

Rosh Hashana as the Beginning of the Teshuva Process

When we look at the sequence of events that takes place at the beginning of the year, the holidays seem to be out of order. One could argue that Yom Kippur should come before Rosh Hashana so that we can atone for all of our sins and start the new year with a clean slate. Why does Rosh Hashana come first?

דרשו ה' בהמצאו ... אלו עשרה ימים שבין ראש השנה ליום הכפורים.
ראש השנה יה.

[The verse states] “Seek out G-d when He can be found” ... These are the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Rosh Hashana 18a

The Gemara teaches us the concept which we know as the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva*, the Ten Days of Repentance, and Rosh Hashana is included in those ten days. What is the connection between Rosh Hashana and repentance? There doesn't seem to be any mention of repentance in the Rosh Hashana liturgy!

When one examines Rosh Hashana, one finds that the core theme of Rosh Hashana is coronating Hashem, declaring and accepting Him as the king. We pay very little attention to ourselves and our own needs and place all of our attention on accepting Hashem as the ruler over us. This is a critical component of teshuva. It is a prerequisite of the teshuva process because if we don't first fully accept Hashem's sovereignty, our entire



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enterprise of teshuva is meaningless. How could we possibly spend the rest of the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva* knocking our hearts and saying “we have sinned before You” if we don't know who Hashem really is? Without first making that recognition, the rest of the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva* would be eight days of empty promises.

I am often asked by my students what they should be thinking about when they reach a part of the prayer on Rosh Hashana that they don't really understand. I tell them that if they can't understand the nuances of that particular prayer, they should think in general terms about coronating Hashem and what that means in their lives. This is the essence of Rosh Hashana.

While Rosh Hashana is part of the teshuva process, it has a unique and distinct role in the process, which is why certain practices from the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva* are not observed on Rosh Hashana. First, we try to avoid any mention of our sins. We don't recite *Viduy* (confessional). According to the Vilna Gaon, we leave out *chatanu lifenacha* — we have sinned before You — from the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer. The Rama, *Orach Chaim* 583:2, writes that we don't

eat nuts on Rosh Hashana because they have the same numerical value as *cheit* (sin). The basis for all of these practices is that mentioning our sins detracts from the message of Rosh Hashana — coronating Hashem. We cannot focus too much on our own actions. We will have time to do that during the rest of the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva*. On Rosh Hashana, we have to build the foundation upon which we can truly repent and we must leave our own struggles and interests out of that foundation.

The poskim discuss whether personal requests in our prayers are permissible on Rosh Hashana (See *Mateh Efraim* 584:25). While common practice is that they are permissible, the argument to forbid them is based on the principle that we have presented. Perhaps asking for personal requests would detract from the primary focus of coronating Hashem as king.

The Netziv, *Devar Ha'Emek*, Nechemiah 8:10, was of the opinion that prayers and thoughts that lead one to cry is inappropriate on Rosh Hashana. Why is it inappropriate? Isn't Rosh Hashana a very serious and somber day? The answer is that the thoughts that would lead one to cry on Rosh Hashana would be thoughts

rooted in one's shortcomings or one's difficult predicament. These thoughts should be the focus of the next eight days of the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva*, but the two days of Rosh Hashana should be focused on Hashem.

If Rosh Hashana is not about us, not about our sins, how do we explain Tashlich? Doesn't going to a body of water to cast away our sins conflict with the coronation of Hashem? How can we focus on ourselves?

Perhaps we can explain Tashlich in a different manner. The Gemara quotes the following dispute among the Tannaim:

שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד מלכות דברי ר' יוסי ר' יהודה אומר אינה מלכות. ראש השנה לב:

The verse "Hear O Israel, G-d is our Lord, G-d is one" qualifies as kingship. These are the words of Rabbi Yosi. Rabbi Yehuda says, this does not qualify as kingship.

Rosh Hashana 32b

What is lacking in the verse that would make it unqualified for *Malchuyos* according to Rabbi Yehuda? Rav Yitzchok Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchok*, Rosh Hashana no. 24, explains that there is a difference between coronating a king and reaffirming the kingship of an existing king. All of the other verses that are recited for *Malchuyos* represent a form of coronation. The verse "Sh'ma Yisrael" represents a reaffirmation of a kingship that already exists. For R. Yehuda, the only way to fulfill *Malchuyos* is to actively coronate Hashem.

While we follow the opinion of Rabbi Yosi and include it among our ten verses, we can still view *Malchuyos*, and Rosh Hashana as a whole, as a coronation ceremony. The Gemara teaches us that about where a king's coronation should take place:

אין מושחים את המלכים אלא על המעיין כדי שתמשך מלכותם. הוריות יב.

Kings should only be anointed by a spring to symbolize that their kingdom should flow.

Horayos 12a

Perhaps Tashlich is not primarily about throwing away our sins. The primary reason to go to the water on Rosh Hashana is to coronate Hashem. Since coronating kings was traditionally done by the water, we too coronate Hashem by the water. Once we are already at the water, we recite the verses that discuss how sins can be cast into the water, but that is not our primary goal.

This idea explains why our judgment takes place on Rosh Hashana, before we fully engage in the teshuva process. In order to coronate Hashem, there has to be absolute acceptance of Him as our King. It cannot be transactional or conditional on our own actions. Those details can be figured out after the coronation. Only after the coronation can we look at our actions and plead for mercy.

How Do we Coronate Hashem?

One way to coronate Hashem is

through acts of kindness. The verse in Nechemiah 8:10, records the charge Nechemiah gave the Jewish people on Rosh Hashana (see Nechemiah 8:2):

ויאמר להם לכו אכלו משמנים ושתו מממתקים ושלחו מנות לאין נכון לו כי קדוש היום לאדונינו ואל תעצבו כי חדות ה' היא מעזכם. *He said to them: Go and eat delicacies, drink sweet drinks and send packages to those in need because today is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad because joy in G-d is your strength.*

Why is Nechemiah insisting on sending packages to the needy on Rosh Hashana? Rav Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchok* no. 1, writes that we see from Nechemiah that engaging in acts of kindness is an integral part of Rosh Hashana. Rav Hutner explains that *chesed* (kindness) is the basis for the creation of the world. Hashem created the world out of total kindness to humanity. If we want to coronate Hashem on Rosh Hashana, we have to show that we follow the values that Hashem's Kingdom was built on. We have to recognize that all of mankind was created in the image of Hashem and that Hashem wants all people to be the beneficiaries of kindness.

One of the verses we read in the *Malchuyos* section comes from *V'zos Haberacha* (Devarim 33:5):

ויהי בישרון מלך בהתאסף ראשי עם יחד שבטי ישראל.

And there was a king in Jeshurun, when the heads of the nation gathered, all of the tribes of Israel were together.

The key word in this verse is *yachad*, together. If we want to coronate Hashem, we have to be unified. The



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Maharal, *Tiferes Yisrael* no. 21, writes that the first two commandments were given to all of the Jewish people together and not individually because without unity, there is no nation, and without a nation, Hashem cannot be a king. We achieve this unity by engaging in acts of kindness on Rosh Hashana and by committing to be kind people throughout the year.

This is also why there is a *minhag*, recorded in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 128:14, to ask forgiveness from our friends and family before Rosh Hashana. The *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 606:1, writes that we should ask forgiveness from our friends and family before Yom Kippur. Asking for forgiveness before Yom Kippur makes sense because we want to rid ourselves of all of our sins before Yom Kippur. If Rosh Hashana is not about our sins, why should we ask for forgiveness before Rosh Hashana? Perhaps the *minhag* to ask for forgiveness before Rosh Hashana serves a different purpose. The purpose is to unify us, to make sure that each person is whole with everyone else. We are trying to create a sense of unity in order to coronate Hashem and in order to do that, everyone must put all of their gripes and grudges behind.

Another way to coronate Hashem is by freeing ourselves from our desires and from our selfish attitudes. The Torah never identifies which instrument should be used for the blasts of Rosh Hashana. The Gemara explains why we specifically require a shofar:

תנו רבנן מנין שבשופר ת"ל והעברת שופר
תרועה אין לי אלא ביובל בראש השנה מנין
תלמוד לומר בחדש השביעי שאין תלמוד
לומר בחדש השביעי ומה תלמוד לומר בחדש
השביעי שיהיו כל תרועות של חדש שביעי זה
כזה.
ראש השנה לג:

Our rabbis taught: How do we know that one must use a shofar? We derive it from the verse "And you shall sound a broken blast." This verse refers to the jubilee year. How do we know [that one must use a shofar] on Rosh Hashana? The verse states "in the seventh month." In the seventh month seems extraneous. What is it teaching? That all of the blasts in the seventh month should be the same.

Rosh Hashana 33b

The Gemara not only derives the requirement to use a shofar from the shofar of yovel, the ensuing passage derives some of the laws relating to how to blow the shofar from the shofar of yovel.

The Maharam Brisk in his *Derashos*, (Rosh Hashana 5695) asks: Why are so many fundamental laws relating to Rosh Hashana derived from yovel? He answers that one of the key elements of yovel is *shichrur*, the freeing of slaves. The shofar symbolizes freedom and therefore on Rosh Hashana, we blow the shofar to symbolize that we are free from all that enslaves us. This perhaps is why the Gemara, *Rosh Hashana* 11a, highlights the fact that Yosef was freed from prison on Rosh Hashana.

The verse in Tehillim states:

אנה ה' כי אני עבדך אני עבדך בן אמתך
פתחת למוסרי.
תהלים קטז:טז

*Please G-d, for I am Your servant,
I am Your servant the son of Your
handmaiden, you freed me from my
shackles.*

Tehillim 116:16

The verse seems to have an internal contradiction. How can we declare that we are servants of G-d and at the same say that He freed us from our shackles? I heard from *mori v'rabi* Rav Hershel Schachter shli"ta that there is no contradiction. If we want to be truly free, if we want to release the shackles that bind us, we have to subjugate ourselves to the service of Hashem.

This is why there is an emphasis on *shichrur* on Rosh Hashana. Part of the coronation process is accepting upon ourselves to be the King's servants, to carry out his will. If we want to be His servants, we can't be enslaved to anything else. We have to allow Hashem to remove those shackles.

May this year be a year when we can truly coronate Hashem. May this Rosh Hashana set a precedent of unity and *chesed* for the entire year. May this Rosh Hashana be a time when we remove the shackles that bind us from truly serving Hashem and may we merit that our acceptance of His sovereignty propels us to properly perform teshuva and leads to us having a *kesiva vachasima tova*.

Perhaps the *minhag* to ask for forgiveness before Rosh Hashana serves a different purpose; to make sure that each person is whole with everyone else. We are trying to create a sense of unity in order to coronate Hashem and to do that, everyone must put all of their gripes and grudges behind.