

YOM KIPPUR - Customs of Rhodian Jews

It is about forgiving others for the wrong they may have committed towards us, seeking other's forgiveness for our shortcomings and seeking forgiveness from the Almighty.

It is the most somber and awe-filled day on the Hebrew calendar with a complete 25-hour fast for all adults over 13 years of age, and abstention of pleasure activities from sundown to sundown.

In Rhodes, a day or two before Kippur a slaughterer (shohet) and the caretaker (shamash) of the Synagogue, would go from house to house to perform the kaparoth. They all had chickens tied-up in a large pan with ashes so when the chicken's neck was cut, the blood would run onto the ashes and not stain the pot. He then put a bit of blood from the chicken upon the forehead of the person on whose behalf it had been slaughtered. This was a symbolic way of seeking forgiveness for sins. The chickens were slaughtered as substitutes for the people, who considered themselves to be deserving of death for their transgressions.



Shofar made on the island of Rhodes a century ago. From Edward and Susan Mizrahi family. - Photo Taken from the Rhodesli Jewish Calendar of 2014 by Aron Hasson, ©The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation

Each family donated a chicken to a poorer family. Generally, one chicken per family member was slaughtered that is if the family could afford it. If not, one chicken would do for 3-4 children. The children were given a small white chicken about a week in advance to care for until it was slaughtered.

On these days engaged couples exchanged gifts. The bride sent a white rooster with its head sprinkled with gold leaf and sweets and the bridegroom sent a white chicken and sweets.

Before services began on the eve of Yom Kippur, women went to the Synagogue to light oil lamps.

The Rhodian Jews had certain liturgical pieces for the High Holidays which were not found among other Jewish communities. Rabbi Hiyzkiah S.Kodron published a volume to supplement the regular Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur prayer books. He included prayers said specifically by the Rhodian Jews, including the memorial prayer recited in memory of the deceased Chief Rabbis of the city, as well as meditation in Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish.

In the synagogue, the deeply moving chant of the ancient hymn Kol Nidre, the commencement of the fast harking back to the 13th century, is sung. The Sephardic liturgy includes poems by the Spanish medieval poets, Shelomo Ibin Gabirol and Yehuda Ha-LEVY, where verses are sung in Ladino. During services on Yom Kippur, before the cohanim stood in

front of the ark to give the priestly blessing, their hands were washed with rose water. This custom was prevalent among Sephardim throughout the Levant. Before the day's worship closed with the Neilah service, worshippers dipped their handkerchiefs into a container of rose water. The entire synagogue was redolent with the sweet fragrance as the congregation concluded its Day of Atonement prayers.

Towards the evening men cover their heads with their prayer shawls, while 30 blasts of the ram's horn (shofar), are blown with great fervor.

The evening before the beginning of Yom Kippur, they ate a very rich, leisurely meal.

To break the fast after Kippur, they washed out their mouths and then had a glass of pipitada, a drink made from the seeds of any melon, except watermelons. It is made by first drying the seeds, grinding them and placing them in water all night and letting them drain. The result is a milky substance served with rose water and sugar. The table was set. The bread was dunked into olive oil and eaten with salt. Cheese, fried fish, rice with tomato were served and rice soup with chicken and vegetables.

Source: "I Remember Rhodes" by Rebecca Amato Levy