

## **Embracing A Life Of Humility**

A story is told of a time when Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev was searching for just the right person to blow the shofar for Rosh Hashana. Many of his students approached him, eagerly wanting to blow the shofar on the upcoming holiday. Thrilled at the prospect of standing in front of an entire congregation and showing off their skills, the students, one after the other, all waved their hands to volunteer.

"I would love to do it!" said one student. "I have been blowing the shofar every day during Elul and have gotten quite good at it!"

"I would love to do it as well," said another. "I have been blowing the shofar since I was a bar mitzvah and have a tekiah gedolah that lasts quite a long time!"

"Please choose ME!" said another student. "I have been praying three times a day, fasting, and preparing my soul throughout Elul- just for this moment. To stand in front of everyone and blow the shofar, wow, that would be such a thrill to show them what I can do!"

In the back of the room stood Moshe the tailor. Moshe didn't usually say much. He was a simple man who often came to pray and study with the rabbi and his students, but he listened much more than he spoke. He didn't like to attract too much attention to himself and spent much of his time in study, prayer, and contemplation.

"Moshe," called out Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, "would you consider blowing the shofar for us?"

Moshe looked up. He was in shock. Could the holy rabbi be talking to him?

"Me?" he asked meekly. "I don't think that I would be very good. I mean, who am I that I should lead the holy sounding of the shofar? I am just a simple tailor trying to be a good Jew. My only concern is for my children, that they should be as blessed in life as I have been."

"And that", said the rabbi, "is why *you* are to be chosen. For only one who is humble, only one who is filled with gratitude, only one who thinks that he is *not* worthy, is actually worthy of standing before God and sounding the shofar."

Humility. A lack of arrogance. An ability to realize that no single one of us is at the center of God's universe; but rather that all of us are. Rosh Hashanah is meant to ground us and put us in a humble state of mind as we prepare to begin a new year, recognizing that there is only One Ruler, and that we stand in awe and celebration of the creation that God handed to each one of us.

I recently came across a well-known photo that highlights just how small and insignificant we are in the cosmic scheme of God's universe. The photo, taken in 1990 by the Voyager 1 Space Probe, shows the Earth from a record distance, about 3.7 billion miles away. In the photo, Earth appears as a tiny dot, a speck, against the vastness of the universe.

This photo inspired astronomer Carl Sagan to write his book, "Pale Blue Dot." In the book, Sagan described what he saw in the photo:

*"Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and*

*coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there -- on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.*

*The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.*

*Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves (\*)*

*(The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.)*

*It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. (\*) **There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world.** To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."*<sup>1</sup>

Sagan gives a perfect description of the emotion that we are to feel today. Scripture compares human beings to a broken shard, withering grass, a shriveled flower, a passing shadow, a fading cloud, a fleeting breeze, scattered dust, a vanishing dream. This is the framing of the way that we are to approach the new year. As the *Unetaneh Tokef* reminds us:

*Adam Yesodo Me-Afar V'Sofe Le-Afar*, Each person's origin is dust, and in the end each person will return to the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 1994

*Hachazireynu b'teshuvah*, return to us, we cry out in the Avinu Malkeynu.

*Kabel b'rachamim u'veratzon et tefilateynu*, accept our prayers, *z'chor ki afar anachnu*, remember that we are merely dust...

Do this for the sake of those who came before us. Not because we deserve it. Not because we are worthy. Not because we did anything particularly special. But only because we are Your children.

*Avinu Malkeynu*, Our Parent, our Sovereign, *Chonenu v'aneynu ki ein banu ma'asim, aseh imanu tzedakah va-chesed*. Have mercy on us even though our deeds are insufficient, deal with us charitably and lovingly.

*V'hoshieynu*, and save us- from ourselves.

It is an utterly humbling way to start a new year. Rosh Hashanah is a day when we are meant to understand our place in the universe. As we prepare for the day of judgement, as we prepare to start the year anew, on Rosh Hashana we are to examine the times we let our arrogance get in the way.

There is a story that those in my adult education classes have no doubt heard before, told by Rabbi Rafael of Barshad who once said the following to his students:

*"When I get to heaven, they'll ask me, why didn't you learn more Torah? And I'll tell them that I wasn't bright enough. Then They'll ask me why didn't you do more kind deeds for others? And I'll tell them that I was physically weak. Then they'll ask me, why didn't you give more to charity? And I'll tell them that I didn't have enough money for that. And then they'll ask me: If you were so stupid, weak, and poor, why were you so arrogant? And for that, I won't have an answer."*<sup>2</sup>

So many of us in this world walk around with such arrogance. We think we have all of the answers. We think, "we know better." We do this with our children. We do this with our grandchildren. We do this with our life partners. We do this with our parents. We do this with our co-workers. We do this with our friends, our neighbors, our fellow congregants. There are so many moments when we are sure that we know best; that we are sure that we are correct, that we are sure that our way is THE RIGHT way.

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<sup>2</sup> Morinis, Every Day Holy Day, Rabbi Rafael of Barshad (1751-1827)

I began with a story involving a shofar. Have you ever noticed that the blessing before sounding the shofar ends with the words, "*lishmoah kol shofar*," to listen to the sound of the shofar? We begin the New Year with a commandment to listen; we endeavor to start anew from a posture of openness, of listening. We endeavor, in the words of author Stephen Covey, "to seek to understand before being understood."

Let me give some specific examples, examples from this moment in our lives that may feel uncomfortable to some of us.

Let's start with issues of race and racism in this country. Have those of us who are white done more listening and learning, or more talking, posting, tweeting, etc. about how we know best? It is the height of arrogance for any of us with white skin to think that we can understand what it means to walk around with black or brown skin in America. Can we be humble enough to acknowledge that and then try to proceed accordingly -- reading, listening, and trying to understand an experience that will never be ours?

Or how about the way we behave in the midst of a global pandemic? Do we think we know better than the experts? Particularly for those of us who do

not have medical degrees or expertise in epidemiology: do we think that we know what will keep us safe and what we have to do to keep others safe?

Covid-19 has been an incredibly humbling experience, the likes of which none of us have before seen in our lifetimes. But not everyone is acting with humility. When people refuse to wear a mask, or refuse to take social distancing seriously, they are acting out of arrogance, placing themselves and their needs over the needs of others. The politicization of this issue into one of “rights” in a society that values “individualism” is problematic because it places the wrong person at the center of the conversation. *It is not about what we want to do ourselves, but rather about the others who we can protect through our actions.* But we can only understand and recognize this if we begin from a place of humility.

Or take some everyday examples, not specific to the time we’re living through right now. When it comes to issues at work -- do you think you always know the best way, or even the *only* way, to solve a particular problem? Are you taking up too much space talking in meetings, or do you balance out talking with listening? Do you cut people off, like the kid raising his hand while the teacher is still talking, or do you really listen until a colleague has finished their point?

If you have a life partner, do you know that there is only one correct way to: load the dishes in the dishwasher, cook a particular dish, or organize the pantry, drive the car, etc.? Do you know that your way is, of course, the right way?

If any of this feels familiar, I am afraid we have some work to do.

Let me take a small step back. It is not that arrogance is, in and of itself, terrible. The emphasis on humility in Judaism, and on humility on this sacred day, is meant to bring us back into a place of balance.

Some of you may recall the sermon that I gave nearly ten years ago where I handed you all wooden coins with writing on each side. The coin, based on a Hasidic teaching that each person should go through life with two slips of paper in each pocket said on one side, "The world was created for my sake" (*Bishvili nivrah ha-olam*), and on the other, "I am but dust and ashes." (*Va-anochi aphar va-efer*). This is the balance we must all try to bring into our lives and our way of being.

Rosh Hashanah is about embracing a life of humility, even as we are *just arrogant enough* to think that our pleas, our supplications, our actions, our

endeavors to renew ourselves, to grow, and to change, matter to God in the first place. Yes, we are like a passing shadow. Yes, we are like a withered piece of grass. But the *Unetaneh Tokef* also says that *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* can minimize the severity of God's decree against us.

If we return to our better inclinations; if we turn towards those who we have harmed and offer sincere apology; if we turn towards God in prayer and self-reflection; if we turn towards the vulnerable and needy and offer real, need-based help, only then we may have a chance at redemption.

Believing that our actions can make any difference at all to God, believing that our actions have the power to influence and determine our life's trajectory, is, indeed, somewhat arrogant. But that is a healthy arrogance. That is an arrogance reminding us to believe in ourselves; to believe in our ability to change, to believe in our ability to make a difference. That is an arrogance reminding us to serve a greater good.

The problem is when our arrogance comes at the expense of others; when our arrogance forgets who is God and who is merely mortal; when our arrogance causes hurt and pain and divisiveness. Teacher and author Dr. Alan Morinis likes to use the following expression to help us pursue a sense

of proper balance: "No more than my place, no less than my space." He reminds us that the space we take up is important, and we should not diminish ourselves, but we also need to stay humble, and not be arrogant enough to take up more than our place.

"No more than my place, no less than my space." This is a useful mantra for each day. It asks us to consider how we can value ourselves enough to add our voices and contributions to the world, without taking up so much room that we prevent others from shining. It reminds us that we are not the center of the universe, but that should not stop us from humbly and thoughtfully striving to make a difference.

May each of us learn to act with more humility and less arrogance as we enter into this new year. May we work to understand that approaching life with self-doubt, with curiosity, with a desire to listen first and speak second, is not weakness; nor does it preclude us from having strengths and accomplishments. May we begin to remember that our many gifts, talents, and accomplishments are not due to the work of our hands alone, but are also due to circumstance, luck, and the divine blessings that so many of us have received in life.

*Ribono shel ha-olam*, Master of the Universe in whose image we are all made, bless us with the opportunity to do *teshuvah*, to turn, inward, and towards one another, as we strive to remember that **You** are *Avinu Malkeynu*, our parent and our sovereign, and **we** are Your children, Your servants, sometimes even your partner- but never Your equal.

*Shanah Tovah U'metukah*- may it be a good, sweet, and healthy new year for all of us.