



Around the Shabbat Table

**Rosh Hashana / Yom Kippur 5766
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Shalom!

With this issue, we welcome back all of our *Around the Shabbat Table* subscribers, and welcome our many new subscribers. This is the first of approximately 25 issues that are scheduled to appear during the 2005-6 school year. To learn more about how *Around the Shabbat Table* can be used in your family or school, please view our [User's Guide](#).



Introduction

Over the next two weeks, we celebrate the beginning of a new year, 5766 according to the traditional Jewish calendar. The holiday we now know as Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, originated in the Torah as a holiday, featuring the sounding of the shofar. It is reasonable to assume that, like many Jewish holidays, this day had an agricultural significance, falling, as it does, at the end of the summer months, but still before the rainy season begins in Israel.

In the Torah's reckoning, this holiday is not at the beginning of the year, but in what was then considered to be the seventh month of the calendar year! The holiday's evolution into the form we know it today – as the beginning of the New Year and a day of judgment and of prayerful reflection – comes in later times. For example, the *Mishna*, six volumes of rabbinical teachings dating to the third century, lists our Rosh Hashana as one of four different dates on the calendar which are New Years days for different purposes. The evolution of prayers for the High Holidays occurs still later.

Unlike Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur appears in the Torah with a theme that corresponds to the way the holiday is still viewed: A day on which we abstain from physical comforts and pleasures and seek atonement for our wrongful actions.

In contemporary Judaism, the days beginning with Rosh Hashana and concluding with Yom Kippur are called the *Aseret Y'mai Teshuva*, the Ten Days of Return. While one may always participate in *teshuva*, improving one's spiritual life and seeking a stronger connection with God, this period has become a particularly propitious time for it.

While the tone of the two holidays is serious, it should not be considered a sad time. Rather, it is a time to reflect on who we are, and what we would like to become.

Questions for your Family's Discussion

As your family shares a holiday meal or during some "down time" during Yom Kippur, we encourage you to discuss the following questions:

1. The traditional Jewish calendar shows this to be the 5766th year. Yet, science estimates the age of our world at 4.55 billion years. While there are many articles that address this discrepancy, one of the best was written by Rabbi Eliahu Dessler (1892-1953), who takes the Biblical story of creation as having occurred *outside of time* as we know it:

Creation, by definition, is outside our world and outside our frame of thought. If time exists only as a mode of our thought, then the act of creation is necessarily non-temporal: "above time."... This is the reason why creation is interpreted by scientists as a process of evolution extending over vast eons of time. Since creation does not take place in time we must ask why the Torah describes it as taking six days. The answer is that the Torah wishes to teach us a lesson in relative values. Everything has value only in relation to its spiritual content. Vast physical masses and vast expanses of space and time are of little significance if their spiritual content is small. The whole physical universe exists as an environment for the spiritual life of the human being... the Torah deliberately contracts the time-scale compared with that which presents itself to the scientist, in order to convey to us the relative insignificance of the material creation compared with the spiritual stature of man.

- Based on Rabbi Dessler's writings, how might we reconcile the scientific dating of the world with the Jewish counting of years?
 - According to many Jewish sources, the traditional counting of years is based not on the creation of the world, but of the first human. If we were to follow these sources, how might we reconcile the scientific dating of the world with the Jewish counting of years?
2. Judaism teaches us that we can atone for those sins we commit against God through prayer. However, for those sins we have committed against another human being, we must seek that person's forgiveness before seeking God's forgiveness for such wrongs.

- Why does a person have to still seek God's forgiveness for wrongdoings against another person after s/he has been forgiven by that person? Why would God, the Creator, still be involved?



A Text to Wrestle With

One of the best known prayers of the High Holidays is *Unetannah Tokef*. There is a tradition that the prayer was written in the following way: A certain Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, Germany, living in the 10th or 11th century, was called before the ruler who controlled the area. The ruler offered Rabbi Amnon a leadership position, if he would only convert to Christianity. After repeatedly refusing, Rabbi Amnon told the ruler that he wanted three days to consider the offer. While he had merely been stalling for time, Rabbi Amnon, upon reflection, was appalled that he had seemingly left the ruler with the impression that he might actually decide to leave Judaism. Rabbi Amnon was so disappointed with himself that he could not eat or sleep for three days. When, at the end of that period, Rabbi Amnon refused to appear before the ruler, he was punished with a tortuous death. Following his death, Rabbi Amnon appeared to another rabbi, Kalonymous, and taught him the prayer that we still use today.

While there is serious doubt as to this story's accuracy as to the writing of this prayer, the prayer itself is clearly an ancient one.

Here is an excerpt from the prayer:

*You open the book of remembrance...
And each person is sealed there...*

*All creatures parade before You as a group.
As a shepherd herds his flock,
Causing his sheep to pass beneath his staff,
So You cause to pass, count, and record the souls of all living,
Decreeing their days, inscribing their judgment.*

*On Rosh Hashanah it is written,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
How many will die, how many shall be born,*

*Who will live and who will die...
[and for those who will die:] Who will perish by water and who by fire,
Who by sword and who by wild beast,
Who by famine and who by thirst,
Who by earthquake and who by plague...*

But teshuva [repentance], tefilla [prayer] and tzedaka [acts of giving, righteousness] avert the severe decree.

1. What does the author view as the events that occur on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur?
2. In the early part of the prayer, who is controlling everything?
3. In the final words of the prayer, who is in control?
4. This year, we have seen thousands of people killed in natural disasters such as the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. Each has also led to an unprecedented outpouring of charitable giving to relieve the sufferings of others. Can you connect the natural disasters to the first part of the prayer? What is the connection of the world's response to the final line of the prayer?

Towards an Action Agenda

- Tzedaka is one way that we “avert the evil decree.” One of this year's harshest decrees has been the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. You can help others to lessen the pain and suffering by giving through one of the many Jewish organizations that are responding:

[UJA Federation of New York](#)

[Union for Reform Judaism](#)

[Orthodox Union](#)

[United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism](#)

- On Rosh Hashana, it is customary to dip an apple into honey and to say:

Yehi ratzon milfanecha, Adonai Eloheinu v'Elohai avoteinu, she-techadesh aleinu shana tova u-metuka.

May it be Your will, Lord God and God of our ancestors, to renew for us a good and sweet new year.



This year, you might want to go around your holiday table, and have everyone, when dipping apple in honey, list the ways in which they hope the new year will be a sweet one for themselves and the family.



Best wishes to you and your family for a shana tova u'metuka, a happy, healthy and sweet New Year.

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply press the "reply" button on your e mail program and respond with your thoughts and ideas.

If you wish to unsubscribe, simply reply to this e-mail.

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