

# What's the point of fasting?

Here are some of my thoughts on the significance of Yom Kipur. Rosh Hashanah inaugurates the Ten Days of Repentance, the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*. But repentance is only a process that leads up to Atonement. Although one can atone at any time during the year, there is something special about Yom Kipur. It creates a unique atmosphere of solemnity, sadness, and regret.

It is another one of those days when we imagine. God sitting up on high as depicted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. Grandfatherly with white hair and beard. Reclining on the clouds surrounded by little angels. He takes out a huge leather-backed tome and a goose quill and starts writing down each person's name and in the column next to it, a tic for life or a cross for death. It's a lovely image. It is a drama that we play out in our minds.

The Torah says, "For this day will atone for you, to cleanse you of your sins and you will be purified before God." (Leviticus 16.30). But atonement, wiping the slate clean so to speak, can be accomplished throughout the year, by an act of *Kapara*, atonement, and sometimes a fine. Which itself requires confession first (Leviticus 5.5). Although the Bible mandated an atonement sacrifice each New Month, Yom Kipur was the special day when God, accepted atonement from His people.

In Temple times people rose at dawn to watch the ceremonies. It must have been quite a spectacle. The priests in their brilliant whites. The High Priest, initially in white too, later changing into multi-colored garments with shining gold. Walking slowly, surrounded by his attendants going through the intricate rituals of the sacrifices. Leaving to change and purify himself at each stage and then returning for the next round. The Levites were singing and playing their instruments. There were clouds of sweet-smelling incense.

The high priest would ask for forgiveness for his sins, those of the priests and then for all the people and finally all Israel. The first goat of atonement was sacrificed in the Temple. The second was taken out through the crowds and set off into the desert to its fate. Inside the temple, there was a red banner. And according to legend, when the goat reached its destination the banner would turn white, says the Talmud. The prophet Isaiah had said, "If your sins are as red as scarlet, God will turn them white as snow." If the banner changed color, everyone cheered to know they were forgiven. The High Priest blessed everyone and they streamed out. And as the Talmud in Taanit says, the young people would go out dancing in the vineyards.

This finale seems to contradict the solemnity of the day. After all the Torah reiterates many times that this is a day when we are supposed to "afflict our souls." But what does that mean? Is affliction of the mind through a sense of unworthiness? Or as the rabbis understood it to mean, and we do today, fasting. Afflicting our bodies as if they are to blame! and yet it is the one thing we can do as individuals to show how significant the day is. If once public sacrifices marked the day, now in a way, we sacrifice ourselves.

The Temple is no more. Besides for many, the idea of sacrifices altogether is no longer as attractive as it was. So what now?

Yom Kipur was first a national event and only then a personal one. The Torah posited two levels of Kapara, the private and the national. Since Yom Kipur was a day for the community, national atonement, this is why when liturgy substituted for the sacrificial system, the language of the prayers and the confessions, the vidui, are all in the third person. We have sinned, not I have sinned. This is why it was called Yom Kipur, for the community. And not Yom Teshuva, a Day of Repentance, which is for the individual. The Talmud says that Yom Kipur only atones for sins between humans and God. Not for sins between human beings and God. Which they can only put right between themselves.

Yet the Talmud (Yoma 85b) goes into painful detail as to what misdeeds the individual can atone for immediately, what needs to be suspended until Yom Kipur, and what can only be expiated with death. In that context, it seems that both sins against humans and sins against God can be atoned for on the day. Altogether the approach of the rabbis is both multi-faceted and ambiguous. It treats the whole process of atonement as transactional and legalistic. Instead of inspirational and elevating. Indeed it treats God as the awesome, judgmental authority. Whereas I prefer to experience God as the sensitive, understanding parent or friend.

I have difficulty with the idea of a day of atoning, forgiving in some automatic way. We have always held that only God could and would forgive. We had to go straight to the boss, not the private secretary or vice-chairman. Martin Luther started his rebellion against Rome precisely over the abuse of buying forgiveness, indulgences. However, rabbis all around the world now, are raising money by promising blessings and forgiveness if you donate. It is one thing to raise money for good charitable causes. It is quite another to say that this will wipe your slate clean.

Nowadays we can experience Yom Kipur, again on a national level. Israel closes down almost completely. More than any other day in the year you feel you are in a Jewish state. Even those who reject religion entirely, seem to get caught up to some degree in the significance of the day. Even if from a technical halachic point of view Shabbat, each week, is more important. Yom Kipur still resonates and rings a bell like no other Holy Day.

The cynic will say that many like to suffer a little bit. It assuages guilt. It can give one a sense of accomplishment and make us feel better, if only temporarily. And it makes up for the neglect of religion throughout the year. Religion is too demanding. But one day is doable. For all that, keeping Yom Kipur is an affirmation of our heritage and our history. It is the one day when the least Jewish Jew feels, for a moment, his or her Jewishness.

Then the day passes and as with New Year resolutions, we quickly return to being who we were. Even so, the experience, if only subliminally, injects a spark that keeps burning until the Seder night on Pesach or the next year. We are a nation of actors and actresses. We each choose how much and in what way we identify with our people. We play our parts, each one of us in the Drama

of the Jewish people's survival. And at least one day a year we make an extra effort.