



Daring to Face our Fears

Are We Ready to Face King of Kings on the Day of Judgment?

Rosh Hashana is so much more than apples and honey. I feel my entire being tighten a bit when we approach the Day of Judgment. Not only is the summer vacation definitely over, it's like the entire year is one big vacation compared to Rosh Hashana and the days that precede and follow this awesome day. The High Holidays are called הַיָּמִים הַנּוֹרָאִים /yamim hanora'im – 'The days of Awe,' because we are facing the King of Kings, Whom we respect and fear. So that's a bit scary and there is a natural tendency to run away and hide. Yet, we eventually realize that even within our escape, G-d is there. Not only is Hashem everywhere, He is actually helping us flee. Running away from facing G-d is the opposite of 'standing.' This is one of the reasons why we always read *Parashat Nitzavim* during the Shabbat preceding Rosh Hashana, since *nitzavim* means to stand – to stand firmly. Standing implies awareness, attentiveness and readiness. Eliyahu the prophet said, "By the life of Hashem, the G-d of Israel, before whom I have stood..." (I *Melachim* 17:1). On Rosh Hashana we must stand before Hashem in mindful prayer. Standing is acknowledging that we cannot fly away, although there is such a great temptation to flee in fear. Resisting standing before Hashem is in actuality to run away from ourselves – from the very deepest place of who we truly are. When I want to run away from facing Hashem – from facing myself – I realize that I have a deep fear of true intimacy with my G-d and my divine self. Yet eventually we will all be standing before Hashem. There is no way around it. The more we try to escape the more we will come close at the end of the day. Yet we can save ourselves some detours by daring to face our fears.

Standing Upright with Raised Heads

Our body language reveals a great deal about who we are. A very bent-over person may lack self-confidence and determination. I know several people who work very hard on attaining the highest level of humility. In their desire to desist 'showing off' they miss the opportunity for inspiring others by for example teaching their highest Torah and leading the prayers from the depths of their heart. They erroneously believe that refraining from achieving success and greatness is the uppermost level of humility. The Torah teaches us to the contrary that we must stand upright facing Hashem:

ספר דברים פרק כט פסוק ט

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לִפְנֵי הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם רְאִשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבֵטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

"You are all standing this day before Hashem, your G-d the leaders of your tribes, your elders and your officers, every man of Israel" (*Devarim* 29:9).

The word נֹצְבִים/*nitzavim* means more than just 'standing' it denotes the particular way of standing firmly and upright. Standing straight and strong with uplifted head will help us succeed in everything we do. The message of the following midrash is similarly that we must put our greatest effort and our entire selves into serving Hashem in the very highest way available to us: "...Scripture comes to tell us that when a person performs a mitzvah he must do it with a complete heart, for had Reuven known that G-d would have it recorded of him, "Reuven heard and he saved him from their hands," (*Bereishit* 37:21), he would have brought him [Yosef] back on his shoulders to his father... (*Midrash Ruth Rabbah* 5:6). This midrash gives additional examples of how great people in the Torah missed an opportunity to excel even more in their mitzvah performance. In my understanding due to our inherent lack of self-confidence, our fear of failing together with our concern about becoming arrogant, we refrain from exerting ourselves to the utmost in order to excel in all our endeavors. Rav Aviner explains that קְדוּשָׁה /*Kedusha* – 'holiness'

does not imply that we should constantly bow our heads. The Torah teaches us to hold our heads high. "When you raise up the heads of the Children of Israel" (*Shemot* 30:12). "For sin causes us to lower our head; evil is rooted in earthly concerns and is lowly. *Kedusha* leads us to raise our eyes on high – to become elevated both in quality and in quantity" (Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, *Shemot* 30:12). Lowering our profile is analogous to sin. When we stand before Hashem, we must stand straight and not bent over. The Ohr HaChaim further explains, "The further anything is from *kedusha*, the lower its profile, the more bent its head. Therefore, the Torah tells us that when we stand before G-d, we stand upright with our heads raised" (ibid).

The Key-Point of Rosh Hashana: Reentering the Covenant

"You are standing firmly today..." This refers to the Day of Judgment (*Zohar* 2:32b). The depths of teshuva (repentance) is to know before Whom we stand – "...before Hashem your G-d" (*Devarim* 29:9). What is the ultimate purpose of standing before Hashem? The continuation of the opening section in *Parashat Nitzavim* clarifies:

ספר דברים פרק כט פסוק יא לְעִבְרָךָ בְּבְרִית הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּבְאֵלֹתוֹ אֲשֶׁר הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּרַת עִמָּךְ הַיּוֹם:
 "...that you may enter the covenant of Hashem, your G-d, and His oath, which Hashem, your G-d, is making with you this day (*Devarim* 29:11).

The key-point of Rosh Hashana is to feel in our deepest essential self that on this day we are entering the covenant with Hashem our G-d anew. This matter, which is entrenched in crowning Hashem King and agreeing to His covenant, is the essence of Rosh Hashana and its main message as we repeatedly proclaim in the Rosh Hashana prayers:

וְתִמְלוֹךְ אַתָּה הוּא הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְהֵרָה לְבִדְךָ עַל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ... מְלוֹךְ עַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ בְּכֹבֶדְךָ...
 "Reign shall you Hashem alone speedily over all Your creations and ...be the King upon all the entire world in Your honor" (Rosh Hashana Prayers).

Since the key-point of the Day of Judgment is reentering the covenant with Hashem, the judgment pertaining to our lives, health, livelihood etc. are all means to re-establish our covenant with Him and achieve the greatest closeness to G-d. The very first word of *Parashat Netzavim*, **אַתָּם/atem** – "you" plural, is the acronym for **אַל תִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי מִלִּפְנֵיךָ** *al tashlicheini milfaneicha* – "Do not cast me away from before You" (*Tehillim* 51:13); (Based on *Netivot Shalom, Parashat Nitzavim* pp. 184-185). Our highest aspirations and aim as Jews are to consummate our deepest relationship with Hashem. To which degree we succeed in reaching our goal depends upon our judgement on Rosh Shana. Our final verdict during the Days of Awe, in return, depends on our attitude – on how much we dare standing firmly, upright and straight, expressing our higher selves – as we face Hashem with both uttermost self-confidence as well as with genuine humility.