



נתיב נצח...

Acquittal on Rosh Hashana

The Gemara (Rosh Hashana 16a) relates: “Said HaKadosh Baruch Hu, ‘proclaim before me declarations of sovereignty, declarations of remembrance, and declarations of the Shofar. Declarations of sovereignty – in order to accept my sovereignty over you; declarations of remembrance – in order that your remembrance may arise in favor before me through the Shofar.’”

This statement of the Gemara raises the following questions.

1. What does a verbal acceptance of HaKadosh Baruch Hu’s sovereignty amount to?
2. Why are we obliged to accept HaKadosh Baruch Hu’s sovereignty specifically on Rosh Hashana, when He is King throughout the entire year?

The Shulchan Aruch (OH 603a) states: “Even one who does not eat bread baked by a non-Jew [during the year] should avoid doing so during the Ten Days of Repentance [- from Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur]. This ruling of the Shulchan Aruch raises the question (put by Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler in *Michtav MiEliyahu*): What is the point of imposing a stringency which is due to lapse after ten days?”

Rabbi Shalom Sharabi, in his ethical preface to the mystical meaning of the Shofar-blasts, quotes the Tikunei Zohar to the effect that those who ask Hashem on Rosh Hashana to give them benefits such as money, long life, health etc., are likened to



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brazen-faced dogs who bark “bow-wow.” This remark is puzzling, in view of the fact that in his kabbalistic siddur, Rabbi Sharabi writes that when one recites the prayer “Recall us for life etc.” [included in the first blessing of the Amida during the Ten Days of Repentance] he should have himself in mind.

Rabbi Levy Yitzchak of Berdichov writes in his book *Kiddushas Levy*:

The verse says (Vayikra 23:40): ‘You shall take to yourselves on the first day the fruit of the hadar-tree...’ The Gemara understands this verse to refer to the first day of the reckoning of sins. What does this statement mean? The Gemara tells us that if a person repents from fear of G-d, his intentional sins count as inadvertent acts; but if a person repents from love of G-d, then his intentional sins count as meritorious acts. On Rosh Hashana, which is devoted to repentance from fear of G-d, we are left with inadvertent sins that still need to be expunged. That is the basis of the practice of “Tashlich” whereby we cast our sins away upon the water. On Succot, which is devoted to repentance from love of G-d, we need to retrieve those sins which are now considered meritorious actions. That is the rationale of the mitzvoh of drawing water for an offering on Succot. The first day of Succot, when HaKadosh Baruch Hu counts our sins count as mitzvot, is thus the first of the reckoning of sins.

The thoughts expressed by Rabbi Levi Yitzchak are beautiful and deep, yet it remains to be explained how it is that repentance, of which there is no mention in the prayers of the day, is a theme of the festival of Succot.



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The Gemara (Avoda Zara 2b-3b) relates that in the end of days the nations of the world will ask of HaKadosh Baruch Hu that he give them mitzvot so that they can receive eternal reward like the Jews. HaKadosh Baruch Hu upbraids them, saying “The one who prepares [meals] on Shabbos eve may eat on Shabbos itself,” i.e. the time for earning reward has passed. Nonetheless, HaKadosh Baruch Hu offers them the mitzvoh of dwelling in the Succah – an “easy mitzvoh.” Their people all go and install themselves in Succot, whereupon HaKadosh Baruch Hu makes the weather blisteringly hot, and the people flee the Succot, kicking them on the way out. The nations thus lost the mitzvoh of Succah, and with it, their last opportunity for eternal reward. The Gemara objects that the Halacha exempts Jews from their obligation if the weather is too extreme, yet they do not lose the mitzvoh. The Gemara replies that the nations lose the mitzvoh because they kick the Succah.

Rabbi Eliezer Kahan, in his *Mussar* work *Nachalas Eliezer*, observes that this passage from the Gemara gives us a test for a person’s true attitude to keeping the Mitzvot. Should a person feel distressed when forced to abandon a mitzvoh, it is a sign that his heart is in the right place; but should he feel relieved, it means that observance of the mitzvoh is in fact a burden for him.

HaKadosh Baruch Hu point was that the nations are unqualified for eternal reward because their observance of the mitzvot is inherently self-centered. Why, though, did He choose the mitzvoh of Succa to convey this lesson? Analysis of the following passage from the Gemara provides the key to the answer.



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The Gemara (Rosh Hashana 16b) relates:

On Rosh Hashana three books are opened. One is for the totally wicked, one is for the totally righteous, and one is for the average person. The totally righteous are inscribed and sealed for life straightaway; the totally wicked are inscribed and sealed for death straightaway; and the [judgement of the] average person is suspended from Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur. Should the average person acquire sufficient merit [in the interim] he is inscribed for life, but should he lack merit he is inscribed for death.

I put the answer to our question why HaShem chose the mitzvoh of Succa to get the point across to the nations that they are inherently unqualified for reward, in the form of a parable. A king who ruled over many countries used a ruse to test the loyalty of his subjects. The king sent agents provocateurs to incite the citizens to break the laws of the realm. The king summoned representatives of the various nations to appear before him on his birthday. The citizens of country but one proved disloyal to the king. The unfaithful nations were punished each according to its crimes. The citizens of the one nation which remained faithful to the king's laws enter in groups. The first group are those righteous citizens who upheld the king's laws. They proclaim their love of the king and loyalty to his rule. The king's agents have no offences with which to charge them. The king rewards the people by granting their requests and providing for their every need. The next group are the average citizens; they too proclaim their loyalty to the king. However, the king's agents testify that this group's



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observance of the laws was inconsistent. Abashed, the people confess their disobedience, offer various excuses, and express remorse. They reaffirm their unconditional faithfulness to the king. The king decides to put them on probation for ten days: should they prove their loyalty during that time they will be reinstated and their wishes granted. The last group are the malefactors among the country's citizens. Unlike the other groups, they do not bother to proclaim their loyalty and press their demands upon the king instead. Infuriated, the king punishes them on the spot for their temerity and their evildoing.

During their ten days of probation, the group of average citizens acquit themselves admirably. They uphold the king's laws and statutes to the letter. On the tenth day they come before the king to proclaim their loyalty and ask his forgiveness. The king receives them with honor, pardons them for their past sins, and grants them their wishes.

Struck by this turn of events, the king's ministers cast doubt on the motives of the two other groups of citizens – the righteous and the criminal. Perhaps their motivation was insincere? How can it be known if they kept the laws not from love and reverence of the king but from fear of punishment? The king proposes a test of their motives. The citizens are to pitch tents for themselves in the garden of the king's palace and live there for a week. The king is looking to see which citizens will tolerate the inconvenience with goodwill, and which will resent it. Those who serve the king from love will not mind the imposition, but those whose service is self-centered will recoil.



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The king can thus infer retroactively whether their past service was pure or insincere. Most of the citizens dwell in their tents with joy and goodwill and pass the test. Overjoyed, the king asks them to stay an additional day and invites them to a feast in the royal palace.

The meaning of the parable is this: Once a year on the day the world was created all persons pass before HaKadosh Baruch Hu one by one. The nations of the world are judged at night, but the Jewish People is judged during the day. The righteous among the Jews reaffirm their loyalty to the King of Kings when they recite the prayer “The Holy King” along with the other additions to the prayer-service that proclaim HaShem’s sovereignty. The righteous thereby repudiate the treasonous counsel of the yetzer hara and reconfirm their fidelity to G-d’s will. The righteous take the opportunity to ask the King to inscribe them for life so that they may continue to serve Him. Pleased with their deeds and purity of heart, the King inscribes them for life and seals the judgement.

The average Jews are those who strive to do G-d’s will but from weakness succumb to the temptations of the yetzer hara. HaKadosh Baruch Hu gives these Jews an extra ten days in which to prove their love of Him. During these days we thus adopt extraordinary stringencies, in order to show that our intent is always to do His will, even though we may fail through weakness. That is the reason for the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch mentioned above that one should avoid eating bread baked by a non-Jew during the Ten Days of Repentance. We reconfirm HaShem’s sovereignty on



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Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, but the yetzer hara challenges our declarations of loyalty as self-serving. HaKadosh Baruch Hu gave us the mitzvoh of Succa following Yom Kippur as an opportunity for us to show by joyous dedication that our earlier repentance was sincere. In the end of days HaKadosh Baruch Hu will give the same mitzvoh to the nations of the world as a test of their sincerity. Only those who pass the test are invited to rejoice with the King in his palace afterwards on Shemini Atzeret.

The Tikkunei Zohar, which castigated those who ask for benefits on Rosh Hashana, was referring to the wicked who seek only personal gratification and ignore the purpose of the day: to hearken to the sound of the Shofar and proclaim HaKadosh Baruch Hu as King of the world.

Rabbi David Daniel HaCohen