



Thoughts and Intentions

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Although Rosh Hashanah is a familiar *chag*, it is also an intriguing one. If we examine key elements of the day, many questions arise:

1. “The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 11a) records an opinion that states the world was created on Rosh Hashanah. Yet the Torah does not explicitly link Rosh Hashanah and creation. Why not?”
2. Blowing the shofar is a key part of the day and takes a central role during the service. However, it is the only positive *mitzvah* unique to Rosh Hashanah. What does this indicate about the *chag*?
3. In tractate Rosh Hashanah, there are many digressions in order to discuss Rosh Chodesh. What is the link between Rosh Hashanah and Rosh Chodesh?
4. The Talmud (Megillah 31b) strangely equates Rosh Hashanah with Shavuot. When explaining why we read *Parashat Ki Tavo*, which contains the curses that would befall the Jewish people for not keeping the *mitzvot*, just before Rosh Hashanah, Reish Lakish explains that “one year and its curses should be finished before the next begins.” The Talmud compares this to the reading of the curses in *Parashat Bechukotai*, just before Shavuot, providing the same explanation and indicating that Rosh Hashanah and Shavuot are intrinsically comparable. What is the nature of this connection?

The answer to these questions lies in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 11a), which records the disagreement between Rabbi Eliezer, who states the world was created in Tishrei, and Rabbi Yehoshua, who argues it was created in Nissan. Rabbeinu Tam (Tosafot, Rosh Hashanah 27a) resolves this debate by explaining that while the

world was *physically* created in Nissan, it was created six months earlier in thought and intention, in Tishrei. This is the key to understanding the essence of Rosh Hashanah: It is a day which centres around thoughts and intentions.

This is why the only positive *mitzvah* of the day is listening to the shofar. The *beracha* we make is not on *blowing* the shofar, but on *hearing* it. The act of hearing is passive and is reliant on intent: By focusing one’s attention and concentrating on the sound, one can fulfill their obligation to hear the shofar. One need not get up or go to shul or blow the shofar in order to discharge their obligation; it is sufficient to simply pay attention. This is explicit in the Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 3:7) which discusses whether one can fulfill the commandment of shofar simply by passing a building where a shofar is being blown. The Mishnah states: ‘even though this one heard and this one heard, this one paid attention [and fulfilled the *mitzvah*] and this one did not pay attention [and did not]’. The defining factor is a person’s intent.

This also explains the connection between Rosh Hashanah and Rosh Chodesh. The Beit Din could only declare a new month after two witnesses had travelled to Jerusalem to testify that they had seen the new moon and been cross-examined by the court (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah, especially 2:6, 3:1). The essence of Rosh Chodesh and Rosh Hashanah are the same: They both depend on human attention and subjectivity. Indeed, Rosh Hashanah coincides with Rosh Chodesh Tishrei, making it more dependent on witnesses and Beit Din than other holidays.

This also explains the parallel between Rosh Hashanah and Shavuot. Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Pesach commemorate concrete historical events – the people’s forgiveness after the golden calf, the protection of the nation in the

desert and the exodus. Rosh Hashanah and Shavuot are different, as the Torah does not explicitly link these holidays to any historical event. Instead, these holidays focus on our personal, subjective relationships with Hashem. On Shavuot, we reflect on the place of the Torah in our lives. On Rosh Hashanah, we reflect on our relationship with Hashem and our service of Him throughout the past year. Rosh Hashanah and Shavuot are new beginnings that require us to focus on our personal, subjective relationship with Hashem.

Rosh Hashanah is a time that requires us to reflect upon our flaws and failings over the past year, which can feel frightening, alienating and dejecting. But this misses the true goal of our reflection and of Rosh Hashanah: The deepening of our relationship with Hashem. On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem invites us into a relationship with Him for the coming year – one that involves responsibility but also one that is deeply meaningful and joyous!

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