

Jews Celebrate New Year as They Observe Rosh Hashana

Jews all over the world are gathering Monday to celebrate **Rosh Hashana**, the holiday that marks the beginning of the new year 5773.

“Unlike in modern secular society and its New Years festivities, Rosh Hashana is a time of deep reflection, of prayer and of serious self-reflection and introspection,” says Jonathan Feldstein, Israel representative for American Friends of Magen David Adom. “On Rosh Hashana, we are taught that God judges us and inscribes us, each according to his or her merits, for a new year of life, health, prosperity, etc.”

The holiday, which is the first of the High Holy Days, literally means “Head of the Year.” It officially kicked off at sundown on Sunday, and Jews will celebrate until nightfall on Wednesday.

Rosh Hashana—one of four new years in the Jewish year—is considered the new year of people, animals and legal contracts. According to the Jewish oral tradition, it also marks the completion of the creation of the world.

The Mishnah describes Rosh Hashana as the “day of judgment,” and it is believed that on this day God opens the Book of Life and decides who is wicked and who is good. After 10 days, on **Yom Kippur**—which starts on Sept. 25—the good can be sealed in the Book of Life.

Jews ordinarily gather in synagogues on Rosh Hashana and participate in extended services. Celebratory customs include sounding the shofar, the Jewish horn, and eating symbolic foods such as apples dipped in honey, raisin challah and honey cake.

President Obama issued a greeting Sunday night as millions of Jews began celebrating Rosh Hashana.

“This is a joyful time for millions of people around the world. But Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are also opportunities for reflection,” Obama said. “They represent a chance to take stock of our lives and look forward to the coming year with clear eyes and renewed purpose.”

The president said the Jewish tradition teaches us that reconciliation is one of the most important duties we have during this period, and said we’re called to make amends.

“At a time when our public discourse can too often seem harsh; when society too often focuses on what divides us instead of what unites us; I hope that Americans of all faiths can take this opportunity to reach out to those who are less fortunate; to be tolerant of our neighbors; and to recognize ourselves in one another.

“And as a nation, let us be mindful of those who are suffering, and renew the unbreakable bond we share with our friends and allies—including the State of Israel.”

Israeli President Shimon Peres also published a Rosh Hashana message.

“As we stand poised on the threshold of the New Year, it is my distinct pleasure to convey my heartfelt good wishes to all the Jewish communities around the world, in my name and on behalf of your brethren in Israel, eager to embark upon another year with hope and optimism,” Peres stated.