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Sodom, Akeidah Yitzchak and the New York Times: A Yamim Noraim Reflection

Rabbi Moshe Hauer

I. It is infuriating. The incomplete and twisted narrative promoted by many in the media and government casts Israel's holy and dedicated army and Jewish people everywhere as genocidal, oppressive and hateful. How can they forget who initiated the attack on October 7, including not only the "soldiers" of Hamas but the common Gazans who joined them? How dare they preach about Israel's humanitarian responsibilities while failing to exert maximum pressure on Hamas to unconditionally and immediately release the hostages? How do they level accusations of genocide against an army that warns its targets before launching attacks? How do they highlight the destruction of homes and hospitals while ignoring the terror infrastructure embedded within and beneath them? Don't they understand that there is only one army in the entire region that follows a moral code and reviews its actions for compliance with international law; that one side in this conflict sees civilian casualties as a tragedy while the other cynically uses them as a strategy? Why is the plain truth so hidden from them?

II. "The outcry against Sodom and Amora is great and their sin is very grave. I shall go down now and see if they have really done as much as the outcry that has reached me, and if not, I will know."¹

The city of Sodom had a reputation of being a terrible place, inhospitable and uncaring to the extreme, where the culture of alienation persisted despite the city's proximity to Avraham, the world's greatest model of kindness, and even after his nephew and student Lot came to live among them. Sodom's treatment of others had reached a boiling point, but before acting to destroy the city, G-d wanted to see it for Himself, so to speak, by sending angels posing as guests to see how they would be treated by Lot and the locals. Made aware of the plan, Avraham prayed and pleaded successfully with G-d to be as forgiving and tolerant as He possibly could and to extend compassion to Sodom if He found even a glimmer of goodness in its midst. That goodness was not to be found. When Lot followed the model of Avraham and welcomed the guests into his home, he and they faced the vicious fury of the entire city, "from young to old, all of the people from every quarter."² Sodom clearly deserved its fate, as it demonstrated its persistent cruelty and its resistance to being influenced by the greatest teachers and role models. Yet even as Sodom was destroyed, G-d plucked Lot from the midst of the devastation such that the righteous would not be destroyed along with the

wicked. The destruction of Sodom was done with perfect justice and left no theological questions.

Sodom's destruction should therefore presumably serve as a powerful and prominent religious symbol, vividly displaying G-d's existence and presence and His true and unquestionable justice. Wouldn't its story be the perfect illustrative Torah reading for the Day of Judgment (Rosh Hashanah)? Shouldn't its ruins serve as the ultimate monument to G-d's presence in this world? Yet while we read much of Parashat Vayera on Rosh Hashanah, we disregard this section—and the ruins of Sodom are altogether forgotten, serving neither as the location of G-d's Temple nor as a place of pilgrimage. Why is this rare and vivid display of G-d's truth virtually ignored?

III. The context! Do they not realize that Israel's occupation of Gaza ended in 2005? Do they not recognize that the checkpoints and sieges were not created to humiliate Palestinians but were a failed attempt to prevent Hamas from building its massive terror infrastructure and arsenal with the goal of destroying Israel? How dare they suggest granting a state to those who remain committed to Israel's destruction—and do so now, as a reward for the terror of October 7? How can they hypocritically call for two states for two peoples without noting that the Jewish State will always welcome Arabs while the Palestinian territories are Judenrein? How do they call for de-escalation and ceasefires without realizing that one side will use that quiet to resume their quest to create the next revolution in artificial intelligence, medicine or agriculture, while the other will use it to rearm and rebuild its terror tunnels? How do they claim to champion peace and coexistence without noting that it is one side's dream and the other's nightmare?

How can they consistently ignore the full picture?

IV. "Take your son, your only one, the one whom you love—Yitzchak—and go to the land of Moriah and offer him up there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, the one that I will show you."³

How could it be? Avraham and Sarah had waited for the birth of this child for decades. Finally, and miraculously, he was born, and it was he who would carry forward the covenant, mission and destiny that G-d had chosen for Avraham, whom He knew "would teach his children and his household the way of G-d, doing what is right and just."⁴

And now G-d is asking his beloved Avraham to sacrifice his future in an act that would contradict every principle of righteousness and justice that he had taught the world! Avraham, who had always walked before G-d,⁵ anticipating⁶ and identifying with⁷ His every command, was being asked to do the incomprehensible. The happy outcome of Yitzchak being spared was certainly welcome, but it did not resolve the overwhelming questions that arose along the way to the mountaintop.

If Sodom is where G-d and His judgment are made vividly clear, Moriah is where He and His ways are most hidden and mysterious. Yet it is the place consecrated forever as G-d's Temple on Earth, where He will be most visible—b'har Hashem yeira'eh⁸—and it is the story that we read from the Torah on Rosh Hashanah and repeatedly invoke in its prayers and rituals, as the shofar represents the horn of the ram that was offered in place of Yitzchak. We may deeply admire and take pride in our forefather Avraham's heroic willingness to sacrifice that which was dearest to Him for G-d, but is the Akeidah the fitting thing to highlight on G-d's Day of Judgment? Avraham's words in praying for Sodom resonate here: "What a desecration it would be for You to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous like the wicked. . . . Shall the Judge of all the Earth not do justice?"⁹

V. The Israeli government, army and people are imperfect. Technical mistakes will cause their bombs to kill those they did not target, and the horror and trauma of war will even lead some of their soldiers to commit war crimes. Politicians are always complicated, security cabinets and army chiefs of staff may make poor strategic decisions, and some within the government, army and citizenry who have had enough of Arab intransigence will call for vengeance and population transfer. In the thick of an existential war with an enemy explicitly committed to its destruction, Israel has not made it a priority to clearly explain its actions or address valid issues that others consider pressing. These are the bugs, not the features, of the Israeli war effort. Yet these imperfections are repeated so often that they have become a mantra among Israel's critics, used to characterize—or, perhaps more accurately, to condemn—Israel and the Jewish people: the nation of goodness that is a source of blessing to the world and its leader in charity, morality and faith. It is infuriating and humiliating. The false and incomplete narratives portray the "Light unto the Nations" as a source of darkness. Klal Yisrael is defamed and disgraced. We are so very far from seeing the fulfillment of the Rosh Hashanah prayer of tein kavod Hashem l'amecha, that G-d deliver honor to His people.

VI. While Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, it is also the anniversary of Creation, the moment when G-d, in His kindness, created man in His image so that we would benefit from His ultimate goodness.¹⁰ G-d built the world

on kindness,¹¹ to offer opportunity and blessing to His creations—gomel chasadim tovim v'koneh hakol.¹² G-d's goodness is such that He wants only that which is good for us. "Remember us for life, O King Who desires life, and inscribe us for life."¹³ Even as we approach Him in Judgment, we are reminded that He "does not seek the death of the wicked but their improvement so that they may live."¹⁴

That is the truth. But is it the prevailing narrative? Already on that first Rosh Hashanah, the snake convinced Chavah that G-d was not giving but rather withholding from them the ultimate good.¹⁵ And ever since, do we believe G-d's narrative or the serpent's? Do Jews come to shul en masse on the High Holidays because they want to greet the King Who desires life—or because they are frightened for their lives? Do we fixate on U'netaneh Tokef because of its imagery of the caring shepherd lovingly tending to each member of its flock—or because of its dramatic and humbling depiction of G-d's judgment? How many rabbis find their schedules filled with people wondering aloud why G-d has showered them with so much good?

Several years ago, a longtime acquaintance of mine lost his wife, Rachmana litzlan, at a young age. She had battled cancer, and one summer, while their younger children were at camp, it returned with a vengeance. The couple decided not to share the news with their children to allow them to enjoy the summer.

When the kids came home, they found their mother still very aware, very alive, but very, very sick. Upon seeing her, one of them broke down and cried, "Mommy, why does this have to happen to you? Why you!?" She held her child and told her, "You know, I have had the most wonderful life. I was blessed with you and with your brothers and sisters. I was blessed with wonderful parents, with Daddy, with good friends and many good times. When I had all that, I never questioned, 'Why me?'" If I didn't ask it then, I won't ask it now."

No, we, and the world at large, neither appreciate G-d's goodness nor understand His judgment. The G-d of tzedakah u'mishpat stands constantly accused of being uncaring and unjust and making bad things happen to good people. The G-d of goodness, the source of blessing in the world and the source of all that is, Who models every virtuous trait, is demonized as the very opposite.

During the Yamim Noraim, we seek to restore G-d's good name. We pray for the day when the world He created will recognize Him and celebrate His goodness, honor His people, and value all those things that will bring the righteous to rejoice. That is the world we pray for—but for now, at best, His presence in our world can only be perceived in its hiddenness. If we search for Him in the ruins of Sodom, in the transparent, perfect exercise of fairness and judgment, we will not find Him. G-d is only visible to those whose vision can pierce the cloudy mystery of the Akeidah. The Days of Judgment revolve not around Sodom but around the Akeidah—on our belief in the G-d in Whose judgment we trust even as we cannot fully understand, and in the ultimate acknowledgment of the Yom Kippur confessions, "V'Atah tzaddik al kol haba aleinu—G-d, You are the righteous one in all that has befallen us."

VII. The central motif of our prayers on Rosh Hashanah is our hope for the restoration of G-d's honor and kingdom in His world; on Yom Kippur, our confessions, assumption of responsibility, and pleas for His forgiveness take center stage. It is a season of rebirth—hayom harat olam—our opportunity to move from anger to trust. A time to lift ourselves out of the frustration over all the terrible things "they" have been doing to us and instead reflect on what "we" can do better: to shift from being plagued by the shame and demonization heaped upon us and focus instead on how we can deepen the world's honor and love for G-d.

In this world, we will find G-d in the clouds hovering over Moriah that we approach in the trusting and committed footsteps of Avraham, leaving there with G-d's blessing to him: "I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; your descendants shall seize the gates of their enemies; and all the nations of the earth shall find blessing through your descendants, because you have heard My voice."¹⁶

Notes 1. Bereishit 18: 21. 2. Bereishit 19: 4. 3. Bereishit 22: 2 4. Bereishit 18: 19. 5. Bereishit 17: 1, 24: 38; Rashi 6: 9. 6. Yoma 28a, Bereishit Rabbah 5: 3. 7. Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 10: 2. 8. Bereishit 22: 14. 9. Bereishit 18: 25. 10. Derech Hashem 1: 2: 1. 11. Tehillim 89: 2. 12. Opening berachah of the Amidah. 13. Ibid. 14. Yechezkiel 33: 11. 15. Bereishit 3: 1–5. 16. Bereishit 22: 17–18.

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Rabbi Yakov Haber

Rosh Hashana: Foundation and Fundamentals

Our parsha begins with the gathering of the entirety of the people of Israel "I'ovrechha bivris" to cause them to enter into a covenant with Hashem. The concept of b'ris or covenant is an oft-repeating theme throughout the Torah: b'ris mila, b'ris Sinai, the b'ris of Bechukosai and the b'ris of Ki Savo. Essentially, it indicates that individual mitzvos are not to be viewed as isolated acts of Divine service but rather are part of a binding commitment forged between the Jewish people and Hashem Yisborach.^[1] The commentaries offer different explanations as to the reason why a new b'ris was required at this point in the midbar experience. (See, among others, Ramban and Abravanel.)

Another understanding emerges from the assertion of the Zohar that wherever the Torah uses the term "hayom" as in the beginning of our parsha, "Atem nitzavim hayom," it refers to Rosh Hashana. Why was the renewal of the b'ris scheduled for Rosh Hashana?

In addition, many ask why we don't seem to directly do teshuva on Rosh Hashana. No vidui or selichos are recited; hardly any mention of חטא appears.

The cryptic comment of Mishna Berura (584: 3) that we do not mention sin שלא ליתן פתוח פה למקטרג – not to allow for the prosecuting angels to mention our sins, leaves one guessing as to why? ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי? When else should one do teshuva if not on the Day of Judgment of the whole world?!

Among the many approaches offered in answer to this question, many commentaries present variations of the following theme: Teshuva primarily focuses on a return to Hashem, a correction of our deficiencies in His service and a commitment to strive ever higher in our life's mission of sanctity charged by our Creator. But a prerequisite to pursuing those lofty corrective and additive goals is to recognize the core truths of the Existence of the Creator and the fundamental purpose of His creating us. In the famous language of Mesilas Yesharim (1: 1): "The foundation... and root of perfect service is that it should be clarified and realized by the individual what his obligation is in the world and toward what he shall direct his... sights in all that he strives for during his entire life." Consequently, although Rosh Hashana is filled with "thoughts of Teshuva,"^[2] we don't focus on actually "doing" teshuva. Rather, the day is dedicated to realigning our priorities in our lives based on the fundamental truths upon which our mission is built. What specific concepts are highlighted?

Firstly, we restate the fundamentals of our belief system which inform our entire life. Rav Yosef Albo, in his Sefer Ikkarim (1: 4), establishes that the three core principles of faith – from which all of the Rambam's famous list of 13 emerge – are Existence of G-d, the Giving of the Torah and Divine Providence including Reward and Punishment.^[3] He further explains that these three principles are the subject of the three middle blessings of the musaf prayer of Rosh Hashana, the climax of the entire prayer service. The first blessing, that of malchuyos, focuses on G-d's Existence, expressed through the concept of kingship, his total mastery of the entire universe. Then, the second blessing, that of zichronos, discusses Divine Providence as well as Divine judgment which is a manifestation of the former core concept. Finally, the third blessing, that of shofaros, highlights Divine Revelation which is manifested by the giving of the Torah and the future Revelation in the messianic era which will cause the truth of Torah to be accepted by the entire world. The blessing begins "You have revealed Yourself to Your holy nation... when, our King, You revealed Yourself on Mount Sinai..." and ends with verses about the shofar of the final redemption.^[4]

Secondly, many explain that the theme of declaring Hashem as King which permeates the entire Rosh Hashana service, is fused into the very blessing of kedushas hayom of every amida and is mentioned hundreds of times in the piyutim, reinforces our commitment to the Master of the world's plan for us as obedient servants. "We are your servants and You are our king; we are your children and You are our Father." The fundamental awareness and acceptance of this truth, kabbalas ol malchus shamayim, is meant to obligate and add a greater sense of urgency to the corrective process of teshuva.

Thirdly, Rav Soloveitchik noted that the blessing of zichronos clearly highlights the concept of b'ris. Most of the pesukim quoted in this blessing mention b'ris^[5] and the blessing ends with "zocher hab'ris." It has been explained that on Rosh Hashana both Hashem and the Jewish people "renew their vows" through "chiddush hab'ris," recommitting to the covenant of Sinai. Perhaps this is the connection the above-mentioned Zohar sees between the day of Rosh Hashana and the renewal of the covenant in our parsha; Rosh Hashana would always be designated as the day of chidush hab'ris. Based on this, it is possible to explain the need for another covenant in our parsha even after one was already forged. The Torah is teaching us that there is a need especially on Rosh Hashana – and in a smaller way, even every day^[6] – to renew this same commitment.

Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva 3: 3) writes that beinonim are neither inscribed for life nor death on Rosh Hashana; rather, their judgment is placed in abeyance until Yom Kippur. If they do teshuva in the interim, they are inscribed for life; if not, the opposite occurs. Many commentaries question why it is insufficient for the beinoni just to do one mitzvah in between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in order to be judged as a tzadik since Rambam defines a tzadik as someone with more mitzvos than aveiros. Among the many approaches offered in answer to this question, Rav Yitzchak Hutner (Pachad Yitzchak, Rosh Hashana, 18) suggests that the status of tzadik, beinoni and rasha is not determined merely by the quantitative number of merits and sins the person has done. Otherwise, one could switch in the same day from being a tzadik to a beinoni to a rasha and back multiple times! This is highly illogical to assume. Rav Hutner therefore explains that these categories are “middos b’nefesh ha’adam,” characteristics of the individual’s soul. A tzadik is someone who is fully committed to keeping the d’var Hashem. Even if he occasionally sins, his trajectory is always to repent and climb the ladder of avodas Hashem ever higher. A beinoni is only occasionally committed to Divine service; at other times, his focus is self-service. Consequently, becoming a tzadik cannot be accomplished merely by doing one extra mitzvah; it is only achieved by changing one’s entire attitude from occasional commitment to total commitment. Perhaps we can suggest that this is similar to the concept of chiddush hab’ris, one of the primary themes of Rosh Hashana. Rav Hutner’s approach allows for this to occur, b’dieved, even during the Aseres Yemei Teshuva, allowing one to merit being inscribed in the Book of Life.

May we all experience a renewed commitment to the foundational aspects of the service of Avinu Malkeinu, and may all of Klal Yisrael merit a year of blessing, of the return of all of the hostages, of individual and national salvation and everlasting peace in the Holy Land בנין בית המקדש במהרה בימינו

אמן!
[1] Also see Y’tzias Mitzrayim: The Source of Kabbalas Ol Malchus Shamayim where the Avudraham is quoted who explains that reciting a birchas hamitzva frames the performance of the commandment within the context of total commitment.

[2] Rav Y. D. Soloveitchik explained the famous words of the Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva 3: 4) that the shofar awakens within us the need to return to G-d and the folly of meaningless life activities which often pre-occupy our time as indicating this “hirhur teshuva” mindset.

[3] The Rambam’s list of 13 neatly fit into these three as sets of the first 5, the middle 4 and the final 4 (ibid.).

[4] Contrast this approach with that of Rav Soloveitchik (Yemei Zikaron) that the blessing refers to three occasions of revelation: that of Sinai, that of the future, and that of the present during the High Holidays during which the Jewish people gather in intense prayer and introspection.

[5] The Rav even emended the common nusach in the siddur, adding the verse “זכר לעולם בריתו דבר צוה לאלף דור” which appears in earlier versions of the machzor (including that of Rambam), explaining that the verse “זכר עשה” neither talks of Hashem’s remembering us nor mentions b’ris.

[6] See article mentioned in footnote 1.

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The Teshuvah Beyond Teshuvah

Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

Man’s struggle for self-transformation—his never-ending battle for spiritual growth—often feels as unsatisfying as it is ennobling. He grasps at the rungs of moral elevation, guided by the familiar maps of teshuvah, yet even assiduous adherence can leave him plagued by doubt. His recognition and profound regret of past misdeeds may be sincere, and his commitment to avoid previous paths resolute; still, as Yom Kippur approaches, the exhaustiveness of effort does not yield confidence. Can one ever say with surety that he has truly repented?

Rav Kook captures this unease in the introduction to Orot HaTeshuvah: teshuvah is at once “the easiest commandment”—for a stirring of the heart already counts—and “the most difficult,” for it has not yet been fully effectuated in life (Orot HaTeshuvah, intro). Unlike mitzvot that are performed by deed or recitation, this commandment’s fulfillment resists the

testimony of eye and ear. Precisely this intangibility, Rav Soloveitchik suggested, explains Maimonides’ reluctance to list teshuvah itself as a mitzvah, choosing instead its verbal correlate, viduy (confession) (see Hilkhot Teshuvah 1: 1, and R. Soloveitchik’s analysis).

With so crucial an essential of Judaism residing beyond our concretized perceptions, it is no wonder that the spiritual aspirant lives with uncomfortable insecurity. Into this anxiety breaks the Talmud’s tantalizing promise: there is a teshuvah beyond teshuvah, a return capable not only of atonement but of transformation—indeed, of retroactive conversion (Yoma 86b). We need not be satisfied with the gracious commutation of z’donot (intentional sins) into sh’g a g o t (unwitting sins). We are told of teshuvah me-ahavah—repentance motivated by love—which turns intentional misdeeds into zechuyot, merits (Yoma 86b).

Yet the penitent greets this concept with ambivalence: exhilarated by its promise, tortured by its distance. Teshuvah mi-yirah (repentance from fear) has recognizable steps in the poskim and the ba’alei musar; teshuvah me-ahavah, by contrast, is known to us chiefly by name. Its instructions seem cloaked in mystery; we are left with a luminous phrase, whose promise is matched by an enigmatic concealment.

The Minchat Chinukh whets the appetite further by attributing an additional quality to teshuvah me-ahavah. The Talmud speaks of four divisions of atonement (arba’ah chillukei kapparah): sometimes teshuvah alone expiates; sometimes it requires Yom Kippur; sometimes afflictions; and, for the gravest sins, even death (Yoma 85b). The Minchat Chinukh (#364) suggests a “shortcut”: teshuvah me-ahavah can grant immediate atonement, bypassing the four stages. He adduces a Yerushalmi in which Prophecy declares that the sinner must die, yet God Himself says, “Let him repent, and he will be forgiven”—apparently even for a capital-level wrong. Since this seems to contravene the four-fold scheme, it must be speaking of a qualitatively different teshuvah—namely, teshuvah me-ahavah.

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, the Netziv, adds a decisive touch in his biblical commentary: teshuvah from fear is, at bottom, self-focused, driven by a desire to escape punishment; teshuvah from love is God-focused, seeking closeness to Him (Ha’amek Davar to Deut. 30: 11). Hence its towering advantage: teshuvah mi-yirah, caught in human psychology, remains prey to doubt; teshuvah me-ahavah, grounded in attachment to the Almighty, grants a rare confidence and security—penitence that endures, lifting the penitent to a new spiritual plane.

Thus our interest is fully captured. The capacity to transform sin into merit, the promise of bypassing the arba’ah chillukei kapparah, and the possibility of deep confidence in spiritual acquisition fuse into a single yearning: to understand and to live this wondrous ideal.

Talmud Torah as Teshuvah

A challenge posed by some acharonim to a comment of Nachmanides leads us out of our sense of utter directionless. “For this mitzvah,” declares the Torah, “is not too wondrous for you, nor is it far” (Deut. 30: 11). Rashi reads the verse generically, as embracing the corpus of Torah and mitzvot (Rashi ad loc.). Nachmanides, joined by Abravanel and Sforno, reads it specifically as referring to the mitzvah of teshuvah.

There is, however, a problem. Chazal already assigned the verse to the study of Torah (Eruvin 55a). How, then, may Nachmanides and the other rishonim apply it to teshuvah? The Netziv proposes that the verse can indeed encompass both talmud Torah and teshuvah (Ha’amek Davar, ibid.). R.

Aharon Kotler, and others among contemporary authorities, offer a more radical harmony: there are times when talmud Torah is itself teshuvah.

This key illuminates earlier sources, as R. Shlomo Wahrman notes in She’arit Yosef (IV, #26). The Sifrei to Ha’azinu glosses “Lekach” (“My teaching shall drop as rain”) as Torah (Deut. 32: 2), then reads Hosea’s exhortation (14: 3) “Take with you words and return to God” likewise as a reference to talmud Torah. Though Hosea’s verse seems to address teshuvah, the identification stands—if talmud Torah and teshuvah can coincide.

The Talmud (Berakhot 16a) also probes the juxtaposition (Num. 24: 6) of “tents” and “rivers,” concluding that just as rivers lift one from impurity to purity—mikveh—so do “tents” elevate the guilty to merit. Rashi explains: the “tents” are batei midrashot; Torah study is a mikveh, purifying Israel from their impurities. Again, if study itself is an instrument of return, the text reads plainly.

What, then, is the precise role of talmud Torah in teshuvah? Beyond the familiar components—recognition, remorse, resolve—what does study contribute? R. Wahrman, together with R. Yaakov Betzalel Zolty (Mishnat Ya’avetz, O.C. 54), suggests that we have here the secret of teshuvah me-ahavah.

Again, there is ample precedence of such indications in earlier literature. The Midrash identifies devotion to the Oral Torah—with its intricacies and demands—as a supreme expression of love of God.

Maimonides contrasts in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* (10: 5), takes the time to expand briefly on the concept of Torah study for its own sake as opposed to study for alternative reasons, defining study for its own sake as a study driven by “a love of the Master of the world who commanded [study]”, and concludes with a statement of the importance of all types of study, in the hopes that the eventual result will be study for its own sake. It is odd that the Rambam, with his legendary precision of order and organization, would expand on this concept in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, while in its apparently more appropriate home, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (3: 5), he refers to it in a much more terse manner. Perhaps the depths of the Maimonides’ intentions are now clear. In *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, where the concern is merely the fulfillment of the mitzvah of Torah study, Maimonides felt no need to expand on the distinction between Torah for its own sake and other motivations for study because both effect a realization of the commandment of Torah study. However, the utilization of talmud Torah for the purposes of teshuvah require more than mere fulfillment of the technical talmud Torah; it requires a study motivated by pure love.

Therefore

Maimonides deals with the distinction in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, because it is there that the differentiation is crucial. (Rabbi Wahrman quotes Rabbi Nachman David Londinsky to this effect.) To apply this truth, we must understand how Torah study effects teshuvah. The realms of teshuvah and talmud Torah intersect on two levels.

1) Shared goals. Sin degrades and distances. It creates a void between man and God—not only psychologically, but metaphysically. The sinner tells himself God is not watching; eventually, he believes it. When he awakens, he longs to bridge the very gap he once courted; from the bottom of the abyss, he reaches upward with new urgency. His immediate method is teshuvah; his ultimate goal is closeness to the Father he had spurned.

The scholar’s goal overlaps: he, too, seeks proximity to God. His method differs: he traverses the revealed word—Torah—reaching back to Sinai. Distinct paths, common destination. When love propels the penitent, his path converges with the scholar’s: talmud Torah becomes the most effective vehicle for teshuvah.

With the Temple destroyed, the last vestige of the sacrificial order became “u’neshalemah parim sefateinu—our lips shall substitute for bulls” (Hoshea 14: 3). Since we cannot offer sacrifices, we learn about them. On this basis arose the daily recital of biblical and mishnaic passages about offerings—viewed by at least one Rishon as a biblical obligation. The Talmud itself portrays God advising Abraham: when the people cannot bring offerings, involvement with their study parashiyot will suffice.

This arrangement spurred halakhic speculation: if one were stranded without a shofar on Rosh Hashanah, might learning its laws discharge the obligation? The Chofetz Chaim, in the introduction to *Likutei Halakhot* on the laws of sacrifices, limits the substitution to korbanot; others disagreed. Why the distinction? Perhaps because sacrifices were not ordinary mitzvot; they were the means of worship, the modality of meeting God. In later generations, only talmud Torah could approximate that relationship—not as a substitute performance of the commandment, but as an alternate connection, an initiated conversation where the Temple’s destruction had interrupted it.

2) Gradual transformation. The penitent seeks not merely to clear his name but to become different: to transform consciousness, refine character, and elevate being. Immersion in Torah lishmah—in constant contact with the holy—cannot leave one untouched. Intellectual rigor refines moral contours; the direction of one’s thinking fine-tunes the deeper elements of personality. Religious understanding sharpens spiritual perception. The longer one lives within Torah’s categories, the more one’s instincts come to align with them. In this way, talmud Torah and teshuvah walk hand in hand, nourishing one another.

Teshuvah as Transformation

We return to the core Talmudic distinction. Teshuvah mi-yirah converts intentional sins into inadvertent ones; teshuvah me-ahavah converts intentional sins into merits (Yoma 86b). Rav Soloveitchik explained: one penitent regards his past as a mistake to be erased; he seeks only to start anew. This is teshuvah mi-yirah: the past is reclassified as sh’gagah, and accountability is lifted. Another penitent, however, does not wish to discard the past. Grounded in ahavah, he wants to do something positive with life; he harvests the painful wisdom of failures and converts them into guides. His sins do not merely vanish; they become assets in the service of God. Such teshuvah me-ahavah cannot rest on raw emotion alone. It requires deliberation, mature insight, and a developed consciousness—the fruits of intensive Torah study. Without that disciplined re-education of mind and heart, the instinct to “make good” on the past lacks reliable compass. Talmud Torah provides it.

The Midrash deepens this portrait. After his sin and expulsion, Adam meets Cain, himself in the aftermath of tragedy. Cain reports that he has done

teshuvah. Adam, astonished, responds with the Psalm of Shabbat. What is the connection? Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht of Kerem B’ Yavneh explained: An earlier comment of the Midrash dealt with the perplexing language of one of the verses describing the creation of the world. At the very end of the process of creation, we are informed that God finished his work “on the seventh day”, although we know that God too rested on that day. The Midrash offers a parable to explain: Imagine a carpenter slamming a hammer into a board, lifting his hammer and dropping it, lifting and dropping, over and over again. God’s work before the seventh day is comparable to the lifting of the hammer, an active, purposeful movement; and his creation for the seventh day itself is compared to the passive, almost reflexive action of dropping the hammer.

So with teshuvah: it is the subtle re-creation of the self. Externally, the body is unchanged; to the casual eye, nothing has happened. Inwardly, an entirely new human being is being formed. That depth of transformation—beneath the surface—is sustained only by the steady inculcation of spiritual values that extended contact with Torah engenders.

This necessity of sustained study appears when the Talmud teaches that chilul Hashem (desecration of God’s Name) is so grave that there is no atonement in this world (Yoma 86a). Rabbenu Yonah, in *Sha’arei Teshuvah*, holds out one hope: prolonged involvement in Torah. R. Yitzchak Hutner explains: chilul Hashem warps a person’s very sense of life’s seriousness; only the sustained realignment of the Torah can recalibrate such skewed perspective.

This leads to a final refinement: ahavah in Pirkei Avot is praised when it is “not dependent on a thing”—ahavah she’einah teluyah badavar (Avot 5: 16). The Yachin explains this as almost purely instinctive love, akin to love of an idea or of a discipline. To relate to Torah in this way is deeply laudable. The Sochachover Rebbe (Avnei Nezer), in the introduction to *Eglei Tal*, addresses those who feel guilty for the joy they feel in learning, fearing it detracts from lishmah. He reassures them: when one genuinely delights in Torah, one has reached the highest form of study lishmah.

In this light we can gather the pieces. Teshuvah me-ahavah asks for more than avoidance of punishment; it asks for re-creation—of instinct, of reflex, of love. Torah study is the workshop of that re-creation. It supplies the grammar and music of God’s world; it restores the conversation that sacrifices once embodied; it guides the penitent to harvest wisdom from failure; it slowly re-forms the contours of the soul.

And so, returning to the opening anxieties: the mitzvah that eludes our senses can nonetheless yield confidence. The confidence does not come from a flash of feeling, but from a life quietly, stubbornly refashioned by Torah. The “bypass” of the arba’ah chillukei kapparah is not a trick; it is the natural consequence of a penitent whose love of God has become his mind’s native language. His z’donot turn to zechuyot not by magic but by metabolism: the very energies once misdirected now fuel service. What was darkness becomes light’s contrast; the abyss becomes the launching point for ascent. The aspiration, then, is to a sensitivity refined to the point where one feels an automatic identification, an instinctual love, with the values he encounters in his Torah study. The hope, then, is that teshuvah and talmud Torah will walk hand in hand, each enhancing the other and nourishing the other’s growth, providing the security of spiritual accomplishment as the impetus for a glorious future of ascendances on the ladder of spiritual and moral greatness.

from: The **Rabbi Sacks Legacy** <info@rabbisacks.org>

date: Sep 18, 2025, 11:15 AM

subject: Why Be Jewish? (Nitzavim)

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Why Be Jewish?

NITZAVIM

Written by Rabbi Sacks in 2012

In the last days of his life, Moses renews the covenant between God and Israel. The entire book of Devarim has been an account of the covenant—how it came about, what its terms and conditions are, why it is the core of Israel’s identity as an am kadosh (a holy people) and so on. Now comes the moment of renewal itself, a national rededication to the terms of its existence as a holy people under the sovereignty of God Himself.

Moses, however, is careful not to limit his words to those who are actually present. About to die, he wants to ensure that no future generation can say, “Moses made a covenant with our ancestors but not with us. We didn’t give our consent. We are not bound.” To preclude this, he says these words:

“It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today.”

Deut. 29: 13-14

As the commentators point out, the phrase “whoever is not here” cannot refer to Israelites alive at the time who happened to be somewhere else. That

condition would not have been necessary since the entire nation was assembled there. Moses can only mean “generations not yet born.” The covenant bound all Jews from that day to this. As the Talmud says: we are all *mushba ve-omed meHar Sinai*, “foresworn from Sinai” (Yoma 73b, Nedarim 8a). By agreeing to be God’s people, subject to God’s laws, our ancestors obligated us all.

Hence one of the most fundamental facts about Judaism. Converts excepted, we do not choose to be Jews. We are born as Jews. We become legal adults, subject to the commands and responsible for our actions, at the age of twelve for girls, thirteen for boys. But we are part of the covenant from birth. A *bat or bar mitzvah* is not a “confirmation.” It involves no voluntary acceptance of Jewish identity. That choice took place more than three thousand years ago when Moses said, “It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with ... whoever is not here with us today,” meaning all future generations, including us.

But how can this be so? Surely a fundamental principle of Judaism is that there is no obligation without consent. How can we be bound by an agreement to which we were not parties? How can we be subject to a covenant on the basis of a decision taken long ago and far away by our distant ancestors?

The Sages, after all, raised a similar question about the Wilderness Generation in the days of Moses who were actually there and did give their assent. The Talmud suggests that they were not entirely free to say ‘No.’ “The Holy One, blessed be He, suspended the mountain over them like a barrel and said: If you say ‘Yes,’ all will be well, but if you say ‘No,’ this will be your burial-place.”

Shabbat 88b

On this, R. Acha bar Yaakov said: “This constitutes a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the covenant.” The Talmud replies that even though the agreement may not have been entirely free at the time, Jews asserted their consent voluntarily in the days of Ahasuerus, as suggested by the Book of Esther.

This is not the place to discuss this particular passage, but the essential point is clear. The Sages believed with great force that an agreement must be made freely in order to be binding. Yet we did not agree to be Jews. We were, most of us, born Jews. We were not there in Moses’ day when the agreement was made. We did not yet exist. How then can we be bound by the covenant?

This is not a small question. It is the question on which all others turn. How can Jewish identity be passed on from parent to child? If Jewish identity were merely racial or ethnic, we could understand it. We inherit many things from our parents – most obviously our genes. But being Jewish is not a genetic condition, it is a set of religious obligations. There is a halachic principle: *zachin le-adam shelo be-fanav*, “You can confer a benefit on someone else without their knowledge or consent” (Ketubot 11a). And though it is doubtless a benefit to be a Jew, it is also in some sense a liability, a restriction on our range of legitimate choices, with grave consequences if we transgress. Had we not been Jewish, we could have worked on Shabbat, eaten non-kosher food, and so on. You can confer a benefit upon someone without their consent, but not a liability.

In short, this is the question of questions of Jewish identity. How can we be bound by Jewish law, without our choice, merely because our ancestors agreed on our behalf?

In my book *Radical Then, Radical Now*[1] I pointed out how fascinating it is to trace exactly when and where this question was asked. Despite the fact that everything else depends on it, it was not asked often. For the most part, Jews did not ask the question, ‘Why be Jewish?’ The answer was obvious. My parents are Jewish. My grandparents were Jewish. So I am Jewish. Identity is something most people in most ages take for granted.

It did, however, become an issue during the Babylonian exile. The prophet Ezekiel says, “What is in your mind shall never happen - the thought, ‘Let us be like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, and worship wood and stone’” (Ez. 20: 32). This is the first reference to Jews actively seeking to abandon their identity.

It happened again in rabbinic times. We know that in the second century BCE there were Jews who Hellenised, seeking to become Greek rather than Jewish. There were others who, under Roman rule, sought to become Roman. Some even underwent an operation known as *epispasm* to reverse the effects of circumcision (in Hebrew they were known as *meshuchim*) to hide the fact that they were Jews.[2]

The third time was in Spain in the fifteenth century. That is where we find two Bible commentators, Rabbi Isaac Arama and Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel, raising precisely the question we have raised about how the covenant can bind Jews today. The reason they ask it while earlier commentators did not was that in their time – between 1391 and 1492 – there was immense pressure on Spanish Jews to convert to Christianity, and as many as a third may have done

so (they were known in Hebrew as the *anusim*, in Spanish as the *conversos*, and derogatively as *marranos*, “swine”). The question “Why stay Jewish?” was real.

The answers given were different at different times. Ezekiel’s answer was blunt: “As I live, declares the Lord, God, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be King over you” (Ezek. 20: 33). In other words, Jews might try to escape their destiny but they would fail. Even if it were against their will, they would always be known as Jews. That, tragically, is what happened during the two great ages of assimilation, fifteenth century Spain and in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In both cases, racial antisemitism persisted, and Jews continued to be persecuted.

The Sages answered the question mystically. They said that even the souls of Jews not-yet-born were present at Sinai and ratified the covenant (Exodus Rabbah 28: 6). Every Jew, in other words, did give their consent in the days of Moses even though they had not yet been born. Demystifying this, perhaps the Sages meant that in their innermost hearts, even the most assimilated Jew knew that they were Jewish. That seems to have been the case with public figures like Heinrich Heine and Benjamin Disraeli, who lived as Christians but often wrote and thought as Jews.

The fifteenth-century Spanish commentators found this answer problematic. As Arama said, we are each of us both body and soul. How then is it sufficient to say that our soul was present at Sinai? How can the soul obligate the body? Of course the soul agrees to the covenant. Spiritually, to be a Jew is a privilege, and you can confer a privilege on someone without their consent. But for the body, the covenant is a burden. It involves all sorts of restrictions on physical pleasures. Therefore if the souls of future generations were present but not their bodies, this would not constitute consent.

Radical Then, Radical Now is my answer to this question. But perhaps there is a simpler one. Not every obligation that binds us is one to which we have freely given our assent. There are obligations that come with birth. The classic example is a crown prince or princess. To be the heir to a throne involves a set of duties and a life of service to others. It is possible to neglect these duties. In extreme circumstances it is even possible for a monarch to abdicate. But no one can choose to become heir to a throne. That is a fate, a destiny, that comes with birth.

The people of whom God Himself said, “My child, My firstborn, Israel!” (Ex. 4: 22) knows itself to be royalty. That may be a privilege. It may be a burden. It is almost certainly both. It is a peculiar post-Enlightenment delusion to think that the only significant things about us are those we choose. For the truth is that we do not choose some of the most important facts about ourselves. We did not choose to be born. We did not choose our parents. We did not choose the time and place of our birth. Yet each of these affects who we are and what we are called on to do.

We are part of a story that began long before we were born and will continue long after we are no longer here, and the question for all of us is: Will we continue the story? The hopes of a hundred generations of our ancestors rest on our willingness to do so. Deep in our collective memory the words of Moses continue to resonate. “It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with ... whoever is not here with us today.” We are each a key player in this story. We can live it. We can abandon it. But it is a choice we cannot avoid, and it has immense consequences. The future of the covenant rests with us.

[1] Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now*, London: HarperCollins, 2000, (published in North America as *A Letter in the Scroll*, New York: Free Press, 2000).

[2] This is what R. Elazar of Modiin means in *Mishnah Avot 3: 15* when he refers to one who “nullifies the covenant of our father Abraham.”

from: **Ben Olam Haba** <ben@halachafortoday.com>

date: Sep 18, 2025, 8: 15 PM

subject: Week In Review: Week of Parashas Nitzavim 5785

Halacha For Today:

Week In Review

Week of Parashas Nitzavim 5785

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<https://lp.constantcontactpages.com/sl/fl6127> WISHING ALL MY READERS AN UPLIFTING AND REJUVENATING SHABBOS KODESH
CURRENT TOPIC: HALACHOS OF YOMIM NORAIM Click Here to Print a PDF Version of WEEK IN REVIEW

Halachos for Sunday, September 14, 2025

1) It is the accepted Minhag in Klal Yisroel to say Hatoras Nedarim (annulling of vows) once a year in front of another three individuals (who act

as a Bais Din), usually on Erev Rosh Hashana. (See Chayei Adam Klal 138: 8 and Mateh Ephraim; Elef Hamagen Siman 581: 102) This serves to annul our vows (that are able to be annulled) so we can enter Rosh Hashana without the sin of unfulfilled vows, or the sins of not maintaining the performance of good deeds and customs that we have done three times or more, which would then in effect give them the status of something that was accepted as a vow. (This is why it is so important to always say "Bli Neder" when promising to do something or when undertaking something new (such as a chumrah or a minhag) which you aren't sure if you are able to always maintain).

If one doesn't understand the meaning of the words of Hatoras Nedarim (as it is printed in the Siddur or Machzor in Hebrew) and recites it anyhow, it isn't valid. (See Chayei Adam ibid.)

Therefore it is better to say it in English or any other language that you understand, or to read it and its translation beforehand so you will know what you are saying when you say it in Hebrew. (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch Siman 128: 16)

2) Women do not have the custom to say Hatoras Nedarim (One of the reasons for this is that doing so in front of 3 men is not in accordance with Hilchos Tznius).

Rather, a married woman should have her husband say to the "Bais Din" that his wife appointed him as a Shliach (messenger) to annul her vows, and they in turn say "Mutarim Lah- her [vows] are annulled".

Some Poskim say that women can rely on the communal Hatoras Nedarim recited at Kol Nidrei at the onset of Yom Kippur, and this is indeed what many women (especially single girls and women) rely on. (See Shu"t Teshuvos V'Hanhagos Vol. 1 Siman 338 and Orchos Rabbeinu from the Steipler Zatzal Vol. 2 page 171)

Halachos for Monday, September 15, 2025

1) It is customary [for men] to immerse in a kosher Mikvah on Erev Rosh Hashana, regardless if they are impure or not, in order to spiritually purify themselves in preparation for the holy day. (Rama Siman 581: 4) The accepted custom is to immerse in the Mikvah three times to signify the 3 times it says the word "Tahara- purity" in the Pasuk (Yechezkael 36: 25) : "V'Zarakti Aleichem Mayim Tehorim U'Tehartem MiKol Tumoseichem U'Mikol Giluleichem A'Taher Eschem - [Hashem says] I will sprinkle purified water upon you, and purify you from all your impurities, and from all your filthiness I will purify you" (See Mateh Ephraim Siman 581: 53) There are other Minhagim regarding how many times to immerse; some do it once, some do it seven times, others do it twelve times.

If you don't have an established personal custom regarding this, rely on the above and do it three times.

2) The earliest ideal time for going to the Mikvah is an hour before Chatzos, which is approximately 1:00 pm. (Mishna Berura Siman 581: 26. See www.MyZemanim.com for exact Halachic times in your specific locatin).

Halachos for Tuesday, September 16, 2025

1) One should constantly have "Teshuva" on his/her mind throughout the day on Erev Rosh Hashana.

Many have the Minhag to go to a grave of a Tzadik and walk around the grave and daven there that in the merit of the Tzadik Hashem should have mercy on us and forgive our sins and grant us a good year in the merit of the Tzadik. (See Rama Siman 581: 4 and Mishna Berura S"K 27. See also Chayei Adam Klal 138: 5 and Kitzur Shulchan Aruch Siman 128: 13 for more things to do- and not to do - and say at the graveside.)

2) If a no Tzadik's grave is accessible, the Poskim recommend going to any Jewish cemetery to daven. (Some even say that if no Jewish cemetery is available, one should go to the outside of a Aino-Yehudi cemetery, as just going to any cemetery reminds us that we will not live forever, and that we better start doing Teshuva before it's too late. However, it is best not to daven at the grave of a Rasha, an evil person.)

Halachos for Wednesday, September 17, 2025

1) One who is impure (due to nocturnal emissions) should preferably not visit a cemetery, especially on Erev Rosh Hashana, as it can be harmful to him. The Gaon of Vilna and others were extremely stringent about this. It is also better to visit the cemetery before eating, thus many have the Minhag to go immediately after Shacharis. (See Mateh Ephraim Siman 581: 50 and Elef Hamagen Os 109 and Chayei Adam Klal 138: 6)

It is a good custom to give Tzedakah to poor people prior to praying at the grave of the Tzadik (In fact it is best to give Tzedakah prior to praying anytime, as the Pasuk (Tehilim 17: 15) states "Ani B'Tzedek Echezeh Panecha- with [the Zechus of] Tzedaka will I approach Hashem [to pray]. See Rama and Mishna Berura ibid. See also Talmud Bava Basra 10b)

2) When entering the Shul on the eve of Rosh Hashanah (or when getting ready to daven, for women or anyone else davening at home) one should enter with a feeling of fear, trepidation and trembling [before Hashem] as the time

has arrived for each of us to take the defendant's seat to be judged by the supreme judge (Hashem).

It is extremely important to daven with Kavanah (concentration; understanding and meaning the words) on Rosh Hashanah. (Chayei Adam Klal 139)

Halachos for Thursday, September 18, 2025

1) Although during the entire year the Shemona Esrei is recited quietly as not to disturb the concentration of people standing near you, on Rosh Hashanah [and Yom Kippur] many have the Minhag to recite it louder than usual, as this brings them to be able to concentrate better.

Being that everyone has a Machzor on these days, we aren't concerned that reciting Shemona Esrei a little louder than usual will cause the people near you to lose concentration.

2) However, even if reciting it louder than usual, it should still not be recited too loud, and if one can concentrate fully even when davening low, as is done the whole year, that is still ideal. (Shulchan Aruch Siman 582: 9 and Mishna Berura S"K 24)

Halachos for Erev Shabbos Kodesh, September 19, 2025 Double Portion L'Kavod Shabbos Kodesh

Halachos for Erev Shabbos Kodesh

1) Should one cry and/or shed tears while davening on Rosh Hashanah [and Yom Kippur]?

The Arizal says that one who does not cry on these days can be sure that his/her Neshama isn't worthy and/or complete, and he/she should exert extra effort to atone for their sins, which are preventing the Neshama from reaching its full potential. (Cited in Mateh Ephraim Siman 582: 28. The Chida; Shiyurei Bracha Yoreh Deah 392: 3 maintains that even if one isn't really crying, he/she should still force himself to daven in a crying voice and that suffices.)

The Gaon of Vilna was of the opinion that one shouldn't cry on Rosh Hashanah, as we must be confident that we will come out of the judgment exonerated based on the Pesukim in Nechemia (Perek 8: 9-11) [which were said to the Jews on Rosh Hashanah of that year] "V'Al Tivku...Ki Kadosh HaYom...V'Al TisAtzvu- Do not cry...for today is a holy day... and do not be disheartened"

2) Does the Gaon of Vilna contradict the Arizal? The answer is no, and the explanation is as follows:

There are two kinds of crying. If one forces himself to cry from fear of a bad judgment even the Arizal would agree with the Gr"a that it is not in the spirit of Rosh Hashanah, and shouldn't be done. However, if one's soul causes them to cry involuntarily from within him/herself [during the prayers], even according to the Gaon of Vilna, he will agree with the Arizal that there is no problem at all, with such an "inspired" prayer and it is actually commendable. (See Shu"t Teshuvos V'Hanhagos from Rav Moshe Sternbuch Shlita Vol. 2 Siman 268 for a more lengthy elucidation of the above explanation)

Halachos for Shabbos Kodesh

1) After Maariv on the first night of Rosh Hashana it is customary to bless everyone you meet with a special greeting of "L'Shana Tova Techasev [V'Techasem] [L'Alter] U'Lchaim Tovim]-To a good year may you be written and signed/sealed immediately for a year of good life". (Rama Siman 582: 9 and Mogen Avraham quoted in Mishna Berura S"K 25)

According to some Poskim, the word "V'Techasem - and signed/sealed" is omitted, as the final signing of the decree happens on Yom Kippur and not on Rosh Hashanah. (Opinion of the Gaon of Vilna, the Ram"a M'Panu and the Levush quoted in Mishna Berura Siman 582: 25. Even though Tzadikim Gemurim and Reshaim Gemurim are signed on Rosh Hashana, that is only for their heavenly reward, but for "life" on this world, even Tzadikim are only signed on Yom Kippur, according to the Gaon of Vilna's explanation)

There is a third opinion that maintains that it is OK to say V'Techasem, as it is referring to the Chasima - the final ruling - which will take place on Yom Kippur, however, according to the word "L'Alter- immediately" should be omitted. (Opinion of the Kaf HaChaim and Mateh Ephraim Siman 583: 1) When someone extends the above blessing to you, it is customary to respond with "Gam Atem- you too", V'Chain L'Mar- So too [should the blessing go] for you", or some other variation of such a response. (Chavos Yair in Mekor Chaim end of Siman 582)

2) On the second night of Rosh Hashana according to the Taz and other Poskim the same greeting as the first night is said. However according to the Elya Rabbah, Pri Megadim, Gr"a and other Poskim, it is not recited. (See Mishna Berura Siman 582: 25)

The prevalent Minhag is like the latter opinion.

The blessing of "Gmar Chasima Tova- A good final judgment" is customarily said instead of "Kesiva V'Chasima Tova" when greeting people anytime from the second day of Rosh Hashana until Hoshana Rabbah.

ה' ישמר צאתך ובואך מעתה ועד עולם
Wishing You an Uplifting Shabbos

Ben Olam Haba Ben@HalachaForToday.com Important Disclaimers: The Halachos in this email and on my website are based on my personal understanding of the texts quoted, and are for learning purposes only, NOT for Psak Halacha L'Maaseh. If you have questions or require further source information, please email Ben@HalachaForToday.com and I will respond as soon as I can. For a Halacha L'Maaseh Psak, please contact your local Orthodox Rabbi. All Halachos on this site were written from an Ashkenazic perspective and follow the rulings of Ashkenazic Poskim. Though I endeavor to point out whenever Sephardic rulings and customs differ from what I write, by no means have I adequately researched the Sephardic point of view of any Halachos that I write and my dear Sephardic readers should please review all rulings with their own Chachamim.

from: **Ira Zlotowitz** <Iraz@klalgovoah.org>

date: Sep 18, 2025, 7:00 PM

subject: Tidbits • Parashas Nitzavim 5785 in memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz Parashas Nitzavim • September 20th • 27 Elul 5785

Nitzavim and Vayeilach are separated this year, as they are whenever Parashas Haazinu is leined on the Shabbos between Yom Kippur and Succos. Parashas Vayeilech is thus separated from Nitzavim to provide for Shabbos Shuva between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. (Unlike many of the other 'double parshiyos,' their separate laining is unrelated to the year being a leap year.)

Vehi Noam is omitted on Motzaei Shabbos.

Mevorchim Hachodesh is not recited before for Chodesh Tishrei. The molad for Chodesh Tishrei is Monday afternoon 12:10 PM and 7 chalakim.

The first opportunity for Kiddush Levana is Thursday night, September 25th. It is customarily delayed until Motzaei Yom Kippur. The final opportunity is the first night of Succos, late Monday night, October 7th at 12:11AM.

Pirkei Avos: Perek 5-6

Daf Yomi - Shabbos: Bavli: Zevachim 6 • Yerushalmi: Shekalim 28 •

Mishnah Yomis: Menachos 6:1-2 • Oraysa (coming week): Chagiga 3b-5b • Kitzur Shulchan Aruch: 131:17-132: End

Make sure to call your parents, in-laws, grandparents and Rabbi to wish them a good Shabbos. If you didn't speak to your kids today, make sure to connect with them as well!

Rosh Hashanah begins this Monday evening, September 22nd.

Tzom Gedaliah is on Thursday, September 25th.

Shabbos Shuva is next Shabbos, Parashas Vayeilech, September 27th.

Yom Kippur begins on Wednesday evening, October 1st.

Succos begins on Monday evening, October 6th.

NITZAVIM: On the last day of his life, Moshe gathers the people to enter them into an eternal covenant • If one goes astray and serves other gods thinking he will be spared, the curses stated in the Torah will be visited upon him • Hashem will not punish for hidden sins of another, rather only for not uprooting other's known misdeeds • When you witness the fulfillment of the berachos and kelalos you will be inspired to repent • The mitzvah of Teshuvah (alternatively, learning Torah) is not difficult; it is well within reach • Hashem lets you choose between life and death - choose life!

Haftarah: The haftarah of Nitzavim - "Sos Asis" (Yeshayah 61:10-63:9) - is the final haftarah of the Shiva D'nechemta. Yeshayah Hanavi proclaims that we will rejoice in Hashem with the final redemption when we emerge triumphant from exile, enveloped in glory and royalty, similar to a chassan and kallah.

Parashas Nitzavim: 40 Pesukim • No Mitzvos listed

כְּדִלִים וּכְרָשִׁים דִּקְנֵי דְלִתִּיד
(Selichos)

We begin Selichos with the words, כְּדִלִים וּכְרָשִׁים דִּקְנֵי דְלִתִּיד - Like poor and destitute people we knock on your door.

A person who falls on hard times financially and finds himself in need of assistance is still very hesitant to approach others for help. At first, he'll perhaps try to drop a hint to people close to him that things aren't going well, or some other subtle insinuation that help is needed. However, once a poor man reaches 'rock-bottom', he'll just walk up to the nearest rich man's door and bang in desperation.

The Gemara (Rosh Hashana 16b) says Kol shanah sherashah b'tchilasa, misasheres b'sofah, Any year which begins in poverty will ultimately be a prosperous year. In reality, this doesn't seem to always be the case. How can we understand this gemara?

Rav Shlomo Heiman zt"l quotes Rav Naftali Trop zt"l: We often find that those with immediate needs, such as those facing a health crisis or who are in need of a shidduch, daven most intently on Rosh Hashanah. The person who just lost his job is concentrating much harder than the fellow next to him who

is in a secure senior position at his firm. But in reality, on Rosh Hashanah we are all "between years" and "between jobs", as our fate for the year is yet to be determined. Although we often get to keep our positions, we are not guaranteed anything. And so, it would be worthwhile to begin the year on Rosh Hashanah with the mindset that we are poor, and so our Tefillos will be even more effective in bringing us the success that we ask for.

K'dalim uch'rashim dafaknu delasecha, we come into selichos asking, begging, like one who knows that all his possessions are only due to Hashem's graciousness and mercy.

Perhaps There is Among You

Adapted from a shiur given by the Tolner Rebbe shlita, Nitzavim 5778

פֶּן יִשְׁכַּח אֶת הַשְּׁמִי אֲשֶׁר אֱלֹהֵינוּ אָמַר שֶׁפָּתָהּ אֵלֶינוּ בְּכָל שָׁנָה יוֹם מַעַל
אֶלֶּה יֵּהְיֶה -- Pen -- woman or man a you among is there

אֲלֵינוּ לְעֵנָה
גִּוְיוֹם הָהֵם פֶּן יִשְׁכַּח אֶת הַשְּׁמִי שֶׁפָּתָהּ אֵלֵינוּ לְעֵנָה
or a family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from being with Hashem, our God, to go and serve gods of the nations; pen there is among you a root growing gall and horehound 1. Rashi writes: Pen there is among you – perhaps there is among you. Now, this is not the first time that the word “pen” is used. So why does Rashi first explain the word here? 2

Q1 Besides, if all Rashi is coming to define is pen, then why did he add to the opening words “there is among you,” only to repeat it after defining pen?

Q2 Furthermore, Rashi continues: “Whose heart turns away today – from accepting the covenant upon himself.” Isn't that obvious from the context?

What is Rashi adding? Q3 One Who Conceals His Sins Will Not Succeed Let us turn to the great Day of Judgment that is but days away. The Midrash³ connects the possuk⁴, One who conceals his sins will not succeed, but one who confesses and forsakes them will be granted mercy, to the first man, who blamed his sin on the woman whom You gave to be with me⁵, rather than repent, as it says⁶, And now, pen he put forth his hand. R' Aba bar Kahana said: The Holy One, Blessed is He, told him to repent, and he says Pen? “And now” can only refer to repentance, as it says⁷: And now, Israel, what does Hashem, your God, ask of you but to fear... -- This is the meaning of One who conceals his sins will not succeed. What can this Midrash possibly mean? Q4

You Appeared Upon Them With the Sound of the Shofar One of the central brachos of Rosh Hashannah Mussaf is the brachah of Shofros. In this brachah, the shofar blown on Har Sinai is mentioned several times. In addition, R' Saadya Gaon, in the third reason of his well-known ten reasons for blowing Shofar on Rosh Hashanah says that it is to remind us of the giving of the Torah. So what actually is the connection between Rosh Hashanah and giving the Torah? Q5 I Forge This Covenant We can answer that the main purpose of our Parshah, Nitzavim, was to forge a covenant between Bnei Yisrael and the Creator – For you to pass into a covenant of Hashem, your God, and into His oath that Hashem, your God, forges with you today⁸. The main point of the covenant was for Bnei Yisrael to accept upon themselves, unconditionally, to keep the promise they made, regardless of what the future may bring. For this reason, in the Holy Tongue, a covenant is nichras (translated here as forged), which literally means, completely cut away. Once something is completely cut away, there is no turning back. And With Whoever Is Not Here With Us Today We can now turn to the text of our Parshah. Bnei Yisrael were to enter a covenant. This required the participation of all, from the leaders to the simplest people of all ages, until the end of time. With whoever is here standing with us today before our God, and with whoever is not here with us today⁹. It also requires the realization that entering a covenant is total and irreversible, with no reservations. Thus, Mosheh immediately said: Pen there is among you a man or woman, or a family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from being with Hashem, our God, to go and serve gods of the nations; pen there is among you a root growing gall and horehound. He was stressing that entering a covenant is final, without any “pen,” or second thoughts. Pen There is Among You This opens up a new understanding of the Possuk. It is not just saying, “Perhaps there is among you...” but actually saying, There is a pen among you. This is what Mosheh was telling them: It could be that there is a little pen among you, a doubt, a hint of a regret. And if there really is such a pen, you should know that that slight doubt is considered as if his heart turns away today. The doubt, small as it may be, will spread like the venom of a snake, until it brings you to go and serve gods of the nations. Accordingly, Rashi explicitly defines pen only here, and he repeats the words there is among you. In effect, he is explaining the nature of this covenant; it is a declaration of war against pen. There can be no pen, no doubt, no perhaps, among them. From Accepting the Covenant Upon Himself For this reason, Rashi continues, “Whose heart turns away today – from accepting the covenant upon himself.” He is not just stating the obvious, as we originally thought. Rather, he was stressing that when it comes to “accepting the covenant upon himself,” there can be no pen, no doubt, whatsoever.

Clear as Day We can now understand the beginning of the Parshah: You are standing today¹⁰. Day, refers to clarity, as Rashi explains regarding the Possuk¹¹, Yaakov said, “Sell, as this day, your birthright to me,” meaning that the sale should be as clear as this day, and irrevocable. Similarly, your standing should be as clear as day, irrevocable and without any pen or doubt. You Are Standing Today Refers to Rosh Hashanah My holy forebear, the Rebbe the Meor Einayim¹², cites a Midrash that says You are standing today refers to Rosh Hashanah. This reflects the essence of Rosh Hashanah, through which one forges an irrevocable covenant with Hashem – clear as day, with no doubt whatsoever. And Now He Says Pen? The Gemara says¹³: Whose opinion do we follow today when we say [in Mussaf of Rosh Hashanah], “This is the day of the beginning of Your actions, in memory of the first day?” That of R’ Eliezer who says that the world was created in Tishrei. The Midrash¹⁴ explains that the world was created on the 25th of Ellul, and the first man was created on the first of Tishrei. On that very day, which subsequently became Rosh Hashanah, the first man sinned and fell from his exalted level. As cited above, Hashem said, And now, pen he put forth his hand. We explained: The Holy One, Blessed is He, told him to repent, and he says Pen? We now know that the first man could have returned to his former pristine level, but he says pen; he has a slight reservation, a slight doubt and, as a result, he was cast out of Gan Eden, and dying was decreed on him and on all his descendants forever after – all because of that little pen doubt. Referring to the pen of his forefather, Mosheh asked them if there was still a remnant of pen in them. On this holy day we must stand up in this powerful principle, uprooting all remnants of pen, and declaring in the words of the davening, “His name is certainty, and so too, His praise.” Thus, parents or teachers who are in situations in which they indeed must use strict justice against their charges, have to do so for the sake of Hashem, and not because they are angry. Simultaneously, they must beseech the Source of Mercy that they not become cruel. You Have Been Shown to Know That Hashem, He is God Regarding the day that the Torah was given amidst thunder and lighting, with the strong sounding of a shofar, it says¹⁵, “You have been shown to know that Hashem, He is God. Rashi there explains that the seven heavens were opened and they actually “saw” Hashem. These people had been enslaved in the defilement of Egypt, and had fallen to the lowest level possible. Presumably, many of them were filled with doubts – and even asked to return to Egypt¹⁶. When they gathered together at the bottom of the mountain and actually “saw” Hashem and that there was none other, all doubts were removed. This doubt-free state was passed on to future generations – by means of the sound of the Shofar. Recite Malchuyos to Accept Me As Your Sovereign The Gemara¹⁷ says that Hashem said: Recite on Rosh Hashanah Malchuyos, Zichronos, and Shofaros; Malchuyos, to accept me as your sovereign, Zichronos that your remembrance should ascend to me favorably, and through what? Through the Shofar. “Accept Me as your sovereign” refers to complete acceptance, unconditional and without doubt. This kind of acceptance is achieved through the shofar blast – a reminder of the Shofar at Mount Sinai, when the unity of Hashem was shown beyond a doubt, a pen or a perhaps. Shofar is an Abbreviation So it is incumbent upon us to get rid of the doubts, the perhaps, the pen. The blast of the Shofar aids us in this task; it brings us back to the stage before the first Pen was recited. The [שׁוֹפָר שֶׁפָּהַר רָאָה] [for abbreviation an is] shofar (שפר that us teach 18 Sefarim Holy other words, the shofar can purify a root growing gall and horehound – the doubts that stop a person from belief that Hashem is with him¹⁹. If I Am a King, Why Did You Not Come to Me? It is known that the great R’ Aharon of Karlin went up to be the Chazan for Shacharis of Rosh Hashanah. The Chazan generally begins with a melodious chanting of Hamelech, the king. Rav Aharon cried out the word and loudly burst into tears. He later explained that he was reminded of the story of R’ Yochanan²⁰, who, upon calling Vespasian “king”, was told, “If I am king, why did you not come to me?” We can learn from this story, that we must be steadfast in believing that Hashem is, was and always will be king. We Know That Hashem Performs Miracles for Us Each year, we continue to call out Hamelech, despite the yetzer Hara’s non-stop attempts to sow doubt in our hearts. Of course there are times throughout the year when we fall in this matter. Yet every year we gather strength and banish our doubts, so that we can unequivocally declare Hashem our sovereign. If we strengthen our simple belief that Hashem is among us, and that he is near us whenever we cry out to him, with no doubts, no pen, and no perhaps, we will merit a good decree and He will inscribe us and seal us for good life on this day of Judgment. Amen, KY”R

from: **Rav Immanuel Bernstein** <ravbernstein@journeysintorah.com>

date: Sep 18, 2025, 7: 14 AM subject: Morals and Meanings in Rosh Hashanah Rosh Hashanah Hashem, Kingship and the Jewish People

Rav Immanuel Bernstein

There are a number of paragraphs added to the third blessing of the Amidah for Rosh Hashanah, beginning with ובכן תן כבודך — And so, too, bestow Your fear, devoted to the subject of Hashem’s kingship and sovereignty over the world. Indeed, for the next ten days, this blessing will conclude with the words המלך הקדוש — The Holy King.

Our Honor or His?

In light of this, it is interesting to take note of the second paragraph where we ask ובכן תן כבוד לעמך — and so, too, give honor to Your people. Does this request not constitute a departure from the theme of Hashem’s kingship? The commentaries explain that in reality, the honor of the Jewish People and Hashem’s kingship are intimately bound up with one another. The ultimate success and perfection of humankind comes from people recognizing Hashem as their Creator and living their lives in accordance with His will. The most tangible basis for recognizing Hashem in the world is the success and well-being of His people Israel. When we thrive, the nations of the world see that there is a God and that He is involved with the world. When we suffer, they take this as an indication that He is distant. Thus the verse states in Hallel: [1] Not for our sake, Hashem, rather, give honor to Your name... Why should the nations say, “Where is your God?”

It is with this in mind that we request of Hashem on numerous occasions over the course of these days, עשה למען שמך — Act for the sake of Your name. With these words we are saying that through our well-being, awareness of Hashem’s name will be promoted and increased, and that is of ultimate benefit for the Divine plan for the world. This connection is expressed even more explicitly in words that we say during the Selichos prayers: בנו נקרא שמך — Your name is called through us, Hashem act for the sake of Your name.

This idea represents the full expression what it means for us to be “Hashem’s people.” Thus, within the context of our plea for awareness of Hashem as ruler of the world, we ask ובכן תן כבוד לעמך — And so, too, give honor to Your people. Having chosen us as His people, our honor and Hashem’s honor are intertwined.

Needless to say, our intent with these words is not to try and be magnanimous towards Hashem, as if to imply that it is in His interests to be kind to us, and we are just trying to help. Rather, we are saying that even if we should lack the means for Divine grace on our own merits, we plead that if for no other reason, Hashem at least favor us for the sake of His name.

A Nation’s Horizon

This idea is what lies behind the mystical concept of שכינות בגלות — the Divine presence in exile. As long as the Jewish People are in exile, awareness of the Divine presence has no natural vehicle for expression, and thus it is said to be “in exile” with them. Thus, the future redemption of the Jewish People will also involve the “redemption” of the Divine name.^[2]

Thus, we should note that with the entry of the idea of Hashem’s name into the equation, the horizons of our petitions on this day expand dramatically. Once we access this concept, we are no longer “merely” asking for a healthy and successful new year as “guardians” of Hashem’s name. The full awareness of Hashem as guiding the destiny of Jewish People comes not through our well-being in exile but through our redemption. Hence, our prayers turn toward the final redemption that will bring about total recognition of Hashem as ruler of the world.

Israel among the Nations

This historic role of representing Hashem’s name and message in the world has had repercussions over the generations for how certain other nations have related to the Jewish People.

When the people of Israel would go to war, Moshe would pray, קומה ה' ויפוצו — Arise Hashem and make your enemies disperse.^[3] Commenting on these words, Rashi says, “The enemies of Israel are the enemies of Hashem.”

On a fundamental level, their pathological and otherwise inexplicable hatred for the people of Israel is in revolt to Hashem’s message that we bear.

This idea finds acute expression in the nation of Amalek, who attacked the people of Israel for no apparent reason soon after they left Egypt. After that battle, Hashem declared that “there is a war between Hashem and Amalek for all generations.”^[4] What Amalek found so objectionable in the Jewish People, to the extent that they were willing to try an annihilate them, was the fact that they represent Hashem’s message in this world.

Thus, that verse begins by stating, regarding Amalek: כִּי יָד עַל כִּסֵּי ה' — It is a hand raised against the throne of God. Rashi comments on that verse that the Divine name יה is missing the two final letters of הוה, and the word כס (throne) is missing the final letter ט, “For neither the (Divine) name nor the throne are complete as long as Amalek exists.” Hashem’s “name” and “throne” represent an awareness and appreciation of His supervision and guidance of

the course of world events. Amalek are campaigning to eradicate any such awareness, and to that end they are fully willing to eradicate the nation that represents it.[5]

It is difficult to identify Amalek in our times as a distinct nation, however, as progenitors of a pitched anti-Semitic ideology, their vassals exist within many nations. Indeed, according to numerous commentators, when we say in our Rosh Hashanah prayers that in the future Hashem will תעביר ממשלת זיון מן הארץ — Remove the dominion of evil from the world, the reference is to Amalek, which suggests that they still exist.

The Mouth of Iniquity

This idea of opposing the message of Hashem as carried by the people of Israel also finds expression in the ongoing pathological vilification of the Jewish People, in which Israel can do no right and her enemies can do no wrong. There are nations calling for its outright destruction with impunity, nations who criticize and condemn Israel incessantly, yet whose crimes against their neighbors and even their own population elicit no criticism whatsoever. Various critical voices seem to lose all perspective, as well as any self-respect for their judicial faculties and balanced moral assessments. The people of Israel thus endure the soul-destroying experience of having their every innocent act blackened, and every sincere gesture thrown back in their face.

In our Rosh Hashanah prayers, we look forward to a time when עולתה תקפץ פיה — Iniquity will close its mouth. What is the concept of iniquity having a “mouth”? This refers to the defamatory and derogatory statements that are the mouthpiece of evil. Not only are they oppressive in themselves, they also breed a climate of antagonism that can then support and encourage actual acts of aggression against the people of Israel. In our times more than ever, we are witness to the power of words in shaping actions, and the arena of discussion and debate is as much a battlefield as the one where bullets and missiles fly.

We pray for פתחון פה למיחלים לך — Eloquent speech for those who are devoted to You. We ask for the words with which to ably and proudly represent Hashem, His message, and His people against the mouth of iniquity, until that mouth is closed and the beauty of Hashem’s word and His people will be recognized by all. May that time come speedily in our days!

B’virkas kesiva vachasima tova.

[1] Tehillim 115: 2.

[2] See Megillah 29a, which expounds the verse dealing with the return of the exiles (Devarim 30: 3) וישב ה' אלהיך את שבותך, and reads it as “And Hashem shall return along with you.” See also Beis HaLevi, Vayigash, s.v., al tira. Rabbeinu Yonah (commentary to Rif on Berachos chap. 5) explains in this vein the verse in Yeshayahu (45: 15): אכן אתה אל מסתתר אלהי ישראל מושיע: — Indeed, you are a hidden God, the God of Israel saves. The prophet is saying that for the most part Hashem’s presence in the world is concealed. That being said, the exception to this concealment is when He acts to save the people of Israel. A basic survey of the experiences of the Jewish People in the land of Israel over the last eighty years will provide more than ample expression to this comment of Rabbeinu Yonah.

[3] Bamidbar 10: 35.

[4] Shemos 17: 16.

[5] In a verse that we recite often, the prophet Zechariah (14: 9) foretells of a time when Hashem’s dominion will be recognized by all, והיה ה'למלך על כל הארץ ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד — Hashem will be King over the entire world, on that day Hashem will be One and His name will be one. Regarding the words יהיה ה' אחד — on that day, commentators point out that the word אחד is comprised of the letters hei, vav, and aleph. These represent the three missing letters from Hashem’s name and His throne, which will be restored in the future when the entire world recognizes His kingship.

Perhaps There is Among You

Adapted from a shiur given by the **Tolner Rebbe shlita, Nitzavim 5778**

לע"נ האשה החשובה מרת אסתר בת הרה"ח ר' זאב ע"ה נלב"ע י"ד סיון תשפ"ה נתנם ע"י בנה ידידנו הנגיד הנכבד רבי זאב מאשאווטש שליט"א פן יִשָּׁב בְּכָם אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה אוֹ מִן שְׂפָתָהּ אוֹ מִן אֶזְרָא שֶׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא הוֹסִיף לָנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְקַדֵּשׁ לְעַד תָּ

אֵלֵינוּ הַיּוֹמִים הַזֵּה פֶּן יִשָּׁב בְּכָם שֹׂחַךְ -- woman or man a you among is there Pen -- or a family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from being with Hashem, our God, to go and serve gods of the nations; pen there is among you a root growing gall and horehound

1. Rashi writes: Pen there is among you – perhaps there is among you. Now, this is not the first time that the word “pen” is used. So why does Rashi first explain the word here? Q1 Besides, if all Rashi is coming to define is pen, then why did he add to the opening words “there is among you,” only to repeat it after defining pen?

Q2 Furthermore, Rashi continues: “Whose heart turns away today – from accepting the covenant upon himself.” Isn’t that obvious from the context? What is Rashi adding?

Q3 One Who Conceals His Sins Will Not Succeed Let us turn to the great Day of Judgment that is but days away. The Midrash³ connects the possuk⁴, One who conceals his sins will not succeed, but one who confesses and forsakes them will be granted mercy, to the first man, who blamed his sin on the woman whom You gave to be with me⁵, rather than repent, as it says⁶

, And now, pen he put forth his hand. R’ Aba bar Kahana said: The Holy One, Blessed is He, told him to repent, and he says Pen? “And now” can only refer to repentance, as it says⁷: And now, Israel, what does Hashem, your God, ask of you but to fear... -- This is the meaning of One who conceals his sins will not succeed. What can this Midrash possibly mean?

Q4 You Appeared Upon Them With the Sound of the Shofar

One of the central brachos of Rosh Hashannah Mussaf is the brachah of Shofros. In this brachah, the shofar blown on Har Sinai is mentioned several times. In addition, R’ Saadya Gaon, in the third reason of his well-known ten reasons for blowing Shofar on Rosh Hashanah says that it is to remind us of the giving of the Torah. So what actually is the connection between Rosh Hashanah and giving the Torah?

Q5 I Forge This Covenant

We can answer that the main purpose of our Parshah, Nitzavim, was to forge Covenant between Bnei Yisrael and the Creator – For you to pass into a covenant of Hashem, your God, and into His oath that Hashem, your God, forges with you today⁸

. The main point of the covenant was for Bnei Yisrael to accept upon themselves, unconditionally, to keep the promise they made, regardless of what the future may bring. For this reason, in the Holy Tongue, a covenant is nichras (translated here as forged), which literally means, completely cut away. Once something is completely cut away, there is no turning back. And With Whoever Is Not Here With Us Today We can now turn to the text of our Parshah. Bnei Yisrael were to enter a covenant. This required the participation of all, from the leaders to the simplest people of all ages, until the end of time:

With whoever is here standing with us today before our God, and with whoever is not here with

us today⁹. It also requires the realization that entering a covenant is total and irreversible, with no reservations. Thus, Mosheh immediately said: Pen there is among you a man or woman, or a family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from being with Hashem, our God, to go and serve gods of the nations; pen there is among you a root growing gall and horehound. He was stressing that entering a covenant is final, without any “pen,” or second thoughts. Pen There is Among You This opens up a new understanding of the Possuk. It is not just saying, “Perhaps there is among you...” but actually saying, There is a pen among you. This is what Mosheh was telling them: It could be that there is a little pen among you, a doubt, a hint of a regret. And if there really is such a pen, you should know that that slight doubt is considered as if his heart turns away today. The doubt, small as it may be, will spread like the venom of a snake, until it brings you to go and serve gods of the nations. Accordingly, Rashi explicitly defines pen only here, and he repeats the words there is among you. In effect, he is explaining the nature of this covenant; it is a declaration of war against pen. There can be no pen, no doubt, no perhaps, among them. From Accepting the Covenant Upon Himself For this reason, Rashi continues, “Whose heart turns away today – from accepting the covenant upon himself.” He is not just stating the obvious, as we originally thought. Rather, he was stressing that when it comes to “accepting the covenant upon himself,” there can be no pen, no doubt, whatsoever. Clear as Day We can now understand the beginning of the Parshah: You are standing today¹⁰. Day, refers to clarity, as Rashi explains regarding the Possuk¹¹, Yaakov said, “Sell, as this day, your birthright to me,” meaning that the sale should be as clear as this day, and irrevocable. Similarly, your standing should be as clear as day, irrevocable and without any pen or doubt. You Are Standing Today Refers to Rosh Hashanah My holy forebear, the Rebbe the Meor Einayim¹², cites a Midrash that says You are standing today refers to Rosh Hashanah. This reflects the essence of Rosh Hashanah, through which one forges an irrevocable covenant with Hashem – clear as day, with no doubt whatsoever. And Now He Says Pen? The Gemara says¹³: Whose opinion do we follow today when we say [in Mussaf of Rosh Hashanah], “This is the day of the beginning of Your actions, in memory of the first day?” That of R’ Eliezer who says that the world was created in Tishrei. The Midrash¹⁴ explains that the world was created on the 25th of Ellul, and the first man was created on the first of Tishrei. On that very day, which subsequently became Rosh Hashanah, the first man sinned and fell from his exalted level. As cited above, Hashem said, And now, pen he put forth his hand. We explained: The

Holy One, Blessed is He, told him to repent, and he says Pen? We now know that the first man could have returned to his former pristine level, but he says pen; he has a slight reservation, a slight doubt and, as a result, he was cast out of Gan Eden, and dying was decreed on him and on all his descendants forever after – all because of that little pen doubt. Referring to the pen of his forefather, Mosheh asked them if there was still a remnant of pen in them. On this holy day we must stand up in this powerful principle, uprooting all remnants of pen, and declaring in the words of the davening, “His name is certainty, and so too, His praise.” Thus, parents or teachers who are in situations in which they indeed must use strict justice against their charges, have to do so for the sake of Hashem, and not because they are angry. Simultaneously, they must beseech the Source of Mercy that they not become cruel. You Have Been Shown to Know That Hashem, He is God Regarding the day that the Torah was given amidst thunder and lightning, with the strong sounding of a shofar, it says¹⁵, “You have been shown to know that Hashem, He is God. Rashi there explains that the seven heavens were opened and they actually “saw” Hashem. These people had been enslaved in the defilement of Egypt, and had fallen to the lowest level possible. Presumably, many of them were filled with doubts – and even asked to return to Egypt¹⁶. When they gathered together at the bottom of the mountain and actually “saw” Hashem and that there was none other, all doubts were removed. This doubt-free state was passed on to future generations – by means of the sound of the Shofar. Recite Malchuyos to Accept Me As Your Sovereign The Gemara¹⁷ says that Hashem said: Recite on Rosh Hashanah Malchuyos, Zichronos, and Shofaros; Malchuyos, to accept me as your sovereign, Zichronos that your remembrance should ascend to me favorably, and through what? Through the Shofar. “Accept Me as your sovereign” refers to complete acceptance, unconditional and without doubt. This kind of acceptance is achieved through the shofar blast – a reminder of the Shofar at Mount Sinai, when the unity of Hashem was shown beyond a doubt, a pen or a perhaps. Shofar is an Abbreviation So it is incumbent upon us to get rid of the doubts, the perhaps, the pen. The blast of the Shofar aids us in this task; it brings us back to the stage before the first Pen was recited. The [שׁוֹפָר פָּךְ הָרִאשׁוֹן לְעֵקֶב] for abbreviation an is) shofar (שׁוֹפָר) that we teach¹⁸ Sefarim Holy other words, the shofar can purify a root growing gall and horehound – the doubts that stop a person from belief that Hashem is with him¹⁹. If I Am a King, Why Did You Not Come to Me? It is known that the great R’ Aharon of Karlin went up to be the Chazan for Shacharis of Rosh Hashanah. The Chazan generally begins with a melodious chanting of Hamelech, the king. Rav Aharon cried out the word and loudly burst into tears. He later explained that he was reminded of the story of R’ Yochanan²⁰, who, upon calling Vespasian “king”, was told, “If I am king, why did you not come to me?” We can learn from this story, that we must be steadfast in believing that Hashem is, was and always will be king. We Know That Hashem Performs Miracles for Us Each year, we continue to call out Hamelech, despite the yetzer Hara’s non-stop attempts to sow doubt in our hearts. Of course there are times throughout the year when we fall in this matter. Yet every year we gather strength and banish our doubts, so that we can unequivocally declare Hashem our sovereign. If we strengthen our simple belief that Hashem is among us, and that he is near us whenever we cry out to him, with no doubts, no pen, and no perhaps, we will merit a good decree and He will inscribe us and seal us for good life on this day of Judgment. Amen, KY”R.

from: Rabbi Chanan Morrison <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>
date: Sep 18, 2025, 5: 31 AM
subject: Rav Kook on Rosh Hashanah: Blasts That Penetrate the Heart
Thu, Sep 18, 5: 31 AM (19 hours ago)
Rav Kook Torah
Rosh Hashanah: Blasts That Penetrate the Heart
“אַשְׁרֵי הָעָם יֹדְעֵי תְרוּעָה, ה’ בְּאוֹר פְּנִידָה יִהְיֶה.”
“Fortunate is the nation that knows the teruah-blast” (Psalms 89: 16).
What is so special about recognizing the sound of the shofar?
Rav Kook explained that in the shofar-blasts, one may hear the inner call of teshuvah.
This idea is illustrated in the following story:
The Wake-up Call
In one of the neighborhoods of Jerusalem, a group of workers was under pressure to complete a particular building, and they continued working during the Rosh Hashanah holiday.
When the neighbors realized what was happening, they immediately notified Rav Kook.
Shortly thereafter, a messenger of the Rav arrived at the construction site — with a shofar in his hand. He approached the workers, who were surprised to see him, and offered New Year’s greetings. He then announced that Rav

Kook had sent him to blow the shofar for them, in accordance with the obligation to hear the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. He respectfully asked them to take a break from their work and listen. The messenger then proceeded to recite the blessing and began to blow.
The words from the Rav and the sounds of the shofar achieved their goal. Each blast shook the delicate chords of the soul and awakened the Jewish spark in the hearts of the young workers. They set down their work tools and gathered around the man blowing the shofar. Some were so moved that they began to cry. The ancient blasts of the shofar, reverberating in the unfinished building, transported them back to their father’s house. They saw images of grandfather, the shtetl and the synagogue, a world of Jews standing in prayer. Questions began to pour out, one after another. What has happened to us? Where are we? What have we come to? The young men stood around the emissary, confused and absorbed in thought.
When the shofar-blowing was over, there was no need for words. The workers unanimously decided to stop working. Some asked the messenger if they could accompany him. They quickly changed their clothes and joined in the holiday prayers at Rav Kook’s yeshiva.
In an open letter from that time, Rav Kook wrote:
“A friendly word is effective; an expression of comradeship and respect will bring others close. Let us not forsake the good and straight path that is illuminated with love and goodwill, peace and friendship. We must break down the wall that divides brothers and speak heart to heart, soul to soul. Then our words will certainly be heard.
These children of ours will suddenly raise themselves up. And they will crown their powerful aspiration to build the land and the nation with the eternal ideals of sublime holiness.”
(Silver from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Olat Re’iyah vol. II, p. 329; Mo’adei HaRe’iyah, pp. 65-66)

from: YUTorah <yutorah@comms.yu.edu>
date: Sep 18, 2025, 6: 31 PM
YUTORAH IN PRINT • Nitzavim 5785
Dressed for Redemption
Rabbi Dr. Kenneth
In this week’s haftara, the last of the series of seven readings of comfort for the prophet Yeshayahu, we find a striking metaphor. The prophet describes the ideal redemptive and purposeful life in terms of physical clothing:
“I shall rejoice, rejoice in the Lord; my soul exults in my God; He has wrapped me in garb of rescue, on my shoulders mantle of righteousness, as a bridegroom attends in splendor, and a bride puts on her jewels” (Isaiah 61: 10).
Righteousness and salvation, intangible spiritual concepts, are here infused with physicality through their comparison to physical garb. For human beings, clothing functions both as a protective layer for the body and as a medium of communication that can express a person’s stature, priorities and even state of mind. The colorful coat of Yosef, the Torah’s demand that priests be properly clothed while performing the service in the Sanctuary, and Tamar’s use of garments for concealment and barter in her interaction with Yehuda are just a few biblical examples of the prominent role of physical clothing in our national culture.
In these contexts, clothing serves to show affection, signal distinctiveness, and express purpose – or disillusionment – within Biblical narrative and law. In our haftara, however, Yeshayahu adds another dimension to the notion of clothing. Here, clothing represents spiritual qualities rather than material wealth or emotional expression. In the prophetic metaphor, our relationships with God, community, and society can be thought of as being woven from spiritual threads, forming clothing that adorns our soul.
This idea was developed in greater detail by the Kabbalists, who speak about nishmatin de’azlin artilin, “souls that go unclothed.” This phrase is used to denote personalities suffering from a lack of righteous deeds of spiritual development. The Zohar teaches: “Happy are the righteous ... [their actions are] woven into garments of glory to be worn in the World to Come” (Zohar Vayechi, 224a). “Great is the portion of whoever is found worthy of those garments wherein the righteous are clad in the Garden of Eden. Those garments are made out of good deeds performed by a person in this world ... a human’s soul is sustained by these deeds and is clothed in garments of glory made out of them.” (Zohar, Vayakhel, 210a–210b).
Likewise, before donning the tallit, some recite this prayer: “I am about to wrap myself in the tzitzit [tallit]; So, too, may You wrap my soul ... in the light of the tzitzit. And just as I cover myself with the tallit in this world, so too may I merit to be worthy of the rabbinical dress and [spiritual] garment in the World to Come.”
Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik notes that the notion of spiritual garb is as old as the institution of clothing itself. When God fashioned clothes for Adam

and Chava after their first sin, we are told: “And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin (רִימָה) and clothed them” (Genesis 3: 21). The Midrash (Bereshit Rabba 20: 12), however, reads the verse slightly differently: “In Rabbi Meir’s Torah scroll it was found written: ‘Garments of light (רִימָה)’.” Apparently, the real challenge for Adam and Chava was not their need to cover themselves physically, but rather spiritually. It was their souls that felt dangerously exposed to the elements and which needed protection. The Rav notes the appropriateness of this Midrash being attributed to Rabbi Meir, whose two teachers – Elisha ben Abuya (also known as “Acher”) and Rabbi Akiva – embodied opposite models of clothing, physical and spiritual. For Acher rebelled against his people and the Torah. He became an agent of the oppressive Roman government and spent his latter days living in the lap of luxury. He ultimately died in his own bed, warm and protected in physical clothing, but his mutiny against God led him to die without any true legacy. His soul had become unclothed.

On the other hand, because of his steadfast loyalty to the Torah, Rabbi Akiva spent his final days as a fugitive, living a desperate untethered existence to avoid capture by Rome. Every night he would sleep in a different location. His body withered without the comfort of warm clothing. When captured, his death as a martyr was as far as can be imagined from the comfort of home. His body was raked with iron combs until he died stripped of even his own skin. And yet his essence became immortal, living on in the psyche, literature and gestalt of his people. Thus, he departed this world clad in extraordinary garments of spiritual light (Yemei Zikaron pp. 202-209).

As we begin the High Holiday season in these turbulent times, the shofar beckons us to ask: What is the state of our spiritual clothing? How can we mend its tears and restore its regality? If we find the answer within our own souls, we will merit to stand before God unashamed – adorned in garments of light.

from: Michal Horowitz <donotreply@wordpress.com>

date: Sep 18, 2025, 8:06 AM

subject: Rosh Hashana 5786

Rosh Hashana 5786

By Michal Horowitz

Rosh Hashana and the beginning of the year brings: Celebration — we were blessed with life the past year, and for this we celebrate and give thanks; Hope — we hope and trust that Hashem will accept our tefillos, and the new year will be one of blessing and redemption for our nation and land; Awe — we feel trepidation and reverence as we stand before the King on Coronation Day, and we recognize that our lives depend upon Him; Repentance — we cherish the opportunity to repent and return in purity and wholeness to Hashem, Who awaits our teshuva and takes us back with love; Strengthening — we feel strengthened as we stand on the cusp of a new year, looking ahead with resolve and determination, accepting the challenge to make the coming year one of productivity and success in avodas Hashem; Silence — we bow our heads, standing silently, as the blast of the shofar pierces our minds, hearts and neshamos, its powerful call stirring feelings deep within us, as we yearn for closeness with our Father in heaven.

The theme of the Shofaros section of Mussaf is the powerful call of the shofar and its eternal message.

The shofar is so important to the essence of Rosh Hashana that the pasuk tells us:

And in the seventh month, on the first of the month, a calling of holiness it shall be for you, all work of labor you shall not do, לַיּוֹם תִּרְעָצָה יְהוָה לָכֶם - a day of the teruah blast it shall be for you (Bamidbar 29: 1).

Interestingly, the bracha that is recited prior to the shofar blasts is “lish’mo’ah kol shofar”, to hear the sound of the shofar.

Thus, it behooves us to ask: What does lish’mo’ah mean? It must mean more than to just “hear” — as in the biological process of hearing — if it is so important to our avodah of crowning Hashem as Melech on this day.

In regard to the mitzvah of shofar, Rambam states:

אף על פי שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה חזרת הכתוב, רמז לש בו, כלומר: עורו ושנים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה וזכרו בראשכם “Even though the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashana is a decree of the Torah, nevertheless, there is an allusion in it. It is as if the shofar is saying: Wake up you sleepers from your sleep! Arise you slumberers from your slumber! Examine your ways and return in repentance and remember your Creator” (Hilchos Teshuva 3: 4).

On this Rambam, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l teaches, “These words constitute not only a moral message, but they bear halachic implications as well. By introducing the above “allusion,” the Rambam suggests a new understanding of the shofar obligation. While mitzvos such as eating matzoh on Pesach do not contain any subjective component and demand no reaction

to the significance of the physical act, the Rambam emphasizes here that aside from the auditory experience of hearing the shofar, there is also a *kiyum* she’ba’lev, an aspect of the mitzvah whose fulfillment requires a subjective emotional response... Even though there is an aspect of the mitzvah that is external and objective, “there is an allusion in it,” i.e., an inner, emotional fulfillment, without which one has not truly and completely addressed the obligation inherent in the mitzvah” (Soloveitchik, Rabbi Joseph B., Machzor M’soras Harav Rosh Hashanah, ed. Dr. Arnold Lustiger and Rabbi Michael Taubes (K’hal Publishing, 2008), p.447).

Hence, the inner fulfillment means that we must not only biologically hear, we are to emotionally “hear” the shofar as well.

It must pierce our essence and become part of who we are.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z”l writes, “In Judaism faith is a form of listening — to the song creation sings to its Creator, and to the message history delivers to those who strive to understand it. That is what Moses says time and again in Deuteronomy. Stop looking; listen. Stop speaking; listen. Create a silence in the soul. Still the clamour of instinct, desire, fear, anger. Strive to listen to the still, small voice beneath the noise. Then you will know that the universe is the work of the One beyond the furthest star yet closer to you than you are to yourself — and then you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might. In God’s unity you will find unity, within yourself and between yourself and the world, and you will no longer fear the unknown” (Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan, Covenant & Conversation, Deuteronomy (Maggid Books, 2019), p.69).

The blast of the shofar cries out to the deepest recesses of our soul, to hear the voice of Hashem in our lives, to recognize His handiwork in all of creation, to crown Him as King over ourselves every day of the year.

The shofar reminds us to focus on what is important in life and to live mindfully, where we pay attention to Hashem, our Father and our King, daily. The shofar blast teaches us that to accept the unity of Hashem, we must first be prepared to listen to Him.

When we appreciate His malchus by integrating Torah and mitzvos into our daily lives, it is then that we can build a relationship with Hashem, for it is then that we are truly listening.

For the voice of God is heard — not in a great, strong wind that splits mountains and shatters rock, and not in an earthquake that shakes the earth, and not in a blazing fire, rather — in the still small sound, בקול דממה דקה (The phrase is part of the U’nesaneh Tokef prayer - cf. Melachim I 19: 11-12). And when we learn to still the noise of the world around us, and we learn to hear the voice of Hashem, we can then truly build a stronger, deeper, lasting and powerful relationship with Him. And it is this relationship that will sustain us through all times, and become our beacon and guide as we enter yet another year of life, in order to serve Him.

זכרנו לחיים מלך חפץ בחיים וכתבנו בספר החיים למענך אלקים חיים

בברכת שנה טובה ומתוקה,

Michal

This article was written for the OU Women’s Initiative and originally appeared in their Ideas & Inspiration publication, Tishrei 5786.

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from: OU Kosher <noreply@ounetwork.org>

date: Sep 17, 2025, 8:04 AM

subject: Halacha Yomis - Rosh Hashana, Tashlich

The Gerald and Karin Feldhamer OU Kosher Halacha Yomis

TOPIC: ROSH HASHANA

QUESTION: Why do we recite Tashlich on Rosh Hashanah?

ANSWER: The first written source for this custom is found in the Maharil (14th century; Minhagim – Rosh Hashanah 9), though the Maharil indicates it was a much earlier custom.

The Maharil presents the custom as follows: “On Rosh Hashanah, after the meal, it is customary to go to a river or sea to throw away our sins.” He does not explain how the sins are discarded. The Rama (OC 583: 2) explains that the sins are expunged by reciting the phrase, “V’sashlich bi’metzulos yam kol chataseinu...” (based on Michah 7: 19 – “and You will cast into the depths of the sea all their sins”).

The basis for the custom of going to a river is the Midrash Tanchuma (Parshas Va’yeira): When Avrohom Avinu went to perform Akeidas Yitzchok, the Satan attempted to prevent him from reaching his destination by placing a deep river in his path, but Avrohom was undeterred. When the water reached his neck, Avrohom cried out to Hashem and the river disappeared. According to the Zohar (Parshas Tetzaveh), Akeidas Yitzchok took place on Rosh Hashanah. Therefore, on Rosh Hashanah we go to a river to commemorate the mesiras nefesh (self-sacrifice) of Avrohom, and in this merit, we ask Hashem to grant forgiveness to his children.

Although this is the primary reason for Tashlich, there are many other reasons offered for this custom. For example, in the Rosh Hashanah machzor of Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, z"tl, the Rav suggests based on Rav Sadya Gaon, that since the shofar of Rosh Hashanah is sounded as part of the coronation of the King, and it was customary to anoint a king by a river as a sign that his reign should continue, so too on Rosh Hashanah, when we proclaim Hashem as King, we do so at a river [also found in the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (129: 21)].

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