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SELECT HALACHOT ON ROSH HASHANA
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The Order of the Simanim

Different opinions exist among the Halachic authorities as the proper order of the Simanim – the special foods which we eat on the night of Rosh Hashanah as symbols of our hopes for the new year. These different opinions can be seen in the different orders that appear in the various Mahzorim. We will present here the view of the Ben Ish Hai (Rav Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909), in Parashat Nisavim, but it must be noted that the order is not critical; even if one eats the foods in a different sequence he has nevertheless fulfilled the custom.

The Ben Ish Hai rules that one begins with the date. One must check the fruit for insects, and then recite the Beracha of “Ha’etz,” having in mind to cover all “Ha’etz” foods on the table. The “Yehi Rason” prayer should be recited only after one takes a bite of the food; otherwise, it would constitute a “Hefsek” (interruption) between the Beracha and the eating.

One then eats any of the foods requiring “Ha’adama,” having in mind to cover all foods on the table requiring “Ha’adama.” At this point, one does not have to recite any more Berachot over the Simanim, as they have all been covered.

One then eats the “Rubia,” or, according to our community’s custom, the “Lubia.” Those who follow this custom to eat “Lubia” should recite in the “Yehi Rason” prayer the word “She’telabebenu.” One then eats the “Karti” (which resembles a large onion), followed by the Swiss chard, gourd, pomegranate and then apple. Our custom is to omit the word “Ki’dbash” in the “Yehi Rason” prayer over the apple, and to recite, “Shana Tova U’mutka Me’reshit Shana Ve’ad Aharit Shana.” The apples are followed by the sheep’s head or fish head (depending on custom).

In our “Yehi Rason” prayers on Rosh Hashanah, we use three different expressions in praying that our enemies will be eliminated: “Yitamu,” “Yikaretu,” and “Yistaleku.” The Ben Ish Hai explains that these three prayers refer to three different kinds of enemies. The prayer, “Yitamu Oyebenu” refers to enemy nations who threaten the Jewish People; “Yikaretu Oyebenu” refers to the harmful spiritual forces which come into existence as a result of our sins; and “Yistaleku Oyebenu” refers to the “Mekatregim” – the angels that prosecute against us before the Heavenly Tribunal. One should try to have this in mind as he recites the various prayers.

The Kaf Ha’haim (Rav Yaakob Haim Sofer, Baghdad-Israel, 1870-1939) writes that if somebody is unable to eat one of the Simanim, such as if it was not available, he does not like the taste, or he is concerned that it might contain insects, then he should look at the food and recite the “Yehi Rason” prayer. The concept of Simanim relates not to the actual eating of the food, but rather to using the food as a symbol of our hopes and prayers for the coming year, and therefore one may recite the prayer even without eating the food.

Summary: The preferred sequence for eating the Simanim on the night of Rosh Hashanah is as follows: date, any “Ha’adama” food, “Rubia” (or “Lubia”), “Karti,” Swiss chard, gourd, pomegranate, apple, sheep’s head (or fish head).

Customs Relevant to Food and Drink on Rosh Hashanah

It is proper to partake of meat and wine on the holiday of Rosh Hashanah. Instinctively, one might have assumed that meat and wine are inappropriate on this holiday, when we stand in judgment before God; if anything, we might have thought, on such an occasion we should be eating stale bread and drinking water. In truth, however, Halacha requires partaking of meat and wine on Rosh Hashanah to express our confidence in the favorable judgment that we will earn. It goes without saying, though, that this day is most certainly not a time for gluttonous indulgence and frivolity. The proper way to conduct oneself is expressed in the famous verse in Tehillim (2:11), “Ve’gilu Bi’r’ada” (“...and rejoice with trembling”); meaning, our joyous celebration must be combined with a sense of awe and reverence.

There are a number of foods which people customarily refrain from eating on Rosh Hashanah. For example, the Rama (Rabbi Moshe Isserles, Poland, 1525-1572) records a custom not to eat “Egozim,” walnuts, on Rosh Hashanah, because the word “Egoz” has the same numerical value (17) as the Hebrew word “Het” (sin). (This assumes that the word “Het” is spelled without the letter “Alef”; normally, however, we indeed do spell “Het” with an “Alef.”) In order to avoid even subtle allusions to sin on Rosh Hashanah, many people have the practice to avoid walnuts on this holiday. Others have the custom to refrain from nuts altogether on Rosh Hashanah, because nuts tend to cause mucous in one’s throat, and the noise of people clearing their throats in the synagogue might drown out the sounds of the prayers and the Shofar blowing.

There is another custom to refrain from all sour and bitter foods on Rosh Hashanah, such as lemons, vinegar and raw garlic. On Rosh Hashanah we seek omens for a sweet, pleasant year, and therefore many people refrain from sour and bitter foods.

Furthermore, some people follow the custom not to eat fish on Rosh Hashanah, due to the similarity between the words “Dag” (“fish”) and “De’aga” (“worry”). We look forward to a year free of anxiety and stress, and thus we do not wish to make any reference to “De’aga” on Rosh Hashanah. However, the Kaf Ha’haim (work by Rabbi Yaakov Sofer, Baghdad-Israel, 1870-1939) writes in the name of Rav Haim Palachi (Turkey, 1788-1869) that when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, one should eat fish on that day. Our Rabbis emphasized the importance of eating fish on Shabbat, noting, “Whoever eats ‘Dag’ on the day of ‘Dag’ is saved from ‘Dag’.” This means that one who partakes of “Dag” (fish) on the seventh day (the word “Dag” has the numerical value of seven), Shabbat, is saved from “Din Gehinam” – the punishments of Gehinam. Therefore, although there is a custom to refrain from fish on Rosh Hashanah, one should eat fish when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat.

Finally, Kabbalistic tradition teaches that one should refrain from eating black grapes on Rosh Hashanah, whereas it is advisable to eat white grapes on Rosh Hashanah.

Summary: There is a Misva to partake of meat and wine on Rosh Hashanah. Different customs exist concerning the consumption of certain foods on Rosh Hashanah. Some have the custom not to eat walnuts, and others refrain from nuts altogether. There are those who do not eat any sour or bitter foods on Rosh Hashanah. Another custom advises refraining from fish on Rosh Hashanah, though even adherents of this practice should eat fish when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat. Black grapes should not be eaten on Rosh Hashanah, but white grapes may be eaten.

The Custom to Eat Sweet Foods, Pomegranates and Apples

There is a custom to refrain from bitter, sour or tart foods on Rosh Hashanah, to symbolize our hopes for a sweet, pleasant year. The Talmud teaches that “Simana Milta Hi,” which means that symbolic acts have significance. One must therefore not belittle the customs regarding the foods eaten on Rosh Hashanah as symbols of our prayers for the new year, as these customs are very significant and indeed have an effect.

There is a common practice to eat a pomegranate on Rosh Hashanah, as the abundant seeds symbolize our hopes that we will come before God with abundant Zechuyot (merits). Interestingly, the Ben Ish Hai (Rav Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909) writes that on Rosh Hashanah one should eat specifically a sweet pomegranate, and he emphasizes this point several times. Of course, the pomegranates we have today generally have a bitter, pungent taste. It appears that in Baghdad, where the Ben Ish Hai lived, they had sweet pomegranates. In any event, in light of the custom to refrain from bitter foods on Rosh Hashanah, it would seem proper to dip the pomegranate in sugar to at least diminish its pungency.

It is also interesting to note that the custom of the Ben Ish Hai on Rosh Hashanah was to dip an apple in sugar, and not in honey. Perhaps this custom was based on Kabbalistic teaching. Regardless, everyone should follow his family’s custom in this regard.

It should be noted that the symbolic significance of the apple on Rosh Hashanah extends beyond the simple fact that it is a sweet food. The Zohar refers to Gan Eden as the “Hakal Tapuhin Kadishin” – “the orchard of sweet apples.” The apples eaten on Rosh Hashanah thus symbolize not only sweetness, but also Gan Eden, which is certainly an auspicious sign as we begin the new year. Furthermore, the apple has a pleasing appearance, a pleasing fragrance and a pleasing taste. It is pleasing and enjoyable in every which way, symbolic of our hopes that the new year will bring joy and success in all areas of life. Furthermore, the Ben Ish Hai explained the significance of this custom on the basis of Kabbalistic teaching. During the period from Nissan until Tishri, we are under the influence of the Sefira (“emanation”) of Malchut, which is the lowest Sefira and receives its strength from the higher Sefirot. Once Tishri sets in, we move into the Sefira of Tiferet, the highest Sefira, which gives to the lower Sefirot. The Sefira of Tiferet is the Sefira of Yaakov Abinu, who represents Torah, and who transmitted the power of Torah to subsequent generations. Tiferet is also associated with the attribute of “Emet” (truth), and on Rosh Hashanah we stand in judgment, which is based upon God’s attribute of absolute truth. The apple, the Ben Ish Hai writes, is associated with the Sefira of Tiferet, and we therefore eat it on Rosh Hashanah, which marks the point of transition from the Sefira of Malchut to the Sefira of Tiferet.

Of course, the vast majority of us are not versed in Kabbala, and thus do not truly understand these concepts. Nevertheless, they demonstrate the depth and profundity of these customs that we observe on Rosh Hashanah. Besides the plays on words, such as “Yitamu Son’enu” for the “Tamar” (date), and “Yikartu Son’enu” for the “Karti” (leek), there are much deeper concepts underlying these customs, and we should therefore observe them in accordance with time-honored tradition.

Summary: It is proper to refrain from bitter and sour foods on Rosh Hashanah. Pomegranates should preferably be dipped in some sugar before they are eaten on Rosh Hashanah, because they otherwise taste pungent. Some have the custom to dip the apple in sugar, instead of honey, and each person should follow his family’s tradition. The customs regarding the special foods on Rosh Hashanah are based upon profound Kabbalistic concepts and thus should not be belittled or neglected.

Eating Pomegranate

It is customary on the night of Rosh Hashanah to eat pomegranate and recite a brief prayer: “Yehi Rason She’ nihyeh Mele’im Misvot Ka’rimon” – “May it be His will that we should be filled with Misvot like a pomegranate.” Meaning, we pray that we should perform many Misvot during the coming year, symbolized by the abundant seeds in a pomegranate. (There is a tradition that a pomegranate contains 613 seeds, and thus we pray that we should be “filled” with all the Misvot.)

Hacham Ovadia Yosef, in Hazon Ovadia – Yamim Nora’im (p. 67; listen to audio recording for precise citation), raises the question of why we recite such a prayer. The Gemara in Masechet Hagiga (27) comments that even the “Posh’eh Yisrael” – the sinners among our nation – are “filled with Misvot like a pomegranate.” If even sinners have this quality of being “filled with Misvot like a pomegranate,” then why do we pray that we reach this standard? Shouldn’t we aspire to much more?

Hacham Ovadia offers an answer which he says he later saw in the Peri Hadash (Rav Hizkiya Da Silva, 1656-1695), namely, that the Gemara means that sinners perform “Misvot like a pomegranate” over the course of their entire lives. We, however, pray that in just the coming year we should fill ourselves with this abundance of Misvot.

Hacham Ovadia then offers a second answer, noting that the Gemara inferred this concept from the verse in Shir Hashirim, “Ke’felah Ha’rimon Rakatech.” The word “Rakatech” could be read to mean “your empty ones,” referring to the sinners, who are “empty” from Misvot, but they are nevertheless like a “Pelah Rimon” – a slice of pomegranate, which is filled with seeds. The sinners are “filled with Misvot” like a slice of pomegranate, but on Rosh Hashanah we pray that we should be filled not like a slice of a pomegranate, but rather like an entire pomegranate, performing far more Misvot than the sinners.

We might also suggest a third answer. The Gemara in Hagiga speaks of “Posheh Yisrael” – in the plural form, perhaps referring to all sinners of the nation combined. Altogether, the sinners of our nation fulfill Mitzvos resembling the seeds of a pomegranate. Our prayer on Rosh Hashanah is that we each should fulfill all those Mitzvos individually, on our own.

According to all these interpretations, this is a significant prayer, expressing our wish that the coming year should be one of intensive involvement in Torah and Mitzvos.

Summary: It is customary to eat pomegranate on the night of Rosh Hashanah and to recite a prayer expressing our wish that we should perform many Mitzvos during the coming year, symbolized by a pomegranate, which is filled with an abundance of seeds.

The Importance of the Special Rosh Hashanah Foods

Unfortunately, there are some people who belittle the “Simanim” – the special foods that we eat on the two nights of Rosh Hashanah to symbolize our hopes and prayers for the coming year, such as the apples, dates and leeks. They mistakenly feel that eating these foods is of no significance, and they therefore do not bother to observe this time-honored tradition.

It must be emphasized that this custom is rooted in the Talmud, which states explicitly, “Simana Milta” – the use of “signs” to express our hopes and wishes is effective and meaningful. Indeed, eating foods that symbolize our hopes for the new year can have a significant impact and effect upon the coming year. The Gemara draws proof from the ancient custom to inaugurate new kings by a fountain of water, as a symbol of the nation’s hopes for an everlasting dynasty that continuously “flows” like a fountain. This demonstrates that symbols are meaningful and effective in fulfilling our wishes. This can be understood either in terms of a spiritual effect caused in the heavens through eating the Simanim, and is mentioned in several books, or on a purely psychological level, that eating sweet foods, for example, impacts upon our psyche and draws us toward joyful, purposeful pursuits such as Torah and Mitzvos. Regardless, one must not belittle this tradition which has its origins in the Talmud, is codified in the Shulhan Aruch, and has been practiced for centuries. In fact, the Arizal (Rav Yishak Luria of Safed, 1534-1572) remarked that there is profound Kabbalistic significance underlying the eating of apples on the nights of Rosh Hashanah. Clearly, eating these foods is far more significant and important than we might think at first.

If a person cannot eat one or several of the Simanim, either because he does not enjoy the taste or because of an allergy, then he should either look or point at the food while he recites the corresponding “Yehi Rason” prayer. He certainly is not required to partake of the food if he does not like it or is allergic to it, but he should nevertheless recite the prayer associated with the food, and this, too, will have a significant effect.

Summary: One must not belittle the importance of the Simanim – the special foods eaten on the nights of Rosh Hashanah as symbols of our hopes for a successful, sweet year. These customs are rooted in the Talmud and are, indeed, beneficial in our efforts to fulfill our wishes for the coming year.

One Who Cannot Eat the Traditional Rosh Hashanah Foods

It is customary to eat certain foods on Rosh Hashanah that allude to our wishes for a successful and pleasant year. Thus, for example, we have the practice of eating Lubia (black-eye peas), pomegranates, dates, leeks, apples and gourds on the first night of Rosh Hashanah; some have the practice of eating these foods on both nights of Rosh Hashanah.

This custom is based upon the Gemara’s discussion in Horiyot, where the Gemara affirms the significance of “Simanim,” making allusions to our hopes for a favorable judgment. There are, however, two divergent texts of this Talmudic passage. According to one version of the text, the Gemara advises eating foods on Rosh Hashanah that express our hopes for a good year, whereas according to a different version, the Gemara speaks of simply looking at, rather than eating, these foods.

Based on these divergent texts, the Kaf Ha'haim (Rav Yaakov Haim Sofer, Baghdad-Israel, 1870-1939) ruled that one who cannot, for whatever reason, eat these traditional foods should point to them instead. One example is a person who discovers on the night of Rosh Hashanah that the pomegranates or dates are infested with insects and thus unsuitable for consumption. This Halacha would similarly apply to somebody who is allergic to, or simply does not like, one of these foods. In these cases, one should recite the traditional "Yehi Rason" prayer over the food in question and then point to that food, instead of eating it. In such a case, we may rely on the second version of the text of the Gemara cited above, according to which this custom involves looking at, rather than eating, these special foods.

Summary: A person who cannot, for whatever reason, partake of one of the special foods traditionally eaten on the night of Rosh Hashanah should recite the "Yehi Rason" prayer and then point to the food instead of eating it.

Reciting Shehehiyanu Over a Grafted Fruit on Rosh Hashanah

There is a time-honored custom to eat a new fruit on Rosh Hashanah and recite the Beracha of "Shehehiyanu" over the fruit.

The question arises as to whether one may recite this Beracha over a grafted fruit, such as a nectarine. The work Halachot Ketanot (Rabbi Yaakov Hagiz, Morocco, 1620-1674) ruled that one may not recite "Shehehiyanu" over a grafted fruit because the Torah forbids the act of grafting. One cannot recite a Beracha thanking God for allowing him the opportunity to enjoy a product that came about as a result of a forbidden act, in violation of the divine will. According to the Halachot Ketanot, then, one may not recite "Shehehiyanu" over a grafted fruit. This was the view of several other authorities, as well, including the Yafeh La'leb, the Sedeh Hemed, and the Ben Ish Hai.

However, Rabbi Yaakov Emden (1697-1776), in his work She'elat Yabetz, disagreed, and maintained that one does, in fact, recite "Shehehiyanu" over a grafted fruit. He argued that no distinction should be made between the Beracha of "Boreh Peri Ha'etz," which is certainly required when eating such a fruit, and the Beracha of "Shehehiyanu." Once the Torah allowed eating a grafted fruit, despite the fact that it resulted from a forbidden act, then a person who derives enjoyment from the fruit must recite "Boreh Peri Ha'etz" and, if he eats it for the first time that season, he must recite "Shehehiyanu," as well. Since he derives enjoyment from the fruit, and the Torah allows him to do so, he should recite all the relevant Berachot.

Hacham Ovadia Yosef, however, challenges this argument, claiming that we may, indeed, distinguish between the Beracha of "Boreh Peri Ha'etz," which one recites before deriving benefit from food, and "Shehehiyanu," an expression of particular joy and excitement. Even though we recite "Boreh Peri Ha'etz" over a grafted fruit, it may not necessarily be appropriate to recite "Shehehiyanu."

Rav Yaakov Emden also contended that since most of the grafting is done by gentiles, who are not bound by the Torah law, grafted fruits are not produced in violation of the divine will. God did not command non-Jews not to graft fruit, and so no wrong has been committed when gentile farmers mix different species of fruits. As such, Rav Yaakov Emden claims, there is no reason not to recite "Shehehiyanu" over a grafted fruit.

Hacham Ovadia Yosef refutes this argument, as well, noting the ruling of the Rambam (Rabbi Moshe Maimonides, Spain-Egypt, 1135-1204) that gentiles are, in fact, forbidden from grafting. Even though grafting is not included among the seven formal Noachide laws by which all people are bound, the Rambam nevertheless held that gentiles must abide even by this prohibition.

In any event, despite these arguments, Hacham Ovadia held that one may recite the Beracha of "Shehehiyanu" over a grafted fruit. Normally, when we confront a difference of opinion among the Halachic authorities with regard to a Beracha, we employ the famous rule of "Safek Berachot Le'hakel," which means that we do not recite a Beracha in situations of uncertainty. With regard to grafted fruits, however, this principle does not apply, because there was a documented custom among the Jews of Jerusalem to recite "Shehehiyanu" over grafted fruits. (Although the Kaf

Ha'haim claims that this was not the custom in Jerusalem, other sources demonstrate that this was, indeed, the practice among the city's Jewish community.) An established custom supersedes the principle of "Safek Berachot Le'hakel," and therefore one may recite "Shehehiyanu" over grafted fruits. This is also the ruling of Rabbi Moshe Halevi (Israel, 1961-2001), in his work Birkat Hashem.

The exception to this rule, as Hacham Ovadia writes, is a community that has an established custom specifically not recite "Shehehiyanu" over grafted fruits. Such communities should follow their custom, and not rely on the custom of Jerusalem mentioned above.

As for the final Halacha, our community does not appear to have any established custom in this regard, and therefore we invoke the rule of "Safek Berachot Le'hakel," which means that we do not recite a Beracha in this case for it is a situation of uncertainty. To avoid all confusion, one should preferably take for this purpose a regular fruit that was not grafted.

Summary: In Israel, one recites "Shehehiyanu" on a new fruit even if it is grafted, such as a nectarine, though it is preferable on Rosh Hashanah to use for the "Shehehiyanu" a non-grafted fruit. In our community in New York, we do not have this custom, and therefore, we do not recite "Shehehiyanu" based on doubt and the rule of "Safek Berachot Le'hakel."

The Beracha of Shehehiyanu on the Second Night of Rosh Hashanah

There is considerable discussion among the Halachic authorities regarding the recitation of the Beracha of Shehehiyanu on the second night of Rosh Hashanah. It is clear according to all views that one must recite the Beracha in Kiddush on the first night of Rosh Hashanah, before drinking the wine, just as we do on the first night of every other Yom Tob. On the second night of Rosh Hashanah, however, some Rishonim (Medieval Halachic scholars) maintained that one should not recite Shehehiyanu. In their view, the two days of Rosh Hashanah differ from other Yamim Tobim in that they constitute a "Yama Arichta" – a prolonged day of Yom Tob. The two days of Rosh Hashanah, according to this position, are not to be viewed as two separate festive occasions, each of which requiring its own recitation of Shehehiyanu, but rather as a single occasion. As such, the Beracha of Shehehiyanu, which celebrates the onset of the festival, is recited only on the first night, and not on the second night.

Other Rishonim, however, including Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yishaki of Troyes, France, 1040-1105) and the Rashba (Rabbi Shlomo Ben Aderet of Barcelona, Spain, 1235-1310), disagreed. They held that Rosh Hashanah is no different from other festivals in this regard, and the two days of the holiday constitute independent festive occasions, both of which require the recitation of Shehehiyanu. This also appears to be the view of the Rambam (Rabbi Moshe Maimonides, Spain-Egypt, 1135-1204).

The Rosh (Rabbenu Asher Ben Yehiel, Germany-Spain, 1250-1327) suggested a compromise position, advising that one should place a new fruit – meaning, a fruit he had not eaten since the beginning of the fruit's season – on the table during Kiddush on the second night of Rosh Hashanah. He should have in mind while reciting Kiddush that if Halacha follows the view that Shehehiyanu is not required on the second night of Rosh Hashanah, then the Shehehiyanu which he recites should refer to the new fruit, which he then eats with his meal. This way, one may recite Shehehiyanu without running the risk of reciting a Beracha Le'batala (meaningless Beracha) according to all opinions.

As for the final Halacha, the Shulhan Aruch rules in accordance with the view of Rashi and the Rashba, that one must recite Shehehiyanu on both nights of Rosh Hashanah. He adds, however, that it is preferable to place a new fruit on the table during Kiddush, as the Rosh recommended, in order to satisfy all opinions, though according to the strict Halacha this is not necessary.

Indeed, the widespread practice is to place a new fruit on the table during Kiddush on the second night of Rosh Hashanah, and then to eat the fruit as part of the meal. Although Rav Haim Vital (Safed, Israel, 1543-1620) wrote in his

Sha'ar Ha'kavanot that a new fruit is unnecessary, as Halacha accepts the view requiring the recitation of Shehehiyanu, this is nevertheless the widespread custom, in accordance with the Shulhan Aruch's ruling. It should be emphasized, however, that one who does not have a new fruit on the second night of Rosh Hashanah should certainly recite Shehehiyanu nonetheless. This is the ruling of the Ben Ish Hai (Rav Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909).

Many later scholars addressed the interesting question of how placing a new fruit on the table resolves the dilemma and enables a person to satisfy all views. Let us assume, for argument's sake, that it is acceptable to recite Shehehiyanu upon seeing the new fruit, and then eat the fruit later, as part of the meal. Still, reciting this Beracha after reciting Kiddush and before drinking would appear to constitute a Hefsek (improper disruption) in between Kiddush and drinking. As discussed, we place the fruit on the table so that the Shehehiyanu recited as part of Kiddush will refer to the fruit according to the view that Shehehiyanu is not otherwise warranted on the second night of Rosh Hashanah. But if so, then this Beracha is entirely irrelevant to Kiddush, and thus constitutes a Hefsek in between Kiddush and drinking, which should, seemingly, disqualify the Kiddush. It would thus seem to emerge that while endeavoring to resolve one problem, we bring ourselves into another, far more serious, predicament!

Rav Haim Palachi (Izmir, Turkey, 1788-1869) suggested that the Beracha of Shehehiyanu would not constitute a Hefsek because, as we saw, Halacha follows the view that one in any event should recite Shehehiyanu on the second night of Rosh Hashanah. This explanation, however, seems insufficient to answer the question, as it essentially concedes that placing a new fruit on the table will not achieve anything according to the view that Shehehiyanu is not recited on the second night of Rosh Hashanah. If so, then why do we place the fruit at all?

Another answer is suggested by Rabbi Moshe Halevi (Israel, 1961-2001), in his work Birkat Hashem, where he explains that the Beracha of Shehehiyanu is not inconsistent with the spirit of Kiddush. This Beracha simply expresses gratitude to God for bringing us to this special occasion; it does not contain any specific reference that would be in contrast with the theme of Kiddush. For example, if in the middle of a Kiddush a person recited the Beracha of She'hakol, this would certainly constitute a Hefsek as this Beracha is entirely out of place in Kiddush. This is not the case with regard to Shehehiyanu, and therefore this Beracha would not constitute a disruption.

In any event, one should preferably follow the widespread custom to place a new fruit on the table during Kiddush on the second night of Rosh Hashanah, if possible. One should then eat the fruit during the meal, without reciting an additional Beracha of Shehehiyanu, as it was covered by the Shehehiyanu recited at Kiddush.

Summary: According to some authorities, one does not recite Shehehiyanu at Kiddush on the second night of Rosh Hashanah. It is therefore customary to place a new fruit on the table during Kiddush on this night, and have in mind while reciting Shehehiyanu that if Halacha follows the view that this Beracha is not recited, then the Beracha he recites applies to the fruit. He should eat the fruit during the meal without repeating Shehehiyanu. Although this is the widespread custom, according to the strict Halacha one recites Shehehiyanu on the second night of Rosh Hashanah even if he does not have a new fruit.

The Custom to Dip the Halla in Honey or Sugar, and to Use Round Hallot

There is a custom to dip the Halla in either sugar or honey at the beginning of the Rosh Hashanah meals. The Kaf Ha'haim (Rav Yaakov Haim Sofer, Baghdad-Israel, 1870-1939) writes that the sugar or honey does not serve as a substitute for salt. The requirement to dip bread in salt anytime a person eats bread applies on Rosh Hashanah no less than on any other day of the year. Therefore, on Rosh Hashanah, after one recites the Beracha of "Hamosi," he should dip the Halla in salt three times, as usual, and then add a bit of sugar or honey. The addition of sugar or honey does not obviate the need for salt.

There is another custom that some people observe to use specifically round Hallot on Rosh Hashanah, as opposed to the normal oval-shaped, braided loaves. The Hatam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer of Pressburg, 1762-1839) explained this custom as an expression of our hopes and prayers that we will receive boundless blessings during the coming year.

Circles are unique in that they have no beginning or end. We therefore use round loaves of bread on Rosh Hashanah as a symbol of our hopes that God will bestow unending blessings upon us and the entire Jewish nation during the coming year.

Confessing Sins and Crying During the Rosh Hashanah Prayer Service

The Bet Yosef (work by Maran, author of the Shulhan Aruch) writes that one should not mention the word “Het” (“sin”) on the festival of Rosh Hashanah, or confess his sins on this day, as this would be inconsistent with the festive spirit of the holiday. The Zohar (principal text of Kabbalistic thought) likewise discourages making confession on Rosh Hashanah.

However, Rabbi Haim Vital (1543-1620) records that his teacher, the Arizal (Rabbi Yishak Luria of Safed, 1534-1572), encouraged confessing one’s sins and repenting on Rosh Hashanah. The Arizal understood that the Zohar discouraged confessing aloud, in an audible voice, but confessing in a soft, inaudible tone is acceptable and even admirable. Particularly, the Arizal taught that one should confess and repent at the time of the Shofar blowing, specifically during the sounding of the first thirty sounds. During these thirty Shofar blasts, the Satan is confounded and off-guard, and thus unable to prosecute against us before the Heavenly tribunal. This is therefore an especially auspicious occasion for confessing one’s sins and begging God for forgiveness, as the Satan is incapable of prosecuting at those moments. The Kaf Ha’haim (Rabbi Yosef Haim Sofer, Baghdad-Israel, 1870-1939) clarifies that one should confess in between the sets of Shofar sounds. The Ba’al Teki’a (person sounding the Shofar) generally pauses in between the sets of “Tashrat” (Teki’a -Shebarim Teru’a – Teki’a), “Tashat” (Teki’a – Shebarim – Teru’a) and “Tarat” (Teki’a – Teru’a – Teki’a). During those pauses it is proper to confess one’s sins, specifying whichever sins he is aware of, and ask God for forgiveness, in a soft, inaudible tone.

Different views exist as to the propriety of crying during the prayers on Rosh Hashanah. The Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, 1720-1797) opposed crying on Rosh Hashanah, noting the verse in the Book of Nehemya (8:10) urging that we observe Rosh Hashanah as a day of joy and festivity, and not with tearful repentance (“Ki Hedvat Hashem Hi Ma’uzchem” – “For the joy of God is your source of strength”). By contrast, the Shela (Rabbi Yeshaya Horowitz, 1565-1630) felt it was praiseworthy to cry from emotion during the Rosh Hashanah prayers. The Arizal went so far as to say that if a person does not shed tears during the High Holidays, this signifies a deficiency in the functioning of his soul.

As for the final Halacha, Hacham Ovadia Yosef ruled that it would be inappropriate to intentionally evoke tears on Rosh Hashanah. However, if a person is overcome by emotion as a natural result of sincere prayer, then he certainly should not restrain his tears, for as the Arizal said, this emotional response testifies to the greatness and purity of one’s soul.

Summary: One should not confess his sins and pray for forgiveness on Rosh Hashanah in an audible voice, but it is commendable to confess and beg for forgiveness in a soft, inaudible voice. This is particularly appropriate during the brief pauses in between the units of Shofar sounds. One should not try to evoke tears during the Rosh Hashanah prayer service, but a person who is overcome with emotion and begins crying should not suppress his crying.

Is it Proper to Cry During the Rosh Hashanah Prayers?

There is a dispute among the Halachic authorities concerning the propriety of crying during the Rosh Hashanah prayers. The Vilna Gaon (1720-1797) maintained that one should not attempt to bring himself to tears during the Rosh Hashanah prayer service, whereas the Arizal (Rav Yishak Luria of Safed, 1534-1572) held that to the contrary, it is proper to cause oneself to cry while praying on Rosh Hashanah. The Arizal went so far as to say that if one is not moved to tears during the Rosh Hashanah prayers, this reflects a deficiency in his soul.

The Hid”a (Rav Haim Yosef David Azulai, 1724-1806) suggested a kind of compromise position between these two opinions. He said that the Rosh Hashanah prayers should be chanted in a solemn melody that resembles the sound of weeping and whimpering. The verse says in Tehillim (6:9), “For Hashem has heard the sound of my crying,” indicating that prayers should be recited in a “sound” that resembles crying.

It should be noted that even according to the Vilna Gaon's view, if one is suddenly overcome by emotion during his prayers and begins to cry, he does not violate any Halachic prohibition. The Gaon spoke only of knowingly bringing oneself to tears; one need not be concerned, even according to the Gaon, if he experiences a rush of emotion during the Tefila that causes him to cry.

As for the final Halacha, one may follow the Arizal's opinion and recite his prayers in a manner that inspires him to cry.

Understanding The Custom of Tashlich

Regarding the Minhag that we have on Rosh Hashana called Tashlich. This Minhag is brought down by the Rama, (Rabbi Moshe Isserles, 1530 - 1572), the Kaf Hachayim (Rav Yaakov Chaim Sofer 1870-1939), and most importantly it's brought down by The Arizal (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi ben Shlomo, 1534-1572). The custom is to go on the first day of the Holiday to a body of water, and to make a special Tikun and Tefilah. The question is why, and what's the reason?

Some correlate the minhag of Tashlich to the events of Akedat Yitzchak which took place on Rosh Hashana. We learn from the Midrash that when Abraham Avinu was on his way to the Akeda, he was confronted by a body of water, which actually was the Satan trying to deter Abraham Avinu from going to fulfill this great act. Abraham Avinu forged ahead through the water, and when the water level reached above his neck by his mouth, at that point he prayed to G-d, and beseeched G-d to save him from the water, which was about to take his life. G-d subsequently told the Satan to leave Abraham alone, as he had passed the Satans test. Since Abraham Avinu made a prayer by the water on that day of Rosh Hashana, we also have a Minhag to make a prayer by the water.

Another explanation is brought down that we are following the custom of coronating the King by the water, by a flowing stream. It's as if to bless the King that his kingdom should flow forever like the water of the stream. And since on the day of Rosh Hashana, we are pronouncing to the world that G-d is the King, it is therefore proper to hold a coronation ceremony of the Malchut (Kingdom) of Hashem.

Lastly, some bring the reason down that water is a symbol of humility, as the water always seeks its level. It always goes from a high place, and it comes down. Therefore on the Holiday we are showing subjugation to G-d, and we are saying that we are like water, that we are trying to subjugate our will and our bodies to G-d.

There is a custom also brought down in Shear Hakavanot, to put fish into the water. There are different reasons as to why we put the fish in the water. Some say that since the fish are under water, they are protected from the Ayin Hara (the evil eye). Nobody can see fish, and so they don't have any evil eye on them. As if to symbolize that we should be saved in the coming year from the evil eye, we pray Tashlich with fish in the water.

Another explanation for the fish is that fish multiply at a very rapid rate. So it's a symbolism that we should have Beracha, that we should flourish and multiply like the fish.

There is also a Musar (ethical teaching) behind the fish that are swimming in the waters of Tashlich. A fish lives in a fool's paradise. A fish swims in the water comfortably without any problems in the world. Everything is going good, and all of a sudden, without any warning, without any pre-notice, he's plucked out of the water and his life is over. Therefore, we put the fish in the water to remind us of this symbolic lesson on Rosh Hashanah. There is no warning when exactly the lease on life is over. So therefore, when one sees the fish, it's a Musar. One should learn from the fish by comprehending how fragile life is. Things can change at any moment without any prior notice.

Shaking One's Garment, Feeding Fish, and Women's Participation

It is our practice to shake our garments during the Tashlich service, while reciting the words, "Tashlich Bi'msulot Yam Kol Hatotam" ("You shall cast all their sins into the depths of the sea"). Obviously, shaking one's garment does not automatically eliminate his sins from his record; if it did, then we would simply shake our garments each day without ever having to undergo the grueling process of repentance and self-improvement. This gesture is certainly not a

substitute for repentance, but is rather a symbolic act to express our sincere desire and attempt to rid ourselves of our sins and return to the faithful service of our Creator.

One may not feed the fish in the river on Shabbat and Yom Tob; it is thus forbidden to throw food to the fish in the river during Tashlich (even inside an Erub).

It is improper for women to attend Tashlich, for a number of reasons, most importantly because of the likelihood of inappropriate mingling and socialization. If Tashlich becomes a social event, rather than an opportunity for reflection and Teshuba, then whatever is achieved is more than offset by what is lost. A person can pray for the elimination of his sins, but in the end commits even more sins through improper socialization with the opposite gender. It is therefore preferable for the women not to attend the Tashlich service. In fact, the Aruch Ha'shulhan (Rabbi Yehiel Michel Epstein, Byelorussia, 1829-1908) wrote that in places where women attend Tashlich, the men should not attend, as it is preferable not to go to Tashlich at all than to go and run the risk of improper behavior.

Summary: It is customary to shake one's garment during Tashlich as a symbol of his attempts to rid himself of his sins. One may not feed fish in the river on Rosh Hashanah. It is preferable for women not to attend Tashlich, in order to avoid inappropriate mingling at an event that is intended as an opportunity for serious thought and introspection.

The Sounds of the Shofar

There is a Misvat Aseh (affirmative command) from the Torah to hear the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah. In order to fulfill this Misva, one must pay close attention to the sounds of the Shofar. Unfortunately, it often happens that people's minds wander during the Shofar blowing, and they do not concentrate on the sounds. The best way to prevent distraction is to follow along the Shofar blowing with one's finger inside the Mahzor, pointing to each sound of the Shofar (Teki'a, Shebarim, Teru'a, etc.) as it is blown. This practice is mentioned in the work Yesod Ve'shoresh Ha'aboda, and it is a worthwhile practice to follow.

The minimum required length of a Teki'a is the length of nine Teru'a sounds. The Gemara says that a Teru'a must consist of at least nine "Turmutin," or quick breaths, and so a Teki'a must be at least the time it takes to blow nine "Turmutin." However, this applies only to the Teki'ot sounded before and after the Teru'a. The Teki'ot blown before and after the Shebarim-Teru'a sound must at least the length of a Shebarim-Teru'a. Each sound of the Shebarim is the length of three Teru'ot, and thus the entire Shebarim must be at least the minimum length of the Teru'a – nine short Teru'a sounds (3 * 3). It emerges, then, that the Shebarim-Teru'a must be double the minimum length of a Teru'a, and the Teki'ot sounded before and after the Shebarim-Teru'a must also be this length.

There is a difference among different Jewish communities regarding the precise nature of the Teru'a sound. Ashkenazim, Yemenites, and Syrian Jews have different traditions regarding how the Teru'a should sound. (Listen to the audio recording to hear the different sounds.) These customs are all based on tradition, and each community should therefore follow its time-honored custom.

There is also a debate among the Halachic authorities as to whether the Shebarim-Teru'a should be sounded all in a single breath, or in two breaths (one breath for the Shebarim, and another for the Teru'a). The common practice is to satisfy both opinions, by blowing the Shebarim-Teru'a in a single breath during the first set of Shofar blasts (the Teki'ot Di'myushab) and in two separate breaths during the second set of Shofar blasts (the Teki'ot De'me'umad).

The one who sounds the Shofar must be aware of all these issues. He must know the minimum length of the Teki'a sound – which depends on whether it is associated with a Shebarim, Teru'a, or a Shebarim-Teru'a – as well as the precise nature of the Teru'a sound according to his community's custom. Additionally, he must remember to sound the Shebarim-Teru'a in a single breath during the first series of Shofar blasts, and in two breaths during the second series.

The Reasons for the Misva of Shofar

What is the reason behind the Misva to hear the Shofar sound on Rosh Hashanah, and what intention must one have while fulfilling this obligation?

The Rambam (Rabbi Moshe Maimonides, Spain-Egypt, 1135-1204) discusses the reason behind the Shofar in Hilchot Teshuba (3:4; listen to audio recording for precise citation). He begins by noting that the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a “Gezerat Ha’katub,” meaning, a decree issued by the Torah without any obvious reason. Before suggesting a possible reason for this Misva, the Rambam emphasizes that we must ultimately approach this Misva as a “Hok,” a law whose underlying rationale eludes human comprehension. Of course, there are possibilities that can be explored, but fundamentally, we observe the Misva of Shofar simply because God commanded us to. And therefore, the most important intention one must have at the time of Shofar blowing is that he intends to fulfill the divine command to hear the sound of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

After this introduction, the Rambam suggests that the Shofar blowing also contains a “Remez” – an allusion – to the message of “awakening” (listen to audio recording for precise citation). The Shofar symbolizes an “alarm clock,” as it “awakens” us from our spiritual slumber. It calls to those of us who have fallen into the routine of pursuing material and physical indulgence, beckoning us to change our course and remember the purpose of life. This “awakening” and the need to change direction is also something we should bear in mind at the time when the Shofar is sounded.

The Gemara mentions yet another benefit of the Shofar, namely, that it reminds God, as it were, of Akedat Yishak. After the angel appeared to Abraham and told him not to slaughter his son, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in shrubbery. The Shofar we sound on Rosh Hashanah is reminiscent of that ram and thus brings to mind the great merit of the Akeda, from which we continue to benefit to this very day and which we seek to invoke as we stand in judgment on Rosh Hashanah.

Furthermore, the Gemara elsewhere notes that the extra set of Shofar blasts that we sound has the ability to confound the Satan, rattling him to the point where he is unable to prosecute and advocate against us before the Heavenly Tribunal.

These are all worthy thoughts to think in one’s mind during the sounding of the Shofar, but, as mentioned, the primary intention must be that we seek to fulfill the Biblical command of Shofar. A verse in Tehillim (81:4) says about the Misva of Shofar, “Ki Hok Le’Yisrael Hu Mishpat L’Elokeh Ya’akob” (“For it is a statute for Israel; a law for the God of Jacob”). The Misva of Shofar is a “Hok,” a Misva without any obvious reason, and this is how we should observe it, even if it is also a “Mishpat L’Elokeh Ya’akob” – meaning, there have been reasons given for it, like a “Mishpat” (a Misva whose reason is clear and known).

Summary: Although several different reasons have been offered for the Misva of Shofar, we observe this Misva primarily because it was commanded by God, and this is the most important intention one should have at the time of Shofar blowing.

Shofar – The Shebarim Sounds; Proper Intention While Listening to the Blowing

One of the Shofar sounds is called the “Shebarim,” and consists of three brief sounds. It is the same as the long, straight Teki’a sound, only shorter, and three such sounds are blown consecutively. (Listen to audio recording to hear a simulated Shebarim sound.) The Toke’a (person who blows the Shofar in the synagogue) must ensure to blow all three sounds in a single breath. He may not stop to take a breath in between any two sounds of the Shebarim. If he did stop to take a breath, then the sound is invalid and the Shebarim must be repeated. The Toke’a should make a slight pause in between the blasts of the Shebarim, so it does not sound as one elongated blast, but he must ensure to produce all three sounds in a single breath.

The Arizal (Rav Yishak Luria of Safed, 1534-1572), as mentioned in Sha'ar Ha'kavanot, taught the Kavanot (intentions) that one should have during the various sets of Shofar sounds. He said that during the Teki'ot Di'meyushab, the thirty Shofar sounds blown before Musaf, one should have in mind that the sounds should negate the Yeser Ha'ra of idolatry. One should also have in mind to repent for any sins he may have committed involving idolatry, which includes anger, as the Gemara teaches that anger is similar to idol worship. During the Shofar sounds blown during the silent Amida, the Arizal said, we should have in mind to negate the Yeser Ha'ra of Arayot (immorality) and to repent for any wrongs committed in this area. When the Shofar is blown during the repetition of the Amida, one should have in mind all sins related to murder, which include publicly embarrassing people, which is deemed equivalent to murder. Finally, while the final ten sounds are blown during the Kaddish Titkabal at the end of Musaf, one should have in mind that these sounds should negate the Yeser Ha'ra to speak negatively about other people (Lashon Ha'ra).

Besides instructing us of what to think about during the Shofar blasts, the Arizal's teaching also alerts us to the severity of the sin of Lashon Ha'ra, as an entire series of Shofar blasts is needed in order to atone for this sin and to reduce the desire to engage in it. In this sense, it is parallel to the three grievous transgressions of idolatry, immorality and murder. Indeed, the Gemara attributes the destruction of the First Temple to these three sins, and the destruction of the Second Temple to Sin'at Hinam (baseless hatred), which involved Lashon Ha'ra. The Gemara concludes on this basis that "Lashon Ha'ra Ke'neged Kulam" – the severity of speaking negatively about other people is equivalent to that of the three cardinal sins combined. It thus comes as no surprise that we require a special section devoted to atoning for, and curbing the urge to engage in, Lashon Ha'ra.

Summary: The one who blows the Shofar should make a slight pause between the short blasts of the Shebarim sound, but must not take a breath between the sounds. While hearing the Shofar blasts before Musaf, one should have in mind to atone for sins involving idolatry; during the Shofar blasts blown in the silent Amida, one should have in mind to atone for sins involving immorality; during the Shofar blasts blown in the repetition of the Amida, one should have in mind to atone for sins involving murder; and during the final Shofar blasts blown after Musaf, one should have in mind to atone for sins involving Lashon Ha'ra.

The One Hundred and One Sounds of the Shofar

It is customary to blow one hundred and one Shofar sounds on each of the two days of Rosh Hashanah. We blow thirty Shofar sounds before the Musaf service, and then, according to our community's custom, thirty sounds are blown during the silent Amida prayer of Musaf. Another thirty sounds are blown during the Hazan's repetition of the Amida, and then, during the Kaddish Titkabal following Musaf, we sound another ten Shofar blasts, bringing the total to one hundred. It is then customary to sound a long "Teru'a Gedola," for a total of one hundred and one.

Why do we blow so many Shofar sounds, beyond that which the Torah strictly requires?

The Gemara raises this question in Masechet Rosh Hashanah (16), and it answers that the additional Shofar sounds serve to "confound the Satan." Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Ben Yishak, France, 1040-1105) explains that when the Satan sees the Jewish people's great love for Mitzvot, to the point where we blow additional Shofar sounds on Rosh Hashanah, he is silenced. His ability to prosecute against us as we stand judgment before God is severely hampered by our display of love and zeal toward the Mitzvot.

Tosefot (commentaries by the French and German schools of Medieval Talmudists) explain differently, noting that the Satan is also the "Mal'ach Ha'mavet" (angel of death). Based on a comment in the Talmud Yerushalmi, Tosefot write that the angel of death will one day be eliminated, as indicated in the verse (Yeshayahu 25:8), "Bila Ha'mavet La'nesah" ("He shall eliminate death for eternity"). We are also told (Yeshayahu 27:13) that on that day, a great Shofar will be sounded. Thus, when we sound the Shofar after having already fulfilled the Mitzva of Shofar blowing on Rosh Hashanah, the Satan begins worrying that perhaps this is the Shofar blast that heralds the time of the final redemption, when he will be eliminated. This fear that Satan experiences hinders his ability to prosecute against us in the Heavenly Tribunal.

The Abudarham (Rabbi David Abudarham, 14th century, Spain) cites a Midrash that offers a different explanation of the one hundred Shofar sounds, namely, that it brings to mind the event of Akedat Yishak (the binding of Yishak upon the altar). The Midrash relates that when Sara heard that her son was bound upon the altar prepared to be slaughtered as a sacrifice, she wailed one hundred times. By sounding one hundred Shofar blasts, we bring to mind Sara's anguish at the time of the Akeda, hoping that in this merit God will atone for our sins and grant us a favorable sentence.

Others explain that the one hundred sounds are reminiscent of the one hundred wailings cried by the mother of the Canaanite general Sisera. The general's mother wept bitterly one hundred times as she waited in vain for her son to return from his battle against Beneh Yisrael, during which he had been killed. We commemorate her weeping by sounding the Shofar one hundred times on Rosh Hashanah. (At first glance, it seems difficult to understand why Sisera's mother's weeping should assume significance on Rosh Hashanah, though this is a subject for a separate discussion.)

We find in Halachic literature some discussion concerning the propriety of the one hundred and first sound that we blow, the "Teru'a Gedola" sounded after the one hundred sounds. The Re'avya (Rabbi Eliezer Ben Yoel Halevi, Germany, 1140-1225), in Siman 541, mentions this custom and expresses his strong disapproval (listen to audio recording for precise citation). He notes that generally speaking, making sounds with an instrument is forbidden on Shabbat and Yom Tob, and sounding the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is permitted only for the purpose of fulfilling the Halachic obligation. Therefore, once the required Shofar sounds have been blown, it is forbidden to blow the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah any further. A number of works cite the Rosh Yosef as going so far as to claim that blowing a one hundred and first sound constitutes "Hilul Yom Tob" – a desecration of the holiday.

It is clear, however, that these authorities who disapprove of this practice were unaware of the writings of the Geonim, which explicitly record the observance of this custom in the two main Yeshivot of Babylonia, and explain that this, too, serves to confound the Satan. A number of Geonim (specifically Rav Amram Gaon and Rav Hai Gaon) addressed the question of whether the custom was for the one hundred and first sound to be blown publicly or only privately by certain individuals, but, in any event, such a custom most certainly existed. In light of this account, it seems very difficult to reject this custom and consider it a "desecration" of Yom Tob.

Accordingly, Hacham Ovadia Yosef, in his work Hazon Ovadia (Laws of Shofar), codifies this practice, and writes that the one hundred and first sound of the Shofar is blown in order to confound the Satan.

One must ensure, however, not to sound the Shofar after having blown or heard the customary one hundred and one sounds. Of course, if one did not hear all the sounds he may and should certainly blow the sounds he missed, and it is of course permissible to blow the Shofar on behalf of somebody who did not hear the Shofar blowing. One may not, however, blow the Shofar needlessly once he has blown or heard the one hundred and one sounds.

Summary: The accepted custom is to blow one hundred Shofar sounds on Rosh Hashanah, plus an additional "Teru'a Gedola" after these hundred sounds. One may not blow the Shofar unnecessarily once he has heard or blown the one hundred and one sounds.

Blowing the Shebarim and Shebarim-Teru'a Sounds in a Single Breath

One of the sounds blown with the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is the Shebarim sound, which consists of three medium-length blasts. The majority view among the Rishonim (Medieval Halachic scholars) is that the person blowing the Shofar must blow the Shebarim in a single breath; he must not take a breath in between any of the three blasts. If he does take a breath in the middle of the Shebarim, then he and the congregation have not fulfilled the obligation of Shofar blowing on Rosh Hashanah.

Another sound that is blown with the Shofar is Shebarim-Teru'a, meaning, a Shebarim which is immediately followed by a Teru'a. The Shulhan Aruch (Orah Haim 590:4) records a debate as to whether or not one should take a breath in between the Shebarim and Teru'a. One opinion requires blowing the Shebarim and Teru'a in a single breath, while

others maintain that one should specifically make a point to take a breath in between the two sounds. The Shulhan Aruch concludes that a Yereh Shamayim (God-fearing individual) should seek to satisfy both opinions. This is done by sounding the Shebarim-Teru'a in a single breath during the first set of Shofar sounds, which are blown before Musaf (known as the "Teki'ot De'meyushab"), and then sounding the Shebarim-Teru'a with a breath in between when blowing the Shofar during Musaf. This is, indeed, the prevalent custom. In fact, some Mahzorim write "Shebarim-Teru'a" in the first set of Shofar blasts with a hyphen in between the two words, indicating that they should be sounded in a single breath.

If the one blowing the Shofar is unable to sound the Shebarim-Teru'a in a single breath, and he takes a breath in between the Shebarim and Teru'a, the congregation nevertheless fulfills their obligation. This is the ruling of Hacham Ovadia Yosef. Preferably, however, the congregation should ensure to appoint somebody who is capable of sounding the Shebarim-Teru'a in a single breath during the first set of Shofar blasts.

Summary: The Shebarim sound must be blown in a single breath. During the first set of Shofar blasts blown before Musaf, one should blow the Shebarim-Teru'a sound in a single breath. During the Shofar blasts sounded as part of the Musaf service, one should pause to take a breath in between the Shebarim and Teru'a. If one pauses to take a breath in between the Shebarim and Teru'a during the first set of Shofar blasts, he and the congregation nevertheless fulfill their obligation.

Talking in Between the Shofar Blasts

The Ben Ish Hai (Rav Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909), in Parashat Nisavim (12), writes that the Toke'a (person blowing the Shofar in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah) should verbally declare before blowing the Shofar that all the sounds he blows should fulfill the Misva obligation for himself and the congregation. Even though it is obvious and self-understood that this is the purpose behind his blowing the Shofar, he should preferably express this intention verbally, rather than simply thinking it in his mind.

The Ben Ish Hai then proceeds to discuss an important Halacha of which unfortunately many people are unaware. Namely, that neither the Toke'a nor the congregation may speak at any point from the time the Toke'a recites the Beracha over the Shofar until after the final Shofar blast is blown after Musaf. Needless to say, conversing during the prayer service is inappropriate at any time, and one must avoid talking from the beginning of the service until the end. In the case of Shofar blowing, however, this prohibition assumes even greater importance. The reason why we blow the different kinds of sounds is because we are unsure of precisely what kind of sounds we should blow. In order to ensure to fulfill the Misva satisfactorily, we blow every possible sound. Therefore, every Shofar blast that is sounded may be the one through which we fulfill the Misva, and one may not speak in between the Beracha over a Misva and the performance of the Misva. It is therefore imperative that one remain silent from the time the Toke'a recites the Beracha over the Shofar until the final sound is blown.

The Ben Ish Hai goes so far as to say that the Toke'a should not recite the verses and hymns that we customarily recite as we return the Torah to the ark (such as "Hon Tahon"), as this would constitute a "Hefsek" (interruption). The custom in our community seems to be that the Toke'a does recite these verses and hymns, but this ruling underscores the seriousness of this Halacha, and how important it is to remain silent throughout the service once Shofar blowing has begun.

Furthermore, Hacham Ovadia Yosef ruled that one should not recite Vidui (verbal confession) in between the sets of Shofar blasts. The Ben Ish Hai advocates following the custom of making verbal confession during the pauses in between the sets of Shofar blasts, but Hacham Ovadia disagrees. He maintains that although one may certainly think thoughts of repentance in his mind during these pauses, one may not verbally declare confession, as this would constitute a "Hefsek." If even confession is deemed an unwarranted interruption in the Shofar blowing, then certainly speech and conversations unrelated to the prayer service must be avoided.

Summary: It is strictly forbidden on Rosh Hashanah to speak from the time the Toke'a recites the Beracha over the Shofar until the final Shofar sound is blown after Musaf.

If One Cannot Hear the Beracha Over the Shofar

Before the sounding of the Shofar, the Hazan recites the Beracha, "Baruch...Asher Kideshanu Be'misvotav Ve'sivanu Li'shmoa Kol Shofar," and the congregation answers "Amen." The congregation should not answer "Baruch Hu U'baruch Shemo" during the Beracha, because anytime one hears a Beracha in order to fulfill his obligation to recite it, he may not answer "Baruch Hu U'baruch Shemo."

If a person suspects that he will not hear every word of the Beracha, such as if he has a hearing impairment or his seat is far away from the Teba, then he should recite the Beracha by himself as the Hazan recites the Beracha. The Halachic authorities debate the question of whether a person in such a case should answer "Amen" to the Hazan's Beracha if he finishes his Beracha before the Hazan. For example, if a person sits far away from the Hazan and thus suspects that he might not hear each word of the Beracha, and so he recites the Beracha on his own, and after completing the Beracha he suddenly hears the Hazan recite, "Li'shmoa Kol Shofar," does he answer "Amen"?

Hacham Ovadia Yosef, in his Yabia Omer (8:20:4), rules that one may not answer "Amen" in such a case, as this would constitute a "Hefsek" (unlawful interruption) between the Beracha and the Misva. Once one recites a Beracha over a Misva, he must immediately proceed to perform the Misva, and thus after reciting the Beracha over the Misva of Shofar, one must then sound or hear the Shofar without any interruption. Hacham Ovadia draws an analogy to one who recites Kiddush quietly to himself while the head of the household recites Kiddush (such as if he is afraid he might not hear every word), and after finishing his Beracha he hears the head of the household finish his Beracha. Clearly, one should not answer "Amen" to another Beracha after reciting Kiddush before he drinks his wine. By the same token, one who recites the Beracha over the Shofar may not make any interruption – including answering "Amen" to the Hazan's Beracha – before fulfilling the Misva by hearing the Shofar sound.

Nevertheless, Hacham Ovadia adds, if one mistakenly answered "Amen" to the Hazan's Beracha, he has nevertheless fulfilled his requirement and does not have to repeat the Beracha. Since the Hazan's Beracha also relates to the Misva of Shofar, we may, after the fact, consider the "Amen" response germane to the Misva such that it does not constitute a Hefsek. But from the outset, one should ensure not to recite "Amen" to the Hazan's Beracha in such a case, and simply wait silently for the sounding of the Shofar.

This ruling is codified in Yalkut Yosef (p. 172; listen to audio recording for precise citation).

Summary: If one suspects that he will not hear every word of the Hazan's Beracha over the Shofar, he should recite the Beracha by himself and then wait silently for the sounding of the Shofar. He should not answer "Amen" if he hears the conclusion of the Hazan's Beracha.

Are Women Required to Hear the Shofar?

Women are exempt from the obligation of Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, in accordance with the general rule exempting women from "Misvot Aseh She'ha'zman Gerama" – Misvot that apply only at a particular time. As the obligation of Shofar applies only on Rosh Hashanah, women are exempt from this Misva.

Nevertheless, if a woman comes to the synagogue and hears the sounding of the Shofar, she is credited with a Misva. Although she has no obligation to hear the Shofar, she is considered as having performed a Misva if she chooses to do so. And thus a man who has already fulfilled the Misva is allowed to blow the Shofar again for his wife or another woman. This is not considered a violation of Yom Tob by producing sounds, because the woman fulfills a Misva by hearing the Shofar, and thus it is permissible to blow the Shofar for her just as it is permissible to blow the Shofar for men. In such a case, however, no Beracha is recited over the Misva, neither by the woman nor by the man blowing the Shofar. Women who perform a Misva from which they are exempt – such as sitting in the Sukka or taking the Lulab – do

not recite a Beracha over the Misva, because the Beracha is only for those who are commanded to perform the Misva (as indicated by the text of the Beracha – “Asher Kideshanu Ba’misvotav”). Therefore, when one blows the Shofar for a woman on Rosh Hashanah, no Beracha is recited.

One may carry a Shofar through a public domain on Rosh Hashanah for the purpose of blowing the Shofar for a woman. Carrying on Yom Tob through a public domain is permitted “Le’srech Ha’yom” – when this is needed for the Yom Tob – and carrying a Shofar so it can be blown for women is considered a need that allows carrying. Although women are exempt, they nevertheless fulfill a Misva by hearing the Shofar, as discussed, and therefore carrying the Shofar to a woman’s home so she can hear the blowing is allowed. By the same token, it is permissible to carry the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah in a public domain to blow it for a child who has reached the age of Hinuch (training in Misvot), as this, too, is considered a legitimate need of Yom Tob.

Summary: Women are exempt from the Misva of Shofar, but they fulfill a Misva if they hear it blown. A man may blow the Shofar for a woman on Rosh Hashanah, even if he had already fulfilled the Misva, and he may even carry the Shofar through a public domain on Yom Tob for this purpose. However, neither he nor the woman recites a Beracha over the Misva, since she is not obligated in the Misva.

Covering the Shofar While Reciting the Berachot

One of the most famous reasons given for the Misva of Shofar is that it serves to invoke the merit of Akedat Yitzhak, when Abraham Abinu was prepared to obey God’s command to offer his beloved son, Yitzhak, as a sacrifice. At the last moment, God told Abraham to withdraw his knife, and Abraham offered in Yitzhak’s place a ram that he saw nearby and which was caught by its horns in the bushes. We blow a ram’s horn on Rosh Hashanah, when we stand in judgment before God, in order to bring to mind the merit of the Akeda, as this will help ensure a favorable and merciful judgment.

This association between the Misva of Shofar and Akedat Yitzhak may explain an otherwise perplexing custom that is observed in many communities. It is customary for the Toke’a (person who blows the Shofar in the synagogue) to cover the Shofar just before the Shofar blowing, as he recites the Berachot of “Li’shmo’a Kol Shofar” and “Shehehiyanu.” He places the Shofar underneath his kouracha (Tallit bag), and leaves it covered until after he recites the Berachot, when he is ready to begin blowing. This custom is mentioned by the Elya Rabba (Rav Eliyahu Shapiro of Prague, 1660-1712), who explains that this practice commemorates the incident of Akedat Yitzhak. As Abraham constructed the altar upon which to offer his son, he feared that the Satan, in its effort to disrupt the sacrifice, may throw a rock at Yitzhak in order to inflict a wound, which would render Yitzhak blemished and hence unfit as an offering. Abraham therefore covered Yitzhak to hide him from the Satan. We commemorate Abraham’s devotion by covering the Shofar just before it is blown.

Others suggest a different reason for covering the Shofar. It once happened in a certain community that the Toke’a was incapable of producing a proper sound from the Shofar. Despite his struggles, he could not produce a proper Shofar sound. The Rabbi determined that the Satan, knowing the immense value of the Shofar blowing in arousing divine mercy upon the Jewish people, possessed the Shofar so that the congregation would be incapable of performing this invaluable Misva. The solution, as is recorded in a number of books, is to whisper to the Shofar the verse, “Vi’hi No’am Hashem Elokenu Alenu U’ma’aseh Yadenu Konena Alenu...” (Tehillim 90:17). The Rabbi whispered this verse, and the Toke’a was able to blow the Shofar properly.

It thus emerges that the Shofar is vulnerable to the Satan’s machinations, and the Satan is capable of possessing the Shofar to prevent us from performing the Misva. Accordingly, some explain that we cover the Shofar in order to protect it from the Satan’s determined efforts to sabotage the Misva.

The Ben Ish Hai (Rav Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909) ruled that even though the Shofar is covered during the recitation of the Berachot, the Toke’a must hold it during this period. As he recites the Berachot, his right hand must be

underneath the kouracha, holding onto the Shofar. Upon completing the Berachot, he lifts the Shofar over the kouracha to begin the blowing.

Summary: It is customary for the Toke'a to keep the Shofar covered underneath the Tallit bag as he recites the Berachot of "Li'shmo'a Kol Shofar" and "Shehehianu." He should hold the Shofar with his right hand underneath the Tallit bag as he recites the Berachot.

Laws and Customs of Torah Reading

The custom among the communities hailing from Aram Soba (Aleppo) is to sing special Pizmonim (hymns) on Rosh Hashanah when the Torah is taken from the ark. Some have the custom to sing, "Ozrenu Kel Hai," a song that relates to the period of Aseret Yemeh Teshuva (Ten Days of Repentance), which begins on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. On the second day, some congregations sing, "Rabat Sab'a Lah Nafshi." Several different customs exist regarding the singing of Pizmonim, and every congregation should follow its custom.

When the Torah is shown to the congregation, one should try to get close to the Torah so he can read the words, because he will then be affected by the powerful spiritual light which emanates from the Torah. It is beneficial for one to find in the Torah a word that begins with the first letter of his name. One should bow in front of the Torah, and special verses are recited. It is proper to bow according to the number of Aliyot that are called to the Torah that day – three on weekday, four on Rosh Hodesh and Hol Ha'mo'ed, five on Yom Tob, six on Yom Kippur, and seven on Shabbat.

On Rosh Hashanah, like on other holidays, we call five Aliyot to the Torah. On the first day, we read the section that tells of Sara's conception and the birth of Yishak, because, as the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 10) teaches, Sara's prayers for a child were answered on Rosh Hashanah.

When a person is called for an Aliya, he should first look at the point in the text where the reading will begin. Some have the custom to place the Sisit strings on that spot in the Sefer Torah and then kiss the Sisit, to show love for the Misva.

If the person receiving the Aliya is not reading aloud for the congregation, he must read quietly along with the reader, as otherwise his Beracha would be considered a Beracha Le'batala (blessing recited in vain). He must ensure to read quietly, in a soft voice. He may not speak until after reciting the Beracha following the reading. It is customary for the person receiving the Aliya to kiss the Sefer Torah again after the Aliya.

Our custom is to leave the Sefer Torah open in between Aliyot, and to cover the text with the cloth, following the view of the Shulhan Aruch.

Our community's custom is to permit adding Aliyot on Shabbat if necessary, such as when a joyous occasion is celebrated in the synagogue, though it is preferable not to add Aliyot if there is no need to. Our custom is to permit adding Aliyot when necessary even on Yom Tob, following the ruling of the Shulhan Aruch (based on the view of the Rambam). The custom of Yeshivat Bet-El was never to allow additional Aliyot, but our custom does not follow this practice.

It is customary for the Toke'a (the one who will blow the Shofar) to receive an Aliya on Rosh Hashanah.

The generally accepted custom among Sepharadim, following the practice of the Arizal, is to sit during the reading of the Torah.

The entire period of the Torah reading, from the moment the reading begins until the end of the final Aliya, is an auspicious time for accessing G-d's mercy, as the Gates of Heaven are open during this period. Any request that a person has should be made during this time when the Torah is open. This is why "Mi She'berach" prayers are recited for the people who receive Aliyot, and why they pledge charity after their Aliyot. This is also when Hashkaba prayers are

recited for the deceased, and a special prayer is recited for the ill, for the same reason. It is recommended that one who receives an Aliya make any requests he have after his Aliya, in addition to the “Mi She’berach” prayer recited on his behalf.

It goes without saying that speaking is forbidden during the Torah reading. This not only violates a strict Halachic prohibition, but also squanders the precious opportunity afforded by the Torah reading.

The Repetition of the Amida of Musaf

The Shofar is sounded during the repetition of the Amida of Musaf on Rosh Hashanah, after the conclusion of the Malchuyot, Zichronot and Shofarot sections. According to some opinions, the Shofar sounds blown during the repetition of the Amida are the primary Shofar sounds, and are more important than even the Shofar sounds blown during the silent Amida.

Since the Sages instituted that the Shofar be blown in the framework of Malchuyot, Zichronot and Shofarot, it is especially important for one to pay attention to the repetition of the Amida. If a person is not paying attention, and is instead involving in other activities, then he is not considered to have heard the Shofar in the framework of these Berachot. The work Ner Le’sion (p. 262; listen to audio recording for precise citation) elaborates on the importance of silently following the Hazan with a Siddur during the repetition of the Amida of Musaf on Rosh Hashanah, and writes that one must not learn or engage in conversation during the repetition, and must instead follow along with the Hazan.

In truth, the Ner Le’sion notes, it is in any event strictly forbidden to speak during the repetition of the Amida at any time, and the Shulhan Aruch (Orah Haim 124:7) and Ben Ish Hai (Parashat Teruma) go so far as to say that if one engages in conversation during the repetition of the Amida, “His sin is too great to bear.” The repetition of the Amida is on a higher level than even the silent Amida, and thus just as we would never think to speak during the silent Amida, we should not even consider speaking during the repetition.

Moreover, one must ensure to respond to every Beracha with “Baruch Hu U’baruch Shemo” and “Amen,” and to concentrate during these responses. The importance of “Baruch Hu U’baruch Shemo” and “Amen” cannot be overstated. The Pele Yoetz (Rav Eliezer Papo, 1786-1827) cites a comment from the Zohar that one who is not careful about responding “Baruch Hu U’baruch Shemo” and “Amen” is punished in the lowest levels of Gehinam, and of those who respond without intention it is said, “U’bozai Yekalu” (“and those who scorn Me shall be belittled” – Shemuel I 2:30). He adds that if people realized the great reward for answering “Baruch Hu U’baruch Shemo” and “Amen,” they would run about searching for opportunities to hear Berachot as though they were frantically searching for treasures.

Summary: While one is always required to listen silently and attentively to the repetition of the Amida, this is especially important when it comes to the repetition of the Amida of Musaf on Rosh Hashanah.

Answering to Kaddish on the High Holidays

It is customary to add a number of special passages to the Kaddish recitation on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Specifically, the one reciting Kaddish adds, “Te’anu Ve’teteru Be’rahamim Min Ha’shamayim,” praying that the congregation’s prayers should be lovingly accepted by G-d, and he prays that G-d should open all the heavenly “gates” for the congregation (“Shaareh...Shaareh...Shaareh...”), whereupon the congregation answers “Amen.”

Unfortunately, people sometimes afford greater importance to these additions than to the basic text of the Kaddish. They answer “Amen” loudly and emotionally to the “Shaareh” prayer, but do not respond, or respond halfheartedly, to “Amen Yeheh Shemeh Rabba” and the other basic sections of Kaddish. It is important to remember that the essence of Kaddish is “Amen Yeheh Shemeh Rabba,” and the special High Holiday additions are of secondary importance. While of course it is proper to answer “Amen” to the “Shaareh” prayer, one must not neglect the essential part of the Kaddish.

A remarkable passage in the Pirkeh Hechalot underscores the special power and importance of answering “Amen Yeheh Shemeh Rabba.” Rabbi Yishmael tells that an angel once invited him to come and see what was in store for the Jewish People, and the angel brought him to the inner chambers of the heavens. He showed Rabbi Yishmael a ledger, and Rabbi Yishmael saw that written in the ledger were all different kinds of crises and calamities decreed against the Jewish People. The angel warned that these were the decrees issued that day, and even worse decrees were going to be issued the next day. Sure enough, the next day Rabbi Yishmael was again brought into these chambers and saw that even worse calamities were written in the ledger – captivity, starvation and deadly wars.

The angel told Rabbi Yishmael that in truth, even worse tragedies than those were decreed against the Jews, but when the Jews assemble in the synagogue and announce, “Yeheh Shemeh Rabba,” these decrees never leave the heavenly chambers.

We often fail to realize just how precious and powerful answering Kaddish is, as it can help ensure that evil decrees remain “locked up” in the heavens and are never unleashed against us.

On the High Holidays, we are pleading for the annulment of harsh decrees that might be issued against us because of our sins. Therefore, especially on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we must pay careful attention to ensure that we answer the Kaddish with full concentration and intensity.

Summary: It is customary to add special prayers to the Kaddish recitation on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but these additions should not distract our attention from the main body of the Kaddish and the requirement to answer “Amen Yeheh Shemeh Rabba.”

Women’s Recitation of Musaf; Reading Hallel as Part of Tehillim

Generally speaking, women are exempt from the Musaf prayer recited on Shabbat, Rosh Hodesh and festivals, and they should not recite this prayer even if they wish to. On Rosh Hashanah, however, the Musaf prayer includes numerous verses and passages relating to the theme of divine mercy and our prayers for a good year, and thus women may recite Musaf on Rosh Hashanah. In fact, according to some views, women are obligated to recite Musaf on Rosh Hashanah, as well as on Yom Kippur. It goes without saying that women may recite the Ne’ila prayer on Yom Kippur.

Even though Hallel is normally recited on Yom Tob, we do not recite Hallel on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. As these occasions are days of judgment when the books of life and death are opened before God, it is inappropriate to conduct the joyous reading of Hallel. And although we feel confident on Rosh Hashanah that we will be inscribed for a good year, we must nevertheless approach our judgment with fear and dread, emotions which are incompatible with the singing of Hallel.

However, if a person recites Tehillim on Rosh Hashanah, and over the course of his reading he reaches the chapters of Hallel, he may recite these chapters. Since he recites these chapters as part of his normal reading of Tehillim, and not in the context of the festive Hallel recitation, this is permissible.

Summary: Women may recite Musaf on Rosh Hashanah, and, according to some opinions, they are required to recite Musaf on Rosh Hashanah. Hallel is not recited on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, though one who recites Tehillim may recite the chapters of Hallel as part of his Tehillim reading.

The Depth of the High Holiday Liturgy

All the prayers of the Yamim Nora’im were established by the great Sages of the Ansheh Kenesset Ha’gedola (“Men of the Great Assembly”), and are thus laden with many levels of meaning. We must strive to understand the simple, plain meaning of the text, but at the same time, it behooves us to recognize the innumerable allusions that these great Sages embedded within this liturgical text. The more we are able to have these deep intentions in mind as we pray, the more powerful our prayers will be.

One example of the deep layers of meaning underlying the High Holiday liturgy is the seemingly innocuous word “U’bechen” (“And thus”). The Zohar Ha’kadosh, in the Tikkunim, comments that this word should be recited four times in the Amida service on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Indeed, we recite in the Amida four passages containing this word: “U’bechen Yitkadash Shimcha Hashem Elokenu,” “U’bechen Ten Pahdecha,” “U’bechen Ten Kabod,” and “U’bechen Sadikim Yir’u Ve’yismahu.” The depth behind these four instances of the word “U’bechen” relates to a series of three verses in Parashat Beshalah (Shemot 14:19-21), which begin, respectively, with the words “Vayisa,” “Vayabo,” and “Vayet.” Each of these three verses contains 72 letters, corresponding to the 72-letter Name of God, and the three verses are associated with the three patriarchs. The word “U’bechen” has the numerical value of 72, and the first three instances of this word in our High Holiday Amida prayer correspond to the three patriarchs and these three verses in Parashat Beshalah. The first “U’bechen” corresponds to Abraham Abinu and to the first of these three verses; the second refers to Yishak Abinu and the second verse; and the third alludes to Yaakov Abinu and the third verse. The fourth time we mention “U’bechen” we allude to King David, who is the fourth “leg” of the Heavenly Chariot, and to the 72 combinations formed by taking one letter from each of these three verses, which all comprise holy Names of God.

It is remarkable to consider how much depth underlies the single word “U’bechen” which we recite in the Amida, and it is difficult for us to even imagine how much depth and profundity our Sages embedded within the text of the entire Yamim Nora’im prayer service!

On the simple level, the word “U’bechen” is intended to bring to mind the verse in Megilat Ester (4:16), “U’bechen Abo El Ha’melech Asher Lo Chadat” – “And thus I shall approach the king against royal protocol.” Ester here expresses her fears about approaching Ahashverosh when she was not summoned – and this is precisely the fear we should experience as we stand before the Almighty in prayer. We must feel wholly unworthy of approaching Him and asking Him to provide our needs. Who are we to come before God? What right do we have to make any requests of Him? The term “U’bechen” is repeated four times in our Amida prayers in order to draw our attention to Ester’s fears before approaching Ahashverosh, and to remind us that this is how we must feel as we stand in prayer before the King of kings. This sense of humility and unworthiness is a critical prerequisite to prayers. The verse says in Tehillim (51:19), “Zibeh Elokim Ru’ah Nishbara Leb Nishbar Ve’nidke Elokim Lo Tibze” – “The [true] offerings to God are a broken spirit; God will not reject a broken, despondent heart.” Hashem regards our humble sense of unworthiness as a sacrificial offering which He lovingly accepts and does not reject.

Our obligation is to try to understand the prayer text to the best of our ability, and, more basically, to have in mind that we pray in accordance with all the deep intentions of the Sages who composed these prayers, and we ask Hashem that He will then supplement whatever intentions we have with all the holy intentions of the Ansheh Kensset Ha’gedola, as the verse states (Tehillim 138:8), “Hashem Yigmor Ba’adi” – once we exert ourselves to the best of our potential, Hashem will then step in to complete the rest.

Men Dipping In Mikveh On Erev Rosh Hashana

The Ben Ish Chai (Rabbi Yosef Chayim of Baghdad, 1833-1909), in Parashat Nitzavim, discusses the widespread custom that men immerse in a Mikveh on Erev Rosh Hashanah in order to be Tahor (ritually pure) on the Day of Judgment. Immersion before Rosh Hashanah is particularly important for men with Tum'at Keri (the status of ritual impurity that results from a seminal emission). The Ben Ish Chai adds that before immersing in a Mikveh, a man must ensure to comb any knots in his hair and remove all traces of dirt from his entire body, including under the fingernails. In order for the immersion to be effective in eliminating Tum'a, no substance may come in between the body and the water. Just as a woman must untangle the knots in her hair and thoroughly cleanse herself before immersing to rid herself of her Nidda status, so must men undergo this process before immersing on Erev Rosh Hashanah.

However, Chacham Ovadia Yosef, in his work Halichot Olam, claims that the Ben Ish Chai's ruling is overly stringent. Halacha follows the view that one may pray and study Torah in a state of ritual impurity, and it is only a "Midat Chasidut" – an additional level of piety – to immerse before prayer or study. Therefore, since this immersion is

altogether on the level of "Midat Chasidut," a man is not required to prepare his body for immersion on Erev Rosh Hashanah as a woman must upon completing her Nidda period. Thus, one need not remove his contact lenses or untangle his knots before immersing on Erev Rosh Hashanah.

What is the deeper meaning behind this practice of immersing on Erev Rosh Hashanah?

A human being originates in the mother's womb, where he is surrounded on all sides by water. (As we know, one of the stages of childbirth is the "breaking of the water," when the water surrounding the fetus exits the woman's body to allow for the child's delivery.) Immersing in a Mikveh likely serves as a reenactment, of sorts, of man's initial emergence into the world. As part of the process of Teshuva (repentance), a person returns to the water, to his origin and source, to the initial state of pristine purity in which he was first created, representing his efforts to spiritually cleanse himself and become pure like he had been at birth.

This symbolism takes on even greater significance on the festival of Rosh Hashanah, which we describe in our liturgy as "Harat Olam" – the day of the world's creation. In truth, the world came into existence one week earlier, on the 25th day of Elul. Rosh Hashanah marks the day when man was created, and it is therefore appropriate as part of the commemoration of man's emergence to immerse in a Mikveh, symbolizing our efforts to return to our roots and our initial state of purity through the process of Teshuva.

Summary: It is proper for a man to immerse in a Mikveh on Erev Rosh Hashanah, which symbolizes the emergence of the human being from the womb in a state of pristine purity. Before this immersion, a man is not required to undergo the thorough process of cleaning his body and removing foreign substances such as contact lenses, as is required of a woman who immerses to divest herself of her Nidda status.

The Meaning of "U'dbarcha Emet Ve'kayam La'ad"

One of the phrases that we recite several times in our Rosh Hashanah prayers is, "U'dbarcha Emet Ve'kayam La'ad" – "and Your word is true and endures forever." What exactly do we mean in this phrase, and why do we emphasize on Rosh Hashanah the point that Hashem's "word" is true and eternal?

The commentators explain this phrase as referring to the comment of the Midrash (listen to audio recording for precise citation) that David Ha'melech said to the Almighty, "Master of the world! You can come upon us only with the attribute of mercy, for otherwise, we are unable to survive for even one moment!" David noted that if G-d judges us on the basis of the rules of strict justice, then nobody, not one person, will be given a favorable sentence. Furthermore, David made reference to the sin of Adam, which occurred on Rosh Hashanah (creation began on 25 Elul, and man was created on the seventh day, Rosh Hashanah; Adam committed his sin that same day). After the sin, G-d judged Adam mercifully, as otherwise he could not have continued living for another moment. And G-d at that point made a commitment that just as he showed Adam mercy and affection despite his wrongdoing, He would similarly judge all of Adam's descendants with love and compassion every year on that day, Rosh Hashanah.

Thus, we declare in our prayers that G-d's "word" – referring to His promise to Adam Ha'rishon – continues to be true and applicable, even to this day. For all time, we are guaranteed access to Hashem's mercy and compassion if we utilize this day of Rosh Hashanah properly for prayer and repentance. This phrase, then, conveys a vital, comforting message to us all, assuring us that if we do what we are supposed to do on these days of Rosh Hashanah, Hashem will judge us mercifully and issue a favorable sentence.

The Reciting of "Ayeh Mekom Kebodo" in "Keter"

On Rosh Hashanah, while reciting the words "Ayeh Mekom Kebodo" in the "Keter" section of the Musaf prayer, one should have in mind that the Kubutz vowel (three dots in a diagonal) is underneath the Yod in "Ayeh," and the Kamatz vowel is underneath the next letter, the Heh. The Kubutz consists of three small Yods, and thus its numerical value is 30 (3 X 10). The Kamatz is comprised of a Yod and a Vav, and thus its numerical value is 16 (10 + 6). Hence, these two vowels have a combined numerical value of 46. This number is significant because it equals the "Milui" ("supplemental")

letters of what is known as the “Shem Ayin-Bet.” This Name is formed by spelling out the names of the four letters that comprise the Name of Havaya (“Yod,” “Heh,” “Vav” and “Heh”). The numerical value of the word “Yod” is 20; the numerical value of the word “Heh” (which is spelled “Heh,” “Yod”) is 15; the numerical value of the word “Vav” (spelled “Vav,” “Yod,” “Vav”) is 22; and the numerical value of the second “Heh” is 15. These sums have a combined total of 72. However, if we count only the “Milui” – the letters added onto the original four letters of “Yod,” “Heh,” “Vav” and “Heh” – the total is 46 (“Vov,” “Dalet,” “Yod,” “Yod,” “Vav,” “Yod”). One should try to have this in mind while reciting the words “Ayeh Mekom Kebodo” during Musaf on the High Holidays.

Furthermore, it is written that at this moment during the prayer service on the Yamim Noraim one is able to make a silent request in his mind for either Torah scholarship, children who are righteous, or great wealth (on the condition that the wealth will be used for the service of Hashem). Rav Mordechai Sharabi (Yemen-Israel, 1908-1983) taught that one should have in mind a different request in each prayer. During “Keter” on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, one should request scholarship; on the second day, he should ask for righteous children; and on Yom Kippur, he should ask for wealth.

The recitation of “Ayeh” is also a propitious time for asking for the retention of one’s Torah knowledge, and for proper comprehension of Torah.

“Yom Terua” and “Zichron Terua”

The Gemara in Masechet Rosh Hashanah (29) notes that the Torah uses two different terms in reference to the holiday of Rosh Hashanah. On one occasion the Torah calls this day “Yom Terua” – “a day of sounding the Shofar” – whereas elsewhere it refers to it as “Zichron Terua” – “a commemoration of sounding the Shofar.” The Gemara explains that these different terms refer to two different situations. When Rosh Hashanah falls on a weekday (as it does this year, 5775), it is observed as a “Yom Terua,” and the Shofar is sounded. But when it falls on Shabbat, then the holiday is only a “Zichron Terua” – a day when we mention the Shofar, but we do not sound the Shofar.

For this reason, the text of the Rosh Hashanah Amida prayer changes when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat. Normally, in our prayers we refer to Rosh Hashanah as “Yom Terua,” but when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, we change the text to “Zichron Terua.”

The Shulhan Aruch (582:7) rules that if one mistakenly recited “Yom Terua” in the Amida prayer on Rosh Hashanah when it falls on Shabbat, he does not have to repeat the Amida, despite the mistake that he made. Several reasons are given for this ruling. Firstly, the reason why the Shofar is not sounded when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat is out of concern that one might carry the Shofar through a public domain, in violation of Shabbat. However, an exception is made in a place with an authoritative Bet Din, as people in such communities are more careful, and thus the Shofar is sounded even on Shabbat. Therefore, at least in theory, Rosh Hashanah is a “Yom Terua” even when it falls on Shabbat, and if one mistakenly recited “Yom Terua” on Shabbat, he does not have to repeat the Amida. Moreover, there are those who suggest that although we do not sound the Shofar on Shabbat, in the heavens the Shofar is blown even when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, thus justifying the recitation of the term “Yom Terua” even on Shabbat.

A number of authorities (the Peri Hadash, and Rav Haim Palachi, in Mo’ed Le’chol Hai) assert that this applies in the reverse case, as well. If somebody mistakenly recited “Zichron Terua” when Rosh Hashanah falls on a weekday, he does not repeat the Amida, because the Rif (Rabbi Yishak of Fez, Morocco, 1013-1103) brings a view that one should always say “Zichron Terua,” even on a weekday. Although Halacha does not follow this view, it may be relied on in a case where one mistakenly recited “Zichron Terua,” and he thus does not repeat the Amida. This is the ruling of Hacham Ovadia Yosef, in his Hazon Ovadia – Yamim Noraim (pp. 82-83).

Summary: When Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, we recite the phrase “Zichron Terua” in place of “Yom Terua” in the Amida prayer. Nevertheless, if one recited “Yom Terua” instead of “Zichron Terua” on Shabbat, or, conversely, if one

recited “Zichron Terua” on a weekday, he has nevertheless fulfilled his obligation and does not have to repeat the Amida.

Must One Wake Up at Dawn on Rosh Hashanah?

The Talmud Yerushalmi teaches, “Anyone who sleeps on the Rosh Hashanah – his fortune will sleep.” On the basis of this passage, it has become customary not to sleep during the day on Rosh Hashanah, as this could lead one’s good fortune to “sleep,” Heaven forbid, during the coming year.

It would appear at first glance that in order to avoid this undesirable consequence of sleeping on Rosh Hashanah, we need to wake up right at the crack of dawn, which is usually sometime after 5am. After all, we need to avoid sleeping during the day, and the day starts at dawn, and it should thus be necessary to wake up already at dawn. Indeed, this is the view taken by several authorities, including the Ben Ish Hai (Parashat Nisavim, 11) and Kaf Ha’haim Sofer (584:37).

Hacham Ovadia Yosef, however, disagreed, and maintained that especially if somebody is up late on the night of Rosh Hashanah studying Torah or reciting Tehillim, he does not have to awaken at dawn. This was also the view taken by Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Jerusalem, 1910-1995), who explained that going to sleep during the day is different from remaining asleep after the day begins. When one goes to sleep during the day of Rosh Hashanah, he shows his disregard for Rosh Hashanah and that he is not concerned about the judgment on this day. But if he was sleeping during the night and remained asleep past dawn, as he normally does, this does not reflect any disregard or lack of concern. Therefore, it is not necessary to wake up at the crack of dawn on Rosh Hashanah.

The question arises, however, as to whether one may go back to sleep if he happened to wake up at dawn. Those who have been waking up early for Selihot during the weeks before Rosh Hashanah might wake up at or shortly after dawn on Rosh Hashanah morning, as they had been accustomed to doing, and then wish to go back to sleep. Seemingly, this should be forbidden, as suggested by a parallel case relevant to the laws of Sukkot. When rain falls on Sukkot, one is permitted to sleep indoors and does not have to sleep in the Sukka. If the rain stops during the night, he nevertheless does not have to go back outside into the Sukka, but if he wakes up after dawn and sees that the rain has stopped, and he wishes to go back to sleep, then he must sleep in the Sukka. Seemingly, we should apply this rule to Rosh Hashanah, as well, and if one wakes up at or after dawn, he should not be allowed to go back to sleep.

In truth, however, Hacham Ovadia maintains that even on Sukkot, one does not have to sleep in the Sukka after dawn if the rain has stopped. In his work Hazon Ovadia – Sukkot (p. 207), he writes that the Halacha requiring one to go out into the Sukka in such a case applied only in times when people would normally arise at dawn. Nowadays, however, when people normally sleep past dawn, one who wakes up after dawn on Sukkot and wishes to go back to sleep may sleep inside, even though the rain has stopped. Similarly, one may go back to sleep on Rosh Hashanah morning after dawn, if it is still earlier than the time when people normally wake up.

Needless to say, there is a general rule of “Zerizin Makdimin La’misvot,” which means that we should always try to perform Misvot as early as possible. Thus, it would certainly be praiseworthy for one who can to wake up already at dawn on Rosh Hashanah. Strictly speaking, however, this is not necessary, and as long as one wakes up at a normal time in the morning, he does not have to fear that his good fortune will “sleep” during the coming year.

Summary: Although it is customary not to sleep during the day on Rosh Hashanah, one does not have to wake up already at dawn, and may sleep until the time when people normally wake up.

The Custom to Fast on Ereb Rosh Hashanah

There is a custom observed by some people to fast on Ereb Rosh Hashanah. Although there are those who fast every month on the day before Rosh Hodesh – a fast called “Yom Kippur Katan” – the custom to fast on Ereb Rosh Hashanah is mentioned by the Shulhan Aruch, and is thus to be treated with special gravity.

The source for this custom is a passage in the Midrash, cited by the Tur, which draws an analogy to a country whose citizens owed an enormous sum of money in back taxes which they could not afford to pay. They decided to send a small delegation to the king, who agreed to cancel one-third of the debt. But as the day approached when the payment was due, the people realized that they still had nowhere near the amount. They therefore sent a much larger delegation to plead their case before the king. Once again, the king relented and waived another third. The day came, and the people still found themselves unable to pay. The entire citizenry – all the men, women and children – came out to greet the king with tears and pleas, and the king accepted their pleas and waived the entire debt. Similarly, the Midrash comments, on Erev Rosh Hashanah, as we realize that we are unable to “pay our debt” to the Almighty, select individuals volunteer to fast and plead to G-d, who waives one-third of our “debt.” During the Aseret Yemeh Teshuva between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as we get even closer, more people come before G-d in fasting to ask for a reprieve, and another third is cancelled. Finally, on Yom Kippur, we all fast and G-d grants us complete forgiveness.

It is therefore appropriate for anyone who can – including youngsters above the age of Bar Mitzva – to observe this fast on Erev Rosh Hashanah to be part of this initial “delegation” which comes before G-d to ask for forgiveness. Needless to say, those who are frail or elderly, and those who have trouble fasting, should not observe this fast, as it is not strictly required.

One might ask how it is possible that the voluntary fast of Erev Rosh Hashanah can accomplish just as much as the obligatory fast of Yom Kippur. According to the Midrash, both these fasts are capable of atoning for one-third of our sins. Is it conceivable that the fast of Erev Rosh Hashanah is as significant and effective as the fast of Yom Kippur?

Rabbi Hillel Haber explained that the first “reduction” is always the easiest. If a person wants to purchase a piece of merchandise and sets out to negotiate a price reduction, the seller might show some flexibility at first and agree to reduce the price by one-third. But afterward, he will be much less likely to agree to a further reduction. Certainly, he will not likely be prepared to offer the merchandise free of charge. Accordingly, the customary fast of Erev Rosh Hashanah accomplishes the relatively “easy” task of securing a reduction. But the fast of Yom Kippur accomplishes something far greater – allowing us to earn complete atonement “for free.”

It should be noted that those who normally fast on Erev Rosh Hodesh will fast the day before Erev Rosh Hodesh if the Molad (first appearance of the new moon) occurs before that day. The Yom Kippur Katan fast must be observed before the Molad, and it thus occasionally becomes necessary to fast the day before Erev Rosh Hodesh. When it comes to the fast of Erev Rosh Hashanah, however, the time of the Molad is immaterial. Even if the Molad occurs before Erev Rosh Hashanah, nevertheless, the fast is observed on the day of Erev Rosh Hashanah.

Summary: There is a custom to fast on Erev Rosh Hashanah, and those who are able to observe this custom without too much difficulty should do so.

Accepting the Erev Rosh Hashanah Fast

One who wishes to observe the voluntary fast on Erev Rosh Hashanah must declare his acceptance of the fast the previous day. If one fasted without having formally accepted the fast the previous day, he cannot recite “Anenu” on the day of the fast. The acceptance is declared at the end of the Amida prayer at Minha the previous day, before “Oseh Shalom,” using the text found in many Siddurim.

The acceptance should be made specifically during Minha Ketana (Minha recited late in the afternoon), though if one prayed Minha Gedola (in the early afternoon) and declared his acceptance then, the acceptance is valid. Before Minha, however, such as if one declared his acceptance during Shaharit, the acceptance is invalid and must be repeated during Minha. If one forgot to accept the fast during Minha, he may still do so after Minha, until sundown. If he forgot to make the declaration before sundown, then “Be’di’abad” (after the fact) he may do so even later, during Ben Ha’shemashot (13.5 minutes after sundown).

If one will be praying Minha just before sundown and will finish his prayer only after sundown, he should preferably announce his acceptance before praying Minha.

If one did not accept the fast by the end of Ben Ha'shemashot, and did so afterward, he may not recite "Anenu" the next day, and the Halachic authorities debate the question of whether he is even required to fast. The consensus is that if the acceptance was made at that point under the mistaken assumption that it is valid, then the acceptance is not binding and the person does not have to fast.

If one did not verbalize his acceptance of his fast, but merely thought it in his mind, the acceptance is nevertheless valid and he may recite "Anenu" the next day, though he should preferably verbalize his acceptance afterward. This is the ruling of the Shulhan Aruch. However, this applies only if he thought in his mind the actual content of the formal text of the acceptance. If he just thought in his mind that he would fast in a general sense, this acceptance is not valid. Likewise, if a person made a mental note before Minha that he must declare his acceptance of the fast, but then forgot to recite the text of the acceptance during the prayer, this acceptance is not valid.

The reason why a formal acceptance is required the previous day is because one must pray that G-d should accept his fast as a sacrifice that brings atonement. Therefore, when declaring the acceptance one must have this intention in mind, and pray that G-d should accept his fast in lieu of a sacrifice for the purpose of atonement.

The text of the acceptance is that which was written by the Hida (Rav Haim Yosef David Azulai, 1724-1807), in Moreh Be'esba (3:127). (Listen to audio recording for the text.) In this text, one stipulates that if he finds himself unable to complete the fast, he will recite the chapter of "Mizmor Le'David" (Tehillim 23) and will then be absolved from the fast. One should not say in his declaration that he accepts the fast "Beli Neder," for then it would not be a resolute acceptance. Nevertheless, after the fact, if one did say "Beli Neder," his acceptance is valid. One must clarify when accepting the fast that he does not intend to take on the practice of fasting on Ereb Rosh Hashanah each year. If one did not clearly stipulate that he does not accept this practice each year, and he fasted on Ereb Rosh Hashanah three consecutive years, then if he wants to discontinue this practice he must perform Hatarat Nedarim before a Bet Din.

If one accepted the fast but feels unable to complete the fast, he recites the chapter of "Mizmor Le'David" and may then eat, as he had stipulated when he accepted the fast. The recitation of "Mizmor Le'David" has the effect of retroactively annulling the acceptance, such that the person is considered to have never accepted the fast in the first place. Therefore, if one mistakenly ate or drink, thus violating his vow to fast, he should recite "Mizmor Le'David" which has the effect of retroactively annulling his acceptance, so that he will not have committed a religious offense.

When accepting the fast, one must specify that he accepts a "Ta'anit Yahid" ("private fast"). Declaring that one accepts just a "Ta'anit" implies that he accepts a public fast day, which has with it additional stringencies, such as prohibitions against bathing and wearing leather shoes. Additionally, a public fast must be observed until Set Ha'kochavim (nightfall), whereas a private fast is observed until whichever time one stipulates. When accepting the Ereb Rosh Hashanah fast, it is best to declare one's commitment to fast until after Arbit the next night. He should clarify that he will fast until after he prays Arbit, as opposed to the congregational recitation of Arbit, as there may be many different congregations in the area.