

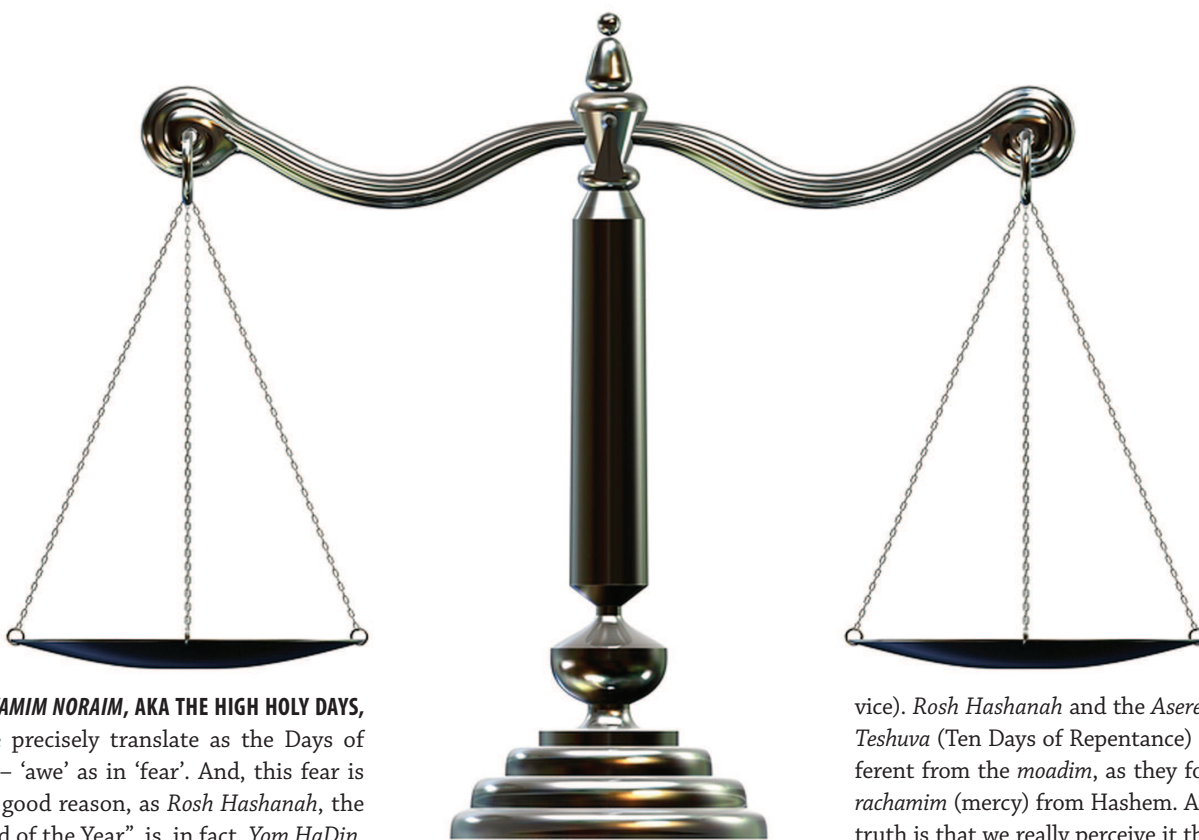


ROSH HASHANAH

DAYS OF AWE...

and of love and mercy

Don't let this opportunity slip away | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



THE YAMIM NORAIM, AKA THE HIGH HOLY DAYS, more precisely translate as the Days of Awe – ‘awe’ as in ‘fear’. And, this fear is with good reason, as *Rosh Hashanah*, the “Head of the Year”, is, in fact, *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment – the day on which is determined what the next year will look like, for good and for better, including whether a person will merit a year of life or, *chas v’shalom*, otherwise. Everything is determined on this day – health, income, etc. – and this awareness awakens within us (or, at least it should) a fear of the judgment that will be made.

NOT A YOM TOV

When we consider it, there are some glaring inconsistencies with how we ap-

proach these awesome days. On the one hand, we don’t say *Hallel* (praises to Hashem normally said on the *yomim tovim*) on *Rosh Hashanah*. On the other hand, however, we are accustomed to treat *Rosh Hashanah* like a *Yom Tov* – getting our hair cut, bathing, and dressing in appropriate clothes that befit such a day.

Rosh Hashanah is also not included in the *moadim* – *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkos* – each of which has a special *avodah* (ser-

vice). *Rosh Hashanah* and the *Aseres Y’mei Teshuva* (Ten Days of Repentance) are different from the *moadim*, as they focus on *rachamim* (mercy) from Hashem. And, the truth is that we really perceive it this way, as, for example, even those who are very far from *Torah* and *Mitzvos*, who don’t ordinarily keep things like *Shabbos* and *kashrus*, nevertheless when it reaches *Yom Kippur*, many people won’t go to work and even fast and come to *shul*, feeling the Jewish soul that’s in them aroused and awakened.

We would normally tend to explain this as something that makes evident the greatness of the Jewish soul, but, in truth, this drawing closer does not originate from an act of the *neshama* (soul)

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“LIKE THE LINKS OF A CHAIN, WHERE EACH LINK ENTERS INSIDE THE LINK BEFORE IT AS WELL AS THE LINK THAT COMES AFTER IT, SO ARE THESE DAYS OF MERCY EMBEDDED IN THE DAYS OF *SELICHOS* LEADING UP TO *ROSH HASHANAH* AND THE *ASERES Y’MEI TESHUVA*, JOINING ALL OF THESE DAYS TOGETHER.”

that comes from our side, but rather the action comes from Hashem’s side! The *chesed* (kindness) of Hashem awakens us on these days of *rachamim* and, in particular, on the holy day of *Yom Kippur*; Hashem opens the heart of a Jew and arouses within him feelings of holiness. In other words, it’s not that a Jew “makes” *Yom Kippur*, but, just the opposite: *Yom Kippur* “makes” the Jew. On this day, even the most distant Jew whose heart is closed off to all things spiritual, even such a Jew is drawn to the holiness of the day and to the davening.

THE BIRTHDAY OF THE WORLD

On that first day of the Hebrew month of *Tishrei*, some 5779 years ago, on which Hashem created the world, there flowed from Hashem an emanation of *chesed* that was without measure and without limit. *Rosh Hashanah* is the “birthday” of the world, or, more precisely, the day on which Hashem created *Adam HaRishon*, the first man, which took place on the sixth day of creation and which revealed that the world was built on *chesed*, on Hashem’s desire to do good with His cre-

ation. So, each and every year, on this, the anniversary of the creation, an emanation of limitless *chesed* and *rachamim* again flows from Hashem, as He creates anew the world and man.

When the calendar reaches *Rosh Hashanah*, Hashem opens the gates of heaven and bestows an enormous blessing of life and sustenance, health and success for every human being. This is the *simcha* (joy) of *Yom Tov* that we experience on *Rosh Hashanah*. The entire creation rejoices in song at this incredible emanation of goodness that we receive. Therefore, in the *birchas hamazon* (grace after meals) said on *Rosh Hashanah*, we must enthusiastically say the words “*hazan es ha’olam kulo b’tuvo*” (Who feeds the world, all of it, with goodness) and to feel *simcha* on this new year of life.

A CHAIN STRETCHING BACK

This period of *rachamim* (mercy) is not only on *Rosh Hashanah* and the rest of

*A wish for peace, good health and good times
for you on Rosh Hashanah and always!*



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ROSH HASHANAH



“THESE SPECIAL DAYS PROVIDE US WITH AN OPPORTUNITY TO FIX THE MISTAKES THAT WE’VE MADE AND TO RID OURSELVES OF THESE STAINS, TO STAND UP AND SAY “CHATASI” (I HAVE SINNED) AND TO ASK FOR FORGIVENESS – AND, MOST REMARKABLY, TO ACTUALLY BE FORGIVEN BY HASHEM, WHO THEREBY REMOVES THESE STAINS FROM US.”

the *Aseres Y’mei Teshuva*, but it already begins from the time we start saying *Selichos*¹, the special supplications that we add each morning during the Hebrew month of *Elul*, beseeching Hashem for forgiveness in the days leading up to *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Like the links of a chain, where each link enters inside the link before it as well as the link that comes after it, so are these days of mercy embedded in the days of *Selichos* leading up to *Rosh Hashanah* and the *Aseres Y’mei Teshuva*, joining all of these days together. Therefore, the entire duration of these days is called “*y’mei harachamim v’haselichos*” (days of mercy and forgiveness).

Saying *Selichos* requires us to arise extra early, so that we can arrive earlier at *shul* to recite these extra supplications. But, it’s a mistake to think of *Selichos* as merely another seasonal burden to long to be rid of. A person who doesn’t wake up in time for *Selichos*, or who wakes up

early, but doesn’t bother to concentrate on what he’s saying is literally like someone who throws a diamond away in the rubbish. The sins we do cleave to us like stains on our *neshama* (soul). These special days provide us with an opportunity to fix the mistakes that we’ve made and to rid ourselves of these stains, to stand up and say “*Chatasi*” (I have sinned) and to ask for forgiveness – and, most remarkably, to actually be forgiven by Hashem, who thereby removes these stains from us. How can we choose to pass up such an opportunity? We need to recognise that the days of *Selichos* are really days of love and mercy, and how foolish it would be for us not to take full advantage of them.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

On *Rosh Hashanah*, Hashem creates the world anew, and the fear it stirs in us is with good reason, as we consider just what we’ve done to merit that we should

be included in this new world. This is what is behind the judgment that takes place and the awesome fear it stirs. If a man’s life was merely a continuation of the life of the year that passed, his life would just carry on automatically. But, with the end of the prior year, each of us now needs to be written anew for another year of life, a new year in this new world that was created anew by Hashem. The fear on *Rosh Hashanah* is because, perhaps, a person will not be fit, *chas v’shalom*, to be written for this new year of life.

WHY TWO BOOKS?

The gemara² explains that the reason we don’t say *Hallel* on *Rosh Hashanah* is because when the Book of Life and the Book of Death are open before Hashem, it’s not an appropriate time for us to be saying songs of praise (ie. *Hallel*) to Him. There’s an obvious question that we can ask: why does the gemara need to mention that the Book of Life is also open, isn’t it enough that the Book of Death is open? From this we learn that just as a person should have fear about whether he will be written in the Book of Death, he also needs to have fear about whether he will not merit to be written in the Book of Life!

And it’s possible that this was the intent of the words of the Chasam Sofer, ztz”l, who said in his final days, “I passed *Rosh Hashanah* and also *Yom Kippur*, but *Hoshana Raba*, I will not pass,” and, in fact, he died a number of days after saying so. Our Sages teach that our judgment is only “delivered” on *Hoshana Raba* (which falls out on the last day of *Sukkos*). If a person does not merit that his name will be among those “sent” on *Hoshana Raba*, he will, *chas v’shalom*, not continue to live. This is not a judgment of death per se, but when a person doesn’t merit to continue living, in any case, the result is nonetheless the same: he dies.

This is the awesome fear that exists on the *Yamim Noraim*. Indeed, the days are days of great mercy, but we need to merit this mercy, and this is what is so frightening – because in what merit do we



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come before Hashem to ask for life? We need to receive life anew and be befitting for this, but we don't have any claim to such a thing. Why would Hashem want to give a year of life to someone who did not adequately demonstrate in the prior year how he would make use of that life?!

HOW TO AWAKEN HASHEM'S MERCY

How do we awaken for ourselves *rachamim* from Hashem? By saying *Selichos*. And, what argument can we make on our behalf before Him? As we say in *Avinu Malkeinu*: “*Aseh l'ma'an shimcha*” (Do it for the sake of Your name) – in other words, even when we don't deserve it, when we're not befitting such a thing, do it anyways for Your sake, as this will result in publicly sanctifying and making Your name great because people will say that there is no end to the magnitude of Hashem's mercy and His compassion.

In the days leading up to the Day of Judgment, we need to arouse in our hearts a great joy at this opportunity that Hashem gives us to ask for forgiveness. Judgment is not punishment – and we have a tremendous opportunity to influence the judgment that Hashem renders. As our Sages teach³, the *Aseres Y'mei Teshuva* are days of closeness with Hashem, the King sits on His throne of mercy and He is benevolently forgiving. If we recognise this and take advantage of the virtue of these days, we can arrive at *Rosh Hashanah* clean from all the stains of our sins, fit to be written in the Book of Life.

WHAT IF WE WASTE THIS OPPORTUNITY?

The gemara⁴ famously teaches that one who is a *beinoni* (ie. an average person) on *Rosh Hashanah*, whose scales stand in perfect balance with his merits equal to his sins, his judgment is held over and waits until *Yom Kippur*. If this person does *teshuva*, he will be forgiven, and if he does not do *teshuva*, he is sealed for death. Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer, ztz”l, asks: The *beinoni* stands with the two sides of the scales balanced – if so, why is the whole thing conditioned on his doing *teshuva*? Doing just one *mitzvah* while he awaits his judgment should be sufficient for him to increase his merits over his sins, and, as a result, tip the scale in his favour!

So, how is it that this man's fate hinges on his doing *teshuva* instead of simply doing more *mitzvos*?

When a man fails to do *teshuva* on these special days that were created specifically for this purpose, it causes his sins to increase over all the other *mitzvos* that he has done! And, we see a proof for this from an incident in the gemara⁵. Rav once had a complaint against a certain butcher who had sinned against him. When erev *Yom Kippur* arrived and the butcher had not come to seek forgiveness from him, Rav decided to seek out the butcher to appease him. Rav Huna met Rav, his Rebbe, and asked him where he was going. When Rav Huna heard what Rav was planning to do, Rav Huna exclaimed that Rav was about to cause the butcher's death. Nonetheless, Rav went and stood in front of the butcher,

who was sitting and cutting an animal's head. The butcher raised his eyes, saw Rav, and said, “Go away. I don't have anything to say to you.” While the butcher was busy cutting the head, a bone flew off from it, struck the butcher in the throat, and killed him. Why did this happen? Because when a person does not take advantage of the opportunity that someone gives him to ask for forgiveness, his sins increase, becoming too much for him to bear!

The *Yamim Noraim* are imbued with these qualities of *rachamim* and *selicha* (forgiveness). If we do not take advantage of them as is appropriate – or worse, have the chutzpah to wish that these days will pass quickly, giving way to the days of *simcha*, of *Sukkos*, which follow so closely after – what an insult such behaviour is to Hashem, whose only desire is that we return to Him and seek His forgiveness. How happy are these days when Hashem is close to us and the world is filled with His boundless *chesed*. At this time, when the gates of heaven are opened wide, when Hashem gives us special *siyata d'shmaya* (assistance), we must be extremely careful to take advantage of them and not let them slip away. ■

Adapted from a sicha by Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus, ztz”l.

¹NB: The period in which Selichos are said differs for Ashkenazim and Sefardim.

²Rosh Hashanah 32b

³Rosh Hashanah 18a

⁴Rosh Hashanah 16b

⁵Yoma 87a