

ROSH HASHANAH

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REJOICE OR RECOIL?



SHOULD ROSH HASHANAH BE A  
DAY OF FEAR, DREAD AND JUDGEMENT,  
OR A DAY OF CELEBRATION?

*by* RABBI SHIMSHON HAKOHEN NADEL

Rosh Hashanah brings a strange mix of emotions. The sound of the Shofar pierces even the most hardened of hearts, as the melodies of the Chazzan cascade up and down an emotional rollercoaster. In the liturgy, we invoke fear and dread and exclaim: "... and from the fright of the judgment my soul trembles... Angels will hasten, a trembling and terror will seize them... behold it is the Day of Judgment!" We reflect on how life is so impermanent, so fleeting; how we are so fragile and vulnerable. And then we wish each other a 'Gut Yuntif', before going home to dip apples in honey and eat a festive meal!

But just how should we feel on Rosh Hashanah? Is it a day of fear and dread – the Day of Judgement? Or is it a festival to be celebrated?

The answer is that it is both.

The Talmud discusses whether Hallel, the prayer of praise and thanksgiving recited on joyous occasions, is appropriate for Rosh Hashanah, and concludes: "The ministering angels asked the Holy One Blessed Be He, 'Master of the World, why does Israel not sing praise before you on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?'" He answers with a question, "Is it possible that the King sits on his Throne of Judgement and the Books of Life and Death are open before Him, and Israel should sing before Me?" (Arachin 10b; Rosh Hashanah 32b)

Filled with so much uncertainty and doubt concerning our fate, how can we sing Hallel? How can we even eat? Yet a famous passage from the Jerusalem Talmud instructs us to celebrate Rosh Hashanah and "eat, drink and rejoice," expressing our confidence and trust in God: "...Who is like this Nation? The practice of the world is when one knows that he is awaiting judgment – he wears black, wraps himself in black, grows his beard – for he does not know what the verdict will be. But Israel is not like that. They wear white, wrap themselves in white, trim their beards, eat, drink and rejoice – for they know that the Holy One Blessed Be He will be merciful and forgive them." (y. Rosh Hashanah 1:3).

On Rosh Hashanah we all stand before Hashem. And when one stands before Hashem there is tremendous fear, but

also tremendous joy. In the constant refrain of the Avinu Malkeinu prayer, we recognize Hashem as both our King (Malkeinu) and as our Father (Avinu).

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach shared the following story: One day, a man was riding the subway on his way home from work. Looking around the subway car, his eyes met the eyes of a woman, and he was instantly smitten. He knew that she was his 'beshert', the woman destined to be his bride. It was fate. But just as he summoned up the courage to approach her, the train stopped at 34th Street, Herald Square. Before he could reach her, she exited, and the doors closed on him. He got off at the next stop and ran up the stairs, knocking over anyone in his way. He pushed through the crowd and opened the door to a taxicab. Ignoring the elderly couple waiting to enter the cab, he yelled at the driver, "Take me to 34th Street now!"

— 69 —

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As he entered the taxi, a police officer who had witnessed the commotion apprehended the man and began to question him. He tried to explain what was happening, but the cop wouldn't let him go. The man tried to run off, but soon found himself in the back of the squad car – arrested for public disturbance and resisting arrest. He spent that night in jail kicking himself and wondering if he would ever see that woman from the subway.

The next morning, he had to appear before the judge. He sat in the courtroom feeling devastated, dejected, and depressed. When his name was finally called, he looked up at the judge. And smiling back at him from behind the bench was the woman from the train.

Indeed, Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgement. But we know the judge!



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