

Rosh HaShanah – ראש השנה - The Jewish New Year ב"ה  
is celebrated with Apple, honey, dates and grapes (wine).



The Jewish New Year is called in Hebrew "**Rosh HaShanah**". "Rosh" means, the head, the sense, and the spirit, as well as the beginning of the calendar year, "HaShanah". The 'beginning' in Hebrew would be; "Reshit" (ראשית), and not "Rosh". Think of the beginning of the Bible; the first sentence begins with: "In the Beginning". In Hebrew, the first word in the Bible is "Bereshit" (בראשית).

The day of the Hebrew New Year is also called "Yom Kesse" (יום כסה), because on this day the moon is fully covered. In Hebrew "Lechasot" means to cover. See Psalm 81, verse 4. With the New Year the Jewish month of "Tishrei" (תשרי) begins. "Tishrei" in Babylonian means the Beginning, i.e. the month with which the year begins. This month, during the Torah era was actually the seventh month, because the month of Nissan (ניסן) is the month which begins the spring.

With Rosh HaShanah, begins not only the count of the new year, but this date serves also to calculate the "Shemita" year (שנת שמיטה), the seventh year during which the people of Israel may not cultivate the land of Israel. Furthermore, Rosh HaShanah also serves to calculate the Jubilee year, the "Yovel" year (שנת היובל), the Jubilee sabbatical year. The Jubilee, takes place after seven "Shemita" years were counted. It is the fiftieth year, in which the slaves were freed, and land was returned to its original owners in case it was taken due to debts. Rosh HaShanah is also the beginning of the calculation of the harvest of the wheat, the barley, and all other vegetable, for the purpose of collecting of the tithe (10% tax).

Please see below the date of "Tu BiShvat" (טו בשבט) for the New Year of the Trees (ראש השנה לאילנות), which is in winter. As the fruit of the trees must be calculated according to a different time table than the harvest of the field and of vegetables.

Rosh HaShanah is celebrated for two days. During the temple time, the citizens of Jerusalem celebrated Rosh HaShanah only for one day. Outside Jerusalem (and outside the land of Israel), Rosh HaShanah was celebrated for two days, because the people there had to wait for



a messenger from Jerusalem to verify the exact date of the beginning of the year.

The Jewish year is based on the cycle of the moon. It is a lunar calendar. The present Jewish calendar doesn't vary any longer since Rabbi Hillel, the President of the "Sanhedrin", set the exact calendar calculation in the year 359 AD. Therefore, no waiting for messengers was necessary anymore.

The origin of Rosh HaShanah is derived from the following two sentences in the Torah, even though the actual words "New Year" do not appear in the text itself. The Day is called the Day of the "Shofar" (יום השופר). A "Shofar" is hollowed ram's horn. The sound of the Ram's Horn should, so Jews believe, remind God of his loyal servant Abraham and his binding of Isaac. So, during the Rosh HaShanah prayer the sound of the "Shofar" should remind God of his promises to his beloved Abraham, in order that God hopefully be more forgiving to us, who may have done some wrong doings – not for our sake, but for Abraham's.

Further, see in the Book Vayikra (ויקרא), Leviticus, chapter 23, verses 23-25; <sup>23</sup> And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying, <sup>24</sup> Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall ye have a sabbath, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, an holy convocation. <sup>25</sup> Ye shall do no servile work therein: but ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord." (KJV)



The definition of the day in Hebrew is called "Shabaton Zichron Truah" (שבתון זכרון תרועה). The second reference to the Jewish New Year is in the Torah book "Bamidbar" (Numbers), chapter 29, verses 1-6. "And in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, ye shall have a holy convocation; ye shall do no servile work: it is a day of blowing the trumpets unto you. <sup>2</sup> And ye shall offer a burnt offering for a sweet savour unto the Lord; one young bullock, one ram, and seven lambs of the first year without blemish: <sup>3</sup> And their meat offering shall be of flour mingled with oil, three tenth deals for a bullock, and two tenth deals for a ram, <sup>4</sup> And one tenth deal for one lamb, throughout the seven lambs: <sup>5</sup> And one kid of the goats for a sin offering, to make an atonement for you: <sup>6</sup> Beside the burnt offering of the month, and his meat offering, and the daily burnt offering, and his meat offering, and their drink offerings, according unto their manner, for a sweet savour, a sacrifice made by fire unto the Lord." In these verses, the name of the Ram "Ayil" (איל), is mentioned explicitly as one of the animals for the sacrifice for the purpose of atonement.

The Hebrew word "Shofar" for the cheering blare "Truah" (תרועה), stems from the Hebrew root of the verb "Leshaper" (לשפר), which means to improve. The sound of the "Shofar" is the call for the people to improve themselves ethically in the spirit of Abraham, who took his son Isaac to the binding, thus demonstrating his absolute belief and trust in God.

A characteristic of the Jewish New Year is manifested in the blare sound of the "Shofar". Celebrating the New Year with the sound of the "Shofar" is a proclamation that the people recognize God as the King of the World. His crowning is celebrated. Rosh HaShanah according to one of the traditions mentioned in the "Talmud" (תלמוד), is also a reminder of the creation of Adam by God.

The Jewish tradition considers the first ten days of the year as the decision-making period, during which the Lord decides the fates of all people. The 10 days are called "HaYamim HaNoraim", the Days of Awe, in which a person fears God for his judgement. The traditional opinion of the Rabbis after the Temple era considers that on Rosh HaShanah,



God makes the initial judgment. The final verdict is officially sealed, so the Jewish tradition, at the end of the tenth day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The verdict is “finally ratified”, so to speak, on the day of “Simchat Torah” (תורה שמחת), at the end of the “Sukkot” Holiday (חג הסוכות), the Feast of Tabernacle. This Rabbinical interpretation is based on Psalm 33, verses 13-15: “<sup>13</sup>The Lord looketh from heaven; he beholdeth all the sons of men. <sup>14</sup>From the place of his habitation he looketh upon all the inhabitants of the earth. <sup>15</sup>He fashioneth their hearts alike; he considereth all their works.”

The ten days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are also called “Asseret Yemei Tshuvah” (עשרת ימי תשובה), the Ten Days of Atonement. During these days, Jews make special efforts of expressing remorse for mistakes and transgressions. One asks for forgiveness from God for mistakes relating to His commandments, but for insults or transgressions against persons, one has to ask them personally for forgiveness. Therefore, Jews wish each other during this time a happy New Year with the words “LeShana Tova Tekatevu ve Techatemu”, which means: “may you be inscribed for a good year and may this judgment be positively sealed by the Lord”.

The most well-known prayer of the New Year among Ashkenazi Jewish communities (originating from Germany, Italy, Central Europe) is called “**Unetane Tokef**” (ונתנה תוקף). The name means “one recognizes the authority of God”. This prayer dates back to the twelfth century, and is attributed to Rabbi Amnon of Magenza (Mainz in Germany). This prayer belongs to the end (“Musaf”) of the morning prayer of Rosh HaShanah, and is traditionally sung on the two New Year days, and on Yom Kippur (יום כיפור), the Day of Atonement. The believer recognizes the authority and the jurisdiction of God. In the prayer, the nullity of man in relation to the Lord and man’s respectful fear of God is expressed in a poetic way, which is rich in rhymes, so it suits singing well. The text describes the procedure of the judgement starting on Rosh HaShanah until the verdict on Yom Kippur. The Prayer “Unetane Tokef” ends with mentioning the “Seraphim” (שרפים), the angels closest to God, who ask God for His grace.

Here is a link to a Youtube version of the “Unetane Tokef” prayer sung by one of the best known Israeli opera singers, who is also a “Chazzan” (חזן) a cantor, Dudu Fisher: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmsWmvILKHM>.



An important traditional custom of Rosh HaShanah is the “**Tashlikh**” (תשל"ך). “Tashlikh” means to shake off or cast away. In the afternoon of the first day of Rosh HaShanah, after the midday prayer of “Mincha”, people traditionally go to the sea shore, lake shore, or the river bank (of moving waters) in order to empty their pockets and shake them off well, as symbolically getting rid of one’s sins and wrongdoings of the past year. Thus, a person may face the Lord with a better, cleaner conscience before He may decide the verdict. This tradition of the “Tashlikh” is rooted in the text of the prophet Micah, in chapter 7, verse 19: “He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”

Further famous customs of the Rosh HaShanah-Feast are, for example, that people give each other and eat apples with honey. This is to express the good wishes for a sweet and fruitful year. Many families serve a honey cake for desert. Pomegranate in the meal symbolizes the wish for a year rich in many good deeds. Meaning that one may fulfil many Torah commandments; as many as the numerous grains of the fruit. Dates stand for the wish for a sweet year like the honey, as well as for ending of bad decisions of the local governments regarding Jews in exile. The allusion to honey is related to the dates, and the impression of flowing honey they made upon the 12 scouts touring the Land of Israel. So, they spoke of the Land of milk and honey, both in fluid form.

Jewish communities in various countries in the diaspora have developed further local traditions since the Talmud times. Among these traditions we find the custom to celebrate the beginning of the Jewish New Year with a meal that includes a pumpkin, a zucchini, or rubia (type of small beans). Some communities integrate beetroot, spinach and chard in the festive meal. In Ashkenazi communities (Germany and Central Europe), families in the last centuries used to have small round slices of cooked carrots with cinnamon in the main dish or as a dessert. The round carrot slices should remind of coins, hence expressing the good wishes for a prosperous New Year. And cinnamon reminds us of the smell of incense in the Holy Temple, as described in Exodus, chapter 30, verse 23. Furthermore, since in German the name for cinnamon is “Zimt”, Jews used to call the dish in Yiddish “Zimmes”.



For centuries Jewish communities used to have the head of a fish as a part of the New Year meal. It should express the hope to be rather a head than a tail in society. It expressed the good wish to be a thinking person, and not merely an obedient member of the community. In the Hebrew calendar the month of Nissan, in spring, was considered according to the Torah also as a New Year. This New Year in Nissan served to count the reign of kings. This New Year was also relevant to calculate the sacrifices one should bring to the Temple. The New Year, Rosh HaShana, at the beginning of the Hebrew month Tishrei, in autumn, is to this day the beginning of the Jewish calendar year.

The 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Shvat (“Tu BiShvat”), in winter, is called the New Year of the Tree. It was decided by the Rabbis of the Mishna time as the relevant date to count the buds on the fruit trees in the land of Israel. This counting was the basis to calculate the tithe (10 % tax) on the first fruits of the fruit trees. The date was chosen after intensive discussions among the Rabbis, some of whom (the House Shammai), preferred the first of the month of Shvat. The date of “Tu



BiShvat” is according to House Hillel.

Footnote 1] “Shofar” is the horn of a Ram. On Rosh HaShana the blowing of the “**Shofar**” is a symbolic reminder of **Abraham**. With the **binding of Isaac** (Genesis, chapter 22), Abraham demonstrated his unconditional faith in God. He trusted that God would surely keep his promise that out of Isaac a numerous nation would spring out. One proof of his confidence one can see in the sentence in which Abraham told his servant to wait until they (Abraham and Isaac) would come back. As we know, Abraham miraculously saw a Ram caught by its horns in the bush, which he took as a sacrifice, after God instructed him not to harm the boy (Isaac). Verse 12: “Do not lay a hand on the boy”. (Incidentally: Isaac was already 37 years of age...) Since in Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, the Jewish people are praying for a positive judgement by God, the blowing of the “Shofar” should serve as a call for forgiveness from God. Since the ordinary person may have sinned in the past year the community is asking for forgiveness and mercy on behalf of the special love and respect Abraham earned from God.

The sacrifice of the Ram instead of Isaac was a strong demonstration against the pagan custom of sacrificing children. It illustrated that even if a person was so religiously zealous in his faith, one should not harm a child. It was an important message by God to Abraham and to mankind that God was to be worshiped as a merciful and not as a bloodthirsty God.

The binding of Isaac is considered to be the last of 10 tests which Abraham successfully withstood, proving his deep faith in the LORD and in his covenant and promises both for the future of the family, and the nation, which will come out of Abraham as well as the promise to inherit the promised land (Canaan).

Footnote 2] The rabbinic interpretation concerning Rosh HaShana is based on the Mishna, treatise Rosh HaShana (New Year) chapter 1, paragraph 2 as well as in the Talmud, in the book "Tosefta", also in the Treatise Rosh HaShana. There we can read that on Rosh HaShana, God decides the verdict, which he seals on Yom Kippur. The verdict becomes valid after "Shemini Atzeret" at the end of the "Sukkot" Holiday.

**Machzor:** The special prayer book for the High Holidays, Rosh HaShana (the New Year), Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), "Sukkot" (Tabernacles), "Pesach" (Passover) and "Shavuot" (Pentecost). The Hebrew word "Machzor" means "the Cycle". It refers to the repetitive annual

holidays according to the Jewish calendar. Originally, the Machzor Prayer books included all the prayers of all days and holidays of the year. They serve mainly the Cantors. Only after printing became popular, did the Machzor become more and more widely used by all people, and not only by the Cantors. The original cycle for the prayers and the Torah readings in the time of the second Temple was three years. The term Machzor is first found in the Mishna, in the "Masechet" (treatise) "Yoma", chapter 54. Among the first handwritten "Machzor" exemplars is the famous "Machzor" of Worms (Germany) from 1272, and from Nuremberg (Germany) of the year 1331. The first printed "Machzor" known to us is from Rome, dated 1485. (My research relating to the subject of the "Machzor" is mainly based on the study of the famous prayer scholar Abraham Meir Habermann, 1901 – 1980).



The prayer book for the everyday and Shabbat prayers is called "**Siddur**". ("Siddur" means in Hebrew the orderly arrangement.)

See More in German at: <https://arilipinski.de/rosch-haschana/>  
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