

The issues of Parsha Potpourri in 2026 are dedicated
לז"נ ברוך בן חיים זאב ז"ל
לז"נ אסתר בת ניסים יצחק ושמחה ז"ל
לז"נ יצחק מנחם בן ניסים דוד ויהודית יוכבד ז"ל
לרפ"ש יהודית יוכבד בת שרה
This week's issue is also dedicated
לז"נ הרב מיכל ב"ר ניסן ז"ל

Parsha Potpourri

Rosh Hashana – Vol. 21, Issue 47

Compiled by Ozer Alport

בראש השנה כל באי העולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון (משנה ראש השנה א:ב)

The Gemara (Rosh Hashana 16b) teaches that three books are opened on Rosh Hashana: one for tzaddikim (the completely righteous), one for reshaim (the totally wicked), and one for beinonim (those in the middle). People who are found to be totally virtuous are immediately written and sealed for life, and those who are completely evil are immediately written and sealed for death. The judgment of the beinonim is suspended until Yom Kippur, at which point they are written for life if they are found meritorious and for death if they are not.

The Rambam (Hilchos Teshuvah 3:3) emends the last statement of the Gemara and writes that a beinoni who repents his actions before Yom Kippur will be sealed for life, but if he does not do so, he will be sealed for death. Why does the Rambam specifically require him to tip the scales in his favor through the mitzvah of teshuvah instead of accruing a merit through any other mitzvah?

The Navi Yeshaya (55:6) exhorts us to seek out Hashem when He may be found and to call Him when He is near. The Gemara (Yevamos 49b) interprets this pasuk (verse) as a reference to the 10-day period from Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur. In light of this, Rav Yitzchok Blazer explains that although the performance of an additional mitzvah will indeed generate a new merit, the beinoni's failure to take advantage of this unique opportunity to draw close to Hashem is such a great sin that it outweighs any mitzvah we could do. For this reason, the Rambam writes that there is no alternative but to properly repent our misdeeds and return to Hashem during this period.

Other commentators answer that after Rosh Hashana has passed and a new year has begun, doing a regular mitzvah cannot help a beinoni because it will be credited to his accounting for the new year. To improve his balance for the previous year, for which he is being judged at this time, his only option is to do teshuvah, which is unique in its ability to go back in time to erase aveiros (sins) and even transform them into merits. Thus, the Rambam is not prescribing repentance for the mitzvah it represents, in which case any mitzvah would suffice, but for its ability to improve our spiritual balance sheet retroactively.

A third answer is given by Rav Yitzchok Hutner, who explains that the term beinoni does not refer to a person who has an equal number of mitzvos and aveiros as we are accustomed to thinking. Rather, a tzaddik is a person who normally does what he is supposed to do, while a rasha is someone who generally makes the wrong decision. A beinoni is inconsistent. Sometimes he chooses wisely, while in other situations he succumbs to his evil inclination. His life does not have the same predictable trajectory as that of the tzaddik and the rasha.

With this understanding, Rav Hutner explains that the evaluation of such a person is not a mathematical accounting, in which case doing one additional mitzvah or removing one sin would suffice. Rather, the repentance that is expected of a beinoni during this period is to do teshuvah for living his life as a beinoni by making a conscious decision to overcome his prior struggles and lead his life as a tzaddik.

Rabbi Eli Reisman points out that although this novel insight is inspiring, it seems to contradict the words of Rashi, who writes (Rosh Hashana 16b) that the term beinoni refers to someone who is **מחצה על מחצה**, meaning that his mitzvos and transgressions are evenly balanced. However, upon further examination, Rashi not only does not contradict Rav Hutner, but he appears to agree with his understanding. When Rashi wrote his commentary on the Gemara, he was extremely calculated and typically translated a word that needed clarification the first time it was used. If Rashi decided to wait to define a term until it appears subsequently, there must be a compelling reason.

In this case, the term beinoni appears twice on the same page. Initially, the Gemara is discussing the judgment of Rosh Hashana and says that the verdict of a beinoni is suspended until Yom Kippur, a statement on which Rashi offers no commentary. Later, the Gemara discusses the three categories of people on the Yom HaDin, which refers not to Rosh Hashana but to a future Day of Judgment when it is decided who goes to Gan Eden and who goes to Gehinnom. The Gemara says that a beinoni first goes to Gehinnom to receive atonement and cleansing, after which he enters Gan Eden, and it is on this Talmudic statement that Rashi writes that a beinoni is **מחצה על מחצה**.

In other words, when the term beinoni is used in conjunction with the judgment of Rosh Hashana, it does not refer to a mathematical accounting, but rather a reckoning of each person's trajectory in life, as Rav Hutner explained. Only when a person comes to receive his cumulative reward or punishment at the end of his life do we shift the focus from his future to his past, and it is only in this context that Rashi defines a beinoni as someone whose life was equally balanced between mitzvos and aveiros.

ותלך האשה לדרכה ותאכל ופניה לא היו לה עוד (הפטרה יום א' - שמואל א 1:18)

The Haftorah read on the first day of Rosh Hashana tells the story of the birth of a child to the heretofore barren Chana. When Chana's husband Elkanah ascended to the Mishkan in Shiloh to offer korbanos (sacrifices), he gave the best portion to his beloved wife Chana. Unfortunately, she could not enjoy it because Elkanah's other wife, Penina, provoked and angered her, leaving her in tears and unable to eat. Instead, Chana went to the Mishkan to beseech Hashem to see her pain and suffering and finally grant her a child.

When the Kohen Gadol, Eli, saw Chana praying silently at great length, he was suspicious of her conduct and accused her of being drunk and not displaying the appropriate respect for the Mishkan. Chana corrected him and explained that she was sober, but she was in intense anguish over her plight and was pouring out her heart to Hashem in prayer. When Eli heard Chana's reply and realized he had been mistaken in his judgment of her, he gave her a beracha (blessing) that her request should be fulfilled, at which point she left the Mishkan with her depressed appearance gone and her appetite restored.

The Brisker Rav points out the tremendous emunas chachamim – trust in the Sages – of Chana, as Eli had not guaranteed her anything, but had simply given her a blessing that Hashem should answer her prayers. Yet even though Chana entered the Mishkan feeling broken and despondent, she had so much confidence and trust in the beracha of a tzaddik like Eli that she viewed his blessing as if it was already fulfilled, and she left full of joy and optimism.

This is even more remarkable in light of the fact that Chana had just experienced Eli making a tremendous mistake in assuming that she was drunk, leaving her humiliated and forced to correct him. If this happened today, somebody in her shoes would be tempted to conclude that this individual is not as righteous as he is reputed to be and would not put much faith in a beracha from such a person. However, Chana understood that everyone is human, and the blessing of the Kohen Gadol, who had just made a major error, was still as valuable to her as if it were already actualized.

Rav Chaim Kanievsky notes that if Chana had so much faith in Eli's blessings, she could have gone to him at any point to ask for one. Why didn't she ever approach him directly to request a beracha before this incident? The Gemara (Berachos 31b) derives from this episode that somebody who falsely suspects another person is required not only to appease him, but to give him a blessing. It was not just the raw power of a beracha from the Kohen Gadol that made Chana so optimistic, but the fact that it was a beracha that he was obligated to give her, which would give it more strength and a better chance of being fulfilled. Since this would not be the case if she simply requested a blessing from him, she never did so.

ובחדש השביעי באחד לחדש מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל מלאכת עבדה לא תעשו יום תרועה יהיה לכם (במדבר 29:1)

The Gemara in Rosh Hashana (16b) teaches that blowing the shofar has the tremendous effect of confusing and silencing the accusing angel in Heaven. Nevertheless, the Gemara (Ibid., 29b) rules that when

Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbos, the shofar may not be blown. This enactment was made due to a fear that a Jew may be unfamiliar with the proper way to blow the shofar.

To learn how to do so, he may carry it to the house of the Rabbi, violating in the process the prohibition against carrying in the public domain on Shabbos. Although this would indeed be a tragedy, why did the Sages deny tens of thousands of people this invaluable merit simply because one Jew may carry it – unintentionally, and for the sake of performing a mitzvah – to a Rabbi to learn how to blow it?

Rav Yitzchok Blazer explains that the impending arrival of Rosh Hashana is heralded by the blowing of the shofar each morning in Elul. Certainly, when Rosh Hashana itself comes, everyone will come to the synagogue, anxiously awaiting the 100 blasts that are sounded. When the normal time for the blowing of the shofar arrives but no sounds are heard, people will become curious about the omission.

When they ask, they will be told it is because of the aforementioned fear of another Jew accidentally carrying the shofar outside on Shabbos. The questioner will press on, wondering why so many people must lose out over such an improbable fear, one that would seem to be greatly outweighed by the guaranteed downside of Jews across the world being unable to hear the shofar blasts.

From the fact that Chazal nevertheless made their decree, we see that they understood that the possibility that one Jew may inadvertently carry the shofar outside – even for the sake of a mitzvah – is so detrimental that they saw no choice but to forbid the blowing of the shofar for everyone else. Upon understanding this, the questioner will be left with a new appreciation of the severity of an accidental sin and all the more so an intentional one. This new recognition will inspire him to a newfound resolve to repent his sins in a manner that even the sound of the mighty shofar could not have accomplished.

אבינו מלכנו נא אל תשיבנו ריקם מלפניך

Rav Henoch of Alexander once remarked that he made three incorrect assumptions in his younger years. He presumed that all those who serve on the chevra kadisha (Jewish burial society) have great yiras Shomayim (fear of Heaven) since they are constantly reminded of man's mortality. Additionally, he surmised that all balanim (mikvah caretakers) must be holy people because so much of their day revolves around spiritual purity. Lastly, he assumed that the Rabbi's shamash (personal attendant) must be a talmid chacham (Torah scholar) after spending so much time assisting the Rav in answering legal queries, adjudicating halachic disputes, and teaching Torah classes.

Over time, he was surprised to discover that members of the chevra kadisha are often distant from religion, numerous balanim lead lives far removed from sanctity, and many shamashim are quite ignorant. These startling observations taught him that a person can be extremely close to opportunities for spiritual growth, but if he fails to recognize and take advantage of them, they will unfortunately go to waste.

Applying this lesson to the Yamim Noraim, Rav Yisroel Reisman notes that this time of year is rife with possibilities for change. Chazal describe (Rosh Hashana 18a) the period from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur as one in which Hashem is close, waiting for us to seek Him out and return to Him. Many of us heard uplifting speeches about the power of these days when we were in yeshiva or seminary, and we took it for granted that everybody around us must be equally inspired to tap into their potential.

Sadly, in many shuls and even in many yeshivos, it is possible to hear people during the breaks before the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashana and Neilah on Yom Kippur discussing the latest headlines in sports and politics rather than sharing last-minute tips on how to improve our judgments. Like those who waste the potential latent in their professions, people who fail to recognize the special opportunities that we are about to be presented with can squander them.

Rav Shimshon Pinkus commented that the most moving of all the supplications in the Avinu Malkeinu prayer that we will say numerous times in the coming weeks is: **אבינו מלכנו נא אל תשיבנו ריקם מלפניך** – Our Father, Our King please do not turn us away from You empty-handed. The prospect of emerging empty-handed from these potent days and exiting the same way we entered should be truly frightening. Let us resolve to maximize the remaining time by beginning the arduous work of examining our ways and developing a realistic plan for lasting inner growth and change, and in that merit, we should all be inscribed for a happy and healthy new year.

Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources that discuss them):

- 1) In Parshas Emor (Vayikra 23:24), the Torah refers to Rosh Hashana as זְכוֹרָן תְּרוּעָה – a remembrance of shofar blasts. In Parshas Pinchas (Bamidbar 29:1), it is called יוֹם תְּרוּעָה – a day of shofar blowing. The Gemara in Rosh Hashana (29b) explains that Parshas Emor refers to Rosh Hashana that falls on Shabbos, in which case the shofar is only remembered but not actually blown, and Parshas Pinchas refers to Rosh Hashana that falls during the week, when the shofar is sounded. Why did the Torah write these two cases in this order, first mentioning the less common case of Rosh Hashana falling on Shabbos and the shofar not being blown? (Rav Akiva Eiger Al HaTorah Parshas Pinchas)
- 2) The Midrash (Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer 31) says that the shofar blown at Har Sinai (Shemos 19:16) came from the horn of the ram that Avrohom Avinu offered as a Korban Olah (Elevation Offering) in place of Yitzchok (Bereishis 22:13). The Gemara in Chullin (90a) rules that when a Kohen offers a Korban Olah, he must burn the horns and hooves together with the rest of the animal. If so, how was Avrohom allowed to save the ram's horn to be used in the future instead of burning it? (Ramban, Rav Eliyahu Mizrahi, Gur Aryeh, and Ayeles HaShachar Shemos 19:13; Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh Vayikra 1:9; Tal'lei Oros, Peninei Kedem, and M'rafsin Igri Parshas Vaeira)

Answers to Points to Ponder:

1) **Rav Akiva Eiger** cites the Gemara's statement (Shabbos 87b) that the Exodus from Egypt occurred on a Thursday. In a year in which Pesach starts on Thursday, Rosh Hashana begins on Shabbos. In Parshas Emor, Moshe addressed the Jews of his generation and taught them about the festivals they would be celebrating. Although in most years the shofar is blown on Rosh Hashana, Moshe referred to the unusual case in which it is only remembered because he knew that in that particular year, Rosh Hashana would fall on Shabbos. In Parshas Pinchas, Moshe taught Bnei Yisroel the laws that would apply to all generations, so at that time, he discussed the more typical case in which Rosh Hashana occurs during the week and the shofar is sounded.

2) The **Ramban** writes that Avrohom did in fact burn the ram's horn together with the rest of the animal, but Hashem miraculously reassembled the ashes of the horn and returned it to its original, pre-offering state so that it could be used again in the future. The **Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh** answers that the ram's horn may have become separated from its body while it was still alive, in which case the Gemara rules (Zevachim 86a) that the horn does not need to be offered with the rest of the animal. The **Tzemach Dovid** notes that the Torah's emphasis (Bereishis 22:13) on Avrohom seeing the ram caught in the thicket by its horns, which would likely have become detached when he untangled it, alludes to this explanation. The **Maharal** argues that if this was the case, the horn was never sacrificed in lieu of Yitzchok and has no significance. He additionally points out that the Midrash (Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer 31) says that every part of the ram was used for other functions, such as the sinews that became the strings in Dovid's harp, even though Avrohom certainly offered them. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh suggests two other answers: The ram was offered in its entirety, but its horn subsequently fell off the altar before it was consumed, regarding which the law is (Zevachim 86a) that it need not be returned. Alternatively, the Avos only observed the mitzvos voluntarily before the giving of the Torah and were free to disregard them if they had a specific reason to do so, as Avrohom did here in saving the horn that he prophetically saw would play an important role in the future.