



MIDEI CHODESH

B'CHODSHO

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A Critical Balance

Now that our year has begun in earnest, let's take a step back to consider the overall structure of the year....

Strikingly, two major “new years” exist on the Jewish Calendar, taking place exactly six months apart: Nissan, ordained in the Torah as the “first of the months,” and Tishrei; labeled by the rabbis as Rosh HaShana, the “head of the year.”

Clearly a balance is intentionally formed through this dual structure. But what does that balance signify? What message is conveyed by the splitting of the year into two equal sections, each headed by its own “Rosh HaShana?”

If we examine the Biblical holidays that mark these “new years,” an answer begins to emerge. Two passages of birth and rebirth begin to appear before us.

Nissan marks the birth of the Jewish nation, a process that unfolds in two steps: the Exodus from Egypt and the Revelation at Sinai. These events are commemorated by the holiday journey launched in Nissan; across Pesach, Sefirat Ha'Omer and Shavuot. Nissan is a time of reconnection to our national story.

In contrast, *Tishrei marks the birth of individual man*, through God's creation of

Adam and Chava and their placement in the Garden of Eden. “*Hayom haras olam*,” the Rosh HaShana prayers of Tishrei proclaim, “Today is the birthday of the world.” While the rabbis in the Talmud debate the actual calendar date of the world's creation, this is the time of the year when we ritually mark that creation. This is the time of the year when—as we move through Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret—we journey through towards renewed understanding of our roles as individuals, each uniquely created in the image of God.

These two calendar poles thus reflect a tension embedded in human experience from the outset....

Every society, across time, is largely defined by the equilibrium it reaches between personal rights and communal needs. The Torah, in fact, describes two doomed societies at the dawn of human history, each of which fails at opposite ends of the spectrum. The generation of the flood was characterized by individual greed, at the expense of societal mores. This civilization had to be utterly destroyed by floodwaters, drowning all of humanity, sparing only Noach and his family. The generation of the dispersion, with its Tower of *Bavel*, focused only on the needs of its societal structure, ignoring the value of each individual. This civilization had to be destroyed, as well; but only through

the dissolution of the society. This was accomplished by the Divinely-ordained dispersion of its citizenry throughout the land.

Only after the destruction of these two civilizations and the transmission of the lessons taught through their respective fates, does God launch Jewish history with Avraham's journey to Canaan. Following the dictates of Divine law, Avraham's nation will strike an ongoing balance between *Yachid* and *Tzibur*, individual and community, in all areas of life.

Consider, as an example, the way we pray. Halacha is clear in its assertion that prayer is best performed within a communal setting, in the presence of at least a minyan. And yet, the central prayer, the *Amida*, is to be recited in isolation within the crowd, only loud enough for the penitent himself, or herself, to hear. And yet again, this private *Amida* is recited in the plural tense-so that others are included in the penitent's personal prayer. And then, this prayer is most often recited again, this time aloud, for all to hear. Personal and communal prayer, in continual delicate balance... the two forces of *Yachid* and *Tzibur*, concretely mirrored and balanced in our approach to God.

Can it be, then, that the two major *Rashei Shana* of our year are designed to weave the balance between *Yachid* and *Tzibur* into the very structure of our calendar?

The Rosh HaShana of Nissan, with its stress upon the birth of Jewish nationhood, reminds us that only through affiliation with our nation's journey can we fully realize our personal potential as Jews. *If we fail to attach ourselves to our nation's hopes and dreams, we are simply incomplete.*

The Rosh HaShana of Tishrei, in contrast, reminds us that the unity of our people does not connote uniformity; *that each of us, as individuals, has a unique, essential, contribution to make towards our nation's saga; that each of us has our own, personal relationship to cultivate with our Creator.*

One final point, however ...

The primary rituals that mark each of these *Rashei Shana* seem strangely counter-intuitive.

The New Year of Nissan, the Communal New Year, is marked by a retreat to our private homes for the individual experience of the Pesach Seder. The New Year of Tishrei, the Personal New Year, is marked in the largest public gatherings of the entire year, as we come together for the prayers of the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe.

And yet, upon consideration, the message is clear. *There must be overlap between the two opposite poles.* The equation between the *Rashei Shana* of our year is not static, but dynamic, a formula in constant flux. *We can only reach our full potential as individuals within the context of the community. And our communal affiliation is complete only when we contribute our own unique gifts, talents and abilities towards the benefit of the whole.*

A duality in the calendar. Individual and community... community and individual... each informing the other...each enriching the other...in constant tension and in constant balance... as we move through the very days of our year. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."