

**Weekly Column by:**

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## **Rosh Hashana's Enigma - Fearful with Joy**

from September '19

In the Torah, Rosh Hashana is called YOM T'RUA (a day of blowing the horn: Bamidbar 29:1). Although horns are generally sounded on joyous occasions, here the horn or, more specifically the shofar, signifies a solemn holiday, when we are all put on trial. We all stand before the Supreme Judge - G-d! This heavenly trial continues for 10 days until Yom Kippur.

On Rosh Hashana, according to the Mishna in Masechet Rosh Hashana, "all inhabitants of the earth pass before Him [G-d] like sheep (KIVNEI MARON)." Our heavenly Shepherd, G-d, counts each and every one of us, determining what our fate will be in the coming year. This statement is the basis of the well-known piyut, UNTANEH TOKEF, which is recited on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. This Piyut includes the moving words "Who will live and who will die, who will rest and who will continually wander."

Obviously, Rosh Hashana doesn't appear to be a joyous holiday. How can we rejoice if we are passing under the staff of our Heavenly Shepherd and do not know what the future holds? We are fearful and tense; thus, on this holiday, the Talmud informs us, we do not recite

Hallel - the song of praise that is part of the liturgy on Jewish festivals: "The ministering angels said to G-d, 'Master of the Universe, why does Israel not sing a song of praise on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur?' 'While the King sits on His throne with the Book of Life and the Book of Death open before Him,' G-d replied, 'can Israel sing a song of praise?'" (Talmud Rosh Hashana)

However, if we take a look at the different versions of this Mishna in Rosh Hashana, we can suggest that perhaps the text should read not KIVNEI MARON, but rather kivinumeron - like battalions parading before the King.

This interpretation changes the meaning of the Mishna dramatically. Accordingly, we are not only on trial, but rather we are participating in a military parade to celebrate a joyous occasion - namely the coronation of G-d as King of the entire universe. Thus, we can say that Rosh Hashana is actually concerned primarily with crowning G-d anew as our Heavenly King, and that we must sound the shofar in joy to honor His coronation. We must stand proudly before G-d as soldiers, and declare with utmost solemnity the fact of His dominion.

The above interpretation explains why on Rosh Hashana we do NOT recite Selichot - the penitential prayers we recite before Rosh Hashana and through Yom Kippur, in which we ask G-d to forgive our sins. Accordingly, we can

see that Rosh Hashana has two very different, seemingly contrary aspects. On the one hand, we fear the King's judgment and, on the other hand, we stand tall before Him as soldiers in His heavenly regal army.

These two elements may seem to be contradictory, but together they give Rosh Hashana its unique character. During its two days, we are BOTH fearful and proud. We find this combination in the Torah: "you stand this day all of you before Hashem your G-d, your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all of Israel" (D'varim 29:10). Rashi cites a Midrash that connects the beginning of this Torah reading with the end of the previous parsha.

In the latter is a terrifying description of our fate should we disobey G-d: disease, pogroms and holocausts, a life of constant fear. Rashi states: "When Israel heard all of the 98 curses, their faces were pale as chalk as they asked Moshe, 'How will we be able to go on living, now that we have such knowledge of what might befall us?' Moshe comforted them, saying, 'You stand this day all of you before Hashem your G-d – although you have angered G-d in the past, you have survived to this day. Take heart.'"

Each year we look back on the previous 12 months and fear the consequences of our past actions, not only at the personal level, but at the national level

as well. Our "bank balance" of good deeds and bad is frightening. The blowing of the shofar is unnerving. Yet, our anxiety is countered by the knowledge that we have survived for close to 3500 years as a nation despite persecutions and holocausts.

Rashi ends his interpretation of the above verse with an emphasis on the word HAYOM (this day): "The Torah says, 'You stand this day all of you before Hashem your G-d.' Just as day never ends, but constantly passes from darkness to light and back again, similarly, G-d has shone His light upon you in the past and will continue to do so in the future. The curses and the suffering enumerated here help maintain you and they cause you to stand erect and proud before Him" (D'varim 29:10).

I will end with the traditional blessing: "May this year and its curses end and may the New Year with its blessings now begin." **ESP**