



The Jewish High Holidays: Rosh Ha Shannah and Yom Kippur

By Steve Cohen

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Rosh Ha Shannah

Rosh Ha Shannah (the head of the year) marks the beginning of the new calendar year on the 1st of Tishre in the Hebrew calendar; usually sometime in September of each year.

The Jewish New Year is a time to begin introspection, looking back at the mistakes of the past year and planning the changes to make in the new year.

The name “Rosh Hashanah” is not used in the Bible to discuss this holiday. The Bible refers to the holiday as Yom Ha-Zikaron (the day of remembrance) or Yom Teruah (the day of the sounding of the shofar). The holiday is instituted in Leviticus 23:24-25.

The shofar is a ram’s horn which is blown somewhat like a trumpet. One of the most important observances of this holiday is hearing the sounding of the shofar in the synagogue. A total of 100 notes are sounded each day. No work is permitted on Rosh Hashanah. Much of the day is spent in synagogue, where the regular daily liturgy is somewhat expanded. In fact, there is a special prayer book called the machzor used for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur because of the extensive liturgical changes for these holidays.

Another popular observance during this holiday is eating apples dipped in honey, a symbol of our wish for a sweet new year.

Another popular practice of the holiday is Tashlikh (“casting off”). We walk to flowing water, such as a creek or river, on the afternoon of the first day and empty our pockets into the river, symbolically casting off our sins. Small pieces of bread are commonly put in the pocket to cast off. This practice is not discussed in the Bible, but is a long-standing custom. Tashlikh is normally observed on the afternoon of the first day, before afternoon services.

The common greeting at this time is L’shanah tovah (“for a good year”). This is a shortening of “L’shanah tovah tikatev v’taihatem” (or to women, “L’shanah tovah tikatevi v’taihatemi”), which means “May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year.”

Yom Kippur

...In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and you shall not do any work ... For on that day he shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you from all your sins before the Lord. -- Leviticus 16:29-30

Yom Kippur is probably the most important holiday of the Jewish year. Many Jews who do not observe any other Jewish custom will refrain from work, fast and/or attend synagogue services on this day. Yom Kippur occurs on the 10th day of Tishri.

The name “Yom Kippur” means “Day of Atonement,” and that pretty much explains what the holiday is. It is a day set aside to “afflict the soul,” to atone for the sins of the past year.



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The evening service that begins Yom Kippur is commonly known as Kol Nidre, named for the prayer that begins the service. “Kol nidre” means “all vows,” and in this prayer, we ask G-d to annul all personal vows we may make in the next year. It refers only to vows between the person making them and G-d, such as “If I pass this test, I’ll pray every day for the next 6 months!”

The concluding service of Yom Kippur, known as Ne’ilah, is one unique to the day. It usually runs about one hour long. The ark (a cabinet where the scrolls of the Torah are kept) is kept open throughout this service, thus you must stand throughout the service. There is a tone of desperation in the prayers of this service. The service is sometimes referred to as the closing of the gates; think of it as the “last chance” to get in a good word before the holiday ends. The service ends with a very long blast of the shofar.

In biblical times, this was the one day of the year where the High Priest (Kohen ha Gadol) was to enter into the Holy of Holies. Leviticus 16 details the duties of making atonement first for his sins and that of his family through the blood of a bull. Then he would return with the blood of a goat and sprinkle seven times with his fingers on the ark to make atonement (covering) for the sins of the rest of Israel.

Today there are no Jewish sacrifices because the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 CE. putting an end to all Jewish sacrifices. Rabbis teach in the in place of the blood we now do: 1) good deeds; 2) repentance; 3) fasting in order to “make our own atonement”.

More and more Messianic Jewish are today fasting on Yom Kippur, because Y’shua is our High Priest and we are his body and representatives, and so we should intercede and ask for mercies and forgiveness on this special day for our people in prayers and fasting – as once the High priest did when he entered once a year the Holy of Holies.

But when we are doing it let us do it as our Lord Y’shua commanded us in the Sermon of Mount:

“Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” -- Matthew 6:16-18

Yes, He just told us how, not if.

Messianic Believers also read from the New Testament book of Hebrews on Yom Kippur, especially chapters 5-7, which speak about Y’shua as the High Priest according to “the order of Melchizedek.”

For Jewish believers, Yom Kippur is not so much a day of our personal cleansing as it is one of prayer and intercession on behalf of our people, the people of Israel. Of course, we must have a clean heart when approaching God in this matter, just like the Temple priest did before he asked for mercies over his people.

Our sins are cleansed by the blood of Y’shua, our Saviour and Messiah, but we are fasting and praying for our nation as priests and representatives of THE High Priest Jesus today.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things,



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and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. -- Hebrews 1:1-4



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