

# INSIGHTS

## Into The Weekly Parsha

SEPTEMBER 16, 2023

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Shmuel ben Allegra.

VOLUME 13, ISSUE 45

*"May his Neshama have an Aliya!"*

1 TISHREI

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

ROSH HASHANA

## Earning Our Keep

For many people, the holiday of Rosh Hashana is a difficult and oppressive experience. We are aware that we are facing heavenly judgment and our fate is being decided for the coming year, which can certainly be a source of great discomfort. The feeling of being under Divine scrutiny with one's entire future hanging in the balance can be almost intolerable. It would be natural for a person to be desperate to escape such an oppressive and frightening situation.

However, this can be difficult to reconcile with Chazal's teaching that Rosh Hashana is a time when we dress in elegant clothes and prepare festive meals that are enjoyed with family and friends. This is based on the verse found in the Prophets: "He said to them, 'Go eat fat foods and drink sweet beverages, and send gifts to anyone for whom nothing was prepared, for today is holy to our Master. Do not be sad, for the joy of Hashem is your strength'" (Nehemiah 8:10).

The fear and tension associated with Rosh Hashana is even more puzzling in light of its historic significance. Rosh Hashana is the "birthday" of mankind, and most people enjoy celebrating their birthday. Hence, one would expect Rosh Hashana to be a time of joy rather than an intimidating experience. How are we to understand the general mood of the day?

In addition to the nature of Rosh Hashana itself, the order of the holidays of Tishrei are also incongruous. The month of Tishrei begins with Rosh Hashana, the day of Divine judgment. This is followed by the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* – ten days that give us an opportunity to repent, to attempt to change ourselves on a fundamental level, and make ourselves worthy of a favorable judgment. This period culminates with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement and Divine forgiveness. Finally, the festival of Sukkos provides an

opportunity for us to observe many unique *mitzvos* and amass merits.

Strangely, Rosh Hashana is not actually described in the Torah as the Day of Judgment. The Torah refers to it instead as *Yom Hazikaron* – the Day of Remembrance. This is also the term that is used in the prayers and *brachos* recited on Rosh Hashana, but it seems to be a peculiar way to refer to this festival.

Of course, Hashem "remembers" all of our deeds in order to judge us on Rosh Hashana, but this is a very indirect way to express the Divine judgment of the day. Why doesn't the Torah simply describe this holiday as the Day of Judgment, which would be a more accurate and direct representation of the day?

Let us begin to address these questions by examining the concept of justice. The Torah's account of the world's creation begins, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The Divine name that appears in this verse, "*Elokim*," is associated with the attribute of Divine judgment. Yet when the Torah revisits these events in the second chapter of *Bereishis*, it refers to this as "the day when Hashem *Elokim* fashioned the earth and the heavens," adding the Divine name that represents compassion. Chazal explain that this indicates a shift in Hashem's approach to the management of the world: His initial intent was for the universe to be governed purely by the dictates of justice, but since this would have been disastrous for the world, He coupled His judgment with the attribute of compassion.

Nevertheless, it is clear that in an ideal world justice would not have been accompanied by mercy. Every sin would have been met with immediate, uncompromising punishment – without the possibility of repentance or



**Miami Edition**

atonement. Yet Hashem also foresaw that mankind would not have survived in a world of that nature. Amazingly, even if any sin triggered an immediate, unmistakable punishment, human beings would not have been able to resist the urge to sin.

(Witness the fact that even after Adam Harishon was told by Hashem Himself that he would die if he ate the fruit of the *Eitz Hadaas*, he failed to resist the temptation. He knew that he was bringing disaster upon himself, yet he sinned anyway. Such is the nature of the human condition.)

As a result, Hashem added compassion to His management of the universe in order to avoid the need to destroy the human race.

Yet this ideal seems to contradict the very purpose of creation. We are taught that Hashem created the world out of a desire to bestow good on creations outside Himself. The entire human race exists for the purpose of receiving kindness from Hashem. But if that is the case, why would He have created the world with justice? Wouldn't it have been more conducive to His goal for the world to be governed purely by kindness?

There is only one possible answer to this question: The ultimate kindness is to relate to the recipients through the attribute of justice.

Justice is not merely the act of punishing crimes. Pure justice calls for every person to receive no more than what he has earned.

If a person is provided with even one iota of benefit more than he deserves, justice has been violated. A generous reward is an act of compassion; on the other hand, justice is extremely precise.

But while this strict approach may not sound particularly kind, it actually brings an enormous benefit: When a person receives something through the framework of justice, he can feel absolutely entitled to it. This gives rise to satisfaction and contentment far greater than the enjoyment one can derive from a gift that has not been earned.

A gift may actually be considered injurious to the recipient. When a person receives a handout, his self-respect suffers as a result. No one enjoys being the beneficiary of another's largesse. There is an innate human tendency to feel uncomfortable with receiving something that hasn't been earned, since one can never feel a true sense of ownership over such a benefit. Therefore, the greatest possible kindness would have been for Hashem to create a system in which every human being would receive only the benefits that he has fully earned.

A world of justice would therefore have been the ultimate fulfillment of Hashem's desire to do good for His creations. It was only because humanity could not withstand such a system that Hashem tempered His judgment with compassion; however, this diminished the possibility for mankind to experience pride and satisfaction. Even Divine forgiveness is a gift of sorts, and it is therefore less of a kindness for a person's sins to be forgiven than for him to be judged with precision. The more exacting the judgment, the greater can be a person's feeling that he has truly earned everything that he has been given.

This is precisely the purpose of the judgment of Rosh Hashana. There is a pivotal difference between the "trial" we experience on Rosh Hashana and the judgments that take place in earthly courtrooms. When a defendant is brought to trial in an ordinary court, there are only two possible outcomes: Either he will be convicted and sentenced or he will be exonerated and freed. The defendant can never gain from being tried in court; the most he can hope for is to emerge from the trial without losing his freedom, his money, or

anything else he possesses.

On the other hand, the judgment of Rosh Hashana does not deal with what we might lose; it focuses instead on what we can rightfully gain.

When we are judged on Rosh Hashana, Hashem examines us to determine what we are truly worthy of receiving. The purpose of the judgment is for us to earn our keep and to be completely entitled to everything we possess in this world. If we are judged favorably, we can redefine our very existence as a life that has been earned and is justified by our actions.

We can now understand that Rosh Hashana should not be viewed as an oppressive or negative experience. While it is true that our fates hang in the balance and we must be awed by the Divine judgment of the day, we must also recognize that Rosh Hashana is a gift of enormous proportions. Without justifying our existence, we might feel that we do not truly exist at all. The only way to make our presence in the world absolutely real and genuine is to feel that we have earned it — and for that purpose, we must face heavenly justice.

Modern scientists would like us to believe that the entire human race came about through some sort of cosmic accident. Science posits that the universe itself was spawned by a cosmic explosion and that all life evolved through a random process. But if that were the case, it would mean that we do not have any inherent right to existence and it would make no difference if we simply disappeared.

However, if we believe that we are actually entitled to exist, then we will feel that we have a much more powerful grip on our presence in this world. If we exist by right and not merely by chance, then the continuation of our presence in this world truly matters. Our existence is not a gift from Hashem and a function of His generosity; rather, it is a function of our deeds and the relationship we have built with Him. When we earn our place in the world, we have a connection to Hashem and to eternity, and that makes us truly real.

This also explains why the heavenly judgment

takes place on the anniversary of man's creation. When we are judged, we are essentially recreated.

In fact, the genesis of the world itself took place several days prior to Rosh Hashana, on the 25th of Elul. Rosh Hashana, the first day of Tishrei, marks the anniversary of the creation of man, yet the liturgy of the festival refers to it as the day when the universe was created. This is because it was only with the creation of mankind that the existence of the universe itself became justified. The purpose of the world's creation was to facilitate humanity's service of Hashem. Until human beings were created, the world had no purpose and therefore no reason to exist. When it was given its purpose with the creation of Adam, the world was considered to have been recreated at that moment.

This idea also explains Chazal's statement that the word "*ori* — my light" in chapter 27 of *Tehillim* ("*I'Dovid Hashem ori*," which is recited after *davening* from *Rosh Chodesh Elul* through the end of *Sukkos*), is an allusion to the festival of Rosh Hashana. Light is a phenomenon that illuminates one's surroundings and makes them perceptible to the senses. In a way, that illumination creates a sense of reality in one's surroundings. Thus, it is a fitting metaphor for the very sense of existing — which is precisely what we achieve on Rosh Hashana.

Finally, this also explains why the Torah refers to Rosh Hashana as the Day of Remembrance rather than the Day of Judgment. When Hashem judges us on Rosh Hashana, it is not the act of a harsh, unsympathetic deity; as we have seen, judgment is the ultimate kindness bestowed upon us by our Father in Heaven.

Remembrance is a sign of caring and involvement; when we reminisce about the past, it is a way to show that the events of the past were important to us and made an impression on us. Rosh Hashana is indeed a day of judgment, but if we were to refer to the holiday by that term, then it would have a cold, harsh connotation. Instead, the Torah describes it as the Day of Remembrance in order to indicate that it is a powerful display of Hashem's caring and love for us. This is articulated by saying that everything that we do is important, and God "remembers" it all.



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