

Rosh Hashanah & Days of Awe

Separation & Self-Examination

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Next Shabbat is *Rosh Hashanah*, the first in sequence of Judaism's High Holy Days – a day, along with *Yom Kippur* that defines Judaism as characteristically as Christmas and Easter define Christianity. A day that is so important in Jewish life and identity that Jews around the world, if they never set foot in a synagogue any other time of the year, are willing to pay to acquire a seat in a synagogue on *Rosh Hashanah* and on *Yom Kippur*. Since the day of *Rosh Hashanah* is so important, let's see what the *Torah* has to say about it:

Leviticus 23:23-25: “Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, saying: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of shofarim (rams’ horns), a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it; and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD.’”

That's it? That's all the Bible has to say about one of the most important days of the year? We're to blow *shofarim* and not go to work so we can conduct a sacrifice that we can't do anyway because we have no Temple? Very strange unless we are willing to read a bit further in the Bible and also be willing to glean from other Jewish writings. First the Bible:

Leviticus 23:26-29: “And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the *Yom Kippur* – the day of covering. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. And you shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God. For any person who is not afflicted in soul on that same day shall be cut off from his people.’”

And also Leviticus 16:29-31:

“This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you. For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the LORD. It is a sabbath of solemn rest for you, and you shall afflict your souls. It is a statute forever.”

So for me, the pieces now begin to fit together. We are to blow the *shofarim* ten days before the *Yom Kippur* sacrifice in order to call attention to *Yom Kippur*'s critical nature – so critical, that the continued existence of Israel once depended upon it. We know from elsewhere in Scripture that *shofarim* were often blown to sound an alarm or to call the people together for something very important, so that makes good sense. Let's go a little further now, and read what the Jewish sages recorded in the Talmud about the period of time between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

The Soncino *Talmud* translation of Tractate Moed, Yoma 2a, MISHNAH 1 states:

“Seven days before the Day of Atonement the High Priest was removed from his house to the cell of the counsellors and another priest was prepared to take his place in case anything happened to him [the High Priest] that would unfit him [for the service]. R. Judah said: Also another wife was prepared for him in case his wife should die for it is written, and he shall make atonement for himself and for his house. His house means ‘his wife.’ They said to him: If so there would be no end to the matter.”

The *Gemara* of the *Talmud* reveals that the separation of the High Priest was in order to keep him ritually clean and insulated from temptation, so that he could perform his Temple duties on *Yom Kippur*. And therein lies a lesson for us because, although we are not Levitical High Priests, the Bible teaches that New Covenant believers are priests under Yeshua, our High Priest, and therefore our purity needed for us to perform our priestly duties is also a matter of importance; it is a fact that we are particularly reminded of during this season.

Possibly related to the High Priest’s separation seven days before *Yom Kippur*, Jewish tradition designates the ten days between *Rosh Hashannah* and *Yom Kippur* as “Days of Awe” (*Yamim Noraim*), also known as “Days of Repentance.” They are days of introspection – days to look for sin to repent of – so that, it is said, by the time of *Yom Kippur*, individuals of Israel would be in a spiritual condition to receive the atonement of the Mosaic Covenant and be written in the Book of Life for the coming year. Although the Israelites under the Mosaic Covenant depended on the animal sacrifice for their atonement and we who are New Covenant believers depend on Yeshua’s sacrifice, our need for repentance both as individuals and as New Covenant priests under Yeshua is just as real.

Traditionally, there are understood to be three actions on men’s parts that can change God’s judgment of them; they are *teshuvah* (repentance), *tefilah* (prayer), and *tzedaka* (charity). Now in the New Covenant, our eternal judgment is based on Yeshua’s sacrifice – not on our works. Nevertheless, we are subject to God’s judgment of us – call it His opinion of us if you must – regarding all of the ways we conduct ourselves in our relationship with Him and with each other, and these three traditional actions are foundational. Let’s take *teshuvah* – repentance. Who among us volunteers to explain to God why, because Yeshua died for us, we need not repent of our sins. *Tefilah* – prayer – is conversing with God. Who among us believes God is happy with those of his children who don’t want to dialogue with Him? Would you be if your children never came to visit? And *tzedaka* – charity. God has made it abundantly clear that loving Him is inseparably connected to loving our brother. *Tzedaka* is a sacrificial way to love our brother, and another way to love our brother is to seek reconciliation with those whom we may have wronged. This is also a tradition connected to the Days of Awe, and one that was broadened by Yeshua in Matthew 18 to every day throughout the year.

One more thing. The Shabbat that falls during the Days of Awe is called *Shabbat Shuvah* or “Shabbat of return,” as a further emphasis on our need to repent and return to God. I find that believers in Yeshua sometimes play down the Jewish emphasis on repentance – I think it is because they fear we are not appreciating Yeshua’s gift to us of salvation through grace that they say is freely given, and that we do not earn. Well, that is true and at the same time it is not true because there is a requirement of us in order to have Yeshua’s salvation; it is to repent and receive Him as our Lord and savior. That requires faith on our part – faith that often does not

come easy. If you doubt it, look around you at the number of unbelievers there are as compared to believers. Anyway, this year, *Shabbat Shuvah* is the week after next, September 26.

So despite the little said about it in Scripture, *Rosh Hashanah* is vitally important as being – not as just a day – but the beginning of a ten-day period during which Jews worldwide examine themselves, and we who are believers in Yeshua contemplate our personal and New Covenant priestly responsibilities, and methodically and consciously search out sin in our lives with an attitude that, if we find any, we will repent both for our own sake, and also for the sake of those whom we serve as priests.

Okay, that is one aspect of our *Rosh Hashanah* observance. There is another that is very different in a Messianic Jewish Congregation than it is in a synagogue that is not Messianic. Next week's service at Ohev Yisrael and at almost all Messianic Jewish Congregations will include dancing and high praise – a practice that is not traditional on *Rosh Hashanah* in the wider Jewish community. That is because we who are Messianic Jews and *K'rovei Yisrael* Gentiles, temper our focus on repentance with the joy of acknowledging our salvation in Yeshua.¹

Let's speak a little now about how Jews traditionally observe *Rosh Hashanah*. First of all, "*Rosh Hashanah*" literally means "head of the year" or "new year," and it is often referred to as the Jewish New Year. That is a rabbinic concept that has some merit, because when we repent we are renewed, and things become as new. The *Torah* calls the day *Yom T'ruah*, "day of blowing," and also *Yom Zikkaron*, "day of remembrance." But *Rosh Hashanah* is fine also.

The *Torah* identifies *Rosh Hashanah* as a single day – the first day of the seventh month that we call *Tishri*; however, as with most Jewish Holy Days, many in the diaspora Jewish community observe a second day as well. This is due to the ambiguity of whether the day should be kept according to the time in Israel or local time. Ohev does not conduct services on the second day of *Rosh Hashanah*, and leaves it up to each of its members to decide whether or not to observe the second day by attending synagogue elsewhere. In Israel, *Rosh Hashanah* is a single day.

Perhaps the most characteristic thing about *Rosh Hashanah* is the tradition that we hear multiple notes blown on the *shofar*. Historically, *shofarim* are rams' horns, but because they are relatively small in size, their sound is often uneven. The large *shofarim* that we often see and use are antelope horns, and they have become traditional as well.

It is a tradition in Judaism to not blow the *shofar* on *Shabbat* – any *Shabbat*. That creates a paradox for years when *Rosh Hashanah*, the day of blowing *shofarim*, falls on *Shabbat* as it does next week. Not to blow *shofarim* on a day we are specifically commanded to blow *shofarim* seems wrong. Well, you have no doubt noticed that Ohev regularly blows the *shofar* on the *Shabbat* closest to *Rosh Chodesh* – the new moon. Ohev generally abides by Jewish traditions but we know the New Covenant gives us liberty, so in some cases we supersede the wider Jewish

¹ This footnote was added in 2011. Since this message was given, Ohev Yisrael re-evaluated its position on incorporating dance in its *Rosh Hashanah* service, and decided to discontinue the practice in recognition of the serious and contemplative nature of the season.

community's traditions with our own. Bottom line: We WILL be blowing the *shofar* next *Shabbat*.

Except for the blowing of *shofarim*, the synagogue service on *Rosh Hashanah* is similar to most *Shabbat* services, with a few exceptions. One of the exceptions is that there are special *Torah* and *Haftarah* readings. The theme of the first and second day's *Torah* readings are in *B'reshit*, and center around events in the life of Isaac. The first day's reading from Genesis 21 recounts the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah because, according to legend, Sarah gave birth to Isaac on the day that eventually became *Rosh Hashanah*. The second day's *Torah* reading is from Genesis 22, the part we call the *Akedah*, which tells of when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac at God's direction, but was stopped by an angel and allowed to substitute a ram that was caught in a thicket by his horns – an obvious connection to the rams' horns we blow ceremonially on *Rosh Hashanah*.

Now for the sake of our being further knowledgeable about Jewish practices, I want to mention the High Holyday prayer book and the tradition of wearing white. The High Holy Day prayer book is called a *machzor*. It is similar to the daily *siddur* and *Shabbat siddur*, but it contains unique prayers for *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur*, and *Sukkot*. Sometimes *machzorim* are for all the holidays in one bound volume, and sometimes they are separate volumes specialized for each Holy Day. As for wearing white, it is optional, but is a tradition that on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, congregants wear white. The *Torah Scrolls* are dressed in white as well, as are the curtain of the ark and the cover of the *bima*. The reason is that the color white symbolizes spiritual cleanliness, which is the theme of the season. There is a special white garment that men sometimes wear during this season that is called a *kittle*. It may be worn at other times as well – by a groom during the marriage ceremony, by a man being laid to rest (buried) along with his *tallit*, and by the leader (and sometimes the male participants) of a Passover *seder*.

Some traditions are so delicious that they are universal. On *Rosh Hashanah*, it is traditional to eat apples dipped in honey and other things that are sweet. Our *oneg* next week will include treats such as those.

Following the *oneg* next week, as we do each year, we will gather at the creek at Accotink Park for a ceremony known as *Tashlich* – which means “casting off.” It involves throwing bread into the flowing water and reading Micah 7:18-20:

“Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will give truth to Jacob and mercy to Abraham, which You have sworn to our fathers From days of old.”

I have noticed in past years that some of us don't bring bread with us and throw stones instead. I guess that's okay, but I prefer to see the bread float away, suggestive of Yeshua taking away my sins. Once again, this is something that is not traditionally done if *Rosh Hashanah* falls on *Shabbat*, but I support our doing it because Ohev does not meet on the second day of *Rosh*

Hashanah, and I believe that experiencing the biblical message of *Tashlich* is important and should not wait a year.

Well, that's really all I have to say about *Rosh Hashanah*, and as I said, I think the real significance of it is not the day itself but the Days of Awe that it initiates. So in closing, permit me to recite a few Scriptures that teach the importance of biblical introspection which is, of course, the purpose of the Days of Awe.

First, Matthew 7:3-5 that exhorts us to look to our own sins before we think we are fit to correct someone else's:

“And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”

Next let's look at 1 Corinthians 11:27-31 that warns us about the danger of taking the *Shulchan Adonai* – the Table of the Lord – in an unworthy manner:

“Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.”

Finally, let's look at 2 Corinthians 13:5:

“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Yeshua the Messiah is in you? – unless indeed you are disqualified.”

Well, I don't believe that anyone in this room is disqualified by unbelief, but even if someone here is, the remedy is in that person's own hands because Yeshua says to us:

Revelation 3:20-21: *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”*

This is a good place to end.