

Change and The Rosh Hashanah

In a discussion of Rosh Hashanah, the holiday that symbolizes time and the inevitable changes that accompany time's passage, it is appropriate to discuss a somewhat paradoxical phenomenon frequent among the Jews. This is the resistance to conscious change in the customary observances of the various institutional Judaisms by many Jews even though they do not find these observances meaningful or relevant. These Jews, moreover, send off their children, whose interest is no greater than their own, to learn the practice of the very observances they themselves have rejected. Note that we are not speaking of the natural opposition to change by Jews who believe and keep such observances, but the resistance of those who rarely or never practice them. Moreover, the form of change that is resisted is conscious change, innovation that is open and deliberate. That observances are changed by the very fact of abandonment appears to be acceptable, for neglect is private and does not require acknowledgment of what is taking place. Needless to say, if old observances are not kept, and new ones are forbidden, the Jewish religious enterprise will not survive. Yet the attitude, albeit unspoken, seems to be that extinction is preferable to evolution. A regretful irony, that the greatest of all changes, death, should be produced by the refusal to change in life.

Among the various reasons that may be advanced to explain the resistance to change described, two are of particular significance, if only because they are generally invisible. They consist of two notions regarding the history of the Jewish religious enterprise that are widely held, particularly by laypersons. The first is that Jews, from the beginning of their history, have had the very same holidays, rituals, and ceremonials observed by present-day Jewish religious institutions. The second is that Jewish observances were not intended to have their meaning and existence dependent upon their relevance to the general environment in which the Jew lived. Jews were meant simply to keep the observances, regardless of their pertinence to such external factors as economic, social, and natural conditions, because they constituted the "Jewish thing to do." It is understandable that persons who consciously or unconsciously subscribe to these two notions will resist change. If it is believed that Jews have always followed the present observances, how then can new practices be justified to which the name "Jewish" is

legitimately given? Likewise, if Jewish observances are considered non-rational, absolute givens of Jewish experience that are to be retained whether relevant to the environment or not, then the basis of change is destroyed and innovation is impossible. Consequently, persons may find present Jewish observances meaningless, yet, subscribing to the two notions above, resist change because they see no way in which it can properly occur.

These two notions are in fact, however, untrue. They have been fostered by reactionary forces in the Jewish community opposed to change, and by the failure to communicate to laypersons the results of scientific research into the Jewish past. The truth is that far from being static, Jewish observances have been continuously transformed over the ages. Neither have these observances been arbitrary, subjective events practiced in a vacuum by Jews wishing to "do a Jewish thing." On the contrary, they were inspired and fueled by events in the environment, and served as responses to these events. Holidays, rituals, and ceremonials provided molds into which hopes, desires, and emotions could be poured in reaction to the great economic, social, and natural forces that influenced and determined the rhythms of Jewish life. Accordingly, environmental conditions constituted an intrinsic element in the meaningfulness of Jewish observances, and as these conditions were altered, so did old observances become obsolete and new ones required.

The history of the holiday we call the Rosh Hashanah (New Year) reveals just these two points: continuous change of observances; and environmental relevance as the basis of their existence and meaning. To illustrate these points in a striking way, let us compare salient features of the Rosh Hashanah as customarily presented today, with the situation existing in the Bible (Pentateuch). In today's understanding, there is, of course, a holiday called the Rosh Hashanah. This holiday takes place on the first of Tishri, the seventh month, and celebrates the beginning of a new year for the Jews. The Rosh Hashanah also begins a period of atonement that culminates ten days later on the Yom Kippur. In the Bible, the situation is quite otherwise. There is no holiday called the Rosh Hashanah. There is, in fact, no new year holiday mentioned at all. We find only that there is to be on the first day of the seventh month: "a solemn rest"; "a memorial proclaimed and a holy convocation"; and "a day of blowing the horn" (Lev. 23:24; Num. 29:1). Moreover, no process of atonement beginning on the first of Tishri extending to Yom Kippur exists. Rosh Hashanah, in truth, does not appear until after the Bible is completed, in the talmudic period, some thousand years or so after the start of the Jewish religious enterprise.

Scholars do conjecture on the basis of evidence from surrounding semitic countries that in biblical times there probably was a New Year holiday in the autumn. This was a new year intimately related to economic and social factors in the environment that naturally produced a psychic state in which a person "felt" the New Year. As the *Jewish Encyclopedia* states: "In the earliest times the Hebrew year began in autumn with the opening of the economic year. There followed in regular succession the seasons of seed-sowing,... ripening of the corn..., harvest and ingathering of the fruits. In harmony with this was the order of the great agricultural festivals...."

Two points emerge from the above discussion regarding the Rosh Hashanah in particular and Jewish observances in general: (i) change is not only a legitimate element in Jewish religious life, it is a necessary one; (ii) holidays, rituals, and ceremonials are meaningful and vital only when integrated with the basic environment in which the Jew lives. The significance of these points is critical. The Jew no longer lives in the unsophisticated environment to which the customary celebration of the Rosh Hashanah is directed. It is relevant neither to the ideological nor economic systems of an industrialized and scientific world. In the Rosh Hashanah services of the Institute of Creative Judaism, we have sought to express a concept of the Rosh Hashanah that brings it into relation with the rhythms of the contemporary world. Rosh Hashanah is viewed as a universal symbol of "New Beginnings." Particular emphasis is placed upon the autumnal equinox, which signals the start of a new season, and a true beginning in the natural world. The somber quality of fall, and its symbolic relation to human finity is portrayed. The beginning of the academic year, which marks personal growth for young people and their families is acknowledged. Perhaps most important, a concept of continuous creation and evolution is introduced to replace the mythological theology of a one-time perfect and miraculous creation of a static world. This view not only fits the reality of the Jewish past, but of the Jewish present as well. It makes us aware on the New Year of the transitory nature of all things, even of the Rosh Hashanah itself. Once the Rosh Hashanah did not exist, and some day it may not exist again; only to be created anew, pointing in a different way to the passage of time in a world that will be new.

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