

A Model of Teshuvah - A Story for RH EVE 5783

By Rabbi Michael Schwab

With the approach of Rosh Hashanah, when we close the past year and welcome the new, what better time for reflecting on the deeds we performed so that we can learn, grow and become better versions of ourselves in the year to come. Each one of us, of course, will do such an audit in our own personal way. Yet, there is something we can all learn from the story of Moshe the Innkeeper, who employed a unique method of accounting for his deeds.

As the story goes, the great Hasidic master, the Baal Shem Tov, was once asked by his students how best to prepare for the High Holidays. In response, he sent them to observe a simple innkeeper, Moshe. While surprised, the students didn't question their master and took a room in Moshe's inn and waited to discover the answer to their question. At midnight before Rosh Hashanah they heard Moshe rustling about in the front room. They peeked out and saw Moshe taking down two large notebooks from a high shelf. He sat down on a small stool, lit a candle, and began reading from one notebook.

The notebook was a diary of all the misdeeds and transgressions the innkeeper had committed in the course of the year; he had scrupulously recorded the date, time and circumstance of each. His "sins", though, were quite benign — a word of gossip one day, oversleeping the time for prayer on another, neglecting to

give his daily coin to tzedakah on a third — but by the time Moshe had read through the first few pages, his face was bathed in tears. For more than an hour Moshe read and wept, reviewing every sin until the last page had been turned.

He then opened up the second notebook. This, too, was a diary — of all the troubles and misfortunes that had befallen him in the course of the year. On this day Moshe was beaten by a gang of peasants, on that day his child fell ill; once, in the dead of winter, the family had almost frozen for several nights for lack of firewood; another time their cow had died, and there was no milk until enough pennies had been saved to buy another.

When he had finished reading the second notebook, the tavern keeper lifted his eyes heavenward and said: “So you see, dear Father in Heaven, I have sinned against You. Last year I repented and promised to fulfill Your commandments, but I repeatedly succumbed to my evil inclination. For that I am truly sorry. But last year I also prayed and begged You for a year of health and prosperity, and I trusted in You that it would indeed be this way. Dear Father, today is the eve of Rosh Hashanah, when everyone forgives and is forgiven. Let us put the past behind us. I didn’t always do what was asked of me and You didn’t always do what was asked of You. I forgive you and you forgive me, and we’ll call it even.”

Hutzpadik, for sure. However, it was none other than the Baal Shem Tov who asserted that Mosheh was a *model* of teshuvah. For Mosheh’s teshuvah, his

review of his own deeds, was sincere, thorough and heart-felt. And, as well, his attitude *toward* Gd took on the same forgiving tone he sought *from* God. On the Eve of Rosh Hashanah, with the ten days of repentance looming before us, we often struggle to approach these days with the appropriate awe, seriousness and respect needed to accomplish their lofty goals. What shall we do to achieve the atonement we hope to secure by the end of Yom Kippur? What shall we do to renew ourselves so that this year can be better than the last? Filled with hope and not resentment? Anticipation and optimism, not dread and worry?

According to the story, we must become like Mosheh the innkeeper. We must model our teshuvah, our approach, off of his. So what has he come to teach us?

The first lesson is the more conventional one. This teaching relates to Moshe's first notebook. In it he listed each offense, with date, time, context and sin. And as he recited his misdeeds he shed tears of regret. Many of us know that during these ten days of repentance we are to seek the forgiveness of those we have offended. I personally know it is the High Holiday season when I hear the refrain from so many of our mouths, "If there is anything I have done to hurt or offend you this year, please forgive me". I say this, many in my family say this, and so do many of you. And don't get me wrong, I love that so many of us say these words and seek each other's forgiveness during this time. I am so touched by how much

we all wish to partake in the act of *teshuvah*, and that we wish to heal the hurt we have caused. Our intent to do teshuvah and our willingness to act on that intent is critical to achieving atonement.

But Mosheh teaches us that *ideal* teshuvah goes deeper. Ideal teshuvah is even more difficult than the recitation of a single phrase, however sincerely it is stated. For ideal teshuvah requires us to be specific, requires us to be clear in our apology, requires us to take full responsibility for the actual behaviors we have committed, and it demands that we feel the true remorse of one who has harmed another. For example, it is much harder for me to say to my mother, I am sorry that before Passover when we were on the phone I was too quick to get off and was unnecessarily rude. And I am sorry for that Friday when I missed our weekly call, texted that I would call you back and never did. Or I am sorry for last month when I lost my temper while we were discussing X issue. It is hard to be vulnerable, hard to bring up one's own faults and hard to admit to people we love what we have done wrong. But that is precisely what next-level teshuvah looks like. We own our mistakes by naming them, taking responsibility for them, expressing our deep regret for them and by pledging and planning not to repeat the misdeed.

And teshuvah done in this manner produces two critical results, one for the offended and one for the offender. First, Teshuvah done like Mosheh makes the apology more sincere and authentic, which leads to actually repairing the damage

done to the relationship *caused* by the offense. A general “If I did anything to you” apology is a nice gesture and could be appropriate for a statement made in public, or to a *group* of people (though parenthetically I would get rid of the word “if” regardless). However, when you actually *have* hurt someone in a specific manner, and you are asking that individual for forgiveness, a general sweeping apology is usually not effective in repairing the damage done, or actually improving the relationship. Yet, when a true, sincere, specific apology in which the penitent owns their behaviors, is given, often the offended *can* truly forgive. For they have confidence that the offender understands the misdeed committed, is sincerely sorry and will attempt not to do it again. As Mosheh demonstrated, powerful and sincere teshuvah leads to the actual forgiveness we are seeking during these sacred days.

A second benefit of participating in teshuvah like Mosheh, by being specific and by owning our mistakes, is that we learn from them, and therefore improve our *own* character. Just as in the business world, where we are counseled as supervisors not to punish mistakes, but to turn them into learning opportunities so employees can grow and perform better in the future, so too with our mistakes in our personal lives. If we have hurt someone, when we apologize in the manner about which I just spoke, by recalling the circumstances, being specific about the wrong, and owning the error, we learn from it. And through such learning, we improve ourselves, we grow and we become better relatives, friends and people.

Teshuvah not only heals the person we hurt, and not only repairs the relationships damaged by our actions, but also improves ourselves. Without teshuvah there is no growth, without teshuvah it is much harder to move forward. Teshuvah is the force that renews us, our relationships and our communities each year and everytime we take this process seriously.

And if that was not enough Mosheh teaches us, as well, the power of *forgiveness*. What *hutzpah* indeed for Mosheh to presume to forgive Gd, for to forgive Gd is to imply that Gd has erred, or maybe even sinned! How could the Baal Shem Tov have condoned such behavior?! But it is precisely because it is so outlandish that Mosheh's actions are so instructive. For if Gd can be called to account and can be forgiven, so too can any of us be called to account and also be forgiven. Anger and resentment can fill so much of our lives if we let it, anger at Gd and anger at others. But if we name the wrong, we can move past it. Gd forgives us for our imperfections and we forgive Gd for the imperfect world in which we live. We *seek* forgiveness from others when we have done wrong because we believe that *we* can do better. And we *grant* forgiveness to others, believing that they too can improve. This doesn't always work perfectly, but this is the ideal for which we strive. For many, it takes years to right a wrong, improve on a fault or to become fully ready to admit a wrong. But this is the path we seek to find and to walk during these holy days.

So as Rosh Hashanah begins, think of Mosheh and his notebooks, his tears and his forgiveness. Let us do our best to deepen our *teshuvah* and to open our hearts to the *teshuvah* of others. And in so doing let us renew ourselves, each other and the world. *Shanah tovah!*

The Waiting King

HaMelech (“the King”) is an oft-occurring word in the Rosh Hashanah prayers, whose dominant theme is our coronation of G-d as king of the universe and submission to His sovereignty. Indeed, this is the first word chanted by the cantor on Rosh Hashanah morning, as he opens the Shacharit prayers with an awe-inspiring melody that climaxes with a sonorous Ha-Me-lech!

One Rosh Hashanah morning, the great Chassidic master Rabbi Aaron of Karlin fainted when he came to the word HaMelech. He later explained that he recalled the Talmudic passage^[1] that describes Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai’s encounter with Vespasian. Rabbi Yochanan had himself smuggled out of the besieged city of Jerusalem to plead with the Roman general to spare the Torah center of Yavneh. When Rabbi Yochanan entered Vespasian’s tent, he addressed him as “Your Majesty.”

“You are deserving of death on two accounts,” said Vespasian. “First of all, I am not the king, only His Majesty’s general.^[2] Secondly, if I am indeed king, why did you not come to me until now?”

“I thought to myself,” said the Rebbe of Karlin, “if we address the Almighty as ‘King,’ does this not invite the question, ‘If I am indeed your king, why did you not come to me until now?’ What can we answer to that?”

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And I pleaded with YHVH at that time, saying, ‘My Master, YHVH, You Yourself have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your powerful hand, for what god is there in the heavens and on the earth who could do like Your deeds and like Your might? Let me, pray, cross over that I may see the goodly land which is across the Jordan, this goodly high country and the Lebanon.

([Deuteronomy 3:24–25](#))

In the course of his plea, Moses recollects God’s great and unparalleled strength, which God has only begun to reveal. A plain-sense reading of these verses would understand the strength in question as something like physical might and dominance – the kind of physical might and dominance that was on display in God’s liberation of Israel from Egypt. Indeed, throughout the book of Deuteronomy the “powerful hand” [yadkha ha-hazakah] of God is tied to the moment of the exodus and the miraculous, thundering power with which God punished the Egyptians and saved Israel. This point also helps make sense of the connection between Moses’s reference to God’s strength and his prayer for entrance into the land: He has only just begun to bear witness to God’s might and strength through the punishment of Egypt and the conquest of the lands east of the Jordan. Thus, he prays for the allowance to see more of this might and

strength as the people enter the land and conquer its inhabitants with the aid of God's strong arm.

Yet for the sages, the strength at stake in this passage is not that of overpowering might but overpowering compassion manifested in forgiveness and generosity.

The midrash reads as follows:

Another interpretation: You have begun [hahilota] ([Deuteronomy 3:24](#)) – You have profaned [hehaltah] the vow. You wrote in the Torah, Whoever sacrifices to a god [other than YHVH alone shall be proscribed] ([Exodus 22:19](#)), and your children worshipped foreign worship, and I requested for them compassion and you forgave – You have broken the vow.

Your greatness ([Deuteronomy 3:24](#)) – this is the quality of your goodness, as it is said, And now, let the strength of my lord be great ([Numbers 14:17](#)).

And your hand ([Deuteronomy 3:24](#)) – this is your right hand, which is extended to all those who come through the world, as it is said, your right hand, YHVH, glorious in strength ([Exodus 15:6](#)), and it says, but your right hand, your arm, and the glow of your face ([Psalms 44:4](#)), and it says, By Myself have I sworn, from My mouth has issued righteousness [tzedakah], a word that shall not turn back ([Isaiah 45:23](#)).

The powerful ([Deuteronomy 3:24](#)) – For you subdue [kovesh] with compassion your quality of judgment, as it is said, Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression ([Micah 7:18](#)), and it says, He will return, he will have compassion on us, he will subdue [yikhbosh] our sins, You will keep faith with Jacob ([Micah 7:19–20](#)).

For what god is there in the heavens and on the earth ([Deuteronomy 3:24](#)) – For unlike the way of flesh and blood is the way of the Omnipresent. The way of flesh and blood: the one greater than his friend nullifies the decree of his friend, but you – who can withhold you [from doing as you please]? And so it says, He is one, who can hold him back? ([Job 23:13](#)). R. Yehudah b. Bava says: A parable – to one who has been consigned to the documents of the kingdom. Even were he to give a lot of money, it cannot be overturned. But you say, “Do teshuvah, and I will accept [it/you], as it is said, I wipe away your sins like a cloud, your transgressions like mist ([Isaiah 44:22](#)).

The text begins with a playful revocalization of Moses’s opening words that transforms “You have begun [hahilota]” into “You have broken [hehalta] the vow.” In so doing, the sages shift our attention from the scene of the exodus suggested by the plain sense of the verses to the scene of the golden calf, in which God broke His vow to punish those who worship other gods. In that moment of Israel’s profound failure, God’s strength manifested itself not through physical might but through forgiveness and compassion. What’s more,

in speaking of God breaking the vow, the text implicitly rejects another pervasive conception of divine power and strength – namely, that divine power rests in stern and difficult judgment. It is not uncommon to hear compassion and forgiveness referred to as a kind of febleness in contrast to the strength at work in administering justice even when it is difficult or tragic. The sages carefully avoid such a perspective and assert that divine strength lies not in holding to a vow even when it is challenging but in breaking a vow for the sake of compassion and forgiveness.

The themes introduced in this first part of the midrash are explored as the midrash continues. First, God’s greatness is translated into God’s goodness through the invocation of a verse tied to another scene of divine forgiveness and compassion – namely, the scene in the aftermath of the sin of the spies. Second, the hand of God, rather than extended against the enemies of Israel in a gesture of physical might is extended in a gesture of compassionate generosity. Indeed, verses tying the hand of God to the destruction and conquest of Egypt and other nations are reread in light of this rabbinic commitment to rendering divine strength as compassion. Third, God’s power is understood as His compassion overcoming and subduing His quality of judgment. In the final piece of the midrash, we are reminded that God, unlike earthly kings, can break vows and overturn decrees in displays of compassionate forgiveness. Furthermore, when God does vow, it is to bind Himself in commitment to the kindness of tzedakah, as noted in the verse from Isaiah quoted by the midrash: “By Myself have I

sworn, from My mouth has issued righteousness [tzedakah], a word that shall not turn back” (Isaiah 45:23). There is none who can withhold or nullify His decrees of compassion, generosity, forgiveness, and kindness.

God, Anger, and Judgment: The Divine Struggle to be Compassionate

Thus, what constitutes divine strength, what makes God unique and incomparable, is a capacity for compassion. This compassion sits in an uncomfortable tension with the rage that lights God against the enemies of Israel and the stern judgment that calls for unmitigated punishment. Yet it is precisely this tension that marks divine compassion as a strength. For it is only in mightily subduing a predilection for unmitigated judgment that God’s compassion emerges victorious. This is the meaning of the striking phrase found in our midrash, “For you subdue [kovesh] with compassion your quality of judgment.” There is struggle and conquest involved in the victory of compassion over divine judgment. The phrase calls to mind a teaching found in [Mishnah Avot 4:1](#): “Ben Zoma says... Who is mighty? The one who subdues [kovesh] his impulse, as it is said, one slow to anger is better than a mighty person and one who rules his spirit than the conqueror of a city ([Proverbs 15:16](#)).” Just as human might emerges in the difficult and effortful conquest of our impulse toward wickedness, divine might emerges in the difficult and effortful conquest of God’s impulse toward judgment and anger.

This notion that God is locked in a fierce struggle with His tendency toward judgment and anger and is striving mightily to act compassionately with His creatures comes to the fore in a beautiful text from [Berakhot 7a](#):

R. Yoḥanan said in the name of R. Yosi: From where [do we know] that the Holy Blessed One prays? As it is said, I will bring them to the mount of my sacredness, and let them rejoice in the house of my prayer ([Isaiah 56:7](#)) – ‘their prayer’ is not said, rather my prayer. From here [we know] that the Holy Blessed One prays. What does he pray? R. Zutra b. Tuviah said that Rav said: May it be my will that my compassion subdue my anger, and my compassion prevail over my [other] qualities, and I will behave with my children with my quality of compassion, and I will enter before them short of the line of the law.

Critically, God’s will for compassion rather than anger or judgment is couched in the language of prayer. To pray for something is in some ways to admit that achieving that something lies beyond the ken of one’s intentional capabilities. There is a measure of hope in prayer that signals a desire that may go unfulfilled. In this case, God’s prayer for compassion signals the degree to which victory against judgment and anger is not a forgone conclusion and the prevailing of compassion is something that will require effort and struggle.

This struggle is powerfully dramatized by the sages in a number of texts that reimagine God's anger and judgment as independent personified characters. The retributive aspects of God's nature become angels who can preclude Him from enacting His will and are often at cross-purposes with this compassionate God. Thus, in the case of divine anger we encounter the following passage from Yerushalmi [Ta'anit 2:1](#):

R. Levi said: What is the meaning of erekh 'apayim? Distancing anger. [This is compared] to a king who had two tough legions. The king said, "If [the legions] dwell with me in the province, when the citizens of the province anger me, [the legions] will make a stand against [the citizens]. Instead, I will send them off a ways away so that if the citizens of the province anger me, before I have a chance to send after [the legions], the citizens of the province will appease me and I will accept their appeasement." Similarly, the Holy Blessed One said, "Afi and Hemah are angels of devastation. I will send them a ways away so that if Israel angers me, before I have chance to send for them and bring them, Israel will do teshuvah and I will accept their teshuvah." This is that which is written, They come from a distant land, from the edge of the sky [YHVH and the weapons of his wrath—to ravage all the earth] ([Isaiah 13:5](#)). R. Yitzhak said: And what's more, he locked the door on them. This is that which is written, YHVH has opened his armory and brought out the weapons of his wrath ([Jeremiah 50:25](#)) ...

Af and hemah, terms often used in the Bible to describe God's anger, are here transformed into "angels of devastation" that operate almost independently of God. In the mashal, they are compared to two military legions who would loose devastation on the citizenry at the slightest sign of the king's anger. It appears almost as though the king would be unable to hold them back from their rampage once they set forth against the people. This frightening independence is confirmed in the nimshal, wherein God sees a need not only to send them far away but also to lock them up. If they are allowed to roam free, who knows what havoc they might wreak. One senses in this text the precariousness of God's relationship with anger and wrath. At the same time, the sages make clear the profound efforts God makes to favor compassion and forgiveness.

Middat hadin, or "the quality of judgment," also becomes an autonomous character in the rabbinic imagination. Thus, in [Pesahim 119a](#) we read:

R. Kahana in the name of R. Yishma'el b. R. Yose said that R. Shim'on b. Lakish in the name of R. Yehudah Nesi'ah said: What is the meaning of that which is written, and they had the hands of a man under their wings ([Ezekiel 1:8](#))? 'His hand' is written. This is the hand of the Holy Blessed One that is spread under the wings of the Ḥayyot [i.e. angels] in order to accept those who do teshuvah from the grips of middat hadin.

In this dramatic scene, God spreads His hand beneath the wings of the angels so as to collect up the remorseful and repentant and protect them from falling into the hands of the less than sympathetic middat hadin. One is given to imagine that were these people to fall into the grips of middat hadin, God would be powerless to retrieve them or at the very least would need to valiantly struggle for their release. In the cosmic drama, middat hadin is God's adversary, attempting to uphold the strict letter of judgment while God vies for the victory of compassion and forgiveness. The sages make this point clear in several texts that situate this struggle at various moments in our mythic-history. Thus, we are told that God constructed a sort of tunnel in the firmament so as to sneak Menasheh – the repentant wicked king of Yehudah – past middat hadin, who would surely have prevented his acceptance in heaven ([Sanhedrin 103a](#)). Similarly, when creating humankind, God disclosed to the ministering angels only that righteous people would emerge from Adam. God chose to conceal the future reality of wicked people, precisely because He was certain that had middat hadin known, it would have prevented the creation of humanity ([Bereishit Rabbah 8:4](#)). Middat hadin was also critical in delaying and precluding the exodus from Egypt. Witnessing the utter depravity of captive Israel who had adopted the customs and practices of the Egyptians, middat hadin could not allow for their liberation. Only on the strength of God's prior commitment and oath to redeem Israel was God able to defeat the uncompromising will of middat hadin ([Vayikra Rabbah 23:2](#)).

These texts are theologically audacious and undoubtedly jarring to ears accustomed to the staid contours of a Maimonidean God. God is a vulnerable, struggling God, fearful of the most dangerous and powerful members of the divine family – anger and judgment – and intent on defeating them through precautionary measures, wily maneuvers, and whatever resources are available. As we briefly alluded to earlier, this picture departs in certain ways from that painted by Sifre Bemidbar and Berakhot. In those texts, the struggle for compassion is rendered internal to God’s person. Judgment and anger and compassion compete for attention in the divine psyche and God struggles mightily for the victory of His more compassionate side. Here, by contrast, judgment and anger are reified and externalized as members of the angelic retinue. It is worth pausing to consider how this impacts the drama. In externalizing anger and judgment, God is rendered wholly and incorruptibly compassionate rather than divided against Himself. This constitutes a certain sacrifice in divine psychological complexity. However, this sacrifice allows for richer imaginative possibilities when it comes to considering how God fights against judgment and anger for the victory of compassion – bolting the door against them, concealing facts from them, tunneling beneath them, etc. I don’t wish to advocate for one of these images to the exclusion of the other. Each of these images captures something about the character of God’s struggle with judgment and anger, and it will only be through the cumulative effect of seeing this struggle in multiple successive perspectives that we will appreciate its full-bodied richness.

“The Day of Judgment”? A Reconsideration

With this consideration of God’s relationship to judgment in mind, we can now turn to consider the day of Rosh Hashanah and how it fits into this broader narrative. In [Vayikra Rabbah 29:3](#), we encounter the following passage:

Yehudah b. Nahmani in the name of R. Shim’on b. Laqish opened: God ascends amidst acclamation [teru’ah]; YHVH, to the blasts of the shofar ([Psalms 47:6](#)). When the Holy Blessed One ascends to sit on the throne of judgement on Rosh Hashanah, he ascends for judgement. This is that which is written, God [Elohim] ascends amidst acclamation [teru’ah]. And once Israel take their shofarot and blow them, immediately YHVH, to the blasts of the shofar. What does the Holy Blessed One do? He rises from the throne of judgement and sits on the throne of compassion, and is filled with compassion for them and transforms the quality of justice into the quality of compassion for them. When? On Rosh Hashanah, in the seventh month on the first of the month.

In the rabbinic imagination, the names of God are to be associated with distinctive traits (see for example, Sifre [Devarim 26](#)). Thus, Elohim signifies God’s quality of judgment while YHVH signifies God’s quality of compassion. Capitalizing on this rabbinic trope, our midrash imagines the shift in divine epithets found in the Psalmic verse to signify a shift in God’s character on the

day of Rosh Hashanah. While God initially ascends the throne of judgment, the blasts of the shofar sounded by Israel move God to abandon the seat of judgment for that of compassion. This idea is one worth examining more closely.

First, this text might push us to reconsider the aptness of yom ha-din or “the day of judgment” as a name for Rosh Hashanah. If we take this text seriously, the day is less one of judgment and more one of the abandonment of judgment for the sake of compassion. It is part and parcel of the story of God’s struggle against the potent force of strict judgment. The day is one on which the singular strength of God is on display, as God succeeds in conquering and subduing God’s quality of judgment with compassion. In a certain sense, we might even take the commandment issued by God for Israel to sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah as a prophylactic measure against middat hadin. God knows that the sound of the shofar’s blast will move Him to remember His deepest commitments, His truest self, and His love and compassion for Israel. For this reason, God assigns this tasks to Israel on the day He has set aside for judgment.

If we wish to deepen our appreciation of Vayikra Rabbah’s claim, we might turn to Maimonides’ articulation of the purpose of the shofar. In Hilkhhot Teshuvah 3:4, Maimonides writes as follows:

Even though the sounding the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a decree of the text, there is a hint for it. That is to say, “Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep and

comatose from your comas, and return in teshuvah and remember your creator. Those who forget the truth through time's hollow things and wile away all their years with hollowness and emptiness that won't be of use and won't save, look to your souls and improve your ways and your deeds. And each one of you, abandon his wicked way and his thoughts, which are not good."

For Maimonides, the shofar is a piercing cry that wakes us from our slumbering attitude. In a world where we find ourselves forgetful of what is important, the sound of the shofar shocks us back into an awareness of our deepest commitments and moves us to abandon the hollow and useless things in life in favor of righteousness. In R. Yitzhak Hutner's rendering of this idea, "the shofar can bring to life the traces and transform something's trace or impression into its embodied fullness" (Pahad Yitzhak, [Rosh Hashanah 20](#)). For both Maimonides and R. Hutner, hearing the shofar is an activity designed for the benefit of human beings. However for Vayikra Rabbah, it would seem that hearing the shofar is something that also benefits God. If the shofar has the capacity to wake us from our slumber and restore vitality to our sedimented commitments, perhaps it has the same capacity to do so for God. Parallel to Maimonides' "Wake up, sleepers" might be the Psalmist's cry: "Rise, why do you sleep, lord?" ([Psalms 44:24](#)). God calls on us to sound the shofar to wake Him from His slumber and transform the trace of reserve compassion into its embodied fullness.

The Sound of the Shofar and the Tragic Costs of Judgment

But what is it about the sound of the shofar that so moves God to abandon judgment and return to His deep and fundamental commitment to compassion and forgiveness? We might find the beginnings of an answer through reflecting on the story of the binding of Isaac and its aftermath, a story we in fact read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. In considering what motivated God to test Abraham with the sacrifice of his child, the late midrashic collection, Yalkut Shim'oni, imagines the following:

Another interpretation: [This is compared] to a king who had a beloved [friend] who was poor. The king said to him, "It is on me to make you wealthy," and he gave him money with which to do business. After a time, he [i.e. the poor friend] entered the palace. They said, "For what reason is this one entering?" The king said to them, "Because he is my faithful beloved [friend]." They said to him, "If so, tell him to return your money." Immediately, the king said to him, "Return to me that which I gave you." He did not withhold, and the members of the palace were embarrassed, and the king swore to grant him more wealth. The Holy Blessed One said to the ministering angels, "Had I listened to you when you said, what is a human being, that you are mindful of him ([Psalms 8:5](#)), could there have been Abraham, who glorifies me in my world?!" Middat ha-din said before the Holy Blessed One, "all of the trials with which you tested him involved his money and property. Try him through his body." He said to him, "He should

sacrifice his son before you.” Immediately, “He [i.e. God] said to him [i.e. Abraham], take your son ([Genesis 22:2](#)). (Yalkut Shim’oni, Vayera)

In the eyes of this midrash, God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was issued at the prodding of middat ha-din. Skeptical of the fortitude and authenticity of Abraham’s commitment to God, middat ha-din asks God to truly test Abraham through his flesh and blood rather than through his material possessions by asking him to sacrifice his son. The story of the binding of Isaac is thus cast as a concession of God to the skepticism of middat ha-din, the quality of judgment. Unobscured by the love God feels toward Abraham, middat ha-din coldly assesses the situation and desires a strict test of Abraham’s righteousness.

This midrash is particularly striking as it evokes and plays with another narrative found in the Biblical canon – namely, the story of God’s test of Job ([Job 1–2](#)). In the beginning of the book of Job, God boasts of Job’s righteousness, prompting the Adversary or ‘ha-satan’ to question the authenticity of Job’s commitment. Like the attendants to the king in the mashal of our passage, the Adversary suggests that robbing Job of the material wealth God has showered upon him will test the strength of Job’s piety. When this fails, the Adversary responds by discounting the previous test as insufficient. A true test of Job’s piety will come when his body and flesh are inflicted rather than merely his wealth. This again is echoed in the comments of middat ha-din, who insists God try Abraham “through his body” [be-gufo]. The implication of this

parallel is hard to ignore. By drawing on the narrative framework of the book of Job, the midrash in Yalkut Shim'oni casts middat ha-din in the role of satanic adversary to God. This text would then continue the trend we have seen of depicting middat ha-din in a tense and difficult struggle with God. Yet remarkably, if middat ha-din is the satanic adversary to God, then its suggestion of binding Isaac to the altar would seem to emerge in a strikingly negative light.

What then is the source of this ambivalence about testing Abraham through the sacrifice of his son? And what does all of this have to do with the sound of the shofar? One possible answer emerges from a midrash that first appears in [Vayikra Rabbah 20:2](#):

He took Isaac his son and led him up mountains and down hills. He took him up on one of the mountains, built an altar, arranged the wood, prepared the altar pile, and took the knife to slay him. Had [God] not called upon him from the heavens and said, Do not reach out your hand ([Genesis 22:12](#)), Isaac would have already been slain. Know that this is so, for Isaac returned to his mother and she said to him, “Where have you been, my son?” And he said to her, “My father took me and led me up mountains and down hills.” And she said, “Woe for the son of a hapless woman! Had it not been for an angel from the heavens, you would have already been slain!” He said to her, “Yes.” At that moment, she uttered six cries, corresponding to the six blasts of the shofar. They said, “she had scarcely finished speaking when she died.” This is that which is written, And

Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her ([Genesis 23:2](#)). Where did he come from? R. Yehudah b. R. Simon said: He came from Mount Moriah.

For this midrash, the binding of Isaac to the altar and his near-sacrifice had tragic consequences in the form of the death of his mother, Sarah. What's more, this midrash explicitly ties the pained cries of Sarah to the piercing sound of the shofar. If we consider this text together with our passage from Yalkut Shim'oni, what emerges is a searing indictment of middat ha-din. Strict judgment leaves casualties of pain, tragedy, and death in its wake, and it is for this reason that it should be seen as an unsympathetic, almost satanic adversary to which God sadly succumbed in asking Abraham to sacrifice his son. When administering strict judgment, one may become so myopically focused on the subject at hand that the unintended and violent consequences of rendering a certain verdict go unnoticed. Middat ha-din fails to note the mothers who suffer pangs of sorrow at the loss of children taken in the name of judgment and justice. Sounding the shofar recalls God to the moment of Sarah's tragic death and awakens God to the reality of middat ha-din's violence and its many casualties. God cannot help but return to Himself, to His deepest commitments, and subdue the impulse toward judgment in the calming waters of compassion and forgiveness.

HH stories:

A parable from Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov:

A King had an only son, the apple of his eye. The King wanted his son to master different fields of knowledge and to experience various cultures, so he sent him to a far-off country, supplied with a generous quantity of silver and gold. Far away from home, the son squandered all the money until he was left completely destitute. In his distress he resolved to return to his father's house and after much difficulty, he managed to arrive at the gate of the courtyard to his father's palace.

In the passage of time, he had actually forgotten the language of his native country, and he was unable to identify himself to the guards. In utter despair he began to cry out in a loud voice, and the King, who recognized the voice of his son, went out to him and brought him into the house, kissing him and hugging him.

The meaning of the parable: The King is G-d. The prince is the Jewish people, who are called "Children of [G-d](#)" ([Deuteronomy 14:1](#)). The King sends a soul down to this world in order to fulfill the Torah and mitzvot. However, the soul becomes very distant and forgets everything to which it was accustomed to above, and in the long exile it forgets even its own "language." So it utters a simple cry to its Father in Heaven. This is the blowing of the *shofar*, a cry from deep within, expressing

regret for the past and determination for the future. This cry elicits G-d's mercies, and He demonstrates His abiding affection for His child and forgives him.

One year, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov said to Rabbi Ze'ev Kitizes, one of his senior disciples: "You will blow the *shofar* for us this Rosh Hashanah. I want you to study all the *kavanot* (Kabbalistic meditations) that pertain to the [shofar](#), so that you should meditate upon them when you do the blowing."

Rabbi Ze'ev applied himself to the task with joy and trepidation: joy over the great privilege that had been accorded him, and trepidation over the immensity of the responsibility. He studied the Kabbalistic writings that discuss the multifaceted significance of the *shofar* and what its sounds achieve on the various levels of reality and in the various chambers of the soul. He also prepared a sheet of paper on which he noted the main points of each *kavanah*, so that he could refer to them when he blew the *shofar*.

Finally, the great moment arrived. It was the morning of [Rosh Hashanah](#), and Rabbi Ze'ev stood on the reading platform in the center of the Baal Shem Tov's synagogue amidst the Torah scrolls, surrounded by a sea of *tallit*-draped bodies. At his table in the southeast corner of the room stood his master, the Baal Shem Tov,

his face aflame. An awed silence filled the room in anticipation of the climax of the day—the piercing blasts and sobs of the *shofar*.

Rabbi Ze'ev reached into his pocket, and his heart froze: the paper had disappeared! He distinctly remembered placing it there that morning, but now it was gone. Furiously, he searched his memory for what he had learned, but his distress over the lost notes seemed to have incapacitated his brain: his mind was a total blank. Tears of frustration filled his eyes. He had disappointed his master, who had entrusted him with this most sacred task. Now he must blow the *shofar* like a simple horn, without any *kavanot*. With a despairing heart, Rabbi Ze'ev blew the litany of sounds required by law and, avoiding his master's eye, resumed his place.

At the conclusion of the day's prayers, the Baal Shem Tov made his way to the corner where Rabbi Ze'ev sat sobbing under his [*tallit*](#). “*Gut Yom Tov, Reb Ze'ev!*” he called. “That was a most extraordinary *shofar*-blowing we heard today!”

“But Rebbe . . . I . . .”

“In the king's palace,” said the Baal Shem Tov, “there are many gates and doors, leading to many halls and chambers. The palace-keepers have great rings holding

many keys, each of which opens a different door. But there is one key that fits all the locks, a master key that opens all the doors.

“The *kavanot* are keys, each unlocking another door in our souls, each accessing another chamber in the supernal worlds. But there is one key that unlocks all doors, that opens up for us the innermost chambers of the divine palace. That master key is a broken heart.”

A Novel Audit