

What is this 'High Holy Day' Malarkey about?

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I'm Lizzy. I'm a non-Jewish 'ally' builder of Makor Hayim Jewish community. My partner Sarah is Jewish and we've been connected to this community for around 2 years. This will be my 4th year being part of High Holy Days with Sarah and her family. At first I didn't have a clue what these days were all about; they're just like Bank holidays off as the Jewish alternative to Christmas, right? Errrr...what do you mean you celebrate New Year in the Autumn, are you mad?! Here are a few of my musings and experiences so far:

The Basics:

Rosh HaShanah (18 – 20 Sept) – literally 'Head of the Year' – is all about celebrating a sweet New Year ahead. Which of course means...two days of being around friends and family and stuffing yourselves silly with all of the food!! I'm talking: tasty fruits with seeds (pomegranates, figs, dates), honey cakes galore, and dipping apple and challah bread in honey; all to symbolise hope for a sweet new year and growth/ new life. I mean, what's not to like? I'm in.

·Yom Kippur (28 Sept) – the day of Atonement – and the most important day in the Jewish calendar. If Jews only do 1 thing in the year at Synagogue, apparently, it's this! The first time Sarah asked me to join her family for YK I took the time off work and felt a bit nervous about what I had let myself in for...1 whole day pretty much entirely in Synagogue!

What I didn't realise is that it actually starts the evening before, with the amazing 'Kol Nidre' evening service of prayers and beautiful singing - lamenting for atonement and forgiveness. So make that 1.25 days in Synagogue...!

This all sounds a bit tough-going...any more surprises? Before this service starts people normally 'carb load' as from the sunset of Kol Nidre until sunset the next day (28 Sept) most people will be fasting from all food and drink (even water); the idea being sacrificing your comfort and really making you focus on what you need to repent for.

As an ally to your Jewish partner or friend you absolutely do not have to fast if you don't want to; I'm not going to lie, the first 2 years I definitely snuck a sandwich and caffeinated beverage on the side. Just being present to see how the services all pan out and hear that ram's horn ('shofar') blown like a million times is great!

For those feeling a bit more hardcore:

If you have some experience of already having marked the above with your partner or Jewish friends through family and services, there's the month of Elul (the 4 weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah) – the month of reflection in preparation for the High Holy Days. My partner had never actually even taken part in this before despite growing up with active practice and attendance at her parents' Synagogue. However, since joining Makor Hayim we completed some extra learning around Jewish practice with Rabbi Daniel, so in 2019 we got stuck in to what Elul is all about; spending some time ahead of the High Holy Days reflecting on the year behind us and thinking about our relationships and where we could have done better, areas of our lives where we might like to right wrongs going forward and ask for forgiveness. This was actually a positive healing process in itself for us both, with some difficulties and family relationship rifts we had encountered that past year.

So...if you're as baffled as I was, yet interested in joining your Jewish partner or friend in supporting them to mark these important spiritual days, why not join Makor Hayim for High Holy Days 2020? It'll be all from the comfort of your own sofa this year so you don't even need to get dressed up! Plus it makes sneaking that cheeky sandwich on Yom Kippur even more realistic. I'll be Zooming in; still somewhat lost at times, but more comfortable and around some really great new friends, so that's OK!

Lizzy