

# NVHC Elul Self Study Packet

5779

## The Talmud of Awe

*Elul* is a month of reflection and introspection in preparation for the High Holy Days. We examine every aspect of our lives, looking deeply into corners neglected and perhaps avoided. This year, Talmud\* will help us prepare for the spiritual growth ahead. Use these texts to stir insight, or just follow your soul and leave the packet behind.

This packet provides a small bite of Talmudic humor, brilliance, creativity, or profundity for every two days. For each text we've provided the "pshat," which is the surface explanation of the text. Take a day to react to the ideas on your own. Then on day two, consider our guiding questions.

We strongly encourage writing. Like painting, dance and other art forms, writing can express inner beliefs, feelings and thoughts, bringing the subconscious to the surface, allowing you to go deeper and find application to your life.

\*don't worry, Talmud 101 at the back of this packet

## **BT Rosh Hashanah 2b**

Mishnah: There are four New Years: On the first of Nisan (in the Spring) is the New Year for kings, and festivals, . . . On the first of Tishrei (in the Fall) is the New Year for years, for Sabbatical years, for Jubilee Years . . .

Gemara: The New Year for Kings, with regard to what law is this mentioned? Rabbi Hisda said: for documents, as we know (from a different Mishnah), antedated promissory notes are invalid, but post-dated promissory notes are valid.

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### **Pshat:**

We live with multiple “New Years” all the time: the school year, the fiscal year, the tax year, the calendar year and the Jewish year. The Gemara starts with the first category, the New Year of Kings, and then talks about promissory notes. This appears to be solely a financial issue, so why start here in a tractate about Rosh Hashanah? Because promises are often the baggage of the past. How often do we feel wronged because we believe someone else made a promise long ago and failed to keep it, or defensive because we are the ones accused of having broken the promise?

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### **Day 1: Initial Reaction:**

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**Day 2: Question:** If antedated promissory notes are invalid, how do we let go of the promises we believe others failed to keep? And if postdated promissory notes are valid, then how do we make promises we intend to keep in the year ahead?

## **BT Rosh Hashanah I IB**

In Nisan (the month of Passover) our ancestors were redeemed (from Egypt), as it states in Torah. In Tishrei (the month of Rosh Hashanah), we will be redeemed (by the Messiah). This is derived from the word “shofar.” It is written here (with regard to Rosh Hashanah), “Sound a shofar at the New Moon” (Psalms 81:4), and it is written there (with regard to the final redemption of the Messianic Age), “On that day a great shofar will be blown” (Isaiah 27:13).

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### **Pshat:**

On Passover we can easily see the story as history, connecting us to the past, but this text wants us to see Rosh Hashanah connecting us to the future. In the same way, Passover connects us to the Jewish people, but Rosh Hashanah points toward the universal redemption brought by the Messiah. The verbal analogy is a common Talmudic trick. The rabbis had such awe for the written text of the TaNaKh, which is the full Jewish Bible, that they saw hints in things like repeated words. This time they explicitly see the shofar as a tool of mystical expectation.

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### **Day 1: Initial Reaction:**

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**Day 2: Question:** Sitting in shul, or preparing alone, these days often feel like the most personal of holy days. They ask us to turn from our personal faults. But do we consider the global nature of our personal faults? What is the connection between overcoming my personal mistakes, and overcoming the mistakes of humanity writ large?

### **BT Rosh Hashanah 26A**

Mishnah: All shofarot are fit except for the horn of a cow . . . Rav Hisda said: For what reason does the High Priest not enter the innermost sanctum (the Holy of Holies), with his golden garments to perform the service? Because a prosecutor cannot be an advocate.

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#### **Pshat:**

On the surface this appears to be a classic Talmudic non-sequitur. What do horns have to do with the Priest's garments? The unifying element is the gold, which, always reminds the Rabbis of the moment in Exodus when the Israelites turned away from God, who just freed them from Egypt, and toward worship of a Golden Calf. Now we can see why a cow is not the right animal to provide a holy ritual object. But the last line inserts a twist: by wearing the gold, the High Priest, who is supposed to intervene with God *on behalf of the people* is actually accusing the people of the idolatry of wealth.

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#### **Day 1: Initial Reaction:**

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**Day 2: Question:** We all make mistakes and we want to do better. Unfortunately, so often we get stuck in thinking about what went wrong, hearing the accusing voice of the shofar or seeing the golden reminders of our sins. What we need is an advocate, a shofar that puts the past behind us and inspires us to act differently going forward. How can we find that advocate in Rosh Hashanah this year? How can we be that advocate for the people we love?

### **BT Rosh Hashanah 26B**

Rabbi Levi said: The commandment of Rosh Hashanah and [the commandment to sound the shofar on the Jubilee Year on] Yom Kippur is with a curved shofar, and on the rest of the year with a straight [shofar] . . . Rabbi Yehudah said: On Rosh Hashanah with a curved ram's horn and on the Jubilee with [the straight horn of] an ibex.

With regard to what principle do these rabbis disagree? One believes that on Rosh Hashanah the more a person bends his mind [and humbles himself] the better. But on Yom Kippur, the more a person straightens his mind [with simplicity] the better.

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#### **Pshat:**

On the surface this appears to be about something so picayune as to be ridiculous. Do we really need an argument about which horns are okay for a shofar? The issue is the metaphor of straightening one's mind and the approach we take to the holidays. When we do inward questioning and the hard work of self-evaluation, that is considered bending the mind, while having conviction in our prayers and being sure of one's self, that is considered straightening the mind. (By the way, we use the same curved Shofar for everything nowadays. But the metaphors are helpful.

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#### **Day 1: Initial Reaction:**

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**Day 2: Question:** When Rosh Hashanah arrives, we begin the 10 Days of Atonement. Are we ready to bend the mind for those 10 days, and by doing so, do we get to a straighter mind by Yom Kippur? What will help us reach conviction about our path forward? What builds resolve in these 10 days to do better?

### **BT Rosh Hashanah 27B**

If one sounds a shofar into a pit, or into a cistern, or into a large jug, if he hear dhte sound of the shofar, he has fulfilled the obligation, but if he heard the echo, he has not. . . . What is the difference? When this one heard (the actual sound and not the echo) and this one did not, this one focused his heart and this one did not.

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#### **Pshat:**

Again, we see how the Talmud uses a seemingly mundane (or absurd) question to get to an important point. Why ask about sounding a shofar in a cistern? Who would do that? And who would think to ask if the echo counts as hearing the shofar? But this is really about participation and being attentive to the call of the day symbolized by the sound of the shofar.

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#### **Day 1: Initial Reaction:**

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**Day 2: Question:** The services are long and there are so many prayers, and perhaps the shofar stands out to us, but how to we keep our intentionality and attention as this day is upon us? Are we listening to the actual sounds of the prayers or the echoes of the sounds of the prayers? What is your mantra, your core idea, that will bring you back to focus when it all starts to sound like echoes.

### **BT Rosh Hashanah 29A**

Ahava, son of Rabbi zeira, taught [with regard to] all the blessings, even if one has fulfilled his own obligation to say a blessing, he can [still recite it for others and thereby] discharge [their obligation].

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#### **Pshat:**

This is a great principle of Judaism. The rabbis have a strict code about blessings. If we are going to take God's name to bless an action or a thing, we have to do it once and with intention. To repeat it is to take God's name in vain, and violate the Ten Commandments. But this exception is critical, we can repeat our blessings, if we are doing it for others.

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#### **Day 1: Initial Reaction:**

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**Day 2: Question:** In the modern day, we can all assume that someone around us in synagogue feels like they have less knowledge than we do. Someone nearby is nervous or intimidated by what's going on. Where is the line between coming to pray for yourself, and coming to pray to help others with their prayers? Once upon a time, the majority of people did not need that help and a handful of teachers could do the teaching. Now aren't we all teachers? How do you help others with their prayers on this High Holy Days?

## **Background on Talmud**

The Talmud is a conversation, a series of quotations strung together by an anonymous, brilliant and playful editor. The text spans seven hundred years with Hebrew quotations from Hillel and Shammai, just before the turn of the era (ca. 100BCE), to comments by the editor in Aramaic perhaps as late as the birth of Islam (ca. 630 CE). Judaism actually has two Talmuds, however, the earlier one, the Jerusalem Talmud fell out of normative use in the early middle ages. So when we refer to Talmud, we mean the Babylonian Talmud (BT).

Talmud is divided into 6 major sections, called Orders, and dozens of subsections, called Tractates. The arguments usually start with a quotation from earlier text, the **Mishnah**, and continues with later authorities in the **Gemara**. Frequently the Talmud will say, “we once heard,” or “we learned from such and so” as a way of setting up an earlier authoritative point of view that will spark a conversation. Almost always this is based on the pretense of arguing an issue of law, but actually hides a deeper question beneath the arguments. In these texts, taken from Tractates Rosh Hashanah and Yoma (which literally means “The Day” and covers Yom Kippur), do not get distracted by the details of argument, but focus instead on the harder, moral questions beneath the text.