

# Jewish High Holy Days

## Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year holy day. The festival commemorates the creation of the world. On Rosh Hashanah Jews traditionally spend significant time in synagogue reciting special prayers appropriate to the day. In addition, prayers are said at meals that usually include ritual wine or grape juice, egg bread (challah – often baked in a round loaf in accord with the cyclical beginning again of the year) and apples dipped in honey. In observing the latter custom Jews act out the desire and actually begin the New Year with a moment of sweetness and goodness. Honey cake is another sweet food that has a place at the Rosh Hashanah table. Jews customarily wish one another Shanah Tovah (Hebrew for good year), and/or a Gut Yontef (Yiddish for a good holy day). On Rosh Hashanah a ram's horn (shofar) is customarily blown to remind us of the need to turn with our hearts and minds to God, to one another, and to ourselves in the New Year.

## Yom Kippur

Repentance and reconciliation with God and human beings are very important aspects of the Days of Awe or the Ten Days of Repentance that begin with Rosh Hashanah and continue through Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is also known as the Day of Atonement. Traditionally Jews ask one another on an individual basis for forgiveness either prior to or during this holy day. As a synagogue community, Jews recite confessional prayers that encompass individual and communal misdeeds and resolve to improve interactions with other human beings and God in the New Year.

For those in good health, it is customary to fast on Yom Kippur as an aid and spiritual spur toward repentance and reconciliation in keeping with the theme of the High Holy Days.

## Sukkot

The Jewish Holy Day of Sukkot (the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles), originally an agricultural festival, commemorates Israel's wandering in the desert in which both temporary structures and God's sheltering presence were a part of the journey. Jews today symbolically reenact these treasured parts of their history by continuing to spend time in hut-like structures called sukkot or booths during the seven days of the Holy Day. Another symbol of the Holy Day is the Lulav-Etrog, a special palm branch used in prayer with twigs of willow and myrtle held together with a citron (Leviticus 23: 40).

## Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

Two additional holy days conclude the season. The first is known as Shemini Atzeret on which Yizkor (memorial) prayers are recited. The second of these is the very joyous Simchat Torah, commemorating the conclusion of the annual reading of the Torah scroll (The Five Books of Moses) and, more broadly, Israel's love of and commitment to God's teaching. Also on Simchat Torah colorful flags are distributed and congregants dance with the scrolls.

— adapted from materials created by the Jewish Chaplaincy Program of Milwaukee