

REACHING WITHIN

by Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig

"Shabbos Mevorchim", the Shabbos (Sabbath) before Rosh Chodesh (start of the Jewish lunar month), is unique because it contains a special prayer announcing the coming of the new month and praying that it be filled with many blessings. This prayer is recited on the Shabbos preceding every month of the year, with one exception. This week, the Shabbos prior to Rosh Hashanah, which will also be Rosh Chodesh Tishrei, we do not announce the coming of the new month or add any special prayers. Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, on which G-d decides the various blessings that will be allotted to each of His children. Of all the months on the Jewish calendar, it would appear that the month of Tishrei would be the most appropriate one to announce; the announcement would serve as a wake up call to prepare for the Judgment Day. Yet on this occasion in particular we remain silent. Similarly, throughout the month of Elul, which precedes Rosh Hashanah, we blow the Shofar each day (except for Shabbos) at the end of the morning prayers. The primary function of blowing the Shofar is as a wake up call to prepare for the impending judgment. The day on which this would seem to be most appropriate would be the day before Rosh Hashanah; it is, after all, our last chance to prepare. But on the day before Rosh Hashanah, however, we do not blast the Shofar. Why do we squander these opportunities with silence?

One of the reasons attributed to our silence on these occasions is that we are attempting to "confuse the Satan." This would seem to indicate that by not announcing the New Year or blowing the Shofar on the last day, we could somehow sneak through the Judgment Day without being accused by the prosecuting angel. This presents us with some difficulties. Firstly, does G-d who judges us not know all of our deeds? How could tricking the Satan change the way he judges us? Also, why do we expect the Satan to fall for the same trick every year? Certainly after all these years he is familiar with the tactic.

The Talmud (Tractate Bava Basra 16a) explains that the Satan and our evil inclination are the same angel. Our silence on these occasions is not a trick designed to fool some detached accusing angel and avert the type of judgment we deserve. It is a trick designed for confuse our own evil inclination to allow us to become closer to G-d. G-d gave us the ritual mitzvos (Divine commandments) in the Torah as a means of connecting with Him. In that vein, prayer and the Shofar are important tools to help us repent and return to G-d. But one cannot allow rites to replace true penitence. There is a natural human tendency to rely excessively upon the rituals we perform as a basis toward defining our spiritual level and how close we are to G-d. But before Rosh Hashanah our focus needs to be on

genuine contrition and resolve for change. This requires introspection and focus on our spiritual weaknesses.

It is on the Shabbos - the day of spiritual reconnection to the Divine - that precedes the Judgment Day, as well as the day before Rosh Hashanah - when we are most intensely focused on the charge before us - that it is most important to deliver this message. By deviating from our normal activities we are reminded that our rituals do not create a relationship with the Master of the Universe when they are performed by rote; they only succeed in creating the bond when they are fulfilled with sincerity. More so, refraining from rituals reminds us the true return to G-d is not simply improving our outward actions; real and lasting change must come from within.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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