

Let There Be Light

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One of the fascinating minor themes in our rabbinic literature concerning the Shofar is that of confusing and confounding Satan, the devil or angel of evil. Thus, we blow the Shofar all during the month of Elul, *larbev et ha-satan*, in order to confuse Satan as to when Rosh Hashanah falls. Before sounding the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah we recite six verses from the Psalms, beginning with Koli shamata. The initial letters of these lines spell *kerasatan*, destroy or confound Satan. And, finally, we sound the Shofar twice, one series before the Amidah and another during its repetition by the cantor, again *larbev et ha-satan*, to confuse Satan.¹

What does all this mean? Are we involved in a kind of game with the devil? Is this an echo of a non-Jewish mythology?

I believe not. I believe that there is a far deeper Jewish thought in these words, one for which the expression *larbev et ha-satan* is a kind of poetic garment. This idea, of which Shofar comes to remind us, is that we right-thinking, well-meaning, loyal Jews — that we must not be confused! Satan always seems to be better organized and more efficient. The forces of evil and tyranny on the international scene are usually far more effective and disciplined than these of democracy and peace. The Satan within each of us is usually far more competent and energetic than our yetzer tov, our inclination for the good.

For most people concentration, single-mindedness, and determination are more prevalent when they are in the casino than when they are in the synagogue. On Rosh Hashanah we are invited *larbev et ha-satan*, to change roles with Satan, to confound him and, in turn, to learn from him the secret of how not to be confused.

Confusion is, indeed, the hallmark of our times. We are confused by the daily anxieties of existence, the senseless anguish and the seeming emptiness of life all about us. We are confused by the apparently suicidal inclinations of world leaders who explode atom bombs with no thought to the irreparable damage inflicted upon generations unborn. We are confused by the conflicting claims pressed upon us by the differ in interpretations of Judaism, both those to the right and to the left of us. We are confused by the clash of religionists and secularists in the State of Israel. We are confused by the strange kind of world in which our children are growing up — indeed, by our children themselves, their dreams and ambitions, their fears and piques, their paradoxical, ambivalent attitudes towards us: rebelliousness on the one hand, love on the other.

¹ See Rosh Hashana 16b, esp. Yerushalmi quoted in Tosafot.

Those of the younger generation are especially bewildered. The intense competition of diverse doctrines and different philosophies for the mind and heart of a young person invariably leave him or her deep in doubt and perplexity. Around his head there swirls a series of smiling salesmen, as if in some weird nightmare, each offering his product and clamoring for its acceptance. Which shall it be: Genesis or Evolution? Moses or Marx? Determinism or Free Will? Shabbat or Ethical Culture? Neture Karta or Ben Gurion? Loyalty to parents and past or a clean break and new horizons? A generation is growing up that is genuinely confused.

Of course, confusion is not a good thing. Philo taught that "confusion is a most proper name for vice." Indeed, many a sinister crime in our society has been lightly dismissed as the doings of "that crazy mixed-up kid," as if confusion were some delightful affectation to be expected of an adolescent.

On Yom Kippur we confess to the sin of confusion: *al cheit she-chatanu lefanekha be'timahon levav*. And R. David Kimhi, the great grammarian, tells us that the word *l'arbev*, to confuse, is related to the word *erev*, evening or nighttime, because then all is confused and dim. Confusion is, surely, a darkness of the mind and heart.

And yet the person gripped in confusion ought not to despair. The fact that it is regarded as a *chet* or sin means that it can be avoided or voided and banished. Confusion is often a necessary prelude to clarity and creativity.

Before the world took the form it's Creator ordained for it, it was *tohu va-vohu*, void and chaotic, all confusion. Only afterwards, after the darkness on the face of the deep, the *erev* of *irbuv*, did God command *yehi ore*, let there be light - and there was light. Creative thinkers or writers or artists know that immediately before the stroke of inspiration there must be a period of *tohu va-vohu* and *irbuv*, of true confusion.

In this spirit and with this knowledge, let us think of how we of this confused generation ought to respond to the challenge of Shofar to achieve clarity and emerge from our perplexity.

Three ways of emerging from this perplexity commend themselves to us. The first way is consciously to have a scale of values. There can be no meaningful existence unless one knows what is more important and what less so, what is right and what is wrong. In Judaism, this scale of values is not a matter for every individual to invent for himself. It is contained in the Torah. To know values therefore, one must learn Torah. That is the first great requirement.

Of course, that sounds so self-evident as to be a truism. Yet it is not always accepted. I have more than once been exasperated in discussing this fundamental question of the values of life with young people who prefer to argue from a confusion born of ignorance, and who are dogmatically certain that they cannot be enlightened by Torah. It is remarkable how a single semester of comparative religion can qualify a youngster to pass judgment on religion without ever having to read the Bible, study the Talmud, or even glance at the insides of a siddur. So it must be stressed again; the first way to climb out of the web of religious confusion is to study Torah — not just to read a bit, or discuss, but to study. After the *tohu va-vohu*, the chaos and the void, as we mentioned, there came the creation of light. Our Rabbis (Genesis Rabbah 3:4) observed that light is mentioned five times in this portion, and they asserted that it was *ke'neged chamishah*

chumshei Torah, corresponding to the Five Books of Moses. Only through the study of Torah can there be that enlightenment that will form creative clarity out of formless chaos. Ignorance leads to a distorted scale of values and even greater confusion. Study alone can clear up perplexity.

The second way of banishing confusion also sounds deceptively simple. It is faith. By this I mean not only faith in G-d but faith in the soundness of your values and faith that ultimately they will be clear to you even if now you are somewhat vague and do not understand them completely. You must have patience and confidence if you are to dissipate the clouds of confusion. When the Psalmist spoke those glorious words of faith, "even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil for Thou art with me," he may have had in mind our problem, too. Even when mentally we walk through the valley of doubt and emotional perplexity, covered by the dark shadows of intellectual chaos, when our problems mount up on both sides of us like steep cliffs so that we seem dwarfed in a deep valley, even then we must not fear, for G-d is with us. Confusion can be cleared up by the faith that it will be cleared up.

Here we can learn a lesson from Satan who always has faith in the persuasiveness his case. The grafter is deeply convinced of the irresistibility of corruption. The unscrupulous advertising man knows for certainty that the shameless exploitation of sex will sell everything from cigarettes to convertibles. What we need is *l'arbev et ha-satan*, to change roles with Satan and learn from him confidence in our convictions and values. We must not be diffident in presenting our case to the world. We must not so lack confidence in our tradition that we allow the salesmen for Judaism to be not the genuine gedolei Torah, but outright secularists or half-assimilated political leaders. We must have sufficient faith in the irresistibility — and invincibility — of Torah that we will spare no effort in increasing the number and quality of day schools in the United States this year. During the year when we celebrate Diamond Anniversary of Yeshiva University, our faith is doubly justified - and must be twice as effective. *Ha-Shem ro'i lo echesar*, "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" — or fail — was interpreted by one Hasidic sage to mean, I shall never fail (*lo echesar*) to know every moment that the Lord is my shepherd (*Ha-Shem ro'i*). With this confidence and faith and patience, we can overcome our confusion.

Finally, in addition to obtaining a scale of values through the study of Torah, and having faith and confidence in them, we must be prepared to live practically and decisively by these same values. It is not enough to "have" values; one must live by them, or else they are meaningless. Just studying and having faith is not enough. One must act by them clearly and constantly. The eminent Harvard professor, the late George Foote Moore, once said that the difference between philosophy and religion is that religion does something about it. There must be a commitment in action. No young person - or even ancient person - can ever emerge from doubt or perplexity merely by pondering Judaism, You have got to take the plunge into the deep waters of the Torah and Talmud and actually swim in it, live it, you must experience Shabbat and Tefillin and the striving for Kedushah, you must practice Kashrut, refrain from Lashon Hara and Shaatnez. Unless you have tasted Judaism in actual practice, you cannot escape from your perplexity. You may study the doctor's prescription and have faith in his competence, but if you do not take the medicine you will not get well.

In the Pirkei Avot we read that *az panim le'gehennom, bosh panim le'gan eden*. That means, literally, that a brash, brazen person will go to Gehennom, whilst the quiet, shamefaced person will enter a more cheerful residence - Paradise. One Rabbi, however, interprets this Mishnah as a complaint rather than a prediction. Why is it, he says plaintively, that when it comes to Gehennom, to doing evil and cooperating with Satan, we are always *az panim*, bold and decisive and brash? When it comes to *gan eden*, however, to good causes such as charity or attending Minyan or a lecture of Torah, we suddenly become *bosh panim*, shy, reticent, hesitant, withdrawn. If we are to escape the confusion of our times, we must be willing to live Judaism as decisively and as boldly as we ordinarily would be bold and decisive in indulging our own pleasures.

My words, my friends, are meant for all people who are sensitive to the crises and demands of our times, but especially for young people who, in their first encounters with our bewildering civilization, still feel acutely and poignantly the anguish of confusion, the collision of cultures, and the impact of opposing standards and principles clashing head on. To you I emphasize that you have in Judaism, the ancient-yet-new Judaism, values tested in the crucible of history and found to be durable for ages yet unborn. Throughout all vicissitudes these values have been available to all who have been willing to study its sacred literature and discover its eternal light. Have patience with it, even as it has had patience with you and us for so long. Have faith that it will stand by you and justify your loyalty to it. But above all, do it, live by it, make it an integral part of your life, now not later, today not tomorrow.

That is what Shofar tells you; *ha-yom harat olam*, today is the birthday of the world, today you create your own private world anew, and a great, noble, exciting, and meaningful world it shall be.

For those of us who agree with this proposition, but who by nature tend to take their time and procrastinate, who promise themselves to think the matter through but not right now — let me leave you with this one story told by Rabbi Hayyim Sanzer. A poor village woman with a large family one day luckily found an egg. She called her family about her and beamingly told them of the good news. "But," she said, "we are not going to eat it now. First we shall borrow a hen so that the egg will hatch, then this new chicken will lay eggs, and they will hatch more chicks. When we have enough we shall buy a cow, and by selling its milk we shall be able to buy many cows, then a wagon, and then ..." And then, to her utter dismay, the woman looked down and realized that the precious egg had fallen to the ground and broken.

Let us dispense with all the grand plans for the future. Let us put aside our well-intentioned promises and resolutions about how we shall pay attention to our Jewishness when we finish school - or when we are married - or when we have children - or when our children are grown up - or when we have retired. We must, like Abraham responding to G-d's command to proceed with the *akedah*, arise early in the morning. We must begin not later but now, this moment, with an iron determination to emerge from our confusion and live by Torah. For if we wait, time passes all too quickly, the egg has broken and the bubble of life has burst.

Ha-yom harat olam. Today is the birthday of the world. Today each of us must create anew the patterns of his life. With the clear call of the Shofar, let us determine *l'farbev et ha-satan*, to confound all that is evil and bring clarity to our lives. Through Torah let there be light - and may we see the light, Amen.