

YEMEI RATZON

Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance

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In a Nutshell

Yemei Ratzon (Days of Favor) refer to the 40 days from Rosh Chodesh Elul through Yom Kippur. The *Yemei Ratzon* are a time of preparation for the Yamim Noraim (High Holidays).

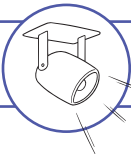
Elul – The Final Month

As the last month of the Jewish year, Elul is a time to pause, reflect, and realign before Rosh Hashana, the day Hashem judges us. It's like the final editing of a report – your last chance to fix up any mistakes before handing your paper in! During these days, our words and actions carry extra weight, and Hashem is especially ready to accept our teshuvah and help us forward.



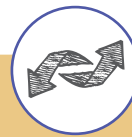
I Love You, You Love Me

It's not just about fear or judgment—it's about connection and love! Hashem gave us a special opportunity: the gates of mercy are wide open during Elul. It's as if Hashem is gently reaching out His hand and waiting for us to take it. He invites us to come closer, fix what we need to fix, and return to who we truly are. It is a lot easier to grow and do teshuvah in Elul, because Hashem Himself draws near to us and invites us to draw near to Him!¹ What an opportunity!



Spotlight

Yemei Ratzon are a time of special closeness to Hashem.



The King in the Field

All year long, the King lives in the faraway capital city, inside his majestic, imposing palace. Tall golden gates surround it, with rows of guards in perfect formation. If you wanted to have an audience with the King, you would have to travel to the capital, wait in line with countless others from across the kingdom, and submit a request. Then you would have to wait for weeks, hoping your request will be approved and that you'll receive the rare royal invitation to speak with His Majesty, the King.

But once a year, something incredible happens: The powerful King leaves his palace and walks alone through the countryside. He brings no guards with him. There are no golden gates and no endless lines. He's just there—open, welcoming, and ready to speak with any of his dear citizens. You don't need a reason. You don't need an invitation.

The king just wants to get to know his people, hear what's on their minds, and help them however he can. Anyone can walk right up and talk to him.

This is Elul! Hashem, the King of the world, is closer and more accessible than ever this month. He's waiting to help us come close to Him through teshuvah. All we need to do is be real and want to reconnect with Him, and He will welcome us with open arms.

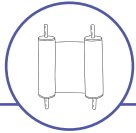


Torah Challenge

אני לדודי ודודי לי...

"I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me..."²

This *pasuk* is hinted to in the name of a month.³ Can you figure out which month? What do you think this is hinting to?



The Power of Prep

Preparation makes everything better. Think about it—big moments in life always feel more meaningful when we get ready for them. A wedding, a championship game, even a big test—you don’t just show up. Preparation enhances the experience. The more important the moment, the more it needs preparation. And what day could be bigger than Rosh Hashana? It’s when the whole world is judged, when we reflect on why we were created and what we’re doing with our lives. Walking into that day without preparation would be missing out on a huge opportunity to really tap into the awesomeness of the day. This is what Elul is all about. It’s a powerful preparation period. It’s our time to get ready, not just for Rosh Hashana, but for Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, Yom Kippur, and the rest of the year.

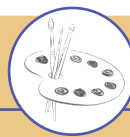
R’ Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, known as the Ramchal, wrote a classic work on spiritual development, called *Mesilas Yesharim* (The Path of the Just). In it, he gives step-by-step instructions for how to grow into the best version of ourselves. The first step on his ladder to greatness is *zehirus*—living with awareness and paying attention to how we act.⁴ He quotes Yirmiyahu HaNavi, who compares people rushing through life without stopping to think about their ways to a horse charging into battle.⁵ Horses don’t think or recognize the danger that they are in. They just charge forward, caught up in the rush. We can’t risk living like this and missing out on the purpose of our lives! Elul comes every year to shake us awake, to remind us to stop and actually pay attention to our actions and where we are headed.

Mindfulness—being aware of what we’re doing—changes how we experience everything. As Jews, this concept comes up all over the place. Think about davening. We don’t jump straight into Shema and Shemoneh Esrei. We start with the morning blessings, then sing *Pesukei D’Zimrah*, “the verses of song.” Only then are we ready for the most powerful moments of tefillah. Before learning Torah, too, we prepare. We make a bracha which reminds us that learning Torah isn’t just another subject in class—it’s

connecting our human minds to Hashem’s wisdom. This changes the quality of our learning entirely! These steps of preparation help us be mindful and get the most out of what we are doing.

So what should we focus on as Elul begins? Chazal teach that the name “Elul” hints to a line from Shir HaShirim: “*Ani L’dodi V’dodi Li*—I am for my beloved, and my beloved is for me.”⁶ Elul is about love—our love for Hashem, and His love for us. The Alter of Kelm, Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv, explains how we need to prepare for *Yamim Noraim* during Elul. He brings the tefillah of *Avinu Malkeinu* as a model, and explains that before we can stand before Hashem as the King and Ultimate Judge, we need to first feel that He is our Father, Who loves us and wants what’s best for us. Only when we feel that love can we experience and accept the awesomeness of His judgment. Hashem judges us because He cares about us, like a parent disciplines their child because he loves him. This Elul, let’s not just drift through on autopilot, but use the time to mindfully connect to Hashem’s love and prepare for the powerful days ahead!⁷

What are some other areas in life where being mindful changes the experience and makes it more meaningful?



Cover Uncovered

Elul is when we begin preparing for the coronation of Hashem, the King of all Kings. We want to show Him that we are loyal “citizens” of His kingdom, ready to live according to His will. Just like a town rushes to clean up and fix everything before a royal visit—painting fences, sweeping streets, planting flowers, we use this time to examine ourselves, fix what’s broken, and polish our actions. The cover shows just that: people working together to get their town ready. But the work doesn’t stop there. During the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*—the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur—we double down, doing our best to return to Hashem and earn a good judgment. These 40 days are a time to reset, realign, and show Hashem we’re ready to be part of Your kingdom!

What do we do differently?

ShoFar, and So Close

Every morning in Elul, we blow the shofar. We do this because Klal Yisrael blew a shofar on Rosh Chodesh Elul, after Moshe went back up to get the second *Luchos*, following the *Chet Ha'Egel* (Sin of the Golden Calf). They blew a shofar in order to remember to avoid another terrible mistake like *Chet Ha'Egel*. Today, we blow the shofar all month to wake ourselves up and remind us to do teshuvah and return to Hashem.⁹ However, we do not blow the Shofar on Erev Rosh Hashana.¹⁰



Tehillim Time

We recite *L'Dovid Hashem*, chapter 27 of Tehillim after Shacharis, and Mincha or Maariv, depending on one's custom.¹¹ We begin on Rosh Chodesh Elul and continue straight until the last day of Sukkos. There are many connections between this perek and the Yemei Ratzon, in particular its underlying theme of asking Hashem to bring us close to Him.

Avinu Malkeinu



Avinu Malkeinu ("Our Father, Our King") is a beloved element of the *Selichos* and *Yamim Noraim* davening, and also said on fast days throughout the year. Rabbi Akiva composed the main part of the tefillah, and it was later expanded into the full *Avinu Malkeinu*.

Saying Selichos

Selichos are special early-morning tefillos that Ashkenazim say from the Motzei Shabbos before Rosh Hashana (for at least four days) until Yom Kippur.⁸ Sefardim say *Selichos* the whole month of Elul! The word *selicha* means "sorry", and that's what these prayers are about: preparing for the *Yamim Noraim* by doing teshuvah and davening for Hashem's mercy and forgiveness.

Marvelous Middos

At the heart of *Selichos* are the 13 *Middos of Rachamim*, the "13 Attributes of Mercy". After the sin of *Chet Ha'Egel*, Klal Yisrael deserved to be wiped out. Moshe begged Hashem to forgive them. Hashem responded by teaching Moshe to say the 13 *Middos*,¹² promising that any time we say them sincerely, Hashem will forgive us.¹³ But it's not just about saying the words! These *middos* are also a model for how we should act: When we are patient, kind, and forgiving with others, Hashem treats us in the same way.

First Fast

The day after Rosh Hashana is *Tzom Gedalia* (the Fast of Gedaliah), when we fast to commemorate the death of Gedaliah, the leader of the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael following the destruction of the First Beis Hamikdash.¹⁴ (Learn more about this fast in the Churban Nugget.)



Corny Corner

What do cleaning light fixtures and fixing software have in common?

Both involve getting rid of a lot of bugs.

Shabbos Shuvah

The Shabbos between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is called *Shabbos Shuvah*, the "Shabbos of Return." The name comes from the *Haftarah* (portion from Navi) that we read on this Shabbos which opens with the words, "*Shuva* (return) *Yisrael* to Hashem, your G-d."¹⁵ On this Shabbos, the rabbi usually delivers a speech, arousing everybody to do teshuvah.



Can a Person Change?

Rabbi Chaim Mintz
from Ask The Rabbi, Book 1 pg.385

Is it true — as I heard quoted in the name of the prophet Yirmiyahu — that just as a leopard can't change his spots, a person can't change himself?

Nothing could be farther from the truth!

Although these words are found in Yirmiyahu¹⁶, if one looks at the text carefully, it is clear that they were issued as a challenge, not as a fact. The great prophet Yirmiyahu wanted to rouse the Jewish people to repent and shake them out of their complacency. He was not telling them that they couldn't change. On the contrary, he was telling them that, although it may be difficult, they definitely could! Anyone can repent, even in the final seconds of his life.

The Talmud¹⁷ relates a dramatic story illustrating this point. Elazar ben Durdaya was known as a degenerate, chasing after every immoral relationship he could find. He traveled the world and paid a fortune to commit grave sins. At one point he was told: "Elazar, there is no hope for you! You have reached the point of 'no return'!" He was struck by these forceful words, realizing how far he had fallen, and searched for help in arousing Divine mercy.

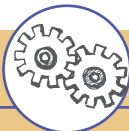
He began begging everything in nature — from the sky to the mountains, to the sun and

the moon — to ask Hashem to forgive him. All of them refused to help him, claiming that they had their own worries to deal with, and were dependent on Hashem for their own existence. Finally, Elazar realized that there was nothing in the world that would help him, and was left with only one option. He sat down and wept with great remorse, until his soul departed. At that point, a Heavenly voice called out, "Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is destined for a place in the World to Come." When Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, the great compiler of the Mishnah, heard this story, he cried and said, "One person may take years to earn his place in the World to Come, and yet some can earn it in a short time!" And then he added: "Not only are penitents accepted, they are even given honorifics, and he went from 'rags to riches,' being given the grand title of 'Rabbi Elazar'!"

This story has a powerful message. Even someone who has sunk to the lowest level of degradation still has a spark in his soul that can be reignited, and he can be welcomed into the World to Come with open arms.

IN SHORT:

Anyone can change even in the last seconds of his life.



Small Seed, Big Growth

How can I pick a *kabbalah* (commitment) that I'll maintain the entire year?

Rav Yisrael Salanter taught that we can merit atonement on Yom Kippur simply by taking on one small commitment in our growth. It's not a shortcut; this is how teshuvah works! Real teshuvah takes time. It's like a beautiful garden — it doesn't grow in one day. Gardeners wait months to finally be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

The Yemei Ratzon are like the first days of a gardening project. We need to approach them with the same patience. First, we need to cast a vision for our "garden." We do this by deciding what we'd like to accomplish in the coming year.

So, be your desired area of improvement *emunah*, *tefillah*,

a relationship, or a *middah*, now is the time to pick a "seed" and start that garden growing! Choose a *kabbalah* — a small, doable commitment. But choose one that will trigger further growth as the year goes on. With Hashem's help, this starting point will lead to growth in the whole area of your choice. For example, if you decide to work on your *tefillah*, a "seed" *kabbalah* could be focusing on the word *Atah* in the first bracha of *Shemoneh Esrei*. For a few seconds, you will focus and think, I'm actually standing in front of Hashem. He's here, listening to me intently. This little action will help you experience the reality that you are speaking to the King of all Kings, just a little more. Over time, your appreciation for the gift of *tefillah* will grow, inspiring you to daven more and work harder on *kavanah*, — all because you actually want to. It's one small step for now, and one great step for your future!



Aseres Yemei Teshuvah



But First...

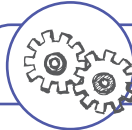
Aseres Yemei Teshuvah refers to the ten days that begin with Rosh Hashana and conclude with Yom Kippur. During this time, we daven, increase our Torah study, and give more tzadakah (charity). But the main focus of *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* is... you guessed it – doing teshuvah! Our fate for the coming year is decided on Rosh Hashana but not sealed until Yom Kippur,²⁴ so *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* is the time to do teshuvah and beg Hashem to change our judgment for the better.²⁵

Teshuvah Time

Although teshuvah is always effective, it is even more powerful during this auspicious time.¹⁹ Chazal teach that the *posuk*, “Seek Hashem when He can be found; call Him when He is near,”²⁰ refers to the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, the time when Hashem is close and “readily available” to all Jews.²¹ It’s a time to repent for all our misdeeds and mistakes. But teshuvah is more than saying sorry—true teshuvah means returning to Hashem and His will, so that every part of our life aligns with what He wants.²² It may sound like a lofty level, but every Jew can reach it! The best time to tap into this is during the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, when we crown Hashem as our King and accept His will as our own.²³

Quick-Fix Up Your Year

The seven days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur each represent all the corresponding days of the year and have the power to atone for every sin committed on that day! This means if someone does teshuvah on Sunday in *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, it atones for all the Sundays of their life! The same goes for each day of the week. By repenting and elevating all seven days, a person can repair the entire year!¹⁸



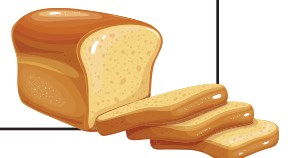
Prayer Points

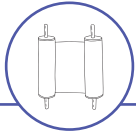
During the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, our davening itself is extra powerful. We also add extra prayers and make some small changes to *Shemoneh Esrei*:

- 📖 We recite special *Selichos* each day.
- 📖 Some add “*Shir Hamaalos Mima’amakim*,” perek 130 of Tehillim, after *Pesukei D’zimrah*.
- 📖 We say *Avinu Malkeinu* after *Shacharis* and *Mincha*.
- 📖 We insert these phrases into *Shemoneh Esrei*:
 1. *Zachreinu L’chaim* (Remember us for life...)
 2. *Mi Kamocha Av Harachamim* (Who is like You Father of mercy...?)
 3. *Uk’sov L’chaim Tovim* (Inscribe us for a good life...)
 4. *B’sef Chaim* (In the Book of Life...)
- 📖 We adjust a few conclusions in *Shemoneh Esrei*:
 5. In *Ata Kadosh* we change *HaKeil Hakadosh* (the Holy G-d) to *Hamelech Hakadosh* (the Holy King.)
 6. In *Hashiva Shofteinu* we change *Melech ohev tzedakak umishpat* (King Who loves righteousness and judgment) to *Hamelekh Hamishpat* (the King of judgment.)
 7. At the very end of *Shemoneh Esrei* some change the word *shalom* (peace) to *hashalom* (the peace).

Could Bread Be Jewish?

There is a halachic restriction against eating *pas akum*, which is bread baked without any Jewish involvement in the process. Many people rely on a leniency to eat *pas palter* (“baker’s bread”) which refers to kosher bread products baked in a non-Jewish bakery or commercial setting. However, during *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, when we are extra careful in our mitzvah observance, even those who eat *pas palter* year-round should be careful to only eat *pas Yisrael*.²⁶





The Power of the Moment

Rosh Hashana begins a stretch of time unlike any other in the year. It is both uplifting and awe-inspiring: on one hand, we stand in judgment before the King of Kings; on the other, we feel the closeness of a loving Father welcoming His children home. And then come the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*—ten days overflowing with urgency and possibility—culminating in the ultimate day of closeness, Yom Kippur.

It's clear that this time is meant to move us forward. Yet many of us wonder: *Will this inspiration really last?* We hear the haunting words of Unesaneh Tokef and feel the weight of life and death, judgment and mercy. But deep down, there's a nagging thought: *I've tried to change before... and it didn't last. Why should this time be different?* Maybe our teshuvah will be as short-lived as our last attempt to stick to a diet or a workout plan.

The answer is that these days truly are different. Chazal teach that this is an *eis ratzon*—a time when the world is filled with an extra measure of Divine closeness and spiritual energy. Hashem draws nearer, making it easier for us to draw near in return. Our efforts carry more weight, our tefillos reach higher, and our small steps create lasting impact. Hashem gives us a boost, helping us climb higher than we ever could on our own.

Think of it like the sun. It shines every day, but in midsummer its rays warm us far more than in winter. It's the same sun, but certain times we feel its power more strongly. These

days work in a similar way. Hashem is always present, but during these ten days His “ear,” so to speak, is closer than usual. This is why even if we've failed before, now is not the time for despair—these days are supercharged for change.

We are never alone in this effort. Chazal teach us that, “In the way a person wishes to go, he is led.”²⁷ If we take even a single step toward growth, Hashem helps us climb even higher. They also teach that “one who comes to purify himself is assisted from Above.”²⁸ We need to want to do teshuvah, to try to do better, and Hashem Himself helps us come close to Him. Knowing that we will succeed helps motivate us to put in more effort. This is true in all areas of life. If a person has a job interview that they actually have a shot at, they won't waste the opportunity, and likely put in more effort than an interview for a job they know they will probably never get. During *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, we have the Master of the Universe helping us along!

What we accomplish during *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* doesn't end with Yom Kippur. Once we've tapped into the *eis ratzon* and experienced Hashem's closeness, we can return to it throughout the year, especially during other powerful *eis ratzon* moments: *tefillah b'tzibbur*, at *Minchah*, when giving *tzedakah* before davening, when lighting Shabbos candles, and at a *chupah* or a *bris*. Learning to recognize and access Hashem's closeness will have a year-round effect!²⁹

What's one way you can remind yourself—during the year—that Hashem is always near, especially during an *eis ratzon*?



TheZone Revolution

At *TheZone*, campers don't just learn about teshuvah—they live it. During our Shabbos Revolution, campers take on kabbalos to bring home. Here are just a few kabbalos taken on by fellow Zoniacs:

-  I'm going to bentch the entire bentching.
-  I will stay off my phone.
-  I'm going to start kissing the mezuzah.
-  I'm going to start to keep Shabbat.

-  I will sing zemirot.
-  I'm going to make brachos before I eat.
-  I'm not gonna color on Shabbos.
-  I'm going to say an extra paragraph of Shema.
-  I won't paint my nails on Shabbat.
-  I will start davening.
-  I will try to listen and be respectful.
-  I'm going to wash my hands before I eat bread.

How can I take advantage of Yemei Ratzon?

Merits & Mitzvos

From Elul through Yom Kippur, Hashem gives us 40 days filled with closeness, mercy, and massive spiritual potential. But we have to use them! The Rambam teaches that each person should live like their judgment is hanging in the balance, with their actions split 50/50 between mitzvos and aveiros.³¹ Just one more good deed could tip the scale toward the side of merit and salvation! During *Yemei Ratzon*, every choice matters more than ever!

Inspect, Reflect, Correct, Perfect



Now is the time for a *cheshbon hanefesh*—a real look inside. What's going well? What can you do even better? What needs fixing? Writing down your "accounting of the soul" helps you clarify your goals (and track your progress!) Remember, you can't really change if you don't know where you're holding. Make sure to include your wins, as well – every little success is priceless! And setbacks are expected, too – Hashem sees your effort and is proud beyond words. The key is to never give up and get back on track.



Did You Know?

In these days before Yom Kippur, some are careful to settle all debts so that they come to the holy day with a clean slate.

Let's Be Friends, Make Amends

Want Hashem to forgive you? Start by making peace with others. Say sorry. Let go. Clear the air. It's not just a nice thing—it's a key to getting forgiven from Above. If you hurt someone, it's not enough to say "sorry" to Hashem—you must ask forgiveness from the person you wronged. At the same time, try to be someone who forgives others easily. When we show others mercy and forgiveness, Hashem mirrors that back to us!³⁶

Get It to the "T"



The three big tools of *Yemei Ratzon* are Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah. These aren't just buzzwords—they're the formula for changing your year. Return to Hashem (teshuvah), speak to Him (tefillah), and give to others (tzedakah) is the way to change your decree for the better.³⁰

Slow and Steady

Tafasta meruba lo tafasta, roughly means, "if you grab too much, you get nothing."³⁵ It's a most important rule when it comes to inner work and growth. You may feel inspired and ready for change, but remember, slow and steady wins the race! Take small steps. Pick something doable and stick with it. Work on one *middah*, one mitzvah, or one relationship. One small change is more powerful than you can imagine!



Then & Now

In the Jewish calendar, times aren't just dates, they are spiritual mines filled with tremendous potential. The 40 days from Elul through Yom Kippur are filled with extra power for teshuvah and getting close to Hashem. You can see how this played out in the earliest stages of our nation's history.

15 Nissan

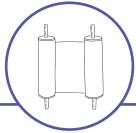
Then: Hashem miraculously saved Klal Yisrael and took them out of Mitzrayim.

Now: We celebrate Pesach. The first night is known as *Leil Shimurim*, (a night that is guarded).³² Even today, Hashem gives us a special protection from harmful elements on that night.³³

6 Sivan

Then: Matan Torah: Moshe Rabbeinu goes up to *shamayim* (Heaven) to receive the Torah.

Now: We celebrate Shavuot, the day Hashem gave us the Torah.



Achieving “Successful” Teshuvah

On Rosh Hashana, we crown Hashem as King and realign ourselves with our mission in His kingdom. However, there are plenty of obstacles holding us back from actualizing this and being our best and most productive selves. During the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* and Yom Kippur, we have the chance to do teshuvah to remove those obstacles so we can fulfill that mission.

That sounds simple enough, but in reality, the teshuvah process itself can be full of roadblocks. The introspection and inner work stir up reactions and emotions that can hold us back. We might feel overwhelmed and discouraged, thinking: *I can't do this. I'm a failure. Why do I always mess up?* Or we might feel angry and frustrated, asking: *Why is this so hard? What do You even want from me?* How can we clear the way for a truly “successful” teshuvah?

We're not the first to struggle with this. Thousands of years ago, Kayin—the firstborn of Adam HaRishon—brought a *korban* to Hashem. But it wasn't a proper offering, and Hashem rejected it. Kayin reacted as many of us would: he grew angry and depressed.

Hashem's response is a lesson for us all: *“Why get angry and depressed? Isn't it true that if you correct your actions, you'll be forgiven? And if not, your sin will remain?”*³⁷ Hashem was telling Kayin: mistakes are just mistakes. They can be fixed. After stumbling, he had two options: stay down and bear the consequences, or correct his actions and be forgiven.

Kayin's emotional reaction is understandable—he was human, after all. But Hashem instilled in us the ability to rise above that first wave of emotion. He gave us the strength to respond to mistakes and criticism by focusing on the future and getting back on track. When sadness

or some other negative emotion is blocking your teshuvah, remember Hashem's words to Kayin. Remember that mistakes are just mistakes. You have a choice in front of you: do nothing or do teshuvah and get back up.

Even if we can try to shift our mindset, we all know that when we fail repeatedly in a certain area, it's easy to feel like there's no point in making another effort. However, beneath that discouragement lies the mistaken belief that our relationship with Hashem is built on being flawless and presenting Him with spiritual “trophies.” That's not what Hashem wants most. What He truly desires is us—our real, striving selves!

Think about the healthiest, closest relationships—between parents and children, spouses, or close friends. They're not built on perfection or performance; they're built on connection. What matters most is the closeness, the presence, the desire to be together.

Hashem wants the same. We give ourselves to Him when we invest in the relationship as we struggle and wrestle with choices. Our searching, our questions, and even our failures are part of that bond. “Connecting with Hashem” doesn't mean being perfect. It means caring enough to engage with Him, to keep coming back, to try again even after we fall.

Trying, falling, and trying again isn't second-best. It's hard—but it's exactly what Hashem wants. He loves us and believes in us, even when we struggle to love and believe in ourselves. He's right there, just one step away. Shifting our mindset this way helps us take that step and reconnect to Hashem and our mission in His kingdom.³⁸

What holds you back from achieving “successful” teshuvah?

17 Tammuz

Then: Moshe Rabbeinu descends and sees the Jews sinning with the Golden Calf. Things seemed beyond repair. In response, Moshe broke the *luchos* and began praying on behalf of Klal Yisrael, desperately trying to obtain Hashem's forgiveness.

Now: We fast and daven for the *Geulah*, when we will be closer than ever to Hashem.

1 Elul – 10 Tishrei

Then: Hashem tells Moshe to come back up the mountain—He's is going to forgive Klal Yisrael! Moshe ascends to receive the second set of *Luchos*, and spends 40 days there.

Now: These 40 days of *Yemei Ratzon* are an auspicious and opportune time to do teshuvah. The gates of mercy open. Hashem is close. It's a time for spiritual repair and renewed connection.

10 Tishrei

Then: Moshe comes down with the second *Luchos*. Hashem fully forgives Klal Yisrael!

Now: Yom Kippur becomes the day of complete atonement for all generations. Like the Jews in the desert, we beg for forgiveness—and Hashem gives us a second chance.³⁴

Zoniac Zone



Key Takeaways

The Yemei Ratzon are a powerful time to recalculate and make sure we are headed in the direction we want. Hashem is closer than ever, helping us along our journey towards Him. And that journey called teshuvah doesn't mean being perfect. It doesn't mean never saying another word of *lashon hara*, never again spacing out through a Shemoneh Esrei, or never again saying something less than nice to your sibling — it just means you are getting back on the right path and realigning your direction. Don't think, "By next year I'll never

say *lashon hara* again," but "I want to become someone who speaks more positively." It's not about results. It's about choosing the road you want to travel.



From Driving to Selichos

When Moshe and Ruth first connected with Oorah, they were searching. Coming from a traditional background, they cherished their Jewish identity, but much of Torah life was unfamiliar territory. Ruth's heart was already leaning toward greater observance—especially keeping Shabbos—but they lived far from shul.

Moshe wanted to daven in shul, but walking the long distance felt impossible. So he drove. Ruth longed for him to stop, but when she turned to Rav Chaim Mintz for guidance, his advice surprised her: "Don't push. Let him grow at his own pace."

She listened.

Months passed. As Elul arrived, something shifted. The early-morning calls of Selichos stirred Moshe's heart. Together, the family began waking before dawn to join the minyan. The spiritual momentum carried forward. By the next year, every Shabbos morning at precisely 6:20 AM, the whole family - Moshe, Ruth, and their two boys - set out on a 2½-mile trek to shul. No cars. Just footsteps, laughter, and the rhythm of a family walking together

toward something higher.

Moshe's growth didn't stop there. After work each day, he began learning Daf Yomi with his boys by his side. Torah became the family's new language, one they spoke with excitement and pride.

The changes rippled through the entire home. The boys, who had once been in public school, now thrived in Torah schools thanks to Oorah's support. They began taking active roles in shul—reading from the Torah, leading Nishmat Kol Chai on Shabbos—turning what had once been distant traditions into deeply personal experiences.

Looking back, Moshe and Ruth see a life transformed—not in a single dramatic moment, but step by careful step. Each decision, each mitzvah, each effort brought them closer to Hashem and to each other. What began with questions and uncertainty, became a steady walk toward connection, meaning, and joy. Just one step, then another, until a family finds itself walking together, hand in hand, all the way to shul.



Life of a Shteiger



Standing up to the American dream
Did my time, made my choices
Went the distance, now I'm stead on my feet
Just a man and his will to Shteig

Many times, it can happen so fast
You're enticed to trade the Torah for a party
Don't lose your grip on your mission in life
You must fight just to keep it alive

It's the life of the Shteiger, it's the thrill of the fight
Risn' up to the challenge for survival
With the strength of a tiger, he's preparing to fight
And he's changing the course of his life...he's the Shteiger

Face to face, with the pull of the street
Standin' strong, fightin' fiercely
The Yetzer Harah fights, still we wont face defeat
Holdin' strong with our sights on the prize

It's the life of the Shteiger, it's the thrill of the fight
Risn' up to the challenge for survival
With the strength of a tiger, he's prepared to fight
And he's changing the course of his life...he's the Shteiger

Risn' up, straight to the top
Had the guts, without the glory
Went the distance, now I'm not gonna stop
Just a man and his will to Shteig!

It's the life of the Shteiger, it's the thrill of the fight
Risn' up to the challenge for survival
With the strength of a tiger, he's preparing to fight
And he's changing the course of his life...he's the Shteiger

The life of the Shteiger x4



Zoniac Challenge

The 40 days from Rosh Chodesh Elul to Yom Kippur represent renewal and new beginnings. How do these other "forties" relate to this theme?

- 1 It rained for 40 days during the flood in Noah's time.
- 2 Moshe went up to Har Sinai for 40 days to receive the Torah.
- 3 The Jews wandered in the desert for 40 years between leaving Mitzrayim and entering the Land of Israel.
- 4 A baby develops in its mother's womb for 40 weeks.



Zoniac Dilemma

Shooting for the Moon

Naava left the *Avinu Malkeinu* program buzzing. The speakers had painted a powerful picture: *Yemei Ratzon* - 40 days when Hashem is close, when every step counts, when one mitzvah could tip the scale for the whole world. Naava felt fired up. This is it. I'm going all in. That night, she pulled out a fresh notebook and titled a new page: *Kabbalos*. She listed five things:

- Wake up for Shacharis on time. Every day.
- Stop speaking lashon hara. Not even a word.
- Say Tehillim every day.
- Always wear a shell under my dress.
- Be nice to my siblings. All. The. Time.

By day two, she had already overslept, mumbled through half of Tehillim, and yelled at her brother for taking her charger without asking. Frustrated and embarrassed, Naava looked at the list. So much for that. She ripped out the page and shoved the notebook into her drawer. "I guess I'm not really cut out for this teshuvah thing..."

Is Naava right? What could she do differently to better take advantage of the Yemei Ratzon?



Daily Challenge

Focus on Hashem being Avinu (our Father), from Avinu Malkeinu (our King), and feel His love wash over you today.



Sources

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- 2) Shir Hashirim 6:3
- 3) Mishnah Berurah introduction to siman 581
- 4) Mesillas Yescharim Ch. 2
- 5) Yirmiyahu 8:6
- 6) Shir Hashirim 6:3
- 7) Based on Why Preparation Is Essential for a Spiritual Experience by Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein
- 8) Mishnah Berurah 581:6
- 9) Tur 581
- 10) Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 481:3
- 11) Mishnah Berurah 581:2
- 12) Rosh Hashana 17b
- 13) Shemos 34:6–7
- 14) Yirmiyahu 40–43
- 15) Hoshea 14:2
- 16) Yirmiyahu 13:23
- 17) Avodah Zarah 17a
- 18) Shaar Hakavanos Inyan Rosh Hashana
- 19) Hilchos Teshuvah 2:6
- 20) Yeshayahu 55:6
- 21) Rosh Hashana 18a
- 22) See Derech Chayim Shaar HaTefillah ch. 84; Kuntres HoAvodah, ch. 5; the maamar entitled Kinyan HaChayim 5688, ch. 13
- 23) Based on Sefer HaSichos 5748 Vol. I pp. 1-6
- 24) “Unesaneh Tokef,” Yamim Noraim Tefillah
- 25) Maharsha to Yevamos 49b
- 26) Tur, Shulchan Aruch, and Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim, 603:1
- 27) Makkos 10b
- 28) Yoma 38b
- 29) Based on Essay by Rabbi Heshy Kleinman, Mishpacha Magazine
- 30) “U’nesaneh Tokef” prayer
- 31) Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva, 3:4
- 32) Shemos 12:42
- 33) Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 481:2, Rama
- 34) Rambam Teshuvah 1:3, Gemara Yuma 85b
- 35) Yoma 80a
- 36) Rosh Hashana 17a
- 37) Bereishis 4:6–7
- 38) Based on Removing the Roadblocks to Teshuvah by Rabbi Levi Lebovits Mispacha Magazine 8-8-24



Dig Deeper *Resources for Advanced Learning*



**Shaarei
Teshuvah**
*Gateways of
Teshuvah*



**How Do I Prepare
for Rosh Hashanah?**
*Ask the Rabbi with
Rabbi Chaim Mintz*

<https://www.torahmates.org/jewish-resources/preparing-oneself-for-rosh-hashanah-ask-the-rabbi-with-rabbi-mintz/>



**Elul, My
Favorite
Month**
By Ann Goldberg

<https://www.torahmates.org/jewish-resources/elul-my-favorite-month/>

ROSH HASHANA

Jewish New Year

1

**What is
Rosh
Hashana?**

2

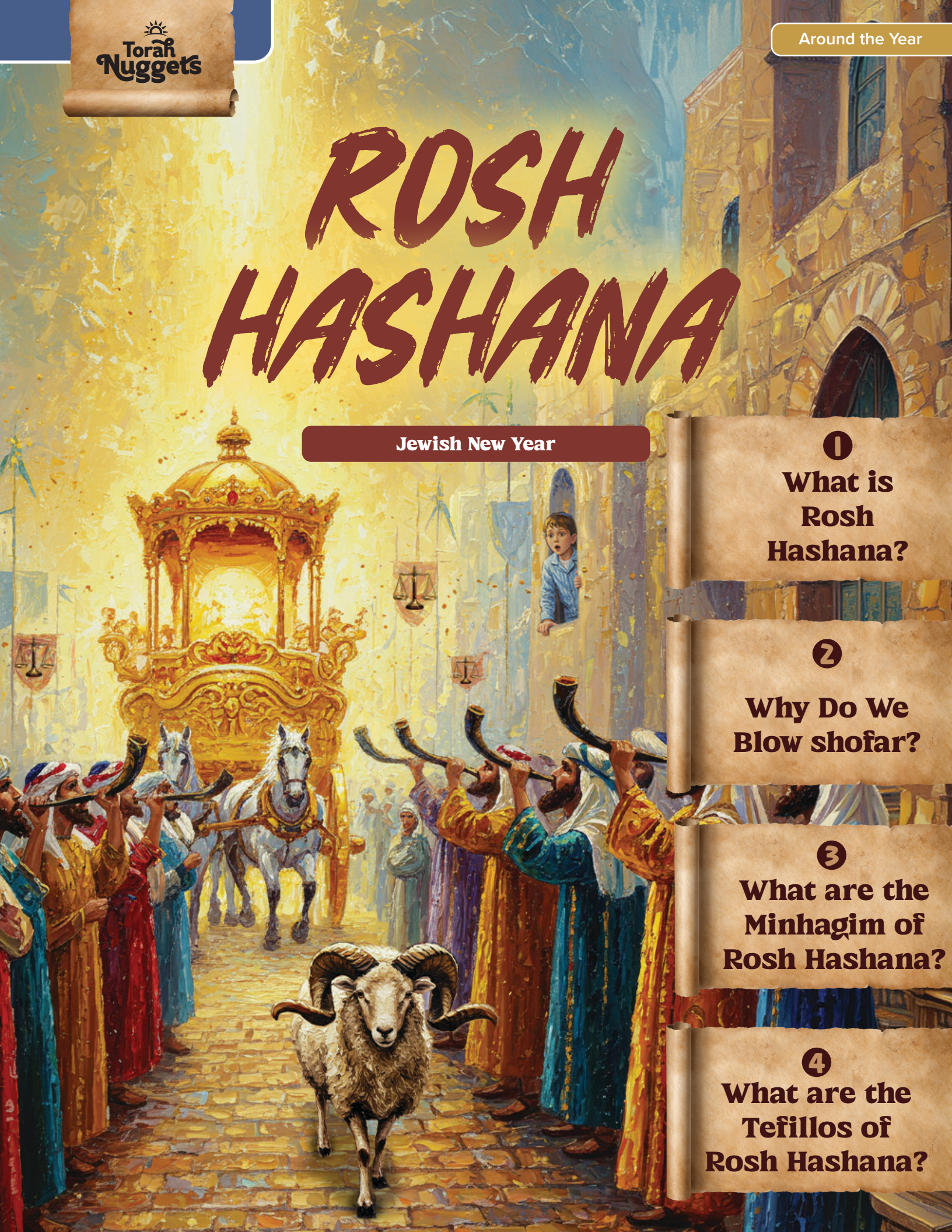
**Why Do We
Blow shofar?**

3

**What are the
Minhagim of
Rosh Hashana?**

4

**What are the
Tefillos of
Rosh Hashana?**



What is Rosh Hashana?



In a Nutshell

Rosh Hashana is the Jewish New Year. It is two days long and begins on the first day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei. It is one of the holiest and most important days on the Jewish calendar and is the first of the *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe, also known as the High Holidays). Rosh Hashana marks the first day of *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* (10 Days of Repentance) which concludes with Yom Kippur. On Rosh Hashana, Hashem reviews the actions of every person and decides what their coming year will be like.

A Day of Many Names

Rosh Hashana – “Head of the Year.” This is the most well-known name. Just like the head guides the rest of the body, Rosh Hashana sets the tone for the rest of the year.

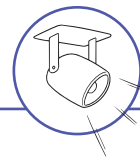
Yom Teruah – “Day of Shofar Blowing.” This is what the day is called in the Torah² because it’s a mitzvah to hear the shofar on Rosh Hashana.

Yom Hazikaron – “Day of Remembrance.” On this day, Hashem remembers everything we’ve done.

Yom Hadin – “Day of Judgment.” Hashem judges each person and decides exactly what their coming year will look like.

Crowning the King

Hashem’s Kingship is the central theme of Rosh Hashana. The *tefillos* refer to Him as King and express our longing for the day when the whole world will recognize His rule. In fact, the entire world was created for this purpose! A king unites his nation and leads it to greatness. Hashem created us so we could choose to accept Him as King over us and faithfully serve Him. That choice gives our lives meaning and helps the world achieve its true purpose. When we say, “Hashem is King,” we’re really saying, “We’re ready to make creation worthwhile!”



Spotlight

On Rosh Hashana we crown Hashem as King.

A Joyful Judgment

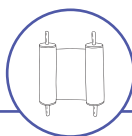
Rosh Hashana is a Yom Tov. We wear nice clothing, eat a festive *seudah*, and celebrate Hashem’s Kingship. All this shows our trust that after we repent and daven, Hashem will judge us with mercy.³ But at the same time, we recognize the seriousness of Rosh Hashana. It is the day Hashem decides who will live and who will die, so we don’t say *Hallel* or dress as fancy as we do on other *Yomim Tovim*.⁴

Birthday Judgment

On the first Rosh Hashana in history, Hashem created Adam and Chava. Although Creation had begun five days earlier, Rosh Hashana is considered the first day of the world¹ because it was the first time there was someone to choose between good and evil and fulfill Hashem’s plan for the universe! Hashem therefore established it as a day to evaluate how well His plan is being fulfilled. Every year on Rosh Hashana, Hashem judges if the world is achieving its goal, and if we are playing our role. All of mankind has responsibilities, but the Jewish people have the entire Torah to keep! That means every minute can be a challenge or an opportunity. On Rosh Hashana, Hashem weighs our every action, asking: *Is this person pushing the world toward perfection? Is he a valuable member of My Kingdom?*

The Shofar

The central mitzvah on both days of Rosh Hashana is listening to the blowing of the shofar (a ram’s horn). Its sounds remind us that Hashem is our King and that it’s time to reflect, refocus, and return to Him. The shofar doesn’t use words, but it speaks straight to the heart.



Spiritual Genetics

Different times in the Jewish year have special energies and powers. Rosh Hashana contains the energy of newness and fresh beginnings. It's when a person can amplify his ability to always be new and self-generating. Strengthening inspiration at the start of something is the key to building the stamina needed for when inspiration wanes.

Rosh Hashana is the start of the year, and all beginnings have unique spiritual force. Everything is determined by how something starts. This is because the beginning is when the basic building blocks are laid down. It is the basis for everything that will be built later. The closer something is to the beginning of its creation, the more potent and critical every detail is. For example, a small injury may not be significant to an adult but would be much more serious to an unborn baby during its development. And even the most minute change to the genes could have the most far-reaching results imaginable!

Practically, this means that our actions and behavior on Rosh Hashana have the potential to affect the entire year. Naturally, if our behavior on Rosh Hashana encodes the genetic material for our year, we want to ensure that we are encoding spiritual health and success for the coming months. While it is usually very difficult to change, on Rosh Hashana it is much easier to reshape the "genes" of one's character. This is why we try to live as perfectly as possible on Rosh Hashana. We are extra careful in our speech, performance

of *mitzvos*, and avoidance of sin. Many have a custom not to sleep during the day, in order that they will not have a "sleepy" year, but a "fully awake" one.

What is the source of Rosh Hashana's special energy? The first Rosh Hashana in history represents its true nature most powerfully: the day man was created. That is why Rosh Hashana always retains its power to re-create man. When we genuinely decide to elevate ourselves on Rosh Hashana and become inspired to live the coming year as higher beings, we tap into the day's energy as the day of human creation. The day has the power to energize real change and help a person become unrecognizably different.

Avraham Avinu said, "*Va'anochi afar va'efer* – And I am dust and ashes."⁵ Torah is never mere poetry! "Ashes" are what remains when something has been burned away; "dust" is the rich soil where growth occurs. Avraham constantly worked on himself, using his core abilities to continue growing. No part of his development continued passively. He was constantly alive and constantly growing. That is the power of *chiddush*, self-generating newness, the source of spiritual life and growth.

Rosh Hashana correctly lived should leave one supercharged. The energy should be so great that the rest of the year is lived, not just as a passive continuation of the past, but as a constant experience of newness. That is Jewish living!⁶

Do you know of anything in Jewish history that miraculously maintained its freshness and newness?



Powerful Rosh Hashana Beginnings ⁷

Avraham Avinu was born—a new beginning for mankind.

Yaakov Avinu was born—marking the beginning of the Shevatim who built Klal Yisrael.

Sarah Imeinu, Rachel Imeinu, and Chana, mother of Shmuel Hanavi, were 'remembered' by Hashem and decreed to give birth after not being able to have children for many years.

Yosef was freed from prison after 12 years and became viceroy of Egypt, which began the path to *galus Mitzrayim*, *yetzias Mitzrayim*, *Matan Torah*, and Klal Yisrael eventually entering Eretz Yisrael.

The Jews in Egypt stopped their slave labor while waiting for the ten *makkos* to finish so Moshe Rabbeinu could lead them to freedom.

Why do we blow Shofar?

The Main Event

On Rosh Hashana, Hashem commanded us to hear the shofar being blown. The shofar is like the trumpet blast of a king's coronation. Its piercing cry also serves as a moving call to do teshuvah. This mitzvah is so important that if someone can either hear the shofar or daven (but not both), they should choose to hear the shofar!⁸ The main shofar blasts are the ones blown during *chazaras hashatz*.

The Judge's Tip



Imagine you had a court case and the judge himself told you exactly what defense to use to win. That's what happens on Rosh Hashana! The Medrash says that Hashem, our King and Judge, told us to blow the shofar because it brings up the *zechus* (merit) of the *Avos* (forefathers) and *Akeidas Yitzhak*,⁹ when Avraham Avinu was ready to sacrifice his son Yitzchak with complete devotion to Hashem. Although Hashem stopped him at the last second, the merit of the Akeidah stays with us forever. The shofar inspires us to be just as devoted as our *Avos* were. If we commit to following in their footsteps, Hashem considers it as if we ourselves passed the test of the Akeidah!¹⁰ The shofar also has the power to change *din* (strict justice) into *rachamim* (mercy)¹¹ and silence the Satan.¹² With Hashem guiding us to victory in judgment, the deck is stacked in our favor!



Corny Corner

**What has one horn
and gives milk?**

A milk truck

Three Kinds of Cries

The *ba'al tokeiah* is the person chosen to blow the shofar for the congregation. After he makes the brachos,¹³ everyone answers "Amen" and listens quietly to all the tekiyas.¹⁴ The *ba'al tokeiah* blows in a special pattern made up of three types of sounds. **Tekiah** is one long, straight blast. **Shevarim** is a set of three short, wailing blasts. **Teruah** is nine quick, broken sounds. These blasts are repeated in different combinations over Rosh Hashana.

Blast off!

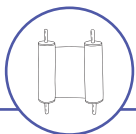
Technically, you only need to hear 9 blasts to fulfill the mitzvah - three sets of *tekiah*, *teruah*, *tekia*. However, there are different opinions on how to blow these sounds, so *mid'Rabanan* (from our sages) we blow three versions to make sure we do the mitzvah correctly. This adds up to 30 blasts. The minhag (custom) is to blow 100 blasts,¹⁵ by adding 30 more during the chazzan's repetition of *Musaf* (and in some communities during silent *Shemoneh Esrei*, too). Extra blasts are added after *Musaf* to bring the total to 100 blasts.

Last But Not Least

At the very end of davening on Rosh Hashana, there's a special minhag to blow an extra-long *tekiah* so the Satan won't be able to accuse us of finishing shofar and then running off to eat and forgetting the seriousness of the day.¹⁶ That final, drawn-out sound says: "We're still focused. We know it's a day of judgment." Some Sefardim have a custom to end with a long *teruah* instead. Either way, it's one last blast to show that we're not done thinking about what really matters.

Shofar vs. Shabbos

If Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbos, Chazal forbade blowing the shofar to prevent someone from accidentally carrying it through a public area, which is forbidden on Shabbos.¹⁷ Worried about losing our spiritual defense on Rosh Hashana? Don't be - the very fact that we hold back from blowing in honor of Shabbos becomes our defense! On that Rosh Hashana, the merit of Shabbos itself takes the place of the shofar to protect us.¹⁸



The Silent Cry of the Shofar²³

The Talmud says that the verses of the shofar in *Musaf* have the power to bring the remembrance of the Jewish people before Hashem for their benefit.¹⁹ What is it about the shofar that can “influence” Hashem to be merciful to Klal Yisrael?

It is humbling and frightening to think about Hashem being our King and Judge. He sees and remembers every single action and detail. Nothing is hidden from Him! How can any person hope to emerge with a favorable verdict?

Many people are very far from the most basic ideas of the Torah. Others are generally observant but still have certain habits or sins that have become so ingrained they no longer even feel wrong. A classic example is *lashon hara*—gossip and slander. People joke, make witty comments, and tear each other down as entertainment. How can an honest person find the words to confess and feel real regret if deep down they still think their behavior is acceptable? It is like a stain that will not wash out. We lack the words to even *begin* propelling ourselves forward.

But even then, there is hope. Even when we cannot find the right words to express our inner feelings, there is still the wordless groan of an aching heart that longs to return to Hashem. That sound is the shofar.

The shofar is a simple, primitive instrument. Its sound is raw and piercing. Yet that is exactly why it is so powerful. Its sound represents the wordless cry of the soul that wants to come home. It says, “*Retzoneinu la’asos retzonecha*—it

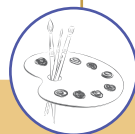
is my desire to perform Your will, but I do not know how! I don’t even have the words to ask for help. But in my heart, I still belong to You.”

Even if we can’t fully understand the reason for mitzvos, the symbolism of shofar is clear: It calls to every Jew: “Wake up from your sleep! Return to Hashem!”²⁰ It is like a bugle calling soldiers to rise and return to duty. Its cry is the cry from the Jewish heart that says, “I belong here!” and Hashem’s response echoing back, “Yes, my child, I am holding the door open for you.” The shofar shows that when words fail you, no words are needed.

Our Sages ask, *through* what can we bring our remembrance before Hashem?²¹ They are asking, “How can we ever be worthy to stand before Hashem in judgment?” Our words and confessions often feel empty because we are so stuck in our sins. But then, they answer, “*through* the shofar.” The shofar shows that there is still a deep and raw place in the heart, far beyond words, that no sin has ever affected, and so even the most stubborn stains can be washed away, and we can come home.

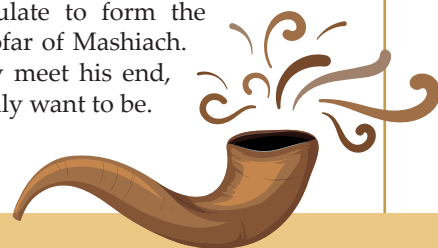
This is why the shofar confuses the Satan and makes him think Mashiach arrived.²² He knows that one day, all the broken sounds of Jewish longing throughout the ages will join together and blast through our habit and apathy. They will accumulate to form the awesome sound of the Shofar of Mashiach. Then the Satan will finally meet his end, and we will be who we really want to be.

How can words limit what the soul wants to express?



Can you explain the cover art?

See how many details you can explain!



WHAT SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT DURING SHOFAR BLOWING?

The shofar is the heart of Rosh Hashana. The most important thing to have in mind is to fulfill the mitzvah of hearing it—*lishmoa kol shofar*.²⁴ But our *chachamim* teach that the shofar carries deep meaning. Here are some powerful thoughts to reflect on during the blasts:²⁵

Wake-Up Call: The shofar is like a spiritual alarm clock, shaking us awake to do teshuvah.

The Akeidah: The ram’s horn reminds Hashem—and us—of *Akeidas Yitzchak*, and calls us to that level of devotion.

Mashiach: The shofar of *geulah* will one day announce Mashiach’s arrival.²⁶ We blow, hoping and davening for

that day when the whole world will know Hashem is King.

Crowning Hashem: Just like trumpets at a king’s coronation, the shofar declares Hashem is our King.

Matan Torah: The sound of the shofar was heard at Har Sinai.²⁷ It reminds us of our unique mission as the nation that accepted the Torah and pushes us to renew our commitment to Torah and strengthen our connection with Hashem.

A Good Year: The cry of the shofar reminds us to cry out to Hashem for blessing, health, and livelihood.

Judgment Day: Like a battle trumpet, the shofar signals that the Heavenly court is in session. It calls us to prepare through teshuvah and tefillah.

What are the Tefillos of Rosh Hashana?



Joyful or Solemn?

If you've been in shul on Rosh Hashana, you've probably noticed how the tunes shift from joyful celebration to solemn pleading. One moment we're rejoicing in Hashem's kingship; the next, we are crying out for our lives and those we love. Some emphasize heartfelt crying on Rosh Hashana,³⁰ yet others say we should be filled with joy.³¹ These approaches really go hand in hand: We daven and cry sincerely, knowing our lives hang in the balance, but then, we rejoice, trusting that Hashem will bless us with a good year.³²

What Are We Davening For?

Rosh Hashana is when every detail of the coming year is decided, yet there are hardly any requests for health, wealth, or peace in our tefillos! That's because the day is really all about declaring Hashem's kingship and pledging our loyalty to Him. We push aside our personal worries and rejoice on the day of His coronation. This is actually our greatest defense in Heaven!²⁸ When the Satan sees shuls packed on Rosh Hashana with people that aren't focused on money or success, but on Hashem's honor, our pure devotion silences accusations and invokes Hashem's mercy for us.²⁹

1, 2, 3 – Change Your Decree!

One of the most famous and powerful *piyutim* for Ashkenazim on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is *Unesaneh Tokef*. It describes how Hashem judges each person and decides exactly what their coming year will be like. But the most important line is said out loud, all together: “*U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin es ro'a hagezeirah!*” - Repentance, prayer, and charity remove the harsh decree!” Most Sefardim do not recite this prayer.

Machzor Memos

We daven a special Rosh Hashana version of *Ma'ariv*, *Shacharis*, *Musaf*, and *Mincha*, so it's important to use a *machzor* instead of a regular siddur. The chazzan repeats each *Shemoneh Esrei* (besides *Ma'ariv*) out loud, called *chazaras hashatz*. We also add many extra *piyutim* (special poems and prayers).

Three-Pronged Prayer

When you daven Musaf on Rosh Hashana, you are stepping into one of the most powerful moments of the year. This special tefillah has three big sections:³³

Malchiyos – Kingship: Here, we stand before Hashem and crown Him King over the whole universe. We ask Him to fill the world with respect for Him so everyone will serve Him.

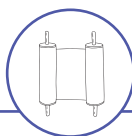
Zichronos – Remembrances: This part is about the perfection of Hashem's justice because He knows everything. We ask Hashem to remember us for good and to bring honor and joy to the Jewish people.

Shofros – Shofar Blasts: The shofar is connected to Hashem revealing His presence, causing all evil to disappear. This happened when Hashem revealed Himself at Matan Torah, when the shofar grew louder and louder, and it will happen again when the Great Shofar announces Mashiach's arrival!¹²

Learning from the Leining

First day: We *lein* (read) from the Torah³⁴ about how Sarah Imeinu was blessed with a child after many years of waiting. The *haftarah*³⁵ tells a similar story: how Chana poured out her heart in tefillah and was answered with the birth of Shmuel Hanavi. These readings remind us of the power of a heartfelt tefillah, encouraging us to daven with sincerity and emotion.

Second day: We *lein* about the *Akeidas Yitzchak*³⁶, a moment of ultimate devotion when Avraham Avinu was ready to give up everything for Hashem. This reminds us of the level of commitment we strive for and also calls upon the great *zechusim* (merits) of our Avos to help us earn favorable judgment. The *haftarah*³⁷ of the second day highlights the power of teshuvah.³⁸



Unesaneh Tokef – A Cry from the Soul

Few *piyutim* stir the soul like *Unesaneh Tokef*. Chanted during *Musaf* on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, its haunting words remind us of the awe of these Days of Judgment. It opens with the majesty of the day, how Hashem's throne is exalted, and all of creation passes before Him, one by one. Every deed, even the ones we've forgotten, is recorded and judged. It continues, "*On Rosh Hashana it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who will die, and who will be born. Who will live and who will die. Who by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by beast. Who by hunger and who by thirst, who by storm and who by plague... Who will rest and who will wander, who will live in serenity and who will be distraught... who will be impoverished and who will be made rich...*" Everything is decided now. And then comes the powerful outcry—one we all say together aloud: "*Uteshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah ma'avirin es ro'a hagezeirah.*" *Teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *zedakah* have the power to remove the harshest decree. We're not helpless—Hashem taught us what to do!

The *piyut* continues, praising Hashem for His mercy: He is slow to anger and quick to forgive. Hashem doesn't want to punish us—He longs for us to return. Our sins can't affect Him! We are just frail mortals, while He is the Eternal King. We conclude

by asking Hashem to forgive us not because we deserve it, but for His sake—so the world can see His mercy and His Name will be glorified. These words lead directly into *Kedushah*, where we sanctify Hashem's Name, together with the angels on high. It is a most powerful *piyut*!

Perhaps even more powerful than the words is the story behind them: Reb Amnon of Mainz was a wealthy, respected Jewish friend and advisor to a bishop. The bishop insisted that R' Amnon convert to Christianity. One day, after being pressured again and again to convert, Reb Amnon, told the ruler, "Give me three days to think it over."

Immediately, he was filled with grief. How could he have given the impression, even for a second, that he'd consider abandoning Hashem?

He returned home shattered. He spent three days in solitude, fasting and praying that he be forgiven. On the third day, when he didn't return to the bishop, he was brought to the palace by force, where the bishop demanded an answer. Reb Amnon replied that he had sinned with his tongue by saying that he would consider the matter, so he said his tongue should be cut out in punishment. The bishop, enraged, said, "Your tongue didn't sin—your feet did, by refusing to come!" He ordered Reb Amnon's limbs severed, joint by joint. After each amputation R' Amnon was asked if he would convert, and each time he refused. The bishop ordered he be sent home, maimed and crippled, together with his amputated limbs.

Rosh Hashana arrived a few days later. Reb Amnon asked to be brought to the *Aron Kodesh* (Ark). Right before *Kedusha*, he asked to be allowed to sanctify Hashem's Name in shul, as he had done in the bishop's palace. He cried out a stirring *piyut* he composed, *Unesaneh Tokef*. As soon as he finished, his soul returned to its Maker.

Later, Reb Amnon appeared in a dream to R' Klonimus ben Meshulam, a great Talmudic and Kabbalistic scholar of Mainz, and taught him the *piyut*, asking him to spread it to Jewish communities everywhere. And so it became one of the most beloved and moving parts of the *Yamim Nora'im*.³⁹

Why do you think *Unesaneh Tokef* became such an highlight of the *Yamim Nora'im* davening?



Tefillah Time

עֲלֵינוּ לְשַׁבַּח לְאֲדוֹן הַכֹּל, לְתַת גְּדֻלָּה לְיוֹצֵר בְּרָאשִׁית - *Aleinu* is something we say all the time, at the end of each tefillah. Some of us recite it three times a day! Because we're so used to it, it's easy to forget how powerful it really is. *Aleinu* is one of our oldest tefillos, composed by Yehoshua bin Nun, *talmid* of Moshe Rabbeinu! Later, the *Anshei K'neses HaGedolah* placed it in the *Musaf* prayers of Rosh Hashana, right in the section of *Malchiyus*, where we declare that Hashem is King over the whole world. When we say *Aleinu* on Rosh Hashana, the *Aron Kodesh* is opened. This moment is like standing in the *Kodesh HaKodashim* in the Beis Hamikdash itself!⁴⁰ We should say *Aleinu* with awe and seriousness. All the angels in Heaven listen up when we say it, and Hashem Himself joins them as they respond, "Fortunate is the nation who is like this!"⁴¹ This happens every time we recite *Aleinu*, not only on Rosh Hashana!

What are the Minhagim of Rosh Hashana?



Check your mail!
These prayers are listed on the Shana Tovah cards sent out by Oorah.

Erev Rosh Hashana: Clearing the Slate

On Erev Rosh Hashana, it's customary for men to do *Hataras Nedarim* after Shacharis. This means standing in front of three men and declaring that you regret any promises or vows you might have made without realizing it. Why do we do this? Because speech is powerful, and breaking a vow, even by accident, is a serious sin. Before Rosh Hashana, we want to start the year clean and not be held back by promises we forgot about. (This doesn't cancel every vow. If you remember a specific promise, ask a rabbi if/how to properly annul it.)⁴⁴

Dress with Serious Confidence

Rosh Hashana is a serious Day of Judgment, but it is still a Yom Tov! Some have the *minhag* (custom) to fast as a part of teshuvah on Erev Rosh Hashana. Today, many people don't fast at all, while others observe the fast only until after *chatzos* (midday).⁴² Some men to a mikvah in preparation for the holy day. The custom is to take a haircut (or at least look neat), shower, and wear nice clothes. We don't dress as fancy as we would for a regular Yom Tov, but we look presentable to show that we trust Hashem will have mercy on us and give us a good year after we do our part by repenting and praying.⁴³

Rosh Hashana Greetings

On the first night of Rosh Hashana, there's a special way to wish someone a good year:

To a man, say: "*Leshanah tovah tikasev veseichasem*"

To a woman, say: "*Leshanah tovah tikasevee veseichaseimee*"

This means: "May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year." From the 2nd night until Yom Kippur, you can wish people, "*Gemar chasimah tovah*," which means: "A good final sealing [in the Book of Life]."⁵⁰

Simanim: Sweet Signs for a Sweet Year

On the first night of Rosh Hashana (some do it both nights), there's a minhag to eat special foods called *simanim*—"signs" for a good year. Common *simanim* include: apple and honey, pomegranate, carrots, gourd, leek, fish, fish head, beets and dates. Before eating each one, we say a short prayer asking Hashem to give us blessings connected to that food. The main reason for *simanim* is to remind ourselves to do teshuvah and daven for a good year⁴⁵ and to show our *bitachon* (trust) that Hashem will make things sweet for us.⁴⁶ That is also why we dip our challah in honey⁴⁷ and have round challos, which symbolize long life.⁴⁸ Many people avoid sharp, sour or bitter foods, but what's even more important is to stay sweet yourself! Be pleasant and happy, trust Hashem to accept your teshuvah, and of course, try to improve your ways—that's the best way to deserve a good year!⁴⁹

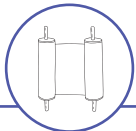
No Nuts Now



There's a custom not to eat nuts, as they cause you to produce extra saliva and can disturb davening. Another reason is because the word *egoz* (walnut) has the same *gematria* (number value) as *cheit* (sin), something we want to stay far away from, especially on the *Yom HaDin*!⁵¹

Tashlich: Casting Away Our Sins

On the first afternoon of Rosh Hashana (unless it's Shabbos), there's a special minhag called *Tashlich*. Many go to a body of water, like a river, lake, or ocean, and say a short prayer asking Hashem to help us get rid of our sins. This minhag comes from the *pasuk*: "*And You shall cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.*"⁵² This custom can also be done after Rosh Hashana until Hoshana Rabbah.



Why Two Days?



The Mishnah says that on Rosh Hashana: "...all who are on the earth pass before Him, one by one, like *bnei maron*." The Gemara gives three explanations for the term *bnei maron*: first, like sheep passing one by one under the shepherd's staff; second, like people ascending the narrow steep path in the area of Maron, and third, like the soldiers of King David counted individually before going into battle.⁵³ Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe explains that at the time of judgment, we stand before our Creator totally alone. It's just us before Hashem. We have no plaintiff or witness: "*Hashem is the Judge, the Witness, and the One taking us to court.*"⁵⁴ We have no one else to transfer responsibility for our actions or to blame for our failings.

Each individual alone is responsible for all that he did or did not do.⁵⁵ However, the Gemara then continues with a seemingly opposite idea: "*Rabba bar bar Chana said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: 'They are all surveyed with one scan.'*" This sounds like we are judged all at once, as a unit. Which one is it? Rav Dessler suggests that there are in fact two kinds of judgment, and we find hints to this in many Jewish sources.⁵⁶ Rosh Hashana is unusual in that it is the only Yom Tov that is observed for two days in *Chutz L'Aretz* (the Diaspora) and in Eretz Yisrael. The basic reason for this is because witnesses of the new moon could not always arrive on the first day of the month, so two days were kept out of doubt. But some say that each day has a different type of judgment. The Ramak, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, explains in his commentary *Ohr*

Yakar that the first day's judgment is individual, while the second day's judgment is general.⁵⁷

The Spinka Rebbe explains beautifully that every Jew lives simultaneously on two planes: as an individual and as a member of the Jewish people. We are judged in both these arenas: first, for how we have lived as an individual, and second, for how we have contributed to the Jewish people. An individual's destiny is inextricably linked to the destiny of the community — Klal Yisrael.

There is no way to escape this responsibility. A person cannot focus exclusively on personal spiritual growth, as essential as that is, without also considering how to contribute to the destiny and well-being of our people. But there is an empowering message hidden here, too.

On the first day, each person is judged by their own merits and transgressions, weighed on a precise scale known only to Hashem Himself.⁵⁸ On the second day, we are judged collectively — evaluated by our contribution and value to the Jewish people as a whole. This means that even if, G-d forbid, a person is judged unfavorably on the first day, his sentence can be overturned if he is considered necessary for the Jewish nation! A person who fills an important role in Klal Yisrael may be given more time, simply because of the benefit they bring to others. We cannot know how we will be judged on the first day of Rosh Hashana. We learn more Torah, do teshuvah, daven and give tzedakah, hoping to tip the scale in our favor. But perhaps just as importantly, we can resolve to take on a greater role in our community and become indispensable to our family, our neighbors, and friends. By doing so, we hope to merit to be judged favorably on both days of Rosh Hashana.

"If the king needs the services of the condemned man, he is brought back from the gallows."

How does this connect to the judgment of Rosh Hashana? Which day would it refer to?

New Night? New Fruit

On the second night of Rosh Hashana, there's a custom to have a new seasonal fruit, one you haven't eaten yet this year. Why do we do this? There were different opinions whether you should say the brachah of *Shehechyanu* on the second night of Rosh Hashana, as we do on other Yamim Tovim. To avoid any problems, we have a new seasonal fruit, so the *Shehechyanu* blessing, which is said when experiencing something for the first time that year, can also go on the fruit (just in case), though if you don't have one, you should still make the brachah. So grab a new fruit, make a brachah, and enjoy starting the year with something fresh and sweet!



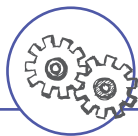
Torah challenge

בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שַׁבָּתוֹן זִכְרוֹן תְּרוּעָה מִקְרָא־מִקְדָּשׁ:

In the seventh month, on the first of the month, it shall be a Shabbos (rest) for you, a remembrance [of Klal Yisrael through] the shofar blast, a holy occasion. (Vayikra 23:24)

This is a source for Rosh Hashana in the Torah. What is interesting about the Torah's date of Rosh Hashanah? Can you explain it?

Zoniac Zone



Thriving Through Surviving Davening

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are full of tefillah—hours and hours spent in shul. Even if the davening is uplifting and powerful, it can feel endless. Aside from taking some breaks, how can one make it easier and more meaningful?

One secret is **preparation**. Getting a machzor with English translation (such as Artscroll) can be a game changer. If you spend even a little time during Elul reviewing the tefillos and getting familiar with what's coming, everything feels smoother and more meaningful.

Leave yourself “**breadcrumbs**.” Write notes or stick reminders in your machzor about what each section means or what you want to daven for.

And finally, try to **daven in a place you know**. When you're used to the tunes and the way things are done, you feel more comfortable. A little preparation can turn a long day of davening into an experience you'll look forward to!

Quotable Quote

It is easier to proclaim G-d as King over the whole universe than it is to accept Him as King over ourselves as individuals!

-R' Yisrael Salanter



Steady Inspiration

As Rosh Hashana approached, Zone counselor Chana Pogrow and her TorahMate, Brittany, decided to spend the Yom Tov together at TheZone. It was a decision that Chana made with a little trepidation; she wanted to have a meaningful davening, and yet she knew that shul would be a challenge for Brittany, whose Hebrew was still not fluent. Would she be able to weather six or seven hours of following along in a Machzor?

Yom Tov arrived and the two girls stood side-by-side in shul. Chana occasionally looked over at her companion to see how she was doing, and each time she did, she saw the same sight. Brittany moved along like a slow, steady train progressing down the tracks, never stopping, reading line by

line, word by word. Occasionally, she would lose her place and ask Chana for help. Then she would resume her journey. Davening lasted until 3 p.m., a total of almost seven hours from the beginning. Brittany never budged from her place.

During the break, Chana went to visit her friend Mindy, another Zone counselor. Mindy hadn't been feeling well the night before. “How was your davening?” Chana asked her. “Are you feeling better?” “I'll tell you the truth, Chana,” Mindy said. “I wasn't feeling great this morning, so I figured I'd go to shul and then take a break when I needed it. But when I looked over and saw Brittany, who can barely read Hebrew, sticking it out hour after hour, how could I leave?”



Zoniac Challenge

Although this is the most famous Rosh Hashana, there are actually three other heads of the year. Do you know the Hebrew date for each of these Heads of the Years? Add the date or Hebrew month in the blanks below.

1 1st of N _ _ s _ _ : This is how the months are referenced throughout Tanach.⁵⁹ It is also the “New Year for Festivals.” This means that the first of the Shalosh Regalim is in this month.

2 1st of _ l _ l: In the times of the Beis Hamikdash, there was an obligation to bring every tenth animal of one's flock as a korban in the Beis Hamikdash each year.⁶⁰ Any animals born before this date are part of the previous year's flock.

3 _ _ th of _ _ v _ t: This is the new year for trees, when the sap rises to nurture the fruits of the coming spring, and many have the custom to eat fruits, particularly those of the seven species with which the Eretz Yisrael is blessed.



Sound of the Shofar



It's that time of year again
Summer has come to an end
The air is cooler and leaves are changing
Jews awaken early, no sleeping
And in shuls all across the world they hear
The sound is clear
It's the sound of the Shofar

And each one is not alone
It's voice is heard across the globe
Rosh Chodesh Elul til it's Yom Kippur
Once you hear it then you'll know for sure
That it's time for you to return to who you were
Feel your soul stir
From the sound of the Shofar

And as we all gather around
And listen to that thunderous sound
We all stand without speaking
We all stand there listening
And we yearn to remain close to Hashem
This year again
From the sound of the Shofar

And on Rosh Hashana Day
As we stand in The Zone and pray
We ask to be put in the book of life
Peace and happiness and no more strife
And we ask Hashem to abolish all our fears
No one dares
Disturb the sound of the Shofar

We pray for a future time
When G-d's glory light will shine
And together we will hear that call
Mashiach will come and redeem us all
We'll return to the land of Yisrael
We'll know it's real
From the sound of the Shofar



Did You Know?

The mazel (Zodiac) of Tishrei, which begins with Rosh Hashana, is a scale.

Why do you think that is?



Zoniac Dilemma

The Rosh Hashana Sleepover

Eli had been looking forward to it for weeks—his best friend Jordan was finally hosting a big sleepover. Pizza, movies, games, and a bunch of their classmates all in one place. The problem? It was scheduled for the night before Rosh Hashana. Eli tried to convince himself it was no big deal. After all, the sleepover would end in the morning, and he could just head straight home to his family. But as the day got closer, he started to feel uneasy. He knew Rosh Hashana wasn't just another day. It was the start of the new year, the Day of Judgment, when Hashem looks at everyone's deeds. Shouldn't he be getting ready—mentally and spiritually—instead of staying up past midnight eating chips and playing video games? When he mentioned it to Jordan, Jordan rolled his eyes. "It's just a holiday. You'll be fine. Besides, you can pray anytime." Eli felt a pang in his chest. He knew it wasn't just any holiday. Still, he didn't want to be the only kid who missed out. His other friends were all excited, and he didn't want them thinking he was too "religious" or serious. That night, Eli lay in bed, wondering what kind of start to the year he really wanted—and whether he'd regret his choice later.



What would you do?



Daily Challenge

Once a day, actively crown Hashem as King over yourself by asking, "What does Hashem want me to do in this situation?"



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- 3) Mishnah Berurah 581:25
- 4) Ibid
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- 6) Living Inspired, Rabbi Akiva Tatz
- 7) Rosh Hashana 10b–11a
- 8) Shulchan Aruch 595:1
- 9) Vayikra Raba 29:7, Yalkut Shimoni Emor #645
- 10) Arugas Habosem (from Eitz Yosef) printed in Otzar Hatefilos
- 11) Pesikta D'Rav Kahana #23
- 12) Rosh Hashana 16b
- 13) Shulchan Aruch 585:2, Mishnah Berurah 585:5, Sha'ar Hatziyun 585:15.
- 14) Shulchan Aruch 592:3, and Chayei Adam 141:9
- 15) Mishna Berurah 596:2
- 16) Tur 596:1 and Taz there. (See also Ba'al Hamaor at the end of Rosh Hashana, and Shibolei Haleket 301-302 for a slight basis for this custom from the Gemara)
- 17) Shulchan Aruch 588:5
- 18) Oznaim Letorah, Vayikrah 23:24
- 19) Rosh Hashana 16a, 34b
- 20) Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 3:4
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- 22) Rosh Hashana 16b
- 23) Adapted from Artscroll Rosh Hashana Machzor Overview
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- 25) All of these are based on R. Saadiah Gaon, as quoted by Avudraham and found in some Rosh Hashana machzorim.
- 26) Yeshayah 27:13
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- 28) Drashas Chasam Sofer on 27 of Elul 5,595
- 29) Rav Elyashiv
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- 33) Sefer Haikkarim; Ramchal
- 34) Bereishis 21
- 35) Samuel 1, 1:1-2:10
- 36) Bereishis 22
- 37) Jeremiah 31:1-19
- 38) Meiri on Rosh Hashana 16a, Elef Hamagen 601:3
- 39) Ohr Zaruah, Siman 276
- 40) Levush end of ch. 133
- 41) Mishnah Berurah 132:2:8
- 42) Tur 581, Beis Yosef; Darchei Moshe; Magen Avraham 9; Pri Megadim, Eishel Avraham 9; Elyah Rabbah 25; Matei Ephraim 581:38.
- 43) Mishnah Berurah 581:25
- 44) Aruch Hashulchan 581:12
- 45) Meiri Horiyos 12a, Mishnah Berurah 583:2 (quoting Shelah)
- 46) Chochmos Shlomo 583
- 47) Mishna Berurah 583:3
- 48) Rabbi Shimon Sofer in Shiur Maon, printed in the back of Toras Moshe, 4th edition
- 49) Mishnah Berurah 583:5
- 50) Mishnah Berurah 585:25
- 51) Remah 583:2
- 52) Michah 7:19
- 53) Rosh Hashana 18a
- 54) Avos, 4:22
- 55) Alei Shur, Vol. II, p. 413
- 56) Michtav M'Eliyahu, Vol. 2, Rosh Hashana
- 57) Ohr Yakar (Ramak)
- 58) Ibid
- 59) Shemos 12:2
- 60) Mishneh Torah, Bechoros 6:2



Dig Deeper Resources for Advanced Learning



**Rosh Hashanah:
Its Significance,
Laws, And
Prayers**

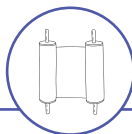


Pathway to Prayer
*Rosh Hashanah and
Yom Kippur Amidah,
Sephardic Custom*



**Happy Rosh
Hashanah!**

torahmates.org/jewish-resources/happy-rosh-hashanah-day-of-joy/



Tzom Gedalia

Most people understand why we fast on the 10th of Teves, 17th of Tammuz, and Tisha B'Av, as they mark the process of the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash and the end of Jewish life in Israel on two separate occasions. But why do we have a fast day for the assassination of Gedaliah ben Achikam?

He may have been a great rabbi and leader, but throughout Jewish history, many great leaders have been killed. Think about the Ten Martyrs who were brutally murdered by the Romans, like Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava¹³, who was a great *Tanna* who was brutally executed by the Romans for ordaining students at a time when *semicha* was banned. The Romans pierced his body with 300 spears¹⁴, yet we do not have a fast day in his memory. What makes Gedalia's death so important that every Jew is obligated to mourn it every year on Tzom Gedaliah?

Gedaliah's assassination was so much more than the loss of one man, no matter how great he and his individual influence may have been. Gedalia's death was the final blow to Jewish independence after the destruction of the First Temple. More than that, it was a tragedy caused by Jews turning against each other. The fast of Tzom Gedaliah reminds us that internal hatred and division can be just as dangerous as any enemy from the outside.

Who Was Gedaliah and What Happened to Him?

Gedaliah ben Achikam was chosen by the Babylonians to be the governor of the remaining Jews in Eretz Yisrael after the First Beis Hamikdash was destroyed in 423 BCE. Most of the Jewish people had been exiled to Bavel, but some were allowed to stay and live under Gedaliah's leadership. He encouraged the Jews to rebuild their lives, plant crops, and have hope for the future¹⁵.

However, not everyone supported Gedaliah's leadership. A man named Yishmael ben Nesanyah, who was from the royal family of Yehudah, believed that Gedaliah was a traitor for working with the Babylonians. He planned to assassinate him, and Gedaliah was warned by his loyal

friend, Yochanan ben Kareiach, multiple times about this threat. But Gedaliah refused to believe that a fellow Jew would do such a thing¹⁶. His insistence on not listening to *lashon hara* was misplaced in this instance, since a person should take precaution when warned of harm, without actually accepting the words as true¹⁷.

On, or just after, Rosh Hashanah, Yishmael and his men came to Gedaliah, pretending to be friendly. While Gedaliah was hosting them for a meal, they suddenly attacked, killing him and many others¹⁸. After this, fear and chaos spread. The remaining Jews in the land panicked and fled to Egypt, officially ending Jewish self-rule in Eretz Yisrael for that time¹⁹.

The Rambam explains²⁰ that the fast (which is held on the third of Tishrei, as one cannot fast on Rosh Hashanah) is about both mourning Gedaliah's death and also understanding the consequences. His assassination led to the complete collapse of Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael. The Jewish people had lost their land, their Temple, and now even the small community that had remained.

Fast days are meant to make us think and do *teshuvah*, not just feel uncomfortable and sad²¹. The first Beis Hamikdash was destroyed because of the three cardinal sins—idolatry, immorality, and murder²². But Gedaliah's death reminds us of a different kind of tragedy: when Jews turn against each other. Even though the first Beis Hamikdash fell due to widespread *avodah zarah*, the final blow to Jewish settlement after its destruction came from an act of internal betrayal. This pattern repeated itself later, with the second Beis Hamikdash being destroyed because of *sinas chinam* (baseless hatred).

By fasting on Tzom Gedaliah, we are reminded that both external and internal dangers threaten Jewish survival. Whether it is abandoning Torah values or allowing hatred and division to tear us apart, our actions shape the future of our nation.

Why don't we fast on the day that the Chofetz Chaim, or Rashi, died?



Why is fasting important?

Stop sign

The purpose of a fast is not to starve yourself, to punish your body, or to lose weight. A Jewish fast is intended to make us pause in our race to accomplish “life” and do some soul-searching, and to recognize our *aveiros* and their results²³. We do not fast to feel depressed about what happened in the past, but to learn from our ancestors and the lessons that their lives-and deaths!- teach us.

Teshuvah Time

The Torah teaches us (*see Teshuvah unit*) that anytime you feel like you’ve made a mistake or blocked your connection with Hashem, you can repair and strengthen your connection to Hashem through the process of *teshuvah*. However, no one says that *teshuvah* is easy! It can be daunting to really sift through your thoughts, words, and actions, identify what is blocking your connection to Hashem, feel real regret, and create a plan for the future so that you’re less likely to make that mistake again.

This is where fast days come to the rescue! Six times a year, we are forced out of the clockwork pace of our lives and into a day where things are just...off. We can’t eat or drink, we feel kind of icky and empty, but we have a chance to look past our daily routines and think deeply about how we can become better servants of Hashem.

Take the Escalator

Hashem is a kind, benevolent, and constantly giving Father. He doesn’t want us to be starving and dizzy for no reason! He wants us to be close to Him, and gave us a way to amplify our *teshuvah* so that we can be closer to Him, sooner! *Teshuvah* on its own is powerful. *Teshuvah* combined with fasting is even more powerful, and *teshuvah* while fasting along with the rest of the Jewish people is like shooting your *teshuvah* through a rocket ship!

Often, people will do anything they can do to make the fast day pass by, like watching movies or sleeping for hours. While a person would still get “credit” for fasting as long as they didn’t actually eat or drink, they’ve wasted their chance to use the power of their fasting to catapult their connection to Hashem.

Korban

In the time of *korbanos*, sacrifices, there was a process where the fat of the animal was burned on the *mizbeiach*, and the blood was poured as well. These *korbanos* would help the person become closer to Hashem and do *teshuvah*. We cannot offer sacrifices without a Beis Hamikdash, but when we fast, we are burning our fat and using the nutrients in our blood more so than when we have a steady stream of nutrition. Therefore, it is as if we are still bringing Hashem a *korban*, and we can achieve *teshuvah* this way.



Stay Strong

In the last few centuries our bodies have become weaker, and we are not able to handle fasting as well as we used to. Fasting is very difficult for our weak bodies, and a rabbi might tell you not to fast, or to break your fast early so that you won’t be really sick. You can still achieve the levels of *teshuvah* and connection that fasting brings, by eating foods that aren’t so exciting, and keeping in mind the meaning and value of the day. It’s harder to stay focused on the seriousness of *teshuvah* when you’re busy with iced coffees and acai bowls, so you need to tone down your focus on food and reach out to Hashem.

Fasting induces frailty, which means your body is tired and weak. Frailty, in turn, generates humility. It reminds a person that they are not all-powerful and that they rely on Hashem for strength. Feeling small and humbled in this way opens the heart to honest reflection. A person is more likely to recognize their mistakes, feel sorry for what they have done wrong, and truly want to change for the better.²⁴