

Touching the Mystery:

A Study Sheet with Nesiya for Rosh Hashana 5775/2014

Rosh Hashana carries a certain mystique. There are the unanswerable questions of what will be in the coming year, but when we look a little deeper, it seems that the core themes have a built-in degree of hiddenness. The more we explore, the picture becomes more mysterious and deep understanding becomes more elusive. Rosh Hashana always seems a little beyond our grasp. The wordless shofar, the hidden moon, the story of Creation are all concepts that we can relate to initially, but the more we explore them, the more this holiday seems to require us to not fully understand them with our reason and intellect, rather we are lead to leave some aspects hidden, unknown and in the realm of experience.

Shofar: The Mystery of Wordless Communication

שפת אמת, ראש השנה, תרל"ב

וזהו התקיעות שהוא קול בלי דבור. שדיבור הוא ההחלקה הקול לתנועות נפרדים ושונים. אבל הקול אחד מיוחד דבוק במקורו והיום בר"ה החיות דבוק בשורשו כנ"ל קודם ההחלקות והשתנות. ורוצין לדבוק עצמן בפנימיות החיה כנ"ל.

Sefat Emet, Rosh Hashana, 1871

Shofar blasts are sound without speech. Speech is the division of sound into separate and differentiated movements. The one unified voice is joined to its source, and today, on Rosh Hashana, the life-force is connected at its root to the state prior to the separation and division. [Through the shofar] one desires to connect oneself to the depths of this life-force from before the division into words.

The primary symbol of Rosh Hashana, the shofar, is an example of expression that is not intellectual, but experiential. It is likened to the cries of a mother or a child, which one can intuitively understand. Why might we begin the year from a place that is 'prior' to words? How do you express yourself without words? Is it easier or harder to communicate without them? What might it feel like to 'connect to the life-force' that is prior to speech?

The Moon: The Mystery of Hiding

תהלים פא:ד

תקעו בחודש שופר; בכסה, ליום תגנו.

Psalms Chapter 81:4

Blow the horn at the new moon, at the full/hidden moon for our feast-day.

תלמוד בבלי, מסכת ראש השנה ה.ח.

איזהו חג שהחדש מתכסה בו? הוי אומר זה ראש השנה

Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Rosh Hashana 8a-b

Which is the holiday that the month is 'covered up'? This is Rosh Hashana.

Background: Most of the holidays on the Jewish calendar are in the middle of the lunar month, when the moon is full and highly visible. Only Rosh Hashana falls on the first day of the lunar month, when there is no visible moon. Rosh Hashana therefore has a built-in element of something being hidden. What does this suggest to you about the meaning of the holiday? Why might it be important for there to be a sense of hiddenness at the beginning of the year? What about you is still 'hidden' as we enter the New Year?

Creation: The Greatest Mystery of All

תלמוד בבלי, מסכת ראש השנה, י-יא.

תניא רבי אליעזר אומר בתשרי נברא העולם... ר' יהושע אומר בניסן נברא העולם.

Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Rosh Hashana 10b-11a

Rebi Eliezar says that the world was created in Tishrei (fall) ...Rebi Yehoshua says that the world was created in Nisan (springtime).

What is this argument about? What images are conjured up by fall or spring? How does it make the story of humanity different if creation was in the fall or in the spring?

מסכת חגיגה פרק ב, משנה א

...וכל המסתכל בארבעה דברים, ראוי לו כאילו לא בא לעולם--מה למעלה, מה למטה, מה לפני, מה לאחור.

Masechet Chagigah, Chapter 2, Mishna 1

For anyone that examines the following four things, it would have been fitting for him not to have been born: What is Above, What is Below, What is Before and What is After.

Rosh Hashana is the only time of the year that relates directly to the commemoration of the creation of the world. It is reasonable that this might lead one to begin to ask questions such as 'why' and 'how' or what came before? Why might this statement from the Talmud forbid such questions outright? Is there no room for this kind of curiosity? Are there any questions that you think we should not ask? What do you do when you know you cannot ask a question?

A Thought Experiment in Expanded Consciousness for the New Year:
Touching the Mystery that is Our Own Consciousness

The Cry of the Shofar is meant to wake us up from our slumber! Where are you?! What are you doing?! Examine yourself! One year is ending and another beginning! How do we begin to think about ourselves and our thoughts? The Baal Shem Tov taught that we are where our thoughts are. So let us embark on a short journey towards touching the mystery of our consciousness.

Where is your consciousness? It is certainly inside of you, no? Is it in your mind? Is it in your heart? If you slowly draw your attention to feeling the keys as you type (or scroll), does your consciousness shift to your fingertips? You can draw your attention the part of your body that is touching wherever you are sitting at this very moment. Is that your consciousness? You can also come to be more aware of more subtle things: You can become aware of the weight of your clothing on your own body. Can you also feel the weight of the hair on your head? But is your consciousness limited to your body? Right now, you are focusing on these words on the screen (or in print), just beyond your physical self. If you listen carefully, you might be able to hear the soft whirring of another appliance across the room. Maybe even a buzz from the lights. The other sounds in the room are there, but you are not paying too much attention to them. If you stop reading here, and begin to focus, you could hear something even in the room next door. Perhaps your consciousness is there in the next room? Could it be outside? You can sense the breeze that's outside, even though you are not there. Are you aware of the noise and traffic passing by on the street? Can you expand your consciousness to there? You can even begin to experience things that are not present with you in a sensory way through your memory or thoughts. You continue reaching out as you expand through space, time and imagination. But what is expanding? Is it you? Your consciousness? Where are *you*? Have 'you' expanded? The more you focus on yourself, the less you are able to expand and be diffuse and touch the infinite. The more present you are with yourself, the less you are able to touch the mysterious that lies just beyond.

Rosh Hashana calls us to be expansive. To be great. To dream big. However, the real depths always remain hidden just beyond the veil. We approach and may even touch the Mystery, but in a flash, it is hidden again behind undifferentiated sounds, the silent moon, and the unanswerable questions.

Blessings for a meaningful, insightful, eye-opening New Year!