

# ALL ABOUT THE HIGH HOLIDAYS

*by Rabbi Mordechai Katz*

Teshuvah, meaning return to G-d or repentance, is important throughout the year, but it is especially crucial during the period of time from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, known as the "Days of Awe" or "High Holy Days." The first day of the month of Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah, is a day of judgment for all human beings, when all the deeds of the past year are scrutinized and heavenly decisions are made for the year to come. This, then, is a period of introspection, during which people can alter the decrees against them through sincere repentance. As it says in the High Holy Day prayer services, "Repentance, prayer, and charity avert the evil decree."

A month before Rosh Hashanah, at the beginning of Elul, we start blowing the shofar daily in the synagogue (except on Shabbat). Special prayers for forgiveness, known as Selichot, are recited during the last several days of the month of Elul. Then, on the two days of Rosh Hashanah (1 and 2 Tishrei), we spend much of the day in the synagogue, praying that every person will be inscribed in the Book of Life for the coming year.

The literal meaning of "Rosh Hashanah" is "head of the year." According to Jewish teachings, it is the "nerve center" of the year. From it flow the decisions that influence our thoughts and our actions for the twelve months to come.

The shofar (ram's horn) is the central mitzvah of the day. It is blown to proclaim G-d as the Ruler of the Universe and to herald the beginning of the Ten Days of Teshuvah, culminating in Yom Kippur. Just as kings in ancient times had trumpets and horns blown to commemorate their coronation, so too do we honor our King and Creator. The blowing of the shofar also reminds us of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, when the shofar's sound was heard; and it invokes the merit of Abraham's binding of Isaac, when a ram was substituted for Isaac's sacrifice.

Some other customs of Rosh Hashanah include the eating of special foods that are symbolic of our desire and hope for a good year. We dip a piece of apple into honey and recite, "May it be Your will ... to renew for us a good and sweet year." We eat pomegranates with their many seeds to indicate our hope that our merits will be many in G-d's eyes, and we avoid nuts because the Hebrew word for 'nut' has the same numerical value as the word for 'sin.'

We recite a special prayer remembering the mercy of G-d, known as Tashlich, near a body of water containing live fish. If possible, this is done on the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, but it can be done any time during the Days of Awe if one does not have a body of water within walking distance.

Yom Kippur, the last of the Ten Days of Teshuvah, is the holiest day of the year, when the Book of Life is closed. All the restrictions of Shabbat are in effect because of the day's holiness, and in addition we fast and avoid sensual pleasures so that we can concentrate completely on our prayers.

Beginning with the Kol Nidrei service just before sunset, all Jews, young and old, assemble in the synagogue to ask G-d for forgiveness. Yom Kippur means the Day of Atonement, and it is our major opportunity to repent and rectify our misdeeds in the eyes of our Creator.

An important aspect of teshuvah deals with relationships between people. Yom Kippur atones for sins committed against G-d, but sins against people are not forgiven until the sinner has asked for forgiveness from his fellow man. Before Yom Kippur, therefore, we should ask forgiveness from anyone we have wronged. Then we can come to G-d with a humble heart to ask for mercy.

How do we do teshuvah or repentance? A person must do three things:

- (1) acknowledge that one has sinned,
- (2) take one's wrongdoing to heart, truly regretting what one has done; and
- (3) commit oneself to not repeating the misdeed.

This process is very important and powerful. A person who does teshuvah is considered in the eyes of G-d as though he had never sinned. Our Sages tell us, furthermore, "Where those who do teshuvah stand, even the completely righteous cannot stand." People who have done teshuvah have transformed themselves through hard work in a way that the person who has not sinned has never had to do.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (19th century Europe) once went to a shoemaker to have his shoes repaired. The hour was late and darkness had already descended. Noticing that the candle was burning out, the rabbi realized that the shoemaker might have trouble repairing the shoes in the dim light, and suggested that perhaps the work could wait till the next day. "Don't worry, " replied the shoemaker, "I can work very well by candlelight. As long as the candle burns, it is still possible to fix the shoes."

Rabbi Salanter immediately recognized the deep significance of the shoemaker's words. As long as the candle burned, he could repair what was broken. Likewise, as long as the spark of life still flickers in a person, that person can still repair his sinful ways. One should never despair.

In addition, the giving of charity plays an important role. Giving to tzedakah before Yom Kippur helps to make peace between Jews and their Father in heaven. It is a widespread custom for synagogues to collect for charity during the afternoon service on the day before Yom Kippur.

Observing the restrictions of Yom Kippur includes fasting, avoiding washing or anointing the body, avoiding intimacy with one's spouse, and not wearing leather shoes. It is customary to have two full meals on the day before Yom Kippur, and the meal immediately preceding the fast is often like a feast. However, one should avoid foods that will make the fast difficult, such as salty foods, and one should not overindulge to the point that it could affect one's health and stamina for the all-important

prayers.

The overall theme of the High Holy Days is that G-d is King. On Yom Kippur, we begin the congregational morning prayers with the word "HaMelech" (The King). Once, Rabbi Aharon of Karlin was officiating as cantor for his congregation, and when he began the prayers with the word "HaMelech!" he burst into tears.

Later he explained that the word had reminded him of a story in the Talmud:

During the time when the Jews lived in Israel under the dominion of the Romans, the great sage, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, appeared before the Roman general Vespasian to ask for certain privileges for the Jewish populace, addressing Vespasian as "king." Vespasian was still only a general (although he would soon receive the news of his having been made emperor). He said to Rabbi Yochanan, "If you see me as the king, why didn't you come before now?!"

Concluding his story, Rabbi Aharon explained, "Today, when I called out the word 'King,' I saw myself being asked in heaven, 'Why didn't you come before now? If you know I am the Ruler of the universe, why did you wait so long to repent?!'"

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