

WHEN THE SHOFAR IS SILENT, WHO WILL SPEAK FOR US?

A Drush for Shabbos Nitzavim-Vayeilech 5786

Seven Days Before Rosh Hashanah 5787

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והנסתרות לה' אלקינו והנגלות לנו ולבנינו

The hidden things belong to Hashem; the revealed things belong to us and to our children.

There are some dates which remain dates on a calendar, and there are other dates which become part of a people's nervous system. October 7 is one of those dates. We do not merely remember what happened on that day. We still live inside its aftermath. Israel changed. Jewish communities throughout the world changed. The way many of us view our neighbours, our universities and even countries in which Jews felt completely at home has changed.

But there is something about October 7 which we may not have sufficiently considered. The last time the first day of Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbos was Rosh Hashanah of 5784. On that Shabbos morning, Jews throughout the world stood in shul, but the shofar was silent. Exactly three weeks later, we awoke on another Shabbos morning, Shemini Atzeres - Simchas Torah in Israel - to the greatest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust.

Next Shabbos, for the first time since then, the first day of Rosh Hashanah will once again fall on Shabbos. Once again, on the first day of judgment, there will be no shofar. What are we meant to do with that fact? Are we supposed to dismiss it as a curiosity of the calendar? Are we supposed to become frightened and imagine that we can predict the coming year? Or is the Torah asking us to hear a message precisely in the silence?

I believe that the answer begins with an extraordinary textual question in this week's parashah.

THE QUESTION OF THE PARASHAH

הגוים על מה עשה ה' ככה לארץ הזאת מה חרי האף הגדול הזה
ואמרו כל

All the nations will say: Why did Hashem do this to this land? What caused this great anger?

The Torah describes a traveller passing through Eretz Yisrael after a terrible national catastrophe. He sees a land burned with sulphur and salt, a land which can no longer be planted. And the nations of the world ask, 'Why did Hashem do this to this land?'

The question is obvious. Why does the Torah place this question specifically in the mouths of the nations? The Jewish people are the ones who have suffered. They have lost their land, their homes and their security. Surely they should be the first people to cry out, 'Why? Why did this happen to us?' Why does the Torah say, V'amru kol hagoyim, that the nations will ask?

There is a second textual problem. After describing the catastrophe and the nations' explanation, the Torah concludes with one of the most famous but puzzling verses in the parashah:

**והנגלות לנו ולבנינו עד עולם לעשות את כל דברי התורה הזאת
הנסתרות לה' אלקינו**

The hidden things belong to Hashem our God; the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to perform all the words of this Torah.

What does this have to do with the nations' question? What is hidden, what is revealed, and why is this the Torah's conclusion to its description of national suffering?

WHEN THE VICTIM IS PLACED ON TRIAL

These verses have become frighteningly contemporary. Many decent non-Jews look at what has happened since October 7 and ask a sincere version of the Torah's question: How can this be? How can a people be invaded, massacred, raped and kidnapped, and then within a remarkably short time find itself standing in the courtroom of world opinion as the aggressor? How can Jews who were the victims of October 7 be treated as though they deserved October 7?

This moral inversion is not something we have imagined. A 2026 Government of Canada report surveyed approximately nine hundred Jewish university students. Nearly ninety-six percent said that they had experienced or witnessed at least one incident of antisemitism during the previous year. Seventy-two percent limited what they said in class about being Jewish. Fifty-seven percent avoided wearing or displaying Jewish symbols because of safety concerns. One student described being called a child killer and a white supremacist simply because fellow students discovered that the student was Jewish.

A good and morally clear non-Jew looks at this and asks, 'Why are the Jews hated? Why are people who suffered an atrocity being told that they invited it?' But there is another kind of observer. He cannot tolerate a fact which conflicts with his ideology, so he changes the moral identity of the victim. He does not say, 'The victim suffered.' He says, 'The victim deserved to suffer.'

This did not begin with Israel. On the day after the attacks of September 11, 2001, an American university professor named Ward Churchill published an essay in which he referred to some of the people murdered in the World Trade Center as 'little Eichmanns.' Instead of grieving thousands of innocent people killed by terrorists, he transformed office workers into accomplices in their own murder. Once the victims were declared guilty, the atrocity could be made to fit the ideology.

That is the recurring moral sickness. When innocent victims disturb an ideology, the ideology solves the problem by announcing that the victims were never innocent.

Antisemitism does not begin by proving that the Jew is guilty. It begins with a need for the Jew to be guilty, and then invents the evidence.

This may help us hear the precise movement of the verses. First, V'amru kol hagoyim: Al mah? The nations encounter Jewish catastrophe and ask how it could have happened. But they do not leave the question unanswered. They immediately provide a confident explanation: Al asher azvu es bris Hashem, because the Jewish people abandoned their covenant. They look at the suffering of others and speak as if they have entered Hashem's private council and read His calculations.

THE JEWISH DIFFERENCE

The Sarei Alafim explains that this is precisely why the Torah places the question in the mouths of the nations. The nations insist that they understand why history unfolded as it did. The Jew knows that there are questions which human beings cannot answer.

The Jewish response is not, 'Nothing happened,' and it is not, 'Do not investigate.' Governments must investigate failures. The army must examine how defences collapsed. Universities must be held responsible for protecting Jewish students. Communities must improve security and confront lies. The Torah does not ask us to replace responsible analysis with passivity.

But there is an entirely different question: Why did Hashem permit this particular event to happen at this particular moment to these particular people? That question belongs to hanistaros, to the hidden calculations of Heaven. We may never look at another person's illness, loss or tragedy and announce why Hashem caused it. We may never point to October 7 and say with certainty, 'It happened because Jews committed this particular sin.' That would be the same spiritual arrogance which the Torah places in the mouths of the nations.

The nations say that we deserved it for their foolish and ideological reasons. The Jew refuses their explanation. But here is the crucial difference: regardless of whether or in what sense the suffering was deserved - a calculation which belongs to Hashem alone - the Jew knows that suffering demands a response.

The nations use suffering to explain the victim. The Jew uses suffering to examine himself.

That examination is not a confession to our enemies. When we undertake teshuvah after an antisemitic attack, we are not agreeing that the antisemite was right. We are saying that no event of such magnitude may pass through Jewish history without producing greater tefillah, greater emunah and greater commitment. Our enemies do not get to tell us why we suffered. But neither do we allow our suffering to leave us spiritually unchanged.

That is why the verse does not end with hanistaros. If it ended there, a person could shrug his shoulders and say, 'Hashem's ways are hidden; therefore nothing is required of me.' The Torah continues:

והנגלות לנו ולבנינו עד עולם לעשות

The revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to act.

The reason may be hidden. The response is revealed. We may not know why Heaven sent or permitted a particular challenge, but we know what instruments a Jew has when challenge arrives: the mouth with which to pray, the heart with which to trust, and the life which must change.

כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו

For the matter is very close to you: in your mouth, in your heart, to do it.

The Torah says: Do not climb into Heaven to decipher what is beyond you. Begin with what is close. B'ficha, what will this place in my mouth? Uvilvavcha, what will this awaken in my heart? La'asoso, what will I actually do differently?

THE YEAR IN WHICH THE SHOFAR IS SILENT

This brings us to the coming Rosh Hashanah. The Gemara teaches that a year in which the shofar is not sounded at its beginning is in danger of ending badly because the Satan was not confounded. Tosafos immediately clarifies that this warning does not refer to a year in which Rosh Hashanah properly falls on Shabbos. We are not violating or neglecting the mitzvah. We are obeying Chazal, who suspended the blowing of the shofar lest someone carry it in a public domain and violate Shabbos.

Nevertheless, Rav Yaakov Ettlinger, the great author of the Aruch LaNer, asks in his Minchas Ani whether Rosh Hashanah falling on Shabbos is a positive or a dangerous sign. He treats the question with great seriousness because he observes an astonishing pattern in Jewish history.

Some of the darkest years in our history began with Rosh Hashanah on Shabbos. The years in which the First and Second Batei Mikdash were destroyed were such years. Yet some of the most glorious years also began with Rosh Hashanah on Shabbos: the year in which Hashem forgave the Jewish people for the sin of the Golden Calf, the year in which the Mishkan was erected, and the year in which the Jewish people entered Eretz Yisrael.

Modern history contains echoes which make the teaching difficult to dismiss casually. The year of the September 11 attacks began with Rosh Hashanah on Shabbos. The year of October 7 began with Rosh Hashanah on Shabbos. On the side of extraordinary deliverance, the year of the rescue at Entebbe also began with Rosh Hashanah on Shabbos. These examples are not a mathematical formula with which we can predict the future. They are a Torah warning that years beginning beneath the holiness of Shabbos can carry extraordinary spiritual consequence.

Why should the result be so extreme? Why should Shabbos Rosh Hashanah sometimes be associated with extraordinary blessing and sometimes with terrible calamity? The Aruch LaNer answers with an unforgettable courtroom story.

SHABBOS TAKES THE WITNESS STAND

A minister sinned against his king and was summoned to stand trial. He searched desperately for someone influential who would defend him, but one potential advocate after another refused. They knew that the evidence was overwhelming and that there was nothing they could say.

The minister returned home broken. When his wife saw his face, she asked what had happened. He told her that judgment was approaching and no one

would speak for him. His wife replied, 'Why are you frightened? I am known within the royal court. I will enter with you, and I will speak to the king on your behalf.'

The day of judgment arrived. His wife stood beside him and spoke with loyalty and love. Her relationship with the king opened doors which no professional advocate could open. The minister was acquitted.

Some time later, a second minister committed a similar offence. He remembered how the first minister had been saved and confidently said, 'My wife also has connections in the royal court. She will defend me.'

But there was a terrible difference. This minister had treated his wife cruelly. He had shouted at her, humiliated her and struck her. When she entered the courtroom, the wounds of his abuse were visible on her face. Before she could offer a single word in his defence, the king asked, 'Who did this to you?'

The truth emerged. The very woman who had come intending to be his advocate became the most devastating evidence against him. Her presence did not defend him. Her wounds accused him.

The Aruch LaNer explains that during an ordinary Rosh Hashanah, the voice of the shofar is our advocate. It recalls the Akeidah, awakens teshuvah and confounds the Satan. But when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbos, the shofar cannot speak. Who then enters the courtroom for us? Shabbos herself, the beloved partner of the Jewish people.

When Shabbos enters the Heavenly courtroom next week, will she appear crowned by the way we have loved her, or carrying the wounds of the way we have neglected her?

For most of us in this room, the question is not simply whether we turn on lights or drive on Shabbos. We are, baruch Hashem, a Shabbos-observant community. But Shabbos can be technically observed and still not be sufficiently honoured. Shabbos can arrive to a home filled with rushing and tension. A beautiful meal can be consumed by politics, complaints and criticism. Hours can pass without Torah, without zemiros and without a serious conversation with a child or grandchild. We can refrain from melachah while failing to experience the gift of menuchah, holiness and closeness to Hashem.

The Aruch LaNer is telling us that this year we cannot allow Shabbos to be incidental to Rosh Hashanah. Shabbos is not merely the reason we do not blow shofar. Shabbos is the one who must speak in the shofar's place.

A SHABBOS KEPT IN CAPTIVITY

There is one young Jewish woman who taught our generation what it means not merely to ask Shabbos to defend us, but to defend Shabbos.

Agam Berger was a nineteen-year-old IDF observer at the Nachal Oz base when she was kidnapped on October 7. She was held in Gaza for 482 days, moved between tunnels and apartments, deprived of freedom and uncertain whether she would ever return home.

Her captors could decide where she slept, when she ate, what she saw and whether she was permitted to hear news from Israel. They ordered the young women to clean and to prepare food. But Agam made one decision which remained hers. On Shabbos, she refused to light a fire or cook for her captors. When a light remained on, she slept with the light rather than switch it off.

She tried to keep kosher despite hunger. For many months she would not eat the non-kosher meat offered to her. When her health deteriorated, a Torah booklet which somehow reached the tunnel taught her the laws of pikuach nefesh and gave her permission to eat in order to preserve her life. She tracked the calendar as best she could, observed Pesach and fasted on Yom Kippur. She sewed a cover for the siddur which had reached the hostages.

Released hostages told Agam's parents that their daughter was keeping Shabbos in Gaza. Her family strengthened its own Shabbos observance while she was still in captivity. Her mother later expressed what Agam had discovered: her captors could control her physical movements, her food and her access to daylight, but they could not take away the freedom of her neshamah. They could not decide whether she would remain a Jew.

When Agam finally returned after 482 days, she displayed the words:

בדרך אמונה בחרתי ובדרך אמונה שבתי

I chose the path of faith, and through the path of faith I returned.

On October 7, Agam lost her physical freedom. In Gaza she guarded a freedom which Hamas could not seize: the freedom to decide what kind of Jew she would be.

Agam did not wait for Shabbos to defend her. In the tunnels of Gaza, she defended Shabbos. And Shabbos preserved her identity, strengthened her family and ultimately inspired Jews around the world.

WE HAVE SEVEN DAYS

We now have seven days. Not seven days to calculate whether 5787 will be an extraordinarily good year or an extraordinarily difficult year. Not seven days to solve the mystery of antisemitism or discover the hidden calculations behind October 7. We have seven days to decide what kind of Shabbos will enter the Heavenly courtroom on our behalf.

An amazing Shabbos does not happen by accident. We prepare our clothes and our food, but next week we must also prepare the sound, the heart and the spiritual content of Shabbos.

B'ficha, in your mouth. Decide now what our Shabbos tables will sound like. Let us not allow the first meals of the new year to be consumed by politics, business, criticism, complaints or lashon hara. Prepare a zemer. Prepare a Torah thought. Prepare a question which will bring every person at the table into a meaningful conversation. Let our words demonstrate that Shabbos has entered the home.

Uvilvavcha, in your heart. Decide that Shabbos Rosh Hashanah will not be remembered by our families primarily as a day of anxiety and judgment. It must also be a day of confidence that we are standing before our Father and King. Bring gratitude, warmth and serenity to the table. Let our children and grandchildren see that Shabbos is not merely a list of things a Jew may not do. Shabbos is the most beautiful place in the week.

La'asoso, to do it. Before next Friday night, choose one concrete Shabbos improvement which will begin on Rosh Hashanah and continue throughout 5787. It might be a fixed period of Torah learning every Shabbos, ten minutes each week devoted to Hilchos Shabbos, one meal protected from weekday conversation, greater care in a halachic area which has become casual, meaningful zemiros, or a commitment to invite someone who would otherwise be alone. Do not accept six vague resolutions. Choose one real commitment and write it down.

The Aruch LaNer is not teaching that one beautiful Shabbos purchases a guaranteed year. He is teaching that on this Rosh Hashanah, Shabbos will stand as the representative of our relationship with her. We therefore have seven days to repair what needs repair, to deepen what can be deepened and to prepare a Shabbos worthy of speaking for us.

Imagine what it would mean if every person in this room entered next Friday night with a plan. The table is prepared not only with food but with Torah. The mouth is prepared not only to eat but to sing and bless. The heart is prepared

not only to fear judgment but to welcome the Queen. The home is prepared to show Hashem that when the shofar is silent, we understand why it is silent: because nothing, not even the holiest cry of the shofar, is allowed to diminish the majesty of Shabbos.

THE QUESTION WE CAN ANSWER

The nations look at Jewish suffering and tell us that we deserved it for their foolish reasons. They can always construct a theory which blames the Jew. We reject their verdict. We refuse to allow antisemites, demonstrators, professors or international institutions to define the moral meaning of Jewish suffering.

But the Jewish response cannot end with indignation. A Jew knows that regardless of whether the suffering was deserved - something only Hashem can know - he must respond. We do not know Hashem's private reasons, but we know that every great event places a demand upon us. The reason is hidden; the avodah is revealed.

הנסתרות לה' אלקינו

Why the last Rosh Hashanah on Shabbos was followed by October 7 remains with Hashem.

והנגלות לנו ולבנינו לעשות

What kind of Shabbos we will bring before Him next week belongs to us and to our children.

We cannot rewrite the Shabbos of October 7. But we can decide how Shabbos will enter the new year. We can decide whether she enters neglected or cherished, wounded or crowned. We can decide whether our families merely keep Shabbos or whether they experience an extraordinary Shabbos filled with holiness, joy, Torah and love.

When the shofar is silent next Shabbos, Shabbos herself will speak.

We have seven days to decide what she will say.

SOURCE NOTES

1. Devarim 29:21-28 and 30:11-14. The central questions follow Sarei Alafim, Parashas Nitzavim, by Rabbi Ephraim Aharon Twerski.
2. Rosh Hashanah 16b; Tosafos, s.v. she'ein token; Rosh Hashanah 29b concerning shofar on Shabbos.
3. Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger, Minchas Ani al HaTorah, Haazinu 17. The historical examples and courtroom parable are developed there.
4. Rosh Hashanah 5784 began on Shabbos, September 16, 2023. The October 7 attack occurred exactly twenty-one days later, on Shabbos, 22 Tishrei 5784.
5. Rosh Hashanah 5761 began on Shabbos, September 30, 2000; the September 11 attacks occurred during that Hebrew year. Rosh Hashanah 5736 began on Shabbos, September 6, 1975; the Entebbe rescue occurred on July 4, 1976.
6. Government of Canada, Campus Antisemitism and Student Experiences (CASE), 2026: <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/canada-holocaust/antisemitism/campus-antisemitism-student-experiences.html>
7. American Association of University Professors, Report on the Termination of Ward Churchill: <https://www.aaup.org/JAF3/report-termination-ward-churchill>
8. World Mizrahi, Faith in Captivity: An Interview with Agam Berger, and A Mother's Faith: An Interview with Meirav Berger: <https://mizrachi.org/hamizrachi/faith-in-captivity-an-interview-with-agam-berger/> and <https://mizrachi.org/hamizrachi/a-mothers-faith-an-interview-with-meirav-berger/>