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Rosh Hashana

The Service of the Day

Since *Rosh Hashana* is the Day of Judgment, it is seemingly an ideal time to do *teshuvah* for our sins. Furthermore since on Rosh Hashana it is decided what we will get for the upcoming year, it is also an ideal time to ask for our needs. However, surprisingly *viduy* (confession)¹ and requests for personal needs² are not a focus of our *tefilot* on *Rosh Hashana*.³ Why does the service of *Rosh Hashana* not seem to fit in with the theme of the day?

The Mishna says:⁴

At four times of the year the world is judged, on Pesach on grain, on Atzeret (Shavuot) on the fruits of the tree, on Rosh Hashana all man kind who come to the world pass in front of Him like sheep⁵ as it says:⁶ who fashions their hearts together, who perceives all of their actions, and on the chag (Sukkot) [the world] is judged on water.

The commentaries ask: if everything is judged on Rosh Hashana then grain, rain, and fruits are also included in the judgment. If so what purpose do the judgments of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot serve? The Ran⁷ offers an approach that opens up a whole new understanding of the judgment of Rosh Hashana. Explaining the above Mishna the Ran says that on Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot **the world** is judged on how much grain, fruits and water **the world** will get collectively. However, on Rosh Hashana **each individual** is judged to determine how much of the grain, fruits and water will be allotted **to him personally**.

Based on the Ran we can begin to understand the following Gemara:⁸

Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rabbi Akiva why did the Torah say to bring the Omer [offering on Pesach? Because Pesach is the time [that we are judged with regard to⁹] grain, therefore Hakadosh Baruch hu said bring before Me the Omer on Pesach so that the grain of the fields will be blessed. And why did the Torah say to bring the bread offering on Atzeret (Shavuot)? Because Atzeret

¹ See **Kaf Hachaim** 592, 17 who brings contradictory Zohars and explains according to the Arizal that between the “sitting tekiot” one can say *viduy* in a very low voice that even he can’t hear. See **Mishna Berura** 593, 12 who says to only think it.

² See **Tikunei Zohar** tikun 6:22 that sharply criticizes those who focus on personal requests on this day; **Shaarei Orah** 8:87; see **Sh’lah** masechet Rosh Hashana perek Torah Ohr 15; see **Sefat Emet**, Rosh Hashana 5653; **Kedushat Levi**, Rosh Hashana dibur hamatchil “be’ofen acher”; But see **Rav Yisrael Salanter zsl** (quoted in the beginning of siddur Hagra on Rosh Hashana) who said perhaps we are not at the level to follow the Zohar on this point; see **Orchot Rabbeinu** II, p. 181 (beshem Chazon Ish zsl) and **Ashrei Ha’Ish** III 15:13 (in the name of Rav Eliyashiv) and **Halichot Shelomo** 1:15 (Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach zsl, all of whom say it is allowed to make *bakashot* even though on a regular Yom Tov this is not done. But Rav Shelomo Zalman Aurbach zsl himself advised his students not to add requests to the *tefilot*. Regarding when Rosh Hashana falls on Shabat Rav Eliyashiv zsl holds it is *asur* while Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach zsl and Rav Chaim Kanievsky shlita hold it is *mutar*.

³ The parts in the Amida where we make hints to making requests (such as “remember us for life” “write us in the book of life” “write us in the book of life blessing, good livelihood, salvation consolation and good decrees...”) are not the main part of the prayer and were added later. In fact if one were to leave them out he wouldn’t have to repeat the amida. In fact the Geonim added it to the first three berachot of the amidah where requests aren’t made to hint to the fact that that’s asking for our needs is not the focus on this day.

⁴ **Rosh Hashana** 16a

⁵ According to one opinion in the Gemara this is the translation of *b’nei meiron* (see Rosh hashana 18a)

⁶ **Tehillim** 33:15

⁷ **Ran** to Rosh Hashana 3a (b’dafei Harif), dibur hamatchil “b’arba’a perakim”; See also **Maharsha**, Chidushei Aggadot to Beitza 16a, dibur hamatchil “kol” who answers similarly

⁸ **Rosh Hashana** 16a

⁹ According to **Rashi** there

is the time [that we are judged with regard to¹⁰] fruits of the tree¹¹ therefore Hakadosh Baruch hu said bring before Me the bread offering on Atzeret so that the fruits of the tree will be blessed. And why did the Torah say bring the water offering on the Chag (Sukkot)? Because the Chag (sukkot) is the time of rain¹² therefore Hakadosh Baruch Hu said bring before Me the water offering on the chag so that the rains of the year will be blessed for you.

We see from the above Gemara that the way to have a good judgment is through dedicating to Hashem the very thing for which we are being judged. Through the offering we symbolically declare our inner desire to use that for which Hashem is judging us, toward His service. In turn just like a father provides his son with everything that will help his son become a great person, so too Hashem will abundantly provide us with all that we need to serve Him. Based on the understanding of the Ran above, we can understand the nature of the offerings that are brought on Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. Since on these days the world is judged collectively, the obligation of the offering is on the entire congregation as a whole. Therefore one offering fulfills the obligation of the entire congregation. However based on this idea we need to ask: what should be our offering to Hashem on Rosh Hashana when **each individual** is being judged on **everything** he will get in the upcoming year?

The Gemara continues further:¹³

*Similarly Hakadosh Baruch Hu said:¹⁴ say before me on Rosh Hashana malchiut zichronot and shofrot... with what? With the shofar. Rabbi Yitzchak said why do we blow the shofar of an ram? Hakadosh Baruch Hu said blow before Me the shofar of an ayil so that I will remember for you the offering up of Yitzhak the son of Avraham and **consider it as if you offered yourselves before me.***

On Rosh hashana we symbolically use the shofar of an ram, (the animal that Avraham offered up instead of his son Yitzchak) to show that just like Yitzchak was willing to give up his very life for Hashem, we are willing to offer ourselves through serving Hashem with all our might. The best way to have a good judgment on Rosh Hashana is to take on oneself to dedicate as much of one's life as possible to keeping the Torah and mitzvoth. Every person has things that he is very attached to and finds very hard to give up. Avraham Avinu was willing to give up the son he was praying for his whole life, Yitzchak Avinu was willing to up his very body by helping¹⁵ Avraham Avinu fulfill this commandment. On this day we must reflect within and declare with a full heart that we are willing to sacrifice even those things that are very dear to us in order to serve Hashem. This is the offering that is demanded of each individual on this awesome day.¹⁶

We can now begin to understand why personal requests are not the focus of the Rosh Hashana service. While it is true that during the year it is in fact praiseworthy to ask for our every need, on Rosh Hashana the focus is different. *Rosh Hashana* is in a way very similar to a job interview. One by one we pass in front of *Hashem*¹⁷ and He scrutinizes us and decides our "job" and the tools we will be given to accomplish that job for

¹⁰ According to **Rashi** there

¹¹ See **Rashi** there who gives two ways to understand the connection between fruits and bread.

¹² According to the girsa of the **Rosh** and the **Rif**

¹³ **Rosh Hashana** 16a

¹⁴ Girsa of **Ritva** and **Ein Ya'akov**

¹⁵ According to most commentaries he was 36 at the time and could very well have fought off Avraham; See **Rashi** to Bereishit 22:6 dibur hamatchil "vayelchoo sh'neihem yachdav"; See also **Midrash** that says he asked Avraham to tie him well so he wouldn't move.

¹⁶ Perhaps this is also why the Torah reading and haftarah of Rosh Hashana include akeidat Yitzchak and Chana (see Gemara (Rosh Hashana 11a) that says the reason is that Chana and Sarah were remembered on Rosh Hashana and the akeida happened on Rosh Hashana). Perhaps the reason why Avraham avinu and chana were zoche to have Yitzchak and sh'muel was because from the outset they were willing to give them up for Hashem (Yitzchak through the akeida and Shmuel through working in the Temple away from his parents at a very young age). See **Mishna Berura** 6 to Orach Chaim 581:1 who brings the minhag Ashkenaz to start saying selichot specifically four days before Rosh Hashana. He explains in the name of the **Eliyah Rabbah** that the reason for this is because on Rosh Hashana we are meant to bring ourselves so to speak as a sacrifice and a korban is analyzed for four days before it is brought. This is why by the korbanot of Rosh Hashana it says va'asitem olah instead of v'hikravtem olah.

¹⁷ See **Rosh Hashana** 16a

the year to come. In a job interview, the interviewee's main focus is on convincing the interviewer that he deserves a job by showing that he is capable and willing to meet the long-term goals of the company. He does not yet make demands about salary, benefits, etc. All of these requests are relevant only for someone who is already given the job and during the interview a job is not guaranteed. Similarly on *Rosh Hashana* we don't focus on asking *Hashem* for our personal needs and rather focus on *Hashem* and His kingship over this world. Asking *Hashem* for tools to serve him are only relevant for those who are already given life and on this day a person's life for the year to come is not guaranteed. Rather we focus on showing why we should be given life for the year to come through crowning *Hashem* and thereby showing we are first and foremost committed to serving Him.

In our analogy of the job interview blowing the shofar of a ram is akin to the interviewee's declaration that his role-model is the company's best worker. Through this he is demonstrating that he wants nothing more than to reach the heights of this exemplary worker whom he looks up to. Connecting ourselves to *akeidat Yitzchak* is similarly a declaration to *Hashem* that as descendents of Avraham and Yitzchak we want nothing more than to follow in their footsteps. What we strive for is to reach a level where we are willing to give up everything for the sake of doing what is right in the eyes of *Hashem*. This is why the prayers of Rosh Hashana revolve around crowning *Hashem* rather than personal requests. The general theme of the day is therefore the nullification of self and glorification of *Hashem*. Through this service we offer ourselves and our possessions to *Hashem* thus declaring that we are first and foremost committed to making His will of revealing Him in this world a reality.

Based on the analogy we can also understand why viduy (confession) is not a part of the Rosh Hashana service. Just like an interviewee does not focus on his past misdeeds but rather tries to show how he is a changed person by showing what he is capable of in a positive sense so too we do not mention our sins on this day. Asking for forgiveness only helps regarding previous deeds, however when it comes to being given a position, explaining how sorry we are for our poor performance in previous positions doesn't make the cut. Rather what helps is showing what we are capable of in a constructive manner. Will we be able to carry out what the company demands of us or not? Therefore, instead of occupying ourselves with our previous misdeeds, we focus on crowning *Hashem* and thereby declaring that we qualify for the role of revealing Him in the world. On *Rosh Hashana* it is demanded of each and every one of us to demonstrate how we can contribute to *Hashem's* master plan. This is precisely why the main theme of the *tefilot* of Rosh hashana is the crowning of *Hashem* as king. This is the work that is required of each and every one of us on this magnificent day.