

GPS for the Soul

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A cake with candles lit and children sitting around the table ready to burst into song. Balloons, presents and decorations are strewn around the room. The scene is familiar enough; a birthday party. But what if instead of a smiling 6 year old at the head of the table, we picture ...the universe? Not the normal picture of a birthday, certainly. But it seems that we are doing just that on Rosh HaShanah. Immediately after we blow the shofar, arguably the centerpiece in our liturgy, we recite the phrase, "*Hayom Haras Olam*" – "Today the world was created." It seems odd for this statement to take such a central role in the Rosh HaShanah davening. It may be noteworthy that this was the day that the world was created, but what relevance does this have to the overall themes of the day?

The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzva 311), an enlightening medieval list of the Mitzvos which elucidates aspects of the reasons behind the Mitzvos, says that the impetus behind Rosh HaShanah is Hashem's tremendous capacity for compassion. Hashem wanted to give us a day once a year where we can wipe the slate clean so that the amount of sins we each bear would never become too overwhelming. He writes that if we would let the sins continue to pile up and then finally be judged when we leave this world it would result in our complete destruction. It is because of Hashem's infinite kindness that we have the holiday known as Rosh HaShanah.

With this idea we can suggest a new spin on the idea of '*Hayom Haras Olam.*' Rosh Hashanah is the once a year cleaning that keeps the world going. The world is recreated on Rosh HaShanah each year since that is our yearly cleaning! It is the yearly maintenance of the world that sustains us and essentially recreates the world each year. But perhaps the idea in the Sefer HaChinuch is even deeper.

There is an inherent tension in the day of Rosh HaShanah. On one hand it is a festive day in which we enjoy family meals and the festivities normally associated with a holiday. On the other hand there is an overtone which is quite serious. We are being judged and that puts a very somber mood on the day. This is the reason that we don't say Hallel on Rosh HaShanah (T.B. Rosh HaShanah 32b). Considering the theme of the day we can easily understand the somber tones. What is more difficult to understand is the root of our celebration.

We can suggest that we celebrate the lives we live as Jews who have a day, and even a full season, where the theme is introspection. Hashem in His kindness has given us a day where we take stock of our past year and where it has left us. We ruminate over where we currently are and what our goals for the coming year should include. This is truly a gift to be celebrated. This is the gift of an examined life. And as Socrates said, "an unexamined life is not worth living."

Too many people wake up one day, late in life, and have a mid-life crisis with the realization that they have 'wasted' many years of their lives. They don't like their

position in life, and wish they could turn back the clock. This is truly an unfortunate situation and a mechanism to avoid such a pitfall should be celebrated. Hashem has given us a day of introspection where we take stock on a yearly basis so we never can get too far afield. Rosh HaShanah is very much a day of judgment, but much of that judgment must be our own self evaluation! Let us use this Rosh HaShanah to focus ourselves on our spiritual journey and how we can best use the coming year to further our goals. May we all take full advantage of this opportunity to really consider where we are and may we truly have a year which brings us many steps farther on our spiritual journey through life.