



THE JEWISH HIGH HOLY DAYS: YOM KIPPUR

Ten days after Rosh Hashana (on the 10th of Tishri) comes Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This most somber of days can occur from mid September through late October. The Biblical day begins at sundown. ("And there was evening and there was morning — the first day." Gen. 1:5) Yom Kippur begins at sundown on the 9th of Tishri. A large family meal is joyfully eaten the afternoon before the solemn Yom Kippur fast begins.

Among some orthodox Jews, there is a custom (rare today) called "Kapporot." This involves swinging a chicken over one's head to atone for one's sins, a rooster for a male and a hen for a female. A prayer is recited: "This is my substitute, this is my pardon, this is my atonement, this rooster goes to death and I shall enter a long, happy and peaceful life." The bird is then ritually slaughtered and given to the poor. Although this practice is not widely accepted among the rabbis, its very existence shows a certain consciousness of the necessity of a substitutionary blood atonement. A remnant of this practice substitutes a charitable gift of money, tied in a handkerchief, in place of a chicken. This is known as "tzedakah" (righteousness).

The synagogue services begin with the Evening Service at which the famous Kol Nidrei is chanted. The Kol Nidrei, or "All Vows", is a prayer which asks God to absolve the worshiper from all vows made during the previous year, vows which were imperfectly kept. During this service, the Tallit (prayer shawl) is worn by males. The lengthy services involve confession of sin collectively, traditional prayers, chants, and scripture readings (Lev. 16, the Book of Jonah, various Psalms, etc.) The services close with the sounding of the shofar (ram's horn trumpet) symbolizing the closing of the heavenly gates. During the High Holy Days, God is said to bring His heavenly court into session to judge the deeds of mankind. Court opens with Rosh Hashana and closes with the final shofar blast of Yom Kippur. One hopes and prays one is *sealed* in the Book of Life at the close of Yom Kippur.

If this is the Day of Atonement, then *where is the Atonement*, where is the payment for sin? In the Torah, the five books of Moses, sin is atoned for by the sacrificial animal, as we shall see below. But how is sin atoned for now, according to Rabbinic Judaism, since the Temple is not in existence? Leviticus 16:30 reads ". . . on this day, atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you." The rabbis have interpreted this to mean that the *day itself* atones for sin. Since there is no longer a blood atonement possible, repentance, prayer, fasting, and charity are substituted for the sacrifice. There is also reference made to Abraham's obedience in offering up Isaac as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah (which later became the Temple Mount). His act is thought to have some merit in saving the nation.

In the Bible, however, we read in Leviticus 16 that sin was atoned for by the blood of the sacrificial victim. The high priest, after becoming ritually pure, offered a bull for his sins and the sins of his household. Then two goats were set aside. Lots were cast, and one goat was chosen to be the scapegoat or "Azazel." The High Priest slaughtered the other goat to atone for the sins of Israel and brought the blood into the Holy of Holies. The scapegoat was sent away to be lost in the desert after the High Priest laid both hands on its head and confessed the sins of Israel. In this way, the sins of the nation were symbolically carried off into the desert. The hides, flesh, and offal of the sacrificial animals were carried outside the camp and burned. The people were to fast and rest from their work. Anyone who did not fast was to be cut off from the people, and anyone who did any work at all was to be destroyed.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR NEW COVENANT BELIEVERS:

New Covenant believers know that the Messiah is the "*atoning sacrifice for our sins*, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world" (I John 2:2). Jesus is our great and pure High Priest who offered himself as our substitutionary atonement. As the prophet Isaiah said: "the Lord has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). He was taken *outside* the camp to be destroyed, and his blood was presented in the *ultimate, heavenly Holy of Holies once and for all*, not year after year. God calls us to humble ourselves before Him, to repent and turn to him in faith. We must rest from our works, our own attempts to be accepted as righteous in His eyes (Gal. 3:10 & 11, Heb. 4:1-11), and personally receive the Messiah's sacrifice for our sins (Heb. 1-12, Titus 3:4).

WITNESSING SUGGESTIONS

1. Read Leviticus 16, 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7-11, Isaiah 53, & Hebrews 5-10
2. Ask your Jewish friend what he is doing for Yom Kippur, etc. (He may be fasting and going to services or he may be doing nothing at all.)
3. Ask Jewish friends about their concept of sin and atonement. Discuss the sacrificial system. Challenge them to read Leviticus with an eye towards atonement.
4. Prepare a 1-2 minute testimony of what Yom Kippur means to you.
5. For educational purposes, attend a Yom Kippur service at a synagogue (paid seating is expensive, but free student seating is often available and some synagogues advertise free seating). I recommend the Kol Nidrei service at a Reform or Conservative synagogue. You might also visit a Messianic congregation.
6. Fast, pray and mourn for those who have no atonement apart from Messiah.

DATE: Occurs mid September through October. Do an internet search yearly for the exact date and remember the Jewish Holidays start the night before.

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