

DAYS OF AARRGGHHHHH!

by Rabbi A. J. Jacobs

"Wow! Almost Rosh HaShanah already? Where does the time go?" (Shudder)

Sound familiar? It's a thought that you, along with Jews all over the world, may have noticed has already crept its way into your conscience. And if it hasn't yet made its appearance - it's there, lurking just below the surface waiting for the opportune time to rear its ugly head. And eventually, no matter how long you try to ignore it and suppress it, the realization that the New Year is almost upon us will emerge. Your muscles will tense ever so slightly, your heart will start to beat a little faster and you may notice small beads of sweat forming on your forehead - but do not be alarmed - these are all normal reactions. After all, it is almost Rosh Hashanah.

But why should the thought of the approaching holiday cause us such discomfort, anxiety, or even downright fear? Is it simply because it brings to us the realization that time moves by so quickly that it could spin your head? We don't take notice on a day-to-day basis of the speed with which the time whirs by, but when yearly milestones come around it somehow seems that it is just not possible that a full year has gone by...in such a short time. Perhaps this is partially to blame. But that can't be it. If this were the only explanation then it would stand to reason that every Jewish holiday would elicit the same response - and in my experience the realization that "it's almost Shavuot" doesn't quite do the trick.

To understand this phenomenon we need to explore the meaning of Rosh Hashanah, its purpose and context. Perhaps then we can begin to discuss how to approach the anxiety that it causes.

Rosh Hashanah is referred to by the Sages as Yom HaDin - the Day of Judgment. We are told that on this day (not coincidentally the anniversary of the creation of man) the Heavenly Creator reviews the progress of each and every individual over the past year. The Sages compare us to sheep passing before their shepherd one by one in a single-file line. The message is that there is nothing to hide behind and no one else to blame - we stand on our personal merits alone. The Almighty scrutinizes our deeds, analyzes our thoughts, and reviews our level of commitment to serve Him. Then, the gravest moment of all, He turns to the two large tomes set before Him - one the book of Life, and the other the book of Death - and inscribes our names in one...or the other. On this Yom Hadin our King decrees the events of the entire following year. Everything is decided on this day - our ability to earn a living, our health, our children's success at finding a mate - even how many times we will stub

a toe - no detail is overlooked.

Indeed, Rosh Hashanah is a serious, even scary day. No wonder why the thought of its approach sends shivers down our spines. But now let's move forward and a look at the events that follow the Day of Judgment - The Days of Repentance and Yom Kippur - and we will find something very peculiar.

Teshuva, repentance, is, quite literally, the process of returning to God. Every time we err and do something that is not in line with what the Creator wants of us, a distance is created and barriers are placed between us and Him. With teshuva we break down those barriers, and draw close once again. The Sages tell us that, although teshuva is acceptable at any time, there is one time of the year that is set aside specifically for teshuva, a time when God looks to us to accept our teshuva and assists us in the process. This time is the ten days of the year that begin with Rosh Hashanah and culminate with Yom Kippur. Ideally, we are meant to spend the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur involved in deep introspection. Now it is our turn to scrutinize our deeds, review our thoughts, and consider our level of commitment to serving our Creator. We recall our mistakes and shortcomings, regret them bitterly, and resolve to set a course for a path of self-improvement. On Yom Kippur we intensify this process through the service of the day and by denying ourselves the basic comforts of normal life. By the time the shofar sounds at the end of the day, we are secure in the knowledge that the filth and stain of our misdeeds have been washed away, and we are instructed, say the Sages, by a Bas Kol, a heavenly voice, "Go and eat your bread in happiness." After all of the stress, anxiety, and hard work, we are rewarded with...well, a beautiful ending.

But if we take a step back and look at the entire chronology something seems wrong. Rosh Hashana, Days of Repentance, Yom Kippur. First comes the Judgment, then teshuva, then forgiveness. We come to Rosh Hashanah with an entire year's worth of baggage, and only afterwards do we attempt to do anything about it. Wouldn't it make more sense to first do teshuva and be forgiven and then come to judgment? Wouldn't it be more beneficial to break down the barriers, wash away the stains and clean our slate before Rosh Hashanah? Wouldn't it be nice to go into the Day of Judgment knowing that everything has already been taken care of? It certainly would alleviate some of the pre-Rosh Hashanah stress! So why this seemingly cruel reversal of order?

The answer, of course, is that, to the contrary, this reversal of order is a tremendous favor that Hashem does for us. Our Creator knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows that as time goes on and, day by day, we go through the motions of life, we tend to forget what's really important. We don't always have the time or clarity of mind to focus on our relationship with God. And eventually we get used to neglecting our duty to constantly grow closer to Him. It reaches the point that we become so jaded in our lack of spiritual growth that we are like sleepwalkers - physically awake but spiritually asleep. Our Creator knows that if, while in this state, we were given a special opportunity to break down the barriers that keep us from Him, we may very well not even notice. In our stupor we would be liable to let the opportunity slip right by.

So we need a wake-up call. Something powerful enough to shake us out of our slumber. Something scary enough to sober us up, and fast. Enter Rosh Hashanah. The awesome nature of the day forces us to examine our relationship with Hashem. We must face the fact that there are so many barriers to break down and so much filth to wash away. The shofar, like an alarm clock, screams to us, "Wake up!! Things cannot continue this way! There is so much work to be done!" Only after this reminder can we hope to take advantage of the opportunity given us and begin, in earnest, the work ahead. Only once we have been shocked into facing reality do we stand a chance to begin the process of returning to Hashem and gaining forgiveness on Yom Kippur. And although the decree of Judgment is written on Rosh Hashanah, it is not sealed until Yom Kippur.

So as you anticipate the coming of the New Year, you may feel a bit anxious. Your muscles may tense ever so slightly, your heart may start to beat a little faster and you may notice small beads of sweat forming on your forehead - but do not be alarmed - these are all normal reactions. After all, it is almost Rosh Hashanah.