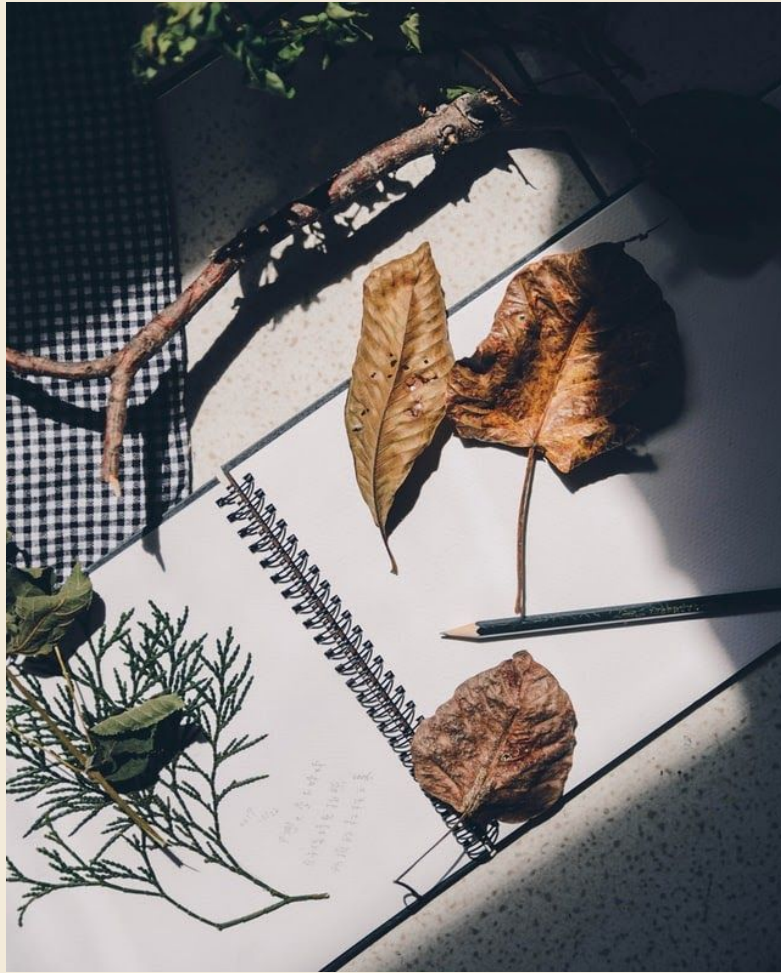


Hillel UW Field Guide: High Holidays



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Why a field guide?

Many of us have heard that the High Holidays are a big deal, but sometimes it's hard to know where to begin! However, not knowing does not make you any less than, and Judaism in particular really encourages asking questions! In our quest to make sure that everyone feels welcome, and because the High Holidays are a long haul and cover a lot of territory, we created this High Holiday field guide to help you find your way on your journey! We hope this helps you explore and encourages you to keep being curious.



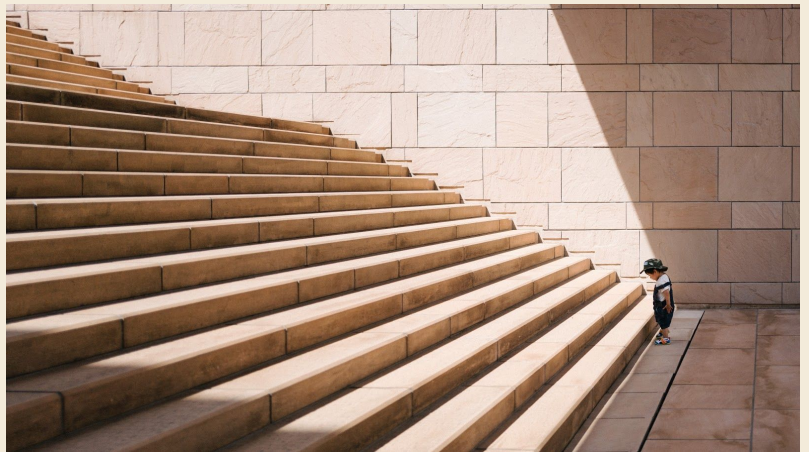
Getting Ready for Your Journey

What ARE the High Holidays?

The High Holidays are Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, and the ten days between the two. That ten-day period is thought of as the Days of Return, and this is the time in which we are invited to reflect on and “make up” for our wrongdoings of the past year, and decide how we will change our course in the year to come.

*At this point of the year, the classic metaphor presents G*d opening up a book of life and a book of death and marking people down according to whether they’ve behaved righteously or not.*

We have the days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur to improve ourselves enough -- through prayer, righteous acts, and Teshuvah/returning -- to make it into the book of life. Modern Jews have struggled with this conception and found alternate ways of understanding the metaphor.



What do you think would happen to you if you spent some time dedicated to prayer/contemplation/meditation, righteous action (e.g. charity, seeking justice), and self-improvement? In what ways might you feel that you

would be “inscribed in the book of life” if you did those things? (See Unetaneh Tokef below for more on this.)

Why is this important?

Rosh Hashanah - literally The Head of the Year

*Rosh Hashanah is the first day of the New Year and also goes by several other names -The Day of Judgement, the Day of Remembrance, and also The Day The World Is Born. Talk about mixed metaphors! But that also means that Rosh HaShanah is, no joke, **the world's birthday**. Wouldn't you like apples and honey on your birthday? (See below under “food to bring.”)*



*Yom Kippur - literally
the Day of Atonement*

Yom Kippur is important because it is the most intense of the ten days of repentance, and their climax. People sometimes think of Yom Kippur as a sad day because we fast, but it's also the

*day **we are forgiven** and the slate is wiped clean so we can start the new year fresh. You tell me: does that sound like a somber day, or more like a good excuse for a party? In fact, the closing of Yom Kippur (Ne'ilah) is full of exuberant energy, and the break-fast that follows is, of course, literally a party. And some communities maintain festive energy throughout Yom Kippur!*

Is the first holiday Rosh HaShanah? / Where do I start?

The High Holiday season begins on the first day of the Jewish month Elul -- a whole month before Rosh HaShanah. Elul is dedicated to "Cheshbon HaNefesh," an "accounting of the soul." Commonly, the shofar is blown on each day of Elul except Shabbat to remind listeners to wake up and become aware of where they've been, where they are, and where they're going in life.

What questions should I ask during Elul and the High Holidays?

What do I regret?

How do I want to move into the new year?

What will I change?

Who will I become?

What makes these the "High Holidays?"

In Hebrew, these are known as the "Yamim Noraim," the "Days of Awe." As the Machzor, or High Holiday prayerbook, says, Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are full of "sacred power -- profound and awe-inspiring." These ten days

are set apart from the everyday in that the gates of repentance are open (or, open more than usual). Traditionally, people were believed to be in mortal danger unless they repented during this time -- life hung in the balance. It's like Halloween but like, with Catholic guilt but like, Jewish! (Again, see Unetaneh Tokef below for a contemporary take on this intense stuff!)



The Journey Itself

Food to bring on your trip

On Rosh Hashanah, eat sweet foods like apples and honey to bring a sweet new year. The pomegranate is thought to have 613 seeds to correspond with the 613 mitzvot, so that's also a good one. People also eat round challah to represent the circularity of the year. Fish is eaten with the head to represent the head of the year (that is, if you eat fish! Sustainable only, please ;-).

On Yom Kippur, people fast (and also abstain from sex), but they often start and end their fast with a good meal. In fact, it's a mitzvah to eat well before Yom Kippur -- the better the meal before, the bigger the mitzvah!

Making it fit you:

If fasting is triggering for you, think more about abstaining from hedonism on Yom Kippur. If repenting and thinking about guilt too much is going to send you into a dark night of the soul, think instead about what you do want to do in the new year, including what you can be doing to help your community. Yom Kippur is not about self-flagellation (well, not anymore it isn't), it is about reflecting and growing! :)



What do we actually do on the High Holidays?

Some people will take part in a mikvah, a ritual bath, to purify themselves right before Rosh HaShanah.

Obviously, more people go to synagogue (this year -- see you online!) more than any other time of year, and there's lots to those services, but that's not all....

We sound the shofar (animal horn) 100 times on Rosh HaShanah. The shofar is associated with many things -- it is an alarm, a call of freedom, the anguished cry of the soul, the birth pangs of the world, and more. What does the sound of the shofar do to you? Find out by closing your eyes and bringing awareness to the experience.

On Rosh Hashanah, you can take part in the Tashlikh ceremony where you throw crumbs (or better yet, something eco-friendly) into a flowing body of water to represent casting away your sins/stuff you want to leave behind from the past year.



Speak the local language

Which prayers are specific to which holidays? What do they mean?

*One classic High Holiday prayer is Avinu Malkeninu, which has us praying to G*d for mercy. What does mercy mean to you? Who has the power to 'give mercy'?*

*Another prayer that is recited on Rosh Hashanah is Unetaneh Tokef, which describes the scene when the books of life and death are opened. It is a poem that describes the reverence with which Jews see G*d. What makes you feel small and reverent? Do you enjoy feeling that way?*

Unetaneh Tokef also appears to say that engaging in prayer, righteous

action, and Teshuvah (self-improvement) during the High Holidays will change our fate in the coming year. But Rabbi Alan Lew says that we've been misreading this. In fact, the prayer suggests that "prayer, righteousness, and Teshuvah will not change what happens to us; rather, they will change us." Which, if you think about it, kinda makes sense!

On Yom Kippur, there is the viddui, confession, where we communally repent.

All our prayers for forgiveness are said in the first person plural -- "we." By doing this we take

responsibility for each other and society. Judaism is not an individualistic religion! What makes you feel connected to others?



¹ Lew, Alan. "This Is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared." Boston: Little, Brown, and Company. 2003. p 14.

Phrase Guide

Before and during Rosh HaShanah you can say “LeShanah Tovah” -- “to a Good Year.” Or, to get fancy with your Hebrew, you can try on “LeShanah Tovah UMetukah” -- “to a Good and Sweet New Year.”

We don’t think Yom Kippur needs to be a bummer, but it still wouldn’t make sense to say ‘Happy Yom Kippur.’ So instead, you can say ‘have a meaningful fast.’

If you want to get fancy with your Hebrew you can also say “Gemar Chatimah Tovah,” meaning may you have “A Good Final Sealing” in the Book of Life, Or just “Chatimah Tovah” -- “A Good Sealing.”

Whatever you say, say it with gusto -- these High Holidays may be intense, but the New Year is a happy time and we could all use someone wishing us a good year right about now!



Must See Sights and Experiences

How can I celebrate?

*You can reflect and repent,
whatever that means for you...*

Ideas:

Journal

*Look for opportunities to get
involved in your community*

Attend services and pray

*Try on a new practice like
meditation, or yoga, or....?*

What year is it?

It is becoming the year 5781.

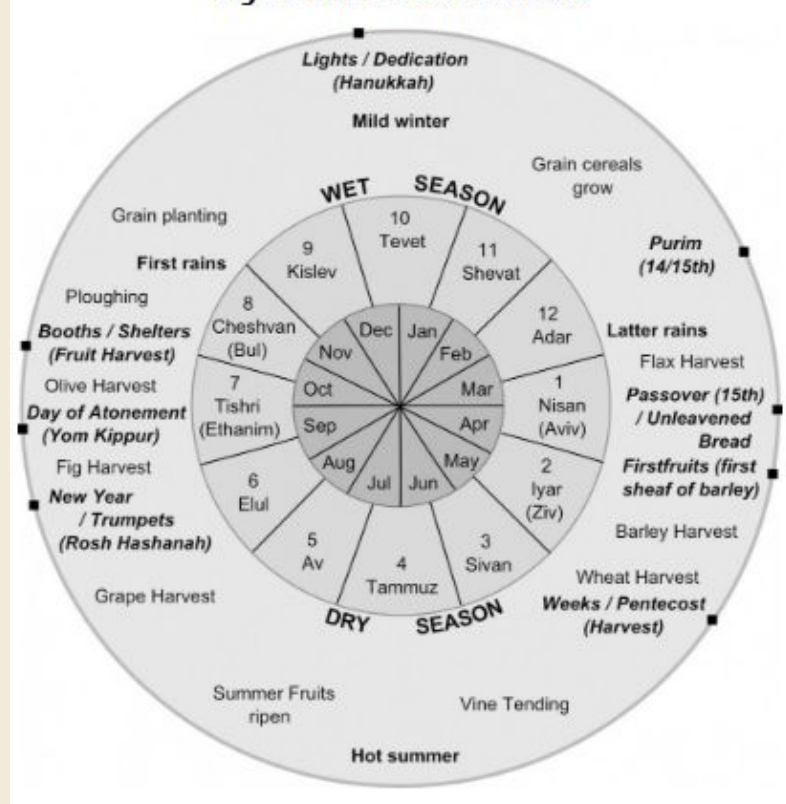
*The creators of the Jewish calendar believed they were counting from when
G*d created the world.*

Why is the new year now?

*The New Year is at the beginning of the Jewish month of Tishrei,
which comes after the month of Elul. Jewish holidays follow a lunar-solar
calendar in which the first of the month is always a new moon, meaning
that Rosh HaShanah is always a new moon.*

*What does the new moon mean to you? When confronted with
emptiness, do you see emptiness as bad, or does it contain some kind of
possibility? What makes you feel in touch with natural cycles?*

Fig. 3 The Jewish Calendar



Nesiyah tovah / Good journey!

The High Holidays can be whatever you want them to be, and you can celebrate them however and to whatever extent you find meaningful. Keep asking questions and know you're welcome to celebrate with us at Hillel UW!

