

Rosh Hashana - A Blow to Improvement

Parasha Vayeilech 5780

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Rosh Hashana is the New Year on the Jewish calendar, but according to Jewish tradition it is also the day of Judgement for the coming year. If I were to ask you what prayers you hope to express on this day, I suspect everyone could list a huge number of requests they have for the coming year: certainly a year of life, health for ourselves and our loved ones, maybe a new car, maybe a new job, maybe some kind of clothes, all the things we want. But the odd thing is that if we examine the prayers we actually say on these days it becomes clear that we are not focused on those kinds of requests.

The prayers we recite, the liturgy of the day is almost entirely focused on the hope that the majesty of God will be fully acknowledged in the world. We pray not for cars and clothes, but for God's presence to be recognized. The great sage R. Chaim of Volozhin argued that in truth our main focus during the High Holidays should be prayers for our spiritual welfare and the spiritual redemption of the world. This is a beautiful thought, but always strikes me as if we're not taking the day as seriously as we should be. If we truly believe it's the day of judgement, how could we not pray for the things we need? If we really feel we are being judged, should we not try to ask for a better year?

Luckily the great Rabbi Yisrael Salanter is quoted (in Siddur Siach Yitzchak) as having felt the same way. He agreed that Rabbi Chaim's way was the ideal for great individuals, but for us, more simple folks we should pray for the things that occupy our thoughts and not strive to act better than we truly are. So we have rabbinic license to pray and ask for the things we want.

But this past year I came across a passage which very much helped me understand Rabbi Chaim's position, and I would like to read it to you. This comes from Alister McGrath's biography of C S Lewis, where he is describing one of Lewis' proofs for the existence of God, as some being beyond the physical reality we know of: "Our experience of this Desire both discloses our true identity and intimates our true goal. We initially understand this Desire as a yearning for something tangible within the world; then we realise that nothing within the world is able to satisfy our Desire."

According to Lewis, we have Desires - yearnings which cannot be fulfilled by anything physical in the world, and which point to something beyond the physical, mundane, lower case desires which we generally pursue. These upper case Desires are indicative that there must be something beyond what we know, something which can ultimately bring us peace and satisfaction. This idea captured my imagination powerfully, and I think illustrates Rabbi Chaim's view nicely.

When we come to the High Holidays, it is not the toys and little trinkets we pursue all year which occupy us, but that true Desire. That searing, constant yearning for satisfaction and meaning which beats within us all year, which eludes us all year, today we have greater clarity that we want it fulfilled! As we sit here this morning we realize we need some resolution to our year long pursuit of Desire. The prayers on this day tell us there is only one satisfying answer and that is for God's majesty and presence be with us more in the coming year. When we

are connected with Him, we will find our Desires – capital case D – better met, and so our prayers focus not on toys but on Him.

I am struck that this is part of the essence of the shofar. We have discussed the wordlessness of the shofar, the ultimate meaning of which is the need to connect with God. Words can describe things, objects or status symbols we want, but they cannot capture what it means to live a life filled with God's presence, and so we retreat from words. Words cannot suffice for what we are trying to express, only the piercing sound of the shofar can begin to pierce through the veil of physical concerns we have spent our lives focused on.

We are about to hear that piercing sound, which will take us from the mundane pursuits of our year and remind us of our Desire for Him. Let the piercing shofar enter our hearts and bring us back to the true goals which should occupy us.

But once a year is not enough. We must take this theme and carry it with us day after day. Our community has groups which have been exploring Mussar – the Jewish tradition of ethical self-improvement. At the heart of this discipline was the notion that even a few minutes a day, day after day, is better than a marathon of fifteen hours once a year. The shofar is a marathon, but it's the consistent, disciplined review of just a few minutes every day which will cause true ethical growth. As we listen to the shofar let us each commit to reflect a few times a week this coming year – not too long and nothing complicated, just a few moments of introspection about how to be better. I suspect it will yield significant fruits.

While our prayers ask for God to redeem the world and show His presence openly, our actions this year can increase that likelihood. Our prayers are both with the hope to be answered, and a call to action – we can make them come true in some small way.