

הַשִּׁבְנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁוֵב וְנִשְׁוֵבָה חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקִדְמָם:

Bring us back to you, O Yhwh, and we shall return; restore our days as of old.

(Eikhah 5:21)

Thoughts for Rosh ha-Shanah 5781

We are living in strange times, and at least here in Melbourne we are facing yomtoyvim without the physical presence of our community, and without shul. I think that it is safe to say that for most of us, this is an unfamiliar experience. It is disorienting, and I imagine for most of us, upsetting. So what do we do with this? How do we approach the Day of Judgment, the Birth of the World, in these circumstances? Below, I will share some thoughts that have been helpful for me in the past weeks, and that I hope might contribute something to others who are trying to navigate the Yamim Noraim during these strange times.

Embracing the strangeness

According to the Rambam, when we are habituated to certain things, we learn to prefer them *despite the fact that they may be limiting*. This is as true of one's spiritual life as it is of one's material preferences. (See *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:31.)

On the one hand, the Yamim Noraim disrupt our habits and bring us into a different headspace. On the other hand, is it not possible that we get used to this very particular rhythm of regular disruption? Personally, I am most sad this year about the things that are familiar: The melodies of Rosh ha-Shanah, the gathering of family and friends, the hush in shul that is fractured by a soft voice – *teki'ah* – and then suddenly pierced by the shofar. There is grief in being denied these experiences this year, but perhaps we can also retrieve something useful.

I have found one insight into the need to adapt to this new and strange situation in a work known as *Tseva'at ha-Rivash* (The Ethical Will of the Besht). As its name suggests, it is attributed to R. Israel b. Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov or Besht. The Besht is traditionally regarded as the founder of the Hasidic movement, and he died in 1760. However, it seems that the work is actually a document of spiritual practice for the community around one of the Besht's closest disciples, the Maggid of Mezritsh (Mezhirichi). It is therefore quite an early Hasidic document. It addresses disruption in one's spiritual practice in a very direct and relevant way:

Tseva'at ha-Rivash (#3)

One must serve the divine with all one's strength, in all ways, for everything is necessary. Because the Divine wants us our service *in all ways (be-khol ha-ofanim)*. This means as follows: Sometimes, one must move around and converse with people, and one cannot learn Torah. But one must still cling to the Divine [in one's mind] and make divine unifications.

Similarly, when one must travel and one cannot learn and pray as one is accustomed to do, one must serve the Divine in other ways.

And don't be pained about this, for the Divine wants to be served *in all ways (be-khol ha-ofanim)*. Sometimes in one way, sometimes in another way. That is why you have had to travel or converse with people, so that you could serve the Divine in a different way.

According to this source, when disruptions occur – particularly those beyond our control – they are to be understood as an invitation to explore other ways of connecting to the Divine, both internally and externally. The Divine wants our devotion in all ways, in all situations – and that means *not clinging to the familiar*. It means letting go, surrendering to changed circumstances and learning to navigate them on their own terms.

And so, I want to return to the ground of what all this is about. I want to return: *Teshuvah*.

If you ask around today, you'll hear that Sephardim say Selihot through the whole month of Ellul and until Yom Kippur, while Ashkenazim recite them from roughly a week before Rosh ha-Shanah until Yom Kippur. In fact, the earliest known practice is documented in geonic sources, dating from soon after the completion of the Babylonian Talmud. They used to recite Selihot from Rosh ha-Shanah until Yom Kippur. So Rosh ha-Shanah initiated this period of penitential practice, which culminated with Yom Kippur. This is also how Maimonides describes this time of year: Rosh ha-Shanah marks the beginning of a period devoted to teshuvah, which reaches its climax with Yom Kippur (Guide of the Perplexed III:46; cf. MT Laws of Teshuvah 3:4).

But in what sense is Rosh ha-Shanah a day of teshuvah? We don't recite Selihot or the vidduy as we do on Yom Kippur. In fact, the centrepiece as described both in the Torah and rabbinic sources is the shofar. It is a piercing sound, it seems to express something unformed, prior to speech. It echoes the encounter with the Divine at Sinai, where the shofar blast grew ever-louder:

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el, ba-ḥodesh #4

The sound of the shofar grew louder and louder. (Shemot 19:19) Normally, the longer one continues the weaker the sound grows. But here, the longer it continues, the louder the sound grows. Why does it begin softly? To provide the ear according to its capacity.

The Mekhilta seems to describe the shofar like a wedge, gradually opening us up to deeper spiritual attentiveness and insight.

In a shiur delivered in 1975, Rav Soloveitchik spoke about the difference between a *hirhur teshuvah* – “a thought of teshuvah” – and teshuvah itself. (The formulation is mine.) Teshuvah has a formal structure: One recognises a failing; articulates it; expresses regret; resolves not to repeat this mode of behaviour. But a *hirhur teshuvah* is different. It is a primal sense of yearning for the Divine, a primal sense – that something anchored deeply within ourselves is missing. Or maybe better, something in which we are deeply anchored is suddenly absent.

According to Rav Soloveitchik, the difference between Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur is precisely the difference between a *hirhur teshuvah* and teshuvah. On Yom Kippur, we articulate, we express, we formulate visions of how we want to be. On Rosh ha-Shanah, **we yearn**. That is all. We allow ourselves to be split open by the sound of the shofar, to experience the grief of absence and the deep yearning to be anchored in something nurturing and loving.

The Rambam writes that the piercing sound of the shofar communicates the following:

Awaken! Awaken, O slumberers, from your slumber! Rouse from your sleep! Examine your deeds and return in *teshuvah*! Recall your Creator, O you who in the vanities of the moment forget reality,

and waste the entire year in nonsense and emptiness that does not help you, will not save you. Contemplate your own minds, refine your behaviour, and abandon – each and every one of you – all negative behaviour and thinking.

(MT 3:4; my own idiomatic/idiosyncratic translation.)

Now that is heavy, and not in the style we're usually used to hearing today. But let's think for a moment: Has not coronavirus revealed to us our fragility? Is the creeping reality of climate change not making us see that how we have been living, the unfettered waste and consumerism, is based on some kind of illusion? In his 1975 shiur, as in many of his writings, Rav Soloveitchik uses this moment to emphasise our utter aloneness. But I'd push back and say that as much as we are alone in our personal challenges and our grief, we are also deeply connected. "A heart knows only its own bitterness; in its joy, no stranger participates." (Mishlei/Proverbs 14:10) But we are also together, we share so much, we depend on one another, and it is only together that we can find a path forward.

But perhaps Rav Soloveitchik is correct: Teshuvah can be collective, but a *hirhur teshuvah* is intensely personal. So let's put it like this: Rosh ha-Shanah is the time for a *hirhur teshuvah* – to perceive our smallness before the abyss, to yearn for firm ground. But it sets us in motion towards the world, where, with renewed clarity, we can support each other and build better communities and societies together.

Put in more concrete terms, tying the strands together: I think that the rupture in our yearly rhythms provides us with an opportunity to explore our inner lives in new ways. If we find ourselves suddenly crowded with family at this time, it might mean bringing a more expansive consciousness to our interactions with each other. If we find ourselves suddenly much more alone than we would like to be, it might mean digging deeper into our consciousness, or re-establishing a childlike wonder at the mystery of the world around us. (In all cases: Self-care is commanded by the Torah!)

Hopefully, next year will be different. But let's do our best to try to recover something constructive from this strange situation.

And by constructive, that can even be in what we normally think of as negative emotions: It's OK to feel a sense of loss, it's OK to feel grief. Let's try to be really present with those emotions as we peel back the layers of the familiar and expose ourselves to ourselves.

I want to finish with one final point. The penultimate verse of Eikhah will be familiar to most of us: It might be the best-known biblical verse that treats the theme of return to the Divine. We sing it regularly as a community when we place the Sefer Torah back in the *aron/hekhal* after reading from it, and at the completion of Eikhah on Tish'ah be-Av. The verse reads as follows:

Bring us back to you, O *Yhwh*, and we shall return; restore our days as of old. (Eikhah 5:21)

In Midrash Eikhah Rabbati, the verse is interpreted by bringing it into conversation with another verse:

Like Adam ha-Rishon, the First Human. As one says: *[God] drove the human away, stationed to the East (mi-qedem) of the Garden of Eden [the cherubim and the flaming ever-turning sword, to guard the path to the Tree of Life].* (Bereshit 3:24)

The Midrash brings us to the entryway of the Garden of Eden: *qedem*, primordially.

If we read the verse according to this midrashic interpretation, we get something like the following:

Bring us back to you, O *Yhwh*, and we shall return; restore our days to *qedem*, to primordially.

Here, teshuvah reaches deep into the mythic past of Eden. We are trying to recover something lost: A lost connection to the Earth, not yet damaged; a lost connection to the Divine, not yet exiled.

In the strangeness of this year, may we encounter the *ganz Andere*, the Wholly Other, the truly Strange and New in ourselves and the world. And may the encounter enable us to return to our families and communities with new insight and new resolve to live more deeply and authentically every day.