

ראש השנה תשפ"ד

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SHABBOS ROSH HASHONOH

All the signs listed in *Chazal* clearly indicate that we are in the period of *Ikvesa DeMeshichah* (the period preceding the coming of *Moshiach*). We must realize that the many disasters which occurred during the past year were all decreed on last *Rosh Hashonoh*, and in the period preceding the Days of Judgement we must take stock of our actions and exploit the remaining days of the Month of Mercy to the utmost for repentance.

Rav Yaakov Ettlinger, the *Oruch Laner* points out (in *Minchas Oni*, P. *Haazinu*) that historically speaking the years in which *Rosh Hashonoh* fell on *Shabbos* either presaged very happy events, or calamitous ones. He explains that since we do not blow the shofar on *Shabbos* the merit of *Shabbos* substitutes for the shofar. Therefore, in those years in which the nation kept *Shabbos* properly the year which started off on *Shabbos* ended up being filled with happy events, because *Shabbos* acted as an advocate in our favor. Hence, we would be well advised this year to adopt a resolution pertaining to the honor of *Shabbos* so that it will protect us. This could consist, for example, in learning *hilchos Shabbos* throughout the year regularly, sanctifying *Shabbos* with Torah learning, or inducing others to become conversant in *hilchos Shabbos*.

In general, each hour of Torah learning with toil and joy acts to counter the evil inclination and to protect us from evil decrees. Women should undertake to strengthen themselves in matters of *zeni'us*.

Rav Sternbuch heard from the late Satmar Rebbe, Rav Yoel, that in our generation steeped as it is in *tumah*, Hashem accepts our repentance even if we have not fulfilled all the requirements for *teshuvah* which were necessary in previous generations.

However, we have to keep the greatest possible distance from the dangers presented by technological devices, which have led to spiritual and material disasters in many Jewish homes.

Rav Sternbuch asks the public to pray for him (Moshe ben Devorah) for his health and wellbeing.

We must strive to emulate previous generations who had a strong faith in the coming of *Moshiach*. In that merit may we witness the redemption speedily, may we all fulfil the will of the A-mighty wholeheartedly, and may the coming year be filled with life, peace of mind, health, and spiritual illumination.

SANCTITY BEFORE ROSH HASHONOH

It says in the *Zohar* that during the three days before *Rosh Hashonoh* the *ba'al tokea* and the *shli'ach tzibur* should be very careful to avoid any *tumah*. The Chasam Sofer notes that nowadays, since the *shli'ach tzibur* is not *motzi* the public, and everybody prays on his own, the ruling of the *Zohar* applies to all of us, which means that we are all obligated to sanctify ourselves to the best of our ability in the days leading up to *Rosh Hashonoh*.

Therefore, one must sanctify the final days leading up to *Rosh Hashonoh* through Torah, prayer, repentance and good deeds, and be especially careful about praying with concentration, and answering *omen yehei shem rabbo* with concentration, until the person

becomes a complete repentant worthy of standing before the King. One should also be especially particular to avoid idle talk, and, all the more so, forbidden talk or *machlokes*, which, envelop the person with a great spirit of *tum'oh*, and prevent one's prayers during the *yomim noro'im* from rising heavenwards, G-d forbid.

THREE PARABLES

"On *Rosh Hashonoa* all the inhabitants of the world pass before Him, *kivnei maron* (like those of *Moron*)" (Rashi: "like sheep counted for the purpose of tithing which leave single file through a small opening"). Reish Lokish says "*moron*" refers to "the steps of a narrow mountain path" (a narrow mountain path overlooking a deep ravine on both sides). There is enough room for only one passer-by and so everyone walks in single file (Rashi). R. Yehudah, in the name of Shmuel says *bnei moron* mean "like the armies of the house of Dovid" (which were numbered one by one when they went out to war).

The parable of the sheep teaches us the important lesson that just like the sheep is on its own when being counted, so too each individual stands in judgement before the Creator on his own, and he is not judged by being compared to his friends, but only based on the special tools which he specifically has been endowed with for the purpose of serving Hashem, in order to determine whether he has fulfilled his purpose in life based on his own specific abilities. There is a natural tendency for a person to assess himself by comparing himself to his friends' situation, thereby concluding since they are worse than him, he is completely righteous. If we were to engage in honest introspection, we would realize that we actually think like that. This parable emphasizes the fallacy of this approach. Our only task is to determine whether we have fulfilled our own specific potential and our duties towards the Creator and our fellow man. That is the only yardstick, because only those are the criteria by which we are judged.

According to the parable of the dangerous mountain path, Hashem does not judge a person only according to his actions, but also according to the difficulties and trials which he has had to endure when performing *mitzvos*. Hashem examines the extent to which he has had to overcome his challenges without looking left or right, and continued walking on the narrow mountain path of his *avodas Hashem*.

The parable of the armies of the house of Dovid teaches us that just like the quality of a soldier is gauged by the extent to which he is willing to risk his life for the sake of the king's honor and in order obey his will, so too Hashem examines each of us on *Rosh Hashonoh* to see whether we are willing to dedicate ourselves to Hashem and give up our own desires for the sake of performing His will, thereby proving the extent to which our inner being cleaves to Hashem "with all our hearts and all our souls". [The "house of Dovid" refers to the heavenly kingdom, because *Dovid Hamelech* corresponds to *malchus*].

BENEFITING THE PUBLIC

Rav Sternbuch recollects how Rav Elya Lopian would preface his talks during Elul by saying, "Today are so and so many days before *Rosh Hashonoh*".

Rav Elya Lopian would say that a wonderful *segula* for meriting a favorable judgement on *Rosh Hashono* is to engage in public activities, or those that benefit the public, because then Hashem saves him from misfortunes so that the public will not lose out or become upset if this person becomes sick or suffers an evil decree.

TEST FOR SUCCESSFUL *TESHUVA*

Rav Sternbuch heard a *godol* interpreting the *possuk* “Take with you words, and return to Hashem” (Hoshea 14:3) as follows. Any person can examine themselves to see if they have repented properly by checking whether after the process of *teshuva* they find it easier to concentrate during *davening*, because the Zohar and the Arizal explain that when a person sins he creates “*klipos*” (literally: “husks”) that confuse him when he prays. If his level of concentration has improved, that is a clear sign that his *teshuva* has been accepted. Hence it says, “Take with you words” take the words which you pray, and use them to determine whether you have “returned to Hashem”.

NOT IN HEAVEN

It says (30:12): “It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us and fetch it for us, to tell it to us, so that we can fulfill it?’”. The Ramban asks why the Torah says, “It is not in heaven” specifically with regard to the mitzvah of *teshuva*?

Rav Chaim Volozhiner explains that every Jew’s actions have an enormous influence on the upper worlds. Every good deed illuminates and reinforces them, whereas every sin causes destruction. When a person repents, Hashem revives and reconstructs the worlds which that person destroyed when he sinned. That is the depth of Hashem’s mercy when He accepts repentance. Not only does He become reconciled with the sinner, but He also amends the damage which he caused.

According to the strict measure of judgement a person would have to go up to the upper worlds himself in order to amend the destruction which he caused and thereby merit repentance, but were this to be a condition for repentance, no one would be able to repent, because it is not possible to do so. Hence, the Torah emphasizes that “*it is not in heaven*”, the power of repentance is so great that a person is not required to ascend to the upper worlds in order to amend what he has destroyed.

Moreover, each sin causes *tumah* and spiritual destructive forces to increase in every part of this world, and yet, “*nor is it beyond the sea*”: a person does not have to travel to faraway places in order to undo the destructive effect of his sins in those places.

Rather, this thing is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it: when a person repents, Hashem amends all the damage that his sins produced in heaven and beyond the sea.

KABOLAS HATORAH ON ROSH HASHONOH

Rosh Hashonoh is like *kabolas Hatorah* because the main *avoda* of the day is *malchuyos* in which we accept upon ourselves Hashem's kingship, and that is not possible without accepting the laws of the King. Therefore, on *Rosh Hashonoh* we accept on ourselves the yoke of Torah and undertake to keep all the *mitzvos* as well as the associated punishments and rewards for keeping or not keeping them.

CHOZER BITSHUVA

How can we enter the Day of Judgement in light of the fact that Hashem knows all our deeds and thoughts, and those leave much to be desired?

The *Rashash* suggested in a *drosho* he gave before the *teki'os* that if we make a firm resolution to completely repent with regard to one feasible item, which needs rectifying, and which will not be too difficult for us to keep, then we will be deemed to have been *chozer betshuva*, and this can be a route for Hashem to forgive all our sins.

Not only a complete *baal teshuva*, but even such a *chozer bitshuva* who has not yet formally repented all of his sins, but has started to change his path, is considered to be a different person who has the power to overturn evil decrees.

It is obligatory to read *parshas Ki Sovo* before the year is up so that we can end the year with the curses contained in that *parsha* already behind us (*Megila* 31b), but in practice the very last *parsha* we read before *Rosh Hashono* is *Nitzovim*, because if it would be *Ki Sovo* there would be a danger of our becoming frightened or depressed by the curses enumerated there, and therefore we read *Nitzovim* in order to bring home the point that we have a way to be saved from those curses. Armed with the knowledge of the immense power of *teshuva*, we can thereby enter *Rosh Hashono* with the requisite state of joy.

JOY ON THE DAY OF JUDGEMENT

Rosh Hashono is characterized, on the one hand, by fear of the Day of Judgment, but, on the other hand, the Yerushalmi (see also the *Tur*) brings down that we wear white clothes and shave in order to show that we are confident of a favorable judgment. How can we reconcile these two seemingly conflicting ideas?

If a defendant in a court case is sure that he will be convicted and that he has no chances of an acquittal, the judge will be likely to convict him just because of his demeanor, but if he displays confidence that he is in the right, and that the charge against him has been concocted, the judge will begin to wonder whether the defendant's claims might really be true, and he starts to examine the matter further.

Similarly, on the outside, we too exhibit confidence that we will merit a favorable outcome, but inside we tremble and supplicate for a favorable judgment. This does not mean that we are, *chas vesholom*, deceiving ourselves. Rather, since the main component of the judgment on *Rosh Hashono* consists of an examination, a kind of diagnosis, of our spiritual situation, whether we are on an appropriate spiritual level or completely materialistic with no link to anything spiritual, the greatest danger in this trial is to show that we have despaired of ourselves believing that we have no chance of succeeding in our efforts to improve ourselves. We therefore make an effort on the Day of Judgment to demonstrate and feel joy, since we are confident that our repentance will be accepted. In other words, we reinforce our feeling that we can change and become closer to Hashem, instead of just mouthing words insincerely.

As for *selichos*, although they should be said with a broken heart, we should at the same time feel joy at the thought that we are standing before our Father in Heaven, who wants and expects us to return to Him and receive a favorable judgment. We should feel confident that we will have the merit of becoming closer to Hashem and to *avodas Hashem*, and that our prayers will be answered.