

Rosh Hashanah

Christians can be inspired by Jewish festivals.

Take, for instance, *Rosh Hashanah* which is Jewish New Year. It has an important theme of God as Creator and King (Sovereign), the One who created the world and continues to renew creation. In fact, Rosh Hashanah is celebrated as 'the birthday of the world'.

It is a solemn festival, with an awareness of the need to renew one's life so as to more authentically reflect the person God created. On Rosh Hashanah the blast of the *shofar* (ram's horn) is heard, and Jews come together at the synagogue for prayers and readings.

In Jewish homes families greet the festival by lighting candles, and a blessing is said over a cup of wine (a ritual called *kiddush*). There are also customs of eating apples dipped in honey (for a 'sweet' year) and sharing festive bread (*hallah*) that is round-shaped (for a 'perfect' year).

During Rosh Hashanah Jews will walk to a place where there is running water and throw pieces of bread or coins into the water, symbolically releasing sins committed over the past year. In the words of the prophet Micah: "*You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea*" (Micah 7:19).

Rosh Hashanah is celebrated over two days by Jews in the diaspora (one day in Israel). It is the beginning of a ten-day period in the Jewish calendar known as the "Days of Awe" (or "the High Holy Days"). During these ten days, observant Jews are aware of standing before God, mindful of their failings and committed to living more faithful lives. (A similar period of self-examination in Christian tradition is Lent). The ten-day period climaxes with a special day of

repentance and renewal called *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

Why should Christians take notice of Jewish New Year?

There are a number of reasons for Christians to be aware of Rosh Hashanah:

1. Christianity has deep links with Judaism—historically, biblically, spiritually. In the words of Pope John Paul II: "*The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain manner, it is 'intrinsic' to our religion. We have therefore a relationship with it which we do not have with any other religion.*" [Synagogue of Rome, 1986] Christians can acknowledge this relationship by being taking an interest in the festivals celebrated by Jewish communities.
2. Rosh Hashanah themes and customs hold inspiration for Christians. They can help one to reflect on God as Creator and Sovereign, and the need to reform our lives in that awareness. They can also refresh Christian religious instincts in a joyful sense; after all, apples dipped in honey are rather delicious! The joys of Jewish festive customs can flow out on the wider community.
3. Most of all, an awareness of Rosh Hashanah can instill awe and gratitude. Learning about Rosh Hashanah puts one in touch with the continuing presence and action of God in the Jewish people.

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LIGHT OF TORAH



Christians can be inspired by Rosh Hashanah customs

Greet. Send your Jewish friends a Rosh Hashanah greeting. 'Shanah Tovah u'Metuka!' (a wish for a good and sweet year).

Learn. Invite a Jewish friend to explain more about their experience of Jewish festivals

Read. Open the Scriptures and revisit a text that is heard in Jewish communities during Rosh Hashanah; e.g. the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19), read on the second day of the festival.

Pray. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for Jewish friends on Rosh Hashanah. Pray that Jewish covenantal life will find continuing vitality and strength.

Enjoy. Savour an aspect of this beautiful world created by God, our Creator and Sovereign. E.g., Gather fresh flowers for your home. Watch the sun rise. Breathe deeply, savouring your living breath.

Let go. Name an attitude or habit that is not lifegiving, that is dark, sinful. Pray, repent, release it. Ask God to create you anew.

Eat. Add a festive food item to your meal table. E.g., apples dipped in honey: a wish for the sweet year to come. Round-shaped bread: symbol of a year that is whole and complete. •

More

To learn more about Jewish beliefs, rituals and customs associated with Jewish festivals:

- My Jewish Learning <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/>
- Chabad.org https://www.chabad.org/holidays/default_cdo/jewish/holidays.htm
- AISH.com <https://www.aish.com/h/>