

CASTING AWAY OUR SINS

Rabbi Paul D. Kerbel discusses the meaning and origin of Tashlich

WHO IS like you, O God, forgiving iniquity and pardoning transgression?

With these words, since the late Medieval period, we have observed the custom of *Tashlich* on the first day of Rosh Hashana. The *Tashlich* ("casting") ceremony is based on several passages in the Bible, most notably, the Book of Micah (7:19): "You will hurl all of our sins into the depths of the sea." The practice is to walk to a nearby body of water, preferably free-flowing, and symbolically rid ourselves of our sins by either shaking out our pockets, or throwing bread crumbs to fish in the water while reciting biblical verses.

At first glance, the *Tashlich* ceremony might seem quite unusual, compared to many other Jewish customs and ceremonies. Upon further study however, it becomes apparent that *Tashlich* incorporates beliefs and practices held since the earliest days of Judaism. We will explore some of the sources of the *Tashlich* ceremony, and the ways it has evolved through the centuries.

The custom of *Tashlich* is mentioned in the Codes of Jewish Law beginning only in the 15th century, but it was most likely observed even before that: Water has continually served as a significant symbol in Jewish life and practice.

For instance, while Jewish thought holds that God can be found wherever he is sought, there was a pervading belief among the Jews in exile that God revealed and manifested himself only near water. The Jews in exile believed that while the Land of Israel was a pure place where God could be found, the Diaspora was impure. Only water could render it pure enough for God's presence.

Wherever possible, Jews prayed and built their synagogues near

bodies of water. This practice persisted throughout the centuries, often to the dismay of Rabbinic authorities. Nevertheless, we know that in medieval Germany, in the 12th and 13th centuries, Jewish boys were brought to the synagogue on Shavuot at age five to consecrate their Tora study, and then led to the banks of the river to complete the ceremony.

By the 14th century, many Jews were going to the river banks on all major holidays. During this period, the custom of watching fish in the river and throwing them food became prevalent. *Tashlich* as we know it today evolved from this practice.

THERE IS NO fixed liturgy or rite regarding *Tashlich*; each community established its own, based on local custom and belief, and the extent to which Rabbinic authorities permitted or prohibited specific practices. The most universal customs associated with *Tashlich* are:

- Walking to a free-flowing body of water, late in the afternoon on the first day of Rosh Hashana (the second day if the first falls on Shabbat)
- Reciting biblical passages such as Micah 7:18-20, Isaiah 11:9 and a selection of Psalms (118:5-9, 31; 33; and 130)
- Throwing bread or other types of food into the water
- Shaking out pockets, a reference to the verse in Nehemiah 5:13, "I shook out my lap." Eliyahu Kitov explains that our pockets are shaken out three times to symbolize our intention to cast away sin and achieve total purification.
- The customs of *Tashlich* have proven highly adaptable to the needs and conditions of the Jewish community in different times and places.

In Jerusalem and in Egypt, *Tashlich* was always observed on the first day of Rosh Hashana, even when it fell on Shabbat. In Jerusalem, where there are no lakes or rivers, *Tashlich* was performed at cisterns. In Safed, Jews would go up to the roofs of their homes and look down upon the Sea of Galilee. The Jews of Yemen observed *Tashlich* in a mikva: Kurdish Jews actually leaped into the water and swam to cleanse themselves of sin. Hassidim in Galicia sent little floats of straw out on the water, set them afire with candles, and rejoiced as their sins were either burned or washed away.

Water, and the act of casting, can transform our lives.

MANY INTERPRETATIONS have been suggested for the customs of *Tashlich*. Of particular interest is the connection between *Tashlich* and fish. The sources emphasize that *Tashlich* should be performed where fish are found, and a number of explanations have been offered:

- Since the eyes of fish never close, they symbolize the unblinking eyes of God reviewing our behaviour. The fish thereby serve as witnesses of our repentance and represent the presence of God.
- We are compared to fish caught in a "net" of Divine judgment, and we gaze at the river to contemplate our repentance.
- A fish's fate, precarious and uncertain, reflects our own vulnerability.

ity and should help us attain a repentant posture.

- We shake out our pockets as a means of transferring our sins to the fish.

Many Rabbinic authorities were not thrilled with these often mystical and quasi-superstitious customs. They were concerned that their people would rely on the magical powers of the fish and the emptying of their pockets to achieve spiritual purification and repentance, instead of taking concrete action to alter their conduct. Those rabbis who did permit the *Tashlich* ceremony sought to instill the practice with greater ethical and moral meaning.

Tashlich was connected to a story in the Midrash describing an early scene in the binding of Isaac, which is the Tora portion for the second day of Rosh Hashana. The Midrash teaches that when Abraham went to sacrifice his son, Satan placed a great river in their path, seeking to prevent Abraham from fulfilling God's command, and thus cause him to fail his ultimate test.

Abraham went into the river until the water reached his neck. At that moment, Abraham raised his eyes to heaven and said: "Master of the Universe, you have chosen me and have said to me, 'Through you shall my Name be known.' If I, or Isaac, my son, should drown, through whom would your Name be declared One?"

Said the Holy One Blessed be He: "By your life, my Name shall be declared one in the world through you." With that, the waters of the river receded and Abraham and Isaac lived to fulfil God's word. The medieval rabbis wanted their followers to recall the merits of Abraham and Isaac in having offered their lives for the fulfilment of God's commandments.

ONE NEED not look far to find other significant connections between *Tashlich* and the Days of Awe. Professor Arthur Waskow has suggested in his book, *Season of Our Joy*, that the 10 days of repentance between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, are bracketed by two biblical versions of *Tashlich* found in the Tora readings for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

On the first day of Rosh Hashana we read the passage in Genesis in which Abraham banishes Hagar and Ishmael from his home and they soon find themselves dying of thirst. Hagar casts Ishmael underneath a bush and sits down at a distance. She cries: "Let me not look on as the child dies." They soon discover a well of water.

On Yom Kippur, we read the Book of Jona, in which Jona prays to God: "You cast me into the depths, into the heart of the sea." (2:4)

According to Waskow, these stories show us that water, and the act of casting, can transform our lives and lead us to repentance. Hagar's casting brings life-giving water. Jona's casting into the sea transforms his understanding of the nature of repentance. During the period of repentance, we celebrate not only a *Tashlich* of ritual and ceremony, but also a *Tashlich* of word and thought through the reading of the Tora. Both of these acts, ritual and study, provide us with important lessons of repentance.

By combining the mystical and often mysterious rituals of *Tashlich* with our realistic and pragmatic responsibilities to seek forgiveness and change the direction of our lives, we may achieve even higher levels of *teshuva*, repentance.

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Tashlikh

Hershel Jonah Matt

Standing by the water,
Emptying our pockets
Of the remaining crumbs of sin,
We turn to You, O God,
Creator of heaven and earth,
Creator of the water.
We pour out
Like water
The confession of our sin.
Hear our prayer
And
"Tashlikh, cast all our sins
Into the ocean's depths."

As You appeared
To grieving, exiled Hagar
(Who, in desperation,
Had cast her thirsting child
Under the bushes)
And assured her
At the well of water
That You, the Living God,
Look mercifully upon the
afflicted—
Look upon us
In our affliction
And
"Tashlikh, cast all our sins
Into the ocean's depths."

As Abraham and Isaac,
On their way to Mount Moriah,
Confronted by an impassable river,
(The guise that Satan took
To deter them from fulfilling
The command of Your dread test)
Marched boldly into the water —
So strengthen our faith and trust,
That we may pass
Whatever test You set for us,
And

"Tashlikh, cast all our sins
Into the ocean's depths."

As You sustained
Our People Israel,
Your People Israel,
With the never-failing well of
water
That accompanied them
(Through Miriam's merit)
In their desert wanderings —
So save us
And sustain us
With Your living water,
And
"Tashlikh, cast all our sins
Into the ocean's depths."

As fish in water
Are ever in danger
Of being caught
And then devoured,
So are we in peril
Constantly.
We turn to You,
Our only sure protection.
Shelter us,
And
"Tashlikh, cast all our sins
Into the ocean's depths."

As in days of yore
A king was crowned
At river's edge,
So too do we
At water's edge
Renew Your coronation,
O Sovereign of the Universe,
And take upon ourselves anew
The blessed yoke of Your sov-
erignty.

Accept us as Your loyal servants
And
"Tashlikh, cast all our sins
Into the ocean's depths."

As You promised
Through Your prophet Ezekiel
To sprinkle upon the People Israel
Your pure and purifying water,
Do so now, we pray,
As we turn our hearts
In penitence to You,
And
"Tashlikh, cast all our sins
Into the ocean's depths."

Let these waters be a token
Of Your covenant promise:
"As I swore that Noah's waters
Never again would flood the earth,
So I swear that I will not
Be angry with you or rebuke you.
For though the mountains may
move
And the hills be shaken,
My steadfast love
Shall never move from you,
Nor My covenant of shalom be
shaken,
Says Hashem, your Compassionate
One."
So
"Tashlikh, cast all our sins
Into the ocean's depths."

*Hershel Matt, a member of the RRC
Faculty, is the author of many clas-
sics of contemporary Jewish liturgy.
This one is to be recited at the
Tashlikh ceremony on Rosh
Hashanah.*