

Who Will Guarantee Another Year?

Second Day of Sukkos 5787 | Drush manuscript

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The Midrash's surprising ending

Our sages say something surprising about the first day of Sukkos. The Torah calls it bayom harishon, “on the first day.” But it is the fifteenth of Tishrei. What makes it the first day?

The Midrash answers: rishon lecheshbon avonos—the first day for the accounting of sins.

It tells a mashal. A province owed its king taxes and had not paid. The king set out to collect. Ten parsahs before he reached the city, its leading people went to meet him and pleaded for relief. He forgave a third. As he came nearer, another group approached, and he forgave another third. At last, all the townspeople came out, and he forgave the rest.

So it is with us. On Erev Rosh Hashanah the leading people fast and a portion of the sins is forgiven. During the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, others fast and more is forgiven. On Yom Kippur, everybody fasts and Hashem forgives the entire debt. After Yom Kippur we are occupied with the sukkah and the lulav and do not commit sins. But that short interval comes to an end. The first day of Sukkos arrives. The Midrash finishes explicitly: **“Therefore the first day of Yom Tov is called the first day for the accounting of sins.”** Lachain korin Yom Tov harishon rishon lecheshbon avonos. The new account of sins began **yesterday, on the first day of Sukkos.**

That is the Midrash. But the Modzitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar, presents a question. Once the debt is forgiven, why do we call this the first day for the accounting of sins? Would we not expect the first day for the accounting of mitzvos? We have built our sukkos. We have prepared the arba minim. We have done teshuvah. Why does the language turn immediately to avonos?

That word can sound frightening, as though Hashem is looking for a reason to punish us. But the Midrash has just told us that He forgave everything. The Rebbe answers with a mashal from his grandfather, the Rebbe of Kazimierz.

The merchant and the forgiven debt

A man owned a small business. He would travel to the large city, take merchandise from a wholesaler on credit, bring it home, sell it, and pay the wholesaler when the agreed time came. That was how his business survived.

One season went badly. He took a loss. The payment date arrived and he had no money. He traveled to the wholesaler and explained what had happened. The wholesaler listened, reduced the debt, and gave him a new deadline for the balance.

The new deadline came. Again, the man could not pay. He went back, poured out his heart, and admitted that even after the reduction he could not manage it. The wholesaler was generous. He reduced the debt a second time and set yet another date. The customer promised that this time he would pay without excuses.

But as that date approached, his purse was empty. He went back a third time, ashamed to look the wholesaler in the eye. He pleaded with him. The wholesaler took pity on him and forgave everything.

Imagine the relief. He no longer owed a penny.

Then imagine the next morning. The man still owns a shop. His family still needs to eat. To keep trading, he needs more merchandise. So he must walk into that very same wholesaler's office and ask for another shipment on credit.

How does he make that request? The wholesaler has reduced his debt twice and, in the end, forgiven it entirely. But forgiveness of an old debt and confidence in a new transaction are two different things. The businessman needs more than a clean ledger. He needs a way to begin again with the person whose trust he has strained.

Now let us carry the business picture to its conclusion. The man goes to his family and tells them the truth. "The wholesaler forgave me. He absorbed a real loss because of me. I cannot expect him to risk another shipment on my word alone." His relatives understand the problem. They each contribute something. Together they bring the wholesaler the money he had written off. They also stand behind the man when he asks to begin trading again. The wholesaler sees that the loss has been made good, that this man is surrounded by people willing to help him, and that the family will stand behind the next account. He is willing to do business with him again.

What the ushpizin bring

Now we can hear the nimshal. On Yom Kippur, Hashem forgave the old account. But we still need life, strength, livelihood, wisdom, and opportunities to serve Him in the year ahead. The first day of Sukkos begins a new cheshbon: the choices we make from here on will count. We come to Hashem asking to begin again, even though last year's promises proved fragile.

The Modzitzer Rebbe says that this is why the ushpizin come to our sukkah. They are our family elders and relatives: Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, Yosef, and David. Like the man's relatives, they come as areivim, guarantors who stand with us as we seek another year of spiritual business with Hashem.

Now we can see where the mashal and the nimshal differ. The man's relatives could collect money and repay the wholesaler's loss, even after he had released the debt. Hashem needs no reimbursement; He has already forgiven us. So what do the avos give when they stand behind us? The Rebbe says that Avraham gives us something of his chesed. Yitzchak gives us something of his gevurah, the strength to overcome the yetzer. Yaakov gives us something of his tiferes. The other ushpizin also bring their qualities to us. They help make us capable of living differently with the new credit Hashem gives us.

That is why the first day of Sukkos is the first day of a new account of avonos. It is the start of another real year, in which our choices matter; it is not the cancellation of Yom Kippur's forgiveness. Hashem lets us begin, and our ancestors help us carry the responsibility of that beginning.

What would it mean to carry some of Avraham's chesed into this year? It need not begin with a grand undertaking. It might begin when somebody comes to our door at an inconvenient time and we welcome that person properly. It might mean noticing someone who has stopped coming to shul and making the call we have been putting off. It might mean giving help in a way that leaves the other person with dignity.

What would it mean to receive some of Yitzchak's gevurah? We often think of strength as the ability to accomplish something impressive. Sometimes strength is the quiet ability to stop: to hold back the sharp reply, to keep a confidence, to turn away from a temptation, to do what we promised when it is no longer convenient. After Yom Kippur we may sincerely want to change. Yitzchak lends strength to the moment when sincerity alone is insufficient.

And Yaakov's tiferes? A life cannot be held together by one good impulse. Kindness must be lived with truth; restraint must leave room for kindness. Yaakov helps us bring the parts of our avodas Hashem into one life, at home as well as in shul.

These examples are an application of the Rebbe's teaching. He explicitly speaks of the ushpizin as guarantors and of the middos they give us. He is asking us to see the gift of Sukkos as something we can actually carry out of the sukkah.

That changes how we hear the word areiv. A guarantor does not make the borrower's responsibility disappear. He stands beside the borrower and makes a new beginning possible. When we invite the ushpizin, we are asking them to stand beside us. We are also accepting the help they offer: their ways of living, in some measure, within our own choices.

There is a beautiful progression here. On Yom Kippur we spoke about what must be forgiven. On Sukkos we sit with those who can teach us how to go forward. At the end of the season comes Simchas Torah. The Rebbe asks why that joy follows Sukkos and answers through the same mashal: after the debt has been forgiven and the guarantors have helped us begin anew, we come to Torah with joy. Torah gives shape and direction to the life we are asking to live.

A life entrusted again

I want to end with a real person whose life makes the question of trust painfully concrete. His name is Mark Borovitz. He has spoken publicly about what he did wrong and about the people who helped him change.

When Mark was a teenager, his father died. He began selling goods he knew had been stolen. He was also president of a Jewish youth group. He has described the unease of those two lives existing side by side: a respectable young man in one setting, making money from theft in another. As he grew older, the dishonesty deepened. There were bad checks, other crimes, heavy drinking, arrests, and prison. He could no longer maintain the story that this was one mistake he could put behind him. He had made choices, again and again, that had cost other people and emptied his own life of trust.

In prison in 1986, he asked his brother, who was a rabbi, for a Chumash and a siddur. His brother sent them. That sounds like a modest gesture, but think about what it gave a man in a cell. His brother could not rewrite Mark's record. He could put Torah in front of him and treat him as someone who could still learn, pray, and make a different choice tomorrow. Mark began studying regularly. He later said that reading about Yaakov gave him hope that a person with a troubled past could change.

Meanwhile, a social worker named Harriet Rossetto was visiting Jewish inmates in California. She saw how many people came out of prison only to find that there was nowhere to live, no work, and no community willing to receive them. She established a small house in Los Angeles called Beit T'Shuvah: a place for Jewish people leaving prison to work toward a different life.

When Harriet first met Mark in prison, it was hardly an inspiring encounter. He challenged her: what could she know about what prisoners actually needed? She found him arrogant. She answered, in effect, "When you get out, come and help me if you know how to do it better." He had questioned her work; she left him a door to walk through.

Then he was released. He wanted to work, but his record went with him from one prospective employer to the next. Wanting to change was real; so was the

difficulty of asking anyone to trust him. He remembered Harriet's invitation and went to her little house. She gave him a job. One of the responsibilities she placed in his hands was running the organization's thrift shop, whose sales helped support Jewish people emerging from prison. He also helped the residents and taught them Jewish subjects.

Consider that shop. Mark had once handled stolen merchandise for profit. Now another person was willing to let him handle merchandise for the benefit of people who had made mistakes like his. Harriet did not have to pretend he had never done wrong. She had seen the record. She gave him work with responsibility, and he had to earn the confidence behind that decision day after day.

The small house grew. Mark and Harriet became partners in life and in the work. He continued his learning and eventually took a leading role in helping other people struggling with addiction and criminal histories. His past was still part of his story; it became one reason he could speak to residents who doubted that anyone would ever trust them again.

Notice who made the change. Mark had to face his own conduct and live differently. But he was not left to do it alone. His brother sent the books that helped him begin. Harriet gave him a place and a responsibility that allowed him to show what he was becoming. Neither could perform his teshuvah for him. Both gave him something with which to do it.

Living with the new account

That, I think, is what our ushpizin do. Hashem has already forgiven the old account. He is not waiting for Avraham to pay Him in cash. He gives us a new year, and our ancestors stand beside us with qualities that help us honour that gift. A measure of Avraham's chesed can become an act of generosity tomorrow. A measure of Yitzchak's gevurah can become the moment we resist a familiar temptation. We can do spiritual business again, because Hashem gives us another opportunity and gives us tools for using it well.

The first day of Sukkos began a new cheshbon. We are already living in that new account. May it show what we did with the trust we were given.

May we take even a small measure of the avos into our own lives, keep faith with the new beginning Hashem has given us, and find many reasons to rejoice together in His Torah.

Sources and adaptation

Teaching: Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar of Modzitz, citing his grandfather of Kazimierz, Otzar Peninei HaChassidus: Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres, pp. 198–199. The Tanchuma is cited there through Tur, Orach Chaim 581.

The family's payment to the wholesaler develops the mashal for this drush. The printed teaching identifies the ushpizin as family elders and guarantors, but does not narrate a payment of money.

Mark Borovitz: [his interview](#); Harriet Rossetto and Beit T'Shuvah: [The Forward](#) and [The Times of Israel](#).