

Communications

TO THE EDITOR:

Ari Berman (“The Fragility of Life and the Meaning of Time,” Summer 2013), interprets Rambam as holding that the repentance of Rosh ha-Shana is a call to awaken from spiritual slumber and misuse of valuable time.

I believe that this theme can be inferred from earlier Rabbinic sources, in particular the Mishna, *Rosh ha-Shana* (1:2): “On the New Year, all the *Ba’ei Olam* pass before Him like flocks of sheep.” The phrase *Ba’ei Olam* remains unexplained by the Gemara’s development of the Mishna’s themes and by later commentaries. We are inclined to simply understand the expression as “inhabitants of the world” or humankind. As such, we usually understand the Mishna to mean that Rosh ha-Shana is the special time of the year when Hashem judges each individual for his or her merits or wrongdoings.

The phrase *Ba’ei Olam* is neither a biblical expression nor is it commonly used by Hazal. In most cases it is merely used as flowery proxy for humankind. The one notable exception may be the Yerushalmi (*Shabbat* 14:1), in its exegesis of Psalms 49:2: “Hear this and listen all the inhabitants of Haled” (i.e., the earth). Playing off the name Haled, the Yerushalmi substitutes the terminology for humankind to *Ba’ei Olam*, who are compared to a *bulda*, an animal singled out by its characteristic of perpetual foraging, burrowing, and squirreling away the fruit of its efforts, in a rote-like nature, in excess proportion to the effort needed for its sustenance. The Yerushalmi portrays man, as a *bulda*, being in a perpetual state of toil, seemingly lacking awareness of the futility of his own excesses when performed in the extreme. The Yerushalmi’s terminology for humankind engaged in such perpetual activity – the proverbial rat spinning his wheel – is *Ba’ei Olam*!

Based on the Yerushalmi, we can now define *Ba’ei Olam* as those who superficially “enter the world” but do not take time to appreciate it. Alternatively, if we define *Olam* in its Biblical sense (as it is often used in Tannaic usage, cf. Arukh), *Olam* means eternal or perpetual. *Ba’ei Olam* means one who “enters into perpetual” activities. The Mishna in *Rosh ha-Shana* can now be understood: On Rosh ha-Shana, *Ba’ei Olam* – people who effectively have only entered the world without fully engaging or appreciating it, because they spend their days engaged in perpetual superficial excessive frivolous activities – are judged.

TRADITION

Finally, I wish to point out that Rambam (*Teshuva* 3:6, initially referenced by R. Berman), specifically chose our nuanced expression *Ba'ei Olam* to represent humankind: “The sins of *Ba'ei Olam* together with their merits are weighed on the festival of Rosh ha-Shana.”

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