

Guidance for staff during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Pavan Nagra

EDI Programme Manager

Rosh Hashanah begins on the evening of Friday 15th September and ends on Sunday 17th and is the Jewish New Year where family and friends come together. It is the start of what is known as the High Holy Days, or High Holidays, a ten-day period of reflection that culminates in Yom Kippur, which begins on the evening of Sunday 24th September and ends on the evening of Monday 25th September. Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, and many Jews will be fasting for the 25 hours of the festival.

It is extremely important to be aware of the personal and religious sensitivities of all staff, including Jewish colleagues. By understanding their experiences and accommodating to any particular needs, you can help ensure people to perform to the best of their abilities through empathy – by boosting morale, productivity and staff retention.

Whether your team consists of staff who are majority Jewish, or not – it is best practice to read through this guidance and familiarise yourself to ensure you are being actively inclusive. Though, to note, this guidance is general and you may need to adapt your approach depending on who you are supporting – as not every Jewish person is the same, some may be more devout, and the interpretations and practices of the faiths are numerous.

What is Rosh Hashanah

In Hebrew Rosh Hashanah translates to “head of the year” and is observed on the first and second days of Tishrei, the first month in the Jewish calendar, which changes every year in the UK because the Jewish calendar is based on lunar cycles.

Whilst Rosh Hashanah is a celebration of the new year it is also known as the “Day of Judgement”, and the start of a period of reflection and atonement known as the “10 days of Awe” or “10 days of repentance”. This is a period in which religiously observant Jews believe that based on their acts of the previous year their fate for the following year is being decided. The 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are an opportunity to reflect and repent before your fate is sealed.

Some people use this time to focus on their spirituality and pray, to perform charitable deeds and acts of kindness, and seek forgiveness.

How is Rosh Hashanah celebrated?

For many Jews, Rosh Hashanah is celebrated with a large feast bringing together family and friends. This will be held on the evening of the first, and sometimes second, night of the festival. For many families this will be the equivalent to Christmas dinner in terms of scale! Lots of symbolic food is eaten including eating apple dipped in honey to symbolise the desire to have a sweet and enjoyable year. Pomegranate is another food eaten at Rosh Hashanah as the vast number of seeds in the fruit represents the desire for a productive and abundant life.

As Rosh Hashanah is both a celebration and a religious festival, prayer is also an important part of how it is observed. Many observant Jews will go to synagogue during the day for special prayer services and to hear the blowing of the shofar. The shofar is a musical instrument made from an animal horn that is blown throughout the day. Symbolically it is meant to act as a “wake-up call” to individuals and trigger reflection.

To note, work is forbidden for those observing Rosh Hashanah.

What is Yom Kippur?

Yom Kippur is the holiest day in Judaism and is focused on reflection, atonement and repentance. In the period following Rosh Hashanah, those observing have been asking forgiveness for their wrongdoings between God and with their fellow human beings. Yom Kippur is the culmination of this period and where religiously observant Jews believe that their fate for the next year is set.

How is Yom Kippur observed?

As one of the most culturally significant Jewish days, Yom Kippur is observed widely, including by many secular Jews who might not engage with other religious activity.

Yom Kippur is dominated by a 25 hour fast in which people refrain from all food or drink including water beginning at sunset and ending after nightfall the following day. Fasting enables those observing Yom Kippur to stop their normal routine and

refocus their attention to prayer, be more spiritually connected, and focus on the soul or inner self, rather than the physical body.

Those observing Yom Kippur are also prohibited from work. More religiously observant Jews may also refrain from wearing leather, wool or other clothing from animals and many will choose to wear all white to symbolise renewal.

During Yom Kippur there are many prayer services held at synagogues starting on the evening and ending with the final prayer service that brings the fast to a close. Many people will spend the whole day in continuous prayer. The prayers on Yom Kippur are focused on reflection and forgiveness and a core and unique aspect of the prayer service are silent and individual.

The fast ends with the blowing of the shofar to signal the end of Yom Kippur, and is usually followed by a breaking of the fast meal amongst family and friends.

How to support colleagues during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

No meetings, both internal and external, should take place between 15-17th. This year Rosh Hashanah falls on a weekend however it is good practice to be aware of religious and cultural customs of those we work with so that we can accommodate for one another better. You should be prepared for Jewish colleagues to be taking annual leave during this time.

- To wish Jewish colleagues well during Rosh Hashanah, you can say "Shana Tovah" (translating to "good year" in Hebrew) pronounced Shaa-nah Tohvah.

For Yom Kippur, large meetings or events should not be scheduled, and all meetings with any Jewish colleagues should be avoided on the 25th. I encourage all line managers to check in with staff to ensure any meetings can be rescheduled to accommodate for Jewish colleagues, and you should be prepared for Jewish colleagues to be taking annual leave on Yom Kippur.

- To wish Jewish colleagues well, you can say "fast well", "have a meaningful fast" or many people repeat new year greetings including Shana Tovah.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this guidance, and I look forward to continuing to work on our EDI programme at Homeless Link with you. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me at

pavan.nagra@homelesslink.org.uk

To note: dates for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur change every year since it is based on the Hebrew calendar. Therefore, the dates mentioned in this guidance are only applicable to 2023.