

# Tashlich

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The first day of the Hebrew year 5777.

By Jay Ledbetter

Tashlich is a Hebrew word which carries with it the concept of “casting away”. The practice is not set forth in Scripture, and thus is traditional. The tradition is normally carried out on the day of Rosh Hashanah (Yom Teruah), before sunset.

This tradition arose in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and quickly became common in Judaism despite the objections of the rabbis who believed there was already too much superstition creeping into the



faith, and were concerned that the people might believe that this symbolic act might actually be effective to change the outcomes of their lives. The rabbis knew then, as we know now, that only true teshuvah (repentance and return to G-d) has that power.

*Hasidic Jews performing tashlich on Rosh Hashanah, painting by Aleksander Gierymski, 1884*

Likewise, the custom of tashlich has some troubling similarities to pagan practices of ancient days. It was believed by the worshippers of the “gods of water” that the way to appease them was to offer sacrifices to them. Often that meant throwing food items or other valuables into the flowing waters.

Did societal paganism have an influence on early forms of tashlich? Possibly. But we need not do that examination in depth, because it is the heart to which G-d looks, and its origins were most certainly not pagan. We must not allow Satan to rob us of meaningful observances merely because he seeks to pollute the world with similar pagan observances which mimic G-d. There is nothing inherently pagan about anything we do today during tashlich, and everything can be seen as pointing directly to specific Scriptures. And this is how we should practice it in these days.

To assure that the practice of tashlich was distanced from pagan rituals of that same era, the rabbis wrote extensively about the spiritual context. They connected the flowing water with the Akeidah Yitzhak (the near-sacrifice of Isaac). The midrash on the Akeidah is that Satan whispered in Abraham's ear continually about the folly of sacrificing the son of promise. Abraham refused to listen. Then Satan became a raging river and flowed across Abraham's path in order to block his way, since Satan knew that what Abraham was to soon do would stand as a monument to the faith in G-d for eternity. Abraham would not be blocked, and waded into the river, and soon the water reached his chin. Abraham cried out to G-d, and the waters were immediately vanquished, and disappeared. See the similarities to Psalm 69:2, and Rev 12:6.

Likewise, water has been likened as the creation of the universe, and of all life. We see that in Scriptural references as well, for G-d's mercy and love is described as flowing as a "river of life". Flowing water is described in Scripture as "living water".

Traditionally, the kings of Israel were crowned near springs. This practice drew upon the visual image of living water emerging from the earth, invoking continuity, and looking forward to the reign of the King of Kings in His eternal kingdom.

Traditions regarding the keeping of the custom of tashlich vary between Jewish communities. On occasion, the first day of Rosh Hashanah falls on a weekly Sabbath. In that case, the Ashkenazi tradition postpones the observance until the next day, so as not to carry prayerbooks too far (carrying a burden on the Sabbath). The Sephardim do not make that distinction, and celebrate it on the very day of Rosh Hashanah, regardless. But if circumstances prevent, it is also traditional that this ceremony can be carried out on any day following Rosh Hashanah to Hoshanah Rabah (the end of Succot).

Some have stated that this practice might have been instituted in earlier times, citing Nehemiah 8. But a close reading of that passage doesn't indicate anything other than a gathering of the people at a good location from which Nehemiah could read to them the rediscovered Torah, so that their hearts could be washed clean.

The common practice during tashlich is to cast either bread crumbs, or even pebbles, into flowing water, and as they disappear, contemplate how completely G-d makes our sins disappear into the depths of the sea as well.

Part of the tashlich liturgy includes verses from Micah 7:18-20, and it is appropriate to read these verses as you toss the bread into the water.

Mic 7:18-20

*18 Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in unchanging love. 19 He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins Into the depths of the sea. 20 Thou wilt give truth to Jacob And unchanging love to Abraham, Which Thou didst swear to our forefathers From the days of old.*

It is also a common practice to turn ones' pockets inside-out to symbolically say that there are no sins being "retained" which should not now be cast away.

Some have commented to me that their breadcrumbs have occasionally gotten "hung up" on sticks or other debris in the stream, or are seen continually circling in an eddy below them. This, I suggest to you, has spiritual significance as well.

You may see the stream as an example of your life. It flows from its source back to its source again. And those symbolic sins which get hung up on the debris in the stream (or circle in eddies) represent our reluctance to fully release the sinful conduct so that the stream may carry them away unimpeded. Debris and eddies in our life-stream represent the imperfections of the channel through which the stream flows. Some of those imperfections are within our control, and others not so. Others cast debris into our stream which changes our flow. As you contemplate those small crumbs circling below you, or those which are caught-up on debris, look upstream. You cannot walk with G-d while you are looking backwards.

Luke 9:62b

*"No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."*

And as you look upstream, you might well see the "sins" of the person just upstream floating toward you. That brings us a lesson as well. You might be tempted to look up to see who is throwing bread into the water upstream from you, and engage in speculation or judgment regarding that person's life. Please don't do that. It diverts you from what you should be doing, and is a trick of Satan.

In this ceremony, we are supposed to be focused *upon our own sins...* and *our own relationship* with G-d. As we see "sins" floating toward us, we are not to judge our brother or sister's level of righteousness, or the sincerity of their repentance. If anything, take joy in the fact that you are part of a community which does this as a group, and that someone upstream is growing closer to G-d, as you are also doing the same. If you are looking upward from your sins to merely observe the sins of others, stop. Raise your gaze. Look higher yet. Do as David did.

Ps 121:1-3

*121 I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; From whence shall my help come? 2 My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth. 3 He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber.*

During this meaningful ceremony, you will be able to gain much insight into G-d, if you will merely look to Him alone, and be quiet so He can speak. You may wish to simply sit on the bank, and read from the Scriptures.

Ps 33

*33 Sing for joy in the Lord, O you righteous ones; Praise is becoming to the upright. 2 Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; Sing praises to Him with a harp of ten strings. 3 Sing to Him a new song; Play skillfully with a shout of joy. 4 For the word of the Lord is upright; And all His work is done in faithfulness. 5 He loves righteousness and justice; The earth is full of the lovingkindness of the Lord.*

*6 By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, And by the breath of His mouth all their host. 7 He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap; He lays up the deeps in storehouses. 8 Let all the earth fear the Lord; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. 9 For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast. 10 The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. 11 The counsel of the Lord stands forever, The plans of His heart from generation to generation. 12 Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, The people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance.*

*13 The Lord looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; 14 From His dwelling place He looks out On all the inhabitants of the earth, 15 He who fashions the hearts of them all, He who understands all their works. 16 The king is not saved by a mighty army; A warrior is not delivered by great strength. 17 A horse is a false hope for victory; Nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength.*

*18 Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, On those who hope for His lovingkindness, 19 To deliver their soul from death, And to keep them alive in famine. 20 Our soul waits for the Lord; He is our help and our shield. 21 For our heart rejoices in Him, Because we trust in His holy name. 22 Let Thy lovingkindness, O Lord, be upon us, According as we have hoped in Thee.*

Ps 130

*130 Out of the depths I have cried to Thee, O Lord. 2 Lord, hear my voice! Let Thine ears be attentive To the voice of my supplications. 3 If Thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? 4 But there is forgiveness with Thee, That Thou mayest be feared. 5 I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait, And in His word do I hope. 6 My soul waits for the Lord More than the watchmen for the morning; Indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning. 7 O Israel, hope in the Lord; For with the Lord there is lovingkindness, And with Him is abundant redemption. 8 And He will redeem Israel From all his iniquities.*

I recommend reading also from Revelation. The end of days is indeed bright.

Rev 20:11-15

*11 And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged*

*from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. 13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. 14 And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Rev 21:22-27

*22 And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple. 23 And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 And the nations shall walk by its light, and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it. 25 And in the daytime (for there shall be no night there) its gates shall never be closed; 26 and they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; 27 and nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

Rev 21:27-22:5

*22 And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, 2 in the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bond-servants shall serve Him; 4 and they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. 5 And there shall no longer be any night; and they shall not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them; and they shall reign forever and ever.*

The traditional greeting during this season is “L’shanah tovah tikateivu”. Which, being loosely translated, is “in the new year may we be written [in the Book of Life”].

For we who understand that Yeshua’s sacrifice is the payment so that our sins *actually can* be cast away (and not paid for by our own blood), and that because of His sacrificial atonement we *now can* be written in the Book of Life, this ceremony is far more meaningful.

The most devout Jews will step away from the waters of tashlich without certainty that their sins are truly washed away, and their atonement granted. If you ask them about that, they will honestly tell you, “I hope so.” Yeshua has purchased for us that assurance. Walk away from these waters saying Baruch HaShem (Bless the L-rd)!