

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Nitzavim

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

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The Fax of Life

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GOOD MORNING! Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, begins this upcoming Sunday evening, September 25th. Rosh Hashanah is a two-day holiday that begins on the first day of the Hebrew month of *Tishrei*. The celebrations for the Jewish New Year are very different from those of the secular New Year, which is celebrated in many parts of the "enlightened" world by partying, drinking to excess, and watching a sparkly ball descend at midnight from a tower in Times Square.

Rosh Hashanah follows the contemplative month of *Elul*, during which we ought to undertake what Jewish tradition refers to a *cheshbon hanefesh* – an accounting of one's soul. We are supposed to be self-reflective and take stock of how we did the previous year; what we did right and what we still need to improve upon. Rosh Hashanah follows this theme and it marks the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance, which culminate on Yom Kippur – The Day of Atonement.

When I was in business school the phrase "Time is Money" was ingrained into my psyche. In prior columns I have explained why this is a complete and utter fallacy: Time is infinitely more valuable than money because time represents our potential and what we can accomplish and become. Money, by contrast, is merely a means to an end. Just as it is natural to make a complete accounting of how monies were spent or invested, we should be even more compelled to account for how we invested and spent our time.

Because time is so precious, every second counts. In fact, even a hundredth of a second is significant: it sometimes separates the Olympic gold winner – who becomes famous – from the Olympic silver winner – who is often quickly forgotten. Every year we are granted about 31,000,000 seconds to spend and this is the time of year when we should all look back and review how we invested those precious seconds. At the end of this column I will suggest some questions and themes that may help you in this process.

Typically, Rosh Hashanah is observed by Jews all over the world who attend synagogue to pray, hear the sound of the shofar (ram's horn), listen to the rabbi's sermon, reflect upon the past, and commit to correcting their mistakes. This is followed by celebrating with festive holiday meals.

Sadly, many (if not most) only make an effort to attend synagogue on the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is therefore only natural that most synagogues charge enormous amounts for "tickets" to attend – it is their one opportunity to raise the monies needed to fund the operations of the synagogue. Reflecting on this, I realize that if I too only came to synagogue three times a year and had to spend most of the day there in prayer services and listening to the rabbi's sermons while paying an exorbitant sum for that privilege, I also wouldn't want to attend more than three times a year.

Because Rosh Hashanah is such an important part of Judaism we are compelled to understand what it's all about and what exactly we are trying to accomplish on this holiday.

Q & A: WHAT IS THE ESSENCE OF ROSH HASHANAH AND HOW DO WE OBSERVE IT?

According to Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment. The Talmud states (*Rosh Hashanah* 8a) that this is derived by from a pair of verses in Psalms: "Sound the shofar at the new month, at the time when it is covered, for the day of our festival. For it is a statute for Israel, a (day of) judgment for the God of Jacob" (*Psalms* 81:4-5). Thus, we pray that we are inscribed in the Book of Life for life, for health, and for sustenance.

Many years ago, I attended a trial of a good friend who was wrongfully charged with some very serious crimes and, if convicted, would spend decades of his life behind bars. The feeling in the courtroom was one of dread and palpable apprehension. I remember being very afraid for him and I could barely eat or sleep. Indeed, for many this is what Rosh Hashanah is all about. But this perception is a mistake.

According to Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah is a time when we celebrate with elegant clothes, festive meals with family and friends, and by sending gifts to others. This is based on the verse found in the Prophets: "He said to them, 'Go eat fat foods and drink sweet beverages, and send gifts to anyone for whom nothing was prepared, for today is holy to our Master. Do not be sad, for the joy of Hashem is your strength'" (*Nehemiah* 8:10).

How can we celebrate when our very lives hang in the balance? Ultimately, we have faith in the kindness and mercy of the Almighty – that He knows our hearts and our intentions and judges us with love and the knowledge of what is best for us. Therefore, we trust that He will accordingly grant us a favorable verdict and bless us with a sweet new year. But there is really a much deeper lesson to understand here.

When a person is being judged in a typical court of law, what is the best result that he could possibly hope for? The best possible outcome is that he be restored to the life that he had prior to entering the courtroom. In other words, he can only lose – he has no possible upside. In fact, after paying his attorney and court costs he is already far poorer than when he began. Essentially, he already lost; it's only a question of whether he also loses his freedom. That is a devastating situation in which to find oneself.

But Rosh Hashanah, our "Day of Judgement," is quite different. According to Jewish tradition, the world was created on the 25th day of *Elul* and man was created on the first of *Tishrei*. Thus, man was actually created on Rosh Hashanah!

Why is this important?

The great medieval philosopher, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, explains in his classic work *The Way of God* that the Almighty created the world in order to bestow kindness on mankind. The very purpose of creation was a gift so that man could experience the most amazing life.

But God, in His infinite wisdom, understood that a gift is never fully appreciated. As we know, a person often feels ashamed to accept a gift, and in fact a person only feels fulfilled when he has acquired something that he has earned through his efforts. Thus, man was given the opportunity to earn his existence.

Every Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of mankind's creation, we are given this opportunity to earn our existence. This is the EXACT opposite of a typical courtroom judgment. We can absolutely hope for improvements in every aspect of our lives and we have much to gain on our Day of Judgement, which is why Rosh Hashanah can be a day of amazing fulfillment and joy, one to be celebrated with friends and family.

Now, everyone wants to have a more meaningful and fulfilling life. We want God to bless us with an amazing year filled with every blessing imaginable. How do we begin to achieve this?

The main objective that we have to achieve on Rosh Hashanah is to actively accept God as our king and the ruler of everything in existence. If we carefully study the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah it becomes rather clear that the theme of God as our king is the major focus of the day. Our job is to define ourselves as living in a theocentric world, a world in which we are committed to living by His laws and bringing Him into our daily lives and into the lives of others.

Rosh Hashanah is much less about begging forgiveness from God than it is about establishing a relationship with Him and creating the rightful place for God in your life. The process of *teshuvah* – repentance – can only begin once a relationship is in place. (We will discuss the actual process of repentance further in next week's column.)

The key element to understanding Rosh Hashanah is remembering that life is a gift from the Almighty and therefore quite precious. Consequently, we are charged with making it meaningful and making sure that we live up to our potential and earn our continued existence. In this way we fulfill God's purpose for creation.

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT IN SYNAGOGUE AND/OR DISCUSS AT YOUR ROSH HASHANAH MEALS:

1. Knowing what I know today, what advice would I have given myself going into last year's Rosh Hashanah?
2. What am I doing to improve my relationship with God?
3. What are the most important relationships in my life? What can I do to nurture those relationships this year?
4. What am I doing to improve my relationship with myself?
5. What would bring me more happiness than anything else in the world? Am I proud of this?
6. What are my three most significant achievements since last Rosh Hashanah?
7. What are the three biggest mistakes I've made since last Rosh Hashanah?
8. What project or goal, if left undone, will I most regret next Rosh Hashanah?
9. What is the most important decision I need to make this year?
10. What important decision did I avoid making last year?
11. What did I do last year that gave me the strongest feeling of self-respect?
12. What are my three major goals in life? What am I doing to achieve them?

Wishing you and yours a sweet New Year filled only with blessings, good health, and the peace of mind to enjoy it all!

TORAH PORTION: Nitzavim, Deuteronomy 29:9 – 30:20

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 *teshuvah* (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!)

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 5:59 Miami 6:57 Cape Town 6:25 Guatemala 5:39 Hong Kong 6:02 Honolulu 6:08

 Jo'Burg 5:46 LA 6:30 London 6:41 Melbourne 5:59 Mexico 7:13 Moscow 6:08 New York 6:33 Singapore 6:42 Toronto 6:55

"QUOTE OF THE WEEK": If you continue to do what you've always done, you'll continue to be where you've always been.

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to
Stuart Schnider



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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