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ROSH HASHANA
GUIDE

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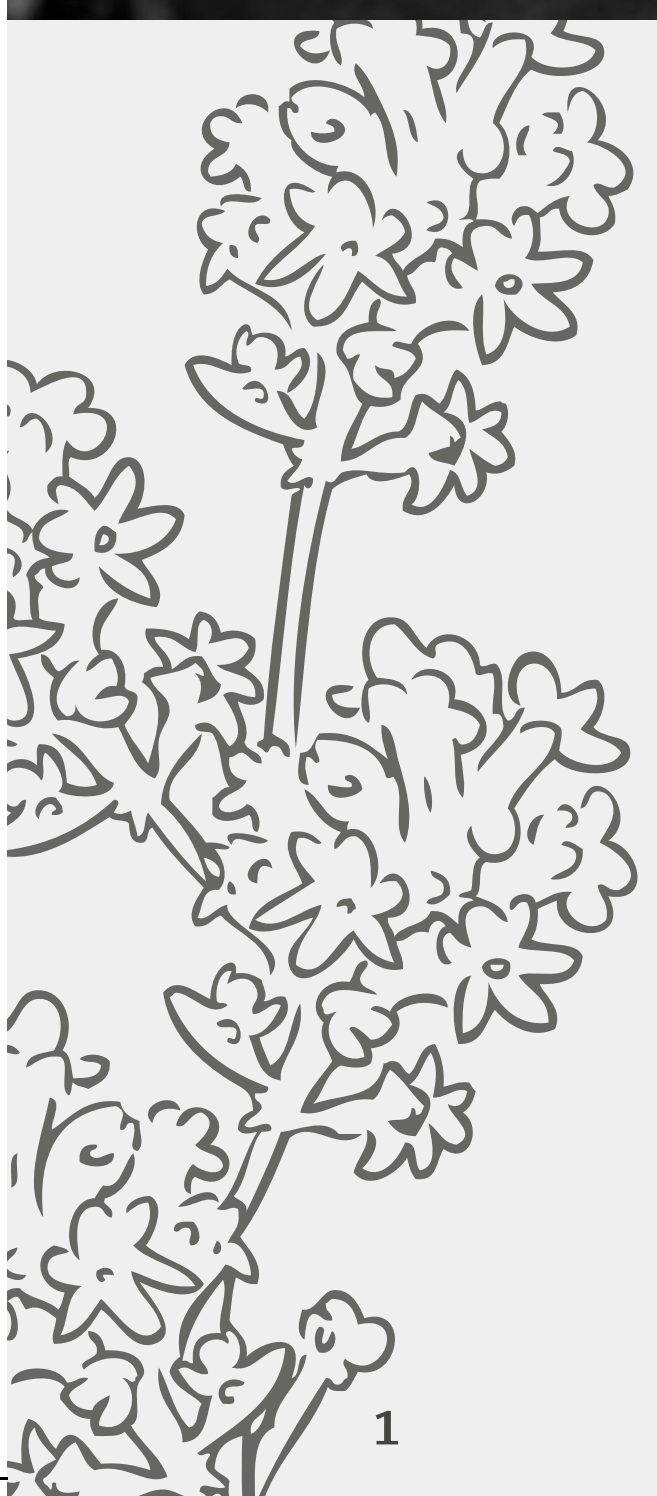
PESUKEI D'ZIMRA

WHAT ARE PESUKEI D'ZIMRA?

Pesukei D'Zimra means 'Verses of praise' and the morning service each weekday, Shabbat and Yom Tov begins with these verses which are a mixed selection of parts of the Tanakh (mostly psalms) that act as a warm up and meditation before the communal prayers. It is said as one long blessing that starts with a bracha (blessing) and ends with a bracha.

SHEMA

The Shema is said in every morning and evening prayer service, and the words "Shema yisrael Adonai eloheni Adonai echad" are a famous profession of the unity of God. But what are all the verses before and after that?



The Shema is made up of three paragraphs which command us to remember “these things” every day and night. “These things” are taken to mean specifically the two paragraphs in the Chumash that contain this commandment as well as a third paragraph that contains the commandment of tzitzit. The key phrase of the Shema is simply the opening sentence of the first of these paragraphs.

The sages added blessings to introduce the Shema and following the Shema. The first of these blessings relates to God filling the universe with light, and special changes are made for Shabbat. Slight changes are also made for Rosh Hashana.

The second blessing is about God’s love of the Jewish people, which prepares us in the congregation as God’s people to declare God’s unity. Unnecessary talk should be avoided during the Shema and this is so important that when we might normally respond “baruch hu u’baruch shemo” after the part of the blessing “baruch ata Adonai,” we refrain from this practice in the Shema.

A related practice is that we are to “somech geula l’tefillah”(put redemption next to prayer[the Amidah]), the last blessing of the shema portion is ‘Redeemer of Israel’ which is before the Amidah. For this reason we do not respond amen following this bracha. To avoid a situation where the leader of the service makes a public blessing and the congregation does not answer amen, which may look like the congregation is being disrespectful, the tradition is that the chazzan trails off and ends the blessing quietly.

SILENT AMIDA

WHY DO WE ALL COME TO SYNAGOGUE TO BE TOGETHER AND THEN PRAY INDIVIDUALLY?

A key element of prayer is focusing inwards, and connection to yourself is part of and preparatory to connection with God. Despite each of us praying individually, there is a power of focus and concentration that is achieved when everyone is involved in the same activity.



There is a disagreement among the sages as to why prayer was instituted, with some of the opinion that each of the three daily prayers was instituted based on verses in the Torah that describe the times of day that each of Avraham, Yitzhak and Ya'akov went to pray so that shacharit (the morning service) is attributed to Avraham, mincha (the afternoon service) to Yitzhak and ma'ariv (the evening service) to Ya'akov.

Others say that the three daily prayers were instituted based on the daily sacrifices that were offered in the temple: one in the morning, and one in the afternoon, with the night-time prayer being associated with burning of what was left.

Even though the silent Amidah is said individually, all the words are in first person plural. So although we are all praying individually, we are doing so as part of a congregation and as a part of the People of Israel.

PUBLIC AMIDA

WE JUST PRAYED THESE EXACT SAME WORDS
INDIVIDUALLY, WHY REPEAT IT ALL?

The public repetition was originally instituted when not everyone knew how to read and due to cost, printed prayer books were not widely available even for people who could read. Members of the congregation would all stand and either repeat word for word after the chazzan or stand quietly and answer only amen at the end of each bracha to fulfil their own personal obligation of prayer.

The public Amidah also gives voice to the communal nature of prayer and that we are not just praying for ourselves, but that the chazzan is praying on behalf of the whole community. The public Amidah also gives us an opportunity to participate in the kedusha and the priestly blessings.

PIYYUTIM

THE COMMUNAL REPETITION ON ROSH HASHANA FEELS A LOT LONGER; WHAT'S UP WITH THAT?

Besides the kedusha and the priestly blessings, on Rosh Hashana we also add piyyutim, which are liturgical poems written mostly in the medieval period. These piyyutim add to the mood of the day and are often sung, and the familiar tunes make the day even more meaningful.

The structure of these piyyutim is that there is often a common refrain. Another common pattern is that the first letter of each verse spells out the alphabet as an acrostic, and sometimes at the end also spells out the name of the author of the piyyut. The verses don't always have the same number of syllables per line, which is why the phrasing can be a little challenging to fit with modern melodies.

MISOD

THE TEXT OF THE AMIDAH WAS SET BY THE SANHEDRIN (THE ASSEMBLY OR COUNCIL OF RABBIS IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL) MORE THAN TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO; THESE MEDIEVAL PIYYUTIM CLEARLY WEREN'T A PART OF THAT. WHAT ARE THE RULES AND CONVENTIONS ABOUT ADDING TO OR CHANGING PRAYERS?

Good point. We aren't supposed to alter the actual text of the Amidah prayer. In one sense, because we are inserting these piyyutim in between sections of the Amidah and the words of the Amidah remain intact, we might be less concerned about this. However, we are also not supposed to interrupt the Amidah with other things. Because of this, there were many Rabbis who objected to the addition of piyyutim. Over time however the pro-piyyut side won the day.



In a nod to the people who felt that piyyutim were halakhically problematic, the service includes a short paragraph at the beginning of the Amidah to explain what we are doing and that we do it on the basis of long-standing tradition.

KEDUSHA

WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT KEDUSHA?

The kedusha (which means holiness) is a re-enactment of the hordes of angels in heavens declaring God's holiness. The prayer is experiential, inviting us to attempt to transcend divisions between heaven and earth and to join with the angels in declaring God's holiness. The kedusha is a heightened moment of the service and is said or sung responsively and it is customary to stand with feet together and not to talk at all (other than in prayer) during the kedusha.

UN'TANEH TOKEF

Un' taneh Tokef is a piyyut that has been part of the Yamim Noraim services for centuries. These words mean "let us speak of the awesomeness" and is a stirring and powerful piece. It is said (actually, always sung) during the repetition of the Amidah in mussaf with the aron open and the community standing.

WHAT IS THE STORY OF THIS ADDITION TO THE TEFILLAH?

The story following is a summary of material in Wikipedia, which does such a good job of telling the story.

The following story is recorded in the thirteenth century commentary Or Zarua, written by medieval rabbi Isaac Ben Moses who in turn attributes the writing to Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn (who compiled Jewish martyrologies, and who died around 1200).

According to the story, Un'taneh Tokef was composed by an eleventh century sage named Rabbi Amnon of Mainz (Mainz was a town in Germany). Apart from this one story, he is unknown to history. The story tells that Rabbi Amnon was pressured by the Archbishop of Mainz to convert to Catholicism. As a delaying tactic, he requested three days to consider the offer. Immediately he regretted intensely giving even the impression that he would convert. After spending the three days in prayer, he refused to come to the archbishop as promised, and, when he was forcibly brought to the archbishop's palace, he begged that his tongue be cut out to atone for his sin. Instead, the archbishop ordered his hands and legs amputated—limb by limb—as punishment for not obeying his word to return after three days and for refusing to convert. At each amputation, Rabbi Amnon was again given the opportunity to convert, which he refused. He was sent home, with his severed extremities, on a knight's shield.

According to the story, this all occurred shortly before Rosh Hashanah. On that holiday, as he lay dying, Rabbi Amnon asked to be carried into the synagogue, where he recited the original composition of Un'taneh Tokef with his last breath (the story contains an ambiguous phrase that some commentators interpreted as saying that he did not merely die but that his body miraculously vanished). Three days later, he appeared in a dream to Rabbi Kalonymus ben Meshullam (died 1096), one of the great scholars and liturgists of Mainz, and begged him to transcribe the prayer and to see that it was included in the text of the High Holiday services. Thus, the legend concludes, Un'taneh Tokef became a part of the standard liturgy.

MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

It was once speculated that Kalonymus was the true author of the poem. However, both the language and style are different from the other poems of Kalonymus. In addition, there is evidence that a very similar piyyut was being recited in Italy contemporaneously with Kalonymus.



Subsequently, a copy of the poem dating to the eighth century was discovered in the Cairo Geniza. (The Cairo Geniza is a collection of documents stored in a synagogue in Cairo and that became known to scholars in the late eighteenth century. The documents span 1000 years of Jewish life from 870 CE in the Middle East and North Africa).

While medieval history testifies amply to the intense persecution of Jews by Christians at the time of the Crusades, there are difficulties with the legend that it was composed by Amnon. The story portrays Amnon as an illustrious Torah giant, but Jewish history of that period provides no record of a 'Rav Amnon of Mainz' at all. It seems unlikely that a person of such tremendous stature would be remembered only in a single legend. Scholars have speculated that this story may have been inspired from Christian legend. Moreover, the discovery of the Un'taneh Tokef prayer within the earliest documents of the Cairo Geniza materials, dating well before the eleventh century, makes it almost impossible that the prayer could have been composed as the legend claims.

A modern scholar Yaakov Spiegel has argued that the prayer was written in the sixth century in Israel, and this is supported by stylistic evidence such as the concluding three-part remedy of "repentance, prayer, and charity", which is found in this exact permutation in Genesis Rabbah (composed in Israel) and is not found in Babylonian sources .

UNPACKING THE TEXT OF UN'TANEH TOKEF

The piyyut draws deeply on language and ideas from the Tanakh, Mishnah and midrash. A whole book could be written on this but here are a few examples of how the piyyut is much richer and more resonant when read with knowledge of the sources of these ideas and images.



The beautiful imagery in the words “And a great shofar will be sounded, and a thin whisper of a voice will be heard” evokes a dramatic story in the book of Kings I (19. 9-14) where Eliyahu encounters God’s presence. “There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of YHVH [the Hebrew name for God] but YHVH was not in the in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake but YHVH was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, fire, but YHVH was not in the fire. And after the fire a small still voice (kol d’mamah dakah). When Eliyahu heard it he wrapped his mantle about his face and went and stood at the entrance of the cave and there a voice addressed him ‘Why are you here Eliyahu?’”.

There is much commentary written about the divine presence being found not in the thunder and lightning, but in the small still voice and what it takes to hear that voice. And the piyyut also leads us to the question being asked by that voice, which is the question at the heart of Yom Kippur: “Why are you here?”

Another strong image in the piyyut is of shepherding, in the verses:

And all who enter the world will pass before him like sheep.

As a shepherd searches his flock, passing his sheep under his staff,

So too will You cause to pass and recount and review every living being.

This uses language and imagery from a section in Ezekiel (34: 1- 16) where the people are castigated by the prophet for being like bad shepherds, for being selfish and not looking out for each other. But as the passage continues, God promises to be a shepherd to the people and to seek out those who are lost and separated from the flock. Similar ideas and language are also found in Jeremiah 33.

One more powerful idea for now is the three ‘big ideas’ introduced by this piyyut, being prayer, repentance and charity. These three key elements of the Yamim Noraim are found in the Midrash Tanhuma Noah (albeit in different order): “Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rabbi Eliezer. Three things cancel a harsh decree. They are repentance, prayer and charity”.



Each of these concepts is a discussion in itself and is literally the subject of books setting out many laws and practices but one beautiful idea is that repentance (teshuva) is inwards looking and requires us to work on ourselves; prayer (tefila) is looking to the Divine – to something bigger and less known than our own lives; and tzedakah (charitable behavior) is about relationships, kindness and community.

TORAH

WHY IS TORAH READING PART OF THE PRAYER SERVICES?

The origin of reading the Torah in public dates back 2,500 years to the time of Ezra when the Jews were returning from the first exile to build the second temple. It is loosely based on the commandment of Hakhel where once every ten years the people would gather to hear the whole Torah read by the king. In the days where there was no longer a Hebrew king, it transitioned to reading in public, more frequently but in smaller portions each week so as to complete the whole Torah once every three years with special readings for the festivals.

In Babylonia, the cycle time was reduced to one year so as to make the portions correspond predictably to times of the year. This custom has also allowed Simchat Torah to be celebrated annually as the completion and start of the cycle.

SO WHAT'S BEHIND THE SELECTION FOR ROSH HASHANA?

On the first day we read how God remembered his promise to Sarah to give her a child, and continues with the story of Avraham sending his son Ishmael (the child of the handmaid Hagar) into the dessert to die under pressure from Sarah who was jealous for herself and her unborn child . Avraham also does this in compliance with God's instruction to do as Sarah asks. Ishmael was close to death when an angel intervened and directed Hagar to water.



The end of the reading is far less dramatic – it is about the recognition by the King Avimelech of Avraham's connection with God through these events, and the subsequent return to Avraham and his family of wells wrongly taken by Avimelech's slaves from Avraham.

On the second day we read the story of the near sacrifice of Yitzhak by Avraham at God's instruction, averted only by the intervention of an angel on behalf of God.

There are many ideas about why we read these sections. They certainly tell of God's mercy for Avraham and his sons – albeit only after much trauma and fear in both cases, with God's mercy being a key theme of the days.

There are many ways to think about the relationship between parents and children in these texts as ways of thinking about our relationships with our parents and with people more broadly, and there are narrative elements that lead us to think about God as a parent too. But the texts also speak to the themes of Rosh Hashana that we encounter in the mussaf service discussed a little later in this pamphlet in more detail – Malchuyot, Zichronot and Shofarot.

WHY DO WE READ FROM A SCROLL IF WE ARE ALL FOLLOWING ALONG IN BOOKS?

There are various laws about the way to write a Sefer Torah so that it can be used for public reading. When you read from a Chumash (the Torah text in a book) it isn't considered to be a public reading and you don't call people up to receive aliyot and make the blessings on the Torah.



A Torah scroll must be written on parchment that was cured in a specific manner with ink that has been prepared in a traditional way and the letters must be written by hand. Letters must not be connected to one another and even a single mistake in a letter or cracked or broken ink can render the whole Torah unfit for use. The Chumash we use on Shabbat services has translation and commentary, but even the Hebrew text looks different than the Torah. In the Torah there are no vowel dots or cantillation signs.

This means that Torah readers have to memorize the cantillation notes (the equivalent of music notes) as well as the vowels. This requires skill and concentration and for longer sections, a lot of practice, so talking during Torah reading makes reading very difficult for the leiners (Yiddish for readers) – it also means people who want to follow the reading may struggle to do so.

SHOFAR

WHY DO WE BLOW A HORN?

The simple answer is that is that we are commanded in the Torah to do so.

וּבַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה
לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ יוֹם תְּרוּעָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the horn is sounded.

In fact as you see in the verse quoted above, the name of the holiday isn't Rosh Hashana or New Year; it is a 'Festival of blowing horns'. Besides the commandment to blow the shofar on this day, the shofar also symbolically acknowledges God's kingship, and evokes the way that before a king is introduced, a trumpeter plays a few notes to announce the king. It is also to remember the binding of Isaac; which is discussed in more detail later on.



HOW DO WE BLOW THE HORN?

There are three ways we blow the shofar: tekia—one long note; shevarim—three notes; and truah—a trill of nine notes. We also have a special tekia—the tekiah gedola. This tekia is still one note, but is blown for longer and signals the end of a section of blasts. Finally, we also have the shevarim-truah, which is a shevarim followed by a truah. The words of the Torah only mention tekia and truah and based on the way that truah is mentioned with a teikah mentioned before it and a tekia mentioned afterwards we bracket each truah with a tekia on either side. The shevarim was added because there was a disagreement on whether the truah mentioned in the Torah is what we call a truah today, or was actually more like what we today call a shevarim.

WHEN DO WE BLOW THE HORN?

We make the blessings on blowing the shofar before Mussaf. The blessing isn't on blowing the shofar, but on hearing the shofar. This means that if you blew the shofar but were wearing really good earplugs so that you didn't hear it, you wouldn't have fulfilled the mitzvah. The Mishna also talks about how you must hear the actual shofar and not its echo, with a case being given of someone blowing the shofar into a pit. The blasts that are completed after the blessing total 30, which is the minimum required to complete the mitzvah of hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashana. However, the main blowing of the shofar occurs during Mussaf between each of the three sections. And because we like round numbers, we follow up with 40 more blasts after Mussaf to reach a total of 100. In some communities the shofar is blown in the middle of the silent Amidah and between each of the sections, everyone waits silently for the horn to be blown. This is a considerable logistics issue as people pray at different speeds.

IS THERE ANYTHING SPECIAL ABOUT THIS HORN?

The horn has to be from a kosher animal, but not a cow. Ideally, the horn is from a ram to commemorate the binding of Isaac, which we will get to, but it can be from any kosher non-cow species. The area where the mouth is placed on the horn must not have anything in the way either as adornments or to make it easier to blow. There are many styles of horn, from a simple curved horn to a spiralling long horn, and different people prefer different ones based on how they blow them and what they think looks better.



MUSSAF

WE READ THE AMIDAH IN SHACHARIT; WHY ARE WE DOING THIS AGAIN

Remember the explanation that the Amidah was either in place of the sacrifices or in honor of the prayer practices instituted by each of the patriarchs? Well in this case it is definitely in honor of the sacrifices. On festivals, special sacrifices were brought in addition to the daily sacrifices; this is why this service is called Mussaf, which literally means “added”.

Shacharit includes some material related to Rosh Hashana, but in Mussaf we really dig into the three main themes of the day: Malkhuyot, Zichronot and Shofarot. Each of these sections is denoted by a bracha and in each of the three blessings includes three verses from the Torah (Pentateuch), three from Nevi'im (Prophets), three from Ketuvim (Writings) and a concluding verse from the Torah, for a total of ten verses.

MALKHUYOT (KINGSHIP)

This section starts at the end of the kedusha with the words “Atah Bachartanu” (You have chosen us) and ends with the verse of the Shema.

WHAT DOES GOD BEING A KING HAVE TO DO WITH ROSH HASHANA?

A number of commentators have answered this question by explaining that the association of divine kingship to Rosh Hashanah seems quite tenuous since nothing in the biblical text connects kingship to this festival. God is rarely called king in the Torah. The middle blessings of the Rosh Hashanah mussaf open with three Torah verses and close with a fourth.



Exodus 15:18: “The Lord will reign for ever and ever!”

Numbers 23:21: “He saw no injustice for Jacob, No deceit did he witness in Israel. The Lord their God is with them, and a King’s adulation resounds among them”

Deuteronomy 33:5: “Then the Lord became King in Yeshurun, When the heads of the people gathered, The tribes of Israel together”.

It is not even certain that this last verse refers to God as king (rather than to Moses). But all three of these verses contain the word melech, king.

In contrast, the concluding Torah verse is from Deuteronomy 6:4 and has absolutely no reference to melech:

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone”

Perhaps the composer was influenced by the rabbinic idea that the Shema deals with accepting ol malchut shamayim – the yoke of the reign of heaven. The use of this verse at the conclusion reflects the lack of explicit references to God as king in the Chumash. In contrast, this image is very common in the nevi'im and ketuvim, and there are many verses in which God is explicitly, unambiguously king like. These verses project upon God many aspects of human kingship. Indeed, out of the Chumash, God as king is the predominant metaphor in the Bible, more common than God as parent or husband.

Even the famous metaphor of Psalms 23:1, of God as a shepherd, may be a variation of the metaphor of God as king, since in Israel, as in the ancient Near East, kings were called shepherds (which is interesting to think about given the extensive use of the shepherd metaphor in Un'taneh Tokef).

There are many Biblical texts that suggest that God as king is a fair-minded judge, better than human kings. It is interesting then that none of the verses chosen for Malchuyot emphasize this aspect of God's kingship. By contrast most of the verses chosen for Malchuyot from nevi'im focus on two themes: God's power and God as creator.



Chosen verses that focus on power include Psalms 22:29 “For kingship is the LORD’s and He rules the nations” and Zechariah 14:9, “And the LORD shall be king over all the earth; in that day there shall be one LORD with one name.”

So it seems that the choice of verses reflects that on Rosh Hashana, we acknowledge God as the creator of the universe, as there is a tradition that God completed creation just before Rosh Hashana. In addition we acknowledge God as the ruler of all that he created. It is by this right that God sits in judgement, as king, to decide the fate of all beings on this day. Perhaps this collection of verses is saying that creation, power and judgment are inherently connected.

Acknowledgment: some of these ideas on Malchuyot are from a piece entitled “God’s coronation on Rosh Hashana” by Professor Marc Zvi Brettler, TheTorah.com

ZICHRONOT (REMEMBRANCES)

This section starts with the words “Ata zocher ma’seh olam” (You remember the making of the world) and ends with the blessing “Baruch atah Adonai, zocher habrit” (Blessed are You oh Lord who remembers the covenant”).

I FORGET, WHAT ARE WE REMEMBERING?

It isn’t that we are remembering; it is that we are asking God to remember. We are asking God to remember his covenant with our forefathers so that when God sits in judgement, God will look at us with favour and treat us not as some distant king but as a loving father.

Professor Brettler explains : “The association between divine memory and Rosh Hashanah is not obvious, though divine memory was a significant enough theme that it also determined the Torah reading according to the for Rosh Hashanah, which begins (Genesis 21:1): “The LORD took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken.”



This reading is more primarily connected to Rosh Hashanah than the akedah, the binding of Isaac, which is read on the second day as a continuation of that passage. Divine remembrance is thus an early rabbinic, central theme for Rosh Hashanah”.

So yes, finally we can talk about the binding of Yitzhak. We ask God to remember the binding of Yitzhak for a few reasons. First, this was a major test for Avraham and Yitzhak, and we ask that God look on us fondly as their descendants. And there is also the connection that a ram was sacrificed in place of Yitzhak, and that ram was caught in the brambles by its horns, and we blow a ram’s horn on Rosh Hashana.

Other things we ask God to remember in this section are the exodus from Egypt where the Torah speaks of God remembering the plight of the Jewish people and the flood of Noah where the Torah speaks of God remembering Noah after Noah is adrift on the water for many days.

SHOFAROT

This section begins with the words “Ata geilta b’an an kevodecha” (You were revealed in a cloud of Your glory) and ends with the verse “Ki Atah shomea kol shofar” (For you hear the call of the shofar).

YOU STILL HAVE MORE TO TELL ME ABOUT THE SHOFAR?

Yes because the shofar has many uses and much symbolism. Besides announcing a king, it is also used to rally the troops to battle. Furthermore, it is also associated with the giving of the Torah and the sound and light show that accompanied the experience of Har Sinai. The shofar is also associated with freedom as it announces the yovel, the fiftieth jubilee year, when servants go free. The final use of the shofar that to mention here is the sound of the shofar in the ultimate redemption.



V'NEMAR

WHAT IS WITH THE “V'NE'EMAR”S?

This word just means “as it is said”; it is simply an introduction to the fact that the next words are quoting the Tanakh. Another word that introduces quotes is “kakatuv”. The singing of “v'ne'emar, along with other chanting that the congregation does, gives the chazzanim a chance to catch their breath and regain focus.

OPENING THE ARON

WHEN DO WE STAND AND WHEN DO WE SIT?

The instructions are in the machzor, and you can also just look around you as to what other people are doing. As a general rule, if the aron (ark) is open, you should be standing.

SO WE STAND WHEN THE ARON IS OPENED, BUT I STILL DON'T KNOW WHY THE ARON IS OPENED AT CERTAIN TIMES. CAN YOU EXPLAIN THAT?

It's a bit circular to say that it is to get people to stand, but that is the case. It is to emphasise that this is part of the service that we are taking particularly seriously and that you should be on your feet to help you focus and to convey respect.



BOWING TO THE GROUND

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE NORMAL BOWING WE DO DURING THE AMIDAH DURING THE YEAR?

There are many types of bowing in Judaism. In the temple, there was an even more extreme version of bowing where people fully prostrated themselves. As we have no temple, we don't go that far. But Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are times infused with a special holiness where we get close to reenacting practices that were done when we did have a temple. This bowing to the floor isn't done year-round so as to keep it special for this time of year.

WHY ARE WE SKIPPING THINGS?

As we pointed out earlier, a lot of what is in the machzor is made up of later additions so we do some editing (Do you really want the services to last longer than it already does?)

TASHLICH

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE THROW BREAD INTO THE WATER?

There is a custom of going to the water to meditate on our sins and wish for them to be metaphorically washed away into the depths of the sea based on a verse in the book of the prophet Micah. For some reason this turned into people wanting to feed the fish and ducks while they are at it, so they started throwing bread into the water and saying that the sins were represented by the bread.

Some people are critical of the whole practice of tashlich as a relatively modern invention without basis and how people could be confused thinking that this ritual meant that they were absolved of their sins rather than repenting, praying and giving tzedakah. Others are critical of just the bread throwing aspect, especially on chag and Shabbat when it is forbidden to feed wild animals. It's also worth keeping in mind that ducks and fish are not naturally bread eaters and that throwing bread into the water is environmentally irresponsible.

WHY IS ROSH HASHANA TWO DAYS LONG?

Unlike all the other holidays which are two days long in the diaspora and one day in Israel, Rosh Hashana is two days even in Israel. This is because Sukkot and Pesach start on the fifteenth of the month and is set to be seven weeks after Pesach. Why does that matter? Because in the days before a set calendar, each new month was set based on eye-witness testimony of when the new moon was seen. This was despite the fact that calculations that were known to about when the new moon would be, and where it would be seen, were already known and understood. In fact, they used that knowledge to test the witnesses to make sure what they saw was actually the new moon and not a cloud or a mirage. If reliable witnesses did not come forward until close to sunset, the celebration of the new month would have to be condensed into the short time left in the day. If there were no reliable witnesses in a month, then the new month would by default start on the next day.

This practice is based on the Torah's concept that the calendar, although based on the movements of the celestial bodies, is firmly in the hands of the Jewish people. It is up to the Sanhedrin to declare leap years and the start of the new month, because it is the people who decide when the festivals fall, not God. When the Beit Din sanctified the new month, they would light bonfires and send messengers to alert the people throughout the land of Israel that a new month was declared. In that way, by the time of the fifteenth of the month they would know that it was the time for Sukkot or Pesach.

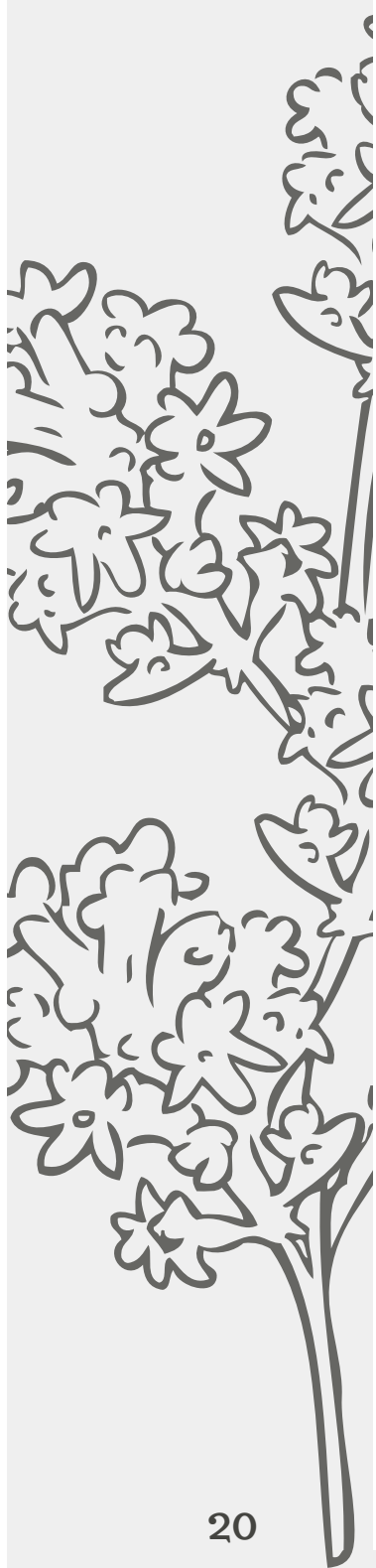


In the diaspora getting the message might take longer, which is why holidays are celebrated for two days because of the uncertainty as to which would be the true date. However as the first of the month of Tishrei is the holiday of Rosh Hashana where work is forbidden from the night before, it wouldn't be acceptable for people not to know it was Rosh

Hashana until witnesses arrived, were questioned and their word accepted, as that could happen late in the day.

Therefore, it was decided that Rosh Hashana would always be two days, so as to ensure it was at its proper time. In fact, there is a concept that this two-day holiday is in fact yoma archita—one long day. Even after the calendar was set and we no longer rely on witnesses, the customs that were set in place were enshrined in the law and two days of Rosh Hashana are kept everywhere and two days of holidays are kept in the diaspora. One interesting thing to note was that when the calendar was set in a 19-year cycle of 7 leap years per cycle is that they were able to stop holidays from falling on certain days. So as to prevent Yom Kippur from falling on a Friday or Sunday, which would be inconvenient to be next to Shabbat, they prevented Rosh Hashana from starting on Sunday, Wednesday or Friday. The mnemonic for this is “lo ad'u rosh” meaning that Rosh Hashana doesn't fall on Aleph—Sunday, Dalet—Wednesday or Vav—Friday.

A famous Mishna from the tractate Rosh Hashana (2:8-9) explains the importance placed on keeping the community in synch in relation to the festivals even if the Beit Din makes a mistake in declaring a new month. Rabban Gamliel had, on a tablet, and on the walls of his loft, various drawings of the moon, which he showed to simple witnesses, and said, “Was it like this [drawing] that you saw, or like [the other one]?”



It happened once, that two witnesses came and said, “We saw [the moon] in the east in the morning, and in the evening in the west.” [In that case,] Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri said, “They are false witnesses.” [But] when they came to Yavneh, Rabban Gamliel accepted [their testimony. It] also [happened once that] two witnesses came and said, “We saw the moon at its time [meaning, on the first of the two possible days], but it was not [to be] seen [afterwards] on the evening of its intercalation,” and Rabban Gamliel accepted [their testimony].

Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinus said, “They are false witnesses; how can they testify that a [certain] woman gave birth [on a certain day], and, on the next day that her ‘womb was between her teeth’ [and the fetus still inside]?” [Then] Rabbi Yehoshua said to him, “I perceive [the truth of] your words.”

[Upon hearing this,] Rabban Gamliel sent [Rabbi Yehoshua] word, saying, “I decree upon you to come to me with your staff and your money on the day that comes out to be Yom Kippur, according to your calculation.” Rabbi Akiva went to [Rabbi Yehoshua], and found him grieving; he said to him, “I have with what to teach, that all that Rabban Gamliel has done is [bindingly] done, as it is stated (Leviticus 23:4), ‘These are the feasts of the Lord, holy convocations which you shall proclaim;’ whether at their [proper] time, or whether not at their [proper] time, I have no holy convocations except [for the ones proclaimed by the court.]” [After this], Rabbi Yehoshua took his staff and his money in his hand, and went to Yavneh to Rabban Gamliel on the day that came out to be Yom Kippur, according to his calculation. [At that point], Rabban Gamliel stood up, and kissed him on his head, [and] he said to him, “Come in peace, my teacher and my disciple! My teacher—in wisdom; and my disciple—in that you accepted my words.”





SHANA TOVA MESSAGE

Wishing all our dear Shira members and friends a shana tova – a good year of health, peace and well-being. Rosh Hashana is also the birthday of the world and we also continue to pray for and work for a better world.

It's been a great year for the shul - we celebrated a record 15 bar and bat mitzvahs and baby welcoming simchas, and another 20 kiddushes sponsored by people celebrating a special event, or marking a yorzeit.

Our strong shabbat mornings are the bedrock of the shul, and drashot have been diverse and enlightening, with shul members and visiting scholars and journalists enriching our shabbat experience. A special shabbat in July with two outstanding bible scholars Judy Klitsner and Rabbi Shmuel Klitsner was a huge success. It has also been wonderful to enjoy the renewal of our musical, egalitarian and traditional monthly kabbalat shabbat.

Chagim this year were all well attended and our Shavuot Tikkun Leil was a highlight with a dinner for 70 and more than double that number attending sessions through the night, featuring a brilliant guest speaker, Talmud scholar Dr Rachel Rosenthal. We were also pleased to host and be a part of a cross-communal Tisha b'Av program.

Our bnei mitzvah program continues to round out the learning experience of participants.

We kvell in the Jewish literacy of our community that boasts real scholarship and a large number of Torah, haftarah and megillah readers of all ages and from all backgrounds, who bring passion, skill and commitment to the critical Jewish project of reading a canon of texts each week and year. And we love the cohort of our youngest members who sing Adon Olam at the bima each week after enjoying wonderful children's programs.

Shira occupies a unique place in Melbourne Jewish life, offering a deeply traditional setting while continuing to grapple with the issues that are challenging and sometimes alienating from orthodoxy. We are especially proud of our record on women's spiritual and ritual leadership, of creating a welcoming and open environment for LGBTQI Jews, and of the learning that we have been able to foster.

We hope that Shira continues to be a space where you can bring your whole self to Jewish life and community.

Shana Tova from Shira Hadasha Board 2019



✻ shira