

The importance of The High Holy Days

Jews regard the first day of the month of Tishrei as beginning a new calendar year. Leviticus 23:24 says that 'a day of complete rest, a holy convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts' is to be observed on 'the seventh month, on the first day of the month' (compare Numbers 29:1). Counting Nisan (the time of the exodus) as the first month, this brings us to 1 Tishrei. It is only in post-biblical Jewish literature that this day is designated *Rosh Hashanah* ('the New Year', literally 'the Head of the Year'). In the Mishnah we find this day marking the beginning of a penitential season (Rosh Hashanah 16b). It is celebrated as the birthday of the world and, in particular, of the human race. Attention is, therefore, focused on God as creator, to whom people are answerable for how they live. Final judgement for the year will be passed on the tenth and last day of this season of penitence, giving people time to reflect and repent. So the recurrent phrase in the liturgy of this season is: '*Remember us unto life, for You, O King, delight in life; inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, O God of life*' and the greeting exchanged among Jews at this season is: 'May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year.'

Everything about this period is designed to help the individual members of the Jewish community to appreciate their significance in a sort of cosmic drama and to encourage the strenuous effort required if they are to recognize all that is wrong in their relationships with God and with other people, and to make amends. It is, then, a time when serious new year resolutions are built into the liturgy and customs of the calendar. The ten days of penitence culminate in *Yom Kippur* (the 'Day of Atonement'), the holiest day of the Jewish year. Rosh Hashanah, observed in Israel as well as in the Diaspora for two days, and Yom Kippur constitute the 'High Holy Days'. Stressing the need for reverence of God, they are also referred to as *Yamim Noraim* (the 'Days of Awe').

Getting to the heart of the 'matter'

It could well be argued that to understand the High Holy Days is to understand Judaism. Repentance and atonement stand at the height of Jewish spiritual life. Many would say, though perhaps using different terminology, that they lie at the heart of human life in general. Certainly, the need to face up to mistakes, to let go of resentments, to feel that others have let go of

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the New Year and the Day of Atonement

In this chapter you will learn:

- how the New Year and the Day of Atonement came to be the most important days in the Jewish calendar
- about the music and words used to express a sense of repentance and a new start
- about the origins and purpose of fasting on the Day of Atonement.

resentments towards you, and to feel the genuine chance of a fresh start are vital parts of much experience. From the Jewish point of view, the designer of the whole enterprise is the one to whom to turn for such renewal.

There are, however, two difficulties in trying to understand these days from the outside. First, it may be asked: 'Whose High Holy Days are we looking at?' For there is great variety of concept and observance. Some would lay the greater stress on obligation whilst others would lay it on emotion, as illustrated by the story about a Hasid who was the only one in the synagogue able to blow the ram's horn. When he stood up to blow, he was so moved that he burst into tears. A Lithuanian rabbi said to the Hasid: 'We are commanded to blow, so blow.' What of the many Jews not affiliated to any synagogue and yet who make a special effort to be present at this period especially on Yom Kippur? And what does the liturgy of this period, with its affirmation that God organizes and judges his world, mean to Jews after the Holocaust? Secondly, it may be asked whether it is actually possible to plumb someone else's faith. This series, *Teach Yourself World Faiths*, rests on the assumption that it is possible at least to get some inkling of it. The best way of getting close to the experience of the High Holy Days is through their liturgy.

Creating the atmosphere

The sound of the Shofar

Both words and the music of the services create the mood. The highlight of Rosh Hashanah and the characteristic sound of the whole period is the *shofar* ('ram's horn'). For an entire month before Rosh Hashanah, the shofar is sounded every morning except Shabbat. The purpose of this is to convey a sense of what is coming and a sense of something changing in the month of Ellul, leading up to the New Year. Some associate the shofar with the story of the binding of Isaac in which a ram is caught in a thicket by its horns (Genesis 22:13). The story of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice is read on the second day of the festival. But no such association is needed for the sound to have its plaintive, pleading, and challenging effect. Maimonides stresses the capacity of the sound to rouse the spiritually inert.

Many imaginative explanations have been offered, encouraged perhaps by the three different kinds of note sounded. Since the

third century, these notes have been combined to form a well-defined series. The first, *tekiah*, is a long, drawn-out, uninterrupted blast, representing a call for attention and a march in a new direction. The final *tekiah* is particularly long. The second, *shevarim*, consists of three broken sounds, and the third, *teruah*, has nine staccato sounds. Both *shevarim* and *teruah* are taken to represent the weeping of the penitent. Repentance is the overall aim and the overall sound matches the aim. The following prayer from the Rosh Hashanah Musaf (additional service) captures the sense of awe:

The great shofar is sounded; a gentle whisper is heard; the angels, quaking with fear, declare: 'The day of judgement is here to bring the hosts of heaven to justice!' Indeed, even they are not guiltless in thy sight. All mankind passes before thee like a flock of sheep. As a shepherd seeks out his flock, making his sheep pass under his rod, so dost thou make all the living souls pass before thee; thou dost count and number thy creatures, fixing their lifetime and inscribing their destiny.

Interspersed with the blowing of the shofar at the Rosh Hashanah service are scriptural verses celebrating God's kingship and judgement with the sound of the shofar. These include Exodus 19:16, where God reveals himself and initiates the covenant at Sinai, Isaiah 27:13, where God will gather people from other lands to worship him in Jerusalem, and Psalm 81:4-5, where the shofar proclaims the new moon. The Saadia Gaon offers as one of ten reasons for the blowing of the shofar the use of trumpets at a king's coronation. So, at the beginning of the year God is crowned as King. Certainly, the theme of kingship is vital to Rosh Hashanah. As creator, God is not to be thought of as simply having set the world going but also as the one who constantly calls human beings to obey his rule.

Prayers of penitence

Throughout Ellul, *selihot* ('penitential prayers') are said early in the morning. The aim is to summon up the concentration and spiritual energy demanded by the High Holy Days. The selihot cultivate self-examination and anticipation. The Reform Mahzor (prayer book for festivals) incorporates short readings and meditations for the whole period. A prayer of confession from a selihot service includes the words:

For not listening to Your voice within us
 For denying the needs of our soul
 For making this world a god
 Forgive us, pardon us and grant us atonement . . .
 For boarding grudges and insults
 For refusing to let go
 For abandoning hope
 Forgive us, pardon us and grant us atonement.

There is a certain ambiguity about the mood of Rosh Hashanah, stemming from the emphasis on God's kingship, which includes both judgement and compassion. We can see this in the following meditation where the opening mood of awe and unworthiness changes to a sense of divine love and joy:

Poor in worthy deeds, I am horribly frightened in thy presence, who art enthroned and receiving praise from Israel . . . May our defaults be pardoned by thy love, since love draws a veil over all wrongdoing. Turn thou all afflictions into joy and gladness, life and peace, for us and for all Israel.

Yet this combination of the misery of estrangement and the joy of returning is crucial to the whole period. It is strikingly expressed in the way in which some communities sing, on Yom Kippur, a long communal confession of awful sins. A further tale sheds light on this. Hearing about a certain rabbi following this practice, the Baal Shem Tov:

sent after the rabbi and asked him, 'Why do you sing the confessions joyfully?' Said the rabbi to him, 'Lo, a servant who is cleaning the courtyard of the king, if he loves the king, is very happy cleaning the refuse from the courtyard, and sings joyful melodies, for he is giving pleasure to the king.'

So on Rosh Hashanah too there is a great sense of festivity combined with an emphasis on the awe-inspiring day of judgement to come. It is not always easy to keep the balance, but it is important for the significance of the whole period where the key thoughts are human sin and divine grace in equal measure.

God the King

The liturgy of Rosh Hashanah itself focuses less on human beings as sinners and more on God as king. Sin is scarcely mentioned, in

fact. There is in the Musaf, a series of benedictions known as 'kingships'. In the Reform Mahzor, these open as follows:

Let us think of the forces which rule our lives, the currents of instinct and longing which rise from the depths of our being, the tides of ambition and desire which sweep away our will, the little waves of habit and routine in which our vision drowns – yet the Lord is greater than these, and His still small voice louder than their roaring. On the New Year we acknowledge Him as king; may He reign over us and within us.

The image of an old man on the throne can create difficulties, but the language was designed to restore a sense of God in the world, the sense of the spiritual which is a prerequisite for atonement. One might expect the train of thought to be in the opposite direction and the liturgy to start with cleaning out the sins and then to focus on the spiritual. Maimonides, for one, however, saw the danger of this. It could end in total self-preoccupation, as if God were somehow incidental to the process.

Returning

The concept which provides the vital link is repentance. The Hebrew for this, *teshuvah*, means literally 'returning'. This returning to God can be in a very simple sense or it can involve profound inner development. An important expression of this in the liturgy comes in Psalm 51. Verse 10 reads:

*Create in me a clean heart, O God
 and put a new and right spirit within me.*

Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur fall the penitential days of the Fast of Gedaliah and *Shabbat Shuvah*, (the 'Sabbath of Returning'). On Shabbat Shuvah, the reading from the Prophets is Hosea 14 which appeals for Israel's return to God and promises attendant forgiveness and prosperity.

There is in Judaism a tremendously profound sense of sin and yet it is always emphasized that sin is transient, for we have the choice and the capacity to turn back to God and achieve spiritual purity. The thought in Judaism is not of some innate tendency always to do wrong (unlike the concept of 'original sin' in Christianity), but of a constant struggle between good and bad inclinations. As Maimonides emphasizes: 'Free will is bestowed

on every human being. If one desires to turn toward the good way and be righteous, he has the power to do so.'

True repentance

In his *Laws of Penitence*, Maimonides is optimistic about change, but the change must be in attitudes, qualities and actions. Teshuvah is thus the focal-point of this ten-day period, in the sense not simply of feeling sorry for certain wrongs done but also of a spiritual transformation, a recentering of life in God and his ethical demands. God's gracious forgiveness is contingent upon sincere personal contrition and deep resolve on the part of the penitent. Only then can God keep the promise of Isaiah 1:18: '... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.' Not forgiveness, however, but reparation is the ultimate purpose and in this process choice and responsibility loom large. In the so-called 'Literature of Introspection', which comes from the Lithuanian talmudic academies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we find a realism about this. There, Israel Salanter says that it is easier to study the entire Talmud than to correct a single aspect of one's character. Salanter founded the movement known as *Musar* ('discipline'), which strove to bring the religious world and its ethics into one's own life and culture. The choice is put starkly in one of the Torah portions for Rosh Hashanah, Deuteronomy 30:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live . . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life . . . (verses 15-16, 19)

Tashlikh

A simple ceremony, carried out after the afternoon service on the first day of Rosh Hashanah (or, if this falls on Shabbat, on the second day), gives a very good sense of what can sometimes seem rather complicated ideas. It is known as *Tashlikh*, ('casting away'). Jews gather, often as a community, by a stream or sea to

recite Micah 7:19 where God casts all sins 'into the depths of the sea'. Some find it helpful to make a physical demonstration of casting away all that is bad about their lives by emptying out crumbs or dust from their pockets. Long established in Orthodox communities, *tashlikh* has become increasingly common in Reform in recent times.

Kapparot

Another symbolic preparation for the Day of Atonement is observed now only by the very Orthodox. This is known as *kapparot* ('atonements'), from the same root as *Kippur*. It is based on the ancient Temple ritual of this day, as described in Leviticus 16, whereby a goat was driven out of Jerusalem into the wilderness. The goat was thought to carry the sins of the people. After the destruction of the Temple, the custom developed of slaughtering a chicken instead and giving it to the poor for the festive meal held before Yom Kippur. Most people now give not a chicken but money instead. The ancient idea is remembered as people recognize that they have done wrong and need to make amends. Kapparot is never performed in Reform communities. Instead, charity is strongly encouraged in the form of inviting the lonely and needy to break the fast of Yom Kippur in someone else's home or communally at the synagogue.

Fasting

The purpose of Yom Kippur

One mark of a festival is a special meal. This is particularly true of Judaism. Rosh Hashanah is no exception. After the festival is welcomed with kiddush, it is customary to eat food containing honey, such as cake and biscuits, or apples dipped in honey. The hope is thus expressed that the new year will be a sweet one. Yom Kippur, however, is not only a festival but also a fast day and so cannot include any food or drink. It may seem odd to fast on a festival, but the point of the fast is not to punish yourself by making yourself miserable. The aim is to take your mind off physical needs to assist concentration on the spiritual. This is linked to three other reasons for fasting on Yom Kippur. It can be a penance for wrongs done, demonstrating a sincerity about one's protestations of remorse. It can encourage self-discipline and self-control, much needed if the New Year resolutions are to

be kept. It can promote compassion by giving a knowledge of what it means to go hungry if only for one day, and an awareness of the need to alleviate suffering. In all regards, fasting is not seen as an end in itself but as a way of fulfilling the purpose of Yom Kippur. The passage read from the Prophets on the day (Isaiah 57:14-58:14) makes plain that there is nothing automatically good about fasting:

*Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.*

*Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?*

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ...
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer:
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.* (58:6-7,9)

The origin of Yom Kippur

It is Leviticus which gives the authority and the name for Yom Kippur. In the Talmud, it is simply called 'The Day' (Yoma 14b), indicating the rabbinic understanding of the day as the most important in the Jewish Year. Leviticus 23:27-8 reads:

Now, the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; it shall be a holy convocation for you: you shall deny yourselves . . . and you shall do no work during that entire day; for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement on your behalf before the LORD your God.

This verse clearly commands that no work be done, as on Rosh Hashanah and the first day(s) of other major festivals. (On Rosh Hashanah, Orthodoxy follows the same prohibitions as

for Shabbat except that food can be cooked if it is to be consumed on the same day. Reform makes the same re-evaluation of prohibited activities as with Shabbat, regarding travel and the use of electricity, for example, as no longer constituting 'work'.) The command in Leviticus 23:27 for self-denial or, as it is sometimes rendered, 'affliction', is interpreted by the Rabbis to forbid sexual intercourse, anointing (washing), the wearing of leather shoes (a sign of comfort), and, chiefly, eating and drinking. This is, then, the most important fast in Judaism, observed, except by the very young or where there is any threat to health, for 25 hours.

Atonement

Again it is through the texts that we can get closest to the significance of Yom Kippur. For every book on theology in a Christian study there will be in a Jewish study a bookcase on Law, that is, the Talmud. It is from the tradition and its expression in prayer that Jewish theology can be derived. This applies to the theology of atonement. Sin in Judaism is seen as separating and alienating people from God. As we have noted, the main purpose of this period of penitence, culminating in Yom Kippur, is not only forgiveness, significant though this is, but restoration. Teshuvah suggests a returning to the pristine purity of what we are. Through this, the thought is, the world may become as God intended and be re-sanctified. (The mysticism of Martin Buber and Abraham Isaac Kook in varying ways expands on this notion.) We see here then the two dimensions of the day. Unlike Tishah B'Av and other fasts, Yom Kippur is not a sad day. Because of the restoration aspect, there is joy in the day, as seen in the story of the man singing as he cleaned out the king's courtyard.

Kol Nidrei

What he was singing, namely a confession of all sorts of sins, still forms the central feature of the Yom Kippur liturgy. Before the confession can begin, however, the worshippers need to feel released from the vows or promises which they have not been able to keep during the past year. To make a vow in Judaism is a solemn undertaking. Not being able to keep it can thus leave a sense of wrongdoing which needs to be erased. So on the eve of Yom Kippur the synagogues are full for a long service. The

The Orthodox confession similarly catalogues damaging acts: hasty condemnation, envy, tale-bearing, to name but three. Again, there is nothing automatic about confession bringing anyone back to being at one with God. Judaism is very clear that God does not forgive anyone any sin against someone if he or she has not tried to put things right. As the Mishnah says:

For transgressions between man and God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for the transgression between a man and his fellow man, the Day of Atonement does not atone unless he has first reconciled his fellow man. (Yoma 8:9)

In the theology of Atonement which emerges from this, divine grace requires human engagement. A contemporary rabbinic authority, J. B. Soloveichik, has evoked the essence of Yom Kippur in a poetic description of Moses standing on Mount Sinai after the disaster of the golden calf (Exodus 32). Alone and desolate, Moses shivers in the unbroken silence of a dark desert night. Only as he trembles is a distant faint sound heard. Once Moses seeks him in prayer and supplication, God appears. The conclusion is drawn from this account that something is expected of the human being, however slender, before 'at-one-ment' can occur.

Other expressions of repentance

The Haftarah during the afternoon service on Yom Kippur universalizes God's longing for repentance. It is the Book of Jonah, where the prophet is commanded to preach to the people of Nineveh. Both Jonah and the Ninevites have to change – their conduct as well as their attitudes. The Mishnah points out that it was when 'God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways' (Jonah 3:10), and not when God saw their sackcloth and fasting that he revoked his punishment (Ta'anit 2:1).

Many Jews spend the whole of Yom Kippur in the synagogue, though some may emerge for a breath of air or absent themselves during the afternoon. The focus is on atonement throughout. White, a symbol of both festivity and purity, predominates. It is seen in the dress of the rabbi and the cantor and in the curtains of the ark. Some men wear a white kittel over their clothes. (Some will have been to the mikveh on the eve of Yom Kippur as a sign of spiritual cleansing. See Chapter 9.) In non-Orthodox synagogues, the liturgy is equally long. Although mentions of

service begins with *Kol Nidrei* ('All vows'), a prayer calling upon God to cancel all vows which have not been fulfilled. This prayer cannot be used to cancel commitments which Jews have simply failed to fulfil, such as repaying someone a debt. It relates only to vows between themselves and God, such as a voluntary fast (see Chapter 13) or other religious obligation, which they were unable to keep for good reason. Historically, the clearest example of such a vow comes from the Spanish Inquisition, when Jews were required to swear allegiance to the Christian Church to avoid persecution. The *Kol Nidrei* prayer enabled such Jews still to worship God without feeling that they had denied him. The ancient tune used for this prayer is a haunting reminder of the difficulties which Jews have often faced in being faithful. The thirteenth-century rabbi, Judah the Pious said:

Chant your supplications to God in a melody that makes the heart weep, and your praises of Him in one that will make it sing. Thus you will be filled with love and joy for Him that seeth the heart.

Prayers of confession

After the cancelling of religious vows, the focus moves to sin. This is a different matter requiring not cancellation but forgiveness and absolution. Attention is firmly fixed on the responsibility of each member of the Jewish people to keep certain ethical demands. The prayers of confession list, in greater and lesser detail, the sins to be forgiven. Like most Jewish prayer, the plural 'we' is used throughout, remembering that each person shares the sorrow and, often, the consequences of other people's sins, but there is a pause after each section for each to confess particular sins privately. The longer form of the confession in the Reform prayer book lists 44 sins. It begins:

*For the sin we have committed before You by foolish speech.
And for the sin we have committed before You by misusing our minds.
For the sin we have committed before You by the demands of business.
And for the sin we have committed before You by using violence.
For the sin we have committed before You by bribery.
And for the sin we have committed before You by compulsion.*

sacrifices, the physical resurrection of the dead, and a personal Messiah are omitted as theologically obsolete, a vast range of material, both ancient and modern, is substituted.

Neilah

The final service, at the end of the afternoon, is called *Neilah* ('closing'). Its title refers to the closing of the Temple gates, when prayers were offered in ancient times. The thought of the Neilah service which has grown from this is of the closing of the heavenly gates of God's judgement. The gates, open for repentance, are symbolized by the doors of the ark being open throughout the service. Ezekiel 18 centres attention on the individual's responsibility to keep God's command and challenges him with the whole point of the High Holy Days:

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?

(Ezekiel 18:23)

A single long blast of the shofar announces the end of the fast. At home or communally, Havdalah is performed and fast broken. Some people then proceed to begin to build a sukkah for the next festival. By this immediate preparation to keep the mitzvah of Sukkot, they are expressing the essence of the Jewish faith: God has given them mitzvot by which to live as he intends.

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the Holocaust

In this chapter you will learn:

- about the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish belief
- about the purpose of remembering the Holocaust
- about the attempts of Jewish theologians to make some sense of the Holocaust.