



From the desk of
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Office of the Rabbinate of Elad, Rosh HaAyin and Herzelia

Religious Court of Elad * Batei Hora'ah * Religious Services * Marriage Licensing * Kashrut * Mikvaot * Eiruvim

OHR

Parashat Nitzavim

HAMELECH

In Your Mouth and In Your Heart

It says in this week's *parashah* (Devarim 30:11-14): For this mitzvah (*teshuvah*) which I am commanding you today, is not concealed from you, nor is it distant. It is not in the heavens... nor is it across the ocean... Rather, the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it.

What is meant by the words, "in your mouth and in your heart"?

Proper Prayer

Concentration during *tefillah* is a most challenging enterprise. Too often, even after we make the effort to get to *Shul* (or the women find a pocket of time and a quiet corner), we find ourselves diverse in our prayers. Prayer seems to be a multi-laned highway, with the mouth speeding down one lane and the heart racing down another (sometimes even in the opposite direction?!). Here we are, standing before our Creator, and we just cannot get our minds off of recent events, distant memories or future planning or anxieties, or simple just plain daydreaming. We finish *davening* and we hope that we managed to utter all of the words, but we feel that something was missing. Where were **we**? Was our inner essence part of the process, or was he on vacation or strike or simply out-of-order?

Tefillah is meant to be "service of the heart" (Taanit 2a). Yet, much to our dismay, too frequently, it ends up being "matters of utmost importance which most people tend to treat lightly" (Berachot 6b).

Good Morning – Good Night – *Gezunt-heit!*

Some people daven and don't even realize what they're saying. *Baalei Mussar* use the following parable.

An uneducated villager got engaged to a big city girl. Before going to meet his future father-in-law, the *shadchan* gave the new *chattan* a short briefing on city manners. The *shadchan* let him know that in the big city, you have to be polite and say the right thing at the right time. In the morning, say, "Good Morning." At night, say "Good Night." Mind your pleases and thank-yous and if someone sneezes, say "*Gezunt-heit*" or "*LaBriyut!*" If you suspect you did something even slightly offensive, be sure to say, "Excuse me."

The *chattan*, thoroughly excited and completely confused, proceeded to meet his future father-in-law. Upon seeing him, he excitedly exclaimed, in one big mumble-jumble, "Good Morning! Good Night – please – thank you – *gezuntheit* – excuse me!"

The *kallah* and her parents did not know if to laugh or to cry.

Heart-to-Mouth Alignment

It has been said that "*Tefillah belo kavannah, keguf belo neshama,*" – "prayer void of concentration is akin to a body without soul." A body without a soul, my friends, is what we call death. If we wish to revitalize our prayers and bring them back to life, we do not need mouth-



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to-mouth resuscitation; we need **heart-to-mouth** revitalization!

Let us go back to that *pasuk* we mentioned earlier: For the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to do it. Expound *Chazal* (Eiruvim 54a): When is it close to you? When it is in your mouth and in your heart to do it. In order for us to really feel in touch with our true selves and our spirituality, we must get our hearts and our mouth working together in alignment.

Fifteen More Years

Sincere tefillah certainly helps. Gemara Berachot 10a relates how King Chizkiyahu was informed by the Navi Yeshayahu that his death was imminent. King Chizkiyahu immediately sent the Navi out of the palace, insisting that he had a tradition from his ancestor King David that even if a sharp sword is upon a person's neck, he is still to pray for salvation.

Without delay, King Chizkiyahu turned to face the wall and offered a fervent plea from the bottom of his heart. Yeshayahu had barely left the palace and was already told by Hashem to return to the king and inform him that his tefillah had been accepted and he would receive fifteen more years of life!

Not a Miracle

Rabbi Yaakov Yisroel Kanievsky (known as the Steipler Gaon) asked his brother-in-law, the Chazon Ish, if it was worthwhile praying for someone who was diagnosed with "the disease" (i.e., cancer). The Chazon Ish responded that he knew of a talmid chacham, the Rav of Chernigov,

who was diagnosed with an illness. The doctors informed him that his end was near. And what happened? He lived another thirty years! Such a thing is not considered a miracle, said the Chazon Ish.

The Steipler added that subsequently, he knew of other prominent scholars, such as Rabbi Moshe Chevroni and Rabbi Baruch Sorotzkin, who lived for decades after being diagnosed with "the disease."

Heart and Mouth in Shofar

Well-known are the words of the Rambam (Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4), yet worth repeating: Although the sounding of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a Divine decree (which we must heed even if we had zero comprehension of the mitzvah), it also communicates a subliminal message. It announces: Awaken, sleepy ones, from your sleep; deep sleepers, arouse from your slumber! Seek out your ways and repent! Remember your Creator, those of you who forget the truth, distracted by transient vanities, staggering through the year from empty to vain pursuits which are not truly helpful nor advantageous. Take a good look at your souls, improve your ways and your deeds. Each person ought to abandon his bad way / habit and his inappropriate thought etc.

B'ezrat Hashem, we will all hear the *Shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah*. But only if we first review and review these words of our teacher, the Rambam, will the *Shofar* evoke the desired result. What is the *Shofar* telling us? Wake up! Today is the Day of Judgment! What have I been doing with my



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life?! Am I living up to Hashem's expectations of me, as delineated in the Torah and *Sifrei Halachah* and *Mussar*?

Such thoughts should put us in the proper mindset, making us aware of the solemnity of the situation. If the *Shofar* arouses us to thoughts of repentance – getting back onto the right track – such a *Shofar*-blowing is the kind which has Hashem rise, as it were, from the throne of Judgment to relocate to the throne of Compassion.

The Ben Ish Chai (Derashot) points out a beautiful allusion. The numerical value of שופר *Shofar* is identical to that of תקפו its strength. When is the *shofar* at its full strength? When heart and mouth are in alignment. Heart is "lev" spelled out למד בית and mouth is "peh" spelled out פה הי; add all of these letters together, and you will also arrive at שופר and תקפו the *Shofar* at its full strength.

As he blows the *Shofar*, the *tokei'a* puts his heart where his mouth is, arousing the entire congregation to do the same, to include their heart – concentration and emotion – in their prayers. The heart-and-mouth team is truly a winning combination.

For Heaven's Sake

On Rosh Hashanah, we realize that everything about our lives is being decided and decreed. This arouses us to pray for life, health, parnasah, etc. How can we feel more secure that our prayers will be answered? "Remember us for life... *Iema'ancha Elokim Chaim*... for Your Sake, O Living Almighty." Let us re-examine all of our

desires and yearnings and requests, why is it that we want life, health, money, etc.? For "business" or for "pleasure"? If just to satisfy our physical thirsts, why should He acquiesce? But if we ask for these grants so that we can serve Him to the best of our ability, why should He **not** want to give us all we ask for?

Step One to Rosh Hashanah is to realize that our very life is on the line. Step Two is to reassess why we really feel worthy of requesting a new lease on life. Step Three is sincerely asking for it, from our new perspective.

No Atheist on the Operating Table

If someone were to contract a rare, life-threatening disease and to date, there is only one doctor in the world who knows how to cure it, what would he do? Certainly, he would do all that he could to get an appointment with that doctor. After the appointment, he would indubitably follow all of the doctor's directives to the tee if he wishes to continue living.

Hashem is constantly giving and re-giving us life, with all of the myriads of miracles involved in having our bodies continue to function. Asking for life, saying "*Lema'ancha*," but *chas veshalom*, thinking that once we get some more life, we'll go back to doing some activities which are not exactly in synch with "*Iema'ancha*,"... well, that is not exactly "*piv velibo shavin*" – mouth and heart on the same page.

Remember us "*Lechayim!*"

A story is told of the Belzer Rav, Reb Shalom. One of his *Chassidim* was a simple tailor. He



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started out quite pious, beginning each day with *Tefillah* and *Tehillim*. Only then would he turn to his work. He earned a comfortable living.

One day, he had a disagreement with one of his regular clients. Thereafter, the latter chose to cut ties and do his tailoring elsewhere. This has been a wealthy regular and the financial cut-back was noticeable. Our friend, the tailor, said to himself, "Well, if Hashem is giving me less *parnasah*, I'm gonna give Him less *Tehillim*," and he cut down on his daily quota.

A little while later, a second regular customer also got into a bit of an argument and he too stopped frequenting this particular tailor shop. Once again, the tailor cut down on a few more *perakim*. This unfortunate downward spiral only continued. The tailor was losing customer after customer and mirroring that, cutting out more and more parts of *davening*. Eventually, he had no *parnasah* whatsoever, nor did he daven a word. He had no choice but to close down his store although he had nothing to eat. Nothing to eat?! That's it, he decided. If Hashem gives me nothing to eat, then even Shabbos... I'll stop keeping!

Which Shabbos was this? Shabbos towards the end of Ellul; on *Motzai Shabbat* the *Ashkenazim* begin to say *Selichos*. The Belzer Rov was always *Shaliach tzibbur* for the *Selichot*. He usually spent a good deal of time *Motzai Shabbat*, readying himself for the special *tefillot*. Yet, this week, instead, he told his *shamash* to get his horse and buggy ready for a short trip. The *shamash* drove the Rov to the home of the tailor. The Rov got off

the wagon and peeked in through the window. The *Shamash* did the same.

What did they see? The tailor was sitting at an empty table, his elbows on the table, his head in his palms, weeping. Suddenly, he jumped up from his place and opened a cabinet. He took a bottle of whiskey and two small glasses. He set the glasses down on the table and filled each to the brim. He lifted his glass, called out, "*LeChayim*", and drank it in one gulp. Then he looked around a little bit, not noticing those at the window, picked up the second cup and drank it as well.

The tailor was not yet finished. He refilled the glasses, lifted his, and with another hearty "*LeChayim*", sent the fiery liquid down his throat. Its comrade soon followed. This process was repeated a few times, each time with a wider smile on the tailor's face, his complexion reddening.

The Rov said to the *Shamash*, "Fine, we've seen enough."

The two headed back, getting there in time for some last minute "*hachanot*". As midnight struck, the Rov came out from his study, heading for the amud. Simultaneously, the *Shamash* could not help but notice the tailor enter the *Shul*, not a bit sober.

The *Selichot* that night were something extraordinary, the tailor joining in quite exuberantly. After the *Selichot* were over, the curious *Shamash* went over to the tailor, whom he hadn't seen in *Shul* for some time, and asked him how he's doing.



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The tailor recounted all that had transpired over the last few months: his financial setbacks along with his gradual reduction in religious observances.

"Just tonight," said the tailor, "I was sitting at my table and bemoaning my situation when I was aroused to *teshuvah*. I yearned to make amends with Hashem. I remembered that one time, I had quarreled with a friend and we made amends over a few glasses of whiskey. So I did the same with Hashem. Only that He did not drink His glass, so I drank it for Him. I kept on drinking *L'Chayim* after *L'Chayim* until I felt we were back on the same page, and then I came to *Selichos*."

The *Shamash*, flabbergasted, went to the *Rov* and asked for an explanation of tonight's journey. The *Rov* said that he was shown through *Ruach Hakadosh* that a whole entourage of Heavenly Hosts was sent to see how the tailor was doing *teshuvah* according to his level of understanding. "I did not want to miss it," said the *Rov*, "so I went to see it for myself."

"LeChayim!" – For Life!

Here is a story of a simple tailor. He returned to Hashem with all his heart and Hashem had his *malachim* come to watch.

All Hashem wants is sincerity. Each person on his own level can call out to Hashem, for He is close to all who call out to Him, so long as they are calling out sincerely (cf. Tehillim 145:18).

Prayer in Our Times

We are living in a challenging era. The coronavirus has put life to a standstill. It has affected all

aspects of life. No one knows how long it will last. *Gabbaim* of shuls are working overtime to come up with solutions for safe operation of *minyanim* for *Yomim Noraim*.

There seems to be a message to us from Heaven to improve our prayers. In the past, prayers were so much more heartfelt and tears flowed freely.

Let us try to pray with our hearts, not just with our lips, and *b'ezrat Hashem* our troubles will cease as the year comes to an end and the new year will be full of only blessing and overt goodness.

Making the Most of these Special Days

In conclusion, let us pay attention to what we say in our prayers, throughout the year and especially during these Special days, when our whole future is on the line. Let us remember what the *Arizal* has taught us that each of the seven days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* corresponds to that day of the week throughout the year, and good conduct during *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* can rectify any misdeeds done on the corresponding day.

Let us put our mind over matter and employ our hearts in our prayers and deeds. This way, *be'ezrat Hashem*, our prayers will be accepted and we will all be inscribed for good life and peace. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom

Ketivah Vachatimah Tovah

Mordechai Malka