

JUDGE ME TENDER, JUDGE ME SWEET

by Rabbi Dovid Green

We are living in the last few days of the Jewish year 5760. The year 5761 will begin, and with it we'll begin a new cycle in the progression toward fulfilling G-d's purpose of creating the universe. G-d will judge us all on Rosh Hashanah regarding past performance, and accordingly, He will make promotions and demotions, "revise and renew contracts" in terms of "period of employment," what His expectations are, and the circumstances under which we will play our unique role in the year to come.

It is noteworthy that Rosh Hashanah is fearful day, but at the same time it is considered a Yom Tov, a day of celebration. Another dichotomy exists as well. In the work Yaaros D'vash it is written that at the time the shofar is blown on Rosh HaShanah, the judgment takes place. In the Midrash (VaYikrah Rabbah 29:3) it states that when the shofar is blown, G-d gets up from His throne of judgement, as it were, and sits on the throne of mercy. On the one hand, the shofar blowing brings about judgement, and on the other hand it evokes mercy.

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, ZT"L points out the aforementioned paradox, and explains that it can be understood in the following way. There is mercy in judgement. The concept of mercy in judgement applies itself when a judge knows that the person being judged is truly remorseful for his actions, and ready to change. If a judge would be able to know that with certainty, then the means necessary to effect change in the wrongdoer can be much more lenient. Punishment reflects a need to force someone to change, and instill fear in those who would otherwise act inappropriately. Stringent punishment is unnecessary when the "criminal" truly recognizes the evil of his "crime," and wishes to change. Punishment is not revenge, but a purposeful way of bringing about change. If change will come by itself, there is no need for punishment.

If we acknowledge that we are here in this world to grow and improve ourselves, and that growing is an ongoing process, we look forward to seeing results. We welcome evaluation which facilitates our personal and communal improvement. When G-d takes notice of our sincere eagerness to become better agents of His will, He views our shortcomings as the judge would who sees "the defendant" is committed to change. It goes without saying that growing is still a painful process, and the evaluation and decision-making that G-d does strikes in us a fear of the unknown even in the best of circumstances. We can't help but wonder what is it that G-d may be sending our way this coming year to effect our growth and to bring out our unique potential. Knowing these decisions are made on Rosh Hashanah makes it a truly fearful day, with a lot hanging in the balance.

At the same time we are aware of the greatness of the day, and we take advantage of that knowledge. We dedicate the day to crowning G-d as our king and accepting the "yoke" of performing His commandments. We are confident because we are in G-d's hands, and we can hope for judgement which is mitigated by mercy. We will ultimately be better people for undergoing this process. This gives us reason to celebrate.

Improvement necessitates introspection, and when we introspect we need to consider what might be stopping us from seeing ourselves in an objective light. We also need to examine what might get in the way of being motivated to make changes. There is an insightful thought which throws some light on this subject. When Moses recounts the events which took place at the time the Torah was given, he states, "I am standing between Hashem and you." Moses was the go-between. Rabbi Sholom Noach Brezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe ZT"L, explains in a different vein that it can be read figuratively as follows. "I," meaning the ego, is standing between each person and G-d. One's ego and desires cloud objectivity, and bribe us to prioritize in a way which leaves G-d out of the picture. Worse, they cause us to follow an all-exclusive path of self-indulgence on principle. The cure for this is a shift in priorities, which is what Rosh Hashanah is all about. When we sincerely decide to subjugate our will to G-d's will, the Torah, and we make our own will secondary, it frees us from subjectivity. We can stand back and observe ourselves from a higher vantage point. Once "I" is used as a means to serve G-d, and get closer to Him, then it no longer separates us from our spiritual potential, but just the opposite, the "I" factor enhances our spirituality.

Lastly, it must be stated, that the fact that there is a judgement conveys very clearly to us that we have incredible potential. G-d judges people because people have choice, and the ability to use their choice for good. The greatness which we are capable of is definitively beyond our wildest dreams. Our souls derive from a spiritual realm much higher than the highest ministering angels, and we are capable of elevating ourselves to that level. With the knowledge of what we can accomplish, and the willingness to grow qualitatively, may we all merit a new year in which our relationship with G-d becomes our first priority and our foremost pleasure.

Good Shabbos, Good Yom Tov! May we all be written and sealed for a good and sweet year!

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