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High Holiday Trivia

Jewish Significance of a Birthday

Contrary to popular perception, Rosh Hashanah does not mark the “birthday” of the world, but the birthday of mankind (created on the 6th day of creation)! Our sages teach that what Rosh Hashanah commemorates for the Jewish people collectively, one’s birthday commemorates for each of us individually. An annual review of sorts, like a personal Rosh Hashana, one’s birthday is a time for reflection and introspection, but also of celebration. It communicates the inspiring message that we are still needed on this earth to fulfil a unique mission we alone can perform.



High Holiday Trivia

Rosh Hashanah: A History

1. Adam and Eve were created.
2. The first recorded sin (with the Tree of Knowledge) and act of forgiveness.
3. Joseph was freed from prison in Egypt.
 4. The Binding of Isaac.
4. The passing of our matriarch Sarah.



High Holiday Trivia

The Rhyme and Reason for Shofar

1. Likened to a coronation trumpet, the shofar is used to crown G-d as our king anew each year.
2. The shofar acts as a wake up call, inspiring us to rededicate ourselves to our soul’s mission.
3. Like the primal cry of a lost child yearning for home, the shofar’s visceral cry activates the yearning of our soul to return to G-d.
4. It recalls the sound of the shofar we heard at Sinai when we accepted the Torah.
5. It foreshadows the shofar of Moshiach, whose blast will herald the Messianic era.



High Holiday Trivia

Shofar Trivia

Did you know that...

...a shofar can be made from the horn of any kosher animal with the exception of a cow (which might serve as a reminder of the sin with the golden calf).

...a curved shofar is preferable, as it calls to mind the humility and flexible spirit with which we approach the High Holidays. ...it is preferable to use the horn of a ram, as it recalls the ram Abraham offered in the place of Isaac, and highlights his extraordinary devotion to G-d.



High Holiday Trivia

Apple and Honey

On Rosh Hashanah we dip an apple into honey. The sweetness of an apple is unremarkable and expected; many fruits are sweet and pleasant. The sweetness of honey is more novel, stemming from an insect that stings and causes pain. We ask G-d to help us find the sweetness in everything we will encounter this year.



High Holiday Trivia

Rosh Hashanah Cuisine

1. Fish head (or ram - if you’re adventurous) - symbolizing the head of the year and its importance.
2. Pomegranates, which are filled with seeds - reminds us to fill our life with good deeds. Additionally, like pomegranates which are eaten by shedding the outer peel, we beseech G-d to look beyond our wayward behavior and see our pure inside.
3. Carrots are called “meren” in Yiddish, which also means abundance, and signifies our wish for bountiful blessings.



High Holiday Trivia

Tashlich

Tashlich is a custom which includes saying a prayer near a body of water. Just as ancient kings were crowned by the riverside, we gather near water to crown G-d as our king. Tashlich, literally translated as “to cast”, symbolizes our commitment to casting away any negative behaviour and energy in preparation for the new year. To concretize this idea, we shake the corners of our garment, “shaking off” any residual negativity and sins, and allowing our pure inner core to shine and blossom.



High Holiday Trivia

Kaparot

Kaparot, literally translated as atonement, is an act of cleansing we do on the eve before Yom Kippur. It is customary to either take a chicken or fish - or a sum of money, and raise it above the head, while reciting a prayer of repentance. The chicken, fish, or money, is then distributed to those in need, thus absolving our iniquities through this act of kindness.



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High Holiday Trivia

Kittel

Kittel is a white caftan worn on special occasions (seder night, wedding, burial), including the High Holidays. Its pristine color calls to mind the purity we seek to attain while also evoking the imagery of angels as we dedicate this day to connecting with our spiritual origins. While conventionally seen as a somber day of repentance, according to Kabbalah, Yom Kippur is likened to a wedding day between G-d and the Jewish people, and, hence, like a groom under the Chuppah, we wear a Kittel to mark this special day.



High Holiday Trivia

History of Yom Kippur

After the Jewish people committed the ultimate act of betrayal - the sin of the golden calf, Moses petitioned G-d for forgiveness on behalf of the Jewish people. On the 10th day of Tishrei, Moses came down the mountain with the second tablets, signifying G-d's forgiveness. Ever since, the 10th day of Tishrei was established as a Yom Kippur, a national day of atonement, and reminds us that no matter how far we may fall short, G-d is always ready to welcome us back to the path of righteousness.



High Holiday Trivia

The Ten Days of Teshuvah

The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are auspicious and unique. Our sages describe this period as a time when "the gates of heaven are open, and G-d listens to your prayers." Tradition teaches that while we are inscribed for the new year on Rosh Hashanah, our fate is only sealed on Yom Kippur. This time period presents a final chance to make adjustments to our character and behavior for the new year. Many have the custom to settle any debts or grudges they may have during this time.



High Holiday Trivia

Sukkah

The sukkah is a walled structure covered with organic material. On the holiday of Sukkot, Jewish people spend time in the sukkah, treating it like their home-away-from-home. As described in the Torah, the sukkah evokes the temporary dwellings the Israelites inhabited on their way out of Egypt, and celebrates G-d's providence and protection throughout our life's journey.



High Holiday Trivia

The Four Species

The four species are a collection of different types of vegetation which are brought together during prayer to show our appreciation to G-d for a fruitful harvest. The four species are the Etrog / Citron, the Lulav / Palm branch, the Hadas / Myrtle branch, and the Aravah / Willow branch. On a deeper level, they represent different kinds of Jews from across the spectrum of Jewish knowledge and piety, and are brought together to signify the importance of Jewish unity and peoplehood.



High Holiday Trivia

Chol Hamoed

Passover and Sukkot are eight day festivals. The first and last two days of each holiday are Yom Tov, while the intermediate period is called Chol Hamoed (literally, "the weekday of the holiday"). Chol Hamoed is not a full-fledged holiday, but nevertheless, many have the custom to wear holiday clothing on these days. It is a mitzvah to drink a glass of wine each night in fulfillment of the biblical command to rejoice on the festivals. The respective mitzvot of each holiday remain in effect; one must still eat in a sukkah during sukkot, and refrain from chametz on Pesach.



High Holiday Trivia

Hakafot

The joyous climax of Simchat Torah is the dancing of hakafot (lit. "circles"), during which we dance and sing with the Torah scrolls. In the words of the Chassidic masters: "On Simchat Torah the Torah scrolls wish to dance, so we become their feet." During hakafot we don't sit down to study the Torah, nor do we celebrate those that have championed its study. Every Jew - young and old, learned and ignorant, scholar and simpleton - dances with the Torah, celebrating the fact that our connection with the Torah is intrinsic and unconditional, and does not stem from our mind, but our soul.



High Holiday Trivia

Why Dance in a Circle?

When dancing with the Torah on Simchat Torah, it is customary to circle around the bimah. Contrast this to a modern dance floor or dance-off, where each dancer and performer draws attention to themselves. The hakafot accomplishes the opposite. Each participant links hands with their fellow, expressing their joy and exuberance at having a common heritage, shared tradition, and the gift of peoplehood.



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Hoshanot

Hoshanot (derived from the words hosha na—"bring us salvation, please") can refer to both the special prayers recited each day of Sukkot while holding the lulav and etrog or the willow branches customarily used to swat the ground on the seventh day of Sukkot, Hoshana Rabbah. In the times of the Temple, the hoshanot prayers were recited while circling the Altar, and were done with great joy.



Points to Ponder

Do you relate to G-d as an authoritative figure, or as a parental one?

Do you connect more with G-d's love and benevolence, or omnipotence and glory?



Points to Ponder

If you could learn a skill from any Jewish figure in history, who / what would it be?



Points to Ponder

What is your favorite High Holiday song, prayer, and memory, and why?



Points to Ponder

If you can go back in history and impact any event, which would it be and what would you do differently?



Points to Ponder

What is a modern application of the Binding of Isaac?



Points to Ponder

How is the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge a lesson in gratitude?



Points to Ponder

Is there anything positive about the emotion of guilt?



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Points to Ponder

Which biblical character blames others / deflects personal responsibility when confronted by G-d with their sinful behaviour?

1. Adam
2. Eve
3. The Snake
4. All of the above
5. 2 of the above



Words That Matter

Chet

Typically translated as Sin, Chet literally means: missing the mark. In Jewish tradition, a sin is not seen as a blemish on the soul, which always remains essentially holy, but rather as a missed opportunity to actualise our soul's highest potential.



Words That Matter

Dibur

Translated as speech, Dibur is etymologically linked to the word, Davar, which means "a thing". This teaches us that words are not just agents of communication, but tools of creation, and draw forth dynamic energies into our universe, for better and worse. For this reason Judaism places great emphasis on using our words for Holy and positive purposes.



Words That Matter

Tefillah

Typically translated as prayer, which is synonymous with petition, lobby, and request, Tefillah actually means to bond, and conveys the truth that prayer, in the Jewish sense, is not about "Me," or even "Thee," but about fostering a sense of "We," of communion and connection with our Father in Heaven.



Words That Matter

Teshuvah

Translated as repentance, Teshuvah literally means "Return," and highlights the spiritual truth that "sin," like "a moment of insanity," does not reflect or affect the essence of our soul which always remains spiritually intact. Hence, unlike repentance which suggests the need to change into someone else, to "turn over a new leaf" or be "born again," Teshuvah encourages us to return to the land of our soul.



Words That Matter

Tzedakah

Translated as charity, which connotes magnanimity and largesse, Tzedakah means justice and teaches us that the money we have does not belong to us, but is a gift from G-d, entrusted to us to allocate responsibly to those less fortunate, thereby distributing G-d's funds to their intended recipient. Tzedakah is thus seen not only as a good thing to do, but as the right thing to do.



Words That Matter

Emunah

Typically translated as faith, Emunah literally means a craft. This teaches us that contrary to popular perception that faith is fixed - one either has it or does not - faith is in fact, fluid, and can be acquired and developed. Furthermore, like the development of a craft, faith requires constant effort and practice. Prayer, Torah study, and acts of lovingkindness are just some of the ways to help nurture our faith.



High Holiday Profiles

Chana

(10th century BCE)

Chana was one of the seven women recorded in the Torah who were given the power of prophecy. She was barren for many years, and her heartfelt prayer to G-d is one of the most detailed in the Torah. Many laws of prayer are learned from this biblical account. G-d responded by blessing her with a son, Samuel, who went on to become one of the greatest Jewish prophets.



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High Holiday Profiles

Samuel

(931-877 BCE)

After his mother, Chana, a barren woman of righteous character prayed for offspring, she pledged to dedicate the life of her child to the service of G-d. Samuel's first prophecy was at the age of two, and he is described by the sages as the equivalent of "Moses and Aaron combined." He was the bridge between the era of the prophets/judges and monarchy, anointing the first two Jewish kings Saul and David.



High Holiday Profiles

Eli

(Passed in 891 BCE)

Eli was one of the only Jewish leaders to serve as both Judge and High Priest. He successfully led the Jewish people with humility and empathy, taking the mantle of leadership from the great Samson and providing spiritual guidance and inspiration. He took the young Samuel under his wing, and groomed him for eventual leadership and a Jewish renaissance of worship.



High Holiday Profiles

Adam

(3760-2830 BCE)

Adam was the first human being created by G-d. Although he sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge and was subsequently banished from the Garden of Eden, he taught his family to walk in the ways of the Lord. His recognition of G-d's presence in the world is the inspiration for many prayers, and empowers us to do the same in our personal lives.



High Holiday Profiles

Eve

(Created 3760 BCE)

The wife of Adam and the mother of humankind, she is described as being exceedingly beautiful, and gave birth to Shem, Cham, and Yafet. Chavah, the Hebrew name of Eve, means mother of all life and reflects the feminine power to bring latent potential to fruition.



High Holiday Profiles

Gedaliah

(Passed in 423 BCE)

Gedaliah was the Jewish governor in the Land of Israel after the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians. They exiled all of the Jewish people with the exception of the working class, whom Gedalia rallied to live and prosper despite the harsh circumstances. Supported by the prophet Jeremiah, he maintained a hopeful presence for the Jewish people in the Holy Land. He was tragically murdered by a jealous opponent seeking power. His day of passing (3rd of Tishrei) was established as a fast day on the Jewish calendar.



High Holiday Profiles

Sarah

(1803-1677 BCE)

The wife of Abraham, she partnered with her husband in spreading the message of monotheism. The legendary hospitality with which she and her husband treated their guests is the golden standard of the mitzvah of hachnasat orchim (hosting guests). She miraculously gave birth to a child at age ninety, and named him Yitzchok, because she laughed in delight and surprise upon hearing the news. She is known for the mitzvah of Shabbat candles and challah.



High Holiday Profiles

Nachash

(Snake)

The snake is the protagonist of the infamous Tree of Knowledge episode, and is the symbol of the Yetzer Hara - Evil Inclination that may lead us astray. The snake sneakily added onto the commandment of G-d, luring Adam to touch the tree (which was permitted), and urging him to taste from it as well (which was prohibited). The sin of the Tree of Knowledge is considered the root of all subsequent sin.



High Holiday Profiles

Elazar Ben Durdaya

(c. Second Temple)

Elazar Ben Durdaya led a decadent life of indulgence and promiscuity. Upon being harshly admonished for his excessive hedonism, he experienced a spiritual epiphany. Feeling a deep sense of remorse for this immoral past, he cried from the depth of his soul and passed away from anguish and immediately entered the world to come. The Talmud teaches this story to illustrate the transformational power of Teshuvah - repentance.



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High Holiday Profiles

Moses

(1393-1273 BCE)

The model of Jewish leadership and advocacy, Moses liberated the Jewish people from Egypt. He led them through the desert for forty years, looking after their physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. He gave the Jewish people the Torah at Sinai, and upon their subsequent sin with the Golden Calf, tirelessly pleaded their case to G-d. Throughout the subsequent four decades of his leadership, Moses continued to advocate on their behalf despite their shortcomings.



High Holiday Profiles

High Priest

(from the Giving of the Torah - Second Temple, 2448 BCE - 70 CE)

The High Priest was a man of unique piety and spiritual purity. Representing the Jewish people on this day of forgiveness, he would enter the Holy of Holies seeking the nation's atonement, and when he did so, the most sacred time, person, and place converged.



High Holiday Profiles

Jonah

(7th Century BCE)

Jonah was a prophet who tried to run from G-d when tasked with influencing the city of Nineveh to return to the path of righteousness. After being swallowed and later spit out by a giant fish during a terrifying storm, Jonah resumes his mission and succeeds in bringing Nineveh to repentance. We read this story on Yom Kippur as a reminder of the importance to heed our personal Divine calling in life.



High Holiday Profiles

Abraham

(1813-1638 BCE)

Abraham was the father of the Jewish People. Recognizing G-d as the single creator and master of the universe at the tender age of three, he made it his life's mission to spread monotheism throughout the world. He was known for his legendary hospitality, having the first brit milah, and being the father of Isaac. One of the most poignant tales of self-sacrifice and dedication is the Binding of Isaac, where Abraham is willing to give up the future of his dream for the word of G-d.



High Holiday Profiles

Isaac

(1713-1533 BCE)

Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, is the second of our forefathers. He is known for continuing the monotheistic tradition, and fathering our forefather Jacob. He was a paragon of self sacrifice, and was not allowed to leave the land of Israel by G-d due to his unique spiritual piety and integrity.



High Holiday Profiles

Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

(1740-1809)

Embodying the highest standard of "dan l'kaf zchus" - seeing the merit and good in others, R' Levi Yitzchak was a chasidic master in Berditchev, Ukraine. He is known for his exemplary Ahavat Yisroel - Love for Every Jew, and for his unwavering advocacy on behalf of those whose religious observance left much to be desired.



High Holiday Profiles

Ushpizin

The Ushpizin, literally translated as guests in aramaic, refers to a tradition that during the festival of Sukkot we are visited by seven of our spiritual ancestors. These mystical guests are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Josef, Moses, Aaron, and David. In the Kabbalah they represent the seven Divine energies: Kindness, Discipline, Harmony, Resilience, Humility, Vulnerability, and Leadership. Reflecting the theme of unity prevalent throughout Sukkot, there is a particular focus on inviting guests into our Sukkah.



Prayer Revisited

Neilah

Neilah is the concluding prayer of Yom Kippur, and is only recited once a year. Literally translated, Neilah means locked. Its name reflects the fact that it is the final prayer before the doors of heaven are locked. The chasidic masters teach that the doors of heaven are indeed locked, but with us inside them. Considered the spiritual climax of the holiday, it is a time of intimate connection with the Almighty. The doors of the holy ark remain open, signifying the accessibility of our prayers during these precious moments.



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Prayer Revisited

Kol Nidrei

Kol Nidrei, the opening prayer of Yom Kippur, has great importance in Jewish tradition and history. It is a legal procedure which annuls our unfulfilled vows over the past year. On the basic level, this prayer highlights the power and sanctity of promises. Our word is our bond and is sacrosanct, and thus before standing before G-d in supplication we must annul our unfulfilled vows of the previous year. Historically, this prayer was of great significance to the marranos (Jews who hid their Judaism during the period of the Spanish Inquisition) as it reflected their desire to disassociate themselves from the hollow vows and loyalties they had been forced to pledge to the church.



Prayer Revisited

Seder Avoda

The Seder Avodah is the order of the service, a detailed account of the Yom Kippur service in the Temple. Highlighting the high priest's entry into the Holy of Holies, the Seder Avodah relates how the high priest would pronounce G-d's ineffable name, and in response the assembled Jews would prostrate themselves on the ground. When reaching these passages, we too prostrate ourselves on our hands and knees.



Prayer Revisited

Avinu Malkeinu

Our Father and Our King is featured often over the high holidays. It speaks of the multi-faceted relationship we have with G-d, both as our King - the omnipotent power to give and govern, and as our Father - who awaits our approach with unconditional love. Master of all things, ruler of all beings, yet tender and caring to our needs with a love that only a parent can feel.



Prayer Revisited

Malchiyot Zichronot Shofarot

The shofar is blown during the Musaf prayer at three intervals. They are marked by the three themes of the Rosh Hashanah prayer, Malchiyot - Kingship, Zichronot - Remembrance, and Shofrot - the Shofar blasts. We accept G-d's sovereignty and authority as only independent free-choosing subjects can, we recall the sacrifice and commitment of our ancestors, and cement these themes with the blowing of the shofar - the act of announcing to all our renewed commitment.



Prayer Revisited

Asara Harugei Malchut

One of the most moving narratives to emerge from our history of martyrdom is the account of the Ten Martyrs—the heart-rending narrative describing in graphic detail the deaths of ten Mishnaic-era Torah luminaries who were murdered on the altar of senseless hatred. We read this account during the Yom Kippur prayers to harken to its message of passion and self sacrifice for the Torah and its continuity.



Prayer Revisited

Vchol Maaminim

A prayer highlighting the innate faith present within every Jew. Faith is not acquired or borrowed, but uncovered and discovered deep within us. Natural to our soul, we need only to nurture and feed it for it flourish and grow.

