



Customs and Folklore

Challot (holiday breads) are prepared for the New Year in a round shape, to suggest a crown, as well as symbolizing the cycle of the seasons.

Selichot – special penitential prayers are recited commencing at midnight on the Saturday before Rosh Hashanah, continuing before dawn on the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Tashlich (casting out of sins) – on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, traditional Jews go to a body of water and cast bread crumbs into it while saying “You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea.” (Micah 7:19)

Practicing **Tzedakah** – helping the needy and supporting institutions that sustain and build up Jewish life – is a primary response to the call of Rosh Hashanah.

Most Jews observe the festival of Rosh Hashanah for two days beginning at sunset on the day that ends the month of Elul. Most Reform Jews celebrate one day of Rosh Hashanah.



JWB Jewish Chaplains Council

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JCC Association
of North America

520 Eighth Avenue, 4th Floor
New York, NY 10018

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For more information contact
jwb@jcca.org or visit jcca.org/jwb



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A Guide to Rosh Hashanah





A New Year Like No Other

Rosh Hashanah is like no other new year celebration in the world. It blends solemnity and joy, and demands accountability in the process of generating hope.

As **Yom Harat Olam** (Birthday of the World), it is a joyous reminder of the original creation. At the same time, it begins the solemn 10-day period of prayer, contemplation and self-examination known as **Yamim Noraim**, the Days of Awe.

Day of Judgment

As **Yom ha-Din** (Day of Judgment), Rosh Hashanah is the day on which God passes judgment on all human beings.

Hoping the judgment will light our way through the year ahead, we pray that “the righteous shall see and rejoice, the upright shall exult and the devout shall delight in song.”

In Jewish tradition, even the most severe judgment can be mitigated by repentance (**teshuvah**), prayer (**tefillah**), and charity (**tzedakah**). These three avenues to God provide our focus during the Yamim Noraim. Thus, we make our celebration of the New Year meaningful by examining how well we have carried out our moral responsibilities in the past year as God’s covenanted partners. Even as we acknowledge falling short of what we should have done, we know that, through teshuvah, we can make amends and enter the New Year at one with ourselves and with humanity.

Our most common Rosh Hashanah greeting is “**L’Shana Tova**”—literally “for a good year.” We often add “**Tikatayvu**” meaning “May you be inscribed (in the Book of Life), for the coming year.”

The 10-day period ends with **Yom Kippur** (Day of Atonement), when the judgment is sealed.

Call to Return

The Jewish New Year is also known as **Yom Teruah** (Day of the Sounds of the Shofar).

The blowing of the **shofar**, or ram’s horn, symbolizes God’s summons to the people for self-judgment, self-improvement and atonement. The sounds of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah are, in order: **tekiah** (a steady blast), **shevarim** (three broken sounds), **teruah** (a rapid series of nine short notes) and finally **tekiah gedolah** (a blasting note held as long as possible).

The message of the shofar is, in the words of Maimonides:

“Awake, you slumberers and ponder your deeds; remember your Creator. Forsake your evil ways and thoughts, and return, so that God may have mercy upon you.”



Chaplain Joshua Sherwin, U.S. Navy, blowing the shofar.

Day of Sweetness

On the first evening of Rosh Hashanah, apples are dipped in honey to usher in the New Year, with the words: “Blessed are You, Eternal God, Ruler of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the tree.” In Hebrew:

ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם בורא פרי העץ.

Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, Borai Pri Ha-etz.

After tasting the apple and honey, we say: “May it be Your will, Our God and God of our ancestors, to renew us for a good and sweet year.” In Hebrew:

יהי רצון מלפניך, ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו, שתחדש עלינו שנה טובה ומתוקה.

Yehi ratzon milfanecha, Adonai Eloheinu V'Elohei Avoteinu, she-te-hadesh aleinu shanah tovah u-metukah.

On the second evening, honey cake and other good foods are served... along with a fruit coming into season, which has not yet been eaten.