

High Holy Day Questions and Answers

What are the High Holy Days?

The High Holy Days are the most spiritually intense part of the Jewish year. They start with Rosh Hashanah and continue through the next ten days to conclude with Yom Kippur.

These annual ten days, also known as the Days of Awe, are devoted to introspection and examination of the way we have failed as human beings over the last year. The focus of this period is the process of *teshuvah*, or repentance. It is a time to admit that we have sinned, ask God's forgiveness and resolve not to repeat our sins in the coming year.

Traditionally, it is taught that God opens the Book of Life on Rosh Hashanah and makes decisions regarding each individual. This is understood as a symbolic image. Judgment is suspended until Yom Kippur, so that our acts of repentance during the intervening ten days can tilt the balance in our favor.

What is significant about Rosh Hashanah?

Rosh Hashanah, which is the start of the Jewish new year, is Hebrew for "head of the year." We celebrate God's creation of the world and strive for spiritual renewal. At Rosh Hashanah we greet each other by saying, *L'shanah Tova Tikatevu*, by which we mean, "May you be inscribed in the Book of Life for a good new year."

Why is challah round for Rosh Hashanah? Why do we eat apples dipped in honey?

The loaves of egg bread, called challah, which are braided on Shabbat, are round for Rosh Hashanah, symbolizing the cyclical nature of the year and of life. Raisins are added to the challah and apples are dipped in honey to express the hope that the new year will be a sweet year.

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. It is our last chance to demonstrate repentance and make amends so that we may be inscribed in the Book of Life.

How do we atone for our sins?

The idea of atonement includes accepting responsibility for our actions. Judaism teaches that we come into the world untainted. We view sin as human frailty and believe we are able to repent and improve. During the High Holy Days, we ask ourselves how we can do better in the eyes of God as we search for wisdom, willpower and compassion.

What is our responsibility to those we have failed or hurt?

There are two distinct relationships in Judaism: person to God and person to person. At Yom Kippur, we atone to God for our sins, including the ways we have wronged others. In the Jewish tradition, it is necessary to apologize directly to those we have hurt and seek reconciliation before the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

How do we observe Yom Kippur?

Yom Kippur is the “Sabbath of Sabbaths.” No work or mundane tasks should be performed. The day is set aside so that we may look inside our hearts and review our relationship with God. Our devotion is demonstrated by fasting, and many refrain from drinking even water. Fasting is not required if doing so would pose a threat to life or health. The fast begins from prior to sunset on the evening before Yom Kippur and ends with nightfall on Yom Kippur.

What is Kol Nidre?

Kol Nidre means “All Vows.” The Kol Nidre service is held on the eve of Yom Kippur. The service begins with the chanting of the ancient prayer known as Kol Nidre, a powerful, haunting melody of great inspiration and beauty. A free translation reads: “Let all vows, oaths, and promises that we made to You, O God, between this Yom Kippur and the next be excused should we, after honest effort, find ourselves unable to fulfill them.”

Why do the clergy wear white on Yom Kippur? Why are the Torah covers white?

White 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 is the shofar sounded during the High Holy Day services?

The shofar says to us, “Wake up!” The shofar, a trumpet made of a ram's horn, connects us to our ancient history. During Rosh Hashanah the shofar is blown in a series of four sounds. The first sound (*Tekiah*) proclaims that God rules over the world and the second (*Shevarim*) tells us to remember all the wonderful things God has done. Next, we hear tiny broken notes (*Teruah*) which remind us to heal what is broken in our world. The last sound (*Tekiah Gedolah*) tells us to listen to the voice of the One God, now and forever. On Yom Kippur, the shofar is blown only once in one long blast at the end of the holiday.

What is Tashlich?

Tashlich means to cast or to throw and is symbolic of self-purification. On Rosh Hashanah, we throw pocket lint or bread crumbs into a river to symbolically cast our sins into the water. As our sins are carried away, we pray for a new year of fulfillment and rejuvenation.

What is Yizkor? What is Neilah?

Yizkor means “God will remember,” or “May God remember.” Yizkor refers to the memorial service held on Yom Kippur afternoon (and the last day of Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot). The service is a commemoration for those who have died and a quest for a higher level of spirituality. Neilah (closing) is the service held at the end of Yom Kippur, when God closes the Book of Life for the coming year.