

ROSH HASHANAH DAY OF ATONEMENT/YOM KIPPUR

The Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, is the most sacred day of the Jewish calendar and follows immediately after Rosh Hashanah, the Feast of Trumpets, which modern-day Judaism has labeled the Jewish New Year (“Rosh Hashanah” means “the head of the year”). Jews today celebrate the “High Holy Days,” comprised of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, typically in September.

It is traditionally understood by Jewish people that on Yom Kippur, God forgives sins, especially those not atoned for during the remainder of the year. The details of ritual and observance for this festival are found in Lev. 23:26-32 and in the entirety of Lev. 16 (although you’ll note that Lev. 16 begins with recounting the death of the two sons of Aaron who were punished for offering “strange fire” before the Lord. This was more than a mere chronological link or the setting of an historical context. It was a graphic reminder that God’s instruction in worship MUST be followed. God’s instruction in Lev. 17:11 must not be changed!)

The theme of holiness is central to the Day of Atonement, as it is to the entire book of Leviticus. Although the laws of Leviticus were given to instruct the people in holiness, the principle of grace flows deeply through the book. God realized that Israel could never maintain His perfect standards. In His grace He provided the sacrificial system, a way for Israel to approach God - to be once again reconciled to God in covenant fellowship.

The Biblical name for the Day of Atonement is Yom Hakippurim, meaning “the day of covering or concealing.” The holiday has been called by different names throughout the centuries. Occasionally it was called “The Day of the Fast” or “The Great Fast”. In the Talmud the name was shortened to “The Day”. In Acts, Luke makes reference to Yom Kippur which he calls “The Fast”.

The sacrificial system was designed to cover sin until it was finally put away through the death of Jesus. Atonement hides rather than removes sin from God’s sight. The covering is total and allows God to look upon the Israelites as if their sin did not exist. God creates a shelter of sacrificial blood to protect worshippers from His wrath. Romans 3:25 states that Jesus was a propitiation and that His blood covered the sins that were past – the OT saints. Acts 17:30 addresses the fact that during the times of ignorance, God “overlooked” or “winked at”. The shedding of blood during the Old Covenant covered sin, it atoned for sin – it postponed God’s judgment. The OT believer was pardoned by God but never justified. The terms “justified” was not used before the death and resurrection of the Messiah; following the resurrection, the term “pardon” is not used.

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The shofar (ram's horn) is blown on Rosh Hashanah beginning the High Holy Days or Days of Awe and Repentance. According to Jewish tradition, the Book of Life is opened to evaluate the fate of individuals for the coming year with ten days for repentance. The ultimate intent is that they may be inscribed into the Book of Life for a good year at the close of Yom Kippur. The greeting on Jewish New Year's cards reads, "May you be inscribed for a good year." Fasting, confession and prayer conclude on the Day of Atonement. The shofar's blast announces the closing of the Book of Life and the destined inscription for the year ahead. The Bible refers to the first day of the blowing of the shofar as the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:23-32).

Scripturally, the focus of Yom Kippur is on the High Priest who makes atonement for the nation (Leviticus 16). In his precise ritual, he chooses two goats – the Lord's goat and the scapegoat. The Lord's goat is slaughtered. The blood is carried into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled on the Mercy Seat, representing the presence of a holy God looking at the law's demands. Breaking the law requires the death penalty. The blood of the Lord's goat is placed on the Mercy Seat instead of executing judgment upon the guilty nation. The High Priest confesses the nation's sins, lays them upon the scapegoat and it is removed forever outside the Israelite camp. The High Priest then appears to notify all that his atonement task is complete.

The provision of the sacrificial system, even on the Day of Atonement, was never meant to be a permanent fixture of Israel's relationship with God. The Day of Atonement was a foreshadowing of something greater: the Messiah. Through His death, our relationship with God was restored. It was restored in a way to which the animal sacrifice offered on the Day of Atonement could only point. In fact, The Day of Atonement was to be celebrated by the Israelites for one day, but that one day was to be kept according to the Scripture as a "perpetual statute." It was to be observed "throughout your generations in all your dwelling places" (Lev. 23:31). The word "perpetual" (or "a statute forever" [KJV]) is in itself a limited period of time. The Hebrews thought in terms of ages, having a beginning and an end. The Greeks thought in terms of endless time. In the New Testament, the concept of *forever* is usually expressed by the phrase *aions ton aionon*, the age of ages. The Israelites, however, had no such concept. So each holiday initiated by God has its fulfillment in history. Yom Kippur was to be celebrated until the day came when a new age of forgiveness dawned and the old age was complete and passed away. That happened with the coming of Jesus Who made atonement once and for all, and with His resurrection began the age of the New Covenant prophesied in Jer. 31:31-34.

Jesus doubles in the functions of the priest and the two goats. Jesus' shed blood on the cross becomes the final atonement for man's sin (Hebrews 9:23-28). Israel and all peoples now may receive complete acceptance from God when it is received on a personal basis.

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The full prophetic purpose of Yom Kippur is consummated when Messiah, Priest-King, appears to His nation, Israel. He visibly returns to earth and regathered Israel recognizes their atonement. "All Israel shall be saved"; they total acknowledge the New Covenant in Messiah's blood (Romans 11:25-27 and Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Four elements of Yom Kippur (Lev. 23:27-28):

- It shall be a holy convocation
- You shall humble your souls
- Present an offering by fire to the Lord
- Neither shall you do any work

The Rabbis developed a great number of prohibitions for the Day of Atonement. (Note: Rabbinical Judaism is NOT Biblical Judaism. Rabbinical Judaism is Judaism as taught by the Rabbis). These were developed lest a Jewish person unwittingly transgress on this day. One ancient writing summarizes it this way: "The following are prohibited on the Day of Atonement: partaking of food, drinking, washing, anointing, wearing shoes, and sexual intercourse. It is also forbidden to do any manner of work and to carry objects, as on the Sabbath" (Kitzur Shulhan Arukh 133).

Isaiah seems to parallel the humbling of a soul with fasting (Isa. 58:3). That theme was expanded by Rabbinic writers who speak of fasting and contrition as a requirement on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is indeed a day of severe fasting. According to the Rabbis, the fast of this day brings one near to the angels, because it is spent in humility and contrition, standing, kneeling, praising, and singing. In fasting, man denies his physical faculties and devotes himself entirely to the spiritual.

Jewish people will cast bread on the water at this time following the afternoon service – before sundown. This is called the "ritual of casting". Jewish people believe they are casting their sins into the sea. This is not Scriptural, in terms of who is doing the casting. Micah 7:19 speaks to GOD casting their sins into the depths of the sea.

Duration: one day (according to Scripture, but observed for two days outside Israel)

Biblical intent: to provide atonement for the sins of the nation of Israel; to teach Israel the scope of God's forgiveness through the offering of the scapegoat.

Traditional Jewish observance: Full day's fast; all day spent in the synagogue; chanting of Kol Nidre (release from all vows which might have originated during the eighth century; some believe that Kol Nidre was a prayer originated by Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity); making peace with those offended throughout the year.

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Messianic fulfillment: Jesus, our High Priest, offered a sacrifice for sin – Himself – once for all (Heb. 10:11-14).

Meaning for believers in Jesus: the death of Jesus tears down the veil between the Holy Place and Holy of Holies (Heb. 10:19-20); we are forgiven and have access to God as never before (Romans 5:1).

For an eye-opening Old Testament perspective on atonement, begin by reading about the major types of Old Covenant sacrifices detailed in the first five chapters of the book of Leviticus. Then review Leviticus chapters 16 and 23. When you have these passages fixed in your mind and heart, meditate on Isaiah 53. Then read the entire book of Hebrews in one sitting. You will have a renewed appreciation for your redemption through Yeshua ha Mashiach – Jesus the Messiah.