

The Path To Follow

Nitzavim

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Good Advice for Being Judged Favorably: "The Joy of Hashem is Your Strength"

We find something extraordinary concerning Rosh Hashanah: It is the day of a great and awe-inspiring judgment, a day when the Creator decides the fate of all the world's inhabitants, in general and specifically, to punish or acquit. As we say in the poem U'Netaneh Tokef, composed by Rabbi Amnon of Mayence: "Let us proclaim the mighty holiness of this day, for it is awe-inspiring and fearsome. Thereon Your Kingship is exalted. ... You open the Book of Remembrance and it reads itself; every man's signature is in it. ... As a shepherd examines his flock, making his sheep pass under his staff, likewise You make every living soul pass before You, and You count, reckon, and are mindful of them. You grant the fixed portion for the needs of all Your creatures, and inscribe the verdict of their judgment." On this day, the Holy One, blessed be He, sits upon His royal throne, the Throne of Justice, judging all the world's inhabitants. He decides the length of their lives and what will happen in the coming year – "who will live and who will die, who will live out his allotted time and who will depart before his time, who [will perish] by water and who by fire, who by the sword and who by wild beast, who by hunger and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by pestilence...."

In other words, everything that happens to a person during the months of the year is decreed on this day of judgment, on Rosh Hashanah, for better or for worse.

Despite all this, we have been commanded to rejoice on this day. Indeed, the verse calls it "a day of your gladness" (Bamidbar 10:10). We also find an explicit account of what Ezra and Nehemiah told the Children of Israel on Rosh Hashanah: "Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet beverages, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, for today is sacred to our L-rd. Do not be sad, for the joy of Hashem is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

This truly requires an explanation. How can G-d command us to rejoice on this day? Is rejoicing not diametrically opposed to the spirit of the day? How can we go about and "eat rich foods and drink sweet beverages," deriving pleasure from eating and drinking as if we were not being judged on this day and did not need to tremble out of fear?

Has anyone ever seen a person whose fate depends on a forthcoming verdict, and yet instead of weeping and pleading for mercy, he sits down to a royal meal of meat and wine, a festive meal? How could that be possible?

To understand this, we must first examine the basis of Judaism, which consists of faith and trust in Hashem. The Rishonim (men such as Rabbi Saadia Gaon, the Rambam, the Ramban, the Kuzari, Chovot HaLevavot, etc.) have spoken at great length on this subject. It is not without reason that the Chazon Ish entitled his Mussar book Emunah U'Bitachon ("Faith and Trust"), for these are the foundations of Judaism.

These principles are so fundamental that a Jew who does not believe that the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, and who does not trust in G-d, is simply lacking something at his very core, for these principles comprise the complete man. One who lives without faith in Hashem and who fails to trust in the Creator of the world, such a person's mitzvot and Torah learning are worthless. This is because these principles are the foundation of every Jew. This means that there is none but Him, that He is the Master of all, and that He was, He is, and He will always be.

Since faith and trust are so fundamental and deeply engrained in us throughout the year, how much more so at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, to which the Sages have applied the verse: "Call upon Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6). In fact a person can choose to ignore, as it were, the Creator's providence throughout the year, for he may get bogged down and drown in his daily routine without worrying about reversing direction. However during the days of Tishri, which are among the kindnesses that the Holy One, blessed be He, has bestowed

upon His creations – days which by their essence lead to "faith and trust" – Hashem draws closer to us. Indeed, "the king is in the field," as our holy books explain. In such a case, how much more are we obligated to increase our faith and trust in Hashem!

These days constitute a true lifeline. If we grab hold of them with all our might, they can save us from a harsh judgment. However if we fail to grab hold of this lifeline of faith and trust, when will we do so? And if not now, when?

This is especially true given that we have already received the promise that "one who places his trust in Hashem will be surrounded by chesed." In other words, even if someone does not merit chesed by the strict measure of justice, if he trusts in Hashem, then Hashem will treat him with mercy, going beyond the bounds of strict justice by giving as He has promised. That being the case, a good way of escaping the judgment would be to trust in the Holy One, blessed be He!

We can now begin to understand the mitzvah to rejoice on this day. It consists of demonstrating our certainty that, because of the Creator's compassion, we will be found innocent on the day of judgment, for just as a father has compassion on his children, we are certain that the Creator will have compassion on us. As a result, the situation is similar to that of a person who must be judged in court, though he knows that he will be declared innocent. He will therefore not be afraid of the verdict or tremble out of fear. Instead, he will eat with joy, for the verdict will only serve to declare his innocence to the entire world.

However if he experiences the slightest degree of fear, it means that he is not certain of the verdict. Thus not only must we rejoice – "Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet beverages, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, for today is sacred to our L-rd" – we have also been commanded: "Do not be sad, for the joy of Hashem is your strength." Joy is the power through which we will be declared innocent. It is joy that demonstrates our complete trust in the Creator of the world, and it is through faith that we are "surrounded by chesed." However if we become sad instead of trusting in Hashem, this is a mistake, for it demonstrates that we lack the incredible virtue of trust.

We may therefore say that if we tremble and fear for our lives on that day, not only will we be lacking joy, we will also be lacking trust. This will show everyone that we do not trust in the compassion of the Creator.

Naturally, we must underline the fact that the judgment is incisive and frightening. Nobody can consider themselves innocent, for who could make such a claim before the King of kings? As King David said: "Do not enter into strict judgment with Your servant, for no living being can be vindicated before You" (Tehillim 143:2) and "My flesh trembles from dread of You, and I fear Your judgments" (ibid. 119:120). Now if King David – G-d's anointed one, the beloved singer of Israel, who said of himself, "My heart shudders within me" (Tehillim 55:5) – so feared the judgment, then what can we say, we who are so insignificant? If fire has descended upon the cedars, what can the weeds do? It is clear that there is reason for fear! Before the terrifying day arrives, the great men of Israel weep day and night during the month of Elul as they repent of their deeds. All this is among a person's duties before Rosh Hashanah, to do complete teshuvah, to improve his conduct by worrying and regretting his misdeeds, and to confess them and commit himself to future improvements, as Rabbeinu Yona explains at length in his book Sha'arei Teshuvah. However on Rosh Hashanah, when the time for judgment has arrived, we can do nothing more because we have already done all that we could through repentance and improving our deeds. At that point we must trust in Hashem, and because of this trust we will rejoice in being declared innocent, "for the joy of Hashem is your strength."

Time for Change

It is written, “From the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water” (Devarim 29:10).

By way of allusion, Rabbi Yehudah Moelem Shlita explains these words with a statement from our Sages, namely that Av 15 was a holiday for Israel, since on that day people stopped cutting wood for the Altar. In fact from that day on, the sun was no longer strong enough to dry wood, meaning that it was possible for worms to make their way into the wood, making it unusable for the Altar. Rav Menassi adds that from that point on, since the nights become longer during the winter months, whoever adds to his Torah study, Heaven increases his days. Conversely, whoever does not add to his Torah study will die before his time.

Hence the verse is saying: “From the hewer of your wood” – which is Av 15; “to the drawer of your water” – meaning until Hoshanah Rabba, when we draw water during the festival, we are standing before Hashem. Until that point, a person can still positively affect the decision rendered in his regards. He can do this by taking upon himself the yoke of the Torah without losing his precious time in useless pursuits, especially during the long winter nights. However if “Hoshanah Rabba” has already come, and yet a person has not taken it upon himself to do good and change his ways, then he truly needs a great deal of compassion in order to tilt the balance in his favor.

– Devar Yosef

Why Twice?

It is written, “You will return to Hashem your G-d” (Devarim 30:2).

The Sages have said, “If one says, ‘I will sin and repent, sin and repent,’ he will not be given any opportunity to repent” (Yoma 85b). Why did the Sages feel the need to repeat the expression “sin and repent”?

Here the book *Prinei Kedem* notes that some commentators state that one of the 613 mitzvot is the mitzvah of teshuvah, as we read in this week’s parsha: “You will return to Hashem your G-d.” Now it is impossible to fulfill the mitzvah of teshuvah without having sinned beforehand. Hence a person must have committed a sin before fulfilling the mitzvah of teshuvah.

Who does this pertain to? To someone who says, “I will sin and repent,” meaning that he sinned once in order to fulfill the mitzvah of teshuvah. However if he repeats his transgression and sins again, he is no longer allowed to repent.

Through the Blessing

It is written, “When all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse that I have presented before you...” (Devarim 30:1).

Since only curses and admonishment lead to repentance, why does the verse mention “the blessing”?

The author of *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* explains this according to the Baal Shem Tov, who used a parable to interpret the verse, “The G-d of vengeance, Hashem, the G-d of vengeance, appeared” (Tehillim 94:1): There was once a peasant who rebelled against the king and publicly ridiculed him. The king thought, “If I act like every other king, I will be cruel and punish the rebel. Yet what benefit will I get by doing this? No, I will not condemn him to death. On the contrary, I will turn him into one of my ministers.” That is precisely what the king did, gradually elevating this peasant from a lowly rank to a prominent position. He therefore saw the glory of the king and the magnitude of his generosity, and his heart broke within him for having rebelled against such a compassionate ruler. The

higher in rank that the king raised him, and the more good the king did for him, the more depressed he became upon recalling how he had ridiculed such a great and generous king.

This is the meaning of, “The G-d of vengeance, Hashem, the G-d of vengeance, appeared.” When the G-d of vengeance reveals Himself through His attribute of mercy, it is the greatest kind of “vengeance,” and there is nothing worse for a rebel. Hence the verse mentions a blessing, for through it a person arrives at teshuvah.

Distress Will Vanish

It is written, “Many evils and distresses shall befall them. They will say on that day, ‘Have these evils not come upon us because G-d is not in our midst?’” (Devarim 31:17).

The gaon Rabbi Elazar Menachem Shach Zatzal, the Rosh Yeshiva of Ponevezh, notes that the verse begins with “many evils and distresses,” but ends with just “evils,” without any mention of distresses.

He gives a wonderful explanation for this in his book *Avi Ezri*: The term raot (“evils”) designates actual evil, whereas the term tzarot (“distresses”) signifies the depression that a person experiences when his situation becomes serious, to the point that his heart may break and his world becomes bleak, this being in addition to the actual evils he experiences. This will happen when a person lacks faith and does not trust in G-d, in which case he becomes completely heartbroken.

Yet when someone fears Hashem in his heart and believes in His providence, “evils” are not evil, and nothing can depress him. As King David said, “Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me” (Tehillim 23:4). In all, he will find solace and hope in Hashem, and his strength will be renewed.

Therefore once Hashem has sent evils to atone for sin, everyone will realize that this has happened “because G-d is not in our midst.” At that point “distresses” will vanish, for people will know why such evils have come upon them. That is why people said, “Have these evils not come upon us?”

The Footsteps of Mashiach

It is written, “When many evils and distresses have befallen them” (Devarim 31:21).

The Maggid of Dubno states that towards evening, as the peddler of goods stands in the marketplace with his baskets in hand, and most of his products are already sold, he wants to return home quickly. He therefore takes his remaining pears, prunes, and other products, and mixes them together in one basket and sells them at half price, for he wants to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

Hence the Torah states, “When many evils and distresses have befallen them” – when you see a combination of various ills descending upon Israel, it signifies that all the “products” are almost gone, and that we have reached the remainder, the “footsteps of Mashiach,” meaning that he will soon arrive.

Moshe’s Sefer Torah

It is written, “When Moshe finished writing the words of this Torah into a book...” (Devarim 31:24).

In his book *Eden MiKedem*, Rabbi Raphael Moshe Elbaz Zatzal cites the words of the Midrash: When Moshe finished writing the Sefer Torah on the day of his death, the angel Gabriel descended from Heaven and took hold of it. He then brought this Sefer Torah to Heaven in order to proclaim the greatness of Moshe. The tzaddikim in Heaven read from this Sefer Torah on Shabbat, the holidays, Mondays, and Thursdays.

Forgiveness that Led to Children

Among the chassidim of the Maggid of Koznitz was Reb Yosef, who felt great anguish over the fact that he was still childless. Thus every month he would go to his Rav and implore him for a blessing. However the Maggid seemed to pay no attention to these requests, or he would reject them with some obscure remark.

The wife of Reb Yosef, without tiring, constantly pressured her husband into obtaining a blessing from his Rav, until he finally gave him one. Indeed, one day he stood before his Rav and said: "My holy teacher and Rav, I will not move from here until I receive your blessing!"

As the Maggid of Koznitz began to think, a very serious look appeared on his face, and he finally said: "If you agree to give up all your money, I will give you a blessing to have children."

The chassid froze, his words stopping before they could leave his mouth. He felt that he could not make such a serious decision by himself, and therefore he returned home to seek his wife's advice. She immediately agreed to the condition stipulated by the Maggid, and so the chassid returned to Koznitz and told his Rav that they were both ready for a life of poverty and want, if only they could have children in exchange. "In that case you must go see the Chozeh of Lublin," the Maggid of Koznitz instructed him, "and do everything that he tells you."

Reb Yosef followed his Rav's instructions and left for Lublin. When he met the Chozeh, he explained to him the reason for his visit, as well as the person who had sent him. "Remain here with me until Hashem clarifies things for me," the Chozeh said to him.

One day the Chozeh summoned him and said, "When you were much younger, you were engaged to a young woman from your town, but afterwards you broke off the engagement and brought shame to the girl. You never bothered to ask her for forgiveness, which is why you cannot have children. Until she forgives you, you will not have any children! Therefore go to the great trade fair at Balta, where you will find your former fiancée, and ask her for forgiveness."

Reb Yosef was stunned. Indeed, in his youth he had been engaged to Esther Shifra, a young woman from a good family. However when he grew older and reached the age of marriage, he agreed to another shidduch. He never bothered, either before his wedding or after, to ask the young woman to forgive him for what he had done.

Reb Yosef left for Balta. On the way, he asked everyone he met if they knew a woman by the name of Esther Shifra from such-and-such a town. He also inquired about her at the trade fair itself, but his search led nowhere.

Three days before the fair ended, as all the merchants were preparing to head back home, Reb Yosef was walking along the streets of the city, confused and lost. All of a sudden a heavy rain began to fall. He sought shelter in one of the nearby stores, and among the people crowding around him was a young woman. Out of modesty, he moved away from her. When the woman saw him, she got upset and shouted in front of everyone: "Look at this man! He rejected me when I was young, and even today he doesn't want to stand next to me!"

When Reb Yosef heard these words, he looked at the woman and immediately recognized his former fiancée. He then addressed her, begging her for forgiveness. He said that he had only traveled this far, all the way to Balta, in order to ask her for forgiveness. As he spoke, he burst into a torrent of tears that testified to his sincerity.

"I am ready to forgive you," said the woman, "but on one condition only." Reb Yosef nodded his head in agreement. "If I can do it, then I'll agree to any condition you set," he said to her.

"Very well," said the woman. "Go to Soblak, where my brother lives. He's very poor and in need of many things. If you give him 200 gold coins for his daughter's dowry, I will forgive you for the harm that you did to me when we were engaged."

Reb Yosef began to think, and he realized that if he sold all his possessions and added whatever cash he had, he could come up with 200 gold coins. He therefore agreed to her condition and returned home. When he had 200 gold coins in hand, he left for Soblak.

He looked for the woman's brother, and eventually found him at his home, wretched and depressed. "The day of my daughter's wedding is approaching, and I don't have a penny," he told Reb Yosef.

Reb Yosef said to him, "Here are 200 gold coins to pay for all the wedding expenses. You can celebrate like a dignitary!" He then handed him a large sack of money. When the man opened it, he looked at the gold coins and then back at Reb Yosef, but couldn't believe it. "Who are you, and what is the meaning of this gift?" he asked in astonishment.

"You have nothing to worry about," Reb Yosef assured him. "The money comes from a valid source and is completely legitimate. I was told by your sister, Esther Shifra, to give it to you. You see, I was engaged to your sister when I was young, but I broke off the engagement to marry another woman. A few days ago, I met her and asked her for forgiveness, and she told me to give you 200 gold coins as a condition to forgive me."

The brother's facial expression changed to one of complete shock. He looked at Reb Yosef as if he were insane. "Have you come here to make fun of me? It's already been 15 years that my sister passed away! She died here in Soblak when she was young, and I buried her myself!"

Reb Yosef's entire body began to shake. After he managed to calm down a little, he told the brother everything that had happened to him, beginning with the Maggid of Koznitz and then with the Chozeh of Lublin. Finally, he described the woman he met in Balta. All that remained was for the man to confirm that it was his sister, Esther Shifra, her and no one else!

Less than a year later, Reb Yosef and his wife had a child. In the years that followed, they had other children and grandchildren, all of whom walked in the ways of Torah.

In the Light of the Parsha

The Torah is a Defense Against the Evil Inclination

It is written, "Return, O Israel, towards Hashem your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity. Take words with you and return to Hashem" (Hosea 14:2-3). Why does the verse first say ad Hashem ("towards Hashem") but then says el Hashem ("to Hashem")? Furthermore, what is the meaning of the phrase: "Take words with you"? According to what our Sages have said (Sifrei, Devarim 306), these "words" are words of Torah, as it is written: "These words Hashem spoke to your entire assembly" (Devarim 5:19). The verse means that even if a person repents of his evil deeds, this repentance does not constitute true teshuvah until he begins learning Torah without repeating his sins. One without the other is impossible, for if a person learns Torah without repenting of his sins, he will die without doing teshuvah. And if he repents of his sins without learning Torah, he will eventually return to his sins because nothing protects from sin as much as words of Torah.

This is why the prophet describes how the mitzvah of teshuvah must take place. At first the sinner must stop sinning and regret his sins. This is what constitutes, "Return, O Israel, towards Hashem" – towards Him without having actually reached Him. In other words, it is not yet complete teshuvah. When is his teshuvah complete? When he takes words with him, these being words of Torah. At that point he returns to Hashem, for he is promised that he will never return to his sins when he learns Torah. The Torah is a defense against the evil inclination.

We may therefore say that the essence of teshuvah consists of learning Torah. In fact a person who repents but does not learn Torah may commit many transgressions. One who never learns Torah is not familiar with its laws, which is why he must immediately start learning after doing teshuvah, in order to know what is permitted and what is forbidden. In the Shulchan Aruch we find, "Those who are vigilant begin...as soon as Yom Kippur ends, in order to proceed from one mitzvah to another" (Rema, Orach Chaim 624:5). Since they have repented on Yom Kippur, they immediately go and learn Torah so as not to sin again.

All Goes According to the Seal

The famous teaching of the Sages, according to which “all goes according to the seal” (Berachot 12a), stands with all its strength and power in regards to the mitzvah of teshuvah. Even if a Jew has sinned during all his days on earth, yet before dying he repents and regrets his sins, doing complete teshuvah, his teshuvah is accepted before G-d.

The same applies to the judgment that takes place at the end of the year, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. When a person rouses himself to examine his deeds on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, committing himself to improving his ways and doing teshuvah, he rectifies the entire year retroactively. The proper attitude that he cultivates in himself at the end of the year allows him to elevate all the deeds which he committed throughout the past year, for good and for blessing.

On the verse, “For had we not delayed, by now we could have returned twice” (Bereshith 43:10), the author of Ketzei HaMateh states that the term lulei (“had we not”) is formed by the same letters as Elul. In other words, we may be among those who delay in repenting during Elul, the month of mercy and selichot. However the term ata (“now”) is formed by the initials of erev techilat hashanah (“eve of the start of the year”). This means that on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, “we could have returned twice” – we can do a double teshuvah (“return”).

I Absolve You of Everything

The Tur in Orach Chaim (581) states that the custom among Ashkenazim is to fast on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. As a source for this custom, he cites the following words from the Midrash (Tanchuma, Parsha Emor):

This is like a province whose inhabitants owed taxes to the king. The king sent emissaries to collect these taxes, but the people did not pay them, and so they owed an enormous amount. This happened not just once, but twice.

What did the king do? He said to his entourage, “We shall pay them a visit.” When they were within ten miles of the province, its inhabitants heard of the king’s arrival. What did they do? Their nobles went out to meet the king.

He asked them, “Who are you?” They replied, “We are the inhabitants of the province to which you sent emissaries to collect taxes.” He told them, “And what do you want?” They replied, “We beg you, have mercy on us, for we have no money to pay these taxes.” He said to them, “I will absolve a third of the debt for you.”

As the king came within five miles of the province, the middle class among the people met him. He asked them, “Who are you?” They replied, “We are the inhabitants of the province to which you sent emissaries to collect taxes. We do not have the means to meet this obligation, and we implore you to show us mercy.” He said to them, “I have already absolved a third of the debt, and I will absolve another third for you as well.”

When the king finally reached the province, all the people came out to meet him, both young and old. He said to them, “What do you want?” They replied, “Your Majesty, we cannot pay you what we owe.” He said to them, “I have already absolved a third of this debt, followed by second third. I will now absolve the entire debt for you. However from now on, we shall begin a new account.”

This king is the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. The inhabitants of the province are the Children of Israel, who accumulate sins throughout the year. What does the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He says to them, “Repent!” What do they do? On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the great figures among the generation fast, and the Holy One, blessed

be He, absolves them of a third of their sins. From Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, a few among them fast, and the Holy One, blessed be He, absolves another third of their sins. On Yom Kippur, all the Children of Israel fast and ask for mercy – men, women, and children – and the Holy One, blessed be He, absolves them of all their sins.

The Chayei Adam gives another reason for this custom: The eve of Rosh Hashanah is the final day of the year, and by tradition the Sages know that one who repents for one day in the year is considered to have repented for the entire year. Hence they instituted that everyone should fast on that day (Chayei Adam 138).

In our time, the custom among Ashkenaz communities that follow the Rema is to fulfill their obligation with a mitzvah meal, such as at a siyum, a Brit Milah, or a similar occasion, as mentioned in the book Peninei Rabbeinu HaKehilot Yaakov.

Rabbi Yochanan Fasted

Another custom is cited by the Beit Yosef in the name of HaGaot Maimoniot:

“Some people have the custom of not fasting on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, so as not to imitate the nations (who usually fast on their holidays). However in Pesikta DeRav Kahana, we find the mitzvah to fast on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, and this is mentioned in the Yerushalmi. Rabbi Yochanan fasted on the eve of every Rosh Hashanah. This is a proof for this custom.”

The custom of not fasting on the eve of Rosh Hashanah is mentioned by other Acharonim. Here we shall only cite what the Maharal states: “It is a custom throughout the Diaspora for young women to eat before sunrise on Rosh Hashanah.” The book Darchei Moshe adds, “I have seen many scrupulous people who eat a little in order to also follow the words of HaGaot Maimoniot, according to which some avoid fasting in order not to imitate non-Jews, which is why they eat a little before sunrise.”

Since according to Kabbalah it is better to abstain from eating before sunrise, the book Sha’arei Teshuvah states that the custom is not to eat, but to drink some tea or coffee.

Through Their Merit

In his book Ben Ish Hai (Parsha Nitzavim), Rabbi Yosef Haim also notes some specific customs for the eve of Rosh Hashanah, in addition to the custom of fasting. As he states, “It is good for everyone to follow the custom of this fast, except those who are very feeble, the elderly, and children.”

In the context of the custom mentioned by the Rema, “On the eve of Rosh Hashanah people usually visit graves and present their supplications there,” he warns: “One must not address the dead, but should pray to Hashem for mercy through their merit.”

Likewise we have the custom of giving a sizeable amount of tzedakah on the eve of Rosh Hashanah to the poor and those who study Torah, basing ourselves on the verse: “Charity saves from death” (Mishlei 10:2).

Guard Your Tongue!

Talebearing

One who goes around talking about another person violates a prohibition, as it is written: “You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people” (Vayikra 19:16). This is a grave sin, leading to the death of many Jews. That is why we find in the very same verse: “You shall not stand aside while your fellow’s blood is shed.” We learn this from the talebearing of Doeg the Edomite, which led to the death of all the residents of Nob, the city of the kohanim.