

Underlying Values and Concepts of Rosh Hashana

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel | September 23, 2019

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On Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, the atmosphere and mood is quite different from the revelry of the secular New Year. This chapter will explore why and how this is so, through the unique customs and commandments related to the day, as well as its historical significance. Rather than examine the laws and customs themselves, the purpose here is to understand the deeper concepts and underlying values of these laws.

THE UNIQUE SHOFAR OF THE MONTH OF ELUL

Even though the Torah’s commandment is to blow the shofar only on Rosh Hashana, the first day of the month of Tishrei¹, it is an almost universal custom in Judaism to blow the shofar, in addition, each day after morning prayers during the entire month of Elul for a full thirty days prior to Rosh Hashana. Why? Many people probably think that the reason is that the shofar blower has to practice in order to “get it right” on Rosh Hashana. But there is no other mitzvah where the custom is to “practice” that commandment, as part of Jewish law and custom, before we actually perform it on its proper day. So, for example, there is no commandment before Sukkot to shake the lulav and four species or practice sitting in the sukkah, or light the candles a month before Chanukah or perform any other ritual in Jewish law simply in order to perfect the action. In fact, adding days to the performance of a Torah commandment is specifically forbidden.² In addition, when it comes to matzah, it is strictly forbidden to eat matzah before the Pesach Seder, before the mitzvah to do it, and some Jews stop eating all special foods for the Seder on the day before Pesach,³ while others do not eat matzah at all for a month before Passover. Why, then, is shofar the only mitzvah in the Torah that we have to seemingly “practice” day after day for an entire month before Jews actually perform the Torah commandment?

According to Tur, the shofar of the month of Elul has nothing to do with the commandment to blow shofar on Rosh Hashana.⁴ Quoting the Midrash, Tur states that Moses was asked by G-d to go up to Mount Sinai to beg for forgiveness on behalf of the people and write the second set of Tablets after he smashed the first ones in reaction to the grave sin of the Golden Calf. In order that no one should repeat the same mistake about mistiming the return of Moses, which caused the sin of the Golden Calf in the first place, they blew a shofar in the camp, indicating exactly when Moses left to go up to the mountain for the next forty days. The Tur continues and says that G-d Himself was uplifted by that shofar on the first day of Elul, citing the same verse that we say concerning the shofar of Rosh Hashana.⁵ Tur then says, based on the verse that the shofar awakens feelings in people,⁶ that the sound of the shofar should awaken within Jews the desire to repent for their sins (and confuse Satan), which is the very reason Jews blow shofar on Rosh Hashana. We understand that since there were no newspapers, radio or even posters to announce Moshe’s leaving, the shofar served that purpose. Thus, the shofar on the first day of Elul was just a horn, a signal to the people and nothing more. Any other signal would have been just as effective. Why, then, the special custom to imitate the signal and blow shofar on the first of Elul each year today? But even if we could answer this question, this would only

¹ Leviticus 23:24, Numbers 29:1

² Deuteronomy 4:2

³ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 471:1-2

⁴ Tur, Orach Chaim 495

⁵ Psalms 47:6

⁶ Amos 3:6

explain why we blow shofar the first day of Elul, as they did in the desert. But why do we continue to blow for an entire month? So we are back to our original question: why start and practice a Torah commandment 29 days before the day of the actual commandment?

Beit Yosef, a commentary on Tur (and author of the Shulchan Aruch) asks these questions,⁷ and then says that the shofar of the first day of Elul was to prevent further sin (regarding the Golden Calf incident), while the shofar for the rest of the month is blown to inspire repentance for past sins. Thus, the two shofar blowings during the month of the Elul have two separate purposes: one to cause repentance for the past and another to prevent sin for the future. Both of these components are needed in true repentance.⁸ But this does not actually answer our question about why we do all this before the day which is the specifically mandated day for repentance, Rosh Hashana.

Furthermore, we know that the sound of the shofar causes both a physical reaction in people⁹ as well as a spiritual wake up call to repent for past misdeeds.¹⁰ But how can the shofar blast prevent future sins? What is the “magic” in the sound that can prevent the Jew from future sinning, according to Beit Yosef? In order to answer these questions, we need to examine the specific commandments of the shofar and its blessing, and in this way discover its uniqueness.

THE COMMANDMENT OF SHOFAR – THE MOST UNUSUAL IN THE TORAH

In one respect, the commandment of the shofar on Rosh Hashana is different from every other mitzvah-commandment in the entire Torah. With every other positive mitzvah-commandment, the requirement is to perform a specific action, and that is the commandment itself. So on Sukkot the commandments are the actions of sitting in the Sukkah and waving the Four Species. On Chanukah, the mitzvah is to light the Menorah. On Purim, the action is to read the Megillah, on Pesach to eat the matzah. Each weekday the act and mitzvah is to wear the Tefillin, wash one’s hands before eating bread, wear tzitzit daily, etc. But the commandment on Rosh Hashana, especially if we look carefully at the wording of the blessing, is not the action itself. There is no commandment to “blow” the shofar. Rather, the mitzvah-commandment on Rosh Hashana is to hear the sound of the shofar.¹¹ Therefore, there could be a situation where the action is performed perfectly, but the mitzvah was not fulfilled at all. In fact, the Talmud says that if a person blew the shofar perfectly into a pit or cistern, but it was not heard properly (only through an echo, for example), the person listening has not fulfilled the commandment. And this is the ruling in Jewish law.¹² Why is this the only commandment in the Torah where performing the proper action is not sufficient? What makes it so different and special? Tur explains¹³ that this is the reason that the blessing specifically says the commandment is to hear the shofar and not to blow the shofar, since only in the case of the shofar the commandment is to hear the shofar blast and not to blow the shofar blast. The question is why this unique to the shofar. What is so different about this particular mitzvah-commandment that the action of blowing is not sufficient? Why is hearing the blast so much more important than blowing the shofar? What exactly are Jews supposed to hear?

THE ACT OF HEARING IN JUDAISM

For the Jew, the act of hearing is not merely to perceive a sound, the physical act of hearing. It is so much more. In the portion of *Re-eh* (which signifies the sense of sight), the second verse says “the blessing that you shall hear” and the “curse that you shall not hear.”¹⁴ Normally it is understood that

⁷ Beit Yosef Commentary on Tur, Orach Chaim 495

⁸ Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuva 2:2

⁹ Midrash Sifri, Shoftim 49

¹⁰ Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuva 3:4

¹¹ Blessing recited prior to blowing the shofar

¹² Rosh Hashana 27b, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 587:1

¹³ Tur, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 585

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 11:26-28

Jews should listen to the words of G-d and they will receive the blessings enumerated, and if they do not listen to G-d's words and commandments, they will receive the curses. But Ohr Chaim understands these words quite differently.¹⁵ He says that the blessing itself is the ability to hear the words of G-d, and for the Jew who does not know how to hear, that is the greatest curse of all, because it will inevitably lead to sin. Thus, the Jew has to acquire a special ability to hear, far beyond the physical dimension.

This theme is repeated numerous times in the book of Deuteronomy, with the commandment that the Jews must "hear the words of G-d."¹⁶ How do we understand these commandments? One of these verses "to hear" is probably the most famous verse in the entire Torah, a verse that any Jew who knows even one Torah verse will surely recognize, the "Shema" (which signifies "hear"). What is the meaning of this verse "Hear O Israel...?" It is certainly not a commandment to use one's ears to hear G-d's words. Rather, it is a commandment to understand that G-d as the Creator of the universe, that distant G-d, is also "our G-d," who cares about each and every action we take, and it is the same one G-d. Thus, the verb "*Shema*-hear" in Hebrew actually means to understand as well. That is why when the Jewish people received the Torah they said "*Na-ase ViNishma*" which translates as "We will do it and then understand it", and not "We will hear it."¹⁷

The commandment concerning the shofar, then, is not merely to hear the physical sound, but to understand the deeper meaning of the message, "*Lishmoa Kol Shofar*-To understand the meaning of the shofar." That is the intention of the commandment. But what are Jews supposed to hear and understand? What is the sound, the voice of the shofar supposed to make us comprehend? To answer that question, we must return to the original use of sound and voice in the Torah.

AFTER THE FIRST SIN, MAN'S ABILITY TO HEAR CHANGED

In the very first sin in the Torah, after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they were embarrassed about being naked and that they needed clothing, while a few minutes beforehand, the Torah praises them for being unclothed.¹⁸ What happens next? Immediately thereafter, it says that Adam and Eve heard the voice/sound of G-d walking in the Garden of Eden, and their reaction to this voice/sound was that they hid from G-d. G-d then asks them, "Where are you?" and they respond, "We heard Your voice/sound in the Garden and we were afraid because we are naked and we hid."¹⁹

This is the same voice/sound of G-d that Adam and Eve heard previously in the Garden of Eden. Why the change? G-d asks "Where are you?" not because He wishes to know their physical place in the Garden. G-d already knows that, as He knows everything. This is the voice/sound of G-d that is internal, the same voice that was walking proudly with Adam and Eve a few minutes earlier, right before the sin. G-d is actually asking, "Where are the Adam and Eve that were with me a few minutes ago?" With all his "cover-ups," man suddenly understands that G-d's voice is not only heard through the ears, but it is also G-d speaking to man's heart – i.e., man speaking to himself. As Adam tries to run away from G-d, he is, in reality, running towards G-d, as he hides by the very same tree that he first received the commandment not to eat from. As Ibn Gevirol writes, "I ran from G-d by running towards Him in my efforts to hide from His wrath."²⁰ Why? Adam instinctively "returns to the scene of the crime" because he wants to return to his previous unblemished status. But when man is not capable of

¹⁵ Ohr Chaim commentary to Deuteronomy 11:28

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 6:4, 11:13, 20:3

¹⁷ Exodus 24:7

¹⁸ Genesis 3:7, 2:25

¹⁹ Genesis 3:8-10

²⁰ Ibn Gevirol, "Keter Malchut" 38

being his true self, that internal voice/sound cannot be heard, and instead of G-d walking with man, man does not hear G-d's voice/sound and is afraid.

Thus, Adam's outward action is to flee from G-d by returning to that tree. But what happens with his inward action? He no longer knows how to hear, or he thinks he is hearing with his ears only and that he can prevent himself from truly hearing G-d by hiding and covering his ears. He does not understand that G-d's voice is within him. That is why the Midrash says²¹ that before the sin, Adam was given the qualities of awe and fear, when all the animals feared him because he walked with G-d and heard His voice/sound loud and clear. After the sin, the first man fears others. As long as man heard G-d's voice, he was not afraid of others and not afraid of G-d, and had no reason to hide.

On which day did all this happen? When did Adam first hear and then stop hearing that internal voice of G-d? When could he not answer the simple question of "Where are you?" This happened on Rosh Hashana, the day of man's birth, according to the Midrash.²² Thus, every future human being is asked the very same question on each subsequent Rosh Hashana: Where are you? Where are you holding in life? Where is the real person inside of you? Adam had many responses to G-d's questions after the sin, but he never answered G-d's basic question – namely, "Where are you?" G-d's question was first answered two thousand years later by Abraham.

THE ILLOGICAL TORAH READING ON ROSH HASHANA

According to one opinion, the world was created on the 25th of the month of Elul and man, born on the 6th day of Creation, was created on Rosh Hashana. His birth, sin and the aftermath discussed above, all occurred on that first day of his life, on Rosh Hashana. Thus, just as every Jewish holiday has a historical precedent that occurred that day, it is man's first sin (and his feeble attempt at repentance) that took place on Rosh Hashana.²³ If this is the event that occurred on this day nearly 6000 years ago, then why didn't the rabbis assign as the Torah reading for Rosh Hashana this story and text of Genesis 3? Why do we, rather, read about Isaac (his birth on the first day of Rosh Hashana and the Binding of Isaac on the second day)? This seems very illogical.

Some have given an explanation that it was on Rosh Hashana that Isaac was born,²⁴ but that answer seems very shallow and not sufficient to create a yearly Torah reading on this day. There must be a deeper reason tying this Torah reading to Rosh Hashana. We do not read about the first man, but, rather, we read about the first man who knew how to answer the question that G-d posed to Adam – "Where are you?" Abraham heard this voice of G-d and responded "*Hineni* - I am here to serve you."²⁵

But what is it that is unique about Abraham and the voice/sound which allowed him to hear the question properly and respond to it? G-d originally said that he would tell Abraham the place of the Binding. But when they got close to the site after three days, the Torah says that Abraham saw the place, and did not hear it.²⁶ What does this mean? Abraham somehow saw that which was supposed to be heard. He, along with Isaac, also saw something else that the others – Eliezer and Ishmael, who accompanied them – did not see. They all saw a mountain, but only Abraham and Isaac saw a cloud that ringed the mountain.²⁷ Thus, Eliezer and Yishmael were equated in the text with the donkeys that also saw only a mountain, and they were asked to stay back along with the donkeys. But how do we know that Abraham and Isaac were correct in what they saw?

²¹ Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah 3:18

²² Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 1:10, Menorat HaMaor 291

²³ Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 29:1

²⁴ Rosh Hashana 10a

²⁵ Genesis 22:1

²⁶ Genesis 22:2-5

²⁷ Midrash, Pesikta DeRav Kahana 26:3

After the angel tells Abraham not to kill Isaac, the Torah says that Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw a ram. Then Abraham named the place “*Hashem Yireh* - In the mountain of G-d, it shall be seen.” This is a special kind of seeing. Then, at the end of the story, the Torah goes out of its way to say that Abraham’s children would be blessed because (only) Abraham was able to hear the voice of G-d,²⁸ the voice that Adam could not hear and no one else heard, understood or answered until Abraham. Later on, the Torah again stresses that what made Abraham special was that he could hear the voice/sound of G-d.²⁹

HEARING THE VOICE/SOUND OF G-D THAT SHOULD BE SEEN

This, then, is the crucial concept that made Abraham unique. Abraham, who was waiting to hear G-d’s voice/sound internally, actually hears it externally, which is an even higher level, by seeing what should have been heard. Abraham had the ability not only to hear G-d’s voice/sound but even to see it. He also saw a cloud around the mountain and then the ram that no one else could see, even though that ram’s horn had been present since Creation.³⁰ It is this ram and its horn that becomes the symbol for Jews on Rosh Hashana, the symbol of the voice/sound of G-d that Abraham was able to hear. This is the essence of the day of Rosh Hashana, that internal hearing, the contemplation, the internal voice within each person.

Therefore, at the height of spirituality, the physical senses are all combined, so that one can not only hear G-d, but also see that which should be heard. This height was reached again at Mount Sinai when every Jew was able to see that which should have been heard, as it says the Jews “saw the voice/sound” of G-d and also saw the “voice/sound of the shofar.”³¹ When Moses reminded the Jews of that special moment thirty-eight years later, he stresses that the Jewish people, in that unique experience, were truly able to hear the voice/sound of G-d.³² But what does it truly mean to “see” the voice/sound of the Shofar?

It is clear that one who knows how to truly hear the sound of the shofar will not only hear the physical sounds but “see” these sounds, as well – i.e., feel the spiritual impact with all of one’s physical senses. This is the true meaning of the blessing “to hear the sound of the shofar” recited on Rosh Hashana before the blasts are blown. But this height of spirituality, this ability to hear the internal voice, is so difficult to accomplish in one day or even one week. Thus, the rabbis gave the Jews time to build up to that which Abraham was able to achieve and that the Jews at Sinai also achieved. Therefore, traditional Jews blow the shofar each day of Elul in trying to prepare to hear that internal voice.

Thus, the shofar of the days of Elul is the shofar that calls upon man to understand that when he sins, he is not his real self, similar to Adam after his sin. But to feel this idea, man must learn to hear this internal voice. That is why the commandment is not to merely blow the shofar, but to hear, to understand the sound of the shofar, to understand the blessing. The challenge of Rosh Hashana is to take something physical and external and to try to hear and understand its essence within each person. This is what Jews recite at the height of the Musaf prayer of Rosh Hashana: “We blow the mighty Shofar, but no physical sound is heard, only an internal message.”³³ But when we do hear, we are no longer afraid of G-d, as Adam was. We understand internally why it is wrong to sin. We stand “naked”

²⁸ Genesis 22:12-14, 18

²⁹ Genesis 26:4-5

³⁰ Mishna Avot, 5:6, Midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah 17:2

³¹ Exodus 20:15

³² Deuteronomy 4: 12, 33

³³ “*Unitane Tokef*” prayer, Musaf of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur

before G-d and can indeed answer the question of “Where are you?” with *Heneni* - I am here, ready to serve the Almighty.

WHY WE PASS BEFORE G-D FOR JUDGMENT ON ROSH HASHANA

(Many of the ideas in this section are based upon a shiur by Rabbi Zev Leff.³⁴)

In that most moving of prayers, *Unitane Tokef*, which Jews recite on Rosh Hashana, we say that each person comes before G-d to be judged like a sheep.³⁵ The image of passing as sheep might strike a negative chord for Jews after the imagery of the Holocaust, and must be understood in this context. What is this imagery based on? Where does it come from?

The source of this passage in the Machzor (prayer book for the holidays), which was written by Rabbi Amnon, is the Mishna which states³⁶ that there are actually four “New Years” in Judaism when people are judged for different aspects of their lives. On Rosh Hashana, the first day of the month of Tishrei, each person passes before G-d like a “*Bnai Maron*.” In discussing exactly what *Bnai Maron* is, the Talmud does say³⁷ that one of the explanations of this expression is “like sheep.” But there are two other explanations offered as well. *Bnai Maron*, says Resh Lakish, is the narrow passageway going up a very narrow path on a specific mountain in Israel, step by step, where only one person can fit at a time. Rabbi Judah, in the name of Samuel, disagreed and said the imagery is one of soldiers passing before a king or general who inspects his army right before war. These are three different imageries of how each human being is judged by G-d, but in the end, each person passes before G-d. Why the need for three different explanations? We need not conclude that they are arguing, but, rather, that each opinion in that Talmudic passage reveals another aspect of G-d’s judgment of man. Taken together, we can see how all three teach us how people are actually judged by G-d on Rosh Hashana, and how each person should prepare to draw closer and come before G-d on the Jewish New Year.

JUDGING PEOPLE LIKE SHEEP

What is it that G-d is looking for when He judges human beings like sheep? What is a shepherd looking for as each sheep passes before him? First, he wants to make sure that they are all there. Maybe he lost some since the last count. Maybe some ran away. Maybe some died. So the shepherd counts to insure that they are all there. Second, a shepherd wants to make sure that each sheep is healthy. Which have blemishes? Which need help? Third, he wants to see that all the sheep bear his brand. In case a sheep gets lost, people will know to whom it belongs.

These three roles of a shepherd are comparable to what G-d wants to know about each human being and each Jew. First, are they still there? Have they turned their back on G-d? Have they run away from Him? There are different arenas and methods of running away from G-d. Is the allegiance of each person still with G-d? Second, even if they are faithful to Him, G-d wants to know if each person is healthy spiritually, or if anyone is blemished. Have they done sins that cause blemishes? Is each person’s faith where it should be? Are every individual’s ethical character and moral values where they should be? Does each person perform commandments properly or merely mechanically? Third, a person may be faithful to G-d and even perform His commandments, but still be missing something. Does each person bear G-d’s “brand?” Does each person represent G-d to others on earth?

A person may do all 613 mitzvot-commandments, but this is not the essence of his or her life, just something he or she does. That person’s main values and standards may not represent what G-d

³⁴ “*Festivals of Life*,” Rabbi Zev Leff, Targum Press, 2009, pages 57-61

³⁵ “*Unitane Tokef*” prayer, Musaf of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur

³⁶ Mishna, Rosh Hashana 1:2

³⁷ Rosh Hashana 18a with Rashi commentary

wants. There are people who observe all the commandments but still have secular values. This is the Jew who will participate in an activity that he or she knows is not really proper, moral or ethical yet not illegal or violating Jewish law, but they will still make sure to eat Glatt-Kosher at an event. G-d wants Jews who are Glatt-kosher Jews, not Jews who merely eat Glatt-Kosher. These people do not do anything technically wrong, but they are not right either. This is not “G-d’s brand.”

Thus, G-d the Shepherd wants to know how faithful each person is to Him, in general. But He also wants to know if Jews observe the commandments with the right values and character traits. Finally, He wants to examine whether each person represents G-d in his or her daily actions as “G-d’s brand.”

JUDGING PEOPLE LIKE THE STEPS OF A MOUNTAIN

The second perspective on the judgment of G-d shows us how it is like the steps of a steep incline along a very narrow path on a mountain. Most people are standing on a different level. Two people can be on the exact same level in the first aspect of the metaphor of sheep, and yet one person will get a positive judgment while the other receives a negative judgment, even though they appear to be exactly at the same place spiritually and morally. Though they seem to have the same observance, keep the same commandments and the exact lifestyle, they end up with two completely different judgments. How is that possible?

The answer is simple. Both are now on “spiritual level 58”, for example, but they have moved in opposite spiritual directions since the previous year. Last year one person was on the 63rd spiritual level but he regressed to level 58. Meanwhile, the second person might have been on level 52 the year before and has now reached level 58, thus his or her progress is positive. Therefore, G-d is not only concerned with where each person is now when He judges each person on Rosh Hashanah. He is also concerned about where each person was, and where he or she is now vis-a-vis the past. G-d wants each person to constantly improve. That is why the Midrash says the word Shofar is related to the Hebrew word “*Shipru*,”³⁸ which tells each person to improve his or her actions, and is thereby a call to Jews to always be better than last year. That is the main message of the Shofar – to awaken the Jew to become a better person, to constantly grow. Thus, this world is compared to an escalator going down, on which a person is trying to climb up. If he or she stands still, the person will go down. If he or she makes a small effort, that individual will stay in the same place. But if a person makes a big effort, only then will he or she go up.

This world, in the physical sense, is a world in motion that is never truly at rest (ask any physicist). We and each object around us are travelling at 11 miles each second, but we just do not feel it. Inside each solid object, the electrons are moving quite quickly. If all movement in the world were to stop, the world would cease to exist. The same principle that is true in the physical world is also true in the spiritual world. A person is always moving spiritually, whether up or down. Just as stagnation is not acceptable or possible in the physical world, it is not possible in the spiritual world as well. G-d wants to know in which direction each individual is moving – not only where each of person is now, but where he or she was before. If there is spiritual regression, it is a negative movement. Thus, the second aspect of G-d’s judgment is like a person who climbs up or down a mountain. G-d does not judge the person based only on what level of the mountain he or she is on at this moment, but on the level as compared to last year.

JUDGING PEOPLE LIKE A GENERAL JUDGES SOLDIERS

³⁸ Midrash, Vayikra Rabbah 29:6

In the *Zichronot* section of the Silent Prayer on Rosh Hashana Musaf, Jewish recite the words “*Maase Ish Ufekudato* - Every person’s deed and mission.”³⁹ What do these words signify? Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz (1886-1948) explained that every Jew has mitzvot-commandments that are common with everyone else’s, like Shabbat, kashrut, etc., but each person, each Jew, also has his or her specific mission in life. It is about this specific mission and unique goals that G-d judges each person on Rosh Hashana.

A *Pekuda* in the Israeli army is a direct order to a soldier from a superior officer. But it is much more than this in the “army of life.” It is that individual’s specific mission. Therefore, as each person comes before G-d as a soldier, G-d judges that person, asking if the individual fulfilled his or her unique mission in life. If one soldier does someone else’s mission, it might look fine to that particular soldier, but it can harm the overall army. Each person must do his or her unique mission.

But how can a person know what his or her unique mission is? Unlike a physical army, there is no paperwork describing the mission, and no one will get an SMS outlining his or her particular calling in life. Part of the mission for the Jew is to seek out and try to find what G-d wants, by combining that person’s unique skill set and personality, along with his or her particular circumstances in life. People think that they plan their lives and their jobs, and think that they are pulling all the strings. But actually it is G-d who is pushing each person every day.⁴⁰ Many things happen beyond a person’s awareness and everything happens for a reason, even if the individual does not understand each event fully. (See the chapter on “How Much G-d, How Much Us” for an expansion on this theme). Each person has to use one’s unique circumstances to find and then fulfill his or her unique mission. It is as if each person is on a stage with a particular role or part in a play. The individual is wearing a particular costume that might change in the course of the play, one’s lifetime. Within these parameters, a person should try to know himself or herself, in order to play that part in the best way possible and maximize the mission.

The basic script for a Jew is the Torah and the Code of Jewish law, and the assignment is an ongoing, unfolding second-by-second mission. Thus, whatever a Jew is doing, whatever situation G-d puts a person into, is identifiable as part of his or her mission. Each human being is supposed to ask and seek out what G-d wants from him or her in each situation. Each day, each person faces hundreds of choices, from getting out of bed, to someone coming to the door, to writing and receiving emails. The script tells the Jew how to relate to each situation in a Jewish manner. A Jew who has done that has fulfilled his or her mission.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) commented on the words Jews recite on Yom Kippur at the very end of the private Silent Prayer: “My G-d, before I was formed I was unworthy, and now that I have been formed, it is as if I have not been formed.”⁴¹ What do these words signify? Rabbi Kook explains⁴² that since G-d wanted me to be born at this particular time, in this particular place to this particular family and with this particular personality, it must be to fulfill a certain mission that is tied to this confluence of circumstances. If I had been born in a different time or a different place, I would not have been able to fulfill my particular mission, or else G-d would have brought me into the world sooner. But now that I am born, if I fail to fulfill the purpose for which I was created, which is my mission, it would be better that I had not been created at all. Thus, for example, if a person is born with a great talent for technology today, he or she can use that talent to help make the world a better place and enhance Judaism. But if that same person had been born 1000 years ago with the same technological talent, it probably would have been a waste. Thus, G-d created each person to use his or

³⁹ *Zichronot* section of the Musaf Shmoneh Esreh on Rosh Hashana

⁴⁰ Proverbs 19:21

⁴¹ End of a personal Silent Prayer on Yom Kippur

⁴² Olat Re-iyah commentary on Yom Kippur Machzor

her skills that are appropriate for a particular time and place. If each person does not try to maximize the framework that he or she is given, as his or her “duty” as a soldier of G-d, then it is better that he or she would not have been born.

Therefore, every soldier, every person, has a mission. The officer in charge, G-d, scrutinizes the person and the mission and asks each person on Rosh Hashana if he or she is fulfilling his or her particular mission. No two soldiers are exactly alike. Each has his or her own capabilities and function.

These three aspects of judgment are how each individual has to present himself or herself before G-d and ask where he or she has succeeded and where he or she has to improve. Like sheep, people are asked how they performed vis-a-vis their responsibilities. Like a climber, individuals are asked if they are progressing, regressing or standing still. And like a soldier, each person is asked if he or she is fulfilling his or her specific purpose in the world. These three aspects correspond to the three main sections of the Shmoneh Esreh prayer of the Musaf service on Rosh Hashana. The *Malchuyot*-Kingship section of the service corresponds to the G-d as Shepherd. How does each person fit into G-d’s Kingdom? Is he or she a good subject? In the *Zichronot*-Remembrances section of the service, G-d remembers where each human being was before and compares that to where that person is now. And just as the *Shofarot*-Shofars section of the service is supposed to arouse each individual’s spiritually, each person must arouse his or her unique talents to fulfill that particular mission.

If people think about these ideas as they stand before G-d on Rosh Hashana, they will improve and certainly be granted a favorable judgment.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is “to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way.” Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.