

THE JUDGMENT

by Shlomo Katz

Hamaayan / The Torah Spring
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Rosh Hashana
Volume XIII, No. 47
1 Tishrei 5760
September 11, 1999

Today's Learning:

Ma'aser Sheni 1:1-2

Orach Chaim 161:4-162:2

Daf Yomi: Megillah 5

Yerushalmi Yevamot 40

We pray on Rosh Hashanah, "Our G-d and the G-d of our fathers, sound the great shofar for our freedom . . ." The prophet Yishayah (27:13) likewise spoke of a "great shofar" that will be blown at the time of the final redemption. What is this shofar?

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Palestine) explained as follows: We find in the laws of the Rosh Hashanah shofar that there are three levels in the fulfillment of the mitzvah: ideally, a ram's horn should be used. If that is not available, the shofar of any kosher animal may be used. If even that is not available, any shofar may be used, but no berachah may be recited.

There likewise are three levels for the shofar of redemption. The purpose of that which we call the

"messianic shofar" is to bring about an awakening, to serve as a drive which will cause the rebirth and redemption of the people of Israel. There has been in Israel at different times, and today too, R' Kook said, an awakening and an aspiration whose origins lie in kedushah/holiness - in ardent faith in G-d and the Torah, in the holiness of Israel and its mission, and in the desire to fulfill the will of G-d. This is the "great shofar" of the redemption - the zeal of the people to be redeemed, born out of the lofty desire to fulfill the great mission which cannot be accomplished while they are wretched and exiled.

There are those in whom the holy aspirations have weakened. They do not have within them a passionate fervor for the lofty ideas of kedushah. But there still remains within them man's healthy human nature, whose origins also, says R' Kook, lie in holiness. This healthy human desire to live in freedom is the middling shofar, not ideal, but acceptable.

Finally, there is the "unfit shofar" which is blown out of necessity when a kosher shofar is not to be found. If the holy fervor for redemption is lost and if natural human patriotism also is gone, then the enemies of Israel will come and sound in our ears the signal for redemption. However, no blessing can be recited upon this shofar because it is a curse.

This is why we pray: "Sound the great shofar for our freedom." (From R' Kook's Rosh Hashanah derashah in 1933, shortly after the rise of the Nazis in Germany)

The Judgment on Rosh Hashanah

Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah - one for perfect tzaddikim/righteous people, one for complete resha'im/wicked people, and one for benonim/people in the middle. Perfect tzaddikim are inscribed and sealed immediately for life. Complete resha'im are inscribed and sealed immediately for death. Benonim are left hanging from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are inscribed for life. If they do not merit, they are inscribed for death. (Gemara, Rosh Hashanah 16b)

R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l ("Ramban"; 1194-1270) writes: This gemara cannot be taken literally because many tzaddikim die each year and many resha'im live out the year in tranquility. Indeed, the verse (Kohelet 8:14) cries out: "There are tzaddikim who are treated as [if they had done] the deeds of resha'im, and there are resha'im who are treated as [if they had done] the deeds of tzaddikim." Also, Chazal have stated (Avot ch. 4): "We cannot fathom the tranquility of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous."

Rather, this is the gemara's meaning: There are some sins for which Hashem's righteous justice demands that a punishment be meted out in This World, and there are some sins for which justice requires that punishment be in the World-to-Come. The same is true of merits. There are some mitzvot for which the Master of Reward pays in This World, and there are some for which He pays in

the World-to-Come.

A tzaddik who is completely righteous will be inscribed for life. A wicked person whose judgment requires that he be paid in This World for the good deeds that he has done also is inscribed and sealed for life, i.e., he is adjudged for a year of life, peace, wealth, belongings and honor. Thus, he is equal to a "perfect tzaddik" as far as his judgment is concerned.

On the other hand, a rasha who is completely wicked in every possible way is adjudged to die immediately. Similarly, someone who has done good deeds and who has committed only one sin - if it is a sin for which he deserves the punishment of death, he is inscribed on Rosh Hashanah for death. This means that he will either die that year or be very ill or experience a year of pain and suffering. Such a person is a "complete rashah" as far as his judgment is concerned.

Even the master of all prophets [i.e., Moshe] was judged for one minor sin and was punished for it; he is called a "complete rasha" for purposes of this discussion.

Furthermore, when Chazal speak of "death," they are not referring only to the length of a person's days. Rather, all forms of punishment are called "death." Similarly, all forms of reward are called "life." (Sha'ar Ha'gemul)

Tosfot interprets the above gemara differently. Tosfot states: Since the gemara mentions a category called "benonim" [which Rashi interprets to mean people whose mitzvot and sins are equal], the implication is that the term "tzaddik" refers to anyone who has performed more mitzvot than sins. Likewise, the term "rasha" refers to anyone who has done more sins than mitzvot. It is apparent that such tzaddikim sometimes die and such resha'im sometimes live.

What then is the meaning of the gemara? The "life" and "death" referred to in this gemara are in the World-to-Come [i.e., man is judged on Rosh Hashanah regarding the World-to-Come.] (Rosh Hashanah 16b)

Later commentaries raise several objections to Tosfot's explanation. One of these is: If the judgment on Rosh Hashanah relates solely to the World-to-Come, why are we judged every year?

This question may be answered as follows:

Even tzaddikim sin, and they must be punished for those mistakes. Likewise, even resha'im perform some mitzvot, and they must be rewarded for those good deeds. However, because Hashem does not want tzaddikim to suffer in the World-to-Come, He punishes them in This World for their sins. Similarly, because He does not want resha'im to be present in Gan Eden, He rewards them in This World for their mitzvot.

It follows that Hashem cannot wait until a person dies to decide that person's place in the World-to-Come. Rather, his place in the World-to-Come must be reviewed on a regular basis so that the quality of his life in This World can be determined accordingly. For example, if Hashem sees that a

given person would deserve immediate entrance into Gan Eden if not for a certain sin, Hashem decrees on Rosh Hashanah that that person experience certain suffering during the coming year in order to be cleansed. And, because that person may sin again, this judgment must be repeated every year until he dies. (Based on Tosfot Ha'Rosh and R' Yoel Sperka shlita: Chazon Yoel p.16)

It is appropriate to conclude with the words of R' Yaakov Yehoshua z"l (Poland and Germany; 1681-1757) in his commentary to the above gemara. He writes:

"Here it is appropriate to be brief, as the Sages have said, 'That which is beyond you do not seek and that which is covered from you do not investigate.' The 'books' referred to here are certainly something that is beyond us. Perhaps one person in 1,000 can understand the nature of these 'books' properly." (Pnei Yehoshua)

Letters from Our Sages

This week we present a free translation of a letter by R' Yisrael Salanter z"l (died 1883). In it, the founder of the mussar movement discusses how different types of people approach the Day of Judgment. The letter is undated and is printed in Ohr Yisrael, No. 14.

At one time, I know, every person was seized by horror from the call, "The month of Elul has come." This fear bore fruit and brought man closer to the service of Hashem, each person on his own level - but not as you would expect.

One would think that a person who was distant from Hashem's service all year long would be seized by fear and worry because of the approaching judgment. In fact, the opposite happens; there is more improvement, and rebuke is taken more seriously, by those who all year hold firmly to a holy path than by those who all year walk in darkness.

There are both materialistic and spiritual reasons for this paradox. The materialistic reason is that habit is a very powerful force. The spiritual reason is that when a person sins he draws upon himself a spirit of impurity which pollutes his soul and confuses him.

Anyone who has studied a little bit of mussar sees vividly that this spirit of impurity of which we spoke stands before him to entice him to act contrary to what his intelligence knows is right . . .

Now, when the great practitioners of the fear of Heaven are gone - those whose own fear of judgment could be seen on their faces and made an impression upon their followers - if there are no roots, from where will the leaves come? Nevertheless, if we can remove from ourselves our dirty garments and put on clean ones [see Zechariah 3:4], we will see clearly that we must be afraid and we must tremble - each person on his own level, but much more so than in previous generations.

It is well known, and experience shows, that it is possible to serve Hashem on a lofty level without studying mussar/ethical works. However, to turn from bad to good without mussar is like trying to

see without eyes or to hear without ears. Therefore the poskim/halachic authorities have written that during the High Holidays -- when one prepares for judgment on Rosh Hashanah and, even more, before Yom Kippur - one must study mussar works.

And what can we do about the wall of iron that separates us from Hashem, i.e., the spirit of impurity that pollutes man's soul, so that the study of mussar can have the desired effect? There is only one answer - this, too, experience teaches us - and that is to pour out one's soul to Hashem with a minyan in order to bore a small hole in that iron wall.

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