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The High Holy Days of Judaism in New Orleans

September is a special month for Judaism as the High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, are celebrated. Those of Jewish faith believe that the book of life is opened on Rosh Hashanah. Over the ten days of the High Holy days, one must atone for the sins of the previous year also pray for the forgiveness of their sins in hopes to bring a better year. On Yom Kippur, the book of life is sealed, and your year is "set" in hopes of being a better year ahead.

Like 40% of New Orleanians, I was raised a Roman Catholic. With Catholicism having such deep roots in New Orleans, holidays and traditions, including Christmas, Easter, Ash Wednesday, St. Joseph alters and Lent are integral around the city just as Mardi Gras, Jazz Fest and Celebration in the Oaks. With those holidays and traditions being at the forefront of our city's culture, it's important to remember that we are surrounded by many other beautiful cultures and religions, including Judaism. For children within the insular walls of parochial schools around the city, it may have been easy to forget other religions and cultures; but my brothers and I were fortunate to have had a front row seat to the Jewish culture through our step grandmother, MJ.

My grandfather and MJ married before I was born, so while technically my step-grandmother, she has played an integral role in my life, just as my other, Roman Catholic grandmothers did. MJ always taught us about Judaism. At her home, we opened Christmas presents but also lit the Menorah for Hannukah. MJ is proud of her faith and generously shared the traditions and meaningfulness of the High Holy Days.

The Jewish High Holy Days start with Rosh Hashanah, which is a two-day celebration considered to be the Jewish New Year and the start of ten days of atonement. Friends and family members gather to share meals, worship, and focus on building a stronger relationship with God. During this time of renewal, Jewish people are prohibited from working, writing or traveling. People of Jewish faith spend time reflecting on their actions

in the past year, atoning for their sins, and making preparations for self-improvements in the year to follow, similar to New Year's resolutions at the beginning of each secular calendar year.

Those two festive days of Rosh Hashanah are a joyous time that mark the beginning of the Days of Awe, a ten-day period of introspection and repentance. My grandmother's family would always have a big dinner to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. Some of the customary dishes that are served are fish, pomegranates, honey cakes, leeks, dates, and MJ's favorite, apples and honey. Like most Jewish families, MJ's family also attends services at the synagogue on the second day of Rosh Hashanah.

Following the synagogue service, a customary Jewish atonement ritual, the Tashlich, is performed that afternoon. The Tashlich, which means casting away in Hebrew, consists of the congregation walking to a natural body of water, like the Mississippi River, and tossing small pieces of bread symbolizing a casting away of people's sins of the past. Prayers for the forgiveness of sins are recited as the congregation tosses the small pieces of bread into the water. Introspection and prayer continue throughout the ten-day period ending with Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur a fast for twenty-five hours starts at sundown and ends at sundown the following evening when a large meal is prepared to break the fast.

When speaking with my grandmother about what these holidays mean to her, there is a sense of tradition, nostalgia, and family. She believes that it is especially important to continue traditions that unite the family together. This year, MJ will do just that. She will continue to carry on the traditions of these Jewish High Holy Days starting with sharing dinner with family.

This year the celebration of Rosh Hashanah starts at sundown on September 15, 2023, and goes through sundown on September 17, 2023. Yom Kippur begins at sundown on September 24, 2023, and ends at sundown on September 25, 2023. Happy new year to our friends, family, colleagues and clients of the Jewish faith! We hope for renewal and a year of goodness ahead.