

# Halakhot of Rosh Hashanah

## I. Selihot

Beginning the day after Rosh Hodesh Elul (the month before Rosh Hashanah), and concluding the day before Yom Kippur, *selihot* are recited early each weekday morning before *shahrit*. These are special prayers designed to facilitate Teshubah (repentance). It is inappropriate to arrive at the annual Day of Judgment, as the first day of the new year is called, without having prepared beforehand.

## II. General Laws and Customs

Since Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the year (and commemorates G-d's creation of the world), it also is the Day of Judgment of humans. One's thoughts should focus on the Creator, acknowledging His kingship and His desire that we strive to improve ourselves spiritually and endeavor to make the world a better place for all in accordance with His will. We must be serious about these matters and not engage in lightheaded behavior. It is necessary to dress modestly.

Although it is the Day of Judgment, we are to express our confidence that the Almighty will accept our prayers and repentance and inscribe us for a year of life. Thus, it is prohibited to fast on Rosh Hashanah and the mitzvah of *simhat yom tob* (happiness of the holiday) applies just as on the three festivals; there should be a festive meal both at night and in the day.

During the evening meal, after *qiddush* and *hamosi*, we eat special foods with an appropriate prayer for each that through their names or nature prompt optimistic thoughts for the new year. Some communities have this custom only the first night, some both nights. It is customary to dip the *hamosi* in sugar (some use honey) instead of salt and not eat "sour" dishes throughout Rosh Hashanah.

The berakha of *sheheheyanu* is recited in *qiddush* both nights just as on both first nights of all *yamim tobim*. However, Shulhan Arukh states it is preferable to have a "new" fruit on the table the second night and direct the *sheheheyanu* toward it also. The reason is that there is a group of *posqim* who consider the two days of Rosh Hashanah as one long day halakhically and according to them *sheheheyanu* should not be recited the second night for the day itself. Having a new fruit removes any doubt concerning the *sheheheyanu*. (Reciting an unnecessary berakha is a violation of our responsibility to respect G-d's name.) In this particular case, however, in the final analysis, if one did not have a new fruit or another new item toward which the *sheheheyanu* could be directed, it is recited anyway, for it is not a true doubt.

In some respects, the two days of Rosh Hashanah are considered as a single halakhic day. Thus, the halakha that permits the use of medicines when there is no danger to life on the second day of *yamim tobim* does not apply to the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Even in Israel, Rosh Hashanah is celebrated two days, unlike other *yamim tobim*.

It is preferable not to sleep during the day of Rosh Hashanah, but rather to study Torah. If one finds himself in a situation where he cannot concentrate on studying Torah and is idling away his time in gossip, etc., it is preferable to sleep.

### III. Prayers

It is traditional to sing the poetic works of great rabbis on the exalted themes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with melodies special for the occasion. Rosh Hashanah is ushered in with the singing of *Ahot Qetana*.

The amida of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur emphasizes the kingship of the Almighty and includes additions reflecting the vision of a world in harmony and peace fulfilling His will.

It is customary to have assistants to the right and left of the hazzan during the prayers of these special days.

**Additions to Prayers:** Hashem Hu Ha'elokim is recited before Hashem Melekh, Shir Hama'alot Mima'amakim after Yishtabah, Abinu Malkenu after the amida of *shahrit* and *minha*. Hamelekh Haqadosh is said in place of Hakel Haqadosh in the amida. Several additional insertions are made in the amida as found in all mahzorim.

**Torah and Haftarah Readings:** On the first day the Torah reading begins with Hashem's 'remembering' Sarah (with childbirth). A portion about Rosh Hashanah is read from a second Sefer Torah. The haftarah is about Hashem's 'remembering' Hannah. The second day Torah reading is about G-d's test of Abraham with Aqedat Yishaq. The portion read from the second Sefer Torah is the same as the first day. The haftarah, from the prophet Jeremiah, is about Hashem's remembering, and love for, Israel.

**Musaf:** The musaf prayer of Rosh Hashanah includes three special sections reflecting the essence of the day. Each section comprises ten verses from Tanakh and concludes with a berakha. The first section focuses on G-d's kingship מלכויות; the second on His remembrances for judgment זכרונות; the third on the significance of the shofar שופרות.

**Tashlikh:** In the afternoon of the first day the custom is to recite '*Tashlikh*', a symbolic 'casting away of sins'. It is preferable to recite it by the banks of a body of water but if a natural body of water is not available, it is acceptable to fill a pool. One who did not recite this prayer on Rosh Hashanah should do so during Asseret Yeme Teshubah.

### IV. Shofar

It is a Torah commandment to hear the shofar blasts on the day of Rosh Hashanah. The shofar is associated with the coronation of a king and helps us focus on the importance of recognizing and accepting Hashem as our king. In addition, in the Books of the Prophets the shofar is associated with the signal of the city watchman who warns that the enemy is

arriving. On the Day of Judgment the Shofar is the alarm that we are faced with an emergency; it awakens us from our slumber and calls us to repent. The shofar also recalls the ram substituted for the sacrifice of Yishaq. It is also associated with the Giving of the Torah and the Ingathering of the Exiles.

Women are not obligated to hear the shofar as it is a positive mitzvah governed by time. Nevertheless, they fulfill a mitzvah if they hear it.

Children who have reached the age of understanding should be brought to synagogue to hear the shofar but only if they do not disturb others.

The *toke`ah* (shofar blower) should stand. For the first series of blasts the congregation remains seated.

The *toke`ah* must have intentions that his blowing is for the mitzvah and that others may fulfill their obligation through hearing his blowing. The listener must also have intent to fulfill his obligation.

Two berakhot are recited before blowing the shofar the first time: *Lishmo`ah Qol Shofar* and *Sheheheyenu*. One who has fulfilled his obligation of shofar earlier in the day and is blowing only for others may still recite the berakhot.

The complete mitzvah comprises one hundred individual blasts. They are blown in eight series. The first series, before musaf, comprises thirty blasts. The other seven series comprise ten blasts each: three series in the quiet amida, three in the hazara and one in the *qaddish* after the amida. It is customary to blow a 101st blast, a *teru`ah gedola*, before Alenu.

When Rosh Hashanah occurs on Shabbat the shofar is not blown and it is *muqseh*. Although from Torah law the shofar should be blown even on Shabbat, the rabbis prohibited it, fearing it might lead to carrying on Shabbat.

## **V. Asseret Yeme Teshubah**

The ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur are singularly designated and dedicated to Teshubah. Although Teshubah is accepted any time, it is accepted even more readily during these days.

For the above reason it has been traditional that Jewish people give more charity and do more good deeds during these days. It is the time when they express their religious identity.

Shulhan Arukh states that it is proper for those accustomed to eating bread baked by non-Jews all year long (known to be kosher, an item that is permitted to eat) to refrain from doing so these days. It is an example of a stringency accepted for these days.

**Prayers:** During Asseret Yeme Teshubah a person should pray more carefully than usual. Six insertions and substitutions are made in the amida as found in all siddurim.

## **VI. Teshubah - Repentance**

Aspects of complete Teshubah:

1. Viduy - recognition of the sin and confession to Hashem. When done silently it is proper to specify the particular transgression.
2. Abandoning the sinful practice
3. Feeling of regret for having done the sin
4. Resolution for the future

In making a resolution for the future, it is proper, often necessary, to devise a strategy to cope with temptation. It is appropriate to build a 'fence' around the transgression, that will prevent one from crossing the line, each person as fits his/her situation.

Just as one must repent of sins involving actions, so must one repent of any evil dispositions that he may have, such as an angry temper, hatred, jealousy, greedy pursuit of money and honor, gluttony, etc.

Sins against one's fellow man are not forgiven by the Al-mighty until the sinner has received forgiveness from the injured party and repents.

**Hatarat Nedarim** (Annulment of Vows): As the sin of broken vows is very serious, it is customary to make Hatarat Nedarim before Rosh Hashanah, to clean the slate as much as possible. We also declare our intention not to vow in the future. Hatarat Nedarim is not a prayer but a declaration to the Bet Din requesting annulment of the vow, which is possible if the individual requesting is deeply regretful for having made the vow. If one did not make a vow Hatarat Nedarim is inapplicable.