



# Understanding (and Respecting) the Jewish Holiday Yom Kippur

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Published September 2021



Yom Kippur, also known as the Day of Atonement, is a Jewish holiday dedicated to coming together in community to reflect, ask forgiveness for wrongdoings committed during the past year, and resolve to do better going forward. For millennia, Yom Kippur has been regarded as the most important, solemn, and holy day in the annual Jewish calendar.

Because Jewish holidays are celebrated according to the lunar calendar, the date of Yom Kippur may fall in a range from September 14 to October 14 each year, always 10 days following the Jewish New Year holiday, Rosh Hashanah. This full 10-day period is known as the Jewish High Holy Days.

**In 2021, Rosh Hashanah began on Monday, September 6 and ended on the evening of Wednesday, September 8. Yom Kippur begins at sunset on Wednesday, September 15 and ends at sunset on Thursday, September 16.**

A core element of the Jewish religion is that there is a single God who created the universe, with whom every Jew can have an individual and personal relationship. On Yom Kippur, Jews are called upon to disconnect themselves as much as possible from the everyday activities of life in order to focus their hearts and minds on their personal connection to God.

Jewish holidays begin at sunset and end at sunset on the following day. How each individual spends Yom Kippur depends on how devout and observant they are and the traditions of their families or religious congregations. Many Jews gather at Jewish houses of worship, called synagogues. Even Jews who are not generally observant or rarely attend services throughout the year may make it a point to attend services on Yom Kippur or spend the day in some other reflective way that is respectful of the solemn nature of the holiday.

Observant Jews do not work at their jobs or at home on Yom Kippur. Many attend services at a synagogue the evening of Yom Kippur and again the entire following day. As signs of humility, many wear a prayer shawl and all white clothing (a symbol of purity) at services, and avoid wearing leather (historically, a symbol of luxury). Many Jews also abstain from eating, drinking, washing, using lotions or perfumes, and sexual relations as further ways to humble themselves, separate from the everyday, and focus on atonement.



According to Jewish tradition, God determines each person's fate for the coming year on Rosh Hashanah and seals it in the Book of Life 10 days later on Yom Kippur. During those 10 days, one's future hangs in the balance and an individual can turn it toward the positive by making amends and doing good acts. For this reason, the customary Hebrew greeting prior to Yom Kippur is "G'mar chatimah tovah" (pronounced gih-MAR chah-tee-MAH toe-VAH, with the "ch" at the start of "chatimah" like the end of the composer's name "Bach.") In English, this expresses "May you be sealed for good in the Book of Life."

As of 2020, the American Jewish population was estimated at **7.6 million people**, or **2.2%** of the US population. So, it's likely that you have at least a few Jewish employees, vendors, and customers.

It's important to remember that throughout the ages, Jews have repeatedly been subjected to persecution, discrimination, and exclusion in societies worldwide, and that antisemitism (hostility or prejudice toward Jewish people) is still present in American society today. For this reason, **it's especially important to ensure that people of all religions and religious backgrounds, including Judaism, are protected by your company's systems and policies and acknowledged, welcomed, and included in your company culture. To ensure inclusion:**

- ✓ Make sure that your Jewish employees are given the flexibility to take an excused absence from work on Rosh Hashanah day (very observant Jews celebrate Rosh Hashanah the following day, too) and on Yom Kippur.
- ✓ Recognize and respect that contacting a Jewish employee on Yom Kippur – even for what may seem like a minor interruption, a quick phone call, text, or email request – is a disrespectful intrusion on this one day each year they have set aside for a very special spiritual purpose.
- ✓ Acknowledge Yom Kippur and other Jewish holidays in your internal and external communications. Engender inclusivity by extending holiday greetings to your Jewish employees and clients. "Happy New Year" works just fine for Rosh Hashanah, but remember that Yom Kippur is a time of meaningful reflection rather than a happy celebration.
- ✓ In addition to "G'mar Chatimah Tovah," one Yom Kippur greeting option is "Gut yontif," which means (in Yiddish, a language that combines old German and Hebrew) "Wishing you a good holy day." Or, in writing, consider a message like "Blessings and Peace on Yom Kippur."

By learning more about different cultures, holidays, and traditions, we can better understand how to be respectful and inclusive of each person's intersecting identities, background, and experiences. Yom Kippur is just one place to start.