

To Judge or Not to Judge

By Rabbi Barry Freundel

Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur are the times of year when we must look closely at the familiar and the usual and see that which we know, with new insight and understanding. It is only in this way that we can make transformative changes in the way we live our lives.

In preparing for the High Holiday period this year, I had an experience of this nature with a familiar Rabbinic source. From earliest childhood I have been taught that the verse "God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a shofar." (Psalm 46:6) from the Psalm we recite before we blow the shofar is to be understood as "when the Holy One, blessed be He, ascends and sits upon the Throne of Judgment, He ascends with intent to do [strict] judgment. That is the reason for this statement 'God (Elokim, the name representing G-d's attribute of justice) is gone up amidst shouting.' But when Israel take their horns and blow them in the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He, He rises from the Throne of Judgment and sits upon the Throne of Mercy-for it is written, 'The Lord (Hashem, the 4 letter name that represents G-d's mercy) amidst the sound of the horn'--and He is filled with compassion for them, taking pity upon them and changing for them the Attribute of Justice to one of Mercy." (Leviticus Rabbah 29:3)

This has always been easy enough to understand. We are afraid of any judgment and certainly of one conducted by a Being who knows our innermost thoughts and deepest secrets. We would always prefer an encounter with G-d's compassion and mercy to an encounter with G-d's power and judgment.

Nonetheless, and here is the insight that came to me this year, is not our request absurd? Have I not been taught, and therefore, been praying for something that can't happen? For if it does not happen, does it make Rosh Hashannah meaningless?

Rosh Hashannah is, or so we are told, "Judgment Day." We change our liturgy to focus on G-d's kingship and judgment. We talk in terms of the books of life and death and, G-d writing in them in the preparation for the final verdict on Yom Kippur. We recite "Unetaneh Tokef" and internalize its imagery of the Heavenly courtroom.

Despite all of this, we introduce the shofar experience, the central ritual of the day, with a plea to cancel the entire enterprise of the holiday. We say to G-d, "Don't sit on the judgment seat. Don't call the court to order. Don't do what You designed this day for You to do. Instead, do something different."

What chutzpah! What remarkable arrogance to suggest to G-d, that for our sakes He undo His entire plan for this day and for the yearly cycle of our lives. Further, Rosh Hashannah is judgment day because on this date Adam and Eve sinned, were judged, and punished. It is therefore part of the fabric of the universe for this to be judgment day. Yet we are praying for it not to happen.

We are also asking G-d to allow for at least delayed justice if not for justice to be canceled. There are many places in our tradition where G-d is challenged with the question of why the path of the wicked remain so pleasant?

The question is both a valid and an agonizing challenge, but we must realize that by our request that G-d not sit in judgment, we are contributing to the problem. If G-d accedes to our request, and judgment does not occur, how can we then complain that the path of the wicked remains uninterrupted by Divine retribution? In fact, one can suggest that the problem of theodicy, of evil in a world that was created by an all-powerful G-d, has its origins in the first act of compassion by G-d. The first time He allowed a sinner to pass without immediate punishment, the question arose. It is at that moment that one can begin to ask, "Why does the path of the wicked remain so pleasant?"

In the circumstance of the first such sinner, especially if we want such compassion for ourselves in regard to our transgressions, G-d's actions are acceptable and desirable, even if at some point, in regard to others, when the evil and the pleasantness become too great, we cannot understand why G-d would permit such allowances. Nonetheless, this reality of compassion overtaking punishments is what we pray for as we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashannah.

All of this would be truly troubling, except that we are making this plea in the context of prayer, both in our introductory Psalm to shofar blowing and in the shofar blowing itself which is prayer that goes beyond words. Prayer today takes the place of sacrifices, which means that we must offer something if we expect our prayer to be answered. At the very least, that offering needs to be a willingness to do what we are asking of G-d.

We are asking G-d to do something other than what He expected to do. We are asking G-d to, as it were, disrupt His orderly life. We are asking Him to rearrange the structure of the way He does business. We are asking Him to rearranged the universe. And we are asking Him to do this in ways that are uncomfortable and raise lots of questions.

The price of admission, it seems to me, is our willingness to do the same. Are we willing to disrupt our lives, change our way of doing things, alter our expectations

about our ways of functioning and possibly raise difficult questions for ourselves and those around us, to go through a true process of teshuvah?

If we are willing to do these kinds of things, we have a right to ask G-d to do them as well. If we aren't willing, then should we even be asking?

One final point; if you know someone, a sincere ba'al teshuvah or convert, who has turned their world upside down for what they believe in, do they not have the right to ask for such things from G-d, and if we are going to ask, must we not borrow some qualities from their way of doing things to make our request legitimate.