

THE TREMBLING OF THE ANGELS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Trembling of the Angels¹

"Hug your judge" is not a slogan you are going to hear much. Judges are not the first we associate with warmth, affection and closeness. Yet Rosh Hashanah asks us to relate to Hashem as Judge[2] , more so than any other time of the year. Paradoxically, it also calls upon us to take advantage of Hashem's closeness to us - more so than any other time of the year!

Rosh Hashanah seems rife with contradictory moods and mixed metaphors.

What demeanor is appropriate on a day of such awesome consequence? With our lives hanging in the balance, we would expect to be somber, petulant - and dejected about the sorry state of our spiritual portfolios. Unlike other holidays, we refrain from reciting Hallel. How could we, asks the gemara,[3] when the Books of life and death are open before the Judge? Yet, we are instructed to treat it as a Yom Tov. Tehilim[4] refers to it as a chag. We laud it in our davening as a day given to us with love. We wear our holiday finery, a practice not lost on the Yerushalmi,[5] which contrasts this practice with the conservative and somber clothes that people generally wear in the courtroom when their lives hang in the balance.

Rosh Hashanah's established role as the day of Divine accounting and judgment disappears precisely where you would expect it to show itself. In our davening, we do not (unlike Yom Kippur) look back at our behavior of the previous year. We do not stand in contrition and remorse (again, unlike Yom Kippur), offering tearful pleas for forgiveness. Most importantly, throughout the long and beautiful Rosh Hashanah davening, this all-too-obvious theme of Divine judgment is given only passing mention by an oblique reference here and there. Why do we not put this idea front and center?

The tension between themes is an ancient one. When the small community in Yerushalayim wept and mourned on Rosh Hashanah in contrition for their sins, Nechemiah[6] objected. He ordered them to enjoy good food and drink, and to make sure that others would be able to share it. He tells them not to be mourn and cry. Why should he not have been delighted that the people were so genuinely disturbed about their misconduct? Is this not what Rosh Hashanah is for?

Even the judgment aspects of Rosh Hashanah puzzle us. Who has not been moved by the haunting words of Unesaneh Tokef, with its chilling evocation of the awesomeness of Divine din? Why, even the angels tremble anticipating it!

Angels? Trembling? What ever for? Do angels have free will? Do they get it wrong, like we do? Is there a Book of Life for angels?

The mystery starts with Chumash itself. The Torah points to the themes of the different Yomim Tovim: cherus/freedom on Pesach, simcha on Sukkos, kapparah and taharah on Yom Kippur. A few are left out. Why isn't the Torah more up front about Shavuot being the time of kabbalas HaTorah? Chazal tell us what Shmini Atzeres is about, but why is the text of the Torah virtually silent about its theme? The Torah describes Rosh Hashanah simply as a day of teruah, of sounding the shofar. It tells us what we do on the day, but not what the day is.

If we look for the essence of Rosh Hashanah in the judgment theme, we are looking in the wrong place. Judgment is the consequence, not the core idea.

Rosh Hashanah, rather, marks the annual renewal of the world. It is the anniversary of the Creation of Man, the purpose and culmination of all of Creation. On this day, explains the Ari, all things return to their pre-history. The world is licensed one year at a time. At the end of a yearly period, it must be created anew.

Shabbos has a similar function. The Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh, teaches us that Hashem places just enough of whatever it takes for the world to last for six days. Existence passes to the next week only through what He invests in it each Shabbos.

The Ari z"l taught that Rosh Hashanah works similarly. The unit of time that we call a year has real substance in the eyes of the Ribono shel Olam. When it comes to an end, all things return to where they came from. They are put back into effect, back into what we experience as existence, only through the vehicle of Rosh Hashanah. "This day is the beginning of your creation, a remembrance of the first day." [7]

This is the true central theme of Rosh Hashanah, a nature so profound that the Torah did not wish to frame it in words - just as it does not explicitly describe the role of other days of greatest kedushah, like Shavuot and Shmini Atzeres. All other aspects of Rosh Hashanah flow directly from this theme, and are subservient to it.

The annual renewal begins with an accounting of all things. It measures the performance of each and every element of the world, measuring how it fits into Hashem's Grand Scheme for the unfolding of human history. Elements that are not performing, or are no longer needed, simply disappear into the abyss of the past. They are not recreated. The world's lease on life expires; a new one is granted only to those receiving passing marks in the annual check-up.

This has nothing to do with free will. It applies to absolutely everyone and everything, Jew and non-Jew, animate and inanimate.

It even applies to the angels.

As powerful a concept that this is, it is only half the picture. Our tradition tells us that whatever it is that this world is supposed to accomplish, Klal Yisroel is the vehicle to make it happen. The equation becomes frighteningly simple. No Klal Yisroel (chas v'shalom), no world. If there is a renewal of the world each Rosh Hashanah, it follows that there is a necessary and parallel renewal of the bris between Hashem and us, a reinvention of the covenant between us. "You all stand this day before Hashem...that you should be entered into a bris with Hashem your G-d." [8] The plain meaning of the text refers to the words of reproach and encouragement that Moshe gave to the Jews of the wilderness at the end of his life. The sefarim ha-kedoshim see an allusion in the words "this day" to a continuing event: to Rosh Hashanah each year, and our standing before Hashem in a new covenant. The ability of Klal Yisrael to implement Hashem's design, to carry His wishes closer to completion, is the essence of "crowning" Him as the regnant Power on earth. Each year on Rosh Hashanah, we renew His coronation by renewing the covenant between us.

This covenant is the reestablishment not only of the fact of the relationship between us, but of the quality of that relationship. Without one special quality, we simply cannot do our job. This all-important quality is the breaking of all barriers between a Jew and his Heavenly Father. There are, ultimately, no veils, no curtains, no walls between the heart and soul of a Jew who seeks closeness with his Creator, and the object of his yearning.

Sanhedrin 64A illustrates the point, by contrasting two kinds of connection. Many Jews fell to the wiles of the Midianite women, and became "attached/ nitzmadim" to Baal-Peor. The survivors, not long afterwards, are praised by Moshe as also being attached - properly so, this time, to Hashem. The word that the Torah uses there, however, is not nitzmadim but devekim. The Gemara sees common ground in the word nitzmadim and tzamid, a woman's bracelet. Rashi explains: A bracelet is attached, but free to move in place, from side to side. Davekim, clinging, connotes a stronger attachment yet.

We've been there before. At Har Sinai, we attached ourselves to Him so perfectly that our souls fled our bodies. This is part of what Rabbenu Saadya meant when he included Sinai as one of the ten items that sounding the shofar on Rosh Hashanah reminds us of. Each year, some spark of the devekus we felt at Sinai is available to us on Rosh Hashanah, as we renew the bris between Hashem and us. It, too, as well as the Divine judgment, is an outgrowth of the main theme of Rosh Hashanah: the renewal of the world, and the renewal of the special relationship between Hashem and His people. Part of this renewal is providing us with the spiritual wherewithal to continue serving Him adequately. Thus, at least for those who understand and accept the mission, it is a time of forgiveness!

(The sense of devekus does not dissipate after Rosh Hashanah. It grows, reaching a climax on Yom Kippur. On that day, the is so strong, that it is the attachment itself to Hashem that eradicates our sins. No sin - all sin is imperfection - can exist within Hashem. When we are united with Hashem, our sins are left with no place to go!)

There is no contradiction between seeing Hashem as Judge, and yet feeling confident in His mechilah. If we pass muster in the key area of our commitment to His service, the details of our past mistakes can and will be dealt with painlessly.

This event is cause enough to treat Rosh Hashanah as a holiday. This is why the machzor returns again and again to the theme of proclaiming Hashem's Kingship, and slips in only a few mostly oblique references to the strictness of His judgment. Our job on Rosh Hashanah is to recommit ourselves to the mission of His service. The rest is commentary.

Not so easy, you say? The explanation is elegant and compelling, but can we meaningfully access this possibility of devekus? Do we really get there?

Listen to the advice of the Zohar.[9] In gratitude for her hospitality, Elisha asked the Shunamite woman, "What can be done for you? Would you like to speak to the king, or to the general?" She demurred. I don't really have any issues with people in high places like them. "I dwell among my people." The Zohar tells us that this dialogue occurred on Rosh Hashanah, and addressed what weighs on most people's minds.

"Today is the day of judgment," said Elisha. "Would you like me to take up your case with the Ribbono Shel Olam? I can try to put in a good word!"

"Thanks, but not really," she answered. "I will take my chances from within the Jewish people as a whole. I do not wish to be singled out."

She was correct, says the Zohar. Our best position is to situate ourselves well within the Jewish people. Hashem's rachamim towards Klal Yisrael in its entirety never wavers.

After each round of shofar-sounding we ask Hashem's compassion, "either as children, or as servants." This is really what Rosh Hashanah is all about. Will we be judged to be mere servants, or will Hashem see us as His children, as united and connected as family members?

The practical consequence of this Zohar is clear. Closeness to Hashem is within range on Rosh Hashanah. If we do not feel it innately, we ought to accentuate the parts of our avodah that require the many, rather than the individual in the privacy of his own thoughts and deeds. We need to pitch in with the tzibur, to join in on serving Hashem as a part of the larger group. In this way, we open ourselves up to the embrace of the Heavenly Father. As we feel that closeness, we can sign on to the new covenant that is formalized on that day, and in the process sign ourselves into the Sefer HaChaim.

1) The passage from the Zohar recited before the sounding of the shofar stresses Hashem's love for justice, and the need to remind the world that there is Judgment as well as a Judge. Chazal (Rosh Hashanah 18A), on the other hand speak of the Ten Days of Repentance as the time that He is

closest and most accessible 2) Rosh Hashanah 32B

3) Tehilim 81:4

4) Rosh Hashanah 1:3

5) Nechemiah 8:10-11

6) Machzor

7) Devarim 29:9,11

8) Part 2, 44B

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