Yom Kippur 2018: What you need to know about the holiest day of the Jewish year



Yom Kippur the holiest day of the Jewish year, takes place in 2018 on the evening of Tuesday 18 September.

Following Rosh Hashanah – the faith's new year – Jews observe the Ten Days of Repentance, an opportunity to reflect on their sins and transgressions over the past 12 months. This period culminates with Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, a solemn 25-hours of prayer and fasting undertaken as a gesture of penance.

What is it?

Beginning at sunset and concluding the following evening when three stars are seen in the sky, Yom Kippur sees Jews “afflict their souls” by abstaining from food and drink, bathing, sex and wearing leather shoes or perfume and engaging in prayers of repentance.

More than that, Jews are expected to make a personal commitment to reform. As the prophet Isaiah says in the Torah, God expects the Jews to “unlock the fetters of wickedness”, share their bread with the hungry, take the poor into their homes and clothe the unfortunate.

What takes place?

As on the Sabbath, labours of any kind are forbidden to ensure a focus on one’s spiritual wellbeing. Observance of the Ten Days and Yom Kippur ensure the new year represents a fresh start.

“G’mar Chatimah Tova” is the common greeting of the holiday, meaning: “May you be sealed for a good new year.”
Depending on the strictness of a follower’s adherence, in practice this can mean anything from not going to the office to not using electricity. In some cases, Jews may stand all day and not sleep as an act of devotion.

In synagogues, the service of Kol Nidre is held at sunset to mark the commencement of Yom Kippur, to which attendees wear tallits (prayer shawls) and dress in white. At services throughout the following 25 hours, special passages are read from the Torah and vidui (confessions) are chanted.

Yizkor also takes place, a memorial service for those lost in the past year, before matters conclude with a final service, Neilah, “the locking of the gates”.

After this, the end of Yom Kippur is marked with the “breaking

of the fast”, a celebratory family dinner.

What is Kapparot?

This is one of the more unusual aspects of Yom Kippur and involves the swinging of a live chicken three times around the head, a folk custom dating back at least 800 years and intended to absolve the devotee of sin. The fowl is subsequently slaughtered and its meat often donated to charity.