

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Chasha *bas* Yehudah *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The Books of Rosh Hashanah NITZAVIM-VAYEILECH 5777

Already from the traditional greeting employed on Rosh Hashanah we get a sense that the Yom Tov bears a connection to “inscriptions”; as we say: “*L’shanah tovah tikaseiv v’seichaseim...* May you be written and signed for a good year...”

Books of Life and Death

Now, one of the instances in which Chazal make explicit mention of “books” in which such inscriptions are made is in connection with the *halachah* regarding the recitation of Hallel. While recited on other festivals, it is deemed improper for Hallel to be said on Rosh Hashanah. As the Gemara explains: אֲפֹשֵׁר מֶלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב עַל כִּסֵּא דִין וְסִפְרֵי חַיִּים וְסִפְרֵי מֵתִים פְּתוּחִין – “Is it possible – while the King sits upon the Throne of Judgment, with the **Books of Chayim** and the **Books of Misah** open before Him – that Yisrael would engage (at this time) in song?” (*Rosh Hashanah 32b*).

Now, the question that arises is what exactly is the definition and nature of these particular “books.” *Chayim*, of course, means “life” or “(the) living” and would seemingly be referring to the register of deeds of living people; they are judged on this day and a determination is made regarding the coming year. By extension, however, the “*Sifrei Meisim*” would seem to refer to the records of those who have already passed away – what place do they have in connection with the judgment of Rosh Hashanah?

R’ Yehonasan Eibshitz (*Ya’aros Devash, vol. 1, § 14*) offers an interesting approach to this teaching of Chazal. He understands the intent as referring entirely to living beings. The “*meisim*” are actually living people, so called because (as opposed to angels) they are mortal. The “*chayim*” is thus a reference to the angels, who “live” forever; they, too, are judged on Rosh Hashanah. As we recite in the *Nesaneh Tokef* hymn: וּמַלְאָכִים יִחַפְּזוּן וְחַיִּל וּרְעָדָה יֵאָחֲזוּן – “And the angels hasten, seized by fear and trembling; and they say, ‘Behold – the Day of Judgment has come, for judgment to be rendered upon the Heavenly hosts!’ For even they may not be acquitted from justice in Your eyes.”

The Maharsha (*Arachin 10b*) takes a different tack entirely. Both “books” mentioned here, he asserts, are those pertaining to living people. However, instead of translating “*chayim*” and “*meisim*” as “living” and “non-living,” they are to be rendered here as “life” and “death.” Thus, these books are the same as those featured in another well-known teaching of Chazal regarding the Judgment of Rosh Hashanah. As the Gemara states: שְׁלֹשָׁה סִפְרִים נִפְתְּחוּ בְרֵאשׁ: הַשְּׁנָה אֶחָד שֶׁל רְשָׁעִים גְּמוּרֵין וְאֶחָד שֶׁל צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרֵין וְאֶחָד שֶׁל בֵּינוֹנִיִּים, צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרֵין נִכְתָּבִין וְנִחְתָּמִין לְאֵלֶתֶר לְחַיִּים, רְשָׁעִים גְּמוּרֵין נִכְתָּבִין וְנִחְתָּמִין לְאֵלֶתֶר לְמֵיתָה, בֵּינוֹנִיִּים תְּלוּיִין וְעוֹמְדִין מֵרֵאשׁ הַשְּׁנָה וְעַד – “Three Books are open on Rosh Hashanah: One for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous, and one for the intermediates. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed and sealed **for life**; the completely wicked are immediately inscribed and sealed **for death**. Regarding the intermediates – their sentence is suspended from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur: if they are found meritorious, they are then inscribed **for life**; if they are not found meritorious, they are inscribed **for death**” (*Rosh Hashanah 16b*).

Lasting Impact

Returning to the original statement (in connection with the omission of Hallel on Rosh Hashanah), there are those who do in fact understand “*Sifrei Chayim*” and “*Sifrei Meisim*” in the literal sense – as referring to the Books of “the Living” and “the Dead.” And so, what remains to be clarified, of course, is the notion of returning the deceased to judgment on Rosh Hashanah.

The Beis Halevi (*parshas No’ach*) elucidates a phrase connected to Divine Judgment that recurs often in the works of Chazal. It states, for example, in the Mishnah in Avos (3:1):

הַסְתַּכֵּל בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְבָרִים וְאַיִן אֶתָּה בָּא לִידֵי עֲבֵרָה. דַּע מֵאַיִן בָּאתָ וּלְאֵן אֶתָּה הוֹלֵךְ וְלִפְנֵי מִי אֶתָּה עֹתִיד לִפְנֵי דֵין וְחֶשְׁבוֹן.

“Contemplate (the following) three things, and you will not fall into the hands of sin: Know from whence you came, to where you are going, and before Whom you will have to provide an **account** and **reckoning** in the future.”

What are these two items? “*Din*,” on the face of it, seems pretty straightforward; this is “judgment” for the perpetration of a particular deed. But the intimation of the Mishnah is that one must answer to Hashem not only for the commission of this misdeed; one must also provide something additional – a “*cheshbon*.” The Beis Halevi understands this to refer to the continuing and lasting impact of his deed – in particular its effect in leading others to sin. When an individual sins, he introduces a measure of spiritual pollution into the world. With the atmosphere thus defiled and degraded, the bounds to further transgression are somewhat eroded. In short, then, a consequence of this individual’s sin is that it now becomes easier and more likely for others to sin, as well. This, then, is the import of “*cheshbon*”: in addition to accounting for the sin itself, the perpetrator is also held responsible for whatever contribution he has made to the further transgressions of others.

We may understand, in this light, why the deceased are once again brought to judgment on Rosh Hashanah together with their living counterparts. True, these individuals were already judged when they passed on to the Next World; and, presumably, they have not performed further *mitzvos* or *aveiros* (transgressions). Nonetheless, there still remains the lasting impact of those deeds they performed while still in This World. For example, someone might have published a treatise in his lifetime containing blasphemous and heretical material. This is bad enough, of course. But unfortunately for him, there are others who may still be affected even after his death; in fact, it is quite possible that he has enticed more people away from Hashem after his death than he ever did in his lifetime! And so, as one’s deeds might continue to reverberate well beyond his actual date of passing, it is quite fitting that even the “*meisim*,” in the literal sense, are included in the judgment of Rosh Hashanah (*Me’orei Ha’mo’adim vol. II, p. 119; cf. also Toldos Yehoshua to Avos 2:2*).

There are further ramifications to this idea, particularly as they relate to the endeavor of *teshuvah* (repentance) – as we shall explore next week, *b’ezeras Hashem*.

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