

## Make *this* Rosh Hashana the Greatest of Our Lives

Every Seder, my family reads a letter from Lady Jacobowitz. In it, she tells of her Seder in 1942. At the time (not yet) Lady Jacobowitz was a child in France during the Shoah. A kind farmer took her and three other children in. They lived under his barn. It has a harsh and difficult winter with barely enough food. When the children saw the first blades of grass out of the high window, they figured Pesach must be coming. So they asked the farmer for flour, newspaper, a match and some water. The flour took weeks to arrive but eventually they mixed the flour and water, lit the paper and made something like Matzoh on the floor of that barn. Then, just before they decided it was time for the Chag, they switched clothes – so they'd have something new for the holiday. Finally, they celebrated the Seder – each sharing whatever they could remember.

Lady Jacobowitz went on to lead a tremendous influential life surrounded by family and plenty. But, as she wrote, that Pesach was the most wonderful Pesach of her life.

I'm reminded of this letter as we go into a somewhat constrained Rosh Hashana. We can either enter the holiday convinced that it is a hardship – or we can view it as an opportunity to have a Rosh Hashana like no other.

Just like Lady Jacobowitz's Pesach, our Rosh Hashana will be boiled down. Not as far as her Pesach was – but more than usual. With this in mind, perhaps we can follow in her footsteps and realize a uniquely rewarding Rosh Hashana experience.

---

At its core, Rosh Hashana is a holiday of blessing through connection to G-d.

On this holiday, we don't ask for forgiveness, we don't regret the past – we seek blessing through connection.

Our need for blessing, our craving for it, can only be enhanced by the challenges we face this year.

I'm going to be a bit contrarian though. I don't believe we realize blessing by crying out before Hashem. On Rosh Hashana, Hashem is called "Our Father in Heaven."

We can think of that as more than a metaphor.

A child can whine and whine and complain to his or her parents. They can even threaten them. But if those parents are good parents (and we can assume Hashem's is pretty good) then they won't respond to that.

We have triplets. When they were little, and would cry for bottles in the morning, the kids who cried the least would get the first bottles. Moaning and complaining is not something you want to encourage.

Instead, you want to encourage the growth of your children's character. In G-d's case, you want to encourage their connection to you – but part of that is encouraging them to be more like you. You want them to be responsible, independent *and* good.

We want our children to present a *positive* case for our blessings and gifts.

As I understand it, when we ask G-d for blessing, we do it in three ways.

- 1) We argue we deserve blessing
- 2) We argue that we were promised blessing (this is where crying comes in)
- 3) And we argue that we will use our blessings well

You might see a theme here: argument. We do not simply lean on emotion (although it is a tool), we are Jews. We argue. When it comes down to it, you'll give your own child what they deserve, what you promised or what they will use well.

Your understanding of what they deserve, what you promised or what they will use well will ultimately be driven by how they embrace your values.

When I was growing up, I knew I'd have a really hard time convincing my dad to give me a bike. But if I had a good use for it, I knew he'd do everything he could to acquire the moon. If I wanted to argue for the moon though, I had to do it on my father's terms – not my own. "It'd be fun" wouldn't cut it.

Luckily for my father, I never really had a good use for the moon (at least on his terms).

With these concepts in mind, let's step into the davening.

---

## Shacharit and HaMelech

What concept lays at the core of Rosh Hashana Shacharit. The answer is Malchiut Shamayim: The Kingdom of Heaven.

The concept of Kingship is hard to fathom in modern times. I use the analogy of a Chatan (Bridegroom) and a Kallah (Bride) to explain monarchy. On their wedding day, a Chatan and Kallah are King and Queen... but what does that mean? When I was a Chatan, I wanted my jacket. It was on a chair across the room. I realized it was more of a Kavod (Honor) for somebody else to get it for me than for me to get it myself.

It is an honor to serve a King.

This is what separates a powerless Queen Elizabeth, a figurehead Naruhito and a much-weakened Mohammed VI from a Stalin or Ghaddafi or Saddam Hussain.

Power does not define a King. *Honor does.*

This is the core of what we should embrace throughout our davening. It is an *honor* to serve G-d.

We should make every effort to embrace that honor – to grasp it and wrap ourselves in it and celebrate it.

It is a powerful thing. It also ties into blessing: if we can find joy in honoring G-d then He can know we will use our blessings well.

The gift of flowers – like offerings in the Beit Hamikdash – are not themselves important. But if those flowers demonstrate a fundamental joy in honor, then they can open the road to a better relationship.

Through the celebration of Kingship, we find joy in honoring G-d.

With this joy we can either argue that we deserve blessing or we can argue that we will use those blessings well.

Either way, we grow.

On this unique Rosh Hashana, the trappings have all been stripped away. We aren't davening as part of massive crowd. Few of us are in magnificent buildings. Great Chazzanim are in short supply.

Instead, we stand before the presence of G-d and – with the essence of our souls – we can honor Him.

Now, on to some specifics of the davening.

### Misod Chachamim

In this short passage, the Chazzan prays that he (or she, if that's how your synagogue works) be a worthy representative of the Kehilah.

As the Chazan recites this, I try to direct my spiritual energies towards him. I see the energy of the entire Kehillah drawing towards him – like bolts in a plasma globe. And then I see that energy flying, collected with the energy of thousands of other Chazzanim, to the gates of Heaven.

We are invoking that collective power in this prayer.

The imagery is only stronger with a more intimate crowd. Our pathway to the divine is shorter.

## Ata Hu: Power and Glory

Just before this prayer we pronounce that Hashem sits on his thrones because of the praises of Israel. This song is a collection of three concepts: power, honor and connection.

It starts by describing Hashem as our higher power (elokainu). G-d can grant blessing or curse. That concept flows throughout.

Intermingled is the idea that He uses that power is ways that deserve honor: charity, salvation, truth. This is our opportunity to embrace what we can understand – values.

Finally, there is a third concept: that our relationship to Him is necessary for blessing. Among other attributes, He is described as jealous, vengeful, and close to those who call Him sincerely.

Through connection we can serve worthy, divine, values and the power of Hashem can be harnessed to our benefit. The inverse also hangs over us.

Pakad carries the concept of accountability. We deserve blessing. We can also deserve curse.

On day 2, *Ata Hu* is replaced by *Melech Elyon*. This has similar concepts, but focuses more on the path of mercy. If we earn our positive reward, we can do it on the first day. If we need mercy, then the second day is the time to secure it.

## Adoshem Melech: Kingship forever

This is a declaration of Kingship. If G-d is our King, if we find honor in honoring Him, then we *deserve* blessing. This is followed by the song of Judgement (La'kel Orech Din). At the end of this second song, we begin to hint at another path. This path (explored in more depth on day 2) speaks to G-d's mercy to his people.

By declaring ourselves his people, we may not only get our just reward, but His forgiveness.

## Avinu Malkainu

This emphasizes the concept of G-d as our Father and our King. It is an honor to serve a King, but a father may bless us because of compassion.

This is the core of where we touch on compassion but we should emphasize asking for mercy, not whining to our father in Heaven.

---

## Torah Reading

The Torah readings are the clearest emphasis on the three paths of blessing. We can put ourselves into these readings – and thus feel their messages more clearly.

### Day 1: Sarah, Yishmael and Avimelech

On Day 1, we read of the three paths to blessing.

Sarah represent the path of Pakad – of just reward. She is granted Yitzchak because *she deserves him*. When reading this, I like to imagine myself as Sarah. My wife and I struggled for years to have children (although nowhere near as long as Sarah). She *earned* Yitzchak – and so the joy of that reward is entirely positive. She should celebrate herself, and well as Hashem. The laughter of Yitzchak is not just disbelief, it is unexpected joy. Those others who laughed upon hearing of him did so because he represented the idea that there is always a possibility of well-deserved blessing. There is always hope.

The reading continues with Yishmael. Yishmael is rescued because Hashem *promised* Avraham he would be protected. Yishmael represents the path of Zocher, of Hashem's promise being remembered. This is the hardest of the paths. The Jewish people must be facing annihilation to trigger this pathway to blessing. Not individual annihilation, but collective. This reading reflects a prayer that we *not* face such a reality. This is a pathway of desperation.

Finally, the reading concludes with Avimelech. Avimelech recognizes the presence of G-d in Avraham and makes a treaty with him. An imperfect treaty, yes. Nonetheless, it is a step on the road to improvement triggered by the presence of G-d. This is the path of Teshuva – of recognition that we will use our blessings more effectively.

For most of us, the path of Avimelech is *our* path. We know we are imperfect – it is our desire to embrace G-d (and His/Her values) that should lead to blessing.

## Day 2: The Akeidah

On the second day, we've taken our swing at the positive paths to blessing. On the second day, we focus on the path of desperation – of G-d's promises.

Hashem promises Avraham that Yitzchak will carry forward his line. With the Akeidah *all* of that is threatened. Hashem, no matter what, will keep his promises. The of Zocher – of fulfilling those promises – remains sacred.

Avraham's fear, his willingness to Trust G-d *despite* the impossibility of what was being asked captures one more idea: the concept of Fear.

Fear of Heaven is not terror. G-d denies us the opportunity to climb Har Sinai for the giving of the Torah because we shook with terror. Fear of Heaven is Trust. Trust that even when G-d asks for that we can not accept or understand, His request should be followed.

Fear of Heaven is a nullification of our own understanding.

It is also critical to the concept of Shofar.

## Maftir

The offerings are based on the Torah reading.

When the angels visit to give Sarah the news of her reward, Avraham serves them a Ben Bakar (a young bull). This is the first of the animals offered on Rosh Hashana.

When Yitzchak is rescued, Hashem offers up an Eyil (Ram). This represent Zocher, or G-d remember His commandments. This is the second of the animals offered on Rosh Hashana.

And when Avimelech recognizes that the presence of Hashem is with Avraham they offer up seven kevasim (ewes). This is the third of the animal offers on Rosh Hashana.

In these three offerings, we capture the core of the Rosh Hashana davening. Rather than imagining the offerings as purely technical, recognize that they commemorate the paths to blessing.

Separately, a He-goat is offered for forgiveness (the goat represents the rambunctiousness of the Jewish people, so we are sacrificing our own weakness).

---

## Shofar – the voice of G-d

In the Torah, Rosh Hashana is called Yom Teruah – the day of blowing. *Everything* else is built on this foundation. The arguments for mercy are built on this concept.

The Shofar is the core of it all.

Shaya Cohen points out that Hashem breathes his spirit into us and gives us our Neshama (spiritual soul). When we speak, we mix the physical and the spiritual in our words. But the Shofar serves as a filter. The Shofar comes from the eyil (ram) sacrificed in place of Yitzchak. It represents Fear of Heaven. It represents the willingness to nullify our own understanding.

The Shofar filters out our own breath. What remains is what Hashem blew into us. The voice of the shofar is a shadow of the voice of Hashem.

We see this in the Tehillim right before shofar blowing. We read: “Adoshem B’Kol Shofar.” Hashem is in the voice of the Shofar.

The shofar has all of the elements of the davening. We can honor G-d's kingship by finding honor in the sound of the Shofar. We can deserve blessing.

We can realize our own limitations (and the risks that face us) through the self-nullification the shofar represents. As you listen, allow yourself to accept that which you do not understand – coronavirus included.

Finally, we can find the path of Teshuva by recognizing the presence of G-d – as Avimelech did – and realizing that we must act on it.

In the Chumash *Tekia* is used to call the people to gather, the *shoresh* of *Shevarim* refers to grain whose outer husk is broken away to reveal its core, and the *Teruah* calls the people to march.

As you listen, Gather yourself to Hashem at the sound of Tekia, expose your soul with Shevarim and then march with Hashem with the blowing of Terua.

And throughout, recognize the presence of G-d.

---

## Musaf

### Unetanneh Tokef

Interestingly Unetanneh Tokef is *not* universal. Many Eidut Hamizrach congregations exclude it entirely.

The opening stresses our fear. It describes the process of judgement and the many ways in which we may die – or be blessed. And then it declares that Teshuva, Tefilah and Tzedakah will rescue us from the evil decree.

Teshuva is obviously a core theme of the day. It is the path of promised improvement.

Pallal (the root of Tefilah) isn't used for the famous prayers of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaacov. Avraham stood, Yitzchak meditated (תָּוַשׁ) and Yaacov encountered (וַיִּפְגַּע) or tarried (וַיִּשָּׂא). Hagar is the first to pray and no words are used at all. *These* prayers are unspoken. Words can not express them. But they are answered. As I read it, they are such strong unspoken desires that Hashem knows that the people who have them can not go on without them being met. *They* are a cry of Zocher – Hashem must respond or he will not have the opportunity to fulfill His promises.

Avraham needs Lot to survive the destruction of S'dom. Yitzchak needs some connection to this world. Yaacov needs to know he has a future. Rachel is remembered and granted a son –

earlier in the same chapter she says: “Give me children, or else I die.”

Tefillah is only our *approximation* of these archetypal prayers. Nonetheless, it is our way of asking Hashem to Zocher us.

Finally there is Tzedakah – the historical fact that we have used our blessings in a positive way is a powerful argument that we *deserve* blessing in the future.

As we hear these words, imagine these paths and the ways in which each applies to us as individuals, to the Jewish people and to mankind.

### Malchiot, Zichronot and Shofarot

As before, through Malchiot we honor G-d and show we deserve his blessing because we are his faithful subjects. Through Zichronot, we express our fear that without G-d's blessing we can not go on – we argue that we must be blessed for His promises to be realized. We ask that He bless us so that His covenants can be realized. And through Shofarot we recognize the presence of Hashem and, like Avimelech, we endeavor to do better.

---

## Summary

There is a tremendous amount of structure around Rosh Hashana. But it all comes down to a simple argument for blessing – an argument built on a connection to G-d.

As I see it, this Rosh Hashana represents a remarkable opportunity.

Rather than connecting with a large Kehillah or even our greater families, we can use this unique Rosh Hashana to connect to G-d.

This Rosh Hashana will be intensely personal.

You will never forget it.

Use it well.

Shana Tova,

Joseph Cox