

Rosh Hashanah 5783: The "State" of Hashem in Our World

Moshe Taragin

"All of humanity pass before You as sheep.. ". On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem reviews all human behavior, scrutinizes our inner hearts, and determines our fate for the coming year. On this solemn Day of Judgement, we also celebrate Divine sovereignty. The shofar blast recalls historical milestones: creation, the binding of Isaac, Jewish selection, Sinai, and, of course, the Messianic endpoint of history. Rosh Hashanah is both a somber day of judgement, but also a celebration of Divine majesty and religious glory.

Hashem is infinite and omnipresent, but His "status" on our planet, is dependent upon human decisions and the fluctuations of history. By vesting humans with free will, Hashem abdicated control of His presence in this world, delivering to humans the opportunity to bolster or undermine that presence. Our historical Jewish mission is to draw Hashem into our world, speak in His name, and hoist humanity to higher ground. Rosh Hashanah is the grand day of divine authority, human free will, and Jewish destiny.

On this day of gravitas, with both trepidation and anticipation, we look toward the future and pray for prosperity and success. We dream of augmenting Hashem, and moral spirit in this world. But we also look back upon the previous year: Which events over the past year have enhanced the presence of Hashem in our world, and which events have diminished His presence? As the new year commences, what is the state of Hashem in our world?

Overcoming Corona

The past year, civilization finally overcame the worldwide corona pandemic. Vaccines were manufactured in rapid speed, enabling us to manage this pandemic in record time, and to significantly limit the death toll. Past pandemics ravaged civilization causing tens of millions of deaths, while thankfully, this pandemic was checked before it overwhelmed society.

Ingenuity is a divine gift and when we employ divinely endowed creativity to improve the human condition and to save lives, Hashem's will has been served and his presence has been enhanced.

As we transitioned from the pandemic and felt its aftershocks, we were reminded just how fragile modern society and modern economies are. "Supply chains" became a household term in 2021-2022. For decades, we outsourced our basic needs, relying on rapid transportation and improved "logistics" to supply daily needs, as we moved goods across great distances. COVID-19 exposed the downside of supply chains: shortages and stoppages far away created local shortages, which ultimately "dominoed" into disruptions of both goods and labor. Eventually, shortages and shutdowns caused food prices to rise and transportation costs to spike, further stressing an already inflated worldwide economy.

We had assumed that we could integrate humanity into a global supply network, but this pandemic showcased just how delicate a global web of human needs can be. For the two years of the actual pandemic, we were reminded of human mortality. This past year, as we struggled with global logistics, we were reminded of how fragile any human "system" is, and how dependent we are upon divine support. The past year was our Tower of Babel moment- the year of disruption. When human experience is disrupted, we look to Hashem for reassurance.

War in Ukraine

In an unprovoked act of naked aggression, Russia attacked a sovereign nation, reviving its imperialist ambitions for territory and for regional hegemony. Thousands of innocents were murdered, and millions have been displaced. Hashem and evil cannot reside side-by-side, and this malicious violence led to a recession of Hashem's presence.

Moreover, this war shattered our post-cold war illusions of creating an interconnected world of peace and harmony, immune to war and aggressive nationalism. Hashem vested us with national identity, but He also wants us to curb nationalistic fervor so that it doesn't encroach upon the rights of weaker nations. In the past century, unchecked nationalism led to two horrific world wars and to the death of hundreds of millions. Once again, aggressive nationalism is running rampant, and Hashem's expectations aren't being met.

We Take Care of Our Own

Though the war has been dispiriting, there is a more encouraging "Jewish" narrative. Throughout history, the regions of the Ukraine and Western Russia, where this war is unfolding, were, literally, killing fields of Jews. In the 17th century the Khmelnitsky rebellions took the lives of anywhere between 100,000 to 500,000 Jews. Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, successive waves of bloody Russian pogroms murdered thousands of Russian Jews, eventually contributing to mass emigration to North America. During the Holocaust, approximately a million and a half Ukrainian Jews were massacred, many at the hands of Ukrainian auxiliaries who assisted the Nazis.

For hundreds of years, Jews living in these regions were defenseless, sometimes directly attacked, while other times caught in the crossfire. During this current war in the Ukraine, international Jewish relief organizations intervened, providing support and services for Jews victimized by the war. Of course, the best way to *protect* Jews is by offering a homeland and a refuge. Since the outbreak of the war, over 30,000 Russian and Ukrainian Jews have emigrated to Israel. Between 1989 and 2006, in one of the most transformative events in the history of the state of Israel, one million Jews from the former Soviet Union made aliyah. Twenty years later this historical wave continues.

Hashem returned His land to His people and the state of Israel must administer to Jews across the world. During this war, Israel's role in overseeing worldwide Jewry was on full display. Jews returning to their homeland inches us closer to our final redemption and to the kingdom of Hashem.

A Great Loss

Rabbi Chaim Kaniefsky, who passed away this year, was known as the Sar Hatorah or the "prince of Torah". His tenacious Torah study is hard to duplicate and his mastery of the entire sweep of Torah is hard to replace. Additionally, he was a moral and religious authority to hundreds of thousands who daily sought his wisdom and guidance. Unfortunately, for some, his political activity and policy statements about the pandemic, blurred his Torah achievements. As the new year begins, our world is considerably deficient in Torah knowledge.

Abusive Public Personalities

During the past year terrible scandals were uncovered, as two well-known and influential religious personalities were exposed to be long-term abusers. As they each took their own life, they weren't legally indicted, but all appearances indicate that this abuse was premeditated and persistent.

Often, our first response to these type of scandals is to raise the concern of "chillul Hashem" or the desecration of Hashem's name in the public arena. What will society think about religion, as they witness supposedly "religious" people committing heinous crimes? How will this reflect upon religion? Immoral behavior by religious people disillusion public opinion about religion. As Rav Kook commented "immoral behavior forms the foundation of ideological heresy".

However, atrocious crimes remove Hashem from our world, whether they are exposed or not. Our primary response to immoral behavior should not be the concern of chillul Hashem, but rather, concern for the victims, and revulsion of the crimes themselves, which always distance Hashem from our world even if never discovered. There is much to recover.

Queen Elizabeth and backsliding democracies

Queen Elizabeth passed, and with her passing, an era came to a close. Though her titular role was largely symbolic, she was an icon, representing centuries of European monarchy. It is unlikely that future "royalty" will wield much influence, if any. She was probably the last of her kind.

The history of monarchy isn't pleasant, as it often persecuted its subjects and repressed freedom. Modern democracy replaced absolute rule, and liberated man from political oppression. However, society is currently witnessing the flaws of modern democracies such as polarized politics, manipulation of public opinion, political gridlock, just to name a few. We cherish democracy because it is the fairest political system humanity has constructed, but it is far from perfect and far from what we dream of.

On Rosh Hashanah we dream of the kingdom of Hashem and for benevolent monarchy. We pray for perfection. Each year we try to inch closer.

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