



## The Jewish High Holy Days

# What is *Rosh Hashanah*?

**R***osh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, is observed on the first day of the month of *Tishrei* on the Hebrew calendar, which falls in September or October on the Gregorian calendar (the calendar in common use throughout the world).

Unlike the secular New Year, *Rosh Hashanah* (which means, literally, “the head of the year” in English) is not characterized by frivolity and celebration. Instead, it is a holy day marked by intense moral and spiritual introspection. On this day, Jews consider themselves plaintiffs appealing for their lives before the Supreme Judge and Ruler of the universe.

Because of this judgment, the mood pervading *Rosh Hashanah* is one of solemnity—but it is also one of trust in a God who is a merciful and beneficent Father, desires our repentance, and is eager to grant forgiveness. In the words of the prophet Ezekiel:

*“But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. . . . Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? . . . Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit.”* Ezekiel 18:21, 23, 31

Jewish sages teach that fates are “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. The period in between the two holy days is known as the Ten Days of Repentance, or the Days of Awe, during which reflection and penitence intensify.

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.

Of course, this spirit of humility and reconciliation is to follow Jews throughout the year, throughout their lives. But the High Holy Days are when Jews believe that they have the most power to transform themselves and channel their abilities and resources to serve God.

Just as the secular New Year invites introspection on the past 12 months and resolutions for the year to come, so too, the Jewish New Year calls for examination of past mistakes and planning for improvement in the future.

The liturgy of the *Rosh Hashanah* morning service is among the most beautiful and moving of the entire year. The following brief prayer expresses some of the different motifs underlying the holiday:

*“Today the world is born, today in judgment there stand before you all the creatures of the world, as children or as slaves. If we may call ourselves [your] children, show us mercy as a father shows mercy to his children; if we are [but] slaves, our eyes are focused on you that you might have compassion and decide our case in judgment as brightness in light, awesome and holy God.”* (*Rosh Hashanah Musaf* service)