

# Rosh Hashanah 2013 – Pain or pleasure?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Torah tells us very little about Rosh Hashanah, not even its name. The three harvest and pilgrim festivals are named, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukot. These were the main focal points of national Jewish life in Biblical times, when as many as possible gathered in Jerusalem and attended Temple ceremonies. The Torah keeps on reiterating how they are supposed to be happy occasions, time to eat, drink, be merry, and share. Yom Kipur is the single Biblical holiday devoted to personal introspection, a serious and painful experience, physically and spiritually.

But when it comes to Rosh Hashanah, all we have to describe it is, “The first day of the seventh month is a Sabbath of remembering and blowing (the shofar)”! (Leviticus 23 and Numbers 29) It is up to the Oral Law to tell us more. The name we use universally nowadays, the New or rather the Head of the Year, came into Judaism much later than the Bible.

So I wonder, where does Rosh Hashanah fit in on the scale of pain and pleasure? Is it a happy, joyful festival like the other three, or is it painful and serious like Yom Kipur? Is it a self-analytical moment in which our very existence is examined and justified, or is it a mystical occasion when we should try, through ecstasy and experience, to get as close to Heaven as we can? Is it a case of “turn from evil and do good” or “do good and turn from evil”?

There is an alternative option, that it is a mixture of both. Just like good chocolate, it has salt as well as sugar. Throughout the history of human intellectual civilization we have always been expected to choose, to decide which one is right. Should we be happy or sad? Should we be enjoying life or suppressing and disciplining? Should we be rational or emotional? Should we be individuals or a community? Perhaps they are both right.

The Western philosophical tradition likes to be precise. It has no time for fuzzy combinations. Either you are Stoic or an Epicurean, an Aristotelian or Platonist, a Greek or a Roman, a Christian or a Muslim, a rationalist or a mystic, a capitalist or a socialist, a Freudian or a Jungian, a person who wants to have fun or a killjoy.

But surely we are a mixture of different ideas, opinions, experiences and feelings. So is Judaism. That’s why we can never agree on anything. Do we have to be scholars or populists, legalists or fabulists, have analytical minds or great memories, prefer gemarah or midrash, be Chasidim or Mitnagdim, Sefardi or a Ashkenazi, strict or lenient? Why can’t we combine lots of different elements and move in and out of different moods and situations?

History plays a part, of course. Zechariah was ready to scrap all the sad fast days and turn them into joyful celebrations. But then came years of oppression and suffering and exile and the number of sad days increased. Once

we were exiled from Jerusalem, our liturgy overflowed with sadness, alienation, loss, and woe. Now we have penthouses overlooking the Old City, with swimming pools and saunas. Once Ashkenazi and Sefardi prayed in different worlds; now we are next-door and often visit each other, pray with each other and dance with each other, let alone marry each other. Once Lithuanians placed bans on Chasidim, now they imitate them. Rav Ovadia Yosef once implored his followers to stop dressing in black Ashkenazi gear, now his sons look like nineteenth century Viennese doctors. Blurring the lines can be good. We should embrace it.

So historically we refer to the first ten days of the month of Tishrei as Yamim Nora'im, Awesome Days, serious days, or the Ten Days of Repentance. Heavy days with much longer services than normal, lots of additional poems, much breast-beating and tears of contrition, and the expectation that being found unworthy we will be condemned in ten days to Heavenly punishment. Yet there is another side. We sit down to huge banquets. Our tables are laden with goodies. We dip apples into honey and wish each other a sweet year. We get hold of as many exotic fruits as we can to symbolize good things, and to be able to thank God "who has kept us alive and enabled us to enjoy this moment." We buy new things and wear our best clothes. We are treated to the sounds of the shofar, and we go down to the water to remark on our never stepping into the same river twice (I bet you never thought of that association with Tashlich).

We can be happy one moment and reflective the next. That, according to the Talmud, is why we break glasses at weddings. It is why we thank God for the bad as well as the good, and vice versa. It is why we celebrate life and we record death. It is why we work but also rest, why we eat but also refrain. The more we do, the richer our lives. But the more we overindulge the less rewarding and enjoyable they become. Unless you add salt, the chocolate cloy. Unless you enjoy life and look on its bright side and remember your good fortune, however modest, the less significant each moment becomes.

Rosh Hashana has no Biblical name because it is sandwiched between the extremes of the delightful pleasures of harvests and the self-denial of Yom Kipur. It stands for the golden mean between them, the best of both harvest festivals and serious self-analysis.

Pain or pleasure? Yes. We all experience it when we look back at our lives, let alone the past year. There are things we did that give us a sense of success and satisfaction. And there are things we did that we regret, wish we had done differently or better, that cause us pain. It's precisely that combination of the two that Rosh Hashanah reminds us of.

May we all have a sweet year.