

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Delivering an Irrefutable Refutation

Rosh Hashanah – Shabbat Shuvah



Rosh Hashanah is more than the Jewish New Year; it is the time to acknowledge that God is our King and to reaffirm our commitment to our Jewish heritage.

Although the sounding of the shofar is reminiscent of the pomp and circumstance of a royal coronation, there is a deeper and more profound spiritual meaning.

Our sages explain that the shofar blasts are a wake-up call to our soul to return to God with sincerity. Furthermore, the different sounds of the shofar correspond to the cries of a lost child who seeks to be reunited with a loving parent.

These lessons explain why the *Avinu Malkenu* prayer, which proclaims that God is our Father and our King, is so central to the observance of Rosh Hashanah.

The shofar blasts are a wake-up call.

Leviticus 25:55 declares that the relationship of the Jewish people to God is that of a child to a Father and a servant to a King. Accepting God as our Father and sovereign Ruler on Rosh Hashanah is the foundation for asking God for forgiveness on Yom Kippur — the Day of Atonement.

The transition from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur is highlighted on the Shabbat that falls between these two Days of Awe. This Shabbat is referred to as Shabbat Shuvah [Shabbat of Return] and it is an extraordinary spiritual opportunity to reconnect to God.

There is a connection between this week's Torah portion, *Vayelech* (Deuteronomy 31:1–30), and Shabbat Shuvah. We read in the Torah portion that although the Jewish people's relationship with God can be strained due to our disobedience, the Torah, which is the bond between God and the Jews, "will not be forgotten from the mouth of their offspring" (Deuteronomy 31:21).

This proclamation reiterates God's promise, "I will not reject them ... or break My covenant with them" (Leviticus 26:44). This eternal and unwavering bond between God and the Jews exists because of the power of repentance [תשובה–*teshuvah*] which means "to return to God." As it says, "return unto Me ... and I will return unto you" (Zechariah 1:3).

The significance of returning to God is highlighted in this week's special haftarah [prophetic reading] and the reason this Shabbat is called Shabbat Shuvah. The first verse in the haftarah says, "*Return Israel [Shuvah Yisrael] to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity*" (Hosea 14:1).

The prophet Hosea continues his prophecy by explaining that although the Jews may be unable to offer sacrifices in the Temple, they can repent of their sins by offering words of prayer. Hosea expresses it this way, "*Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to Him, 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer our lips [prayers] in place of bulls [sacrifices]'*" (Hosea 14:2).

Hosea's words are an irrefutable refutation to the missionary argument that "without a Temple or sacrifices, Jews can no longer repent directly to God."

The sound of the shofar awakens our soul.

In the same way that the sound of the shofar awakens our soul, sacrifices inspire feelings of remorse and repentance. Hosea's words are a clear instruction that prayerful words of confession and regret can accomplish the same thing as sacrifices, anywhere and anytime.

Today, our heartfelt prayers on Shabbat Shuvah prepare us for Yom Kippur, which is the most auspicious time to return directly to God and experience the Almighty in our lives.

The power of words to receive forgiveness is also highlighted on Yom Kippur when the entire congregation recites the biblical passage, "*God said, 'I have forgiven them according to your words'*" (Numbers 14:20).

The most effective prayers are offered with humility before God. This explains the meaning of the Torah's instruction that on Yom Kippur we should "*afflict [תענוּ-teanu] our souls*" (Leviticus 16:29). The Hebrew word for "afflict" can also mean "humble," as King David says, "*I humbled [עניתי-enasi] myself with fasting*" (Psalms 35:13).

This is one of the reasons Jews fast for the entire day of Yom Kippur. Fasting humbles us and refocuses our attention on spiritual delights rather than physical pleasures.

The three pillars of Yom Kippur are Teshuva [return], Tefillah [prayer], and Tzedakah [acts of kindness and charity]. Through their practice, may we merit to receive God's abundant blessings and experience true spiritual delight.

Shabbat Shalom,

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