ROSH HASHANA: Three questions and answers

Rosh HaShana, is a festive and joyful day, or a solemn and serious day?

To understand the double aspect of Rosh HaShana, let me share with you a question that was asked to rab Obadia Yosef z "l. A Hazan (cantor of the synagogue) should recite the prayers of Rosh HaShana with a cheerful melody or with a sad and solemn tone?

On the one hand, Rosh HaShana is a Yom Tob, a festive and joyful day in which we wish each other to have a good and sweet year. This is why during the two nights of Rosh HaShana we have a pre-meal Seder with blessings and celebration for a better new year.

On the other hand, we know that Rosh HaShana is the "day of judgment", which begins the "Divine trial" which will determine whether we will deserve to be alive. On Rosh HaShana we recover the awareness of our fragility and our mortality. We realize that the continuation of our life is not guaranteed. That our existence is a delicate privilege, a gift from God, which can be reclaimed by Him at any time. From this point of view, Rosh HaShana is a very serious day. A 'Yom hadin', the day of judging whether we deserve or not deserve one more year of life …

I think that now we can better understand the question if Rosh HaShana is a joyous or a solemn day. Rabbi Obadia Yosef replied that Rosh HaShana melodies should be happy. Because although we are judged, we are aware that our Judge is also our Father, who loves us and when we recognize our mistakes is willing to forgive us and give us another chance. Hence the optimism and the celebration.

What happens if a woman has to go to the Mikve the night of Rosh HaShanah or Yom Kippur?

There are some nights in the Hebrew calendar during which marital relations are suspended.

There are two categories:

1. Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av. During these two nights, conjugal relations are strictly forbidden by Halakha.

Therefore, if the Mikve night falls on one of two nights, the Mikve must be postponed until the following night.
2. During the two nights of Shabu'ot, both nights of Rosh HaShana and the night of Hoshana Rabbah conjugal relations are also prohibited. However, this limitation is not Halakhic (= from the Talmud) but it is rather a tradition (Minhag). Therefore, if the Mikve falls during one of these 5 nights, a woman goes normally to the Mikve and this limitation is suspended. The rabbis, however, recommended proceeding with more circumspection than usual during the night of Rosh HaShana.

Do women have the same obligation as men in relation to the Mitsva of Shofar?

Men are required to listen the Shofar, following the biblical commandment "yom teru'a yihie lakhem". And although women are formally exempt from the Mitsva of Shofar, since it is a commandment which is only fulfilled at a specific time, in practical terms, women listen to the Shofar like men. Why? Keep in mind that in addition to the formal compliance with this important command, the sound of the Shofar "awakens us from our spiritual slumber," calling us to repent and to improve our actions. And this is a message that both men and women,need to assimilate these days of Teshuba. Therefore, it is very commendable for women to attend synagogue, hear the shofar and be inspired by its sound. The only practical difference between men and women regarding the Shofar relates to the recitation of Berakha in the case of a person who can not attend synagogue on Rosh HaShana. Let's see. In the Synagogue the Toke'a (= the person who blows the Shofar) recites the Berakha ASHER QIDDESHANU BEMITSVOTAV VETSIVANU LISHMOA' QOL SHOFAR for the whole congregation. And all who hear this Berakha and say AMEN, men or women, are included in this blessing. However, if a woman is not able to attend the Synagogue, when the Ba'al Toke'a blows the Shofar she should not recite the Berachah. While in the case of a man who hears the Shofar out of the synagogue, he does recite the Berakha (among Ashkenazi Jews, women also recite the Berakha in these circumstances).