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Rosh Hashana 2011: Understanding the Jewish New Year

By Katy Dutile



Ezekiel Isaac Malekar, honorary secretary of the Judah Hyam Synagogue, poses with a shofar horn inside the synagogue in New Delhi (Reuters/B Mathur)

The celebration of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, starts at sundown Wednesday, Sept. 28 and traditionally last for two days. This quick break down on the holiday should give those who aren't Jewish -- and those who need a little refresher course -- all the information on what Rosh Hashanah is, where to go, and what to eat.

Significance

The holiday which translates to "head of the year" is both the Jewish New Year and days of repentance. It may seem unusual, but the New Year is actually not the first month in the Hebrew calendar, rather the first two days in the seventh month, known as Tishrei.

Rosh Hashanah takes place ten days before Yom Kippur, and many use this as a time of reflection known as the ten days of penitence, or aseret yamei teshuva. In that ten day period, many will apologize to those they have wronged and hope to find forgiveness. This assures when Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement, comes ten days later, the person will not be left out of the Book of Life, where names of those destined for Heaven are written.

There are three ways a Jewish person can get their name into the Book of Life, even if they aren't always on their best behavior: they can repent (teshuva), pray (tefillah), or do charity work (tzedakah).

Symbol

The ram's horn, or Shofar, is considered the most important symbol of the holiday. The sounds created through the blowing of the Shofar are a wake up call for the Jewish community to repent. The horn is also used in times of community distress, so God may hear.

What to do

Even your friends who don't step into a synagogue any other time of the year can often be found at a synagogue during Rosh Hashanah. Getting your name into the Book of Life kind of makes missing work not such a big deal. Make sure to dress up to attend celebrations as most wouldn't be caught starting the new year in sweatpants.

What to eat

Everyone wants to know about the food -- the best part of holidays -- and it couldn't get better for anyone with a sweet tooth. Give up on counting calories with Challah (egg bread, to symbolize continuity) and apples (dipped in honey to represent a blessing of a sweet new year). Many traditional Jewish foods will also be served including matzah ball soup and gefilte fish, so come hungry.

However, not all the food gets eaten. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, bread or sometimes pebbles are thrown into flowing water. This ritual, known as tashlikh, symbolizes the casting away of sins.

Now that you're no longer left out of the Rosh Hashanah traditions, you can wish all a "Shana Tova" or "a good new year."