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Rosh Hashana is opportunity for renewal

By Rabbi Brad L. Bloom

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The holidays

Rosh Hashana (Jewish New Year holiday) began at sundown Friday and is observed today and Sunday.

Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) will begin this year at sundown Sept. 27 and will be observed through Sept. 28.

Day of Atonement. Jewish communities throughout the world will flock to synagogue, gather for festive dinners and discuss the prospects for the world we all live in.

During these High Holy Days, as they are called, we will be listening to sermons and to the stirring music composed for these festivals. On Rosh Hashanah we will hear the sound of the ram's horn -- or "shofar," in Hebrew -- as it sounds a series of cantillations designed to awaken feelings of repentance and a desire to return to the Eternal One, who is the God of all humanity. On this occasion we repent as a community as well as individuals.

Rosh Hashanah is a joyous time for the Jewish people. We usher in the New Year by dipping apples in honey and praying for a sweet new year. Traditionally, the new year commemorates the creation of the world. It is therefore a time of hope that we shall experience good health and the fulfillment of our noblest dreams and aspirations.

On Yom Kippur we fast for 24 hours and focus our thoughts on how we might have offended God. Jewish teaching states that the Day of Atonement itself atones for our sins. But the sages clarified that belief and insisted that divine forgiveness applies only when we have first asked our neighbor, whom we have wronged or offended, for forgiveness, even before we appeal to God for forgiveness.

Fasting for 24 hours begins the night before with a festive meal. Jews attend worship services at night and fast until after sunset the next day.

We spend practically the entire day in prayer. By the time the sun has set and the entire congregation concludes its services, Jews wish each other a "shana tovah," a good new year. We go out to each other's homes and break the fast with another celebratory dinner. I am sure that eating is a spiritual act in Jewish life, but that is probably true for most religious traditions.

Some people have asked me, "Why restrict yourselves to just one day to atone for transgressions against God or one's fellow human beings? Can't someone repent any day of the year?"

The answer is, of course, yes, any day is a legitimate opportunity for repentance. Yet Judaism's calendar of holy days provides one special day that brings Jews together from all over the world to engage God, and by doing so we achieve a sense of communal renewal on a spiritual level that transcends the daily opportunities to reflect and atone for our transgressions.

On both these holy days our teachings command us to cease from all work and focus our energy strictly on worship and introspection. This means Jewish people do not work and children refrain from attending school.

We appreciate and are grateful when school authorities and employers respect these traditions and especially when they help our children by affirming the positive role religion should play in shaping the values of our young. Sometimes that means scheduling major events not to exclude Jewish students from participating and working with them to keep up on their studies.

We live in a world today where religion often is the focus of negative news coverage. But let us not forget that one reason why our country is great is because we have a long-standing acceptance of religious pluralism. In this way we are building the next generation of Americans to uphold religion and the society that cherishes freedom for all Americans to believe in God, each in their own way.

Rabbi Brad L. Bloom is the rabbi at Congregation Beth Yam on HiltonHead Island. He can be reached at 843-689-2178.