

HIGH HOLIDAYS HONORS

THE JEWISH CENTER

Princeton, New Jersey

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Summer and vacation time are coming to a close, and the High Holidays are right around the corner. A committee of lay volunteers meets over the summer to plan the distribution of each year's High Holidays honors. There are often many questions about this process and so we offer an explanation in this article.

We all have our personal mental scrapbooks about the honors process - based, perhaps, on what we observed long ago as children in our parents' shuls, and on what we have since seen and experienced. Having heard many of these stories over the years and having exchanged information with other USCJ synagogues, we realize that assigning the honors is a very challenging – and often misunderstood – process. Some congregations (and congregants) are very satisfied with how it goes, some are very dissatisfied, and most are somewhere in the middle.

Here are some typical questions about the honors process:

1. How many honors are there to be distributed?

There are, give or take, 210 honors available for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, spread across the Classical and Sanctuary services. These include all the *aliyot*, all the Ark openings and closings, the English readings, holding the *Torahs*, and more. The honors of *leyning*, or reading from the Torah, and *davening*, leading services, are not included among the honors assigned by the committee. We have more than 725 households as members, and thus we start off at a disadvantage of not being able to come even close to assuring that every adult or every household can receive an honor.

2. Who decides to whom the honors are offered?

Each year there is a committee that typically includes many of the same people from the previous year, to help assure a consistent approach, plus some new members. In addition to its own suggestions, the committee solicits suggestions for honors recipients from TJC's clergy, professional staff and lay leaders.

3. What factors does this group consider when assigning honors?

We believe that the High Holidays **honors** are exactly that – an opportunity to recognize and express our gratitude to those members who have distinguished themselves in one or more of these categories:

- Volunteerism
- Leadership
- Financial Support

In addition, honors may be offered to members who have reached significant milestones in their lives, who have recovered from serious illnesses, or who represent TJC positively in the community by virtue of their involvement with civic or volunteer organizations.

We do not sell or auction honors. While these practices are favored in some congregations they are not something we want to see at TJC.

4. Why does it seem that so many of the same people get the honors year after year?

The committee keeps records of previous years' honorees and tries not to offer the same honors to the same active and supportive congregants repeatedly. However, the reality is that we are blessed by having a large group of volunteers and lay leaders who do in fact remain active and involved year after year – in some cases in ways that are not visible to the congregation at large – and we believe that it is entirely appropriate to recognize their service in this way.

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5. Why don't you just give out the honors on a random basis, to make sure that more people can get them?

A partially or fully random basis has been discussed, and in fact some congregations simply go through their membership lists and pick, for example, every fifth name and those people receive honors. That way, the entire congregation is pretty much assured of receiving an honor at least once every five years. We do this on a small scale – and are trying to increase it – by selecting people at random for honors that remain available after most have been assigned. Also, this year we reached out to members who have joined in the past twelve months to see if they would like to receive an honor; we believe this is a very tangible way of continuing to welcome these new members and express our thanks for their decision to join TJC. Because we believe so strongly in the value of the High Holidays honors to visibly acknowledge the support of involved congregants, it is not likely we will ever shift to a random or every-fifth-year (or similar) system.

6. What if I'd like to receive a particular honor?

You're welcome to express this to Nancy Lewis or Gil Gordon (see contact information below) and we will take your request into account for *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur*, *Simhat Torah* or *Sukkot*. Please understand that we are just not able to promise to fulfill those requests,

7. What happens if I'm offered an honor that isn't what I'd prefer?

There are many reasons why people say they'd rather receive a different honor from the one offered. These include a preference for an honor that comes earlier or later in the service, is on the first day of Rosh Hashanah instead of the second day, is at the Sanctuary service instead of Classical service (or vice versa) or, to be blunt, is perceived as a "better" honor.

Trying to deal with these preferences and requests is very difficult – and the last point especially so. Nobody would deny that on its face, an Ark opening early in *Shacharit* may be seen as a "lesser" honor than an *Aliyah* on *Yom Kippur*. We would like to say that congregants should treat any honor as *an honor*, no matter what it is, but we can't deny that different honors are perceived differently.

It is almost impossible to give everyone their first choice, in honors and in life. Sometimes there are legitimate reasons why one honor is less desirable than another, e.g., a medical issue that makes certain honors difficult to accept, or if you will be visiting with family at another shul on the first day of *Rosh Hashanah* and would rather have an honor on the second day. We need to know about these issues and will do our best to cooperate and accommodate your needs.

But we must ask for *your* cooperation and forbearance as well. The numbers noted above and the logistics of managing two sets of services for a total of more than 1500 people mean that we simply cannot make everyone happy. If you are able to accept the honor offered, that's wonderful and we look forward to your participation. If not, we will keep you in mind for next year.

8. What are my obligations as someone who receives an honor?

We have three very simple requests. First, respond to the invitation letter by the date listed. *If we don't hear from you by then we have to assume you're not able to accept the honor, and we will go on with our planning and offer it to someone else.* Second, plan to arrive at the designated service in plenty of time so there isn't any last-minute scurrying to locate you. Third, please be sure to check in with one of the *shamashim* or ushers – or a member of the Honors Committee - when you arrive; they are typically standing near the entrance to the Sanctuary or the Riverside meeting room. The more we try to broaden the base of honors recipients, the more likely it is that the *shamashim* will have

HIGH HOLIDAYS HONORS

The Princeton Jewish Center

difficulty attaching the name on their list to a face in the congregation, so we ask you to introduce yourself.