

# **CMTL Rosh HaShanah Reader 2019 Edition**

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**"Taking Responsibility for Torah"**

*Unless otherwise noted, all pieces are by Rabbi Klapper and published on the CMTL website or blog.*

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## Akeidah Moments

October 26, 2018

Fathers are not supposed to sacrifice their sons, even if they think G-d is telling them to do so. Please seek psychiatric care immediately if you think G-d is telling you that. Let's get that out of the way. Now we can talk seriously about the akeidah.

Avraham our Forefather did not seek psychiatric care when G-d told him to sacrifice Yitzchak. If we are to learn anything edifying from the akeidah narrative, we need to bridge the gap between his reaction and our understanding of what would constitute a reasonable contemporary reaction.

Here is a minimalist bridge. The story of the akeidah teaches us that G-d would never ask us to kill someone innocent. That's why anyone who experiences G-d telling them to kill an innocent person can be confident that they are insane. But we should also learn from Avraham that anything G-d commands is binding, however horrible it seems to us, unless and until G-d tells us that He didn't really mean it by issuing a specifically contradictory command. It is not enough to show that a specific command violates a general value He has previously articulated; such values are parallel to G-d's promises that Avraham would have many descendants etc, which did not stand in the way of G-d's command to sacrifice Yitzchak.

Here is a maximalist bridge. The story of the akeidah teaches us that G-d wants human beings to exercise independent moral judgement about anything and everything that appears to be His command. That a moral giant like Avraham seriously considered slaughtering Yitzchak teaches us that uncritical obedience leads inexorably to pure evil.

Here is an intermediate bridge. Many acharonim point out that Avraham's willingness to sacrifice Yitzchak would not have been considered immoral by his contemporaries. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia, and Meisha King of Moav sacrificed his son, and after all there was an entire religion called Molekh. The akeidah is what taught Avraham, and eventually the civilized world, that human sacrifice is unjustifiable. But it teaches us that one cannot rely on human moral consensus either, since the consensus of Avraham's time would have approved of his going through with the sacrifice. The real moral of the story is that we cannot stop listening for G-d's voice when we first think we understand what He wants. Had Avraham done so, he would never have heard the angel telling him to stop. (Frighteningly, it seems from the text that the angel had to tell him twice.)

Each of these bridges can be mapped onto our relationship with halakhah.

The minimalist bridge yields a system in which halakhah is the foundation of our values, and all elements of moral conversation need to be grounded in halakhic sources. The only way to critique a halakhic result is on the basis of another halakhic result. Contradictions are generally resolved in favor of the more specific law. For example, one cannot eat bacon to avoid embarrassing someone, despite the general halakhic imperative to be concerned for human dignity (*kavod haberiyot*).

The maximalist bridge yields a system in which halakhah has a voice but not a veto. Now that formulation may seem prejudicial because of its association with Mordechai Kaplan. But I think it is important to acknowledge that **no** account of Orthodoxy sees **formal** halakhic rules as absolutely controlling. Even Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l, who denied the concept of *aveirah lishmah* (transgression for the sake of Heaven) any impact post-Sinai, conceded the relevance of informal principles which can be semantically defined as in or out of halakhah. The differences between the maximalist and minimalist positions are about whether the informal principles must be derived by abstraction from specific halakhic rules, or rather can be sourced in other aspects of Torah or in human intuition; and about whether there is a presumption that formal rules trump informal principles.

The intermediate bridge yields a system in which conflicts between formal and informal principles yield an obligation for further study. The problem is that decisions often cannot be put off forever, and sometimes cannot be put off at all. How does one decide when there isn't time for the study and restudy

one feels is necessary? In John Kerry's famous phrase, how does one tell someone that they may be the last person to die for a halakhic mistake? Bottom line, the intermediate bridge still requires us under time-pressure to choose between the minimalist and maximalist models.

But it's not obvious to me that this decision needs to be made the same way in all times and circumstances.

For example: It may be that informal rules have more power where/when there is a general sense of confidence within the halakhic community that halakhah conforms to human moral intuition. It further seems to me that this confidence generally develops in one of two ways. First, sometimes a halakhic community becomes isolated from other communities. In such circumstances, it is natural over time for intuition to accommodate itself within the confines of halakhah, and for halakhah to more consistently account for the community's intuitions. Second, sometimes the halakhic community is deeply integrated with the general human community that hosts it. Such integration often results from a sense that Torah has a great deal in common with near-universal human values-systems.

By contrast: Formal rules may have more power when/where the halakhic community lacks moral self-confidence.

What sort of situation are we in?

It seems to me that Orthodoxy in the late 20th century was deeply integrated with its host American community. This accordingly led to moral self-confidence and a general prioritization of informal principles over formal rules.

This claim may seem off if you're accustomed to think of Modern Orthodoxy through the lens of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man*, which sets out a system parallel to the minimalist bridge above. I suggest that we recognize that the system was never intended to control practical decision-making in specific cases, and never did. It was a model for the development of formal principles. A more accurate picture of practical Modern Orthodox halakhah emerges from Rabbi Soloveitchik's regular reliance on informal values principles in his actual halakhic decisions, and on the oral record of his acknowledgement that in specific situations of moral challenge he would act first and find the formal justification later.

But – in the 21st century, the relationship between the halakhic community and its host American community has been changing. Progressive morality may have evolved faster than a traditionalist community can follow with integrity. Given the broad and deep influence of progressive morality, it is very hard for conservative morality to present itself as reflecting universal human intuition. So we should expect a movement toward greater reliance on formal rules.

But that is at least an oversimplification, and perhaps just wrong. A community that has been highly integrated with its host community does not easily disengage, and properly so. As the gap between the formal rules and the values of the host community grows, we should also expect a move to expand the power of informal principles to fill that gap.

I also think that America is and should be unique in Jewish history because it is a democracy in which we are genuinely full participants. This means that the category "host" is not right; we are a part of a broader community, and it is an abdication of responsibility to simply disengage from the general moral conversation. This I suggest is why Orthodoxy by and large has not gone its own way, but rather different elements of our community have chosen to integrate with the conservative and liberal wings of America society, respectively. Both sides have largely chosen to prioritize the informal over the formal, but they have chosen different informal principles. The irony is that the laudable shared desire to remain part of American society threatens the cohesion of Orthodoxy.

Here lies the power of "akeidah moments," places where we acknowledge that there seems no way to bridge the gap between what halakhah requires of us and our moral intuition. Whichever model we pick

to address them, a recognition that we each are genuinely committed to both horns of the dilemma has the capacity to hold us together. But only so long as we believe in the genuineness of each other's commitment.

## What to Sacrifice: God or Morality?

by Steve Gotlib (SBM 2017-2018)

October 26, 2018

The *Akedah* portrays a stark conflict between moral intuition and the direct, unquestionable word of God. Rav Soloveitchik commented that “God demands that man bring the supreme sacrifice, but the fashion in which the challenge is met is for man to determine” (*Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*). What should we readers choose to sacrifice as we finish reading the *Akedah*? Our sense of human morality, or our devotion to God?

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard famously argued that a human’s duty is to nullify his or her will before God even when that means suspending one’s ethical assumptions. Whatever God wants done must be done without question. When God tells you to jump, you can’t even ask how high. When God tells you to slaughter your son, you start sharpening the knife.

Kierkegaard’s view is in direct contradiction to that of Immanuel Kant:

*Abraham should have replied to this putative Divine voice: “That I may not kill my good son is absolutely certain. But that you who appear to me are God is not certain, and cannot become certain, even though the voice were to sound from the very heavens. (The Conflict of the Faculties)*

According to Kant, the only thing we know for certain is that it is utterly immoral to kill our children. No one can know with the same degree of confidence that God is communicating to them. It was therefore incumbent on Abraham to question the voice he heard commanding the akeidah and make no move whatsoever until proof of it being God’s voice could be ascertained – and no sufficient proof would be possible.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein and Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar) each wrote responses from within Jewish tradition to both Kierkegaard and Kant.

According to Rav Lichtenstein, a person cannot and should not suspend their own ethical judgement when faced with the word of God. They must rather work on themselves until they and God want the same thing. “One must nullify his own will and accept God’s will as the driving force in his life. Ultimately, one should strive to reach the level where he can translate God’s will into his own” (*Mitzva: A Life of Command*).

Rav Lichtenstein says more on this in a different essay:

*...the grappling must all be done within the parameters of the understanding that, however much I wrestle, I do not for a moment question the authenticity or the authority of the tzav... I may grope, I may ask, and I may ultimately seek resolution. (“Being Frum and Being Good”)*

This approach allows for Kierkegaard’s acceptance of God’s command as the be-all-and-end-all, while simultaneously allowing for a degree of Kant’s moral push-back. With this view, a person may search for the reason that they are faced with this apparent contradiction between God’s word and their moral intuition. They can wrestle with the command that they have been given and come to their own conclusions about the reason for it. But at the end of the day, a command is still a command. Upon reaching resolution, that command must be carried out as the will of God, and as their own will as well.

Rav Shagar by contrast gives doubt a legitimate and essential role in religious decision-making. He develops his position via a midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 56:4) in which the Satan tells Abraham Avinu that it was really he, not God, who commanded the slaughter of Isaac. God will accuse Abraham of being a murderer the very next day if he goes through with this crazy act. Abraham’s responds that he will go

through with what he perceives as the will of God, even though he knows that he can't demonstrate the truth:

*[This answer] expresses Abraham's unremitting dedication, his willingness to forfeit everything – not just his ethics, but even his very religion – which is his only path to unqualified devotion, if not utter certainty. In any event, it appears as though Abraham's insistence on the divine origin of the imperative to slaughter his son can be facilitated only by the seed of doubt planted by Satan. This is what sets it apart from ordinary obstinacy, especially if we read Satan as a manifestation of Abraham's own misgivings. Intransigence that does not take doubt into account is meaningless and false. (Uncertainty as the Trial of the Akeda)*

Rav Shagar argues that one can achieve true religious devotion only by experiencing and overcoming doubt. A devotion that ignores doubt entirely can be very dangerous in an age where we no longer have direct prophecy. How are we to know that the path that we are on is truly the right one and we are not misguided? Furthermore, how do we know that what we are doing is truly the word of Hashem?

Rabbi Hayyim Angel answers this question:

*The Akedah teaches several vital religious lessons. Ideal religion is all about serving God, and is not self-serving. Because we expect God to be moral, the Torah's protest tradition also emerges with Abraham's holding God accountable. We may and should ask questions. Simultaneously, we must obey God's laws in our mutual covenantal relationship. We aspire to be extremely religious, and Abraham serves as a paragon of the ideal connection to God, an active relationship, and faithfulness. The Akedah also teaches the key to avoid what is rightly condemned as religious extremism, using religion as a vehicle for murder, persecution, discrimination, racism, and other expressions of immorality. Morality and rationality must be built into every religious system, or else its adherents risk lapsing into immorality in the name of their religion. (The Binding of Isaac: Extremely Religious Without Religious Extremism)*

Judaism is about serving God, not about serving ourselves. But since God is a wholly moral being, His commands must also be moral. The *Akedah* narrative demonstrates to us that we should love God enough to do whatever it is that He demands of us, but also that God does not want us performing immoral actions in His name. Reading the *Akedah* with this in mind makes clear that neither moral intuition nor trust in God should ever be sacrificed.

## “Good” Deeds Done in the Service of Evil?

October 1, 2014

Rambam asks us to imagine ourselves and our world at equipoise, with virtues and vices cancelling out perfectly, so that our next action decides G-d’s verdict. But is it true justice to weigh deeds against one another, rather than responding to each deed independently? I want to approach this highly metaphysical question by putting two very concrete halakhic analyses in dialogue: Professor Jeffrey Rosen’s take on *lashon hora*, and Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky’s approach to dealing with abuse allegations.

Let’s start with the obvious question regarding *lashon hora*: Since it is true, why should it be forbidden? Why shouldn’t we see maximum transparency as a good, and celebrate when a false image is shattered? Professor Rosen’s answer is that perfect transparency is never achieved. We are continually making educated guesses and filling in the blanks of our knowledge about others in order to complete our view of them. In this process, human nature tends to assign negative information disproportionate weight, and therefore a word of *lashon hora* can generate untold numbers of unjustified negative guesses. *Lashon hora* is therefore deceptive in result—it makes us think of people as worse than they are.

Rabbi Karlinsky notes that abuse allegations against popular rabbis and teachers often generate the opposite reaction. People rush to serve as character witnesses for the accused, and argue that their many acts of kindness and compassion make the abuse allegations implausible. Rabbi Karlinsky’s response builds off a Kli Yakar. Kli Yakar understands Devarim 25:13-16 as condemning both the honest and dishonest weights of a shopkeeper who maintains two sets, on the ground that the honest weights—and all the transactions for which they are utilized—are essentially covers for the fraud. When accused by a victim, the shopkeeper will produce the honest weights and satisfied customers, and use them to attack the credibility of the fraud accusation. So too, Rabbi Karlinsky argues, the abuser’s acts of kindness and compassion are a core part of their abuse.

On the surface, Rabbi Karlinsky and Professor Rosen are in serious tension. However, they dovetail in the following way: Our tendency to overplay the sins of others makes it hard for us to believe that someone who has sinned seriously is also capable of great good. Where the good is incontrovertible, we may choose to disbelieve the evil, since we cannot find a coherent narrative that explains it.

Rabbi Karlinsky’s solution to this problem is dramatic. He encourages us to disregard apparent good done by abusers, seeing it as instrumental to the evil, and so the evil becomes the only aspect of character left, and cannot be ignored.

I prefer a slightly different framing of the problem. It may not be that people disbelieve the accusations, but rather that they are hesitant to ruin a life for one misdeed when they know of much good the accused has done. Rabbi Karlinsky’s solution theoretically works for this version of the problem as well. But I’m not sure it works in practice. Here’s why:

If the fundamental issue is whether the allegations are accurate, it is directly useful to explain how the same person could have committed both great and foul deeds. But if the fundamental issue is justice, Rabbi Karlinsky’s theory has a more uphill climb. It requires us to believe both that the accused committed evil deeds, and that their good deeds are essentially meaningless.

*Divrei Torah* during this period of repentance should meet two criteria: cause self-reflection and be concrete. So let me put this question in a framework that functions as a soul-mirror, challenging us to make real decisions differently.

Are there people who do good primarily to enable doing or getting away with evil? Is this an underlying motivation for other people? I think the answer to both questions is yes, which is an introduction to more serious questions.



Base motivations can often be bent to positive aims. One can imagine a person successfully doing good their whole lives by convincing their evil inclination that, on some undefined day, their reputation will be so unimpeachable that they can act as they please without fear of consequences. So the real questions are: How much good is done by being alert for such motivations? How much harm is done by such suspicion?

Answering these questions properly may require developing a comprehensive taxonomy of people who do both significant good and significant evil. Here is a tentative and very incomplete attempt toward that end:

1. **Conflicted:** They have tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and found it delectable either way. There is no ultimate way to know which will predominate their life. In the language of *mussar*, we might say that they constantly revisit the same “*bechirah* (choice) points.”
2. **Consistent:** They are fundamentally driven by a single basic passion, regardless of whether it leads to good and evil. Examples of such passions include power and eros.
3. **Goal-oriented:** They believe they have an end that justifies all means, and their actions ultimately aim at that end. In an extreme version, their end not only justifies any means, but fundamentally makes all other values irrelevant. Such people may believe that their attainment of power is an essential means, and can end up confusing that means with their ultimate end.
4. **Manipulative:** They have no values other than their own satisfaction, but are capable of making short-term sacrifices and carrying out long-term strategies. They will go to lengths to cement relationships that give them what they want. But they will badly use people after a relationship is established, using gratitude, insecurity, and hero worship to maintain control.

These are types, and very few people fit any of these descriptions precisely. But I suspect that each of us can recognize a little of ourselves in at least one.

It is very important to socially reward the conflicted and the consistent for the good they do. But Rabbi Karlinsky argues that we as a community and as individuals must recognize the manipulators for who they are. Gratitude and admiration are natural and generally wonderfully positive human emotions, but they can be perverted. The question is how we can tell which kind of person we are dealing with.

Perhaps the scariest experience of my life was attending a speech by the late Rabbi Meir Kahane. What terrified me was the way he insulted his followers—he seemed depressed that his supporters were generally not intellectually gifted—and nonetheless kept perfect control over them. I submit that the surest sign of a manipulator is the presence of acolytes who cannot tear themselves away no matter how badly they are betrayed or humiliated. When apologists for the accused include people whose trust he or she has betrayed, look out.

Now it seems to me from a legal theory perspective that in general we rule that interpersonal *mitzvot* do not require intent to be legally significant. Money given to the poor is charity even if given for the sake of personal aggrandizement, even if it is not ideal charity. So from a theological perspective, it may be that G-d rewards manipulators for the interpersonal *mitzvot* they do.

From a human perspective, however, we cannot allow the good they do to weaken our resolve to stop their ongoing manipulation, **and, as Rabbi Karlinsky argues, we cannot think in terms of balancing their good and evil.** We must take a particularly jaundiced view of any apparent *teshuvah*, minimally demanding that it be sustained for many years without relapse, before even thinking of considering them changed people.

It is also very important that we identify the goal-driven, not because their good deeds are done in service of evil, but because their good deeds are not predictive of how they will behave when faced by similar

choices in the future. **Most specifically, they are likely to behave differently when trusted with power than when they are powerless.**

In the foremath of Yom Kippur, it is and should be emotionally difficult to set high standards for accepting the repentance of others even as we ask G-d to set abysmally low standards for our own. It is similarly hard to judge others by their worst aspects as we ask G-d to judge us by our best. We are mostly, I hope, conflicted or consistent sinners, striving to find ways to empower our best selves. We would rather believe that all others are doing the same, and we pray for G-d to take that as His premise. But that may be a Divine luxury in which we humans cannot always indulge.

## Reciprocity as the Groundwork for Repentance

by Avinoam Stillman (SBM 2015)

September 2, 2015

Our first association with the term *vidui* is probably the “confession” of sins we recite repeatedly leading up to and on Yom Kippur. As Maimonides codifies in *Hilchot Teshuvah* 1:1, *vidui* is the obligatory verbal expression of *teshuvah*. But the term *vidui* is also used in rabbinic literature for various liturgical recitations, including for offering *bikkurim*, for *ma’aser*, and for animal sacrifices. What unifies these disparate meanings of the term *vidui*?

Verbal declarations create a reciprocal relationship between human beings and G-d. A relationship with G-d, like any other relationship, cannot, by definition, be one-sided. Without the belief that our actions matter to G-d, and the faith that our attempts to reach G-d produce Divine responses, *teshuvah* is meaningless. Thus, developing our understanding of the importance of reciprocity in both human and Divine relationships lays the groundwork for *teshuvah*.

The Palestinian Talmud, at the beginning of *Masekhet Bikkurim*, discusses whether a tree that is propagated using a process known as הברכה (“layering” in English), in which a branch of an “elder” tree is grown into the ground and cultivated as a “child” tree, can be a valid source of *bikkurim* if the tree passes through property not owned by the owner of the tree. The Talmud rules that neither the “elder” tree nor the “child” tree is valid if either passes out of their owner’s domain. This follows the principle that

כשם שילדה חיה מן הזקינה כך הזקינה חיה מן הילדה  
“Just as the child lives from the elder, thus does the elder live from the child.”

Here is another model of reciprocity, one in which, as *mori ve-rebbi* Rav Re’em HaCohen of Yeshivat Otniel pointed out, generations are interdependent. What holds true for trees is true for humans as well, as per Deuteronomy 20:19; כי האדם עץ השדה, “for a person is a tree of the field.” Unless both elders and children remain in the same domain, maintain mutual respect and recognize their reciprocal dependence, no first fruits can be brought, none of their products are blessed.

*Mishna Ma’aser Shenii* 5:13, also found in *Sifrei Piska* 303 on Deuteronomy 26:15, uses a verse from the *vidui ma’aser* to elaborate G-d and Israel’s reciprocity:

... השקיפה ממעון קדשך מן השמים – עשינו מה שגזרת עלינו אף אתה עשה מה שהבטחתנו  
“Gaze from Your holy abode, from the heavens” (Deut. 26:15) –  
We have done what You decreed upon us, so too You do what You promised us...

Our fulfillment of G-d’s command to provide for the poor creates a reciprocal responsibility for G-d to fulfill the promise of prosperity. As the Alter Rebbe notes in *Likkutei Torah* on *Parshat Re’eh*, the month of Elul is an acronym for Song of Songs 6:3; אני לדודי ודודי לי, “I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine.” In both our human and our Divine relationships, then, Elul is a time to foster the interdependence and responsiveness that allow us to do *teshuvah* in the coming year.

## Is Teshuvah a Mitzvah?

by Judah Kerbel (SBM 2015)

September 30, 2016

Rambam presumably wrote *Hilkhot teshuvah* to elaborate on an obligation to do *teshuvah*. But *Avodat HaMelekh* (R. Menachem Krakowski, d. 1930) notes something peculiar – Rambam’s language in Chapter 1 does not indicate that *teshuvah* itself is a *mitzvah*:

כל מצות שבתורה בין עשה בין לא תעשה  
אם עבר אדם על אחת מהן בין בזדון בין בשגגה  
כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו חייב להתודות.

*All commandments in the Torah, whether positive or negative,  
if a person transgressed one of them, whether intentionally or unintentionally,  
when the person does teshuvah and repents from that sin, the person is obligated to confess.*

It seems here that the obligation associated with *teshuvah* is the confession! There is an assumption that one will do *teshuvah*, but Rambam never says that there is an obligation to abandon sins and engage in a process called *teshuvah*.

This problem is sharpened when one looks at Devarim 30:1-2:

וְהָיָה כִּי יָבֹאוּ עֲלֵיךְ כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה  
הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ  
וְהִשְׁבַּתְתָּ אֶל לְבָבְךָ  
בְּכָל הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר הִדִּיחֶךָ יְקֹוֹק אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ שְׁמָה:  
וְשָׁבַתְתָּ עַד יְקֹוֹק אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעַתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ  
כָּל אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם  
אֶתְּהָ וּבְנֵיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ:

*It will be that when all these things come upon you –  
the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you –  
then you will take it to your heart  
among all the nations where Hashem, your God, has dispersed you;  
and **you will return** to Hashem, your God, and listen to his voice,  
according to everything that I command you today,  
you and your children, with your heart and all your soul*

Ramban understands the second verse as presenting a *mitzvah* of *teshuvah* (30:11), “you **must** return” rather than you **will** return. In *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 7:5, however, Rambam presents this verse as a promise that G-d will redeem us and that we **will** do *teshuvah*.

What is the nature of *teshuvah* if *viduy*, rather than *teshuvah* itself, is the commandment?

*Avodat HaMelekh* suggests that *teshuvah* is not specifically commanded because it is assumed by definition as part of keeping the Torah. If one has violated a *mitzvah*, obviously one has to abandon that path! We don’t need a verse to teach us that – it is unfathomable to think otherwise, it is the foundation of the entire Torah. Rather, the Torah elsewhere (Bamidbar 5:6-7) teaches the *chiddush* that *teshuvah* requires verbal confession, and Rambam asserts that is the emphasis here as well.

A person wishing to make a proper change in behavior going forward cannot assume that wishing will make it so. One has to verbally commit to making that change happen, and to making a conscious effort to act cautiously to avoid making future mistakes. For Rambam, lack of confession undermines the entire *teshuvah* process.

Minchat Chinukh disagrees (Mitzvah 364). He holds agrees that there is a *mitzvah* to confess, and by not confessing one has not fulfilled that particular *mitzvah* – but if one genuinely repented in his heart

without verbally confessing, one has fulfilled the separate commandment of “you **must** return,” and one has still properly atoned for one’s sins.

Regardless of whether teshuvah is its own mitzvah, it is certainly tied to redemption. When we return to G-d, G-d will end the exile and bring us back to Eretz Yisrael. By working to strengthen our observance of *mitzvot*, and thereby reversing course when we have not met all of our obligations, we come closer to G-d (Rambam 7:6). As the Yamim Noraim approach, may will all merit to do our own *teshuvah* and to come together as a united people in doing *teshuvah*, to come closer to G-d, and to reap the benefits of the promises G-d made with our ancestors.

## Three Models of Repentance

September 11, 2012

As a Yeshiva University student, I was inevitably heavily influenced by the thought of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik on almost all Jewish issues, with repentance certainly among them. In *Hakakhic Man*, R.S. presents repentance as the ultimate act of *imitatio dei*, arguing the following: G-d first appears in Torah as the Creator, and His ultimate creation is the human personality. Therefore, our *teshuvah*, by remaking our personality, is imitating G-d.

I have several objections to this powerful vision. (Note: I do not mean to suggest that the Rav was unaware of these issues, or that he did not have reasonable responses to them. This is not a full or fair treatment of his position, rather an introduction to an alternative.)

- 1) It seems to focus exclusively on the act, rather than on the content of repentance. Were someone to repent of their good deeds and resolve to become completely evil, it seems that R.S. would have to consider that as well an act of *imitatio dei*.
- 2) It makes the ultimate act of *imitatio dei* one that Hashem himself could never experience, as He is definitionally unchanging.
- 3) It seemingly should result in a complete lack of responsibility for past actions, as it views the repentant self as an *ex nihilo* creation.

What attracts me most about R.S.'s vision is its depiction of humanity as completely free, unbound not only by the objective past but even by the subjective past.

A radically different, in important ways diametrically opposed, account of repentance is offered by R. Zadok HaCohen of Lublin (N.B. I have read very little of his work myself – the following account is based almost entirely on secondary sources, and may not accurately present his views.) R. Zadok argues that because history enacts a Divine Plan in every detail, it follows that human beings cannot have any substantive impact on history. In other words, he is a historical determinist. However, he is aware that determinism as a philosophy is gravely weakened by its need to deny the substantive reality of perhaps the subjectively strongest human experience, choice. He is unwilling to argue that choice is only a psychological reality, with all decisions determined in advance by the nature of one's character. He therefore concludes that true choice is not about whether to do something, because what will or won't happen is predetermined by Hashem, but rather about the relationship of our will and Hashem's Will. At times we will something not in Hashem's plan, and it happens despite us – we could have chosen instead to have it happen in accordance with our will. More importantly for our topic, sometimes we choose to believe that we are willfully acting against Hashem's plan, although in fact all sins are Planned.

Let me elaborate on that last sentence. R. Zadok believe that all sins are inevitable and determined. Our choice is whether to (arrogantly and falsely) view those sins as the products of our will and against Hashem's Will, or whether to view them – even when *contra-halakhic* – as expressions of Hashem's Will enacted with our acquiescence. (This perspective drives R. Zadok to develop his highly influential notion of *aveirah lishmah*, of the spiritually positive sin.)

For R. Zadok, repentance involve a change of attitude toward the past, a recognition not of responsibility but of lack of responsibility. True repentance is the recognition of the practical futility of one's own will. This conception fits very well with the Talmudic claim that repentance transforms past deliberate sins either into accidental sins or into virtues, as it argues that what changes in repentance is one's responsibility – or at least one's perception of responsibility – for the past.

I am, however, dissatisfied with this account as well. Firstly, my own preference is almost always for accounts that expand the scope and impact of human freedom rather than diminishing it. Secondly, I'm

not comfortable with repentance that disclaims responsibility, especially with an account that removes all possible responsibility for the consequences of sin. After all, if you always do what Hashem wants, how can you be responsible if things turn out badly?

So let me offer a third account. Let us assume that personality is unavoidably continuous, in other words that the past has an indelible impact on our character. Let us further assume that this implies that we can never be divorced of responsibility for our past actions.

The Talmud famously speaks of sublimation as a preferred way of dealing with evil impulses, suggesting, for example, that someone who feels bloodlust should become a ritual slaughterer. I think that a perhaps even stronger case can be made within the tradition for denying the existence of intrinsically evil character traits, although certainly some traits are more easily used for evil than others.

An alternative model of repentance based on the above would involve sober self-assessment together with a commitment to turning every aspect of our current personality, and of the world as we are responsible for it, to the best possible future use. Every aspect of past experience can be useful in Avodat HaShem, even if only by enabling us to better understand those who still commit the sins we have given up (and generally in far more positive ways).

A second point about repentance – how does one decide to change? If one is still the same person, how will one make different and better decisions in the future? An interesting Tosafot opens up an avenue of approach, although it certainly does not provide a rationally compelling answer. The Talmud states that people sin against their own will and HaShem's for three reasons – poverty, depression, and idolaters (or idolatry, depending on one's reading). Tosafot ask why sexual desire is absent from the list, as in several places the Talmud implies that sins under the influence of extreme arousal can be considered coerced. They reply that while on occasion sexual desire cannot be resisted, those occasions can be avoided with sufficient foresight. The Talmud's classic example of a young man bathed, perfumed, bankrolled, and placed in front of a brothel need not come up in every young man's life.

Perhaps, then, the obligation to repent should be carried out not merely through introspection but by actively seeking out the external influences that we are aware encourage our spiritual improvement. If we have inspirational friends or mentors, we should seek them out, and if we find certain texts or book encourage reflection, we should reread them.

Obviously many of us have been deeply affected by the mass murders of September 11. The sheer magnitude of the tragedy should have enabled repentance from specific deeds, and certainly enabled us to forgive others, out of a renewed sense of perspective. My sense, however, is that repentance out of shock is short-lived if not anchored in some other form of influence-to-change.

Gemar Chatimah Tovah. May we merit engaging together in the conversation of Torah for many years to come, and may those years be pleasant and peaceful for all Israel and all humanity as well.

## Should One Repent From, or Rather Toward?

September 20, 2012

One of my favorite halakhic questions of all time is one where someone begged to be allowed to sin once, so that they could obtain the incomparable merit of the mitzvah of repentance. The assumption of the question was that one can only repent from, that *teshuvah* is always about restoring a past better personality. This seems to fit well with the literal definition of “teshuvah” – return. And while the classical formulation involves both “regret for the past, and commitment for the future” – in other words, repentance both from and toward - one can argue that even the commitment for the future is about going “forward to the past,” about returning to who one was before one sinned.

However, the Talmud famously distinguishes between “repentance out of fear” and “repentance out of love.” Repentance out of fear erases past sins; repentance out of love converts them into virtues. In other words, repentance out of fear is past-focused, and seeks only to correct what has happened, whereas repentance out of love seeks to use even past sins as a vehicle for a better future. Repentance out of fear is repentance from; repentance out of love is repentance toward.

In our day, the term “baal teshuvah” refers primarily to someone who has become halakhically observant for the first time. We use the term *teshuvah* to describe going ‘back to the future,’ returning to an ideal state that one has never actually experienced. Thus our primary model is repentance out of love, and we are in an excellent position to deeply internalize the model of “repentance toward.”

I think this gives us a window into several other aspects of repentance that are sometimes overlooked. One example: Rambam teaches that repentance relates to character traits as well as actions. One can only repent from actions, but one can repent toward better character. Repenting from an action is the attempt to get back to where one was before one sinned, but repenting from a character trait is often an attempt to create a new self, better than any self that one has previously inhabited or been.

Another example: Repenting of an evil deed is purely repentance from, but what is repentance from an imperfectly performed good deed? For example, how does one repent for having had incomplete *kavvanah* during davening, even if one nonetheless fulfilled one’s obligation? From having given *tzedakah* to a poor person without a smile and encouraging word? For not having called to say “Good Shabbes” to someone for whom it would have made a difference? When one is repenting for missed opportunities, it seems that the goal must rather be to repent toward, to become the kind of person who misses fewer such opportunities.

I suspect that this is also often true with regard to communal repentance, and specifically the aspect of individual repentance that relates to one’s responsibilities for creating a just, compassionate, and religiously vibrant community. It’s hard to measure what difference, if any, one’s failures in that regard made – perhaps somebody else stepped up to the plate when you stepped away, or perhaps the idea wouldn’t have worked anyway. The process of building community is rarely about actual restoration, as people come and go and a community is always being reshaped and recreated. Communal *teshuvah* generally is, and should be, about being better than the community has ever been.

In truth, our use of the term *teshuvah* has deep roots in the Talmud. When Rav Yochanan meets Resh Lakish for the first time, Resh Lakish is an armed bandit, and Rav Yochanan commands him “Return!” While Tosafot suggest (for other reasons) that Resh Lakish may have been a yeshiva student gone wrong, the straightforward reading is that Resh Lakish first became involved with Torah at that moment.

And on another level, from Tanakh to our day Jews have described their vision of *Geulah*, Redemption, as a return, even though it is a return to something they have never experienced, and in many ways to something that never existed in the past. May it be His Will that our generation’s special capacity to understand *teshuvah meiahavah*, repentance out of love, enables us to repent toward ultimate *Geulah*.



## Teshuvah in the Age of Dataism

by Rabbi Avraham Bronstein (SBM 2002)

September 28, 2017

In the thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *teshuvah* is inextricably connected to humanity's overriding mandate to create. "God wills man to be a creator – his first job is to create himself as a complete being," he wrote. "Man, through repentance, creates himself, his own I."

Soloveitchik's emphasis on the human ability to create and shape both oneself and one's surrounding reality echoes his own context. As Yuval Noah Harari charts in his bestsellers *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*, the modern era has been about humanism and has seen authority stripped from external forces, whether rulers, gods, or some combination, and refocused within individuals. We see the effects of this shift in terms of politics (democracy), economics (market capitalism), and a variety of other fields.

The underlying assumption of our era, Harari notes, is the belief in the inherent integrity and dignity of individuals who possess the free will to express themselves. Increasingly, and along the same lines as Soloveitchik, this is what many contemporary Jewish thinkers came to mean by *Tzelem Elokim* – of humanity created in the "image of God." Rather than seeing *teshuvah* simply as contrition for wrongdoings, Soloveitchik saw genuine *teshuvah*, the recreation of the self, as the most profound form of *imitatio dei*.

Harari's point, though, is that these humanist assumptions were the product of their times – and times are quickly changing. Humanism is becoming obsolete, and is being replaced by what he calls "Dataism," a worldview focused on the creation and free flow of ever-increasing amounts of information that is analyzed and shared by increasingly powerful computers. Human agency is quickly becoming outstripped by biotechnology and AI that know more about ourselves than we do – and we are increasingly comfortable outsourcing control of our lives to the Cloud.

In Soloveitchik's footsteps, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recently wrote,

*It was Judaism, through the concept of teshuvah, that brought into the world the idea that we can change. We are not predestined to continue to be what we are. Even today, this remains a radical idea. Many biologists and neuroscientists believe that our character and actions are wholly determined by our genes, our DNA. Choice, character change, and free will, are – they say – illusions.*

Sacks' foil here is the determinism and predestination at the heart of the Greek tragedies. Today, however, we are less certain about how independent our choices actually are than we have been in centuries. In particular, we are increasingly aware of the external forces that push us seamlessly in specific directions. In a world where our belief in democracy is shaken by fake news driven by social media algorithms, and our belief in market capitalism is shaken by custom-tailored Amazon recommendations and Google search results, it should be myopic to have faith in our ability to perform self-creation through *teshuvah*.

Harari himself addresses this concern. He concludes:

*If you don't like this, and you want to stay beyond the reach of the algorithms, there is probably just one piece of advice to give you, the oldest in the book: know thyself. In the end, it's a simple empirical question. As long as you have greater insight and self-knowledge than the algorithms, your choices will still be superior and you will keep at least some authority in your hands. If the algorithms nevertheless seem poised to take over, it is mainly because most human beings hardly know themselves at all.*

Read this way, our introspection during this High Holy Days season takes on special urgency. As Harari notes, the technology is improving much more quickly than our ability to adapt to it. The question of questioning who we are – really – and to what extent we are simply responding to stimuli that are carefully calibrated by a computer somewhere to generate our response is critical, even existential. If we don't want to lose agency over our own lives, this is the time to reassert control. In his *Laws of Teshuvah*, Maimonides explains that the biblical Pharaoh, by the end, did not actually have control over his choices –

the consequence for the life he had lived to that point. Likewise, the self-creation of *teshuvah* is, increasingly, all that stands between us and a passive, AI-driven journey through life.

Another avenue forward is shifting our understanding of *Tzelem Elokim* to a meaning that may survive our Dataist future. Even if we admit that we simply don't have that complete control to shape ourselves and our lives – and perhaps that was always the reality behind the curtain – being created in God's image still challenges us in a fundamental way.

Harari admits that modern science, for all its success in comprehending human responses and thought patterns, has not yet come to a satisfactory understanding of consciousness itself. Though we know which neurons and chemicals are involved, the actual feeling of transcendent love is still mysterious and awe-inspiring. Perhaps in this spirit, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler wrote that *Tzelem Elokim* is really about the human capacity to feel compassion and empathy, and responding to others with generosity and kindness. God is not to be emulated so much as a Creator, in this reading, but as a Giver.

Our liturgy may already know this. According to one popular reading of Unetaneh Tokef, we assert that repentance does not affect the circumstances of our lives, but the quality of our response. Our *teshuvah* – and *avodat Hashem* more broadly – might likewise focus less on our agency and choices, and more on the strength of our human connections and relationships, and the cultivation of empathy and love.

## Saying the Unsayable: Why G-d Wore a Tallit to Lead the First Selichot

September 30, 2016

On Rosh HaShannah 17b, Rabbi Yochanan explains the opening of Exodus 34:6 via an arresting image.

“... ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא” –  
אלמלא מקרא כתוב, אי אפשר לאומר!  
מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח צבור,  
והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה.  
אמר לו:

כל זמן שישראל חוטאין –  
יעשו לפני כסדר הזה, ואני מוחל להם.

*“Hashem passed before h/His face, and h/He proclaimed”:*

*Were it not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say this!*

*This teaches us that The Holy Blessed One wrapped Himself like a congregational prayer leader and showed Mosheh the order of prayer.*

*He said to him:*

*Whenever Israel sins,*

*they should do before me just like this order, and I will forgive them.*

Rabbi Yochanan seems shocked by his own theological audacity. But what is it about this image that so shocks him? Is it the blatant anthropomorphism of G-d wearing a tallit?

This aspect of the image certainly bothered many later rabbis. Rabbi Yom Tov ibn Ashbili (RITVA) hastens to explain that the verse is written from Mosheh’s perspective – he saw this in a prophetic vision, but it was only a metaphor. Rabbeinu Chananel contends that G-d ordered an angel to appear as if he were wearing a tallit, or alternatively, that G-d created an angel with the appearance of a tallit-wearing human.

I am not convinced, however, that Rabbi Yochanan’s shock issue here was anthropomorphism (or that any of the later rabbis believed it was). Anthropomorphism is all over Tanakh, and RITVA and Rabbeinu Chananel are trotting out standard solutions for the issue. Something more must have triggered Rabbi Yochanan’s assertion that Scripture here writes the otherwise unsayable.

What might this have been?

The declaration “Were it not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say this!” appears seven times in the Talmud. Several of these can be understood as referring to anthropomorphism, but several of them cannot. The clearest example is Bava Batra 10a, also said by Rabbi Yochanan.

א”ר יוחנן  
מאי דכתיב “מלוה ה’ חונן דל”?  
אלמלא מקרא כתוב, אי אפשר לאומר!  
כביכול – עבד לזה לאיש מלוה

*Said Rabbi Yochanan:*

*What is the meaning of “Those who are gracious to the poor are Hashem’s creditors” (Proverbs 19:17)?*

*Were it not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say this!*

*As if it were possible – the borrower is slave to the [human] creditor.*

There is no physical imagery at all here. What then is the issue?

Let’s look at one more example, from Berakhot 32a:

“ועתה הניחה לי ויחר אפי בהם ואכלם ואעשה אותך לגוי גדול וגו’”  
אמר רבי אבהו:

אלמלא מקרא כתוב, אי אפשר לאומר!  
 מלמד שתפסו משה להקדוש ברוך הוא כאדם שהוא תופס את חבריו בבגדו,  
 ואמר לפניו:  
 רבונו של עולם, אין אני מניחך עד שתמחול ותסלח להם!  
 “Now you leave go of Me, and My anger will burn amidst them and consume them . . .”  
 Said Rabbi Abbahu:  
 Were it not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say this!  
 This teaches that Mosheh seized The Holy Blessed One like a person seizing his fellow by the garment,  
 and said before Him:  
 Master of the Universe, I will not leave go of you until you absolve and forgive them!

I suggest that common denominator, the issue in each case, is not anthropomorphism, but rather the depiction of G-d as subject or servile to human beings. Berkahot 32a depicts G-d as subject to detention by Mosheh; Bava Batra 10a as subject to the will of charitable people; and Rosh HaShannah 17a as manipulable by human beings via the recitation of a verbal formula, namely the “13 Attributes.” Call it magic or theurgy, the last is surely the most shocking.

Now Rabbi Yochanan states that he can say this only because Scripture says it – but what if Scripture could be understood differently? Would we be allowed to take one of several possible interpretations and claim that it permitted saying the otherwise unsayable?

Here again it is vital to understand exactly what Rabbi Yochanan thought was unsayable. If the issue were anthropomorphism, he could simply agree with Ramban that על פניו ה' יעבור means that G-d passed before **Mosheh's** face, and nothing would compel him to permit or accept the image of G-d's tallit. But he was bothered by magical theology, not by anthropomorphic metaphors.

Rabbi Yochanan could not evade the issue by having *Mosheh* be the subject of ויקרא (h/He proclaimed). He **knew** that G-d was the One who proclaimed the 13 Attributes, and that He intended them to be recited efficaciously by Mosheh, because in Bamidbar 14:17-18 Moshe recited them after declaring that this is “as G-d had previously spoken = כאשר דברת לאמר”, and G-d then forgives them “in accordance with Moshe's speech = כדברך.” Rabbi Yochanan's challenge was to make sense of this apparent theological absurdity in some way. His solution was the image of G-d as Shaliach Tzibbur.

Some background information is necessary here. Rabbinic literature depicts human beings as wrapped in tallitot for prayer even when they are praying alone, and both G-d and humans as wrapped in tallitot even when not praying. So Rabbi Yochanan has no *exegetical* need to introduce the notion of G-d as congregational prayer leader even if he translates “passed before His face” as a reference to wrapping a tallit.

Now only Mosheh was present atop Sinai – there was no “congregation” (although Mosheh was “equal to all of Israel”). Furthermore, Bamidbar 14:17–18 proves only that Mosheh could use the formula, not that it would be useful permanently for the Jews. Rabbi Yochanan presents G-d as a **congregational** prayer **leader** in order to move from the verse to a claim that the formula works for post-Mosheh congregations as well.

Based on Shemot 34 and Bamidbar 14, we can only know that reciting the 13 Attributes works to save *all* of Israel, so most likely Rabbi Yochanan treats a halakhic *tzibbur* as a formal representation of the entire Jewish people.

The question that remains is – (how) does presenting G-d in this way solve the underlying problem of G-d's apparent manipulability? Why does this image help make the verse's theology sayable, if only barely?

My very tentative answer is that Rabbi Yochanan's goal was to connect the verses to the practice of communal fasts. Why? Because if reciting the 13 Attributes were simply a matter of magic, with

forgiveness automatic, there would be no need to fast or repent. By limiting the efficacious recitation to the context of a communal effort at repentance, Rabbi Yochanan opens up the possibility that the 13 Attributes work only insofar as they help us change into the sort of people who can be at least plausibly worthy of Divine forgiveness.

At the same time, the depiction of G-d as shaliach tzibbur emphasizes that G-d very much wants us to make those changes, and that He Himself prays for His mercy to be revealed above His other attributes (see Berakhot 7a).

## Apples and Honey, Repentance and Covenant

by Batsheva Leah Weinstein (MA 2015, 2016)

September 8, 2015

We all know of the *minhag* to eat apples dipped in honey on Rosh Hashanah. The reason most often given for this custom, and indeed we say this before we eat them, is that it symbolizes our desire for a sweet new year. However, as the Maharil points out, the language used to describe this *minhag* is "נוטלים התפוח" – "אוכלים דבש עם תפוח" – we eat honey with an apple. This implies that the apples themselves are important. This can also be derived by the fact that we make a bracha "בורא פרי העץ" as opposed to a "שהכל נהיה בדברו", which tells us that it is the תפוח that is the עיקר, the main thing, and not the honey. We can now ask our question: why do we dip apples in honey?

When Yaakov, pretending to be Esav, comes to Yitzchak to receive the bracha for the firstborn, Yitzchak says, "ראה ריח בני כריח השדה אשר ברכו ה'" – see the scent of my son like the scent of a field that was blessed by Hashem. רב יהודה בריה דרב שמואל בר שילת says in the name of Rav, "כריח שדה של תפוחים" – the scent of a field of apples. The *midrash Bereishit Rabbah* says that when Yaakov entered the room, the fragrance of גן עדן came in with him. Thus, the apples that we eat on Rosh Hashanah symbolize גן עדן, an appropriate reference for the Day of Judgement.

In the *midrash* בראשית רבתי, Rav explains this *passuk* in a different way. When Yitzchak saw that the children of Yaakov who rebelled against Hashem "יתנו ריח טוב שיעשו תשובה" – that they will give off a good scent, meaning that they will repent and return to God, the presence of the שכינה rested on him and he was able to give Yaakov the *bracha*. According to this interpretation, the field of apples refers to בני ישראל doing *teshuvah*. Consequently, when we eat apples, it is a reminder for us to do *teshuvah*.

Another reason for eating apples is from a *passuk* in *Shir Hashirim* which says "כתפוח בעצי היער" – like an apple tree amongst the trees of a forest, which refers to בני ישראל. R' Tzadok Hakohen explains that בני ישראל are compared to apples because, just like the fruits of an apple tree come before the leaves, so too בני ישראל said נעשה – we will do – before נשמע – we will hear. Overlooking the scientific accuracy of this statement, our point is, that just like the important thing of the tree – the fruits – come before the less important part of the tree – the leaves, so too בני ישראל put the important thing – doing what G-d commanded – before the less important thing – finding out what G-d wants us to do. Therefore, apples remind us of מתן תורה and our covenant with G-d in which we promised to obey His Torah.

Here we have a number of reasons of why we eat apples on Rosh Hashanah, all based on references to apples in the *p'sukim*. We dip them in honey for a sweet new year but the apples themselves are also symbolic and relevant to Rosh Hashanah.

## Shofar Metaphors

September 16, 2009

טעמי מצות שופר לרב סעדיא גאון (אוצר הגאונים, ראש השנה, חלק הפירושים, סימן קעג)

מה שצונו הבורא ית' לתקוע בשופר בראש השנה יש בזה עשרה ענינים:

א. מפני שהיום היתה תחלת הבריאה, שבו ברא הקב"ה את העולם ומלך עליו, וכן עושים המלכים בתחלת מלכותם, שתוקעין לפנין בחצוצרות ובקרנות להודיע ולהשמיע בכל מקום התחלת מלכותם, וכן אנו ממליכין עלינו את הבורא יתברך ביום הזה, וכך אמר דוד: "בחצוצרות וקול שופר הריעו לפני המלך ה'."

ב. כי יום ר"ה הוא ראשון לעשרת ימי תשובה, ותוקעים בו בשופר להכריז על ראשנו, כמי שמזהיר ואומר: 'כל הרוצה לשוב, ישוב; ואם לאו, אל יקרא תגר על עצמו!'

וכן עושים המלכים, מזהירין את העולם תחלה בגזרותם, וכל העובר אחר האזהרה אין שומעין לו טענה

ג. להזכירנו מעמד הר סיני, שנאמר "וקול שופר חזק מאד", ונקבל על עצמנו מה שקבלו אבותינו על עצמם נעשה ונשמע.

ד. להזכירנו דברי הנביאים, שנמשלו כתקיעת שופר,

שנאמר "ושמע השומע את קול השופר ולא נזהר ותבא חרב ותקחהו – דמו בראשו יהיה, והוא נזהר - את נפשו מלט"

ה. להזכירנו חרבן בית המקדש וקול תרועת מלחמות האויבים, כמו שנאמר "כי קול שופר שמעתי נפשי תרועת מלחמה", וכשאנו שומעים קול השופר נבקש מאת ה' על בנין בית המקדש.

ו. להזכירנו עקידת יצחק, שמסר נפשו לשמים, וכן אנחנו נמסור נפשנו על קדושת שמו, ויעלה זכרונו לפניו לטובה.

ז. שכשנשמע תקיעת שופר נירא ונחרד ונשבר עצמנו לפני הבורא, כי כך הוא טבע השופר, מרעיד ומחריד, כמו שנאמר "אם יתקע שופר בעיר ועם לא יחרדו."

ח. להזכיר את יום הדין הגדול ולירא ממנו, שנאמר "כי קרוב יום ה' הגדול, קרוב ומהר מאד, יום שופר ותרועה."

ט. להזכירנו קבוץ נדחי ישראל ולהתאוות אליו, שנאמר בו "והיה ביום ההוא יתקע בשופר גדול ובאו האובדים בארץ אשור וגו'."

י. להזכירנו תחית המתים ולהאמין בה, שנאמר "כל יושבי תבל ושוכני ארץ כנשוא נס הרים תראו וכשמעו שופר תשמעו."

*Rav Saadia Gaon's Rationales for the Mitzvah of Shofar*

*That which the Creator may He be blessed commanded us to blow the shofar on Rosh HaShannah contains 10 topics:*

*1. Because that day was the beginning of the Creation, on which The Holy One Who is Blessed created the world and reigned over it, and thus behave human kings at the beginning of their reigns, they cause trumpets and horns to be blown before them, so as to inform and publicize everywhere the beginning of their reign, and thus we coronate the Creator may He be blessed over us on this day, and thus wrote David: "With trumpets and the sound of a shofar hariu before the king Hashem."*

*2. Because the day of Rosh HaShannah is the first of the Ten Days of Repentance, and we blow shofar on it in order to serve notice on ourselves, like someone who serves notice and says: 'All who wish to repent, repent; and if not, let them not declare themselves wronged!', and thus kings behave - they first caution the world about their decrees, and (therefore) anyone who violates after the caution, we pay no heed to his explanations.*

*3. To remind us of the Standing Up at Mount Sinai, as Scripture says "and the voice of a shofar, very powerful,"*

*and (thereby) we will accept upon ourselves what our ancestors accepted upon themselves (in the form) “naaseh v’nishma”*

*4. To remind us of the words of the prophets, which are compared to the blast of a shofar, as Scripture says: “and the hearer heard the sound of the shofar but did not take caution, and the sword came and took him – his blood is on his own head, whereas he who did take caution – he rescued his life”*

*5. To remind us of the destruction of the Holy Temple, and the sound of the enemies’ battle teruah, as Scripture says: “for the sound of a shofar my soul hears, the teruah of war,” and when we hear the sound of the shofar, we will plead to G-d about the Building of the Holy Temple,*

*6. To remind us of the Binding of Isaac, who gave his life over to Heaven, and so too we should give our lives over for the sake of the Holiness of His name, and (thereby) our remembrance will arise before him to good result*

*7. Because when we hear the blast of the shofar we will fear and tremble and shatter ourselves before the Creator, because such is the nature of the shofar, that it causes terror and trembling, as Scripture says: “Can it be that a shofar will blow in the city, and the populace not tremble!?”*

*8. To mention the great Day of Judgment and be in awe of it, as Scripture says: “Because the great day of Hashem is neat, near and hurrying, a day of shofar and teruah”*

*9. To remind us of the collection of the scattered of Israel and to yearn for it, about which Scripture says: “it will be on that day – He will blow a great Shofar, and those lost in the Land of Ashur will arrive etc.”*

*10. To remind us of the resurrection of the dead and to put faith in it, as Scripture says: “All dwellers on Earth and inhabitants of the land will see as the banner is raised on the mountain, and when the shofar is audible they will hear.”*

Rambam writes that there are two ways of being unjust to religious metaphors:

- taking them literally and mocking them, and
- taking them literally and accepting them.

Thus, for example, it is wrong to use “His legs will be standing on that day on the Mount of Olives” as evidence that G-d has legs, and wrong to use it as evidence that Tanakh has a primitive corporeal notion of G-d.

The question this leaves open is what purpose metaphor serves, if one is required to understand that it is mere metaphor. One possibility is that it serves as a temporary bridge that enables us to arrive at truth – after we understand the *nimshal*, the symbolized, there is indeed no further use for the *mashal*, the symbol. The midrashic metaphor of King Solomon “chaining metaphor to metaphor until we could pull the waterjug up from the well” may support this idea.

But it would be truer to my experience to say that the best symbols have enduring worth. This may be simply a function of beauty – even after we have concluded, say, that “the fog comes in on little cat’s feet” means that it comes in silently and unhurriedly, the description can still bring a smile. Or it may be a function of residual meaning – surely “silent and unhurried” does not exhaust the qualities of a (little) cat’s tread. The metaphor of Divine legs, as well, endures, and Tanakh remains worthwhile for those who understand that G-d is incorporeal.

For vigorous anticorporealists such as Rambam, however, it seems critical that one never be lost in the metaphor, that there not be even a momentary suspension of disbelief in the literal meaning, at least after the initial understanding. This is not quite the same thing as the midrashic “*k’beyakhol*,” “as if it were



possible,” which seems to encourage a twilight state in which one believes the literal meaning while affirming its impossibility.

It seems to me that another example of this unwillingness to function on the k’beyakhol level is found in this week’s text. Rav Saadia Gaon goes out of his way to ensure that every reason for shofar makes clear that the shofar has no effect on Hashem, that Hashem does not listen for or hear the shofar, but rather that He pays attention only to us. Thus the shofar reminds us to act self-sacrificingly like Yitzchak, not to remind G-d of Yitzchak’s willingness to self-sacrifice.

RaSaG was certainly aware that the Torah describes G-d as “hearing.” What, then, made him unwilling to give rationales for the mitzvah of shofar that assumed that metaphor? Perhaps it was a reaction to a contemporary context in which many took that metaphor with absolute literalness. Perhaps the words of Tanakh are immutable, and therefore one must fight for their meaning, whereas rationales for mitzvot can be cast aside when their cost becomes too great.

It is perhaps worth thinking about the “makhnisei rakhmim” controversy in this light. (On that, see SBM alumnus Rabbi Shlomo Brody at <http://text.rcarabbis.org/?p=265>.) Perhaps communities that don’t see belief in personified angels as at all plausible can sing songs about intercessory angels with impunity.

Bivrahah leshanah tovah. May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life (and all parallel metaphors).