

# Rosh Hashanah Prayers as One Answer to Our Existential Situation

By Rabbi Josh Jacobs-Velde

I would like to make the case for you that the roughly 2000-year-old structure that is specific to our Rosh Hashanah prayers is actually a pretty good way of getting in touch with and responding to our existential situation. But first, a story I recently happened upon from the Tibetan tradition:

“Once there was a beggar who was wandering around begging for food and grain. At one point, he was able to accumulate enough barley that he had this huge sack of it. He was quite happy.

It was the best achievement of his life. He felt more relief and more happiness than he had ever felt before. he decided to take a little break.

He saw a house and decided to sleep underneath it. He tied the big sack of barley to one of the rafters, and then he lay down to sleep. But he couldn't fall asleep because his heart was racing with so much joy.

Then he started planning his future. The first thought that popped into his mind was that he was going to make a business out of that bag of barley.

Soon he would be a wealthy man. It was just a matter of time.

Soon he would get married and have a child, a son. This thought made him very excited.

He started thinking about what he would name his son. He had a bit of a problem coming up with an auspicious name.

Just then, the moon was rising, and he decided to call his son “The Famous Moon.” (I'm assuming it works better as a name in Tibetan than it does in English.)

All this time, a big rat was gnawing on the rope that held the big sack to the rafter. Soon the rope was broken in the big sack fell on his head and killed him.

Nevertheless, in Tibetan, this story is called the parable of the father of The Famous Moon.”<sup>1</sup>

So that is the first element of our existential situation. We all want certainty. Our minds get away from us planning things out. We think that having some kind of security is something we can plan for and maintain, that will make us happy. We try to shore things up, to hedge. Of course, there is some truth to this; we obviously need to plan for the future and retirement accounts are a good thing. Studies have shown that it's important not to sleep directly under a big heavy sack of barley. But we really don't have certainty, and try as we might we are never going to get it.

Probably many of us know the Yiddish saying: *Der mensch tracht, un gott lacht*. The human being thinks and God laughs.

And so our Rosh Hashanah prayers directly address the situation. Who by fire? Who by water? We all come together collectively and we admit: “We just don't know. We don't know who is going to be here next year. We don't even know who is going to be here at the close of Yom Kippur. We are not in control. We acknowledge our vulnerability. We are not calling the shots.”

Covid taught us all a lot about this, and this is one of the perhaps underappreciated gifts of the pandemic that is worth recalling.

So we don't have control; we live in this place of deep uncertainty, but our tradition has given us some structures through this day that can help, that are empowering, that can speak to our existential situation. They are basically the elements of Rosh Hashanah Mussaf: the idea of today as *Yom ha'Din*, conventionally translated as the day of judgment, and the other special components known as *malchuyot*, *zichronot* and *shofarot* (which I'll soon say more about).

Let's begin with the *U'netanah Tokef* prayer that I invoked a few moments ago. One of my favorite lines comes in the middle of page 347:

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<sup>1</sup> *Embracing Each Moment: a Guide to the Awakened Life*, Anam Thubten, p. 43-43.

*You alone can remember what we have forgotten;  
it is you who shall open the Book of Remembrance,  
but its contents shall speak for themselves,  
for it bears the imprint of us all,  
which our deeds and our lives have inscribed.*

The Hebrew that I particularly love is in the last line: *v'chotam yad kol adam bo*. Every human being signs the Book with their signature, their *chotam yad*, literally the “seal of their hand.”

How have we each signed the Book?

The next line describes the scene of the heavenly court: “and when the great shofar is sounded, a small, quiet voice (*kol dmamah dakah*) can be heard, and the heavenly beings [the angels] are thrown into fright, and, seized by a terrible dread, they declare:

*Hinei Yom HaDin!!* Behold, the Day of Judgment has arrived!

This is one of the archetypal images, the mythic scenes of drama that our tradition evokes for us at this season. *Din* does indeed mean judgment, but it is also self-scrutiny and accountability. We act as though this is the day and this is the season that we are called to account.

Each of us individually hears the existential question God asked Adam in the garden, “*Ayeka?*” Where are you? Of course, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi says, God was not asking a simple locational question, God was asking at the deepest level, “Where are you at Adam?” There is a sense of awe that we collectively enter into on this day and part of that awe comes from being called to account by the Holy One.

Of course, the *U'netanah Tokef* prayer gives us an answer to working with the uncertainty of our lives: *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* make easier what God may decree. *Tefilah*/prayer, *tzedakah*-- giving generously to those in need, living from a place of generosity, and *teshuvah*, looking deeply into our lives. That is what we mean by Yom Ha'Din. The day of deep scrutiny, self-scrutiny. And we can wake up, and really notice where we are falling asleep in our life. That's the shofar.

Some of us have been trying to do this from the beginning of the month of Elul. But it's hard to sustain this kind of awareness and scrutiny continually. So we are given this bounded ritual time, through Yom Kippur, to really focus. To notice: where are we acting unconsciously, reactively, hurtfully? When are we just being driven by impulse in ways that don't serve us, that are unskillful? Where are we not taking responsibility in our lives?

Interestingly, the theme of *din*, of judgment is not mentioned that much in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy,<sup>2</sup> beyond the prominent place I just spoke about in the *U'netanah Tokef* prayer. Much more prominent is the idea of divine sovereignty or *malchut*, evoked in many Rosh Hashanah prayers, and soon we will come to the section of Mussaf called Malchuyot. One of the classical explanations for the shofar is that it is to accompany a coronation enthroning God as ruler.

What can this mean for us, who live in a society without kings and queens committed to democratic ideals? There is actually quite a lot I've come to value about the invocation of God's *malchut*.

I want to share with you what I think is one of the most powerful reconstructings of the idea of God's *malchut* which comes from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, better known as Reb Zalman. Reb Zalman was deeply concerned with paradigm shift, of reformatting and reimagining key Jewish ideas for the paradigm in which we now live.

Of course, the king/melech metaphor comes from the very long stretch of time when hierarchy ruled our understanding of the world. In the idea of the Great Chain of Being, the king or queen was the most exalted of all humans, and beyond them the angels, "until the Throne of God himself, *melech ha'olam*, king of the universe."

Of course now "we do not crown rulers: we vote for them... Kingdoms and feudal hierarchies have given way to states and corporations. These, too, are hierarchical, but the hierarchies are fluid." Science is interested in systemic models. Business management theories "advise allowing productivity and creativity to emerge organically from within organizations. Slowly but surely, we are replacing the hierarchical Great Chain of Being as our core model for understanding our world with a Great Chain of Life [a

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<sup>2</sup> *Netivot Shalom: Chelek Sheini, "Rosh Hashanah, Ma'amar Rishon."*

*tzror ha'chayim*], one that enfolds everything from the microorganisms that keep our planet alive to the planetary intelligence of which they are a part.”<sup>3</sup>

This is Reb Zalman’s Jewish spiritual adaptation of the Gaia hypothesis, a scientific theory that “proposes that all organisms and their inorganic surroundings on Earth are closely integrated to form a single and self-regulating complex system, maintaining the conditions for life on the planet.”<sup>4</sup>

“What happens [Reb Zalman continues] if we reimagine *melekh ha-olam* as the governing organismic wisdom of *ha-olam*-- that is, of the planet Earth? All of a sudden we see phrases like ‘God is kind’ or ‘God is merciful’ in a new light. Instead of seeing God as an all-powerful patriarch in the sky, we can affirm that, yes, the universe is kind in the sense of being hospitable to life. Yes, the universe is compassionate in the sense that Earth heals her children. In our new understanding, such phrases become metaphors for the essential qualities of this planetary miracle we call life.”<sup>5</sup>

A traditional, what we could call triumphalist understanding of the many prayers we have in our machzor saying, “God, rule over the world” would be “Let all the peoples of the Earth acknowledge God in the way we the Jews do.”

But now, aided by Reb Zalman’s ideas, we can understand these prayers to say something like, “God, help us to truly know our organismic nature-- that we are a cell in the Jewish organ of the Divine body. Help us to know that we are an integral part of the whole.”

This understanding opens up a key line from our liturgy--*zochreinu l'chayim*, (remember us for life) *melech ha'fetz b'chayim* (governing organismic wisdom of our planet and beyond, Who desires life ). It makes so much more sense from this perspective! We are not asking an all-powerful King to not condemn us to death, instead we are saying to God: we want to collaborate with You to serve and support the flourishing of all of

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<sup>3</sup> *Jewish with Feeling: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Practice*, Rabbi Zalman Schachter- Shalomi with Joel Segel, p. 167-168

<sup>4</sup> <https://courses.seas.harvard.edu/climate/eli/Courses/EP281r/Sources/Gaia/Gaia-hypothesis-wikipedia.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> *Jewish with Feeling*, p. 169.

life. We don't want to act like "a rogue cell, a cancer cell in the greater body."<sup>6</sup>

This sense of being integral is so important. In Malchuyot, we are not just surrendering to God's vastness, we are recognizing our cell-nature in the Jewish organ of the Divine body, and from that awareness we seek to serve the Whole. It's an empowering evolution of the meaning Divine kingship.

And so we need to install the software today and tomorrow, to take this idea forward into the year, to bring that consciousness to the different things that we do.

This kind of integral understanding and consciousness is one of the clearest ways that we can say what the Divine Will is expressing now. This awareness contains its own teshuvah within it: When am I acting from a place of separation? When am I acting like a rogue cell? When am I acting and praying from a place of knowing mine and others "integralness" to the Whole?

We come now to the last component of our existential exploration, Zichronot. Feel free to open your machzorim to page 635 to follow along with me in the beautiful poetry of the early rabbis:

*You remember all that you have made within your world, consider every creature fashioned since Creation. Before you every secret is uncovered, the whole multitude of mysteries since the world began. Nothing is forgotten in the presence of your Throne of Glory and nothing is hidden from before your eyes. You remember each completed act each created being – none escapes your gaze...[skipping a little] All of your many works, your mass of living creatures, the vast infinity of beings – each has its place within your memory and thought...*

What is clear to me is that the early rabbis are guiding us to invoke something very deep here.

We are being seen by the Divine compassionate gaze. Our individuality, our humanness, is being seen, noticed, within an impossibly vast,

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<sup>6</sup> *The Gates of Prayer: Twelve Talks on Davvenology*, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, p. 83.

conscious Awareness, we could call the Divine Mind. Just sit with that for a moment.

In Indian and Buddhist traditions they would call It consciousness Itself. Our tradition imagines us as being noticed, seen, held, by the Divine gaze, registering in the Divine memory.

In offering this, I'm actually intentionally pushing back against what I see as the limited nature of classical Reconstructionist theology which waters down and makes excessively humanist the rabbis' traditional language, saying things like "when we pray for God to remember, we are reciting a list of things that we then collectively remember."<sup>7</sup>

Zichronot goes way deeper than that. In my understanding and experience, there is a vast, unknowable intelligent context in which we all exist in our individuality, which is continually seeing us, from which we are not separate and to which we return to.

Seeing ourselves as included in the divine compassionate gaze can give us that sense of being integral to the whole.

Another way of languaging this is to say that the power of Zichronot is the opportunity to be transparent before God, to not be opaque, to allow ourselves to be seen.<sup>8</sup> And of course transparency is key to accountability.

And so these are the gifts, the tools that our tradition offers us to deal with our difficult human situation: embracing our reality of uncertainty, allowing ourselves to take in the power of this day as a day of deep scrutiny, yet one that at the same time is held within the compassionate Divine gaze and memory. And seeing ourselves as integral to the Whole, that the "sovereign" that we seek to serve is the governing organismic wisdom of ha'olam, our planet and beyond.

Shabbat shalom and shanah tovah.

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<sup>7</sup> Reconstructionist Machzor, p. 637.

<sup>8</sup> Reb Zalman has often spoken in the language of transparency before God.