



From Routine to Return

by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz is about to complete his monumental project, a 45-volume translation and commentary on the Talmud, begun in 1965. This accomplishment will be celebrated worldwide with a Global Day of Jewish Learning on Nov. 7, 2010. We are proud to be partnering with the Global Day. For more information and to find a Global Day event in your community visit www.theglobalday.com.

Awakening from Hibernation

There is something of an inner contradiction in the expression “new year.” “Year” implies something cyclical, replicated time and time again, while “new” indicates transformation, an escape from that cycle. Each year is fundamentally a repetition of the structure of the year, the succession of autumn, winter, spring, summer, returning to short days after long, rainy seasons and dry, cold and heat, and all of this returns and recurs year after year. Minute differences crop up from year to year, but when we seek a “new year” we look toward something truly novel, distinct.

This perpetual yearly cycle is not limited to the weather or seasons, but rather they are a pattern for every aspect of life. Outside of a few exceptional incidents, for every person the essential flow of life is cyclical and routine. Even events that seem to have some element

of change or turmoil such as birth, marriage, or death, fall quickly into conventional fixed categories. For most people these things have little impact, so much so that at times it seems like these people passing through the various events of one’s life are not different people at all, it is as if one ambiguous personality returns time and again. A stencil of a human being that receives a moving force like life, propelling it from place to place, shedding and donning garments, skipping from one ritual to the next, and returning continuously with the same movements, the same words and the same emotions. Individuals themselves, the living beings who nonetheless possess personalities and lives of their own, what do they do? It is as if they slumber or live the vegetative existence of potatoes, and yet look toward a “new year” to come and transform, to awaken.

Rosh HaShanah is the inauguration day of the new year, and the central element to this holiday is the blowing of the *shofar*. The *shofar* is not, and never was, a musical instrument. The voice of the *shofar*, especially when broken down into its fractured and crying calls, is a bellowing shout, wailing and moaning its threatening exclamation, maddening and fearsome. The Rambam says that “the blast of the *shofar* on *Rosh HaShanah*... holds a hint, as if to say, those who sleep, awaken from your slumber, and drowsy ones arouse from your hibernation... those who forget the truth, for temporal vanities, and those who waste their years in frivolity and emptiness, who neither help nor save, examine your souls and your ways.” (*Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva* 3:4) Therefore, the *shofar* blast does not resonate pleasantly in the ear, as its function is to arouse and agitate, to awaken those who sleep.

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Religious Life – Disrupting the Routine

The call of the *shofar* comes to arouse one from the routine of the year – to return in repentance. The essence of repentance is awakening the potential for renewal, awakening one's ability to return to being oneself instead of a reflection; a reflection of media images, a reflection of neighbors, or even a reflection of a younger, more authentic self. Certainly this might seem doubtful: is return in repentance (in the sense of return to a more religious life) really the path to self-renewal? Isn't religion itself, with its thousands of prescribed *mitzvot* and deeds, instructions of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not," a piece of the same perpetual cycle and routine multiplied exponentially?

One must stop being afraid of oneself, stop fearing for the approval of the congress of fools.

Actually this is not the case, for two reasons. In truth there is an established routine of prayer, *mitzvot*, and good deeds, however this system does not simply carry on, concurrent with the other empty routine of life. To the contrary, these routines clash ceaselessly. Religious life disrupts the normal course of eating, drinking and working in its track, and this disturbance of one type of continuum rouses it to transformation. Practically, the minute interference of Jewish law into every detail of life rescues individuals from sinking into the mire of animal-like behavior. For every action there is some small pause, saying "for a moment unleash from this race, shift for a moment to another paradigm – one of blessing, prayer, the ritual washing of the hands – that is neither connected to nor anchored within daily life."

Additionally, as much as a person may be caught up in the routine of *mitzvot* and small

deeds, he is still compelled in the foremost obligation to focus his heart on his actions. In this he may be able to deceive mankind, but he cannot deceive God and comfort himself in saying that "no one knows."

In any other area one may spend years acting by rote, without anything else being required of him, and without feeling it necessary to seek from within himself something deeper. He might be a talented worker and successful at the office, a distinguished teacher, spiritual leader, faithful husband or loving father, yet all this is nothing more than a mask, and worse – a mask with nothing underneath. However a person cannot do this in the world of Judaism. He may be able to live a routine life, but he is unable to protect himself from the patent knowledge that his conduct is not correct or appropriate, that he is committing a fraud. This impulse to live a deeper life never abandons the religious individual, and even if small and insignificant to himself, because of this he has a chance, in some few moments, to feel the experience of creation renewed in "standing at Mount Sinai," of "memory of the first day."

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Difficult to Believe

There is a saying, "happy is the believer." How good it is for the one who believes, who was born believing, but in our intellectual and erudite times is it still possible to be a believer? Perhaps for generations past, in the Jewish center of Poland or the ghettos of Morocco, in the immigrant neighborhoods at

the edge of the world, but at present who is truly able to be a believer? There is a Jewish folktale about this very idea.

The story goes that when, in his wisdom, King Solomon said, as is established in the Book of Proverbs, “a simpleton will believe anything,” (Proverbs 14:15) he shocked all of the fools of the world. A global congress was held to deal with the fact that until now, until Solomon’s revelation that “a simpleton will believe anything,” it was impossible to distinguish the wise from the fools, and we fools were able to hide from the eyes of humanity. What shall we do now? After much discussion it was decided that from now on, in order not to be discovered, the fools would do the opposite; from now on they would believe nothing, and this is how they act even until today.

Therefore, when people speak about the impossibility of faith anymore, about the absurdity of faith and all the other expressions of simplicity or education with which they speak of those who themselves have it, the desire arises to ask them, did they participate in that congress?

The essence of repentance is awakening the potential for renewal, awakening one’s ability to return to being oneself instead of a reflection; a reflection of media images, a reflection of neighbors, or even a reflection of a younger, more authentic self.

This is not to say that the road to faith is easy. It is not easy for someone raised in a religious household or a secular environment. The path of faith is at all times and for all people a long short path. It is not a kingly path that all of humanity traverses uniformly, it is at all times a narrow and twisting path, extremely personal and individual. One *tzadik* purely and profoundly spoke of this (*Sichot HaRan*

1), emphasizing the language of the verse “For I knew that the Lord was great.” (*Tehillim* 135:5) For I knew, I alone knew, and no other person may know like I know. He may know more than I, or he may know in a deeper way or more comprehensively than I, he may know more completely than I, but in the end it is something personal and individual that is impossible to convey. When a person tastes a fruit he may express what he ate and provide every manner of theory or explanation, but he is unable to convey the essence of the taste. Experience is the only way to understand. This is the meaning of the verse “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (*Tehillim* 34:9) – taste it for yourself.

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Neither in Heaven nor Beyond the Sea

Who is able to achieve this, to taste from “the tree of life?” Is there no need to be great and experienced, exalted in wisdom, pure of heart and of thought in order to achieve “the religious experience?”

To this question there is no response clearer than the words of Torah read by the congregation on the Shabbat before *Rosh HaShanah*. “It is not in heaven, that you might say ‘who will go up for us to heaven and bring it to us that we may hear it and do it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you might say ‘who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Rather it is exceedingly near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.” (*Devarim* 30:12)

Where does one find faith? Neither in heaven nor beyond the sea. Rather it is incomparably close, “in your mouth and in your heart,” because in truth (and this is just as correct when one plumbs the theological depths as it is in personal experience), the language of faith and trust flow from the mouth of every individual, though many times one does not give due consideration to what one’s mouth speaks, and cannot discern what one’s heart expresses and truly believes. In every routine utterance of “it’s nothing, it will be fine,” there is a true expression of faith. In the words that comfort a crying child, in the recognition that it is somehow possible to go through life, despite all obstacles, with dignity and wholeness – in all of this faith is expressed.

A person can waste his life analyzing external things which will not amount to a true accounting. Every year will be another old year, the same old thing, an unending dream, a cycle with no escape. It is because of this that we sound the *shofar*! This call, unpleasant to the ears, is a simple wordless shriek, that without words, every person might hear and heed the same essence.

There are some unrelenting atheists who nonetheless believe. They believe in the “eternity of Israel.” There are people who are unprepared to accept the entirety of religion and the tradition, of the inheritance of our forefathers, yet even so they stand and fight for things which they feel are good and upright. These individuals may be equipped to be enlightened or simple people, with perplexing paths or straight, and they have a language of genuine faith found “in their mouths and in their hearts,” yet their inhibitions and obstacles entice them to believe that they have no portion in all of this.

They are of the opinion that truly religious faith is found in some distant place high in the heavens, beyond some chasm, and therefore they do not seek it in the closest place; they do not cultivate and develop the seed found within them.

One of the meanings of the word “faith” is connected to the word “foster,” or one who brings up and nurtures an infant. One must nurture this shoot; develop this true experience, giving it room to grow, allowing it to be expressed. One must stop being afraid of oneself, stop fearing for the approval of the congress of fools. One must find and nurture that which is found so close, that which makes no demand other than “to do,” to carry out, to make manifest.

The Year will be a New Year

So one year haunts the next; “that which was, will be.” (*Kohelet* 1:9) A person can waste his life analyzing external things which will not amount to a true accounting. Every year will be another old year, the same old thing, an unending dream, a cycle with no escape. It is because of this that we sound the *shofar*! This call, unpleasant to the ears, is a simple wordless shriek, that without words, every person might hear and heed the same essence. This call, however, is just a shout. At times it is series of tremulous notes and fragment wails about what was or what was lost, sometimes it is a blast of warning – in the face of what else might sink and deteriorate. Sometimes it is a voice of triumph – of the promise that despite all of that is possible, and the possibility for the year, that life will not be merely a repetition, that within the cycle of time there is an opening of hope, that it might truly be a new year.