

Another Rosh HaShannah

Minyan Ohr Chadash

9/8/21

Another Rosh HaShannah. On the one hand, Rosh HaShannah is a celebration. It's not as jovial as the secular New Year. It doesn't have fireworks or a carnival character. But nonetheless, it's a celebration. It brings together family and friends. It has wonderful foods. Undeniably, Rosh HaShannah has a gaiety. On the other hand, it is a solemn occasion. It is the beginning of a period of judgement culminating on Yom Kippur. The destinies of humanity, nations, and individuals will be decided.

How do you experience these two aspects of Rosh HaShannah? It's easy to relate to and enjoy a festival. But isn't it a little harder to connect with the judgment aspect? Do you find yourself struggling to feel the awesome solemnity of Rosh HaShannah? Do you try to find meaning and inspiration in the prayers, hoping that *U'Netaneh Tokef* will move you, but overall challenged to connect with the theme of judgment? Why do we struggle?

We struggle to rise above our assuredness that life will go on as usual, our belief that we are in charge, and in control of our destinies. After all, our decisions and our effort, determine our fate. We aren't worried and we don't feel we need to fret over judgment.

This Rosh HaShannah, the theme of judgment should be more real to us. We are in the midst of a pandemic. Most of us have lost someone dear or know someone who has experienced tragedy. In our country and beyond, extreme weather, fires, heat waves, and floods have destroyed homes, taken lives, and exposed our vulnerability to the whims of nature. If we once felt that we are in-charge of our destinies, that fantasy should, by now, be dispelled. We control nothing. Jobs, homes, health, and life can be wrenched from us, and we are helpless.

A year ago, the Almighty judged us, the nations of the world, and humanity. We were wanting. We need to do better. The first step is realizing and accepting that the judgment is very real.

But you ask me, "We are ready to accept the reality of judgment. How do we do better this year? Each of us is flawed! We are not perfect, and we are deluding ourselves if we believe that this year, we will suddenly be *tzadikim*. Hashem

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fashioned us. He knows our weakness. What does G-d want from us?" To respond, I need to discuss with you the fundamental character of Rosh HaShannah.

Where shall we look to identify this basic character? There is no better source than the day's beautiful prayers. These are replete with declarations of the Creator's sovereignty. This is the essence of Rosh HaShannah. Rav Soloveitchik often described Rosh HaShannah as Hashem's coronation.

Isn't this a paradoxical idea? The Almighty created the universe. It is sustained only by His will. What does our declaration of His dominion accomplish? He does not require our acquiescence to his authority; our affirmation does not add to His ascendancy. What a strange king! He is the Creator and master of all that exists in the vastness of the universe. He governs the movements of the subatomic particle and the stars of the most distant galaxy. Yet, He requires that we acknowledge and assert His sovereignty!

I will remind you of a story that contains the solution to this paradox. You recall the dreams that Yosef shared with his brothers. The dreams described Yosef's ascendance over them. They responded to his dream:

"Truly! Will you be king over us? Will you be ruler over us?"

The brothers averred that Yosef would be neither their king nor ruler. They referred to two types of sovereigns – a king and a ruler. They spoke of a king. He is a sovereign whose authority is willingly accepted by his subjects. They declared they would never voluntarily accept Yosef as their king. They spoke of a ruler. He is an autocrat who imposes his authority without the acquiescence of his subjects. The brothers asserted that Yosef would never impose his authority upon them. Again, they distinguished between a king and a ruler. They would never willingly submit to Yosef as their monarch, and he would never subdue them and rule over them.

This distinction between king and ruler is essential to resolving our paradox. The Creator is the ruler of His universe. His authority is imposed. It does not require and is not enhanced by the acquiescence of His subjects. But on Rosh HaShannah

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we describe the Almighty as *melech* – king. We are describing a sovereign whose authority is willingly accepted by his subjects. By its very definition, kingship cannot be imposed. A king's authority must be accepted by His subjects. On Rosh HaShannah, we declare that Hashem is our king. We submit to Him and celebrate His coronation.

This resolves our paradox. The Creator of the universe does not require our acquiescence to be its ruler. He imposes His authority over all creation. But His *malchut* – His kingship – cannot be imposed. A king must be accepted by His subjects. On Rosh HaShannah, Hashem's subjects are called upon to submit to Hashem as their king – to coronate Him.

This year has been a stern warning. It has communicated the reality of judgment and it is a piercing summons to reconsider our lives and our priorities. How do we secure a judgment for the coming year that will be better than last year's? We are not called upon to become *tzadikim*. We cannot completely reform ourselves. But we are required to embrace Rosh HaShannah's theme. We can, and we must submit to our Creator's sovereignty. This is not an easy task. It will not be accomplished in a day. But it is a goal and aspiration that each of us can and must embrace. I believe that if we sincerely accept this challenge – if we indeed aspire to submit to Hashem's will, we will take the most important step toward securing a better outcome for the new year.

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Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you.

Shannah Tovah!