

אתה אחד  
ושמך אחד  
ומי בעמך ישראל  
גוי אחד בארץ

אחד!

ד

One!

One G-d.  
One Goal.  
One Person.  
One Community.

# Yamim Noraim 5779

## Rabbi Moshe Hauer

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Congregation  
Baltimore, Maryland*



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# אחד! One!

**Yamim Noraim 5779**

**Rabbi Moshe Hauer**

*Bnai Jacob Shaarei Zion  
Congregation  
Baltimore, Maryland*





## Dedication

This collection of essays is dedicated  
to the memory of my father and teacher,

**HaRav Benyamin Hauer ז"ל**



**אאמו"ר הרב בנימין ב"ר משה ז"ל**

who taught our family and countless others  
how to live and breathe the words of the Torah.

I hope and pray that הקב"ה will continue  
to grant strength and health to our dear mother,

**Mrs. Miriam Hauer**

to continue עמו"ש to guide and inspire all of us  
along our path in life, בדרך עץ החיים.





## Dedication

This booklet is dedicated  
in appreciation of

**The Leadership, Membership  
and Friends of BJSZ -**  
our extended family.

We are always deeply grateful to you  
for your kindness, love and support.

We are exceptionally grateful for the encouragement  
and *chizuk* you gave us this past year,  
in celebrating our 25th anniversary together.

May ה"קב grant each and everyone of you  
every *bracha* for the coming year.

With much appreciation and love,

Moshe and Mindi Hauer





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# Foreword

The period of the month of *Elul* and the *Yamim Noraim*, known as the High Holiday season, is a great gift, מן הטובות אשר הטיב השי"ת עם ברואינו. Each year we are afforded this opportunity to reflect and to reconnect, to spend weeks engaged with G-d and community on a fundamentally deeper level than the usual. Ideally this serves as a basis for the substantive and tangible adjustments to our lives resultant of *Teshuva*. But even without those measurable changes, we treasure this time as our annual visit back to the source, to the wellspring of our existence, and we draw upon its inspiration – consciously and subconsciously – for the balance of the year.

Over the years at Bnai Jacob Shaarei Zion, we have worked to enrich the season and make it more impactful and lasting. A number of years ago we moved to focus our discussions during this season around a single theme, a specific area of growth that would be the backbone of our *Teshuva* work for that year. More recently we developed an artistic take-home card that encapsulated that theme, and that left room on the back for personal notes and commitments, insights taken from the season that could be referenced throughout the year.

Subsequently, we attempted to take one further step towards creating a lasting impression of this precious season. Included here are some of the central addresses, the *Drashos*, given during the season. This booklet is a continuation of that effort, recording in this booklet the central addresses of the *Yamim Noraim* 5779 season, dedicated to the theme, "One!" These essays are not meant as scholarly presentations, but rather as words of inspiration and guidance to a community of growth-oriented individuals. While the words may have some value for a general audience, their primary intended audience is the membership of our community who heard these speeches during the *Yamim Tovim*, and who seek to keep the sparks of the season alive.

It is my hope that you will find this of some value, and that each of us and all of us will continue to grow in every way – religiously, inter-personally and individually – to enhance ourselves, our families and our community, and to sanctify Hashem's Name in our world.

With best wishes for a healthy and productive year,

*Rabbi Moshe Hauer*



# Introduction: One!

“You are One and Your name is One, and who is like Your nation Israel, One nation in the land.”

“One” ironically implies different things. It implies both uniqueness and unity, togetherness and exclusivity. Exploring “One” allows us to focus on many of our questions and challenges as we engage in the *Teshuva* process: on our place and significance as individuals; on our connection to each other and to community; on our understanding of our connection to the one G-d; and on how we relate with clarity to the complexities of the world.

The essays presented here review our discussions during the *Yamim Noraim* of 5779 addressing these issues, and are meant to inspire and instruct us towards meaningful *Teshuva*.

May each of us be blessed with a year of life, health, meaning, and growth, as we move towards the most beautiful and perfect version of ourselves.



# Chana's Prayer: Standing Alone Before G-d

## *First Day of Rosh Hashana*

Can anyone really understand?

In today's *Haftarah* we read the story of Chana and the heartfelt prayer she offered in her hope of bearing a child. Chana's prayer was intense and genuine, and serves as the paradigm of prayer; indeed, the Talmud learned many of the laws of prayer from it (TB *Brachos* 31a-b). But Chana – even as she was offering this powerful prayer – was grossly misunderstood and misjudged by the greatest prophet and leader of the Jewish people at that time, by *Eli HaKohein*.

What confused Eli was that Chana was inaudibly mouthing her prayer. Eli was not used to this, and therefore assumed that she was intoxicated, that she had come to the Temple after over-indulging in food and drink, when in fact she had come to deliver one of history's most heartfelt, intense and effective *Tefillos*. He completely misread her.

This was not a new experience for Chana. Sadly, she was somewhat used to being misunderstood. After all, the distress that drove her to offer this prayer was her childlessness, a painful experience that profoundly saddened her, but that her husband could not understand. "Chana, why do you cry? Why do you not eat? Am I not better for you than ten sons?!" (Shmuel I, 1:8)

Chana's husband Elkana was a great man and a kind man. But he did not seem to even approach understanding Chana's anguish. Her wonderful husband did not understand her, and now the leader of the generation, the sage and *Kohein Gadol* Eli, did not understand her either. She was utterly alone.

This experience, this story, underscored what is perhaps the most profound element of *Tefillah*, of prayer: That it is indeed only G-d Himself Who can really understand us.

Fundamentally, we are alone. We may or we may not be surrounded by a caring spouse, children, friends, siblings or parents. Nevertheless, on the most profound level, we are alone. There is only One who truly understands us, One who enters our hearts and sees what fills them, and He is the One to Whom we pour out our hearts in prayer. The people around us will not really "get it". And so, we would do best to learn how to turn

towards G-d.

And it is from Chana, from lonely Chana, that we learn exactly how to do that. We learn from Chana to pray silently, inaudibly, so that only G-d can hear. We learn from Chana that the genuineness of prayer corresponds to the intimacy of that prayer with G-d. We stand before G-d and think of Him alone.

Thus, *Rav Yosef Karo*, the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, in *Beit Yosef* OC 141, cites a *Zohar* that explains the practice of praying inaudibly. The *Zohar* states that a prayer is only heard by the one who hears it first. If one prays audibly, then that prayer is heard by the other person and never makes it to G-d's ears.

Ideas like this are of course not to be taken superficially. And as we reflect on this idea, we can certainly explain it in rational terms: Our prayers are heard by G-d when we stand before Him, when He is the absolutely clear destination of our prayers, of our words and thoughts. But all too often, when we are in the presence of others, when our words enter their ears on the way to G-d's – so to speak – then those words may not have been truly addressed to G-d to begin with.

Yes, the genuineness of prayer corresponds to the intimacy of that prayer with G-d. We stand before G-d and think of Him alone.

This may indeed be the meaning of this story of Chana, this strange combination of genuine, intense prayer, and complete misunderstanding and misjudgment by man. The two are deeply related. Chana was intent on praying to G-d. Her prayer was shared with Him in utter silence; only G-d could hear. Her prayer was offered with no attention to the people observing her; in fact, her prayer confused those around her, people who – as Eli's successor, the prophet Shmuel was told (Shmuel I, 16:7) – see only with their eyes, and do not – as G-d – see to the heart. But what man thought did not matter; she was standing before G-d!

Indeed, it matters not what anyone else sees or thinks.

The *Kotzker Rebbe* was known to have said: “If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you.” Our genuineness is created by a true sense of self. The awareness of others who watch us makes our own selves go AWOL.

Indeed, there were *Mussar* masters and student, such as those of the school of Novardok, and Chassidic masters and students, such as those

of the school of Kotzk, who would sometimes act specifically in a way that man could not respect, that seemed unusual to man, in order to reinforce for themselves that it was only G-d that mattered, only G-d that would get them right. They were motivated to avoid spending their lives trying to please man, to pass muster in his eyes.

The Talmud (TB *Brachos* 28b) tells the story of the sage *Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai*, who, as he lay on his deathbed, was asked by his students for a final blessing. He responded with the prayer that יהא מורא שמים עליכם במורא בשר ודם, “May the fear of heaven be upon you like the fear of man.” His students were astounded - “That is all?! Isn’t the fear of G-d to be immeasurably greater?” To which their sage teacher replied, הלואי, “I wish that our fear of G-d would approach our fear of man. Indeed, when a person contemplates doing something wrong, they often look this way and that to make sure nobody is watching them. G-d’s seeing them does not seem to concern them at all.”

This perspective is so fundamental as to be shared in the very first paragraph of the Code of Jewish Law, the *Shulchan Aruch*. The *Shulchan Aruch* begins by guiding us to live life as someone who is in the presence of a great king, such that even in the privacy of our own room we should conduct ourselves with modesty and dignity, as one who lives in the presence of G-d. And then, it proceeds to warn us, do not allow people’s opinions to influence you, people who would size you up and put you down for what you believe in and what you do.

We must begin by living before G-d, not before man.

Imagine for ourselves if we were here, in this room, but invisible to others. If nobody could see us, what would we do differently? We would almost certainly not be wearing these uncomfortable shoes! But there are so many other things we would not be doing. Our world – free from being judged by others – would be very different. All those efforts that we make to impress others, to appear in a way acceptable and respected by others, could be put aside, and replaced by working to be true to G-d and to ourselves.

Perhaps that is why specifically on Rosh Hashanah we pray more audibly. It is ironically on this day, the day that we read the story of Chana that teaches us the rule that we need to pray inaudibly as if only before G-d, that we are actually accustomed to breaking that rule and praying slightly aloud (see OC 101:3; 682:9)!

It is indeed on this Day of Judgment that we realize that we stand truly before G-d, and only before G-d. It is on this Day of Judgment that we realize - as Chana experienced - how man will never get it, will never understand fully what is going inside of me. Man - who sees with eyes - does not really see who I am. Only G-d - who sees to the heart - does. And thus, with the power of realization of our standing alone in the presence of G-d, we may raise our voices in a manner utterly un-self-conscious relative to those around us, because it is G-d alone before Whom we stand, utterly alone, and completely confident in His true understanding.

Yes, from Chana we learn that to pray one needs to stand alone before G-d. Yet usually we can only stand before G-d as part of the world, and so we are necessarily aware of those around us, of the *ציבור*, the community of which we are a part. Thus, we must pray silently, focusing in on G-d while standing within a group. Yet today, on Rosh Hashanah, each of us is a world of its own; each of us stands before G-d on our own, *בבקרה*, *רועה עדרו*, as the shepherd examines the individual sheep of his flock. On Rosh Hashanah our prayers do not melt in - in a sense - with those of the community. We stand alone before G-d. We stand in a room filled with people, each of whom stands today - especially - in his or her own world. We can pray aloud because we are oblivious to anyone else when we stand alone in His presence.

Rav Shraga Feivel Mendelowitz was a deeply passionate man, very alive and intensely dedicated to prayer. He was the principal of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, which - as many yeshivas - had an exceptionally lengthy davening on Rosh Hashanah, and therefore had a break for people to have *Kiddush* and a bit to eat before the sounding of the *Shofar*. One year, while everyone went out for *Kiddush*, Rav Shraga Feivel stayed in, and was pacing the floors of the *Bais HaMedrash*, intently and uncharacteristically. One student, Yehoshua Geldzahler, had stayed behind, and approached his *rebbe* with concern. The *rebbe* looked up and exclaimed in sadness, "I cannot proceed to the *Shofar*. My heart is completely closed!"

The student replied by sharing something written by *Rav Zadok HaKohein*, whose writings he had been introduced to by Rav Shraga Feivel. There is a *Bracha* we make as we describe the *Shofar*: *כי אתה שומע קול שופר ומאזין*. *תרועה ואין דומה לך*. "For you G-d are incomparable in your listening to the sound of the *Shofar*." What does this mean?

Explained *Rav Zadok*: G-d hears the broken hearts of people, even when that heart is so covered, so buried within them. Even when man himself



cannot sense himself crying out to G-d, G-d hears the inaudible cry, the cry from the depths of the Jewish soul. This cry is like the blast of the *Shofar*, unarticulated, as even the person from whom the cry is emitted may not know how to express it. And only G-d hears that cry, because *האלקים יראה ללבב*, only G-d sees to the heart, *ואין דומה לך*, and in this He is incomparable.

When we stand before G-d alone, He hears that which is sometimes so deep down in our hearts that even we are unaware of it.

Hearing this idea, Rav Shraga Feivel came back to himself, came back to life. “Now”, he said, “I can proceed to the *Shofar*.”

Yes, this is Rosh Hashana. On this day, the anniversary of creation, imagine yourself as Adam or Chava in the Garden of Eden, as the only people in the world, where passing man’s muster is nothing, and all that matters is that we please G-d; where we stand before G-d on our own, in our own world. Where he hears our voice, our lone voice, even the utterance of our heart, as if it is the only voice in the whole world.

That is our reality. For now, we are all alone before Him. Nobody else matters. And before Him, what is deeply embedded in our hearts is given the chance to emerge. He sees into our hearts, even farther and deeper than we ourselves can see. He understands us. We stand alone before Him, and therefore we are not at all alone.

May He hear the sound of our *Shofar*, of our simple, plaintive cry.

# תְּרוּעַת מֶלֶךְ: Parts of One Whole

## Second Day of Rosh Hashana

There is an old and worn story about the *Tzaddik* of Jerusalem, Rabbi Aryeh Levin. He visited the doctor together with his wife, and when their turn came, the doctor asked what was wrong. “My wife’s foot hurts us,” responded Rav Aryeh, or “Our foot hurts”, according to another version.

It is a simple story and a beautiful story, but it is also just a small example of how he lived his life, of his capacity to truly identify with other people. He was first and foremost a wonderful husband and father, with his charity and care beginning at home, as it must. But he was altogether a giant of kindness, and it is about his kindness beyond his home that more is known and that we can share. He visited the sick, and he was the rabbi – indeed the father and the brother – of the prisoners. Simply put, he took it upon himself to do everything he could to relieve the loneliness of others, to try to make it that nobody would feel alone, to make every person’s ache, pain or difficulty his own.

Indeed, that is the Torah’s teaching about compassion and caring. אַתָּה עֵינֵי עָנִי הֵעֵנִי עִמָּךְ – הוּי מִסְתַּכֵּל בְּעַצְמְךָ כְּאִילוֹ אַתָּה עֵנִי. When one encounters a poor person, he is to view himself as poor. His poverty is yours, his situation is yours. “Our foot hurts.”

How did Rav Aryeh Levin visit the sick?

*“It was Reb Aryeh’s practice to go to the hospitals of Jerusalem every Friday, to visit the sick who were confined there. First he would go and speak with the nurses, to find out from them which patients received no visitors. At the beds of these forgotten souls whom no relatives came to see he would linger, caressing each one’s hand and giving him words of encouragement and cheer. He would sit for hours near the beds of the sick, especially at Bikur Cholim hospital in Jerusalem.”*

*“He was also a frequent visitor at hospitals for lepers, including a hospital in Bethlehem, where most of the patients were Arabs. Reb Aryeh began this holy practice after he had found a woman weeping bitterly at the Western Wall. Reb Aryeh asked her what made her cry so intensely. She told him that her child had no cure, and was locked up in the leper hospital in Jerusalem. He immediately decided to visit the young child, and when he arrived, all the patients burst into tears. It had been years, since they had*

*the privilege to see any visitor from the outside world.”*

And to the prisoners:

*“Reb Aryeh’s eyes radiated love and comradeship, and he spoke soft and soothing words of encouragement to those imprisoned. Even the most stubborn prisoners succumbed to his simple, untainted love for his fellow man.”*

*“In the doorway he would stand a few seconds, scanning the faces in the room looking for “new guests”. When there were any - he went to them first. He took a new inmate’s hand between both of his and caressed it on the back, as though seeking to caress, calm and reassure the spirit of the man. Difficult as it may be to believe or explain, his face, lined with wrinkles and adorned with a silvery beard and curly side-locks, radiated a boundless benevolence, a feeling of goodness. Never before did I see the face of so good-hearted a man.”*

He cared incredibly deeply for others, for the prisoners, for everyone whom he encountered. He seemed to truly experience their lives as his own.

I am sure that many have had the opportunity to visit the Museum of the Underground, the former British prison in the heart of Jerusalem, in the Russian Compound. It is very accessible, and very instructive. One of the displays is of the room that was set aside as the “shul” for the prisoners, and it contains a memorial to Rav Aryeh. It is a beautiful tribute, and an example of magnificent *Kiddush Hashem*, accomplished through a Jew truly feeling connected to another.

Yaakov Kotik was one of the underground fighters who was imprisoned at the Russian Compound prison and was sentenced to death. This is how he tells his story:

*“The very first Sabbath after the verdict was given, he came to see me in my isolation, in the condemned men’s cell. He just came in, took my hand between the two of his and said, “They will not succeed in hanging a Jew in Jerusalem!” After praying with me, he put a book of Psalms in my hands. ‘Recite this,’ he told me, ‘Say the words constantly and have absolute faith that you will not go to the gallows.’ ‘But rabbi’, I answered, ‘At some time in his life everyone must go, sooner or later.’ ‘No,’ he exclaimed, ‘You have to believe that you will not hang.’ He spoke quietly, but with so much faith that he infused me with the belief that I would remain alive. A sense of relief came over me and my life alone in that condemned cell became easier. It no longer oppressed me.*

*Well, a week after the verdict was given, the warden informed me that the military commander had commuted my sentenced to life in prison. The very next Sabbath after the good Rabbi had visited me, I was privileged to greet and welcome him together with the other Jewish inmates. I do not have the literary gift or power to describe his sheer happiness. He kissed me. For a very long time he would not my let my hand out from his and he said with me the blessing of "HaGomeil" that people recite when they come safely through a danger to their life.*

*When the British left and I was set free, it was the Sabbath day. I went to the home of a friend, washed myself up a bit and changed into ordinary clothes. Then I hurried off to visit our good Rabbi. We reached his home toward evening, and found him in the midst of the third meal of the Sabbath. He sprung up toward me and kissed me on the forehead with tears in his eyes, and I cried a bit too. Then he took out a bottle of wine. "Look", he said, "this bottle I bought on the day that your death sentence was commuted. I made a resolution to drink this on the day of your release." We went out to go to the synagogue and whomever the good Rabbi met he stopped him to tell him, "Share in my happiness!" The handshakes and congratulations were endless."*

That is a human being who understood viscerally what it means to "Love your fellow as yourself." Indeed, "Our foot hurts." "Our heart aches."

*"In 1965 (5725), Rabbi Levin was honored at a ceremony assembled by the veteran underground resistance fighters from the Mandate period. Timed to take place on his eightieth birthday, it was held in the courtyard of the old central prison in the Russian Compound. Reb Aryeh stood up to speak. He stated, "The importance of this assembly is that it has brought friends together. Moreover, this good meeting is taking place on the other side of the prison bars... It particularly makes my heart glad to see the families of the prisoners, especially the little children, since I have always loved small children." Then he added, "I do not know if I shall be privileged to be with you again like this. All I ask of you is this: Tell your children: There was an old Jew in Jerusalem who loved us so very much!"*

*With that, he burst into tears, and among the thousands of people there, not a dry eye was to be found."*

What a beautiful vision of caring. Imagine our world, our community, our homes and families, when we look towards each other with that kind of care and love, when we feel for each other, like one.

This talk is dedicated to all those who would benefit from this kind of compassion; those who would benefit from encountering others to whom they are not invisible, and from encountering others who are not uncomfortable being around them, who avert their gaze because of their discomfort. It is dedicated to all those who would benefit from a loving gaze, from a hand that clasps theirs. In other words, it is dedicated to all of us, although perhaps to some more than others. It is dedicated to making us feel connected, like one, not alone in the world, not alone in our community, in our shul, or even in our home. It is dedicated to loving our fellow man like ourselves.

We are blessed to have amongst us people who – like Rav Aryeh – look at others, at spouse, sibling, neighbor or friend, and see in them a part of themselves, experiencing both their pain and their joy as their own. They simply never give another the arm’s-length look of a stranger.

We can all be that person. We must all be that person.

The great *Alter of Kelm*, the master teacher of the *Mussar* movement, shared the following message with his students in anticipation of *Rosh Hashana*.

*“On this day, we have the task of declaring G-d as our King, אמרו לפני מלכות. But when we consider any human kingdom we understand that it can only be maintained to the extent that the king’s subjects are bound together like one in their service of the king, בהתאסף ראשי עם יחד שבטי ישראל. Therefore, taught the Alter, it is incumbent upon us as we declare G-d as our king, to make ourselves One, to commit with all of our being to the Mitzvah of loving our fellow man as ourself. How can we ask of G-d רעשו כולם אגודה אחת Your service, when we ourselves are not bound together? Each of us can and should look around at our immediate circle, as well as at our neighbors and community, and see ourselves as pieces of a single whole.”*

And perhaps to add a step from where the *Alter* left off. Yes, as subjects of our king, מלכינו, of our king, we need to be unified, יחד שבטי ישראל. But, even more so, as children of our father in Heaven, אבינו, we certainly want to present as one, as children of the same father, dedicated deeply to each other. As *Rambam* wrote (*Hilchos Matnos Aniyim* ch.10):

*All the Jewish people are as brothers (and sisters), as it says, ‘בנים אתם לד’, אלקיכם, ‘You are children of G-d.’ If a brother will not have compassion, then who will?*

And it is thus natural that we learn from that same verse that calls us children of the same father, the prohibition of *לא תגודדו*, that we must not allow ourselves to be divided from each other; that we will stand together as one flesh, as one person, as one family, caring deeply for each other. “Our foot hurts.”

Recently I met a man who passed through the shul for a *simcha*. He was with us for *Mincha* and *Maariv*, and listened attentively to the short Torah thought shared in between. After *Maariv*, he introduced himself. He was clearly a Holocaust survivor, and he was proudly here to celebrate a grandchild’s *simcha*. He told me that he was not a Torah scholar, but that he had one Torah thought that he liked to share.

When Moshe was laid in the basket in the Nile, he was found by the daughter of Pharaoh. The Torah records that she opened the basket and “saw the child, and behold a young man was crying.” The shift from describing the “child” to the “young man” troubles the commentaries who offer different approaches. Remarkably, one Midrashic approach is that it was not Moshe the child, but his older brother Aaron who was crying, as he stood nearby and watched. Indeed the *Baal HaTurim* notes that the gematria, the numerical value of the words *נער בוכה* equals “זה אהרן הכהן”.

This begs the question however, what then is meant by her reaction, “This is clearly a Jewish child”? Explained my friend the survivor: The daughter of Pharaoh was noting that as this boy was not just left in the basket, that his brother stood waiting, watching and weeping for his fate, then this must be a Jewish child. After all, it was Aaron who more than eighty years later, when their sister Miriam was suffering from *Tzora’as*, told Moshe: “It is as if half of our own flesh has been consumed.” Our foot hurts. Our heart aches.

That is what it means to be a Jew. To love your fellow like yourself. To cry over your brother’s pain.

The most celebrated story of human suffering is told in the book of Job. It is an unusual story, where Job is singled out for his goodness, faith and kindness. The great antagonist, the Satan, challenges G-d, suggesting that Job is good only because of the charmed life that he lives, that were he to experience suffering he would turn against G-d. And so G-d indeed brings suffering upon Job, allowing the Satan to do anything he wants to Job – with the exception of hurting him physically. This begins the suffering of Job, as he loses his property and his children, R”L. But Job reacts stoically and faithfully, uttering the ultimate words of faith, “G-d

has given, G-d has taken; may G-d's name be blessed.”

The Satan remains unimpressed, telling G-d that Job has remained faithful only because he himself has been spared: ואלם שלח נא ידך וגע אל עצמו. “G-d, if you would reach out and harm his flesh and his bone, he will certainly turn against You.” And indeed G-d allows Satan that next step, to inflict suffering upon Job's own body. Job accepts this suffering as well for a time. His friends join him and sit with him in silence, knowing that the pain is so great. But finally Job breaks, and words of anger towards G-d tumble from his lips.

It is fascinating and painfully instructive how this sequence is described. “See what happens if you touch his bone and his flesh.” That expression, עצמו ובשרו, is used in the Torah specifically in reference to relatives! Lavan said to Yaakov, “אך עצמי ובשרי אתה”, “You are my flesh and bone!” Yet Job's reaction is fundamentally different when his actual flesh and bone are struck, fundamentally different than when he loses his flesh and bone, his children, R”L. Here lies the failure of Job, that despite his goodness and kindness, there remained an empathy gap, an inability to truly see the other as part of himself. And perhaps this is why after his outburst his “friends” switch from empathetic silence to words, words that are ultimately characterized by the Sages (TB *Bava Metzia* 58b) as the greatest example of אונאת דברים, of failed empathy, לא כמו שאמרנו חבריו. Where one does not see the other as himself, proper sensitivity is lost. And that loss of empathy is a two-way street; when we do not feel it towards others, they will not feel it towards us.

There is a verse we will recite in the *Mussaf* prayer:

לא הביט און ביעקב ולא ראה עמל בישראל ד' אלקיו עמו ותרועת מלך בו.

The verse is recited as one of the ten that refer to G-d's kingdom, תרועת מלך. But the reference is to kingdom, not to the *Teruah*. Rashi indeed explains that the term *Teruah* as used in this verse refers not to the *Shofar* blast, the broken *Shofar* blast that is identified with this day of Rosh Hashana, the *Yom Teruah*, but it is rather referring to G-d's closeness and connection to us, לשון חיבה וריעות. He finds no fault in us because He is so close to us. How can you find fault in yourself? In someone who is so dear to you as yourself? (Indeed the term for bribery in Hebrew is שוחד, based on שהוא חד, in that it identifies the recipient of the bribe with its giver, making them as one and therefore making him unable to judge him objectively.)



This may indeed be the meaning of the *Teruah*, of the broken blast.

Rav Hutner explained that the term for friendship, for ריעות, comes from the same root as the *Teruah*, shattered and broken, תרועם בשבט ברזל ככלי. The ultimate source and realization of friendship is the sense that we are all really one, pieces of one whole. As one man with one heart.

The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Nedarim* 1:9) suggests that jealousy and revenge are avoided when there is that total sense of identity between people, as the left hand does not take revenge against the right. “Our foot hurts.”

This idea, this ideal of identifying with the other as one, can be found in the call of the *Shofar*. We sound the *Shofar* on the anniversary of creation, when we were created as one person, one original whole that includes us all. We will sound the *Shofar*, first a single long blast, a *Tekiah*, uninterrupted, signifying unity, that we start off as one, all descended from G-d, and all descended from one man, all unified at the core. Then the broken blast, recognizing that the one has splintered into many.

- That man and his wife are really one, just that they were separated from each other, and they spend their life finding each other and building true relationship, “Our foot hurts.”
- That human kind all originates from one man and one woman, that we are one family, but have just separated from each other. That it is as if half of our own flesh has been consumed.
- That in fact we are all and will always be parts of a whole, and will ultimately be brought back together to be that whole. ועשו כולם אגודה אחת.

And as we sound the *Shofar*, the whole and the broken sounds, we recall the binding of Isaac and feel that complete bond with G-d that his action expressed, and that makes G-d feel as one with us, unable to find fault with us. תרועת מלך.

Mrs. Esther Tendler was a woman who my wife and I admired very much. She was an incredible mix of idealism and practicality, a profoundly “real” person. Most impressive to us was the magnificent family she built, some 14 children, and her laser-focus on giving priority to them, to spending time with them, dedicating more of her Fridays to reading to her children than to making them elaborate meals. Eye on the prize.

Her son, Rabbi Eliyahu Tendler, told an unforgettable story. When he was around forty years old, serving as an educator in Atlanta, Georgia, he was struck by kidney failure and needed to go on dialysis. The treatment



was several hours a day, many days a week, and it was literally and figuratively draining. After the first day, he was speaking with his mother, and he expressed his sadness that during the treatments he was too weak to read anything, to learn anything, that even listening to a recording of a Torah class was hard for him. The treatment room had television screens on all the walls, so that patients could keep themselves busy that way, but as a person who had grown up in his parents home this was not something he was used to, and not something he wanted to get used to at a time like this. He was so sick, he needed Hashem's help, and did not feel good about how his time would be spent. His mother reassured him that everything would be okay, but he hung up not quite sure how it would be okay.

The next day he sat in the chair for treatment at the usual time, and after a few minutes his cellphone rang. It was his mother. She called to talk to him, to just "shmooze" while he was having the treatment. She stayed on the phone with him for the hours of the treatment.

She did the same thing the next time and the next time, calling him and speaking with him for hours each time, several times a week, for the many months of his dialysis.

When was the last time we spoke to our children for two hours? Could we? She did, she showed her children that "our foot hurts", that I am with you, that your challenge is mine too, that I am with you all the way. "*Teruah*". We are one, we are completely together.

That Is the person that we can be. A Jew, a father or a mother, a spouse, a child, a neighbor, a friend – who loved us so very much. Who was like part of us, who understood that we are part of one whole, broken apart but really originating in one and ending in one. Like one man with one heart.

Let us look towards each other, and act towards each other, with love and care. Let us be ריעים, friends that are so dear, that feel towards each other as parts of a single whole. Our foot hurts. Our heart aches. None of us stands alone.

# **Teshuva:** **For the Individual; For the Community** *Shabbos Shuva*

The *Chazon Ish*, Rav Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* in 1933, and chose to live in the new *Yishuv*, in the fledgling community of Bnei Brak. He had published many highly respected Halachic works, all of them anonymously, and had committed himself to never occupy a formal rabbinic position. Yet he was immensely respected as a sage and a *Tzaddik*, and so when he appeared at the small *Bais Yosef* yeshiva in Bnei Brak for the *davening* on Rosh Hashana, his presence generated great excitement, and members of the yeshiva and its leadership asked the *Chazon Ish* if he would address them before the sounding of the *Shofar*. The *Chazon Ish* was not in the habit of delivering lectures or speeches, and so he refused. They continued to ask, and finally the *Chazon Ish* partially relented, saying that he would not give a speech, but if there were those who wished, he would study something with them in a side room.

When word spread amongst the students and attendees, everyone piled into the side room, and the *Chazon Ish* read to them a passage from the end of *Pirkei Avos*, Ethics of the Fathers:

”אמר רבי יוסי בן קסמא, פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך ופגע בי אדם אחד, ונתן לי שלום, והחזרתי לו שלום. אמר לי: רבי, מאיזה מקום אתה? אמרתי לו: מעיר גדולה של חכמים ושל סופרים אני. אמר לי: רבי רצונך שתדור עמנו במקומנו ואני אתן לך אלף אלפים דנרי זהב ואבנים טובות ומרגליות? אמרתי לו: אם אתה נותן לי כל כסף וזהב ואבנים טובות ומרגליות שבעולם, איני דר אלא במקום תורה. וכן כתוב בספר תהלים על ידי דוד מלך ישראל: ”טוב לי תורת פיך מאלפי זהב וכסף.”

*Said Rabbi Yossi the son of Kisma: Once, I was traveling and I encountered a man. He greeted me and I returned his greetings. Said he to me: “Rabbi, where are you from?” Said I to him: “From a great city of sages and scholars.” Said he to me: “Rabbi, would you like to dwell with us in our place? I will give you a million dinars of gold, precious stones and pearls.” Said I to him: “If you were to give me all the silver, gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would not dwell anywhere but in a place of Torah. Indeed, so is written in the book of psalms by David the king of Israel: ‘I prefer the Torah of Your mouth over thousands in gold and silver’ (Psalms 119:72)*

The *Chazon Ish* read this, and then repeated the line: איני דר אלא במקום תורה,

“I will live only in a place of Torah.” He continued for some time, simply repeating these words over and over again.

The *Chazon Ish* was communicating two ideas to the assembled: First, he was making a statement of values, that nothing is more precious – no material gain or value, all of the silver and the gold in the world – than Torah. And second, he was expressing a dream and a commitment, that from this small group would grow a community, a society that would encourage and nurture others to live by that statement of values, a community and society where Torah would be the most precious value.

It is worth considering what precisely is the meaning and the critical value of a “place of Torah”?

**Simply put, a מקום תורה, a place of Torah, is a “community of values”.**

What we should consider today is that the mandate to live in a מקום תורה, a community of values, may in fact be essential to the path to *Teshuva*.

*Teshuva* can be seen in different ways. On the one hand, we can look at it as a piecemeal process, where we address and attempt to correct specific wrongs and flaws within our behaviors and our selves. This kind of careful self-correction is what we refer to in the first words of the blessing of *Teshuva* that is part of the daily *Amidah* prayer: השיבונו אלינו לתורתך וקרבנו מלכינו לעבודתך; “Lead us back, our Father, to Your Torah, and draw us near, our King, to Your service.”

On the other hand, there is a more broad and general direction to *Teshuva*, and that is the return to Hashem, the creation or restoration of a connection with G-d Himself, what we refer to in that same blessing when we ask, החזירנו בתשובה שלימה לפניך, “Restore us in perfect repentance to Your presence.” This aspect of *Teshuva* is not focused on internal self-correction, what we usually refer to as self-improvement, but rather on bringing ourselves closer to G-d. And it is often this aspect of *Teshuva* that looms largest, as we saw in our reading of this morning’s *Haftarah* (Hosea 14:2): שובה ישראל עד ד’ אלקיך, “Return Israel unto Hashem your G-d,” and as we read from the Torah (Devarim 30:2) last Shabbos, ושב עד ד’ אלקיך, “You shall return unto Hashem your G-d.” Likewise, the MABI”T (16th Century sage of Safed, Rabbi Moses ben Joseph di Trani), in his classic *Bais Elokim*, opens his discussion of *Teshuva* by defining it concisely as קריבה להשם מריחוק החטא, “Coming close to G-d following the distance created by sin.”

But returning to Hashem or coming close to Him are rather vague con-

cepts. Yes, we all recognize that we can live with a greater or lesser sense of Hashem's presence in our lives, both as we see His hand in our lives, and as we live our lives according to His will. But assuming "connection" and "relationship" to the invisible, overwhelmingly great, Master of the Universe, seems a bit presumptuous. In fact, our Sages were bothered by precisely this issue.

The Torah (Devarim 11:22) speaks of attaching ourselves to Hashem, וכי אפשר לו, regarding which the Sages (see Rashi there) asked, "How can a person possibly achieve attachment to G-d if He is referred to as an all-consuming fire?!"

Our Sages therefore understood that this *Mitzvah* requires us to create real attachments and connections to people who represent that which is G-dly, i.e. the *Middos* (character traits) and the Torah which represent G-d's word as seen in the world. Thus, it is incumbent upon us to develop associations and relationships that fulfill this *Mitzvah*, creating social and communal attachments that will have a real impact on our own personalities.

As the *Rambam* (*Hilchos Dei'os* Ch. 6) wrote:

“דרך ברייתו של אדם להיות נמשך בדעותיו ובמעשיו אחר ריעיו וחביריו ונוהג כמנהג אנשי מדינתו לפיכך צריך אדם להתחבר לצדיקים ולישב אצל החכמים תמיד כדי שילמוד ממעשיהם ויתרחק מן הרשעים ההולכים בחשך כדי שלא ילמוד ממעשיהם הוא ששלמה אומר הולך את חכמים יחכם ורועה כסילים ירוע ואומר אשרי האיש וגו' וכן אם היה במדינה שמנהגותיה רעים ואין אנשיה הולכים בדרך ישרה ילך למקום שאנשיה צדיקים ונוהגים בדרך טובים ואם היו כל המדינות שהוא יודעם ושומע שמועתן נוהגים בדרך לא טובה כמו זמנינו או שאינו יכול ללכת למדינה שמנהגותיה טובים מפני הגייסות או מפני החולי ישב לבדו יחידי כענין שנאמר ישב בדד וידום ואם היו רעים וחטאים שאין מניחים אותו לישיב במדינה אא"כ נתערב עמהן ונוהג במנהגם הרע יצא למערות ולחוחים ולמדברות ואל ינהיג עצמו בדרך חטאים כענין שנאמר מי יתנני במדבר מלון אורחים:

מצות עשה להדבק בחכמים ותלמידיהם כדי ללמוד ממעשיהם כענין שנאמר ובו תדבק וכי אפשר לאדם להדבק בשכינה אלא כך אמרו חכמים בפירוש מצוה זו הדבק בחכמים ותלמידיהם לפיכך צריך אדם להשתדל שישא בת תלמיד חכם וישא בתו לתלמיד חכם ולאכול ולשתות עם תלמידי חכמים ולעשות פרקמטיא לתלמיד חכם ולהתחבר להן בכל מיני חבור שנאמר ולדבקה בו וכן צוו חכמים ואמרו והוי מתאבק בעפר רגליהם ושותה בצמא את דבריהם:

*It is natural for a man's character and actions to be influenced by his friends and associates and for him to follow the local norms of behavior.*

Therefore, he should associate with the righteous and be constantly in the company of the wise, so as to learn from their deeds. Conversely, he should keep away from the wicked who walk in darkness, so as not to learn from their deeds. This is [implied by] Solomon's statement (Mishlei 13:20): "He who walks with the wise will become wise, while one who associates with fools will suffer." Similarly, it (Tehillim 1:1) states: "Happy is the man who has not followed the advice of the wicked."

A person who lives in a place where the norms of behavior are evil and the inhabitants do not follow the straight path should move to a place where the people are righteous and follow the ways of the good. If all the places with which he is familiar and of which he hears reports follow improper paths, as in our times, or if he is unable to move to a place where the patterns of behavior are proper, because of [the presence of] bands of raiding troops, or for health reasons, he should remain alone in seclusion as it (Eichah 3:28) states: "Let him sit alone and be silent." If they are wicked and sinful and do not allow him to reside there unless he mingle with them and follow their evil behavior, he should go out to caves, thickets, and deserts [rather than] follow the paths of sinners as it (Yirmiyahu 9:1) states: "Who will give me a lodging place for wayfarers, in the desert."

It is a positive commandment to cleave unto the wise and their disciples in order to learn from their deeds as it (Devarim 10:20) states: "and you will cling to Him." Our Sages [questioned the nature of this command for] is it possible for man to cling to the Divine Presence? They [resolved the difficulty,] explaining this commandment to mean: Cleave unto the wise and their disciples. Therefore, one should try to marry the daughter of a Torah Sage and marry his daughter to a Torah Sage, eat and drink with Sages, do business on behalf of Sages, and associate with them in all possible ways as it (Devarim 11:22) states: "to cling to Him." Similarly, our Sages have directed [us], saying: "Sit in the dust of their feet and drink in their words thirstily."

This is how we attach ourselves to G-d.

It is thus not a great leap to say that if *Teshuva* is to return to G-d, we must follow the path of one who wishes to attach themselves to G-d by attaching ourselves to a community of more G-dly people, such that we can learn from them and become more G-dly ourselves.

That is the value of being part of a מקום תורה, a place of Torah; to be part of a community of values, a community that grows and nurtures the right values within us.

So how are we going to fulfill this *Mitzvah* of *Teshuva*, of connection and attachment to G-d?

It would seem that we need to ask ourselves two fundamental questions. First, as individuals we must ask ourselves, are we fulfilling this *Mitzvah* by choosing the right friends, the right community or society? **Are we mindful to not simply choose people who we feel good around, but rather to choose to associate with people who being around them makes us good, people who bring out the best in us, who open new horizons for us in kindness and goodness, in spiritual matters, in Torah and Mitzvos?**

And second, as a community we must ask ourselves, are we creating an environment that is influencing people to do the right things? Is our communal environment encouraging or forcing its members to make the right or the wrong kinds of choices?

Let us consider both of these things, but we will start with the second. Let's discuss what it takes to construct a community of values, to improve the values of our community, and to make our community one that nurtures and builds the values of its members.

And let us not discuss this in the abstract, rather let us take it personally, viewing this less as a *Drasha*, a lecture, and more so as a congregational meeting. We must have a discussion about how we make ourselves a better community.

What are the values of community, its strengths and weaknesses, its power and effects?

## **A COMMUNITY OF CARING**

The first value of a community lies in the care it provides for its members. Last year on Rosh Hashana, we shared the following:

Community, connection to others, breeds hope. Isolation breeds despair. I will quote to you from a recent discussion of the subject.

*“To cite just one finding from among a growing body of medical research on this subject, Tyler VanderWeele of Harvard’s T. H. Chan School of Public Health recently published a study of 89,000 participants that found that some groups remain protected from the rising tide of despair and self-harm. Between 1996 and 2010, those who attended any religious service once a week or more were five times less likely to self-harm. There are straightfor-*

*ward reasons why religious practice protects. Church attendance is a social activity that protects people against loneliness and isolation.*

*(Aron Kheriaty, Dying of Despair, First Things – August 2017)”*

*Yes, from being in shul, from being part of community, we can gain hope. We are granted hope by each other, by the company of others, being noticed by others, being smiled at by others. This is part of the magic of community.*

*Yet many come out to join community and still feel alone.*

*I will tell you the saddest story.*

*A few years ago, a man in his thirties took his own life by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. After his death, his psychiatrist went with the medical examiner to the man’s apartment, where they found his diary. The last entry, written just hours before he died, said, “I’m going to walk to the bridge. If one person smiles at me on the way, I will not jump.”*

*Does this story surprise you? Do we realize the power we hold in our faces, in our smile, in our eye contact? וילכו שניהם יחדיו. The power of togetherness creates and sustains hope and life.”*

We surely all understand this primary value, the caring and attention that community positions us to provide each other.

Ironically, based on his version of a passage in the Talmud (TB *Sotah* 14a), the *Sefer Yere'im* (authored by the 12th Century Rabbi Elazar of Metz) explains the *Mitzvah* of לדבקה, of attaching ourselves to G-d, as being accomplished by adopting and emulating His caring behaviors:

ספר יראים סימן תז (ג)

”להדבק לשם. צוה הקב”ה שידבק האדם בדרכי המקום דכתיב (דברים י’ כ’) את ה’ אלהיך תירא אותו תעבוד ובו תדבק וכתיב (שם י”ג ה’) ובו תדבקון וכתיב (שם י”א כ”ב ול’ כ’) ולדבקה בו. ותניא בסוטה פ”א (י”ד א’) וכי אפשר לו לאדם לידבק בשכינה והלא כבר נאמר כי ה’ אלהיך אש אוכלה הוא אלא הדבק בדרכי המקום מה הב”ה מבקר חולים דכתיב וירא ה’ אליו אף אתה בקר חולים וכו’ והדבק בחכמים ותלמידיהם.”

*G-d commanded man to attach himself to G-d’s manner of conduct, as it is written (Devarim 10:20): “Hashem your G-d you shall fear, you shall worship Him and to Him you shall cleave....” We are thus taught in the Talmud (TB Sotah 14a): “Is it even possible for a person to cleave to G-d? Wasn’t it said that Hashem your G-d is a consuming fire? Rather attach yourself to the G-d’s manner of conduct. As He visits the sick so shall you... And you should also connect to sages and their students.*



Thus it is his understanding that we attach ourselves to G-d both by acting in the caring manner that is the hallmark of community, and by becoming part of a community of values.

## **COMMUNAL PRESSURE**

It feels good to be part of a supportive and caring community. But there are times when community is a source of stress rather than support, of pressure rather than caring.

As we all know and experience, it is frequently the case that to truly “belong”, to truly feel and be treated as part of the community, we need to do certain things, be a certain way. If that is the case, then we are never really comforted and secure in our community. Instead, we are always working to earn and to maintain the status that entitles us to be cared for. That does not work.

We truly feel community when we experience unconditional love from community. And a community’s unconditional love is not sufficiently expressed by offering its kindness and services to everyone unconditionally. It is experienced when its members feel that to truly “belong”, they do not need to meet certain standards, to walk the specific walk.

The city of Sodom gained infamy for its lack of hospitality. The Talmud (TB *Sanhedrin* 109b) notes that they did indeed “welcome” guests in Sodom, however they had a specific bed that was reserved for those guests. The “Sodom bed” was one size for all, and if they did not fit the bed exactly, they would be made to fit. The tall would be shortened, and the short would be stretched.

While the physical description of the Sodom bed sounds like something out of a medieval torture chamber, we must ask ourselves if the welcome we afford people into our community is that much different. Does our “welcome” not force those who wish to be a part of our community to similarly stretch themselves, or cut away parts of themselves, just to fit in? And while it is the role of a shul to clearly and unambiguously stand for its true and eternal values, the criteria of “belonging” often have little relationship to those values. How much effort and expense is invested, how much debt – both financial and emotional – is accrued in the effort to “belong”?

One of the unique qualities of our shul community is that it is more diverse than others. We welcome as a positive value a variety of age groups,



backgrounds, and levels of knowledge and observance. So while I am thrilled that we are not a “boutique” shul, where everyone shares an age range, education and minivan model, we have more – both as a shul and as a community – to do in getting rid of our own invisible version of the Sodom bed. I think that we can be quite intimidating to a newcomer, and make it challenging to easily feel that sense of belonging.

To paraphrase President George Washington’s famous letter to the Jewish community of Newport, we must move beyond a model of tolerance, “as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.” We must not be simply polite. We need to be driven to see beyond our little groups, by a desire to be together with others, and not to simply put up with them.

Rav Kook wrote that a truly free person is faithful to his essence, *בן חורין*, *באמן לעצמיותו*, driven to achieve and live according to true and essential values, rather than slavishly adhering to the superficial expectations of others. As we shared on Rosh Hashana, this concern was profound enough for the great sage *Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai*, as he lay on his deathbed, to bless his astonished students that *יהא מורא שמים עליכם כמורא בשר ודם*, “May the fear of heaven be upon you like the fear of man.” And while the students were surprised by the simplicity of the blessing (see TB *Brachos* 28b), their sage teacher knew otherwise, saying *הלוואי*, “I wish that our fear of G-d would approach our fear of man.”

*Rav Yochanan Ben Zakkai* understood well the power of communal pressures to distract and to distort our sense of reality.

Cornell University Economist Robert Frank has developed a concept he calls “relative prosperity”, arguing that rather than objective wealth or comfort, it is what people around us spend that defines our level of satisfaction. Thus, he found in his experience in the Peace Corps in Nepal:

*“My one-room house had no electricity, no heat, no indoor toilet, no running water. The local diet offered little variety and virtually no meat. Yet, although my living conditions in Nepal were a bit startling at first, the most salient feature of my experience there was how quickly they came to seem normal. Within a matter of weeks, I lost all sense of impoverishment. Indeed, my \$40 monthly stipend was more than most others had in my village, and with it I experienced a feeling of prosperity that I have recaptured only in recent years.”*

Consider the following from the same economist - who doesn’t even live

in a *frum* neighborhood:

*“Although there is scant evidence that middle-income families in America resent the spending of top earners, they are nonetheless affected by it in tangible ways. Additional spending by the rich shifts the frame of reference that defines what the near rich consider necessary or desirable, so they too spend more. In turn, this shifts the frame of reference for those just below the near rich, and so on, all the way down the income ladder. Such expenditure cascades help explain why the median new house built in the U.S. is now about 50 percent larger than its counterpart from 30 years ago, even though the median real wage has risen little since then.”*

Dr. David Pelcovitz tells the story of someone who came to see him, a Wall Street executive, simply broken-hearted about his annual bonus. The bonus was \$750,000! But it wasn't equal to some of his peers.

Yes, community can create a wonderful support network of caring. But it can also create a world of social pressure, of elevated expectations, that is nothing short of oppressive.

## **COMMUNAL VALUES**

We noted above the Rambam's words encouraging the individual to choose a strong community of values. Rambam's opening line is a bit provocative, and worthy of exploration. Yes, "It is natural for a man's character and actions to be influenced by his friends and associates and for him to follow the local norms of behavior." But is it healthy? Isn't this just a concession to some kind of herd mentality, where people just ape and mimic the actions - and even the beliefs - of those around them? Are we conceding to and even encouraging this sort of shallow 'groupthink'?

We have spoken about how we seem to often worship those around us instead of the G-d above us. In addition to Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai's death-bed blessing to his students, that their fear of G-d should be as great as their fear of man, we noted the poignant words of the Kotzker Rebbe, who said: "If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because your are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you." Our genuineness is created by a true sense of self. The slavish awareness of the others who watch us bends us out of the shape we should be in.

Yet, at the same time, here we are encouraging people to choose to live with and amongst people who will shape their thoughts and behaviors.

And while it may be entirely realistic and appropriate to choose such a path, knowing the reality of our personalities and the way we are affected by society, on another level this seems a bit resigned to a shallow reality.

I think we all recognize that this is really not a question, but rather a way of underscoring an important subtlety in the dynamics of groups. Our groups, our societies, are powerfully influential. But there are two forms of group influence. There is the **power** of peer pressure and expectation: If everyone else is doing it then I feel a need to conform to those standards and do it too, in order to curry favor and gain acceptance. That is representative of a shallow association, where in following the group I am not being true to myself. But there is also the true **influence** of the group, where I respond to the actions of others by learning them by example and by environment.

We are both **influenced** and **forced** by our friends and society.

The rest of the story of the *Chazon Ish*, as they say, is history. The *Chazon Ish* continued to avoid any official public position, but from his extremely simple and modest home in Bnei Brak successfully engineered the creation of a true place of Torah, a town that reflects at its core a life of amazing material simplicity, a rejection of all the silver and gold in the world, and an outstanding commitment to the value of Torah, studied and lived. And his vision extended way beyond that small town, and served as the defining roadmap for the creation of what is called today the Charedi world in Israel.

The Israeli Charedi world is complex. I am not a part of it, and I do not know that I could be. And at the same time, there are aspects of it which I am absolutely admiring of and humbled by.

This summer, I spent two weeks in Yerushalayim, living in Charedi neighborhoods. The most amazing and humbling experience for me was going on Shabbos afternoon to a shul called “*Bnei Hayeshivos*” – and there are shuls that go by that name in every Charedi neighborhood, essentially every few blocks – and see the place jammed with men, in their 30’s, 40’s, 50’s or 60’s, learning Torah with a freshness and intensity that is usually seen around here only in the rare twenty-year-old. When it is time to *daven Mincha*, the experience continues, as the *davening* is done carefully and earnestly, not rushed at all, and with an amazing mix of melodiousness and intensity. Meeting these people one feels that *Mishna in Pirkei Avos*: It

is clear from their clothing, from their secure and happy faces, from their interaction with their children and grandchildren, that they have happily spurned all the silver and gold in the world and value only the core values of Torah, *Avodah* (worship), and Kindness.

My son, at *Shacharis* on Shabbos in one of those shuls, directed my gaze to one of the people davening in the back corner. “That is the person who Rav Hershel Schachter often calls when he has a question.” That simple, unassuming man is the author of *הבצלת השרון*, a beautiful multi-volume *Sefer* on the Torah. And he just sits there in the corner, davening quietly and anonymously amongst his peers.

I find being around these people profoundly humbling and inspiring. They are the heirs of the students of the *Gaon* of Vilna and the *Baal Shem Tov*, the hundreds who came to *Eretz Yisrael* in the early eighteenth century, and saw themselves – and were seen by world Jewry – as the *Kohein Gadol* who had entered the Holy of Holies, as the representatives of the Jewish people in the Holy Land, who gave up everything material to live lives of simplicity, poverty and material hardship, so that there would be Jews in the Holy Land studying G-d’s Torah and praying to Him from up close. The Jewish world recognized their role, valued them and supported them as their representatives.

Today’s Charedi community numbers not in the hundreds but in the hundreds of thousands, *בלע”ה*, and the economic model has become much more complex of course, but the core of this community that I just described to you are indeed the heirs to that role.

They have created something of immense and profound value. They have created their own version of “relative prosperity” – a communal focus on spiritual rather than material success, on a genuine desire to serve Hashem, to give of themselves and to be happy with their lot.

The Haredi Institute, a think tank in Israel staffed by secular Israeli academics and researchers that study the Charedi community, recently published a study that demonstrates that while using objective financial criteria the Charedi community is disproportionately impoverished, the community is also disproportionate in not seeing itself as impoverished. They have their own measure of prosperity, their own sources of happiness.

It is a community that I admire deeply. And at the same time, I am not sure I could live there. And in that sense I am likely typical of many of you.

That makes us complicated.

But it seems that *Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma* was also somewhat complicated.

The Talmud (*Avodah Zara* 19a) tells the story of the death of *Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon*.

”תנו רבנן כשחלה רבי יוסי בן קיסמא הלך רבי חנינא בן תרדיון לבקרו אמר לו חנינא אחי (אחי) אי אתה יודע שאומה זו מן השמים המליכוה שהחריבה את ביתו ושרפה את היכלו והרגה את חסידיו ואבדה את טוביו ועדיין היא קיימת ואני שמעתי עליך שאתה יושב ועוסק בתורה [ומקהיל קהלות ברבים] וספר מונח לך בחיקך אמר לו מן השמים ירחמו אמר לו אני אומר לך דברים של טעם ואתה אומר לי מן השמים ירחמו תמה אני אם לא ישרפו אותך ואת ספר תורה באש... אמרו לא היו ימים מועטים עד שנפטר רבי יוסי בן קיסמא והלכו כל גדולי רומי לקברו והספידוהו הספד גדול ובחזרתן מצאוהו לרבי חנינא בן תרדיון שהיה יושב ועוסק בתורה ומקהיל קהלות ברבים וס”ת מונח לו בחיקו...”

*The Sages taught: When Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma fell ill, Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon went to visit him. Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma said to him: Chanina my brother, do you not know that this nation has been given reign by a decree from Heaven? The proof is that Rome has destroyed G-d's Temple, and burned His Sanctuary, and killed His pious ones, and destroyed His best ones, and it still exists. Evidently, all of this is by Divine decree. And yet I heard about you that you sit and engage in Torah study, and convene assemblies in public, and have a Torah scroll placed in your lap, thereby demonstrating complete disregard for the decrees issued by the Romans. Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon said to him: Heaven will have mercy and protect me. Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma said to him: I am saying reasonable matters to you, and you say to me: Heaven will have mercy? I wonder if the Romans will not burn both you and your Torah scroll by fire.... The Sages said: Not even a few days passed before Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma died of his illness, and all of the Roman notables went to bury him, and they eulogized him with a great eulogy. And upon their return, they found Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon, who was sitting and engaging in Torah study and convening public assemblies for Torah study with a Torah scroll in his lap....*

It appears from this story that *Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma* was not quite living in Bnei Brak, but rather the opposite. He was hob-nobbing with the Roman elite, who respected him so much that while they were busy martyring other Sages with the cruelest forms of torture, they gave *Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma* a royal send-off. Indeed Rav Yossi quite emphatically told Rav Chanina ben Tradyon that they were living in the very opposite of a place of Torah, and that he had better get used to the idea.

How do we put together these two contradictory versions of Rav Yossi

ben Kisma? How could the man who would live nowhere but a place of Torah be the same person who circulated amongst the greats of Rome?

Apparently Rav Yossi lived and circulated in a world that was not his world. He functioned well in that world, garnering the respect of its elite. But that was not the world where his heart lived. His deepest and most cherished values were not those of the Romans, of silver and gold, but of the Torah. He lived in one world – but he was attached and a part of another.

*D'veykus* is real and true attachment. It is allegiance. And each of us need to ensure that we have that attachment and allegiance to the world of Torah. That even if we function as we feel we must in a broader society, and as such need to respect many of the norms of that society, our heart and soul – our attachment – is to the world of values we must nurture here, in our shuls and homes.

This is a central charge of *Teshuva*: As we live and work in a broader society, we must commit to align our hearts and values with our own. And we must make sure that the values of our own society are those that uplift and strengthen all of us. Not standards that pressure, but values that inspire.

And we here must commit to those critical communal values:

- The value of *Ahavas Yisrael*, of caring for each and every member of our community, friend or relative stranger.
- The value of *Ahavas Torah*, passionate and vibrant engagement with a Torah that makes us sing.
- The value of *Darchei Noam*, of living with exquisite character and conduct, as great people formed by the Torah that we study and live.
- The value of *Teshuva*, of always striving to do even better, to grow as Jews, as people.

May we succeed together in pursuing this path of *Teshuva*, to strengthen community as a place of true attachment, of emotional connection, as the source of both our sense of security where we feel unconditional love from each other, and as the source of our values and aspirations, our strivings that will lead us upward, inspired to be better and to make our community better.

May that be G-d's will and ours, *Kein yehi ratzon, Amein*.

# One Goal: Yom Kippur and Unity of Purpose

## *Kol Nidrei*

I am holding a card that I assume many of you would not recognize. It is a card that is produced by a fine organization in New Jersey, and what it contains are the “Final Prayers”, the appropriate order of *Tefillos* to be said bedside of a dying person. It is handy, convenient and helpful at a time of otherwise great turmoil and confusion.

Ironically, this card shares a common component with our *Machzor*, this very large prayer book we will read from cover to cover over the next 25 hours. Indeed, the last lines of this card are identical to the last lines of our Yom Kippur prayers. In both cases, we end by reciting aloud the *She-ma*, followed by three declarations of *Baruch Hashem*, blessing the name of G-d’s Kingdom for eternity, and seven pronouncements that Hashem is the Lord, **ד’ הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים**.

This is ironic, as in the case of the card we say these lines as we leave the world, and on Yom Kippur we say it as we return to the world. In the case of the card we say it with the dying before dressing him or her in the *Kittel*, the traditional shroud, and today we say it before changing out of the *Kittel*.

We are treating the end of Yom Kippur like the end of life. Indeed, the reason given for this recitation at the end of Yom Kippur is because it is then that the *Shechina*, the Divine Presence so tangible on Yom Kippur, leaves us. It is then that we are stripped of the ultimate *Neshama Yeseira*, that extra measure of spirit and soul, that we are granted on the ultimate *Shabbos Shabboson*.

Many of us are wearing the *Kittel* or other white clothing today, as explained by *Rema* (OC 610:4), both because today we stand like angels in white, **לבושי הַבְּדִים**, involved only in the spiritual and not the physical, and because it introduces within us an extra measure of sobriety, as it brings to mind the day when we will ultimately and finally be dressed in the *Kittel*, the shroud placed upon the dead. Both of these perspectives bring out what is unique on Yom Kippur; we live for just one day in a reality that is not our usual reality, that is beyond the confusion of the material world.

That is what is so exceptionally beautiful about Yom Kippur, this one day when our lives are far less complicated, when we are not stuck in the am-



biguity and confusion of the human mixture of body and soul, each vying for our attention and making it very difficult to maintain a steady focus on what is important.

Isn't that one of the hardest challenges we face? Pulled in so many directions, we struggle to focus on what is important in life, to really be present for what counts. That person dying and saying the *Shema* is so often thinking about that, never saying "I wish I had spent more time at work"; almost always saying "I wish I had spent more time and invested more of myself in my kids, in my parents, in my siblings, in my spouse, in my *davening*, in doing for others...."

If we could only accomplish the unity of purpose beyond Yom Kippur; if we could only have a bit more of that single-minded clarity....

I want to share with you two stories, one ancient and one more recent. Two stories that share much in common.

The great sage Rabbi Akiva was being tortured to death by the Romans. They were combing his flesh with iron combs, and at that very moment he was reading the *Shema*, accepting G-d as his king. His students were astounded: רבינו עד כאן; "Our teacher, even now?!" How could Rabbi Akiva, the righteous and the sage, be accepting G-d's kingdom at this moment? To which Rabbi Akiva replied, "All of my life I have read the *Shema* and its mandate to love G-d בכל נפשך, with all your soul, even as he takes your soul, and I would agonize over this, when would I have the opportunity to fulfill this? Now that this opportunity has come, shall I fail to fulfill it?"

That is the ancient, chilling, well-known story of Rabbi Akiva.

Here is another story, related in the name of Rebbetzin Kleiner, the daughter of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Bloch, about whose aunt the following is told, and confirmed as a known story within the family to Rav Ye-chieh Spero by Rebbetzin Gifter, daughter of the subject of the story.

After all the men of Telz had been killed by the Nazis, Rebbetzin Luba Bloch, the wife of Rav Zalman Bloch, the spiritual leader of the yeshivah, was taken by the Nazis with her children. The rebbetzin walked to the area where she knew she would die. The German guards barked orders and demanded that the Jews prepare for their deaths. At that point, the rebbetzin approached a Nazi guard and promised to reveal the secret hiding place of all her jewelry and valuables – if he would be willing to honor her last request. "Please let me die last," she said. The guard took her for a coward who wanted to delay the inevitable, but he acquiesced



to her wishes. And so, all her children were led to the edge of the pit and murdered in cold blood.

Immediately after seeing her children slaughtered in front of her eyes, Rebbetzin Bloch lowered herself into the pit and tended to the bullet-ridden bodies. Tenderly closing their eyes, she kissed them on their foreheads, and then scooped up a few handfuls of dirt and sprinkled it gently over them. With that, she looked up toward Heaven and declared, “Thank You for giving a *Yiddische mama* the opportunity to bring her children to *Kever Yisrael*, to be buried as Jews.”

Then she stood up and faced the Nazi barbarian once more. “Now you may do what you want to me.” And he did, killing her immediately.

These two stories of absolute strength and clarity in the face of the most trying circumstances, come together by virtue of a remarkable essay about Rabbi Akiva and single-mindedness by the father-in-law of Rebbetzin Bloch, the great Rav Yosef Leib Bloch. In an essay entitled *בבל דרכך דערה*, on the theme of living a thoughtful, G-d-centered life, he speaks about how Rabbi Akiva went beyond Rabbi Eliezer in his understanding of that verse in the *Shema*. While Rabbi Eliezer also understood that “with all your soul” requires a person to sacrifice their life for G-d, Rabbi Akiva - posited Rav Yosef Leib - added that this love is expressed even at the time that one’s life is being taken, אפילו בשעה שנוטל את נפשך. That while one level is the person willing to pay the price, the greater level is the person who is able to be completely present even as he pays the price, seeing it as the crystallizing moment, that which expresses what his whole life has been oriented towards.

We must understand that Rabbi Akiva was not spending his life dreaming of the day he would be killed by the Romans. But he did spend all of his life with single-minded dedication to G-d, doing anything and everything for that single purpose of serving Him. To him, it was what his every step in life was about, where every path led him. And so, while most other people would face such a moment with complete confusion, as their life was being so rudely interrupted and all that they had hoped for themselves was being dashed to bits, Rabbi Akiva was cool as a cucumber. Rabbi Akiva’s life was all about G-d, and if this was what G-d wanted now, then this was what he would face, what he would do. Clear, single-minded, mission driven. No confusion.

That same clarity was exhibited by Rav Bloch’s great and sainted daughter-in-law. Clear as a bell, cool as a cucumber. She knew what life was

about, she was absolutely clear about it, and whatever came up, even the most desperate and dastardly circumstances, her eye remained clear and focused.

Attaining such clarity is almost super-human. Indeed, it is angelic. Humans are complicated; when we live for the soul, the body cries out. When we live for the body, the soul protests. Angels are clear, simple, with a single mission, as the Talmud teaches.

Many of us are familiar with the Talmudic passage (TB *Megillah* 10b) that describes the scene in heaven as the Jews crossed the Yam Suf. ולא קרב זה אל זה כל הלילה. According to the Talmud, the angels wished to sing their own song of praise to G-d for the miracle of our salvation, but G-d objected: “My handiwork – the Egyptians - are drowning in the sea and you are singing?!” So, the angels did not sing.

Yet the Jewish people sang, and their song was precious, divinely inspired and immortalized such that we repeat it every single day in its entirety, and additionally invoke some its central lines before we pray the Amidah each morning and night. What is the difference? Why could man sing when the angels could not?

Rav Shimon Schwab explained that angels do not know how to multitask. As the Midrash (*Bereishis Rabba* 50:2) says, they have one mission and one mission only. And so, they could not sing at the time of our salvation as at that very same time they were also pulled to cry over the loss of G-d’s creations, over the other side. The Jews on the other hand, as people, would need to live with conflict, with multiple feelings. They would have to learn to accomplish multiple missions at the same time, to juggle tasks and feelings. We would need to sing over our salvation, even as we remain aware of the sadness of the concurrent loss.

Yes, in a way Yom Kippur is the easiest day in the year. Today we are angels, with a single mission. No pulls in other directions. Just one thing, we are here for the distance. No rush to get home, to get to lunch or *kid-dush*. No cell phones to answer, e-mails to check. We know exactly what we are here for. Eye on the prize.

If only life were so simple.

How confused we get all the time. How conflicted we are, pulled in so many different directions. Stress is the essence of life, pulled this way and that, unsure, unclear of what our real mission is, what our priorities should be. And while in a sense if we sat down and gave it thought

we would know immediately what our mission is and what our priorities should be, in the heat of life – we forget.

Rav Ruderman z”l used to share a classic “*vort*”, a Torah thought, at a *Pidyon HaBen*. As part of the ritual of redeeming the first-born son, the *Kohein* asks the father: “What would you prefer? The five silver coins or your first-born son?”

The question seems ridiculous, as we all know what any father would choose, and - in addition – from a Halachic perspective the father really has no choice. There is no option for him to hold on to the money and to cede his child to the *Kohein*. Why then does the *Kohein* even pose this question?

Rav Ruderman would explain that as these young parents are holding their precious new-born, we ask them this question that indeed sounds completely ridiculous. They would never even consider trading this precious bundle for all the money in the world! Yet in fact, as life will proceed, this same question will come up again and again, only it will not be so boldly and flatly stated. Life is filled with the question: What is more important to you, your work or your kids? The size of your house or the amount of time you are able to spend with your family in that house, focused on them, enjoying them, being part of their lives?

So here and now we ask the question boldly and flatly, in all its absurdity, in the hope that as life proceeds on its twisted and complex path, these maturing parents will remember the stark choices that life presents, even when they do not seem so stark at all.

I have a new hobby, listening to the talks of Rabbi Daniel Kalish. Rabbi Kalish is an incredible educator, a real gift to mankind, the soul and spirit of the Waterbury yeshiva. He tells his students that he has no interest in putting up walls for them, lines and rules. He has one goal. He wants to help them identify and get excited by what is important in life. He wants them to be so driven by that vision, by what is important, that they simply won’t have time for *תאוות*, for distractions, for these other things. “I have things to do!”

The same Rabbi Kalish will not tell people not to talk in shul. By all means, talk! Talk to G-d! Spill your guts out to Him! Be so clear, so focused on what you are here for that you avoid the pulls and pushes, that you skip the conflict. “Who has time to talk to someone else?! I have this amazing chance to talk to G-d!”

Focus. Clarity. Direction. It is a beautiful thing.

There is a man named Rabbi Yerucham Pitter. He is a known and beloved Rebbe in the Yeshiva in Long Beach. As a young man, he came from a smaller town, without much of a Jewish educational infrastructure. Around his Bar Mitzvah, he visited the Skokie yeshiva, and was very taken with it. He wanted very badly to study in the yeshiva, yet he was his parents' only child. Heroically, they agreed to send him. They drove him to the yeshiva, and as they tearfully said good-bye, they just asked him to please stay close, and to write them each day.

Recently, some fifty years later, Rabbi Pitter was sitting shiva for his mother. In his pocket he had a postcard that he had written to his mother on the day of her death. For more than fifty years, he kept that promise, every single day. He wrote to his parents every day. He remembered – each and every day – how much his parent loved him, missed him, and had given up for him to have a treasured opportunity. Laser focus, day after day. Never losing sight of the goal.

Focus. Clarity. Direction. A beautiful thing.

G-d is one. אֱלֹהִים אֶחָד. And we are supposed to emulate His unity. *Ramchal* – Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto - explains the unity of G-d as a unity of purpose, as an utter lack of conflict (see *Derech Hashem* 1:1:5). Whereas people have various competing parts of themselves, such as their sense of justice and feelings of compassion, their ambition and their desire for peace, the call of the spirit and the call of the body, G-d is One. No conflict. Utter clarity. שלימות.

And man, in his mandate to serve G-d with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all that is dear to him, is called upon to be equally internally unified. To have such clarity of mission and of purpose that in his eyes there is laser-like clarity and focus on the prize, on the one goal, one purpose, on what really matters.

There is a classic parable from the famed *Maggid* of Dubno. He told the story of a poor man whose family was desperately hungry and needy, who heard about a far-away land where diamonds lay in the street like dust. With his wife's permission, he travelled off to that far away land, with the hope of returning with a life-changing fortune.

Sure enough, when his ship arrived at the destination, he disembarked on to diamond-strewn streets. He was amazed, scooping up fistfulls of diamonds and stuffing them into his every pocket.

But he was hungry, and so he stepped into a small store. He chose a few fruits and some bread, and came to the counter to pay. Though he was poor and had no money, he confidently placed a diamond on the counter to cover his purchase. But the store-keeper laughed. “Diamonds?! These are worthless here. If you had onions – that would be something! Onions are indeed precious here.”

The poor man could not believe what he had heard. Onions?! More precious than diamonds?! Ridiculous...

The poor man with diamond-stuffed pockets – whose work was done – was however stuck on the island for some time, as his ship was not returning for a few months. And during those months he needed to eat, and so he took jobs, working to earn onions, with which he could buy food and other staples. In fact, he was actually quite successful, quickly earning many onions, and building quite a fortune.

Finally, the day came for him to return, and he was quite proud of all he had accomplished. At home he had not been a success, but here the story was quite the opposite. His pockets now bulged with the local currency – onions – as he embarked on the return trip.

When the ship arrived, he excitedly ran home, and immediately spilled out the contents of his pockets to proudly share his accomplishments. His wife could not believe what she saw. “Onions?! This is what you were away for months to earn?!” The man suddenly realized how he had completely lost sight of reality. How during his time on the island, he had shifted his goals to that which would ultimately have little value. Desperately, he searched in the corners of his pockets to discover a few small diamonds that had remained.

That is often the story of our lives. We are in a world filled with diamonds, with the richest opportunities. Parents to write letters to, children to focus on, prayer, study, acts of goodness and kindness. Things to live for.

But life is confusing. And we often get side-tracked by the alternative local currency, by the onions. We need to make life less confusing. To zero in on what is really important. As King David (Psalm 27) said, “There is one thing I ask of G-d, and it is that which I seek; to dwell in the house of G-d all the days of my life.”

We need our *אחת שאלתי*, our singular focus.

We need to have a mission statement, we need to identify those diamonds, and we need to pursue those diamonds every step of the way.

Yes, a useful mission statement sits in front of us every moment of every day as the measuring stick for each of our choices. We need to know what is important, and then figure out how to line everything else up behind it. Otherwise at the end, as our souls leave us, we can find ourselves filled with torment for all that we missed in life. Confused, lost, where did it all go?! Where are those diamonds?! All we have collected are onions....

That is sometimes the real difference between the *Shema* called out at the bedside and the *Shema* of Yom Kippur.

Sometimes the *Shema* at the bedside sounds so desperate. The person, headed to their final and eternal rest, has just woken up to realize what is central, what the mission statement is. And it is too late to do much more than just scream it out.

The *Shema* of the end of Yom Kippur is not desperate. It is the climax of the joy of the day. The expression of perfect clarity.

And so we grab the gift of Yom Kippur, this day when we get the chance to step out of conflict, to clarify mission, to not juggle for a change, to just zero in on the prize. When it is over, we will be able to declare with absolute clarity G-d's unity and ours, a renewed and strengthened sense of vision, of clarity, of unity of purpose.

Now I know where the diamonds are. I understand what life is all about. I am going to carry this with me.

Life is so confusing. Yom Kippur is so beautifully clarifying. Let's identify the diamonds, and spend our lives collecting them.

# One Person Can Make All the Difference

## Yizkor

Rabbi Berel Wein, noted scholar and Jewish historian, tells this story, which he heard from Rabbi Moshe Pardo himself. Pardo has since passed away.

*Moshe Pardo was a wealthy Jew in Turkey, and he owned many businesses and properties. He also had a number of orchards in Israel near the town of Bnei Brak, before Bnei Brak became the city it is today.*

*He had just one daughter. A few weeks before his daughter's wedding, she contracted meningitis and died. Moshe Pardo was heartbroken.*

*Seeking solace and advice, Pardo visited the Chazon Ish (Rabbi Abraham Yishayahu Karelitz), one of the leading rabbis and arbiters of the 20th century.*

*The Chazon Ish was himself childless his entire life. Pardo told the Chazon Ish the story of his daughter. He then said, "I want to die, too."*

*The Chazon Ish told Pardo that it is forbidden for a believing Jew to think like that. Then, the Chazon Ish told him, "I'll tell you what. You give up your business, Pardo. And you make a school for Sephardic girls, because you see what's happening here, the Sephardim are being destroyed. You make a school for Sephardic girls here in Bnei Brak; take some of your orchards and start. And I promise you hundreds of children and thousands of grandchildren."*

*Pardo took the Chazon Ish's advice and founded Or Hachaim Seminary in Bnei Brak in 1952. For girls from kindergarten age up to high school, the school serves children from disadvantaged homes, girls who would find themselves on the street otherwise, and gives them a chance to have a livelihood. The school also helps make shiduchim, or matches, so they could marry.*

*Or Hachaim Seminary in Bnei Brak still exists today, serving 1,500 students.*

*On the day Moshe Pardo told this story to Rabbi Wein and his wife, Pardo pulled out a notebook. In this notebook, he had recorded the name of every girl who ever went to the school, what happened to her, and how many children she had.*

*On that day, he told Rabbi Wein, his 4,000th grandchild was born.*

One person can make a world of difference.

Yom Kippur is the story of one person making a difference. One person



– the *Kohein Gadol* – entered the Holy of Holies on behalf of all the Jewish people. That one person performed all of the service of the day.

One person gained us our atonement.

ר"ר Rav Moshe Shapira z"l shared a *Mesorah*, a tradition he had received from Rav Dessler z"l, who had received it from his teachers, that every Yom Kippur, in every generation, there is one person who stands in place of the *Kohein Gadol*, whose *Teshuva* has the impact of the *Kohein Gadol's* entry into the Holy of Holies.

And it is not that the person has to change the world in a visible sense. Our world is such that goodness is reality, and that it matters – and can change the world – even if it is small, modest and hardly visible. The famous 36 *Tzaddikim* upon whose shoulders the world stands are the opposite of famous, but rather they are pictures of quiet greatness.

And so taught the Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuva* 3:4):

”צריך כל אדם שיראה עצמו כל השנה כולה כאילו חציו זכאי וחציו חייב וכן כל העולם חציו זכאי וחציו חייב חטא חטא אחד הרי הכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לכף חובה וגרם לו השחתה עשה מצוה אחת הרי הכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לכף זכות וגרם לו ולהם תשועה והצלה שנאמר וצדיק יסוד עולם זה שצדק הכריע את כל העולם לזכות והצילו”

*Accordingly, throughout the entire year, a person should always look at himself as equally balanced between merit and sin and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. If he performs one sin, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and brings destruction upon himself.*

*[On the other hand,] if he performs one mitzvah, he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to himself and others. This is implied by [Proverbs 10:25] “A righteous man is the foundation of the world,” i.e., he who acted righteously, tipped the balance of the entire world to merit and saved it.*

The Rambam is not simply giving a psychological trick to get us to take life seriously. He is saying that what we do – any one of us, any small action – really does matter.

This is a mandate not to be a spectator, not to imagine oneself limited by fate from being able to make a difference. Whether it is the 4,000 children of the person who lost their only child, or whether it is the small, unnoticeable action of the person who tipped the scales of the world, mak-



ing a critical difference – every person can find themselves as the *Kohein Gadol*, as the one who so completely matters.

No, we are not supposed to be spectators, and whoever we are we can make a real difference – if we realize it.

This is something each of us should be thinking about right now. Who are we? How can we be that *Kohein Gadol*, making a difference with our lives, changing the world, or changing the life of one person?

Mrs. Rochel Greisman is a very fine woman who lived for decades right in this area, right behind the shul, until she moved a few years ago to New Jersey. She is a fine person, good, modest, not what we would usually call a typical mover and shaker. She founded no organizations or institutions. But she was not a spectator.

One day, she was sorting through her mail, and one charity appeal of many caught her eye. It was a letter about a young girl from Israel who was born with her eyelids fused shut, and who needed a specialized surgery in the U.S. to enable her to see. The letter appealed for funds to accomplish this surgery.

Mrs. Greisman was somehow taken by this story and decided to follow up on it a bit. She found the phone number of the family in New York who had been the source of the appeal letter, and she called them to see where things were up to. She was informed that the issue was still very active, that the child – ironically – was actually in Baltimore, at Johns Hopkins, but that the surgery could not be scheduled without the family providing a very large sum of money. Even further captivated by this sad challenge, Mrs. Greisman asked if they had appealed to the doctor to reduce his fee. She was told that they had made their efforts, but by all means she could feel free to try.

So this regular woman, with no “*protectsia*”, no pull or connections with the CEO or the board of Hopkins, picked up the phone and called the doctor, the world class surgeon. When she gave the reason for her call, to her surprise the receptionist virtually immediately put her through to the doctor. And when she made her plea to the doctor, he was profoundly receptive, saying that he indeed would waive any personal fee just to make sure that this girl could have her eyesight back, but the hospital was not willing to budge. Mrs. Greisman, deeply interested in the girl’s fate pushed on, urging the doctor to press the hospital on the matter. He promised that he would try and said good-bye.

Three weeks later, Mrs. Greisman calls the doctor's office again to follow-up. The secretary was thrilled that she called, and had a story to tell her. After Mrs. Greisman had originally called, the doctor tried one more time to get the hospital to allow for the surgery, and was unsuccessful. So he assembled his own team of doctors, nurses and techs who all volunteered their own time to join in the project, and when there was a free slot in the OR they performed the surgery, restoring her sight. Unfortunately, concluded the secretary, the doctor and hospital have since decided to part ways, and he would be leaving the hospital in a week.

One person, a regular person, decided not to be a spectator, and she gave a girl her eyesight.

Yes, one person can make a world of difference. Sometimes to change the whole world, and other times to change someone's life. We matter.

Rav Noach Weinberg was a visionary, a man who lay awake at night thinking about the disappearing Jews of the United States, about the staggering rate of assimilation. He was driven to do something about it. Many of you sitting here are here because he was driven, because he felt he had to do something about it.

Around fifteen years ago he took the leaders of the many branches of Aish HaTorah on a Holocaust tour in Europe, and a film was produced that documented the trip. It was very powerful overall, but there was one line that he said and that he came back to that is absolutely haunting, challenging and inspiring.

As they stood dazed in one of the extermination camps, trying to absorb the extent of the devastation, Rav Noach said the following, which was actually something Rav Shach had said about him: "Look what one man, a crazy and unimpressive man, could do. He could almost conquer the world, kill six million people. Horrifying. But if one man can kill six million, then one man can also save six million."

He carried that on his shoulders. One person can make the difference. One person can change a world.

And forget the big, bad world.

What a difference each of us can make in the life of another, a huge difference, with a good word, with a smile. Someone shared with me a recording of a talk by Charlie Harary, a very inspiring communicator. He talked about the gift that we all possess to brighten the lives of others, with a simple word, with a smile. How we can literally change the world

for others in that way. And its so easy.

He gave a brilliant illustration of the idea. Imagine that one day you received in the mail a black credit card, and the name on it – the billed party – was G-d Himself. The credit card had no limit; you could use it as much as you wanted, and G-d would foot the bill. Amazing! Swipe, swipe, swipe! Groceries, rent, mortgage, car payment, TUITION!!!! It does not cost anything.

Then you realize, that he even lets you use it for others. You are a good person, so when you go to the grocery you pay your bill and that of everyone near you in line. You make sure to go to the tuition office when lots of people are there, and you swipe, swipe, cover them too. Amazing!

Well, that is what G-d gave us when he gave us the ability to freely share a good word, a smile, a bit of warmth. Swipe, swipe, swipe!

Any person can make a world of difference. We matter.

We know, because we mattered to someone, because we changed someone's world, someone's life, just by being here.

It seems to me that the place a person learns in the truest sense that they make a difference, that they can make a difference to someone, is from their parents. Job Number One of a parent is to make the child understand that for them the world was created; that they are worth everything, because they are worth everything to them; that they are their priority, the most important thing in their world.

Parents teach this to their children by putting everything aside for them, by being present, by loving, noticing, by being off the phone and 100% there. Reliable, warm, caring, consistent.

Dr. David Pelcovitz tells a story about a Holocaust survivor conference in Germany that he attended and presented at. There was a person participating who was the happiest person around. An older man, a survivor, but he was such a happy person, such a warm person, so alive that everyone just loved to be around him. Dr. Pelcovitz asked him how he came to be this way, and the man explained. He told him that when he was in the camps, when he faced the daily struggles and the unspeakable brutality, he used an emotional device to survive. He would summon the memory and the feeling of his father's hands on his head, blessing him; he would summon the pleasant smell of his father that he felt up close when he gave him a Bracha.

That memory gave him strength; helped him remember how much he mattered to somebody, and thus helped him remember how much he mattered. And that gave him the strength to fight, to survive, to push on, and to ultimately be this happy person, adding light to so many lives. What a gift this man received from his father!!

A year later, Dr. Pelcovitz repeated this story elsewhere. When the speech was over, a mega millionaire who he was friendly with, a man with a fancy car collection as a hobby, came over to Dr. Pelcovitz with tears in his eyes. He confided that he too was a survivor, and that he would give everything he owned just to feel one more time his parents holding his hand and walking with him to shul.

Yes, each one of us is a *Kohein Gadol*. In the hands of each us is the opportunity to make the difference. Each of us is the one that can tip the scales, for the world – or for a person who equals a world.

May we realize that power, the power of One, the power we each hold in our hands.

# You are One; G-d is One

Ne'ilah

I want to share a letter that was written by the *Chazon Ish* (Volume I letter 7). It is a letter he wrote to a young man who he had heard about from others. It was a letter of care, of notice, of concern:

*Our Sages spoke of “generations”, implying that each generation is like a joint entity, that its members are like parts of one whole, limbs of a single body, living a shared life with a shared soul.*

*And as a part of that body, any harm or wound that any other limb experiences pains me as well. And I must tell you, from this sacred source of feeling I turn to you my dear one, and tell you that despite the fact that we have never met, my soul feels connected to yours. Knowing how you succeeded in finding pleasure and satisfaction in the study of Torah, in living an upright life.*

*And so it pains me deeply to hear that this path has become blocked for you, that obstacles have come in your way, and that you see things not as clearly as you had. Of course, I cannot demand of you that you heal my pain, but I wanted you to know of my pain.*

*In my love for you I would truly appreciate a response from you. I anxiously await your precious words.*

Can you imagine the reaction of the letter's recipient? This anonymous young man just received a letter from the Sage of his generation, expressing his care, concern and value for him.

Potentially life-changing.

Now, imagine getting a letter like that from G-d, telling you that you matter, that he worries for you and wants you to succeed, to thrive.

That letter is right there, in our *Machzor*.

....כִּי רוֹצֵה אֶתְּךָ בַתְּשׁוּבַת הַרְשָׁעִים. “For you are interested in the improvement of the wicked. You are not interested in their deaths.”

The sentiment of the Book of Jonah, where G-d explains how He does not wish to lose us, to lose his precious creations. How we matter.

That is one sentiment I wanted to share with you. G-d is waiting. G-d is interested. He knows we have used Yom Kippur to focus on the diamonds.

Please allow me to share a second feeling.

There is a tradition that one should not simply focus selfishly at *Ne'ilah*, like the rest of this holy day, thinking only of ourselves, our future, our decree of life and death, ease or stress. We should be thinking about G-d and his honor in the world, about praying for His world to be better, for His sake.

I am having a problem with that. No, not a problem with praying for the world, but in doing it selflessly. We look at our world, at adults and children, at the kinds of challenges that people face to do the right thing; it is a rough world. There is so much there, in front of us, pulling at us, that draws us and our children into unhealthy things. There is so much danger, so much hard being threatened and inflicted on innocent people everywhere.

Yes, I pray that the world should recognize G-d, but for His sake?

Every Shabbos I ask the little children to say "Amen" to Kaddish. I explain to them that we are praying that the world should know about Hashem, **יהגדל ויתקדש שמי' רבה**. I ask them, "Wouldn't the world be so much nicer, so much better, if everyone knew about Hashem?" Invariably they think for a moment, and they smile and nod enthusiastically. And I think to myself, "If they only knew how much better it would be...."

Imagine a world where you could walk to your airplane without the need for screening to protect from vicious attackers.

Imagine a world where you did not need to protect your identity five times over, for fear of those lurking and waiting to rob you.

Imagine a world where when you look something up you do not need to encounter all kinds of alluring attempts for your attention, trying to draw it to impure and unethical things.

Imagine a world where everywhere we turned we found gratitude and support, encouragement of values and of strength and security, of faith and kindness.

Imagine.

We have what to pray for. For the day of **אחד ושמו אחד** 'ד, when G-d will be One and His name One. But for His sake?! For ours.

The world is so complex, so difficult. If we could only see through it all. If we could only maintain the clarity of Yom Kippur. If we could only keep in mind how much we matter to G-d, how He yearns for us to do well, to thrive. If we could only merit a world that knows Him, that values and recognizes the good and the true.

If only.

Let us pray for it. For His sake, and for ours.

אתה אחד  
ושמך אחד  
ומי בעמך ישראל  
גוי אחד בארץ

# אחד!

# One!

One G-d.  
One Goal.  
One Person.  
One Community.

I will work to strenghten my Emunah in the One G-d: ה' אחד

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I will work to strenghten my own unity of purpose: בכל דרכיך דעהו

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I will work to strenghten my unity with family and others: ואהבת לרעך כמוך

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ימים נוראים תשע"ט

בני יעקב שערי ציון