

Living Time

Festival Discourses for the Present Age



Rabbi Shagar

LIVING TIME
FESTIVAL DISCOURSES
FOR THE PRESENT AGE

EDITED BY
Alan Brill

TRANSLATED BY
Levi Morrow

Maggid Books

Living Time
Festival Discourses for the Present Age

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In Memory of Our Parents

Shrage Feivel Halevi ben Haim Simha and Leah Doppelt

A man of honesty, integrity and action

Chana Sarah bat David and Tzivia Gintel

A kind and virtuous woman

May their souls be bound up in the bond of eternal life

Monique and Haim Trau

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Preface

The Institute for the Advancement of Rabbi Shagar's Writings is proud to present another collection of teachings from Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Rabbi Shagar) in translation for his English-speaking audience. This volume takes its place alongside its predecessor, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, enabling readers to engage more deeply with the breadth of Rabbi Shagar's teachings.

Faith Shattered and Restored, published by Maggid in 2017, was met with enthusiastic interest and acclaim from its audience. The intervening years have seen intense debate among the book's readership regarding the original ideas it contained, as well as their applicability to Diaspora Jewry. We at the Institute take great joy in this discussion, because we believe that Rabbi Shagar's teachings carry considerable meaning and relevance even outside the narrow borders of Israeli Jewry within which they took shape. We hope to continue putting out translations of Rabbi Shagar's writings, making his ideas ever-more accessible to all readers.

Faith Shattered and Restored's introduction contains a detailed description of Rabbi Shagar's life and personality, of the broad horizons and varied textures of his teachings, and of the Institute's continuing efforts to edit and publish these teachings. Readers seeking

more information in those areas should look there. Additionally, this present volume begins with an introduction by Rabbi Professor Alan Brill wherein he lays out a broad, rich perspective on Rabbi Shagar's thought, its intellectual context, as well as the way it developed over time. This introduction, therefore, focuses on the novel contributions of the sermons contained in this volume for Rabbi Shagar's English-speaking audience.

This book began as a project of Rabbi Dr. Alan Brill and Rabbi Levi Morrow, who reached out to the Institute with a proposal to translate a selection of Rabbi Shagar's holiday sermons into English. The essays chosen set out in a direction distinct from those in *Faith Shattered and Restored*, which were written in the style of philosophical essays attempting to grapple with the challenge modern and post-modern ideas create for Judaism. The texts contained herein portray a different facet of Rabbi Shagar's thought, and they take a different form as well – they are sermons, written and taught in tandem with the holidays of the Jewish calendar.

Rabbi Shagar was not a philosopher pursuing abstract, timeless ideas. His thought grew organically out of learning and teaching Torah in the *beit midrash* and out of his experiences with real educational challenges. He was driven by his existential reality as a Jew, as a servant of God, and by his lived experience of the Jewish calendar – the holidays, fasts, and the days that have become part of the calendar since the founding of the State of Israel.

Preparing for the holidays was an essential part of Rabbi Shagar's Torah study and spiritual work. He would often say that each holiday has its own unique "illumination," which we must study and prepare for in order to be able to experience it. In his holiday sermons, he sought to express each holiday's unique illumination by exploring relevant texts, analyzing the mitzvot and customs of the holiday, and revealing its underlying ideas. Simultaneously, Rabbi Shagar used the platform provided by the sermons to give each holiday's characteristic attributes new interpretations which would speak to contemporary Jews. In the introduction to *Lottery is Destiny (Pur Hu Hagoral)*, a book of his Purim sermons that was published during his lifetime, Rabbi Shagar described this practice in the following way:

One of my goals is to create relevant, substantive meanings for the holidays and seasons which are meant to be times of depth and renewal. Each holiday has its own light and color. It is toward this end that I have integrated modern ideas into hasidic lines of thought, in order to translate these hasidic ideas into our world.

The genre of the sermon is well-fit for this purpose. Anyone who reads Rabbi Shagar's sermons will find the ideas similar to what he explores in his more philosophical essays, but in a form that enables different elements of the ideas to emerge. In contrast to the essays in *Faith Shattered and Restored*, the festival sermons have a briefer, more evocative style, reminiscent of a speech presented orally. The sermons do not aim to fully and clearly convey the discussed ideas or to explain the quoted texts, but to awaken the reader to the existential questions inherent in the illumination of each holiday. They seek to go beyond the realm of the intellect and address the heart, and they should therefore be read with openness and attention to the melody behind Rabbi Shagar's words. Great effort and consideration went into making sure that this melody is audible even in the translated version of the sermons.

The management of the Institute for the Writings of Rabbi Shagar appointed me to coordinate the work on this volume, and to oversee the process of selecting and translating the sermons. As a representative of the Institute, I want to express our whole-hearted gratitude to the book's editor, Rabbi Dr. Alan Brill, and to the translator, Rabbi Levi Morrow, for the incredible amount of work they have put into the book, and for their commitment to the spreading of Rabbi Shagar's teachings to the English-speaking world. Rabbi Dr. Brill's initiative and patience were a constant presence while we worked on the book – from start to finish – and Rabbi Morrow's deep comprehension and sensitivity to language created a translation that is clear and accessible while also being precise and faithful to the original.

The original versions of the sermons were edited by Yishai Mevorach, Zohar Maor, Odeya Zuriely, Elhanan Nir, Netanel Lederberg, and myself, and these editors have our grateful appreciation. A note at the beginning of each sermon identifies the sermon's original editor and place of publication.

Living Time

Our thanks as well to the members of the book's broader editorial team: Professor Tamar Ross, Rabbi Yehoshua Engelman, Rabbi Zach Truboff, and Dr. Zohar Maor, whose many incisive comments throughout the process of working on the book contributed to the exactitude of the translation.

Thank you to Rabbi Shimon Deutsch, chairman of the publication committee, for his involvement in the work and publishing of the book. Thank you as well to Rabbanit Miriam Rosenberg, Rabbi Shagar's widow, for the great efforts she has put into publishing Rabbi Shagar's writings. Finally, thank you to Matthew Miller, Rabbi Reuven Ziegler and Maggid Books for publishing another volume of Rabbi Shagar's teachings in English, and to Maggid's outstanding professional staff: Aryeh Grossman, Caryn Meltz, Ita Olesker, David Silverstein, Tani Bayer, Aryeh Sklar, and Rachel Miskin.

Eitan Abramovich

Editor's Introduction

The Essence of Rabbi Shagar

Rabbi Dr. Alan Brill
Seton Hall University

Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (1949–2007), better known by the acronym formed by the initials of his name ShaGaR (henceforth, Rabbi Shagar), was arguably the first native Israeli religious thinker. He was an introvert, and in his lifetime was mainly known to a small group of students; however, his importance has grown exponentially since his premature death in 2007. He was ardently religiously Orthodox, yet he lived with an existential chaos – a chaos that created an empty space of “existential absurdity” within him. He often spoke about it and posited that it created an anarchistic feel to parts of his thought. Rabbi Shagar left behind decades of drafts of personal reflections and unpublished lectures. His ideas, however, were always in the process of development and not conclusions, part protest and rebellion, and part revealing his own heart in order to encourage others also to be themselves. Therefore, we can say little to clarify the loose ends of

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Rabbi Shagar's thought, or resolve the tensions of his thinking. Nevertheless, his lectures as compiled and edited into essays by his students, have created a new post-modern Hasidism, opening up new vistas of religious Jewish thought.

BIOGRAPHY

Rabbi Shagar was born in Jerusalem to Holocaust survivor parents, and attended the Hesder yeshiva Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, afterward studying at Mercaz HaRav and with Rabbi Shlomo Fischer of Itri. After his marriage, he learned in the Kollel of Yeshivat HaKotel. He fought in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. His tank took a direct hit at the very start of the fierce tank battles in the Golan Heights; two of his comrades were killed instantly, and he was wounded and badly burned. This event, along with the subsequent Israeli political trajectory of events – from the withdrawal from Sinai to the disengagement from Gaza – elicited within Rabbi Shagar a sense that the Religious Zionist narrative of messianic redemption through return to the land was broken.

The 1970s and 1980s were a time for Rabbi Shagar – then teaching at Yeshivat HaKotel – to forge his own unique path of education, during which he integrated hasidic thought into the yeshiva and sought to make personal meaning a part of Talmud study. In 1984 he briefly established the yeshiva Shefa, together with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz and Rabbi Menachem Froman, as a place to explore new ways of understanding within Judaism. During this period, he also taught at the successful high school Yeshivat Makor Haim, established by his close student Rabbi Dov Singer under the auspices of Rabbi Steinsaltz. In 1988–1989, he taught at Beit Midrash Maaleh. In 1990, Professor Benjamin Ish-Shalom established the Beit Midrash of Beit Morasha and appointed Rabbi Shagar to lead it together with Rabbi Eliyahu Blumenzweig (later head of Yeshivat Yeruham). At the end of 1996, Rabbi Shagar established Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak (originally Yeshivat Siach) together with his lifelong colleague Rabbi Yair Dreifuss, where he served as head of the yeshiva until his death. On June 11th, 2007 (25th of Sivan, 5767), Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg died of a rapidly-spreading pancreatic cancer.

There are currently over twenty-five published volumes of Rabbi Shagar's lectures, which could potentially double, or even triple, in

number, considering the vast range of topics in his lectures on Jewish philosophy, Kabbala, Hasidism, and talmudic analysis. Much of the posthumous fanfare surrounding Rabbi Shagar focuses on the published lectures he gave in the last decade of his life; however, to put his thought in perspective, we need to turn the clock back to the formation of his ideas in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as his application of these ideas in the 1990s.

CONTEXT: THE NEW RELIGIOUS ZIONISTS

In the early 1990s, the Religious Zionist world in Israel started undergoing tremendous changes, when various groups, collectively called “the New Religious Zionists” (*HaDati'im HaHadashim*), sought to reformulate Religious Zionism away from the messianic ideology of the prior decades toward a greater sense of individualism.¹

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Religious Zionist yeshivas were swept up into the nationalistic Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), with its vision of a messianic settling of the West Bank. By the 1990s, much of the Israeli Religious Zionist world followed the teachings of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook (d. 1982), son of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, in which the individual was to subjugate himself to the collective project of building the nation. One cannot understate the importance of this trend of messianic nationalistic collectivism, ideologically centered at Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, for Religious Zionist education. Merkaz Harav ideology was against individualist Western culture, secular studies, and political liberalism, and it created an intense sociopolitical and theological pressure to view everything through the lens of immanent messianism, in which its teachers generally offered absolute and certain answers.

This trend intensified under the influence of Rabbi Zvi Yisrael Tau, which culminated in his founding of Yeshivat Har HaMor in 1998. His students created the *Hardal* (“National *Haredi*”) ideology and community, which follow a straight and constrained path, the *Kav*. They emphasize complete faith in the acute messianic import of the State of Israel and reject any secular studies and secular influences. They are also against any academic influence by teachers and colleges, ultimately

1. See Yair Sheleg, *The New Religious Zionists* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2000) (Heb.).

rejecting the influence of modern educational psychology and modern approaches to the study of the Bible. They are especially notable for rejecting individualism, modern personal independence, or the thinking of the New Religious Zionists.

The response of the New Religious Zionists was a turn toward individualism and independence. Instead of prioritizing the collective and the national, they emphasized creativity, academics, filmmaking, neo-Hasidic enthusiasm, journeys to India, and poetry writing. These “New Religious Zionists,” as they called themselves, freely rejected many traditional elements of the ideology of collective state building by seeking answers in pluralism, social analysis, tolerance, critical thinking, feminism, philosophy, and autonomy. This, in turn, created a wave of new institutions including, but not limited to, those started by Rabbi Shagar. These new Religious Zionist institutions integrated into the yeshiva, a place of traditional Talmud study, a kaleidoscope of new perspectives including New Age thought, creative writing, yoga, philosophy of religion, poetry and academic study of Bible and Talmud. Finally, there was a revivalist Neo-Hasidism of a distinct Religious Zionist nature focusing on experiential Judaism, such as the trend of Habbakook (Chabad, Breslov and [K] Carlebach/Kook) which was characterized by ecstatic prayer, turning to Hasidism instead of Talmud, and wearing sidecurls (*peyot*).²

The New Religious Zionists sought to embrace the fullness of the secular world, Western culture, and normal life. Unlike the certainties of the older ideology of prior decades, they acknowledged doubt, questions, and a pluralism of truth. They wrote articles announcing that the older religious language was no longer adequate and that a new religious language was needed; they wanted new answers and new philosophies.

When such Religious Zionists use the term “post-modern,” they include anything that emphasizes individualism and uncertainty, including Kafka, Buber, Freud, and Sartre, as well as Elie Wiesel and Soloveitchik’s *Lonely Man of Faith*. Even though these authors, whom they cite, wrote during the height of modernism, the New Religious Zionists instead define modernism as the state building and rationalism of the

2. Semadar Cherlow, *Who Moved My Judaism? Judaism, Post-Modernism and Contemporary Spiritualities* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2016) (Heb.).

Merkaz worldview. Their definition of the post-modern, contrastingly, is characterized by the individual and the existential.

Rabbi Shagar was not the leader of this shift in understanding, nor of the attendant social changes, but he became the thinker who gave this new Religious Zionist world the religious language it sought. Not only did Rabbi Shagar advocate for changes in education and religious society, he also connected the post-modern loss of the grand narrative with the breakdown of the former collectivist ideology. Many of his Israeli readers simply saw him as a needed move beyond Merkaz, because for them, he was the first person whom they ever heard say that history, metaphysics, ethics, and social problems do not have absolutes, or who advocated for the importance of subjectivity.

Rabbi Shagar's contribution in the 1980s and 1990s reflected in this volume included a new approach to Torah study, a turn to Hasidism, a use of existential themes, and a unique interpretation of concepts such as repentance and self-acceptance. In the last decade of his life, he integrated post-modern language and worked on the concept of faith for a world without foundations, as well as welcoming the multiplicity of ideas. Finally, in the last years of his life he turned more to the thought of the existentialist Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and also to the problems of Post-Zionism and the Disengagement from Gaza. We will now conceptually look at these listed topics, explaining their importance to his thought.

TORAH STUDY

Rabbi Shagar's greatest influence on the Israeli scene was setting a new agenda for Torah study as a quest for meaning (*mashmaut*). How does the text speak to you? What do you hear in the text? In asking these types of questions, he was clearly rejecting the widespread focus almost solely on the analytic approach of Talmud study, generally called the approach of Brisk. Instead, he believed, we need to ask human questions, seek personal answers, and look for religious meaning, not just formalism. In Torah study, we need to use not just intellect but also imagination, emotions, and desire.

For Rabbi Shagar, non-legalist Aggada, Hasidism, and Jewish thought need to inspire Talmud study. We need to bring Western culture,

philosophy, and literature into dialogue with the Talmud. For Rabbi Shagar, there needs to be individual creativity in interpretation of the Talmud, as well as individual projects and group discussions.

This shift, one of Rabbi Shagar's lasting accomplishments, is the inspiration behind an entire new wave of educators, and the creation of new institutions in which students spend significant time engaged in spiritual quest. These educators and institutions have brought academic studies, Western philosophy, and Eastern spirituality into the study hall (*beit midrash*), which is the crucial place of spiritual formation and religious life. Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, Plato, Franz Rosenzweig, yoga, and poetry writing workshops are made part of the curriculum. The study hall is a place to find one's individuality and relevance to contemporary issues, to hear the eternal voice of God in the authentic self. It should not be a place of submission to an absolute Torah. The novelty in Rabbi Shagar's thought is that these other fields cannot – and should not – be explored in the university or in the secular realm, but in the rabbinic study hall. Discussions of this phenomenon are found in the writings of the generation of rabbis of the yeshivas of Tekoa, Othniel, Maaleh Gilboa, and the institutions Herzog College and Beit Morasha, but the acknowledged theologian of this new approach is Rabbi Shagar.

For Rabbi Shagar, in order for the study of Talmud to be existential, we need to instill a sense of the study hall as a place of personal formation and the Gemara as one's world, the culture in which one lives and plots one's inner life. Rabbi Shagar describes this quality as "*beitiyut*," which we might translate as "at-homeness." This at-homeness allows the study hall to function as a place that allows freely chosen self-identification, a self-affirmed covenant (*brit*), which is also in continuity with one's parents, family, ancestry, and community. The *beit midrash* is one's place because it creates meaning in one's life; it offers experiential contact with the Infinite as both personal and primal. Torah study is creative and individualistic in that anyone can construct his or her own meaning of Torah, which makes space for holiness and the Divine Presence. "This is the Jew's refuge from the alienation and estrangement of the outer world, and it is here that he finds his place and feels at home."³

3. See below, "Face to Face," p. 279.

For Rabbi Shagar, someone who requires justification of the tradition is already outside of it because tradition, according to its own definition, is a function of self-identity and self-definition, which is composed and sustained by experience.⁴ Torah must be studied out of love, not as an outsider. Not only do you have to be a participant in the covenant in order to understand the Torah, but rather the whole sense of Torah study is this revelation of personal meaning.⁵

Alternatively, Torah study serves as a means to ward off existential meaninglessness by lending meaning to one's activities that are grounded in the infinite divine. In Rabbi Shagar's non-foundational existential theology, we construct our world of Torah by means of personal commitment, creativity, and finding meaning, thereby blurring "the lines between discovery and creation" – and by extension, between God and the human. In the encounter with Torah, the student gains the truth of existence and the inner unity that rests in the declaration "I am who I am."⁶

In his later thought, after his post-modern turn, Rabbi Shagar claims that the Torah is not a static body of knowledge, but rather a subjective language game in which a *lamdan* (a talmudic scholar) engages in the activity of *lamdanut* (conceptual understanding of the Talmud). By creating Torah language, Torah continuously creates meaning.⁷ Despite this lack of certainty and foundation, Rabbi Shagar requires strict halakhic adherence and thinks laxity would undermine the system. Nevertheless, he states that the concept of halakha is not coherent or determined, but rather includes different genres with different arguments, creating different worlds to inhabit.⁸

4. See below, "The Name of the Father," p. 178–180. The idea is from Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), but Rabbi Shagar cites it from Avi Sagi, *The Challenge of Returning to the Tradition*, (Jerusalem-Ramat Gan, 2003), 92 (Heb.).

5. See below, "Face to Face," p. 282.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 283–284.

7. Rabbi Shagar, *Kelim Shevurim* (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak, 2004), 32.

8. *Ibid.*, 43–44.

High Holy Days

The Matter Depends Upon Me Alone

They said about R. Elazar ben Durdaiya that he did not leave aside one prostitute in the world with whom he did not engage in sexual intercourse. Once, he heard that there was one prostitute in one of the cities overseas who would take a purse of dinars as her payment. He took a purse of dinars and went and crossed seven rivers to reach her. During the act, she passed wind and said: Just as this passed wind will not return to its place, so too Elazar ben Durdaiya will not be accepted in repentance.

He went and sat between two mountains and hills and said: Mountains and hills, pray for mercy [on my behalf]. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: “For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed” (Is. 54:10). He said: Heaven and earth, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: “For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a

Based on a sermon delivered in 5744 (1984), edited by Odeya Tzurieli and published in *Commemorating the First Day: High Holiday Sermons* (Efrata: Institute for the Advancement of Rav Shagar’s Writings, 2007), 15–25 (Heb.).

garment” (Is. 51:6). He said: Sun and moon, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: “Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed” (Is. 24:23). He said: Stars and constellations, pray for mercy on my behalf. They said to him: Before we pray for mercy on your behalf, we must pray for mercy on our own behalf, as it is stated: “And all the hosts of heaven shall mold away” (Is. 34:4).

He said: The matter depends on me alone! He placed his head between his knees and cried loudly until his soul departed. A Divine Voice emerged and said: R. Elazar ben Durdaiya is destined for life in the World-to-Come.

Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] wept [when he heard this story] and said: There is one who acquires his share [in the World-to-Come only] after many years [of toil], and there is one who acquires his share [in the World-to-Come] in one moment.¹

Why did R. Elazar ben Durdaiya cry? Did he cry about his sins? If so, why didn't he cry earlier when he first recognized his sins and decided to repent? He cried only once he discovered that the matter depended on him alone. There are two different reasons for this.

First, he cried then because until that moment he thought that he had no control over his fate, and he discovered that he had wasted his time trying to find help from some external source. The wasted time upset him even more than the sins themselves. A person sins, stumbles, fails, but the time he wastes searching for external help, for some person or book that could help him, is the biggest disappointment of all. It is impossible to actively sin all the time, but it is very easy to sit around, wasting time by forever looking for something to motivate you – and that is the greatest sin of all.

Second, he cried then because of the discovery itself that the matter depended upon him alone. This is an awesome and terrifying discovery. It all depends on you! You are the one who sinned, and you

1. Avoda Zara 17a. Translation from The Noé Edition Koren Talmud Bavli, with emendations.

are the one who repents. You are the one who wasted your life, and you are the one who can redirect it upwards.

Before this point, R. Elazar ben Durdaiya knew that he had sinned, but he was not able to cry over the sin. He had not yet internalized the fact that it all depended on him. In truth, though, he needed nothing but himself, not long conversations or *musar* pep-talks, not people or ideas or books, but only his sincerity, his deep will, his self. As long as a person makes himself subservient, dependent on something outside himself, looking for acceptance or excuses, he cannot really truly cry, the kind of weeping so intense that it can cause the soul to depart.

YOU CANNOT GO BACK

This teaches us the secret of repentance. The origin and starting point of repentance is freedom of choice – the idea that “the matter depends upon me alone.”

The brazen sinner lives with the illusion that he can always make do – there is neither king nor judgment. Reality is never decided. Nothing is ever so absolute and final that he cannot come back from it. When R. Elazar ben Durdaiya stood before absolute reality, he fell to his knees in fear, as the illusion of his freedom shattered. He started asking for mercy because he never had any real courage, brazenly relying on the idea that he could always escape, that he would always have a way back.

The sinner does not want to accept the yoke of sovereignty upon himself. All sin is about throwing off the yoke – being flippant and frivolous.² The sinner thinks that nothing is decisive, no process is irreversible, and that nothing absolute exists. The first step of repentance is confronting the absoluteness of reality: “Just as this passed wind will not return to its place, so too Elazar ben Durdaiya will not be accepted in repentance.” There is no way back – there is only you.

Next comes the step of searching and asking for mercy. R. Elazar ben Durdaiya was not yet strong enough to face reality, to judge himself and feel regret. He could not even really cry because he was not truly sorry. Looking outside himself for help, he turned to the heavens, the

2. “Reish Lakish says: A man commits a transgression only if a spirit of folly enters him” (Sota 3a).

earth, people, conversations, proofs, persuasions, inspirations, feelings, ideologies. He was looking for something that would motivate him to act, for someone who would tell him the truths that would push him to change, confer feelings that would give him the power to repent.

At this point, he was no longer a brazen sinner. He was a searcher, one of those people looking to repent but stuck in the search, never to leave it. He discovered that there is nothing that exists that is eternal or absolute – heaven and earth, the land and the seas, are all temporary. Nothing is eternal. Nothing in the entire cosmos can provide an anchor to hold on to when a person needs to change.

Confronting judgment filled R. Elazar ben Durdayya with fear, but he was still unwilling to face it head on. He still lived in an illusion, the illusion of sin itself! He thought that there was someone who would have mercy on him, that the passed wind might ultimately return to its place anyway. He thought that he, as opposed to everyone else, would never die. If he could not stand on his own merit, as he once thought, he would stand on the merit of big things or wise people. Certainly, R. Elazar thought, there must be someone or something that possesses the secret of eternity and who could have mercy on him.

Suddenly, in a flash of inspiration, he discovered the simple fact that there was no one to have mercy on him. In the entirety of creation, there was simply no one and nothing that could save R. Elazar ben Durdayya. He reached the most fundamental conclusion of all: the matter depends on me alone.

A person says, I can't, it's too difficult, I want someone to help me, I'm afraid, I, I, I. But what is this "I"? Is it a thought? An abstraction? No – it is you, exactly as you are! The matter depends on you alone. If you truly want it, then you want it, and you do not need anyone else. R. Elazar discovered the secret of freedom. Repentance, as the kabbalists write, belongs to the *Olam HaHerut*, the "World of Freedom." Only then did R. Elazar cry his great cry.

Many people waste their whole lives in this stage. They are no longer sinners, but they have not repented. They are waiting for someone to have mercy on them, to teach them, to do something to them, internally or externally. Confused and sad, they are stuck in an unending search for the ostensible truth. The very search itself, however, is falsehood. It

is illusory, sinful, because everything is temporary. Nothing in reality, either physical or spiritual, can help. Only God is eternal, and He exists beyond physical reality, and even beyond spiritual reality.

THE CRY

So, R. Elazar cried for the years he wasted searching. He had looked for something in a place where he could not possibly find it. A person only truly feels sorry at the moment he consciously recognizes that he is the one who is guilty and he is the one who needs to repent.³

As long as R. Elazar was searching for someone else, even just to help him, he could not really be sorry. Only through taking responsibility – discovering that ultimately it is all up to him – was he able to cry and be sorry. The sinner, who does not understand that judgment truly exists, lives with the *illusion* of freedom. He deludes himself in feeling free, but when he eventually has a confrontation with concrete reality, and recognizes that reality cannot simply be changed back – the illusion of choice disappears. At that moment, he can see how conditioned, enslaved, and wretched he really was.

R. Elazar recognized his sin and ran quickly to find someone who could help him. After years of searching, he discovered that there wasn't anyone who could help him, nor could there be. Only then did he finally accept the yoke of the sovereignty of heaven, when the illusion of choice disappeared. He then stood and accepted judgment, thereby receiving repentance and freedom. The matter depends on me alone. He cried, deeply and painfully, regretting what he had wasted. I cry and regret that I, I, sinned. However, this cry is also happy. He felt genuine joy in the realization that he was no longer enslaved, that the matter depends on him alone.

At the end of the story, R. Yehuda HaNasi also cried, because, “There is one who acquires his share in the World-to-Come only after many years of toil, and there is one who acquires his share in the World-

3. [Translator's note: In *Return, My Soul: Freedom or Grace* (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak, 2003), 92n24 (Heb.), Rabbi Shagar traces a similar idea to a line from Rabbi Yisrael Salanter's *Iggeret Hamusar*, “A single individual is he – the sinner and the punished.”]

to-Come in a single moment.” Some people toil their whole lives on the Torah and the commandments. Yet they still never acquire their eternal life, because reaching the decisive, wholehearted – *unified* – mindset of “the matter depends on me alone” is a function of divine grace. A person could toil for many years and never achieve this change, this revolution, the type of repentance the kabbalistic texts call *teshuva ila’a*, “Higher Repentance.”

SHOFAR OF SOVEREIGNTY, SHOFAR OF FREEDOM

The shofar of Rosh HaShana is about sovereignty: “And recite before Me on Rosh HaShana [verses that mention] Kingships, Remembrances, and *Shofarot*: Kingships so that you will crown Me as King over you; Remembrances so that your remembrance will rise before Me for good; and with what? It will rise with the shofar.”⁴ We are commanded to accept the yoke of heaven twice daily with the recitation of the *Shema*, and it constitutes a fundamental element of the service of God. At the beginning of the New Year, we are also commanded to do so through sounding the shofar.

However, this shofar is also a shofar of freedom: “Sound the great shofar for our freedom.”⁵ The Jubilee shofar is the shofar of freedom. The rabbis connect the two shofars linguistically:

The Sages taught: From where [do we know] that [the soundings of Rosh HaShana] are with a shofar? The verse states: “Then you shall make proclamation with the blast of the shofar [on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall make proclamation with the shofar throughout all your land]” (Lev. 25:9). I only have the Jubilee Year, what of Rosh HaShana? The verse states: “Of the seventh month.” Since there is no need for the verse to state: “Of the seventh month,” what is [the meaning] when the verse states: “Of the seventh month”? This comes

4. Rosh HaShana 16a.

5. The daily *Amida* prayer.

to teach that all the soundings of the seventh month must be similar to one another.⁶

Maimonides writes similarly:

It is a positive commandment to sound the shofar on the tenth of Tishrei in the Jubilee year. This mitzva is entrusted to the Court first, as is stated: “You shall sound a shofar blast” (Lev. 25:9). Every individual is obligated to sound the shofar, as it states [in continuation of the verse]: “And you shall sound the shofar.” We sound nine shofar blasts in the same way as we sound them on Rosh HaShana.... [The requirements] of shofar used for the Jubilee and Rosh HaShana are the same in all matters. Both on Rosh HaShana and in the Jubilee the *tekiyot* [shofar blows] are sounded.... From Rosh HaShana until Yom Kippur, servants would not be released to their homes, nor would they be subjugated to their masters, nor would the fields return to their [original] owners. Instead, the servants would eat, drink, and rejoice, with crowns on their heads. When Yom Kippur arrives and the shofar is sounded in the court, the servants are released to their homes and the fields are returned to their owners.⁷

The freedom and liberation of the Jubilee shofar begin with accepting the yoke of heaven with the shofar of sovereignty on Rosh HaShana.

Similarly, the Talmud famously says:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: This ear heard My voice on Mount Sinai when I said: “For to Me the children of Israel are slaves” (Lev. 25:55) – and not slaves to slaves. And yet this man went and acquired a master for himself. [Therefore,] let [this ear] be pierced.⁸

6. Rosh HaShana 33b.

7. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Shemitta VeYovel* 10:10–14. From Eliyahu Touger’s translation on Chabad.org with slight emendations.

8. Kiddushin 22b.

High Holy Days

The servant is the one who did not accept his servitude to heaven.

The Mishna depicts a debate about the relationship between the Rosh HaShana shofar and the Jubilee shofar:

The shofar for Rosh HaShana is the straight horn of the ibex. ... On fast days, it was the curved horn of rams. ... The Jubilee year is the same as Rosh HaShana with regard to [the laws of] blowing and the benedictions. Rabbi Yehuda [disagrees and] says: On Rosh HaShana we blow the [curved horn of] rams, whereas in Jubilee years, it is [the straight horn of] the ibex.⁹

The Talmud explains the logic behind the debate:

What is [the basis] for their disagreement? One Sage [R. Yehuda] holds that on Rosh HaShana the more a person bends his mind [in submission], the better, but on Yom Kippur, the more a person straightens his mind, the better. The other Sage holds that on Rosh HaShana, the more a person straightens his mind, the better. On fasts, the more a person bends his mind, the better.¹⁰

According to R. Yehuda – and the halakha follows his opinion – submission is the trait associated with Rosh HaShana. The shofar of Rosh HaShana is a shofar of accepting the yoke: “The more he bends his mind, the better!” The shofar of Yom Kippur represents the trait of straightforwardness and simplicity. On Yom Kippur, the servant returns to his origins, his birthplace and his family. Furthermore, as Rashi comments, the servant also regains his original dignity when he is freed, a return to the dignity of his fathers.¹¹ This shofar is the shofar of freedom, wherein simplicity reigns. Simplicity, as the Maharal explains in many places, is the trait of selfhood, elementary, essential behavior, rather than submission.

A famous passage expresses the connection between accepting the yoke of heaven and freedom: “One who accepts upon himself the

9. Mishna Rosh HaShana 3:3–5.

10. Rosh HaShana 26b.

11. Rashi on Leviticus 25:41.

yoke of Torah is exempted from the yoke of government duties and the yoke of worldly cares.”¹² Accepting a yoke would seem to limit a person, binding and oppressing him, but this is not the case. “All the shofar blasts of the seventh month should be of the same character,” because when a person sincerely accepts the yoke of heaven, with devotion to God and recognition of truth, he is first and foremost liberated from servitude to himself. Only someone who acts according to the supreme principle, the lofty divine principle of the commandments – acting for the sake of heaven rather than for personal profit – gains freedom. He returns to his original self, like a servant returning to the ancestral land of his fathers and his family.

Someone who throws off a yoke thinks he is free. However, this very arbitrariness, the thought that there is no sovereign in the world, brings with it enslavement and lack of freedom.

Let us look again at Maimonides. In the middle of his Laws of Repentance, Maimonides cuts short his discussion of repentance and starts discussing the topic of free will.¹³ How are free will and repentance connected? Maimonides explains: “Since free choice is granted to all men as explained, a person should always strive to repent and to confess verbally for his sins, striving to cleanse his hands from sin in order that he may die as a repentant man and merit the life of the World-to-Come.”¹⁴ For Maimonides, repentance does not mean merely fixing the past, regretting the past, but changing the future.¹⁵ The essence of repentance is choice and freedom. The individual repents out of a recognition of truth. Recognizing his responsibility for his actions moves him to repent. He is not motivated by moral intuition, regret, or fear of punishment, but by freedom, responsibility, and the understanding that the matter depends upon me alone. I alone am responsible and have obligations. This recognition – the recognition of choice and responsibility – is itself repentance.

12. *Pirkei Avot* 3:5.

13. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Teshuva*, ch. 5.

14. *Ibid.*, 7:1.

15. *Ibid.*, 2:1–2.

High Holy Days

Just as accepting the yoke of heaven leads to choice, freedom, and repentance, so too the reverse. Freedom leads to accepting the yoke of heaven completely: “Who has reached complete repentance? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin again], and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it because of his repentance alone and not because of fear or a lack of strength.”¹⁶ The individual who abstains from sin for any reason other than his free choice has not truly repented. The sovereignty of God depends on free choice.¹⁷

We will conclude with Malbim’s words in his commentary on Psalms: “For to the Lord is kingship (*hamelukha*) and He rules (*umos-hel*) the nations.”¹⁸ Malbim comments, “There is a difference between a king (*melekh*) and a ruler (*moshel*). The king is accepted and chosen by the nation insofar as he is fit for the role, while the ruler must use force.” God wants to be king, wants us to enthrone Him willingly, accepting the yoke of His kingship upon us. “And they willingly accepted His kingship upon themselves.”¹⁹

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 5:4.

18. Psalms 22:29.

19. Siddur, Maariv, Blessings after the *Shema*.