

Rosh Hashana – Part II The Beginning or the End of the Year

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As already noted previously ([last week's shiur](#)), there is no reason given in the Torah for the holiday of Rosh Hashana. The Ri Ibn Shu'ib (ר"י אבן שועיב)³³ suggests that this is a product of the fact that Rosh Hashana is a historical universal event that predates the Torah. Since the Torah added no new dimension to Rosh Hashana, it felt no need to elucidate the reasons for the holiday. He then adds that the Torah does not explicitly discuss exalted matters that are beyond human comprehension or issues that are esoteric and not tangibly experienced by people. It will only hint at such matters and leave them to be explicated upon by Chazal in the Oral Torah. In the same vein, both the Ramban and Ibn Ezra indicate that Rosh Hashana being the Day of Judgment is a product of tradition from the prophets and Chazal.³⁴

The first Mishna in Rosh Hashana begins, there are four beginnings to the year (ארבעה ראשי שנים הם)³⁵. Enumerated amongst that list of four is the first day of Tishrei which is the New Year for years, Shemitta, Yovel, saplings and vegetables. As discussed last week, the latter four items are connected to the agricultural cycle in the Land of Israel which begins with the onset of the new rainy season in the autumn. With regards to the first item on the list, the Gemara queries as to what is the normative ramification of the fact that the first of Tishrei is the New Year for years.³⁶ To any observant Jew, instinctively the answer as to what is the significance of the first of Tishrei beginning the new year would be that it is the Day of Judgment. Surprisingly, the first option proffered by the Gemara is that it has mundane implications with regards to the proper dating of contracts.³⁷ The second option suggested is that it is the beginning of the seasons of the year which be consistent with the remainder of the agricultural items in the list.³⁸ At this point it is worthwhile to reflect that even within the Oral Torah, it is amazing that what is known colloquially as Rosh Hashana is only one of a number of starts to the year and even the first of Tishrei itself according to the first two answers of the

Gemara is not connected in any way to the themes that are normally associated with the character of the day.

Finally, the third option offered by the Gemara as to the significance of the new year beginning on the first of Tishrei is that it is the Day of Judgment.³⁹ This is based on the verse in Parshat Eikev which states, "It is a land which the Lord your God looks after, on which the Lord your God always keeps His eyes, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year."⁴⁰ Rav Nachman bar Itzchak interprets this to mean that at the beginning of the year it is determined what shall be at the end of the year.⁴¹ While that indicates that there is a Day of Judgment, how is one to know that it is necessarily associated with Tishrei? The Gemara then quotes the verse from Tehillim which is contained in the chapter that is recited as the song of the day (שיר של יום) for Thursday and for Rosh Hashana. "Blow the shofar at the moon's renewal, at the time appointed (בכסה) for our festive day."⁴² The Gemara rhetorically asks what is the only holiday that coincides with the moon's renewal and where the moon is not visible (ראש חודש)? The only holiday that meets that criteria is Rosh Hashana. Immediately afterwards the Pasuk says, "For it is a law for Israel, a ruling (משפט) of the God of Jacob" which the Gemara interprets to be a reference to the judgment of the heavenly court or the Day of Judgment. This is codified in the second Mishna in Rosh Hashana which begins that are four times a year when the world is judged (בארבעה פרקים העולם נדון): On Pesach for the grains, on Shavuot for the fruits of the tree and on Sukkot for the water (rain); on Rosh Hashana all the people of the world pass before Him like a division of soldiers, as it says, "He who fashions the hearts of them all, who discerns all their doings."⁴³ While these verses associate the Day of Judgment with Rosh Hashana, they still do not explain the historical significance or reason as to why it would be chosen as the Day of Judgment.

The Midrashei Chazal help to bridge the final gap when they explain that Rabbi Eliezer believes that the world was created starting on the twenty-fifth of Elul.⁴⁴ That would mean that the sixth day of creation coincides with Rosh Hashana and that the

³³ ר' יהושע אבן שועיב (1280-1340) חי בספרד תלמיד הרשב"א וחברו של הריטב"א ורבו של מנחם בן זרח

³⁴ ויקרא כג, כג

³⁵ **ארבעה ראשי שנים הם** באחד בניסן ראש השנה למלכים ולרגלים באחד באלול ראש השנה למעשר בהמה רבי אלעזר רבי שמעון אומרים באחד בתשרי **באחד בתשרי ראש השנה לשנים ולשמיטין וליובלות ולניסיה ולירקות** באחד בשבט ראש השנה לאילן כדברי בית שמאי בית הלל אומרים בחמשה עשר בו באחד בתשרי ראש השנה לשנים, למאי הלכתא? (גמ' ר"ה ח.)

³⁶ אמר רב פפא: לטטרות (שם)

³⁷ דרבי זירא אמר: לתקופה (שם)

³⁸ רב נחמן בר יצחק אמר: לדין (שם)

³⁹ אָרְץ אֲשֶׁר-יִתְּנָה יְקוֹקֵךְ אֱלֹהֶיךָ דָרֶשׁ אֶתָּה תְּמִיד עֵינֵי יְקוֹקֵךְ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּהַ מְרִשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד

⁴⁰ רב נחמן בר יצחק אמר: לדין דכתיב מראשית השנה ועד אחרית שנה - מראשית השנה נידון מה יהא בסופה. ממאי דתשרי הוא - דכתיב תקעו בחדש שופר בכסה

ליום חגגו, איזהו חג שהחדש מתכסה בו - הו' אומר זה ראש השנה וכתוב כי חק לישראל הוא משפט לאלקי יעקב (שם)

⁴² תקעו בחדש שופר בכסה ליום חגגו: כי חק לישראל הוא משפט לאלקי יעקב: (תהלים פא, ד-ה)

⁴³ **בארבעה פרקים העולם נידון** בפסח על התבואה בעצרת על פירות האילן **בראש השנה כל באי העולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון שנאמר (תהלים ל"ג) היוצר יחד לבם המבין אל כל מעשיהם** ובחג נידונין על המים (משנה ר"ה א, ב)

⁴⁴ **תני רבי אליעזר בעשרים וחמשה באלול נברא העולם** ואתיא כרב דתניא בתקיעתא דרב זה היום תחלת מעשיך זכרון ליום ראשון כי חק לישראל הוא ועל המדינות בו יאמר איזו לחרב איזו לשלום איזו לרעב איזו לשובע ובריות בו יפקדו להזכירם לחיים ולמות, נמצאת אומר **בראש השנה נברא אדם הראשון**...בשמינית הכניסו לגן עדן, בתשיעית צוהו, בעשירית עבר על צויו, באחת עשרה נידון, בשנים עשרה יצא בדימוס מלפני הקב"ה, אמר לו הקב"ה אדם אתה סימן לבניך כשם שנכנסת לפני בדין ביום הזה ויצאת בדימוס, כך עתידין בניך להיות נכנסין לפני בדין ביום הזה ויוצאים בדימוס (ילקוט שמעוני רמז תשפב ופסקתא רבתי פרק מא)

pinnacle of creation, the creation of man, took place on the first of Tishrei. The Midrash gives a detailed timetable for the latter twelve hours of the sixth day of creation which includes, "in the eighth hour God brought Adam HaRishon into Gan Eden, in the ninth hour He commanded him not to eat from the Etz Hada'at, in the tenth hour Adam HaRishon abrogated that command, in the eleventh hour he was judged, in the twelfth hour he was forgiven; and God said to Adam HaRishon, you are a paradigm for your descendants; just like you stood before Me in judgment on this day and were forgiven, so too, in the future, your descendants will stand before Me in judgment on this day and be forgiven."

Rabbi Eliezer's explanation of the historical significance of Rosh Hashana seems so compelling, yet as seen above, there is still so much uncertainty surrounding why the day is considered the beginning of the year. That is because Rabbi Eliezer's position rests upon an assumption that is not universally accepted by other Tanaim. In the Gemara Rosh Hashana, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer disagree as to when the world was created.⁴⁵ They both agree that on Rosh Hashana (the first of Tishrei) Sara, Rachel and Chana were remembered (conceived), Yosef was released from incarceration in Egypt, and Bnei Yisrael were freed from slave labor in Mitzrayim. They also agree that Yitzchak Avinu was born on Pesach. On the other hand they disagree as to when the other Avot were born and passed away, when the world was created and when the future redemption will take place. Rabbi Eliezer believes that the Avot were born and died in the month of Tishrei, the world was created in Tishrei (בתשרי נברא העולם) and while the Exodus took place in Nissan, the future redemption will take place in Tishrei. In contrast, Rabbi Yehoshua believes that the creation (בניסן נברא העולם) and the other events took place or will take place in Nissan. The fact that man was created and judged on Rosh Hashana only makes sense if one subscribes to Rabbi Eliezer's view that the world was created in Nissan. According to Rabbi Yehoshua, none of that would be true since man was created on the first of Nissan and not on the first of Tishrei. Moreover, when there is a disagreement between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, generally Rabbi Yehoshua's view is accepted as being normative. That would explain why it seems to be that even in the Oral Torah it is so unclear as to what transpired historically on the first day of Tishrei.

Rav Shmuel bar Itzchak asks in the Gemara Rosh Hashana, "according to whose opinion do we pray on Rosh Hashana, 'This day is the beginning of Your works, a commemoration of the first day (ה' היום תחלת מעשיך זכרון ליום ראשון)?" It is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer who believes that the world was created in Tishrei.⁴⁶ As the Maharsha explains, since man was the *raison d'être* of creation, it is as if everything created before him was meaningless. Therefore, his creation is called the beginning of God's works and that moment is considered the first day of the year or Rosh Hashana. Since the text quoted by Rav Shmuel bar Itzchak is found in our liturgy, it would seem that Rabbi Eliezer's position that the world was created in Tishrei is the accepted view. This would then finally yield that the creation and judgment of Adam HaRishon is the significant historical event that took place on Rosh Hashana. The only problem with this conclusion is a Mitzvah called Birkat HaChama which transpires every twenty-eight years.⁴⁷ It is a blessing recited upon witnessing the sun in the same position it was found at the moment of creation (same day and hour). Many may remember the last occurrence of this Mitzvah which was Erev Pesach 5769 (April 8th, 2009). Obviously, if the performance of this Mitzvah is in the month of Nissan, and that is when the sun returns to its placement at creation, then it would stand to reason that the normative practice is like Rabbi Yehoshua that the world was created in Nissan. How could it be that the liturgy on Rosh Hashana and the Mitzva of Birkat HaChama are subscribing to mutually exclusive positions? If Rosh Hashana is a commemoration of the creation of man then the sun could not return to its position at the time of creation in Nissan. And if the moment of the sun's creation is found in Nissan then Rosh Hashana cannot be a remembrance to the first day of creation. Tosafot notes this internal inconsistency and to resolve these seemingly incompatible practices, he quotes the Rabbeinu Tam who makes a radical suggestion that God considered and contemplated creating the world in Tishrei, but He did not actually create it until Nissan.⁴⁸

While the concept seems revolutionary, it actually mirrors that which transpires in the natural world. The agricultural cycle starts with plowing and seeding the field. Embedded in those seeds is the potential to emerge as fully grown produce. When nourished by the rain and the nutrients of the soil, that latent potential comes to fruition. Tishrei is the

⁴⁵ תניא, רבי אליעזר אומר: בתשרי נברא העולם, בתשרי נולדו אבות, בתשרי מתו אבות, בפסח נולד יצחק, בראש השנה נפקדה שרה רחל וחנוה, בראש השנה יצא יוסף מבית האסורין, בראש השנה בטלה עבודה מאבותינו במצרים, בניסן נגאלו, בתשרי עתידין ליגאל. רבי יהושע אומר: בניסן נברא העולם, בניסן נולדו אבות, בניסן מתו אבות, בפסח נולד יצחק, בראש השנה נפקדה שרה רחל וחנוה, בראש השנה יצא יוסף מבית האסורין, בראש השנה בטלה עבודה מאבותינו במצרים, בניסן נגאלו, בניסן עתידין ליגאל. (גמ' ר"ה י')

⁴⁶ אמר רב שמואל בר יצחק: כמאן מצלינן האידינא זה היום תחלת מעשיך זכרון ליום ראשון, כמאן - כרבי אליעזר, דאמר: בתשרי נברא העולם. (שם כז.)
⁴⁷ גמ' ברכות נט: הרואה חמה בתקופתה ורש"י שם
⁴⁸ תימה הא קי"ל כרבי יהושע כדאמרין בפ"ק (דף יב.) לתקופה כר' יהושע...אומר ר"ת דאלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים ואיכא למימר דבתשרי עלה במחשבה לבראות ולא נברא עד ניסן (תוד"ה כמאן ר"ה כז. ושפת אמת שם ועיין פרי צדיק בראשית לר"ח כסלו א ובדברים לר"ה ועיין במשנ"ב א"ח תקצב ס"ק ה)

time when the farmer takes a leap of faith by placing a seed that has current utility into the ground. Without the proper care and nourishment it will decompose and be lost. On the other hand, with the right management and natural inputs, the seed can produce bounty that far exceeds its current utility. At this moment, it is all potential that is fraught with fear, hope, anxiety, anticipation, risk and danger. Everything hangs in the balance, this planting could yield a cornucopia of produce, nothing at all or something in between. In the spring, in Nissan, when the produce emerges and matures, the realization of all that potential is unleashed. The relationship between that which is reaped and that which planted has to do with how much of that potential is realized. It is directly correlated with how optimal the conditions and inputs, provided by the farmer and God, were during that interim period to foster the emergence of that which was planted.

As noted before, understanding the historical and agricultural significance of Rosh Hashana would shed light on the character of the day and yield deeper insights as to the nature of the day of Rosh Hashana. Rosh Hashana does not commemorate the creation of the world, but rather the thought to do so. Like the seeds that are planted in Tishrei, Rosh Hashana speaks to the opportunity embedded in the creation. It celebrates creation's potential and not its realization. Man as the center-piece of that creation has nested within him the greatest potential to realize God's intent in creating the world. Recognizing that potential is the first step to achieving its actualization. Just like there is so much more to a seed, if cultivated properly, than its immediate benefit, so too man has the capacity, with proper nurturing, for so much more than that which is currently apparent. Perceiving, comprehending and appreciating those possibilities and capabilities is essential to bringing to fruition all that God intended and expected from that individual. Man can only be as great as his belief in his personal value to the creation. It is a prerequisite to achieving man's God given mission. Therefore, Rosh Hashana is about what man can be and not what he is.

This concept is actually brought to the fore in the Chazarat HaShas of Musaf on Rosh Hashana at the conclusion of Malchiyot, Zichronot and Shofarot, where we declare, "Hayom Harat Olam (היום הרת) (עולם)" which is often mistranslated as "Today is the birth of the world." The Hebrew word for birth is Leida (לידה), Hara (הרה) means conception or pregnancy. It is not birth, but rather the potential for life. Rosh Hashana is not the birthday of the world

and man, but rather it is the conception of what could be realized by the birth of the world and man.

This gives a new meaning to the statement of Rabbi Yitzchak about the justification for God's rescuing Yishmael despite all the evil he would perpetrate and difficulties he would cause for Bnei Yisrael in the future. He explained, "God does not judge man on what the future brings, but rather on his actions of that moment."⁴⁹ In other words, God looks at the potential of the individual at that moment not what they actually will do in the future.

That is why symbols are so central to Rosh Hashana. It is not because they are omens or determinant in any way, but because they express the potential of the upcoming year. It helps to direct one's perspective towards what could be rather than what has been. They turn one's frame of mind away from the limitations of their reality and experiences to focus on the greater vistas of untapped potential. These Simanim are integral to Rosh Hashana because they are essential props in accenting the motif of the day which is the recognition of the latent potential that exists in each individual and in the creation.

It also would explain why everyone agrees that Sara, Rachel and Chana were remembered on Rosh Hashana. They did not give birth on Rosh Hashana (everyone agrees Yitzchak was born on Pesach), but rather they conceived on Rosh Hashana. This is emphasized in the choice of the Torah reading and Haftorah for the first day of Rosh Hashana which revolves around these barren women and their being remembered by God. Their potential salvation from being childless took place on Rosh Hashana, but their true deliverance would only be realized with the birth of a child at a later date (Nissan). So too, Bnei Yisrael were released from slave labor on Rosh Hashana. They were potentially free men on the first of Tishrei even though they did not physically realize that redemption with the Exodus until Nissan. Lastly, Yosef's release from prison opened the potential for him to be reunited with and bring salvation to his family. It would be years before that freedom produced tangible results, but that ultimate outcome was set in motion on Rosh Hashana. In all these cases, Rosh Hashana was a pivotal moment when the potential for fulfillment was unlocked

In the introduction to Zichronot, we say, "For the remembrance of all that is formed comes before you, the deeds of each individual and the decree of his fate (מעשה איש ופקודתו)."⁵⁰ If one were to translate U'Phukadato (ופקודתו) as "his mission"

⁴⁹ ואמר רבי יצחק: כל שנה שרשה בתחלתה מתעשרת בסופה, שנאמר מרשית השנה - מרשית כתיב, ועד אחרית - סופה שיש לה אחרית. ואמר רבי יצחק: אין דנין את

האדם אלא לפי מעשיו של אותה שנה, שנאמר כי שמע אלהים אל קול הנער באשר הוא שם. (שם טז:)
⁵⁰ כי זכר כל היצור לפניך בא מעשה איש ופקודתו

rather than "his fate," it would imply that the judgment of Rosh Hashana focuses on man's mission and potential rather than his failings. From that perspective, the judgment of the day is not about what has happened, but about what will be. It is forward, not backyard, looking. That is why Rosh Hashana is celebrated on the first day of the new year and not the last day of the previous year. It is setting the trajectory for the upcoming year. Rosh Hashana comes before Yom HaKippurim and is the first two days of the Ten Days of Repentance because one must first establish a standard and benchmark to be able to recognize their shortcomings and failings in realizing their potential. Rosh Hashana is a day of exaltedness, not a day of introspection. Therefore, speaking about sin and confession are incompatible with the character of the day because they focus on man's failures and disappointments.

This would help explain the two recorded celebrations of the holiday of Rosh Hashana in Tanach. In Ezra, the focus of the day was on the reinitiating of the altar and the sacrifices.⁵¹ This was done before they began to build the Second Temple, but it set in motion the service of the Temple which would only be fully realized with the dedication of the Temple itself (in Nissan) many years later. It also can help make sense of the seemingly strange reaction of the leaders to the people's crying after the public Torah reading in the description of Rosh Hashana in Nechemya.⁵² 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. That is because their sincerity in wanting to rectify their lack of adherence was the potential and fuel needed to have them acknowledge and rectify their shortcomings in the future. They accepted that God was their King and that had ramifications as to their future choices. Upon reaching that pivotal moment it was reason to "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. That is the reason to celebrate on Rosh Hashana.

The first step to successfully accomplishing the goal of Rosh Hashana is to acknowledge that there is a King with directives and an intent for the creation. This in turn leads to the recognition of man's frailty and insignificance in the context of the creator. At the same time, it is also uplifting and invigorating to realize that God has an intended mission for man and that man has so much to offer in advancing the creation towards God's will. Without subjects, there is no king. Therefore, man (Bnei Yisrael) is essential

and indispensable to God's blueprint for the world. In order to serve in this vital role, it is imperative that one detach themselves from the constricting material mundaneness of life and one open their eyes to their spiritual potential and mission. They must free themselves of their self-serving selfish nature and see the opportunity afforded to them in serving their King and God. One must adjust their gaze upwards to the soaring limitless heavens, and not stare downwards at the confining physical world.

That is why Rosh Hashana has an embedded tension within it that yields such mixed feelings and ambivalence. Celebrating the coronation of the King and the great possibilities of the creation or the upcoming year are a double edged sword. It is exhilarating, exciting and inspiring to contemplate the opportunity to coronate and declare the King's presence and the great potential afforded to the creation and to man. At the same time, it is daunting, unnerving and disconcerting to be faced with such an awesome task and to grasp how far one is from realizing that potential. We are conscious of this tension and therefore are both at once awestruck and fearful, celebratory and reserved.

The judgment of Rosh Hashana surrounds what we will offer to bring to the table of creation. What will we do differently in this upcoming year to realize the mission God has given us? What potential have we failed to unlock? How will we make God's presence more apparent in the upcoming year? How will we become the exalted person that God intended? The gap between that which we desire to accomplish and that which is our reality and the inherent shortcomings that prevent us from realizing our potential are the work of the other eight days of the Ten Days of Repentance. It reaches its zenith in the short "confession" found in Neilah on Yom HaKippurim where we beg God (למען נחדל מעושהך) to help us to stop stealing and return to You. What theft is so egregious that it is the sole focus of the Vidui in Neilah? It is to stop stealing from God by squandering one's potential. On Rosh Hashana let us celebrate what we will do and not get mired in what we have done. Let us rise to the occasion and be deserving of God's mercy, blessing and munificence. Let us tell God we are ready to coronate You as the King, to live up to Your expectations, and that this year will be the year when the seeds we plant in Tishrei will come to fruition in Nissan. We will make it a year where at the end of the year the harvest and ingathering will match the potential unleashed on Rosh Hashana.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova
כתיבה וחתימה טובה

⁵¹ עזרא ג

⁵² נחמיה ח