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The DoJewish

Guide

to the

High Holidays

Including explanations of all of the
major customs, laws, and themes of the

Jewish New Year

by

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The Month of Elul

Elul is the name of the Jewish month that immediately precedes Rosh HaShanah. Traditionally this is a month of introspection and preparation for the Day of Judgment. If we were subpoenaed to appear in court before a judge we would spend as much time as possible preparing our case. So, too, for Rosh HaShanah, when we will be judged by G-d, we spend our time evaluating the previous year's activities and priorities.

Slichot

The Saturday night before Rosh HaShanah - or some years two before the New Year - the custom is for all to gather at synagogue at midnight to recite the moving Slichot prayers. The central theme of the Slichot is the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. This is the prayer that G-d taught to Moses on Mount Sinai which enabled the Children of Israel to obtain pardon for the sin of the golden calf. HaShem promised Moshe that this prayer, when sincerely offered, will assure us of G-d's forgiveness. The Slichot are traditionally recited each weekday from after Shabbat until Yom Kippur.

Mikva

There is a deep and beautiful custom for men to immerse in a mikva - a proper river, ocean or specially designed bath - before the onset of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. The mikva has the power to cleanse the spirit and to allow the person to be "reborn". Furthermore, since the water must be either rain water or spring water, i.e., water connected to its source, it is a way to re-establish contact with the natural, primordial order of the world.

Four Names

Four Hebrew names describe various aspects of the holiday: *Rosh HaShanah* - The Beginning of the Year. It is so designated because Rosh HaShanah is the anniversary of the creation of the world.

Yom HaDin - Day of Judgment. On this day all of humanity stands before G-d and each is judged according to his or her actions of the previous year. Furthermore, all aspects of our lives - health, family, finances, etc. - are determined and “budgeted” for the following year as well.

Yom Teru'ah - The Day of Sounding the Shofar. Blowing the Shofar is a mitzvah from the Torah, and serves to penetrate our souls and inspire us to T'shuvah.

Yom HaZikaron - The Day of Remembrance. G-d has a complete awareness of our past performance, regarding both actions and intentions. Private, hidden kindnesses do not go unnoticed by HaShem. This awareness informs the Judgment of this day.

Two Days

That Rosh HaShanah is observed for two days is a practice that dates back to the time of our earliest prophets. The Jewish calendar is partly a lunar one, wherein the months are determined by the phases of the moon. People would go out into the night and gaze up at the clear sky to view the renewal of the moon's cycle. At the light of day they would bring the news to the Beit Din in Jerusalem who would in turn send the news to Jews both in Israel and abroad. When those who lived in outlying areas received the news too late, they would be unable to observe the holiday and would feel disconnected from their brothers and sisters who lived in or closer to Israel. In order to maintain the unity of the Jewish people and to honor the integrity of the holiday, the Prophets and Sages enacted a second day of Rosh HaShanah so that all Jews the world over would be observing the days of the holiday as one people. The Talmud refers to the two days as one long day, indicating the wholeness of the holiday. Jews all over the world observe the two days of Rosh HaShanah with equal love and attachment, as we have for thousands of years. It is a beautiful way to keep faith with the millions of Jews who lived before us, and it reconnects us to the elements of nature, so intertwined in the tapestry of the Torah.

Kiddush

As we sit down to enjoy each Yom Tov meal, we begin, as we do on Shabbat, with the Kiddush that is said over a cup of wine. The purpose of the Kiddush is to declare the sanctification of the day. In the statement of Kiddush itself we make a blessing that expresses our great gratitude for having our unique and close relationship with HaShem. We also note that HaShem gave us this day - the Day of Judgment - out of love for us.

The Rosh HaShanah Seder

There is a lovely and meaningful custom of having a special seder the first night of Rosh HaShanah. The seder consists of many types of fruits and vegetables - simanim, or “signs” - each of which has a name that recalls the blessings that HaShem bestows upon us. After Kiddush and HaMotzie we partake of each of the delicacies and say a brief prayer that G-d bring about these blessings. Dipping apples in honey is the most well-known of these simanim.

Learning Mishnaiot

Since Judaism is a highly intellectual way of life, it is customary to enhance the holiday with the study of the relevant passages of the Talmud. There are four chapters in the Talmudic Tractate Rosh HaShanah which discuss the major themes of the day. Some study the entire Tractate during the first evening and day; others study a chapter at each of the four festive meals. It is highly enjoyable and stimulating to study the Mishnaiot in pairs.

Opening of the Ark

Many times during the services of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur the Aron Kodesh - the Ark that contains the Torah Scrolls - is opened and we stand for the prayers that are then recited. For many other prayers the Ark remains closed and we are seated. This does not indicate the importance of some prayers over others. Rather, we open the Aron at certain times when we need extra inspiration, an extra dose of awe. When we are face to face with the Sefer Torah, we are confronted with the word of G-d. We measure our thoughts, actions and priorities against the lofty and demanding expectations of the Eternal Word.

Teshuvah, Tefillah, Tzedakah

In reviewing our past year we work at correcting the mistakes and misjudgments that we all make. To demonstrate our desire to “turn over a new leaf”, we acknowledge the power of Teshuva - true repentance, renewal; Tefillah - sincere prayer; and Tzedakah - donations to the poor and to Jewish organizations. These are steps in the personal growth that defines this period of the year.

Shofar

Hearing the blast of the Shofar - a ram’s horn - is the central mitzvah of Rosh HaShanah. So much so that the Torah itself refers to the day as Yom Teru’ah. Three different notes are sounded: Tekiah, a long, steady sound; Shevarim, a three-part wailing sound; and Teru’ah, a nine-part broken sound. These sounds are blown for a total of 100 notes. The great sage Rav Sa’adiah Gaon enumerated ten reasons for the sounding of the Shofar. One is that the Shofar reminds us of Akeidat Yitzchak, when Abraham and Isaac were willing to sacrifice all that they had - physically, emotionally and intellectually - for G-d. Ultimately G-d asked them to sacrifice only a ram. The Shofar symbolizes that dedication. Another reason is that when we received the Torah from G-d at Mt. Sinai, “the sound of the Shofar grew louder and louder...” The Shofar blasts on Rosh HaShanah remind us to personally renew that commitment to Torah. The sounds of the Shofar are the most simple and unadorned, and symbolize the deep-seated longing of every Jew to return to his or her source of life: HaShem. “The Shofar is our homing signal, the cry from the heart that says, ‘I belong here,’ and the echoing cry from G-d’s heart that says, ‘Yes, the door is open.’ It is the sound that says that when no words are possible, no words are needed.” In order that the entire congregation can fulfill the mitzvah of hearing all of the notes clearly, the Shofar is sounded by only one individual, designated by the community, known as the Ba’al Toke’ah.

Tashlich

The Tashlich prayers are said on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh HaShanah. The service is recited at a body of water, and expresses our hope that HaShem will wash away our misdoing on this Day of Judgment. The prayers appeal to HaShem's mercy and patience, as we say, "cast into the depths of the sea all their sins."

Teshuva

One of the great miracles of the world is that we can reverse the course of our own personal history. The process of Teshuva involves three basic steps. The first is to genuinely regret the mistake that we made. The second step is to verbally confess to having erred. The third step is to give up commission of the transgression. (It should be noted that teshuva does not attain forgiveness for wrongs committed against one another until rectification is accomplished and the wronged party has been appeased). When Teshuva is sincerely accomplished, it has the effect of turning our past transgressions into Mitzvot, our earlier guilt into merit. The Talmud teaches that one who truly does Teshuva surpasses even the greatest of saints.

Ten Days

The days beginning with Rosh HaShanah and culminating with Yom Kippur are known as the Eseret Yamei Teshuva, the Ten Days of Repentance. While HaShem always hears our prayers, and introspection towards self-perfection is always appropriate, these are days when HaShem is particularly close and accessible. We are not judged and dismissed on Rosh HaShanah. Rather, G-d has given us these intervening days to allow us to further advance in our process of Teshuva. Many try during this time to enhance their observance of the traditions of Judaism: some more time and greater concentration in prayer; more generous donations to Tzedakah; heightened sensitivity towards others; selecting a traditional Jewish book to complete during the week. We struggle to make ourselves better people and better Jews, and consequently more deserving of a favorable judgment.

Shabbat Shuvah

The Shabbat that falls between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur is called Shabbat Shuvah. The day is named after the opening words of the day's Haftarah: "Shuvah Yisrael! Return, Israel, to the L-rd your G-d." One of the messages is that all can benefit from Teshuva; the greatest saint can become greater still, and even the most corrupt can begin anew. Many dedicate this Shabbat to reflection upon their accomplishments of the past year. A well-spent Shabbat Shuvah may serve as a "tikkun" for any Shabbat that might have been better observed during the previous year.

Outline of the Rosh HaShanah Services

The services for the New Year, as for all other days of the year, are divided into several major sections. The major delineation is outlined below. The prayers are essentially the same for both days of Rosh HaShanah. This outline follows the traditional prayer service.

Ma'ariv -- The Inaugural Evening Service

- Barchu: The communal call to prayer
- The Shema: Declaration of the Unity of HaShem
- Amidah: The Silent Devotion

Shacharit -- The Morning Service

- Birchot HaShachar: Morning Blessings of Gratitude
- Pesukay D'zimrah: Preparatory Psalms of Praise
- The Shema: Declaration of the Unity of HaShem
- Amidah: The Silent Devotion
- Chazarat HaShatz: The Chazan's Repetition of the Amidah

Kriyat HaTorah -- The Torah Reading

- Hotza'at Sefer Torah: Removal of the Torahs from the Aron
- Kriyat HaTorah: The Torah Readings
- The Haftorah: The Prophetic Reading
- Tkiyat Shofar: Blowing of the Shofar
- Chazarat Sefer Torah: Returning the Torah to the Aron

Musaf -- The Additional Service

- Hinini: The Chazan's Plea
- The Amidah: The Silent Devotion
- Chazarat HaShatz: The Chazan's Repetition
 - U'netaneh Tokef - G-d's Kingship
 - Kedushah - Sanctification of G-d's name
 - Tkiyat Shofar - Blowing of the Shofar
 - Birkat Cohanim - Blessing of the Priests

Mincha -- The Afternoon Service

- The Amidah: The Silent Devotion
- Chazarat HaShatz: The Chazan's Repetition

Ma'ariv -- The Concluding Evening Service

- Barchu: The communal call to prayer
- The Shema: Declaration of the Unity of HaShem
- Amidah: The Silent Devotion
- Havdalah: Parting Ceremony (recited at the close of the second day of Rosh HaShanah).

Kaparot

The custom of Kaparot - Atonements - is an ancient one, dating back to the days of the Geonim (post-Talmudic scholars).

There are different forms of the custom; many people today perform it in the following manner. During the morning before Yom Kippur, one separates a specific sum of money - usually a multiple of 18, for “Chai, Life” - and holds it in his or her hand while reciting the text found in the Machzor. The idea is to drive home the understanding that we may, because of our transgressions, be deserving of punishment. Rather than serving as atonement for our mistakes, the Kaparot serve to encourage us to do teshuva and to ask HaShem for mercy. The money is given to the poor.

Vidui

The Vidui - Confession - is one of the central elements of the prayers of Yom Kippur. Without verbal confession the act of Teshuva remains incomplete and ineffectual. This is because it is through verbalization of misdeeds that the act becomes external to ourselves. We become able to view it, so to speak, as something concrete and as something that has a very real, negative impact on our lives and on the world around us. Once so blatantly placed before us, we can then begin to grapple with the problem of our own weakness and its consequences. The fact that we repeat the Vidui - recited ten times over the course of the day - demonstrates the difficulty in truly and sincerely evaluating our own actions. The enumeration of the transgressions is in the plural form. There is a very beautiful idea that as we go through our own process of introspection and self-improvement, we have in mind others who may not be so privileged to do so. If we ourselves have not committed a particular misdeed, we mention it nevertheless for the benefit of one who will not. Certainly if one is aware of a wrong that he or she committed that does not appear in the text of the Vidui, that person should specify that act quietly. It should go without saying that one must offer the Vidui with as much sincerity as one can feel; we must avoid mere rote recitation of the text.

Seudat HaMafseket

The term means “final meal”. As it is a Mitzvah to fast on Yom Kippur, so too is it a Mitzvah to feast before Yom Kippur. Not only to have sufficient strength during the fast to focus properly on our Teshuva - reason enough by itself - but also to express our joy that we have the opportunity to draw closer to the Source of life. With confidence that through sincere teshuva HaShem will indeed forgive our transgressions, we celebrate the arrival of our time of atonement. We do so by having prepared the house and ourselves for the day. The home should be clean and orderly, and we come to the meal clean and in our finest holiday clothes. The meal should conclude well before sunset, when the fast begins. One should avoid alcoholic beverages to ensure clarity of mind for the services.

Five Restrictions

Literally called by the Torah “afflictions”, there are five specific acts that are prohibited on Yom Kippur. They are: a) eating and drinking, b) washing, c) using lotions, d) wearing leather shoes, e) and marital relations. These restrictions actually serve the purpose of allowing us to focus exclusively on the internal process of introspection and commitment to self-improvement. Upon reflection, we would probably conclude that mistakes that we make are usually attributable to an overemphasis on our material desires. By removing our minds from thoughts of our physical, material existence we emphasize the priority we give to our spiritual selves.

White Clothes

Both men and women customarily wear white clothes on Yom Kippur. Many men wear a specially designed white robe called a kittel. There are two reasons for the custom of wearing white. First, the kittel is used as the burial shroud for one who has died. Thus it serves on Yom Kippur to remind us of our mortality, which in turn encourages us to greater Teshuva. Secondly, the white is symbolically representative of the angels, who exist in the white purity of complete freedom from transgression.

From Strength to Strength

After we conclude Yom Kippur and have broken the fast, we begin to construct the Succah in anticipation of the Succot holiday. The first act that we do after having our slates wiped clean is the mitzvah of preparing for the holiday. We want to be eager to demonstrate, more to ourselves than to G-d, that we are quite serious about the commitments that we made during the last 24 hours. We move from the strength of commitment to the strength of action, and that sets the tone for the months to follow.

NOTES

Outline of the Yom Kippur Services

The services for the Day of Atonement, as for all other days of the year, are divided into several major sections. The major delineation is outlined below.

Ma'ariv -- The Evening Service

- Kol Nidre The Annulment of Vows
- Barchu: The communal call to prayer
- The Shema: Declaration of the Unity of HaShem
- Amidah, Vidui: The Silent Devotion, Confession
- Slichot: Pleas for Forgiveness
- Avinu Malkeinu Our Father, Our King

Shacharit -- The Morning Service

- Birchot HaShachar: Morning Blessings of Gratitude
- Pesukay D'zimrah: Preparatory Psalms of Praise
- The Shema: Declaration of the Unity of HaShem
- Amidah, Vidui: The Silent Devotion, Confession
- Chazarat HaShatz: The Chazan's Repetition of the Amidah

Kriyat HaTorah

- Hotza'at Sefer Torah: Removal of the Torahs from the Aron
- Kriyat HaTorah: The Torah Readings
- The Haftarah: The Prophetic Reading
- Yizkor: Memorial Service
- Chazarat Sefer Torah: Returning the Torah to the Aron

Musaf -- The Additional Service

- Hinini: The Chazan's Plea
- The Amidah, Vidui: The Silent Devotion, Confession
- Chazarat HaShatz: The Chazan's Repetition
 - U'netaneh Tokef - G-d's Kingship
 - Kedushah - Sanctification of G-d's name
 - Aleynu, Bowing
 - Birkat Cohanim - Blessing of the Priests

Mincha -- The Afternoon Service

- Kriyat HaTorah: Torah Reading
- The Haftorah: The Book of Jonah
- The Amidah, Vidui: The Silent Devotion, Confession
- Chazarat HaShatz: The Chazan's Repetition

Neilah -- The Closing Prayer

- Amidah: The Silent Devotion
- Chazarat HaShatz: The Chazan's Repetition
 - Kedusha Sanctification of G-d's Name
 - Slichot Pleas for Forgiveness
- Avinu Malkeinu Our Father, Our King
- Tekiat Shofar Blowing of the Shofar

Ma'ariv -- The Evening Service

- Barchu: The communal call to prayer
- The Shema: Declaration of the Unity of HaShem
- Amidah: The Silent Devotion
- Havdalah: Parting Ceremony (recited at the close of the day).

NOTES

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