

YOM KIPPUR NOTES

A COMPANION TO



THE DAY OF AT-ONE-MENT

THE JEWISH RENAISSANCE PROJECT

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YOM KIPPUR

As the culmination of the ten days of repentance that began with *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur* is considered the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. On this day we publicly confess our sins, we abstain from eating, drinking, washing, wearing leather and having sex, and we spend most of the day in synagogue contemplating our past and ensuring our fate for the coming year.

Yom Kippur Notes is intended to help each of us, regardless of our formal Jewish education, to unlock the personal and spiritual power of this holiday, its rituals, and

Note: Italicized and underlined words are defined in the vocabulary section on page 19

Yom Kippur Notes was edited by Rabbi Mike Uram with special help from Samantha Safran and Brian Cohen. JRP is a project of Penn Hillel

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SPIRALING TOWARDS REPENTANCE

Teshuvah [return] is the key concept in the rabbinic view of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. Most traditional sources agree that repentance requires five elements: recognition of one's sins, remorse, desisting from sin, restitution where possible, and confession.

1. Recognition of one's sins is an act of one's intelligence and moral conscience. It involves knowing that certain actions are sinful, recognizing such actions in oneself as more than just lapses of praxis, and analyzing one's motives for sin as deeply as one can. For example, stealing from someone must be seen not only as a crime but also as a sin against another human and a violation of God's demands of us within the covenant. It also involves realizing that such acts are part of deeper patterns of relatedness and that they are motivated by some of the most profound and darkest elements in our being.



2. Remorse is the feeling of regret due to the failure to maintain one's moral standards. It may also encompass feelings of being lost or trapped, of anguish, and perhaps of despair at our own sinfulness, as well as a feeling of being alienated from God and from our own deepest spiritual roots, of having abandoned our own inner selves.

3. Desisting from sin is neither a moral-intellectual analysis nor a feeling; it is an action. It is a ceasing from sin, a desisting from the patterns of sinful action to which we have become addicted. Desisting from sin involves actually stopping the sinful action, consciously repressing thoughts and fantasies about the sinful activity, and making a firm commitment never to commit the sinful act again.

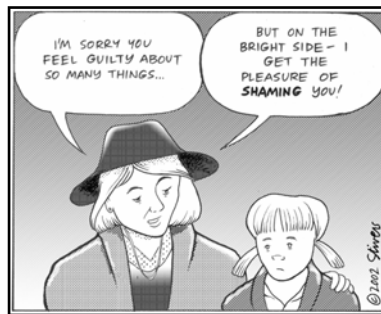
4. Restitution is the act of making good, as best one can, for any damage done. If one has stolen, one must return the object or pay compensation. If one has damaged another's reputation, one must attempt to correct the injury to the offended party.

5. Confession has two forms: ritual and personal. Ritual confession requires recitation of the liturgies of confession. Personal confession requires individual confession before God as needed or during official times of prayer. The more specific the personal confession, the better.

SPIRALING TOWARDS REPENTANCE

The tradition is quite clear, however, that recognition of sin, remorse, restitution, and confession, if they are done without desisting from sin, do not constitute *teshuvah*. Without ceasing one's sinful activity, one has only arrived at the "preliminaries to repentance" (*hirhuréi teshuvah*). Actual desisting from sin is what counts.

The highest form of *teshuvah* is achieved when one reforms his or her own character by going through all five steps mentioned above in a way that ends with the total cessation of the sinful action. This form of repentance is called "repentance rooted in love" (*teshuvah mei-ahavá*). However, it is interesting to note that the Rabbis are realistic and pragmatic about the whole process. Even if one desists from sinful action only because of being frightened into it, that is still *teshuvah* and the person is considered a penitent.



Rabbinic tradition teaches that all the steps to *teshuvah* are necessary. Their interrelationship is best described as a spiral which touches each of the five points, yet advances with each turn. Thus, one may begin at any point--with action, analysis, remorse, restitution, or confession. However, as one repeats the steps of *teshuvah* again and again, one's analysis and remorse deepen, one's restitution and commitment-to-desist become firmer, and one's confession becomes more profound. As one cycles through the five phases of *teshuvah* again and again, one's *teshuvah* becomes more earnest, more serious. At its height, one achieves "full repentance" (*teshuvah gemurá*), which would require full consciousness and action such that, given the same situation, one would refrain from the sin for which one had repented.

Sinfulness is a very deep dimension of human existence and dealing with it calls upon all our spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and moral resources--even when we recognize that ceasing to sin is the base line of repentance.

Adapted from Rabbi David J. Blumenthal

KOL NIDREI IS WEIRD!?

There is a million dollar question about the ritual of *Kol Nidrei* (Every Vow) that no one talks about. While it is the first prayer most of us hear at synagogue before sundown on Yom Kippur, its meaning and history seem to be shrouded in mystery. This prayer which is chanted in a haunting melody is actually a legal document that annuls all vows we make in the coming year.

This seems to be a strange practice. Why would we make such a declaration at the start of a new year when we don't yet know what promises we will make? And what is the point of making any commitments at all if we can get out of them by reciting a simple prayer?



One answer is that Judaism includes this practice on Yom Kippur to acknowledge the fact that we are imperfect and, despite our purest intentions, sometimes we are not able to live up to our contracts. The idea here is counterintuitive. We take our vows so seriously that the Rabbis allow us to annul them lest we never promise anything or that we all enter the day of Yom Kippur as terrible sinners because of the promises that we failed to keep.

Where Did it Come From? The Historical Perspective

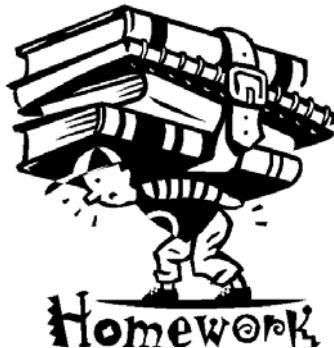
Many believe that this ritual was introduced as a result of repeated Jewish persecution. Throughout history, Jews were coerced into converting to other religions and, yet, when the threat of coercion had passed, they wanted to return to their Judaism. The problem was that in their forced conversion they had sworn their undying loyalty to another faith and Judaism takes vows very seriously. Thus, *Kol Nidrei* was created to absolve the oaths that these forced converts had made to other religions and to facilitate their integration back into the Jewish community.

THIS HOLIDAY HAS HOMEWORK?

While it seems odd that sitting in synagogue all day while not eating isn't enough, there is a tradition of doing homework before Yom Kippur.

The idea is that you can't just walk into the day of Yom Kippur ready to atone but rather that you need to prepare yourself. This homework is called doing *Cheshbon Hanefesh* or *an account of the soul* and it is the Jewish way of preparing for the High Holidays by looking inward and examining the things about ourselves we would like to change.

The term was first coined by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Lefin in the early 19th century. He wrote of a detailed process by which we can track the positive and negative actions of our daily lives, take stock of where we are in relation to where we would like to be, and set goals for improving our personal character. Though most of us today do not adhere to the original formula, we maintain the idea of self-examination.



Your Homework

- 1. What are my personal attributes that make me proud?**
- 2. What things can I do better?**
- 3. What relationships need repair?**
- 4. What relationships am I ready to let go of?**
- 5. How do I treat the environment? Am I unnecessarily wasteful?**

ORIGINS OF YOM KIPPUR

The holiday that we know today as Yom Kippur developed over the course of Jewish history. In biblical times, Yom Kippur is described only in its barebones form as a day dedicated to atonement and abstinence.

Leviticus 23:27 tells us that on the 10th day of the month of *Tishrei* should be a day of Atonement (*Yom Ha-Kippurim*) and that we should practice some form of undefined “self-denial.”

We also learn in Leviticus that the major events of Yom Kippur were not services in a synagogue but rather an elaborate set of rituals that the *High Priest* would perform in order to achieve expiation** of the people’s sins.

These rites included a lottery to choose two goats—one to be consecrated to God (i.e. slaughtered as a purification offering) and one to “Azazel.” While the exact meaning of the word Azazel is uncertain, the ritual required the High Priest to confess the sins of Israel on this Azazel-goat and to set it free in the wilderness.



*This is from T2:
Judgment Day. Get
it?*

In *Rabbinic literature*, the next layer of Jewish history, Yom Kippur is given an additional name, *Yom HaDin* (Day of Judgement). This solemn day is the culmination of the *aseret y’mei teshuvah* (10 days of repentance) following *Rosh Hashanah*.

To the Rabbis, *Rosh Hashanah* marked the beginning of a spiritual trial for the souls of Israel, the 10 days of repentance could then be seen as a time for appeals, and Yom Kippur marked the climax.

****Expiation is the fancy and more correct translation for “atonement.”**

ORIGINS OF YOM KIPPUR

At this time God's verdict was handed down deciding the fate of all of Israel and hopefully inscribing them into the Book of Life.

In addition to this spiritual trial, the Rabbis also defined for us what the verse in Leviticus meant when it commanded us to practice "self-denial." They understood it as the basis for the practice of fasting and abstaining from certain pleasurable things.

In addition to eating and drinking, they also excluded bathing and anointing oneself (putting on makeup), wearing leather shoes (at the time the most comfortable option), and abstaining from sexual relations.



The shift in focus from the High Priest-centered ritual to the idea of a trial examining the sins of Israel is a perfect example of Rabbinic ingenuity in the face of political turmoil. With the Temple in ruins, the Rabbis developed a new, more portable way to allow for the expiation of sins.

While most of the holidays originating in the Bible have their logical place on the agricultural calendar, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur do not necessarily fit that mold.

The Rabbis tell us that the 10th of Tishrei (when we now celebrate Yom Kippur) was the day on which Moses completed and brought down the second set of commandments from Mt. Sinai, signifying that God had granted atonement for the sin of the Golden calf.

This Rabbinic interpretation lends historical significance to the otherwise unexplained placement of the holiday 10 days after Rosh Hashanah.

Adapted from myjewishlearning.com

CONFESSION—ISN'T IT A CATHOLIC THING?

We often associate confession with the Catholic religion where individuals approach the priest privately and confess their sins to him alone. However, Judaism has its own form of confession formulated solely for the Day of Atonement.



On Yom Kippur, we recite the *vidui*, or confession, in two parts throughout the day. First there is the *ashamnu* (literally, *we have sinned*), an alphabetical acrostic of general sins, and the *al chet* (literally, *for the sin*), which follows a more detailed list of transgressions.

Many Jews beat the left side of their chests with their fist each time another sin is mentioned.

As we read through this list of sins there is a striking question that arises. Why must we adhere to this uniform regimen of confession when each of us leads individual lives and are certainly not guilty of all the sins for which we are confessing?

We stand together and recite these confessions aloud so that we, as a community, may accept collective responsibility for them, and so that no one person will be singled out or embarrassed by what he or she may have done in the past year.

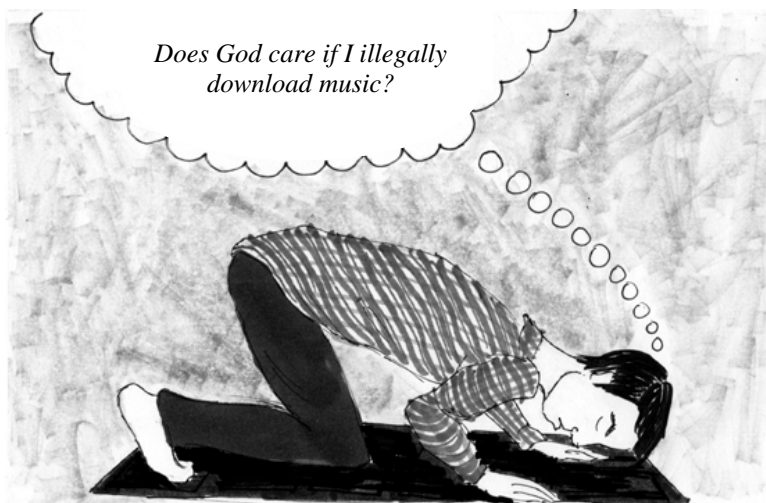
HOW LOW CAN YOU GO? BOWING DOWN ON YOM KIPPUR

In contemporary Jewish prayer services it is not customary to bow down to the ground. However, Yom Kippur is an exception. During the Musaf (additional) service on Yom Kippur, we re-enact the ancient ritual of the High Priest of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Thousands of years ago on this same day the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the most sacred and inner chamber of the Temple, to confess the sins of the Jewish people to God three times. Only the High Priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies (the most sacred place in the Temple) and only on Yom Kippur.

Upon pronouncing the explicit name of God (*shem ha meforash*) — which we don't do today, since we are not sure how the letters were meant to be pronounced—the people waiting outside in the courtyard to receive atonement from the High Priest would prostrate themselves to the ground.

In many traditional synagogues today Jews prostrate themselves four times during the Yom Kippur Musaf service: upon the retelling of the High Priest's confessions (three times), and again during the Aleinu prayer.



5 THINGS YOU CAN'T DO

Is Judaism just mean or is there a deeper reason for all the things we cannot do on Yom Kippur?

In its instructions for observing Yom Kippur, the Torah specifies that we are to “afflict our souls.” The Rabbis [have since] identified five activities from which we abstain on the most solemn, but not mournful, day of the year. The purpose is not to punish ourselves but to gain control over our bodies and their potentially harmful appetites, which can become ends in themselves. While not engaging in our normal daily concerns and pleasures, we become more conscious of how our physical urges so often lead us into trouble.



Fasting

Derived directly from the Torah, Jews do not eat or drink for about twenty-five hours starting eighteen minutes before sundown lasting until the appearance of three stars in the night sky. This full day fast is probably the greatest test of self-control during this holiday.

How are we supposed to accept the notion that fasting frees us to worship when hunger pangs and a parched mouth create strong distractions to concentration on lofty spiritual thoughts? The abstention itself cannot create a sense of spirituality.

The idea is to be able to refrain from giving in to our impulses. We prove to ourselves that we can control our bodies in the extreme; under normal circumstances we should certainly be able to prevent our desires from leading into damaging excesses. Allowing the body to rid itself of the toxins produced by eating mirrors our efforts on this day to purge ourselves of the impurities of unhealthy thoughts and deeds.

5 THINGS YOU CAN'T DO

Sexual Relations

The normal and healthy drive, encouraged on Shabbat because it is an act seen to involve God and assist in ongoing creation, is again an appetite whose satisfaction could lead us astray.

Washing

Traditional Jews do not shower, bathe, or wash their hands or faces, unless they are soiled with mud. The focus of this day is on internal, rather than external, cleanliness.

Anointing

The application of oil to the body was once done regularly, particularly after bathing, and was part of the cleansing process. Today, anointing generally refers to the use of face and hand creams, which on Yom Kippur are not to be applied except for medicinal purposes.

Wearing Leather Shoes

The act of wearing leather shoes is perceived by the *Rabbis* as an expression of comfort and luxury. Yom Kippur is a day where we try to keep it simple and modest so that we can remain focused on the emotional, ethical and spiritual work that we need to do.

-Adapted from *Leslie Koppelman Ross*



ACTING OUT OUR OWN DEATH

Did you know that the rituals of Yom Kippur help us to act out our own death?

I know this may sound morbid and even crazy but there really is a relevant religious idea here. Let's explore the rituals of the holiday in the hope of finding that idea.



On Yom Kippur we abstain from eating, drinking, having sex and partaking in any type of luxury. We also avoid all of the activities prohibited on a normal Shabbat— we don't create, destroy or alter the world around us. We even dress differently than we normally do. Traditionally, everyone in the congregation would wear a white robe called a *Kittle*.

As this list of rituals grows, it becomes clear that the central theme is death. On Yom Kippur we refrain from the very things that differentiate between those who are living and those who are not.

Only the living can eat and take part in bodily enjoyment. Only the living can build, destroy and transform. The *kittle* that we wear today is also the same garment in which Jews are buried.

As we engage in these rituals, we symbolically act out a moment of death—not bodily death, but a symbolic death. The question is for what purpose?

ACTING OUT OUR OWN DEATH

One reason that we symbolically act out our own death is so that we can confront our mortality. This idea actually fits in very nicely with the holiday's emphasis on *teshuvah* (repentance). Here's how the connection works:

We've all seen that sitcom plot where the main characters find out that they only have a short time to live and then they totally change their lives. They make amends with the people they really love, they stop worrying about the small stuff and take time to do the things that really matter. In the end, the characters find out that they are fine and are left feeling like the whole experience was a gift.



*The original
scrooge*

This is the same with Yom Kippur. We are asked to simulate and thereby confront our own mortality so that, before it's too late, we can wake up and start living our lives more fully and treating each day as if it were the most important.

Again this does not work on its own. The transformative power of these rituals only work when we allow the symbolic meaning to really impact our lives.

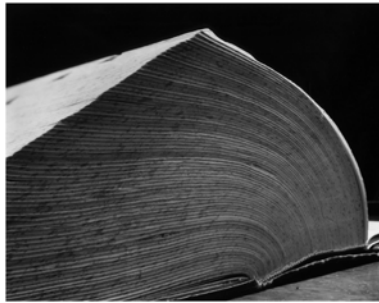
So as we confront our mortality this year, we must seriously ask ourselves the question, "What would I change about my life if I only had six months to live?" Finally, the key is not just to ask the question, but to make some of those changes.

By Rabbi Michael Uram

YOM KIPPUR PRAYER 101

Kol Nidrei: As discussed before (see page 6), this is the melodious evening service that marks the start of Yom Kippur before sundown.

Shacharit: The morning service. The *Torah* reading here describes the service of the Temple in Jerusalem. The *haftarah*, Isaiah 57:14-58:16, warns against observing all of the rituals correctly while failing to care for society's most disenfranchised.



Musaf: This is an extra-long additional service because of two special additions: 1) the *avodah* service is a comprehensive description of the Temple service on Yom Kippur and 2) the *martyrology* focuses on the many celebrated Talmudic scholars who were killed in the time of the Roman Empire. Some suggest that the martyrology is inserted into the Yom Kippur *Musaf* as a reminder that these scholars gave their lives for God, and therefore we ask God to have mercy on the people of Israel on Yom Kippur.

Mincha: The afternoon service, is the shortest of Yom Kippur. We read from Leviticus 18 about forbidden sexual relations. For the *haftarah* we read the Book of Jonah.

Ne'ilah: The final service of the day! This is the time when the gates of heaven are closing and we ask God to seal us in the *Book of Life* for the coming year. Many people stand for the entire service at the end of which the *shofar* is sounded, marking the conclusion of the High Holidays in the Jewish calendar.

FASHION DO'S AND DON'TS: WHO SAID YOU CAN'T WEAR WHITE AFTER LABOR DAY?

Sure, the fashion police claim that white can only be worn between Memorial Day and Labor Day, but obviously they weren't taking Yom Kippur into account...

On Yom Kippur it is customary to wear comfortable, white clothing. This is for several reasons:

- White signifies a clean slate. No matter what we have done in the past year, Yom Kippur is our chance to begin anew.
- White is a symbol of purity. On Yom Kippur we abstain from the pleasures of eating, drinking, washing and having sex. We come to services untainted by these desires.
- When a Jew is buried he/she is wrapped in a white shroud. By clothing ourselves in white we are reminded of our inevitable fate, but we ask that it be delayed for at least the coming year.

Many people also refrain from wearing leather on Yom Kippur. Leather garments require that life be sacrificed for their production. If we stand in services asking for life, while bearing garments that took life, how can we expect our prayer to be answered?

A *kittel* is a white linen robe that more traditional Jews (usually men) wear on special occasions—first at their wedding, then during the High Holidays and Passover, and finally, for their burial.



YOM KIPPUR RECIPES

GLOSSARY

Aleinu: This prayer proclaiming God's greatness is recited at the end of the worship service and during the *Musaf* service on Yom Kippur.

Book of Life: The book into which God inscribes the righteous, thereby assuring for them a year of health and success. The Book of Life is sealed in the concluding service on Yom Kippur called the *Neilah* service.

Golden Calf: The sin of the Golden Calf is the quintessential story of the children of Israel's failure to remain faithful to God. As recorded in the Book of Exodus, the Children of Israel build an idolatrous golden calf while Moses is on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments.

GLOSSARY

Haftarah: The additional section of the biblical prophets that is read on Shabbat and holidays after the respective Torah portion.

High Holidays: This term is used to refer to the holidays of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish new year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).

High Priest: The *Cohen Gadol* (High Priest) was the chief religious functionary during the time of the Temple that predated the time of the Rabbis.

Kol Nidrei: Literally *every vow*, the opening chant of the Yom Kippur evening service in which all vows that we failed to live up to over the past year are annulled in a spirit of forgiveness.

Mt. Sinai: According to tradition this mountain, also known as Horeb, is the site of God's revelation to Moses and the children of Israel.

Musaf: The additional service (following *Shacharit*—the morning service) that is recited in Conservative and Reform congregations was instituted in place of a Temple sacrifice.

Ne'ilah: The final service of Yom Kippur when we ask to be sealed in the Book of Life for the coming year.

Rabbinic Literature: This term refers to a collection of writings that serves as the foundation for post-biblical Judaism. It includes two *Talmuds* as well as a large corpus of interpretive literature called *Midrash*.

The Rabbis: This term refers to the sages whose names and ideas are recorded in Rabbinic literature including the Talmud and Midrash dating from the 1st-6th centuries CE.

Rosh Hashanah: The Jewish new year.

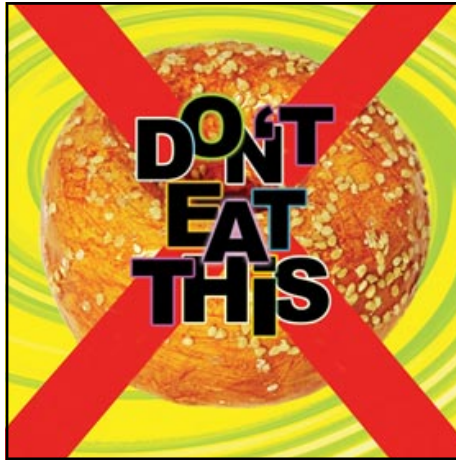
Shofar: A trumpet like instrument made from the horn of an animal (often a ram). It is sounded during the High Holidays to serve as a spiritual alarm clock to awaken us to our bad habits and to spur us on toward positive growth and repentance.

Talmud: A compendium of legal arguments and stories that depict the content of Judaism's Oral Law and provide the foundation for many of the rituals that are most common in modern Judaism.

Tishrei: The Hebrew month in which Yom Kippur falls. It is the seventh month in the Hebrew calendar.

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