

# WHY IS ROSH HASHANAH HIDING?

*by Shlomo Katz*

## Parshios Netzavim & Vayeilech

### Why Is Rosh Hashanah Hiding?

There are two holidays mentioned in the Torah whose primary significance is not described there. Nowhere in the Torah is Rosh Hashanah described as the Day of Judgment. Likewise, Shavuot is not referred to in the Torah as the holiday of the Giving of the Torah. Why?

R' Shlomo Ephraim z"l of Lunschitz (17th century; author of the Torah commentary Kli Yakar) answers by noting that there are two other dates that are hidden as well: the date of one's eventual death and the date of the arrival of mashiach. The reason for all of these is the same, he writes. Being in doubt forces us to think differently. Not knowing the date of the Giving of the Torah allows us to feel every day as if the Torah is new. Not knowing when mashiach will come can drive us to repent constantly in order to merit his arrival. Not knowing when we will die also can lead us to repent constantly in preparation for the Great Judgment. Finally, not knowing when the Day of Judgment (Rosh Hashanah) is prevents us from sinning all year long, when it is seemingly safe to do so, and planning to repent at the last moment. (Olelot Ephraim II 33)

Of course, we do know when the Day of Judgment (Rosh Hashanah) and the Day of the Giving of the Torah (Shavuot) are because the Oral Tradition tells us. Perhaps, suggests R' Menachem Simcha Katz shlita (Brooklyn, NY), the Torah is teaching us a second lesson: that without complete loyalty to the Oral Tradition and meticulous adherence to the laws found in it (i.e., in the Talmud), teshuvah is impossible or meaningless. This is alluded to in the blessing of the daily Shemoneh Esrei which speaks of teshuvah: "Return us, our Father, to Your Torah; draw us close, our King, to Your service, and [then] return us in complete repentance before You." (Simcha L'ish p. 406)

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"You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your Elokim . . ." (29:9)

Rashi (to verse 12) writes: Why is the section beginning with the words, "You are standing today" juxtaposed to the curses in the previous section? Because when Yisrael heard the ninety-eight

curses [in last week's parashah] on top of the forty-nine curses in Vayikra, their faces turned pale [i.e., they were horrified], and they exclaimed, "Who can possibly withstand these?!" Therefore Moshe began to calm them, "See, you are standing today before Hashem!" Many times you have provoked the Omnipresent to anger, yet He has not destroyed you. Rather, you still continue in His presence. [Until here from Rashi]

R' Ben-Zion Yadler z"l (1871-1962; maggid/preacher of Yerushalayim) asks: Have we ever heard of such a thing? Does a father rebuke his son and, when he sees that his son has taken the rebuke to heart, say, "Don't worry, my son! You have angered me many times, and you have always gotten away with it"? Furthermore, R' Yadler asks, why does Moshe immediately follow with more dire warnings?

He explains: Hashem judges man both individually and collectively. First He weighs all of each person's mitzvot and aveirot, and then He weighs all of the good deeds and sins of the Jewish People collectively. Sometimes, a mitzvah performed by one individual may be the merit that protects the nation as a whole. However, that only can occur when the Jewish People are united. Thus Moshe said, "You are standing today, all of you . . ." True you have angered Hashem and each of you individually deserves punishment. Nevertheless, because you are united, you need not fear the curses.

But be careful, Moshe continued (verse 17): "Perhaps there is among you a man or woman, or a family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from being with Hashem, our Elokim, to go and serve the gods of those nations; perhaps there is among you a root flourishing with gall and wormwood." If such a person exists, one who separates himself from the Jewish People and tries to lead others astray as well, the reprieve that comes from unity will be lost. (B'tuv Yerushalayim p.185)

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"It will be that when he hears the words of this imprecation, he will bless himself in his heart, saying, 'Peace will be with me, though I walk as my heart sees fit' . . . Hashem will not be willing to forgive him, for then Hashem's anger and jealousy will smoke against that man, and the entire imprecation written in this Book will come down upon him, and Hashem will erase his name from under heaven." (29:18-19)

R' Betzalel Ashkenazi z"l (approx. 1520-1592; Egypt and Eretz Yisrael; author of the Talmud commentary, Shitah Mekubetzet) explains: Hashem created many different personality types so that people would choose different occupations and, between them, make civilization possible, something that would not happen if everyone had the same personality and chose the same occupation. Thus, a person might think that, since the world apparently needs him, he can sin to his heart's content and "there will be peace for me." Not so! our verse therefore warns. "Hashem will not be willing to forgive him." The world will indeed exist without his participation. (Derashot

U'ma'amarim L'Rabbeinu Betzalel Ashkenazi p.4)

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"You will return until Hashem, your Elokim." (30:2)

One might think that he is obligated to sin so that he can fulfill the mitzvah of teshuvah. Otherwise, he might go through his entire life without ever performing this mitzvah.

Not so, says R' Chaim Chizkiyah Medini z"l (author of the halachic encyclopedia Sdei Chemed; died 1904). Rather, just as our Sages say that one who studies the laws of the Temple service is deemed to have performed the service, so one who studies the laws of teshuvah is considered to have performed that mitzvah. Thus, even if one never sins, he still can fulfill the commandment to repent. (Drush B'ma'alat Midat Ha'anavah; reprinted in Ohr Ha'chamah p.338)

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"See--I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the bad." (30:15)

R' Dov Ber z"l (the Maggid of Mezeritch; successor to the Ba'al Shem Tov z"l as leader of the chassidic movement; died 1772) asks: We read (Bereishit 1:31), "G-d saw all that He had made, and behold it is very good." If all that G-d made is "very good," then what is the source of the "bad" that He places before us, as mentioned in our verse?

The Maggid explains: The verse is not referring to absolute bad as we use the term. Rather, G-d created different levels of good and, in relation to a higher level of good, a lower level of good is "bad."

For example, the Maggid continues, a broom is "good" because it can be used to clean the house. [Nevertheless, if one were asked to associate an object with the adjective "good," he would be unlikely to respond, "broom."] Compared to true good, a broom is only a little bit good. [Thus, what our verse is teaching is that G-d has given us a choice between choosing a higher level of "good"-- i.e., Torah and mitzvot--and a lower level of good-- i.e., mundane physical good. In relation to the higher good, mundane good is "bad" and, our verse tells us, is equivalent to death.]

The Maggid concludes: We can create absolute bad [as opposed to something less good, which is only relatively bad, as noted above]. Specifically, if one sins, he creates evil. For example, if one would use the same broom that is inherently a good tool to hit another person, the broom would then be "bad." (Ohr Torah No.7)

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## Selichot

R' Michel Zalman Shurkin shlita writes in the name of R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l (1903-1993): The origin for the recitation of selichot is the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 17b) which tells that after the sin of the golden calf, Hashem wrapped Himself in a tallit (so-to-speak) and taught Moshe "seder tefillah" / "the order of prayer." Hashem said (the Gemara relates), "Any time the Jews sin, let them do thus before Me and I will forgive them." (It was at this time that Hashem taught Moshe the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.) Based on this, we may understand the ruling of R' Moshe Isserless z"l (the Rema) that the one who leads selichot should be "the most worthy and the greatest in Torah study and good deeds who can be found." Since Hashem was (so-to-speak) the first chazan in the history of selichot, those who follow Him should be the most worthy individuals possible.

Because the Gemara refers to selichot as "seder tefillah"--a term usually used only to describe Shemoneh Esrei--it is customary to stand for selichot (or at least for the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy). The sefer Levush explains that this is also the reason that we recite "kaddish shalaim" (with "titkabbel") after selichot, although that kaddish usually is recited only after Shemoneh Esrei. Similarly, says R' Soloveitchik, this is why we begin selichot with praises of Hashem, just as Shemoneh Esrei begins with praise of Hashem.

Why are selichot recited at night? (All of the selichot were intended to be recited before sunrise.) Rambam writes: "It is the way of repentance for the penitent to cry before Hashem with tears and entreaties." When is the time for crying? We read in Eichah (1:2), "She weeps bitterly at night." We also read (Bemidbar 14:1), "The people wept that night."

It is customary in many communities that the one who led selichot leads the other prayers that day. Some commentaries explain: "When one begins a mitzvah, we tell him to finish it." This implies that selichot is not a separate mitzvah; rather, it is part of the day's prayers. If, for some reason, a person recited selichot but did not recite the day's prayers, he would not have fulfilled his obligation to recite selichot. (In this respect, selichot are analogous to ne'ilah on Yom Kippur, which is meant to be an "added" prayer. If one recited ne'ilah but had not recited any of the prior prayers, he would not fulfill the mitzvah of ne'ilah because his ne'ilah would not be "added." (Harerei Kedem)

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