

Rosh Hashanah Eve 5783 / 2022
 Rabbi Esther Adler, Mount Zion Temple

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”¹
 Sorry, Juliet. I beg to differ.

What’s in a name? In Jewish tradition, a lot. Names matter. Names make things real and help us differentiate between them. In Genesis, the first things created come into being through naming: *And God said, let there be light, and there was light.*² And then, the first thing that sets the human apart from the other living creatures is the power to name them.³

A name reflects the essence of who we are - the word *Neshama* - soul - has at its center the word *Shem* - name. Our name tells a story of our past and even of our future. Sometimes a given name no longer fits and requires updating: Our biblical ancestors Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah after they encounter God,⁴ Ya’akov becomes Yisra’el after wrestling with God’s angel.⁵ Superstitious Jews will change their names when seriously ill to confuse the Angel of Death.⁶ When a person chooses Judaism, they choose their own Hebrew name.

A midrash teaches that when we complete our years on this earth and face heavenly judgment, one of the most powerful questions we will be asked at the outset is, What is your name – and did you live up to it?

What is your name, and did you live up to it? Tonight, I’m not posing that question *to you* - although I’d encourage you to think about it over the next 10 days. I’m posing it to the reason we are all here: Rosh Hashanah.

Because Rosh Hashanah is neither the original name of this holy day, nor its only name. In the Torah, this day is called *Yom Teruah* - the day of loud blasts. Several centuries later, in the Mishna, it gets the now familiar name *Rosh HaShanah*. In our liturgy, it is called *Yom Ha Din* - day of judgment, *Yom Zikaron*, day of remembrance, and *Yom Harat Olam*, the birthday of the world.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, scene 2.

² Genesis 1:3

³ Genesis 2:19

⁴ Genesis 17:5, 17:15

⁵ Genesis 32:28

⁶ For this and other customs see <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2014-04-19/ty-article/.premium/unlucky-change-your-name/0000017f-e15b-d75c-a7ff-fddfae480000> or <https://aish.com/judaism-the-power-of-names/>

If names tell a story, what is the story here, and what can it tell us about how we can make the most of this day?

Let's start with the earliest name: *Yom Teruah*: Loud-blast day, bringing to mind the soul-stirring sound of the Shofar. In Scripture, *Teruah* means a loud call, either by horn or a crowd. It can be a call to assembly or a call to war. During our Israelite ancestors' wilderness wandering, a *teruah* let them know that it was time to move on. In the book of Joshua, a *teruah* tumbles the walls of Jericho. In Psalms, *Teruah* is a joyful shout, a form of connection with God. : אֲשֶׁר־הָעָם : יְדֻעֵי תְרוּעָה יִהְיֶה בְּאוֹר־פְּגִיחַ יְהִלְכוּן : Happy is the people who know a joyful shout - Adonai, they walk in the light of Your presence.⁷ Maimonides teaches that the shofar blasts say "Awake, you slumberers, from your sleep, and rouse yourselves from your lethargy!"⁸

What will the *Teruah* be for you on this day? Will it be a wakeup call? A joyful shout? Perhaps a call to assemble and work together towards a goal, or to move forward in your journey? Can it be a reminder to pay attention and live life fully awake? Can it tumble the walls that separate you from loved ones?

Next, *Yom Zikaron*: Day of memory. This is an allusion to our - and God's -- remembrance of our deeds of the past year. It is our mandate to reflect on our hits and misses at doing what is good and right. It is an opportunity to remember with gratitude all the good things God has done for us in the past, or if you don't believe in God in that way, to remember - the good with gratitude. On the other hand, Jacob Milgrom suggests that *Yom Zikaron* is supposed to remind God to go easy on us, following King David when he pleads: : חֲטָאוֹת נְעוּרַי וּפְגַמֹּתַי אֶל תִּזְכֹּר : Do not remember my youthful sins and transgressions Adonai ...remember what is in my favor, as befits Your goodness.⁹

What memories will this day awaken in you, and what will they awaken in God? Will you respond to those memories with contrition or compassion? Regret or resolve? Disappointment or gratitude? Despair or hope?

Which brings us to the next name in our liturgy: *Yom Hadin*. Judgment day. *The U'netanne Tokef* prayer paints a picture of each of us passing before God, who sits in the heavenly court inscribing our fates for the year ahead: who shall live or who shall die, who by fire, who by water, and so on. While it's certainly vivid, I don't think most of us really ascribe to this very literal theology. I can tell you that I, for one, do not believe that God purposefully causes the

⁷ Psalms 89:16

⁸ Hilchot Tshuva 3

⁹ Psalms 25:7 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27* (AB; NY: Doubleday, 2001), 2011. In <https://www.thetorah.com/article/zichronot-asking-an-omniscient-god-to-remember>

illnesses, accidents and other tragedies that can befall us at any moment. So how can *Yom HaDin* speak to us in a meaningful way?

First is that this is our opportunity to look with discernment at our deeds and relationships over the past year. I chose discernment deliberately because, according to Oxford, it means the ability to judge well.¹⁰ It is much too easy to judge ourselves or others too quickly, and either too lightly or too harshly. It is much harder to judge honestly.

Raise your hand if, over the past year you *never once* misjudged someone or jumped to a wrong conclusion about them...It's OK, my hand isn't up either. Despite our best intentions, the judging mind is relentless¹¹ in attempts to criticize. But *Yom HaDin* can motivate us to slow down and quiet the judging mind so we can judge ourselves and others carefully, honestly, and with compassion.

There is a midrash that when God set about to create the world, there was a debate among the ministering angels as to whether the world should be created with the attribute of *din*, judgment or *rachamim*, mercy. They tell God, If you create the world with the attribute of mercy alone, sin will abound; if with justice alone, it will be too harsh. God responds: Then I will create it with both justice and mercy, and I pray it will endure!

And this brings us to another name for this day, *Yom Harat Olam* -Birthday of the world. There is a Kabbalistic teaching that in the Beginning, God filled all time and space. In order to make space for the created world God chose to contract, and gathered the divine light into vessels. Unable to hold the light the vessels broke, and shards containing sparks of divine light fell into the newly created space. It is our job to seek out and restore God's light in acts of Tikkun - repair - by collecting the shards and liberating the sparks. In essence, this makes us God's constant partners in creation. Also, birthdays are celebrations, and although we contemplate very serious themes on this day, *Yom Harat olam* reminds us to celebrate the amazing world we live in, and to embrace the promising possibilities inherent in fresh starts. On this Birthday of the world, what gift will you bring to the party?

Finally, the name we know best: *Rosh Hashanah*. The New year, or more literally the Beginning of the Year. The word *Shanah* is the Hebrew root of *l'shanot*, which means to change. So we could translate *Rosh Hashanah* as the Beginning of change. This is a time to begin making the changes we know are needed but perhaps have put off. And to face up to all the changes that are beyond our control. Frankly it feels like we've had enough change already, thank you very much, but we know that change will happen, and what matters is how we will respond to it.

¹⁰ https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/discernment

¹¹ This idea of the judging mind is explored in *Compassion: Listening to the Cries of the World* by Christina Feldman, Rodmell Press (2003)

Will we fight it, flow with it, or embrace it? While we can't control what will happen, we can choose whether we will be reactive or responsive to change.

Some of you know that I love language. *Shanah* is an interesting word. It is an auto antonym - a word with two meanings which contradict each other. For example, the word cleave can mean both cling and cut; sanction can mean both allow and penalize, oversight means accidental error and careful supervision.

Shanah, the Hebrew the root for change - also means its antonym: repeat. A *Shanah*, a year, is a repeat of what has come before. Each year - leap year notwithstanding - repeats the same number of days, weeks, and months, the same seasons and holidays. On the other hand - and in Judaism there is always another hand - while we may be repeating the same holiday as last year, we are not the same. Each of us can say with absolute certainty "I am different than I was a year ago."

Contrary to the popular saying, change is not the only constant. Repetition is both inevitable, and invaluable. There is comfort in repetition, and it's how we learn. *L'shanot* - as repeat, also means "teach" because we learn lessons by repeating them over and over. Rosh Hashanah is an invitation to think about what went right this past year, what we did well, and to be intentional about what we want to repeat in the new year.

The challenge is to fully inhabit this paradox. With one hand, to reach for and embrace change; with the other, to hold on to what warrants repeating.

That which we call a rose, by any other name, indeed smells sweet. That which we call Rosh Hashanah, by many other names is enhanced and enriched. As *Yom Teruah*, it awakens us, calls us together and moves us forward. As *Yom Zikaron*, this day invites us to look back at the past year with open hearts. As *Yom HaDin*, it helps us think judiciously but not judgmentally about our lives. As *Yom Harat Olam*, we get to celebrate and embrace new beginnings. The world is unfinished; we have work to do, but we can look forward with hope because today is *Rosh Hashanah*, the beginning of change and the beginning of learning. May it be a very good one for us all.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon; may it be so.