



IT'S NOT IN HEAVEN

The Torah portion says of God's Word, "It's not in heaven nor across the sea" (D'varim 30:12).

Even if it were in heaven or over the sea we would still be duty-bound to strive for it, but it's not as distant as all that. It is accessible wherever we happen to be.

There must be a symbolism in the use of the words "in heaven" and "across the sea".

Possibly it is this: The Torah is neither spiritually and intellectually beyond us, nor is it geographically inaccessible.

Take each category on its own. The first says that the Torah is not too high for us - "in heaven", as it were.

God bless you if you're a saint or a genius, but most people aren't. Saints and geniuses can find their way to the Torah; so can the rest of us.

On one level or another, we can all comprehend and adopt Torah ideas and insights.

The second category says that the Torah is not "across the sea".

If you live in the Diaspora, forget about saying, "Things are different in Israel. There it is easier to follow the commandments." Israel is certainly different and superior, but don't make it an excuse for not raising your religious levels in whichever place you happen to be.

And if you do have the blessing of being in Israel, don't make an excuse out of that either, saying, "If I were in Jerusalem things would be different."

In Jerusalem things would be different, but that shouldn't stop you elevating yourself anywhere else.

Whenever I Feel Afraid

Julie Andrews made it into a famous song - the notion that whenever I feel afraid I make out that I don't fear the future.

In "The Sound of Music", Julie's response to fear was to hold her head erect and whistle a happy tune so that no-one would suspect she was afraid...

In my case, there hasn't ever been a Rosh HaShana when I didn't feel afraid and uncertain about what to do. You probably always felt as afraid as I did.

This Rosh HaShana is no exception. How can we not feel afraid when health crises have not been overcome, the war in Eastern Europe shows no signs of abating, the cost of living is skyrocketing and inflation is rampant, the climate is zigzagging, crime is surging, racist attitudes abound, Israel is menaced, and the earth alternates between fire and flood?

When the air is anguished, and the clouds are dark, when we feel it is UNTANEH TOKEF all over again? When we wonder who will live, and who will die? Who will be born into the world, and who will not reach old age? When even the sheep are distressed, even the ministering angels are ill at ease, and God probably shakes His head in anxiety about the state of His Creation.

What did Julie Andrews do when things were not going well? She pretended. She put on a show. She wanted people to get the impression that all was well. She whistled a happy tune.

How wonderful, but how unrealistic. Surely it is better to face facts. The Midrash (Pir'kei d'Rabbi Eliezer 31) suggests how. It says the world's problems need the SHOFAR. The ram which Avraham found in the thicket

and sacrificed in place of Yitzchak yielded two ram's-horn shofarot.

One shofar was for the here and now, resounding at Mount Sinai to arouse hearts to the Torah. The second horn is for the future, resounding to announce the day of redemption.

We blow the first shofar to know how to build a moral society, seeing in the other person the face of a brother or sister and looking after each other and dealing with the world's problems one by one in a constructive way.

We blow the second shofar to say that human redemption will come through faith, and not fear; hope, and not hatred; forgiveness, and not folly; practical effort, and not pretence...

OZ