

About the High Holy Days

The High Holy Days (also known as the Days of Awe or *Yamim Nora'im* in Hebrew) are the most solemn days of the Jewish year. This is a time of intense reflection beginning with the month of *Elul* leading up to the Jewish New Year (*Rosh Hashanah*) and reaching its climax ten days later on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

Traditionally, this is the time of year when God decides what kind of year is in store for us.

During this time period, Jews worldwide reflect upon the past year, searching their actions for ways to improve the relationships in their lives. These relationships may be with other people, the environment, God or themselves. The hope of this sacred time is that people can really change their behavior for the better. The act of change is called *t'shuvah*, from the verb *shuv* which means to turn, or return. *T'shuvah* is turning around of one's life and a reflection upon it.

In a famous prayer from The High Holy Days liturgy, it says: On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die . . . but repentance, prayer and righteousness mitigate God's decree.

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah literally means head of the year in Hebrew. Rosh Hashanah is observed on the first and second days of the month of *Tishrei*. Rosh Hashanah is considered to be the birthday of the world, the birthday of Adam, the day on which Sarah first learned that she would give birth to a son, and the day Isaac was born. It is also the day on which Hannah learned that she would have a child.

The traditional greeting is *Shana Tova* – A Good Year.

The *shofar*, a ram's horn, is blown in the lead up month of Elul, on Rosh Hashanah (except if it falls on Shabbat) and at the very end of Yom Kippur. It is a call to repentance and it is a *mitzvah* (commandment) to hear the shofar.

Rosh Hashanah has a number of different names, each reflecting an aspect of the holiday.

<i>Yom T'ruah</i>	The Day of Sounding (or blowing)
<i>Yom Ha'Zikaron</i>	The Day of Remembrance
<i>Yom Ha'Din</i>	The Day of Judgment

Customs

On Rosh Hashanah it is customary to eat apples dipped in honey. The apples remind us of the roundness of the year and the hope that the coming year will be fruitful, and the honey represents the wish for a sweet year. Some people dip *challah* in honey as well. The *challah* for the holidays is round, symbolizing the circle of the year or the crown of royalty, and is often made with either sweet dough or sweet fruit like raisins baked into it. Other traditional foods include honey cake or *tzimmes*, carrots cooked with honey.

Sending Cards

A wonderful custom is to send Rosh Hashanah cards to wish one another a sweet and happy year. A common greeting on Rosh Hashanah is "*L'shana Tova Tikateivu*" – May you be inscribed (in the Book of Life) for a good year.

Wearing White

It is customary to wear white on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur because white symbolizes purity and our desire to be close to God. A white robe also reminds us of the white robes worn by angels. The curtains across the ark, the Torah covers and the mantel draping the podium are also changed to white. This is to show that our mistakes will be whitened like snow.

Tashlich

During the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah (or the second day if the first falls on Shabbat) it is a custom to perform a ritual called *tashlich* (casting off). Jews go to the bank of a river or the beach and recite brief prayers containing a reference to the forgiving God who “casts our sins into the depths of the sea.” Then, breadcrumbs are thrown into the water, symbolically casting away sins.

Yom Kippur

Kol Nidre

The haunting melody of *Kol Nidre* is chanted on the eve of Yom Kippur, traditionally before sunset. The prayer is intended to release anyone who has made an oath and who has been unable to keep this oath due to negligence or unforeseen circumstances. This includes only those oaths which do not involve another person. It is believed that Kol Nidre entered the liturgy when Jews were forced to vow allegiance to Christianity in the Middle Ages while continuing to practice Judaism in secret.

Yom Kippur

The term Yom Kippur translates to Day of Atonement. This is the day on which an individual’s fate is “sealed” in the Book of Life. In other words, it is when God decides our fate. It has come to be known as the “Sabbath of Sabbaths” and it is the most sacred day of the Jewish calendar.

According to Maimonides, we all have the choice to be the kind of person we want to be. We can choose to either be evil or good, just as Adam and Eve were given the choice in the Garden of Eden. Judaism teaches us that we can direct our own lives – we have the power to determine which path we take.

Customs

On the morning before Yom Kippur, Jews practice the custom of *kapparot*. This is a symbolic custom whereby one takes a fowl and “transfers” one’s sins into it. This is done by waving the fowl around one’s head three times and reciting a prayer. The fowl is then donated to charity. In biblical times a goat was selected and sins transferred to the goat which was then driven into the wilderness, hence the term “scapegoat.” These days, however, instead of swinging a live fowl or goat, one may swing a small bag of coins and donate money to charity. This is reminiscent of the sacrifices made in the Temple in biblical times.

On the eve of Yom Kippur, Jewish adults begin a 25-hour fast that ends with the blast of the shofar at the end of Yom Kippur. We also kindle a memorial candle in the home that will burn for 24 hours to recall those who have departed from this world. It is also customary to wear white on Yom Kippur and some people wear a *kittel* (a long white robe) as a symbol of purity. Many Jews refrain from wearing leather shoes on Yom Kippur.