

Getting Beyond the Sweetness: Selichot and Jewish New Year (KS1, KS2, KS3, KS4)

"I am all prepared for Jewish New Year," said an RE teacher friend. "I've got apples, honey to dip them in and bought some Jewish New Year cards and pomegranates."

Of course, there is nothing wrong with using some traditional food to teach Jewish New Year (this year – 2019 – will be 5780 in the Hebrew calendar). The hope for a sweet and fruitful New Year is reflected in these symbols or *simanim* (signs/indicators). A common Jewish greeting is "Shana Tova U'Metukah" – have a happy and sweet New Year."

However, there are other deeper themes that are a key part of Jewish New Year and are more challenging to teach.

What is Selichot?

The month preceding the New Year is Elul, a reflective time to search one's heart and prepare for the Days of Awe – *Yamim Noraim* - the ten days that begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with the fast of Yom Kippur.

Ashkenazi Jews observe Selichot, a word that translates as 'forgiveness' with prayers at the end of Shabbat, usually the week before Rosh Hashanah. For Sephardi Jews, the prayers are said for the whole month of Elul.

In a choral service often held at midnight, prayers are recited to ask for pardon from God. Jewish people examine their behaviour over the past year and think how they can make amends. This is a major theme of New Year. Some have described this early start to the Days of Awe as a way of jump-starting the season. It is as if the King is greeted on the road before he gets to his palace, when it is then harder to get past the guards to talk to him.

A key part of Selichot is the recitation of God's Thirteen Attributes (*midot*). In Exodus 33:13, Moses asked God to tell him his attributes. "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

The Selichot service can be very powerful. A member of a North West London synagogue explains his feelings about this time of year,

Selichot provides a choral curtain-raiser for the High Holy Days. The themes and the tunes are all there and it is beautiful. However, it is important not to let the beauty of the melodies lull you into anything less than the anticipation of Rosh Hashanah and the core message of return/repentance. Selichot is the start of that journey

through our Days of Awe during which we must account for our actions and our words to our fellow human beings and to God. It is - potentially - a roller-coaster ride, which the familiarity of the liturgy and the music prepares us better for.”

Classroom Activities

The theme of forgiveness and saying sorry is a key element of the Days of Awe. At Selichot, one rabbi asked her congregation to place cards into a box with examples of when they had regretted hurting others in the past year. These words were then made into a communal prayer for the morning of the fast day of Yom Kippur.

- Considering when we say sorry to others and why could create a link between RE and relationships education. A ‘sorry box’ could be made by **KS1** pupils, decorated with traditional New Year symbols, showing that the preparation for being better people is as important as the sorry messages that are placed inside. Role plays can help pupils to model caring behaviour, for example, saying sorry to someone who has been left out of a friendship group.
- **KS2** pupils can list the Thirteen Attributes of someone they care about; a member of their family, friend, or special adult. The emphasis should be on their qualities and values.
- **KS3 and KS4** pupils can watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzBLcOm1DjI> Danny Raphael Silverstein’s rap is a spiritual response to the Jewish New Year theme of teshuvah – returning. Maimonides, the medieval Jewish philosopher and Torah scholar, clearly described this process
 - 1) Stopping negative actions
 - 2) Feeling regret for your behaviour
 - 3) Saying sorry out loud, to God and to the person you’ve upset
 - 4) Making a practical plan so that you will not, for example, upset your friend again by talking about things that annoy him.

Maimonides felt that it was only then *teshuvah gamurah* – complete return - could happen. It is as if the mistakes are deleted from the Facebook page of the past year. Pupils could write their own New Year rap, incorporating the symbols and the messages of this season.

This resource was written by Hannah Mandelbaum, one of RE:ONLINE’s Email a Believer team. If your class would like to ask a Jewish representative any questions about their faith, or to see answers to previously asked questions please visit <http://pof.reonline.org.uk/people-of-faith/judaism/>