

# The High Holidays in Interfaith Families

**Three Essays from InterfaithFamily.com, with Discussion Guide, Tips, Recommended Resources and Activities for Children**

**By InterfaithFamily.com**

## Understanding the High Holy Days

By Rabbi Jonathan Kraus

"Why are Rosh Hashanah and especially Yom Kippur so important to my Jewish partner? He almost never attends services the rest of the year, isn't observant and doesn't even know what he believes about God. Yet, at this time of year, he insists on attending services. What's the big deal with these holidays?"

There are both "official" and "unofficial" answers to these questions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the unofficial explanations are often the more significant ones. The official answers (to which I'll return shortly) speak in terms like judgment, sin, repentance, life and death. The unofficial answers have something to do with the complicated puzzle of American Jewish identity.

For many Jews in this country, attending High Holy Day services (particularly, the first evening service of Yom Kippur) is a way of affirming that we still are part of the Jewish people. Finding our way to a synagogue during these days is a way of demonstrating that we haven't yielded to assimilation, haven't broken the ancient chain of the Jewish people's survival and continuity. Being with our people at services says that no matter how far we may have drifted from active involvement with the Jewish religion, we're still proud to be Jews. We still belong. We still care about being Jewish--even if we're not very religious and are not sure how we feel about the content of those services. Many times, our participation also says that we're still connected with the values of parents and grandparents, for whom our attendance (or absence!) is a very powerful symbol.

Notice that these "unofficial" answers have little to do with theology or even with the religious significance of the prayers and rituals. That's because for many American Jews, their "Jewishness" is not first and foremost a matter of religion. Many American Jews will tell you that their Jewish identity is primarily ethnic or cultural or communal. They speak about Jewish holiday customs or Jewish ethical values or a feeling of connection they associate with being Jewish that seems, to them, to be somewhat separate from the Jewish religion.

While I take issue with that perspective, I'll save my objections for another time. What's important for understanding this High Holy Day commitment is that in the mind of your loved one, the urgency of attending services may not be primarily about the religious significance of the ritual.

Nonetheless, if you will be joining your partner to sit through an unusually long and crowded synagogue service, you might want to know a little more about what to expect and what the ritual means officially. For most Jews, the term, "High Holy Days" is the title given to a period of 10 days that stretch between the holy day of Rosh Hashanah--which means, literally, "head of the year"--and Yom Kippur--the day of atonement. Both holy days have their earliest roots in the Hebrew Bible (see, for instance, Leviticus 23:23-32), though the name Rosh Hashanah was not used until significantly later in Jewish history.

Rosh Hashanah ushers in the Jewish new year and with it a period of profound self-examination and repentance. It is, therefore, a day of joyous celebration balanced against a humbling and solemn consideration of how well (or poorly) we have used the gift of the previous year. Tradition teaches that God judges each of us individually and our community as a whole on

Rosh Hashanah. Tradition also teaches that the result of God's judgment will be a matter of life and death (either figurative or literal, depending on your theological orientation). Our prayers, songs and rituals, therefore, focus on confessing the ways in which we've gone astray, asking forgiveness for occasions on which we've missed the mark, and committing ourselves to acts of repentance.

Note that we go through this process collectively. We ask for forgiveness and repent almost exclusively in the first person plural! This use of "we" versus "I" reflects Judaism's emphasis on community. Our first concern is how well the Jewish community as a whole has fulfilled its covenant (sacred agreement) with God. Our first responsibility is to live in such a way that we help the community be the kind of holy people God has challenged us to become. Of course, our Rosh Hashanah observances also celebrate the possibility of a new beginning that comes with the new year--God's gift to us if we engage in this cleansing process with sincerity.

Some distinctive observances to watch and listen for on Rosh Hashanah: the extensive ritual for sounding of the shofar (ram's horn) during the morning service, which is mandated by the Torah and serves as a deeply moving call to renewed awareness and action; eating apples and honey for a sweet year; and greeting others by expressing the hope that they will be judged for a good year (in Hebrew, it's "Shanah tovah."). Depending on the congregation you join, you also may participate in Tashlich--an outdoor, afternoon ceremony in which we symbolically cast away our sins by throwing bread crumbs (or other, less traditional things such as little stones) into a body of water.

Yom Kippur begins in the evening 10 days later. Its mood is one of deep solemnity, contrition and humility. According to tradition, the judgments begun on Rosh Hashanah are sealed and finalized on Yom Kippur. Because Leviticus (23:27) instructs that self-affliction should be part of this day dedicated to repentance, most Jews will observe a complete fast for at least part of the day. In fact, many Jews will spend almost the entire day at the synagogue (from sundown to sundown) engaged in fasting, prayer, reflection and repentance. The observance ends with the setting of the sun, a final sounding of the shofar--dramatically marking the end of this intensely spiritual day and as a reminder of ancient practice in the Jerusalem Temple--and then, gatherings to break the fast together.

The heart of Yom Kippur observances is its liturgy. The opening, evening service centers around an ancient formula known as Kol Nidre. Kol Nidre is actually an ancient legal formula that absolves us of vows and oaths we may take between this Yom Kippur and the next one. I suspect that the prayer is revered as much for its haunting and powerful music as for its somewhat complicated message.

While Yom Kippur services may vary somewhat from synagogue to synagogue, all will center around communal confessions and introspection, requests for forgiveness and the effort to obtain perspective on our present lives by placing them in the context of the past. More specifically, synagogues hold a special Yizkor, or memorial, Service to honor loved ones who have died and to gain important insight from both their lives and deaths. Many synagogues also honor the martyrs of the Jewish people throughout history and, again, seek to learn important lessons from the humbling example of their sacrifices. Then, as Yom Kippur draws to a close, the observance concludes with the Neilah, or locking, service--a final chance to repent before the symbolic gates of repentance are closed and locked to us.

**Jonathan Kraus is Rabbi of Beth El Temple Center in Belmont, Mass.**

## Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the Non-Jewish Partner

By Andrea King

Ben and I had been married for a couple of years when I asked him to take me to a High Holy Day service. As a regular churchgoer who enjoyed the ceremonies and rituals of worship, I thought I'd appreciate the service. Besides, I wanted a glimpse into Ben's background.

It turned out to be one of the most disconcerting experiences of my life. Yom Kippur was a blistering September day and the temple was packed. When we arrived, the service was already in progress, but no one looked askance as we (and several other late arrivals) found seats. I noticed that many people seemed to be comfortable talking and walking around during the service. The music, instead of being joyful and uplifting, was downright mournful. To top it off, when the service ended, it just ended. No triumphal procession down the aisle and out of the building to carry the message of faith into the world. People simply left. This was not how we Episcopalians worshiped!

Suddenly I felt distanced from Ben; maybe we didn't share as much as I had thought. This was the one service of the year he was willing to attend, and I wanted to share it with him, but I could not. It was simply too different.

Twenty-some years later, I know that my reaction was predictable. Interfaith couples tend to build their relationships on their similarities rather than on their differences. What the couple shares is much more important to each partner than the ways in which they differ. Couples tend to identify the parallel threads in their ceremonies and holidays, while playing down the differences.

It's easy, for example, to find all the ways that a christening is like a bris (circumcision ceremony) or baby-naming. The Jewish Shabbat and the Christian Sabbath are both designed to be days of rest and worship, set apart from the rest of the week. Christmas and Hanukkah, because they occur at the same time of year, are easy to link. Passover and Easter also have the calendar in common, and because the Last Supper was in all probability a Passover seder, the bond between the two holidays is especially strong.

This comparability can be convenient and comfortable for the Christian partner: for each new Jewish holiday or event, there seems to be a familiar Christian parallel. That, in a nutshell, is why Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are so difficult for non-Jewish interfaith partners. There is no Christian analogy to the High Holy Days.

The two Christian festivals that most American Christians celebrate are Christmas and Easter, which go nicely with Hanukkah and Passover. All four have messages of hope and freedom; all four have home-based customs that focus on children; all four are essentially fun. For many interfaith couples, the "Four-Holiday Calendar" fills their need and/or desire for religious observance.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur do not make it onto this top-four list, despite the central role that the High Holy Days play within Judaism. Why? First, there is no big Christian holiday in September to balance them. Second, the whole tone of High Holy Day services is foreign to most Christians. If you haven't grown up with them, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are not

easy to understand and appreciate. Somber self-reflection is seldom the theme at Christmas or Easter services. Third, there are few home-based customs in connection with the High Holy Days, so it's difficult to include young children in the observance. Finally, even though it's the one time of year that many Jews are drawn to services, the Jewish partner may not be able to articulate why the High Holy Days are meaningful to him/her, and it's hard to share what you can't talk about.

So why bother with the High Holy Days? Because, even for the non-Jew, there can be meaning in the services and value in the exercise of self-reflection.

Through 20-odd years of Rosh Hashanah, Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur services, I have grown to appreciate them. I see them now as an opportunity to take a break from the hectic demands of family and work, a time to look honestly at my goals and progress, my shortcomings and strivings. The cycle of High Holy Day services is a progression that offers me a chance to clear the dust, cobwebs and disorder from my mind, re-focus on my priorities, and start fresh. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur give us a couple of family days without having to entertain, travel, shop, or even cook much. We can spend time together and, if we choose, take stock of where we've been and where we're going.

I didn't grow up with the High Holy Days. Hearing the *shofar* (ram's horn, which is blown on the High Holidays) or the *Kol Nidre* (haunting chant that is offered on the evening of Yom Kippur) will never transport me back to my childhood as it does Ben. For me, the High Holy Days are an adult expression of my continuing growth as a thinking, feeling, caring human being. At High Holy Day services I am part of a community engaged in the process of self-examination. There is meaning in this uniquely Jewish observance, even for this non-Jew.



**Andrea King is the Christian partner in an interfaith marriage of 25 years. She and her husband, Ben Cardozo, live in Santa Monica, Calif. The family belongs to Beth Shir Sholom, a Reform synagogue, where their son Nathan became bar mitzvah, Ben has served on the Board, and Andrea heads the outreach program. Ms. King is the author of *If I'm Jewish and You're Christian, What are the Kids?* (UAHC Press, 1993). She holds a master's degree in education, and supervises the preschools for the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District.**

## Grandparenting for the High Holidays

**By Zell Schulman**

As the Jewish grandmother of nine, my plate is overflowing with pride and joy. Yet whenever the High Holy Days approach, my heart is distressed. As an only child, from a traditional, kosher home, with two of my four children intermarried, I still deal with "Jewish guilt." I'm from the generation where "Jewish guilt" was part of being Jewish. It was our families' way of getting their point across. Comedians have had great success with this concept. Though the guilt has gone from stage 10 to stage two or three, it may never go away completely. Maybe reaching my 70s has helped though, as I do believe I've finally rearranged my priorities.

More than 16 years ago our oldest son married a lovely, beautiful, and caring woman, who chose Judaism. They have two sons, 14 and 16. Our youngest son also married a lovely, beautiful, caring woman, who did not wish to choose Judaism, but promised to raise their children as Jews. They have three children, two boys, ages 7 and 11, both with special needs, and a darling 4-year-old daughter.

Our oldest son and his family live near us. Our youngest son and his family live in California. Neither family is into practicing Judaism in a major way. Our oldest son and his family are affiliated with a Humanistic Jewish Congregation. Their younger son became bar mitzvah (assumed the responsibilities and privileges of an adult Jew) last year. Our youngest son's family is unaffiliated, but practices "culinary Judaism." You know, honey cake on Rosh Hashanah, latkes (fried potato pancakes) at Hanukkah and a seder (ritual meal) at Passover.

I used to send cards, books and holiday packages to our younger son and his family, hoping they would include some Jewish traditions at the holidays. I believe this only antagonized them. Early in their marriage I purchased tickets for them to attend services at a large and quite affluent congregation. My daughter-in-law's comment was, "I felt like I was in Neiman Marcus."

Now, I don't send packages, New Year cards, or even call anymore before or during the High Holidays. I have found that less is better. I do receive a call at High Holiday time. The phone call may arrive a day or two late, but at least it comes.

In the early years of their marriage, when the High Holidays were near, I would ask my oldest son, "Are you coming with us to services?" "Will you join us for lunch or break-fast after services?" "Would you like us to meet you for the children's services?" Not a good way to endear ourselves to them. I stopped asking or expecting anything. Now, should an opportunity arrive when we can be together, I only try to say positive things, no negatives.

As my grandchildren grew older and I grew wiser, several High Holiday traditions have evolved. My mother, of blessed memory, always bought new clothes for me to wear on Rosh Hashanah. I've tried passing this tradition down by sending each grandchild a check with a note a week or two before school begins in the fall. They may not buy clothing, but they have purchased books, a box of sweets, new software for their computer, or an additional game for their Game Boys. It helps us communicate on their level. When they call or write to thank me, it provides an opportunity for me to speak with them about the upcoming High Holidays. "I'm so glad you bought that," I

say. "It's always nice to begin the school year with something new. I bought myself something, too: it's a new outfit for the Jewish New Year."

There are traditions which our forefathers handed down, and then there are new traditions we can establish to make the Jewish New Year special. Several weeks before the High Holidays arrive, I send each family a jar of honey, a project that benefits my temple sisterhood.

A tradition I've continued since our children attended college has been to send tins of home-made strudel and honey cake at the High Holidays. Today, all four of my children's families receive a tin of holiday goodies for a sweet year. (Should you not have the time or inclination to bake, you can order a gift basket from Kosher Cornucopia ([www.koshercornucopia.com](http://www.koshercornucopia.com)) or Kosher Gift Baskets ([www.koshergiftbaskets.com](http://www.koshergiftbaskets.com)).

There's nothing like sharing a holiday meal together as a family. I've negotiated time and dress code for my children, whether they are visiting or live near. Now whichever family members happen to be in town look forward to being together for lunch after Rosh Hashanah services. I usually include friends without families nearby, and I've served the same menu for years. My children would get upset if I changed it.

When my children arrive at my home for lunch, I never ask if they've been to services. I only welcome them with love and understanding. If the couple is happy, the children are well cared for, and everyone is healthy, what more can a grandmother ask for?



**Zell Schulman is a Certified Culinary Professional and member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals. She is the author of three books, *Let My People Eat! Passover Seders Made Simple* (Macmillan, 1998), *Planning Perfect Parties* (Zee Publishing, 1989), and *Something Different for Passover* (Triad Publishing, 1986). Her column, "The Modern Jewish Cook," appears in *American Israelite*, the oldest Jewish weekly in the United States.**

## Discussion Guide

### Discussion Questions for *Understanding the High Holy Days*

1. Do you agree with Rabbi Kraus' theory about the "official" and "unofficial" reasons Jews attend synagogue on the High Holidays?
2. What do the High Holidays mean to you?
3. How do you feel about fasting on Yom Kippur? Are the reasons Rabbi Kraus offers sufficient reasons to not eat for 24 hours?
4. Is there anything comparable in other religions to Rabbi Kraus' "unofficial" reasons for why Jews observe the High Holidays?

### Discussion Questions for *Rose Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the Non-Jewish Partner*

1. Do you agree with Andrea King's initial negative assessment of attending services during the High Holidays?
2. Is it "fair" to compare religious observances in an interfaith couple?
3. How difficult or easy has it been for the non-Jewish partner in your relationship to relate to the High Holidays?
4. King clearly has committed to observing the High Holidays. Is it OK for the non-Jewish partner not to observe the High Holidays? Is it OK to celebrate Hanukkah and Passover with a Jewish partner but not celebrate the High Holidays?
5. Have your feelings about the High Holidays changed over the years?

### Discussion Questions for *Grandparenting for the High Holidays*

1. Zell Schulman no longer asks her children if they're going to synagogue during the High Holidays. Do you agree with her "hands off" approach?
2. What role do you think grandparents should play in the Jewish upbringing of their grandchildren?
3. Schulman seems to focus a lot on the culinary aspect of Jewish culture. Should she focus more on religious practice?
4. How does Schulman's approach differ from your own approach to your grandchildren, or your parents' approach to your children? Which is better?

5. Would Schulman's approach work with young children, or is it only valid for adult children and grandchildren?

## Six Tips for Interfaith Families Facing the High Holidays

### By InterfaithFamily.com

1. Since family meals are universal, inviting in-laws and their families to join in the holiday meals can serve to focus on the commonalities of your traditions. Over time, these gatherings become part of the year's cycle of the extended family. They become familiar. Try to cook traditional foods eaten on that holiday. If you don't have recipes, you can find them on the Internet. Or you can invite close friends, both Jewish and/or non-Jewish.
2. Try to involve each member of your family in the holiday. On Rosh Hashanah, you can begin new family traditions by discussing as a family how to make the year a better one, how you as a family want to grow. Come up with three or four ways you can attain your goals. On Yom Kippur, you can talk about how you as a family have "missed the mark" and what you can do to repair any wounds.
3. If your spouse doesn't like to attend temple with you, try to create a group for others in your situation. Set up a certain area in the synagogue where you can all sit together. Another option is to join a "havurah" (informal study and worship group) that will sit together.
4. If your spouse would go to temple but doesn't understand how the service is put together, why certain prayers are said, and what the Hebrew means, ask your rabbi to hold a special learning service for people in that situation (which could also include Jewish members). At that special service, the rabbi can explain the different elements in the service, the Hebrew, and the overall goal, and also answer questions.
5. If you are the Jewish partner, remember that your spouse may be feeling uncomfortable with the traditions, the synagogue and all your family members. So, pay attention to your partner, explain as much as possible to him/her, and express gratitude for your spouse's willingness to participate.
6. If you don't usually attend synagogue and your partner can't understand why you want to now, you can explain that for many Jews in this country, attending High Holiday services (particularly the first evening service of Yom Kippur) is a way of affirming that we still are part of the Jewish people. We still care about being Jewish--even if we're not very religious and are not sure how we feel about the content of those services. For many American Jews, Jewish identity is primarily ethnic, cultural or communal, as opposed to religious.

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**InterfaithFamily.com empowers interfaith families to make Jewish choices for themselves and their children, and encourages the Jewish community to welcome interfaith families.**

## Recommended Resources

### Books

- Cox, Harvey. *Common Prayers: Faith, Family, and a Christian's Journey Through the Jewish Year*. Mariner Books, 2002.
- Friedland, Ronnie and Edmund Case, ed. *The Guide to Jewish Interfaith Family Life: An InterfaithFamily.com Handbook*. Jewish Lights, 2001.
- Olitzky, Kerry M. and Rachel T. Sabath. *Preparing Your Heart for the High Holy Days*. Jewish Publication Society, 1996.
- Strassfeld, Michael. *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary*. HarperCollins, 1985. In addition to in-depth discussion of each holiday, this book includes commentaries, ideas for family holiday involvement, and suggestions for new traditions.
- Waskow, Arthur I. *Seasons of Our Joy*. Beacon Press, 1991.

### Websites

- <http://www.interfaithfamily.com/highholidays>. InterfaithFamily.com's High Holidays Resource Page, with links to resources and more than 50 articles.
- <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/RoshHashana.htm>. Information on all aspects of Rosh Hashanah.
- <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/YomKippur.htm>. Information on all aspects of Yom Kippur.

## Ideas for Children

### Activities

- You can help your child write his or her own Rosh Hashanah prayers. Talk about what s/he is thankful for and what are his or her wishes for the New Year. Let your child dictate what he or she wants to say, as you write it down. Your child can then decorate the paper. If you save these from year to year, they will become a treasured remembrance of childhood.
- Children are too young to fast on Yom Kippur. They can experience a sense of fasting by choosing some type of food (something they like!) that they will not eat that day. Sweets or other special treats are always a good choice. Some slightly older children often also choose to skip part or all of an afternoon snack.
- Rosh Hashanah is an excellent time to start a growth chart for your child. Mark and date your child's height, perhaps on the inside of a closet door. You may wish to repeat this a few times during the year, or just leave it as an annual practice. In following years, your child will be able to see how much s/he grew physically, and use that as a jump-off point to explore how much growth there has been intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually over the past year.
- Making Rosh Hashanah cards is a wonderful activity to do with your children, to involve them in preparations and anticipation of the coming holiday. There are many ways to make New Year cards. Some possibilities: gluing things from nature, incorporating family pictures, collages with pictures cut from Jewish calendars and catalogs, apple stamping. Always allow your children as much individuality as possible. Make a trip to a mailbox to mail the cards part of the activity!
- **Craft activity: Honey Pot Wish Jar.**  
This is a great activity to do with younger children in preparation for Rosh Hashanah and it really involves them during the meal. They see their handiwork actually being used. To make the "honey pot," you will need two pieces of yellow craft foam, a hole punch, yarn, scissors, and markers and stickers to decorate. On the foam, draw an outline of a honey pot and cut two (same size, you will want to cut it together or trace it) out of each piece of foam. Using the hole punch, punch holes around the foam, leaving a hole open at the top of the honey pot. Kids can help take the yarn and lace it through the holes – be sure to knot each end. Decorate the honey pot with stickers (bees, sunshine, happy faces, etc.) and markers. On the pot, write phrases such as "Happy New Year" and "Wishes for a Sweet New Year." During dinner (or before the meal is served), give each guest a piece of paper (a nice thing to do is have your child/children color pictures of apples and cut them out, or cut pictures of apples out of magazines/supermarket flyers, etc.). Pass the "honey pot" around the table and have each family member or guest share their wish with everyone for the new year--and then put their "wish" (paper) into the honey pot and pass around the table.

### Books

- Heiligman, Deborah. *Holidays Around the World: Celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: With Honey, Prayers, and the Shofar (Holidays Around the World)*. National Geographic Children's Book Publishing, 2007.
- Rouss, Sylvia A. *Sammy Spider's First Rosh Hashanah*. Kar-Ben Publishing, 1996.

*Ideas for Children, except Craft Activity: Honey Pot Wish Jar, submitted by JCCs of Greater Boston along with Beth Reisen, Sherry Grossman, Alisa Levine and Josh Segal. Craft Activity: Honey Pot Wish Jar submitted by Amy Rovin, Community Connections Coordinator.*