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Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

GUIDE TO THE HIGH HOLIDAYS FOR INTERFAITH FAMILIES

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The High Holy Days--What Are They?

Jews refer to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as the High Holy Days, or the Days of Awe. These holidays usually fall in September or October and are characterized by long synagogue services and a focus on repentance.

If you are going to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services this year, or preparing to celebrate these holidays with your family, we hope that a basic overview of the season and its symbols will help you to have a good experience of connection to the community, and even some taste of the ideal spiritual experiences that often elude worshippers on these days.

Logistical Considerations

Because so many Jews attend High Holiday services, most large synagogues require worshippers to purchase tickets for them. Some congregations have decided not to charge for tickets, because they want to be more accessible, but they still require reservations of some kind, and a few congregations treat the High Holidays like every other Jewish service and invite people to drop in.

If you are not a synagogue member, in order to ensure that you have a place to go you will need to contact your local synagogues and find out whether they have tickets available, whether non-members can purchase them and how much they cost. Whether a synagogue charges for tickets is not an indication of the quality of the prayer services on the holidays--it is only an indication of how the synagogue is paying for what they do during the rest of the year, and of how big their physical space is.

InterfaithFamily.com has listings of synagogues and other Jewish organizations that want to welcome interfaith couples and families, called [Connections in Your Area](http://interfaithfamily.com/connections_in_your_area/Connections_in_Your_Area.shtml). (http://interfaithfamily.com/connections_in_your_area/Connections_in_Your_Area.shtml) Another way to find a Jewish congregation for the High Holidays is to phone your local Jewish federation--search the internet for your city name and "Jewish federation" if you are having trouble finding it in the phone book. Your local Jewish newspaper may also publish listings for the High Holidays.

Rosh Hashanah, The Jewish New Year

Rosh Hashanah means literally "the head of the year." The first of the Hebrew month of Tishri, it's the beginning of a month full of Jewish holidays. Its symbols are the shofar or ram's horn and sweet food like apples and honey. The central metaphor of Rosh Hashanah is having our fate for the New Year written in the Book of Life.

Jewish Time: The Jewish Calendar and the Jewish Year

Why is there a specifically Jewish New Year? Like most Jewish holidays, this observance is mentioned in the Torah, the Hebrew scriptures, which Christians sometimes call the Old Testament. In the Torah it is called Yom Teruah, the Day of Sounding the Shofar, or Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance. Why is this holiday in the autumn when the secular New Year is in the winter?

Jewish holidays are set on the Hebrew calendar, which reflects a Jewish sense of time. All Jewish holidays start and end at sundown, and are tied to the phases of the sun and the moon so that they remain at same season of the year and the same phase of the moon. The secular calendar is only solar, so that both secular and Christian holidays are always at the same season, but not always at the same moon phase. Rosh Hashanah always falls in the autumn, usually in September or October, and always at the new phase of the moon. The Muslim calendar is exclusively lunar so that Muslim holy days move through the seasons but are always at the same phase of the moon.

Some Jewish communities celebrate Rosh Hashanah for two days, and some for one day. This comes from antiquity when there was still a temple in Jerusalem, but there were also substantial Jewish communities outside the land of Israel that wanted to celebrate in sync with Jews in Jerusalem. In this period, the Jews of Babylonia had to rely on a series of signal fires to let them know when people in Jerusalem could see the new moon. As the signal fires might take more than 24 hours and there were no cell phones in the first century, Jews outside of Israel began to extend many holidays to two days that Jews in Israel only celebrated on one day. In the modern period the Jewish Reform movement began celebrating Rosh Hashanah for one day.

Oddly enough, Jews in Israel today still celebrate Rosh Hashanah for two days. Because Jews had such a long history outside of the land of Israel, they developed a second set of Torah readings and a large collection of liturgical poems to make the second day of Rosh Hashanah beautiful and compelling. When Jews established the State of Israel in 1948, Rosh Hashanah became the one holiday that Orthodox and Conservative Jews celebrated for two days there, too.

Whether North American Jews celebrate for one or two days, Rosh Hashanah is a popular holiday for synagogue attendance and for visiting with families.

What to Expect at Home On Rosh Hashanah

Jewish Holiday Blessings

Jewish holidays traditionally begin at sunset, when Jews make a blessing on lighting candles. Before or after evening services at synagogue, the Jewish family has a ritual dinner in honor of the holiday. At home, families may recite the blessing over the wine to sanctify the holiday, and the blessing over the bread to elevate the meal. These traditions of blessing wine and food are part of the Jewish pattern of elevating the home table to the status of an altar. Usually, guests do not have to recite the blessings, but only to affirm them by saying "amen."

Ritual Foods for the New Year

If you have participated in Shabbat meals or other Jewish holidays, the rituals of blessing the bread and wine will be familiar to you. There is one special ritual for Rosh Hashanah meals, which is the meditation on (and eating of!) symbolic foods that are sweet, round, symbolize money, or make a pun on a Hebrew word that indicates good fortune. In most American Jewish families, the special foods are apples with honey and round challah (enriched, braided white bread) with raisins. Many prayer books contain a set meditation for eating these sweet foods, "May it be your will, our God and God of our ancestors, that you renew for us a good and sweet year."

Jews traditionally eat yellow or orange foods, like carrots, as a symbol of prosperity, as well as foods whose names pun with desirable outcomes for the New Year and foods with heads. Rosh Hashanah literally means the head of the year and therefore some Jews eat fish with the heads on, or calf brains. In the same spirit, feel free to eat a head of lettuce or cabbage instead--some French Jews eat food with a head of garlic in it. Some eat honey cake or teiglach, an Eastern European cookie that is boiled in honey, or other sweets. Pomegranates are traditional in some Jewish communities, because the many seeds inside symbolize abundance. Another tradition is to eat a new fruit on the second night of Rosh Hashanah.

What to Expect in the Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah

Brand New to the Synagogue?

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the most popular times of year for Jews to go to synagogue, but they also present an atypical synagogue experience. Most synagogues use the high attendance at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to fund their relatively expensive operations during the year, and so require worshippers to purchase tickets in advance. On a normal Shabbat or a less popular holiday, synagogues welcome anyone to just drop in to participate in services, so that's unusual.

Another crowd-related anomaly which may feel a little more welcoming than the tickets is the presence of volunteer ushers at many synagogues on the High Holidays. Again, there are not going to be ushers or greeters at a normal service. Ask for help if you don't know where to sit or what you need to have with you.

Traditionally, Jews pray a set service, mainly in Hebrew, with only a few opportunities for improvisation. The typical Saturday morning Sabbath service is longer than most Christian Sunday services, but the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services are much longer even than that. If you want to, you can pray for most of the day on both holidays. In addition to the regular prayers that Jews pray all the time, there are many special prayers for the holiday. There is a special prayer book just for these two holidays that contains not only the prayers, but the scriptural readings for the holiday.

Most prayer books that Jews use on the High Holidays acknowledge that many worshippers only come once a year and are not fluent Hebrew readers. They provide both translations of the Hebrew prayers and inspirational readings in English on the themes of the service. In the Reform movement, much of the service may be prayed in English. In many Orthodox services, where Hebrew is the default language for prayer, the worshipper can still find a prayer book for these holidays that contains the Hebrew prayers with English on facing pages. Most congregations provide the prayer books for worshippers, and it is good to be on the same page as everyone else. You are not obligated to pray, but it is good manners to stand and sit when others do.

At most synagogues, the dress code for the High Holidays is dressy business attire. It is a custom of long standing to buy new clothing in honor of the holiday, and in many congregations there is social pressure to look good. There are wide variations in standards of appropriate modest dress as well. In some congregations, all men cover their heads with a skullcap called a yarmulke or kippah. In some, women cover their heads completely, or with a kippah, or not at all, and in some, head covering is optional. There should be a basket of head coverings at the entrance to the sanctuary if people in this congregation expect worshippers to wear them. If most worshippers wear a prayer shawl for morning services or for the special evening service on Yom Kippur, the congregation may provide those, too.

Images of God as King and Parent

The salient themes of Rosh Hashanah prayers are God as King and God as Judge. At Rosh Hashanah, traditional prayers are peppered with additional references to divine kingship. The prayers emphasize the relationship between Jews and God--God's power and might and humanity's relative lack of power, as a way to excuse human failings.

The text of the prayer book is also full of language about the Jewish family relationship with God. The Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Hashanah is the sacrifice of Isaac, the ultimate test of Abraham's faith in the book of Genesis. Throughout the services, the prayers remind Jews that Jews have a family relationship with God, a history with God and with each other. Along with emphasizing God's mercy, the prayers address God at length as Avinu Malkenu, "Our ruler, our parent." Standing before the open ark where the Torah scrolls are displayed in white covers, the congregation sings a familiar melody addressing God in this way, in one of the characteristic moments of the holiday.

Blowing the Shofar, or Ram's Horn

Another distinctive part of Rosh Hashanah services is the shofar service, which usually follows the morning services. If Rosh Hashanah falls on Saturday, the shofar is not sounded. The shofar is usually a ram's horn, though some other kosher animal horns can be used. It's blown like a trumpet, but not musically. The person leading the service calls out a series of blasts. It's loud and in some way atavistic, recalling a pastoral past. Sometimes the person blowing the shofar wears a prayer shawl over his or her head, to shut out the congregation and concentrate, or not to be the focus of public attention. The traditional liturgy of the shofar service is verses about God's kingship and about the power of remembering.

Children on Rosh Hashanah

Unlike other Jewish holidays that are more centered on children, Rosh Hashanah and especially Yom Kippur are primarily adult holidays. Nevertheless, the High Holidays do provide some opportunities for children's education. Rosh Hashanah is a time for adults to model behavior and to integrate children into the adult world.

There are some good children's picture books and songs about Rosh Hashanah. A lot of these emphasize that Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world. For children, two symbols stand out. One is the shofar. (See page 7.) In religious school, the rabbi or teacher may take out the shofar and blow it, or let the children examine it. The second symbol of Rosh Hashanah is sweet food. Among North American Jews, the typical sweet foods are apples and honey. Children can prepare for Rosh Hashanah with their parents by going apple picking beforehand, and buying local honey.

On the evening of the second day of Rosh Hashanah, some Jews eat a new fruit, one they haven't tasted in the last six months. They do this in order to be eligible to say the blessing over new experiences, which Jews say on the first night of the holiday with the festival blessing over the wine. This is a fun custom for families. Children can help shop for exotic or unfamiliar fruit before the holiday, or parents can surprise them with the fruit and then the family can try it together at the second night meal.

Other foods that are typical of Rosh Hashanah (see Ritual Foods for the New Year) are honey cake and round challah, usually with raisins. (If your child doesn't like raisins, you can buy or bake round challah without them--they are supposed to be a treat.)

Other customs that have special meaning for children at Rosh Hashanah are sending New Year's cards. A good activity for children and families preparing for Rosh Hashanah is making cards. Today these cards can be sent virtually, on the internet, but children can still make the artwork and write the messages. It's also a custom to buy new clothing at the New Year, and to greet people, "I'shanah tovah tikatevu" (may you be inscribed for a good year) or "Happy New Year."

Yom Kippur--The Day of Atonement

Ten days after the Jewish New Year holiday of Rosh Hashanah comes the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. A day of collective confession, fasting and prayer, Yom Kippur is a serious holiday but not a sad one--an intense way to start the New Year.

What to Expect at Home on Yom Kippur--Fasting

Fasting on Yom Kippur is more than just not eating. There are five prohibitions for the Yom Kippur fast, which is a 25-hour fast:

1. eating and drinking
2. having sexual relations
3. washing
4. wearing leather shoes
5. applying cosmetics

In some Jewish neighborhoods, you may see people wearing sneakers with their dress clothes on the street, as part of the fast.

Children under 13 are not supposed to fast. People are not supposed to fast if it will harm their health. Most Jews believe that pregnant women and nursing mothers should not fast for this reason, though some Jewish women do fast when they are pregnant or nursing because there is disagreement about whether it is inherently harmful. Non-Jews are not obligated to fast in Jewish law, but if you are in an interfaith couple or are otherwise connected to the Jewish community, it's a good way to connect with the holiday spiritually. It is fine to come to synagogue even if you are not fasting.

The official reason to fast on Yom Kippur given in Leviticus 23 is to practice self-denial or self-affliction. Fasting on Yom Kippur can function either to help with the process of repentance, or provide a counter-irritant that distracts the person praying from how bad she feels about the sins she's trying to overcome. Some people find that fasting amplifies their response to the liturgy, especially to the memorial service in the afternoon. If you have a tendency to bury your feelings with food, fasting may put you in a position to feel things more intensely. Some take the opportunity to reflect on the plight of others who are hungry, and to recommit to helping feed them. The three practices of the High Holidays are repentance (teshuvah), prayer (tefillah) and charity (tzedakah.) Fasting can help focus attention on all three.

In a culture that puts as much weight on eating as Judaism does, fasting creates a lot of excitement. Hence, many Jewish families have folk traditions about what to eat before and after the fast. Many families eat a meat meal before the fast and a dairy one afterward, or have ideas about eating a lot or only a little beforehand. Joyous break-the-fast meals with friends and relatives are a strong Jewish cultural tradition.

What To Expect in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur

If this is your first Yom Kippur, you should be aware that it's an entire day of prayer, much longer than on Shabbat or any other Jewish holiday. There are five official services on Yom Kippur:

- Evening service, often called Kol Nidre after its opening ritual
- Morning service (Shacharit)
- Additional service (Musaf)
- Afternoon service (Minchah)
- Closing service (Neilah) which is only done on Yom Kippur

An ordinary sabbath or holiday only has four services, and none are as long and complex as those on Yom Kippur, which has many added poems and readings. Most synagogues have a break between the additional morning service and the afternoon service. Many people who fast find that they are tired and need a nap. Not everyone has the staying power to pray all the services, and many Jews just choose to go to their favorites. Kol Nidre, with its solemn tune, is probably most popular, and the memorial service, usually done after the Torah reading in the morning service, but sometimes moved to the afternoon, is also well-attended.

Ideas of Sin and Repentance in Judaism--Collective Responsibility and Fallibility

A key feature of Yom Kippur is that the congregation confesses to long preset lists of sins as a group. In this way individuals fulfill the Jewish legal requirement of confessing their sins in front of at least two witnesses without enduring embarrassment. The collective confession also brings to attention that we have collective responsibility for the actions of the community as a whole. At the end of each long catalog of all the various types of sin a person might commit, the authors of the prayer book have added the disclaimer that the worshippers are confessing all sins, even those they didn't know they were committing, even those they forgot.

It can seem a little funny to confess to everything, whether you know you did it or not. After all, doesn't sin depend on intentionality? Don't Jews believe that each person possesses Good Inclination and the Evil Inclination, a choice about whether to do right or wrong? This is all true, but the collective confession of Yom Kippur provides a chance to reflect on the community's collective responsibility to provide an atmosphere that encourages good behavior. It is also, to some extent, a reflection of the general Jewish cultural sense that Judaism is full of mysterious knowledge and that the worshippers might believe themselves to have violated principles they didn't know existed.

As the congregation goes at a breakneck rate through the list of sins in the prayer book, the person who is new to Jewish services and Judaism has an opportunity to learn a lot about Jewish ideas of morality and sin. Yom Kippur is the day when Jews atone for sins

against God, but there are many sins in this list that are transgressions of principles of how people should behave toward other people. There are a few reasons for this. It's not very easy to feel guilty for transgressing some ritual rule that is only a symbol of the Jewish attachment to God. The ancient and medieval rabbis who created Jewish liturgy, like modern people today, thought that the rules of behavior for Jews in relation to God were much harder to understand and somehow less important than how Jews dealt with other people. Furthermore, people may have transgressed moral principles of how to behave toward other people to whom they can't apologize, especially if the other person has died. Yom Kippur is also a day to ask God for help with doing better in human relationships. Though Jews are obligated to attempt to repair their relationships, it's not easy to implement every resolution.

The very first service of Yom Kippur, Kol Nidre, acknowledges the difficulty we face in keeping promises to ourselves. This service opens with the legal formula for absolving people from unkept vows. Caught up in the enthusiasm for self-improvement, one might vow to do something that one cannot. This ritual also reminds the congregation of all the resolutions that they failed to implement in the previous year.

Children on Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur is a tough time to be a parent, if only because of the responsibility for preparing food for young children while fasting. Parents have to be aware of their children, who may be trying to behave well in long services next to them, or may be in babysitting or a children's service without them. It's also hard because the subject of right and wrong is so difficult to approach in a way that fosters moral development without causing the child to be fearful.

For children themselves, though, Yom Kippur is not so bad. Children are surprisingly interested in fasting and sin, and Yom Kippur is a quiet, contemplative day that gives them a chance to ask questions about right and wrong, God and religion.

Yom Kippur, more than any other holiday, is a holiday about growing up, because children aren't allowed to fast until they are 13, the age of bar or bat mitzvah. Plan to have a lot of conversations about who is and isn't allowed to fast! It's also a great time to talk about apologies and making amends. There are some good picture books for younger children about Yom Kippur, and retellings of the Book of Jonah, which is traditionally read during the afternoon service on Yom Kippur. Most synagogues do have children's services and activities for children. What they provide varies from pared-down prayers from the adult services to directed play and crafts projects.

Getting The Most Out of Challenging Holidays

It's difficult to understand why many Jews only go to synagogue on the high holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah, which means the New Year, is a solemn holiday that has more set services and more prayers in its traditional liturgy than an ordinary Shabbat or weekday does. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is even more solemn, with even more traditional liturgy and a stronger focus on repentance from sin, and of course, it's a fast day. On the high holidays, most synagogues charge their congregants for tickets of admission to the services. For the majority of North American Jews, going to synagogue to pray all day when they don't usually pray in a congregation at all is comparable to hiking up a mountain after walking around the block once or twice.

Yet for some reason, many synagogues are packed with people who haven't been through their doors much in the last year. Some synagogues need to place folding chairs in front of video monitors in unused rooms to cope with the overflow crowd from the main sanctuary. They pay to crowd together in their nicest new clothing, to feel bored and guilty because they can't read Hebrew and to listen to a very long sermon. Why does it work this way, and why do some nice Jewish boys and girls want to subject their non-Jewish partners to this ordeal as their first experience of Judaism?

Clearly there is something about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that makes these holidays feel special and important to Jews. Perhaps it is their serious themes, or a sense of nostalgic pleasure in the repetition of the many synagogue rituals. These holidays are replete with Jewish cultural messages, and in this way they could prove to be a good introduction to Jewish services for a non-Jewish partner or family member.

For many people, the secular New Year in January is a time to resolve to do better. The Jewish New Year has a more serious focus on self-improvement. The schedule of holidays can provide an unparalleled opportunity for structured reflection and repentance. Many Jewish holidays have themes that are focused on the home, but Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are all about the synagogue and the community, because Judaism recognizes that the individual doesn't change alone. This may be one reason why these holidays have evolved many synagogue observances and only a few home-based traditions, and why Jews continue to brave the crowds at synagogue on these holidays more than on any others.

Some Jews get a lot of satisfaction out of the rituals of repentance. The liturgy of these holidays is beautiful. Jews in the ancient and medieval periods created many liturgical poems to enhance the experience of the service. Many people who aren't comfortable with the literary qualities of the medieval Hebrew have a strong emotional response to the tunes, which seem to bring out the solemn themes of the holidays. In nearly every variety of Jewish congregation, these holidays present the opportunity for service leaders, musicians and choirs to embellish prayer with musical flourishes. Service

leaders today follow an ancient tradition of introducing new readings and new tunes, though today these readings are generally in English instead of Hebrew. The long sermons, which can sometimes be stultifying and sometimes stimulating, are also an old tradition.

For many Jews, Rosh Hashanah has aesthetic memories associated with the blowing of the shofar, or ram's horn. Congregations put white mantles on their Torah scrolls, and in some places, people wear special clothing. All of these changes to the usual synagogue routine add to a sense of returning to the strong impressions of childhood.

In addition to wanting to repent in community, many Jews have a strong tradition of remembering family members who have died. They participate in the folk tradition of visiting graves during the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. They light a memorial (yahrzeit) candle before Yom Kippur, and attend the memorial service, Yizkor, in the late morning or early afternoon. Remembering the dead and establishing a connection to the past is a very important theme of the holidays.

Training for a Marathon of Repentance

One way to make these holidays more meaningful that can work for people whether or not they believe in God or religion is to engage in the process of reflection and repentance that are the special hallmarks of the season. Traditional Jewish customs can constitute a sort of getting in shape to reform your life for the New Year, or at least a chance to think about how you would like to be living.

Elul--Gaining Strength for Repentance

There are many customs associated with the month preceding Rosh Hashanah, the Hebrew month of Elul. Sephardim, Jews whose ancestors lived in Spain and other Muslim countries during the Middle Ages, have the custom to get up earlier and recite selichot, prayers of repentance. Other Jews begin saying these prayers only in the week before Rosh Hashanah. Among Ashkenazim, Jews whose ancestors lived in Germany and other European Christian countries in the Middle Ages, there is a custom to blow the shofar, or ram's horn, every morning for the entire month before Rosh Hashanah. During the month before Rosh Hashanah, many Jews recite Psalm 27, a psalm with themes of trust in God, as part of their usual prayer routine.

These customs are part of gearing up for repentance, and have the effect of focusing attention on our need for change in the upcoming New Year. This is something that doesn't require any sort of religious feeling. Reforming your life is a practical matter, one that does not require divine intervention--but for people who do believe in God, the reminder of a relationship with God can buttress them in their resolve. Some play with the Hebrew letters of the month of Elul, aleph lamed vav alef, making them an acronym for Ani L'Dodi V'Dodi Li--"I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." (Song of Songs 6:3) In this verse, God and the individual are like lover and beloved. The month before Rosh Hashanah can be an opportunity to focus on the individual's relationship with God as a way of gaining strength for the process of change.

Selichot--Prayers of Repentance

On the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah, many Jewish communities begin saying selichot. (In some communities, the service is pronounced and transliterated selichos.) In some congregations, there is a custom of doing this just on the Saturday night preceding, preferably so that people wind up in synagogue at midnight. The service includes repeated recitations of God's attributes, which are also a feature of the Yom Kippur prayers. The liturgy asks God's mercy in the names of our ancestors. Attending a night-time selichot service can provide an intense taste of the spiritual flavors of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and it probably won't be quite as crowded as some of the most popular services during the actual holidays.

Other Rituals During the Days of Awe

During the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, called the Days of Awe, there are many customs that can help people get into the mood for repentance. Some of these are folk customs that Jewish religious authorities initially discouraged, seeing them as a substitute for repentance. In recent times, Jews have reclaimed some of these customs in order to make the High Holidays more meaningful.

Tashlich

In some communities, it's the custom to perform the ritual of tashlich, a symbolic casting away of sins, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah in the afternoon, but it can be done any time during the Days of Awe. A group of people goes to a body of water and throws the crumbs from their pockets into it. The preference in this ritual is to use a body of water that has fish in it, so that the fish will eat the crumbs. Many liberal Jewish congregations organize groups to go together to bodies of water to do tashlich.

Visiting Graves

A popular folk custom for which there is no set liturgy is visiting the graves of family members during the Days of Awe. There are lots of reasons this might be customary. Perhaps it is because of the focus on remembrance that characterizes Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Some people may be mustering all of their resources toward the process of repentance and change, including their memories of important people in their lives who have passed away.

Kapparot and Giving to Charity

You may have read about the strange custom of swinging a chicken over your head before Yom Kippur. A small minority of Jews still practice this folk custom, called kapparot or kappores in the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, reciting prayers over the chicken and then sending it to be slaughtered in a kosher fashion and donated to the poor. This was another custom that many rabbis did not like: they didn't want Jews to think that it was enough to do the symbolic action without real repentance. There are many other reasons why this custom is problematic.

Some people who continue this custom do it with a shirt or a bag of money. They swing the bag overhead, and recite the same formula. This is much less cruel to animals, and provides the person with an opportunity to give to charity. The idea that giving to charity helps a person to atone for sins is probably related to the biblical concept of sacrificing. Jewish concepts of charity go beyond sacrifice; the Hebrew word for charity, tzedakah, means justice. Jews give money to charity in order to promote justice in the world-- something that one does not have to be Jewish or religious at all to do.

The Most Important Custom: Repairing Relationships With People

The most important custom of the Days of Awe is the custom of apologizing to people in our lives for things we have done to offend them in the past year. While Yom Kippur atones for sins between people and God, problems that occur between people are a human responsibility.

There does not seem to be a concept in Jewish religious literature of forgiving people before they repent, or whether or not they repent. This is different than some ideas expressed in Christianity. Jewish theology doesn't seem to expect that even God will forgive people who do not repent. The High Holiday liturgy imagines God waiting for the individual to turn to God, but ready to receive the person as soon as they repent.

It's hard for human beings to forgive people when they have apologized, but Jewish sources require this. Not to accept someone else's apologies and repentance is itself a sin. This may be the most effort that the individual expends in their spiritual workouts in training for these holidays. It may be as difficult, or even more difficult, to forgive other people than it is to ask for forgiveness.

There is a lot about Judaism that is particularistic and cultural and to some extent, exclusive. The High Holidays are full of Hebrew language, folk customs and new and strange images and symbols. What's universal is the human desire to improve ourselves, to start off fresh, repair relationships and behave better. As members of interfaith families and communities, we can share these universal goals with each other, and celebrate a sweet year together.