

Rosh Hashanna: Coronation Day.

Is Rosh Hashanna a day of joy or a day of awe?

On the one hand, we celebrate this day as a Yom Tov with sumptuous meals and festive dress. On the other hand, we experience the "dread of Judgement" as we pray for long hours on this Judgement day. How do these contradictory emotions; celebration and Judgement coalesce¹?

I have a feeling that of these two emotions, the better understood dimension of Rosh Hashanna is the "fear" aspect. Indeed it is the aspect of "Judgment" for which we prepare with our selichot and our Hatarat Nedarim. For many, the "highlight", the most emotive prayer of the Rosh Hashanna service is "*Unetanne Tokef*" that thrusts us into the courtroom of God, with all the associated emotions; the sense of awe, uncertainty, helplessness and trepidation.

And so, where does the Joy come from? What creates the Yom Tov aspect of Rosh Hashanna?

THE SHOFAR: THREE APPROACHES.

We shall attempt to answer our question by probing the effects, the function of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanna. The shofar, certainly the most central ritual of Rosh Hashanna should give us some clues as to the character of the day².

1. The Alarm Bell:

Let us begin with the Rambam in Hilchot Teshuva:

"Even though the sounding of the Shofar is mandated by the Torah, it contains a hidden message, namely: Wake up! Awake from your slumber! Emerge from your state of drowsiness and examine your life! Do Teshuva! Remember your creator! Here we address people who lose sight of the Truth in the frantic rush of life, always busy with one thing or another; things

¹ The duality that we have raised here is clearly evident in the first recorded Rosh Hashanna in Tanach. There, we read of an assembly called on Rosh Hashanna by the great leader, Ezra. See the book of Nehemia 8:1-11.

To confirm this reading of Nehemia, we should remember the Gemara in Betza 15b that brings this source as a proof-text that Yom Tov should be "half for God, half for man."

² In fact the ONLY description of Rosh Hashanna in the Torah is in the context of Shofar; see Vayikra 23:24 "Zichron Teruah," Bamidbar 29:1 "Yom Terua".

that in the final analysis are insignificant..." (Hil Teshuva 3:4)

This is one of the classic understandings of the Shofar. It is a wake up call, an alarm bell. It is there to shake us out of our complacency, to prompt us to take stock of our lives, to pay attention to the things in life that are "important but urgent." We are fully aware that "Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanna one for the righteous, one for the completely wicked, and one for average persons. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life; the completely wicked ... in the book of death." The Shofar heralds the start of the Ten Days of Penitence, calling the entire nation to break our routine, to shake of our complacent demeanour and to focus on our Avodat Hashem.

2. Inducing Mercy. Invoking the Akeida.

"Rabbi Abahu taught: Why do we sound a Shofar that is a ram's horn? The Holy One said: Sound a ram's horn before Me in order that I may remember favourably the binding of Yitzchak, the son of Avraham, and I shall consider it for you as though you have bound yourselves before Me." (Rosh Hashanna 16a)

In this Gemara, the effects of the Shofar are directed at God, not at man. The Shofar is sounded by Am Yisrael, "to recall Akeidat Yitzchak" thereby inducing God's compassion, the Midat HaRachamim, God's "soft side" if you will.

How does this work? It would appear that the invocation of the Akeida highlights Jewish self-sacrifice. This sense of self-sacrifice begins with the ultimate sacrifice, the Akeida, but continues throughout Jewish history, throughout a history of exile, expulsion and persecution. By focusing upon the Akeida, we are bringing before the Almighty the extent of Jewish commitment through the course of History. It is as if to say, "We have remained faithful to you, please recognize that dedication." Mercy in the courtroom is always about seeing the personal distress, the implications of the harsh punishment upon the plaintiff. Raising the memory of the Akeida serves to put our dedication to God at the forefront, thereby ensuring God's compassion.

So here are two approaches to the Shofar. Both revolve around the notion of Rosh Hashanna as a day of Judgment, a day on which human fate, personal and collective, lies in the balance. The first approach sees the Shofar as functioning as a wake-up call to man. The second approach sees the Shofar as a method of reaching out to God.

The Third Perspective: Tehillim (Psalms) Chapter 47

But I believe there is a third approach to the sounding of the Shofar. This approach reveals a fundamental underpinning to

Rosh Hashanna, and suggests a radically different perspective to our entire day.

The source for this approach will be the perek of Tehillim that we recite, seven times, before the Shofar is sounded³. The perek mentions the Shofar explicitly (v.6) but also alludes to the Shofar being sounded in the course of the multiple references, in noun or verb, to the Terua. Our seven-fold repetition of the chapter creates a meditation of sorts upon the words and themes of this perek⁴. Let us take a closer look.

1. For the Chief Musician. A Psalm by the sons of Korach.
2. Oh clap your hands, all you nations. Shout to God with the voice of a Terua!
3. For the LORD Elyon is awesome (nora). He is a great King over the Earth.
4. He subdues nations under us, and peoples under our feet.
5. He chooses our inheritance for us, the glory of Ya'akov whom he loved. Selah.
6. God has ascended with a Terua, The LORD with the sound of a shofar.
7. Sing "Elokim!" Sing! Sing to our King, Sing!
8. For God is the King of all the land. Sing praises with understanding.
9. God reigns over the nations. God sits on his holy throne.
10. The representative of the nations gather together, The people of the God of Avraham. For the shields of the land belong to God. He is greatly exalted!

What is this Perek about? In short, it is a Perek that calls for rejoicing – song, clapping hands, sounding the Terua. But why? What are they rejoicing about? We shall claim that the perek describes God being proclaimed as king of the world. This is the song of God's coronation. Drawing upon the imagery of real kings, human kings, and the pomp and ceremony of their coronation procession, this perek tries to apply that image to Hashem.

Now where is the image of a coronation? If you read the perek closely, you will discern a sense of movement. After proclaiming God's majesty, we then state the fact that "God has ascended." Ascended what? Where? Later, we read: "God sits on his holy throne." Apparently, the perek visualises an image of God, obviously a metaphorical image, but one modelled upon the world of real-life royalty. We view God in a coronation procession as He slowly makes His way to His royal throne, being installed there in a state of absolute power and control over the world.

³ Massechet Sofrim 19:2 is the earliest place in which this perek is linked explicitly to Rosh Hashanna.

⁴ Agnon, in his book, Days of Awe, writes that the seven-fold repetition is designed to penetrate the "seven heavens." (Agnon must have had a source for this but he doesn't quote the source.) Is the seven-fold repetition to "break through" to ourselves, or to "break through" to God?

Many of the phrases here are clearly reminiscent of Biblical coronation ceremonies:

"clap your hands"	"They clapped their hands and proclaimed: Long live the King!" (II Kings 11:12)
Song and music at a coronation "sing" "sound the Terua"	"and all the people followed playing flutes, and with great festivities the earth exploding with the noise." (I kings 1:40) – at Solomon's coronation.
"the voice of a Terua!"	"Teruat Melech" - The Terua of a king (Bamidbar 23:21)
"God has ascended with a Terua, The LORD with the sound of a shofar"	"When you hear the sound of the Shofar, proclaim: Absalom is King!" (II Sam 15:10) "Sound the Shofar and say, Long live the King!" (I Kings 1:34) "They sounded the Shofar and proclaimed : Yehu is King!" (II Kings 9:13)
"God sits on his holy throne"	"Come and sit on my throne" I Kings 1:35

All of these textual parallels should convince us beyond doubt that the language of the Perek is transcribing the imagery of a coronation of the King of Kings.

The theme of God's majesty, His rule over the universe, is as I perceive THE central theme of Rosh Hashanna. In our prayers, we acclaim God repeatedly as "Melech al kol Haaretz," (King of the world) "Hamelech Hakadosh." The entire environment created by our prayer book states clearly that the significant and dominant event of the day is God's rule, his control over the universe.

By reading through this chapter⁵ focusing on certain phrases and by amplifying them, we shall illustrate the latent energies within this powerful perek.

THE NATIONS

Who is being called to declare the majesty of Hashem? "Oh clap your hands, ALL YOU NATIONS. Shout to God with the voice of a Terua!" The Jewish people call to the nations of the world to recognise Hashem. This is a universal call. The people of Israel call the nations of the world to rally around God and to accept His majesty over the entire world.

It is here that we turn our attention to the unusual name of God that is utilised in this Perek – the term ELYON. I believe that this name is not brought here indiscriminately. I quick search

⁵ My reading is highly influenced by Prof Meir Weiss's article in his book Mikraot KeKavannatam which I strongly recommend to you all.

through Torah finds this name in an episode from the life of Abraham.

'And Malki-Tzedek, King of Shalem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of the Supreme God (EL ELYON). He blessed him saying; "Blessed be Avraham to EL ELYON, creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be the Supreme God, who has delivered your foes in your hand." Bereshit 14:18-20)

Let us remind ourselves of the scene. Avraham had set out to battle in order to rescue his nephew Lot. Avraham was victorious, defeating the enemy and thereby saving the inhabitants of Sedom. The King of Sedom, the evil city, offers Avraham an alliance. But Avraham refuses to associate with Sedom preferring instead to build an association with a very different king, the king of Shalem (which traditionally is identified with Jerusalem.) The King of Shalem is named Malki-Tzedek – my King is righteousness – and he talks of an EL ELYON, a single Supreme God. In Malki Tzedek Avraham finds an ally. He shares Abraham's two groundbreaking principles; that of monotheism, and that of Justice and Kindness⁶.

Avraham clearly finds his religious partner in Malki-Tzedek as we hear Avraham talk adopting Malki-Tzedek's terminology in his speech. Here as Avraham refuses the proposal by the King of Sedom.

"I swear to the Lord (YHVH), EL ELYON, creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, 'It is I who make Avraham rich.'"

Note how Avraham combines his own connotation for God – YHVH – with Malki-Tzedek's EL ELYON!

Why does our Perek in Tehillim use the phrase ELYON? Because we are inviting the world to recognise God! If we want to invite the nations to proclaim God's majesty, then we should use THEIR terminology. And the terminology of gentile monotheists is ELYON!

THE NATIONS RESPOND

We have clearly established that this perek sounds a clarion call for all peoples to recognise God. Do they accede to the request?

In verse 5 we speak only of Israel as "chosen" by God. In verse 7 Hashem is still spoken about as "our king," Israel's king. Apparently God is still at this stage, unrecognised by the world. And yet, the perek ends with a sense that the world unites with Israel in their faith:

"9. God reigns over the nations. God sits on his holy throne.

10. The representative of the nations gather together, The people of the God of Avraham. For the shields of the land belong to God. He is greatly exalted! "

Clearly, the gathering of the "dignitaries of the Nations" to hail God, is indicative of their change of heart. The world has seen the light! But there is a second group in this verse; "The people of the God of Avraham." Who exactly are this group? Some commentators (Rashi, Radak) say that this refers to the Jews. In which case, we have two groups, the Nations and the Jews proclaiming God's majesty. But Ibn Ezra has a more radical reading. Ibn Ezra believes that this venerable title - people of the God of Avraham - refers to ALL the nations⁷. Avraham was the founder of a faith, who called upon all humankind to recognise God. Here we return to Avraham and EL ELYON. And now we have a far more dramatic end to the Mizmor. At the end of the perek ALL MANKIND is united in God's family, and Israel is subsumed in the more universal family of nations! As the nations too convene of their own volition to herald God as King, they become children of Abraham, "the father of all converts." At the end of the perek, Hashem is "God of Abraham," God of Everyman.

UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM

But here, we should note a certain tension. After all, Avraham is the founder of our nation. He is not simply the father of all monotheists. This tension echoes throughout the perek. On the one hand, we call upon "all nations" (2) to clap and hail Hashem as King, and we talk of (v.10) "representatives of all nations" gathering together to salute God. We perceive God's rule and the awareness of God's majesty as a universal issue.

And yet, the chosenness of Israel, God's love for Israel, how God "subdues nations under us, and peoples under our feet" (v.5) gives prominence to the unique place that Israel hold in this drama. The nations are invited, but to play what role? What exactly is the nature of the relationship between Israel and the nations here?

Ironically, if we read our perek closely, it would appear that the nations' acceptance of God's rule will take place only after God has subdued "nations under us, And peoples under our feet." It would appear that there will NOT be some automatic understanding of God's presence. The nations will have to realise God's power the hard way. This rather pessimistic prognosis of world history suggests that until the day in which God reveals Israel as victorious in some manner, no nation will truly accept God's majesty. And yet, there WILL be a day when the world nations will join Israel, sharing our view of God and morality, and indeed, we pray for this day of universal unity with

⁶ Cf. Bereshit 18:19

⁷ See also the Gemara in Chagiga 3a which sees "Avraham" here is the archetypal convert.

which the chapter concludes. Here is a universalistic⁸ vision in which the entire world will join us as a single family of Abraham, in recognising the Almighty as King.

Now this theme – ultimate 0universal realisation of God amidst the centrality of Israel - goes to the very heart of Rosh Hashanna. Our special additions to our Amida revolve precisely around this theme: that God be accepted as master over the world, through the understanding of the status of the Jewish nation, and that this will inaugurate a new world order which fights evil and nurtures morality and goodness:

"And so, God, cast fear into all your creations ... let all creations fear You....let them unite into a single collective to perform Your will with a complete heart ...

And so, give honour to your people, praise for those who fear you, hope for those who await you, ... joy to your land, happiness to your city...

Indeed let the righteous see and rejoice, let those who are moral be happy ... let all wrongdoing lose its voice, and all evil immediately disappear, for the reign of evil will vanish from the world.

And you - God - will reign alone over all your creations, in Mt. Zion your dignified abode, and Jerusalem your holy city..."

The vision of Rosh Hashanna is God establishing a rule of TZEDEK and MISHPAT⁹ in the world, eradicating evil and supporting truth. The entire world will be affected by this. But the Jews, faithful to God throughout history will be especially joyous as they see their faith come to fruition. And indeed God will rule the world from the epicentre of Jerusalem.

"NORA"

⁸ This is not the only place in which our dream for the future hopes for the unification of all mankind. See the closing chapters of the Book of Yishayau, Zecharia, Yoel.

⁹ In our Amida, God's majesty is mentioned many times particularly in reference to the virtue of "mishpat" (Hamelech Hamishpat) – See the passuk we quote in our tefilla, containing both Tzedek and Mishpat as key factors in God's malchut: Isaiah 5:16 (and the context there.)

Interestingly, Tehillim 47 mentions the notion of God' holy "throne" (v. 9).

There is only one place in Torah, in which we hear about the throne of God. It is in the war against Amalek (Shemot 17). There we read: "Hand on the throne of God! The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages." This phrase gives an image of an oath – see Rashi there -whereby the hand on God's throne expresses a pledge for all time that God an evil are diametrically opposed. God's throne is the antithesis of Amalek. It represents integrity, justice and kindness.

In verse 3 We use the phrase: "Ki Hashem Elyon Nora." We have already focussed upon the name "Elyon." But let us also pay attention to the term, "Nora" that we use to depict God. Try to translate it. What do you come up with? It clearly derives from the same root as Yirah – fear. Is the use of the word "nora" informing us that God should be inducing feelings of dread. And how does that emotion square with the joyous temperament of our Mizmor. If God is frightful, then why are we so happy?

Prof. Meir Weiss offers a different understanding of this word based upon a verse in Shemot 20:17. To understand the context, the nation are assembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai. They hear God's voice and they flee, terrified by the intensity of the experience. Moses tries to reassure them:

"Do not be afraid (*al tira'u*) for God has appeared in this manner in order to put you to the test and in order that His "Yirah" will be forever with you, so that you do not sin."

How does one translate the word Yir'ah? If it should be translated as "fear" then why is Moses saying, "Do not be afraid!" In fact if this is the correct reading Moshe should be saying: Great! That is wonderful that you are afraid. Now remember that feeling every time you wish to sin. But he doesn't say that. He says that we should not be afraid, but rather have Yir'ah. What is that.

Weiss suggests that Yir'ah is closer to awe. When we sometimes encounter a truly great person, or an individual of immense importance, we might experience an emotional nervousness of great proportions, bordering on fear, or fright. And yet at the same time, we might feel attracted and drawn to that powerful individual. We might describe this by talking about a feeling of awe – a mixed emotion denoting greatness and distance while simultaneously experiencing attraction and admiration. This is Yir'ah, and this is the title of God as NORA! His coronation induces intense joy, at the same moment as we feel a sense of trepidation at God's magnitude and power. Here we have the apprehension of fear mixed with a feeling of attraction.

IN SUMMARY

Tehillim 47 describes God's coronation. As we blow the Shofar this Rosh Hashanna we salute God, proclaiming, heralding our acceptance of God as King¹⁰. We call the entire world to join us in this task. On the one hand, God's presence is a fearful one. On the other hand, the thought of a world-order that represents truth and justice prevailing over a world of tyranny and evil, is a heart warming thought. The understanding that God will take

¹⁰ I have already said that Malchut is the dominant theme of Rosh Hashanna. My belief is that this is the basis for visiting springs of natural water on Rosh Hashanna (known as Tashlich.) Rather than throwing sins into water, see I Melachim 1:9, 38 where the spring was the place of royal coronations. We go to a spring to crown God as king!

charge of his world is a vision that fills us with inspiration, hope and joy.

And so, we are excited, and also nervous. Joy and fear mixed in a strange hybrid that is unique to Rosh Hashanna.

Our prayer then is precisely the prayer that we will be reciting in shul this Rosh Hashanna. That we be written and sealed for life, and be granted a good year – spiritual and material. That God will indeed rule our planet raising the banner of truth, goodness and life and that we will see an end to the forces of evil and suffering in the world.

May God bless all Israel with a year of peace!
Shanna Tova!