

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# The beginning of a new year for both Jews and Muslims



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“Hayom harat olam — today is the birthday of the world.”

This is part of the Rosh Hashanah prayer that marks the new year in the Jewish calendar.

Both Jewish and Muslim communities celebrate this week the beginning of a new year. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, began at sundown Sunday and ended at sundown Tuesday. It is the first day of the month of Tishrei, and Rosh Hashanah literally means “beginning or head of the year.” According to tradition, it is also the anniversary of the creation of Adam and Eve and thus marks the beginning of humanity. Custom calls for the sounding of the shofar, a hollowed-out ram’s horn, attending special services at the synagogue or temple and eating apples dipped in honey in hopes of a “sweet year.”

This week is also the beginning of the month of Muharram and marks a new year for Muslims, which began at sundown Tuesday, just as the Jewish New Year concluded. The coincidence is not usual, because — while both traditions use a lunar calendar — the Jewish calendar adds a leap month every few years to keep the months and the seasons approximately coordinated. The Muslim monthly calendar does not add extra months, so the holidays and the months move through the year as measured by the Georgian calendar. The dates of special days in the Muslim calendar differ each year by 10 or 11 days.

For Jews, Rosh Hashanah is also the beginning of a 10-day period of introspection and repentance culminating on Yom Kippur, also known as the Day of Atonement. A few years ago, Krista Tippett, host of the public radio program “On Being,” interviewed Sharon Brous, the passionate senior rabbi of a growing congregation in Los Angeles. They discussed these 10 days called the Jewish High Holy Days and also known as Days of Awe.

Brous described these days as a time to focus hearts and minds “to bring people to one momentary understanding of the fragility of life. But to take that and to leave with a commitment to live a life in which they’re able to transform themselves and their relationships and the world, knowing that every day they have might be their last.”

She described the saying in the prayers: “Hayom harat olam” — “Today is the birthday of the world.” She sees it as not just a commemoration of something in the past, but a reminder of “the fact that each one of us participates in creation every single day, when we make a choice about how we want to live in the world.”

Brous describes the “shofar, which blasts in our ears. And it’s not supposed to be beautiful and melodious. It’s supposed to really wake you up and say, ‘Look at yourself. Are you the mother you want to be? Are you the friend you want to be? Are you the American you want to be? Are you the human being that you want to be in the world?’”

She also spoke of Abraham as not just the father of the Jewish people, but the father of both Isaac and Ishmael. It takes us back to “the creation of our faith, the origin story of our faith, where we realize that we are in this story with other human beings in the world.”

Also appearing closely together this year are the Jewish Yom Kippur (Sept. 19) and the Muslim holiday of Ashura (Sept. 21). My Muslim friend Aslam Modak is active in the Burton Islamic Center and on the board of the Interfaith Dialogue Association. He has written the following about Ashura.

“According to Muslim traditions, after the Prophet Muhammad first arrived in Medina, he found Jews in Medina fasting on this day. They told him that ‘This is a great day when God saved Moses and his people, and drowned Pharaoh and his people.’ Because of the connection of this day to Moses, the Prophet Muhammad asked Muslims to also fast on this day in the Islamic month of Muharram.

“Muslims consider Ashura as an important day in the life of every Prophet, and commemorate it by fasting to recognize and celebrate them all. On this day, Adam was created, he was forgiven on this day, Noah’s ark came to land, Jonah was released from the belly of the whale, Abraham was born, the sea was parted for Moses and Jesus Christ was raised to heaven. Peace be upon them all!

“A tragic event also took place on this day that greatly affected the course of Islam. The Prophet’s heroic and pious grandson, Imam Husain, and his loyal family members, fought against a tyrant called Yazid, and attained the honor of martyrdom. Their unflinching stand against the lust for power has created for all time a benchmark for the victory of selflessness over selfishness, truth over falsehood, justice over injustice and morality over wickedness.

“About Imam Husain, the Prophet Mohammed said, ‘Husain is of me, and I am of Husain.’ The martyrdom of Imam Husain and his family, therefore, is considered a great manifestation of spiritual steadfastness. Their sacrifice shook up all Muslims, and their courageous resistance for a sacred cause triggered great awakening and self-reflection; it is remembered with intensity, sorrow and prayer by Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims. All of them spend the first 10 days of Muharram in remembrance of Imam Husain’s noble precedent. Shia Muslims consider Ashura as the most important day of the year and spend it in public mourning. The sacrifice of the family of the Prophet Muhammad is honored almost everywhere in the Muslim world.”

Let each of us, no matter what tradition we claim, join in this time of self-reflection and commit ourselves to live in peace with all with whom we share our humanity.

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