

JEWISH COMMUNITY LOOKS INWARD WITH ARRIVAL OF HIGH HOLY DAYS

YOM KIPPUR, JUDAISM'S MOST SACRED DAY, FOLLOWS A PERIOD MEANT FOR REPENTANCE

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With the approach of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in mid-September, Halton's Jewish community is already making preparations for what many consider the most important holiday of the year. Beginning on the evening of Sept. 9, Rosh Hashanah — the Jewish new year — marks the start of a 10-day period of repentance and introspection that culminates in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement that represents Judaism's most sacred day.

Even now, observant

Jews are getting mentally ready, says Cantor Cheryl Wunch of Oakville's Shaarei-Beth El Congregation. She explained that on the Jewish calendar, the month before Rosh Hashanah is called Elul, a time often used for "taking account of our souls" in advance of the new year.

For many Jews, the High Holy Days begin when Elul begins," said Cantor Wunch, who, alongside Rabbi Stephen Wise, forms the clergy of Shaarei-Beth El.

"It's about looking in and seeing how we've done: What have we gotten right? What have we gotten wrong? What do we have to fix? (It) is a month of reflection and preparing our souls."

Shaarei-Beth El describes its vision as being the "vibrant centre of Jewish life in Halton Region." It may also be the only synagogue. Halton is home to a Jewish community of "roughly around 1,500 peo-



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Jews will celebrate Rosh Hashanah - the New Year - starting the evening of Sunday, Sept. 9, 2018.

ple, according to the available data, though I think it might be higher," estimated Rabbi Wise in an email.

On Sept. 1, the synagogue hosted a special service to mark Selichot, which acts as a kickoff to

the High Holy Days, explained Wunch. Rosh Hashanah starts after sunset on Sept. 9 and is generally observed for two days, she added, noting the first evening is often a time when families eat a festive meal.

Apples dipped in honey, symbolizing a sweet new year, are a common tradition. After dinner, many families will attend synagogue, which also hosts a service the following morning. The shofar, an instrument made of a ram's horn, is typically played to usher in the new year.

"It's not like a new year's celebration that is like a party," Wunch explained.

"It's worship that is both celebratory and somewhat somber. We are grateful for the (year), and looking forward, but it's also a commemoration of the creation of the world. We celebrate that and we also begin the process of repentance."

Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Jews try to right wrongs they have made toward others, often by apologizing and asking for forgiveness. On Yom Kippur, the focus turns to sins against God and oneself, said Wunch, who believes the two are al-

most indistinguishable. "Asking your friend for forgiveness might be scary and anxiety-producing but it's not that hard," she said. "But coming to terms with the ways we've treated ourselves can be much more challenging."

Adherents often spend much of Yom Kippur, which starts at sundown on Sept. 18 through Sept. 19, at synagogue. Shaarei-Beth El hosts several services, as well as a communal walk by Lake Ontario. Adults often fast for a 25-hour period, and abstain from sex, wearing leather and bathing.

"Everyone has their own personal practice in that regard of what is meaningful to them," said Wunch. "Some people don't shower or wear makeup."

It's about eschewing the needs of the physical in order to focus on the needs of the spiritual... Putting energy, time and focus on spiritual health and ability to dig deep."

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