



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

ROSH HASHANAH: AN ANATOMY OF THE JUDGMENT¹

SOURCE AND DISCUSSION SHEET



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.

INTRODUCTION TO THE JUDGMENT ON ROSH HASHANAH

The Talmud explains to us (Rosh Hashanah 16a) that all mankind is judged on Rosh Hashanah, and this judgment is sealed on Yom Kippur, with the ability for us to change it through our sincere teshuva (repentance).

We are familiar with the sequence of this judgment, as it mirrors what we say each Rosh Hashanah in the famous Unesaneh Tokef prayer:

"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.

Yet, the Talmud on 16b describes the judgment another way, where three books are opened, one for the righteous, **one for the wicked and one for the average people, "beinonim" (literally in between)**. The **righteous and the wicked** are written and **sealed immediately on Rosh Hashanah**, while the judgment for **the average person is suspended** until **Yom Kippur**.

Most of the rabbis² explain that these two renditions refer to **two separate judgments** – the first judgment refers to **life in this world – olam hazeh** while the second refers to **life in the world to come – olam habah**.

Judgment regarding **life in this world** seems straightforward: Actual 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**.

However, it's very unclear what it means to be judged on the world to come.

Question: How can we be judged for the world to come while we are still alive?

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.

Question: If this is so, what is the need for a yearly evaluation? It would seem to be out of place, because presumably this new existence will take place only after we die.

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

² The majority of Rabbis including the Vilna Gaon, the Ramchal, the Rama and Tosefos understand these judgments refer to this world and the next, while the Ran and the Ramban hold both refer to the judgment in this world only.

Perhaps there is a basic question about the judgment we can ask, that may actually lead us to an understanding of this enigmatic judgment on the world to come.

Question: Judgment typically takes place at the conclusion of a period upon which we are being judged, like the last day of school when we receive our report cards. Yet, our judgment takes place on Rosh Hashanah – the New Year - the equivalent of the first day of the new school year. Why?

The answer is that unlike most judgments which focus upon the past, this judgment looks towards the future (getting closer to the world to come). Consider the following source which links the historical creation of the world, which occurred on Rosh Hashanah, as the template for the judgment relating to the upcoming year:

SOURCE 1: RABBI CHAIM FRIEDLANDER, SIFSEI CHAIM MOADIM VOLUME 1, P. 106, TWO JUDGMENTS ON ROSH HASHANAH

...Like all holidays, each festival has its own unique spiritual energy. So too, regarding Rosh Hashanah, for **on this day each person receives his new purpose and spiritual level.** According to the Ran as cited in the Pesikta, **“This is the first day of Your Handiwork, a remembrance of the first day (of creation).”** Just like Adam was created, receiving his purpose in life and his new spiritual potential on (the original) Rosh Hashanah, **this day was set for all time, as the day of establishing each person’s spiritual potential (level) for the entire year,** ... Rosh Hashanah sets our spiritual life for the year, and how our spiritual potential will be expressed.

Setting the day of judgment on Rosh Hashanah - the original day of creation - signals to us that this judgment is not merely about the past, but the spiritual level that we will be able to attain in the newly re-created year ahead! It’s about the array of opportunities that we will have to achieve our full potential.

Question: Though these remarks clarify better the direction of the judgment, we don’t really have a handle yet as to the criteria for the judgment. On what basis are we judged?

As Rabbi Friedlander mentions in several places, the judgment is one which looks to the future but keeps the track record of the past year in mind when setting the judgment. In other words, on the one hand we are what our record says we are, and the judgment will reflect our actions in detail during the past year. However, there is a way to change the past and leapfrog ahead of our records from last year. Consider the Torah portion that we read on Rosh Hashanah describing the story of Yishmael and Hagar, that provides a hopeful path for us all to change our judgment.

SOURCE 2: TORAH PARSHAS VAYERA (21:17-18) JUDGMENT IS WHERE YOU ARE

God heard the cry of the boy, and a messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for **God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.** Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאָךְ
אֱלֹקִים אֶל־הָגָר מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מָה־
לָךְ הָגָר אֶל־תִּירָאִי כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶל־קוֹל
הַנֶּעֱר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־שָׁם׃
קוּמִי שְׂאִי אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר וְהִזְזִיקִי אֶת־יָדְךָ בּוֹ
כִּי־לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשִׁימָנּוּ׃

The Rabbis understand that although the descendants of Yishmael (the Arabs) will torment the Jews throughout history, **God judges him at that moment – “b’asher hu sham, where he is”** – Yishmael did teshuva and was deserving of life.

Question: How can we apply this concept to our judgment on Rosh Hashanah?

It means that no matter how badly we have underperformed this past year, if we sincerely want to live better, more elevated lives, **God judges us on that basis – where we stand on Rosh Hashanah!**

Imagine going to school on the first day of the new year, and presenting your case to the teacher, that you should get an A in the class this term. But you only got a B- last year? That's ok, provided you are truly genuine and serious about consistently performing in a way that is commensurate with receiving an A this year. If so, the report card for the term ahead is signed and sealed on the first day of the new school year with an A.

The opportunity on Rosh Hashanah is to realize that we are literally becoming **"born again Jews"** - re-created with a brand-new spiritual potential - according to our deepest and most sincere desires! It is awesome because we have such immense power to literally change the trajectory of our lives. However, by the same token, it is frightening in that whatever we attain on Rosh Hashanah will set the boundaries of our "spiritual lanes" for the entire year ahead! Consider this contemporary and very vivid description of the opportunity presented to us on Rosh Hashanah:

SOURCE 3: RABBI SHIMON APISDORF, THE ROSH HASHANAH YOM KIPPUR SURVIVAL KIT, P. 66 - THE BIG BANG THEORY OF ROSH HASHANAH

What preceded the big bang was an infinitesimally small mathematical point that was not made up of matter, contained no energy, occupied no space, and preceded time itself. Paradoxically, this inconceivably tiny point contained within it the entire universe. This tiny primordial point represents ultimate potential.

Rosh Hashanah is the (spiritual) big bang. On Rosh Hashanah we neither ponder our future nor grapple with our past. On Rosh Hashanah we confront our ultimate potential. Each one of us is destined to explode. Each one of us, with our lives, will create an entire universe. Each one of us possesses a profoundly immense and unique potential. The question is this: Will the universe we create be a true reflection of the potential we possess?

This spiritual "big bang" is up to us. How much do we want to bring God's spiritual priorities into our lives? Our answer will determine our judgment and will define for us how much of "olam haba - the world to come," we will merit to live with this year in "olam hazeh – this world."

Let's take one more step to define the criteria for this judgment more clearly and practically. Consider another source from Sifsei Chaim by R' Chaim Friedlander introducing another major theme of Rosh Hashanah – Making God King!

SOURCE 4: RABBI CHAIM FRIEDLANDER, SIFSEI CHAIM MOADIM VOL. 1, PG. 107 MAKING GOD KING (BRINGING MESSIAH)

According to what measuring stick is our spiritual potential set (our judgment) and written in the book of life? **(How much do we desire to further) the purpose of the creation, to reveal the glory of God and His Kingship in the world....**Therefore, all of our practices of the day and our prayers are only to reveal His Kingship, having almost nothing to do with any requests of our own regarding life in this world.

Therefore, **the main task of Rosh Hashanah, is to "Make Me King over them."** This raises up the person's spiritual potential, **causing him to be written in the Book of Life.** When a **person merits** to be **set for spiritual life in the year ahead, already in "this world," he experiences** the spiritual life of the **"world to come...."**

Rabbi Friedlander is telling us that the criteria for us being judged for a vibrant spiritual life, full of opportunity, depends upon how much we want to make God King in this world?

Question: How does Making God King relate to being judged for spiritual life in the year ahead?

“Making God King” is the slogan for the process of taking God from an idea, belief or theory to becoming a felt presence in our lives and in this world. Through committing to live a sincere, elevated spiritual life of Torah and mitzvos, we bring God, and “the world to come” into our world. Every day we say the Jewish Pledge of Allegiance, the Shema. It is a statement about remembering to bring God into all areas of our lives, and fittingly, it is the final verse that we say on Rosh Hashanah in the Kingship section of the prayers. Our judgment on “life in the world to come” is based upon how much we want God to be sovereign in our world – a felt presence in all dimensions of our lives!

SUMMARY AND ONE MORE IMPORTANT QUESTION:

There are two judgments on Rosh Hashanah, one regarding one’s spiritual life in the year ahead and one regarding one’s physical life in the year ahead.

One judgment is macro and one micro. The macro judgment is set around how much spiritual potential – life of the world to come – one will merit in the coming year. The micro judgment is about physical and material life in the coming year and the quality of one’s life.

Question: Both of these judgments begin on Rosh Hoshana. For most of us (except for the completely righteous and evil), they are sealed on Yom Kippur. But how do these judgments relate to one another?

The spiritual judgment on *olam haba* – the world to come is macro and sets our opportunity channel for the coming year. The physical judgment – micro – are the relevant physical details and occurrences of life that will allow a person to carry out this spiritual mission throughout the year.

Imagine a salesman who has convinced his boss to double his sales territory this next fiscal year. In order to accomplish his greater goals, he will need additional resources, like an expanded expense account, perhaps a company car and maybe a secretary. Once his boss sets his job and sales responsibility, then he must give him the resources to get the job done. So too, with God.

Rosh Hashanah is about the “big picture.” Prepare yourself during the month of Elul, and on Rosh Hashanah opt in to God’s Agenda for the world through Torah and mitzvos and sincerely WILL to Make Him King. Hopefully, each of us will succeed and be written and sealed for life on Rosh Hashanah. If not, we get to show God that we are really serious about this throughout the next 10 days leading up to and including Yom Kippur. Our judgment on **“this world”** will depend upon our judgment on **“the world to come,”** and it is suspended (for most of us) until Yom Kippur. Eventually, both judgments will cohere on the Day of Atonement, where the physical circumstances and occurrences of life decreed for the year ahead will perfectly match one’s granted spiritual level and potential for the year!

One thing is clear, it is an awesome opportunity to be able to set the course of our entire year in one day! It is fully in our hands and depends upon how much we truly want to make God King in our lives. Let’s maximize the opportunity!