

Thoughts for Rosh Hashanah

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The name “Rosh Hashanah” is never mentioned in the Torah. The holiday celebrated as the “Jewish New Year” is called “*Yom Teruah*” (a day of blowing the horn) or “*Zichron Teruah*” (a memorial proclaimed with the blast of the horn) in the Torah (Num. 29:1, Lev 23:24). How did this day become known as “Rosh Hashanah” (New Year) in rabbinic literature (see, e.g., Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:3) and “*Yom HaZikaron*” (the Day of Remembrance) or “*Yom HaDin*” (the Day of Judgment) in the prayers? Moreover, if this day’s major significance is as the beginning of the Jewish calendar year or the day of remembrance/judgment, why did the Torah describe it as the day of “*Teruah*”, emphasizing the call of the shofar?

A further puzzling aspect of this “Day of Judgment”, is that judgment generally comes at the end of an endeavor: when it is finished, we examine what was done to determine if it was successful or not. So how is it that the Day of Judgment is called Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the year? And how is it that many of the prayers on Rosh Hashanah do not seem to be concerned with pleading our case before the Throne of Judgment (see, e.g., the *Mussaf Shemoneh Esrei*, the silent *Amidah*)?

Moreover, Rosh Hashanah is not the only day of judgment. The Mishnah states that: “At four seasons judgment is passed on the world: at Passover in respect of produce; at Pentecost in respect of fruit; at New Year all creatures pass before Him like children of *Maron* ...; and on Tabernacles judgment is passed in respect of rain” (Rosh Hashanah 1:3). The Talmud quotes opinions that man is judged every day and even every hour (Rosh Hashanah 16a). Why then the intense focus on Rosh Hashanah, as the day on which a person’s fate is inscribed in the Book for the entire year? If a person is judged throughout the year, what is the significance of this once-a-year judgment?

We need to take a closer look and get a better insight into the dynamics of the day. Rosh Hashanah is indeed a day when the world and all its inhabitants stand before the Judge, not only for judgment, but for Him to decide how each individual fits into the Divine scheme for *the coming year*. Each year is designated with a certain program which will bring the Creation that much closer to its ultimate goal and perfection, *tikkun olam*. On Rosh Hashanah, the Master of the Universe decides what role each person will be given in furthering the Divine scheme during the coming year.⁵⁹ Thus, our prayers on this most awesome day bespeak our acceptance of the Kingship of God, our recognition of His Majesty—and our supplication to be granted the privilege of life so that we may use that life for the glorification of the Divine Name. This type of “judgment” comes only once—at the *beginning* of each year.

Even though the Torah designates Rosh Hashanah as one day, since ancient times it has been observed as a two-day holiday, even in Jerusalem, corresponding to two different types of judgment, *din kasheh* and *din rafeh*, “harsh” judgment on the first day and a “softer” judgment on

⁵⁹ Chaim Friedlander, *Sifte Haim – Moadim* (Bnei Brak: 1994), 1: 156-7.

the second day. The harsh judgment refers to judgment of the individual, while the less severe one focuses on the group.

This disparity is reflected in the talmudic explanation of humanity passing before the Throne of Judgment like “children of *Maron*” (Rosh Hashanah 18a). The three talmudic explanations of this phrase are: (a) like sheep in a flock, who pass before the shepherd’s crook one at a time; (b) like those who climb a certain cliff called *Beit Maron*, a precipitous crag that was so difficult to negotiate that each climber had to file over the narrow ledges by himself, and (c) like the soldiers of David’s army. The Talmud concludes this description, “but they are all viewed together in one glance.” All three talmudic explanations assume that each individual passes through the judgment alone: as part of a herd passing before their master to be counted, or as individuals traversing a treacherous path one at a time, or as part of a phalanx which marches forth in the service of the king. But also, paradoxically, all together.

Just as each sheep is inspected as he passes through the gate to the corral, the individual is inspected to see if he measures up to his responsibilities to the flock; each member of that flock needs to show his contribution to the group. On the first day of judgment, the hard judgment views each individual as he passes through the challenges of life, to see whether he is worthy to continue along the mountain path. God also judges us as soldiers who, preparing for war, march out one at a time. All three talmudic opinions describe different aspects of the same judgment: the individual, striving alone, is measured and evaluated as he passes before the bar of judgment. Yet, the Talmud concludes, “they are all viewed together in one glance”, which alludes to the “soft” judgment, when each person is judged as part of the group.

Our rabbis often point out the relative desirability of belonging to a group, sort of getting lost in the overall picture, rather than having the spotlight of judgment focus on one’s own person, highlighting all his flaws in sharp relief. This is the import of the Shunamite woman’s response to the Prophet Elisha, who wanted to express his thanks for her hospitality by speaking on her behalf to the king, if she needed a favor. She responds “I dwell among my own people” (2 Kgs 4:13), which we can explain to mean, “No thanks, I’m comfortable being part of the group, I don’t want any special attention directed towards me.”⁶⁰ When one is perceived as part of a group, his/her failings, failures, and flaws are not noticed. Rather, the positive achievements of the group as a whole override the flaws of the individual components. Thus, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, there is a mitigation of harsh judgment, a *din rafeh*. To the extent that a person is involved in communal activities and seeks to further the needs of the group, of *Kelal Yisrael*, as well as the Divine goals for the year, he will be judged more favorably.

The biblical appellation *Yom Teruah*, the day for sounding the shofar, also requires us to seek a deeper understanding. The symbolism of the ram’s horn, the shofar, is well known: it serves as a “reminder”, a trophy of our ancestor Isaac’s binding on the altar in preparation for being sacrificed to God, which we hope will “remind” Him that we are the children of His beloved Isaac, worthy of His mercy. But Rosh Hashanah is not called the Day of the Shofar—it is the Day of the *Teruah*, the blast of the horn. This is like the flourish of trumpets which heralds the presence of a king or

⁶⁰ See commentary of Malbim ad loc.

honored personage. The *Teruah* announces, so to speak, that the Divine Court is now in session, that the King of the Universe is making decisions, literally life and death decisions, about the fate of the world and each and every living soul. The blast of the shofar also serves as a reminder of an impending attack. As the Prophet Amos warns, “Shall the horn be blown in a city, and the people not tremble?” (*Amos* 3:6). Maimonides assumes a similar function of the call of the shofar, as an alarm, “It is as if [the shofar’s call] is saying: Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep, and you who slumber, arise.” (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance* 3:4).

The shofar and its call are not issues separate from the judgment but an integral part of it. God Himself is looking at us, weighing whether we are worthy of participating in His grand plan. In the Rosh Hashanah prayers, we express the existential fears of puny human beings. What can a mere human possibly do to merit his continued existence? Only one thing – acknowledge and proclaim his realization that God is King and that he, the lowly individual, prays only for the opportunity to serve Him, to glorify Him, to be counted as one of His servants. Only that coronation of God over ourselves can serve as a possible entitlement to remain alive.

It is a remarkable feature of the Rosh Hashanah prayers that as we stand in awe and trembling before the High Court, there is virtually no supplication for food, for clothing, for financial success. We are praying only to be given the opportunity to serve in the army of God, proclaiming His rule over the universe; in so doing, we indirectly receive our needs as well, since the King will provide for his soldiers whatever they require in order to serve Him well.

There is a fundamental difference in the format of judgment between Rosh Hashanah and the rest of the year. On Rosh Hashanah it is decided in which category a person will be classified; during the year, based on his actions and achievements, the person can rise or fall—within that category. But on Rosh Hashanah, the choices are fundamental and life-altering. As an example, when a person graduates high school, he has to choose a life path: will he go to college and seek academic achievement? Will he perhaps join the military and become a professional soldier? Will he join his father’s construction firm and learn the trades? Whichever choice he makes, it will set him on a totally different path in life than any of the others. Opting to major in accounting rather than chemistry, or to join the navy rather than the marines, or become an electrician rather than a plumber—these are still choices to be made, but do not remove the person from the category he has chosen for himself. So, too, on Rosh Hashanah, through our prayers, our repentance, our acceptance of the Almighty as Sovereign, we can hope to be classified in a positive category. Subsequently, during the year, our freedom of choice is generally limited to minor emendations in our lifestyle rather than to major, life-altering decisions.

This awareness of the cosmic significance of our spiritual readiness to be part of the Divine plan for the universe does not come easily. It takes more than glib recitation of the formulaic prayers in the Machzor on Rosh Hashanah. Our rabbis, in their wisdom, instituted a heightened focus on our spiritual status throughout the preceding month of Elul, a time for introspection, for preparation, for soul searching. For an entire month, the shofar is sounded each morning, reminding us of the coming judgment, urging us, beckoning us, to wake up, before it is too late.

May we all merit inscription in the Book of Life.