

August 19, 2019  
18 Av, 5779

To our public and private school teachers, administration, and coaches:

I am asking for your assistance. To explain, this year Rosh Hashanah begins on the evening of Sunday, September 29<sup>th</sup> and continues until the evening of Monday, September 30<sup>th</sup>. Some will observe a second day of Rosh Hashanah, through the evening of October 1<sup>st</sup>. Yom Kippur begins on the evening of Tuesday, October 8<sup>th</sup> and concludes on the evening of Wednesday, October 9<sup>th</sup>. (*Please note that these dates change every year – I'm happy to provide an explanation*). Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the Jewish New Year and the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance, one of the most sacred times in the Jewish year. Yom Kippur is a full fast day for Jews aged 13 and older. It is the holiest day of the Jewish year as we seek forgiveness for our mistakes and strive for a better year.

The closest way to understanding the spiritual significance of these Holy Days is to compare them with Christmas and Easter. Unlike Christmas and Easter, these holiest of Jewish days are not national holidays. Most Jews will therefore take off work or school in order to devote this sacred time with family and community, often spending hours at the Temple. Some travel distances to be with family and require additional time for travel before and after.

Texas state law mandates that students must be given an excused absence for the observance of religious holy days, including travel required for those purposes (Texas Education Code Chapter 25). The vast majority of schools have been very accommodating regarding excused absences and that is greatly appreciated. This letter is on the most basic level justification for excused absences, but that is not the primary purpose of this letter.

The challenge that we as a community have faced far too often, is that our students have been penalized for attending services on the holiest days of the Jewish year with their families. Even though the absence is excused, every year I hear stories from my congregation about how students are threatened with mountains of homework or will not be given an opportunity to make up a test if they miss class on Rosh Hashanah. One's standing in band or their ability to play in the next soccer game (or other sporting event) is put at risk for wanting to fast and attend services on Yom Kippur.

I need your help! It can be challenging enough for young people to explain to friends and others that they are different and observe different Holy Days from everyone else. To be penalized on top of that by teachers and coaches can be very stressful. Practicing one's religion in a country that promises and celebrates the free exercise of religion should not be so difficult. Some extra homework is expected. I am asking for your compassion and your understanding.

In addition, please know that Jews observe these Holy Days differently. There are some Jews who will attend school or after school activities just like any other day. Similar to all other religious traditions, different people have different levels of observance. Since my congregant is providing you with this letter, chances are, they will be observing our sacred days with family and community.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or for more information. I am providing the following links if you would like to understand a little more about these sacred days:

<http://reformjudaism.org/rosh-hashanah-customs>

<http://reformjudaism.org/yom-kippur-customs-and-rituals-0>

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-high-holidays/>

Please consider me a resource to you. I want to assist you in any way I can. If you have any questions or requests, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Thank you for your time and consideration and thank you for all that you do for all our children. I know that your job is not easy, and I know how much you care for your students. There's a reason why in Jewish tradition we teach that one's students are called one's children. The impact you have on these young people is that significant. We appreciate all you do and hope that you will support your students in their ability to practice our sacred tradition.

Sincerely,



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