

# The Dawn of Conscience

BY RABBI BERNARD S. RASKAS

The term Rosh Hashanah, literally "head" (or beginning of the year, is found once throughout the Bible (Ezekiel 40:1) and even there it does not appear to refer to the first day of the year.) In the Bible, it is described as Yom Teruah "a day of blowing the horn." This is the basic reason that we sound the shofar on this day.

The designation commonly used is clearly enunciated in Mishna: "The first day of Tishrai is Rosh Hashanan (New Year) for the reckoning of years. By tradition Rosh Hashanah symbolizes creation and becomes the "birthday of the world" as well as the "birthday" of human beings. Unlike the New Year celebrations of most peoples, characterized by revelry and hilarity, Rosh Hashanah is observed with a solemnity that is marked by prayer, contemplation and self-searching.

Often the question is raised if the earth is more than four billion years old why, then, is Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Jewish New Year referred to as the day when the world was created. Since the Jewish calendar is less than 5800 years old, the explanation is that Jews celebrate on Rosh Hashanah the time when recorded history began, about 5800 years ago.

Though the earth is of a far greater age, man's career as cave dweller is some 100,000 years ago; then about 10,000 years ago humans learned agriculture, but not until the last five-and-a-half millennia do we have demonstrated human responsibility to other humans. So it is that on Rosh Hashanah, appropriately enough, we celebrate the anniversary of the dawn of conscience.

In fact, the first episode in the Bible which highlights clear moral choice and man's ac-

countability for his actions is the Cain and Abel story in which God asks Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain's reply is "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer of the Bible is that we are our brother's keepers, for God's reply is: "The blood of your brother is crying out to Me." This phrase represents the first statement of conscience, and with it begins the

history of civilization.

The dominant theme and motif of these days is the trial. Our conscience is placed on trial. The trial image sharpens our self-awareness and judgment that flows from the idea that we must review our deeds, both good and bad, during the past year. The trial begins on Rosh Hashanah and reaches its climax on Yom Kippur.

On Rosh Hashanah we confront our conscience and we hope to turn into finer human beings. It is the uniqueness of Judaism to have fashioned a holy day out of the first day of the new year as the proper occasion to do this. That is why Anatole Leroy - Beaulieu, the French author once wrote, "Conscience is like charity, a Semitic importation. Israel introduced it into the world." Rosh Hashanah marks the birthday of that introduction.

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