

Rosh Hashanah

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The key source for Rosh Hashanah as a day of judgment is found in the Book of Psalms, chapter 81:3-4. "Blow the shofar on the [new] month, at the appointed time (1) for our holiday. For it is a chok for Israel, a mishpat for the G-d of Jacob." Chok is a decree beyond our understanding, while mishpat is a rational ordinance. To Israel, G-d's judgment appears to be an unfathomable chok, but to the G-d of Jacob it is a fully understood mishpat.(2)

Alternatively, the verses refer to two separate judgments, both of which are rendered on Rosh Hashanah. One is "for Israel" in this world, a judgement which will be made known to everyone through the events of the coming year. The other is "for the G-d of Jacob" in the next, known only to G-d until a man dies and is judged for the world to come.

How are we to view G-d's judgement in this world? Life was once nasty, brutish, and short; the average adult lived only thirty or forty years, and feared G-d because he feared death. Today, death seems remote. We expect to live over seventy years, and longevity seems a function of modern medicine rather than of Divine decree.

Certainly, as the Talmud states, an individual's fate in this world is not necessarily dependent on his sin or merit.(3) But denying concern for our collective future is to be historical blindness. Our century has seen two cataclysmic conflicts and we live under threat, if not of a third world war, then of devastation by rogue atomic, biological, or chemical attack, by drug-resistant plagues or chance asteroid. That society can return to darkness is an unpopular thought for those who forget that the Dark Ages resulted from the decline of Rome's great civilization. Human history is cyclical; since the Flood, great nations have risen and fallen, dragging the innocent down with them.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we recite: "This is a generation of those who look for Him; seekers of Your face, selah" (Psalms 24:6). How I envy King David, who sang these words! Would that we could say of our generation what he said of his.

My wife recalls her sixth-grade teacher noting that in the previous generation, people actually cried in the synagogue on Yom Kippur. She was stunned. In her synagogue, people still cried every year, and it had never occurred to her that other synagogues were different.

Devotion is often replaced today by nostalgia for parents and childhood, by the conviction that the best way to raise children is through religion, or by community or national affiliation. Missing is the immediacy of standing before G-d, of feeling immeasurably small before the Creator.

In the imagery of the Days of Awe, G-d opens his records on Rosh Hashanah. The Talmud relates that there are three groups of people: "The clearly righteous are immediately inscribed and sealed

in the book of life. The patently wicked are immediately inscribed and sealed in the book of death. Those in-between remain suspended until Yom Kippur: if they prove meritorious they are inscribed for life; if not, they are inscribed for death."⁽⁴⁾ The Jerusalem Talmud explains that one "proves meritorious" by means of teshuvah, repentance.⁽⁵⁾

Yet for those who have not done teshuvah, nothing has changed! They are still in-between, neither righteous or wicked. Why are they inscribed for death?

During the Ten Days of Repentance beginning on Rosh Hashanah and culminating in Yom Kippur, when the calendar and the entire community focus on prayer and repentance, indifference to teshuvah is not neutral. At such a time, refraining from repentance itself is incriminating enough to tip the scales.

Note, however, that according to the Talmud only the clearly righteous and the patently wicked are inscribed and sealed. Those in-between who do not repent by Yom Kippur are inscribed for death, but they are not sealed. G-d awaits their repentance at all times. May we merit that our teshuvah breaks the cycle of history and hastens the coming of the Messiah.

Notes

1. Per Rashi, ad loc. Another reading is "during the concealment," (i.e., of the moon) at the beginning of the month; see BT Rosh Hashanah 8a.
2. See Kedoshim, above, pp. XX.
3. BT Yoma 39b
4. BT Rosh Hashanah 16b.
5. JT Rosh Hashanah 1:3