

Rosh Hashanah 5779/2018
 Rabbi Lester Bronstein
 Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

“Like a Battalion (כבנומרון)”

I.

Our world is broken, and we are all complicit in having helped to break it. How will we be judged? Our institutions of government, education, law, health care, religion - are broken. Our environment is broken. Our means of interpersonal communication are broken. Our will to stand for decency in public and private is broken. We are all complicit. How will we be judged by generations to come?

II.

“On four occasions of the year the world is judged (בארבעה פרקים העולם נידון): [First,] on Pesach (Passover) with respect to grain (תבואה); [Second,] on Atzeret (Shavu’ot), with respect to the fruits of trees (פרות האילן); [Third,] on Rosh Hashanah, when all who pass through this world come before the One of Being like a flock of sheep (כבני מרון), as it says in Psalms 33, ‘the One who fashions the hearts of all, who discerns their every action (“היוצר יחד לבם המבין אל כל מעשיהם”);’ and [fourth,] on Sukkot with respect to water (המים).”

Before I tell you what this text is, and where it comes from, try to answer this question: Which item does not fit with the other three? Grain; the fruits of trees; passing through the world like a flock of sheep; and water?

Obviously, three of the four (grain, fruits, and water) are crucial for *physical* survival, especially in a pre-modern (pre-technological) world. If the grain harvest is adequate, if the trees bear sufficient fruit, if the rains come in their season and provide enough water to drink and to farm, but not so much water that the crop and the town are flooded away, then humans can feel relatively assured of their physical survival for another year, or at least through the next growing season.

And if any of these basic needs is deficient, then the people will perish. Or they will head off down the road - desperate refugees on a mass migration, like the heroes of our New Year Torah readings, running to Canaan, and then to Egypt, then back to Canaan, then to Gerar, then back again to Canaan. And even then these refugees could perish, depending on the graciousness of the populations at whose mercy they might throw themselves.

It would be fair to say that an ancient civilization might fashion its world view - its theology – its understanding of the cosmic relationship between human deeds and the divine bestowal of life-sustaining water and food – on this farmer's view from below. Pre-scientific farmers felt helpless before the powers of climate

and soil and wind. Thus, at each “perek” or chapter of the year, they would feel the awesome and unpredictable burden of “judgement (דין),” again and again and again.

“On four occasions of the year the world is judged בארבעה פרקים העולם נידון”

What about the one that doesn’t jibe with grain, fruit, and water: the judgment that comes on Rosh Hashanah? How does it fit with the other three? *Does it fit with the other three?* And if it does, how does it figure into our understanding of “survival?” In a quid pro quo theology, we know we have “passed” the test when we get grain or fruit or water. We receive physical “blessings.” We live another day.

But what do we get when we “pass muster” on Rosh Hashanah? How do we know we’ve passed? What do we “get” for our efforts?

III.

This text is a passage from the Mishnah, from the tractate called Rosh Hashanah, chapter 1, number 2.

What is the Mishnah? Well, in the Second Century of the Common Era, after the Romans had destroyed the Second Temple and quashed the Bar Kokhba revolt of 135 CE, putting an end to any hope of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, and with Jews spreading far and wide across the Mediterranean (some as

migrants, some as refugees, some as slaves), a wise rabbi in the north of Israel known as Yehudah Hanassi (Judah the Prince) created a written handbook of the basic laws, practices, teachings, and structures of the new Israelite religion, the religion of the Greco-Roman era, the religion that had grown up in the previous two centuries and that looked nothing like Biblical religion.

It was a religion of both survival and innovation. It was modern. It was relevant. It was serious. It was spiritual. It was radical, in that it relied on no land, no temple, no sacrifices, no priesthood. It was, if you will, *Judaism*. The Mishnah of Judah Hanassi was the first written-down handbook of Judaism.

This handbook, which he finished around 200 CE, contained words that had never been written down, but that now needed to be recorded in order to assure the continuity of this new thing called Judaism in an ever-dispersing Diaspora.

Most of these teaching units – these Mishnayot – were well-known *orally* by the time Judah Hanassi wrote down his “oral law.”

The Mishnah I shared with you today, concerning the four chapters of the year and their respective signs of judgment, reflects the thinking of Jewish spiritual leadership in the First Century, around the time of Hillel, of Shammai, of Hillel’s likely student Jesus, and of the fall of the Second Temple, when our people

began to question in earnest the relationship (if any) between their own actions and God's.

In other words, this Mishnah is not Biblical Israelite religion. It is not the Torah. It is Rabbinic. Modern, if you will. Philosophical. Reflective. Maybe even fatalistic. Certainly not certain about whether we have a direct connection to God and God's doings. Biblical religion knew that if we were deserving, we would be rewarded. The new religion does not presume to know how to "read" God.

Why is the Mishnah remarkable in its own time? Because, as much as Biblical religion was public, and its ethics focused on the sovereign (self-governing) Jewish public, this new religion suddenly speaks to each *private* person in a new age when public sovereignty has been lost, and private ethics must take hold if the Jewish people hope to form a new collective ethics, a new shared morality.

Indeed, the new religion of the Rabbis addresses the problem of hope in an age of hopelessness; in an age when our people can no longer be certain that any of their long-standing institutions will last, including their belief in the integrity of their fellow human beings. Sound familiar?

What is remarkable about our specific text is that it takes three concrete categories of survival (grain, fruit, and water) that ancient people assumed were

direct gifts from the divine, and which therefore constituted the sum total of religion, and turns them into *metaphors* by adding a fourth category that heretofore would not be seen as a category of survival at all.

That category is, in a phrase, our mortal soul. Our essential human self. Our worth as human beings. Our measure as ethical actors in an *uncertain, unmeasurable* world.

Biblical religion understood Rosh Hashanah to be the day when the shofar was blown to harken Israel to the fact that only two weeks hence, the festival of Sukkot would be upon them, and the sacrifices and prayers for water, fruits, and grains should commence with vigor. Especially the implorings for water.

Rabbinic Judaism now transforms Rosh Hashanah into something else entirely; into a day when we are directed toward our *human harvest*, our offering of our best selves, for no other reward than the knowledge that we have “passed before” the measure of morality and “survived” in our own self-assessment. We cannot drink or eat what we get from this *din*, this judgment on Rosh Hashanah. We can only use it to pace ourselves for another year of striving to be carriers of the image of God, of the *ethic of Godliness*.

In other words, the Rabbis felt our pain. They knew we wanted to hang onto something in a world that felt like it was slipping away. They decided to give

us Rosh Hashanah, *their* Rosh Hashanah. They told us that behavior matters; that the harvest of our souls matters; that our *soul-ness* is as crucial for survival as grain and water; that in a universe of fatality, it matters to God (and ought to matter to us) what kind of people we are.

IV.

In Jewish scholarship, as in all fields where philology can be applied, there is a thing called a *girsā*. A *girsā* is a version, but specifically a version of a text that varies from the one commonly in use. It could be an alternate spelling or a different phrasing, or a text that includes something that dropped out of the tradition for whatever reason. Censorship. A scribal error. A change of heart. A cultural trend that lost out in the struggle to define the official version of history.

Our Mishnah has an alternate *girsā*, and it is one that I think changes the entire meaning of the text, and in fact buttresses our point about what the Rabbis are trying to tell us moderns about the human harvest and the meaning of these Days of Awe.

It comes in the line about what they think happens during the judgment of Rosh Hashanah. Our version, our *girsā*, reads: “[on Rosh Hashanah] all who pass through this world come before the One of Being like a flock of sheep (כבני מרון)”. The great 20th century Israeli scholar Chanoch Albeck, and the renowned

American scholar Saul Lieberman, say that the “correct *girsā*” is not *kiv’nei maron*, like a flock of sheep, but *k’v’numeron*, like those in a *numeron*, which is a Latinate word meaning “a battalion of soldiers”. Not mindless sheep being numbered by a shepherd, but soldiers who intentionally “number *themselves*” among those going out to battle for a cause.

Sheep are helpless. Soldiers have a fighting chance. Sheep have no sense of purpose. Soldiers have a cause, a motivation to fight. Even if their chances are slim, they still have a reason to go out there and try.

I think the Rabbis - if this is their original version - are telling us that we have a cause that is as basic and necessary as our physical sustenance. Our cause, for which we need to go out and do battle, is the cultivating of our humanity. It is the “passing of the test” of our worthiness to carry the image of God.

If this *girsā* is right, then how much does it change the meaning of the great liturgical passage we are about to intone, the *Un’taneh Tokef*, where we will shortly sing כַּבְּקֶרֶת רוּעָה עִדְרוּ מֵעֵבִיר צֹאֲנוּ תַּחַת שִׁבְתּוֹ “As a shepherd numbers his flock as they pass beneath his staff?”

What if the prayer said, “Like a battalion of troops marching forward into history, ready to confront the precariousness of life and the forces of nature, ready to stand up to disgrace with dignity, ready to respond to apathy with

responsibility? Ready to accept the inevitability of death - even untimely death - but nonetheless to act as if all life is a magnificent gift from God? What if that's what the Rabbis wanted us to feel all along? What if?

The Rabbis essentially gave us a Rosh Hashanah for the ages. They must have hoped that we would take their methodology and apply it - adapt it, if you will - for whatever times we live in.

Have we lost faith in governments and leaders here and abroad? Has our technology allowed us to forget how to have a direct face-to-face conversation, and to respect one another's privacy? Have our careless actions harmed our environment beyond repair? Have our own Jewish institutions lost the ability to hold onto our children, to inspire their imaginations and their search for meaning? Has our faith in our beloved State of Israel often been shaken to the core by corruption and callousness on the part of its officials? By Israel's seeming to forget us Jews of the Diaspora, and by our stubbornly forgetting what Israel means to us?

The Rabbis would respond: It was ever thus! Take matters into your own hands! Join the battalion, the *numeron*. Never give up on the possibility of repairing the world. Never give up on the Jewish people and our noble raison

d'etre, which is to help repair the broken world, yes, and also to repair our own broken Jewish souls.

V.

“On four occasions of the year the world is judged (בארבעה פרקים העולם) (נידון): The third of these is Rosh Hashanah, when all who pass through this world come before the One of Being like a great battalion of soldiers (כבנומרון), fighting for the greatest cause of all, as it says in Psalms 33, “ היוצר יחד לבם המבין אל כל ” מעשיהם ” The One who fashions the hearts of all, who discerns their every action.’

The one who discerns our every action indeed, because we will have learned to *take* action. This is how we will be judged, if not by God then certainly by history and by our children. This is how we will be judged at every *perek*, every chapter of the year, but especially at this precious turning time of year; this *perek chayeinu*, this fleeting chapter in the life we are all so blessed to share.