

# ROSH HASHANAH

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The High Holy Days are the second major cycle of festivals in the Jewish year. In its narrowest sense, the cycle is composed of Rosh Hashanah (the first day of the month of Tishri) and Yom Kippur (the tenth of Tishri). Whatever the origin of these festivals—a subject of much debate among scholars—they are today a celebration of the beginning of the New Year and a striving for atonement of our misdeeds of the past year. Both elements, reflected respectively on Rosh Hashanah as the New Year and on Yom Kippur as the Day of Atonement, are present in this period, though over time the themes of repentance, judgment and atonement during Yom Kippur have become predominant. The days between these two festivals have also become part of the cycle, as have the days following them and the month of Elul preceding them. In Hebrew, this cycle is called *yamim noraim*—Days of Awe—which more truly captures the mood of this period than the phrase “High Holidays” or even “High Holy Days.” This period is devoted to a careful examination of who we are in an attempt to become cognizant of the ways we have failed—failed others, failed our own selves and failed God. This introspection is meant to lead to regret and remorse for the harm we have done and attempts at restitution when possible and to turn away from our past selves to better selves, who will act differently in the coming New Year.

## HISTORY

### 1. *Is Rosh Hashanah Biblically based?*

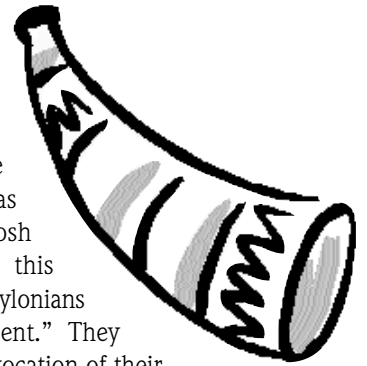
In a sense it is. The Book of Leviticus (23:24-25) declares: “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of rest, a memorial proclaimed with the blowing of the shofar, a holy convocation.” This day eventually became Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. But it was not known as such at that time.

### 2. *How could the first day of the seventh month become the New Year?*

In ancient times, there were four “New Years” in the Jewish calendar. Each one had a distinct significance:

- 1<sup>st</sup> of Nisan: The New Year of Kings, a date used to calculate the number of years a given king had reigned.
- 1<sup>st</sup> of Elul: The New Year for tithing of cattle, a time when one out of every ten cattle was marked and offered as a sacrifice to God.
- 1<sup>st</sup> of Tishri: The agricultural New Year, the New Year of the Years.
- 15<sup>th</sup> of Shevat: Tu B'Shevat, the New Year of the Trees.

The Torah refers to Nisan (the month in which Passover occurs) as the first month of the Jewish year. Despite this, however, the first of Tishri emerged as what we know as Rosh Hashanah. Most likely this occurred because the Babylonians marked a “Day of Judgment.” They believed on that day a convocation of their deities assembled in the temple of the god Marduk. These gods, they held, renewed the world and judged each human being, inscribing the fate of every individual on a tablet of destiny. This legend was a powerful one, and Jews living among the Babylonians most likely borrowed elements from it in shaping Rosh Hashanah.



### 3. *When did the holiday receive the name Rosh Hashanah?*

It was not until about the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. that the name Rosh Hashanah first occurs in the Mishnah. Before then, however, the day had other designations. The oldest name, found in the Torah (Numbers 29:1), is *Yom Teruah* (Day of Sounding the Shofar). Two other names, undoubtedly reflecting the Babylonian influence, were *Yom Hazikaron* (Day of Remembrance) and *Yom Hadin* (Day of Judgment). While those terms are still preserved in liturgy and rabbinic literature, Jews all over the world today usually refer to Rosh Hashanah as the Jewish New Year.

## CUSTOMS AND SYMBOLS

### 1. *What is the meaning of Selichot?*

*Selichot*, a Hebrew word meaning “forgiveness,” refers to the special prayers of forgiveness recited by Jews during the High Holy Day season. The *Selichot* liturgy contains some of the finest Jewish religious poetry ever composed.

Traditional Jews recite *Selichot* beginning late at night on the Saturday before Rosh Hashanah and continue before dawn on the days between the New Year and Yom Kippur. Reform congregations who observe *Selichot* usually do so on the Saturday night just prior to Rosh Hashanah, a solemn and fitting preparation for ten days of reflection and self-examination.

### 2. *Why do we eat apples and honey?*

Over the centuries, Jews have dipped challah, apples, grapes and other fruits in honey, eating them on Rosh Hashanah while wishing one another a “sweet” New Year. Apples, however, are most commonly used.

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Why apples? Why not pears or oranges? No one knows for sure, but there are some interesting possibilities. Scholars of ancient cultures tell us mystical powers were once ascribed to the apple. People ate the fruit in the belief that it could guarantee good health and personal well-being. There is also a number of oddities involving the apple which defy explanation. For example, although the story of Adam and Eve does not specify which “forbidden fruit” was eaten, we customarily speak of the apple as the cause of expulsion from paradise. Why do we say “An apple a day keeps the doctor away”? Why did school children once bring an apple for the teacher?

If one assumes that customs in society arise for a reason, scholars are probably correct in theorizing that the apple was once invested with great symbolic significance. Whether the custom of eating apples and honey arose out of superstition, ties to Genesis or some other reason, it is a lovely—and delicious—way for families to begin celebrating the New Year together.

### 3. *Where did the shofar originate?*

The shofar (“horn” or “trumpet”) is one of the world’s oldest wind instruments. It was important in Jewish history long before it became associated with the holiday we now know as Rosh Hashanah. Throughout the Bible, we find the shofar mentioned as a central element in ritual observance. For example, the shofar was sounded at the new moon and solemn feasts. The Book of Exodus (19:16, 20:15) describes how the shofar was blown at Sinai to prepare the people for the giving of Torah. The Book of Joshua (6:1-20) details the use of the shofar as part of the conquest of Jericho. And, as we have seen, the celebration which ultimately evolved into Rosh Hashanah was originally called *Yom Teruah* (Day of Blowing the Shofar).

### 4. *Why do we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah?*

There are many explanations for this custom which has become such an integral part of the Jewish New Year. Certainly the link with *Yom Teruah* was an early reason for blowing the shofar, but there are many others.

Some people feel the shofar reminds us of the Sinai experience. At a time when Jews are closest to God, they say, this historical moment is relived through the shofar service. The great Jewish philosopher Maimonides saw the sounding of the shofar as a call to repentance, while the Talmud viewed the ritual as a means of confusing Satan so he would not harm the Jewish people during this time of judgment.

The most common explanation of the shofar in the Rosh Hashanah service, however, derives from the account of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, which we read on the New Year. As you recall, the sacrifice of Isaac was averted through the substitution of a ram for the boy. Although the key message is a statement against human sacrifice, the story also became a basis for blowing a ram’s horn on Rosh Hashanah.

There are three shofar sounds: *tekiah*—one long blast; *shevarim*—three short blasts; and *teru’ah*—nine staccato blasts. The Torah does not state explicitly how many shofar blasts are required, but the rabbis (based on a complicated exegesis of Lev. 25:9 and 23:24 and Num. 29:1) have developed the reason it is necessary to have three blasts of *teru’ah* preceded by and followed by *tekiah*.

## THE SYNAGOGUE LITURGY

The traditional liturgy for this festival has many additions that express the themes of judgment and repentance. One of the most famous of these liturgies is the *unetaneh tokef* hymn written, according to legend, by a rabbi in the Middle Ages who was tortured for refusing to convert to Christianity. Before dying, this rabbi composed the hymn, which vividly describes all humans passing before God, Who decides who shall live and who shall die.

Another recurrent image is that of the Book of Life. According to tradition, there is a Book of Life and a Book of Death and each person’s name is written down in one of these books. On Rosh Hashanah, all the righteous are written in the Book of Life and all the wicked in the Book of Death, but all those who are neither righteous nor wicked have until Yom Kippur to repent before their fate is sealed. The liturgy is replete with requests to be chosen for life.

The Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah in Reform congregations are the binding of Isaac—the *akedah*—on the first day and the beginning of Genesis—the creation story—on the second day. The story of the *akedah*, demonstrating our ancestors’ supreme love for God, ties in with our appeal to God to rescue us from death. The creation story connects the holy day to the birthday of the world.

Finally, there are a number of additions to the Amidah that are meant to emphasize God’s kingship and to request that God remember us for life and that He write our names in the Book of Life.

Thank you to Temple Israel in Westport, Connecticut, for assembling this information from the following sources:

Strassfeld, Michael, *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985.

Syme, Daniel, *The Jewish Home: A Guide for Jewish Living*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1989.