

Rosh Hashanah in Israel

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The universal nature of Rosh Hashanah isn't limited to a particular nation and certainly not to a particular location. All human beings are judged and, more broadly, the entire universe is re-created – just as it was thousands of years ago at the point of “initial” creation. In addition to “reviving” creation, the Day of Judgement underscores the power and glory of Divine authority. As Hashem judges every creature, on this day Divine authority is universally manifest. These elements of Rosh Hashanah are worldwide and unrelated to location. However, though geographically unbounded, Rosh Hashanah themes are intensified in the land of Israel. Living in Israel magnifies three important facets of Rosh Hashanah. This magnification is best appreciated by revisiting the Rosh Hashanah ceremonies declared by Ezra 2400 years ago.

The second recorded Rosh Hashanah in history (the first was the creation of the world) is documented in the 8th chapter of Nechemiah and describes Ezra's return to Israel. Assembling the returning Jews in the public square, Ezra ceremoniously read the Torah but also encouraged the people not to grieve nor to excessively lament. Despite the solemnity of Rosh Hashanah and the potential for introspection and sorrow, the day should be observed through joy, shared food based on the recognition that: “Chedvat Hashem Hi Ma'uzchem” (the joy of Hashem is their strength -Nechemiah 8: 10).

In general, the complexity of Rosh Hashanah demands Ezra's careful calibration of between solemnity and joy. On the one hand it is a “charged” day of seriousness and gravitas and the stakes are incalculably high as the books of life and death are inscribed. Yet, Rosh Hashanah is also a day of majesty and splendor- celebrating the palpable presence of Divine Authority. In judging His Creation Hashem imposes His authority- a condition which is veiled year-round but inexorably emerges on the Day of Judgement. We yearn

for the conclusion of history and universal recognition of Divine authority. Until this is achieved Rosh Hashanah is the closest approximation of that utopian condition and serves as a “taster” for the ideal world we all await. The sheer grandeur of this visionary experience mandates elation and delight. Experiencing Rosh Hashanah- anywhere- demands a very careful calibration between awe and splendor, between trepidation and majesty. In this respect Ezra’s directive is a generic template for Rosh Hashanah celebrated anywhere.

However, Rosh Hashanah experience in Israel demands an even more sensitive calibration and Ezra specifically selects the return to Israel as the setting to stress celebration not solemnity. Though God spans the entire universe His throne is centered upon the Mikdash in Yerushalayim and it is specifically in these precincts that His authority is most tangible. Rosh Hashanah in Israel showcases the royalty of the day and therefore should yield greater human elation. It is interesting that Rosh Hashanah prayers in many communities and yeshivot in Israel often accent joy and celebration – sometimes at the expense of solemnity. In the land of God’s regency Jews are acutely aware of the Rosh Hashanah coronation and are more attuned to the regality which Ezra’s stressed. Having returned to “ground zero” of Divine authority, Ezra sensed the magnificence of this day and emphasized celebration in place of melancholy.

Rosh Hashanah in Israel is different for a second reason - not only because the land serves as the base of Divine authority. The Jewish people – natural residents of this land- also represent Hashem in this world. Until the ultimate kingdom of God evolves we yearn in our Rosh Hashanah davening: “V’yeida Kol Pa’ul Ki Ata P’alto” (every creature will acknowledge that You are its Creator). Sadly, at this preliminary stage of history, we are the only nation to fully embrace His presence and we alone sense the extraordinary royalty of Rosh Hashanah. Without any human contingent acknowledging Divine authority, Rosh Hashanah would be hollow; its full resonance depends upon a human “echo”. The Jewish people’s acceptance of God’s authority is crucial to the glory and majesty of the day. By extension the more “honor” Jewish people achieve, the more profound our acceptance of God’s monarchy and the more

elaborate the regality of the day. Our return to our homeland and our ascendant national condition have boosted our own national honor and by extension have augmented the honor God receives on Rosh Hashanah. We launch Rosh Hashanah prayers with the well-known plea: U'vchein Tein Kavod Hashem L'amecha- (provide honor for your nation) recognizing that the honor we accrue deepens God's "Malchut" on this day. Our restored national honor is sensed most deeply in our homeland and consequently the power and glory of Rosh Hashanah is most intense in Israel.

Tragically, during the Exile of the First Temple, seventy Rosh Hashanah days had elapsed without meaningful Jewish celebration in the land of Israel. Jews were strewn across the Mediterranean region and God's was coronated on Rosh Hashanah by scattered groups of refugees. As Jews returned with Ezra, Rosh Hashanah was rejuvenated and the royalty of the day was augmented. Ezra conducted a national ceremony to punctuate this shift and encouraged the people to recalibrate the balance between solemnity and celebration. Like Ezra, we have returned and have refreshed the royal nature of this day. After 2000 years in which scattered, but faithful communities of Jews embraced Divine authority across the globe, Jews are finally united in their homeland and better able to reaffirm Divine monarchy on this day. Given this new condition we have greater mandate to carefully calibrate the day between joy and solemnity.

There is a third difference of Rosh Hashanah in Israel. On this day God recalls all human activity from the dawn of time and probes all human thoughts and emotions. Additionally, He surveys Jewish history and recalls the great moments of Jewish heroism. The section of Zichronot in Mussaf prayer delineates these surpassing moments – from the Exodus through our nation's faith in the desert and, ultimately, our visions of the Messianic era. Our prayers constantly invoke the Covenant of Brit Avot which was steadily forged throughout thousands of years of commitment and sacrifice. Those who reside in Israel -the land of our ancestors- live the Covenant more personally. Rosh Hashanah in Israel isn't only superior because it is the region of Divine Monarchy. Rosh Hashanah in Israel allows a powerful identification with the

historical Covenant which lies at the core of this day of “Memory”. Just as Ezra sensed the heightened Rosh Hashanah experience upon the return from Babylonian Exile we sense the difference between Rosh Hashanah experiences of the past 2000 years and the transformed holiday in our renewed homeland. Israel is the seat of Divine authority, the homeland of Jewish honor and the anchor of our historical Covenant.

To summarize, Ezra’s Rosh Hashanah invites us to cast our experience within the framework of our return to land. However, as ambitious as it sounds, our current stage of history demands that our Rosh Hashanah experience surpass even that of Ezra’s. We live at the tail end of history and we have dramatically fortified our historical covenant with Hashem. Our enduring emunah outlasted the greatest horror in human history- the Holocaust. Our sustained faith is a testament to our unconditional commitment to the Divine Covenant. Additionally, the national courage and devotion displayed in reconstructing the Modern State of Israel in the face of so much adversity and hostility, further reflects our unwavering emunah in our historical mission. It is absolutely crucial that in 2018, on this day of Historical covenant, a Jew daven differently from the way he did in the past. Failure to update our tefilla severs it from history and disassociates Rosh Hashanah from its historical core. Having ‘passed’ these two crucial tests at the conclusion of history we have the “right” and the obligation to humbly lodge a claim for our final redemption. We have adhered to our part of the Covenant through the nightmare of the Holocaust and through seventy years of endless enmity and international opposition to our presence in Israel. As we pray on Rosh Hashanah in Israel – some of us physically in the land while others following their hearts and imaginations to this land- we reinforce our centuries-old historical commitment while adding new layers of historical consciousness to this Covenant. Our prayers and voices on this day must reflect these new Israel-based layers.

Kesiva Vachasima Tovah