



Tashlich on Rosh Hashanah

The earliest recording of *Tashlich*, performed on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah, was by the early 15th-century German scholar Rabbi Ya'akov Molin, the Maharil (Minhagei Maharil RH 9). He describes how the masses would walk to rivers and “cast away their sins” by reciting the last verses from the prophet Micah, which include, “He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea” (7:19). Yet the ritual is undoubtedly older, with much speculation about its origin and meaning.

G-d reveals Himself near water in several Biblical stories, including the vision of the Divine Chariots (Ezekiel 1:3) and Daniel's end-of-days prophecies (Daniel 10:4). One Midrash even claims that all prophecies took place near water (Mechilta Rashbi 12:1). As in the story of Creation (Bereishit 1:2), G-d's presence, so to speak, is said to hover over water, making it an appropriate place for prayer (Ba'al HaTurim Bereishit 16:7). Indeed, many medieval European synagogues were built close to waterfronts.

Great bodies of water connote majesty and glory. Riverfronts are deemed appropriate sites for royal coronations since they symbolize the new reign's perpetuity (Horayot 12a). Some later writers speculated that *Tashlich* similarly celebrates G-d's kingship over the world, a central theme in the Rosh Hashanah prayers (Yabia Omer OC 4:47). Others alternatively contend that the ceremony recalls Ezra's Rosh Hashanah assembly that rededicated the Torah by the water gates (Nehemiah

8:1-2). Maharil himself speculates that the waters recall Abraham's alacrity to bind Isaac, which, according to one Midrash, included him being neck-deep in a river that was created by “Satan” to stymie him.

While the earliest depictions of *Tashlich* vary, most require using water that contains fish. Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe (16th century, Poland) explained that fish, constantly in danger of being caught by fishermen, warn us of the snares of death and therefore inspire repentance (Levush OC 596). Others believe that because fish are always alert with their roving eyes, they remind us of the ever-watchful gaze of G-d (Shlah RH 23). Alternatively, fish might ward off the evil eye, and represent the blessing of fecundity (MB 583:8).

Some early sources also allude to the ritual of throwing bread or other food into the water, possibly signifying the casting away of our sins. Many Sages, however, deemed this a violation of the holiday restrictions, especially if Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat when carrying food and prayer books in unenclosed public domains is prohibited. The Shulchan Aruch omits any reference to throwing food or fish (OC 583). In his lesser-known philosophical work, Rabbi Moshe Isserlis describes how the mighty waters make us contemplate the grandness of G-d's creation and His dominance over nature, leading us to repentance and the casting away of sins (Torat HaOlah 3:56).

These creative interpretations notwithstanding, the diverse and conflicting practices and interpretations most likely reflect emendations of a folk

custom with potentially problematic meaning. In a detailed study on this custom's history, Prof. Jacob Lauterbach speculated that this rite stemmed from an attempt to pacify certain Satanic forces and protect children from undue harm. Historians have further pointed to a medieval ritual with similar themes and rites documented in Rashi's 11th century Talmudic commentary (Shabbat 81b). Suspicious of *Tashlich*'s origins, the Gra abstained from the entire ritual (Ma'aseh Rav 202), a position which my family and others of Lithuanian descent continue to maintain (see Aruch HaShulchan, Orach Chaim 583:4).

Be that as it may, the ritual clearly continues to have widespread observance. Here in Jerusalem, the lack of bodies of water has not deterred its citizens from flocking to empty ancient wells, artificial ponds, Ir David's wellspring, and even kiddie pools in synagogue courtyards! Nonetheless, no interpretation of the ritual has been universally embraced. While the famed 16th-century mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria ordained shaking out one's clothing to aid the extraction of harmful forces, more rationalist scholars shunned this embellishment, instead framing *Tashlich* as a mere tool to inspire repentance – to stimulate us to genuine introspection and change.

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