar to the word *ribui*/ריבוי, which means to increase. We hope for an increased success.

Following these explanations many other foods have become customary to eat on Rosh Hashanah in various communities, such as an Eastern European custom to eat carrots which is *mehrin* in Yiddish, similar to the Yiddish word *mehr* which means “more.” Others eat pomegranates which have many seeds symbolizing the many merits we hope to attain. Still others eat the head of a fish or sheep, so as to be at “the head of the pack” in the forthcoming year.

One of the earliest mentions of the custom to eat apples dipped in honey is found in *Arbah Turim*, an important compilation of Jewish law written by Yaakov Ben Asher (1270-1340), who cites a German practice to do so.

Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, known as the Vilna Gaon, cites a verse in Song of Songs as the origin of an apple being used in metaphorical terms: “Like the apple tree among the trees of the forest so is my beloved among the youths” (Song of songs 2:3). The Talmud explains that in this verse God is comparing the Jewish people to apples. Just as the fruit of an apple tree appears before the leaves, says the Talmud, so too the Jewish people were eager at Mount Sinai to enter into a relationship with God before even knowing all the responsibilities that relationship would entail. According to this, an apple is a metaphor for a strong desire for spiritual growth and closeness to God, powerful enough to help transcend barriers that prevent having a close relationship with God.

What honey represents is less clear. Although the land of Israel is referred to many times in the Torah as a “land of milk and honey,” most understand the biblical term honey is referring to date or fig honey. Yet the custom on Rosh Hashanah is to dip apples into bee honey.

Perhaps an explanation is as follows. The Torah forbids any fruit sweetener (honey in the biblical term) to be placed on the altar in the temple but requires salt to accompany every meal offering.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) explains the contrast between these two foods. Fruit honey is delicious but spoils easily. It represents quick pleasures and the seeking of instant gratification. Just as fruit products rot easily, a lifestyle devoted to the pursuit of these goals often leads to a sense of emptiness and unhappiness.

Salt is overwhelming and harsh when eaten by itself, but when used sparingly is an important flavor enhancer. Furthermore, it is the original preservative, as salting food is probably the most ancient method of food preservation. This represents a focus on the subtle pleasure that spirituality offers and how a lifestyle based on spiritual values can create long term and consistent meaning and happiness. Although a transition from a purely hedonistic lifestyle to a value-based system may be jarring and unpleasant at first, in the long term it will lead to a more cohesive, content lifestyle.

The goal of one looking to connect to God through the altar should be to imbue the lesson that salt represents within themselves, so salt is offered with every meal offering.

Bee honey has the unique property of being a food that is incredibly sweet but also has a nearly infinite shelf life. So, bee honey represents a spiritual journey that both starts out pleasantly and also continues to remain a permanent source of satisfaction.

On Rosh Hashanah we take an apple, which represents an energetic desire to become more spiritual, and dip it in bee honey, which represents a sweet experience that is not transient. If we approach the new year vigorously committed to self-improvement we hope and pray the result of such a commitment will have both immediate and long-lasting benefits. By incorporating this vibrant, positive message into our Rosh Hashanah meal, we hope to create an energy that will help us merit a judgment for a truly sweet new year.

## The Shofar's Stirring Message

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech

There was a young man in my community who, because of a terrible accident, went into a coma that resisted medical intervention. For months he responded to nothing in his surroundings. On Rosh Hashanah the hospital chaplain, making the rounds to extend the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of hearing the shofar, almost passed him by. *What would be the point*, he initially thought to himself. The doctors told the rabbi that the patient “isn’t really here.” But upon reflection, the rabbi decided that even if the man’s mind was incapable of responding to God’s mystical notes, perhaps the shofar might reach his soul. After all, the soul was brought into existence by God blowing into the physical form of Adam “the breath of life,” investing in him some of His divine spirit. It is the soul which defines us as sharing “the image of God. Immediately after the sounds of the shofar the young man’s eyelids began to flutter. His lips started to move. He recognized those around him.

How was that possible? The answer is both simple and profound. The wavelength on which the shofar operates is on a different level than the one that communicates with the ears and the mind. Our *neshamah*, our soul, hears what we do not hear – or what we do not choose to hear. Our soul is more attuned to reality than all of our other organs. Our soul is who we really are – because it is the closest link we have to our Creator.

It is no accident that when we speak of someone who died we say he expired. The word expired comes from the Latin “*ex*” and “*spiritus*.” “*Spiritus*” means breath; “*ex*” refers to its leaving. Death is the moment when the original breath of God returns to its source. It is the disappearance of God’s presence which we refer to as dying. It is acknowledgment of God’s continued sharing of our existence that is the true meaning of living.

Whenever we acknowledge that truth we are “inspired” – “*in*” “*spiritus*” – filled with the awareness of the divine breath which defines our partnership with God. The mitzvah of shofar shows us that there is a level of divine communication that transcends the rational. It demonstrates that a mitzvah can accomplish its goal in a moment, that the emotion of a musical note can mean more than a brilliantly expounded message. Perhaps Aldous Huxley said it best: “After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.”

### *The Three Sounds of the Shofar*

The rabbis of the Talmud revealed the meaning of the musical messages. Yes, they need to be felt. But they also need to be understood because they convey some of the deepest truths of our lives’ experiences.

Each of the three sounds of the shofar has a role in preparing the mind and soul of the listeners to the spiritual process they are about to go through – and the theological meaning of our ongoing encounters with God.

The first sound is the *tekiah*. Its long, uninterrupted and straight blast is stability. It is discipline and consistency. It was used as the sound of the coronation of the King. It is a note of joy and of hope, of belief in the ultimate goodness of the universe and its inhabitants. On Rosh Hashanah God is crowned as King of the universe. The *tekiah* was blown to call the people together for joyous occasions and the sharing of good news.

If only our lives would always be filled with “the sound of music” that encourages us to sing and to dance, to celebrate and to rejoice. But we also need to acknowledge that life invariably also brings in its wake moments of pain, sadness and desolation. These moments are expressed by *shevarim* and by *teruah*, the two other sounds of the shofar. *Shevarim* means broken. They are the sounds of sickness, the musical sighs of what Yiddish so aptly calls a *krechitz*. Oy, oy, oy! Tragedy has its powerful language which transcends words and alerts us to the kind of pain experienced by so many in these past two years of global pandemic. This broken threefold expression is followed by the nine gasps of the broken *teruah*, emphasizing the test of faith we’ve had to endure as we witnessed the horrors of sickness and death exceeding anything we ever could have imagined.

After the wail of the *shevarim* and the staccato blasts of the *teruah*, giving expression to our recent travails, we still maintain our hope in the final *tekiah gedolah* – the long straight blast of the shofar that will not only bring an end to the cycle of tragedy but will usher in the long-awaited era of universal peace, tranquility and joy.

That is the shofar’s musical message that seeks to speak to our souls. I can’t help but believe that the young man who was brought back to life from his nearly fatal coma by the sounds of the shofar managed somehow to hear far more than the music. His soul heard the message.

After expressing our recent travails, we maintain our hope in the final blast of the shofar that signals an end to the cycle of tragedy, ushering in the long-awaited era of universal peace and joy. My prayer for this for Rosh Hashanah is that we all grasp the message of the shofar as well – and that our lives finally pass beyond the notes that bespeak tragedy so that we may at long last be blessed with the *tekiah gedolah*, the final great blast of divinely promised redemption.