

The Rosh Hashanah Prayers

Structures, Messages & Themes



SHACHARIT (MORNING SERVICE)

Birkot Hashachar/ morning blessings and study passages	<p>Thanking God first thing in the morning, learning Torah early on in the day.</p>
Pesukei Dezimra/ verses of praise	<p>Uplifting Biblical passages, mainly from the Book of Psalms, about God's creation of nature and the miracles within nature. During the <i>Yamim Noraim</i>, High Holy Days, the chazzan ends this section with a special section, beginning '<i>Hamelech</i>', the King.</p>
The Amidah	<p>Recited quietly by each individual congregant, this is our central prayer. On Rosh Hashanah, it includes references to God's sovereignty, hopes for a monotheistic future for the whole world and further ideas about Rosh Hashanah. It mixes requests and theology.</p>
Chazarat Hashatz / the repetition of the Amidah	<p>Led by the chazzan, this recitation is on behalf of the community which joins in with some parts of it, notably the <i>Kedushah</i> prayers and some piyutim. These are often sung to well-known tunes. It is immediately followed by the dramatic <i>Avinu Malkeinu</i>, Our Father, Our King, prayer in which we relate to God in both of these identities.</p>
Keriat HaTorah 'leyning' / reading of the Torah	<p>The readings of the Torah amplify the themes of the day. For the first day, we read from the stories of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs in the book of Bereishit (Genesis), focusing primarily on the birth of Yitzchak (Isaac), signifying that Rosh Hashanah is not about the creation of the world per se, but about humans - the impact we can and must make on the world. This passage also charts the development of Yishmael (Ishmael), another of Avraham's (Abraham's) sons as well as Abraham's continuing connection to the Land of Israel.</p> <p>For the second day, we read the story of the binding of Yitzchak, describing the incredible religious commitment of both Avraham and Yitzchak.</p>
Maftir	<p>The reading from the second Sefer Torah on both days describes the offerings for the Temple (when in existence) on Rosh Hashanah.</p>
Haftara	<p>For the first day, we read the story of Channah (Hannah) and the birth of Shmuel (Samuel), taken from the Biblical book of Samuel. This Haftara is also famous for recording Channah's prayers, which form a basis to understanding Jewish prayer in general.</p> <p>For the second day, we read from the Biblical prophecies of Jeremiah, focusing on the tears of the Matriarch Rachel as the Jews were led into Babylonian captivity following the destruction of the First Temple. The Haftara though has a positive ending, about the return of the Jews to their Land, encouraging us to focus on our prayers for a good year ahead.</p>

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Shofar	<p>The Shofar blower recites two berachot (blessings) prior to sounding the Shofar. Others present answer 'Amen'. There are three different types of blasts: tekia (long, straight blast); teruah (staccato blasts); shevarim (three broken blasts) which give aural expression to the Rosh Hashanah themes of sovereignty and personal reflection.</p> <p>Those who wish to observe the mitzvah of the Shofar in the most rigorous way do not speak between the first and last Shofar blasts (a considerable period of time) other than about matters relating to the service. At any event, one should try to listen to initial 30 blasts without interruption, focusing on the emotions evinced by the Shofar sounds.</p>
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MUSAF SERVICE

Amidah	<p>As in <i>Shacharit</i>, this is recited quietly by each individual congregant. It is the longest <i>Amidah</i> prayer of the year. On Rosh Hashanah, as well as a petition to God, it is a review of Jewish history and future. Its main themes are <i>malchiyot</i>, <i>zichronot</i> and <i>shofarot</i> – God's sovereignty, Jewish history, messianic times - and the part played by the Shofar in all of these.</p>
Chazarat Hashatz / the repetition of the Amidah	<p>As in <i>Shacharit</i>, this is led by the chazzan, a recitation on behalf of the community. It also has its own Kedushah prayers and some piyutim which we sing. Perhaps the most famous is <i>Untaneh Tokef</i>, a prayer outlining the judgement time of Rosh Hashanah with references to the books which are open in Heaven on this day. The repetition also includes Shofar blasts at the end of its central sections.</p> <p>In many communities, we prostrate full-length (if feasible) in the '<i>Aleinu</i>' prayer, whose original 'home' is in the <i>Musaf</i> service of Rosh Hashanah and was later applied as the closing prayer of every other prayer service.</p>

IN GENERAL

- Even though it is preferable to say some parts of the service whilst standing, especially if the Aron Hakodesh (ark) is open, it is perfectly acceptable to sit down at these times if one needs to do.
- If your Hebrew is rusty, you can pray in English instead or use a transliterated *machzor*.
- Also consider which personal prayers, for specific matters you wish to pray for, you could say at appropriate parts of the service. You can make these prayers up yourself, in English.
- A number of special inserts are made into the beginning and end sections of the Amidah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, such as the prayers of 'zochreinu lachayim' (remember us for life) and 'besefer chayim' ([inscribe] us in the book of life). These all highlight the importance of striving for and asking God for a life of good which is well-lived as a Jew.