**SALT | ROSH HASHANA 5784 – 2023**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

On the first night of *Selichot* (in Ashkenazic communities), we recite the “*Be-motza’ei Menucha*” hymn, in which we describe the fear we experience in advance of Rosh Hashanah, when we and the world will be judged. We are so fearful, in fact, that “*chalim ke-mavkira*” – we feel “ill” like a woman in labor with her first child.

At first glance, we might explain that the poet mentions specifically a *mavkira* – woman delivering her first child – because a woman’s first birth is generally longer and more difficult than subsequent deliveries. However, Rav Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak of Alexander, in *Yismach Yisrael*, offers an additional explanation, suggesting that the focus here is not on the physical pain of labor, but rather on the anxiety that the woman feels. A woman going through labor for the first time experiences not only intense pain, but also the angst of uncertainty. Having never before delivered a baby, she does not know what to expect, and is thus worried. Likewise, the *Yismach Yisrael* explains, we are to strive to approach Rosh Hashanah as though we have never experienced it before. Part of the reason why we often find it difficult to sense the gravity of the day is our having grown accustomed to observing Rosh Hashanah each year. The *Yismach Yisrael* teaches that we should experience Rosh Hashanah each year like a “*mavkira*,” as though this is our first time, understanding that the judgments in previous years have no bearing whatsoever on this year’s judgment.

Underlying this teaching by the Rebbe of Alexander, perhaps, is the notion that each year brings us new opportunities, and, by extension, new responsibilities. We need to consider that this past year perhaps offered us new possibilities which we squandered, that our circumstances during this past year may have allowed us to accomplish and contribute more than in previous years, and yet we failed to do so. Each year’s judgment is unique because each year’s opportunities are unique. When we reflect on the past year, we are to think of whether there were doors which opened for us for the first time that we ignored; whether God had granted us new avenues for achievements which we preferred to avoid. And, we must commit ourselves to pursuing the opportunities presented to us during this coming year, so we can achieve to the best of our ability and make the most of each and every day that we are given.

Sunday

In one of the hymns recited (in Ashkenazic communities) on the second day of *Selichot*, we recite a series of pleas that begin with the phrase “*Ulai yeracheim*” – “Perhaps He will have compassion.” In each stanza, we plead our case, so-to-speak, explaining why we need and are worthy of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

In one stanza, we describe how “*omtzei shevacho be-khol eit ve-ona*” – we make an effort to speak God’s praises at all times and under all circumstances. The word “*omtzei*” likely denotes hard work and struggle, such that we emphasize here that we exert ourselves to give praise to the Almighty even in times of hardships and distress. Even when life brings us pain and anguish, we struggle to find God’s grace and kindness amid the challenges, and to express praise and gratitude.

In the very next phrase, we describe that we are “*agudim ba-tzara li-shpokh techina*” – “bound together in distress, to pour forth supplication.” This is likely a reference to the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Menachot (27a) comparing communal prayer to the four species held during Sukkot. Two of the four species produce fruit (the palm and the *etrog*), while the other two do not, and they are all held together, symbolizing the bonding of all different types of Jews. Those who do not bear “fruit,” who do not fulfill the *mitzvot*, join together with the exceptionally righteous in appealing to God for compassion. When we join together to petition God in times of distress, we must include everybody, all kinds of Jews, even those who do not, outwardly, appear to produce “fruit,” to be spiritually accomplished, because we must approach God as a single united nation.

Just as we exert effort to find the goodness within every situation, to give praise to God even when we face hardship, so are we to exert effort to find the goodness within each and every one of our fellow Jews. One of the ways we earn God’s grace and compassion is by appreciating all the goodness that He bestows upon us, even when this goodness is concealed by life’s struggles, and by appreciating the goodness of the people around us, even when they appear bereft of “fruit,” of admirable qualities and *mitzvot*. When we invest effort in finding the good in our lives and in other people, then we are deserving of Hashem finding the good within us, and granting us a favorable judgment.

Monday

            On the third day of the *Selichot* prayers (according to Ashkenazic custom), we include the hymn *Yisrael Amekha Techina Orekhim*, which describes the dire plight of the Jewish People in exile.  Toward the end of this hymn, we acknowledge our spiritual shortcomings, but appeal to God for compassion on the basis of His everlasting love for His people.  We cry, “*Yeteira chibatekha lefanekha Adonei ha-adonim*” – “Your affection for them is abundant, O Master of masters.”  This is clearly a reference to the famous Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (3:14), which states, “*Chavivin Yisrael she-nikre’u banim la-Makom*” – “Beloved are Israel, who are called ‘children’ of the Almighty.”  The Mishna then adds, “***Chiba yeteira****noda’at lahem she-nikre’u banim la-Makom*” – “An abundance of affection was made known to them, that are called ‘children’ of the Almighty.”  As we plead to God for compassion, we mention that “***yeteira chibatekha****lefanekha*,” He has special affection for us, as we are His beloved children.”

            We then continue, “*Bein kakh u-vein kakh keru’im lekha banim*” – “Either way, we are called Your children.”  This refers to the position of Rabbi Meir brought by the Gemara in Masekhet Kiddushin (36a) that Moshe’s pronouncement, “You are the children of the Lord your God” (Devarim 14:1) is true even when we fail to fulfill God’s will.  “Either way,” Rabbi Meir maintains, even if we do not adhere to God’s laws as we should, He loves us as His children.  Rabbi Yehuda, as the Gemara cites, disagrees, and maintains that our status as God’s children depends upon our behavior; it is only when we act as we should that God considers us His “children.”

            The author of this hymn – Rabbi Yehuda ben Rabbi Meir, a grandson of Rashi, and one of the Tosafists – follows Rabbi Meir’s position, that we are considered the Almighty’s children regardless of our conduct.  This position is taken also by the Rashba, in one of his responsa (1:194).  He writes that although we generally accept Rabbi Yehuda’s position in his disputes with Rabbi Meir, nevertheless, in this instance, Rabbi Meir’s view is accepted.  The Rashba explains that Rabbi Meir cites several verses proving that God calls *Am Yisrael* His “*banim*” (“children”) even when they act wrongly, and therefore, since Rabbi Meir proved his case, his opinion is accepted.

            The Ben Ish Chai (Rav Yosef Eliyahu in Baghdad), in his *Ben Yehoyada* (Rosh Hashanah 30a), offers a different reason for why Rabbi Meir’s view is accepted in this instance.  The Gemara in Masekhet Eiruvin (13b) comments that *Halakha* generally does not follow Rabbi Meir’s rulings because “his colleagues were unable to understand his opinion.”  Rabbi Meir’s rationale and analysis eluded the comprehension of his colleagues, and thus they did not accept his conclusions.  The Ben Ish Chai writes that the question of whether or not God considers *Benei Yisrael* His beloved children when they disobey Him is one which only God, and not the scholars, need to understand.  Therefore, whereas generally the Sages dismissed Rabbi Meir’s rulings, which they could not comprehend, they accepted his position regarding this matter.

            The Ben Ish Chai discusses this topic further in a different context (*Ben Yehoyada,*, Megilla 6a).  There he notes that Rabbi Meir led a yeshiva in the city of Tiberias (see Yerushalmi, Chagiga 2:1), and the Gemara in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (31a) teaches that the redemption will arrive from that city.  Although Rabbi Meir’s rulings are generally not accepted, the Ben Ish Chai writes, it stands to reason that in his city, where he served as the leading Torah scholar, his views are regarded as authoritative.  Hence, since the redemption is destined to unfold in Tiberias, it will unfold even if we are undeserving, in accordance with Rabbi Meir’s view that we are God’s children even when we do not obey His wishes as we should.

The Ben Ish Chai adds that the Gemara (Megilla 6a) says about Tiberias, “Even the ‘empty ones’ within it are filled with *mitzvot* like a pomegranate” – meaning, even the less spiritually accomplished of the city have many good deeds to their credit.  In Rabbi Meir’s city, the people are considered God’s beloved children even when they sin, and thus He forgives their wrongdoing, such that they are “filled with *mitzvot*.”

In our *Selichot* prayers, we invoke Rabbi Meir’s view that “*Bein kakh u-vein kakh keru’im lekha banim*,” and implore God to compassionately bring our redemption, which will will begin in Rabbi Meir’s city, where we are considered God’s children despite our mistakes and failings.  After bemoaning our hardships in our current state of exile, we petition God on the basis of Rabbi Meir’s position, and plead to our loving, compassionate Father for assistance.

Tuesday

The *Selichot* service revolves around the “*yod gimmel midot rachamim*” – thirteen attributes of compassion which God Himself proclaimed to Moshe when expressing His forgiveness for the sin of the golden calf (Shemot 34:6-7). The Gemara in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (17b) tells that God at that time instructed Moshe that *Benei Yisrael* should recite the *midot rachamim* when praying for forgiveness.

The list of the thirteen attributes begins with the Name of *Havaya*, repeated twice (“*Hashem Hashem…*”). The Gemara explains that the repetition of God’s Name here means, “I am He before a person sins, and I am He after the person sins and performs repentance.” Seemingly, this means that God, in His compassion, treats the penitent sinner the same way as He treated him before he committed his misdeed. However, Rabbeinu Tam, cited by *Tosafot*, writes that the phrase “*Hashem Hashem*” expresses two – and not just one – attributes of mercy. Meaning, even the first instance of God’s Name, which speaks of God’s attitude toward a person before his sin, is counted separately, as one of the thirteen attributes of compassion.

Many writers addressed the question of what “compassion” is needed before an individual acts improperly. We can understand that God’s willingness to treat a penitent sinner as though he had never sinned displays mercy and compassion. But why would “*ani hu kodem she-yecheta ha-adam*” – God’s treatment of a person before he sins – be considered an expression of mercy and pity? What kind of compassion is needed at that point, if the individual did not yet do anything wrong?

The *Chatam Sofer* explains that normally, a king hires a servant only if he feels assured that the servant would fulfill his duties capably and faithfully. If the king has reason to suspect that a candidate for the position lacks the ability to consistently perform the necessary tasks, or might have conflicting loyalties, then he certainly would not want to give him the job. God, however, “hires” us as His servants despite knowing of our limitations and frailties. He of course realizes our tendency to become lazy, and to fall prey to the numerous lures and distractions that surround us, but He has nevertheless chosen us as His servants. “*Ani hu kodem she-yecheta ha-adam*” – God shows us compassion by lovingly elevating us to the position of His servants, and caring for us accordingly, even though He knows that we are likely to make many mistakes.

The observance of Rosh Hashanah is characterized by the fear of judgment, but also by the exuberant joy of celebrating the privilege we have to serve the Creator and King of the world. While we feel anxious about our shortcomings over the previous year, we also exult in the knowledge that God has chosen us as His servants despite our imperfections. And we trust that as long as we honestly introspect and sincerely commit to serve Him to the best of our ability, He will keep us in His service and provide us with everything we need to fulfill our role.

Wednesday

It is customary on the night of Rosh Hashanah to eat certain foods which allude to our hopes and wishes for the coming year. Many partake on this night of the head of a fish (or a sheep), and recite the prayer, “*Yehi ratzon…she-niheyeh le-rosh ve-lo le-zanav*” – “May it be His will…that we should be the head, and not the tail.”

The Biblical source of this expression is a verse in Parashat Ki-Tavo, in which we are promised that in reward for faithfully observing God’s laws, “The Lord shall place you as the head, and not as the tail; you shall be only up, and you will not be down…” (Devarim 28:13). The simple reading of this blessing, seemingly, is that *Am Yisrael* will be the “head” in terms of success and prosperity, as opposed to being the “tail” – downtrodden and oppressed. (See Ramban.) Indeed, the preceding verse promises, “…and you will lend to many peoples, and you will not borrow.” The images of “head” and “tail,” then, seem to refer, respectively, to economic prosperity and economic hardship. And thus on Rosh Hashanah, too, we pray to be the “head” in the sense of material blessing.

However, Rav Shimshon Pincus suggested an additional insight into the prayer, “*Yehi ratzon…she-niheyeh le-rosh ve-lo le-zanav*.” The primary difference between the head and the tail is that the head, which houses the brain, makes the decision of where the body should go, and the tail mindlessly follows this decision. The tail is pulled along, its direction determined by the will of the head. On Rosh Hashanah, Rav Pincus explained, we pray that we should always exercise control over ourselves, and have the power to choose our direction. As we look ahead to the coming year, we must aspire to create the lives that we want for ourselves, rather than be dragged along by external factors. We must make it our goal to consciously choose how to live, rather than live passively, floating like a ship that goes wherever the winds take it. And we pray that God grant us the wisdom and courage to be the “head,” to make the correct decisions and chart the right course for ourselves, the one which will lead us to a year of success, fulfillment, and the full realization of our potential.

Thursday

One of the foods which people customarily eat on the night of Rosh Hashanah as an expression of their hopes and aspirations for the near year is a pomegranate, a fruit that consists of a large number of small seeds. The prayer recited before eating the pomegranate on Rosh Hashanah is that our merits shall be numerous like the seeds of a pomegranate. This custom is mentioned by the Rama, in his glosses to the *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 583:1), where he formulates the prayer as “*Nirbeh zekhuyot ka-rimon*” (“We shall have many merits like a pomegranate”).

The *Peri Chadash* raises the question of why we would offer such a prayer. The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (57a) cites a verse in Shir Hashirim which compares *Benei Yisrael* to a slice of pomegranate (“*Ke-felach ha-rimon rakateikh*” – 4:3), and explains, “Even the ‘empty ones’ among Israel are filled with *mitzvot* like pomegranate.” Even the less righteous among our nation, who do not meticulously observe the Torah’s laws, have many *mitzvot* to their credit. It emerges, then, that the pomegranate symbolizes the *mitzvot* performed by even the “empty ones,” those who underachieve in their Torah observance. The *Peri Chadash* thus wonders why we would pray that our merits should be numerous as the seeds of a pomegranate, if this standard is attained even by the less devout members of our nation. Should we not have higher aspirations as we begin the new year?

The *Peri Chadash* answers by explaining the Gemara’s comment to mean that the “empty ones” among our nation perform a considerable number of *mitzvot* over the course of their lives. The Gemara does not, according to the *Peri Chadash*, mean that at any given moment, people who are lax in *mitzva* observance are “filled with *mitzvot* like a pomegranate.” Rather, it states that over the course of a person’s life, he performs many good deeds even if he falls short of expected standards of religious observance. Our prayer on Rosh Hashanah is that we will always have countless merits, on account of the numerous *mitzvot* that we genuinely strive to perform.

Rav Gamliel Rabinowitz, in *Gam Ani Odekha – Rosh Hashanah*, suggests several additional answers to the *Peri Chadash*’s question. Firstly, he notes that the Gemara makes its comment in reference to a verse that compares *Benei Yisrael* to “*felach ha-rimon*” – a slice of pomegranate. The merits of the less devout, Rav Rabinowitz explains, are as numerous as the considerable number of seeds in a small slice of pomegranate, but we hope and pray that we will accumulate merits *ka-rimon* – like the seeds contained in an entire pomegranate.

Rav Rabinowitz also suggests distinguishing between “*mitzvot*” and “*zekhuyot*” (“merits”). The Gemara teaches that even the less committed members of our nation have numerous *mitzvot* to their credit, but on Rosh Hashanah, we pray that we should also have countless *zekhuyot*. Rav Rabinowitz proposes that the term *zekhuyot* in this context might refer not to the *mitzvot* that we perform, but rather to their impact. When we model *mitzva* observance for the people around us, thereby influencing them to perform *mitzvot*,we receive part of the credit for their good deeds. Thus, on Rosh Hashanah, we ask not to be “filled with *mitzvot*,” a standard achieved by all, but rather that we attain countless *zekhuyot* through our *mitzvot*. We aspire to not merely perform *mitzvot*, but to have an impact, to make a difference. One of our goals for the coming year is to set a positive example for others to follow, to live in a manner that uplifts and motivates others to grow and achieve, so that we make the greatest contribution that we are capable of making.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the custom mentioned by the Rama (O.C. 583:1) to eat pomegranates on Rosh Hashanah, and to pray, “*Nirbeh zekhuyot ka-rimon*” – “We shall have many merits like a pomegranate.” The *Peri Chadash*, as we saw, raised the question of why would aspire only to this level, which the Gemara (Berakhot 57a) teaches is attained by all Jews. The Gemara states that *Benei Yisrael* are compared to pomegranates (Shir Hashirim 4:3) because “Even the ‘empty ones’ among Israel are filled with *mitzvot* like a pomegranate.” If even the less devout among our nation are “filled with *mitzvot* like a pomegranate,” then why do we pray and hope for this “achievement”?

Rav Yehuda Ayash, in his *Mateh Yehuda* commentary to the *Shulchan Arukh*, answers by distinguishing between the way we are to view others, and the way we are to view ourselves, particularly on Rosh Hashanah. The Gemara teaches us that we must perceive our fellow Jews as “filled with *mitzvot*” even if they outwardly appear “empty,” without many good deeds to their credit. We are to strive to focus our attention on other people’s good deeds, to respect and admire the fine qualities and their accomplishments, rather than arrogantly and condescendingly dismissing them as “empty.” If our initial impression of somebody is that he is “empty,” we must try to find the multitude of “seeds,” of admirable qualities and good deeds, that deserve our recognition and respect. When it comes to our self-perception, however, we must never see ourselves as finished products, as though we are “filled” with *mitzvot*, having already achieved to our full potential. We must continue striving, longing, aspiring and praying to become “filled” with *mitzvot*, to accomplish all that we are capable of accomplishing.

Of course, feelings of pride and gratification over our achievements have their place, and we certainly should not view ourselves as “empty,” as bereft of any merits. However, on Rosh Hashanah, as we look ahead to the new year, we must direct our attention toward the “empty” areas within ourselves, those that require improvement. We are to consider where in our lives we can add more “seeds,” more *mitzvot*, so we will “fill” our lives with as much meaning and achievement as possible.