

Selected Minhagim of Rosh Hashana

Rabbi Avrohom Gordimer

Rabbinic Coordinator, Orthodox Union

Rosh Hashanah, like all yomim tovim, is packed with unique halachos and minhagim. The busy pre-Yom tov season and active observance of the yom tov days themselves often prevent us from reviewing the laws and customs of each yom tov upon its approach. The Gemara (Pesachim 6a) states: “We are required to delve into and expound upon the halachos of Pesach 30 days prior to the festival.” This rule is derived from the example of Moshe Rabbeinu, who taught the laws of Pesach Sheini to B’nei Yisrael 30 days prior to the occasion of Pesach Sheini.³⁸ Before every yom tov, one must study its laws in order to gain an understanding of the approaching holiday and be capable of observing it to the fullest.

The need to prepare ourselves intellectually (and emotionally) in advance of upcoming festivals is thus not just a good idea; it is, rather, part of our religious tradition and the fulfillment of an important Torah axiom. This presentation will address some of the significant customs of Rosh Hashanah. The intent of this article is to promote greater understanding of the topics to be discussed, and this article is not meant to be used as a guide to practical halacha.

Simanim at the Rosh Hashanah Seudah

Abaye said: Now that you say that certain omens are of significance, one should accustom himself on Rosh Hashana to eat gourds, fenugreek, leeks, beets, and dates.

Horayos 12a

אמר אביי, השתא דאמרת: סימנא מילתא היא, [לעולם] יהא רגיל למיחזי בריש שתא קרא ורוביא, כרתי וסילקא ותמרי.
מסכת הוריות דף יב.

When eating fenugreek one should say “May it be Thy will that our merits should increase”. Leeks, “that our enemies be cut down”; Beets, “our enemies be removed”; Dates, “our enemies be stopped”; Gourds, “our judgment be torn up and our merits be called out before You”.

Shulchan Aruch O”C 583:1

כשיאכל רוביא יאמר: יה"ר שירבו זכותינו; כרתי, יכרתו שונאי ה'; סלקא, יסתלקו אויבינו; תמרי, יתמו שונאי ה'; קרא, יקרע גזר דיננו ויקראו לפניך זכותינו.
שולחן ערוך אורח חיים תקפג:א

³⁸ The Shulchan Aruch codifies the requirement to delve into and expound upon the halachos of Pesach 30 days in advance of the holiday (Orach Chaim 429:1), whereupon the Mishnah Berurah (ibid. s.k. 1) comments in the name of a host of rabbinic authorities that this dictum applies to all yomim tovim.

The Hebrew and Aramaic names of these foods can be understood to symbolize good omens. For example, the word “karsei” - leeks - has the same basic spelling as the Hebrew root “karas” - to cut down. Thus, leeks can be taken to signify a New Year wish and prayer that the oppressors of the Jewish People should be cut down. So, too, is the case with fenugreek - “rubya” in Aramaic - whose basic spelling is akin to that of the Hebrew root “rav” (to multiply); fenugreek is taken to signify that “our merits should multiply”.

Other foods which are not specified by Abaye in the Gemara are also eaten, due to their names having similarities with the blessings we seek as we enter the New Year. One such example is the pomegranate, which has hundreds of seeds (actually 613 of them), upon which we recite, “May it be God’s will that our merits be many like the pomegranate.” It is also customary to dip an apple in honey and to pray for a good, sweet year.³⁹

Most of the special foods which have symbolism are fruits and vegetables which one would normally not consume as independent servings during a meal. For this reason, the berachah of Ha-Motzi which is recited at the beginning of the meal does not cover these foods - for the rule is that only foods which are normally consumed as part of the regular course of the meal are included in Ha-Motzi. Other foods require the recitation of a separate berachah before eating them, and the leeks, gourds, pomegranates, dates and so forth of which one specially partakes on Rosh Hashanah night are no different. Unless one eats these foods with bread - which serves per force to include them as meal foods - he must first recite the appropriate berachah.⁴⁰ In the case of foods which necessitate the recitation of a berachah, it is proper to first recite the berachah, then immediately eat some of the food without interruption, and then to recite the special Yehi ratzon prayer.⁴¹ Some have a custom not to consume nuts on Rosh Hashanah, as the gematria (mathematical equivalent of the letters of the) Hebrew word “egoz” (nut, or hazelnut in particular) is similar to the gematria of the word “chet” - sin.⁴²

Judaism is a system of actions and beliefs which demonstrate fidelity to Hashem and His Torah. Why on Rosh Hashanah night is the symbolism of foods important? Isn’t it foreign to the authentic mandate of our faith?

The answer is that Rosh Hashanah - when God begins His judgment of us and His world - is a time when we declare God’s kingship and total mastery over the universe and we also appeal to God for compassion. During the Torah reading, we recount the miracles wrought by Hashem for His people and His world. The notion that God can manipulate the universe, its forces and features, as

³⁹ Rema 583:1

⁴⁰ See Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 177:1.

⁴¹ Mishnah Berurah ibid. s.k. 4

⁴² Rema 583:2. There is a famous comment of the Kotzker Rebbe about this concept and the idea of symbolism in general. The Kotzker said: “The gematria of “chet” is also “chet.” The Rebbe intended to caution people not overemphasize the symbolic aspects of Rosh Hashanah and neglect the day’s core values and message of pouring one’s heart out to God and placing our trust in His mercy. To place primary focus on the symbolic parts of Rosh Hashanah to the exclusion of the day’s deep message and primary observances reflects a failure to grasp and internalize real meaning and purpose of Rosh Hashanah.

its Supreme King, is reflected by the seemingly minor customs of the simanim of Rosh Hashanah night. We take foods with benign, seemingly unimportant names which in actuality do not relate to the good wishes for which we pray as we recite each *Yehi ratzon*; however, by beseeching our King to grant us the blessings associated with a manipulation and heretofore totally unapparent interpretation of the name of each food, we recognize His ability to manipulate private and global affairs and forces, transforming and redefining our lives and fortunes in profound and unexpected ways. The simanim of Rosh Hashanah night are a miniature venue for us to express our commitment to God and our confidence in His true judgment as our Supreme King.

Sleeping on Rosh Hashanah Day

There are those that have the custom (based on the Talmud Yerushalmi) to not sleep during the day of Rosh Hashana, and this is a proper custom.

Rema O”C 583:2

וגם נוהגים שלא לישן ביום ראש השנה (ירושלמי), ומנהג נכון הוא.

רמ"א אורח חיים תקפג:ב

As it says in the [Talmud] Yerushalmi, one who sleeps on Rosh Hashana will have inauspicious fortune [lit. his fortune will sleep].

Taz O”C 583:3

דאיתא בירושלמי מאן דדמיך בריש שתא דמיך מזלי:

ט"ז אורח חיים תקפג:ג

There are individuals who – in their attempt to fulfill the words of this Yerushalmi (which is actually not found in our editions of the Yerushalmi) – are careful to arise on Rosh Hashanah morning by sunrise.⁴³ While it is certainly commendable to arise early on the Day of Judgment (and engage in Torah study or *Tehillim*), the practice of being careful to arise specifically by sunrise may not be consistent with the thrust of the Yerushalmi’s advice.

First, from a halachic standpoint, the day for general purposes begins at *Alos Ha-Shachar* (daybreak, when the sky begins to become light). *Alos Ha-Shachar* in New York City during September is between 4:55-5:30 AM, depending on the English date of Rosh Hashanah. As Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik explained, “*Haneitz Ha-Chamah*” (sunrise) is the halachic commencement of the day only as it pertains to a select group of specific mitzvos which are bound by chronological *shiurim* (halachic measurements) within the daily time-frame (such as *K’rias Sh’ma* and *korbanos* - sacrifices), but the general day itself begins at *Alos Ha-Shachar*.⁴⁴ Therefore, those who interpret the Yerushalmi as advocating abstinence from sleep once it is day must really arise by *Alos Ha-Shachar*, which is much earlier than sunrise.

More fundamental, though, is the true thrust of the Yerushalmi’s statement. The daytime hours of Rosh Hashanah are a period of judgment. The Yerushalmi, taken at face value, means that one should not use the day for sleeping, as it is inappropriate to sleep while one is being judged On High; sleeping on Rosh Hashanah day reflects a nonchalant and perhaps insensitive and

⁴³ There is no established minhag to remain awake all night on Rosh Hashanah; the Yerushalmi’s words refer to sleeping on Rosh Hashanah only during the day.

⁴⁴ *Shiurim L’Zecher Abba Mari* v. 1 p. 110-112.

uncaring attitude about the magnitude, solemnity and import of the day, and it will result in an unfavorable judgment. It is very comparable to the first Shavuot, when the Midrash relates that our ancestors overslept and were late for Mattan Torah – the Giving of the Torah. To oversleep and arrive late at such an event is highly inappropriate, and the same message rings clear with regard to Rosh Hashanah.

This being the case, one should certainly use every free minute of Rosh Hashanah for spiritual purposes - at least during the daytime morning hours, when God judges the world and every individual - and not use that time for sleep or frivolous activity.⁴⁵ The intent of the Yerushalmi is that one not exhibit disregard for the Rosh Hashanah judgment by sleeping; it does not mandate that one arise specifically before daybreak (or sunrise!), but it means that one should not opt to nap or “sleep in” when he would otherwise be involved in Torah and tefillah. Arising at a normal time and then using one’s time properly does not contradict the sentiments and message of the Yerushalmi.

In fact - and apparently in support of this thesis - the holy Ari (the master kabbalist, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria) opined that one may sleep on Rosh Hashanah afternoon, as God’s mercy has by then been aroused.⁴⁶ The Ari’s objection to morning sleep was because that is the time of Din. We thus see that sleep is objectionable because it shows a nonchalant stance or a neglect of the seriousness of the Din, not because it is banned or inadvisable per se. The Chayei Adam 139:11 advises that one should study Torah on Rosh Hashanah afternoon and that one may nap a bit then if truly necessary. In addition, the Mishnah Berurah cautions that wasting time on Rosh Hashanah by sitting around and doing nothing is the equivalent of spending one’s time on Rosh Hashanah sleeping.

Torah Reading of Rosh Hashanah

The Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is taken from chapter 21 of Sefer Bereshit, which briefly details the birth, naming, and weaning of Yitzchak, and then devotes much narrative to the eviction and tribulations of Hagar and Yishmael, and the dispute between Avraham and Avimelech regarding ownership of wells and the subsequent pact into which they entered.

The Haftarah of the first day of Rosh Hashanah consists of the story of the barren Chanah, her prayers for a child, and the joy which she expressed upon giving birth to the child (Shmuel) for whom she had prayed for so many years.

The Torah reading and Haftarah of the first day of Rosh Hashanah raise a big question. That is, how are the overall themes of these texts essential to Rosh Hashanah? While it is true that both stories speak of barren women whose prayers were answered in the affirmative (and we, too, seek such response to our own tefillos on Rosh Hashanah), the bulk of the Torah reading presents us with events (Yishmael, Avimelech) which seem unrelated to this theme. Similarly, there are many other miracles recorded in Tanach in which individuals’ prayers were answered with an overwhelming display of divine mercy. Why, then, are the story of Yitzchak’s birth, alongside the

⁴⁵ See Aruch Ha-Shulchan Orach Chaim 583:4 and Mishnah Berurah *ibid*.

⁴⁶ Mishnah Berurah 583:9.

events of Yishmael and Avimelech, as well as the actions of Chana and the birth of Shmuel, especially appropriate to the theme of Rosh Hashanah?

If we take a step back and look at the developments in Bereshis beginning with Yitzchak's birth, we can detect a sublime theme. The name Yitzchak - as is clear in many passages which relate to his birth - is due to the tz'chok - the laughter - which was precipitated by his birth. Laughter represents that which is unreal, which does not coincide with the world as we know it. Whether laughter is a response to extreme simcha⁴⁷ or an expression of disbelief, it connotes that which is beyond reality. Yitzchak's name, moreover, indicates that his persona was other-worldly, and as we know from the Midrash, quoted by Rashi, which describes Rivka's reaction to her first sighting of Yitzchak, he had an angelic, holy aura about him.

In light of the above, we can better understand the import of God granting Yitzchak to Avraham and Sarah as it pertains to Rosh Hashanah. A significant portion of our prayers to evoke God's mercy is in the framework of His remembering the uniqueness of B'nei Yisrael. This uniqueness is based on our spiritual qualities, and such qualities have enabled us to reach heights otherwise reserved for celestial beings. We thus ask God to refrain from judging us according to natural law and strict mishpat (justice), as this system is suited for those whose existence is earthly and relates to the material, mundane, and natural order of the world. We ask that those who are rooted in holiness and are really not based in the here-and-now world not be judged by its strictures. Rather, the supernatural qualities of B'nei Yisrael warrant God's middah (attribute) of Rachamim (compassion), as our inner potential and other-worldly qualities associate us with God in a much tighter bond, such that we are like His personal servants or emissaries, and we thus seek to be judged as such, reflective of our internally holy and elevated characteristics.

The other-worldly qualities of B'nei Yisrael - as epitomized by Yitzchak and the miracles of his birth - are then contrasted in the Torah reading against Yishmael's and Hagar's performances, as critiqued by the commentators. Hagar's actions when Yishmael was sick were based on self-interest, while Yishmael's behavior represented the lowest, most base side of Man. The Torah then further displays the other-worldly characteristic of B'nei Yisrael when it depicts Avraham Avinu's interaction with Avimelech. In that event, Avimelech approached Avraham because "he saw that God is with him," to paraphrase the passuk, which attests to the divine association of B'nei Yisrael. Furthermore, Avraham used the event of his covenant with Avimelech to praise God (establishing an "eshel"), such that the mundane, earthly qualities of the story's well were associated with an elevation of the mundane to the holy. This upward, heavenly thrust to bring all to God's service represents the role of B'nei Yisrael in the world. So, too, is it with the story of Chana. She clung to God and then dedicated her son to His service, and this association further reflects the other-worldly qualities of B'nei Yisrael which we pray will endow us with favorable judgment on Rosh Hashanah.

However, we may never be haughty. We must always bear in mind that our unique persona and mission are divinely gifted to us, and any self-aggrandizement on our part is an utter, severe distortion of our purpose and is thus a chillul Hashem (desecration of God's name).

⁴⁷ See Rashi based on the Midrash regarding the many joyous events which transpired on Yitzchak's birthday.

Akeidas Yitzchak – the episode in which God commanded Avraham to bring his son Yitzchak as a korban – is read in full as the Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. The Akeidah, as this narrative is commonly called, occurred on Rosh Hashanah, and its theme reverberates through the mitzvos of Rosh Hashanah and permeates the day’s liturgy. The shofar - a ram’s horn - invokes memory of the Akeidah, and the beracha of Shofaros which is recited during the Rosh Hashanah Mussaf prayer, concludes, “and akeidas Yitzchak, for (the merit of) his descendants, may You remember today in compassion. Blessed are you, God, Who remembers the Covenant.” The Akeidah is likewise a very prominent theme in many of the Selichos and other tefillos of the Yamim Nora’im (Days of Awe).

Why does the Akeidah play such a central role in Rosh Hashanah? There are so many other examples in which our ancestors put their lives on the line to show their belief and commitment to God (such as Nachshon at the Yam Suf, the Sea of Reeds, as well as over a dozen other personalities mentioned in the daily “Mi She’anah” section of Selichos). Why is it that the Akeidah is used as the prototype of such faith-based courage and its reward on Rosh Hashanah?

It should be noted that the Akeidah can be divided into two distinct parts. The first section ends when Avraham Avinu follows God’s command and is about to sacrifice Yitzchak, at which point an angel tells Avraham that he should not do so and that he has proven his devotion to God. The second part of the story displays Avraham’s persistence, in which he sees a ram in the thicket and insists on serving God with a korban - even though Avraham has already passed the test at hand.

The eternal promises and blessings which conclude the Akeidah are only granted after Avraham brings the korban. This seems to indicate that this latter act - under the circumstances - demonstrated an even higher level of service of God than the fulfillment of the initial Akeidah command. When Avraham offered the ram even after he had fulfilled his mission of the Akeidah, his act was one of love for God. Service of God out of love - which is on a higher plane than service out of fear - was the pinnacle of the Akeidah process. Avraham could have left Har Hamoriah after he passed the test and was told to hold back the knife. However, out of love of God, he insisted on bringing a sacrifice to show his devotion.

It is with this in mind that we enter Rosh Hashanah. For, as we mention daily in Selichos, we cannot expect to be vindicated in God’s judgment on our merits. Any act of transgression - and certainly many such acts - is incongruous with our prayers for blessings of goodness and sweetness for the New Year. Such requests simply defy logic and proper judgment; if we have sinned, how can we expect rewards? However, we are taught that one thing supersedes the onus of judgment - the love relationship between God and His people. We thus ask God to recall that this higher plane of our relationship, the bond of love, should override the logic of inescapable judgment, so that we should be blessed to serve God with a renewed commitment each year. We call to God in prayer for His mercy and benevolence with the shofar of the Akeidah, as we invoke the merit of the Avraham’s (and our) love of God, which can override the strict judgment which we would otherwise deserve.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ This concept would seem to explain the phrase in the chazzan’s Shemoneh Esrei of Rosh Hashanah, “Od yizkor lanu ahavas Eisan - May He remember for us the love of Avraham” (Midrashically referred to as ‘Eisan’).

Tashlich

The Tashlich service has become a very popular Rosh Hashanah afternoon custom. However, recitation of Tashlich is not found in early halachic sources, and the Chayei Adam omits mention of it altogether. It is for this reason that many people do not recite Tashlich.

Darchei Moshe (ibid. s.k. 2) quotes the Maharil (in Hilchos Rosh Hashanah 9 p. 277) that Tashlich is modeled as a commemoration of Avraham's travel through deep waters on his way to perform the Akeidah, where he prayed, "Help, O God, for water has engulfed me to the point of death." (Tehillim 69:2 - from Yalkut, Vayera 99) We invoke Avraham's courageous performance of the Akeidah and the salvation that Hashem granted Avraham, as we beseech Hashem to remember the merit of our ancestors and to answer our tefillah as He did Avraham's.

In contradistinction, the Rema in Shulchan Aruch (ibid.) quotes the more well-known source for Tashlich: "And may You cast ("tashlich") all of our iniquities into the depths of the sea." (Michah 7:19) This passuk, which is found in Michah in the context of Teshuva (repentance), portrays the vivid imagery of God cleansing the repentant sinner by tossing away his sins to the distant recesses of the waters. Our recitation of Tashlich adjacent to a body of water is akin to a live portrayal of this beautiful and stirring narrative, beseeching Hashem to recall the words of Michah His prophet and to fulfill them.

Although there are various customs, the primary pessukim included in the Tashlich service are Michah 7:18-20, Tehillim 118:5, Yeshaya 11:9, Tehillim 130 and 119:89. These verses depict the one reciting Tashlich in a state of spiritual despair, compelled to call out to God from the depths and asking Him to be aroused toward forgiveness, invoking God's promises to accept Teshuva and proclaiming God as the living and eternal King. The themes of Tashlich combine the motifs and liturgical expressions of the Aseres Y'mei Teshuva (Ten Days of Repentance) and Yom Kippur, serving as a transition from the theme of Hashem's Malchus (Kingship) of Rosh Hashanah - when expiation from sin is absent from our tefillos - to that of His drawing close to us as we cry out from the depths, as He seeks our sincere and heartfelt Teshuva (as highlighted during the Aseres Y'mei Teshuva and culminating on Yom Kippur).

One must keep in mind that Tashlich is a minhag which is not binding, and that there are no requirements to it. If one cannot recite Tashlich or must skip sections, there is absolutely no reason to feel bad or to think that he or she has failed to properly observe Rosh Hashanah.

It is customary to recite Tashlich after Mincha on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. If that day is also Shabbos, Tashlich is normally delayed until the following day (as people cannot carry Machzorim or Siddurim on Shabbos to use for Tashlich, unless there is an eruv that encompasses the area⁴⁹). According to custom, Tashlich may be recited until Hoshanah Rabbah - the final day of Sukkos - which marks the completion of the period of judgment commenced at Rosh Hashanah.

⁴⁹ Mishnah Berurah ibid.