

Long Island

Rosh Hashanah ushers in start of Jewish High Holy Days

Updated September 12, 2015 7:51 PM

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The High Holy Days of Judaism begin after sunset Sunday with the start of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, and the 10 Days of Awe, a time of repentance and forgiveness and hopes for a sweet new year.

The celebration of the Jewish New Year of 5776 continues until sunset Tuesday.

The High Holy Days culminate Sept. 22 to 23 in Judaism's most solemn holiday, Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, when observant Jews fast from sunset to sunset and God is envisioned sealing the books of life and death.

"The whole period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur is one of reflection, searching, looking inward and asking forgiveness for our wrongs from our community," said Rabbi Elliot Skiddell, president of the Long Island Board of Rabbis and leader of the Reconstructionist synagogue Congregation Beth Emeth, in Rockville Centre. And, he said, "it's a time for healing."

And in that spirit, a theme of a number of local rabbis' High Holy Day sermons will be the need to heal rifts created by disagreements over the Iran nuclear pact, he said. The pact would lift economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for limiting its nuclear capacity, Skiddell said.

The pact's fate in Congress is already seemingly decided, "but now that the decision is made," he said, "how do we come back together, close the gap and heal the rifts that have emerged in our society over the last few months that the deal has been fought over?"



Rabbi Susie Heneson Moskowitz, of Temple Beth Torah in Melville, said she would discuss the pact within the larger context of a changing world, and issues of tolerance, race relations, the refugee crisis.

"I don't see another option with a better deal being presented anywhere," she said, "so our challenge now is to work within the parameters of this deal and ensure the safety of Israel, the Middle East, the U.S. and the world."

She said she tried to balance her sermons between those that were "introspective and self-reflective and sermons that connect us to the world community and the Jewish community at large."

For Rabbi Charles Klein of the Merrick Jewish Centre Congregation Ohr Torah, the High Holy Days are the gathering of the Jewish people and as such a time to "remind everyone that we are a people, and we do have an obligation one to the other that we must not forget about."

He will not be discussing the Iran deal, however, although he has spoken out against it and on Iran's nuclear capacity "for years." He will instead be focusing on questions of meaning and higher purpose.

"The season of the year is eternal, and forces us to face the big questions of life, which don't change from year to year," Klein said. "We come back to the same topics in different ways. We know that this is what is most deeply troubling to people: How do you steer the course of your life in a direction of blessing and meaning?"

He added, "We have the responsibility to think deeper and live higher," to make "our lives a blessing . . . for everyone there is a road to character; you just have to not be afraid to get on that road."

The High Holy Day season, called the Days of Awe, or the Days of Repentance, offer communal traditions and feasts to mark the onset of Rosh Hashanah and the ending of the Yom Kippur fast.

Apples dipped in honey symbolize the sweetness of the new year; in a service usually on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah pieces of bread symbolizing sins are cast into lakes, rivers and the sea. The shofar, an instrument made from a ram's horn, is sounded to inspire awe and piety.

Rabbi Tuvia Teldon, who directs the Chabad Lubavitch of Long Island and its 45 rabbis working out of 33 synagogues, said, "I believe I can safely say they will all be talking about how we can be better Jews and better human beings."

The High Holy Days, he said, are about "how we can draw inspiration from the new year, and make it a better year than last."

His son, Rabbi Mendel Teldon of Chabad of Mid-Suffolk in Commack, said that many Jews may come to the temple only on the High Holy Days. "So it's an opportunity not to just talk about politics but to warm their hearts toward God, toward Judaism, to reconnect and to welcome them home."