

High Holy Days

Rosh Hashanah

High Holy Days, the Days of Awe, *Yamim Noraim*, begin with Rosh Hashanah. As *Yom Harat Olam*, the birthday of the World, Rosh Hashanah is a joyous New Year's commemoration of creation and the birth and binding of Isaac. However, it is also a Day of Judgment, *Yom ha-Din*, a time for personal introspection, reconciliation, and solemnity.



Rabbinic literature includes descriptions depicting God sitting upon a throne with books enumerating the affairs of all humanity open for inspection and judgment. On this day the assets and losses of each person are allocated for the coming year.

The literature says that three books are used to inscribe the destiny of the wicked, the righteous, and those whose have mixed moral worth. The righteous have their names immediately inscribed in the Book of Life. The wicked are “blotted out of the Book of the Living.” The folks of mixed worth are

given ten days of grace — until Yom Kippur — to repent and reform.

Thus one custom during this season is visiting graves of relatives and teachers and reflecting on their sanctity.

The greeting is *Le-Shana Tovah* or *Le'shana Tovah Teekateyvu* — May you be inscribed for a Good New Year!

This year, 5766 in the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah begins before sunset Oct 3. It is observed one or two days, depending on the particular Jewish community.

Yom Kippur

The holiest day of the Jewish liturgical year is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, *Yom Hakippurim*. The synagogue service opens with an ancient prayer, a somber and beautiful chant called “Kol Nidre.”

The prayer asks for forgiveness for vows not kept. But vows made to God can only be settled with God, and vows unkept to fellows can be released only those to whom we

made the vows.

This is an important distinction because in the Middle Ages Christians, distorting the intent of the prayer, used the “Kol Nidre” to accuse Jews of duplicity in human agreements even though Jewish law strictly limits the prayer to vows made to God, and can never be used to escape obligations with others.

The “Kol Nidre” is particularly associated with the persecution of Jews during the Spanish inquisition and became a way of affirming one's Jewish identity with other Jews at Yom Kippur, if necessary, in secret. Because of the persecution by the Christians, Jews were forced into exile or pretence that they had become Christians, and this day was a powerful, if secret, way of affirming their heritage and intent.

The exact history of the prayer is obscure. The text derives from the Talmud, completed before the Sixth Century CE, and the tune is at least 500 years old, perhaps reaching back much further.

Older folks who have experienced how they and others easily make mistakes tend to find this holiday's recognition of human frailties and the path to atonement and reconciliation especially meaningful.

The tradition includes fasting from food and drink and forgoing bathing, cosmetics, wearing leather (including shoes), work, and love-making.

In ancient times, the “scapegoats” or “emissary goats” (see Leviticus 16:8-10) were offered as part of the ceremony. Scholars note that similar ritual practices to effect expiation of sin were found in neighboring cultures.

With the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, Judaism was transformed from a religion where Temple sacrifice was an important part of observance to rabbinic Judaism, where moral and legal codes became more important than the ritual instructions requiring the Temple.

The holiday's basic meaning, however, was retained as the subsequent historical developments enriched it. A midrash notes that “Though no sacrifices be offered, the day in itself effects atonement.”

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