

Weekly Parsha NITZAVIM – VAYELECH 5780

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The very two words that signify the titles of the two portions of the Torah that we will hear in the synagogue this Shabbat are, at first glance, contradictory. Nitzavim signifies a solid stance, and unwavering presence, and a commanding appearance. It reflects an unchanging nature, and the necessary ability to stand one's ground, no matter what the circumstances of life.

On the other hand, the word Vayelech signifies motion, progress, change and a forward thrust in behavior and concepts. It seems that these two Torah readings cancel each other out, for one signifies unchanging steadfastness while the other champions progress, change and motion. Such an understanding of Torah and Judaism is very superficial and erroneous.

Rather, the two traits indicated in the opening words of these two Torah readings essentially complement each other. They do not come to point out a disagreement, one with another, but to point out that Judaism requires both traits to be present within every Jewish individual and the Jewish people as a whole, in order that Torah and tradition will survive and prosper in Jewish society.

An important and necessary part of our Jewish character and that of Jewish society, is our stubbornness – our refusal to abandon what we have been commanded by the Lord to observe and practice. This commitment can never be modified or adjusted, acceding to the passing social norms, and changing human mores.

We are witness, in our times, how quickly acceptable human behavior and ideas can rapidly change, so that what was unthinkable and perverse a few short decades ago is today not only acceptable, but behavior that should be championed, admired, and, in some cases, even enforced legally against one's wishes.

At the same time, Jewish society cannot remain eternally frozen and incapable of adjustment to new situations and differing societal changes. Our recent experience with the Coronavirus, with the various halachic responses to it concerning prayer services, study sessions and personal behavior, testify to the adaptability that the Torah and Jewish tradition, dating back to Sinai, has built-in in order to be able to deal with all possible situations, no matter how unforeseen.

The only question that remains is how to achieve a proper balance between Nitzavim and Vayelech. We are witness to the fact that helter-skelter progress and the adoption of new norms leads to spiritual destruction and is an enormous danger to Jewish survival. On the other hand, we certainly need to recognize that 21st-century Israel or the United States is not the same as 19th century eastern and central Europe. Every individual, as well as every group within Jewish society, must feel its way slowly and carefully, to try and find the proper balance that fits them, and allows them to retain the blessings of tradition and faithfulness, while still dealing with current problems and situations. Understandably, this process is an ongoing one, and it is one of great delicacy and nuance. Nevertheless, it is part of our drive for eternity and the enhancement of our religious society.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

In My Opinion ROSH HASHANA

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

I believe that all of us can agree that this year the awesome days of Rosh Hashana will be different than in past years. Many of us may not even be allowed to attend the synagogue for public worship. Others will pray and assemble in open, outside areas. There is a rhythm to our holidays that this coronavirus has interrupted. Nevertheless, Rosh Hashana will take place and Jews worldwide will commemorate it according to our halachic and traditional customs. But perhaps most importantly, I feel, and I certainly hope that it will be a more introspective Rosh Hashana than we perhaps have experienced in past years.

The prayers for life and family, success and prosperity, peace and tranquility, accomplishment and productivity, purposefulness and meaning, will have a more intensive, personal tone. This year it requires little imagination to realize that we stand before the heavenly court and pass, in single file, to be judged and blessed. There are those who because of circumstances in their synagogues or community may curtail the prayer service and omit certain of the paragraphs that are ordinarily so much a part of the holiday service of the day. I respect the opinion of rabbis who chose to follow this route because of the local situation in which they find themselves, however to me every word of the holiday prayer book now takes on even greater meaning and relevance.

I cannot imagine that under the present circumstances that exist here in my synagogue, that we will omit any prayers. We can all do without sermons and other additions but the holy words that have been sanctified over the centuries by the tears and even the blood of millions of Jews who stood before their creator for judgment and blessing should not be absent from our lives and lips. We need to remember that wherever we are it is Rosh Hashanah and that it should be treated and observed as such.

The Talmud records that we passed before the heavenly court as soldiers in the army of King David. It also compares us to the sheep that exist around Mount Meron. Sheep and soldiers, at first glance, seem to be opposite descriptions and scenarios. Soldiers stand erect and march proudly, while sheep always have a low profile and are not given to represent strength and firmness. Yet, I believe that we can well understand that the Talmud did not present us here with an either/or choice – soldiers or sheep. Rather, it meant to teach us that all human beings are both at the same time. We have within us enormous strength and capability, potential and firmness of purpose and behavior while at the same time we are but dust and ashes, putty in the hands, so to speak, of the Holy One who has fashioned us.

It is the challenge of life, its experiences and events that confront us as to when we should stand erect and firm as soldiers or whether we should be humble and adopt a low profile, as do sheep. Rosh Hashanah brings us face-to-face with this challenge. As far as Torah values and the Jewish people are concerned, we are certainly to be soldiers in the army of King David. But as far as our own personal wants and desires, social behavior, and communal responsibility, we should lower our egos and allow ourselves to be counted as the sheep of Mount Meron.

I send you my blessings for the new year and for a ktiva v'chatima tova.
Rabbi Berel Wein

How to Renew a Nation (Nitzavim – Vayelech 5780)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The Talmud gives an ingenious reading to the line, "Moses commanded us a Torah, as a heritage of the congregation of Israel." Noting that there are 613 commands, and that the numerical value of the word Torah is 611, it says that in fact Moses gave us 611 commands, while the other two – "I am the Lord your God," and, "You shall have no other gods beside Me," (the first 2 of the 10 commandments) – the Israelites received not from Moses but directly from God Himself.[1]

There is a different distinction the Sages might have made. Moses gave us 611 commands, and at the very end, in Vayelech, he gave us two meta-commands, commands about the commands. They are Hakhel, the command to assemble the people once every seven years for a public reading of (key parts of) the Torah, and "Now write for yourselves this song" (Deut. 31:19), interpreted by tradition as the command to write, or take part in writing, our own Sefer Torah.

These two commands are set apart from all the others. They were given after all the recapitulation of the Torah in the book of Devarim, the blessings and curses and the covenant renewal ceremony. They are embedded in the narrative in which Moses hands on leadership to his successor Joshua. The connection is that both the laws and the narrative are about continuity. The laws are intended to ensure that the Torah will never grow old, will be written afresh in every generation, will never be

forgotten by the people and will never cease to be its active constitution as a nation. The nation will never abandon its founding principles, its history and identity, its guardianship of the past and its responsibility to the future.

Note the beautiful complementarity of the two commands. Hakhel, the national assembly, is directed at the people as a totality. Writing a Sefer Torah is directed at individuals. This is the essence of covenantal politics. We have individual responsibility and we have collective responsibility. In Hillel's words, "If I am not for myself, who will be, but if I am only for myself, what am I?" In Judaism, the state is not all, as it is in authoritarian regimes. Nor is the individual all, as it is in the radically individualist liberal democracies of today. A covenantal society is made by each accepting responsibility for all, by individuals committing themselves to the common good. Hence the Sefer Torah – our written constitution as a nation – must be renewed in the life of the individual (command 613) and of the nation (command 612).

This is how the Torah describes the mitzvah of Hakhel:

"At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the strangers in your towns—so they can listen and learn to revere the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this Torah. Their children, who do not know, shall hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess." (Deut 31:10-13).

Note the inclusivity of the event. It would be anachronistic to say that the Torah was egalitarian in the contemporary sense. After all, in 1776, the framers of the American Declaration of Independence could say, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," while slavery still existed, and no woman had a vote. Yet the Torah regarded it as essential that women, children and strangers should be included in the ceremony of citizenship in the republic of faith.

Who performed the reading? The Torah does not specify, but tradition ascribed the role to the King. That was extremely important. To be sure, the Torah separates religion and politics. The King was not High Priest, and the High Priest was not King.[2] This was revolutionary. In almost every other ancient society, the head of state was the head of the religion; this was not accidental but essential to the pagan vision of religion as power. But the King was bound by the Torah. He was commanded to have a special Torah scroll written for him; he was to keep it with him when he sat on the throne and read it "all the days of his life" (Deut. 17:18-20). Here too, by reading the Torah to the assembled people every seven years, he was showing that the nation as a political entity existed under the sacred canopy of the Divine word. We are a people, the King was implicitly saying, formed by covenant. If we keep it, we will flourish; if not, we will fail.

This is how Maimonides describes the actual ceremony:

Trumpets were blown throughout Jerusalem to assemble the people; and a high platform, made of wood, was brought and set up in the centre of the Court of Women. The King went up and sat there so that his reading might be heard ... The chazzan of the synagogue would take a Sefer Torah and hand it to the head of the synagogue, and the head of the synagogue would hand it to the deputy high priest, and the deputy high priest to the High Priest, and the High Priest to the King, to honour him by the service of many persons ... The King would read the sections we have mentioned until he would come to the end. Then he would roll up the Sefer Torah and recite a blessing after the reading, the way it is recited in the synagogue ... Proselytes who did not know Hebrew were required to direct their hearts and listen with utmost awe and reverence, as on the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Even great scholars who knew the entire Torah were required to listen with utmost attention ... Each had to regard himself as if he had been charged with the Torah now for the first time, and as though he had heard it from the mouth of God, for the King was an ambassador proclaiming the words of God.[3] Apart from giving us a sense of the grandeur of the occasion, Maimonides is making a radical suggestion: that Hakhel is a re-

enactment of the Giving of the Torah at Sinai – "as on the day the Torah was given," "as though he had heard it from the mouth of God" – and thus a covenant renewal ceremony. How did he arrive at such an idea? Almost certainly it was because of Moses' description of the Giving of the Torah in Va'etchanan:

The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, "Assemble [hakhel] the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children." (Deut. 4:10).

The italicised words are all echoed in the Hakhel command, especially the word Hakhel itself, which only appears in one other place in the Torah. Thus was Sinai recreated in the Temple in Jerusalem every seven years, and thus was the nation, men, women, children and strangers, renewed in its commitment to its founding principles.

Tanach gives us vivid descriptions of actual covenant renewal ceremonies, in the days of Joshua (Josh. 24), Josiah (2 Kings 23), Asa (2 Chron. 15) and Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 8-10). These were historic moments when the nation consciously rededicated itself after a long period of religious relapse. Because of Hakhel and covenant renewal, Israel was eternally capable of becoming young again, recovering what Jeremiah called "the devotion of your youth" (Jer. 2:2).

What happened to Hakhel during the almost 2000 years in which Israel had no king, no country, no Temple and no Jerusalem? Some scholars have made the intriguing suggestion that the minhag Eretz Yisrael, the custom of Jews in and from Israel, which lasted until about the thirteenth century, of reading the Torah not once every year but every three or three-and-a-half years, was intended to create a seven year cycle, so that the second reading would end at the same time as Hakhel, namely on the Succot following a sabbatical year (a kind of septennial Simchat Torah).[4]

I would suggest a quite different answer. The institution of the reading of the Torah on Shabbat morning, which goes back to antiquity, acquired new significance at times of exile and dispersion. There are customs that remind us of Hakhel. The Torah is read, as it was by the King on Hakhel and Ezra at his assembly, standing on a bimah, a raised wooden platform. The Torah reader never stands alone: there are usually three people on the bimah, the segan, the reader and the person called to the Torah, representing respectively God, Moses, and the Israelites.[5] According to most halachists, the reading of the Torah is chovat tzibbur, an obligation of the community, as opposed to the study of Torah which is chovat yachid, an obligation of the individual.[6] So, I believe, keriat ha-Torah should be translated not as "the Reading of the Torah" but as "the Proclaiming of Torah." It is our equivalent of Hakhel, transposed from the seventh year to the seventh day.

It is hard for individuals, let alone nations, to stay perennially young. We drift, lose our way, become distracted, lose our sense of purpose and with it our energy and drive. I believe the best way to stay young is never to forget "the devotion of our youth," the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place. Hakhel was Moses' parting gift to us, showing us how it might be done.

Shabbat Shalom

Shabbat Shalom: Nitzavim-Vayelech (Deuteronomy 29:9-31:30)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "Behold, I give before you this day the life and the good, the death and the evil... blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your seed..." (Deut. 30:15, 19)

What does it mean, to choose "life"? Is it really an individual choice as to whether one lives or dies? I believe it worthy of note to raise another linguistic curiosity within this context: the Hebrew word hayyim (life) is a plural noun, ending in the two Hebrew letters yod and mem to signal the plural case. I do not know of any other language in which the word for "life" is a plural form; Why is it so in the Hebrew language? Hassidim have a cute play on words which provides an interesting

insight explaining the composition of the Hebrew word for “life”: on an occasion of joy such as an engagement, marriage or birth it is customary to celebrate with a “drink,” but only when drinking wine or liquor do we call out, le’hayyim, “to life.” Why not also say le’hayyim when drinking water, which is so basic to the formation of life (remember the amniotic fluids which “break” before an impending birth) and to the continuity of life which is impossible without water ?!

They answer that the Hebrew word for wine, yayin, has two yods, as does the Hebrew word for liquor, yash (literally yayin saraf, “fiery wine”). The Hebrew letter yod is phonetically and homiletically tied to Yid (Yehudi), or “Jew”—a toast usually being invoked to celebrate two Jews coming together in marriage, in joining for a birth celebration, or generally within the familial context of kiddush on Friday evening. The Hebrew word for water, mayim, has only one yod, and God Himself has declared that “it is not good for the human being to be alone” (Gen. 2:18).

Hence, say the Hassidim, the Hebrew word for life consists of four letters, the exterior letters being het and mem, spelling hom, warmth, love—surrounding two yods completely together and not separated by any other letter. And the beverages which go along with the toast also require two yods (Jews) together as in the Hebrew words yayin and yash.

Despite the sweetness of this explanation, allow me to present an alternative interpretation, which proves a profound theological truth at the same time. In attempting to pictorially describe the creation of the human being, the Bible states: “And the Lord God had formed the human being [Adam] of dust from the ground, and He exhaled into his nostrils the soul [breath] of life, making the human a living being” (Gen. 2:7) Apparently the Bible is here explaining in more graphic language the difficult term tzelem Elokim, image of God, used in the first creation chapter, “And God created the human being [Adam] in His image, in the image of God created He him...” (Gen. 1:27). The Sacred Zohar adds a crucial dimension to the imagery of God’s exhalation into the nostrils of the clay-dust form: “Whoever exhales, exhales from within himself,” from the innermost essence of his existential being.

What this teaches us is arguably the most important insight into the essence of the human being defined by the Bible, the one element which qualitatively separates the human from all other creatures of the earth: a “portion” of God from on High resides within every human being, to which the Tanya (written by Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, late 18th century, known as the Alter Rebbe, founder of the Chabad movement) adds: mamash, really, palpably, within the very physical human being “resides” the spiritual essence of the Divine, the eternal and transcendent soul.

This idea has enormous ramifications as to how we see the human being, as to how we look upon ourselves. The human being is indeed a composite creature; homo natura and homo persona (see R. Soloveitchik, Family Redeemed), a part of the natural world with many of the instincts and limitations of the other physical creatures, but at the same time apart from the natural world, endowed with a portion of Divinity which enables him to create, to change, to love, to transcend both himself as well as the physical world into which he was created; the portion of God within the human being lives eternally just as the God without and beyond is eternal, and empowers the human being to perfect God’s world and redeem God’s world.

The challenge facing each of us is which aspect of our beings we choose to develop, the bestial or the celestial. Idolatry idealized the physical, the bestial: power (Jupiter), speed (Mercury), physical beauty (Venus), a golden calf; Judaism commands that we idealize the spiritual, the celestial: love, compassion, loving kindness, truth... The good news is that to help us in this existential struggle within ourselves is that very portion of God from on High who dwells within us, and that the human being is never alone, that God is always with us, within us, the still small voice which we must listen for and hearken to. Yes, God is Above, but even more importantly God is also Within!

That is why the Hebrew word for life, hayyim, is a plural noun; the “soul of life” is the God who resides within each of us, the essence of our

personalities to whom we must return and with Whom we must live our conscious lives if we are to realize our truest human potential, if we are to truly live eternally, together with our partners and progeny in a perfecting world.
Shabbat Shalom!

Insights Parshas Nitzavin-Vayelech Elul 5780

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim/Talmudic University

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of our parents, Daniel bar David & Esther Miriam bas Yaakov and Noach Yaakov ben Chaim & Dvora Esther bas Moshe.

"May their Neshamos have an Aliya!"

The Real You

...there among the nations that I have banished you, you will reflect on the situation. You will then return to Hashem your God and you will obey him [...] You and your children (will repent) with all your heart and soul (30:1-2).

Ramban understands the verse, "This commandment that you are charged (to obey) isn't hidden nor far off from you" (30:11), as referring to the mitzvah of teshuvah that is introduced above (30:1-2). Ramban continues; "this mitzvah is, in fact, not hard to do and it can be done at all times and in all places."

Ramban's description of the mitzvah of teshuvah as rather easy can be difficult to comprehend. After all, year after year, we seem to find ourselves in the same situation and repenting for the same sins as in previous years. Ramban's comment on the ease of teshuvah is reminiscent of the not-yet-reformed smoker who says "quitting smoking is the easiest thing in the world - I have done it a hundred times."

This becomes even more troubling when we examine Maimonides' description of teshuvah (Yad Hilchos Teshuvah 2:2): "What constitutes teshuvah? A sinner must abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again [...] Similarly, he must regret the past. He must attain a level that he knows (that the Almighty) will testify for him that he will never return to this sin again [...] He must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart."

Clearly, the objective is to regret the past and pledge to never again commit those sins again. How can anyone honestly come back year after year and say the exact same words, asking forgiveness for the same sins time and time again? At what point is it no longer believable? Even in the case of the truly penitent, how can he look himself in the mirror after resolving to no longer commit the sins that he knows he'll be repenting for again next Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? What kind of teshuvah is this? What honest commitment can one possibly make? The answer to this question is probably the key to understanding what we are trying to accomplish during these "ten days of repentance."

In all likelihood you, or someone you know, has struggled with their weight at some point. Imagine, for a moment, someone who is very overweight, but has committed to a strict diet, suddenly facing a crucial test: a pizza pie with all the toppings, accompanied by two extra-large orders of fries, has "miraculously" been delivered to them. Obviously, some people will be able to overcome their urge to inhale this pizza and fries (we call them weirdos). But others will likely succumb to their desires. Why?

Most people that succumb to the "pizza test" are thinking, "Let's face it - I weigh 300 lbs., who am I kidding?," and proceed to devour the entire pizza and fries. In other words, the reason they continue down the same path is because they look at themselves as overweight. Their diet was rooted in trying to change their behavior - when they really should have been focused on trying to change themselves. Therefore, they aren't dealing with this as a new situation; they are, in reality, succumbing to their past mistakes and accepting that as their reality. This new eating indiscretion is rooted in their past behavior, which is why they fail.

This is exactly what teshuvah is supposed to address; when we commit to doing teshuvah we have to 1) regret the past 2) resolve to no longer commit this transgression. In other words, we commit to making a real change. While it is true that we must distance ourselves from how we

behaved in the past, our commitment isn't merely a behavioral change, it is a change of self definition. We must say, "In the coming year I may be faced with a test of the same sin, and hopefully I will be able to restrain myself because I truly do not want to be that type of person."

"But even if I fail, it will be because I couldn't control myself, it will absolutely not be a transgression based on my past behavior." At that point one's transgressions are not a repetition of past sins. This is why Ramban says it is not hard to do. One has to merely decide to be the person he wants to become, and commit to leave who he currently is behind. At that point Hashem will help him find the true path to teshuvah (see Ramban on 30:6).

What Are Kids Good For?

Gather together all the people - men, women, small children...so that they will hear and so that they will learn and they will fear Hashem... (31:12)

This week's parsha contains the mitzvah of hakhel - the gathering of the entirety of the Jewish people on the holiday of Sukkos following the shemitta year. The king at that time would read from different sections in the Chumash of Devarim from an elevated platform. The Gemara (Bavli Chagiga 3a) explains that the men came to study and the women came to hear. The Gemara then asks; "Why did the very small children come? To give reward to those that brought them" (ibid).

Maharsha (ad loc) explains that the Gemara wonders why the Torah discusses the children in this verse and then mentions the children again in the very next verse. In fact, the next verse clearly explains that the children are coming to learn from the experience. So, explains Maharsha, the first verse must be talking about children who are too young to gain from the experience. Therefore, the Gemara explains they are only coming in order "to give reward to those that bring them."

Simply understood, the Gemara seems to be saying that the extra strain of bringing the very young children will bring some kind of reward to their much beleaguered parents. Perhaps this can be understood along the lines of the Talmudic dictum (Avos 5:26) "commensurate to the pain is the reward." But notwithstanding the fact that children can inflict exquisite discomfort on their parents, this cannot be the sole reason for bringing them. First of all, older children can be even more painful to drag to a speech that they can hardly understand. Second, if it is simply to make the experience more difficult, why shouldn't even people without young children have to do something to make the experience more trying? Why are only parents of very young children worthy of this added aggravation?

Obviously, there has to be another reason why we bring very young children to such a gathering. Have you ever noticed that some sports crazy fans bring their one year old children to baseball and football games decked out in baby sized team jerseys and other team themed items? What possible purpose can there be in such an effort? Clearly, the child will have no recollection of the event or of his parents' single-minded obsession; so, why would someone go to all that effort?

The answer has to be that it is an internalization, for ourselves and our children, that we want our legacy to be connected to this ideal. There are families who take great pride in being multigenerational fans of certain teams. So too, by the mitzvah of hakhel we are expressing the ideal, that our deepest desire is for our children to be connected and bound to the values of the Torah and the Jewish people. The reason these parents earn special reward isn't because of the added aggravation; it is because they are making the greatest expression of their personal commitment to Hashem and his Torah: They want their children to follow in their footsteps and the legacy of the Jewish people.

Did You Know...

The first night of Rosh Hashanah is also when we eat the first meal of the year. This special meal is marked by the tradition of creating simanim (signs) through the consumption of certain foods. There are many that are universally accepted as customary to eat; karsi (leek) so that our enemies may be "cut down," silka (beet) and tamri (date) for the removal and obliteration of our enemies, and rubia (black-eyed peas) in order for our merits or assets to increase in the coming year.

The Geonim mention the age-old custom of eating additional items not mentioned in the Talmud. This includes eating the head of an animal (customarily head of a lamb or a fish), as a request that Hashem place us in a position of leadership and not servitude.

Another ancient practice is eating fatty meat and sweet beverages as a sign of a prosperous and sweet new year. The Geonim traces this custom back to the second Beis Hamikdash, when Ezra and Nechemia instructed the people on Rosh Hashanah to "go and eat fatty dishes and drink sweet drinks" (Nechemia 8:10).

The Tur remarks that Jews have always added to the list of simanim (often using wordplay). Many people eat carrots since the Yiddish word for carrot is mehren, which is similar to the word mehr or "more." In Morocco, they serve boiled lungs as a siman since the Hebrew word for lungs reaya resembles the word riya (vision).

There's also a siman by some in France to eat bananas because the French word for banana, banane, sounds just like the words for good year in French, "bonne année."

Many years ago, Rav Heinemann Shlita introduced a now famous Baltimore siman to take lettuce, half a raisin, and celery as an indication to "let-us-have-a-raise-in-salary."

Although it is not mentioned in the Gemara, the Tur also records eating apples and honey as an old Ashkenazic custom. Maharil (Darkei Moshe 583:3) says that the apple reminds us of the sweet aroma that accompanied Yaakov Avinu when he appeared before Yitzchak to receive the brachos (according to Midrashim, this occurred on Rosh Hashanah, see Biur HaGra). Moreover, honey represents an additional significance in that the Gematria of honey (d'vash) is equivalent to "Merciful Father" (Bnei Yissoscher 2:13).

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Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech

Let It Go!

"You are standing..." (29:9)

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that one of the great things about having been part of Ohr Somayach for more around three decades is that I have met some people who are clearly living on a different level to the rest of us mere mortals. One of these great souls distilled the essence of one's relationship with one's fellow into three principles: His first principle is, "I was created to serve others, and no one was created to serve me."

The second is, "I wouldn't do it to you. But if you do it to me - it's okay." This doesn't mean that a person should be a doormat and invite the world to trample on him, but post facto - if you did something to me that I could really take you to court for and get back at you - and I give up on that - I get forgiven for all my sins.

The source for this is the Gemara that says, "Anyone who 'passes over on his character traits,' meaning one who resists the knee-jerk reaction that many have to resent and want revenge - and just lets it go - so, concomitantly, Hashem lets go on all our sins.

It's true that this level of saintliness is beyond the letter of the law, but it sure sounds like a good deal to me. All of my sins? Another source for this idea is the Tomer Devorah, which says that even though we constantly flout the Will of Hashem and use our G-d-given abilities to go against His Will, nevertheless, He constantly continues to give us the power to continue to do this and doesn't "hold a grudge."

During this week, before Hashem opens the Books of Judgment, I can think of no better exercise than to think of someone who has wronged us - and remove all resentment from our hearts. And with that we may approach the Heavenly Throne.

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Parshas

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Forgiven, but not Forgotten

He was one of the greatest Talmud scholars of the last century, but outside of a small circle of disciples, he was never well-known. He was a tragic figure in many ways, and although few have heard of him today, he has not been totally forgotten.

Interestingly, forgetting was one of the central themes of his many teachings.

His name was Rabbi Arye Tzvi Fromer, and he hailed from an obscure town in Poland named Koziglov. He served in the rabbinate of several towns with equally obscure names. His extreme modesty mitigated the spread of his reputation.

Late in his life, he experienced the unique frustration of being called upon to succeed an individual who was unusually charismatic and world-famous. He was asked to fill the shoes of a great man, and his accomplishments were constantly compared, usually unfavorably, to the achievements of his glorious predecessor.

The man he was called upon to succeed as the head of the great Talmudical Academy in pre-World War II Lublin, Poland, was Rabbi Meir Shapiro. Besides being the founder of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, an innovative school for prodigious young Torah scholars, Rabbi Shapiro was an author, an orator of note, and a composer of Chassidic melodies. He was a member of the Polish Parliament and is remembered best as the person who introduced the concept of Daf Yomi, the daily study of the same page of Talmud each day by Jews all over the world.

Rabbi Shapiro died of a sudden illness while a relatively young man in his early 40s. The search for a successor was not an easy one, and the reaction of most people to the choice of Rabbi Fromer was one of astonishment. "Who is he," people asked, "and how could he possibly follow in the footsteps of the multitalented Rabbi Shapiro?"

Destiny did not give Rabbi Fromer much time to prove himself worthy of his new position. Within several years, World War II broke out. He suffered the deprivations of the ghetto and was brutally murdered by the Nazis.

We do have some of the writings he published in his lifetime, and those few of his disciples to survive the Holocaust published some of his teachings on the weekly Torah portion. I have become enamored with these writings and am particularly taken by the fact that he returns again and again to the theme of forgetting.

In this week's Torah portion, Parshat Vayelech (Deuteronomy 31:1-30), we come across the following phrase: "This song (the Torah) will proclaim himself as a witness, for it will never be forgotten from the mouths of his descendants..." Here, the Almighty assures us that despite the vicissitudes of Jewish history, the Torah will never be forgotten.

Rabbi Fromer relates this assurance to an interesting phenomenon. The reader of this column may not be aware that many passages of the Talmud were censored by the Roman Catholic Church over the centuries and are today absent from most editions of this fundamental text. Jews have struggled in various ways to preserve these censored passages, and some modern editions do incorporate them, but by and large they have been forgotten.

Rabbi Fromer was once asked by a student who had just completed studying a tractate of the Talmud whether he could make a siyum, a festive meal celebrating that completion. "After all," the student argued, "I didn't really complete the entire tractate. I did not study the censored passages because I had no access to them."

Rabbi Fromer responded, consoled the student, and encouraged him to go through with the festive celebration. "You must understand," he argued, "that we have a guarantee in the Bible that Torah will not be forgotten. If some words were indeed forgotten, that is ipso facto proof that they were not authentic Torah to begin with."

Many will take issue with this concept and find it too radical. But the message is one which we can all affirm. That which is not Torah can be forgotten. What is trivial is ephemeral. Torah is not forgotten. Sanctity is eternal.

This lesson carries over to the wondrous day which typically follows the reading of the Torah portion of Vayelech. I refer, of course, to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Even Jews who have forgotten the rest of their Jewish heritage remember Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur does not allow us to forget who we are.

Stories abound about individuals who were on the threshold of apostasy, but who returned to our faith because of their experience of Yom Kippur. That fascinating Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, is just one example of this phenomenon and writes in his memoirs of his readiness to accompany his close cousin to the baptismal font, only to reconsider after spending a Yom Kippur in a small synagogue somewhere in Germany, nearly one hundred years ago.

"Israel, and the Torah, and the Holy One Blessed Be He, are one." This statement of the mystical holy Zohar says it all. All three are bound together forever.

"Forgive and forget." That is a cliché with which we are all familiar. One of the messages of hope which pervades this season of the Jewish year is that the Holy One Blessed Be He forgives but does not forget.

He does not allow his two most cherished objects, His Torah and His people, to be forgotten.

Zvi Arye Fromer could easily have been forgotten, given the horrible circumstances in which he perished. But the Almighty did not allow him to be forgotten. Nor did He allow the Torah he taught to be forgotten.

The Yizkor service, one of the prominent features of the liturgy of Yom Kippur, is a method by which we do our part to see to it that those souls whom we knew personally are not forgotten.

And our regular Torah study is the method by which we each see to it that the words of the Torah are not forgotten.

For four years now, these weekly columns on the parsha have helped so many of you, in an admittedly small way, to prevent the forgetting of Torah. I take this opportunity, at the beginning of this New Year, 5773, to thank each of you for reading my words, for taking them seriously, and for responding every week in so many wonderful ways to what I have to say.

May the Almighty bless you with a new year filled with peace and health, sweetness and joy, and much success. Ketiva Vachatima Tova to you and yours.

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Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message

Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5780-2020

"An Exclusive Covenant with an Inclusive Philosophy"

(Revised and updated from Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5760-2000)

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In parashat Nitzavim, the first of this week's double parashot, Nitzavim-Vayeilech, we encounter the great Moses, on the last day of his life.

Moses has gathered all the Jewish people from the lowliest to the most exalted, old and young, men and women, to bring them into the final covenant with G-d. This covenant is intended to serve as a powerful affirmation of עֲרַבְנוּ-a'ray'vut, reflecting the profound concept of every Jew assuming responsibility for their fellow Jews.

In Deuteronomy 29:9-14, Moses says to the Jewish people, אַתֶּם נִצְּבִים הַיּוֹם בְּלִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, רְאִישֵׁיכֶם שְׂבָטֵיכֶם, זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשִׁטְרֵיכֶם, כָּל אִישׁ וְיִשְׂרָאֵל. "You are standing today before the L-rd your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers—all the men of Israel. Your small children, and your wives, and the proselytes who are within your camp, from your woodchoppers to your water-drawers. For you to enter in to the covenant of the L-rd your G-d and His oath which the L-rd your G-d is sealing with you today. In order to establish you today as His people and that He be your G-d, just as He spoke to you and as He swore to your forefathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Not with you alone do I form this covenant and seal this oath. But, with those who are here standing with us today before the L-rd our G-d, and with those who are not here today."

These bold verses continue to dramatically reverberate with us, even to this day, as if they were being pronounced to the People of Israel at this very moment.

In the name of G-d, Moses declares: אַתֶּם נֹצְרִים הַיּוֹם בְּלִפְנֵי הַשֵּׁם אַתֶּם לִפְנֵי הַשֵּׁם, “You are standing here today, all of you, before the L-rd your G-d!” The commentators see in the nuance of the language, in the use of the word, אַתֶּם—“Ah’tem,” that this covenant is being exacted with a broad constituency. It is not a contract with the nobility of Israel. Israel has no nobility who are granted special advantages, nor can there be special representatives or privileged proxies before G-d. This gathering is not intended to be a gathering of Priests, Prophets or Holy People. This covenant is not to be concluded only with those of esteemed pedigree or of exalted birth. Judaism, after all, is not a sect or a cult. This covenant is meant for the entire people of Israel. In an unprecedented act in human history and in the history of religions, Moses declares in the name of G-d, that all the people of Israel, without regard to gender, age or status, from the leaders, to the water-drawers, are welcomed into this covenant.

Not only is this covenant historic in that it is totally inclusive of all those who are present at this time, but it actually transcends time to include the past, present and future members of Israel. Deuteronomy 29:14 boldly proclaims, כִּי אַתְּ אֹשֶׁר יִשְׁנֶנּוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ עַמְד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי הַשֵּׁם אַתֶּם לִפְנֵי הַשֵּׁם וְאַתְּ אֹשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם, “Not only with you who stand here with us today before the L-rd our G-d, does G-d seal this covenant, but also with all those who are not here with us today!”

At this critical juncture in Jewish history, and from this crucial vantage point of Jewish destiny, not only are all the tribes of Israel joined together, but all Jewish generations are seen as if they are standing before the L-rd our G-d. At this singular moment, we all stand together as one Jewish people—past, present and future.

Yes, this covenant is intended to be all-embracing, to be executed with the entire people, with those who are with us and those who are not with us. And yet, for G-d, even this is not enough. For the Al-mighty it must be even more inclusive. Not only is this covenant intended for those who are not with us at this time, but even for those who are not with us in spirit, in thought, in mind and in belief. It includes even those who recoil and say: “We do not want any part in this covenant today, הַיּוֹם—Ha’yom. This is not for us. We seek alternative religious experiences. We are off to the Himalayas, to embrace our personal Gurus, to dwell in the Ashram. We reject your concept of Heaven, we relate only to Earth.” There are always some who relate only to the Heavens, to the metaphysical, and reject the concept of “Earth.” But, for G-d it is Ha’yom, only today. G-d knows that these attitudes cannot, and will not, be permanent. With time, with love and with infinite patience, attitudes can change.

From this covenant which Moses executed with the people of Israel in Arvat Moav, in the Wilderness of Moab, with the G-d of Israel, with the G-d of reality, with the G-d of existence—no one is excluded. Everyone is here. Everyone is included!

It is with this same heightened sense of inclusiveness that we are to begin the preparations for the rapidly approaching High Holidays. As we read in the introductory meditation for the קֹל נִדְרֵי—Kol Nidre on Yom Kippur night, we say, בְּיָשִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַעְלָה, By the authority of the heavenly court, by the authority of the earthly court, with the consent of the Omnipotent One, and with the consent of this congregation, we declare it lawful to pray with the sinners. This exclusive covenant is totally inclusive, anyone wishing to be part of it, is welcome to join.

That is why during this propitious time of the year, we must think about the myriads of Jews who are estranged from Judaism, who consider themselves outside the covenant. Yes, our grandparents prayed for a “Melting Pot” in America, but, unfortunately, we’ve wound up with a “meltdown” instead. But, we dare not write off any Jew, and we dare not give up hope on our brothers and sisters, our sons and our daughters. As we read the prophetic words in Deuteronomy 30:4, in this week’s parasha, אִם יִהְיֶה נִדְחָךְ בְּקֶצֶה הַשָּׁמַיִם, Even though you dispersed be at the far ends of Heaven, וּמִשָּׁם יִקְרָא הַשֵּׁם אֶת־לִקְיָךְ, and from there the L-rd will gather you in, and from there He will take you.

It is during this very special High Holiday season that we are called upon to redouble our efforts, to reach out to those of our brothers and sisters who are not yet connected to Jewish life, and are waiting longingly for a hand to be extended to them, so that they too may be welcomed back into the Jewish fold. We must not fail them. We will not fail them.

Rosh Hashana 5781 is observed this year on Friday evening and all day Saturday and Sunday, September 18th, 19th and 20th, 2020. The Fast of Gedaliah will be observed on Monday, September 21st from dawn until nightfall. May you be blessed.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah: Nitzavim Vayelech

What is the significance of every single letter of the Torah?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe gave a beautiful explanation. In Parshat Vayelech, which we’ll be reading this coming Shabbat, the Torah presents us with the last of the Mitzvot. Mitzvah number 613 states “וְעַתָּה כְּתוּבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה־הַזֹּאת וְלַמָּנָה אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁירָה בְּפִיהֶם” – and now, write for yourselves this song, which is the Torah, and teach it to the children of Israel. Place it in their mouths”.

Why is there a mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah? We can fulfil this Mitzvah by writing just one letter of a Sefer Torah and it’s attributed to us as if we’ve written the whole Sefer. But why this imperative to be engaged in the writing of letters of the scroll?

The Rebbe explained, there is a Halacha which we learn from the Gemara in Mesechet Mehachot, Daf 29a. There Chazal tell us that all the letters must be “גוּיֵל מוֹקֵר” – surrounded by blank parchment”. That is to say that no letter can be connected to any other letter. At the same time there is also a Halacha that each letter must be visibly part of its own word – and visibly separate from all other words.

Each letter represents an individual. The message of the letters of the Torah, is that each one of us should know that we are unique people. As a result, everyone should respect our own individuality, our unique nature and personality. At the same time, none of us should ever forget that we are an integral part of our nation and as a result, we have an ‘areivut’ – a responsibility, to selflessly care for others and reach out to them.

In addition, if one single letter of the Torah is ‘passul’ – rendered unfit, then the entire Sefer Torah is passul. From here we learn that if there is something with just one of us, then every single one of us is affected as a result.

This is such a beautiful message for us and so apposite on the eve of the commencement of Slichot – a time when we’re just about to usher in a new year and when we’re engaging in ‘Cheshbon Hanefesh’ – introspection.

At this time, therefore, let us never forget how important each and every one of us is and how we should develop ourselves and excel in our own personal way as individuals. At the same time, we should never forget that everybody depends on us and is looking for us to pull our weight for the sake of our nation and for the sake of the world.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

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Egocentric Theology (Nitzavim-Vayelech)

Ben-Tzion Spitz

The egoism which enters into our theories does not affect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief. - George Eliot

Moses is near the end of his monumental discourse, conveying the word of God to the nation of Israel about to enter the Promised Land. He touches on multiple themes and a plethora of commandments, but also repeats certain points, each time with a different nuance.

An oft-repeated theme is the need to obey God with one's entire heart and soul, as well as the ability to return to God when we fail to do so, as per the following verse:

"Since you will be heeding the Lord your God and keeping His commandments and laws that are recorded in this book of the Torah—once you return to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul." - Deuteronomy 30:10

The Meshech Chochma wonders why in this verse, is a person heeding God and the laws written in the Torah only after they return to God. Presumably, just reading the Torah and being familiar with its precepts should be enough to encourage, convince, and instruct a person as to what their divinely ordained responsibilities and obligations are.

The Meshech Chochma explains, that reading the Torah, or even being familiar with it is often not enough. It is human nature to read into things. To read things and understand it according to our notions. It's possible to read the Torah and come to conclusions that support our personal ideals and philosophy, but have nothing to do with Judaism. In short, our powerful egos are often the ones interpreting the Torah in a way that satisfies our vision and thinking, but is far removed from the truth.

That is why, the Meshech Chochma states, we first must return to God. We first have to accept, embrace, and be open to true divine instruction. We need to cease the worship of our egos and in turn worship God. Once we have placed our egos in their proper place, then we may have a chance to understand the truth that has been staring us in the face. Then we can be open to what the Torah is truly saying. Once we check our egos at the door, once we return to God, to our spiritual source, then we can start to understand what he's been saying to us for millennia.

May we remove the blinders of our egos.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova

Dedication - For the Bar-Mitzvah of Eden Yechiel Spitz. Mazal Tov!

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

Jerusalem Post

Parashat Nitzavim-Vayeilech - A moment of honesty

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Teshuva is primarily an emotional process that has practical implications.

'And that the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and a burning, that it is not sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger, and in His wrath' – Deuteronomy, Nitzavim 29:22

'For this commandment which I command you this day,' Moses tells the Jewish people in his farewell speech, "is not concealed from you, nor is it far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?' Rather, [this] thing is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it" (Deuteronomy 30: 11 – 14).

What commandment is he talking about? Why would we think it is far away, in the heaven, or beyond the sea? What is this thing that is very close to us, according to Moses?

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According to some of the most important commentators, the commandment he is referring to is none other than teshuva, repentance.

Is repenting easy? If we were asked, many of us would probably say it isn't. If there is one difficult commandment that is especially challenging, it would be teshuva. The expectation that a person will change his habits, adopting a new outlook and new lifestyle, is perhaps

the most far-reaching expectation possible. So how can we explain what Moses said?

We're used to thinking about teshuva in practical terms: What have I been doing until now, and what will I do from now on? This is correct, but only partially. Teshuva is primarily an emotional process that has practical implications. Sometimes it is a single, solitary moment when a person faces himself honestly, looks himself in the eye and asks: "Is this who I want to be? Is this how I want to live?"

That one moment is a pivotal juncture. It is a turning point whose results will be recognized only in hindsight, but which already serves as a watershed moment. Maimonides, in Mishneh Torah, wrote the halachot (Jewish laws) of teshuva in several chapters that should be read and learned.

There he writes, "Teshuva atones for all sins. Even a person who was wicked his entire life and repented in his final moments should not be reminded of any aspect of his wickedness."

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In dramatic language, Maimonides describes the change that occurs in the relationship between a person who did teshuva and God: "Teshuva is great for it draws a man close to the Shechina (the Divine Presence)... Teshuva brings near those who were far removed. Previously, this person was hated by God, disgusting, far removed and abominable. Now, he is beloved and desirable, close and dear." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 7: 6)

Try to think of person who you might describe as "disgusting, far removed and abominable." What did this person do? This wouldn't be someone who failed once, or someone who sins occasionally. This would be someone for whom sinning is characteristic, who is immersed in the squalor of sin. This is a person who is addicted to ugly behavior.

Now let's think what we would demand of such a person in order to remove the negative label attached to him. Maybe a process of recovery. Maybe he would have to prove he has changed over a period of time. We would not be quick to purify him from all his sins.

This is not the teshuva that Judaism is talking about. "Previously," says Maimonides, just recently "this person was hated by God, disgusting, far removed and abominable; and now," today, even one day later, this person we denounced has become "beloved and desirable, close and dear."

How did this happen? What changed from one day to the next? One moment of introspection, one minute without masks, when a person reveals to himself his true desire to be good, pure, exalted. That one moment is etched into the soul forever and it changes a person into being beloved and desirable, close and dear.

During this period of time called the "Days of Awe," Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are all called upon to find that moment of teshuva; that most crucial moment in our lives that will never be forgotten, that moment when we will merit being "beloved and desirable, close and dear."

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Nitzavim-Vayeilech

פרשת נצבים-וילך תש"פ

Nitzavim

ושבת עד ד' אלקיך

And you will return unto Hashem. (30:2)

Teshuvah means return. One returns to his source, his beginning, from where it all began, so that he can start over again and repair what requires restoration. This is not consistent with the objective of society, which focuses on the future, ignoring the past. What happened, happened. Forget about it. Move on. What society ignores is the cross which envelops us. Unless we expunge it, it accompanies us wherever we go. Focus on "Why? "Where? How did it all start?" A pathologist searches for the sources, the etiology. *Teshuvah* is a pathology, searching for the beginning, "Why? How? Where did it all

begin?" Once he has researched the source, the penitent has the opportunity to map out and begin his journey home.

A German Jew from the city of Danzig came to the saintly *Horav Pinchas Koritzer, zl*, to seek counsel concerning his daughter who had suddenly lost her eyesight. He had traveled to the greatest doctors, to no avail. No medical reason explained her sudden blindness. The holy *Rebbe* said, "She is unable to see, because her father does not see. Her illness has been passed on to her from the previous generation. The man looked at the *Rebbe* in surprise. "*Rebbe*, my eyesight is perfect. I do not even need glasses," he said. The *Rebbe* explained, "One who is truly blind is the sinner. The *Navi Yeshayah* says, *Am iveir v'einayim yeish*; 'The people are blind, though they have eyes' (*Yeshayah* 43:8). The *Mishnah (Sotah 1:8)* teaches, 'Shimshon followed his eyes, therefore, the Philistines pierced his eyes.'" The *Rebbe* concluded that the danger of loss of vision was imminent to every member of his family who stared at him. Although the man had assimilated into western culture, he still remembered his Orthodox upbringing. He began to weep profusely, knowing quite well that the *Rebbe's* admonishment was warranted. He promised to change his ways. Upon returning home, he changed his home to observe the laws of *kashrus*, and *Shabbos* observance became his family's way of life. Shortly thereafter, his daughter's eyesight returned.

The penitent must open his eyes and take a penetrating look into the contrast between who he had been and who he has become. The variance should impel him to search for a way to return, but, until he expunges the spiritual smut that envelops him, he will just carry it around. When he performs *teshuvah gemurah*, complete repentance, he can expect it to disappear. *Teshuvah* achieves something unlike no other purifying agent, as indicated by the following story.

A boy was having difficulty participating in class, mostly because he was almost never present. He was extremely wild and, as a result, he was "invited" by his *rebbe* to leave the classroom since his unruliness was having a detrimental effect on everyone. His parents had tried everything, from different *rebbeim*, to transferring him to another school, to educational and psychological specialists, all to no avail. Finally, they were referred to a *rebbe* who claimed that he could help, but it would take time. How long? It would depend on their son. What did they have to lose? He had already hit rock bottom.

Their son arrived at the new *rebbe's* office with a smirk on his face, manifesting his usual attitude. The *rebbe* sat him down and said, "As far as I am concerned, I will commence my teaching obligation only when you decide that you are prepared to learn. In other words, you will have no learning until you decide that you are ready. At the end of each day that no learning occurs, I will bang a nail into my wall. The boy laughed at the offer. The next day, he showed up and smirked, paid his respects to the *rebbe*, whom he thought was strange (after all, what *rebbe* would not demand that his student learn?) and went along his merry way. At the end of the day, true to his word, the *rebbe* banged nail number one into the wall. This continued daily: no pressure; no learning; another nail. Week after week, the boy came to "school," checked in, refused to learn, and earned another nail in the wall each day.

It took an entire year for the *rebbe* to wear the boy down. Everyone needs a challenge. When the parents/*rebbe* challenge a recalcitrant child, he will often rebel, fight back, actively or passively, but he will do something negative to demonstrate his reluctance to allow anyone to dominate him. This boy could not accept the fact that no one was challenging him. As he was about to celebrate his one-year anniversary of doing nothing, he took one long look at the nail-studded wall; all 365 nails were in perfect sequence, and the stark realization of one wasted year hit him squarely in the eyes. He broke down in tears. The amount of learning he could have achieved, the year of Torah that he had lost, began to penetrate his mind, his heart, his psyche. He wept and wept, and, when he was finished, he told the *rebbe*, "I am now ready to learn."

The boy and the *rebbe* studied every day, all day, because the boy had to make up for all the time that he had needlessly wasted. At the end of every day, the *rebbe* took his claw hammer and yanked one nail

out of the wall. This continued for an entire year, until all of the nails had been dislodged. It should have been a joyous first anniversary. After all, all the nails were gone. The boy took a look at the wall and, once again, as he had one year earlier, he began to cry. The *rebbe* looked at the scene and asked, "Why are you crying?" The boy looked up at his *rebbe* and, with great remorse, replied, "I am crying because now I have a wall with 365 holes in it."

Every hole cannot be filled; the void remains once the nail is removed. Every blemish leaves a mark, a taint, a deformity. Not so with *teshuvah*. Not only does *teshuvah* remove the "nails," but it also fills the holes; it builds a new wall. The *Mesillas Yesharim* writes (*Perek 4*), "Truthfully, how can a person repair what he has corrupted when the sin has already been committed? If someone has murdered his fellow or committed adultery, how can he remedy the matter? Can he remove the performed deed from existence? The Attribute of Mercy tempers the Attribute of Strict Justice, however, and it catalyzes a reversal: first, by granting the sinner time to repent; second, by exacting a punishment that is not too severe; and finally, by offering the opportunity for repentance, purely out of Hashem's kindness." *Teshuvah* fills the holes.

החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובהרת בחיים

I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life. (30:19)

One would think that choosing life is a decision that requires little to no mental effort. Why would the Torah exhort us to choose life? This question has inspired much commentary. Obviously, the meaning of "life" in Torah-speak is different than the mundane, physical existence to which many have become accustomed. Furthermore, as *Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl*, observes, the Torah implores us to choose life, so that our children will live. The message is clear: the decision we make for ourselves affects our families. What our children will be in twenty years, their demeanor – moral, ethical and spiritual – will be on us. Our decision to live properly determines whether they will live.

After reading an inspiring article by *Rav Yehudah Adler, zl*, I was very moved. He penned this article while he was a patient in the oncology department. He was in tremendous pain, suffering from the effects of his rapidly progressing disease. He was a *kollel* fellow who took great satisfaction from his *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty. He spent the day learning, after arising early in the morning to *daven k'vasikin*, at sunrise.

Rav Adler writes that, at first, when he confronted his dread diagnosis, he was emotionally broken. A young man with a young family, the last thing on his mind was his mortality. Hashem, however, has a way of reminding us of our transitoriness. *Rav Yehudah* was emotionally devastated. Why did he deserve this? He was trying so hard to rise early to *daven* with exceptional *kavanah*, devotion. He did not waste time from his learning. His spiritual life was soaring, and now this. Suddenly, he came upon a revelation which changed his outlook and gave him the strength to confront his pain and mortality.

The answer to his questions was simple. He was not doing Hashem a favor. It was quite the other way around. He wondered why Hashem made it so difficult for him to learn, to *daven*, to think clearly. It was because Hashem does not need us to serve Him at our convenience. He wants us to serve Him the way He decides. One might counter, "I could do much better and much more, if I were not in pain." Well, Hashem wants you to serve Him as you are – now! He has enough members of *Klal Yisrael* who serve Him amid good health, wealth and satisfaction, etc. He wants to see how you *daven* when you are in pain, with an IV in your arm. How you manage to go to *shul* when it is hard to walk, to breathe, to stand. He knows that you are unable to rise from your bed, go to *kollel* and learn all day. He wants to see how you will learn in bed, hooked up to all the monitors. This is the meaning of fulfilling *ratzon Hashem*, the will of G-d. We serve Him on His terms.

Many of us think that after we have had a good day – *davened*, learned, gave *tzedakah*, reached out to our fellow – we deserve a big thank you; Hashem is in our debt. After all, we extended ourselves. Wrong! Hashem has many people who serve Him. He wants you to serve Him – not as a favor, but because it is His will. If He makes it easy

for you, i.e. great health, economics, no family issues, life is going your way, then you owe Him for allowing you to serve Him in comfort.

Hashem is exceedingly kind to us. When we survive troubles, we should express our gratitude with boundless joy. *Horav Yechezkel Abramsky, zl*, said the following to his *talmidim*, students: “Let us open the *siddur* to see how we are supposed to *daven*. We begin with *Mah Tov*, ‘How goodly are Your tents,’ and continue with *Vaani b’rov Chasdecha*, ‘As for me, with Your abundant kindness.’ Is this correct? Hashem’s kindness? Go to the dormitory and see how many are still sleeping. ‘But I came to *Shacharis* early, you claim. ‘I deserve a big thank you.’ It should say, *b’rov chasdi*, ‘with my kindness’!” *Rav Abramsky* stopped for a moment to allow his question to sink in, and then he said, “Go to the hospital and pass between the beds and see how many would give their last penny away just to get up from their bed. How many cannot go to *shul*? This is why we say, *b’rov Chasdecha*, ‘with Your abundant kindness.’”

We owe Him everything, and as soon as we realize and acknowledge this verity, our plea of *Zachreinu l’chaim*, “Remember us for life,” will have so much more meaning.

Vayeilech

ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא

But I will surely have concealed My face on that day. (31:18)

Hashem will conceal His Presence from us. Indeed, many times Jews feel that Hashem has “disappeared” from their lives. They should know that the Almighty is always present. At times, however, He conceals Himself, making it that much more difficult for us to perceive Him. This only means that we must look harder. Why does the Torah repeat itself – *hasteir astir*, double concealment? Concealment, by its very definition, is absolute. Something is either hidden, or it is not. If one can easily locate it, it is not really concealed. *Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl*, explains that this concealment is unique, in that Hashem will conceal the actual *hester panim*, concealment. People will experience troubles, adversity, economic havoc, unexplained illness. Do they attribute it to Hashem, or do they “blame” everyone and everything, while refusing to stop and think that Hashem might be communicating with them?

Finding fault in everything but the true Source of the adversity is our way of avoiding the truth: Hashem is speaking to us, warning us that enough is enough. It is time to change. Hashem will conceal the concealment. He will not make it obvious for us to sense that He is manipulating the circumstances that affect our *tefillah*, prayer, and *teshuvah*, repentance, so that we own up to our faults and do something to counteract them.

ויאמר ד' אל משה הנך שכב עם אבתך וקם העם הזה וזנה אחרי אלהי נכר הארץ ... ועזבנו והפר את בריתי אשר כרתתי אתו ... ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא ... ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת ולמדוה את בני ישראל

Hashem said to Moshe, “Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will arise and stay after the gods of the nations of the land... and they will forsake Me and annul the covenant that I formed with them... I will distance them and make Myself oblivious to them. So now, write this song for yourselves and teach it to *Bnei Yisrael*. (31:16,18,19)

The above *pasukim* paint a stark picture of the spiritual deterioration that will occur in the period following Moshe *Rabbeinu’s* *petirah*, passing. While it did not happen immediately, the dynamics that led to the nation’s freefall from their *igra ramah*, spiritually-elevated perch, to a *bira amikta*, nadir of depravity, were apparent. During certain moments in history – even in the last two hundred years, leading up to the present – we have observed an acute distancing from positive spiritual activity. For many, assimilation has almost become a way of life. Within the observant camp, a spiritual tug of war has ensued between those who are committed to strengthening Torah study and *mitzvah* observance and those who seek to “open up” Orthodoxy and water it down to the letter of the Law. (The latter have rejected the spirit of the Law and the accompanying traditions and customs, which are not only considered law, but have maintained our spiritual integrity throughout the generations.)

While this situation is certainly depressing, we have hope. I quote a vignette, a conversation that took place between *Horav Shlomo Lorincz, zl*, and the *Brisker Rav, zl*. *Rav Lorincz* lamented the reality (60 years ago) of the nation’s spiritual degradation; the *Brisker Rav* assuaged him with hope. *Rav Lorincz* was a distinguished Torah activist, who represented Agudah Israel in the Knesset. He came to the *Brisker Rav* depressed and dejected, following the defeat of a bill that he had worked on for a while that was almost certain to pass. It did not. Despite all assurances to the contrary, his bill prohibiting the raising of *davar acheir*, pigs, failed. He poured out his heart over the low spiritual state of the country, and his fears that they had not yet reached rock-bottom. It would get worse.

The *Brisker Rav* said, “Let me teach you a lesson in *Chumash* in the manner that I used to teach my sons. He opened a *Chumash* and read from *Devarim* (31:16), ‘And Hashem said to Moshe, “*You will (now) lie with your forefathers, but this people will arise and stray after the gods of the nations of the land.*” Speaking in *Yiddish*, the *Rav* explained, “To stray after the gods of the nations of the land does not mean that they would not *daven Shacharis*. It means that they literally worshipped idols. If that were not (bad) enough, the *pasuk* continues, *And they will forsake Me*. This does not mean that they would not *daven Minchah*; it means that they will not even serve Me (Hashem)... And if this were not enough, the *pasuk* continues, *and annul the covenant that I formed with them*. This does not mean that they would not *daven Maariv*; it means that they did not perform circumcision. And it concludes with the words, *I will distance them and make Myself oblivious to them*.

“Nu,” the *Brisker Rav* said, raising his eyes, “I am certain that you will agree that the situation described here is much worse than the one you just described, but let us continue learning: ‘So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to *Bnei Yisrael*...’ Torah study is the antidote for all spiritual deterioration, even idol worship and the abandonment of *Bris Milah*. It will return Hashem’s People to Him. All that we are relegated to do is take care of teaching it to *Bnei Yisrael*. In that case, you have no reason to despair.”

What is it about studying Torah that literally transforms a person? I write this *Isru Chag Shavuuous*, the *Yom Tov* dedicated to Torah. Due to the various restrictions, the majority of *minyanim* were held outdoors. After *davening vasikin* in a large tent, I was walking home and passed my gentile neighbor who was outside enjoying the early morning air. While he is well aware that his Jewish neighbors attend prayer services in the synagogue, he never realized what this meant until he observed us *davening* outdoors, across from his house. I explained to him what had taken place during the night, how fifty men and many young boys had studied Torah together. He, of course, did not understand the concept of studying a book as part of a religious service. He asked me, “Rabbi, what is so special about this book?” I told him that this Book was the word of G-d, and, through it, the Almighty speaks to us. “In other words,” I said, “we are not simply studying a book. We are listening to the Almighty speak to us.”

This is what Torah study does for a Jew. It affords him the opportunity to listen to Hashem. When a person listens to Hashem, the experience is transformative. Obviously, the degree of listening, and the depths of comprehension, will determine the change that will transpire. *Teshuvah* stories abound which demonstrate the amazing spiritual regeneration that ensues within the person who commits to *teshuvah*. We have varied understandings of the meaning of *teshuvah* and what one must endure in order to succeed. I, therefore, have selected the following vignette, which is both timely and illuminating.

Horav Naftali Ropshitzer, zl, was one of the first *Admorim*. He was learning in his room one day when Zevulun, a member of the Jewish community, came to him, obviously very distraught. “*Rebbe*, I cannot live with myself any longer. I have committed numerous transgressions, a number of which are very serious. *Rebbe*, I must know what to do in order to repent to expunge these *aveiros*, sins.” With that, he presented a list of sins that were quite egregious. (We must underscore that many people in those times [mid-eighteenth century] did

not have the luxury of a *yeshivah* education, and they suffered from economic hardship, as well as the influence of a society that was antagonistic to religious observance.)

The *Rebbe* reviewed the list and declared, “There is no question. For such sins, there is only one resolution. You must forfeit your life! There is just no other way.” With a tear-filled voice, Zevulun accepted his fate. “It is better that I die having received Hashem’s forgiveness than to live the life of a sinner. I want to leave this world with a clean *neshamah*, soul.”

“If so, then we can proceed with your *teshuvah* ritual. I will prepare the molten lead that will be poured down your throat. This will serve as the process that expunges all of your sins.”

Zevulun nodded in agreement. He was prepared to die if that is what it would take to purify his soul. As soon as the lead had melted, *Rav Naftali* laid Zevulun down on the bed, tied him up and blindfolded his eyes. “Now, my dear friend, recite *Viduy*, Confession, in preparation for your death.”

Zevulun recited *Viduy* and declared, “*Rebbe*, I am ready. I feel good that I will leave this world as I entered it – pure.” “If so,” the *Rebbe* said, “Open your mouth.” Zevulun opened his mouth, prepared for the searing pain of burning lead to melt his innards. Instead, he received the shock of his life. Instead of hot molten lead being poured down his throat, the *Rebbe* had poured sweet honey down his throat!

“Do you think that the Almighty really wanted me to take your life?” the *Rebbe* asked. “*Chas v’shalom*, Heaven forbid! When a person commits such grave sins that warrant his death, do you think that Hashem wants him to die? Absolutely not! Hashem wants him to live. All the Almighty asks of us is remorse, a broken heart. Forgiveness is not about death; it is about life with contrition. When I saw how deeply pained your heart was, how much you really regretted your sinful behavior, to the point that you were prepared to renege on your life, I realized how utterly broken you were. Therefore, I had nothing to do. You had already achieved forgiveness.”

Zevulun never forgot the day that he received a new lease on life. He changed his past life’s trajectory and became a serious penitent, wholly committed to *mitzvah* observance. All Hashem asks of us is spiritual integrity, not a manifestation of religious observance solely for the purpose of impressing others. The only One we have to impress is Hashem.

Va’ani Tefillah

מְעוֹלָם קוִיִּנו לך – *Mei’olam kivinu Lach*. (As long as we can remember) We have always hoped for You.

The fact that we continue to hope for salvation, despite having survived some of the most difficult periods in history, is in and of itself one of the greatest *chassadim*, kindnesses, bestowed upon us by Hashem. We have maintained *tikvah*, hope, amidst challenge and adversity. *Horav Shimon Schwab*, *zl*, notes that the words *tikvah* and *kivinu* both find their origin in the word *kav*, which means a piece of string or rope, which binds/attaches two objects. This is the meaning of hope: connection. As long as one knows that he is firmly anchored in place, the winds that blow him all over will not prevail in blowing him away. He is connected. This is the underlying meaning of *mei’olam kivinu Lach*: Throughout history we have maintained an unbroken and undiminished attachment to Hashem via our unswerving hope that He would respond to our sincere prayers, even when the outlook has appeared tenuous and hopeless. A Jew should never give up hope.

In memory of a dear friend on the occasion of his yahrzeit

החבר הרב צבי בן החבר ר' משה ז"ל נפ' ד' תשרי תשע"ג

Mr. Bjorn Bamberger

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prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

Is That Shofar Kosher?

Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Shofars come in many different sizes and prices, and they can be bought in many different places. But is that shofar on sale at Amazon.com fit for use on Rosh

Hashanah? And if a shofar does need a hechsher, what should that kashrus certificate cover?

Yossi had always hoped to follow the family tradition of becoming a baal tokei’ah. But even though he had spent many hours during the summer months practicing on his grandfather’s shofar, he couldn’t manage to produce anything more than a weak sound. Then one day he was walking through the Arab shuk in Yerushalayim and his eye was caught by a beautiful shofar.

“Try it,” said the Arab shopkeeper, thrusting the shofar into Yossi’s hands.

Yossi did try it – and to his amazement, the tekiyos not only sounded loud and clear, but they took almost no effort. After some haggling, the shofar didn’t cost that much, either. Yossi was so excited by his purchase that when he got home he immediately called his family to listen to a recital.

“I’m sure it’s a very beautiful shofar,” said his brother, “but are you sure it’s kosher?”

“A shofar has to be kosher? What could be the problem? I am not going to eat it!” Soon enough, Yossi learned that the potential for problems is far from negligible. And although we can’t repeat every detail of such a discussion in this article, we can look at a few key factors that go into making a shofar not only beautiful, but also kosher.

Beyond the Minimum

Most shofaros sold today in frum stores are made in one of numerous small, family-operated factories scattered around Eretz Yisrael. While some shofaros have no hechsher, others have one that covers the minimal standard: It certifies that the shofar is manufactured from a ram’s horn. Since all halachic authorities rule that a ram’s horn is preferred and that a horn from a different, kosher, non-bovine animal may be used only when there is no alternative, there is some value to this minimal hechsher. In addition to the concern that the shofar might have been made from the horn of a cow or a bull, which is not acceptable, there are commercially available “shofaros” made of quality plastic that but look, feel, and blow like a shofar. Thus, the “minimum standard” hechsher should hopefully ensure that the shofar is a genuine ram’s horn.

By the way, here is a simple, non-scientific way to verify that a shofar is plastic. Look at many available on display in the Arab shuk. Carefully examine them and you will notice that they all have their “natural” markings in exactly the same place. Some are oriented to the left and others to the right, and the color varies from shofar to shofar, but it is quite clear that they were poured into the same mold.

Boiled, Buffed, and Beautiful

The majority of rams’ horns used to make shofaros are imported from abroad. When they arrive at the factory, they are not a pretty sight. Not only is the horn’s exterior rough and lacking a pleasing shine, but the bone is still inside.

Although it is perfectly kosher to use a shofar by drilling a hole through the bone on its inside, commercial manufacturers remove the bone. The first step, therefore, is to boil the horn for several hours to soften it and make it more malleable, allowing for easy removal of the bone.

A hechsher that guarantees only that the shofar was originally a ram’s horn does not address problems that occur to the shofar during the manufacturing process. (While those problems may not occur with great frequency, my opinion is that someone giving a hechsher should assume responsibility for the product’s complete kashrus.)

Returning to our description of the process: After the skull bone has been removed, the wider end of the horn is hollow, whereas the narrower side of the horn, that is attached to the head, is not hollow. Since the horn grew thick on this side, it must be drilled and cleaned out to create an empty “tunnel” that reaches the hollow part of the horn. In addition, a usable mouthpiece on the narrow part of the horn has to be fashioned. In order to accomplish all of this, the narrower section of the horn is straightened. This creates the difference in appearance between the complete shofar, which is straight at this end, and the natural ram’s horn, which is curved along its entire length. Take a look the next time you are this close to a ram.

As part of this process, the factory might shorten an over-long shofar or trim its sides. This does not invalidate the shofar, which, unlike an esrog, doesn’t have to be complete. However, a shofar cannot be lengthened, not even by using material from another kosher shofar.

Overlaying the mouthpiece with gold invalidates the shofar, because that puts an intervening substance between the mouth of the baal teki’ah and the shofar, meaning that he is not blowing the shofar itself. Even an overlay, such as gold or silver, on the external surface of a shofar invalidates the shofar if it modifies its sound.

On the other hand, there is no halachic problem with shaping the mouthpiece to whichever shape is comfortable to blow, provided one reshapes the shofar’s natural horn material and doesn’t add other material to coat it. In fact, a shofar’s mouthpiece is always created by opening a hole where the horn is naturally closed.

Buff and polish

The next step in the processing of a shofar is to sand, buff, and polish the exterior of the shofar. Sometimes a lacquer is added to give it a nice sheen. According to all sources I spoke to, the lacquer doesn't modify the sound in a discernible way, so it does not invalidate the shofar.

Still, a shofar can be rendered unkosher if a hole is created during the manufacturing process (other than the hole for the mouthpiece). When that happens, the status of the shofar becomes a whole new story.

Hold the Super Glue

This article is not long enough to cover all the details of opinions concerning a shofar that is cracked or has a hole. Instead, I will summarize briefly those opinions:

- (1) The most stringent opinion contends that any lengthwise crack in the shofar requires repair.
- (2) The moderate opinion rules that any crack more than half the shofar's length requires repair.
- (3) The most lenient opinion states that one may ignore a crack that is less than the full length of the shofar.

Assuming that a cracked shofar is invalid until it is mended, does it make a difference how the crack is repaired?

There is a dispute among early authorities as to whether the shofar will be kosher if repaired by gluing it together. Some, such as the Ramban, contend that since coating the inside of the shofar with foreign material invalidates it, gluing a hole in a shofar with a foreign substance also invalidates it. Those who advocate this approach contend that the only way to repair a cracked shofar is by heating the horn at the point of damage until the horn is welded together.

The Rosh disagrees with this approach, contending that there is a difference between plating a shofar with foreign material — which means that one is in essence combining a non-shofar material with the shofar — and glue, which becomes totally inconspicuous in the finished product. Although the halachah follows this last opinion, one should rely on this only if the crack did not affect the sound of the shofar and if the crack is not so big that the glue is obvious. Otherwise, one will be required to weld the horn as described above, so that the shofar is repaired with shofar material.

Herein then lies an issue. If we need to be concerned about the possibility that the shofar was cracked, do we need a guarantee that it was repaired by welding and not by gluing?

If we do, we have a problem. There is no reason to assume that a non-Jewish, nonobservant, or unknowledgeable shofar crafter would repair it by welding. To compound the concern, shofaros made for sale are always polished to provide the beautiful, but unnatural, sheen that the customer expects to see on his shofar. This polish may mask any damage and repair that was made when the shofar developed a crack; only a highly trained expert might be able to notice such a repair.

Unfortunately, few shofar crafters are that halachically concerned. The assumption is, therefore, that most shofar makers would simply take an acrylic or similar glue and fill the hole. Therefore, enter the potential need for a more reliable hechsher. We will return to this question later.

Holey Shofaros!

Another potential problem is if a hole was inadvertently made in the shofar during the drilling process. The Mishnah states: If a shofar has a hole in it that was subsequently plugged, if "it" affects the sound, then the shofar is invalid, and if not, the shofar is valid.

There are three critical questions here that impact on our discussion:

- (1) Does the Mishnah mean that the shofar is invalid because it has a hole? Or is the shofar invalid because the hole was plugged, but the hole itself is not a concern?
- (2) Does it make any difference what material is used to plug the hole?
- (3) What is the "it" that affects the sound? Does the Mishnah mean that the hole changed the sound of the shofar, or that the plugging changed the sound? If the Mishnah means "because" the hole was plugged, the Mishnah is teaching that a shofar with a hole is kosher, and the plugging of the hole creates the problem.

But why might this be true? It seems counterintuitive that the hole in the shofar does not present a problem, but plugging it does.

The answer is that this opinion contends that any natural shofar sound is kosher — even if the shofar has a hole (Rosh, Tur). Although the air escaping through the hole may affect the sound the shofar produces, the sound produced is from the shofar and not from anything else. However, when the shofar's hole is plugged, the sound is now partially produced by the plug. Therefore, this opinion rules that a plugged shofar is no longer kosher if it produces a different sound from what it produced before the shofar was plugged.

As a matter of fact, this is the way the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 586:7) actually rules. Following his approach, if a shofar develops a hole, it is best to do nothing to the shofar, since the unplugged hole allows the shofar to be perfectly kosher.

Although this solution is halachically acceptable according to many authorities, it does not provide us with a practical solution. A shofar manufacturer will not leave a hole in a shofar because customers won't purchase such a shofar. In other words, customers want a holy shofar, not a holey one.

In addition, not all authorities accept this understanding of the Mishnah. The Rambam, in his Commentary to the Mishnah, rules that a shofar with a hole is not kosher; the Biur Halachah (586:7 s.v. Sh'ein) notes several other rishonim who agree with this conclusion. The Rema (Orach Chayim 586:7) concludes that one should not use such a shofar unless he has no other.

At this point, we should address a second question: The Mishnah states that a shofar with a plugged hole is not kosher. Does it make a difference which material plugs the hole?

The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 27b) quotes a dispute between the Tanna Kamma and Rabbi Nosson whether the Mishnah's plugged shofar is invalid regardless of what one used to plug it, or only if it was plugged with non-shofar material. Rabbi Nosson contends that a shofar repaired with shofar material remains kosher even though its sound changed. The Tanna Kamma disagrees, contending that regardless of whether the hole was plugged with shofar material or with non-shofar material, the shofar is invalid if its sound changed. Most rishonim rule according to Rabbi Nosson, which means that a "holey" shofar subsequently plugged with pieces of shofar is kosher.

We've now come to a third question: Does the Mishnah mean that the hole changed the sound of the shofar, or that the plugging changed the sound? According to the Rambam (Hilchos Shofar 1:5), a shofar with a plugged hole is kosher only if it sounds the same after the repair as it did before the hole developed and was repaired. If the shofar sounds different after the repair, the shofar is invalid. It is also invalid if the repair was with non-shofar material, even when the repaired shofar sounds identical to how it sounded before the damage. The Rosh, on the other hand, rules that the shofar is kosher if it sounds the same after the repair, even if it was repaired with non-shofar material. It is also kosher if it was repaired with shofar material, even if the sound changed as a result.

This dispute is mentioned in Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 586:7), who rules, like the Rambam, that one may not use a shofar plugged with non-shofar material, unless there is no other shofar available.

Do We Need To Worry?

Halachah makes a general assumption that there is no need to be concerned about a problem that is unusual. Do shofar cracks fall into this category? Just how frequently does a shofar develop a hole during its production?

Since no one has conducted a survey on the subject, and it would be almost impossible to perform one, we cannot answer this question definitively. A friend of mine who has attempted to visit shofar factories tells me that they usually do not allow visitors, and are probably not likely to reveal the type of information we are asking. We certainly do not know the track records of the Arab craftsmen, nor those of the shofaros made in China.

Despite this lack of information, I think we can assume that, since the people making shofaros are indeed craftsmen, and since it is highly disadvantageous to drill an extra hole while cleaning out the horn, the majority of shofaros are made without creating unwanted holes during the processing.

Thus, technically speaking, a shofar might not require a hechsher to guarantee that a hole did not develop in the shofar during its manufacture. However, is there a simple way to ascertain that the shofar you purchase was not damaged during the manufacturing process?

Some rabbanim do provide a "hechsher" for the manufacturer, stating that he is a halachah-abiding Jew who would not sell a shofar that has developed a crack or hole in the course of production.

What might the concerned manufacturer do when a shofar develops a hole? I asked this question of a particular manufacturer, and was told that he sells the damaged, rough shofar to a non-Jewish manufacturer. Many shofaros are sold to non-Jews who have a Biblical interest in blowing them. (I had hoped that the plastic variety mentioned above is also marketed exclusively to the same audience. However, I subsequently discovered otherwise, much to my chagrin.)

Unfortunately, most shofar manufacturers do not meet this standard. Although the person who began the business usually was an observant Jew, who may have been knowledgeable enough to merit this hechsher, often, the current business operators are not very observant. Therefore, a hechsher on the manufacture may have limited value, unless it is issued by a well-known rav.

There is yet another kind of hechsher, which has a different standard. In this case, the distributor or store interested in selling a particular shofar has it checked by a highly skilled rav or mashgiach who knows how to check a shofar for signs of damage or repair. A shofar that shows such signs is rejected.

Does a hechsher add significantly to the price of the shofar? The answer is that it does not. In some instances, the hechsher adds a small, non-significant premium to the price of the shofar — but the price is almost always primarily linked to its size and the particular retailer's markup.

So what would I do if I wanted to buy a shofar for Rosh Hashanah? I would either ask for a hechsher that meets the last standard mentioned or, alternatively, ask for

a letter from a known rav verifying that he knows that the manufacturer of this shofar is a halachah-abiding and knowledgeable Jew.

Outwitting the Satan

The shofar is blown to remind us of many things, including a wakeup call to do teshuvah and/or to herald Moshiach. The Gemara explains that the repeated blowing of the shofar — that is, both before the Shemoneh Esrei and then again afterward — is in order to confuse the Satan and to prevent him from prosecuting us (Rosh Hashanah 16b). This is surprising. Is the Satan so easily fooled? Most of us have firsthand experience with the Satan, and have found him to be extremely

clever. Does he not remember that we pulled the same prank on him in previous years, when we blew the shofar twice?

Tosafos explains the Gemara on a deeper level. The Satan is constantly afraid that Mashiach will come and put him out of business. Therefore, every time the shofar blows, the Satan leaps up, terrified that Mashiach has come, and forgets to prosecute us! Then he realizes, too late, that it is just Rosh Hashanah again. By that time, Hashem has reached our verdict without the Satan's input.

How nice it would be if we would sit on the edge of our chairs waiting for Mashiach with the same intensity as the Satan!

לע"נ

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה