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What If We Knew?

There is something almost auspicious about the way the calendar falls this year.

It is almost exactly as it was three years ago.

Rosh Hashanah on Shabbat.

Yom Kippur on Monday.

Simchat Torah on Shabbat.

Three years ago, we had no idea what was coming.

Today, we do.

Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger, the בעל ערוך לנר, makes a fascinating observation in his commentary *Minchat Ani* on Parshat Ha'azinu. He asks whether a year in which Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat is a good sign. His answer is striking: historically, these were not ordinary years. Some were among the worst years in Jewish history, while others were among the greatest.

The destruction of both Batei Mikdash occurred in the years in which Rosh

Hashanah fell on Shabbat. But so too did the forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf, the establishment of the Mishkan, and the year in which Bnei Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael.

In other words, a year beginning with Rosh Hashanah on Shabbat can be a year of extraordinary consequence. It can be a year of painful destruction—or a year of extraordinary glory.

And here we are, three years later, staring at almost the exact same calendar.

It is impossible not to wonder: What will this year bring?

But perhaps that is not the question we should be asking.

Perhaps the more important question is: **What will we bring to this year?**

Because we have something this time that we did not have three years ago.

Hindsight.

If we had known then what was waiting for us on Simchat Torah 5784, how differently would we have experienced Elul? How much more urgently would we have davened? How much more intensely would we have cried out to Hashem on Rosh Hashanah?

We would have been shaken into taking every word of our tefillot seriously.

And perhaps that is precisely the opportunity we have been given now.

The Rambam, in Hilchot Teshuvah (2:1), defines complete teshuvah in a remarkable way:

”אי זו היא תשובה גמורה? זה שבא לידו דבר שעבר בו ואפשר בידו לעשותו ופירש ולא עשה מפני התשובה, לא מיראה ולא מכשולו כח.”



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True teshuvah is when a person finds himself in the same situation in which he previously sinned—he has the same ability to do it again—and nevertheless chooses differently.

We are approaching Rosh Hashanah, and in some extraordinary way, we have been brought back to the same place.

The calendar is repeating itself.

But we are not the same people.

We have lived through October 7th. We have lived through war, loss, uncertainty and extraordinary miracles. We have seen what happens when a nation is fractured. We have also seen what happens when Jews come together with extraordinary courage and love.

And now, as the media fills our screens with elections, politics, arguments and competing narratives, we are once again watching division play out before our eyes.

Perhaps those divisions do not represent the entirety of who we are. But they are certainly what is being amplified.

And perhaps the question of teshuvah this year is not simply, *What do I need to change?*

Perhaps it is: **What have I learned?**

Have we forgotten what disunity can cost?

Is October 6th already becoming a distant memory?

Have we forgotten how desperately we cried to Hashem on Yom Kippur 5784?

And what can we possibly do now?

Yes, we can create achdut projects.

We can strengthen relationships.

We can choose shalom over conflict.

But can we solve everything?

The problems are simply too big.

So what happens when the problem is bigger than us?

We turn to the One who is not limited by it.

We daven.

Perhaps this year, our tefillot need to be bigger than our own personal requests.

“Hashem, open their eyes to see clearly.”

“Hashem, open their ears to hear truth.”

“Hashem, give our leaders wisdom.”

“Hashem, give our nation clarity.”

“Hashem, remove the fog.”

Yeshayahu describes a future era in which **מְלֶאֶה הָאָרֶץ דַּעַה אֶת ה' כְּמִים לַיָּם מְכֻסִּים** — the world will be filled with knowledge of Hashem as the waters cover the sea.

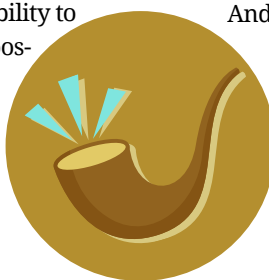
Perhaps we are not there yet.

So we pray for it.

We pray that those days come quickly.

But there is another way we can use the extraordinary power of tefillah this Rosh Hashanah.

Pray for someone else.



Before Rosh Hashanah, make a list.

Who needs a refuah? A shidduch? Success? Salvation? Insight and clarity? Who needs to find their way back?

While the main point of Rosh Hashanah is re-inaugurating Hashem as king over my life and the world, we also tend to come to Rosh Hashanah with a spiritual “shopping list” knowing only He can provide my needs.

But what if we come before Hashem not asking for our personal needs but rather asking for the needs of other people.

Because there is something extraordinarily powerful about standing before Hashem, knowing that we have His attention, knowing that we can ask Him for almost anything—and choosing to say:

“Hashem, I want this for myself. But please give it to them.”

What parent wouldn’t experience enormous nachas from hearing a child ask for a sibling’s needs before their own?

Perhaps this is a form of **mesirut nefesh**.

Not only because praying for someone else strengthens our bond with that person. Not only because it is an expression of **ואהבת לרעך כמוך**. But because there is holiness in surrendering our own desire and asking Hashem to give to another Jew first.

I want health—but please give it to him.

I want happiness—but please give it to her.

I want salvation—but please save them..

Perhaps this is our opportunity for teshuvah this year.

The calendar has brought us back to the same place.

But we know something now that we didn’t know then.

We know that everything can change overnight.

We know that we cannot control the future.

We know that Torah, mitzvot, achdut and tefillah are not abstract ideals. They are the very things that connect us to the One who runs the world.

So perhaps this year, instead of allowing the turbulence around us to pull us into anger, fear or despair, we can turn it into tefillah.

We can take every frustration and send it heavenward.

Every disagreement can become a prayer for clarity.

Every worry can become a request for protection.

Every person we disagree with can become someone we daven for.

Rabbi Ettlinger reminds us that a year with this calendar can go in radically different directions—toward destruction or toward glory.

With our hindsight vision, with our turning to Hashem, with our willingness to put others ahead of ourselves, and with our giving and doing for one another from the bottom of our hearts, may we be *zoche* to turn this year toward glory rather than destruction, toward unity rather than division, toward redemption rather than fear — and toward a year of **pure undeniable sweetness**.

■ **כתיבה וחתימה טובה.**

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