

Sparks

by Rabbi David Aaron
*Founder and Dean, Isralight
Rosh Yeshiva, Orayta*

Who is G-d to Judge?

How to Celebrate a Day of Judgment

I did not grow up in a religious home but we did go to *shul* (synagogue) every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I remember one Rosh Hashanah the rabbi got up and said, “We’re about to open the ark. It is customary for the congregation to stand while the ark is open, but it will be open for quite some time. So if you get tired, you can sit down.”

I thought to myself, “I only come here twice a year, so if standing and going through a little torture is going to take away my sins, then why not stand for the whole thing?” When they opened the ark, everyone stood and then everyone sat. I was the only one who remained standing. I figured, how long could it last, five minutes, ten minutes? I stood there in terrible pain for an hour and a half, figuring ‘OK. I guess --no pain, no gain’. I was scared and ready to do whatever it took to appease G-d’s wrath and escape His punishment.

The next morning at my high school locker, the boy next to me glared around the locker door and said, “You had to stand!” He did not speak to me for the rest of the year. I found out later that he was sitting behind me in *shul*, feeling terribly guilty for sitting while I stood. For many people, guilt and torture is their image of Rosh Hashanah.

If people knew the truth about Rosh Hashanah, they would anticipate it rather than dread it. The Torah idea of judgment is not about guilt or pain. It is about compassion and empowerment.

However, when I was a teenager I would often feel resentful towards G-d, especially on Rosh Hashanah – the Day Judgment.

I thought, “Who is G-d to judge *me*? Does G-d have to deal with temptation? Does G-d live in this seedy world, where magazines of half-clad models grace the aisles of every supermarket checkout? What right does He have to criticize especially when He created me this way?”

Your Inner Adversary

The Torah teaches that every human being has an inner adversary (referred to as the *yetzer hara* – the evil inclination) that tries to keep us from doing the right thing and actively tries to persuade us to do wrong. And what is so conniving about the *yetzer hara* is that we think it is really our true selves talking.

Take dieting, for example. When most of us decide to start a diet, we hear a little naughty voice that says, “Eat it, eat it—just one bite!” It certainly happens to me. And when I try to start a morning exercise

regimen, that same voice says, “This morning you need to rest in order to exercise better tomorrow.” I’m sure most of you can relate.

As soon as we decide to do something positive, our inner adversary tries to get us to do exactly the opposite of what we really want to do.

When I first began learning Torah and was introduced to this truth, I was shocked to discover how real the *yetzer hara* is. It is as if we all struggle with a split personality. On one hand, we have an inclination to do good (which Torah calls the *yetzer tov*), and on the other hand, we have an opposing inclination to do what’s not so good.

The power of the *yetzer hara* is quite amazing. The Torah says that the *yetzer hara* increases its strength with every passing day. This means that it does not become easier to fight, and once we do fight it, it renews itself. Therefore, the tactics that it used to make us stumble yesterday are completely different from the ones it will use today. For this reason, the sages warn us, “If not now, when?” In other words, it is better to deal with it now because tomorrow your *yetzer hara* will be even stronger and the challenge even greater.

The Talmud Yerushalmi teaches that as soon as G-d gives us a *mitzvah* (commandment), the *mitzvah* actually creates its own *yetzer hara* against performing it. Therefore, as soon as we are commanded to do something, we are concomitantly inspired with the desire not to do it. Conversely, if we learn that G-d wants us not to do something, suddenly we want to do it.

And to make matters worse, even when you make positive changes in our life, you may be surprised to find that your *yetzer hara* is no less easy to manage. The Talmud teaches, “The greater the person, the greater his evil inclination.” It is logical to assume that holy people do not have to deal with their evil inclination and all the drives that try to pull them away from the right path. But the Talmud says, no, our *yetzer hara* just grows with us.

Challenging G-d

Like it or not, the fact is that G-d created us with drives that are often difficult to use properly. He also gave us an ever-strengthening evil inclination whose sole purpose is to get us to fail. And He put us in a world that only excites and incites these drives.

The Torah teaches, “Do not judge your friend until you are in his place.” In other words, “Don’t judge a person until you are in his shoes.” How can G-d judge us if He has never been in our place?

G-d is in His perfect Heaven, and we are down here on earth, struggling with our *yetzer hara* and the plenty of distractions to entice it. What right does G-d have to judge us?

I once read a challenging story set during the time of the Holocaust. I read it as a teenager, during the first Shabbat that I ever kept. I did not know how to fill my time on Shabbat, so I followed someone’s advice to read books. Since I did not particularly like reading, I decided to read something short and Jewish. I picked up this short novel and I had no clue what I was getting myself into. By the end of Shabbat, I was very angry at G-d. In the book, a little child gets hung by the Nazis. The father, in his anger, challenges G-d and says, “Let’s

switch places. You become man and we will become G-d.” They switch places, and, when G-d asks to switch back, the father refuses.

Who is G-d to Judge?

The truth is that, according to the Torah, G-d is incredibly impressed with us. In fact, although we praise G-d through prayer, there are many sources that indicate that G-d is praising us. There is a story in the Talmud that metaphorically describes G-d as wearing *tefillin* (phylacteries). Inside our *tefillin* is an excerpt from the Torah that acknowledges G-d’s oneness. In the Talmudic story, inside G-d’s *tefillin* is an acknowledgement of our own unity. There is also a verse in the Shabbat afternoon prayers that attests to our unity: Who is like you, Israel, who stand united in the world? For G-d to be one in heaven is easy. But for people to be one in the world, with all its challenges, is a true accomplishment.

What really happens on Rosh Hashanah?

Rosh Hashanah is referred to as a Day of Judgment. For most people the idea of being judged seems to connote that G-d is being critical and judgmental of us, as if He could do better than us. When you think of G-d’s judgment in this way it does not feel like it’s coming from a place of compassionate. But the theme of Rosh Hashanah is really about G-d’s compassion because He is “our Father, our King.” But in truth Rosh Hashanah is a Day of Assessment because it is actually an annual review.

Think of it as a work performance evaluation. A boss would not judge his employee by saying, “Well I can do better, and therefore you are fired.” In fact, the main reason that bosses hire people is because they cannot do what the employees can do.

So too, G-d’s assessment of us on Rosh Hashanah is not a criticism and judgment of who we are as people. Rather, it is a compassionate evaluation of what we have done and how we have used our potential that year. From there, He determines what corrective measures must be taken to get us back on track to fulfill our potential. When G-d makes a judgment, He makes it with tremendous love for us and respect; with enormous sensitivity and consideration for our challenge.

Sinner or Loser?

However, seeing Rosh Hashanah as an annual review and assessment does not mitigate the seriousness of the day.

The idea of Rosh Hashanah being a day of assessment is actually more daunting than simply a day of judgment. Because then, it is not about determining whether we are sinners or saints; it is about whether we are losers or winners. As it says in the prophets, “G-d says to the Jewish people, ‘Return, for you have failed in your sins.’” In other words we did not just sin -- we failed. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik points out that when we transgress, we are existential failures—we failed at the very purpose for our existence.

For most people to be a loser is much harder to handle than being a sinner. In fact, we live in a society where it is actually fun and glamorous to be a sinner. A song by Billy Joel aptly describes this attitude:

*They say there's a heaven for those who will wait
Some say it's better but I say it ain't
I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints
The sinners are much more fun...*

When I was growing up, there were clear distinctions between the bad guys and the good guys, and people always rooted for the good guy. Today, there are movies that persuade us to root for the bad guy. We admire the guy who is trying to pull off an incredible theft. We marvel at his engineering, planning, decision-making and courage. And we hope he will get away with it. To be a sinner is macho and hip.

Torah, however, is not trying to protect us from being a sinner. It protects us from something much worse –from being a loser and existential failure.

Recently while waiting in the airport I saw on the television a show about a famous rock star called, “The Fabulous Life of

” I had never heard of the young man, and frankly I was intrigued at how fabulous his life could be. As they gave an inventory of his various prize possessions, all I could think was, “Where is the fabulous life?” They talked about his \$200,000 watch collection, highlighting the diamond-studded piece. Next came his many cars, worth \$1, 000,000. Then came a shot of his game room and views of his several mansions, the first of which he was too young to legally purchase without his parents’ co-signature. Finally came a shot of all the women he has dated and his lavish, lewd and lustful parties. The only noble thing on the show was the one-minute coverage of his charities, showing that the boy is not totally hedonistic. Imagine all the kids watching this show and believing that this young man lives the ultimate dream, that materialism and hedonism is the path to a fabulous life. That there is any promise to promiscuity.

For many to be naughty and sinful is glamorous but for Torah it means you are a loser and downright failure at what you have come to planet Earth to do.

From G-d with Love

With great love and compassion G-d built into the year an annual review to evaluate our performance. It is meant to be a very empowering time for us. It should not depress us or make us angry with G-d for being critical or judgmental. G-d is not out to get us. He knows that He created us with much inner conflicts and put us in a world full of challenges. The annual review is only there to help us achieve our optimal personal performance and protect us from becoming losers. He evaluates and assesses us with love, compassion, empathy and forgiveness. All G-d wants is for us to do better next year, actualize our potential, be the best we can and choose life.

Rabbi David Aaron

Author of Endless Light, Seeing G-d, The Secret Life of G-d, Inviting G-d In, Love is My Religion, Soul Powered Prayer, Living A Joyous Life, and The G-d-Powered Life