

Jewish High Holy Days

Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement

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The most important days in the entire Jewish year are during the High Holy Days. The first two days are Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and the last day is Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the Days of Penitence.

Yom Kippur

The Jewish High Holy Day period will conclude with the solemn observance of Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement, at sundown, tonight (Kol Nidrei) through tomorrow (Yom Kippur), one hour after sundown.

The Biblical source of Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar is found in the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 23: *“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: The tenth day of the seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation to you and you shall afflict your souls. You shall do no work throughout the day — for it is a Day of Atonement.”*

It is from this source that Judaism teaches us how to observe this special day. The Biblical commandment — *“to afflict your souls”* — is fulfilled by a complete and total fast (by abstaining from all eating

and drinking) from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. The obligation to fast, coupled with five religious services in this 24 hour period, help focus and direct all worshippers to address the need for forgiveness from G-d as well as neighbors and friends for sins and transgressions. The atmosphere at most synagogues encourages and enables those in attendance to come closer to G-d and to reorder their priorities in the New Year. A memorial service for our dear departed is a salient feature of the day’s worship.

Yom Kippur begins, like all other Jewish holidays, in the evening. It opens in the synagogue with the leader singing a prayer called “Kol Nidrei.” Jews read prayers from the Yom Kippur prayer book, and also begin to say prayers in their hearts and minds as well. Worshippers spend the entire time of the holiday thinking about their ways, thinking how they can become better people, praying they will be for-

given for any wrongs they may have done. Many of the prayers are said out loud, with everybody in the synagogue joining in. The prayers ask G-d for forgiveness.

On the afternoon of Yom Kippur, the Bible story of the Prophet Jonah is read in the synagogue. Then, as the sun goes down on Yom Kippur and the gate of heaven begins to close, Jews say the “Neilah” prayer, which is the holiest prayer.

The conclusion of the Day of Atonement is marked by a single long blast of the shofar which signals the joy and elation of all worshippers who know that G-d has forgiven them for all their misdeeds and shortcomings and has blessed them with health, happi-

ness and prosperity in the New Year.

Editor’s note: The references to G-d in the following story have been changed due to the writer’s reverence. According to the writer’s spiritual beliefs, that word is never said or completely spelled out.

