

## Introduction to Tractate Rosh Hashanah

Scripture's presentation of the festival of Rosh Hashanah ("the beginning of the year"), the New Year, commences with the identification of the new moon of the month Nisan (Exo. 12: 1P2). The New Year *par excellence*, the one marked by the new moon of the month Tishré, is covered in Lev. 23:23–25, and more elaborately at Num. 29:12–38.

- I. The designation of the new month through the year
  - A. The four New Years
  - B. The new moon: receiving testimony of the appearance of the new moon and announcing the new month
- II. The shofar ("ram's horn") sounded on Rosh Hashanah
  - A. The law of the shofar
  - B. The liturgy of the New Year
  - C. Sounding the shofar in the liturgy

The shofar, or ram's horn, according to *Rosh Hashanah*, is sounded in the Temple—so Scripture states explicitly—but also in the synagogue. The portions of the Mishnah and the Talmud devoted to the New Year work out two matters: first, the sounding of the shofar, and second, the character of the synagogue liturgy. Scripture knows that the shofar is integral to the Temple rite. But the presentation of the synagogue-liturgy by the rule of *Rosh Hashanah* insists upon the shofar-rite as integral to synagogue worship. From this it follows that the law of the oral Torah centers upon the synagogue service in connection with the divine judgment of mankind. The law deems the shofar-rite particular to the occasion of judgment upon the occasion of the New Year marked by the first day of the month Tishré and, it follows, legislates as much for the synagogue as for the Temple.

Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment for Israel, and, within its understanding of Israel's relationship with God, that judgment takes place wherever Israel is located, not only in the Temple, but also in the city, or even in the Land of Israel. Rosh Hashanah is represented by the Talmud as a utopian occasion, hence as much a moment of the synagogue as of the Temple.

The law at hand makes sense only in light of the haggadic exposition of the ram's horn, well-embodied in the following, which carries us even to the matter of substitution, *temurah*, with which this part of the exposition commences:

- A. "And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, [caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son]" (Gen. 22:13):
- B. What is the meaning of the word for "behind"?
- C. Said R. Yudan, "'Behind' in the sense of 'after,' that is, after all that happens, Israel nonetheless will be embroiled in transgressions and perplexed by sorrows. But in the end, they will be redeemed by the horns of a ram: 'And the Lord will blow the horn' (Zec. 9:14)."

D. Said R. Judah bar Simon, “‘After’ all generations Israel nonetheless will be embroiled in transgressions and perplexed by sorrows. But in the end, they will be redeemed by the horns of a ram: ‘And the Lord God will blow the horn’ (Zec. 9:14).”

E. Said R. Hinena bar Isaac, “All through the days of the year Israelites are embroiled in transgressions and perplexed by sorrows. But on the New Year they take the ram’s horn and sound it, so in the end, they will be redeemed by the horns of a ram: ‘And the Lord God will blow the horn’ (Zec. 9:14).”

*Genesis Rabbah* LVI:IX.1

Now we understand why what is important is the exposition of the law of the shofar, on the one hand, and the rites of the synagogue, on the other.