

“The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people thus: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts. You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall bring an offering by fire to the LORD.” (Lev. 19:23-25)

ROSH HASHANAH, the first day of the seventh month (the month of Tishri), is celebrated as “New Year’s Day”. On that day the Jewish people wish one another

Shanah Tovah, Happy New Year.
שָׁנָה טוֹבָה

Rosh HaShanah, however, is **more than** a celebration of a new calendar year; it is a new year for Sabbatical years, a new year for Jubilee years, and a new year for tithing vegetables. Rosh HaShanah is the **BIRTHDAY OF THE WORLD**, the anniversary of creation—a fourfold event...

- NEW YEAR’S DAY

Rosh HaShanah [ראש השנה]

- THE DAY OF SHOFAR BLOWING

Zikaron Teruah | Yom Teruah [זְכוֹרוֹן תְּרוּעָה | יוֹם תְּרוּעָה]

- THE DAY OF JUDGMENT

Yom HaDin [יוֹם הַדִּין]

- THE DAY OF REMEMBRANCE

Yom HaZikaron [יוֹם הַזְכוֹרוֹן]

DAY OF SHOFAR BLOWING

One of the special features of the Rosh HaShanah prayer services is the sounding of the *shofar* (the ram’s horn). The *shofar*, first heard at Sinai is heard again as a sign of the coming redemption.

THE DAY OF JUDGMENT

It is believed that on Rosh HaShanah that the destiny of

all humankind is recorded in ‘the Book of Life’...

“...On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, how many will leave this world and how many will be born into it, who will live and who will die... But penitence, prayer and good deeds can annul the severity of the decree.”

(from Unetaneh Tokef Kedusabti Hayom, Liturgical prayer, Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur)

THE DAY OF REMEMBERING.

Rosh HaShanah is a time for remembering God’s faithfulness to Israel through history. That is why Rosh HaShanah is also called **Yom HaZikaron** (Lev. 23:24). *Yom HaZikaron* is a time for personal and communal reflection: How did I live the past year in faithfulness and justice? On Yom HaZikaron the liturgy remembers the faithfulness of the patriarch Abraham who offered his only son, Isaac, to God in faithful obedience (Gen. 22). As the result of his readiness to sacrifice Isaac, God caused a ram to appear and be killed instead. According to Jewish tradition, this sacrifice is believed to have occurred on the 1st of Tishri. The ram’s horn is linked to the *shofar* and in the Rosh HaShanah service hints at Isaac’s binding (Talmud, Rosh HaShanah 16a).

ROSH HASHANAH—THE 1ST OF TISHRI—THE BEGINNING OF TEN DAYS OF REPENTANCE

Throughout the previous month (the month of Elul) the people have been in penitential mode—rather like the Christian Lenten preparation for Easter. Rosh HaShanah begins a time of anticipation of rebirth and renewal as the Jewish people enter into “The Days of Awe.” These days of *awe* are **Ten Days of Repentance**—ten days of self examination and commitment to a change of habits. The Days of Awe are days of *teshuvab*—a Hebrew word that means “return”. These ten days come to a climax with the holiest day of the whole year for Jews, Yom Kippur, “The Day of Atonement.” During the Days of Awe Jews seek forgiveness from God as they reflect upon their wrongs committed in the past year and, at the same time, people visit or call one another to seek forgiveness for their human failures and omissions in relation to each other.

ROSH HASHANAH USHERS IN THE HOLIEST MONTH OF THE YEAR [TISHRI] AND BEGINS

“THE HIGH HOLY DAYS”

On the first afternoon of Rosh HaShanah some Jews will go to a place where there is running water and cast pieces of bread or coins into the water to symbolise the sins they have committed over the past year. This tradition stems from the prophet Micah who stated “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? ... You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18, 19). The ceremony is called *tashlikh*, from the Hebrew phrase: “you will cast.”

TO BE THE BEST WE CAN BE MORALLY, SPIRITUALLY AND ETHICALLY, WE MUST ALWAYS BE OPEN TO THE PRESENCE OF THE DIVINE...

Rosh HaShanah begins a period of personal examination of conscience and of focusing on change in our attitudes and behaviour. During the Days of Awe (which begin on Rosh Hashanah) tradition has imaged God as in the judgement seat. Ancient Jewish tradition from Babylon spoke of angels as prosecutors and defenders in a heavenly courtroom. A more realistic later and contemporary notion is that of the God of judgement as the internal conscience. God calls upon us symbolically during this season [but in reality at all times] to be the best morally, spiritually and ethically that we can be—which means, that we must always be open to change and the presence of the divine in our lives.

ROSH HASHANAH—HONORING CREATION

Rosh HaShanah traditionally marks the creation of the world [Passover marks the *creation* of Israel]. The rabbi’s noted that the Hebrew word, *bereshit* (בראשית, in/with beginning), which is the very first word in the Torah and begins the account of the creation becomes, when one rearranges the letters, the 1st of Tishri—the date on which the New Year, Rosh HaShanah, falls—*Tishri One* (אי בתשרי).

The letters of *bereshit* [Gen. 1:1] בראשית become א [1st] of בתשרי [Tishri]

2

The festival of Rosh HaShanah, therefore, reflects or is *witness to* the creation. The festival is one of the ‘signs’ that ‘witness’ to ‘fixed times’ in Time where we are drawn out of the reality of everyday experience and into the ‘reality’ of the infinite.

God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate day from the night; and let them (the lights) be for signs (*otot*) and a witness (*ed*) to set times (*mo’adim* | festivals/fixed times), to the days and the years. (Gen. 1:14)

God said...
...let them (the lights) be for signs and for seasons
 לאתת ולמועדים...

אתת are signs

Mo’adim, מועדים, translated as seasons, means ‘set times’

Buried within the word מועד (season) is עד (witness).

The word מועד also means festival.

Jewish festivals are called *mo’adim*.

The Talmud not only draws out the importance of Rosh HaShanah as the birthday of the world but links the feast to important dates in the ‘history’ of the Jewish people.

We are told that

- God remembered Sarah on Rosh HaShanah,
- Isaac was born on Rosh HaShanah [although another tradition has Isaac born on Passover (Talmud, R. Sh. 10b, 11a)]
- Hannah was remembered on Rosh HaShanah and her son Samuel was the answer to her prayers
- Abraham’s offering of Isaac at Mt Moriah [the *Aqedah* (binding)] occurred on Rosh HaShanah.

ROSH HASHANAH LITURGIES

The prayer services on Rosh HaShanah include, besides the regular daily Amidah prayers, prayers that focus on repentance and redemption: who shall live and who shall die, who will be written in the Book of Life. The Rosh HaShanah additional prayer service, called *mussaf* (addition), inserts three special blessings/*berakhot* into the Amidah prayers related to the major themes of Rosh Hashanah. These

prayers anticipate a future day when *all* people will acknowledge and accept the kingship of God. The Rosh HaShanah *mussaf* service acknowledges, “Therefore, we bend the knee and reverently bow before the King of kings, the Holy One, praised be God.” At this point, as part of the choreography of the service, it became customary to bow before God in a physical act of accepting God's kingship.

The Rosh HaShanah mussaf prayer themes develop the notion of God's kingship, God's fidelity, providence, and revelation. The Mishnah indicates that it has been the practice to sound the *shofar* at the conclusion of each section since ancient times [Rosh HaShanah 4:5-6].

SELICHOT—PRAYERS FOR FORGIVENESS

selichot | סְלִיחוֹת—forgiveness

[The modern Hebrew word for sorry/excuse me is *s'lichab*]

Selichot are special penitential prayers, which have been prayed since antiquity on fast days and in time came to be applied to the preparation days before Rosh HaShanah and between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. [Sephardic Jews begin reciting *selichot* at the beginning of Elul so that the total number of days of recitation is equal to 40 and according to Midrash corresponds to the number of days that Moses stayed on Mt Sinai after the Golden calf incident.]

The *selichot* prayers focus on the suffering of both individuals and the community now, and through history, and on the continued hope and faith of God's people that God will relieve suffering and bring redemption. Some of the prayer practices in the liturgy which stress confession and petition are very ancient. Nehemiah 9:3 tells us:

Standing in their places, they read from the scroll of the Teaching of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day, and for another one-fourth they confessed and prostrated themselves before the LORD their God.

THE THIRTEEN ATTRIBUTES OF MERCY

Central to the *selichot* is the recitation of the *shelosh esre midot*—The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy
שְׁלֹשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה מִדּוֹת

These are the words that God taught to Moses on Sinai [Ex. 34: 6-7] after the incident of the Golden Calf. The Talmud [Rosh Hashanah 17b] says that Moses felt that Israel's sin was too great for him to intercede on Israel's behalf but God appeared and said “whenever Israel sins, let them recite the *shelosh esre midot* in the proper order and I will forgive them.”

“The LORD! | יהוה | *Adonai*
the LORD | יהוה | *Adonai*
a God | אֵל | *El*
compassionate | רַחוּם | *rachum*
and gracious | וְחַנּוּן | *v'chanun*
slow to anger | אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם | *erech apayim*
abounding in kindness | וְרַב חֶסֶד | *v'rav besed*
and faithfulness | וְאֱמֶת | *v'emet*
extending kindness to the thousandth generation | נֹצֵר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים | *notzeir besed la'alafim*
forgiving iniquity | נוֹשֵׂא עוֹן | *nosei avon*
and transgression | וְפִשְׁעַ | *v'pesha*
and sin | וְחַטָּאָה | *v'hata'ah*
and who cleanses...” | וְנִקְיָה | *v'nakeh*

Rosh HaShanah Mussaf Blessings/Benedictions

[*berakhot* | בְּרָכוֹת]

Malkiyot.

God is King: God is sovereign of the Jewish people and the universe.

Zikronot

Remembrance: God intervenes in the world. God will not abandon people and Israel will remember and invoke God mindful of the Divine promises to them.

Shofarot

Revelation & Redemption:

Acknowledgement of revelation: remembering God's covenant with Israel at Sinai, the merit of the ancestors, and God's promise of future revelation and redemption at the end of days.

THE SHOFAR

The *shofar* sounding is an important part of the tradition of Rosh HaShanah remembering as it does the event of God's immanence at Mt Sinai and the giving of the law [Ex 19:16, 19; 20:18]; and echoed in the Jubilee year, and the biblical stories of God's awesome and powerful control over events in time (e.g. the fall of the walls of Jericho [Josh 6:4, 20])



Since ancient times the distinctive notes of the *shofar* have been understood as a call to repentance.

The sounding of the *shofar* recalls the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai and the coronation of God as king, proclaiming God's awesome power to all of the inhabitants of the world.

During the 30 days of Elul and through the Ten Days of Repentance the sound of the *shofar* proclaims both God's sovereignty and a call to repentance.

The Talmud [Tractate Rosh HaShanah] relates the manner in which the *shofar* should be sounded. The basic pattern is a combination of the sounds produced by the *shofar*—*Tekiah*, *Teruah*, *Shevarim*. The *tekiyah* is a continuous sound that stops abruptly: a sound of attention, a call to gather. *Teruah* on the other hand is a series of broken staccato sounds rather like sobbing, while *shevarim* is a series of three shorter wailing notes. Put together in various sequences the *shofar* notes produce a sense of the trembling, signing and wailing with which one stands before God's judgement.

The mediaeval sage, Maimonides, says that as a reminder of the *shofar* blasts at Mt Sinai the blasts of the *shofar* on Rosh HaShanah call:

"You who are asleep, wake up! Search your deeds and repent. Look into your souls, you who indulge all year in trifles. Amend your ways; let each one of you give up his evil course and purpose."

In the closing liturgy of Yom Kippur the great *shofar* blasts become a celebratory herald of emancipation from sin.

SOME SHOFAR SPIRITUALITY...

The Sa'adia Gaon, [Sa'adia ben Yosef Gaon, 10th C.] suggested ten reasons for sounding the *shofar*...

1. On Rosh HaShanah, the celebration of creation, the *shofar* proclaims the sovereignty of God.
2. During the Ten days of Repentance the *shofar* stirs people to repentance.
3. The *shofar* recalls the revelation at Sinai and the promise of the people, "We will do and we will obey."
4. The *shofar* echoes prophetic calls and warnings.
5. The *shofar* recalls the battle alarm of Judea.
6. The *shofar* recalls the attempted sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham.
7. The *shofar* stirs the heart with awe and reverence.
8. The *shofar* recalls the Day of Judgment.
9. The *shofar* looks forward to the future final restoration of the people of Israel.
10. The *shofar* is identified with the resurrection of the dead.

REFERENCES

- Birnbaum, P., *Encyclopedia of Jewish Concepts* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1998)
 Eisenberg, R. L., *JPS Guide: Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008)
 Strassfield, M., *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985).

ROSH HASHANAH TRADITIONS

While the New Year festival (Rosh HaShanah) is a time of reconciliation and penitence it is also a time when Jewish families gather together to celebrate the year that has been, and joyfully anticipate another. At Rosh HaShanah families gather for a festive meal on the first two nights during which they symbolically dip pieces of apple and bread in honey and wish each other "*Shanah tovah umetukah*" (Happy New Year and a sweet one!)

CHALLAH

The *hallah* (bread) used at Rosh HaShanah is usually a round loaf rather than the usual oval or rectangular loaves used on Shabbat or other festive meals. The round shape is symbolic reminder of the sovereignty of God—a crown, and also a reminder that God awards "crowns" to the righteous.

CUSTOMARY ROSH HASHANAH GREETINGS

Shanah tovah Happy New Year
Shanah tovah umetukah Happy New Year and a sweet one!

or

Leshanah tovah tikatevu May you be inscribed for good year (in the Book of Life)

Others may combine the greeting:

Leshanah tovah umetukah tikatevu

May you be inscribed for a sweet and good year.

The response is: "The same to you!"

gam lemar or *gam lekha* (mas.) or *gam lakh* (fem.)

