

Rosh Hashanah – God’s Judgement

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1. First three hours of the day

It is taught in the name of Rabbi Meir: When the kings wake up and place their crowns on their heads and bow down to the sun, the Holy One, Blessed be He, immediately grows angry. Rav Yosef says: A person should not recite *musaf* during the first three hours of the day on the first day of the year individually. Since the judgment is reckoned then, perhaps the Heavenly court will scrutinize his actions and reject him. If that is so, the community should not recite at that time as well! The community is not rejected due to its many merits. If that is so, then shouldn't the morning prayer of one who is praying individually also not be recited at this time? Since there is a community that prays the morning prayer at that same time, his prayer is not rejected. But didn't you say that during the first three hours of the day The Holy One, Blessed be He, sits and engages in Torah? Reverse it. And if you wish, say: Actually, do not reverse. Torah, with regard to which it is written: Truth, as it is written: “Buy the truth, and sell it not” (Proverbs 23:23), the Holy One, Blessed be He, does not act beyond the letter of the law. Judgment, with regard to which it is not written: Truth, the Holy One, Blessed be He, can act beyond the letter of the law. (Meseches Avodah Zarah 4b)

The Gemara explains that a person shouldn't pray the *musaf* prayer on Rosh Hashanah during the first three hours of the day if they will *davening* without a *minyan*. Why is that the case? Rav Yosef stated this directive in response to the kings waking up and placing their crowns on their heads and bowing down to the sun, which causes Hashem to become angry. So since judgement is taken during that time, a person shouldn't put themselves before the Heavenly court lest he not make it through unscathed. Then the Gemara explains that one who prays with a *minyan* is saved from such trouble because the congregation has many merits and its prayer will not get rejected. Finally, the Gemara ends off with a debate as to when God sits in judgement, as if it were possible to say. Is it the first half of the morning or the second half of the morning? Either Hashem is involved in Torah the first half of the morning and judging the second half, or vice versa.

2. Rosh Hashanah *Musaf*

Many strange elements present themselves in this narrative. First of all, when do all of these issues occur? Is it merely on Rosh Hashanah or is it every day of the year? To that Rashi responds that there is something special about the *musaf* prayer on Rosh Hashanah. Although this calculation seems to present itself throughout the year, “The *musaf* prayers throughout the year are praise and stories, but the *musaf* of Rosh Hashanah, since he prays Kingship, *zichronos* (memories), and *shofaros*, judgement is taken more seriously. And a person shouldn’t separate themselves from the congregation” (Commentary of Rashi on Meseches Avodah Zarah 4b).

So we see that there seems to be verdicts present throughout the year, not just on the day of judgement. However, what is the Gemara trying to teach us concerning this debate about the two halves of the morning? What does it mean that God is involved in Torah for three hours of the day? What purpose would it serve for Him to learn Torah? He already knows everything! Additionally, the Torah comes from Hashem, so what could He possibly be doing with the Torah?

Additionally, it is not so easy to say that Hashem is spending three hours a day judging. The Ramban points out (Commentary on Sefer Vayikra 23:24) that the Torah didn’t mention that Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgement, as it would teach an erroneous idea. A person shouldn’t think that Hashem is tied to a specific time, as He is beyond time. So what is the Gemara doing when it says that Hashem is involved, so to speak, with certain things during each time?

3. Relating to God

What is apparent from the Gemara is that this directive about not praying *musaf* individually on Rosh Hashanah only occurs during the first three hours, regardless of when He is judging. Meaning, if He is judging during the second three hours of the day, this admonition is still relegated to only the first three hours of the day. Therefore, we see that these two segments of time, regardless of their label, reflect a certain level of harshness of accurate reflection during the first half of the morning and a softer side during the second half of the morning.

When the Torah refers to some time of action or emotion on the part of God, it is speaking metaphorically. Rather, these are terms we label certain actions or dispositions because that is what it seems like to us. For instance, if Hashem does something good for us, we view it as Him being merciful or forgiving, not that there is some emotion that overtook Him (Mishneh Torah

Foundations of the Torah 1:12). So we see that this Gemara is expressing two different ways of how Hashem relates to the world during these times.

4. Involved in Torah

What does it mean that Hashem is involved in Torah? As we pointed out, there is nothing He could gain from the Torah, as the Torah comes from Him. Rather, the midrash is teaching us that Hashem relates to the world based on elements of the Torah of truth. So if a person steals during this time, God would respond via direct punishment, not slow His “anger” or take the whole person into consideration for a judgement. After the first three hours there is mercy present, and people are not immediately punished. Why should the first three hours merit such decisive action?

The Gemara explains that the kings would get up, put on their crowns, and bow to the sun. The Maharal points out (Be'er HaGolah 4) that this bowing need not actually occur, rather the kings serve the sun through their actions. The sun typifies the laws of nature and the kings worship the laws of nature as opposed to God. This is not the will of God, and this is the cause of the “anger.” However, what is unique about this time-period as opposed to the rest of the day?

The Gemara is telling us a psychological insight about the beginning of the day. We have in our common parlance expressions such as “conquering the day” or “not letting the day pass you by.” When titans of industry begin their day, they hit the ground running. They start the day off very strong and come with an attitude that they are in charge. They believe that if they “take control of the day” that they will be able to conquer nature.

5. Control

Kings take charge and want to feel in control of their kingdom. In fact, we learn that we can say the daytime Shema until three hours into the day, which is when the princes get up (Mishnah Berachot 1:2). Princes need not worry about leading the nation just yet, so they take their time to get up. However, kings are responsible for leading their nations. They are more susceptible to feeling the need to try to develop a sense of security. If God would allow a person to cheat during this time, they would be led to the improper conclusion that the laws of nature run supreme, and not the Supreme Ruler.

Now, how do we counteract this notion of thinking that we are in charge? We accept upon ourselves that Hashem is in charge: Shema; that He is the King. On Rosh Hashanah, we coronate Hashem, reestablishing Him as the King of the world. So shouldn't the first three hours of the day be the best time to contemplate this action? If we see why it is appropriate for a congregation to do this, maybe we can understand why it might be detrimental for an individual.

6. Powerful influences

The congregation has many merits so they need not worry about this time-period. People are influenced by their surroundings. As such, a person who is not congregated with a group of like-minded individuals, is subject to the ideologies of those who surround him. So even if a person chooses to try and coronate Hashem as King, they may be unduly influenced by those around them and not properly appoint God as the King. They may relate to the Ruler of the world in a less than optimum way. They may not, as the Gemara says this is a fear that exists, not a forgone conclusion. However, a person shouldn't put themselves in such a situation.

Hopefully we can continue to reinforce within ourselves that God is in control. Although we may lose focus on that during the day, if we consciously recognize that the beginning of the day, every day, is an especially auspicious time for such a misunderstanding, we can realign our thoughts toward the proper recognition of God. Certainly we can hope to join our congregation in properly recognizing Hashem's authority this Rosh Hashanah.