



Rosh Ha Shanna, literally translated as the 'head of the year' is a time when Jewish people begin the time of 'feshuvah', meaning 'returning to the right path'. Jewish people who do not usually attend the synagogue will often attend at this time of year. What is the attraction then, when other festivals often have a more exciting service?

Purim for example, has fancy dress and lots of approved alcohol. Some of the best of Jewish culinary delights is definitely on offer at Chanukah and Pesach has a fantastic cliff-hanging story. Will they or won't they make it to the Promised land? Rosh Ha Shanna gives us none of that. It is intrinsically spiritual, encouraging us to look carefully at what we have done over the last year, how we have behaved, particularly to other people. It is a time of community, when we may meet up with people we haven't seen since last Rosh Ha Shanna.

In Jewish communities all over the world, people have attended synagogue services at Rosh Ha Shanna and have celebrated the festival with their own traditions and customs. Here are some extracts which show how Rosh Ha Shanna has been experienced in other countries throughout history.

**Adapted from 'New Year in Cochin, India'
David G Mandelbaum - October 1939**

'I was able to participate in the celebration of the High Holy Days with the white Jews. On the eve of Rosh Ha Shanna, the entire community is to be found within the synagogue. All are in their best clothes, the young and the middle aged men in European suits, the elders in loose white trousers and knee-length shirts with a brightly coloured kaftan on top. Every male, down to the youngest, wears a prayer shawl at morning services, but not usually at evening prayers. As the service opened, the eldest man uttered the word 'kavod'. He was too feeble to conduct the prayers himself and he thus indicated that he passed the privilege to the next eldest man. During the services on the day of Rosh Ha Shanna, the Chazzan is flanked by two young men on each side who help him chant the liturgy. It is a coveted honor to participate in this choir and then men compete to attain it. The respect given to older members of the community is apparent by the way in which the older men lead services. The younger men will, in their turn, have the honored position of taking charge when their time comes.

**New Year in Netanya, Israel
Shelley Marsh - September 1988**

'I decided to go into a small synagogue just off the main square in Netanya. It was really hot, a very sticky day and I remember thinking that the summer heat must be over soon. As I approached the shul, I could hear the prayers being sung in tunes that were unfamiliar but quite beautiful. The community were mainly of Moroccan descent and then men weren't seated in rows looking ahead towards the bimah as I had expected, but were all sat around a central bimah instead. They were chatting to each other and the singing, combined with the chatting created a loud noise. The women stood together at the back of the room and also sang and chatted freely as the service progressed. There were many children running around, and they ran out of the main synagogue room, and then came back into it to be given sweets and pieces of cake by their friends and relations. There was no

disapproval of the children's exuberance, in fact the opposite was true. The adults seemed genuinely pleased that the children were skipping about, joining in with the service or not. The atmosphere in the synagogue was joyful and relaxed. This was clearly a time of celebration and this community were united in their way of enjoying it.

At the end of the service I began to move towards the door and a woman from the community approached me and asked me which community I was from. I told her that I was originally from London, England but that I was now living in Israel. She immediately invited me to join her and her family for lunch and seemed concerned that I was so far from my own family. I spent a wonderful afternoon and evening with her family, eating a variety of spicy and sweet dishes which were really unusual for me but absolutely delicious. The warmth the community showed to me made a big impression on me at the time. It was with a feeling of belonging that I began the New Year.

**Adapted from 'In the Warsaw Ghetto'
Henry Shoskes - Poland 1941**

Once more the Jewish New Year has come. The Nazis gave permission to reopen a few synagogues, but at the same time let it be known that the Jews would do better not to assemble for prayer, otherwise there might be incidents. But the Jews could not be frightened off. They went to their places of worship and they prayed.

The Jews never believed, not for one moment, that God would forget them. But the world, they were certain, had forgotten them. Nobody was coming to their help. Nobody was trying to liberate them from their prison. The world was going to let them perish. And just then they were given proof that the world had not forgotten them. Some of the Jews still had radios hidden away somewhere which they sometimes tuned in after they had locked their doors. That night they heard a secret Polish station broadcasting a New Year's greeting to the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto.

During the same night a group of Polish workers approached the walls of the ghetto near Hodna Street and threw flowers over the wall. There was a little card, too, which said this was a New Year's greeting from the Polish workers of the Vola factories.'

These are just three experiences that Jewish people had in different communities around the world. For us, this Rosh Ha Shanna may seem very much like last years, or the year before that. I hope you will enjoy spending time with family and friends, maybe enjoying a service, but I also hope you will find a little time for self-awareness. For Jewish people all over the world this is a time of new beginnings.

Chat through with others...

- ***What are your Rosh Ha Shanna narratives?***
- ***How connected do you feel to other Jewish people around the world?***
- ***How do you relate to any of the three Rosh Ha Shanna narratives above?***