



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

JEWISH HIGH HOLY DAYS IN THE WORKPLACE

Inclusive Employer Guide

WHAT ARE THE HIGH HOLY DAYS?

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are known as “High Holy Days” in the Jewish faith, and are celebrated with family and loved ones.

Rosh Hashanah, meaning “head of the year” or “first of the year,” is the Jewish New Year, and commemorates the creation of the world and marks the beginning of the Days of Awe.

This year, Rosh Hashanah begins at sunset on September 25 and ends at sunset on September 27. The exact date of Rosh Hashanah varies every year as it is based on the Hebrew Calendar, where it begins on the first day of the seventh month. Rosh Hashanah occurs in September or October. A common greeting to mark this occasion of Rosh Hashanah is “Shanah Tovah”, which means “Good Year.”

Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement and is considered the holiest day in the Jewish faith. This year, Yom Kippur begins at sunset on October 4 and ends at sunset on October 5. It marks the culmination of the 10 Days of Awe, a period of introspection and repentance. The holiday is observed by fasting from sunset to sunset and a religious service at the synagogue.

HOW ARE THEY CELEBRATED?

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah is a two-day celebration that begins on the first day of the month of Tishrei in the Hebrew calendar, and marks the beginning of the new year.

Rosh Hashanah is a time for both rejoicing and introspection, a time to celebrate the completion of another year while also taking stock of one’s life. The two days of Rosh Hashanah usher in the Ten Days of Repentance, which culminate in the major fast day of Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement.

The central custom of Rosh Hashanah is the blowing of the “shofar,” a musical instrument, which serves as a symbolic “wake-up call” to mend one’s ways and repent. The shofar is blown at various points during Rosh Hashanah prayers, with a total of 100 blasts on each day. During Rosh Hashanah, Jewish followers attend synagogue services and recite special liturgy. A special prayer book called the “mahzor” is used and three unique set of prayers known as “malkhuyot” are added to morning service during the holiday.

During Rosh Hashanah, followers will share a festive meal with family and loved ones to celebrate the new year. It is customary to eat apples dipped in honey to evoke a sweet year ahead.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur or the “Day of Atonement” take places ten days after Rosh Hashanah. It is also known as the “Sabbath of Sabbaths” and is considered Judaism's the holiest day. Yom Kippur completes the annual period known as the High Holy Days or “yamim nora'im.”

The holiday is an opportunity to atone for sins, and repent. Jews traditionally observe this holy day with a day-long fast, abstaining from food, water, washing, wearing of leather, and sexual relations, and focusing attention on their relationship with God.

Observers attend special Yom Kippur services at their local synagogues. Yom Kippur has five prayer services - Ma'ariv, Shacharit, Musaf, Mincha, and Ne'ilah. Yom Kippur prayer services also include private and public confessions of sins known as “vidui”.

At the conclusion of Yom Kippur, observers repent for their sins and ask for forgiveness from God.

HOW CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

- 1 Get Educated.** Ensure staff who supervise self-identified Jewish colleagues are aware of the High Holy days and how they can be supportive.
- 2 Intentional Planning.** Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events on the High Holy Days.
- 3 Be flexible.** Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. If shift work is the norm, they may want to swap shifts to observe the High Holy Days, look for solutions that suit all parties.
- 4 Be thoughtful.** On Yom Kippur, Jewish colleagues refrain from food or water for a 25-hour period. If colleagues work on this day, and are fasting, please be considerate about this.
- 5 Don't make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all Jewish colleagues may take the time off or fast, but they may still observe in various ways. These are very general guidelines, and practices of the faith differ by community and affiliated congregation.