

# Yom Kippur

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**Yom Kippur**, the **Day of Atonement**, is the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar. The Bible prescribes Yom Kippur as a day of affliction (Lev 16; 23:26-32).

In the ancient world, the High Priest woke up early, donned his priestly garments, and sacrificed a bull for both himself and his family. He then cast lots over two goats, choosing one for the Lord and designating the other as the goat to remove sin. Only on this day did the High Priest enter into the Holy of Holies in the Temple to offer incense and sprinkle blood on the ark of the covenant. Before concluding the sacrifices by burning both the bull and the goat, the High Priest placed blood from the Lord's goat onto the second goat. He then cast the second goat into the wilderness, thus symbolically removing Israel's sin.



In modern observance, Yom Kippur involves a fast from both food and drink. Many spend the entire day praying in the synagogue. During the Ten Days of Awe preceding Yom Kippur, many Jewish people give *tzedakah* (charity) which some consider a replacement for the animal sacrifice. A small segment of the Orthodox Jewish community practices *kapparot*, a ceremony in which a person waves a chicken over his head, before killing the chicken as a symbolic transfer of sin. According to tradition, the Book of Life and the Book of the Dead are closed on Yom Kippur, and the fates of those within the books are sealed for the coming year.

Followers of Jesus the Messiah confidently look forward to eternal life, because our names are written in the Book of Life. When Jesus died, the veil of the Holy of Holies ripped in two, symbolically breaking a barrier between humans and the presence of God. Previously, only the High Priest had access to this room, and he only entered it once a year on Yom Kippur (Matt. 27:51). However, Jesus' death gives believers access to God, because He entered into the Heavenly Holy of Holies to offer His blood for our redemption (Heb 9:11-12). Unlike the Israelites' annual sacrifices on Yom Kippur, Jesus' one sacrifice continues to provide atonement to this day. Yom Kippur, for followers of Jesus, reminds us of the certainty of our redemption through the blood of our Messiah and High Priest, Jesus.

Yom Kippur also reminds us of the ultimate salvation of the Jewish people. The prophet Zechariah speaks of a day when the nation of Israel will recognize her Messiah and "they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son" (Zech. 12:10). When the Jewish people recognize Messiah, as Paul writes, "All Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). The Day of Atonement thus reminds us of our own salvation and also looks forward to the salvation of Israel.

# Yom Kippur FAQ

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## 1. What does Yom Kippur mean?

Yom Kippur literally means "Day of Atonement." It functions as the day in which the nation of Israel corporately asks for forgiveness.

## 2. Where does Yom Kippur appear in the Bible?

Yom Kippur appears frequently in the Hebrew Bible. It is first mentioned in reference to the initial instructions to the priests about making atonement once a year upon the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 30:10). Leviticus 16 provides a detailed description of the High Priest's role in offering sacrifices during Yom Kippur. According to this passage, Yom Kippur takes place on the tenth day of the seventh month. Although Tishri is the first month in the modern Jewish calendar, it corresponds to the seventh month in the biblical calendar. God tells the nation it is a day of affliction and self-denial (Lev. 16:29,31; 23:27,29,32). Later in Leviticus and Numbers, within the list of the national holidays, God provides a summary of instructions for Israel concerning observance of Yom Kippur (Lev. 23:26-32; Num. 29:7-11).

## 3. When does Yom Kippur occur?

Yom Kippur begins at sundown on the tenth day of the Jewish month of Tishri. The Jewish day begins at sundown and continues until sundown of the next day. This tradition developed out of the creation account in the Torah, where it says, "the evening and the morning were the first day" (Gen. 1:5). Although the Jewish and Gregorian calendars differ, the Jewish month of Tishri always begins in either September or October, depending upon the year.

In 2013, Yom Kippur begins at sundown on the evening of Friday, September 13<sup>th</sup>.

## 4. How did ancient Israel observe Yom Kippur?

In ancient Israel, observance of Yom Kippur centered upon the temple. The High Priest woke up early for ritual purification. He then put on special priestly garments, representing the sacredness of the holiday (Lev. 16:2-4). After the initial preparation for the holiday, the priest offered a bull as a sacrifice for both himself and his family (Lev. 16:6). He then selected and consecrated two separate male goats, one as a sacrifice for God and the other which the community would later lead into the desert (Lev. 16:7-10).

The priest took the blood from the bull, which he had sacrificed as sin offering for himself and his family, and placed it upon the coals of the altar before entering into the inner room of the temple to sprinkle the blood upon the Ark of the Covenant (16:11-14). Then he sacrificed the Lord's goat on behalf of the nation before entering into the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the goat's blood upon the Ark (16:15). Finally, the priest placed some of the blood from the Lord's goat

onto the second goat. The High Priest confessed the sins of the nation over the second goat and the nation led the goat out into the wilderness (16:21-22). According to tradition, the people led the goat to a high precipice in the wilderness and pushed it over the side to ensure the goat would never return to the camp. The removal of the goat from the camp symbolized the removal of the nation's sins from Israel.

There are many nuances of the ancient observation of Yom Kippur, but the essential lesson from the temple sacrifices for this Holy Day is regarding the means of atonement: God's only method of atoning for sins is through the offering of a living sacrifice.

## **5. How does the modern Jewish community observe Yom Kippur?**

In modern Judaism, Yom Kippur represents the end of the Days of Awe, ten days of repentance and reflection starting with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur. This period of repentance culminates in Yom Kippur, when it is said that God makes His final judgment on the fate of each person for the coming year.

As a day of repentance and the most sacred day in the Jewish calendar, most observant Jewish people spend Yom Kippur at the synagogue. The Bible describes it as a day for the affliction of the soul (Lev. 23:27). Modern Judaism implements this affliction through certain forms of self-denial, such as fasting, as many Jewish people abstain from both eating and drinking for an entire twenty-five hours, beginning before sundown until after nightfall on the following day. The entire community has a special meal after sundown at the conclusion of Yom Kippur to break the fast.

In addition, Jewish law also prohibits washing and bathing, marital relations, and use of any type of lotions or perfume during Yom Kippur. As with most Jewish holidays, Yom Kippur is a day of rest, which means the Jewish community must also abstain from any type of creative work. The main theme of Yom Kippur is repentance. Jewish people express their repentance through prayer, confession and giving *tzedakah* (charity).

Yom Kippur has five separate synagogue services. Both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur utilize a special prayer book, called the *Machzor*, which simply means "cycle." The Yom Kippur services add special prayers focusing on confession and repentance. Some Jewish men wear special white robes, called *kittel*, symbolizing both purity and mortality. It is also customary to wear a *tallit*, prayer shawl, during all prayer services. Yom Kippur is the only time in which Jewish men wear the *tallit* in the evening. The final synagogue service concludes with the blowing of the *shofar* (ram's horn).

## **6. Why do we still celebrate Old Testament Holy Days like Yom Kippur?**

Each of the appointed festivals in Leviticus 23 points to Jesus, and they look forward to His first and second comings. Believers in Messiah Jesus have a freedom either not to observe these Holy Days, or to celebrate them in a way that draws attention to Messiah.

Followers of Jesus recognize that atonement is available to God's people only through the death and resurrection of our Messiah. God has already accomplished the complete work of atonement through Jesus' sacrifice. Thus, for believers, Yom Kippur does not represent a time of apprehension and fear, worrying about one's position with God.

Rather, observance of Yom Kippur can be a poignant spiritual experience for both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. First, Yom Kippur reminds us of the penalty of our sin and reinforces the importance of holiness in our spiritual lives. Since Yom Kippur is a somber day, focused upon repentance, it calls believers to remember God's holiness. Our sin has terrible consequences and is severely offensive to our holy God. Despite our deep sorrow over our sin, we can have assurance and confidently approach God's presence, as Jesus' sacrifice gives God's people an eternal redemption (Heb 4:14-16; 9:11-14).

Second, since Yom Kippur is the national "Day of Atonement" for Israel, believers can dedicate prayers on Yom Kippur to praying for the redemption of the Jewish people, as the Bible promises a day when the nation of Israel will recognize their Redeemer and Messiah (Zech 12:10).

## **7. Does Yom Kippur have any prophetic significance?**

Yom Kippur as the Day of Atonement has significant prophetic significance. When Jesus died, the veil standing in front of the Holy of Holies ripped in two, thus symbolizing free access to God's presence. Previously, only the High Priest had access to this room and only once a year on Yom Kippur (Matt. 27:51). Jesus' death provides access to God because He entered into the Heavenly Holy of Holies to offer His blood for our redemption (Heb 9:11-12). Unlike the repeated annual sacrifices on Yom Kippur, Jesus' one sacrifice continues to provide atonement. Yom Kippur reminds us of the certainty of our redemption through the blood of our Messiah and High Priest, Jesus.

Atonement through the Messiah is different than it was in ancient Israel. Instead of offering animals, Jesus offered Himself as our atonement (Heb. 9:12). As our High Priest, He did not first need to offer a sacrifice on His behalf, because He is sinless. His atonement is perfect and permanent; His sacrifice does not need to be repeated every year.

Yom Kippur, the national Day of Atonement for Israel, also reminds us of the ultimate salvation of the Jewish people. The prophet Zechariah speaks of a day when the nation of Israel will recognize her Messiah and "they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only son" (Zech. 12:10). When the nation recognizes her Messiah, Paul states, "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). As Yom Kippur reminds us of our own salvation, it also gives us anticipation to look forward to the salvation of God's chosen people.

# The Promise of Forgiveness Fulfilled in Messiah

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Forgiveness. What more comforting word could there be, especially when we know how much we are in need of it? Forgiveness is at the heart of the Gospel message. The sinful woman who bathed Jesus' feet with the tears accumulated over the course of a lifetime understood. And her love for Him overflowed to such an extent that He declared, "Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (Luke 7:47).

The gift of forgiveness, the Apostle Paul says, is not like the offense that calls forth its necessity. "...For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many" (Romans 5:15).

But where does forgiveness come from? What are its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Judaism? How does it find fulfillment in the life and teaching of the Messiah?

## The Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish Tradition

One of the most important things to remember about the teachings of the Jewish faith is the larger framework in which they operate. This larger framework may be called God's covenant with Creation. Everything follows this single, consistent thread of continuity throughout Scripture. The Lord created the universe and humanity for the purpose of a loving and harmonious relationship. Therefore, anything that hinders the quality of that relationship must be dealt with.

This is the primary purpose of the sacrificial system and the priesthood. It was instituted to implement God's statutes: "...So the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin, and it shall be forgiven him" (Leviticus 4:26). Therefore, forgiveness is the means through which the balance of peace (shalom) in creation is restored.

But unlike other systems of sacrifice in the ancient Near East, there was nothing inherently powerful about the priesthood or the sacrifices. "Whereas the required ritual is carried out by the priest, it is desired and is granted solely by God."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the attitude of the penitent sinner was of great importance. Sacrifice must be offered in humility and accompanied by repentance. One of the most striking features of the message of the prophets is Israel's casual assumption that going through the motions of sacrifice would be enough to please a just and righteous God.

Still, the topic of forgiveness is a constant theme in the literature of Judaism throughout the centuries. The Talmud confidently asserts, "He who sins and regrets his act is at once forgiven" (Hagigah 5a, Berakhot 12b).<sup>2</sup> Maimonides, the 12th century Jewish sage who did so much to shape the thought of his time and for centuries to come, wrote, "Even if a man has sinned his whole life and repents on the day of his death, all his sins are forgiven him" (Yad, Teshuvah).<sup>3</sup>

### **The Day of Atonement in Judaism Today**

There is no more solemn observance in the Jewish calendar year than the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Coming at the end of the ten-day period known as the "Days of Awe," it is the culmination of an intense time of introspection during which the faithful Jewish person seeks amends not only with God, but also with others whom he or she might have offended in the past year.

The Day of Atonement begins with fasting at sundown and an evening synagogue service. It continues the following day and culminates in the evening when worshippers stand for an hour-long service to conclude the long day of prayers and fasting. The liturgy of the synagogue for the Day of Atonement is filled with pleas for forgiveness and restoration of relationship with God.

The focus of Yom Kippur is upon worship, the need for forgiveness and deliverance from the just judgment of the Lord against our unrighteousness, and upon the hoped for restoration of relationship. There is much Scripture woven into the synagogue services, particularly from those Psalms which emphasize the exaltation of God and the supplication of sinners. The spirit of the day is summed up in the ancient prayer that begins with the words "Selach Lanu," Forgive Us:

*"And for all these, O God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement...For thou art the Forgiver of Israel and the Pardoner of the tribes of Jeshurun in all generations, and beside thee we have no king to pardon and forgive our sins."<sup>4</sup>*

But from the time of the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, there has been no prescribed sacrifice to accompany the Jewish plea for forgiveness. And without sacrifice, how are such pleas to be answered?

### **The High Priest of the Book of Hebrews**

If we are conscious of having sinned, it follows that we long for our sins to be forgiven and to be reassured of the good graces of our Creator. And while the Book of Hebrews confirms these comforting truths, it also reveals to an even larger extent the scope of the ministry of Messiah as our eternal High Priest.

Among other things, the Book of Hebrews patiently spells out the superiority of Messiah to all that has come before him. Each year Israel's High Priest entered the Most Holy Place with the blood of animal sacrifices. However, as Hebrews reminds us, "...now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 9:26).

The office of High Priest was a temporary provision, as were the annual sacrifices that needed to be repeated over and over so that our sins could be wiped from our slate. Now, however, we have a High Priest Who not only brings the perfect and sufficient offering, but is Himself that offering-not year after year, but once and for all through the sacrifice of Himself.

Knowing this, all who have placed their trust in Him may rejoice. No longer must we wonder how or even if we are forgiven and restored. The promise was on His lips even as He died for us when he spoke His final words, "It is finished" (John 19:31).

**Notes:**

1. *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), volume 6, p. 1435.
2. Ibid.
3. *Mishneh Torah*. Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1
4. Davis, Arthur and Adler, Herbert M., eds. *Synagogue Service for Day of Atonement* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co.,1959) p.10.