

# Mysteries of the New Year

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*“The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.” Deut 29:29*

The shofar is a sacred instrument that produces sounds that we can hear. This midrash consists of words that we can see. Like musical notes these words attempt to convey a message, a meaning that is partly hidden and encoded so that only those with an open mind can hear it and those with open hearts can understand. It is said that when Moshe carved out the two tablets of stone upon which G-d wrote the Ten Commandments, that the process of chiseling inevitably produced chips. Just as one who chops wood creates “chips off the old block” that are identical to the tree from which it was cut, so are these words as chips gathered from my study of the Torah and from the lips of my teachers.

The prophet Daniel promised that Hashem would give “wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding: He revealeth the deep and secret things: He knoweth what is in the darkness, and the light dwelleth with him.” Dan 2:21-22 Many secret things are in plain view. It is only the blindness of the mind’s eye that make them appear hidden. Such is the truth in this case. My entire midrash revolves around the most obvious and repeatedly spoken word at this season. The Hebrew word שָׁנָה, pronounced “shanah” as in the traditional greeting “la shanah tovah,” means “may you be inscribed in the book of life for a good year.” The common translation of this Hebrew word is “year.” Like most people, it was only in this narrow, limited sense that I understood the meaning of the term.

While investigating the etymology of another word, I discovered other definitions for these three letters נ ש ח. As a verb it can mean “do again, recur, or repeat.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, each year can be a period in which we repeat the same thoughts, and consequently, the same behavior. This connotation would suggest a cyclical nature in time where we essentially go through life, year by year, doing the same things.

Yet, the exact same word, נ ש ח, can have the almost opposite meaning, one that can be translated as “to change” or “be different.”<sup>2</sup> Obviously, then, in

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*, New Enlarged Edition 1990, by Reuben Alcalay

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

this sense a year can be a period of newness, a departure from the status quo, a time ripe with opportunity. Notice that I have not implied that stability and change are mutually exclusive or inherently positive or negative. In fact, I firmly believe that these forces vary with different situations and that they are both strongly influenced by individual choice and freewill. For example, if one is doing well, has found peace, and is in harmony with the will of the Creator, then, change would not be good if it led one off the path of righteousness. Like wise, for many who need to change their ways to achieve a more healthy, life affirming, and spiritually harmonious state of being, then, for such a person change would be welcomed and necessary.

Deeper still, the word שנה also means “to study, learn, or teach.”<sup>3</sup> We find it used in this context in the future tense in a famous statement in the *Ethics of the Fathers* where it is written: “אֵל תֹּאמַר לְכַשְׁאֲפִנִּי אֶשְׁנֶה” Which means “Say not when I have leisure I will study!” (Perchance you will never have leisure)<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the same letters, שנה, with a mere changing of the first vowel would cause it to be pronounced “shenah” instead of “shanah,” and the same word now means to “sleep or slumber.”<sup>5</sup> The implication here, as I interpret it, is that the year can be a period that passes without notice. There may be change or continuity, but those who are spiritually asleep are completely oblivious to these events just as a sleeping person is unaware of the passage of time. As a corollary, there is a Talmudic tale that says when Israel was to meet Hashem at Mount Sinai they over slept. Millions of our brothers and sisters are still in darkness; they are without the knowledge of their G-d, like a man in a deep sleep.

Kabbalistically, the numeric value of the word שנה is 355. At first I did not know what to make of this. However, my father, Chief Rabbi Levi Ben Levy, a Kabbalistic master himself, taught that “the numeric value of Hebrew words are a secret language by which Hashem speaks to man.” Number and words are interrelated ways of expressing ideas. And he said, “ideas are powerful because they prefigure action.” Hence, he often quoted, “As a man thinketh, so is he.” Proverbs 25:7. Yet, we must be careful not to force interpretations into words, or twist logic in order to make a novel point. As I researched and meditated on this problem, the following observation came to me: The number 355 is ten days short of the solar calendar year that we commonly use. However, the Hebrew lunar calendar, upon which all of our High Holy Days are based, fluctuates from between 353 days, when Heshvan and Kislev have only twenty-nine days, to as many as 385 days, during a leap year. The normal year has 354 days. However, years that have 355 days are called “שְׁנָה שְׁלֵמָה” meaning “a complete year.” In

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Avoth 2:4

<sup>5</sup> *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*, New Enlarged Edition 1990, by Reuben Alcalay

other words, a complete year has 355 days and the numeric value of the Hebrew word for year equals 355. Hence two sound postulates can be formed: One, that the word שָׁנָה, when interpreted to mean year, not only means year, but is numerically equal to a year. This would be like writing the word red with red ink. Both the meaning and numeric value of this word reconfirm and reinforce each other. Such unity and perfection is undeniable evidence of the divine intelligence we call Hashem.

The second postulate that I pose for consideration, is that since the normal lunar year is one day short of the ideal or complete year of 355, so are we usually short of our ideal state. The only way to get 355 days out of a normal year of 354 days is to get more life ( חַיִּים ) out of each day. This should be our goal; to get more out of a year than is normal. Remember, just because something is not normal does not mean that it is not possible. We must strive to be above average. We are exceptional. We are Yisrael.

Finally, if we bring all this together we see that the year itself is something we can use to change what needs to be changed and to maintain what needs to be preserved. The year is a time to study and learn; learning requires staying alert, adequate rest promotes alertness, but fatigue is the enemy of concentration; and learning, in turn, requires repetition; which after all, is a definition of a year. All these concepts interact with each other and become manifested in us.

May Hashem help us to make this year complete in every sense of the word.