

On September 9th [2010] Jews around the world will celebrate Rosh HaShanah—literally “Head of the Year”—marking the end of one Jewish liturgical year and the beginning of another. Rosh HaShanah, [The 1st day of the month of Tishri,] is also a pivotal point in a process of self-reflection that began 30 days before and will culminate on the 10th day of the month, Yom Kippur.

Throughout the previous month (Elul) people have been in penitential mode—rather like the Christian Lenten preparation before Easter. Rosh HaShanah begins a time of rebirth and renewal as the Jewish people enter into “the Days of Awe”: ten days of self examination and commitment to a change of habits. These ten days come to a climax with the holiest day of the whole year for Jews, Yom Kippur—“The Day of Atonement”. During the Days of Awe Jews do *teshuvah* (repentance) seeking forgiveness from God as they reflect upon their wrongs committed in the past year, and, at the same time, visit or call others, to seek forgiveness for failures and wrongdoing.

While the New Year festival is a time of reconciliation and penitence it is also a time when Jewish families gather together to celebrate the year that has been and joyfully anticipate another. On the first two nights of Rosh HaShanah families gather for a festive meal during which they symbolically dip pieces of apple and bread in honey and wish each other “*Shanah tovah umetukah*” (Happy New Year and a sweet one!)

On the first afternoon of Rosh HaShanah some Jews go to a place where there is running water and cast pieces of bread into the water to symbolise the sins they have committed over the past year. This tradition stems from the prophet Micah who stated that Jews should cast their sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19).

One of the special features of the Rosh HaShanah prayer services is the sounding of the *shofar* (the ram’s horn). The *shofar*, first heard at Sinai, is heard again as a sign of the coming redemption towards which all hopes are turned. Since ancient times the distinctive notes of the *shofar* have been understood as a call to repentance.

“You who are asleep, wake up! Search your deeds and repent.” Maimonides (12th C.)

During the Days of Awe tradition has imaged God as in the judgement seat. Ancient Jewish tradition from Babylon spoke of angels as prosecutors and defenders in a heavenly courtroom. A later and contemporary notion is that of the God of judgement as the **internal** conscience. God calls upon us symbolically during this season, but in reality at all times, to be the best morally, spiritually and ethically that we can be – which means, that we must always be open to change and the presence of the divine in our lives.