

HIGH HOLY DAYS

A SEASON OF REPENTANCE



International Fellowship
of Christians and Jews®



ROSH HASHANAH

GOD'S ALARM CLOCK

Is your alarm clock a friend or foe? As the witty joke goes: My alarm clock and I had a fight. It wanted me to get up, and I refused. Things escalated. Now I'm awake, and it's broken. I'm not sure who won...

"This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites."

And it was done, as the LORD commanded Moses.

— LEVITICUS 16:34

The job of an alarm clock is to wake us up so that we can start our day. However, while some people see this as a gift, others see it as an enemy. But whatever your stance on the value of the alarm clock, most will agree that if you want to be productive, the alarm clock is a necessity to start the day.

But have you ever considered needing a wake-up call to start a new year? That's exactly how we start the Jewish New Year – with a wake-up call using God's own prescribed alarm clock. We call it the *shofar*, a trumpet crafted from a ram's horn, and it is a central part of services on Rosh Hashanah.



In fact, the wake-up call is scripturally mandated:

"On the first day of the seventh month hold a sacred assembly...It is a day for you to sound the trumpets." According to Jewish tradition, the first day of the Hebrew month *Tishrei* is when man was first created, and on this day, every year, humanity begins a new year. We start with a wake-up call.

But what are we waking up to?

God's greatest gift to humankind is time, but it is not unlimited. No matter who we are, there are still only 24 hours in a day, 365 days a year, and an average lifespan that is all too short. Too often, we go through life in a "slumber," not really governing what we do or thinking about why we do it. We go through our daily routines like zombies, devoid of meaning and purpose. We let precious moments slip by and fail to notice the beauty around us. Some people get to the end of their lives and realize that they slept their way through it all; others never awake from their dream state and believe that they will live forever.

This is what the psalmist was thinking about when he wrote: *"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom"* (Psalm 90:12). Only when we wake up to the reality that every day has an end and so does every life, can we really *live* in the truest sense of the word. Only then will we use our time for what matters most. No longer will we procrastinate, hitting the proverbial "snooze button," but we will begin to live.



While you may celebrate the New Year on January 1, you can begin afresh and anew today. Begin each day as we begin the New Year – with clarity, energy, and a new appreciation for life. Each day, let us love, give, and serve, so that when our eternal rest comes, we will have used the time allotted to us fully and well.

THE CALL OF THE TRUMPETS

Rosh Hashanah is identified in the Bible as “*a day for you to sound the trumpets.*” Indeed, Rosh Hashanah has become known for the object that symbolizes it the most: the trumpet, or in Hebrew, the *shofar*. The *shofar* has several different meanings, and together they comprise the essence of this most sacred day.

Over the course of Rosh Hashanah, the *shofar* is sounded in three different ways. The *tekiah* blast is one long sound. The *shevarim* blast is comprised of three slightly shorter notes. And the *teruah* blast contains nine, staccato-like short blasts blown in quick succession of each other. The three different ways of blowing the *shofar* symbolize the three messages that we are meant to understand on the days on which they are blown.

The long singular *tekiah* blast reminds us of royalty. When a king enters a place, trumpets are blown to signal his presence. Similarly, on Rosh Hashanah, the King of the world is present. Every year, on Rosh Hashanah, we coronate our King all over again. We recognize that the Lord, our God, is King, and we acknowledge His dominion over the world. Message number one is that God, and God alone, rules the world.

Message number two is represented by the three-part *shevarim* sound, closely resembling the sound of weeping. This distinct blast reminds us that our lives, and everything that we hold dear to us, hang by a single thread held by the Master of the universe. In the blink of an eye it could all disappear! That’s why we cry. Yet our brokenness leads us to wholeness when we pray to God, asking that He bless us for yet another year. We remember that He is our loving Father and that He will answer our prayers.



The final message, the nine, short *teruah* blasts, are reminiscent of an alarm clock, and their purpose is to awake us from our slumber. All year long we get caught up in the humdrum of life. We begin to forget the purpose of it all. Once a year we make it a point to wake up and remember that we are here for a specific purpose. During the High Holy Days, we reassess our lives and make any necessary changes.



Together, the three distinct types of *shofar* sounds bring us to a deep understanding of what the holiday is all about. Rosh Hashanah literally means the “head of the year” because it is on that day that we define which way our year is headed. When we recognize that God is the King who directs our lives and we adjust our lives to reflect that truth, we will have set the New Year in the right direction.

*Blessed are those who have
learned to acclaim you,*

*who walk in the light of
your presence, LORD.*

– PSALM 89:15



ROSH HASHANAH

THE SECRET OF THE SHOFAR

*The LORD said to Moses,
“Say to the Israelites: ‘On
the first day of the seventh
month you are to have a day
of sabbath rest, a sacred
assembly commemorated
with trumpet blasts.’”*
– LEVITICUS 23:23–24

My friend Jonathan had been pulled over by the police for talking on the phone and driving at the same time. The officer immediately started his diatribe, scolding Jonathan and explaining to him that he had earned himself a sizeable fine and points on his license. Jonathan’s wife tried making excuses. The officer seemed to anticipate an argument and only got louder and stronger.

Finally, Jonathan said something that stopped the officer mid-sentence. He said: “You are right. Hand me the ticket.” The officer’s mouth hung open as if he had suddenly forgotten how to talk. He obviously didn’t hear that too often!

Jonathan continued saying how wrong and dangerous it was to talk and drive at the same time and even thanked the officer for calling him on it. It was a lesson that he needed to learn. The officer walked away for a moment and when he came back, his demeanor had totally changed. He handed back Jonathan’s license and registration with a smile and a kind warning – but no ticket.

Tradition teaches that when we blow the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah, God our King, who is sitting on His throne of judgment, gets up and takes the seat of compassion. With just one piercing sound, the day is transformed from a day of stern judgment into a day of merciful compassion. Why?

These days, at the start of a trial, the judge bangs his gavel in order to bring the court to order. But in the olden days, a Jewish trial began with the sounding of the *shofar*. So when we blow the *shofar*, it is as though we are willingly starting our trial. *We* initiate the judgment. It is as if we are saying to God, “Hand me the ticket – give me my penalty! I know that I am guilty.”



We recognize that we have done things wrong and we accept our verdict, acknowledging that it is for our own good. In response, God switches His from judgment to compassion.

The psalmist writes: “*Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you...*” The Hebrew for “*to acclaim you*” in this verse is “*teruah*.” And as you may recall, *teruah* is also the name of the nine-note *shofar* blast. So our Jewish sages interpret this verse to mean: “Blessed are those who know the secret of the *shofar* blast.” The secret of the *shofar* blast is that it unleashes God’s mercy.



Tradition teaches, “When there is judgment below, there is no need for judgment above.” In other words, when we are able to take responsibility for our shortcomings on our own, God doesn’t have to correct our behavior for us. Instead, He helps us out with love and mercy.

A GOOD AND SWEET YEAR

Shana Tova is the traditional Jewish greeting for the New Year. However, contrary to most greeting cards, the translation is not “Happy New Year!” Rather, when we wish someone *Shana Tova*, the wish is for a “Good Year.” This nuance may seem inconsequential at first, but the truth is that the difference is extremely significant.

There is a big difference between pursuing a *happy* life and pursuing a *good* life. Seeking a happy life is usually focused on getting things for myself. We say, “I’ll be happy when I take that vacation,” or “when I get that new car,” or “when that person treats me better.” Seeking a good life, on the other hand, is about giving to others. My life is good when I do the right thing, help others, and contribute to the world around me.

Let’s take a look at the first time the word *good* is used in the Bible. In the very first chapter of the *Torah* we read the story of Creation. After every day God looked over His creation and deemed it “good.” On the final day, which traditionally is considered the actual date of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, “*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*” The Jewish sages explain that by labeling His creation good, God meant that all He had created fulfilled the purpose for which He had created it.

God created human beings to be givers. When we wish people a “Good Year,” we are wishing them a year filled with purpose, meaning, contribution, and fulfillment.

On Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish custom is to dip apple slices in honey. The apple represents our wish for a good year. An apple is healthy – it is good for us. However, we dip it in honey to express our desire that what is good for us also be experienced as something sweet. The longer version of the Rosh Hashanah greeting is actually *Shana Tova u’metuka* – “Have a good and sweet year.”



“On the first day of the seventh month hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work. It is a day for you to sound the trumpets.”

– LEVITICUS 23:24



While we are clear that our main goal is to have a good year and a good life, we also ask God that it be sweet. There is a certain sweetness that comes from living a life of contribution, and we ask God for a year that is filled with both goodness and the accompanying sweetness.



ROSH HASHANAH

WHERE ARE YOU?

*God saw all that he had made,
and it was very good. And
there was evening, and there
was morning – the sixth day.*

– GENESIS 1:31

Most people familiar with the Jewish New Year will tell you that it commemorates the creation of the world. And they would be vaguely correct. But more specifically, the first day of the Hebrew month of *Tishrei*, on which we celebrate Rosh Hashanah, correlates with the sixth day of creation. On that day, God completed the creation of the world with his final act: the creation of man.

A lot happened on man's first day of life, according to Jewish tradition. Not only did Adam meet his spouse, he also had his first run-in with God when he and his new wife ate from the forbidden tree. Adam and Eve tried to hide from God when they realized what they had done, but nothing is hidden from the Almighty.

God asked, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9) but He already knew where they were. His question was really, “Where are you spiritually?” In other words, it as if God were saying, “Somewhere in between the time that I created you and now, you veered off the path of righteousness. Take a look at where you are and find your way back.”



Repentance in Hebrew is *teshuvah*, but the word has other meanings as well. *Teshuvah* means “to return,” and it also means “answer.” This is because our *answer* to God’s question “where are you?” is *to return* to the path of righteousness. This is repentance, and repentance is a central theme of Rosh Hashanah.

Ever since that first Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year has been a time of introspection. We get the chance to evolve the creation called man. From all the many things that God created when He designed and made this world, humans are the only ones with the ability to be introspective. When we ask how we can make the world a better place, we raise humanity to a higher level.



That’s why we celebrate the New Year not with parties that leave us in a drunken stupor so that we can forget who we are, but with introspection that leaves us knowing more than ever what we are all about. Where am I? Who am I? What needs to change? These are the questions that we need to ask as the New Year begins and we chart our course for the year ahead.

What will you answer?

YOM KIPPUR

AT-ONE-MENT

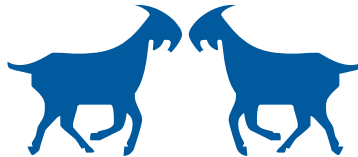
The Day of Atonement has a specific observance as described in the Bible, which revolved around two goats. Today, prayer and Bible readings take the place of that observance, but there is still much that we can learn from the practice that once was.

Here is what they did: Two goats were brought before the high priest. He cast lots to determine which goat would be sacrificed to the Lord, and which would be sent into the wilderness, bearing sins of the people. After the fate of each goat was decided, one goat was slaughtered and offered up to God, and the other was set free in the desert. When the freed goat came to a cliff, he was pushed off. That was how he met his death.

What can we learn from this seemingly bizarre practice? What does it have to do with the personal changes we aim for on Yom Kippur?

Let's take a look at this service from a different perspective – through the eyes of the goats. When the lots were cast, it would seem that the goat chosen for the wilderness received the better deal. His identical counterpart was immediately sacrificed while he was left alive. When the second goat got to the wilderness, it only confirmed that he got the better lot in life. He was set free to roam and do as he pleased. It was only at the last moment, when the goat realized he was about to meet his end, that he saw things differently. Perhaps the other goat was more fortunate than he.

Jewish tradition teaches us that these two goats symbolize ways of living. The first goat represents those who chose to dedicate their lives to God. They submit their will to His and give up their ego for the sake of God's name. The second goat represents those who chose to live wild and free. They do whatever they please with no restrictions placed on them whatsoever.



These people look at God-serving individuals and pity them. But at some point, often just before they die, they consider that maybe they had been wrong all along. They recognize that everyone turns to nothingness eventually, but only some will have filled their lives with meaning.



Atonement is the same as “at-one-ment.” When we choose to be at one with God, we are cleansed of all our sins. On Yom Kippur, we make this critical decision – do we live our lives in a wilderness of nothingness, or do we live a life filled with meaning and godliness? If we choose at-one-ment, we will achieve atonement.

“This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work – whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you...”

– LEVITICUS 16:29



YOM KIPPUR

DRESS REHEARSAL

“Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.”

– LEVITICUS 16:9–10

Yom Kippur is a dress rehearsal. When the Bible instructs, “*you must deny yourselves*,” it refers to five “denials” in particular. In the Jewish tradition, during Yom Kippur and cosmetics, engage in marital relations, or wear leather shoes.

In other words, we stay away from anything especially physical. As we stand in synagogue with nothing but our deeds behind us and God before us, awaiting judgment for the year to come, we are practicing for our final judgment. In essence, Yom Kippur is a dress rehearsal for death.

When God created the world, He said the same thing on every day of Creation: “*it was good*” (Genesis 1). There is one exception to that rule. On the sixth day God said, “*and it was very good*” (Genesis 1:31). The Jewish sages teach that while “*it was good*” refers to the potential for life that God had created, “*very good*” refers to the potential for death. What is so “*very good*” about death?

Steve Jobs, the famous founder of Apple who died at age 56 from cancer, once said: “No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet Death is the destination we all share...And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life’s change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new.”

Knowing we will die influences how we live.

On Yom Kippur, men traditionally wear a kittel, a burial shroud – the very same garment in which they will one day be buried. This is not a morbid or depressing gesture. Rather, it reacquaints us with “Life’s change agent.” It encourages us to let go of old habits in favor of some newer, better, and more godly life choices.



I’ve never forgotten this easy, yet effective, exercise that I first encountered in Stephen Covey’s illustrious *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. In this simple visualization, perfect for the High Holy Days, one imagines his or her funeral. We think about the eulogies that might be given. What would our family members say? What would our co-workers say? How about our friends? What about our spiritual leader? After envisioning what these significant people from all areas of our lives might say about us, comes the most important question: What would we *like* them to say?



Knowing how we would like to be remembered teaches us how we should live. In forcing us to face the inevitable end of life, Yom Kippur propels us toward making the best of the time we do have. And that, indeed, is “*very good*.”

PLEDGE TO BE BETTER

As we read earlier, part of the Yom Kippur observance includes denying ourselves. We don't eat or drink, wash our bodies, beautify ourselves with creams and cosmetics, engage in marital relations, or wear leather shoes. The Bible refers to these observances when it says *"You must deny yourselves."* Why is deprivation a crucial component of Yom Kippur?

There is a story about a rabbi who wanted to raise money for the needy. He knocked on the door of a wealthy donor, and when the man answered, the rabbi asked him to step outside. In spite of the cold, the man obliged. The rabbi started talking and he would not stop. The donor suggested that they take the conversation indoors – once, twice, three times – until the rabbi finally agreed to enter the warm home.



Once inside the rabbi explained: "I'm about to ask you for a donation to buy warm coats for the poor. But before I ask you, I wanted you to feel what it's like to be cold. Now that you are sensitive to the need, I know that you will give to your greatest capacity."

Yom Kippur works in much the same way. On this most holy day we pledge to be better people. But in order to make our pledge more significant, we sensitize ourselves to the need for our contribution to the betterment of God's world.

When we deny ourselves food and drink, we sensitize ourselves to those who are hungry. When we remain physically separated from our spouse, we remember those who are lonely. When we cannot wash up or use creams and cosmetics, we begin to imagine what it's like for those who have no place to go for a warm shower or other home comforts that we take for granted.

When we refrain from wearing our usual, well-made shoes, we begin to sympathize with those who can't afford any. When we deny ourselves these ordinary comforts, we literally walk in someone else's shoes. And that experience should shape our plans for the year to come.



Next time that you feel hungry, lonely, or lacking, don't let the feeling go to waste. Could God be trying to tell you something? Consider how those experiences might shape your responses to others in need.

"...because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins."

– LEVITICUS 16:30



YOM KIPPUR

MISSING THE MARK

A Jewish mother gives her son two ties for Hanukkah. After opening them up, the son puts one on and proudly comes to show it to his mother. She takes one look at him and says, “What’s the matter? You didn’t like the other one?”

“This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work – whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you.”

– LEVITICUS 16:29

Jewish guilt has been the source of many jokes, but the truth is that guilt is no laughing matter. Guilt is a very serious theme, and yet, like many important aspects of life, it is greatly misunderstood.

There are two kinds of guilt. The first is the kind that causes a person to think, “I am bad.” This kind of guilt is debilitating and unproductive. It has no place in Judaism. The second kind of guilt leads a person to realize “what I did was bad.” This kind of guilt is what is more properly referred to as “regret.” It is enlightening, empowering, and a great catalyst for positive change. It leaves a person feeling “what I did was bad, but I am good.”

The person who experiences this type of guilt believes, “Those actions are not really a part of who I am. I am so much better than that. I am created in the image of God – how could I do such a thing? I must make some changes so that my actions reflect who I really am.”

This type of guilt is the focus of Yom Kippur and the goal of our prayer service.

Did you know that there is no Hebrew word for sin?

The closest we get to it is the word *chet*, which literally means “a miss.” When someone aims an arrow at a target, but fails to hit it, it is called a *chet*. He missed the mark; it was a mistake.



Another word we use is *aveira*, which literally means “a cross over.” This word implies that while a person was supposed to stick to a certain path, that person veered off from it and got stuck in the mud. In other words, that person made a mistake. These nuances are profound. They emphasize the idea that while we miss the mark, it doesn’t mean that the shooter is doomed. With time and practice we will get closer and closer to hitting our target and getting things right.



Yom Kippur is time for getting out of the mud, cleaned off, back on track, and refocused on our target. While we regret past mistakes, they do not hold us back from correcting them and moving on. Take the opportunity of the High Holy Days to consider our own path. Where might we be off track or missing the mark? What adjustments might we make? Today is a good day to get back on target.

YOM KIPPUR

RISE AGAIN

On Yom Kippur, the most solemn day on the Jewish calendar, we turn to God and say, “I’m sorry, I messed up and I resolve never to do it again.” But who are we kidding? In all likelihood, we probably will do it again sometime in the 364 days to come. Possibly the next 24 hours!

By the time Yom Kippur comes around next year, we will have a whole new list of things to be sorry for all over again. We will say, “I’m sorry, I messed up and I resolve never to do it again.” And the cycle will begin anew!

Even God isn’t falling for our bluff. Why else would He prescribe Yom Kippur, a day of atonement, every single year? If He really thought that we would stick to all of our resolutions, then why would He mandate that Yom Kippur be observed by everyone, every year? God knows that we are all going to stumble again.

King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, says in the book of Proverbs, “*for though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again*” (24:16). He does not say “IF the righteous fall....” He says, “*though the righteous fall....*” The righteous *will* fall. Many times. They will stumble. However, that’s not what counts. What matters most is that “*they rise again.*”

God knows that we will stumble – year after year after year. Yet on Yom Kippur, we will rise again – and that is what matters.

A story is told about a great rabbi who would address God every night and say: “God, I sinned today, but tomorrow I shall not sin again. I know I said this yesterday, but *this* time I really mean it.” He would say this every single evening. However, every night that he rose from where he fell, he would stand a little higher, and reach a little closer toward God.



This is the purpose of the yearly Yom Kippur service. The Hebrew word for repentance is *teshuvah*. Literally, the word means “to return” because when we repent, we return to God and to our godly nature. But there is another meaning for the word as well. *Teshuvah* also means “to repeat,” because repentance is something that we do over and over again. Yet, every time that we return to our Source, we get closer to Him and He becomes that much more a part of our lives.



The message of Yom Kippur is an empowering one. It teaches us that it’s ok to fall, so long as we get back up again. We don’t need to be perfect, just perfectly dedicated to trying again.

“This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites.”

And it was done, as the LORD commanded Moses.

– LEVITICUS 16:34



International Fellowship
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A SEASON OF REPENTANCE

Beginning with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and ending ten days later with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, marks the most holy time of the year on the Jewish calendar. During this ten-day period, known as the Days of Awe (*Yamim Noraim*) or Days of Repentance, Jews around the world engage in intense introspection, examining their lives and seeking forgiveness from God and each other for the coming year.

Jewish sages teach that an individual's fate is "written" as God judges the world on Rosh Hashanah and "sealed" ten days later on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement and the holiest day on the Hebrew calendar. Jews know they are judged by their actions during the course of the whole year, but just as one would be that much more careful while sitting in a courtroom in front of the presiding judge, they know that now is their last chance to make good before the King of Kings, the Judge of Judges – God Himself – before His judgment is made.

According to Jewish tradition, during this time God opens up three books – one for those who were righteous during the year, one for those who were wicked, and one for those whose good and bad deeds balance. Everyone's fate is inscribed in one of those three books. During the Days of Awe, a person can alter his or her destiny by repenting, praying, and doing acts of charity. On Yom Kippur, Jewish tradition teaches that God closes all three books and seals humankind's fate for the coming year.

During this time, people typically greet each other with the words "*le-shanah tovah tikatevu v'taychataymu*," which means "May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year."

We have prepared for you a collection of ten devotions to help you take this spiritual journey and understand the importance and significance of this holy time of year, not only to Judaism, but also to the Christian faith as well.

OUR MISSION

The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews is the leading nonprofit building bridges between Christians and Jews, blessing Israel and the Jewish people around the world with humanitarian care and life-saving aid.

On the cover:
Jewish man blows the *shofar*
at dawn in the Carmel mountains.
Photo by Eric Davis, © IFCJ