



Stories of Change

Sivan Rahav Meir and Yedidya Meir

When Rabbi Lau heard the shofar

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau once recounted the first and most powerful time he heard the sound of the *shofar* during *Selichot*: “We, a group of Holocaust orphaned children and adolescents, immigrated to Israel at the beginning of Av in 1945, shortly after the end of World War II. At the age of eight, I could not read or write one word in Hebrew, and in any case, I did not know about Rosh Hashanah and the *shofar*. After a short stay in Atlit controlled by the British and in a children’s institution in Kfar Saba, I arrived at my uncle’s house, Rabbi Mordechai Fogelman zt”l – the rabbi of Kiryat Motzkin, where I grew up until I reached my *Bar Mitzvah*. At the heart of the city, the main shul stands, large and with a high dome. The shul is full on Shabbat and Yom Tov but relatively sparse during the week.

“I will never forget that morning when I accompanied my uncle. It was Rosh Chodesh Ellul davening, with Hallel, the reading of the Torah and the Mussaf prayer. I just stared at my *siddur* because I could not yet read it. Suddenly I jumped in panic at the unfamiliar sound of a mighty siren that resounded throughout the shul. Its sound echoes in my ears still to this day. In Polish, I asked my uncle what this vibrating siren meant. I then received my first lesson in the meaning of the *shofar* in Jewish law and tradition. How already in the month of Ellul we blow it every morning to arouse the heart of the people to *teshuvah*. How the *shofar* not only shakes the heart and reminds us of the binding of Yitzchak and Mount Sinai, but its letters are equal to the word *שפור* – improvement – improve your deeds. I heard all this for the first time in my

life that morning when I was eight years old.”

This beautiful story teaches us a simple but powerful lesson: that one can move forward in life and bridge gaps. The boy who did not understand a word of Hebrew and who did not know what a *shofar* was until the age of eight later became the Chief Rabbi of Israel and one of the most prominent Jewish speakers in the world.

How will next year look?

Have you imagined yourself on Rosh Hashanah next year? Many explain that this is precisely what should be done on Rosh Hashanah. On Rosh Hashanah, our focus is not, primarily, on looking backwards, but mostly on looking forward to the year ahead. We must try to clarify what we want from ourselves, on all levels.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, hy”d, the Grand Rabbi of Piaseczno who was murdered in the Holocaust, captured this sentiment with a practical proposal:

“If you would like to worship G-d and elevate yourself so that you will not be on your 70th birthday as you were on the day of your *Bar Mitzvah*, please do the following: every year, set for yourself a goal. If your name is Reuven, for example, imagine what kind of Reuven you will be next year, what will your achievements, your service and your *middot* (character traits) be like one year from now. And that imaginary Reuven shall be for you as a measuring stick to assess yourself throughout the year – how much are you still lacking to be that imaginary Reuven? Is your daily service and acts

of self-improvement enough to reach the level of next year’s Reuven?”

Breaking down the task

The first 10 days of the year are called *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* – 10 Days of Repentance. Rambam writes of these special days: “Although it is ever well to cry out and repent, during the space of the 10 days’ time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom HaKippurim it is exceedingly better, and the supplication is presently accepted, even as it is said: ‘Seek Hashem while He may be found’ (Isaiah 55:6).” Now the time has come.

How do you do *teshuvah*? How do you begin such an internal and personal process? In the early days of the Hasidic movement, Rabbi Zusha of Hanipol heard a scholarly and profound explanation of what *teshuvah* is and then said that he could not reach such a high level, so he broke *teshuvah* down for us into smaller parts, smaller tasks, initial letters. Here is the division he presented:

ת תמים תהיה עם ה' אלקיך

Thou shalt be whole-hearted with Hashem your G-d.

ש שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד

I have set Hashem always before me; surely He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

ו ואהבת לרעך כמוך

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

ב בכל דרכיך דעהו

In all your ways acknowledge Him.

ה הצנע לכת עם אלקיך

Walk humbly with your G-d.



Everyone needs to find their path and try to become the best version of themselves.

Innocence, devotion, love of Israel, love of G-d, modesty – Rabbi Zusha breaks *teshuvah* down into several gateways, and making it closer and more accessible. But perhaps there is an additional message here that: there are different ways to achieve change. We do not have to panic at what initially seems a daunting amount of work needed to do *teshuvah*. We can and should find different gateways and paths which speak to each one of us.

In the same spirit, Rabbi Zusha is said to have taught: “I am not afraid of being asked after my death, in Heaven, why I was not Moshe Rabbeinu. I am not scared of being asked why I was not Rambam. I’m just afraid they’ll ask me why I wasn’t a Zusha.”

Everyone needs to find their path and try to become the best version of themselves.

A small commitment

A bit of practical advice: during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it is customary for us to take upon ourselves a new commitment. To make one commitment regarding improvement in one area of life – and

to persist in living up to it. It could be any little positive obligation or commitment regarding ourselves, our family, our community, *tzedakah*, surfing the Internet, prayer, learning or something else. In this way, we assure ourselves that all the promises and thoughts for the new year will not disappear. A little something will remain and continue to accompany us.

Some commentators explain that this new commitment for the new year is like a new garment that a person buys – not for the body, but for the soul. The commitment needs to be modest, doable, and within reach.

Rabbi Elimelech Biederman tells of when he was a student and approached his rabbi at the beginning of the year and asked for a worthwhile commitment to take upon himself. His rabbi answered: think about, contemplate, and then choose an easy commitment that you are confident you can live up to throughout the year. Rabbi Biederman returned to his rabbi with a promise to undertake a specific commitment. His rabbi then told him: now cut that commitment in half so that you will be sure to fulfill it.

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