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Logic Versus Faith

Many people are curious as to how Jewish tradition foresees "the end of days" -- the coming of the Messiah. While there are many descriptions offered in the rabbinic sources, we are nevertheless cautioned against speculating much on this subject. Why? Because Jewish tradition says if we're focused too much on the future, we'll miss out living in the present!

It is worthwhile to note one striking Midrash, which describes the "awesome fear" that will prevail at the end of days. The Midrash says that a competition will be held between Jews and other religions, to determine who is really carrying out the Almighty's will. The Midrash says that initially it will be other religions, not the Jews, who will be answered by God. This shocking response will cause "awesome fear" in

the minds of the Israelites and will be for them a time of great trial and tribulation.

Ultimately, Israel will be vindicated, but those early moments will be a time of great terror and self-doubt. The entire scenario, the Midrash explains, is a grand, final test of the Jews' loyalty to God and His Torah.

FALSE PROPHETS

A similar idea is found in this week's parsha, Re'eh. The Israelites are warned against falling prey to "miracles" performed by false prophets. Says the Torah (Deut. 13:2-4)

"If there should rise up among you a prophet or dreamer of dreams and offer a sign or a miracle. And the (predicted) sign or miracle should then occur of which he has told you, and he says to you, 'Let us go after other gods whom you do not know and worship them.'

Do not listen to the words of this prophet or dreamer of dreams because it is God who is testing you to know if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul."

The Torah is warning us: Despite the seeming evidence that a magician may offer, if they contradict the Torah, then their ministrations are to be ignored. One who is loyal and whole with God will not be swayed by demonstrations that are contrary to God's commands.

LEAP OF FAITH?

This brings us to the millennia-old theological debate of whether "faith" or "reason" should be the foundation of a person's belief system. Is it enough to have faith in our forefather's

traditions, or do we need concrete, rational evidence to support these claims?

Many Jewish approaches have been offered on this issue. They range from Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi's brilliant philosophical proofs, to Rebbe Nachman of Breslov's inspiring discourses on faith.

In today's generation, the approach of "reason" clearly rules the day. Ours is a world of science and computers, and thus we tend to view life as rationalists.

Is there a rational basis for belief in Judaism? Of course! Whether it is Torah prophecies which have come true (e.g. the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel), or the stunning Bible Codes (presented in Aish HaTorah's Discovery Seminar), or archeological evidence. Belief in Judaism is by no means a "leap of faith!"

FEEL THE DIVINE

The Torah itself, at the beginning of this week's portion, weighs in with a powerful voice on the issue.

"Behold! I place before you today the blessing and the curse. The blessing that you listen to the mitzvot of the Lord your God which I command you today."

A careful reading of this passage suggests that this "reward" is not some additional gift that will come a person's way through observing the mitzvahs. Rather, proper observance brings its own rewards: a corresponding awareness of the Almighty's nearness and the validity of Torah. The mitzvot themselves have the power to bring one into God's presence, which can be seen as the greatest of blessings. A Shabbat dinner or a

trip to Israel can touch a person so deeply that the presence of God becomes clear and obvious.

As Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, a contemporary Chassidic master, said to his students: "Have you not felt, have you not seen, how your soul is certain that it sees God?"



Why Preparation Is Essential for a Spiritual Experience

It's so interesting that preparation deepens an experience. But this applies particularly to deep and meaningful experiences. The truth is, an experience that is superficial is not enhanced by preparation; it can sometimes even be ruined by preparation. The more profound the experience, the more it is enhanced by preparation. And what could be a bigger experience than that of Rosh Hashana, the day of judgment for us and the entire world?

This Shabbos coincides with the beginning of the month of Elul, which is such an important month in the Jewish calendar. Elul is the month before Rosh Hashana - thus it is the month of preparation for Rosh Hashana, two days that are of the utmost significance and impact. These are the days of judgment and introspection, of reflection on the purpose of creation and the purpose of our lives. We cannot simply walk coldly into such an experience. We need to

prepare. And that's what the month of Elul is about. It is a month of preparation before entering into Rosh Hashana, followed 10 days later by Yom Kippur. Elul is a time of preparation not just for Rosh Hashana, but for Yom Kippur as well, and for the 10 days in between.

Preparation is crucial to how our sages guide us to live a life of meaning. Living a life of goodness, in harmony with the will of Hashem, requires preparation. To live such a life means to live in a constant state of preparation - to live with mindfulness. We don't just rush through life oblivious to what is taking place; we carefully consider our purpose, and the general direction of our lives. We consider our actions and give genuine, deep thought to who we want to be and where we want to go.

In the *Mesillat Yesharim*, one of the classic works of spiritual development and growth, written by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, known as the Ramchal, he describes a ladder of ascending levels of spiritual achievement to help us to grow and become truly great people. The starting point of the ladder is what the Ramchal calls *zehirut*, which means living with self-awareness and mindfulness. The Ramchal quotes an image from Jeremiah the prophet, who talks about people living life "like a horse charging headlong into battle". The image is a powerful one. Think of horses in a cavalry charge, with no awareness of what is going on around them, but still rushing headlong because they are caught up in the frenzy of the moment. Rather, we should live with mindfulness, and Elul arrives as a reminder for us to return to this state of mindfulness - therefore, it is crucial in preparation for Rosh Hashana.

Mindfulness is about living with careful introspection and self-awareness of what we are doing, which enhances the spiritual experience of living like a Jew. An example is saying the Shema, and praying. These are two important mitzvahs. In the Shema, we accept God as our King, and we can experience a moment of incredible closeness to God as we accept His authority in our lives. Prayer is a time when we pour out our hearts to God in a state of vulnerability and deep emotional connection to Him. These two mitzvahs are fulfilled when we say the Shema and the Amidah. But the siddur is structured in such a way that we don't just rush headlong into the Shema and Amidah. There is a process of preparation. First, we say the morning blessings, and then the special passages from the Book of Psalms and other places in the Tanach, which are filled with words of praise and reflection about God and His greatness. These *pesukei dezimrah* - the "verses of song" - prepare us for the climax of what is contained in the siddur in the form of the Shema and the Amidah.

We also prepare for Shabbos each week, not just practically, i.e. food and home preparation, but rather, we go through a process of mentally, emotionally and physically preparing ourselves to accept the holiness of the Shabbos experience, which is enhanced through our preparation. This is why the prayers that begin the Shabbos service, taken from the Book of Psalms, are called *Kabbalat Shabbat*, the receiving of the Shabbos. We don't just walk into Shabbos, we prepare to receive Shabbos.

One of the greatest mitzvahs of mindfulness is the mitzvah of learning Torah. Firstly, this mitzvah is preceded by blessings, where we acknowledge that God is the giver of the Torah -

so we prepare ourselves for the experience of learning Torah. It is not merely a dry intellectual activity, but rather an experience of receiving the wisdom of Hashem in this world and appreciating the privilege of what that is and what that means. To divorce Torah from its Divine origins and just to experience it as one would experience any intellectual pursuit is to drain it of its holiness and its significance, and to severely limit its capacity to impact our lives. In fact, the Gemara says one of the reasons for the destruction of the Temple is that the Jews of the time did not say their blessings before learning Torah. They approached Torah with a lack of awe for its greatness.

As we approach Elul with awe, mindful and aware of the opportunity it gives us to prepare for Rosh Hashana, what should we be focusing on? Our sages teach us that the month of Elul corresponds to the verse from the Song of Songs: "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me." In Hebrew, the first letters of words of the verse: *Ani ledodi v'dodi li* make up the letters of Elul. So Elul is about our love for God and His love for us, and about our closeness to God. And an important part of the preparation of Elul is to feel that closeness to God.

Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv - the Alter of Kelm - links this to the famous prayer we say over Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur: *Avinu Malkeinu* - "Our Father, our King". First, God is our Father, and that represents the relationship of love, connection and bonding. And then He is our King who judges us. So before He is our King, He is our Father. The Alter of Kelm explains that before we can embrace the experience of being judged by God, we need to embrace the experience of being loved by God.

Whatever He does is ultimately because He loves us and because He wants the best for us. In the same way that a parent loves a child and only wants the best for a child, so too God loves us and wants what's best for us. We need to enter Rosh Hashana deeply connected to God's love for us and our love for God. Then the process of judgment, introspection and repentance can be so much more powerful. We also prepare for Rosh Hashana during the month of Elul by blowing the shofar. The shofar blowing, says the Rambam, is to "awaken those who sleep". We need to awaken ourselves spiritually, and this connects deeply with the idea of mindfulness and living with intent and heightened awareness. Habit is one of the most powerful forces in human life. This can be used for the good, because if we adopt good habits then they can be effortlessly implemented without us having to think about them. On the other hand, habit can lead us to living without intent. In preparation for Rosh Hashana, we need to step out of our habits and reconsider, look at everything afresh, renew ourselves and reawaken ourselves spiritually. The message of the shofar sounded throughout the month of Elul is a reminder to prepare for Rosh Hashana. It is actually preparing us for the mindfulness with which we need to engage Rosh Hashana, and it's reminding us to live our lives with mindfulness, so it touches on both aspects.

Elul was the time, historically, when we were forgiven for the sin of the golden calf, which culminated in Moshe bringing down the second set of tablets from the mountain on Yom Kippur. It was a time of acceptance by God, a time of closeness to God, a time of opportunity and a time of preparation.

Our sages describe these days as *yemei ratzon* -

"the days of acceptance". It is during this time that we are especially close to God and that our prayers, repentance and introspection are more easily accepted by God. In fact, the entire period, beginning with Rosh Chodesh Elul leading up to Yom Kippur, is a time of acceptance. So, as we take the time to carefully prepare for Rosh Hashana this year, let us be mindful of the fact that this is a time in which the gates of heaven are wide open for us, and let us use this opportunity to truly connect with and be embraced by Our Father, our King - *Avinu Malkeinu*.



Telescopic Tzedaka

The creation of the Internet has changed the notion of interconnectedness for eternity. Today, every global issue has the potential to be transformed into a local one. There are, of course, many positive offshoots of these developments. Examples include networking prospects, crowdfunding sources and crowdsourcing avenues for an unparalleled flow of ideas and these extraordinary opportunities should be celebrated.

But the inherent dangers are easily overlooked. In large western cities we are seeing that small stores are rapidly being forced to fold and close down. They are neither able to compete with the digital retail market nor with the megastore

chains.

While usually overlooked, this trend actually extends beyond the marketplace and into the world of charity.

Instagram and Facebook feeds are flooded with competing needs that require 'heroic' attention. Who doesn't want to end widespread hunger, disease and war – these are all noble causes that deserve urgent help. But often our priorities are confused such that the global replaces the local; the more public, exciting and popular replaces the more anonymous, smaller-scale issues, which is where we are actually more likely to be able to make a real and lasting difference.

Take a typical example of a teenager who reads of a disease affecting an African tribe in a post on social media. The boy follows link after link to understand the problem and feels terrible about those lives being severely affected. He shares a photo and caption on his Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. His charitable feelings have been successfully broadcasted to his sphere of influence, and he has therefore shown that he cares. And, as a result of his altruism, he can now enjoy the satisfaction of having done something to help save the world.

What has been achieved is indeed positive and must not be belittled. But unfortunately, his thirst to do good has, at this point, been somewhat and sometimes entirely quenched. And when his mother now asks him to do any act of kindness – visit his grandmother, help with household chores, take a sick friend out for a fun activity, volunteer at a local aid organization – he might not feel as compelled. He may feel he has already done his bit for society, so to speak.

This phenomenon may be compounded by the fact that often those suffering in our closest circles do not appear to be as desperate for help as the sensationalized tragedies on the other side of the planet. The fact that time is spent on the latter is not negative; however, the fact that this supersedes taking responsibility for the former is indeed negative.

The Torah states, 'if there shall be a destitute person with you, from your brethren, in one of your cities, in the land that the Lord your God has given you, do not harden your heart and do not close your hand from your destitute brother. For you shall surely open your hand to him' (*Deut.* 15:7-8). The Midrash deduces from this that one should prioritise one's charity, beginning with the destitute among you – your family, your own city, Israel and then the rest of the world (Rashi ad loc., based on *Sifrei* 116). Indeed, this prioritisation of charitable endeavours has been codified in Jewish law; one begins with one's immediate sphere and moves outward (Rema, *Yoreh De'ah* 251:3; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 34:6).

That is not to say that one should not worry about what happens on the other side of the world – we should. However, if one has limited resources, one's duty is first to those who are within one's immediate sphere and only subsequently to those in the other wider spheres. To respond to any cause, near or far, is indeed a noble endeavour. Yet, we must ensure that this telescopic charity does not come at the expense of the tangible difference we can make to those who are nearby.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, ethicist and founder of the *Musar* movement, is often attributed with the following declaration:

When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realise the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realise that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.

We have a biblical command to give charity (See *Lev.* 25:35-38; *Deut.* 15:7-11). Jewish law requires between ten and twenty percent of one's income to be distributed, such that the more we have, the more we give (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 249:1). This idea can be extended beyond the financial, to time and talents as well. For the average person, the opportunity cost of pursuing the exciting global 'mega causes' involves compromising the simple for the sassy. Rather than looking through the telescope of the digitally charitable, we should take out a microscope to focus on the needs of those nearest to us, at home.



Feats of Amazement

A man turns up in London claiming to be a prophet. He does some groovy stuff: levitates, revives the dead, heals the sick, turns lead into gold. Then he tells you that at noon tomorrow, it will begin to rain. At 11:00 there isn't a cloud in the sky. 11:30, 11:45, 11:55 and it's still a beautiful day. Shame, he seemed pretty good. Suddenly at 11:59, a cloud materializes out of nowhere. By 12:00, it's filled the whole sky. At 12:01, a most torrential downpour begins.

What do you say? "Oh, that's England for you." Apart from that, though, I think you would give him a little leeway. He didn't do all that badly.

But what does Jewish law say: Is he a prophet and should you listen to him?

Well, Jewish law has a very simple formula for such a guy. You put him out of commission. He is clearly a false prophet, for if God had said it would rain at 12:00, it would not begin to rain at 12:01. God doesn't make mistakes. To be sure, this "prophet" is a very clever man, possibly even in touch with spiritual forces we are not aware of. But in touch with God, he ain't.

Judaism has rules for establishing the credibility of a prophet - and they are not in any way based on the miracles he is able to perform. We Jews are not impressed by miracles. We don't judge a person on the cleverness of his tricks.

Of course, when someone comes with such an impressive repertoire, it is very hard not to be moved. When someone can really heal people, it is difficult not to want to believe. But there are many healers and miracle workers out there. All have different agendas. Be it those who are selling themselves or those who are selling a way of life. Judaism doesn't doubt for a minute that people are able to perform wondrous deeds. What Judaism says is that this is not any proof He is a messenger of God. There are many people out there who appear "successful," but that does not mean that they have God's approval.

The path to a relationship with God in this world is a difficult one. There are no shortcuts. It is a matter of using our freewill to overcome the myriad challenges that we constantly meet. It is human tendency to look for simple solutions to difficult problems. The preponderance of cults, faith healers and so-called 'kabbalistic' groups is very understandable. They may offer simple answers. They may even perform what appear to be miracles. But in the long run, the answers will not satisfy. They are merely escapes from life's real challenges.

Judaism says: Use your mind. Don't judge by "miracles." Judge by evidence. In the primitive world, miracles impressed. Surely in the 21st century we should know better.

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