



ROSH HASHANA, HUMAN INITIATIVE AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

A Jew's main *avoda* (service) from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur is to do teshuva, a task that requires great wisdom, humility, and summoning of strength. However, there is another basic element to the *avodat hayom* (service of the day) of Rosh Hashana that we expend less energy on, not because of its lack of centrality but because it is easier: the coronation of Hashem as King of the entire world. This centrality finds expression in the fact that *Malchuyot*, the section of tefilla most focused on this coronation, is merged with the main beracha of Musaf of Rosh Hashana.

It is in *Zichronot*, though, not *Malchuyot*, that we mention a special,

“secret” significance of the day, albeit one not all agree to — Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of the completion of creation.

כמאן מצלינן האידינא זה היום תחלת מעשיך
זכרון ליום ראשון, כמאן — כרבי אליעזר,
דאמר: בתשרי נברא העולם

*According to whom do we now pray,
“This is the day of the beginning of Your
actions, a remembrance to the first day”?
It is like Rabbi Eliezer who says that the
world was created in Tishrei.*

Rosh Hashana 27a

The major themes of *Zichronot* are man's accountability for his actions to Hashem and Hashem's Divine providence. On this anniversary of creation, Hashem decides what

man deserves and will receive. And this too is likely connected to the “world birthday” motif, as we repeat throughout the order of shofar blowing: “Today is the conception of the world; on this day He shall place in judgment all the world's creations.” And the world He created is classically the instrument through which we receive punishment or reward:

איזו לְחַרְב, וְאיזו לְשָׁלוֹם? איזו לְרָעַב, וְאיזו לְשִׂבְעָה?

“Who will receive the sword (i.e., punishment carried out by our fellow human creations), and who will have peace? Who will experience famine (i.e., when the natural world fails us), and who will have plenty?”

The goal of most shul-goers in prayer and action — to obtain a good year of life and blessing — is focused on their own lives and that of their close family. However, the rabbis tell us that there are at least three levels of judgment that can and should be of interest to us. The Gemara (*Kiddushin* 40b) is apparently the main source for the following thesis of the Rambam (*Teshuva* 3:1-2):

כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מִבְּנֵי הָאָדָם יֵשׁ לוֹ זְכוּת וְעוֹנוֹת: מִי שֶׁזְּכוּתוֹ יִתְרוֹת עַל עוֹנוֹתָיו - צְדִיק; וּמִי שֶׁעוֹנוֹתָיו יִתְרוֹת עַל זְכוּתוֹ - רָשָׁע; מְחֻצָּה לְמְחֻצָּה - בִּינוּנִי. וְכֵן הַמְדִינָה: אִם הָיוּ זְכוּתוֹת כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל מְרֻבּוֹת עַל עוֹנוֹתֵיהֶם - הָרִי זֶה צְדָקָתָם; וְאִם הָיוּ עוֹנוֹתֵיהֶם מְרֻבּוֹת - הָרִי זֶה רָשָׁע. וְכֵן כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוֹ. אָדָם שֶׁעוֹנוֹתָיו מְרֻבּוֹת עַל זְכוּתוֹ - מֵיָד הוּא מֵת בְּרָשָׁעוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "עַל רֹב עֲוֹנוֹתָיו" (ירמיה ל"ד; שם ל"ט; הושע ט"ז). וְכֵן מְדִינָה שֶׁעוֹנוֹתֵיהֶם מְרֻבּוֹת - מֵיָד הִיא אוֹבְדָת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "זֶעֱמַת סֹדִם וְעַמָּהּ כִּי רַבָּה" (בראשית י"ח, ב). וְכֵן כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוֹ: אִם הָיוּ עוֹנוֹתֵיהֶם מְרֻבּוֹת - מֵיָד הוּא נִשְׁחָתוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וַיִּרְא ה' כִּי רַבָּה רַעַת הָאָדָם" (שם ו'ה).

Each and every person has virtues and vices. He whose virtues exceed his vices is a just person, and he whose vices exceed his virtues is an evildoer; if both are evenly balanced, he is mediocre. Even so is a nation. If the virtues of all of its inhabitants exceeded their vices, it is, indeed, a just nation; but if their vices exceeded, it is, indeed, a wicked nation. Even such is a standard for the whole world.

A man whose vices exceed his virtues presently dies in his wickedness, even as it is said: "For the multitude of thine iniquity" (Hos. 9. 7). So is a nation whose vices exceed presently destroyed, even as it is said: "Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great (Gen. 18. 20). So, too, is the whole world, if their vices exceeded their virtues they are presently destroyed, even as it is said:

"And God saw that the wickedness of man was great" (6. 5).

In other words, man should realize that he is judged and subject to Divine decree not only as an individual, based on his personal actions, but also as part of a nation, and even as part of the world as a whole.

Presumably, almost all of us have seen wonderful blessings and horrible hardships befall individuals. We have seen nations experience good and hard times. Nevertheless, the last 18 months has arguably been the first time we have personally witnessed a single great hardship that has deeply affected mankind as a whole. What started as a mysterious new virus taking the lives of dozens of people in a part of the globe few of us even expect to visit was of limited interest to most. Then it started spreading to one country after another until it hit virtually every community on the globe. Indeed, while the virus never threatened full destruction of mankind in the manner of Noah's deluge, a heavy shadow has enveloped civilization. According to our belief system, this pandemic was decreed upon us, i.e., humanity in the broadest sense, on Rosh Hashana 5780, and was renewed, with its British and Delta variants but also with its effective vaccines, on Rosh Hashana 5781.

Could any individual have made the difference between there being such far-reaching decrees, or not? The Gemara (*Kiddushim* 40b) seems to indicate that when approaching our own moral status, we should view this as a realistic possibility:

ר' אלעזר בר' שמעון אומר: לפי שהעולם נידון אחר רובו והיחיד נידון אחר רובו, עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף זכות; עבר עבירה אחת, אוי

לו, שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף חובה שנאמר: "וחוטא אחד וכו'". בשביל חטא יחידי שעשה זה, אבד ממנו ומכל העולם טובה הרבה.

R. Elazar b. R. Shimon says, for the world is judged by its majority, and the individual is judged by his majority. If he did one mitzva, he is fortunate, for he brought himself and the whole world to the side of merit. If he did one aveira, woe unto him, for he brought himself and the whole world to the side of liability...

Those who are drawn to mathematics/statistics may not find this enormous opportunity and responsibility compelling. After all, what are the chances that my next actions will serve as the "tiebreaker," especially the tiebreaker for the whole world?! On the other hand, having been taught morality with a worldview that what each of us does is significant and that we are at least as responsible as the next person, the opportunity and responsibility should be viewed at least in the following measured manner:

לא עליך כל המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין ליבטל ממנה.

It is not your responsibility to complete the whole task, but neither are you free to make yourself idle from it.

Avot 2:16

For this reason, I vote in elections, while never imagining that my vote will be the deciding vote. For this reason, I used to diligently stand guard as an IDF soldier, while never considering it likely that during my shift, a terrorist would attack. And for this reason, during the era of Corona, I followed the rules (and a little more) and got vaccinated even if there was no way of knowing if it would make a major difference in my health or the health of those around me. Indeed,

this is the way most responsible people act.

Many of us took the unique situation of a pandemic to notice, contemplate, and internalize matters of providence more poignantly than before.

Believers in Divine providence see Hashem's Hand behind this pandemic, whether His initial "agent" was a bat, a Wuhan lab technician, or something else. Hashem decreed for reasons known to Him that many people from many countries would die from it. Yet, that does not necessarily mean that the exact numbers, identities, and locations of victims were decreed, based on the moral state of each. Several classic sources speak of plagues and similar broad calamities as lending themselves to a reduced and different type of providence, and this is reason for even and especially those with a solid "moral bill of health" to avoid danger or pay a harsh price (see Yeshayahu 26:20; *Bava Kama* 60a; see *Yalkut Bi'urim* p. 251 for additional sources).

Furthermore, in general, those who are not otherwise deserving of such a decree can die or suffer negative consequence due to their neglect to properly avoid danger. We start with the Gemara in *Shabbat* (see understanding of *Tosafot, Ketubot* 30a on it):

לעולם אל יעמוד אדם במקום סכנה לומר
שעושין לו נס שמא אין עושין לו נס, ואם
עושין לו נס, מנכין לו מזכויותיו.

One should never put himself in a dangerous place, saying that a miracle

will save him, lest a miracle not save him, and if a miracle saves him, it is reduced from his merits.

Shabbat 32a

Even Yaakov Avinu (see *ibid.* and *Bereishit* 32:5-12) and Shmuel HaNavi (*Shmuel I*:16:2; see *Pesachim* 8b), in the midst of carrying out Divine commands, were unwilling to rely on Divine intervention alone to extricate themselves from dangerous situations, but instead took far-reaching steps to avoid dangers.

This approach of not relying on Divine providence alone in the face of specific danger, which then requires taking practical steps of self-protection, is adopted by Rishonim such as the Rambam (*Moreh Hanevuchim*, III:18) and Rabbeinu Bachyei (*Chovot Halevavot, Sha'ar Habitachon* 4).

Therefore, the great majority of *poskim*, notably including our own Roshei Yeshiva, ruled that it is absolutely necessary to heed the recommendations of health authorities. The theological or political views of these experts were not relevant, as Halacha requires following the experts in their field. While many who conformed also fell victim to COVID-19 and many who did not conform were spared, observations and statistics bear out the correlation between precautionary steps and rates of survival.

Let us also look not just at avoiding clear danger but at charting a course

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to rectify unseen danger. Our belief system teaches that Hashem can and does decree that a certain person, nation, or the world will undergo a hardship and that nothing (other than teshuva) will change it, certainly not natural steps. However, we find in Tanach and Chazal and up to the approach of contemporary *poskim* that we are allowed and recommended to act to naturally "improve our chances" in the health, financial, and other realms.

The Gemara (*Berachot* 40a), for example, gives dietary recommendations unrelated to anything religious. It then says that if we follow the guidelines, we will "not be damaged" or "not have intestinal problems," and if we fail to follow the advice, we should be concerned about serious maladies. This approach is cited in *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim* 179:6). Thus, these basic sources expect that practical, not just moral, steps bear practical fruit. While the nature of the Divine mechanism



may be subject to debate, the correlation is Rabbinically recognized.

Hashem does not frown upon those who ostensibly try to overcome Divine decrees of human hardship by taking practical actions and creating innovations to improve mankind's lot. Perhaps the starkest example was Noah. Hashem decreed that thistles and thorns would torment mankind due to Adam's sin, yet Noah developed technology (ploughshares) to mitigate this anguish (see Rashi to Bereishit 5:29). Hashem allowed Noah to succeed, and not only was he not vilified, he emerged as his generation's one *tzaddik*. Perhaps he found justification from the language of the curse to Adam: "With the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread" (Bereishit 3:19). Mankind would eat; they would just have to toil to produce the food. Perhaps Noah reasoned: "If I toil to invent an efficient agricultural tool and people 'sweat' in making and using it, Hashem will happily let us enjoy the net gain."

Indeed, while we can never pinpoint Hashem's ways, we are to act as if our attempts at improving our lot may work. We should not be surprised that since the world began putting great efforts and resources into medical knowledge and technologies, life expectancy has more than doubled since 1800 and increased by more than a decade since 1950. Might we conclude that Hashem has looked favorably on our attempts to save each other? I daresay yes.

Let us put the indications together. We have seen that Chazal motivate us to do good not just for our own sake or for our nation's sake, but also for the sake of the whole world. The *Sefer HaChinuch* (Mitzva 311) also writes of the importance of the judgment

that impacts the world as a unit. It should be part of our mindset that we are part of humanity, and we can impact on it and be impacted by it, positively or negatively.

This idea seems of little practical consequence, since our nation is but a small part of the world, and of course each of us are just a small part of our nation — but it is both a practical and a *hashkafic* point. If there were ever a Rosh Hashana in our lifetimes to contemplate global interdependency it would be last year's and this one — when Hashem showed us how what happens in one corner of the world can have a deadly effect on the entire world. We can also think positively — how noble and possible it is to have a positive impact. Is it not wonderful that Jews played critical roles in companies that produced vaccines and medications to fight COVID-19, thereby taking their part in apparently saving tens if not hundreds of thousands of lives already? We can take pride in the State of Israel for the wisdom and guts of becoming a nation of fortunate guinea pigs and showing the world (who were indeed watching) how to save lives.

The tests if we, as individuals and as a nation, internalize this approach, do exist. Will the State of Israel and Jews, as influential members of U.S. and even world society, internalize the concept that we have no right to ignore the needs of the world even though we cannot save it alone? We can do this, for one, by being (or continuing to be) responsible and idealistic in the hopefully winding down, worldwide fight against COVID-19.

We do not know what surprise crises Hashem might send our way. However, those who adopt the

halachic approach of listening to the consensus of experts in various fields of science (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 328:10) know, with close to certainty, that the world is in the early stages of an expected great crisis, generally known as "climate change." Those who take the time and use their integrity to learn what the consensus is (and not take comfort in the 2-3% of relevant scientists who are called climate skeptics) should know what is at stake. There are differences between climate crisis and COVID-19. For one, COVID-19 started with a patient zero. Global warming comes from many geographical places and from many human activities. The solutions (which Hashem will hopefully enable us to find and help us implement) we will need to at least partially adopt to mitigate the crisis will be many. They will probably include adapting personal consumption and major investment in technologies (a strength of our nation).

Rosh Hashana is not the time to get bogged down on such details, but we might want to reason as follows: Regarding personal growth and teshuva, I am my own master, and my critical goal is to do Hashem's Will as best as I can. This year, in light of Hashem's sending us a rare, truly global crisis, part of my *avodat Hashem* is to see myself as a responsible, idealistic part of the broader world. I then should employ the age-old adage, "It is not your responsibility to complete the whole task, but neither are you free to make yourself idle from it." Where this takes us in the future remains to be seen.