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Rosh Hashana

Significance of Beginnings

Chazal tell us that on Rosh Hashana there is a judgment for everything a person will get in the upcoming year. As the *Gemara* says:¹ *Rav Nachman Bar Yitzchak said regarding judgment it [the pasuk] says: "from the beginning of the year until the end of year", [this means] from the beginning of the year there's a judgment about what will be at the end [of the year].* A fundamental question that needs to be asked is: if everything is decided on Rosh Hashana, does it mean that we can't change it during the year? And if we can indeed change the verdict during the year then what makes Rosh Hashana so special?

The root of everything that happens in the physical world is in the spiritual. Unlike the physical world however, the spiritual world is not bound by time. As things transition from the spiritual to the physical world they first go through a quasi state of being in the physical world and yet obey the rule of the spiritual world of being beyond time. This is why the beginning of every process carries within itself the rest of the development.² This is also why the beginning of the year, by virtue of being beyond time, carries within itself the rest of the year.³ This is the depth behind the saying "everything goes after the beginning".⁴

Based on this idea the *Ramban*⁵ says that by studying the six days of creation we can learn about what will happen for the six thousand years that the world will exist (each day corresponding to one thousand years). This is because the six days of creation mark the beginning of the world and therefore must contain within them what is to come. The *Vilna Gaon*⁶ develops this idea even further and says that every single detail of a person's life is found in the first *Parsha* of the *Torah*, *Parshat Bereishit*. In a more condensed form it is included in the account of the six days of creation. In an even more condensed form it is all included in the first *pasuk* (verse) of the *Torah* and even all of that is included in the first word of the *Torah*, *Bereishit*.

We see the idea of the beginning containing the rest when it comes to the physical world as well. The closer something is to the beginning the more all-inclusive it is. The seed of a fruit includes in it all the coding that is needed for the tree to grow branches, leaves, roots, flowers fruits etc. Similarly a human embryo includes in it the coding that will determine the gender, the eye color, the physical build, etc. of the person that it will develop into. The head of the human being includes in it the power that is needed to control the rest of the body. Everything around us obeys this rule.

How does all this relate to Rosh Hashana? Rosh Hashana is referred to in the *tefillah*⁷ as "*hayom harat olam*" (the day of the conception of the world). At first glance it seems like *Chazal* are using poetic language to express the idea that Rosh Hashana marks the creation of man. However the idea is much deeper than that.

¹ **Rosh Hashana** 8a

² See **Siftei Chaim**, Moadim I p.93; See **S'fat Emet** to Rosh Hashana (beginning); See **Rashi** to Bereishit 1:14 & 2:4 & 1:24; All aseret hadibrut were said at once; The concept of a beginning not obeying the laws of nature may explain why the aron didn't take up any space and also how all the animals could fit in the ark (since the ark was meant to be a new beginning); See also **Moreh Nevuchim** 2:17 where he uses the mashal of the boy who grew upon an island without women to explain that the six days of creation the laws of nature did not yet exist.

³ See **Siftei Chaim**, Moadim I p.93

⁴ Hakol batar reisha garir; Magid mereishit acharit; See **B'nei yisaschar**, lag baomer, first time we see the word "tov" in the *Torah* gives us it's essence; See **Bava kama** 55a regarding the letter "tet" that the *Gemara* says is a siman tov to see in a dream because the first time the letter "tet" appears in the *Torah* is by the word "tov"; see **Kohelet Rabbah** 7:8 that attributes Acher's kilkul to Acher's mother eating something not kosher when she was pregnant with him (see also **Ketzot Hashulchan** 147:4; *Chazal* also attribute Acher's kilkul to Acher's brit mila where his father didn't have the right kavanah; Shlomo hamelech built beit hamikdash on that day played bad music; This is why Rav Chiya spent so much time trying to do all the beginning stages of setting up an education system on his own (**Bava Metzia** 85b, see **Maharsha** there); See **Sotah** 65, that says the head is formed first. Every action has its root in the brain; See **Maharal's** Chidushei Aggadot to Rosh Hashana 10b about rosh, ertz yisrael is also rosh;

⁵ **Bereishit**

⁶ See **Sifra d'tzniuta** 66

⁷ **Mussaf** of Rosh Hashana

Chazal teach us that man is an *olam katan* (a small world)⁸. Every part of man can symbolically be found in the world at large and vice versa. Furthermore in a more abstract way every part of the human being can be found in the dimension of time. Therefore at times *Chazal* use terms that are used to describe the body to describe the spiritual energies that exist in different times of the year. The purpose of this is to enable us to use our body (which is physical and familiar to us) as an analogy to relate to more abstract and spiritual ideas in relation to the world and to time.

Using this ideology Rav Yitzchak Isaac Chaver⁹ explains that Rosh Hashana is comparable to conception, the nine days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are similar to the nine months of pregnancy while Yom Kippur, the day when the soul finishes its process of *tikun*, is akin to birth when the baby finishes its process of *tikun*. In other words the process of the formation of a baby is analogous to the spiritual energy that is available in the transition from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur. What can we learn from this? We mentioned above that included in the genetic code of an embryo is the coding that will determine the physical makeup of the future baby.¹⁰ Once the baby's genes are coded for, the rest of development is just waiting for the genes to show themselves. Rosh Hashana is the time when the genes for the rest of the year are being coded. This is the depth behind why we refer to Rosh Hashana as "*hayom harat olam*". This day is literally comparable to the conception of an embryo.

Let us now use return to the question of whether it is possible to change what was decided on *Rosh Hashana*?

The *Gemara* says:

*If the Jewish people were bad on Rosh Hashana and little rain was decreed for them but in the end (meaning during the year) they became good its not possible to add more rain for them because it was already decreed on them to have little rain, rather Hakadosh Baruch Hu (G-d) causes the rain to come in its proper time and in the places that need it... If Yisrael were good on Rosh Hashana and a lot of rain was decreed for them but in the end (meaning during the year) they became bad, its not possible to give them less rain since it was already decreed for them to have a lot of rain, rather Hakadosh Baruch Hu (G-d) brings the rain at an improper time and on land that doesn't need it.*¹¹

We learn from this *Gemara* that there are parts of the *din* (judgment) of *Rosh Hashana* that one can change and there are parts that he can't change (i.e. the amount of rain didn't change but where it fell **did** change). Let's go back to the analogy to understand this idea better. If a baby is born with genes to have a certain medical problem then when it is older it would need complicated surgery to fix it. However more often than not, even with the best surgery he is still worse off than the person who did not have the genes for that condition. Similarly if we mess up on *Rosh Hashana* we would need serious operations during the year to fix ourselves and even then it is only as good as external surgery, we can not change the genes of the year that are formed on *Rosh Hashana*.¹² The vice versa is true as well. If a baby is born with healthy genes but doesn't get the proper nutrition later on in life the gene may not develop into 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 fully. However it

⁸ **Tanchuma**, Pikudei 3

⁹ See **Rav Yitzchak Isaac Chaver's** Haggadah shel Pesach "Yad Chazakah" pizmon Echad mi Yodea, dibur hamatchil "tisha yarchei leida"

¹⁰ See **Rav Yitzchak Isaac Chaver's** Haggadah shel Pesach "Yad Chazakah" pizmon Echad mi Yodea, dibur hamatchil "tisha yarchei leida" Analogy of genes heard from Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

¹¹ **Rosh Hashana** 17b; The *Gemara* concludes that when it comes to a community they can always change the decree of *Rosh Hashana*. However it is always harder to change the decree after it has already been stamped on *Yom kippur*. When it comes to an individual however, it is even harder.

¹² See **Rashbeitz** to Rosh Hashana 16a Even according to the Rabbi Yitzchak's opinion who says it is good for a person to pray whether it is before the judgment whether it is after, he uses the word "good" to hint to the fact that an individual can only change the judgment to an extent but not fully; see **Ritva** to 16a; see **Parshas Derachim** 13; see **Rashbaitz** to 16a; see **Ran** who says individual can soften it but not tear; Some say that the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur have the power of the teshuva of a tzibur which can overturn any decree (see **Meiri**, **Parshas Derachim** 13, **Aruch laner**, **Pachad Yitzchak** 26)

should be kept in mind that the formation of the genes are the main thing and it will be much harder to change it for good or bad during the year.¹³

Now we can understand the depth behind the name “*Rosh Hashana*”. *Rosh Hashana* literally means head of the year; just like the head (brain) controls all the parts of the body, so too *Rosh Hashana* is the head in the time dimension that controls the rest of the year.¹⁴ This is the depth behind the *pasuk* in *Kohelet*, “the wise man’s eyes are in his head”.¹⁵ The head is referring to *Rosh Hashana*¹⁶ when the genes are being formed. It is the root and foundation of the year. A tree or building can be magnificent but if its roots or foundation is not stable and firm it is bound to collapse.

Since the beginning of every process is so important, Judaism treats beginnings with special care. If we look throughout the *Torah* we will notice that many “firsts” are dedicated to *Hashem*. For example: the first portion of dough when making bread,¹⁷ first sheerings of wool,¹⁸ firstborn of every kosher animal,¹⁹ firstborn donkey,²⁰ first fruits of the seven species of *Eretz Yisrael*,²¹ first portion of the new crop (offered as the *korban Omer*),²² first born sons (redeemed from the *Kohen*),²³ the first city that was conquered in *Eretz Yisrael* (*Yericho*),²⁴ are all dedicated to *Hashem*.

One reason for all these dedications of firsts to *Hashem* is that the beginning has contained in it the rest. Therefore if we can infuse the beginning with spirituality by dedicating it to *Hashem* and symbolically demonstrating that all that we have and all that we do is ultimately for His sake, then the rest will follow in suit and thereby have blessing in it. Based on this we can gain a deeper understanding of many other beginnings.

- We can now understand why a husband and wife have to dedicate their first year of marriage to each other. In fact the husband doesn’t even go to war in his first year of marriage.²⁵ The first year is when the genes are being formed therefore it is crucial that they build a strong foundation by spending time together.
- Now we can also appreciate the idea of *chanukat habayit* (ceremonial dedication of a new home where guests are invited, *Torah* is learned, and *mezuzos* are put up) for a new house. We want the house to become a place for the *shechina* to dwell in. Therefore we start if off by doing kindness to others by having them as guests, learning *Torah* and putting up *mezuzos*. We hope that this *mitzva*-filled first day will be the genes that form the rest of the experiences in that house.
- Furthermore we can appreciate why Judaism has so many rules regarding the intimacy between man and wife. This is literally the time when the baby is being conceived. This is the *first* act of the creation of the baby. The way the man and wife act when they are together can affect the child for the rest of his life²⁶
- And finally we can understand why in the story of *Chanuka* when the *Chashmonaim* defeated the Greeks and rededicated the Temple, they looked for a pure jar of oil which as we know burned for 8 days until

¹³ See **Michtav M’Eliyahu** II P. 67-71 who explains the idea of bechira kelalit with the mashal of choosing to learn in yeshiva. See there where he also explains that the opinion in the Gemara that says we are judged everyday is not in contradiction to the opinion that says we are judged on Rosh hashana.

¹⁴ See **Maharal’s** Chidushei Aggadot to Rosh Hashana 10b

¹⁵ **Kohelet** 2:14

¹⁶ **S’fas Emes**

¹⁷ **Bamidbar** 15:20

¹⁸ **Devarim** 18:4

¹⁹ **Shemot** 13:2; **Devarim** 15:9

²⁰ **Shemot** 34:20

²¹ **Devarim** 26:2

²² **Vayikra** 23:9

²³ **Shemot** 13:2, **Devarim** 15:9, **Bamidbar** 18:15-16; The firstborn belongs to Hashem and therefore we are required to redeem him from the kohen who is the messenger of Hashem. The Firstborns were originally supposed to be dedicated to Hashem by working in the Temple, however after the sin of the golden calf this job was transferred to the kohanim and leviyim.

²⁴ **Yehoshua** 6:24-26, 6:19 The first city that was conquered by the Jewish people in Israel was Yericho. This city was forever dedicated to Hashem forbidding anyone from building on it.

²⁵ **Devarim** 20:7

²⁶ See the **Ohr Hachaim** and **Chida** (Midbar Kedemot 7:4 in the name of the Zohar) who explains that even if the woman is unable to become pregnant, souls are drawn down every time a man and woman have relations, Ohr Hachaim says these souls can sometimes become the new souls of converts.

they made more oil. This wasn't *halachically* necessary. Since in those circumstances they were allowed to light with oil that was impure. However being that it was a rededication of the Temple (a first in its own right) it was of vital importance to do it the right way so that it could set the tone for the years to come.²⁷

This is also why what we do on *Rosh Hashana* and the ten days of teshuva is so important. The taking on of special stringencies that we will give up after Yom Kippur is not because we are trying to fool *Hashem* at the time of judgment but because this is the very building block of the year to come. We mentioned before in the name of Rav Yitzchak Isaac Chaver²⁸ that Rosh Hashana is comparable to conception, the nine days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are similar to the nine months of pregnancy while Yom Kippur, the day when the soul finishes its process of tikun, is akin to birth when the baby finishes its process of tikun. Just like a pregnant woman sticks to a stricter diet when she is pregnant so too we treat Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and the days in between with special care.

This idea also explains many of the customs of the day of Rosh Hashana. On such a special day when everything is being determined we want to make as much of the time we have as possible. This is why there is a custom not to sleep on Rosh Hashana.²⁹ This is also one reason why we eat *simanim*³⁰ (foods that have names that hint to the judgment of the day) on this day. Since this day sets the foundation for the rest of the year we eat the *simanim* so that even at the time of eating we wouldn't forget the awesome judgment of the day and will thereby continue to pray for a good judgment.³¹ The different customs of these days and more specifically of Rosh Hashana are therefore a means to engrave higher standards of spiritual awareness within ourselves. Therefore, it is very important to take this time seriously and spend it in a place where the people around us are fully conscious of the sanctity of the day. May we all merit making the most of the tremendous spiritual potential of this day.

²⁷ **Gilyonei Hashas**, Shabat 21, dibur hamtchil "na'asah bo nes"

²⁸ See **Rav Yitzchak Isaac Chaver's** Haggadah shel Pesach "Yad Chazakah" pizmon Echad mi Yodea, dibur hamatchil "tisha yarchei leida"

²⁹ See **Orach Chaim** 583:2; See **Mishna Berura** there who says according to the **Arizal** after chatzot is ok; but see **Chida** who says in our days even after chatzot one should try and not go to sleep.

³⁰ **Kritot** 6b; **Horyot** 12a; **Orach Chaim** 583:1

³¹ See **Sh'lah**, Masechet Rosh Hashana Ner Mitzva 22 brought in **Mishna Berura** 583,2; Based on this reason we can understand the shita of the **Magen Avraham** (reish siman 583) who holds any food that hints to a good judgment in any language can be used. Since the reason for the simanim is to prevent hesach hada'at anything can work. See **Kaf Hachaim** 6 to **Orach Chaim** 583:1 who explains based on the different girsoth that eating or seeing the simanim works and even if he doesn't have the simanim he can say the yehi ratzon. This is also understood based on the explanation of the Sh'lah. See also **Meiri to Horyot 12a** who explains the purpose of the simanim is to inspire us to do teshuva. See the **Maharal's Chidushei Aggadot** to Horyot 12a for a different approach to the simanim