

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

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POSITIVE PEER PRESSURE

Peer pressure is generally viewed as a negative concept - a phenomenon that encourages people to be led almost blindly by a need to fit in with the crowd and to be liked. It is most often identified with bad or even dangerous behaviour. Although it is generally associated with adolescents, in connection with issues such as body image, substance abuse and bullying, in essence it exists at every age and in every community. **With the exponential spread of social media and technology, the channels through which peer pressure can be experienced are spreading,** the scope of peer pressure is growing, and its negative influences are intensifying. But to view peer pressure as purely negative is to see only the harmful outcome of a neutral phenomenon. The fact is that peer pressure can yield very positive results.

In the Torah's description of the Jubilee year, the nation is forced to let the land lie fallow and to free all Jewish servants.

And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year, and proclaim freedom (for slaves) throughout the land for all who live on it. It shall be a Jubilee for you and you shall return, each man to his property, and you shall return, each man to his family. This fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee for you, you shall not sow, nor shall you reap its aftergrowth or pick (its grapes) that you had set aside (for yourself). For it is Jubilee. It shall be holy for you; you shall eat its produce from the field.¹

The underlying rationale for this command is to remind us that God is the One running the show, and that man is but a sacred trustee of the Land of Israel, and of basic human rights such as freedom.² This mitzva ennobles one with Divine purpose and a sense of humility. At the same time, it enables one to reflect on everyday morals, ethics and individual accountability. Interestingly, this momentous occasion is heralded

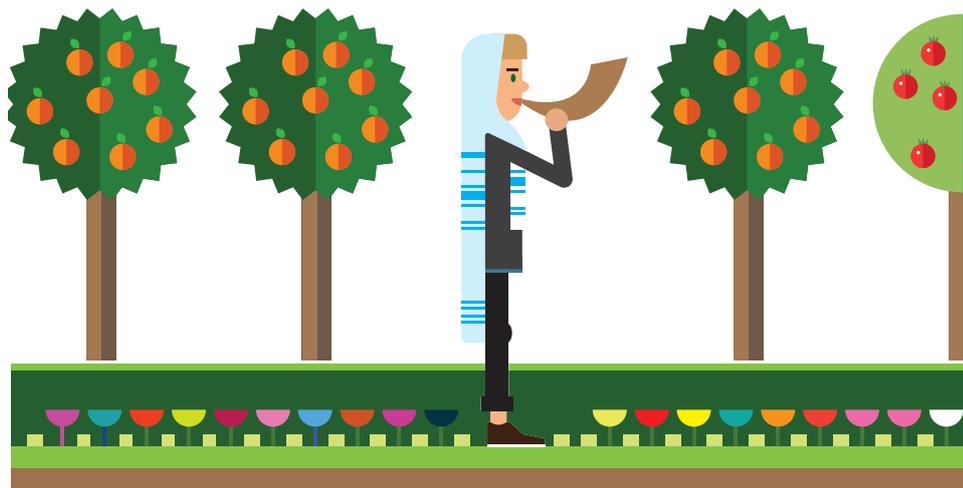
by the blowing of a shofar.³ The obvious question is why? What is the significance, at this particular moment, of the shofar?

To let one's land lie fallow after years of working it is a tremendously difficult task that requires a high level of faith. Similarly, to let one's servants free after they have become a crucial part of one's daily schedule is challenging and demanding.

In this difficult moment the blowing of the shofar presents an unexpected voice of support and comfort. At the moment the Jubilee begins, when each person steps outside to blow their shofar, they are immediately bombarded by numerous other shofar blasts from their surrounding neighbours. This sense of communal unity and combined dedication to God offers solace and support - a true feeling of being together in the same boat: "The distress of the masses is comforting [for the individual]."⁴ In biblical times, the sounding of the shofar was a mechanism for

announcing something to the world. Whilst the Jubilee task was extremely difficult to implement, it was reassuring to realise that everyone was experiencing the same struggle together.

Often in life we are faced with challenges that seem insurmountable. Whilst we may feel that we are the only ones in the world who can understand the extent of our challenges, in truth, "There is nothing new under the sun."⁵ There is comfort in the notion that there are other people who have braved, are braving and will brave similar burdens. The concept of peer pressure, so often seen through a lens of negativity, can actually in appropriate contexts be harnessed in a positive direction. This is perhaps most commonly expressed in our generation through the myriad of support groups being started daily through social media channels like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Furthermore, many revolutionary movements have begun simply because a few individuals shared a vision and dreamed in the same direction. In order to truly harness the positivity that can be found within the context of peer support, it is important to seek and build networks of people who share similar values, who will help foster and reinforce that which is important to us, and who will share our angst in moments of trial.



The primordial sound of the shofar awakens the heart of man, serving as a piercing reminder that we are never alone - neither in our triumphs, nor our tribulations. The voice of the shofar fosters within us a sense of camaraderie that serves to transform the potentially negative peer pressure into the comfort of peer support.

Notes

- ¹ *Leviticus* 25:10-12.
- ² *Sefer HaChinnuch*, mitzva 328.
- ³ *Leviticus* 25:9.
- ⁴ *Sefer HaChinnuch*, mitzva 331.
- ⁵ *Ecclesiastes* 1:9.

Parasha Fact:

In modern times, we do observe the Sabbatical year in the Land of Israel, but the Jubilee year is only observed once the majority of the Jewish people live in the Land, a situation fast approaching.

Next week in Bechukotai:

It is easy to reflect on certain aspects of life as distinctly holy or spiritual. This applies to specific times, such as Shabbat, specific places, such as the synagogue, and specific activities, such as prayer. In the same vein, it is easy to understand how one could perceive any other time, place or activity as relatively mundane. Through the use of just one simple word, the Torah offers a glimpse into a contrasting perspective, one that has the potential to spiritually enhance our entire existence.

... ..
In honour of a speedy and complete recovery for our precious daughter
Lital Gila bat Renana Yael
מוקדש לרפואתה השלמה
והמהירה של ביתנו היקרה
ליטל גילה בת רננה יעל

שבת שלום