

Shanah Tovah, Happy New Year

By Andrea Martinez Vera



This September hosts the most important time in the Jewish community, who celebrate the High Holidays or High Holy Days. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is in some aspects similar to the American New Year, with a celebration that brings the community together; it is a joyous occasion. Depending on the temple, services occur from 9 am to 1 pm, and this year the holiday falls on September 10. After the services, it is tradition to give out little apples with honey to symbolize a sweet new year. In the afternoon, the ritual of Tashlikh occurs - a tradition where one throws pieces of bread into a lake or body of water to symbolize the letting go of any wrongdoing one has done the past year and looking for forgiveness within oneself to have a fresh start to the new year. This approach to the new year emphasizes a time of self-reflection and forgiveness, and it made me rethink how I celebrate the new year - with my own flimsy New Year's resolutions I make...and often break.

Rosh Hashanah continues on September 11, ending the holiday before nightfall; however, many students are unable to attend the second day of services for reasons later described. After Rosh Hashanah, the community holds space for 10 days, during which individuals attempt to right the wrongs they have committed the past year. These atonements include serving the community or apologizing to those one had wronged. After these 10 days, the Jewish community celebrates Yom Kippur, the most important holiday in the Jewish culture. Unlike Rosh Hashanah, it is a solemn and serious time of self-reflection with more intense traditions.

This year, Yom Kippur began on the night of September 8 with Kol Nidre, the night in which a bland and spiceless meal is served, keeping one focused on their inner-self and nothing else. This is the last meal one has until the end of Yom Kippur. Fasting consists of not being able to eat or drink anything until nightfall, including water. It is an important experience that many cannot relate to outside of religious communities that practice fasting, and thus no writing can really explain what one feels and experiences during those moments of deep thought about one's self and the world around them. Those who are exempt from participating are those who are unable to fast due to health reasons and those who have not yet celebrated their bar or bat mitzvah. The day after Yom Kippur, one is supposed to wear white as well as avoid wearing animal products, which oftentimes means wearing tennis shoes and very plain articles of clothing. These traditions serve in keeping one focused on inner-self and reflection; materialistic items such as clothing and food are seen as a distraction to one's path of becoming a better self and to being in touch with the meaningful things they have. The day of services are typically held from 9am to 3pm, with a few hours of break in which one is able to meditate, attend classes, or nap to cope with the effects of fasting. Services then continue into the evening, from about 5pm to 8:30pm. The day ends before nightfall with the blowing of Shofar (a ram's horn) to symbolize the end of the holiday and the new year.

To my (and perhaps many people's) ignorance, we know nothing of the Jewish Culture and have seen September as simply September. This lack of awareness can cause many complications for Jewish students. One

of these is that the school system currently has placed a limit on days a student can have excused for religious reasons. With the current limits, our Jewish classmates are either unable to fully participate during the most important time in their culture or they have to use their sick days. Though the United States champions religious diversity, it becomes clear that we privilege some over others, such as when we are given breaks during Christmas and Easter holidays. According to Education Code 48205, religious holidays are considered excused absences; however, the number of excused absences are limited to 10 days and cover all kinds of purposes, such as medical appointments and funeral services. Secondly, it is a yearly issue for the students to have their work done in a timely manner as is the expectation of many teachers. As a result, many students end up spending their holiday worrying about the assignments they have due upon their return. As MC Senior Ariel Hochhauser says, "We have two days in the entire year that we ask not to have off, not to make up the work, but just to have a little bit of cultural consideration." To make matters worse, some of these tests or projects are mandatory, so Jewish students have to come in during their holiday to turn in a project or take a test. According to Ariel, "It's offensive, because you would never give kids Christmas work." She offers that perhaps a solution involves planning ahead; the faculty could coordinate assignment schedules with these holidays in mind, or consider excusing them of the homework assignment. Students, be aware of these dates as well and try to be respectful of this time; offer to lend a hand, getting notes for them or helping them with the assignment they missed on a later date.

Cultural appreciation must also include cultural awareness, for we, at the least, must make the conscious effort in giving respect to the cultures we are ignorant to. I would like to thank Ariel Hochhauser for taking the time to talk to me about her culture and trusting me with her experiences. Culture is at the root of us, of our community and life values; by understanding one another's culture, we can we understand our differences and similarities, hopefully creating a more vibrant and peaceful world.