

CLASS 19 - ROSH HASHANA

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

"At four periods the world is judged: at Pesach, for the produce; Atzeres, for the fruits of the tree. On Rosh HaShanah, all the world passes before Him....; at the Chag, they are judged regarding water." (Rosh HaShanah, Chapter 1, Mishna 2)

Why is the first of Tishrei an appropriate time to judge mankind?

While the judgments of the Shalosh Regalim each relate to items produced at that particular juncture, the judgment day of man could just as well be carried out at any other time.

The Ran, commenting on this Mishna, cites the well-known dispute of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua as to the date of creation. According to Rabbi Eliezer, who teaches that the world was created on the first of Tishrei, we can understand why this day serves as Yom HaDin. But, the Halacha follows Rabbi Yehoshua, states the Ran, who rules that the first of Nissan is the dawn of man's creation. If so, our query remains unresolved: why is this period different than any other?

The custom of blowing the Shofar throughout Chodesh Elul is not mere preparation for Rosh HaShanah, but it has a value of its own. According to the Tur, our Shofar echoes the sound heard in the camp of Israel as Moshe Rabbeinu ascended Har Sinai, on the first of Elul, on his way towards receipt of the second tablets. On Yom Kippur, Hashem finally is appeased, and Moshe descends with life in his hands.

Apparently, the placement of Yom HaDin is a function of this trek up the mountain. It is the Shofar that announces G-d's greatest gift, and it is on Rosh HaShanah that this favor begins.

Rosh HaShanah is a new lease on life.

1

When Moshe Rabbeinu descended from Mt. Sinai to the scene of Klal Yisrael dancing around a Golden Calf, he cast away the Luchos.

Why?

The first Luchos granted freedom to the Jewish people. Not mere political independence, but eternal life, invulnerable to the angel of death, immune to the influence of the nations.

But, after worshiping Avoda Zara, the nation was subject to destruction, and G-d promised to wipe

out the entire generation. Hence, the gift of Torah was rescinded. The Torah, tree of life, is an inappropriate possession for those subject to imminent death.

This decree was never revoked. The sentence of death still looms. On Rosh Chodesh Elul, Moshe Rabbeinu returned to Heaven and G-d granted a stay of execution. This reprieve takes shape in the second Luchos, but, if they, too, are rejected, Klal Yisrael returns to its original position, with no right to life.

The popular perception of Rosh HaShanah is the day our future is decided, determining the course of the upcoming year. Our feeling is that life itself is a given, what remains to be determined are questions of better or worse, more or less. Even, perish the thought, perhaps this is the end.

The truth is a bit different.

It is the original sound of Har Sinai that resonates on Rosh HaShanah.

Man can choose between two different dimensions, a life of Torah, or the death sentence of the Egel. For those who cling to the Etz Chaim, their connection to life itself is renewed once again.

Simply put, it is not daily events that are being ordained, but it is the essence of life that hangs in the balance. Are we citizens of the world that is called life?

If the major part of our waking day is spent dreaming of the fantasies that modern culture provides, our conscious identity dissolves in a world of make-believe. The Torah, in contrast, is utter truth, and eternally so. Its hallowed words provide refuge for those seeking escape from oblivion.

Unfortunately, in the frenetic pace of a high-tech world, this basic idea is easily forgotten.

It is the Shofar that serves to awaken us from our slumber, to remind us what life is really all about.

It is this Shofar that was heard on Har Sinai, and it is this Shofar that assures we will stray no longer after foreign gods.

Let us explain how.

2

"...Why is it that the sound of man is not heard during the day as well as it is heard at night? Because of the cycle of the sun, which chops through the firmament as a woodcutter chopping cedars....Were it not for the cycle of the sun, the sound of the multitudes of Rome would be heard, and were it not for the sound of the multitudes of Rome, the sound of the cycle of the sun would be heard." (Yoma 20b)

What is the sound of the sun, and what does it say?

"The heavens declare the glory of G-d, and the firmament of sky tells of His handiwork." (Tehillim 19, 2)

The sun and the stars reveal a tale of spiritual splendor, displaying the magnitude and magnificence of G-d's dominion. This story is difficult to relate, for the natural world of cause and effect conflicts with the discovery of a deeper dimension. It is this resistance that the sun steadily flattens. As a woodcutter chopping away at the trunk of a tree, the hidden world of the spirit slowly overcomes the superficial perceptions of a materialistic existence.

The Roman multitudes and their varied descendants fill the air with the bombastic cacaphony of a society that knows only itself. Their boisterous parade drowns out the still, silent voice of G-d's lingering word.

In our busy lifestyle of travel to and fro, harried schedules that juggle two jobs and take care of the kids, we easily overlook the true meaning of life. In a hectic struggle with the daily grind, the fleeting headline of fame and fortune is the only sound heard.

Long ago, at the foot of Har Sinai, a Shofar was heard. When that sound broke through its physical barriers, the entire world stood still and silent, suddenly attentive to the Dvar Hashem.

The Shofar has no words.

It is the sound that precedes all speech, the pure thought that silences a clamoring world. Its words are rendered superfluous, for the reality is abundantly clear.

3

When G-d spoke at Sinai, the souls of the Jewish people left their bodies, unable to contain the awesome revelation of G-d's immediate presence. With words of Torah, Hashem restored them to life, the original Tchiyas HaMeisim. From that moment on, our life is singularly defined by the Torah we live by.

Har Sinai marks the dawn of a different creation, the eternal life of a nation loyal to its Creator.

As the sun reflects G-d's honor, the Jewish people are testament to His command.

On Rosh HaShanah, we are not judged merely by our actions. Rather, our continued existence is weighed in the light of His glory.

Are we able to testify to the truth of His word? Do we have a place in the world that G-d creates? Do we have our own page in the book of life? Or, have we lost the sound of the Shofar, oblivious to its call?

On this Rosh HaShanah, Moshe Rabbeinu has once again climbed that mountain. It is his Shofar that separates the chaff from the essence of life. In its wake, we strive to hear once more the sound we have forgotten, the truth and justice that cannot be ignored.

"Ashrei HaAm Yod'ei Tru'ah, Hashem B'Or Paneicha Yehaleichun"

I want to take this opportunity to wish everybody a happy, healthy, and successful new year. K'siva V'Chasima Tova.

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