

# Parsha Ponders

Rosh Hashanah | September 14, 2023 | 29 Elul 5783

## Turning justice into mercy<sup>1</sup>

זה היום תחלת מעשיך זכרון ליום ראשון. כי חק לישראל הוא משפט לאלקי יעקב

Today is the beginning of Your creation; a remembrance of the first day. For it is a decree of Israel, a judgement for the G-d of Yaakov<sup>2</sup>

There are a few lines in the Rosh Hashanah prayers that are seemingly confusing. We say that today is the beginning of Your creation, and then we say it's a commemoration of the first day. Isn't that redundant? Furthermore, the next sentence, "For it is a decree of Israel, a judgement for the G-d of Yaakov"<sup>3</sup>, is seemingly incongruous. Now, this happens to be a verse from Psalms. If we look at the previous verse, we do find some relevance to Rosh Hashanah: "Blow [תקעו] in the month of the shofar [שופר], on the covering of the day of our Festival"<sup>4</sup>. How can make sense of all of this?

It's known<sup>5</sup> that when the Jewish people do complete repentance, without any expectation of reward, or unprompted by fear of punishment, only motivated by a desire to become close to their G-d, then even Hashem's attribute of strict justice becomes one of mercy. The attribute of justice will then bestow upon them all the good in the world, and no one on earth can stand against the Jews. This is because at this point, the just and moral thing would be to give the Jews all good, as they repented with all of their hearts and souls. Therefore, the attribute of strict justice is on their side.

With this, we can explain a different verse: "G-d [אלקים] goes up<sup>6</sup> with a shofar blast [תרועה]; Hashem [יקוק], with the sound of the shofar [שופר]"<sup>7</sup>. It's known<sup>8</sup> that through breaking one's heart and spirit via sincere confession of one's sins, Hashem's strict attribute of justice is removed from oneself. Hashem considers broken hearts as if one has brought an offering<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, the attribute of justice doesn't become one of mercy without a reversal of one's deeds. This would require totally abandoning one's bad habits and deeds<sup>10</sup>.

Now, the word תרועה is an expression of breaking<sup>11</sup>, as we see in the verse "תרועם בשבט ברזל, break them with an iron staff"<sup>12</sup>. As well, the word שופר is an allusion to fixing of one's actions for the better, like the Hebrew expression שפרו מעשיכם (fix one's ways)<sup>13</sup>. This is all alluded to in our verse. "אלקים

<sup>1</sup> Based on Derashos Chasam Sofer III p. 16 col. 1

<sup>2</sup> Zichronos prayer in the Mussaf of Rosh Hashanah

<sup>3</sup> Psalms 81:5

<sup>4</sup> Ibid v. 4

<sup>5</sup> The Chasam Sofer often says things are "known" even when we don't know what his source is

<sup>6</sup> The verse is in the past tense, but some commentaries explain it in the hypothetical future

<sup>7</sup> Psalms 46:6

<sup>8</sup> Zohar III p. 20a

<sup>9</sup> Psalms 51:19

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 34:15). See also Proverbs 28:13

<sup>11</sup> See Zohar III p. 231b

<sup>12</sup> Psalms 2:9

<sup>13</sup> We see this in Pesikta D'Rav Kehana 23:8 and Vayikra Rabbah 29:6: בחדש תשרי בחדש זה תחדשו מעשיכם בשופר בחדש הזה שפרו מעשיכם אמר להן הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל אם שפרתם מעשיכם הריני נעשה לכם כשופר הזה מה שופר זה מכניס בזו ומוציא בזו כך אני עומד מכסא הדין ויושב על כסא רחמים והופך לכם מדת הדין למדת רחמים אימתי בחדש השביעי

goes up with a תרועה”, meaning אלקים, Hashem’s name of strict justice, is removed with the breaking of one’s heart through sincere confession. “שופר with the sound of the יקוק”. It then becomes the attribute of mercy, associated with the name of Hashem, through the shofar, as in fixing one’s ways.

This is all in contrast to when the Jews perform an insincere repentance. Sure, Hashem is all merciful and will bestow upon them goodness anyways. But it won’t be considered “just” or “moral”. It’s not something we would be deserving, and the attribute of strict justice would not be on our side. As it says: “They seduce with their mouths and they falsify with their tongues; their hearts are not with them and they’re not faithful with His covenant”. Nevertheless, as the verse concludes: “[Hashem] is merciful, atoning for sin”<sup>14</sup>.

Those who insincerely repent will be noticeable after *Yomim Noraim*, as they’ll quickly return to their old ways. However, those who want to repent with all of their hearts will repent this time of year. They know that this is the best time for it. If they follow through with their will, then their repentance will last them the entire year.

Now, something a person firmly believes in can be called engrained [תקוע]<sup>15</sup> in their heart. With the above, we can have a new understanding of the verse we started with. “שופר in the month of the תקוע”. When we improve our ways [לשפר מעשיכם], it should be engrained [תקוע] in our hearts. “For it is a decree for Israel”, as in there should be no reason for our repentance. It should be without ulterior motives. Then, “it is a judgement for the G-d of Yaakov”, as in the goodness we receive from Hashem will be on the side of strict justice, being entirely moral. Even Hashem’s strict attribute of justice will be on our side.

If we look closer, we’ll find a clear reason why these days specifically were given to turn our hearts towards Hashem, and that Hashem investigates the hearts of mankind. There’s a famous contradiction<sup>16</sup> as to when the world was created. We hold that the world was created in the month of Nissan. If so, why then on Rosh Hashanah do we say that the world was created in Tishrei? There are many answers, but one is that the world was physically created in Nissan. However, the thought to create the universe occurred in Tishrei. What that means then is that *Teshuva*, the concept of repentance, was also created in Tishrei, for we are taught<sup>17</sup> that *Teshuva* was created before the world<sup>18</sup>.

Since Tishrei has this aspect of “thought”, it makes sense then that Hashem investigates the thoughts of mankind during this month<sup>19</sup>. We can also finally understand what we say in the Rosh Hashanah prayers. “Today is the beginning of Your creation”. As in, the thought of creation, but not the actual creation, which happened in Nissan. Rather it’s just “a remembrance of the first day”. Today is the day that it came in Hashem’s “memory” to create the world “on the first day” of Nissan. Therefore, “it is a decree for Israel” ... as we said above.

Kesiva VeChasima Tovah! Have a happy, sweet, new year

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<sup>14</sup> [Psalms 78:36-38](#)

<sup>15</sup> See [Genesis 31:25](#)

<sup>16</sup> See [Tosafos to Rosh Hashanah 27a s.v. כמאן](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Pesachim 54a](#)

<sup>18</sup> Although, I’m not sure why it couldn’t be between Tishrei and Nissan

<sup>19</sup> See [Psalms 33:15](#)