



The High Holy Days

Questions and Answers to help you more fully experience and enjoy these Holy Days



What do the words Rosh Hashanah mean?

Rosh Hashanah is Hebrew for “head of the year” (literally) or “beginning of the year” (figuratively). 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 and second days of Tishrei, the seventh month of the Jewish calendar.

Why is the New Year in the Fall?

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. The first month of the Hebrew calendar was Nisan, in the spring. The fifteenth day of the month of Shevat was considered the New Year of the Trees. But the first of Tishrei 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 are the “Days of Awe?”

Rosh Hashanah is the first of the “High Holy Days,” and begins the most spiritually intense part of the Jewish year – the yamin nora'im, the Days of Awe. The Days of Awe begin on Rosh Hashanah and conclude on Yom Kippur, a total of 10 days. According to the tradition, on Rosh Hashanah the wholly righteous are inscribed in the Book of Life. For the rest of us, judgment is suspended until Yom Kippur, when our good works and acts of repentance during those 10 days can tilt the balance in our favor so that we may live. These 10 days are devoted to a careful examination of who we are in an attempt to become cognizant of the ways we have failed – failed others, failed our own selves and failed God. This is the time given to ask forgiveness to those you might have failed, hurt or

offended during the past year. During this period, emphasis is placed on the sincerity of one's repentance.

Why is the challah baked round for this holiday?

The loaves of egg bread, challah, which are normally braided on Shabbat, are baked in round shapes to symbolize the cyclical nature of the year, and of life. It is also customary to celebrate the sweetness of the New Year by baking with raisins.

Why is honey served on Rosh Hashanah?

The custom of eating sweets on Rosh Hashanah is more than 1,500 years old. It expresses the hope that sweetness will enter the lives of all Jews in the coming year. It is common practice not to serve sour foods during Rosh Hashanah.

Why is a shofar made from a ram's horn?

The ram's horn is used in commemoration of the sacrifice of Isaac. The last moment before Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac, a ram caught in a thicket was used as a substitute sacrifice. To honor the ram, Jews use a ram's horn at religious services.

Why are 100 shofar blasts sounded in some congregations?

At one point in history (the exact time is uncertain), the idea took hold that the total number of shofar blasts to be sounded on Rosh Hashanah is 100. This tradition is probably based on Rabbi Meir's comment that a Jew must recite 100 blessings every day (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot, page 43b). Since hearing the sound of the shofar is considered a blessing ("Blessed is the people who knows [appreciates] the sound of the shofar"-Psalms 89:16), over the years many congregations have insisted that on Rosh Hashanah the shofar be sounded 100 times.

What is Tashlich?

The word tashlich means to “cast/throw” and is symbolic of self-purification. On Rosh Hashanah it is a tradition to throw pocket lint or bread crumbs into a river or a stream (or a body of water) to symbolically cast sins into the water.

What does Yom Kippur mean?

Yom Kippur means “Day of Atonement.” It is a day set aside to atone for the sins of the past year. This day is an excellent chance to change God’s judgment, to demonstrate our repentance and make amends so that we may enter the new year with a clean heart.

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 seek reconciliation with that person, righting the wrongs you committed against them 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 (importantly) of other human beings as well.

What is Kol Nidre?

Kol Nidre means “All Vows.” The name of this best known of all Yom Kippur petitions is chanted at the beginning of the Yom Kippur evening service. It has a haunting melody. A free translation reads: “Let all vows, oaths, and promises that we make...to you, O God, between this Yom Kippur and the next be excused should we, after honest effort, find ourselves unable to fill them...” While the origins of the prayer are uncertain, during the Middle Ages and subsequently thereafter, Jews were often forced to vow allegiance to Christianity, while continuing to practice Judaism in secret. Through this prayer, they begged God to forgive them and release them from such vows made under duress. Today, Kol Nidre remains part of the liturgy because of its historical associations, its inspirational melody and its great beauty.

Why is Yom Kippur considered the most serious of Jewish Holidays?

Yom Kippur emphasizes human failings and/or the need to do teshuvah (repentance). As we focus on teshuvah, we disengage from the life-affirming activities of our daily routines, such as eating, and we undergo a process of intense self-reflection. We ask ourselves how we can do better in the eyes of God and other human beings, and we search for wisdom, willpower and compassion. The process of teshuvah helps to set right some of our wrongdoings, and in so doing, helps us to be partners with God in the creation of a better world.

What are some of the restrictions for Yom Kippur?

Yom Kippur is a complete Sabbath; no work can be performed on that day. We are supposed to refrain from eating and drinking (even water) on Yom Kippur. It is a complete, 25-hour fast, beginning before sunset on the evening before Yom Kippur and ending after nightfall on the day of Yom Kippur. Where a threat to life or health is involved, this restriction is lifted. Some people also refrain from wearing leather products (a sign of wealth in ancient times), bathing (showing more concern for the body than for the soul) and intimate relations.

Why do many Jews 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.

Why are the confessions done in the plural?

The Al Cheyt, “For the Sin,” is one of the prayers in the Vidui (Confession). It contains a litany of human sins, and the entire congregation recites it collectively and in the plural emphasizing communal responsibility for sins.

Why do people raise their fist to their chest when reciting the Al Cheyt?

On Yom Kippur, each person is bidden to raise a fist in protest against all that is wrong in the world...greed, violence, pollution, and human-made miseries of every imagined sort. But the fist of protest is not raised against the world or any of its suffering inhabitants. Rather, the fist of protest is raised in rage or anguish, but ultimately is lowered to one’s own heart in the sad realization that no amount of rage or self-righteousness will mend all that needs mending unless the mending begins in one’s own heart.

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 concept of the universality of God is emphasized throughout the High Holy Days liturgy. 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?

“God will remember,” or “May God remember.” Yizkor refers to the memorial service, which is held on Yom Kippur (and the last day of Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot). The service involves both a commemoration of those who have died and a quest for a higher level of spirituality. Yizkor usually takes place on Yom Kippur afternoon, after the Afternoon Service and before the Ne’ilah, or closing service.

Vocabulary

Chet: Figuratively means “missing the mark,” or “to make a mistake.” Sometimes it is translated as ‘sin.’

High Holy Days: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

L’Shanah Tovah Tikatayvu: “May you be inscribed for a good year.” This is the Rosh Hashanah greeting which expresses the hope that all friends and loved ones will be written and sealed in the Book of Life, and granted happiness and fulfillment in the year ahead.

Machzor: High Holy Day prayer book. The word machzor literally means “cycle.”

Shofar: The shofar is made from the horn of a ram. It is sounded every morning during the month preceding Rosh Hashanah, on Rosh Hashanah itself, and again at the conclusion of Yom Kippur. Some say that its piercing sound is a “wake-up call” that reminds people to engage in the process of repentance.

Tallit: A prayer shawl, with fringes attached to each corner to remind us of the 613 commandments. Even though used for morning worship only, the tallit is worn for the Yom Kippur evening service. The reason for this exception is that the tallit helps to create a special atmosphere for worship and accentuates the idea of purity.

Teshuvah: Literally means “returning,” a Hebrew term for repentance.

Tzedakah: “Righteousness,” but used in the same sense as “charity.” The giving of tzedakah is customary at this time of year.

Yahrzeit candle: Memorial candle lit on the anniversary of a loved one’s death and also on those days when Yizkor is recited. Yizkor is recited on the afternoon of Yom Kippur.

Yom Tov: Literally “a good day.” The term has come to mean “holy day.” It is often pronounced Yuntiff (the Yiddish pronunciation) and the standard holiday greeting is “Gut Yuntiff.”

What Is Outreach?

Outreach is an effort by the Temple Beth Miriam community to welcome and include those seeking a stronger connection to Judaism, as Jews-by-Choice, interfaith couples and families, parents of interfaith married children, gay families or individuals, or anyone interested in knowing more about Judaism.

Outreach does not seek to convert non-Jewish partners. Rather, it enables them to explore, study, and come to understand Judaism, thereby providing an atmosphere of support in which a comfortable relationship with Judaism can be fostered.

Outreach encourages people to make Jewish choices in their lives through community support and adult education, and by making Jewish resources at Temple Beth Miriam readily available.

Outreach educates and sensitizes the Jewish community to be receptive to Jews-by-Choice and intermarried couples.

We encourage you to make Temple Beth Miriam your spiritual home. You can see us on the web at <http://www.bethmiriam.org> and, for membership information, please feel free to contact the temple at 732-222-3754.

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