



## *On the Festivals*

*by*

*Rabbi Yaakov Hillel*

*Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom*

### *Elul and Rosh Hashanah*

### *Our Service in the Time of Favor*

#### *Part 1*

There are a number of questions we can raise concerning the nature of the Ten Days of Repentance, which fall between Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. Some of these are famous questions, which have been addressed by many great Jewish thinkers in the past. Still, they deserve our attention, for there is much to learn from the answers.

The first question concerns the order of the High Holy Days. It seems strange that Hashem put Rosh Hashanah before Yom Kippur – the first being a day of judgment, and the second, a day of repentance and forgiveness. After all, wouldn't it have made more sense to set them the other way around? For, if a person first receives forgiveness for his improper deeds, he stands a much greater chance of receiving a favorable judgment. Hashem is not cruel. He desires that we be acquitted in judgment. Why did He arrange the holidays in this order?

The second question is based upon a teaching of the Zohar and the Kabbalists. They explain that the judgment of the High Holy Days does not end at *Neilah* of Yom Kippur, as we are accustomed to believe, but actually continues until Hoshana Rabbah and Shemini Atzeret. According to the Arizal, only at the moment of saying the word "*Ehad*" – "One" during the *Kedusha* prayer of *Mussaf* on Shemini Atzeret is the judgment concluded. The Zohar compares this process of heavenly judgment to that of an earthly court. (As the Talmud says, all earthly monarchies



reflect the heavenly one – *Berachot* 58a.) In an earthly court, the judges first sit at the bench to hear the sides. The lawyers then present their cases, judgment is passed, the decision is inscribed, and then sent to a higher office for authorization. There it receives its first seal, which orders its execution. The decree is then passed onto the law enforcement agency, which adds a second seal, as an endorsement, and then hands it over to the particular officer who will carry out the judgment.

This same process occurs Above, in the Supernal Court. During the month of Elul, we prepare for our trial. These are favorable days, when we arrange our defense and seek to arouse G-d's compassion on us. Each day, we recite the *selihot* prayers, and some congregations blow the shofar, to remind us of the upcoming judgment. Rosh Hashanah is the day of the hearing itself: the prosecuting and defending angels state their cases, witnesses are called to testify, and the decision is written down. *Tzaddikim* are immediately inscribed for life, the wicked, for death, while the rest of us await Yom Kippur. At *Neilah* of Yom Kippur, the judgment is stamped, sealed, and approved. Thus, during the Ten Days of Repentance, we pray: "Inscribe us for life," but during *Neilah*, we plead "Seal us for life" – for the judgment is then sealed.

However, as the *Zohar* (3:31b) and the Arizal said, it is not until midnight of Hoshanah Rabbah that the judgment is endorsed with a second seal, and actually handed over to the bailiff to be carried out. This is why many people have the custom of spending the entire night of Hoshanah Rabbah reciting *Tehilim* and special *selihot* – so that when the fateful moment arrives, it finds them in *teshuvah* and prayer. Yet, even the executors of judgment, who received their orders on Hoshanah Rabbah, do not have permission to begin implementing them until after the recitation of *Kedusha* during the *Mussaf* prayer of Shemini Atzeret. That is the very last moment of judgment, which concludes the entire series of events that began with the first day of Elul.

Clearly, these are decisive days. Yet they need not be confronted with fear or dread. For *Hazal* tell us that they are the most propitious time of the year for doing *teshuvah* and improving our deeds, as the verse says (*Yeshayahu* 55:6): "Seek Hashem when He is found, call Him when He is near" – these are the Ten Days of Repentance, when Hashem is close to all who call upon Him. For as long as the judgment is still in the King's hands, it can be annulled. One more good deed, one more prayer, creates further defending angels, who can help reverse the decision. However, once judgment has been delivered to its executors, there is no one to talk to further. Angels of destruction are not open to discussion. Their whole existence is devoted to carrying out the supernal will, which has now been decreed.

This produces a curious situation. On the one hand, the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur are the last chance to rectify the judgment based upon our



previous year's activities. On the other hand, they are also a part of the *new* year, and our actions during them will be judged on the following Rosh Hashanah. It is as though they are part of an intermediary period, related to both years. This is another point that we need to understand better.

### ***Asking for What We Don't Have***

Another famous question revolves around the prayers of the Ten Days of Repentance. We say, in the Sefardi *nusah*: "Our Father, Our King, write us in the book of the righteous and the pious (*tzaddikim v'hasidim*). Write us in the book of the honest and the pure-hearted." In the classic sense of the word, a *tzaddik* is a person who does not sin; who fulfills the *Shulhan Aruch*, and does everything that is required of him. A *hasid* is one who goes beyond the letter of the law and is careful to follow even minority or stringent opinions among the *poskim*. Now, if a person really is a *tzaddik* or *hasid*, if he is honest and pure-hearted, then he can certainly beseech Hashem to write him in those books. But what if he is not (and each person knows himself more or less), how can he make such a request of Hashem? How can he ask to be written in the book of merit, if he does not *have* any merits? What will they write? It is as though he were stating an untruth to Hashem. Yet, these prayers were written by the early Sages, who were blessed with Divine Inspiration, and who wrote them for all *Klal Yisrael* – righteous and sinners alike.

### ***On our Best Behavior***

This leads us to a related question. The *Shulhan Aruch* states (*Orah Hayim* 703:1, based on the *Talmud Yerushalmi Shabbat* 1:3) that during the Ten Days of Repentance, a person is allowed – and even required – to behave more stringently in halachah than he does during the rest of the year. For instance, a person who isn't careful to eat *pat Yisrael* (Jewish-baked bread) the whole year should nevertheless do so during the Ten Days of Repentance – even though he knows that he won't continue this custom after the holidays. (Obviously, this relates to stringencies in *halakha*, not transgressions, which are always prohibited.)

Here, too, is a problem. Hashem desires that we do complete *teshuvah*, not temporary *teshuvah*; He wants us to become true *tzaddikim*, not imitation ones. Who do we think we are fooling by acting on this higher level for only a short period of time – during the days of judgment – in order to receive a favorable sentence? According to the Rambam (*Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:2), the very definition of *teshuvah* is: "that a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again... [He must reach the level where] Hashem, who knows what is in his heart, will testify about him that he will never return to this sin again."



Hashem only accepts our *teshuvah* if it is true and authentic. How, then, do these passing actions help, and why are they recommended by the *Shulhan Aruch*?

### ***The Many Facets of Rosh Hashanah***

The final question concerns the confusing nature of Rosh Hashanah itself, and the many important, yet contradictory concepts associated with this day. We all know that Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the world's creation. It is also the day of judgment, when all created beings pass before Hashem to receive their fate for the coming year. It is the day on which we declare Hashem to be King over His creation. On the other hand, it is also a day of loving-kindness, as the verse says (*Tehilim* 99:3): "I said, You have built a world of loving-kindness." Indeed, Hashem's very reason for creating the world was in order to bestow His goodness upon His created beings – a desire that is reawakened each year on this day. We also find Rosh Hashanah to be a day of Hashem's compassion, as *Hazal* said (*Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra* 29:10): On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem rises from His Throne of Judgment and sits on His Throne of Compassion.

With so many different facets, we need to become clear concerning the precise nature of the day. Is it a day of judgment and kingship, of love and compassion, or somehow of both?

### ***The Beginning of an Answer***

When Kabbalistic texts discuss the reasons why Hashem created the world, they are quick to point out that *whatever* we say is superficial at its best. After all, Hashem's perfection is absolute. He lacks nothing, nor does the creation add anything to His existence. We cannot attribute His decision to create the world as responding to a desire to fulfill some intrinsic need. Furthermore, any answer we give is only meant to satisfy our limited minds. We can never fully understand Hashem's plans or intentions, as the verses state (*Yeshayahu* 55:8-9): "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," says Hashem. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts [higher] than your thoughts,'" and (*Iyov* 11:7-8): "Can you find out the mystery of G-d; can you find out the limit of the Almighty? [In] the heights of heaven, what will you do? Deeper than the grave, what do you know?"

On the other hand, Hashem *did* create a world, and in giving us the Torah, He allows us to formulate a reason as to why.

One of the concepts frequently used in Kabbalistic texts to explain this idea is "There is no king without a people." Meaning to say, just as an earthly king is not really a king until he has a nation to rule over, so Hashem's kingship is somehow



only *in potential*, until He has a creation to rule over.<sup>1</sup> In other words, in order to bring the concept of Hashem's kingship to perfection, He chose to create all the worlds.

Now we see the connection between Rosh Hashanah as the anniversary of creation and as the day on which we coronate Hashem. For through the emanation of the creation – all the worlds, and especially, the Jewish people – Hashem's kingship becomes revealed.

We can also state this concept in reverse: "There is no people without a king." For an itinerant group of individuals cannot be considered a "people," unless they become united under one leader, who rules over them and establishes their laws. Even today, when there are few real kings left, each nation has its own laws and regulation, its constitution that unites all of its citizens and makes them into a "people."

### ***His Existence and His Power***

This idea can be better understood by looking at the Ramban's commentary on the First Commandment (*Shemot* 20:2): "I am Hashem, your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

According to the Ramban, this verse contains two positive commandments: (1) to believe in G-d's existence and (2) to believe that He actively rules over creation.<sup>2</sup> Both these facts – His existence and His power – were demonstrated in the miracles that accompanied the exodus from Egypt. This was an astounding

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<sup>1</sup> Even though we say in the morning prayer "*Adon Olam*": "L-rd of the world, who reigned before anything was created," which clearly states that Hashem's kingship existed *even without* a people. Here we see the difficulty in discussing these ideas, and concretizing them with human images. This present essay is certainly not the place to delve into the deep philosophical or esoteric discussions necessary to clarify this issue. For our purposes, the most we can say is that by emanating the creation, it is *as if* Hashem has brought about an additional level of revelation of His Kingship. However, we must never imagine that creation has any effect on His absolute perfection.

<sup>2</sup> We need both these commandments, for, theoretically, one could believe that Hashem exists, but does not actively rule over creation. Certain nations claimed this in the past – among them, ancient Egypt, at the time of Moshe. They believed that Hashem was too mighty and exalted to deal with His lowly creatures, as the verses say (*Yehezkel* 8:12): "For they say, 'Hashem does not see us; Hashem has abandoned the earth,'" and (*Tehilim* 113:4): "Hashem is exalted over all nations; His glory transcends the heavens." However, *we* say (*Tehilim* 5:7): "Who is like Hashem, our God, Who dwells on high, yet looks down low upon heaven and earth? He lifts the pauper up from the dust, and raises the needy from the dung heap." We believe that while Hashem dwells on high, He also cares for the least of His created beings, and directs all of creation toward its ultimate goal of perfection. Thus, because His providence over us is ongoing, our obligation to serve Him is also continual.



revelation at the time – that Hashem is actively involved in directing His creation, and can intervene in order to deliver those whom He chooses.

These two facts lead to a third conclusion – that we are obligated to *serve* Hashem, as the first commandment concludes: “Who took you... out of the house of bondage,” or as Moshe said to Pharaoh, in Hashem’s name (*Shemot* 7:16): “Send out My people, that they may serve Me.”<sup>3</sup> Hashem did not redeem us for nothing; He chose us to be His servants. Indeed, the very period of time we spent as slaves in Egypt was only to ingrain within us a deep inclination to service – only now, it must now be directed to the service of Hashem, and not to any man.

All of this, concludes the Ramban, is included in the Sages term “*kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*” – “accepting the yoke of Hashem’s kingship.” They are the aspects that define the relationship between a king and his people, or, in this case, between Hashem and *Klal Yisrael*. The Ramban cites the following Midrash (*Mechilta, parashat Yitro, bahodesh 6*) in corroboration:

Why does the Second Commandment say: “You shall have no other gods before Me”? Because the First Commandment says: “I am Hashem, your G-d.” This is like a king who enters a country. The people say to him: “Issue decrees upon us!” But he replies: “Not yet! Only after you have accepted my rule will I issue my decrees. For if you do not first accept my kingship, why should you fulfill them?”

Hashem spoke similarly to Yisrael. “I am Hashem, your G-d. You shall have no other gods before Me.” That is, now that you have accepted My kingship in Egypt (“I am Hashem”), you can accept my decrees (“You shall have no other gods”).

### ***The First Step in Teshuvah***

How does this relate to Rosh Hashanah and the questions we raised above?

We know that *teshuvah* entails improving our behavior and our performance of mitzvot as best as we are able. It means devoting attention to their every detail – each person according to his or her level. A businessman has his ideal way of performing mitzvot, and a *ben Torah* has his way, which usually requires a much greater attention to the details and consequences of each act.

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<sup>3</sup> A further implication of the exodus is that Hashem created the world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. For if the world had existed eternally, there would be need for Hashem’s involvement. (This was the belief of the ancient Greeks.) However, by overturning nature through the ten plagues, He demonstrated that He actively rules *over* nature. He created the world, and runs it, as well.



In both cases, however, such an approach is impossible, unless we first accept upon ourselves Hashem's unqualified rulership – unless we consider ourselves loyal servants of the King. For to the degree that our submission to Hashem's authority is lacking, so will we be lax in fulfilling His will – to the point that a person can even sin, because he lacks of a sense of a higher authority ruling over him.

On the other hand, if a person lives with a constant sense of Hashem's presence, if he fulfills the very first paragraph of the *Shulhan Aruch*, which cites the verse (*Tehilim* 16:8): "I have set Hashem always before me" – meaning, I am aware of Hashem Presence even in the privacy of my own home – such a person could never sin, for he would be betraying the King and forfeiting his life. A person only sins when he lacks *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* – the acceptance of the yoke of Hashem's kingship; as the *Mechilta* said, above: "Once you accepted My rulership, now you can accept my decrees.

This explains even further why Rosh Hashanah – the first of the Ten Days of Repentance – is also the day when we declare Hashem to be our King. For there is no point in being judged over our actions if we have not yet wholeheartedly accepted Hashem's Kingship. That is, until we feel, every moment of our lives, that we are in the presence of the King of Kings, who sees into our hearts and minds, who judges according to the truth, and who it impossible to deceive. If we can accept upon ourselves the level of servitude this realization demands, then we can arrive at ever new levels of *teshuvah*, and make great strides in Torah study, mitzvot and good deeds.

### ***Hashem as King and Judge***

Now, the pieces start to fall together. Because the world was created in order that we acknowledge Hashem's Kingship, therefore Rosh Hashanah – the day of creation – is the day we declare Him as King. And our *teshuvah*, which begins on this day, derives precisely from this awareness; for it means strengthening our service of Hashem by accepting upon ourselves His decrees. *Hazal* alluded to this, when they commented on the verse (*Bereshit* 1:1): "In the beginning, Hashem created the heavens and the earth." The word "beginning" alludes to the Torah and to the Jewish people; for, Hashem created the world for the sake of them both.

Thus, Rosh Hashanah is also the day of judgment. As the Midrash above stated, once the citizens of the country accepted upon themselves the king's rule, they become obligated to keep his commandments. For one of a ruler's most important tasks is to issue decrees and sit in judgment, as the verse says (*Mishle* 29:4): "A king establishes the country with justice." And as we say in the *selichot*: "G-d, King, who sits on the throne of mercy!"



Yet, despite the fact that Rosh Hashanah is the day of judgment, Hashem's still show us His love – like a father who shows compassion to his children, as the verse says (*Devarim* 14:1): “You are children to Hashem, your G-d.” For, after all, it was on behalf of Yisrael that the world was created. Hashem does not desire the death of the wicked, but rather, that they repent and rectify all their actions. Hashem is the source of all goodness, and he created the world specifically because He desired to bestow His goodness upon us. As the verse states (*Tehilim* 99:3): “I said, You have built a world of loving-kindness.”

However, as the Ramchal explains (*Da'at Tevunot* §18), in order for this bestowal to be perfect, we must not be ashamed to receive it (when we reach the world-to-come), as *Hazal* have said (based upon the *Yerushalmi Orlah*, 1:3): “A person who eats from another man's meal is ashamed to look him in the face.” So too, we must earn our reward for ourselves, through the study and practice of Torah. Then, we will not be ashamed to receive all the goodness that Hashem desires to bestow upon us.

Thus, even when we stand on trial on Rosh Hashanah – and let us not fool ourselves, Hashem's judgment is precise and exacting; the demands made upon us are great, nothing escapes His attention, and He does not forgo a single transgression – nevertheless, since His ultimate desire is to bestow His goodness upon us, He shows us compassion in the midst of the judgment, and opens the gates for us to return to Him. He grants us numerous opportunities to do *teshuvah*, precisely on this day.

### ***The Role of the Shofar***

The main way that Hashem helps us do *teshuvah* on Rosh Hashanah is through the mitzvah of the shofar. The shofar, too, serves the dual function mentioned above. On the one hand, it is reminiscent of earthly monarchy. Kings are appointed amidst trumpet blasts, and so, we also declare Hashem King when we blow the shofar. On the other hand, the shofar arouses in us deep fear of Hashem's judgment, as the verse says (*Amos* 3:6): “Will a shofar sound in the city and the people not quiver?” It awakens in us deep regret over our misdeeds, so that we confess to Hashem from the depths of our hearts, and commit ourselves to change and improvement from that moment on. Then, Hashem rises from His Throne of Judgment, as it were, and sits upon His Throne of Compassion, to judge us favorably. This is like a king who newly reigns in a country. His first concern it to sit in judgment, in order to right any wrongs that had previously occurred. “A king establishes the country with justice.” But, if he is a compassionate king, who loves his people, he does not seek out ways to punish them, but to help them and provide them with opportunities to do *teshuvah* and correct their mistakes, even as he judges them. So, too, we cry out during the Ten Days of Repentance: “*Avinu, Malkenu* – our Father, our King – return us in perfect *teshuvah* to You!” Hashem is



our King in terms of His judgment, but our Father, in terms of His love for us. And through our *teshuvah*, He shifts the terms of the relation from one aspect to the other, relating to us first with strict judgment, and afterward, with deep love and mercy.

This is why the Ten Days of Repentance were instated by our Sages to occur during the first ten days of the new year, even though the judgment is not concluded until Shemini Atzeret – the day after Sukkot. For in each period, a different aspect of *teshuvah* applies. During the Ten Days of Repentance, when the entire world stands in awe of Hashem's judgment, we repent out of fear. Afterward, however, during Sukkot, we repent out of love of Hashem. And thus, the days after Yom Kippur, until *Shemini Atzeret*, are the most joyful of the year. This reflects the gemara's statement (*Yoma* 86b): "When a person repents out of fear, his willful transgressions are considered like unintentional ones; when he repents out of love, his willful transgressions are considered like merits." At the beginning of the Ten Days of Awe, we repent out of fear; by the end, in the "Time of our Rejoicing," we repent out of love.

Thus, the time between the first of Elul until Shemini Atzeret is one long, multi-faceted period of *teshuvah*, from the day on which we declare Hashem to be King, until the day when He issues his decrees in the world. And all of it leads to one end – to our acknowledging the King of Kings, and committing ourselves to His service.

Part 2 of this essay, in which the remaining questions raised above will be answered, will appear between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

כתובה וחתומה טובה

**This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.**