



..... NICKNACKS

A Collection of Insight, Inspiration and Information from the Norfolk Area Community Kollel



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Rosh HaShana
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Save the Date!

- Monday evening, 9/17 Rosh HaShana begins
- Wednesday evening, 9/26 Yom Kippur begins

Rabbi Schwartz, the Kollel's dean, served for several years as the Educational Director of the Community Kollel in Des Moines, Iowa. He is joined in Virginia by his wife Aliza and their two children, Shani and Yonah.

Of Dogs, Chickens and a Bar Mitzvah by Rabbi Ephraim Schwartz

Although many Jewish holidays have seemingly strange customs, there is something about Rosh HaShana that really brings out some of the most, shall we say, creative of those. Many of us may recall our grandparents sharing stories of “shlugging kapporos, spinning a chicken above their heads (an interesting variation of Spin the Bottle, perhaps). While the chicken circled wildly above, the custom entailed the recitation of a prayer declaring that the chicken should serve as an atonement for our sins and stand in our stead for any unfortunate decrees the Almighty may have in store for the coming year. Ultimately, the chickens employed in this ritual were distributed among the poor to provide for their holiday meals. The more faint of heart improvised a bit by instead swinging coins overhead and then dispensing them to the needy.

A more prevalent custom is Tashlich during which congregants gather at a local stream where they proceed to recite several prayers before casting all sins into the water. Even those in landlocked areas would make their way to the local reservoir to fulfill this time-honored custom. Also widespread is the practice of eating various foods that represent messages of hope on Rosh HaShana. Last but not least, the meal would hardly be complete without the symbolic dipping of an apple in honey as we express of our desire for a sweet new year.

The question that immediately comes to my mind is, “What is possibly the point of all this?” Will spinning chicken, feeding fish and dipping an apple actually impact the Divine system of justice? I’d like to believe that traditions that result from centuries of collective Jewish wisdom contain within them a lesson or moral that we can apply even today. That’s where the dogs come in.

We’re all familiar with the adage “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” For those in the elderly canine clan this must be a rather depressing thought. Repeating the same old tricks over and over without any hope of self-improvement doesn’t exactly make the prospect of a long life anything to “bow wow” about. Human beings are different. We can change and we strive to change; sometimes however, we simply don’t think we can. Upon being reprimanded for inappropriate behavior, our most common response is “That’s just how I am”. That’s where we’re mistaken.

The Talmud describes one who is entrenched in sin as a “ba’al aveirah”- literally, an owner of sin. This stands in contrast to how we refer to a young Jewish man or woman who come of age. The term Bar or Bat Mitzvah identifies them as children of the commandments. I believe the difference in terminology is instructive. Our sins or mistakes do not define us, they are merely things we have. Much like all of our other possessions, they can be here today and gone tomorrow. What truly defines us are the good deeds that we do and the example we set. These are our essence; in that sense we are the children of those mitzvos. They are eternal and can never be taken away from us.

Perhaps that is the idea behind all these customs: Be it on chickens, in streams or with honey, we really can actively cast away our sins because they are not who we are. We simply own them, and we are now prepared to give them away. We can indeed change and we can grow. Whether or not we have been as in touch with it as we would like, we are truly b’nei mitzvah

The customs may vary between individuals and communities, but the sweetness of being human and the joy of finding fulfillment in life can be shared by all.

The Cry of the Shofar

Rabbi Sender Haber

One Rosh HaShana several people noticed a young boy standing alone in the synagogue. Although no one recognized him, he was quite obviously troubled. They watched as the poor child tried unsuccessfully to articulate his problems. Becoming increasingly frustrated and upset, the boy began to cry. Finally, in desperation the boy removed a whistle from his pocket and began to blow on it with all his might. The congregation stood still and watched as the boy blew with all his heart and soul, releasing pent up emotions and conveying his pain with more clarity than any words could have. When he was done, the boy turned, and with a shining face and a bounce in his step left the sanctuary, mission accomplished.

We have all experienced moments of extreme emotion, whether in joy, pain, relief, fright or sorrow. At these instances our feelings are so powerful that we can do virtually nothing other than scream. Similarly, the blowing of the shofar is not a logical expression of thought, but an emotional one. It has the potential to convey prayers that are too complex and deep for words or even song.

If the shofar is a manifestation of our innermost feelings and thoughts, why is it so complicated? Why the long tekiah, the three-part shevarim and the fragmented teruah? And why must we all blow an identical pattern as opposed to each individual expressing individual feelings? After all, haven't our feelings and prayers changed in 3000 years?

The Talmud tells us that for many generations it was customary for the pattern of shofar blowing in each congregation to evolve over time. The long, trumpet-like tekiah was used by all, but the teruah took on many different forms, varying with time and geographic location. Amazingly, after several generations the result was invariably one of three sound patterns. Every congregation independently arrived at either the wailing, three-part shevarim, the pleading whimper of the teruah or both.

The Talmud reports that upon witnessing this incredible phenomenon Rabbi Avahu instituted these three patterns worldwide. Rabbi Hai Gaon (939-1038) explains that this ruling was not the result of compromise in a case of halachic disagreement. Rather, the ruling was intended to promote unity and solidarity in the global Jewish community. Thus, in addition to our "personal" shofar sounds, we include those of the entire nation as well. The message conveyed hereby is that our desire is for the feelings and yearnings of every Jew to be heard. A Jew is never left to cry alone.

King David wrote (Psalms 89:16) "Fortunate is the nation who knows the shofar blasts." We are fortunate when we are in touch with our own hearts, our personal shofar blasts. We are even more fortunate when we are united enough to anticipate the needs of another.

This Rosh HaShana as we listen to the shofar being blown, let us remember that these blasts are the vehicle with which we offer up our deepest emotions, those that words cannot verbalize. And let us pray that the sounds of the shofar carry not only our feelings but the suffering and yearning of Jew everywhere whose heartfelt "shofar sounds" may be different than our own.

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Rabbi Haber divided his youth between Buffalo, NY and Melbourne, Australia where his father served as a Rabbi. He and his wife Chami, a native Canadian and an Early Childhood teacher at the Hebrew Academy of Tidewater moved to the Hampton Roads area from Lakewood, New Jersey where he studied at the famed Beth Medrash Govoha.

The Big Four-Oh: the REAL significance of 40

Rabbi Ephraim Adler

40

Our preparations for Rosh HaShana begin with the Hebrew month of Elul. During this month we begin the process of rousing ourselves from what often has been a year-long stupor. The period of time from the first day of Elul until the culmination of the season on Yom Kippur is forty days. Our kabbalists point out that the number 40 is not merely coincidental; in fact, it crucial to the approach we must take during these all-important weeks.

It is interesting to note that the number 40 appears numerous times throughout the Torah and halacha, always with one underlying theme. In nature, 40 represents the amount of time needed for the developmental process of new creation. The Talmud tells us that it takes forty days for an embryo to attain and develop human form; from that point and onward the growth process takes over.

(continued on page 3)

On the other hand, the flood during the time of Noah lasted 40 days and 40 nights to counteract the deterioration of the created world that had taken place.

The same concept presents itself at the giving of the Torah. This monumental gift of God essentially heralded the rebirth of the Jewish people as a nation under the covenant of the Torah. Even the Torah, by virtue of its being given over to mankind for the first time, was undergoing a rebirth of sorts. As a result it should not be surprising that the time required for Moses to mold and define this relationship was 40 days and 40 nights. A mikva, the ritual bath, plays an integral role in the recreation of an impure person as pure. Thus, its required capacity of 40 cubits.

When the Torah tells of the return of the spies from the land of Israel, the verse specifies that they returned "at the end of forty days". The spies certainly knew that the nation would experience a spiritual rebirth upon entering the Holy Land, but they knew the significance of the number 40 as well. Therefore, they remained in Israel for that length of time so as to experience the awaiting sensation of spiritual growth and be able to report back on it. Their intentions however, were not pure and they were not worthy of experiencing this rebirth. When they failed to, they returned to their brethren with reports of a desolate land a doomed future. Consequently, it took 40 years of wandering in the desert for the Israelites to elevate themselves once again and merit to finally enter the land.

The fundamental theme of the days of Elul, a time of extraordinary closeness to God, is expressed with the verse "I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me." The first letter of each word in this verse spells out the Hebrew word "Elul". The last letter of each of these four words, the letter *yud*, is crucial as well. The numerical equivalent of *yud* is 10; adding the four *yuds* together once again yields 40.

The message of rebirth and renewal is all around us. The 40 days of the High Holiday season afford us a prime opportunity to rededicate ourselves to our lifelong goals of coming closer to our creator while making ourselves into better Jews and better people.

Rabbi Adler moved to Norfolk to join the Kollel after spending several years studying at the Mir Yeshiva, the largest rabbinical college in Israel today. His wife Chaya Etti teaches at the United Hebrew School and is pursuing a Master's degree in Special Education. The Adlers' have a one year old daughter, Pessi.

10 Questions

TO ASK YOURSELF
THIS ROSH HASHANA

Sometimes life is a bit overwhelming and we need to put things back into focus. These 10 questions for thought, discussion and introspection will do wonders:

- 1) If I could live my life over, what would I change?
- 2) What would bring me more happiness than anything else in the world?
- 3) What project or goal, if left undone, will I most regret next Rosh HaShana?
- 4) If I knew I could not fail, what would I undertake to accomplish in life?
- 5) If I could give my children three pieces of advice, what would they be?
- 6) What am I working at now in my life that requires the most time and energy? Is this what I ideally want to be doing with my time?
- 7) Is this what I want to be working most at in 10 years from now? In 40 years from now?
- 8) If not, what do I ideally want to "work at"- i.e. what do I want to be spending most of my time and energy doing?
- 9) What do I feel is the ultimate good that a human being can strive towards?
- 10) Is closeness to God central to my ultimate life goal? What do I have to work on to achieve greater closeness?

Courtesy of Rabbi Dov Heller, Aish.com

How Life is Like a Postcard— Rosh HaShana Musings Rabbi Aryeh Gibber

As a child growing up in Chicago, turning the calendar page to usher in the month of September was always accompanied by mixed emotions. Clanging school bells, new teachers and a sudden crispness in the air heralded the impending arrival of autumn; the only things heating up were baseball's pennant races. Further clouding my young mind was the distinct and unsettling sense that another precious summer had passed me by.

Years later, so much has changed, and yet so much remains the same. Clanging school bells and new teachers are now thankfully in my past, and my recent move to Hampton Roads has proved a successful defense against the sudden crispness of the Midwestern autumn air. And yet the feeling lingers. Has another precious year passed me by?

Clearly, the internal Jewish calendar that exists in each of us is sending a message, one that goes beyond academics, meteorology and even baseball. The essence of this message was perhaps best captured by the Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan (1838-1933) when he astutely observed "Life is like a postcard." The experience is common enough—the gleaming white space designated for inscription appears plentiful; the vacationer begins writing with large, bold strokes. Nearing the bottom of the card however, a new realization begins to set in: the space was not quite so large after all. Having scarcely even gotten past the most basic "Hello!", "How are you?" and "Wish you were here", the handwriting quickly becomes smaller and smaller. With each passing word the letters are squeezed closer together and in a maneuver born of pure desperation, the final sentences curl around the bottom corner of the postcard and begin an impossibly-angled, often illegible ascent.

The analogy is self-evident. The dawn of a new year is inevitably accompanied by a flurry of promises and commitments. Virtually no area of personal, family or communal life is left untouched by the idealist's resolutions. Unfortunately however, these days of sunny optimism are often short lived. Occupations, social obligations and relationships are just a few of the factors that conspire to relegate genuine self-improvement to the proverbial back burner. As the days get shorter and the winter months bear down, the calendar begins to play the tortoise to our hare in the race against time.

As we begin to focus our attention on yet another High Holy Day season and yet another new year, familiar questions loom large. What can I do to make the impact of this season last beyond the final shofar blast? How does one go about disembarking the treadmill of resolutions and disappointment? And speaking of resolutions, how can I be assured that next year's wish list will not be identical to this year's?

The typical vacation involves so many moments

and so many memories—pleasant, comical and otherwise—it would be hopeless to even attempt to touch upon them all within the space allotted on a single postcard. And so the question arises: why bother even beginning an exercise doomed to failure, frustration and writer's cramp? The hassle and ensuing dilemma seem to be eminently avoidable. Why not choose one aspect, one incident or even one memorable moment and convey it in its entirety?

Once again, the analogy is self-evident. As the old axiom goes, "Rome wasn't built in a day". If something so simple as a world power required gradual, deliberate work, it stands to reason that an individual, described by the Talmud as a world unto his or herself needs at least as much time and effort. The renowned sage and ethicist Rabbi Yisroel Salanter once commented that to truly and entirely abandon a single negative character trait is a lifetime of work. The key, in life as in postcard etiquette, is the need to focus. A character trait, Jewish education, an interpersonal relationship—if we can identify a single, realistically attainable goal to strive for between today and next Rosh HaShana, this can be the year that serves as a springboard for so many years to come. Beyond simply avoiding frustration, downsizing our expectations and pinpointing our efforts will prove more rewarding and fulfilling in that ironic and paradoxical way that delights philosophers and confuses the rest of us.

Rabbi Gibber recently relocated from Providence, Rhode Island where he attended the New England Rabbinical College and later served as its Director of Community Relations. His wife Sara Chana was born and raised in Jerusalem, Israel, later spending three years at the Jewish Teachers' Seminary in Gateshead, England.

Best Wishes

to the entire Hampton Roads area
for a Happy and Healthy year!

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