

## **2nd Day Rosh Hashana 5767**

### **Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen**

I'm feeling a little bit of déjà vu. Weren't we just here about 24 hours ago? Didn't we just recite the same brachot and sing the same melodies only yesterday as we celebrated Rosh Hashanah? But if we just did it yesterday, why are we doing it again today? Why are any of us here on this Sunday giving up our entire weekend to be in synagogue together and listening to the same liturgy again? Believe me, the answer is much more than "why not?"

Consider for a moment how you sometimes feel after a particularly good meal, something inside you says that you just have to go back for seconds knowing that the savored second helping is going to be just as good or even better than the first.

However, as Reform Jews, celebrating the Second Day or Additional Days of chagim are not part of our regular practice. For example, we only celebrate seven days of Sukkot and Pesach versus the Eight that Conservative or Orthodox Jews outside of Israel celebrate. So why today? And what can we gain from doing it all twice?

Let's begin with some history:

We are introduced to Rosh Hashanah in Numbers which reads, *U'vachodesh ha'shvi'I, b'echad, la'chodesh, meekra kodesh, yiyeh lachem kol mlechet avodah lo ta'asoo, yom t'ruah yiyeh lachem* "In the seventh month, on the first of the month, there shall be a sabbath for you, a remembrance with shofar blasts, a holy convocation." Not once in the Torah is it ever called Rosh Hashanah. That title doesn't come about until Rabbinic times. Actually, this festival of Shofar blasts is based on three principles; the creation of the world, the manifestation of God's kingship over the world, and the judgment of the world by God. Each of these are expressed in Psalms reminding us that God is creator, King and Judge.<sup>1</sup>

And did you know that Rosh Hashanah is not the only New Year on our calendar? Our American calendar has numerous "new years." From the new year, January 1st, to the first day of the school year in August or September, and of course the fiscal year on July 1st, and some seasonal sports, which some sports widows would claim last all year.

So too does Judaism have more than one New Year. In fact tradition holds that there are four. The first of Nisan for the purpose of counting the reign of a king and the months on the calendar; the first of Elul for the tithing of animals; the 15th of Shevat, also known as Tu B'shvat, the new year of the trees; and of course, Rosh Hashanah which is the first of Tishrei, which was yesterday, marking the New Year and the beginning of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. Hence, there are other opportunities for setting new goals with each new year celebration.

But we are still left with the question, why celebrate Rosh Hashanah for two days? While we know the dates for observing the holidays, the challenge came generations ago before the calendar was firmly established. According to the Mishnah (RH 2:2) each month, as the new moon was announced, bonfires were lit on mountaintops to alert each village of the celebration. However, the bonfires were not effective because of a rogue group of Jews who set their own

bonfires since they did not agree with the calculations of the rabbis announcing the new month. It was then that messengers were sent out to run from town to town, announcing the new month. But if the runners could not make it to the towns, the people had to rely on the knowledge that the month was either 29 or 30 days, and to be sure to celebrate the holiday of Rosh Chodesh at its appropriate time, the people celebrated for two days.

This practice of adding an extra day to holidays remains in existence in some communities because it was the custom of our ancestors. Israel, however, does not observe the second days of *chagim* since even ancient communications allowed for accurate and timely observance of the holy days. Yet, even in Israel Rosh Hashanah is the exception. The messengers were not allowed to travel on holy days, therefore, no messengers were able to announce Rosh Chodesh Tishrei, or Rosh Hashanah. Everyone from Jerusalem to the farthest towns in Israel, therefore, observed two days for Rosh Hashanah in order to insure that they celebrated it on the appropriate day.

The Reform movement has chosen to adopt the minhagim, the traditions, of Israel in observing all holidays according to the Biblical citations, yet there are some Reform communities who do observe the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah and some who do not. How is that confusing?

Rosh Hashanah is said to be a Yoma Arichtah, or Aramaic for 'one long day.' And as yesterday and today are interconnected, we get to enjoy a second helping of this celebration for a sweet new year, guilt free.

But understanding why we observe a Second Day Rosh Hashanah is not enough. Instead, let us strive to find meaning and inspiration in this day even if it may seem repetitive in action.

Yesterday, the sanctuary was filled to capacity. Many entered the sanctuary for the first time in months and it was the first time since last year that all of us were together as one family. For many, it was the first time to see the Torah mantles decked out in their High Holy Day finest. And for all of us, it was a chance to reconnect with someone we lost touch with because our lives had been going in different directions.

Yesterday was a challenging day for us on the bima. Our choir allowed their voices to rise up for the entire congregation. We as clergy carefully orchestrated our dance to ensure that the service ran smoothly and honors were bestowed. We celebrated the Torah and this Holy Day, giving them the respect they deserve. Yet, this dance was challenging as we strove to touch each individual congregant at some point during our service. And while my attention was focused on each detail, what I sometimes forgot was to give myself the permission I needed to focus inwardly and embrace the holy moment in which I stood. I found the moments briefly throughout the service as I stood facing the ark or came across a special prayer that touched me at that moment. Yet, there was always something that interrupted my moment as I was quickly drawn back to the cues written in my machzor.

But this second day gives me the chance to step back, realize that I know my cues and the service. I now allow myself to go to another plane of holy day worship. This second day is my second chance to embrace the moment, stand with my temple family and God.

Take a moment now, whether you were here yesterday or not, and think about how this Second Day is different for you.

[...]

And now it is our time to take on one more challenge, to “Live” the year, not just be “living.” To just be living is not enough. But what’s the difference?

In our morning liturgy we pray, *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, asher yatzar et ha-adam b'chochmah, uvara vo n'ka-veem n'ka-veem, chaluleem chaluleem*, ‘We praise You Adonai our God, Eternal Soul of the universe, who with wisdom created human beings, and created within them arteries, veins and organs in a wondrous design. As only You, God, might know, if but one them were to be opened or blocked, it would be impossible to exist.’

If we are only living, then yes, our only concern is that are organs and all the parts of our body are working in perfect fashion. But what about for those whose organs or bodies have failed them at some point this year? Can one appreciate what it means to truly LIVE when given a second chance? When one crosses over the threshold of experiencing a health crisis, one might start to see the world through new lenses and appreciate the little things that were once so easily overlooked.

However, it should not take a crisis for us to accept the second chance. We should not need to endure a life heralding moment during which we finally appreciate what we have. We should live now for the moment not because of the moment.

How often have you had one of those days? You know those days and weeks – there are so many items on your to-do list at work and home that you spend countless hours awake, pouring over the paperwork, the bills, the projects that each passing day it is all you can do just to stay awake and keep trudging through the piles. We drink coffee, think that a protein bar is dinner and hurriedly get the kids to bed so we can get back to work. We’re just living, trying to survive one moment to the next. Yet, our bodies have not been upgraded or reformatted to keep up with the increased demand by the fast-paced-get-it-done-now world. This means we have to take a risk and say, “I can’t get it all done right now, but I can change how I arrange my priorities.”

How many of us have home offices? Sure, it sounded like a good idea at the time – build an office in the house so we would not have to spend more hours at the office outside the home. But what do we do? We leave our work offices and head straight into our home offices. But what about taking care of our needs and then needs of our family? Here is the opportunity for the second chance.

Close the door to that home office occasionally. Instead of trying to rush to get the kids to bed, spend more time reading them a story or just listening to them tell you about their day. And then when the kids are asleep, keep the office door closed and sit on the couch with your spouse and talk about your day together. Share stories about the funny thing that happened on the way to work. Or starting in the morning, give everyone the assignment that instead of coming home and complaining about what went wrong during the day, each person has to share something that

went right or something that made you laugh during the day. This might give each family member a new lens through which to see the day.

Then find something to do for yourself. How many of you have a pile of books next to your bed that seems to be growing in hopes that you will eventually get to read one of them? Well, pick one of them up, start reading it, even if it's only for five minutes before you fall asleep with your glasses hanging off your nose and the book lying on your chest. But at least you will have gone to bed thinking about something other than what you have to do tomorrow.

Or what about that class you keep telling yourself you'll take some day, when you find the time. If this is a new year and this is a time for second chances, then take the class. Not sure what class to take, no problem, we have a wealth of classes just waiting for you in this coming year through our adult education department. There is absolutely something for everyone but we have to make the commitment to just do it.

As we indulge in our second helping today, and as we remember to live and not just focus on living, we look toward one more blessing. Our blessing for thanking God in allowing our body to work in perfect order is followed by the blessing for our soul, *Elohai n'shamah shenatah bi, t'horah hi* 'My God, the soul which you have given to me is pure. You created it and formed and breathed it into me, and You sustain it within me.' To live requires body AND soul working together in rhythm to the world around us and allowing us to live IN the moment.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Eternal Soul of the universe, who blesses us with second chances and provides us with each of life's moments. May the messengers, be it by foot or bonfire, not only remind us to celebrate this holy day, but may we also be reminded to live through our body and soul.

Amen v'Amen

---

"The Religion of Israel Before Sinai", Jewish Quarterly Review 52, 1963, p. 52