



Guide to the High Holy Days

Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur

18 DOORS

Unlocking Jewish



Guide to the High Holy Days *Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur*

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When and What Are the High Holy Days?

The High Holy Days—or, *High Holidays* as they are also called—consist of two autumn holidays called Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In Hebrew, “Rosh Hashanah” means “Head of the Year” and it’s the Jewish New Year. Ten days later comes Yom Kippur, which is Hebrew for the “Day of Atonement.” It is the most solemn day of the Jewish year, and many adults fast as a spiritual practice for the duration of the day. Because of differences between the Hebrew and Western calendars, the High Holy Days move around a bit on the Western calendar, but they always fall sometime in September or October.

These holidays, and the stretch of days in between them, are sometimes referred to as the “Days of Awe” or the “Days of Repentance.” They’re serious but also joyful, and they are the one time of year when the largest number of people in the Jewish community attend synagogue services. The main reason these are considered the most important holidays on the Jewish calendar is because they are about self-examination, forgiveness, the repairing of broken relationships and giving ourselves a fresh new start.

People of all faiths, including people who identify as non-religious, are completely



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welcome to attend and participate in these holidays.

What is the Meaning of the High Holy Days?

The High Holy Days are a time of year when the Jewish people as a whole are asked to engage in a process of doing a moral self-assessment; seeking forgiveness from others for harms we’ve done; making amends as

appropriate; and resolving to do better in the future. The Hebrew word that refers to this entire process is **Teshuvah**, pronounced *teh-shoo-vah*. The expression people sometimes use is, “making Teshuvah.” For example, you might hear someone say: “Ronnie and I hadn’t talked to each other for months, and to be honest I’m still kind of upset with him, but at this time of year we are encouraged to make Teshuvah, so we did.”



When the sun finally sets at the end of Yom Kippur, the mood shifts from somber self-reflection to joy and release.

Although Teshuvah is really the “big idea” of the High Holy Days, another important theme of these holidays is the **celebration of the Jewish New Year**. Rosh Hashanah, the first of the High Holy Days, marks the beginning of a new Jewish calendar year. It’s actually celebrated for two days in most, but not all, Jewish communities. Judaism has been around a long time, so according to the Jewish calendar, the current year at the time of the publication of this guide is 5775.

The mood of the Jewish New Year is a mix of reflection on the year that has just ended, hope for the year that’s begun, gratitude for the goodness in our lives, and general celebration.

Ten days after we celebrate the Jewish New Year, we gather together again for the **Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)**. “Atonement” means acknowledging our misdeeds during the past

year, looking for opportunities to apologize or make things right and asking God for forgiveness and a fresh start. It’s the holiest day of the Jewish year, and most Jewish people who participate in any Jewish holidays, regardless of personal religious beliefs, participate in observing Yom Kippur in some way. Many take the day off work and/or attend at least one of the synagogue services of the day.

All Jewish holidays begin at sunset, so when the sun goes down to begin Yom Kippur, the next 24 hours take on a focus of gathering with community to acknowledge our wrongdoings and seek God’s forgiveness together. There are many special, well-loved Hebrew prayers and melodies sung in

synagogue on Yom Kippur, and many adults in the community follow the practice of fasting (abstaining from all food and drink) for the duration of the day, from sundown of the night it begins until the sun goes down the next day. When the sun finally sets at the end of Yom Kippur, the mood shifts from somber self-reflection to joy and release. Some families and synagogues prepare delicious meals to break the fast (more on this, including recipes, in other sections of this guide).

The Days In Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

The ten days beginning with the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) and ending with the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) are known as the “Ten Days of Teshuvah” (you’ll sometimes see this translated as the “Ten Days of Repentance”). During this stretch of time, the tradition encourages all of us to think about who we may have harmed over the course of the last year, whether intentionally or by accident, and whether by word or by deed. We’re invited to take time to reach out to people personally and take responsibility for our mistakes. The idea is to talk privately with family members, friends or anyone else we feel we may have wronged. We do our best to admit our mistakes, seek forgiveness from those we have hurt, and

offer to make amends. This can be a really powerful exercise for families, including families with young kids.

Being Together in Community

There's another major aspect of these holidays, and it is that these are the Jewish holidays when Jewish people, and their family members of all backgrounds, come out of the woodwork every year and gather in large numbers in synagogues. (The other most popular Jewish holidays—Passover and Hanukkah—take place mainly in peoples' homes, not in the synagogue.)

The High Holy Days have been part of the rhythm of marking time for centuries, and the fact that Jewish communities all over the world are similarly gathering during these holidays gives a lot of people in the Jewish community a warm feeling of connection and solidarity.

Symbols and Rituals

Fasting on Yom Kippur

One of the things Yom Kippur is best known for is the practice of fasting for the duration of the holiday. The purpose of the fast—which traditionally includes abstaining from food, drink, sex and bathing—is to purify the spirit and concentrate the mind on the



Jewish people all over the world are similarly gathering during these holidays, sharing with others in the Jewish community a warm feeling of connection and solidarity.

theme of forgiveness and moral renewal. The fast begins at sundown when the holy day begins, and it ends at sundown the following evening, often with synagogues offering a small spread of food.

In traditional Jewish practice, children under 13 are not expected to fast. Neither are pregnant women, or anyone with a medical condition that fasting would exacerbate.

The idea isn't to create a health hazard—it's a spiritual practice and nothing more.

It's also not an all or nothing proposition. People who take daily medications generally maintain those routines through Yom Kippur, even if they are fasting. Some people take on some aspects of the fast but not all: they might refrain from eating but drink water during the day, or just fast for part of the



day. Some people who can't fast for health reasons choose to donate the equivalent of one day's worth of meals to a food bank to honor the tradition. Whether someone identifies as Jewish or not, everyone is welcome to participate in fasting.

Judaism doesn't have many holidays that involve intentionally creating physical discomfort for ourselves in order to create a special state of consciousness, so Yom Kippur stands out for most Jews as a very unique day of the year. People at synagogue services will ask one another how their fast is going, and it's perfectly OK to say, "I'm not able to fast this year, how is yours going?" If you decide to participate in fasting for

The first meal everyone eats after Yom Kippur has ended is often called the "Break-the-Fast" or "Break Fast" and sometimes people issue invitations to host friends for this meal.

the first time, it's a good idea to get well hydrated in the hour or two before the beginning of Yom Kippur.

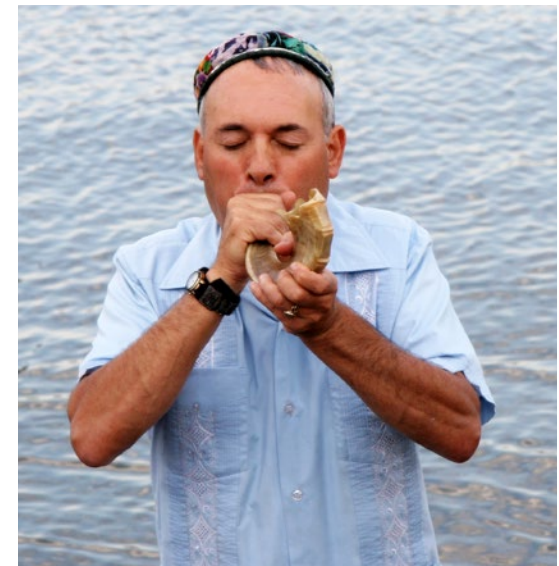
The first meal everyone eats after Yom Kippur has ended is often called the "Break-the-Fast" or "Break Fast" and sometimes people issue invitations to host friends for this meal. Conventional wisdom about resuming eating and drinking is to take things slow and avoid overdoing it. Some synagogues will lay out a spread of food so that people attending the final services for Yom Kippur are able to eat something and mingle together after. Bagels, spreads, fruit and traditional dishes like kugel (we have a great recipe [here](#)) are popular choices for breaking the fast.

The Shofar

The most famous ritual object connected with the High Holy Days is a **ram's horn**. The ram's horn, or **shofar** in Hebrew, is an ancient musical instrument that is blown like a trumpet. During synagogue services for Rosh Hashanah, there are several points during which someone will sound the shofar

according to a prescribed series of blasts. On Yom Kippur the shofar is not sounded, except to mark the holy day's conclusion.

Shofars come in various sizes and shapes, though they're always curved. People who are good at playing horns usually can figure out how to get a strong sound out of a shofar, and in many synagogues different community members volunteer to do some of the shofar blowing.





The sound of the shofar is memorable and unique. For many people, it evokes of a variety of feelings. Its origins go back to ancient rituals in Jerusalem. In antiquity, shofars were also used to send urgent messages across great distances. Learn more about shofars and videos of people blowing them [here](#).

Wearing White and Not Wearing Leather

During the High Holy Days, there's a tradition for people to dress in white clothes. It's not required and not everyone does it, but many people do. The idea is that we're working on purifying ourselves ethically and morally during the High Holy Days, and by wearing white we symbolize that aspiration. Some people like to wear a simple white linen robe over their clothes during the High Holy Days. This robe is called a *kittel*. In

liberal synagogues, you're most likely to see only the rabbi or cantor wearing a *kittel*, and possibly a small number of congregants.

There are some other traditions regarding clothing that are observed to varying degrees in different synagogues. One tradition is to refrain from wearing anything made out of leather on Yom Kippur. Why? Because at the time this tradition was established, only the well-off could afford clothes and shoes of leather, and so wearing leather was seen as an act of showing off. Since the purpose of the High Holy Days is to encourage humility, self-examination and self-improvement, Jews of an earlier era decided that leather (and other symbols of wealth and privilege) shouldn't be worn on this particular day. If you happen to wear leather to synagogue, don't worry about it. Not everyone observes these practices, and it's OK if you don't. But if you happen to

Shofars come in various sizes and shapes, though they're always curved. People who are good at playing horns usually can figure out how to get a strong sound out of a shofar.

notice people wearing dressy clothes with canvas sneakers that don't match, now you'll know why.

How to Greet People During the High Holy Days

Throughout the High Holy Days season, it's always appropriate to say "Happy New Year" to others in the Jewish community.

Sometimes people will greet each other with different versions of "Happy New Year" in Hebrew. The most common of these Hebrew greetings, which means "May you have a good year," is *(click on the speaker icon 🔊 to hear pronunciation)*:

Shana Tovah or L'shana Tovah



There are also versions of this greeting that incorporate one of the metaphors of the High Holy Days known as "The Book of Life." The tradition imagines that at this time of

year, while we are doing our own personal moral self-evaluation, God is preparing to inscribe us in a heavenly Book of Life for a year of whatever quality we have merited through our actions. Most Jews don't take this idea literally, by the way, so don't worry if you're not sure how you feel about this religious metaphor. Anyway, you might hear people say the following greetings:

L'shana Tovah Tee-kah-tay-voov 

"May you be inscribed in the Book of Life for a good year."

Or

L'shana Tovah Tee-kah-tay-voov v'tee-kha-tay-moo 

"May you be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life for a good year."

As the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, approaches, many Jews offer greetings expressing the hope that people will have an easy fast, or that they will be sealed in the Book of Life for a good year. You might hear:

Tzom Kal 

"May you have an easy fast."

Or

Khah-tee-mah Tovah 

"May you be sealed for good [in the Book of Life]."

It can be fun for people new to these holidays to practice these greetings, but

rest assured that you can't go wrong with "Happy New Year" in English, at any time throughout the High Holy Days season.

Tashlich: A Fun, Accessible Ceremony

During the Rosh Hashanah holiday, many synagogues observe a fun outdoor tradition whose origins go back to the Middle Ages. It's called **Tashlich** (pronounced *tash-leeckh*), which is the Hebrew word for "casting off / throwing off."

People gather together at a body of flowing water—often a nearby river—and they bring bread crumbs with them in bags. The leader of the ceremony invites everyone to grab a handful of bread crumbs and imagine that the crumbs represent all of our misdeeds over the course of the past year. Then, we're invited to toss the crumbs into the water, symbolically "casting our sins upon the waters."

Like many of the other symbols and rituals of these holidays, many Jews participate in the ritual without taking the metaphor literally. Often, the person leading Tashlich will offer



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some words of hope and encouragement to everyone to continue doing the work of Teshuvah—of moral self-examination, of offering apologies when appropriate, of seeking to improve ourselves going forward.

If the weather is good, this is a really fun ritual for young children, and it's a great opportunity for interfaith families with kids to get a chance to mingle with other families with kids in the community. Note: In recent years, some congregations have substituted very small pebbles instead of bread crumbs, out of concern about ill-effects on waterfowl eating the bread we toss into their habitat.

High Holy Days Food!

What delicious foods are customary for the High Holy Days?

We have a great online recipe index with dozens of recipes and fun food ideas, which you can find [here](#). And [check out our Food Blog](#) for the latest recipes for the holidays and every day in-between.

Start of Rosh Hashanah Dinner

Many families gather for a special dinner the evening of Rosh Hashanah. If they're also attending the synagogue evening service that begins the holiday, they may have this meal on the early side, so everyone



can get to the synagogue on time. Some families just have people over for a meal and don't go to synagogue at the start of Rosh Hashanah.

Round Sweet Challah

The tradition is to start the meal with **challah** bread dipped in honey. Challah is the

Challah is the special, braided bread that is generally used as part of meals on the Jewish Sabbath. It's usually oblong and braided.

special, braided bread that is generally used as part of meals on the Jewish Sabbath. It's usually oblong and braided. Because Rosh Hashanah celebrates the Jewish New Year, the custom is to use a **round challah bread often times with raisins**. The circular shape symbolizes the cycle of the years and the raisins represent a sweet new year.

During Jewish holidays, the start of a celebratory meal begins with a blessing giving thanks for bread, followed by everyone enjoying some challah. At all other times of year, the custom is to sprinkle some salt on the challah before everyone has a piece. But, at a Rosh Hashanah meal, the custom is to dip the pieces of challah in honey, again, in order to symbolize everyone's hopes for a sweet new year! (You can see a video demonstration of three ways to make a round challah from scratch [here](#) and a recipe [here](#).)

End of Yom Kippur Dinner

As we discussed above, the other major holiday during this season is the **Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur**, which takes place ten days after Rosh Hashanah. Yom Kippur is a fasting holiday, but when Yom Kippur ends, there's a tradition of having a "break-the-fast" meal. This meal is often set up as a buffet table with foods that are light and easy to digest. Find our recipes for Yom Kippur break-the-fast [here](#).

The High Holy Days are a time for families to come together. But you might be wondering how to make these holidays fun for your kids.

Celebrating High Holy Days with Kids & Family

The High Holy Days are a time for families to come together. But you might be wondering how to make these holidays fun for your kids, or for those new to Judaism. 18Doors has a free, printable [Guide to the High Holy Days with Kids](#). The following section of this guide offers a few key ideas and suggestions. If you're short on time, you might also enjoy "[Six Tips for Interfaith Families Facing the High Holy Days](#)."

Parents today face several basic questions regarding how to involve their kids in the High Holy Days. Some of these questions are:

Should the kids skip school in observance of these holidays, and if yes, how much school should they skip?

Most Jews who are observing the holidays, though not all, have their kids skip school



on the first full day of Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur. One guideline some families use is that if a parent is taking off work in observance of a Jewish holiday, then the kids take off from school too. It's a tricky time because the school year has just started.

If you are planning to have kids skip school for the holiday, it's a good idea to let their teachers know in advance. Ultimately, your family has to weigh its own unique values and circumstances to decide whether or not to have kids miss some school. In most liberal synagogues, there will be some families whose kids aren't missing school, some whose kids are, and some who have different kids doing different things.

What about going to services at a synagogue? If the adults are going to some or all of the services, should the kids come too?

It's a good idea for parents to talk in advance of the High Holy Days about which religious services they are planning to attend, and to which ones they're planning to bring kids. Some congregations offer childcare, but sometimes you have to sign up in advance to get a space. Asking people who are familiar with the synagogue you're considering attending for their impressions about how kid-friendly the scene is can be really valuable. If you're new to the



Just as there's a lot of variation in practice among adults, there's a lot of variation among how parents guide their kids regarding fasting.

congregation, calling and asking the receptionist for help thinking this through can also be really helpful. If the synagogue offers special Kids' Services aimed at your kids' age groups, these services can be a surprisingly rewarding experience for kids and parents too.

If we do bring the kids to services, what kinds of quiet activities can they do if they get bored?

If you're planning to have the kids join you for some of the longer prayer services, it's a good idea to plan ahead for what you'll do if they start to get "wiggly." In two-parent households, some parents decide beforehand whether one parent will be the one to leave early with the kids if the kids are starting to come unglued.

This is a parenting decision that is highly personal. Some parents feel that there's a value for kids to cultivate patience and have respect for religious services that may be geared for adults. Other parents don't want to give their kids an experience of Judaism as an "endurance test," and instead they tend to focus on having their kids attend children's services or engage in other non-synagogue-based activities connected to the High Holy Days (see our section called "Fun and Meaningful Activities").

What about the tradition of fasting on Yom Kippur and our kids?

Traditional Jewish teaching is that girls younger than 12 and boys younger than 13 have no religious obligation to try to fast on Yom Kippur. Tradition also stresses that no one should attempt to fast if it will endanger their health, so pregnant women and people with a variety of medical situations are urged

not to fast. In the liberal parts of the Jewish community, some adults attempt to fast for the duration of Yom Kippur, and some do some kind of modified or partial fast. Some don't fast but still participate in the holiday.

Just as there's a lot of variation in practice among adults, there's a lot of variation among how parents guide their kids regarding fasting. And kids' attitudes will vary. Some kids want to try fasting, others don't. Once again, these are personal and private family decisions for parents to make, and generally people in liberal synagogues aren't looking to question or judge the decisions families make.

There are all kinds of reasons why a day of fasting can create unique challenges for some families. If a family member is struggling with an eating disorder, for example, Yom Kippur can intensify those anxieties. One important tip: if you or your child is not fasting, the polite thing to do if one of you is going to have something to eat or drink is not to do that at the synagogue.

Public Schools and the High Holy Days

One of the High Holy Days decisions parents face is whether to keep their kids home from

If you decide to keep your kids home from school for any part of the High Holy Days, it's a good idea to ask the school if they are familiar with these holidays



school on Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). Many Jewish parents, even if they aren't particularly religious, take off work and have kids stay home from school for some or all of these holidays. Most parents who do this go to synagogue services for at least some part of the day, and often kids go with them and may even attend special children's services.

If you decide to keep your kids home from school for any part of the High Holy Days, it's a good idea to ask the school if they are familiar with these holidays and what kind of communication they require in order to make the absence an excused

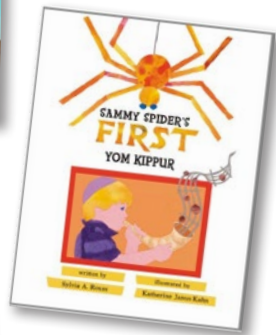
absence. While many schools in major North American cities are experienced and comfortable with allowing students to miss class for these holidays, many aren't, so your best bet is to speak with other parents who are planning to keep their kids home, and to communicate pro-actively with school administrators. For middle and high school age kids, it can be a good idea to clarify what accommodations their teachers will make for these absences, especially regarding homework or quizzes, etc.

Fun and Meaningful Activities

To whatever degree your family is planning to attend synagogue services during the

High Holy Days, there are some great non-synagogue-based activities for the High Holy Days. For example:

- 18Doors has [great ideas](#) for having fun with your family during the High Holy Days.
- Earlier in this guide we talked about the fun ceremony called Tashlich—this can be especially fun for very young kids.
- The Reform movement suggests some [cool crafts](#).
- JewishBoston.com has a wonderful downloadable guide for at-home activities for the High Holy Days, which you can find [here](#).



- Temple Emanu-El of New York City has a great [one-page printable download](#) of a “Mitzvah Checklist” that kids and parents can each use. A mitzvah is a good or righteous action, and their worksheet offers a fun family project that doesn’t take much time but is likely to spark good conversations about the meaning of these holidays.

Kveller.com offers ideas for all-ages fun activities, including apple-picking, honey tasting and an arts & crafts project.

Great Storybooks for Young Kids

For younger kids, there are some wonderful children’s books that gently and beautifully teach some of the best values of the High Holy Days (like accepting that we all make mistakes, and learning about the healing power of forgiveness, etc.). Some of these books are very universal in their language choices, as well. We have our own recommendations [here](#).

For another great list of children’s books about the themes and customs of the High Holy Days, [try this list](#).

Another great resource for parents is PJ Library. You can check out their many recommended book and music titles [here](#).



These are good holidays to plan ahead for, especially regarding the choices you want to make regarding kids’ participation.

PJ Library also offers a free book and CD subscription service for families with young kids. You sign up and then get a new book or CD each month, along with companion materials. If this sounds interesting, visit them at www.pjlibrary.org.

Planning Ahead

These are good holidays to plan ahead for, especially regarding the choices you want to make regarding kids' participation. Some synagogues overflow with people for these holidays, so they may require people to make reservations to guarantee their places at services (we'll discuss the subject of "buying tickets" for the High Holy Days later in this guide). Many congregations also have limited space available for kids' activities or childcare. Taking some time during summer vacation to investigate your options and think through your family's plans for these holidays will help reduce stress.

It's also helpful to keep in mind that synagogues usually have their entire staff working extra hard during the last couple weeks before the Jewish New Year. They're trying to prepare for these holidays and for the start of the religious school year at the same time. Also, in the final few days before these holidays begin, they tend to receive a lot of last-minute calls from people who haven't planned ahead and are now scrambling a bit. Deciding what you want to do earlier than that and, if your plans include synagogue services, reserving the places you want are great ways to avoid stress.

If you want to become a hero in the eyes of a synagogue's staff, getting in touch during the summer and offering to volunteer to

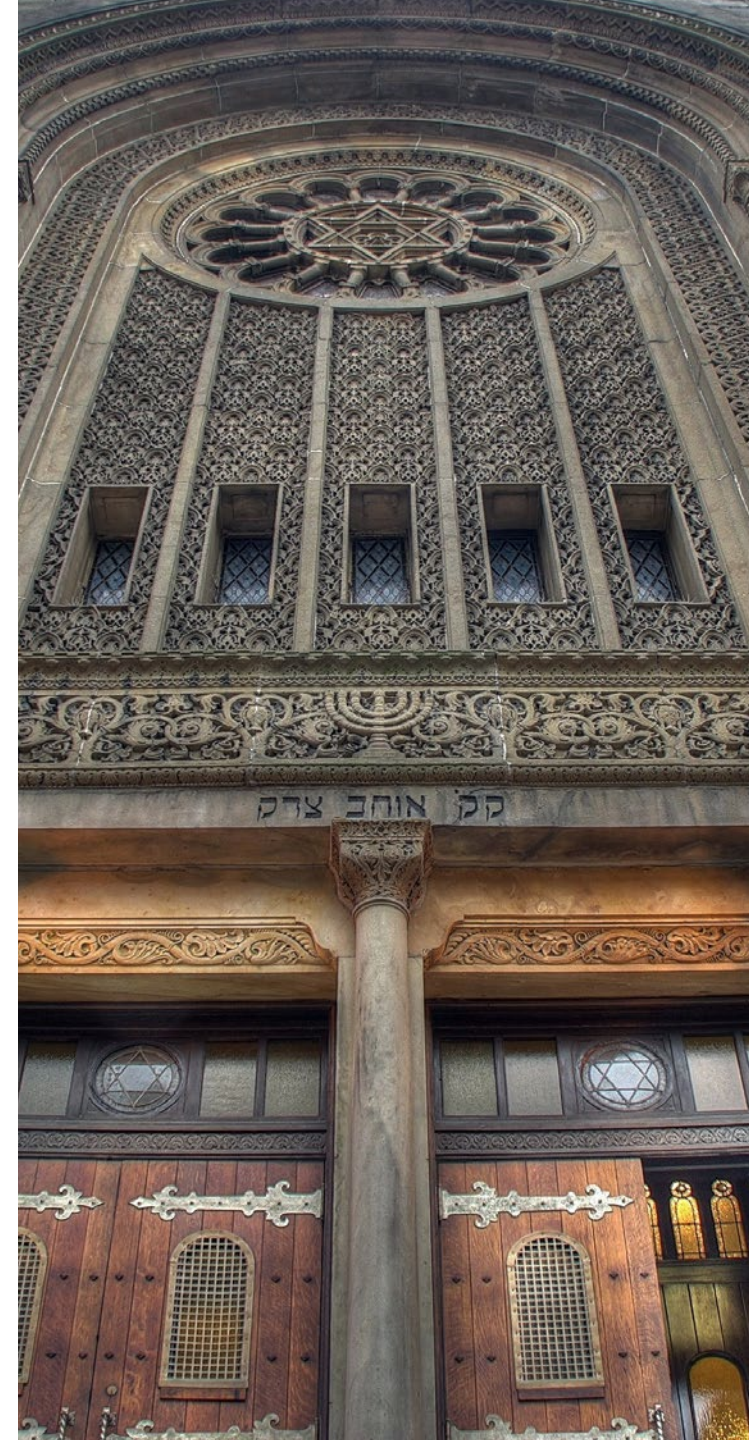
assist in some way during the High Holy Days is a great way to make a genuine difference for a congregation during their most demanding time of year. Obviously there's no obligation to do that, but it can be fun and it's a great way to get to know others in the congregation more personally.

Community During the High Holy Days

How to Find a Synagogue

If you're trying for the first time to find a place to attend services during these holidays, depending on where you live (and the size of the Jewish community), you

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may have many or few options. If you know people (especially other interfaith families) who've gone to High Holy Days services in your area, they can be a good resource for deciding where to attend services.

In larger cities, there is often a Jewish newspaper or monthly magazine, which will generally provide listings of congregations offering High Holy Days services in their summer issues.

Looking up your local Jewish Federation can also be a good way to research options for attending services in your area. Jewish Federations are non-profit social service and community resource centers located in hundreds of cities across North America. You can visit their main website [here](#), and then click on the "Find Your Federation" tab on their homepage to search for your local Federation's website. Also, in larger cities, there is often a Jewish newspaper or monthly magazine, which will generally provide listings of congregations offering High Holy Days services in their summer issues. If you're not sure how to get a copy,

Why Do So Many Non-Synagogue-Goers Attend High Holy Day Services?

The High Holy Days tend to bring Jews and people of other identities who are in interfaith households into synagogues in droves. Congregations may be filled beyond capacity. Many congregations aren't able to use their own buildings, at least for the heavily attended evening services of the New Year (Rosh Hashanah) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), so they may rent space in a larger auditorium.

Why do so many people who aren't members of a synagogue, or who may not even be personally religious, come to High Holy Days services? There are several reasons. First, there's comfort and familiarity. For people who've lived in a community for a long time, friends and acquaintances that they haven't seen in a while are likely to be there. There are also people who take comfort in "touching base" with a synagogue once a year, possibly because they like to hear what a certain rabbi has to say during a sermon, or because they value the continuity of Jewish institutions even if they aren't highly involved in them. For people who are new residents of a community, part of the draw is that these services offer an opportunity to check out part of the local Jewish scene.

A useful thing to keep in mind is that congregations that are in the midst of making High Holy Days services happen are functioning in a situation that is different from the ways in which they normally operate. A lot of volunteers are taking on different pieces of the single biggest project that synagogues undertake each year, so the energy and feel of the community for newcomers may be different than what they'd find coming to synagogue services or events during the much calmer rest of the year.

calling your local Federation is a good way to find out how.

18Doors also has hundreds of synagogues and other Jewish organizations that have listed themselves with us in order

to affirm their commitment to welcoming interfaith families.

The Whole “Tickets” Thing

Because most synagogues expect a lot of people who aren't members to come to services for these holidays, and because many synagogues have space and seating limitations, what they often do is require non-members to buy reserved tickets in advance in order to attend some or all of the services. Sometimes congregations sell out all their tickets days or weeks before the holidays begin, so it's a good idea to check with congregations to ask if this is an issue. Some synagogues may not have a ticketing system, in which case there will be plenty of space and you can skip this section.

For some in the Jewish community, the tickets system feels disappointing and off-putting. A common complaint is that selling tickets for High Holy Days services seems to conflict with some of the core values of Judaism. And even though almost all synagogues have a policy that no one will be denied tickets due to lack of ability to pay, for many people the prospect of asking a stranger for a reduced ticket fee because of inability to pay is deeply uncomfortable.

Many rabbis and synagogue staffers will tell you that they don't like implementing the tickets system, but that they feel it's necessary because most synagogues depend on High Holy Days tickets for a

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big part of their annual budget. Without that source of income, they'd have to reduce staff and programming. In fairness to synagogues that use this system, it's important to remember that synagogues don't "pass the plate" during weekly Sabbath services to collect monetary offerings. Congregations of any religion have budgets, and they do need reliable ways of sustaining their operations.

The tickets system mainly affects families who aren't members of a synagogue, since members usually receive tickets as part of their annual dues. Because a lot of interfaith

families—especially younger couples—are statistically less likely to have joined a synagogue than other demographic groups, the tickets issue sometimes ends up being the “first look” that interfaith families get at the organized Jewish community.

We recommend that people who are new to attending High Holy Days services approach the tickets system with a couple thoughts in mind:

- 1) If the cost is a challenge, don't be embarrassed to call the synagogue and ask about their policies regarding

lack of ability to pay the full cost. The vast majority of people working in synagogues want to do the right thing, and genuinely believe that no one should be turned away due to lack of funds. If you're willing to make the effort to ask, you'll probably get the help you need, and the conversation will be confidential.

- 2) Keep in mind that most synagogues are run on tight budgets, and that many of their staff and volunteers are doing their best to serve the community. Paying something for High Holy Days tickets is a bit like making a pledge to a public radio station. The funds you contribute support the year-round programming that the synagogue does, which often includes various kinds of support for the poor, the elderly and the bereaved in the local community.

The High Holy Days Bring Up Loss and Remembrance for Some People

Something to bear in mind is that, for a lot of people, this particular set of holidays brings up memories of loved ones who have passed away. One reason for this is that on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), there is a special memorial service called "Yizkor" (Remembrance), in which everyone in the sanctuary is invited to take some time to



reflect on the memories of lost loved ones, and special prayers for the dead are chanted. (For more on the meaning of Yizkor, click [here](#).)

There are other reasons why this particular set of holidays evokes memories of love and loss, as well as the passing of time and generations. The themes of the holidays ask us to mark the transition of time, from one year to the next. For older congregants especially, there's a good chance that

The themes of the holidays ask us to mark the transition of time. For older congregants especially, there's a good chance that they have memories of many years of marking the Jewish New Year and coming to synagogue for the High Holy Days.



they have memories of many years of marking the Jewish New Year and coming to synagogue for the High Holy Days with spouses, family, and friends. Finally, the music of many of the prayers evokes feelings of poignancy, solemnity as well as a mix of both sorrow and hope. For people who are newcomers to High Holy Days services, it's good to know that some of the people present at services may be feeling a heightened sense of vulnerability as these once-a-year melodies and traditions trigger memories of life, love and loss.

Attending High Holy Days Services Away from Home

Sometimes people find themselves planning to be away from home during the High Holy Days, and they may want to attend services

Doing an online search for synagogues in the area you're planning to visit and contacting their offices to ask about High Holy Days services is a good way to ensure that you won't be scrambling at the last minute to find a place.

at a local synagogue. For interfaith families, this sometimes happens in conjunction with travel to visit Jewish in-laws. Whatever the reason for being out of town for the High Holy Days and wanting to go to a synagogue, we recommend taking the time to do some planning ahead.

As mentioned above, many congregations literally run out of seating space and use the tickets system. Doing an online search for synagogues in the area you're planning to visit and contacting their offices to ask about High Holy Days services is a good way to ensure that you won't be scrambling at the last minute to find a place.

Some communities may have venues where there is no seating limit, or where there's no need to make an advanced reservation or get a ticket. If the place you're visiting has a local [Jewish Federation](#) or [Jewish Community Center \(JCC\)](#), they may have good information about local options for the High Holy Days. If you're going to be near a university campus, you might also want to check out the website of the [Hillel](#) (Jewish

student center) on campus. They may be offering High Holy Days services for students and faculty, and these services are usually open to the general public.

High Holy Day Services FAQ

What to do when services feel really long?

Many people experience High Holy Days services as being long, so if you happen to be feeling that way, you're not alone. The evening services are sometimes fairly short, but the daytime services in some synagogues are offered in multi-hour segments covering most of the day, with a break or two in the middle.

If you are looking for shorter blocks of time to attend, look over the synagogue's online or printed materials describing the High Holy Days services for specific parts of the services that most interest you.

If you feel it's time for you to leave a service that is in progress, it's OK. Just try to mosey

on out as quietly as you can so that others can continue to participate with minimal distraction. If a speaker is in the middle of giving a talk or a reading, it's considered more polite to quietly slip out just before or after their remarks.

If you want to experience the major “highlights” of High Holy Days services without attending a lot of the longer daytime services, here are some specific segments of the services that you might want to select from based on your interests:

- Attend the **evening services** for the first day of Rosh Hashanah and for Yom Kippur. The evening service for Yom Kippur has its own special name, “Kol Nidre,” and some of the music specific to this service is haunting and beautiful.
- If you want to hear the thoughts of other community members and rabbis, find out when the main **sermons** are being given, and center your attendance around those moments.
- If hearing the **shofar** in synagogue is especially important to you and/or any kids you may have, ask the synagogue office for approximate times that the shofar services will be taking place.
- The final hour or two of services for the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, have a special feel to them. These services are called *Ne-illah*, and they

Some High Holy Days prayer books alter the English translation of problematic language to reflect a more contemporary values set, or they include commentaries on the prayers acknowledging the tensions or offering alternative readings.

usually start somewhere around 5 or 6 pm, depending on when sunset will be. They end with a **final major blast of the shofar**. One thing to keep in mind: The last hour of services on Yom Kippur includes a lot of standing for long periods of time. It's OK for kids to sit if they get tired, and for adults to sit if standing is painful.

What if I feel uncomfortable with some of the prayers?

- You're not alone. Judaism is a very old religion, and a lot of the prayers and metaphors of the High Holy Days reflect the ways people felt comfortable talking about God and faith many centuries ago. The High Holy Days in particular have many prayers that use the image of God as a great King on a heavenly throne, sitting in judgment of all living beings, and decreeing what their fate will be in the year to come. There are also specific readings from the Hebrew Bible that were assigned to these holidays about 2,000 years ago, and some of these texts

clash severely with modern liberal values. Some High Holy Days prayer books alter the English translation of problematic language to reflect a more contemporary values set, or they include commentaries on the prayers acknowledging the tensions or offering alternative readings. Here's one way to look at it: The High Holy Days are a bit like an opera. They're full of amazing music and dramatic words, they're long and they're emotionally powerful. But they can also feel very culturally distant from 21st Century modern Western values. If you find yourself uncomfortable with something that's read or sung during these services, just know that there's a good chance many others in attendance, including the rabbi, are feeling a similar discomfort, and that the language may be altered over time. And remember: Judaism is a tradition that values questioning and even wrestling with its own texts and traditions.

Is there a dress code?

- The culture around how people dress to High Holy Days services varies a lot from synagogue to synagogue. The easiest way to know the norms at a particular congregation is to call them and ask. When in doubt, go for something resembling business attire.
- There's a humorous and very helpful overview of many of the topics we just covered in this section over at Religion News Service's online feature, "[The 'Splainer](#)."

What if I don't know the words to the songs and prayers, or when to stand or sit?

- Don't worry—lots of Jewish people who've been to these services before also don't know!
- A lot of prayerbooks for the High Holy Days have transliteration (Hebrew words phonetically spelled out in English) alongside the key Hebrew passages that are being sung. Everyone is welcome to sing along as best they're able, or to simply listen without singing. Humming along or singing "la la la" along with the Hebrew songs the congregation is singing is also totally acceptable.
- If you find that some of the longer periods of standing is making you physically uncomfortable, or if you have

a physical condition that requires you to manage things like sitting or standing, please know that you're free to sit or stand as you need.

We have more questions. Who can we talk to?

In addition to your local clergy, friends or other nearby trusted resources, we have staff here at 18Doors who are more than happy to take a little time to hear your specific questions or challenges. We're not counselors, but several of us are rabbis and experts on these questions and concerns. If you'd like to email or talk with someone at 18Doors, send an email to info@18Doors.org.

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