

New Beginnings: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

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Tonight at sundown the shofar will sound wherever Jews gather to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of a new year. The shofar, a ram's horn, makes a sharp sound, not like any other, that is intended to pierce the armour around our heart. Where it is heard in the heart, it calls a quiet moment out from our busy day. Where it is heard in the mind, it calls us to pay attention. Where it is heard in the spirit, it beseeches us to return to ourselves: slow down and turn inward, become at one with ourselves.

According to legend, on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, the Angel of Life writes each of our destinies for the year to come. During the ten days following, the Book of Life is kept open. If during that time we merely try to understand how to take the Torah's insights with us into the everyday world, the Angel of Life must reconsider what has been written. Just reviewing how we have lived our lives in the past year will alter the future. The shofar will sound again at the end of Yom Kippur. Legend says that at that moment the Book of Life for the year to come is sealed. All is written. Our destiny is set.

The days after Rosh Hashanah and before Yom Kippur are a time to see ourselves as we truly are without the trappings, which may clutter our days and ways. What we will see is awesome. We are called to stand in awe of the universe within us and the universe that surrounds us. Not surprisingly these are called "The Days of Awe."

On Yom Kippur, a day of fasting and prayer, all vows, all promises we have made to ourselves in this last year; all commitments to unswerving thought, opinion and behaviour are cancelled, nullified and made naught. Now we are free to re-examine all of our motivations and desires, and all the roads we have chosen to walk, without critique. It is a day we have been given freedom to choose to be human again, even in this world where nations refuse sanctuary to the refugee, the poor are ignored and even scorned; where our environment is exploited and destroyed. On Yom Kippur we are called to look at how we may live our lives in the year to come. We consider our answer to Rabbi Hillel's question: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?

Over the years I have been fortunate to know several Rabbis. What they had in common was self-effacing humour and a love of telling a good story. Story is Judaism's secret weapon for creating a strong community. Story builds a sense of common identity. Stories tell them who they are.

I had a choice at this point in the sermon. I could go on and explain in detail how the Jewish people celebrate these days known as the High Holy Days or I could tell you some stories and parables like any good rabbi. It was an approach that worked for Jesus, who was also a rabbi. Fortunately for you I have chosen the latter path over a dry theological discourse.

To explain the shofar here is a parable told by Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov:

A King had an only son, the apple of his eye. The King wanted his son to master different fields of knowledge and to experience various cultures, so he sent him to a far-off country, supplied with a generous quantity of silver and gold. Far away from home, the son squandered all the money until he was left completely destitute. In his distress he resolved to return to his father's house and after much difficulty, he managed to arrive at the gate of the courtyard to his father's palace.

In the passage of time, he had actually forgotten the language of his native country, and he was unable to identify himself to the guards. In utter despair he began to cry out in a loud voice, and the King, who recognized the voice of his son, went out to him and brought him into the house, kissing him and hugging him.

Rabbis other than Jesus like to explain the meaning of their parables: The King is God. The prince is the Jewish people. The King sends a soul down to this world in order to fulfill the Torah. However, the soul becomes very distant and forgets everything to which it was accustomed above,

and in the long exile it forgets even its own “language”. So it utters a simple cry to its Father in Heaven. This is the blowing of the shofar, a cry from deep within, expressing regret for the past and determination for the future. This cry elicits God’s mercies, and God demonstrates God’s abiding affection for God’s child and forgives him.

A contemporary rabbi explains Rosh Hashanah this way to someone in his congregation who no longer sees the point of getting judged and accepting God as King.

He tells him the following: Rosh Hashanah is a birthday celebration. Whose birthday? The entire world's birthday. Today the world was conceived.

It's also the birthday of the first human being, the day on which human consciousness was breathed into God's creation. So Rosh Hashanah isn't just about reality emerging into being, it's about our human experience of that reality as well.

Now, birthdays are not trivial in the cosmic scheme of things—especially birthdays of reality. Each year, reality is provided a licence to exist for just that year and no longer. The licence expires and reality has to reapply again, year after year. So guess who's lining up at the counter of the equivalent of a Department of Motor Vehicles? We are.

Us: Hi, I'm applying for a reality licence for the coming year.

Clerk: *You have your proof of identity with you?*

Us: I think I lost it somewhere. It was one of those years, you know...

Clerk: *Well, in order to have a reality, you need to have an identity. I can't just give you a licence when even you don't know who you are. There could be outstanding fines and penalties on your account...*

Us: Hmm. Maybe it's not such a bad thing that I lost that identity after all. Actually, it had really gotten kind of worn out and unreadable. So how about I just create a new identity for this coming year?

Clerk: *For that, you'll need to speak to The Manager.*

As it turns out, incinerating your identity is an effective strategy to bypassing the Rosh Hashanah judgment scene. And, in fact, it plays neatly into the theme of the renewal of humankind. Problem is, how do you renew your identity if you don't have an identity? Something like a person in a coma reviving himself.

So that's why you need to see The Manager—God being the One that grants all things -- their identity to begin with. But then, seeing The Manager about renewing your licence on reality is more than a little paradoxical. It's comparable to Bugs Bunny walking into a Warner Brothers corporate meeting where they are considering axing the obnoxious bunny.

Bugs: Hi docs! I'm Buggy and I'm here to plead my case. Over the past year, I've made children laugh, adults chuckle...

Board: *Hold on! Who did you say you are?*

Bugs: Bugs Bunny. I've got my carrot to prove it. And I...

Board: *That's impossible! We're sitting here deciding whether or not Bugs Bunny is going to exist this year or not!*

Bugs: Exactly, so that's why I...

Board: *So if we haven't decided yet whether you exist or not, what on earth are you doing here?*

As absurd as it sounds, that is precisely the scenario every Rosh Hashanah, as we plead with the Ultimate CEO for a renewal on existence. That's what it means to “crown God as King”: We're out to convince God that God should continue running a world, also known as *reality*, with us inside it, and God should really enjoy it, too.

Rosh Hashanah gets the High Holy Days rolling as they move towards the holiest of the days, Yom Kippur. Here is a story about how seriously a Jew, even a secular Jew, considers this day.

In 1965, Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Sandy Koufax was at the top of his game. He was the Ritchie McCaw of baseball. Nicknamed “the Man with the Golden Arm,” his skill had helped propel the Dodgers to the World Series. The Dodgers faced the Minnesota Twins. The opening game was scheduled on October 6 – a date that happened to be Yom Kippur.

Although he didn’t consider himself particularly religious, Koufax didn’t have to think twice. “There was never any decision to make,” Koufax later recalled, “Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish religion. The club knows I don’t work that day.” Koufax sat out the game. I was 16 and living in L.A at the time. I remember well how upset Dodger fans were. The Dodgers lost that game without Koufax, but the fans forgave him later when, with his help, they won the 1965 Pennant.

For religious Jews Yom Kippur means more than missing a ball game. Under Turkish and then British rule, Jewish activity at the Western Wall – the last remnant of the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and the holiest site of the Jewish people – was severely constrained. British law codified the restrictions on Jews who wanted to pray at the Wall: Jews were not allowed to recite prayers loudly, they could not bring a Torah to the Wall, and they were forbidden from sounding the Shofar.

On Yom Kippur, 1930, at the conclusion of the final service, recited just before sundown, a sound rang out that had not been heard at the Western Wall in generations: the ringing blast of a shofar. A young rabbi, Moshe Segal, had smuggled a Shofar to the Western Wall, and blew it at its traditional place at the end of the Yom Kippur service.

Rabbi Segal was soon arrested, but in subsequent years, other Jewish boys – all in their teens – took his place. Each year from 1930 to 1947, Jewish teenagers smuggled Shofars to the Wall, concealed them under their clothing, and blew them at the end of Yom Kippur. The boys worked in teams of three, aiming to blow the Shofar at each end of the Wall and in the middle. Abraham Caspi, who was 16 when he blew the Shofar at the Western Wall in 1947, remembers being told “You’ll be the first, and if you don’t succeed or are caught, someone else will do it.”

British soldiers arrested the boys who blew the shofar. Each one was tried and sentenced to prison for terms of up to six months. Still, the volunteers were undeterred.

When Jordan captured the Old City of Jerusalem in 1948, they forbade any Jew from setting foot near the Western Wall for 19 years. In 1967 Israel recaptured the Wall, allowing all people – Jews, Muslims, and others, – access and the Shofar once again rang out.

Abraham Elkayam, who had been 13 when he blew the Shofar at the Western Wall in 1947, was in the area, and quickly made his way to the Wall. An Israeli soldier was standing by the Wall, blowing a Shofar, and Abraham asked him if might have a turn as well. Abraham blew the Shofar, and a nearby soldier asked him why it was so important for him to sound this Shofar.

Abraham Elkayam explained he was one of the last people to sound the Shofar at the Western Wall, in 1947. The soldier then introduced himself, telling him that he was the first one to blow the Shofar. It was Rabbi Segal who had started the yearly tradition back in 1930.

In preparation for Yom Kippur some Jews perform a ceremonial sacrifice called kaparat. It involves holding a rooster in one hand and the prayer book in the other while reciting this text, “this is my exchange, this is in my stead, this is my atonement.” The rooster is then slaughtered in a kosher manner and given to the poor for their feast held that day before fasting on Yom Kippur.

Once, on the evening before Yom Kippur, one of the followers of Rabbi Elimelech asked to see how he, Rabbi Elimelech, observed the custom of kaparat. They compared methods and other than the colour of the rooster they did it just the same, but still the disciple wanted to see his rabbi do it.

“You want to see an extraordinary kaparat?” asked Rabbi Elimelech. “Go observe how Moshe the tavern-keeper does kaparat. Now, there you’ll see something far more inspiring than my own,

ordinary kaparot.”

The disciple located Moshe’s tavern at a crossroads several miles outside of town and asked to stay the night. “I’m sorry,” said the tavern-keeper. “As you see, this is a small establishment, and we don’t have any rooms to let. There’s an inn a small distance further down the road.”

“Please,” begged the disciple, “I’ve been traveling all day, and I want to rest awhile. I don’t need a room – I’ll just curl up in a corner for a few hours and be on my way.”

“O.K.,” said Moshe. “We’ll be closing up shortly, and then you can get some sleep.”

After much shouting, cajoling and threatening, Moshe succeeded in herding his clientele of drunken peasants out the door. The chairs and tables were stacked in a corner, and the room, which also served as the tavern-keeper’s living quarters, readied for the night. Midnight had long passed, and the hour of kaparot was approaching. The disciple, wrapped in his blanket under a table, feigned sleep, but kept watch in the darkened room, determined not to miss anything.

Before dawn, Moshe rose from his bed, washed his hands and recited the morning blessings. “Time for kaparot!” he called quietly to his wife, taking care not to wake his guest. “Yentel, please bring me the notebook – it’s on the shelf above the cupboard.”

Moshe sat himself on a small stool, lit a candle, and began reading from the notebook, unaware that his “sleeping” guest was wide awake and straining to hear every word. The notebook was a diary of all the misdeeds and transgressions the tavern-keeper had committed in the course of the year, the date, time and circumstance of each scrupulously noted. His “sins” were quite benign – a word of gossip one day, oversleeping the time for prayer on another, neglecting to give his daily coin to charity on a third – but by the time Moshe had read through the first few pages, his face was bathed in tears. For more than an hour Moshe read and wept, until the last page had been turned.

“Yentel,” he now called to his wife, “bring me the second notebook.”

This, too, was a diary – of all the troubles and misfortunes that had befallen him in the course of the year. On this day Moshe was beaten by a gang of peasants, on that day his child fell ill; once, in the dead of winter, the family had frozen for several nights for lack of firewood; another time their cow had died, and there was no milk until enough money had been saved to buy another.

When he had finished reading the second notebook, the tavern-keeper lifted his eyes heavenward and said: “So you see, dear Father in Heaven, I have sinned against You. Last year I repented and promised to fulfil Your commandments, but I repeatedly succumbed to my evil inclination. But last year I also prayed and begged You for a year of health and prosperity, and I trusted in You that it would indeed be this way.

Dear Father, today is the eve of Yom Kippur, when everyone forgives and is forgiven. Let us put the past behind us. I’ll accept my troubles as atonement for my sins, and You, in Your great mercy, shall do the same.”

Moshe took the two notebooks in his hands, raised them aloft, circled them three times above his head, and said: “This is my exchange, this is in my stead, this is my atonement.” He then threw them into the fireplace, where the smouldering coals soon turned the tear-stained pages to ashes.

At sundown, we might choose this day to be Jews for the next ten days. How can it harm us to consider our true nature and how far we have strayed from it? How might it heal us to find hope in a new beginning during the Days of Awe and consider how we might be the fully human being we are capable of being? How freeing would it be to know that we are still loved and the past has been washed away? New beginnings are perhaps the holiest of times.

On Rosh Hashanah there are two traditional greetings: I offer you them both. May you have a good inscription and sealing in the Book of Life and I wish you a good, sweet year with all my

heart.