

Remembering G-D

Category: Rosh Hashana

What is Rosh Hashanah really about?

The holiday we are now celebrating is known by several names in Judaism. The Torah calls it the “Day of Trumpeting”—meaning, the day on which we blow the shofar. The Talmud calls it the “Head of the Year”—since it is on this day that we mark the creation of Adam, the first man, which is when the New Year starts according to the Jewish calendar.

However, in our prayers, we refer to it as the “Day of Remembrance,” and in the Kiddush prayer we’ll recite tonight at our dinner tables, we conclude with the words, “Blessed are you, G-d, who sanctifies Israel and the Day of Remembrance.”

But what exactly is the “Day of Remembrance”?

We ask G-d to remember us, as we know from the Torah that when G-d remembers someone, this fact brings him blessing and assistance. This fact is seen in the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading about our childless Matriarch Sarah, when we read, “And G-d remembered Sarah.” And what happened after G-d remembered Sarah? The Torah tells us that shortly thereafter, she gave birth to a son. In like manner we read elsewhere how “G-d remembered Rachel,” and shortly thereafter we read, “and she conceived and bore a son.”

These examples demonstrate that we very much want G-d to remember us for the good, and then give us a good and sweet year.

However, we all know that in Judaism, there is the concept of “measure for measure.” Thus, if we want G-d to remember us, we must in turn remember Him. So how can we remember G-d?

Recently, at a Chabad center somewhere in the United States, a Russian immigrant family celebrated the Bas Mitzvah of their daughter. Their family had not marked a Bar or Bas Mitzvah in over 100 years, as doing so in Russia was impossible.

Before the party began, an American-born Jew approached the Chabad rabbi and asked: “I don’t understand—how did Jews from the Former Soviet Union succeed in maintaining their Jewish identity? It’s one thing to be a Jew in America, where a Jewish boy typically gets a bris, and then goes to Hebrew school, and then, when he celebrates his Bar Mitzvah, he feels like a complete Jew. But in Russia there were no circumcisions as it was against the law—doing a bris could get you a few years in Siberia. And who even dreamed of Hebrew school or Bar Mitzvahs? How did they succeed in standing strong? What gave them the strength to protect their Jewish identities?”

The shliach answered him: The first time a Jewish boy in Russia got beaten up in school because he was Jewish, and was called “Zhid” despite not being sure whether he really was a Jew in the first place since his parents hid the fact from him—this beating was his bris. The second beating was his “Siddur Party,” the small celebration typically held in kindergarten or First Grade when little Jewish kids receive their first prayer book. And the third time was his Bar Mitzvah—after all all that, he is confirmed as a complete Jew.

In Russia, the shliach continued, it was not hard at all to remember that you’re Jewish. The non-Jews would take pains to remind you at every opportunity and any chance.

In the United States, however, we are liable to quickly forget our true identity: who we are, where we come from, and where we’re headed. In America must we seek means to ensure that the fact that we are Jews is remembered well, and that above all, that our children remember it well.

On Rosh Hashanah, there is an ancient custom of resolving to keep a new mitzvah in the coming year that one did not observe until now. So tonight, let us resolve to take on a mitzvah—any mitzvah—that will remind our children every day of their Jewish identities. Let us recite the sacred verse of “Shma Yisrael,” with our children every night as they go to bed. Or, let us recite the “Modeh Ani” prayer with them when they get up in the morning. Alternatively, let us make sure that our kids give a few pennies to charity every day. Whatever it is, we each can come up with creative and original ideas to remind our children of their Jewishness, whether with a Jewish song, a mezuzah on the door or anything else. As long as it’s done every day, it doesn’t matter what it is.

And then, as we strive to remember G-d every day, or at least not to forget Him, as we pray on Rosh Hashanah, "Happy is the man who doesn't forget you," then G-d, Who is described in the Zohar as "the person's mirror," will remember us for goodness and blessing, and grant us a good and sweet new year.