

Rosh Hashanah - The Birthday of the World

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Today is the birth[day] of the world. Today all creatures of the world stand in judgment – whether as children of [G-d] or as servants. If as children, be merciful with us as the mercy of a father for children. If as servants, our eyes [look toward and] depend upon You, until You will be gracious to us and release our verdict [clear and pure] as light, O Awesome and Holy One. (*Rosh Hashanah Machzor: With Commentary Adapted from the Teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, K'hal Publishing, page 541*)

This *piyut* (liturgical poem) from the *Machzor* (prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) is at least as ancient as the Ninth Century, and is first found in the Gaonic period work, *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*. All congregations recite it in unison at the conclusion of the *chazzan's* repetition of the *Mussaf* for Rosh Hashanah's three main sections, namely, *Malchiyut* (Kingship), *Zichronot* (Remembrances) and *Shofrot*. While it is one conceptual unit, it is nonetheless comprised of several major themes:

- Today is the birth[day] of the world.
- Today all creatures of the world stand in judgment.
- Today we are viewed as either children of the Almighty, or as servants.
- Children of the Creator and servants of G-d are judged quite differently.

Given the prominent placement and singular import of this *piyut*, let us examine its major ideas.

Today is Simultaneously the Birthday of the World and the Day of Judgment

HaRav Yaakov ben Yaakov Moshe Lorberbaum of Lissa (1760-1832) was the author of a number of major works on Halacha and Torah exegesis. In *Sefer Nachalat Ya'akov al HaTorah*, he analyzed the fundamental reason as to why Rosh Hashanah is called the “birthday of the world,” and the “day of judgment”:

The reason [why Rosh Hashanah is simultaneously the “birthday of the world,” and the “day of judgment”] is because their [i.e. each and every creature in the world] judgment is preordained for adjudication [on Rosh Hashanah]. As we find in Tosafot’s comments in the name of Rabbeinu Tam, on *Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 27a* (s.v. *k’man matzlinan*), “Tishrei was the month when [the Holy One Blessed be He] first thought of creating the world, [even though] it was not created until Nissan.” Moreover, Rashi, may his memory be remembered for a blessing, in his commentary on Parashat Bereishit (1:1), wrote that “initially, [the Master of the Universe] planned to create the world via the quality of strict judgment (*middat hadin*). He refrained from this, however, when He recognized that the world could not possibly exist [based solely upon this principle]; therefore, He began with *middat harachamim* (the quality of mercy), and combined it with *middat hadin*. As the Torah states (*Sefer Bereishit 2:4*): ‘On the day that Hashem [*middat harachamim*] Elokim [*middat hadin*] made earth and heaven.’” In sum, since the initial thought of Creation was in Tishrei, and it was originally conceived as an act of *middat hadin*, therefore, this day [Rosh Hashanah] was established as the Day of Judgment [for evermore]. (Commentary on *Sefer Shemot*, Parashat Ki Tisa, 32:32, translation, parentheses and brackets my own)

Children or Servants of the Almighty?

Armed with the *Nachalat Ya'akov*’s explanation of the terms, “birthday of the world” and “day of judgment,” we are now prepared to understand what it means to be viewed as either children of the Almighty, or as servants. In doing so, we will also be able to apprehend the reason as to why children of Hashem have such seemingly different potential outcomes on Rosh Hashanah than do servants. Our guide will be HaRav David ben Yosef Abudarham who lived in Seville, Spain. In his classic work on Jewish liturgy entitled, “*Abudarham*” (published 1340), our author notes that the phrase, “whether as children of [G-d] or as servants,” reflects the existential ambiguity and angst that we have

at the onset of *Yom Hadin* (the Day of Judgment). In a word, we really have no idea how the Master of the World will view us on Rosh Hashanah - will we be treated as His children or His servants? The difference is highly significant, since “it is not the normal manner to be merciful to one’s servant in the same fashion as to one’s son.” Therefore, “if like [Your] children” connotes “if we merit that You will judge us like children, then have mercy upon us in the same fashion that a father has upon his children.” (*Sefer Abudarham* translations and brackets my own) In sum, we are beseeching Hashem to treat us with the entire catalogue of the 13 *Middot Harachamim* (Attributes of Mercy): “And the L-rd passed before him [Moshe] and proclaimed: L-rd, L-rd, benevolent G-d, Who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness and truth, preserving loving kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and rebellion and sin.” (*Sefer Shemot* 34:6-7, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

At this juncture, one might well have imagined that being mere servants would result in overly harsh judgments on Rosh Hashanah. In HaRav David ben Yosef’s view, however, this is, nonetheless, not the case:

And if we do not merit to be judged like [Your] children, but rather as servants, it remains the case that many masters treat their servants with mercy, and that the eyes of the servants [look] dependently upon them. As the text states: “Behold, as the eyes of servants to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a handmaid to the hand of her mistress, so are our eyes to the L-rd our G-d, until He favors us.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 123:2)

The Abudarham’s message is clear. Whether we are judged as Hashem’s children or His servants, there is always hope for the Jewish people. This premise strongly parallels Rabbi Akiva’s famous words that conclude *Mishnah Yoma*:

Rabbi Akiva said: “Be joyous O’ Jewish people! Before Whom are you ritually [and spiritually] purified? Who purifies you? [None other than] your Father in Heaven! As the verses state: ‘And I [G-d] will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean; from all your impurities and from all your abominations will I cleanse you,’ (*Sefer Yechezkel* 36:25) and ‘The L-rd who is the source of the hopes (*mikveh*) of Israel...’ (*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 17:13). Just as a mikvah has the ability to ritually purify the ritually impure, so, too, does the Holy One blessed be He ritually [and spiritually] purify the Jewish people.” (Translation, brackets and underlining my own)

Let us pray that on this Rosh Hashanah we will be treated like Hashem’s children, and thereby merit the extra degree of mercy that a father bestows upon his child. If, however, we do not achieve this status, and we are viewed as His servants, let us not despair. May we always remember and turn toward Rabbi Akiva’s words of ultimate hope, “Be joyous O’ Jewish people! Before Whom are you ritually [and spiritually] purified? Who purifies you? [None other than] your Father in Heaven!” *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, *kativah v’chatimah tovah* and *tizku l’shanim rabot*.

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