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FROM THE SHIURIM OF

Rabbi Joey Haber

Sukkot: I Am

Delivered 23 September 2026

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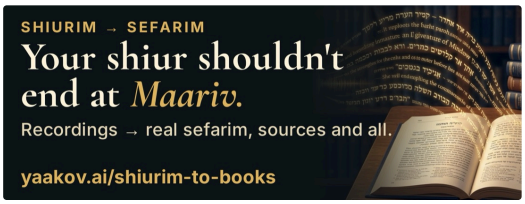
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◆ *Coming to See You on the Other Side*

I CAME TODAY TO SEE YOU on the other side. Everyone gave the speeches during the עשרת ימי תשובה. Everyone had the conviction, the determination, the acceptances, the decisions. Now here we are, roughly forty hours after Neilah ended, and I have come to find out whether you meant a single word of it.

Let me tell you what made me say this. We had in our shul this year a particularly beautiful and inspiring Yom Kippur — and I heard the same from shul after shul across the community. It used to be that coming to shul on Yom Kippur, for so many people, was just about showing up. Especially for the women; many of them could not read the words and had not been given the education. They came, they spoke to each other, they heard the shofar, and that was more or less that. Among the men there was plenty of talking; people came for a few hours and did not really come at all. Even people who kept Shabbat did not always arrive with the right frame of mind. That has genuinely changed. Walk into so many shuls now and it is quiet. The chazarah is quiet. Kaddish is quiet. People are focused, people understand what the words mean, there are guides to help them. The women and the girls are learned and inspired. Not every single place, but most shuls in our community have really grown.

Our shul was like that. We were screaming ה' הוא האלוקים at Neilah, crying, the shofar, hundreds of people. And then came Tuesday morning. Regular Shacharit, regular weekday minyan. I got up and I looked around the room and I said: guys, look around. Is there one extra person here today? Is there one man who does not normally come during the week, but yesterday he was so inspired, he was holding onto Hashem's hand at Neilah, he made a decision, he made a commitment — is there one more person in shul this morning? **There was not one more person.** There was a single unfamiliar face and he was a guest.

It is crazy how much we do not change. I used to think that when you speak to somebody on Chanukah and ask what he accepted on Yom Kippur and he says, "I don't exactly remember," it is because the inspiration wore off. It is not that it wore off. Watch people at the break-fast on Motzaei Kippur and you will see their personalities come right back out. If you are a לשון הרע speaker, you probably spoke לשון הרע at that meal. Over a piece of cake, a bagel and a sambusa, you somehow had something to say about the chazan, the rabbi, the air conditioning, or the fellow sitting next to you. If you are a fighter, you did not change. It is frightening how exactly we resemble our same old selves the moment the fast is over.

◆ *The Drunkard Who Only Wants Another Drink*

There is a pasuk in Mishlei, in the twenty-third chapter, that describes a strange scene. הכוני בל חליתי הלמוני בל ידעתי מתי אקיץ אוסיף אבקשנו עוד.[1] It does not sound at first like a pasuk of wisdom and advice, but it is one of the sharpest in the whole sefer.

The commentators explain, based on the context, that the pasuk is describing an alcoholic. You ever see a man who is truly drunk? You hit him and it does not affect him. You hit him harder and he does not even register it. הכוני בל חליתי — they struck me and I did not get sick. הלמוני בל ידעתי — they beat me and I did not even know it. And what does he say? מתי אקיץ — when will I wake up? Not: when will I wake up and change my life. אוסיף אבקשנו עוד — when will I wake up so I can have another drink. That is the whole pasuk. The man is stone drunk, they hit him, they hit him harder, he feels nothing, and all he wants is to come to so he can go back for more.

That is exactly how habits work. Habits are ridiculous; they make no sense whatsoever. You look at the drunk and you tell him, this is not helping you. You look at the man taking drugs and you say, it is wrecking you. You look at the gambler and you say, you are losing, it is ruining your life. But I do not even need to reach for the extreme cases. Take the fellow obsessed with sports. Every time you get excited, another player gets injured. What exactly are you getting excited about? It keeps disappointing you — and you go back for more. Take the person who goes to sleep late. You gained one hour from twelve to one, and you ruined the next eighteen. You are exhausted and you are a mess all day. It is not working. It is hitting you. And what do you do at the end of those eighteen hours? You stay up another hour.

Look at the person who overeats. It is not helping your body, it is not helping how you feel, it is not helping anything you actually want. Your stomach hurts, you do not feel healthy, you do not feel confident, you feel like a mess — and you keep eating. מתי אקיץ, when will I wake up, אוסיף אבקשנו עוד, I want more. Pick any example: foul language, gossip, talking behind people's backs, being nasty, being condescending. It is not working. **It is hitting you and you just want another drink.** You have spoken to your spouse this way ten thousand times and it has never once worked. It ruined an evening, it ruined a week, it ruined a Shabbat, it ruined a holiday. Why do you keep doing it?

◆ *The Two Most Dangerous Words*

Our habits are so embedded in us that they never seem to leave, and I will tell you why. It comes down to two words. They are going to sound like the simplest words you have ever heard, and they are the most dangerous words in a person's vocabulary. The two words are: **I am.**

I am this. What can I do — I am honest. I am a late sleeper. I am someone who likes food. I am a sports fan, it is in my blood. I am a drinker. I am a partier. I cannot help myself. You tell a man that every time he opens his mouth he insults somebody, and he answers, I am honest. People say, I am dumb, I am not smart, I am not the learning type, I am not the praying type. I am not a shul-goer. And if I am not a shul-goer, then I am not a shul-goer — you can scream at me all you like, it is simply what I am. And if it is what I am, it does not change.

We need to free you from I am. And the Sukkah is going to do it.

Understand what I am really means. For me to be different from this is hard, so this is who I am. For me to be tactful in how I speak is difficult, so I am blunt and honest. For me to go to sleep on time is challenging, so I am a late sleeper. I am not comfortable in shul, I do not navigate the siddur well, so I am not a shul-goer. I do not understand what the words of the Gemara mean, I did not have a good rebbe in tenth grade, so I am not a Gemara learner. Being refined around people takes real work, so I am not the refined type — what you see is what you get. I am busy. I am not so religious. I am not extreme. Every one of these phrases is an excuse, and every one of them means the same thing: this is too difficult for me. So you barely even try.

And then you cry on Yom Kippur. You say the וידוי four times, you enumerate every single thing you did wrong, and I hope you meant it in the moment — but you had no chance of changing any of it, because I am.

◆ *This Month Is in Order*

The Torat Kohanim notes something about the language of the Torah in this month. By Yom Kippur it says the tenth day of הזה החודש, and by Sukkot it says the fifteenth day — הזה, this month. What does הזה come to teach? That this month, the month of Tishrei, is arranged in a proper order. There is Rosh Hashanah, and then there is Yom Kippur, and everyone agrees that the two are linked and that Yom Kippur is a step up from Rosh Hashanah. And then from Kippur to Sukkot is also in order, and is also another step up.

The question is how that is possible. I understand Rosh Hashanah: we bring Hashem in as King. I understand Yom Kippur: we are literally like angels, and that is a step higher. But how is the Sukkah a step above Yom Kippur? It does not carry the same severity. It does not have the same strictures. How is sitting in a hut a step up from the holiest day of the year?

◆ *Greater Than Angels*

To answer this I want to bring something from the Nefesh HaChaim, the sefer written by Rav Chaim Volozhiner only a couple of hundred years ago, which contains tremendous depth — even a touch of Kabbalah — about how things in our world as Jews actually work. In שער א׳ he takes up the old debate: who is greater, a human being or an angel? The Rishonim argue about it. And he says that both sides are true. An angel is greater in its essence. An angel is purer and holier. Everything I have been describing for the last ten minutes, an angel does not do. There is no angel who is a Yankee fan. There is no angel who is drunk. There is no angel chasing money or oversleeping. The angel is perfect.

But a human being has an ability that an angel does not have: the ability to bring holiness down into this earth. As it is put in the Yerach HaMoadim from Lakewood, the difference between an angel and a human is that an angel is intrinsically holy, while a human being can transform the world.

Let me show you what that means with two mountains. There are two famous, holy mountains in Jewish history — Har Sinai, which you have heard of, and Har HaMoriah, where the Beit HaMikdash was built. Everybody asks this question. Har Sinai is the place the Torah was given. It was so holy that it was assur even to touch it. And yet today Har Sinai has no kedushah at all. We do not even know where it is, and if we knew, you could do whatever you wanted there. Har HaMoriah, on the other hand — the Beit HaMikdash has been destroyed for nearly two thousand years, and the place still retains its holiness. Why the difference?

Because the holiness of Har Sinai was created from Heaven. Hashem and the angels descended onto that mountain, and once Heaven departs, that kind of holiness does not last. The holiness of Har HaMoriah was created by human beings. The first thing that generated kedushah in that place was Avraham Avinu bringing his son — עקידת יצחק. Human beings sanctified that place. Human beings made a kedushah on this earth that transforms it and never leaves. השמים שמים לה׳ והארץ נתן לבני אדם.[2] The heavens belong to Hashem; this earth He gave to man, with the ability to create holiness and to transform it. That is a power embedded inside us that an angel does not possess — the power to make a lasting change. And our model for it is Har HaMoriah, where two men, a father and a son, had one powerful moment that has been generating holiness for thousands of years.

Children can change, because children are not yet locked into I am. You have all heard about my youngest son, Moshe — I cannot even go places with him anymore, because people do not say hello to me, they say hello to him. This Yom Kippur he came to shul almost the entire day, and he had the longest Amidah in the room. This is the same kid? He is a character. He is in, he is out, he is up, he is down. Kids change. Kids get better. People have the ability to make a change that lasts.

◆ *Go to Pharaoh Because I Hardened His Heart*

In Parashat Bo, Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu בא אל פרעה כי אני הכבדתי את לבו. Come to Pharaoh, because I have hardened his heart. That pasuk is very difficult. I would have expected: go to Pharaoh even though I hardened his heart — go anyway. What does it mean, go to Pharaoh because I hardened his heart? Hashem hardening the man's heart is a reason not to go, not a reason to go.

Here is what it means, and this explains everything. A lot of people think the יצר הרע is their nemesis — that their challenges and their tests are the obstacle standing between them and greatness. They are not your obstacle. The יצר הרע is not your enemy. Those difficult things in front of you are your opportunity. Your greatness lies right at the door of the very thing that is hardest for you. You take your biggest challenge, the thing that is most difficult, and you overcome it — and that is how you become great. The יצר הרע was placed there to unleash your greatness. You cannot become great without him. You need the obstacle, the test, the temptation, the thing you are certain you cannot do. And when you overcome it, that is when you become you.

Let me be clear about this. After a hundred and twenty years you are going to stand before Hashem, and He is not going to say, wow, you made an open layup, what an unbelievable person. He is not going to say, I gave you billions of dollars and you gave away a nice two or three percent to tzedakah, I am so proud of you. He is not going to say, I gave you the easiest spouse in the world and you were nice to that person. He is not going to say, I gave you straight-A children and you were a good parent, or I made you wealthy and you built a beautiful Sukkah. He is not going to say, you had a wonderful boss who paid you extremely well and you said thank you. **You are not getting credit for easy things.** Every restaurant in your neighborhood is kosher — great job eating kosher. No. You were born naturally nice — wonderful, it costs you nothing. I am not getting any credit for eating in a kosher restaurant; nobody has ever invited me anywhere else in my life, I would not even know where to go.

Here is what you will get credit for. Hashem will say: look at this person, I gave him a difficult spouse, and he worked, and he changed, and he built a beautiful marriage anyway. Look at this young woman who expected to be married ten years ago and is not, and she believed in Me even more. Look at this one — I gave him billions and he gave away twenty percent, which is hard. And look at this one, with a limited income, who still found a way to cut out ten percent for tzedakah. Look at this person, naturally impulsive, who made himself patient. Look at this one, whose friends all went out to a non-kosher restaurant and who picked up the phone and said, guys, I am not doing that, I will eat somewhere else. That you get credit for.

You are going to get an enormous amount of credit for the child who makes you pull your hair out, and you pray better because of him, and you work on yourself, and you go to chinuch classes, and you read books, and you acquire skills. You get credit for the son-in-law who makes your skin crawl

and whom you nonetheless treat properly at the Sukkah table. You get credit for the grandchild your daughter cannot handle, when you say, I thought I was done at this stage of life, but I am going to chip in anyway. You get credit when tuition means two fewer vacations and cleaning your own house — which, if you are Syrian, is no small thing — and you say, my children are going to yeshiva regardless. **You get credit for everything the יצר הרע makes hard for you.**

So: thank you, יצר הרע, for making me a person who naturally likes to drink, because if I beat you I become great. Thank you for making me someone drawn to gambling, because if I defeat you I become great. Thank you for making me obsessed with sports, because if I overcome you I become great. Thank you for making me someone who does not read well, because if I ever train myself to read properly, my Torah will ascend straight to the heavenly throne. Thank you for giving me a spouse with whom I sometimes have no idea what to do — because when I figure out what to do anyway, that conversation will be played back to me after a hundred and twenty. Thank you for giving me a child with a learning disability and a social disability and a struggle at every turn, because you transformed me as a person.

That is what human beings were put on this earth to do. We are not angels. We were put here to transform. And the only obstacle to transformation is I am — the thought that I am this, because becoming that is difficult, so I will simply stay this. No. You now have a chance to locate the hardest area of your life and beat it. That is what you are here for. Hashem says to Moshe: you know why I am sending you to Pharaoh? Because I hardened his heart. Because it is going to be a brutal meeting and it is going to turn you into Moshe Rabbeinu. Go into the impossible interaction and it will make you one of the greatest leaders who ever lived. I am telling you to go precisely because you cannot do it. You do not know what you will say to this man, and you will walk in anyway, and I will help you, and you will transform, and you will become what only a human being can become.

◆ *A Place Where I Have No Habits*

That is why we move into the Sukkah. I am is who I think I am — and when you walk into the Sukkah you leave everything behind. I have nothing in my Sukkah. I am nothing in my Sukkah. I have no identity there, no habits there, no style there, no things I have always done there. In my house I have things I do. At my table, in my kitchen, in my den, in my room — I have routines. But I have nothing that I do in my Sukkah. **In the Sukkah I have a chance to leave myself behind and become something new.**

So yes: on Rosh Hashanah we crown Hashem as King. On Yom Kippur we live like angels. On Sukkot we are above angels, because we are human beings who transform.

And where did we get this power? From the angels themselves. The Midrash tells us that during עקידת יצחק, as Avraham Avinu stood with his arm outstretched and the knife in his hand, the angels were watching and weeping, and the tears of the angels fell into the eyes of Yitzchak Avinu. What does that mean, the tears of the angels entered the eyes of a human being? It means the angels poured into the human being the power to become greater than angels. The capacity to transform — the angels handed it to us. You have a direct connection to the angels enabling you to do it down here.

I think this is what stands behind the two famous opinions in the Mishnah about why we sit in a Sukkah. Rabbi Eliezer says it is because of the ענני הכבוד, the clouds that surrounded us in the desert. Rabbi Akiva says it is because of the actual huts, the booths we built out there. It is hard to think of something so fundamental with two such different explanations. But perhaps the two opinions are really one. The clouds are Shamayim coming down here. The booth is taking Shamayim and building it here. The ענני הכבוד are Hashem; the booth is us constructing a place to live with Hashem. The clouds are angels descending; the booth is the human being transforming.

◆ *The King's Visit*

Let me put this in practical terms. On Sukkot you do not have your regular routine. Everything is different. There are mitzvot all around you, meals all around you, children and family and chaos all around you. Your schedule is different, your work is different. You have left your ordinary house and your ordinary comforts — not as a nice idea from the sefarim, but physically and literally. You are simply not in your house as much. And if you use the Sukkah properly, if you live there, sit there, talk there, eat there, have dessert there, even sleep there, you have a genuine chance to move away from who I am and into who I need to build myself to be.

Here is a mashal I heard last night from a friend of mine a little older than me, Rabbi Rakoff, a chazan and baal tefillah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He told it to me in the name of the Maggid of Dubno. Parts of it are well known; I do not think the ending is.

There was a king, and the king had a daughter — every mashal has a king, and he always has a daughter. The daughter needed to get married, and nobody was ever good enough. One was too tall, one was too short, one was not educated enough, not smart enough, not sophisticated enough, not cultured enough, not handsome enough, not talented enough, not enough of a warrior. Finally the king announced: the next one who walks in, that is who she is marrying. Sometimes parents reach that point — whoever he is, if he has two legs, fine. In walks a commoner, a simple village boy. The king says, I said the next one, and tells his daughter: you are marrying this boy.

They have a beautiful wedding, and the princess moves to the boy's village, right near his mother — a perfectly ordinary village woman, who promptly puts her to work. Here we scrub the floors. Here we clean the restrooms and the sinks. Plow the field, milk the cow, see to the eggs and the chickens. The girl is a princess. She has no idea what to do with herself, and it gets worse every day, every week, every month.

Then word goes out that the king is coming to visit his daughter. Signs go up. The whole village begins to transform — they clean the streets, they fix things up. The king's messengers arrive; soldiers come ahead to pave the way and prepare everything. And finally the king himself arrives. They treat him like royalty, and everyone around him is treated like royalty. He sees his daughter. Everything is beautiful. And then the king says: all right, I am leaving. He walks toward his horse and chariot, and his daughter comes running after him. Father, do not leave! Why not? Do not leave — you do not understand, they work me here. The moment you go, tomorrow I am back scrubbing bathrooms and milking cows in the mud. Please do not leave. And the king says, what do you mean? I came for a visit.

So the king turns to his son-in-law and says, what are you doing to her? And the son-in-law answers: Your Highness, you married her off to me. You married her to a villager. You gave me nothing. You gave me no plan, no palace, no place, no portion of royalty. So I treat her the way I was trained to treat a wife. I treat her exactly the way men in my village treat their wives.

That is where the Maggid of Dubno ends the mashal.

◆ *The Palace He Gave Us*

The nimshal is this. Hashem took a soul — the soul of the Jewish people — and He placed it inside a human body. And a human body is built for villagers. Look at what human bodies are, look at how people adorn them. They are made for simple folk. So we go through a year doing what humans do: running, driving, buying, choosing carpets, all the mundane things that do not ultimately matter.

And then word spreads that the King is coming. Signs go up — it is Elul. We begin Selichot; some communities sound the shofar and add tefillot. We start making changes, because the King is coming. Then He sends His senior messengers on Rosh Hashanah, and from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur the King Himself arrives, and our soul is elevated. And then, as Kippur draws to a close, Hashem says: I am leaving now. The last time we will say המלך הקדוש. And at Neilah our neshamah is screaming — Hashem, where are You going? I am about to go back to living like a commoner. And Hashem says: I came for a visit.

Then Hashem turns to our body and says, are you really going to treat this soul that way? And the body answers, what am I supposed to do? You gave me a human body with human needs. It eats. It is tempted. It has desires and distractions. That is what You made me. And Hashem says: you know what — I am going to give you a palace. I am going to give your body a place where it will know how to treat the soul properly. That place is the Sukkah. I am putting you into My palace, and there you are going to live as a different person. Your body will be in sync with your neshamah. The prince and the princess will finally be of one mind. For that week the human will live more like an angel.

And that is why we shake the lulav. The set is our whole body — the etrog is the heart, the lulav is the spine, the aravah is the lips, the hadas is the eyes. We are saying: Hashem, my body has been transformed by the Sukkah I am sitting in. We shake in every direction to declare to every force pulling at us, every temptation, every desire: you are all out of here, because I am now a different being.

◆ *Hoshana Rabbah and the Final Seal*

And then it carries us to Hoshana Rabbah, about which they say the verdict is really sealed. What does that mean? You told me it was signed on Yom Kippur. Now there is a do-over? It gets signed again? People speak about the גוט קוויטל, as though there is something more. What more is there? We did Yom Kippur, we cried, we begged the Kadosh Baruch Hu to seal us for good.

Here is what it means. Hashem says: I signed. But now I want to see whether anything you promised has any substance, whether you can transform at all. So I will give you about ten days to show Me that you meant it. Are you still speaking the same לשון הרע? Now that you are living in My miniature palace on this earth, in the place of transformation, where the prince can be raised up to the level of the princess — are you beginning to act differently, or are you still busy with I am? If you are still I am, then whatever you did on Yom Kippur did not amount to much. But if you are prepared to become what you could be and what you need to be, because you are standing in a place of transformation — **now the seal means something.** Now there is proof of concept, because I gave you ten days in My palace.

And then comes Shemini Atzeret, a day with no mitzvot. Why no mitzvot? Because now the prince and the princess are on equal footing, and they can simply talk to one another. They are on the same page — the body and the soul, Hashem and us. On Shemini Atzeret there is technically no Sukkah; we sit in it because of the safek, but technically there is none, and there is no lulav and no etrog. Of all the holidays, this is the one with no fast, no shofar, no lulav, no etrog, no shaking, nothing at all. Just us and Hashem, because Hashem says our relationship is now what it is supposed to be. And from there you can celebrate the life of Torah and dance on Simchat Torah.

This season is no accident. It is not a cluster of holidays that happen to fall near each other. It is a buildup. The King arrives, we become like angels, and then we rise above the angels by sitting in a house of transformation — a house only human beings can build. Angels can make the heavens holy. Humans can transform this world. Angels made Har Sinai holy temporarily. Humans made Har HaMoriah holy forever. And so on Shemini Atzeret the King comes back for a visit, and the Midrash says He tells us: I am making one last small meal, just you and I. He looks around and sees the prince and princess living together properly. Now you know how to treat her. Now go and do it for the rest of the year.

So every one of us went through Yom Kippur. Forty hours later, we get to ask honestly how much of it we meant, and how many of us are still locked in the jail of I am. Or whether on Yom Kippur we genuinely decided that I can rise higher than angels, that I can transform — that Hashem gave even this villager, this body of mine, the ability to be a prince. Hashem gave me, a human being, the ability to be greater than an angel. He gave me the ability not to be stuck in I am, but to look straight at my biggest challenge and believe that I can.

◆ *In Memory*

These words are dedicated לעילוי נשמת a very important person in our community whom Hashem took suddenly this past week, Chacham Leon Gindi, עליו השלום — Chacham Eliyahu ben Farida. He was seventy-nine years old, and he was in the middle of giving a shiur in Shaarei Tzion on Shabbat morning, Shabbat Shuvah, speaking about teshuvah, when he suffered a massive heart attack and passed away on the spot.

I do not know if it is possible to be more consistent than he was. Forty years in a row of never arriving late to a shiur in his life. Walking to shul on Yom Kippur I mentioned this to my son Moshe, and he said, wow, Dad, he is so not like you. I suppose I inspire my children. He prepared for every shiur, taught so many masechtot, taught groups of men in Arabic and in depth, and never deviated. He would barely go away in the summer because he did not want to spend the time away from his Gemara. He was extraordinarily knowledgeable in halacha and in the minhagim our community carried from Chaleb — any rabbi who needed to know what our community's custom was went to him.

And with all of that, such humility. I do not know that I have ever met anyone, in my sphere, with that quality of humility. He would never stand at the front of a room. Never. There were times I was speaking and he sat in the audience like any other member of the crowd. Although he had some of the toughness and strength of Chacham Yehoshua, he also had tremendous beauty and sweetness; you would speak with him and he spoke back as if he were your own age, as if he were your friend. The entire community was shaken as the news spread through Shabbat, and it changed the way we

all walked into Yom Kippur. He was buried in Israel, and his family is sitting shivah. He was a role model for every member of the community, and above all a role model for every rabbi in the community — in how a rabbi should conduct himself, how he should treat people, how he should teach, how committed he should be, and how humble, which is at times the hardest part of all. May his deeds, his children, and his grandchildren be an elevation for his neshamah, and may our words here partner with all that his family is doing and be an elevation as well.

Today is also the yahrtzeit of Mr. Albert Cohen, עליו השלום, who passed away a number of years ago and was buried on Erev Sukkot. His daughter is always here at this class, and we feel very close to the family. May our words elevate his beautiful neshamah, and may his wonderful children continue on the path of Torah and mitzvot. Amen.

Sources

1. Mishlei 23:35. הכוני בל־חליתי הלמוני בל־ידעתי מתי אקיץ אוסיף אבקשנו עוד:
2. Tehillim 115:16. השמים שמים ליהוה והארץ נתן לבני־אדם: