

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Yom Kippur

The Day of Atonement: a month of dawn prayers, a day dressed in white, poetry from medieval Spain, and break fast tables from Baghdad to Rhodes.

WHEN

The 10th of the Hebrew month of Tishrei, in September or October, ten days after Rosh Hashanah. It begins at sundown and ends at nightfall the next day.

WHAT IT IS

The holiest day of the Jewish year, a day of fasting, prayer, reflection, and seeking forgiveness from God and from other people.

THE SEASON

Most Sephardic and Mizrahi communities begin early morning *Selihot*, prayers for forgiveness, at the start of the month of Elul.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

Beloved poems such as "El Nora Alila," prayers translated into Ladino, white clothing, and break fast foods by community.

For Jews of the Middle East and North Africa, Yom Kippur is not a single day but the peak of a long season. For weeks, communities gather before dawn to chant prayers for forgiveness. On the eve of the fast, families share a generous meal, and many put on white clothes. In the synagogue, the day is carried by poetry, much of it written by Jewish poets in medieval Spain and sung to melodies that differ from Casablanca to Baghdad. When the final shofar blast sounds, each community breaks the fast with its own familiar flavors.

From Elul to the final shofar

- **Selihot in Elul.** Sephardic custom is to recite Selihot through the whole month of Elul, starting the day after the first of the month, ideally before dawn. Ashkenazi Jews usually begin in the week before Rosh Hashanah, and Yemenite Jews recite them for about half of Elul.
- **Kapparot.** In this custom, a chicken or a sum of money is set aside as an "atonement" and given to the poor. Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of the *Shulhan Arukh*, opposed it, while other authorities upheld it. Today many families who keep the custom use money for the poor.
- **The meal before the fast.** The *seudah mafseket*, "separating meal," is eaten in the late afternoon before sundown.
- **Kal Nidre.** The evening opens with this Aramaic declaration about vows, chanted as Torah scrolls are held. Many Sephardim say *Kal Nidre*; Ashkenazim usually say *Kol Nidrei*.
- **Ne'ilah.** At the closing prayer, the ark is opened, and the day ends with the shofar.

Why white?

Wearing white on Yom Kippur goes back to the Jerusalem Talmud. In the 1500s, Rabbi David ibn Zimra called it an ancient custom of Egypt's Jews, and Jews in Syria, Turkey, Morocco, and Yemen also dressed in white or fine clothes for the High Holidays.

Scholars give three main reasons: white was a color of joy, it stands for purity ("though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow," Isaiah 1:18), and simple white clothing makes rich and poor equal.

Poetry and prayer

Much of the Yom Kippur service is made of *piyyutim*, poems written for the prayer book. Many of the best loved Sephardic ones come from the golden age of Hebrew poetry in medieval Spain.

“El Nora Alila”

“God, awesome in deeds” opens Ne’ilah in Sephardic and Yemenite synagogues. Written by Moses ibn Ezra, its eight stanzas spell his name, and each ends with the same refrain about the hour of closing. Some Ashkenazi congregations later adopted it.

Sources: Jewish Virtual Library; Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre

“Lekha Eli”

“My longing is for You,” usually credited to Abraham ibn Ezra, is a personal prayer of devotion and humility. Most Sephardic communities sing it at the start of Yom Kippur, with melodies from Jerusalem, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Thessaloniki.

Source: National Library of Israel

Prayers in Ladino

A Ladino prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Kippur was printed in 1663. In 1910, Rabbi Reuben Eliyahu Israel of Rhodes published Ladino versions of the holiday poems so people could understand them. Rhodes Jews in Seattle still sing them, and Ladino versions of El Nora Alila and the Book of Jonah are preserved too.

Sources: University of Washington; Jewish Language Project

Many melodies

The words of Kal Nidre are shared, but the music is not. The Eastern Sephardic melody has a narrow range, and listeners can compare the Syrian style with the recitation of Syrian Muslim neighbors. Some Iranian communities, such as Mashhadi Jews in New York, chant Selihot partly in Judeo Persian.

Sources: Posen Library; Hebrew University; Jewish Language Project

Community by community

Morocco

Before the fast, Moroccan Jews made *sfenj*, fried doughnuts, outside the synagogue and handed them to worshippers. Afterward, families drink mint tea with marzipan cookies or *fijuelas*, followed by *harira*, a lentil and chickpea soup that may echo the Ramadan meals of Muslim neighbors.

Sources: Moment; Unpacked; My Jewish Learning

Iraq

The fast is broken with dates and *hariri*, homemade almond milk scented with cardamom or rose water, then *t’beet*, a whole chicken stuffed with rice and spices that cooks slowly through the day. *Sambusak* pastries are favorites too.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Unpacked

Iran

Before the fast, families serve *morgh tu deli*, chicken stuffed with rice and spices. To break it, there is black tea, a soft boiled egg, and *faloodeh seeb*, grated apple soaked in rose water.

Sources: Moment; My Jewish Learning; Unpacked

Syria

Apricot water often comes first, followed by dishes such as zucchini stuffed with apricots and meatballs in a sweet and sour cherry and tamarind sauce. A Syrian style Kal Nidre can be heard in the Posen Library recording.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Posen Library

Ottoman Sephardic (Greece, Turkey, the Balkans)

Families save melon seeds for weeks to make *pepitada*, a sweet white drink to break the fast. Its color fits the white of the day. An egg and lemon chicken soup often follows.

Sources: ANU Museum of the Jewish People; Unpacked

Yemen

On the eve of the fast, families ate a dairy lunch of *ftout*, and later a soup with *salouf* bread, followed by dates and white coffee. Afterward, they had *zom*, a soup of soft cheese or yogurt.

Sources: Moment; Unpacked

Libya and Tunisia

In Libya's provincial towns, families brought food to the synagogue on the day before the fast and ate together. Tunisian and Libyan families break the fast with *boulou*, orange blossom cookies, and soup. Tripoli and Djerba followed their own order of Selihot.

Sources: Moment; Unpacked; Hebrew University

Spain and its heirs

Many Sephardic families break the fast with a real meal, often chicken or meat soup, rather than a dairy brunch, a custom traced to medieval Spain. In Algeria, a family might serve a chicken tagine with quinces.

Sources: Jewish Standard (JTA); Unpacked

Common misconceptions

- **"Everyone breaks the fast with bagels."** That is an American Ashkenazi tradition. Sephardic and Mizrahi tables offer almond milk, melon seed drinks, soups, and stuffed chicken.
- **"Yom Kippur is a gloomy day."** It is solemn, but white clothing once signaled joy, and the day ends with hope of forgiveness.
- **"Kapparot is a Sephardic custom."** Practice varies. Rabbi Yosef Karo opposed it in the *Shulhan Arukh*, though later Sephardic rabbis permitted it, and many who keep it today use money instead.
- **"All Middle Eastern Jews are Sephardic."** Terms vary. Many Iraqi, Iranian, and Yemenite Jews identify as Mizrahi, while many Syrian and Moroccan Jews use Sephardic, which refers to Jews of Spain and Portugal and is also used for those who follow Sephardic prayer customs.

Words to know

Selihot *Hebrew*

Prayers asking for forgiveness, recited before dawn in Elul.

Elul *Hebrew*

The month before Rosh Hashanah, a time of reflection.

Teshuvah *Hebrew*

"Return." Repentance and changing one's ways.

Kapparot *Hebrew*

"Atonements." A custom on the eve of Yom Kippur, often done with charity money.

Seudah mafseket *Hebrew*

The "separating meal" eaten before the fast.

Kal Nidre *Aramaic*

"All vows." The declaration that opens the evening.

Piyyut *Hebrew*

A poem written for the prayer service.

Ne'ilah *Hebrew*

"Closing." The final prayer of Yom Kippur.

Pepitada *Ladino*

A sweet drink of melon seeds that breaks the fast.

Hariri *Iraqi Judeo Arabic*

Sweet homemade almond milk.

Bringing Yom Kippur to life

In the public school classroom

- Never ask students to fast, even for part of a day or as an experiment. Teach about the holiday instead.
- Read “El Nora Alila” in English as medieval poetry from Spain, and compare it with other poems about time and endings.
- Map the break fast foods and discuss how Jews shared ingredients with Muslim and Christian neighbors.
- Do not have students recite prayers or act out customs. Avoid scheduling tests on Yom Kippur.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Listen to recordings of Kal Nidre and El Nora Alila from different communities and compare the melodies.
- Explore the Ladino translations of Rabbi Reuben Eliyahu Israel and why he made them.
- Invite families to share how their communities break the fast.
- Prepare *pepitada* or *hariri* together after the holiday, following allergy rules (many recipes use nuts and seeds).

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: What was Yom Kippur like in your family? What did you eat before and after?
- Learn a family melody for El Nora Alila from an elder.
- Try a break fast dish from a community other than your own, such as Iraqi *t'beet* or Moroccan *harira*.
- Record an elder's memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might a community spend a whole month preparing for one day?
- Rabbi Reuben Eliyahu Israel translated prayers so people could understand them. What is gained and what might be lost?
- Why do you think foods to end a fast are so similar within a community and so different between communities?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Yom Kippur Liturgy: Kal Nidre, Syrian Style (Posen Library, with Hazzan Yechiel Nahari)
posenlibrary.com/node/12035

El Nora Alila, sung by Haim Effendi of Turkey (Hebrew University)
jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/node/24611

Lekha Eli Teshukati, recordings from five communities (National Library of Israel)
nli.org.il/en/discover/music/jewish-music/piyut/piyut/lekha-eli-teshukati

High Holiday Liturgy in Ladino and Judeo Persian (Jewish Language Project, with recordings)
jewishlanguages.org/high-holiday-liturgy

Pre Rosh Hashanah Sephardic Community Seder (JIMENA, 2021)
vimeo.com/596916113

Read

A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs, by Herbert C. Dobrinsky (Ktav and Yeshiva University Press, 1986). For teachers.
jewishbookcouncil.org/book/a-treasury-of-sephardic-laws-and-customs-the-ritual-practices-of-syrian-moroccan-judeo-spanish

Encyclopedia of Jewish Food, by Gil Marks (Wiley, 2010).
jewishbookcouncil.org/book/encyclopedia-of-jewish-food

The Rhythms of Jewish Living: A Sephardic Exploration of Judaism's Spirituality, by Marc D. Angel (Jewish Lights, 2015).
jewishideas.org/node/182

Explore online

The High Holidays in Ladino (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/high-holidays-in-ladino

Halacha According to Sephardic Practice: The Month of Elul (Orthodox Union)
ou.org/holidays/halacha-according-to-the-sephardic-practice-the-month-of-elul

Why Do We Wear White on the High Holy Days? (Schechter Institutes)
schechter.edu/why-do-we-wear-a-kittel-and-use-white-torah-mantles-table-cover-and-ark-curtains-in-the-synagogue-on-the-high-holy-days-responsa-in-a-moment-volume-10-issue-no-1-september-2015

A Brief History of a Fowl Custom (Tablet, on kapparot)
tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/a-brief-history-of-a-fowl-custom

Yom Kippur Break Fast Traditions from Around the World (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/the-nosher/yom-kippur-break-fast-traditions-from-around-the-world

Beyond Bagels: Yom Kippur Break Fast Foods (Unpacked)
unpacked.media/beyond-bagels-yom-kippur-break-fast-foods-from-jewish-communities-around-the-world

Pepitada, Melon Seed Milk (ANU Museum of the Jewish People)
foodish.anumuseum.org.il/en/recipe/pepitada-melon-seed-milk

From JIMENA

Rosh Hashanah guide
jimena.org/jewish-traditions/rosh-hashanah-guide

Culture and Holidays video collection
jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Oral history collection
jimena.org/oral-history

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)
sepharditoolkit.org



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include the University of Washington Strum Center for Jewish Studies; the Jewish Language Project; the Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre; the National Library of Israel; the Posen Library; the Jewish Virtual Library; the Schechter Institutes; the Orthodox Union; Tablet; My Jewish Learning; Unpacked; Moment; the Jewish Standard (JTA); and the ANU Museum of the Jewish People. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.