



A Word About Rosh HaShana

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The Parasha that we read on the first day of Rosh HaShana deals with the fulfillment of the promise of the birth of Yitzhak Avinu.

The message of this reading is a simple one: G-d is with us and will fulfill His promise to assist us in facing life's adversities. But this is on condition that we ourselves do what it necessary to fulfill our human obligations in the task.

That Sarah could become pregnant at the age of 90 is a miracle in its own right. Yet, her pregnancy was no immaculate conception. Abraham was very much the father of Yitzhak. He could not just sit back and wait for a son to come down from Heaven. No, Yitzhak was born like any other child, of an intimate union between his father and mother. Avraham and Sarah did their part and G-d did His. This is the message of Rosh HaShana.

We call this day, a Day of Judgment. We believe that on this day G-d ordains what will be for a person during the coming year. Now, G-d knows our hearts and our minds. He is not a myth nor is faith in Him a myth. Regardless of what we personally believe G-d and His judgment marches forward. G-d actually pays no mind to the mistakes of the human intellect. How or what we believe about Him doesn't seem to matter that much. What is important in the Eyes of G-d and also in the eyes of man is our human behavior and character.

Avraham Avinu was called a righteous man because he embodied a simple attribute; his was a personality of giving and providing hospitality. In a day when hotels did not yet exist Abraham opened his own home to travelers and provided for them lodging and food. This was no small feat in his day.

Avraham was a man of action, and as such G-d blessed his actions, and made even an almost impossible one to be possible. And thus Yitzhak was born.

Whether we today believe in G-d or not is not the point. The point is that we believe in ourselves, as beings created in the image of G-d, to be the greatest human being that we possibly can be; to embrace our responsibilities and obligations and to fulfill them with vigor and resolve.



When G-d sees how we do the right things, then He blesses us that He reinforces our efforts and enables us to accomplish even sometimes the impossible, but only if we stand diligent to believe in the impossible and make all efforts to make it possible.

On the other hand, if and when we seek to shirk our responsibilities we will face all sorts of adversity in life. This is why the Book of Jonah is read on Yom Kippur, ten days after Rosh HaShana.

The days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur are called the Ten Penitential Days of Repentance. What we are supposed to be focusing on during this time is how to make ourselves a better person. And at the time of the afternoon service on Yom Kippur just hours away from the close of the High Holidays we read about Jonah.

We all know the story about Jonah. He was a prophet who G-d spoke to and commanded that he travel from Israel his home to modern day Syria/Iraq to the ancient town of Nineveh and warn the city that G-d is set to destroy them if they do not change their ways. Jonah wanted no part in the Divine mission and immediately booked passage on a ship going to sea in the opposite direction. And what do you know, a great sea storm blows up blocking the ships passage. Jonah is thrown into the sea, a big fish swallows him whole and belches him up back in Israel, where G-d again speak to Him and tells him to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah goes, he preaches and the entire city is so touched by him that they do indeed change their ways. Yet, Jonah is unhappy with the results becomes depressed and that is about where the story ends.

Jonah is the example of the one who desires to stand in opposition to the power of fate and destiny. He tries to steer his own course. Yet, there is a higher Hand over him guiding him in another direction. Only when Jonah acquiesces does his fortune change for the good, but only after much suffering, which I remind you was brought on by himself.

The Book of Jonah stands to remind us that when we accept upon ourselves our duties and obligations, we can create for ourselves all the good that comes with doing the right thing. This is why we read the book on Yom Kippur just before the end of the holiday to remind us that Atonement means more than saying "I'm sorry." It means making a difference.

Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur and the Ten Penitential Days between them are all intricately linked together with a common cause and a common message. This message must be heard by all, religious and secular alike. The message again is simple. Do the right things in life and you will see the fruits of your efforts. Do the wrong things in life and you will taste of those bitter fruits. The choice as always is our own.



This is why Rosh HaShana is called a Day of Judgment. Yet, ask yourself who is really our Judge? Is it G-d or is it ourselves? We had better pray that it is G-d, for with G-d there is mercy and forgiveness. With ourselves and some of the foolish things we do from time to time, there is often no mercy nor forgiveness; we are forced to eat of the bitter fruits of our own planting.

Which do you prefer: the blessings of abundance (symbolized by the birth of a child) or the belly of a fish (a metaphor for the tight spots we get ourselves into)? Rosh HaShana comes to remind us that like Abraham and Jonah we each have a choice in life, and that as we choose, so will be our path.

Shana Tova to you all. May G-d bless you all with a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year filled with all sorts of good things, Amen.