

– Bamidbar/Numbers 29:1

“And in the seventh month, on the first day, there shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall not perform any mundane work. It shall be a day of Shofar sounding for you.”

Perhaps the lesson of this juxtaposition is that success is best achieved by consistently setting modest achievable goals that move us slow and steady toward our ideal selves. As the Talmudic idiom *Tafasta Meruba Lo Tafasta* literally translates, “If you [try to] grab too much you will [end up to] have grabbed nothing.” (T.B. Yoma 80a)

While the ‘Jewish New Year’ isn’t traditionally a day for campaign, number glasses, and party hats, the idea of New Year’s Resolutions borrowed from the secular New Year isn’t necessarily out of place on Rosh Hashanah. It is after all a time for repentance, which in many cases means committing to breaking bad habits and establishing better ones.

In a twist of irony, however, one of the activities that is traditionally performed on the morning before Rosh Hashanah is a ceremony called *Hatarat Nedarim* – the annulment of vows. The purpose of this repeal is to ensure that we don’t enter the Day of Judgment (another name for Rosh Hashanah) carrying the weight of unfulfilled commitments.

Fun Facts

All about Rosh HaShanah

The Jewish ‘New Year’ and beginning of the ‘10 Days of Repentance’

October 3-4 / Tishrei 1-2



Listen out for the Shofar - The original New Year’s Noisemaker!

The Backstory



The *Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 29:1)* connects the holiday of Rosh HaShanah to the creation of human beings on the 6th day of creation. On this day in biblical history, the advent of human subjects paves the way for God's coronation as King. The other significant occurrence on the 6th day was the first sin when Adam and Eve (Chava) ate from the Tree of Knowledge. What makes it noteworthy is not that a person

sinned, King Solomon in his significant wisdom taught that "there is no righteous person on earth who does good and doesn't sin," (*Kohelet 7:20*), but what follows when Adam and Chava are subsequently judged and pardoned by God. This Divine clemency sets the precedent for the annual time of judgment each year during the High Holidays when we too seek repentance with an assurance that our sincere introspections, regrets, and resolutions for a better future will be met by God's mercy and ongoing support.

This backstory sets the stage for the three big themes for the day's prayers – *Malchuyot* (verses of Kingship emphasizing the sovereignty of God), *Zichronot* (verses of Remembrance calling attention to God's mindfulness of us, our situations,

and our covenantal history), and *Shofarot* (verses recalling the Shofar with a focus on God as Redeemer).

This awareness also kicks off the 10 Days of Repentance (*Aseret Yemei Teshuva*) which culminate during Yom Kippur and whose enormity is captured in the cantorial highlight of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer shared by Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Playing off the imagery of the Talmud (T.B. *Rosh HaShanah 16b*) describing the books which are opened and inscribed on Rosh HaShanah and then sealed on Yom Kippur, this *Teffila* emphasizes how our activity generally, and particularly during this small window of time, can tip the scales in our favor as God determines our course for life or death in the year to come. As such, custom has evolved to be 'extra good' during this time period, often adopting extra ritual stringencies. But, as captured in *Unetaneh Tokef*, the most impactful behavior changes come through increasing *Teshuva* (Repentance), *Tefilla* (Prayer), and *Tzeduka* (Charity).

The result of these entwined themes is that Rosh HaShanah is simultaneously a day of solemnity and earnest introspection as well as a day of great joy and celebration. This dichotomy often manifests in the contrast between serious heartfelt prayers in the synagogue, and the upbeat family feasts we enjoy around our tables. It is the *Gilu Birada* – the rejoicing while trembling (Psalm 2:11) which is our natural response as we hear the call of the Shofar.

How We Celebrate

Shofar: This horn from a Kosher animal (but not from a cow – *Mishna Rosh HaShanah 3:2*) is the quintessential symbol of Rosh HaShanah. It is the ritual specifically commanded by the Torah and a highlight of the service for many, especially children. There are traditionally 100 *Kolot* (blasts) of the Shofar blown each of the two days of Rosh HaShanah with four special patterns to the sound. The *Tekiah* is a single long tone, the *Shevarim* is comprised of three short blasts in succession, and the *Teruah* is made up of nine quick staccato notes. The final blast is a *Tekiah Gedolah*, a single extra-long call unique to the *Yomim Noraim* (High Holidays).

Tashlich: Typically on the afternoon of Rosh HaShanah, or at some other point during the 10 Days of Repentance, individuals or whole communities will gather at a naturally flowing body of water "to cast off" their sins (*Tashlich* comes from the Hebrew meaning "cast off"). Different customs, like turning out one's pockets, shaking out *Tzitzit* (ritual fringes), or even tossing breadcrumbs to the water, help us to psychologically break free from previous sins. *Tashlich's* message is clear. We possess the capacity to effect positive change in our actions and in our communities as our past needn't dictate our future.

Feasts Filled with Symbolism: For many, the highlight of Rosh HaShanah is partaking in delicious meals filled with unique family traditions. Certain traditions are more universal; the use of round *Challah* breads, dipping apples into honey, eating 'new fruits' and other symbolic pun filled foods all bring with them hope and prayers for a sweet new year filled with personal growth, success, and wellbeing.

Words of Greeting: Throughout this period there are traditional words of greeting which we offer up to each other. The most basic formulation is simply "*Shana Tovah*" (good year), though it's easy and common to also append the word "*u'Metukah*" (and sweet) to the end of it. You may also hear variations on "*Ketivah v'Chatima Tovah*" – a blessing that one should be inscribed and sealed for a good year, and "*A Gut Gebentcht Yohr*" - Yiddish for a good and blessed year.

