

“The Paradox of Growth”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

In the 1700s Oliver Goldsmith wrote a popular romance, *She Stoops to Conquer*. The paradoxical movements of the human heart are not only vertical: sometimes we rise by being low, but we also show closeness by demonstrating detachment, and discover that the shortest distance between two human points is anything but straight.

One learns this truth about spiritual growth from a ram's horn.

The shofar call begins with a *tekiah*, a long unbroken blast, progresses to shevarim, three wailing blasts, and finally, the staccato *teruah*. But the shofar always returns to the *tekiah*. That is the growth of a spirit: first wholeness, then brokenness, shattering, and, finally, a new, stronger wholeness.

Bowing teaches the same lesson. We begin upright, bow down, and return upright. At the end of the Amidah prayer, we even tip up our heels, as if to say, “I am higher now than when I began, for in the meantime I have bowed low.”

“Life breaks all of us,” wrote Hemingway, “and most are strong in the broken places.” That is wisdom the Rabbis knew and have taught for generations. We grow not only through triumph, but through failure, humility and even doubt. We stoop to rise, move away to come close, break to be whole, reach out to discover what is within. Softness can be strength and circuitry straightness. Confused? Then, according to the same logic, everything is clear.