

issue #862
perceptions
NITZAVIM



Dedicated in fond memory of an exceptional Neshamah, dear Sheindel Leika bas Fega Rachel (Lisa Kates), z”l, of Toronto, Canada. May the sponsoring of this spreading of Torah be an aliyah Neshamah for her.

This is in order to elevate you today as a people to Him, and so that He may be to you God, as He promised you, and swore to your fathers, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya’akov. (Devarim 29:12)

I LEARN DAILY with an elderly gentleman of British origin. Every year he reminds me of something he feels is a general misunderstanding about Rosh Hashanah. He has heard many people over the years say that Rosh Hashanah is the time we coronate God as our King, which is simply wrong. God is King all year round, he points out, and has been ever since He created “subjects.”

A coronation is what happens when someone goes from NOT being a king to BEING a king. Coronation, from the word “corona,” means “crown.” Since God is ALWAYS king, we do NOT need to coronate Him or proclaim His kingship. Something else has to be happening on Rosh Hashanah.

There are many things that allude to what that “something” is, but the best hint is the change of brochah from “HAKEL HaKadosh,” the “Holy ALMIGHTY,” to a “HAMELECH HaKadosh,” the “Holy KING (in the Shemonah Esrai). We do this for the entire 10 days until the end of Yom Kippur, but not the rest of the year. The question is, why NOT, if God IS the “Holy KING” all year round?

This is tied to another question. A person can and SHOULD do teshuvah all year round, not just during the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah—the 10 Days of Repentance. The Rambam answers this question by saying that, yes, you CAN do teshuvah all year round, but you WON’T. At least not the way you CAN do it from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. Therefore, use the time well.

Of course. The pressure and atmosphere of this time of year tends to bring the teshuvah out in us. All the time we spend in shul praying from machzorim tends to bring the teshuvah out in us. Everyone praying for the same thing and doing teshuvah together, tends to bring the teshuvah out in us. What else do you need to bring the teshuvah “out in us”?

If you don’t know the answer to this question, then you also won’t figure out the answer to the first question, because they are the same. Furthermore, if you don’t know what this “extra” element is, you can miss the opportunity to use it, as so many people do year-after-year. This is why few people change that much after the High

Holidays, and the Jewish people as a whole are still very much in exile.

We'll answer this with an example. A king may rule a very large kingdom, but most of his subjects may never see his face, or at least see him in person. They'll believe the king is actually there in the palace, and they'll swear loyalty to him. But, being so far away from the king, they will have difficulty EMOTIONALLY relating to him, and it will affect their reverence and loyalty for him.

What happens though if, one day, the king decides to travel his kingdom and allow his subjects to actually SEE him IN PERSON? Even modern day leaders, as much as we disrespect them, and even abuse them, still draw people out to see them, if only because of the power they represent. Even EVIL leaders, as much as they are to be reviled, also evoke a certain sense of awe because of what they control.

What happens AFTER the people see the leader, even if only from a distance? It changes them. It makes the king more real to them. It actually creates an emotional connection that may not have previously been there. As a result, even after the king leaves, people remain "connected" to him. They may have made fun of the king before, but may feel awkward doing it henceforth.

This is what Elul is about. We add the prayer "L'Dovid Ori" twice a day, and blow the shofar from Rosh Chodesh onward. Elul is the announcement that the King is coming to "town," and the time to make all the preparations befitting His arrival. When He finally arrives, we want the "town" to be ready, and to have secured a good vantage point from which to "see" Him.

This is what puts the AWE into the "Days of AWE." We get to glimpse the King, not with our physical eyes, but

with our MIND'S eye. We're able to make a connection to God as King, like at no other time of the year, intellectually AND emotionally.

Without this experience, God is only "HaKel HaKodesh," the "Holy Almighty" to us. He is hidden from us, and we don't relate to him the same way emotionally. We don't maintain the level of awe necessary to call Him "HaMelech HaKodesh," even if we say the words. We may KNOW it is true, but we don't FEEL its truth.

This affects our level of teshuvah as well. When people are in the presence of greatness, they sense their OWN potential for greatness, which tends to also point out their weaknesses and shortcomings. If the person is sincere, which they tend to be at this time of year, feeling the "gaze" of God on them, this will inspire them to aspire to more personal greatness. The teshuvah then will take care of itself.

It is far more impactful to confess one's mistakes out of a desire to be BETTER, than simply because we know we have done wrong. The consequence of punishment, believe it or not, is a far less effective tool of improvement than a person's desire to be greater. We can rationalize around the belief that we might be punishable. We CANNOT rationalize around a sense of falling short of personal expectations.

The King is coming to town, and He is the GREATEST King ever. It should inspire a person to be an even GREATER subject.

❖CONNECTING THE DOTS, Issue #3

I recently read an article by someone that asked the question, "Is the world getting better, or worse?" The au-

thor professed that it is a question that can be answered SCIENTIFICALLY, by comparing data from different generations regarding certain specific aspects of life such as, longevity, poverty, crime, happiness, etc.

It was an entertaining and informative article. The upshot was that, based upon statistics, the world is definitely getting better. People live longer, there is less murder per 100,000 people, famine is basically licked, and more people are happier than ever before. He did point out many of the dangers that still exist, like global warming and nuclear war, but quickly added that these are merely challenges with solutions, not reasons to doubt the future.

So why is the news always so gloomy? Because sad and tragic news is more dramatic, and it sells newspapers. Bad things also tend to happen suddenly, whereas the good things tend to happen over time. Also, for some reason, people have a fascination with the morbid, etc.

The trouble with his presentation was that he did not consider two very important factors that tend to determine the overall direction of society: intelligence and morality. These were distinctly missing from the discussion, leading me to believe that the presenter was probably an atheist. He didn't say so, but there were many things he did say that seemed to point in that philosophical direction.

Rome was not built in a day, and it did not come down in one either. But the Romans were trying to make the world a better place physically by inventing things and then spreading the technology throughout their empire. Yet, Rome itself collapsed from the inside, especially morally.

In fact, technological improvement has been around since man was booted from Paradise. We have needed it to survive outside of the garden, and for the most part, it has advanced. The Generation of the Flood was not destroyed because of a lack of technology. It was wiped away because of a lack of morality. And, they didn't have enough foresight to realize that it was going to happen, and that it could have been avoided if they changed their approach to life.

Many have already spoken about the dumbing down of society, and what technology has done to accelerate this. It is highly ironic that a generation that has unprecedented access to an unprecedented amount knowledge should be called "less smart." How did that happen?

It happens because "smart" is about more than quantity of knowledge. It's about wisdom, and wisdom is the result of knowledge AND morality. If either exists without the other, it will become self-serving and ultimately, destructive. And, the more the two are kept apart from each other, the more one will try and destroy the other.

From a BODY'S perspective, the world is considered BETTER if physical comfort has increased, as it certainly has for most of the world. But, from a SOUL'S perspective, it is only BETTER if wisdom has increased, when society as a whole is not just SMARTER, but WISER. Given the dropping level of morality today in the secular world, it is hard to imagine that the world is getting better from GOD'S perspective, which is truly the only one that counts.