



## MACHSHAVOT

### Rosh Hashanah 5781

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## Happy Birthday World and Happy Birthday Me!

**Rabbi Andrew Shaw**  
*Chief Executive, Mizrahi UK*

Birthdays are a strange thing – as kids we used to look forward to them with great excitement, the cards, the presents, the event etc. As we get older they don't have that same sheen. Why?

Possibly because life gets in the way?

As a child, your responsibilities were to get yourself dressed, go to school, do your homework – that's pretty much it. A child doesn't have to worry about the mortgage, or the job market, there are no stresses looking after elderly parents or making sure there is enough money to afford the much needed house repairs.

However, you may think that that should make birthdays, as we get older, even more celebratory. As the stresses mount we should have a day to just party and have fun – we need it – we deserve it. Kids, conversely, every day is basically easy and fun – why should they have such a big celebration on their birthday?

The answer, I believe has a lot to do with who we are as human beings and relates to Rosh Hashanah tonight.

We have all heard the phrase 'when is he/she just going to grow up' said with disdain. The idea is that once we 'grow up', we start to realise that we have responsibilities to ourselves, our families, our communities and the world around us. People who either refuse or are unable to move into this phase of existence are either pitied, reviled or worse just ignored.

Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the first human, we should take that birthday every year as a driving force to reflect on our lives. How are we doing? Are we living up to our responsibilities both Divine and human? Do we feel we are maximising our time correctly? Are we raising our families to follow in the ways of our ancestors?

When it comes to personal birthdays, there is always that taste of mortality as the years mount. We all know we are not here forever and certainly as the clock turns another year older – we feel it.

However, there is a deeper lesson, which we can learn from the birthday boy of tomorrow – Adam Ha Rishon.

The Torah tells us *'And Hashem made the beasts of the earth according to their kind and the cattle according to their kind, and all the creeping things of the ground according to their kind, and God saw that it was good. And Hashem said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth." And Hashem created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.'* (Bereishit 1:25-27)

We notice that when Hashem creates the animals – there is a 'ki tov' – *it was good*. Yet when he creates the pinnacle of His creation – nothing. Why is there no Ki Tov after the creation of humanity?

The answer given by R' Chaim Albo is powerful. He says that once an animal is created, we can say 'Ki Tov', that animal will do what he or she is created for, there are no mid-life crises for animals, they fulfil their purpose. Everything is 'Good' as created, except for us.

The reason being that when a person is born, they have as yet accomplished nothing. They have no more than potential, they are alive to face the challenges that will confront them but with no assurance that they will overcome them successfully.

As Voltaire wrote, "God gave us the gift of life; it is up to us to give ourselves the gift of living well." How we play our role is the great test of our character.

We therefore cannot say 'Ki Tov' yet. Maybe we can say 'Ki Tov' after 120 years, when that potential is finally reached, but not on the day of Creation.

So birthdays don't really deserve that much celebrating because they are actually commemorating nothing more than our first appearance on the stage of life. That is why in Judaism there is much more value placed not on the anniversary of one's birth, but on the anniversary of one's death- the Yahrzeit.

It is then, with the passage of time, that we can reflect upon all that was accomplished by our departed as well as the legacy of their achievements. We have a right – as well as an obligation – to celebrate a life that we can now in retrospect acknowledge as having been well lived.

So 29<sup>th</sup> Elul/18<sup>th</sup> September is a date I have always had, and will continue to have, as my birthday, which I think should be celebrated if the life you are leading is one of constructive living and demonstrates that you are on the path to living a life of meaning and substance. That you are in the process of turning that potential into actual.

However, this year I have had to add to new dates to my personal calendar 27<sup>th</sup> Sivan and 14<sup>th</sup> Elul.

These are the yahrzeits of my parents.

Two dates when I will, during the course of 5781 celebrate the incredible lives they lived and know that when they came to Olam Ha Emet the Heavenly Host would definitely have declared 'Ki Tov'.

So Happy Birthday World – may this upcoming year be a better one for the entire world, may we realise our responsibilities and may Hashem bless us, our families, our communities and the entire world for a year of peace, health, happiness and the geulah shleimah that we pray for everyday.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova

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## **A Rosh Hashanah with a Difference ... and a Time to Think**

**Rabbi Andrew Shaw**  
*Chief Executive, Mizrachi UK*

*Mah Nishtana Ha Laila ha zeh mikol haleilot*

This question is not normally asked on any other Chag aside from Pesach. The asking child sees so many differences on Seder night, he or she is driven to ask the four questions.

This Rosh Hashanah we can ask another four:

1. On all other years we have large gatherings of family and friends for dinner- this year we will have the maximum of six
2. On all other years we all go to shul – this year so many of us will not
3. On all other years we will be in shul for five hours or more – this year it will mostly be three hours or less
4. On all other years we hear 100 notes of the Shofar – this year we may only hear 30

These four questions deal with four major areas of Jewish life:

1. Hachnasat Orchim
2. Tefillah b tzibur
3. Tefillah
4. Halachic observance

In each one of these areas, we may look at this year as a severely restricted Rosh Hashanah – but maybe there are lessons to be learnt.

1. Over the past decades the idea of having just the family for a Shabbat meal was replaced by mass invitation to homes on a weekly basis. Growing up, I recall for some Yom Tov meals we would have guests or go to other families, but on the whole it was always quality time with my parents and brother. Over the last few months I have heard from so many families how phenomenal it has been to focus on the family and not stress about cooking for twenty people.
2. During the lockdown, when shul was impossible, the opportunity presented itself for families to pray together. For individuals to focus more on tefillot, rather than rushing to keep us with the Chazan. Tefillah is supposed to be 'Avodah She Balev' a service of the heart – that was certainly the case in many homes during lockdown.
3. On our return to shul, we have found that services have had to become more streamlined, for the Yamim Nora'im the minor piyutim are being skipped to allow for the service to be shorter. When I came to Stanmore Synagogue twenty years ago – that is exactly what I did. We, like this year, only said the major piyutim to allow more time for davening the major tefillot and to allow times for explanation and inspiration. The phrase 'less is more' was very apt.
4. Ideally we should hear 100 notes, but the halachic requirement is 30. Many aspects of Judaism today have moved into the realm of Chumrah – stringency. We need to understand first what the halachic obligation is, and then decide if we wish to take on a stringency. Rosh Hashanah celebrates the creation of the world – that perfect world of Gan Eden that was shattered when according to the tradition, Chavah unconsciously added a chumra "neither shall you touch it" and when the snake pushed her against the tree and nothing happened she succumbed. Or as Rashi comments: "She added to the command of Hashem, therefore she ended up by reducing it."

Yes, a different Rosh Hashanah indeed, but maybe the differences are there to wake us up to changes we need to make both personally and communally.

Something to discuss in your group of six!

Shana Tova

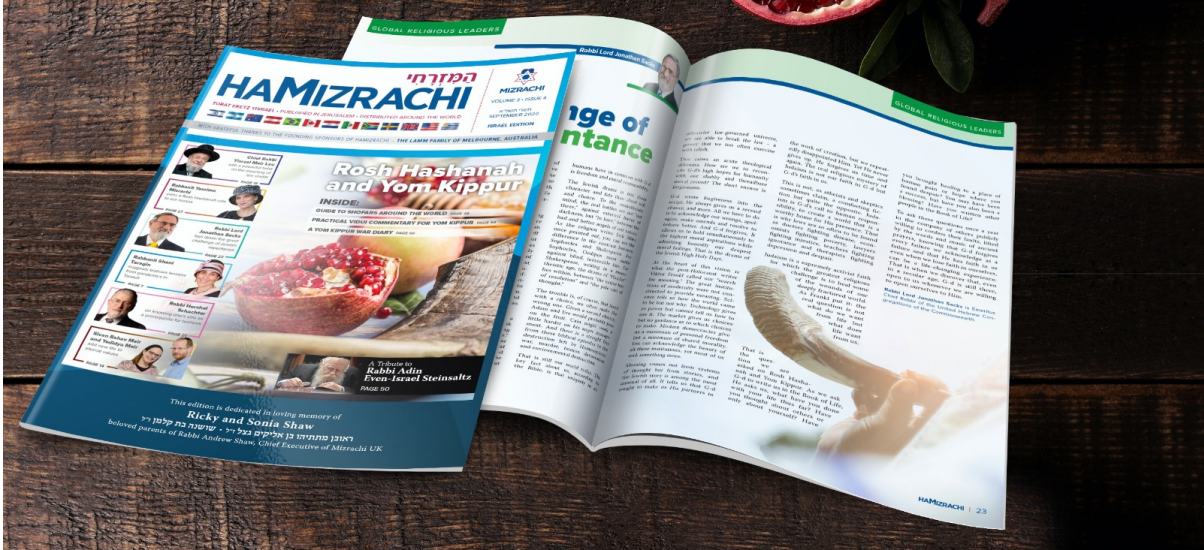
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WRITTEN AND NARRATED BY RABBI ANDREW SHAW  
PERFORMED BY JONNY TURGEL  
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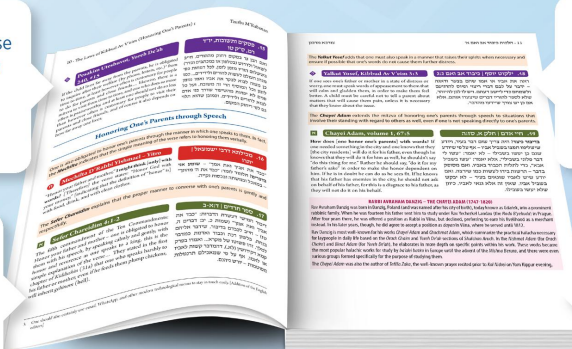
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