

Theme 4C: Religious practices that shape religious identity – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Key words

Selichot
Shofar
Machzor
Challot
Tashlikh
Kittel
Kol Nidrei
Neilah

Key concepts

Rosh Hashanah ('head of the year') is the Jewish New Festival; it is the anniversary of the day when God created Adam and Eve. Jews believe that God judges all people for their deeds during the previous year at this time. It is a solemn time for repentance and atonement. A selichot service is held at the synagogue on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, encouraging self-examination, and raising one's spiritual awareness. White garments are worn representing the cleansing of sins; the bimah, ark and lectern are also draped in white. The role of God as king is highlighted, with the machzor taking the place of the siddur and prayers emphasising the sovereignty of God. The Amidah also has amendments. It is believed that God sets down the judgements of the past year in the *Book of Life* which is finalised on Yom Kippur.

Symbolic acts are undertaken. These include the blowing of the shofar, the eating of round challot, dipping apple in honey and eating a pomegranate. Tashlikh is symbolic of casting away the sins of the previous year.

The period of time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is known as the Ten Days of Returning and is focused on the themes of repentance and forgiveness. On the eve of Yom Kippur there is a festive meal followed by a 25-hour fast.

Yom Kippur is considered to be the most important and holiest Jewish festival as it is the day when each person has the opportunity to make themselves right with God. On the day before Yom Kippur, some families give donations to charity in lieu of the ceremony of the scapegoat from the time of the temple in Jerusalem.

Five services are held on the synagogue. A white kittel will be worn. The opening service is the Kol Nidrei in which all religious vows and oaths that will be uttered in the coming year will be declared null and void.

The day's worship ends with Neilah ('the closing of the gates'). It is the final service before the decrees made by God on Rosh Hashanah are sealed. At nightfall there is a single blast on the shofar and the fast is over.

Key quotes

'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.' (Isaiah 1:18)

'Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the tree. May it be Your will to renew for us a good and sweet new year.' (Words spoken before eating a piece of apple dipped in honey)

'The great shofar is sounded; a gentle whisper is heard; the angels quaking with fear, declare: "The day of judgement is here."' (Rosh Hashanah prayer)

'Yom Kippur is a day of awe. Yet the Talmud calls it one of the most joyous days of the year ... God has given us free will and thus the strength to turn from bad to good. He has granted us a Day of Atonement, and thus the chance ... to find forgiveness.' (Sacks)

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments and debates

Are Jewish festivals effective in reinforcing Jewish identity?

What constitutes Jewish identity? Jewish identity is more usually linked to lifestyle practices such as keeping kosher food laws; however, the weekly celebration of Shabbat is synonymous with Jewish identity. Certain festivals within the year are so significant in the faith that even non-observant Jews participate. Festivals certainly bring the community together.

Is the regular acknowledgement of sins and penitence an admission of failure in spiritual development?

What is meant by 'regular'? It could be considered as meaningless if there was never any true intention to pay anything other than lip service to the acknowledgement of sin. If penitence were not truly sought after, then could it be seen as a failure in spiritual development? The human need to be given the opportunity to wipe the slate clean and start afresh is by no means a sign of failure in spiritual development.