

Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch High Holiday Class “The Meaning of Life” 2023

1. If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when? (Avot 1:14)
2. “Hayom – The Day - is the day the world was conceived. Hayom – The Day - all the world’s creatures will stand in judgment...” (Rosh Hashana Machzor) “Hayom – The Day- this refers to Rosh Hashana.” (Midrash Iyov, Zohar)
3. God’s (Elohim) creation of the heavens and the earth: But it does not say “of the Lord’s (YHVH) creation of” (i.e., it should say “of the Lord God’s creation of” as below 2:4 “on the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven”) for in the beginning it was His intention to create it with the Divine Standard of Justice (Din), but he perceived that the world would not endure; so He preceded it with the Divine Standard of Mercy, allying it with the Divine Standard of Justice, and that is the reason it is written: “on the day the Lord God made earth and heaven.” (Rashi Bereisheet 1:1)
4. And the child grew and was weaned (ויגמל), and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned (הגמל) . (Bereisheet 21:8)
5. And Abraham fell on his face and rejoiced, and he said to himself, "Will [a child] be born to one who is a hundred years old, and will Sarah, who is ninety years old, give birth?" (Bereisheet 16:17)
6. And Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have become worn out, will I have smooth flesh? And also, my master is old." And the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Is it really true that I will give birth, although I am old?'" (Bereisheet 17:12-13)
7. Master of the universe ... you call them Israel, my [God’s] first-born son, but now all of the sudden, they’re my (Isaac’s) children? Besides, how much could they have sinned? How long did they live? 70 years? Subtract the first 20 years, when they were too young to be punished, and You’re left with 50, then subtract 25 years for nights, and You’re left with 25. Now take another 12 ½ years devoted to praying, eating, and using the bathroom, and You’re left with 12 ½ years in which to sin. If You can handle that, fine. If not, we can split it 50-50. And if You insist that I take it all on myself, well I already sacrificed myself to you. After hearing Isaac’s reply, the Jewish people proclaimed, You Isaac (to the exclusion of Abraham and Jacob) are our father.... (Shabbat 89b)
8. We may find the answer to this conundrum in a mysterious passage in the Talmud, where we are told that in a spiritual way, Isaac was sacrificed on the altar that day. When the Jewish people were seeking a location for the altar on the Temple Mount, the Talmud’s enigmatic conclusion is that they found the proper spot on the Temple Mount when they discovered the ashes of Isaac from the remnants of Abraham’s Akeida sacrifice. In this sense, Isaac survived to live the rest of his life on borrowed time, when he should have been dead. A person can only completely understand this idea after going through a near death experience, like with a deadly illness or a calamitous accident. One possible outcome of such a harrowing experience is that it helps you appreciate every moment of your life. (The Book of Life Chapter 2 The Last Laugh)

9. Rabbi Eliezer who said the world was created in Tishrei....and Rabbi Yehoshua [who said the world was created in Nisan]. Rabbeinu Tam says they are both [correct]: You can say that in Tishrei [God] thought about creating the world, but didn't create it until Nisan... (Tosefot Rosh Hashana 27a)
10. If the Jews were wholly wicked on Rosh Hashana, so that only a meager amount of rain was decreed for them for the year, but in the end they repented, what can be done? To add rain is impossible, as the decree was already issued. Rather, the Holy One, Blessed be He, causes those sparse rains to fall at the appropriate times on land that needs it, e.g., fields, vineyards, and gardens, all according to requirements of the land, and those rains are just as effective as a lot of rain. (Rosh Hashana 17b)
11. We have learned that Rosh Hashana commemorates God's Creation of the world in thought. But holidays in Torah are never merely about commemoration; they are also about reexperiencing the essential aspects of the day we are remembering. It stands to reason then that Rosh Hashanah is a time for us to focus on our own power to create in thought. What are we creating? Contrary to common belief, Rosh Hashana is not the day when we determine the way our future will unfold. Rather, Rosh Hashana is our precious opportunity to create our ideal potential for the coming year, and that is a very different thing. This idea about Rosh Hashana being a day of potential is implicit in the Talmud's teaching that on Rosh Hashana it is decided how much rain will fall, but where it falls will depend on the Jewish people's behavior during the year. Both factors in the outcome will matter, of course – the ideal potential tells us the maximum rainfall but the specific way it's actualized will determine whether it helps our crops grow or simply causes flooding. However, for now, we are focused on the special significance of Rosh Hashana, which is the judgment about ideal potential. No matter what we do afterwards, what we receive during the year will be limited to the maximum potential we were granted on that day. (The Book of Life Part One Chapter 2 "The Last Laugh")
12. The mitzvah of the confession of Yom Kippur begins on the day's eve, before one eats [the final meal], lest one choke to death in the meal before confessing. (MT Teshuva 2:7)
13. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and as Yom Kippur, as on them the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white clothes... And the daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards. And what would they say? Young man, please lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself for a wife... (Taanit 26b)
14. In Eretz Yisrael, the custom was that when a man married a woman, they would ask him: Matza or motzeh? In other words, they would ask the groom whether the appropriate passage for his wife is the above verse from Proverbs that begins with the word matza, as it is written: "He who finds a wife finds good and obtains favor from the Lord" or whether the more appropriate verse is the one beginning with the word motzeh, as it is written: "And I find [motzeh] the woman more bitter than death" (Ecclesiastes 7:26).
15. Search for God while He may be found (Yishayahu 55:6)