



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

ROSH HASHANAH 5776 • 2015

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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September 14, 2015  
Rosh Hashanah - Day 1

**HaSatan and Iran**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5776 Enter the Heart”*

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## ABSTRACT

It is no coincidence that the ratification (or not) of the nuclear deal with Iran falls smack on Rosh Hashanah.

And so this sermon is going to focus on Iran and *HaSatan* (has a kind of poetic ring to it, no?) because ever since the fall of the Shah in 1979 and the rise of the Ayatollahs and Islamism, Iran has referred to the United States as the “Great Satan,” and Israel as the “Little Satan.”

It’s true that, in Judaism, we don’t really focus on *HaSatan* or “Say-tan” (as we pronounce it in English). Yet, surprisingly, we do find many references to Satan when it comes to Rosh Hashanah.

It is on Rosh Hashanah that the first human being was created and, on that very day, Satan – in the person of the snake – manipulated Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Ever since then, once a year on Rosh Hashanah, Satan comes to litigate against the Jews in the heavenly court. And there are various customs we engage in to trick and fool him.

But who is Satan, and why is he here? What’s his connection with Iran, nuclear energy, and the destruction of Israel? And how do we get rid of him?

This Rosh Hashanah, when *all* energy – nuclear and otherwise – is sent down for the entire world and the entire year, it is up to us to ensure that it falls only into the right hands: ours.

## HASATAN AND IRAN: HAPPY NU(CLEAR) YEAR, AND OTHER SATANIC VERSES

### 1. Current Events

*Ketiva v'chatima tova, Leshana Tova Umetuka*, a Happy and Sweet New Year – 5776 – to one and all.

Exactly 5776 years ago, the Creator of the Universe fashioned every molecule of existence and formed every particle of being with a very specific purpose in mind – to make a home for the Divine on this physical earth.

So what went wrong?

How did the world become so undivine, more devilish than godly? More diabolical than divine?

All of history has seen man (created in the Divine Image) fighting man. In particular the year past has brought to the forefront the uncomfortable reality that in some places in the world the original divine dream seems to be a distant dream indeed. What, with the proliferation and entrenchment of ISIS and, as we speak, the vote over whether or not we should ink a deal with Iran (the world's largest terrorist organization, sponsor and financier).

Instead of a home for peace, unity and God, parts of the world appear to be a homeless shelter for hate, darkness and evil.

What better time than Rosh Hashanah to ask, “Where did God’s plan for the perfect world detour?” and, “How can we – you and I – get it back on track?”

Nothing is random. And the fact that the Congressional vote is happening on Rosh Hashanah clearly holds important lessons for the world and for us.

To understand these events, I would like to approach this subject from an unconventional angle – that of the Devil, who is called *HaSatan* in Hebrew and Satan in English.

And there is no better way to open a conversation about Satan than with a little humor.

## 2. Devil of a Player (Joke)

One day, Satan challenged God to a baseball game.

Smiling, the Lord proclaimed, "You don't have a chance. I've got Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, Jackie Robinson, Joe DiMaggio ... all the greatest players up here."

"Yes," laughed Satan. "But I have all the umpires!"

## 3. Who Is Satan?

We know that ever since the fall of the Shah in 1979 and the rise of the Ayatollahs and Islamism, Iran has referred to the United States as the "Great Satan," and Israel as the "Little Satan."

In Judaism, however, we don't really focus on Satan. Yet, surprisingly, we do find a number of references to Satan when it comes to Rosh Hashanah.

It is on Rosh Hashanah that the first human being was created and, on that very day, Satan – incarnated as a snake – manipulated Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Ever since then, once a year on Rosh Hashanah, Satan comes to litigate against the Jews in the heavenly court.<sup>1</sup>

How do we know that?

Well, for example, we find that, in the Book of Job,<sup>2</sup> Satan is described as accompanying the celestial angels to stand beside God. The commentaries on this passage explain that this was the Day of Judgment – that is, Rosh Hashanah, when Satan comes to refute the Jews' claims that they are fulfilling their divine mission and should be blessed with life, health and sustenance to carry on with their mandate in the New Year.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rosh Hashanah 16a.

<sup>2</sup> Job 1:6-7.

Thus we learn that, on Rosh Hashanah, we the Jewish people are placed in the unenviable position of being defendants in the courtroom of life, and we must try to make the case that we are working hard to make the world a better place. Meanwhile, Satan, acting the prosecutor and our adversary, tries to find fault in our commitment and our work. The case will be decided by God, the Judge, who will rule if we shall be allowed to continue or not – in effect decreeing a verdict of life or death. Hence, Rosh Hashana is called the Day of Judgment, when we pray, do teshuva (repentance/return) imploring God to write and seal us in the Book of Life.

Now we don't expect Satan to play fair. Indeed, the devilish baseball joke contains a strand of profound truth: while the positive forces in creation endeavor to play the game of life fairly, the negative forces engage in subterfuge, manipulating us and the rules to gain an advantage and achieve their end goal. To fix the game, all the negative forces need is to control the umpires – the people in control of our governments, companies, schools, anyone in charge of our lives; fill in the blanks – as the umpires are in charge of the rules.

So while the players – you and I – try to play a sublime game, the negative forces try to manipulate the umpires and their calls (turning balls into strikes).

So what's a Jew to do? Well, we also have a few tricks up our sleeve. Indeed, on Rosh Hashanah we have various customs all designed to fool Satan and thwart his diabolical plans.

#### 4. Tricking Satan

Yep, that is what I said. A number of Rosh Hashanah customs have no other purpose than to dupe Satan.

For example, the Talmud<sup>3</sup> states that the reason we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is to confuse Satan.

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<sup>3</sup>Rosh Hashanah 16b.

Here we are standing before the heavenly court, and Satan is trying to get his case against the Jews together – his persecuting witnesses, his damning evidence – when suddenly a resounding blast echoes through the courtroom, distracting the very distractor himself. And when the Satan hears how much the Jews love the Torah – for they are blasting away as the Torah commands – he becomes disheartened and gives up.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to blowing the shofar, there are a few other Jewish customs<sup>5</sup> that are intended to confuse or trick Satan:

- We do not mention *Rosh Chodesh* (the start of the month) in the Rosh Hashanah prayers, so that Satan should not know when the month begins.
- In the month of Elul leading up to Rosh Hashanah, we blow the shofar every single morning. Yet, when it comes to the morning before Rosh Hashanah, *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, we do not blow the shofar at all. Why? To trick Satan in thinking the Day of Judgment has already passed.
- We begin the new cycle of reading the Torah on Simchat Torah after the conclusion of Sukkot, and not on Rosh Hashanah, so that Satan should not know when the year begins and when it ends.

Now, you are thinking, “Yeah, right!” And I admit it sounds very strange. I mean, can we actually fool Satan? Hasn’t he been around the block a few times – indeed, more than five-thousand times – surely he realizes by now what we’re up to.

And why should we even try? Why this focus on a belly-slithering snake, whose sole purpose is negativity and criticism? And on Rosh Hashanah no less!

In Judaism overall, we don’t obsess about Satan the way other religions do. We aren’t a devilish – a devil-consumed – religion. So why now – during the Days of Awe – are we concerned with Satan?!

And how does this relate to Iran – the country that thinks we are Satan?

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<sup>4</sup> Rashi on the Talmud.

<sup>5</sup> See the Levush 581:1, 3 (with Eliyhau Zuta commentary), 582:6; Tur, Orach Chaim 581; Magen Avraham to Orach Chaim ibid; Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 591:6.

To answer these questions, we first must understand who or what Satan is, and to do that we have to go back to this day, 5776 years ago, to that lovely place called the Garden of Eden.

## 5. The Snake and Satan

As we read in the Book of Genesis – a story all of us are familiar with – Satan (in the body of a serpent) tricked Adam and Eve into eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and thus mixed up good and evil, light and darkness in the world.

How do we know the snake was Satan?

We know it from the Zohar,<sup>6</sup> the seminal work of Kabbalah, and also from the Talmud,<sup>7</sup> and I quote, “He is Satan, He is the Evil Inclination, He is the Angel of Death.” All these three are one and the same.

Thus, even though negativity, evil and darkness take on many forms, they all come from the same root. And that root is Satan.

But why is he called Satan? Where does that term come from?

The main clue comes from the Torah story of the evil prophet Balaam who wanted to curse the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. He was riding his donkey, on his way to do just that, when ... *an angel of the Lord stationed himself on the road to thwart (l'satan) him...*<sup>8</sup>

From the Hebrew verb to thwart *l'satan*, we learn that Satan is a thwarting, an adversary. He litigates against the Jews and tries to thwart their mission of making this world a home for the Divine.

How does he do this?

By intermingling evil with good, darkness with light – as he did when he tempted Adam and Eve at the Tree of Knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> Zohar, Genesis 35b.

<sup>7</sup> Bava Batra 16a.

<sup>8</sup> Numbers 22:22.



This volatile mix of good and evil confuses us from achieving moral clarity. Most if not all our errors and iniquities come from not seeing clearly and being able to distinguish between what is right and wrong. The serpent Satan is wily and scheming – “the serpent was the most cunning”<sup>9</sup> – and knew how to confuse Adam and Eve, ensnaring them in a tangled mix of good and evil, enticing them to eat from the Tree.

## 6. A Matter of Perfection

Now, Judaism teaches that if Adam and Eve were in the right state of mind – that is, if they waited until they were spiritually perfect and completely refined, had they waited until Shabbat<sup>10</sup> – then they *could* have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and everything would have turned out just fine. In fact, the entire world would reach its perfection.

But the cunning snake got in the way. He convinced Adam and Eve that they were already perfect – when they clearly were not. He told them that, since they were created in the Divine Image, they could eat the forbidden fruit without working on themselves.

The end result is what we all know and live with daily.

In our world, Satan – the “evil inclination” – is ever-present. He isn’t scary looking, indeed he is deceptively alluring. Sometimes he wears the garb of a movie star, sometimes of a wise politician, sometimes of a saintly Jew. All the while he seeks to confuse us with his message – that perfecting ourselves, working on ourselves, is not necessary.

How do we combat his wiles? What is the antidote?

To thwart Satan (*l’satan et HaSatan*) we must work to perfect ourselves. To honestly appraise our situation and with integrity grow and improve our lives. This is how we will render him irrelevant, since he only thrives in places of confusion, of imperfection and fragmentation.

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 3:1.

<sup>10</sup> See Sifsei Kohen (Shach) Kedoshim 19:23. Likkutei Torah Kedoshim 29a.



## 7. Nuclear Knowledge

And all this leads us to the modern day Tree of Knowledge, which – with some poetic license – we shall call the Tree of Nuclear Knowledge.

In the right time and under the right system of controls, nuclear energy is a powerful force for good, for it can energize humanity like no other. But like all powerful forces, placed in the wrong hands it can destroy humanity like no other.

So the issue isn't nuclear energy – the issue is who possesses it. The issue isn't the Tree of Knowledge (its name alone hints at something profound and holy) – the issue is maturity, humility, responsibility, context and timing.

In the hands of God, the Tree of Knowledge is holy. In the hands of Satan, it is evil. Nuclear energy in the hands of a divine nation is holy, constructive, but in the hands of a hate-mongering regime, it is evil and destructive.

No one cares if I use a knife to cut bread for a sandwich, but everybody cares if a psychopath runs up and down Main Street brandishing that same knife. What's the difference? It's not the knife but rather how it is used and by whom.

So the issue isn't nuclear power; the issue is how the nuclear power is to be used.

How do we ensure that it is used for positive ends? We apply the same tactics to whatever evil nation seeks to possess it with nefarious ends in mind that we apply to Satan.

## 8. Combatting Satan and Other Evils

Satan is wily, craft, and cunning. He dresses up like a devout Jew and uses holiness, mitzvot and Torah to trick us into doing wrong by telling them it's right.

So how to combat an entity that uses mitzvot for evil means? By taking away those mitzvot. As follows:

When the mention of *Rosh Chodesh* is omitted, and the shofar is not blown on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, and we postpone the new cycle of Torah reading – the ever inquisitive Jew has to ask himself: Why am I deprived of these mitzvot? And the answer is: To fool Satan.

The inquisitive Jew then has to ask: What's with this Satan? Why does Satan exist in the first place? How come he's here in this holy place? And the answer is: Satan exists only in places of imperfection.

Which, of course, causes the Jew to ask: What imperfections exists in my sphere of influence that allow this sneaky serpent into my life – to such an extent that I have to forego all these mitzvot?

This then moves and motivates the Jew to perfect his life, to iron out the wrinkles and fill in the cracks, to illuminate the shadows and color the gray scales of life with vibrant colorful rays of soul.

## 9. Inspiration for Teshuvah

And then, on Rosh Hashanah, when the sound waves of the shofar blasts enter the Jew's ears, he is eager to return to himself and to return to God. For when the Jew hears the tiny voice in his soul that says he must remove those imperfections – meaning the small or large gaps that allow Satan to exist – the Jew is truly inspired. He is inspired from within, and inspiration from within is so much deeper than inspiration from without.

The only justification to suspend all those mitzvot is because that anomaly awakens in us a greater sense of *teshuvah* – of repentance that facilitates a return to God and His Torah.

This is what is meant to happen on Rosh Hashanah.

On this day *all* energy – nuclear and otherwise – is designated and allotted to all the worlds. And our prayers and conduct influence whether that the energy will be light, positive and peaceful. We have to make sure that it is never the opposite.

When we look and see that the world is imperfect, that Satan is still around conniving to trick us into no-good, we must dig deeper and find more light. Every adversary and every form of resistance is meant to achieve one thing: to serve as a catalyst and springboard to catapult us to greater heights.

We must double down, increase our efforts and dedicate all of our resources and energy in order to ensure that, through our prayers, actions, faith and commitments, every evil force – be it Iran or *HaSatan* – becomes marginalized and irrelevant. As we are taught, that a little light dispels much darkness.

Darkness gets empowered when we give it credence. Introduce light, infused with strength and courage, and we are in a far better position to do away with any negative force.

## 10. Our Attitude

Iran is only as powerful as we allow it to be. Every bully is emboldened by our show of weakness. And every tyrant gets stronger by confusing the other side with pretenses of putting on a good face and negotiating in good faith. This two-faced approach – smiling and making deals and agreements while spouting venom and threats against the West and Israel – can confuse and thus weaken our resolve.

We are defeated when we allow ourselves to be convinced that Iran is using God's gift of energy for peaceful means, when in truth Iran desires nuclear power not to energize its citizens but to threaten to destroy others. We cannot allow ourselves to buy into any form of deception – masquerading evil objectives in a cloak of legitimacy.

The solution is to look with clear eyes and not to show a weak and tentative hand. This clarity and strength is the best antidote to expose charlatans and sabre rattlers. By standing strong and being clear headed we have the responsibility and the power to neutralize their hateful regime and to vanquish every form of hate.

Satan is only as powerful as we allow him to be. But the tragedy is when we convince ourselves that Satan is an innocent angel, and buy into his masquerade.

When we mend the cracks and schisms, when we fuse all divisions through our observance of the Torah, life's ultimate unifier, then the divine wisdom we acquire will enable us to see through and beyond any obstacle that Satan has put in our way.

When we perfect ourselves, the world is perfected as well.

It is a distraction to be intimidated by Iran when we are supposed to be focusing on the fact that the world was created for us, and we have the power to transform the universe.

If we channel *all* of our power, nuclear ability, and infinite possibility to good and light, nothing will be left for the opposite, and the opposite will wither, shrivel and cease to exist.

### 11. Rebbe Rashab (Inspirational Story<sup>11</sup>)

Soon after the passing of the Rebbe Maharash (the fourth Chabad Rebbe), his son, the Rebbe Rashab assumed leadership of the Chabad Movement. At this time, a certain Chassid came to him, begging for a blessing for a specific, merciful thing that was essential to him. The Rebbe Rashab demurred and did not give this blessing.

So, broken-hearted and lost, the Chassid left the room and dissolved into uncontrollable tears. The Rebbe Rashab's brother, Rabbi Zalman Aaron (also known as the Raza) asked the Chassid what was bothering him. When the Chassid told him what happened, the Raza entered the Rebbe Rashab's chamber and inquired as to how it was possible that a Rebbe would withhold a blessing from his Chassid who is obviously in dire straits and torn apart by anguish!

The Rebbe Rashab said that the Chassid should come back to see him once again. When the Chassid entered, the Rebbe blessed him and the blessing was soon fulfilled.

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<sup>11</sup> As shared by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in a talk delivered on Simchat Torah 5739 (1978), printed in Likkutei Sichot vol. 24 p. 227 (cf. vol. 15, p. 126).

The story begs the question: If the Rebbe could bless the Chassid and help him, why didn't he do so in the first place? Why did the man have to weep and complain before the Rebbe agreed to give the blessing?

Because of the Chassid's spiritual state when he first came into the Rebbe Rashab's chamber, he could not hold such a large blessing and influx of light required to answer his prayers. And thus the Rebbe could not help him. He needed to reach a deeper state of need and lack in order to open him up to be able to contain the blessing.

The Rebbe's initial rejection broke him down, so that his soul was bathed in pure tears and humility, and he became a new person, a new entity, one that was open to the infinite light and blessing of God Almighty.

## 12. Our Secret Weapon: Us! (Conclusion)

When we become aware that in order to dupe Satan and all the negative forces we are deprived of mentioning *Rosh Chodesh* on the Shabbat that blesses Tishrei, and the shofar is not blown on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, and we postpone the new cycle of Torah reading – that evokes in us a deeper cry and pining to connect with the Divine.

That in turn opens up new channels of blessings, and indeed vanquishes Satan and all his evil conspiracies, and we come away victorious on this Day of Judgment.

This is it. We pray for God to stop any inherent evil, but we pray just as hard for God to reveal the inherent good within us all.

When we tap it, we ensure that no evil, no serpent, no negativity takes hold and we guarantee that Satan takes his last breath, that the Angel of Death slaughters itself and all death with it, that the evil inclination is inclined only toward goodness.

Remember: Always think positive. We have all the power we need to achieve our greatest aspirations, and to automatically vanquish and thwart any adversary. Our greatest enemy is not without, but within:

Losing our self-confidence, certainty and clarity. When we feel we are weak we become weak. Conversely, when we feel we are strong we become strong.

As the New Year begins let us all set the tone for the entire year by resolving to think positive.

Think good and it will be good. How your neurons are fired that's how they get wired.

*Ketivah Vachatimah Tova* – may we be inscribed and sealed for goodness in the Book of Life!