



WEEKLY PARASHA

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The Teshuva of Kingship

As Rosh Hashanah approaches, many of us are preparing for this Day of Judgment by engaging in the traditional process of *teshuvah*, of repentance. This process, as described by the Rabbis, is one that is focused inward. It involves serious self-reflection: assessing our behavior over the past year, truly regretting our sins and misdeeds, and committing to act differently in the future. This approach to Rosh Hashanah and *teshuvah* is the dominant one, but it has become so dominant that it has overshadowed an equally important dimension of the day and the process of *teshuvah*.

Rosh Hashanah is not just a day of judgment. As a day that commemorates creation, it is also a day of *malkhut*, of God's kingship. The centrality of this theme can be seen in its being one of the three major sections of the Musaf Shmoneh Esrei, together with those of remembrance and *shofar* blasts. Additionally, our regular *ha-El ha-Kadosh* blessing in every Shmoneh Esrei is transformed into the blessing *ha-Melekh ha-Kadosh*: "Blessed are you, God, Holy King." Kingship is also the theme that appears in the blessing of the sanctity of the day of Rosh Hashanah in every Shmoneh Esrei and in Kiddush: "Blessed are you, God, King over the entire world, Who sanctifies Israel and this Day of Remembrance." The message is clear: The day of Rosh Hashanah is equally a day of God's kingship as it is a day of being remembered by God.

For many years, I treated kingship as a secondary aspect of Rosh Hashanah, as a prerequisite to making it a day of judgment. To stand before God in judgment can only take place after we recognize God's sovereignty over the world and over us. It was kingship in the service of judgment. But what would kingship mean as a theme by itself, as a primary identity of the day?

In considering this question, we should first note that on Rosh Hashanah we speak of God's sovereignty not only in terms of the past (God created the world) or the present (we recognize God as King on this day), but most

significantly in terms of the future ("And then the righteous will see and rejoice... and all evil will fade away like smoke..."). It is about cultivating a messianic vision. It is a day when we imagine what a more perfect world, a more holy world, could look like, a day when we strive to envision a world in which God's presence is more felt and more manifest.

What would happen if we prepared for Rosh Hashanah by working to internalize this vision? What would happen if our prayers of Rosh Hashanah were infused with a yearning for such a future world? The answer is obvious: We would be driven to try to do something about it. We would strive to model this imagined future in our own lives and in our interactions with others. And we would seek out opportunities to make a real difference in the world, to bring the world just a little bit closer to a world that is more perfect, more Godly.

This striving for a more perfect world and working to actualize it can itself be considered a form of *teshuvah*. Just as there is a *teshuvah* associated with Judgment, there is a *teshuvah* associated with Kingship. It is not a *teshuvah* motivated by a fear of judgment. It is not even a *teshuvah* that is about judging oneself. It is a *teshuvah* motivated by a vision. It is a *teshuvah* about human dignity, characterized by belief in our capacity and in realizing our potential. It is a *teshuvah* that points not only inward to oneself, but also outward to the entire world.

In his famous work *Orot Hateshuvah*, Lights of Repentance, Rav Kook describes this *teshuvah* in metaphysical terms, as a cosmic yearning of the entire world to achieve a more perfect state. This *teshuvah*, according to Rav Kook, is of a much higher level than the "practical *teshuvah*" which focuses on past deeds and remorse for sin. This is the *teshuvah* that preceded creation, and which infuses all of creation with an impetus to achieve its fullest potential.

In a moving passage from chapter five of *Orot Hateshuvah* (Ben Zion Bokser, trans.), Rav Kook writes:

Every removal of sin resembles the removal of an obstruction from the seeing eye, and a whole new horizon of vision is revealed, the light of vast expanses of heaven and earth and all that is in them. The world must inevitably come to full repentance. The world is not static, but it continues to develop, and a truly full development must bring about the complete state of health, material and spiritual, and this will bring repentance along with it.

The spirit of repentance hovers over the world, and it is that which endows it with its basic character and the impetus to development. With the scent of its fragrance it refines it and endows it with the propensity to beauty and splendor.

In his powerful and poetic way, Rav Kook paints a picture of a dynamic world striving to achieve perfection. The key themes in this passage are those of *potential* and *sight* and *vision*. The spirit and the fragrant scent tempt us. They pull at us and hold out to us the promise of something greater that exists just below the surface. They are the potential that is inherent in creation, a potential that can be smelled and tasted by us if our senses have been properly trained.

And the first sense that we must train is that of sight, or more accurately, vision. This Kingship *teshuvah* calls on us to see differently, to envision a more perfect world, to refuse to accept all the problems of the world, all the problems in our communities, all the problems in our personal lives, as unfixable and as givens. It demands that we “remove the obstructions from our eyes,” that we see new horizons, that we see the world not as it is but as it can be.

This *teshuvah* is self-directed as well. It asks us to look at our own self-focused work in a different light than that to which we have been accustomed. Do not start by asking what you have done wrong and how you can stop yourself from repeating those actions. Start, rather, by closing your eyes and by envisioning what the ideal you looks like. Not what a great *tzaddik* looks like, but what you, the real you, with all your talents and all your shortcomings, could ideally be. What is the potential within you that has not been actualized? How would the ideal you interact with others? What life choices would this ideal you make – in

parenting, in your career, in your education?

Cultivate this vision, and then work to achieve it. Having the vision is key. No one ever achieved their full potential without being driven by a vision. If you don’t know where you are going it is unlikely you will ever get there. A vision inspires and focuses. With one’s eyes fixed on that end goal, one will be able to work toward it, slowly perhaps, at times only taking one step forward with many steps backward. But with commitment and focus, it will become a reality.

Florence Chadwick was one of the greatest swimmers ever, male or female. She had a vision of herself as a champion swimmer and she worked tirelessly to achieve it. She became the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways, setting a time record each way. She later attempted to swim the 26 miles from the California coastline to Catalina Island. When she was within a half mile of her goal, a heavy fog set in. Despite urging from those in the boat accompanying her, she was unable to complete the swim. Later she said, “I’m not trying to make excuses for myself, but if I could have seen the land, I think I would have made it.” A few months later she tried again. And again a heavy fog set in. But this time, she made it to Catalina. She said that what enabled her to finish was a mental image of the shoreline that she kept in her mind the entire time. With a clear vision, a person can even see through the fog; a person can remain focused and directed even in the midst of life’s uncertainties.

Let us make this Rosh Hashanah a Day of Kingship. Let us devote our work to a *teshuvah* of Kingship. Let us envision a more ideal world and a more ideal self. And let us spend the next year keeping that vision fixed before our eyes, working slowly and surely to achieve it. Let us help bring the world one step closer to that day when *vi’hayah Hashem li’melekh al kol ha’arets*, that day that God will be one and God’s name will be one.

Shanah Tova!

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