

A Requiem for Satan

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The Jewish Center

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Like so much of what we read these days, I'm not sure if it's true, but I read that Donald Trump, Nancy Pelosi and John Roberts got together earlier this week in Trump Tower to try to create a path forward for the country. And in the course of their conversation, Donald Trump said, "You know, I could throw a \$10,000 bill out this window right now and make some guy really happy." Nancy Pelosi said, "Well, I could throw 100 \$100 bills out the window and make 100 people really happy." At which point John Roberts said, "I could throw both of you out the window and make the whole country really happy."

I'll come back to politics in a few minutes, but first I want turn to a topic that I hope will be a little more elevated.

During the month of Elul, we blow shofar every morning. But when we get to Erev Rosh Hashana, we stop. Tomorrow morning, there's no shofar.

Ask any school child and they'll tell you why. כדי לערבב את השטן. It's to confuse Satan. There he was preparing to level allegations against us on the Day of Judgment. Suddenly the shofar stops. He thinks he's missed his chance. He packs up his papers and goes home.

And this is neither the first nor the last place this theme comes up. It goes all the way back to the Gemara.

Why do we blow shofar before Mussaf when it seems the main mitzvah is to blow shofar *during* Mussaf. To confuse the Satan.

And why blow shofar after Yom Kippur?

Same reason.

It's very troubling.

Let's just grant all the assumptions of this statement for a moment.

So there's a satan and he's out to get us. So we try to throw him off his game.

But he falls for the same trick every year? If Satan is such a dimwit to begin with, it doesn't seem like we need to be expending so much energy trying to keep him at bay. Even according to its own internal logic the whole idea seems to make no sense.

And of course there are lots of attempts to answer this question, but I've never been satisfied with any of them.

So this morning I want to propose a radical reinterpretation of this whole notion.

And it has to do with the concept of euphemisms.

In English, when saying something explicitly would feel too harsh and we use a euphemism, it means that we've dialed it back. Instead of saying someone got fired, we might say he was let go. The euphemism is a softer or more socially suitable alternative.

In the language of Chazal, it works a little differently.

- There's a book that contains all the halachot of death and mourning. We call it מסכת שמהות.
- If someone is guilty of cursing God, we say they are guilty of ברכת ה'.
- Sometimes the gemara will tell us that the Jewish people deserved destruction so it says God was prepared to destroy the שונוי ישראל – the enemies of Israel.

Rather than substituting a milder expression as we do in English, Chazal substitute the opposite word to tip us off that they are speaking euphemistically.

It's not exactly the same model, but I want to argue that something very similar is going on whenever we talk about confusing the Satan.

Whenever the phrase comes up, it signals that we are in fact doing something quite confusing.

- Why would we stop blowing shofar just before Rosh Hashana?
- Why would we start blowing shofar before Mussaf when the mitzvah is to start during Mussaf?
- Why would blow the shofar at the end of Yom Kippur when the Mitzvah to blow shofar is on Rosh Hashana?

In all of these cases, our sages are telling us – you're right. There is something here which is inherently illogical or unexpected or simply confusing. It's a milder way of telling us: This is counterintuitive; we hope you're not confused by it.

By telling us that the idea is לעררב את השטן, they're quietly signaling to us their hope that the satan become confused – and not us.

And so it's no wonder that in each case, even though it's not obvious – there's a much more compelling – for what it is that we're doing.

- We don't blow shofar on Erev Rosh Hashana to differentiate between shofar blasts that are discretionary on the one hand and shofar blasts that are obligatory on the other.
- As Rashi writes, we start blowing shofar even before Mussaf to demonstrate just how much we love the mitzvah – it's as if we can't wait to do it.
- And we blow shofar at the end of Yom Kippur to remember that the shofar would be blown during the Yovel year on Yom Kippur to activate all the halachot of the jubilee.

To confuse the satan is rabbinic code for the goal of not confusing the rest of us.

So allow me to make one modest proposal as we think about some of our goals for the coming year.

Let me suggest that we make Torah study a higher priority in our lives.

It's almost too trite to say, but we're living in an exceptionally confusing time. Just when you think you've seen the craziest news story, you wake up the next morning and there's something even crazier.

I think the most apt bumper sticker I've seen said: *Elect a clown, expect a circus.*

It doesn't matter to whom that aphorism was referring; I think we can all agree that given the elected officials we've sent to Washington, we can reasonably expect a circus.

For 3,000 years, our sacred texts have been our tether. If confusion is the malady; Torah is the antidote. When the world is turned upside down, the Torah has kept us on the straight and narrow. Whether or not we find all the answers we're looking for, we can always be sure it will give us the framework and the values with which to consider our questions.

What could be more grounding than the collected wisdom of the most enduring religion on the planet?

The Talmud tells us that before we get to the pearly gates we'll be asked a series of questions. One of them is קבעת עיתים לתורה.

Not *did you study a lot of Torah?*

Not *did you master the Jewish canon?*

Not *did you become a massive תלמיד חכם?*

Just *did you set fixed times for Torah study?*

If our goal is scattershot; if our plan is haphazard; if our execution is slapdash – our chances of succeeding are very low.

We need a real plan and a concrete sense of how to make it a reality. So let me make a few suggestions.

- In three months' time, our Daf Yomi will be finishing shas and starting from the beginning. Both men and women come. We have wonderful teachers. Why not consider joining?
- Or sign up for one of our weekly classes and commit to coming regularly.
- Or set up regular times to listen to a Torah podcast or a shiur on yutorah. Not a one off – a real commitment.

As Moshe tells us at the end of our Parsha,

העדותי בכם היום, את-השמים ואת-הארץ--החיים והמות נתתי לפניך, הברכה והקללה; ובחרת, בחיים--למען תחיה, אתה וזרעך .

Heaven and earth are called as witnesses because they are eternal. The media, or the politicians or the academics may swing wildly in one direction or another. We hope and daven that they find a healthy equilibrium. But until they do, there's only one surefire path toward the life promised to us by the Almighty: the path paved with the stones of our holy Torah – the path tread by our ancestors – and with God's help – our descendants.