



The Ziegler School  
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

# Walking with the Jewish Calendar

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

# ROSH HASHANAH

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## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

What is *teshuvah*? *Teshuvah* is typically translated as “repentance” but it means much more. A more literal translation would be a “turning” or “reorientation”. During this season we work on reorienting ourselves. Throughout the year we have had choices to make and actions to take, and we realize that we have not always taken the path that leads us to living in a Godly fashion. So we need to take time to reassess, to chart a better course and get back on our journey.

A number of years back, while working at a summer camp, I observed an example of *teshuvah* first-hand. A 1st year counselor was kicked out of camp because of drug use. A couple years later this counselor, after some serious

<sup>1</sup> Rashi, Exodus 33:11.

<sup>2</sup> Song of Songs 6:3.



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conversations with the camp administration, was allowed back to work at camp. When I shared this story with a friend from a different camp, I was informed that under no circumstances would their camp have let this counselor back on staff. What a shame! Not allowing the counselor a chance to grow, to change and heal the wounds he had caused would have denied him the opportunity for *teshuvah*.

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

## TESHUVAH

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

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

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

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

## RITUALS OF ROSH HASHANAH

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

The experience of hearing the shofar sounded – and the mitzvah associated with shofar is "*lishmo'ah kol shofar*," hearing the shofar's voice rather than blowing it ourselves – is paradoxical. The shofar's cry is a loud resounding blast that is heard in the deepest recesses of our souls, but as we experience the shofar being blown what we are listening

<sup>3</sup> *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:2*

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

<sup>5</sup> *Leviticus 23:24.*



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for is the still, small voice of God. This contrast is described in the *Un'taneh Tokef* prayer in which we invoke the imagery of Elijah's encounter with God.<sup>6</sup> We state, "The Great Shofar will be sounded and the still, small voice will be heard".

The shofar blasts are performed in a particular manner. There are three different notes: *tekiyah* (one long blast), *shevarim* (three shorter notes), and *teruah* (nine staccato notes). The sounds of the shofar are meant to elicit varying emotional responses. The *tekiyah*, the most iconic of the shofar's cries, is like a trumpet blast or alarm clock. It is meant to jolt us out of our routines, our inappropriate actions, and our complacency. Rambam in his *Laws of Teshuvah* identifies this as the shofar's key role: rousing the sinners from their slumber and encouraging them to repent.<sup>7</sup> The *teruah* evokes a mournful wailing. It elicits feelings of grief or sorrow. We are in grief over potentials that we did not fulfill in the past year and express sorrow over the pain that we have caused others. Finally, the *shevarim* emulates the quick gasps of sobbing. Its cries express the sadness we experience day-by-day as we work through life's minor bumps and scrapes. When we cry we aid the healing process, and in the same way the *shevarim* help us heal our accumulated wounds.

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

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

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

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

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

Apart from the special insertions in the amidah, there are other inclusions in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy that mark it as distinct. In the prayer *Avinu Malkeinu*, we address God as "Our Father, Our King," invoking two important aspects

<sup>6</sup> 1 Kings 19:11-13.

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



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of our relationship with God. The metaphor of God as king stresses the pivotal role which God plays in our lives. Just as an earthly king who holds the ultimate decision-making power in his hands could sentence any one of his subjects to death on a whim, so we recognize that our lives are literally in God's hands. By contrast, the metaphor of God as father is a gentler, more approachable image. God loves us and feels responsible for our wellbeing. God wishes us to act appropriately, but will nevertheless deal kindly with us when we err. We need both halves!

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

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

Rosh Hashanah is our opportunity to reconnect with the people in our lives and with God. Through each ritual we perform during this season, from the sounding of the shofar on the first day of Elul to the casting off of our sins during *Tashlich*, we express our desire to right our ship. We recognize that we have drifted off course and need to get back on the right tack, and the Torah and teachings of our traditions provide the map which will allow us to do so. Rosh Hashanah is our time to examine that map and to take the steps that will allow us to follow it a bit more closely in the year to come.

<sup>8</sup> Micah 7:19.

<sup>9</sup> Baba Kama 82a.



# ROSH HASHANAH – TEXT 1

## תלמוד בבלי מסכת ראש השנה דף לג עמוד ב

שִׁיעוּר תְּרוּעָה כְּשֶׁלֶשׁ יְבֹבוֹת . וְהַתְּנִיא: שִׁיעוּר תְּרוּעָה כְּשֶׁלֶשָׁה שְׂבָרִים . אָמַר אַבְיִי: בָּקָא וְדָאי פְּלִיגִי,  
דְּכְתִיב יוֹם תְּרוּעָה יִהְיֶה לָּכֶם, וּמִתְרַגְּמִינָן: יוֹם יִבְבָּא יִהְיֶה לְכוּן . וּכְתִיב בְּאִימִיה דְּסִיסְרָא בְּעַד הַחֲלוּן  
נִשְׁקָפָה וְתִיבב אִם סִיסְרָא . מִר סָבַר: גְּנוּחֵי גְנוּחַ, וּמִר סָבַר: יְלוּלֵי יְלוּל .

### ROSH HASHANAH 33B

The length of the *teru'ah* is equal to the length of three *yebaboth* [sobs]. But it has been taught, 'The length of the *teru'ah* is equal to three *shebarim*' [short gasps]? — Abaye said: Here there is really a difference of opinion. It is written, It shall be a day of *teru'ah* unto you, and we translate [in Aramaic], a day of *yebaba*, and it is written of the mother of Sisera: Through the window she looked forth, [wa-teyabab]. One authority thought that this means drawing a long sigh, and the other that it means uttering short piercing cries.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- How does the sound of the shofar reflect our emotions and feelings on this day?
- Is the shofar a reflection of how we feel or rather a means to bring about such feelings?
- How do the shofar's distinct cries affect us differently (or do they)?
- The passage makes oblique reference to the fact that while the Torah refers to the shofar's sounding in terms of a single cry, it has long been the practice to use the shofar to produce a variety of calls. What does this reflect about the nature and evolution of Jewish ritual?



## ROSH HASHANAH – TEXT 2

### משנה מסכת ראש השנה פרק א

בְּאַרְבַּעַת פְּרָקִים הָעוֹלָם נִדוֹן בְּפֶסַח עַל הַתְּבוּאָה, בְּעֶצְרַת עַל פִּירוֹת הָאֵילָן, בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בְּאֵי  
הָעוֹלָם עוֹבְרִין לְפָנָיו כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן. וְשֹׁאֵמֵר (תהלים ל"ג) הַיּוֹצֵר יַחַד לֶבָם הַמְּבִין אֶל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם וּבְחַג  
נִדוֹנִין עַל הַמַּיִם:

### MISHNA ROSH HASHANAH 1:2

At four times the world is judged:

On Pesach, for the crops.

On Shavuot, for the fruits of the tree.

On Rosh Hashnah, all the world passes before Him like sheep, as it says,

“He that fashioneth the hearts of them all, that considereth all their doings.” (Psalms 33:15)

And on Sukkot, they are judged for the water (rain).

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- What is the purpose of distinguishing multiple points of judgment throughout the year?
- Why is it that in our contemporary understanding Rosh Hashanah stands out as the Day of Judgment?
- What does the imagery of passing by God like sheep invoke for you?
- What other metaphors describe the relationship between us and God at this time of year?



## ROSH HASHANAH – TEXT 3

### מיכה פרק ז

יח) מי אֵל כְּמוֹךָ ג' שֵׁא עֹז וְעֵינֵי בְרַעַל פִּשְׁעֵי לְשֹׂאֲרֵית נִחְלָתוֹ ל' אֵל הַחֲזִיק לְעַד אִפּוּ כִי חָפֵץ חֶסֶד  
הוא: יט) יָשׁוּב יִרְחַמֵּנוּ יִכְבֹּשׁ עֵוֹנֵינוּ וְתִשְׁלִיךְ בְּמַצְלוֹת יָם כָּל חַטְאוֹתֵם: כ) תִּתֵּן אֱמֶת לְיַעֲקֹב בְּחֶסֶד  
לְאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְרָהָם תִּינֹן מִיְמֵי קֶדֶם:

### MICHA 7:18-20 (FROM THE TAHSLICH LITURGY)

**18** Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity, and remitting transgression; Who has not maintained His wrath forever against the remnant of His own people, because God loves graciousness. **19** He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all their (our) sins into the depths of the sea. **20** You will keep faith with Jacob, loyalty to Abraham, as You promised on oath to our fathers in days gone by.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- How do we understand the comparison being made in the first verse? To whom or what is God being compared?
- What is appealing about the image of God casting away our transgressions? What are its drawbacks?  
What (if anything) is the advantage of physically acting out this image through tashlich?
- Why is God the actor here and not human beings (see especially verse 19)? Is this the way we understand teshuvah?
- Why do we invoke the names of Abraham and Jacob in this prayer?





## ROSH HASHANAH – TEXT 4

ליקוטי תורה (דשניאור זלמן מליאדי), פרשת ראה, דף לב (קובץ אני לדודי, ע' יג)  
והנה נודע שבאלול הוא זמן התגלות י"ג מדות הרחמים... משל למלך שקודם בואו לעיר יוצאין אנשי העיר לקראתו ומקבלין פניו בשדה ואז רשאיין כל מי שרוצה לצאת להקביל פניו, והוא מקבל את כולם בסבר פנים יפות ומראה פנים שוחקות לכולם. ובלכתו העירה הרי הם הולכים אחריו. ואחר כך בבואו להיכל מלכותו אין נכנסים כי אם ברשות ואף גם זאת המוחרים שבעם ויחידי סגולה.

וכך הענין על דרך משל בחודש אלול יוצאין להקביל אור פניו ית' בשדה, כי הנה כתיב "יאר ה' פניו אליך", שהוא ענין הארת י"ג מדות. שיהי' פנים בפנים דהיינו שיאיר גילוי פנימיות רצונו ית' למקור נש"י ע"י שיהיה עיקר פנימיות רצונו אליו ית' לדבקה בו בלב ונפש מעומקא דליבא במסירת נפש.

### LIKUTEI TORAH (OF SCHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI), PARASHAT RE'EH

It is known that the month of Elul is the time of the revelation of God's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy... There is a story told of a king. As he approached his capitol at the end of a journey, the people of the city would go out to the fields to receive and welcome him. And everyone who so desired could go out to greet him and would be received with favor and graciousness, and the king would smile upon every one of his subjects. And as he made his way into the city, they would follow him in a procession. But after his return to his palace, no one would be allowed an audience in his throne room without permission, which was granted only to the chosen and to the most select individuals.

In the same way, during the month of Elul, Jews go out "to the fields" to greet the light of the Divine Countenance, for it is written: "May God lift up His countenance upon you and grant you peace" (Numbers 6:26). Thus God's Thirteen Attributes are illuminated "face-to-face," for it is through them that God reveals the inner essence of His will...to those who cleave to him with all their heart and soul, from the depths of their hearts and with the utmost devotion.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- Are there times that God is more accessible to us? If so what defines these moments?
- What are our aspirations in drawing closer to God? What fears do we have in doing so?
- If God's intention is to draw close to humanity, what is the point of God maintaining a distance from us at certain times?
- Does the teshuvah we do during Elul have a greater impact than that which we perform at other points throughout the year?



# ROSH HASHANAH – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

מחזור לימים הנוראים - ונתנה תקנה

בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן וּבַיּוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחַתְמוּן ... וְתִשׁוּבָה וְתַפִּילָה וְצְדָקָה מְעַבְרִין הַגְּזֵרָה.

## MACHZOR FOR THE DAYS OF AWE (UN'TAHEH TOKEF)

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed ... But repentance and prayer and charitable deeds can annul the severity of the decree.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- Follow the progression of Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah. Is there any reason for them to be in that order?
- Can you come up with a midrash about the words and their meaning in this context?
- What does it mean to have “the severity of the decree annulled”?
- Look to see where this passage occurs in the Machzor. How does it fit in the overall flow of the liturgy? What is its effect?





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