

Who Do We Pray For?

Rabbi Reuven Mann

On Rosh Hashana most Jews, filled with a certain tension, find themselves in Synagogue at some point. But we must ask, is the Jewish New Year a time of concern only for Jews? The prayers emphasize that on this day of Creation, *all* of G-d's creatures come before Him for judgement. This would seem to include gentiles, and thus they too should take heed of this holiday.

Moreover, in the *Nesaneh Tokef* prayer we read that on this day even "the angels quake with fear" because of the impending judgement which is happening then. Indeed, you may ask, what are the angels concerned about, are they also prone to sin? Such a premise would seem out of line with our understanding that angels are "intellects without bodies" i.e., beings that do not have a *Yeitzer HaRa* (evil inclination). So what could they have possibly done wrong?

This would seem to indicate that angels do not act entirely by rote, but instead must make decisions based on their understandings. Thus, they are not necessarily "perfect" and are subject to a certain degree of Divine scrutiny. Perhaps that is why this is a time of trepidation for them as well.

There might be another explanation for this phenomenon. Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of the world's creation, and as such reminds us that our existence is contingent on Hashem's decision to invest us with life. We, therefore, cannot take our existence or that of the world for granted. G-d decided to bring the universe into being for reasons that are not known to us. According to the Rambam it is blasphemous to suggest that Hashem has a need for *any* of His creatures.

Therefore, it is grossly erroneous to believe that our praises or Mitzvot effectuate any benefit to the Creator. We should never maintain the notion that we are going to do something *for* Hashem. Man must have an accurate appreciation of the position that he occupies in the scheme of things. In the words of our father Avraham who reached an exalted level of prophecy and "challenged" Hashem's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, "Behold I have endeavored to speak to G-d, and I am but dust and ashes." (Bereishis 18:27)

We cannot comprehend the reasons behind Hashem's determination to create man and the world, but it would seem that the decision was not intrinsically "irrevocable". The story of the Flood illustrates that. Every year, on the day of creation, the Creator visits His "Works" and sits in judgement. The essential question is whether the created beings are worthy of continued existence. Everything comes under His scrutiny, even beings more exalted than ourselves, such as angels. Accordingly, they quake with fear. So should we.

There is an element of selfishness in our approach to Rosh Hashanah. First and foremost, we are concerned about ourselves. This doesn't mean that we don't care about others; but it's kind of like on an airplane where if a problem occurs and the oxygen masks come out you are supposed to put one on yourself first and then tend to your children. This means that you can't be of help to anyone if you

are not in very good shape yourself. So we come before the Creator and beseech Him for life on the basis of the fact that we recognize our flaws and are determined to correct them and become a better person. That is a person more deserving of life according to the terms which Hashem has established.

Alongside the selfish aspect of the Holiday, there is a decidedly altruistic one as well. We are concerned for those close to us such as family, friends and community. As Jews, our community is an extended one. We care about every single Jew on the planet of whatever race, color and religious orientation. But it is important to note that our Involvement does not stop there.

We are unabashedly solicitous to the welfare of all of mankind. This may sound strange, as the world doesn't seem to be so caring about *our* wellbeing. In fact, most of the time we have to protect ourselves against the hostility of the nations who tend to persecute us. But we don't bear grudges, and we don't wash our hands from our responsibilities to others. That is because it is our mission to be the emissary's of G-d to the world.

Contrary to what many people believe, Hashem in choosing us to be His people did not thereby declare that He has no interest in others. In the *Ashrei* prayer, we declare that Hashem is "Good unto all; and His mercies are on all of His creations. (Tehilim 145:9)" The "Goodness" of Hashem extends to all whom He has created. He gave His Torah to the Jews *not* because He is only concerned for their spiritual welfare. He is, *but* He wants the Jews to set the right example and become the religious teachers of mankind.

In the Laws of *Teshuva* the Rambam explains the rules that govern G-d's judgement of the individual, the nation and the world. One may ask, why is it necessary for me to know how Hashem judges various countries and the world at large? Shouldn't my concern be exclusively with myself, since I can only rectify my own behavior?

However, the Laws of *Teshuva* teaches otherwise. We too, in emulation of the Creator, must cultivate a sense of compassion for all His creatures. We care about the various countries we may live in, as well as those we have never set foot in. And what must be our attitude to the continued existence of the world?

The Rambam teaches that a single good deed can tilt the scales of judgement favorably and bring salvation to the individual, the country and the world. He says, (Teshuva 3:5) "For these reasons it is customary for all of Israel to give profusely to charity, perform many good deeds, and be occupied with Mitzvot from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, to a greater extent than during the remainder of the year. During these ten days, the custom is for everyone to rise while it is still night and pray in the synagogues with heart-rending words of supplication until daybreak." The Jewish People engage in these strenuous spiritual activities at this special time because of their unique sense of compassion for all the world's inhabitants.

May we merit to perform many good deeds which together with our heartfelt prayers will find favor with Hashem and bring salvation to ourselves, the Jewish People and all mankind.

Shana Tova.

Dear Friends,

My newest book, *Eternally Yours: Torah's Enduring Relevance for a Life of Wisdom on Devarim* was recently published, and is now available at: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C9S3G1H2/>

I hope that my essays will enhance your reading and study of the Book of Devarim and would greatly appreciate a brief review on Amazon.com.

Additionally, for those in *Eretz Yisrael*, my books are available at David Linden's bookstore located at Emek Refaim Street 21, Jerusalem and at Pomeranz Book store, Be'eri 5 Jerusalem. They are very nice stores to visit and browse.

—Rabbi Reuven Mann