

Imperfectly Perfect

A Rosh Hashanah Message

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There is a beautiful story told about the beloved Bobover Rebbe, Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam, zt”l, who passed away in 2000. I heard this story from Rabbi Yitzchak Aryeh Epstein on TorahAnytime. A Jewish homeowner in Borough Park once hired an African-American painter to paint his house. Before the work began, the homeowner and the painter took down the framed pictures hanging on the walls. Among them was a large photograph of the Bobover Rebbe.

The painter looked at the picture and asked, “Is this your rabbi?” The homeowner was a little taken aback by the question. “No,” he replied, “not really.” The painter seemed surprised. “Why isn’t he your rabbi?” The homeowner tried to move the conversation along. “I have many pictures of great rabbis in my home. They are not all my personal rabbi. Come, let’s get on with the job.”

But the painter smiled, reached into his wallet, and pulled out a small photograph of the Bobover Rebbe. “He may not be your rabbi,” he said, “but he is my rabbi.” The homeowner stared at him. “What do you mean?” The painter explained.

“One time I was doing some painting in the Rebbe’s house. One morning, he asked me if I had eaten breakfast. I told him I hadn’t. So he said, ‘Really? Then I’ll make you breakfast.’ And the Rebbe himself prepared breakfast for me and personally served it to me. Afterwards, he said, ‘I want to tell you something.’ I knew exactly what I thought he was going to say. I figured he was going to tell me, ‘I’m paying you good money, so please make sure you do a good job. I expect the best.’

“But that is not what he said. He said to me, ‘Once we lived in a world of perfection. Hashem had a home in this world — the Beis HaMikdash in Yerushalayim. The world was complete. But because of our sins, the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, and ever since then we have lived in an imperfect world. So I cannot expect perfection from you. Just do the best that you can.’

“From that day on,” the painter continued, “he became my rabbi. And he recommended me to hundreds of his Chassidim. Do you know something? Not one of them ever offered me breakfast! But almost every one of them tells me, ‘I’m paying you good money, and I want a perfect job.’ And I tell them, ‘A perfect job? How can you expect perfection? The Beis HaMikdash has been destroyed. We live in an imperfect world!’”

There is humor in that story, but there is also something extraordinarily profound. Look at the way the Bobover Rebbe viewed the world. The Churban Beis HaMikdash was not merely an event that happened two thousand years ago. It shaped the way he understood human beings. It shaped the way he treated people. It even shaped what he expected from them.

We live in an imperfect world, and we ourselves are imperfect people. Hashem does not ask us to be perfect. He asks us to try. He asks us to care. He asks us to put forth sincere effort and to do the best that we can. That does not mean that we stop striving for

greatness. Quite the opposite. It means that when we fall short, we do not decide that everything has been lost. We get up. We try again. We continue moving forward. Hashem understands the world in which we live. He is not demanding perfection. He is asking for effort, sincerity, and a heart that continues to strive. That was the perspective of the Bobover Rebbe. And I think it speaks particularly powerfully to us as Rosh Hashanah approaches.

It is hard when Rosh Hashanah comes and you cannot go to shul. Maybe you are home with a number of small children, completely absorbed in what seem to be their endless, mundane needs. Maybe you are unwell and lying in bed. Maybe this year simply does not look the way you imagined Rosh Hashanah was supposed to look. You want to be in shul. You want to be surrounded by a minyan, hearing the beautiful tefillos and the heartfelt melodies of the shaliach tzibbur. Instead, here you are, “stuck,” so to speak, somewhere else.

But perhaps the Bobover Rebbe would tell us: ***Your situation may be imperfect — but it may also be perfectly designed for you.***

Recently, when I was going for treatment, things were not going right, so to speak. There were mix-ups with secretaries and various frustrations along the way. A nurse turned to me and said something I have not forgotten: ***“Every disappointment is an appointment with Hashem.”*** What a powerful way to look at life.

While we are diapering a baby, taking our pills, lying in bed, reading to a child, preparing a meal, setting the table, or simply wishing we could be somewhere else, perhaps we can stop for a moment and reframe the situation. ***Baruch Hashem, I get to do this.*** This is the avodah Hashem has given me — right here and right now. These are the circumstances in which Hashem has placed me, and hidden within them are countless so-called “mundane” mitzvos, acts of kindness, moments of patience, and holy thoughts that may be far more meaningful than we realize.

Since entering the world of chemotherapy, I have also developed a new appreciation for something else: Oxymorons. An oxymoron is a phrase that puts two seemingly contradictory ideas together. “Deafening silence.” “Bittersweet.” And then there is one I have discovered personally: Chemo brain.

There is chemotherapy that hurts, chemotherapy that harms, and, thank God, chemotherapy that heals. But it most certainly does not make you more brainy. In fact... What was I about to say?

Recently I discovered another one. I had to go for a biopsy, and the technician announced that before the procedure I needed a “gentle mammogram.” I started laughing. A gentle mammogram? Now that is an oxymoron.

But perhaps one of the most profound expressions we use also contains two realities at the same time: L’Chaim. We say L’Chaim at weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, engagements, celebrations — at all the happiest moments of Jewish life. The Hebrew word chayim is plural in form, and perhaps we can hear within it a beautiful message. We are asking Hashem for life in this world — a life filled with health, joy, family, purpose, meaning and connection. But we are also asking for the kind of life here that creates eternal life.

We want both. We hold this world and the World to Come in the same hand because they are not really separate. ***It is the way we live here that builds our eternity.***

When a Jew says L'Chaim, perhaps we are saying: Hashem, give me life — but help me make it a life worth living. A life of purpose. A life of meaning. A life of connection. A life of growth. A life that gives me the best possible life in this world — and builds my life in the World to Come.

And as Rosh Hashanah draws closer, that is exactly what we ask Hashem for: Chayim. Real life. Our best life. And how is that life constructed? By crowning the King. The King of all kings. Hashem.

Rosh Hashanah is the day when we stand before Hashem and say: At Your service. This is where You placed me. This is the life You gave me. This is the avodah You have asked of me. And I would not want to be anywhere else doing anything else if this is where You want me to be.

Rosh Hashanah is, in a sense, the great coronation. From wherever we are sitting — figuratively and literally — we proclaim: HaMelech! ***Hashem is the King.***

And perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give Hashem on Rosh Hashanah is simply to stop and recognize the relationship that we have with Him. Avinu Malkeinu. He is Avinu — our loving, merciful Father, who knows us, understands us, and loves us. And He is Malkeinu — the King of the universe, with the power to give us everything we truly need.

Rav Avigdor Miller, zt"l, encouraged people to take a few minutes on Rosh Hashanah simply to review the things for which they are grateful. And there is so much. Let me share with you something you probably never thought of.

Chemotherapy can make you lose your hair. But I do not mean only the hair on your head. You can even lose the tiny hairs inside your nose. Really. And you might think: Who cares about the tiny hairs in your nose? Until they are gone. Those little hairs play an important role. Suddenly your nose runs differently. It may bleed more easily. Everything feels different.

I never once woke up in the morning and said: "Hashem, thank You for my nose hairs." Not once. Until I did not have them.

So perhaps before we present Hashem with the list of everything we want this coming year, we can first say: Ribono Shel Olam, You are amazing. Look at everything You have given me. How can I possibly thank You for all that You have done for me this year? I have hair. I have eyes. I have ears. I have fingers. I have people who love me. I have opportunities. I have mitzvos. I have another Rosh Hashanah.

And in my case, Baruch Hashem, there is one advantage to the hair situation: No chin hairs! I have not had to pick up a pair of tweezers in weeks. There is always something to be grateful for.

And let us appreciate something even greater. ***Hashem loves teshuvah.*** Think about what that means. Hashem gives us the ability to look honestly at who we are and where we are. Not to destroy us. Not to make us feel like failures. But so that we can decide where we want to go.

Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the creation of humanity. And therefore Rosh Hashanah asks us one of the most basic questions imaginable: What kind of human being am I? Where am I going? What am I doing with the life that Hashem has given me? And when Hashem gives us an assignment, He also gives us what we need to fulfill it. It is, so to speak, our Divine “business account.” If this is the job Hashem has given me, then somewhere within the circumstances of my life are the resources I need to succeed. I want to end with a sweet story I heard from Rabbi Yehoshua Nissan. He was speaking about his in-laws, the Levy family. The Levys have a family whistle. It is a particular whistle that has been handed down in the family for generations, going all the way back to their great-grandfather. Family members recognize it instantly.

One time his father-in-law was at the Kotel and could not find his wife. So he did what Levys apparently do. He whistled. Suddenly, a man came over to him. “Are you a Levy?” “Yes.” “I knew it! That’s the Levy whistle!” It turned out that this man was a relative — a cousin he had not even realized was there. One little sound, and a family recognized one another.

We have a family whistle too. ***It is called the shofar.*** The shofar calls us home. Back to our family. Back to our origin. Back to Avraham and Yitzchak. Back to Hashem. Back to who we really are. And back to our personal and communal destiny.

The shofar tells us: You may not be perfect. Your circumstances may not be perfect. Your Rosh Hashanah may not look perfect. Your year may not have been perfect. But you are still part of the family. Hashem is still your Father. Hashem is still your King. ***And He is calling you home.***

May Hashem grant each and every one of us a year of true chayim — a year of health, purpose, joy, growth, closeness and meaning. May we learn to recognize the gifts we already possess, to serve Hashem joyfully in the circumstances He gives us, and to hear in the voice of the shofar His loving call to return home.

And may this finally be the year when the imperfection of our world is healed completely: “Hashem will be King over the entire world; on that day Hashem will be One and His Name will be One.”

Kesivah v’chasimah tovah. May we all be written and sealed for the most phenomenal year of all.