

Holiday Observances



ANYONE CAN TELL YOU that as Jews, our lives revolve around the holidays of the year. In fact, sometimes one can get dizzy from it.

We have happy days, sad days, solemn days, and silly days. We have days upon which we work, and days upon which we don't. Some holidays need less preparation, and some need months of strategic planning and troop movements.

At the end of the day (or week), however, the point is that we commune with Hashem and find holiness and meaning in every day.

Elul: Preparing for the Days of AAUUGGHH!!

IN MY YESHIVAH, TELZ in Cleveland, Ohio, Elul was a magical time. It conveyed special meaning and feeling as we strove to improve ourselves in preparation for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

There were special *shmuessen* (ethical lectures) designed to inspire us, we learned *Mussar* out loud as a group, and in general, the mood was somber and more solemn than other times of the year.

In fact, there was an old joke about a car driving through Yerushalayim on Shabbos. The Yerushalmi screamed, “Shabbos! Shabbos!” The Telzer yelled, “Elul! Elul!” [Ed. Note: *The irony being that Shabbos wasn’t sufficient to inspire righteous indignation.*]

One day in late Elul, I was looking at my trusty Ezras Torah *luach*, reading what we would be doing in the coming weeks. I read how on *erev Rosh Hashanah* we get up before *alos hashachar* (waaayyy before humans were meant to get up) to say extended *Selichos* (you mean there’s more?!), plus that it is customary to fast half a day on *erev Rosh Hashanah*.

My thoughts spiraled out of control as I conjured up visions of dark mornings, long dreary *Selichos*, and constant sleep deprivation (and that was even *before* having kids). Though I’m ashamed to admit it, I thought to myself, “I can’t wait for MarCheshvan!”

Okay, that all took place in about three nanoseconds, and then

I caught myself. I imagine I'm not the only one who's ever had those thoughts but I hope I'm also not the only one who did a retraction instantaneously.

If you look at *Selichos* and getting up early as *avodah* (work), then it may very well seem dreary. But I have another way to look at it, as I will now explain.

I've invented a hypothetical contest. In it, someone gets the opportunity to work for Ronald Grump, wealthy real estate mogul, toupee model and entrepreneur (any similarity to real persons is purely coincidental). There's a catch. He doesn't want to just tell you what to do; he wants to see how you think. He will give you six weeks to pitch him your best ideas and why you're the one he should entrust to run the projects.

It gets better. Mr. Grump ("The Ronald," as he likes to call himself) has very specific times when he wants to hear what you have to say. He wants you to meet him for breakfast. Did I mention he eats breakfast on the subway at 4 A.M.?

You've been chosen as a contestant. What do you do? If he likes your style, your starting salary would shadow that of members of Congress... ALL OF THEM PUT TOGETHER.

Instead, you decide that it's too much trouble and stick to your current lifestyle. Thanks anyway, Mr. Grump — but I'M TIRED!

Okay, so that's not likely. We all know we'd be there at 3:45 with coffee and Danish and a big can of Lysol. It's not often you get an opportunity like that so you'd be crazy to miss it.

Well, each year, we get the same opportunity. Actually, it's a much better one. When we get up early for *Selichos*, we're meeting with THE BOSS. We may be crowded into a shul, but His attention is focused on US. He's ready to listen to our ideas. When we blow the *shofar* and say *L'David Hashem Ori*, we're telling Him our gameplan for success, and it's all built around Him.

If He likes what we have to say, and feels we're sincere, we'll get a successful year of life, health, wealth, happiness, and all the good

that comes with being God's right-hand man, His "apprentice" if you will — doing His business and making Him [and ourselves] happy.

In the *Haftorah* read on fast days, the *Navi* Yeshayahu (55:6) tells us, "Seek out Hashem while He can be found; call to Him while He is close." The six weeks from the beginning of Elul are when He is closest and ready for us to pitch Him our ideas of why we deserve this chance. Who could pass that up?

Oh, and did I mention the best part of the contest? We're not competing against anyone — but ourselves.

Rosh Hashanah: Signs

AS THE DEADLINE FOR my next article loomed closer, I drew a blank. I had no idea what to write about. Images of lonely writers with mental block assailed me. Typewriters sitting in garbage cans (for those of you who don't know what I mean, you must be too young — imagine the guy throwing his monitor out the window instead), crumpled sheets of paper, depressing tales of writers who never made it.

“Please Hashem,” I thought, “Give me a sign.” Wait a minute, signs! Perfect, that's what I'll write about! You see, the article would be out just before Rosh Hashanah and that is the perfect time to talk about signs, omens, and symbolism.

Almost every Jew knows that we dip an apple in honey so that we should have a sweet new year; even the non-Jews know it, thanks to Sue Bee and her friends at the honey factory. But those of us who are more familiar with Jewish traditions know that this is just the tip of the iceberg (which, by the way, is a *siman* done by eating just the very smallest edge of your lettuce leaf, but I digress...)

On Rosh Hashanah, we make all kinds of symbolic acts, usually involving food. That, more than anything, probably proves the authentic Jewish origins of this custom. The common symbols we eat are listed in the *machzor* and include: the head of a lamb or fish so we should be, “the head and not the tail”; pomegranates, so we should be “as full of mitzvos as a pomegranate”; and carrots. Why

carrots? Because in Yiddish the word for carrots is “*merren*” which can also mean “more.” We appreciate what we have, but we want “more” *zechusim*, “more” *chesed*, “more” of everything.

People have taken this to new levels. One prominent Rav was known to eat peas on Rosh Hashanah to have “peace on earth.” You could eat lettuce, half a raisin and celery so Hashem might “Lettuce half a raisin celery” (Let us have a raise in salary), or put a cabbage in your briefcase to get “a head at the office.”

What we see is that even though these foods have no special significance other than their chance homophonic similarities to something, they are respected as *siman* food. Doesn’t seem too magical, does it? So how does it work?

The thing to understand is that *simanim*, the signs we assemble on Rosh Hashanah, don’t work by magic. One origin of this custom is the Gemara in *Horayos* 12a which says that one should be accustomed to view various items at the beginning of the year. That’s good news for those squeamish among us who can’t quite stomach the idea of eating something like a lamb’s head that can watch us as we do. We don’t need to eat it, just look at it. Okay, so we know where it comes from, but do we know how it works?

The Gemara just before the one mentioned above says that if a person wants to see if he will live out the year he should light a candle in a wind-proof room during the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*. If it stays lit, he knows he will live out the year. But what if it goes out? The Gemara doesn’t say. The Maharsha says, “If it goes out, it doesn’t mean anything.”

You see, *simanim* and signs can only be for good. If a person sees what he considers a “bad omen” and then something bad happens, it’s because in his fear and trepidation about the bad sign he has somehow negatively affected his *mazel* and that’s what caused the trouble.

This knowledge is of great use! That means that if you see something as a good sign, your happiness improves your *mazel*,

leading to good things, too. I'm reminded of the story about a multi-millionaire who used to stop and pick up pennies on the street. Someone asked him why he needed the penny. Showing him the letters on the small coin, the rich man said, "You see what it says here? It says 'In God We Trust.' I know it isn't me who made all this money, it was God's benevolent hand. Whenever I see a penny, I just know He put it there to send me a message and remind me that He's watching out for me. Isn't that worth picking up?"

By taking even the smallest occurrence as a good sign, we can ensure that good things happen. And if we think something is a bad sign? Remember, "It doesn't mean anything!"

Aseres Yemei Teshuvah: You're Stronger Than You Think

Divrei Chizuk for the Yamim Nora'im

A FEW WEEKS AGO, THERE was something in the house that I didn't want to eat. Let me rephrase that — I *wanted* to eat it, but I knew that I shouldn't. I don't remember if it was ice cream or macaroni and cheese or something along those lines that I really didn't need. I was fighting my urges, then told myself, "I'm going to eat something *fleishig* (meat, as opposed to dairy or pareve) so I can't have it." Then it hit me.

What difference would it make if I was *fleishig*? Who was stopping me? — ME! If I could stop myself from eating it because I was *fleishig*, why couldn't I stop myself without eating the meat? I think I passed it up that night, but that's not the point because I'd had a revelation.

What remained with me was the fact that I was able to be in control of myself when I didn't feel there was an alternative, when I had no choice. Let's take another example. On Rosh Hashanah, we know (most of us do, at least) that one may not speak from the time the *berachah* is said on the *shofar* until after the hundredth blast. If we speak, we have not fulfilled the proper mitzvah of *tekias shofar*.

Somehow, tens of thousands of us survive without talking during Rosh Hashanah *davening* for several long hours. So why

is it that we can't do that on a regular Shabbos? Or a weekday *Shacharis*? People speak, joke, comment, and *kibbitz* when they're supposed to be conversing with Hashem — you know, the One who gives us EVERYTHING — like the things we're *davening* for!

What about when one of the days of Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbos? When it falls on a weekday, people refrain from speaking for fear of breaking the connection of the *berachah* and the blowing of the *shofar*. What about when there's no *shofar* because it's Shabbos? Do they think, "Whew, I can do what I want because there's no *shofar*?"

A friend mentioned to me tonight that the Manchester Rosh Yeshivah *z"l* used to say, "People don't talk by *shofar* because from a young age it was ingrained in them that they could not speak. Could you imagine if we did the same thing with *lashon hara*?" The same way one who inadvertently spoke out before all one hundred blasts of the *shofar* were complete would hit himself in the head and feel like a fool, that's how it should be if one slips and says something derogatory about another Jew (yes, even if it's true!). He should be kicking himself for even thinking that way.

During the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, the *Shulchan Aruch* says, people are more stringent about bread baked by a non-Jew. Why are we stricter during this time period? Are we trying to fool God?

On the contrary — we're trying to show the truth to mankind. When we maintain higher levels of behavior between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it does more than just provide the benefit of starting off on a higher level. (Think of a sled or bicycle going down a hill. The higher the start, the further the rider will go.)

What it also shows us is how we are capable of doing these things all the time, if we realized that we could do it. Imagine for a moment we thought about things we manage to do once in a while, which could be done all the time.

We've already had our first example in the "speaking in shul" category. We saw that we are able to refrain from talking to anyone

else but Hashem in shul on Rosh Hashanah. That means we could and should do it all the time.

What about not speaking ill of someone else? Imagine you were talking to someone's father or mother and their child had done something bad. Would you share the "juicy" gossip with them? Clearly not. They would not be amused. For those of you who think that you would still say it, let's make it easier. That person is your boss, the one who will decide whether you get your raise or whether you will have a job next month. Do you still have the urge to smear his child's reputation, or do you maybe decide to hold your tongue? I'm guessing you don't say anything. You obviously have the capacity and ability to refrain from speaking about others, so the problem isn't "I can't," it's "I don't want to."

One of my pet peeves (besides the shopping carts, which I continue to remove from parking spaces, especially in the rain) is people taking off their *tallis* and *tefillin* early in shul. Why do you need to take them off before *davening* is over? If you were making a *bris* in the shul you'd find a way to keep them on.

So, maybe you have to go to work. But why are you standing and schmoozing afterwards? And what if you were told you had to keep a cast on a broken arm for six weeks? Would you take it off after four because you were in a rush? It's not different. One is for your physical health and one is for your spiritual health. And what's the excuse of the fellow who's retired, yet he does it too? Or the boy in school whose *tefillin* are wrapped before he says the *Shir shel Yom*? It doesn't have to be this way; you CAN do it!

Couldn't control yourself from yelling at the idiot who...? What about if he was about to give you a hot stock tip or pay you for a job you did? How many times has a customer dropped something in a retail store and we say, "It's ok," because we expect to keep making money on the future sales? That means we can control ourselves if we recognize the stakes.

So next time Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbos, remember that

if there would have been a *shofar* blowing, you would have been able to keep yourself from talking, and do it even when there isn't.

When you sit down at the meal, treat your family as if they were prized customers, at whom you'd never get upset or annoyed. When you wish people a sweet new year, really mean it, as you could if you were wishing goodness on your own child.

As you go on through the year, and you find things difficult, imagine a scenario when you'd be able to overcome your urges, and you'll soon find yourself overcoming them in all situations.

Then, when Rosh Hashanah rolls around next year, you will be able to humbly say, "I guess I didn't know my own strength."