

Drashos for Rosh Hashana

5768

ROSH HASHANA DRASHA, DAY ONE

There is a vociferous undercurrent in today's culture. Whereas in recent

times we have been tempted to blame people or institutions (: nationalism, capitalism or, more commonly, Israel) for the worlds troubles, lately we have been seduced by surrender and have raised the white flag of defeat, explaining that it is us just "being" that is the universe's chief, if not sole, hindrance to perfection.

This is greatly illustrated in the new book, *The World Without Us*, by Alan Weisman, where he creates a hypotheses supposing mans sudden disappearance from the planet. How long, he wonders, until the subway tunnels in New York are flooded? Will our greatest achievements survive the rush of animal life back into our habitat? Will the lack of an ivory trade bring thousands of elephants into downtown Washington DC, thus destroying the capitol?

While we may want to assume this theses is no more then a social experiment - perhaps it is even highlighting the *importance* of Man and the havoc that would be left in the void of his absence -, his words in the prologue dismiss those illusions as well as demonstrate how the author exemplifies and articulates one of the great follies of our time:

"HOW WOULD THE REST OF NATURE RESPOND IF IT WERE SUDDENLY RELIEVED OF THE RELENTLESS PRESSURES WE HEAP ON IT AND OUR

FELLOW ORGANISMS? HOW SOON WOULD, OR COULD, THE CLIMATE RETURN TO WHERE IT WAS BEFORE WE FIRED UP ALL OUR ENGINES? HOW LONG WOULD IT TAKE TO RECOVER LOST GROUND AND RESTORE EDEN TO THE WAY IT MUST HAVE GLEAMED AND SMELLED THE DAY BEFORE ADAM, OR HOMO HABILIS, APPEARED? COULD NATURE EVER OBLITERATE ALL OUR TRACES?"

Humans as a species (homo habilis) as the source of the world's problems.

Robosai, "the day before Adam" was yesterday, today we *celebrate* our birth, the Sixth Day.

It is so tempting to dissuade ourselves of the utter irrelevance and perhaps even sacrilegiousness of the hypothesis cited above, to remind ourselves of the words of Rashi, Bereishis 2:5 based on the Talmud, Chullin 60a, that until there was Man, all life - both vegetative and animal - lived only in the world of potential- they were about to give birth or on the verge of blossoming- the only ingredient missing was Man, his prayers and his working of the land. We may also want to remind ourselves of how Hashkofas HaTorah views us as not only the centre but the whole without whom the world would fail to see a purpose.

Yet, somewhere in the back of our minds, in the inner recesses of our memory, lies something that is tugging at us, which reminds us that perhaps Mr. Weisman is on to something. It comes in the form of a short piece of Talmud (Eruvin 13b) that we may have heard discussed in the past:

תנו רבנן: שתי שנים ומחצה נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל, הללו אומרים: נוח לו לאדם שלא נברא יותר משנברא, והללו אומרים: נוח לו לאדם שנברא יותר משלא נברא. נמנו וגמרו: נוח לו לאדם שלא נברא יותר משנברא, עכשיו שנברא - יפשפש במעשיו. ואמרי לה: ימשמש במעשיו.

The Rabbis taught: For two and a half years the Academy of Shammai and Hillel disputed if it would have been better if Man was never created, until a vote was cast, Better Had We Not Have Been Created, and now that we have come to this one must inspect his deeds of the past/some say deeds of the future.

Bizarre! This may be, perhaps, the most staggering Memra of Chazal one can find.

Could it be that the world, like Mr. Weisman believes, is *pained* by Mans existence? Or the extreme; the world *does* need Man, rather, us not being needed ceases the need for the world?

Besides the obvious, there are some other peripheral questions that arise:

- 1- Why here, of all disputes, was a vote taken? Voting, outside the Sanhedrins, developing a consensus, after all, was not common.
- 2- Did we not already come to the conclusion (on that same page!) that we almost always follow Beis Hillel? Why the shift in policy?
- 3- What difference, *in practice*, is there in deciding who was right in the above case?
- 4- Why did the Talmud end with two versions in the search in deeds as opposed to embracing *specifically* Mitzvos or Talmud Torah?

Let me share with you a story:

Two weeks ago I was in the bank when my cell phone rings. Not knowing proper cell phone protocol and seeing a number I did not recognize and an area code I was not familiar with, I apologized to the teller and said this will only take a second. "Rabbi Taub?" Yes. "Rabbi Taub we just had a conference call with several Rabbonim and we decided you should be called immediately." Surprised that this actually was an urgent call, I asked if I could be called back in two minutes when I will finish what I was doing and will have the proper Yishuv HaDas. Now in my car some five minutes later the phone rings again right on que. Repeating his preface, he then introduces himself as a Menahel of a prestigious Yeshiva. He explains, "Twenty years ago a man walked into a well known Kiruv Yeshiva and slowly evolved into a Shomer Shabbos. He got married and had children, but slowly it emerged that he was not emotionally well. He was a pathological liar and unbalanced. Finally, his wife took the kids and left. He, now living in the Mid-west, refused to give his wife a Get (Get-a Jewish divorce document without which a woman can not remarry)". Fascinated and depressed by the story thus far, I waited to see how Buffalo comes into play. "Well", he continued, "separation begot money troubles and this man allegedly stole his friends credit card, putting on it significant sums. After some time, he felt the need to get away from his situation and decided to visit a friend in Canada. At the border the officer saw on his computer that there was a warrant out for his arrest (for the alleged theft) and placed him in the Niagara County Jail to await extradition and trial. After speaking to Poskim it was decided that

although he is being kept in a non-Jewish prison we may put forward to him the following ultimatum: We will do everything to get you out of here on condition you sign a Get". Knowing that it was me that would have to do this, I let the Rabbi know that for Agunos (wives without a Get, lit. bound) I would cancel anything and I would head off to the facility immediately. Upon my arrival, and learning from past experiences, I put on my hat, pulled my Payyus from behind my ears and took the biggest Sefer I could find under my arms. Walking up to the head guard I said, "I am a Rabbi and you must let me talk to all Jewish inmates to see that they have all religious needs taken care of. Today I would need to talk to So and So". They not only let me in from behind the metal detector but let me go up to see him alone. Getting off the elevator, the C.O., who seemed to have been expecting me, took me into a small interrogation room; I could faintly see the blood on the walls. Sitting there alone and waiting for my "guest" (or was I his guest?) I noticed no intercom or two way mirror in the room and was taken aback when the man I was waiting for came in and shut the door. Standing 6 foot 5 the man could easily be a linebacker for the Buffalo Bills. This I was not expecting. How does one tell a 230 pound inmate a threat or ultimatum? Clearly buying time, I asked him if he had Davened yet today. He answered no and explained that his Tephillin were in his impounded car. "Well," I said, "let's say Shma. Do you have a Yarmulka?" "No." Glancing at a roll of tissue paper, he reached over and ripped several pieces and put them on his head. We all have moments when we question what we are doing with our lives. Here, in prison, with a total stranger who has Kleenex sitting on his head preparing myself to threaten not helping him unless a Get is signed, was one of those moments. As we began to recite Shmah, he paused, regained his composure and started again. He could not get through it. Sobbing now, he explained, "these last few months have been filled with such silence and these days in prison I have had no one to talk to. One can not be expected to be a good person in silence."

It is not human activity that we bemoan - but the lack thereof. What was being debated above was not what was best for the world; rather what is **נוח לו לאדם** - good for mankind, and nothing is more advantageous to a flailing spirit than מעשיו-action.

On Rosh Hashana we are **מפשפש במעשיו**, we wonder if we have made enough noise over the year, benefited mankind with doing, with action, and, we determine what more human activity we can do in the future that will be **נוח לאדם**.

Perhaps what the Shofar is all about is us coming together, אנשים נשים וטף, and filling a room with a lack of silence, an absence of quiet. We make noise, the right sounds this time; we also learn how to listento the clamor and learn how to decipher it- שומע קול שופר.

How to listen; to the noise of our families and spouses. How to “do”; turning “free time” into precious time of study and deed, speaking out to our editors of newspapers, or, perhaps, thanking them for their support of Israel. Working for our communities instead of only second guessing those who already do.

We are reminded that in our faith we do not have “moments of *silence*” rather moments of prayer, of study, of action.

Moments of Teshuva, Tephila and Tzedaka.

ROSH HASHANA DRASHAH DAY TWO

*The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty.
(Contemporary writer Anne Lamotte)*

Not by chance are the Parshiyos of Moshe’s demise immediately preceding these Days.

Moshe Rabbainu calls the nation for one final charge:

דברים פרק לא

וַיִּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל... יְדֹ אֶל הָיִד הוּא עֵבֶר לְפָנֶיךָ הוּא
 יִשְׁמִיד אֶת הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה מִלְּפָנֶיךָ... חֲזֹקוּ וְאִמְצוּ אֶל תִּירָאוּ וְאֶל תַּעֲרָצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם כִּי יְדֹ
אֶל הָיִד הוּא הֵה לְךָ עִמָּךְ לֹא יִרְפָּךְ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבְךָ: וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לַיהוָשִׁעַ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לְעֵינַי כָּל
יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲזֹק וְאִמְצֵ כִּי אַתָּה תָּבוֹא אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְדֹ לְאַבְתָּם לְתֵת לָהֶם

וְאִתָּהּ תִּנְחַלְנָה אוֹתָם: וַיֵּד וְדָ הוּא הֵהָלֵךְ לְפָנָיו הוּא יִהְיֶה עִמָּךְ לֹא יִרְפָּךְ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבְךָ לֹא תִירָא וְלֹא תִתְחַת:

For the sake of brevity we have shortened these verses, but even more similarities are there between the charge to Am Yisroel and the directive to the incoming leader, Yehoshua.

Why the redundancy? To Am Yisroel: חֲזָקוּ וְאַמְצוּ , to Yehoshua: חֲזַק וְאַמֵּץ . To the Klal: לֹא יִרְפָּךְ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבְךָ , To the incoming leader: עִמָּךְ לֹא יִרְפָּךְ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבְךָ .

Why too did Moshe see fit that the Bnei Yisroel must be present (לְעֵינַי כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל) at this transition, only to then hear what they had been told only moments ago?

Perhaps, Moshe was revealing something fundamental to Am Yisroel; leaders are human; leaders are afraid; leaders are like them. This was not a speech about how the *Homan Am* – average Jew - should overcome uncertainty should it rear its ugly head, rather how we must *expect* it and even, at times, embrace it.

At that moment Klal Yisroel understood that Moshe too, during these past forty years as leader, had moments of fear/ירא. That, like all of us, there were moments where Chizuk was desired.

Several years ago, Yonasan Rosenblum, gifted writer and author of many biographies of Gedolim for Artscroll, wrote the following:

In a famous letter, HaRav Yitzchak Hutner, Rosh Yeshivas Chaim Berlin, rails against the mistaken impression that gedolim "came out from under the hand of their Creator, in all their fullness and glory." Such a portrayal not only diminishes the stature of the gadol in question by downplaying the extent of his efforts and struggles, but it deprives his life of much of its instructive value. As Rav Hutner writes, "When we speak of a gadol, we speak of the finished product. But who knows how much struggle went into achieving that state, or how many challenges there were along the path? And when we fail to recognize this fact, and compare ourselves to the stories we read of the perfection of our gedolim, we come to despair..."

Let me share a comment that I had heard in the name of R' Elchonon Wasserman HY"D; in order to understand his forthcoming words an introduction is warranted.

In 1909, Erev Shabbos Parshas Zachor, a man came with his daughter to the Chafetz Chaim. His daughter, he felt, was "possessed" and the Chafetz Chaim agreed. So began one of the greatest and most famous stories of a Dybbuk in Jewish lore. The next many hours are shrouded in mystery. Although many give reports (Reb Elchonon would speak about it every year Parshas Zachor), they vary. The Dybbuk was asked about the world

we live in, the Chafetz Chaim as well as the impenetrable mysteries of the next world. Finally, after the directive of the Chafetz Chaim the Dybbuk left the girl's body. Everything that was told to Reb Elchonon- from the soul of the Dybbuk leaving through the girl's pinky to the crack that would be formed in the window in its departure – happened.

Years later, Reb Elchonon would say; my entire life I worked on Emunah/Faith, it was one thing I was sure that I would get Zchar for after 120, now, after what I saw, it went from אמונה פשוטה to ידיעה בעלמא , what will be with my Zchar, this loss of the challenge?!¹

Life is not a puzzle to be solved but a mystery to be lived².

All Yomim Tovim have a Mitzvas HaYom that is a certainty. We can succeed in the Mitzva to eat Matza, accomplish sitting in a Sukka or have a drink on Purim.

Rosh Hashana, however, is about Malchiyos-making G-d *your* G-d and King. Who can be sure they fulfill this year to year? Unless, therein lies the Mitzvos Hayom – to embrace the incompleteness of our missions.

It is about not being certain in *ourselves*, in our actions.

It is about embracing the uncertainty, knowing that the danger of complacency and the risk of stagnatism lies in telling ourselves that we have already reached the finish line.

It is about the Rosh, the *beginnings* of faith, the *seeds* of change and the embracing of the uncertainty of the challenge.

¹ For the sake of full disclosure, although I heard this version over years ago, I did research to its validity for this Drashah and found an interesting version: It was Reb Elchonon's Talmid, Rabbi Shlomo Elimelech Drillman, who always **wanted to ask** his Rebbe if he had lost his Bechiras Chafshi after said

incident, see <http://www.teaneckshuls.org/parsha/pdf/Shmos/TetzavePurim64.pdf>.

² unattributed quote