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Journeying through Tishrei: Four Midrash Maps for the New Year

Rabbi Aviva Richman



COURSE INTRODUCTION

Even for those deeply familiar with the Jewish calendar, the fall holiday season can feel spiritually—and practically—overwhelming. The Hebrew month of Tishrei is packed with holidays, including some of the most major moments of the entire Jewish year: Rosh Hashanah (1 Tishrei), Yom Kippur (10 Tishrei), and Sukkot (15 Tishrei) arrive in rapid succession, each carrying its own emotional and spiritual atmosphere. Awe and majesty. Vulnerability and reckoning. Joy and abundance.

I often find myself wondering: What are we meant to take from this spiritual rollercoaster? Why does Judaism ask us to invest so much energy, emotion, and time into this season? And is there a way to experience these holy days not as isolated observances, but as a connected journey with direction and purpose? This course grew out of those questions.

In four sessions, we will explore four different ways of understanding the holidays of Tishrei as a single spiritual arc. Our guides will be a series of teachings from **Vayikra Rabbah**, a classical collection of *midrash*. *Midrash* is the rabbinic tradition of close and imaginative Torah interpretation, uncovering deeper layers of meaning within biblical texts. In these teachings, our Rabbis read the verses describing the holidays in Leviticus not simply as a calendar of observances, but as a map for inner transformation.

Alongside these *midrashim*, we will study the psalms woven throughout them and explore how they deepen the emotional and spiritual imagination of the season. As we learn, you'll also become familiar with some of the literary forms that shape classical *midrash*, including the ***petihta*** (the poetic opening that frames a teaching by drawing on a provocative verse from the Bible), the “target verse” that anchors the midrashic interpretation in Torah, and the ***mashal***, the parable that opens new pathways into meaning.

Together with your *havruta*, you'll encounter four paths through Tishrei—four visions of what this sacred season asks of us and what it might awaken within us. My hope is that these texts will help you move through the holidays with greater intention, deeper understanding, and a renewed appreciation for the spiritual richness of this time of year.

Enjoy your learning!
—R. Aviva Richman





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SESSION 1 עמך הסליחה A Prolonged Journey of Forgiveness

◆ “Seventh” month

We are used to thinking of Rosh Hashanah as the beginning of the year, but actually, due to quirks of calendrical history, the months begin not in Tishrei when the year changes but in Nisan (in which Pesah falls). This makes Tishrei, even though it contains the new year, the seventh month. The full slate of holidays can also be found in the comprehensive list of sacrifices in Bemidbar 28–29. □

◆ Leviticus

Translations of biblical sources in this course are based on JPS, 1985.

Welcome to the first session of this course about the holidays of Tishrei. Each session traces a specific arc or narrative that unites the otherwise disparate festivals of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Before we begin studying texts, take a few minutes to reflect on the following questions and share with your *havruta*:

- » What is your experience of the fall Jewish holidays?
- » Is there one holiday that stands out as particularly meaningful for you? Why?
- » Do you experience each holiday as connected to the others, or does each holiday feel very distinct?

I. THE “SEVENTH MONTH” SEQUENCE OF HOLIDAYS

Before we get into the narrative arc of this session, we will spend some time with the holidays of Tishrei as they are presented in the Torah. A full description of the fall holidays of the “seventh” month ◆ can be found in the book of Vayikra (Leviticus). The text describes the holidays on the first and tenth of the month, what we call Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, along with Sukkot on the fifteenth.

With your *havruta*, start by reading through Vayikra’s overview of the holidays of the seventh month. This need not be a close reading, but as you skim with your *havruta*, take note if anything jumps out to you about the character of each holiday.

SOURCE #1 □

Leviticus ◆ 23:23-36,39-43

ויקרא כג:כג-לו,לט-מג

²³God spoke to Moses: ²⁴“Speak to the Israelite people thus: ‘In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts. ²⁵You shall not work at your occupations; and you shall bring an offering by fire to God.’”

²³וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ²⁴דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בָּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שַׁבָּתוֹן זִכְרוֹן תְּרוּעָה מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ: ²⁵כָּל מְלָאכָת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אֹשֶׁה לַה':

²⁶God spoke to Moses: ²⁷“Mark, on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of

²⁶וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ²⁷אֵךְ בַּעֲשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הִזֶּה יוֹם

♦ *hadar*

Perhaps “beautiful,” but the meaning of this word is important for various *midrashim* we will encounter in this course. Regardless, it refers to what we call the *etrog*.

Atonement. It shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall practice self-denial, and you shall bring an offering by fire to God; ²⁸you shall do no work throughout that day. For it is a Day of Atonement, on which expiation is made on your behalf before the God your Lord. ²⁹Indeed, any person who does not practice self-denial throughout that day shall be cut off from their kin; ³⁰and whoever does any work throughout that day, I will cause that person to perish from among their people. ³¹Do no work whatever; it is a law for all time, throughout the ages in all your settlements. ³²It shall be a sabbath of complete rest for you, and you shall practice self-denial; on the ninth day of the month at evening, from evening to evening, you shall observe this your sabbath.”

³³God spoke to Moses: ³⁴“Say to the Israelite people: ‘On the fifteenth day of this seventh month there shall be the Feast of Booths for God, [to last] seven days. ³⁵On the first day shall be a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations; ³⁶seven days you shall bring offerings by fire to God. On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering by fire to God; it is a solemn gathering: you shall not work at your occupations.” ...

³⁹Mark, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the yield of your land, you shall observe the festival of God [to last] seven days: a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day. ⁴⁰On the first day you shall take the product of *hadar* ♦ trees,

הַכִּפָּרִים הוּא מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ יְהִיָּה
לָכֶם וְעֲנִיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם
וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אֶשָּׁה לַה': ²⁸וְכָל
מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ בַעֲצֵם הַיּוֹם
הַזֶּה כִּי יוֹם כִּפָּרִים הוּא לְכַפֵּר
עֲלֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם: ²⁹כִּי
כָל הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא תַעֲנֶה בַעֲצֵם
הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וְנִכְרְתָה מֵעַמֶּיהָ: ³⁰וְכָל
הַנֶּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה כָּל מְלָאכָה
בַּעֲצֵם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וְהִאֲבֹדְתִי אֶת
הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מִקֶּרֶב עַמָּהּ: ³¹כָּל
מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ חֻקַּת עוֹלָם
לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם בְּכָל מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם:
³²שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן הוּא לָכֶם וְעֲנִיתֶם
אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם בַּתְּשׁוּעָה לַחֹדֶשׁ
בְּעָרֶב מִעָרֶב עַד עָרֶב תִּשְׁבַּתוּ
שַׁבְּתֶכֶם:

³³וַיֹּדְבֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
³⁴דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר
בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ
הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת שִׁבְעַת
יָמִים לַה': ³⁵בְּיוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן
מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ כָּל מְלָאכָה
עֹבְדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ: ³⁶שִׁבְעַת
יָמִים תִּקְרִיבוּ אֶשָּׁה לַה' בְּיוֹם
הַשְּׁמִינִי מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ יְהִיָּה לָכֶם
וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אֶשָּׁה לַה' עֲצֶרֶת הוּא
כָּל מְלָאכָה עֹבְדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ: ...

³⁹אֲךָ בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ
הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַסְפְּכֶם אֶת תְּבוּאוֹת
הָאָרֶץ תַּחֲגּוּ אֶת חַג ה' שִׁבְעַת
יָמִים בְּיוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן שַׁבְּתוֹן וּבְיוֹם
הַשְּׁמִינִי שַׁבְּתוֹן: ⁴⁰וְלִקְחֶתֶם לָכֶם
בְּיוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר כַּפֹּת
תְּמָרִים וְעֵנָף עֵץ עָבֹת וְעֵרְבֵי נָחַל

◆ **Branches of palm trees**

i.e., what we call the *lulav*.

branches of palm trees, ◆ boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before God your Lord seven days. ⁴¹You shall observe it as a festival for God for seven days in the year; you shall observe it in the seventh month as a law for all time, throughout the ages. ⁴²You shall live in booths (sukkot) seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, ⁴³in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I God am your Lord.”

וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: ⁴¹וַחֲגַגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ
חַג לַה' שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה
חֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם בַּחֹדֶשׁ
הַשְּׁבִיעִי תַחֲגוּ אֹתוֹ: ⁴²בְּסֻכּוֹת
תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל הָאֻרֶּחַ
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בְּסֻכּוֹת: ⁴³לְמַעַן
יָדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בְּסֻכּוֹת
הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם
אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Questions from R. Aviva Richman

1. What kind of religious experience does each holiday conjure?
2. Do these holidays seem connected to each other in any way?
3. What are your questions about the purpose of this nearly month-long flow of holidays?

II. AWAITING FORGIVENESS

The first arc we will trace between the fall holidays focuses on the theme of **seeking forgiveness**. Instead of a single day of forgiveness on Yom Kippur, the *midrash* we will study imagines that the entire series of holidays is an experience of seeking forgiveness.

The impetus for this interpretation comes from a close reading of Vayikra 23:40 (also v. 35), bolded in the verses above, that describes the fifteenth of the seventh month as “the first day” of the holiday of Sukkot. How, our Rabbis ask, can the fifteenth day of Tishrei be “the first day”? This question prompts the *midrash* to probe the relationship between the fifteenth day of Tishrei (i.e., Sukkot) and the first day of Tishrei (i.e., Rosh Hashanah).

The *midrash* tells a parable (in Hebrew: *mashal*), and then interprets the parable (the *nimshal*). Start by carefully reading the parable first (Source #2) and answering the questions that follow. Then you will move on to the read the interpretation (Source #3).

◆ Vayikra Rabbah

We will spend a lot of time with this 5th–6th century CE Galilean collection of *midrashim* in this course. Vayikra Rabbah is structured in various sermons based on specific hooks and themes from the Book of Leviticus. It often takes what might seem as outdated biblical themes of sacrifice and Temple and extrapolates them into contemporary relevance. It is a masterful work and I hope you feel you get to know it a little better through this course!

◆ In the name of

The statement, before it made its way into this midrashic collection, has been transmitted by three generations of rabbis, ultimately going back to R. Levi (late 3rd century CE).

◆ A city

The late Roman-Byzantine empire was administratively divided into cities and their surrounding areas. It was the richest and most prominent men of each city who were responsible for collecting and paying the local imperial taxes.

SOURCE #2 □ A Parable (*mashal*)

Vayikra Rabbah 30:7◆

It is the fifteenth [of Tishrei], but you say “on the first day”!?

R. Mana of She’av, R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin in the name of◆ R. Levi said:

A parable: There was a city◆ that was obligated to pay arrears to the emperor. The emperor went to collect it.

[When he was] within ten miles, all the leaders of the city came out and praised him. He waived a third of their taxes.

Within five miles—all the ordinary people of the city came out and praised him. He waived for them another third.

When he entered the city, all of the people came out—men, women, children—and praised him, and he waived for them everything.

The emperor said to them, “What has gone is gone. From now, let us begin the count.”

ויקרא רבה לז:

זֶה חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר, וְאַתָּה אומֵר בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן?

רַבִּי מָנָא דְשֵׁאָב וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ דְּסִיחְנִין בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי לֵוִי אָמַר:

מָשַׁל לְמַדִּינָה שְׁחִיבָת לִיפָס לְמַלְךָ, וְהַלֵךְ הַמֶּלֶךְ לְגִבּוֹתָהּ,

בְּתוֹךְ עֶשְׂרֵה מֵיִלִּין יָצָאוּ גְדוֹלֵי הַמַּדִּינָה וְקִלְסוּהוּ, הִתִּיר לָהֶם שְׁלִישׁ מִדִּמּוּסָא שְׁלָהֶם,

בְּתוֹךְ חֲמִשָּׁה מֵיִלִּין יָצָאוּ בִּינוֹנֵי הַמַּדִּינָה וְקִלְסוּהוּ, הִתִּיר לָהֶם עוֹד שְׁלִישׁ,

בֵּינוֹן שְׁוֹנָנִים לְמַדִּינָה יָצָאוּ כָּל בְּנֵי הַמַּדִּינָה אַנְשִׁים וְנָשִׁים וְטַף וְקִלְסוּהוּ וְהִתִּיר לָהֶם הַכֹּל.

אָמַר לָהֶוֹן מֶלֶכָא: מָה דָּאֻל אֻל, מִן הָכָא נַחֵיל חֲשִׁבְנָא.

Questions about the *mashal* (parable) from R. Aviva Richman:

1. What is the conflict in the parable and how is the conflict resolved?
2. How many stages are in the parable?
3. What is unclear in this parable? What questions are you left with?

◆ **on Rosh Hashanah eve**

Apparently there was a custom of phased fasts before Yom Kippur.

◆ **[Prominent] individuals**

For the function of these individuals in fasting, see Mishnah Ta'anit 1:4. 

◆ **And children**

While Rabbinic Judaism has decided children are exempt from fasting on Yom Kippur, it is not so obvious and early sources have some ambivalence. For example, see Tosefta Yoma 4:2 and compare to the Samaritan practice explained here: <https://www.thetorah.com/article/afflicting-the-soul-a-day-when-even-children-must-fast>

Now turn to the continuation of the *midrash*, which elucidates the parable (*nimshal*):

SOURCE #3 Elucidation of the Parable (*nimshal*)

So too on Rosh Hashanah eve, ◆ the leaders of the generation fast—and the Holy Blessed One waives for them a third of their sins.

And from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur, [prominent] individuals ◆ fast—and the Holy Blessed One waives for them a third of their sins.

And on Yom Kippur, all of us fast—men, women, and children ◆—

and the Holy Blessed One says to Israel, “What is gone is gone; from now on, let us begin the count.”

And from Yom Kippur until Sukkot, all of Israel are occupied with *mitzvot*—this one is occupied with their *sukkah*, this one their *lulav*—

and on the first day of Sukkot all of Israel are standing before the Holy Blessed One—and their *lulavim* and *etrogim*—for the sake of the Holy Blessed One,

and God says to them, “What is gone is gone; from now on, let us begin the count.”

This is why Moshe exhorts Israel: “On the first day you shall take.”

כך בערב ראש השנה גדולי הדור מתעניין והקדוש ברוך הוא מתיר להם שליש מעונותיהן,

ומראש השנה ועד יום הכפורים היחידים מתעניין והקדוש ברוך הוא מתיר להם שליש מעונותיהן,

וביום הכפורים כלן מתעניין אנשים ונשים וטף,

והקדוש ברוך הוא אומר להם לישראל מה דאול אול מן הקא ולהלן נחיל חשבנא.

ומיום הכפורים עד החג כל ישראל עסוקין במצוות, זה עוסק בסכתו וזה בלולבו,

וביום טוב הראשון של חג כל ישראל עומדין לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא ולולביהן ואתרוגיהן לשמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא,

ואומר להם, מה דאול אול, מן הקא נחיל חשבנא.

לפיכך משה מזהיר לישראל: “ולקחתם לכם ביום הראשון.”

Although it's a little tricky, let's try to match up the *nimshal* to the *mashal*. (It's tricky because there are two different endings to the *nimshal*!) First, try to list all the aspects of the *mashal* and the *nimshal* and see how they parallel one another. Then, check your list against the table below:

Parable <i>Mashal</i>	Elucidation <i>Nimshal</i>
City	Jews
Emperor	God
Tax arrears	Punishment for sins
Within 10 miles	Rosh Hashanah
Within 5 miles	Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur
Entering the city	Yom Kippur OR Sukkot?
Praising	Fasting OR occupied with the <i>mitzvot</i> of Sukkot?

Questions from R. Aviva Richman:

1. Which parallel aspects between *mashal* and *nimshal* feel intuitive and which do not? What might be the significance of the parts where the correspondence is not as clear?
2. How do you understand the role of the preparation and celebration of Sukkot here? What do these have to do with forgiveness?
3. Why does the statement of full forgiveness appear twice—once on Yom Kippur and once on Sukkot? Could you see these two different endings as different modes for seeking forgiveness—whether through suffering or through engagement with embodied *mitzvot*?
4. When you take in the whole *midrash* – the parable and its elucidation, how does it envision the journey from Rosh Hashanah through Sukkot?

III. ZOOMING OUT: DELAYED FORGIVENESS

The midrashic parable suggests that full forgiveness, although the process begins at Rosh Hashanah, does not come to us until Yom Kippur or perhaps even Sukkot. In the final part of the *midrash*, Rav Aḥa introduces a verse from Psalms to convey this concept of delayed forgiveness.

SOURCE #4

Rav Aḥa said: “For with You there is forgiveness” (Psalm 130:4 ד)—from Rosh Hashanah, forgiveness waits with You.

And why all this? “So that You will be revered” (130:4)—in order to impose fear of You upon Your creations.

אָמַר רַב אַחָא (תהלים קל, ד): “כִּי עִמָּךְ הַסְּלִיחָה”, מֵרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה הַסְּלִיחָה מִמִּתְנַת אֲפֻלָּה,

כָּל כֶּךָ לְמַה, “לְמַעַן תִּירָא”, בְּשִׁבִּיל לִתֵּן אִימָתֶךָ עַל בְּרִיּוֹתֶיךָ.

Questions from R. Aviva Richman:

1. According to Rav Aḥa, why does God “hold on” to forgiveness? Why not just give it right away?
2. According to Rav Aḥa’s framing, what kind of posture do we find ourselves in for an extended period in the seventh month? What does this do for our Tishrei experience?

Now spend some time with Psalm 130 itself, the textual source for Rav Aḥa’s idea of forgiveness withheld for a prolonged period. Given Rav Aḥa’s interpretation, we might now see this entire psalm as lingering on the feeling of longing and waiting for forgiveness, each line stretching out our sense of anticipation, and even anxiety, about whether forgiveness will come.

SOURCE #5 ד

Psalm 130

¹A song of ascents.

Out of the depths I call You, God.

²My Lord, listen to my voice;

let Your ears be attentive
to the sound of my plea.

³If You keep account of sins, God,
My Lord, who will survive?

⁴But with You there is forgiveness
so that You may be held in reverence.

תהלים קל

¹שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת

מִמַּעְמָקִים קָרָאתִיךָ ה':

²אֲ-דָנִי שְׁמָעָה בְּקוֹלִי

תְּהִינָה אָזְנוֹךָ קְשׁוּבוֹת
לְקוֹל תַּחֲנוּנִי:

³אִם-עֲוֹנוֹת תִּשְׁמֹר יְ-הוָה
אֲ-דָנִי מִי יַעֲמֹד:

⁴כִּי עִמָּךְ הַסְּלִיחָה
לְמַעַן תִּירָא:

⁵I wait for God;

My soul waits;

And in God's word I await with hope.

⁶My soul waits for my God

More than watchmen for the morning,
watching for the morning.

⁷O Israel, wait with hope for God;

for with God is steadfast love

and great power to redeem.

⁸It is God Who will redeem Israel

from all their sins.

⁵קִוִּיתִי ה'

קִוְיָה נַפְשִׁי

וְלִדְבַר הוֹחֲלָתִי:

⁶נַפְשִׁי לֹא-דָנִי

מִשְׁמָרִים לַבֶּקֶר

שֹׁמְרִים לַבֶּקֶר:

⁷יַחַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל ה'

כִּי עִם ה' הַחֶסֶד

וְהַרְבֵּה עֲמוּ פְדוּת:

⁸יְהוָה יַפְדֶּה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל

מִכָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָיו:

Questions from R. Aviva Richman:

1. What do you notice in the psalm now, aware of the idea that God intentionally holds back forgiveness?
2. Which phrases highlight this image of prolonged waiting for forgiveness?
3. Which phrases resonate most with you?

Take a Step Back

1. Does delaying forgiveness seem fair to you? Does it feel different if it is God delaying forgiveness, as opposed to a person delaying forgiveness?
2. Have you ever experienced this dynamic of delayed forgiveness in an interpersonal relationship? If you have, how would you think about that experience now that you've studied this *midrash* and this psalm?
3. What might you learn or gain from experiencing the period between Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot as a period of delayed forgiveness, as a process that involves significant periods of waiting? Have you ever thought about the Tishrei holidays this way?
4. What are different actions you might take—whether more like “fasting” or more like engaging with *mitzvot*—when you find yourself in multiple stages of waiting for forgiveness—or waiting to forgive?