

What's the Truth about ... *Tashlich*?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: A feature of the Rosh Hashanah *tashlich* ritual is the throwing of bread or other food into a body of water, to be eaten by the fish and ducks.¹

Fact: For the performance of *tashlich*, a custom which is symbolic of numerous things, it is customary to seek out a body of water that harbors fish and to shake out one's pockets over the water. One should not, however, feed the fish (or ducks) on *yom tov*.

Background:² Ideally, *tashlich* should take place at a flowing, natural body of water that contains fish and is located outside the city boundaries (MA 583:5; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 129:21). At the water, one recites the final three verses from Michah (7:18-20) that are, in essence, a summary of the Thirteen Divine Attributes. Over the years, other prayers, such as those composed by the Chida, have been added.

The name of this ceremony is derived from the verse in Michah (7:19) which states, "and cast [*tashlich*] into the depths of the sea all of their sins." Though it is clearly meant as a metaphor, Jews began the custom of literally "casting their sins" into the sea every Rosh Hashanah.

The earliest recorded source for *tashlich* is found in the writings of the

Maharil, Rabbi Yaakov Moelin (Germany, 1365-1427). He notes that after the Rosh Hashanah meal people would go to lakes or rivers³ to "cast off" their sins. He further notes that this ritual is in commemoration of *Akeidat Yitzchak*, a main theme of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. In *Yalkut Shemoni* (*Vayera* 99), the story is told that when Avraham and Yitzchak were on the way to perform the *Akeidah*, they were confronted by the Satan, who attempted to block their path by assuming the form of a river. Avraham would not be deterred and plunged into the river, which reached up to his neck. Avraham then recited Psalms 69:2: "Save me, O God, for water has come up to my soul." In response, God dried up the "river" so that they could proceed. According to some, this episode occurred on Rosh Hashanah. *Tashlich* serves to recall Avraham's sacrifice and to request that God grant the Jews forgiveness based on the patriarch's merit and on our willingness to emulate him.

This custom was soon adopted by many Ashkenazic communities, albeit with variations. *Tashlich* is mentioned by the Rema (OC 583:2); since the Arizal also approved of the practice, a kabbalistic component was added, and it soon spread to Sephardic communities as well, although not to Yemen.

Over the years, different meanings have been ascribed to the practice. In

addition to citing the Maharil's explanation, the Rema in *Darkei Moshe* (OC 583) offers an explanation based on the *Sefer Minhagim* of Rabbi Tirna: the appearance of live fish represents the *berachah* that Bnei Yisrael should proliferate like fish, and that just as fish are immune to *ayin hara*, so too should the Jews be protected. Providing a psychological rationale, the Rema in *Torat HaOlah* (3:56) explains that when one goes to the river or sea and observes the majesty of God's creation, he is struck by the glory of God as creator of the world. This will cause the person to regret any misdeeds, and God will thus forgive his sins, which will then be "thrown into the depths of the sea."

Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe (known as the Levush; 1530-1612), a student of the Rema, notes yet another link between fish and Rosh Hashanah (*Levush HaTechelet*, no. 596). Fish can, at any moment, can get trapped in a net; the precariousness of their lives reminds us that a human being can similarly be abruptly ensnared in the net of death and judgment, as expressed in Unetaneh Tokef.

A central motif of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy is the crowning of God as King. It is one of the three special themes that comprise the Mussaf Amidah and it also has been associated with *tashlich*. In the first Book of Kings (1:33, 38), King David instructs that

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his son Shlomo be brought to the Gihon Spring to be coronated. From here the Talmud (*Horiyot* 12a) derives that all kings are anointed at a body of water. This is to symbolize that the new king's reign should have continuity, just as a spring flows continually.⁴ After Shlomo's anointing, Tzadok the Kohen blew a shofar (I Kings 1:34, 39). Similarly, on Rosh Hashanah we coronate God as King by a body of water and blow a shofar (see *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 129:21).⁵

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich⁶ creatively connects the notion of *zechut Avot*, our prayers for mercy in the merit of our forefathers, to our prayers at a water source. He asks, why, if we are truly righteous, is there a need to invoke *zechut Avot*? If, on the other hand, we have drifted from the path of the Avot, we would hardly be deserving of their merit. He suggests that *zechut Avot* only help if we exhibit the trait of humility, which the Avot exemplified. By doing so, we demonstrate that we are indeed their descendants and that even if we're not righteous, we are at least trying to emulate them. The Talmud notes that water is reminiscent of humility because water always flows to the lowest level; thus, the custom of reciting prayers at a water source is an attempt to relate our humility to that of the Avot.

Feeding the Fish

From the earliest days of *tashlich*, there was a practice of throwing bread to the fish, which was supposed to represent the casting away of our sins. Indeed, John Pfefferkorn (1469-1521) describes⁷ how the people would go to the water, shake the food from their garments, and while throwing it to the fish, say "we throw our sins to you [the fish]." However, this practice was looked upon disapprovingly by many rabbinic authorities. The Maharil objected to throwing food to the fish. Similarly, the *Mateh Efraim* writes that the water should have fish in it (because of the symbolisms mentioned earlier), but he criticizes the practice of feeding

them (598:4-5). The *Machatzit Hashekel* (1738-1827; 583:5) notes that the "inferior" practice of throwing bread into the river is forbidden.

The Maharil, the first to discuss this, objected to the practice for two reasons: It involves both carrying outside of the eruv and feeding untrapped fish. Even though there is no prohibition against carrying needed items on *yom tov* (OC 495:1), because the fish are *muktzah*, the food is therefore not needed, and thus it is forbidden to carry it outside of the eruv.⁸ While one is not only permitted, but is, in fact, obligated, to feed his pets and farm animals on Shabbat and *yom tov*, the Talmud clearly prohibits feeding other animals on these days⁹ (*Shabbat* 155b). In clarifying the issue, the Talmud distinguishes between animals that are dependent on man for sustenance and those that are not, and between animals for which one has responsibility and those for which one does not. The *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 324:11-12) codifies the prohibition against feeding animals that are not one's own, and the *Mishnah Berurah* (324:29) clarifies that even if the animals belong to you, if they can get food on their own (e.g., bees) it is forbidden to feed them.¹⁰ The *Shulchan Aruch* provides an additional reason as to why one should not feed animals on *yom tov*. He writes (OC 497:2) that it is prohibited to do so, lest one come to trap them.

While many condemn the practice of feeding the fish, the Rema and many other authorities do not mention it. From their silence on the matter, it is unclear if they were in favor of the practice, if they felt powerless to abolish it and therefore didn't mention it or if they were simply unaware of it. No sources, however, explicitly justify the practice.

Certain leniencies, however, are mentioned in regard to feeding animals on Shabbat and may be relevant to *tashlich*. Firstly, the prohibition against feeding applies only to placing food directly in front of the animal, but placing it at a distance is permitted (*Beir Heteiv* 497:2; *Mishnah Berurah* 497:5; MA,

OC 497:2). Secondly, feeding animals is only prohibited when there is a fear of trapping them, a fear that is essentially irrelevant with regard to *tashlich*.

Older Sources

It is hard to believe that such a widespread custom originated in the fifteenth century without an earlier basis. The Rashba (OC 210) thus suggests that *tashlich* is based on a Biblical precedent. He cites the anointing of King Solomon (mentioned earlier) as well as Ezra gathering the people at the "water gate," the nearest gate to the water source, on Rosh Hashanah for a public reading of the Torah (Nechemiah 8:1).

This idea has been expanded into the theory¹¹ that *tashlich* actually existed in modified forms in ancient times. Philo (early first century) describes a prayer recited at the seashore on Hoshanah Rabbah, another solemn day of judgment; Tertullian (late second century) describes a similar ceremony that took place on Yom Kippur.¹² There is evidence of similar practices that took place on Pesach.¹³ Jacob Lauterbach explains that there was an early belief, traceable all the way back to Bereishit 1:2 ("God's spirit hovered over the surface of the water"), that God can be found near sources of water. Josephus (*Antiquities* 14:10, 23) even records that there was a custom to build shuls at the seaside.

Rashi (*Shabbat* 81b, s.v. *hai parpisa*) reports a custom that may also be viewed as a precursor to *tashlich* (and also resembles *kaparot*). He describes, in the name of the Geonim, that two or three weeks before Rosh Hashanah the Jews would make baskets from palm leaves and fill them with dirt. Then, each person would plant beans in his basket.¹⁴ *Erev Rosh Hashanah* he would swing the basket over his head seven times, declare it to be in place of himself, and then toss the basket into the river.

Shaking Out One's Garments

While the feeding of fish was widely condemned, the symbolic shak-

ing of the corner of one's garment over the river is mentioned approvingly by rabbinic authorities. However, the *Kitzur Shnei Luchot Habrit* (Rabbi Yechiel Michal Epstein Ashkenazi, who lived in the second half of the seventeenth century; see p. 279 in 5758 ed.) objected to this practice. Rashban (OC 210) argues that the practice is part of an ancient tradition, dating back to the prophets, of symbolically enacting an obligation or request. Rashban writes that it is thus common practice to eat symbolic foods on Rosh Hashanah (based on *Horiyot* 12a), such as fatty meat and sweet foods. This custom originated with Nechemiah, who told the people to eat such foods on Rosh Hashanah (the custom was later codified by the Rema, OC 583:1 and Ben Ish Chai, *Netzavim* 5). Similarly, Rashban explains that the act of shaking out one's garments or pockets is to symbolize God's shaking "those who do not fulfill the Torah." He further notes that the practice of throwing something into the water is a symbolic enactment of the

central verse of the *tashlich* ceremony—"tashlich bemetzilot hayam, and cast into the depths of the sea all of their sins." He does not state whether or not the item should be food. The *Mateh Efraim* (598:4) and *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (129:21) both explain that the shaking out of the pockets is a symbolic act of ridding oneself of sins.¹⁵

Tashlich on Shabbat

Possibly because of the concern of carrying food to the water, the *Kitzur Shnei Luchot Habrit* (ibid.) instituted a radical change in the performance of *tashlich*: when the first day of Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, *tashlich* is observed on the following day to avoid the possibility of violating Shabbat. This change was accepted by some communities, to the extent that if the first day of Rosh Hashanah was on Shabbat, sometimes *tashlich* was cancelled altogether. Others saw no reason to adopt this change. Rabbi Yaakov Reischer (d. 1733; *Shvut Yaakov* 3:42) was asked in 1725, a year in which Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat, when to perform *tashlich*; he maintained that there was no reason to postpone it. Rabbi Reischer quotes the Maharil, who explicitly states that one should perform *tashlich* on Shabbat. Rabbi Reischer then notes that the *Kitzur Shnei Luchot Habrit*, which had been recently published, includes a directive not to perform *tashlich* on Shabbat without providing a source or a reason for the ruling. There is no reason, Rabbi Reischer concludes, to accept everything written in every new book, and therefore *tashlich* can be performed on Shabbat.

Rema does not mention the issue of performing *tashlich* on Shabbat at all, while the *Mishnah Berurah* (583:8) states that in certain places, *tashlich* is postponed when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat. He suggests that this might be because of the concern of carrying *machzorim*.

The *Mateh Efraim* (598:4), who was from Brody (which is in modern-day Ukraine), states that one should recite *tashlich* on Shabbat, while the Elef

Hamagen, who was from Warsaw, says that his community's custom was not to (see his work by the same name, 598:11). The Ben Ish Chai (*Netzavim* 5) rules that it should be recited on the first day of Rosh Hashanah even if that day happens to be Shabbat. At least one authority suggests that because *tashlich* historically consisted of only a few verses, there was less of a concern about carrying a *machzor* (*Yabia Omer* 4, OC 47).¹⁶ As more verses were added over the years and people started bringing *machzorim* along, the concern about Shabbat desecration arose, resulting in today's custom of delaying *tashlich* when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat.

It is interesting to note that there were those who did not practice *tashlich* at all. The Gra reportedly did not perform *tashlich*, nor did his star pupil Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin.¹⁷ The *Chayei Adam* fails to record the custom. From the *Aruch Hashulchan* (OC 583:4) it seems that *tashlich* was far from a universal custom; furthermore, the *Aruch Hashulchan* has an ancillary problem with the custom. He advises women not to go to *tashlich* so as not to create a mixed scene. If they do go, he suggests the men should stay home.¹⁸ Evidently, the custom was not very important to him.¹⁹

In the final analysis, God doesn't desire only the symbolic act of *tashlich* or just the *davening* and fasting on Yom Kippur. Rather, He wants true repentance, as found in the words of Yonah (3:10) used by the town elder on public fast days (*Ta'anit* 2:1): "And God saw their deeds that they had repented from their evil ways, and the Lord relented of the evil that He had spoken to do to them, and He did not do it." **IA**

Notes

1. Sephardim apparently do not throw bread into the water, and thus this misconception does not apply to them, although the rest of the discussion does.

2. An exhaustive collection of the laws, customs and explanations for *tashlich* can be found in *Sefer Pnei Hamayim* by Rabbi Shmuel Hakohen Schwartz of Satu-Mare, Romania, published in 5699

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(1939). See also Jacob Z. Lauterbach, "Tashlik: A Study in Jewish Ceremonies," HUCA 11 (1936): 207-340, a 134-page *tour de force* on the history of this practice.

3. It is interesting to note that in Europe, the Jews lived in areas that had many rivers and streams, while in Israel, especially Jerusalem, there is a dearth of such natural water sources. The *Kaf HaChaim* (583:30), who calls *tashlich* an "Ashkenazic custom," notes that the early twentieth-century custom of Jerusalem's Beit El kabbalist yeshiva was to say it near a well, even if it was totally dry.

4. The Talmud similarly states that Rav Mesharshiya advised his son to study at a place near a river because "just as water flows continually, so too should his studies flow continually."

5. Others find a textual basis for *tashlich* in the story in I Samuel 7:5, where water was symbolically poured out.

6. In his approbation to *Sefer Pnei Hamayim*.

7. Cited in Lauterbach, p. 296.

8. The key word here is "needed" (see Rema, OC 518:1). Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch (*Teshuvot Vehanhagot* 1:346) advises saying *tashlich* early in the day because carrying a *machzor* right before the end of *yom tov* cannot be justified. He suggests it be said right after the meal, or at least before Minchah. And because many say it after Minchah, he makes the recital of Minchah on Rosh Hashanah earlier than usual in his shul. He further questions the permissibility of carrying for the sake of *tashlich*, a mere custom that is not even accepted by all authorities (*Moadim u'Zemanim* 1:34, note a).

9. This prohibition is also relevant to the custom of placing bread for the birds on Shabbat Shirah. For reasons behind this custom, see *Aruch Hashulchan* OC 324:3 and *She'arim HaMetzuyananim BeHalachah* 87:8. Among those who criticized this practice were the Magen Avraham (324:7); Rabbi Yaakov Emden (*Siddur, Sha'ar Hagai*, no. 7, p. 371 in 5664 ed.; who called the practice "foolish and prohibited"); *Shulchan Aruch Harav* (OC 324:8); *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 87:18; Chazon Ish (*Orchat Rabbeinu, Shabbat* 201, vol. 1, p. 152); Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky (*Shoneh Halachot*

324:12); and the *Mishnah Berurah* 324:31. *Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchatah* (27:21) is also against it, but offers a way to avoid the problem. The author suggests that one may shake out a tablecloth outdoors (in a place with an eruv), even if doing so will allow the birds to get the crumbs. However, the Maharsham (*Da'at Torah* 324); *Aruch Hashulchan* (324:3) and *She'arim HaMetzuyananim BeHalachah* (87:8) justify the practice of feeding the birds. Tzitz Eliezer (14:28) notes that placing food for birds on Shabbat Shirah is an old Yerushalmi custom practiced by distinguished individuals and should not be challenged. Note that despite all those who defend the Shabbat Shirah practice, no one defends feeding the fish during *tashlich*.

10. Details regarding feeding animals on Shabbat and *yom tov* can be found in *Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchatah* 27:21-23.

11. By Lauterbach.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 230-237, 239.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 320.

14. This custom, using wheat in lieu of legumes, was actually practiced by a segment of Egyptian Jewry until just several decades ago.

15. Eliyahu Rabba (596:3, cited in *Ta'amei Haminhagim*) gives a kabbalistic reason for the shaking. He says it is to shake off the *kelipot* that adhere to us because of our sins.

16. See *Yalkut Yosef*, vol. 5 (*Moadim, Hanhagot Yom R"H*: 12, p. 34) for a summary of Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef's opinion as to when to say it on Shabbat, and *Yabia Omer* (*ibid*) for a complete survey of the sources on the subject. *Kaf HaChaim* 583:31 brings sources on both sides of the issue and then says that the custom in Jerusalem is to say it on Shabbat.

17. *Ma'aseh Rav* 209 and note from *Tosefet Ma'aseh Rav*, 202:60. Many who generally follow the customs of the Gra nevertheless do perform *tashlich* (Moshe Harari, *Mikra'ei Kodesh, Hilchot R"H*, chap. 14, end of note 4).

18. Similar sentiments are found in *Elef Hamagen* (583:7).

19. I found no sources explicitly against *tashlich*, just sources that ignore it.

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