

Adin Steinsaltz

Change & Renewal

The Essence of the Jewish Holidays,
Festivals & Days of Remembrance

TRANSLATED BY

Daniel Haberman

EDITED BY

Yehudit Shabta

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Rosh HaShana –
The New Year

A New Year

AWAKEN FROM YOUR SLUMBER

The Hebrew phrase *shana hadasha* (new year) is itself a contradiction – a *shana* (year) denotes something that repeats itself again and again, whereas *hadasha* (new) denotes change, emergence from a cycle of repetition.

Each year is essentially a repetition of the same basic structure. Once again, we experience fall, winter, spring, summer; once again, there are shorter days and longer days, rainy season and dry season, cold and heat. The constant repetition is not limited to the weather or to the annual seasons; recurrence and routine are the pattern of all of life. Every person's life, with the exception of rare incidents, essentially flows in a routine cycle. Even events that involve change or upheaval – birth, marriage, death – quickly fall into set molds. Indeed, the events of most people's lives are so similar that it often appears as though we experience these events not as different people, but as one anonymous figure. It is as if a form of a human being, invested with life-like mobility, moves from place to place, constantly changing its garments, rushing from one ceremony to the next, repeating over and over again the same motions and the same words and going through the same emotions...

And the people themselves, the living people who, after all, have

their own character and their own lives – what are they doing? They seem to be sleeping, leading a vegetative existence, looking forward to a “new year,” anticipating something that will bring change and awaken them.

Rosh HaShana is the day on which the new year begins, and the central event of this festival is the blowing of the *shofar*. The *shofar* is not and never was a musical instrument. In fact, the *shofar*’s sound, particularly when broken into the tones of *shevarim* and *terua*, is the sound of a cry, of sobbing and moaning. It is a sound that is threatening, agitating, and alarming. Maimonides writes:

In the blowing of the *shofar* on Rosh HaShana there is an allusion, as though saying: Awake you sleepers from your sleep, and slumberers arise from your slumbering... All who forget the truth in the follies of the times and err the whole year in vanity and emptiness that cannot benefit or save, look to your souls, improve your ways...¹

The sound of the *shofar* is not meant to be pleasant to the ear; its purpose is to arouse and to shock, to awaken those who slumber in the endless routine of life and guide them towards *teshuva*.

RELIGIOUS LIFE – INTERRUPTING THE ROUTINE

The essence of *teshuva* is the process of stimulating the ability of self-renewal, one’s ability to again become oneself instead of being merely a copy – a copy of a newspaper advertisement, a copy of one’s neighbors, or even a copy of one’s younger and more authentic self.

Perhaps one might argue that *teshuva*, returning to a more religious way of life, is by no means the proper way to renew one’s selfhood. After all, isn’t religion, with its thousands of fixed details, commandments, duties, and prohibitions, part of the endless repetition and routine, only redoubled?

In truth, religious obligation does not constitute further routine, but rather escape from it. There is certainly a routine of prayers, commandments, and good deeds, but this system does not go hand in

1. Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:4.

hand with the other, ordinary routine of life. On the contrary, it clashes with that routine constantly. It interrupts the ordinary course of eating, drinking, and working, and that interruption of the uniform sequence stimulates change.

It is this “trivial” intervention of the halakha in all the small details of life that saves us from sinking into the mire of animalistic action. The halakha tells us: “Let us desist for a moment from this race! Let us switch for a moment to another system – a system of blessing, of prayer, of washing the hands – a system that is not connected to and does not flow from the daily course of affairs.”

There is an additional renewing aspect of religious life that is worthy of consideration. In any other realm, a person can carry on his activity like a robot for years on end, without feeling obligated to give more of himself than that. One may be a talented and successful worker in the office, an outstanding educator, a spiritual leader, a reliable husband, a loving father – and all this may be nothing more than a mask. Even worse, there may be nothing behind that mask!

This is not possible within the world of Judaism, however. One can lead a life of routine, but he cannot escape the knowledge that what he is doing is not right and proper, that he is deceitful. Although one may be absorbed in a routine of mitzvot, he is bound by the basic duty to direct his mind to what he doing. He may certainly fool other people in this regard, but he cannot fool God, and therefore cannot take comfort in the thought that no one knows the truth.

Because the Jew maintains the feeling that he can and should lead a more meaningful life, he has a chance – at rare moments – to relive the primal experiences of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* (the revelation at Sinai) and *Zikaron LeYom Rishon* (remembrance of the first day of Creation).

HARD TO HAVE FAITH

Many people think that true faith is unattainable in our day. “Perhaps it was possible once, in past generations, in the small Jewish towns of Poland, in the ghettos of Morocco, in the immigrant neighborhoods in the far corners of the world. But nowadays, in our wise and discerning era, who can be a true believer?”

The story is told that when King Solomon, in his wisdom, set

down in his book of proverbs, “A simple person will believe anything,”² all the fools in the world became very agitated. They convened a grand World Congress to deal with a pressing issue: Until Solomon revealed that “a simple person will believe anything,” it was impossible to discern the wise person from the fool, and the fools could escape the attention of others. But now what was to be done? The fools concluded that in order to avoid detection, they would do just the opposite. From now on, they must not believe in anything. And, indeed, that is the practice of fools to this very day...

When people, simple or scholarly, speak of the inability to have faith in our day, of the absurdity of faith, one is tempted to ask them: “Were you perhaps a participant in that Congress?”

Of course, the way to faith is not an easy one. It is not easy for a person who grew up in a “religious” home, and not for one who grew up in a non-religious environment. The way of faith is a “long shorter” way; it is not a wide highway, traveled in the same way by all, but rather a narrow and winding path, personal and private.

The words of one *tzaddik* who spoke on this matter are simple and profound. On the words, “For I know that God is great,”³ he commented, “For I know – I alone know, and no other person can know like me!”⁴ Another person may know more than me, or in a deeper, broader, or more complete manner, but knowledge of God is ultimately a private, personal experience that cannot be communicated.

It is possible to recount to another person what you ate through all sorts of descriptions and explanations, but it is impossible to convey the taste. Taste can only be perceived in one way – through actual experience. This is the meaning of the verse, “Taste and see that God is good”⁵ – taste Him for yourselves!

2. Proverbs 14:15.

3. Psalms 135:5.

4. *Sihot HaRan* 1.

5. Psalms 34:9.

NEITHER IN HEAVEN NOR BEYOND THE SEA

But who can reach that level? Who can taste “of the fruit of the tree of life”? Isn’t it necessary to be great and exalted, an eminent scholar, pure of heart and pure of mind, in order to attain a “religious experience”?

This question has no clearer answer than the words of the Torah that are read communally on the Sabbath preceding Rosh HaShana:

It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven and bring it to us, so that we hear it and do it?” It is not beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross the sea and get it for us, so that we can hear it and do it?” It is something that is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.⁶

Where can faith be found? Neither in heaven nor beyond the sea. It is very close, “in your mouth and in your heart.” Both theology and personal experience attest that every person utters words of faith and trust, although he may not be aware of the subconscious thoughts that emerge from his mouth, and he fails to discern what his heart truly believes. In every ordinary statement of “It will be all right,” there is a true expression of faith. The comforting words spoken to a crying child, the awareness that somehow it is possible to get through life despite all the obstacles – these and the like are expressions of belief in God.

There are people who deny God’s existence and yet believe with all their heart in the “eternity of Israel.” There are people who are unwilling to accept anything that is part of the religion, of the tradition, of the heritage of our ancestors, and yet they stand and fight for things they think are good and right. These may be intellectual or simple people, they may have lost their way or they may be on course – but they have a wealth of true faith “in their mouths and in their hearts.” There are hindrances and obstacles that lead them to think that they have no share in their heritage; they think that true religious faith is found somewhere far away in the high heavens, inaccessible to them, and so they do not search for it in the closest place possible. They do not nurture and develop the kernel that is found in their own selves.

6. Deuteronomy 30:12–14.

The word *emuna* (faith) is related to the word *omen*, one who raises and nurtures an infant. The seedling of faith must be tended like a child. The authentic experience must be developed and given room to grow; it must be given the opportunity to find expression. We must stop being afraid of ourselves, stop worrying about the approval of the Congress of Fools. We must find and nurture the thing that is so close, which needs only “to be done” – to be carried out and actualized.

THIS YEAR WILL BE A NEW YEAR

One year follows the other; “What *has* happened is what *will* happen.”⁷ A person can spend his whole life repeating externals, never questioning them. For such a person, every year will be another old year, the very same thing again – an endless dream, a closed circuit from which there is no exit.

For this reason, the *shofar* is sounded! Its unpleasant sound is a cry without words, for there are no words that would convey the message to disparate people. This sound simply cries out. Sometimes, it is a blast of broken sobbing over what has happened, over what has been lost, while other times it is a blast of warning against further pitfalls and sources of decline. And sometimes it is the sound of victory, of assurance that this year, in spite of everything, it is indeed possible that life will not be merely a repetition – that in the midst of the cycle of the seasons, there is a door of hope that this year will truly be a new year.

7. Ecclesiastes 1:9.

A Reckoning of This World

IN WHAT DIRECTION IS THE WORLD PROGRESSING?

An assumption widely accepted throughout the world – both as a practical basis for various religions and as a tacit assumption in many intellectual or “scientific” approaches – is that the world is of necessity progressing steadily, and that with time, everything must necessarily become better, improved, and more perfected.

This outlook has not always been the most widely held one. On the contrary, many considered it naive, unrealistic, and meaningless optimism.

The Greek myth about the world’s different eras – the first of which was a happy and perfect Golden Age, and the last of which is a hard, cruel, and base Iron Age – is an example of an essentially different world-view, a pessimistic outlook on the future of the world and the direction in which it is going. An even gloomier outlook is found in the Norse myth that concludes with the “decline of the gods,” with whom the whole universe declines as well.

A world-view in this spirit can be found in our own time as well – for example, among many scientists who see how the world’s population is increasing out of all proportion, and who observe with alarm

how the universe draws ever closer to its inevitable decline, even if not in the immediate future.

According to another view, human history is a succession of ever-recurring cycles: “What *has* happened is what *will* happen, and what *has* been done is what *will* be done. There is nothing new under the sun.”¹ This approach is also fundamentally pessimistic, for it assumes that all the efforts people make in their lives will ultimately fail to effect real change or advancement.

The Jewish view of world history is more complex, but the essence of it may be encapsulated in the following simple structure: Man begins his journey in the Garden of Eden, from which he progressively descends, falling step by step. This descent, however, is only one side of what transpires. At the very same time another, reverse movement, is active in the world – that of rectification and redemption. Stage after stage, at times openly and at times secretly, an inevitable, unstoppable process advances, ultimately culminating in redemption. Like the process of pregnancy leading to birth, man and the world are slowly elevated even above their starting point.

ILLUSORY PERFECTION

The conception of a world destined to be redeemed, a view of history as progressing towards “the end of days,” evolved from Judaism and became a basic element in the thought of the entire modern world. Through the teachings of Christianity (and to a certain degree those of Islam), this concept is well-known. Even the Communist “religion” promoted this belief as the basis of a way of life and a course of action on both the ideological and tactical levels. Communism based itself on the heartfelt certainty that the messiah (in other words, the revolution) would come, although he tarries.

The very same assumptions emerge from views and approaches maintained in the democratic and capitalistic western world, conceptions that seem to be far removed from any kind of faith. The theory of evolution, for example, through a slight change in meaning, metamorphosed from an explanation of the process by which animals adapt

1. Ecclesiastes 1:9.

to certain conditions to a schema outlining how, in every generation, things progressively improve and become more and more perfect. This is the source of the assumption that if we would only let reality operate on its own, with time, it would produce the good and desirable. If we do not stand in the way of progress, if we simply give the forces of the marketplace the freedom to operate, this would result in the constant improvement of human society.

The assumption that the world is getting better rests, among other things, on so-called proofs, such as the advance of technology or science. Yet these assessments are often based strictly on preconceived notions, according to which anything that is more complex or more artificial is also better.

People who think this way may remark indignantly, “Is something as base and primitive as this worthy of our era?” – as though our era is necessarily better, purer, more perfect than the preceding centuries, and accordingly is also incomparably nobler than any preceding time. Characteristically, the essentially neutral word “modern” has become synonymous with “good,” “desirable,” and “useful;” saying that something is “progressive” has come to mean that it is superior.

AN OBJECTIVE CRITERION OF PROGRESS

Closer consideration of these phenomena reveals that something has changed in the original concept, not only in the idea’s external forms, but in the idea itself. In the course of secularization, the idea has lost one of its vital dimensions – accountability, the criterion for and sense of something’s value.

The religious belief in the future redemption incorporates a system of reckoning, an evaluation that each year and even each act must undergo. The new year is not necessarily a better year; rather, it must first be subjected to the crucible of judgment. It must prove that man, the era, and the way of life are indeed worthy of continuation.

When people content themselves with the statement that such-and-such is “progressive,” thinking that thereby they have justified its existence, they have at least an equal chance of progressing toward hell in this world. When God (and with Him, the acceptance of absolute values) is “banished” from the seat of judgment, a substantial change

is made in one's whole outlook, not just in matters of faith and religion. When "man is the criterion," then not only is the criterion reduced, but it ceases to set any standard; the smallest dwarf will always be the equal of the greatest giant. By this criterion, one cannot tell if he has grown; what is worse, one cannot be set straight when he is shrinking!

Restoring Heaven's standard, restoring the values that do not originate within man himself and are not measured by man himself and for himself, is the basic idea of the "Day of Judgment" of the Heavenly Court.

The whole world is very much in need of Heaven's standard, which gives real direction. Any doctrine of general relativism of all values advances steadily toward the Deluge, whereas grasping the "finger of God"² is a true return to the conception of possible redemption.

2. Exodus 8:15.