

ROSH HASHANA LESSONS

Rosh Hashana is nearly upon us and therefore it would be appropriate to look at an overview of what the day of Rosh Hashana is all about so that we can utilize it and make the most of it. As we all know Rosh Hashana is the beginning of the new year this is based on the fact that Adam was created on Rosh Hashana (the world was created on the 25th of Elul and our counting of the years starts from the time Adam was created and not the world). Furthermore we know that Rosh Hashana is the day of judgment. According to the Gemara everything that will take place this following year will be decided n Rosh Hashana. There are some fundamental questions that arise from this that we will have to address. For one what does it mean that everything is decided on Rosh Hashana? Are we not able to change what will happen during the year? Furthermore if Rosh Hashana is the day of judgment then why is there no repentance done on this day? Why is Teshuva done only on yom kippur?

Three parts of Amida

To begin to answer these questions we first need a background on what Rosh Hashana is all about. A good way to start is by looking at the parts of the amida prayer for Rosh Hashana.

Incidentally it should be noted that the laws regarding the amida were all learned from the prayer of Chana which we read as the Haftora of the first day (Samuel 1:1 - 2:10); it is worthwhile to read the translation. We learn that our lips must move in prayer, that we must be able to hear our own prayer but no one else should. We learn that prayer is to be said standing. But most important, we learn how to pour out our soul. It is interesting to note that we learn the laws of the amida the most important part of prayer from a woman even though women are only obligated to pray once a day. This truly shows the beauty of Judaism which placed this much value on women at a time when feminism was still thousands of years away.

The amida is split into three parts namely Malchuot (kingship), Zichronot (remembering) and Shofarot (shofar). Each of these parts contains ten verses, three from the Torah three from Neveiim and three from ketubim concluding with one verse from the Torah. If we look at all the prayers of Rosh Hashana we will see that it is all about Hashem. We don't make any personal requests or ask for forgiveness (we do ask to be inscribed in the book of life but verses such as this were added later and are certainly not primary and according to halacha if one left them out they don't have to go back) we instead focus on Hashems Malchuot (kingship) over the world. Why is this so? One might ask if I am being judged on Rosh Hashana then it is the perfect time to ask for personal needs for the year. Then why is it that we don't focus on the self at all? Also we see that there is a lot of zichronot (remembering) of prior events in history, this is also a perplexing thing to do on a day of judgment. Finally the third part of the amida is the shofarot (shofar). The question that comes to mind is why do we blow the shofar and why is it such a fundamental idea of Rosh Hashana?

Let's turn our focus onto the question: why don't we concentrate on the self on Rosh Hashana? Why is it all about Hashem if we ourselves are being judged? The correct way of looking at this problem is by looking at the nature of the judgment of Rosh

Hashana. Imagine you are standing in court, you are shown a video of yourself and all the things which you have done. What would be the correct response to make the judge have mercy on you? Surely there is no excuse for the things you have done especially in the eyes of Hashem who knows what you are thinking and what your level of spirituality is. It is a life and death situation and your entire year depends on this. So what do we do?

Malchuot (Kingship)

We start by stating that Hashem is the Melech (malchuot, king) of the world. We accept that his word is the truth and any deviation from that is as good as non-existence. We state that everything we do is for him and basically accept his rule over us. In our analogy this would be similar to a person standing in court and accepting the power of the judge and then stating how he/she will do everything in his/her power to benefit the community at large. This is not the time to go into the details of asking for forgiveness. Forgiveness does not work if we haven't shown that at our core we want to do what is right and just. Therefore instead of concentrating on ourselves we concentrate on Hashem (in our analogy we concentrate on doing good for the community). We show that our central goal is to do his will. On Rosh Hashana we put the self away and instead concentrate on Hashem. This is beautifully demonstrated by the fact that all of our holidays are either in the middle or close to the middle of the month when the moon is full; however Rosh Hashana is on the first of the month when the moon can barely be seen. Kabbalistically the Jewish people are compared to the moon while Hashem is compared to the sun. The moon has no light in and of itself it only reflects the light of the sun. So too we only reflect what Hashem is which is all that is in the world. On Rosh Hashana however, just like the moon is diminished we diminish ourselves and only speak about Hashem and show that he is what lies in our core. This way we hope that just like we are concealed Hashem will conceal our sins (pesikta Rabbasi 40)

Zichronot (Remembrance)

Then we continue by connecting ourselves to our past history, to our forefathers and to our great ancestors. In our analogy this would be like the person who is standing in court and saying that he is the son of the very judge who is ruling the case. By stating this he is showing that he wants to follow in his footsteps and that he believe in his fathers ideals. He is showing that he wants to be part of the chain of the great history of his family and to continue in their ways. Similarly on Rosh Hashana we speak about all the things that happened in our history. We state the great things that Hashem did for us and furthermore describe the greatness of our forefathers (the reading of the Torah of the second day of Rosh Hashana is the binging of Yitzchak which was the ultimate test which Avaraham our father passed) and the things they did in the name of Hashem. This is the second part of the amida called zichronot (remembering).

Shofarot

The third part is shofarot. This alludes to the blowing of the shofar. What is the meaning of this? In a deep sense it is going further than remembering our past it is in fact going back to when we were created and when we were pure. We know that the sound of the shofar comes from blowing into it. When a person blows into something he is giving something from inside. In fact in Bereishit when the Torah talks about the creation of Adam it says that Hashem blew into his nostrils. The deeper meaning of this is that Hashem instilled in him a part of his inner being. Each one of us has a part of Hashem in us and by blowing the shofar we are trying to show Hashem that our inner being is

nothing but you. This can't be described with words. Hashem is not finite he is beyond words. Describing Hashem is like saying the number six is green. Numbers don't have colors and similarly Hashem can't be described in words (incidentally this is the deep reason why we never pronounce that name of Hashem as it is written ud hey vav and hei; because it has no meaning in a physical world.). Being that he can't be described in words we demonstrate that our inner being is a piece of him by blowing into the shofar. The sound of the shofar is the sound of our inner godliness which was instilled in Adam at the time of creation.

The word shofar in fact has the same roots as the word "mey shafier" which is the liquid that surrounds the baby in its mother's stomach. The idea is that we are trying to take ourselves back to when we were one with Hashem, before we were born. We are asking Hashem to remember those times and know that that's our real core and that's at the heart of each and every one of us and not the wrong routes that we have taken. Rosh Hashanah in a sense is the new year's birth canal. The shofar with its narrow mouthpiece and wider opening resembles a birth-canal. In fact, we see in the Torah that the woman who saved the Jewish children from the Egyptians upon their coming out of the womb was named Shifra again from the same root as shofar. Rashi tells us that the name Shifra comes from a Hebrew root that means, "the capacity to make something better, or to improve its quality", and that is what she did and that is what the shofar does.

Furthermore, traditionally, we blow 100 blasts of the shofar during Rosh Hashanah. The Midrash teaches that the first 99 are the cries of a woman in labor, and the final one, the tekiah gedolah, is the responding cry of the newborn child symbolizing both the birth pains of now and the future coming of moshiach and the being reborn of ourselves which happens on Rosh Hashana. Therefore we see that the shofar takes us back to when we were created. It takes us back to our core which is nothing but an emanation of the core of Hashem which he breathed into the nostrils of Adam.

So what should one have in mind when he/she hears the shofar? Rav Saadya Gaon mentions ten things. The shofar is sounded as a reminder of the end of the creation of the world and thereby Hashem's crowning as its master, it is to remind us of the shofar of the ram with which Abraham completed his final test by showing his willingness to sacrifice his own son, it is to remind us of the destruction of the beit hamikdash, it is to awaken us to realize that it's the time of judgment, it is to remind us of the shofar that was blown on mount Sinai and beezrat Hashem it will be a precursor to the shofar which will be this coming year with the coming of Moshiach.

Putting It All Together

Now we can answer the first question. Why don't we concentrate on the self? ; Because the judgment of Rosh Hashana relates to the core of a person. The question asked is: at his/her roots is he/she a good person on his/her level or not? Rosh Hashana is not the time to go into the details of the wrongdoings. That is not the point. Instead through showing kingship to Hashem, connecting ourselves to our forefathers and taking ourselves back to when we were one with Hashem, we are asking the judge to give us a chance not because we did nothing wrong or because we asked for forgiveness but because at our roots we are trying to do his will.

Following being given a second chance, we then look at what we did wrong and only then ask for forgiveness. This is the idea of Yom Kippur. On Rosh Hashana we are given a second chance not because of what we did but because of what we are capable of

becoming. Then on Yom Kippur after being given the second chance we have to look back at our wrongdoings and ask for forgiveness. The analogy of this would be a tree. In the Mishna man is compared to a tree and so it is fitting to apply that here. When a gardener wants to decide the fate of a tree (whether to cut it down or not), he first looks at the roots. He looks to see if it is planted in an area where growth is possible. Once he has decided that the tree does in fact have a potential for growth then he looks at the branches. Some branches have branched off to places away from the sun and away from ideal places for growth. Those branches are then cutoff. Similarly on Rosh Hashana we look at our root and see the place where we were planted by our forefathers as a member of the Jewish people. Only after showing Hashem that we are capable of growth then we can concentrate on the branches that grew far off (sins) and cut them with the use of teshuva, tefila and tzedaka on Yom Kippur.

Importance of Beginnings

Now let's tackle the other question. How is it that everything is decided on Rosh Hashana? Are we not able to change what happens during the year? And if in fact we can change it then why is Rosh Hashana more important than other days?

To answer these questions we need a brief background in Jewish thinking. There is an idea which says that whenever we want to understand something about a particular subject we look at where it first appeared in the Torah. The Vilna Gaon used to say that the entire Torah is in the first word Bereishit. In fact there is a famous story that the Vilna Gaon was once at a pidyon haben and they asked him where do we find the mitzvah of pidyon haben in the word Bereishit? And he brought up the pasuk which speaks about pidyon haben whose acronym actually spells the word Bereishit. It is known that he did this with any mitzvah. This idea is prevalent throughout Torah. In fact we say that all the 613 mitzvot are contained in the ten commandments, all ten are in the first commandment, the first commandment is contained in the first word anochi (I) which describes the totality of the universe which is Hashem and lastly the first word is contained in the aleph which is composed of two yods and a vav which add up to 26 the name of Hashem. Incidentally the two yods are reflected through the vav (which means hook) which shows how Hashem is reflected in the physical world in a reversed view.

Now let's look at Rosh Hashana. Rosh Hashana is the beginning of the year and so it has to have contained in it the entire year. The Baal Shem Tom used to say that everything in the physical world teaches us something about the spiritual world. In fact there are kabalistic works which deal with this at length and ask what we can learn from all kinds of physical things like why do we have two eyes but one nose? And why are we born young and then grow old? Similarly let's use an analogy of a physical phenomenon to deal with the question at hand. When a baby is conceived all of its genetic coding has already been decided. So too on Rosh Hashana our entire year is decided. Once the baby's genes are coded for the rest is just a waiting for them to show themselves. If the baby is coded for blue eyes it will have blue eyes if it is coded to be tall then it will be tall. Even though it can't be seen when the baby is born, it is all coded for in the genes. Now we can understand why Rosh Hashana is such a critical period. Rosh Hashana is the time when the genes are being formed. If something goes wrong when the baby's genes are being formed then he/she will see its gruesome results throughout his/her life. Similarly if we don't do what we are supposed to on Rosh Hashana at the time of the

formation of the genes then we will unfortunately have to bear the consequences throughout the year.

How about the second question: Is it possible to change what was decided on Rosh Hashana? The answer is yes and this applies for both good and bad. Let's continue with the analogy. If the baby is born with genes to have a certain medical problem then when it is older it would need complicated surgery to fix it. Similarly if we mess up on Rosh Hashana we would need serious operations during the year to fix our mazal. The vice versa is true as well. If we are inscribed with genes to be healthy but we don't get proper nutrition later on in life the gene may not live up to its potential. Similarly if on Rosh Hashana we are judged for a good year but fail to live up to it during the year then it will not show itself. However it should be kept in mind that the formation of the genes are the main thing and it will be very hard to change it for good or bad during the year.

This is why what we do on Rosh Hashana is so important. The kabbalists such as the Arizal had a tradition not to sleep during the day. Also there are many writings which say that one must be careful not to get angry and instead be very careful how he acts on Rosh Hashana because that sets the baseline for the year to come.

Eating On Rosh Hashana

On Rosh Hashana there is a custom to eat different foods symbolizing various things. The idea behind it follows what we mentioned before about the physical world resembling the spiritual. Just as when we eat, the thing that is consumed becomes a part of us, we hope that the characteristics associated with that particular food do so as well. This is symbolic but yet there are many kabbalistic teachings behind it and it shouldn't be taken lightly. The Arizal said there is much Kabbalah in just eating an apple and so we shouldn't take it on face value. Another idea regarding eating the various foods also pertains to the idea that we mentioned regarding not concentrating on self on Rosh Hashana. Being that we don't ask explicitly for material things in the prayers, we instead allude to them by symbolism in the foods such as a pomegranate symbolizing us asking Hashem to make us fruitful. We do this so that even our physical actions on Rosh Hashana such as eating will show that we are concerned about our judgment.

Ten Days of Repentance

Following Rosh Hashana are the days of aseret yemei teshuva which means the ten days of repentance. If we rule out the two days of Rosh Hashana and the day of Yom Kippur there are only seven days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We say in our prayers that on Rosh Hashana we are judged and on Yom Kippur the books are sealed. This means that on these days in between we are still given the chance to fix ourselves. In fact according to the Kabbalistic master the Arizal, each day of that week has the potential to fix all the days of that day of the week of the past year. For example the Monday of those seven days has the potential to do a tikun (fixing) of all the Mondays of the year. Therefore they should certainly not be taken lightly and instead should be utilized for what they are. One should try to take on extra mitsvot to do on these days and certainly be very careful about everything that he/she does. It is recommended that one should ask forgiveness of everyone around them because Hashem does not forgive sins between man to man. Also he/she should do teshuva. The Rambam says that the mitzvah of teshuvah has three steps: confession, regret and saying that one would not do it again. It is important to note that all three steps have to be said **out loud**. No one else should hear it unless it was something done to them and you are asking for forgiveness. Again it

is very important to say it out loud and not just think it. There are many reasons for this and one is that just like the sin was done with a physical act so too the teshuvah for it has to be done with a physical act in this case being speaking. A kabbalistic master once told that when a person just thinks about doing teshuva his train goes on a new track but his baggage of sins is still attached however if he/she confesses out loud (to him/herself) out of love and sincerely to Hashem, the baggage is detached as well.

Shana Tova! Have a Great New Year

Throughout Jewish history the day of Rosh Hashana has been a good day of judgment. In fact that's why although it is the day of judgment it is a joyous holiday as well; because we know that Hashem will judge us with kindness. Adam was ruled favorably on this day after sinning, Sarah, Rachel, and Chanah were all remembered that day with the promise of children, Yosef was freed from prison, the bondage of Egypt ceased and the start of the redemption came. Furthermore it is said through the name of R. Eliezer that Abraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov were all born in the month of Tishrei. Working through what transpired as a result of all these things that happened at this time, we see again the importance of beginnings and how they have in them the potential of everything that will take place. Therefore I hope that this Rosh Hashana we will all be judged for good and that we will have a sweet and joyous new year in which Hashem will grant us the coming of Moshiach when the real shofar will be blown to gather us all in Israel bimhera beyameinu amen.

By Navid Danesh

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The following is an article on Tashlich taken from Dailyhalacha.com by Rabbi Eli Mansour and an article on tzom gedalia from torah.org please take some time to read it to understand the meaning of Tashlich and the fast of gedaliya as well.

Tashlich

Regarding the Minhag that we have on Rosh Hashana called tashlich. This Minhag is brought down by the Rama, (Rabbi Moshe Isserles, 1530 - 1572), the Kaf Hachayim (Rav Yaakov Chaim Sofer 1870-1939), and most importantly it's brought down by The Arizal (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi ben Shlomo, 1534-1572). The custom is to go on the first day of the Holiday to a body of water, and to make a special Tikun and Tefilah. The question is why, and what's the reason?

Some correlate the minhag of tashlich to the events of Akedat Yitzchak which took place on Rosh Hashana. We learn from the Midrash that when Abraham Avinu was on his way to the Akeda, he was confronted by a body of water, which actually was the Satan trying to deter Abraham Avinu from going to fulfill this great act. Abraham Avinu forged ahead through the water, and when the water level reached above his neck by his mouth, at that point he prayed to G-d, and beseeched G-d to save him from the water, which was about to take his life. G-d subsequently told the Satan to leave Abraham alone, as he had passed the Satans test. Since Abraham Avinu made a prayer by the water on that day of Rosh Hashana, we also have a Minhag to make a prayer by the water.

Another explanation is brought down that we are following the custom of coronating the King by the water, by a flowing stream. It's as if to bless the King that his kingdom should flow forever like the water of the stream. And since on the day of Rosh Hashana, we are pronouncing to the world that G-d is the King, it is therefore proper to hold a coronation ceremony of the Malchut (Kingdom) of Hashem.

Lastly, some bring the reason down that water is a symbol of humility, as the water always seeks its level. It always goes from a high place, and it comes down. Therefore on the Holiday we are showing subjugation to G-d, and we are saying that we are like water, that we are trying to subjugate our will and our bodies to G-d.

There is a custom also brought down in Shear Hakavanot, to put fish into the water. There are different reasons as to why we put the fish in the water. Some say that since the fish are under water, they are protected from the Ayin Hara (the evil eye). Nobody can see fish, and so they don't have any evil eye on them. As if to symbolize that we should be saved in the coming year from the evil eye, we pray tashlich with fish in the water.

Another explanation for the fish is that fish multiply at a very rapid rate. So it's a symbolism that we should have Beracha, that we should flourish and multiply like the fish.

There is also a Musar (ethical teaching) behind the fish that are swimming in the waters of tashlich. A fish lives in a fool's paradise. A fish swims in the water comfortably without any problems in the world. Everything is going good, and all of a sudden, without any warning, without any pre-notice, he's plucked out of the water and his life is over. Therefore, we put the fish in the water to remind us of this symbolic lesson on Rosh Hashanah. There is no warning when exactly the lease on life is over. So therefore, when one sees the fish, it's a Musar. One should learn from the fish by comprehending how fragile life is. Things can change at any moment without any prior notice.

Tzom Gedalya - The Fast of Gedalya

By: Rabbi Yehudah Prero

The day after Rosh HaShana, the third day of Tishrei, is the Fast of Gedalya. The Gemora in Rosh HaShana explains that we first see this fast mentioned in Zecharia 8:19, when the verse speaks about "...the fast of the seventh...." As the seventh month (starting from Nissan) is the month of Tishrei, the fast mentioned in that verse is referring to Tzom Gedalya, the third day of Tishrei. (See #s 27 and 30 for more information on this verse.) On this day, the Gemora says, Gedalya ben Achikam was killed by Yishmael ben Nesania. The Gemora concludes that this fast teaches us that the death of a righteous person is on par with the burning and destruction of the Holy Temple.

Before we start to explain the reason for this fast, a little historical background as to who Gedalya was is needed. Gedalya is mentioned in Yirmiya (Jeremiah) 40 and in Melachim Bais (Kings II) 25. From looking at these two locations, one learns the following about Gedalya: After Nevuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple and the nation of Israel was exiled to Babylon, a small contingency of Jews remained in the land of Israel. Nevuchadnezzar appointed Gedalya as a "governor" over them. When the Jews who were in exile heard that a group of Jews was allowed to remain in Israel and that Gedalya was appointed to oversee them, they were happy, and people started returning to the land to live.

The King of the neighboring nation of Amon, Balis, did not want the Jews to stay happy. He convinced Yishmael ben Nesania that he should assassinate Gedalya. According to the commentators, Yishmael was of royal blood. Balis, in order to provoke Yishmael into killing Gedalya, would "tease" Yishmael about the fact that a "commoner" was appointed a leader over Israel, and that Yishmael, who was of royalty, was passed over for the job. This caused Yishmael to become envious and jealous of Gedalya, to the extent that Yishmael decided to kill Gedalya.

At the beginning of the month of Tishrei, Yishmael came to Gedalya. Although Gedalya had been told that Yishmael was coming to kill him, he did not believe it because he did not want to believe this "lashon ho'ra," or slander. When Yishmael arrived, Gedalya treated him with respect. Then Yishmael and his henchmen turned on Gedalya and killed him. The Jews who were then living in Israel feared reprisals from Nevuchadnezzar (as "they" killed the leader he had appointed) and fled to Egypt. The land of Israel was then devoid of Jews. This day, therefore, is a day of great tragedy, and therefore we fast. (For the reason why we fast on days of tragedy, see # 28.)

Now that we know about Gedalya, let us return to the Gemora. The Gemora, by stating that the fact we have a fast on this day teaches us that the death of a righteous person is on par with the destruction of the Holy Temple, implies that just as we have fasts that commemorate the destruction of the Temple, so too do we have a fast commemorating the death of a righteous person. If this is truly what the Gemora means, a question

becomes apparent: There have been many, many righteous people who have died. In fact, there is probably no day in the year which did not have a righteous person die on it. Does this mean that we should fast every day?

The Maharsha, who asks this question, provides the following explanation: We fast on this day not solely because Gedalya was killed. It is true that Gedalya's death in it of itself was a tragedy, as he was righteous. However, it is because of the effect his death had - that all Jews left the land of Israel and went into exile - that we fast. We see how great of a tragedy the death of a righteous person is by the fact that the mention of this fast in the verse in Zecharia is juxtaposed with all the other fasts which commemorate the destruction of the Temple. The common denominator between the four fasts listed in the verse is the fact that the extent of the tragedy of all of them is equal, because the death of a righteous person is on par with the destruction of the Temple. Although this is true, we do not, and we practically could not, fast on every day a righteous person died.

The Maharsha continues and tells us what we are supposed to learn from the events which we are commemorating with a fast today. This murder took place in the days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur - the holiest time of the year. Yishmael should have thought about what he was going to do, realized what time of the year it was, and instead of assassinating Gedalya, he should have repented. We all know that did not happen. Yishmael not only killed a person, he killed a righteous person, and caused the nation of Israel to suffer a great tragedy which we feel to this day.

We see that after the two days on which the whole nation of Israel prayed for life and a good year, we suffered a great downfall. On this day, we should truly feel troubled and worried about our devotion to Hashem. We should focus our prayers on requesting mercy from Hashem. We should not be so confident that the prayers we just completed on Rosh HaShana sufficed. We should ask from Hashem that not only should He raise us from the depths to which we have sunk after our downfalls, but He should decree a good and long life for the whole nation.