

Jewish High Holidays

The High Holiday period actually begins in *Elul*, the Hebrew month preceding Rosh Hashanah. *Elul* is an important period of introspection, of clarifying life's goals, and of coming closer to G-d. Because when the big day of Rosh Hashanah comes, and each individual stands before the Almighty to ask for another year, we'll want to know what we're asking for!

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year, commemorating the creation of Adam and Eve, the first human beings. On Rosh Hashanah, the Books of Life and Death are open on the heavenly desk. On this "Day of Judgment," we each stand before G-d and offer our best case for being "created anew" — i.e. granted another year of life.

The morning before Rosh Hashanah, we perform "*Hatarat Nedarim*" — annulling all vows. This enables us to enter the new year with a clean slate.

The essential mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is to hear the sounding of the *shofar*. The *shofar* blasts sound very much like the sobbing cry of a Jewish heart as well as an alarm clock, arousing us from our spiritual slumber.

The *shofar* is also mindful of the biblical story of Abraham binding his son Isaac, when a ram was caught in the thicket and sacrificed in Isaac's stead. We blow a ram's horn to recall the great act of faith in G-d performed by Abraham and Isaac; tradition records that this event occurred on the day of Rosh Hashanah.

A central part of Rosh Hashanah is a festive meal. During the High Holidays, a round *challah* bread is used — symbolizing fullness and completion. We dip the bread into honey, and also an apple into honey, symbolizing our prayer for a sweet new year. On Rosh Hashanah, we also eat a series of foods that symbolize good things we hope for in the coming year.

It is customary to greet others with the words: "*L'shana Tova — Ketivah vi-chatima Tova.*" This means: "For a good year — You should be written and sealed in the good (Book of Life)."

The "*Tashlich*" prayer is said on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah by a pool of water that preferably has fish in it. These prayers are symbolic of the casting away of our mistakes.

While the decision for "another year of life" is handed down on Rosh Hashanah, the verdict is not "sealed" until Yom Kippur. Therefore, the 10 days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur are a crucial period when most peoples' judgment "hangs in the balance." During these "Ten Days of Repentance," we engage in intense introspection, and are particularly careful with our speech, actions, and mitzvah observance.

This introduction on the Jewish High Holidays is provided to you by the Twin Cities Jewish Healing Program, a program of Jewish Family and Children's Service of Minneapolis. Through the wisdom and traditions of Judaism, the Twin Cities Jewish Healing Program offers comfort, hope and strength to people experiencing loss, life challenges, illness and grief. For information about our resources and volunteer visitors, please call 952-542-4840.

