

A YOM KIPPUR READER

5772/2011

YESHIVA

OF GREATER WASHINGTON

לעילוי נשמת

ר' יצחק אייזיק ב"ר אהרון חיים ז"ל

dedicated by

the Meth Family

in memory of Sheldon's Father

Mr. Irving Meth Z"L

Yes We Can!

Rabbi Usher Laifer, Rebbe, Yeshiva Gedolah
Yeshiva of Greater Washington

Rosh Hashana has passed. Yom Kippur is almost here. Someone once posed the following question: “I do *teshuva* every year for my sins. It seems like I do the same sins over and over again each year. So am I being sincere and honest with myself never to do this sin again? I said the same “*al chait*” last year, and yet here I am again, repenting for the same sin once again.” In other words, rephrasing the question, “can we really change this year?”

There are two main approaches to answer this question. The first one is as follows. There is a famous question: How can the Torah tell us “*lo sachmod*” – you shall not desire another person’s possessions? I can understand if the Torah prohibits an action; that a person can control. However, desiring something is subconscious, which is almost uncontrollable. Hence, how can the Torah prohibit it?

The Bais HaLevi answers with a parable. A person once had a burning desire for something. The only problem was that he had to cross a frozen lake to get it. The person started the trek across the frozen lake. All of a sudden, the ice cracked and the person started to slip into the icy water. At the moment he started to fall all of his burning desire was totally gone. The fear in his heart replaced any iota of desire that was there. That is how the Torah can prohibit desiring someone else’s possessions. If the person fears transgressing the prohibition of *lo sachmod* enough, then there is no room left in his heart for desiring. He should feel as if he is falling into the icy water. Then the only thing he will feel is fear of transgressing *lo sachmod*.

With this concept we can explain how our *teshuva* is truly sincere, regardless if during the course of the year we slip back and do the same sins. We all know that Rosh Hashana is the Day of Judgment. It is very possible that some people have more sins than they have merits. That means that they very possibly can be judged and sentenced to death. Yom Kippur is our last chance. If we do *teshuva* we will receive life. It is as if we fell into the icy water, but there is someone there with a rope. He asks us, “Will you continue sinning next year? Will you still speak *loshon horah*? If yes, I will not throw you the rope and you will sink and drown. However, if you will promise not to do the same sins, if you will do *teshuva*, I will save you and throw you the rope.” The person who knows that his life is on the line gasps

out the words, “I won’t do the same sins again.” Is he sincere? Of course he is. At that moment he will do anything to save his life. If we know that our lives are on the line, we will certainly do *teshuva* whole-heartedly even if we know that next year we may be repenting for the same sins. When a person realizes that Yom Kippur is a life line, he sincerely accepts upon himself never to do the sins again for that is the only way he will get out of the icy water and live.

The second approach is as follows: A Jew must always try to improve and do *teshuva* for his sins. He must understand that he has weaknesses and the *yetzer harah* exploits these weaknesses. However, there is an end to every weakness. Eventually if a person works on his shortcomings and tries to overcome them, he will prevail. The *yetzer harah* knows this very well and does everything he can to stop the person from doing *teshuva*. One method he uses is, “you are too deep in this sin to try to do *teshuva* on it. You keep on failing! Stop trying already!” But this is the *yetzer harah* talking - and a desperate *yetzer harah* talking; for the *yetzer harah* knows precisely when the sinner is about to get out of his sin and tries to persuade him that it is impossible for him to do *teshuva*. If a person persists with his *teshuva* even though it might take years and years of trying, and failing, eventually he will come out on top.

There is a beautiful *Tosfos Yom Tov* in *Avos* that says that the *yetzer tov* (the good inclination) and the *yetzer harah* are constantly battling each other. When the *yetzer hara* is almost beaten it makes one last stand and does whatever it can not to be totally vanquished. The very fact that the *yetzer hara* seems to be making such a strong stand is indicative of the fact that it is almost defeated – and knows it. This argument the *yetzer harah* is giving us, to give up the fight because we can’t win, is his last stand against our *teshuva shlaima*, our full fledged *teshuva*. If we would just keep on persevering then we would certainly win the battle.

In the tefillah of “*l’Dovid*” (said during the month of Elul after *Aleinu*) it states, “*im tokum alei milchama b’zos ani boteach*” – “if there is a war upon me in this I trust.” What is *b’zos ani boteach* referring to? What does “in this I trust” mean?

The *Sfas Emes* says a beautiful thought. “*Ki saitzai lamilchama al oivecha*” – “when you go out fight with your enemy” (Devarim 20:1) refers to a person’s battle with his evil inclination. The *Halacha* is that one who is called to war and is afraid that, because of the sins that he did, he may be killed in battle, is absolved from fighting the war and may return home since his sins will stop him from succeeding. So, too, in the *milchama* against our *yetzer harah*. If a person cannot succeed in fighting this war he is absolved from fighting it. We can therefore

deduce that when a person is thrown into a battle between himself and his *yetzer harah* and has no choice of being absolved from the fight, he obviously has the power to succeed! From the very fact that a person has a *milchemes hayetzer* is in itself proof that he can fight and win his *yetzer harah*. This is the meaning of “*b’zos ani boteach. Im tokum alei milchama* – if Hashem put me in this war against my *yetzer harah* without any means of escape- *bzos ani boteach* – I trust in this” that if I am put into battle I have the power to succeed. As tough as the situation may seem a person can be confident that he can prevail over his *yetzer harah*, for Hashem never places a person in a situation he cannot handle.

In conclusion, the question was, “Can I really change? Am I being sincere when I do teshuva?” The answer is definitely yes! It’s the *yetzer harah* telling you to give up and not try to do *teshuva*. If you have a tough battle with your *yetzer harah* it is proof that you can prevail. Additionally, when one realizes that his life is on the line and Yom Kippur is his last chance he will certainly to *teshuva* with sincerity to gain a decree of life. May we be *zocheh* to a sincere whole-hearted teshuva. May we be *zocheh* to a *g’mar chasima tova!*

Fleeting Shadows

R' Jacob Goodman/Yeshiva of Greater Washington/Kollel Zichron Amram

"ר' הונא בשם ר' אחא אמר: דוד אמר דבר אחד ולא פירשו, ופירשו שלמה בנו; שלמה אמר דבר אחד ולא פירשו, ופירשו דוד אביו... שלמה אמר "כי מי יודע מה טוב לאדם בחיים... ויעשם כצל"- באיזה צל? אם כצלו של כותל יש בו ממש, אם כצלו של דקל יש בו ממש. בא דוד ופירש "ימיו כצל עובר". ר' הונא בשם רב אחא כהדין עופא דעבר וטוליה עבר עמיה; שמואל אמר כצלן של דבורים שאין בו ממש של כלום."

“Rav Huna in the name of Rav Acha said “Dovid [Hamelech] said something and did not explain it, and his son Shlomo came and explained it; Shlomo said something and did not explain it, and his father Dovid explained it¹... Shlomo said² : “Who knows what is good for a man in his life...that he should consider like a shadow...(Koheles 6:12)” - Like what type of shadow? If like the shadow of a wall – it has substance, if like the shadow of a date palm – it has substance, came Dovid and explained³ “his days are like a passing shadow.”” Rav Huna in the name of Rav Acha said: “Like a bird which passes over and its shadow passes with it.” Shmuel said: “Like the shadow of bees, which have no substance at all.” (*Koheles Rabbah* 1:3)”

A simple explanation of this Midrash might be as follows: Koheles, as understood through a verse in Tehillim, is telling us that a person should perceive his life to be insignificant and fleeting. How so? Like a passing shadow. According to Rav Acha this is like the brief moment it takes for the shadow of a bird to pass by. According to Shmuel, this is like the intangible shadow cast by bees. Taken as is, the Midrash is making a humbling statement about life. Life is short and fleeting, man is insignificant, his existence a mere shadow. The imagery used is something we are familiar and the message hits home. But is this all Chazal wished to convey?

If we take a careful look at the words of the Midrash, we might begin to ask some questions. What was the point of the back and forth? Why go through other possible interpretations such as “the shadow of a wall” or “the shadow of a date palm” only to reject them? What makes these potential interpretations reasonable

¹ For an understanding of the chronological difficulty see *Koheles Rabbah* 1:3 *Peirush Maharzav* כצל ויעשם

² Koheles 6:12

³ Tehillim 144:4

anyway? Why a wall? Why a tree? A date palm in particular? Why not a cherry tree? The Midrash rejects these on the grounds that their shadows “have substance,” granted the simple understanding is that they cast a nice large shadow and thus lack a certain ephemeral quality, but can a shadow have substance?

More questions: even in the Midrash’s accepted answer, that Koheles was referring to a “passing shadow,” there seem to be two opinions. Rav Acha expresses it as the shadow a bird, while Shmuel as that of a bee. This is bewildering. If the goal is a stirring image of the transience of life, does it really make a difference at the end of the day? Would not one realize the same basic message, be it bird or bee? Is Shmuel’s point simply to say that life is “very very” insignificant, as opposed to just “very” insignificant?

These questions force us to think more deeply about the message Chazal wished to convey. Chazal’s words are not idle. They do not say things simply because they sound nice or poetic; their choice of wording is precise and carries great weight. Additionally, when we find multiple opinions among Chazal we cannot assume they are arguing about superficialities. If we do not understand their words it is evidence only of our lack of grasp. Let us try and apply ourselves; perhaps we may achieve some small insight.

Let us observe the stages of the Midrash. A question is posed: What type of shadow was Shlomo HaMelech referring to? Four answers are given: The shadow of a wall, the shadow of a date palm, the shadow of a passing bird, the shadow of bees. The first two answers are rejected and the latter two are accepted as under the heading of a “passing shadow.” If we observe closely we can see something of a progression. Both a wall and a date palm cast relatively significant shadows, both are connected to the ground and as such are immobile. A wall is a solid barrier from the ground and up, hence its shadow is complete. A date palm has the interesting quality that its trunk is more or less bare, with leafy branches extending from its peak. The bulk of its shadow is thus cast from a position above the earth. The bird as well as the bee are much smaller by comparison and fly above the ground unrestrained. The shadow of a bee is certainly smaller than that of a bird, but if we observe closely there is an even more marked difference. A bee’s wings are translucent, so in a certain sense they don’t cast a shadow at all⁴.

A picture seems to emerge. We see a progression from a solid shadow cast by something fixed completely to the ground, to the shadow of something fixed yet

⁴ See *Eitz Yoseif on Koheles Rabbah* 1:3 ד"ה כצלן של דבורים

largely in the air. These are followed by two much smaller shadows, cast by two creatures free to soar above the earth, the latter whose shadow is in a sense not there at all. Chazal seem to be alluding to something here, their choice of imagery is compelling. Perhaps we can offer an explanation.

What does shadow represent?

Physically speaking, shadow is simply the area of darkness cast by an object in the path of a light source. Spiritually speaking, however, shadow is an apt metaphor for a very important and fundamental concept. Every day - twice a day - we declare “*Sh’ma Yisroel, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad*”⁵. We often don’t grasp the significance of what we are saying. But the words “*Hashem Echad*” carry a profound message: “Hashem is one”. What does that mean? It means exactly that – Hashem is one. There are no divisions to Him, there are no components, no parts we can break down, He is simply One. Effectively this means there is no existence beyond his unity. Thus in essence we are declaring that all that we see, hear, feel, touch and smell does not exist. There is only the oneness of Hashem. One might wonder, “Well if so, how am I here? I seem to exist as far as I can tell. After all, I ate breakfast this morning! What does ‘*Hashem Echad*’ really mean?” The full answer to this question is well beyond the scope of this work, and indeed beyond the capacity of the human intellect. But we can understand in a small way using the parable of light and shadow.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu’s “light,” as it were, fills all of existence. In theory this means that there isn’t room for anything else. Insofar that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* wants us to exist, he “blocks” His light, casting a “shadow” of sorts, allowing room for the world and ultimately a person to be. This shadow creates and is the physicality which we see in our world. The greater this physicality, the less we can perceive of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. Our mission is, through Torah and Mitzvos, to elevate ourselves above this physicality and achieve a higher awareness of Him.

We find that there are various degrees to a person’s perception of Hashem, and as a result his or her outlook on life. On the lowest level, you have an individual who sees only the physical. His world is a world of sticks and stones, cause and effect, laws of nature. This individual sees no evidence of Hashem and has no concept of spiritually. His world is a world of darkness. In the language of the Midrash, he sits in the shadow of a wall. Just as the wall’s shadow is a total barrier, secured firmly

⁵ Lit. “Here O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One.”

to the earth, so to this person sees only the darkness of physicality and he is in essence “fixed to the earth.”

There is a degree of perception higher than this. There are those who believe in Hashem, they perceive His presence in the world, they perform the Mitzvos. Nonetheless they are still earth-bound. While they may appreciate a sense of spirituality, they cannot separate it from the physical. The mitzvos they do, while well intentioned, are ultimately traceable to material motives. Like the shadow of the date palm, which is cast by leaves elevated in the air, so too these individuals are elevated to a degree but remain fixed to the earth.

At the next level, though, there is a striking change. These are the individuals who live life with a great degree of clarity. The shadow of physicality in their life is very minute. They perceive Hashem’s presence in the world, and they live their lives for His sake alone. This is the level of the *neshama*⁶, the level of the *Ben Olam Habo*⁷, the level of *lishmah*⁸. Like the bird who flies well above the earth and whose shadow cast passes by in a fleeting moment, so too these individuals live life elevated above physicality, the light of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* illuminating their world with but a trace of obstruction.

Seemingly we could stop here. Is this not the level we all should all strive for? Who could be greater than one who lives his life for the sake of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* alone? But indeed there is another level. There are those who are so elevated, their perception so clear, that even as they walk the face of the earth they are hardly even here. They are living in this world almost as if it were really the next. They are attached to Hashem to a degree that few can even imagine. Like the shadow cast by a bee, which isn’t really a shadow at all, these individuals perceive Godliness in the world with the least inhibition imaginable.

These varying degrees of perception have a direct affect how the individual sees his time on earth. For the individual of complete physicality this world is all he knows. All his hopes and dreams, desires and accomplishments begin and end on planet earth. His lifetime is not short, for “short” is a relative term. For such an individual there is no other reference frame other than his own existence. His lifetime is all that he is.

For the individual of higher perception, he may understand that his time is limited. Indeed he is well aware of the many generations that have since passed on. He

⁶ Soul. See *Michtav Me’Eliyahu* vol. 1, p. 216

⁷ Lit. a member of the World to Come. Refers to someone destined for the World to Come.

⁸ For the sake of heaven.

seeks to accomplish as much as he can, perhaps even leave a legacy for himself. But his outlook is nonetheless limited to the world as he sees it. Inasmuch as he seeks to accomplish, he remains earth-bound. While he realizes his life is transient from the perspective of the rest human history, since his grasp is attached solely to earth there is no real reference frame that can describe his existence as short.

At the two higher levels we described, transience is profoundly accentuated. A person whose perception stretches beyond the physical world, to that of *olam habo*, understands that his existence on earth is but a mere flicker of an instant, in the overall eternity of *olam habo*.

The Midrash is very clear now. Shlomo Hamelech stated, “a person should consider his life like a shadow.” Spiritually speaking, there are various degrees of “shadow,” so the question “what type of shadow?” is natural. The first two suggestions are indeed possibilities, the shadow could be like that of the wall, the lowest level of perception possible, an almost complete disconnect from the Divine. Alternately, it could be like the shadow of the date palm, a certain elevation of perception. These propositions are rejected on the ground that “they have substance,” and indeed they do. Without the perspective of *olam habo*, if one’s perception of Hashem is solidly blocked, the world is simply the world. It is not transient or intransient, it deceivingly has “substance,” an existence all its own without the *hasgachas Hashem*⁹. Thus the Midrash explains from Tehillim that it is a passing shadow. Rav Acha explains that this means one must view the world from the perspective of one’s *neshama*, the part of him which soars above the earth, and whose shadow cast on the face of the earth is visible for but a fleeting instant. Shmuel does not come to argue, but rather describes an even higher perspective. One can live in this world with such clarity of perception that it is as if he is not even in the world at all.

So what does this mean for us?

If we take an honest look at ourselves, we may come to the sad conclusion that we do not live from the perspective of our *neshama*. The test is simple. Do we really see the world as transient preamble to a far greater eternity? Not really. In many ways we don’t think about the next world much at all; it is not part of our daily routine, our thought process, our life. If anything it is like a nice afterthought when we do mitzvos. “I went to Shacharis this morning. Why? Well that’s what I do

⁹ involvement of Hashem

every morning. It's a mitzva after all. I think I'll get rewarded in *olam habo* or something like that."

There are moments in life where we are forced to look at our lives from a broader perspective. Moments of tragedy, loss, and pain, *lo aleinu*¹⁰, force us to look beyond this world. World events developing like darkening thunderheads on a not-too-distant horizon give us pause. Hashem can force our hand; He will wake us up if he needs too. Yet it does not have to be this way. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* has given us days in the calendar which if properly used can give us this perspective. Yom Kippur is such a day.

On Yom Kippur we stand in shul like *malachim*¹¹, dressed in white, immersed in prayer. We do not eat, drink, or enjoy other physical comforts. Hashem comes close to us on this day and, as it were, beckons us to join Him, to live in His presence again, to live our lives in the perspective of His eternity. Beginning Rosh Chodesh Elul until the dramatic moment of *Ne'ilah*¹² and the final shofar blast, His door is open to us. How can we not arouse ourselves to His call?

What can we do?

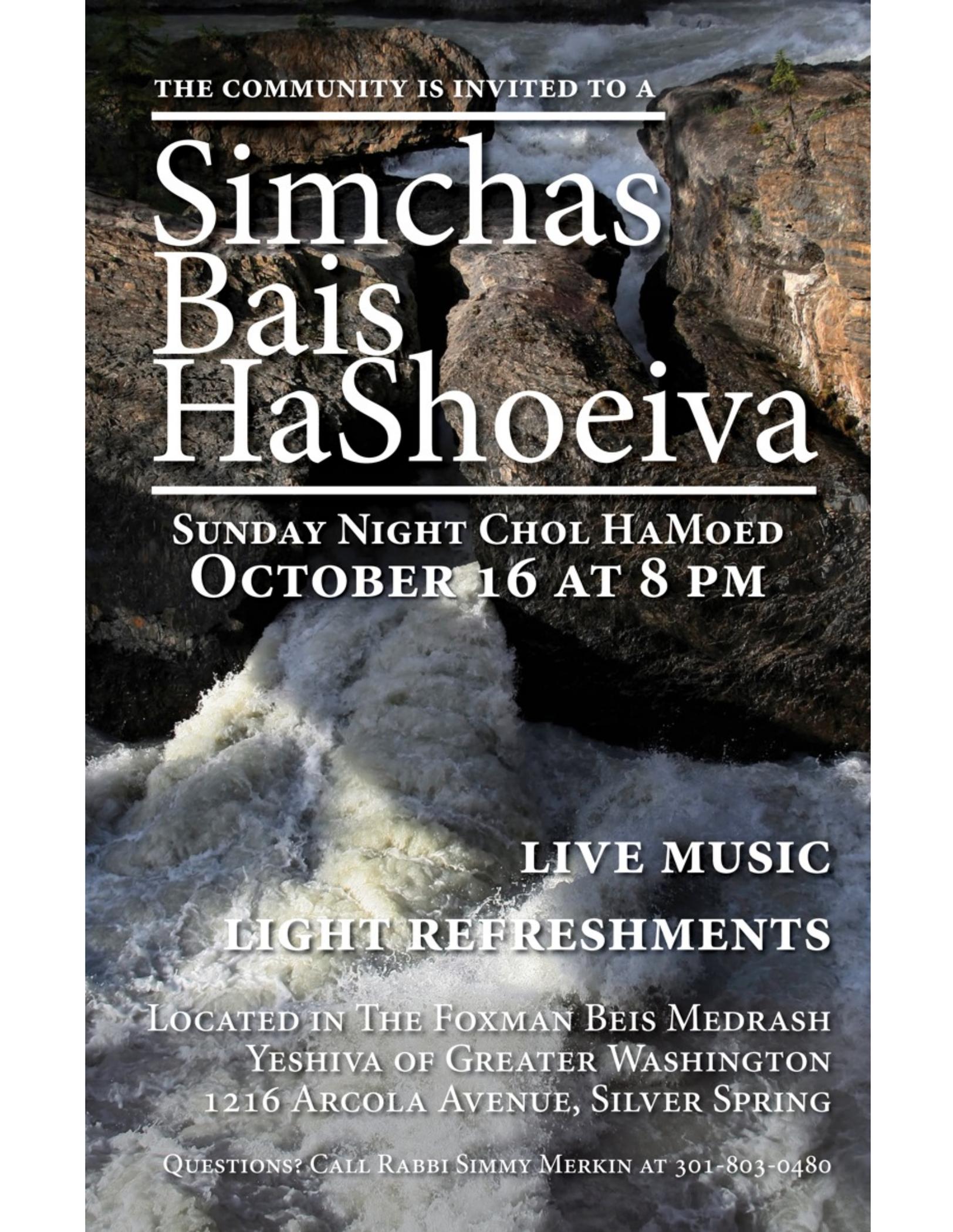
Koheles teaches us how a person must view his life. As we have explained, this means a dramatic change in perspective. We must make an effort to view our lives in this world as but a walk in an entranceway leading to the World to Come. While we may never reach the level hinted to by Shmuel, we all have the ability, even in some small way to achieve the level of Rav Acha. We can all be a little less physical, a little less earth-bound. Every one of us has an area where we could be a little more *lishmah*, a little more focused. This Yom Kippur, 5772, let us arouse ourselves to His call, and live – even if in a small way, with the awareness that our destination is not this world but the next. If we can do so, if we can really elevate our perception, perhaps we will realize that our time in this world is but a fleeting shadow and there is so much we can accomplish.

G'mar Chasima Tova

¹⁰ i.e., such things should not befall us

¹¹ Angels

¹² Lit. closing. The final prayer service of Yom Kippur.



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