

Fall Holiday Glossary

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October 2, 2005

Dear Religious School Parents,

Do you wonder what your children are learning during the first several weeks of school? Much of the material revolves around the fall holidays, which offer us an opportunity for change and renewal. You may be thinking: this time of year is so challenging! School has just begun, and life seems a bit crazy. Plus, the fall holidays can be confusing (so many terms, information, and rituals). And, much of the holiday observance revolves around worship in synagogue, which may be difficult with young children and/or may not feel comfortable for everyone.

Let us stop for a moment and allow ourselves time to reflect on the possibilities. We get so caught up in daily activities, work, and chores that we need time to consider our behavior, to figure out how to improve, and to ask ourselves and our loved ones for forgiveness. During the latter fall holidays, we also benefit from having a chance to rejoice, to decorate, and to dance!

On the following pages, you will find some information about the fall holidays: Rosh Hashanah through Simchat Torah. Perhaps if we can increase our understanding about these holidays, we will be able to take advantage of the opportunities they provide and to celebrate our tradition and history. We will also be able to consider them from a Reconstructionist point of view and to figure out what they mean to us in our daily lives. And, most relevant to the first question posed in this letter, we will be able to talk to our children and to each other about them.

As you read the following pages, please consider some of the following:

- What is a “good” versus a “happy” New Year?
- Rosh Hashanah is often called the Day of Judgment. How do I judge myself? How can I make sure that I find the time to reflect on my actions?
- This is a time to make choices. What kind of person do I want to be? What kind of family member do I want to be?
- How can I apologize to those I have hurt in some way?
- The shofar is a call to repentance. For what else can the shofar be calling us?
- How is Sukkot like Thanksgiving?
- How can we be more welcoming of guests and newcomers in our community?
- What does “starting over” mean, and how can we apply it to our own lives?

If this guide raises more questions than it answers, please ask me for more information. I will be happy to provide you with additional resources. Please also let me know if this guide is helpful to you and how it can be improved in future years.

B’shalom,

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Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah literally means, “Head of the Year.” As the Jewish New Year, this holiday commemorates the birth of the world. There is a story that on Rosh Hashanah, a book in heaven which contains everyone’s names, called the “Book of Life,” is opened. The book remains open until the end of Yom Kippur, by which time one’s name will be re-inscribed for another year. Everyone is recorded in God’s book, demonstrating the significance of each person and of our actions. Rosh Hashanah asks us to reflect on our past behavior, and to turn to other people and to God for forgiveness, so that we can achieve our highest selves. Given the significance of the holiday, Rosh Hashanah has many other names; it is also called the Day of Remembrance (each individual is remembered), the Day of Judgment (we judge ourselves and reflect on our actions), and the Day of the Sounding of the Shofar (we blow the shofar).

Holiday Vocabulary:

Apples & Honey—traditional food for Rosh Hashanah. Food served on Rosh Hashanah is generally sweet to symbolize our hope that our lives will be sweet in the new year. We eat apples (*tapuchim*) dipped in honey (*d’vash*), persimmons, sweet potatoes, carrots, and raisin challah, which is often round to show us the round cycle of the year.

Days of Awe (also called the High Holy Days)—the ten days that begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippur. This is a time of reflection, self-examination and communal prayer for forgiveness.

“L’Shana Tova Tikateyvu”—“May you be inscribed for a good year.” This Rosh Hashanah greeting is often shortened to “*L’Shana tova*” and refers to the Book of Life.

Machzor—a special prayer book that we use on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as the liturgy on these days is longer than and different from our daily and Shabbat services.

S’lichot—the name of both the penitential prayers recited during the service and the service that is held at midnight on the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah (or a week earlier if Rosh Hashanah falls on a Monday or Tuesday). The *S’lichot* service contains poetry, prayers, and other readings that help set the mood for the High Holy Days.

Shofar—a ram’s horn. The shofar announces the new year and symbolizes a call to repentance. The shofar is heard on Rosh Hashanah and at the end of Yom Kippur. The shofar appears in the Torah story (read on Rosh Hashanah) in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. At the crucial moment, God stops Abraham from doing so and instead asks him to sacrifice a ram. The shofar sounds are *tekiah*, *shevarim*, *teruah*, and *tekiah gedolah* (great *tekiah*).

Tashlich—the throwing of bread crumbs into moving water, usually done on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah. This act symbolizes purifying ourselves of our sins.

Teshuvah (repentance), Tefillah (prayer), and Tzedakah (charity)—three actions that are encouraged throughout the year but are especially indicated during the Days of Awe and influence how one is written in the Book of Life.

Yom Tov—“a good day.” This is a greeting used on many holidays.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, occurs ten days after Rosh Hashanah and is known as the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. Many people wear white, which symbolizes purity and holiness. Yom Kippur is our last chance in the Days of Awe to atone for our sins, as it is believed that at the end of the day, the Book of Life is sealed for the year. It is important to note that we are supposed to ask God to forgive us for our sins between ourselves and God. However, if we have wronged another person, we should ask that person for forgiveness.

Holiday Vocabulary:

Al Cheyt—“for the sin.” *Al Cheyt* is one of the confessional prayers recited on Yom Kippur by the entire congregation. It is in the plural since we are all responsible for one another. Each sentence begins, “For the sin we committed before you by...” However, it should be noted that *Cheynt* actually means “missing the mark” or “going astray,” not “sin.”

Break fast—the meal held at the end of Yom Kippur. Many people have break fast at friends’ or relatives’ homes. Break fast is usually a light dairy meal.

Fasting/Indulgences—It is traditional to fast on Yom Kippur in order to demonstrate self-discipline, repentance, and a concentration on spiritual needs (the soul) instead of physical needs (the body). Some of those who do not fast all day choose to fast for part of the day or to eat simple foods. Many people also refrain from other indulgences, including wearing leather (which also shows mercy for animals), having intimate relations, bathing and using perfume.

G’mar Chatimah Tovah—“be sealed in (the Book of Life) for good.” This is a greeting used between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Kapparat—Literally “atonement.” On the day before Yom Kippur, it is customary to recite prayers and atone for sins by giving *tzedakah* (charity). This custom replaces the tradition of slaughtering a chicken and giving it to the poor as a way of giving away sins.

Kittel—white robe worn during the Days of Awe. White is often worn on these days, especially Yom Kippur, as it symbolizes goodness and purity.

Kol Nidre—“all vows.” *Kol Nidre* is the prayer recited at the beginning of the evening service of Yom Kippur and also the name of the evening service. *Kol Nidre* is recited three times.

Jonah—the Haftorah reading on Yom Kippur. The story teaches about the importance of forgiveness and mercy for all people.

Neilah—concluding service on Yom Kippur. At the end, one final blast of the shofar is heard.

Yetzer Tov/Yetzer Ra—*Yetzer* refers to one’s impulses. *Yetzer Tov* is someone’s good inclinations, and *Yetzer Ra* is someone’s natural desires that when left unchecked by the *Yetzer Tov* can have negative consequences. Everyone has both a *Yetzer Tov* and a *Yetzer Ra*. The goal, especially at this time of year, is to make sure that we are making choices based on our *Yetzer Tov*.

Yizkor—memorial service held on Yom Kippur.

Sukkot

Called “Festival of the Booths,” Sukkot is a seven day harvest festival that is similar to Thanksgiving. It reminds us that our ancestors were farmers who celebrated the harvesting of their crops. Sukkot also commemorates the time after the Jews left Egypt and wandered in the desert for forty years and lived in tents. For this joyous holiday, many congregations and families build a *sukkah*, an open-air temporary structure made out of wood and branches. It is customary to eat and sometimes even to sleep in the *sukkah*. Sukkot helps us consider our surroundings, the importance of food and harvest, and our relationship to nature. It provides us with an opportunity to make crafts and decorate the *sukkah*, to feel a connection to our ancestors and to Jews everywhere, to appreciate our environment, and to separate our basic needs from our modern conveniences.

Holiday Vocabulary:

Chol HaMo'ed—the intermediate days of Sukkot (third through the sixth days). These days are considered semi-holidays. Special holiday prayers are recited, but otherwise these days are treated like any other non-holiday.

Etrog--a citrus fruit native to Israel and a symbol of the heart.

Hoshana Raba—the seventh day of Sukkot. *Hoshana* means, “Save us, please,” and *Hoshana Raba* means, “The Great Hoshana.” On Sukkot, while holding the *lulav* and the *etrog*, we march around the sanctuary once each day and ask for God’s help. On *Hoshana Raba*, we have seven processions around the sanctuary.

Lulav—six branches bound together that include one palm branch (*lulav*), two willow branches (*arava*) and three myrtle branches (*hadass*). The palm branch is the longest branch, so the whole bundle is also called a *lulav*. While holding the *lulav* and *etrog*, we recite a blessing and wave them in all six directions (east, south, west, north, up, and down, showing that God is everywhere). These four species represent different parts of the body which make a whole person. They also symbolize different types of people and suggest that Jewish people have differences but that we can join together in a purposeful and welcoming community.

Sukkah—“booth.” *Sukkot* (plural of *sukkah*) were used by our ancestors who wandered in the desert and who were farmers. For Sukkot, many people build a *sukkah* at synagogue or outside their homes. They decorate it with items like fruits, vegetables and pictures with harvest themes.

S'chach—the roof of the *sukkah*. The roof is made of branches with spaces between them so that at night, stars can be viewed from the *sukkah* and in day time, there will be more shade from the sun.

Shalosh Regalim—the three pilgrimage festivals (Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot) when Israelites thanked God for their harvest by bringing the best of their crops to the Temple in Jerusalem and celebrating major events in the religious/historical life of our people.

Ushpizin—special guests who are invited to eat with us in the *sukkah*. It is customary to invite friends, relatives and *ushpizin*, who include seven of our ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David. We also include 7 biblical women: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda and Esther.

Shemini Atzeret & Simchat Torah

Shemini Atzeret is a full festival day (observed for two days in some communities) that follows the last day of Sukkot. Shemini Atzeret is the day when a prayer for rain is added to the service. We pray for rain on this day so that the rain does not interrupt the celebration of Sukkot but so that it comes afterwards to help the crops grow.

Simchat Torah is often celebrated on the second day of Shemini Atzeret. Simchat Torah literally means, “Rejoicing in the Torah.” Simchat Torah celebrates the ending and beginning again of the reciting of the Torah. Families attend services, watch the Torah scroll being “rewound,” march in procession around the synagogue seven times, and then participate in singing and dancing. The final Torah portion (the death of Moses) and the first Torah portion (creation) are recited during the service.

Holiday Vocabulary:

Aron HaKodesh—the ark where the Torahs (*Torot* in Hebrew) are stored.

Degel—flag. Many children participate in the joyous celebration of Simchat Torah by holding flags while marching around the sanctuary.

Hakafah—a procession of the Torah through the sanctuary prior to the reading of the Torah. There are seven *hakafot* (plural of *hakafah*) on *Hoshana Raba* (the seventh day of Sukkot) and on *Simchat Torah*. Traditionally, on *Simchat Torah*, children march in the procession around the sanctuary, waving flags and carrying little Torahs. Adults also participate in the *hakafot*, during which all the Torahs are removed from the ark and carried.

Keter—crown that covers the wooden rollers of the scroll of the Torah.

Kippah—a yarmulke. The *kipah* is the head covering worn in synagogue to show reverence for God.

Mantle—decorative plate that often partially covers the front of the Torah.

Ner Tamid—“eternal light.” The *Ner Tamid* is hung near the ark and continuously burns to show that God is always present.

Rimonim—“pomegranates.” One of these ornaments is placed over each Torah roller as a decorative covering. These are sometimes used instead of a crown. The ornaments are called *rimonim* because pomegranates are a symbol of life, as is the Torah. Also, it is said that pomegranates have 613 seeds, which is the number of *mitzvot*, or commandments, in the Torah.

Sifre Torah—Torah scrolls. The Torah is the Jewish Bible and includes the Five Books of Moses.

Yad—“hand.” The *yad* is a pointer used while reading the Torah so that the scroll is not touched by a finger.