



Rosh  
Hashanah  
and  
Aseret Yeme  
Teshuvah



Rabbi Yaakov Hillel





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This publication about Rosh Hashanah  
and Aseret Yeme Teshuvah

is dedicated by  
**Ezekiel and Hazel Elias**  
and their children

Chana and Yisroel Benjamin

Khedoori and Rivka Elias

Nahom and Shiri Keren Elias

and all their grandchildren

May they be blessed with much berachah,  
hatzlachah, and happiness, and many semahot in  
their home. May Hashem grant them all a good and  
healthy new year and a gemar hatimah tovah.

Rabbi Yaakov Hillel







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# The Structure of Repentance



## Year-round Repentance

The month of Elul, which concludes the cycle of the Hebrew calendar, is the time for us to take stock and make a personal accounting of the year now drawing to a close. Hashem in His mercy has given us this month as an especially favorable time for repentance, when the Heavenly Gates of Mercy are open wide. In particular, we should take advantage of Elul to prepare ourselves for the upcoming Days of Judgment.

The holy month of Tishre provides a structured setting for repentance. First we have Rosh Hashanah, the Ten Days of Repentance, and Yom Kippur, days dedicated to “repentance through

fear.” From there we go on to the higher stage of “repentance through love,” on Sukkot, Hoshana Rabbah, and Shemini Atzeret.

But repentance is not confined to Elul and Tishre alone; there are other times during the year that are appropriate for repentance, as we find in the writings of our great Torah authorities.

For example, some have the custom of observing *erev Rosh Hodesh* as *Yom Kippur Katan*, reciting *Selichot* and *Viduy*, and fasting for all or part of the day (see *Orah Hayyim* 417:1, *Mishnah Berurah*). As the last day of the month, it is a good time to repent for the misdeeds of the previous month. *Erev Shabbat*, the last day of the week, is an opportune time to review the deeds of the week and repent. In addition, every night before retiring, we should assess the day’s events and repent for any wrongdoing during the day. This is why the Arizal instituted *Viduy* as part of the *Keriat Shema* recited before sleep. The *Mishnah Berurah* writes, “It says in the sacred books that at night before retiring, it is proper for a person to reflect on his deeds of the day, and if he finds that he has transgressed, he should confess and



accept upon himself not to commit that sin again” (*Orah Hayyim* 239:1, *Mishnah Berurah* 9).

What is more, our Sages teach that the process of Divine judgment is in effect every day, at any given moment. They cite the verse, “‘And You examine him in the mornings, You observe him every minute’ (*Iyov* 7:18). Rabbi Yosse says, man is judged every day: ‘and You examine him in the morning.’ Rabbi Natan says, man is judged at every hour, as it says, ‘You observe him every minute’” (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a).

As we see, every day, even every minute, bears an element of judgment. With this in mind, we should make an accounting of our deeds not only once a year, or even just once a month, but at all times, so that we are constantly engaged in repentance. Repentance is an ongoing process relevant to every step we take in life.

If we take this to heart, we are fortunate: “Repentance is great because it reaches the Heavenly Throne” (*Yoma* 86a). Through repentance, we constantly cleave to the Creator (see *Tomer Devorah*, chapter 4).

## A Guide to Repentance

The text of our daily prayers was formulated by the *Anshe Knesset HaGedolah* (Men of the Great Assembly).<sup>1</sup> In *Shemoneh Esre*, also known as the *Amidah*, their Divinely inspired words provide us with a succinct outline for our service of Hashem and the process of repentance in Tishre, starting with Rosh Hashanah.

Let us begin with *Birkat Avot*, the first blessing, where we address Hashem as *Melech*, *Ozer*, *u'Moshia*, *u'Magen*: King, Helper, Redeemer, and Protector. Hashem is our King, Who helps us, saves us, redeems us, and shields us. These powerful words carry us through the holy days of the month of Tishre.

### ***Melech* on Rosh Hashanah**

The concept of *Melech*, Hashem as King, is the fundamental basis of Rosh Hashanah. In the words of our Sages, “Say before Me *malchuyot* [the portion of the prayers where we express

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1. The members of the Sanhedrin of Ezra the Scribe, many of whom were prophets.

our acceptance of Hashem as *Melech*], so that you will crown Me as your King” (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a). The very first stage of repentance, and its essential preliminary condition, is accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>2</sup> The entire Rosh Hashanah service is founded on this principle.

On Rosh Hashanah we say, “Rule over the whole, entire world with Your glory.” The realization that the entire universe is ruled by a King Who judges every individual, and before Whom we will one day give a reckoning and accounting, will motivate us to subject our deeds to careful scrutiny. This scrutiny is our springboard to repentance.

## Ozer in the Ten Days of Repentance

Ozer, Helper, corresponds to the Ten Days of Repentance. This is the time when we can “Seek

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2. Our Sages compare this to a newly arrived king. His subjects say, “Institute enactments for us.” He replies, “No. When you accept me as your king, I will institute enactments for you. If you do not accept me as king, how will you accept my enactments?” (*Mechilta, Yitro, bahodesh hashlishi, parashah* 6, cited by Ramban, *Yitro* 20:2)

out Hashem while He can be found, call Him when He is close” (*Yeshayahu* 55:6). As our Sages tell us, “These are the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur” (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a). During these special days, Hashem’s Hand is extended to accept His children’s repentance. If only we take the first step, He will have mercy on us and help us return to Him. The Sages teach that “One who comes to purify himself is granted assistance” (*Yoma* 38b). This is not merely a kindly helping hand; it is our only hope in the face of the evil inclination. On our own, we would be helpless against this formidable contender: “Man’s evil inclination attempts to overpower him every day...and if not for the Holy One, blessed be He, Who helps him, he would not be able to overcome it” (*Sukkah* 52b).

Hashem in His mercy fulfills the Torah’s words, “You shall surely help him” (*Shemot* 23:5).<sup>3</sup> We

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3. If the owner of a fallen donkey does not participate himself in unloading the donkey, the other party is exempt from helping him (*Baba Metzia* 32a). So too, we cannot ask for or expect Divine assistance if we do not first make an effort on our own.

start by doing our part. If the load proves too heavy for us, Hashem completes the job for us. With Him helping us and guiding us along the proper path, we can succeed in achieving complete repentance.

However, it is important to realize that the first move really is up to us. “The Holy One, blessed be He, says to Israel, ‘My children, open for Me an opening of repentance as small as the head of a needle, and I will open for you an opening large enough for wagons to enter’” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:3). We must be the ones to take the first step, however small, and begin the upward climb. Then He will take over, flinging open the Gates of Repentance and helping us repent in full.

How big does our initial “opening” have to be? Not very big at all. A sincere, heartfelt desire to do what is right, even if it is not yet accompanied by actual deed, is enough to merit’s Hashem’s assistance.

### ***Moshia* on Yom Kippur**

*Moshia*, Redeemer, corresponds to Yom Kippur, as we learn from our Sages’ explanation of the

verse, “Hashem is my light and my redeemer.’ My Light – on Rosh Hashanah...and my Redeemer – on Yom Kippur” (*Shoher Tov, Tehillim 27*).

On this sacred day, our Father in Heaven draws us close to Him. He cleanses us of all our impurities, protects us, and defends us against our accusers, as we learn from the verse, “Israel’s hope [is Hashem], He saves him in time of trouble” (*Yirmiyahu 14:8*).

On Yom Kippur, Hashem, our Redeemer, rescues us from the evil accusations of the Satan. The Satan arrives at the Heavenly Court loaded down with our entire year’s crop of sins, demanding that we be punished in full for every last slipup.

But something else happens on Yom Kippur as well. We confess our transgressions openly before Hashem, saying “We have sinned unintentionally, we have sinned deliberately, we have sinned rebelliously,” fulfilling the verse, “One who confesses and forsakes [his sins] will be granted mercy” (*Mishle 28:13*). We repent wholeheartedly and accept Hashem’s judgment with love, saying, “For You are righteous in all that comes upon us,

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for You have done truth and we have done evil” (Viduy Prayer, based on the *Zohar*’s explanation concerning Yom Kippur; *Tomer Devorah*, chapter 1, Ninth *Middah*).

When this happens, Hashem immediately treats us with mercy, tempering His punishment with kindness and love. Our confession earns us a plea bargain. If Hashem had sentenced us according to the true severity of our sins – as eloquently presented by the Satan – the punishment would have been too enormous and too dreadful to even contemplate. But now that we have confessed and accepted the absolute justice of Hashem’s judgment, we get a better deal, so to speak, and a much, much lighter sentence. The Satan and his incriminating testimony are thrown out of court; they have become superfluous. His claims are silenced and there is no further need for him and his evidence. Hashem has already issued the verdict, and there is nothing more to hear or discuss.

With this in mind, we can better understand the otherwise surprising phenomenon of the goat sent off to Azazel, to be given over to the Satan

and his entourage as part of the Yom Kippur service in the Holy Temple. On Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol* would confess the nation's sins over the head of the goat designated for this unusual sacrifice. An appointed messenger would then convey the goat to the desolation of the desert, the abode of the Satan and his cohorts, and fling it over a cliff. When the goat became a mass of broken limbs and bones the messenger said, "So shall the sins of the House of Israel be erased," and destroyed all record of our nation's guilt.

Had the Satan gotten all he wanted, he would have unleashed a terrifying fury of retribution on our people, G-d forbid. When we confess and accept Hashem's judgment, we are spared the full brunt of his wrath. Instead, he is only allowed a much smaller prize for his efforts, what the *Zohar* terms "a few dry bones" – the Azazel goat. True, there will be punishment, but it will be the milder form decreed by Hashem in His mercy, and not the savage onslaught desired by the Satan (*Zohar*, vol. III, p. 63b; see also *Tomer Devorah*, chapter 1, Ninth Middah, *Tashlich B'metzolot Yam*).



This is why we confess our sins every day in our prayers. By admitting them and accepting Hashem's judgment, we forestall the Satan, eliminating his ability to prosecute us (*Od Yosef Hai, Parashat Ki Tisa, halachah alef*).

### **Magen on Sukkot**

On Sukkot Hashem is *Magen*, our Protector; we are sheltered in the safe shadow of His wings. Even after the atonement of Yom Kippur, we are still not entirely secure. We need protective fences to guard our hard-earned gains and preserve the purity we have worked to acquire.

The Festival of Sukkot is “refuge and strength” for us (*Tehillim 46:2*), with the capacity to shield us from the Attribute of Strict Justice. The *sukkah* itself is called “*tzila d'mehemanuta*” (literally, “shade of true belief”; *Zohar*, vol. III, p. 103a). It is a protective haven, shielding us from the agents of harm bent on destroying us. Even after they are dispatched to strike, Hashem will protect us and turn our decree around from death to life in the merit of our repentance.

This is the special power inherent in these holy days. As the *Zohar* teaches, after the accusers depart on Yom Kippur, Hashem wishes to rejoice with us, His children. When we dwell in our *sukkot*, we are secure against their harmful designs. This concept is alluded to in the verse (*Bereshit* 33:17), “And Yaakov traveled to Sukkot, and he built a house for himself there” (*Raaya Mehemana, Emor*, p. 100b). The *Zohar* also teaches that we take shelter without fear in the *sukkah*, symbolic of our faith in Hashem, for the accuser has retired (*ibid.*, p. 103b).

*Melech, Ozer, Moshia, u’Magen*: these few words encompass the developing stages of repentance. Throughout the holy days of Tishre, every day and in every prayer, they remind us to repent and return to Hashem, our King, Helper, Redeemer, and Protector.

### ***Birkat HaDaat: Repenting Through Reason***

The *Amidah* is divided into three sections. In the first three blessings, we praise Hashem, and in the last three blessings we thank Him. The thirteen middle blessings are a series of requests. Careful

study of these requests shows that they too relate to the step-by-step process of repentance. Let us see how the Men of the Great Assembly instilled this message into what appears to be an appeal for personal needs.

This set of blessings begins with the *Birkat HaDaat*. Before anything else, we pray, *hanenu m'Itcha hochmah, binah, va'daat*: grant us from You wisdom, intelligence, and reason.

Our Sages' teachings highlight the importance of *daat* (reason).

- “If you have acquired reason, what do you lack? If you lack reason, what do you have?” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 1:6).
- “If you have [*daat*], you have everything. If you lack [*daat*], what do you have?” (*Nedarim* 41a, Rashi).
- “If there is no reason, how will we have the capacity to differentiate?” (*Jerusalem Talmud Berachot* 5:2).

“Reason” is the power to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil. If we can tell

the difference, we are able to choose between them. This capacity is a primary requirement in service of Hashem.

The *Mekubalim* teach that the human mind is divided into three distinct compartments. *Hochmah*, wisdom, is the capacity to accumulate and store knowledge, located in the right brain. *Binah*, intelligence, located in the left brain, is the capacity for intellectual depth. *Binah* defines, classifies, compares, and contrasts our stock of acquired information (*hochmah*). *Daat*, the third brain at the nape of the neck, is the most important of the three. It connects the mind to the body, and to our heart, our *middot*, and our deeds.

*Daat* is the reasoning power and capacity for innovative, creative thought that enables us to apply the product of our *hochmah* and *binah* to the situation at hand. With *daat*, we are able to carry over our theoretical knowledge to reach practical halachic conclusions. *Daat* brings intellect to bear on action. It is the most important brain of all, for without it, our knowledge remains abstract. We find this concept in the verse “To make known

(*ladaat*) Your way on earth” (*Tehillim* 67:3). The earthly affairs of this world must also be guided by *daat*.

Unlike other cultures, in Torah, knowledge cannot be divorced from deed. The Greeks achieved very great heights of philosophical wisdom, including comprehension of the Almighty, as the Rambam said of Aristotle. Yet all their wisdom did not obligate them to behave like decent human beings, because it was detached from the critical element of *daat*. In the words of our Sages, “Any Torah scholar who has no *daat*, a carcass is better than him” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 1:15). A scholar may be fluent in enormous quantities of material and be able to explain and discuss it brilliantly. However, if his actions and character are not directed by his intellect – by *daat* – his knowledge has little worth.

The Ramhal writes, “The foundation of saintliness and the source of perfection in the service of Hashem is that it becomes very clear to man what his duties are in this world, and toward what objective he should set his sights and goals in all his labors” (*Mesillat Yesharim*, chapter 1). We

must recognize our duties and the goals we work for in this world. For that we need *daat Torah*, the special reason and insight that comes with Torah learning.

There is only one way to attain *daat Torah*: by toiling in Torah. In-depth Torah study is the gateway to fear of Heaven, and to all spiritual growth and development (see *Yoma* 72b, Rashi). We find this concept in Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair's famous *baraita* (*Avodah Zarah* 20b): "Torah leads to watchfulness, watchfulness leads to zeal," and so on, with progressively higher levels culminating in *Ruah HaKodesh* (Divine inspiration). If we wish to repent, we must begin the process with a firm commitment to Torah.

The word "Torah" is derived from *hora'ah*, instruction. Our Torah is not merely theoretical, abstract intellectual concepts and ideas. It is practical instruction, applicable to every aspect of daily life. As King David said, "and Your Torah is in my intestines" (*Tehillim* 40:9). True Torah directs us in all we do, penetrating to the depths of our being and controlling our wishes and desires.

Our first request, then, is *hanenu m'ltcha hochmah, binah, va'daat*: grant us from You wisdom, intelligence, and reason, or in other words, Torah. It is through *daat* that we accept upon ourselves the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, subjugating ourselves completely to Hashem. *Birkat HaDaat* corresponds to Rosh Hashanah and the concept of *Melech*.

### ***Birkat HaTeshuvah: Repenting with Torah***

We are making good progress. We are learning Torah, and through *daat*, have accepted Hashem as King. Now we are ready for the next stage, that of *teshuvah*, repentance. Our Sages (*Megillah 17b*) ask why the Men of the Great Assembly placed the blessing concerning repentance immediately after the request for *binah* (intelligence). In answer, they cite the verse, “And his heart will understand (*yavin*) and he will repent and be healed” (*Yeshayahu 6:10*).

The Blessing of Repentance has three parts. It is significant that this blessing begins with the words, *Hashivenu Avinu l'Toratecha*: “Bring us back Hashem, to Your Torah.” We asked for Torah

in the first blessing; why is this request repeated here, in our plea for repentance?

Torah is the embodiment of Divine wisdom, but the mere acquisition of wisdom is not the purpose of Torah study. We learn Hashem's Word to know how to obey His Will and serve Him. It is only the unique spiritual power of Torah that enables us to repent.<sup>4</sup> We find this concept frequently in our Sages' teachings:

- “The Torah teaches man to walk in the true path” (*Zohar*, vol. III, p. 260a).
- The way to correct oneself is through Torah study (see *Erchin* 15b).
- “If only they would forsake Me, and My Torah they would study, for through their involvement in it, the light in it would bring them back to the proper path” (*Pesih'ta Echah Rabbati* 2).

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4. The Hida cites this blessing as proof that the first step of repentance is returning to Torah (*Nahal Kedumim, Parashat Vayelech*). *Reshit Hochmah (Shaar HaTeshuvah, chapter 2)*, citing the *Zohar*, writes that above all, repentance means studying Torah with fear and love, which leads to a very high level of repentance.



- “If one transgresses a sin punishable by death at the hands of the Heavenly Court, what should he do in order to live? If he was accustomed to studying one page, he should study two. If he was accustomed to studying a single chapter, he should study two” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 25:1).

Clearly, repentance begins with Torah. Before any attempt at rectification (*tikun*) or self-imposed afflictions (*sigufim*), we must first repent by strengthening our commitment to Torah study.

After “Bring us back, our Father to Your Torah,” we can go on to request, “and bring us close, our King, to Your service.” Torah study is the key to perfect fulfillment of the commandments, bringing us closer to the service of Hashem. We “learn in order to do” (*Avot* 4:5). Increased knowledge helps us “turn away from evil and do good” (*Tehillim* 34:15), by fulfilling the six hundred and thirteen commandments to the very best of our ability.

It is only now, when we are both studying and fulfilling, that we reach the third request in the Blessing of Repentance: “and bring us back in

complete repentance before You.” “Complete repentance” is the rectification of the roots of the sin and the blemish it caused in the higher spiritual worlds.

As we see, we follow a distinct order: Torah study, careful fulfillment of the *mitzvot*, and the final stage of repentance, that of cleansing the spiritual blemish caused by the sin and rectifying the higher worlds. In essence, this is the procedure we should follow in the Ten Days of Repentance, when Hashem helps those who truly seek to return to Him.

### ***Birkat Selah Lanu: Repentance and Forgiveness***

We have explained that the blessings in our daily *Shemoneh Esre* follow the pattern of Rosh Hashanah, the Ten Days of Repentance, and Yom Kippur. After completing the stages of repentance outlined in the Blessing of Repentance, it is time to seek the concept of forgiveness and atonement represented by Yom Kippur. This is expressed in the blessing *selah lanu Avinu ki hatanu*: “Forgive us Our Father, for we have sinned.”

If we have repented and warded off punishment, why need we also ask specifically for forgiveness? To answer this question, let us consider what happens when we sin.

The commission of a sin awakens the Attribute of Strict Judgment in Heaven, bringing our case under review. As soon as our file is opened, our sins come crowding around to testify against us, eagerly accusing and denouncing us. It is worth remembering that *our very own sins* clamor to see us punished: “Evil pursues sinners” (*Mishle* 13:21), and “Your evil will rebuke you” (*Yirimiyahu* 2:19).<sup>5</sup> As the Sages tell us, “One who transgresses a sin, acquires for himself a prosecutor” (*Avot* 4:11).

As long as the trial is still in progress in the Heavenly Court, we can ask forgiveness and plead

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5. Rabbi Moshe Cordevero writes that it is only just for Hashem to say that He does not sustain a harmful angel born of man’s sins. It can go to the one who produced it and take its nourishment from him. The destroying angel immediately descends and takes the sinner’s soul, or executes the punishment of *karet* on him, or punishes him otherwise, in accordance with his sin (*Tomer Devorah*, chapter 1).

for Hashem's mercy. At this point, it is still possible to keep the punishment at bay in Heaven; Hashem may yet choose to rip up our guilty verdict and replace it with a favorable one, rescuing us from our accusers.<sup>6</sup> But once the verdict has been handed over to the agents of punishment, it is almost impossible to turn back the tide; crying to them for mercy will not help. They are following orders and carrying out the job they were sent to do, making repentance and forgiveness much more difficult to attain.

We find this frightening concept in an incident related in the *Zohar*. One day when Rabbi Shimon's students were studying Torah in a field, they noticed a big snake slithering along

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6. When the Ark is opened in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah it is customary to say, "Forever, Hashem, Your Word (*devarcha*) stands in the Heavens" (*Tehillim* 119:89). The Rosh Hashanah prayer book explains that *dibbur* refers to harsh words, as opposed to *amirah*, which refers to soft words. With this verse, we ask that the *dibbur*, the harsh verdicts, should remain immobilized in the Heavens, and not handed down to the agents of harm for implementation.

in front of them. Rabbi Elazar, Rabbi Shimon's son, understood where it was going, and he told the snake to return to its hole, for the Jew it had been sent to kill had already repented. But the snake stayed where it was. Rabbi Elazar said, "I understand what you want. Since you were sent to do harm, you won't retreat until you cause some injury, if not to your original victim, then at least to someone else. If that is the case, go back to the cave you came from, find a wicked non-Jew who has hurt a Jew, and kill him instead." The snake obeyed Rabbi Elazar and went off to do as he said (*Zohar*, vol. III, *Hosafah*, p. 304a).

We learn from this incident that once an agent of harm is let loose, it will fulfill its mission, come what may. Once matters have gone that far, it would obviously require enormous Divine mercy and compassion to annul the decree. Because of this, we protect ourselves in advance by praying for forgiveness every day, instead of waiting until it is too late.

This is why we pray, "Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned." We ask Hashem to pardon us as long as our judgment is still in His Hands, for He is

“a kind and forgiving G-d,” Who wants us to live to fulfill more *mitzvot* and fully rectify the source of our soul.

### ***Geulah, Refuah, Parnassah: Fully Protected***

With this in mind, we can explain the next three blessings: *Geulah* (Redemption), *Refuah* (Healing), and *Parnassah* (Livelihood).

When the verdict has been issued and the agents of harm have permission to set about their business, they can attack on any of three major fronts: bodily harm from an external source; bodily harm from an internal source (such as illness); and financial loss.

Even if the decree has already been issued for one of these three forms of punishment, we still should not give up on Hashem’s mercy: “Even if a sharp sword is [already] resting on one’s neck, he should not refrain from asking for [Divine] compassion” (*Berachot* 10a). No matter how bad a situation looks, repentance and prayer can *always* help. In the next three blessings, we ask Hashem to save us from these three dangers.

We ask Hashem, *re'eh na b'anyenu, v'rivah rivenu, u'ge'alenu meherah*: “Please see our affliction, and fight our battle, and redeem us speedily.” This does not refer to the future Redemption and the coming of *Mashiah*, which we request in the later blessings. Here we are speaking not about the future, but about the present – we ask Hashem to redeem us from the sufferings that continually befall our nation (*Megillah* 17b, Rashi).

This blessing refers to harm from external sources. The harsh decrees may have already been issued and the agent of harm already dispatched. Our enemies may be busily plotting our destruction, G-d forbid, and we are not even aware of the impending danger. But while our vision is limited, Hashem sees all and knows all. We plead to Him to “see our affliction and fight our battles,” protecting us even from trouble brewing unseen and unknown.

Now we go on to ask for Hashem’s protection from harm emanating from internal sources within the body, saying *Refa'enu Hashem v'nerafe*: “Heal us Hashem, and we will be healed.” The third blessing in the series is *barech alenu...v'sabenu*

*mituvecha*: “Bring blessing upon us...and satiate us with Your bounty.” In this blessing, we ask Hashem to spare us from financial harm in all its manifestations and grant us material abundance.

All these requests are related to our earlier request for repentance. If we repent in time to stay the decree before it is sent out for execution, we are fortunate. If not, and trouble is already on its way, we can still continue to pray to Hashem to save us, and prevent our personal “snake” from attacking.

### **Coming Close in Tishre**

Now we understand how the blessings in *Shemoneh Esre* parallel our repentance in the month of Tishre.

Rosh Hashanah is the first stage: we recognize and accept Hashem as *Melech*. We achieve this through *Daat*, the wisdom of Torah.

Rosh Hashanah is followed by the Ten Days of Repentance. In the Blessing of *Teshuvah*, we pray to Hashem, our *Ozer*, to help us repent and correct our misdeeds.



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On Yom Kippur, when our sins condemn us in the Heavenly court, we plead to Hashem, our *Moshia*, to be merciful and save us from harsh decrees and punishment. This is *Selah Lanu*: true, we have sinned, but we still beg Hashem's forgiveness.

On Sukkot, Hashem is our *Magen*, sheltering us and protecting us from all harm – external, internal, and financial – as expressed in the blessings of *Geulah*, *Refuah*, and *Parnassah*.

The sacred words of the Men of the Great Assembly teach us how to repent our sins and come close to Hashem. Guided by their wisdom, may we all merit to “seek out Hashem while He can be found, call Him when He is close.”

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## Building Worlds on Rosh Hashanah



### Created for *Hesed*, Created for *Din*

We can gain insight into the upcoming days of Rosh Hashanah by considering a fundamental question discussed by our great Torah authorities: why did Hashem create the world?

The *Mekubalim* suggest two primary explanations of Hashem's purpose in Creation. The first and most important reason is that "It is the nature of one who is good to impart good" (*Derech Hashem*, part 1, chapter 2; *Daat Tevunot* 18; see *Etz Hayyim*, beginning of *Shaar HaKelalim*). It is the Will of Hashem, Who is good in essence, to bestow good. Because He is perfect, it is His Will to bestow complete, perfect good that the

recipient can enjoy in full. This is why He created a world where good and evil operate side by side, and gave man *behirah hofshit* (Free Will), the ability to choose between them.

By choosing to do what is right and overpowering the urge to do wrong, we earn the perfect good of Divine eternal reward. This struggle is essential for the attainment of maximum enjoyment; without it, our reward would be an uncomfortable, embarrassing handout, or in the words of the Sages, *nahama d'kisufa*, “bread of shame” (Jerusalem Talmud *Orlah* 1:3). The element of embarrassment diminishes the recipient’s pleasure, and minimizes the giver’s potential to give to the fullest; it is no longer “perfect good.” This understanding of the purpose of Creation is alluded to in the verse, “For I said, the world was created for lovingkindness” (*Tehillim* 89:3): Hashem created the world in order to bestow *hesed* (lovingkindness) upon His created beings.

The second reason suggested for Hashem’s creation of the world is related to Hashem as King: “There can be no king without a nation” (*Rabbenu Behayye*, *Bereshit* 38:30; see *Pirke*

*D'Rabbi Eliezer* 3). Hashem created the world for His Kingship to be revealed through His subjects, the Jewish people. A king without subjects has no one to rule, and no one to proclaim His Kingship.

Our Sages teach that Hashem's initial plan was to create the world with *Middat HaDin*, the Divine Attribute of Strict Judgment. The Attribute of *Din* stems from Hashem's rule of the world through the *Sefirah*<sup>7</sup> of *Malchut* (Kingship). We find allusion to this concept in the verse, "A King with judgment establishes the land" (*Mishle* 29:4). We see that administration of justice is integral to the role of a king.

Another, more profound allusion to this principle is our Sages' statement, *dina d'malchuta dina*, "The law of the kingdom is law" (*Nedarim* 28a). Understood simply, this means that halachah obligates us to respect the authority of the government and accept its legislation as binding law, as long as it does not conflict with Torah law.

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7. The *Sefirot* are ten spiritual forces through which Hashem rules the world, each a separate, specific revelation of His Will in relation to Creation.

The *Mekubalim* explain this phrase on an esoteric level: *Din*, the Attribute of Divine Judgment, comes down to the world from Hashem's rule through the Divine Attribute of *Malchut*, Kingship.

Neither of these reasons truly suffices to fully explain Hashem's purpose in Creation. We cannot really understand *why* He wished to bestow good on created beings, or rule mankind with judgment. These questions are about Hashem's Will before Creation, which is completely beyond our grasp.

Rabbi Menahem Azariah of Fano writes that man is not permitted to study concepts concerning the essence of G-d Himself; they are beyond the boundaries of Creation.<sup>8</sup> He is only permitted to attempt to understand His Will, as revealed in the *mitzvot* of the Torah, and in the way He rules the world (cited in *Shomer Emunim, Vikuah Sheni*, 27, 29). By seeing and studying His world and the way He relates to His creations, we can draw conclusions concerning His Will: because Hashem

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8. See below, "Room for Evil."

structured a given situation, we can deduce that the product of that situation is His Will.

We see that Hashem created a world where He bestows good, so we deduce that it His Will to bestow good. We see that He rules the world through the *Din* derived from the Attribute of *Malchut*, so we understand that it His Will to rule and judge man, in the manner of a king. However, we cannot know why He wanted this in the first place. Any reasons we can suggest for Creation relate only to His Will as it is revealed in Creation – specifically, the Will that rules, not the Will that created. This is the most we can hope to comprehend. We can try to understand reasons for Creation that indicate what Hashem wills now that the world already exists, but not what He willed before it existed.

These two reasons – *Hesed* and *Malchut* – are not contradictory; both are true, and they complement each other. According to the former, the purpose of Creation is the bestowal of absolute good on Hashem's creations, in a world where man earns reward by exercising his Free Will. According to the latter, G-d's Kingship is manifested in a world

where He judges His created beings in keeping with their deeds. It follows that the two are connected. A sovereign's kingship is actualized by the nation he governs. There can be no reward bestowed without judgment, and there can be no judgment without a king to impose it.

On Rosh Hashanah we crown Hashem as King. Based on the concept of revelation of Hashem's Kingship as the purpose of Creation, we can understand why we do so specifically on the first of Tishre. The Arizal teaches that Adam, the first man, was created on Rosh Hashanah<sup>9</sup> (see *Shaar HaKavanot, Derush Alef D'Rosh Hashanah*, p. 70c; *Pri Etz Hayyim, Shaar HaShofar*, chapter 5). With the creation of Adam, Hashem became a King, because He now had subjects – Adam and his descendants. Every year on Rosh Hashanah, the spiritual force of Hashem's Kingship, realized with Adam's creation, is renewed in regard to the coming year. The Early Authorities cite this as one

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9. The first day of Creation was the twenty-fifth of Elul. The sixth day of Creation, when man was created, was the first day of Tishre, Rosh Hashanah.



of the reasons for blowing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah: a king's coronation is heralded by *shofarot* and trumpets (see *Mahzor Ohale Yaakov L'Rosh Hashanah, B'taame HaTekiah*, p. 120b, Ot Alef).

### **Planned Imperfection**

Let us try to understand more about Hashem's main reason for creating the world – His desire to bestow perfect good. As we said, by definition, Hashem is perfection in essence. Despite this, He created an imperfect world where good and bad exist together in a confusing jumble. The difference between the two may at times be so subtle that we can hardly tell them apart, and do not even know with certainty what is “good” and what is “bad.” Our challenge is to use our Free Will to differentiate between the two, choosing good and rejecting bad.

The coexistence of good and evil in Hashem's world raises a question. Hashem is perfect, and His essence is perfect good. How can it be possible for Him to have created a world that is imperfect, and where evil can exist? We can answer this

question by considering the reasons behind the creation of an “imperfect world.”

If Hashem had created the world using His full, unbounded capacities, so to speak, it would have been the very essence of perfection. It could not have been a world where the option of evil exists and man faces trials and temptations that he must overcome in order to earn Divine reward; in a perfect world Hashem’s Presence and absolute power would be obvious and undeniable. There could be no evil, no Free Will, and ultimately, no setting for man to acquire the good that G-d wishes to impart.

This is not the world Hashem created, because His plan in Creation called for an imperfect world, which the future *Am Yisrael* would perfect by choosing to do good. In order to create this imperfect world, Hashem concealed and confined the powers He employed in Creation, using only limited forces. In Kabbalistic writings this is known as *tzimtzum*. Creation with Hashem’s full powers would have produced a perfect world. Creation with limited forces produced our limited world where good and evil exist side by side, providing

constant challenges and opportunities for man to earn reward by choosing good.

### **Room for Evil**

This does not mean that Creation began with our imperfect world. It began with a very exalted spiritual world of nearly perfect good. At that stage of Creation, the Creator was revealed on such a high level that there could be no possibility for evil to exist. Even this highly spiritual world was not created with unlimited Divine powers; it too was created with controlled, limited forces. As such, even this first and greatest revelation of the Will of the Almighty included the *Shoresh HaDin HaElyon* – the Root of Strict Divine Judgment in its most subtle and spiritual form, which would later be fully manifested in a physical world of good and evil.

Confining His powers further, Hashem then created a series of worlds, each on a progressively lower level, and each with a somewhat lesser revelation of His Divine Light. The more Hashem's Light was concealed at each succeeding level, the more room there was for evil to exist. The

last in this series of progressively lower worlds is our material world, where outright evil can exist and Hashem's Will to reward the righteous can be realized.

Hashem hides His true unlimited capacities from us, and reveals only the limited forces evident in Creation. While His Light is present in our world, it is almost entirely obscured. Spiritual darkness reigns, and man does not "see" Hashem clearly as the Ruler of Creation. The resulting sin and corruption so apparent in our world make it exceedingly difficult to choose good over evil. All the imperfection and evil in our world are derived from the Root of Strict Divine Judgment, first revealed in the highest of worlds.

The Ramhal discusses the question of how a limited, imperfect world can be the product of Hashem's perfect Will to create, and how evil can derive from the Creator Himself, Who is good in essence (*Kalah Pit'he Hochmah, Petah Lamed*). He writes that we find allusion to this question in our Sages' teaching, "One who looks into these four concepts, it would have been better for him not to have been born: what exists above [the

boundaries of Creation]; what is below [those boundaries]; what existed before [Creation]; and what will exist after [Creation ceases to be]” (*Hagigah* 11b).

“Above” and “below” refer to the dimension of space. “Before” and “after” refer to the dimension of time. Hashem is *En Sof* – infinite, unlimited by the constraints of time and space. In contrast, man cannot comprehend anything that exceeds the boundaries of space and time. We are not permitted to speculate on matters that exceed these boundaries, because they are beyond our capacities. We are incapable of understanding the limitless essence of the Almighty as *En Sof*.

The Sages explain their statement with a parable. A king instructed his servants to build a palace for him on a rubbish heap. The palace was built, but the king never wanted to have the word “rubbish” mentioned at the site (*Hagigah* 16a).

How does this analogy explain our Sages’ statement? Did Hashem in fact build His world on a foundation of loathsome garbage, like the king in the parable? This is a very puzzling statement.

## Creation with *Din*

We can understand the parable in light of Hashem's creation of the world using only limited capacities, in order to allow for the existence of good, evil, and man's Free Will. This world would be the arena where the Jewish people would carry out their struggle to serve Hashem, earning complete, perfect eternal reward. This is why the first Divine Attribute that Hashem revealed in Creation was the Root of Divine Judgment, or in other words, the Divine Will to withhold His full capacities and create a world using only limited powers, so that evil could eventually come into being.

All the evil that exists at the lowest level of Creation has its source in Hashem's Will to create the world with limited forces. Even the very lowest levels in Creation, referred to in the Sages' parable as "rubbish," stem from this Will of Hashem.

The "limited Will" employed in Creation is rooted in the *Shoresh HaDin HaElyon*, which descended from the highest of spiritual worlds to

the lowest dregs of evil in our world. This is the “rubbish heap” upon which all the worlds – the magnificent “palace” – were built. It is Hashem’s Will to conceal this undignified foundation, to prevent us from ever associating any form of deficiency or imperfection with His creation.

*Din*, Divine Judgment, is an essential component of Hashem’s rule of His world. He rules with a perfect balance of *Hesed* (Lovingkindness), *Din* (Judgment), and *Rahamim* (Mercy). These three Attributes operate like a balance scale: *Hesed* is on the right side and *Din* is on the left side, with *Rahamim* as the supporting beam in the center. The combination of all three components is the perfection in Hashem’s rule.

*Din* is the power of limiting and dividing. At its root it is pure sanctity, part of the Divine Chariot through which Hashem rules. As *Din* descends, level by level, to progressively lower worlds, it becomes an increasingly thicker, denser barrier, concealing Divine *Hesed* from us to a greater and greater extent. In our lowly world, the concealment is so complete that we live in a

state of *hester panim*,<sup>10</sup> a concept alluded to in the prophet Yeshayahu's words, "You are a G-d Who conceals Himself" (*Yeshayahu* 45:15). When Hashem is hidden, so to speak, evil comes to the fore with such force that it can seem to mankind that it is evil that runs the world. At this level there is room for error; we may make the mistake of thinking that Hashem is one force, with evil existing as an opposing force, G-d forbid. This is a critical error. Evil was also created by Hashem. It is rooted in the Divine Attribute known as *Gevurah* (Might), and at its source in the Higher Worlds, it too is good. *Middat HaDin* is integral to Hashem's rule of the world.

### **Repenting with *Din* and *Hesed***

With these two reasons for Creation in mind, we can understand the "debate" between Hashem and the Jewish people, recounted by the Sages (*Echah Rabbah* 5:21). Where does *teshuvah* (repentance) originate – with us, or with Hashem?

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10. *Hester panim*, literally, "concealment of [Hashem's] Face," is a state in which Hashem does not openly reveal His Presence to man.



We, the Jewish people, say, “Bring us back to you, Hashem, and we will return” (*Echah* 5:21). We ask Hashem to help us take the first steps toward repentance, and then we will do the rest. Hashem, on the other hand, says, “Return to Me...and I will return to you” (*Zechariah* 1:3). We, the nation, need to make the first move to repent – then Hashem will complete the process. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes that this argument has gone on for nearly two thousand years, and it is time for us to give in and return to Hashem wholeheartedly, on His terms (*Derashah L’Selihat*, 5572).

In essence, both sides of the “argument” are right. The first tiny stirring of repentance – the original tentative thought that we need to improve our poor spiritual state – is a gift from Hashem. He plants it in our heart, to help us before we take the first step. *Sefer Haredim* writes that this inner voice that urges us on to repent is the “Heavenly Voice that emanates each and every day from Mount Horev, proclaiming, ‘Woe to them, to mankind, because of the insult to Torah’” (*Avot* 6:2; *Sefer Haredim*, chapter 73).

The next step is up to us: we must fan the tiny spark we were given into a sincere commitment to improve our ways and come back to Hashem, and make a concrete, significant move forward. Once we start going in the right direction, Hashem helps us complete the job.

We can better understand this unique “debate” in light of the two possible reasons behind Creation. The perception of Hashem as “The king [who] establishes the land with judgment” – the Almighty King Who rules His created world with the Attribute of *Din* – dictates that the first move is up to us. Our sins are an act of rebellion against Hashem’s Kingship, the very basis of Creation. We need to first return to Him. Once we have begun the process of repentance (“return to Me”), we can now ask Hashem to aid our efforts and help us return (“Bring us back to you, Hashem”). We also seek to arouse Hashem’s Attribute of *Hesed*, the basis of the second reason for Creation – Hashem’s desire to bestow lovingkindness on His creations. Surely this is reason enough for Him to assist us in our efforts to repent, so that we will merit the reward He so wishes to bestow upon us.

This is one possible explanation of the wording of the special prayer for Divine mercy said during the Ten Days of Repentance, starting on Rosh Hashanah: we entreat Hashem as *Avinu Malkenu*, “our Father, our King.” He is *Avinu*, our loving Father, Who is eager to bestow kindness, and at the same time, He is *Malkenu*, the King Who judges us. We serve Him with both joy and trembling (see *Tehillim* 2:11), as both sons and servants – a combination of *Hesed* and *Din*.

### **The Role of the *Shofar***

The blowing of the *shofar* is integral to Rosh Hashanah. Our Sages teach that when the Jewish people blow the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah, the Holy One, blessed be He, “arises from the Throne of Judgment, [and moves over to] the Throne of Mercy” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 29:10). Why do the Sages say that Hashem seats Himself specifically on “the Throne of Mercy” (*Rahamim*), rather than on the Throne of Lovingkindness (*Hesed*), symbolic of unlimited lovingkindness?

We can answer this question based on the principles we discussed concerning Hashem as

Judge and King (*Din*), and His desire to impart good to His creations (*Hesed*).

Rosh Hashanah, when we crown Hashem King, is the Day of Judgment; as we said, Hashem's Kingship is related to His Attribute of Strict Judgment. The Divine Attribute of *Hesed*, on the other hand, is pure lovingkindness, dispensed without limit. *Hesed* is granted in abundance to the deserving and undeserving alike, without regard to judgment and justice, because "All transgressions are covered over [and hidden] by love" (*Mishle* 10:12). This is why the Sages teach that "Love ruins the line (*shurah*)" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 55:8), a reference to "*shurat hadin*," the straight, direct line of justice. This is the arrow-straight path of unswerving judgment, with no room for deviation or mitigation, implied by our Sages' words, "Let judgment (*din*) pierce the mountain" (*Yevamot* 92a).

*Hesed* stems from Hashem's endless love for His children, the Jewish people. *Hesed* eliminates the severity of *Din* and the resulting punishment. It twists the line by finding ways to bestow good despite *Din*'s demands for punishment. *Din* barrels

straight through the mountain regardless of any possible considerations; *Hesed* introduces curves that swerve around it.

Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, and it cannot be transformed entirely into a day of *Hesed*. However, while we cannot annul the element of *Din* on Rosh Hashanah altogether, it is possible to “sweeten” the severity of *Din* with *Hesed*. This is accomplished by the *shofar*: the *shofar* blasts “sweeten” Divine Judgment. The outcome is Divine Mercy (*Rahamim*), a blend of *Din* and *Hesed*. This is why the Sages teach that when we blow the *shofar*, Hashem leaves the Throne of Divine Judgment in favor of the Throne of Divine Mercy. *Rahamim* will divert the verdict away from strict, unbending judgment to a more moderate “middle.” From this position, we can be judged innocent and receive Hashem’s *Hesed*.

It would be very convenient for us to imagine that we need only hear the sound of the *shofar* and our judgment will automatically be mitigated, just by this one act. This would be a serious mistake. The primary purpose of the *shofar* is to awaken us and remind us that even as we hear

it blown in the synagogue, we are being judged for our sins. This judgment knows no mercy; it is powerful and unstoppable. The sound of the *shofar* should remind us of the critical importance of these days and hours and move us to repent, so that Hashem will have mercy on us.

This is in keeping with the Arizal's teaching that we should confess our sins and repent while the *shofar* is being blown, because repentance is the main reason behind the Torah's commandment to blow the *shofar*. The Rashash elaborates. He writes that the sound of the *shofar* should be accompanied by sincere thoughts of repentance from the depths of a broken heart. Together, they will ascend to the Heavenly "Ear."

What we hear affects our mind; for example, we hear a friend ask for help and we are moved to assist him. When Hashem "hears" the sound of the *shofar*, along with our repentant thoughts, He responds with an outpouring of Divine Mercy that has its source in the higher spiritual world of repentance (related to the Attribute of *Binah*, the left brain, which parallels the ears). The verse "Hashem hear, Hashem forgive" (*Daniel* 9:19)

alludes to this concept: when Hashem hears our pleas, the outcome is forgiveness. *Din* is then sweetened at its highest source. It descends to the lower world as *Rahamim*, and we are granted a year of *Hesed* and *Rahamim* (*Nehar Shalom*, p. 38d; see *Shaar HaKavanot, Derush Zayin D'Shofar*, p. 98a, “v’ahar she’nitbaaru”).

### **The Sounds of *Hesed* and *Din***

The sequence of the *shofar* blasts on Rosh Hashanah alludes to the profound concept of *Din* sweetened by *Hesed*. We first blow a *tekiah*. It is a simple, unbroken sound reminiscent of *Hesed*. As the Arizal explains, *Hesed* flows freely and continuously to all, with no breaks or gaps. The *tekiah* is followed by the *shevarim* and *teruah*, sounded in short bursts, like sobs. *Shevarim* and *teruah* are reminiscent of *Din*, which is dispensed gradually, in small doses, in keeping with the specifics of each individual’s Heavenly account.

They are followed by a second *tekiah*, concluding the series of *shofar* blasts with additional *Hesed*.<sup>11</sup>

*Din*, represented by the *shevarim* and *teruah*, operates on Rosh Hashanah, but it is surrounded by *Hesed* on both sides, represented by the *tekiot* before and after. The *Hesed* sweetens and surpasses the *Din*. Together they comprise *Rahamim*, the blend of *Din* and *Hesed*.

With this in mind, the message of the *shofar* is clear: if we reflect on repentance when the *shofar* is blown, Divine Judgment is sweetened at its source, and descends to our world enveloped in *Hesed*. Hashem “arises from the Throne of Judgment, [and moves over to] the Throne of Mercy,” mitigating *Din* with *Hesed*, and granting us *Rahamim* in the new year.

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11. The *Zohar* teaches that the *Kohanim* are rooted in *Hesed*, but the Levites, who sang in the Tabernacle and the Temple, are related to the Attribute of *Din*. Songs are not composed of one continuous note. They consist of a series of tones broken up to rise and fall, louder and softer, in the same pattern as the *shevarim* and *teruah* related to *Din* (see *Zohar*, vol. III, p. 178b).



## Building New Worlds

We mentioned the Arizal's teaching that the inherent spiritual power unique to each Festival is reawakened every year anew on that Festival (*Shaar HaKavanot*, p. 89d). The *mitzvot* specific to the Festival allow us to once again renew and receive that influx. The unique spiritual force of Rosh Hashanah is the power of Creation; Hashem created the world with lovingkindness in order to bestow lovingkindness on His created beings, because "It is the nature of one who is good to impart good." Every year on Rosh Hashanah, we "create" the new world of the upcoming year on the basis of the goodness and lovingkindness of the Creator. By so doing, we reinstate the power of Hashem's *Hesed* as the pillar that supports the entire world.

On the very first Rosh Hashanah in the history of the world, Hashem was alone in His work of Creation, so to speak. Man, who would function as Hashem's partner in Creation by building new worlds through his Torah and *mitzvot*, had not yet been created. In all subsequent years, the world is renewed and rectified through man. Our Sages

explain the verse, “‘And all your sons (*banayich*) are students of Hashem’ (Yeshayahu 54:13). Do not read ‘your sons’ (*banayich*), but rather, “‘your builders’ (*bonayich*)” (Berachot 64a). The special *mitzvot* of Rosh Hashanah – repentance and the blowing of the *shofar* – create and build the world for the entire upcoming year on the basis of the *Hesed* of Hashem, Who created in order to give.

How do our *mitzvot* build a new world?

As we explained, Hashem created the world imperfect and incomplete, in order for us to perfect and complete it. The process of the rectification and perfection of the new world for the coming year always begins on Rosh Hashanah.

We, the Jewish people, were created to fulfill the six hundred and thirteen commandments as perfectly as we can, with the components of *maaseh* (deed; correct halachic fulfillment of the *mitzvah*); *dibbur* (speech; studying the relevant *halachot* and reciting the related Torah verses);

and *mahshavah* (thought; total focus on the *mitzvah*).<sup>12</sup>

We personally gain from fulfilling the *mitzvot*. They refine us spiritually, and perfect the respective limbs and sinews involved in carrying out each *mitzvah*. But the Almighty is perfection in essence, and is unchanged by any actions committed by man. He does not “need” our *mitzvot*; “If you are righteous, what do you give him?” (*Iyov* 35:7). In the words of the Sages, “The *mitzvot* were only given as a means to test the people of Israel. For what does the Holy One, blessed be He, care if one slaughters from the [animal’s] throat or slaughters from the back of the [animal’s] neck? We learn from here that the *mitzvot* were only given as a means to test (*letzaref*) the people of Israel” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 44:1; *Tanhuma, Shemini* 8). They serve as a yardstick, assessing our loyalty to Hashem (see Responsa of the Rashba vol. 8, 366; see also *Shelah, Pesahim, Matzah Ashirah*; Rabbi Shmuel

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12. This includes doing the *mitzvah* because it is the Will of Hashem Who so commanded us.

Laniado's *Kli Hemdah*, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, *Derush Bet*; the Yaavetz's *Lehem Shamayim*, *Avot*, end of chapter 6).<sup>13</sup>

This teaching of the Sages refers to only one aspect of the commandments, which concerns only one aspect of our perception of Hashem. Based on the teachings of the *Zohar* and the *Arizal*, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin explains that there are in fact two perceptions of the Almighty: one is *Mitzido*, "from His standpoint," and the second is *mitzidenu*, "from our standpoint." *Mitzido* refers to Hashem on His Own, so to speak, as He was before Creation and as He will remain forever, unrelated to man or to the world. "From His standpoint," *Mitzido*, He is unchanging; whether we do or do not obey His commandments, He is not affected.

As we said, it is beyond man's capacities to have any understanding of Hashem's Will before Creation. The perception of Hashem "from our

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13. The Ramban (*Devarim* 22:6) and many other commentaries explain that on a more profound level, *letzaref* means "to refine."

standpoint” is about Hashem after Creation. We can only understand what His Will was after Creation, because the creation of a world is an indication of what He wants of that world. We are able to conclude that Hashem wishes to bestow good, because He created a world to be the recipient of that good. From this aspect, *mitzidenu*, our *mitzvot* are central to Creation. They contribute to the perfection and rectification of the world, and they earn us the reward He wishes to give us.

“From His standpoint” – the aspect of Hashem before Creation – our *mitzvot* do not build or effect change. “From our standpoint,” once the world and man were created, our *mitzvot* matter very much, because we have a great responsibility to perfect the world as Hashem desires (*Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Gimel*, in particular chapter 4).

### **Working for the King**

With this in mind, we can understand why the Sages refer to our fulfillment of Torah and *mitzvot* as “work” in a number of teachings:

- “Rabbi Elazar says... know before Whom you labor, and that your Employer can be relied upon to pay you the wages of your toil” (Avot 2:14).
- “Rabbi Tarfon says, the day is short and there is work in abundance, and the workers are lazy, and the reward is plentiful, and the master is pressing” (ibid. 2:15).
- “He would say, it is not up to you to complete the job, and yet, you are not free to give it up... And your Employer can be relied upon to pay you the wage of your work” (ibid. 2:16).

These teachings imply a relationship between an employer (Hashem) and an employee (the Jewish people), complete with labor and wages. Is our relationship with Hashem similar to that of an employer and employee, where we provide Him with a service by doing *mitzvot*? If we view the six hundred and thirteen commandments only as a test of our loyalty to Hashem, and a means for us to receive reward and punishment, what connection is there to the concept of work and providing services for an employer?

One answer is that *mitzvot* really are hard work. We can explain with a parable. A king was eager to bestow reward upon his subjects. He knew that for them to derive maximum satisfaction and enjoyment from the lavish gifts he planned to give them, they would need to feel that they had earned them, and not just received them as a glorified handout.<sup>14</sup>

So great was the king's love for his subjects that he decided to do more than simply distribute free gifts. He opened his royal treasury and removed a vast cache of priceless gem-studded jewelry, silver, and tiaras. He broke them into pieces, and scattered them in the sand along the shore. He then assigned his subjects a job, working for the king himself: they were to dig through the sand, searching for the jewels and broken pieces of gold and silver. Then they had to reassemble the parts, clean and polish them to perfection, and present the restored treasures to the king, once again as good as new. The wise king had set up the entire "job" – he had broken apart the jewelry

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14. See above, "Created for *Hesed*, Created for *Din*."

specifically in order to give the people something to repair, and “earn” their wages rightfully. The king in the parable is Hashem, Who created the world in order to bestow Divine reward

### Collecting the Sparks

This parable explains our Sages’ profound teaching, “[Hashem] created worlds and then destroyed them” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 3:7). Before creating our world, Hashem first created a series of very lofty spiritual worlds. These worlds were on a level as high as the exalted *Olam HaAtzilut* (“the world in which Hashem reveals Himself”), the highest of the four worlds mentioned in Kabbalistic teachings, although they were created before it.

Hashem then destroyed these higher worlds and scattered the broken “pieces,” known as “sparks of holiness” (*nitzotzot kedushah*), throughout all the lower levels of Creation. These sparks are the life force of all the created worlds, including the spiritual and physical worlds. They are also the life force of every created entity in our lowly world, on the four levels of *domem*-inanimate objects,



*tzomeah*-plant life, *hai*-animals, and *medaber*-man, who is endowed with *dibbur*, the power of speech.

When we use any entity to fulfill a *mitzvah*, we retrieve its sparks of holiness and elevate them to their original source in the higher spiritual worlds, where they are rectified. This process is known as *birur v'tikun* (retrieving and rectifying). For example, when we use inanimate stones and earth (*domem*) to build the Temple or the Altar, or in our times, a synagogue, study hall, or Jewish home dedicated to Torah and *mitzvot*, these inanimate entities fulfill their ultimate purpose and achieve their required rectification.

Wheat made into *matzot* for Pesah, the Four Species on Sukkot, the herbal ink used by a scribe, and other agricultural products (*tzomeah*) used to fulfill *mitzvot* are automatically uplifted. When we recite a blessing and eat fruit, vegetables, or grains (*tzomeah*) for the nutrients that enable us to study Torah and serve Hashem, we elevate the sparks of holiness in those foods. The same is true of the wood used in furniture or construction, and cotton or other fibers in clothing. If they are

utilized as part of our service of Hashem, they are elevated. Used with proper intent for positive purposes, and certainly for *mitzvot*, the holy sparks in plant life are uplifted.

Animals (*hai*) also have their place in the service of Hashem, and they too are elevated when we use them for *mitzvot*. A Torah scroll is written on parchment processed from animal hides, and the *shofar* blown on Rosh Hashanah is made of a ram's horn. We carry out kosher slaughter and cover the blood of the slaughtered animal as required by halachah. We recite blessings before fulfilling these *mitzvot*, and before and after eating the slaughtered meat. In former times animals were used for transportation, farm work, and hauling. One donkey carried the saintly *Tanna* Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair, and attained a very high level of rectification (*Shaar HaMitzvot, Parashat Ekev*). In contrast, another donkey belonged to Bilam, and was used for sin (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 22, 765*).

There are many *mitzvot* fulfilled by contact with other people (*medaber*), like giving charity, doing *hesed*, teaching Torah, and praying with a

quorum of fellow Jews. Some are carried out with the power of speech (*dibbur*) itself, for example, *kiddush* on Shabbat and Festivals, and counting the Omer between Pesah and Shavuot (see *Shaar HaMitzvot, Parashat Behar*, p. 25b, and *Parashat Ekev*, p. 41b).

The author of *Kerem Shlomo* explains how the holy sparks in human beings can be uplifted on a large scale through our *mitzvot*. Sheep are raised and their wool shorn in one corner of the world. The wool is taken to port, laded, and shipped overseas to be purchased in another continent, where it is processed into fabric. The fabric is sent on still further, until it is eventually cut and sewn into a garment that a G-d-fearing Jew will wear in honor of Shabbat. Countless people have been involved in the handling and manufacture of this suit, including the sheep farmers, dock workers, customs agents, factory workers, tailors, and more. Through their share in the process, every one of them imbues the garment with some of his sparks of holiness. When the purchaser recites the *Sheheheyanu* blessing and wears the suit in honor of Shabbat or the Festivals, all these holy

sparks are elevated (*Kerem Shlomo, Perush al Etz Hayyim, Shaar Gimel*, chapter 2, Ot Bet).

The Arizal teaches that the four elements of *domem*, *tzomeah*, *hai*, and *medaber* are all brought together in the offering of a sacrifice, a very lofty form of serving Hashem. The salt used on the sacrifice is *domem*; the flour, wine, and oil used in the *menahot* that accompanied certain sacrifices are all *tzomeah*; the animal itself is *hai*; and the person who offers the sacrifice and says the relevant confession is *medaber* (*Taame HaMitzvot, Parashat Vayikra*, p. 73a; *Nehar Shalom, Hakdamat HaKorbanot*, p. 25b).

The Arizal writes that the process of *birur* is the reason for the Jewish people's sojourn in so many different countries during our long years of exile. In every new land where Jews reside, their Torah and *mitzvot* retrieve and rectify the holy sparks dispersed throughout that country, "polishing" them and returning them to the King, so to speak (*Pri Etz Hayyim, Shaar Keriat Shema*, chapter 3, p. 39c-d).

This is also the reason behind the prohibition against returning to Egypt (see *Devarim* 17:16). During the Jewish people's years there, they retrieved and rectified all the sparks of holiness present in Egypt, leaving the country devoid of any sanctity. It is in this sense that "they emptied out Egypt" (*Shemot* 12:36), leaving it "like a net without fish, and like a storehouse without grain" (*Berachot* 9b). The country had been drained of any drop of holiness, and there was nothing left for our people to do there (*Shaar HaMitzvot, Parashat Re'eh*, p. 48a; see *Petah Enayim, Berachot* 9b).

The Hida writes that this concept explains the term *shakle v'azle*, literally "collecting and walking," used in the Gemara to describe our Sages' walking (*Berachot* 18a; *Hagigah* 5b; *Kiddushin* 39a; *Baba Kama* 81b). The Gemara does not use the simpler term *azle* (walking), but instead specifies that the Sages "collected and walked." This is because wherever they went, they were engaged in *mitzvot* and Torah study. As they walked, they "collected" holy sparks, retrieving and rectifying them, and restoring them

to their Heavenly source (*Devash L'Fi, Maarechet Bet, Ot Yud*).

The Torah's six hundred and thirteen commandments are spiritual. Each one is rooted in a lofty Heavenly source, but they are carried out in the material world, through contact with the four levels of physical creation. The scattered sparks of holiness in *domem, tzomeah, hai, and medaber* in our world are retrieved and uplifted by our Torah and *mitzvot*. They ascend from one level to the next, from the spiritual levels of *Olam HaAsiyah* to *Yetzirah* and *Beriyah*, up to *Atzilut*. Their ascent is by means of man's G-dly soul, as alluded to in our Forefather Yaakov's prophetic dream of "a ladder standing on earth and its head reaching to the Heavens; and behold, angels of G-d are ascending and descending on it" (*Bereshit* 28:12). By returning the holy sparks to their source we build the King's palace in the higher spiritual worlds, restoring the lofty spiritual worlds that were created and then destroyed.

We discussed our Sages' parable of a king's palace built atop a rubbish heap. The "palace" of the higher spiritual worlds where the "king"

dwells is made of the holy sparks that we retrieve from the “rubbish” in our world. Compared to the exalted spirituality of the Higher Worlds, our lowly physical world is little more than a junkyard, where we work hard to recover valuable “scraps.”

### **The Impact of Mitzvot**

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin explains a parable from the Sages that provides further insight into the significance of our Torah and *mitzvot* in this world, and our relationship with Hashem (*Ruah Hayyim, Avot 3:1*). A king distributed splendid royal garments to his servants. The wise servants took good care of them, folding them away in storage chests for safekeeping. The foolish servants put them on and wore them as they did their work. The time came when the king asked them all to return the royal garments. The more intelligent servants brought their garments back nicely pressed and in perfect condition, while the fools turned theirs in stained and soiled. The king was pleased with the wise servants, and angry at the fools (*Shabbat 152b*). The “garments” are man’s soul, a precious gift on loan to him during his stay in this world. If

we are wise, we will preserve our soul as whole and clean as we received it, in anticipation of the day that we return it to the king. Fools will treat their soul roughly, ignoring its incalculable value, only to return it embarrassingly dirty and tattered.

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes that based on the Sages' wording, it appears that the clever servants simply preserved the garments in their original condition, but did nothing more to beautify them. In other words, they did not blemish their souls by transgressing negative commandments, but they also did not enhance their souls' beauty by fulfilling positive commandments. It must be, then, that the king's intention was not merely to have his servants keep the garments in their original state, but to embellish them by dyeing them, adding new color and shine to the fabric. This is why the parable says the wise servants returned them pressed – they had done something to improve them, a reference to fulfillment of positive commandments. Not only did the fools contribute nothing – they did not beautify their souls with positive commandments



– they dirtied them with sin, by transgressing negative commandments.

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin goes on to explain the wording of the *mishnah* in *Avot*: “Before Whom will you give a reckoning (*din*) and accounting (*heshbon*)?” He connects the use of the two terms *din* and *heshbon* to our Sages’ parable of the king and his servants. The first matter addressed in our Heavenly judgment is *din*, related to transgression of negative commandments – we should take care not to dirty the king’s royal garment. However, simply staying away from the sins that stain the soul is not enough. The world was created for us to do more than just preserve the soul intact, in its original state. It is up to us to adorn it further, by fulfilling the positive commandments.

This is the meaning of the parable that follows in the Gemara, about a king who invited his servants to a banquet, without mentioning an exact date. The wiser servants dressed in festive attire and waited at the palace gate. The fools went about their business as usual, figuring that it was impossible to hold a banquet without preparation – surely they would have enough advance notice

to get dressed on time. The summons came suddenly and they all had to appear, ready or not. To the king's pleasure, the wise servants were prepared. They arrived suitably dressed and were able to partake of the banquet. He was angered by the sight of the fools, who stumbled in dirty and disheveled. They were not allowed to participate; they could only stand on the sidelines and watch.

In the World to Come there will be *din*, punishment for blemishing the soul by sinning. There will also be *heshbon*, the accounting for our failure to enhance the soul with positive commandments (*Ruah Hayyim, Avot 3:1*).

We see that according to Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, there is a major difference between negative and positive commandments. Transgression of the negative commandments blemishes the transgressor's soul, but refraining from transgression has no additional beneficial impact. Fulfilling positive commandments does affect the soul, beautifying and elevating it.

However, according to the Arizal, fulfillment of both positive and negative commandments has a similar impact. The two hundred and forty-eight positive and three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments correspond to man's two hundred and forty-eight spiritual limbs and three hundred and sixty-five spiritual sinews. This complete spiritual structure (*shiur komah*), a total of six hundred and thirteen, reflects man's creation *b'tzelem Elokim*, "in the image of G-d" (*Bereshit* 1:27), and parallels the *shiur komah* of the Higher Worlds (*Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, chapters 4–6).

When we have the opportunity to transgress a negative commandment and refrain specifically because the Torah forbids it, we rectify and perfect the sinew related to that commandment, along with its corresponding component in the Higher Worlds. For example, when we are in the barber's chair for a haircut and make sure he does not cut our *peyot* (sideburns) in a manner forbidden by halachah, we should have in mind that we are obeying the Torah's prohibition against shaving off the sideburns (*Vayikra* 19:27). With our care

not to transgress this commandment, we not only avoid blemishing the related sinew, we actively rectify it (*Shaar HaMitzvot*, p. 1b).

The same is true of positive commandments. Fulfilling a positive commandment rectifies the related limb and its corresponding component in the Higher Worlds. Neglecting to fulfill it not only fails to rectify the limb, it blemishes it. Unlike the opinion of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, according to the Arizal, every commandment, whether positive or negative, causes rectification when it is fulfilled, and a spiritual blemish when it is not fulfilled.

Our *mitzvot* literally build worlds. They perfect not only our own spiritual and physical limbs and sinews, but also the corresponding aspects of the higher spiritual worlds. They retrieve and rectify the holy sparks in all created entities, restoring them to the lofty worlds that preceded ours. We are builders who labor for the mightiest of all kings, “and [our] Employer can be trusted to pay [us] the wage of [our] work.”

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Our obligation to build and rectify worlds is renewed every year on Rosh Hashanah, when the special spiritual power unique to this time of year is reawakened. As the new year begins, we undertake to labor for Hashem in keeping with the spirituality of the year ahead and our own Divinely designated task in this world. We have only a limited time here, and a great deal to accomplish. It is up to us to use all of our G-d-given capacities – our skills, talents, means and circumstances – to accomplish it.

With the arrival of the Day of Judgment, let us all repent and return to Hashem wholeheartedly. Then we can truly pray, “Bring us back and we will return,” arousing the Divine *Rahamim* that will acquit us in judgment. If we merit Hashem’s mercy on these great days, He will open His treasury of *Hesed* on the Festival of Sukkot, and grant all our Jewish brethren a year of blessing and salvation. Amen, so may it be His Will.

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# The Ten Days of Repentance



**For the Sake of His Name,  
with Love**

## **For His Sake**

The Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are an opportune time for penitence and atonement. The Gates of Heaven are open wide, awaiting our *teshuvah* (repentance). Our Sages define the special quality of these days: “‘Seek out Hashem while He can be found, call Him when He is close’ (Yeshayahu 55:6)...These are the ten days between Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur” (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a). During these days, known as the *Aseret Yeme Teshuvah*, prayers and repentance are more readily accepted than at any other time of year.

The Sages instituted additions to the prayers during the Ten Days of Repentance. To the first blessing in *Shemoneh Esre* we add the words, “Remember us for life, King Who desires life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, G-d of life.” We begin by asking Hashem to “remember us for life,” because *He* is the “King Who desires life.” Then we ask to be inscribed in the Book of Life, not for any reasons relating to ourselves, but “for Your sake, G-d of life.” In other words, our request here centers not on our own personal need for life, but on Hashem – we ask for life strictly to fulfill His desire, and above all, for His sake. We find the same theme in the *Selichot* prayers recited in Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance. We beseech Hashem, “Do for the sake of Your Name, do for the sake of Your truth, do for the sake of Your covenant, do for the sake of Your greatness” continuing



through the alphabet in this vein.<sup>15</sup> Apparently, the entire list of Hashem's lofty attributes is only of consequence when realized by the people of Israel. It is through us that His Name is His Name, His truth is His truth, and the like.

We express this idea three times a day in our prayers. We praise Hashem as “the great G-d, the mighty, awesome and supreme G-d, Who bestows good kindnesses, and is the Creator of everything, and remembers the kindnesses of the Forefathers, and brings a redeemer to their descendants, for the sake of His Name, with love.” The conclusion of the blessing, “for the sake of his Name, with love,” implies that all Hashem does in this world, including the vast kindness He constantly bestows upon us, is not for us, but for Him.

How are we to understand this? Our existence, every moment of every day, depends completely on Hashem, but He does not depend on us for

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15. In Hebrew, the various elements (Your truth, Your covenant, etc.) listed in this prayer are in alphabetical order, from *alef* to *tav*.

anything at all. Why do we beseech Hashem to “remember us for life” and “bestow good kindnesses” upon us specifically “for the sake of His Name”? We are the ones who need these blessings. In what sense are they “for His sake”?

We can answer this question by understanding something about why Hashem created the world to begin with. Our Sages tell us, “Everything that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He created only for His honor, as it says, ‘All that is created in My Name and for My honor, I created it, and formed it and also made it’” (*Yeshayahu* 43:7; *Avot* 6:11). This concept is fundamental to our understanding of the purpose of Creation, and our service of Hashem in this world.

### **Worlds of Good**

On the one hand, our Sages tell us the world was created solely for Hashem’s honor. On the other, the *Mekubalim* teach that Hashem created the world to bestow good upon His created beings. In the words of the Ramhal, “It is the nature of one who is good to bestow good” (*Derech Hashem*, part 1, chapter 2; *Daat Tevunot* 1:42–43).

At first glance, this would seem to contradict some major fundamentals of our faith. It is basic to our understanding of the Almighty that He is perfect, and lacks for nothing. Everything in the entire universe, even above and beyond in the higher spiritual worlds, is His. There is nothing that He “must” do, or anything He lacks that another party can provide.

Saying that Hashem created the world in order to bestow good would mean that in order for His good to be realized, He needs a recipient for that good. This implies that He is in some way lacking. Yet we know that He has no needs, and even our fulfillment of *mitzvot* does not contribute to Him – He commanded us to do them because they contribute to us. “If you have sinned, what [harm] do you do to Him... and if you are righteous, what [benefit] do you give Him?” (*Iyov* 35:6,7).

The Sages elaborate: “The *mitzvot* were only given as a means to refine the people of Israel. For what does the Holy One, blessed be He, care if one slaughters from the [animal’s] throat or slaughters from the back of the [animal’s] neck? We learn from here that the *mitzvot* were only

given as a means to refine the people of Israel” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 44:1; *Tanhuma, Shemini* 8). The *mitzvot*, with kosher slaughter as an example, are for us – not for Him.

Our purpose in fulfilling the commandments should be primarily to give Hashem *nahat ruah*, pleasure and satisfaction, through our good deeds. In the *L’shem Yihud* prayer recited prior to fulfilling a *mitzvah* we say, “I hereby undertake to fulfill this *mitzvah* to cause *nahat ruah* to my Creator.” This appears to be a contradiction in terms. How can we give Hashem anything? There is nothing He lacks that we can provide. We can ask the same question concerning our Sages’ teaching in the *Zohar*: “Who is a *hassid*? One who does *hesed* with his Creator” (*Zohar*, vol. II, p. 114b). *Hesed* (lovingkindness) means benefitting others. Hashem continually does *hesed* for us – not we for Him. There is nothing we can give Him that is not already His, and nothing we can do that He needs from us. To answer this, we need to understand what it means that Hashem created the world in order to give.

## Divine Will

Let us begin with a basic principle taught by the *Mekubalim*. Rabbi Menahem Azariah of Fano writes that man is not permitted to engage in studying the essence of G-d. We are only permitted to attempt to understand His Will (cited in *Shomer Emunim, Vikuah Sheni*, 27, 29). We do not and cannot know or understand anything about G-d's essence; such knowledge is totally beyond human comprehension.

Everything that we study and know regarding Hashem is not about Hashem Himself – it is about His Will. For example, Creation is no more than the outcome of Hashem's Will. By studying the way Hashem relates to the world and His created beings, we can derive some understanding of His Will and expectations concerning Creation.

The *Mekubalim* discuss various reasons behind Hashem's decision to create the world, among them His desire to bestow good. Any such reasons can only refer to Hashem after Creation; we know nothing about Him prior to Creation. Before Creation, He had no need to bestow good. As a

perfect G-d, He had no needs at all and lacked for nothing, not even for a recipient of His bounty. It was only with Creation that it became possible to conclude that it was His Will to bestow good – because He created a world that would be the recipient of that good. But we cannot know the Divine calculations that preceded Creation, or why imparting good should be a reason for Creation. Certainly Hashem lacked for nothing that the existence of a world would provide. We can only understand what His Will was after Creation, because the creation of a world indicates what He wants of that world.

### **The Paycheck**

Because Hashem is perfect and His Will is perfect, any actualization of His Will can only come about in perfect form as well. When He bestows good, it will be absolute good, granted to the very fullest. Our Sages teach that “There is no reward for *mitzvot* in this world” (*Kiddushin* 39b), not because Hashem does not wish to give to us here and now, but because this world is too small to provide reward on a Divine scale. Worldly

pleasures are fleeting and futile; they would be a cheap tradeoff for the value of even a single *mitzvah*. The only site with the means to give true, perfect reward is the World to Come. It is a spiritual, eternal world, where we can enjoy the endless, limitless spiritual reward Hashem wishes to grant us.

With this in mind, we can also understand the true purpose behind our service of Hashem in this world. This world abounds with *nisyonot*, the tests and trials we contend with throughout our lives. We must constantly choose between good and bad in an unending variety of situations. Hashem could surely have spared us the difficulties and hardships – and the risk of failure – and instead given us lives of unadulterated good.

But He would not be doing us a favor by eliminating the challenges in our lives. If there were no struggle, no need to overcome our laziness, greed, desire, bad temper, and all the rest, our piety would not be worthy of reward, since it demanded no effort on our part. Any reward we received would not be the satisfying outcome of our lifetime of hard work for Hashem. It would be

a handout, what our Sages call *nahama d'kisufa*, literally “bread of shame” (Jerusalem Talmud *Orlah* 1:3). An employee picks up his paycheck with his head high and shoulders straight, knowing that he has earned it. An indigent on the dole collects his check with an embarrassed glance over his shoulder, and hurries off before anyone can spot him. In the World to Come, reward conferred as a handout will not bring full satisfaction, making it less than perfect. In order for the eternal good Hashem bestows upon us to be as perfect as its Divine Giver, it must be earned. We earn it by prevailing over the ceaseless efforts of the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) to drag us away from Torah and *mitzvot*.

This is how we give Hashem *nahat ruah* with our *mitzvot*. It is His Will to grant us perfect good. In order for the good to be perfect, it must be earned. By fulfilling the *mitzvot* that warrant Divine reward, we cause Him the satisfaction of fulfilling His Will in Creation.



## The Better World

Our Sages teach us this principle in the well-known *mishnah* in *Pirke Avot*, “One moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than the entire life of the World to Come. And one moment of pleasure in the World to Come is better than the entire life of this world” (*Avot* 4:17).

Understood simply, the first part of this *mishnah* is about our service of Hashem in this world, where we have Free Will. We are faced with a test, and we can either be strong and prevail, or we can fail and fall. Our Free Will gives us the opportunity to choose good over bad, causing *nahat ruah* to our Creator and earning eternal reward. This pattern repeats itself in countless variations throughout our lives. However, these opportunities are only available to us *in this world*. Once we move on to the World to Come, they are no more. King Shlomo calls life in the world after *Mashiah* “the years...of which you will say, there is no pleasure in them” (*Kohelet* 12:1). The Sages say that “these are the days of *Mashiah*, when there is neither merit nor guilt” (*Shabbat* 151b) – there are no more *mitzvot* to be acquired then, and no more

sins. The World to Come is pure spirituality where Hashem is revealed on a level unattainable in our world, but it lacks the vital element present in our own world: trials and Free Will (*Zohar*, vol. I, p. 139b). This is all the more true of the very highest spiritual worlds, where man attains levels that are angelic and even G-dly. Conflict between good and bad has no existence in these lofty spheres.

It is only here that we can cause Hashem *nahat ruah* through our struggles to fulfill His commandments and do His Will. This is why our Sages say that “One moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than the entire life of the World to Come.” The enormous satisfaction we gain from conquering our evil inclination and serving Hashem with repentance and good deeds in this world can no longer be attained in the World to Come. This exhilarating accomplishment is more enjoyable than even the spiritual delights of the World to Come.

The second part of the *mishnah* is about the reward for serving Hashem – the true, limitless good that Hashem wishes to bestow upon us. “One moment of pleasure in the World to Come

is better than the entire life of this world.” In comparison to what He has in store for us, this world is small and petty. In addition, during our lives in this world we are entirely physical beings, and as such, we are simply incapable of coping with the intense spirituality of Divine bounty in its fullest sense. When the time comes for us to shed our physicality and live on in the spiritual World to Come, we will be able to receive and take pleasure in spiritual reward. Of this our Sages say, “One moment of pleasure in the World to Come is better than the entire life of this world.” Our entire world, past, present, and future, cannot contain even a moment’s worth of the ecstasy of the World to Come.

### **More Precious**

We can also explain this *mishnah* differently, in reference to the Almighty. Our Sages teach that “Torah scholars have no peace in this world nor in the next world, as is written, ‘They will go from strength to strength and be seen before G-d in Zion’” (*Berachot* 64a, citing *Tehillim* 84:8). In the World to Come, the souls of *tzaddikim* continually

ascend to increasingly higher levels of spirituality, in keeping with their service of Hashem in this world.

The Arizal teaches that these levels of closeness to Hashem correspond day to day, hour to hour, to a *tzaddik's* service of Hashem in this world (*Shaar HaGilgulim, Hakdamah 22*).<sup>16</sup> Surely these *tzaddikim* are achieving great spiritual heights, but even so the *mishnah* tells us, “One moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is *better than* the entire life of the World to Come.” In other words, “one moment” of our dedicated efforts in this world to overcome our evil inclination, serve Hashem, and repent, is more precious to Him than all the lofty spiritual levels later achieved in the World to Come.

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16. Rabbi Aharon Ferera went so far as to warn the *Mekubalim* who pray with the Kabbalistic intents of the Rashash that if they miss a day of praying with these intents here, they will not be able to pray with those intents on the corresponding day in the World to Come (see *Mekabtziel*, No. 14, p. 80, *Ginze Nistarot*, notes on the customs of the Bet El community, published in *Divre Shalom, Ot Kaf-heh*).

In the World to Come, we exist on the level of angels; there is no temptation and no challenge. In our corrupt, material world, we face nearly impossible odds in the battle to do good and shun evil, so that our struggles and triumphs here are very dear to Him. We can compare this to a father watching his son grow up. The joy and pride he feels as he observes his son working to develop and progress in Torah and *mitzvot* are even greater than when his son has grown up and is honored for his achievements.

But in terms of reward, “One moment of pleasure in the World to Come is better than the entire life of this world.” It is Hashem’s desire to bestow maximum reward, and this world is not a fitting venue – as we said, it is too small. The intensity of even “one moment of pleasure in the World to Come” is vastly greater than all that “the entire life of this world” could ever provide; there can be no comparison. In this sense, a single moment in the World to Come is dearer to Hashem, because it is there that He can give reward on the lavish scale He desires.

## Giving by Receiving

Let us try to understand more about the complex concept of Divine reward. We learn in *Pirke Avot* that “Antigonos of Socho... would say, do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive reward. Instead, be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive reward. And may the fear of Heaven be upon you” (*Avot* 1:3).

Belief in reward and punishment is one of the Thirteen Principles of Faith (Rambam, *Perush HaMishnayot, Sanhedrin, Perek Helek*). Yet while we know that the reward – and the punishment – are there, they should not be our motivation for serving Hashem.

Even our anticipation of eternal reward should be directed to Hashem: by obeying His commandments, we enable Him to reward us, fulfilling His purpose in Creation. This is the meaning of the *Zohar*’s teaching, cited above: “Who is a *hassid*? One who does *hesed* with his Creator.” *Hesed* is bestowing lovingkindness on another party; as we said, there is nothing we

can give the Almighty, the Creator and Master of everything in existence. But if our intention is to provide Him with the opportunity to fulfill His purpose in Creation by bestowing His good upon us in full measure, we “do *hesed* with our Creator.” This concept is not simple to comprehend, and great care is needed not to err. We are not doing Hashem a favor with our *mitzvot*. He is doing us a favor, as we learn from the verse, “Yours, Hashem, is *hesed*, for You reward man in keeping with his deeds” (*Tehillim* 62:13).

This statement seems surprising – rewarding someone “in keeping with his deeds,” or in other words, paying his wages, is not a special *hesed*. It is a basic obligation for an employer to pay a worker for his labor or for services provided. He is not a *tzaddik* for paying; he would be grossly remiss if he did not. But reward for *mitzvot* is different – it really is *hesed*. If not for the abilities Hashem gives us, and His constant, active assistance in all we do, we could accomplish nothing at all. We actually play a minor role in producing the *mitzvah*, but He rewards us “in keeping with [our] deeds,” as if we

had done it all on our own and were entitled to the full fee.

We can also explain this verse in relation to Hashem's desire to bestow perfect reward. When we give Hashem the opportunity to "reward man in keeping with his deeds," fulfilling His Will in Creation by showering us with unlimited Divine bounty, it is "Yours, Hashem, is *hesed*," in this sense, we can have the opportunity to do *hesed* for the Almighty.

Now we can understand the Sages' words, "Everything the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He created only for His honor." Everything in this world, including ourselves and our actions, was created to give Hashem the satisfaction of rewarding us when we obey Him, His desire from the very onset of Creation.

### **Adjusting the Focus**

With this understanding in mind, let us consider our prayers during the Ten Days of Repentance, when we make the request, "Remember us for life, King Who desires life, and inscribe us in the



Book of Life, for Your sake, G-d of life.” When man sins and disqualifies himself from receiving Divine reward, whether on a small scale in this world, or on the enormous scale awaiting us in the World to Come, he detracts from the greater revelation of Hashem that comes about when He gives in full. In this sense, our sins prevent Hashem’s Oneness and perfection from being fully revealed in the world.

When we say, “Remember us for life,” we ask for a long, tranquil lifespan that allows us to perfect ourselves by serving Hashem and studying His Torah. When we do so, we become worthy of receiving His boundless good in the World to Come. It is contradictory to Hashem’s Will for a person to die as a sinner, without having accomplished his G-d-given mission and perfecting himself spiritually. Our lives in this world should be directed towards fulfilling His Will: as long as we live, we can cause Him *nahat ruah* by enabling Him to reward us, so we want to live.

We find this concept in the *Zohar*, which uses harsh terms to describe those whose prayers revolve only around their own personal requests

(*Tikune Zohar*, p. 22). These people ask for everything – life, health, sustenance, success, and more. It never occurs to them to direct their prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to the exile of the Divine Presence. They are concerned only with salvation from their own personal exile. These prayers too closely resemble those of the other nations, who plead with their gods to provide their list of needs, without a thought of personal improvement. We live among them, and are influenced by their simplistic, self-centered approach to prayer. We ask Hashem to forgive our sins and grant us atonement, and that is all that matters to us. The suffering endured by the *Shechinah* as a result of our sins never enters our minds. We should be doing more. As Jews, our prayers and personal conduct should be geared higher than daily needs and problems, toward the greater goal of revealing Hashem's sovereignty and Oneness in the world.

The Sages teach that when we suffer, the *Shechinah* suffers with us (*Hagigah* 15b). Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes that the persecution and misery of our people in exile are not merely

a matter of our own troubles or punishment; they are above all a *hillul Hashem*, a desecration of Hashem's Name. The suffering of an individual is not a *hillul Hashem* on the same scale as the degradation of the Jewish people as a whole, but Hashem participates in this private anguish as well. This, he teaches, should be the focus of our prayer: we beseech Hashem for relief and salvation not for ourselves, but to end the suffering and disgrace of the Almighty, as it were. This is the main theme of our Rosh Hashanah prayers. For the most part, they are not personal requests, but requests that Hashem's greatness and Kingship be completely and openly revealed on earth, annulling the darkness of exile.

The Sages compare the mutual anguish of Hashem and His people to that of twins: when one hurts, the other hurts along with him (*Shemot Rabbah* 2:5). We find this concept in such verses as "I am with him in distress" (*Tehillim* 91:15), and "In all their suffering, He suffers" (*Yeshayahu* 63:9). By the same token, when the Jewish people are granted salvation, it is Hashem's salvation too,

as it were (see *Tanhuma, Ahare Mot* 12; *Midrash Shoher Tov, Tehillim* 13; *Zohar*, vol. III, p. 90b).

### **Making Suffering Sweet**

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin explains that when a sufferer is not consumed exclusively by his own personal anguish, but rather, feels sorrow over the resulting anguish of the *Shechinah*, his suffering purifies him and atones for him, so much so that all his sins are forgiven and he is no longer afflicted with suffering.

When we suffer, we should keep in mind that from our standpoint, the suffering has a positive effect – it cleanses us of our sins. Our sorrow should be directed to the anguish caused to the *Shechinah* by our suffering: “In all their suffering, He suffers.” In other words, instead of being immersed in our own pain, our concern should be the pain suffered by the *Shechinah*, so to speak. If we sincerely repent the sins that brought it on, and ask for salvation not because we are in pain, but because we are causing the *Shechinah* pain, we will gain atonement.

This is the meaning of our request for salvation *lemaan Shemo b'ahavah* – “for the sake of His Name, with love,” and not for ourselves. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes that prayer directed solely to the concerns of the Almighty, requesting that He should not have to suffer because of our sins, transforms that suffering; it is not ours, but His. When we are oblivious to our personal suffering in the face of Hashem’s suffering, our suffering is discontinued.

This, says Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, is the true meaning of the fundamental Kabbalistic concept of “sweetening Divine judgment at its source.” We can better understand what this means by learning more about the Divine Attribute of *Din*.

Hashem rules the world with a perfect balance of *Hesed* (Lovingkindness), *Din* (Judgment), and *Rahamim* (Mercy). These three Attributes operate like a balance scale: *Hesed* on the right side and *Din* on the left side, with *Rahamim* as the beam in the center that supports them. *Rahamim*, which corresponds to the Attribute of *Emet* (Truth), combines *Din* and *Hesed*. *Rahamim* is the true, perfect balance, the ideal form of

Divine rule. We find allusion to this concept in our Sages' description of our Forefather Yaakov as "the select one of the Forefathers" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 76:1). Yaakov's primary trait of *Emet* was the balance between Avraham's trait of *Hesed* and Yitzhak's trait of *Din*.

The Arizal explains that *Hesed* is an outpouring of good without bounds or limits, lavished equally upon those who are righteous and those who are wicked. *Din* is totally straightforward. It metes out exactly what is deserved, no more and no less – neither favoritism nor prejudice, as expressed in our Sages' teaching, "Let judgment pierce the mountain" (*Yevamot* 92a). *Rahamim* acts as the balance between the two. *Rahamim* looks only at our good, and deals with us with compassion alone. It sets aside the bad for the time being, holding it at bay until the final accounting in the future. In the words of our Sages, "Hashem delays His anger, but will eventually call us to account" (*Jerusalem Talmud Taanit* 2:1).

At its Heavenly source, *Din* (Strict Judgment) is not harsh and powerful. It is *memutak*, "sweetened." As it descends, level by level, to

our world, it becomes increasingly harsh and formidable. The harsh form of *Din* is the source of all suffering in this world. At its lowest level, it also becomes the source of evil in this world. *Din* is an essential component in Hashem's rule of the world, part of the Divine Chariot that must always be complete and perfect; we cannot eliminate it entirely. However, because it can be harsh in the extreme, we seek to mitigate its impact.

The way to rectify the overwhelming force of *Din* in this world is by returning it to its original source, where it is sweetened. The Arizal teaches that this is the profound intent of the *shofar* blowing on Rosh Hashanah, alluded to in the verse “*Elokim* has ascended with [the sound of] the *teruah*, Hashem (the Name *yud-keh-vav-keh*) with the sound of the *shofar* (*Tehillim* 47:6). The Name *Elokim* represents the Divine Attribute of *Din*.

The Name *yud-keh-vav-keh* represents Divine *Hesed* and *Rahamim*. The Attribute of *Din* (“*Elokim*”) ascends all the way to its source with the wail of the *teruah*. It is sweetened there, and then descends once again as *yud-keh-vav-keh*,

the Name signifying Divine lovingkindness and mercy. In this sense, the blowing of the *shofar* sweetens *Din* by elevating it to its original highest source, where it is sweetened and rectified (*Shaar HaKavanot, Derush Zayin D'Shofar*, p. 95a).

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes that every individual can sweeten the *Din* that afflicts him personally and causes him to suffer. When a sufferer focuses not on himself but on the suffering of the *Shechinah*, the Attribute of *Din* responsible for his suffering ascends and is sweetened. If instead, the sufferer thinks solely of his own personal misery, he gains nothing; he is left only with the suffering he must undergo to atone for his sins.

He cites the prayer of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Shmuel, who beseeched Hashem for a child in very powerful terms: “And Hannah prayed to (literally ‘on’) Hashem” (1 *Shmuel* 1:10). Our Sages comment, “She flung words at Heaven” (*Berachot* 31b). We might take this to mean that Hannah’s anguish and distress led her to address Hashem disrespectfully, but apparently, this was not the case, as we learn from the continuation



of the Gemara. The Gemara goes on to tell us that “Eliyahu flung words at Heaven...and Hashem conceded to Eliyahu.” It would seem, then, that “flinging words at Heaven” is an acceptable approach to prayer.

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin presents a highly original interpretation of this Gemara. He writes that Hannah flung her words on Heaven – she directed and related her pain to the pain of Heaven. Her suffering was Hashem’s suffering, caused by her distress over her childless state, and she prayed for it to end – not for herself, but for *Him*. While her personal pain was real and acute, she did not focus on her own longing and despair, but rather on its impact in Heaven. Her actions sweetened the *Din* responsible for her suffering, and she was ultimately granted a child (*Nefesh HaHayyim, Shaar Bet*, chapters 11–12). The Ten Days of Repentance are days of prayer. We can elevate the quality of our prayer by focusing on its true goal, and the ultimate aim of our service of Hashem in this world. We serve Hashem to fulfill His purpose in Creation. We can serve Him not merely in order to receive eternal reward, but

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to cause Him *nahat ruah* by providing the setting that allows Him to bestow perfect reward in full. We can pray not only with the simple intent of ending our own suffering, but in order to end the resultant suffering of the *Shechinah* and the exile that the *Shechinah* endures along with us, so that Hashem's Oneness and Kingship are revealed on earth. If we can learn to direct our prayers, Torah, and *mitzvot* not just to our own interests, whether in this world or the next, but to Him, we will serve Him on the very highest level: not for the sake of our own wants and needs, but *lemaan Shemo b'ahavah* – for the sake of His Name, with love.

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