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At War before Rosh Hashanah

A pious man encountered a group of triumphant soldiers coming back from a fierce battle, flushed with victory.

"You have returned victorious from a minor struggle," he said to them. "Now get ready for the major battle."

"And what is that major battle?" they asked.

"The war within us, against the evil inclination. That is the great war. You just came back from three weeks of intense fighting, and now the enemy has been vanquished. But fighting the insanity of the *yetzer hara*, our evil inclination, never ends. Even after 100 defeats, he will never leave you alone. The battle is constant. He will not rest until he kills you. The moment you let your guard down, he will pounce and attempt to utterly destroy you.

"In a typical war there is a front line. Sometimes you are surrounded, but at least

you know where the enemy lies. The *yetzer hara*, however, is a master of disguise. He knows how to mask illusions as reality, how to rationalize evil as good. He is so devious, he knows how to get you to harm yourself and your loved ones without your even realizing it." (Duties of the Heart, *Shaar Yichud Hamaaseh*, chapter 5)

We are in the middle of the Hebrew month of Elul, gearing up for Rosh Hashanah, and it is time to intensify the battle against the *yetzer hara* and restock our supply of weapons.

The enemy's first plan of attack is to knock out your sense of personal responsibility and get you to hand it over to someone else. "Let my teachers inspire me," you think. Or, "Let my rabbi tell me what I have to work on."

No one can help you grow unless you take responsibility for yourself.

Stop waiting for someone to tell you what to change. You are responsible for yourself. You must do the necessary introspection, get in contact with yourself, and determine what you need to work on. As the Mishnah says, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" (Avos 1:14). No one can help you grow unless you take responsibility for yourself. Your teachers can give you the greatest tools in the world for self-transformation, but you will leave those tools on the bench if you don't take responsibility for your own life.

You need to get clarity about what life means to you. What do you want to accomplish this coming year? What are you committed to tackling? If you don't make these decisions, you might easily delude yourself into thinking that you are preparing adequately for Rosh Hashanah by listening to some inspiring talks and hoping that somehow these great rabbis will make you great.

No one can make you great. No one can fight

your battles. No one can turn you into a Torah scholar. There are no shortcuts; you are solely responsible for your own growth and learning. Toughen up and stop relying on others. No one can do it for you.

Judgment and Love

The month of Elul seem to be paradoxical. On the one hand it is the time for "*Ani l'dodi v'dodi li* – I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me" – an acronym for "Elul." It is a time when we feel God's intense love and closeness. Yet Elul is also the time to prepare for Rosh Hashanah, when the Book of Life and the Book of Death are open and the King of the universe sits in judgment, deciding who will live and who will die, who will have cancer and who will be cured, who will be crushed in an accident and who will survive. There seems to be a contradiction between *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li* and the Day of Judgment. How are the two related?

The Ramchal encapsulates in one paragraph the whole point of our existence, and in doing so gives us an answer. In *The Way of God* (1:4:6) he writes, "The root purpose of the service of God is for the human being to constantly turn to his Creator, to realize that he was created for the sole purpose of being drawn close to his Creator...." Everything that happens to us in this world is for one reason and one reason alone: to get closer to the Almighty, to feel that I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me. The Jew understands that everything God does is for our good; it is an expression of His love. Every judgment He renders – whether a windfall or a bankruptcy – is exactly what we need to grow closer to Him. *Ani l'dodi*, if you love the Almighty and appreciate that He is your father, then *v'dodi li*, you will see that the Almighty loves you and that everything He does is for your good. But if you don't appreciate what God has done for you and instead you have complaints, you will mistakenly think He does not love you.

The Ramchal describes the objective of the

war against the *yetzer hara*: "Man was placed in this world only to overcome his evil inclination and subjugate himself to His Creator through the power of his intellect. He must overcome his physical desire and tendencies, and direct all of his activities toward attaining this purpose [of coming close to God]" (ibid). It is up to us to choose to cling to God by vanquishing our *yetzer hara* and rising above the vanities and confusion of the world.

Learning Torah

The Ramchal then identifies the primary weapon God gave us to fight the *yetzer hara* and achieve our purpose: "God gave us one means that is greater than anything else in bringing man close to God, and that is Torah study" (1:4:9). There is nothing more powerful than learning God's instructions for living. These are the actual words of our Creator.

Elul is the time to examine your goals and drives, and to make sure it is for the right reasons. Keep it pure.

The shofar is blowing; the [Day of Judgment](#) is approaching. You are at war and the enemy is at the gate. Now is the time to strengthen your resolve to fight the great battle against the *yetzer hara*. It is time to take responsibility for every aspect of your life, to reconnect to God's constant love, and to intensify your determination to learn Torah. No one can do it for you.

Adapted from [Wisdom for Living](#): Rabbi Noah Weinberg on the parasha. [Click here to order](#).



The Arrival of Rosh Hashana

The story is told of a king who would go out to the towns and villages and visit the citizens one month out of the year. At that time, he was accessible to everyone, and showered all who came to him with kindness. At the close of the month, the people would accompany him as he returned to the palace.

The Baal HaTanya, the great Chassidic master, explained that this parable refers to the Almighty and the nearness of His presence during the month leading up to Rosh Hashana. It is a time when the Almighty is "near to all who call to him." With the advent of Rosh Hashana, however, the Almighty returns to His palace where we affirm the majesty of His Kingship.

On this theme, we find an interesting exception in Jewish law. Normally, on the Sabbath before each new lunar month, blessings are recited welcoming the new month. But before Rosh Hashana (i.e. the new month of Tishrei) no such blessings are said. This, the Baal Shem Tov explains, is because it is the Almighty Himself who blesses the new month of Tishrei and provides the blessings for the entire incoming year.

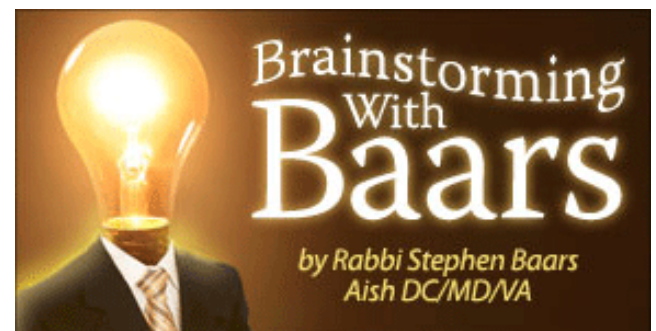
In the Torah portion of Vayelech, which we read last Shabbat, Moses is on the final day of his life. He gathers the entire nation together and has every man, woman, and child reaffirm

their commitment to the covenant with God. It is in fact this covenant, not the one that was made at Mount Sinai and later broken with the Golden Calf, that forms the basis for the Jewish people's eternal bond with the Almighty.

But it is not with God alone, however, that the Jewish people enter into this covenant. They also enter into a covenant of responsibility for one another. It is only when all Jews are sincerely concerned about one another's welfare, that God's teachings can be properly fulfilled.

This idea is not one to be relegated to history; it remains as alive today as it was 3,000 years ago. In fact, the Baal Hatanya explains that this "gathering of all Israel together" also alludes to the Jewish people's gathering together every year on Rosh Hashana. Just as in Moses' time we affirmed our loyalty to the Almighty, so too in our day on Rosh Hashana we reaffirm the Almighty as our King. Just as then we took responsibility for one another, so too it is on the High Holidays today that we ask forgiveness from one another and heighten our concerns for one another's welfare.

On Rosh Hashana, every Jew stands equally before the Almighty, for we all have ultimately been given the same assignment: to fulfill His will.



The Greatest Venture Capitalist

I used to have a class with a very successful venture capitalist. One time I started our weekly session and instead of opening the Torah to discuss a relevant issue, I asked him if he would fund my new business.

He was a little taken aback. Usually we would be discussing some principal of existence or fundamental of parenting by now.

I could see the wheels of his brain turning? "Is this the rabbi's new career?"

He asked, "Well, do you have a business plan?"

"Business plan!" I laughed, "You know me, I'm a good guy, I don't need one of those."

Now he was getting nervous (he thought I was serious).

"How much do you want?"

"\$500,000." I wasn't messing around with small time incremental investments.

He was clearly uncomfortable. This is no small amount for anyone to ask for, no less a Rabbi turned businessman.

"Ok, well what do you expect to make, what will be your return on the investment?" He questioned.

"ROI." I laughed again. "Common, I'm a good guy, you can trust me, it's all going to work out. Don't worry so much."

"Ok, so what exactly is the business?"

"Listen," I said, "Why do you need to know all these details. I'm a good guy, it's all going to work out."

He was now getting nervous. He had enough respect for Rabbis that he didn't know how to say no.

My compassion was sufficiently exercised, and feeling that the point had been made, I explained:

In a few days will be Rosh Hashana. On that day, The Almighty is going to make the most important investment there is. More important than money!

We will stand in front of God and ask Him to give us another year of life.

God is the ultimate venture capitalist and He is going to make an investment of time.

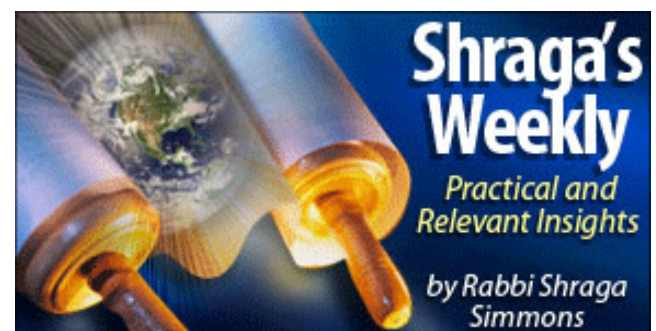
What is our business plan? What are we going to do with the year?

What's the return on investment? By next Rosh Hashana what are we hoping to tell God we accomplished?

Many people answer like I did. I'm a good guy, I'm good for it, don't worry. Just give us the year.

Rosh Hashana is coming, we want to live another year, so what are we going to tell God we are going to do with another year of life if we get it?

Come with a plan.



Symbolism of the Shofar

During the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashana, notice there are three distinct sounds:

1. *Tekiah* – one long, straight blast
2. *Shevarim* – three medium, wailing sounds
3. *Teruah* – 9 quick blasts in short succession

Let's examine each of these shofar sounds, and see how they relate to the different themes of Rosh Hashana.

The *Tekiah* Sound

Rosh Hashana is the day of appreciating who God is. We then internalize that understanding so that it becomes a living, practical part of our everyday reality. God is all-powerful. God is the Creator. God is the Sustainer. God is the Supervisor. In short, God is King of the Universe.

But for many of us, the idea of a "king" conjures up images of a greedy and power-hungry despot who wants to subjugate the masses for his selfish aims.

In Jewish tradition, a king is first and foremost a servant of the people. His only concern is that the people live in happiness and harmony. His decrees and laws are only for the good of the people, not for himself. (see Maimonides, Laws of Kings 2:6)

The object of Rosh Hashana is to crown God as our King. *Tekiah* – the long, straight shofar blast – is the sound of the King's coronation. In the Garden of Eden, Adam's first act was to proclaim God as King. And now, the shofar proclaims to ourselves and to the world: God is our King. We set our values straight and return to the reality of God as the One Who runs the world... guiding history, moving mountains, and caring for each and every human being individually and personally.

Maimonides adds one important qualification: It isn't enough that God is MY King alone. If ALL humanity doesn't recognize God as King, then there is something lacking in my own relationship with God. Part of my love for the Almighty is to help guide all people to an appreciation of Him. Of course this is largely an expression of my deep caring for others. But it also affects my own sense of God's all-encompassing Kingship.

The *Shevarim* Sound

When we think about the year gone by, we know deep down that we've failed to live up to our full potential. In the coming year, we yearn not to waste that opportunity ever again. The Kabbalists say that *Shevarim* – three medium, wailing blasts – is the sobbing cry of a Jewish heart – yearning to connect, to grow, to achieve.

Every person has the ability to change and be great. This can be accomplished much faster than you ever dreamed of. The key is to pray from the bottom of your heart and ask God for the ability to become great. Don't let yourself be constrained by the past. You know you have enormous potential.

At the moment the shofar is blown, we cry out to God from the depths of our soul. This is the moment – when our souls stand before the Almighty without any barriers – that we can truly let go.

The *Teruah* Sound

On Rosh Hashana, we need to wake up and be honest and objective about our lives: Who we are, where we've been, and which direction we're headed. The *Teruah* sound – 9 quick blasts in short succession – resembles an alarm clock, arousing us from our spiritual slumber. The shofar brings clarity, alertness, and focus.

The Talmud says: "When there's judgment from below, there's no need for judgment from above." What this means is that if we take the time to construct a sincere, realistic model of how we've fallen short in the past, and what we expect to change in the future, then God doesn't need to "wake us up" to what we already know.

God wants us to make an honest effort to maximize the gifts He gave us. You aren't expected to be anything you're not. But you can't hoodwink God, either.

The reason we lose touch and make mistakes is because we don't take the time everyday to reconnect with our deepest desires and essence. The solution is to spend time alone everyday, asking: Am I on track? Am I focused? Am I pursuing goals which will make the greatest overall difference in my life and in the world?

Make it a habit to keep in touch with yourself, and when Rosh Hashana comes around, the alarm clock of the shofar won't be nearly as jarring!