

# RABBI YEHUDA AMITAL

MAGGID MODERN CLASSICS



## WHEN GOD IS NEAR ON THE HIGH HOLIDAYS



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# The Themes of Elul

The following midrash appears in *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*:

On Rosh Hodesh Elul, God said to Moses, “Come up the mountain to Me and sound a shofar throughout the camp.” Because Moses was ascending the mountain, the shofar was sounded in order that the people not repeat the error of idol worship.... For this reason, *Hazal* decreed that the shofar be blown on Rosh Hodesh Elul every year, in order to remind Israel that they should repent, as it is written, “Will the shofar be blown in the city and the nation not be afraid?” (Amos 3:6). (*Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 45)

The Rosh (*Piskei HaRosh*, Rosh HaShana 4:14) and *Tur* (*Orah Hayim* 681) cite this same passage as binding law.

On the first of Elul, Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the second tablets. The accompanying shofar blast served two purposes: first, notifying the people that Moses was ascending to receive the Torah; second, warning them not to repeat their error of worshipping an idol.

Why was it necessary to notify them that Moses was receiving the Torah? The shofar blast was meant to tell the nation, “The road is

long and difficult. You have to prepare yourselves. You need to know that you are about to receive the Torah.” This is our first task in the month of Elul: to mark our destination, the goal toward which we are aiming.

In *Parashat Ki Tetzeh*, we read of the *ben sorer umoreh* – the stubborn and rebellious son. According to Nahmanides, this passage teaches us our true aim in life. The *ben sorer umoreh* is guilty of two sins: he rebels against his father and mother and rejects their authority, and he is a glutton and a drunkard. Regarding this second sin, we are taught something curious: the death penalty is imposed on the *ben sorer umoreh* only if he consumes vast quantities of kosher meat, but if he eats non-kosher meat, or meat that the Rabbis prohibited, the laws of *ben sorer umoreh* do not apply to him. Nahmanides explains that the sin of the *ben sorer umoreh* is that he violates the norms of proper behavior, and thereby transgresses the command of the Torah, “You shall be holy” (Lev. 19:2). We see that the Torah demands that even an adolescent boy of thirteen live a life of sanctity, and if he fails to do so, he may fall into the category of the *ben sorer umoreh*.

The Torah’s imperative, “You shall be holy,” means that our performance of mitzvot is not sufficient. We are required to aspire to a higher level whose very essence consists of being holy. The Torah limits our consumption of meat because man needs to become more spiritual, to ensure that carnal desires not be the central focus of his life. Even when young, a person must strive for a life that is more spiritual, more moral, more balanced, more pure. Every one of us is expected to strive to achieve closeness to God, to develop a personality that is more authentic, more moral. Failure to do so makes a person into what Nahmanides calls a *naval bireshut haTorah*, “a scoundrel with Torah approval,” even if, like the *ben sorer umoreh*, he scrupulously observes the finest details of the laws of *kashrut*.

The sounding of the shofar in Elul defines our goal in life. We who learn in yeshiva have an obligation to translate this goal into a single aim: the aspiration to become a *talmid hakham*, to attain Torah knowledge and to engage completely in Torah study. Today more than ever, it is imperative to become a *talmid hakham*. *Hazal* asserted that “an ignoramus cannot be pious” (Mishna Avot 2:5), but nowadays even a simple Jew is required to be a *talmid hakham*. In the past it was possible to be

a good Jew even without being a *talmid hakham* and engaging in Torah study. In previous generations there were simple Jews, manual laborers, with no pretensions in the area of Torah study, who were nevertheless “good Jews.” In our day, this is virtually impossible for a number of reasons, which I would like to explore with you.

The first factor is the nature of the period we live in. We live in a time when the outside culture seeps into our consciousness from every possible direction. Once upon a time, a Jew could live in a small town and never be exposed to anything that ran contrary to his way of life. His community was homogenous. Every day, he would go to synagogue, return home, go out to work. He was never exposed to the things we see every day. We, on the other hand, want to know what is going on in the world; we read newspapers and connect to different sources of news and information. As a result, we are exposed to a different culture. Therefore today we need a different standard of *yirat shamayim* and Torah study from that required in earlier generations.

The second factor is our lifestyle. Today, people have a lot of free time, and a whole culture of leisure time has developed to fill the vacuum. People no longer work from sunrise to sunset. We have substantial amounts of leisure time, and one of our main problems is what to do with so much free time. As technology advances, the problem of leisure time has become more pronounced. And one thing is certain: whatever time one does not spend on Torah will be filled with other things. There is no middle ground. No one can claim, “I’m just not meant to learn Torah.” If you don’t learn, you’ll end up wasting your time.

The third factor relates to the intellectual debate in which we are engaged every day and every minute, often unconsciously. We are surrounded by a secular culture, a secular world which day and night declares its supremacy. Our struggle with this world animates our every step and generates challenges to our faith, our *yirat shamayim*, and our performance of mitzvot. The most dangerous thing is that we aren’t always aware of this influence. For this reason we need to arm ourselves intellectually, with a firm grounding in Torah.

The fourth factor concerns the contemporary job market. Let’s be honest: most of us connect the term “job” with some kind of intellectual pursuit, with a career involving thought and analysis. Obviously

this applies not only to those who are planning a future in the rabbinate or teaching, but to anyone who intends to enter a profession. What will we become if we dedicate our most important faculty – our brain – solely to making a living, to advancing our career, and not to serving our Creator? Our *avodat Hashem* will be limited to physical activities, eating matza, washing hands, walking to the synagogue, but will not engage our minds. How can the intellect, the pinnacle of human achievement, not be central to our *avodat Hashem*? In the past, people's livelihoods were not connected with intellectual pursuits – they worked as a carpenter, a shoemaker, or some other unskilled labor. But we, who are accustomed to engaging our minds to meet our basic needs, can we neglect to do so for our spiritual needs?

The fifth factor involves the events we have witnessed in our day. We have seen hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews immigrating to Israel.<sup>1</sup> I doubt that a thousand of them knew what Torah is or heard of Abraham. Their move to Israel will change the country's social fabric. If Jewish knowledge becomes the province of a minority of the population, there is a real danger that the Jewish people will split between those who know and those who don't. We need to embody the uniqueness of Torah in our daily lives, but also make it known to others. We cannot leave all those hundreds of thousands of people who have never heard of Torah in the hands of those who are Jewishly ignorant. We need to create an educational elite to reach these people, and this will require intensive Torah study.

The last factor concerns our position in Israeli society. We do not seek to cut ourselves off from the national conversation. We are deeply involved in what is happening around us. The very concept of a *hesder* yeshiva reflects this involvement. But I believe that it is impossible to be involved in a secular society without a strong Torah basis. Without Torah we will be left with nothing.

The basis of the Torah is the Oral Law. “The Holy One, blessed be He, made a covenant with Israel only for [the sake of] the Oral Law”

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1. Rav Amital here refers to the wave of immigration to Israel from the former Soviet Union between 1990 and 2000.



(*Tanḥuma, Bereshit* 58). Everything is built on the disputes of Abbaye and Rabba and, in descending order, Tanakh, then Jewish philosophy. But the Oral Law has a special aspect, a magic of its own. By studying the Oral Law a person hears the word of God Himself. In the words of the Midrash:

“Let them take for Me a contribution” (Ex. 25:2) – To what can this be compared? To a king who had an only daughter. Another king arrived and married her. The king said to him, “I cannot tell you not to take her, for she is your wife. On the other hand, I cannot be separated from her, for she is my only daughter. I ask only this favor of you: wherever you go, build me a small chamber so that I may dwell with you.” Similarly, God said to Israel, “I gave you the Torah. I cannot be separated from the Torah, but I cannot ask you not to take it with you. Wherever you go, build Me a small structure so that I may dwell there.” (Exodus Rabba 33:1)

The study of Torah brings you closer to God. No one understands how this works. But if you focus your study on Jewish philosophy, Tanakh, or other subjects – you will fail. The Oral Law is the basis for everything – faith, Torah, *yirat shamayim*, love of mitzvot. Afterwards, of course, it is necessary to supplement with aggada and mussar, Tanakh and philosophy. But the foundation of all foundations is the Oral Law.

The second reason for sounding the shofar on Rosh Ḥodesh Elul, according to *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, is to prevent further idol worship. Let us imagine how the people felt following the debacle of the golden calf. They were surely weighed down by a feeling of failure as they prepared to receive the second set of tablets. Indeed, “My sin is before me constantly” (Ps. 51:5) is one of the principal themes of Elul.

This verse does not refer to a specific sin. We need constantly to examine ourselves: How deep is our faith really? How scrupulous is our performance of mitzvot? How do we treat others? Do we exercise responsibility toward society as a whole? What are our priorities? What is our level of *yirat shamayim*? How committed are we to Torah? These are the issues that demand introspection and self-evaluation.

We also need to examine the quality of our prayer. How many times a day do we repeat the words, “who sanctified us with His commandments”? This is not mere words, but an expression of the power of mitzvot to sanctify us. “He pours out his heart before the Lord” (102:1). Are we truly capable of pouring out our hearts before God?

Do we appreciate the great benefit of studying Torah and fulfilling mitzvot? The prophet Malachi (3:13) says, “‘Your words have been strong against Me,’ says the Lord. Yet you say, ‘What have we said against You?’” God accuses the people, “You have spoken harshly against Me.” The Jews do not understand: “What did we say? Heaven forbid! We’ve said nothing against You!” The prophet responds, “You have said, ‘It is useless to serve God; what have we gained by keeping His charge, and by walking in abject awe of the Lord of Hosts? And so, we account the arrogant happy: they who have performed wickedness have endured; they have indeed dared God and escaped.’”

“It is useless to serve God.” People say, “What difference does it make whether or not we observe the mitzvot? What do we gain? God commanded us to do, and so we do. Just as it says in the *Mishna Berura*.”

If we do not constantly feel, every hour and every minute, the great value of putting on *tefillin*, keeping Shabbat, or performing mitzvot generally, then our actions fall under the category of “Your words have been strong against Me... ‘It is useless to serve God.’”

This is the second lesson from Moses’ climb to the top of Mt. Sinai and the second foundation of Elul. Our quest for self-improvement begins, as we said, with an awareness of failure, and the desire to bridge the distance between where we want to be – and need to be – and where we actually find ourselves.

A third principle relating to Moses’ ascent of Mt. Sinai to receive the second tablets is, “Carve yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones” (Ex. 34:1). The second tablets were inscribed with divine writing, just as the first tablets were, but Moses was required to hew the second tablets from stone. Speaking of the *yetzer hara*, *Hazal* say, “If this *menuval*, this contemptible creature, confronts you, drag him into the *beit midrash*” (Sukka 52b). Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk explained that the phrase “this *menuval*” refers to the one outside the *beit midrash*. But in the *beit midrash* another

*menuval* waits for you, the same *yetzer hara* in a different form. The *yetzer hara* sometimes fools you into thinking that “the *beit midrash* will make everything right.” You don’t need to make an effort; the *beit midrash* will create the right atmosphere and will have the desired influence on you.

But we need to remember that the true experience of Elul doesn’t just happen; it results from an effort of “Carve yourself,” of hard work. Certainly, the atmosphere of the *beit midrash* adds something, but anyone who builds his life on atmosphere is wasting his time. A person has to apply himself, to overcome shifts in mood and interest. Being a student in yeshiva requires rousing oneself to engage in *avodat Hashem* whether one feels like it or not. One has to get to the *beit midrash* on time, and open the Gemara, no matter his mood. Constantly applying oneself is hard work. In other areas – preparing for an examination, for example – one knows that the moment will come when he has reached the finish line, the task is complete. This isn’t true of *avodat Hashem*. The effort is constant and unrelenting.

One’s years in yeshiva can be the most productive years of your lives. I envy you. But you have to make proper use of this time. If a person is presented with such possibilities, can he possibly be forgiven for not making the most of the opportunity?

When Moses prepares to receive the second tablets, he is told, “And no one will ascend with you” (Ex. 34:3). Rashi comments on this verse that the first tablets attracted the evil eye as a result of the fanfare and thunder and throngs accompanying their transmittal, whereas, for the giving of the second tablets, “modesty is the most worthy trait.”

Not creating a big impression; not making a big noise; not the superficial but the substantive. Whoever feels that appearances are primary needs to correct this. Fear of Heaven requires going beneath the surface.

Performance of mitzvot also demands that we turn inward. Many mitzvot require little effort – going to synagogue, buying kosher food, etc. But even with respect to these, we need to add another dimension, to deepen our fulfillment of these commandments.

That is why we have gathered in the *beit midrash*. Sometimes, we may feel despair, we may lose faith in our own abilities. But one must strengthen his faith in himself too, as *Hazal* taught: “Open for Me an

opening the size of the eye of a needle” – that alone is sufficient – “and I will make an opening for you as wide as the entrance to the Holy Temple.” The mussar masters explain: If one makes a hole in some fabric the size of a needle, it can easily be lost. It’s there, but he cannot see it. God here is promising that, even if we pry open a tiny opening, it will remain open, it won’t be lost. And then we are promised that God will expand for us the opening “as wide as the entrance to the Holy Temple.”