

*Preview*

# 70 Days for 70 Years

Remember the past  
to build the future





*“I should like someone to  
remember that there once lived  
a person named David Berger.”*

David in his last letter, Vilna 1941

# ***Introduction***

70 years ago over six million of our people were murdered in the darkest period of our history.

On the 25th January 2015, the United Synagogue (UK) will be launching the '70 Days for 70 Years' project. Created in the UK and commencing to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, this project will engage hundreds of thousands of Jews in an uplifting educational and memorial programme across the globe. Countries that are taking part include Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the USA.

Building on the previous success of the '60 Days for 60 Years' project, participants will receive a copy of a specially published book of 70 inspirational essays written by internationally renowned educators, historians and scholars - to be read, one a day for 70 days. Accompanying the book will be a memorial card giving the details of one victim of the Holocaust who they will learn for 70 days in memory of (information provided by Yad Vashem).

During the project the '70 Days for 70 Years' website - [www.70for70.com](http://www.70for70.com) will have additional materials relating to the essays and it will also list all the events and activities that are being organised by communities for the project.

In the UK, every United Synagogue household will receive the '70 Days' pack. Other communities and organisations are currently signing up to participate. If you or your community would like to know more please email **info@70for70.com**.

At this difficult time in world affairs where we are seeing a rise in extremism across the globe and a significant rise in antisemitism, the message of the '70 Days' project is clear – That, as Jews, we should be proud and knowledgeable about our heritage and history and stand up for our community wherever we see persecution and injustice.

*The following essays are a preview from the '70 Days for 70 Years' book that will cover themes including Holocaust and Rebirth, Living Judaism and Philosophy.*

70 years ago a nation rose up to gather us together to destroy us. 70 years on we are gathering together to learn in memory of those who were murdered and to learn for our future.

**To remember the past to build the future**

**Rabbi Andrew Shaw**

September 2014

Tishrei 5775

Sara Rigler

## Yom Kippur: The Crime I Didn't Commit

On a recent visit to Michigan, I stayed with Circuit Court Judge Alice Gilbert and was intrigued by her brilliant idea of requiring every person convicted in her courtroom to confront the consequences of their actions by writing an essay answering four questions:

How did my crime affect me? How did it affect my family? My community? And what can be done to prevent such crimes in the future?

She has two boxes full of essays (with names deleted) and I picked out the most severe crimes: a drunken driver who had killed a teenage girl; a high school student who had given birth to a baby, stuffed him into her closet and gone off to school etc. I sat down to read these dramatic confrontations of human beings with their shadow selves and the epiphanies that ensued.

What I read, instead, was essay after essay explaining why the writer was not *really* guilty of the crime. Totally ignoring the judge's four questions, each convict wrote at length how events had conspired to produce the horrific outcome and that it was absolutely not the fault of the writer.

The drunk driver wrote that it was the fault of the weather; it was the fault of the girl herself; it was even the fault of the police. As for the high school girl and the dead baby, she didn't realize she was pregnant until the baby started coming out, and anyway she did everything she could to save the baby's life, and... Why is it so hard for people to admit they did wrong?

The first step in the process of *teshuvah* (of returning to God through repentance) is to admit, "I did it!" A Jew confesses transgressions not to a priest or any other human being, but to God – in

the privacy of his or her own home. This is where the process of change begins, but trying to change without admitting wrong-doing is like trying to ski without snow.

#### THE SHREK FALLACY

Three major obstacles keep us humans from that simple act of admitting wrong-doing. The first is a sense of “I’m as rotten as my sins.”

The human ego is too wobbly a table to load it up with a couple hundred pounds of wrong-doings. If I admit that I cheated on my exams, then I’m a despicable, dishonest cheat. If I admit that my outbursts of anger traumatize my children then I’m an out-of-control, savage ogre. My wrong actions are not simply the garments that clothe my essential self; they become my image of who I really am.

This misconception derives from the ‘Shrek fallacy.’ Shrek famously declared, “Ogres are like onions. They have layers,” meaning that they are complex beings with multiple layers of personality components. Since human beings, too, have layers, the faulty syllogism is that human beings are like onions. This is a lethal analogy because, if you take an onion apart, layer by layer, in the end you will find . . . nothing.

This fear – that really we are nothing but the sum total of our personality traits and actions, with nothing inside – leads to the existential angst that fuels justification and rationalization at the expense of admitting our faults. And justification and rationalization are splintery boards to bolster up the wobbly table.

Judaism counters the Shrek fallacy with the assertion that a human being is essentially a divine soul. If you take off the layers of personality and actions, you will find shining within a perfect, pure, immutable divine soul.

The soul is like a candle flame. It cannot be tarnished or stained in any way. Transgressions are simply curtains strung around the flame. Many layers of thick curtains, especially room darkening curtains, can shroud the flame so that its light is totally invisible, but the flame itself is unaffected.

The more a person – through the spiritual practices of the *Torah* – identifies with this inner core of spirituality, the more courage the person will have to admit wrongdoing. He or she

realizes that sin adheres to the essential self as little as dirt adheres to fire – which is to say, not at all. Thus teshuvah is predicated on establishing a sense of oneself as a soul, on connecting to one's inner core of good. Confession is the first step in taking down the curtains that veil the soul.

#### THE 'I CAN'T CHANGE' FALLACY

My daughter and I were planning a trip to Hawaii. I spent hours on researching and reading. I would never have invested so much time and energy if I didn't believe that we would get to Hawaii. If I were toying with travel to an impossible destination – I would not have spent time planning the journey.

To plunge into the journey called teshuvah and admit your wrongdoings requires a belief that you can actually arrive at the destination – called 'real change.' This conviction is, therefore, undermined by the fallacy that your actions are determined by heredity and environment, and you cannot change.

If teshuvah's destination is a fantasy Shangri-La location, you'll never embark on the journey.

Countering this fallacy, Judaism insists that human beings have free will in the moral sphere. Everything is determined by God *except* your choices between right and wrong. You can choose not to cheat on your exams, not to yell at your children, not to gossip, not to carry a grudge, etc.

The 'I Can't Change' fallacy is fuelled by your past failures in trying to reach your desired destination. Mark Twain quipped, "Quit smoking? It's easy! I've done it hundreds of times." If you have tried to stop smoking (or yelling or cheating or gossiping) many times, and each time you succumbed to the habit, then you are easy prey for the 'I Can't Change' fallacy.

I personally know people who – through the Jewish ethical practice of *Mussar* – changed themselves from screaming banshees who yelled at their kids several times a day to parents who almost never yell at their kids.

#### THE 'GOD IS TOO SMALL' FALLACY

The third obstacle to honestly admitting our transgressions is our hopelessness that the mess we made can ever be cleaned up.

But the life-altering process of teshuvah changes who we are so fundamentally that God erases our past. The result of our teshuvah is that God performs the miracle of expunging our sin. It's as if it never happened. If we do the requisite steps of confession, regret, and making a concrete plan to change (and, when another person was involved, asking forgiveness and making restitution), then God cleans up the mess.

Years ago a woman whom I'll call Beth came to Jerusalem bearing a deep dark secret. Beth enrolled in a programme that teaches Judaism. When the month of Elul (preceding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) rolled around and Beth started learning about teshuvah, she recoiled. She had committed a sin so grievous that she was sure that teshuvah was impossible.

When Beth was 19 years old, she had had an affair with one of her college professors. This professor was married, with children. For young Beth, the affair was an escapade, but it turned out that the professor was serious about their relationship. He divorced his wife. Beth, however, ditched the professor, but he did not return to his family. As the years passed, Beth was haunted by what she had done. She was sure that there was no way to cleanse from her soul the stain of destroying an entire family.

One of Beth's teachers took her to a prominent rabbi. He told her, "Your problem is that you think God is too small to forgive big sins." He explained that her sin was indeed big, but she had to realize that God is bigger. Beth protested that she could not possibly fix the damage she had caused. The rabbi advised her to learn the laws of *lashon hara* (proper speech). When other women would see that Beth never gossiped or divulged secrets, they would come to her to confide their conflicts. Eventually, a woman who was grappling with the same temptation would confide in her, and Beth was able to guide the woman away from committing that sin. That would be her expiation.

With an infinite God, teshuvah is always possible.

Once we realize that our sins do not define us, that we can indeed change, and that God can absolve us for even the worst misdeeds, we can be brave enough to admit that we did wrong. That's the beginning of teshuvah.

Mordechai Ginsbury

## The Symbol and the Sign

Rev Leslie Hardman a"h was Minister of Hendon United Synagogue from 1946 until 1979. In those years, through his passion and zest for Jewish living, his commitment, enthusiasm, inspirational leadership and, together with his wonderful wife, Josi a"h, Rev Hardman 'grew' the community into one of the largest and most influential of British-Jewry. A significant part of Rev Hardman's formidable personality was undoubtedly shaped by his experiences as a British Army Chaplain during the course of the Second World War and in particular by his personal involvement in supporting and reviving the shattered spirits of his fellow Jews who had been incarcerated in the infamous Bergen Belsen concentration camp.

After Rev Hardman's passing in 2008, some of us in the Hendon community, galvanised by one of Rev Hardman's grandsons, Daniel Verbov, joined with him to produce a commemorative book – *My Dear Friends* – which is filled with Rev Hardman's teachings, sayings and stories. Amongst them is one of the most poignant illustrations of the holiness of the Jewish spirit which I have thus far encountered. (*The story was adapted, with publisher's permission, Vallentine Mitchell, 2009*)

Rev Hardman related how one Friday morning a middle-aged man, a survivor of the unimaginable horrors of Bergen Belsen, knocked hesitantly on his office door and asked to be given something to eat. Rev Hardman was somewhat surprised for he knew that the British Authorities were doing whatever they could to provide for the material needs of the survivors. The man explained that he was looking for something a little special, with which to honour the Sabbath day. Rev Hardman produced a can of sardines from a stock of tinned items which he kept in his cupboard, which was accepted with 'pathetic eagerness'.

As he was about to close the cupboard Rev Hardman felt a restraining hand on his arm and a voice saying “Rabbi, wait, please, please.” “What is it?” he asked. “I saw the *Tefillin!*” The man spoke with awe in his voice, gazing at the bag containing Rev Hardman’s Tefillin which lay on the bottom shelf of his cupboard.

“It’s four years since I wore them last,” he said, his eyes fixed on the well-remembered shapes outlined in the velvet bag. As Rev Hardman brought his Tefillin to the table the man put down his sardines and picked up the Tefillin with shaking hands. Sobs clutched at his throat and tears ran unheeded down his puffy cheeks.

“Rabbi, please . . . please may I use them?” he asked.

With still shaking hands the man took the Tefillin out of the bag. Reverently he kissed the hand Tefillin and having undone the leather strap and taken the cover off the box he placed it on his upper left arm reciting the blessing. He then removed the second box from the bag, kissing it too and then placed in on his head reciting the second blessing. He wound the remainder of the strap around his middle finger and back on to the palm of his hand reciting the verses from Hosea (2:21–22) ‘And I will betroth You to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness, and in loving kindness, and in mercy; I will betroth You to me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord.’

For over three thousand years the Jewish people had donned Tefillin daily, other than festivals and *Shabbatot*. The man had loyally done this himself, presumably from his *Bar Mitzvah* until the time when the evil Nazis snatched him, together with millions of his brethren, from all that was familiar, warm and secure – just because he was a Jew! Through four long years of a living ‘hell on earth’ he had been denied this and all other precious *mitzvot* – all he could have done was to pray. How he must have prayed for freedom, for mercy, for strength . . . he must have asked God to spare him beatings, typhus or worse . . . to save his family, restore his people . . . or maybe just for a morsel of food or a drop of water. Or perhaps he had simply called to his God: “Lord where are You?”

Some of his prayers had been answered. Once more he knew what it was to eat and drink, to wash oneself, to put on clothes and to sleep securely. As a Jew he had begun to reconnect with the laws and customs of his religion which had come down to him through

the generations over thousands of years. In the act of putting on Tefillin he was renewing the bond of connection between himself and his Maker.

The man became calm, his hands ceased to shake, the lines smoothed around his eyes and mouth and his whole body relaxed. He began to pray and it was as though a warmth was rising from the *siddur* he was clutching, permeating his very being.

Rev Hardman gave the man some space moving away from him until he had finished. The man removed the Tefillin as lovingly as he had donned them, carefully replacing them in their bag.

He told Rev Hardman: "I felt that God was pushing me away from Him. With every bad thing that was done to me it seemed that He was pushing me further and further away; but I clung to Him, I would not lose Him, I wanted him always." And then he quoted from Psalms (42:2), "As the hart longs for streams of water, so does my soul long after You, O God," "Rabbi," the man said, "I thought God no longer wanted me but when you put these Tefillin in my hands it was a sign . . . He has allowed me to come back to Him!"

The man straightened up and wiped tears from his eyes. Rev Hardman, also unable to control his emotions took the Tefillin bag and put it into the man's hands. "Take these," he said, "keep them. May God bless you."

As Rev Hardman turned back to his desk the first thing he saw was the can of sardines. The man had gone!

# Glossary

*A"h* – acronym for ‘*alav/aleha ha-shalom*’ which translates as ‘may peace be upon him/her’

*Bar Mitzvah* – a boy who has reached the age of 13 and is consequently obliged to observe the commandments; also a ceremony marking the fact that that a boy has achieved this age

*Elul* - the sixth month of the Hebrew calendar

*Lashon Hara* – is the Jewish legal term for derogatory speech about others

*Mitzvot* (plural of *mitzvah*) – Any of the 613 commandments that Jews are obligated to observe; it can also refer to any Jewish religious obligation, or more generally to any good deed

*Mussar* – Jewish system for personal growth and character improvement

*Rosh Hashanah* – The Jewish New Year

*Siddur* – Prayer book

*Shabbatot* (plural of *Shabbat*) – the Jewish Sabbath

*Tefillin* – Biblical passages on parchment scrolls placed in small leather boxes. They are affixed to the head and arm with leather straps; worn during morning prayers by adult men

*Teshuvah* – Repentance for sin

*Yom Kippur* – The Day of Atonement; a day set aside for fasting and repenting for sins

## Biographies

RABBI MORDECHAI SHLOMO GINSBURY has been Rabbi of Hendon United Synagogue from 1999, Principal of Hasmonean Primary School since 2003 and Director of P'eir (*Promoting Excellence In Rabbis*), the United Synagogue's support, training and networking facility for US Rabbis and Rebbetzins since 2009. He previously served, for nearly 14 years, as Rabbi of the Prestwich Hebrew Congregation, Manchester.

SARA YOHEVED RIGLER is the author of three best-sellers: *Holy Woman*, *Lights from Jerusalem*, and *Battle Plans: How to Fight the Yetzer Hara* (with Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller), as well as her new release: *God Winked: Tales and Lessons from My Spiritual Adventures*. She is a popular international lecturer on subjects of Jewish spirituality.

# ***What people worldwide said about '60 Days for 60 Years'***

"I just want to thank you for inspiring me to learn more about the Holocaust and my person Abraham Teich. Apart from helping my Hebrew reading, it's taught me a lot about life and how I as a teenager can live it to the fullest"

***Pnina Mills – Australia***

"I came home from university this weekend to find my dad had left a copy of 60 Days for 60 Years on my bed for me. I began reading it and I found it incredibly insightful, the different chapters are short, yet gave me so much. I just want to thank you for putting together this book which is so useful for people of all ages, especially young people who are confused about parts of Judaism and sceptical about parts.

***Stacy Pinkus, London***



Assisted by Yad Vashem



Yad Vashem



**The US**  
LIVING • LEARNING • CARING



**70 Days  
for 70 Years**

Remember the past to build the future

305 Ballards Lane, London, N12 8GB, UK  
**T** +44 (0)20 8343 6289 **E** [info@70for70.com](mailto:info@70for70.com)  
**W** [www.70for70.com](http://www.70for70.com)  [@70days70years](https://twitter.com/70days70years)