

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are known together as the High Holidays or the Days of Awe. So what exactly is it that is so “high” and so “awesome” about these days? Interestingly, these High Holidays were not originally together as a pair. In fact, the first Rosh Hashanah took place more than 2000 years before the first Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgment. It harkens back to the day of our creation and forces us to ask ourselves if we moved ourselves and the world forward or backward over the past year. Yom Kippur is the day on which we stand in front of God and recall all the things we've done wrong and ask for forgiveness.

For some reason, the Torah ties both holidays together, and to me there seems to be a problem in doing so. Why should Yom Kippur, when we ask for forgiveness for our wrongdoings, come after the judgment has already taken place? Wouldn't it make more sense to go to the judge before the judgment and say, "Look, I know I've made mistakes in the past, but I regret them; they were wrong, and from now on I'm going to be a different person"? In our Canadian court system, doesn't the judge let the accused speak and ask for forgiveness and leniency before the verdict and sentencing?

In other words, shouldn't Yom Kippur come first, and then, after having pleaded our case, we can throw ourselves on the mercy of the court and brace ourselves for the judgment of Rosh Hashanah?

But maybe we have to alter our thinking about Rosh Hashanah. Imagine both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as parts of a GPS. If you don't know where you want to go, a GPS won't help you. It can only work when we enter the coordinates where we want to go. Only then can you know the right and wrong directions. If you don't put in the coordinates, you won't realize that you are traveling in the wrong direction, and almost everything you do will be a mistake and will only take you farther and farther away from your intended destination. You might get lucky, but odds are you will be way off course.

Rosh Hashanah is when we stand back and reassess the direction of our lives: where do we want to go? It's the day we get our coordinates and reset them for the year. Once we have clarity on our destination, we can then look back over the year at every turn and intersection of life and assess if they have moved us closer to where we want to go or not. If not, our GPS needs to recalculate to get us back on the correct route. That recalculation and repairing is Yom Kippur—fixing the wrong turns that took us away from our destination and reestablishing ourselves on the correct path. That recalculation can only take place when we first have Rosh Hashanah to help us determine where we want to go.

With a world so very different from last year, let us use this as an opportunity to look at our lives and our goals differently. We are getting used to doing things another way, so what else can we do differently?

In terms of our relationships, Rosh Hashanah is a time to evaluate our commitment to our human and spiritual relationships. Only after setting straight our course on Rosh Hashanah does Yom Kippur become meaningful. Yom Kippur is an examination of choices that you have made in your relationships. Did your choices bring you closer and deepen the relationships or drive you in different directions?

On Rosh Hashanah we assess, and God examines, our underlying commitment to our relationships. Yom Kippur gives us the opportunity to repair and realign our actions with the values, ideals, and goals we truly want to live for and get back on the road to become the person we truly long to be as human beings, but even more, as Jews.

Shanah Tovah,
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