

# NERVE CENTRE OF THE YEAR

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

Some people thrive on irregularity. They love changes in their schedules - days off; exploring new places and doing new things. These people often find day-to-day life dull and humdrum; they constantly await the opportunity to investigate new vistas and experience new events.

Then there are people like me. I love routine. I thrive on regularity. I find drastic schedule changes difficult to adapt to. Such people would gladly do the same thing day in/day out, rarely feeling the need to "get away" from routine and do something out of the ordinary. For such individuals, days like Rosh Hashana present a unique challenge. We are asked to pour tremendous energy and concentration into a short, 48 hour period. In complete departure from schedule, we spend most of our day in shul, immersed in prayer. We are told that these two short days have a disproportionate effect over our entire year. How is one to understand and adapt to this sudden and drastic change? How can we gain an appreciation of these days, so that we may truly utilize them to their full potential?

While Rosh Hashana is indeed the Jewish New Year, the word Rosh does not mean new. Rosh means head; thus Rosh Hashana is the Head of the Year. Why do we refer to it as the head, as opposed to the beginning, of the year? If a person has a problem with his feet, his feet suffer. If his hands are not healthy, his hands hurt. If a person has difficulty with his brain, his entire body suffers. The brain is not simply another organ playing its role in the multifaceted creation we know as the human body - the brain is the nerve-centre of the entire body. It controls our actions, our movements, even our thoughts and feelings. While in rare cases doctors may consider amputating a sick limb, or even transplanting a critical organ such as a liver or heart, one does not remove the brain.

Thus it would be fair to say that, within the scheme of the human body, the relatively small brain plays a disproportionately large role. This is why we go to such lengths to protect our heads. Bicycle helmets are now required by the law. Broken hands and feet can be mended; a blow to the brain, G-d forbid, can be life-threatening.

Just like the body has an appendage that plays a central and irreplaceable role in its function, time also has its "head." Rosh Hashana is the "Head of the Year." It is the nerve-centre of the Jewish calendar. While it represents a relatively small portion of the time-cycle, its effect over the coming year is powerful and immeasurable. Just like a small irregularity in the brain could have catastrophic effects on the entire body's function, so too even small deviations and lapses on Rosh Hashana can cause untold harm to our lives over the coming year. Is it just? Is it fair that such a short period

should have such a powerful impact? That's not for us to judge. We can only absorb the fact, and try our best to take advantage of these incredibly powerful 48 hours.

This concept helps to explain some of the unusual customs and laws surrounding Rosh Hashana. Commentators quote the Talmud Yerushalmi that suggests one not rest (during the daytime) on Rosh Hashana. "One who sleeps on Rosh Hashana will have a sleepy mazal the coming year." What's the difference, one might ask, if I have a little nap on Rosh Hashana? I do it every other Shabbos and Yom Tov! Rosh Hashana is different. It is the "head" of the year. Half an hour - a small period of time - on Rosh Hashana, may regulate entire weeks or even months of our coming year, just as a tiny area of the brain may control critical bodily functions and services. Commentators even question why we're allowed to sleep at night on Rosh Hashana! (Luckily for us they rule it permissible.)

Rosh Hashana is steeped in ritual. We eat the head of a sheep or fish as a symbol of leadership and ascendancy. We dip our challah and apple in honey in the hope of a sweet year. We even avoid sharp, bitter or pungent foods for the same reasons. While all year long we would consider such practices superstitious and obsessive, Rosh Hashana has such tremendous impact on our lives that even small changes that serve to put us in the right frame of mind (sweet, positive), and arouse us to prayer and faith, are necessary and normal.

On Rosh Hashana, we are especially meticulous with our prayers. While all year long we are not particular about the precise vowelization of some words, on Rosh Hashana we are. "Zochreinu l'chaim - remember us for life!" While during the year we often pronounce it "La'chaim," on Rosh Hashana we are careful to say "L'chaim," because La'chaim sounds too similar to "Lo chaim," which means "not life." (Mishnah Berurah 582:16) Consider this: If halacha requires us on Rosh Hashana to be so careful with our prayers, how much more so must we be careful with what we speak about at our Yom Tov meals, or during our breaks from prayer or Torah study!

The Talmud (Yerushalmi quoted by Ran) rules that if one blows the shofar from its wider side, he has not fulfilled his obligation. The shofar may only be blown from its narrower side. Perhaps this halacha alludes to the above concept: The voice of the shofar emerges from a tiny hole, travelling through an ever-widening cavity, until ultimately it leaves its confines, and its powerful voice fills every corner of the synagogue, permeating as well the thoughts and consciousness of all who hear it. So too Rosh Hashana is a small window to our year, from where our lives emerge, never unchanged, impacted by these two short days with such great repercussion.

Just 48 hours of time, with so much hanging in the balance. Forty eight is the numerical value (gematria) of moach - the brain. Rosh Hashana is the nerve-centre of our coming year. May the Almighty grant us the sense and the clarity to utilize it to its full potential and appreciate its impact.

Wishing all our readers and all of K'lal Yisrael a good Shabbos, a good Yom Tov, a K'siva ve-chasima tova, and a gut gebentsched yur!

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*Heitner, on the occasion of the engagement of their daughter, Sarah Esther. May they see much nachas from all of their children.*

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