**SALT – ROSH HASHANA -**

**PARASHAT VAYELEKH 5783 / 2022**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Gemara, in a famous passage (Rosh Hashanah 16a-b), raises the question of why it is customary to sound the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah more than the Torah requires. The Torah obligation to sound the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is fulfilled through the set of *shofar* blasts sounded after the Torah reading, before the *musaf* service, but the Sages enacted blowing the *shofar* also during the *musaf* prayer. The Gemara, enigmatically, comments that we add the second series of *shofar* blasts “*kedei le-arbeiv ha-Satan*” – “in order to confound Satan.”

Rashi explains this to mean that when Satan sees how much we cherish the *mitzvot*, sounding the *shofar* even more than we are technically required to, he can no longer prosecute against us before the Heavenly Tribunal. On this day of judgment, we seek to demonstrate our love for *mitzvot*, our fierce desire to serve God to the best of our ability, and thereby silence the “prosecution” so we earn a favorable judgment.

*Tosafot* cite a much different explanation in the name of the *Arukh* (Rav Natan ben Yechiel of Rome). He explains that upon hearing the additional *shofar* sounds, Satan mistakes these blasts as the *shofar* blasts which will herald the arrival of *Mashiach* (as prophesied by Yeshayahu 27:13). Knowing that the final redemption will mark his permanent downfall, Satan is overcome by fear, and thus does not have the peace of mind to prosecute against the Jewish People as they stand trial.

How might we explain this image, of Satan misidentifying our *shofar* blasts on Rosh Hashanah as the *shofar* of *Mashiach*? Why would the Gemara – as understood by the *Arukh* – want us to imagine the “prosecutor” being befuddled by the fear that the final redemption has arrived?

One meaningful explanation that has been given is that this image serves to encourage us by assuring us that our final redemption is well within reach. The notion that Satan could easily mistake our *shofar* blasts as the announcement of *Mashiach*’s arrival indicates that even Satan – the symbol of the “prosecutor,” who draws attention to, and highlights, all our faults and misdeeds – anticipates our imminent redemption. The Gemara here depicts the image of a prosecutor who does not truly believe in the case he brings against us, because he realizes that any minute, *Am Yisrael* might be deemed worthy of redemption. We are assured that even the prosecutor, those who desperately seek to have us convicted on this day of judgment, are aware of our virtues and merits, and fear that we will be deserving of blessing.

The extra *shofar* sounds, therefore, serve to counterbalance the fear of judgment with the confidence that we are fully capable of bringing our final redemption. We are reminded that we are far closer than we sometimes think to the point we need to reach. We should not observe Rosh Hashanah with a feeling of dread and despair, but rather with the confidence of knowing that we are fully capable of realizing our destiny and becoming worthy of God’s boundless grace and kindness.

Sunday

The Gemara in Masekhet Beitza (16a) teaches that “*mezonotav shel adam*” – a person’s livelihood – for the entire year is decreed during the period from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur. It is during this time when God determines how much money a person will earn over the course of the coming year. (The Gemara adds that this does not include one’s expenses for Shabbat, Yom Tov, and his children’s Torah education, which are added onto the amount decreed at the beginning of the year.) As a source for this concept, the Gemara cites a verse in Sefer Tehillim (81:5) which says in reference to Rosh Hashanah, “*Ki chok le-Yisrael hu*” – that this day is a “*chok*” (literally, “statute”) for the Nation of Israel. The Gemara proceeds to note two verses which mention the word “*chok*” in the context of receiving one’s livelihood. The first is a verse in Sefer Bereishit (47:22) which speaks of the portion granted by Pharaoh to the Egyptian priests – “*ve-akhelu et* ***chukam***.” The second is the plea in Sefer Mishlei (30:8), “*Hatrifeini lechem* ***chuki***,” begging God to provide one’s material needs. As the word “*chok*” is associated with livelihood, the description of Rosh Hashanah as a “*chok le-Yisrael*” suggests that this is the day when our sustenance for the coming year is determined.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in *Mussar Ha-mishna* (vol. 1, pp. 329-330), notes the difference between the two verses cited by the Gemara in establishing the association between the word “*chok*” and material sustenance. The first speaks of a king granting a generous portion to a select class of people, who receive a substantial allowance without exerting any effort. The second verse, by contrast, refers to the provision of food with the verb “*hatrifeini*,” a derivative of the root *t.r.f.*, which generally refers to animals preying on other animals for food. Animals in the wild obtain food with great difficulty, and are seldom satisfied. The Gemara thus depicts two contrasting models of sustenance: a comfortable livelihood received effortlessly, and a meager sustenance which is secured with considerable hardship and struggle.

Rav Ginsburg explains that the Gemara cites both verses to emphasize that we must acknowledge God as our provider under all circumstances, regardless of whether we are blessed with a comfortable livelihood, or if we struggle for a scarce sustenance. Even in times of financial hardship and shortage, when we resemble beasts of prey, exerting great effort to obtain what we need to survive, without experiencing satiation, we are to recognize that God graciously gives us everything we have, and He has determined that this is what we need. Rather than feel resentful and embittered, we should appreciate all that God gives us, and reinforce our belief that He always grants us precisely that which we are meant to have. While we pray for a “*chok*” resembling the generous allowance granted to the Egyptian priests, we must strive to feel appreciative and content even under conditions of “*Hatrifeini lechem chuki*,” when our material aspirations remain unfulfilled.

Monday

The Gemara in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (16a) states that we use for *shofar* blowing on Rosh Hashanah specifically the horn of a ram, in order to bring to mind, and invoke the merit of, *akeidat Yitzchak*. Avraham was prepared to slaughter his beloved son, Yitzchak, and lifted his knife to perform the slaughter in compliance with God’s command, desisting only when God appeared to him and instructed him to withdraw the knife. He then proceeded to offer a ram on the altar in place of Yitzchak. The Gemara teaches that God says to us, “Blow before Me the horn of a ram so that I remember for you the binding of Avraham’s son, Yitzchak, and I consider you as though you bound yourselves before Me.” Indeed, the story of *akeidat Yitzchak* assumes a prominent place in our Rosh Hashanah liturgy, and is read from the Torah on the second day of this holiday.

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 29:9) comments that the notion of invoking the merit of *akeidat Yitzchak* on Rosh Hashanah was proposed by Avraham himself. After God told him to withdraw his knife, Avraham turned to God and said, “Master of the world! It is revealed and known to You that at the time when You said to me, “Please take your son, your only son…’ I had in my heart what to respond to You.” Avraham could have asked God why, after having promised that Yitzchak would produce a large nation, he know commands that Yitzchak be slaughtered before marrying and begetting children. Nevertheless, Avraham complied without posing such questions. “Similarly,” Avraham pleaded, “when Yitzchak’s children come upon sins and evil deeds, You shall remember for them the binding of their ancestor, Yitzchak, and stand from the throne of judgment to the throne of compassion.” Avraham asked that in the merit of his unquestioning faith and compliance, God should forgive his descendants as they stand in judgment before Him on Rosh Hashanah.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Mussar Ha-mishna* (vol. 1, p. 335), notes that the Midrash appears to indicate some sort of parallel between *Am Yisrael*’s wrongdoing and God’s baffling command to Avraham. In his appeal to God, Avraham said that just as he had an argument to bring against the Almighty, but instead kept silent, “*kakh*” – “similarly” – God should forgive the people for their wrongdoing, without condemning their conduct. The question thus becomes how to explain this parallel, in what way *Am Yisrael*’s misconduct is comparable to God’s seeming inconsistency, commanding Avraham to slaughter the son from whom He had said a large nation would emerge.

Rav Ginsburg suggests that when we come before God on Rosh Hashanah to declare His kingship, humbly submit to His authority, and ask that He grant us a year of life and health, He could respond by asking, “Where have you been until now?” He could point to our conduct throughout the year which was wholly inconsistent with our humble subservience now on Rosh Hashanah, the times when we neglected our religious responsibilities, when we overlooked God’s commands and prioritized other concerns and desires over the fulfillment of His will. It is this inconsistency, Rav Ginsburg explains, that the Midrash compares with the question that Avraham could have asked God after he heard the command of *akeidat Yitzchak*. Just as God first declared that Yitzchak would produce a large nation, and then turned around and commanded that He be slaughtered, we, too, often change our tune, as it were, overlooking our obligations to God and then turning around to proclaim our loyalty and plead for His assistance. Avraham asked God that in the merit of his silence in the face of God’s seeming inconsistency, He should pardon the inconsistency of Avraham’s descendants and judge them favorably.

As we stand before God on Rosh Hashanah, we invoke the merit of *akeidat Yitzchak* and draw inspiration from our righteous patriarch who displayed complete, unquestioning allegiance to the Almighty. And we pray that our resolve to serve Him wholeheartedly should atone for the times when we were inconsistent, when we failed to fulfill our obligations to Him, so that we will be worthy of receiving the great blessings promised to Avraham’s descendants who follow his example of unbridled devotion to God’s authority.

Tuesday

The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (3:4), famously comments that the *shofar* symbolizes the need to “awaken,” to introspect and improve our behavior. He writes:

Even though sounding the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a Scriptural decree, it [also] contains an allusion, as if to say: Awaken, those who sleep, from your sleep, and arise, those who slumber, from your slumber; inspect your deeds and perform repentance, and remember your Creator…

The piercing sound of the *shofar* represents the “wakeup call” that we need, shaking us from our complacency and our inattentiveness, and alerting us to the need to closely examine our conduct and make the changes that we need to make.

The Tolna Rebbe further develops this concept, explaining more fully the “awakening” which we are to experience on Rosh Hashanah. Rav Yaakov Yitzchak of Pashischa (the “Yehudi Ha-kadosh”) noted that the *mitzva* of *shofar* is alluded to in a verse in Parashat Nitzavim (Devarim 29:17), in which Moshe warns the people of a “*shoresh poreh rosh ve-la’ana*” – a “root” from which spiritual “disease” (literally, “poison and wormwood”) could sprout. The first letters of these words (*shin*, *peh*, *reish* and *vav*) are the same letters that spell the word “*shofar*,” thus alluding to the sounding of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah. The Tolna Rebbe explained that the purpose of the *shofar* blowing is to eliminate the “root” of sinfulness within us. Just as a plant’s roots are embedded deep in the ground, out of human sight, we similarly all have a “root” of evil within our beings of which we might not be aware, negative characteristics and incorrect perceptions which yield improper behavior. As we are naturally predisposed to judge ourselves favorably, we often fail to recognize these “roots,” our subtle faults and misconceptions, and so we cannot address them. By associating the *mitzva* of *shofar* with Moshe’s warning of the “*shoresh poreh rosh ve-la’ana*” – the “root” of evil – within our beings, the Yehudi Ha-kadosh teaches that the *shofar* blowing is to “awaken” us in the sense of drawing our attention to the hidden “roots” of negative behavior within us. It calls upon us to look honestly and thoroughly within our characters to identify the flaws which we normally do not see. We are to “awaken” from the “slumber” of our delusion, of our comfortable assumptions about who we are, and try to find the concealed “roots,” our less obvious faults and shortcomings. This process, difficult as it may be, is necessary for us to uproot our negative traits, thereby ensuring that they never produce “fruit” in the form of misconduct, and helping us become the devoted servants of God that we are supposed to be.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Vayeilekh introduces the *mitzva* of *hakhel*, which requires assembling the entire nation every seven years, during Sukkot following the *shemita* year, and conducting a public reading of portions of the Torah. Moshe presented this *mitzva* after he completed delivering his final addresses to *Benei Yisrael*, and he wrote down the material. He presented the scroll to the *kohanim*, and commanded them that it must be read to the entire nation every seven years: “Assemble the nation – the men, women and children, and the foreigner who is in your gates – in order that they listen and they learn, and they will fear the Lord your God” (31:12).

The simple meaning of this verse, seemingly, is that the Torah must be read to the nation “in order that they listen and they learn, and they will fear the Lord your God”; that hearing the public reading will have an impact upon the people, and inspire them to devote themselves to God. However, Rav Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, in *Ma’or Va-shemesh*, offers an alternative reading, boldly suggesting that the assembly itself is what will lead the people to “listen and…learn” and “fear the Lord your God.” The *Ma’or Va-shemesh* explains that unity among the people is vitally important for achieving our goal of the nation’s collective devotion to God. When people genuinely respect, admire and love one another, focusing on each other’s positive qualities, rather than their shortcomings, they are able to more effectively influence one another. People leave an impression and have an impact on each other only when they respect and admire one another, not when they are embroiled in conflict or competition. It is thus the “*hakhel*,” the gathering of the people, which has the effect of leading the people to fear of God and religious devotion. When we join together in love, affection and harmony, then we are open to learning from each other’s fine qualities and admirable conduct, such that we can all uplift one another and growth together both individually and collectively.

Thursday

Parashat Vayeilekh begins with Moshe announcing to *Benei Yisrael*, “I am today one hundred and twenty years old, I can no longer come or go, and the Lord has told me: You will not cross this [river,] the Jordan. The Lord your God – He is the one who will cross before You, He will destroy these peoples…”

Seforno explains that Moshe, knowing he was about to die, set out to console the people. He reminded them that he was already aged, and that in any event, he was no longer capable of leading them, and God had decreed that he would not cross into the Land of Israel. Moreover, God had assured to lead *Benei Yisrael* to victory over the nations of Canaan, such that they did not require his leadership. For all these reasons, the people should not be saddened by his passing.

Seforno writes that Moshe sought to console the people because they had just formally entered into a covenant with God. In the previous *parashiyot*, Moshe outlined for the people the terms of the covenant – the blessings they would receive for observing God’s laws, and the punishments they would suffer for disobeying – and brought them into an official bond with God (“*le-ovrekha bi-vrit Hashem Elokekha*” – 29:11). The grief of Moshe’s passing, Seforno writes, would put a damper on the otherwise joyous occasion of the covenant. This moment was to be marked by festivity and enthusiasm, and thus the anguish over Moshe’s death would create an inappropriately gloomy atmosphere. Therefore, Seforno explains, Moshe set out to comfort the people, so as not to undermine the festivity of this special occasion.

This model is perhaps relevant to all of us, each and every day. Our covenant with God is everlasting; each day, we in a sense reaffirm our devotion to God, our commitment to maintaining this special relationship. As such, we are to live with a sense of joy and satisfaction over the privilege we have been given to forge a unique bond with the Almighty. Just as Moshe sought to console *Benei Yisrael* in order to preserve the joyful aura surrounding the covenant, so are we bidden to try to maintain our joy and enthusiasm even in times of hardship and misfortune. Moshe’s effort to comfort *Benei Yisrael* before his death shows us the importance of striving to find solace in the face of adversity, to avoid melancholy and despair, so that we can serve God joyfully. The daily renewal of our covenant with God gives us reason to feel blessed and privileged, and we are thus bidden to temper our sorrow and angst during times of hardship with a feeling of gratitude and excitement over our having been chosen to be His servants.

Friday

Parashat Vayeilekh begins by stating, “Moshe went and spoke these words to all Israel.” The Torah proceeds to explain that Moshe assured *Benei Yisrael* that although he was now passing on, God would help them achieve victory over the nations of Canaan under the leadership of his successor, Yehoshua.

Numerous different interpretations have been offered for the precise implication of the word “*va-yeilekh*” (“went”) in this verse. Several commentators, including Ibn Ezra, the Ramban and Chizkuni, explain that Moshe made a point of going to the people to deliver his parting words before his passing, out of humility and respect for *Benei Yisrael*. Whereas normally the people assembled around him, this time, Moshe went to the people to speak to them.

*Targum Yonatan ben Uziel*, surprisingly, explains that Moshe went to “*mishkan beit ulpana*” – the study hall. According to this reading, on this final day of Moshe’s life, in the middle of his parting address to the people, Moshe went to the house of study.

One approach that has been taken to explain *Targum Yonatan*’s reading is based on the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Sota (13b) concerning Moshe’s condition on this final day of his life. Moshe here told the people, “*Lo ukhal od la-tzeit ve-la-vo*” – “I can no longer come or go (31:2), and the Gemara explains this as a reference to his intellectual capabilities. In the Gemara’s words, “*Nistatmu mimenu sha’arei chokhma*” – “The gates of wisdom were shut before him.” On this final day of Moshe’s life, he lost his ability to learn and teach. It has thus been suggested that according to *Targum Yonatan*, Moshe went to the study hall specifically to show that even in his compromised condition, there was value in being present in the study hall and investing effort in Torah learning. Even when one finds that “*nistatmu mimenu sha’arei chokhma*,” that he is incapable of learning and understanding, he should nevertheless spend time in the study hall making an effort to learn to the best of his limited ability. The pursuit of Torah knowledge is not reserved for the intellectual elite, or for times when one’s head is perfectly clear and he finds it relatively easy to focus and comprehend the material. Even under less than pristine conditions, when we find it a challenge to learn, and when we might be unable to fully grasp what is taught, there is value to showing up and putting in the effort. We are to achieve to the best of our ability under whichever circumstances we find ourselves in, and must never think that Torah learning is worthwhile only under perfect conditions.