Yom Kippur – The Day of Atonement

Saturday (September 21st, 2026) is the holiest and most solemn day of the whole Jewish year—**Yom Kippur**. Yom Kippur is a day devoted to **prayer** and **repentance**. Throughout the day people attend gather as a community praying and singing and frequently recalling God's compassion and healing.

Yom Kippur has the power to change lives. Jews believe that the purification of Yom Kippur is effective only against transgressions against God. Before coming before God to be reconciled one must first be reconciled with one's neighbour. This is why Jewish people have, in preparation, been confessing sins and seeking forgiveness from one another in order to emerge from Yom Kippur without any burden of sin remaining.

In Second Temple times Yom Kippur was a day on which sacrifice was offered for the cleansing and purification of the Israel: its priests, the temple and the people. In the temple ritual a "scapegoat" was sent into the wilderness—it was a public and symbolic way for the people to acknowledge their sins and to cast them from themselves. (Leviticus Ch. 16)

The temple ritual of Yom Kippur was underpinned by the understanding that repentance and return to God is valueless unless it is accompanied by moral regeneration and the service of the weak.

> For transgressions between man and God Yom Kippur effects atonement. For transgressions between man and his fellow Yom Kippur does not effect atonement, until he appeases his fellow. (*The Mishnah*, Yoma 8.9)

God is always ready to welcome our *teshuvah* (return/repentance). Rabbi Ishmael (early Second Century) 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.

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

> Love God; and love your neighbour as yourself. (Deut. 6:5; Lev 19:18)

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik in his book *On Repentance* explains that *teshuvah* (repentance) is not a single action but a process that can extend over a whole lifetime. Repentance grows slowly with each action a person does, until the person undergoes a metamorphosis and emerges as a new person.

Maimonides (12th C. philosopher and Torah scholar) says that in order to repent one must sincerely regret past sins, verbally confess them, and vow never to commit those sins again.

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