



Thoughts on Rosh HaShanah

by Rabbi Bernie Fox



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Rosh HaShanah Confusion

However, there is no recitation of Hallel on Rosh HaShanah and Yom HaKippurim because these are days of repentance, awe, and fear. They are not days of excessive joy. (Maimonides, Hilchot Chanukah 3:6)

1. The Rosh HaShanah paradox

Rosh HaShanah is paradoxical. It seems that on this festival we are expected to experience both joy and dread. Maimonides explains that although *Hallel* is generally recited on festivals, it is not recited on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur because these are days of repentance, awe and fear.¹

Yet, Maimonides teaches us that on *yamim tovim* we should be joyful. He lists the *yamim tovim* as the seven days of Pesach, the eight days of Succot, and the other festivals. Apparently, he includes Rosh HaShanah and even Yom Kippur!²

How can we reconcile the fear and anxiety that are natural reactions to judgment with the festive character of Rosh HaShanah?

You revealed Yourself in the cloud of Your glory to you sacred nation ... With thunder and lightning You revealed Yourself to them and with the sound of the shofar you appeared. (Musaf of Rosh HaShanah)

2. The dual message of the shofar

The answer lies in the *shofar*. Like Rosh HaShanah, the *shofar* expresses a paradox. The *musaf* of Rosh HaShanah includes three central blessings. The final of these discusses the message of the *shofar*. It describes the *shofar* blast as a pronouncement of Hashem revealing Himself as king. It declared His descent to Sinai and at the final redemption it will proclaim His revelation as king.

However, Maimonides explains that the *shofar* has another meaning. It is a call to repent. It awakens the slumbering person from his apathy and calls upon him to contemplate his actions and return to Hashem.³

In short, the *shofar* is a declaration of Hashem's glorious revelation. It is also the sound of an alarm

1 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Chanukah 3:6.
2 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Yom Tov 6:17.
3 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4.

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5017 90th Avenue SE
Mercer Island, WA 98040
206.232.5272
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and a call to repent. How can we reconcile or join together these two *shofar*-identities?

3. The challenge of being aware of Hashem

Let us set aside these questions for a moment and consider a different issue. During the *musaf* repetition, we will declare that “today the universe was born”. For us, creation is not a historical event that occurred millennia in the past. It is an ongoing process. Every day in the blessings preceding the *Shema*, we declare that Hashem sustains or re-creates the universe every moment. His will is the ongoing source of the universe’s existence. As Maimonides explains, if His will were to be removed from the universe for the briefest moment, creation would be voided.⁴

Every event in our lives, our triumphs and tragedies, our achievements and disappointments, are a consequence of His will. We plan; we labor; we strive. But the success of our efforts is not the product of our initiatives, wisdom, and dedication, as much they reflect His will and benevolence.

But this is not our everyday experience. I get up in the morning and I wash *netilat yadayim*. I do not doubt that water will emerge from the faucet as it has every morning. I get into my car, press the button to open the garage; it opens as it has every morning for many years. I arrive at the yeshiva. The building awaits me with its students, as it does every school day. Where is Hashem?

On an intellectual level, I recognize that health, prosperity, and security, are not to be taken for granted. I recognize that these are precarious blessings that can disappear in a moment. But I feel secure, smug and self-assured in my blessings. Hashem is creator. He is king. But He seems a very distant king. He is separated from me by the millennia since creation and by the perfect regularity of the very cosmos He designed, created, and sustains.

But what if tomorrow I were deprived of my health? What if I could not pay my mortgage? What if, G-d forbid, one of my students was seriously ill? Suddenly, the regularity of my world would be set asunder. My cocky, self-confidence would be replaced by fear and despair. I would be painfully aware of my limited control over my fate and the precariousness of my existence. G-d would quickly emerge as the true king and arbitrator. I would seek sanctuary and rescue in His shadow and call upon Him for salvation.

Can only tragedy or disaster awaken my awareness of Hashem’s sovereignty?

4. Awakening in response to the *shofar* blast

Let us more carefully consider Maimonides’s comments on the *shofar*. He tells us that the *shofar* calls to us: Arouse from your sleep. Those in a deep slumber awaken! Search your actions. Repent. Recall your creator!

What is this slumber that is suddenly disturbed by the *shofar*’s mighty blast? What is this sleep that the *shofar*’s call interrupts? That sleep and slumber are the very sense of security and smug self-assurance and are my everyday cognitive reality.

The *shofar* declares that judgment approaches. Our fate is not in our hands. The regularity and predictability of our lives are not assured and cannot be taken for granted. Today’s health and prosperity are not precursors to tomorrow, and may suddenly vanish.

We hear the call of the *shofar* and we part the veil of regularity and predictability. Behind the veil we perceive the Almighty seated upon His throne. He is the creator, the king; and He is the judge. All of creation is before Him as He sits in judgment; He decides its fate and destiny.

Our awareness of judgment enthrones Hashem and establishes Him as our king.

5. Proclaiming and rejoicing in Hashem’s sovereignty

The sound of the *shofar* is at once plaintive and glorious. It is a warning and an alarm. But by awakening us, it restores Hashem to His place as creator and ruler. It proclaims His sovereignty.

The dual characteristic of Rosh HaShanah is not paradoxical; it is reflection of and a response to our own existential confusion.

⁴ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 1:2-3.

Intellectually, we recognize Hashem is creator and our king. Yet, we cannot feel His presence and His authority. He is hidden from us by the very regularity and predictability of the incredible universe He fashioned. We need help, some catalyst, to empower us to sweep away this deception so that we may gaze upon Hashem as our king.

Our awareness of judgment is this catalyst. With this awareness, we suddenly perceive Hashem as creator and sovereign of the universe.

Rosh HaShanah celebrates Hashem's kingship over the vastness of the universe and the minutiae of our individual lives. It establishes His sovereignty not as a distant, unreachable ruler but as a contemporary and personal G-d. We celebrate His sovereignty and rejoice in His presence. But we achieve this cognitive breakthrough through the awareness of judgment.

6. The Rosh HaShanah journey

On Rosh Hashanah we undertake a journey. The journey is not easy. It evokes our fears and anxieties. But at the end of this journey we arrive at a wonderful destination and we rejoice.

Our journey is along a path of self-evaluation and even criticism. It is a journey through an experience of judgment. As we proceed, we are anxious and fearful. But at the end of our journey we arrive at a wondrous destination. We observe – we encounter – Hashem enthroned in His glory. We rejoice in His presence. He is our king and we are His subjects. He is our father and we are His children.

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