

Yom Kippur Cheat Sheet

“Day of Atonement” In Hebrew. Healthy adults are commanded to refrain from eating and drinking from sunset to sunset to remind us of the frailty of the human body and our own mortality, and to encourage complete focus on the holiday.

It is customary to wear white on the holiday and some choose to wear sneakers or other rubber-soled shoes out of deference to the ancient practice of avoiding leather shoes, which were a symbol of luxury.



How Do We Celebrate Yom Kippur at Home?

Before sundown, families and friends gather together and eat the last meal before the start of Yom Kippur and the period of fasting. It is only after the last bite is eaten, and the holiday candles are lit, that Yom Kippur and the fast officially begin. If you choose to fast, it is important to remember that children under the age of 13 are not required to fast nor are adults whose health precludes them from fasting.

Yom Kippur is a somber Jewish holiday of reflection and contemplation. We think of those who came before us and those who have influenced our lives and we take the time to remember family and/or friends who have died. You can light a special Yahrzeit candle (available in Judaica shops and online), if you choose.

Just like on Shabbat, two candles can be lit at the evening meal.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments and commands us to light the [Sabbath and] holiday lights.

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu,
melech haolam, asher kid'shanu
b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner
shel (Shabbat v'shel) Yom Tov.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ
לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל (שַׁבָּת וְשֶׁל) יוֹם טוֹב.

Many choose to spend Yom Kippur at a synagogue, but there are various ways to observe it. There might be alternative offerings in your community as well as learning opportunities leading up to the holiday, so make sure to do some searching (try your local Federation or JCC) or asking people in your community to see what your options are. Get creative and think about the themes of Yom Kippur, such as forgiveness, the possibility for change, the past and the future. You can meditate, spend time in nature, visit a space you find calming or visit with family and friends. It is so important to take time out of our busy lives to gain some perspective, think about ways to better yourself and resolve to make positive changes in the coming year. However you mark this important holiday, do it in a way that feels authentic and meaningful to you.

What Happens at Synagogue?

Kol Nidre: Kol Nidre is the name for the evening service that begins Yom Kippur. Kol Nidre is also the opening prayer for the service and is a declaration, in Aramaic, that nullifies all the vows and promises that each person will make to God and to him/herself in the coming year if, after our best attempts, we are unable to fulfill them. It serves as an acknowledgment of the weakness of human resolution.

Yom Kippur Day: Yom Kippur services are a full-day affair, beginning in the morning and running through sunset, when the fast ends. There are several services that run back-to-back beginning with a morning service, an afternoon service, a memorial service and finally a closing service.

Synagogues have a variety of practices even on the High Holy Days and some may not include a formal afternoon service but might offer a Torah study or alternative ritual in its place. There is no obligation to stay for the whole day, but it can certainly be a powerful communal experience.

Yizkor Service: Yizkor (“memory”) is a memorial service that takes place late on Yom Kippur afternoon. Names of loved ones who have died in the past year are remembered and read aloud. Anyone can attend this service, but often those who have not lost a loved one in their lives will not attend. It is a somber yet beautiful service reminding us of those people who have come before us and hopefully reminding us to keep their memories alive as we move into the next year.

Ne’ilah Service: The concluding service is called Ne’ilah and means “closing.” Many people stand throughout this short emotionally powerful service, which ends with a final long shofar blast as the days of awe come to an end, our fast comes to an end and the year, filled with hope and promise, truly begins.

Break-the-Fast: Yom Kippur ends with a break-the-fast celebration. Family and friends join together with food they have prepared in advance. It is traditional to invite newcomers, visitors from out of town and anyone who might be alone during the holiday to share the break-the-fast meal. Many synagogue families also contribute both money and non-perishable food at this time, to help feed the hungry in their communities.

Glossary of Jewish Terms

L’shanah Tovah Tikatayvu: “May you be inscribed for a good year.” A greeting which expresses the hope that you will be written in the Book of Life and granted happiness and fulfillment in the year ahead.

Machzor: High Holy Day prayerbook, literally means “cycle” in Hebrew

Shofar: Made from the horn of a ram, the shofar is a basic instrument that is blown daily in the month preceding Rosh Hashanah, on Rosh Hashanah and at the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

Shanah tovah: Literally, “a good year.” This is another greeting you might hear during this season, which is equivalent to “Happy New Year.”

Tallit: A prayer shawl traditionally used during any prayer service that includes a Torah reading. It is worn for the Yom Kippur evening service, Kol Nidre, even though the Torah is not read at that time, as all of the Yom Kippur services are meant to be a continuation.

Teshuvah: Literally means “returning,” a Hebrew term for repentance. Think of it as “turning a new leaf” or “turning over.”

Tzom Kal: “An easy fast.” Another greeting you may hear right before Yom Kippur as many begin their fast.

Yahrzeit candle: Memorial candle lit on the anniversary of a loved one’s death, on Yom Kippur, and whenever Yizkor is observed.

Yom Tov: Literally “a good day” in Hebrew, it is often pronounced Yuntiff (the Yiddish pronunciation) and is used as a synonym for “holiday.” A standard holiday greeting is “Gut Yuntiff” (Yiddish for “good good day”).