



Halachah Guide: Elul and Rosh Hashanah

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Elul

Teshuvah – The major work of the month of Elul is to examine our lifestyles and actions in a process known as *cheshbon hanefesh*, a spiritual accounting of our relationship with Hashem as well as with other people. We practice teshuvah, acknowledging our mistakes, expressing regret, repairing the harm done, and committing to improve in the future.

Sins involving harming other people require that we apologize to them and gain their forgiveness. However, we are required to avoid harming our victims with our apology. Therefore, one who genuinely believes that describing the sin would upset the victim should only apologize in general terms, without explaining the sin in detail.

Selichot – Beginning on a Motzaei Shabbat at least four days before Rosh Hashanah, we recite special Selichot prayers apologizing for our wrongdoings and appealing to Hashem for mercy. Ideally, we should say these Selichot after halachic midnight – approximately 12:50 AM this Elul – and before sunrise. We stand for *Kel Melech*, the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy, and the *Ashamnu* paragraph. One who cannot say Selichot before sunrise may recite them all through the following day, but should alter any wording which claims to be reciting Selichot “at night.”

One who prays alone should omit the Aramaic portions. Also, an individual is not eligible to recite the portions of Selichot which list the 13 attributes of Divine mercy (Shemot 34:6-7), but many authorities rule that an individual may recite them with the notes of the *trop*, as though reading a verse from the Torah rather than a prayer.

Hatarat Nedarim – In the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah we customarily annul any vows we have made, with the practice of *Hatarat Nedarim*. *Hatarat Nedarim* may be done at night.

The judges must be adult males who observe mitzvot. Normally judges for *Hatarat Nedarim* should be well-versed in the laws of repealing vows, but for the ritual *Hatarat Nedarim* before Rosh Hashanah, and certainly where one does not recall making any particular vow, the popular practice is to accept judges who merely understand the basic concepts of *Hatarat Nedarim*. At least, the judges must understand that the person before them wishes to repeal a vow, out of regret for having made the vow at all. The judges may be related to the person performing *Hatarat Nedarim*, but may not be married to that person. Some contend that the judges may not be related to each other. The judges should be seated, while the person reciting *Hatarat Nedarim* stands.

The person reciting *Hatarat Nedarim* must understand the words; saying the text in English is fine. To repeal a specific vow, one must specify to at least one of the judges what the vow was. Some add that one must also explain the reason for the vow. Normally, one may not act as an agent to do *Hatarat Nedarim* for others. However, married women may assign their husbands to perform *Hatarat Nedarim* for them; other women do *Hatarat Nedarim* themselves, and some just rely on Kol Nidrei.

Mikvah for Men – Many men use the mikvah on Erev Rosh Hashanah, as part of personal purification and elevation. Ideally, this is done after the fifth halachic hour of the day, or 11:47 AM this year.

Fasting Erev Rosh Hashanah – In Talmudic times, certain great rabbis and communal leaders fasted on erev Rosh Hashanah, for atonement. During the late Middle Ages, fasting on erev Rosh Hashanah became widespread in Ashkenazi communities, and then in Sephardic communities as well. The fast is mentioned as a popular practice in Shulchan Aruch. However, we avoid fasting all day lest we diminish the festive aspect of Rosh Hashanah. To address this, many Jews end the fast after midday (12:49 PM this year), or after the earliest time for minchah (1:20 PM). Some specifically daven minchah before breaking the fast. One should follow their family’s minhag.

Rosh Hashanah

Candle lighting – When Rosh Hashanah is Shabbat, the berachah on the candles includes both Shabbat and Yom Tov. We add the berachah of Shehechyanu when lighting candles on each night of Rosh Hashanah. One who says this berachah at candle lighting should not respond *amen* to Shehechyanu during Kiddush.

Greetings – On Rosh Hashanah night we customarily greet others with some version of *L'shanah tovah tikatev v'teichateim l'alter l'chayim tovim ul'shalom*, wishing that they should be inscribed and sealed immediately for a good and peaceful life.

Changes in shemoneh esreih – Beginning on the night of Rosh Hashanah and continuing through Yom Kippur, we make certain changes in the shemoneh esreih; all of these are labeled in siddurim and machzorim. However, one who misses the changes need not repeat the shemoneh esreih, other than the change at the end of the third berachah of shemoneh esreih, saying *HaMelech HaKadosh*. One who misses that change must repeat shemoneh esreih.

Pat yisroel – It is customary to be careful to eat baked goods baked by Jews throughout the period from Rosh Hashanah until Erev Yom Kippur.

Simanim – It is customary to eat foods that convey positive messages on the first night of Rosh Hashanah; these are called *simanim*. Some eat them on the second night as well. *Simanim* which grow on trees require a special *borei pri ha'eitz* unless eaten with bread; some also recite *borei pri ha'adamah* on *simanim*, but that is subject to dispute. Customs vary regarding which *simanim* to eat, whether to eat them before or after *hamotzi*, and when to say the *yehi ratzon* prayer. Some people also avoid particular foods which have negative connotations, or which might cause reactions which end up interfering with one's davening the next day. One should follow the custom of one's family.

Shofar – We blow shofar on Rosh Hashanah, unless it is Shabbat. (Since the shofar is not used on Shabbat, it is actually muktzeh.) First, the person blowing the shofar recites the berachah on the mitzvah and Shehechyanu, having everyone in mind. Everyone else must hear every word of the berachah, have in mind to fulfill the mitzvah, and answer *amen*. (One does not say *baruch hu uvaruch shemo*.)

We blow thirty shofar blasts before Musaf, thirty more shofar blasts during Musaf, and forty more after Musaf. One may not speak from the berachah until the end of the shofar blasts; it is especially important to avoid any communication between the berachah and the first shofar blast. We do not recite the special, Kabbalistic prayers inserted in some machzorim among the first thirty shofar blasts.

One who is davening alone should not daven Musaf before the end of the third hour of the day; this is 9:42 AM this Rosh Hashanah. The Talmud states that the Divine judgment in the early morning is too harsh for individuals, and is only manageable for a community. However, some permit davening earlier if a local minyan is also davening at that time; the person davening privately is viewed as part of that minyan. Either way, one who is davening alone should not hear shofar during their shemoneh esreih, even if blown in time with the Musaf shemoneh esreih. One who needs to hear the shofar blown privately should be the one to recite the berachah, if the person blowing shofar has already fulfilled the mitzvah. If the listener is a woman, then it is a requirement that she recite the berachah herself.

Tashlich – We customarily recite special Tashlich prayers near water on Rosh Hashanah, based on a passage from the prophet Michah and multiple key biblical moments which occurred near water. We do not throw bread in the water on Rosh Hashanah, due to halachic concerns regarding feeding wildlife on Yom Tov. We do not recite Tashlich on Shabbat. One may recite Tashlich until Hoshana Rabbah, but ideally one should do it before Yom Kippur.

Seudah shlishit – As a general rule, we do not begin a large meal on erev Yom Tov during the last quarter of the day, to ensure that we will be hungry for the Yom Tov meal that night. This even applies on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, since it is erev Yom Tov of the second day. This year, when the first day of Rosh Hashanah is Shabbat, one should endeavor to begin seudah shlishit before 3:55 PM.

The second night – One may not prepare for the second night of Yom Tov, including lighting candles and setting the table, until at least 45 minutes after sunset. (This is particularly important this year, when the first day of Rosh Hashanah is Shabbat.) The candles are lit from an existing flame.

When the first day of Rosh Hashanah is Shabbat, we recite a form of Havdalah in Maariv before preparing for the second day. One who does not daven Maariv should say *Baruch Hamavdil bein kodesh l'kodesh*, "Blessed be the One who distinguishes between different sanctities." Kiddush includes a Havdalah paragraph, and a berachah on a flame. We don't light a special Havdalah candle; instead, most people use the light of the Yom Tov candles. Some people join two of their Yom Tov candles to create a multi-wicked flame for Havdalah, but this may create halachic problems. Therefore, most people leave the candles as they are, and simply recite the berachah beside them and make use of their light that way. One should follow one's family custom.

New fruit – The second day of Rosh Hashanah is considered an extension of the first day in certain ways. Since it is not a fully independent holiday, the berachah of Shehechyanu may not be appropriate. Therefore, we customarily provide an additional reason for reciting Shehechyanu, such as by having a new fruit present, or wearing new clothing. Normally, Shehechyanu should be recited for a fruit only if there are seasonal periods when it is unavailable. However, for the sake of the Shehechyanu on Rosh Hashanah one may use any fruit one hasn't eaten in a year. And in truth, one who has neither new clothing nor a new fruit should still recite Shehechyanu.

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