

Hoshana Rabba Gems | Part One

Tuesday's teaching · A day to stand before the King

What happens on Hoshana Rabba?

Hoshana Rabba is the seventh and final day of Sukkos, still a day of Chol Hamoed, yet its morning in shul feels different. The davening is longer and more elaborate. We add psalms with a Yom Tov flavour; parts of the Torah service and the Kaddish after Musaf are said in a Yom Tov manner. We take the four species and, instead of the usual single circuit, make seven hakafoes around the bimah with the Hoshanos, calling to Hashem for salvation. The service also includes the separate aravah and its customary beating.

The Shulchan Aruch describes additional prayers for water, for Sukkos is a time of judgment concerning water. The Aruch HaShulchan calls Hoshana Rabba the gemar hadin, the concluding judgment, and explains that water also embraces livelihood and other needs. Its prayers carry the gravity of a final decision for the year, together with the closeness and joy of Sukkos.

The Rema records the custom of leaving ordinary weekday work until after one has left shul. Ideally, if one can arrange it, one should set aside the entire day from work, allowing the davening the unhurried time one gives a Yom Tov morning. Even if work is unavoidable afterward, the service should not be squeezed into a hurried weekday schedule. Hoshana Rabba remains Chol Hamoed: Yom Tov's full melachah restrictions do not apply, while the rules of Chol Hamoed still do. The day itself deserves our full attention.

The Aruch HaShulchan also records the custom of a festive meal with good food on Hoshana Rabba. After the hakafoes and davening, one can carry the day's Yom Tov flavour to the table. He cautions against eating so heavily that one loses the appetite for the Shemini Atzeres meal that evening. Thus the morning's earnest pleading leads into gratitude and celebration.

Set aside real time for Hoshana Rabba: the final judgment is approached through prayer, hakafoes, and the joy of the festival.

What is “great” about Hoshana Rabba?

The word rabba means “great.” But what is great? The teachings offer three answers, each placing the emphasis somewhere else.

First, the salvation is great. We are asking for much more than assistance with one difficulty. We ask for a year of life and for help with the needs that will arise within it. Second, the One who saves is great. Our confidence rests on the greatness and mercy of Hashem, not on the strength of our own plea. Third, a great many people need salvation. We call out with all of Klal Yisrael, including people whose needs we may never know.

Thus the congregation’s cry holds all three meanings: a great salvation, from the Great One, for a great multitude.

A fourth explanation turns to the word na in “Hosha na.” Its letters, nun (50) and aleph (1), have a gematria of 51. Hoshana Rabba is the fifty-first day of this season of pleading, counting from the beginning of Rosh Chodesh Elul. Through Elul, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos, the request has continued: “Please save us.”

After fifty-one days of prayer and the mercy of Yom Kippur, why are we still asking for salvation?

The Merchant Who Refused to Have His Debt Canceled

A wealthy merchant supplied merchandise to smaller businessmen throughout the surrounding towns. They received their goods on credit, sold them, and were expected to repay him from their earnings. Each year, the wealthy merchant set aside a day to review their accounts and calculate what each businessman owed.

One year, he discovered that their unpaid debts amounted to many thousands - far more than they could afford to repay. Being a generous and compassionate man, he announced:

“All your old debts are forgiven. From today onward, we will begin a new account.”

The businessmen rejoiced. What an extraordinary kindness! Their accumulated debts had disappeared, and they could begin again.

But one businessman approached the wealthy merchant with a surprising response.

“I certainly owe you thanks for your kindness,” he said. “Nevertheless, I do not want you to cancel my debt. Let us examine the account and see who is in the right.”

“What is there to examine?” the wealthy merchant replied. “You took merchandise from me on credit, and you have paid me nothing!”

“Yes,” answered the smaller merchant, “but calculate how much merchandise you gave me during the year, and how much profit I could earn from it. You supplied me with only a small amount. With so little merchandise and so little profit, I could not repay my debts.

“Try something different from today onward. Give me a large supply of merchandise, so that I can earn a substantial profit. Then you will see that I can repay everything - **the new debts and the old debts as well.**”

His request was remarkable. He appreciated the forgiveness, but he wanted something more: the means to become a successful businessman and fulfill his obligations.

What We Are Asking of Hashem

Hashem gives us the resources of life: *banei*, *chayei*, *umezonei* - children, life, and sustenance. These blessings enable us to fulfill mitzvos, perform acts of kindness, and serve Him. They are the “merchandise” with which we are meant to produce a spiritual profit.

But the year does not always unfold as it should. Through our sins and shortcomings, we fail to use those gifts properly. We have received so much, yet we have not produced the mitzvos and good deeds that we should have.

Then come Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the days of judgment and accounting. Hashem, in His abundant kindness, forgives our sins.

We are deeply grateful. Yet the teaching places a further plea in our mouths:

“Ribbono Shel Olam, You have forgiven us - but **we still want to repay what we owe**. We want to fulfill our responsibilities and make up for the opportunities we missed.

“Consider how difficult the past year has been. The blessing we received was limited, and earning our livelihood demanded so much effort. We were occupied with financial worries, illness, and the struggle to meet our daily needs. So much of our strength went into simply getting through the day.

“Please give us abundant blessing this coming year. Give us health, ample sustenance, and the peace of mind to serve You with spaciousness and ease. With those blessings, we can fulfill Your will, and we can also do teshuvah and repair what was lacking in the past.”

The teaching acknowledges our sins while asking Hashem for the conditions that will help us do better. We want His gifts to bear fruit in Torah, mitzvos, tzedakah, and kindness.

Hoshana Rabba: An Abundant Flow of Blessing

This is the deeper meaning of **Hoshana Rabba** in this teaching: we ask Hashem for an abundant flow of blessing - *hashpa'ah rabbah* - so that we can fulfill His will without obstacles holding us back.

Our plea is:

“Give us abundant blessing, so that we can produce abundant spiritual profit.”

This also gives meaning to the word *hakafah*. Besides describing a circuit, it can refer to receiving goods on credit. As we make the *hakafos*, we can hear the merchant’s plea in our own prayers: “Please entrust us with the resources for another year. Give us generously, and help us use Your gifts well.”

That is a powerful reason to be present for the Hoshana Rabba services and to pray with attention. We are asking for the blessings that will sustain an entire year of service to Hashem - and for the opportunity to turn those blessings into lasting spiritual achievement.

Dovid HaMelech: grateful, yet still asking

Hoshana Rabba is the day of Dovid HaMelech among the ushpizin. He had received astonishing help from Hashem: rescue from danger, kingship, and salvation again and again. Yet Tehillim is full of new pleas. Dovid never concluded, “Hashem helped me yesterday, so today I can manage on my own.” Every earlier rescue made him more aware of the Source of the next one.

That is Dovid’s humility. Past help gives us reason to thank Hashem and confidence to turn to Him once more. A person may say, “I have asked so much since Elul; how can I ask again?” Dovid teaches us to answer: Because I know how much Hashem has given me, I know how much I still need Him. Gratitude and pleading belong together.

The late petitioners and the departing king

A mighty and compassionate king ruled many lands. He would visit one of his cities, and his coming was announced well in advance. The people assembled their petitions: one needed help with a burden, another protection, another the means to live. The king welcomed his subjects and heard what each had to ask. Some who had done wrong also approached him humbly and received his mercy.

Yet there were people who never came. Perhaps they were ashamed; perhaps they thought they still had time. The days passed, and suddenly the city heard that the king was leaving. The procession was already making its way out. They hurried after him, conscious both of their need and of their missed chance.

At this point they could not approach as though the visit had only just begun. The appointed period for personal requests was over, and the king was taking leave. Wise people showed them another way. A plea concerning the king’s honour and the welfare of his kingdom was still fitting, even at the end. They could stand before him now if they spoke for what would serve his reign.

This is the decisive turn of the mashal. We have had the days of Elul and the Yamim Nora’im to confess, repent, and speak of our needs. We have spent Sukkos under Hashem’s shelter. Now the festival is nearing its end. Our request rises beyond “Give me what I want” to “Lema’ancha Elokeinu, Hosha na” - “For Your sake, our God, save us.”

We ask for health so that we can use our strength in His service. We ask for livelihood so that Jewish homes can be sustained, tzedakah can be given, and others can be welcomed. We ask for peace and salvation for Klal Yisrael so that His name will be honoured in the world. The words lema'anacha invite us to ask sincerely what we want the coming year for.

The merchant asks, “Entrust me with more.” The petitioners add, “Let that more serve Your kingdom.”

Why come to Hoshana Rabba davening?

The day calls for our presence. Its name speaks of many Jews raising a great voice. Its seven hakafof ask us to enact our plea, returning to it again and again. Dovid teaches us to bring gratitude for the help already received alongside our need for help today. And at the close of the season, the king mashal gives us a prayer we must not leave unsaid: Lema'anacha.

If you davened deeply on Yom Kippur, come to carry that teshuvah into the new year. If the days passed without the concentration you hoped for, come now. The late petitioners in the mashal could not reclaim the earlier days, but they could stand before the king while he was still there.

Bring the needs of your family and of all Klal Yisrael. Join the congregation's cry. Make the circuits. Ask for a good year - and for the wisdom and strength to make that year a source of honour to Hashem. Then, when we part after the service, we may wish one another “Pitka Tava” - an Aramaic wish for a good heavenly note - or “a gut kvittel” in Yiddish. It expresses our hope for a favourable final decision and a year of life and blessing.

On the fifty-first day, we still say “Hosha na”: Give us life, and help us use it for Your sake.

Hoshana Rabba Gems continues Wednesday and Thursday. Join us for the next teachings and for Hoshana Rabba services.

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Sources: Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 664:1-4; Aruch HaShulchan, Orach Chaim 664:11-13. A collection of teachings from the sefer Otzar Peninei HaChasidus, various pages on Sukkos and Hoshana Rabba.