

**At the Judges' Table**  
*Rosh Hashanah 5771 – Rabbi Toba Spitzer*

I don't watch a lot of TV, but in recent years I've become a fan of "Top Chef," one of Bravo channel's reality competition shows. In it, a talented group of professional cooks battle to become the "Top Chef." Each week they have to prepare dishes under a variety of odd conditions that force them to be creative, to work quickly under challenging circumstances. At the end of each show, the top three contestants, and then the bottom three, are brought before the "Judges Table," where they hear their fate – who will be the winner of that week's prize, and who will get sent home? The producers at Bravo make the most of "Judges Table," where the show's host and a few master chefs sit in judgment. The contestants stand in a line facing the judges, who sit at a distance, behind a grand table. There is dramatic music, close-ups of the contestants' worried faces, and then, finally, after what seems like an hour of suspense—the verdict.

I think for many people the Rosh Hashanah liturgy conjures up an image not too different from this one. A stern, patriarchal God sits on the Judgment Throne, looking down at us mere mortals, deciding who wins the big prize, and who gets sent home. Rosh Hashanah is also called "Yom Din," the Day of Judgment, and carries with it the notion that on this day all of creation is judged—what will be in the coming year, who will rise and who fall. It is a harsh image, and a problematic one for many of us.

But the truth is that while most of us really don't like the idea of Someone or Something out there judging us, we spend a good deal of our own time and mental energy judging—judging ourselves, judging others, judging everything. We judge one another's appearance, political opinions, parenting styles, taste in food and music and home décor. We all have our own inner Judges Table that is constantly deciding who gets the prize and who is the loser. And for probably too many of us, the loser is usually ourselves, as we turn the tables and become our own harshest Judge.

So is judgment bad or good, necessary or not? What does the "Day of Judgment," "Yom Din," really mean?

We first encounter the image of God sitting on a "throne of judgment" on Rosh Hashanah in an early rabbinic midrash (Lev. R. 29:3). Yehudah the son of Rabbi Nachman is commenting on the verse in the Torah which describes the holiday that we now call Rosh Hashanah. In the book of Leviticus, chapter 23, we read that the first day of the seventh month is to be celebrated as a holy day, marked by the *tru'ah*, the sound of the shofar. The Torah doesn't say anything here at all about judgment, or God on a throne, or even that this is a new year. Just a holy day on which we blow the shofar, followed ten days later by Yom Hakippurim, the great day of repentance.

In the midrash, Yehudah bar Nachman brings a verse from Psalm 47, which reads, *Alah Elohim b'tru'ah, Adonai b'kol shofar*, "God has gone up with a *tru'ah*, Adonai with the voice of the *shofar*." The connection to Rosh Hashanah clearly has to do with the blowing of the shofar, the

sound of *tru'ah*. But why does the Psalm say “*Alah Elohim*,” “God has gone up”? Gone up from where, to where?

The midrash also picks up on something subtle in this verse in Psalms. The verse uses two names for God—first “Elohim,” and then “Y-H-V-H,” the four letters that we pronounce as “Adonai.” In rabbinic understanding, these two names represent two different aspects of God’s power. The name “Elohim” signifies “*din*,” the divine attribute of justice—that aspect of reality that brings consequences for our actions, that demands accountability. And the name Y-H-V-H, Adonai, stands for the divine attribute of *rachamim*, of overflowing compassion and forgiveness. So Yehudah bar Nachman reads this verse from psalms as if it is saying, “The Attribute of Justice got up, and became the Attribute of Compassion with the voice of the shofar.”

The midrash goes on to explain that on Rosh Hashanah, God sits upon a throne of *din*, strict judgment, intending to judge the world according to a harsh accounting. But when we blow the shofar, God gets up from the *kisei din*, the seat of judgment, and moves to the *kisei rachamim*, the seat of compassion. In so doing, God is filled with compassion for us, and acts with compassion towards us, forgiving us for all the wrong that we have done.

The rabbis imagined as God moving from one attribute to another on Rosh Hashanah, a kind of transformation within the Source of Life Itself. I would suggest that we can think of this movement as a potential for transformation within ourselves. We are made in the image of God, according to our tradition, and thus we too encompass *middat ha-din*, the attribute of strict judgment, and *middat harachamim*, the attribute of compassion. How do these attributes, these *middot* or qualities, play out within each of us? What does it mean for me to move from the “seat of judgment” to the “seat of compassion”?

A related midrash imagines God saying to the Jewish people on Rosh Hashanah, “Just as the shofar takes breath in at one end and sends out at the other, so will I get up from the seat of *din* and sit in the seat of *rachamim*, and change for you from the attribute of *din* to that of *rachamim*.” (Lev. R. 29:6)

This is such an interesting metaphor—that the transformation of breath that occurs within the vessel of the shofar parallels the shift from strict judgment to loving compassion. The medieval commentator Rabbi David Luria, known as RaDaL, comments on this midrash: “The narrow end of the shofar is compared to imprisonment, and the broad end to liberation.”

So what is strict judgment like? According to the midrash and the RaDaL, it is like the narrow end of the shofar—it is narrow and constricting, it can imprison us. And compassion is like the broad end of the shofar, it is expansive and liberating. But just as we need both ends of the shofar to make a sound, the midrashic tradition emphasizes that we need both qualities in this world, both judgment and compassion. So what exactly do we seek on this day—from the cosmos, from God, from ourselves?

Let’s begin with the attribute of *din*, judgment. *Din* is often paired with *emet*, “truth,” and it shares with truth a kind of absolute quality. Something is just or unjust, true or untrue. In rabbinic tradition, to uphold *din* is to hew exactly to the letter of the law, to hold ourselves

accountable for any violation of what is right and good. In a world of strict *din*, no one would ever get away with anything—we would suffer the consequences of every negative action. Such a world the rabbis called untenable—we could never live up to it.

On a less cosmic level, I imagine this strict measure of *din* as the voice in our heads that berates us whenever we sense that we've done something wrong. It's the twinge in our stomach when we make a misstep, the anxiety we feel when we worry that we've blown it once again. It tends to be a harsh voice, an unforgiving voice, whether directed towards ourselves or those around us.

On the one hand, we certainly need to have some sort of inner voice, our conscience, to delineate right from wrong. We need to hold ourselves accountable, to know when we've caused damage and need to make a repair. This is an essential step in our process of *teshuvah*, the process of turning towards our best selves, and turning away from that which is harmful.

I would call this positive quality of judgment, discernment. The quality of discernment is the ability to see ourselves clearly, to sit with the truth of our lives and to not distort that truth either through denial, or with an overwhelming sense of shame that clouds our vision.

**But true discernment must be accompanied by the quality of compassion.** In the powerful Unetaneh Tokef prayer which we chanted earlier, the poet says to God, *va'yikon b'chesed kiseicha, vateshev alav b'emet*: Your throne is established with lovingkindness, and you sit upon it in truth.

God's judgment of truth, the Godly power of discernment, is established within a framework of love. If I think of this image as a kind of map of the soul, of my own interior, I imagine a seat of *chesed* and *rachamim*, a place of love and compassion, from which the power of truth, of clear seeing, can emerge.

The opposite of loving discernment is a judgmentalism that distorts our vision, that clouds our reality. Whether this problematic type of judgment is directed towards others or towards ourselves, the effect is the same.

A few years ago I was on a silent retreat. A day or so into the retreat, I began noticing a woman who kept doing things that annoyed me. She seemed oblivious to everyone around her. She made a lot of noise when she entered the meditation hall. She didn't wait patiently in line for the meal but eagerly got right in front. She was breaking retreat etiquette right and left. I didn't know this woman, had never spoken with her, and I was trying not to focus on her, but as the days went on, it seemed like she was everywhere, always doing something to get on my nerves.

One morning I noticed her outside, taking pebbles from one of the paths and making patterns on the grass. She had outlined a big heart and some kind of sappy message. I didn't think she should be doing this, but I didn't know what to do.

A little later that day, one of the retreat center staff made an announcement, asking us to not put stones on the grass, as it got in the way of the lawn mower. I looked around—in a subtle, retreat-kind of way—and tried to see if she was listening. I was so happy about this announcement,

feeling satisfied that finally this oblivious woman would get the message. You can imagine my horror when the next day, I saw that she had done it again! There were the pebbles, outlining some inane message on the grass. This time, I was the do-gooding avenger. I sat down and removed each and every pebble, putting it back on the path where it belonged.

My obsession with this woman grew until finally, I decided I couldn't stand it any longer. At this rate my entire retreat was going to be consumed with my 5anger at this stranger. So during the next meditation session, I tried just to sit with my feelings about this woman, to see what would arise. First I realized how much I was suffering. And then this sentence came into my mind: "I'm jealous." I was totally surprised. Jealous, of this oblivious, insensitive flake? But then I saw that it made total sense. This woman represented everything I would never allow myself to be – someone who ignored rules, who did whatever she felt like, without regard for what anyone else would think. There was some significant part of me that longed to feel that free.

And the most marvelous thing was that as soon as I had this realization, my aversion to my erstwhile nemesis passed. She no longer bothered me in the slightest. I barely even noticed her any longer. I have no idea who she was, but I am indebted to her for the insight that she gave me.

I offer this story as an example of judgment—the harsh, constricting kind—versus discernment, the ability to see the truth of a situation. The judgment of this woman that accompanied me for those three days on retreat caused me a lot of suffering. It entailed a lot of projection, of me imagining who this woman was and what motivated her. And when I was able to sit with some sense of compassion—not for her, but for myself—the truth was able to emerge. And the truth was just the fact of what was—that I was jealous. I didn't judge myself for that jealousy, I didn't get mad at it, I just saw that that was the truth, and the suffering fell away.

I also learned from this episode that when I am so stringent with myself, when I hold myself to impossible standards, I make myself suffer and I judge others harshly. If I could have lightened up a bit in my own retreat practice, I wouldn't have been so jealous of this woman, and I wouldn't have had such a negative reaction to her behavior.

It's so easy for our self-judgment to lead to self-righteousness, an odd combination of being hard on ourselves and highly judgmental of others. We usually do this with good intentions, thinking that we're holding the moral high ground. But the fact is that we're doing little but sitting on our imperial thrones of judgment, making ourselves and the people around us miserable.

It is impossible to forgive others for something that we have not forgiven in ourselves. As long as we are ensconced in the *kisei din*, the seat of harsh judgment, we will not get very far along our path of *teshuvah*, of repentance and return.

So what does it mean to move into *kisei rachamim*, the seat of compassion?

The Hebrew word *rachamim* comes from the same root as the word *rechem*, which means "womb." One way to think of *rachamim*, which I am translating as "compassion," is as the kind of love a mother feels for her child—an unconditional, overflowing love. But I wonder if it also

alludes to what each of us feels while we're still in the womb. There we are, floating in amniotic fluid, feeling held and nourished. Feeling safe. In the midrash, when God moves from the seat of *din* to the seat of *rachamim*, it says that God "*mitmaleh aleyhem rachamim*," God fills up with compassion for us, upon us. The image I get is of God Itself as the womb, a compassion-filled womb, inside of which each of us is held.

Understood in this way, compassion, *rachamim*, is not so much an emotion but a state of being, a way of feeling held by the universe. When I am floating in a sea of *rachamim*, it is impossible for me to judge myself or others harshly.

This is not because I've lost my values, my sense of right and wrong, my ability to discern the truth of the moment.

It's because I feel safe, and thus have no need to take defensive actions to protect myself from my own or other's deficiencies. It's because I feel cared for, and so don't need to project my own sense of lack, of scarcity, onto those around me. It's because I am able to understand how profoundly and deeply I am connected to every other person on this planet, every one of whom started out just like me, inside someone's womb. It's because if I am in the seat of *rachamim*, if I am truly compassionate towards myself, then I don't feel the need to judge others, to make them smaller than they are because I am feeling small.

Because compassion is not an emotion but a state of being, it can be cultivated. We can intentionally foster a sense of compassion both for ourselves and for others. We also need to cultivate the quality of discernment, of seeing the truth of our situation, but we can't do this without a healthy dose of compassion. Without compassion, we can't bear the truth, we can't sit with the reality of our own lives. And so we need to begin with compassion for ourselves.

One way to foster compassion is to undertake what I would call a blessing practice, what in Buddhist practice is called "metta." This is a simple meditation practice, in which you wish yourself and others well. It's important to start with yourself. One way to do this practice is to sit quietly for 10 or 15 minutes a day, and just repeat these phrases to yourself:

"May I be blessed with happiness.  
May I be blessed with well-being and abundance.  
May I be blessed with peace."

Or make it even simpler: "May I be happy. May I be safe and protected. May I live in peace." You just sit, and repeat these phrases, and try and mean it as you say it.

The point of this practice is not magical thinking, it's not that by saying it you make it true. It's a practice of re-orienting yourself, making a loving gesture towards yourself, in order to foster a more loving and open heart. You can do it anywhere, in line at the grocery store, while you're driving your car, sitting in a waiting room. I find it most helpful when I realize that I'm suffering—that I'm upset, or scared, or angry. If in that moment I can catch myself, I can drop

the angry or agitated thought and replace it with, “May I be happy. May I be safe and protected. May I live in peace. “

Often, as I do this, I experience a softening of my mind and my heart, a greater ability to let go of whatever distress I’ve been experiencing. It’s an amazing antidote to anxiety, to the thoughts which entangle us and cloud our awareness.

We can also say these phrases with others in mind. We can practice with people that we already have positive feelings for, with someone who helps and supports us. Bring that person to mind, and send them the same well-wishes, really meaning it as you say the phrases to yourself. “May you be blessed with happiness. May you be blessed with wellbeing and abundance. May you be blessed with peace.”

And perhaps most challenging, we are encouraged to take on this practice with regard to the difficult person, the person with whom we’re in conflict, whom we judge most harshly. And the point of the practice is not to get them to change, to make them happy and peaceful so that they’ll stop annoying us. It’s about fostering compassion in our own hearts.

There’s a lovely Hasidic practice that is similar to this one. Rabbi Yoel Frumkin teaches that when he is inclined to dislike a person, he says blessings for that person’s wellbeing, in order to turn his own heart towards love. I’ve tried this, and it’s really quite interesting. When you find yourself about to say something negative about a person, say a blessing for them instead, wish them well. It has an amazing effect. Not on the difficult person, but on our own hearts.

It’s hard to move from the seat of judgment to the seat of compassion. We are so defined by our likes and dislikes, by measuring ourselves against other people, or against our own fantasy of who we should be. We cling to our judgments as if they give us life. But they don’t. They restrict us and imprison us. They keep us battling in a poorly conceived reality show where no one ever wins.

In a few moments, we will once again hear the sound of the shofar. I invite you, as you listen to each blast, to imagine this movement, from the *kisei din* to the *kisei rachamim*, from the place of strict judgment to the overflowing place of compassion. Let the sounds open your heart. Let yourself *mitmaleh rachamim*, be filled with compassion. Know that you’re already forgiven, and all you have to do is take it in.