



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

ROSH HASHANAH: AN ANATOMY OF THE JUDGMENT¹ MODULE I



We all want to be written and sealed in the Book of Life on Rosh Hashanah for a sweet new year. Yet, to ensure a positive verdict, we first need to know more about the nature of the judgment and the criteria for success or failure.

SOURCE 1: MISHNA ROSH HASHANAH 16A ON ROSH HASHANAH WE ARE ALL JUDGED

The world is judged four times a year: On Passover for the harvest; on Shavuot for fruit trees; on **Rosh Hashanah all of the inhabitants of the world pass before God (in judgment) like sheep**, as it is stated: "The One Who created [sees together] their hearts, the One Who understands all of their actions" (Tehillim/Psalms 33:15). And on Sukkot there is judgment for water.

מתני' בארבעה פרקים העולם
נידון: בפסח – על התבואה,
בעצרת – על פירות האילן, בראש
השנה – כל באי עולם עוברין לפני
בבני מרון, שנאמר: "היוצר יחד
לבם המבין אל כל מעשיהם", ובחג
נידונין על המים

The Mishna informs us that all of mankind is judged on Rosh Hashanah.

Let's look at how the Talmud describes this judgment.

SOURCE 2: TALMUD, ROSH HASHANAH 16A ON ROSH HASHANAH WE ARE ALL JUDGED

Rava said: A Tanna from the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: At four times of the year the world is judged: On Passover concerning grain; on Shavuot concerning fruits that grow on a tree; on the festival of Sukkos they are judged concerning water; **and mankind is judged on Rosh Hashanah and the sentence is sealed on Yom Kippur**. And when the Mishna is taught (above in Source 1), its comments are made with reference to Rosh Hashanah at the beginning of the judgment period.

אמר רבא: האי תנא דבי רבי
ישמעאל היא, דתנא דבי רבי
ישמעאל, בארבעה פרקים העולם
נידון: בפסח – על התבואה,
בעצרת – על פירות האילן, בחג
נידונין על המים. ואדם נידון בראש
השנה, וגזר דין שלו נחתם ביום
הכפורים. וכי קתני מתניתין –
אתחלת דין

¹ Module is based upon an essay in *Sifsei Chaim on the Moadim*, Vol. 1 p. 102-109, by Rabbi Chaim Friedlander.

Question: What is the difference between how the Mishna describes the judgment on Rosh Hashanah versus the Talmud?

The Mishna only relates that all people are judged on Rosh Hashanah. The Talmud adds that this judgment is not sealed until Yom Kippur. So, we all have 10 days to change the decree!

The famous Unesaneh Tokef prayer on Rosh Hashanah seems to follow this ruling from the Talmud:

"B'Rosh Hashanah Yikasevun, U'Byom Tzom Kippur Yechasemun"

On Rosh Hashanah they will be written (judged) and on Yom Kippur they will be sealed.

A little further in the Talmud there is yet another description of the judgment:

SOURCE 3: TALMUD, ROSH HASHANAH 16B
THE NATURE OF THE JUDGMENT II

Rabbi Cruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, "Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah: One of totally evil people, one of completely **righteous people**, and one that includes people with both good and bad deeds [average/Beinonim]. The completely **righteous individuals** are **written (judged) and sealed** immediately for life. The totally **wicked individuals** are **written (judged) and sealed** immediately for death. The [sentence for the] individuals with both good and bad **deeds (most people)** is **suspended from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur**. If they merit, they are inscribed for life, if they do not merit, they are inscribed for death."

א"ר ברוספדאי א"ר יוחנן
שלשה ספרים נפתחין בר"ה
אחד של רשעים גמורין ואחד
של צדיקים גמורין ואחד
של בינוניים צדיקים גמורין
נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר לחיים
רשעים גמורין נכתבין ונחתמין
לאלתר למיתה בינוניים תלויין
ועומדין מר"ה ועד יוה"כ זכו
נכתבין לחיים לא זכו נכתבין
למיתה

Question: This source provides a fundamentally different view of the judgment. What is the conflict between these two sources, both seemingly referring to the same judgment taking place on Rosh Hashanah?

The first source from the Talmud (Source 2) relates that ALL of us are initially judged on Rosh Hashanah, yet this judgment is only sealed on Yom Kippur. However, the second source (Source 3) above, counters that both righteous and wicked people are judged and sealed on Rosh Hashanah, without any recourse to Yom Kippur.

Question: How do we make sense of these seemingly irreconcilable sources?

The group of commentators collectively known as Tosefos, raise a startling question regarding Source 3, whose answer will allow us to reconcile our two conflicting accounts of the judgment highlighted above.

Question: How can R' Cruspedai (Source 3) say righteous people are judged and sealed for life on Rosh Hashanah, while evil people are judged and sealed for death, when we see that righteous people die (in any given year) while wicked people live!?

SOURCE 4: TOSEFOS, ROSH HASHANAH 16B - GOOD PEOPLE SOMETIMES DIE, WHILE BAD PEOPLE SOMETIMES LIVE?!

...A righteous person is one whose merits are greater [than his bad deeds], and a completely wicked person [is defined] as one whose transgressions outweigh [his good deeds]. Sometimes, however, the righteous are sealed for death, and the totally wicked for life, (i.e **in a given year, we find that some good people will die, and some bad people live. This is a direct contradiction to Source 3 above, which states that the righteous live while the wicked die.**) ... Tosefos addresses this apparent contradiction by stating: *Therefore, the **definitions of death** for the wicked and life for the righteous (mentioned in Source 3 above) must refer to **life in the World to Come**, (not life in this world where good people do die and evil people live).*

צדיקים קרי למי
שזכויותיו מרובים
ורשעים גמורים למי
שעונותיו מרובים
ופעמים הצדיקים
נחתמין למיתה
ורשעים גמורים
לחיים... וכל זה
דקרי הבא גבי
רשעים מיתה וגבי
צדיקים חיים כלומר
לחיי עולם הבא

Tosefos answers this very strong question by saying that Source 2 and Source 3 are talking about two different periods of life - **life in this world (Source 2) and life in the world to come (Source 3).**

If we adopt this explanation what emerges is there are actually **two judgments on Rosh Hashanah**, one concerning life in this world (Source 2) and one concerning life in the world to come (Source 3)!

Question: What do you think these two different judgments refer to?

Judgment regarding **life in this world** seems to be the more straightforward of the two: Life and Death in the coming year as well as the quality and circumstances of our lives including: health, wealth, opportunities, successes, failures etc.

Regarding this judgment, we are ALL judged on Rosh Hashanah, yet God holds off on sealing our fate until Yom Kippur.

Question: Yet, what does you think it means to be judged for “life in the next world” (R’ Cruspedai in Source 3) while we are still alive in this world?

This question is even more perplexing when we factor in the well-established tradition that we are all judged at the end of our lives regarding whether we will enter the world to come. If so, what is the need for a yearly evaluation?

In part II of this module, we will delve into the mysterious nature of this judgment “on the world to come,” what it has to do with our lives in this world, and how the two judgments relate to one another, if at all.