

PREPARING FOR ROSH HASHANA AND SHMITTAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Judges and police you must establish in all your communities . . . (Devarim 16:18)

Rosh Hashanah is only three-and-a-half weeks away, b"H. We still don't know how this year will end or how the next one will begin, but we now know how it might have begun: with a terrible and tragic attack against the Jewish people.

In case anyone has already forgotten, the kidnapping of the three Israeli teenagers led to a house-to-house search in Chevron and many arrests of Palestinians. That in turn led to increased rocket attacks by Hamas out of Gaza against Israel, which provoked an Israeli operation in Gaza. It was this incursion that, quite miraculously, led to the eventual discovery of dozens of terror tunnels. Apparently, they were waiting to be used this Rosh Hashanah to confuse, kidnap, and murder countless Israelis. It could have brought the Israeli government and Jews around the world to their political and emotional knees.

It was all ready to go. The attack had been coordinated with other Palestinians already in Israel and perhaps even with Hizbollah up north who have their own system of tunnels to clandestinely enter Israel. Israeli Intelligence, apparently, was unaware of the plan, which had a frighteningly good chance of success. Had God not thwarted it, it would have been a very different Rosh Hashanah this year, and a whole different future for the Jewish people and the world. We owe the "Guardian of Israel" a tremendous amount of thanks.

At the same time, we lost dozens of soldiers, Hy"d. Jews lived in fear of missile attacks for weeks on end having to run to their shelters every time a siren went off, with some in the south barely ever leaving those shelters the entire time the war continued. Chunks of life have been "stolen" from children who will never be the same again even after the war is over.

In the meantime, the problem is no longer only in this part of the Middle East. ISIS (Islamic State In Iraq and Syria) has become a force with which to be reckoned, in Iraq and now around the world, forcing President Obama to backtrack on a campaign promise of getting out of Iraq for good. No such luck. In fact, making good on his promise is what created the military void that allowed ISIS to move in so powerfully in the first place. Let's see how he deals with his own version of Hamas.

As if current history wasn't already "entertaining" enough, a different type of enemy is on the march and doing its scary damage: Ebola. The World Health Organization has already sounded the alarm about this plague that seems agile enough to skip borders and, God forbid, devastate the world

population. We're also waiting to see how this one is going to play out in the coming year.

In the meantime, there is all the local chaos as well, in just about every country around the world. Is it just a part of the human condition, or is it also part of the overall direction of history which seems to be getting worse before it gets better. Believe it or not, I'd much rather be upbeat about history and its direction. If someone can show me how while sticking to the facts about current events, please let me know.

Meanwhile, seemingly, most of what is happening has little or nothing to do with rising global anti-Semitism. That does not mean that it won't in the future, given the "right" set of circumstances that allow a leader to redirect all that anger and frustration against a different enemy. That's the way it worked in Germany in the 1930s and 40s.

How much more so might this be the case given the fragile state of the global economy. History knows only too well how failed gentile financial aspirations can easily be transformed into Jew hatred and pogroms. This was so even when the Jewish community was poor, so how much truer is it today when many Jews are quite affluent.

In short, we have what to pray for this Rosh Hashanah. Like a defendant who thinks that he is in court only to defend himself against a single infraction, only to find out that an entire dossier has been compiled against him that includes everything he ever did wrong, the Jewish people have a lot riding on this year's judgment. Rosh Hashanah in the best of years is a solemn time. This year, it is particularly so. I do think that it necessarily is an issue of what we pray, but more a matter of how we pray. The Machzor is the machzor, a long-standing tradition of prayer for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and not subject to change. It was bequeathed to us over a thousand years ago, assembled by rabbis who, based upon the traditions they had received, knew how best to appeal God at this holy time of year. It is the structure of prayer that we have been meant to follow each year at this time.

However, the heart we put into our prayer is our own. We control that, and it is affected based upon what we think. If we perceive a happy situation, then we are moved to excitement. When we perceive a sad situation, then we respond with a heavy heart. When we perceive an awesome moment, then our hearts are humbled. It all comes down to how we perceive the opportunity of the moment, which can either be in step or out of step with reality.

The Talmud says:

Rebi Yosi says: Woe to people that they see but know not what they see, they stand but know not on what they stand. (Chagigah 12b)

It is one of the few places that the Talmud gets Kabbalistic, talking about the spiritual foundations of Creation. Rebi Yosi is pointing out how people go about their everyday lives with little or no appreciation of the world in which they live, and often abuse it for that matter. They see the world around them and everything in it, but they do not understand what is they are looking at, allowing

them to belittle that which is very important and holy in God's eyes.

The same thing is true of most of us on a daily basis. We see the world around us and what happens as it unfolds. We have no idea of what is going to happen the next moment, whether it will be enlivening or dangerous, a reason for joy or a reason for sadness. As people sat in cafes at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, drinking coffee and reading newspapers, they had no inkling of what was transpiring just miles away from them, or what was about to happen just minutes into their futures.

We try to get this point across in the Usaneh Tokef prayer on Rosh Hashanah when we intone:

All mankind will pass before You like a flock of sheep. Like a shepherd pasturing his flock, making sheep pass under his staff, so shall You cause to pass, count, calculate, and consider the soul of all the living; and You shall apportion the destinies of all Your creatures and inscribe their verdict. On Rosh Hashanah will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur will be sealed, how many will pass from the earth and how many will be created; who will live and who will die; who will die at his predestined time and who before his time; who by water and who by fire, who by sword, who by beast, who by famine, who by thirst, who by upheaval, who by plague, who by strangling, and who by stoning. Who will rest and who will wander, who will live in harmony and who will be harried, who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched, who will be degraded and who will be exalted.

That's also an amazing part of the entire idea. Events can occur at the end of the year that were decided on Rosh Hashanah the previous year. A person can find themselves in financial straits 10 months after Rosh Hashanah, only to unexpectedly to leave them a few days before the next Rosh Hashanah, all of which was decided during the previous "Days of Awe."

There are families who last Rosh Hashanah sat down together to celebrate the holiday who this year will be sitting down missing some members of their families who passed away this year, for one reason or another, some late in life, some early. It will be a different type of Rosh Hashanah for them this year.

In general it is most important to never take anything in life for granted. That is true during the times of history when peace reigns, so how much more so when chaos looms around just about every corner. Anti-Semitism is on the rise, among other potentially explosive issues. We need to show God that we know that, and appreciate every ounce of protection that He is granting us. We need to be grateful for every aspect of success that we enjoy.

As the rabbis point out, the letters of "Elul," the month before Rosh Hashanah, are the same as the first letters of the four words that translate as, "I am to my beloved and beloved is to me" (Shir HaShirim 6:3). We learn from this that Elul is a time that God 'descends' into our world to become more 'accessible' to man. It is a time to build a relationship with God, or to mend broken and damaged ones, in preparation for the Day of Judgment, for Rosh Hashanah.

We also learn that the relationship is a two-way street. Yes, God makes His Presence easier to feel during Elul, but only for the person who reaches out to God. If God is our beloved, then we become His. A person must yearn to improve his relationship with God to merit to have such a relationship.

Ironically, this is also a Shmittah year, which is less significant to Jews living in the Diaspora than it is to Jews living in Eretz Yisroel where its laws are kept. Many farmers will let their fields go unworked in the upcoming year, and many homeowners will only tend to their gardens minimally. Shopping for fruits and vegetables in Eretz Yisroel will be a little more challenging this coming year than it normally is during non- Shmittah periods.

Without question, keeping the Shmittah, even if only rabbinical today, is a challenge of bitachon and emunah, of trust and faith in God. Even just the knowledge that it is a Shmittah year, something that is far easier to be aware of in Israel than abroad, makes one more aware of God and how dependent we are upon him for survival. It increases ones potential to connect to God and remain close to Him.

However, Jews in the Diaspora who at least contribute financially to help the farmers in Israel who keep the Shmittah have a major portion in the mitzvah, and can gain some of the benefits of being in Israel while still in the Diaspora. There is no replacement for physically living on the Land. There are, however, Eretz Yisroel benefits, such as more intense Divine Providence, that a Diaspora Jew can enjoy if he commits himself to life in Eretz Yisroel as much as he can. At this time of history, that counts for a lot.

Text

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