

Our Covid-19 responsibility this Rosh Hashana



The Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis

Rosh Hashana is an anniversary. But of what?

According to our tradition it was on this day that God created Adam. It was the sixth day of creation. No wonder therefore that our liturgy takes us back to the dawn of all time. And it is in this context, at the beginning of the book of Genesis in Chapter 3, that we read the very first question on record. It was a question posed by God to Adam. God said to him,

“אַיִנְכָּה” – “Where are you?”

Adam had just eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree. Of course, Hashem knows everything, so what He implied with “אַיִנְכָּה” – “Where are you?” was,

“Where are you standing? What is your מדריגה, your spiritual level? How responsible are you being to yourself and to your future?”

This was followed up by another question one chapter later in Chapter 4. This time God posed a question to Cain who had just killed his brother Abel. God’s question was,

“אַי הַבֶּל אָחִיךָ” – “Where is Abel, your brother?”

It was as if to say, “How responsible have you been towards another?” And Cain’s answer was,

“לֹא יָדַעְתִּי” – “I don’t know.”

“הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אֲנִי” – “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

I believe that these questions are as pertinent and relevant to us today as they were to those original dwellers on earth – particularly during Covid-19 times. Hashem is saying to each and every one of us “אַיִנְכָּה” – “Where are you?” Literally, physically, are you too close to other people at a time when you should be socially distancing? Are you standing

at events and in places where the law is being flouted? How responsible are you being to yourself?

In addition Hashem is saying to us “אֵי הַבֵּל אֶחָיִךְ” – How responsible are we being towards others? Because if we’re neglecting our health we could be posing a danger to the lives of others.

Over the High Holy Days we ask God for forgiveness for our sins, our trespasses, and our transgressions during the past year. According to our tradition, for sins between ourselves and the Almighty, we go straight to God but if we have sinned against others, we must first appease them before God will hearken to our prayers.

If this is the case with regard to regular situations, in which we’re hurting the feelings of others, offending others, disappointing them, how much more so does it apply to situations in which we might be presenting a threat to their very lives?

As we enter into the forthcoming High Holy Days, sadly here in the UK, as is the case in many other places around the globe, cases of Covid-19 are on the rise and this is primarily due to irresponsibility – the responsibility that people have towards themselves and towards others. We pray that Hashem will bless us all with a שנה טובה – a good, happy, peaceful, fulfilling and most of all a healthy new year. But this can only happen if none of us ever again gives the shameful reply of Cain:

“Are we our fellows’ keepers?”