

*Cultivating the Inner Self* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks<sup>1</sup>

“Original” is not a word often used in connection with a code of Jewish law. In general, the rule tends to be that if it’s true it isn’t new, and if it’s new it isn’t true. But “original” is precisely the right word to use in connection with Moses Maimonides’ law code the *Mishneh Torah* (“Repetition of the Torah”), especially in connection with Rosh Hashanah. Maimonides was the first halakhist to create a work called *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, the Laws of Repentance. One law in particular (3:4) is stunning in its originality, as well as in its implications for us.

It begins with these words. “Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a scriptural decree, nonetheless it contains within it a hint (as to its purpose), namely: **Wake you sleepers from your sleep, and you slumberers from your slumber, examine your deeds, return in repentance and remember your Creator, you who forget the truth in the follies of time and waste the whole year in vain pursuits that neither profit nor save.**”

What is original about this is that in the Talmud, the explanation given for the shofar is that it reminds us and God of the ram offered in place of his son by Abraham at the binding of Isaac. The sound of the shofar itself, *teruah* (“shouting” or “blasting”), represents, according to the Talmud, the sound of tears. In other words, as we stand before God in judgment we ask Him to remember the sacrifices we and our ancestors made for His sake. **The shofar is our cry to God.**

Maimonides says the opposite. **The shofar is God’s cry to us.** It is God’s way of saying what he said to the first humans in the Garden of Eden: “Where are you?” What have you done with the life, the freedom and the blessings I gave you? This is a unique Maimonidean insight. What, though, does he mean when he says, “you who forget the truth in the follies of time and waste the whole year in vain pursuits that neither profit nor save”?

This past year the brilliant New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote a national best seller, *The Road to Character*, in which he distinguishes between what he calls the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues.

The **résumé virtues are the ones we write on our curriculum vitae, our achievements, our qualifications, our skills.** But it is the **eulogy virtues that are the ones for which we will be remembered. Are we kind, honest, faithful?** What are the ideals for which we live, and how do we live them? These are not what we write on our résumé, but they make all the difference to our quality of life and the impact we have on those around us.

“We live,” he writes, “in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career, but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life.” That is not a million miles from what the Rambam meant when he spoke about wasting time on vain pursuits that neither profit nor save: **not that résumé virtues are unimportant, but they are not all-important.** The relentless pressure on us to succeed in the commercial market-place gives us all too little time and encouragement to develop the depths of character that make all the difference to the quality of our relationships, our sense of a meaningful life, and the love we give and receive. That, says the Rambam, is what the shofar is calling us to.

What made David Brooks’ book especially fascinating is the way he explains how he came to see the distinction between the two kinds of virtue. He arrived at it, he says, after reading Rav Soloveitchik’s great essay, *The Lonely Man of Faith*. Rav Soloveitchik<sup>2</sup> noted that the Torah contains two accounts of the creation of man, one in Genesis 1, the other in Genesis 2. Genesis 1 is about humans as part of the natural order, *Homo sapiens*, the biological species. Genesis 2 is about individual people, Adam and Eve, capable of loneliness and love.

The reason the Torah does this, said the Rav, is because there are two basic elements that make us what we are. There is Adam 1, “majestic man,” the language-speaking, tool-making animal, highest of all life forms, capable of monumental scientific and technological achievement. But there is also Adam 2, the “covenantal” personality defined by our relationships with other people and with God. Majestic man has the résumé virtues, but Torah—the life of the covenant—is about the eulogy virtues: **humility, gratitude, integrity, joy, the willingness to serve and make sacrifices in the name of high ideals.** It is about “**charity, love and redemption.**”

1. Colossians 3:12

<sup>12</sup>... as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with **compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.**

a. 1Peter 5:5

<sup>5</sup>All of you, clothe yourselves with **humility** toward one another ...

2. 1Chronicles 16:34

<sup>34</sup>**Give thanks** to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

a. Hebrews 12:28 (Col 3:15; 4:2)

<sup>28</sup>Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, **let us be thankful**, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe ...

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ber Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was a major American Orthodox rabbi, Talmudist, and modern Jewish philosopher. He was a scion of the Lithuanian Jewish Soloveitchik rabbinic dynasty.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://rabbisacks.org/cultivating-the-inner-life-rosh-hashanah-message-5776/>

### 3. Proverbs 13:6

<sup>6</sup>Righteousness guards the person of **integrity**, but wickedness overthrows the sinner.

#### a. 2Corinthians 1:12-14

<sup>12</sup>Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves ... **with integrity** and godly sincerity.

### 4. Psalm 19:7-8

<sup>7</sup>The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. <sup>8</sup>The precepts of the LORD are right, giving **joy to the heart**. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

#### a. Matthew 13:44

<sup>44</sup>"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then **in his joy** went and sold all he had and bought that field.

### 5. Deuteronomy 10:12-13

<sup>12</sup>And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, **to serve** the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, <sup>13</sup>and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

#### a. Mark 10:43-45

<sup>43</sup>Not so with you. Instead, **whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant** ... <sup>45</sup>For even **the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve** ...

Even today, says Brooks, you know when you are in the presence of someone who has the eulogy virtues. They "seem to possess an impressive inner cohesion." They are not leading "fragmented, scattershot lives." They are grounded, they have roots, they know what matters in the long run, and **they can tell the difference between the music and the noise**. The result is that they are not "blown off course by storms," nor do they "crumble in adversity." They radiate, he says, "a sort of moral joy." They are not defeated by failure or wounded by criticism. They have a massive internal strength and they make a real difference to those whose lives they touch.

That defines the *cheshbon ha-nafesh* ("accounting of the soul"), **the self-searching and self-evaluation that should inform our thoughts on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the days between**. That, according to Maimonides, is what the shofar is calling us to. And that, surely, is a message for our time.

### 6. Haggai 1:1-6

<sup>2</sup>This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house.' " <sup>3</sup>Then the word of the

LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" <sup>5</sup>Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: **"Give careful thought to your ways**. <sup>6</sup>You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

#### a. Psalm 26:2

<sup>2</sup>Test me, LORD, and try me, **examine my heart** and my mind;

#### b. Lamentations 3:39-40

<sup>39</sup>Why should the living complain when punished for their sins? <sup>40</sup>**Let us examine our ways and test them**, and let us return to the LORD.

#### c. Luke 15:11-19

<sup>11</sup>Yeshua continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living ... <sup>17</sup>"**When he came to his senses**, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup>I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants' ...

#### d. Sirach<sup>3</sup> 18:20 (RSV)

<sup>20</sup>Before judgment, examine yourself, and in the hour of visitation you will find forgiveness.

None of us, as individuals, can end global warming, bring peace to the Middle East, or bring justice and compassion to the international arena. But we can, quietly, develop the strengths of character that will make a difference not only to our own lives but to those around us. That, according to the Rambam (in his *Eight Chapters*<sup>4</sup>) is what Judaism is about, **the cultivation of character through the repeated acts we call mitzvot and the way of life we call halakhah**. That is where Judaism is so rich and

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3 The Wisdom of (Ben) Sirach (also known as the Book of Ecclesiasticus) is a Jewish work originally in Hebrew of ethical teachings, from approximately 200 to 175 BCE, written by the Jewish scribe Ben Sira of Jerusalem, on the inspiration of his father Joshua son of Sirach.

4 Composed in Middle-Age Egypt (c.1157-c.1165 CE). Eight Chapters is Rambam's introduction to Pirkei Avot. In the introduction to the work, Rambam states that the ideas are not of his own invention, but, rather, are gleaned from midrashim from the Talmud and opinions of other scholars. Eight Chapters discusses ethical issues.

transformative, and where contemporary secular culture, with its focus on externalities and résumé virtues, is often sadly lacking.

7. 2Timothy 3:16-17

<sup>16</sup>All Scripture is God-breathed and **is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness**, <sup>17</sup>so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Let us try this coming year to develop, through our Jewish living, those qualities of character that really are life-enhancing and that come from a sense of the Shekhinah in our lives. The sages understood, none more so than Maimonides, that **the best way to change the world is by changing ourselves**. That is what the shofar is calling us to: to cultivate the inner life so that, through humility, forgiveness and love, we become vehicles through whom God's blessings flow. Let us learn to radiate moral joy.

*Shana tova u'metukah* ("[To] a good and sweet year").  
May 5781 bring health, happiness, peace and prosperity  
to all of *Am Yisrael*, the nations and the world.