

SEVEN QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK ABOUT ROSH HASHANAH

by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf

I.

Question: Why don't we celebrate New Year's in January?

Answer: The calendar that begins in January and ends in December is known as the Gregorian calendar and was introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. This calendar is based on an even earlier calendar, the Julian calendar, that was introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C.E.

The Jewish calendar not only is of much earlier origin but also differs from the Gregorian calendar in numerous ways.

1. The Jewish calendar is based on the moon (lunar) and not the sun (solar).
2. The Jewish calendar contains a number of "new year" dates. This is like having a fiscal year that overlaps two calendar years. The month of Tishrei, which begins with Rosh Hashanah, is the beginning of the year vis-à-vis the number of years, e.g., 5752, 5753, etc. The month of Nissan, the month in which Passover falls, is considered the beginning of the year with regard to the festivals (Passover, Shavuot and Succot) as well as for the establishment of the reign of a Jewish king.

Insight: Our calendar is based on the moon, and similarly the Jewish people are compared to the moon. No matter how dark life seems for the Jewish people, we must know that the "light" is already waiting to reappear. Jewish history is an ongoing portrayal of this principle. Also, unlike the sun, which is always present in its fullest form, the moon progresses in stages until it is full and radiant.

A Jew must look at life as a constant process of growth and development. Tiny beginnings can grow to their fullest potential, and even darkness can be overcome.

II.

Question: On Chanukah the menorah burned for eight days; on Passover the Jews left Egypt. What happened on Rosh Hashanah?

Answer: The Talmud relates that Man was created on the first of Tishrei. This being the case, Rosh Hashanah is a birthday of sorts for the human race.

Insight: In the Torah, the account of the creation of the first human beings states that Man was created, "in the image of God." Jewish tradition understands "the image of God" to mean that human

beings possess free will. Our actions are not predetermined by any Divine, psychological or sociological forces; rather, we are free to choose and are thus responsible for the consequences of our actions. As will be explained later, on Rosh Hashanah we celebrate our humanity by exercising our free will.

Life is a gift. You appeared. You had nothing to do with it whatsoever. You had nothing to do with the color of your eyes, the color of your hair, the color of your skin, or how tall you were going to be. You stand with this gift of yourself. What are you going to do with it? God gave you self, gave you life, and gave you the world to live in. What are you going to do with that gift? Millard Fuller, Founder of Habitat for Humanity¹

III.

Question: Is Rosh Hashanah a happy day or a sad day?

Answer: Rosh Hashanah is a happy day, a festival, and at the same time it is a very serious day. It is a serious day because it is the day of judgment, and it is a happy day because we are confident that if we understand the meaning of the day and use it properly, then we will indeed receive a favorable judgment.

IV.

Question: Why does God judge us?

Answer: Because life is serious business. If we feel that we are being judged, we are more apt to treat life with the proper gravity. Insight: Big God cares about little me. Judgment implies caring. If you don't care, you don't judge. Therefore, another way of understanding how Rosh Hashanah is both solemn and joyous is seeing God's judgment, the fact that He cares about how we live our lives, as the surest sign of His love.

V.

Question: Why do we dip an apple in honey?

Answer: Because it tastes good! Also, because it represents our heartfelt wishes for a sweet year, not only for ourselves and our families but also for all the Jewish people.

Insights:

1. On most fruit trees the leaves appear before the fruit, thus providing a protective cover for the young fruit. The apple, however, makes a preemptive move by appearing before the leaves. The Jewish people are compared to an apple because we are willing to live out our Jewish lives even if this seems to leave us unprotected. We have confidence that God and the instructions in the Torah could never mislead us.
2. A bee can inflict pain by its sting, yet it also produces delicious honey. Life has this same

duality of potential. We pray that our choices will result in a sweet year.

VI.

Question: Why do we blow the shofar?

Answer: Since Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the creation of the world, it follows that it is also the anniversary of God being sovereign over the world. Rosh Hashanah is a coronation of sorts, and thus we trumpet the shofar just like at a coronation ceremony.

Insight: In truth, Rosh Hashanah marks the creation of Man, not the world. The actual creation of the world took place five days before the first human beings were created. In Judaism, the creation of the entire universe is marked by celebrating the creation of the purpose of the world: the free-willed human being.

The word shofar is related to the Hebrew word, l'shaper. The word l'shaper means "to beautify." The call of the shofar reminds us each of our own calling, the calling to live beautiful lives. Why does our King decree the celebration of holidays and the performance of mitzvot, commandments? Only as a way to guide us in the process of beautifying ourselves and the world we live in.

VII.

Question: If you don't have a shofar, will a trumpet or some other instrument suffice?

Answer: No. Our sages teach us that it is specifically a ram's horn that must be used. The ram's horn is an allusion to the binding of Isaac that took place on Rosh Hashanah, when a ram eventually replaced Isaac on the altar.

Insight: Abraham and Isaac, each in his own way, were prepared to give up everything for what they believed was right—the will of their Creator. When we hear the sound of the ram's horn on Rosh Hashanah, we are supposed to consider what sacrifices we would make for what we believe in as Jews.

- If things looked dire, would we go fight for Israel?
- Would we pass up a good job opportunity if it meant living in a place where our children's Jewish education would be compromised?
- Would we give up a week's pay if it were required to help resettle Soviet Jews in Israel?
- If hiding our Jewish identity would help us get the job, promotion or date we want, would we hide it?