



# Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (known as the High Holy Days) are often regarded as the most important of all Jewish holidays. They are observed in the fall season during the month of Tishrei, the first month of the Jewish lunar calendar. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year and begins a ten-day period known as the *Yamim Nora'im* (“Days of Awe” in Hebrew), which is a time of reflection, repentance and renewal. Traditionally, no work is permitted during Rosh Hashanah, as it is a day the Torah calls “Holy Convocation.” The ten-day period ends with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement—a day set aside to atone for the sins of the previous year. In addition to the prohibition of work during Yom Kippur, fasting is traditionally practiced and the day is spent in prayer and meditation in synagogue.

## **Rosh Hashanah**

Unlike the secular New Year’s Day on January 1<sup>st</sup>, or Christmas, which always falls on December 25<sup>th</sup>, Rosh Hashanah falls at a slightly different date each year. Managers should be alert and check its dates. In 2020, Rosh Hashanah will begin at sundown on September 18<sup>th</sup> and end at sundown on September 20<sup>th</sup>. There is a range of ways that Jewish employees may observe and celebrate the holiday. Some may request two days off in observance, while others may take a half-day off to attend services at synagogue, and others may ask to leave early to attend a holiday dinner. Recognizing that each employee has a distinct set of beliefs and traditions is the key to effectively managing time off requests. Invite your employees to share how they observe Rosh Hashanah and to which practices they plan to adhere. “Happy New Year” or “*Shana Tova*” (“Good New Year,” in Hebrew), can be used to greet your colleagues and friends appropriately during Rosh Hashanah. You may also wish your colleagues “a sweet New Year.”

## **Yom Kippur**

As noted, Yom Kippur always falls ten days after the start of Rosh Hashanah. In 2020, Yom Kippur will begin at sundown on September 27<sup>th</sup> and continue until sundown on September 28<sup>th</sup>. Many Jews view Yom Kippur as the most holy of the Jewish sacred times. Jewish employees may request time off to observe Yom Kippur. It is important to be flexible in an effort to meet their needs. “Easy Fast,” or “*Tzom Kal*” in Hebrew, can be used to greet colleagues and friends appropriately during Yom Kippur.

## **Fasting**

In observance of Yom Kippur, Jews will traditionally fast for a full day, beginning at sundown the evening before and usually after a large holiday meal. During the fast, observers consume neither food nor drink. The fast ends at sundown of the second day and is usually referred to as the break-fast. This year, it will occur at sundown on September 27<sup>th</sup>. It is likely that a Jewish employee will request to take the day off in observance of Yom Kippur. However, if a Jewish employee is fasting in observance of Yom Kippur but has willingly agreed to work, it is important for employers to be aware of the employee’s need for a break to end the fast after sunset.

# Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, & Simchat Torah

These three holidays, though separate, are often grouped together, as they occur consecutively. Sukkot (also spelled: Succot, Sukkos, or Succos) begins five days after Yom Kippur and lasts seven days. Historically, Sukkot is one of the three pilgrimage holidays (along with Passover and Shavuot), *chagim* or *regalim*, during which Jews would gather to Jerusalem, to the Temple. This holiday has dual significance: historical and agricultural, as it celebrates the end of the harvest season and also God's protection of the Israelites in the wilderness, where they wandered for forty years after leaving Egypt. To celebrate, many Jews build temporary structures, also called *sukkot* (singular: *sukkah*) or huts, in which to eat and sometimes sleep. These huts are likened to the structures the Israelites lived in while wandering the in desert. Another custom is to gather four species of vegetation (a citron, a palm frond, myrtle twigs, and willow twigs) and wave them together in six directions.

Shemini Atzeret is two-day long, occurring immediately after Sukkot. Simchat Torah, occurring during the second day of Shemini Atzeret, celebrates the Torah. It is the time when Jews finish reading the entire Torah (which takes a year) and start again. The observance of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are traditionally centered in the synagogue. These holidays are a period of great happiness and joy. These days are also referred to as *Zman Simchateinu*, or "Time of our Joy."

## **Sukkot**

In 2020, Sukkot begins at sundown on October 3<sup>rd</sup> and ends at sundown on October 4<sup>th</sup>. The first two days are "festivals," or *yom tov*, traditionally during which no work is done. Employees might request time off to observe the holiday and be with family. During the remaining days of Sukkot, work is permitted. Many Jews still eat in *sukkot* and wave the four species. An appropriate greeting for Sukkot (as well as for Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah) is, "*Chag Sameach*," or, "Happy Holidays!"

## **Shemini Atzeret**

In 2020, Shemini Atzeret begins at sundown on October 9<sup>th</sup> and ends at sundown on October 10<sup>th</sup>. (The second day is Simchat Torah, discussed below, in the Diaspora. In Israel, these two holidays are celebrated as one day.) Shemini Atzeret is another *yom tov*, where work is forbidden, and many Jewish employees may request time off. It is not required to continue to eat in the *sukkah* but many have the custom to continue to do so.

## **Simchat Torah**

In 2020 in the Diaspora, Simchat Torah begins at nightfall of October 10<sup>th</sup>. Another *yom tov*, work is not permitted during this day. Many Jews will request the day off from work to observe the holiday. Many spend the day in synagogue, dancing and singing with Torah scrolls.

## **Scheduling around the Fall Jewish Holidays**

In general it is important for companies to take all these fall Jewish holidays into account when scheduling conference calls, meetings, or conferences. To avoid scheduling conflicts, a better practice is for

companies to ensure that the dates for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah are circulated in advance, or automatically programmed into online scheduling tools.

It is important to note that some of the *yom tovs* occur during the workweek. This means that Jewish employees who wish to observe these holidays may be out of the office or unavailable for much of late September and early October. It is best to remain flexible with employees during this time of year.

A final scheduling consideration is the timing of the start and end of the Jewish holidays. As mentioned previously, Jewish holidays begin at sundown the night before and continue until sundown of the next day. Traditionally, “sundown” refers to when there are three stars visible in the sky. While not all observers may use this definition of sundown, it is an important awareness to have when considering the availability of your colleagues and clients around the holidays.

**For more useful information on world religions, subscribe to Tanenbaum’s online resource, [Religion at Work: A \(Human\) Resource](#). Visit the Tanenbaum [Workplace Resources](#) page for additional Tanenbaum fact sheets and contact Tanenbaum at [workplacediversity@tanenbaum.org](mailto:workplacediversity@tanenbaum.org) with questions.**