

three high-ranking officers entered. Zalman’s heart sank. To his surprise, they had a request to make. “Bronstein”, began one of the officers, “ We are fellow Jews, and today is Yom Kippur. We wish to hear some Jewish songs from you, to help us mark Yom Kippur.”

“But how can I sing”, Zalman asked, still fearful of being caught, “I am officially suffering from severe throat pain, and we are sure to be overheard!”

Someone in the group hit upon the idea of venturing into the woods behind the barracks, there they would be able to pray without being discovered. The three officers stood together comprising the small congregation, while Zalman stood a few paces in front, a chazzan once more.

He began slowly, haltingly, as a flood of emotion overcame him, choking his voice. He began the Kol Nidrei service with, “על דעת המקום”. As he sang he forgot where he was, he forgot his pain and suffering, he forgot his loneliness and depression of war. He opened his heart to his Father in heaven, singing from the depths of his heart with all his soul. He sang for his wife and children, he sang for his fallen comrades, concluding with his favorite stirring niggun of Poltava.

Awaking from his reverie, he turned to face his “congregation”. To his surprise, the three husky officers stood there weeping like small children. Evidently they too had been transported back to earlier days, back to the shtetl of their youth. They stood with their fathers, surrounded by devout worshippers, in a time and a place that no longer existed save the memory, as the chazzan’s voice soared, it seemed, piercing the very heavens.

The Jewish people are likened to a large extended family consisting of many interlocking branches. Our father in heaven, is the patriarch who cares for each and every one of his children when they show up, and He can and He surely will find room to forgive.

**Lesson 1
High Holiday Edition**



Rosh Hashana

The New Year is called “**Rosh**” Hashana, the “**Head**” of the year, similar to the beginning of a new month called, “**Rosh**” Chodesh.

Our Jewish tradition teaches that the beginning includes the entire future, and as such, it’s extremely important that the beginning be perfect. Chassidic philosophy stresses the point that the beginning of everything must be done in the best possible manner so as to erect a strong, viable foundation for all subsequent activity. Rosh Hashana is so important for this reason.

The **Baal Shem Tov** (1698-1760) master of the good name, founder of the Chassidic movement who emphasized prayer, joy, and love for every Jew regardless of level of Torah knowledge or observance: A person should be extremely careful to consecrate his/her first spoken words upon awakening in the morning. Likewise, one should purify his/her first thoughts and enshrine them in holiness, so that they will influence all subsequent activity throughout the day. Each day we awake afresh, with renewed vigor and spirit. So what is usually done at that moment? grab the cell, check facebook and the like. Truly, first thing in the morning is a great opportunity to thank Almighty G-d for returning our soul and for another day, simply with a one-line prayer. “מורה אני לפעך מלך חי וקים שהחזרת בי נשמתו בחמלה רבה אמונתך”

In this same vein, Chassidim have high regard for the first Shabbat of the year following the holidays of Tishrei, **Shabbat Breishis**. The great Chabad Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, is quoted, “As one sets oneself up on Shabbat Breishis, so goes the rest of the year”.

On the other hand, if the beginning is not the perfect setting, *or if it is*, but there is slackening along the way, one should not give up and be disillusioned. Rather, every day has a beginning and every day has a moment of “firstborn” that makes it unique and worthwhile.

We are empowered to make a difference at any time and beginning a new road to betterment for oneself and for the world around us is in fact a turning point or a “Moshiach moment”.

The concept of a **Bchor** (firstborn son) with firstborn privilege of שני כפים (double portion), is significant (Exodus 13:2). Yet we find in the Torah that famous firstborns were not quite a success story, i.e. Cain, Yishmael, Esau. Judaism has “Seven Shepherds”, famous leaders of our nation. Yet, only one, Abraham, was

Content of this lesson has been culled from JLI Torah Studies Courses taught at Aleph Learning Institute throughout the year

Dear Friend:
I would like to share the significance of round challah on Rosh Hashana. Rosh Hashana is the beginning of a new year and round represents the circle/cycle of life. Additionally, on Rosh Hashana, the day that Adam, the first man was created, is a day of renewal of G-d’s coronation as king over the universe. The round (crown) shape signifies a crown.
May we all merit to be blessed this New Year 5776 with Health, Happiness and Prosperity, and especially Peace in Israel and around the world, with open protection from those who seek to do harm to the Jewish people.
Thank you for helping us make this incredible learning institute possible!
Sincerely,
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a firstborn. We find that when Joseph brings his two sons, Menasheh-firstborn- and Efraim, to be blessed by their grandfather Jacob, before his passing, Jacob rebuffs preferential treatment and crosses his hands to place his right hand on his younger son, Efraim. The Kli Yakar, a distinguished preacher and scholar (1550-1619) explains as follows: “ But his younger brother will be greater than he.” G-d generally prefers the smaller one and all who humble themselves, lifting them to great heights, as it is stated, “**Not because you are more numerous than any people did G-d delight in you and choose you, for you are the least of all peoples,**” and it is further stated, “**The smallest shall become a thousand and the least a mighty nation.**” In G-d’s eyes, humility and small is the precise recipe for “chosenness.”

The simplest explanation pertaining to the privileged status of all things “first” or “debut performance” is due to the special status they have in the eyes of their owner. The concept of “first” is not limited to children but extends to many areas in life. For the farmer, first crops after many months of toil and sweat in the fields under the blazing sun, has special placement. The prophet Isaiah 28:4 paints a poetic description as follows: And his glorious beauty shall be the young fruit of an inferior fig, which is on the head of the valley of fatness; as a fig that ripens before the summer, which, if the seer sees it, he will swallow it while it is still in his hand. Because the first fruit and first shearling are particularly dear to their owner it is most appropriate that they are dedicated to G-d (בכורים).

Yom Kippur

On the 10th day of the month of Tishrei, we celebrate the holiday of Yom Kippur, holiest day of the year, a day of atonement and fasting. The first prayer of the evening service is **Kol Nidrei**, a prayer to renounce vows. Generally this refers to a commitment or a vow made that has been forgotten and has not been fulfilled. Well meaning intentions often somehow become abandoned due to human memory lapses. Kol Nidre is the solution to declare that all forgotten promises, made to G-d be dissolved, out of the inability to be recalled. This is done at the onset of Yom Kippur. We need to get this out of the way before we proceed with the other holy duties of the day.

There is a story of a great sage (Talmud Tractate Shabbat 147 b), by the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. He was a man of great stature who slipped in his devotion to G-d and who made the decision to get back on track. He found that the spiritual decay had penetrated deeply. His hedonistic foray had an internal impact. When he finally read the Torah the message he received was that his heart was deaf! He had in fact blocked off his sensitivity to all things spiritual.

We live in a material world where G-dliness is not the dominant, advertised attraction. The more immersed or engaged in the hedonism of society, the more out of touch spiritually. It takes time and work and refinement to acclimate to the finer things, and much more so, to the metaphysical.

This metaphor is especially relevant to the beginning of Yom Kippur. As we begin the day with fasting, ready to reconnect to G-d, with sacred prayer and devotion, we pause. How can we just walk into synagogue after having been absent all year? How does one make the transition between these two realities? Is it possible to begin a new relationship with The Almighty? We are for the most part, “tied” to our worldly existence. The tool to counteract this experience is Kol Nidrei. The first order of the day is to free oneself, by removing oneself from the unholy experiences we are coming from. The first words, “כל נדרי ואסרי”, Chassidic thought veers from the common translation of “prohibitions” to “**tied**”. The concept is not so much a renunciation of vows, but a grand ribbon cutting ceremony, cutting us from our worldly material pursuits.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi; Likutei Torah: The concept of prohibitions (issur) is that he/she is tied up and bound within them. Therefore, it is a weakening of the soul’s strength, for it is unable to free itself from its own captivity...It can be said that the absolution of vows recited on Yom Kippur is that through teshuvah, repentance, one effects a removal and nullification of any connection to evil, and a revelation of the great love within the soul. What this means, is that the baggage of the past does not define you. Rather, they are to be untied and annulled freeing you to be the person you wish to be.

Story

Zalman Bronstein huddled in a trench, shivering in the freezing Russian night. He was on guard duty. WW2 was raging, and Zalman had been drafted into the Red army, fighting fierce battles and witnessing much violence and bloodshed. On lonely nights like this one he often thought of his wife and three young children left behind at home, wondering whether they were still alive!

His guard duty finally over, Zalman trudged back to his barracks, a weary and cold figure in the darkness. As he entered the shower room he overhear a high-ranking officer coarsely whistling an off-tune rendition of a well-known military march. Zalman’s musical sensibilities were aroused upon hearing a song performed so off- tune. Endowed with great musical ability, he chimed in singing the march with great gusto. The officer was startled and exclaimed, “A voice like yours shouldn’t be wasted on the battlefield!”

That very day Zalman was transferred to the Red Army choir. The move was a providential one, whisking him away from the travails of the front to a life of relative safety. The choir would often perform for large groups of battle-weary or wounded soldiers, lifting their morale during the dark days of the war.

It once happened that Zalman was notified of an upcoming concert. To his chagrin, he noticed that the date of the concert coincided with Yom Kippur. What was he to do? It was out of the question to perform on the holiest day of the year, but how was he to arrange an exemption? He wrestled with the dilemma for some time, until he came up with a satisfactory plan of action.

On the morning of the concert, Zalman complained of severe throat pain. His “sudden” condition did not allow him to speak at all. Any attempt at speaking resulted in convulsive fits of coughing. Without recourse, the troupe left Zalman in the barracks as they headed out to their big performance.

All alone in the barracks, Zalman was free to focus on the awesome and holy Day of Atonement. He shut his eyes and tried to reconstruct the prayer service from memory. He was just beginning to pray when suddenly the door opened and

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