

TORAT HAR SHMUEL

by

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WHAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT

We come before Avinu She'ba'Shamayim, our Heavenly Father every year on Rosh Hashana and pour our hearts out for the necessities in life that we realize (at least during these ten days) we cannot control: Good health, sustenance, success, to mention but a few. During these days it's apparent what a huge role "mazal" plays in our lives. What does mazal stand for?? 'Makom' – place, 'z'man' – timing, and 'loshon' – language. We have to be in the right place at the right time and express ourselves in the right manner. Everyone will agree that for all the intangibles in life to come together requires a nice dose of Divine Intervention. Understanding this, within the privacy of our own hearts and souls, we make deals with Hashem Yisborach. We promise that a sincere effort will be made to improve on our shortcomings, be more thankful for the blessings that emanate from Hashem rather than attributing our successes exclusively to our G-d given talent, be more of this or that and lessen the personality characteristic that our contrary to what they should be. Indeed, there is a beautiful thought on the verse (Devarim 11:12) where we learn that Hashem watches over Eretz Ha'Kedosha, Israel, "from the beginning of the year until the end of a year".

The beginning of the year appears with a "hay" before the word

"shana", year, while the end of *a* year does not have a "hay" before it. What starts out as the year, the time I'm going to dedicate myself to learning more, attending minyan more, most importantly being a better person, a better husband, father son or daughter, a better work associate or partner, *a better all-around Jew*, more often than not just turns into another ordinary year left with promises and goals unfulfilled. The question is obvious. Why is this problem so prevalent? Are we over-reaching, expecting too much from ourselves? Do we establish unrealistic goals because we're emotionally caught up in the moment of the "yomim noraim", the davening, the shofar, a good drasha? I don't think these are the reasons.

In my opinion, I think we don't grasp what's at stake and how our own personal and spiritual potential plays into the scenario. There is a famous Gemara (Rosh Hashana 17a, Rashi & Kiddushin 40b) that teaches every person in every generation a remarkably powerful reality. It's more than just a theoretical lesson – **IT'S A REALITY!!** The world is compared to a scale. Everyone's deeds are placed on the scale, including ours. On one side are our nation's collective merits while on the other rests all of our sins. And wouldn't you know, what we're thinking of doing **RIGHT NOW** will determine which direction the scale tips. The yetzer hara is telling us not to give the Tzedaka because we need it for the yet unidentified 'something else', while the yetzer tov encourages us to be generous. Sleep late so you can focus better at work or in school rather than get up for minyan. All of us can



build a list of a thousand examples. At the end of the day, it's "the Force" verses "the dark side". We think our choices only impacts us, our "dalet amos", when in fact the choices we make may very well have an impact on Jews living on another continent.

More importantly than that, we may think that the consequences of choosing properly, what the Torah calls "u'vacharta b'chaim", choosing LIFE, only has a proportionately small impact on our overall nation. If we do a kindness here today, it may positively affect someone in France, but only a few people, proportionate to our view of what we've done. Is this true? The Yam Suf, the Red Sea split after one person, Nachshon ben Aminadav, jumped into it. Hashem said move forward, and rather than ask how, Nachshon did what Hashem instructed. Because of him, the sea split and everyone proceeded to cross and witness the drowning of the world's strongest army. In whose merit was the sea destined to split? The Midrash teaches that when Avrohom was commanded to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak, he took care of every detail with great sensitivity. If one is going to bring wood for fire, it's easier to haul whole logs and chop them at the final destination rather than to transport split wood. But splitting the wood on top of Har Ha'Moriah would cause Yitzchak anguish because of the wait he would have to endure prior to the sacrifice. So rather than have someone else split the logs, Avrohom does it himself before leaving, making the trip more difficult, rather than putting Yitzchak through the obvious emotional turmoil. Because of this, Avrohom's children became worthy of the entire Krias Yam Suf episode. Avrohom split the wood, so his children would be worthy of experiencing the splitting of the Red Sea. The lesson is obvious: No one knows, quantitatively or qualitatively, the impact one Mitzvah or aveyra has on the Jewish world. Suddenly these spiritual/Talmudic scales are much more important than we previously recognized.

How do we integrate this 'scaled' reality into our lives? How do we respond, as individuals, families, communities, a nation to what has become a remarkably chaotic world? Politics around the world have reached a level of insanity that we've never before experienced. The Arab threat has intensified and is very real. Our present day Sages, G'dolay HaDor, speak of the coming of the Ma-

shiach in a manner that we have to consider that it may happen in a matter of days. How do we wrap our heads around today's challenges and opportunities so that we can contribute to the success of the Jewish nation, rather than remaining as spectators on the sideline, watching others doing what we can and should do? The complete answer to this question could be (and should be) published as a sefer. Permit me to suggest a few things all of us can think about that will hopefully motivate us to achieve these goals.

The Tur brings down that one should check Tefillin every year during the month of Elul. What makes this Halacha interesting is the fact that by no means is this the practice of today. The Halacha

calls on us to check our Tefillin (and Mezuzot) two times every seven years. If we have no reason to think that we put our Tefillin in a position whereby they *may* have become 'pasul' – no longer kosher, then we can rely on their presumption of being fit, their 'chezkat kashrut'. So what's the Tur talking about. Years ago I heard from Rabbi Ephraim Shapiro that the way to understand the Tur is that it's not our Tefillin we're checking, but those of Hashem Yisborach.

Amongst the 'parshiyot', the scriptures in our Tefillin is the sacred Shema, which declares our acceptance of Hashem Yisborach as the 'everything' our lives should revolve around. What's written in Hashem's spiritual Tefillin? "Who is like the nation of Israel – a unique nation in the world". During the month of Elul, we are responsible to make sure that Hashem's Tefillin are Kosher! Are we that unique nation living up to the covenant described in His Torah HaKedoshah? Are we a nation that Hashem can be proud of? How do we pray to our Heavenly Father? Do our Mitzvot come with Kavanah and the Simcha, the joy in knowing how privileged we are to live the lives we do? Are we the role models that we can be so others are inspired to raise their levels of Torah observance? Are we *learning & doing* what we can to insure that Hashem's Tefillin are Kosher?? These are emotionally difficult questions. Nonetheless, if we don't ask them this time of year, when will we ask them?

In my opinion, we have to look back to the destruction of the second Bais HaMikdash, the watershed moment that precipitated the



שנה טובה ומתוקה

Galut Edom and Galut Yishmael that we are presently in. We all know that this Bais HaMikdash was destroyed due to ‘sinas cheenom’ – free hate. As obvious as the antidote is, ‘ahavas cheenom’ – free love amongst our people, we still struggle greatly with machlokes, conflict. The amount of fault Hashem is willing to overlook if we, as a people, are unified is staggering. Unity saved the generation that built the tower of Bavel from certain death, and HKB'H had no tie to speak of with those people, and considering what they did, Hashem had every reason to wipe them out. All of us are aware of how segmented our population is: Ashkenaz & Sephard, Chassidish & Misnagdish, numerous differentiations, all part of Klal Yisroel. At the end of the day, we’re one family, one nation. As is the case within every family, there will be conflict, differences of opinion. That’s human nature, a nature that is part and parcel of how Hashem Yisborach created us. It’s how we handle those difficult moments that distinguishes us and makes Hashem proud of us or disappoints Him. Don’t forget that Bais Hillel and Bais Shamai had very different views regarding Halacha, how Jewish life should be lived. They were still great friends and had profound respect for each other.

How close were Rav Yochonon and Raish Lakish?? To say that Raish Lakish was Rav Yochonon’s son in law doesn’t begin to describe what they felt for each other. HaRov Yosef Soloveichik, ZT'L, provides us with an insight that demonstrates their love for each other. Rav Yochonon lost ten children. The death of one child is catastrophic, and yet, he endured losing ten. When visiting another person sitting shiva, he brought the tooth of his youngest child with him, showed it to the mourner and utilized the opportunity to comfort them and strengthen their emunah. The loss of ten children, he endured. When his son in law, his chavrusa in Torah learning predeceased him, he lost it, *he went insane!!* The deterioration was so intense, his Talmidim begged Hashem to take him and bring an end to his suffering. Ten children he lost, and remained whole. The loss of his chavrusa, his partner in everything Jewish, that broke him. When it came to Halacha, how many times in the Gemara do we see them disagreeing, at odds with each other. Their machlokes was l’shaim shamayim, as was that of Hillel & Shamai.

So how do we succeed in mitigating machlokes and precipitating “ahavas chinam”? Once again, this question deserves much more

than an article for its answer – it could fill a sefer. But let’s at least have something we can think about during Rosh Hashana. I think the first ingredient is to recognize that removing ourselves from machlokes is NOT the goal. Take a quick look at the Brichas HaTorah we say every day. It speaks of respecting parents, kindness, etc. Nowhere does it say to stay away from interpersonal strife. **TO THE CONTRARY**, the goal is to “bring peace between a person and his friend”. Our Torah calls for us to get involved and reestablish the love between people, even when, “It’s none of my business”. It’s an art that requires wisdom, courage, excellent communication skills, but most importantly, the desire for peace and ‘ahavas chinam’. Not getting involved inevitably leads to at least one of the parties remaining in pain, feeling alienated. Oh how convenient it is to close an eye and say nothing. If we view our community and a single unit, a Kehilah, then this can be compared to one experiencing pain in one part of their body, and the rest of the body ignores it. No organism operates that way!!! Why should we??

The Chofetz Chaim explains a very perplexing Rashi in Parashat Shemot. When Moshe Rabbeinu realizes that one of his own, *our own*, has informed Paroh that he killed the Egyptian, he says “ochen noda ha’dover” – “certainly the thing is known”. Rashi explains that for a long time Moshe pondered why the Egyptians were the masters and the Israelites were the slaves. When this happened, he had his answer. The Chofetz Chaim asks how the actions of a few rotten apples can condemn an entire nation to slavery. What was Moshe thinking? The Chofetz Chaim answers that our nation is compared to a tree. The roots are our Avot, Avrohom, Yitzchak and Yaakov. The trunk represents the twelve tribes, while the branches represent their children, their descendants. If there’s a disease in one part of the tree that remains unchecked, untreated, it’s only a matter of time before it spreads and eventually kills the entire tree. It’s the same thing here. The disease is present and impacts the entire tree. This calls for us not to ignore the ailment of machlokes, but to cure it by helping to eradicate it, to bring shalom.

The second ingredient calls on us to judge everyone favorably. We learn this from Pirke Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, (1:6). It’s interesting to note that the very next Mishna (1:7) calls upon us to

distance ourselves from a bad neighbor. How does a bad neighbor exist if we judge everyone favorably? Obviously there is a balance to be struck here, and it all starts by making sure that before we intercede on behalf of anyone we have all the information, both sides of the story, the entire picture present and accounted for. We all sin, we all make mistakes which is why Yom Kippur exists. There is not a person in the world who we should hold to a higher standard than we demand of ourselves. Therefore, if you've been offended by another or if you're in a position to mediate the peace between two people, make sure that all the information is available. More times than not, this factor alone will clear the air. How many misunderstanding exists because one party did not know something critical about the other, and when they find out, the light bulb illuminates – "Now I understand", after offensive words have been expressed.

There's another scenario in which judging favorably has application. If a new business or a new religious entity opens, those who feel the new entity is competing with something that preexists it may be critical either because it dilutes what presently exists or the competition will harm them. So the "knee-jerk" reaction is to condemn it, fight over it. Why be negative?? Today's competition may be tomorrow's partner. Diversification brings strength, services a greater part of the population, and fills needs that aren't presently being addressed. If this is the case, noise that should not have existed in the first place will die down. If it's not the case, the wise should step forward and peacefully incorporate them into what presently exists. The opportunity here begins by being peace oriented in the judgment process.

The third ingredient may be the most powerful in cutting the legs off of any dispute. For those of us who take our Torah learning, our Mitzvah observance, our family and communal, G-dly oriented lifestyle seriously, it's most important to realize that within every conflict, it should not be about us or them. Ultimately, it's about Hashem Yisborach, or Heavenly Father. The question we should ask is NOT what we want. At this moment of conflict, **what does Hashem want??** The power of this question is absolutely nuclear!! The strength it has to reconcile differences is mind blowing, mainly because the focus is where it belongs: Not on us, but on Hashem!! When we properly integrate Him into the dispute the only direction it can go in is one that will end peace-

fully, probably placing everyone in a stronger, more unified position than they were before it began. The truth is that all of life is not about us, which is why we live our lives the way we do. It's the upward direction of our Avodas Hashem that has marked the uniqueness of our people since the days of Avrohom Avinu. (You'll see more about this on Succot.)

The final ingredient revolves around our paragon of peace, Aharon Kohen Gadol. The Mishna once again in Pirke Avot (1:12) exhorts us to be like Aharon. "Ohev shalom v'rodef shalom - Love peace and pursue peace..." In my opinion, the most important part of this phrase is the vov (v') in the middle. There are those who claim they love peace, but when it comes to facilitating peace between feuding parties, they run the other way because they choose not to get involved in machlokes. How can one love shalom, peace if they've chosen to run from at a critical moment when that love is really being tested? Is it real? What purpose does it serve? Similarly, there are those who 'pursue peace', not because they love it but because they love to stir the pot or just witness the action going on. This type of personality brings nothing productive to the process. We have to join both sides of the Mishna: Love peace AND pursue peace.

Chazal teach us that the Mashiach is going to arrive – B'EZRAS HASHEM YISBORACH, SPEEDILY IN OUR DAYS – in one of two ways. If we as a people are not worthy, but the time absolutely requires it, he will arrive in a natural way, within the framework of the natural world. If we are worthy, if as a nation we are UNIFIED, he will come with the same amazing miracles and wonders that accompanied the exodus from Egypt centuries ago. Which way the Mashiach comes begins with each and every one of us, individuals, families, communities – this is what makes up our nation. Choose life, choose unity, and choose Shalom!!

To all the members of Har Shmuel community and well beyond, this 'yochid' wishes all of you the best of everything in the coming year: Good health, happiness, success and most importantly, endless growth and fulfillment in Torah, Mitzvot & Maasim Tovim. Looking forward to all of Am Yisroel being in Eretz Yisroel, together.

KETIVA V'CHATIMA TOVAH