

## **IT IS NOT IN HEAVEN: GOD AMONG THE CONGREGATION**

It has been taught: On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: “If the halakhah agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!”

Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place. Others affirm, four hundred cubits.

“No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,” they retorted.

Again he said to them: “If the halakhah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!”—whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards.

“No proof can be brought from a stream of water,” they rejoined.

Again he urged: “If the halakhah agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,” whereupon the walls inclined to fall.

But Rabbi Joshua rebuked them, saying: “When scholars are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what have you to interfere?”

Hence they did not fall, in honor of Rabbi Joshua, nor did they resume their upright position, in honor of Rabbi Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined.

Again he said to them: “If the halakhah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!” Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: “Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halakhah agrees with him!” But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed: “It is not in heaven.”

What did he mean by this? Said Rabbi Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, “After the majority must one incline.”

Rabbi Nathan met Elijah (the prophet) and asked him: “What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour?—He laughed [with joy],” he replied, “saying, ‘My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.’” (Babylonian Talmud)

First things first, what a pleasure it is to see you all here tonight. All over the world, the Jewish community gathers to celebrate the turning of the year. I spend an awful lot of time answering questions about this

time of year to my non-Jewish friends, and I imagine some of you do as well. So let me start by addressing one of the most pressing of these questions.

Why now? Why is this the new year? I wish that were a simple question to answer, but, alas, it is not. And like so many questions addressed in Jewish religious thought, there are different ways to answer that question.

The reason the dates of our holidays move around the ‘regular’ or ‘secular’ or ‘normal’ or ‘school’ calendar has to do with the fact that we Jews use the moon as a natural timekeeping device, but make sure it lines up in general with the solar year and the changing of seasons. It’s very complicated math and it results in an amazingly stable system. Regardless of whether it falls in early September or October, it won’t ever fall in July or November, so it always falls in late summer/early autumn.

You may know that Thanksgiving falls on the first day of Hanukkah this year. That’s never happened before and it will only happen again in 75,000 years. So if you want to serve cranberry sauce with your latkes, boys and girls, now’s the time.

But before we talk about how perfect a deep-fried Turkey is going to be THIS year, let's talk first the apples and honey and round challahs of Rosh HaShana.

Did you know that there is no mention of Rosh Hashana in the Torah? Torah mentions a day of rest where a horn is sounded. It does not spell out the idea of judgment or New Year or anything that would lead the reader of the Torah text to the kind of observance that we recognize as "The Jewish New Year, and a Day of Judgement". The Torah declares a "Yom Teruah" a "Day of Horn Sounding" which is every day in New York City.

Two thousand years ago, the rabbis counted four--four--new years. Two of these "new years" have to do with counting how old a tree was or how old a head of cattle was, and this makes sense based on the planting cycle of trees and established breeding cycles in ancient Israel. Although as Texans we will be happy to learn that there was some debate about the livestock thing.

For a moment, let's pretend we were writing a new Mishna:

- A. There are four New Years:
- B. On January 1, for Banks, for Governments and for Disney World Season Passes.
- C. On a Tuesday in late August for Madden Football, a holy day for the under 50 crowd,
- D. In February for Pitchers and Catchers in Major League Baseball
- F. June 1 for CJCN's annual budget.

Again, historically, in Ancient Israel, there were different 'new years' based on the area of life you were talking about. The rabbis believed that at different times of the year, different judgements were handed down and these judgements were revealed through the success or failure of crops or of the rainy season. They considered this day, Yom Teruah, the day of horn-blasts, to be the start of the cosmic karmic fiscal year. And I can honestly tell you that I remain uncertain as to why. But that makes sense, that uncertainty as to "why now".

Rosh Hashana is a time of uncertainty. We do not know what the final weeks before harvest will bring. We do not know what kind of rainy season we will have. We have no idea how the Texans will do.

In the age of the rabbis, they did not know what persecutions or political shifts to expect. The world in which Rosh Hashana developed was one of

cataclysmic change, conflict and confrontation. The message of the rabbis, that on Rosh Hashana ALL nations and people are judged, not just Jews, spoke to their vision of a world that was unified by Torah and service to God, not divided. It was a glimpse of their hopes for a united humanity, even as they sought to protect and preserve the unique and holy heritage of the Jewish people in exile.

But it is more than that. It is a testament to the way they saw God and understood our relationship to God. Completely dependent upon God, completely beyond any comprehensible importance to the power that created all this, they were convinced still, to their amazement and awe that God had called us, the Jewish people, to service. To serve as agents of the Divine will upon this Earth.

Our relationship with God should not be one of fear, or superstition. Look around, consider the astounding world in which we live. This vast, unimaginably huge and ancient universe, and we, part of that universe, one with it and within it, connected to it by electrons and elements. We are the universe encountering itself. Though we are not the mind of God, we are absolutely an expression of the mind of God, and beyond that, gifted with self-awareness. Our teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel, who

we should note famously marched with his friend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., described the awe we should feel as “radical amazement”.

“Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. ....get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

That sense of wonder at being here at all is central to understanding why we are here. To accept your place in the universe is to accept an undeniable connection to The Eternal One.

Having trouble believing in God? Perhaps that’s because you don’t believe in yourself. See no real value in Jewish thought or practice? Perhaps you don’t see yourself as a force that is capable of effecting great change. Jewish spiritual insight and inspiration often comes when you work at it. That isn’t a bad thing. You tend to value more things you work for and don’t take for granted.

The rabbis two thousand years ago established that even if a voice from Heaven called out in support of someone’s argument about a religious matter, we don’t listen to it. Instead we look to Torah for our answers. Because that’s why God gave it to us in the first place. That story, by the way, blows the minds of some of my evangelical Christian friends. Which leads me to another point of difference.

One reason Jews don't believe what Christians believe about God becoming incarnate in a man is because we believe that God is incarnate in THAT man. And that one. And that little boy, and you, and you and everyone. I feel like Oprah. "God's in you! God's in YOU! You get a spark of God, and you Get a spark of God!"

And since that is the case, God rightfully owns us, especially when we recognize the fact that we are not simply 'us', but part of Him. We like to use the metaphor of a parent when we talk about God. So would it be so unreasonable for God to expect that as long as we are on the payroll and living under God's roof we follow some rules? And if we respect our great and holy family name, does that not also present us with certain obligations about how we behave? Including carrying ourselves with great humility.

Imagine for a moment that someone you admire, for real reasons, someone powerful and influential and beyond caring what anyone else thought of them, let's say, George Washington, or Moses, or Earl Campbell, were to call you up and say, "Hey, I've been watching you for a while, and I need your help" Would you not be filled with all sorts of

emotions, among them the fear of disappointing this idol, and I use the term intentionally? How much more so if God was reaching out to you?

We are an expression of the force that created all of this, and we were given the capacity to understand what that means! Given that the Jewish way is the way of Mitzvot--of carrying out God's will on earth, does this not fill you with a sense of awe, gratitude and deep honor?

God has been calling you every day of your life. He sent you a lengthy text message. I have it here for you when you're ready.

Each of us is filled with incalculable worth, each of us is an entire universe, yet we also know that we are mortal, and we can never know if this Rosh Hashana will be our last. So we pray for mercy, and forgiveness. We try to renew ourselves and support each other in trying to be the best people, the best representations of our maker that we can be.

We are called to listen to the blast of the Shofar with all our soul, so that it might wake us from our complacency and spiritual slumber.



It is said that the Shofar is also calling to God, so that God will hear our cry and respond to our plea for forgiveness and mercy and blessing.

What if, and consider this well, the hearer and the heard are one and the same? What if the only answers needed to your prayers were not in heaven, but here, with us.

“For it is said: God standeth in the congregation of God.” (Babylonian Talmud M. Berachot)

Ken Yehi Ratzon--God, be this your will.