

## HIGH HOLY DAY WORKSHOP – ROSH HASHANA

### History

The origins of Rosh Hashanah may be sought in a royal enthronement ritual from biblical times, though the Bible itself never mentions the “New Year” or “Day of Judgment” aspects of the holiday.

Even though Rosh Hashanah falls in the seventh month, later rabbinic tradition decided to designate it the beginning of the year. Although the origin of this tradition may have been adopted from the Babylonians, the rabbis imbued it with Jewish significance as the anniversary of the day on which the world was created, or of the day on which humanity was created.

Another explanation can be found in the significance of Tishrei as the seventh month, hence the Sabbath of the year.

Rosh Hashanah actually means “Head of the Year.” Just like the head controls the body, our actions on Rosh Hashanah have a tremendous impact on the rest of the year.

### Services

Rosh Hashana is a time to ask the Almighty to grant us a year of peace, prosperity, and blessing. But it is also a joyous day when we proclaim God King of the Universe. The Kabbalists teach that the continued existence of the universe depends on God’s desire for a world, a desire that is renewed when we accept His kingship anew each year on Rosh Hashanah.

Much of the day is spent in synagogue, where we pray that God grant all of His creations a sweet new year. The evening and afternoon prayers are similar to the prayers said on a regular holiday. However, the morning services are significantly longer.

The holiday prayerbook—called a *machzor*—contains all the prayers and Torah readings for the entire day. The most significant addition is the *shofar* blowing ceremony. However, there are also other important elements of the prayer service that are unique to Rosh Hashanah.

The Torah is read on both mornings of Rosh Hashanah.

On the first day, we read about Isaac's birth and the subsequent banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. Appropriately, the reading is followed by a *haftarah* reading about the birth of Samuel the Prophet.<sup>3</sup> Both readings contain the theme of prayers for children being answered, and both of these births took place on Rosh Hashanah.

On the second morning, we read about Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. The *shofar* blowing on Rosh Hashana recalls the ram, which figures prominently in this story as a powerful display of Abraham's devotion to G-d that has characterized His children ever since. The *haftarah* tells of G-d's eternal love for His people.

### **The Unetaneh Tokef**

We read in the Rosh Hashanah prayers that each year on this day "all inhabitants of the world pass before G-d like a flock of sheep," and it is decreed in the heavenly court "who shall live, and who shall die ... who shall be impoverished and who shall be enriched; who shall fall and who shall rise."

### **The Shofar Service**

The central observance of Rosh Hashanah is the sounding of the *shofar*, the ram's horn, on both days of the holiday, adding up to 100 blasts over the course of the Rosh Hashanah morning services. For someone who cannot come to synagogue, the *shofar* may be heard the rest of the day.

The *shofar* blowing contains a series of three types of blasts: *tekiah*, a long sob-like blast; *shevarim*, a series of three short wails; and *teruah*, at least nine piercing staccato bursts.

There are the parts to the Shofar Service:

*Malchuyot* – Kingship of God

*Zichronot* – Remembrances by God

*Shofrot* – Shofar Blasts to awake us

**Tashlich:** On the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah (provided that it is not Shabbat), it is customary to go to a body of water (ocean, river, pond, etc.) and perform the Tashlich ceremony, in which we ceremonially cast our sins into the water. With this tradition we are symbolically evoking the verse, “And You shall cast their sins into the depths of the

### **Rosh Hashana at Home**

**Candles:** As with every major Jewish holiday, we light candles on each evening of Rosh Hashanah and recite the appropriate blessings.

We eat festive meals every night and day of the holiday. Like all other holiday meals, we begin by reciting [kiddush](#) over wine and then say the blessing over bread. But there are some important differences:

- a. The *challah* (traditional bread) that is eaten for the Rosh Hashanah season is round, symbolizing the eternal cycle of life. The challah is traditionally dipped in honey, symbolizing the hopes for a sweet New Year. The same is done with apples, which are made even sweeter with the addition of honey.
- b. Furthering the sweet theme, it is traditional to begin the meal on the first night with slices of **apple** dipped in **honey**. Before eating the apple, we make the *ha'eitz* blessing and then say, “May it be Your will to renew for us a good and sweet year.”
- c. Many people eat parts of the **head of a fish** or a ram, expressing the wish that “we be a head and not a tail.”
- d. In many communities, there are additional traditional foods eaten, each symbolizing a wish for the coming year. Many eat **pomegranates**, giving voice to a wish that “our merits be many like the [seeds of the] pomegranate.” Another common food is *tzimmes*, a sweet carrot-based dish eaten because of its Yiddish name, *merren*, which means both “carrot” and “increase,” symbolizing a wish for a year of abundance.

- e. It is traditional to avoid nuts, since according to a somewhat convoluted *gematria* (mystical numerical interpretation) the Hebrew words for nut (*egoz*) and sin (*het*) have the same numerical value. We also avoid vinegar-based, sharp foods, most notably the horseradish traditionally eaten with gefilte fish, since we don't want a bitter year.
- f. On the second night of the holiday, we do not eat the apples, fish heads, pomegranates, etc. However, before we break bread (and dip it in honey), we eat a “**new fruit**,” something we have not tasted since the last time it was in season.

### **ROSH HASHANA TERMS**

***L'shana Tova OR Shana Tova – Happy New Year***

***Rosh Hashana – The New Year***

***Yom Tru'ah – The Day of the Shofar Blast***

***Yom Ha Zikaron – The Day of Remembrance***

***Yom Ha Din – The Day of Judgement***

***HaYom Harat HaOlam – Today, the world was born***

***Machzor – Special Prayer book for the High Holy Days***

***Unetaneh Tokef – Let us cede power...***

***Avinu Malkenu – Our Father our King***

***Torah Service***

***First Day – The Birth of Isaac***

***Second Day – The Binding of Isaac (Akedah)***

***OR – The Creation Story***

***Shofar Service***

***Malchuyot*** – Kingship of God

***Zichronot*** – Remembrances by God

***Shofrot*** – Shofar Blasts to awake us

***Taschlich*** – Casting off (our sins)

**Aseret Y'mei Teshuva** – The Ten Days of Teshuva

### **QUESTIONS AS WE LEAD UP TO ROSH HASHANA**

**One effective way to move your life forward is to ask yourself existential life questions. The traditional time to do this is around the time of Rosh Hashana.**

Don't try to answer all the questions at once. Take some time and meditate on each question for at least five minutes.

When you feel satisfied that you have a concrete, workable answer, move onto the next question. You will want to spread this out over a number of sessions.

You may want to have this list with you at the shofar blowing, a time of special inspiration and insight.

- (1)** When do I most feel that my life is meaningful?
- (2)** What would bring me more happiness than anything else in the world?
- (3)** What are my three most significant achievements in the past year?
- (4)** What are my biggest mistakes in the past year?
- (5)** What project or goal, if left undone, will I most regret a year from now?
- (6)** If I knew I couldn't fail, what would I undertake to accomplish in life?
- (7)** What are my three major goals in life? What practical steps can I take in the next two months toward these goals?
- (8)** What is the most important decision I need to make this year?

- (9)** What important decision did I avoid making last year?
- (10)** What endeavor gives me the strongest feeling of self-respect?
- (11)** What kind of person do I want to be one year from now?
- (12)** What kind of person do I want to be five years from now?
- (13)** Over the last year, did my most important relationships become closer and deeper, or was there a sense of stagnation and drifting?
- (14)** What can I do to nurture those relationships this year?
- (15)** In what areas of my life am I hiding from God?
- (16)** What is one step I can commit to that will bring me closer to God?
- (17)** If I could change only one thing about myself, what would it be?
- (18)** Are there any ideals I would be willing to die for?
- (19)** If I could live my life over, what would I change?
- (20)** What do I want written on my tombstone? And how do I begin living that way now?