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Introduction to the Holidays

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Introduction to the Holidays

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Yitzchak ben Berol Ha'Cohen ז״ל

who had a deep love of
Judaism, Israel, and the Jewish people

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Rosh HaShana

The Anniversary of Creation

The ten days that begin on Rosh HaShana and culminate in Yom Kippur are the holy of holies of Jewish time. The atmosphere in the synagogue is intense. You can almost touch the Divine Presence. Isaiah said: "Seek God where He is to be found, call on Him when He is close" (Is. 55:6). The rabbis wrestled with this verse. What could it mean? God is the God of everywhere and all time. He is always to be found, always close. The verse seemed to make no sense at all.

This was their reply: "These are the Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur" – meaning, God is always close to us, but we are not always close to Him. He is always to be found, but we do not always seek Him out. To sense the closeness of God needs some special effort on our part. To reach out to the Infinite in finite space, to meet the Eternal in the midst of time, to sense what ultimately lies beyond the senses, requires a focus far beyond the ordinary.

It needs a drama of holiness, enacted in our holiest place, the synagogue, at the holiest of times, *Yamim Nora'im*, the Days of Awe.

To begin, it needs a sound – the shofar – so piercing and strange that it wakes us out of our everyday consciousness into an awareness of being present at something vast and momentous. We need to come close to God for God to feel close to us. That is what happens on the Ten Days of Repentance, and it begins on Rosh HaShana.

It is as if the world has become a courtroom. God Himself is the Judge. The shofar announces that the court is in session, and we are on trial, giving an account of our lives. Properly entered into, this is a potentially life-changing experience. It forces us to ask the most fateful questions we will ever ask: Who am I? Why am I here? How shall I live? How have I lived until now? How have I used God's greatest gift: time? Whom have I wronged, and how can I put it right? Where have I failed, and how shall I overcome my failures? What is broken in my life and needs mending? What chapter will I write in the book of life? The unexamined life, a philosopher said, is not worth living. No one who has genuinely experienced Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur lives an unexamined life.

These are days of reflection and introspection when we stand in the conscious presence of Infinity, knowing how short and vulnerable life really is, and how little time we have here on earth. This can be, and should be, a life-changing experience. Unfortunately, it not always is. The prayers are long. Some of them, especially the *piyutim*, the liturgical poems with their elaborate acrostics and obscure wordplays, are hard to understand. Others use imagery that can seem remote. The central image of Rosh HaShana is of God as King enthroned in the seat of judgment. That image would once have been self-evident, but there are fewer kings today than there once were, and even in the monarchies that remain, the role of royalty is often more symbolic than judicial. The prayers we say on Rosh HaShana span more than thirty centuries, and some need decoding if they are to speak to us today.

Yet Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur have retained an undiminished hold on the Jewish imagination. They remain days on which even Jews estranged from Judaism for much of the year come to synagogue, and the world's longest courtroom drama continues: the extended argument between God and His people about the fate of justice and the justice of fate that has been running since the day when Abraham first called God "Judge of all the earth," and that led Albert Einstein to

speak about that "almost fanatical love of justice" that made him thank his stars that he was born a Jew.

No people has believed as lucidly and long as have Jews that life has a purpose; that this world is an arena of justice and human dignity; that we are, each of us, free and responsible, capable of shaping our lives in accordance with our highest ideals. We are here for a reason. We were created in love and forgiveness by the God of love and forgiveness who asks us to love and forgive. However many times we may have failed to live up to our aspirations, God always gives us the chance and the power to begin again. On Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, the holiest days of a holy people, God summons us to greatness.

I want in this chapter to tell the story of Rosh HaShana and what it might mean for us.

The Mystery

No sooner do we open the Torah, seeking to understand the significance of the day, than we are plunged into mystery. Only twice does the Torah touch on the subject, and in neither case does it provide much information:

> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people thus: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts [*zikhron terua*]. (Lev. 23:23–24)

> On the first day of the seventh month you shall hold a sacred assembly. You shall do no laborious work, and you shall mark a Day of the Blowing of the Shofar [*Yom Terua*]. (Num. 29:1)

Other than details of the sacrifices to be offered, that is all. There is no explanation of what the day represents, or what the sound – *terua* – signifies. Nor does the Torah specify what instrument is to be used. It might be a horn. But equally it might refer to the silver trumpets the Israelites were commanded to make to summon the people (Num. 10:1–10). The central motifs of the other festivals, the unleavened

bread and bitter herbs of Pesaḥ, the booth of Sukkot, the affliction (fasting) of Yom Kippur, all have symbolic value. We know what they mean and how they connect with the mood of the day. But the Torah does not tell us what the sound of *terua* symbolizes. Is it the sound of celebration, of warning, of fear or tears? We do not know.[1]

Nor does the Torah use the phrase *Rosh HaShana*, the beginning or "head" of the year, in this context or any other. The only time it appears in Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible as a whole, it refers to Yom Kippur: "In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year [*berosh hashana*], *on the tenth of the month*, in the fourteenth year after the fall of the city" (Ezek. 40:1). In fact the Torah seems to make it clear that Rosh HaShana is *not* the beginning of the year. It is the first day, not of the first, but the seventh month. The first month is Nisan.

How then do we arrive at the festival as we know it today?

In the earliest stages of an embryo, when a fetus is still no more than a small bundle of cells, it already contains the genome, the long string of DNA, from which the child and eventually the adult will emerge. The genetic structure that will shape the person it becomes is there from the beginning. So it is with Judaism. "Bible, Mishna, Talmud and Aggada, even what a senior disciple is destined to teach in the presence of his master, was already stated to Moses at Sinai" (Yerushalmi, *Pe'ah* 2:4). The evolution of Rosh HaShana was prefigured at the outset, but to see how it developed we have to decipher the clues.

The Anniversary of Creation

The first thing we notice is that it is "the first day of the seventh month." The number seven, especially when applied to time, always signifies *holiness*. The first thing declared holy in the Torah is the seventh day, Shabbat (Gen. 2:1–3). The seventh or "sabbatical" year is likewise holy. There is to be no work in the fields. The land is to enjoy rest. Debts are released. A similar provision applies to the fiftieth or Jubilee year (at the end of seven seven-year cycles) when, in addition, most ancestral land returned to its original owners. The seventh month fits this pattern. It

1. Rabbeinu Baḥya, *Kad HaKemaḥ, Rosh HaShana* (2).

is to the year what Shabbat is to the week, the sabbatical to a cycle of years, and the Jubilee to an era. It is holy time.

What is specific about the holiness of the seventh in a sequence of time is that it is marked by a cessation of work. It marks a period during which we cease creating and remember that we are creations. We stop making and remember that we are made. We, the universe and time itself are the work of a hand greater than merely human, greater in fact than anything we can conceive. On the seventh, be it day, month or year, we focus our attention on God the Creator of all. Rosh HaShana is a festival of creation.

No sooner have we said this than we see that in Judaism there is a dual structure of time, just as there is a unique duality in Judaism as a whole. On the one hand God is the *Creator*, who made heaven and earth and all that lives. But God is also the *Redeemer* who rescued His people from slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. He is the *Revealer* who appeared to the people at Mount Sinai, made a covenant with them, gave them laws, and from time to time sent them, through the prophets, His word.

God's creation is universal. God's redemption and revelation are particular to the people of Israel who, by their history and way of life, testify to His existence and involvement with the world. The two cycles of time in Judaism represent this duality. One cycle – Pesaḥ, Shavuot and Sukkot – is about redemption and revelation, about the way God acts in history through the shaping events of the Jewish people. The other – the seventh day, seventh month and seventh year – is about creation, God in relation to the cosmos as a whole.

This is the first insight into the meaning of the day. Rosh HaShana is a celebration of the universe as God's work. The sages called it the anniversary of creation. This is the theme of the middle section of the Musaf Amida, *Zikhronot*, "Remembrances." "You remember all of creation, and all things that were formed … for this day is the opening of all Your works, a remembrance of the very first day." It is echoed in the prayer *HaYom Harat Olam*, "This day is the birth of the world."

Because it is about creation and humanity, the prayers of Rosh HaShana have a universalism not shared by Pesaḥ, Shavuot and Sukkot. The central section of the Amida on those days begins with the words, "You have chosen us from among all peoples," a declaration of Jewish

chosenness. By contrast, in the Amida on Rosh HaShana we say, "And so place the fear of You…over all that You have made," an expression of complete universality. Pesaḥ, Shavuot and Sukkot are about what it is to be a Jew. Rosh HaShana is about what it is to be human.

The Kingship of God

The next hint is given in the biblical names for the festival, *Yom Terua* and *Zikhron Terua*, "the day of *terua*" and "a commemoration or remembrance of *terua*." What is *terua*? In all other biblical contexts, it refers to a sound, usually produced by a wind instrument, though sometimes it may mean a shout or cry on the part of a crowd.

What instrument is the Torah referring to? The silver trumpets used by the Israelites in the wilderness were used to sound both a *tekia* and a *terua*, a *tekia* to summon the people and a *terua* to signal that it was time to begin a further journey (Num. 10:1–7). So the *terua* of Rosh HaShana might refer to a trumpet. The sages ruled out this possibility for a simple reason.

Rosh HaShana turns out not to be the only time that a *terua* was sounded in the seventh month. It was also sounded on the tenth of the month, Yom Kippur, in the Jubilee year, when slaves went free and ancestral land returned to its original owners. The Jubilee was the occasion of the famous words, taken directly from the biblical text, written on the Liberty Bell of America, "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" (Lev. 25:10). The previous verse (25:9) states specifically that one should sound the *terua* with a shofar:

> Then you shall sound the horn loud [*shofar terua*]; in the seventh month on the tenth day of the month, on the Day of Atonement, you shall have the horn sounded throughout the land.

Indeed the Hebrew word for Jubilee, *yovel*, also means a ram's horn (Ex. 19:13). It became a simple inference to conclude that this applied to the *terua* of the first day of the seventh month as well.

What was special about the shofar? In several places in Tanakh it is the sound of battle (see, for example, Josh. 6; I Sam. 4; Jer. 4:19, 49:2). It could also be the sound of celebration. When King David brought the Ark into Jerusalem, he danced and the people rejoiced with "*terua* and the sound of the shofar" (II Sam. 6:15). But in a number of places, especially the historical books, the shofar was sounded at the coronation of a king. So we find at the proclamation of Solomon as king:

> Tzaddok the priest took the horn of oil from the sacred tent and anointed Solomon. Then they sounded the shofar and all the people shouted, "Long live King Solomon!" (I Kings 1:39)

Likewise when Jehu was appointed king:

> They quickly took their cloaks and spread them under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the shofar and shouted, "Jehu is king!" (II Kings 9:13)

When Absalom sought to have himself proclaimed king in the lifetime of his father, David, we read:

> Then Absalom sent secret messengers throughout the tribes of Israel to say, "As soon as you hear the sound of the shofar, then say, 'Absalom is king in Hebron!'" (II Sam. 15:10)

The book of Psalms associates the shofar not with a human king but with the declaration of God as King. A key text is Psalm 47, said in many congregations before the shofar blowing on Rosh HaShana:

> God has been raised up in sound; raised, the Lord, in the voice of the shofar.... For God is King over all the earth.... (Ps. 47:6, 8)

Psalm 98 makes a clear connection between God's kingship and His judgment:

> With trumpets and the sound of the shofar, shout for joy before the Lord, the King.... For He is coming to judge the earth. He judges the world with righteousness and all nations with equity. (Ps. 98:6, 9)

We have now arrived at the second great dimension of Rosh HaShana. It is the day on which we celebrate the kingship of God. This has left its mark throughout the Rosh HaShana prayers. The key word is *Melekh*, "King." The leader begins in the morning service with a dramatic rendition of *HaMelekh*. The third blessing of the Amida, which normally ends with the words "the holy God," on Rosh HaShana and throughout the Ten Days of Repentance becomes "the holy King." In particular, Musaf on Rosh HaShana begins with an entire section dedicated to *malkhiyot*, verses relating to divine kingship. Rosh HaShana is the day we celebrate God not just as Creator of the world, but its Ruler also.

The Coronation

The concept of divine kingship sounds simple, even routine, but it is not. It made ancient Israel unique. Eventually it had an impact on the development of freedom in the West. It was a Jewish scholar, Philo, who lived in Alexandria in the first century, who realized how radical it was. Philo was writing about Judaism for a Greek-speaking audience, and when it came to the political structure of Jewry he found that the Greek language had no word for it. The Greeks had words for most things. They were the world's first systematic thinkers, and in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* they surveyed every known type of political structure – tyranny, monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy and democracy. But there was no word for the Jewish system, and Philo was forced to invent one to explain it.

The word he chose was *theocracy* – rule by God alone. This was the thought expressed by Gideon, the man who led the Israelites to success in their battle against the Midianites. When the people sought to make him king, he replied: "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. God will rule over you" (Judges 8:23).

Eventually the Israelites did appoint a king, and in the course of time they developed other systems of governance: judges, elders, patriarchs, exilarchs, city councils and, in the modern State of Israel, democracy. But the ultimate Ruler of the Jewish people was God alone. This meant that no human ruler had absolute authority. Prophets could criticize kings. People could disobey an immoral order. The sovereignty of God meant that there are moral limits to the use of power. Right is sovereign over might. These were, and remain, revolutionary ideas.

They were also responsible for the single most astonishing phenomenon of Jewish history, the fact that Jews retained their identity as a nation for two thousand years in exile, scattered across the world. Wherever they were, God remained their King. They remained His people. Rarely was this better expressed than in the great prayer, *Aleinu*, originally written for Rosh HaShana as a preface to the verses about God's kingship:

> He is our God; there is no other. Truly He is our King; there is none else.

There is an integral connection between kingship and creation, and it can be stated simply. God made the universe. Therefore God owns the universe. Therefore God is its ultimate Sovereign since He can specify the terms and conditions under which we exist within the universe. This applies to all humanity.

Hence the second paragraph of *Aleinu*, with its vision and hope of a time "when all humanity will call on Your name," and "all the world's inhabitants will realize and know that to You every knee must bow." The God of revelation and redemption is the God of Israel. The God of creation is the God of all humankind. But they are the same God. Hence the vision of Zechariah with which *Aleinu* ends, when "the Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One and His name One" (Zech. 14:9).

Underlying this is perhaps the most remarkable idea of all. "There is no king without a people."[2] The fact that the people of Israel accepted God as their King, and His covenant as their constitution,

2. *Kad HaKemaḥ, Rosh HaShana* (2).

means that they bear witness to Him by their very existence and way of life. That is what the psalm means when it says, "You are the Holy One, enthroned on the praises of Israel" (Ps. 22:4). The praises of Israel are the visible symbol of God's majesty. That confers extraordinary dignity on us.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, doyen of Jewish thinkers in the twentieth century, used to explain this by telling the story of his first Hebrew teacher, a Chabad Hasid who made an indelible impression on him as a child by telling him that Rosh HaShana was God's coronation. "And who puts the crown on His head? We do." He spoke about his memories of praying as a child among the Hasidim on the first night of Rosh HaShana:

> I can feel the unique atmosphere which enveloped these Hasidim as they recited the prayers by which they proclaimed Him their King. The older Hasidim termed this night the "Coronation Night" as they crowned Him as their King. These poor and downtrodden Jews, who suffered so much during their daily existence, were able to experience the enthroning of the Almighty and the true meaning of the Kingship prayers of the Rosh HaShana liturgy.[3]

The shofar on Rosh HaShana is our way of participating in God's coronation.

Exile and Return

The anniversary of creation, a kingship renewal ceremony – there Rosh HaShana might have remained had it not been for one overwhelming historical fact: the Babylonian exile. It is one thing to celebrate the harmony of the created universe when you are at home with the universe, another when you are reminded daily that you are not at home, when you are strangers in a strange land. It is one thing to celebrate divine sovereignty when you enjoy national sovereignty, another when you have lost it and are subject to another power. The destruction of the Temple

3. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, vol. 2 (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House), 171.

and the Babylonian exile were a trauma for the Jewish people, physically and spiritually, and we have an indelible record of how the people felt: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept as we remembered Zion.... How can we sing the Lord's song on foreign soil?" (Ps. 137:1–4).

Judaism and the Jewish people might have disappeared there and then, as had happened to the ten tribes of the northern kingdom, Israel, a century and a half before. There was one difference. The religious identity of the southern kingdom, Judah, was strong. The prophets, from Moses to Jeremiah, had spoken of exile and return. Once before, in the period between Joseph and Moses, the people had experienced exile and return. So defeat and displacement were not final. There was hope. It was contained in one word: *teshuva*.

There is no precise English translation of *teshuva*, which means both "return" – homecoming, a physical act; and "repentance" – remorse, a change of heart and deed, a spiritual act. The reason the Hebrew word means both is because, for the Torah, sin leads to exile. Adam and Eve, after they had sinned, were exiled from the Garden of Eden. Cain, after he had murdered his brother, was punished by being sentenced to eternal exile (Gen. 4:12). The idea of justice in the Torah is based on the principle of *mida keneged mida*, "measure for measure." A sin, *ḥet,* is an act in the wrong place. The result, *galut,* is that the agent finds himself in the wrong place. Sin disturbs the moral harmony of the universe.

But God forgives. That one fact rescues life from tragedy. The sages said that God created repentance before He created humanity (*Nedarim* 39b). What they meant was that God, in creating humanity and endowing the human person with free will, knew that we would make mistakes. We are not angels. We stumble, we sin. We are dust of the earth and to dust we will one day return. Without repentance and forgiveness, the human condition would be unbearable. Therefore God, creating humanity, created the possibility of repentance, meaning that when we acknowledge our failings, we are forgiven. Exile is not an immutable fate. Returning to God, we find Him returning to us. We can restore the moral harmony of the universe.

It follows that on a national scale, *teshuva* means two things that become one: a spiritual return to God and a physical return to the land.

This is how Moses put it in the key text of *teshuva betzibbur*, collective national repentance:

> When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey Him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where He scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. (Deut. 30:1–4)

That was the theory and the hope. The question was: Would it actually happen that way? It did, in the return of the Babylonian exiles to the land of Israel, and it was solemnized in one of the shaping events of Jewish history. It took place in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah on Rosh HaShana itself.

The Great Renewal

Jews, not all but many, had returned from the Babylonian exile. The ruined Temple had been rebuilt. But the nation was in disarray. Religious knowledge was slight. Many had intermarried with local populations. They could not even speak Hebrew. "Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, or they spoke the language of one of the other nations, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah" (Neh. 13:24).

On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the scribe and Nehemiah the governor convened a national assembly at the Water Gate in Jerusalem. Ezra, standing on a wooden platform, publicly read from the Torah while Levites were stationed throughout the crowd to translate and explain what was being said. As they began to realize how far they had drifted from the divine mission, the people started weeping:

> And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.... Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. And he [Nehemiah] said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve." Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. (Neh. 8:3; 8:9–12)

That Rosh HaShana (which incidentally extended for two days: the people returned the next day to continue the reading) became the start of a period of national rededication, a covenant-renewal ceremony. It was a turning point in Jewish history, and it is not too much to say that we owe to it the survival of Jews and Judaism.

What Ezra and Nehemiah had understood was that religious identity was at the heart of Jewish survival. The Israelites had undergone almost a controlled experiment on what enables a nation to endure. Following the split of the nation into two after the death of Solomon, the northern kingdom had been conquered by the Assyrians. Transported, its people had, for the most part, acculturated into the general population and disappeared, to become known to history as the Lost Ten Tribes. The southern kingdom of Judah, conquered and forced into exile by the Babylonians, had sustained their identity. Inspired by people like Ezekiel, they studied Torah. They prayed. They listened to the prophets, who told them that their covenant with God was still intact. They stayed Jews. Indeed the very fact that we are today called Jews (*Yehudim*, i.e. members of the southern kingdom of Judah) is testimony to this phenomenon.

Ezra and Nehemiah, seeing the sad state of Jewish identity among the Jews of Israel, realized that a major program of religious revival was called for, beginning with the public reading of the Torah that Rosh

HaShana, the first-ever national adult education seminar. The strength of the Jewish nation, they saw more clearly than any of their contemporaries, lay not just in armies and physical defense but in identity and spiritual defense. Ezra was a new type in history: a "scribe," the teacher as hero.

Slowly over the course of the next five centuries, new institutions emerged, most significantly the synagogue and the house of study, which would allow Jewry to survive even military and political defeat. By the first and second century of the common era, when Jews suffered two catastrophes at the hands of the Romans, they had become a people whose heroes were teachers, whose citadels were schools and whose passion was study and the life of the mind. That transformation was responsible for a phenomenon that has no parallel, a people capable of surviving two thousand years of exile, their identity intact. It began with that gathering on the first of Tishrei, when Ezra recalled a people to its ancient mission, and the people wept as they became aware of how far they had drifted from the Torah, their constitution as a nation.

Thus was born the association of the day with *teshuva*, national return. It was Nahmanides in the thirteenth century who most clearly understood that the return of Jews from Babylon and their renewal of the covenant was the historical realization of Moses' prophecy about return, which was itself, for Nahmanides, the source of the command of *teshuva* (commentary to Deut. 30:2).

Individual Responsibility

The Babylonian exile had another effect as well. As a nation in their own land, the Jewish people experienced their fate collectively. War and peace, poverty and prosperity, famine or fruitfulness, these are things a nation experiences as a nation. The Torah is intimately concerned with the fate and dignity of individuals, but it was first and foremost a covenant with the nation as a whole.

Things are different in exile. The nation is no longer in charge of its destiny. It experiences fate primarily as a group of individuals. It remains a nation, but an injured nation, a nation not at home in the world. It was then that an idea present in Judaism from the beginning took on a new significance. The key figure who brought this message

to the exiles was a priest and prophet who was with them in Babylon: Ezekiel.

Ezekiel reminded the people of the power and possibility of individual responsibility. In so doing, he gave expression to the idea of *teshuva* in a way that has remained salient from his day to now. The first principle he taught the people had already been emphasized by his elder contemporary, Jeremiah. We are each responsible for our own sins, and no one else's:

> The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them. (Ezek. 18:20)

Then he gives precise articulation to the idea of *teshuva*:

> But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all My decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die. None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them. Because of the righteous things they have done, they will live. "Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" declares the Sovereign Lord. "Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?" (Ezek. 18:21–23)

That is it. No Temple, no sacrifice, no sin offering, no ritual of atonement, but simply the act of turning – *teshuva* – understood as an abandonment of sin and a change of behavior to embrace the holy and the good. These and other verses from Ezekiel became key texts in the rabbinic understanding of *teshuva*.

Ezekiel relates this to the shofar:

> The word of the Lord came to me: Son of man, speak to your people and say to them: When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him

> their watchman, and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the shofar to warn the people, then if anyone hears the shofar but does not heed the warning and the sword comes and takes their life, their blood will be on their own head.... (Ezek. 33:1–4)

The task of the prophet is to sound the shofar as a warning to the people that their sins are about to be punished and that they must now do *teshuva* if they are to avert the coming catastrophe. Ezekiel is not the only one to speak of the shofar in these terms. As we read in Isaiah: "Raise your voice like a shofar. Declare to My people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins" (Is. 58:1). Hosea (8:1), Joel (2:1, 15) and Amos (3:6) all understood the shofar as the sound of warning of imminent war, itself a sign that the nation had sinned. But Ezekiel, more lucidly than anyone else, set out the doctrine of *teshuva* in the way we understand it today, as something done by individuals as well as a nation, as a change of mind and deed, initiated by the sound of the shofar.

A Day of Judgement

So the basic shape of Rosh HaShana emerged from potentiality to actuality. What was originally a festival of divine creation and sovereignty, accompanied by the shofar as a clarion proclaiming the King, became also – through the prophets, the Babylonian exile and the return – a day of national and individual rededication, a remembrance of sins and a turning with new commitment to the future.

The rabbis fleshed out this sketch with detail and color. First was the name Rosh HaShana itself. The sages knew of four New Years: the first of Nisan as the New Year for kings and festivals, the first of Elul for the tithe of cattle, the first or fifteenth of Shevat for trees, and the first of Tishrei for "years, and Sabbatical years and Jubilees" (*Rosh HaShana* 1:1). However, it was the first of Tishrei that became known as the New Year per se.

The Mishna states that on Rosh HaShana all creatures pass before God (ibid. 1:2). How they do so depends on the precise text of the Mishna, which exists in two variants: *kivnei Maron* or *kivenumeron*.

Numeron is thought to be derived from a Greek word meaning "a troop of soldiers." Accordingly the Talmud reads this as meaning "like the troops of the house of David." The alternative reading, "like the children of Maron," is given two interpretations in the Talmud. One is "like a flock of sheep" passing one by one through a wicket so that they can be counted by the shepherd, or "like the ascent of Beit Maron," a narrow pass through which only one person can go at a time.

The first reading, "like the troops of the house of David," sees the primary meaning of Rosh HaShana as a festival of divine kingship. God is King, the shofar proclaims His presence, and we, His retinue, gather to pay Him homage. The second and third see it as a day on which God judges us, one at a time. The biblical phrase about the land of Israel – "The eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end" (Deut. 11:12) – was understood to imply that "from the beginning of the year, sentence is passed as to what the end shall be" (*Rosh HaShana* 8a).

The rabbis also articulated the concept of a book of life. Moses, pleading for the people after the making of the golden calf, says, "But now, please forgive their sin, but if not, then blot me out of the book You have written" (Ex. 32:32). In Psalms 69:29, David says about the wicked, "May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous."

The book of Esther contains a famous episode: "That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of records [*sefer hazikhronot*] ... to be brought in and read to him" (Est. 6:1). There were times when the king read a record of events that had happened and passed verdict, whether for punishment or reward.

Rabbi Yoḥanan taught that on Rosh HaShana three books lie open in heaven: one for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous and one for the intermediate. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are immediately inscribed in the book of death; the verdict on the intermediate is suspended from New Year till the Day of Atonement. If they deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of life; if they do not deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of death (*Rosh HaShana* 16b). It became a particularly beautiful custom to wish people, on the first night of the year, that they be written and sealed immediately for life,

implying that those around us are completely righteous. Those who judge others favorably are, we believe, themselves judged favorably.

Both the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud specify that, whatever the decree, there are certain acts that have the power to avert or annul it, or at least mitigate its harshness. The Babylonian Talmud lists four: charity, prayer, change of name and change of deed; some add a fifth: change of place (*Rosh HaShana* 16b). The Jerusalem Talmud lists three: prayer, charity and *teshuva* (Yerushalmi, *Ta'anit* 2:1), deriving all three from God's answer to Solomon's prayer at the inauguration of the Temple:

> If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray [= prayer] and seek My face [= charity] and turn from their wicked ways [= *teshuva*], then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and heal their land. (II Chr. 7:14)

All of these motifs – God's kingship, His sitting in the throne of judgment, opening the book in which our deeds and signatures are written, the sound of the shofar that makes even the angels tremble, the shepherd counting his flock, the verdict written on Rosh HaShana and sealed on Yom Kippur, and the power of repentance, prayer and charity to avert the evil decree – are brought together in the liturgical poem *Untaneh Tokef*, one of the great prayers and the most vivid image of Rosh HaShana as we might imagine it in the heavenly court.

We have traveled a long way from the starting point of Rosh HaShana as the anniversary of creation, yet there is a fine rabbinic midrash that brings us back to our starting point. According to Rabbi Eliezer, creation began on 25 Elul, making the first of Tishrei the day on which humanity was created. That day, Adam and Eve were made, and that day they sinned. Yet God forgave them, or at least mitigated their punishment. Initially He had said, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (Gen. 2:17). Adam and Eve ate but did not die. Evidently they were forgiven. The midrash continues:

> God said to Adam: This will be a sign to your children. As you stood in judgment before Me this day and were pardoned, so will

> your children in the future stand in judgment before Me and will emerge from My presence pardoned. When will that be? *In the seventh month, on the first day of the month.* (Leviticus Raba 29:1)

On Rosh HaShana we are like Adam and Eve, the quintessential representatives of the human condition. We may have sinned. We may have lost the paradise of innocence. We all do. But we are alive. We live in the radiance of God and the generosity of His compassion. In the simplest yet most moving of prayers, Rabbi Akiva turned to God and said, "*Avinu Malkeinu*," "Our Father, our King" (*Ta'anit* 25a). God is our King, Sovereign of the universe, Author of our laws, the Judge who administers justice. But He is also our Father and we are His children, and can a father withhold compassion from his children? Time and again He forgives us and never loses patience. Human parents may lose faith in a child, but God never does: "Were my father and my mother to forsake me, the Lord would take me in" (Ps. 27:10).

Past, Present and Future

All of these ideas have left their mark on the Maḥzor and appear in our prayers, especially in the central section of the Musaf Amida. On all other festivals, there is one central blessing, *Kedushat HaYom*, "the special sanctity of the day." Uniquely, Rosh HaShana has three central blessings, *Malkhiyot*, Kingship; *Zikhronot*, Remembrances; and *Shofarot*, verses about the Shofar. These correspond to the sentence (not found in Tanakh, but pieced together from biblical phrases), "The Lord is King, the Lord was King, the Lord will be King, forever and all time."

Malkhiyot refers to the present. *Zikhronot* is about memories of the past. *Shofarot* is about the future. The shofar is always a signal of something about to come: the imminent arrival of the king, a warning of impending danger, or the sound of a trial about to begin.

Teshuva sensitizes us to the full significance of time. There are those who live purely in the present, but their lives have no overarching meaning. They react rather than act. They travel with no ultimate destination. They are "like chaff blown by the wind" (Ps. 1:4). To be a Jew is to live poised

between past and future: the past and future of our individual lives, of our ancient but still young people and of humanity as a whole.

Teshuva tells us that our past does not determine our future. We can change. We can act differently next time than last. If anything, our future determines our past. Our determination to grow as human beings – our commitment to a more faithful, sensitive, decent life in the year to come – gives us the courage and honesty to face our past and admit its shortcomings. Our *teshuva* and God's forgiveness together mean that we are not prisoners of the past, held captive by it. In Judaism, sin is what we do, not what we are. Therefore we remain intact, able to acknowledge our failures and then move on.

My predecessor Lord Jakobovits made a profound comment about Rosh HaShana. Given that it is the start of the Ten Days of Repentance, surprisingly it contains no explicit confessions, no penitential prayers. These form the text and texture of Yom Kippur but not Rosh HaShana. Why so? Because, he suggested, *teshuva* is driven by two different mindsets: commitment to the future and remorse about the past. Rosh HaShana is about the first, Yom Kippur about the second. *Rosh* means "head" and the default position of the head is looking forward, not back. The placing of Rosh HaShana before Yom Kippur means that our determination to act better in the future should be prior to our feelings of remorse about the past – to which we might add that this is why we blow the shofar on Rosh HaShana. The shofar, too, turns our attention to what lies ahead, not behind.

What Rosh HaShana Says to Us

What then does Rosh HaShana say to us? Of what is it a reminder? How can it transform our lives?

The genius of Judaism was to take eternal truths and translate them into time, into lived experiences. Other cultures have constructed philosophies and theologies, elaborate systems of abstract thought. Judaism prefers truth lived to truth merely thought. Ancient Greece produced the logical imagination. Judaism produced the chronological imagination, truth transposed into the calendar. Rosh HaShana, the

anniversary of the creation of humanity, invites us to live and feel the human condition in graphic ways.

The first thing it tells us is that life is short. However much life expectancy has risen, we will not, in one lifetime, be able to achieve everything we might wish to achieve. *Untaneh Tokef* tells the poetry of mortality with haunting pathos:

> Man is founded in dust and ends in dust. He lays down his soul to bring home bread. He is like a broken shard, like grass dried up, like a faded flower, like a fleeting shadow, like a passing cloud, like a breath of wind, like whirling dust, like a dream that slips away.

This life is all we have. How shall we use it well? We know that we will not finish the task, but neither are we free to stand aside from it. That is the first truth.

The second is that life itself, each day, every breath we take, is the gift of God:

> Remember us for life, O King who delights in life, and write us in the book of life – for Your sake, O God of life. (*Zikhronot*)

Life is not something we may take for granted. If we do, we will fail to celebrate it. God gives us one gift above all others, said Maimonides: life itself, beside which everything else is secondary. Other religions have sought God in heaven, or in the afterlife, the distant past or the distant future. Here there is suffering, there reward; here chaos, there order; here pain, there balm; here poverty, there plenty. Judaism has relentlessly sought God in the here-and-now of life on earth. Yes, we believe in life after death, but it is in life before death that we truly find human greatness.

Third, we are free. Judaism is the religion of the free human being freely responding to the God of freedom. We are not in the grip of sin. We are not determined by economic forces or psychological drives or genetically encoded impulses that we are powerless to resist. The very fact that we can do *teshuva*, that we can act differently tomorrow than we did yesterday, tells us we are free. Philosophers have found this idea

difficult. So have scientists. But Judaism insists on it, and our ancestors proved it by defying every law of history, surviving against the odds, refusing to accept defeat.

Fourth, life is meaningful. We are not mere accidents of matter, generated by a universe that came into being for no reason and will one day, for no reason, cease to be. We are here because a loving God brought the universe, and life, and us, into existence – a God who knows our fears, hears our prayers, believes in us more than we believe in ourselves, who forgives us when we fail, lifts us when we fall and gives us the strength to overcome despair. The historian Paul Johnson once wrote: "No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny." He concluded: "The Jews, therefore, stand right at the center of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose."[4] That too is one of the truths of Rosh HaShana.

Fifth, life is not easy. Judaism does not see the world through rose-tinted lenses. The sufferings of our ancestors haunt our prayers. The world we live in is not the world as it ought to be. That is why, despite every temptation, Judaism has never been able to say the Messianic Age has come, even though we await it daily. But we are not bereft of hope because we are not alone. When Jews went into exile, the *Shekhina*, the Divine Presence, went with them. God is always there, "close to all who call on Him in truth" (Ps. 145:18). He may hide His face, but He is there. He may be silent, but He is listening to us, hearing us and healing us in ways we may not understand at the time but which become clear in retrospect.

Sixth, life may be hard, but it can still be sweet, the way the *ḥalla* and the apple are on Rosh HaShana when we dip them in honey. Jews have never needed wealth to be rich, or power to be strong. To be a Jew is to live for simple things: the love between husband and wife, the sacred bond between parents and children, the gift of community where we help others and others help us and where we learn that joy is doubled and grief halved by being shared. To be a Jew is to give, whether in the form of *tzedaka* or *gemilut ḥasadim* (acts of loving-kindness). It is to learn and never stop seeking, to pray and never stop thanking, to do

4. Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (London: Phoenix, 2004), Prologue, 2.

teshuva and never stop growing. In this lies the secret of joy. Throughout history there have been hedonistic cultures that worship pleasure and ascetic cultures that deny it, but Judaism has a different approach altogether: to sanctify pleasure by making it part of the worship of God. Life is sweet when touched by the divine.

Seventh, our life is the single greatest work of art we will ever make. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in one of his earliest works, spoke about *Ish HaHalakha*, the halakhic personality and its longing to create, to make something new, original. God too longs for us to create and thereby become His partner in the work of renewal. "The most fundamental principle of all is that man must create himself." That is what *teshuva* is, an act of making ourselves anew. On Rosh HaShana we step back from our life like an artist stepping back from his canvas, seeing what needs changing for the painting to be complete.

Eighth, we are what we are because of those who came before us. Our lives are not disconnected particles. We are each a letter in God's book of life. But single letters, though they are the vehicles of meaning, have no meaning when they stand alone. To have meaning they must be joined to other letters to make words, sentences, paragraphs, a story, and to be a Jew is to be part of the strangest, oldest, most unexpected and counterintuitive story there has ever been: the story of a tiny people, never large and often homeless, who nonetheless outlived the greatest empires the world has ever known – the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, the Greeks and Romans, the medieval empires of Christianity and Islam, all the way to the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. Each in turn thought itself immortal. Each has gone. The Jewish people still lives.

So on Rosh HaShana we remember and ask God to remember those who came before us: Abraham and Isaac, Sarah, Hannah and Rachel, the Israelites of Moses' day, and the Jews of every generation, each of whom left some living legacy in the prayers we say or the melodies in which we sing them. And in one of the most moving verses of the middle section of Musaf we recall the great words said by God through the prophet Jeremiah: "I remember of you the kindness of your youth, your love when you were a bride; how you walked after Me in the desert, through a land not sown" (Jer. 2:2). Our ancestors may have sinned, but they never stopped following God though the way was hard and the

destination distant. We do not start with nothing. We have inherited wealth, not material but spiritual. We are heirs to our ancestors' greatness.

Ninth, we are heirs to another kind of greatness too, that of the Torah itself and its high demands, its strenuous ideals, its panoply of mitzvot, its intellectual and existential challenges. Judaism asks great things of us and by doing so makes us great. We walk as tall as the ideals for which we live, and those of the Torah are very high indeed. We are, said Moses, God's children (Deut. 14:1). We are called on, said Isaiah, to be His witnesses, His ambassadors on earth (Is. 43:10). Time and again Jews did things thought impossible. They battled against might in the name of right. They fought against slavery. They showed that it was possible to be a nation without a land, to have influence without power, to be branded the world's pariahs yet not lose self-respect. They believed with unshakable conviction that they would one day return to their land, and though the hope seemed absurd, it happened. Their kingdom may have been bounded by a nutshell, but Jews counted themselves kings of infinite space. Judaism sets the bar high, and though we may fall short time and again, Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur allow us to begin anew, forgiven, cleansed, undaunted, ready for the next challenge, the next year.

And finally comes the sound of the shofar, piercing our defenses, a wordless cry in a religion of words, a sound produced by breath as if to tell us that that is all life is – a mere breath – yet breath is nothing less than the spirit of God within us: "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). We are dust of the earth but within us is the breath of God.

And whether the shofar is our cry to God or God's cry to us, somehow in that *tekia, shevarim, terua* – the call, the sob, the wail – is all the pathos of the Divine-human encounter as God asks us to take His gift, life itself, and make of it something holy by so acting as to honor God and His image on earth, humankind. For we defeat death, not by living forever but by living by values that live forever; by doing deeds and creating blessings that will live on after us; and by attaching ourselves in the midst of time to God who lives beyond time, "the King – the living, everlasting God."

The Hebrew verb *lehitpalel*, "to pray," more precisely means "to judge oneself." On Rosh HaShana we stand in judgment. We know what it is to be known. And though we know the worst about ourselves, God sees the best; and when we open ourselves to Him, He gives us the strength to become what we truly are.

Those who fully enter the spirit of Rosh HaShana emerge into the new year charged, energized, focused, renewed, knowing that to be a Jew is to live life in the presence of God, to sanctify life for the sake of God, and to enhance the lives of others – for where we bring blessings into other lives, there God lives.