

Tashlikh: A Multifaceted Ritual

Rosh Ha-Shanah is a complex and complicated day. It encompasses multiple themes, some of which may at times appear to conflict with one another. It is certainly an ominous occasion, being the first day of the year, and with the hopes of starting on a high note and hopefully maintaining that level throughout the year, the day is sanctified unto *Hashem*. It is also a Yom Tov, a celebratory holiday, similar to the *Regalim*, with its concomitant requirement for *simchah*, joy. At the same time, it is the first of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* – the Ten Days of Repentance, a time when we are to “seek out” *Hashem*, since His presence can be more easily felt (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 18a), and is uniquely efficacious for *teshuvah*. As a Yom Tov however, the traditional modes of *teshuvah* – including the seasonal *selichot* prayers – are omitted on Rosh ha-Shanah, even while being recited for the days prior and subsequent. And even while we are in our repentant mode, Rosh Ha-Shanah is also a day dedicated to recalling and recognizing *Hashem*’s kingship over the world as well as each individual and re-accepting and re-coronating Him anew as our and the whole world’s King. While these varying themes need not be mutually exclusive, throughout the generations *poskim* have often chosen to elevate some of these themes above the others and highlight them as particularly relevant and overarching. It is in this light that *Tashlikh* and the various regulations surrounding it can be understood.

Meaning

Tashlikh appears to be an ancient custom, with the Maharil (1355–1427) – the earliest written record of *Tashlikh* – referring to the ceremony as “*mah she-nohagin*” – “that which is the custom” (*Hilkhos Rosh Ha-Shanah* 9). While practiced throughout much of the Jewish community – both historical and present (albeit with notable exceptions) – the reasons behind it and that which it is intended to accomplish are quite varied.

Maharil explains that standing on a river bank is meant as a reference to the story of the *Akeidah* (*Yalkut Shimoni Vayeira* 99), when Satan attempted to derail Avraham’s attempt to go through with the ultimate sacrifice. As a last resort, Satan turned himself into a river so that Avraham could not pass. Not missing a beat, Avraham continued ahead, walking head on into the water until it reached his neck. At that point, he called out to *Hashem*, “Master of the Universe, You revealed Yourself to me and told me, I am One and you are one, make My name be known in the world and sacrifice your son to Me! I didn’t question your command or delay. And now, if Yitzchak drowns, how will Your name be sanctified?” Immediately *Hashem* rebuked Satan and the river vanished. The *Zohar* (*Vayikra* 18a) records that the *Akeidah* took place on Rosh Ha-Shanah. Therefore, to commemorate, recall, and invoke our inherited merits of those moments, we too travel to a river or other body of water on this very day.

Others offer alternative rationales. *Siddur Otzar Ha-Tefillot* explains that as we are coronating *Hashem* as the King of the world, we symbolically do so in the same manner that we coronate earthly kings – on the banks of rivers, indicative of our desire that the kingship should last (*Horayot* 12a). The parallel to earthly coronation and renewing our covenant with the king is also seen in the widespread practice to shake out or brush off our garments during *Tashlikh*, reminiscent of the similar ancient ritual of sealing an agreement (*Nechemiah* 5:12–13). Further symbolism is found by the insistence of some that *Tashlikh* be performed by a river containing fish. *Eliyah Rabbah* (596 no. 3) explains that just as a fish’s eyes never close, so too we wish to “awaken” the *eina pekicha de-le’eila* (the open eye above) and pray for unyielding and uninterrupted Divine providence.

On a more mystical level, *Sha’ar Ha-Kavanot* (90b) records that the purpose is to rid ourselves of the metaphysical *kelipot* (shells or sheaves of impurity that metaphysically attach themselves to people who may have sinned) by casting them into the *yam ha-elyon* (the Heavenly sea). *Noheg Ka-Tzon Yosef* (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 19) explains that shaking off clothing to remove spiritual impurities is reminiscent of Zekhariah’s vision (*Zekhariah* 3:3–5) of an angel spiritually purifying Yehoshua the *Kohen Gadol* by cleansing his garments. *Kitzur Shelah*¹¹³ is quick to note that he considers it a *chilul Hashem* (desecration of God’s name) to consider *Tashlikh* as a perfect cleansing process that

¹¹³. *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 85a.

manages to erase all sin and iniquity automatically. Rather, the focus is on the *teshuvah* process and particularly on the metaphysical notion of purification by casting off impurities.

Performing a physical action to bolster and concretize a more abstract prayer is indeed familiar from other Rosh Ha-Shanah customs. The *Gemara (Horayot 12a)* records and *Shulchan Arukh (O.C. 583:1)* codifies that during the evening meal, one should eat various foods whose names are incorporated into a series of blessings and requests for the new year. While the prayers stand on their own and could have rightfully been recited during *tefillah*, since they include language reminiscent of these food items, they are recited specifically when these foods are eaten. Reciting the prayer and eating the food item hinted at by the blessing enhances both this particular blessing as well as the meal during which it occurs.

Timing

One issue of contention amongst the *poskim* is the proper timing for *Tashlikh*. All agree that it should be ideally recited on the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah. What happens when that is not possible? Can it be postponed? If so, until when? Answering these questions will depend on which aspects of *Tashlikh* each *posek* chooses to highlight and how those elements fit in with their broader understanding of the nature of Rosh Ha-Shanah.

Broadly speaking, there are three general situations for which postponing *Tashlikh* is discussed: When the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah is Shabbat, when the schedule of the Rosh Ha-Shanah *tefillot* does not allow for enough time to perform *Tashlikh*, and when external/personal exigencies (such as rain or sickness) are present.

At first glance, the question of performing *Tashlikh* on Shabbat appears quite technical in nature. Even though the *pesukim* from *Mikhah* that make up the core of *Tashlikh* are short and easily memorized, many people also recite the lengthy special *tefillot* that the Chida composed for this occasion as well as portions of the *Tikkunei Zohar* prior to *Tashlikh*. These extra *tefillot* usually require a *machzor* and carrying a *machzor* to the *Tashlikh* location may be limited by whether or not the particular locale has an *eiruv*. Since *Tashlikh* is often (and according to some,¹¹⁴ should preferably be) performed on the outskirts of city limits, even cities with *eiruvim* may not include these locations within their limits.

Taking all of this into consideration, some¹¹⁵ are willing to postpone *Tashlikh* on Shabbat when there is no *eiruv*; otherwise, they find no reason to reschedule its recitation. They contend that barring external constraints, *Tashlikh* should be recited on the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah even on Shabbat. They find no inherent contradiction to the spirit of Shabbat or reasons that its recitation be deemed inappropriate on Shabbat.

On the opposite extreme, others¹¹⁶ prefer to postpone *Tashlikh*, whenever the first day or Rosh Ha-Shanah occurs on Shabbat even when there is no problem of carrying *machzorim* to the *Tashlikh* location. While this may simply be good advice, so as not to differentiate between locations with and without *eiruvim*,¹¹⁷ others argue that it is inappropriate to perform *Tashlikh* on Shabbat. In such circumstances, many advise postponing *Tashlikh* until the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah. While perhaps the first day is ideally more appropriate, so long as it is recited on Rosh Ha-Shanah – even on the second day – it is still appropriate.

Others, particularly amongst chasidic circles,¹¹⁸ postpone *Tashlikh* until the eighth of *Tishrei*, two days before Yom Ha-Kippurim. Since according to many chasidic traditions, *tefillah* takes up much of the day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, there is virtually no time available to perform *Tashlikh* on either of the two days. They therefore advise postponing *Tashlikh* until the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*. The eighth of *Tishrei* is selected as, according to *nusach Sefard*, it is the day in which the *piyut* of the “thirteen *middot*” is recited in the morning *selichot*. The significance is found in the description of the *pesukim* in *Mikhah* as the *yud gimel middot de-rachamei ila’in* (the elevated/supreme thirteen attributes of Divine mercy), which are seen as appropriate juxtaposed to the *piyut* containing the “standard” thirteen attributes of mercy, described in kabbalistic circles as the *yud gimel middot de-rachamei teta’ei* – the lower level thirteen attributes of Divine mercy.

¹¹⁴. See *Magen Avraham* 583:5.

¹¹⁵. *Shu”t Yabi’a Omer* 4 O.C. 47.

¹¹⁶. *Penei Ha-Mayim* 2.

¹¹⁷. See *Mishnah Berurah* 583:8.

¹¹⁸. See *Sha’ar Yisaschar, Chodesh Tishrei, ma’amar shuvah Yisrael*, 22 (quoted in *Penei Ha-Mayim*, p. 9a).

Tashlikh within the Framework of Rosh Ha-Shanah

Perhaps these different approaches reflect and highlight different aspects of the complex tapestry that is Rosh Ha-Shanah. Choosing which theme to highlight requires navigating between Rosh Ha-Shanah as the first and perhaps goal and trend setting day of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* and a day in which Nechemiah demands feasting and happiness. “*Ki kadosh ha-yom la-Adoneinu, ve-al te’atzevu*” – “for it is a sanctified day to our Master, do not be sad,” since after all, “*chedvat Hashem hi ma’uzkhem*” – “for your rejoicing in Hashem is your strength” (*Nechemiah* 8:10). Additionally, as one of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the day should seemingly encompass elements of the *teshuvah* process, including *vidui* (confession) and requests for forgiveness – elements that appear contradictory to the themes of rejoicing and feasting.

Practically, there is no formal recitation of *vidui* or formal request for forgiveness and atonement on Rosh Ha-Shanah. The themes of *tefillah* surround the notions of Divine kingship and judgment. However, here and there according to some versions, certain elements manage to slip in. The classic *Avinu Malkeinu* is a case in point. While the *Beit Yosef*¹¹⁹ recommends omitting those stanzas that relate to admitting guilt and requesting forgiveness,¹²⁰ the Rama¹²¹ is quick to note that the (Ashkenazic) practice does not follow this opinion and the standard full text of *Avinu Malkeinu* is recited. While the Rama does not elaborate on his reasoning, the commentators limit the *Beit Yosef*'s concern to requests made during the *Shemoneh Esrei*¹²² or when not done in a manner of confession.¹²³ Aware of these limitations, the *Beit Yosef* appears nonetheless still hesitant to allow even these indirect and less formalized expressions of *vidui* and forgiveness. (The Rama seems to view *Avinu Malkeinu* as an “all or nothing” enterprise – if it is to be recited, it must be recited in its entirety. This is also likely the reason for the Rama’s insistence that *Avinu Malkeinu* be omitted on Shabbat, while the *Shulchan Arukh* allows for the recitation of the abridged version [omitting mention of *vidui* and forgiveness].)

For the *Beit Yosef* and those who follow his approach, despite Rosh Ha-Shanah concurring with the first day of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the focus of the day is specifically not on the procedural aspects of *teshuvah*, which require *vidui* and formal requests for forgiveness. The other themes of the day play a larger and definitive role, particularly that of Hashem’s kingship – evidenced in his requiring reciting *Avinu Malkeinu* (our Father, our King) no matter the day of the week. The Rama and those following his approach, appear more open to permitting some of these elements – at least in indirect ways – to shine through.

These two approaches may also explain other disagreements with regard to particular elements of *tefillah* on Rosh Ha-Shanah. Upon opening the *aron* to remove the *sefer Torah* during *Shacharit*, many communities chant the thirteen attributes along with a supplementary prayer attributed to the Arizal. This practice is part of the larger custom of reciting the thirteen attributes when removing the Torah from the *aron* during all *Yamim Tovim*. The moments of opening up the *aron* are considered particularly auspicious for reciting these lofty prayers. Some Sephardic communities, however, refrain from reciting the thirteen attributes while opening the *aron*, whether on Rosh Ha-Shanah or on the other holidays. The reasoning is that these thirteen attributes of mercy form the core of the *selichot* service, the prototypical prayers of *teshuvah* which appropriately include elements of *vidui* and requests for forgiveness. This is not by chance, as the *Gemara* (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 17b) indicates that Hashem Himself taught them to Moshe as uniquely efficacious in achieving forgiveness and atonement.

While only invoking these notions indirectly, perhaps according to those communities that refrain from this practice, even this is too much for Rosh Ha-Shanah, since it invokes elements that are incongruous with a day dedicated to coronating the King of Kings. Perhaps the other communities view chanting the thirteen attributes in a similar way to which the Rama views *Avinu Malkeinu*. Even while classically part and parcel of the *selichot* service, since the thirteen attributes themselves do not directly invoke notions of *vidui* or forgiveness, there is no need to refrain from reciting them. (The supplementary prayer said in many Ashkenazi communities that does ask for forgiveness does not pose a serious problem either as it is clearly not part of the *Shemoneh Esrei* service).

Interestingly, the history behind the inclusion of the thirteen attributes during the opening of the *aron* is complicated. While it is mentioned in most modern printings of the *Sha’ar Ha-Kavanot*¹²⁴ attributed to the Arizal,

¹¹⁹. O.C. 584.

¹²⁰. Based on *Zohar Tetzaveh* 186a.

¹²¹. *Darkhei Moshe*, ad loc.

¹²². *Magen Avraham* 2.

¹²³. *Mishnah Berurah*, 3.

¹²⁴. *Derushei Shavu’ot* 89b (and included in the kabbalistic compendium *Olat Tamid* 44b–45a).

R. Yaakov Moshe Hillel strenuously rejects this as a misattribution. In recording the history of the printings of *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot*, R. Hillel notes¹²⁵ that reciting the thirteen attributes while opening the *aron* is not found in the original manuscripts. R. Chaim Vital, in authoring the *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot*, was quite meticulous to include only those practices of his master, the Arizal, which he himself witnessed or questioned him about. He carefully omits this practice, since although appearing in a handwritten gloss to the Arizal's personal *machzor*, these were written during the Arizal's younger years, before he engaged in the higher levels of Kabbalah. Practically, R. Vital's son, R. Shmuel, in editing his father's work, included many of these comments and handwritten glosses omitted by his father, often without noting that his father had in fact omitted them. This is consistent with *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot's* approach elsewhere¹²⁶ to the thirteen attributes, where it admonishes against reciting them during the *tikkun leil Hoshana Rabbah*, as inconsistent with the sanctity of the day, even while recommending reciting almost the entirety of the rest of the traditional *selichot* service.

Perhaps these varying approaches to the theme of forgiveness and *teshuvah* on Rosh Ha-Shanah can help explain the different positions on postponing *Tashlikh* in various situations. Taking the custom of *Tashlikh* as a given, the approach that does not allow for any mention of *vidui* or requests for forgiveness on Rosh Ha-Shanah – such as the *Beit Yosef's* position with regard to *Avinu Malkeinu* and R. Hillel's explanation of the Arizal's omitting mention of the thirteen attributes of mercy while opening the *aron* – likely views *Tashlikh* in the same light.

If it is to be performed on Rosh Ha-Shanah – and all agree that ideally at least, it most certainly should – then it cannot relate to those procedural aspects of *teshuvah* that are incongruent with the unique sanctity of Rosh Ha-Shanah. This approach highlights those explanations of *Tashlikh* that focus on the notion of the symbolism of coronating kings by a bank of water or recreating, invoking, or recalling Avraham's journey to the *Akeidah*. Since, according to this understanding, *Tashlikh* is not about forgiveness and atonement, its proper timing is particularly on Rosh Ha-Shanah – on the first day when possible (the day of the *Akeidah*), and if not, then on the second day. If missed for whatever reason, there is no reason or room for corrective practice according to this approach; it is a custom unique to Rosh Ha-Shanah and once the opportunity is missed, it cannot be rectified.

The alternate perspective that allows for some mention of these procedural elements, albeit indirectly and obliquely – highlighted by the Rama's insistence that *Avinu Malkeinu* be recited in its full form complete with its mention of sin, iniquity, and forgiveness – may in fact have no problem viewing *Tashlikh* along these very lines. Its central theme and perhaps purpose, according to this approach, may very well be an informal (outside of the confines of the standard *Shemoneh Esrei tefillah*) request for forgiveness, highlighted by the very *pesukim* recited themselves – “*Ve-tashlikh bi-metzulot yam kol chatotam*” – “and cast into the deep waters all of their iniquities.” Since, according to this perspective, *Tashlikh* represents these procedural elements of *teshuvah* (even if informally), when it cannot be performed on Rosh Ha-Shanah, it can (and likely should) be postponed to another date during the *teshuvah*-focused season.

Postponement may be necessary when Rosh Ha-Shanah occurs on Shabbat, since even the more permissive approach with regard to indirectly invoking *vidui* and forgiveness on Rosh Ha-Shanah, is more hesitant when it comes to Shabbat. Even those following the Rama's approach completely forbid such practice on Shabbat and therefore omit *Avinu Malkeinu* entirely and refrain from reciting the thirteen attributes when opening the *aron*. Even if the reason for postponement is more technical, such as leaving no time in the day's schedule for its recitation, it is no matter. Since *teshuvah*, along with all its procedural elements, is the prime focus of the days following Rosh Ha-Shanah, this approach finds nothing wrong with, once having to postpone *Tashlikh* initially, selecting the most auspicious time during this period to recite it – be it *erev Yom Ha-Kippurim* or two days prior. Cognizant of the *Zohar's*¹²⁷ description of the period of judgment and atonement extending beyond the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* and culminating in Hoshana Rabbah, some even have the custom of postponing *Tashlikh* until that later time.

Like Rosh Ha-Shanah itself, *Tashlikh* is a multifaceted ceremony. As an ancient custom, *poskim* throughout the ages have viewed it through different lenses. It is likely that the perspective one takes on *Tashlikh* relates to a similar perspective taken to selecting which themes of Rosh Ha-Shanah to highlight as most significant and pervasive. In navigating these first days of *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, we are cognizant of all of these themes – *Hashem's* kingship over the world and over each and every person as well as the *shofar's* clarion call to *teshuvah*. Regardless of which perspective we choose to highlight with its concomitant ramifications for the timing of a potentially postponed *Tashlikh*, the ultimate *tefillah* of each and every one of us is ultimately the same – that we be sealed in the book of life.

¹²⁵. *Shu"t Va-Yashov Ha-Yam* 2:11 [see also R. Hillel's *Kitvuni Le-Dorot*].

¹²⁶. 103b.

¹²⁷. *Vayehi* 220a.