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LEHRHAUS Over Shabbos

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NITZAVIM AND ROSH HASHANAH

This week's *Lehrhaus Over Shabbos* is sponsored by
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איש אמונה, איש אשבולות
In memory of our dear friend **David Landes**
A man imbued with belief and wisdom

'MAY MEMORIES RISE'- ON THE MEANING OF 'YA'ALEH VE-YAVO'

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On *Yamim Tovim*, High Holidays, and Rosh Chodesh, we include the *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo* prayer in our *davening*. Commentators suggest that this prayer was added to the liturgy as a substitute for the Temple sacrifices once offered to Hashem during these hagim.[1] In this prayer, evoking our ancestral virtues and Messianic aspirations, we ask God to have mercy upon us, save us, and treat us with compassion and lovingkindness.

But what exactly do we mean when we ask God, in *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo*, to "remember" us and our ancestors, Jerusalem, and Messiah? Why not simply pray for God to "save us," "redeem us," etc? What is added by evoking, in flourishing detail, the uprising of memories before God's consciousness?

Earlier in the Musaf liturgy on Rosh Hashanah- a holiday also called *Yom ha-Zikaron*, the Day of Remembering, where *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo* likely found its original home[2]- we already affirm that "You Remember all that is forgotten...there is no forgetfulness before Your holy throne." We do not worry, therefore, that God's attention has simply drifted from us, that the saga of the Jewish people has slipped God's mind.

Nor do we ask God to engage in pleasant reminiscence, to nostalgically flip through a photo album of God's Jewish people and our deeds. Our pleas for God to "remember us" are charged with an urgency and intensity intimately related, it seems, to our very redemption. How can we look to Jewish tradition to understand this special power of *zikaron*, remembrance? How can a renewed appreciation of *zikaron* enhance our experience of Rosh Hashanah, a day when, during the Musaf service, the themes of remembrance, kingship, and the blowing of the shofar are intimately entwined?

In the Torah, the root *z-kh-r* appears 169 times, in various forms, to describe remembrances performed both by God and the Jewish people. "In the Bible," writes Nahum Sarna, "'remembering,' particularly on the part of God, is not the retention or recollection of a mental image, but a focusing upon the object of memory that results in action."[3] When "God [remembers] Noah," God ends the Flood (Genesis 8:1); when "God [remembers] Rachel," God answers her prayers for children (Genesis 30:22); when Joseph cries "remember me," he begs to be freed from imprisonment (Genesis 40:14). Here and elsewhere, "remembrance" fulfills a pre-existing covenant, intervenes to make some redemptive claim upon human events; not simply a digging up of lost memory, it is a focusing on readily accessible information, in order to take a form of action.

In the Talmud, we find that remembrance performed by the Jewish people, too, carries similar qualities. In *Megillah* 18a, the Sages conclude that to fulfill the *mitzvah* of remembering Amalek and the Purim story, it is not enough to remember "by heart," but rather, the memory must be read from a book. Furthermore, it is not enough to read silently, to oneself; the commandment of *Zakhor* means one must read aloud, "with the mouth." Remembrance, for the Rabbis, is not simply passive recall, held aloof in one's memory as pleasant nostalgia or scientific contemplation. Remembrance is, rather, a decisive *action*, a positive imperative to transmit, to actualize by producing the written trace and the public proclamation.

We are bound together as a people when in our calendrical cycle, in our *davening*, in our ritual, we collectively cleave to memories of the

[1] Rashi on *Shabbat* 24a says that Ya'aleh ve-Yavo is to request mercy on Israel and Jerusalem, to return the Temple service to its place, and to be able to do the sacrifices of the day. The prayer is said on days where there are extra sacrifices that are especially missed: Biblical Holidays, Rosh Hodesh and Hol ha-Moed.

[2] Steven C. Reif, Judaism and Hebrew Prayer: New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 189.

[3] Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 56.

events of our ancient past. These memories are not truly "past" for us; rather, they "arrive, reach, [are] seen" for us to experience anew in the present. We leave Egypt again and again, in new-old ways, each time we re-enact the Exodus at our Passover Seder. We bring "those days" into "this time" each time we light candles and say the *berakhot* during Hanukkah. Our ritual is concretized remembrance; our remembrance is anticipatory redemption.

We do not cleave to remembrance because the impulse to narrate, document, even relive our past carries, in itself, some intrinsic value. "If Herodotus was the father of history," writes Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Memory,* "the fathers of *meaning* in history were the Jews" (italics added).[4] While the Greeks celebrated history as a linear series of events, strung together by cause and effect- much like the commonsense view of history today- we Jews cleave to our shared mythic past as the arena where God's emanations once intervened and, in our own time, may intervene again, may burst forth in a moment of divine rupture that, like the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, redeems and uplifts, inaugurates a new beginning.

On Rosh Hashanah, the haunting cry of the shofar calls upon us to remember our deeds of the past year, to parse through the details of our individual and collective histories, and in doing so, to begin to integrate our fractured selves, to rectify wrongs, to embark anew upon the process of *teshuvah* which culminates ten days later, on Yom Kippur. We do this by calling upon God, on the day of Rosh Hashanah, to remember us, to help us in this work of *teshuvah* by measuring our deeds from the perspective of eternity.

"In remembrance," said the Baal Shem Tov, "lies the secret of redemption."[5] When we remind ourselves, in *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo*, that God remembered our ancestors, we strengthen our hope that so, too, God will remember us today. Through active, immersive, intimate remembrance, we charge our mythic memories with sparks of anticipation, which we hope may burst forth into a transformed present, a redeemed reality where God, as in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, is newly enthroned as King.

On the *pshat* level, *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo* is about God's remembrance, not our own. However, several commentaries complicate this simple distinction. According to the Vilna Gaon, at the beginning of *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo*, when we evoke, in flourishing detail, the step-by-step process of God's remembrance- "may memories rise, arrive," etc.- we are in fact praying for our own *tefillah* to ascend through the seven levels of *shamayim*, until we reach the very source of *teshuvah,* emanating from the highest spiritual realms.[6]

In either case, these commentaries suggest that when we pray in *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo* for God's memories to ascend to God's attention, we are to visualize our own devotion, ascending from the altars of our lips to Hashem. The key here again is remembrance as *action*- we do not await passively, begging for the divine remembrance of which we speak to unfold in a process beyond our control. Rather, we compel God to remember, as it were, through the fervency of our *davening*, the intention of our sacrifice, the blowing of our shofar. Again, we hope that our remembrance arises before God not for its own sake, but rather, we pray quite literally that "our memory may be a blessing"- that the remembrances God preserves of us may bestow goodness and peace upon our lives.

With some poetic license, we may imagine that this prayer for God's remembrance functions, in fact, as a performative metaphor for our own remembrance. Perhaps, in praying for God to remember Jerusalem, our ancestors, and the Messiah, we in fact bind these very remembrances closer upon our own hearts. Actualizing the Mishnah's imperative to "make His will into your will, so that He will perform your will like His will" (*Pirkei Avot* 2:4), we pray, in *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo*, for our own remembrance to redeem us, to strengthen us and light the way forward, to inspire us, like the blowing of the shofar, towards a new beginning. When we pray on Rosh Hashanah for God to remember us, we are praying simultaneously for our own work of *teshuvah* to be meaningful, for our own careful examination of past deeds and rectification of misdeeds to inspire God to write us anew in the Book of Life on Yom Kippur.

It may be said that our calendar is structured as a scaffolding for remembrance, its various holidays affixed at specific points along the yearly cycle to concretize, in our collective consciousness, specific memory-worlds from our mythic past. In Temple times, the entire people would gather in Jerusalem during these holidays, to offer prayer and sacrifice. Now, bereft of a Temple, we pray *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo* so that our lips may become the altar, and our remembrance the sacrifice. On Rosh Hashanah, we gather as an entire people in prayer, immersed in the work of *teshuvah*, memories in tow, and standing before Hashem, we lay bare the churning gears of our remembrance- "may memories rise, arrive, reach," etc.- and pray that the emancipatory potential, brimming in our own past, may flower forth into redemption, into the inauguration of God's Kingship, the new beginning announced in the earth-shattering cry of the shofar.

The Hatam Sofer observes that in *Ya'aleh* ve-Yavo, we evoke remembrances of the past- our forefathers- the present- Jerusalem, suspended between destruction and rebirth- and the future- Messiah.[7] Rabbi Yonoson Roodyn observes that we are bound as Jews, individually and collectively, by these three temporal peoplehood markers- we each have a link to the spiritual potential of the *Avot*, a connection to Jerusalem, a stake in the final redemption of Messiah.[8]

Evoking these remembrances, *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo* merges and concentrates past, present, and future- but not in the undifferentiated embrace of an "eternal Now." Rather, it is as if, in the act of *davening*, our remembrance dwells in exile between Time and its Other, singled out and commanded by a past which remains, a present which is already a trace of itself, a future which is always to-come.

In *Ya'aleh ve-Yavo* we cry to God, "Leave us traces! Raise the sparks of our remembrance; gather past, present, and future and, in a single gesture, blast history itself open; redeem us, and redeem our ancestors, all together, speedily, at this very moment!" And we cry to ourselves, "may we remember! May we cling to traces! May our

[4] Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (*University of Washington Press, 1982), 8.
[5] R' Ya'akov Yosef of Polonne, Zafnat Pane'ah 77a.
[6] Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer: the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Rites (Lanham, MD:* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 1993), *362*
[7] Rabbi Yonoson Roodyn. *Yaaleh VeYavo: Stairway to Heaven*, March 5, 2008, https://www.torahanytime.com/#/lectures?v=57893. Source sheet available upon request.
[8] Roodyn, ibid.

remembrance not remain bound to the earth, within linear, causal time; may its fierceness break the bonds of time itself, and gather us and our ancestors together, at once, into liberation!"

"As flowers turn toward the sun," wrote Jewish Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, "so, by dint of a secret heliotropism, the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history."[9] *Ken yehi ratzon!*

Beyond Perfect Repentance

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As we prepare for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when we beg God to forgive our sins, we expend considerable effort thinking about how to do *teshuvah* (repent). Our rabbis and teachers refer us to Chapter One of the *Laws of Repentance*, in which Maimonides outlines a roadmap for fulfilling all the elements of repentance, one shared by many moralists in different traditions. The sinner expresses remorse for his previous act and shame for having committed that act, apologizes to those he has hurt, makes restitution where possible, and makes a serious commitment not to repeat the evil act in the future. So it seems that perfect repentance means deliberately fulfilling each element of the process of repentance.

In the effort to fulfill the elements of repentance, apology presents a challenge. After all, many public apologies amount to pseudo-apologies: "If anyone was offended by what I said or did, I am sorry that they took offense. I meant no harm." We always wonder about the true significance of the public apology; perhaps the speaker only regrets getting caught.

Commitment for the future presents yet another challenge. I can say I have made a commitment, but how will I behave next time? To achieve "complete repentance," Maimonides explains, one must face the same opportunity to sin, and this time not yield (*Hilkhot Teshuvah* 2:1). Rabbi Judah gives the vivid example of illicit sex: the same woman, just as willing; the same man, just as able; but this time he refrains, and so demonstrates "complete repentance" (*Yoma* 86b).

So it seems that even someone who issues a full apology, checking off every box of Rambam's elements of repentance, always has a whiff of self-interest. He knows he is apologizing, and he hopes to be forgiven by God on Yom Kippur, by his victims, or by the public. Someone who overcomes those challenges, who manages a real apology, and who makes a true commitment for the future, has accomplished this "complete repentance."

And yet, in light of the above observations regarding the possible self-interest inherent to repentance, we may surmise that there exists a level of repentance beyond even this kind of complete repentance. Forwarding precisely this thesis, my teacher Professor Jerome (Yehudah) Gellman distinguished between the naive and sentimental penitent in a short article, "Teshuvah and Authenticity" (*Tradition* 20:3, Fall 1982, 249-253). Someone who genuinely reforms, not because she knows the formula for apology or the way to get forgiveness (sentimental repentance), but because she has genuinely changed (naive repentance), does a real kind of repentance, without even aiming at repentance. Gellman considers this unplanned repentance to be the highest level, precisely because one thereby sidesteps the possibility of inauthenticity.

But this notion is not only rooted in our surmise or the innovation of Professor Gellman. Judah already exemplifies this model of naive repentance in the book of Genesis. Let us begin by reviewing the back story.

Judah and his full brothers grow up with justified resentment. They cannot accept the way their father Jacob treats their mother Leah, and the way he treats them. Only Joseph and Benjamin, the sons of Rachel, seem to count as sons; the others count as something less.

Of course, Jacob has reasons for his favoritism. He and his wives have a messy back story. Jacob's uncle Laban substituted Leah, and then extorted more work in exchange for the intended bride, in effect selling Rachel twice. A casual reader would probably determine that Jacob reluctantly comes to accept Leah as his wife. The same casual reader might decide that the servants Bilhah and Zilpah count as mere concubines.

But if we read the text carefully, we see otherwise: Jacob goes even further in disenfranchising Leah. Leah refers to Jacob as her husband ("*ishi*" = "my man") when she names two of her sons: Reuben, "now my husband will love me" (Gen. 39:22), and Levi, "now my husband will accompany me" (Gen. 39:34). Yet the narrator of the Torah, the anonymous voice of the text, never refers to Leah as Jacob's wife. Jacob avoids calling Leah his wife.

Instead, in an enigmatic verse, the narrator tells us that Joseph "was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives" (Gen. 37:2). Bilhah, the servant of Rachel, and Zilpah, the servant of Leah, given by their mistresses to Jacob, here – and nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible - are described as the wives of Jacob. Leah and her sons do not appear in the verse at all. Does Joseph act like a boy with the sons of Leah? The text scrupulously avoids telling us. Does Leah count as Jacob's wife? The text remains silent, suggesting that Jacob himself is unconvinced.

The sons of Leah, lorded over by their privileged half-brother, their father's obvious favorite, nearly kill him. Perhaps he treats them as no more worthy of respect than the sons of the servants. As an only-slightly less horrifying alternative to murdering him, they throw Joseph into a pit. Perhaps they feel motivated for their murderous anger because Joseph (like the narrator) treats the sons of Leah as equivalent to, or less than, the sons of the servants.

Consistent with his treatment of their mother, Jacob pointedly avoids calling any of Leah's children his sons. He saves the word "son" for Benjamin, the only remaining child of Rachel. Later, during a famine in Canaan, when Jacob must allow his sons to go to Egypt to purchase food, he resists letting them take Benjamin (a son of Rachel) with them. Speaking to Reuven, a son of Leah, Jacob says: "My son shall not go down with you. For his brother is dead, and he alone remains, and if an accident should befall him on the way that you are going, it would bring my gray head in sorrow to the grave" (Gen. 42:38). Benjamin counts as "my son"; Joseph, presumably dead, was "his brother." Speaking to a son of Leah, Jacob makes it clear that the son of Rachel "alone" is his son. If Benjamin would die, that would leave

[9] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 257.

Jacob "bereft," or perhaps, "childless" (43:13). The sons of Leah, it seems, do not count at all.

Consistent with this theme, in Genesis 46:8, the narrator gives us a list of the descendants of Jacob who go down to Egypt. The verse opens, "These are the names of the children of Israel who were coming to Egypt." The list begins with the children of Leah, but her name does not appear until a summary after the last of them: "These are the children of Leah whom she bore to Jacob in Padan Aram" (46:15). A few verses later, after listing the children of Zilpah, the text pointedly reads: "The children of Rachel, the wife of Jacob, are Joseph and Benjamin" (46:16).

The biblical narrator, then, refrains from describing Leah as a wife of Jacob. The narrator refers to Rachel as "the wife of Jacob," but Leah just as "Leah." As Robert Alter reminds us that, when reading stereotypical language, such as in lists, we need to pay careful attention to small variations.[10] The ancients, used to such formal lists, expected such close reading, a skill that might not come so easily to moderns, who more commonly expect writers to spell out their meanings. The narrator has carefully not given Leah a title; only Rachel appears as Jacob's wife in this list.

Finally, when asking to be buried in the family cemetery, Jacob continues to pointedly refuse to describe Leah as his wife: "There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebecca his wife; and there I buried Leah" (Gen. 49:31). It feels like the rhetorical equivalent of syncopation in music: The phrase for the first two matriarchs ends with an emphatic "his wife," and then the phrase for Leah ends with an emphatic... nothing. To the end, Jacob refuses to describe Leah as his wife.

Once we appreciate that the narrator never describes Leah as Jacob's wife, and that Jacob describes Rachel, and only Rachel, as his wife, then we can surmise that this slighting of Leah contributes to her sons' jealous decision to imprison Joseph in a pit, and their subsequent decision to sell him into slavery in Egypt. It was about more than Joseph's dreams; it was about their very status as children. They would let their brother suffer imprisonment, and their father bereavement, in the hope that their father would recognize them as full sons should he have no alternative.

With this background in mind, we can appreciate the depth of the transformation Judah has undergone when he confronts the Egyptian officer (whom he does not recognize as Joseph), to beg for the release of Benjamin.

Without any fanfare or protest, Judah recalls that his father described Rachel as his only wife, and her two sons as his real sons. Judah quotes his father as having said, "You know that my wife bore me two sons" (44:27). Judah recognizes that Joseph and Benjamin count as the only real sons of the only real wife. Judah, as a son of another woman, like his full brothers, qualifies as a kind of second-class son. But no complaint is implied; Judah simply accepts this status. Now Judah accepts his subservient status without protest, and even, to protect his father from experiencing the imprisonment of the favorite son, Judah offers that he himself should be imprisoned.

Joseph has maneuvered Judah into the same situation that he faced years ago: now once again he can rid himself of the favored brother, let the son of the only acknowledged wife languish in prison, while Judah can return to his father without the rival. Yet this time Judah does not repeat the ugly deed. Instead, he protects his half-brother, the favored son, and his father, even at the cost of his own freedom.

Not only is this an instance of a perfect apology and complete repentance, but it is perhaps the archetypal example of naive repentance. Judah has no idea that he is confessing or apologizing. He is simply stating what he has now come to accept. He will not succumb to the same temptation, because he has genuinely changed. He is no longer the son who would throw his uppity half-brother into a pit, and perhaps sell him into slavery. He is now the second-class son who would sacrifice himself to save the favored son. We cannot know whether Judah believes that he deserves the status as second-class son, or whether he merely accepts that his father considers him a second-class son. In either case, he no longer fights against his second-class status.

Though Jacob never accepts Leah as his wife, Leah lies in the ancestral cemetery beside Jacob, and Jewish history does not end with Jacob. We, the children of Israel, descend from Leah. Many of us, *Kohanim* and *Leviim*, descend from Leah's son Levi. Many others consider ourselves descendants of Leah's son Judah; or we descend from converts; or we ourselves have converted to Judaism, to Judah-ism, the faith of Leah's son Judah. Leah longed for the words "my wife"; Judah eventually accepted that his half-brothers would always be, in his father's eyes, the sons of "my wife." We are the children of naive, complete repentance. Whether during the High Holy Days or all year round, it is our essence, and, hopefully, our destiny.

[10] "There are also narrative conventions that are unique to the Bible, the two most prominent involving repetition, with significant variation in the repetition on the microscopic level of words and phrases and on the macroscopic level of plot." Robert Alter, "A Life of Learning: Wandering Among Fields." ACLS Occasional Paper #70, *American Council of Learned Societies*, New York, 2013.

Sin-a-gogue: A Must-Read for the Yamim Noraim

JENNIE ROSENFELD serves as the Manhiga Ruchanit in Efrat, where she also directs the Bet Din for financial matters.

> Let's face it, most modern Jews have a problem with sin. It's not that we don't do it, often even enjoy it, and also repent for doing it, but we don't like to talk about it much, we don't like our Judaism to be infused with talk of sin. From ModernOrthodoxy to Reform, Reconstructionism, and Renewal, and we like our Judaism positive.

Thus begins Shaul Magid's foreword to David Bashevkin's new book, *Sin-a-gogue: Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought* (Academic Studies Press, 2019). And it's true – sin may be something that happens for many (if not most) on a daily basis, but it's also something which is rarely discussed in public. When I was growing up in the New York Modern Orthodox community, after the first-grade explanations of sin and repentance, sin didn't receive all that much attention. The only sin that could legitimately be decried from the pulpit and talked about at Shabbat meals was *lashon ha-ra*. But what about some of the less savory sins that many otherwise committed Orthodox Jews commit? Violations of tax fraud, internet

pornography, as well as a myriad of other common financial and sexual infractions within the Orthodox community – I certainly never heard those decried or even discussed from the pulpit.

Bashevkin should be commended for his courage and independent thought in tackling a subject, at once so important and so taboo. In the midst of the month of Elul, we are not far from Yom Kippur. We begin the *Kol Nidrei* service on *Yom Kippur* with the unambiguous line which welcomes the sinners in our midst to join in the prayer: "*anu matirin le-hitpalel im ha-avaryanim*," "we ask permission to pray with the sinners." And even before *Kol Nidrei* starts, many have the custom of arriving early to synagogue to recite *Tefillah Zakah*, with its explicit descriptions of sin and temptation as they impact every bodily organ. It isn't our tradition which has hang-ups over sin – from the Bible to the Talmud to medieval pietists to later responsa literature - there are Jewish texts replete with an awareness of sin (many of them discussed by Bashevkin in his book). It is we who have the hang-ups.

Bashevkin's writing is infused with both a depth and breadth of Jewish knowledge as well as wide-ranging general knowledge. The subsections are short and written in an engaging and easily readable style. Each chapter opens with a story or case from the world at large and then moves into a Jewish source-based angle to the question, ultimately looping back to the story or case with which the chapter began, thereby providing a sense of closure. Creating conversations across religions, cultures, and time periods – such as between Brother Daniel, a Jewish convert to Catholicism who petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court to be included in Israel's "Right of Return," and Talmudic and medieval discussions of apostasy (chapter 7) – is enriching and also serves to broaden the discourse beyond the uniquely Jewish context.

The book's introduction, entitled "The Stories We Tell," offers an engaging discussion of how we choose to tell stories, both in the wider stories we tell about rabbis of previous generations (what Bashevkin refers to with approbation as "sanitized storytelling"), to the more narrow family stories we tell, to the very personal story we tell when we write our own bio for a lecture or on a book jacket. Based on a research-based survey which found that "the oscillating family narrative" (a story of family history which recounts both successes as well as failures) cultivates the most resilience in children, Bashevkin extends this argument to Judaism, claiming that the way to cultivate religious resilience is likewise to focus on both success and failure, sin and repentance, as part of the religious narrative we model. He offers Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner as a model of this praxis, and quotes from one of his most famous letters, in which he discusses the importance of sin in religious life, for it is only through sinning that the righteous are able to reach the heights which they reach. In Rav Hutner's words, "Greatness does not emerge despite failure; it is a product of failure" (p. xv, and again on p. 144). The fact that the book ends by returning to Rabbi Hutner's letters and his integration of spiritual failure into religious life, underscores the deep impact that Rabbi Hutner has had on Bashevkin's thought. One way of reading *Sin-a-gogue* is as an attempt to translate Rav Hutner's thought and make it accessible and relevant to the 21st century reader.

As he writes in his bio on the book jacket, Bashevkin is the director of Education for NCSY, the youth movement of the Orthodox Union. NCSY is a major site of *kiruv*, often catering to Jews who attend public schools and who know little about Judaism from home, trying to bring these teenagers closer to Judaism and halakhic observance. I would venture to say that in his professional capacity, Bashevkin has certainly encountered another angle on the issues about which he is writing. Indeed, in the beginning of chapter eleven (originally published at Lehrhaus), he begins with a brief discussion of his frustrations as an educator who sees people coming to religion from the wrong motivations (i.e., out of loneliness, illness, or a broken family life), though he cuts this discussion short. Overall, Bashevkin makes a conscious choice to keep the focus of the book on the intellectual and to maintain a critical distance. While the less personal voice definitely serves to widen the readership beyond Orthodox Jews, it also carries the possibility that the book can be read exclusively on the intellectual level, such that the reader can choose not to take a practical message from it. As a fellow Orthodox Jew who doesn't see the issue as solely intellectual, I would have appreciated a stronger place for Bashevkin's personal voice.

This book follows on Bashevkin's earlier Hebrew book, *Be-Rogez Rahem Tizkor* (2015), which, though it also deals with sin and repentance, is substantially different. The Hebrew book is a "*sefer*," exclusively a work of Jewish thought, of *lomdus*, without reference to materials outside the Jewish tradition. It also contains more of an inspirational tone, speaking to the reader as a fellow traveler in the religious experiences of failing and recouping. In contrast, the current work, while firmly grounded in traditional Jewish sources, includes a wealth of material from outside the Jewish tradition, giving the book a wider reach and potential to speak to an audience which is not exclusively Jewish and steeped in Jewish knowledge. It also has more of a detached tone, so that it doesn't sound at all "preachy."

Sin-a-gogue contains three sections, each with several chapters surrounding a theme related to sin. The first section, "The Nature of Sin," begins with a discussion of the many words the Bible and later rabbinic literature use for "sin." In addition to the multiplicity of terms, each with subtle differences from the others, there are also multiple images for how sin is constructed – as a burden, or as a debt – each of which leads to a different conceptualization. The impact of language cannot be overstated. When I was writing my doctoral dissertation[11] and asking friends for advice, several told me to take out the word "sin" from the doctorate – it was too strong, too alienating. They suggested I replace it with the more neutral "violate the Halakhah." While the words may mean the same thing, the sanitized version doesn't emotionally capture the fullness of the experience of sin and its impact on the individual: the range of shame, guilt, conflicted pleasure, and self-loathing which can often result from sin, and which are discussed by Bashevkin in light of the differing terminologies.

In the next chapter, Bashevkin moves to a discussion of the first case of sin, or "Original Sin" concluding that "lateness, sin, failure, and shame are the crucial components that make humans human" (p. 21). From here he moves to a discussion of action versus intention and which is needed in order to categorize something as sin, as well as a discussion of the various levels of intention that one can have behind an action (*shogeg, meizid, mitasek,* and *oness*). Bashevkin also goes on to discuss issues such as determinism and the unique view of sin taken by the Hasidic school of Izbica, including the radical notions "sinning for the sake of Heaven" (*aveirah lishmah*) and the concept of God's repentance. Each of these discussions opens another angle to sin, introducing rich source material.

[11] My dissertation "Talmudic Re-readings: Toward a Modern Orthodox Sexual Ethic" (City University of New York, 2008), dealt with the conflicts faced by Orthodox singles in navigating between their commitment to halakhic observance with the challenges of observing the halakhic sexual restrictions.

The second section, "Case Studies in Sin and Failure," deals with several instances in which an examination of the specific case can also teach us about the broader issues. From a chapter on the concept of apostasy in Judaism and whether it is possible to ever leave Judaism, to a character analysis of Jonah, whose quest for truth leads him to scorn those who would repent out of practical considerations, to an analysis of the "Rabbi's Son Syndrome" in which specifically children of clergy often end up leaving religion – this section adds depth to the topic through the layering of each specific example.

The final section, "Responses to Sin and Failure," contains fascinating material found in rabbinic correspondence on sin and failure. The material contained in the rabbinic correspondence is a treasure-trove for both parents and Jewish educators, who are looking for concrete ways in which to respond to their children or their students in situations of sin and religious failing and their aftermath.

Sin-a-gogue should have a place on the shelf of parents and Jewish educators alike. Beyond the main text, the footnotes should be read and primary sources opened, for they will help us all to educate the next generation with a healthier understanding of sin than we were raised with. The book of Kohelet teaches us that no human being is completely righteous without failing (7:20); failing is intrinsic to human nature, and also intrinsic to growth. If we were able to better understand the place of religious struggle, we would be better equipped to educate the next generation into a full life of *avodat Hashem* – both the victories and the failings which propel us forward. For those looking for a new book to buy this Elul, which will help move them into the mindset of the *Yamim Noraim*, as well as push them to think in new directions about very traditional categories – Bashevkin's *Sin-a-gogue* is it.

Coming Undone: Vows and the High Holy Days

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Vows and their undoing resound throughout the high holy days. Many individuals recite a formula annulling oaths and vows on the eve of Rosh HaShannah and most communities begin Yom Kippur with the Kol Nidrei prayer. Few of us can actually recount any vows or oaths that we have undertaken recently, though, so why is there this focus?

Both biblical and rabbinic literature view vows very seriously. Numbers 30:3 cautions, "If a man vows a vow to God or swears an oath to forbid something to himself he shall not violate his words, all that he says, he must do." Talmud Bavli Ketubot 72a warns of the unbearable consequences of breaking a vow, "for the sin of [breaking] vows, children die." Given the nature of what is at stake, we may want to undo any potential vows before we are judged, just to be safe.

I would like to argue though that our focus on vows at this time of year is about more than just precaution. Instead, taking vows and annulling them are a meditation on what it means to be human. First, let's explore why vows were so seductive. If a person took a vow, for example, to refrain from eating chocolate, the Torah commands her to keep her vow and so the prohibition for her to eat chocolate would be on the level of a Torah violation. This is an extremely powerful use of language. Our words have the capacity to take on divine force, to really mean something. (This might explain why the Bible in Numbers 30:4-17 assumes that fathers and husbands would want to curb this power.) Even though the Mishnah in Nedarim 2:5 warns that only the wicked take vows, rabbinic literature is full of stories of rabbis and other highly reputable persons who engage in vow making.

We can understand the allure, the desire to speak significantly, to impose a steadfastness on our inherently mutable existence. We want to be more noble in our speech, more reliable in our actions. Yet the anecdotes about those who take vows always seem to end with a desire to get out of the vow. The nature of being human is to aspire to be God-like and then to fall short. We are unable to meet our commitments, we don't want the same things tomorrow that we want today. Talmud Bavli Nedarim 21b relates that a man came before Rav Huna with a vow to annul. Rav Huna asks him one question, לבך עלך is your heart with you? Do you still want what you had wanted? When the man responds no, Rav Huna frees him from his vow. A different anecdote (Bavli Nedarim 22b) relates that Rav Sechorah went before Rav Nachman to annul a vow:

Rav Nachman said, "Did you vow with the knowledge of this?" [Rav Sechorah] said, "Yes." "With the knowledge of this?" [Rav Sechorah] said, "Yes." This [exchange] was repeated several times. Rav Nachman became angry and said, "Go to your place!" Rav Sechorah left and found an opening for himself . . . "I did not vow with the knowledge that Rav Nachman would get angry at me." [In this way] he freed himself from the vow.

The story understands that the annulling of vows involves a legal charade. Indeed Rav Nachman gets angry because Rav Sechorah is not playing along appropriately. Yet the story also contends that even those who think long and hard before vowing eventually want to be free of their vows and need to rely on ingenuity to annul them. Fortunately, even though the rabbis famously assert in Mishnah Chagigah 1:8 that "the annulling of vows floats in the air and has [no biblical basis] on which to rest", there is almost always a way out of a vow.

Generally the basis for annulment is חרטה, regret. The vow-takers adduce that there were circumstances beyond their cognizance at the time the vow was taken that now have led them to reconsider the vows. Or more simply, as in the above story about Rav Huna, the vow-takers do not want what they used to want. There is a debate (see Bavli Nedarim 77b) about whether others can help the vow taker articulate his/her regret or whether s/he must express the regret independently. Either way, it is the changeable nature of people that frees them from their divine ambitions.

Humans want to be like God, they inevitably fail in their aspirations, but they can rely on others in their community to come to their rescue. This is the essential message of the high holy days, perfectly captured in the ancient traditions of annulling our personal and communal vows.

Rosh HaShana and God's Battle For Compassion

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U-netaneh Tokef, one of the most memorable pieces of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, imagines the central drama of the day as a trial in which humanity is called to account before God, as the angels in the divine retinue declare, this day is "the day of judgment" [*yom ha-din*]. Often when we reflect on the significance of Rosh Hashanah as a day of judgment, we consider what it will mean for us to be judged: we engage in protracted self-reflection and a sober consideration of our shameful misdeeds. We try to embody sincere remorse and attempt to turn toward a path of righteousness. Our attention is focused on the tragedy of human sinfulness and the redemptive possibility of repentance [*teshuvah*].

Less often do we consider what it will mean for God to judge us. Yet, thinking through God's relationship with judgment may fruitfully complicate our picture of Rosh Hashanah as a cosmic trial of humanity. What's more, attending to God's part in the drama of judgment may be valuable in achieving a different understanding of the ritual fabric of the day. To engage in this theological work, we will turn to the corpus of rabbinic literature and consider the striking ways in which our sages imagined God's relationship with judgment.

God's Distinctive Strength: The Quality of Compassion

We should begin by noting the following: for the sages, God's strength, prowess, and power is most on display not in acts of stern judgment but in acts of tender compassion. This idea is explored in a moving *midrash* from the *Sifre* on Numbers. The textual locus for this *midrash* is the verses in Numbers in which Moses is told to gaze out over the land of Israel before meeting his end at its border. Drawing on the parallel account found in the book of Deuteronomy, the sages direct our attention to the impassioned plea for entrance into the land offered by Moses at this juncture:

> And I pleaded with YHVH at that time, saying, 'My Master, YHVH, You Yourself have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your powerful hand, for what god is there in the heavens and on the earth who could do like Your deeds and like Your might? Let me, pray, cross over that I may see the goodly land which is across the Jordan, this goodly high country and the Lebanon. (Deuteronomy 3:24–25)

In the course of his plea, Moses recollects God's great and unparalleled strength, which God has only begun to reveal. A plain-sense reading of these verses would understand the strength in question as something like physical might and dominance – the kind of physical might and dominance that was on display in God's liberation of Israel from Egypt. Indeed, throughout the book of Deuteronomy the "powerful hand" [*yadkha ha-hazakah*] of God is tied to the moment of the exodus and the miraculous, thundering power with which God punished the Egyptians and saved Israel. This point also helps make sense of the connection between Moses's reference to God's strength and his prayer for entrance into the land: He has only just begun to bear witness to God's might and strength through the punishment of Egypt and the conquest of the lands east of the Jordan. Thus, he prays for the allowance to see more of this might and strength as the people enter the land and conquer its inhabitants with the aid of God's strong arm.

Yet for the sages, the strength at stake in this passage is not that of overpowering might but overpowering compassion manifested in forgiveness and generosity. The *midrash* reads as follows:

> Another interpretation: *You have begun* [*hahilota*] (Deuteronomy 3:24) – You have profaned [*hehaltah*] the vow. You wrote in the Torah, *Whoever sacrifices to a god* [*other than YHVH alone shall be proscribed*] (Exodus 22:19), and your children worshipped foreign worship, and I requested for them compassion and you forgave – You have broken the vow.
>
> *Your greatness* (Deuteronomy 3:24) – this is the quality of your goodness, as it is said, *And now, let the strength of my lord be great* (Numbers 14:17).
>
> *And your hand* (Deuteronomy 3:24) – this is your right hand, which is extended to all those who come through the world, as it is said, *your right hand, YHVH, glorious in strength* (Exodus 15:6), and it says, *but your right hand, your arm, and the glow of your face* (Psalms 44:4), and it says, *By Myself have I sworn, from My mouth has issued righteousness* [*tzedakah*]*, a word that shall not turn back* (Isaiah 45:23).
>
> *The powerful* (Deuteronomy 3:24) – For you subdue [*kovesh*] with compassion your quality of judgment, as it is said, *Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression* (Micah 7:18), and it says, *He will return, he will have compassion on us, he will subdue* [*yikhbosh*] *our sins, You will keep faith with Jacob* (Micah 7:19–20).
>
> *For what god is there in the heavens and on the earth* (Deuteronomy 3:24) – For unlike the way of flesh and blood is the way of the Omnipresent. The way of flesh and blood: the one greater than his friend nullifies the decree of his friend, but you – who can withhold you [from doing as you please]? And so it says, *He is one, who can hold him back?* (Job 23:13). R. Yehudah b. Bava says: A parable – to one who has been consigned to the documents of the kingdom. Even were he to give a lot of money, it cannot be overturned. But you say, "Do *teshuvah*, and I will accept [it/you], as it is said, *I wipe away your sins like a cloud, your transgressions like mist* (Isaiah 44:22).

The text begins with a playful revocalization of Moses's opening words that transforms "You have begun [*hahilota*]" into "You have broken [*hehalta*] the vow." In so doing, the sages shift our attention from the scene of the exodus suggested by the plain sense of the verses to the scene of the golden calf, in which God broke His vow to punish those who worship other gods. In that moment of Israel's profound failure, God's strength manifested itself not through physical might but through forgiveness and compassion. What's more, in speaking of God breaking the vow, the text implicitly rejects another pervasive conception of divine power and strength – namely, that divine power rests in stern and difficult judgment. It is not uncommon to hear compassion and forgiveness referred to as a kind of feebleness in contrast to the strength at work in administering justice even when it is difficult or tragic. The sages carefully avoid such a perspective and assert that divine strength lies not in holding to a vow even when it is challenging but in breaking a vow for the sake of compassion and forgiveness.

The themes introduced in this first part of the *midrash* are explored as the *midrash* continues. First, God's greatness is translated into God's goodness through the invocation of a verse tied to another scene of divine forgiveness and compassion – namely, the scene in the aftermath of the sin of the spies. Second, the hand of God, rather than extended against the enemies of Israel in a gesture of physical might is extended in a gesture of compassionate generosity. Indeed, verses tying the hand of God to the destruction and conquest of Egypt and other nations are reread in light of this rabbinic commitment to rendering divine strength as compassion. Third, God's power is understood as His compassion overcoming and subduing His quality of judgment. In the final piece of the *midrash*, we are reminded that God, unlike earthly kings, can break vows and overturn decrees in displays of compassionate forgiveness. Furthermore, when God does vow, it is to bind Himself in commitment to the kindness of *tzedakah*, as noted in the verse from Isaiah quoted by the *midrash*: "By Myself have I sworn, from My mouth has issued righteousness [*tzedakah*], a word that shall not turn back" (Isaiah 45:23). There is none who can withhold or nullify His decrees of compassion, generosity, forgiveness, and kindness.

God, Anger, and Judgment: The Divine Struggle to be Compassionate

Thus, what constitutes divine strength, what makes God unique and incomparable, is a capacity for compassion. This compassion sits in an uncomfortable tension with the rage that lights God against the enemies of Israel and the stern judgment that calls for unmitigated punishment. Yet it is precisely this tension that marks divine compassion as a strength. For it is only in mightily subduing a predilection for unmitigated judgment that God's compassion emerges victorious. This is the meaning of the striking phrase found in our *midrash*, "For you subdue [*kovesh*] with compassion your quality of judgment." There is struggle and conquest involved in the victory of compassion over divine judgment. The phrase calls to mind a teaching found in *Mishnah Avot* 4:1: "Ben Zoma says… Who is mighty? The one who subdues [*kovesh*] his impulse, as it is said, *one slow to anger is better than a mighty person and one who rules his spirit than the conqueror of a city* (Proverbs 15:16)." Just as human might emerges in the difficult and effortful conquest of our impulse toward wickedness, divine might emerges in the difficult and effortful conquest of God's impulse toward judgment and anger.

This notion that God is locked in a fierce struggle with His tendency toward judgment and anger and is striving mightily to act compassionately with His creatures comes to the fore in a beautiful text from *Berakhot* 7a:

> R. Yoḥanan said in the name of R. Yosi: From where [do we know] that the Holy Blessed One prays? As it is said, *I will bring them to the mount of my sacredness, and let them rejoice in the house of my prayer* (Isaiah 56:7) – 'their prayer' is not said, rather *my prayer*. From here [we know] that the Holy Blessed One prays. What does he pray? R. Zutra b. Tuviah said that Rav said: May it be my will that my compassion subdue my anger, and my compassion prevail over my [other] qualities, and I will behave with my children with my quality of compassion, and I will enter before them short of the line of the law.

Critically, God's will for compassion rather than anger or judgment is couched in the language of prayer. To pray for something is in some ways to admit that achieving that something lies beyond the ken of one's intentional capabilities. There is a measure of hope in prayer that signals a desire that may go unfulfilled. In this case, God's prayer for compassion signals the degree to which victory against judgment and anger is not a forgone conclusion and the prevailing of compassion is something that will require effort and struggle.

This struggle is powerfully dramatized by the sages in a number of texts that reimagine God's anger and judgment as independent personified characters. The retributive aspects of God's nature become angels who can preclude Him from enacting His will and are often at cross-purposes with this compassionate God. Thus, in the case of divine anger we encounter the following passage from *Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 2:1:

> R. Levi said: What is the meaning of *erekh 'apayim*? Distancing anger. [This is compared] to a king who had two tough legions. The king said, "If [the legions] dwell with me in the province, when the citizens of the province anger me, [the legions] will make a stand against [the citizens]. Instead, I will send them off a ways away so that if the citizens of the province anger me, before I have a chance to send after [the legions], the citizens of the province will appease me and I will accept their appeasement." Similarly, the Holy Blessed One said, "*Af* and *Ḥemah* are angels of devastation. I will send them a ways away so that if Israel angers me, before I have chance to send for them and bring them, Israel will do *teshuvah* and I will accept their *teshuvah*." This is that which is written, *They come from a distant land, from the edge of the sky* [*YHVH and the weapons of his wrath–to ravage all the earth*] (Isaiah 13:5). R. Yitzḥak said: And what's more, he locked the door on them. This is that which is written, *YHVH has opened his armory and brought out the weapons of his wrath* (Jeremiah 50:25) …

Af and *ḥemah*, terms often used in the Bible to describe God's anger, are here transformed into "angels of devastation" that operate almost independently of God. In the *mashal*, they are compared to two military legions who would loose devastation on the citizenry at the slightest sign of the king's anger. It appears almost as though the king would be unable to hold them back from their rampage once they set forth against the people. This frightening independence is confirmed in the *nimshal*, wherein God sees a need not only to send them far away but also to lock them up. If they are allowed to roam free, who knows what havoc they might wreak. One senses in this text the precariousness of God's relationship with anger and wrath. At the same time, the sages make clear the profound efforts God makes to favor compassion and forgiveness.

Middat hadin, or "the quality of judgment," also becomes an autonomous character in the rabbinic imagination. Thus, in *Pesaḥim* 119a we read:

> R. Kahana in the name of R. Yishma'el b. R. Yose said that R. Shim'on b. Lakish in the name of R. Yehudah Nesi'ah said: What is the meaning of that which is written, *and they had the hands of a man under their wings* (Ezekiel 1:8)? 'His hand' is written. This is the hand of the Holy Blessed One that is spread under the wings of the *Ḥayyot* [i.e. angels] in order to accept those who do *teshuvah* from the grips of *middat hadin*.

In this dramatic scene, God spreads His hand beneath the wings of the angels so as to collect up the remorseful and repentant and protect them from falling into the hands of the less than sympathetic *middat hadin*. One is given to imagine that were these people to fall

into the grips of *middat hadin*, God would be powerless to retrieve them or at the very least would need to valiantly struggle for their release. In the cosmic drama, *middat hadin* is God's adversary, attempting to uphold the strict letter of judgment while God vies for the victory of compassion and forgiveness. The sages make this point clear in several texts that situate this struggle at various moments in our mythic-history. Thus, we are told that God constructed a sort of tunnel in the firmament so as to sneak Menasheh – the repentant wicked king of Yehudah – past *middat hadin,* who would surely have prevented his acceptance in heaven (*Sanhedrin* 103a). Similarly, when creating humankind, God disclosed to the ministering angels only that righteous people would emerge from Adam. God chose to conceal the future reality of wicked people, precisely because He was certain that had *middat hadin* known, it would have prevented the creation of humanity (*Bereishit Rabbah* 8:4). *Middat hadin* was also critical in delaying and precluding the exodus from Egypt. Witnessing the utter depravity of captive Israel who had adopted the customs and practices of the Egyptians, *middat hadin* could not allow for their liberation. Only on the strength of God's prior commitment and oath to redeem Israel was God able to defeat the uncompromising will of *middat hadin* (*Vayikra Rabbah* 23:2).

These texts are theologically audacious and undoubtedly jarring to ears accustomed to the staid contours of a Maimonidean God. God is a vulnerable, struggling God, fearful of the most dangerous and powerful members of the divine family – anger and judgment – and intent on defeating them through precautionary measures, wily maneuvers, and whatever resources are available. As we briefly alluded to earlier, this picture departs in certain ways from that painted by *Sifre Bemidbar* and *Berakhot*. In those texts, the struggle for compassion is rendered internal to God's person. Judgment and anger and compassion compete for attention in the divine psyche and God struggles mightily for the victory of His more compassionate side. Here, by contrast, judgment and anger are reified and externalized as members of the angelic retinue. It is worth pausing to consider how this impacts the drama. In externalizing anger and judgment, God is rendered wholly and incorruptibly compassionate rather than divided against Himself. This constitutes a certain sacrifice in divine psychological complexity. However, this sacrifice allows for richer imaginative possibilities when it comes to considering how God fights against judgment and anger for the victory of compassion – bolting the door against them, concealing facts from them, tunneling beneath them, etc. I don't wish to advocate for one of these images to the exclusion of the other. Each of these images captures something about the character of God's struggle with judgment and anger, and it will only be through the cumulative effect of seeing this struggle in multiple successive perspectives that we will appreciate its full-bodied richness.

"The Day of Judgment"? A Reconsideration

With this consideration of God's relationship to judgment in mind, we can now turn to consider the day of Rosh Hashanah and how it fits into this broader narrative. In *Vayikra Rabbah* 29:3, we encounter the following passage:

> Yehudah b. Naḥmani in the name of R. Shim'on b. Laqish opened: *God ascends amidst acclamation* [*teru'ah*]*; YHVH, to the blasts of the shofar* (Psalms 47:6). When the Holy Blessed One ascends to sit on the throne of judgement on Rosh Hashanah, he ascends for judgement. This is that which is written, *God* [*Elohim*] *ascends amidst acclamation* [*teru'ah*]. And once Israel take their *shofarot* and blow them, immediately *YHVH, to the blasts of the shofar*. What does the Holy Blessed One do? He rises from the throne of judgement and sits on the throne of compassion, and is filled with compassion for them and transforms the quality of justice into the quality of compassion for them. When? On Rosh Hashanah, in the seventh month on the first of the month.

In the rabbinic imagination, the names of God are to be associated with distinctive traits (see for example, *Sifre Devarim* 26). Thus, Elohim signifies God's quality of judgment while YHVH signifies God's quality of compassion. Capitalizing on this rabbinic trope, our *midrash* imagines the shift in divine epithets found in the Psalmic verse to signify a shift in God's character on the day of Rosh Hashanah. While God initially ascends the throne of judgment, the blasts of the *shofar* sounded by Israel move God to abandon the seat of judgment for that of compassion. This idea is one worth examining more closely.

First, this text might push us to reconsider the aptness of *yom ha-din* or "the day of judgment" as a name for Rosh Hashanah. If we take this text seriously, the day is less one of judgment and more one of the abandonment of judgment for the sake of compassion. It is part and parcel of the story of God's struggle against the potent force of strict judgment. The day is one on which the singular strength of God is on display, as God succeeds in conquering and subduing God's quality of judgment with compassion. In a certain sense, we might even take the commandment issued by God for Israel to sound the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah as a prophylactic measure against *middat hadin*. God knows that the sound of the *shofar*'s blast will move Him to remember His deepest commitments, His truest self, and His love and compassion for Israel. For this reason, God assigns this tasks to Israel on the day He has set aside for judgment.

If we wish to deepen our appreciation of *Vayikra Rabbah*'s claim, we might turn to Maimonides' articulation of the purpose of the *shofar*. In *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:4, Maimonides writes as follows:

> Even though the sounding the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a decree of the text, there is a hint for it. That is to say, "Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep and comatose from your comas, and return in *teshuvah* and remember your creator. Those who forget the truth through time's hollow things and wile away all their years with hollowness and emptiness that won't be of use and won't save, look to your souls and improve your ways and your deeds. And each one of you, abandon his wicked way and his thoughts, which are not good."

For Maimonides, the *shofar* is a piercing cry that wakes us from our slumbering attitude. In a world where we find ourselves forgetful of what is important, the sound of the *shofar* shocks us back into an awareness of our deepest commitments and moves us to abandon the hollow and useless things in life in favor of righteousness. In R. Yitzḥak Hutner's rendering of this idea, "the *shofar* can bring to life the traces and transform something's trace or impression into its embodied fullness" (*Paḥad Yitzḥak*, *Rosh Hashanah* 20). For both Maimonides and R. Hutner, hearing the *shofar* is an activity designed for the benefit of human beings. However for *Vayikra Rabbah*, it would seem that hearing the *shofar* is something that also benefits God. If the *shofar* has the capacity to wake *us* from our slumber and restore vitality to our sedimented commitments, perhaps it has the same capacity to do so for God. Parallel to Maimonides' "Wake up, sleepers" might be the Psalmist's cry: "Rise, why do you sleep, lord?" (Psalms 44:24). God calls on us to sound the *shofar* to wake Him from His slumber and transform the trace of reserve compassion into its embodied fullness.

The Sound of the Shofar and the Tragic Costs of Judgment

But what is it about the sound of the *shofar* that so moves God to abandon judgment and return to His deep and fundamental commitment to compassion and forgiveness? We might find the beginnings of an answer through reflecting on the story of the binding of Isaac and its aftermath, a story we in fact read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. In considering what motivated God to test Abraham with the sacrifice of his child, the late midrashic collection, *Yalkut Shim'oni*, imagines the following:

> Another interpretation: [This is compared] to a king who had a beloved [friend] who was poor. The king said to him, "It is on me to make you wealthy," and he gave him money with which to do business. After a time, he [i.e. the poor friend] entered the palace. They said, "For what reason is this one entering?" The king said to them, "Because he is my faithful beloved [friend]." They said to him, "If so, tell him to return your money." Immediately, the king said to him, "Return to me that which I gave you." He did not withhold, and the members of the palace were embarrassed, and the king swore to grant him more wealth. The Holy Blessed One said to the ministering angels, "Had I listened to you when you said, *what is a human being, that you are mindful of him* (Psalms 8:5), could there have been Abraham, who glorifies me in my world?!" *Middat ha-din* said before the Holy Blessed One, "all of the trials with which you tested him involved his money and property. Try him through his body." He said to him, "He should sacrifice his son before you." Immediately, "He [i.e. God] said to him [i.e. Abraham], *take your son* (Genesis 22:2). (*Yalkut Shim'oni*, *Vayera*)

In the eyes of this *midrash*, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was issued at the prodding of *middat ha-din*. Skeptical of the fortitude and authenticity of Abraham's commitment to God, *middat ha-din* asks God to *truly* test Abraham through his flesh and blood rather than through his material possessions by asking him to sacrifice his son. The story of the binding of Isaac is thus cast as a concession of God to the skepticism of *middat ha-din*, the quality of judgment. Unobscured by the love God feels toward Abraham, *middat ha-din* coldly assesses the situation and desires a strict test of Abraham's righteousness.

This *midrash* is particularly striking as it evokes and plays with another narrative found in the Biblical canon – namely, the story of God's test of Job (Job 1–2). In the beginning of the book of Job, God boasts of Job's righteousness, prompting the Adversary or '*ha-satan*' to question the authenticity of Job's commitment. Like the attendants to the king in the *mashal* of our passage, the Adversary suggests that robbing Job of the material wealth God has showered upon him will test the strength of Job's piety. When this fails, the Adversary responds by discounting the previous test as insufficient. A true test of Job's piety will come when his body and flesh are inflicted rather than merely his wealth. This again is echoed in the comments of *middat ha-din*, who insists God try Abraham "through his body" [*be-gufo*]. The implication of this parallel is hard to ignore. By drawing on the narrative framework of the book of Job, the *midrash* in *Yalkut Shim'oni* casts *middat ha-din* in the role of satanic adversary to God. This text would then continue the trend we have seen of depicting *middat ha-din* in a tense and difficult struggle with God. Yet remarkably, if *middat ha-din* is the satanic adversary to God, then its suggestion of binding Isaac to the altar would seem to emerge in a strikingly negative light.

What then is the source of this ambivalence about testing Abraham through the sacrifice of his son? And what does all of this have to do with the sound of the *shofar*? One possible answer emerges from a *midrash* that first appears in *Vayikra Rabbah* 20:2:

> He took Isaac his son and led him up mountains and down hills. He took him up on one of the mountains, built an altar, arranged the wood, prepared the altar pile, and took the knife to slay him. Had [God] not called upon him from the heavens and said, *Do not reach out your hand* (Genesis 22:12), Isaac would have already been slain. Know that this is so, for Isaac returned to his mother and she said to him, "Where have you been, my son?" And he said to her, "My father took me and led me up mountains and down hills." And she said, "Woe for the son of a hapless woman! Had it not been for an angel from the heavens, you would have already been slain!" He said to her, "Yes." At that moment, she uttered six cries, corresponding to the six blasts of the *shofar*. They said, "she had scarcely finished speaking when she died." This is that which is written, *And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her* (Genesis 23:2). Where did he come from? R. Yehudah b. R. Simon said: He came from Mount Moriah.

For this *midrash*, the binding of Isaac to the altar and his near-sacrifice had tragic consequences in the form of the death of his mother, Sarah. What's more, this *midrash* explicitly ties the pained cries of Sarah to the piercing sound of the *shofar*. If we consider this text together with our passage from *Yalkut Shim'oni,* what emerges is a searing indictment of *middat ha-din*. Strict judgment leaves casualties of pain, tragedy, and death in its wake, and it is for this reason that it should be seen as an unsympathetic, almost satanic adversary to which God sadly succumbed in asking Abraham to sacrifice his son. When administering strict judgment, one may become so myopically focused on the subject at hand that the unintended and violent consequences of rendering a certain verdict go unnoticed. *Middat ha-din* fails to note the mothers who suffer pangs of sorrow at the loss of children taken in the name of judgment and justice. Sounding the *shofar* recalls God to the moment of Sarah's tragic death and awakens God to the reality of *middat ha-din*'s violence and its many casualties. God cannot help but return to Himself, to His deepest commitments, and subdue the impulse toward judgment in the calming waters of compassion and forgiveness.