

## Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

### Haazinu/Shabbat Shuva 20

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat shalom. First, I would like to acknowledge that this week's sermon is sponsored by the Gradman family, in commemoration of the Yahrtzeit of Jonathan's uncle, Dr. Marc Gradman רפאל בן דוד ז"ל. May his memory be a blessing.

Our Jewish calendar is structured to leave 7 days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. This timing is analogous to the waiting period before a baby's bris. We hold the bris 8 days after birth, so that the baby should live through one Shabbat before the bris. The Taz explains that this first Shabbat is the reason why we have a shalom zachar celebration on the Friday night after a baby boy is born. Rosh Hashana commemorates the **birth** of the world, and we similarly always observe one Shabbat before we reach Yom Kippur.

The significance of this Shabbat can also be found in its name. *Shabbat* and *shuva* come from same root -- *shav*, which among other translations, means *to sit*. As I sometimes like to point out, these words also share the same root as *yeshiva*, *house of study*, where we mostly sit. Why is *yeshiva* called *a sitting place*? Because *yeshiva* is a place where we sit quietly and engage in contemplation.

Two weeks ago, we read the double parsha, *Nitzavim-Vayeilech*. Based on the Zohar, the commentators say that those two titles reflect 2 ways of being: *Nitzavim* means to *stand*, and *Vayeilech* means *to walk*. Tradition tells us that angels stand, which is why we stand with our legs together when we recite the *Kedusha* to behave as the angels do. In contrast, human beings walk, and part of the uniqueness of human being is that we also sit, which symbolizes, as we said, the ultimate form of contemplation, an activity which, like walking is unique to humans and not available to angels.

This year Shabbat Shuva is atypical, because we read Parshat Ha'azinu, which is ordinarily read after Yom Kippur. However, I think this timing is fitting. We discussed last week that both Rosh Hashana and Sukkot fall out on Shabbat this year, and so we are enjoined from blowing the shofar or shaking the lulav on those days. As we explained, the Sages may have created such injunctions to remind us that Shabbat bestows benefits comparable to the holiday mitzvot. The same could be said about Haazinu, which likens Torah to a song, or a poem. Its timing this year is a reminder that Shabbat is like a song that harmonizes all the elements of our lives.

Every few years, we have this special opportunity to appreciate what Shabbat brings us and remember that life may feel random at times, but on the contrary, everything that happens in our lives comes together to form a cohesive composition, like a song, and contributes to the meaning of our existence.

I think this is at least one positive message we can take away from Covid this year. People are not walking about freely; they are confined to their homes, and they spend considerable time sitting (often in front of computer screens!) It's not easy to live life that way, because it can make us feel as though we are stagnating. But we must know that Covid is not a random occurrence. The purpose of all the events leading up to Yom Kippur: Tisha B'Av, the Shiva d'Nechemta/7 weeks of consolation, the month of Elul, and Rosh Hashana and the 10 days of teshuva, is to inspire us to exercise the muscle, so to speak, of our minds, of contemplation, and to sit, so to speak, in order to do so. We should see this positive aspect of covid as part of our life's song, giving us the opportunity to contemplate, especially at this crunch time with 2 days until Yom Kippur. God willing, our reward will be to enter the new year prepared to accomplish our goals, leading to a happy and successful year ahead. Shabbat shalom.