

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayelech

Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

25 Elul, 5784

The Fax of Life

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September 28, 2024

GOOD MORNING! Next Wednesday night, October 2nd, begins the holiday of Rosh Hashanah. The literal translation of Rosh Hashanah is "head of the year" – otherwise known as the "Jewish New Year." There are many aspects to this holiday, but perhaps the overarching theme of Rosh Hashanah is that of being a day of judgement. In fact, another name for this holiday is "*Yom Hadin* – Judgement Day."

This attitude towards Rosh Hashanah can be traced to a passage from the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b): "Rabbi Kruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, 'On Rosh Hashanah three books are opened before the Holy One, Blessed be He: One book of wholly wicked people, and one book of wholly righteous people, and one book of middling people, whose good and bad deeds are equally balanced.'

'**Wholly** righteous people are immediately written and sealed for life; wholly wicked people are immediately written and sealed for death; and middling people are left with their judgment suspended from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur – their fate remaining undecided.'"

But there is an aspect of Rosh Hashanah that is often overlooked. Growing up in an Orthodox community and attending religious schools as a child and all the way through rabbinical school, I can attest that this aspect of Rosh Hashanah is rarely mentioned, and never emphasized. But as I grew older and began to pay more attention to the actual words in the liturgy of the holiday, this aspect became so very clear to me.

I began to notice that Rosh Hashanah being labeled the "Jewish" New Year is a little bit of a misnomer. It is 100% true that in terms of the calendar it is only the "Jewish" New Year. But the significance of Rosh Hashanah goes way beyond the Jewish community. According to the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a): "*On Rosh Hashanah everyone in the world passes before the Almighty – kibnei maron.*"

According to one opinion in the Talmud, *kibnei maron* means that every living soul passes before the Almighty like a shepherd carefully counting his sheep, one at a time. Our sages are teaching us that it is the day that the ENTIRE world is judged – both Jews and non-Jews alike. This is why so much of the liturgy of the holiday repeatedly mentions all the world's inhabitants.

There is an opinion in the Talmud that the sixth day of creation was Rosh Hashanah. In other words, the day that Adam and Eve were created – **and the day they sinned and were judged by the Almighty** (see *Genesis* 3:9-15) – was Rosh Hashanah. Thus, because they chose to sin – a character flaw that they would pass on to their children – this day was chosen as a day of judgement forevermore for their children as well. (It should be pointed out that Adam and Eve were not the first Jews; rather our forefather Abraham is considered the first Jew. Adam and Eve are the forbearers of all of humanity.)

Based on the above teaching that on Rosh Hashanah there are three books open in front of the Almighty, one might easily conclude that on Rosh Hashanah we are quite literally praying for our lives. That would explain the feeling of dread and foreboding that is commonly felt on this particularly important day. However, if we take a closer look at this concept then we will see that it is simply not so.

If we are truly honest with ourselves, we can easily see that whether or not a person goes to synagogue and prays their heart out on Rosh Hashanah has little to do with him or her meriting another year of life. There are no actuarial tables definitively proving that those who plead for their lives on Rosh Hashanah have longer life spans. In addition, we all know many wicked people who are not immediately "sealed for death." So, what does this passage in the Talmud mean?

To answer this, we must ask ourselves a most critical question: What are we really trying to accomplish on Rosh Hashanah?

The primary mission that each and every person is supposed to achieve on Rosh Hashanah is to coronate the Almighty as our King whose dominion spans all of creation; hence our pledge of fealty to Him. This is the day when we proclaim God to be our King and that our lives revolve around fulfilling His will, for us and all of creation. Thus, all the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah is about God as King of the entire world.

Hebrew is a holy language and has many layers of meaning. As discussed in prior columns, one of the indicators of meaning is understanding some of the esoteric attachments of the numerical values to the Hebrew letters (*gematria*). The Hebrew word for crown is *keter* and the numerical value of *keter* is 620.

To me, this indicates that the crown of the Almighty is only complete when Jewish people keep the 613 commandments of the Torah, and the rest of the world observes the 7 Noahide laws of social justice. A further proof: the sages teach that there are 620 Hebrew letters in the Ten Commandments – this too has been said to represent the 613 commandments in the Torah and the 7 Noahide laws (see Bal Haturim *Exodus* 20:14).

Once we understand that our primary responsibility on Rosh Hashanah is to proclaim God as our King and place ourselves in a theocentric world, then we can understand how we are immediately granted life.

Being connected to the Almighty means a connection to the infinite and everlasting life. By contrast, if we choose to live in an egocentric world, one where everything revolves around ourselves instead of God, then we are choosing a finite reality, which means we are inexorably headed toward death and obliteration.

There is, in fact, a judgement that is made on Rosh Hashanah – the Almighty examines our deeds from the prior year and uses that as a basis for concluding whether we live in a theocentric world or in an egocentric world. Our goal on Rosh Hashanah is to reaffirm our allegiance to the Almighty and His goal for the world; a world unified under His sovereignty.

This is what the judgement of Rosh Hashanah is all about. But even in judgment we find a unique forbearance from the Almighty.

The Talmud also makes a remarkable statement about how the Almighty, in His infinite kindness, actually grants people the benefit of the doubt – if they are so deserving. What makes a person deserving of this kindness? Our sages teach us an important rule regarding this based on a verse in the Torah:

“*With righteousness you shall judge your fellow man*” (Leviticus 19:15).

Rashi (ad loc) explains that this verse is referring to the obligation that we are required to give a person the benefit of the doubt. In other words, upon seeing someone engage in questionable behavior, we must give him the benefit of the doubt. This can take different forms; you may presume that you do not know the entirety of the situation or that the person only had positive intentions for his actions. For example, you see your friend driving as you’re walking to synagogue on a Friday night and you think, “Oh, his wife must have gone into labor and he’s taking her to the hospital! *Mazel tov!*”

One of the sources for this is found in the ancient book of Jewish ethics known as “*Pirkei Avot – Ethics of Our Fathers*,” which states that we must judge everyone to the side of merit (1:6). The Talmud (*Shabbat* 127b) takes this one step further and states, “anyone who judges his friend to the side of merit will be judged (by heaven) to the side of merit.” Rashi in his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* likewise says that the Almighty judges favorably those who give others the benefit of the doubt.

This principle, that God gives us the benefit of the doubt if we accord that to others, is difficult to understand. After all, when we give others the benefit of the doubt it is because we do not actually know what the person’s intentions were, nor do we know the entirety of the situation.

However, the Almighty is omniscient and absolutely knows everything that everyone does and why they do it. How are we to understand that God gives someone the benefit of the doubt when in truth He knows exactly what a person’s intentions were and exactly what happened?

I am reminded of the time many years ago when a friend was telling me about an awful date he had gone on the previous evening. He started by complaining, “The minute I saw her I just **KNEW** she would be judgmental.” I stared at him, somewhat astonished by his breathtaking cognitive dissonance.

Nevertheless, we all do this. When meeting someone new we open a case file as to their worthiness of our friendship. We wait until this new acquaintance justifies a relationship with us. We hardly ever give someone the benefit of the doubt or extend ourselves until we are sure that they “deserve” our friendship.

Herein lies a remarkable exception to God’s system of justice, a system in which we must justify our existence. When a person judges others to the side of merit – when he gives other people the benefit of the doubt without making them justify their actions to him – the Almighty returns the favor.

God judging someone to the side of merit isn’t referring to a specific act; of course He knows what the person intended and what he did. But if we are willing to suspend our judgement of others then God does the same for us. This is also the corollary to one of the most important principles in the Torah: “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Just as you treated your neighbor, the Almighty treats you.

This explains why Rosh Hashanah is in fact a holiday. The opportunity for mortals to earn an eternal life, relegating one’s physical death to merely a stage in one’s progression, is in fact a great kindness from the Almighty. Yes, it is a somber day, a day when we must focus on the coronation of our King, but it is also an opportunity to transcend our physical reality, and that is truly something worth celebrating.

May we, along with the entire world, merit a sweet New Year filled with good health, prosperity, and world peace for ALL of God’s creations.

TORAH PORTION: Nitzavim-Vayelech, Deuteronomy 29:9 – 31:30

On the day of Moses’ death he assembles the whole Jewish people and creates a Covenant confirming the Jewish people as the Almighty’s Chosen People for all future generations. Moses makes clear the consequences of rejecting God and His Torah as well as the possibility of repentance. He reiterates that Torah is readily available to everyone. He warns us against idolatry (thinking anything other than God has power) and assures us that eventually the Jewish people will do *teshuva* (repent) and will be redeemed and brought back to the Land of Israel — and those who hate the Jewish people and pursue us will get their just recompense.

Nitzavim concludes with perhaps the clearest and most powerful statement in the Torah about the purpose of life and the existence of freewill: “I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil [...] the blessing and the curse. Therefore, choose life that you may live, you and your descendants.” (Now that’s a real Quote of the Week!)

Vayelech begins with Moses passing the torch of leadership to Joshua (Yehoshua). Moses then gives Joshua a command/blessing, which applies to every Jewish leader: “Be strong and brave. Do not be afraid or feel insecure before them. God your Lord is the One who is going with you, and He will not fail you nor forsake you.”

Moses writes the entire Torah and gives it to the *Cohanim* and Elders. He then commands that in the future at the end of the *Shmita* (Sabbatical Year) the king should gather all the people during the *Sukkot* festival and read to them the Torah so “[...] that they will hear and learn and fear the Lord your God and be careful to perform all the words of the Torah.”

The Almighty describes in a short paragraph the course of Jewish history (that’s starting from *Deuteronomy* 31:16 for the curious). Lastly, before Moses goes to “sleep with his forefathers,” he assembles the people to teach them the song of *Ha’azinu*, the next weekly Torah portion, to remind them of the consequences of turning against the Almighty.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 5:52 *Miami* 6:53 *Cape Town* 6:28 *Guatemala* 5:35 *Hong Kong* 5:57 *Honolulu* 6:04

Jo’Burg 5:48 *LA* 6:23 *London* 6:31 *Melbourne* 6:03 *Mexico* 6:09 *Moscow* 5:56 *New York* 6:25 *Singapore* 6:40 *Toronto* 6:46

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: Every ending is a beginning. We just don’t know it at the time. – Mitch Albom

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to
Gabriele Mason



Shabbat Shalom,
Yitzchak Zweig
Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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