

Jewish Customs of Rosh Hashanah

The Feast of Trumpets requires a preparing of the spirit. Each person is to take time to look back in self-examination over the events and emotions of the previous year. The shofar is blown each morning in the synagogue. Psalm 27 is recited twice a day. New Year's cards are sent, cantors and choirs practice, and a special collection is taken for the poor.

Most Jews celebrate this holiday for two days. As explained in the calendar chapter, the precise hour for the appearance of the new moon of Tishri could not always be ascertained, therefore, it was extended to two days. Reform Jews retained the practice of a one-day celebration.

This is a time of offering forgiveness and seeking reconciliation with others (family, friends, and business associates). Everyone is to seek out anyone who feels hurt or wronged and "clear the air" by asking for understanding for any harsh words said, or deeds done, during the past year. If anyone has treated someone unfairly, this is the time to correct it and make amends.

The night before Rosh Hashanah, a special midnight service is conducted called Selichos (Repentant Prayers), which helps to prepare the worshipper for the time of reverence and self-appraisal during the coming Days of Awe.

The Evening Service

The holiday begins in the evening. Much of the ritual takes place in the synagogue, but most Jews celebrate a joyous feast in their homes with family. It begins as all Sabbaths, by the woman lighting the festival candles. The woman usually stays home to prepare the holiday as the men go to the synagogue.

The mood is mixed. It is a serious and somber yet festive occasion. Worshippers pull prayer shawls over their heads as they pray over God's judgment.

The Readings and Songs

The annual Torah cycle has the following readings for the first day of the Feast of Trumpets: Genesis 21:1-4, 5-12, 13-21, 22-27, 28-34; Numbers 29:1-6; 1 Samuel 1:1 - 2:10. The theme of the readings is "remembered" because Sarah and Hannah were remembered by God.

The Jewish liturgical tradition has preserved songs for many of the prayers for "Coronation Day." The shofar, in this light, announces God's Kingship: With trumpets and sound of cornet [shofar] make a joyful noise before the LORD, the King (Ps. 98:6).

The Blowing of the Shofar

On both days of the Feast of Trumpets (except when the first coincides with a Sabbath) the blowing of the shofar is a high point of the services. Before the shofar is sounded, the Ba'al Tokea (the shofar blower) prepares himself for his task of blowing the shofar for the congregation and says: "I am prepared to fulfill God's commandment to blow the shofar, as it is prescribed in the Torah, a day of blowing unto you."

The sound from the shofar is broken, a series of staccato blasts. The broken sound is said to remind the people they need to break their evil inclinations. The shape of the shofar is not straight like a trumpet. The end is curved and bent as a reminder to bend in respect to God.

The sound is meant to be a rousing call to repentance on the part of each individual. It is meant to awaken everyone to make them remember the Creator and forsake evil ways and return to God. The sound is also meant to inspire. It is a reminder that man should strive to break the impulses of his heart which are evil with the sinful cravings of the world.

The sounds have been established in detail by centuries of tradition. There are four different sounds associated with the Feast of Trumpet's service. These sounds are explained as follows:

- Tekiah—A pure unbroken sound that calls man to search his heart, abandon his evil ways, and seek forgiveness through repentance.
- Shevarim—A broken, staccato, trembling sound. It typifies the sorrow that comes to man when he realizes his wrong and desires to change his ways.
- Teruah—A wave-like sound of alarm calling upon man to stand by the banner of God.
- Tekiah Gedolah—The prolonged, unbroken sound typifying a final invitation to sincere repentance and atonement.

A total of one hundred notes are sounded, beginning with thirty blasts immediately after the Reading of the Law. Sephardi, Eastern, and Hasidic Jews then blow thirty more during the silent Additional Service Amidah, another thirty during the reader's repetition of the Amidah, and the remaining notes at the end. In the Ashkenazi rite, however, there is no sounding of the shofar during the silent Amidah, only in the course of the reader's repetition (thirty), and at various points thereafter (thirty), usually concluding with a final sequence of ten blasts prior to Adon Olam (Avudraham, 71-72).

Ten Reasons for the Ram's Horn

Saadia Gaon, a leading rabbi and scholar of the ninth century says there are ten reasons the Creator, be blessed, commanded us to blow the ram's horn on Rosh Hashanah.

1. The first is because Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of Creation, on which the Holy One, be blessed, created the world and reigned over it. Kings do the same, who have trumpets and horns blown to let it be known and heard everywhere when the anniversary of the beginning of their reigns fall. So we, on Rosh Hashanah, accept the kingship of the Creator, be blessed. Thus said David: "With trumpets and sound of cornet [shofar] make a joyful noise before the LORD, the King" (Ps. 98:6)
2. The second reason is that, since Rosh Hashanah is the first of the ten days of Teshuvah, the ram's horn is blown to announce their beginning, as though to warn: Let all who desire to turn in Teshuvah, turn now; and if you do not, you will have no reason to cry injustice. Kings do the same: first they warn the populace in their decree, and whoever violates the decrees after the warning complains unheeded.
3. The third reason is to remind us of our stand at the foot of Mount Sinai, as it is said: And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder... (Exodus 19:19), in order that we may take upon ourselves that which our forefathers took upon themselves when they said "will we do and be obedient" (Exodus. 24:7).
4. The fourth reason is to remind us of the words of the prophets, which were compared to a ram's horn, as it is said: "Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head...But he that taketh warning shall deliver his soul" (Ezek. 33:4-5).
5. The fifth reason is to remind us of the destruction of the Temple and the battle alarms of the foe, as it is said: "...because thou hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war" (Jer. 4:19). When we hear the sound of the ram's-horn, we beseech God to rebuild the Temple.
6. The sixth reason is to remind us of the binding of Isaac, who offered himself to heaven. So ought we to be ready at all times to offer our lives for the sanctification of His Name. And may our remembrance rise before Him for our benefit.
7. The seventh reason is that when we hear the blowing of the ram's horn, we fear and tremble and bend our wills to the will of the Creator for such is the effect of the ram's horn, which causes shaking and trembling, as it is written (Amos 3:6): "Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid"

8. The eighth reason is to remind us of the great Day of Judgment, that we may all fear it, as it is said (Zeph. 1:14-16): “The great day of the Lord is near, it is near and hasteth greatly ... a day of the trumpet and alarm...”

9. The ninth reason is to remind us of the gathering of the dispersed of Israel, that we may passionately long for it, as it is said (Isa. 27:13): “And it shall come to pass in that day, that the great trumpet shall be blown; and they shall come which were ready to perish in the land of Assyria.”

10. The tenth reason is to remind us of the revival of the dead, that we may believe in it, as it is said (Isa. 18:3): “All ye inhabitants of the world, and ye dwellers on the earth, see ye, when he lifteth up an ensign on the mountains; and when he bloweth a trumpet, hear ye.”

Wishing One Another a Happy New Year

Before leaving the House of Prayer on the night of Rosh Hashanah, it is customary to bless one another with the benediction, “May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year.” Then it is customary to go home joyfully and to keep away from all grief and sighing, so as not to give the Accuser an opening, for the Accuser’s only place is where there is grief and sighing. One ought to trust in God, as it is written: “For the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10) (Seder haYom, 53-54).

The Dinner

When the men return home for dinner, the table is beautifully set with a centerpiece of sweet fruits and cakes symbolic of the sweet year to come. The challah bread is baked for this holiday just as for the weekly Sabbath. However, the loaves are shaped symbolically. A round loaf signifies hopes for a good round year or a crown as a reminder of the kingship of this holiday. A ladder-shaped loaf symbolizes Jacob’s ladder or man’s effort to direct his life upward to God. A bird-shaped loaf symbolizes God’s protection as in Isaiah 31:5. Sweet cakes are usually served, a custom traceable back to King David (2 Sam. 6:15,19). Sour and bitter foods are avoided, representing the avoidance of bitter times for the year ahead. Other traditional foods eaten during this holiday are gourds, fenugreek, leeks, beets, carrots, and dates.

Apples and Honey

A popular observance during this holiday is eating apples dipped in honey, a symbol for a sweet new year. It is customary to dip an apple sweetened in honey during the evening meal, and to recite this blessing, “Be it thy will that a good and a sweet year be renewed for us.” “Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, creator of the fruit of the tree,” is recited at the beginning, even though the apple may be eaten in the middle of the holiday.

The Next Morning Service

The blowing of the shofar is incorporated into the service three times. Each one is followed by Biblical verses. The annual Torah cycle has the following readings for the second day of the Feast of Trumpets: Genesis 22:1-3, 4-8, 9-14, 15-19, 20-24; and Jeremiah 31:1-19. These passages are to recall the faith of Abraham and Isaac. Because God used a ram as a substitute sacrifice for Isaac, the ram’s horn is a reminder of how Isaac and Abraham were prepared to give up all their hopes and dreams for God’s sake (Gen. 22:7). (This is traditionally read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, but in most Reform synagogues it is read on the first day.)

Casting the Stones—Tashlikh

A custom still widely observed is the ceremony of Tashlikh, consisting of the symbolic casting of one's sins into a river, lake, or other body of water on the afternoon of the first day of the Feast of Trumpets (or of the second day if the first coincides with a Sabbath). There is no record of this tradition until the sixteenth century in Germany, when the tradition became popular after the endorsement by Rabbi Isaac Luria. It is supposedly derived from Micah 7:19, "He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea."

Taking a brief break from the long hours in synagogue, the community gathers in the afternoon at a river to metaphorically divest their sins. The widespread practice in most Jewish communities today is to turn one's pockets inside-out, discarding crumbs that might be taken along for the occasion. The ceremony is symbolic of the determination to free oneself from sins and shortcomings during this special season. Some do this custom on the first day. Others wait until the second day to avoid working on the Sabbath.

According to Jewish Tradition all the following happened on Tishri 1:

- Adam and Eve were created
- The Flood waters dried up
- Enoch was taken by God (Gen. 5:24)
- Sarah, Rachel, and Samuel (1 Sam. 1) conceived
- Joseph freed from prison by Pharaoh
- The forced labor of Hebrews in Egypt ended
- Job contracted leprosy
- Start of sacrifices on the altar built by Ezra (Ezra 3:1)