

I.

The Yom Tov of Rosh Hashananah is an emotional roller coaster. It is our day of judgment: yet we are forbidden from saying Vidoy. It represents the birthday of the world; yet no Hallel is said. Unesana Tokeph is declared; then we go home to feast. The dichotomy of this day is extreme. Although is it also true that Yom Kipper itself is called a Yom Tov, as is Tisha B'av – there, it is only the title that needs explanation, but at least the motions we go through on those days fit the occasion and collective mood. What is it about Rosh Hashanah that begs the question “how should I feel?” Why is it a time where even to cry for our lives is a dubious act¹?

The concept of repentance is an enigma². We all have times when, in a nostalgic mood of melancholy, we wish we could “do it all over again”. We see our past mistakes, or the wrong path taken, and want to retroactively change them. Impossible, right? Judaism teaches us otherwise. Not only does Teshuvah wipe away the bad, but it also transforms past *offense* into past *merit*. This amazing gift most obviously came from G-d’s Middas Harachamim (G-d’s character trait [as it were] that represents his divine mercy)³. His attribute of Din (judgment/justice) tells us the opposite: no deed goes unpunished. Divine justice tells us the past cannot be ignored only learnt from.

But herein lies the riddle. The Talmud⁴ tells us that this act of regret not only expunges our record of misdeeds but can potentially obliterate our Mitzvos as well, if one were to regret them. How can this merciful gift turn on us? This power to erase makes no sense outside the realm of kindness and mercy. Yet it can also do us harm?

The Talmud^{4b} tells us that in the days to come G-d will say to Avraham “your children have sinned against me.” Avraham will reply, “Erase them (destroy them) to sanctify Your name.” G-d will then turn to Yaakov hoping that through his personal pain of raising children, he will find favor for Klal Yisroel. But Yaakov will answer the same.

¹ See Maseh Rav number 207. Although there are those who wish to explain GR’A’s intent differently (see Yabia Omer chelek 1 number 30) all agree that tears of fear or sadness he did forbid. As his prime disciple explained “the Gaon believed that the practice of some Chazanim who try to move the congregation to tears by “Mi Yichyeh Umi Yamus...” should be stopped (see footnotes to Maseh Rav).

² This question is found in Kovetz Mamarim from Rabbi E. Wasserman Hy’d pg. 23. See there how he and the Chofetz Chaim answer it.

³ See Meslias Yesharim chapter 4.

⁴ Kiddushin 40b.

^{4b} Shabbos 89b.

He will then turn to Yitzchok and say “your children have sinned.” Yitzchok will respond “*my* children? Not *Your* children?! And furthermore, how much can they have sinned? How many years are Man’s? Seventy? The first twenty years You don’t punish (see Rashi)? Now fifty years are left. Take an additional twenty-five years off due to sleep and rest where they could not have sinned. Twenty-five years (of possible) sin is left. Now take off twelve and one half years that were spent in prayer, eating etc. If you can withstand the remaining years, good. If not half I will bear and half You will bear. And if You say that I should bear all of it, I will reply I already sacrificed myself for you...”

This passage is as stunning as it is troubling. Of all our Avos (Forefathers) to come to our defense, Yitzchok would seemingly be the last. As we know it is Yitzchok who represents the Middah of Din, of Gevurah (strength). Yet in this passage, it is he who appears to exude the Middah of mercy?

To answer this question, we must reevaluate the meaning of Din⁵. Justice does not mean to punish. Judgment is not a segue to guilt. Rather Din means to set boundaries. Indeed, these are sometimes boundaries on mercy. Yet it also gives limitations and sets borders to judgment itself. In fact this was the addition Yitzchok added to his father’s legacy⁶. He took the concept of Chessed Chinum (unquestioning kindness) and gave it structure. “Tough love” is *not* conditional love, rather, true compassion.

All the more so may be said of G-d. One of the six constant Mitzvos is to concentrate and believe in the Yichud Hashem (the oneness of G-d). G-d is one. Every act is directed from Him. But we can take this a step further. G-d has many attributes. To say that these depend on His moods is heresy. Rather, all His attributes are wound up in one entity that is G-d. He is not a G-d that emanates Midas HaDin one day and Midas Harachamim the next. He is always the same. And to have both at the same time, as we have just explained, is not a contradiction. Rather it highlights the beauty of His ways. We say, “Shemah Yisroel Hashem Elokainu Hashem Echod.” The Shaim Hamefuresh (Hashem) is always representative of mercy. Elokainu refers to Din. Yet we are reminded Hashem Elokainu. It is still He, the G-d of mercy who is punishing you. And what better Possuk to teach this concept than the Possuk that defines Yichud Hashem.

Now it can be said, that although this great gift of Teshuvah was given through an act of kindness, it now *must* become part of a larger entity. There is now a bigger picture it is obligated to fit into. It now is required to become consistent throughout and if we regret the wrong thing it will uproot that as well.

⁵ This paragraph is based on Michtav MaEliyahu, Chelek 4, page 55 and Yisroel Kiddoshim from Rav Tzadok, Page 43.

⁶ See Sfas Emes to the first Passuk in Parshas Toldos.

We can see this theme in our prayers. In the Yud Gimmel Middos, the essence of Middas Harachamim, one word is seemingly out of place: Emmes (truth). Where does that fit into mercy? In fact it appears altogether conflicting to clemency⁷. But now it is clear. It is precisely this message G-d is trying to convey. Hashem Elokainu. It all comes from the same source.

The Rabbis tell us that when one prays it must be with the proper reverence and fear. On this the Talmud⁸ asks, “From where do we know this?” Finally after sifting through numerous verses they find one to their satisfaction. The question is obvious. Was this Halacha not simple common sense? Are we suggesting that without a verse from the Torah this Halacha would have been dismissed? After all, is there another mood more appropriate before the Al-mighty?

We say in our Shemonah Esrey “Al Chayainu Hamisurim Byadecha Val Nishmosaynu Hafkudos Luch” – “(we thank You) For (the fact that) our lives that we give to your power and our souls that are entrusted to you.” Why is this statement said in the prayer of appreciation? Is this not a declaration of submission, giving over our lives? Does this not rather elicit emotions of fear *not* gratitude⁹?

But if we continue with the premise we set above, the answer to these two questions is quite clear. Our judgment, our Din, is in G-d’s hands. Who better to decide our fate? Who more can we trust with Din than G-d? He will *judge* us *with* mercy. And therefore we thank Him. This is why the Talmud needed a verse. For perhaps our emotion going into Teffilah should be joy, not fear. Appreciation, not trepidation. Let us now see the verse the Talmud chose as its source- Vgilah Braada¹⁰-be joyful with fear. Be afraid, certainly. But be joyful in who you are afraid of. The Talmud does not abandon its original notion, that prayer is best accomplished through joy. It rather modifies it.

This Possuk strikes at the heart of Rosh Hashanah. It is our Day of Judgment, yet we feast in confidence, knowing who the Judge is. It is a day where our Emunah is put to test. A day we fear Din yet embrace G-d’s mercy. Vgilah Braada.

Hallel is not said. As we are told¹¹, it is inappropriate and out of order on this Day of Judgment. This would be the Vgilah without the Braada. Yet to acquiesce only to the fear would be the other extreme. The challenge is to find equilibrium.

⁷ See Pachad Yitzchok Yom Kipper Maimer 6 note 2 for a similar observation.

⁸ Berochos 30b.

⁹ In fact in the Beracha of Boruch Hashem Leolam that we say by Maariv, which is a condensed Shemonah Esreh, the Bracha of Hodah is expressed under this theme.

¹⁰ Tehillim 2 11.

¹¹ Mishna Berrurah 584-2.

II.

What may be an innate part of G-d, comes at a challenge to us. We have to take these two distinctively conflicting qualities and transform them into a harmonized unit. This of course is a difficult task.

The Zohar¹² tells us that the battle between Klal Yisroel and Amalek was in fact a battle between Din and Rachamim. Klal Yisroel was on a mission to Sinai. To defeat them was not possible no matter what their guilt¹³. Yet prayer was needed¹⁴. Why¹⁵?

Although our battles with Amalek are known, the genesis of this beast is perhaps a mystery to some. The Talmud tells us¹⁶ that the mother of Amalek, Timneh, approached our forefathers to convert and she was turned away. This, says the Talmud, is the reason for all our suffering at their hands. The commentators explain the reason the Avos believed it was appropriate to dismiss her, so why the perennial punishment?

Timneh wanted nothing more than to change her ways. The power to do that is Rachamim. For the Avos to refuse her based on Din – to critique her, was *misplaced* Din¹⁷. Where acceptance and mercy were appropriate, judgment, nay, misjudgment was used.

Centuries later, when her descendants attacked Klal Yisroel, in order for us to be the victor, that act had to be rectified. This time, it was *Klal Yisroel* who needed only Rachamim to succeed. And now it was Klal Yisroel who had to unnecessarily use Din as their conduit¹⁸. Just as we misplaced Din, so is our punishment.

When both Din and Rachamim are used in their proper settings they act in a harmony that is pure and just. Yet, when they are separated and each one is used at whim, they are contradictory and destructive.

¹² Beshalach 452.

¹³ Remember, Klal Yisroel was already on the lowest rung of impurity when they left Egypt.

¹⁴ See Shmos 17/10-13

¹⁵ See Rabbi Solovetchik On The Days Of Awe – page 79 where he discusses this question at length. He opines that A Beis Din was needed to judge on our original question; if Teshuvah is Din or Rachamim.

¹⁶ Saanhedrin 99b.

¹⁷ Of course, this only because we know Timneh was truly sincere. Had this not been the case, the Avos would have acted correctly.

¹⁸ The word for prayer – Teffilah gets its root from Pelell, meaning – to judge.

The Prophet tells us¹⁹ that when Shaul was harshly reprimanded for having mercy on the Amalekite king and their animals, he begged for forgiveness, yet Shmuel rejected it. Perhaps again we are seeing this Middah Kineged Middah – measure for measure, but by this instance it was the other way around; where Din was necessary, he acted on mercy. So was *his* punishment. He demanded mercy but in its place Shmuel displayed Din.

During these great days we pray; this is our cry to Din. We repent; this is our plea for mercy. Finally, we give Tzedaka. We take what was fairly earned by us and give it to a stranger who did not labor for it. That is the balance. Taking Din, what is rightfully ours, and linking it with mercy. This is the essence of Vholachta B'drachov. And if we do this, than our hope becomes that much more secure – that G-d will give us more than *we* deserve. This symmetry between Din and Rachamim is at the core of what hides behind these days.

¹⁹ Shmuel 1. 14/7-34