



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

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TORAT

Parashat Shoftim

HAMELECH

A Poor Start

We are now less than a month away from Rosh Hashanah. In Masechet Rosh Hashanah (16b), Rav Yitzhak teaches: Any year which is poor at its outset becomes wealthy at its end.

Now, one may wonder: why must it be poor at the start? It seems that we prefer to have positive omens on Rosh Hashana. Based on the Gemara (Kareitot 5b), we make sure to have *simanim* on Rosh Hashanah. We eat foods which are sweet and those which grow quickly. We eat apples and dates and more, we dip in honey, we eat heads so that we'll be heads and not tails.

The Wrong Start

Many people are professionals at procrastination. In Mexico, when you ask someone to help you out with something, they'll usually say, "*Manyana*" – which means "tomorrow."

But Hillel teaches (Avot 2:4) not to push things off. Besides for the fact it may never get done, there is great significance to starting things off on the right foot.

In Kohelet (7:8) we read, "*Tov acharit davar meireishito.*" Rabbi Meir explained this verse to mean, "Better is the end of a matter than its beginning."

His rebbi, Elisha ben Avuya, responded that Rabbi Akiva explained it differently. He explained: The end of a matter is good if the beginning is good.

Elisha applied this verse to himself. His father sent him to learn Torah because he was impressed with *kavod*, for the sake of honor. Elisha learned a great deal of Torah, but eventually turned sour. He went off the *derech* and performed severe misdeeds. He attributed his rotten end to his less-than-noble beginning.

A Difficult Start

The Medrash (Mechilta Yitro) teaches that beginnings tend to be difficult. If we realize that and put in enough effort to get over the initial hump, things will continue much more smoothly.

Wise Eyes

Shlomo Hamelech teaches (Kohelet 2:14), "*Chacham einav berosho*"; simply translated: A wise man's eyes are in his head.

"And where are the fool's eyes," asks the Yerushalmi, "In his feet?!"

Rabbi Abba answers: A wise man can figure out from the beginning what the end will be. A wise man thinks about the results of his actions, the outcome, the continuation. The fool only looks at the here and now.

The Dangerous Doorway

Hashem told Kayin (Bereishit 4:7), "If you repent, you will be able to surmount the evil inclination. If you do not, then the evil inclination crouches at the doorway."

Which "doorway"? The beginning of any venture is its doorway. The *yetzer horah* tries very hard to



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get a foothold at the outset, because then he has an easy "in." We must not give him that "inch" so he does not take many a "mile."

Heads and Heels

The serpent (a.k.a. *yetzer horah*) was told (Bereishit 3:15): He (man) will smite you in the head, and you will overpower him in the heel. Rav Chaim Vital explains: Man can overcome his evil inclination if he makes sure to subdue him from the start. But once man allows the *yetzer horah* to get involved in some of his dealings, it is very hard to part ways with him.

Similarly, Kli Yakar explains: The *yetzer horah* starts out seemingly insignificant, like a spider web, whose threads are so simple to break through. But if one allows the *yetzer horah* to take control, his ropes thicken and become as ropes of a wagon, which are nearly impossible to sever.

So a person must do all he can to fight from the very start. Do not allow yourself the liberty of developing any bad habits. Once a person is entrenched in sin or even indulges in a life of laziness and luxury, it is exceedingly difficult to pull oneself out of it and dedicate oneself to spiritual pursuit.

The First Step

In next week's *parashah* we read: When you go out to battle against your enemy, and Hashem your Almighty will deliver your enemy into your hands.

Now, the Torah does not say, "When you go to battle," rather "When you go *out* to battle." The message is, that all you have to do is to step out the door – just be on your way! If you take the first step in battling the *yetzer horah*, Hashem will do all the rest!

Don't Walk

Tehillim opens with the phrase, "Praiseworthy is the man who did not stroll in the counsel of the wicked, and did not stand in the path of the sinners, and did not sit in the company of scoffers." R' Shimon ben Pazi explains: One who walks with the wrong type of people eventually stands around and *shmoozes* with them, until he finally joins their group totally.

So we really have to be careful not to take the first step in the wrong direction, for it is not easy to abandon such friends.

"Pooring" Out Your Soul in Prayer

We had asked how the Gemara which speaks of poverty on Rosh Hashana fits with the Gemara of doing good omens. Let us examine Rashi's words. Rashi explains "poverty" in this context not that a person has to disown all of his property. Rather he is to speak as a pauper speaks. He is to beg as a beggar begs. On Rosh Hashanah we are to approach Hashem and offer supplications, not demands. Rich men tend to give orders more than requests. On Rosh Hashanah, regardless of the numbers in our bank accounts, we are to approach Hashem as if we are on empty, and from that vantage point, offer heartfelt pleas.



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In truth, explains Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, in his awe-inspiring *Siftei Chayim*, on Rosh Hashanah we are all paupers. We are all penniless. Not just in finances, but in all areas: health, family, means of sustenance, protection from harm, etc. Every year on Rosh Hashanah, all of the things that matter in life are decreed for us anew. There is no status quo. No one is just continuing on as is. Everyone goes through judgment, without exception. No one is overlooked. There is no escaping the courtroom. The court comes to you.

Being “poor” on Rosh Hashanah means viewing yourself as someone who has nothing and needs grants on all fronts to get started, to get back on his feet. Each year, on Rosh Hashanah, it is as if we lose all we have and need to beg for things anew. Now, we could be selfish and beg for our own sake. But we could also be smart and beg for Heavens’s Sake, because we care about *Malchut Shomayim* and we pledge to use all of our grants towards furthering and enhancing awareness of Hashem’s Sovereignty. That is truly the best argument we could possibly present in the Supreme Court as we pass through judgment on this most solemn day.

The Gift of Ellul

Now, we cannot just wake up on Erev Rosh Hashanah and suddenly, on the spur of the moment, imagine ourselves bankrupt. We have to start at the beginning of *Ellul* getting ready for the big day. All of our great leaders and laypeople of yesteryear took *Ellul* and *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* very seriously. On the one hand, Rosh Hashanah is truly *Yom HaDin* – the Judgment

Day, the day when Heaven determines our fate for the coming year, which usually affects our entire life. Certainly our behavior throughout the year is scrutinized; each deed, misdeed and lack of deed has been recorded for posterity. Nonetheless, Hashem allows us to make a plea. He allows us to approach Him in prayer, broken-hearted and humbled.

What do gentiles do on their New Year? They party and get drunk and try to forget about life.

What do we do on our New Year? We approach our Creator, our King, and beg for a new lease on life.

Gateway to Success

The opening *pasuk* in this week’s *parashah* instructs us to appoint judges and law enforcement agents at all of our gates. Literally, this refers to the gates of each city. Allegorically, a gate is a place of entrance or exit. It is the place one passes through as he sets out on an expedition or mission. As mentioned, the way a person starts has a great effect on the outcome. So the verse is encouraging us to be sure to start out in the finest manner possible. A judge thinks things through and renders decisions. The law enforcement agent sees to it that the judge’s decisions are carried out.

So too, each of us has “judges”, as in mental capacities to decide which actions are worth doing etc. We also have “policemen”, i.e. the capabilities to carry out the decisions of the mind. Certainly, Rosh Hashanah is a starting point, the first day of the New Year. But there are other



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starting points as well, and each one is a “gate” of sorts and requires “judges” and “policemen.”

As *Chodesh Ellul* commences, we begin the *zeman* in *yeshiva* and *kollelim* and shortly thereafter the girls begin their school year. These are all new beginnings and their impact should not be taken lightly. For how you embark upon your journey will greatly influence your success. Each day can really be a new experience, so it is important to start each day on the right foot.

Start your day with an emphatic “*Modeh Ani*.” Start your learning *seder* with a boom; start out right and you’ll accomplish and achieve.

Marriage is also a new beginning. Starting out on the right foot is most crucial. Listen to all the sage advice offered to you by experienced guidance counselors. Even if you feel that you will not be able to act that way unendingly and perpetually, at least be committed to beginning your marriage with exceptional patience and encouragement. Once it becomes habit, the continuation will be much easier.

Rashi (Devarim 11:19) teaches that when a child begins to talk, teach him first words of Torah. Doing so will earn longevity for parent and child.

In Avot (4:2), Ben Azai teaches to run to a mitzvah and flee from an *aveira*. One mitzvah leads to another, but so does an *aveira*. This Mishna comes on the heels of, “Who is a strong man?” Medrash Shmuel explains the juxtaposition. If you are to be empowered to overcome your evil inclination even regarding difficult challenges, first start off by running to do the easy mitzvot. Once you do one, you’ll do

another and another and eventually you’ll be able to take on any challenge that comes your way.

Just Say “Thank You”

A story is told of a *Chatan* and *Kalla*, both orphans, who needed much financial assistance for their wedding and to follow. Word of their need got to Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Baal HaTanya, and he took the matter to heart. He met with the local Rav and asked for a list of the local philanthropists. He knew of a certain wealthy individual whose name was absent. After inquiry, he was told, “Oh, that man? He never supports worthy causes!”

The Baal HaTanya stated emphatically, “We are going to visit him first!”

Unoptimistically, the local Rav escorted the Baal HaTanya to the wealthy man’s mansion. They told the butler of the purpose of their visit. He then disappeared into the inner chambers of the home, leaving the Rabbis at the door.

Soon thereafter, the owner came to the door and handed them a rusty, eroded coin, the cheapest currency around. Before the local Rav had a chance to throw it back in his face, the Baal HaTanya said, “Thank you, oh so much! Mitzvah goreret mitsvah,” and turned to go.

At that, the wealthy man said, “Wait a minute,” and stuck his hand into his pocket. He came out with ten rubles and handed it to the Rabbis. Once again, Rav Shneur Zalman exclaimed, “Thank you, *yasher koach!*” and turned to leave.

Again, they heard, “Wait a minute.”



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The man went inside and came out with a rare note of 1,000 rubles, the kind that simple people do not rest their eyes on in their lifetime. After another round of thanks, the newborn philanthropist asked how much they need to cover all costs. When they told him "10,000 rubles," he chose to give the entire sum.

As he gave it, he explained his behavior. Years back, when approached for a donation, he gave that simple coin. When it was thrown back at his face, he became so upset and insulted that he swore to never give any charity to anyone unless they would first accept that small coin. "You are the first one who took it," he explained, "and it made me want to give you more."

Stay Calm

What does the Ben Ish Hai tell us in *Hilchot Rosh Hashanah*? To be especially careful not to get angry! For example, certainly it is the wife's job to see to it that the table is set when her husband returns from *shul*. But if it is not? Then it is the husband's job not to get upset! And if anything goes not as planned or not as preferred, stay calm! Since Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the New Year, getting angry on Rosh Hashanah can have terrible repercussions. One of our great leaders related that he once angered on Rosh Hashanah, and as a result, suffered from that the whole year!

Good Foundations

A certain Yeshiva was not being successful with its *talmidim*. The *Roshei Yeshiva* came to Rav

Yechezkel Levenstein to ask for advice. The *mashgiach* asked many questions about the Yeshiva and concluded; Your entire Yeshiva started out without the right spiritual foundations. At present, it has no chance at success. Your only hope is to close the yeshiva and start again with the right foundations.

Start on Time

Yeshivat Mir in America desperately needed renovations. The *Rosh Yeshiva* had them push it off until *Bein Hazemanim*. Halfway through the vacation, the *Rosh Yeshiva* visited the *Beit Midrash* and saw how things were progressing. At this rate, it had no chance of being ready in time for the new *zeman*. Immediately he demanded that more workers be ordered and longer hours be kept so that the new *zeman* could start on time with an operating *Beit Midrash*. This *Rosh Yeshiva* understood the importance of starting out right.

So let us do our best at appointing "judges" and "policemen" at all of our starting points, ensuring a proper beginning and a successful journey.

No good building is built without the architect carefully sketching the blueprint, paying attention to every last detail. The stronger the foundation, the better the building.

May we all make the best use of our opportunities and not procrastinate. The secret to success is a good start.

Shabbat Shalom,
Mordechai Malka