

Yom Kippur is the holiest and most solemn day of the whole Jewish year. Yom Kippur is unsurpassed in importance—a day devoted to prayer and repentance, and culminating in cleansing from all transgressions against God.

“It is a day of atonement on which expiation is made on your behalf before the LORD your God” (Lev. 23:28)

The Day of Atonement is the culmination of 40 days of introspection, examination of conscience, reparation and preparation—40 days of *teshuvab* (repentance)—beginning with month of Elul (30 days), and intensified at Rosh Hashanah (1<sup>st</sup> of Tishri) through to the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Tishri (Yom Kippur). Jewish people prepare themselves to stand before God and individuals and as community to publicly confess their sins and seek forgiveness.

Yom Kippur is the holiest and most solemn day of the whole Jewish year and concludes 40 days of *teshuvab* (repentance)

- The month of Elul (30 days)  
*and*
- 10 Days of Awe...  
Rosh Hashanah — Yom Kippur  
the *holiest* day of the year.

On Yom Kippur the people attend their synagogues praying and singing, and frequently recalling God’s compassion and healing.

Yom Kippur has the power to change lives—for the preceding ten days (The Days of Awe) Jewish people have been confessing their sins and seeking forgiveness from one another in order to emerge from Yom Kippur without *any* burden of sin remaining.

## YOM KIPPUR IN TEMPLE TIMES

In ancient times, when the Temple, which was the center of Jewish religious focus, was still standing in Jerusalem, Yom Kippur was a day on which sacrifice was offered for the cleansing, purification and atonement of the Israel, its priests, the temple, and the people. On Yom Kippur the High Priest himself slaughtered the sacrificial offerings of the bull and goat, and a “scapegoat” was sent into the wilderness—it was a public and symbolic way for the community to acknowledge their own sins and to cast them from themselves (Leviticus 16).

“O God, thy people, the House of Israel, have committed iniquity, have transgressed, and sinned before thee. O God, forgive, I pray, the iniquities and transgressions and sins which thy people, the House of Israel, have committed and transgressed and sinned before thee; as it is written in the law of thy servant Moses, ‘For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you from all your sins shall you be clean before the LORD.’”

*Midrash says . . .*

“The Day on which God showed Himself merciful to Moses and to his people, was the 10th day of Tishri [Yom Kippur],

This was the day on which Moses was to receive the tables of the law from God for the second time, . . . and all Israel spent it amid prayer and fasting.

‘My children, I swear by My Lofty Name that these your tears shall be tears of rejoicing for you; this day shall be a day of pardon, of forgiveness, and of cancelling of sins for you, for your children, and your children’s children to the end of all generations.’”

Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*

The importance of Yom Kippur in ancient Judaism is illustrated in the liturgical use of the Divine name\* in the temple service when, in the sight of all the people, on Yom Kippur,

the High Priest pronounced the Name of God ten times during the ritual—in his personal confession of sin, as he leaned his hands upon his bull to be offered as a sin offering; again after he had drawn lots to decide which of the two he-goats was to be the “scapegoat” and which was to be the goat designated as ‘A sin offering to the LORD’; and again when he laid his hands upon the scapegoat and confessed on behalf of all Israel.

\*[i.e., YHWH/יהוה, the Tetragrammaton, the name of God that traditionally Jews never pronounce.]

The *Mishnah* (a collection of oral commentary compiled 220 CE) relates...

“And when the priests and the people which stood in the Temple Court heard the expressed Name come forth from the mouth of the High Priest, they used to kneel and bow themselves and fall down on their faces and say, ‘Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom for ever and ever!’” (*Yoma* 6:2)

Yom Kippur, however, was not just a religious ‘ritual’... The Jewish people have always understood that their repentance and return to God is valueless unless it is accompanied by moral regeneration and the service of the weak.

The nature of the atonement effected on Yom Kippur is clarified by the Rabbis...

- A sin offering and an unconditional guilt offering atone.
- Death and the Day of Atonement effect atonement when joined with repentance.
- Repentance atones for minor transgressions against both positive and negative commandments.
- For grave transgressions, repentance suspends punishment until the Day of Atonement comes along and effects atonement. (*Mishnah*, Yoma 8:8)

The rabbis made it clear, however, that Yom Kippur does not remove responsibility for guilt in matters touching human beings unless reparation precedes all else.

“If a man said, ‘I will sin and repent, and sin and repent’, he will be given no chance to repent. [If he said,] ‘I will sin and the Day of Atonement will effect atonement’, then the Day of Atonement effects no atonement. For transgressions that are between man and God the Day of Atonement effects atonement, but for transgressions that are between man and his fellow the Day of Atonement effects atonement only if he has appeased his fellow.” (*Mishnah*, Yoma 8:9)

Hear again the words of the Jew, Jesus, speaking to his Jewish followers...

“But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24).

The Hebrew word for repentance is *teshuvah* | תשובה, a word derived from a Hebrew root that means *to return*. God is always ready to welcome our return. The Rabbis stressed the constant availability of forgiveness to those who return to God:

“God says to Israel. Open to me a gate of repentance no bigger than the point of a needle, and I will open to you a gate [of forgiveness] wide enough to drive a wagon and carts through.” (*Canticles Rabbah* 5:2)

One of the traditional readings of the Yom Kippur liturgy makes the moral and practical implications of repentance and atonement clear...

“Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free...  
If you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness...  
The Lord will guide you continually  
...and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail (Isa. 58:6, 10-11).

On Yom Kippur two things become fundamentally clear. We are inextricably bound in relationship and responsibility to both **our neighbor** and **our God**.

“You shall **love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5).

“**Love your neighbor** as yourself, I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:18).

“**Love God**, and **love your neighbor** as yourself” (cf. Mk. 12: 30-31).

### YOM KIPPUR AFTER 70 CE

With the loss of the Temple in 70 CE the priestly role in effecting atonement on behalf of the people became a major problem which the rabbis discussed. Their conclusion, immortalized in the synagogue prayer service for Yom Kippur, was the dictum that...

**“REPENTANCE, PRAYER AND CHARITY CANCEL THE STERN DECREE”**

### YOM KIPPUR TODAY

The synagogue service which developed in the place of the Temple Yom Kippur service now dominates the celebration of Yom Kippur in Jewish life. On Yom Kippur the Jewish people attend five

synagogue services beginning on the evening before and ending the following evening.\* The people gather before sundown to begin with the *Kol Nidre* (all Vows) which is said three times in a rising crescendo as the people acknowledge their need to be absolved of their personal vows made to God.<sup>1</sup>

\*[The eve of Yom Kippur is the only time when the *Tallit* (prayer shawl) is worn at night.]

**The *Kol Nidre*** an ancient Aramaic plea precedes Yom Kippur the prayer service.

“Let all our vows and oaths, all the promises we make, and the obligations we incur to you, Oh God, between this Yom Kippur and the next, be null and void should we, after honest effort, find ourselves unable to fulfill them. Then may we be absolved of them.”

***Each of the five prayer services on Yom Kippur includes***

- Penitential prayers (*Selibot*)
  - Confessional prayers
  - Torah readings
  - Poems and singing
- ... all in addition to the regular Amidah\* prayers.  
\* A liturgical prayer, part of all daily prayer services, that is recited in a standing position.

It is always understood that *Kol Nidre* refers to vows made between the individual and God and not to those vows and obligations that we have to one another.

**PENITENTIAL PRAYERS (*SELIHOT*)**

These prayers, as the Hebrew name *Selichot*/forgiveness suggests, call upon God for forgiveness, recall God’s mercy and compassion and express the hope that God’s welcoming presence will be the rewards of the repentant sinner. Central to the *Selichot* prayers is the *Shelosh Esre Midot*, The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (Ex. 34:6-7). Tradition, by focusing upon God’s primary attribution of mercy, has provided a model of ethical behavior and for human imitation of God.

**THE CONFESSIONAL PRAYERS**

These prayers, prayed ten times in all on Yom Kippur consist of two parts which are generally said in the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural. “We have acted...”

**PART 1. THE *ASHAMNU*** (*We have trespassed*)—these are shorter, more general confessions.

We have acted treasonably, aggressively and slanderously;  
We have acted brazenly, viciously and fraudulently;  
We have acted wilfully, scornfully and obstinately;  
We have acted perniciously, disdainfully and erratically.  
Turning away from your good precepts and laws has not profited us. You are just in all that has come upon us; You have dealt truthfully, but we have acted wickedly.  
Oh You that dwells on high, what can we say to You? You who are in heaven, what can we declare in your presence? You know whatever is open or hidden.  
You know the mysteries of the universe and the dark secrets of every living soul. You search all the innermost chambers of our conscience; nothing escapes you, nothing is hidden from your sight.

Yom Kippur is so important that on it no one does any work. Everyone observes a complete fast ...

- no food or drink, even water, for 25 hrs
- no sexual relations
- no wearing of perfumes or oils
- no bathing
- no wearing of leather shoes.

**PART 2. *AL CHET*** (*For the sin*)—longer and more specific confessions.

Now, may it be your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, to forgive all our sins, to pardon all our iniquities, and to grant atonement for all our transgressions.  
For the sin we committed in your sight forcibly or willingly,  
And for the sin we committed against you by acting callously.  
For the sin we committed in your sight unintentionally,  
And for the sin we committed against you by idle talk.  
For the sin we committed in your sight by lustful behavior,  
And for the sin we committed against you publicly and privately.  
For the sin we committed in your sight knowingly and deceptively,  
And for the sin we committed against you by offensive speech....

“Repentance means the sinner gives up the sin, removing it from his mind, and determining in his heart not to repeat the evil action; and so also he must regret his past ... he must confess with his lips and give expression to the thoughts which he determined in his heart.”

Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuvab* 2.2

<sup>1</sup> This prayer has often been held up by anti-Semites as proof that Jews are untrustworthy (they do not keep our vows), and for this reason the Reform movement removed it from the liturgy for a while. In fact, the reverse is true: Jews take vows so seriously that they consider themselves bound even if they make the vows under duress or in times of stress. The prayer gave comfort to those who were converted to Christianity by torture in various inquisitions, yet felt unable to break their vow to follow Christianity. In recognition of this history, the Reform movement restored this prayer to its liturgy.

At the conclusion of each Yom Kippur service the Ark is opened and the congregation gathered stands before it and sings the *Avinu Malkeinu* (Our Father our King). *Avinu Malkeinu* is a supplicatory prayer calling on God to hear the prayers of a humble and penitent people, and respond with Divine mercy and compassion. The prayer addresses God as gracious King and has its origins in Talmudic times (*Talmud*, Ta'anit 25b).

While the lines differ according to Jewish traditions the last verse of the prayer is held in common. . . .

#### AVINU MALKEINU

*Avinu Malkeinu*  
*Chanenu v'anenu*  
*Avinu Malkeinu*  
*Chanenu v'anenu*  
*Ki ain banu ma'asim*  
*Asseh imanu*  
*Tsadaka v'chesed*  
*Asseh imanu tsadaka v'chesed v'hoshi'ainu.*

#### OUR FATHER OUR KING

Our Father Our King  
 Be gracious unto us  
 Our Father Our King  
 Be gracious unto us and answer us  
 for we are wanting  
 in good deeds  
 Deal with us in charity  
 In good deeds, Deal with us in charity, and save us.

Tradition tells that on Yom Kippur Moses returned from Mt Sinai with the second tablets of the Law and announced God's pardon for the sin of the Golden Calf, (*The Talmud*, Bava Bathra 121a). Therefore, the people should not dress in somber clothes on this day. Many people wear white clothes on Yom Kippur, and the Ark and the Torah covers are white. White symbolizes purity because on this day "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow" (Isa. 1:18).

#### THE THIRTEEN 'ATTRIBUTES' OF GOD

A very impressive and important part of the Yom Kippur liturgy is the frequent calling out of the Thirteen Attributes of God's Mercy [revealed to Moses (Ex. 34:6-7)] during the penitential prayers.

"The LORD! The LORD! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgressions and sin." (Ex. 34:6-7)

The LORD	I am He before you sin
The LORD	I am He after you sin
God	merciful to all, Gentile and Jew
Gracious	to those with merit
And Compassionate	to those without merit
Patient	with the wicked, who may repent
Abounding in Kindness	with those in need of kindness
And faithfulness	rewarding those who do thy will
Assuring love for a thousand generations	when you do good deeds
Forgiving iniquity	when you sin deliberately
Transgression	when you rebel maliciously
And Sin	when you sin unintentionally
And granting pardon	when you repent

*Then Moses prayed:*  
 "Pardon our iniquity  
 and our sin; claim us  
 for your own."  
 (Ex. 34:9)

Midrash tells us that the Day on which God showed Himself merciful to Moses and to his people, was the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Tishri [Yom Kippur], the day on which Moses was to receive the tables of the law from God for the second time, and all Israel spent it amid prayer and fasting, that the evil spirit might not again lead them astray. Their ardent tears and exhortations, joined with those of Moses, reached heaven, so God took pity on them and said to them:

"My children, I swear by My Lofty Name that these your tears shall be tears of rejoicing for you; that this day shall be a day of pardon, of forgiveness, and of cancelling of sins for you, for your children, and your children's children to the end of all generations." (Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*)

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(*The Talmud*, Bava Bathra 121a)

The last prayer service of Yom Kippur (the *Ne'ilah*) is unique in that the Ark which contains the Torah scroll remains open throughout the service and the people stand throughout. At the end of the service the people proclaim seven times "The Lord is our God". The service then **ends with a very long blast**

of the *Shofar* and the people go home to break their fast and joyfully behind the building of their *sukkah* in preparation for the festival of Sukkot which begins in just four days—the 15<sup>th</sup> day of Tishri.

### KEY ELEMENTS OF REPENTANCE

The service of Yom Kippur repeatedly emphasizes that God gives pardon for those sins committed between the person and God and not for those committed against others. The wrong doer must first seek to be reconciled and with others before standing before God. Therefore one should also offer forgiveness whole heartedly to those who beg forgiveness of you.

Central to Yom Kippur and the dominant theme of the liturgy is God's Justice and Mercy. The Atonement that Yom Kippur effects is bound up in two important aspects of the theology of repentance: these are *selichot* (forgiveness) and *vidui* (confession). Of these confession is considered a prerequisite to forgiveness and atonement. The Jewish sage Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon 12<sup>th</sup> Cent.) taught that when one transgresses any one of the precepts of the Torah one is under obligation to confess this sin (cf. Num. 5:6-7). The essence of confession, according to Maimonides, lies in three stages: acknowledgement of sin; remorse and resolution for the future. Maimonides, however, emphasized that *complete* repentance requires confession *in words* of wrongdoing—the sinner must confess with his /her lips, in words: “declare verbally all that is in his heart.” Without this a complete act of repentance resulting in acquittal/*kapparah* cannot be achieved.

Yom Kippur is understood as serving a double function. The first is *kapparah*/acquittal from sin and the second is *tabarah*/catharsis or purification. According to Soloveitchik sin both binds and defiles—this is why sin requires the double counterweight. Atonement or pardon unbinds and purification or forgiveness removes defilement. While *kapparah* is possible without the sinner having personally repented [*kapparah* is a “legal” concept involving forgiveness and removal of claim or penalty] *tabarah* is impossible without personal repentance. This is because regret over past actions and resolution not to repeat them is sufficient for *kapparah* but the defilement caused by sin is of a metaphysical nature; an impairment of one's spiritual integrity as created in the divine image.

True *teshuvah*/repentance requires both *kapparah* and *tabarah* in order to restore the human person to his or her original state. This is why personal confession is crucial to Atonement: because our purification is dependent upon our drawing near and standing before God—every person must enter into the holiness of the day as an individual. Through repentance of purification a person is reborn anew.

The status of the repentant sinner is such that the rabbis claimed:

In the place where a penitent (*Baal-Teshuvah*—one who has sinned and already repented) stands, even the wholly righteous do not stand (*Talmud*, Berachot 34b).

Maimonides, in *Hilchot Teshuvah* (Ch. 7), emphasizes the high status of the repentant sinner by amending the Talmudic text to read, “In the place where the *Baal Teshuvah* stands, even the completely righteous are not able to stand.”

### TWO TYPES OF ATONEMENT ARE ATTAINED AT YOM KIPPUR

While the nature of atonement attained on Yom Kippur has been discussed by the rabbis the matter of individual atonement and communal atonement has always been in tension. It has always been understood that the individual and the community are closely interconnected and that the “holiness of the day”—the participation of the whole community of *Knesset Israel* in the atonement effected on Yom Kippur is an essential element of the atonement ritual. The general consensus of rabbinic discussion is that individual atonement without *teshuvah* is effected by the atonement granted to *Knesset Israel* on Yom Kippur for breaches in the category of *kalot* (these are violation of affirmative commandments) while atonement for violations against *chamurot* (Torah prohibitions/negative commandments) is effected only to the extent that the individual repents and confesses *serious* breaches of the commandments. Maimonides refined the latter ruling concluding that Yom Kippur provides atonement for negative commandments that do not involve a punishment by death or *karet* (being cut of from inclusion in Israel) even in the absence of *teshuvah*.

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik explained Maimonides position on the basis of a clear distinction between communal and individual atonement. An individual cannot receive atonement for serious transgressions without *personal* and sincere repentance, confession and resolution. The atonement effected for the community on Yom Kippur can be understood as atonement of the Jewish people as a collective entity. Because the individual sins of each member of the community casts a degree of responsibility on the whole community the communal atonement effected on Yom Kippur cleanses the community of this collective guilt, even if the violator does not repent. It is Knesset Israel collectively that earns atonement and individual members benefit by virtue of their membership in the community.

Reflecting upon the matter of choice and free will, Soloveitchik observed that the movement from sin to repentance is the movement from exile back to the Divine. The implication of individual “free choice” and communal responsibility is that the individual must take responsibility for the fate of the world. Each individual has the power to “tip the scales,”

When performing one *mitzvah* [commandment], man is blessed for tilting his own and the world’s scales to the side of merit; when committing one transgression, man is damned for tilting his own and the world’s scales to the side of guilt. (*On Repentance*, p. 29)

Knowing that one has free choice is a “positive commandment” [Maimonides]. This means that the individual has the power to create his or herself anew—to be born anew. Soloveitchik wrote that God created the world leaving room for humanity to participate in creation; God left an area of evil and chaos so that humans can make it good. In creating free will and establishing Repentance humans are compelled to become “choosers” and “obliged to participate in the renewal of Creation; and most important of all is the obligation that man create himself: This is a conception which Judaism gave to the world” (*On Repentance*, p. 32).

In the end, the answer lies in the concept of grace. “The very phenomenon of repentance, the fact that man can transcend his baseness and ascend the mountain of God, is one of the great acts of Grace conferred by Go on his creations.” (*On Repentance*, p. 32).

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**Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik** (a 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish theologian) speaks of repentance as having a dual nature that is revealed in two ways. The first is through the human personality: that is the true sanctuary of God. “The greatest of all holy temples is the human soul, the divine dwelling place. ‘And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them’ (Ex. 25:8)—if the Holy One, Blessed be He, did not dwell within man, repentance would not be possible. The divine presence within man—this is the first act of grace. The second one, which is a divine favor throughout eternity, is the fact that the Holy One, Blessed be He, who chose the human soul as his dwelling place, does not remove himself from man even after he sins. “The eternal God is a dwelling place.” (*On Repentance*, p. 207)

Two dwelling places; two sanctuaries... “One is the sanctuary of feeling, in the Holy of Holies of human sentiments such as love, wonder, mercy, goodness of heart, awe of the exalted, joy sorrow, amazement. In all of these it is possible to find a manifestation of the divine presence. The second is the sanctuary of thought. When a person thinks, when he studies Torah, when he purifies and sanctifies his intellect, the instrument of his knowledge and reason—the Holy One, Blessed be He, can be found. (Soloveitchik)

God is understood to have two dwelling places with a person—in the heart and in the soul—and God does not depart from us even when we sin for it is said “He who dwells with them amidst their defilement (Lev 16:16)” (*Hermeneutics*, 1997).

One dwelling place of the Eternal God is within the human heart. The second dwelling place of the eternal God is inside the human brain. When a man sins and the Holy One, Blessed be He, continues to dwell within him, both emotion and cognition cry out in revolt and battle with him until he is brought to either of the two kinds of repentance, whether it be repentance of the emotions or that of the mind. When a person becomes a penitent it is because the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who is present within him has aroused and alerted him to do so” (*On Repentance*, p. 207).

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