

HOSHANA RABBAH

THE BIG IDEA

DURING HOSHANA RABBAH WE USE:

- Lulav and etrog
- Willow branches
- A kittel for the prayer leader (white robe also used during the High Holidays)
- Tallit/Tefillin (take off halfway through)
- All of the Torahs in the ark
- Bible - specifically Psalms or the Book of Deuteronomy
- Honey cake (Lekach/Ugat Devash)
- Soup with kreplach
- Honey
- Challah
- Cabbage or stuffed cabbage
- Shofar
- Something to help us stay up all night

WHAT IS HOSHANA RABBAH



Hoshana Rabbah is the seventh day of *Sukkot* and is considered the final day of the divine judgment in which the fate of the new year is determined. It is the day when the verdict that was issued on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* is finalized. *Hoshana Rabbah* was viewed by the rabbis of the *Talmud* as a mini-*Yom Kippur*, a day on which the entire Jewish community is judged by God to be worthy or not of the seasonal rains. All seven *Hoshanot* prayers are recited in seven *hakafot*, or processions, around the sanctuary carrying the *lulav* and *etrog*. In many ways it is a highlight reel for the entire month of *Tishrei* holidays.

At the conclusion of the seven processions, a special ritual is conducted in which the branches of the willow (the *aravot*) are struck upon the ground. This is a symbolic attempt to rid ourselves of any remaining sins (the leaves representing these transgressions) that might influence the Divine decision to send the seasonal rains.

Since *Hoshana Rabbah* blends elements of the High Holy Days, *Chol HaMoed*, and *Yom Tov*, in the Ashkenazic tradition, the cantor recites the service using High Holiday, Festival, Weekday, and Shabbat melodies interchangeably.

On the evening following *Hoshana Rabbah*, the festival of *Shemini Atzeret* begins. While for many Jewish *Hoshana Rabbah* is the last day for shaking the *lulav/etrog* and dwelling in the *sukkah*, some Jewish continue to dwell in the *sukkah* through *Shemini Atzeret* without the accompanying blessing.



WHAT DO WE DO ON HOSHANA RABBAH?

LEARNING ALL NIGHT

On the night before *Hoshana Rabbah*, many Jews stay up late to study *Torah* – some even study *Torah* the entire night long. It has become traditional to read the Book of Deuteronomy, both because it can serve as a summary of the entire *Torah* and because it is the last book of the *Torah*, and Jews everywhere are about to conclude the yearly cycle of reading the *Torah* on *Simchat Torah* (two days after *Hoshana Rabbah*). Some also recite Psalms, and Sephardic Jews also recite *Selichot* prayers.

ASKING FOR DIVINE HELP

Much of the liturgy for *Hoshana Rabbah* includes prayers for Divine assistance – “*hosha-na*” which literally means “save us.” We do a *Hoshanot* ceremony every day of *Sukkot*, but it is extended and expanded on the last day, *Hoshana Rabbah*. On *Hoshana Rabbah*, all of the *Sifrei Torah* are removed from the ark and are circled seven times. The seven *Hoshanot* each come with one of the acrostic prayers featuring the word “*hosha-na*” but the service does not end there. After making the seven circuits, a new set of *hosha-na* themed prayers begins. Each one rhetorically expands the key supplication of “save, please” by a notch – the desperation in the voice of the congregation is impossible to overlook.

Based on the biblical story of Jericho in the book of Joshua, some scholars notice the parallels between bringing down divine judgment on the city and the rituals on *Hoshana Rabbah*. The prayers and rituals serve as a kind of summoning of the Divine presence and Divine attention. With this ritual we bring the Divine presence into our synagogues so that we can make our request for rain and, more broadly, for survival. This day is significant because it's the final day we recite Psalm 27 *LeDavid*.

As the new year begins we are afraid. We are afraid that we or our loved ones may become ill; we are afraid that we may lose our livelihoods; we are afraid of terrorism or war; we are afraid that our marriages may collapse or our children may take a bad path; we are afraid that we are not succeeding or that we are not worthy of succeeding. Thus, every year we take these fears, this nervous tension, and we act out in ritual form a way of communicating with the Divine. It is the culmination of the High Holiday season of hopes and dreams.

BEATING THE WILLOWS



Among the unusual rituals used on *Hoshana Rabbah* is this: we take the willow sprigs and beat them against the ground five times. In addition to the *lulav* and *etrog* (myrtle, willow, palm and citron) taken every day of *Sukkot* (except on *Shabbat*), it is a tradition, dating back to the times of the prophets, to take an additional willow on the seventh day of *Sukkot*. This commemorates the willow ceremony in the Holy Temple, where large eighteen-foot willow branches were set around the altar every day of *Sukkot*. Every day of *Sukkot* the altar was circled once, to the sounds of supplications for divine assistance; on *Hoshana Rabbah*, the altar was circled seven times.

Today, during the course of the *Hoshana Rabbah* morning services, all the *Torah* scrolls are taken out and the congregation then makes seven circuits (instead of the one circuit done the other days of *Sukkot*) while reciting the *Hoshanot* prayers, with the *lulav* and *etrog* in hand. At the conclusion of the *Hoshanot* we take a bundle of five willows and with it we strike the ground five times.