

Rosh Hashana

The lamim Noraim (the 10 days going from Rosh Hashana to Iom Kipur) are, perhaps, the most well-known days in our luach – calendar. Where does the incredible potential of these days lie? Why do those Jews that for 50 weeks a year do not come to the synagogues suddenly feel that they must be present during these days?

Days and times of the year.

Rosh Hashana is celebrated the 1st and 2nd day of the month of Tishrei. This is the only holiday which appears in the Torah which lasts two days in Israel as well as in the Diaspora.

It is strange though, that Rosh Hashana (literally meaning, beginning of the year) occurs during the 7th month of the Jewish calendar (Lev. 23:24). Let's explain this paradox. The name Rosh Hashana does not appear in the Tanach (Bible) but in the Mishna.

Since the beginning of the period of the Prophets, with Moses and until the Talmudic period, the tendency among those who were forging Jewish concepts was to shift the centre of the human life from nature to history. In the Torah, the first month is Nisan, which is the month of spring. This corresponds to an approach of the Universe which was mostly related to Nature and Life: the world comes to life again in spring after having been inactive during winter. Tishrei, on the other hand, is the beginning of autumn. Therefore it is logical that our sages of the Mishna chose this date as Rosh Hashana to prove that the important thing was not the rebirth of the earth, but to remember a fundamental fact. Following this trend of thought it is also understandable that the 1st day of Tishrei is thought as being the anniversary of Creation (Ha'iom Harat Olam), meaning that the first day of Rosh Hashana set the beginning of History itself.

The Different Names of the Holiday

Rosh Hashana is only one of the different names that this holiday has. It is also known as Iom Trua (day of Shofar Sounding), Iom Hadin (day of Judgement) and Iom Hazikaron (day of Remembrance).

At the Seminary, our teachers presented us the following challenge: to put the names of the holiday in order following a logical and pedagogical sequence, so as to be able, through such order, to learn the profound meaning of these days. Here is my choice:

A) Iom Terua: the Shofar sounds. It greets us as a clock which wakes us from our sleep. Its deep sound takes us back to the depths of our conscious. It makes us detour from our daily routine.

B) Iom Hazikaron: this is a permanent remembrance in our memory: we are neither machines, nor animals. We are human beings. And as such we are fallible, we make mistakes.

C) Iom Hadin: as humans we also need to evaluate and account for our mistakes. G-d judges us and we are able to review our actions and recognise those which are good ones and those which are bad ones.

D) Rosh Hashana: a spiritual renovation. After self-evaluation it's time to prove ourselves that we are able to be brave and truly embrace who we are. Rosh Hashana is the beginning of a new time, a time for spiritual renovation.

Costumes Related to the Day of Rosh Hashana

A) Round Challah: For each Shabbat, it is a costume that we have two regular challot, for Rosh Hashana the challah is always rounded. One of the explanations for this is that through the shape of the challah we acknowledge that life is like a circle. Today we might be feeling a little under the weather, but we shouldn't lose our optimism, maybe next year, the events of life shall take us straight to the top. Or maybe it is exactly the other way around. Nobody should have an arrogant attitude when they are in a good position.

It is also a costume not to put salt to the food during Rosh Hashana.

B) Other costumes related to food: apart from the round challah, people also include sweet vegetables to their tables. The best known example of this is the apple with honey. After the Hamotzi people take the apple with honey and say:

May it be Your will, Lord our God and God of our ancestors that You renew for us a good and sweet year.

There are also some places where people eat, together with the apple a pomegranate, to ask for a year full of Mitzvot and there are also others who eat sweet beat (selek in Hebrew) asking for our enemies to disappear (Istalku: from the same group of words as Selek). Some others don't eat walnuts as the numeric value of the word in Hebrew, egoz, is the same as jet (sin, mistake).

C) Kartissei Bracha (greeting cards): according to the Talmud, three books are opened on Rosh Hashana: Those who are righteous are immediately inscribed in the Book of Life, those who are totally wicked are "blotted out of the book of the living", and those who are in-between are written in an intermediate Book. According to their behaviour and their merits they can be transcribed to any of the other two Books. (Talmud Babli, Rosh Hashaná 165 a). It seems that the Maharil (Yaakov Moellin) during the XIV or the XV century was the first one to send good wishes for people to be inscribed in the Book of Life to his friends and students. It is said that he based this teaching in what his teacher, Rabbi Shalom Ben Itzjak from Vienna had done. During the month of Elul he would incorporate the phrase Le Shaná Tová Tikatevu Vetijatemu in all his letters. The first printed greeting cards are from the past century, from Poland.

D) Iom Arijta: Even though we said that Rosh Hashana is the only holiday which lasts two days in Israel as well as in the Diaspora, the classical interpretation differs. Rashi says that Rosh Hashana is not two different days, but one long day, 24 hours, in its normal durations (Iom Arijta: long day, see Rashi's comment of the Babli Talmud, Beitsá4b). This does not represent a problem until we reach the Kidush of the second night. If it's not one day per se, but the prolongation of the previous, we shouldn't sing the Sheheianu after the blessing of the day. To solve this problem, many beautiful and well known traditions have been created. The 2nd night of Rosh Hashana every Jew must wear something new or put in the dinner table some new fruit which has not yet been eaten in that season, being this a proper occasion for singing the Sheheianu.

E. Tashlij: this is the prayer that we say in the afternoon of the 1st day of Rosh Hashana (or the 2nd day if the 1st day is Shabbat). Jews go to the river or the sea or to a place with flowing water. They carry little pieces of bread. As they recite Tashlij they throw the bread to the water to let the water take away those pieces and, with them, our sins. This tradition is found in a verse at the end of the book of the Prophet Mijá: "... and you shall send (Tashlij) to the bottom of the sea all your mistakes."

Shana Tova Umetuka!

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