

Rosh Hashanah Q&A

The questions everyone actually asks · 5787

1. The Torah never actually calls this day “Rosh Hashanah.” What does the Torah itself call it?

Yom Teruah, or Zichron Teruah — a day of shofar blasts, or a day of remembering the shofar blast. The name “Rosh Hashanah,” head of the year, comes from Chazal, not from the Torah's own text.

Vayikra 23:24; Bamidbar 29:1

2. Why is a ram's horn preferred for the shofar over other kosher animals' horns?

The Gemara teaches that Hashem said: sound a ram's horn before Me, so that I remember the akeidah of Yitzchak, and count it for you as if you had bound yourselves before Me. Other kosher horns are valid after the fact, but a ram's horn is the preferred choice.

Rosh Hashanah 16a; Shulchan Aruch O.C. 586:1

3. Which kosher animal has a horn that can't be used for the shofar at all, even bedieved?

A cow or ox. The animal itself is kosher, but its horn is not a valid shofar — the Gemara gives more than one reason, including that an accuser cannot become a defender: the cow's horn recalls the sin of the Golden Calf.

Rosh Hashanah 26a

4. Besides being commanded directly, the Gemara says the extra shofar blasts serve another purpose entirely. What is it?

To confuse the Satan, and interfere with his ability to prosecute against us on Yom HaDin.

Rosh Hashanah 16a–16b

5. This year, Rosh Hashanah Day 1 falls on Shabbos. What's different about the shofar this year specifically?

The shofar will not be blown at all on Day 1. Chazal decreed that the shofar isn't sounded on Shabbos, out of concern someone might carry it through a reshus harabim to learn how. It's only blown on Day 2 this year.

Rosh Hashanah 29b

6. Why are there two days of Rosh Hashanah, when Eretz Yisrael normally keeps only one day of Yom Tov?

Beis Din used to wait for witnesses to testify about the new moon, sometimes arriving late in the day — so both the 30th of Elul and the 1st of Tishrei might already have been treated as holy. Chazal therefore made the two days into one “long day,” a status that stuck even after the calendar became fixed.

Rosh Hashanah 30b; Beitzah 5b

7. Because Day 1 is Shabbos this year, one very well-known Rosh Hashanah custom moves to Day 2 as well. Which one?

Tashlich — going to a body of flowing water to symbolically cast off our sins. It's normally done on Day 1 afternoon, but in some communities, when Day 1 is Shabbos, it's postponed to Day 2, possibly out of concern about carrying machzorim or other items to the water without an eruv.

Micha 7:19; Mishnah Berurah 583:8

8. The Mussaf Amidah of Rosh Hashanah has three special sections not said any other day of the year. What are they, and how many pesukim does each need?

Malchuyos (declaring Hashem as King), Zichronos (Hashem's remembrance), and Shofros (about the shofar itself) — the standard practice is at least ten pesukim in each, though the Gemara records an opinion that fewer can suffice after the fact.

Rosh Hashanah 32a; Shulchan Aruch O.C. 591:4

9. The Torah reading for Day 1 is about Sarah finally having a child in her old age. What does this have to do with Rosh Hashanah?

Chazal teach that Sarah, Rachel, and Chana were all “remembered” by Hashem specifically on Rosh Hashanah — each one's years of waiting ended on this day. That's also why Chana's own prayer for a child is read as the haftarah.

Rosh Hashanah 11a

10. Chazal actually derive some of the halachos of tefillah by watching Chana pray in the haftarah. What do we learn from her?

That tefillah must be articulated with the lips, but said quietly, without raising one's voice — ideally quiet enough that only you can hear yourself, the way Eli the Kohen Gadol watched her lips move with no sound reaching him, and at first mistakenly thought she was drunk.

Brachos 31a; Shulchan Aruch O.C. 101:2

11. It's an old custom to eat simanim on Rosh Hashanah night, like apples in honey or a fish head. Where does this actually come from?

The Gemara itself says a person should get in the habit of eating foods that are simanim — good omens — for the new year, though its own list is gourds, fenugreek, leeks, beets, and dates. Apple in honey is a later custom recorded by the Rema. Eating a head is already in the Shulchan Aruch's own base text — but specifically a sheep's head, recalling the ram of the akeidah; using a fish head instead is a later, common substitute.

Horiyos 12a; Krisus 6a; Shulchan Aruch O.C. 583:1–2

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