

# A Serious Birthday Celebration

Rabbi Reuven Brand

Rosh Kollel, YU Torah Mitzion Kollel of Chicago

## Coronation

Rosh Hashana is a multi-faceted experience, which at first glance seems contradictory. Let us begin by exploring the dominant theme of the day.

According to the tradition of Chabad,<sup>2</sup> Rosh Hashana is known as *Yom HaHachtarah*—the day of coronation of Hashem, with trumpets and confetti as appropriate features of this celebration. This concept of coronation is rooted in our understanding of the central character of the day of Rosh Hashana, which is *malchuyot*—kingship. Our sages have demonstrated that *malchuyot* is the definitional quality of the day in various ways, especially in our Tefillot. A most striking example is found in Tefillat Mussaf of Rosh Hashana, which contains three additional components unique to the service of Rosh Hashana: *malchuyot*, *zichronot* and *shofarot*. These are incorporated into the Mussaf Amidah of Rosh Hashana, which the Talmud rules must contain nine blessings (*Berachot* 29a). The Mishna (*Rosh Hashana* 32a) discusses how to fit these three segments into the already existing framework of seven blessings; two *berachot* would need to be combined to create a unified nine. The Mishna records a debate as to which two blessings should be combined. Our practice follows the opinion of Rabbi Akiva, who instructs that we incorporate *malchuyot* into the central *beracha*, as the Rambam rules in *Hilchot Shofar* 3:7:

*The chazzan recites Avot, Gevurot and Kedushat Hayom/Malchuyot and then three sets of blasts are blown; Zichronot and then another three sets of blasts; Shofarot and three sets of blasts...*

אומר שליה צבור אבות וגבורות וקדושת  
השם ומלכיות ותוקע שלש, ואומר זכרונות  
ותוקע שלש, ואומר שופרות ותוקע שלש ...

This ruling and the debate that sparked it are not just technical questions of liturgical syntax; they teach us about the essence of the day. By choosing to combine *malchuyot* with the *beracha* of *Kedushat Hayom*, the section that expresses the theme of the day, we learn that these two concepts are harmonious and, even, synonymous.

<sup>1</sup> Thank you to *Avi Mori*, Mr. Etzion Brand; Rabbi Joshua Flug; Mrs. Ora Lee Kanner and Mrs. Andrea Polster for their helpful comments on this article.

<sup>2</sup> See *Sha'arei Hamoadim, Rosh Hashana* no. 37.

This explains how the central *beracha* of *Kedushat Hayom* in every tefillah of Rosh Hashana is to be understood. We conclude the focal *beracha* of each Rosh Hashana Amidah:

<p><i>Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the world, King of the earth Who sanctifies the Jewish people and the Day of Remembrance.</i></p>	<p>בא"ה אמ"ה מלך על כל הארץ מקדש ישראל ויום הזכרון.</p>
---	---

The text contains two components: one of kingship over the earth and the other of the sanctification of the day. Yet, the Talmud teaches that *ain chotmin b'shtayim*, one cannot conclude a blessing with two themes (*Berachot* 49a). Each and every *beracha* must contain only one theme. How, then, can this *beracha* combine both elements? Based on our understanding of the core theme of Rosh Hashana—*malchuyot*—the *beracha* is not considered to be a violation of a dual theme since the day of Yom Hazikaron is that of *malchuyot*.<sup>3</sup>

Although it is clear that majesty and coronation are essential aspects of the day, we are left to wonder how our sages knew that this is the case. There is no hint in the Torah, which describes Rosh Hashana as a day of *zikaron*—remembrance (*Vayikra* 23:24)—to it being a day of *malchuyot*.

## Judgment

There is another difficulty in our understanding of the day. For there is a different mood—a competing theme—that is conspicuously ever present in the Rosh Hashana experience. This is the theme of judgment. Although it does not appear in the Torah itself, our Rabbis teach us that Rosh Hashana is a day of judgment:

*At four seasons [Divine] 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 [G-d] like children of Maron, as it says, 'He that fashioneth the heart of them all, that considereth all their doings'; and on Tabernacles judgment is passed in respect of rain.*

**Rosh Hashana 16a (Soncino Translation)**

בארבעה פרקים העולם נידון בפסח  
על התבואה בעצרת על פירות  
האילן בראש השנה כל באי העולם  
עוברין לפניו כבני מרון שנאמר  
היוצר יחד לבם המבין אל כל  
מעשיהם ובהג נידונין על המים.  
ראש השנה טז.

The famous poem *Unetaneh Tokef*, a liturgical highlight of the chazzan's repetition of the Amidah, follows this theme and gives us the stark, foreboding predicament of judgment along with various frightening possible means of demise:

*Let us pay attention to the import of the holiness of the day because it is awesome and frightening ... Who will live and who will die, who in his time and who before his time, who with water and who with fire? ...*

ונתנה תקף קדושת היום כי  
הוא נורא ואיום ... מי יהיה  
ומי ימות מי בקצו ומי לא  
בקצו מי במים ומי באש ...

<sup>3</sup> This concept of *malchuyot* (coronation) as the central theme of Rosh Hashana is also reflected in many of the liturgical poems we recite during davening (Hashem Melech, etc.), which are supposed to deepen our emotional connection with our King. It is the opening pronouncement of the Shaliach Tzibbur at Shacharit: **Hamelech** that is synonymous with the service of these majestic days. It continues through the entire Ten Days of Teshuva in which we insert Hamelech twice into our daily Amidah. In addition, the siddur *Otzar Hatefillot* (on *Tashlich*) explains that our practice of going to the water on the afternoon of Rosh Hashana (colloquially known as *Tashlich*) is because in biblical times, kings were coronated at a spring and we coronate our King, Hashem, on Rosh Hashana; see Talmud Bavli, *Horayot* 12a.

This concept seems completely at odds with the aforementioned theme of *malchuyot*. While coronation has a celebratory tone, judgment is fraught with anxiety and dread. We associate it not with cheering, but with solemnity, with pacing and white knuckles. How do we understand the concept of judgment within the framework of coronation?

Moreover, our traditional approach to this experience of judgment is also perplexing. Many have asked the question: if we are truly standing before a judge, our fate being deliberated, wouldn't we address the misgivings that might seal our fate? How can it be that on Rosh Hashana we do not make a single mention of our mistakes—we do not recite *vidui* at any point during these two days in our pleas to be remembered for the good?<sup>4</sup>

## An unlikely case study

Let us examine an unlikely source to better understand the character of Rosh Hashana: the biblical episode of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. These two formerly influential men in the court of Pharaoh meet Yosef in jail. They each have an inexplicable dream that Yosef interprets regarding their futures, which proves to be the correct premonition, as the Torah describes:

*Now it came about on the third day, Pharaoh's birthday, that Pharaoh made a feast for all his servants, and he counted the chief cupbearer and chief baker among his servants. And he restored the chief cupbearer to his [position as] cupbearer, and he placed the cup on Pharaoh's palm. And the chief baker he hanged, as Joseph had interpreted to them.*

**Bereishit 40:2-22** (Judaica Press Translation)

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יוֹם הַלֵּדָת  
אֶת־פַּרְעֹה וַיַּעַשׂ מִשְׁתֶּה לְכָל־עַבְדָּיו  
וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ שַׂר הַמַּשְׁקִים  
וְאֶת־רֹאשׁ שַׂר הָאֲפִים בְּתוֹךְ עַבְדָּיו.  
וַיִּשָּׂב אֶת־שַׂר הַמַּשְׁקִים עַל־מִשְׁקָהוּ  
וַיִּתֵּן הַכּוֹס עַל־כַּף פַּרְעֹה. וְאֵת שַׂר  
הָאֲפִים תָּלָה כְּאֲשֶׁר פָּתַר לָהֶם יוֹסֵף.  
**בְּרֵאשִׁית מ:כ-כב**

This passage raises many questions. Why are the cupbearer and baker appearing at Pharaoh's birthday celebration? Why are their fates meted out at this time?

The Talmud Yerushalmi (*Avoda Zara* 1:2) teaches that “*yom huledet*,” the birthday of a monarch, is also “*yom genusia*”—the day of coronation for the king.<sup>5</sup> Hence, it is certain that on the king's birthday, on the day that he is coronated once again, his subjects come to herald another year of his rule. As Pharaoh celebrates his annual coronation, each servant, even those who had been incarcerated, appear before him to celebrate this milestone.

This appearance before the king provides each subject with a brief moment with the monarch—a rare privilege. It is also a moment of trepidation; this encounter carries with it the scrutiny of the ruler. As each subject proclaims his or her loyalty, the monarch acknowledges it with the obvious, unspoken questions: Who are you? Where have you been? What is your relationship to me and my kingdom? How have you served? Each subject, in that moment facing the king, must be worthy of coronating the exalted monarch and deserving of a place in the kingdom. This

<sup>4</sup> Various practices exist regarding the recitation of specific verses in *Avinu Malkein* that reference sins; see *Mateh Ephraim* 584:11, *Magen Avraham Orach Chaim* 584: 2, *Shu"t Yechaveh Daat* 1:55.

<sup>5</sup> This designation has halachic significance regarding the status of various idolatrous practices relating to pagan rulers.

explains why the cupbearer and baker were sentenced on *this* day—their appearance before Pharoh precipitated Pharoh’s decision to determine their fate for the coming year. The Torah does not explain why, but, as we will explore below, only the cupbearer succeeded in proving his connection with and worthiness to Pharoh to merit a reinstatement.

## Birthday for humanity

Rosh Hashana is a *yom huledet*—a birthday. It is the anniversary of the creation of the world, or, more precisely the creation of humanity with Adam HaRishon.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of *Zichronot* we declare:

*This day marks the beginning of Your creation, it is a remembrance of the first day.*

זה היום תחילת מעשיך זכרון ליום ראשון

We state that Rosh Hashana is the birthday of Hashem’s earthly creations. Similarly, following the shofar blowing of *Malchuyot*, *Zichronot* and *Shofarot*, we recite the passage *Hayom Harat Olam*, which states that today is the birth of the world.<sup>7</sup> It is, therefore also the birthday of G-d’s monarchy in this world. In this light, we understand that Rosh Hashana is the great birthday party of humanity and the anniversary of Hashem’s monarchy over humanity. Hence, our Rabbis understood that on this day, each of His subjects—each of us—appears before Hashem to celebrate his monarchy. With this, just as with the coronation of Pharoh, we experience the trepidation of His scrutiny: Where have we been? What is our connection with our King? Are we worthy of serving our King? It is a time of joy as we salute and herald our King, yet we also experience it with seriousness as a *yom hadin*: *v’gilu b’r’adah*, rejoice with trepidation. We must experience and synthesize both emotions—those of celebration and trepidation—and for this reason, we have many tefillot and piyutim that reflect both themes. The following story illustrates a supremely righteous expression of this notion:

*R. Aharon of Karlin was once visiting his rebbe [The Maggid of Mezeritch] on Rosh Hashana and they honored him to lead Shacharit services. The tradition is to say the word “HaMelech” (The King) out loud, but when he reached that word, he let out a bitter scream and was unable to continue. They asked him what had happened and he answered that he recalled the story in the Talmud (Gittin 56a) when R. Yochanan ben Zakai greeted Vespasian as “king,” to which Vespasian responded “If I am a king, why have you waited so long to greet me?” “For this reason,” stated R. Aharon, “When I started to say ‘HaMelech’ I felt despondent because if He is truly a king, why did I wait so long to greet Him and return to Him through repentance?”*  
*Seder Hadorot Hechadash pg. 18a*

In light of this concept of scrutiny within coronation, we can also understand why it is inappropriate to mention our sins during the service of Rosh Hashana. On Rosh Hashana we do

<sup>6</sup> This follows the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer (*Rosh Hashana* 10b) who opines that the world was created in Tishrei. A full description of the timeline of the day of Adam’s creation on the first of Tishrei based on the *Pesikta*, appears in the comments of Rabbeinu Nissim on the Rif, *Rosh Hashana* 3a. Tosafot, *Rosh Hashana* 12a s.v. *L’mabul* and Bach, end of *Orach Chaim* 591, address the fact that the normative ruling in this case should follow the view of Rabbi Yehoshua and not Rabbi Eliezer. See also, *Netiv Binah* vol. 3, pp. 152-153.

<sup>7</sup> In this context, the word *harat*, usually translated as conceived, means birthed (see Ibn Ezra, *Iyov* 3:2)

not picture ourselves in a courtroom, rather along a parade route. Imagine a servant celebrating the coronation of his king. As the subject approaches the royal receiving line, he leans over to the jubilant monarch and begins to list various offenses for which he would like to ask forgiveness. This behavior would obviously spoil the mood of the joyous occasion for the king and is completely out of place. Instead, the servant will hopefully have garnered the favor of the king since his last appearance and will stand tall with a firm and resolute salute that the king will connect with and appreciate. Only after the parade, should he approach the king and seek to mend his ways. Hence, *vidui* has no place in the coronation of Hashem on Rosh Hashana.<sup>8</sup>

## Coronation lessons

Incredibly, the birthday story of coronation and judgment of Pharaoh occurred on the day of Rosh Hashana.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps we can draw a lesson from the narrative regarding how we should experience the coronation and judgment of Rosh Hashana. The Torah does not reveal to us the reason for the different predictions that Yosef offered to the cupbearer and the baker; we are not told why Pharaoh restored the cupbearer and executed the baker. However, we can explain the disparity by a close examination of their dreams.

*So the chief cupbearer related his dream to Joseph, and he said to him, "In my dream, behold, a vine is before me. And on the vine are three tendrils, and it seemed to be blossoming, and its buds came out; [then] its clusters ripened into grapes. And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I placed the cup on Pharaoh's palm." ... Now the chief baker saw that he had interpreted well. So he said to Joseph, "Me too! In my dream, behold, there were three wicker baskets on my head. And in the topmost basket were all kinds of Pharaoh's food, the work of a baker, and the birds were eating them from the basket atop my head."*

**Bereishit 40:9-11, 16-17** (Judaica Press Translation)

וְיֹסֵף שָׂר-הַמְּשָׁקִים אֶת-הַלְמוֹ,  
 לְיוֹסֵף; וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ--בְּחֻלּוֹמֵי, וְהִנֵּה-גִבְעוֹן  
 לְפָנָי. וּבְגִבְעוֹן, שְׁלִשָּׁה שָׂרִיגִם; וְהוּא  
 כִּפְרֹחֶת עֲלֵתָהּ נֹצֵה, הַבְּשִׁילֹ  
 אֲשַׁכְּלֶתֶיהָ עֲנָבִים. וְכֹס פְּרֻעָה, בְּיָדִי;  
 וְאָקַח אֶת-הָעֲנָבִים, וְאֲשַׁחֵט אֹתָם אֶל-  
 כּוֹס פְּרֻעָה, וְאָתַן אֶת-הַכּוֹס, עַל-כַּף  
 פְּרֻעָה ... וַיֹּרֵא שָׂר-הָאֲפִים, כִּי טוֹב  
 פָּתַר; וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶל-יוֹסֵף, אֶף-אֲנִי  
 בְּחֻלּוֹמֵי, וְהִנֵּה שְׁלִשָּׁה סְלֵי חֲרִי עַל-  
 רֹאשִׁי. וּבִסֵּל הָעֵלְיוֹן, מִכֹּל מִאֲכָל  
 פְּרֻעָה--מִעֲשֵׂה אֹפֶה; וְהֵעוּר, אֲכַל אֹתָם  
 מִן-הַסֵּל--מֵעַל רֹאשִׁי.  
**בְּרֵאשִׁית מ:ט-יא, טז-יז**

The dream of the baker is one in which he sees his future bread being eaten by birds, while the cupbearer envisions himself squeezing fresh grapes into a cup onto the hand of Pharaoh. Yosef and Pharaoh both recognize a key difference. The baker envisions his future as a mediocre one—perhaps we could use the expression: it's for the birds. Yes, he will provide bread, but it will be done in a somewhat lackadaisical, dispassionate way. By contrast, the cupbearer envisions a service of excellence, squeezing the finest grapes and placing the cup directly into the hand of Pharaoh. Pharaoh responds predictably, as Yosef anticipated, without mercy for someone whose

<sup>8</sup> In light of our understanding, we appreciate why Rosh Hashana is referred to in the Torah as *Yom Hazikaron*, for we are each remembered as we pass our King along the parade route. This also explains the meaning and sequence of *malchuyot*, *zichronot* and *shofarot*, according to the explanation of the Gemara in *Rosh Hashana* 16a.

<sup>9</sup> The Gemara in *Rosh Hashana* 11a, teaches that Yosef was freed from prison on Rosh Hashana. The *Midrash Rabbah* (Bereishit 89:1) teaches that this was precisely two years since the day of reckoning of the baker and butler, which places the day of Pharaoh's coronation celebration- the day of his birth- on Rosh Hashana.

commitment and drive is only mediocre and half-hearted, while he welcomes the one whose vision and dedication is unquestionable and whole-hearted.

The message for us is clear, as the Rabbis of the Talmud teach: מלכותא דארעא כעין מלכותא דרקיעא, an earthly kingdom is representative of the Heavenly Kingdom (*Berachot* 58a).

On Rosh Hashana each of us stands to salute, cheer and coronate our King. At the same time, we know we are imperfect and have disappointed our King. We feel a sense of trepidation and perhaps even embarrassment at our lowly state in the face of His inquiring gaze, which will determine our place in His kingdom for the coming year. We are called upon to commit ourselves to a new year with an aspiration for excellence in our devotion to our Master—the Master of the world. At this moment, our past is behind us and our task is to devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the coronation of Hashem—to embrace the Divine presence in our lives as fully as possible. Hopefully, thanks to the unending compassion of our King and our best efforts to express His kingship in our world, we will all merit to be restored to positions of successful, prominent service of Hashem in the year to come.