

**A High Holiday Reader**

Days of  
**Awe**  
Volume II  
*Eight Original Essays*



© 2003

**Cincinnati Community Kollel**

2241 Losantiville Avenue • Cincinnati, Ohio 45237-4222

513 631-1118 • [kollel@shul.net](mailto:kollel@shul.net)

Days of Awe Volume I can be found online at <http://kollel.shul.net/Resources/Pubs/elul.pdf>

This booklet contains words of Torah. Please treat it with respect, as you would a prayer book.

Partial funding provided by our friends at



This *Holiday Reader* is dedicated by

**Dr. Sidney Peerless**

in memory of

**Mrs. Miriam Peerless**

**Rabbi & Mrs. Louis Feinberg**

**Mr. Alter & Mrs. Sophia Peerless**

## Honor Roll 5762-63

# Dedication

We are grateful to the members of our Honor Roll, whose support over the past twelve months has continued to make the Kollel a positive force in the community.

## Founders

Mrs. Esther Becker

Mr. and Mrs. Sam Boymel

Mr. and Mrs. Joe Lukens / Neace Lukens Insurance

Rabbi and Mrs. Jacob Lustig

Dr. Sidney Peerless

Mr. & Mrs. Stephen L. Rosedale

Mr. Abbie Spetner / Executive Trading Co.

Mr. & Mrs. Jonathan Spetner / Spetner Associates Insurance

Mr. & Mrs. Ronald Wilhelm

## Builders

Anonymous

Mr. & Mrs. Robert Fisher

Genesis Rehabilitaiton Services

Gordon Food Service

Mr. & Mrs. Paul Heiman

Mr. Jon Hoffheimer

Jewish Federation of Cincinnati

Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati

Mr. & Mrs. Howard Mayers

Dr. & Mrs. Ned Mehlman

Mr. & Mrs. Herman Moskowitz

National Legal Professional Associates

Omnicare Foundation

Torah Umesorah / Wolfson Fund

## **Benefactors**

Rabbi & Mrs. Bernard Moskowitz  
Anonymous  
Mr. & Mrs. Albert Shohet  
Dr. & Mrs. Bruce Younger  
Mr. & Mrs. William Ziv

## **Patrons**

Drs. Doug & Francine Behrman  
Drs. Jay & Melissa Bernstein  
Dr. & Mrs. Eric Bramey  
Stanley M. Chesley  
& the Honorable Susan Dlott  
Mr. & Mrs. William Freedman  
Dr. & Mrs. Herbert Halpern  
Rabbi & Mrs. Nechemiah Kibel  
Anonymous  
Mr. and Mrs. David Mabo  
Marbeh Chaim  
Mellott & Mellott, P. L. L.  
Mr. & Mrs. Gene I. Mesh  
Mr. & Dr. Yaakov Morton  
Mr. & Mrs. Paul Osborne  
Mr. & Mrs. Robert Pransky  
Mr. Harvey Richman  
Dr. Jim Schmidt & Marla Morse  
Rabbi & Mrs. Moshe Schwab  
Mr. & Mrs. Stephen Shapiro  
Anonymous  
Mr. and Mrs. Donald Taplits  
Mr. & Mrs. Yoni Wagschal  
Mr. & Mrs. Egal Ziv

## **Sponsors**

Capt. & Mrs. Edward Abraham  
Mr. & Mrs. Stan Better  
Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Brant  
Suellen Chesley  
Kneseth Israel Congregation  
Donald Martens & Sons  
Ambulance Service  
Mr. & Mrs. Kenneth Flacks  
Mr. & Mrs. Coleman Goldsmith  
Mr. & Mrs. Jack Klein  
Miami University / B'nai Brith  
Hillel Foundation  
Novack Burnbaum & Crystal LLP  
Mr. & Mrs. Leonard Penn  
Mrs. Anita Preis  
Rookwood Properties  
Mr. & Mrs. Robert Rosen  
Rabbi & Mrs. David Spetner  
Standard Textile  
Dr. & Mrs. Raphael Warren  
Mr. & Mrs. Richard Weiland  
Dr. & Mrs. Michael Weinberg  
Rabbi & Mrs. Dov Aharon Wise  
ZA Consulting, L.L.C.  
Rabbi & Mrs. Raffie Zuroff

## **Donors**

Mr. & Mrs. John Acklen  
Mr. & Mrs. Abraham Alper  
Mr. & Mrs. Moshe Bane  
Mr. & Mrs. Richard Basofin  
Rabbi & Mrs. Ely Behar  
Rabbi & Mrs. Baruch Berger  
Dr. David Bienenfeld  
Rabbi & Mrs. Yehudah  
Bienstock  
Congregation B'nai Tzedek  
Mr. & Mrs. O. J. Cohen  
Mr. & Mrs. Sidney Deutch  
Mrs. Amy Diamond  
Mr. & Mrs. Edward Frankel  
Mr. Allan Friedman  
Mr. & Mrs. Michael Ganson  
Dr. & Mrs. Daniel Glassman  
Mr. & Mrs. Shelby Gubin  
Dr. & Mrs. Simon Hakim  
Dr. & Mrs. Moshe Harris  
Dr. & Mrs. Leonard Horwitz  
Ms. Susan Jacobs  
Jewish Community Center  
Rabbi & Mrs. Mayer Kahn  
Mrs. Nancy Klain  
Rabbi & Mrs. Boruch Leff  
Mr. & Mrs. Mark Littman  
Dr. & Mrs. Andrew Loewy  
Mr. & Mrs. Moshe Luchins  
Mr. Edgar Machuca  
Dr. & Mrs. Ernest Meese  
Mr. & Mrs. Joshua Moss  
Rabbi & Mrs. A. D. Motzen  
Mr. & Mrs. Yechiel Nath  
Mr. Yitzchok Neuberger  
Dr. David Paul  
Mr. & Mrs. Herb Pollock  
Mr. & Mrs. Yaakov Rabenstein  
Mr. & Mrs. Daniel Randolph  
Mr. & Mrs. Alter Raubvogel  
Mrs. Ilene Raubvogel  
Mr. & Mrs. Marvin Rosenberg  
Dr. & Mrs. Marc Rothenberg  
Mr. & Mrs. Richard Sadoff  
Rabbi & Mrs. Shai Scherer  
Mr. & Mrs. Henry Schneider  
Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Schreiber  
Mr. & Mrs. Jason Schreiber  
Mrs. Chaiah Schwab  
Mr. & Mrs. Allen Schwartzberg  
Mr. & Mrs. Harry Solomon  
Mrs. Sandra Spinner  
Dr. Barry M. Stregovsky  
Mr. & Mrs. Jerome S. Teller  
Mr. & Mrs. Eliyahu Tolchinsky  
Rabbi & Mrs. Binyomin Travis  
Weil Funeral Home  
Mr. Nathaniel Weiner  
Anonymous  
Dr. & Mrs. Jacob Yosafat  
Dr. & Mrs. Ira Younger  
Mr. & Mrs. Ira Zimmerman

## Friends

Rabbi and Mrs. Menachem Adler  
Cantor and Mrs. Avraham  
Albrecht  
Drs. David & Ann Alden  
Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Allen  
Mr. and Mrs. Eliezer Allman  
Dr. and Mrs. Steven Arnow  
Rabbi and Mrs. Hanan Balk  
Drs. Salomon and Miriam Banarer  
Mr. and Mrs. Stan Bard  
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Barnett  
Mr. & Mrs. Jeffrey Bassin  
Mr. and Mrs. Nelson Behar  
Mr. and Mrs. Shachar Benshalom  
Rabbi and Mrs. Herbert Berger  
Rabbi and Mrs. Moshe Berlove  
Mr. and Mrs. Max Bienstock  
Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Bochner  
Mr. and Mrs. Mark Bratslavsky  
Mr. and Mrs. Julius Briskin  
Dr. Madeleine Briskin  
Mr. and Mrs. Harry Brown  
Dr. Steven J. Cahn  
Mr. and Mrs. Barry Cobb  
Mr. and Mrs. James Cohen  
Rabbi and Mrs. Yoseph A. David  
Mr. and Mrs. Harry Davidow  
Rabbi and Mrs. Menachem Deutch  
Mr. and Mrs. N. Nachum Eden  
Mr. Ethan Eichelberg  
Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Eisenberg  
Mr. and Mrs. Yisroel Elin  
Rabbi and Mrs. Moshe Englander  
Dr. Ellen Feld  
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Festenstein  
Mr. & Mrs. Joseph B. Fine  
Mr. and Mrs. B. David Fish  
Mr. and Mrs. Marc Fisher  
Mr. K. Jeff Fladen  
Rabbi and Mrs. Menachem Frank  
Rabbi and Mrs. Mayer Friedman  
Gettler Family Foundation  
Mr. and Mrs. Joey Goldberg  
Mr. and Mrs. David Goldman  
Dr. and Mrs. Jonathan Goldstein  
Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Goller  
Mr. and Mrs. Jay L. Gottlieb

Mr. and Mrs. Seymour Greenstein  
Dr. and Mrs. Hertzka A. Grinblatt  
Mr. and Mrs. Simon Groner  
Ms. Renana Gross  
Mr. and Mrs. Brian Grossbard  
Mr. and Mrs. Asher Grosz  
Mr. and Mrs. Ian Guttman  
Mr. Joshua Harkavy  
Rabbi and Mrs. Yosi Heber  
Rabbi and Mrs. Moshe Heigh  
Ms. Allyson Henn  
Mrs. Elaine Henn  
Mr. and Mrs. Aubrey Herman  
Mr. and Mrs. Stuart Hodesh  
Rabbi and Mrs. Yisroel Homnick  
Dr. and Mrs. Steve Jubelirer  
Mr. and Mrs. Michael Kahn  
Mr. and Mrs. Barry Kaplan  
Mr. and Mrs. Jeff Karas  
Rabbi and Mrs. Yuval Kernerman  
Mr. and Mrs. Moshe Kirschner  
Dr. and Mrs. Nachum Klafter  
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Klein  
Mr. and Mrs. Schaja Klein  
Mr. and Mrs. Uri Kops  
Mr. and Mrs. Jamey Kurtzer  
Rabbi and Mrs. Maier Kutoff  
Dr. and Mrs. Daniel Kuy  
Rabbi and Mrs. Stuart Lavenda  
Mr. William & Dr. Sarah Lazarus  
Mr. and Mrs. Marvin Leff  
Rabbi and Mrs. Zalman Leff  
Dr. and Mrs. Robert Lemlich  
Rabbi and Mrs. Dov Lipman  
Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Lipman  
Ms. Lori Lipp  
Mr. and Mrs. Manuel London  
Victorine Malka  
Mr. and Mrs. Mike Maltinsky  
Mr. and Mrs. Larry Mandell  
Rabbi and Mrs. Yisroel Mangel  
Mr. and Mrs. Albert Markovitz  
Mr. Steven Mayers  
Mr. and Mrs. Reuven Meer  
Mr. & Mrs. Donald Miller  
Mr. and Mrs. Menachem Minster  
Mr. Kyle Mishne

Mr. and Mrs. David Mizrachi  
Mr. & Mrs. Ira Moskowitz  
Cantor and Mrs. Yaakov Motzen  
Mr. and Mrs. Jerry J. Nadel  
Mr. Henry Nathan  
National Energy Services Corp.  
Mr. and Mrs. Louis Newmark  
Dr. and Mrs. David Novick  
Mr. and Mrs. Paul Osborne  
Mrs. Salomee Osborne  
Mr. Richard Overturf  
Rabbi and Mrs. Abraham Pelberg  
Rabbi and Mrs. Reuven Pelberg  
Ms. Ruth Pransky  
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Preis  
Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Rabenstein  
Dr. Doug Rank  
Drs. Mitchell & Karen Ohlbaum  
Rashkin  
Mr. and Mrs. David Rich  
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Ronkin  
Mrs. Meyer Rosenbaum  
Mr. Robert Rosenberg  
Mr. Ronald Rosenberg  
Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon H. Rosenberg  
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Rosenblatt  
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Rubenstein  
Mr. and Mrs. Ari Rubinoff  
Mr. and Mrs. Michael Samet  
Mr. and Mrs. Scott Samuelson  
Mr. and Mrs. Allan Satin  
Mr. and Mrs. David Scharf  
Mr. Ben and Dr. Ronna Schneider  
Mr. and Mrs. Harry Schneider  
Mr. Jeremy Schneider  
Mr. and Mrs. Moshe Schneider  
Mr. and Mrs. Mordechai Schonfeld  
Mr. and Mrs. Gary Schottenstein  
Mr. Keith Schreiber  
Dr. and Mrs. Robert Schutz  
Mr. Irving Schwartz  
Mr. and Mrs. Eric Schwartzberg  
Dr. and Mrs. Mitch Shapiro  
Dr. and Mrs. Lee Shonfield  
Shor Yeshuv Gamach  
Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Shriberg  
Mr. and Mrs. Aryeh Silverberg

Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Steinberg  
Rabbi and Mrs. Moshe Toron  
Rabbi and Mrs. Yaacov Toron  
Mr. and Mrs. Philip Travis  
Dr. and Mrs. David Varady  
Mrs. Ahuva Wainhaus  
Mr. and Mrs. Wirly Weiler  
Drs. Nolan and Susan Weinberg  
Rabbi and Mrs. Zev Weiner  
Mr. and Mrs. Ari Weisberg

Mr. and Mrs. Marvin Weisberger  
Mr. and Mrs. Mitch Weisberger  
Miss Irene Wells  
Mr. and Mrs. Howard Yasgur  
Rabbi and Mrs. Menachem  
Zehnwirth  
Mr. Steve Zimmerman  
Dr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Zipkin  
Mr. and Mrs. Morris Zipkin  
Mr. and Mrs. Ben Zweiter

## Contributors

Rabbi and Mrs. Marc Abramowitz  
Mr. and Mrs. Harold Andelman  
Rabbi and Mrs. Avraham Avnit  
Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Berger  
Mr. and Mrs. Shimshon Bienstock  
Rabbi and Mrs. Naftoly Bier  
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Brand  
Rabbi and Mrs. Yitzchak Breitowitz  
Mr. and Mrs. Avner Chriqui  
Dr. and Mrs. Michael Cowen  
Mr. and Mrs. Allen Davidoff  
Mr. and Mrs. Elliot Deutsch  
Rabbi and Mrs. Sender Dolgin  
Mrs. Regina Eisenberg  
Mrs. Milton Evensky  
Mr. and Mrs. Morton Felix  
Mr. and Mrs. Myron Fish  
Mr. and Mrs. Stuart Fletcher  
Mr. and Mrs. Max Frankel  
Mr. and Mrs. Martin Freed  
Mr. and Mrs. Tzvi Fried  
Dr. and Mrs. Benjamin Goldman  
Mr. and Mrs. Fred Golin  
Dr. and Mrs. Naftali Golombeck  
Mr. and Mrs. Martin Grad  
Mr. and Mrs. Shraga Green  
Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Gushin  
Mr. and Mrs. Avi Hagage  
Dr. and Mrs. Martin Hanopole  
Mr. and Mrs. David Haspel  
Rabbi and Mrs. Moshe Hauer  
Rabbi and Mrs. Moshe Heinemann  
Mr. and Mrs. Morton H. Hollander  
Mr. and Mrs. Jess Hordes  
Ms. Mary Jordan  
Mr. and Mrs. Ernst Kahn  
Mr. and Mrs. Steven Karmel  
Mr. and Mrs. Alfred B. Katz

Ms. Joyce Garver Keller  
Mrs. Judith Korcz  
Mr. and Mrs. Milton Korelitz  
Dr. and Mrs. Elliot Lasson  
Mr. and Mrs. Brett Leonard  
Rabbi and Mrs. Sroy Levitansky  
Ms. Rosanne Levitt  
Ms. Donna Maier  
Mrs. Yetta Mandell  
Rabbi and Mrs. Tzvi Millstone  
Rabbi Melvin Minster  
Rabbi and Mrs. Henoah Morris  
Mr. and Mrs. Barry Nagler  
Rabbi and Mrs. Sheftel Neuberger  
Mr. and Mrs. Louis Peerless  
Rabbi and Mrs. Shlomo Porter  
Rabbi and Mrs. Doniel Pransky  
Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Rubenstein  
Rabbi and Mrs. Daniel Raccach  
Mr. and Mrs. Sylvan Sax  
Mr. and Mrs. Tuvia Schachter  
Mr. and Mrs. Max Schechter  
Ms. Cheryl L. Gersch Schloss  
Mr. Jerry Schwartz  
Mr. and Mrs. Michael D. Schwartz  
Mr. and Mrs. Barry Smith  
Mr. and Mrs. David Snitzer  
Mr. and Mrs. Greg Spitz  
Mr. and Mrs. Chaim Mendel Stein  
Mrs. Ruth Stregevsky  
Mr. and Mrs. Sam Sudman  
Northern Hills Synagogue  
Mr. and Mrs. Avrohom Wagschal  
Mrs. ETTY Weiner  
Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Weller  
Rabbi and Mrs. J. Hillel Yarmove  
Mr. and Mrs. Yehoshua Young  
Mr. and Mrs. Gary Zakem

Click on any title or page number to go directly there.

# Contents

## 5 Preface

## 6 Introduction: Elul and the High Holidays

### Preparing for the Days of Awe

## 7 The Cleansing Power of Kindness

*Rabbi Meir Minster*

## 9 The Attributes of Mercy

*Rabbi Shai Scherer*

## 12 You Are What You Want Do You Want to be *Alive*?

*Alter B. Raubvogel*

### Rosh Hashanah

## 15 King of Hearts

*Rabbi David Spetner*

## 17 Judgment Day?

*Rabbi A. D. Motzen*

## 20 On the Water An Appreciation of Tashlich

*Rabbi Zev Weiner*

### The Ten Days of Repentance

## 23 Mourning Inspiration Reflections on Tzom Gedaliah

*Rabbi Yitzchok Preis*

## 25 A Perfect Ten

*Rabbi Raphael Weinschneider*

## 27 Appendix: Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud

The Writing of the Oral Torah

# Preface

We live in a society that is awash with debate over the role of G-d in the public sphere. As descendants of Abraham, who introduced the world to G-d, we understand that the real challenge of life is allowing G-d into *our* space. As the *Kotzker Rebbe* famously replied to the question of where G-d is, “He is wherever man lets Him in.”

At no time during the year do we try harder to allow G-d into our lives and minds than during the days surrounding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These days are known in Hebrew as *Yamim Noraim*, Days of Awe.

The following essays have been written by our staff to help educate and inspire all of us during this High Holiday season. We hope that you will benefit from these essays and share them with others.

We wish you and your families a happy, healthy and prosperous new year!



Rabbi Meir Minster



Rabbi David Spetner

# Elul and the High Holidays

The essays in this booklet explore some of the themes which underlie the High Holiday period—the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, and the preceding Jewish month of Elul. Here is a quick overview of the season and some of the jargon associated with it.

The month of **Elul** is traditionally devoted to introspection, in preparation for the upcoming Day of Judgement (Rosh Hashanah). In Ashkenazic<sup>1</sup> communities, a shofar (see explanation below) is blown after weekday morning services, a reminder that the great shofar-blowing of Rosh Hashanah is approaching. Psalms 27, which speaks of G-d's salvation, is recited twice a day.

Another custom in Elul is the recital of **Selichos**, prayers for Divine mercy. (The Hebrew word *selicha* means “forgiveness.”) These prayers are typically recited in the early morning, before the regular services—a time, the Kabbalists say, when G-d is inclined to be more compassionate.

**Rosh Hashanah**, the Jewish New Year, is the date on which G-d finished creating the world, the first day of the Hebrew month Tishrei. It is a day when G-d asserts Himself as King by judging mankind and deciding Man's fate in the coming year, and the holiday services describe G-d's majesty and power. The most significant Biblical commandment on this day is to hear the blowing of a **shofar**, a ram's horn. This horn represents the ram that Abraham sacrificed to G-d in the place of Isaac, his son.<sup>2</sup> Long, short, and bleating notes are sounded throughout the service, for a total of one hundred tones. If Rosh Hashanah begins on the Sabbath, the shofar is only blown on the second day.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Communities which originated in northern and western Europe. (*Ashkenaz* is Hebrew for “Germany.”)

<sup>2</sup> See Genesis 22:1-19

<sup>3</sup> Rosh Hashanah never begins on a Friday. We do not blow the shofar on the Sab-

Other customs of Rosh Hashanah include the **Tashlich** service (see the essay “On the Water”) and the eating of **special foods**, symbolic of the things we wish to experience in the new year; among these are apples and bread dipped in honey.

Rosh Hashanah is a two-day festival—even in Israel, where the Festival (*Yom Tov*) days of most Biblical holidays last only one day.

The day after Rosh Hashanah, the third of Tishrei, is the **Fast of Gedaliah**. This is a “minor” fast, observed from dawn to dusk. (See the essay “Mourning Inspiration” for a more detailed explanation.)

The ten-day period from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur is called the **Ten Days of Repentance**. *Selichos* are again recited before the morning services. The silent *Amidah* prayer, which is recited at every prayer service, is modified to reflect the impending judgement. An additional prayer, *Avinu Malkeinu* (“Our Father, Our King”), is added to the morning and afternoon services.

The Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is **Shabbos Shuvah**, named after the opening word of that day's *Haftarah* (reading from the Prophets): “*Shuvah Yisroel*—return, O Israel, to G-d.”<sup>4</sup>

The climax of the High Holidays is reached on the tenth of Tishrei, the fast of **Yom Kippur**, on which G-d renders His final decision on the fate of every Jew over the course of the coming year. The day is marked by the **Five Afflictions**—we refrain from eating and drinking, wearing leather shoes, bathing, anointing, and marital relations, from before sundown on the eve of the fast until dusk of the next evening, some twenty-five hours.

Although the Jewish People approaches Yom Kippur with dread, it is also a happy day, on which our people finds *rapprochement* with G-d. After thirty-nine days of repentance and prayer, we take solace and confidence in the Biblical promise<sup>5</sup> that G-d will always receive His children with open arms: *For on this day He will atone for you, to purify you. From all your sins before the L-rd you will be cleansed.*

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

bath, out of concern that someone might inadvertently carry a shofar into the street, which is prohibited on the Sabbath.

<sup>4</sup> Hosea 14:2

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 16:30



# The Cleansing Power of Kindness

As the summer ends and the Jewish month of Av becomes the month of Elul, we shift our focus from mourning over the loss of the Temple to thoughts of repentance and the judgment of the Days of Awe.

The following incident, from the Talmud, offers a helpful insight.

Once, Rabbi Yochanon Ben Zakai was leaving Jerusalem. Rabbi Yehoshua, who was following him, gazed upon the ruins of the destroyed Temple and said, “Woe to us that this is destroyed—the place in which the sins of the Jewish People were cleansed!” Rabbi Yochanon Ben Zakai responded, “My son, let this not trouble you. There is another, equal source of cleansing, and it is performing acts of kindness (*chessed*).<sup>1</sup>

Having come to appreciate what we have lost with the destruction of the Temple—the means to cleanse ourselves from our sins—the prospect of facing these days of judgment without the Temple would have been even more daunting, if we did not have some type of substitute. Understanding the importance of kindness, and what it can accomplish, is a great source of hope. It is even more comforting when we realize that the opportunities and our ability to perform kindness are limited only by our own imagination. Nevertheless, it would seem that one specific form of kindness is not only most appropriate but most available at this time of the year.

As part of the process of repentance one must seek out anyone

---

<sup>1</sup> *Mesichtos Ketanos, Avos D'Rebbi Nosson 4:5*

---

*Ordained at Ner Israel Rabbinical College by Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory, Rabbi Meir Minster oversees the academic excellence of the Kollel's staff scholars. He also delivers the Daf Yomi (page a day of Talmud), Women's Chumash, and other classes.*

whom he has harmed and beg their forgiveness.<sup>2</sup> The flip side of this requirement is that the victim must then choose to forgive.

Although any time of the year is appropriate for such overtures, the mood and the call<sup>3</sup> of the Days of Awe understandably make them the prime time for such confrontations.

Consider, for a moment, the irony. At the very time that we are concerned about being judged by G-d, some of us will be thrust into a situation where we will suddenly become the judges of others.

With this perspective it may be easier to feel compassion towards one's antagonists. However, sometimes the offenses are great and the wounds are still sore. It is not always easy to forgive, and the challenge to perform this act of kindness becomes a real test. The stakes, however, are high.

On the subject of forgiving others, the Talmud<sup>4</sup> contains an often-quoted passage.

Rava said, “If anyone forgoes his measure of retribution, [Heaven] will relinquish [punishment] for him for all his sins.”

Rava's words suggest that if one forgives others, he too will be forgiven by G-d. This would certainly be a strong motivation to ignore our own feelings of hurt and to extend our pardon. In fact, on the whole it seems like quite a bargain; trading our offenses and sins against G-d for that which we may have suffered by the hands of others would certainly leave us the winners, by far.

This leads us to ask, then, is it really that easy? Can one escape punishment for his sins by exchanging his own forgiveness for G-d's?

*Ben Yehoyada*,<sup>5</sup> basing himself on the words of the Dubno Magid, offers us a simple but sobering, “No!” If our motivation for forgiving is simply to gain G-d's good grace, measure for measure, we cannot be assured of the desired outcome. Of course, even if our motivation is G-d's compassion, it is still a far better thing to forgive than not to forgive at all.<sup>6</sup> Yet this is not what Rava had in mind when he spoke of relinquishing one's “measure of retribution.”

---

<sup>2</sup> See Maimonides, *Yad Hachazaka, Laws of Repentance 2:9*.

<sup>3</sup> Particularly on the day before Yom Kippur. Shulchan Aruch 606:2.

<sup>4</sup> Talmud, Yoma 87b. (Also, Yoma 23a and *Kesef Mishna, Laws of Repentance 2:9*.)

<sup>5</sup> Rosh Hashanah 17a

<sup>6</sup> As the Talmud (Pesachim 50b) states, “Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: A

As *Ben Yehoyada* understands it, the Talmud itself makes this qualification,<sup>7</sup> when Rabbi Acha ben Chanina notes that the verse upon which Rava bases his guarantee of forgiveness ends with the words “to the remnant of His (G-d’s) heritage.”<sup>8</sup> In Rabbi Acha’s words,

We have here a fat tail with a thorn in it.<sup>9</sup> [The verse says] “To the remnant of His inheritance,” not “To all of His inheritance.” [This means that only] for the one who makes himself a mere remnant [is there forgiveness].<sup>10</sup>

*Ben Yehoyada* explains that “remnant” describes someone who possesses an extreme level of humility<sup>11</sup> and views himself as a mere remnant. In this way, the victim sees the offense as meaningless, as it was perpetrated against someone of insignificance, and it is therefore easily forgiven. It is achieving this level of humility that is actually the source of G-d’s forgiveness.

There is an important insight here in terms of our desire to do kindness. There can be many different motivations for us to give of ourselves. Often we feel that we must, that we have no choice but to give. Other times we truly want to give. Sometimes, like we saw in regards to forgiving others, we may act for our own benefit. Giving itself is something that we need to do in order to grow and become bigger people. However, the highest form of kindness is when we give out of a sense of humility, putting the needs and wishes of others ahead of our own.

Perhaps this insight is the message of a surprising line in the Midrash.<sup>12</sup> The Midrash describes the experience of the moment of

death and lists several questions which the Angel of Death inquires of the dying person. The answers to these questions impact the harshness of the soul’s passage.

Have you involved yourself in the study of Torah and acts of kindness?  
Did you accept your Creator as King, morning and evening?<sup>13</sup>  
Did you accept your friend as a king, with a pleasant demeanor?

This last question is certainly unexpected and its meaning is a bit elusive. Apparently there is a parallel between the nature of our relationship with G-d and the way we relate to others. How can this be?

Our ability to accept G-d as King comes from a sense of humility, an awareness of the reality that we are totally dependant on our Creator. Without this sense of humility our personal world becomes self-centered, instead of being focused on serving and growing closer to G-d. This same self-centered existence interferes with our desire to give, and taints the purity of the acts of kindness that we do perform.

The final question of the Angel of Death suggests that it is not enough just to be involved in acts of kindness, the subject of his first question. We need also to develop an attitude and an approach in our dealings with others—to treat them as our superiors, to see in them the image of G-d, in which they were created, and not to regard them simply as competitors in some great race of self-centered attainment.

In a practical sense, humbling ourselves in this way will bring us to a better sense of our own true selves. After all, we are all created in the image of G-d, but seeing that in others first can help us make this concept a reality for ourselves, and prepare us to accept the obligations which it demands. Ultimately, this brings us closer to G-d and to accepting Him as our King.

We now have a deeper insight into the great hope offered by Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakai, that the cleansing power inherent in the performance of acts of kindness is equal to the service in the Temple. Like the Temple, kindness, when done properly, brings us closer to G-d and returns our world to its proper balance and purpose. This is what brings true forgiveness.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> A reference to the twice-daily recital of the Shema, in which we accept the yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom.

<sup>14</sup> In a very broad sense this process shares a parallel with the period of the Days of

---

man should always occupy himself with Torah and good deeds, even for ulterior motives, for out of [doing good with] an ulterior motive there comes [doing good] for its own sake.”

<sup>7</sup> Rosh Hashanah 17a-b

<sup>8</sup> Micah 7:18

<sup>9</sup> I.e., good news and bad news. There are words of comfort here, but there is something harsh within them—namely, that Rava’s words do not apply to everyone. (Commentary of Rashi, ad loc.)

<sup>10</sup> Talmud, Yoma, ibid.

<sup>11</sup> This interpretation is supported by Rabbeinu Chananel, ad loc., and Rashi’s commentary on Sanhedrin 111b. See Maharsha, commentary to Rosh Hashanah 17b.

<sup>12</sup> *Otzar Midrashim*, p.84



The truth is that every act of kindness, for whatever motivation, has the power to at least start us towards this goal. We should seek out every opportunity that is available to us, to give and forgive as much as we can, growing closer to G-d in the process. Through this may we merit our own forgiveness, a good year, and the rebuilding of the Temple.

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

**Rabbi Shai Scherer**

# The Attributes of Mercy

As we enter the month of Elul, the season of *teshuva* (repentance), and as we continue on into the High Holidays, there is one prayer which we repeat dozens upon dozens of times. Many congregations sing it aloud together. Perhaps it ranks just below the *Shema* as the second most familiar of the High Holidays prayers, even to those unaffiliated throughout the year. This prayer, “The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy,” is actually taken from two verses in the Torah.

The L-rd passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, “The L-rd, the L-rd, G-d, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, of abundant kindness and truth, Who preserves kindness for thousands [of generations], Who forgives iniquity, willful sin, and error, and Who cleanses—but Who does not cleanse completely, remembering the iniquity of forefathers upon sons and grandsons...”<sup>1</sup>

The name “Thirteen Attributes” is not explicitly stated in the Torah. The source for this term is Rav Yehuda, in the Talmud,<sup>2</sup> who titles them “The Thirteen Attributes,” yet neglects to list and enumerate them individually. As a result, although we know there are thirteen, the Talmud leaves unclear what they specifically are. Various commentaries, in their effort to clarify what these Attributes are,

---

This essay is based in a lecture given by Rabbi Eliezer Gibber, Rosh Yeshiva (Dean) of the New England Rabbinical College of Providence, Rhode Island.

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 34:6-7. Punctuation has been added here for ease of reading, but as we will soon see, these verses are subject to interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Rosh Hashanah 17b

---

*Holding both a Rabbinic degree from Ner Israel (Baltimore, Maryland) and a Bachelor of Commerce from University of Toronto, Rabbi Shai Scherer maintains the Kollel's library and teaches an assortment of classes, including “Understanding Prayer—In Depth.”*

---

Awe. We focus on accepting G-d as King on Rosh Hashanah and we hope that through this we will merit forgiveness on Yom Kippur.

disagree, resulting in a three-way debate. (See sidebar.)

Rabbeinu Tam,<sup>3</sup> the Rosh,<sup>4</sup> Nachmanides,<sup>5</sup> and Ibn Ezra<sup>6</sup> all start enumerating them with the first mention of G-d's name following the word *vayikra* ("he proclaimed").

On the other hand, Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon<sup>7</sup> argues that the first name of G-d is connected to the previous word (*vayikra*), so he starts his enumeration with the second name of G-d. Thus the verse reads, "The L-rd passed before [Moses] and the L-rd proclaimed, 'The L-rd, G-d...'" As proof to his opinion, he notes the *p'sik* (cantillation note), analogous to a comma, after the former name, implying that it belongs with the verb preceding it.

The earlier mentioned commentaries take issue with this, stating that the subject, G-d, is already mentioned at the outset of the verse, making it unnecessary to indicate who called out. They also point out that if Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon were correct, then all the prayers in which these tributes are recited (e.g., *Selichos*<sup>8</sup> and the High Holiday services) would require a modification. The accepted custom, in all communities, is for the leader of the services to recite "The L-rd passed... and proclaimed," followed by the congregation's recital of "The L-rd, the L-rd..." If the Gaon were correct, the Chazzan should say "...And the L-rd proclaimed," followed by a communal response in which "The L-rd" is only mentioned once!

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Tosafos, commentary to Talmud, *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Commentary to Talmud, *ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> Commentary on Torah, Exodus 34:6

<sup>6</sup> Commentary on Torah, *ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> *Megillas Sesarim*, quoted in Tosafos, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Additional prayers said in the month of Elul and throughout the Ten Days of Repentance.

Vaya'avor	וַיַּעֲבֹר
He passed	
Ado-nai	יְהוָה
the L-rd	
al panav	עַל-פָּנָיו
before him	
vayikra	וַיִּקְרָא
he proclaimed	
Ado-nai	יְהוָה   ב
the L-rd	
Ado-nai	יְהוָה c
the L-rd	
E-l	אֱלֹהִים d
G-d	
rachum	רַחוּם
merciful	

The opening words of Exodus 34:6, literally translated, with vowels and cantillation marks, but without punctuation. Numbers indicate the beginning of the list of G-d's Attributes according to:

① Rabbeinu Tam et al  
 ② Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon  
 ③ *Korban Nesanel*

To complicate matters further, *Korban Nesanel*<sup>9</sup> offers a third opinion as to where the enumeration of the Attributes should begin. He explains that the Arizal (quoting the *Zohar*, the classic book of *kabbalah*) believes that the first Attribute is "G-d." The reason for this opinion<sup>10</sup> is that the Talmud<sup>11</sup> implies that the Jewish people should recite these Attributes whenever they are in need of atonement—yet it is forbidden to enunciate G-d's four-letter Hebrew name as written here<sup>12</sup> except in the Temple service. Furthermore, "*A-donai*," the normal substitute for the Ineffable Name, is associated with strict, Divine justice, while the objective at hand is quite the opposite. It must be that "the L-rd" should not be recited during the recitation of this prayer, and would not be enumerated among the thirteen Attributes.

Our task now is to resolve these three views, or at least to clarify the factors and issues upon which their dispute is based.

At the same time we will attempt to resolve a second difficulty involving the Attributes, an apparent contradiction in the Torah. Moses requests to "see G-d's glory," that is, G-d's ways. G-d responds<sup>13</sup> that the time has come for Moses to be given extra insight into the attainment of mercy for the nation that had sinned, yet this method will not be guaranteed. As Rashi's<sup>14</sup> commentary on the verse points out, Moses is merely informed that if the people recite these Attributes, their prayers will sometimes be answered; however, the proclaiming of these traits does not guarantee atonement. Yet after hearing the Attributes, Moses is told, "behold, I make a covenant."<sup>15</sup> If the people follow this procedure, they will surely find favor in the Almighty's eyes. How can we resolve this contradiction?<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Commentary on the Rosh, *ibid*. *Korban Nesanel* actually brings a fourth opinion, (that the list begins with "merciful"). However, strong arguments are made against it, so it will not be discussed here.

<sup>10</sup> As explained by Noda Biyehuda, *Doresh LTzion* 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> The Tetragrammaton (the name of G-d that we commonly pronounce "Ado-nai"), when spelled as it is in this verse, is called the Ineffable Name (*shem hameforash* in Hebrew). Note that in the sidebar it is set without vowels.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 33:18

<sup>14</sup> Acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, medieval commentator on the Torah.

<sup>15</sup> Exodus 34:10

<sup>16</sup> Rashi offers his own resolution, but in this essay we'll suggest a different answer.

Earlier in that passage from the Talmud, we find:

*The L-rd passed before him and proclaimed...*

Said Rabbi Yochanan, “Were it not that this verse had been written, one could never have said this—[the verse] teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped himself up [in a prayer shawl] like the leader of a congregation and demonstrated to Moses a *prayer service*. He said to him, “Whenever Israel sins, let them *perform* before me like this service, and I will forgive them.”<sup>17</sup>

Reading this passage, one can make two contrasting inferences. One implies an obligation to act in regards to the thirteen Attributes, while the other implies the need only to recite them. G-d says “Let them *perform* before Me,” implying that action is required on our part, not just a mere utterance. Yet G-d demonstrated to Moses “a *prayer service*,” clearly describing a verbal recitation. So which is it? A mere recital of verses, or a required acting out of these Attributes of G-d, presumably toward our fellow man?

These two different notions of the correct way to achieve atonement after sinning are a topic of much debate.

The *Ba'al Hafla'ah* argues that Man cannot be G-d, and therefore to conduct oneself as “G-d” (*E-l*, which is one of the Attributes) is impossible. Furthermore, in the introductory prayer to these Attributes (“*E-l Melech Yosheiv*”), we recite, “G-d, You taught us *to say*.” This convinces the *Ba'al Hafla'ah* that a recital suffices.

The Rif and Rosh,<sup>18</sup> on the other hand, cite a version of the Talmudic text that reads simply, “[G-d] demonstrated to Moses *at Sinai*,” slightly but significantly different than our reading of “[G-d] demonstrated to Moses a *prayer service*.” Do the Rif and the Rosh hold that action is required?

How would the Rif and the Rosh answer the valid argument presented by the *Ba'al Hafla'ah*?

The Bnei Yissaschar<sup>19</sup> argues with the *Ba'al Hafla'ah*'s premise that man cannot emulate G-d.<sup>20</sup> In the masterpiece, *Tomer Devorah*, Rabbi Moshe Cordobero explains each and every one of the thirteen At-

tributes. He translates “*E-l*,” G-d, as strength in patience, referring to the fact that G-d gives strength to people, even though He knows they will abuse it by sinning. He claims G-d is generously patient with Man by granting him life, while knowing Man will rebel. Since by training oneself one can come to emulate this quality, one can indeed imitate and act out the Attribute of “*E-l*.”

*Iyun Yaakov* and *Eitz Yosef*<sup>21</sup> both argue vehemently that declaring these Attributes in prayer without internalizing them into one's character is a useless exercise. One must cling to G-d's ways by emulating them.<sup>22</sup> The Talmud relates that G-d appeared to Moses as a cantor, reciting the Thirteen Attributes.<sup>23</sup> If all that is required is saying these verses, why did G-d feel compelled to appear in a vision? Or, as the Rabbeinu Chananel translates the Talmud, G-d commanded an angel to don a tallis—for what? Why was the visual aspect necessary if the goal was merely to memorize a few phrases?<sup>24</sup>

In light of the fact that the Talmud implies both concepts (the need to verbally say these Attributes as well as the need to internalize them into one's character traits), we can now resolve the two difficulties we raised earlier.

First, the apparent contradiction in the Torah. Will the Children of Israel only be forgiven at times, implying that on occasion they will not achieve atonement, or does G-d guarantee forgiveness to his people? To resolve this, we can say that the former is true if the Children of Israel merely recite the verses, thereby subjecting themselves to the possibility of insincere repentance, and hence no forgiveness. On the other hand, the verse that guarantees atonement applies when reciting the thirteen Attributes is accompanied by repentance, in the form of the emulation of G-d's Attributes. This formula was alluded to in the Talmud as the necessity to combine the recitation of the thirteen Attributes with a character change, and all else being equal, if it is completed successfully, one is guaranteed atonement.

As for clarifying the basis of the dispute over the beginning of the

<sup>21</sup> Commentaries on *Ein Yaakov*, a work encompassing all of the stories found in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds.

<sup>22</sup> See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, De'os 1:5-6.

<sup>23</sup> See Ran, Ritva, and Maharsha, commentaries to Talmud, *ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> Granted, this point is disputable; however, in addition to the previous arguments, it seems to hold some weight.

<sup>17</sup> Talmud, *ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> Commentaries to Talmud, *ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov, d. 1841

<sup>20</sup> He bases this opinion on Genesis 33:20 and Rashi's commentary there.

list of Attributes, perhaps we can say that the Kabbalists (who started counting from “E-l,” G-d, due to the prohibition against pronouncing G-d’s full name outside the Temple) felt that the obligation is simply to recite the Attributes.<sup>25</sup> The other commentaries (who agreed on beginning with “the L-rd” and just argued over which instance, the first or the second) were of the opinion that one has the dual responsibility of recital plus character improvement, thereby allowing one to begin with the Attribute of “G-d.” The majority opinion (which we follow) maintains that we utter Hashem’s name twice, as if to say that G-d in heaven has been “matched,” so to speak, by the newly refined Jewish People on earth, through their emulating His Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps we can all take this to heart upon entering the season of these prayers, and not only recite them but refine our own characters, in order to receive the ultimate guarantee from G-d, the third and final Temple, speedily in our days.

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

---

<sup>25</sup> Albeit so, they will agree that our recitation should begin with the first name of G-d in order to utter the verses straight through (i.e. from the Chazzan’s leaving off at “Va-yikra”, as opposed to only saying parts of a verse if we started at “Kayl”)

<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein, the Midrash explains the repetitiveness of “Abraham, Abraham” (Genesis 22:11) as an indication by G-d that Abraham’s “replica on high” had finally been equalled by the mortal Abraham when he successfully completed the last of his ten trials.

## Alter B. Raubvogel

# You Are What You Want

## Do You Want to be *Alive*?

Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, “Three books are open on Rosh Hashanah—one for the totally wicked, one for the completely righteous, and one for those in between. The totally righteous are inscribed and sealed immediately for life. The completely evil are immediately inscribed and sealed for death. Those who are in between are left waiting from Rosh Hashanah till Yom Kippur. If they merit it, they are [then] written for life; if they don’t, they are written for death.”<sup>1</sup>

Every year we ask G-d to “inscribe us in the Book of the Living,”<sup>2</sup> and I suspect that most of us mean that literally. Who doesn’t want to live another year?

But all of us know righteous people who die, despite the fact that they are the first to be “inscribed for life” on Rosh Hashanah. And there are plenty of evil people out there who are enjoying health, wealth, and longevity. So what did the Sages mean by “life” and “death?” And what, exactly, are we asking for?

Those aren’t new questions. Over nine hundred years ago, the *Tosafos* gave this answer:

---

<sup>1</sup> Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 16b

<sup>2</sup> In the first blessing of the *Amidah* (silent prayer), for example, which is recited no less than 34 times over the ten-day High Holiday period.

---

*A Cincinnati native, administrator Alter Raubvogel attended rabbinical schools in St. Louis and Brooklyn, and spent eleven summers as Art Director at a camp in New York’s Catskill Mountains. His duties range from running the Kollel office to creating publicity materials—including our Holiday Reader series, which he designs and edits.*

What is described here as the “death” of the wicked and the “life” of the righteous is said in reference to life in the World to Come.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, on Rosh Hashanah G-d considers whether or not man deserves the Afterlife.

Isn't that a decision best made at man's “final reckoning,” after he dies?

And isn't it true that G-d *does* make real-world, life-and-death decisions at the beginning of the year? Just look at the prayer book—for example, the prayer “*Avinu Malkeinu*.”

Our Father, our King, inscribe us in the book of good life!

Our Father, our King, inscribe us in the book of redemption and salvation!

Our Father, our King, inscribe us in the book of sustenance and support!

Are there *two* Books of Life and Books of Death?

What does it mean to be alive?

Dictionaries say that living things have a “vital force,”<sup>4</sup> a “union of body and soul;”<sup>5</sup> that life is “manifested in functions—uch as metabolism, growth, reproduction, and response to stimuli or adaptation to the environment—originating from within the organism.”<sup>6</sup>

But in Jewish thought, life, or at least human life, is meant to be more than a biological process or a temporary union of body and soul.

Our Sages describe the spiritual realm, the world of the Afterlife, as *olam ha'emes*, the world, or realm, of truth. This is in part because G-d and His Torah are inherently and eternally (*truly*) real.

On the other hand, the physical universe is called *olam hadimyon*, the realm of illusion. One reason for this is that G-d's Creation is not intrinsically real; it only appears to be. The entire universe, both physical and metaphysical, exists only because G-d wills it to exist.

Another reason why the world is called a realm of illusion is that

<sup>3</sup> Commentary to Talmud, *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Ed.

the universe is misleading. G-d's Creation seems so complete and all-encompassing that it is easy to assume that nothing exists outside of this transient, artificial universe—and that nothing else matters.

That brings us to the reason the world “exists.” G-d created Man so He could give him true, eternal pleasure, and Man earns that pleasure by exercising his free will and choosing to do that which is right.<sup>7</sup> Man's decision, however, is made difficult by the invisibility of G-d and all things spiritual. Man has to use his intellect and rise above his surroundings. He must see beyond the attraction of worldly pleasures and realize that true fulfillment only comes through spirituality and closeness with G-d.

It's here that the dictionary and Jewish philosophy diverge.

In Jewish thought, the point of earthly life is to accomplish, and only spiritual accomplishments have lasting significance. The physical activities of life, and the material by-products of life, are no more “real” than anything else in Creation, which, as we said, is only an illusion. In other words, to be truly alive means to be spiritual. A life of materialism is a hollow, wasted life.

What's more, man has the freedom to choose between spirituality and materialism—between life and death. That is what G-d meant when He commanded us to “choose life.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler,<sup>9</sup> that choice is also a decision whether or not to “live” in the Afterlife. He explains that it's the desire to be spiritual that makes a man spiritual. (In other words, a person *is* what he *wants*.) Only a spiritual soul will appreciate the chance to live on in an eternal, spiritual state. If a person dies with a hunger for truth (the truth of the Torah, that is) and with a love of G-d, then he will be perfectly at home in the Afterlife. But if a person has no interest in spirituality, then he will take no pleasure in a completely spiritual existence. Not only that, but the knowledge that he has failed to ready himself for an eternity in the Afterlife will cause him anguish beyond description.

Rabbi Avigdor Miller,<sup>10</sup> of blessed memory, once illustrated this

<sup>7</sup> *Mesillas Yesharim* (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato), Introduction

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19.

<sup>9</sup> B. 1891, d. 1954. Based on a sermon from 1944 recorded in *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, vol. 2, pp. 66-64.

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Miller (b. 1908, d. 2001) led a modest congregation in Brooklyn for over

with the story of Rabba bar Bar-Chana, a sage of the Talmud, who traveled through the desert once with an Arab merchant.

[The Arab] said to me, “Come—I’ll show you the swallowed-up [followers] of Korach.”<sup>11</sup>

He showed me two crevices that were pouring out smoke.

He then took some fleece, soaked it in water, put it on the tip of a spear, and brought it [to the source of the smoke]. When he returned, the wool was singed.

He said, “Listen closely. What do you hear?”

I heard voices. They were saying, “Moses and his Torah are true and we are liars!”

The Arab said, “Every thirty days, Gehinnom returns them to this spot. [They drift in it] like pieces of meat in a boiling pot! And they [always] say, “Moses and his Torah are, true and we are liars!”<sup>12</sup>

Rabbi Miller explained that Korach and his followers died with the conviction that Moses was an autocrat and a nepotist. Now that G-d had shown them that Moses was acting on His word, they regretted their rebellion and they wished that they could take back their protest. But it was too late—Man can only change himself while he is physically alive. So Korach and friends remain as they were when they died, angry and defiant, despite their knowledge of the truth. They hate themselves for this, and they constantly shout at themselves, “Moses and his Torah are true, and we are liars!” in a vain attempt to reconcile themselves with the truth.

This fits in well with Rabbi Dessler’s assertion that the joy or the anguish that Man finds after death is the direct result of the choices he has made and the person he has decided to be. True life begets eternal life; wasted life leads to death.

On Rosh Hashanah (Rabbi Dessler continues), G-d peers into all of our hearts and minds, and He takes measure of who we are. The yardstick G-d uses on that annual, worldwide Day of Judgement is the

same one He uses on the final, individual Day of Judgement: Are we truly alive?

Now we understand what the *Tosafos* meant when they wrote that the Books of Life and Death are associated with the World to Come. Of course G-d decides on Rosh Hashanah who will be born and who will die, who will be poor and who will be rich. But, more significantly, G-d is also looking to see who is *truly* alive, and who is already dead.

G-d wants us to be happy—that is, after all, why He created us—and he is gracious enough to show us the path to fulfillment. But the decision to “live” or “die” is ours. As we approach the Days of Awe, *let’s choose life.*

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

---

fifty-five years, but he taught Torah to countless people around the world through his published works and over 2,000 tape-recorded lectures.

<sup>11</sup> See Numbers 16.

<sup>12</sup> Talmud, Bava Basra 74a



# King of Hearts

Kings are out of style. It's true there are a few here and there, scattered among the family of nations, but monarchy as an absolutist form of government is virtually nonexistent. This presents a challenge to any Jew who takes our liturgy seriously, with all of its references to G-d as King. We have virtually no personal frame of reference for such a position of authority. Rosh Hashanah is especially challenging. The theme that runs throughout our prayers, and is continually articulated in Jewish thought, is that on Rosh Hashanah we recognize G-d as Sovereign over ourselves and the entire universe.

Intellectually, we can understand that G-d is King. Even if the rule of an absolute monarch is no longer acceptable to most of human society,<sup>1</sup> G-d is clearly different. Like it or not, He controls our entry into and exit from this world and most of our fortunes along the way. The drawback in relating to G-d solely through this view is that He is then more despot than king. Proper monarchy has always held an element of endearment. Witness the still loyal feelings of the British public toward “the Royals.”

What we must attempt to do then is to see how we can *appreciate* G-d as King. One way of doing this may be by seeing what the Torah teaches us about appointing a Jewish king.

Jewish groups need Jewish leaders. This may seem obvious to some. Jewish law even rules it to be a legal necessity.<sup>2</sup> This in no way degrades the leadership ability of any non-Jew. It is simply sound advice and good policy in order to maintain the Jewish integrity of the organization, as I will explain.

---

<sup>1</sup> A number of brutal dictatorships notwithstanding—though, come to think of it, even those despots will not take the title of king, it's become so unacceptable.

<sup>2</sup> See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 1:4

---

Before founding the Kollel in 1995, **Rabbi David Spetner** served as a congregational rabbi in Richmond, Virginia. While overseeing the Kollel's many operations, he leads a weekly Lunch-and-Learn in Blue Ash.

The Torah teaches us that when appointing a King over Israel we are commanded not to appoint a non-Jew to that position.<sup>3</sup> This commandment always struck me as odd. Why does the Torah need to proscribe this behavior?<sup>4</sup> Would any people willingly place themselves under foreign rule?

As irrational as placing yourself at the hands of a foreign ruler may seem, it has been common throughout history. From Balak, King of Moab,<sup>5</sup> to the monarchs of Europe, to Schickelgruber of Austria—who became Adolf Hitler, chancellor of Germany—mankind has shown a tendency to appoint rulers who come from a foreign land and often a foreign culture.

This idea was really driven home to me in 1990 with the election of Alberto Fujimori to the presidency of Peru. Here was a man, albeit born in Peru, yet the son of Japanese immigrants, looking very Japanese and maintaining his Japanese surname, winning the highest office of a Latin American nation! It is likely years away till a Fujimori-like candidate could win the Presidency of the United States.

Yet I believe what happened in Peru and has happened throughout history is simply a version of the old cliché: the grass is always greener on the other side. Peru was beset by difficulties at that time and the people yearned for effective leadership. What country had shown the greatest capacity to rise from the ashes? Japan! Elect a president of Japanese descent and he will know how to turn things around. I do not know if this was an actual campaign slogan (though perhaps it was), but these ideas certainly percolate through the national sub-conscience.

However, this tendency to look elsewhere for leadership is a grave error, one that the Torah is addressing in the verse cited above. We are enjoined not to take a foreign king because of the essence of what

---

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 17:15

<sup>4</sup> It is true that there are commandments in the Torah which, had the Torah not forbidden them, no one would really have considered participating in them anyway (such as the commandment against drinking blood). About such commandments our sages teach us that G-d desired to give us an opportunity to receive reward even with minimal effort and to give us a sense of how much more we will be rewarded for keeping the truly difficult *mitzvos* (see Rashi to Deuteronomy 12:25). Such a rationale is understandable in a commandment to an individual. In a charge to the nation though, such an approach is improbable.

<sup>5</sup> See Rashi's commentary to Numbers 22:4.

leadership really is.

Maimonides<sup>6</sup> has a description of the essence of a King that is both fascinating and concise. He writes, “The heart of the king is the heart of the people.” Many commentaries use this axiom of Maimonides to explain an amazing phenomenon regarding the book of Psalms.

Most of the book of Psalms was authored by King David over 3,400 years ago. These psalms describe the joy, worry, tribulation, hope, and prayer that were elements of David’s personal life. Yet for millennia, people have been able to express their innermost feelings and yearnings and have poured out their hearts on both a personal and national level using David’s words. How can the words of one man become the fountainhead for the emotions of a nation?

The answer is what Maimonides already told us, “The heart of the king is the heart of the people.” More than any other individual, David, G-d’s anointed and the founder of Jewish monarchy epitomized the emotions, aspirations and yearning for G-d that are at the depths of every Jewish heart. Perhaps we could call this a “representative monarchy,” where the monarch represents the very best of the essence of the nation.

If a true leader epitomizes the qualities of his people, then a nation that looks elsewhere for its leaders is missing out on the essence of true leadership. Arguably there is something unique and special about Peruvians, and the best leader for them would be someone who epitomizes those special qualities. Practical considerations may override this ideal, yet the ideal it remains.

When it comes to Jews, though, indigenous leadership is more than an ideal. As a nation committed to a mission designed by G-d, non-Jewish leadership misses the point entirely. By extension it also follows that the more the leader of a Jewish organization is true to Jewish values and traditions, the more the organization will be true to its Jewish mission.

This may help us appreciate G-d as King. Just as a Jewish king must be of one heart with his people, so must we be of one heart with our King, G-d. And G-d has made it easy for us, as I will now explain.

In his Laws of Divorce, Maimonides<sup>7</sup> rules that despite the fact that a divorce is only valid if the husband gives the divorce willingly, if

---

<sup>6</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 3:6

<sup>7</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Divorce 2:18

the court rules that he must divorce and they physically force him to say he agrees, the divorce is still valid. Maimonides explains that it works despite the husband’s outward protests, since he really wants to do the *mitzvos*, it is just that his evil inclination overpowers him. Once his inclination is overpowered, even if by outside force, his true desire to do the right thing can express itself.

This may seem to us at first glance as a radical idea. The truth is though, that this is a fundamental Jewish concept about the inherent will of every Jew. The Talmud tells us that the postscript prayer of the sage Rabbi Aleksandri was, “Our will is to do Your will, but what gets in the way? The yeast in the dough (a euphemism for the evil inclination) and societal pressures.”<sup>8</sup>

We see that all Jews, in the depths of their hearts, wish to do the will of their Maker. Rather than being forced to display our true will (as with divorce), we ourselves can find it within us to align our hearts with that of our King. When we truly feel that our heart’s desire is the same as G-d’s, which is that we perform *mitzvos* so that we may draw close to Him, then we will have fulfilled our mission for Rosh Hashanah, to accept G-d as our King.

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

---

<sup>8</sup> Berachos 17a

# Judgment Day?

Multiple choice question:

The Torah describes Rosh Hashanah as—

- a) A day of judgment for the entire world.
- b) A day of judgment for the Jewish people.
- c) A day of blowing horns.

Although all of the above answers are perhaps true statements about Rosh Hashanah, only the last answer is mentioned explicitly in the Written Torah.<sup>1</sup> The first two answers are only given in the Oral Torah—the Mishnah<sup>2</sup>—and expounded upon in the Talmud and Midrash. What remains puzzling is the apparent secrecy of the Torah. If Rosh Hashanah is truly a day of judgment, why is there no explicit mention of it in the Torah? Why would G-d wish to hide the judgment from us?

Imagine that a friend of yours, a prominent judge, invites you to a party. He tells you it is a surprise party, and it is being held in the courthouse. All you need to do is dress in nice clothes and bring a party horn. When you enter the room on the assigned day, you find your friend on the bench, dressed in his robes, and you are suddenly the center of attention in a packed courtroom. Your “friend” promptly pronounces that you have been tried in absentia and found guilty of a capital crime. Your sentence is the death penalty. At this point you are pinching yourself so hard you begin to bleed. “This must be a dream,” you think. Or is it?

---

This essay is adapted from Abarbanel’s commentary on Leviticus 23 (Hapoel Hamizrachi ed., Jerusalem, 1974, pp.133-144).

<sup>1</sup> “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, it shall be for you a Sabbath, a memorial of blowing horns.” (Leviticus 23:24)

<sup>2</sup> Rosh Hashanah 1:2

---

A second-generation Special Ed teacher, **Rabbi A. D. Motzen** has put that career on hold to pursue advanced studies at the Kollel and gain experience teaching adults. Among other classes, he leads the advanced level of the Yesodai Hatorah skills-building program.

Is this not what G-d does on Rosh Hashanah? The Torah tells us to celebrate this day by blowing a horn; only later do the Rabbis reveal to us that really this “party” is the judgment day for all our actions! Could it be that in some way it is *not* a day of judgment? But then what did the Talmud mean? Why are our prayers replete with references to the awesome judgment of this day?

Let us explore the Talmudic statements and see for ourselves what they possibly meant. Let us take a closer look at the Written Law and try to understand how G-d wants us to perceive this awesome day.

But first, more questions.

“Judgment Day” is how we describe Rosh Hashanah in our prayers.<sup>3</sup> Who is being judged? How long does it take?

How is this day different than Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement? According to our prayers, the judgment is inscribed on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur.<sup>4</sup> Why isn’t it sealed on the very same day? What new information does an omniscient G-d need, that causes him to wait ten days to seal His judgment? The purpose can’t be to give us a second chance, because as humans, we are not aware of G-d’s original judgment nor his final decision. So why do *we* need the dual-stage verdict? If G-d simply wanted to give us ten extra days, why not have Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as a one-day holiday on the *tenth* of Tishrei?

Alternatively, why not place Yom Kippur before Rosh Hashanah? What is the point of being judged on Rosh Hashanah if the judgment can be changed on Yom Kippur? Would it not have been more logical to have the amnesty day of Yom Kippur first, and then judge all those who refuse to repent afterwards?

We must search for a different understanding of the judgment of Rosh Hashanah and its relationship with Yom Kippur. Let us start from the beginning.

The Torah tells us very little about Rosh Hashanah. It tells us to celebrate it with a cessation of constructive labor and by blowing a shofar. The passage about Rosh Hashanah is immediately followed by the instructions for Yom Kippur. The language of the biblical verses<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Most notably in “*Unesaneh Tokef*,” in the cantor’s repetition of the Mussaf prayer.

<sup>4</sup> “On Rosh Hashanah it will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur it will be sealed... Who will live and who will die...” (Ibid., based on Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 16b.)

<sup>5</sup> Abarbanel (ibid.) gives some examples:

and our prayers<sup>6</sup> hints that they are parts of but one holiday. Other than in the sale of High Holiday seats, how is this true?

The Mishnah<sup>7</sup> tells us that the world is judged on four occasions each year. On Rosh Hashanah, continues the mishnah, *all creations* pass before Him. How long does this “processional” take? The Talmud<sup>8</sup> reveals that G-d sees all of Creation instantly, with one glance.

However, an earlier statement in the Talmud<sup>9</sup> says that the judgment is written on Rosh Hashanah but not sealed until Yom Kippur.<sup>10</sup> The statements seem contradictory. If the judgment of Rosh Hashanah is for the entire world, is *its* judgment *also* sealed on Yom Kippur? The Torah’s description of Yom Kippur, limiting the day’s atonement to the Jewish people,<sup>11</sup> does not leave room for this possibility. We are left with three choices. Either Yom Kippur is for everyone, contradicting the biblical text, or the judgment of Rosh Hashanah is only for Jews, contradicting the tradition of the Rabbis. The one remaining possibility is that the entire world is judged on Rosh Hashanah, but Yom Kippur is only for Jews. How is this so?

On Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of Man, there is an accounting of all the past deeds of Man. Based on those actions, the inevitable consequences of Man’s actions will be played out throughout the year, each event in its appointed time. We are expected to do our best throughout the year, not just before the High Holy Days. However, it is logical that the “accounting year” of our actions (like that of taxes, for example) should have a beginning and an end.<sup>12</sup> This accounting occurs whether anybody knows about it or

- 
- The special, additional sacrifices of the two holidays are the same (Numbers 29:1-11).
  - The passage about Yom Kippur (Leviticus 23:27) begins with the word “but” (*ach*), indicating that it is a continuation of the previous passage about Rosh Hashanah.
  - Unlike the other holidays, Yom Kippur is not presented by the Torah with the introduction, “Speak to the children of Israel.” (See Leviticus 23:26.)

<sup>6</sup> The prayers of both days follow a similar structure.

<sup>7</sup> Rosh Hashanah 1:2

<sup>8</sup> Rosh Hashanah 18a

<sup>9</sup> Rosh Hashanah 16b

<sup>10</sup> The description of a suspended verdict is only said in reference to a category of people called “in between” (*beinonim*). However, Abarbanel (*ibid.*) understands this to include everyone but a person who never sinned and a person who never did

not—ninety-nine percent of the world lets this time go by without a second glance. This entire process is instantaneous. G-d does not need time to review the evidence.

This annual accounting should apply to the Jewish people, as well. But G-d is gracious to us. He wants to spare us from justice, but justice is necessary. So He tells us to blow the shofar.

How does that help? Let us study a Midrash.

G-d (*Elokim*) has ascended with a blast, the L-rd (*Hashem*) with the sound of the horn.<sup>13</sup>

When G-d ascends and sits on the seat of Justice, He ascends with the Divine attribute of Justice... However, when Israel take up their horns and blow, G-d rises from the bench of Justice and sits on the seat of Mercy... and has mercy on them, and He transforms for their sake the Divine attribute of Justice into the Divine attribute of Mercy.<sup>14</sup>

The Midrash derives this explanation from the change in usage of the names of G-d. The name *Elokim* signifies strict justice, and the Ineffable Name, *Hashem*, signifies mercy. The verse then describes the scene where G-d ascends with justice, but the sounds of the shofar then cause G-d to treat us with the attribute of Mercy. This verse (and the entire Psalm 47) is said seven times as part of the preliminary prayers before the blowing of the shofar.

How do the seemingly mundane blasts of an animal horn bring about such profound metaphysical ramifications? What do those blasts represent?

The blasts in their most basic symbolism wake us up to repent. It is as if G-d is calling out to us, “Yom Kippur is coming. Remember the shofar blasts of Sinai, when you originally came together as My special nation. Let the blasts remind you of a coronation, of the King that I am supposed to be over you. Let the blasts remind Me of the Binding

---

anything good. (See Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 3:1, for a different interpretation.) The prayers also seem to assume that we are all in that category.

<sup>11</sup> “To atone for the Children of Israel.” (Leviticus 16:34)

<sup>12</sup> See Abarbanel (*ibid.*) for a fascinating explanation of why this judgement occurs on Rosh Hashanah, and what is meant by “judgement.”

<sup>13</sup> Psalms 47:6

<sup>14</sup> *P’sikta D’Rav Kahana*, 23:3

of Isaac, when he demonstrated his absolute service to Me, and I will consider it as if you did the same. Let the blasts remind you of the times of the Messiah, when the entire world will join together and make Me King over it and share the special relationship with Me that now only you possess.”<sup>15</sup> The message resounds: Blow the Shofar and *avoid* the judgment. Be treated with Divine Mercy instead. If we opt to be G-d’s special people we will receive G-d’s special treatment. This is why the focus of our prayers is to make G-d King over us.

This point is made almost explicitly in another Midrash:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, says, “On Rosh Hashanah I judge My world. I should really seal the judgment on that very day. Why then do I suspend the sentencing for ten days? So that they should repent... If you repent during these days, even if you have many sins I will eradicate them and exonerate you. But if you do not repent, you are hereby informed that your judgment will be sealed on Yom Kippur, and it will be you, not I, who is responsible for your verdict... For I have commanded you to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah so that you will fear and prepare for repentance.”<sup>16</sup>

Judgment should only take an instant. The natural consequences of Man’s actions should be immutable.<sup>17</sup> And in fact they are, with regards to the rest of the world. But G-d is gracious. He gives *us* extra time. He even gives us the tools to begin on the path towards repentance. This difference between the judgment of the world as a whole and that of the Jewish people is described in Psalms.

Blow the shofar at the renewal [of the moon], on our holiday that is covered,<sup>18</sup> for it is a statute (*chok*) for Israel, a judgment (*mishpat*) for the G-d of Jacob.<sup>19</sup>

The Talmud<sup>20</sup> understands that the first part of the verse refers to

<sup>15</sup> See Abarbanel, *ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> *P’sikta Rabbasi*, 40:7

<sup>17</sup> Sincere repentance is always accepted.

<sup>18</sup> Unlike most Jewish holidays, which occur in the middle of the month, Rosh Hashanah occurs at a time when the moon is still hidden (Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 8a). Alternatively, based on our present study, the judgement of the day is hidden, or covered up, through the use of the shofar.

<sup>19</sup> Psalms 81:4-5

<sup>20</sup> Rosh Hashanah 8b

the judgment of the Jewish people, while the latter half is a reference to that of the entire world. Why does the Psalmist use the word *chok* (law) when describing our accounting and not the more familiar *mishpat* (judgement)?

*Mishpat* refers to laws of social justice that are readily understood by all. *Chok* is used to describe decrees that we may not rationally understand; we observe them because G-d said to. (One example is *sha’atnez*, the prohibition against wearing clothes made of a mixture of wool and linen.) This does not mean that there is no other rationale for observing these commandments, only that they don’t ostensibly serve any social or commemorative function.

The description of the judgment of Rosh Hashanah as a *chok* is now readily understood. Logic dictates that our actions should have consequences, both positive and negative. The Jewish concept of repentance that can actually erase our mishaps and errors does not make rational sense. It is even called miraculous by some commentators.<sup>21</sup> How can evil actions be turned into merits? How can a person who spends his entire life sinning repent for his actions after they are done? That is beyond our understanding. Yet G-d tells us that He does this for us, and only us.<sup>22</sup> Although the entire world is judged with *mishpat*, the logical consequences of their actions, only the Jews were commanded to observe Yom Kippur and erase their inequities. It is a decree from the Merciful One, because of His love for His people. Rosh Hashanah, then, is a day of *avoiding* judgment.

Let us return to our questions. The Torah does not focus on the judgment<sup>23</sup> but on the shofar, the tool that is used to *avoid* the judgment. G-d wants to keep the judgment “hidden,” because He really prefers not to relate to us as a *judge* at all. He wants to treat us with *mercy*. Rosh Hashanah comes first, because for the world as a whole that is the *only* day of judgment. The Torah’s description of the Jewish

<sup>21</sup> Maharal of Prague (R. Yehuda Loewe, d. 1609) in *Nesivos Olam, Nesiv Hateshuva*, ch. 1.

<sup>22</sup> During this period G-d makes it easier for us to repent. Also, the day of Yom Kippur itself has the power to atone for those who repent. See *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*, vol. 4, p.73.

<sup>23</sup> Why, then, do the Talmud and our prayers heavily stress the judgement? Perhaps it was because the Rabbis felt that the people would not take the shofar and the holiday as seriously as they should unless they understood what was really transpiring in the Heavenly Court (see *Emes LYaakov*, commentary on Leviticus 23:24).

celebration of Rosh Hashanah however, points to a holiday dedicated to the preparation for Yom Kippur. As Jews, this is a cause for celebration. Even if we were not aware of the judgment that takes place, the effect of the shofar would lead us to repent. The commandment of shofar tells us about G-d's *reluctance* to judge us. The piercing sounds should elicit tears in our eyes—tears of repentance, mixed with tears of joy over the realization of G-d's special love for us.

G-d is hoping that we make Him King over ourselves, acting like His people, thereby meriting Divine Mercy. We are granted ten days of repentance for *our* sake. G-d does not need ten more days to hear evidence. If we fail to act, the judgment of Rosh Hashanah remains in its place. If we take action, G-d ignores the judgment and treats us, based on the new reality, with the attribute of Mercy. The choice is ours.

So will this Rosh Hashanah be Judgment Day? G-d certainly hopes not. What about you?

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

**Rabbi Zev Weiner**

# On the Water

*An Appreciation of Tashlich*

Imagine the following scenario. You have just completed the festive meal on Rosh Hashanah, and are helping clear the table. As you reach for the crystal apple-shaped honey dish, in walks the next door neighbor asking you if you're ready to go to the beach.

How would you respond? Would you discard the dish in exchange for your bathing suit, or would you drop the dish out of shock? Perhaps you'd be more moderate in your response, asking your neighbor, "Why today?" After all, if we take a quick review of Rosh Hashanah, the last place we should be is at the beach. Isn't today Judgment Day, and didn't we just spend a large part of our day in sincere prayer?

Yet for many, going to the beach on Rosh Hashanah is the norm. They go with prayer books,<sup>1</sup> not bathing suits.

The event that we refer to is called *Tashlich*, and Jewish communities throughout history have involved themselves with this custom. The etymology of this word is the Hebrew for "send" or "throw." For hundreds of years our ancestors have gone to the banks of rivers, seas, oceans, or even to watering holes, to fulfill this custom. The basic

---

<sup>1</sup> Those familiar with *Tashlich* might wonder why bread was left out of the items brought to the sea. There are some who mistakenly believe that *Tashlich* culminates with the throwing of bread into the ocean. While there might be some theoretical basis for this practice (in light of our compassion toward the fish, we hope G-d will deal with us compassionately—see *Minhag Yisroel Torah*, volume 3, 583:6), on a *halachic* basis this practice is forbidden. See the comments of *Machatzis Hashekel* (Shulchan Aruch, *Orach Chaim* 583:3), who explains clearly that feeding fish in the wild is a violation of the laws of Yom Tov.

---

**Rabbi Zev Weiner** travels weekly to Oxford, Ohio, to lead a student group at Miami University Hillel. He also runs a weekly after-school program for junior high-aged boys which combines dinner, Torah study, and sports. Among other classes, he teaches a popular Torah portion group at Golf Manor Synagogue, which even the Rabbi attends!



rite<sup>2</sup> involves no more than a proximity to water and the recital of a few verses.<sup>3</sup> We also empty our pockets, which signifies our desire to have our sins thrown away; this is one of the reasons this custom is called *Tashlich*.<sup>4</sup>

The actual source for this custom is shrouded in mystery. What is known about *Tashlich*'s origin is that it was certainly practiced in medieval times. The earliest mention of this custom is found in the writings of the Maharil.<sup>5</sup> It is here that we are given our first glimpse into the depth of *Tashlich*. He explains that the significance of heading to water on Rosh Hashanah is based on a Midrash<sup>6</sup> which describes, in detail, Abraham's last test, the Binding of Isaac (his son) on Mount Moriah. Realizing that if Abraham were to pass this test, G-d would consummate His covenant with Abraham, Satan attempted to persuade the elderly sage from sacrificing his progeny. After two failed attempts, one focused on Abraham and the other on Isaac his son, Satan made himself into a raging river cutting off the route to Moriah. Undaunted, Abraham continued on into the water. It wasn't until the waters reached his neck that Abraham prayed for Divine assistance. With that, the waters dried up, and he was able to approach the mountain.

When we travel to the water on Rosh Hashanah, we evoke the memory of our ancestors' unending dedication in the service of G-d. This memory serves us well on the day in which our deeds are being scrutinized. We hope that by telling the Judge who our "parents" are, He will grant us a favorable verdict.<sup>7</sup>

*Tashlich* is not the only time we recall this merit. When choosing a shofar, we select the horn of a ram, so as to awaken the memory of

---

<sup>2</sup> In this article we will focus our attention on the underlying meaning of *Tashlich*, not on its rules.

<sup>3</sup> The *Tashlich* service follows the Afternoon Service in most Rosh Hashanah prayer books.

<sup>4</sup> See *Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chaim* 583:4. He explains that one of the verses that we recite is "V'tashlich bimtzulas yam—and cast, into the depths of the sea, all of their sins" (Micah 7:19). It is based on this verse that we call the rite *Tashlich*.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Yaakov Moelin, the foremost Halachist of his time. He was born and died in Germany during the fourteenth century.

<sup>6</sup> *Tanchuma, Vayeira*, chapter 23.

<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this concept, see *Strive for Truth* (Feldheim Publishers), volume one, essay four, "The Attribute of Mercy," by Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler.

Isaac's Binding. The Binding is also the central theme for the additional blessing of Remembrances that we insert into the Musaf prayer.

There is another allusion found within this ancient custom. Toward the end of King David's life,<sup>8</sup> his older son Adoniyahu attempted to steal the throne from Solomon, the rightful heir. After guaranteeing Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, that the throne would not be usurped, David ordered the High Priest and a handful of his closest men to anoint Solomon at the River Gichon, ensuring that the kingdom would be his. The Talmud<sup>9</sup> uses this story to teach us the way in which to coronate a king. We need to bring the king down to the water in order that his kingship should endure. The correlation between water and a continued reign can be understood in the following way: Just like water has no end, so to this king's rule should continue through his progeny.<sup>10</sup>

The day of Rosh Hashanah is not only a day of judgment, it is also the day we coronate G-d as the King of the Universe. In truth, the best way to merit a favorable verdict is to sincerely accept His yoke upon us. If we show a willingness to subjugate ourselves, then the King will be merciful and invest in our potential. If we do not show an interest in being trustworthy subjects, then on the day He is crowned, our outcome is more tenuous.

Parenthetically, it is for this reason that the prayers of Rosh Hashanah are not focused on our personal needs for the coming year.<sup>11</sup> After all, who really knows what we need? At best, we only think we know what's good for ourselves, and giving G-d a "wish list" on Rosh Hashanah can only limit our ability to receive that which we really need. Our all-knowing G-d is much more capable of giving us everything that will help us fulfill our potential. By participating in His coronation and by accepting His sovereignty, we are bound to receive all our needs for the coming year.

When we stand at the edge of the water, we are at the coronation

---

<sup>8</sup> The whole story can be found in I Kings 1.

<sup>9</sup> Horios 12a

<sup>10</sup> See *Ben Yehoyadah* on this passage of Talmud. He uses the numerology of the Hebrew word for water to show that the revealed letters and the unrevealed letters equal the same number, signifying the continuity of the king's sovereignty through his children.

<sup>11</sup> See *Siddur Ha'GRA*, in the introduction to the prayers of Rosh Hashanah, where he offers a more pointed reason for this exclusion.

of the King of Kings. *Tashlich*, then, embodies the notion of G-d's sovereignty over all of Creation.<sup>12</sup> This concept is also found in the Rosh Hashanah prayers. (The first additional blessing of the Musaf prayer focuses on G-d's reign over the world.) While it is certain that G-d's Kingship will always endure, and a water-based coronation is unnecessary, we can still benefit from the experience. One of the greatest challenges that we face in prayer, is to internalize the things we pray for. Verbally declaring G-d's majesty alone may not lead us to live with this reality. However, when we take physical steps<sup>13</sup> to coronate Him, we can gain an appreciation for His sovereignty. This is accomplished by going to do *Tashlich* by water.

We can now begin to fathom the depth that is latent within this holy custom. Whether we arouse the merit of our ancestor's courage or the vision of a majestic coronation, our prayers by the banks of the sea are filled with meaning.

There is another aspect to *Tashlich* that we have yet to uncover. While a proximity to water is crucial in the proper observance of *Tashlich*, having fish present in the water is also encouraged. There are many reasons given for this addition. Fish have no eyelids and are therefore always seeing. On one level, by having fish present at *Tashlich* we symbolize the notion that G-d is always watching out for us.<sup>14</sup> This is a very comforting thought, especially on Rosh Hashanah. Fish are also very prolific. We too want the blessing of the fish. Here we are given the impetus to hope that our progeny will be as fruitful as the fish.<sup>15</sup> These are a few of the physical aspects of fish that we associate with though *Tashlich*.

On a metaphysical level, fish represent the ability to ward off the Evil Eye. The Talmud<sup>16</sup> offers the following reason to explain this phenomenon. Fish are covered by water, so they cannot be seen clearly. This provides the fish immunity from the destructive force of the Evil Eye. Rosh Hashanah is an opportune time to tap into this symbolism,

---

<sup>12</sup> *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 129:21.

<sup>13</sup> This is based upon the premise that physical actions have the ability to facilitate spiritual growth. This notion can be found in *Path of the Just*, by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato.

<sup>14</sup> *Eliyahu Rabbah*, Laws of Rosh Hashanah 596.

<sup>15</sup> *Darchei Moshe* 583:2.

<sup>16</sup> *Berachos* 20a.

in the hope that we too will be granted this protection.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, fish are caught with large nets. There is nothing more pathetic than seeing fish struggling to set themselves free; the net is the end of the line. We can liken our position on Rosh Hashanah to that of the fish. Our lives hang in the balance on this Judgment Day. Whether we will live or die is decided in the course of a few short days. We too are in a net, and by standing by a fish-filled body of water we are reminded of this.<sup>18</sup>

At the onset of this essay we began a journey, hoping to find meaning in a medieval custom. The beach didn't seem to the proper place for a Jew on Rosh Hashanah. We gave a number of thought provoking insights into the rite of *Tashlich*. The water of Isaac's Binding and the sea of coronation flow with the fish that symbolize our hopes and aspirations. We must take advantage of this wonderful opportunity.

There is but one significance left lurking beneath the surface. As we know, Rosh Hashanah is the time to announce G-d's sovereignty, and to subjugate ourselves to His Judgment. We recall the efforts of our forefathers as a merit for our verdict. If we look at the custom of *Tashlich*, we see a very revealing fact. *Tashlich* is a microcosm of the entirety of Rosh Hashanah. With it, we focus on our judgment by observing the fish, we coronate the King of Kings at the water, and we evoke the memory of our ancestors to advocate for us. We also conjure aspirations related to the fish, in their ability to be fruitful and unaffected by the Evil Eye. It is with this thought that we can truly appreciate the custom of *Tashlich*.

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

---

<sup>17</sup> *Darchei Moshe*, *ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> *Levush Malchus*, Laws of Rosh Hashanah 596.

# Mourning Inspiration

## Reflections on *Tzom Gedaliah*

The seventh fast<sup>1</sup>... the third of [the month of] Tishrei, when Gedaliah ben Achikam was killed... which teaches you that the death of the righteous is equivalent to the burning of the House of our G-d.”<sup>2</sup>

Not nearly as well-known as the holiday of Rosh Hashanah immediately preceding it, *Tzom Gedaliah*, the Fast of Gedaliah, is day well worth our attention. We will explore several facets of this Rabbinic, dawn-to-dark fast. After sharing some historical background we may gain insight as to the significance of this date, its juxtaposition to Rosh Hashanah and its important message for us. This will serve to make not only *Tzom Gedaliah*, but the entire High Holiday period, more meaningful and more productive.

After destroying the First Temple and exiling most of the Jews to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar eventually appointed a righteous Jew named Gedaliah ben Achikam to govern the territory. This was seen as a calming of what had been a furious storm against Israel and her inhabitants. Gradually, Jews began to trickle back from neighboring countries to their homes in Israel. The harshness of the Exile was beginning to ease.

---

<sup>1</sup> Enumerated in Zachariah 8.

<sup>2</sup> Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 18b

---

Director of the Kollel's outreach arm, **Rabbi Yitzchok Preis** is a graduate of Ner Israel and Johns Hopkins School of Engineering. Rabbi Preis organizes Jewish learning opportunities throughout Cincinnati, on topics ranging from keeping kosher to the afterlife.

Balis, the King of neighboring Ammon, resented the renewed Jewish sovereignty, limited though it was. Balis found a receptive ally in a frustrated Jewish adversary of Gedaliah's named Yishmael ben Nesinah. This Yishmael, possibly of royal descent, was particularly jealous of Gedaliah, whom he viewed as an "outsider" sitting at the head of the Jewish State. He accepted the Ammonite king's bidding to assassinate Gedaliah. During the Rosh Hashanah season (some understand on Rosh Hashanah itself, others understand on the third of the month), Gedaliah was murdered together with many of his peers. Following Gedaliah's murder, the Jews feared reprisal from the infuriated King of Babylon. He was not expected to distinguish among them and would surely hold all Jews responsible for the death of his appointee.

The Jews deliberated between an escape to the morally corrupt, yet safe, Egypt, and remaining in their spiritually safe, yet physically precarious, Israel. They turned to the prophet Jeremiah, who in turn pleaded with God for an answer. Finally, on Yom Kippur, he was answered. Jeremiah relayed the Divine message: The Jews would remain safe, provided they remained in Israel. The tides would turn and, before long, even the exiled Jews would be permitted to return to their own soil. The Babylonians would not bring them harm if they would remain in the land but should they abandon Israel, the sword from which they were fleeing would kill them there.

As is tragically so common, the people refused to believe the prophet. Their own assessment of the situation and their personal emotions overrode the message of the prophet. They descended to Egypt, kidnapping Jeremiah and forcing him to join in their departure from the Land of Israel. Their new Egyptian haven was short lived. Several years later, Babylon conquered Egypt. The newly developed Egyptian Jewish community was wiped out, with the exception of a sole survivor—Jeremiah, whose prophecy had become so painfully true.

Having noted the historic context of Gedaliah, let us analyze some curious elements of the fast day commemorating his death.

Let us revisit the Talmudic passage with which we opened:

The seventh fast<sup>1</sup>... the third of [the month of] Tishrei, when Gedaliah ben Achikam was killed... which teaches you that the death of the righteous is equivalent to the burning of the House of our G-d.”<sup>2</sup>

In analyzing this brief passage, two questions come to mind:

Why does the Talmud focus on the death of “the righteous” as a general concept, and not on the tragedy of the death of the historically unique, pivotally positioned Gedaliah? After all, his assassination led to upheaval and, eventually, massacre.

And in what way does the death of the righteous compare with the Destruction of G-d’s Holy Temple?

We can answer these concerns with the following:

In drawing our attention to the death of the righteous, the Talmud shares an important perspective on the *life* of the righteous. A righteous person is valuable not only because of his or her contributions, or potential contributions, to society. Were that to be the case, our focus would certainly be drawn to the particular tragedy in Gedaliah’s death. But we are not. We are taught to focus beyond the details of context, role, and even accomplishment of a particular individual. Instead we are to learn the value of something far more abstract—the “life” of the righteous. The very existence of the righteous portrays the elevation of the physical self. The tzadik displays in his very living, the infusion of spiritual into the physical. Physical life has potentially infinite value because the physical body can be home to the infinite soul.

The parallel to the Holy Temple can now be understood.

The Holy Temple was a man-made, physical building, in which concrete, material forms of worship were performed, yet it was the most sacred spot on Earth. Its existence facilitated an unparalleled bond between Heaven and Earth. In its destruction, elements of that bond were severed. The Divine became more distant, its impact on our world less apparent.

So it is with the death of the righteous. Their souls live on but they are no longer intimately tied to our physical world.

In comparing the death of the righteous to the Destruction of the Temple, we are being taught to recognize the loss of that spiritual presence. But more importantly, perhaps, we are being urged to recognize the potential that exists while the gift of life is still present.

This may help us understand the significance of this commemoration on the day following Rosh Hashanah. There are, after all, no coincidences in the Jewish calendar.

The Rosh Hashanah-Yom Kippur season is one of an intense display of the relationship between Heaven and Earth. Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgement, indicating that all that happens on Earth is

of concern to G-d. If we are being judged, our actions must be of consequence. If physical deeds are noted in the Heavens, there is no absolute divide between our worlds. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, a time when G-d makes Himself most “available” for our gestures of return. Yom Kippur is also the day on which the Ten Commandments were actually brought down from Heaven to earth, bringing the Word of G-d into a physical abode.

The ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur are referred to as the Ten Days of Repentance. For reasons beyond the scope of this essay, we find almost no attention paid to the repentance theme in the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah itself. The repentance focus begins in earnest on the third of Tishrei, *Tzom Gedaliah*.

Having gleaned inspiration from the Rosh Hashanah holiday, we are now to mindfully evaluate our shortcomings of the past. Yet, if we do so seriously, taking careful inventory of our spiritual failings, we can run the risk of becoming despondent. We can make the tragic error of viewing ourselves as hopeless, anchored down by the physical cravings and temptations that restrict our spiritual elevation. With such an attitude, the “Days of Repentance” can be met with a sense of futility.

Countering this despondency is the message of *Tzom Gedaliah*. We mourn the death of the righteous. Yet through the mourning we are inspired with the message that the human being has infinite spiritual potential. If death can be as tragic as the destruction of the Temple, then life can be as valuable as the Temple’s existence. By fasting and reflecting on the comparison of the righteous and the Temple, we come to a recognition of Man’s infinite potential. If we can remind ourselves of this with “repentance-inventory” in hand we can be inspired to rid ourselves of the spirituality-inhibiting practices that have made their way onto that list.

On Rosh Hashanah, the world starts anew—we start anew. These messages are still fresh in our minds on *Tzom Gedaliah*. We can make a fresh start at attaining the incredible potential that is latent in each of us. No one is born righteous. But no one is born without the potential to earn that lofty title.

Properly utilized, *Tzom Gedaliah* serves as a powerful tool in assisting us in the repentance process. May we merit achievement of that critical goal.

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

# A Perfect Ten

The period starting with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur is known as the Ten Days of Repentance. The name would imply that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are not connected merely by their proximity on the calendar, but rather that they are a part of a larger unit which consists of a total of ten days of repentance.

Why ten? Why not two or five or eight? Does the number have significance, or is it simply that Rosh Hashanah had to be on a specific day and Yom Kippur had to be on a specific day, and it just worked out that the days between these two days, which both have to do with connecting to G-d, add up to a total of ten?

There are many other Jewish “tens.”

To have a public prayer service, a quorum of ten men are needed.

When the Jews expected to enter the Promised Land, they chose to send spies to scout out the land.<sup>1</sup> One of spies was Joshua. Previously known as Hoshea, Joshua was the primary disciple of Moses and he made Moses’ tent his second home. This mission was the first time Joshua was to leave his teacher’s side for a lengthy period. Understanding the potential for sin that was involved in such a mission, Moses added a letter to Joshua’s name. He chose to add a *yud*, the tenth letter in the Hebrew alphabet.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier in history, G-d chose to prove Abraham with ten tests.<sup>3</sup> Before that, there were ten generations from Adam to Noah and another ten from Noah to Abraham.<sup>4</sup> And even before that, G-d cre-

---

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 13:2

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 13:16

<sup>3</sup> *Ethics of the Fathers* 5:4

<sup>4</sup> *Ethics* 5:2-3

---

A native of Chicago, **Rabbi Raphael Weinschneider** hails from a line of four generations of American rabbis. He also holds a Masters in Business Administration from Johns Hopkins University. He leads a weekly class on Practical Jewish Law.

ated the world with ten utterances and then created ten last-minute items in the last moments of Creation.<sup>5</sup>

Is this a coincidence?

There is a *mitzvah* for Kohanim (priests) to bless the nation,<sup>6</sup> and there are three verses that they chant. *Kli Yakar* points out that in the original Hebrew, all three of these verses start with the letter *yud*—equal to the number ten.<sup>7</sup> He explains that the way to spell out the name of the letter *yud* (much as we would spell “K” phonetically as K-A-Y) is *yud-vav-dalet*. Numerically, that would translate to 10-6-4. Thus *yud* is one of the few letters about which one can say that the letter itself, as it is seen in written Hebrew, and the remainder of its name, which is *not* seen in written Hebrew (i.e., *Yehuda*, not *Yud-ehuda*), are numerically equivalent. (Ten equals six plus four.) *Kli Yakar* goes on to explain that each of the verses in the Priestly Blessing is made up of a spiritual and physical component. Thus it is fitting for them to start with a *yud*, a letter with a dual focus—the part you see (the physical), as well as the part you don’t see (the spiritual). When these two components work together, that is a perfect blessing.

In Jewish writings, the number ten represents perfection. (Today the universal—Olympian—perfect score is also a ten.) Thus, when Joshua was to undergo the challenge of the spies without the positive influence of his teacher, it was appropriate that he be sent off on this mission with an extra *yud*—the blessing of being able to stand on his own two feet and being successful where many other great men failed.

Before we go through all of the “tens,” let’s return to our original ten, the Ten Days of Repentance. The message seems to be that over these ten days one is expected to achieve perfection. This would depress the vast majority of good, Torah-abiding Jews. *Perfection? These ten days must be for the likes of the most pious of men. Count me out!*

To address the dark cloud that has probably just engulfed the reader, I’d like to share with him or her a letter Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner<sup>8</sup> wrote to one of his students, who felt that the rabbi had a false impression of him and felt dutybound to set the record straight. The student had written that, while he once had been extremely devoted

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ethics* 5:1,8

<sup>6</sup> Numbers 6:22-26. This blessing is recited in the synagogue.

<sup>7</sup> Commentary to Numbers 6:24

<sup>8</sup> Leading Rosh Yeshiva (dean) and thinker, b. 1906 d. 1980.

to Torah study, yearning to get closer to G-d, he was no longer that person; he had explained that his drive seemed to have vanished, and he had elaborated on the difficulties he felt were making him falter on various spiritual fronts.

Rabbi Hutner's response<sup>9</sup> was to explain the meaning of the verse "A righteous person shall fall seven times and get up..."<sup>10</sup> The simple understanding of this verse would seem to imply that even the righteous sin from time to time, but that the difference between them and the wicked is that they keep making a comeback. But this is not what the verse means. What it means is that the way a person becomes righteous is by sinning and then repenting, then sinning again and then again repenting, and so on. A person who doesn't give up but, rather, redoubles his efforts, is a person who later in life will be known as a righteous person.

We do ourselves a great disservice with the way we picture our leaders. We tend to know of their righteous qualities, and we picture them having these qualities even as young men. Rav Hutner wrote that the way to picture the Chofetz Chaim, for example, who championed the cause of speaking within the parameters of Jewish law, is not as a saintly man who never spoke a forbidden word in his life. Rather, we should picture him struggling with his evil inclination, which was pushing him to do all types of sins. And we should understand that he became the Chofetz Chaim because every time he lost a battle and sinned, he redoubled his resolve not to let it happen again. In a sense, you have the exact same test he had. Don't give up. Messing up can just be messing up, or it can be a step closer to perfection.

We see this too, in the Talmud, which states<sup>11</sup> that four people died "because of the sin of the snake"—that is, they never sinned, and they only died because Man became mortal after Adam and Eve were enticed by the serpent to sin. If one had to guess who those four people were, one might guess that at least some of them were Patriarchs or Matriarchs, or perhaps Moses, Aharon, or the great King David. Yet the four, while certainly great men, were not extremely significant figures in Jewish history. They were Benjamin, son of Jacob; Amram, father of Moses; Jesse, father of King David; and Kilav, son of

<sup>9</sup> Pachad Yitzchak, Ig'ros Umichtavim 128

<sup>10</sup> Proverbs 24:16

<sup>11</sup> Shabbos 55b

King David. We see clearly that our greatest leaders were men who, at some point in their lives, *sinned*. What made them great was growing from those mistakes and becoming that much greater from them.

**Abraham was tested with ten tests.** The question arises, why does G-d test men—doesn't He already know what the outcome of the test will be? Nachmanides' explanation is that G-d wants to reward us for our deeds, and we don't get credit for potential—we get a reward for actually performing.<sup>12</sup>

I'd like to suggest that there is another need for tests. Abraham would not have become Abraham without undergoing an internal struggle. When one prevails over his inclination, he becomes a new person, a person on a spiritual level that he previously was not on.

We find this pattern throughout life. To get to the fruit you first have to go through the peel; it gets dark before the blessing of rain comes; G-d created the night before the day.

When one repents, his sins don't get erased. Rather, they become like merits.<sup>13</sup> This is because he uses those sins to boost himself to become a better human being. When a person pulls back his hand in order to throw forward, when we look at the entire motion it is apparent that the backward motion was really what allowed the forward motion to take place.

**Ten generations from Adam to the Flood, and from the Flood till Abraham.** The generation immediately after Adam, the first man, started sinning. So why did G-d wait ten generations until He flooded the world? What was He waiting for? And after the Flood, the next nine generations did not do G-d's will; then Abraham came and "received reward for all of them." Why did he receive the reward for them all, why not simply receive the reward for what he did?

By now the answer should be clear. Abraham used nine generations, chock full of sin, as a source of energy, to propel himself as far as he could from that lifestyle. Thus, not only did he receive credit for his deeds, he got credit for what he overcame, and for all that he rejected with the decisions he made.

Unfortunately, things did not work out quite as well in Noah's generation. G-d waited until that tenth generation to see if someone would emerge who would see the truth and use the evil around him as

<sup>12</sup> Commentary to Genesis 22:1

<sup>13</sup> Talmud, Yoma 86b



a force with which to throw himself the other way. No one emerged. Thus the world was to come to an end. However, Noah, though not quite as magnificently as Abraham, did do enough to spare himself and his family, and thus restart the count for another ten generations.

Now we see that the Ten Days of Repentance, the days meant for reaching perfection, *are* meant for you and me. The prophet said, “Seek out G-d when He is to be found; call Him while He is close.”<sup>14</sup> All that G-d wants out of us during these ten days is that we try our hardest. G-d comes close to us during these days, and we have a responsibility to respond in kind. If we refuse to take advantage of these wonderful ten days of opportunity, we may be asking for a fate similar to that of Noah’s generation. However, if we respond, then all the mess-ups we have made over time can actually be part of what helps us find favor in G-d’s eyes now.

On the very first Rosh Hashanah, G-d completed His perfect world, made through ten utterances. May we use these ten days properly, and allow G-d to bless each of us with the perfect blessings of both spiritual and physical bounty, as depicted in the Priestly Blessings, which all start with a *yud*, ten.

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

## Appendix

# Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud

## The Writing of the Oral Torah

The essays in this collection draw on many sources, but an attentive reader will note that a good number of them are described as “Mishnah,” “Midrash,” and “Talmud.” The following paragraphs explain what these terms mean, and outline their roles in Jewish tradition.

In the Sinai desert, the Jewish people received the Torah. It was given to them in two forms: the Written and the Oral.

The Written Torah (*Torah Shebich’sav* in Hebrew) consisted then of the Five Books of Moses. Later, the writings of the Prophets (*Nevi’im*) and the Hagiographa (*Kesuvim*, such as Psalms and the Five *Megillos*) were added.

The Oral Torah consisted of explanations of Scripture (for instance, that *tefillin*—phylacteries—must be black and square), as well as additional and supplemental laws (such as the obligation to light a menorah on Chanukah).<sup>1</sup>

This second Torah remained a purely oral tradition for many centuries. Eventually, the Sages decided that an outline of this tradition must be composed and written down, to ensure that its transmission would continue undisturbed. The initial phase of this composition ended toward the end of the second century CE, around 100 years after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

The central component of that outline is called the **Mishnah**. It contains quotes and legal opinions from sages who lived during and immediately after the era of the Second Temple. The Mishnah is or-

---

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 55:6

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Meshech Chochma*, Leviticus 23:24.

ganized into six series (*sedarim*), each of which contains several volumes (*mesechtos*).

Other teachings of the Sages of this period were compiled in a number of works, the majority of which are called **Midrash**. The Midrash is primarily concerned with explaining and expounding upon Scripture. Some Midrashim cover legal subjects, while others deal with the Biblical narrative, philosophy, and mysticism.

Over the next three or four centuries, two commentaries on the Mishnah were written. Both were called **Talmud**, and both are still studied today. One commentary, the Jerusalem Talmud, was composed by scholars living in Israel. The second, the Babylonian Talmud, became the central body of the now-written Oral Torah. Although many important works have been written in the centuries since (such as *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law), all of them draw on the principles outlined in the Talmud.

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

**the mission of the  
Cincinnati Community Kollel:**

*To enrich  
the Cincinnati Jewish community  
by creating an environment  
of Torah study  
and providing access  
to our spiritual heritage.*