



Community-Wide High Holy Days Study

We are “The People of the Book.” Even as Jews were scattered throughout the world, our shared textual tradition gave us sustenance and kept us connected to one another and a larger sense of community and peoplehood.

So too, in this strange holiday season, when we're scattered across the city in our homes, unable to gather together physically, we find our way to one another in the act of Torah study.

Behold your ready-made, self-guided Talmud-study sessions for both days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Follow the instructions, or ignore them. Study with a partner, in a group, or by yourself. Take 20 minutes or two hours. But know that as you learn, you join a whole community of learners, united even in these challenging times by shared sacred conversations.

Each of the three sessions contains: introductory information, a text in Hebrew and in English, and some guiding discussion questions.

On Rosh Hashanah, Day 1, we will be studying:

“A Shofar Showdown”
Babylonian Talmud - Rosh Hashanah 29b

On Rosh Hashanah, Day 2, we will be studying:

“There’s Still Time!”
Babylonian Talmud - Rosh Hashanah 18a

On Yom Kippur we will be studying:

“*Teshuvah* - For Love or From Fear?”
Babylonian Talmud - Yoma 86b

Take your time and enjoy the learning. Next year may we all be able to sit together and share all that we have learned! Shanah tovah-

Rosh Hashanah Day 1: “A Shofar Showdown”

Part I - *What do you need to know?*

- The Talmud is a collection of teachings by the first people to refer to one another as ‘Rabbis,’ a group of scholars who lived in the years after the Roman destruction of the Great Temple in Jerusalem, in 70 CE. They are still very much attempting to figure out what Jewish Life will look like after that catastrophe.
- The Talmud is made up of an earlier section, called the Mishnah, which was compiled in the year 220 CE, and a later section of commentaries on the Mishnah, called the Gemara, which was compiled in around 600 CE. The Gemara will often elaborate on or add a story to a teaching from the Mishnah, as it does in our text below.
- The question being discussed in this Mishnah is whether or not we blow a shofar on Rosh Hashanah when it falls on Shabbat (as it does this year). The reason we might not is that the Rabbis were concerned that if we had to run around worrying about finding a Shofar, that might disturb the sanctity of our Shabbat.
- Now let’s look at a controversial attempt to resolve this question by Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai of Yavneh, one of the principal architects of Post-Temple Judaism:

Part II - The Text: *Babylonian Talmud - Rosh Hashanah 29b*

משנה

יום טוב של ר"ה שחל להיות בשבת במקדש היו תוקעין אבל לא במדינה משחרב בהמ"ק התקין רבן יוחנן בן זכאי שיהו תוקעין בכל מקום שיש בו ב"ד אמר רבי אלעזר לא התקין רבן יוחנן בן זכאי אלא ביבנה בלבד
אמרו לו אחד יבנה ואחד כל מקום שיש בו בית דין

Mishna:

When the holiday of Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat, they would blow shofar in the Great Temple, but not [outside of Jerusalem, or anywhere else] throughout the land. But once the Temple was destroyed, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai decreed that they would blow the shofar in any place where there was a courthouse.

Rabbi Elazar said, "Rabbi Yohanan only meant in the city of Yavneh."

They said to him, "Whether in Yavneh or any other place there is a courthouse!"

גמרא

משחרב בהמ"ק התקין רבן יוחנן בן זכאי כו': תנו רבנן פעם אחת חל ראש השנה להיות בשבת [והיו כל הערים מתכנסין] אמר להם רבן יוחנן בן זכאי לבני בתירה נתקע אמרו לו נדון אמר להם נתקע ואחר כך נדון לאחר שתקעו אמרו לו נדון אמר להם כבר נשמעה קרן ביבנה ואין משיבין לאחר מעשה

Gemara: "Since the Temple was destroyed, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai decreed..." "

The rabbis taught: Once Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat, and people gathered together from all the cities. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai said to the elders of the community, "Let's blow the Shofar!"

[Still uncertain whether or not it was appropriate to blow shofar in Yavneh, or anywhere else outside of the Temple, which had been destroyed,] They replied, "Shouldn't we deliberate and render an official judgment first?"

He [Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai] said, "Let's blow the shofar [first], and then afterwards we'll render a judgment."

After the shofar was blown, they said, "Okay, now let's sit and figure out what the law should be."

He [Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai] said to them, "The horn has already been sounded in Yavneh, and we can't go back on what's already been done."

Part III - Questions for Discussion:

1. In the Mishnah, there is a debate over whether Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai believes we should blow the shofar on Shabbat only at the courthouse in Yavneh, or in *any* city with a courthouse. What difference would it make?
2. What did it mean “to render judgment” in this community? How did Rabbi Yohanan subvert that process, and why?
3. What is the significance of Rabbi Yohanan’s extension of Temple rites outside of Jerusalem? What does this snippet of rabbinic history teach us about how religious practice must respond to times of crisis?
4. In what ways has your own relationship to your Jewish practice changed during the current crises?
5. What other kinds of personal rituals or practices have you had to adapt to our new reality?
6. In what ways do you long to return to “normal,” and in what ways do you think this experience might change the way you live for good?

Rosh Hashanah Day 2: “There’s Still Time!”

Part I - *What do you need to know?*

- One of the central metaphors used during the High Holy Days is of a judgment being first written down on a scroll, and then eventually stamped with a seal of permanence. The idea here is that the judgment is rendered, but until it has the final seal, it might still be reconsidered.
- The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur have come to be known as the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the ‘Ten Days of Return/Repentance.’ So we imagine that if a judgment is rendered on Rosh Hashanah, there is still time to fix the problem - to mend a relationship, pay back a debt, right a wrong, etc. - before the judgment (so goes the metaphor) is finally sealed on Yom Kippur. That makes these ten days a period of especially intense activity, when we all race around attempting to repair what is broken.
- One of the classic ways that the Rabbis argue with one another is to bring “proof-texts” - verses from the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) that support their opinions. So as you read each of the verses cited in this text, part of your job is to figure out how these words are meant to support the position of the person quoting them.

Part II - The Text: Babylonian Talmud - Rosh Hashanah 18a

אמר רב שמואל בר איניא משמיה דרב מניין לגזר דין של צבור שאינו נחתם
 אינו נחתם והכתיב (ירמיהו ב, כב) נכתם עונך לפני
 אלא אע"ג שנחתם נקרע שנאמר (דברים ד, ז) כה' אלהינו בכל קראנו אליו
 והכתיב (ישעיהו נה, ו) דרשו ה' בהמצאו התם ביחיד הכא בצבור
 ביחיד אימת אמר רבה בר אבוה אלו עשרה ימים שבין ר"ה ליוה"כ

Rabbi Shmuel bar Inya said, in the name of Rav: From where do we learn that the final judgment of a community is never sealed?

Is that really true? Look, it says (in Jeremiah 2:22), “The *stain* of your sin is before Me.”

Rather, let's say that even though it is sealed, it can be torn up. As it says (in Deuteronomy 4:7), “For the Our Eternal is there *whenever* we call out.”

But doesn't it also say (in Isaiah 25:6), “Seek God *when* God can be found.”

That verse [in Deuteronomy] is about a community, but this [in Isaiah] verse is about an individual.

So, for an individual, when is the time [that God “can be found”]? Rabbah bar Avuhah said: This is during the Ten Days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Part III - Questions for Discussion:

1. Why do the Rabbis use the metaphor of writing judgments down, sealing them, and tearing them up? Is this useful imagery for you? Would you choose a different metaphor to describe the *teshuvah* (return/repentance) process?
2. What is the difference between communal *teshuvah* and individual *teshuvah*?
3. This text concludes by suggesting that while a community can (and should) seek *teshuvah* at any time, an individual needs to have a designated window of time to focus their energies. Why might that be so, for the community and for the individual? Do you agree with this model?
4. It is hard to imagine that the Rabbis really believed that God could *only* “be found” during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. So what do they mean by that? Can God be more present at some times than at others? Do you experience God as more present during the High Holidays?
5. What do you need to do over the next ten days to make sure that you have repaired all that you can?

Yom Kippur: “*Teshuvah* - For Love or From Fear?”

Part I - *What do you need to know?*

- The central work of the High Holy Days is a process known as *teshuvah*, a Hebrew word that we often see translated as ‘repentance,’ but which literally means ‘return.’ When the teaching below brings proof texts from the Books of the Prophets, it will rely on the word carrying both of these connotations.
- There is a great difference, in ancient Jewish law (as in most legal systems), between transgressions done intentionally and those done by mistake. One was not, for example, allowed to bring a sacrifice to the Temple to atone for an intentional sin. But the process of *teshuvah* seems to work differently with these categories.
- Reish Lakish was a famous Talmudic scholar who spent the first part of his life as a famous bandit. So when he talks about *teshuvah*, it isn’t theoretical - he knows from personal experience.
- *Fear* and *love* are both considered virtues in classical Jewish theology. We are commanded to both fear God and love God. And yet, in the following text, there seems to be a preference for one of these motivations over the other.

Part II - The Text: *Babylonian Talmud - Yoma 86b*

אמר ריש לקיש גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות שנאמר (הושע יד) שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך כי כשלת בעונך הא עון מזיד הוא וקא קרי ליה מכשול איני והאמר ריש לקיש גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכיות שנאמר (יחזקאל לג) ובשוב רשע מרשעתו ועשה משפט וצדקה עליהם <חיה> [הוא] יחיה לא קשיא כאן מאהבה כאן מיראה

Reish Lakish said: Great is *teshuvah*, for because of it, intentional sins are turned into mistakes, as it says in (Hosea 14): “Return/Repent, O Israel, unto the Eternal, your God, for you have stumbled in your sin.” ‘Sin’ is intentional, and yet he calls it a ‘stumbling.’

But that is not so! For didn't Resh Lakish actually say: Great is *teshuvah*, for because of it, intentional sins are turned into merits, as it is says (in Ezekiel 33): “And when a wicked person returns/repents from wickedness, and does that which is lawful and right, then that person shall live!”

There is no contradiction: One refers to a case of *teshuvah* done out of love, the other to one due to fear.

Part III - Questions for Discussion:

1. What does it mean that certain sins can be transformed from “intentional” to “unintentional”? Is this a metaphysical process or a psychological one?
2. What does it mean that a sin could be transformed not just into a lesser sin, but into a merit?
3. Why does it matter whether the *teshuvah* was done out of Fear or out of Love? Can you explain why Fear would produce one result, and love would produce another?
4. What kind of *teshuvah* does the Talmud seem to be encouraging us to do, and why?
5. In what areas of your life are you driven by fear, and in what areas of your life are you driven by love? Which of those motivators is more effective?