

# Self Meditations – In Search of the Never Changing and Ever Changing Self

Rosh HaShanah Day 1 – 5774 (2013)  
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A number of years ago, shortly before Rosh Hashanah, a dear rabbinic colleague received a startling message on the synagogue's office line. A rabbinic organization was verifying its internal records, hoping to ensure that each affiliated synagogue and its rabbi were listed correctly. The message, short and brief, was as follows: "We wanted to know if the rabbi is the same as last year..."

Not surprisingly, the question struck a deep chord.

No, the rabbi was not concerned that a revolution took place, that the community's board had gone wild, or that a new rabbi had secretly assumed leadership of the shul. No, not at all. Instead, my colleague was taken back, then was deeply shaken, and finally was awakened by this very question: Is the rabbi the same as last year?

I too wonder...*is the rabbi the same as last year?*

I ask this question not only as a rabbi but also as a son, a spouse, a father, a brother, and a friend. As a member of a family and a close knit community, am I the same as last year?

This same question also poses itself to me as a Jew and as a seeker. Despite all appearances, like so many of us, I still ask this question, as a person who is still trying to find his place in the presence of God. Am I and are we, the same as last year?

That is the question. But it is not just my question or my colleague's question. On this very day, it is a question for each and every one of us.

On this day we ask: In what ways have we changed or should we still yet change? But also, in what ways should we have stayed or must still yet remain the same?

The Rosh HaShanah Mussaf service offers a roadmap to this very question through its three central sections – *Malchoyut*, *Zichronot*, and *Shofarot*.

The first section, *Malchoyut* or Kingship, focuses on God's glory and splendor as the creator of all living things. In that vein, *Malchoyut* urges us to live to our fullest potential. After all, we are children of the King of Kings, endowed with infinite value and God's very majesty. At the same time, the second section, *Zichronot* or remembrance, focuses on God's recollection and knowledge of each and every thing and being, each having their purpose, role, and place in creation. Though we are each endowed with majesty and infinite value and potential, we must each also humbly recall and remember the purpose given to us in our very creation. Placed side by side, *Malchoyut* and *Zichronot*, call upon us to simultaneously strive to become more than we are while always remembering who we are.

The concluding section, *Shofarot* or the Shofar blasts, offers its own paradoxical message. This section focuses on the thundering sounds heard at Sinai as our people received the Torah in days of old. At the same time, *Shofarot* also calls each of us to prepare for the Shofar blasts that will be heard in the days of redemption. The sounding of the Shofar therefore simultaneously commits us to the inherited path of Sinai as well as to bold and innovative directions of a world yet to come.

In the book "Capturing the Moon," R. Edward Feinstein aptly captures the tension between *Malchoyut* and *Zichronot*, between staying who we are and becoming more than we are, between assuming our place as royalty, as kings and queens, and also knowing our place in the world.

“There was once a king who ruled his kingdom with wisdom and compassion. As he approached the end of his days, the king put instructions in a letter, which was to be opened only on the day of his death.

When that day arrived, the kingdom mourned its wise and caring leader. And then all eyes turned to the king's letter to see who would rule in his place. Whom had the king chosen? Not one of his children, nor an adviser, nor a general. The king had chosen the jester.

The jester? Everyone in the kingdom thought this must be a joke. How could a fool be king? But such were the king's instructions. And so the jester was brought before the royal court. Royal retainers removed his jester costume and cloaked him in the robes of the king. They removed his jester hat and placed the crown on his head. And they sat him on the royal throne.

At first the situation was awkward. But over time it turned out to have been a brilliant choice. The jester was every bit as wise, as compassionate, and as insightful as the old king had been. Everyone in the royal court indeed, everyone in the kingdom, came to love him.

There was a mystery surrounding the jester-king, however. Every so often he would retreat to a distant room in the palace, a room to which only he had the key. For a few hours he would lock himself in that room. And then he would return to the throne and resume his duties.

Once an ambassador came from a far-off land. The ambassador spent many hours with the king. He grew to appreciate the king's wisdom and his kindness.

When the ambassador noticed that the king occasionally disappeared into his distant room, he wondered, "What does the king do in that locked room? Why does he go there?" The ambassador just couldn't let go of the mystery. So one day when the king retreated to his room, the ambassador secretly followed behind. When the king closed the door, the ambassador crouched down and peered through the keyhole. There he took in the king's great secret.

In the privacy of the room, the king took off his crown and his royal robes and put on – the costume of a jester. Around and around the room he danced the jester's dance, making funny faces and singing the silly songs of a jester. Then he stood before a great mirror and recited to himself: "Never forget who you are. You may look and sound and act like the king, but you are only the jester. You are only the jester pretending to be the king. Never forget who you are."

Over the years the king and the ambassador grew close. One day when they were alone, the ambassador confessed what he had done and what he had seen. "I promise you on my life that I will never reveal your secret," he declared. "But there is one thing I have never been able to figure out: Of all the people in the royal court whom the old king could have chosen to succeed him, why did he choose you? Why did he choose the jester?" The king smiled at his friend and slowly replied, "And who do you think he was before he became king?"

On Rosh HaShannah, through the sections of *Malchoyut* and *Zichronot*, each of us is called to live as both king and jester, to garner our majestic potential and at the same time, to humbly accept and recall our place and role in the world. In the words of our Mussaf, words we recite in response to the Shofar blasts: *Im ke'vanim, im ke'avadim* – Whether as children of God or as servants of God, whether as descendents of the King or as slaves to the King.

*Im ke'vanim, im ke'avadim* – On Rosh HaShanah we must weigh the royal and the restricted, the jester and the king, as we assess the state and direction of our life.

In responding to our initial question – *In what ways have we changed or should we still change? And also, in what ways should we have stayed or must still now remain the same?* – the *Shofarot* section offers an additional insight by urging us to commit to the voice of the past and the redemptive call of the future, the commanding voice of Sinai and the emerging call of King Messiah.

Over the course of the summer, I had two experiences that deepened my understanding of the dual call of the Shofar blast.

Only a few weeks ago, I sought the advice of a dear and wise rabbinic mentor. I mentioned to this rabbi that I wanted to explore a certain topic with our community, but that I felt that I just might be too young or inexperienced to fully tackle it, to give it the proper *kavod* and respect.

My mentor however insisted in the following way: “Remember,” he said to me, “remember that you are not speaking as a young rabbi in his thirties. Remember that you are always speaking in the voice of a three thousand year old tradition.”

Over the course of the summer I also had the great blessing to spend time with Rav Yitz Greenberg, one of the most influential and innovative rabbinic voices in the last forty years in America; a bold sage of Torah. Now in his eighties, Rav Yitz, who is a tall and gentle giant, is no longer a young man. At times, his body seems tired and his walk is ever slightly frail.

During our time together, Rav Yitz shared a humorous story, the details of which I can no longer recall. One thing however did remain with me. At some point during his telling of the story, Rav Yitz described an old man and as he painted this old man with his words, Rav Yitz took on the old man’s character, acting out the role of this old sage.

For those brief moments, Rav Yitz seemed to have forgotten his own age, his own ever slightly frail body, and the whisper of old age in his own voice. The bold and innovative Rav Yitz needed to act as an old man because deep down inside the bold and innovative Torah sage never gets old.

On Rosh HaShannah, through the dual message of *Shofarot*, each of us is called to be both young and old, to be old but bold. We are urged to recommit to our inherited sacred message of old and to the bold and innovative vision of the not yet told. In the words of Rav Kook, we

are called to renew the old and to sanctify the new. In the words of our prayers, the words we beautifully recite as we return the Torah to the ark: *Chadesh yameinu ke'kedem* – Renew our days as of old.

*Chadesh yameinu ke'kedem* – On Rosh HaShanah we must weigh the old and the new, that which was and that which is yet to be, as we assess the state and direction of our life.

The famous Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, seems to aptly capture all three sections of the Rosh HaShannah Mussaf service in a single poem, titled “My Parents’ Lodging Place.” The poem alludes ever so lightly to *Malchoyut*, *Zichronot*, and *Shofarot*. In it Amichai writes:

My father was God and didn't know it. He gave me  
the Ten Commandments not in thunder and not in anger,  
not in fire and not in a cloud, but gently  
and with love. He added caresses and tender words,  
"would you" and "please." And chanted "remember" and "keep"  
with the same tune, and pleaded and wept quietly  
between one commandment and the next: Thou shalt not  
take the name of thy Lord in vain, shalt not take, not in vain,  
please don't bear false witness against your neighbor.  
And he hugged me tight and whispered in my ear,  
Thou shalt not steal, shalt not commit adultery, shalt not kill.  
And he lay the palms of his wide-open hands on my head  
with the Yom Kippur blessing: Honor, love, that thy days  
may be long upon this earth. And the voice of my father—  
white as his hair. Later, he turned his face to me for the last time,  
as on the day he died in my arms, and said, I would like to add  
two more commandments:  
the Eleventh Commandment, "Thou shalt not change,"

and the Twelfth Commandment, "Thou shalt change. You will change."

Thus spoke my father, and turned and walked away  
and disappeared into his strange distances.

On Rosh HaShannah, as we coronate *Avinu She'bashmayim* as *Melech Malchey HaMlachim*, our Heavenly Father as the King of kings, the question of the hour becomes clear: Are we the same as last year? Have we changed? How must we still change and in what ways must we always remain the same?

At this time, Amichai's poem rings and resonates deeply within: "Thou shalt not change" and "Thou shalt change. You will change."

As we join together for the Mussaf service, *Malchoyut* or kingship, urges us to live to our fullest potential. As children of the King of Kings, endowed with infinite value and God's very majesty, we are called to garner the courage to lead sacred and transformative lives. As children of the King, we must strive to become more than we already are.

At the same time, *Zichronot* or remembrance gently sets limits to our expectations – of both ourselves and of others, of who we are and whom we may or may not be able to become – by reminding us that in God's world, each created being has a set role, purpose, and place. Though endowed with majesty and infinite potential, we are called to humbly recall the purpose given to us in our very creation. After all, each of us is always both a jester and a king.

Finally, *Shofarot* or the Shofar blasts, challenges us to simultaneously commit to the inherited path of Sinai as well as to bold and innovative directions of a world yet to come. In that vein, *Shofarot* calls upon us to speak in the language of old as we strive to create the world anew.

*Malchoyut, Zichronot, Shofarot* – We are children of the King and yet we are also enslaved to the King. We are limitless and limited. We are new and old, traditional but bold.

Will we change this year or will we stay the same this year?

This year, may we not change and this year, change we will.