



# CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

## Rosh Hashanah 5768 By Rabbi J. Rolando Matalon

A well-known midrash (*Genesis Rabbah 39:1*) tells us that Abraham was traveling from place to place when he came upon a *birah doleket*, a castle alight, and gained consciousness of God for the first time. What exactly did Abraham see? Some say that the castle was radiating brilliant light. Others maintain that the castle was burning, enveloped in flames. These are two very different readings of the word *doleket* – alight – with very different implications for our perspective on the world: one emphasizes the world's beauty and the other highlights its potential for destruction.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose centennial we commemorate this year, writes in *A Passion for Truth* (p. 34): “One may look upon the world with enthusiasm and absorb its wonder and radiant glory; one may also see and be shocked by its ugliness and evil. The prophet Isaiah heard the angels proclaim: ‘The whole earth is full of God’s glory’ (*Is. 6:3*); Job, however, maintained that ‘the earth is given to the power of the wicked’ (*Job 9:24*).”

Heschel challenges us to see both of these things in the world: as we travel from place to place in our daily lives, we ought to see beauty and delight, as well as violence and human degradation. The *birah doleket* in which we live is both bathed in glorious light and engulfed in destructive flames.

On Rosh Hashanah, we both celebrate the world in its radiant glory and are shocked by its ugliness. But we must go beyond bearing witness and being shocked: strengthened by the knowledge that light is possible, we must use the light to expose the ugliness and begin to fix it.

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate *and* we claim responsibility. We celebrate *and* we reject the status quo of our lives and of our world. We celebrate *and* we refuse to submit to the tyranny of our own apathy, hypocrisy, cruelty.

We celebrate because we commit to shedding, in the words of Joseph Soloveitchik, an existence of fate, and embrace instead an existence of destiny.

Soloveitchik teaches us in his masterpiece *Kol Dodi Dofek*:

Judaism has always distinguished between an existence of fate and an existence of destiny. What is the nature of the existence of fate? It is an existence of compulsion, an existence of the type described by the Mishnah, “Against your will do you live out your life.” (*Avot 4:29*), a pure factual existence, one link in a mechanical chain, devoid of meaning, direction, purpose, but subject to the forces of the environment unto which the individual has been cast by providence, without prior consultation. The “I” of fate has the image of an object. As an object, he appears as made and not as maker... What is the nature of the existence

of destiny? It is an active mode of existence, one wherein man confronts the environment into which he was thrown, possessed of an understanding of his uniqueness, of the special worth of his freedom, and of his ability to struggle with his external circumstances without forfeiting either his independence or his selfhood. The motto of the "I" of destiny is, 'Against your will you are born and against your will you die, but you live of your own free will.' Man is born like an object, dies like an object, but possesses the ability to live like a subject, like a creator, an innovator, who can impress his own individual seal upon his life and can extricate himself from a mechanical type of existence and enter into a creative, active mode of being.

We stand at the threshold of a new year and we assert that there can be meaning beyond the absurdity that we often witness, that we have the power to create and to change, that there is a higher path than the one that we currently tread, that our actions matter. Above all, we affirm that the castle in which we live does not have to burn inevitably to destruction, but that our deeds, filled with Torah and love, will cause our world to shine.

*Leshanah tovah tikatevu vete<sup>h</sup>atemu.*



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