

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Rosh Hashanah



Context

*Rosh Hashanah is one of 4 New Years in the Jewish calendar, and certainly the most popular! As **Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner**, Senior Rabbi to Reform Judaism, and **Ben Lewis** write below, it is a time of gathering for many in the community who otherwise might only mark Seder night and maybe Yom Kippur. New Years resolutions do feature, but tend to focus on our relationships to one another, the world and God. And while the secular New Year is feted with heavy drinking and partying, Rosh Hashanah is celebrated with gatherings filled with sweet foods and over eating. But can Rosh Hashanah do more for us than bring us around a nostalgic family table?*

Content

Rosh Hashanah is more than just a central and beloved festival in the psyche of the Jewish community. The magnitude of this moment in our calendar has become one of the few truly unifying elements of Jewish identity. When the Hebrew month of Tishrei comes around and with it the opening moment of Rosh Hashanah, there is a seemingly irresistible force that temporarily brings the whole of *klal yisrael*, the people of Israel, together.

What is it that gives Rosh Hashanah this kind of magic? The disunity of our community is often felt, so how does this festival manage to largely unite Jews from across denominations? How does it bring in many Jews who would not even consider stepping foot inside a synagogue at any other time?

The first reason is almost tautological - Rosh Hashanah is important because we have collectively bestowed it with a huge weight. Rightly or wrongly, you will hear some Jews suggest that participating in the community on Rosh Hashanah is a requirement to be “truly” part of the community. There is far more to being part of community life than this, but it clearly shows how Rosh Hashanah has become a moment where we feel the desire to stand alongside each other, to reaffirm our connection to this community and to make an act of solidarity. This chance to pin our colours to the mast is powerful and gives us an annual opportunity to tighten the links of our community, even if they have been tested in the previous year.

Beyond the importance we impose on this day, the universal message of Rosh Hashanah rings true. The concepts of self-help and self-improvement, are important values alongside the centrality of community. Judaism, through Rosh Hashanah, made this realisation a long time before today’s self-reflection culture took off. It is an essential element of the human condition that we know we are flawed, but that we want to improve and better ourselves. Rosh Hashanah and the moment of judgement that it brings is able to speak to us all in a way which is meaningful. Whatever our interpretation of how we should be “good people”, a time set aside for *teshuvah* - return to those core values we hold dear - can be powerful. Almost uniquely within our tradition, we are united in our innate understanding of the message of Rosh Hashanah.

There are challenging elements to the framework we are given for Rosh Hashanah. This challenge goes to its very heart - that this day is one on which we are judged by a God who issues rewards and punishments accordingly. Repeatedly, we will hope to be inscribed into the Book of Life, for a good year. According to the traditional liturgy, we will only be worthy of such a fate if our deeds have been good enough and our *teshuvah* has been sincere enough.

Nowhere in our Rosh Hashanah liturgy is this message distilled more clearly than one of its most central prayers - the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer. Its message is quite literally one of fear for a day which is “awesome and terrible”, where we will be herded as helpless sheep to be recorded, and on which it shall be decided who will live, who will die and the exact nature of that life or death. It is intense, to say the least, but it also strikes against many of our understandings as Reform Jews as to our relationship with God. Is God truly an unyielding judge and are we as humans rewarded or punished in our daily lives according to the ruling God has given? Indeed, as is written in this text, are those who we know who die before their time consigned to that fate as a direct punishment from God? That is certainly a jarring message to take, and one which feels inherently wrong to us.

The legend behind this text is that it was written by an 11th-century Rabbi named Amnon who recited Unetaneh Tokef as his dying words after refusing to convert to Catholicism. This legend is certainly not true but speaks to the emotional backdrop this poem was set against. When it was popularised, Jews were taking risks with their lives in order to stay Jewish. The fear of the consequences from abandoning Judaism needed to be greater than the fear of staying Jewish for it to be worth maintaining their faith.

The paradigm in which we live as Jews has shifted in the 21st century. As Reform Jews, we do not need our Judaism to scare us into action - instead, we look to it for opportunities to achieve self-fulfillment. We are far more likely to see ourselves as partners of God in the improvement of the world, than subjects of an/ almighty ruler. That is not to say *Unetaneh Tokef*, and this element of Rosh Hashanah, cannot resonate today. On this day, we consider the consequences of our actions - not the punishments from above, but the direct impact we cause. It is awesome and terrible to consider the difference our choices can make on the people and world around us. Indeed, some of those choices can even be life-or-death: those that impact our environment, or which contribute to inequality or poverty. What we today fear is the realisation that we have to take our partnership with God to repair our world seriously, because there are real consequences which will be felt.

Could there be a better message for our community at this unique time for coming together? We have tremendous responsibilities to each other and to the society and world around us. If we can collectively meet those responsibilities with the same unanimity as we show in coming together on this special day, our world will no doubt be inscribed for a good year.

Contemplation

We have the opportunity to reach Rosh Hashanah after a period of preparation during the Hebrew month of Ellul. And from the New Year we enter the 10 days of repentance. These cycles are designed to take us on journeys that allow us to process and deal with the reality of the world as it is, and the strength to work towards making it the world as we want it to be.

We may arrive at Rosh Hashanah unprepared, but it is never too late to engage and ask ourselves what more we might do to effect change for ourselves, and for the world around us. Our Machzor quotes the 11th Century Rabbi Bachya Ibn Pakuda; ‘Days are scrolls, write on them what you want to be remembered’. Rosh Hashanah allows us to take stock and rethink the scrolls we want to leave behind us.

What will you write on your scroll in the coming year? Do you want it to be different to last year’s scroll? What will your commitments be this new year? And how can you ensure they are changes that will benefit you, your community, and society beyond?