

The opportunity of Rosh Hashana is too important to leave things to chance. Here's a handy checklist of what you'll need to know.

PRE-ROSH HASHANA

A key component of Rosh Hashana preparation is to ask for forgiveness from anyone one may have wronged during the previous year. To whatever extent possible, we want to begin the year with a clean slate -- and without anyone harboring a grudge against us. One should also be quick to forgive those who have wronged him.

Many people have the custom to go to the mikveh before Rosh Hashana after midday. A mikveh, which has the power to purify from certain types of spiritual impurities, can be an important part of the teshuva process.

Some have the custom of visiting a cemetery on the morning of Rosh Hashana and praying at the graves of the righteous. Of course, we do not pray "to" the righteous, but only to God who hears our prayers in the merit of the righteous.

The morning before Rosh Hashana, we perform "*Hatarat Nedarim*" -- annulling all vows. In Torah terms, saying something as simple as "I refuse to eat any more candy" can be considered a legal vow. Therefore, before Rosh Hashana, we annul any vows, whether they were made intentionally or not. This is done by standing in front of three adult males (or 10 if available), and asking to be released from the vows that were made. The full text can be found in a Siddur or Rosh Hashana Machzor.

Furthermore, one should remember the Eruv Tavshilin when Erev Rosh Hashana is on a Wednesday, being that the Holiday goes through Shabbat. One must prepare an Eruv Tavshilin before the Holiday by separating a piece of bread, a cooked egg, and making the Beracha 'Al Mitzvat Eruv', and then reading the paragraph in the Machzor that begins 'Biden Eruva Yihe Share...'. This should be done any time on Wednesday when Rosh Hashana falls out on a Thursday. You should put the bread and the egg in a special place, and save it through Shabbat. The Minhag is to try and eat it during Shabbat Seudat Shelishit.

Next we discuss candle lighting. The ladies light candles on Rosh Hashana night at the proper time as posted, before sunset. They should make the Beracha of 'Lihadlik Ner Shel Yom Tov.' The ladies also light the candles on the second night of Rosh Hashana after it gets dark when the men come home from synagogue after ma'ariv but before the meal. And of course on Friday night, they light again before Shabbat. Obviously, we do not light matches or make fires on Yom Tov, and therefore we should prepare on Wednesday an existing flame. You should buy these tall candles that last for at least a few days, and you should light it Wednesday in order to have an existing flame. Any time you need to use a fire, you light from that existing flame. For example, the candles that you light on the second night of Rosh Hashana and for Shabbat should be from a candle that was lit from the existing flame. It should be pointed out though, that after you light the candles, you now have that intermediary candle that you used to light which is still lit, and you are not allowed to blow it out or put it out. You have to leave it there and let it go out

on its own. Although it's permissible to light from an existing flame, it is forbidden to extinguish. So one has to be careful of that.

THE FESTIVE MEAL

During the High Holidays, a round challah is used -- symbolizing fullness and completion. After making the "Hamotzi" blessing, it is customary to dip the bread into honey -- symbolizing our prayer for a sweet new year.

Then, after most of your slice of bread has been eaten, take an apple and dip it in honey. Make a blessing on the apple (since "Hamotzi" did not cover the apple) and eat a little bit of the apple. Then say, "May it be Your will, God, to renew us for a good and sweet new year." (OC 583)

Why do we ask for both a "good" AND "sweet" year? Doesn't the word "good" automatically include "sweet?"

Judaism teaches that everything happens for the good. It is all part of the divine will. Even things that may look "bad" in our eyes, are actually "good." So when we ask God that the year should be "sweet" (in addition to good), it is because we know that everything will be for the good. But we also ask that it be a "revealed" good -- i.e. one that tastes "sweet" to us.

On Rosh Hashana, we add the paragraph *Ya'aleh V'yavo* in Grace After Meals.

SYMBOLIC FOODS

On Rosh Hashana, we eat foods that symbolize good things we hope for in the coming year. We contemplate what these foods symbolize, and connect with the Source of all good things.

The symbolic foods are based on a word game which connects the name of a certain food, to a particular hope we have for the new year. Here is a list from the Talmud of symbolic foods customarily eaten on Rosh Hashana. (The food and its related meaning are written in capital letters.)

After eating LEEK or CABBAGE, say: "May it be Your will, God, that our enemies be CUT OFF."

After eating BEETS, say: "May it be Your will, God, that our adversaries be REMOVED."

After eating DATES, say: "May it be Your will, God, that our enemies be FINISHED."

After eating GOURD, say: "May it be Your will, God, that the decree of our sentence should be TORN apart, and may our merits be PROCLAIMED before You."

After eating POMEGRANATE, say: "May it be Your will, God, that our merits increase as the seeds of a POMEGRANATE."

After eating the HEAD of a sheep or fish, say: "May it be Your will, God, that we be as the HEAD and not as the tail.

You can also use other foods and make up your own "May it be Your will..." For example, you could eat a raisin and celery, and ask God in the coming year for a "raise in salary" (raisin celery)!

ROSH HASHANA PRAYERS

Since there are so many unique prayers on Rosh Hashana, we use a special prayer book called a "Machzor."

In the "Amidah" and "Kiddush" for Rosh Hashana, we say the phrase *Yom Teruah*. However, if Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat, we say *Zichron Teruah* instead. (If one inadvertently said the wrong phrase, he needn't repeat the prayer.)

The supplication "Avinu Malkeinu" should be said on Rosh Hashana, except when Rosh Hashana and Shabbat coincide, since supplications are not said on Shabbat. If Rosh Hashana falls on a Friday, "Avinu Malkeinu" is not said at Mincha.

During the High Holidays, the curtain on the ark is changed into a white one, to symbolize that our "mistakes will be whitened like snow."

The chazan (cantor) for the High Holidays should not be chosen for his vocal talents alone. Ideally, the chazan should be over 30 years old, God fearing, learned in Torah, humble, and married. A learned man under 30 with the other qualifications is acceptable. Though it is preferable to allow an unfit chazan to lead services, rather than cause strife over the issue in the community.

Since it is a question as to whether the *She'hechianu* blessing should be said on the second day of Rosh Hashana, we are accustomed to eat a new fruit or wear a new garment and say *She'hechianu* upon it. When saying the *She'hechianu*, one should also have in mind the mitzvot of lighting candles, "Kiddush" and hearing the shofar.

THE SHOFAR

The essential mitzvah of Rosh Hashana is to hear the sounding of the shofar. The shofar blasts after the Torah Reading are called "Tekiot M'yushav."

The minimum Torah obligation is to hear nine blasts. However, there is a doubt whether the sound of the shofar should be a groaning type of cry (*Shevarim*), or a sobbing weep (*Teruah*), or a combination (*Shevarim-Teruah*). Therefore, we perform all three sounds, each preceded and followed by an unbroken blast, *Tekiah*. Three of each set results in 30 blasts total, which are necessary to remove all doubt that the Torah precept has been fulfilled.

It is customary to blow shofar in the same place that the Torah is read, so that the merit of the Torah will support us. The shofar should be blown during the daytime. In ancient times, when the Romans persecuted the Jews, the rabbis instituted blowing the shofar before Musaf, since the Romans had guards in the synagogues during the early morning.

The person who blows the shofar must stand. He should be instructed immediately before blowing to have intention to fulfill the obligation for all those listening. Similarly, all those listening should be reminded to have intention that their obligation is being fulfilled.

Before blowing, two blessings are recited: "to hear the sound of the shofar," and *She'hechianu*. Once the blessings have been made, one may not speak until the end of the shofar blowing.

Women may sound the shofar and say the blessing to accomplish the mitzvah. A child who is old enough to be educated regarding mitzvot is required to hear the shofar.

The shofar is not blown when Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat.

The shofar used on Rosh Hashana should be a curved ram's horn, and longer than four inches. It is permitted to use the shofar of an animal not ritually slaughtered. After the fact, any shofar is acceptable except the horn of a cow, ox or an unkosher species of animal.

In the "Amidah" prayer of Musaf, there are three special blessings: *Malchiot* (praises to God the King), *Zichronot* (asking God to remember the merits of our Ancestors), and *Shofrot* (the significance of the shofar). During the chazan's repetition, we blow an additional 30 blasts in the various combinations.

It is the custom to blow 40 extra blasts at the end of services, bringing the total to 100. It is customary to prolong the final blast, which is called a *Tekiah Gedolah*.

OTHER CUSTOMS

It is customary to greet others as follows: "*L'shana Tova -- Ketivah vi-chatima Tova.*" This means: "For a good year -- You should be written and sealed in the good (Book of Life)."

One should try not to sleep or go for idle walks on the day of Rosh Hashana. (The Arizal permits a nap in the afternoon.)

It is advisable to avoid marital relations, except if Rosh Hashana falls on the night of the wife's immersion.

If a Bris Milah falls on Rosh Hashana, it should be performed between the Torah reading and the shofar blowing.

TASHLICH

The "Tashlich" prayer is said on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashana by a pool of water that preferably has fish in it. These prayers are symbolic of the casting away of our mistakes. Of course, it is foolish to think you can rid sins by shaking out your pockets. Rather, the Jewish approach is deep introspection and commitment to change. Indeed, the whole idea of "Tashlich" is partly to commemorate the Midrash that says when Abraham went to the Akeida (binding of Isaac), he had to cross through water up to his neck

If Rosh Hashana falls out on Shabbat, "Tashlich" is pushed off until the second day. If "Tashlich" was not said on Rosh Hashana itself, it may be said anytime during the Ten Days of Repentance.

Both the body of water and the fish are symbolic. In Talmudic literature Torah is represented as water. Just as fish can't live without water, so too a Jew can't live without Torah!

Also, the fact that fish's eyes never close serve to remind us that, so too, God's eyes (so to speak) never close; He knows of our every move.

This is the text of "Tashlich:"

Who is like You, God, who removes iniquity and overlooks transgression of the remainder of His inheritance. He doesn't remain angry forever because He desires kindness. He will return and He will be merciful to us, and He will conquer our iniquities, and He will cast them into the depths of the seas.

Give truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham like that you swore to our ancestors from long ago.

From the straits I called upon God, God answered me with expansiveness. God is with me, I will not be afraid, what can man do to me? God is with me to help me, and I will see my foes (annihilated). It is better to take refuge in God than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in God, that to rely on nobles.

Many people also read Tehillim 33 and 130.

K'Siva V'Hasima Tova,

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