

How to Run High Holidays Beginners Services and Programs

This section of the High Holidays Programming guide offer ideas and strategies to prepare, run and follow-up on your Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur services and programs. It is largely based on the [Netitzot Yom Noraim Programs, Volume #21, September 2005](#) by Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, and shiurim and/or discussions with Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf, Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, Rabbi Lawrence Hajioff, Rabbi Yaakov Marcus, Rabbi Shmuel Schwartz and Rabbi Moshe Trepp.

Section I. The Goal

We all know how powerful the Yamim Noraim can be for us. So much is at stake, and there's so much opportunity in the air. When working with beginners to Judaism, the opportunities are ever more pronounced. Many secular Jews will come to High Holidays services even if they would not step foot in a synagogue the rest of the year. As a Jewish educator or communal leader, this is crunch time for sharing the relevance of Judaism with those of limited background.

So, while the Yamim Noraim are an intense time of teshuva, tefillah, and tzedakah for ourselves, when it comes to beginners programs, the focus has to be on making them enjoyable, interesting, and inspiring. After Yom Kippur, we want our participants excited to return to experience and learn more. This overarching goal must have a bearing on everything that we plan and do on these days.

Consequently, when running the minyan -- insights, comments and stories would relate to the meaning of prayers and the deep significance of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Alternatives to the minyan, such as classes and discussion groups, can address the High Holidays, themes of general interest, popular topics, and/or a Jewish perspective on current events. When possible, these themes should be related to the Jewish festival.

Section II. Pre-Holiday Programs

1. Classes and Courses: Leading up to the High Holidays you may wish to run classes or even courses that will feed into the services themselves. Examples would be a Hebrew reading crash course or an overview of the High Holidays. See Section V below for recommended NLE Morasha Syllabus classes.

2. Honey drive: Advertise that you are selling beautiful packages that include jars of honey, apples, and other holiday delicacies. The target audience for purchase is either religious or non-religious participants. Observant participants can also give honey packages to non-religious friends and family to increase overall Jewish awareness. Core organizational participants can do much of the legwork – buying, packaging, marketing, and selling – affording them a chance to get involved as active kiruv leaders.

3. Holiday Gifts: This is an appropriate time to send presents to board members, leadership, and those to whom you feel hakoras hatov. It's also a good time to prepare a gift for your membership such as a calendar with highlighted events so recipients are reminded and look forward to your key activities throughout the year. You may also consider raising funds by selling ads in the calendar.

Another timely gift is a leather-bound, English-Hebrew listing of the brachos of the simanim, easily ordered from printers in Israel.

4. Women’s Cooking Classes: Offer participants a chance to prepare for the holidays in a fun and interesting way and to get some tasty kosher recipes as well. Organize a holiday cooking class with traditional holiday favorites, such as apple cake, honey cake, honey-glazed chicken, tzimmes, and others. Or for a hipper audience, show how to make the High Holidays cool – serve a gourmet menu using holiday-associated ingredients.

5. Practice Shofar Blowing: Host a pre-Rosh Hashanah class for parents and/or kids with plenty of shofars. Participants are taught how to blow the different sounds and learn their significance. It’s a great combination of a hands-on and thought-provoking event.

6. High Holidays Tzedakah Drive: Find out what is required by the needy in your community (canned food, toiletries, furniture, etc.) By reaching out to the community and encouraging them to give to needy Jews, you can get to know concerned individuals, work with (not in competition with) existing Jewish organizations, build a “caring reputation,” and help Jews in need.

Section III. Marketing and Advertising

Marketing and advertising are key, since this is the first impression that you make – if you don’t do it right, you won’t attract your target audience. For further assistance in marketing and advertising, see NLEResource.com.

1. Start early and plan well. If you are too late, people will make other plans. People book seats early. Also, there is a lot to consider and arrange, and you need to be sure that you have enough time to get everything done in the best and most efficient manner.

2. Planning: Set clear targets, and use them to make your plans.

3. Advertisements: Advertisements should pique a person’s interest. They should be eye-catching and trendy. Design a way-cool web page for the High Holidays with compelling programming ideas.

- Place ads in local **community internet sites and newspapers** linked to your High Holidays web page.
- Another way to attract interest is to send **postcards** to your mailing list. This may be a splurge, but may be the one time a year that is worth it. The cards should be creative, colorful, eye-catching, and should contain the necessary information to get someone to call. They should feature at least the highlights of your Yamim Noraim programs.
- Utilize **your website and/or Facebook** page for advertising and information. You should have clear and correct detailing of the schedule of *all* events. Offer online registration with contact phone numbers of people trained and prepared to speak with potential participants as discussed below.

- **Email and Twitter** them with updates as the High Holidays approach.

4. Fielding Phone Calls: Those who answer the phone should be carefully chosen and well trained. They should have friendly, inviting, and upbeat voices, and they should be keyed in to the potential concerns of the caller and have proper answers to any questions. The caller should perceive your shul or organization's motives as genuine, as concerned for the individual; and that you are preparing a meaningful High Holidays experience. They shouldn't feel they are getting a packaged sales pitch. It is preferable not to have program information on an answering machine which decreases the potential for future personal conversations.

5. Tickets should be free, or very cheap. Charge as little as possible; make the price a "suggested donation," and advertise that "no one will be turned away for lack of funds." This can't be stressed enough. High Holidays tickets in general are expensive and may deter someone from going somewhere else, and if yours are free or cheap, he/she will go to you.

6. Registration: All participants should be pre-registered, so that there will be a way of following up. This is an essential element, and part of why pre-planning is so important. Make sure to get the registrant's contact information when he is registering. If registration is available online, it should not be processed without relevant contact information. You might tell them that after Yom Kippur you will send them the password for the minyan's **post High Holidays blog** to continue the conversations and discussions (see below, Section VI – Follow-up).

7. Events: All events and classes leading up to the High Holidays should be viewed as opportunities to attract people to attend services. Have available flyers with all relevant details and contact information, and talk about the services at all events.

Section IV. Pre-programing and Set-up

1. Machzorim: Order standard or interlinear ArtScroll Machzorim ahead of time during advertised sales. Consider buying the Metsudah machzorim with linear translations.

2. Mechitza: Use aesthetic mechitzas that can be easily moved if your minyan space will be also be used for workshops, discussion groups, classes, and/or kiddush.

3. Babysitting: A crucial function of your success – it needs to be well-organized with the requisite staff.

4. Youth Minyan and Programming: If you are targeting families with older children, consider organizing a separate youth minyan with alternative discussion groups and classes.

5. Communal Meals and/or Home Hospitality: You might want the participants to join a communal meal or a family for some or all the seudahs on Rosh HaShanah, or for breaking the fast after Yom Kippur.

6. Greeting Committee: Not everyone can be davening when your participants arrive. Have individuals who have already davened or who will daven later available to greet people at the door and provide direction and orientation.

7. Schedule: Print out a detailed schedule of your High Holidays programs, services, classes and discussion groups. This keeps everyone in the know and is psychologically soothing for those afraid of being “stuck” in services for hours.

8. Supplementary Reading Material: Have interesting books, articles, and hand-outs available on both sides of the mechitza. Pique their curiosity and let them explore. Shimon Apisdorf’s Survival Guide is good to have on hand. Also, print out any articles you find relevant and interesting from such sites as aish.com, chabad.org, torah.org, and yutorah.org, etc. See the nleresources.com listing of [High Holidays Additional Resources](#) for potential materials.

9. Coordination among staff and communal volunteers: Your staff and communal volunteers should be trained to interact positively and non-judgmentally toward the participants. Make sure that the participants will feel relaxed and ready to have a good time!

Section V. Running the Service

Format #1: Traditional service with concurrent optional classes

In this format for running Beginner’s services, the mainstay of the service is a traditional minyan with very brief explanations about what is happening. At opportune periods, the participants are invited to an “alternative service” to take place in a different room which will actually be a class or discussion session on a particular topic of your choice. These “break-out” sessions are referred to as an “alternative service” rather than a class or discussion session because people want to feel like they’re going to services (no matter how much they may secretly loathe them).

A. The Service

Keep the pace moving. During the minyan, don’t give a lot of explanations, nor explain the meanings of the prayers. Give the overall structure of the tefillot (“Now it’s time for: Pseukei D’zimra, Barchu, Shema, Shemonah Esrei, etc.”), announce page numbers in the machzorim as you go along. Give a short explanation of the Torah reading and the Shofar.

You can think of this as a sort of play-by-play: call pages, say what “we” are about to do, relate short insights. Offer a short ten-second overview of what’s to come. *Never tell the participants what to do.* Just tell them what’s happening and invite them to join along if they want. For example, say, “We’re about to take the Torah out of the Ark, and it’s customary to stand.”

Encourage as much involvement as possible from the participants. That means using *familiar* tunes, not necessarily the traditional Yamim Noraim tunes, coordinated with the chazzan in advance. Try to have lots of communal singing rather than the chazzan dominating. Ask a shaila about reducing the amount of tefillot so that it’s a streamlined yet kosher service.

No-Fear Involvement: Invite the participants to receive an honor such as *pesicha*, explain the procedure, and tell them that you're available to go along to help them if they prefer, to guide them with what to do and when.

B. The Alternative to the Service: Interactive Classes and Discussion Sessions

As mentioned above, it's a good idea to offer alternatives to the formal service such as classes and discussions. Plan to start the classes or discussions at a time you can realistically expect people to show up. That means either at the beginning of Chazarat HaShatz for Shacharit, before Torah reading, or even at the beginning of Musaf. You will want to have everyone together for Shofar blowing.

When you are ready to start, make an announcement in the main service that you will be beginning an alternative service in a different room.

The classes could be on any interesting topic: the meaning of life, spirituality, general themes of Rosh HaShanah & Yom Kippur, prayer, teshuvah, or whatever people may be interested in learning. [Click here](#) for recommended Morasha shiurim.

Alternatively, lead a shorter, discussion session. As mentioned earlier, our ultimate goal is enable participants to appreciate the relevance and significance of Torah and to have an enjoyable time so they will want to return for more programs. [Click here](#) for a collection of discussion groups based on Rabbi Yaakov Haber and the OU Pardes Project.

You need a talented, non-confrontational, and interesting teacher for the classes and discussion groups.

Format #2: Integrated Explanatory Service

In this model, the service and any discussions are integrated into one, ongoing experience. This requires coordination between the chazzan and rabbi. The rabbi offers a constant stream of insights related to the prayers, interspersing group participation with well-known tunes and silent prayers.

Section VI. Follow-up

The most effective time to begin following-up your participants is when they are attending your High Holidays programs! Talk up and then pass around a stunning brochure with an irresistible array of programs, classes, workshops and events that begin over Sukkot. Campus rabbis could promote their Maimonides Series culminating in an Israel Trip.

Within two days after Rosh Hashana and / or Yom Kippur make quick, **personal phone calls or emails to thank the participant for coming and say you're looking forward to seeing them at the next event.** As mentioned above, names and contact info should come from pre-registration. Utilize the opportunity to invite them to new events, but don't overwhelm them. Focus on what you think would be the best event for each person and invite him/her to just that one (unless of course they ask about everything).

As mentioned above, have compelling materials handy at the services (**flyers, postcards**) ready for them to take home. Prior to the High Holidays have events planned and scheduled to take place after each holiday so that you have what to invite them to. These events should be appealing and should make the participant want to come back. Have several, different events to attract each type of person.

For example, on Yom Kippur you may wish to personally invite your participants to a four-session series on (for example) “Great Jewish Ideas” starting over Sukkot. Try week 1 in the shul’s sukkah, week 2 in the shul, and weeks 3 and 4 in your living room. Once they are comfortable in your home, there’s a greater chance they’ll come for Shabbos. Extend the series until Chanukah. Then offer to run a series of classes in a participant’s home, to which they may invite their friends.

Consider creating a **post-High Holidays blog site** to keep the connection alive immediately after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Inform them during over the High Holidays that they can continue their conversations and discussions in the blog and then Email / Twitter them with each new entry.