



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

# ROSH HASHANAH 5777 • 2016

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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October 4, 2016

Rosh Hashanah - Day 2

**Praise and Raise**



# Meaningful Sermons

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## ABSTRACT

When you walk into a courtroom, should you flatter the judge?

If you notice, one item is conspicuously missing from the High Holiday prayer service. On both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we do not recite *Hallel* – the collection of psalms praising G-d.

*Hallel* is essentially praise and flattery. Why not flatter the Judge on the Day of Judgment?

According to the Talmud, when the angels asked this question of G-d, He responded that it would not be feasible to sing songs – which is what psalms are – when the Book of Life and the Book of Death is open in judgment.

Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, who passed away this year, was a great tenor, but he resigned from his choral group when he ascended to the Supreme Court. What is the connection, or contradiction, between song and law, between the judge, jury and choir?

Should we be preaching to the choir?

Two brilliant, but very different interpretations of a Talmudic passage, provide us with two practical and invaluable lessons to help us make 5777 (and every year hereafter) the best year ever!

- 1) The Berditchever sees it through the prism of love.
- 2) The Chatam Sofer sees it through the prism of generations.

With both together, we are well-equipped to tackle the year with song and to guarantee a favorable divine verdict!

**PRAISE AND RAISE:****WHY NOT FLATTER G-D ON ROSH HASHANAH**

## 1. The Singing Judge

Many things happened over this past year. And, from all of them a lesson in serving our Creator may be gleaned. I would like to mention the passing of one individual, on February 13, an individual who held major sway in the United States of America – Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

But I don't want to talk about his legal legacy or law acumen. I simply want to highlight one fact about him that I came across recently: "Long before Justice Antonin Scalia was known as a voice of strict constructionism on the Supreme Court, he was known for his tenor singing voice."<sup>1</sup>

In an interview with New York Classical radio station WQXR host Gilbert Kaplan, Scalia said of the choral group, which he joined during his days as a Court of Appeals judge: "[We] sang at the National Gallery, the National Cathedral, various other places. I miss it very much."

It is the fascinating crossroads of song and law, which I want to speak about today, on Rosh Hashanah, as we stand before the Judge of All Judges and the verdict is out.

## 2. The Missing Hallel

Of all the many things we do during the High Holiday season, from the blowing of the *shofar* to the dipping of the apple in honey on Rosh Hashanah, from fasting to wearing sneakers on Yom Kippur, there is one festive element – a mitzvah at that<sup>2</sup> – that is conspicuously missing.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://lawyersusaonline.com/dcdicta/2010/01/06/scalia-on-singing-playing-and-being-the-funniest-justice/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Hallel* is one of seven mitzvot decreed by the sages.

Can you guess what it is?

It is the most musical part of any festival. It is beautiful and praiseworthy, composed by King David himself. It is *Hallel*, the collection of psalms of praise<sup>3</sup> recited, chanted or sung during every holiday right after the cantor's repetition of the *Amidah* prayer.<sup>4</sup>

Then why, on the High Holidays, the Days of Awe, is this great prayer omitted?<sup>5</sup> Why, on this most judgmental of days, do we not praise and flatter the judge? Should we not use every method (every "trick in the book"), including flattery – as they say, flattery will get you everywhere – to ensure that we will be written and sealed for a year of abundant health, prosperity and blessing?

The Talmud relates how the angels asked this very question of the Master of the Universe:

*Said the ministering angels afore the Holy Blessed One, "Master of the Universe, why don't the Children of Israel recite the song before You on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?" Said He to them: "Is it feasible that the King sits upon the throne of judgment with the Book of Life and the Book of Death open before Him and Israel should sing?"*<sup>6</sup>

Imagine a courtroom, the judge sitting on his elevated bench above all present, evaluating the evidence, listening to testimony, and suddenly the gallery breaks out in a song of praise and exaltation. Surely that would be considered contempt of court.

Now imagine that life hangs in the balance: the evidence has been submitted, the jury has given its verdict, the books are wide open and the judge is ready to announce a decree of life or death. Would it be prudent for the defendant, the accused, to leap up and begin singing and dancing, praising the bench, serenading his honor with sweet melodies?

And now imagine that the judge is the Judge of All Judges, the King of Kings. In front of Him lies open the Book of Life and the Book of Death.

<sup>3</sup> Psalms 113-118.

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive mystical take, see Derech Mitvotcha, "Hallel."

<sup>5</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Hilchot Rosh Hashanah 584:1 and commentaries.

<sup>6</sup> Rosh Hashanah 32b. Erachin 10b.

Every creation is humbled and awed. Every Jew comes to bear testimony and witness for his fellow brothers and sisters that they are the most righteous of all righteous souls. Life hangs in the balance. More: the universe hangs in the balance. He spoke and it was. He ceases to speak, and it isn't.

So, in such a moment of suspense it is not feasible that the Jewish people should sing praise. When the books of reality are open and G-d the Judge prepares to write and seal the New Year for good and blessing, surely, it would be unseemly to break out into song.

### 3. Ezra on Joy

Yet, we read that Ezra the Scribe, the leader of the Jewish people at the beginning of the Second Temple period, advocated being joyous on Rosh Hashanah. On one occasion, when he read from the Torah before the assembled nation, the people began to weep realizing that the Day of Judgment was upon them and the verdict was about to descend. Ezra responded:

*"Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord, and do not be sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."*<sup>7</sup>

If being joyful is fine, why not recite *Hallel* and praise G-d?

Furthermore, consider the Jerusalem Talmud's opening to the Tractate Rosh Hashanah:

*"Ordinarily, one who knows that he faces judgment dresses somberly, wraps himself in dark clothing, and lets his hair grow, for he is unsure regarding his future. But Israel is not like this: They dress in white and wrap themselves in white, and they eat and drink in joy, for they know that the Holy One, blessed is He, performs miracles on their behalf."*

So why no song, why no praise, why no *Hallel*?

Here are two different answers from two Torah greats.

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<sup>7</sup>Nehemiah 8:10.

#### 4. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

The first one comes from Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev.

A great lover of Israel, the Berditchever, always saw everything in life through the lens of optimism and within the glow of a silver lining. It's not that there was no wrong in the Berditchever's eyes, it's just that in this cynical and critical world, he chose to see the good in people and judge them favorably. This is why the Berditchever was known as the great "advocate" and "defender" of Israel. If a court, even the heavenly court, wished to prosecute a Jew, he was there to defend the Jew *pro bono*!

It is with this spirit that the Berditchever offered the following explanation why we do not say *Hallel* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.<sup>8</sup>

Say there is a particularly praiseworthy human being. You only really praise that individual when you are talking to someone who does not know how praiseworthy he is. If, however, everyone already knows his level of greatness, all of his attributes and depth, then your praise is redundant.

All year round, said the Berditchever, the Jews say *Hallel*, sing the praises and accolades of the Creator because the entire world does not know how great and praiseworthy G-d is.

But on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the entire order of creation, every fiber of existence, from the greatest heights to the lowest lows, from the massive body of celestial angels to the minute molecular structures and microscopic sub-atomic particles, all readily recognize the greatness and praiseworthiness of the Creator, and they begin singing praise immediately of their own volition.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Israel's *Hallel* becomes superfluous, and therefore, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, *Hallel* is omitted.

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev looked through a lens of love at all people and at all of existence. He thus saw the divine in everything.

<sup>8</sup> Kedushat Levi Al Hatorah, Rosh Hashanah (p. 96).

<sup>9</sup> This works beautifully with Tosafot to Erachin 10b, s.v. *Amru Malachei Hashreit*.

So when Rosh Hashanah arrives and all the books of reality are open, when the Book of Life is open, when everything is revealed like, well, an open book, then all the cosmos and all the worlds and all creations and all the angels and all the heavenly ensembles immediately and automatically sing praise and thus it is unnecessary for Israel to sing praise.

## 5. The Chatam Sofer

The second answer comes from Rabbi Moshe Ben Shmuel, better known as the Chatam Sofer.<sup>10</sup>

When the Talmud says that the Children of Israel do not recite *Hallel* because the Book of Life and the Book of Death is open before the Judge of All Judges, it is not speaking literally. Rather, it is referring to the books in which are recorded all the souls who have ever existed for all eternity, those alive today, in the Book of Life, and those who have passed away, in the Book of Death.

On Rosh Hashanah, all these souls pray together, and there is no difference between a grandfather and a grandson, between a grandmother and a granddaughter, for all souls of the Nation of Israel are judged together as one.

G-d evaluates both merits of past generations as well of our generation.

And both of these books are wide open. This means that today, right now, G-d is viewing our lives, the lives of our parents, grandparents, all the generations together, those physically alive and those whose bodies have left this world but whose souls are eternal.

Imagine: We are not standing alone in our prayers on Rosh Hashanah. Today, right now, this synagogue is brimming with all the souls of all of history praying together! This is more than a *minyan* – this is *mega-minyan* of multitudes of generations. If you thought it was squishy in here, how do you feel now that you know that every soul to ever live is right here right now praying with us?

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<sup>10</sup> Torat Moshe to Nitzavim 29:14.



But, although souls pray, souls cannot recite *Hallel*, they cannot praise. As Psalm 115 declares: *Neither will the dead praise G-d, nor all those who descend to the grave.*<sup>11</sup> Only the living have that ability.

So, in deference to them, we do not say *Hallel* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

## 6. Two Explanations = Two Lessons

These two interpretations, the Berditchever's the Chatam Sofer's, offer us two essential lessons – lessons that will help us approach the coming year in a most heavenly and sweet light, will equip us with essential spiritual tools to achieve our mission, and will empower us to make a true difference in our personal lives and in the world as a whole.

### Lesson #1 Praise and Raise

On Rosh Hashanah, on the birthday of the universe and when its contract is being renewed, we all have the power to look at ourselves, at each other and at the world with the eyes of Reb Levi Yitzchak Berditchiver. And when we do, we see divine praise emanating and exuding from every fiber of existence.

Look closely at your spouse, at your children, at your neighbors – look at and listen closely to everyone and everything – and you will see and hear a beautiful melody of praise. Every person, every creature, sings its own particular song. And on Rosh Hashanah, when the veils are lifted and the books of reality are open, we can see and hear those songs of praise radiating.

On Rosh Hashanah, the entire cosmic order, from the angels above to the subatomic particles below, know and recognize their Creator.

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<sup>11</sup> Psalms 115:17.



Therefore, they instinctively and naturally sing praise, hum hymns, laud the awesomeness of the Master of the Universe. It is, after all, the day of creation, when the creation can sense its Creator. As we say in the Rosh Hashanah prayer, *v'yoda kol po'ul ki atoh pi'alto*, everything that has been made know that You have made it.

But Rosh Hashanah is not only about Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah, as its name, "head of the year," implies, is about the entire year. From Rosh Hashanah we receive the power and the awareness to perceive the divine in everything throughout the year. However, during the rest of the days of the year, when the veil conceals the divine, we do need to articulate and sing this praise of the divine.

Starting tomorrow, for the next 363 days until next Rosh Hashanah, very single day of the year, every single moment of every day, every single creation, from the angels to the skies, to the suns, to the moons, to the trees, to the birds, to the sidewalks – every single thing! – will not sing its song until we do. I will repeat: every moment of the year, not a single molecule sings its song, fulfills its purpose, praises its Creator until you and I do.

This means: When we sing the praises of G-d Al-mighty, we cause a chain reaction, a cosmic choir, an intergalactic orchestra playing out an amazing symphony. When we sing the praises of G-d, all creation – from a tiny blade of grass to a jumbo jet – sings the praises of G-d.

We do this on every festival with the mitzvah of *Hallel*, and we do it every moment of every day with the Torah and mitzvot by which we lead our lives.

Singing the divine song happens in many ways, no two alike. Your mission, if you so choose to accept – and, from the nods of your heads I can tell that you do! – is to find your heavenly song, be it at work or at home, and sing on the top of your lungs. (Such a song, even your neighbors will enjoy.)

So on Rosh Hashanah the song of creation sings on its own, but after Rosh Hashanah we have to initiate and sing the song, empowered by the epiphany we had on Rosh Hashanah.

## Lesson #2 – Generation to Generation

The Chatam Sofer teaches us that today, we are not praying alone. We do not sit in these pews, upon these chairs, by ourselves. You may see the people sitting next to you, but if you open the eyes of your soul, you will see the generations of souls, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, brothers and sisters, all the way back some 100 generations to our father Abraham, sitting next to us.

Throughout 5777, and every year hereafter, whenever a challenge arises and you feel down, alone or depressed, remember that an eternity of souls sits with you. On Rosh Hashanah they are actually in the room with us, as the Chatam Sofer writes. But, throughout the year, as you raise and praise through the good deeds that you do, you lift up your loved ones who cannot lift themselves up.

Every preceding generation relies on you to sing *Hallel* and to live *Hallel* – to live in a praiseworthy and flattering fashion. Today, and throughout 5777, ask yourself this question, and live by its answer: “Am I, today, in this moment, flattering the world, flattering myself, flattering my loved ones, flattering G-d? Am I praiseworthy?”

If you are living up to your potential or striving to do so, surely your answer is Yes!

## **7. Happy And Sweet New Year (Conclusion)**

The Book of Psalms declares:

*You crown the year with Your goodness;  
And Your clouds drip down riches.  
They drip onto pastures of the wilderness,  
And the hills are wrapped in joy,  
The meadows are covered with flocks,  
And the valleys are arrayed with corn.  
They rejoice as they sing...<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Psalms 65:12-14.

Ultimately, with the coming of the Final Redemption and the raising of those that have passed, all of us together, generation upon generation, creation upon creation, human and angel, heaven and earth shall sing the songs and praises of G-d – in one grand, magnificent symphony.

And may these words be fulfilled today, kicking off 5777 with a resurrecting big bang!

A happy and sweet new year to one and all!