

## FESTIVALS IN OCTOBER 2005

### St. Francis Day (Christian – 4<sup>th</sup> October)

*St. Francis of Assisi, lover of all creation, champion of justice, patron saint of animals and the environment, founded the Franciscan Order. His feast day is October 4.*

#### **Who Was St. Francis?**

Francis of Assisi was a poor little man who astounded and inspired the Church by taking the gospel literally—not in a narrow fundamentalist sense, but by actually following all that Jesus said and did, joyfully, without limit and without a mite of self-importance.

Serious illness brought the young Francis to see the emptiness of his frolicking life as leader of Assisi's youth. Prayer—lengthy and difficult—led him to a self-emptying like that of Christ, climaxed by embracing a leper he met on the road. It symbolized his complete obedience to what he had heard in prayer: "Francis! Everything you have loved and desired in the flesh it is your duty to despise and hate, if you wish to know my will. And when you have begun this, all that now seems sweet and lovely to you will become intolerable and bitter, but all that you used to avoid will turn itself to great sweetness and exceeding joy."

From the cross in the neglected field-chapel of San Damiano, Christ told him, "Francis, go out and build up my house, for it is nearly falling down." Francis became the totally poor and humble workman.

He must have suspected a deeper meaning to "build up my house." But he would have been content to be for the rest of his life the poor "nothing" man actually putting brick on brick in abandoned chapels. He gave up every material thing he had, piling even his clothes before his earthly father (who was demanding restitution for Francis' "gifts" to the poor) so that he would be totally free to say, "Our Father in heaven." He was, for a time, considered to be a religious "nut," begging from door to door when he could not get money for his work, bringing sadness or disgust to the hearts of his former friends, ridicule from the unthinking.

But genuineness will tell. A few people began to realize that this man was actually trying to be Christian. He really believed what Jesus said: "Announce the kingdom! Possess no gold or silver or copper in your purses, no travelling bag, no sandals, no staff" (see Luke 9:1-3).

Francis' first rule for his followers was a collection of texts from the Gospels. He had no idea of founding an order, but once it began he protected it and accepted all the legal structures needed to support it. His devotion and loyalty to the Church were absolute and highly exemplary at a time when various movements of reform tended to break the Church's unity.

He was torn between a life devoted entirely to prayer and a life of active preaching of the Good News. He decided in favour of the latter, but always returned to solitude when he could. He wanted to be a missionary in Syria or in Africa, but was prevented by shipwreck and illness in both cases. He did try to convert the sultan of Egypt during the Fifth Crusade.

During the last years of his relatively short life (he died at 44) he was half blind and seriously ill. Two years before his death, he received the stigmata, the real and painful wounds of Christ in his hands, feet and side.

On his deathbed, he said over and over again the last addition to his Canticle of the Sun, "Be praised, O Lord, for our Sister Death." He sang Psalm 141, and at the end asked his superior to have his clothes removed when the last hour came and for permission to expire lying naked on the earth, in imitation of his Lord.

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### Ramadan (Islam – 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> October)

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic Lunar calendar and the holiest of the four holy months. It begins with the sighting of the new moon after which all physically mature and healthy Muslims are obliged to abstain from all food, drink, gum chewing, any kind of tobacco use, and any kind of physical pleasures between dawn and sunset. However, that is merely the physical component of the fast; the spiritual aspects of the fast include refraining from gossiping, lying, slandering and all traits of bad character. All obscene and irreligious sights and sounds are to be avoided. Purity of thought and action is paramount. Ordained in the Quran, the fast is an exacting act of deeply personal worship in which Muslims seek a raised level of God-consciousness. The act of fasting redirects the hearts away from worldly activities, towards The Divine.

The month of Ramadan is a time for spiritual reflection, prayer, doing good deeds and spending time with family and friends. The fasting is intended to help teach Muslims self-discipline, self-restraint and generosity. It also reminds them of the suffering of the poor, who may rarely get to eat well. It is common to have one meal (known as the Suhoor), just before sunrise and another (known as the Iftar), directly after sunset. This meal will commonly consist of dates, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him. Because Ramadan is a time to spend with friends and family, the fast will often be broken by different Muslim families coming together to share in an evening meal.

Ramadan derives from the Arabic root: ramida or ar-ramad, meaning scorching heat or dryness. Since Muslims are commanded to fast during the month of Ramadan, it is believed that the month's name may refer to the heat of thirst and hunger, or because fasting burns away one's past sins. Muslims believe that God began revealing the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad during Ramadan (in the year 610 C.E.). The Qur'an commands: "O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint...Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'an, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting..." (Chapter 2, verses 183 and 185). Fasting during Ramadan did not become an obligation for Muslims until 624 C.E., at which point it became the third of the Five Pillars of Islam. The others are faith (Shahadah); prayer (Salah); charitable giving (Zakah); and the pilgrimage to Makkah (Hajj).

Another aspect of Ramadan is that the evening of the 27th day of the month, Muslims celebrate the Laylat-al-Qadr (the Night of Power). It is the holiest night of the holiest month; it is believed to be the night on which God first began revealing the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Jibril (Gabriel). This is a time for especially fervent and devoted prayer, and the rewards and blessings associated with such are manifold. Muslims are told in the Qur'an that praying throughout this one night is better than a thousand months of prayer. No one knows exactly which night it is; it is one of God's mysteries. Additionally, Muslims are urged to read the entire Qur'an during the month of Ramadan, and its 114 chapters have been divided into 30 equal parts for this purpose.

When the first crescent of the new moon has been officially sighted by a reliable source, the month of Ramadan is declared over, and the month of Shawwal begins. The end of Ramadan is marked by a three-day period known as Eid ul-Fitr, the "Festival of Fast-breaking." It is a joyous time beginning with a special prayer, and accompanied by celebration, socializing, festive meals and sometimes very modest gift-giving, especially to children.

When Ramadan ends, Muslims give charity in a locally prescribed amount, calculated to feed one poor person in that region for one day. This is known as fitra, and is meant as another reminder of the suffering endured by many. Many Muslims also take this occasion to pay the annual alms which are due to the poor and needy, known as Zakah (2.5% of assets).

At the beginning of Ramadan, it is appropriate to wish Muslims "Ramadan Mubarak" which means "Blessed Ramadan." At its conclusion, you may say "Eid Mubarak."

Sri Sathya Sai Organisation, UK

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According to the Holy Quran:

*One may eat and drink at any time during the night "until you can plainly distinguish a white thread from a black thread by the daylight: then keep the fast until night"*

During Ramadan, it is common for Muslims to go to the Masjid (Mosque) and spend several hours praying and studying the Quran. In addition to the five daily prayers, during Ramadan Muslims recite a special prayer called the Taraweeh prayer (Night Prayer). The length of this prayer is usually 2-3 times as long as the daily prayers. Some Muslims spend the entire night in prayer.

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## Rosh Hashanah (Jewish 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> October)

### 1. Jewish New Year

Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year, the symbolic anniversary of the creation of the world. The words "Rosh Hashanah" literally mean Head of the Year. In addition to being the anniversary of the past creation of the world, Jewish tradition sees everyone as being created anew at this time every year. Rosh Hashanah occurs on the first and second days of the Hebrew month of Tishrei (which usually falls sometime in September or October).

### 2. Day of Judgement

Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment. On Rosh Hashanah, God opens the Books of Life and Death. Jews ask to be forgiven for their sins in the hope that God will give them a good signing in the Book of Life for the coming year.

### 3. Pre- Rosh Hashanah: Slichot and Hatarat Nedarim

In order to enter the new year with a clean slate, Jews ask for forgiveness and annul all vows before Rosh Hashanah. [Slichot](#), which means forgiveness, is a series of prayers recited daily in preparation for the "Days of Awe", Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. [Hatarat Nedarim](#), absolution of vows, is practiced by more observant Jews.

### 4. Rosh Hashanah Prayers: God is King

On Rosh Hashanah, most of the day is spent praying in synagogue. There are many unique prayers on Rosh Hashanah, so a special prayer book called a [machzor](#) is used. The main theme of the [Rosh HaShana liturgy](#) is that God is King, and He rewards good.

### 5. Mitzvah of the Shofar

The essential mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is to hear the sounding of the [shofar](#). The shofar is a ram's horn which is blown like a trumpet. When Rosh Hashanah falls on the Sabbath, the shofar is not blown.

### 6. Meaning of the Shofar

The blasts of the shofar are reminiscent of:

- 1) The sound of a King's coronation
- 2) The wailing of a Jewish heart
- 3) A spiritual wake-up call for Jews to repent
- 4) Abraham's great faith in God. (Abraham bound his son Isaac, but was allowed at the last minute to sacrifice a ram in Isaac's stead.)

### 7. Festive Meal

A festive meal is central to the Rosh Hashanah holiday. A round challah, which symbolizes completion, is used. The challah, as well as apple, is dipped into honey to symbolize hope for a sweet new year. Other [foods](#) have also become Rosh Hashanah traditions, as they symbolize hopes for the coming year.

### 8. "Shana Tova"

There are two traditional [Rosh HaShana greetings](#). "Shana Tova" means Good Year. "Chatima Tova" means Good Signing in the Book of Life.

### 9. Tashlich

On Rosh Hashanah, Jews walk to flowing water, say a prayer, and symbolically throw their sins into the water. This custom is called [tashlich](#) (casting off). Tashlich is done on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah. If Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat, then tashlich is done on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. If tashlich was not done on Rosh Hashanah, it may be said anytime during the Ten Days of Repentance. The practice of tashlich is not discussed in the Bible, but it is a long-standing custom.

Source [www.Judaism.about.com](http://www.Judaism.about.com)

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### **10. Ten Days of Repentance**

On Rosh Hashanah, God signs one in the Book of Life, but only on Yom Kippur does he "seal" one in the book. Therefore, during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur one's verdict is not certain. This period is referred to as the "Ten Days of Repentance," and it is a time in which Jews engage in intense introspection.

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## DASHERA (Hindu – 12<sup>th</sup> October)

The festival of Dashera (sometimes spelt as Dussehra, Dasara or Dushera); is also known as Vijaya Dashmi. This is one of the most important festivals of India and is celebrated with joy and enthusiasm for ten continuous days. The first nine nights are spent in the worship of goddess Durga and hence these nights are known as "Navarathri". This festival falls in the month of September / October. The tenth day, the Dashera day, is in honour of Durga Devi.

Dashera is a festival that celebrates the victory of Lord Rama over Lord Ravana of Lanka. On this day, Rama had killed the great demon Ravana who had abducted Rama's wife Sita to the kingdom of Lanka. Rama, along with his brother Laxmana, Hanuman the monkey prince and his monkey army, built a bridge over the Indian Ocean and crossed over to the island of Lanka. The war against Ravana lasted for ten days. Rama battled with Ravana, killed him and his brothers Meghnad and Kumbhakarana who were also mighty warriors; and rescued Sita. Ravana had a noble brother Vibhishana who joined hands with Rama to fight the battle with Ravana, as he knew Ravana was a wicked man who had wrongly abducted Sita.

Ravana was an invincible warrior but his navel was his weak spot because this was where his pot of nectar was stored. Rama carefully aimed at the great warrior's navel and he fell down dead. People down the ages proclaim this victory as the greatest victory of good over evil.

The day came to be known as Dashera and is still celebrated with gusto. Lord Rama was a great believer in the powers of Goddess Durga and he prayed to her for nine days before entering the battlefield on the tenth day. That is why the days preceding Dashera are called "Navarathri" (nine nights).

### Excerpts from Swami's Divine Discourses

*"During the ten days of the Navarathri and Dashera, the Rakshasas (demons) in the form of wicked qualities have been routed. Rakshasas do not mean demonic beings. The bad qualities in men are the demons. Arrogance is a demon. Bad thoughts are demons. Ravana is depicted as the king of Rakshasas. He is said to have ten heads. He was not born with ten heads. Who is this Ravana and what are his ten heads? Kama (lust), Krodha (anger), Moha (delusion), Lobha (Greed), Mada (pride), Maatsarya (Envy), Manas (the mind), Buddhi (intellect), Chitta (Will) and Ahamkara (the Ego) - these ten constitute the ten heads. Ravana is one who has these ten qualities. The Vedas proclaim, "Sathyam Vada; Dharmam Chara", which means speak the Truth and follow Righteousness.*

*Each one can decide for himself whether he is a Ravana or a Rama according to his qualities. Rama is the destroyer of the bad qualities. When engaged in this act of destruction of bad qualities, He manifests His Rajo Guna. But His Rajasic quality is associated with His Sathwic quality. Even in cutting off Ravana's ten heads, Rama showed His love. This was the only way Ravana could be redeemed.*

*When the Lord metes out a punishment, it may appear harsh. But what appears externally as Rajasic is in reality Sathwic. In a hailstorm, along with rain there will be hailstones. But both the rain and hailstones contain water. Likewise, there is Sathwic quality even in the Lord's Rajasic actions.*

*Similarly there may be Sathwic quality even in Tamasic actions. These depend on the time, place and the circumstances in which the Lord acts. Butter can be split with a finger. But a powerful hammer is needed to break a piece of iron. The Lord deals with Sathwic persons in a Sathwic way. He applies the Rajasic weapon against Rajasic persons.*

*The Divine has only one attribute: the embodiment of Love. It has been said: "Love is God. Love pervades the Cosmos." Hence, one should not view the world from a worldly point of view. It should be viewed through the eyes of love.*

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*During these sacred nine days (Navarathri), people go through the sacred texts such as Devi Bhagavatha, Ramayana and Mahabharatha. People also worship the deities Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswathi. This Trinity is present in the principle of Truth. Goddess Gayathri has three heads. They are: Gayathri, Savitri and Saraswathi. Gayathri is the presiding deity of your senses. Savitri is the presiding deity of Life Principle. Saraswathi is the presiding deity of speech. All these three are within the same principle of Truth. Gayathri Mantra begins with "Om Bhur Bhuvah Suvah". 'Bhur' means Materialisation (Body); 'Bhuvah' means Vibration (Life Principle); 'Suvah' means Radiation (Atma).*

*Therefore, the Navarathri festival should be observed, by contemplating on God for ten days, cleansing one's self of all impurities, to experience the divinity within. The penultimate day of the festival is dedicated to what is termed Aayudha Pooja (Worship of weapons). The weapons to be worshipped are the divine powers in man. When the divine is worshipped in this way, one is bound to progress spiritually. This is the inner meaning of the Dashera festival."*

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## Yom Kippur (Jewish – 13<sup>th</sup> October)

What are "angels?"

Angels are completely spiritual beings, whose sole focus is to serve their Creator.

On Yom Kippur, every Jew becomes like an angel. As the Maharal of Prague explains:

*"All of the mitzvot that God commanded us on [Yom Kippur] are designed to remove, as much as possible, a person's relationship to physicality, until he is completely like an angel."*

Just as angels (so to speak) stand upright, so too we spend most of Yom Kippur standing in the synagogue. And just as angels (so to speak) wear white, so too we are accustomed to wear white on Yom Kippur. Just as angels do not eat or drink, so too, we do not eat or drink.

### FIVE ASPECTS

There are five areas of physical involvement which we remove ourselves from on Yom Kippur. They are:

Eating and Drinking

Washing

Applying oils or lotions to the skin

Marital Relations

Wearing Leather Shoes

Throughout the year, many people spend their days focusing on food, work, superficial material possessions (symbolized by shoes) and superficial pleasures (symbolized by anointing). On Yom Kippur, we restore our priorities to what really counts in life.

As Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler writes:

*"On Yom Kippur, the power of the evil inclination is muted. Therefore, one's yearning for spiritual elevation reasserts itself, after having lain dormant as a result of sin's deadening effect on the soul. This rejuvenation of purpose entitles a person to special consideration and forgiveness."*

### TESHUVA AND FORGIVENESS

Following the Golden Calf, Moses pleaded with God to forgive the people. Finally on Yom Kippur, atonement was achieved and Moses brought the second set of Tablets down from Mount Sinai. From that day forward, every Yom Kippur has carried with it a special power to cleanse the mistakes of Jews (both individually and collectively) and to wipe the slate clean.

Though while Yom Kippur atones for transgressions against God, this does not include wrongs committed against other human beings. It is therefore the universal Jewish custom - some time before Yom Kippur -- to apologize and seek forgiveness from any friends, relative, or acquaintances whom we may have harmed or insulted over the past year.

### THE FAST ITSELF

The Yom Kippur fast begins at sundown, and extends 25 hours until the following nightfall.

The afternoon before Yom Kippur, it is a special mitzvah to eat a festive meal.

As far as making your fast easier in general, try to pace your intake throughout the previous day by eating something every two hours. At the festive meal itself, eat a moderate portion of food so as not to speed up the digestion process. Also, don't drink any coffee or coke, because caffeine is a diuretic. Heavy coffee drinkers can also avoid the dreaded headache by slowly reducing the amount of coffee consumption over the week leading up to Yom Kippur.