

Breath of Life

Rosh Hashana 2019

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The Jewish Center

At the very end of our sabbatical, I bumped into a cousin at a family simcha. And he said to me in passing, “How’s the marijuana plant?” I said, “Excuse me?”

He said, “You know. Right across the street from you is where they produce all the marijuana.”

I said, “I’m sorry I have to confess I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It’s called *fresh life* or *breath of fresh air*. Look into it.”

Driving home that evening, it dawned on me that he must have been talking about the huge industrial complex right across from our yishuv.

We passed the sign, “Breath of Life” almost every day. I just assumed it was a pharmaceutical company. Turns out it’s the largest manufacturer of medical marijuana in the country.

So I thought I would pay them a visit. I mean – how often in life do you live across the street from a marijuana plant?

When I got through to the “Breath of Life” office, I asked if we might be able to schedule a tour of the facility for my family. And the woman on the other end of the line said very matter-of-factly: “Sir, this is a marijuana factory. We would be happy to sell you our product, but we’re not here for your entertainment.”

היום הרת עולם

Today is the anniversary of creation – or as chazal tell us – the anniversary of the creation of humankind.

It’s also Yom Teruah: A day to sound the shofar. In fact, hearing the shofar is the only mitzvah of the day.

So my question is very simple. What has one got to do with the other? Why would we celebrate the birthday of man by blowing the shofar?

And I want to share with you an answer propounded by R. Yonatan Eybeschutz – who wasn’t just the nemesis of R. Yaakov Emden; he was arguably the most important Rosh Yeshiva of the 18th century. Any rabbi worth his salt was his student.

R. Yonatan Eybeschutz writes that if you want to understand the significance of the shofar, you have to go all the way back to the garden.

ויצַר ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם, עֶפֶר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה, וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו, נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם, לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.

And Hashem formed man of the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (Gen. 2:7)

It was the breath of God that transformed man into a sentient and spiritual being. So on the anniversary of that day, we observe the one mitzvah in the Torah that asks us to use our breath to create something – in this case – the sound of the shofar.

How provocative that we begin our year by mimicking God's most enduring creative act. What emerges is that shofar is the great reminder of our creative capacity.

And on the heels of reading about the baby born to Avraham and Sarah, how special to bring a new baby into the covenant of Avraham Avinu on this exalted day.

So my question is: Just what is it that we want to create this year?

If the sound of the shofar takes us back to our ancestral roots in Gan Eden, I'd like to propose that we spend a little more time thinking about our roots not just today – but over the course of the coming year.

And I have two ideas in mind. The first is quite general; the second is more specific.

On a macro level, I want to think about a return to Jewish history.

Yosef, the Talmud teaches us, was remembered on Rosh Hashana. That's when he was finally released from prison. That's when his star began its meteoric ascent.

To think about Yosef on Rosh Hashana is to think about Jewish memory. He's the first person in the Torah to be described as remembering. And it's no coincidence. Because Yosef was always thinking about his past: His home; his dreams; the land of Israel – are forever on his mind.

It's no wonder that he saw a visage of his father that saved him from temptation because he always saw the visage of his father.

The most successful Jew in the diaspora was the Jew with the deepest sense of his history.

The idea of national memory is so imbedded in our consciousness we almost take it for granted. But every holiday is a commemoration of the past: The exodus, the wilderness and revelation. Every time we say Kiddush, it's *זכר למעשה בראשית* and *זכר ליציאת מצרים*. And we perpetually recall the Temple and its destruction.

Judaism is entirely forward looking. We're always davening for the redemption and the ingathering of exiles. We don't live in the past; but we sure think and talk about it often.

As Yosef Haim Yerushalmi famously put it, only in Judaism is the injunction to remember “felt as a religious imperative to an entire people.”

There was particular couple that was struggling with memory loss. So they decided to see their doctor. He suggested that the best practice would be to get in the habit of writing things down. When they got home, the woman asked her husband if he would bring her a bowl of ice cream. "You might want to write it down," she said. The husband said, "You want a bowl of ice cream. No problem" Then she said she'd like a bowl of ice cream with whipped cream. "You might want to write it down," she told him. And again he said, "Ice cream with whipped cream. I got it." Then she added, "Could you make it a bowl of ice cream with whipped cream and a cherry on top. And you should probably write it down like the doctor said." And again he said, "No problem. You want a bowl of ice cream with whipped cream and a cherry on top." He goes into the kitchen. Thirty minutes later, he comes out and hands her a plate of eggs and hash browns. The woman stares at the plate for a moment, then looks at her husband and asks, "Where's the toast?"

If we forget the things we're supposed to know, what hope is there for the information we've never even committed to memory?

And so it's particularly painful to watch a generation of American Jews growing up without a sense of its roots – without a sense of history. In a recent poll, 66% of millennials in this country couldn't say what Auschwitz was.

Memory very quickly turns to history. And history very quickly gets forgotten.

Jewish history doesn't run on autopilot. We can't take for granted that our kids and grandkids will know what happened in 1942 or 1948 or 1967 – let alone the story of the Jewish people from the R. Akiva to Herzl. We have to tell them! And first we have to know it ourselves.

So this year I invite you to join me as we prioritize the study and experience of Jewish history. We'll have weekly classes beginning right after the chagim.

We'll have historians with us throughout the year.

We'll take trips here in NYC to learn about Jewish history.

And we'll take a journey to Poland and Israel to deepen our understanding of who we are and where we've come from.

I'm not convinced that people who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. But I am convinced that people who don't know history have drastically limited their intellectual, spiritual and emotional potential. It's so rich and so fascinating.

זָכֹר עוֹלָם בֵּינֵנו שָׁנוֹת דּוֹר וָדוֹר שֶׁאֵל אֲבֵיךָ וְנִגְדֶיךָ וְקִנְיֶיךָ וְיִאֲמְרוּ לְךָ.

It's our duty to ask questions about our past – to seek out the wisdom of those who have come before us. The moment we give up on Jewish history is the moment we give up our identity.

But more specifically, there's a very particular piece of our Jewish Center past to which I want to return this year. And that's our history of decorous Tefillah.

Our haftarah today tells us the story of Chana, whose Tefillot were answered on Rosh Hashana. And forever more, she serves as the very paradigm for how we pray. The question is: Many people had prayed before. What was unique about Chana's Tefillah?

The answer, I believe, has never been more relevant than in our generation. The secret to Hannah's prayer can be reduced to one word: Interiority.

Eli didn't even know what was happening. He saw her lips moving but not producing any sound. He thought she was drunk. But it was just the opposite. She was the epitome of sobriety. It's not just that she was focused – it's that she turned inward. היא מדברת על לבה – it was her heart that gave expression to her deepest thoughts.

It's not just that the 21st century is the age of distraction. It's not just that we've lost our ability to focus or think deeply. We've turned outward: The likes, and the approval ratings and the crowdsourcing – there's nothing wrong with any of them. But they bespeak an orientation to the world that's perpetually turned toward others – in search of validation or approval – a quest to follow what others have deemed important or meaningful.

Tefillah's stock has never been so high. And our need for Tefillah has never been so pressing. It's our chance to carve out the space of our inner lives.

As Rav Soloveitchik wrote, "What man fails to comprehend is not the world around him, but the world within him... Through prayer man finds himself ... It tells man the story of his hidden hopes and expectations. It teaches him how to behold [a] vision and how to strive in order to realize this vision; when to be satisfied with what one possesses, when to reach out for more..."

In this frenetic world in which we live, who wouldn't yearn for a few moments of refuge?

This shul was founded by people who wanted their davening to be really beautiful. It wasn't as if there was no place to daven on the west side of Manhattan in 1917; but there was no decorous place to daven. The shtiebels were shtiebels. Where could someone go for a davening that was filled with majesty and grandeur?

The idea of The Jewish Center was to create a space and home for people who didn't want to race through the davening; who didn't want to mail it in. They wanted to come to a מקום תפילה that would be inspiring - that would allow the best of their inner selves to find outward expression in the songs and sounds of our tefillot. Never before has our sanctuary looked more spectacular. With your help, I would love to aspire with you to reach that place.

I was standing next to young man waiting on line at the airport on one of my trips home from Israel and we got to talking. He asked what I did. I told him I was a rabbi. He said of what shul. I said The Jewish Center. He said, "You're the rabbi of The Jewish Center? I've never seen you there." I said, "You daven at The Jewish Center?" He said, "No. I just come for Kiddush."

I love that in our shul people don't leave early. Once they're here, they're here. But how about challenging ourselves to come a little earlier. And how about challenging ourselves to use our

time in shul for davening and reserving the socializing for Kiddush. Imagine if we could create a spiritual refuge from the chaos of this fractured world – a home in which to find our inner voice.

On Rosh Hashana, Hashem asks us to return to the beginning of our story.

This was the day on which Hashem first breathed life into the soul of man. I want to challenge our community to aspire to something no less ambitious. If Hashem spends so much time poring over the annals of our Jewish lives, shouldn't we?

Let's breathe new life into our pursuit of Jewish history.

And let's breathe new life into our Tefillah.

אשרי העם יודעי תרועה

Happy is the people that knows the magic of the shofar.

Happy is the people that breathes the breath of life.