

RAV DAVID EBNER Z" L

The Dance of
T E S H U V A

Essays & Poetry



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Why 18Forty?

BY RABBI DOVID BASHEVKIN

WHEN A STUDENT of Rabbi Ebner called and asked if 18Forty would be interested in publishing some of the teachings of his rebbe, the obvious question was: Why 18Forty?

Personally, I was not a student of Rabbi Ebner. In fact, I never had the privilege of meeting him. And yet, as I began to learn more about his Torah, I thought: *This is exactly what we should be publishing.*

Because this is what 18Forty is all about: creating a platform for serious and thoughtful Jewish conversation, particularly the kind of conversation that asks not only what Judaism demands of us, but what it means to live a Jewish life with honesty, depth, and a sense of personal encounter.

Reading through Rabbi Ebner's beautiful Torah, I was struck again and again by how deeply his teachings resonate with so many of the religious themes we have tried to explore on 18Forty.

Perhaps most powerfully, Rabbi Ebner presents teshuva as the process of becoming present to oneself. Teshuva is not merely about correcting behavior or resolving to do better. It begins by stopping long enough to ask the deepest questions: *Where am I? What am I doing? For whom am I living?* In a world filled with noise and distraction, these questions are harder to ask than ever.

Much of what we try to do at 18Forty is simply to create the space in which such questions can once again be heard.

Rabbi Ebner was also deeply attuned to the danger of religious habit. Even sincere religious behavior can become what he so evocatively describes as “the dance of memory” rather than the “dance of the soul.” We can say the same prayers, perform the same *mitzvot*, observe the same holidays, and even summon the same emotions year after year—and somehow no longer be fully present for any of it. Judaism can become something we remember ourselves experiencing rather than something we are experiencing now.

Rabbi Ebner’s Torah calls us to renew our religious lives—to make Judaism our own. This is a question that has animated so many of our conversations at 18Forty: not simply *What does Judaism teach?* But *how do those teachings become meaningful within an actual human life?* How does an inherited religious tradition remain alive rather than becoming merely an inheritance?

This brings us to perhaps the idea of Rabbi Ebner’s that struck me most. In discussing *Avraham Avinu*, he explains why the Torah does not provide us with a detailed account of precisely how *Avraham* discovered God. Had we been given a step-by-step description, we might simply imitate *Avraham*’s journey. But, as Rabbi Ebner writes, “when truth is imitated, it becomes forgery.”

Avraham found God. So must I.

There is something in that formulation that could almost serve as a philosophical description of 18Forty itself. We want to create a space where inherited Jewish ideas meet individual experience, where ancient texts encounter contemporary questions, and where the goal is not to manufacture one prescribed religious personality. The goal is to help people encounter Torah and God as living realities—to receive an inheritance without allowing it to remain merely inherited.

That is why I am so grateful that these teachings have found a

home at 18Forty. Rabbi Ebner's voice deserves to continue to be heard—not only by those fortunate enough to have known him personally or studied under him, but by a new generation searching for a Judaism that is at once deeply rooted and deeply alive.

A special thank you is owed to Rabbi Jeffrey Saks, who studied and worked alongside Rabbi Ebner at Yeshivat Hamivtar, who graciously allowed us to republish several of Rabbi Ebner's poems, which appeared in a volume sponsored by ATID (which, allow me to add: published some of the best Jewish religious writings for many years—still available on Amazon!). His generosity has helped us present a fuller picture of Rabbi Ebner's distinctive religious voice.

And, of course, our deepest gratitude goes to Rabbi Ebner's students and family, who have preserved his Torah and allowed us the privilege of helping share it with a wider audience.

As we enter the *Yamim Noraim*, when we are each called upon to ask again *Where am I? Who am I becoming? For whom am I living?*, I can think of no more fitting Torah to accompany us.

Wishing everyone an uplifting and meaningful High Holiday season,

Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin
Founder, 18Forty

Why This Reader?

A NOTE FROM HIS STUDENTS

RAV DAVID EBNER *zt'l* liked to say that the length of an introduction should be inversely proportional to your respect for the person being introduced. He would have preferred no introduction to this book at all.

So, first, plainly: What follows are his thoughts for the teshuva season. They are short pieces, composed mostly of Torah from the schools of Pshischa, Kotzk, Rebbe Nachman, the Alter of Novardok, with Thoreau and Wordsworth wandering through when they have something to add. They were not written to establish anything about their author, though they do say a lot about his intellectual range and understanding of the human condition. They were written for reflection in the weeks when a Jew is supposed to be doing something about his or her life.

He died in Elul, one year ago, at 80, in the season he had spent his life teaching so passionately. Many of us cannot enter these days without hearing his voice, rousing us with lines from the Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuva* (“*uru yesheinim misheinatchem ... awake sleepers, from your slumber*”) or describing the story of characters in the Jewish story awakened to repentance. “*Yesh koneh olamo besh'a'achat*” — “there are those who acquire eternal life in a single hour, a single moment, a single turn.”

Born in Bradford, Pennsylvania, in 1945, Rav Ebner received semikha at Yeshiva University. He trained as a sociologist and a Talmud scholar. In 1982, he moved with his family to Israel. For more than two decades he served as *mashgiach ruchani* at Yeshivat HaMivtar, and then as *rosh yeshiva* and *mashgiach ruchani* at Yeshivat Eretz Hatzvi. He was a pioneer educator and a *lamdan* (scholar) of the first order who was happiest teaching the beginners' *shiur*.

He loved teaching Torah, he loved learning Torah, and he loved struggling with Torah. He railed against the curse of a life as an *am ha'aretz*, an ignoramus, and he was also its best antidote. "I never met a Jew," he said, "who wasn't interested in knowing something about what the Torah teaches. I have met those who didn't want to be missionary targets; who didn't want condescension; and who didn't want to do anything. But nary a one who wasn't curious."

As much as he railed against ignorance, he also worried about the literate. He liked German sociologist Max Weber's phrase for it, "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart." And he had his own: We were not to become mere "bureaucrats of Divine, Inc." As he put it in *Tradition*, "inwardness, spirituality, and the living presence of God may be the buzzwords of our detractors, but that is no reason to treat them as anything less than critical if we are serious about spiritual excellence." 18Forty has created content committed to these same ideas, invested in a rich, textured, spiritually fulfilled Orthodox Judaism, and we are grateful that their team (and its leader, Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin) have partnered with us to distribute this reader.

Rav Ebner was a poet, in an age where there are too few poets in the world of rabbis and *yeshivot*. He published three volumes of his own work (including some poems appearing in this volume), and revered the great writing of others. It was not unusual for him to quote Milton, Galway Kinnel, and Denise Levertov in one sitting

in the *beit midrash*, and to put them in conversation with rabbinic voices. He constantly reminded us that we were learning, reading, singing poetry every day across our davening, and living with it, *hashira hazot*, in our Torah learning.

He quoted Yeats, who said: “We make out of the quarrel with others rhetoric, but with ourselves, poetry.” The poetry, the soulfulness, the davening, the *niggunim* (melodies), the merciless and endless prodding toward self-improvement—he modeled it for us in his own life, reminding us that inner conflict, self-doubt, and personal difficulty are not obstacles to insight but its source.

He was an endless striver on the Quest for Authenticity. He was not interested in fakery, imitation, or flattery, communally or personally. He taught us to love Torah for its own sake, but also that it was supposed to make us better people, with new ways of seeing and new ways of being. In his love for his wife and *ezer kenegdo* Shulamith, and his children and grandchildren, he brought these lessons to life.

The beauty of these short essays is that they represent exactly the kind of teacher Rav Ebner was: They speak, in equal measure, to the veteran of many seasons of teshuva and to someone entering his or her first.

We, his students, heard Rav Ebner say that the goal of a teacher is to free the student from the need of the teacher; in that, he did not succeed. But he left us this wisdom for the season of teshuva, and he was blunt about what to do with it: put the book down at this moment and stand before Him.

His Torah insists that teshuva is, in the end, a single turn. And then, as he writes here of the holy goat whose horns no longer reach the sky, go outside when evening falls and look up. The stars are waiting for us to begin the melody.

—*Elul* 5786

ESSAYS

The Dance of Teshuva

AFTER THE JEWISH PEOPLE had sinned in their worship of the Golden Calf, God told them that “I will not go up in your midst for thou art a stiff-necked people.” Their response is described by the Torah: “And when the people heard these evil tidings, they mourned...” This act of repentance resulted in God’s subsequent forgiveness of their act, and the terrible decree was rescinded.

When Moshe told them that their complicity in the sin of those who had gone to spy out the land of Canaan and brought back an evil report had so angered God that He would not allow them to enter the land, “the people mourned greatly.” Yet, this act of mourning failed to gain them pardon; the punishment of their death in the great desert had been irrevocably sealed.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshischa was puzzled by the apparent contradiction. If mourning is a genuine response of repentance, why were they not forgiven in this second sin? His perplexity was sharpened by the fact that we are told that they “mourned greatly” and, therefore, their act of repentance seems to have been marked by an even greater depth of contrition. Nonetheless, it proved to no avail.

His answer is in the form of a parable that speaks to the very nature of repentance, and indeed, to the very nature of the service of God:

Imagine a person who was seized with emotional ecstasy and in his passion began to dance. Every step of his dance is a wondrous expression of his deepest, most genuine feelings. The mo-

ment of joy that spontaneously wells up in his soul expresses itself in the physical movement of the dance. So too, feelings of anguish and sadness find their outlet in the movement of his feet. Though he dances with his body, it is truly his soul that is dancing. He needs no orchestra to accompany him; his melody is that of his very self. What a dance he dances!

The moment departs and the soul has choreographed its expression. The dancer returns to the world and its humdrum rhythm. Yet, there comes a time when circumstances demand that he dance once again. This time, however, he dances not a new dance, but rather the steps of his first dance. The second time it is less the dance of the soul and more the dance of memory. The steps are the same but the soul is not, for the soul can never repeat itself. In order to somehow regain the depth of that first time, the dancer will dance with even greater energy, whirling in a frenzied attempt to reach the pinnacle of his first passion. No matter how beautiful such a dance may be to the observer, it fails in the heart of the dancer. He is not dancing truth; he is dancing imitation. The soul cannot repeat itself but must always find new words.

When the people sinned the first time and heard of the punishment, they knew anguish and remorse deep within themselves. A dirge of the soul welled up from within and expressed itself in their mourning. Such mourning, such an essential expression of remorse, moved God to forgiveness. The second time they sinned they already knew the dance of mourning; they already knew that it could gain expiation. Of course, they now “mourned greatly”—it was the second dance. Yet, the desired forgiveness was not forthcoming. The mourning was the same; the dance had become habit. When we dance out of habit, we may leap with the greatest of energy but it is our feet that move. Our soul is dormant.

The difficulty of teshuva is that we have done it before. It is no

different than the difficulty we face in the performance of any and every mitzvah. The rabbis tell us that our acts of mitzvah should be new each day. They were warning us of the danger of habit, of mere repetition. We pray the same prayer every day, three times a day. Are we able to make it new each time? Do we even know that it must be made new?

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a *chasid* of Rabbi Simcha Bunim once said:

He who prays today because he prayed yesterday and who will pray tomorrow because he prayed today is a wicked person.

The Kotzker's words sound harsh and perhaps they are. But let us not hide behind this as an excuse to come to grips with the problem he was addressing. It is that of habit. And let us try, try very hard, not to examine this problem as we habitually do. If we succeed, we will be able to beat our hearts in contrition as we recite the familiar litany of our sins with a new dance of our hand, a new beat of our heart.

The Joy of Repentance

THE HOLY SEER, the *Chozeh* of Lublin, once called his *chasidim* together after prayer and told them:

I had great pleasure today in prayer. When I entreated God to “cause us to return in complete repentance before You,” I thought to add the words “in joy.”

Many people find repentance to be a great burden, an experience so painful that, though they speak of it often, they avoid it always. It means the dragging out and dredging up of our faults, mistakes, and, above all, tragedy. It conjures up for them the futility and waste that has been so much a part of their lives. Thus, while they will study the laws of repentance, buy books on the subject, and attend countless lectures about it, they never get around to actually doing it. In truth, they are like the person who refuses to remove a painful splinter because its very removal will cause pain. No matter that splinters of the soul, when not removed, will cause spiritual infection—it just hurts too much.

Perhaps this is precisely what the *Chozeh* was trying to address in his remark to the *chasidim* that morning in Lublin. Yes, we may pay a price in deep pain, but that price can be paid in joy. A woman must experience deep pain in bringing life into the world. Yet, it is a pain that is bound up with the joy of birth; it is the pain of ecstasy rather than tragedy. The process of repentance is one in which

we birth ourselves anew; in which we bring forth a cleansed and uninfected soul. Creation always takes place in suffering but it is a suffering that is shot through with triumphant joy.

Among the *chasidim* gathered around the *Chozeh* when he tried to teach this lesson, there may have stood his disciple Simcha Bunim, the pharmacist of Pshischa. Years later, when he succeeded his other master, the Holy Jew (*Yehudi Hakadosh*), as rebbe, he made a comment on the issue of repentance. It echoes that of the *Chozeh*:

The great tragedy of life is not that we sin, for sin is part of life, and there is none who can avoid it. That is the way we are—frail and weak and beset by powerful drives and urges. No, sin is not the great tragedy. It is that at any moment we have the capacity to return in repentance and ... we choose not to. That, I say to you, is the true tragedy of life.

Lord, grant me the strength to hear the words of the *Chozeh*, and of Reb Simcha Bunim. Merciful Father, help me find the courage to put this book down at this moment and stand before You that I might purify myself in Your loving forgiveness. Let their words pierce my soul as a call of love that brings forth the labor of birth— of my birth.

The Stars Don't Sing

REPENTANCE IS OFTENTIMES seen as setting right what we have done wrong. In truth, however, it allows us to focus both on the value of time and the possibilities of what we might accomplish were we not so taken up with sin. In this sense, the act of teshuva has a powerful liberating effect on the whole direction of life.

The Kotzker Rebbe once asked his *chasidim* why it is that man should not sin. All suggested answers were quickly brushed aside by the Rebbe and when no more opinions were forthcoming, he said to them:

Now, I shall tell you why you must not sin. It is simply because there is so much to be done and sin is the wasting of time. To waste time is to waste life. That, man must not do.

The idea Rabbi Menachem Mendel was trying to express was once formulated by a philosopher who said that he found it strange that men could imagine that one could “kill time” without doing damage to eternity. Eternity is made up of the use of our time in the here and now. How, then, can we waste it?

The Kotzker spent the last 20 years of his life in a solitary, mysterious seclusion in a room that adjoined the *beit midrash* in Kotzk. He received few visitors and only rarely left this room. One time, however, he entered the *beit midrash* to ask a strange question and

give an even stranger answer. It is the closest he came to explaining the secret that lay behind his withdrawal from the world. As we ask ourselves the question of what we are doing and accomplishing in the world, let us listen to the strange tale of the holy goat.

“Tell me who I am,” the Rebbe challenged his *chasidim*.

The *chasidim* were confused and frightened by both the Rebbe’s question and his extreme agitation but a few managed to stammer out:

“Why, you are our Rebbe...”

“No, no,” cried the Rebbe and then he grew silent and appeared to be lost in thought.

Finally, he raised his head and said: “I will tell you who I am. I am the holy goat.” And he told them the story of the holy goat.

Once upon a time, a Jew was walking through a field when he came upon a goat. Of course, there would be nothing noteworthy in that but this goat was extremely peculiar.

Its horns stretched up and up, high up into the sky. Though something was very odd about this, the Jew sensed that the goat was a gentle creature and he reached out to feel the texture of its horns. They felt and looked like the finest ivory, something he had only heard about from somebody who had once travelled to the farthest lands.

“Tell me,” he said to the goat, “what these horns of yours are for. You must realize that I’ve never seen such horns before in my life.”

“You are right,” said the goat. “I am the only goat with such horns and they were given to me because I have a special mission to perform. You see, each night when darkness falls and the stars come out, it is my task to raise my head and to brush the stars with my horns. When I do this the stars begin to sing.”

The Jew thought about this answer for a minute and then said to the goat, “I wonder if you might do me a small favor. You see,

I've never seen such wondrous horns. Would you allow me to cut off a small piece that I might carve of it a snuff box. You can't imagine how happy this would make me."

Unhesitatingly, the goat lowered its horns and welcomed the Jew to fulfil his request. The Jew hurried home and spent the day fashioning a snuff box. Naturally, he brought it to the synagogue the next morning and after prayers offered his fellow congregants a pinch of snuff from his new snuff box. Of course, they were all astounded at its beauty and complimented it as the most magnificent snuff box that had ever existed. And, of course, they all wanted to know where he had obtained it. Hardly had he finished telling them the story when they all rushed from the synagogue in search of this goat, this holy goat. The news spread like wildfire and Jews from all over were to be seen rushing pell-mell in search of the holy goat, each one carrying a pocket knife to get snuff box material.

Many a Jew found the goat in its wanderings; many a time it lowered its horns; and many a beautiful snuff box was fashioned.

The goat still wanders the world. When evening falls and the stars come out, the goat still raises its head so that its horns may brush them and make them sing. But its horns have become snuff boxes. They no longer reach up into the star-filled heaven. And the stars no longer sing.

"Who am I," repeated the Rebbe. "I am the goat, the holy goat."

The Kotzker rushed back into his room, closed the door, and was once again silent.

Teshuva is realizing how we give ourselves away and squander our potential to make the stars burst forth in song, to make the world a different, more joyful, and holy place. When repentance is full and arises from deep in the heart, a miracle takes place.

The horns regenerate and our heads can again be lifted to the most noble of tasks. Teshuva means to return both to God and to ourselves.

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth His handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night declareth knowledge.

Come, let us go out in the dark and look at the heavens and the fullness thereof. Come, let us wander forth when evening falls and look at the stars. They are waiting for us to begin the melody.

Watchmen

WE HAVE THINGS, countless things, to do. All of them are so important and we always seem to find ourselves running late. Burdened with all the “musts” of our life, it seems that we never have time to halt our frenetic rush and step back to examine exactly what it is we are doing. Indeed, such a course of inaction seems to smack of a frivolous waste of time.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto notes this tendency in his classical ethical work *Mesillat Yesharim* and states that this attitude is rooted deep in the evil urge. There is a tendency, an inclination, within us that is essentially self-destructive. It provides us with both rational and emotional arguments that conclusively prove that we have no time to stop what we are doing and ask the simple questions:

Why? For what? For whom?

Stop reading for a minute and think of a friend whom you know to be a workaholic. Isn't it clear that in all his activity he is, in fact, escaping from the really important things in life and, though his life is full, it is not a full life? Doesn't it cause you to sigh in sadness and remind him of the advice of Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshischa to the effect that a man who doesn't have an hour in the day to call his own is no man?

The moment at which we take the courage to heed this advice for ourselves is the moment at which we can begin the process of repentance. Teshuva cannot begin if we do not stop what we are doing,

stop totally and completely, and ask ourselves those simple questions. And, as Hillel adjures us to ask ourselves, “if not now, when”?

Tomorrow? Next year? When this project is done, this course finished, this relationship resolved, this degree gained, this deal closed?

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, but tomorrow never comes. Rabbi Yosef Hurwitz, the Alter of Novardok, once observed:

People who live for tomorrow really have no life at all. They have given up today for tomorrow and ... every tomorrow becomes a today.

When we convince ourselves that what we are doing is so critical and important, it is no wonder that we fail to find time to step back and question. This failure does not serve our interest but is, rather, a form of spiritual suicide. Rabbi Simcha Bunim, who was a lumber merchant in Danzig and a pharmacist before becoming a rebbe and, thus, knew the world very well, told the following story:

A king purchased a most expensive and magnificent horse and, because he wanted to guard it, built a special stable and hired a watchman. One evening the king had difficulty sleeping and decided to take a walk in the palace grounds. When he passed by the stable, he noticed that the watchman seemed to be deep in thought.

“What are you thinking about?” asked the king.

“I was wondering where the plaster goes in the spot where a nail is driven into a wall,” responded the watchman.

The king was puzzled by this concern but decided that he was now sufficiently tired to fall asleep and, so, returned to the castle. However, sleep again escaped him and he decided to go out once more. When he came to the stable, he found the watchman still deep in thought.

“Are you still thinking about the plaster?” asked the king.

“No,” replied the watchman. “Now I’m trying to figure out what happens to the dough that should be in the center of the doughnut. Where does it go?”

Again the king returned to his bed, again he could not sleep, again he took a stroll, and again he found the watchman deep in thought.

“What now?” asked the king.

“This time,” answered the watchman, “there is something truly strange and perplexing. Here I am guarding the horse. There is the barn and it is locked. How is it, then, that the horse is gone?”

That is the way it is with us. We are on the job constantly and, yet, we are failing in our mission. We have neglected to ask ourselves the one important question, the only question we should be asking. What am I supposed to be doing? When all is said and done, when morning dawns, we find that the horse is gone. Our pursuits in life are in reality no more significant than the watchman’s pointless reveries and deflect us from the truly significant. Why is it that we laugh at the watchman’s foolishness and then return to our everyday affairs? Why don’t we ask ourselves what it is that we are supposed to be guarding?

It once happened that Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz was unable to sleep and decided to take a walk. He came to a section of town that had a lot of warehouses and noticed somebody else walking back and forth in front of a building.

“I suppose that you are a watchman,” said the Rabbi. “Tell me, who is your master?”

The watchman answered the Rabbi’s question and they talked briefly, after which Reb Naftali took his leave and walked on. He had taken but a few paces when the watchman called

after him and asked: "Now you tell me who is your master. For whom do you work?"

The question took Rabbi Naftali by surprise and he stood silent for a few moments. Finally, he said: "Tell me, would you be willing to work for me?"

"What kind of work are you suggesting?" asked the watchman. "What would you have me do?"

"Your job," answered the Rabbi, "would be to ask me the question you just asked. Your job would be to remind me."

The prophet Isaiah long ago formulated the central question that must be asked before man is capable of repentance. It is the need to find within ourselves Rabbi Naftali's watchman and to strip ourselves of the illusion that we are on guard when we live our lives as the watchman in Rabbi Simcha Bunim's parable:

*Watchman, what of the night?
Watchman, what of the night?
The watchman said, The morning
cometh, and also the night:
if ye will inquire, inquire ye:
return, come.*

The Gates of Tears

‘**T**HE GATES OF TEARS are not closed.”

Rabbi Simcha Bunim asked: “If these heavenly gates are never closed, what need is there for them?”

He answered: “The gates are necessary if we entreat heaven with false tears. Then they are closed.”

False tears are those that we shed when we recognize the error of our ways but do not resolve to truly change. It is not enough to know what we have done wrong; it is not enough to recognize failure. We must also resolve to set things right. We must also devise a plan for future avoidance of past mistakes.

False tears are those that are shed in unmitigated bitterness since they deal only with the past. Tears of truth, on the other hand, are always a mixture of profound remorse and joy. Yes, we are deeply grieved at the past; however, we are equally filled with happiness at the future we shall live.

Many people find themselves trapped by turning only to the past; they cannot imagine that there is another direction, the future, that beckons and awaits them. They feel that wherever they go, they will be weighed down by the burden of past actions for which there is no escape. Yet, the meaning of teshuva is just that. There is a way that we can shed this unbearable burden, that life can become unfettered by the luggage of sin. It is the way of repentance; it is the future that awaits the penitent. Maimonides states:

Repentance brings near those who were distant. Yesterday was this man hateful before God—despicable, distant, and abominable. But today he is beloved and cherished, near and dear.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov was concerned that man not fall into despair about the future when he considers his past and present. He taught:

If you believe that it is possible to ruin,
Believe that it is possible to set aright.

The meaning of sin is that our actions are not inconsequential; that nothing we do is insignificant. Were that true, we would not suffer from the evil we have wrought. However, this very realization should inspire us with confidence. What we do counts! We can fix that which we have broken; we can repair that which we have ruined. Everything is in our power; everything is in our hands. The meaning of teshuva is that our actions are not inconsequential; that nothing we do is insignificant. Our tears must be an admixture of both ingredients.

Days of Awe are approaching. Days of repentance are drawing near. Let us pray that the tears of our prayers have been forged in the crucible of truth. Let us act now that they might be. Let us learn to cry.

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner was wont to say:

A Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur *machzor* that is not stained with tears is like a Passover haggadah that is not stained with wine. It has not been used.

Beginnings

TESHUVA means to return—to return to God, to ourselves, and to the beginning. The Sages expressed this last point when they said that teshuva was created before the world. Absent the possibility of repentance, there would be no possibility of the world itself. Teshuva is the very framework of the meaning of creation in which the world strives to return to its divine source.

Oftentimes, people are convinced of the futility of any effort to return to the beginning. They feel that they have journeyed so far down the path of sin that they are helplessly lost in a maze of their own making. Trapped by the web of their actions, any attempt to get out, to get back, is doomed to fail. Yet, the message of teshuva is precisely that there is never a point of no return. Teshuva is that miracle hidden in creation in which the arrow of time can be reversed. It allows us to travel back in time and start anew.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once asked his *chasidim* why they found teshuva to be so difficult. They began to explain, to offer the well-known rationalizations but the Rebbe cut them short.

“Difficult, you say! I’ll show you just how difficult it is.”

He then turned his back to them and said, “that is how difficult it is. It’s nothing more than turning your back.”

The Kotzker did not mean that in teshuva one ignores the past. Indeed, such a proposition would be the height of absurdity. He

was trying to teach something about the difficulty people find with doing teshuva. He was trying to say that people are falsely convinced that, having set themselves a life direction based on their past, they are then condemned to the path chosen. In this they err. Man can always choose the diametrically opposite path. He can always turn his back and move in another direction.

However, we should here take note of a warning sounded by the Alter of Novardok which we will translate into more recognizable geographic terms.

Imagine a man who boards a train in Chicago bound for New York. When the conductor comes to collect his ticket, he informs him that he has gotten on a train heading west toward Los Angeles. What does the flustered traveller do? He gets up and begins walking down the train's aisle, walking east in the direction of New York.

"How foolish is that man," exclaimed the Alter. "He will never get to his destination unless he gets off the train and boards one going east."

It is not enough to make a movement in the opposite direction if we continue to allow ourselves to be surrounded by all the circumstances of the past which continue to hurtle us into the future. Teshuva may well require a life accounting which deems that we get off the train. This, of course, is no small dilemma in many instances. It is no small matter to jump off a moving train. In answer to this, it can only be said that if one's life is at stake he will jump off that train.

Furthermore, we have the capacity to slow down the train of our life in stages such that our jump will result in a soft landing. Sometimes radical breaks with the past are such that they do not take hold and the person is listed as a casualty in the teshuva statistics. The phenomenon of the teshuva drop-out is well known in the present

age. Unfortunately, it is not so well known to those who have always been religious, among the so-called “frum from birth.”

However, that is mainly due to a complacency which afflicts them, a complacency which leads them to devalue the importance of repentance in their lives. This illusion has led the Orthodox community to create the classification of “*baalei teshuva*” and “frum from birth”; that somewhat odious distinction between the “BT” and the “FFB.” In reality, since we all sin, since we all do wrong, anybody who is not a *baal teshuva* cannot be considered a truly religious person. It is only the effect of pernicious complacency that allows people to apply the duck analogy to themselves. If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and swims like a duck—then it must be a duck. Substitute the word religious for duck and you have the reason that many religious people see no need for teshuva. Our looks are deceptive not only to others, but to ourselves as well.

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Izhbitz once commented on the issue of making new beginnings:

The first word in the Torah is *bereishit* which means “in the beginning.” However, it can also be translated as “with beginning.” We must know that it is “with beginning that God created heaven and earth.” The essence of creation is the reality of beginnings. As God constantly renews the creation, so too is the capacity of the new beginning granted man and the world.

Torah is the map which God has given us to find our way about in the world. The coordinates of this divinely drawn map are always marked with beginnings. It has no point at which beginnings are ruled out of its bounds.

Why is this so? It is simply because wherever and however a person falls, he always falls into God’s embrace. And in God’s embrace we are always able to begin anew.

Another possible translation of *bereishit* was offered by the Lechivitzer Rebbe:

“For the sake of the beginning God created heaven and earth.”
God asks only that we make a beginning in the proper direction. If we find the strength to do that, He will help us to proceed on the right path. This is the secret of the first fruits, grain, and cattle that are offered unto Him. It is also the reason that the first part of our every day is offered up in prayer to God.

Our Sages teach that God wants man to return and so says unto him:

If you but open unto me as the eye of the needle, I will open unto you as the entrance to the Temple.

The gates of the Temple open wide. It is not hard for man to enter through them and find himself in God’s holy Temple. It is only as hard as opening ourselves a needle-eye’s width.

Beginnings, always beginnings. There is no end, no end of beginnings.

Out of the Depths

REPENTANCE is connected, first and foremost, to the emotional dimension of the human soul. While the intellectual aspect of self plays a role in the process, it is the affective dimension that must grip man and sweep him up in the storm of teshuva. The Musar movement, founded by Rav Yisrael Salanter, recognized the frailty of the intellect when it stands alone against the force of sin. This position was formulated by Rav Yisroel in the introduction to his classic *Iggeret HaMusar*:

For fantasy is a raging river
and the intellect will drown . . .
Unless we carry it in a boat.
It is the ship of the
spirit's passion
and the
soul's whirlwind.

We deceive ourselves when we locate the reason for sin in a rational, philosophical nexus. While this cannot be discounted, it is most often but a screen behind which lies the true motive of sin. Philosophical doubt serves as a wonderful mask covering the deeper feelings of anger, fantasy, and depression which make sin so attractive and alluring. However, it is in the nature of this mask that the actor himself fails to realize that he is even wearing one.

Indeed, the word “person” in English is derived from the Latin *persona* which means mask.

Psychology has amply detailed the forces of repression and self-censorship which we use to hide our true motives from ourselves. Thus, in order to change we must gain more than an intellectual appreciation of the truth. We must experience a welling up of the deeper forces of the emotions in order to combat those subconscious emotional forces which control us below the surface of awareness. That is why therapists place a box of Kleenex next to their patient’s seat. Its use is an indication that therapy is succeeding.

Teshuva is an act of therapy, a powerful catharsis which man is asked to perform on himself. It cannot be effected unless we bring the “passion of the spirit and the whirlwind of the soul” into play.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once announced that he would be interviewing candidates to blow the shofar in his synagogue during the Rosh HaShanah service. Of course, aspiring applicants came from near and far. Who would not covet the merit of blowing the shofar in the presence of that great tzadik? Though they were able to demonstrate a profound grasp of the mystical meanings of the shofar, the Rebbe rejected them all. None was deemed worthy of performing this great act.

Finally, a man of plain appearance and dress appeared before him and submitted himself for consideration for the position. The Rebbe asked him to explain the intentions he had when blowing the shofar.

“Rabbi, I am a simple Jew, as simple as my appearance would suggest,” answered the man. “I have no knowledge of the special intentions of the mystics. However, I have four daughters of marriageable age and when I blow the shofar I think the following:

‘Master of the universe, as I am doing Your will in sounding

the shofar, so may You do my will and help me to marry my daughters in dignity to honorable men.”

“You shall blow the shofar in my synagogue,” said the Rebbe.

Inasmuch as the shofar represents a call to repentance, to a genuine outpouring of the heart, this intention must be preferred. Its expression of ultimate dependence upon God is such that the sound produced will rise out of the heart and speak to the heart. It is there that the intent of teshuva lies, rather than in an intricate tapestry of intellectual elegance.

God has no need to hear our sins. God has no need to understand the analysis of their roots. Man does. To what purpose? Surely, it can only be that we will be able to not merely affirm that God is He who “knowest all thoughts” but rather to cry it from the depths of our souls. If we are not there in the totality of ourselves, what have we accomplished?

Where Am I?

WHEN UNDERSTOOD as a record of past events, no matter how important, Torah is always misunderstood. History is something that we stand outside of; it remains a tale of an-other. Torah is more than important; it is significant. Though we have grown weary of the Madison Avenue hyperbole that attaches “significance” to that which is basically trivial, the term denotes something that we should ponder. It indicates a reality that should serve as a sign, a critical mark, in our approach to the affairs of life. It is in this sense that Torah is significant, rather than merely important and why it must be read as my story, rather than his-story.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, the author of the Tanya, the classic work of Hasidic thought, and first Rebbe in the Lubavitch dynasty, suffered greatly at the hands of the opponents of Hasidism. Several times he was imprisoned by the Russian authorities following denunciations brought by the Mitnagdim that he was a dangerous subversive.

Once he was visited in his cell by the prison warden who asked:

“Rabbi, I am a man who reads the Bible regularly and with great interest. I ponder its difficult passages and try to understand their meaning. Yet, there is one question that I have never been able to resolve. I know that guilty or innocent of the crime of which you are accused, you are a learned man. Perhaps you can help me with my question.”

“I will do my best,” said the Rebbe. “What is your question?”

“It concerns the story of the first sin,” answered the warden whose name has not come down to us but whom we shall call Ivan Andreyovich. “After Adam had sinned he hid among the trees of the Garden, and God asked him, ‘Where art thou?’ Why did God ask him this question? Surely He knew where Adam was.”

“No, you misunderstand,” replied the Rebbe. “God is asking you, Ivan: ‘Where art thou?’ You are 37 years old, a subject of the Czar, and the warden of a prison but God says to you: ‘Ivan Andreyovich, where art thou?’”

When we read Torah as my-story, when we recognize its ultimate significance, we hear the question addressed to us. After we sin, we hide in the forests of our making that we might escape and ignore the consequences of our deed. But the voice of God tells us that there is only one response that we should have to sin. It is to ask ourselves the question that Adam was asked. It is to know that God asks us this question. We may delude ourselves into feeling safe in our escape but, in truth, we do not really know where we are as long as we think ourselves safely hidden.

A story is attributed to Rabbi Aharon of Karlin:

There was once a man who was so forgetful and absent-minded that it was difficult for him to get dressed in the morning. He could never remember where he had put his clothing, his glasses, or his keys. One day he had an idea to solve his predicament. Before he went to sleep at night, as he undressed, he wrote down all the details of the whereabouts of all these items and tied the slip of paper to his wrist. What a pleasure the next morning was. He dressed quickly by following the information he had recorded and was filled with joy at the ease

of it all. However, as he was about to leave his house, he was suddenly filled with a sense of foreboding and dread. He had forgotten to complete the list; he had left one item out and he didn't know where it was. He hadn't written down where he was and he couldn't find himself.

We have the world under control. We have programmed our lives with lists and calendars. We know what to do and when to do it. But we don't know where we are. And because we don't know where we are, we don't know who we are. Adam's story is mine. God asks me the question. It is the question that introduces teshuva. Any other question will not find us in the answer.

The modern response to this question is to define ourselves through others. I am this person's son, that person's employer, and a third person's neighbor. I am better than this acquaintance and more talented than that classmate. When I define right, whether the issue is that of dress fashion, or ethics, I always look to others to see what they are doing. What a sad travesty of the genuine self this is. Can it ever provide me with a genuine answer? Am I not thereby saying that I would be nonexistent in a world of sensory deprivation?

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk said:

If I am I because I am I
and you are you
because you are you,
then I am I
and you are you.

But, if I am I
because you are you,
and you are you

because I am I,
the I am not I
and you are not you.

Teshuva begins in the moment that we find the courage to stand
naked before God and ourselves and ask ourselves:

What am I?
What is my life?

Our hiding in the forest is when we stand surrounded by others
and use them as trees to answer that question.

Entering the Words

IT IS NOT ENOUGH to mouth the words of repentance. They must be entered into with a fullness of heart and represent a resolution of the soul. Indeed, in the list of sins that we confess on Yom Kippur, we take note of that “sin which we have committed before Thee with the confession of the mouth.” What we are herein confessing is the act of the insincere confession of our misdeeds, that which issues from our lips, but not from our heart.

On the other hand, we are enjoined to verbalize our sins, and teshuva remains unfulfilled if we fail to do so. No matter how deeply we feel remorse and resolve concerning our past and future actions, halacha demands that we must say this out loud and deems feelings alone as insufficient to express repentance.

Thus it is that teshuva is complete only when it expresses itself in the duality of an inner and outer component. The deepest feelings of the heart must be poured out through the medium of speech. The absence of either component renders the process insufficient and ineffectual. In a sense, then, teshuva is an analog to prayer which demands direction of the heart wedded to speech. In many ways the difficulty of teshuva is the difficulty of prayer: we can say the words but we are not in them.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev once approached his fellow congregants after morning prayer and greeted them with

a hearty welcome, a *sholom aleichem*, such as is reserved for a stranger newly arrived in the community. When questioned about this odd behavior he replied:

“But you have just arrived from faraway. One of you was in the market in Warsaw, another in Vilna visiting a relative, a third in the governor’s office... Your bodies were here in the synagogue, but you were not.”

It is told that Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once questioned a *chasid* about the nature of his intentions during prayer. The *chasid* entered a long exposition of the profound mystical devotions he tried to bear in mind while praying.

The Kotzker seemed unable to contain himself and finally shouted, “but where is your stomach?”

Man must bring the totality of himself to prayer. His words alone are not enough. And, the Kotzker teaches us, his intellect alone is not enough. Indeed, the intellect may serve as a screen behind which we hide. Teshuva, like prayer, is the moment in which we stand before God. That moment must be one of self-revelation and not self-concealment. When we say the words we must be in them.

Moshe Borochovitz was a simple Jew from Zelichow near Warsaw.

“What did that Moshe Borochovitz do?... He was hidden for a long time in a desolate village, in a bunker. Most of his family had been destroyed: his wife and daughter; his sisters and their children. Together with them and their fellow Jews all the synagogues, all the prayer books, all the prayer shawls were destroyed.

This Jew was afraid that the world might remain without a siddur and then it surely would revert to primordial chaos ...

While living in the bunker, Moshe Borochovitz decided to

write a new siddur, to write it by hand in the letters of a *Sefer Torah*. This siddur would also serve as a memorial to his family who had been killed for the sanctification of God's name. It would also be his own memorial—should death be decreed upon him.

However, his major intention was 'that the world not remain without a siddur.' He obtained paper, ink, and a pen and throughout many months remained in his hiding place and wrote the siddur on long, wide sheets in the holy script used for the writing of a *Sefer Torah*. Between the prayers, and, at times, in the very text of the prayers themselves, he noted in many places the names of the holy martyrs of his family."

This description of the siddur by H. Leivick in *Mit Der Shearis HaPleita* leaves us with a question. Why did Moshe Borocho-vitz put the names where he put them? Surely, they belong in the foreword or postscript. But let us remember that he was the last, doomed Jew and that he was trying to save the world. A siddur can save the world only if there are Jews to pray from it. To pray from a siddur means to enter the words of prayer, to reflect at its junctures, and at times to stop in the middle and ask myself if I am in the prayer.

Moshe Borochovitz, on his selfless task to save a world that had murdered his people and was to take his life, knew the secrets of the world's survival. It is simply that prayer lives on through us and we live on through prayer.

The siddur is found in the archives of the Yitzchak Katzenelson Ghetto Fighters Museum. Let us read a page that the world might survive...

The Bridge to Teshuva

IT WAS ALMOST the end of basic training and everybody was looking forward to being discharged, leaving the rigors of army life, and getting home. The activity coming up did not seem too difficult. What could be hard about watching a movie about first aid, particularly after a grueling day in the field? Yet, the graphic depiction of what war is really about, the celluloid sight of what the bullets fired on the shooting range could actually do to a human being, left us silent and speechless. The movie ended and not a sound was to be heard—the silence was as pure and deep as silence can be.

Someone began to sing in a slow and mournful melody the words of a song we all knew but had never really sung as it should be sung.

*The whole world is but
a very narrow bridge,
a very narrow bridge,
a very narrow bridge...*

*And the essence,
And the essence,
Is not to fear,
not to fear
at all.*

The song seemed to go on endlessly and even the hardened drill officers knew that this was something not to be interrupted

with harsh commands. It was in its own way a moment of military maturity.

In a sense, that experience was pregnant with teshuva. For what is teshuva if not the recognition of the meaning of what we have done and what we are doing? However, the relationship of these words to the root of repentance are deeper even than that. Their essential connection to teshuva becomes clear when we examine their source in the famous teaching of the “narrow bridge” in the *Likkutei Moharan* of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. When we do so, we note that the song leaves out two letters of the original Hebrew, two letters that make a profound difference. Let us listen to Rabbi Nachman as he addresses us:

One must be extremely stubborn in the service of God not to abandon one’s place, that is, the little bit of his service that he has begun, come what may. Remember this well, for you will need it when you begin the smallest part of God’s service. Tremendous stubbornness is necessary to be strong and brave; to take hold of one’s self and maintain one’s position even if he is always being pushed down.

For it is well known that there are times when one is pushed down from God’s service. Nonetheless, he must do that which is his; accomplish that which he is able in His service and not allow himself to fall totally. Indeed, it is necessary to experience all these fallings, going downs, and confusions before one enters the gates of holiness. All the true *tzadikim* experienced this.

Know that one may be at the entrance of holiness only to retreat because of these confusions. For when he is near the door, the evil urge rises up against him in power, in great and awesome strength. It will not allow him to enter and as a result he retreats.

That is the way of Satan, of the “other side.” When it sees a man so very close to the gates of holiness, so close that he has al-

most entered, it envelops him with very great power. Therefore, one then needs a great strengthening against it.

We heard from a true *tzadik* who said that if someone had but said to him at the inception of his service of God:

“Brother, be strong; take hold of yourself... I would have run and acted with great alacrity in His service, may He be blessed.”

For all this happened to him, but he heard no encouragement from anyone.

Therefore, he who would enter the service of God should always remember this well. Strengthen yourself greatly and do what you can in His service. In the plenitude of days and years you will assuredly enter the gates of holiness with His help. For God is full of mercy and truly wants your service.

Know that all the movements that you take away from the purely physical and toward His service gather and join, bind together and come to your aid when necessary. That moment is when there is some difficulty and time of trouble.

Know that man must pass over on a very narrow bridge and the rule and the essence is that one must not make himself afraid at all.

Rabbi Nachman’s teaching is a counsel against despair. He is telling us that the nature of the religious life is such that the path to success, to entering the gates of holiness, is inevitably fraught with a series of failures. We ascend toward God only to fall. We pick ourselves up and begin the climb again but we fall once more. This can happen with such frequency that we give up; we no longer try to pick ourselves up but let ourselves fall all the way without trying to catch hold and stop our slide. This downward path has a name: It is sin.

The important point is to never give up. First, we should be aware that this process cannot be avoided. The way to the pinnacle never rises in a straight line, but, rather, in a series of ups and

downs. The critical issue is that in our backslidings we stop ourselves and hold on to a point higher than our previous low. The power to do this comes only when we do not lose sight of that which we have, in fact, accomplished. We must never say that all our past service must be meaningless because we now find ourselves falling. We must always know that the failings of sin do not render the good we have accomplished worthless. To hold on to the good, to not allow depression to take hold, is the secret of arresting the slide. It is the acceptance of the reality of teshuva that enables us to return and gain even higher ground.

And Rabbi Nachman lets us in on a secret. Even the greatest *tzadik* goes through this process and reaches his level only because he doesn't give up. However, this lesson is rarely taught. We are not told about the inevitability of failure and, therefore, all too often imagine that its presence proves that we will never become *tzadikim*. This despair is the final victory of the forces of evil. It is our final retreat from the field of battle. Yet, how sad all this is. How tragic it is that we picture the *tzadik* as a person who does not have to struggle and in his struggle to deal with defeat. The *tzadik* becomes who he is by continuing the struggle in spite of his defeat. He is the man of teshuva.

Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorki once defined the meaning of a *chasid*. He said:

A *chasid* is a fighter.

He never gives up.

What then did Rabbi Nachman mean by the metaphor of the world as a narrow bridge? Imagine someone who suffers from fear of heights. If asked to walk a straight line within an area five inches wide on the ground, he will be able to do so without veering from the specified boundary. However, if a long plank is raised 50 feet

from the ground and placed as a bridge between two points, he will fall. The foot-bridges of the Andes are a death warrant for him. The objective reality of the path has not changed; it is just as wide. What has changed is the subjective perception in his psyche.

There is no such thing as objective terror. The difference between the coward and the hero is not something outside of them but, rather, something internal. The world does not make us afraid; the world is not that which terrorizes us. We make ourselves afraid; we terrorize ourselves. Rabbi Nachman's language is precise and contains the essence of survival in the struggle to get across this world to the gates of holiness on the other side. The rule is not "not to fear" but "not to make oneself afraid." Failure is not what the world does to us; it is what we do to ourselves.

Sin, in all the power of its failing and falling, does not make us give up. The gates of holiness can be reached if we but hold on as we are slipping. Yes, we will have to pull ourselves up. But as sin is within our grasp, so is repentance. Everything, from triumphant victory to abject defeat, lies within us. We must learn not to paralyze ourselves with demons of our own making. Thereby, we will be able to traverse the very narrow bridge that is the world.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk expressed this truth in a majestic parable:

All souls are sent down from heaven to this world on a ladder. When they alight and grasp the nature of the world, they want to go back, to return home to heaven. However, while they can see the bottom of the ladder, it has been raised such that they cannot simply step on it and begin the climb back.

They begin to jump and find that it cannot be reached by their leaping. Many give up and accept their fate; indeed, they wander far, far away from the ladder in exploration of a world that can't be escaped. Others continue to jump in hope of grab-

bing hold of the ladder's bottom, but after repeated failure they, too, resign themselves.

But there are some souls that never give up; that never stop their jumping. Notwithstanding the fact that the ladder always eludes them, they leap up incessantly and never admit defeat. When God looks down from heaven and sees how they yearn to return, He takes pity on them in His infinite mercy. At that moment, the ladder is lowered and they are able to climb back home to their source.

Repentance is the soul's statement that it has not given up. We shall continue to leap heavenward. We shall continue to cross the narrowest of bridges. We refuse to be vanquished—to vanquish ourselves. We shall return.

The First 'Baal Teshuva'

THE FIRST *baal teshuva* in Jewish history is the first Jew. In his discovery of God he abandoned the life and culture in which he had been raised as he turned to the One God. His repentance is the classic paradigm for that of his descendants through countless generations. It is our model, though we inhabit a world far different from his.

How was it that a man named Abraham, born and raised in the pagan world of Ur of the Chaldees, came to hear the voice of God? What was it that so possessed this man that a voice which directed him to an unknown, indeed unnamed, land was heeded unquestioningly?

In vain will we search the Torah for an account of the psychogenetic, philosophical, or material factors that led him to a radical break with his past and caused him to desert his father's house. Remarkably verbose and detailed in other information concerning his life, the Torah maintains total silence on what is surely this most crucial of questions.

When the great *Chasidic* Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk was a young boy, he set out on a journey from his home in Tomashov to the court of the holy *Chozeh* (Seer) of Lublin. His father, an opponent of the *Chasidic* way, pursued his son and succeeded in catching up with him before he arrived in Lublin.

"Enough of this nonsense, Mendel," his father stormed, "this is not my way. I will not permit such madness and folly."

But the young Mendel was not to be dissuaded and replied with determination: "The Torah tells us 'This is my God and I will glorify Him; the God of my fathers and I will exalt him.' I have to find my God before I can find my father's God."

Chasidic legend does not record his father's response, if indeed, there was a reply. In any case, no reply could have countered the Kotzker's profound characterization of religious life. Man must find God, but he must do so in his own way. He may discover him in joy or sadness, in song or dirge. He may meet Him in the bustle of a great metropolis, and a "world that is too much with him" or in the loneliness of a desert night and the "sounds of silence." But it must be his God met; his God discovered. Otherwise, it may be only a memory encountered; a convention faced. The force of memory and convention will not; nay, cannot, call man to go forth from his land in heed of a voice calling him, only him.

So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with 12 yoke of oxen before him, and he with the 12th: and Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him.

And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee. And he said unto him, Go back again: for what have I done to thee?

Elisha's God was the God of his father and mother and, though he felt the divine presence in the prophet's mantle, he could not so easily leave his past. It was only when the old prophet said to him, "what have I done to thee?" that Elisha experienced the living God, rather than the God of memory. He is a God whose meeting so completely filled his life, whose encounter did something so fully to Elisha, that he was no longer the same Elisha.

And he returned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and they did eat. Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him.

When man truly meets his God, He does something to him. If He calls him to follow Him, he abandons the past without farewells; and sheds himself of possessions that have value only in his father's house.

Thus it is that the Torah tells us nothing of how Abraham first discovered God. Abraham's path to God is his path but it may not be mine or yours. Had the Torah not remained silent, had it revealed Abraham's path, we would have thought that this is the way to find God and would have followed in his footsteps, in his memory. But this would have been imitation and when truth is imitated, it becomes forgery. The God of truth cannot be found in that which is counterfeit.

I know only that Abraham found God.

And so must I.

I know only that Abraham repented.

And so must I.

The Baal Shem Tov asked:

Why do we say in prayer: "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob"? Why not merely say "the God of the Fathers"?

He answered: Each of the Fathers found God for himself. Isaac discovered God on his own and so, too, did Jacob.

Between Man and Man

‘AND GOD SAID to Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy birthplace, and from thy father’s house, unto the land that I will show thee.”

There is a special law within the world of teshuva that distinguishes between sins committed against our fellow man and those committed against God. Indeed, one may perform teshuva in all its details for sins against others but if we do not gain their forgiveness directly, the atonement of Yom Kippur does not apply to such sins. Perhaps this is related to the essence of the Jew as it was expressed by the first Jew, the first *baal teshuva*, Abraham.

Abraham was the first man who chose to wonder and in wonder met God. In finding God, he was also the first man who chose to wander and in wandering found man. Having discovered God’s omnipresence in His power and majesty, he was to discover man’s omnipresence in his need and destitution. Who truly loves God in his raiments of glory, must love man in his rags of poverty. Wherever he may go, he will find the Other watching over him; wherever he may go he will find an Other over whom no man watches.

The purely philosophical awareness of God must remain incomplete unless we are prepared to wander in search of his exiled children and grant them succor. It must remain incomplete unless we are prepared to remonstrate with God Himself on behalf of man. Thus, Abraham is the first man to pray and his first prayer is a militant quarrel with God. The subject: the fate of the sinful men of Sodom. Sinful, yet men.

II

As a child, I would listen in rapt attention to the tales of the holy Rabbi Israel who was known simply as the “Master of the Good Name,” the Baal Shem Tov. Here was a man who had wandered from his mysterious origins in the nowhere of the Carpathian Mountains (Where were they? East of Eden, west of Shangri-La, or on the road to Xanadu? As a child it was all the same.) and despite all the fame he was to gain, never ceased his endless wandering. The stories were always different—here he saved a poor man in a forgotten hamlet from oppression; there he delivered an entire community from the most terrible decree. He was a hero for all times, for all places; a veritable Elijah who could always be counted on to know where to go and to arrive in the nick of time to prevent disaster. I was thrilled by the stories of the Baal Shem Tov as others were thrilled by those of the Golem. The Baal Shem Tov, at least, was human.

Yet, that was not all. I marveled at the fact that, while every story was different, they all shared an identical opening chapter. The Baal Shem Tov would arise in the morning and instruct his coachman to prepare for a journey. When all was ready, the two would climb into the coach, the driver would turn to the holy Baal Shem Tov, and would ask the question all drivers ask of all passengers. “Where to, Master? Where are we going?”

The same question was always asked; the same answer was always given. “Let the horses run; our destination is where they stop.” Oh, how marvelous and miraculous and, at the same time, how fitting. Indeed, did I not know the Baal Shem well enough to expect that even his horses would be graced with holy prescience and would know exactly where and how fast to go?

As I grew older, perhaps more jaded, I came to doubt and question the authenticity of this detail.

Though still believing in the awesome power of the Baal Shem, I came to partially accept the *Mitnagdic* charge that many *Chasidic*

stories are spun at the loom of fairy tales. Adulthood taught me the truth of the pungent Yiddish aphorism that, when all is said and done “*a ferd bleibt a ferd*” (an ass always remains an ass). Even the horses of the Baal Shem Tov.

In my adult cynicism, I found myself becoming a literary critic and the questions multiplied. I understood why the Baal Shem Tov had to be on the carriage. After all, every story needs its protagonist. I understood why the horses had to run before the carriage. After all, carriages do not transport themselves. But why the driver? Who needs a driver who does not drive? And there was something more problematic in this: It seemed that the horses were even more intelligent than this anonymous, yet ubiquitous, coachman. Why was he always asking the destination; why did he not learn that the answer never differed? Could anyone accompany the Baal Shem Tov on so many journeys and, nonetheless, remain so obtuse? Why, one morning, did he not simply turn to the Baal Shem Tov and say: “I suppose, Master, that you want me to just let the horses run where they will?”

It took me many years to realize that it was I, not the driver, who suffered from a surfeit of obtuseness, and only then was I able to stand in mature awe before these stories. Their depths do not lie in the mere fact of the Baal Shem Tov’s ability to save this man or that community. Those are the depths that one sees as a child. It is precisely in the constant repetition of the coachman’s question and the Baal Shem Tov’s answer that the true marvel, the profound religious moment, lies.

“Where to?” asks the driver, and the Baal Shem Tov responds, “wherever the horses go.” Horses are but horses; they do not know where they will go. Yes, even the horses of the Baal Shem Tov do not know. They are guided by horse caprice and nothing more. Even the Baal Shem Tov could not know their destination. Yet, he knew that wherever they might go, wherever their wanderings would stop, there would be somebody in need, a kindness to be performed, a disaster to be averted. Wherever a man may

find himself there will be someone who needs him, only him.

Neither the Baal Shem Tov nor his horses need the coachman, nor his question. We do. We must be reminded again and again and then again that the answer to the question of destination is always “it makes no difference.” Journeys, not destinations, are the only thing of importance. We fail to set out on the quest for those who so desperately need us because, in our ignorance, we are convinced that all journeys must be routed with precise map coordinates.

How many times have we failed to comprehend the Baal Shem Tov’s dialogue with a coachman whose sole task is to be there only to ask his master a question that the master may tell us that it makes no difference? How many times have our brothers’ and sisters’ cries gone unheeded because we did not know how to find them?

III

Abraham awoke one morning in Ur of the Chaldees and God dawned upon him. He turned to Sarah and told her that God had told them to journey to an unknown place.

When all was ready, the coachman turned to Abraham and inquired of their destination. “It makes no difference,” the master responded. “God will lead the horses.”

The coachman was puzzled and disconcerted. This was not the Abraham he knew; the Abraham who always knew where he was going. He asked the question again but Abraham only smiled at Sarah and she at him.

Indeed, wherever this wondrous couple wandered they found souls waiting for a brother or sister to grant them surcease from suffering.

How wonderful is the wanderer!

How wonderful is repentance!

How wonderful to know the secret

of at-onement with our fellow man!



A Peasant, a Prayer Ascending

This is the purest prayer,
sung to a wood-chopping symphony.
The first sound a sonata,
In which God's silent name
thunders through infinite time and space.
Followed by the adagio
of axe slowly splitting asunder
His ineffable name -
hewing cords
into mercy,
into grace,
into patience,
especially patience.

And then to open
as a minuet,
a dance of joy,
and segue into a rondo,
a rose,
a thirteen petalled rose,
in which abundant loving-kindness,
plays perfect pitch
to love's truth,
and forgiveness is born.

But who is this peasant,
who the player?
And how does this humble hut,
now rise through the seven heavens?
And what is this sound,

silencing the matins of myriad angels,
(come to sing His holiness,
in magnificent counterpoint;
come to awaken worlds to glory)
who even now fall silent
before the supernal sound,
of a gruff peasant?

Perhaps Ivan?
Perhaps Alexei?
Perhaps Vassil?

It is Moshe Leib of Sosov,
chopping wood
for future generations:
lighting the fire
that succors the sick.

While singing thirteen words
to the discordant melody
of an axe.

His wood-splitting instrument,
Which stokes the sun's flame
to warm the world,
of an old, penniless woman,
and stir God,
thirteen times over,
to grace.

Glosses

1. The actual rebbe in this story is Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sosov (1745-1807), but this is not the place for historical analysis. The important point is based on the talmudic passage (Rosh Hashanah 17b) which teaches that after the sin of the Golden Calf and God's forgiveness thereof, God revealed to Moshe that whenever sin was to be forgiven, the people "should do before Me this order (of the Thirteen Attributes) and I will forgive them."
2. The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy are the most important part of the penitential prayers said before and during the Days of Awe and are repeated many times during each prayer. Yet, if one reads the talmudic passage carefully, it is clear that it is not the mere recitation of the words that is the real significance, since the passage reads *yaasu lefanai*, "they shall do before me," emphasizing that it is the merciful behavior and loving act that is truly the redemptive movement of expiation.

Biz Hundret und Tzvontzig

עד מאה ועשרים

Rebbe taught
of absolute presumptions
of probable cause
of issues
too arcane for poetry.

Recondite, abstruse,
pilpuls of paradox—
in which we sharpened mind razors.
(Perhaps we strove for truth.)

Shunning elephants
in needle's eye,
He counted angels
on a pin's head.
Ah!
Angels.
(Perhaps we strove for truth,
Dreaming of angelic syllogisms.)

Yet, of angels
he said:
I can teach you nothing.
But here, now,
in New York,
I can tell you a story
you won't understand.
Here, now.

There,
in Brisk
(before, before...)
a young boy
stands next to his grandfather
during Yom Kippur prayer.
He hears the angels crowd about him.
Forty years later he tells you this tale.

And forty years further
in Jerusalem
I ask myself:
To what grace-note
of Reb Chaim's prayer
do angels dance
on Yom Kippur
in Brisk
on the head of a pin?

II

I hear the sound of Elijah's cloak whirling,
whirling towards Elisha.
I give this sound to you.

Holy

Do you hear it?

Holy

Listen.

Holy

The sound will reach you
in forty years.

The earth is full of his glory.

Glosses

1. Some of life's most important lessons are not internalized until decades after we have first heard them. "Go sons (=students), hear me." (See Ps. 34:12; *Pachad Yitzchak: Igrot*, pp. 244 and 134). It is only long after we have left parents and teachers that the significance of their teachings becomes evident to us. The rabbis teach that it takes 40 years until this process is completed (*Avodah Zarah* 5b). A man may wander two score years on life's journey, as the Jews wandered in the desert, until the word strikes the core of his heart. Even the teachers who taught more than facts, who sought to instruct us in the process and perspective of their discipline, even those special few who eschewed the tests of memory for the tests of values and commitment cannot hope to see success in their students until many years later.

2. Elijah's confrontation with the legions of false prophets on Mount Carmel (I Kings 19) has led him to escape in despair and dejection from his victory into the desert, that very desert the people wandered in for 40 years before they gained understanding. Arriving at Mount Horeb, he is granted a prophetic vision in which God appears and charges him to go forth and anoint Elisha as a disciple. A great and strong wind sweeps over him and rends the mountain, but God is not in the wind; an earthquake follows, but God is not in the earthquake; a fire passes by him, but God is not in the fire. And then, finally, he hears a *kol demamah dakah*—a sound of silence, of very fine silence—and in that sound of silence, he finds God (the translation "a still, small voice" still misses the poetic *precision* of the Hebrew). And in this finding, in this hearing, he wraps his face in his mantle. When he leaves Horeb and meets Elisha, he says nothing to him; instead, he casts his mantle on him. It is that mantle with which he had covered himself in God's presence. He says nothing to Elisha because words are insufficient and will ultimately fail. Had God not appeared to him in the most silent of silences? He says nothing to Elisha because the experience of revelation is beyond all language. Only one question is im-

portant. In the swirling of the mantle that is being cast upon him, will Elisha sense that this mantle has been in the presence of the Divine? Will this wealthy farmer hear a sound of silence more profound than the lowing of the 12 pairs of oxen with which he is plowing? Will he hear that which cannot be said and experience that which is beyond words? This is the perennial dilemma of teachers and students. The teacher has lived his 40 years and journeyed life's deserts with the words of his teachers, with the mantles of his teachers, which now resonate in his heart—can he pass this on to his students? The words are not the issue but, rather, the day on which he stood at Horeb (see Rambam on Devarim 4:9).

3. I first heard Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (The Rav) speak at a Rabbinical Council of America convention in the Laurentian Mountains. I was 15 years old and did not understand nor do I remember much of his speech, but now when I say the *Kedusha* of *Musaf* I hear his words and their melody: *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*; distant, distant, distant; transcendent, transcendent, transcendent... And I feel a certain sadness at how far away God is, how unbridgeable the gulf that separates me from Him—a sadness that I first sensed then as a young boy but didn't, indeed, couldn't understand. Then I come to the words: *melo kol haaretz kevodo*—the earth is full of His glory—and the sadness of the echo is relieved with a spirit of joy. The Rav intoned these words and their meaning—immanent, immanent, immanent (I did not know what these words meant, and yet somehow, I did): close, close, close. And after some 40 years I am beginning to understand. And that understanding is bound up in the experience of those words whirling over me as Elijah's mantle passed over Elisha.

Some 40 years later, I am preparing a *shiur* on the 10th chapter of Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuva*—the sublime chapter on the love of God that I have long associated with and taught on Yom Kippur. The *shiur* is to be delivered in a public forum in England and I feel at a loss. How can I teach in text what love for God might be? How can my words shape a sense of the passionate yearning for His embracing forgiveness that is His love for us on Yom Kippur?

I recall that the Rav once said to us (when we were young and thought that smartness meant only conceptual understanding) that although he could teach and we could follow the difficult talmudic logic of the intricacies of the service of the day of Yom Kippur (*avodat hayom*), there was something that he felt he hinted at, which he could not

teach. And that was what it was to be a young boy more than 40 years in the past, praying on Yom Kippur next to his grandfather, Reb Chaim of Brisk, and hearing the sound of the angels as they came to listen to Reb Chaim recite the order of service in the *Musaf* prayer. That he couldn't teach.

40 years later, I finally understood his words. I understood that there are critically important things that cannot be taught. They have no words. But the story can be told. The tale of the experience can be recounted; can be passed on to another generation. And the words must be said even if at the time they are but the silences of the whirling cape. Because students deserve lessons that cannot be understood for 40 years. Because they deserve teachers who understand this and continue to teach long after life and death have silenced them.

And in this understanding, I am swept away by this poem. 40 years ago in New York I heard the story. 40 years before that it took place in Brisk.

And 40 years from now, one of my students in London may hear angels. *Biz hundert und tzvontzig.*

Elul

I am sailing to Tarshish,
have booked a sleeping berth cabin
on my dream vacation
an endless journey.

There is no penalty for overweight luggage
of little lies and cruelties
that are as long as the alphabet,
and the Do Not Disturb
sign hangs on my door.

Tekiah.

Elul blows a question

at me:

“Are you looking for the One?

Is it that which you seek?

Or is that another small lie,
recited at onboard services?

Is Tarshish God’s house?

Is your soul unto Him,
your body His work?

Do you feel the terror of angels,
their silken wings trembling,
at the silent soundings of the great shofar?”

Shevarim. Teruah.

Elul is knocking at my door,
trying to wake me,
to alarm a broken shard from sleep,

disturb a fleeting dream at dawn,
divest the flying dust of vanity,
and say:
“But You are King.”

Tekiah.

A siren song of truth,
calling me to untie myself from the mast,
to desert this ship of fools,
and search for the One,
in the land of Moriah mountains,
through Nineveh the great city,
at the lepers' gate of Rome,
to bind the wounds,
feed the hungry,
and clothe the naked,
to raise my voice as a shofar,
and cry aloud:

HaShem Hu haElokim,
HaShem Hu haElokim,
HaShem Hu haElokim,
HaShem Hu haElokim,
HaShem Hu haElokim,
HaShem Hu haElokim,
HaShem
Hu
haElokim.

And blast
Tekiah Gedolah,
next year,
in Jerusalem.

Glosses

Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin once asked: Why do we recite the great confession of sins on Yom Kippur according to the order of the alphabet? His answer: There is no end to our sins of omission and commission. But there is an end to the alphabet. And in this we find hope.

On Yom Kippur the Book of Jonah is read as the afternoon's *haftarah*. The climactic end of *Neilah* in its powerful seven-fold cry: Hashem *Hu haElokim* (the Lord, He is God); the final shofar blast in the series which had begun in Elul; and the longing of "Next year in Jerusalem" are bound up with the story of Jonah. It is one of the prophets who seeks to escape his mission to rescue frail humans deserving of our compassion as God grants them His. Jonah's escape leads him to book passage to Tarshish and, once boarded, to hide in sleep in the "belly" of the ship. Indeed, this is the theme of the shofar itself according to Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuva*, 3:4: "Awake, you sleepers from your sleep...examine your ways...repent. These are the people who forget the truth in the vanities of time."

The series of shofar blasts—*tekiah*, *shevarim*, *teruah*, *tekiah*, and the *teki-ah gedolah*—are all wake-up calls. They are all posing the question of returning to God and what He wants of me. They ask me to rise from my couch of fantasy and embrace God who is knocking at my door (see *Song of Songs* 5:2-6).

They call me to follow the path God would have me take, even into the land of Moriah, even to a life of sacrifice which we read about in the Torah on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.

They call me to the gates of Rome where the Messiah is waiting and binding wounds (Sanhedrin 98a). From the beginning of Elul, Ashkenazim blow the shofar daily and recite *LeDavid* (Psalms 27) with its stirring words of dedication: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the graciousness of the Lord, and to visit early in His temple."

They call me to the fast of Yom Kippur and the words of Isaiah (ch. 58) which we read as the *haftarah* of Yom Kippur morning:

Is such the fast that I have chosen? The day for a man to afflict his soul?
Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and
ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to

the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him, and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (Isaiah 58:5-7).

The shofar calls me as it summons the angels in heaven in the *U'Netaneh Tokef* prayer: "The great shofar will be blown and a sound of fine silence will be heard. Angels will hasten and trembling and fright will seize hold of them and they will say: 'Behold, it is the day of judgment...'"

It calls me to recognize the essential human condition: "It is true that You are their creator and know their inclination for they are flesh and blood. Man's foundation is from dust and dust is his end; it is with his soul that he brings his sustenance. He is like unto a broken shard, withering grass... blowing dust, and a passing dream."

It calls me to proclaim the ultimate truth: "But You are King, O living God."

From at least four days before Rosh Hashanah, we begin the recitation of *Selichot* in which we affirm: "*Haneshamah lach / Chusab al amalach /* The soul is Yours / the body is Your work / take pity on Your toil." Note well the terms *chusab* and *amal* which are the key terms in God's lesson to Jonah about compassion and repentance and are the focus of the last two verses of the Book of Jonah.

All of these *shofar* calls in their various permutations are expressed in the passages from the readings and liturgy of Elul and the Days of Awe. They should be the ship in which we are now sailing.

For This, I Beg Forgiveness

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בזלזול הורים ומורים

For the sin we have sinned before You
in the denigration of parents and teachers

I

I have listened to the eulogizers:
some tell the truth,
some tell their truth,
but all are defeated by the whirlwind,
and none have found your fallen cloak.

At the end, you remain a puzzle,
a Rebbe Akiva Eiger's
tzarich iyun gadol.

Either the poet or child brings me
here,
on a wintry New England day;
here,
to a lonely cemetery on Baker Street,
to cast lots of words at your grave.

To confess the sin
of *zilzul morim*.

For I was told
as we all were:
“you won’t appreciate something,
until you’ve lost it;”
I was told:
“value time
before it runs out”

It was true,
Rebbe,
it was true.

But I have lost you,
and time is running out.

Ah! And Oy!
how heavy,
the habit of negligence...

For this I beg forgiveness.

II

I have seen the focus of a cheetah,
poised to make its dash,
in an African jungle;
the concentration of a grand master,
plotting the inevitable mate,
five moves ahead.

I have seen these things -
oddly -
they reminded me of you
struggling,
struggling with a Rashi,
with a difficult Rambam...

Decades were to pass
before I saw,
in memory's vision,
Jacob's wrestling,
in your tense brow;

before I grasped
your disdain of lethargy,
in the hunt for truth...

I have asked many questions,
at times
even given answers,
but now you interrupt me,
with a frown
of sharp criticism:
when ingenuity,
mimes genius:
when cleverness,
masquerades as clarity.

For this I beg forgiveness.

III

Once in the cafeteria
you stood with us on the line,
shuffled slowly forward,
toward the salads and sandwiches.
We asked you to go ahead,
to cut the line,
but you refused,
and that, too,
was Elisha's pouring of the water...

But there were times when I forgot,
when pride triumphed
over memory,
and applause
over truth,

over humility.
For this I beg forgiveness.

IV

I have turned white as this snow
covering you,
am now called to *teshuva*...

Though you taught a teenager,
to continue the search
for the dead after death,
for the truth behind the truth;
to see the world through the lens of *lomdus*,
to scale the mountains
of tortuous Talmudic trails,
to find God and His prophets
in a word...

Though I passed the tests,
I learned little.

I retreated as the Jews
at Sinai's majestic moment;
as the disciples of Elijah
before the last mountain.

For this I beg forgiveness.

V

Yet,
my soul now revives
at the *bat kol*
of your words,

it quickens
at the *kol dodi dofek*,
of your gravitas...

Hoi adon yispedu lach.

Glosses

1. Rav Soloveitchik insisted in various eulogies that the nature of eulogy demanded that one not exaggerate and that in the spirit of Elijah's disciples who searched the mountains for him for three days after his fiery ascent to heaven—the eulogy must seek to capture the essence of the departed (see Kings II:2).
2. Rabbi Akiva Eiger's questions occasionally conclude without an answer but with the challenge of *tzarich iyun gadol*; to wit, that their resolution requires profound analysis.
3. *Bat kol* is a heavenly voice that may persist after the original words were spoken and, in a sense, echo them.
4. Elisha's pouring of the waters refers to the talmudic teaching that the service of a Torah scholar in which we learn lessons from his life is greater than the academic learning of the Torah that he teaches. It is *embodied* Torah (Brachot 7b). This is derived from the description of Elisha as the one who poured water over the hands of Eliyahu, rather than as the one who learned Torah from him.
5. *Hoi adon yispedu lach* (Jeremiah 34:5). The application of this verse in a eulogy was employed by the *Beit HaLevi* in his eulogy for R. Yaakov Gesundheit of Warsaw and repeated by Rav Soloveitchik in his eulogy for his brother Dr. Shmuel Soloveitchik. It expresses the idea that the departed was not properly valued or celebrated in his lifetime. In this case, for this minor student, it is an expression of regret at and confession for failing to recognize the import of what the Rav was trying to teach me.

I Am Prayer

ואני תפילה (Psalms 109:4)

I am folding myself
into
a paper accordion
of prayer.
I am squeezing myself
into
a crack
in the Wall.

At 3 AM
(in the dark hour
of the soul,
when I try to sleep,
so I won't have to think)
an angel comes
to the
Wall.
He unfolds every
prayer
and sings it
under the *huppah*
of heaven and earth.

I am a *kvittel*:
for a blessing
of head to understand
God's Torah;
heart to love

God's handiwork;
of hands to comfort
God's poor;
and feet to climb
God's mountain.

And may
the angelic chorus
say:
Amen.

Glosses

Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin was once discussing the issue of proper intent (*kavanah*) in prayer. He taught: "One must enter the very words and letters of prayer and become one with them." One of the disciples was puzzled by this and asked: "Rebbe, how is it possible for a person who is so big to enter a letter which is so small?" Rabbi Moshe's response: "I am not speaking to those people."

The Psalmist tells us that he is prayer. Even a man who is as great and powerful as King David enters and becomes one with the small word, the tiny letter that is prayer—or he is but mouthing words.

Maharal writes: "The function of prayer is to complete man in whatever manner he is incomplete. Then God hears his prayer and petition, when man (recognizes) his (essential) lack and need of perfection" (*Netiv HaAvodah*, chap. 2).

A poem by Karl Shapiro, a man of courage:

In the dark hours
of the soul,
it is always
3 a.m. in the morning.

Drafted into the Israeli Army at the age of 41, I was placed in a unit that required a minimum of physical exertion. In other words, I did guard duty. Of the various posts to which I was assigned, the plum was

at the Kotel—and I spent many late nights in my army career guarding the Wall. Anybody who has ever been in the army knows that its most fundamental characteristics are monotony, boredom, and complaining. However, this was tempered with an odd mix of pride and humility that in the twisted path called history, an Ebner had made his way back from the destruction of the Temple two millennia ago. I had accepted the charge to protect those hardy souls who came at all hours of the day and night, and in all weather conditions, to pray and to recite the poems of King David (rumored to be an ancestor of mine) at the foot of God's holy mountain. Even those who didn't know how to recite Psalms knew to write their longings on *kvittelach* and place them in the cracks of the Wall. These little notes, wadded so tightly, feel like the mortar joining and anchoring the great Herodian stones.

One night—I think it was on Chanukah—I envisioned these *kvittelach* fluttering around. I saw an angel removing them and singing them as the bride reads *kvittelach* while waiting for the groom to lower her veil.

I knew that I was not alone in guarding the Wall.

My Mother's Shofar

I

Man hears the word of the One,
father takes an only son,
climbs mountain peak unknown,
raises sharpened knife alone.

But it had a happy end
for the Holy One did send
a ram trapped in the wild
to sate the knife, to be the child.

And my father, *Abba*,
you have climbed
five heavy years
distance from me.
A solitary journey
I will make
and my son after me.
Fathers go alone
toward God.
Who would wait for son?

II

Yet by mother, nothing was heard.
Not vision, nor whisper, nor word.
She dreamed only of joy at his birth,
of tearful laughter, of long ago mirth.

When Satan came and said he died
then she sobbed and six times cried.

Bereft and betrayed as mother and wife
laughter was paid in the coin of her life.

My mother, *Ima*,
You have traveled
35 heavy years
away from me
today.
A journey
I will make
and my son after me.
Do mothers wait for sons?

III

I was twelve.
Still a just born.
My mother was dying
of the unspoken
disease.
The ineffable Name of Sickness
Jews don't pronounce
(absent from dire death lists
in Rosh Hashanah prayer)
and children don't know—
the vocabulary of silence.

A hurricane was landing
on the New Jersey coast.
The radio warned
to stay inside.
But my mother said,
"Come with me,

together we will
watch the ocean,
listen to the wind.”
We entered the terror
of fierce beauty,
alone together.
And *Ima* asked me,
“Do you see it,
do you hear it?”
(Is that what
she felt,
when she cried
at my birth?)

I answered yes
to the obvious,
but remaining oblivious,
put shoulder to wind,
and came home soaked.

Now, I hear her again,
for the first time.
She told me of her death,
its terrible peace,
showed me she would die
into the ocean she loved.
She is
a tide rising
at Coney Island,
a wave breaking
off Herzliya,
a sea roiling
near a Long Branch beach.

Promising
she will wait for me,
and take me
with her,
to meet
her God.

IV

Shofar is memory:
trumpeting
war and victory,
for men;
moaning
betrayal and loss,
for women.

Echoing cries of mothers,
who birth children,
and wait for the telegram,
for the midnight knock.
The wail of Sarah,
the cry of Rachel,
the sob of Sisera's mother.

The shofar of women
is the storm wind,
the crashing wave
against heaven's shore.
A howl of refusal
to bring children to death,
or leave them in death.

I hear my mother's

hurricane
in her shofar.

And Satan trembles.

Glosses

When Abraham came from Mount Moriah, Satan was angry at his failure to satisfy his desire to negate Abraham's sacrifice. What did he do? He went and told Sarah, "Oh Sarah, have you not heard what's been happening in the world?" She answered, "No." He said, "Your old husband has taken the youth Isaac and sacrificed him as a burnt offering, while the youth sobbed and cried." Immediately, she began to cry and sob. She cried three times, corresponding to the shofar's three *tekiyah* blasts and thrice she sobbed, corresponding to the shofar's *yelalah* wails. Her soul flew out and she died (*Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* ch. 32).

It is written: "He will swallow up death forever and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces" (Is. 25:8), and it is written: "It shall be on that day that a great shofar shall be blown" (Is. 27:13). When Satan hears the sound of the shofar once, he is somewhat panicked, but when he hears it a second time, he says, "This certainly is the shofar blast of the 'great shofar' and my time has come to be swallowed up" (Yerushalmi, quoted in *Tosafot*, Rosh Hashanah 16b s.v. *kedei*).

Thus saith the Lord:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
Lamentation, and bitter weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children;
She refuses to be comforted for her children,
Because they are not.
(Jer. 31:15)

"And Rachel died and was buried in the way to Efrat" (Gen. 35:19). What was Jacob's reason for burying Rachel in the way to Efrat? Jacob foresaw that the exiles would pass on from thence, therefore he buried her there so that she might pray for mercy for them. Thus it is written (Jer. 31:15 ff.): "A voice is heard in Ramah.... Rachel weeping for her

children....Thus says the Lord: Refrain thy voice from weeping...and there is hope for thy future.” (See Rashi, Gen. 48:7)

Sisera’s mother’s sobbing while waiting for her son serves as a model for the very nature of the particular sound of the shofar blasts (Rosh Hashanah 33b).

Reb Yisrael in Paris—Gauguin in Tahiti

מה חובת האדם בעולמו

What is man's obligation in this world?

Und Elul iz Doch Elul

(A *mussar* poem and, therefore, without commentary)

Toward the end of his life Rav Yisrael Salanter (the founder of the *Mussar* movement) left all behind and spent a few years in Paris. It is not clear why he went and what he hoped to accomplish...

Paris may be for lovers,
but Reb Yisrael is engaged to Elul.
And Elul is Elul.

He paces the garret
mah chovas ha'adam b'olamo ...
sounds his soul,
in *mussar* melody,
which sails out the window
of his Parisian palace
(12 square meters
4th floor
cinq Rue Duval)

Heard perhaps,
by a young Proust,
now walking the street below,
in search of early loss;
or perhaps by Pissarro
now measuring the loss of light,
in the murkiness of Marais.

(Jews who will be admired,
even in Vichy.
They are, after all, dead.)

Perhaps they are trapped
by its plaintiveness,
lock his melody in the memory
of heart and eye,
the tune of a whirlwind
of Elul butterflies,
beating their wings
in return.

While Reb Yisrael recalls
other Eluls,
in other cities,
(where nobody had heard
of Michelangelo or Raphael;
certainly not
Cézanne
or Monet
or Gauguin)
where even the fish,
trembled in the rivers;
and birds rose in panic,
at the sound of the shofar:
water and wind
sweeping them
to judgment...

Mah chovaso b'olamo
Why am I here?

Que sommes-nous?

Does Paris have the answer
to this question
better than Vilna,
better than Kovno?

D'où venons-nous?

In another time
I said:
Live all year
as if it were Elul.
And Elul?
Why!
Elul is Elul.

In another world I said:
If a Jew learns Torah in Kovno,
someone in Paris,
will be saved.

Someplace else I said:
the rule of Service is
there is no rule,
and this,
too,
is not a rule.

And what is the Parisian rule?
And if every rule is not a rule,
isn't perfection impossible
in a plenitude of paradox?

Nu, genug shoin,
Enough,

enough daydreams
of an old man,
while the Pletzl burns
in Elul heat.

The rule is an obligation:
end this song,
exit this garret,
make sure the beggars
are given bread.

Où allons-nous?

HaMelech!

Turning Sounds

Rabbi Moshe calls me
at year's turning,
transcribing *shofar* music
into amnesiac allusion.
Dispersing illusion clouds
of
dust and dreams,
of
shadows and shards,
With the sharp blast
of
Truth.

Memory lies baldly in somnolent fantasy.
All yields to pride's denial.
Truth is cast down in soporific forgetting.
None stoops to raise it.

Wake me, Rabbi Moshe.
Blast *teruah*-truth
through me
And through me.

Remind a sleepwalker
of
spirit sold for fad,
of
soul squandered for bread.

Wake me, Rabbi Moshe, wake me.
Whisper *teruah*-whimper

through me

And

through me.

Remind a dreamer

of

Love's memory,

of

His embrace.

At year turning.

As grass withers.

Through truth allusion.

At year turning.

As flower fades.

In *shofar* sound.

Glosses

Although the blowing of the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah* is a decree of the Torah, it contains an allusion (*remez*), to wit: "Sleepers, awake from your sleep...examine your ways, repent, and remember your Creator." (The sleepers) are those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and are passionately involved all their year in vanity and emptiness... "Look out for your souls, better your ways...abandon, each of you, his evil path" (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuva* 3:4).

Yesterday this (sinner) was hateful, disgusting, distanced, and abominable unto God. Today he (the penitent) is beloved, desired, near, and befriended (*Hilchot Teshuva* 7:6).

It is true that You are their Creator...for they are flesh and blood. Man's foundation is of dust and his end is in dust. With his soul he gains his bread. He is as a pottery shard, withered grass, a fading flower, a passing shadow, a dissolving cloud, a blowing wind, flying dust, and a fleeting dream (*Musaf* of Rosh Hashanah).

Memory says, "I did..."

Pride says, "I couldn't have..."

In the end, memory yields to pride (Nietzsche).

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: "My children, open for Me one opening of repentance as a needle's eye..." (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 5:2).

"A needle's eye" is an opening in metal, an opening that will never close; it is through and through, *durch und durch* (R. Menachem Mendel of Kotsk).

(God) cast truth down to the earth (Bereishit Rabbah 8:5).

Why, then, is truth so scarce?

Because none stoops to raise it up (R. Menachem Mendel of Kotsk).

Whenever a Jew falls, he falls into God's embrace (R. Mordechai Yosef of Izbitz).

God Is in the Details

How detailed are the details,
that God is in?

I am looking through the haystack,
of my inbox and outbox,
my delay box and ignore box,
for the detail work,
of the needle
on which He balances;
watches infinite angels dancing,
and waits for me to find Him.

It is a note,
I am searching for,
a memo on the back of a receipt:
“large”
or
“small”—

A reminder to myself,
about whether my wife prefers,
that I buy,
large,
or small,
eggs,
for her baking.

Is this too mundane a detail
for God?
Or will He pop out of the egg box,
when she says,

“You remembered”;
and say,
“You found Me”?

Glosses

The renowned architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, once remarked that God is to be found in the details. (Of course, the converse of this is that the devil is in the details, as the devil tends to frequent the space of the divine ... After all, it is his occupation.

The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) tells the story of the would-be convert who was ready to accept Judaism on condition that he be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot. When he approached Shammai, the sage was holding a measure (perhaps level) in his hand and he pushed him out with the instrument. (Was this actually his response to the question? To wit, Judaism is about getting your head straight; the measure of a man is not asking stupid questions. Shammai was responding in a Zen fashion ...) Hillel, on the other hand, responded by telling him that the essence of Judaism was that what is hateful to you, don't do to your *re'a*, the rest is commentary, now go learn. Rashi comments that *re'a* might refer to God and offers a variant possibility that it refers to our fellow—man. Perhaps both commentaries share a common thread—the way to serve God which defines the essence of Judaism is found in the concern we exhibit toward others.

Rabbi Simlai—the very same authority who is the source for the statement that Torah is composed of 613 mitzvot, the wealth of details that Hillel told the convert from the great commentary to the paradigmatic rule, states that the Torah begins with examples of

God's loving-kindness and ends in a similar fashion (see Sotah 14a). In other words, the prologue and epilogue of Torah, the introduction and summary which spell out the very nature of Torah have one message—act towards others with loving-kindness.

Rabbi Baruch of Meziboz once heard his son crying. He asked him what was wrong and the child responded: “I was playing hide and seek with a friend and when it was my turn to hide, I hid in a closet. I stayed there a long time until I realized that my friend had stopped playing and wasn't even looking for me...”

Rabbi Baruch held the crying boy and told him: “Dear Ye-chiel, that is the way it is with us and the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. He hides, wanting us to search for and one day find Him. But we've stopped looking...”

I am talented in only one area of baking: eating. However, in the area of actually making cakes, I know and understand nothing. They seem to appear *ex nihilo* through the power of my wife. However, she does ask me to buy eggs for these cakes and I always have trouble remembering the size she prefers or understanding why it matters. But it matters to her and perhaps this detail is the closet in which God secreted himself from me and is waiting for me to discover Him. Perhaps, this was the teaching of Hillel. And, perhaps, this teaching is not only for would-be converts...

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