

# **The Menoras Hamaor Midrash Anthology**

## **The Ten Days of Teshuvah**

An Annotated Excerpt from  
*The Light of Mitzvos,*  
the third Light of the Menorah

**Rabbeinu Yitzchak Abohav**

Translated by

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## &&Translator's Foreword

*The Ten Days of Teshuvah* is the second in a series of excerpts from *Menoras Hamaor* especially prepared by C.I.S./Publications Division for Mifal Torah Vodaath Youth Centers for Sephardic Children in Israel. These excerpts from one of the great Sephardic classics are a fitting symbol of the goal towards which Mifal strives: the renaissance of the magnificent Sephardic tradition among large segments of the disadvantaged Sephardic youth of Israel.

*Menoras Hamaor*, the Menorah of Light, is one of the great classics of Jewish religious literature. It is a masterwork consisting of seven separate and distinct works, each dealing with a separate and distinct area of Jewish thought—the seven branches of the Menorah.

For centuries, *Menoras Hamaor* has enjoyed spectacular popularity. It has appeared in seventy-nine editions and has been translated into Ladino, German, and Yiddish. First printed in Constantinople in 1514, it has since been reprinted in many cities on four continents.

As its basic premise, *Menoras Hamaor* uses the verse, Turn away from evil and do good, search out peace and pursue it (Tehillim 34:15). Drawing on the chronicles and timeless wisdom of the Agadic portion of the Talmud and on the Midrashim, it develops a system for the improvement of the individual and the fulfillment of his role in society.

This volume, *The Ten Days of Teshuvah*, is an annotated excerpt from *The Light of Teshuvah*, the Fifth Light of the Menorah. It is an in-depth look at the ten day period beginning with Rosh Hashanah and climaxing with Yom Kippur. It directs the reader to the symbolism and meaning of this period and how it is meant to bring a person closer to Hashem.

The other Lights of the Menorah include: *The Light of Contentment*, *The Light of Expression*, *The Light of Mitzvos*, *The Light of Torah*, *The Light of Harmony*, and *The Light of Humility*.

*The Ten Days of Teshuvah* is an arrangement of a selection of chapters from *The Light of Teshuvah*, the Fifth Light of the Menorah. The first two

parts of this excerpt appear intact in the complete work as Section II, Chapters 1-8. The third part of this excerpt contains an abbreviated look at teshuvah and fasting. It appears in the complete work as Section 1, Chapters 2-3 and Chapters 10-12.

The first two parts of this excerpt discuss the proper attitude one should have during the Ten Days of Teshuvah, beginning with the preparations from as early as Rosh Chodesh of the month of Elul, The chapters dealing with Rosh Hashanah focus on its being the day of judgment, a time when it is crucial that one do teshuvah, and show how this date is particularly appropriate for this purpose from a historical viewpoint. They then tackle the perplexing paradox of the righteous person who suffers while the sinful one prospers. They conclude with a description of the relationship between the blowing of the shofar and teshuvah, followed by a comprehensive listing of the symbolism of the mitzvah of shofar.

The chapters dealing with Yom Kippur differentiate between those sins for which Yom Kippur atones and those for which it does not, outlining what one must do in order to enter Yom Kippur cleansed and pure. They then go on to describe the singular nature of this day—a day that is at once joyous and terrifying, a day of fasting that must be honored with holiday finery—and how it is designed to inspire a person to do teshuvah.

The third and final part of the excerpt offers a brief glimpse at the *Menoras Hamaor's* perspective on teshuvah and fasting. It begins with a discussion of the seven levels of teshuvah, determined by when and why the person does teshuvah. Although any form of teshuvah is acceptable there are definite advantages for the person who does a higher form of teshuvah. This point is very graphically demonstrated by a beautiful parable from the Midrash. The excerpt concludes with an extensive discussion of the Torah perspective on fasting, in sharp contrast to the role of fasting in many of the gentile religions.

About the Author

The Abohav family was a very prominent Spanish family of outstanding scholars who lived in the Middle Ages. After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, in 1492, branches of the family were established in North Africa, Turkey, Italy, and the ex-Marrano communities of Northern Europe.

The life of the author, Rabbeinu Yitzchak Abohav, is shrouded in mystery, with very few details available. It is generally accepted that he lived in Spain in the latter half of the fourteenth century. His father, Rabbeinu Avraham Abohav, was quite possibly the Rabbeinu Avraham Abohav to whom Rabbeinu Yehudah ben Asher of Toledo, the son of the Wash, addressed responsa in *Zichron Yehudah*.

The author's fame rests entirely upon his authorship of *Menoras Hamaor*, which is but one part of a trilogy. The other parts of the trilogy, *Aron Ha 'edus* and *Shulchan Hapanim*, have been lost. The author describes all three parts of the trilogy, and their interrelationship, in the "Ode to the Menorah" (see Appendix A to *The Light of Contentment*, the First Light of the Menorah).

The little that is known about the author's life must be gleaned from what he himself writes in the introductory "Ode to the Menorah" and "Profile of the Menorah" (see Appendix B to *The Light of Contentment*, the First Light of the Menorah). In "Profile of the Menorah", the author writes that a substantial part of his life was devoted to secular affairs. It was in his later years that he turned to writing and the rabbinate. He implies that part of his motivation for writing *Menoras Hamaor* was to have a systematic arrangement of the Agada to draw upon when he had to speak before the people. There is also a tantalizing reference in the "Ode to the Menorah", Part V, to some time spent in captivity. However, this might only be an allegorical allusion to the time he spent in secular pursuits.

Rabbeinu Yitzchak Abohav II, a descendant of the author who lived one hundred years later and died in 1493, was known as "the last gaon of Castille". He studied with Rabbeinu Yitzchak Canpanton and became the head of the Toledo Yeshiva. In 1491, Rabbeinu Yitzchak Abarbanel studied

with him. Rabbeinu Yitzchak Abohav II wrote many works, including a commentary on *Arba'ah Turim* of Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Asher, the son of the R'ash. Although this last work has been lost, it is quoted extensively in the commentaries of Rabbeinu Yosef Caro, the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, who refers to him as one of the greatest scholars of his generation. The authorship of *Menoras Hamaor* is sometimes erroneously attributed to the better known Rabbeinu Yitzchak Abohav II, but the "Chida" proves that this is not so. (See also *Toldos Haposkim* under "Aron Ha'edus".)

Part I:

ROSH HASHANAH

(Chap. 1-5)





## Chapter One

### Preparing for Judgment

Any intelligent person who is scheduled for trial before a mortal king of flesh and blood will surely spend sleepless days and nights preparing his case. He will seek the advice of every knowledgeable person he knows that can help him prepare his case. He will go to great lengths to attain a favorable verdict, even if all that is at stake is but a small part of his fortune and he faces no personal risk. Should he not do so as well when he is brought to judgment before the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy Blessed One? When he himself, his children, and his fortune all hang in the balance?

Indeed, nothing can be concealed from the Holy Blessed One. He needs no witnesses and no evidence; He knows all. And no advocates can plead before Him other than a person's own good deeds and teshuvah for his transgressions. Before such an awesome trial any intelligent person must certainly tremble with fear. He must prepare very thoroughly, examining his actions closely and repenting his sins. As Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, approaches he must seek any advice he can get that will help him obtain a favorable verdict.

Therefore, it is important to begin preparing for Rosh Hashanah at least thirty days earlier, from Rosh Chodesh of the month of Elul. This is the minimum time required to rouse oneself fully from one's year-long stupor.

Furthermore, the month of Elul is a period of grace during which the Holy Blessed One views the Jewish people as a whole with favor and forgives their sins, for it is the month during which Moshe Rabbeinu went up to Mount Sinai to receive the Second Tablets of the Commandments. The Midrash tells us (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 46):

*%%It was taught: On Rosh Chodesh of Elul the Holy Blessed One said to Moshe: "Come up to Me to the Mount (Devarim 10:1)."*

*This was the time when Moshe went up to receive the Second Tablets of the Commandments. The sounds of the shofar were trumpeted throughout*

*the encampment letting the people know that Moshe had gone up to the Mount. Thus the people would not mistakenly turn to idolatry.<sup>1</sup>*

*And the Holy Blessed One was exalted through the sound of that shofar, as it is written., The Lord ascends amidst the teruah, God amidst the sound of the shofar (Tehillim 47:6).*

*Therefore, the Sages decreed that each year the shofar be blown from Rosh Chodesh throughout the entire month of Elul. This is to warn the Jewish people to do teshuvah, as it is written, Can a shofar be blown in a city and the people not tremble? (Amos 3:6), and also in order to confuse Satan.<sup>2</sup>*

&&In the responsa of the Geonim we find mention of the various customs pertaining to the month of Elul, including both the blowing of the shofar and the saying of special prayers of entreaty, the Selichos.

Rav Hai Gaon writes: "It is our custom to say Selichos only during the Ten Days of Teshuvah. We have heard, however, that in some places in

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<sup>1</sup> [Translator's note: This is a reference to the incident of the worshipping of the golden calf-idol. On the seventh day of the month of Sivan, when Moshe Rabbeinu went up to Mount Sinai to receive the First Tablets of the Commandments, he told the Jewish people that he would return after forty days during the first six hours of the day. He returned on the seventeenth day of the month of Tamuz. This calculation of forty days was based on full twenty-four hour periods and did not include the day of his ascendance. The people mistakenly counted that first day as well. According in their calculation Moshe was due to return on the morning of the sixteenth day of Tamuz. When Moshe did not appear on what they considered the fortieth day they were sure that he would never return, and they succumbed to the worship of the golden calf-idol. Therefore, when Moshe went up to receive the Second Tablets of the Commandments the shofar was blown in the encampment every day to warn the people not to err again and turn to idolatry.]

<sup>2</sup> [Translator's note: This is a reference to the fact that Satan caused the people to turn to idolatry when Moshe Rabbeinu went up to receive the First Tablets of the Commandments. The Talmud tells us (Shabbos 89a) that on the fortieth day, according to the mistaken calculation of the people (see Footnote 1), Satan appeared and confused the world.

He asked the people: "Where is your master?"

They replied: "He ascended to the Upper World."

He said to them: "The morning of the fortieth day has already passed." They paid no attention to him.

He said to them: "He has died."

They paid no attention to him.

Then he showed them the image of Moshe's deathbed, and they finally believed him,

Thus, when Moshe went up to receive the second Tablets the shofar was blown to confuse Satan to prevent him from misleading the Jewish people.]

Persia it is the custom to say these prayers during the entire preceding month of Elul as well, because this is the period during which Moshe went up to Heaven for the third time, returning with the Second Tablets on Yom Kippur. Additional entreaty will certainly bring one only benefit."

Rabbi Yitzchak Ibn Giyas writes: "We follow the custom of beginning from Rosh Chodesh of Elul."

Rabbeinu Nissim writes: "Many elders and householders blow the shofar from Rosh Chodesh of Elul. I have found the source for this custom in the Midrash..." He then goes on to quote the aforementioned passage from Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer.

As part of the preparations for the Day of Judgment we also find the custom of fasting on the day before Rosh Hashanah. The basis for this custom can be found in the Midrash (Tanchuma Emor 22):

*It is written, And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, twigs of myrtle trees, and willows of the brook (Vayikra 23;40).*

*Why does the verse refer to "the first day"? Doesn't the Festival of Sukkos fall on the fifteenth day of Tishrei?*

*Only, this refers to the first day of the new accounting of transgression.*

*There is an analogy to this. One of the king's provinces owed taxes to the king but had not paid. The king mustered an army and set out to the province to collect the overdue taxes. As the king approached within ten parsas<sup>3</sup> of the province the most prominent inhabitants came out to greet him.*

*They said: "We have nothing, and we cannot pay."*

*The king cancelled one third of the debt.*

*As the king approached even closer to the province the middle level people came out to greet him and plead their cause.*

*The king cancelled yet another third of the debt.*

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<sup>3</sup> [Translator's note: A parsah is a Persian mile equivalent to about four miles.]

*As the king approached even closer all the inhabitants came out to greet him and plead their cause.*

*The king cancelled the entire debt.*

*The king in this analogy represents the Holy Blessed One; the inhabitants of the province are analogous to the lavish people who transgress all year and accumulate a large debt. On the day before Rosh Hashanah the most prominent among the Jewish people fast, and the Holy Blessed One forgives one third of their guilt. During the Ten Days of Teshuvah the middle level fasts, and the Holy Blessed one forgives another third of the guilt of the Jewish people. On Yom Kippur everyone fasts, and the Holy Blessed One forgives their entire guilt. During the short period of time between Yom Kippur and the Festival of Sukkos people are preoccupied with the mitzvos of sukkah and lulav; they do not have the opportunity to sin. Therefore, the beginning of the Festival of Sukkos is called the first day" of the new accounting of transgression.*

&&It should be noted, however, that those who fast on the day before Rosh Hashanah are nevertheless required to bathe, have their hair cut, and dress in white garments. The Yerushalmi tells us (Rosh Hashanah 1:3):

*%%Rabbi Seemon said: "It is written, For what great nation is there that has deities close to it, as is God our Lord whenever we call out to Him? (Devarim 4:7).*

*"Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Yehoshua explained: 'What other nation can compare to this nation in its familiarity with the laws and customs of its lords? In the way of the world, if a person is scheduled for trial he puts on black garments, wraps himself in a black cloak, lets his beard grow, and does not cut his fingernails, since he does not know what the verdict will be. Not so are the Jewish people. They put on white garments and wrap themselves in white cloaks. They trim their hair and cut their fingernails. They eat and drink and are joyful on Rosh Hashanah. For they are confident that the Holy Blessed One will perform a miracle for them.'"*

&&Clearly, Rosh Hashanah is a time for festivity, not fasting. This point is stated explicitly in one of the responsa of the Geonim, which reads as follows:

"As to fasting during the two days of Rosh Hashanah it is our considered opinion that one should not fast, For we find that the early leaders of the Jewish people told them, as the verse quotes, Go eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is sanctified for our Lord, and be not sad, for the joy of God is your fortress (Nechemiah 81.0). Similarly, we do not approve of fasting on the Shabbos between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (known as Shabbos Shuvah). For even Tisha b'Av (the Ninth of Av), which is a very important mandatory fast day, is postponed if it falls on Shabbos...

"The Yerushalmi tells us that Rabbi Yaakov used to instruct his scribes to permit fasting on any day but for Shabbos, the Festivals, Rosh Chodesh, and Purim (Nedarim 8:2). The Talmud also mentions that abstention from physical pleasure has no place on Shabbos and the Festivals (Yoma 81a)."

These sources prove the folly of those who fast on Rosh Hashanah and Shabbos Shuvah. Obviously, these people do not realize that teshuvah can be accomplished without fasting. Actually, fasting is only one of the various approaches to teshuvah. There are others that are more fundamental.

## Chapter Two

### Historical Background

Rosh Hashanah is the day on which all people are judged on worldly matters, both collectively and as individuals. The Talmud tells us (Rosh Hashanah 8b):

*Our rabbis have taught: it is written, For it is a law for Yisrael, a judgment for the Lord of Yaakov (Tehillim 81:5). This comes to teach us that the Court of the Upper World does not convene until the court of the lower world has declared and sanctified the new month.<sup>4</sup>*

*It was otherwise taught: It is written, For it is a law for Yisrael (Ibid.).*

*Based on this verse it would seem that only the people of Yisrael are brought to judgment on Rosh Hashanah. How do we know that the gentile nations are also judged on this day?*

*The verse concludes, A judgment for the Lord of Yaakov (Ibid).*

*Why then was it necessary to single out the Jewish people in the first part of the verse? Why was it not sufficient to include them in the generality of the conclusion of the verse?*

*This comes to teach us that the Jewish people are brought to judgment first, according to the saying of Rav Chisda.*

*For Rav Chisda said: "If a king and his populace are brought to trial the king is judged first, as it is written, To execute the judgment of His servant and the judgment of His people Yisrael (Melachim I 8:59)."*

*Why is this so?*

*It can be said: Because it is improper to have a king sitting and waiting while another is being judged.*

*It can also be said: Because early judgment is more favorable, since the Divine Wrath has not yet been fully aroused.*

*Elsewhere, the Talmud also tells us (Rosh Hashanah 16a):*

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<sup>4</sup> Translator's note: This derivation is based on the juxtaposition of the verse to the previous verse. Blow the shofar at the new moon, at the time appointed for the day of our festival (Tehillim 81:4).]

*%%The world is judged four times during the year: On Pesach the harvest is determined. On Shavuot the produce of the trees is determined. On Rosh Hashanah all the inhabitants of the world pass before Him as sheep of the flock, as it is written, He molds their hearts together (Tehillim 33:15). On Sukkot the rainfall is determined.*

&&A closer look at the historical background of Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the month of Tishrei, and all the momentous events that occurred on this date, will give us a better insight into the auspiciousness of this date for the Day of Judgment. The Talmud tells us (Rosh Hashanah 10b):

*%%It was taught: Rabbi Eliezer says: "The world was created during the month of Tishrei. Our forefathers [Avraham and Yaakov] were born during Tishrei. Our forefathers died during Tishrei. Our forefather Yitzchak was born on Pesach. Sarah, Rachel, and Chanah conceived on Rosh Hashanah. Yosef was released from prison on Rosh Hashanah. Our ancestors were freed from their labors in Egypt on Rosh Hashanah, although they were not actually released from Egypt until the month of Nissan. And the ultimate redemption will come during Tishrei."*

*...And it was also taught: Rabbi Eliezer says: "How do we know that the world was created during Tishrei?"*

*"For it is written, And the Lord said, Let the earth bring forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and trees bearing fruit... (Beraishis 1:11). During which month does the earth bring forth vegetation and do the trees grow fruit? I would assume that it is Tishrei. Also, that time was a time of rainfall, and the rains came down and made the land bloom, as it is written, And a mist arose from the land and watered the whole face of the earth (Beraishis 2:6), a further indication that the world was created during Tishrei, the rainy season."*

*And Rabbi Yehoshua says: "How do we know that the world was created during Nissan?"*

*"For it is written, And the earth yielded vegetation... (Beraishis 1:12). During which month is the earth already full of vegetation and are the trees already full of fruit? I would assume that it is Nissan. Also, that time was a time of animal mating, as it is written, The pastures were clothed with sheep (Tehillim 65:14), a further indication that the world was created during Nissan."*

*.. Rabbi Eliezer says: "How do we know that our forefathers were born during Tishrei?"*

*"For it is written, And all the men of Yisrael gathered around the king, Shlomo, during the Month of the Mighty on the festival (Melachim I 8:2). The reference to Tishrei as 'the Month of the Mighty' indicates that the Mighty Ancients were born during this month."*

*...And Rabbi Yehoshua says: "How do we know that our forefathers were born during Nissan?"*

*"For it is written, And it was in the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Yisrael went forth from the land of Mizraim, in the fourth year, in the Month of Brilliance... (Melachim I 6:1). This reference to Nissan as 'the Month of Brilliance' indicates that the Brilliant Ancients were born during this month."*

*..The one who says our forefathers were born during Tishrei also says that they died during Tishrei. The one who says our forefathers were born during Nissan also says that they died during Nissan, How do they know this?*

*Because it is written, And he said to them, I am one hundred and twenty years old today (Devarim 31:2).*

*What is the significance of "today"?*

*Moshe was telling the Jewish people that on that very day the one hundred and twenty years were completed.*

*This comes to teach us that the Holy Blessed One figures the years of the life spans of righteous people to the precise day and month, as it is written, And I will make full the number of your days (Shemos 23:26).*



*...Sarah, Rachel, and Chanah conceived on Rosh Hashanah. How do we know this?*

*Rabbi Elazar said; "This is derived from the parallel expressions of two different Hebrew words meaning remembering. It is written of Rachel, And the Lord remembered Rachel (Beraishis 30:22), and it is written of Chanah, And God remembered her (Shmuel I 1:19). We find the same Hebrew word used in reference to Rosh Hashanah in that which is written, A remembrance of teruah (Vayikra 23:24). Having established that Chanah conceived on Rosh Hashanah, we can now determine when Sarah conceived. The same Hebrew word is used in that which is written of Chanah, For God remembered Chanah (Shmuel I 2:21), and in that which is written of Sarah, And God remembered Sarah (Beraishis 21:1). This indicates that Chanah and Sarah conceived at the same time of year."*

*Yosef was released from prison on Rosh Hashanah. How do we know this?*

*For it is written, Blow the shofar on the new moon... for it is a law for Yisrael... as a testament to Yosef did he establish it when he went out to the land of Mitzraim (Tehillim 81:4-6).*

*Our fathers were freed from their labors in Egypt on Rosh Hashanah. How do we know this?*

*It is derived from the parallel expression of the Hebrew word for burden in that which is written, From under the burdens of Mitzraim (Shemos 6:6) and in that which is written of Yosef, I removed his shoulder from the burden (Tehillim 81:17).*

*They were redeemed from Egypt during Nissan but the ultimate redemption will come during Tishrei. This is derived from the mention of the shofar in reference to Rosh Hashanah in that which is written, Blow the shofar on the new moon (Tehillim 81:4) and in reference to the ultimate redemption in that which is written, And it shall be on that day that a great shofar shall be blown . . (Yeshayahu 27 :13).*

&&Considering that man was created during Tishrei it is fitting that the new year for all the world's inhabitants should begin at that time. Also, considering that Sarah, Rachel, and Chanah, who were all barren, were "remembered by Hashem" and conceived during Tishrei it is apparently an auspicious time for remembrance. Therefore, it is fitting that the supplications for a healthy and prosperous new year come during this time.

Furthermore, Adam was created on Rosh Hashanah, and on that very same day he sinned, did teshuvah, and was forgiven. And the Holy Blessed One said to him: "Just as I have forgiven you on this day, so too will I forgive the sins of your descendants on this day." Thus, the proper day for judgment, teshuvah, and forgiveness is Rosh Hashanah.

The Pesikta tells us (Piska 23):

*%%It is written., Forever, O God, is Your Word established in the heavens (Tehillim 119:89), and it is also written, Before Your judgment do they stand on this day (Tehillim 119:91), the inference being that this day had been established as a day of judgment from the beginning of creation.*

*Rabbi Eliezer says: "The world was created on the twenty-fifth day of Elul."*

*This explanation is based on that which we have been taught: During the prayers of Rosh Hashanah we say: "This day marks the beginning of Your Deeds." Meaning: On Rosh Hashanah Adam, the primal man, was created. During the first hour of the day, He conceived the plan of creating a man\_ During the second hour, He sought the counsel of the angels of service\_ During the third hour, He collected the dust from which He would make the man. During the fourth hour, He kneaded it. During the fifth hour, He shaped it. During the sixth hour, He completed its form. During the seventh hour, He put a soul into it. During the eighth hour, He led the man into the Garden of Eden. During the ninth hour, the man was commanded not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. During the tenth hour, he transgressed that command. During the eleventh hour, he was judged. During the twelfth hour, he was granted amnesty.*

*The Holy Blessed One said to Adam: "Just as you stood before Me today and were granted amnesty, so too, in the future, will your descendants stand before Me to be judged on this day and be granted amnesty,"*

&&It should be noted, however, that although Rosh Hashanah is the day of judgment certain matters remain pending. They are decided at various appointed times throughout the year. These are times when specific sacrifices were brought in the Bais Hamikdash to seek favor before Him as regards these matters. The Talmud tells us (Rosh Hashanah 16a):

*%%It was taught: Everything is judged on Rosh Hashanah, but the final verdicts are delivered on each matter in its own time: the grain harvest on Pesach, the harvest of the fruit trees on Atzeres (Shavuos), the rainfall on Sukkos. People are judged on Rosh Hashanah, and their verdicts are sealed on Yom Kippur.*

*Rabbi Yosi says: "People are judged every single day, as it is written, And You remembered him every morning (Iyov 7:18). "*

*Rabbi Nassan says: "People are judged at all times, as it is written, You tested him every moment (Ibid.)."*

*...It was taught: Rabbi Yehudah says in the name of Rabbi Akiva: "Why did the Torah direct that the omer offering from the new harvest be brought on Pesach?*

*"Because Pesach comes during harvest time. The Holy Blessed One said: 'Bring Me the omer on Pesach so that the harvest in the fields should be plentiful.'*

*"Why did the Torah direct that the offering of the two loaves be brought on Atzeres?*

*"Because Atzeres comes during the harvest from fruit trees. The Holy Blessed One said: 'Bring Me the two loaves on Atzeres so that the harvest from the fruit trees should be plentiful.'*

*"And why did the Torah direct that the water ablutions be poured in the Bais Hamikdash on Sukkos?*

*"Because Sukkos comes during the beginning of the rainy season, The Holy Blessed One said: 'Pour the water ablutions before Me on Sukkos so that the year's rainfall should be plentiful. '*

*"And the Holy Blessed One said: 'Say before Me on Rosh Hashanah the prayers of kingship, remembrance, and the blowing of the shofar. Kingship, to accept Me as your king. Remembrance, so that your remembrance will come favorably before Me. And through what medium? Through the shofar.'*

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*Rabbi Abahu said: "Why do we blow on Rosh Hashanah with a shofar made from a ram's horn?"*

*"And the Holy Blessed One said: 'Blow before Me on Rosh Hashanah with a shofar made from a ram's horn so that I will recall to your benefit the Akeidah upon which Yitzchak the son of Avraham was offered up as a sacrifice to Me and replaced by a ram. Thus will I consider it as if you too have offered yourselves up to Me as a sacrifice.' "*

&&Indeed, the Akeidah of Yitzchak is of major significance to the descendants of our forefather Avraham. Avraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Yitzchak to fulfill the Will of the Creator earned him and his offspring the Creator's everlasting love. His conduct during this ordeal is a source of merit upon which the Jewish people repeatedly draw in perilous times. The Talmud tells us (Sanhedrin 89b):

*%%It is written, And it was after these things, and the Lord tested Avraham (Beraishis 22:1).*

*After which things?*

*Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yosi the son of Zimra: "After the events involving Satan. For it is written, and the boy grew up, and he was weaned... (Beraishis 21:8).*

*"Satan said to the Holy Blessed One: Master of the Universe, You have granted this old man a child at the age of one hundred. Yet, of all the feasts he has made he did not sacrifice before You even one turtledove or one fledgling.'*

*"He replied: He made these feasts only in honor of the birth of his son..  
If I were to tell him to sacrifice that son to Me, he would do so.'*

*"Thereupon, And the Lord tested Avraham... (Beraishis 22:1)."*

*It is written, And He said, Please take your son, your only one, that you love, Yitzchak, and go you to the land of Moriah, and offer him up there as a burnt offering on one of the hills that I will tell you (Beraishis 22:2).*

*Rabbi Shimeon the son of Aba said: "The verse uses terms of entreaty rather than command. There is an analogy to this. A mortal king of flesh and blood was beset by many wars. He had one mighty warrior who fought these wars for him and won them all. After a time, the threat of a major war loomed.*

*"The king said to the warrior:I beg you to wage this war for me so that it not be said that your earlier service was meaningless.'*

*"So too did the Holy Blessed One say to Avraham: I have put you through many ordeals and you have withstood them all. Now I ask you to withstand this ordeal so that it not be said that the earlier ones were meaningless.' "*

*The Holy Blessed One said: "Please take your son... (Ibid.). "*

*Avraham replied: "I have two sons.<sup>5</sup>*

*He continued; "Your only one... (Mid.). "*

*Avraham replied: "Each of my sons is his mother's only one."*

*He continued: "That you love... (Ibid.)."*

*Avraham replied: "I love both of them. "*

*He continued: "Yitzchak (Ibid.). "*

*Why was all this necessary? Why didn't He specify Yitzchak directly?*

*To lessen the shock to Avraham and to protect his sanity.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> [Translator's note: Yitzchak the son of Sarah and Yishmael the son of Hagar.]

<sup>6</sup> [Translator's note: At first glance, the Talmud seems to be saying that if it had been Yishmael who was to have been sacrificed it would not have been quite so shocking to Avraham. This is indeed true since Avraham's lineage would be continued through Yitzchak, as it is written, For through Yitzchak shall your offspring be known (Beraishis 21:12). However, it can also be said that as long as the exact nature of the ordeal was not clearly defined its full import did not strike home. Therefore, by being deliberately ambiguous Hashem was gradually preparing Avraham for the shock.]

*Satan went forth to meet Avraham along the way and said to him: "If we try to speak to you will you be wearied? but who can hold back words? behold, you have chastised many, and you have strengthened weak hands, your words have kept erect those that stumbled, and you have supported those with sinking knees, yet now it comes upon you and you are wearied, it touches you and you are confounded (Iyov 4:2-5)<sup>7</sup>*

*Avraham replied: "But I will walk in my innocence (Tehillim 26:11)."*

*Satan continued: "Is not your fear folly? (Iyov 4:6)."*

*Avraham replied: "Remember please whoever perished being innocent (Iyov 4:7). "*

*When Satan saw that Avraham would not heed him he said: "But to me a word came by stealth (Iyov 4:12.). This have I heard from behind the heavenly curtain: A sheep will be the burnt offering; Yitzchak will not be the burnt offering."*

*Avraham replied: "It is the punishment of a liar that even if he tells the truth he is paid no attention. "*

*Rav Levi said: "The reference in the verse to 'after these things' is to a conversation between Yishmael and Yitzchak.*

*"Yishmael said to Yitzchak: I am greater than you in the performance of the mitzvos, for you were circumcised when you were eight days old, while I was circumcised at thirteen years of age.*

*"Yitzchak replied: Do you pride yourself over me because of just one organ? If the Holy Blessed One would tell me to sacrifice myself before Him I would do so. '*

*"Thereupon, And the Lord tested Avraham.,, (Beraishis 22:1)."*

*&&As a reminder of Avraham's readiness to sacrifice his son Yitzchak on the Akeidah to fulfill His Will, a ram being substituted at the last*

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<sup>7</sup> [Translator's note: Rashi explains that Satan was in effect saying: "Can it be that the One who loves you would test you with something that is so troubling to you and will cut off your lineage?"]

moment, Hashem commanded that the shofar, a ram's horn, be blown on Rosh Hashanah.

The verses we read on Rosh Hashanah and the blowing of the shofar are all expressions of teshuvah and our acceptance of His Kingship over us. We read the portion of how He remembered Sarah when she was barren (Beraishis 21) and the Akeidah of Yitzchak (Beraishis 22). And we conclude with the Haftorah reading of how He remembered Chanah when she was barren (Shmuel I 1) and of repentance (Yirmiyahu 31). We implore Him to accept our teshuvah, even if we have not repented perfectly, and to let us benefit from the merit of these righteous women whom He remembered and the Akeidah of Yitzchak. We implore Him to let our remembrance come favorably before Him and to have mercy on us.

## Chapter Three

### Reward and Retribution

All the principles of the Torah and our beliefs are based on the concept of total and universal Divine Providence, the belief that the Creator controls and guides every aspect of the world, both in the general sense and the individual sense, dealing with each person according to his deeds,<sup>8</sup> There are countless references to this concept in the Torah. Our Sages have told us (Avos 3:15):

*%%Everything is observed by Hashem, and choice is granted to people; the world is judged through His goodness, but everything is determined according to the preponderance of deeds.*

&&Although it is certainly true that He is constantly guiding the world, giving out reward and punishment as each situation warrants, on Rosh Hashanah there is a general accounting. It is a time when a person's every deed is placed on the scale of justice to determine if it will be tipped to his favor or detriment.<sup>9</sup> Nothing is forgotten when a person is brought to judgment before the Throne of Glory. In fact, in order that the common people understand perfectly, our Sages speak in the allegory of deeds being recorded in the Book of Remembrance to underscore the fact that He remembers everything. The Talmud tells us (Rosh Hashanah 16b)

*%%Rabbi Kruspidai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: "Three separate books are opened on Rosh Hashanah. One contains the records of the absolutely righteous, another contains the records of the absolutely sinful, and a third contains the records of average people. The book of the absolutely righteous is immediately inscribed with the verdict of life and sealed. The book of the absolutely sinful is immediately inscribed with the verdict of death and sealed. The book of average people is left pending from*

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<sup>8</sup> As it is written, Great in counsel and mighty in exploits, that Your Eyes. are vigilant over all the ways of people, to give each man according to his ways, according to the fruits of his actions (Yirmiyahu 32:19). And it is written, The Eyes of God, they examine the entire earth (Zechariah 4:10).

<sup>9</sup> As symbolized by the sign of the month of Tishrei which is Libra, or scales.



*Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. If they are found worthy the verdict of life is inscribed. If they are found unworthy the verdict of death is inscribed."*

*Rabbi Avin said: "From where is this derived? From that which is written, They shall be erased from the book of life, and they shall not be inscribed with the righteous (Tehillim 69:29).*

*"They shall be erased from the book' is an allusion to the absolutely sinful.*

*"Life' is an allusion to the absolutely righteous,*

*"And they shall not be inscribed with the righteous' is an allusion to average people."*

*Rav Nachman the son of Yitzchak said: "The allusion can be found in that which is written, But if not, please erase me from Your Book which You have written (Shemos 32:32).*

*" 'Please erase me' is an allusion to the absolutely sinful.*

*" 'From Your Book' is an allusion to the absolutely righteous.*

*" Which You have written' is an allusion to average people."*

*It was taught: The disciples of the school of Shamai say: "On the day of judgment the judged are divided into three groups: One consists of the thoroughly righteous; one consists of the thoroughly sinful; one consists of average people.*

*"For the group of the thoroughly righteous, it is immediately inscribed and sealed that they are to live in the world to come..."*

&&Many scholars have commented on the perplexing nature of this passage from the Talmud, pointing out that we sometimes find that a righteous man perishes in spite of his righteousness, while a sinful man endures in spite of his sinfulness.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, we find that this perplexity troubled even David Hamelech, who wrote, And I nearly set out... for I was jealous of the wanton, when I saw the tranquility of the sinful (Tehillim 73:1-2). This observation did not let him rest, until he concluded, Not until I

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<sup>10</sup> [Translator's note; A reference to Koheles 7:15.]

come to the Sanctum of the Lord will I perceive their ultimate fate (Tehillim 73:17). His intention can be interpreted either as their "ultimate fate" immediately after their death or as their "ultimate fate" in the world to come. The prophet Yirmiyahu also expressed a similar perplexity, Why is the way of the sinful prosperous? (Yirmiyahu 12:1).

It would appear that their perplexity was focused more on the success of the sinful rather than on the suffering of the righteous. This is because there is no righteous man in the world who does only good and never sins.<sup>11</sup> Thus, someone who might appear to be a righteous person might actually be guilty of secret sins. Those people, however, who are openly sinful and still enjoy peace and tranquility are certainly a cause for great perplexity.

Our Sages have anticipated these questions (Taanis 11a).<sup>12</sup> They quote that which is written, The Lord of Trust with no injustice (Devarim 32:4), pointing out that He has no prejudice or partiality. It is possible that someone who is steeped in sinfulness might nevertheless have done something meritorious. Therefore, He rewards that sinful person thoroughly in this world so that he will have no claim to reward in the world to come. Similarly, it is possible that a righteous person might have been guilty of some sin. Therefore, He exacts full retribution from him in this world so that he may be thoroughly rewarded in the world to come.

Consequently, if we see an apparently righteous person die before his time, or someone sinful live long, it is because the judgment of Rosh Hashanah does not determine the fate of the soul but the fate of the body, Rabbi Yochanan was saying that only those who are absolutely righteous, completely free of guilt, are immediately inscribed for life in this world, and that only those who are absolutely sinful, completely lacking in merit, are immediately inscribed for death. The judgment to determine the fate of the soul in the world to come comes only after death. This judgment is

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<sup>11</sup> [Translator's note: A reference to Koheles 7:20d]

<sup>12</sup> [Translator's note; For full text and discussion see Prologue to the First Light of the Menorah, The *Light of Contentment*.]

discussed in the conclusion of the above passage from the Talmud in the name of the disciples of the school of Shammai (not quoted here).

Others offer a different explanation for the incidence of misfortune among some righteous people.<sup>13</sup> They contend that if the Creator were to grant prosperity, tranquility, and long life in this world to the righteous, while denying these benefits to and even visiting immediate retribution upon the sinful, the purpose of the Torah would be defeated. All people would then automatically decide to be righteous. Their primary motivation, however, would be mere practicality. They would neither be doing it for the sake of Heaven, nor for the deep significance of the acts, nor to achieve the glorious ultimate rewards outlined in the Torah. They would be doing it only to achieve immediate material benefits and to avoid immediate retribution. Therefore, the Creator has designed the world in such a way that material reward and retribution are not always in direct proportion to righteousness and sinfulness. Only thus will people serve Him expressly for the sake of fulfilling His Will and achieving spiritual reward. Only thus will immediate material benefit and the avoidance of retribution be relegated to secondary motivations for their righteousness.

Indeed, people cannot be expected to react otherwise. It is in the very nature of the species to instinctively seek that which is beneficial and to recoil from that which is harmful. All living creatures react this way purely out of instinct. If a hungry beast finds grass or a thirsty beast finds water it will immediately try to satisfy its need, but it will be very careful to avoid ditches or thorns that stand in its way. Certainly, people who are endowed with the ability to make logical choices will choose what benefits them and avoid what harms them. Even a small child who is presented with a smoldering coal and a pearl will always choose the pearl.

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<sup>13</sup> [Translator's note: Elsewhere, the author cites *Sha'ar Hashamayim* by Rabbi Yitzchak ben Letef as the source for this opinion. See Epilogue to the Third Light of the Menorah, *The Light of Mitzvos*.]

In fact, even now that the relationship between righteousness and reward is not perfectly clear, our Sages have found it necessary to tell us not to serve the Blessed Lord in order to be rewarded but for the sake of Heaven (Avos 1:3). Service should be for the realization of truth; honors will come ultimately. If the relationship between righteousness and reward *were* perfectly clear people would inevitably be improperly motivated.

Furthermore, if all righteous people would experience only good and all sinful people misfortune the balance of nature would be disrupted, No longer would the natural order of events be determined by positive and negative factors within nature itself. It would then be quite possible that a pious person would habitually eat unwholesome foods without experiencing discomfort or illness. He might even throw himself off a high place and escape harm. Conversely, a sinful person might sow a fertile field and nothing would grow, even if his field is right next to the field of a pious person which is in full bloom. It might even rain on the field of the pious person but not on the field of the sinful person. Also, the sinful person might marry and not have children. Such eventualities are a negation of the natural order which the Creator instilled in the world. Nature must be permitted to run its course, at least in outward appearance.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, we must be content not to focus so intently on material benefit in this world. Such rewards are empty compared to the peaceful bliss of the world to come. Even if the righteous person falters in this world he will surely be successful in the world to come. And even if the sinful person is successful in this world he will surely have his downfall in the world to come. We must keep in mind that all reward is limited and temporary except for the peace and security of the eternal world to come, as

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<sup>14</sup> [Translator's note: This does not mean that righteous people are not rewarded with good in this world. It merely means that there must not be an incontrovertible cause and effect relationship between righteousness and material reward. Manipulation of natural forces and circumstances to benefit the righteous person does not subvert the natural process. Only inevitability subverts the natural process.]

the prophet has written, No eye has seen a deity beside You, who provides for the one that waits for Him (Yeshayahu 64:3).

In summation, we find that although teshuvah and good deeds are always effective, they are of particular importance as we approach the day of judgment. At this time, when one's self, one's children, and one's livelihood are judged a person must be especially careful to remove his sins through teshuvah. Thus can he be assured of a favorable verdict and of being immediately inscribed for life. Even if he will only attain the level of an average person whose merits and demerits are in balance, his scale will be tipped to his favor and he will merit being inscribed for life after Yom Kippur.<sup>15</sup> The abovementioned passage from the Talmud which tells us that if average people are found unworthy on Yom Kippur the verdict of death is inscribed refers only to those who fail to do teshuvah.<sup>16</sup>

The Talmud tells us that the best time for the individual to do teshuvah is during the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (Rosh Hashana 18a). This is the time when He is most willing to accept teshuvah, the time of which the prophet says, Entreat God when He can be found, call out to Him when He is near (Yeshayahu 55:6),<sup>17</sup> the time referred to in that which is written, And from there you shall seek out God your Lord, and you shall find Him if you entreat with all your heart and all your soul (Devarim 4:29).

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<sup>15</sup> [Translator's note: This is according to the opinion of the disciples of the school of Hillel. For full text and discussion see the First Light of the Menorah, *The Light of Contentment*, Section 1, Chapter 8.]

<sup>16</sup> This is because it is incumbent on each person to do teshuvah, as it is written, And you shall return to God your Lord, and you shall listen to His Voice (Devarim 4:31). The transgression of this mitzvah tips the otherwise balanced scale of average people to their detriment.

<sup>17</sup> [Translator's note: According to the interpretation of this verse in Pesikta (Piska 24).]

## Chapter Four

### The Shofar's Call to Teshuvah

Because of His mercy for his creatures the Blessed Lord has given them the opportunity to do teshuvah and be spared the consequences of their misdeeds. He knows that the inborn inclination of people is to sin<sup>18</sup> and that by nature they gravitate towards the material rather than the intellectual. Therefore, He has required people to examine their ways constantly and to return through teshuvah.<sup>19</sup>

In actuality, however, people are caught up in their material drives throughout the year and are not constantly inspired to do teshuvah. For this reason, the Torah has directed that the shofar be blown on Rosh Hashanah to urge and remind them to do teshuvah. The blowing of the shofar is, in effect, saying: "Rouse yourselves from your slumber, you sleeping ones, for the time of your judgment approaches. The blessed Lord, who seeks not the destruction of the sinful but their return through teshuvah, has called out to the Jewish people through the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah and exhorted them to do teshuvah." Then, if the shofar is blown in the city and the people do not tremble<sup>20</sup> their blood is on their own hands.

The Pesikta tells us (Piska 25):

*%%It is written, And God calls out before His army, for his encampment is very numerous, for powerful is the one who fulfills His Word, for great is the day of God, and very awesome, and who can withstand it? (Yoel 2:11).*

*"And God calls out" on Rosh Hashanah. "For his encampment is very numerous" refers to the Jewish people. "For powerful is the one who fulfills His word" means that He enhances the power of the righteous people who fulfill His Will. "For great is the day of God, and very awesome" refers to Yom Kippur.*

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<sup>18</sup> [Translator's note: A reference to Beraishis 8:21.]

<sup>19</sup> As it is written, Let us examine our ways and investigate, and let us return to God (Eichah 3:40).

<sup>20</sup> [Translator's note: A reference to Amos 3:6.]

*"And who can withstand it" is explained by that which Rabbi Kruspidai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: "There are three accounts: one for the thoroughly righteous, one for the thoroughly sinful, and one for average people.*

*"Those for eternal life"<sup>21</sup> refers to the thoroughly righteous. 'And these for disgrace and everlasting shame' refers to the thoroughly sinful.*

*"They shall be erased from the book"<sup>22</sup> refers to the thoroughly sinful. 'Life' refers to the thoroughly righteous. 'And they shall not be inscribed with the righteous' refers to average people. The Holy Blessed One has granted the average people the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as a grace period. If they do teshuvah they are inscribed with the righteous; if not they are inscribed with the sinful,*

&&Since the purpose of the blowing of the shofar is to arouse the people to do teshuvah, the Torah has directed that it be blown in the sequence of tekiah, teruah, tekiah. These sounds correspond to the three elements of teshuvah. The tekiah sound is a long trumpet blast. It is blown first to symbolize that the person doing teshuvah must look into and closely examine his ways. He must break completely with his sinful ways. if he has any guilt, even in his heart or mind, he must purge it.<sup>23</sup>

The teruah sound is a tremulous wailing sound. It is blown second to symbolize the second stage of teshuvah, that the person doing teshuvah must lament and wail over his transgressions, that he must regret the sinfulness of his deeds.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the tekiah is blown again to symbolize the final stage of teshuvah, the deep resolve never to return to the sinful attitudes and deeds.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> [Translator's note: Rabbi Yochanan is referring to Daniel 12:2.]

<sup>22</sup> [Translator's note: Rabbi Yochanan is referring to Tehillim 69:29.]

<sup>23</sup> As it is written, Let the villain abandon his ways, and the guilty man his thoughts, and let him return (Yeshayahu 55:7).

<sup>24</sup> As it is written, After I returned I was regretful, and after I was made aware I beat upon my thigh, I was embarrassed, and also ashamed, for I bore the disgrace of my youth (Yirmiyahu 31:18).

<sup>25</sup> As it is written, And we will no longer say that the works of our hands are deities, for it is in You that the orphan finds mercy (Hoshaya 14:4).

The Torah refers to these three stages of teshuvah when it describes the ease of doing teshuvah in that which is written, For this mitzvah that I command you today is not difficult for you, nor is it far off, it is not in the heavens, that you can say, Who will go up for us to the heavens and take it for us, and impart it, that we may do it? and it is not across the sea, that you can say, Who will cross over for us to the other side of the sea and take it for us, and impart it to us, that we may do it? for this thing is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, to do it (Devarim 30:11-14).

The Torah is telling us that the teshuvah which it directs the Jewish people to do is more accessible and easier than that required of other peoples by their own religions.

Members of other religions who transgress and seek the advice of their priests as to repentance are advised to subject themselves to the most severe penance to expurgate their sins. They are told to fast for many days and to trudge to distant lands, barefoot, weary, and exhausted. They are told to flagellate themselves with metal rods and to undergo other horrible tortures.

The holy Torah, however, is solicitous of the welfare of the Jewish people. It does not demand many fasts or great torture or long journeys. It does not demand that one scale impossible peaks or travel to distant lands across the sea. "it is not in the heavens ,, and it is not across the sea," the Torah tells us. "For this thing is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, to do it.

These last three phrases refer to the three stages of teshuvah, which are represented by the mouth, the heart, and deeds. At first, the mouth must acknowledge the transgressions and declare that they are being abandoned. Then the person doing teshuvah must lament and be heartbroken over his transgressions. Finally, the sincerity of his teshuvah must be manifest in his deeds, never reverting to his earlier transgressions.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> These verses can also be interpreted as referring to the Torah rather than to teshuvah. According to this interpretation the explanation is as follows: All the mitzvos of the Torah, both positive commandments and prohibitions, must be performed on three levels—verbal expression, inner consciousness, and overt deeds.



Our Sages have also directed that the shofar be blown once again during the Mussaf prayers. The Talmud tells us that the purpose of this is to confuse Satan<sup>27</sup> (Rosh Hashanah 16a). There is a further Midrashic explanation. It states that the first blowing of the shofar arouses the fear of those who hear it. And when they hear it again their fear becomes heightened and more effective.

It would also appear to me that the blowing of the shofar confuses Satan by reminding him of his ultimate fate. When he hears the shofar he is reminded that in the end of days when the great shofar is blown to announce the final redemption<sup>28</sup> he will be destroyed for eternity.<sup>29</sup> Just as a human prosecutor who is reminded of his impending death becomes disoriented and unable to prosecute effectively, so too is it with Satan.

We also find in the Responsa of Rabbi Yitzchak Ibn Giyas (Responsa 175 and 1.76) that Rav Amram, Rabbeinu Saadya, and Rabbeinu Hai would customarily blow the shofar a third time, after the conclusion of the prayers, in order to further confuse Satan.

It is interesting to note that the Torah refers to Rosh Hashanah as "the Day of Teruah,"<sup>30</sup> rather than as "the Day of Tekiah". This is because one who is truly regretful of his sins wails and laments over them. Thus, it is the middle stage, symbolized by the teruah, which is most important, because it indicates that one has truly abandoned one's sinful ways and will not readily return to them. Also, the word "teruah" is an expression of brokenheartedness, as it written, You shall break them with an iron rod (Tehillim 2:9).

The poet has written of the importance of understanding the meaning of the teruah, saying, Fortunate are the people that know the teruah (Tehillim 89:16). And he concludes. O God, they shall walk in the radiance of Your

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<sup>27</sup> [Translator's note: See Chapter 1.]

<sup>28</sup> [Translator's note: According to Yeshayahu 27:13.]

<sup>29</sup> As it is written, And death will be consumed forever (Yeshayahu 27:8), Satan being synonymous with death.

<sup>30</sup> Bamidbar 29:1.

Face (Ibid). Hashem will shine the radiance of His Face upon the people who do teshuvah, and He will draw them close to His great Name with love.

## Chapter Five

### The Ten Symbols of the Shofar

All of the mitzvos have many properties that are beneficial both to the body and the soul. Therefore, when the Holy Blessed One wanted to increase the merit of the Jewish people, whom He had chosen above all the peoples, He gave them many laws of the Torah and mitzvos from which they would gain advantage. The mitzvah of blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah as well has many purposes, and all of them pave the upward path for the intelligent.<sup>31</sup> They fall into the following categories:

1. On this day man was created This was the culmination of the creation of the lower world which was designed as a setting for people. Thus, Rosh Hashanah signifies the day during which the Holy Blessed One assumed the kingship of the creatures of the world. It is a well-known custom on the anniversary of the ascendance to the throne of a mortal king of flesh and blood for his servants to gather and to blow trumpets in honor of the occasion, as if to proclaim: "Long live our master, the King!" The Supreme King of Kings, the Holy Blessed One, whose kingship preceded his nation, whose kingship is eternal and uninterrupted is certainly worthy of the same honor. And so the poet writes, With trumpets and the sound of the shofar blow before the King, God (Tehillim 98:6).

2. This is the period designated for the acceptance of those returning. The Torah, therefore, directed that the shofar be blown to announce that whoever wishes to return should do so now, and whoever doesn't has his own blood on his hands. What better warning could there be? It is the practice of kings to publicize their decrees so that the people should abide by them and that whoever doesn't will bear guilt. And it is also the practice of kings who wish to grant amnesty to make a proclamation saying: "Whoever comes forward during the designated period of time and resumes the service of the king will be forgiven; whoever doesn't has only himself to blame." So too is the significance of the blowing of the shofar.

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<sup>31</sup> [Translator's note: A reference to Mishlei 15:24.]

3. The blowing of the shofar reminds us of the gathering at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, because at that time too was the shofar blown, as it is written, And the sound of the shofar grew very strong (Shemos 19:19). The memory of that awesome spectacle induces fear of the Holy Blessed One in our hearts, and we resolve to perform the mitzvos in the manner He prescribed and to do teshuvah for our transgressions.

4. The blowing of the shofar reminds us of the words of the prophets, which are compared to the sound of the shofar, as it is written, And whoever hears the sound of the shofar and is not heedful, the sword shall come and take him, his blood shall be on his own head (Yechezkel 33:4). When we remember their admonitions, and take heed of them, we ensure safety for our households and all we possess.

5. The blowing of the shofar reminds us of the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash, which was to the accompaniment of the battle trumpets of the enemy, as it is written, For my soul heard the sound of the shofar, the trumpet call of war (Yirmiyahu 4:19).

6. The blowing of the shofar reminds us of the Akeidah upon which our forefather Yitzchak was willing to give up his life for the glory of his Master to fulfill His Will. And it reminds us of his father Avraham who loved him no less than himself, yet was willing to sacrifice him to heed the Words of Hashem. But the Holy Blessed One took mercy on the father and the son. He showed them the ram that was created at the same time as Adam, and he accepted it as a burnt offering instead of Yitzchak, considering it as if Avraham had indeed sacrificed his son as a perfect burnt offering. If we follow in his footsteps the Creator will have mercy on us as well and remember his righteousness to our credit as the Talmud tells us (Rosh Hashanah 16a):

*%%The Holy Blessed One said: "Blow before Me on the shofar of a ram so that I will remember to your credit the Akeidah of Yitzchak the son of Avraham. I will accept your teshuvah, and I will rescue you from your enemies and adversaries."*

7. &&The blowing of the shofar awakens fear and terror in us. Such is the instinctive reaction to this sound. Thus will we humble ourselves before our Creator, as it is written, Can a shofar be blown in the city. and the people not tremble? (Amos 3:6), People hearing the sound of the shofar will ask each other: "What is significant about today?" And they will be told the reasons. The Rambam writes (Teshuvah 3:4):"Although the blowing of the shofar is an unexplained Scriptural decree its meaning is suggested. It is as if to say: 'Sleeping ones! Rouse yourselves from your slumber and examine your deeds. Remember your Creator and return through teshuvah. Do not be among those who are oblivious to the 'truth, preoccupied by the foolishness of the moment,, who spend all their lives caught up in foolishness and emptiness that provide no benefit or protection. Look at yourselves! Look at your actions and your deeds! Let each one of you abandon his sinful ways and attitudes which bear no good. Let him return to God, and He will have mercy on him.' "<sup>32</sup>

8. The blowing of the shofar reminds us of the great day of judgment that comes after death, and thus, it arouses fear in us. For it is written, The great day of God draws near, it draws near very quickly, the sound of the day of God, the mighty man cries bitterly there, that day is a day of wrath, a day of anguish and distress, a day of waste and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and fog, a day of the shofar and teruah against the fortified cities and the high battlements (Zephaniah 1:16). And the prophet continues, Gather yourselves together and assemble, O nation without longing (Zephaniah 2:1).

9. The blowing of the shofar signifies that the Holy Blessed One will gather in the banished of Yisrael, as promised by the prophet Yeshayahu, And it shall be on that day a great shofar will be blown... (Yeshayahu 27:13)

7. The blowing of the shofar reminds us of the resurrection of the dead. The prophet has described that day, saying that a shofar will be

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<sup>32</sup> [Translator's note: A reference to Yeshayahu 55:7.]

blown, and they will all gather at the sound of it, as it is written, All the inhabitants of the world and those who dwell in the earth, when the banner is lifted upon the mountain you shall see and when the shofar is blown you shall hear (Yeshayahu 18:3). "The inhabitants of the world" refers to the Jews in the Diaspora. "Those who dwell in the earth" refers to the dead, as we find a similar usage in that which is written, Your dead shall be revived, my dead cadavers shall arise, wake up and sing, dwellers in the dust... (Yeshayahu 26:19).

It is therefore important that we familiarize ourselves with all of the various meanings of the blowing of the shofar.<sup>33</sup> It is clear, however, that the underlying theme of Rosh Hashanah is the call to do teshuvah and abandon our sinful ways. (The liturgy of Rosh Hashanah is discussed in *The Light of Mitzvos*, Section In, Chapter 25, and spelled out in greater detail in *Shulchan Hapanim*.<sup>34</sup>) The Midrash tells us (Vayikra Rabah 29:6):

*%%The Holy Blessed One said to the people of Yisrael: 'If you will beautify your deeds before Me I will be as a shofar<sup>35</sup> for you. Just as the shofar takes in breath from one side and releases it on the other, so too will I arise from the Throne of Strict Judgment and sit on the throne of Merciful Judgment. I will have mercy on you. "*

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<sup>33</sup> Careful observance of the mitzvos is to our benefit, as it is written, And God commanded us to execute all these laws, to fear God our Lord, that it might benefit us for all the days... (Devarim 6:24).

<sup>34</sup> [Translator's note: *Shulchan Hapanim* is a halachic work written by the author. It is part of a trilogy that also includes *Menoras Hamaor* and *Aron Ha'edus*, one of the earliest codifications of the Halacha. *Shulchan Hapanim*, actually a sub-division of *Aron Ha'edus*, deals with berachos (blessings) and tefillos (prayers). The only work of this trilogy extant is *Menoras Hamaor*. (See the First Light of the Menorah, *The Light of Contentment*, Translator's Foreword and Appendix A: Ode to the Menorah.)]

<sup>35</sup> [Translator's note: The roots of the Hebrew word shofar and the Hebrew word used here for beautify are identical.]

Part II:  
YOM KIPPUR  
(Chap. 6-8)





## &&Chapter Six

### Preparing for Atonement

Any intelligent person who fears the Word of God should tremble inwardly when he realizes that all his deeds are recorded and that the Lord will incorporate every minute detail, both good and bad, into His judgment. If a person is to be brought to trial before a mortal king of flesh and blood surely he will be filled with a great fear and seek ways to escape an unfavorable verdict. What then should he do when he is brought to trial before the Universal Judge, in whose Hands lies the power of forgiveness? Certainly, it would be wise for him to rouse himself from his stupor and do teshuvah before he is pronounced guilty.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, it would be appropriate for anyone who fears the Lord to make the Days of Teshuvah, the period before the verdicts are sealed, a time for reflection. He should restrict his business activity, concentrating instead on examining his ways. And he should occupy himself with returning through teshuvah, because this is the period during which He is most willing to accept teshuvah (see end of Chapter 3).

It should be noted, however, that although the Holy Blessed One is merciful, He only forgives transgressions between a person and the Omnipresent. If someone transgresses against another person he must pacify and appease that person, by word and by deed, before he is forgiven by Hashem, The Talmud tells us (Yoma 85b):

*%Rabbi Elazar the son of Azariah expounded: "It is written, From all your sins before God shall you be cleansed (Vayikra 16:30).*

*"Yom Kippur atones for the transgressions of a person of the Omnipresent. Yom Kippur does not atone for the transgressions of a person against his fellow unless he appeases him first. "*

&&The Talmud goes on to elaborate on the extent of this obligation (Yoma 87a):

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<sup>36</sup> As it is written. What shall we do for our sister on the day she is spoken for? (Shir Hashirim 8:8).

*%%Rabbi Yitzchak said: "Whoever enrages his fellow, even if only with word, should pacify him..."*

*Rav Chisda said: "And he must pacify him before three separate groups of three people each..."*

*And if the offended person has died?*

*Rav Yosef said: "He must assemble ten people and stand alongside the grave of the offended person. Then he must Say: 'I have sinned to God, the Lord of Yisrael ,, and to this person whom I have injured. '"*

*Rav Yirmiyahu had a quarrel with Rav Aba. He went and sat on Rav Aba's doorstep when the maid was emptying out dirty water. Some droplets of the water fell on his head.*

*He said: "I have been made as a rubbish heap. I need no longer stay here, for I have been forgiven, as it is written, From the rubbish heap He lifts up the pauper (Tehillim 113:7)."*

*Rav Aba heard of this and went out to greet him...*

*Whenever Rav Zeira had a quarrel with someone he would go back and forth in front of that person, making himself available for that person to come and apologize...*

*&&Although someone who offends his fellow should appease him immediately, no matter what time of the year it is, he must never delay doing so beyond Yom Kippur. Even if he does not have the opportunity to appease him fully before Yom Kippur he should at least apologize. The offended person should accept the apology immediately, and in turn, Hashem will forgive him for his sins. The Talmud tells us (Nedarim 55a):*

*%%Rava had a quarrel with Rav Yosef. On the day before Yom Kippur, he decided to visit Rav Yosef and smooth it over. When he came to Rav Yosef's house, he found the servant preparing to blend a cup of wine for Rav Yosef.*

*Rava said to the servant: "Hand me the cup and let me blend the wine for Rav Yosef. "*

*Rav Yosef was blind and did not see Rava, but when he tasted the wine, he said: "This wine tastes like one of Rava's blends, "*

*Rava spoke up: "Indeed, it was I that blended the wine."*

*Rav Yosef said to him; "Do not take a seat until you explain these verses to me. What is the meaning of that which is written, And from the desert to Matanah, and from Matanah to Nachaliel, and from Nachaliel to Bamos, and from Bamos to the valley (Bamidbar 21:18-20)?"*

*Rava replied: "If a person lets himself become as a desert that is trampled underfoot the Torah is given to him as a present, as is intimated in the Hebrew meaning of that which is written, And from the desert to Matanah (Ibid.).*

*Once he receives the Torah as a present, the Lord gives it to him as a birthright to pass on to his children, as is intimated in the Hebrew meaning of that which is written, And from Matanah to Nachaliel (Ibid.).*

*If, however, he becomes arrogant in his new-found greatness, the Holy Blessed One humbles him, as is intimated in the Hebrew meaning of that which is written, And from Bamos to the valley (Ibid.).*

*"Still, if he returns through teshuvah the Holy Blessed One raises him up again, as is intimated in that which is written, Every valley shall be raised up (Yeshayahu 40:4),"*

*&&Elsewhere, the Talmud mentions that Yom Kippur is a time for reconciliation (Yuma 87a):*

*%%Rav had a quarrel with a certain butcher. Twelve months went by, and the butcher did not come to apologize. The day before Yom Kippur arrived, and still he had not come. Rav decided to go to him instead.*

*Rav Huna met him on the way and asked him: "Where is the master going?"*

*Rav replied: "I am going to pacify such and such person."*

*Rav Huna remarked: "The master is going to cause a death."<sup>37</sup>*

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<sup>37</sup> Translator's note: Rashi explains that the butcher would be punished by death for inconveniencing Rav to come to him when he should have gone to Rav.]

*Rav stood on the doorstep of the butcher's house and called out to him.*

*The butcher responded: "Go away! I want nothing to do with you."*

*The butcher had been splitting animal skulls. After this exchange the blade of the axe came loose from its shaft and lodged in his head, killing him.*

*Rav was once reading a portion from the Torah before Rabi. Rabbi Chiya entered, and Rav went back to the beginning. Rabbi Shimeon the son of Rabi came, and he once again started over. Then Rav Chanina the son of Rav Chana walked in. Rav decided that he was not required to continue starting over after each interruption in honor of the newcomers. Thus, when Rav Chanina the son of Rav Chana arrived, he continued to read from the point of interruption.*

*Rabbi Chanina the son of Rav Chana was deeply offended. Rav tried to mollify him for thirteen years, each year coming on the day before Yom Kippur, but Rabbi Chanina would not accept his overtures.*

*Why did Rav do so for thirteen years? Did not Rabbi Yosi the son of Chanina say: "Whoever seeks the forgiveness of his fellow need not ask more than three times?"*

*Rav set stricter standards for himself.*

*And why didn't Rabbi Chanina accept Rav's apology? Didn't Rav say: "Whoever acts with forbearance is forgiven all his sins?"*

*Only, Rabbi Chanina had dreamed that he saw Rav suspended from a palm tree. There is a tradition that such a dream is a sign that the suspended person will become the head of the yeshiva. Since Rabbi Chanina was at that time head of the yeshiva he feared that this boded his death. Therefore, he refused to accept Rav's apology making it uncomfortable for Rav in the yeshiva in Israel. Rav Chanina felt that by doing so he could induce Rav to go study Torah in the schools of Bavel (Babylon), If he were to become head of the yeshiva there it would not threaten Rabbi Chanina's life.*

*(And so it was. Rav went to Bavel to study Torah, and he became head of the yeshiva.)*

&&Once a person has appeased the people he has offended he can then turn his attention to preparing for a complete atonement on Yom Kippur. It is customary to immerse oneself in the mikveh on the day before Yom Kippur. The source for this custom is in the Midrashic directive to be as pure as the angels of service on Yom Kippur (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 46). According to the opinion of Rabbi Yitzchak Ibn Giyas, this immersion does not require a berachah since it is by custom rather than by law.

Our Sages have also decreed that the day before Yom Kippur be a feast day to show how happy we are to be approaching the time when we will be cleansed of our sins. The Talmud tells us (Yoma 81b):

*%%It was taught: Rabbi Chiya the son of Rav from Difti says: "It is written, And you shall torment yourselves on the ninth day of the month (Vayikra 32:23).*

*"Do we then fast on the ninth day of Tishrei? Does not the fast of Yom Kippur fall on the tenth day of Tishrei?*

*"Only this verse comes to tell you that whoever eats and drinks on the ninth day is considered as if he had fasted on both the ninth and tenth days.*

&&This is because feasting on the ninth day indicates, that although we are awestricken and overwhelmed by Yom Kippur, we rejoice at the prospect of being elevated spiritually by the atonement it brings. The Midrash tells us (Beraishis Rabah 11:4):

*%%It once happened that the military governor of a city told his servant: "Go, buy me a fish."*

*The servant could find only one fish on the market. He offered a golden piece for it. There was a Jewish tailor there who offered two golden pieces for the fish. The servant raised his offer to three golden pieces. The tailor, however, raised his offer to five golden pieces. The servant no longer bid against him, and the tailor took the fish home. The servant then went back and told his master all that happened.*

*The military governor summoned the tailor and said to him: "What is your occupation?"*

*He replied: "I am a tailor."*

*The governor asked: "Why did you buy a fish worth but one golden piece for five golden pieces? Moreover, why did you bid against my servant who was trying to buy it for me?"*

*The tailor replied: "How could I refuse to buy it even for ten golden pieces for the festivities of this do before Yom Kippur on which the Holy Blessed One has directed us to eat and drink? And we are confident that He will forgive our sins."*

*The governor said: "If so, you have done well." And he bade him farewell.*

&&Furthermore, this day of festivity before Yom Kippur the Holy Blessed One shows His compassion for the Jewish people. For on the one day of the year that he directed they fast He also directed that they first fortify themselves by eating and drinking. It is analogous to a king who had an only son and decreed that he fast one day. However, when the time arrived, he directed that he first be fed and given to drink so that he would be able to fast easily.

Furthermore, on every Shabbos and Festival we have feasts for the sake of Heaven. Yom Kippur is also a holy day, but since it is a fast day it cannot have the spiritual adornments of the holiday feast, Therefore, we are required to have these feasts on the day preceding Yom Kippur.

Others offer an opposite interpretation. They point out that if someone gorges himself immediately before a fast day, fasting becomes doubly hard since the body becomes accustomed to comfort. In this way, they explain the abovementioned Talmudic statement that whoever eats and drinks on the ninth is considered to have fasted both the ninth and the tenth. In other words, feasting on the ninth makes fasting on the tenth doubly hard, as if he had fasted two days.

Although the fast day of Yom Kippur is itself an atonement for one's sins, the intelligent person does not wait for Yom Kippur to do teshuvah. Rather, he prepares himself by doing teshuvah beforehand.

It is common medical practice that when a doctor sees an improvement arises in a patient's illness he will make sure to empty the patient of any harmful substance that caused the illness. For instance, if a harmful food caused the illness he will give the patient an emetic to cause him to vacate the contents of his stomach. Otherwise, the crisis might kill him.

Yom Kippur is the crisis, the catharsis, of the illness of the soul. If a person enters the crisis still burdened with his sinfulness and transgressions he places himself in jeopardy. He risks an unfavorable verdict. But if he cleanses himself through teshuvah Hashem will purge him of his sins and purify him, as it is written, If your sins shall be as red thread, they shall become as white as the snow (Yeshayahu 1:18).

Therefore, it would be wise for a person to examine his ways carefully, early on the day before Yom Kippur, to repent from his sins and to acknowledge them at the very beginning of the day. Then he should immerse his body to purify it, But more important, he should seek to purify his soul. Let him not be as one who immerses himself while grasping a vermin in his hand. Such an immersion is worthless, Let him prepare to enter this day cleansed and stimulated through teshuvah. Then the Blessed Creator, in His attribute of Mercy, will forgive his sins on the Day of Atonement, as it is written, For on this day will He atone for you, to purify you (Vayikra 16:30).

Charter Seven

The Day of Atonement

As Yom Kippur begins a person should see to it that his body and soul are sanctified, that he is like a heavenly angel completely free of sin. The Midrash tells us (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 46):

*%%Samael<sup>38</sup> saw that he could find no sins among the Jewish people. He said: 'Master of all Worlds! There is a people on the earth that resembles the angels of service. Just as the angels of service are barefoot, so too are the Jewish people shoeless on Yom Kippur. Just as the angels of service are pure of all sin, so too are the Jewish people pure on Yom Kippur. Just as the angels of service are at peace with each other, so too are the Jewish people at peace with each other on Yom Kippur.'*

*When the Holy Blessed One hears such testimony even from the adversaries of the Jewish people, He forgives them.*

&&The Midrash also tells us (Devarim Rabah 2:36):

*%%When Moshe went up to the Heavens he overheard the angels of service as they were praising the Holy Blessed One, saying: "Blessed is the Name of the Glory of His Kingdom forever and ever.*

*Moshe brought down this exalted phrase and imparted it to the Jewish people.*

*There is an analogy to this. A person stole a beautiful ornament from the palace of the king and gave it to his wife. However, he warned her: "Do not adorn yourself with it other than in the privacy of your own house. "*

&&The purpose of this analogy is to explain the custom to say this phrase, "Blessed is the name...", under our breaths throughout the year but to say it aloud on Yom Kippur. The Midrash is telling us that this phrase is actually the property of the angels. If we have appropriated it for our own use we must use it inconspicuously, uttering it only in a whisper. On Yom Kippur, however, we are compared to the angels of service and are entitled to utter it loudly without stealth. This is also the basis of the custom of some

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<sup>38</sup> [Translator's note: Samael is another name for the angel of death, the adversary.]



people to remain standing through the day of Yom Kippur. Since we are compared to angels we should remain standing as they do.

The day of Yom Kippur falls on a date that is very auspicious for atonement. It is the date on which Avraham circumcised himself, the removal of the foreskin being also a covenant for the removal of the pollution from the heart, the ears, and the lips. It is also the date on which the Jewish people were forgiven the sin of the golden calf-idol and on which they were given the Second Tablets of the Commandments. For these very reasons, our Sages have told us that the girls of Yerushalayim would dress up more lavishly in honor of Yom Kippur than for any other festival (Taanis 26b, Bava Basra 121a).

It can also be said that Yom Kippur falls during this time of the year because during this time there is danger of rebelliousness and disobedience. The summer harvest having just passed, the storehouses are full of grain, fruit and all the bounty of the earth. People have a tendency, at this time, to be caught up in their material abundance, They tend to congratulate themselves for their accomplishment, forgetting that their bounty comes from Hashem. Hashem, therefore, decreed that Yom Kippur come at this time to rouse people from their stupor, to induce them to abandon the pursuit of gratification and their rebellious ways, to induce them to purge their thoughts of all false ideologies. Only by restricting one's physical drives to those necessary to keep body and soul together and for the preservation of the species can one hope to achieve fulfillment as a human being.

Indeed, it is to awaken people to the sinfulness of their being steeped in material pursuits all year that a *chatas* sacrifice of a goat is brought on Rosh Chodesh at the beginning of every month. It is meant to remind us to examine our ways and never to despair of doing teshuvah as long as the soul is entwined with the enemy, the body. (One's physical body is truly one's enemy. It is Satan; it is the evil inclination; it is the angel of death.)

On Yom Kippur, however, *two* goats are brought as chatas sacrifices. One of these goats is sacrificed on the altar in the Bais Hamikdash close to Hashem; the other is sent away to be thrown off a hill and dismembered. These two goats represent the two classes of sins and what our attitude should be towards them. It is fitting to take this comprehensive in-depth to sinfulness on Yom Kippur, because it is the appointed time for teshuvah.

The first goat represents those sins that are caused by the physical drives of the body. These are sins of excess, of attaching too much importance to the body which will eventually die and disintegrate. These physical drives should be harnessed instead; these energies should be channeled into the service of Hashem. The body need not be destroyed. It need only to be kept at arm's length and under control, Therefore, the goat representing this class of sin is lifted onto the altar to be sacrificed and brought closer to Hashem. (Similarly, the five abstentions on Yom Kippur are meant to subjugate the five senses and bring them under control.)

The second goat, however, represents the intellectual sins, including foolish ideologies such as the various forms of polytheism in which the gentile nations believe and distortions of those parts of the Torah that are couched in colloquial terms. These attitudes can serve no constructive function in the service of Hashem. They must be destroyed completely, without leaving a trace. Therefore, the goat representing these sins is sent far off, thrown down, and dismembered.

The reason for goats being used for these sacrifices is because the goat is a destructive creature. Thus, by these sacrifices we implore that the Jewish people be protected from the two kinds of harmful influences; we ask that harmful intellectual influences be destroyed completely, and that the harmful physical influences be limited to enable us to serve Hashem properly and for the sake of Heaven.

## Chapter Eight

### Fasting on Yom Kippur

While it is certainly true that the Holy Blessed One has assured us that the day of Yom Kippur is in itself an atonement for the sins of Yisrael, it is nevertheless necessary for every individual to abandon his sins, to express regret over having committed them, and to resolve never to return to them. Only when combined with teshuvah such as this will Yom Kippur be an atonement. Otherwise it will not. The Talmud tells us (Yoma 85b):

*%%If someone says: "I will sin, and then I will do teshuvah" he is not given the opportunity to do teshuvah.*

*If he says: "I will sin, and Yom Kippur will atone for me" Yom Kippur will not atone for him.*

*Yom Kippur atones for transgressions against the Omnipresent. Yom Kippur does not atone for transgressions against another person, until that person is appeased.*

&&Clearly, Yom Kippur atones only for those worthy of atonement.

Moreover, the purpose of fasting on Yom Kippur is not to torment the body while leaving the soul contaminated by sin. The Holy Blessed One detests such fasting and rejects it. The purpose of fasting is to stimulate people to examine their deeds and their ways and to set them to right.

This is the essence of the exchange between the Jewish people and Hashem as recorded by the Prophet. The prophet tells us that the people complained, Why did we fast and You did not see? why did we torment ourselves and You did not acknowledge it? (Yeshayahu 58:3). And the prophet writes that Hashem replied, Behold, on the day of your fast you tend your affairs, and you demand payment from all your debtors. Behold, your fasts are occasions for quarrel and dissension, and for striking with villainous fists, you do not fast on this day to make your voice heard on high. If such is your fast shall I choose to accept it? a day that a person torments himself? is it just to bow his head like a reed and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? do you call this a fast day and a day of appeasement

for God? Rather such is the kind of fast that I choose to accept, it is to break open the chains of villainy, to loosen the bonds of oppression, to set the downtrodden free, to uproot all oppression. Rather it is to distribute your bread to the hungry, and to bring the wretched poor into your house, when you see an unclad man that you clothe him, and that from your kinfolk you do not conceal yourself. Then your light shall burst forth like the morning star and your healing shall come speedily, and your charity shall go before you, the Glory of God shall enfold you. Then you shall call and God will answer you, you shall cry out and He will say, I am here (Yeshayahu 58:3-9).

Indeed the Pesikta tells us that a combination of prayer, charity and teshuvah symbolized by fasting most effectively dispels an evil decree (Piska 30).

It is important to note that although we do not partake of physical pleasures on Yom Kippur it is nevertheless a holy day and must be honored inasmuch as Shabbos and the festivals are honored. The Talmud suggests that we adorn this day with beautiful clothing (Shabbos 119a).

As to the liturgy and readings on Yom Kippur, we read the portions of the Torah describing the various sacrifices. We also review the entire order of the Yom Kippur service. The Talmud tells us that when we do so Hashem considers it as if we have brought the sacrifices in the Bais Hamikdash, and He forgives all our sins (Taanis 27b, Megillah 31b). We also read the portion of the Torah listing all the adulterous and incestuous relationships, because many people are guilty of these, either by actual deed or by licentious thought. For the Haftorah we read the prophecy of Yonah so that we can take example from the full teshuvah that the people of Nineveh did, even though they were not Jewish. The value of their teshuvah is underscored by the mention of it among the prophecies.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Our Sages have also instituted the practice of referring to the teshuvah of the people of Nineveh among the words of contrition spoken on a special fast day called because of a calamity (Taanis 16a). We say: "Our brothers! Sackcloth and fast days are not in themselves effective, only teshuvah and good deeds. For thus do we find the case with

At the close of Yom Kippur it is the custom to say seven times: "Hashem, He is the Lord!" Afterwards the shofar is blown. It is said in the name of Rabbi Yehudah Gaon that we do so to symbolize that on this holy day the Divine Presence rests in the lower world among the Jewish people, but at night it rises above the seven heavens and returns to the Upper World. The blowing of the shofar emphasizes this ascension, as it is written, The Lord ascends amidst the teruah... (Tehillim 47:6). We find a similar connection at Mount Sinai, as it is written, When the trumpet sounds they may go up on the mount (Shemos 19:13), and our Sages explained that this signified the departure of the Divine Presence (Mechilta Yisro).

We find mention in the responsa of the Geonim, in the name of Rav Hai Gaon, that it is customary to blow the shofar after Yom Kippur is over but that it is not obligatory; it is only a symbol of the yovail year or to confuse Satan.

We can also venture another significance. After Yom Kippur has atoned for us our souls are freed from the shackles of physical bondage. In fact, even, our bodies have been purified and are worthy of eternal freedom. Therefore, we blow the shofar to symbolize our future liberation which will be to accompaniment of the shofar, as it is written, And it shall be on that day a great shofar shall be blown... (Yeshayahu 27:13).

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the people of Nineveh. it is not written of them that the Lord saw their sackcloth and their fast days. Rather, it is written, And the Lord saw their deeds... (Yonah 3:10)."



Part III:

TESHUVAH AND FASTING

(Chap. 9-13)





## Chapter Nine

### The Seven Levels of Teshuvah

Anytime a person repents his sins and does teshuvah, no matter when it is, it is accepted by the Holy Blessed One; and if a person leaves the world having done complete teshuvah he leaves the world in a state of purity.

There are, however, seven different levels of teshuvah. They are as follows:

1. The ideal teshuvah is that which is done right after the offense. Such teshuvah is immediately accepted.

Rabbi Abahu was speaking of this level of teshuvah when he said:

"Where the people who have done teshuvah stand, even thoroughly righteous people may not stand (Berachos 34b)." In other words, it is quite possible that the thoroughly righteous person doesn't sin simply because he has no desire to do so, but if he would have a lustful nature he might not be able to control it. Indeed, if someone is hotblooded and powerfully driven it is very difficult for him not to sin. The Talmud further tells us that the greater a person is the greater is his evil inclination (Sukkah 52a). If such a person overcomes his drives it is truly a great accomplishment. As the Talmud tells us, the reward for an achievement is measured according to the amount of pain caused by the achieving of it (Avos 5:23). Thus, even if one's torrid nature has momentarily led one astray, either in thought or in deed, if one's better judgment immediately prevails and one does teshuvah, Rabbi Abahu tells us, such a person is greater than a thoroughly righteous person. He has done battle with his evil inclination, and he has emerged victorious.

It should be noted that Rabbi Abahu, refers to those sins which exist only because they are prescribed in the Torah, which otherwise would not have been dictated by common sense. There are some sins, however, that would be dictated by common sense even if they were not explicit in the

Torah. If someone is inclined to such sins it is not a reflection of greatness but of a seriously flawed character.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, if he does teshuvah immediately after committing even such a sin it is accepted instantly and is considered the highest level of teshuvah.

2. Sometimes, a person becomes accustomed to a sinful life for a long period of time, even years, but he still manages to do teshuvah during his young years. He repents from his evil ways while he is still strong and vigorous, while it still requires a considerable effort to overcome the evil inclination and do a proper teshuvah.

Shlomo Hamelech was referring to such a person when he wrote, And remember your Creator during the days of your youth (Koheles 12:1). In other words, remember your Creator when you are still full of vigor and still as inclined to sin as when you first sinned. Let your teshuvah be inspired by a fear of sin rather than by the inability to sin. The Talmud makes this point as well (Yoma 86b).

3. A lower form of teshuvah is that which still takes place during a person's youth but does not stem from deep conviction. Rather, it comes about because his current situation does not present him with the opportunity to sin or because he finds it increasingly embarrassing to let himself be clearly governed by his evil inclination. Little by little he turns away from his sinful ways and returns to Hashem. Such teshuvah is also welcomed. Although it was caused by outside factors, it has nevertheless come during one's vigorous years.<sup>41</sup>

The Talmud also tells us (Avodah Zarah 19a):

*%%It is written, Fortunate is the man who fears God (Tehillim 112:1).*

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<sup>40</sup> Of such a person is it written, The soul of the villain yearns for evil (Mishlei 21:10), while of the pious person who is not thus inclined it is written, It is a joy to the righteous to do justice (Mishlei 21:15).

<sup>41</sup> Of him is it written, And I will remove his blood from his mouth and his abominations from between his teeth (Zechariah 9:17). [Translator's note: This reference seems to be based on the abominations still being between the teeth. other words, when one is inclined to sin.]

*Only a man, not a woman?*

*Rav Amram said in the name of Rav: "This means that one is fortunate if one does teshuvah during the height of one's vigor."*

*And Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi said: "This means that one is fortunate if one can overpower one's evil inclination like a man."*

4. &&Yet a lower form of teshuvah is inspired by the suffering or the rebuke of other people or by the fear of a harsh decree. For example, the people of Nineveh were not inspired to do teshuvah until they were rebuked by the prophet Yonah who said to them, In forty more days Nineveh will be overturned (Yonah 3:4). Immediately, the verse continues, And the men of Nineveh believed in God and they proclaimed a fast day... (Yonah 3:5).

Such teshuvah is also acceptable, even though it is caused by the threat of a harsh decree. In the final analysis, people doing such teshuvah have nonetheless repented and abandoned their sins. As the verse concludes, And the Lord took note of their deeds, that they had returned from their evil ways, and the Lord reconsidered the evil He had spoke to do to them, and He did not do it (Yonah 3:10).

The Talmud tells us (Taanis 16a):

*%%Our brothers! It is not sackcloth and fasting that are effective. Rather, it is teshuvah and good deeds that are effective. And so we find with the men of Nineveh. It is not written that the Lord took note of their sackcloth and fasting. Instead, it is written that the Lord took note of their good deeds, that they had returned from their evil ways.*

5. &&Even lower is teshuvah which comes not in anticipation of suffering but as a result of suffering. Such teshuvah is insufficient to atone for offenses against other people, as Yiftach said, Why do you come to me only now when you are distressed? (Shoftim 11:7). The Holy Blessed One, however, out of His great kindness to His creatures, *does* accept such teshuvah, as it is written, When you are distressed, and when all these things come upon you, in the end of days, and you will return to God your Lord, and you will heed His Voice... (Devarim 4:30). The Talmud is also

speaking of such teshuvah when it tells us that teshuvah and good deeds are shields against retribution (Avos 4:11).

6. Yet lower is teshuvah which comes during one's old age, when one is no longer strong enough to pursue a sinful life. Still, if one repents for the sins of one's youth and returns through wholehearted teshuvah it is accepted\_ Of such teshuvah is it written, You drive people to the brink of despair (in other words, to the time when a person is crushed and powerless—and yet) and You said, Return people (Tehillim 90:3).

The Talmud also makes this point (Kedushin 40b):

*%%Rabbi Shimeon the son of Yochai says: "Even if someone is a thoroughly righteous person all his life he forfeits all his merit if he is rebellious in the end, as it is written., The righteousness of the righteous shall not save him on the day of his transgression (Yechezkel 33:12).*

*"And even if someone is a thoroughly sinful person all his life no mention is made of his sinfulness if only he does teshuvah in the end, as it is written, And the sinfulness of the sinful, he shall not stumble upon it on the day he returns from his sinfulness (Ibid.)."*

*Why does the righteous man lose all his merit in the end? Why aren't his sins merely balanced against his merit?*

*Rabbi Shimeon the son of Lakish said: "This refers to one who regrets his early righteousness. "*

7. &&Finally, the lowest level of teshuvah is that which takes place in the face of impending death, when one goes through one's entire life without repenting. The Talmud tells us of such teshuvah, "Return even one day before you die (Avos 2:10)."

The Talmud tells us (Shabbos 32a):

*%%Our rabbis have taught: If someone falls mortally ill and seems to be dying he is told: "Confess all your sins. " For it is the way of all condemned to confess their sins.<sup>42</sup>*

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<sup>42</sup> [Translator's note: Based on Sanhedrin 44b.]

*If a person finds himself in the marketplace surrounded by people bickering with each other he should consider it as if he were arrested. If he has a slight headache he should consider it as if he were thrown into prison. If he becomes so ill that he must take to his bed he should consider it as if he has been brought onto the gallows to be judged. In this case, he can only be saved if he has influential advocates; otherwise he is lost. And these are a person's advocates; teshuvah and good deeds. And even if there are nine hundred and ninety-nine accusers and only one advocate he will be saved, as it is written, If he has with him a defending angel, one of a thousand, to tell of a person's virtue, then He takes pity on him, and He says, Release him from being lowered to destruction, I have found an atonement (Iyov 33:23-24).*

*Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Yosi of Galilee says: "Even if a person's lone advocate has nine hundred and ninety-nine accusations against him and only one defense he is nevertheless saved. . . "*

&&The Talmud is telling us that the "defending angel" referred to in Iyov is teshuvah. Let us now look at these verses in their full context. They are taken from Elihu's statement: "And his soul came close to destruction and his life to the executioners, if he has with him a defending angel, one of a thousand, to tell of a person's virtue, then He takes pity on him, and He says, Release him from destruction, I have found an atonement, his flesh will become rejuvenated, he will return to the days of his youthfulness, he will beseech the Lord, and He will pardon him (Iyov 33:22-26),"

Clearly, if a person does teshuvah even when he is already facing death it will be accepted. If he beseeches the Lord He will pardon him and forgive his sins.

Elsewhere, the Talmud relates an incident which proves that it is never too late for teshuvah (Avodah Zarah 17a):<sup>43</sup>

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43 Also quoted in the Epilogue to the First Light of the Menorah (The Light of Contentment).

*%%It was taught: It was said of Elazar the son of Durdia that there was no prostitute with whom he did not copulate. Once he heard of a prostitute from one of the coastal cities that demanded and received a purse of dinars as her payment. He took a purse of dinars and traveled to her, crossing seven rivers during his journey.*

*While they were copulating the prostitute passed gas. Elazar thought: "Just as this gas will never return to its place, so will Elazar the son of Durdia never be taken back through teshuvah."*

*Despondent, he went and sat among the mountains and the hills.*

*He said: "Mountains and hills, beg mercy for me!"*

*They replied: "Before we beg mercy for you we must beg mercy for ourselves. For it is written, For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wear out like a garment (Yeshayahu 51:6)."*

*He said: "Sun and moon, beg mercy for me!"*

*"They replied: "Before we beg mercy for you we must beg mercy for ourselves. For it is written, Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed (Yeshayahu 24:23). "*

*He said: "Stars and constellations, beg mercy for me!"*

*They replied: "Before we beg mercy for you we must beg mercy for ourselves. For it is written, And the hosts of the heavens shall be dissolved (Yeshayahu 34:4)."*

*He said: "It seems I can depend on no one but myself."*

*He put his head between his knees and wept bitterly until his soul passed out of his body.*

*Thereupon, a Divine Echo was heard to say: "Rabbi Elazar the son of Durdia is invited to everlasting life in the world to come."*

*When Rabi heard this story he cried and said: "Some people gain everlasting reward in one moment, while some people gain everlasting reward only after laboring for many years."*

*Rabi said: "Not only are those who do teshuvah accepted back, apparently, they are even called 'Rabbi' "*

&&Although we have demonstrated that there are varying levels of teshuvah, depending on when and why it comes, they are all accepted. If, however, a person persists in his sinfulness even in the face of death and he dies without having done teshuvah he is a genuine heretic. He has clearly demonstrated that he does not believe in a day of judgment. He has spitefully given up his body and soul to destruction. Such a person is condemned to Gehinom for generation upon generation.

Shlomo Hamelech, in his great wisdom, said: "Do whatever is within your power to do, for there are no deeds nor accounts nor intelligence nor wisdom in the abyss to which you are headed (Koheles 9:10)." In other words, do teshuvah in this world while you still can, preferably when you are still at the height of your power. Once a person has died it is too late to do teshuvah. At that point, there will be no way to avoid the abyss.

This point is also implicit in that which the Sages said: "Prepare yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter the parlor (Avos 4:16)." The main point of this statement is to convey the importance of making good use of the time spent in this world, "the vestibule." But they were also saying that preparations must be in the "vestibule." Once one has passed from the "vestibule" into the "parlor" one can no longer influence one's fate.

Thus has the Prophet cried out, Return, O return from your evil ways, and why must you die, O House of Yisrael? (Yechezkel 33:11). And he also says, Make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, and why must you die, O House of Yisrael? (Yechezkel 18:31). The Prophet is imploring the Jewish people not to neglect to do teshuvah at least before they die. But if they do teshuvah, even if they had been wayward for a long time, their condition can still be remedied, as it is written, Return, O wayward children, I will heal your waywardness (Yirmiyahu 3:22).

## Chapter Ten

### Parables from the Midrash

In order to give people a better understanding of the various levels of teshuvah the Midrash tells a parable about five groups of seafarers. The five groups are meant to correspond to those people who have never sinned and have no need to do teshuvah, those people who sin but never do teshuvah, and three general categories of people who do teshuvah. These three general categories include all seven levels of teshuvah outlined in the previous chapter. The first of these categories includes those who do teshuvah while still in the full bloom of youth. The second category includes those who are induced to do teshuvah by illness or advancing age. The third category includes those who do teshuvah only when death is staring them in the face. The Midrash tells us:<sup>44</sup>

*%%To what can the matter be compared?*

*It can be compared to a shipful of people who had spent a long time at sea without reaching their destination. One day, there was a hurricane at sea. The winds swept the ship and its passengers along, finally depositing them on a small island. The sea surrounded the island on all sides as far as the eye could see.*

*On the island itself there were very tall trees heavily laden with fruit, with all kinds of exotic delicacies. Each kind of fruit was beautiful to behold and delicious to eat. The island had springs of water sweeter than honey that gushed forth and irrigated the entire island. The island was lush with plants and grass. Its fruit and its flowers bloomed. Its trees sprouted shoots and twigs that grew into branches clothed in luxuriant growths of leaves. And on these branches were perched many different species of beautiful birds that filled the air with their chirping and warbling. It would be*

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<sup>44</sup> [Translator's note; The source of this quote is unknown. It is quite possible that this passage is drawn from the writings of the Geonim or early Rishonim to which the author sometimes refers as "the Midrash".]



*delightful to live in such a place, in the shade of the tall trees among the springs of sweet water.*

*There were five groups of people on the ship.*

*The first group refused to get off the ship and onto the island. They said: "If we leave the ship it is possible that another wind will come along and carry off the ship, stranding us on the island. We would be putting ourselves in jeopardy for the momentary pleasure of enjoying the fruits of the island. if the ship goes off and we are left on the island we will die."*

*The second group disembarked from the ship onto the island, but they did not spend much time there. They tasted some of the fruit, strolled briefly about the island, and immediately returned to the ship. They found the same seats that they had left and settled comfortably into them. They suffered no loss for having visited the island.*

*The third group also disembarked from the ship onto the island. They ate from the fruits of the trees, and they strolled about the island, They stayed on the island until a stiff wind arose, The crew of the ship wanted to set sail and continue their voyage. The sailors sounded the customary departure signals on their bugles, When this group heard the sound of the bugles they immediately became concerned for their safety and hurried back to the ship. They still managed to find places to sit but not with the same comfort as the first and second groups.*

*The fourth group ate from the fruits of the trees and swam in the waters of the island. When they heard the sound of the bugles they said: "Although they have sounded the bugles they will not leave until they erect the mast."*

*Once the mast was erected they said: "They still won't go until they have unfurled the sails."*

*Once the sails were unfurled they said: "Surely they won't go until the sailors have eaten."*

*All along these people were sitting and eating the fruit of the island, intoxicated with the wine of their desires. Meanwhile, the sailors finished eating, manned their positions, and the ship set sail.*

*Once the ship set sail, however, this group said: "If we delay one moment longer the ship will leave without us, and we will be doomed."*

*They immediately ran to the shore of the island and leaped recklessly into the sea. They swam to the ship and climbed into it. The places they found for themselves were cramped and uncomfortable, unlike those of the people who had not dallied so long on the island.*

*The fifth group settled into the island. They ate, drank, and made merry. They gave absolutely no thought to returning to the ship until it was already gone and they were left marooned on the island. The summertime passed, and the wintertime arrived in its stead. The fruits fell off the trees. The leaves withered on the branches. They were left unprotected from the blistering sun during the day and from the freezing cold in the night. Strange and vicious beasts emerged from their lairs and attacked the marooned group, pouncing on some of them and devouring them. They cried and lamented that they had not returned to the ship, but it was to no avail. They remained on the island and perished. In the final analysis, they were cut off both from the ship and the island.*

*This parable is analogous to the situation in which a person finds himself in this world. His good deeds are like the ship in which he travels through his life, if he conducts himself with integrity and serves his Creator meticulously, not allowing his evil inclination to tempt him into the empty pursuits of the world, he is assured of reaching his destination safely.*

*The first group that refused to get off the ship altogether represents the thoroughly righteous people who have never tasted sin, who have overcome their evil inclinations and spurned the material lure of this world. These people have never left their places to set foot on the island; they have never allowed themselves to be influenced by the seductive pull of worldly desires, desires which can ultimately destroy those who indulge.*

*The second group that visited the island only briefly, represents those people who sin but do teshuvah immediately while they are still in their full*

*youthful vigor. As explained in the previous chapter, this is the ideal teshuvah.*

*The third group that did not leave the island until they heard the sound of the bugles signaling the impending departure of the ship represents those people that do teshuvah only when they grow old. Only when they realize that their time on this world is coming to an end do they give thought to doing teshuvah. Although their teshuvah is also accepted their places are not as comfortable as those of the first two groups.*

*The fourth group that waited until the last second, only leaving the island when the ship had already set sail, represents those people who do teshuvah only on their deathbeds. Only when they see that there is nothing left to their lives and death is staring them in their faces do they do teshuvah. Although this teshuvah is also acceptable their station is considerably less comfortable than that of the other groups.*

*The fifth and final group that stayed behind on the island and then shed futile tears at their folly represents the incorrigible sinners. These people are so steeped in their physical desires that they arrogantly reject the very thought of doing teshuvah. They die sinful and are doomed to destruction. The pleasures of this world are replaced by the worms and maggots of the grave; their flesh is devoured, their souls consumed. They are condemned to everlasting shame and disgrace. They are as the island dwellers whose idyllic existence is replaced by the most dreadful conditions, who must suffer blistering heat during the daytime and bitter cold at night, who are beset by strange, vicious beasts and by snakes and scorpions.*

*&&Elsewhere, the Midrash tells us:<sup>45</sup>*

*%%It is written, Who has woe, who has sorrow? (Mishlei 23:29), It is one who leaves behind great wealth and takes many sins along with him into the grave.*

*Who is this?*

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<sup>45</sup> [Translator's note: See Footnote 44.]

*It is someone who accumulates money illegally. Of such a person is it written, He that gets riches, but not justly, shall abandon them in the midst of his days (Yirmiyahu 17:11). For when a person passes away from the world he is not accompanied by gold or by silver, only by teshuvah and good deeds.*

*There is an analogy to this, A man had three companions. He liked one of these companions immensely. He liked the second one too, but not as much as the first. He did not particularly care for or value the third one at all.*

*One time the king summoned the man to come to him. The officers of the king came to hasten him along to the palace of the king to fulfill the will of their master. The man was dismayed and terrified by the summons of the king.*

*He thought: "It is possible that some mischief makers denounced me to the king and I shall be executed when I come to the palace. My best recourse is to seek the help of my close friend with whom I would entrust my life. I will ask him to come along with me and plead my case before the king."*

*He went to the companion that he liked very much. He explained the situation to him and asked him to accompany him to the king's palace. His friend refused to come along. He did not let himself be convinced. The man left in a despondent mood.*

*He thought: "I will approach my second companion and ask him to accompany me."*

*The man went to his second companion, whom he also liked, and asked him to come along and help him plead his case.*

*His friend replied: "I will not actually come into the palace with you, but I will accompany you along the road to protect you until you get there. Once you come to the palace of the king, however, will leave you and go on my way."*

*The man went to enlist the help of his third companion, the one for whom he had never cared. He told him all that had happened, including the refusal of his other friends to accompany him, and asked him if he would help him.*

*His friend replied: "Do not worry. I shall go along with you. I shall come into the palace of the king with you. I shall plead your case for you. I shall do everything in my power to save you."*

*Thereupon he accompanied the man to the king. He defended him and secured his acquittal.*

*The first friend, whom the man liked very much, represents a person's money that he loves more than anything else in the world. But on the day of a person's passing from the world he must leave all this money behind; he can take nothing along, as it is written, His glory shall not descend after him (Tehillim 49:18).*

*The second friend represents a person's children, relatives, and friends, These people accompany the deceased on his funeral up until the grave. But when he is laid in the grave they leave and go on their way.*

*The third friend, the one who pleaded his case before the king and defended him, represents teshuvah and good deeds, which are generally neglected by people during their lifetimes. These are the only friends that accompany a person to defend him after his death, as it is written, And your charity shall go before you, the glory of God shall enfold you, then you shall call and God will answer you, you shall cry out and He will say, I am here (Yeshayahu 58:8-9).*

*The king that summoned the man represents the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy Blessed One, before whom there is no favoritism or bribery, only justice. In a trial such as this only teshuvah and good deeds can bring about a favorable verdict.*

## &&Chapter Eleven

### A Perspective on Fasting

The role of fasting in teshuvah is twofold. It serves to weaken the body of the person who has sinned and is attempting to do teshuvah, eroding the arrogance that led him into sin in the first place. Fasting also constricts a person's desires and cleanses his tissues and his blood in proportion to the extent to which they have been contaminated by his sins. This purging of a person's own flesh and blood through fasting is valued more highly than offering up the blood and blubber of a sacrifice on the altar in the Bais Hamikdash.

Indeed, the remedy for a spiritual malaise is similar to the remedy for a physical malaise. If it is diagnosed that someone has taken ill because of heavy overeating the remedy prescribed is to restrict the intake of food. Similarly, if someone has contaminated his soul through food and drink the remedy lies in abstention from food and drink.

On the other hand, just as someone who is not ill or whose illness involves a weakening of the body should not restrict his intake of food, so too, only someone suffering from a spiritual malaise should fast. Unnecessary fasting is counterproductive. Our Sages have addressed the problem of unnecessary fasting. The Talmud tells us (Taanis 11a):

*%%Rabbi Shmuel said: "Whoever fasts is considered a sinner, as it is written, And it shall atone for him in that he has sinned against the soul (Bamidbar 6:11)*

*"Against whose soul did he sin by taking the Nazirite vow?*

*"Against his own soul in that he had denied himself wine. We can draw our own conclusion from this. If someone is considered a sinner merely for denying himself just wine, someone who fasts, and denies himself everything should certainly be considered a sinner."*

*Rabbi Elazar says: "He is considered a holy person, as it is written, He shall be holy... (Bamidbar 6:5). We can draw our own conclusion from this. If someone is considered a holy person merely for denying himself just*

wine, someone who fasts and denies himself everything should certainly be considered a holy person, "

...Raish Lakish said: "He is considered a pious person, as it is written, He who weans his soul is a man of piety... (Mishlei 11:17). "

And Rav Shashess said: "If a Torah scholar sits in fast let a dog consume his food."<sup>46</sup>

&&At first glance there would seem to be a difference of opinion between the Sages quoted in this passage of the Talmud. However, they are actually all in agreement. Rabbi Shmuel is discussing someone who fasts unnecessarily; he is considered a sinner. Rabbi Elazar and Raish Lakish are discussing someone who fasts to atone for his sins; such a person is considered holy and pious. Rav Shashess concludes that a Torah scholar is always forbidden to fast, because fasting will interfere with his Torah study and thus restrict the service of Heaven.

Indeed, we have at various times witnessed some of our pious people practicing abstinence. They have tormented their bodies with fasting; they have forsworn meat and wine; they have withdrawn from women; they have clothed themselves in garments of rough wool and hair. However, they only did so because they sensed within themselves an inclination towards the opposite extreme. In cases of physical illness, when a physician detects an imbalance in the body he will prescribe going to the opposite extreme in order to return the body to balance. These pious people were using the same system to reestablish their spiritual balance when they felt an imbalance developing within them. Furthermore, it is also possible that they were submitting themselves to suffering to purge themselves of some unworthy thoughts or other personal failings.

Unfortunately, there were foolish people who observed the actions of these pious people and, not knowing their motivations, drew entirely erroneous conclusions. They assumed that this kind of conduct was

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<sup>46</sup> [Translator's note: In other words, it is considered as if he fasted only because he had nothing to eat (Rashi).]

inherently desirable. They thought that if they too would torment their bodies with all sorts of torments then they too would be elevated and come closer to Hashem. As if Hashem hates the body and wants to destroy it! They did not understand that such actions are bad for someone who is not using them for a specific purpose.

The actions of these people can be compared to someone who is ignorant of medicine and sees an expert doctor administer a certain powerful potion to a sick person, thereby healing him. Seeing this, the ignorant person went and administered the same potion to a healthy person. He reasoned: "If this potion can heal a sick person it can certainly help a healthy person protect his health." This is faulty reasoning. This potion will undoubtedly make the healthy person ill.

So too is the case with spiritual illnesses. A spiritually fit person will also suffer if he takes a spiritual medicine that goes against the intent of our Torah which is perfect, refreshes the soul, and enlightens the fool.<sup>47</sup> The intent of the Torah was for a person to live a natural life, a life of moderation. He should eat in moderate amounts and drink in moderate amounts. And if he detects an imbalance developing within himself and an inclination towards excess he should correct that imbalance by fasting in moderation.

It is of fasting such as this that the Talmud is speaking when it tells us that fasting is greater than charity, since it takes from one's body rather than from one's money (Berachos 32b).

On a fast day such as this a person should pray to his Creator that He should consider the cleansing of his blood and his tissues by the fast as a sacrifice brought before Him. The Talmud tells us (Berachos 17a):

*%%When Rav Shashess used to fast he would say: "Master of All Worlds! It is perfectly clear before You that when the Bais Hamikdash was still standing a person would bring a sacrifice, offering up only its blubber and its blood, and his sins would be forgiven, Now through my fasting I*

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<sup>47</sup> [Translator's note: A reference to Tehillim 19:8.]



*have diminished my own blood and body fat. May it be Your Will that the amount of blood and body fat that I have lost be considered as a satisfyingly aromatic sacrifice brought on the altar in the Bais Hamikdash and that I should find favor before You."*

&&It is of such a fast day that the Talmud tells us (Shabbos 11a):

*%%Rabah the son of Mechasiah said in the name of Rav Chama the son of Curia who said in the name of Rav: "A period of fasting is as effective against an ominous dream as a fire is effective against chaff "*

*Rav Yosef said: "This applies only when the fasting takes place on the same day as the dream, even if that day is on Shabbos. "*

&&The Talmud also tells us (Berachos 31b):

*%%Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yosi the son of Zimra: "If someone fasts on the Shabbos any evil decree against him, even from as long as seventy years before, is torn up and replaced by good."<sup>48</sup>*

&&Of course, the intent of our Sages in their praise of fasting was not that the fast day should be an end in itself but that by tormenting one's body one should be inspired to examine one's ways and return through teshuvah. In this way he will be able to nullify the evil decree that has been issued against him if indeed there is one, and Heaven will have mercy on him.

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<sup>48</sup> See the Third Light of the Menorah (*The Light of Mitzvos*), Section IV., Chapter 30.

## Chapter Twelve

### Other Fast Days

The fast days which are mentioned in the Torah, and the practice of crying out to Heaven on these days, were established to commemorate events that transpired with our forefathers on specific dates. The Talmud tells us (Rosh Hashanah 18b):

*It is taught: Rabbi Shimeon the son of Yochai said: "There are four things that Rabbi Akiva used to expound with which I do not agree.*

*"The fourth fast day is Shiva Asar b'Tamuz (the Seventeenth Day of Tamuz) on which the city of Yerushalayim was breeched, as it is written, It was in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, and the famine raged in the city (Yirmiyahu 52:6), after which it is written, And the city was breeched (Yirmiyahu 52:7).*

*"Why is it called 'the fourth fast day'?*

*"Because it comes during the fourth month (counting from Nissan).*

*"The fifth fast day is Tisha b'Av (the Ninth Day of Av) on which the House of our Lord was burned.*

*"Why is it called 'the fifth fast day'?*

*"Because it comes during the fifth month.*

*"The seventh fast day is the Third Day of Tishrei on which Gedaliah the son of Achikam was killed.<sup>49</sup> This comes to teach us that the death of the righteous is comparable to the burning of the Bais Hamikdash.*

*"Why is it called the seventh fast day?*

*"Because it comes during the seventh month.*

*"The tenth fast day is Asara b'Teyveys (the Tenth Day of Teyveys) on which the king of Bavel (Babylon) laid siege to Yerushalayim, as it is*

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<sup>49</sup> [Translator's note: When Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Bavel (Babylon), destroyed Yerushalayim and drove the Jews into exile, he left a remnant of the Jewish populace in Yehudah and appointed Gedaliah the son of Achikam as administrator of this community. Yishmael the son of Nesaniah, a royal descendant, assassinated Gedaliah the son Achikam, and this remnant community fled from the Land of Yisrael. See Melachim 11 25:22-26. The fast day commemorating this tragedy is also known as Tzom Gedaliah (the Fast of Gedaliah).]

written, *And the Word of God was spoken to me in the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, saying, Son of man! Record for yourself the name of this day, of this very day, the King of Bavel has laid siege to Yerushalayim on this very day (Yechezkel 24:1-2).*

*“But I myself do not agree with Rabbi Akiva about this point. Only, the tenth fast day is the Fifth Day of Teyveys on which the reports of the destruction of Yerushalayim reached the Jewish communities in exile, as it is written, And it was in the eleventh year, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, in the time of our exile, that the survivor of Yerushalayim came to me, saying, The city was destroyed (Yechezkel 33:21). ”*

&&The Talmud also tells us (Taanis 26a):

*%%Five things happened to our forefathers on the seventeenth day of Tamuz and five on the ninth day of Av.*

*On the seventeenth day of Tamuz the First Tablets of the Commandments were shattered;<sup>50</sup> the bringing of the daily sacrifice was discontinued; the defenses of the city of Yerushalayim were breeched; Apustumus burned the Torah scrolls; and a graven image was erected in the Sanctum of the Bais Hamikdash.*

*On the ninth day of Av it was decreed that our forefathers who had come forth from Egypt would spend the rest of their lives in the Desert and would not enter the Land of Yisrael; the first Bais Hamikdash was destroyed; the second Bais Hamikdash was destroyed; the fortress of Beitar was vanquished, ending the Bar Kochba rebellion against the Romans; and the city of Yerushalayim was razed and leveled.<sup>51</sup>*

&&The most important of these fast days is the fast of Tisha because on this date the most dreadful calamities befell the Jewish people. Over the

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<sup>50</sup> [Translator's note: See Footnote 1.]

<sup>51</sup> [Translator's note: As an interesting historical sidenote, this is a recurring black date in Jewish history. On the ninth day of Av in the year 1290 C.E. the official decree of expulsion against the Jews of England was signed. In 1492, the proclamation outlawing Judaism from Spain specified this date as the deadline, The first ghetto was established in Rome on this date in 1555, The first orders to liquidate the Jews were put into effect on this date in 1941. These are only some of the many sad occurrences on this date.]

years, the first nine days of Av were instituted as a period of mourning; joyous matters are avoided. It is also customary not to eat meat during this period, especially during the meal immediately preceding the fast, unless it is a Shabbos meal. On Tisha b'Av itself all mourners' restrictions and the five abstentions of Yom Kippur are in force. Readings from the Torah may not deal with joyful matters. It is also customary not to work on Tisha b'Av. The Talmud tells us (Pesachim 54b):

*%%Wherever it is customary to do work on Tisha b'Av it is permitted to do so; wherever it is customary not to do work it is forbidden to do so. And Torah scholars everywhere are forbidden to do work.*

*Rabban Shimeon the son Gamaliel says: "All people should always conduct themselves as if they were Torah scholars."*

&&The Talmud further tells us (Taanis 30b):

*%%Rabbi Akiva says: "Whoever works on Tisha b'Av will never see signs of success in his efforts.*

*"Whoever eats on Tisha b'Av will never witness the return of joy to Yerushalayim, as it is written, Rejoice with Yerushalayim and delight in her, all who love her, be elated with her, all who mourn for her (Yeshayahu 66:10).*

*"But whoever mourns for Yerushalayim is deemed worthy of witnessing the return of her joy, as it is written, Be elated with her (Ibid.).*

*"Whoever eats meat and drinks wine on the day before Tisha b'Av, of him is it written, And their sins were upon their bones... (Yechezkel 32:27)."*

&&The Midrash tells us that it is within the power of the Jewish people to return to their original state (Eichah Rabasi):

*%%It is written, Bring us back, O God, to You, and we will return... (Eichah 5:21).*

*The Jewish people said before the Holy Blessed One: "Master of the Universe! Bring us back!"*

*He said: "It is up to you, as it is written, Return to Me, and I will return to you (Malachi 3:7)."*

*They said before Him: "Master of the Universe! It is up to You, as it is written, Bring us back, O Lord of our salvation (Tehillim 85:5).*

*This is the meaning of that which is written, Bring us back, O God, to You, and we will return... (Eichah 5:21).*

*The verse concludes, Renew our days as of old (Ibid.). This refers to our forefathers of whom it is written, And from the top of the ancient mountains (Devarim 33:25).*

*Otherwise: This is a reference to that which is written, And the offering of Yehudah and Yerushalayim shall be enjoyable to God as in the ancient days and as in the early years (Malachi 3:4). "The ancient days" are the days of Moshe of whom it is written, And He remembered the ancient days of His servant Moshe (Yeshayahu 63:11). "The early years" are the times of Shlomo Hamelech.*

*Otherwise; "The ancient days" are the days of Noach of whom it is written, And with ancient kindness will I have mercy on you, said your Redeemer, God, for these are the waters of Noach to Me, that I have sworn that the waters of Noach will no longer pass over the earth (Yeshayahu 54:8-9), "The early years" are the times of Hevel, when there was no idolatry in the world.*

&&Indeed, the Holy Blessed One has assured us through his prophet Yirmiyahu that he will change our mourning to gladness, as it is written, And I will change their mourning to gladness, and I will console them, and I will make them rejoice in place of their sorrow (Yirmiyahu 31:12).

## Chapter Thirteen

### Fasting in Times of Distress

Just as our Sages have decreed specific fast days as a remembrance of past calamities, so too have they instituted the ordering of public fast days in the face of impending calamity. If a country or province or city or even an individual find themselves in pain or distress, or if the rainy season arrives but there is no rainfall, a fast day is to be declared. On this day, the people must fast and pray to Hashem, and they must blow the shofar. In this way, they will overcome their arrogance, and they will examine their ways and do teshuvah. Then the Holy Blessed One will surely have mercy on them and deliver them from whatever danger faces them.

The exact procedure of these fast days varies with the times and the gravity of the situation. A more serious danger indicates the need for a more profound teshuvah, and therefore, the procedure is made more frightening. The Talmud tells us (Taanis 15a):

*%%[The Mishnah says:] The Holy Ark of the Torah is brought out into the main square of the city. Burnt ashes are placed on the Holy Ark and on the heads of the Prince and the President of the Court. Individual people also take some of the burnt ashes and place it on their own heads. The oldest among the people speaks words of rebuke, saying: "Our brothers! It is not written of the people of Nineveh that the Lord took note of their sackcloth and fasting. Instead, it is written that the Lord took note of their good deeds, that they had returned from their evil ways (Yonah 3:10). And it is also written, Rend your hearts and not your clothes (Yoel 2:13).*

*[The Gemara says:] Let the Prince and the President of the Court also take from the burnt ashes and place it on their own heads. Why is it that other people must take it and place it on their heads?*

*Rabbi Aba of Kesari said: "Because there is no comparison between humiliating oneself and being humiliated by someone else."*

*On which part of the head are the ashes placed?*

*Rabbi Yitzchak said: "On the place where one puts the tefillin, as it is written, To establish for the mourners of Zion that they be given an adornment in the place of the ashes (Yeshayahu 61:3). "*

*Why do they go out into the square?*

*Rabbi Chiya the son of Aba said: "It is as if to say, 'We have cried out in private, and we were not answered. Let us disgrace ourselves publicly.' "*

*Rabbi Shimeon the son of Lakish said: "It is as if to say, 'Let our expulsion from our places atone for us. ' "*

*When is there a practical difference between these two opinions?*

*In instances where they move from the privacy of one synagogue to the privacy of another synagogue, there being expulsion in this case but no public disgrace.*

*Why is the Holy Ark taken out into the square?*

*Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi said: "It is as if to say, 'We were entrusted with a special article, but we disgraced it through our sins. ' "*

*And why do we drape ourselves in sackcloth?*

*Rabbi Chiya the son of Aba said: "It is as if to say, We are like beasts before You. ' "*

*And why do we put burnt ashes on the Torah scrolls?*

*Rabbi Yehudah the son of Pazi said: "It is to symbolize that which is written, I am with him in distress (Tehillim 91:15). "*

*Raish Lakish said: "It is to symbolize that which is written, In all their afflictions He was afflicted, and an angel from His Presence rescued them (Yeshayahu 63:9)."*

*Rabbi Zeira said: "Whenever I saw the burnt ashes being placed on the Torah scrolls my whole body would tremble."*

*And why are burnt ashes placed on everyone's heads?*

*There is a difference of opinion about this between Rabbi Levi the son of Lachma and Rabbi Chama the son of Chanina.*

*One said: "It is to say, 'We are like dust before You. "*

*The other said: "It is to say, 'May You recall to our benefit the ashes of the altar of the Akeidah of our forefather Yitzchak, and may You have mercy upon us.' "*

*When is there a practical difference between these two opinions? In instances where ordinary dust is used instead of actual ashes, there being a symbol of the insignificance of ashes in this case but no symbol of the Akeidah.*

*Why do they go out to the cemetery?*

*There is a difference of opinion about this between Rabbi Levi the son of Lachma and Rabbi Chama the son of Chanina.*

*One said: "It is to say, 'We are like dead people before You. " The other said: "It is to implore the dead to plead that we be shown mercy."*

*When is there a practical difference between these two opinions?*

*In instances where the cemetery contains graves of gentiles, there being only a symbol of death in this case.*

*&&The purpose of all of these actions was, of course, to condition their hearts to do teshuvah and to pray to the Holy Blessed. One that He heed their prayers. The Talmud tells us (Taanis 24a):*

*%%Rabbi Yehudah the Prince declared a fast day. He prayed for mercy, but the rains did not come.*

*He said: "How great is the difference between (the prophet) Shmuel of Ramah whose prayers brought rain and (myself) Yehudah the son of Gamaliel whose prayers go unanswered! Woe to the generation that has been so stricken! Woe to the one during whose lifetime such a thing happens!"*

*He was extremely disheartened, whereupon the rains came. ...Rav Nachman declared a fast day. He prayed for mercy, but the rains did not come.*

*He said: "Take Nachman and throw him off the wall onto the ground.*



*He was extremely disheartened, whereupon the rains came. ...Rava visited Hagrunia. He declared a fast day and prayed for mercy, but the rains did not come.*

*He said: "Let everyone fast overnight."*

*The next day he asked them: "Has anyone seen anything significant in a dream?"*

*Rabbi Elazar of Hagrunia told him: "I was shown a statement in my dream which read as follows, 'Good peace to a good Torah master from the Good Master from whose good He gives benefit to His people.'*

*Rava said: "Apparently, it is a time of favor." He prayed for mercy, and the rains came.*

&&This was a common occurrence with our early Sages, only some such as Choni the Circlemaker were answered immediately (Taanis 19a), while others such as Rabbi Chama the son of Chanina and Levi were answered only after much lament (Taanis 25a).

The Talmud tells us (Taanis 25b):

*%%Our rabbis have taught: It once happened that Rabbi Eliezer decreed thirteen fast days for the community, and still, they were not answered and the rains did not come.*

*As the last fast day was coming to an end he asked the people: "Did you prepare graves for yourselves?"*

*They burst out crying, and the rains came.*

*It also happened that Rabbi Eliezer once stood before the Holy Ark of the Torah. He said twenty four berachos, and he was not answered.*

*Rabbi Akiva followed him and said: "Our Father, our King, we have sinned before you. Our Father, our King, we have no king but You. Our Father, our King, have mercy on us."*

*He was answered.*

*The people thought that Rabbi Akiva was greater than Rabbi Eliezer. A Divine Echo was heard to say: "It is not because the one is greater than the other. Rather, it is because the one is more tolerant than the other."*

&&The Talmud also tells us what lies in store for someone who divorces himself from the commonfold in times of distress (Taanis 11a):

*%%Our rabbis have taught: When the Jewish people are suffering and one individual divorces himself from the common fold the two angels of service that constantly escort every person place their hands on his head and say: "This person who divorced himself from the common fold shall not live to see the redemption of the community."*

*It was also taught: When the community is suffering a person should not say: "I will go to my home. I will eat and drink. And I will make my own peace with the situation."*

*If he does so, then it is of him that it is written, And behold, there is elation and happiness, killing cattle and slaughtering sheep, eating meat and drinking wine... (Yeshayahu 22:13). What is the conclusion of the verse? It concludes, And it was revealed in the Ears of God of Hosts if this sin would be forgiven to you until you die, said the Lord the God of Hosts (Yeshayahu 22:14).*

*This is the measure used for average people. What is the measure used for the sinful?*

*It is written, Come along, I will get wine, and we will guzzle intoxicating drink, and such will also be tomorrow, great and very luxurious (Yeshayahu 56:12). What is the continuation of the verse? It continues, The righteous person perishes, and no man takes it to heart, and kind people are taken away, with no one understanding that the righteous are taken away before the evil time (Yeshayahu 57:1).*

*Rather, a person should commiserate with the suffering of the community, just as Moshe Rabbeinu commiserated with the suffering of the community. For it is written, And Moshe's hands were heavy, and they took a stone and placed it under him, and he sat upon it (Shemos 17:12). Why was it necessary for Moshe to sit upon a stone? Did he not have a pillow or a blanket upon which to sit? Only, Moshe Rabbeinu said: "Because the Jewish people are suffering I too shall share in their suffering."*

*A person might wonder: "Who will bear witness against me that I did not commiserate with the suffering of the people?"*

*Rabbi Zeira says: "The two angels of service that constantly escort every person bear witness against him, as it is written, For He shall appoint His angels to you (Tehillim 91:11)."*

*Rabbi Chidkai says: "A person's soul bears witness against him, as it is written, From the one who rests in your bosom you must guard the openings of your mouth (Michah 7:5)."*

*Others say: "A person's limbs bear witness against him, as it is written, You are my witnesses by the Word of God (Yeshayahu 43:10)."*

&&Elsewhere, the Talmud points out that it is preferable for the pious people and the people of good deeds to fast and pray on behalf of the common people. In this way, it would be possible to avoid a general interruption of Torah study among the common people because of fasting. The Talmud tells us (Taanis 27b):

*%%Our rabbis have taught: The People of the Watch in the Bais Hamikdash used to pray that the sacrifices of their brethren be accepted favorably. The People in Attendance would go into the synagogue and decree four fast days every week.*

*On the second day of the week they would fast for the safety of seafarers. On the third day of the week they would fast for the safety of those who were traveling through the deserts, On the fourth day of the week they would fast so that children should not be infected with diphtheria. On the fifth day of the week they fasted for pregnant women and nursing mothers—pregnant women that they carry to term, nursing mothers that they have sufficient milk to nourish their children.*

*On the day before Shabbos they did not fast out of respect for the Shabbos. Needless to say, they did not fast on the Shabbos itself. Why did they not fast on the first day of the week?*

*Not to antagonize the Nazarites (Christians) who celebrate the first day of the week as their sabbath day,*

*Rabbi Shmuel the son of Nachmeini said: "Because man being created on the sixth day of the week, the first day of the week represents the third day of the creation of man, the third day of a person's existence being his weakest day."*

*Raish Lakish said: "Because on the first day of the week a person is weak from the loss of the heightened state of his soul,"*

*This is according to that which Raish Lakish said: "A person is provided with a heightened state of the soul before Shabbos, and it is taken away from him after Shabbos..."*

&&In conclusion, it is important to remember that the fast days the Holy Blessed One seeks are those that are highlighted by submission to Him, by teshuvah and charity to the needy. Fasting whose main purpose is to torture the body and subjugate it, which clothes the outer person in sackcloth while leaving his arrogance and sins intact within, is meaningless before Him. As the prophet has said, Is it just to bow his head like a reed and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? do you call this a fast day and a day of appeasement for God? (Yeshayahu 58:5).

The Talmud tells us that on general fast days it is important to examine the state of public affairs, in addition to prayer, so that they can be corrected (Taanis 12b):

*Abaya said: "From the morning until midday community affairs are examined. During the first of the two remaining quarters of the day from midday until evening portions from the Torah and the Haftorah are read. The remaining quarter is spent in prayer and supplication, as it is written, And they stood in their places, and they read in the Book of the Torah of God their Lord for a quarter of the day, and for a quarter they acknowledged their sins and bowed down before God their Lord (Nechemiah 9:39).*

&&If the Jewish people fast and do proper teshuvah at the same time they can rest assured that He will heed their prayers.