



Frequently Asked Questions about the High Holy Days

What are the “Days of Awe?” Rosh Hashanah is the first of the High Holy Days, and begins a ten-day period of soul-searching that concludes with Yom Kippur. Tradition tells us that on Rosh Hashanah the names of the righteous are inscribed in the Book of Life, guaranteeing another year of life. For those who are not entirely good, judgment is suspended until Yom Kippur. At that time, our good works and acts of repentance during those ten days will help us gain forgiveness. Synagogue services give us time to reflect and resolve, but prayer and meditation are not sufficient to wipe the slate clean. The only way to expunge sins committed against other people is by sincerely apologizing and asking for forgiveness.

What do the words Rosh Hashanah mean?

Rosh Hashanah is Hebrew for “head” or “beginning of the year.” In the Torah, we read, “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, there shall be a sacred assembly, a cessation from work, a day of commemoration proclaimed by the sound of the *shofar*.” Therefore, we celebrate Rosh Hashanah on the first day of Tishrei, the seventh month of the Jewish calendar. The number assigned to the Jewish year changes on Rosh Hashanah based on ancient rabbinic reckoning of when the world was created.

Why is the New Year in the fall? And why

do we start the New Year in the seventh month? Our ancestors had several dates in the calendar marking the beginning of important seasons of the year. Originally, the first month of the Hebrew calendar was Nisan, in the spring. But the first of Tishrei, in the fall, was the beginning of the economic year, when the old harvest year ended and the new one began. Around the month of Tishrei, the first rains came in the land of Israel, and the soil was plowed for the winter grain. Eventually, the first of Tishrei became not only the beginning of the economic year, but the beginning of the spiritual year as well.

What is done in the home for Rosh

Hashanah? The focus of home celebration is the evening meal served at the start of Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah menus vary among Jewish subcultures and from household to household, but two customs are pervasive: using a round challah (with or without

raisins) as a symbol of the cycle of the year, and starting Rosh Hashanah with apples dipped in honey as a harbinger of a sweet year.

What happens in the synagogue for Rosh

Hashanah? Rosh Hashanah is primarily a liturgical or synagogue holiday with a few core elements, the blowing of a *shofar* (the horn of a ram or other animal) and distinctive holiday melodies, which are reprised over and over during Rosh Hashanah, and again on Yom Kippur.

Rosh Hashanah prayers sound the themes of judgment and repentance, and the recurrent image of God as a parent-ruler is given voice in one of the most memorable prayers and melodies of all the Jewish holidays, *Avinu Malkeynu*, “Our Father, our King.”

During the morning service on Rosh Hashanah, the Torah reading from Genesis 22 is always a focal point. Genesis 22 contains the terrible test of Abraham’s faith, when he is asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. This story is referred to as “the binding of Isaac,” or the *Akedah*.

What is Tashlich? After synagogue, people generally have lunch with family and friends. Then it is traditional to go to a lake, river, or harbor for a ceremony called *Tashlich*, from the Hebrew for “send off” or “cast away.” An informal and non-liturgical custom, people symbolically cast off their sins by emptying crumbs from their pockets into the water.

What does Yom Kippur mean? Yom Kippur means “Day of Atonement.” Yom Kippur, the most somber day of the year, is called *Shabbat Shabbaton*, the “Sabbath of Sabbaths” in the Bible. On this day devoted to reflection and repentance, healthy adults fast from all food and drink from sunset to sunset.

What happens in the home for Yom Kippur?

Although this is probably the least home-based of all holidays, it begins and ends with a family meal. The evening meal is cooked with a mind to the fast ahead, so generally it is neither too heavy nor too spicy. Unlike other festival dinners, candle lighting takes place afterwards, marking the official start of Yom Kippur and the fast.

After eating and before lighting the festival candles, it is traditional to light a candle in memory of family members who have died. Special *yahrzeit* (“year’s-time”) candles are available in Judaica shops and some

supermarkets. These candles are lit without formal blessing, though some people say a silent prayer. Yom Kippur ends with a light meal to break the fast. This repast has no formal rituals or ceremony apart from the blessing over bread, *Hamotzi*. Food prepared in advance is usually set out, buffet style, while family and friends discuss the relative difficulty of their fasts and the content of their rabbis' sermons. It is a *mitzvah* to invite to your table anyone who might have nowhere else to break the fast. Many families contribute both money and canned goods to help feed the hungry. Synagogues often collect food for distribution to local pantries.

How do we atone for our sins? Yom Kippur atones only for sins between humanity and God, not for sins against another person. To atone for sins against another person, you must first apologize, righting the wrongs you committed if possible. This must all be done before the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

What is the Jewish definition of sin?

In Judaism, the word "sin" has different connotations than it does in our wider culture. "Sin" in Judaism is generally not something for which a person will be punished in the afterlife, but is rather an improper act for which one can ask forgiveness—not just of God, but of other human beings as well.

What is Kol Nidre? Services begin with the haunting melody of *Kol Nidre*, the opening prayer and also the name of the evening service. *Kol Nidre* is an Aramaic declaration that nullifies all the vows and promises that each person will make to God and to him/herself in the coming year, an acknowledgment of the weakness of human resolution.

What happens at synagogue Yom Kippur day? Yom Kippur services run throughout most of the day: *Shacharit*, the morning service, includes a Torah reading from Deuteronomy 29:9-30:20, which ends with the lines "I have put before you this day life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life." The morning *Haftarah* reading is Isaiah's passionate sermon demanding justice and decrying religious hypocrisy. *Musaf*, the "additional" afternoon service that follows *Shacharit*, includes recitation of the martyrology, which begins with a list of the murders of Talmudic sages by the Romans, and describes other persecutions culminating with the Nazi Holocaust.

Why is the Book of Jonah read on Yom Kippur? The Book of Jonah was selected for the haftarah reading for the *Mincha* (afternoon) service on Yom Kippur because God is represented there as the God of all nations. The Book of Jonah also addresses itself to another High Holy Days theme: that a person can abandon one's evil ways, accept responsibility for one's own actions, and return to God.

What is Yizkor? *Yizkor* is a service which recalls loved ones who have died. *Yizkor* usually takes place on Yom Kippur afternoon, after the Afternoon Service and before the *Ne'ilah*, or closing service. Kippur ends with a light meal to break the fast. This repast has no formal rituals or ceremony apart from the blessing over bread, *Hamotzi*. Food prepared in advance is usually set out, buffet style, while family and friends discuss the relative difficulty of their fasts and the content of their rabbis' sermons. It is a *mitzvah* to invite to your table anyone who might have nowhere else to break the fast. Many families contribute both money and canned goods to help feed the hungry. Synagogues often collect food for distribution to local pantries.

What is the Ne'ilah service? Yom Kippur services conclude with *Ne'ilah*, from the Hebrew "to lock," referring to the symbolic closing of heaven's gates and the "book of life." Many people stand throughout this short service, which ends with a final *shofar* blast. *Ne'ilah* is followed by a *Havdalah*, the ceremony that ends this holiday as well as the Sabbath.

Why do the rabbis and cantors wear white on Yom Kippur; why do we cover the Torah scrolls with white covers? It is customary to wear white on the holiday, which symbolizes purity and calls to mind the promise that our sins shall be made as white as snow (Isaiah 1:18). Traditionally, Jews are buried in plain white garments. Wearing white on Yom Kippur reminds us of our mortality. Some wear sneakers or other rubber-soled shoes out of deference to the ancient practice of avoiding leather shoes, which were a symbol of luxury.

Why are the confessions done in the plural? The communal confession is called the *Vidui*. It contains a litany of human sins, and the entire congregation recites it collectively and in the plural, emphasizing communal responsibility for sins.