

# *Parshas Haazinu/Rosh HaShanah*

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## *1. Touching Man's Spiritual Potential*

The Torah tells us that in the Shmitta year (the Sabbatical year) the land must remain fallow and one is not permitted to engage in agricultural pursuits because it is, **"Shabbos L'ashem (A Sabbath for Hashem)"**. The Sforno in his commentary explains that **"Shabbos L'ashem"** means that the Shmitta year should be a time of dedicating oneself to introspection, meditation, and the study of Torah. The Shmitta year is devoted completely to spiritual endeavors.

The Torah states that during the first day of *Chol HaMoed Succos* of the eighth year (the year after the *Shmitta* cycle), the entire Jewish People (men, women, and children) must gather at the Temple Mount to hear the reading of *Mishna Torah* (The Book of Devarim) by the King of Israel. This Positive Commandment is referred to as *Hakhail*. The Torah states that the purpose of this reading is, **"So that they (the Jewish people) should listen and learn to fear Hashem."** The purpose of the mitzvah of *Hakhail* is to instill the fear of G'd into the hearts of the Jewish people.

The Torah designates the eighth year during the Festival of Succos (after the Shmitta Cycle) as the time for the mitzvah of Hakhail. In order for us to understand the sequence of events, which begins with the Sabbatical year and culminates with the reading of the Torah by the King on the Festival of Succos (at the beginning of the eighth year), we must understand why this progression is the most appropriate. It would seem that according to the interpretation of "Shabbos L'ashem" (offered by Sforno) that the Sabbatical year which is designated for introspection, meditation and the study of Torah – should follow the mitzvah of Hakhail rather than precede it. If the purpose of the reading of Mishna Torah on the Temple Mount is to learn to fear G'd, it would seem that one should first be inspired by this reading and then dedicate the following year to spiritual pursuits. Yet, the Torah states that this is not the case. Why is this so?

We only have the capacity to internalize and experience an event only after a certain degree of spiritual preparation. To begin this process we must dedicate a year to spirituality (the study of Torah, meditation, and introspection), without any distraction whatsoever. Then we must experience Rosh Hashanah (the Day of Judgment), and the Ten Days of Penitence, culminating with Yom Kippur. It is only at this point, when we have been sufficiently oriented that we are able to ascend the Temple Mount to listen to the King of Israel read the Book of Devarim and learn to fear G'd.

The Torah is teaching us that even with an awe inspiring event, we do not have the capacity and sensitivity to receive, absorb and internalize it unless we first prepare ourselves.

The Torah tells us that Adam was made from earth (*Adam- from "adama" meaning "earth"*). Just like a field needs to be cultivated and prepared for sowing, regardless of the quality of its soil and seed, so that the seed takes root and germinates properly, so too does man, regardless of his potential, need to be cultivated in order to be receptive to spirituality. The Talmud tells us, **"I (G'd) created the Yetzer HaRa (The Evil Inclination) and I created the Torah as its antidote."** For the Jew, the study of

the Torah is equivalent to the “plow” which cultivates and orients the person to be sensitive to its values and to appreciate its concepts. Therefore before being qualified to do the mitzvah of *Hakhail*, one experienced the following sequence of events: the Shmitta year, Rosh Hashanah and the Ten Days of Penitence culminating with Yom Kippur.

If one enters into Rosh Hashanah (the Day of Judgment) – the most awesome and solemn day of the year- without any degree of preparation how can one have a sense of G’d and the gravity of the day? Chazal tell us that the Torah was given to those “who partook of the Mann (Manna).” The Mann (which sustained the Jewish people in the desert for a forty year period) was spiritual food that presented itself in a physical form. It spiritualized and gave the Jewish people the capacity to fully absorb the Sinai experience and the Torah itself. Had the Jews eaten physical food (which is material and earthy), then they would not have had a sufficient capacity to internalize the Torah properly.

The verse in Shir Ha’Shirim (Song of Songs) states, “I am asleep but my heart is awake.” Reb Chaim of Volozhin z’tl explains this verse based on the Zohar that “I am asleep” is referring to the Jewish people. The Jewish people are asleep and are not sensitive to their spirituality and to G’d. He explains that the phrase “my heart is awake” is referring to G’d, who is the heart of Jewish people. G’d is continuously awake and He sees that His children (Jewish people) are in a deep sleep. How does G’d awaken them? Reb Chaim of Volozhin explains this with a parable:

There was a king whose son was stricken with an illness that would intensify if he were to fall asleep. In an effort to keep his son awake, the king removed him from the bed and placed him on the hardened ground. However, despite the discomfort of the earthen floor, the son began dosing off. The king had to resort to placing knives and spikes under his son to force him to stay awake. Reb Chaim of Volozhin z’tl explains that this is the reason why the Jewish people experience tragedies and suffering. It is G’d’s attempt to keep them awake. When the Jewish people drift away from G’d and fall into a trance-like state which causes them to be insensitive to their spirituality, it will ultimately bring about spiritual death. Therefore G’d brings upon us pain and suffering to awaken us so that we should not drift into spiritual oblivion.

We experience many difficulties but are we in touch enough with ourselves to realize why we are experiencing them? Although G’d attempts to awaken us from our trance with much suffering, we are not sensitive to understand and appreciate the value of this experience. Rambam writes in Hilchos Teshuvah (The Laws of Repentance) that listening to the sound of the Shofar is a Torah Decree and simultaneously it transmits a subtle message: “Those who sleep, awaken from your sleep. Rouse yourself from your trance, introspect your ways, remember your Creator and do teshuvah.” A man can appreciate and relate to a spiritual experience properly only if he sensitizes and elevates himself above his physicality. Therefore in order to maximize on the Rosh Hashanah experience, one must orient himself to spirituality through the increased study of Torah and through doing mitzvos in a more perfect manner.

## ***2. The Power of Torah***

The Gemara in Tractate Taanis tells us that there are two types of rain that are needed to allow the various species of vegetation to grow. For example, in order for a tree to grow, the rain needs to penetrate its roots – thus requiring a fierce and heavy rain. However, that rain is so powerful that it can devastate crops. Therefore crops require

more gentle rains in order to be nourished.

The Torah tells us that G'd says, "I will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your children." At the time of the coming of Moshiach, G'd will remove the spiritual impurity/covering/blockage, which was introduced to the heart after the sin of Adam. Ramban explains that after the sin of Adam a spiritual covering came upon the heart impeding it from being sensitive to spirituality. As result, the heart lusts after the material and everything that is contrary to spirituality. At the end of time G'd will rehabilitate the heart to its original condition. Until that time, how could the Jew overcome and penetrate that spiritual blockage?

Studying the Torah with the proper intent has the ability to break through the covering of the heart. Despite the confusion and falseness of the world, Torah study has the ability to penetrate the heart and allow the individual to understand his predicament.

The Gemara in Tractate Avodah Zorah tells us that the only way one can take control of and dominate the evil inclination is through Torah study and performing acts of kindness. If one does not engage in these two areas, then the inclination will be in control of the person.

The Midrash Tanchuma asks, "Why is the Torah compared to rain water? Just as water is able to penetrate stone, identically Torah can wear through the heart that is made of stone. Our Rabbis tells us that if one's heart is like stone it will melt away. If one's heart is like iron it will burst. Therefore it is worthwhile for the Jew to sacrifice his life for the sake of Torah. He should engage in it day and night." The only way the heart can function properly is if the Torah penetrates it.

During the Days of Awe (the days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur) one should reflect on how his time over the last year was invested. It is true that many mistakes were made on a deliberate as well as on an inadvertent level. One should introspect, reflect upon, and understand one's failings. Rabbeinu Yonah explains that the first step in the process of teshuvah (repentance) is the recognition of one's failings. In order for one to be able to properly reflect on one's actions and assess his failings, one needs to break his heart of stone through the study of Torah. It is only then that he will have the clarity necessary to do a proper teshuvah.

### ***3. The Importance of Sincerity***

The Gemara in Tractate Rosh Hashanah cites a verse, "**Moshe said to the Jewish people – who is as great as our G'd? Whenever we call out to Him, He responds.**" However, the Prophet Yeshaiya said to the Jewish people, "You should seek out G'd when He is found. Call to Him when He is close." From the words of the Prophet it is indicated that one cannot beseech G'd at any time that one chooses to do so. Rather, one should do so during the time that He is closest to the Jewish people – which is the time from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. How do we reconcile the words of the Prophet with the words of Moshe Rabbeinu, "**...Whenever we call out to Him...**"

The Gemara answers that when a *tzibur*/quorum (a minimum of ten men) beseeches G'd, He responds to them whenever they call out to Him. However, regarding the individual, G'd responds during the time that He is closest – which is during the Ten Days of Repentance. Thus, the Prophet is referring to the individual beseeching G'd, while the Moshe Rabbeinu is referring to a *tzibur*.

Rambam writes, “Although teshuvah and crying out to G’d is something positive (done at any time), during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – it is considered more special. During these ten days, G’d receives one’s teshuvah (repentance) immediately. It states, “You should seek out G’d when He is found...” This is referring to the teshuvah of the individual. However, whenever the tzibur (community) does teshuvah and cries out to G’d with a “whole heart – *leiv sholeim*” G’d responds to them.” Rambam explains that the words of the Prophet are referring to the individual while the verse in the Torah is referring to the tzibur. However, he adds regarding the tzibur, that although they can call out to G’d throughout the year, they need to do so “whole heartedly” in order for Him to receive their teshuvah and prayers. He does not mention “whole heartedness/sincerity” regarding the individual. Evidently, during the ten days of teshuvah, G’d is so close to the Jew (because of His love for him), that even if the Jew beseeches G’d (as an individual) without a sincere heart, He will respond.

The Midrash Tanchuma explains, “We find that there are three times of the year that there is a day of judgment that relate to our financial situation: on Passover the judgment is on grain, on *Shavuot* it is on fruits; however, on Rosh Hashanah the judgment is on life or death. G’d judges us for life or death with the blow of the Shofar... If the individual does teshuvah with a whole heart (*leiv shaleim*) then G’d will judge him to be meritorious. Because on these special days, the gates of heaven are open and G’d watches us from every location.” We see from the Midrash that G’d will receive the teshuvah and prayers of the individual and the tzibur only if they are done with a sincere heart/ *leiv shaleim*.

Thus, we must say that although Rambam only mentions the need for the tzibur to beseech G’d with a sincere heart, it does not necessarily exclude the individual. It is understood that if the individual cries out to G’d without a sincere heart, his teshuvah and prayers will not be accepted. Therefore during the ten days of awe, when G’d is closest to the Jewish people it is the time that the individual as well as the tzibur need to beseech G’d *b’leiv shaleim*.

Every aspect of our lives is determined during this ten day period. It is therefore incumbent upon all of us to reflect and introspect in order to prepare for this important time.

#### ***4. The Expectation of Man***

The Torah states, “**I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you...**” Rashi explains, “Hashem said to the Jewish people, “You should look at the heaven and the earth which I have created to serve you. Did it ever happen that the sun did not rise in the east and illuminate the world? The earth that I created to serve you – did it ever change its function? Did you ever plant and it did not grow? Did you ever plant wheat and barley grew in its place? If the creations of heaven and earth do not deviate from their function despite the fact that they are not deserving of reward when they function as they were intended to or receive punishment if they should fail, should it not be more so that the Jewish people not deviate from their responsibility because they are deserving of reward and subject to punishment?”

One of the methodologies given at Sinai as an approach to interpret the Torah is

known as *kal v'chomer*. This logical principle states, for example, if one is deserving of reward for doing less, how much more so is one deserving for doing more (minimally the same degree of reward). To give the Jewish people a greater understanding of their responsibility, Moshe uses heaven and earth as the model to establish the *kal v'chomer* to give them an appreciation of the value of their actions. It seems that the function of heaven and earth is not comparable to the function of a human being. Heaven and earth are not "beings" that have the ability to choose. Therefore, they perform the function for which they were created. However, the human being who is a creature of choice must continuously contend with an inclination which makes his choice difficult. If so, there is no basis for the *kal v'chomer*. However, the Torah presents this as a valid *kal v'chomer* and we must understand why it is so.

Rambam states in Hilchos Yisodei HaTorah that *malachim* (angels) who were created to carry out the Will of G'd are not spiritual robots. An angel is a spiritual being who does not deviate from carrying out the Will of G'd because it recognizes and understands who G'd is. Thus, the angel is not the spiritual robot.

We find on the third day of creation that G'd decreed, "Let the earth give forth fruit trees producing fruit." Meaning that not only should the fruit of the tree be edible, but even the tree itself should be edible. However, G'd's Command only brought about a tree which was itself inedible but that produced edible fruits. For some unknown reason, the angel, who is the spiritual being, who carries out the agency of G'd, did not follow the order as it was given. Thus the result was not as perfect as G'd had wanted it to be. Now that we understand that the function of the angel is based on its own understanding of G'd, we are now able to appreciate the *kal v'chomer* which is being drawn by the Torah (from heaven and earth to the behavior of the human being). Meaning – although the angel is not deserving of reward or punishment it does not deviate from His Will because it is cognizant of the Will of G'd. The Jew who is subject to reward and punishment should definitely be cognizant of His Will because if not, he will be held culpable for its violation or deserving of reward for its fulfillment. The only reason a Jew fails is because of his lack of cognizance.

The function of the evil inclination is to distract and overwhelm the Jew so he will not appreciate the Will of G'd. He will lose perspective regarding his behavior. If one would continuously reflect on the consequences of his actions – for the positive or negative – then he would be no different than the angel. In fact the Jew would be even more inclined than the angel to do the Will of G'd because he is eligible for reward while the angel is not.

The Gemara in Tractate Sukkah states, "I (Hashem) created the evil inclination, and the Torah as its antidote." The Torah is needed to give one the clarity to appreciate the consequences of one's actions. It is when one achieves clarity through Torah study that he is able to subdue the evil inclination.

The Torah tells us that at the end of time G'd will circumcise our hearts and the hearts of our children. Sforno explains this to mean, "G'd will remove all confusion from our hearts. He will open our eyes and thus be removed from the pitfalls of life." One will have the clarity to want to do "good" because the state of confusion in which we exist will be lifted. In order not to have this happen, one only has to realize the invaluable benefit of doing the Will of G'd and the grave consequences that result from deviating and not following His Will.

The Gemara in *Tractate Taanis* tells us that a Torah Sage angers because the fire of Torah is within him. As the verse states, "Are not My Words like fire..." Rashi explains that the Torah contained within the Sage causes him to become angry. The Torah itself gives one an appreciation and depth of understanding of the wrong that is being perpetrated. However others who are not advanced in their Torah knowledge do not have the capacity to sense the wrong in what is contrary to the Torah.

It is only by gaining clarity that one can attain a semblance of the understanding of an angel. Thus, the comparison that is drawn by the Torah between the Jew and the angel is valid.

## ***5. The Success of the Evil is a Confirmation of G'd's Justice***

The Torah states in the Portion of Haazinu, "**Yeshurun became fat and kicked. You became fat, you became thick, you became corpulent – and it deserted G'd its maker, and was contemptuous of the Rock of its salvation.**" Sforno explains "Yeshurun became fat and kicked" is referring to the Jewish people who are called "Yeshurun" because they are the congregation of those who uphold the Torah and have the ability to delve into its depth. He explains, "Just as the animal who kicks the owner who feeds it, so too the Jewish people shun (kick) G'd who provides them with their sustenance and blessing. How did this happen? You, the Jewish people, who are "Yeshurun" who are able to delve and understand the Torah, you have turned to all of the material desires and through them have become thickened (lost your sensitivity) to unadulterated truth." If the Jewish people become overly involved and immersed in the material they lose their sensitivity to truth; thus, they bolt from G'd.

Moshe refers to G'd as "the Rock whose action is perfect." Meaning, even when one is punished and it seems that he is being treated unjustly by G'd, he must understand that G'd is Perfect and His Judgment is Perfect. Moshe continues and states, "All His ways are Just." The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains this by citing the Midrash Tehillim, which cites the words of King David who rejoiced when he witnessed evil being rewarded. "Why did he rejoice? It is because he understood – if this is the way G'd treats those who transgress His Will, how much more will He reward those who adhere to His Will." How do we understand this?

We can explain it with the concept of *rasha v'tov lo* – an evil person (who despite his evil) experiences good fortune and *tzaddik v'ra lo*- a righteous person (who despite his devoutness) experiences misfortune. If one sees an evil person with good fortune while the righteous person is experiencing difficulty, one may perceive this wrongly and take a position that G'd is not being Just. Thus, Moshe states, "All of His ways are Just." How do we put this into perspective?

There is no individual who is completely evil or completely good. Although the vast majority of one's deeds may be evil, if he had done even the minutest act of kindness (or other righteous deed), he is deserving of reward. G'd does not withhold the rightful reward from any living creature. Thus, the *rasha* who is deserving of reward will receive it in a material context. Therefore, if G'd does not deny reward to the evil for even the minutest act of righteousness, how much more so will He bestow reward on the *tzaddik* who is so deserving. It is important to note that the *rasha* receives his reward in the physical context while the *tzaddik* receives his reward in a spiritual context – which is the world to come. Thus, when one sees a *tzaddik* experiencing misfortune and a *rasha* experiencing exceptional success in his life, one should understand that the *rasha* is being rewarded for the few good deeds that he had performed. This is the reason King David rejoiced when he saw the evil being rewarded.

If a Jew lives a life, which is focused on materialism and this becomes his value system, then his ability to comprehend and appreciate G'd's Justice becomes impaired. He will not be able to understand why the *rasha*, despite his evil ways, deserves material success while the *tzaddik* suffers.

## **6. Shofar, Entering into the Inner Sanctum of G'd**

The Mishna in Tractate Rosh Hashanah tells us that a Shofar cannot be made from the horn of a cow. The Mishna gives two reasons for this. The first reason is that the horn of a cow is referred to as "keren" and not "Shofar." Secondly, there is a principle "*Ein kateigor naaseh sanheigor* - that a prosecutor cannot be an advocate." The horn of the cow represents the Golden Calf (*Chet Ha'Eigel*) with which the Jews sinned at Sinai. Anything which has relevance to the Golden Calf must be avoided at a time when we are in need of an advocate. Any derivative of the cow or gold arouses the most serious level of prosecution against the Jewish people.

On Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest) officiated with two sets of vestments. He would wear the golden vestments when he performed the service in the outer sanctuary of the Temple. However, when he performed the service that was particular to Yom Kippur, which required him to enter the Holy of Holies, he wore white

vestments. He was not permitted to wear the golden vestments for the Yom Kippur service because he had to enter the Holy of Holies (the location of the Shechina – the Divine Presence) to atone for the Jewish People. If he had worn gold, he could not have functioned in the capacity of an advocate because gold arouses prosecution.

The Gemara asks, since the principle “a prosecutor cannot be an advocate” only has relevance within the context of the Holy of Holies – the location of the Divine Presence- then why is it that one cannot utilize the horn of a cow to fulfill the mitzvah of Shofar since the mitzvah is fulfilled outside of the Holy of Holies?

The Gemara answers that since the purpose of the blowing of the Shofar is to cause G'd to “remember” (*zikaron*) the merits of the Jewish people, when one blows the Shofar it is considered as if he is standing inside the Holy of Holies. The blowing of the Shofar brings about an intimacy between the Jew and G'd that is the equivalent of standing in the Holy of Holies. Thus, at this moment, the prosecutor cannot be an advocate (the cow horn cannot be used). What aspect of the Jewish people do we want G'd to “remember” on Rosh Hashanah?

The Gemara asks if the shape of the Shofar should be bent or straight. The Gemara concludes that the shape of the Shofar should be bent “*kafif* (in Hebrew). Since the blowing of the Shofar is intended to “remind” G'd of the merits of the Jewish people, it should also reflect their posture- which is being humble and bent before Him. The Shulchan Aruch writes that although during the year we recite the Amidah in an erect position, it is advisable to recite the Amidah of Rosh Hashanah in a slightly bent position. This is to indicate one's humility and submission.

The Jew has the unique quality of submitting to G'd. No other people have submitted themselves as the Jewish people have done. When G'd gave the Torah to the Jewish people, they accepted it unequivocally by declaring “Naaseh V'nishma – we will do and we will listen.” All of the nations of the world when offered the Torah had asked G'd, “What is written in it?” in order to determine if they wanted to accept it. The Jewish people had negated themselves to G'd to such a degree that He had asked, “Who revealed this secret (known only to the angels) to My children?”

The only separation between the Jew and G'd is his own conflicts of interest and agenda. However, when the Jew blows the Shofar it recalls the level of negation demonstrated by Avraham our Patriarch. He was willing to sacrifice his only son because G'd had commanded him to do so. Although G'd had promised Avraham that he would his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in heaven, he did not question the word of G'd.

This level of submission is a prerequisite to being able to enter the Holy of Holies. The Shofar causes G'd to “remember” that the Jew possesses the characteristic of submission of Avraham. If Avraham was able to perform the Akeidah, every Jew as his spiritual heir, has the ability to do the same. Reb Chaim of Volozhin z'tl writes in his commentary on Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers) that the reason Jews throughout history have given their lives not to submit to idolatry is because Avraham had inculcated this characteristic into his spirituality.

Rambam states in Hilchos Teshuvah, “Although the obligation of blowing of the Shofar is a Divine Decree in the Torah, simultaneously the blowing of the Shofar is also

an allusion (*remez*).” The message that the Shofar conveys is – all those who are asleep or in a deep slumber should awaken. They should introspect and reflect on their past behavior and do teshuvah (repent). Part of the teshuvah process is to remember one’s Creator. Those who are in a slumber have forgotten the truth because they are consumed with the vanities of time. They occupy themselves completely with pursuits of vanity and emptiness, which have no value. Gaze upon your souls and better yourselves and abandon your evil ways and improper thoughts.”

The Shofar awakens that which is dormant within the Jew because he has the inherent ability to submit to G’d.