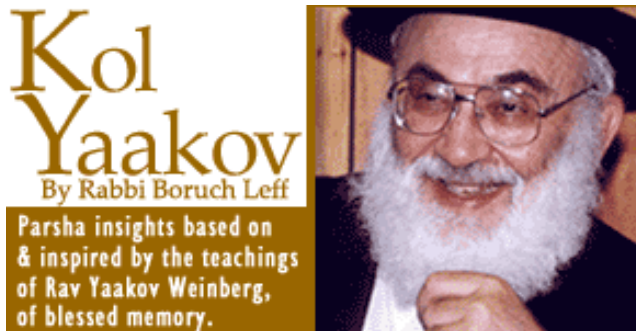


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A Personal God

Elul. The very mention of this repentance-filled, preparatory month before Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, usually evokes feelings of dread. Right in the middle of our summer vacations we are forced to face the reality that once again we will blow the *shofar*, eat the apples and honey, and - face the consequences of God's judgment. Elul is definitely (unless we lull ourselves to sleep and ignore it) a month that is full of anxiety, if not fear. This is why the famous acronym for *E"l"U"L"* is very surprising.

E"l"U"L" stands for the phrase in Shir Hashirim 6:3, "*Ani LeDodi VeDodi Li*" - "I am for my beloved, and my beloved is for me." This is one of the most loving expressions in all of the Torah in which the Jewish People declare their beautiful and close relationship with God. If *E"l"U"L"* means to signify this loving relationship, it seems quite strange and inappropriate for the aspect of love between God and His nation to be highlighted during the month before the judgment of the New Year. How can Elul be identified as a month full of love when it is associated more with fear, severity, and strict justice?

And besides, why is it that God is always caring so much about our sins? Why the need to judge us all the time? (The Talmud says that we are actually judged every day and not just on the Jewish New Year - Rosh Hashana 16a.)

In addition, we actually celebrate Rosh Hashana as a holiday, even though it is the annual Day of Judgment. What exactly are we celebrating? Do defendants celebrate their day in court? Or do they dread it with nervousness?

The answer to all of these queries is a fundamental concept in our relationship with God.

Why does God judge us? It cannot be because He has a need to judge or to exact revenge. God, by definition, is perfect and the ultimate source of goodness. He has no needs. It must be that He judges us for our benefit. Why is judgment to our benefit? God, through His judgment, shows His love for us and that He cares about everything that we do. We are so important to Him that He, like a father tracking his child's progress, constantly watches us. He is concerned with our every move. We are the beings, through our free will, who shape the world and its destiny. Through His judgment, we are made aware that every little thing that we do makes a difference to Him.

This is why Elul's acronym is one that expresses love and this is why we celebrate Rosh Hashana, the Day of Judgment. We are happy to have God care deeply about our actions. We relish in the thought of having our lives laced with significance.

The fact that God judges us shows His personal love and concern for us. He is not indifferent to our actions. The worst type of treatment in a relationship is indifference. Marital therapists know that as long as a couple is still fighting it is possible to save the marriage. If a husband is bothered by things his wife does, or vice versa, love is still present. They still care about each other which

is why they make each other angry. If they become indifferent to each other and disappointments no longer matter to them, divorce is almost inevitable because all love in the relationship is gone. So too, the fact that God personally cares about all of our actions, for good and for bad, means He loves us.

We derive these concepts from Rambam's 13 Fundamentals of Faith, as well.

In a few short paragraphs, Rambam clearly and orderly set in writing the basic awareness of the Jewish credo. These are the fundamental requirements of relating to and serving the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. Rambam writes: "The individual who does not believe each of these Principles abandons the Community of Israel, denies the Essence of the Almighty and is called a heretic and apostate." Commentary to Mishna Sanhedrin 10:1

While it is true that someone who attributes even one word of the Torah to Moshe and not to God denies the entire Torah and has no share in the Next World, the 13 Principles are unique as those tenets which one must actively accept and be aware of in order to be considered a practicing Jew. These Principles define the minimum requirement necessary for one to relate to God, Torah, and the Jewish people. (A complete listing appears in the Artscroll Siddur, pgs. 178-180.)

The 10th Principle states: "God knows the actions (including speech and thoughts) of people and does not ignore them."

The 11th Principle states: "God rewards those who fulfill the Torah's commandments and punishes those who transgress them ... God knows who serves Him and who transgresses, and applies the proper reward and punishment."

Rambam establishes these two principles as distinct and separate. At first thought, one would think that if God punishes and rewards,

then He obviously is aware of all of man's actions, making the 10th Principle unnecessary to state.

In truth, God could have designed a system where reward and punishment would be built into creation. Reward could have been the automatic consequence of a fulfilling a commandment and punishment the automatic result of violating one. God could have created a systematic spiritual supercomputer in which justice would be pre-programmed as a natural outgrowth and response to all actions, for good or for evil. God would not have been personally involved or aware at all.

Even if God was omniscient, man would not need to know and be aware of this fact, and Rambam would not need to list God's omniscience as a principle that is needed to relate to God and Torah in this imaginary system that we are suggesting. Since the supercomputer of justice would be administering reward and punishment, whether or not God knew all of man's actions, the Torah would be observed nonetheless.

But Rambam does indeed list knowledge of the 10th Principle as vital. We must know that God is personally aware of our actions in order for observance of Torah to have meaning. God is not interested in a cold, dry 'assembly line worker' relationship. He doesn't only want His laws to be kept. He desires a loving, caring, unique and special covenant with us. When we sin, we don't merely bring terrible and severe consequences upon ourselves, we personally insult our Father in Heaven. And when we perform a Mitzvah, we don't only earn immeasurable, spiritual rewards, we make God smile. This is unlike a built-in reward and punishment system which would destroy any possibility of a real relationship between man and God.

This concept of God's love and desire for personal relationship is seen in the following sentence:

"SoshallyousaytotheHouseofJacobandtell to the Sons of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to Egypt and that I carried you on wings of eagles and have brought you to Me. And now if you listen well to Me and you will keep My covenant, you will be a treasure to Me from all the peoples, (although) all of the earth is Mine. You will be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" (Exodus 19:3-7)

God tells us in these verses: You saw what I did to Egypt. You know why I destroyed and punished them. It was not due to my anger for their evil sins and immorality. They were deserving of punishment long before they met the Jewish nation. But I was waiting, thinking perhaps they might repent. But as soon as they began making life difficult for you, I started striking against them. This could only be because I love you. I was even willing to protect you like an eagle defends her young. (See Rashi 19:4).

During the Ten Days of Repentance, between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the Talmud, based on a verse in Isaiah 55:6, states that God is closer to us, ready to accept our prayer and repentance more easily. (Rosh Hashana 18a, see also Rambam, Laws of Repentance 2:6.) This is normally understood to mean that since God is in the process of judging man, He performs a special act of kindness by making Himself available before a final decision is made. This classical explanation may have truth to it, but there is great depth in this statement as well. The very process of judgment itself is the greatest act of kindness and personal relationship that God could grant to man. The fact that God judges us shows His personal love, closeness and concern for us. He is not indifferent to our actions.

This act of kindness by God explains why it is that Rosh Hashana comes before Yom Kippur. Many question: Shouldn't Yom Kippur, a day of

forgiveness, come before Rosh Hashana, a day of judgment, so that we can be judged after we have received atonement for our sins?

The answer: One whole year has passed since the last season of repentance and we have become careless and callous to the reality of judgment and its consequences. We have forgotten that what we do or don't do makes a difference to our personal relationship with our caring God. Only the traumatic experience of being judged personally by God on Rosh Hashana saves us from our apathy and motivates us to return to Him. When we regain the awareness on Rosh Hashana that God is a King who cares, we then are inspired to critically examine our lives and deeds.

With these insights, instead of greeting Elul and the High Holidays with emotional dread, perhaps we can appreciate how much God loves us which forces Him to judge us.

May we all merit not only to feel God's personal love and concern in judgment, but God's beautiful blessings and rewards as the result of a positive verdict for long life, peace, and good tidings for us and for all of Israel.



The Sound of the Shofar

The holiday celebrating the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana, has been marked for millennia as a time for introspection, celebrated by blowing the Shofar and eating apples dipped in

honey . Yet the scriptural evidence does not explicitly specify any of the familiar elements with which the festival is so closely associated. The Torah states:

Speak to the People of Israel, saying, "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbatical, a commemoration of teru'ah, a holy gathering." (Vayikra 23:24)

And in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a holy gathering; you shall do no labor; it shall be a day of teru'ah for you. (Bamidbar 29:1)

When the Torah commands observance of this holiday there is no clear reference to the identity of this day as the start of a new year, no mention of the Shofar - not even the apple and honey. The crux of the problem is the word *teru'ah*. What is *teru'ah*, and why are we required to remember or commemorate it? How is that commemoration achieved?

This word is used elsewhere in the text: Not far from the first reference, in the Book of Vayikra, we again find the word *teru'ah*. The context is the commandment to observe the Jubilee Year; significantly, the word *teru'ah* is attached to the word *shofar*.

Then shall you transmit shofar teru'ah on the tenth day of the seventh month, on the Day of Atonement shall you sound the shofar throughout all your land. (Vayikra 25:9)

This passage teaches us that the word *teru'ah* is the sound of the *shofar*. Additionally, there is one earlier source that connects *shofar* and *yovel* (Jubilee): Both of these terms appear in the Book of Shmot in the context of the Revelation at Sinai.

There shall not a hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live; when the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mount...19. And when the voice of the shofar sounded long, and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by a voice. (Shmot 19:13,19)

Mount Sinai, which heretofore had been a non-descript, insignificant location, became, for a limited time, the holiest place on Earth. The temporary change in status was signified in various ways, and these verses indicate the very severe consequences of trespassing the boundaries of this holy area during the days leading up to and including the Revelation. The Revelation itself was accompanied by a crescendo of shofar sound, and the signal that the restrictions were lifted and the mount returned to its earlier mundane status was the sounding of the yovel, a long, final note of the shofar. Thus, when we read in our present context that the first day of the seventh month should be observed as "a commemoration of *teru'ah*" or "a day of *teru'ah*", we know that the intention is to blow the shofar. What remains unclear is - why? What is the particular spiritual character and significance of this day and how is it connected to the sound of the shofar?

From what we have seen thus far in the verses, the commandment to blow the shofar seems most appropriate as an observance of Shavuot, the day on which the heavens opened and the Torah was given at Sinai, accompanied by the blast of the shofar and the final blast of the yovel. Why, then, shofar on Rosh Hashana? Similarly, the association of the yovel blast with the Jubilee Year observance, held on Yom Kippur of the fiftieth year in the sabbatical cycle, could easily explain our tradition to sound the shofar on Yom Kippur each year. Yom Kippur is the day

the Jewish People actually received the Torah, in the form of the Second Tablets that Moshe brought down from on high after the nation was forgiven for the Sin of the Golden Calf. This would be an additional reason to sound the shofar on Yom Kippur, continuing the association of the shofar with the Giving of the Torah at Sinai. Yet we are none the wiser as to the reason we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashana; simply put, what do the things we know about Rosh Hashana have to do with shofar blasts?

Multiple Calendars

The Mishna teaches that the Jewish year is layered with multiple calendars. The cycle of months begins with Nisan, commemorating the Exodus from Egypt and the birth of our national identity celebrated on eve of the 15th of the month. This is the particular calendar of the Jewish People, the cycle of our particular national history. On the other hand, the start of the natural, universal year is in the autumn, and begins with the month of Tishrei. The Mishna teaches that the 1st of Tishrei marks the beginning of the natural cycle, and all of creation passes before God in judgment. This aspect of judgment that is associated with Rosh Hashana is embedded in our Oral Tradition, and is not hinted at in the text of the Torah. In fact, when we are told that the first day of the seventh month is a day to commemorate the *teru'ah*, no rationale is offered, making Rosh Hashana unique among the biblically ordained holidays in this respect.

According to Rabbinic tradition, Creation took place on Rosh Hashana - specifically, Creation of Man. On the very same day that Man was created, he sinned, and was judged:

It was taught in the name of R. Eliezer: The world was created on the twenty-fifth of Elul. The view of Rav agrees with the teaching of R. Eliezer. For we have learned in the blessing for the Shofar composed by Rav: 'This day, on

which was the beginning of work, a memorial of the first day, for it is a statute for Israel, a decree of the God of Yaakov. On it, sentence is pronounced upon countries: which of them is destined to the sword and which to peace, which to famine and which to plenty; and each individual creature is visited on that day, and recorded for life or for death.' Thus we learn that on Rosh Hashana, in the first hour the idea of creating Man entered His mind, in the second He took counsel with the Ministering Angels, in the third He assembled Adam's dust, in the fourth He kneaded it, in the fifth He shaped him, in the sixth He made him into a lifeless body, in the seventh He breathed a soul into him, in the eighth He brought him into the Garden of Eden, in the ninth he was commanded [against eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge], in the tenth he transgressed, in the eleventh he was judged, in the twelfth he was pardoned. 'The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Adam, 'This will be a sign to your children. As you stood in judgment before Me this day and came out with a free pardon, so will your children in the future stand in judgment before Me on this day and will come out from My presence with a free pardon.' When will that be? 'In the seventh month, on the first day of the month.' (Midrash Rabba Vayikra 29:1)

The 1st of Tishrei is therefore an auspicious day: the day of our creation, and the day when we were given a second chance. Subsequently Rosh Hashana becomes a day of taking stock, with one eye on the actions of the previous year and the other eye on the upcoming year.

The First Breath

But why blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana?

Rav Yehonatan Eybeshutz points out a deep and meaningful connection between the day of the Creation of Man and the commandment to blow the shofar:

And the Almighty God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (Bereishit 2:7)

Man becomes a living, sentient being when God breathes His breath into him, transforming him from physical matter into a living hybrid of the physical and spiritual. When we blow the shofar on the day of Man's creation, it serves as a memorial to that first breath, the divine breath of life blown at the dawn of Creation, on Rosh Hashana.

We may now take a closer look at the mitzva of shofar: On Rosh Hashana, we are commanded not to blow the shofar, but to hear the blast of the shofar. When our Sages composed the wording of the blessing we recite each year on Rosh Hashana, they attempted to focus our concentration on that first breath, that primordial breath which infused mankind with a Divine soul. In the course of the year, the sound of the shofar may become distant and we may turn our attention away from the divinity that is at our very core. This cycle is interrupted on Rosh Hashana, as it was on certain other occasions in our history when we were able to hear that sound collectively, to hear it clearly, and to recognize its divine source: At Mount Sinai, when we received the Torah, on Yom Kippur of the Jubilee Year.

Once each year we are commanded to listen intently, with proper concentration, to the sound of the shofar. We are called upon to tune in to that cry that supplants words, the sound that is made by our breath, and to hear the echoes of that first breath that reverberates through time, ever since God

blew His own breath into Man.

Just as the sound of the shofar is the sound of the beginning of human history, it is also the sound of the culmination of human history: The prophetic description of the End of Days includes the sound of the great shofar blast that will reverberate throughout the land. Once again, God's breath will animate the entire world. God Himself will sound the shofar, just as He breathed a soul into Man, just as He sounded the shofar at Sinai. On that day, all of mankind will hear the sound and recognize God, Creator and King.

And it shall come to pass on that day, that the great shofar shall be blown, and those shall come who were lost in the land of Assyria, and the outcasts in the land of Egypt, and shall worship the Almighty on the holy mount at Jerusalem. Yishayahu 27:13

When we truly hear the shofar on Rosh Hashana, we hear echoes of the act of Creation, and we reaffirm our anticipation of the future sound of the shofar that will usher in the Messianic Age, the apex of the cycle of Creation commemorated on the day of Man's creation.

1. See Rav Moshe Isserlis in Shulchan Aruch section 583:1. The custom of eating foods as part of a prayer can be traced to the Talmud Kritut 6a: 'Said Abaye: Since you hold that symbols are meaningful, every man should make it a habit to eat on New Year pumpkin, fenugreek, leek, beet and dates.'
2. Mishna 1:1: 'There are four new years. On the first of Nisan is New Year for kings and for festivals. On the first of Elul is New Year for the tithe of cattle. R. Eleazar and R. Simeon, however, place this on the first of Tishreei. On the first of Tishri is New Year for years, for release and jubilee years, for plantation and for [tithe of] vegetables. On the first of Shvat is New Year for

trees, according to the ruling of Beit Shammai; Beit Hillel, however, place it on the fifteenth of that month.'

3. Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:2, found in Talmud Bavli 16a: At four seasons [divine] judgment is passed on the world: at Pesach in respect of produce; at Shavuot in respect of fruit; on Rosh Hashanah all creatures pass before him [God] like children of *maron*, as it says, 'He that fashions the heart of them all, that consider all their doings' (Tehilim 33); and on Sukkot judgment is passed in respect of rain.
4. See Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashana 10bf. Rabbi Yehoshua voices a conflicting opinion: "It was taught, Rabbi Eliezer said; in Tishrei the world was created, in Tishrei the Avot were born, in Tishrei the Avot perished, on Pesach Yitzchak was born, on Rosh Hashanah Sarah, Rachel, and Hanah were answered. On Rosh Hashanah Yosef left prison, on Rosh Hashanah the slavery came to an end in Egypt. In Nissan we were redeemed, in Tishrei we will be redeemed in the future. (Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a).
5. The relationship between the judgment of Rosh Hashana and that of Yom Kippur deserves separate analysis. See commentary of the Ramban on Vayikra 23:24.
6. Rav Yehonatan Eybeshutz (1690-1764), Y'arot Dvash, vol. 1:1.
7. See the formulation of the Rambam in Laws of Shofar, introduction, and 1:1.
8. See R. Judah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), in the S'fat Emet, Rosh Hashana 5659.
9. See Sifri Baha'alotcha, piska 76.



The Mood of Rosh Hashanah

One of the most perplexing aspects of Rosh Hashanah is the seemingly contradictory sources about whether It is a happy day or a serious day: The Talmud states that we do not say Hallel on Rosh Hashanah. It records that the Angels asked God why this is the case: God answers: "Can it be that the King is sitting on the throne of judgment and the books of the living and the dead are open before Him, and the Jewish people are singing¹!?"

Yet, the Midrash has a different approach: "It is the way of the world that if one has a judgment pending, he wears black clothing, leaves his beard unkempt, and doesn't trim his nails, for he doesn't know how his judgment will turn out. However, the Jewish people are not like that; they wear white clothing, trim their beards and nails, and eat, drink and rejoice on Rosh Hashanah, for they know that the Holy One, Blessed is He, will perform a miracle for them [and give their judgment a favorable outcome]²".

On the one hand, there is a very serious element on the day, to the extent that it is inappropriate to say Hallel. On the other hand, we are confident that God will provide us with a good outcome. In truth, there is no contradiction at all. One can have a serious state of mind, realizing the gravity of the day, and at the same time, be confident (but not complacent) that God will judge him favorably. This idea is only difficult to fully comprehend based on a common, incorrect view of

happiness that pervades the secular world: That is that happiness by definition involves having fun, and not having to take anything seriously. This is antithetical to the Torah value system:

In the Torah outlook, seriousness and joy do not contradict each other, rather they complement one another. As Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein puts it: "The basis of our joyous mood is our confidence that God will judge us favorably. That favorable outcome is itself a product of how seriously we are taking the day. Additionally, without a sense of its seriousness, a positive mood may be more an expression of complacency and obliviousness than one of trust in God³."

In truth, this dichotomy lies at the very foundation of two fundamental mitzvot in the Torah: Love of God, and Fear of God. Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Rosh Yeshiva of Aish HaTorah, notes that these two mitzvot also seem to be contradictory. Is our relationship with God supposed to be a loving one, or are we supposed to live in mortal fear of Him?⁴ He explains that this question is built on the incorrect premise that it is impossible to love someone who we also fear.

When we think of fearing something, we normally visualize that this thing can cause us great harm. However, in truth fear of God is a very different kind of fear. It is built on the recognition of the fact that there are consequences to our actions. As the Talmud⁵ states, God is not a 'vatran', someone who 'lets us off' when we err. A person who believes that God overlooks our actions, will be punished. What is wrong with this belief?

Rav Berkovits explains, based on a difficult Midrash⁶: The Midrash states that Noach was among the 'Ketanai amanah' – those who had limited faith. He believed in God, but he did not believe He would actually bring such a destructive flood. How can the Sages call Noach one who is lacking in Emunah, Faith,

when he spent 120 years building the Ark, suffering ridicule from those around him. Surely, he would not have done so if he believed that God would never really bring a Flood?

The answer lies in the resolution of the contradiction between Love of God and Fear of God. As Rav Berkovits⁷ is quoted:

"When a person inculcates himself with the idea that HaShem loves him, he puts himself into a precarious spiritual position. HaShem's love for us can easily be misunderstood as a willingness to look aside when we sin. If HaShem loves me, one can think, then why can't He allow me to act as I see fit? Why must He demand retribution if I transgress His decrees? This sort of outlook on life and religion allows a person to live the life of a reprobate, because no matter how low he sinks, HaShem will forgive him."

To a minute degree, this was Noach's mistake. He knew God was capable of bringing the Flood, but he was convinced, deep down, that God would ultimately forgive humanity's sins out of His deep love for them. Why is this error so serious, that it 'merits' the description of being 'small in Emunah'?

The problem with this attitude is that it diminishes the definition of love. This can be understood when analyzing the relationship between parents and children. Permissiveness on the part of the parents does not reflect love, rather it reflects weakness. A parent who cannot say no to his children is weak, not necessarily loving. A parent who truly loves his children will look out for their best interests, and sometimes that will mean giving them boundaries, limits and even 'unpleasant' consequences to their actions, that are for their benefit. Parenting experts assert that parents who do not teach their children the

concept of discipline and boundaries, do them a great disservice, and their children are far more likely to struggle in life, when they face the inevitable challenges and consequences as they grow up.

This mirrors the way God treats us: He created a system of actions and consequences, where the wrong decisions and behavior can have 'negative' results. Yet this is for our benefit, for if life was simply one unending free gift, then we would never face the challenges and difficulties that force us to grow and become great. Ahavas HaShem and Yiras HaShem do not contradict each other – on the contrary, they are complimentary. As Rav Berkovits conclude⁸: "It is because of Ahavas HaShem - the mutually loving relationship between God and us - that Fear of God is possible. When we realize that HaShem loves us and will ensure that we suffer the consequences of our sins so that we can merit the ultimate pleasure of closeness to Him, we can develop awe of the One Who weighs our deed and responds to them according to whether or not they are in accordance with His will, thus becoming true *yirei Shamayim* (those who fear Heaven)."

This is also the basis of the dichotomy of Rosh Hashanah: We are afraid, because we know that there are consequences to our actions, but we are happy, because we know that if we make the effort, then God will respond in kind, and our success in judgment will have been earned. Rosh Hashanah reminds us not to look on God as One who lets people off for their behavior, but as both a loving Father and powerful King. May we all merit to be inscribed in the Book of Life.

1. Rosh HaShana, 32b.
2. Devarim Rabbah, 2:15, cite in Tur, Orach Chaim, Simun 581.
3. 'Teshuva', p.66.
4. 'The 6 Constant Mitzvos', p.191.
5. Bava Kama, 50a.
6. Cited by Rashi, Bereishit, 7:7.
7. Ibid, p.197.
8. Ibid, p.198.



The Tishrei Unit

Greetings from the Holy City of Jerusalem!

The month of Tishrei incorporates the three major holidays of Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot. These give us an opportunity to improve the three major components of self: mind, heart and limbs.

Rosh Hashana is a holiday when we use our mind and intellect to serve God as we acknowledge and accept the sovereignty of God over the world. It is a time when we re-affirm our belief that God rules the world, and we contemplate our outlook and Jewish perspective on life. Even the name of the holiday - Rosh Hashana - 'Head of the Year' is indicative of the predominant involvement of the mind on this holiday.

Yom Kippur, however, is more of an emotional day as we pour out our hearts to God in prayer and supplication. It is a solemn and awesome time when we re-connect to God on an emotional level, therefore representing the heart, the second dimension of Man.

Finally, Sukkot represents the body/limbs, as it involves much movement and physical activity, for example, building a sukkah prior to the holiday, sleeping and eating in the sukkah, shaking the four species, and lots of dancing at Simchat Beit Hashoeva celebrations. It is a time when we serve God predominantly with our body.

Three Patriarchs

We could suggest that these three holidays also symbolize the three Patriarchs. Rosh Hashana, which focuses on connecting to God with our mind, represents our forefather Yaakov who was deeply involved in Torah study (Genesis 25:27).

Yom Kippur is a day when we connect to God with our heart, representing the patriarch Yitzchak who also symbolizes this type of service. Yitzchak, at the *Akeida*, was willing to be offered up as a live sacrifice to God. As prayers nowadays serve as a substitute to offerings (Talmud - Brachot 26b). Prayer is referred to as 'service of the heart' (Talmud - Ta'anit 2a). Yitzchak represents prayer, connecting to God with the heart, and therefore shares the same essence as Yom Kippur. It should therefore not surprise us that the *Akeida* occurred on Yom Kippur!

Finally, the festival of Sukkot, which focuses primarily on serving God physically, represents Abraham who was renowned for his hospitality (see Genesis 21:23 and Talmud Sota 10b). Abraham was constantly involved in helping others, physically going out of his way to reach out to people in need. On Sukkot, we leave our homes and places of comfort and go out to the Sukkah, which is open to all who wish to enter. Sukkot is a time when the focus of our service to God is through physical acts of kindness, just as Abraham represents.

Four Blessings

Although Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are referred to as the High Holidays, it could be that Sukkot is actually the highest of holidays, as its essence, likened to that of Abraham, will ultimately bring about the final redemption. We read in Genesis 12:2 of God's blessing to Abraham. The verse can be divided into four parts as follows:

1. I will make you into a great nation.
2. I will bless you.
3. I will make your name great.

4. It will be for you a blessing.

Rashi explains that in the first part of the verse, God tells Abraham that he will become a great nation, indicating that he would be mentioned in the first blessing of the Amidah, as we read "*Elokei Avraham*."

In the second part of the promise, Rashi continues, God, in telling Abraham that he will be blessed, indicating that his son would also be mentioned in the liturgy, as we read, "*Elokei Yitzchak*." Finally, the third section of the verse, where God promises to make Abraham's name great, served as an indication to Abraham that his grandchild too would be mentioned in the first blessing of the Amidah, as we read, "*Elokei Yaakov*."

At this point, says Rashi, we may think that just as we mentioned the three Patriarchs at the beginning of the blessing, so should we conclude the blessing by mentioning all their names. However, God continues to bless Abraham saying, "It will be for you a blessing," suggesting that Abraham alone was chosen to be mentioned in the conclusion of the first blessing of the Amidah ("*Magen Abraham*"), as Rashi says, "With you [Abraham, the blessing] is sealed and not with them."

The Ba'al Shem Tov explains how God's blessing to Abraham indicated not just that he and his descendants will be mentioned in the liturgy in specific places, but also revealed how the whole of Jewish history would unfold. Beginning with the first major historical event for the Jewish nation - the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai - starting from that point in time and continuing until the Temple period, there would be a *Tekufa shel Torah* - 'An era of Torah', a period of time when serving God with the mind and intellect would be most predominant. Thus history would begin with a focus on the study of Torah, which is the essence of Yaakov.

Starting from the Temple period, the focus of

serving God would be carried out through offerings, which corresponds nowadays to serving God through prayer, *Avodah She'b'lev*, thus symbolizing an era in which the essence of Yitzchak would predominate.

Finally, in the end of days, explains the Ba'al Shem Tov, the primary method of serving God in the era of the coming of Mashiach, will be serving God through acts of kindness to others, corresponding to the essence of our Patriarch Abraham.

This is how the Ba'al Shem Tov explains the deeper meaning of Rashi's statement, "With you [Abraham, the blessing] is sealed and not with them." Not only will the first blessing in the liturgy end with (mentioning the name of) Abraham, but also the whole of history will culminate with an era when the characteristic trait of Abraham, kindness will be the primary method in serving God. It is through these acts of kindness that we will merit the coming of the Mashiach.

This idea fits in perfectly with the verse in Leviticus 26:42 where, after warning Israel of the curses that would befall them if they deviated from God's word, God promises Israel, "[But] I will remember My covenant with Yaakov, and even My covenant with Yitzchak, and even My covenant with Abraham I will remember, and I will remember the Land [of Israel]." Many of the commentators are puzzled by the seeming lack of chronology in the listing of the Patriarchs and provide a plethora of approaches to answer this question. However, based on the approach of the Ba'al Shem Tov, this verse makes perfect sense, as it is exactly the order in which history will unfold!

(Following the mention of the covenant with Abraham (in Leviticus 26:42), which according to the Ba'al Shem Tov, refers to the end of days, the verses talk of the return to Israel, which connects to this time period, as God will gather all the Jews scattered across the world

and return them to the land.)

Entire Body

We can now provide a deeper insight as to why the festival of Sukkot, which represents Abraham, is referred to in the Torah as *Chag Ha'Asif* - 'the festival of ingathering' (see Lev. 23:39). Based on the idea that Abraham represents the physical service of God through kindness, we could suggest that on Sukkot, we 'gather' all our limbs to serve God physically, performing kindness and good deeds to others. This could be why the general term *Chag* refers to Sukkot more than it refers to Passover and Shavuot (see Numbers 29:12), as the word *Chag*, when read backwards, spells out the letters *gimmel* and *chet*, which is the acronym for *Gemilut Chasadim*, acts of kindness.

The idea that Sukkot resembles the channeling of the physical body to serving God is hinted at in the four species, which symbolically represent different parts of the body, as each of the species share a similar shape to the corresponding body part. The Midrash (Vayikra Raba 30:14) explains that the *Etrog* (citron) symbolizes the heart, the myrtle branch is symbolic of the eye, the willow branch symbolizes the mouth and the palm branch, the spine. As King David expresses in Psalms 35:10, "All my bones say who is like you, God."

We could further suggest that the festival of Sukkot, symbolic of the essence of Abraham who reached out to all humanity in need, is a holiday of ingathering of the Jewish people themselves. This is hinted at in the Midrash (Vayikra Raba 30:12) where it describes how each of the four species represents different types of Jews. The etrog, which has a good taste and smell, is symbolic of a Jew who possesses both Torah and good deeds. The palm branch, which has a taste but no smell, represents the Jew who possesses Torah but no good deeds. The myrtle with its characteristic smell but lack of taste is

symbolic of the Jew with good deeds but who lacks Torah. Finally the willow branch, with no smell or taste, symbolizes the Jew who lacks both Torah and good deeds. As we hold the four species together, we are imbibing the message of the need to respect and care for others regardless of background or religious level, just as Abraham exemplified.

May we all be blessed this year, as we gather around the table in our Sukkot, to understand the deeper meaning of the holiday and pull together all our limbs, performing acts of kindness for all types of Jews, thus unifying the Jewish people, and meriting the speedy arrival of the Messiah.