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תשרי תשע"ט 5779 TISHREI



There once was a train-track employee whose sole responsibility was to sit near a crossing and wave a lantern, signaling oncoming trains to slow down. One night, however, two trains collided, so the train company opened an investigation. Everyone including the lantern-waver was interviewed, and it was determined that all safety procedures had been followed and everyone had acted according to protocol.

When the lantern-waver heard the results, he broke into tears. In between his inconsolable sobs, his family begged him to explain his strange reaction to what should have been wonderful news. Pulling himself together, the man admitted to his family that while it was true that he was, in fact, waving the lantern, no one had thought to inquire whether or not it was lit.

Often, as we enter these months of Elul and Tishrei, we find ourselves in the same predicament as the lantern-waver. If we're to be honest, truly honest, many of us would have to concede that we've spent far too much of the year "going through the motions" while our "light inside" remained tragically unlit. To this all-too-common reality, these months of teshuva – spiritual reflection and introspection – bid us to slow down, take stock, realign our priorities, and rekindle our inner spirit.

In the halls of Midreshet Lindenbaum, as in the halls of Ohr Torah Stone's 26 other educational, outreach and advocacy-based institutions, students and faculty are eagerly preparing to greet the New Year with a renewed sense of passion and commitment, with a light that burns brightly from within and radiates outward, illuminating a path for all to follow.

In the pages of this special Yamim Nora'im edition of Ta Shma, we invite you to share the warmth of our light as reflected in the beautifully written Divrei Torah penned by various Midreshet Lindenbaum alumnae and staff. Each Dvar Torah is a jewel which captures the essence of its author, whose scholarship and commitment to the Mesorah serve as an inspiration to families and friends. Many of the authors are Talmidot Chakhamim engaged in the study of Torah on the highest of levels; all are Bnot Torah, equally committed to mitzvot bein adam l'chavero as they are to mitzvot bein adam l'Makom, and happily contributing their skills and talents as leaders within our community and society at large.

We proudly share our nachat with you and trust that you will draw much inspiration from these pages.

Wishing you a radiant and inspiring High Holiday experience.

Ketiva v'Chatima Tova,

Rabbi Kenneth Brander, President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone



"Let It Go": the Secret of Selichot

RABBANIT SALLY MAYER

Does Judaism believe in magical formulas? Each year during the Yamim Nora'im season, we recite the "13 attributes of mercy" many times during selichot and the tefilot of Yom Kippur: "Hashem, Hashem, God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and [He will not] clear [the guilty]..." (Shemot 34). The Talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan (Rosh Hashana 17b) explains that we recite these thirteen attributes so often and so

fervently because Hashem promised Moshe that “Whenever the Jewish people sin, they should perform before Me this order, and I will forgive them.” The Gemara concludes that there is a “covenant” that these thirteen attributes “never return empty-handed.”

How are we meant to understand this? Is this list of attributes some kind of magic formula? Can we skip all of the much harder work of *teshuvah*, of introspection, repentance and return, and achieve forgiveness by simply mouthing this as an incantation?

The answer to this question lies in a story that precedes this passage in the Gemara. The Talmud quotes a *pasuk* in Mikha (7:16) which is quite similar to the list of attributes in Shemot 34: “Who is a God like You, who pardons

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iniquity and passes by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?” Rav explains: “For whom will Hashem pardon iniquity? For those who pass by others’ transgressions.” Rav is teaching a profound lesson: we must behave

towards others the way that we wish Hashem to behave toward us. What happens when someone slights us? How do we react when someone says or does something that hurts our feelings? If we maintain our anger and are slow to forgive, so Hashem will be with us; if we are forgiving and let things go, so Hashem will be with us.

The Gemara continues with the story of the Talmudic sage, Rav Huna son of Rav Yehoshua, who was extremely ill. Rav Papa, his colleague and neighbor, came to visit him; concluding that he was about to die, he told others in the room to begin preparing for the funeral. Miraculously, however, Rav Huna recovered and survived, whereupon Rav Papa was mortified that he had spoken about his friend’s impending death in his presence. Rav Huna comforted his friend: “Indeed, I was dying, but when I arrived at the Heavenly Court, I heard Hashem saying to them, ‘He is not strict about his matters, let us not be strict with him.’” This story illustrates Rava’s assertion: since Rav Huna was a person who let things go, in this case, when he actually deserved to die, Hashem decided

to let things go for him. (In a beautiful twist, this story is itself an example of Rav Huna’s forgiving approach. While someone less forgiving would have been truly angry if his friend prematurely declared his death, Rav Huna instead comforts Rav Papa by sharing with him that he had actually been correct!)

Now let’s look back at Rabbi Yochanan’s statement about the efficacy of the thirteen attributes of mercy: “Whenever the Jewish people sin, they should perform before Me this order, and I will forgive them.” The Meshekh Chokhma notes that Rabbi Yochanan did not discuss *saying* this formula, but rather *performing* it. The Gemara is teaching that if we want forgiveness from Hashem, we must actually practice these thirteen attributes of mercy. We ourselves must be merciful, slow to anger and forgiving, and then, so Hashem will be with us. In addition to the fatherly compassion we evoke by reciting these attributes, we are also insistently delivering a message to ourselves: when we emulate Hashem and treat others in an understanding and forgiving way, we merit not only a kinder society, but also Hashem’s kindness towards us as well.

If we want forgiveness from Hashem, we must actually practice these thirteen attributes of mercy. We ourselves must be merciful, slow to anger and forgiving, and then, so Hashem will be with us.

Rabbanit Sally Mayer serves as Rosh Midrasha at Midreshet Lindenbaum’s Maria and Joel Finkle Overseas Program, as well as teaching Talmud, Halakha, Parsha and Jewish Philosophy at the midrasha. She has worked as an editor for the new Koren translation of the Talmud. Before moving to Israel with her family, Sally was a member of the core faculty that built Ma’ayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls in Teaneck, NJ, where she chaired the Talmud Department and directed Israel Guidance. She has served as Education Director at The Jewish Center on Manhattan’s Upper West Side and lectures in communities in the United States and Israel. A Midreshet Lindenbaum alumna, Sally holds a BA from Stern College, an MA in Medieval Jewish History from Yeshiva University, and studied at Drisha Institute in the Scholars Circle Program. She lives in Neve Daniel with her husband and their six children.



Yishma'el: an Unlikely Model for Teshuva

ILANA GADISH

If you were to ask a classroom of students to list a few of Tanakh's primary models of *teshuvah*, Yishmael would be a very unlikely answer. Yet, surprisingly, Chazal seem to view Yishmael, in the story of his banishment from Avraham Avinu's household in Bereishit Chapter 21, as one of Tanakh's models of repentance. When taking a close look at this text, a few striking features stand out, creating an unexpected core story that teaches us critical tenets of *teshuvah*.

Avraham banishes Yishmael and his mother, Hagar, from his household after seeing his son's damaging

influence on the family, and he gives them water and food as they leave. When their provisions run out and Hagar determines that they will not survive much longer, she has Yishmael take cover under some bushes, stands at a distance so as not to see her son suffer, and begins to weep. In *pasuk* 17, Hashem sends a message to Hagar telling her not to fear: Yishmael

The midrash elaborates that Hashem's acceptance of the prayer occurred despite Yishmael's personal misdeeds, both before and after this moment, and, more remarkably, despite the fact that Yishmael's descendants would later torment the Jewish people.

will be saved because Hashem has heard his voice "in the place that he is in – בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא-נֶשֶׂם." Hashem then reveals to Hagar a well of water in the area that provides lifesaving sustenance for the pair.

The final words of *pasuk* 17 are vague – what does it mean that Hashem has heard Yishmael's voice "in the place that he is in"? Rashi, citing *midrash* Bereishit Rabbah 53:14, explains that this phrase refers to his spiritual status; in the moment that he called out to Hashem, Yishmael was perfectly repentant, and Hashem accepted his prayer. The midrash elaborates that Hashem's acceptance of the prayer occurred despite Yishmael's personal misdeeds, both before and after this moment, and, more remarkably, despite the fact that Yishmael's descendants would later torment the Jewish people.

When we approach *teshuvah* during the Yamim Nora'im, Yishmael reminds us that though we may have low points in our lives in which we are far from the best version of ourselves, the capacity for *teshuvah* and the ability to return to Hashem to strengthen our relationship with Him is always there. Moreover, *teshuvah* is possible even if we know that we will continue to make mistakes in the future. This is the core message that Bereishit Rabbah highlights: even when Hashem knew that Yishmael had potential for wrongdoing in the future, he was still worthy of being saved in that moment, in his sincere call to Hashem.

This point is remarkably powerful. We so often avoid trying to fix our worst habits, or our most challenging personality traits, because we know how easily we will revert back to them and fall prey to the same mistakes in the future. We tell ourselves we can't possibly change, we can't possibly overcome a particular hurdle. Yishmael's salvation is a message to us that even if we will make mistakes in the future (and, as humans, we likely will), it is still worthwhile to do *teshuvah*, and to reach out to Hashem when we most need Him.

The Talmud (Rosh Hashana 16b) goes so far as to use this moment as a basis for a fundamental principle of judgment:

וא"ר יצחק: אין דנין את האדם אלא לפי מעשיו של אותה שעה, שנאמר: "כי שמע אלקים אל קול הנער באשר הוא שם."

And Rabbi Yitzchak said: a man is judged only according to his actions of that present moment, as it says, (Bereishit 21:17) “for God has heard the lad’s voice in the place where he is.”

When Hashem judges us, He judges us according to our sincerity in that moment. He does not add in to the calculation our future potential for error – He assumes the best of us.

We so often avoid trying to fix our worst habits, or our most challenging personality traits, because we know how easily we will revert back to them and fall prey to the same mistakes in the future.

The Talmud here adds a layer to this. When we, as humans, are in a position to judge others, we are to judge in the current moment. We should not speculate what the person might do in the future. This is true not only in the context of formal judgment, but in our everyday interactions with other people. While there are times in our life that we are in the place of Yishmael – asking for *rachamim*, mercy from Hashem, we are even more often placed in situations where we have the ability to judge others. May we succeed in the challenge that Chazal pose to us in the Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashana: when those in our lives ask for forgiveness or need our help, may we judge them favorably, without casting aspersions on their future, hoping and helping them to become their best selves.



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Judgment and Mercy

SHOSHANA MAGID

What insights can we learn about a holiday’s significance from the choice of Torah and *haftara* readings for the day? When it comes to Rosh Hashana, we find a debate in the Talmud (Megillah 31a) regarding which portions to read. One opinion chooses the Torah portion from Bemidbar 29 that describes the sacrifices of Rosh Hashana, and the *haftara* of “*haven yakir li*” (Yirmiyahu 31), whereas the second opinion argues that we should read the story of the birth of Yitzchak in Bereishit 21 with the *haftara* of the story of Chana (Shmuel I:2). This debate assumes that there is one day of Rosh Hashana; since we celebrate the holiday for two days, we might have guessed that we would accommodate each of these opinions on one of the days. However, the Gemara goes on to say that on the first day we follow the second opinion in its entirety and on the second day we follow the first opinion only in part, we read the *haftara* from Yirmiyahu, but for the Torah reading, we read the story of *akeidat* Yitzchak (Bereishit 22) and not the sections about the sacrifices as the main reading (though we do read it as the *maftir*, the additional reading, on both days). What were Chazal teaching us by the choice of readings for each day, and why the sudden inclusion of the story of *akeidat* Yitzchak? A closer look at the *haftarot* can help us answer these questions.

Chana's actions define the essence of the day – the recognition of Hashem as the King of the universe who has the power to answer our prayers.

The *haftara* of the first day of Rosh Hashana tells the story of Chana's fervent prayer for a child and vowing to dedicate the child to Hashem if her prayers are answered. God answers Chana with the birth of Shmuel, and Chana sends

Shmuel to spend his life in the *mishkan* with Eli HaKohen. Afterward, Chana praises and thanks God for answering her *tefilot*. Rashi on the Gemara says that this *haftara* is chosen because Chana's *tefilot* were answered on Rosh Hashana, though it is clear that it is not only the coinciding date that makes this an appropriate *haftara*. Chana's actions define the essence of the day – the recognition of Hashem as the King of the universe who has the power to answer our prayers. Chana's *tefila* to Hashem in a time of need, fulfilling her *neder* (vow) without hesitation and her subsequent praise and thanks to Hashem, all model the behavior to which we aspire on Rosh Hashana. It is no wonder that on the first day of the new year, the Sages want us to internalize her message of the ideal way to recognize and approach God.

In contrast, the *haftara* of the second day presents quite a different, perhaps less ideal model in our relationship with Hashem. The *haftara* comes from Sefer Yirmiyahu, which is filled with prophecies of the *churban* resulting from Bnei Yisrael's actions. The specific *perek* that we read in the *haftara* describes Hashem's promise to turn Bnei Yisrael's mourning into joy with their return to Israel, and concludes as follows (31:19):

“הבן יקיר לי אפרים אם ילד שעשועים, כי מידי דברי בו, זכור אזכרנו עוד, על כן המו מעי לו, רחם ארחמנו נאום ה'.”

“Is Ephraim a son who is dear to Me? Is he a child in whom I delight? For whenever I speak of him, I still remember him; therefore, My very innards are agitated for him; I will surely have compassion on him, says Hashem.”

The Malbim notes that the letter bet in the phrase “כי מידי דברי בו” indicates a conflict with the subject; for example, when Miriam and Aharon speak negatively about Moshe, the Torah writes: “ותדבר מרים ואהרן במשה” (Bemidbar 12:1), and when Bnei Yisrael complain in

the desert, the *pasuk* says (Bemidbar 21:5): “וידבר העם באלוקים ובמשה למה העליתנו ממצרים למות במדבר.”

In light of this understanding, Yirmiyahu is actually discussing Hashem's initially approaching Ephraim negatively due to his sins, and employing the *midat hadin*, Hashem's attribute of judgment. However, His *midat harachamim*, the attribute of mercy, succeeds in overpowering judgment, once He begins to yearn for Ephraim and eventually has mercy on him, as a father with unconditional love for his son. Similarly, to evoke God's mercy, we emphasize Hashem's attribute of *rachamim* throughout the *selichot* as we recite the 13 attributes of mercy, in order to overpower the *midat hadin*. This also explains the choice of *akeidat Yitzchak* as the second day Torah reading; we are appealing to Hashem's mercy by reminding Him of the merits of our forefathers.

Although the eventual success of mercy over judgment, and our finding favor in God's eyes in the *haftara* of Yirmiyahu is encouraging, it is clear that this is far from the ideal way in which Bnei Yisrael should form their relationship with God. This explains why the Gemara chose Chana's story as the *haftara* for the first day of Rosh Hashana, as Chana represents the ideal way in which we should strive to understand and approach Hashem. But, if all else fails, and we are not successful in living up to the lofty ideal of Chana's example, then, as Yirmiyahu teaches us in the words we read on the second day, we can be comforted and hopeful that God will have mercy on His children even if we are not deserving through our own merit.

Chana represents the ideal way in which we should strive to understand and approach Hashem.



Shoshana (Winter) Magid studied at Midreshet Lindenbaum ('02-'03), and then returned to Toronto to earn a BSc from York University. She made aliyah and studied for an MSc in physics from the Weizmann Institute and also studied Tanakh and Halakha at Matan and Beit Morasha. She currently works as a physicist at a hi-tech company in Yavne and

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Gedalia and Yosef: Digging Deeper into Tzom Gedalia

GABRIELLE BERGER

Tzom Gedalia, often overshadowed by the Yamim Nora'im, is likely one of the most underappreciated fast days of the year. And yet it commemorates an extremely tragic story: the murder of Gedalia at the hands of a fellow Jew, Yishmael. Gedalia had been appointed by Nevuchadnetzar as governor over the remaining Jews in the Land of Israel immediately after the destruction of the first *beit hamikdash*. Following the assassination, the Jewish remnant flees Israel for Egypt out of fear of retribution from Babylonia. While many view Tisha B'Av as the culmination of the fast days mourning the destruction of the *beit hamikdash*, Tzom Gedalia is truly the final, perhaps even more tragic event. Despite the destruction, the Babylonians had allowed the Jews to maintain at least a small presence in Israel; that opportunity was quickly dashed by one of their own, completing the destruction. How did this happen, and what must we learn from these events? A close reading of the many details of the story, told to us in II Melakhim 25 and Yirmiyahu 39-43, suggest a comparison to another narrative in Tanakh that can shed light on this one and help us understand it on a deeper level.

There is another episode in Tanakh in which Jews harm other Jews and the result is a descent to Egypt: the story of Yosef and his brothers. Indeed, there are many similarities between these two narratives, beyond simply infighting, a murder attempt, and a descent to Egypt. Both stories begin with the victim acting foolishly: Yosef flaunts that he is the favorite, and Gedalia wholly ignores a warning from Yochanan, a Jewish army officer, that Yishmael intends to kill him. Moreover, in both narratives, the attempted murderers or murderer are motivated by jealousy: the brothers are jealous of Yosef as the favorite son, and, according to Radak (Yirmiyahu 41:1), Yishmael is jealous that Gedalia was appointed governor instead of

him. Both stories feature an attempt to avoid the murder: Reuven and then Yehuda try to dissuade the brothers from harming Yosef, and Yochanan warns Gedalia of Yishmael's intentions. In Bereishit, the brothers place Yosef in a pit and then eat together. In Melakhim, Gedalia and Yishmael eat together, and then Yishmael and his men kill him and his companions and place their bodies in a pit. Lastly, the violence in both stories is carried out by ten men: ten brothers in the Yosef story, and Yishmael with his ten men in the Gedalia story.

Despite all of the similarities between the two narratives, they end completely differently. Yosef is not killed, but instead is sold into slavery in Egypt, where he eventually rises to greatness and saves his family during the famine. The Yosef story may be the start of exile, but it is also the beginning of redemption. Gedalia, however, is murdered and the few remaining Jews in the Land of Israel choose to depart. Why? If the two stories share so many characteristics, what leads them to have such disparate endings?

Perhaps the answer to this question relates to how speech is used in each story. At the beginning of each story, we encounter only examples of negative speech.

Yosef speaks poorly of his brothers to his father, incites jealousy by telling everyone his dreams, and the brothers then plot to kill Yosef. The end result: Yosef is thrown into a pit. Correspondingly, Sefer Yirmiyahu is all about the failure of speech; Yirmiyahu's prophecy is ignored repeatedly throughout the book. In the Gedalia story, the word *sheker*, lie, is used twice (40:16; 43:2).

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The decisive moment in the Yosef story, however, is when Yehuda, still unaware of the Egyptian viceroy's true identity, approaches Yosef to defend Binyamin. In contrast to his past behavior, Yehuda now uses speech to save his brother. This climactic moment in the story is introduced with the words "*Va-yigash eilav Yehuda*"—"And Yehuda



approached him" (Bereishit 44:18). Notably, the same Hebrew root is used in the Gedalia story: "*Va-yigshu kol sarei ha-hayalim vi-Yochanan ben Kareach...*" – "All the army officers and Yochanan the son of Kareach approached..." (Yirmiyahu 42:1). After the murder, Yochanan and his people approach Yirmiyahu and implore him to ask God what they should do, promising to heed to whatever Hashem says. In a Sefer where the words of Yirmiyahu have been consistently ignored, their declaration of faith and obedience is a momentous change: perhaps speech is about to be redeemed here as well. And yet, when Yirmiyahu returns with the message that they should stay and Hashem will protect them, they too ignore the prophet and run away to Egypt. What the reader anticipated will be a turning point in this story ends in failure.

In both stories, when speech is used negatively or positive speech ignored, violence ensues. Events shift in the Yosef story when Yehuda uses speech for a positive purpose, but that reversal never materializes in the Gedalia story.

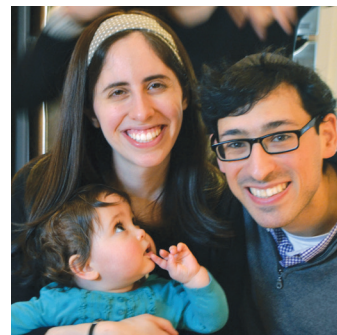
This idea of negative use of speech leading to physical violence is not just a platitude, but rather key to our national identity. When Yitzchak is trying to discern which son is before him asking for a blessing, he says "*ha-kol kol Yaakov ve-ha-yadain yedei Esav*" – "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Esav" (Bereishit 27:22). Chazal point to this phrase as the defining difference between Yisrael and Edom. The Children of Israel use prayer, while Edom turns to the sword (see Rashi on Bereishit 20:16, 20 and Bemidbar 22: 4, 23). Thus, in the Gedalia story, improper speech demonstrates not only our descent into violence but, more importantly, the abandonment of our character.

While at first glance the Gedalia story is catastrophic only because it leads to absolute exile, we now see that the tragedy runs deeper. Our nation reached that low point because we lost our sense of identity. We lost "*kol*" and we became "*yadain*," like any other nation. Consequently, we could not be Bnei Yisrael in Eretz Yisrael.

Tzom Gedalia just happens to fall out at the same time of year as the Yamim Nora'im but nevertheless offers a timely message. The Yamim Nora'im is a time of prayer, when we use our speech to connect with God. We learn from the Yosef story that we do not have to be perfect; Yosef and his brothers initially failed to use speech appropriately. But they changed, and their story ended positively as a result.

In the Gedalia story, improper speech demonstrates not only our descent into violence but, more importantly, the abandonment of our character.

May we as a community, no matter what has happened in the past, remember our national identity and use speech to do *teshuvah* and achieve closeness to Hashem – *bi-heyoto karov*, at a time when He is close to us.



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A Psychological Approach to *Teshuva*

MIRYAM KIDERMAN

As we approach the Yamim Nora'im season, the tone of communal conversations starts to shift. Synagogues across the world will soon fill with repentant community members searching their souls and beating their chests...*Ashamnu*. We are guilty. *Maradnu*. We have rebelled. *Kishinu oref*. We have been stubborn.

What is the appropriate response to these intense moments of reckoning?

The Gemara in Yoma (75a) records a debate between Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi about the best approach to managing distress. The Gemara quotes a verse from Mishlei (12:25), "*Da'aga b'lev ish yashchena*." Rabbi Ami comments

that the intended meaning is *yaschena*, that one should forcefully push the stressor from one's mind, while Rabbi Asi holds that the appropriate response is *yisichena*, to discuss. The Rabbis appear to debate the optimal psychological response to stress: distract? Or discuss?

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Similarly, contemporary psychology theorists debate the best path toward healing emotional pain.

Similarly, contemporary psychology theorists debate the best path toward healing emotional pain. Proponents of cognitive and behavioral therapies propose that changing one's thoughts and actions can alter painful beliefs, thus paving a path to a better present and future; among these skills is the strategy of "distracting the mind." Classical psychotherapy, in contrast, holds that by delving deeply into the depths of the past, one gains a greater understanding of the self, creating awareness and insight to make positive changes for the future.



Combining the Talmudic debate and psychology, we can re-examine the Biblical Yom Kippur ceremony (Vayikra 16:7-10):

ולקח את שני השעירים והעמיד אותם לפני ה' פתח אהל מועד: ונתן אהרן על שני השעירים גורלות גורל אחד לה' וגורל אחד לעזאזל: והקריב אהרן את השעיר אשר עלה עליו הגורל לה' ועשהו חטאת: והשעיר אשר עלה עליו הגורל לעזאזל יעמד חי לפני ה' לכפר עליו לשלח אתו לעזאזל המדברה.

As Aharon HaKohen approaches Hashem on behalf of the nation, he offers two goats. One goat stands as a *chatat*, a sin-offering, while the other is to be sent to the desert and pushed off a cliff. The Kohen Gadol approaches the first goat, slaughters it, and sprinkles its blood in the holiest of places. Through this process, the Kohen Gadol takes the guilt of the nation upon himself and confronts Hashem, as it were, in His home, to "discuss" the nation's deepest and most shameful moments. The transformative process of bringing flesh and blood before Hashem brings the focus inward, to a confrontation with the self, as we ask Hashem to forgive our most dire of sins. The paradigm of the "goat that is for Hashem" is a model of confrontation with sin and with the self: the "discuss" model.

The "*sa'ir la'Azazel*," the cast-off goat, is a different matter entirely. The second goat is whisked away by a designated man to the desert and is pushed off a cliff. The Kohen, with the help of his emissary, puts the sins of the nation upon this goat and, as it were, "distracts" the shame away.

Recalling the debate of Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi, we can see both models at play in this process. Rabbi Ami calls upon the distressed to “push away” the stressor, a process that is so dramatically enacted through the *sa’ir la’Azazel*. Using behavioral means, the *sa’ir la’Azazel*

The *sair la’Hashem* reminds us that it is impossible to confront Hashem and seek *teshuva* without also engaging in a conversation with Him, exploring our past in order to re-imagine the future.

becomes a representative of the undesired aspects of the self. By pushing away sin, the nation both distracts from the shame of turning away from God, while pushing forth to embody the desired behaviors of being true *ovdei* Hashem, servants of God. Simultaneously, Rabbi Asi prescribes

the model of, “*yisichena*” discussion. This term recalls a source for *tefila*: “*vayetzei Yitzchak lasuach basade...*” (Bereishit 24:63). Rabbi Ezra Bick describes the *avoda she’balev*, service of the heart, of *tefila* as the corollary to the *avoda* of *korbanot*. The *sa’ir la’Hashem* reminds us that it is impossible to confront God and seek *teshuva* without also engaging in a conversation with Him, exploring our past in order to re-imagine the future.

As we see from both ancient Torah *mitzvot* and contemporary practices, an integrationist model can bring these two perspectives of distraction and discussion together. During the month of Elul, we push ourselves to fully engage in *teshuva*, *tefila*, and *tzedaka*, confronting Hashem and ourselves through prayer as we strive to become our best selves.



Miryam Kiderman (Midreshet Lindenbaum ‘07) is a graduate of the Masters in Biblical and Talmudic Interpretation at Stern College (GPATS) and is completing a Psy.D. in School-Clinical Child Psychology at Pace University. She will begin a postdoctoral fellowship in pediatric pain psychology in the Fall. Miryam has been

teaching *kallot* for years in New York, where she lives with her husband and their two children.

Simchat Torah: a Re-examination of Completion, Growth, and Renewal

JENNIFER RASKAS

Rosh Hashana marks the beginning of the new Jewish year, and often coincides with personal beginnings such as a new year at school, a new job, or the start of a new role or project. Some of these beginnings will build directly on past achievements, and lend to a smooth transition of growth. But what of the beginnings that bring us, in some way, back to “square one”? Is there a way we can more optimistically approach new classes, jobs, roles or projects that seem to take us back to where we previously began?

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Collectively, we encounter this type of beginning on Simchat Torah, when after having read a portion of the Torah each week for a year, we finally reach the last verse of Chumash, only to then immediately start reading the Torah again from Bereishit. Why is it that we mark the moment of completing the reading of the Torah by immediately starting right back where we began? This question becomes more difficult when we consider Simchat Torah’s connections to the numbers seven and eight.

Rav Menachem Leibtag, in his analysis of Sefer Vayikra (tanach.org), asserts that when the number seven is mentioned in Tanakh, it reminds us of Hashem’s creation of the natural world in seven days. The holidays of Sukkot and Pesach are seven days long, and Shavuot occurs after the culmination of counting the Omer, seven weeks of seven days. These holidays occur at important times of the natural harvests. The number seven, as connected to these religious holidays, helps remind us that Hashem created and sustains the natural world that produced the land’s bounty.



In contrast, the eighth day in Tanakh signifies Hashem's elevation of His relationship with the people of Israel above nature. Most notably, the *brit mila*, circumcision, of a baby boy on the eighth day of his life is a sign of Hashem's unique covenant with the Jewish people. Similarly, there were seven days of preparation for the dedication of the *mishkan*, but it was on *yom hashmini*, the eighth day, that the *mishkan* became the new central point for the people of Israel's relationship with God.

Based on this interpretation, it is understandable why our sages chose the holiday of Shmini Atzeret, the eighth day following seven days of Sukkot, to celebrate Simchat Torah (the original intention, as celebrated in Israel today, is to celebrate both of these on the same day). The Torah elevates our relationship with God above His relationship with the natural world. As we read in Sefer Shemot, God spoke to the people during the revelation at Mount Sinai stating, "Behold, I will make a covenant; before

all your people I will do wonders, such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation" (Shemot 34:10).

Now we can return to and strengthen our original question. Why on Simchat Torah, the eighth day, just as we climactically finish reading the yearly Torah cycle, do we immediately start again by reading *parashat Bereishit*, the Torah portion about... the seven days of creation? Why on this day of eight do we purposely read the paradigmatic story of seven?

The answer involves a re-examination of the relationship between seven and eight. While it is important in our lives to know how to transition from seven to eight, from our natural routine to an elevated spiritual status, it is equally, and sometimes more important, to know how to transition from eight to seven, to bring our moments of spiritual inspiration into our own natural world.

Just as when we start a new job or a new school we are not actually starting from scratch, but rather bringing to this new chapter all the knowledge and experience we attained so far, we do not actually start the Torah again on the eighth day "from square one." Instead, we infuse the new reading with the insights, inspiration and spiritual heights we achieved through reading the previous year's Torah cycle.

Over the course of the months of Elul and Tishrei, we will experience intense weeks of holidays filled with praying, reconnecting with community, fasting, eating, dancing, *shofar*-blowing and *sukka*-gathering. Let us ensure that we not only grow spiritually and personally over the course of this time, but that we intentionally take the inspiration from this month of "eight" and infuse it into the rest of our year of "seven."

While it is important in our lives to know how to transition from our natural routine to an elevated spiritual status, it is equally, and sometimes more important, to know how to bring our moments of spiritual inspiration into our own natural world.



Jennifer Raskas (Midreshet Lindenbaum '02) is the Director of Israel Action and Education at the JCRC of Greater Washington and teaches classes on Hebrew literary approaches to readings in Tanakh across the United States and Israel. Jennifer received her Bachelor of Arts from Columbia University and her Master's in Public Policy

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Celebration and Submission

RABBANIT NOMI BERMAN

From the first *shofar* blast on Rosh Chodesh Elul through the conclusion of Sukkot, our lives are enriched by a series of symbolic rituals that focus our attention on the theme of *teshuva*. The final day of this period, known in later *halakhic* literature as Hoshana Rabba, is referred to in the Mishna as “the seventh day of the willow branch.” We conclude this rather intense period with a seemingly esoteric gesture of beating *aravot* on the ground.

The Mishna describes the complete ceremony which took place in the *beit hamikdash* throughout the holiday of Sukkot.

How is the *mitzva* of the willow [branches] done? There was a place below Jerusalem... they would gather from there large willow branches, and they would come and stand them upright on the sides of the altar, with their tips inclining over the altar. They would blow a *tekiya* [a steady blast], and a *terua* [a broken blast], and a *tekiya*. Every day they would circle the altar one time and say, “We beseech you Hashem, redeem us, please; we beseech you Hashem, bring prosperity, please.” And on that particular day [i.e. the seventh days of willow ritual], they would circle the altar seven times. At the hour of their departure, what did they say? “Beauty for you, O altar! Beauty for you, O altar!”

A parallel passage in the Tosefta refers to an obligation of “*chibbut arava*.” This term is open to interpretation. Rashi suggests that the *mitzva* is to wave the *arava*, apparently just as one waves the *lulav*. The Rambam, however, uses that verb to refer to the contemporary practice of “beating” the willow branch.

The Yerushalmi uses surprising imagery related to this practice. Rav Acha looks at the symbolism of encircling the altar once a day for six days, culminating in seven revolutions on the seventh day and suggests a compeling

comparison to the battle in Jericho, where the Jewish army surrounded the city seven times, also accompanied by *shofar* blasts. The Maharsha explains that the gesture of surrounding the altar is a prayer that Hashem will protect us from our enemies as He did in Jericho.

A close reading of the analogy, however, is troubling. In the paradigm of Jericho, the enemy was encircled, whereas in our case the altar is being encircled. A very precise reading of the analogy would lead us to suggest that the altar itself is the enemy!

When we combine Rav Acha’s comments with the Mishna’s description, a complex picture emerges. On the one hand, we decorate the altar with willows, seemingly expressing our gratitude for the atonement process represented by the altar, which allows us each year to restore our relationship with God. On the other hand, the process of atonement can be wrenching, as suggested perhaps by the Jericho imagery. The altar, the location of our sacrifices, is the battleground where we wrestle with our sins, personal and national.

The process of atonement can be wrenching, as suggested perhaps by the Jericho imagery. The altar, the location of our sacrifices, is the battleground where we wrestle with our sins, personal and national.

The debate over the meaning of the term “*chibbut*” perhaps also reflects this ambiguity. The implication of placing the *aravot*, or waving them above the altar, seems quite different from the more violent imagery of “beating” the *aravot*. Is the act of “*chibbut*” a symbol of celebration or of submission?

In the absence of the Temple, the *aravot* ritual is limited to the seventh day only. We replace the encircling of the altar with the *hakafot* around the *bima*, as our *tefilot* have replaced the altar as the primary vehicle of atonement. Notably, the Rambam first mentions the element of beating the *aravot* in his depiction of the custom in our days, post *churban*.

Perhaps this reflects our changed reality. In the absence of the Temple, the *aravot* take on a strident role. Today, we conclude the Yamim Nora'im season with a gesture which reflects battle imagery. We acknowledge that the atonement process has been rendered all the more challenging and we experience it as an act of beating the *midat hadin* into submission. Our weapon of choice, however, is the *aravot*, the very same *aravot* that we hope to use to beautify the altar when the Temple is rebuilt in the future. The *aravot* express our gratitude that the possibility of forgiveness nonetheless still exists. We are privileged to be part of a tradition which places such a premium on the possibility of personal transformation.



Rabbanit Nomi Berman is a "product" of Midreshet Lindenbaum, having studied in the Midrasha's Shana Aleph, Shana Bet, and Bruria Scholars Programs, and now the Rosh Beit Midrash of the Maria and Joel Finkle Overseas Program. In between her studies at Lindenbaum, Nomi completed her B.A. at Stern College and studied in the Talmud department at Bar Ilan University. She and her husband Todd served for four years as the first Av and Eim Bayit in Lindenbaum's current facilities on the Chana and Yaacov Tilles Campus. As a team, Nomi and Todd also pioneered the Jewish Learning Initiative, a program co-sponsored by the OU and Hillel which brings "Rabbinic couples" to university campuses. They served as the first JLI couple at Brandeis University before returning to their current home in Efrat, where they live with their eight children.



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