

Day 1 Drasha

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah!

Wow, it is awe-some to be here with you all today as we celebrate Rosh HaShanah. Looking around the room, I must confess – that I feel a bit afraid – I have the privilege and responsibility to offer a D’var Torah – words of wisdom and orientation as we begin this year and – as most of you surely know – this is my first year here in Vestal, with Temple Israel, striving to serve as rabbi of this unique, holy community. Over the past 2 months, I have started to get to know many of you, yet there are also a number of faces that are new to me here. I pray that the words I share here today will resonate with you and that you will be patient with me, as I share a few complex concepts that I hope can enrich our lives in what will be a lengthier sermon than I have given before.

So, what are we doing here? Why are we here today? What is the goal of this gathering?

Of course, we are here because it is Rosh HaShanah – the Jewish new year – and we have come together to celebrate.

Except there are at least two major problems with this story of why we are here. First, our celebration of this day does not look like most celebrations that I have seen. Yes, afterwards, many of us will enjoy a festive meal. But now we spend hours on our new year praying together and while some of our prayers can be accurately described as celebrations, many of the prayers we offer are appeals,

pleas to G-d for life in the year ahead. So, it is not so simple to call this day a celebration of the new year.

And, if we want to be honest, we should not simply call this day “*the Jewish new year*” because according to our tradition we have several new years. In the early compilation of rabbinic teachings called the Mishnah which has guided Jewish practice for 1800 years, in the volume dedicated to Rosh HaShanah, we read that there are four different new years in our year and this day is only one of them.

When we look closely at the passage from the Torah we read this morning as Maftir, we see that this day is called the first day of the *Seventh* month, not the first month. In the framework of the biblical calendar, our first month of the year is the month of Aviv – the month in which we celebrate Passover.

This day, the first day of the 7th month, is described in the Torah not as “Rosh HaShanah,” but rather as Yom Truah – a day of shouting – or the day of crying – or the day of the blowing of the shofar with a sound that echoes the wailing of human voices. Since antiquity, the sounding of the shofar has been the central *mitzvah* of this day, the central spiritual activity in which our ancestors have engaged for longer than we remember. So, the sounding of the shofar, and for most of us, listening to the sounds of the shofar, continues to be central to our observance of this holy day.

So, while we might think that we are here today to celebrate “the Jewish new year,” today is not our only new year, and what we do together on this day is not exactly celebration.

To add another layer of complexity and confusion, *today we will not even actually blow the shofar*. Since today is Shabbat, Jewish communities traditionally refrain from blowing the shofar on Shabbat. On a regular shabbat, when we offer a prayer for healing or any *bakashah* – request of G-d – traditionally we are taught to say *Shabbat hi Mi'Liz'ok* – Shabbat is a time not to cry out. On Shabbas, we appreciate the wholeness of the world without our need to intercede and reshape materials – this leads us to refrain from all sorts of behaviors which are understood to either be “work” or simply “not restful.” This leads us to refraining from certain tools, technologies, and instruments on Shabbat – including horns, trumpets, and the *shofar*. So, today we will not blow the shofar and we will not make some of our special appeals like Avinu Malkeinu and the 13 Attributes of Mercy. Yet, we are still gathered to observe this Yom Truah – this day of the shofar’s sound.

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This all leads me back to my question: *what are we doing here today? What do we hope to accomplish together here?*

Over the next few minutes, I will attempt to demonstrate that our purpose here, even without blowing the shofar, is to engage in a day of Truah – just like our ancient ancestors and all of our predecessors who have participated in the practices of this sacred day.

In reality, we have already begun to perform this mitzvah – this central sacred action of this day – through our prayer. And – in a few minutes – we will intensify our T’ruah as we enter into our festival Musaf Amidah. We will raise our voices in T’ruah – songs, cries, and shouts like the sound of a shofar – and through doing so we will experience and express Yirah – the spiritual quality of awe or fear – in a

manner that will carry us into the year ahead. Hopefully, our communal prayer today leaves an impression of Yirah upon our hearts that will shape our perspectives on life as we embrace a new Fall season and a new year.

If we look ahead in our Mahzor, in the third blessing of our Amidah for Rosh HaShanah, we add several paragraphs which express a hope that all creatures will have Yirah for G-d. The word Yirah, is the third word used in the sequence that could be translated as fear, along with Pahad and Eimah. So, it seems that fear is a feeling or mood which is part of our prayer experience today. But, how can we relate to the language of fearing G-d? What might it mean for us to fear G-d? To cultivate Yirah.

Yirah is a biblical term which has continued to figure prominently in Jewish thought until today. Yirah is a high virtue in Judaism - along with Ahavah - love - Yirah is one of the pillars of Jewish worship - spiritual practice.

In Devarim 10:12 Yirat HaShem – Fearing G-d is presented as one of the central elements of how we are to relate to G-d. We are both to Love and to Fear HaShem – L’Ahavah U’Lirah

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שְׂאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אִם לִירְאָה אֵת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַקֵּת בְּכָל דְרָכָיו וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וּלְעֹבֵד אֵת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ.

In Proverbs, we read The Beginning of Wisdom is Yirat HaShem – awe or fear of G-d.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory, a scion of an Eastern-European Hasidic dynasty who ventured out of the world of Polish

Hasidism to do a doctorate in Berlin before fleeing Germany for the US in the 1930's, gifted the world an amazing translation of the word Yirah: he calls Yirah "Radical Amazement."

In his own words, Heschel wrote "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

Amazing. I imagine that for many of us this is an inspirational ideal. We intend to not take life for granted, to slow-down enough in our day-to-day to appreciate the miraculous nature of our world; to wake up and smell the coffee; to slow down and smell the roses; to make moments of mindfulness and to cultivate gratitude. By now, our secular society has gotten on board with the notion that cultivating these attitudes provides psychological and physiological benefits to us.

However, this description of radical amazement sounds pretty different than "fear of G-d." Being "Godfearing" conjures to mind, for me at least, an old-school Christian way of describing people who can be trusted because they share a religious framework of reward and punishment. This term "Godfearing" has never resonated with me, and in fact, in the past even turned me off from any notion of fear of G-d. Yet, in reality, this term shares a common origin with "radical amazement" in the biblical term of Yirah.

Yirah refers to a multi-dimensional, multi-layered, emotional-spiritual experience of fear or terror. We will see that, according to some rabbinic perspectives, there

are at least three distinct layers to *Yirat HaShem*: Fear of Punishment, Fear of Sin, and Fear of Greatness.

Each layer builds upon the other and depends on the other, for they are each called for in different times and places.

I encountered this framework through the writings of Levi Yitzchak of Berditchyv, of blessed memory, who is often referred to by the name of his collected teachings: *Kedushas Levi* – the Holiness of Levi. Levi Yitzchak was a part of the early Hasidic movement. Like the alter rebbe Shneur Zalman of Liadi who founded Chabad, Levi Yitzhak of Berditchyv was a student of the Maggid of Mezeritzch, Dov Baer Friedman who learned from the Ba’al Shem Tov and raised students who spread the Hasidic movement throughout Europe. Levi Yitzchak was the only one of these students who became the *rav* of a community. In Berditchyv where he lived and served for many years, Levi Yitzhak developed a reputation as the “advocate of Israel” or “Defender of the Faithful” – Both in the Presence of G-d and in the presence of the Russian authorities and the Ukrainian public – he would focus on the good deeds of Israel – the merits of the Jews.

I had the privilege a few years ago to serve as a research assistant and editor for an intellectual biography of Levi Yitzhak of Berditchyv written by my teacher Rabbi Art Green, titled “Defender of the Faithful.” Through the time I spent with the *Kedushas Levi*, I learned to appreciate his consistent emphasis on *Yirah Ila’ah* – a transcendent experience of awe and wonder – the inspiration for Heschel’s term “radical amazement.” At the same time, he always reminds us that we need the other, lower, levels of fear in our lives as well.

The bottom rung of Yirah, according to the Kedushas Levi, is Yirat HaOnesh – fear of punishment. This is the kind of fear which we can easily understand as evolutionarily beneficial. It helps humans to survive when we are afraid of the harm or violence that others may inflict upon us. Fear from physical injury and pain can motivate us to take important safety precautions, which are not to be taken for granted. Yet, as the Kedushas Levi points out, this kind of fear is learned from a young age instinctively by most children – and even non-human animals. We need this fear from harm to keep us safe, but it would be a stretch to describe it as a virtue.

In contrast, Yirat Het – fear of Sin – actually requires effort to experience and maintain. This lower level of Yirat haShem grows out of an active moral process on the part of a person. To achieve an experience of Yirat Het, you need to decide to want to do what is right and good. We should want to do what is good not merely because it is beneficial to us, but because it is compassionate, good, and even holy. Once we are committed to the goal of doing what is right, then we begin to develop a healthy fear that we might do something that is wrong, something harmful. This kind of moral fear does not necessarily need to be rooted in a theological understanding of G-d, yet it is central to much of our imagery of this season of repentance. We confess to our mistakes and sins and articulate a hope that we will live more morally in the year to come. We are afraid – we are in awe – precisely because we know that in this past year we have not always succeeded in doing what we know was right. We have cut corners, made hurtful comments, given in to temptations. So, we appeal to G-d to forgive us – appealing at the same time to ourselves to be forgiving and learn from our mistakes.

This is Yirat Het – Fear of sin – or as it is sometimes called in Aramaic – Yirah Tata’ah – the lower spiritual virtue of fear – in contrast to Yirah Ila’ah – the lofty Yirah. This higher dimension of fear is rooted in moments of profound wonder – moments when we realize how small we are in the scale of the world – and this inspires in us a sense of transcendent connection. I imagine that most – if not all - of us can bring to mind at least a moment or two in our lives when we experienced this kind of wonder.

We may have been gazing up at the stars so many millions of lightyears away – or watching waves roll into the coast, one after another. We may have been watching a campfire dance on a dark night, or the leaves of trees dance in the wind. We may have been gazing lovingly into the face of a child, a niece or nephew, a daughter or son, a grandchild or even the baby of a stranger. Or, perhaps, we have experienced this kind of transcendent, terrifying knowledge of our smallness while watching a loved one prepare to take their last breaths, or battle an illness.

(Pause to breathe for a moment)

Each one of us is a small, small part of a people, a species, a planet, a galaxy, and a universe. And, when we open our hearts to the awareness of this reality, we can, momentarily, step outside of ourselves – we can transcend our individual ego as we experience our interconnectedness. This is the experience of Yirah Ila’ah – of Higher Fear of G-d.

According to the Kedushas Levi, Yirah Ila’ah is a powerful aspect of human consciousness. It can birth in us great joy, bringing to us a subtle pleasure in the miracle of being alive and of being a part of a much greater whole. Most often,

great experiences of radical amazement, of profound wonder and awe, leave us feeling more grounded, wiser, with more capacity to love and with greater generosity.

Our practices on hagim, especially blowing the shofar on Rosh HaShanah are meant to inspire us to this kind of consciousness. Our communal prayer is supposed to cultivate in us a sense of wonder and amazement. However, as Heschel emphasizes, these seasonal experiences serve to model for us what it feels like to experience amazement, but we are meant to cultivate this consciousness all year round.

As I shared before, Heschel writes “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted.”

This is a life-long, all-year goal. Each day, we should strive to get up in the morning and take nothing for granted.

In another drasha about Rosh HaShanah, the Kedushas Levi repeats a Kabbalistic teaching that the sounding of the Shofar opens the Divine storehouse or treasury of blessing, of love and goodness – Otzar haShefa. The worshiper, the Jew, each and every one of us, who opens our hearts to hear the shofar’s T’ruah – the shofar’s cry – is pulled in the direction of Yirah Ila’ah. Each individual cry of the shofar may not bring us there, but our soul is pulled upward in awe and wonder. Then, from the experience of Yirah, we are given the opportunity to take a portion of goodness, love and blessing from the Divine storehouse to sustain us for the year.

That is one way to understand the spiritual activity of Rosh HaShanah – to understand what we are doing here together today - we come together to use the cry of the shofar to inspire in our hearts a profound sense of wonder and connectedness that opens us up to receive all the abundant blessings we can hope for in the year to come. Hopefully, our communal prayer experience on this day of awe, this day of the shofar, leaves an impression upon our hearts that guides us to act with more compassion and consideration in the year ahead.

However, we have a clear problem. Today, it is shabbat and we are not sounding the shofar.

How will we be able to accomplish this spiritual goal of awe?

On Shabbat, we are commanded to remember that the world is already created. We already have enough of what we need. This once-a-week experience of satisfaction with ourselves as-we-are is meant to encourage us to work for a world where everyone is fully valued and honored as holy as-they-are.

So, on Shabbat Rosh HaShanah, we do not depend on the tool of the shofar to arouse in us radical amazement. We are reminded that simply with our bodies, with the song of our throats, the clapping of our hands, and the tapping of our feet together, that we are capable of rising up in T'ruah – of rising up in heartfelt song and inspiring in our hearts Yirah Ila'ah – a transcendent, sense of awe.

In a moment, when we will turn our hearts from Torah to Tefillah – from learning to prayer. In the third blessing of our Amidah for Rosh HaShanah, we add several paragraphs which narrate the psychological-emotional-spiritual process of these three stages of Yirah.

After our standard words in this blessing we pray:

וּבְכֹן חֵן פְּחָדָךְ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ עַל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ וְאִמְתָּךְ עַל כָּל מַה שֶּׁבָרָאתָ. וַיִּירָאוּךָ כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים

Therefore, Hashem Our G-d place fear into all of your works, terror upon all creatures, and everyone one will be in awe of you.

Three stages of Yirah: Pahah is fear of punishment, Eimah is fear of sin, and Yirah - is radical amazement; feeling the awesomeness of God and creation.

Before we conclude this blessing, we describe the outcome of this trifold collective experience of Yirah. This is our inherited highest hope for a redeemed world:

וּבְכֹן צְדִיקִים יִרְאוּ וַיִּשְׂמְחוּ ... ׀

And, then the righteous will see and celebrate, the upright will sing, and the compassionate will rejoice with song. Injustice will close its mouth and all the wickedness will dissipate like smoke, for the rule of intentional-wrong-doing will be removed from the earth.

I pray that we may open our hearts to a healthy, spiritual experience of fear, awe, and amazement, that by joining together in song we can experience the Truah for which this day is named, and that we will all be left with an impression of awe in our hearts that brings us to joy, life, and abundant blessing in the year to come.