

Rosh Hashanah: Judgment and Creation

A Study Guide, The Nesiya Institute 5766/2005

היום הרת עולם, היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים
*Today the world is born,
Today all the world's creatures stand in judgment*

Introduction

Rosh Hashanah carries within it a challenging and often unsettling duality. On the one hand the Rabbis tell us that the first of Tishrei – Rosh Hashanah – celebrates God's creation of the world. We gather together as Jews to acknowledge God's kingship over the entire world, and express our appreciation for the incredible gift of all existence. The shofar serves as our trumpet at the coronation ceremony that we re-experience every year.

On the other hand, Rosh Hashanah is also described in the Talmud as a day of judgment; a time when God calls all of creation forward for an accounting of their deeds during the past year. The fact of this judgment instills this day with a tremendous sense of awe and fear. Our mood is somber, and our thoughts are heavy. From this perspective, the shofar is best interpreted as a cry, a wordless appeal for God's mercy.

How can we reconcile the conflicting themes of this day? How do we go from celebratory family meals to reciting prayers that ask us to reflect on our mortality and uncertain future? Is the day about the birthday of the world, or is it about "who will live and who will die"?

Teshuva, the central religious act that dominates the Rosh Hashanah period, combines these two competing themes. It includes both the difficult process of self-judgment and personal accounting, and celebrates the power of creation and renewal. The act of teshuva demands both somber and even fearful self reflection and honest assessment, yet at the same time affirms the potential for human self creation instilled in us by divine gift. We as humans have the ability to overcome our failings through the creative power bestowed upon us as beings created in the divine image.

Our challenge on Rosh Hashanah is to allow ourselves to fearlessly admit and reflect on the damage that we may have caused ourselves and others and, at the same time, to rejoice in our capacity to change and improve ourselves and the world around us.

We hope the following texts and questions can enrich your own and your family's relationships with judgment and creation during this season of renewal.



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Sources and Questions

From Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, Halachic Man, pp. 110, 113

Repentance, according to the halakhic view, is an act of creation – self-creation. The severing of one's psychic identity with one's previous "I," and the creation of a new "I," possessor of a new consciousness, a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals – this is the meaning of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future....

The desire to be another person, to be different than I am now, is the central motif of repentance. Man cancels the law of identity and continuity which prevails in the "I" awareness by engaging in the wondrous, creative act of repentance. A person is creative; he was endowed with the power to create at his very inception. When he finds himself in a situation of sin, he takes advantage of his creative capacity, returns to God, and becomes a creator and self-fashioner. Man, through repentance, creates himself, his own "I."

Questions to Think About:

Can you think of one way in which you would like to "create yourself"?

Do you know someone who seems to be engaged in constantly re-creating themselves?

How does Soloveitchik's definition of "repentance" differ from other definitions you might have?

From Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, Halachic Man, pp. 101

When God created the world, He provided an opportunity for the work of His hands – man – to participate in His creation. The Creator, as it were, impaired reality in order that mortal man could repair its flaws and perfect it. God gave the Book of Creation – that repository of the mysteries of creation – to man, not simply for the sake of theoretical study but in order that man might continue the act of creation.

Questions to Think About:

What does Soloveitchik mean when he writes about human beings completing the act of Creation?

In what ways do you participate in the "creation" of the world?

From Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness, biography by Edward Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, p. 240

These [high holy] days are dedicated to establishing God as king within us... The deepest human longing is to be a thought in God's mind, to be the object of His attention.

Questions to Think About:

What does the phrase "to be a thought in God's mind" mean to you?

How can Heschel's approach help us view God's judgment as a positive or even celebratory opportunity rather than as something that we fear?