

Jewish Fall Holidays

The fall is a busy time for a quick succession of Jewish holidays, some or all of which colleagues may request time off from work to observe. They are observed in the fall season during the month of Tishrei, the first month of the Jewish lunar calendar. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (known as the High Holy Days) are often regarded as the most important of all Jewish holidays. These two are followed shortly thereafter by Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah, which are three separate holidays that are often grouped together, as they occur consecutively in the fall. Observance of each holiday may look different for different people and, therefore, requests for time off may be varied.

Rosh Hashanah

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.

Unlike the secular New Year’s Day on January 1st, Rosh Hashanah falls at a slightly different date each year. Managers should be alert and check its dates. In 2019, Rosh Hashanah will begin at sundown on September 29th and end at sundown on October 1st. 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 2019, Yom Kippur will begin at sundown on October 8th and continue until sundown on October 9th. 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 October 9th. It is likely that a Jewish employee will request to take the day off in ob-

servance 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

Historically, Sukkot is one of the three pilgrimage holidays (along with Passover and Shavuot), *chagim* or *regalim*, during which Jews would travel to Jerusalem and gather at the Temple. This holiday has dual significance: agricultural and historical, 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 in the 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.

In 2019, Sukkot begins at sundown on October 13th and ends at sundown on October 20th. 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 citron, a palm frond, myrtle twigs, and willow twigs. An appropriate greeting for Sukkot (as well as for Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah) is, "*Chag Sameach*," or, "Happy Holidays!"

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

Shemini Atzeret is a two-day long holiday, occurring immediately after Sukkot, celebrating the completion of Sukkot. While Shemini Atzeret is considered a holiday in its own right, it is also considered to be somewhat of a continuation of the celebration of 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 full 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."

In 2019, Shemini Atzeret begins at sundown on October 20th and ends at sundown on October 22nd. Simchat Torah, the second day of the celebration, begins at nightfall on October 21st in the United States and all countries outside of Israel. In Israel, these two holidays are celebrated as one day.

Each day of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are each considered a *yom tov*, where work is forbidden, and many Jewish employees may request time off to observe the holidays. It is not required to continue to eat in the *sukkah* but many have the custom to continue to do so.

Scheduling around the Fall Jewish Holidays

In general it is important for companies to take all these fall Jewish holidays into account when scheduling conferences, meetings, or luncheons. To avoid scheduling conflicts, a better practice is for companies to share interfaith calendars that include the dates for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah with all colleagues, or automatically program this information into online scheduling tools, for considerate scheduling by all.

It is important to note that this year, all of the *yom tovs* occur during the workweek (in other years they may fall during the weekends). This means that Jewish employees who wish to observe these holidays may be out of the office for much of October. For some Jewish people, taking time off from work to acknowledge Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is sufficient for their practice, while for others it is equally important to take time from work to observe all five holidays. It is best to remain flexible with employees

during this time of year and, when in doubt, to ask colleagues respectfully what their plans are during this holiday-filled time of year.

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