

YOMIM NORA'IM—AWE OR FEAR OF GOD

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It's difficult not to imagine the *shofar* (ram's horn) when we think of Rosh Hashanah. We also know the day as Yom Teruah—it's to be a day of *shofar* blasts to shake us up. The *mitzvah*, of course, is not to *blow* the shofar but to *hear* it blown. It is, in a manner of speaking, like a summons from a court—but this summons is from the Court on High.

What are we to think when we hear this sound, whether in our imagination or real life?

We are being called to a spiritual *yoveil*, not unlike the jubilee of the fiftieth year, to be rescued from moral poverty and to be at one with God again. We are being called to abandon everything that estranges us from God and goodness. We are being called to ally ourselves with God, not just momentarily with prayer in the sanctuary, but persistently in our everyday actions.

Maybe it's naïve to think so, but we imagine that on some level most of us long for that spiritual *yoveil*, to no longer live with and berate ourselves for moral mistakes and missteps.

But how is it possible when mundane pressures, and our obsessive search for sensory pleasures to assuage them, often dominate our day-to-day lives? How is it possible to sharply reduce our intentional and unintentional wrongdoing, which causes needless pain to people we love and care about, and to us.

Our tradition teaches that the beginning of moral maturity is *yirat Adonai* (יִרְאַת ה'). The term is ordinarily translated as awe or fear of God. But we suggest that each of us has a choice in this matter; we can choose to live our lives either in awe or in fear of God. And the character of our *yirat Adonai* depends on whether and how we *keep God in mind*.

We're in awe of God when constantly conscious of God's power, or whatever we call the creative power in the universe. That consciousness produces within us a sense of respect, reverence, and wonder. And we can choose to live our lives inspired by the genius and beauty of that power, which is infinitely greater than our own powers. When we find ourselves admiring the beauty of an ordinary tree, for instance, we may recall that God created a forested earth, while we're unable to create anything comparable to the beauty of a single living leaf.

On the other hand, we're dogged by anxiety and fear when we fail to keep God in mind. These

emotions are the outcome of consciously failing to recognize and respect that the Creation operates by certain rules. When we ignore those rules and the Creator who devised them, our subconscious begins to protect us by anticipating that we may suffer damaging or even destructive consequences. It partly explains why, once we recover from initial embarrassment and shame, we almost always feel relief when our wrongdoing is revealed. So it's our choice whether or not we live our lives with this fear of God.

One of the most extraordinary powers of the Creator is the ability to eradicate the evidence and effects of our wrongdoing on us. Of course, this miracle requires *teshuvah*, that we turn our lives. And *teshuvah*, in turn, requires confession.

We know how difficult it is to confess our misdeeds to others. But the real obstacle to that necessary step is overcoming our resistance to confessing them to ourselves. Insincere confession to others, for the sake of *shalom bayit*, maintaining peace in the home, is cheap if we can privately humor ourselves with the thought that truly, we're not morally compromised. Thus we're called on for *hitvadah* (הִתְוַדָּה)—the reflexive form of *vidui* or confession—admitting our wrongs to ourselves.

But why should we take this drastic and potentially very painful step?

It's essential if we're to be reconciled with those that we've become spiritually alienated from by our misdeeds. Put more directly, the incentive we have for confession, first to ourselves and then to others, is to end our isolation and loneliness, a condition that entails more intense pain when we nonetheless surround ourselves with people. The alternative is spiritual intimacy—that is, intellectual, emotional, and physical intimacy with others, reflecting a relationship with and response to God.

How soon and how much do we have to confess?

It's a little like asking how soon we have to take the nail out of the bottom of our shoe. We can choose to continue living relatively isolated and anxious lives. Or we can choose to live lives inspired by the Creation's beauty and limitless possibilities, breaking down the distance between those we love and us.

It's largely our choice whether we experience the coming year as a bad year or a good year, whether we live the year in fear or in awe of God.

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