

Rav Hutner and Kindness on Rosh Hashanah

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I – Introduction

Rav Yitzchak Hutner was one of the most influential Orthodox philosophers and theologians of the twentieth century. As *Rosh Yeshiva* of Chaim Berlin, he became well known for his *ma'amarim*, discourses on Jewish theology, that he would deliver to students during holidays¹. Drawing upon his rich and diverse background, Rav Hutner combined the Lithuanian analysis he learned in *Knesset Yisrael*, the Chassidic and Kabbalistic philosophy of his mentor Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, and general scholarship, to transform seemingly benign textual nuances into fundamental theological principles rife with practical implications for personal and communal divine service. The Maharal, R. Bezalel Loew of Prague, was one of the largest influences of Rav Hutner's thought. The Maharal's influence was not limited to content, but also to style. Much like the Maharal, Rav Hutner often explains esoteric ideas in a manner that is understandable even to the uninitiated laymen. Moreover, he, like Maharal, would often leave much of the broader concept to be deduced by the reader through a combination of critical analysis of his sermon and outside knowledge of Jewish theology. One such example is his famous *Kuntris HaHessed*. Although Rav Hutner devotes over twenty pages to explaining different aspects of 'kindness' and its importance on Rosh Hashanah, a richer, more nuanced perspective is left for the reader to discover.

II – The Prominence of Hessed

The holiday marking the New Year has been given many names in the Torah and rabbinic works. Each title evokes a different aspect of the day: “*Yom Teruah*” recalls the shofar

¹ See the introduction to each volume of *Pahad Yitzhak* in which Rav Hutner acknowledges and explains his unique style of delivery and content.

blowing. “*Yom Hazikaron*” and the more colloquial name “*Yom Hadin*” evoke the fear of judgement that will ensue². The later term, Rosh Hashanah, simply describes it as the beginning of the New Year for chronology, *shmittah*, and *yovel*³. However, Rav Hutner develops another dimension to Rosh Hashanah: kindness.

As with most of his works, Rav Hutner quotes a source that serves as the textual basis for this idea. One of the more famous narratives of Rosh Hashanah in Tanach appears in *Sefer Nehemiah*⁴. Ezra and Nehemiah gather the Jews to the newly built Temple and teach them various laws of the Torah that they were neglecting. Upon learning of their numerous transgressions, the Jews begin to cry bitterly. Nehemiah comforts them, insisting that instead of crying, they should rejoice in their renewed commitment to God and their faith that He would forgive them, and express this rejoicing and gratitude through feasting. Additionally, Nehemiah instructs the Jews to send portions [of food] to those who lacked the financial means to celebrate.

While most readers studying these verses would focus on the usual themes of accepting God as King or repentance⁵, Rav Hutner chose to focus on a different element, namely the seemingly extraneous insistence to supply the impoverished with food and drink. Why was it so important to mention this command? Just as a similar verse was used in Megillat Esther as the source for the commandment to give *matanot laevyonim*, gifts to the poor, on Purim⁶, so too Rav Hutner uses this verse as the source to conclude “that acts of kindness are embedded into the framework of the holiness of the day.”⁷

² See Ramban (*Vayikra* 23,24) who elaborates on the term “*zikaron*” and its relevance to judgment.

³ See Rosh Hashanah 2a.

⁴ *Nehemia* 8

⁵ For example, see Ralbag (*Nehemia* 8,10).

⁶ See Maimonides end of Laws of *Yom Tov* about giving food to the poor for celebrating holidays and compare to here and *Megillat Ester*. See also Laws of *Megillah*. See also *Metzudat David* (*Nehemia* 8, 10) and Ralbag (id.).

⁷ *Pahad Yitzhak: Rosh Hashanah*. Discourse 1, Chapt. 1.

The duration of the *ma'amar* elaborates on the centrality of *hessed* to Rosh Hashanah. Rav Hutner explains that Rosh Hashanah does not merely commemorate the creation of the world, but also heralds the reawakening of the powerful spiritual forces of creation. Indeed, these “holy lights,” as Rav Hutner calls the spiritual forces involved in the historically singular act of creation, are qualitatively different than those employed in the perpetuation of the world after its creation. The Talmud states that the first chapter in *Bereishit* should not be expounded publically⁸. Rav Hutner explains that this is because this chapter describes those spiritual forces of creation that are not expressed anymore – other than on Rosh Hashanah. Because the creation of man in the “image of God” is mentioned in this chapter, it stands to reason that divine characteristics of man are most expressed during this time as well. Because the world was created with kindness – ‘*olam hessed yibaneh*⁹ – man is enjoined to imitate God and perform acts of kindness which better manifest his image of God.

III – The Role of Kindness

Although performing acts of kindness is obviously a virtue, the connection between doing these acts and the other themes of Rosh Hashanah appears to be somewhat tenuous. One might suggest that acts of kindness would be in consonance with a day dedicated to accepting God as the King because such acts represent sacrificing the “I” for a greater purpose, cause, or entity. However, a closer analysis reveals a starkly different perspective.

In his second discourse, Rav Hutner states that *hessed* in its notional form¹⁰ does not involve any loss on the part of the beneficiary, because this would limit the giver’s

⁸ *Masechet Hagigah 13a*

⁹ Psalms 89, 3

¹⁰ Rav Hutner calls this term “*betaharta ha’atzmit*”

munificence¹¹. It is only once the desire to do good is manifested in the physical world that the act of kindness appears to involve an element of sacrifice. Thus, although traditional acts of kindness generally involve an expenditure of resources¹², the impetus or desire to do good is not a manifestation of nullification or servitude.

Moreover, kindness is not only a lack of subservience, but also an act of empowerment. At the end of the first discourse, Rav Hutner summarizes the imperative to perform acts of kindness as it relates to Rosh Hashanah as a time of creation, specifically the creation of man in the image of God. In other words, it is the commandment of *imitatio dei* that is mandating kindness¹³. It is not medium of self-nullification, but a tool of divine empowerment.

Kindness is actually a manifestation of creativity. This idea is best reflected in *Lonely Man of Faith*¹⁴. In this work, Rav Joseph B. Solovetichik develops an exegetical framework for understanding the two accounts of man's creation in *Bereishit*. Adam I is created in the "image of God" and charged with dominating the world to achieve the grandeur that man deserves as being the pinnacle of creation and an 'image of God,' while Adam II seeks a covenantal relationship with God involving servitude and sacrifice. Even if one were to ignore the secular overtones of Adam I, such a description is still far from a picture of self-nullification. Reduced to its simplest form, Adam I is a creative being. Kindness may be the product of such creative impulses; but such acts would only further buttress man's position as munificent caretaker (or, in cruder terms, benevolent despot) of his surroundings.

¹¹ Although Rav Hutner does not state this explicitly, it can be inferred from his explanation in the second discourse (2, 4).

¹² This notional form of kindness is more apparent when the kindness involves spiritual elements. Thus,

¹³ This is the reason for the concept of "*mah hu rahum af atah rahum*" (*Masefet Sofrim* 3, 17), just as [God] is merciful, so too should [man] be merciful. See *Pahad Yitzhak: Pesah* (43).

¹⁴ Chapter 1.

This concept of man actualizing his divine potential and thereby imitating God is expressed even more forcefully in the *Sefer Habahir*¹⁵ which recounts God commenting that as long as Avraham was alive he did not have to do any ‘work’ because Avraham embodied the *middah* of *hessed*¹⁶. Avraham, as it were, assumed God’s role. How does such a perspective abet servitude to God and acceptance of His kingship, the much more apparent theme of Rosh Hashanah?

IV – Degrees of Nullification

In order to reconcile this apparent contradiction, one must first understand the concept of nullification before God. Understandably, this relationship with God is not binary but occurs in varying degrees of conception of the self and God. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, however, notes¹⁷ that there are two broad degrees of nullification: 1) *bittul b’yesh* and 2) *bittul bmtziut*. The first degree is the internalization that God is the Supreme Being that rules the physical and spiritual realms, while the latter is the understanding that God transcends the worlds and that there is nothing but God; the purest form of fear is the fear of what God is and not what He does.

Avraham and Moshe personify these two perspectives. The Talmud states¹⁸ that the degree of servitude of Moshe was greater than that of Avraham because Avraham declared that he was “dust and ashes,” whereas Moshe declared that he was “nothing.” Rabbi Elya

¹⁵ See *Sefer Ha-Likuttim: DAC”H Tzemach Tzedek*. Vol. 1 *Avraham 3:1*.

¹⁶ A full understanding of this concept is beyond the author’s capability. However the term *melachah* is important. This term refers to creative work. Such a term was used to describe the process of creation (see *Breishit 2,2*) – transforming the *tohu vavohu* into its fullest potential. Kindness could be conceptualized as acts that facilitate someone or something developing into its full potential. (See also *Bava Batra 10a* regarding the discussion between *Turnus Rufus* and Rabbi Akiva regarding the necessity of creating rich and poor people, and a discussion about the importance of charity.)

¹⁷ *Likkutei Amarim* Ch. 34 and Siddur, “Introduction to *Tikkun Hatzot*

¹⁸ *Hullin 87b*

Weintraub¹⁹ explains that Avraham found God by looking through the world. This is best expressed by the midrash²⁰ which relates that Avraham gazed at the world as if it were a building and was able to perceive the builder. The building must exist as a separate, distinct entity if one hopes to find its builder. Thus, Avraham could internalize the reality that God was the creator and ruler of the world. However, Moshe's degree of *hitbatlut* transcended the world. He, along with the rest of creation, was nothing, merely an expression of godliness.

Such a distinction leads one to the conclusion that Moshe was on a higher spiritual level than Avraham. Indeed, one of the Thirteen Principles of Faith²¹ is that Moshe was the greatest prophet that ever lived, enabling him to receive the Torah. However, such a position is problematic. Maharal²² and others state that Avraham, along with the other forefathers, became a *merkavah*, a chariot for God (to drive and propel His will forward). In other words, they totally nullified themselves to the will of God. If Moshe's degree of nullification was greater, why wasn't he a part of this dynamic as well? This problem is also connected to Rosh Hashanah. The *Midrash Rabbah*²³ states that Avraham is connected to the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, and Maharal²⁴ comments that Avraham was even born on Rosh Hashanah. If Rosh Hashanah is a day of accepting God's sovereign over the world, why is Moshe not representative of this day instead?

V – The Roles of Avraham and Moshe²⁵

¹⁹ *Hayei Yosef. Discourse on the Two Sets of Tablets*, note 3.

²⁰ *Bereishit Rabbah Lech Lecha* 39.

²¹ See Maimonides's *Intorduction to Perek Helek*.

²² *Netivot Olam (Netiv Ahavat Hashem, Chapter 1), Tiferet Yisrael Chapter 20, id. Chapter 24.*

²³ *Vayikra Rabbah (Emor 29)*

²⁴ *Hiddushei Aggadot: Rosh Hashanah* 10b.

²⁵ The vast majority of this concept is explained fully in *Tiferet Yisrael Chapter 24.*

An analysis of Maharal's descriptions of Moshe and Avraham leads to the conclusion the biblical figures manifested two different stages of a Jew's relationship with God: Avraham was the first Jew, while Moshe was the paradigm Jew. This distinction is manifested with the Maharal's concept of *nivdal*, separate, a term used to describe a qualitative gap between two entities. Such a gap may be required for two reasons: 1) because the second entity is qualitatively different from the first or 2) because the second entity is to be the counterpart of the first (thus, this separation facilitates the second entity's connection to the first). Maharal states²⁶ that Avraham was called a *ger* because he was separate from the nations of the world. Similarly, he was given the commandment of circumcision to separate himself from the physical world²⁷. Thus, Avraham was separated from the physical, heathen world to serve as the beginning of the Jewish nation²⁸.

Moshe, however, was to be the ideal Jew, the one capable of leading the Jewish nation and receiving the Torah. Thus, he was born circumcised, a stage which Avraham spent the first 98 years of life building up to²⁹. To be able to relate to the entire Jewish entity, he needed to sever all ties to specific components of it. Thus, Moshe was separated from the Jewish nation because he was the spiritual embodiment of the entire Jewish nation³⁰. He was raised in the Egyptian palace, away from the rest of the Jewish people. Moreover, he married a convert, someone who had no biological connection to the Jewish nation. In effect, he became a parallel

²⁶ *Gevurot Hashem* Chapter 38.

²⁷ *Tiferet Yisrael* Chapter 24.

²⁸ One can argue that Avraham's status of a *nivdal* was also for the second reason – that he and the Jewish nation was the spiritual counterpart of the physical world. Although this is true, the discussion of this essay is describing Avraham and Moshe's status from the perspective of the Jewish people.

²⁹ *Gevurot Hshem* Chapter 19.

³⁰ *Gevurot Hashem* Chapter 33. Moshe is referred to as the *tzurah*, the ideal spiritual form, of the Jewish people.

Jewish nation unto himself³¹. Thus, while Avraham's role was to serve as a transition (i.e. a separation) between the nations of the world and the Jews, Moshe's role was to serve as a counterpart to the Jewish nation by serving as its emissary to God (and receiving the Torah).

Rav Weintraub's analysis of the Talmudic statement above indicates that being an initiator requires that the individual serving as a bridge remain anchored on *both* ends. In order to begin the quest of "traveling beyond the world" to find God, one needs to remain grounded in the world. Thus, Avraham needed to retain a sense of self, that he was something physical – dust and ashes. The Torah, however, is something that is completely spiritual, something so transcendent that it predates the world by 2000 years³². As such, Maharal writes³³ that Avraham was able to divine the practical *mitzvot* of the Torah but could not receive the text itself. The ability to receive and bring down the Torah requires someone with a higher degree of nullification and connection to the divine – Moshe.

However, Moshe's qualifications were insufficient without the efforts of Avraham. The *midrash* states³⁴ that the angels did not allow Moshe to accept the Torah until God changed Moshe's face³⁵ to resemble Avraham's. Maharal explains that the only way to bring down the Torah is through *hessed*. Thus, although Moshe was the medium capable of receiving the Torah, he needed to build upon Avraham's connection to God, the bridge Avraham created between the physical and spiritual realms, in order to do so.

³¹ One can now understand god's desire to create an entire new nation out of Moshe after the Jews had sinned by creating the Golden Calf.

³² *Avodah Zarah* 9a

³³ *Tiferet Yisrael* Chapter 20 and *Dereh Hayyim* (1,2)

³⁴ *Shmot Rabbah* (Yitro 28,1)

³⁵ The significance of Hahsem transforming Moshe's face may be for one of several reasons. One is that it is the medium through which other people interact with the individual. Thus, one's expression is only an externality and does not fully encapsulate the individual's complete personality. Another possibility is that the face is traditionally associated with kindness. The constant phrase in *Tanach* is to find favor in one's eyes. Similarly, the final *berachah* in *Shmoneh Esrei* states "Sim...vhessed...barheinu Avinu...b'or panecha."

Based on the above, one can now understand why Moshe was not part of the *merkava*. The forefathers who were part of the *merkava* were the progenitors of the Jewish nation. By becoming the *merkava* they succeeded in engendering an intimate connection with God into the Jewish spiritual makeup³⁶. It would be impossible for a *nivdal* to fulfill that role because he is separated from them; one cannot help form the entity that one was separated from. On a deeper level, the *merkava* was only established with the participation of all three forefathers; each of those traits alone only comprised a part of being vehicle (i.e. subservient) to God. Moshe, however, was the complement to the Jewish nation and the mouthpiece of God. He did not constrict divine service to a particular trait. In a sense, his role transcended the diffraction of normative *dveikut*, cleaving to God with a particular trait³⁷.

V – Rosh Hashanah: The First Step

One can now understand why Rosh Hashanah is so critically connected to the theme of *hessed*. Accepting God's dominion is a graduated process with well-defined steps. Although the ultimate goal may be to internalize that there is "nothing but God," the first step must be to acknowledge that God is the ruler of the world. However, there must also be people to accept God as the King³⁸. Thus, we also celebrate the birthday of man, an entity created in His image, the being capable of giving to others and furthering the divine plan of revealing the Godliness of this world. By performing acts of kindness, man harnesses his ability as a creator, thereby reinforcing and elevating his status as physical being infused with spirituality – an 'image of God.'

³⁶ See *Pachad Yitzhak: Rosh Hashanah* Discourse 2.

³⁷ Thus, he is referred to as "*ish*." (See also *Ma'amarei Pahad Yitzhak: Sukkot* Discourse 10 in which Rav Hutner describes the divine service of Ya'akov in similar terms. See *Tiferet Yisrael* Chapter 24 and *Sefer Halikutim: Moshe* for complete comparison of Moshe and Ya'akov.) However, see *Tiferet Yisrael* Chapter 24 in which *Maharal* says that Avraham is called *Adam* because he is a progenitor.

³⁸ See *Gra Mishlei* Chapter 27.

It is only later, on Yom Kippur, that we can achieve the next step in connecting God. On this day Moshe brought down the second set of *luhot* and the Jews' *teshuva* process was completed. When the Temple stood, the Kohen Gadol would enter the Holy of Holies, a realm that took up no physical space³⁹. This sanctuary was the bridge to the spiritual worlds⁴⁰ in which the most intimate connection with God occurred. This is the second stage of *hitbatlut*, the nullification of Moshe⁴¹.

This perspective also influences the process of repentance. In order to step out of the mire of sin, one foot must first remain grounded in the cesspool. Thus, on Rosh Hashanah, we accept God as the King of the World. When God is the king of the world, the full severity of sins becomes instantly apparent for even the most distant Jews, like those who stood before Ezra and Nehemia. Although pain and sorrow may rightfully ensue, Ezra and Nehemia's commandment to rejoice and perform kindness serve as a reminder of both the potential of man and God's infinite kindness to facilitate genuine repentance, thereby ultimately reaching the second level of *bitul on* Yom Kippur⁴²: when there is nothing but God⁴³.

³⁹ *Megillah* 10b. The application of this Gemara to the Yom Kippur service was told to the author by Rabbi Mendel Blachman.

⁴⁰ See *Likkutei Amarim* Chapters 53-55.

⁴¹ Thus, Moshe received the second set of Tablets on Yom Kippur. One can also better understand the midrash that Moshe was initially destined to become the High Priest (see Rashi *Shemot* 5).

⁴² For a more nuanced description of the role of Rosh Hashanah, see *Likkutei Torah* and *Sefer Halikutim (Avraham, 3,1)* which indicate a significant degree of *bittul* on Rosh Hashanah as well. To understand this dichotomy, see *Bet Yishai Drashot (Ma'amar Behirat Yisrael)* and *Pahad Yitzhak: Rosh Hashanah (Discourse 20)* which describe two perspectives of Rosh Hashanah. (This answer can also be used to homiletically explain why Yom Kippur is omitted in *Nehemia*. See *Yalkut Shimoni* ad loc which alludes to several themes of Yom Kippur. Thus, although both themes are present, the theme of Yom Kippur was stressed on Rosh Hashanah.)

⁴³ See *Likkutei Torah* that describes the process of repentance as developing a connection with G-d that transcends the rift of sin. See also *Sifsei Hayyim* that describes the spiritual transformation between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in slightly different terms. However, the general idea is the same. See also *Sihot Rabbi Shimshon David Pinkus: Yom Kippur (Discourse 1)* and *Pahad Yitzhak: Rosh Hashanah (Discourse 20)* which also develop this theme.