

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech – Rosh Hashana The Beginning or the End of the Year – Part I

Simon Wolf

The holiday of Rosh Hashana, which only appears twice in the Torah, is the most elusive and ambiguous of all the holidays mentioned in the Torah.¹ It evokes feelings of ambivalence as one vacillates between a sense of awe due to the gravity of the day and moments of rejoicing in celebration of the grandeur and festive nature of the day. It is at once the Day of Judgment (יום הדין), the coronation of the King (יום תרועה) and a festival (שבתון מקרא קדש). This dissonance is captured in the ministering angels question to God as to “why Bnei Yisrael do not recite the Hallel before You on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur?”² The implication of course is that there is ample reason to sing songs of praise before God on these days. God responds, “Is it possible that while the King is sitting on the throne of judgment and the books of life and death are open before Him, that Bnei Yisrael recite joyous songs of praise before Me?” The Rambam succinctly summarizes this quandary, “on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, Hallel is not recited because they are days of repentance, fear and awe, not days of excessive joy.” They are days of celebration, just not unbridled jubilation. The normative expression of this uncertainty is manifest in the Gaonic disagreement as to whether it is permissible or even preferable to fast on Rosh Hashana or is one obligated to eat and rejoice.³ Even those that champion Rosh Hashana being celebrated like any other holiday still caution not eating to the point of satiation which can deteriorate into frivolity and undermine the profundity of the day.⁴

To add to the intrigue of the day, there are many unusual practices on Rosh Hashana that revolve around their symbolism. The Rema endorses the practice not to sleep on the day of Rosh Hashana based on a Yerushalmi that posits that one who sleeps on Rosh Hashana will cause their destiny to be lethargic.⁵ In addition, the Bavli states that a king should be anointed by a live spring because it is auspicious for the longevity of the king's reign.⁶ Abaye then extrapolates the Gemara's conclusion that a sign or an omen is meaningful to suggest that a person therefore should be accustomed on Rosh Hashana to eat (see) gourds, fenugreek, leeks, beets and dates.⁷ The Shulchan Aruch codifies Abaye's recommendation with the addition that the

eating of these foods should be accompanied by a recitation of a relevant prayer for the upcoming year that utilizes a phonetically similar word to the name of the symbolic food.⁸ Many of the Rishonim and Achronim are troubled by this Gemara since it seems to be in contradistinction to an explicit Torah law not to engage in divination, rely on omens or be wary of superstitions.⁹ They give varied justifications and explanations for these practices, but the real question is why are all these symbolic gestures so integral to Rosh Hashana? How are they in consonance with the character of the day? They seem so trivial in light of the profoundness of the day.

Rosh Hashana is the first two of the Ten Days of Repentance. Yet surprisingly absent from any of the liturgy on Rosh Hashana are the trappings of remorse and contrition that are the hallmark of the remaining days of penitence (סליחות) and Yom HaKippurim. The Beit Yosef is of the opinion that while Avinu Malkeinu (אבינו מלכינו) should be recited on Rosh Hashana, nevertheless any request that deals with sin should be omitted since we do not engage in confession (וידוי) on Rosh Hashana.¹⁰ How strange is it to begin the process of atonement without even a mention or acknowledgment of wrongdoing? Without penance, contrition and making amends how does one expect to gain expiation? How is it that Rosh Hashana is the beginning of the process of repentance?

Another perplexing aspect of Rosh Hashana is its placement before Yom HaKippurim. If Rosh Hashana is the Day of Judgment and Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, would it not make eminently more sense to first engage in penitence and seek forgiveness and expiation before entering into judgment? It is much harder to appeal a judgment already rendered than to stave off a decree through gaining clemency beforehand. The standard answer given is that it takes a Rosh Hashana to set the tone and get one into the mindset to face a Yom Kippur, but is there something more fundamental that makes it essential for Rosh Hashana to precede Yom Kippur?

In addition, if Rosh Hashana is the Day of Judgment whereby the deeds of individuals, nations and the world from the previous year are weighed in order

¹ אפשר ששמיני עצרת ג"כ נמצא במעמד דומה

² ערכין י:

³ עיין טור או"ח סימן תקצ"ז וברמ"א שם סעיף ג

⁴ שם פרישה בשם ספר האגודה

⁵ בספר אבן שונוב דרשה לר"ה וברמ"א או"ח תקפג,ב ע"פ הירושלמי למרות

⁶ שבירושלמי שלפנינו ליתא (ברוך שאמר)

⁷ כריתות ה: והוריות יב.

⁷ ת"ר: אין מושחין את המלכים אלא על המעין, כדי שתימשך מלכותו...אמר אב"י:

השתא דאמרת סימנא מילתא היא, יהא רגיל איניש למיכל (כריתות שם ובהוריות

שם למיחז'ב) ריש שתא קרא ורוביא, כרתי, סילקא ותמרי.

⁸ שו"ע או"ח תקפג,א (לדוגמא:כשיאכל רוביא יאמר: יה"ר שירבו זכותינו)

⁹ דברים יח,ט"ג

¹⁰ ונראה לי דשאר בקשות שאומרים באבינו מלכנו אומרים בראש השנה אבל חטאנו

לפניך וכן כיוצא בו דבר שיש בו הודאת חטא אין אומרים מהטעם שאין אומרים וידוי

בראש השנה (בית יוסף או"ח תקפד,א)

to determine their fate in the upcoming year,¹¹ then even without its relative position vis-à-vis Yom HaKippurim, it is hard to understand why the Day of Judgment would be situated at the beginning of the year. It should be akin to a final exam which is the cumulative culmination of one's studies over a duration of time that is administered at the end of the period. So too, the Day of Judgment should be situated at the end of the year as a conclusion to a year's efforts rather than at the beginning of the new year. In essence, what does the Day of Judgment have to do with Rosh Hashana?

As already noted above, there is an embedded tension in the day of Rosh Hashana from all the competing motifs and feelings associated with the day. The Day of Judgment looms large in the background and weighs on the gaiety of the festivities and the excitement surrounding the coronation of the King. Strangely, it is as if one is celebrating the uncertainty of the moment. More disconcerting is the fact that all of these themes which shape the character of the day of Rosh Hashana are completely absent from the description of the nature of Rosh Hashana in the Torah.

In the most elaborate list of the Jewish holidays in Parshat Emor, the Torah simply says that there is a holiday "on the first day of the seventh month (בחדש) (השביעי באחד לחדש) with the following characteristics, "a sabbath, a memorial of trumpeting, a holy gathering (שבתון זכרון תרועה מקרא) (קדש)." By the Korbanei Musaf in Parshat Pinchas, there is an equally sparse description with again the "first day of the seventh month (ובחדש השביעי באחד) (לחדש) being day that is "a holy gathering for you, where you shall do no laborious work, a day of trumpeting for you (מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל מלאכת) (עבודה לא תעשו יום תרועה יהיה לכם)." ¹²

The only hint that we have that the day might be connected to Yom HaKippurim is the fact they share the same Korbanot Musafim of "one young bull, one ram and seven male lambs (פר בן בקר אחד איל אחד) (כבשים בני שנה שבעה ושעיר עזים אחד) (חטאת)." ¹⁴

This problem is not lost on the exegetes. The Ramban commenting on the reason for the trumpeting (זכרון תרועה) on Rosh Hashana states that "the verse does not give the reason for this

Mitzva, why trumpeting (תרועה)? And why do we need a remembrance (זכרון) before God on this day more than any other day? And why was it commanded to make this day into a holiday at all? It must be since it falls out in the same month as Yom Kippur at the beginning of the month (ראש חודש) that it is a day of judgment before God...and there is a sign in the heavens since the zodiac of this month (תשרי) is the scale which is used to measure and weigh the judgment of God." The Ibn Ezra also notes that there is a Mitzva to blow the trumpets at the beginning of every month (ראש חודש) ¹⁵ and so the command to sound the Shofar on Rosh Hashana is no different than the trumpeting of any other month. It is most explicit in the Ri Ibn Shuiv (ר"י אבן שויעב) ¹⁶ where he minces no words when he states that the Torah never explicitly speaks about these issues and asks why is it that they are absent from the Torah's description of the day. ¹⁷ In the Torah, there is no Day of Judgment, there is no coronation of the King and there is no blowing of the Shofar!

The most perplexing aspect of the festival of Rosh Hashana is the name of the holiday itself. How is it that it became known as Rosh Hashana, the beginning of the year, or in the vernacular, New Years? Yes, it is Rosh Chodesh, but nowhere in the Torah does it indicate that this holiday is the beginning of the year. It is a holiday on the first day of the seventh month which hardly seems to be the most befitting time to start the year. Moreover, most of the indications in the Pesukim seem to point to the fact that Rosh Hashana is situated at the end of the year and not at the beginning of the year. The three pilgrimage festivals (שלוש רגלים), Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, are described a number of times in the Torah either by their agrarian significance or by their coinciding calendrically with an important agricultural time period. Pesach is the Festival of the Spring (חג האביב), Shavuot is the Festival of the Harvest (חג הקציר) and Sukkot is the Festival of the Ingathering (חג האסוף) situated at the end of the year (בצאת השנה) ¹⁸ or at the turn of the year (תקופת השנה). ¹⁹ The Torah enumerates the three agrarian holidays chronologically and it logically describes Sukkot as culminating this trifecta of festivals at the conclusion of the year. In this week's Parsha, the Torah describes the Mitzva of Hakhel which takes place at the end of every seven years, at the time of the Shemitta on the holiday of Sukkot. ²⁰ Sukkot is celebrated after Rosh Hashana, yet once again here the Torah describes

¹¹ משנה ר"ה א, ב, ורמב"ם הל' תשובה ג, א-ב

¹² דבר אל בני ישראל לאמר בחדש השביעי באחד לחדש יהיה לכם שבתון זכרון תרועה מקרא קדש (ויקרא כג, כד)

¹³ ובחדש השביעי באחד לחדש מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל מלאכת עבודה לא תעשו יום תרועה יהיה לכם (במדבר כט, א)

¹⁴ במדבר כט, א-א

¹⁵ וביום שמחתכם ובמועדיכם ובראשי חדשיכם ותקעתם בחצצרת על עלתיכם ועל זבחי שלמיכם והיו לכם לזכרון לפני אלקיכם אני יקח אלקיכם (במדבר י')

¹⁶ ר' יהושע אבן שויעב (1280-1340) חי בספרד תלמיד הרשב"א וחברו של הריטב"א רבו של מנחם בן זרח

¹⁷ דרשות ר"י אבן שויעב דרשה לראש השנה

¹⁸ וחג הקציר בכורי מעשיך אשר תזרע בשדה וחג האסוף בצאת השנה באסוף את מעשיך מן השדה (שמות כג, טז)

¹⁹ וחג שבעת תעשה לך בכורי קציר חטים וחג האסוף תקופת השנה (שמות לד, כב)

²⁰ ויצו משה אותם לאמר מקץ שבע שנים במעד שנת השמיטה בחג הסוכות (דברים י, לא)

it as marking the end of year. The most compelling evidence is the fact that in Parshat Behar when describing the onset of the upcoming Jubilee (יובל), the Torah enjoins that the Shofar be blown on the tenth day of the seventh month, Yom Hakippurim, in order to usher in the sanctity of the Yovel.²¹ That which is implied in that Pasuk is made unequivocal by the sole explicit reference to Rosh Hashana in the entire Tanach. The prophet Yechezkel has a vision that begins in the following manner, "In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, on the New Year (בראש השנה) on the tenth of the month, fourteen years after the destruction of the city..."²² The cumulative evidence would lead one to believe that the new year begins either on Yom Kippur or somewhere around Shemini Atzeret, but certainly not on Rosh Hashana.

The Tanach records two celebrations of the holiday that falls out on the first day of the seventh month. In Ezra, prior to the rebuilding of the Second Temple, it describes the people gathering from the surrounding cities in Yerushalayim to re-initiate the daily functioning of the Temple's altar. It mentions nothing else significant transpiring on that day, though it does mention that on Sukkot they sacrificed the burnt-offerings according to the daily prescription (of the Torah).²³ In a more elaborate ceremony in the time of Nechemia, the people gather at the Gate of the Water where for the first half of the day Ezra reads from the Torah to educate all the men and women gathered who are ignorant of that which is contained in the Torah. After the public Torah reading, the leaders instruct the people not to mourn or cry over their neglect of the Torah laws that they had just heard. Instead they should **"go and eat delicacies and drink sweet beverages**, send portions to those that have nothing prepared since today is sacred to our Lord. **Do not be sad**, the enjoyment of God is your strength. The Leviim quieted the people saying, be silent, for this day is sacred, **do not be sad**. So all the people went to **eat and drink** and to send portions and to engage in **great rejoicing**..." On the second day, they gathered once again and received instructions regarding the holiday of Sukkot and the people built for themselves Sukkot to dwell in during the upcoming festival. Once again here, in both instances, Sukkot has a semblance of what one would expect, but Rosh Hashana seems to be devoid of any of the aspects that shape the character of the day. Even more surprising is the emphasis on being happy and rejoicing which seem

to be the antithesis of the austerity and solemnity usually associated with Rosh Hashana.

Generally, when the Torah mentions a festival it also states the rationale for the celebration of that holiday. In many instances, the Torah gives multiple reasons for a given festival. Overall, the impetus for given holidays consist of two genres. Those that fall on a particular calendric date and are commemorating or reliving a particular historical event and those that are tied to a significant agricultural milestone.²⁴ The three pilgrimage festivals (שלוש רגלים) appear together in the Torah five times.²⁵ Pesach (חג המצות) is described as being the Festival of the Spring (חג האביב) and is also described as being the time of the Exodus. Historically, Bnei Yisrael left Egypt on the fifteenth of Nissan which we are commanded to commemorate and relive with a yearly holiday, but it is also the significant agricultural milestone of the emergence of the new crops, the beginning of the early harvest (מהחל חרמש בקמה) and the spring season. The coinciding festivals yield a holiday that celebrates both events simultaneously. Shavuot is described as being the festival that celebrates the wheat harvest (בכורי קציר חיטים) or the harvest of the first fruits of your labor (חג הקציר בכורי מעשיר). It is also the Festival of Weeks whose date is set as fifty days post both the first day of Pesach (מחרת השבת) and "from when the sickle is first put to the standing crop (מהחל חרמש בקמה)." The Torah associates no historical event with Shavuot, but Chazal tell us that it is the day of the Revelation at Sinai, the day the Torah was given by God to Bnei Yisrael.²⁶ Sukkot is the festival that celebrates the ingathering of the crops from drying in the fields, of the grain from the threshing floor and of the wine from the press, all the bounty that God has blessed the person with in the previous agricultural year. That bounty is used to build the Sukkot that are central to the celebration. At the same time, on the fifteenth on Tishrei, one is enjoined to sit in the Sukkah for seven days in order that the generations will be aware that God housed Bnei Yisrael in Sukkot²⁷ when they left the land of Egypt.²⁸ The overlap between the historical events and the agricultural cycle yields three holidays with dual reasons for their significance. In summary, the Ibn Ezra explains that it is only appropriate that Nissan be the first month since the history of the Jewish nation began with the Exodus in that month and chronologically it is the beginning of the agricultural

²¹ והעברת שופר תרועה בחדש השבועי בעשור לחדש ביום הכפרים תעבירו שופר בכל ארצכם וקדשתם את שנת החמשים שנה וקראתם דרור בארץ לכל ישיביה יובל הוא תהיה לכם ושבתם איש אל אחזתו ואיש אל משפחתו תשובו (ויקרא כה, ט-י) בעשרים וחמש שנה לגלותנו בראש השנה בעשור לחדש בארבע עשרה שנה אחר אשר הקתה העיר בעצם היום הזה היתה עלי יד יקוק ויבא אתי שמה (יחזקאל מא, עזרא ג, א-ו)
²² זה גם הטעם שמכניסים את חודש העיבור ללוח העברי ע"פ הלבנה כדי להתאים בין התקופות האיכרים והתאריכים בלוח הלבנה של החגים האלו

²⁵ שמות כג, שמות לד, ויקרא כג, במדבר כח-כט, דברים טז
²⁶ כדאי להקדיש שיעור שלם לאיפה רמזה התורה לדבר הזה וגם איך ידעו חז"ל לקשר בין האירועים האלו
²⁷ דתניא: כי בסוכות הושבתי את בני ישראל - ענני כבוד הוין, דברי רבי אליעזר. רבי עקיבא אומר סוכות ממש עשו להם. (סוכה יא:)
²⁸ עיין בגר"א שהוא מסביר מה האירוע ההיסטורי שקשור לתאריך ט"ו בתשרי ע"פ המד"א שסוכות פירושו ענני הכבוד

cycle celebrated by these three holidays.²⁹ That implies that the coinciding of the historical and agricultural events is not just coincidental, but there is a deeper thematic correlation between these celebrations. The birth of the Jewish nation, the Exodus, is coterminous with the spring season, the emergence of the new crops, the beginning of the early harvest (barley) and the revitalization after the dormancy of the winter. The cross-pollinating between the two cycles deepens one's understanding of the reasons for these festivals and helps the individual to fuse and synthesize their spiritual and historical worlds with their mundane and natural existence to create a rich living religious experience.

The remaining Torah holidays seem to be devoid of one or both of these aspects. In the Torah's description of the holidays of Rosh Hashana and Shemini Atzeret, the Torah gives neither a historical nor an agricultural reason for their significance. Yom HaKippurim has historical significance in that the tenth of Tishrei is the day that Moshe returns to Bnei Yisrael with the second Luchot and it is the successful culmination of Moshe's appeal to God to win forgiveness for Bnei Yisrael for the worshipping of the Eigel. That historical event defines the character of the holiday of Yom Kippur as being a day for atonement, forgiveness and reconciliation. The practices and the temperament of the day are defined by the Torah as being a day of affliction (עינוי נפש) with a specific protocol (סדר עבודת יו"כ) that is detailed in Parshat Acharei-Mot. Still missing though is the agricultural significance of the day.

It is possible that the Torah's defining of Yom HaKippurim as being the beginning of the sanctity of the Shemitta and Yovel years might shed some light on this matter. The Torah tells us that one must desist from plowing and harvesting during the Shemitta year (בחריש ובקציר תשבות).³⁰ In addition, one must forgo planting, pruning and harvesting on the Sabbatical year.³¹ From both of these descriptions, one sees that the three pilgrimage holidays really pick up in the middle of the agricultural cycle. As the Shemitta indicates, there is a prelude to the spring, harvest and ingathering. It is the planting, nourishing and growth management part of the cycle that yields the results that are celebrated on Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. In the Land of Israel, the rainy season begins in the month of Cheshvan which means that the plowing and seeding is done prior to that in the month of Tishrei. In essence, the month of Tishrei sits at the crossroad of the end of the previous year and the beginning of the new year. It is the culmination of

the previous year's agricultural cycle and its successes which are celebrated on Sukkot as the Festival of the Ingathering, but it is also the outset of the new agriculture year which is fraught with risk and danger. Looking backwards, it is a time of celebration and rejoicing while looking forward it is a time of fear, anxiety and anticipation. Assuming that Rosh Hashana, Yom HaKippurim and Shemini Atzeret, which all share the same Korbanei Musafim, are part of the same cycle then they are the holidays of the new year that capture the emotions and experiences in anticipation of the upcoming agricultural cycle. Therefore the month of Tishrei is both at once the end of the year and the beginning of the year.

All of this is best captured by Rabbi Akiva in the Gemara Rosh Hashana where he explains, "Why is it that the Torah commands us to bring the Omer (barley meal-offering) on Pesach? Because Pesach is the time of the grains. God said bring before me the Omer so that I may bless the grains in the field. Why does the Torah say to bring the Shte HaLechem (two wheat loaves of bread) on Shavuot? Because it is the time of the fruits of the tree. God said bring the Shte HaLechem so that the fruits of the trees will be blessed. Why does the Torah say to pour water libations on Sukkot. God said pour the water libations before me on Sukkot so that the rains of the upcoming season will be blessed."³²

Yom Kippur therefore is both a historical day of atonement, but it is also a current Day of Atonement. It is the attempt to right the wrongs and reorient oneself towards God because as the Torah tells us in Parsht Eikev, the upcoming rainy season is dependent on the behavior of the people. If you listen to the commands of God and follow in his ways then the rains will come in a timely and productive fashion.

We still need to explain the historical significance of Rosh Hashana and how that interplays with the new agriculture cycle which hopefully will yield some deeper insights into the holiday of Rosh Hashana which will help to answer many of the questions raised above as well as provide for a more meaningful understanding of the holiday of Rosh Hashana.

To be continued next week.

Shabbat Shalom

²⁹ כי תחלת החשבון מניסן, כי בו יצאנו ממצרים. ועוד, כי אביב השעורים תחלה, ואחר כן בכורי קציר חטים, ואחר כן באספך את מעשיך, ואלה המועדים תלוים להיותם בימים הנזכרים (ויקרא כג, כד)

³⁰ שמות לד, כא

³¹ שמות כג, י-יא וויקרא כה, ג-ה
³² ראש השנה טז.