**S.A.L.T. – ROSH HASHANA 5777**

**PARASHAT VAYELEKH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah (Bamidbar 29:1) describes Rosh Hashanah as “*Yom Teru’a*,” referring, of course, to the sounding of the *shofar* which is required on this day. *Targum Onkelos* translates the word “*teru’a*” in this verse as “*yabava*,” a term which the Gemara in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (33b) explains as a reference to crying. It cites as a prooftext Devora and Barak’s description of the mother of the slain Canaanite general Sisera, who wept – “*va-teyabeiv*” – as she waited nervously, in vain, for her son to return from battle (Shoftim 5:28). The *teru’a* sound, then, connotes anxiety and uncertainty, a feeling of fear and insecurity about one’s future. Appropriately, the Torah earlier (Bamidbar 9:9) requires blowing a *teru’a* sound with trumpets during times of war and crisis – “***va-harei’otem*** *ba-chatzotzerot*” – expressing the feelings of fear and anxiety wrought by the dire crisis. Indeed, the parallel term for *teru’a* is “*shevarim*,” which literally means “broken pieces.” *Teru’a* signifies the experience of emotional brokenness, brought about by fear and uncertainty.

By contrast, during festivals and times of celebration, the *teki’a* sound was blown – “***u-tkatem*** *ba-chatzotzerot*” (Bamidbar 9:10). The straight, unbroken *teki’a* sound expresses confidence and security which allows us to experience contentment and joy. Whereas the *teru’a* reflects a broken spirit, enduring the uneasiness of uncertainty, the *teki’a* is the sound of confidence and security.

On Rosh Hashanah, of course, we blow both sounds. Although it is the *Yom Teru’a*, our oral tradition requires surrounding every *teru’a* sound with a *teki’a* before and after.

The explanation, perhaps, is that although we long for and strive for lifelong “*teki’a*,” for undisrupted serenity and security, a straightforward, smooth life in with no unpleasant surprises or large, unexpected obstacles we need to surmount, we must allow room for “*teru’a*,” for the fear and uneasiness of the unknown. Arguably the greatest impediment to change is fear and uncertainty. We feel comfortable and at ease with what is, with our current condition, and we feel uneasy about changing it. The experience of Rosh Hashanah requires us to introduce an element of *teru’a*, of uneasiness, into our lives which we otherwise wish would be characterized by the *teki’a*. Even as we hope and pray for the stability expressed by the *teki’a*, we are commanded to observe a day of contemplating *teru’a*, of preparing ourselves for the uncertainty and instability of change. If we live only as a *teki’a*, if our lives are always straight, stable and predictable, we will never grow and advance. In order to change, we need the courage to expose ourselves to the *teru’a*, to the discomfort and unfamiliarity of new terrain.

Formulating this idea a bit differently, on Rosh Hashanah we must ask ourselves, which “*teki’ot*” in our lives are we prepared to “break” into “*teru’ot*”? Which routines and habits to which we’ve grown comfortable and accustomed are we willing to break for the sake of personal growth? How much of our comfort are we willing to sacrifice in order to improve ourselves and become better people and better servants of God?

Of course, we are not expected to break all, or even most, of our *teki’ot*. As mentioned, every set of *shofar* blasts on Rosh Hashanah consists of just one *teru’a* surrounded on either side by a *teki’a*. It is perfectly acceptable and appropriate to maintain many of the “*teki’ot*” in our lives, to recognize the validity and value of many of our habits and routines. The challenge on Rosh Hashanah is to carefully assess our patterns of conduct to identify those which need to be broken, even at the expense of a degree of comfort and security which will need to be surrendered in exchange for the inestimable benefits of growth and change.

(Based on [an article by Rav Ronen Neuwirth](https://www.facebook.com/ronen.neuwirth/posts/523682201121812))

Sunday

The *U-netaneh Tokef* prayer, which we recite each day of Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur, vividly and hauntingly describes the fear that grips the heavens on the Day of Judgment. It speaks of the sounding of the heavenly *shofar*, announcing the moment when the Almighty once again ascends to the throne and sits to judge the earth. And at that moment, as this prayer describes, the angels run about frantically, in trepidation, wailing, “Behold, it is the Day of Judgment, when a reckoning is made of the Heavenly Hosts in judgment.”

A number of writers addressed the question of how to explain the fear which the heavenly angels are depicted as experiencing. Does God indeed judge the angels on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? Are the angels ever judged? Angels are generally understood as creatures without free will, God’s agents who faithfully, and even robotically, fulfill God’s command without any hesitation or ambivalence, without any inclination or desire to do otherwise. How can they be judged if they are incapable of wrongdoing? And if they are judged, what would they need to fear?

Rav Tzvi Hirsch Ferber, in his [*Sefer Ha-moadim* (p. 46)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41860&st=&pgnum=45&hilite=), suggests explaining this passage as referring to the notion of heavenly angels serving as our advocates before the Heavenly Tribunal. *Chazal* speak of angels that arise as a result of our prayers and good deeds and plead our case, as it were, as we stand trial. The image depicted in *U-netaneh Tokef* of the heavenly angels gripped with fear at the time of judgment might therefore refer to the fact that even our staunchest “supporters” and “advocates” fear the outcome of this tribunal. The good deeds we’ve performed are deficient and few in number, and thus hardly give us cause for confidence in a positive outcome, and so they “tremble” as the judgment looms. According to this explanation, the description of the panic in the heavens is, in truth, a chilling description of the panic that ought to grip us here on earth. As we stand trial on the Day of Judgment, we come to the realization that even our own “attorneys” are frightened. Recognizing what’s at stake, we look high and low hoping that we have sources of merit to “advocate” on our behalf, that might provide us with a glimmer of hope and optimism. But when we look at ourselves with brutal honesty, we realize that these sources of merit are woefully insufficient, leaving our “angels” – and, therefore, us – in a state of dread of panic.

Of course, the *U-netaneh Tokef* prayer ends on a far more joyful and comforting note, as we loudly exclaim, “But repentance, prayer and charity eliminate the harsh decree.” Rosh Hashanah is a complex day when we experience both the fear and dread of judgment, as well as the exhilaration of knowing that God welcomes our repentance with love and open arms. And so the panic of *U-netaneh Tokef* gives way to the comfort of “*teshuva, tefila, tzedaka*,” of God’s boundless mercy and compassion which we can always access through genuine and heartfelt *teshuva*.

Monday

The Mishna in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (16a) famously teaches that on Rosh Hashanah, all people on earth pass before the Almighty “*ki-vnei maron*,” which the Gemara (18a) explains to mean that we all pass before Him individually, one at a time, for judgment. Interestingly, however, the Gemara then immediately adds, “*Ve-khulan niskarin bi-skira achat*” – “And they are all surveyed in a single survey,” meaning, we are all judged together. It appears that alongside the personal judgment of each and every individual, we are also “surveyed” altogether.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his [*Mussar Ha-mishna*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2500&st=&pgnum=182), offers several explanations of the Gemara’s comments, one of which is that it refers to each person’s impact upon the world. We are judged not only on the basis of our actions, of the positive and negative things we’ve done, but also in light of their effect on other people. Specifically, people of stature yield considerable influence upon others, either positive or negative. An important part of our judgment is the nature and magnitude of our influence, whether, and to what extent, we have impacted positively or negatively upon our surroundings and upon the world at large. And thus in addition to the weighing of our merits against our wrongdoing, we are also judged “*bi-skira achat*,” in consideration of how and to what extent we have affected the world.

Rav Ginsburg cites in this context the famous story told by the Gemara (Berakhot 28b) of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai’s final moments or life. The Gemara relates that Rabban Yochanan’s students came to visit him as he lay on his deathbed, and when he saw them, he began weeping. He explained that he wept out of fear, as he would soon be departing this world and facing judgment. From the Gemara’s account it appears that Rabban Yochanan started weeping only upon seeing his students. Why, we might wonder, would he weep out of fear of judgment only upon seeing his students enter the room? Rav Ginsburg suggests that when Rabban Yochanan saw his large group of disciples, and he realized the scope of his influence, he felt anxious. Knowing that his judgment would take into account the influence he has had, he wept. A person of stature has the capacity to wield profound positive influence, but can also produce far-reaching, gravely harmful consequences by speaking or acting improperly, or by making an incorrect decision. These unsettling thoughts went through Rabban Yochanan’s mind when he saw his students and realized just how many people he had influenced, and this caused him to cry.

As we introspect during the *Yamim Nora’im* and consider where and how we need to change and improve, we must take into account the impact our speech and conduct has upon the people around us. We are judged “*bi-skira achat*,” in reference to the effect – positive and negative – that we have upon the world. Our process of *teshuva*, then, must relate not only to our conduct itself, but also to the broader question we need to ask ourselves, the question of what kind of effect our conduct has on the people in our lives, and whether we are contributing positively and significantly upon *Am Yisrael* and the world.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the Mishna’s famous comment – which is mentioned in the *U-netaneh Tokef* prayer – that on Rosh Hashanah we all pass before the Almighty for judgment “*ki-vnei maron*.” The Gemara (18a) cites different interpretations of this phrase, the first of which is that it refers to sheep passing through the door to the corral. Rashi explains that ranchers needed to count their animals for the purpose of the *ma’aser beheima* obligation, which requires offering one-tenth of one’s kosher domesticated animals as sacrifices. Herdsmen would have each animal pass before them one by one, and mark every tenth animal as a sacrifice for the *ma’aser beheima* obligation. According to the first view cited by the Gemara, this is the meaning of “*ki-vnei maron*.”

Why would this image – of a shepherd counting his sheep for the fulfillment of his *ma’aser beheima* requirement – be invoked as an example of our individual judgment on Rosh Hashanah? Why did the Mishna choose specifically the analogy of counting sheep as the means by which to illustrate our judgment?

Rav Shmuel Rubenstein, in his [*She’eirit Menachem* (vol. 3, p. 308)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20537&st=&pgnum=305&hilite=), suggested that this image was intended to provide encouragement and reassurance as we contemplate the frightening judgment of Rosh Hashanah. The *ma’aser* system symbolizes the fact that by definition, not all members of a group will be exceptional. In every group of ten sheep in the pen, only one is designated as sacred, earmarked as a sacrifice to God. As the shepherd surveys his sheep one by one, he accepts them all for what they are, assigning only one-tenth of them a special stature of sanctity. The others are perfectly acceptable as ordinary sheep, without the distinction of being named a sacrifice. There is no expectation whatsoever that each and every sheep will be offered as a sacrifice in the *Mikdash*; each is valued in its own right as part of the herd. The message for us on the Days of Awe, Rav Rubenstein suggests, is that each and every one of us has his or her role to fill, and we are not all expected to be a “*korban*,” reaching an especially high stature. We need to strive to be the best we can, not to be the best of the entire “herd.” There will always be those who achieve more, in any area of life, and this should not disturb or discourage us. God judges each and every one of us on the basis of our individual capabilities and circumstances, and the individual roles we are meant to fill. We are not expected to be like anybody else, but rather to reach our maximum individual potential. This must be our ultimate objective as we retrospect during the *Yamim Noraim* and set our goals for the upcoming year.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Vayelekh that after Moshe completed his final discourse to *Benei Yisrael*, he wrote the Torah on a scroll and gave it to the *Leviyim*, ordering them to place it alongside the ark (31:24-26). *Da’at Zekeinim* cites a Midrashic passage stating that Moshe actually wrote thirteen scrolls that day, twelve of which were given to the twelve tribes of Israel. The scroll given to the *Leviyim* to place alongside the ark was the thirteenth.

The Midrash then cites a remarkable tradition that the angel Gavriel came and grabbed this thirteenth scroll, and brought it to the heavens “in order to make Moshe’s righteousness known in the Heavenly assembly.” Moreover, the Midrash adds, this Torah is read by the angels in the heavens on the days when the Torah is read by the Jews here on earth.

This Midrashic account should perhaps be understood in light of the Gemara’s famous description in Masekhet Shabbat (88b) of Moshe’s confrontation with the angels when he ascended to the heavens to receive the Torah. The Gemara tells that the angels protested the decision to allow Moshe to receive the Torah and bring it to *Am Yisrael*, asking, “What is this human being doing here among us?” They contended that the holy Torah, which predated the world’s creation, belonged in the pristine, spiritual realm of the heavens, and not among flawed human beings down on earth. Moshe, however, argued that to the contrary, the Torah’s laws are intended to guide and direct human beings, forbidding murder, theft and other crimes, and instructing people how to live meaningful lives in their imperfect, mundane world. Moshe’s arguments triumphed, and he was permitted to bring the Torah down from the heavens to *Benei Yisrael*. Gavriel’s “snatching” the Torah and bringing it back to the heavens might be seen as vindicating Moshe, expressing the angels’ full-fledged acquiescence. Whereas they had originally opposed Moshe’s desire to bring the heavenly Torah down to earth, they now brought his earthly Torah to the heavens, and this is the Torah which they use.

In truth, the significance of the Midrash’s account runs even deeper. After mentioning that Gavriel brought Moshe’s scroll to the heavens “in order to make Moshe’s righteousness known in the Heavenly assembly,” the Midrash cites the verse in Parashat Vezot Haberakha, “He [Moshe] acted righteously for God, and [taught] His law to Israel” (33:21). The implication of this verse is that Moshe’s “righteousness” was expressed through his teaching God’s law to *Benei Yisrael*. Whereas the angels insisted on keeping the Torah with them, in the pristine environs of the heavens, Moshe willingly and lovingly shared the Torah with *Benei Yisrael*. As the Midrash tells, Moshe gave a copy of the Torah to each of the twelve tribes, symbolizing his commitment to sharing the Torah with the entire nation, excluding no one. And it was then that Gavriel came and brought Moshe’s Torah to the heavens. Gavriel wanted to show the angels Moshe’s example of “righteousness,” that the Torah is meant to be shared, not reserved for the spiritual elite. Torah is to given to the masses, to guide, direct and inspire them. It is not intended only for the angels, or only for quasi angels like Moshe. It is to be studied, embraced, and followed by all twelve tribes, not only by a select group of “angels.”

This is the message which Gavriel sought to teach his fellow heavenly beings, and this is the message which the Midrash seeks to teach us. The Torah is to be both studied and shared; its teachings are relevant to all twelve tribes of Israel, and must therefore be shared with them all. Just as the Torah was not meant to remain with the angels in the heavens, it was likewise not to meant to remain exclusively with the likes of Moshe Rabbenu, and must instead be disseminated and taught throughout all of *Am Yisrael*.

(See Rav Natan Gestetner’s [*Le-horot Natan* – *Moadim*, vol. 3, pp. 172-3](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=50222&hilite=75eae8b5-be41-4ca3-89b0-a6bae16a3f3e&st=%D7%93%D7%A3+%D7%94%D7%99%D7%94+%D7%91%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%98&pgnum=176), where he explains the Midrash’s comments along generally similar lines.)

Thursday

In the final verses of Parashat Vayelekh, we read that Moshe, just prior to his death, commanded the *Leviyim* to place the Torah scroll he had just written alongside the ark, as an eternal testament of God’s covenant with *Am Yisrael*. Moshe explained that he had reason to suspect that *Benei Yisrael* would abandon God after his death, and when this happens, the Torah would bear witness to God’s having warned the people of the dire consequences of their abandonment of the covenant. He says, “After all, already during my lifetime you have betrayed the Lord, and also after my death” (31:27). Moshe appears to be telling the people that if they betrayed God during his lifetime, when he was leading and guiding them, then certainly they are likely to betray God after his passing.

The Maharsha (Sanhedrin 37a) raises the question of why *Benei Yisrael*’s periods of failure during Moshe’s lifetime indicated a high likelihood of similar periods of spiritual regression after his death. After all, the Gemara (there in Sanhedrin) tells of a group of people who were influenced by a spiritual leader, and repented specifically after his death. The story involves a group of delinquents who lived in Rabbi Zeira’s neighborhood. Rabbi Zeira, despite opposition by his rabbinical colleagues, befriended these people in an effort to exert a positive influence on them. After he passed away, the Gemara tells, the wayward group reflected on the repercussions of his death. During his lifetime, they realized, he had prayed on their behalf, pleading their case before the Almighty, which he could no longer do once he left this world. This realization made them feel vulnerable, and they were inspired to repent. In this instance, then, the rabbi’s passing inspired repentance and a greater commitment to act properly. Why, then, did Moshe assume that his death would leave the people more spiritually fragile, and especially prone to failure?

Rav Moshe Sternbuch, in his [*Ta’am Va-da’at*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20035&st=&pgnum=216), answers the Maharsha’s question by distinguishing between different kinds of sinners. In this verse in Parashat Vayelekh, Moshe mentions specifically the people’s obstinacy: “I know your rebelliousness, and your stiff neck…” Moshe points to the people’s disobedience and unwillingness to yield to his authority. When this is a person’s flaw, then he is indeed more prone to failure after the authority figure’s passing. If he refused to submit to the figure’s authority and follow his instructions when he was alive, he is far more likely to disobey after that figure is gone and no longer able to exert any authority. But in the story told by the Gemara, Rav Sternbuch suggests, the source of these sinners’ flaw was not a disregard for authority, but rather a lack of restraint. These people acted inappropriately because they followed their base instincts, and not because they resisted the authority of Torah law and refused to yield. This flaw can be overcome by fear of the repercussions of sin, which these sinners began to experience with the passing of Rabbi Zeira. This is far different from Moshe’s concern, that the people’s tendency to resist his authority would strengthen after his death.

Friday

Among the sections read as the *haftara* for Shabbat Shuva, the Shabbat in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is a portion from Sefer Yoel (2:11-27) that speaks of the onslaught of locusts that ravaged the Land of Israel during Yoel’s time. In this prophecy, Yoel implores the people to repent and pray to God for help, and he assures them that God would be receptive to their prayers and drive the locusts from the land. In describing the predicted departure from the locusts, God proclaims through the prophet, “*Ve-et ha-tzefoni archik mei-aleikhem*” – that He would drive the “*tzefoni*” far from the Land of Israel. The simple interpretation of this verse is that it refers to the locusts, which originated from the north (“*tzafon*”), and which God now promises to keep away from His people in response to their repentance and prayers.

The Gemara, however, in Masekhet Sukka (52a), explains the term “*tzefoni*” differently, claiming that it refers to the evil inclination. Our evil inclination is known by this term, the Gemara comments, because it is “*tzafun ve-omed be-libo shel adam*” – concealed within a person’s heart, ever present and ever intent on luring him to sin.

The Tolna Rebbe explained the Gemara’s comment as referring to the deceptive nature of the *yetzer ha-ra*. One of the greatest dangers faced by a God-fearing person is the confusion between right and wrong, and this is the challenge which the Gemara says is known as “*tzefoni*.” This is when evil masquerades as virtue; when sin hides itself behind a veneer of nobility and sanctity. The “*tzefoni*,” the “hidden” *yetzer ha-ra*, is the tendency we have to justify our vices and misdeeds by considering them virtuous. It is when sin conceals itself by appearing noble that we are most susceptible and likely to be ensnared by our negative inclinations.

The Gemara interpreted this verse from Yoel as an allegorical description of the banishment of the *tzefoni*, of this “concealment.” In the future, we will still have faults and temptations, but we will have greater clarity which will allow us to carefully and accurately distinguish between right and wrong, between evil and goodness. We will have a clearer understanding of what is proper and what is improper, and will no longer be prone to mistake sin for something valuable. This clarity will allow us to see evil for what it is, such that we will feel little or no temptation to embrace it.

Part of the process of *teshuva* is restoring our lost perspective, viewing sin and wrongdoing as something repulsive that we must seek to distance ourselves from. Repentance must include a concerted effort to banish the “*tzefoni*,” the confusion and skewed perspective that makes certain forms of sin seem attractive and desirable. As we return to God, we must try to return our minds and hearts, as much as possible, to the proper perspective on what is good and what is bad, on what we wish to embrace and what we need to reject.

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