

Shuvah HaAzinu

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It almost feels like time travel. Next week will be hectic and probably tiring, so I am getting a head start on the next issue of Perceptions. I am writing for 5785, it should come on us for good, while it is still 5784.

On one hand, what's the big deal? I do that every week when I write on Sunday for *Shabbos*, or even for next week already. We're constantly making plans today for tomorrow. Nothing seems futuristic about that other than the fact that we're planning for the future.

On the other hand, there is something about every year that is very different from previous years. Weeks are different from each other but they can belong to a single year. A year seems like an independent unit, and though one hundred of them make up a single century, a change in century is so rare that we don't think about it until it actually happens.

Even the Hebrew word for year, *shannah*, alludes to this difference. It means change. *Chodesh*, which is a month, means *new*, which is a change, but not necessarily to something that is *different*. *Shannah* specifically means a change to something different. An act forbidden on *Shabbos* can become permissible if it's done with a *shinui*, in a way that makes it different than the forbidden act.

Admittedly, not much ends on December 31st each year, except another tax year. It's mostly a night for partying and, tragically, suicide. There is no concept of any kind of judgment, of having to prove yourself to a higher authority, of having to make difficult changes for the better. Quite the contrary. People act in ways on their new year that we Jews apologize on our new year for having done previously.

I have learned that during the blowing of the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashbanah*, a Torah *mitzvah* that is central to the day itself, one should have intention for "*Na'aseh v'Nishma*." The Jewish people said those words during the *shofar* blowing at Mt. Sinai because that is when the *Shechinah* arrived. Our blowing of the *shofar* connects us over time to that moment, recreating for us in the here-and-now the his-

toric opportunity we had back then.

It is a transformative opportunity. Anyone who takes the *shofar* blowing seriously feels inspired by it, but the person who takes it to heart changes their heart.

Yéchezkel prophesied:

“And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh.” (Yéchezkel 36:26)

That is what the *shofar* is capable of doing, if it is allowed to. You see, when the Jewish people said, “*We will do and we will understand*” at Mt. Sinai, they didn’t just promise their loyalty to God and Torah. They opened their hearts as if through spiritual surgery, so that the reality of God could enter and fill every part of them. That is the very *definition* of a heart of flesh, and a life-changer.

Because a person goes where their heart goes. Even if the brain wins out for a while, an unhappy heart will, in the end, prevail. That’s why God said in *Parashas Ki Savo* that the curses will come because we did not serve God in joy while we still had what to be joyful about. We only give ourselves to that which pulls our heart, which is why the rabbis advise that a person should learn the sections of Torah that talk to their heart.

We certainly won’t change if our hearts aren’t in it. We might go through the motions for a while, but only until the heart says, “Enough!” Motivational speakers can inspire people to get up and do what they haven’t until then, but if people don’t find something to love in what they are trying to accomplish, they won’t succeed.

They certainly won’t be happy, and there is a *mitzvah* to serve God in joy. But everyone knows that you can’t command someone to be happy, so the *mitzvah* is more about doing that which will lead you to serve God in joy. In short, do that which will lead you to love of God, one of the six constant *mitzvos* we have to fulfill every day.

That’s how we make God our king on *Rosh Hashbanab*, and hopefully for the rest of our lives. Any king can impose his rule on his subjects. But his subjects won’t love him, the basis of any real loyalty a king needs from his people. A monarch needs to inspire people to love them for a kingdom to survive and hopefully, thrive.

Because nothing stays the same in this world. The world is constantly changing, and this changes the needs of the *Malchus* as well. Rome fell, as has every other empire, because its subjects did not change with the times. They did not love their king or the kingdom, and they therefore lacked the kind of loyalty necessary to make people more malleable to change.

We’re here today as a people living by Torah, those that still do, because of our love

of God. Without it, people have a very difficult time remaining committed to Torah when the pull away from a Torah lifestyle is so strong. We're willing to adapt and make changes for our King each year because of that love, and *Rosh Hashbanah* is the best time of year to renew and strengthen that love. Do that, and the judgment will take care of itself.