

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School  
Rhythms of Jewish Living  
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## Topic: *Rosh HaShanah*

**Key Idea:** There is no festival in the *Torah* called *Rosh HaShanah*. The beginning of months is the spring month in which *Pesach* is observed (Exodus 12: 1-2). We are, however, commanded to celebrate an unnamed festival on the first day of the seventh month (later known as the month of *Tishrei*), on which we are to refrain from work, bring specified sacrifices and observe the day as a sacred occasion (which we do on all biblical festivals). The only unique practice associated with this day is the command to celebrate it with "loud blasts" of the *shofar*. There is no reason or explanation given in the *Torah* for blowing the *shofar*.

The festival name of *Rosh HaShanah* first appears in the *Mishna* (c. 200 CE), where we are told that there are four new years. The first of *Tishrei* is the new year for calculating the years of foreign kings and the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. The *Mishna* also tells us that on *Rosh HaShanah* all creatures pass before God to be judged. In the *Talmud*, Rabbi Eliezer puts forward the idea that the world was created on the first of *Tishrei*. From these themes, *Rosh HaShanah* becomes the first day of the new year--a day of renewal and repentance (*teshuva*), when the sound of the *shofar* awakens us to our responsibility to ask forgiveness from both God and our fellow humans for mistakes we have made in the past, and to examine the choices and opportunities for self-improvement in the year ahead.

### *Our discussion of the texts:*

**Suppl. text.** *Mishna* ("oral law" put into writing around 200 CE by Rabbi Judah the Prince) **Rosh HaShanah 1:1:**

**There are four New Years. On the first of *Nisan* is the year for (counting the reign of Jewish) kings and for (the cycle of ) festivals. On the first of *Elul* is the New Year for the tithe of cattle. R. Eliezer and R. Simeon say it is on the first of *Tishrei*. On the first of *Tishrei* is the New Year for Years (for counting the reign of a non-Jewish king), for the Sabbatical Year, for the Jubilee year, for planting (trees) and for the tithe of vegetables. On the first of *Shevat* is the New Year for Trees, according to the ruling of Beit Shammai. Beit Hillel say, "On the fifteenth thereof."**

**Text 1. Prayer recited upon eating apple dipped in honey.** It is customary to eat foods with certain desirable characteristics—especially sweetness and a multiplicity of seeds—and recite a “yehi ratzon,” that expresses the hope that we will take on these traits. Besides apples, other symbolic foods, such as fish head, pomegranate, carrots, etc. are eaten with a *yehi ratzon*.

**Text 2. Rosh HaShanah greeting:** "*L'shana tova tikateiv(u) v'tichatem(u)*"—"May you be inscribed for a good year!" (Probably originated in Germany in the late Middle Ages—it is first mentioned in the work of Rabbi Jacob Molin (1360-1427).

**Text 3. Leviticus 23: 23-35.** The first day of the seventh month as a day of rest and a fire offering, commemorated with “loud blasts.”

**Text 5. Psalm 47.** God as King over all the earth and over all nations is greeted with shouts and trumpet blasts. *Haree’u* (“raise a joyous shout”) is derived from the same Hebrew root as “*teruah*” (“loud blasts”).

**Text 10. Nehemiah 8:1-12.** The observance of *Rosh HaShanah* after the return to Zion.

**Text 4. Talmud, Rosh HaShanah 10b-11a.** A dispute among the Sages as to whether the world was created in the month of Tishrei or in Nisan.

**Text 6. Mishna Rosh HaShanah 1:2.** How does the imagery of all creatures passing before God like sheep before a shepherd relate to the new year of tithing of cattle in the Supplementary text above?

**Text 7. RaMBaM (a/k/a Maimonides, 1135-1204 ), Mishne Torah** (codification of Jewish practice based on the Mishna and Talmud). Why we blow the *shofar*.

**Text 8. Shai Agnon, “Ten Reasons for Blowing the Ram’s Horn.”** Various explanations as to why the shofar is blown on *Rosh Hashanah*.

**Text 9. Reuven Hammer. “From Obscurity to Prominence.”** The evolution of the observance of *Rosh HaShanah* from ancient times to the present.

#### **Some *Rosh HaShanah* Observances and Customs**

On the Saturday night prior to *Rosh HaShanah*, a service called *Selichot* is traditionally done at midnight. Although there is no specific halakhic format that a *Selichot* service must follow, generally the prayers focus on repentance and renewal.

*Rosh HaShanah* is observed for **two days** in Israel as well as the Diaspora. (Some Reform congregations observe only one day.) Both days of *Rosh HaShanah* are considered to be a single day, and rabbinic authorities differed as to whether the *Shehecheyanu* blessing ("who has kept us alive and sustained us and enabled us to reach this season") is said on the second night of *Rosh HaShanah* during candlelighting and *Kiddush*, and when blowing the *shofar* on the second day. The custom arose of women wearing new garments when lighting candles and of eating a new fruit at dinner on the second night.

There are 3 *shofar* sounds: *tekiah* (one long blast); *shevarim* (3 short blasts) and *teru'ah* (9 staccato blasts). In traditional congregations, the shofar is not blown on Shabbat.

Scales are the zodiacal sign for the month of *Tishrei*, when the deeds of human beings are weighed in the balance.

On the afternoon of the first day of *Rosh HaShanah*, it is a (controversial) custom to go to a flowing body of water and symbolically cast our sins away by throwing bread crumbs into the water. This ritual, called *tashlich* (Micah 7:19), was/is opposed by many rabbinic scholars concerned that people would think they could rid themselves of sin by means of the ritual instead of repentance (*teshuva*). Nevertheless the custom has remained popular. When *Rosh HaShanah* falls on Shabbat or when the weather makes it impossible on the first day, *tashlich* is postponed until the second day.