

Rabbi,

I am 93 years old, and since I was a teenager have never received a satisfactory answer to this question. If Rosh Hashana is the day of judgement and Yom Kippur the day of atonement, why isn't the order switched? Why not first repent and absolve yourself of your sins, and then go to the day of judgement? I hope I can finally get an answer!  
Tillie K.

Dear Tillie,

I hope you will find this satisfactory!

Rosh Hashana begins the period called the "Ten Days of Teshuva" or repentance, in which there is a mitzvah of introspection and Teshuva. It ends with Yom Kippur, when we finalize our Teshuva for our wrongdoings.

We must attain a deeper understanding of Teshuva to answer your question. The Talmud states, "the wicked, even while alive, are really dead; the righteous, even after they die, are considered alive". This reflects a profound definition of "life". Life is not defined by eating, breathing and being involved in commerce. True life is one's connection to G-d, "Elokim Chayim", the source of true life. To the extent one is strongly connected to the Source of life, he is spiritually alive. One could be partially alive, and at the same time considered partially spiritually dead, if one is connected in some ways and in other ways disconnected from G-d. One's mitzvos are a connection. One's sins are a disconnect. The word "cheit", translated as sin, really means to "miss the mark", a disconnect.

This gives us a new understanding of Teshuva. When one repents and G-d cleans the slate of that sin, there is a reconnect to Him. If one would be wicked and do Teshuva, it would be a "Techias Hameisim" or revival of the dead, back to being spiritually alive. What gives us the strength to bring ourselves back to life?

The answer is: Rosh Hashana. This day coincides with the day of the creation of the first man and woman. The Kabbalists explain that just as Adam and Eve were created on that day, so too our souls are renewed on Rosh Hashana. (Hence the "Day of Judgement": to be renewed or not to be renewed!).

On Rosh Hashana our souls receive a "wakening from Above", as they are renewed by G-d. That give us the spiritual energy to begin the work of renewal from below, in our own lives, through the process of Teshuva, culminating in the Teshuva of Yom Kippur when we complete the process of renewal for the coming year.

If Yom Kippur would come first, we would not have the spiritual strength to embark upon the process of Teshuva which is the core mitzvah of that day. The order of: 1) Rosh Hashana 2) Ten Days of Teshuva 3) Yom Kippur, is very precise and couldn't be any other way. On Rosh Hashana we are not judged for specific acts, rather if we connect to being subjects of the King, and accept His will upon our lives. That's all it takes to receive that spiritual charge to enable us to embark upon the path of Teshuva and Yom Kippur.

Wishing you and all the readers a sweet, meaningful and successful New Year with peace in Israel and throughout the world.