YESHIVAT HAR ETZION VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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ROSH HASHANA 5756

THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

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by Asher Meir

I. TWO ROSH-HASHANAS

The religious and scientific controversy over the age of the world has received much popular attention. However, the Gemara relates another disagreement that has more conceptual impact - a debate over the world's exact birthday. The debate is found in a braita in Rosh HaShana 10b:

"Rabbi Eliezer says, the world was created in Tishrei. In Tishrei the patriarchs were born, in Tishrei the patriarchs died; but Yitzchak was born at Pesach. Sarah, Rachel, and Chana were all granted the ability to conceive on Rosh Hashana; Yosef was freed from prison on Rosh Hashana, and on Rosh Hashana our forefathers were freed from labor in Egypt. We were redeemed from Egypt in Nisan, but we are destined to be redeemed in Tishrei.

"Rabbi Yehoshua says, the world was created in Nisan. In Nisan the patriarchs were born, and in Nisan the patriarchs died, and Yitzchak was born at Pesach. Sarah, Rachel, and Chana were all granted the ability to conceive on Rosh Hashana; Yosef was freed from prison on Rosh Hashana, and on Rosh Hashana our forefathers were freed from labor in Egypt. We were redeemed from Egypt in Nisan, and we are destined to be redeemed in Nisan."

Ostensibly, R' Eliezer and R' Yehoshua's debate is of little significance. Why should the exact date of creation matter? One understanding is that Tishrei and Nisan are not mere months - they symbolize man's relationship to the natural world.

In Tishrei, the gateway to autumn, man must combat nature in order to survive. In Nisan, the dawn of spring, nature helps man live and grow. The debate of R' Eliezer and R' Yehoshua, then, is whether man is fundamentally in conflict with his environment (Tishrei) or in harmony with it (Nisan).

Imagine that Adam and Eve were created in Tishrei - the autumn; they oppose nature in two ways. The first is that they are “out of sync” with nature: while the newly created human beings blossom and develop, the world around them withers. The second is that while they depend on nature for their needs, nature does not cooperate with them: every day there is less warmth, less shelter, fewer fruits and vegetables to eat.

In contrast, if we imagine man's creation in Nisan, the exact opposite holds. The world blossoms in tandem with man's development; the bounty and warmth of springtime aid man's early stages as well.

II. SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Maharsha explains that R' Eliezer thinks the world was created in Tishrei because it "is the time of repentance," and R' Yehoshua thinks the creation took place in Nisan because it "is the time of redemption." (It is evident that the sages agree as to the significance of the two seasons - they concur on the dating of most events in the Braita). It seems that redemption is intimately connected with the idea of collaboration with nature, while repentance - teshuva - is connected with overcoming nature. The redemption from Egypt epitomizes how all creation can cooperate to realize God's design for mankind. The birth of the Jewish people was accompanied by many miracles - from the plagues to the splitting of the sea - that demonstrate how nature can help man.

The fact that the festival devoted to judgment and repentance falls in Tishrei suggests that the kind of repentance God seeks from us on the judgment day is that of "man against the universe." We must struggle against the yetzer hara - man's earthly nature and baser instincts. Judaism recognizes the potential harmony that exists between us and our material side, but Tishrei is not a suitable time for expressing this harmony. On the eve of Nisan we have Adar and Purim, when we increase our happiness and immerse ourselves in the joys that we can acquire from the material world. On the eve of Tishrei we have Elul, where we immerse ourselves in introspection, isolating ourselves from the material and concentrating on the spiritual.

III. TISHREI, TESHUVA AND THE WORLD

From the end of the braita we learn that there is an additional dispute between R' Eliezer and R' Yehoshua. Not only do they disagree as to when the world as we know it came into being, they also disagree as to when it will end, ushering in a new and better world. Since they agree on the symbolism of the times of year, we can extend our understanding of the first part of the debate to the second. Will the future redemption be a Tishrei redemption, dependent on repentance, or a Nisan redemption, which will come even without merit like the redemption from Egypt? And so we find in Sanhedrin 97b: R' Eliezer claims that the Jewish people will not be redeemed except through repentance; R' Yehoshua claims that whether or not they repent, they will be redeemed.

According to R' Eliezer's "Tishrei" view, our "battle against nature" has very far-reaching implications. If we succeed in "holding our own" against a hostile environment, returning to God despite the many pitfalls and temptations of the withering world, we effect the perfection of nature itself - the final redemption.

In other words, the “Tishrei” approach is that our repentance can transform the world. This connection between the repentance of the individual and the rectification of the world as a whole is illustrated by Rambam in his Laws of Teshuva (3:1-2). Rambam says that Rosh Hashana is not only the time of judgment for the individual, but also that for the world as a whole: "If [the world's] sins should outweigh its good deeds, the world is immediately doomed." Our teshuva can save the world; our lack of teshuva can destroy it.

IV. CONCLUSION

Every month in the Jewish calendar has a unique character. Tishrei, when winter begins to fall, symbolizes our periodic necessity to confront the hostile elements in our environment - not only the material, but even more the spiritual. The fact that we are not yet in perfect harmony with nature and society implies not only an ability to resist their imperfections, but also an ability to overcome them, to perfect the world as a whole through our individual repentance.