

Ya'alu L'elef U'lerevava

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's Poem for Rosh Hashana

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Thousands and myriads shall ascend,
Like sheep, all the sons of the Earth;
And under the staff they shall be brought,
Without omission and without exception.
The verdict of the naughty and of the righteous,
In the Valley of Judgment shall be decided;
Before the Lord, for He has come
To judge the land.

Today orders are declared;
And the Earth stands on trial;
And on it the Rock began to display
The power of his hewing right arm.
And on it was established the awesome throne
Of He who dwells on high
Of He who crouches to view
That which are on heaven and on land.

And the foundations of the world were established,
And the pillars of the Earth's circle were raised.
And three barren ones were visited;
The faithful of Yeshurun born.
And those who were enslaved in Pathros
And by the Zoanites, they were redeemed;
And these on that day will be remembered,
To raise them up from the land.

Oh Sought Out one, crown today
Your King, and he will govern over you;
And sound your long and short blasts, until
The remembrance of your assemblies arises
To redeem your life from destruction
And he will shine his countenance upon you
To renew, as a phoenix, your youth
And, as with a gentle rain, will be sated the land

Raise up, oh silent distant dove,
A call from a distant land;
You who sound out from the depths,
Lift up a song to the heavens.
Perhaps the time has drawn near to fulfil
His word to the Valley Rose
"And your people are all righteous;
Forever, they shall inherit the land."

Translated by Gamliel Shmalo

יֵעָלוּ לְאֵלֶיךָ וְלִרְבִּיבָה
וְתַחַת הַשֵּׁבֶט יִבָּא
דִּין שׁוֹבֵבָה וְדִין שָׁבָה
לִפְנֵי ה' כִּי בָא

הַיּוֹם פְּקֻדוֹת נִקְרְאוֹת
וּבֹה הַחַל הַצּוֹר לְהִרְאוֹת
וּבֹה כּוֹנֵן פֶּס נִוְרְאוֹת
הַמְּשֻׁפְּלִי לְרְאוֹת

וּמוֹסְדֵי עוֹלָם נוֹסְדוּ
וְשָׁלֵשׁ עֲקָרוֹת נִפְקְדוּ
וְאַשּׁוּר בְּפַתְרוֹס הָעֶפְדוּ
וְאַלֶּה בּוֹ יִפְקְדוּ

דְּרוֹשָׁה כִּיּוֹם הַמְּלִיכִי
וְתִקְעִי וְהִרְעִי עַד כִּי
לְגֹאֵל מִשַּׁחַת תִּיַּיְכִי
לְחַדֵּשׁ כְּנֹשֶׁר נְעוּרֵיכִי

הַעֲלֵי יוֹנָת אֵלֶם רְחוּקִים
הַקּוֹרְאָה מִמְּעַמְקִים
אוֹלֵי יִקְרַב עֵת לְהִקְיָם
וְעַמְּךָ בְּלֶם צְדִיקִים

The Jews of Yemen have preserved the above poem by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (“Rihal”) as part of their Rosh Hashana liturgy, reciting it at the close of the second night’s service. It is woven from themes that are quite familiar to anyone acquainted with the early rabbinic literature about Rosh Hashana, and embroidered with evocative phrases from Tanach. A first reading reveals a pleasant and uplifting composition, like an elegant arrangement of favorite garden flowers in the hands of a master florist. Only after careful study and some reflection do Rihal’s novel interpretations of these familiar sources emerge, uncovering this philosopher/poet’s profound understanding of the Judgment Day.

The first stanza quotes from the Mishnah in Rosh Hashana as it is understood by the most basic of the three interpretations offered by the Babylonian Talmud:

On Rosh Hashana, all inhabitants of the Earth pass before Him like “benei Maron”...

Mishnah, Rosh Hashana 1:2

בראש השנה כל באי העולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון
משנה, ראש השנה א:ב

What are “benei Maron”? Here (in Babylon) we translate it as “like sheep” (like “benei amarana”).

Gemara, Rosh Hashana 18a

מאי כבני מרון הכא תרגימו כבני אמרנא
גמרא, ראש השנה יח.

Rashi and other commentators emphasize the individual inspection of each sheep; Rabbi Menachem Meiri adds the image of the shepherd’s staff. In the Ashkenazic liturgy, the image of sheep passing individually under the shepherd’s critical gaze has been memorialized famously and graphically in the hauntingly powerful poem *Un’taneh tokef*. As the chazzan invokes this ancient rabbinic image in bloodstained medieval verse, each Jew imagines himself being scrutinized individually by the Almighty, the Book of Life and the Book of Death opened before Him, with his personal verdict (“who by water; who by fire”) inscribed with his personal signature.

Trained as we may be by years of association, it is easy to read *Un’taneh tokef*, together with its emphasis on personal judgment, into the first stanza of Rihal’s poem: “. . .like sheep under the staff . . . the verdict of the naughty and of the righteous. . .” Franz Rosenzweig, the great 20th century Jewish philosopher, dedicated the last years of his rich life to Rihal’s poetry. He commented on this poem, “Thus, the New Year’s Day in the fall has become ‘The Day of Judgment,’ bringing the individual every year face to face with the awesomeness of the last judgment.”¹ But while this emphasis was certainly found by Rashi and other commentaries in the Mishnah and Talmud, and while Rihal appears to open in that direction as well, ultimately I cannot locate it in Rihal’s poem; at least here, Rihal’s conception of Rosh Hashana seems to be entirely different.

As much as Rihal drew from the Mishnah, he was also invoking the prophecies of Yoel, particularly from chapter 4:

2 I will gather all nations, and will bring them down into the Valley of Jehoshaphat; and I will enter into judgment with them there for My people and for My heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and divided My land...

(ב) וקבצתי את כל הגוים
והורדתי אל עמק יהושפט
ונשפטי עמם שם על עמי ונחלתי
ישראל אשר פזרו בגוים ואת ארצי

¹ Franz Rosenzweig, *Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Yehuda Halevi*, (2000, Albany) 27.

12 *Let the nations be stirred up, and ascend to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there will I sit to judge all the nations round about...*

14 *Multitudes, multitudes in the Valley of Judgment! For the day of the LORD is near in the Valley of Judgment.*

Yoel 4

חלקו:....
 (יב) יעוררו ויעלו הגוים אל עמק יהושפט כי שם אשב לשפט את כל הגוים מסביב:....
 (יד) המונים המונים בעמק החרוץ כי קרוב יום ה' בעמק החרוץ:
ספר יואל פרק ד

Rihal read the Mishnah and Talmud in the light of Yoel's prophecies, and in that light he saw the ascent of many multitudes, "thousands and myriads," only a small minority of whom are Jews, and many more "the sons of the Earth" who had exiled and abused God's holy people. As a philosopher, Rihal reserved personal Divine providence for Jews;² it is therefore implausible that the Mishnah claims that "all inhabitants of the Earth" receive an annual personal verdict. Rihal also may have had in mind the Midrash that states that Israel's emerging with the lulav in hand on Sukkot is a sign that Israel was previously victorious over the nations of the world on Rosh Hashana.³

The verdict, then, is not a personal verdict on individuals; rather, these are entire flocks, some "naughty" and some "righteous," which are ascending to the Valley of Judgment. Perhaps not even each nation will be judged on its own merit, but may face off against each other as litigants and antagonists. Furthermore, they may be driven to Yoel's horrifying inversion of Yeshayahu's hope: "Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning-hooks into spears."⁴

What is it about Rosh Hashana that threatens to precipitate such Divine wrath? In the second stanza, Rihal points to Rosh Hashana as the anniversary of the creation. On this day God mysteriously turned outward from his Aristotelian solipsism and formed a structured universe—"orders are declared"—a kingdom over which He would rule. In his act of creative majesty, God chose to sit on a throne of sovereignty, and to gaze down on the heavens and earth He had carved from the primordial hyle.⁵ And so on this day the very "earth stands on trial": have the creations maintained the divinely ordained order; or must there be a recalibration of that order, a breaking and resetting that is traumatic even as it heals?

Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of creation, of the metaphysical divine throne (second stanza), and of the physical "foundations of the world" and "pillars of the earth" (third stanza). But for Rihal, the great poet of Jewish national pride, the following *beraita* was pregnant with additional meaning:

The beraita states, Rabbi Eliezer says: on Tishrei the world was created; on Tishrei the Patriarchs were born; on Tishrei the Patriarchs died; on Passover Yitzchak was born; on Rosh Hashana Sarah, Rachel and Chana conceived; on Rosh Hashana Yosef was freed from prison; on Rosh Hashana our

תניא, רבי אליעזר אומר: בתשרי נברא העולם, בתשרי נולדו אבות, בתשרי מתו אבות, בפסח נולד יצחק, בראש השנה נפקדה שרה רחל וחנה, בראש השנה יצא יוסף מבית האסורין, בראש

² Kuzari 2:32; 4:3.

³ Midrash Tehilim 17. See also Tanchuma Parshat Emor 18.

⁴ Yoel 4:10.

⁵ Kuzari 1:67.

forefathers in Egypt were liberated from labor; in Nissan we were redeemed; in Tishrei we will be redeemed...

Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashana 10b–11a

השנה בטלה עבודה מאבותינו במצרים,
בניסן נגאלו, בתשרי עתידין ליגאל...
מסכת ראש השנה דף י: – י"א.

Not only the foundations of the world were created in Tishrei; the foundations of the Jewish nation were created in Tishrei. Not only was the earth born in Tishrei; the Jewish nation was born (in part), and will be born in full, in Tishrei. Once again, in this poem of Rihal (1) the subject of Rosh Hashana is less personal judgment and more a reordering of the world; (2) the object of divine attention is less the individual and more the nation; (3) the goal of Rosh Hashana is less about each person finding his place before God, and more about the Jewish people retuning to its proper place among the nations, and its proper place of honor within its Master's kingdom.

Given this reframing of the holiday, how may we Jews best participate in the annual recalibration of the universe in all its dimensions—metaphysical, physical and national? God himself reorders the world, putting everything back in its proper place. But perhaps we can do for God the one thing He cannot do for Himself: we can return God to *His* proper place, because a nation needs a king, and only a nation can create one.

Therefore the fourth stanza calls upon Jerusalem, the “Sought Out one” (to which she is referred by Yeshayahu, 62:12), to abandon the cacophony of the past and to play her proper role in the symphony of tomorrow, to enthrone the Almighty as King of the Universe. That is the ancient role of our capital city in a well-ordered world; but Jerusalem can hardly fulfill that role if she is abandoned and hollow. Jerusalem should therefore call out “You are my king!” so that God should rule over her; Jerusalem should trumpet the call of assembly on the shofar so that “remembrance of your assemblies arises,” so that she should be filled with her children. Scattered among the nations, the Jewish people are barely alive, “like the dry bones which Yechezkel saw in his vision” (*Kuzari* 2:30); but at the time of the universe's regeneration, we can draw on that renewed creative energy to be given renewed life, to be rejuvenated “like a phoenix.”

Each of us senses some of that renewed energy in our souls, and in our otherwise dry bones, on this day of remembrance. Even in the distant lands of our continued exile—where we feel so alienated from authentic spirituality that prayer often seems forced and artificial, and where the price of authenticity all too often is silence—we may feel moved to return to our ancient role as a people. And what is that role? Actually, it is not really to pray; certainly not to beseech. Although we normally, at our best, “sound out from the depths,” on this day such a petition would turn a spotlight on us as individuals that would be better focused on the King himself. Such a prayer would also indicate a lack of harmony that awaits resolution on a day that should celebrate precisely that resolution, that divine recalibration. Instead of *prayer*, Rihal asks us to join together with that newly reordered, heavenly harmony in *song*. Indeed, if this is a moment of favor, perhaps our song will join the cosmic chorus of coronation and we will be invited to reclaim our rightful place in the kingdom of God, to glorify God on land as he is glorified in Heaven.