We the sheep

זוכרנו לחיים מלך חפץ בחיים

Rosh haShana, the Jewish New Year, is the day of judgment. On that day God examines our actions and decides what we deserve for this coming year, based on what we have done this past year.

There is a very beautiful metaphor that our rabbis mentioned in the Mishna to illustrate this profound idea. In Rosh haShana כל באי עולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרום *“All human beings walk before the Almighty as sheep [in front of the shepherd] “*

Once a year the shepherd gathers all his animals in a barn to carefully examine each of them. An expert shepherd needs just a few seconds to “judge” each animal. First, he takes a look at the animal and then examines with his hand the quality of the animal’s wool and the body of the sheep. After this short inspection, the shepherd takes his brush and marks each sheep with a different color.   If the wool of the sheep is of good quality, the shepherd will mark the back of the sheep with, say, a yellow color. This means that this animal will be sent to shearing. A sheep that is healthy and strong will be marked with blue paint, which means that this sheep will be destined for reproduction. Now, if the wool is not of good quality and the sheep is not in a good condition for reproduction, the shepherd will mark the sheep with a red color, which indicates that this sheep will be slaughtered and used for food. In those few seconds, the shepherd determines the destiny of each animal for the next cycle.

Our rabbis used this beautiful illustration to explain how we humans are judged by HaShem, our Shepherd, on Rosh HaShana. The Almighty looks carefully at each one of us. HaShem observes what we have done and have not done during the previous year. He sees if we have grown, learned, and improved, or if we have wasted our time… Then, He determines our destiny, marking us for success, for good health, and for life or Has veShalom for nothing of that….

Two very important observations.

1. How do we know what color the mark that we carry on our backs after Rosh haShana is? The sheep walk around the barn without knowing what color the mark on their back is. Similarly, we human beings can not know for sure what color

is stamped on our backs… We might think that we have done many good things during the past year, but we can not be sure that what we have done is enough in the eyes of HaShem. Perhaps, knowing my full potential, God expected much more from me. Therefore, since we cannot be sure of the color we have been marked, we ALL ASSUME (perhaps as a strategy) that we carry a red mark.

2. What now? Our advantage over the sheep is that, unlike the sheep, our destiny is still in a pending status, because the final verdict remains open until Yom Kippur! Thus, for the following week, we Jews pray to God, literallym for our lives. We repent, we cry, we admit our faults, we beg for forgiveness and we try to "convince the Shepherd" with credible arguments and actions, that, although during the past year we might have not done great, next year we will. On Yom Kippur, we devote the whole day exclusively to this matter: appealing the possible capital sentence pending on our backs! We resolve to improve and ultimately we appeal to HaShem's compassion to grant us "hayim", "life", a new opportunity to show Him that we are worthy of our existence. The magic of Teshuba, the process of repentance, is that HaShem gives us the opportunity to appeal His own verdict.