

Yom Kippur

‘Day of Atonement’

*“If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry,
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.”*
(Isaiah 58:9-10, read on Yom Kippur)

Here we focus on the meaning of the Jewish festival Yom Kippur (‘Day of Atonement’) and how it reveals the God of mercy and compassion. Sometimes we Christians act as if the teaching about God’s compassion started with Jesus! Yet Jesus himself was drawing on a teaching embedded in Judaism. God’s loving mercy is powerfully expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures and enshrined in Jewish traditions and practices; it is a teaching that Jesus drew out, highlighted and embodied in a profound way.

‘Day of Atonement’

Yom Kippur is the holiest and most solemn of all the holy days of the Jewish liturgical calendar. It is the day when the Jewish people cast themselves upon God’s mercy and ask forgiveness for their transgressions. Yom Kippur is the climax of a forty-day period of introspection, examining one’s conscience. As Yom Kippur approaches, this period intensifies in ‘Ten Days of Awe/Repentance’ during which Jews confess their sins and seek forgiveness of one another. At the heart of this festival is a confidence in God’s mercy and a keen awareness of the communal implications of our choices for good and evil.

Temple times

Yom Kippur is described in Leviticus as a day of atonement. No one must work; self-denial is to be practised. In ancient times, when Jewish liturgical

life revolved around the Temple, Yom Kippur involved elaborate cultic rituals for the atonement of the people. Central to the ritual for expiating Israel’s sins was the act of taking a goat, symbolically burdened with the sins of the community, and sending it away into the wilderness. Later, in Christian times, Jesus’ sacrifice for sinful humanity would be compared to this ‘scapegoat.’

Today

Yom Kippur continues to be celebrated by the Jewish people as a day of atonement, principally by gathering at their local synagogue for a day of prayer. A striking aspect of the Yom Kippur liturgy is the calling out of the Thirteen Attributes of God during the penitential prayers:

“The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7; JPS).

This and other beautiful prayers and readings give voice to God’s steadfast love. People wear white, an expression of confidence in God’s forgiveness. Yom Kippur is a day of fasting. Abstinence from the activities of work, bathing, sexual relations, anointing the body with oil, and wearing leather shoes are all part of Yom Kippur observance in Orthodox Judaism.

Teshuva

Teshuva (‘repentance’) and reconciliation are hallmarks of the life of God’s people. Central to the festival of Yom Kippur is a sensitivity to the communal dimension of sin, an awareness that also shapes our Catholic understanding of the sacrament of reconciliation. There is no ‘private’

sin as such; our lives are interwoven as members of a human family. Just as we can hurt each other, so too can we heal one another and our world. In fact, the Mishnah teaches:

“For transgressions that are between man and God, Yom Kippur effects atonement; for transgressions between a man and his fellow man, Yom Kippur only effects atonement if he has appeased his fellow...” [Yoma 8:9]

Perhaps this reminds us of a gospel teaching:

“...leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Mt.5:24).

Taking it to heart

- In what way does Yom Kippur resonate with your Catholic beliefs, rituals and customs (e.g., penitential prayer, Lenten practices, etc)?
- What penitential practices are part of your home life; i.e., how do you say ‘sorry’ to spouse, family, friends, neighbours?
- In what ways are our penitential practices in the church and in society effective and helpful? In what ways might they need renewing or reshaping?

Faith & Life

In Jewish custom, Yom Kippur is one of a number of occasions during the year when a *Yahrzeit** (Memorial) Candle is lit to remember loved ones who have died. According to custom the candle is lit at sundown as Yom Kippur begins, and it burns for 24 hours. During this time of introspection, the flame of the *Yahrzeit* Candle is a reminder of the precious fragility of life, life that must be embraced and cherished at all times.

* *Yahrzeit* is Yiddish for: “a year’s time”

Five ways to pray on Yom Kippur

Jewish traditions and Christian life

The Hebrew Scriptures are a rich source of prayer. Jesus’ life was shaped by these sacred texts. As a way of showing respect for Yom Kippur, and in solidarity with Jewish communities, Christians might include some verses from the readings of this Jewish festival (below) and include them in their own prayer time as appropriate.

1. Leviticus

“For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord” (Leviticus 16:30). See also 16:1-34; 18:1-30.

2. Numbers

“You shall offer a burnt offering to the Lord...” (Num 29:8). In 29:7-11 we read of penitential rituals of our ancestors-in-faith. Talk with the Lord about *your* penitential rituals.

3. Isaiah

“The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden” (Isaiah 58:11). See also 57:14—58:14

4. Jonah

“I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried” (Jonah 2:2). Yom Kippur includes the story of Jonah’s tumultuous relationship with God.

5. Micah

“You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old” (Micah 7:19-20).

Sources: Steinberg, *Celebrating the Jewish Year* (Philadelphia, 2007); Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays* (New York, 1985); www.etz-hayim.com/festivals. Scripture: NRSV.

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