

Uncover the Darkness

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We stood in the Western Galilee Hospital in the north of Israel and looked out at the field below us. Our view was not impaired by windows, since the windows on our floor had all been shattered by Hezbollah rockets. Glass was all over the place. It covered the floor and it also covered many of the mangled hospital beds. Our guide told us that the army had found the exact coordinates of the hospital inside Hezbollah bunkers. Hezbollah had fired its rockets with the intention of hitting the hospital. What kind of person does something like that?

It is very easy to look at the world right now and just get flat out depressed. Every day it seems like the world is one step closer to its annihilation. Pick your poison.

And for Jews the outlook is particularly dire. Israel is surrounded to the North and South by enemies that have no desire for peace. Increased anti-Semitism is spreading around the world. When I visited France recently, I asked the rabbi in Synagogue if he felt any anti-Semitism. He said, "Where isn't there anti-Semitism?" Things look tough.

It is easy to get down and cynical when you think about the state of the world. We are in a struggle for our survival. It is easy to get depressed.

We might be excused for thinking to ourselves that the last thing we need right now are Yamim Noraim, Days of Fear and Awe. We have plenty of that already.

But the truth is Rosh Hashanah is not supposed to scare us. Rather it teaches us how to respond to such feelings of despair.

Rosh Hashanah is known as Yom Ha-Din, Judgment Day, which has a very scary connotation. But what does Judgment Day mean?

Surprisingly, no where in the Torah is Rosh Hashanah called Judgment Day. If one looks at the literal reading of the Torah there is no reason to think that the Biblical holiday is Judgment Day. Yet, today we have come to equate Rosh Hashanah with Yom Ha-Din. What is the source of this concept?

The Talmud in Tractate Rosh Hashanah (8a) answers our question by citing a verse from Psalms (81:4), "*Tiku bahodesh shofar ba-kesah le-yom chageinu ki chok leyisrael hu mishpat lelokei yaakov*, Blast the shofar, *bakesah*, on the time designated as a holiday. This is a statute for Israel, as ordinance for the God of Jacob."

The key word in this verse is *bakesah*, which means covered, i.e. when the new moon is covered and not yet visible. That is when the shofar should be blasted. This verse supports the idea that the holiday of judgment coincides with the holiday in which the

moon is covered. Explains the Talmud, that holiday must be Rosh Hashanah since that is the only holiday on which the moon is covered

Other biblical holidays like Pesach and Sukot fall on the fifteenth of the month when the moon shines most brightly. They are holidays of great joy. The only holiday that comes on the first of the month—when there is no moon visible at all—is Rosh Hashanah.

Judgment day equals the moment when the moon is not visible. Why?

In the Jewish tradition, the fullness of the moon represents success. Everything is bright. The world is full of light and everything seems possible. It is a time of hope. It is a time of joy. That is why we celebrate Pesach and Sukkot on the fifteenth of the month, when the brightness of the moon is at its peak.

But on Rosh Hashanah, we don't have the luxury of seeing the brightness; we only see darkness. The moon is covered.

What we mean by Judgment Day is that we feel less confident. Our future is cloudy or covered. We are not sure what will be. We don't understand. We are lost. Unsure of what God's ruling will be we tremble before God.

The rabbis explain that this is why we don't say Hallel on Rosh Hashanah. As the Midrash teaches: *Sifrei hayyim ve-sifrei metim petuchim lifanei ve-atem omrim shirah*, the book of life and death are open before me and you want to chant happy songs?

Judgment day understood like this a scary concept. It matches what many of us feel about the world right now. Many of us are concerned about the future. Many of us desire the brightness of the moon, but only feel its absence.

But Rosh Hashanah is not just meant to judge us and scare us. Anyone can scare. That's easy. It's also meant to inspire us; to give us hope to get through the darkness. Most of all it is meant to **empower us**.

There is another reason why Rosh Hashanah comes with the absence of the moon. One reason is because we are not sure what God's ruling will be. But the other reason is to remind us that WE CAN affect the ruling.

R. Moshe Amiel – chief rabbi of Tel Aviv in the 1940's – explains that the word *kesah* means that our fate is EVEN covered from God. Even God does not know what the final ruling will be.

He cites a peculiar midrash which states the following: *“The ministering angels come before God and ask: When is Rosh Hashanah and when is Yom Kippur? God answers: Don't ask me. Together lets go to the lower court of humans and find out. As it states: “Tiku bachodesh shofar ba-kesah le-yom chageinu.”*

In this context the word *kesah*, means that God is telling us our fate is covered even from Him. As the rabbis say, “Everything is in the hands of heaven except for fear of heaven.” When we are faced with difficult situations, even God does not know how we will respond.

God is telling us that it is covered from Him too. We can determine the future.

Look at the verse again. It doesn’t just tell us that the moon is covered. It commands us to do something about it. Precisely when the moon is covered, we are told: “Go blast the shofar. *Tiku bachodesh shofar*, go out and blast the shofar in the midst of the darkness.”

We must remind ourselves constantly to stay true to God; not to give up or lose ourselves before our enemies; not to let them dictate who we are; not to become what they want us to become, but what God wants us to be.

This lesson is taught to us by the blasts of the shofar.

The shofar has many meanings and a lot of symbolism. But one meaning it has is a rallying cry. In the book of Judges, when Gidon was leading his army into battle, we are told that his army went out in the pitch darkness of night, blasted the shofar while holding fiery torches and shouted, “For God and for Gidon.”

In the midst of our darkness comes the shofar and gives us strength. It is too easy for us to be cynical or downcast. When we are feeling that way, the shofar rallies us. It encourages us. It reassures us that we can overcome those who want to take away our freedom. It reassures us that our path—a path of openness, loving kindness to all of God’s children, a path that despises hatred—is the path of God. Amidst the darkness the fiery torch of the shofar gives us the inspiration to continue.

The message of the shofar is that although we are in darkness, our darkness will not last forever. As long as we do not despair, we will find our path.

This is the message of the Haftorah that we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.

When I visited the family of Ehud Goldwasser in Nahariya, I saw a poster with the picture of the three kidnapped soldiers—Ehud, Eldad Regev, and Gilad Schalit. On the poster was a verse from Jeremiah which stated, “*Ve-Shavu banim ligvulum*, and your children will return to their borders.”

That verse comes from the Haftorah of the second day of Rosh Hashanah. This is the context.

The prophet Jeremiah is telling the story of the exile of the people. They are just a remnant. They have been exiled. God is distant. Everyone has given up. Everyone, that is, except for one person: Rachel. Suddenly, when there seems to be no hope: “*Kol*

beramah nishmah nehi bechi tamrurim rachel mevakah al baneah, a sound is heard in Ramah—a bitter weeping sound—it is Rachel crying for her children.”

Rachel emerges from her cave and cries out for her people. She refuses to be comforted by God. She demands that God redeem her people. When she sees her children in distress, she cries; not once but continuously. She cries until she receives the desired answer.

It is this crying and refusal to give up that eventually brings about the redemption of her people. God finally gives in to Rachel: “*Mini koleikh mi-bechi, ve-enayikh mi-dimah*, restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, *ki yesh sekhar le-feulateikh neum Hashem ve-shavu bani le-gevulum*, your work shall have its reward, says Hashem, your children shall return to their borders.”

When I entered the Goldwasser home I wasn't sure how they would greet me. After all, what interest could they have in yet another visitor coming in? But when I arrived, the entire family was there to greet me. They had great courage and spirituality. When I said to Ehud's mother, Malka, that we pray for Udi in our shul. Malka politely but firmly corrected me. She said, “You must not just pray for Udi. You must pray for Gilad and Eldad as well.”

Shlomo told me, “Look what a great nation we are. We are one family. Every day I get calls from people telling me that they are praying for me.”

And the bravery of Ehud's wife, Karnit, is overwhelming. I stood in a crowd of 100,000 people who were all crying as Karnit read a letter that she wrote to Ehud that morning. Here was a woman in the midst of great sadness. And yet, she was serving as an inspiration and a leader for so many people.

After the rally, I said to Shlomo. “You see how Karnit spoke about Ehud...He sounds so wonderful. I wish I had met him.” He gently interrupted me, “But you will, you will...”

Today I draw inspiration from Karnit Goldwasser. She is our modern day, Rachel. Many of you saw her strength when she spoke here just a few days ago. Before Udi was kidnapped she was an ordinary engineering student. But now she is a Rachel, traveling around the world, standing up and pleading on behalf of her husband.

Today we must all be Rachels. We must never give up or feel tired or beaten down. Hashem tells us on Rosh Hashanah that it is up to us to uncover the darkness.

This year the cries of the Goldwasser, Shalit, and Regev families are our kol shofar. May our cries echo their cries!