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High Holy Days

the basics



InterfaithFamily.com

Encouraging Jewish Choices & A Welcoming Jewish Community

High Holy Days

Rosh Hashanah is the first of the High Holy Days, beginning 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. Traditionally, we are given the period of the ten days, these Days of Awe, to make amends for our transgressions. By Yom Kippur, it is believed that, having made amends, our acts of repentance can compensate for the rest of the year. Worship services give us time to reflect and resolve to do better in the coming year.

In Judaism, a transgression or “sin” indicates a failure to fulfill an obligation to another person or to God. To atone for sins against another person, you must first apologize directly, right the wrongs if possible and ask for forgiveness. Yom Kippur prayer atones only for sins between people and God, and not for sins against another person. This must all be done before the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

The communal confession, recited on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is called *Vidui* (Hebrew for “confession”). It contains a litany of human sins. The entire congregation recites it collectively and in the plural, emphasizing communal responsibility for sins.

Rosh Hashanah (literally “Head of the Year” in Hebrew) is the New Year. In the Torah we read, “In the seventh month (*Tishrei*), 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*” (*Leviticus 23:23-25*). The Hebrew calendar dates the Jewish New Year according to an ancient rabbinic understanding of when the world was created.

How Do We Celebrate Rosh Hashanah At Home?

The traditional start of the holiday is at the evening meal; Jewish holidays begin at sunset before the day of the holiday. Menus vary from house to house, but two customs are widely followed. We make or buy a round challah with raisins: the roundness of the bread symbolizes the never-ending cycle of time and sweetness of the raisins symbolizes the hope that the coming year will be a sweet one. We also eat apples dipped in honey as a symbol of the wish that the entire new year be a sweet year.



Before the Rosh Hashanah meal, as is custom at the start of most Jewish holidays, candles are lit with this blessing:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ
לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל
[שַׁבָּת וְשֶׁל] יוֹם טוֹב.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
A-SHER KID'SHA-NU B'MITZ-VO-TAV
VITZ-I-VA-NU
L'HAD'LIK NER SHEL
[SHAB-BAT V'SHEL] YOM TOV.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the universe,
who has sanctified us
with Your commandments
and commanded us
to light the [Sabbath and]
holiday lights.

[A traditional translation.]

Holy One of Blessing,
Your Presence fills creation,
You make us holy
with Your commandments and calling us
to light the lights of [Shabbat and]
this holy day.

[An alternative translation.]

Then we raise a cup of wine and say:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
BO-REY P'RI HA-GA-FEN.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the universe,
Who creates the fruit of the vine.
[A traditional translation.]

Holy One of Blessing,
Your Presence fills creation,
forming the fruit of the vine.
*[An alternative translation
from Vetaher Libenu, a prayerbook created by
Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley.]*



Before cutting or breaking the round challah, we say the blessing over bread, which acts as a blanket blessing over all food we will be eating at the meal:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמּוֹצִיא לַחֵם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
HA-MOTZ-I LECH-EM
MIN HA-AR-ETZ.

And for the holiday itself we say:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שְׁהַחִינּוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהַגִּיעֵנוּ לְזִמַּן הַזֶּה.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
SH-HEKH-I-YA-NU V'KI'MA-NU
V'HI-GI-A-NU LAZ'MAN HA-ZE.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the Universe,
who has kept us alive and sustained us
and permitted us to reach this moment.
*[A traditional translation
from The Jewish Catalogue.]*

Blessed be the Eternal One,
Source of Life,
Who has given us life, helped us to grow,
and enabled us to reach this moment.
*[An alternative translation
from How to Raise a Jewish Child.]*

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the universe,
Who brings forth bread from the earth
[A traditional translation.]

Our praise to You, Adonai
our God, Sovereign of the universe,
who brings forth bread from the earth.
[From Mishkan T'filah, a Reform prayerbook.]

And last but not least, we bless the apples dipped in honey. This blessing has two parts: first, the customary blessing over fruit from a tree, then a line specific to a sweet year:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
BO-REY P'RI HA-ETZ.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the universe,
Who creates the fruit of the tree.
[A traditional translation.]

Holy One of Blessing,
Your Presence fills creation,
forming the fruit of the tree.
*[An alternative translation from Vetaher
Libenu.]*

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ,
ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ,
יְאֻלְהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ,
שֶׁתְּחַדֵּשׁ עֵלֵנוּ
שָׁנָה טוֹבָה וּמְתוּקָה.

Y'HI RA-TZON MIL-FA-NE-KHA
A-DON-AI EL-O-HEY-NU
V'EL-O-HEY AV-O-TEY-NU,
SHEH-T'CHA-DESH A-LEY-NU
SHA-NA TOV-A UM'TU-KA

May it be Your will, Lord our God,
and God of our ancestors,
to renew us with
a good, sweet new year.

[A traditional translation.]

Wishing that Adonai our God,
and God of our parents,
renews us for
a happy and sweet new year.

[An alternative translation.]



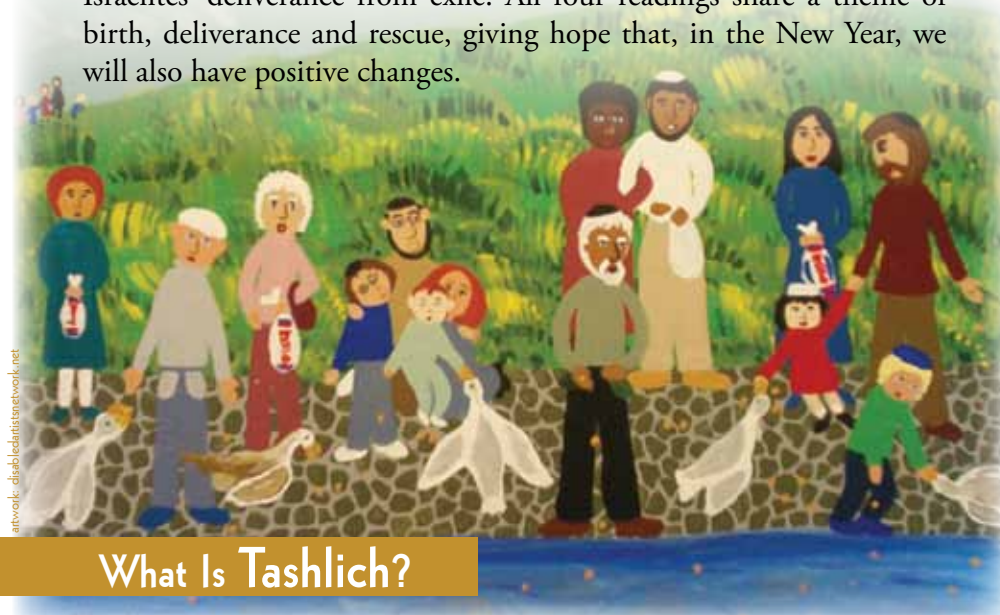
What Happens At The Synagogue?

Rosh Hashanah prayers focus on the themes of judgment and repentance. God is visualized as a parent and ruler in prayers that are sung to special holiday melodies. The most famous of these is *Avinu Malkeinu*, which translates to Our Father, Our King (or, Our Parent, Our Ruler). The *shofar*, a ram's horn, is blown as a wake up call to pay attention to the ending of the year.

Services on Rosh Hashanah consist of two main parts: *Shacharit* (morning) and *Musaf* (additional, coming from the additional sacrifice made at the Temple in Jerusalem on holy days). Some synagogues will also offer *Mincha* (afternoon) and *Ma'ariv* (evening) services, which are shorter than the combined morning services.

It is the custom of many Reform synagogues to only offer services on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Synagogues of other denominations, including Conservative, Reconstructionist and Orthodox, will offer services on both days of the holiday.

During the morning service on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the Torah readings tell the powerful and problematic stories of the birth of Isaac, the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael into the desert, and their rescue by God. The haftarah reading is from Judges, examining the birth of Samuel. The Torah reading for the second day tells of the 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*. The haftarah reading is from Jeremiah, about a vision concerning the Israelites' deliverance from exile. All four readings share a theme of birth, deliverance and rescue, giving hope that, in the New Year, we will also have positive changes.



What Is Tashlich?

Tashlich is the Hebrew word for "send off" or "cast away." It is traditional to go to a body of moving water, such as a lake, river or harbor, on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah for a ceremony in which we symbolically cast off our sins by emptying crumbs from our pockets into the water. The ceremony comes from Micah 7:19 – "**You will cast [tashlikh] your sins into the depths of the water**" – a verse that is customarily recited, along with Psalms 118:5-9, Psalm 33 and Psalm 130, at the ceremony.

Yom Kippur

means “Day of Atonement” In Hebrew. This day is also called Shabbat Shabbaton, the “Sabbath of Sabbaths,” in the Bible. Healthy adults are commanded to refrain from eating and drinking from sunset to sunset to remind us of the frailty of the human body and the many ways we are tempted.

The restrictions of Yom Kippur help us focus our senses and realize our ability to resist temptation. It is customary to wear white on the holiday because Jews are traditionally buried in plain white garments and this 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 and arrogance.



How Do We Celebrate Yom Kippur At Home?

Before sundown, families and friends gather together and eat the last meal before the start of Yom Kippur and the period of fasting. It is only when the last bite is eaten, and the candles are lit, that the holy day and the fast begin.

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. There is no blessing said over the memorial candles. The blessing for the Yom Kippur candles is:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ
לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל
[שַׁבָּת וְשֶׁל] יוֹם טוֹב.
BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
A-SHER KID'SHA-NU B'MITZ-VO-TAV
VITZ-I-VA-NU
L'HAD'LIK NER SHEL
[SHAB-BAT V'SHEL] YOM TOV.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the universe,
who has sanctified us
with Your commandments
and commanded us
to light the [Sabbath and]
holiday lights.

[A traditional translation.]

Holy One of Blessing,
Your Presence fills creation,
You make us holy
with Your commandments and calling us
to light the lights of [Shabbat and]
this holy day.

[An alternative translation.]

What Happens At Synagogue?

Kol Nidre

This is the name of the evening service that opens with a prayer of the same name, usually sung to a haunting melody. *Kol Nidre* is a declaration, in Aramaic, that nullifies all the vows and promises that each person will make to God and to him/herself in the coming year. It serves as an acknowledgment of the weakness of human resolution.

Yom Kippur Day

Yom Kippur services run throughout most of the day: *Shacharit* (the morning service) is usually followed by a Torah service. The Torah reading describes the rituals for Yom Kippur, as they were practiced in the original Temple in Jerusalem. An alternate Torah reading may be used instead, which tells how the Torah is addressed to all people. The haftarah reading from Isaiah teaches that God looks for justice and mercy, and does not want people to fast out of obligation alone. These readings were selected as they each directly relate to Yom Kippur's rituals and goals.

Glossary

During *Musaf* (“additional” service), which follows Shacharit, we honor all those of every race, faith and nation who have been innocent victims of cruelty, persecution and murder, who have been marked out as being different, in a service known as the “martyrology.”

The afternoon (*Mincha*) service includes a Torah reading from Leviticus. Unusual to a Minchah service, there is also a Haftarah reading: the Book of Jonah. There are three possible reasons why the Book of Jonah was selected for Yom Kippur: it’s a story about citizens of a city who do not have a particular relationship to God, who repent and are forgiven; it teaches that God has compassion for all living things and prefers repentance to destruction; or we learn from Jonah’s example that we cannot flee God.

Yizkor Service

Yizkor is a memorial service that takes place late on Yom Kippur afternoon. Names of those who are being remembered are read aloud.

Ne’ilah Service

The concluding service is called *Ne’ilah*, from the Hebrew “to lock.” This refers to the symbolic closing of heaven’s gates and sealing of the Book of Life for another year. Many people stand throughout this short emotionally powerful service, which ends with a final shofar blast. In some congregations, *Ne’ilah* may be followed by a short evening (*Ma’ariv*) service, and/or *Havdalah*, the ceremony that concludes holidays and every Sabbath.

Conclusion

Yom Kippur ends with a break-the-fast celebration. Family and friends join together with food they have prepared in advance. It is traditional to invite newcomers, visitors from out of town and everyone who might be alone during the holiday to share the break-the-fast meal. Many synagogue families also contribute both money and non-perishable food at this time, to help feed the hungry in their communities.

High Holy Days: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

L’shanah Tovah Tikatayvu: “May you be inscribed for a good year.” Greeting which expresses the hope you will be written in the Book of Life and granted happiness and fulfillment in the year ahead.

Machzor: High Holy Day prayerbook, literally means “cycle” in Hebrew.

Shofar: Made from the horn of a ram, the *shofar* is a basic instrument that is blown daily in the month preceding Rosh Hashanah, on Rosh Hashanah, and at the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

Tallit: A prayer shawl traditionally used during any prayer service that includes a Torah reading. It is worn for the Yom Kippur evening service, Kol Nidre, even though the Torah is not read at that time, as all of the Yom Kippur services are meant to be a continuation, as if there isn’t a break between Kol Nidre and Shacharit the next morning.

Teshuvah: Literally means “returning,” a Hebrew term for repentance. Think of it as “turning a new leaf” or “turning over.”

Tzedakah: “Righteousness,” often mistranslated as “charity.”

Yahrzeit candle: Memorial candle lit on the anniversary of a loved one’s death, on Yom Kippur, and whenever Yizkor is recited.

Yom Tov: Literally “a good day” in Hebrew, it is often pronounced *Yuntiff* (the Yiddish pronunciation) and is used as a synonym for “holiday.” A standard holiday greeting is “*Gut Yuntiff*” (Yiddish for “good good day”).



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*InterfaithFamily.com gratefully acknowledges the support of
the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund and
the Walter and Elise Haas Fund.*

*This booklet is one of a series originally created by Karen Kushner at The Jewish Welcome Network.
Previous versions of some of the booklets were published by
Project Welcome of the Union for Reform Judaism:
www.urj.org/outreach.*