

Rosh Hashanah- Day 1. 2020/5781

Of course, we all know that Rosh Hashanah means the New Year, and thus, the new Hebrew month we are celebrating, Tishrei, is the first month of the New Year, right? Wrong! In fact, it's the seventh month. This has always been a curious twist, even to the rabbis of the last two thousand years: why is it that Rosh Hashanah begins in the seventh month whereas Pesach/Passover begins in the first month, the month of Nissan? One must remember that as the Hebrew calendar is lunar, it is not connected to natural events of the solar year, such as the winter and summer solstices.

Passover is actually two holidays rolled up into one: the first day is officially Chag Hapesach, the day in which all families would eat of the pascal lamb. This served as a remembrance of the blood of the lamb that was painted on the lintels of Israelite households in Egypt, to save them from the Angel of Death, the harbinger of the final, tenth plague. The second part of this holiday was known by many names, Chag Hamatzot- the holiday of matzohs, Chag Ha'Aviv, the holiday of Spring, but the last one, Chag Z'man Chairutainu, the holiday of the season of our liberation, is the most telling. The whole telling of the seder story recounts the suffering of the Hebrew slaves at the hand of the Egyptians followed by the plagues that forced Pharaoh to let the Hebrews leave, followed by miracles that saved the Hebrews such as the parting of the Reed Sea, followed by the birth of the new nation of Israel. It is no wonder that we celebrate Nissan as the first month in the Hebrew calendar because the whole story of the exodus from Egypt was if, after a long gestation period, the Jewish people were finally born into freedom, into liberation.

On the other hand, Rosh Hashanah is also known as Yom Hazikaron, which typically is translated as the Day of Judgement, but can also be translated as the Day of Remembrance. Rabbis have used the idea of Day of Judgement to mean that this is when G-d starts a formal judgement of each of us to weigh how we have fared in the prior year and whether we merit another year of life.

But today, I would like to talk about Rosh Hashanah as the Day of Remembrance. By making Rosh Hashanah the seventh month, we are being told to reflect back to the first month, the month of our liberation, a time when we were given freedom. In this regard, we are free to realize what it is like to NOT be a slave; we can act any way we want, but most importantly, we have

to live by our actions, whether they are right or wrong. What is most striking about the stories in the Torah right after the Exodus tale that described this freedom is the many stories about the Israelites' discontent: they grew tired of the manna, they grew impatient when Moses did not come down quickly enough from Mount Sinai and so they build an idol- a golden calf, the insurrection by Korach to return to Egypt, Miriam was jealous that her brother Moses took a Cushite wife, the two elder sons of Aaron grew impatient with the protocols for bringing sacrifices, so they brought their own "strange fires", and the list goes on. How is it that the generation of people who witnessed the most dramatic of G-d's miracles, miracles that produced their liberation from slavery just months and years earlier became so discontent, so unappreciative of their newfound freedom? The Torah is here to tell us one simple lesson: human nature. Indeed, it is not coincidence that throughout the story of the wandering of the Sinai desert, we are referred to as the Children of Israel, arguably because we were not yet mature enough to make grownup decisions. Human nature, I'm here to tell you, is to forget.

If the month of Nissan and the holiday of Passover is the moment of our birth as a nation, the month of Tishrei and the holiday of Rosh Hashanah is the moment when we must remember what freedom is and how we are responsible for the actions we take.

How do we know that the rabbis were thinking about Passover and the month of Nissan during Rosh Hashanah? It's because they chose a Torah reading that recalls Sarah's difficulties in getting pregnant, only to give birth to Yitzchok, and they chose a haftarah reading that recalls Hannah's same difficulty getting pregnant, only to give birth to Samuel. It's telling us- remember their births, remember your birth, Children of Israel, and now remember where you have progressed since then. What have you remembered and what have you forgotten?

The history of the Jewish people and history in general is laden with moments that we should remember and the lessons that they teach us: Remember the Alamo, Remember the Maine. When I was growing up and my family went to Yom Hashoah services to memorialize victims of the Holocaust, a large banner always hung from the stage saying זָכוֹר, *zachor*, Remember! Why these rally cries? Of course, we, the Jews, and all of the world would always remember what atrocities had occurred in Nazi Europe during the Shoah. Of

course, we would not fail to teach these lessons to generations of school children. Well, as we know, this has not been the case, with recent surveys showing a significant number of American adults have little to no idea that 6 million Jews as well as other millions of others were slaughtered in death camps. A whole generation was born since 9-11, and again, surveys show a significant lack of knowledge of what occurred that day. In April, the whole of the U.S. watched in horror as hospital ICU wings filled to over-capacity with dying COVID patients trying to gasp one last breath. We were told that the only way to mitigate spread as to continuously wash our hands, to shelter in place, not to congregate in large unprotected groups, and when in public, to wear masks and to socially distance- all 100 year-old inventions of epidemiologists. People, for the most part, obeyed, but as time went on, we forgot, we became complacent, we complained at the discomfort, we- like the Children of Israel wandering the Sinai desert forgot what miracles we had been given- life and freedom, and we started to take off our masks, open bars, rally in large groups.

Let's face it: it is human nature to forget.

For this reason, we have added an important clause to the Yom Hashoah banners: *zachor al tishkach*, remember do not forget. The sages wanted us, on Rosh Hashanah, to remember what miracles we have been given in our lives, and how we have chosen to use our freedoms to do what is right or what is wrong. How have we acted, as a father, mother, teacher, student, son, daughter, colleague, neighbor, Buffalonian, American, member of the human race? Did we fulfill the acts of lovingkindness and charity that we intended?

This year has been earth-shattering in so many ways, a once-in-a-century global pandemic, world-wide protests that mark our ultimate intolerance of systemic racism, hurricanes and raging fires that remind us that if we are not the stewards of nature, we will be its victim. On this Rosh Hashanah, this Yom Hazicharon, let us remember all the good we have accomplished and all the good we planned to accomplish, and then let us give ourselves a rebirth, a fresh, clean slate for another year. Let us ask for and forgive ourselves for our shortcomings, let us forgive each other, our families, friends and neighbors, for our slights. Let us pledge to respect each and every one of us. And to respect each other, we must know one another. This coming year, let

us pledge to reach out and get to know someone out of your comfort zone, a new immigrant, some outside of your economic, religious, ethnic sphere.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention our most recent loss, the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. She lived a full life of principle and accomplishment, and yet we seemed to have lost her too soon in her 87 years and her multiple battles with cancer. I want to review one lesson from her history where we, the congregation of Jews, can do better. Ruth lost her mother just before her high school graduation, and in keeping with her mother's lessons of fierce independence, Ruth wanted to be counted in the minyan to say Kaddish for her mother. But in the 1940's, even Reform and Conservative congregations did not include women in the minyan count. This is when Ruth lost interest in religious Judaism, because we failed her. Let us make a pledge, starting in our congregation, that we will try our hardest in the coming years to be as inclusive as possible, so that we can be a home for all Jews. If we succeed in this alone, we will have truly fulfilled the legacy of Ruth Bader Ginsberg, and in so doing, make her memory a blessing

Shabbat Shalom, Shana Tova!