

# A Guide to Holiday Services

---

*By Rabbi Michael Werbow*

“Hayom Harat Olam” (“Today is the birthday of the world”). We make this declaration every year on Rosh Hashanah, recognizing the First of Tishrei as the day when God began the work of Creation. This is the time of year when the world and man’s relationship to it – and to God – came to be. Many comparisons can be made between the birthday of the world and our own birthdays. On our birthdays, we celebrate (or lament) being another year older, but we also take stock of our lives. We pay homage to those who gave us life and assess the relationships we have with those around us. Perhaps we even make vows: we’ll spend more time with our kids, less time with our bosses. On Rosh Hashanah we do the same things, but the relationship we focus on is our relationship with God, the Source of all life.

Rosh Hashanah occurs at an especially auspicious time of year for addressing and improving our relationship with God. It falls in the midst of the forty day period which begins on the first of Elul and extends until Yom Kippur. In the Torah, these days correspond to the forty days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai receiving the second set of tablets<sup>1</sup>, tablets given to replace the set Moses had shattered in the incident with the Golden Calf. The gift of these tablets is a sign of God’s forgiveness of the Israelites. It represents a kinder, softer face of God than that seen in other instances such as the Flood of Noah or Sodom and Gemorah, when God, as Judge takes humanity to task for their transgressions. But the face of God that we see in the gifting of the second set of tablets is a face which reflects God’s desire to be in relationship with humanity. Tradition expresses this relationship through the statement “Ani L’dodi V’dodi Li” (“I am my beloved and me beloved is mine”),<sup>2</sup> which as an acronym spells E-L-U-L, an illustration of the linkage between God’s desire to be in a loving relationship with us in this season.

In fact, God’s desire to forge a relationship with humanity is evident already in the story of the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, God tells Adam that he will have to toil to farm the land; indeed, that all subsequent generations will have to struggle to produce what they need to survive. By contrast, the snake is told that henceforth it will crawl on its belly and eat dust; sustenance will always be there for the snake with no effort needed to procure it. Why the discrepancy? Is this God’s way of emphasizing the severity of Adam’s punishment? On the contrary, God’s contrasting decrees are illustrative of God’s different relationship with these two elements of Creation. Human beings who lack the things they need will call out to God, thus strengthening their relationship with their Creator. When their prayers are answered they will praise God, adding another point of connection. These occasions for

---

1 Rashi, Exodus 33:11

2 Song of Songs 6:3

closeness are absent from the snake's existence because God had no desire to form such an intimate relationship with the snake.

But, close relationships take work and during the period from the start of Elul through Yom Kippur we engage in the work needed to realign our behavior, so we can be better partners with God in the work of perfecting the world. We reflect on our actions, deeds and misdeeds in order to refine ourselves. The first step in this process is known as cheshbon ha'nefesh, which literally means "an accounting of the soul." Have we been reaching out to communicate with God? Do we harbor anger towards God for something that happened this year? Do we feel that God has let us down? How does God view us? Have we held up our end of the relationship? At what times in the year gone by have we let God down? Through the process of cheshbon ha'nefesh we uncover the places in which our relationship with God is lacking, and having done so must move to address these shortcomings. This is the process known as teshuvah.

What is teshuvah? Teshuvah is typically translated as "repentance" but it means much more. A more literal translation would be a "turning" or "reorientation". During this season we work on reorienting ourselves. Throughout the year we have had choices to make and actions to take, and we realize that we have not always taken the path that leads us to living in a Divine fashion. So we need to take time to re-assess, to chart a better course and get back on our journey. A number of years back, while working at a summer camp, I observed an example of teshuvah first-hand. A 1st year counselor was kicked out of camp because of drug use. A couple years later this counselor, after some serious conversations with the camp administration, was allowed back to work at camp. When I shared this story with a friend from a different camp, I was informed that under no circumstances would their camp have let this counselor back on staff. What a shame! Not allowing the counselor a chance to grow, to change and to heal the wounds he had caused would have denied him the opportunity for teshuvah.

Lest we fear that God will deny us the opportunity to make amends in our relationship with God, our tradition assures us that God seeks the return of those who err, rather than to destroy them. The Baal Shem Tov illustrated God's particular receptivity to our advances during this season of repentance in a parable. He said that during Elul, God is like a king who has left his palace and gone out to connect with his people, wandering through his kingdom so that the people have greater access to him. In the same way, Elul is a time for us to reach out to God. God is waiting for us to take this time to improve our relationship.

## **Teshuvah**

The process of teshuvah is not an isolated act, but rather a process. Rambam, the 12th century philosopher and scholar, laid out a system by which teshuvah should be carried out.<sup>3</sup> He said that first you must recognize that you have made a mistake. Next, you must experience remorse. Then, once you have admitted the wrongdoing to yourself, you must ask forgiveness from the person you have wronged or hurt.

---

3 *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:2*

Our process of doing teshuvah at this time of year is similar, although in fact it is a double teshuvah process with Rosh Hashanah marking a pivot point between its two components. During the month of Elul, we reflect on our behavior during the year and reach out to friends to ask for forgiveness from them, for our tradition teaches that mistakes that we have made in our dealings with other human beings must be addressed with them before we approach God for forgiveness. On Rosh Hashanah, the first day after the conclusion of Elul, we start the Aseret Yamei Teshuvah (the Ten Days of Repentance or Return). We wrap-up our task of mending fences with our fellow human beings and begin our teshuvah process with God directly.

Given the fact that Rosh Hashanah comes in the middle, rather than at the end of the period of repentance, it is somewhat ironic that Yom Kippur is seen as the more solemn of the days. In reality Rosh Hashanah should be viewed with more trepidation. By Yom Kippur our judgment has been rendered and we can celebrate being given a clean slate, but at Rosh Hashanah our fate is still unknown. We are entering God's court not knowing what our fate will be. Reflecting this drama is an alternative name for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Ha'din ("the Day of Judgment").

There is one last general point to be made about teshuvah before moving on to a discussion of the particularities of Rosh Hashanah's observance. Teshuvah requires that we work to do better the next time. The ultimate indicator of whether we have been successful in our teshuvah is whether, when we find ourselves in a similar situation again, we make the same mistakes or take a better tact.

## **Rituals Of Rosh Hashanah**

The only ritual which the Torah mentions in connection with Rosh Hashanah is the sounding of the shofar.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the holiday is referred to in the Torah as Zich'ron T'ruah, a day of remembrance with loud shofar blasts<sup>5</sup>. Despite our strong association of the ritual with Rosh Hashanah itself, the shofar is actually blown every morning throughout the month of Elul to usher us into the spirit of teshuvah.

The experience of hearing the shofar sounded – and the mitzvah associated with shofar is "lishmo'ah kol shofar," hearing the shofar's voice rather than blowing it ourselves is paradoxical. The shofar's cry is a loud resounding blast that is heard in the deepest recesses of our souls, but as we experience the shofar being blown what we are listening for is the still, small voice of God. This contrast is described in the Un'taneh Tokef prayer in which we invoke the imagery of Elijah's encounter with God.<sup>6</sup> We state, "The Great Shofar will be sounded and the still, small voice will be heard".

The shofar blasts are performed in a particular manner. There are three different notes: tekiyah (one long blast), shevarim (three shorter notes), and teruah (nine staccato notes). The sounds of the shofar are meant to elicit varying emotional responses. The tekiyah, the most iconic of the

---

4 Note, when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, the shofar is not sounded (Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 29b).

5 Leviticus 23:24

6 1 Kings 19:11-13

shofar's cries, is like a trumpet blast or alarm clock. It is meant to jolt us out of our routines, our inappropriate actions, and our complacency. Rambam, in his Laws of Teshuvah, identifies this as the shofar's key role: rousing those who have transgressed from their slumber and encouraging them to repent<sup>7</sup>. The teruah evokes a mournful wailing. It elicits feelings of grief or sorrow. We are in grief over potentials that we did not fulfill in the past year and express sorrow over the pain that we have caused others. Finally, the shevarim emulates the quick gasps of sobbing. Its cries express the sadness we experience day-by-day as we work through life's minor bumps and scrapes. When we cry, we aid the healing process, and in the same way the shevarim blasts help us heal our accumulated wounds.

The customary pattern of sounding the shofar is such that over the course of Rosh Hashanah day we will have heard 100 blasts of the shofar. Rabbi David Leiber, of blessed memory, when teaching Psalms would regularly refer to incidents of words or themes that occurred ten times. Ten, he said, was in Judaism the number of wholeness. Thus the 100 shofar blasts, ten times ten, inspires us to a whole teshuvah.

While the shofar's blasts are meant to prepare us emotionally for the work of teshuvah, it is the liturgy that is instrumental in directing our thoughts during the day. Each holiday, whose observance comes from the Torah, has an additional service called Musaf. The Musaf service correlates to the Musaf, or additional, sacrifice that was brought to the Temple on those days. The Musaf service on most holidays consists of an additional amidah which includes mention of the special sacrifices that were brought to the Temple on that day. The Rosh Hashanah Musaf amidah is similar, but it contains three other sections as well. They are: Malchuyot ("God's Sovereignty"), Zichronot (Remembrances) and Shofarot ("Shofar blasts"). In each section we read ten verses (that number again!): three from Torah, three from Psalms and three from Prophets, followed up by one more verse from the Torah. Each verse speaks to the theme of that particular section.

The character of each section of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy is different. The Malchuyot liturgy focuses on God's sovereignty. We know that we don't view God in the same way that we view an earthly king. We call God "Melech Malchei Hamlachim" ("King, the King of kings"). There will always be kings but none will reign eternally as God does. They will all come and go but God will reign forever. Additionally, we glorify God as a king who deals with his subjects with compassion and who wants to strengthen a relationship with us, not sit on a throne aloof from us.

The Zichronot section is composed of texts asking God to remember us and take note of us. In the Zichronot verses, we make mention of the times God has remembered our ancestors in the past: God remembered Noah on the ark; God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and based on this covenant redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt; and God remembered the Israelites wanderings through the desert as testimony to their faith in God's powers. We invoke these verses to express our desire that God remember us for the good, as well.

The Shofarot section recalls the instances when the shofar's sounding punctuated important

<sup>7</sup> *Mishna Torah, Laws of Teshuvah 3:4*

moments in the Jewish people's relationship with God. The shofar was blown when the Torah was given at Sinai; it was sounded in praise of God at the start of every month (Rosh Chodesh); and it will be sounded again when God announces the messianic age, a time when perfection has been achieved.

Apart from the special insertions in the amidah, there are other inclusions in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy that mark it as distinct. In the prayer *Avinu Malkeinu*, we address God as "Our Parent, Our Ruler," invoking two important aspects of our relationship with God. The metaphor of God as ruler stresses the pivotal role which God plays in our lives. Just as an earthly ruler, who holds the ultimate decision-making power in their hands, could sentence any one of his subjects to death on a whim, we state a belief that our lives are in God's hands. By contrast, the metaphor of God as parent is a gentler, more approachable image. God loves us and feels responsible for our wellbeing. God wishes us to act appropriately, but will nevertheless deal kindly with us when we err. We need both halves!

The last line of *Avinu Malkeinu* provides an important insight into our mindset as we approach God asking for forgiveness on Rosh Hashanah. We state, "Our Parent, Our Ruler, be gracious and answer us for even though we have no deeds, act righteously and kindly towards us and save us." The important part of this statement is the phrase "for even though we have no deeds," meaning that we do not merit your kindness but we ask nonetheless. Although we enter Rosh Hashanah with the intention to change our behavior moving forward, we actually have nothing yet to show in terms of our actions, nor can we undo the mistakes which we have already committed. So, in asking God to forgive us we are relying first and foremost on the fact that God is gracious and recognize that we receive God's goodness despite our absence of merit.

While prayer, interspersed with the sounding of the shofar, constitutes the majority of our Rosh Hashanah observance, there is one more custom which is worthy of note. On the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah (or second day if the first is Shabbat) people gather by a body of water to observe the ritual of *Tashlich*. They gather by the water's edge to read verses from Micah which ask God to "cast off our sins into the depths of the sea."<sup>8</sup> From the standpoint of ritual obligations, there does not need to be any other ritual beyond the recitation of these lines. However, it has become customary for people to toss bread crumbs into the water as they recite the verses. The bread crumbs are symbolic of us casting our transgressions away. We demonstrate to God our desire to send our misdeeds as far away from us as possible. Performing *Tashlich* at a body of water containing fish also brings to mind an image from the Talmud, in which a fish's need for water is compared to a Jew's need for Torah.<sup>9</sup>

Rosh Hashanah is our opportunity to reconnect with the people in our lives and with God. Through each ritual we perform during this season, from the sounding of the shofar on the first day of Elul to the casting off of our transgressions during *Tashlich*, we express our desire to right our ship. We recognize that we have drifted off course and need to get back on the right

---

8 *Micah 7:19.*

9 *Baba Kama 82a*

track. Torah, and teachings of our traditions, provide the map which will allow us to do so. Rosh Hashanah is our time to examine that map and to take the steps that will allow us to follow it a bit more closely in the year to come.

## How should I prepare?

**Do some personal work during Elul.** Take some time during the month before Rosh Hashanah to assess your actions in the past year. But, don't bite off too much. Thinking about the whole year and all your actions is daunting. Try these steps:

- Reflect on one piece of your life, one role that you play or one habit you would want to get rid of or improve.
- Be kind but honest in your assessments of yourself.
- Ask for help from someone else. Share your goal with them and ask them to check in with you or kindly point out where you need to get back on track.

Prepare yourself and your area for prayer and contemplation. Zoom is a poor substitute for being together in the sanctuary for the holidays. Even though we make jokes about how it is nice to roll out of bed and be in casual clothes for Shabbat services, some preparation for the holidays can help you have a meaningful experience.

**Connect with others.** Reach out to others before the holidays. This certainly can and should be done to perform Teshuvah but it can also be to make a personal connection with those you expect to see on the screen. Find out what they are thinking about and will have in mind as they go through the holidays. Having a small group in the sanctuary for our services will enhance our experiences by there being multiple voices coming through the zoom feed. It may also enhance your experience, if you have more people together for the service. Take into account your personal feelings about the risks of being with others but there is a possibility to be with another family unit so you all can hear reach other's voices in prayer. Keep physical distance, wear masks, gather outside and if you want, invite others to join you.



## What can I expect from the service?

The service is divided into several main parts.

- ***Birkot Ha'shachar*** – Morning Blessings – A collection of blessings related to getting going in the morning. (Pages 34-46)
- ***P'sukey D'zimrah*** – A collection of Psalms and reflections we use to “warm up” and get in the proper frame of mind for prayer. (Pages 47-69)
- **Shacharit** – The morning service. Its highlights are the Shema, our testament of faith, (Page 77) and the Amidah, private meditation to God (RH-Page 81, YK-Page 252).
- ***Torah Service*** – On Rosh Hashanah (RH), Day 1 we read about God fulfilling the promise made to Avraham and Sarah that they would have a son and a repetition of the promise that Avraham will be the head of a nation. RH Day 2 contains the story of God telling Avraham to sacrifice Isaac. In Avraham's quest to carry out the command we find the source of our Shofar – the Ram. On Yom Kippur (YK) we read about the service the High Priest was to perform to ask for forgiveness for the community. (RH – Pages 100-114, YK Pages 278-287)
- ***Sounding the Shofar*** – At this point, when it is not Shabbat, we sound the first 30 blasts of the shofar. Later in the service we will add another 70 blasts for a grand total of 100. The sound of the shofar is a “wake up” call. It reminds us to look inward and reflect on our actions.
- ***Musaf*** – Means “additional” – This section was instituted to mirror the “additional” sacrifice that was offered on Shabbat and holidays. The Rosh Hashanah musaf contains three sections; malchuyot – “sovereignty” where we praise God as the One Ruler above all other rulers, zichronot – “remembrances” where we ask God to remember us as individuals for our own merit and as a community in the merit of those before us, and shofarot, where we recount times in our Biblical texts when the shofar was used.

## What is my role in this experience?

- The **leader's** role is to guide the community through the service. The leader provides a pace for the prayers, as well as melodies, which will aid others to connect to the prayers.
- The **congregant's** role is twofold. First and foremost it is to spend time focusing on the words or themes of the prayers. The words of the prayer book are a tool. How we use these tools are up to us. Just saying them is not enough. It is our job to use these words in a reflective manner to do the personal, spiritual work needed to start the year renewed. We also should use the words to reflect on who we are as individuals and in what areas we would like to change.
- The **congregant's** second role is to participate in the service. The leader is not there to perform but to guide the congregation. There will hopefully be many melodies that are familiar to you or that you can easily pick up on. Join in with them either by singing the words or humming the melodies. In addition, there are many blessings that are said during the services. The leader may be making these statements but you have to seal them by saying “Amen,” – I agree. By participating in these ways the leader has the backing of the community and is not left up in front all by their self.

שנה טובה ומתוקה

May you have a good and sweet year!

## **Texts for reflection:**

*All beginnings are hard. – Mekhilta Yitro*

As long as the candle is still burning, it is still possible to accomplish and to mend.  
– Rabbi Yisrael Salanter

One night, Rabbi Salanter was walking home, past the home of a shoemaker. Despite it being very late, he observed the shoemaker was still busy, working by the light of a single candle. “Why are you still working?” Rabbi Salanter asked him. “It is very late and soon the candle will go out.”

The shoemaker replied “As long as the candle is still burning it is still possible to accomplish and to mend shoes.” In his wisdom, Rabbi Salanter realized this message is true for all of us. It’s never too late to change.

One of Dear Abby’s most famous pieces of advice was given to “Unfulfilled in Philly”, who wrote that he would love to be a doctor, but if he were to go back to college and get his degree, then go to medical school, then do an internship, and finally practice medicine, it would take him seven years and he’d be 43 years old. Dear Abby’s advice was priceless: How old will you be in seven years if you don’t do all those things?

*Though the righteous one may fall seven times, he will arise. – King Solomon (Proverbs 24:16)*

**The Book of Life and the Book of Death are open every day, and our name is written in one or the other of them at every moment, and then erased and written again the moment after that. We are constantly becoming, continuously redefining ourselves. This doesn’t just happen on Rosh Hashanah. – Alan Lew**

*Forgiveness is the key to action and freedom. – Hannah Arendt*

The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it’s indifference. – Elie Wiesel

**Your future isn’t bound by your past.**

