



MACHSHAVOT

Parashat Ha'azinu

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After the Marathon

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As I finished Selichot and Shacharit from the *amud* this morning in shul, one of the gabbayim, with a note of sympathy said to me 'marathon almost over'.

When you think about it, the marathon actually began thirty-seven days ago with the piercing sound of the Shofar which ushered in the month of Elul.

Twenty-five days later we began Selichot, getting up 20 minutes earlier for these penitential prayers. Then came Rosh Hashanah – two days in shul, long days, intense days.

And then it was into Aseret yemei teshuva – adding more prayers to the Selichot service in the morning, additions in the Amidah, Avinu Malcenu every morning and evening- we were building up to a climax.

And then comes Sunday night, the pinnacle of the Teshuva process - Yom Kippur. Many hours in Shul, fasting, praying, pleading and then with the final shofar blast..... nothing!

No more Selichot, no more additions, no more shofar, no more *avinu malceinu* – back to normal? How can it be after such a monumental climb up the spiritual ladder, that we are just right back where we started Or are we?

I remember many years ago at Stanmore, after Kol Nidrei, I happened to spy one of the many teenagers who chose not to come into a service on Kol Nidrei. I had met this young man on Rosh Hashanah so I went up to say hello.

He told me that he didn't come into the service because he couldn't read Hebrew, found it boring and if it was more interesting he might come – as would some of his friends.

We therefore made a deal – I told him to meet me at 11:30 the following morning upstairs in the board room and he should bring some of his friends – no service, just a chance to talk.

11:30am Yom Kippur, I went upstairs and there he was with about 10 friends! So I sat down and asked them a pretty simple question – 'do you believe in God?' Now there were 11 teenagers between the ages of 15 and 17, they do not go into shul on either Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah, how many of them would believe in God?

All but one did and even he was wavering.

And at that point I realised something, it is not so important if you say you believe in God – the question is, how does that belief impact on your life?

In the case of my young friends it was a belief along the same lines as saying I believe that unemployment in Spain is bad for the Spanish economy – i.e. it may be true but it won't make any difference to my life.

The teens concluded that primitive man needed God whereas modern man really does not, since according to them and to many sociologists, human religious feeling is inversely proportional to the human sense of control.

Primitive man was intensely religious because he or she understood very little about the workings of the universe. They didn't know how or why people were born or died, they didn't understand why the seasons changed, or why people got sick or how to cure them.

We have come an enormous way from that primitive man in the last 5,000 years. We have unravelled the mysteries of the physical world, and we are well on our way to unravelling the complexities of the human character. We are in control of our futures. We no longer need God to feel secure.

Thus, many in the western world may say that they believe in God, but to all intents and purposes He is just a puppet, used to make speeches and to score religious brownie points.

Haazinu has a whole different take on the issue as it says in verse 39, *'I put to death and bring life, I strike down and I will heal'*.

The Jewish concept of God does not fall into either camp, we are not primitive, we fully endorse progress and to seek out answers to the mysteries of the universe BUT, and here is the crux of it, we ultimately realize that Hashem is in control.

And that is the answer to the original question, the sudden absence of powerful symbolism after Yom Kippur.

You see that is exactly the point, Hashem is now saying to us 'If you don't get it now, you never will'.

For weeks now we have been praising Hashem, declaring him Master of the Universe – *Melech Kelyon*, stating that we human kind are nothing – *afar v eifer* – dust and ashes and that He knows all – *ata yodeah razei olam* – you know the secrets of the universe.

Now comes the test, we have been through it, we have said the words with our lips, but did those words penetrate our hearts, do we really truly believe or it is just a phrase. Will our actions change based on the work we have put in during this time?

We should come out the other side of the Teshuva cycle – those 40 days from Rosh Chodesh Elul to Yom Kippur with a new appreciation of the world around us. An appreciation of the fragility of life and the importance of positive living and that ultimately Hashem not man is in control.

That is one reason why we have Succot. We leave our secure abodes, our palaces on earth and dwell in flimsy structures at the mercy of the elements, enabling a realization of who really is in control.

When we go into our Succot next Friday night and glance up at the stars, there is always a feeling of a diminution, a feeling that there is something greater than the human kind.

We have not gone right back down to where we were on Rosh Chodesh Elul, we now and only now due to our intense preparations and completion of the 'marathon' ending with Yom Kippur, have the right to fully appreciate all that Succot has to offer.

There is a time for everything under the sun said King Solomon. Elul, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur were a time for introspection, for reflection and for repentance, whereas Sukkot is *zman simchateinu* – the time of our rejoicing. Rejoicing in a world in which Hashem is King and that we, as the Jewish people know that the ultimate joy in this world is based on living a lifestyle that is focused on reality, focused on spirituality and focused on eternity – with Hashem and Torah at the centre.

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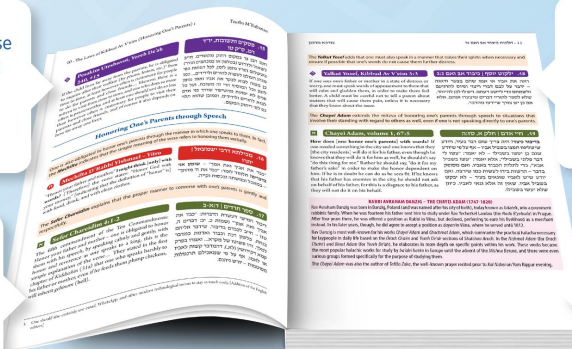
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