The High Holy Days drama starts with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. The following ten days are filled with prayer, repentance, and acts of charity. Now comes the final act, Yom Kippur, the last chance of the year to atone for sins and get right before God. It is the holiest day on the Jewish calendar or, as described in the Torah, the “Sabbath of Sabbaths.”

At the end of Yom Kippur, Jews believe that God closes the Book of Life on our fate and judgment for the year to come. Our greeting to each other during this day, “gemar chatimah tovah,” or “May you be sealed [in God’s Book of Life] for good,” reflects our hope for the new year — that we have pleased God and received His forgiveness.

“This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work — whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you — because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a day of sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance.”

— Leviticus 16:29–31 —
As the Bible instructs, Yom Kippur is a day of self-denial. It’s not about us today; it’s about God and His desires for our lives. This is the day we address those areas where we are out of alignment and where we fall short.

During the 24-hour period of Yom Kippur, Jews fulfill the biblical commandment to deny ourselves by fasting from food and water, engaging in intense soul-searching, and praying for forgiveness. From the evening of the holiday until sundown the following day (except for the few hours when we go home to sleep), we are in the synagogue beseeching God for forgiveness and reflecting upon the course of our lives. It’s like spring cleaning for the soul.

Yom Kippur is a day of inner purification and reconciliation with God and others. However, Judaism insists that repenting, fasting, and praying atone only for those sins between man and God. Those sins committed against our fellow man require that Jews seek forgiveness personally from those we have offended as well as from God. Therefore, this is a day of many humble and healing conversations.

To help us with this spiritual reckoning, Jews fast on Yom Kippur.

This physical act is meant to help us focus on spiritual matters. It is a reminder of the frailty of human existence and of the duty to act charitably toward the less fortunate. The inspiring, yet sobering, words of Isaiah 58 are read publicly in the synagogue on Yom Kippur to reveal the true meaning of the Yom Kippur fast:

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?”

—Isaiah 58:6–7
What does it mean for you to deny yourself? Is it foregoing your favorite dessert? Or turning off the television one night a week to spend more time with your family or friends? Perhaps it’s sacrificing that extra hour of sleep so you can spend time in God’s word. Denying ourselves can be as minor as giving up that piece of chocolate cake or as significant as turning down a job promotion so we can be more involved in ministry.

Self-denial is a key element in the observance of Yom Kippur. In fact, God commands that we “must deny” ourselves during this time. Not only do we cease from all work on Yom Kippur, but we also honor God’s command to deny ourselves by fasting, soul-searching, and praying.

Fasting is not to be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a prompt for us to focus on spiritual matters. For you see, we are also reminded during this time of the true meaning of the fast. The words of the prophet Isaiah, 58:6–7, are read during the Yom Kippur service to help us focus on that meaning.

Fasting should be more than just denying ourselves food and water. We are called to take our fasting beyond our personal growth to acts of kindness and compassion, justice and charity. We are all called, Jews and Christians alike, to serve one another by seeking justice for the oppressed, feeding the hungry, clothing the needy, and sheltering the homeless. This is the true fast, the true meaning of denying ourselves and taking up the cause of those less fortunate than ourselves.

And that is what truly pleases God.
A Time to Purify

Besides fasting, a number of other Jewish customs and traditions are associated with Yom Kippur. For example, Jews immerse ourselves in a mikvah, or ritual bath, beforehand in order to fulfill the biblical command, “They must purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then they will be clean” (Numbers 19:12). The mikvah offers the individual, the community, and the nation of Israel the remarkable gift of purity and holiness.

It was on Yom Kippur that the High Priest was allowed entrance into the Holy of Holies, the innermost chamber of the Temple. This was the zenith of a day that involved a series of services and rituals — all of which were preceded by immersion in a mikvah.

Since the beginning of creation, immersing oneself in water has been seen as the gateway to purity for God’s people. According to the Midrash (traditional Jewish literature), after being banished from Eden, Adam sat in a river that flowed from the garden. This was an integral part of his repentance process and of his attempt to return to his original perfection. Later, at the foot of Mount Sinai, all the people of the nation of Israel were commanded to prepare themselves for meeting God by immersing themselves in a mikvah.

The critical function of the mikvah was not to enhance physical hygiene as much as it was a spiritual exercise. Like many aspects of Jewish life that promote separation and distinction, the mikvah is the threshold separating the unholy from holy. Immersion in a mikvah signals a major change in status — more specifically an elevation in status. It symbolizes purification and regeneration, as well as new birth through repentance.

Sound familiar? The practice of mikvah is the origin of baptism for Christians. When John the Baptist stood on the Jordan River preaching baptism (which is the Greek word for “immersing”) for all who repented of their sins, this would have been a familiar concept for his Jewish audience. In fact, when non-Jews converted to Judaism in biblical times and even today, they had to undergo a mikvah ritual as a sign of their passing from the worship of idols to the worship of the one true God.
If you have ever worked in the garden pulling weeds during a hot summer day, you know how grimy a body can get — and you know how revitalizing it is to wash away all that dirt and grime with a refreshing shower. Once the dirt has been removed and you are completely clean, you feel like a new person, renewed and revitalized. In a sense, this is the underlying principle of the priests who were commanded by God to wash themselves before entering the Tabernacle and preparing sacrifices for the people during the Day of Atonement. On one level, the priest was preparing himself spiritually for worship by bathing himself. Immersing himself in the water was a sign of purification and regeneration.

This purification ritual was also prescribed by priests to those who were deemed unclean, whether from an illness, being in contact with someone who was ill, or any number of things that the Torah deemed were unclean. The “unclean” person was washed, and therefore, made clean and presentable before God.

Before Yom Kippur, many observant Jews practice this tradition, immersing ourselves in a mikvah or “ritual bath.” This physical act not only symbolizes our act of purifying ourselves before God, but also our “new birth” through repentance.

Most of us don’t go a day or more without cleaning ourselves physically. It’s an important part of preparing ourselves for our daily activities. But what about our need for spiritual cleansing? How can you “prepare” yourself to come before God, whether it’s in a formal worship service or your quiet time with Him? Memorizing verses like Psalm 26:6–7, Psalm 51:1–2; 7, or Ezekiel 36:25 might be a good way to “cleanse” and revitalize yourself spiritually.

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We see Jonah's story as a reminder that we can never flee from God and His judgment.


A Tale of Caution

Though there are many fascinating themes in the book of Jonah, for Jews the book about the wayward prophet is primarily about repentance and redemption. This is why we read it every year at Yom Kippur. We see Jonah’s story as a reminder that we can never flee from God and His judgment, and as an affirmation that He seeks our repentance and longs to forgive us and shower us with His love.

All the activities of Yom Kippur bring with us a heightened awareness of our fallen nature — of the punishment we deserve and our desperate need for God’s mercy. And it is with this perspective that we hear the story of Jonah on Yom Kippur.

Who was Jonah? He was a reluctant prophet who ran from God’s clear directive to go to Nineveh and preach His truth. He was a defiant believer who wanted mercy for himself, but not for the people of Nineveh, and admitted to his boat-mates that he worshipped “the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (1:9) even as he was trying to flee from God in a wooden ship. He was a forgetful man who — even after he was miraculously saved from the seas, the storms, and the sea creature — had the audacity to get angry with the God who rescued him.

And in all these unsavory qualities we find ourselves — sinful, broken, selfish, disobedient, and desperately in need of God’s forgiveness. Biblical scholars disagree on who Jonah was, when the book was written, and who wrote it, creating ambiguity that makes it all the easier for us to identify with this cautionary tale.

The book of Jonah makes us painfully aware of our need for atonement and all the more grateful for a God who, as Jonah reminds us, is a “gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (4:2).
A SECOND CHANCE

Who hasn’t acted like Jonah at some time or another? As you’ll remember, when Jonah was called by God, he ran the other way.

When God asked Jonah to help others, especially those sinners in Nineveh, Jonah refused. In fact, throughout the four short chapters of this book, Jonah is primarily interested in one thing — himself.

Yet, despite Jonah’s selfishness, his stubbornness, and his disobedience, God pursued him. God gave him another chance, and when Jonah blew that, God offered him yet one more opportunity to do the right thing and help others. (Is any of this sounding familiar?)

We read the story of Jonah on the afternoon of Yom Kippur because it is our last chance of the year to repent before God and to change the direction we’ve been headed in — much like Jonah. The book of Jonah is the story of last chances, not only for himself, but for the people of Nineveh as well. Repent — or else — is the message.

But through it all, we see a gracious God who is willing to forgive, who is gracious and compassionate to all who will turn toward Him. Even Jonah knew this!

If you think you have run out of chances with God, think about Jonah. If you feel like you’ve been heading in the wrong direction, be encouraged by Jonah’s story. It’s never too late with God to change direction and to seek forgiveness from Him. We can never flee from God and His judgment, but it’s also equally true that He is “a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Psalm 103:8).

Going Deeper for Christians

For a Christian perspective on God’s forgiveness, read these Scriptures:

- Ephesians 1:6–8
- 1 John 1:8–10

He prayed to the Lord, ‘Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love; a God who relents from sending calamity.’”

—Jonah 4:2
A Time to Confess

On Yom Kippur, Jews attend synagogue, where the mood is one of solemnity and awe but also of hope. A spirit of holiness pervades the congregation as we stand before God during this final 24-hour period before the end of the year. All appeal to the eternal Judge for a merciful judgment.

The services on Yom Kippur morning and afternoon contain a number of unique features. Jews recite a series of confessional sins we may have committed during the course of the past year.

In another portion of the service, worshippers remember our ancestors who suffered martyrdom rather than abandon their faith in God. We also recite prayers of Yizkor, or “remembrance,” for the souls of deceased members of our families.

Evening services commence with the recitation of the Kol Nidrei prayer, one of the most powerful and emotionally evocative in all of Jewish liturgy. Kol Nidrei is a plea for absolution from any and all unfulfilled vows a person may have made to God in the course of the year. One interpretation of the opening words of the Kol Nidrei says, “See, O Lord, what miserable sinners we are. We make promises to live better lives each year and yet always fall short of keeping them. Therefore, help us, O Lord, and pardon us for our shortcomings.”

This prayer grew out of a strong tendency among Jews in ancient Israel to make vows to God. Rash vows to God made for whatever reason were to be taken and dealt with seriously, as evidenced from Deuteronomy 23:21: “If you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin.”

The Kol Nidrei thus developed from the longing for a clear conscience on the part of those seeking reconciliation with God, and so became an integral and moving part of the Yom Kippur service.

At the opening of every Yom Kippur service, Jews feel an abundance of emotions as we listen to the sorrowful strains of the Kol Nidrei melody and recall our history of persecution and suffering. Both the words and the melody of the prayer end in a triumphant note of optimism, leading from despair to hope. This prayer encapsulates the Jewish historical experience and vision for the future.
The Power of Words

I’m sure most of us can remember that childhood retort when someone called us a nasty name on the playground: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” As adults, I think we can all agree that sometimes that is not true at all. Words can and do hurt us.

Given the time, I am sure we could all remember a stinging comment from a boss about our work performance, a slight from a colleague, or a criticism from a parent that has stuck in our psyche long after the words were uttered. We all know that words are, in fact, very powerful, and how we use them actually reflects upon our relationship with God.

King David understood this. In Psalm 15, he posed the question, “Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?” In the next verse, David provides the answer: “The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks truth from their heart.” Such a person, according to David, doesn’t slander his neighbor, keeps her promises, and doesn’t insult others.

The Proverbs give much attention to our use of words. The godly person uses words that are helpful (10:32), bring healing (12:18), and offer encouragement (12:25). This person knows exactly the right thing to say at the right time (15:23). In contrast, the godless person uses words that are perverse (10:32), that are hurtful and destructive (11:9), and which crush the spirit (15:4). As Proverbs 12:18 says, “The words of the reckless pierce like swords.”

Our words can destroy, crush, and pierce. Or they can heal, encourage, and help. As people of faith, Jews and Christians alike, how we use our words should reflect the One we serve.

Who can dwell in God’s sacred tent? The one who uses his or her words carefully, thoughtfully, truthfully, and with integrity.

Devotion

Going Deeper for Christians

For a Christian perspective on the power of words, read these Scriptures:

- Matthew 12:33–35
- Romans 10:8–10
- Ephesians 4:29
- James 3:1–12
A Time to Repent

As mentioned previously, true repentance, according to Jewish tradition and teaching, involves turning away from evil and returning to God and to our true, pure selves. The rabbis insist that teshuvah, or repentance, is an act of will that we are capable of asserting — no matter how caught in sin we are.

Jewish teaching holds that man is never too ridden with sin that he cannot turn toward God and initiate his own moral regeneration and renewal. For while God created man with both evil and good inclinations, He also provided us with the antidote to the power of evil — the Torah. The more we read the story of God and His plan for our lives, the more His truths get planted in our hearts, the more capable we become of turning from our desires to His.

Teshuvah is also dependent on the notion that God does not desire "the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezekiel 33:11). God is a merciful and compassionate Father, as well as a just Judge. Jewish teaching tells us that God created and governs the entire world through a combination of His attributes of mercy and justice.

When we consider God’s justice, power, and holiness, we realize that our ability to initiate reconciliation and inner healing is itself a divine miracle and act of grace. God extends His love to us by responding a thousandfold to our turning from sin. This Jewish view of repentance was inspired by the prophets who declared, “‘Return to me,’ declares the Lord Almighty, ‘and I will return to you’” (Zechariah 1:3).

God’s ability and desire to forgive are amazing realities year-round, but Jews make a deliberate effort to celebrate and accept these wondrous gifts at Yom Kippur.
The Perfect Parent

Most parents would agree that when it comes to raising children, a balance of discipline and love is required. Without discipline, children grow up knowing no boundaries. Without love, children grow up scarred and wounded. In either situation, the children suffer the consequences.

We see this dual balance of love and discipline modeled by God, our Father and Perfect Parent. Throughout the High Holy Days, as we are called to repentance, we also see repeatedly in Scripture that God is waiting and willing to forgive us.

But that does not mean God governs the world and “raises” us with mercy alone. If He allowed only compassion to rule all His decisions, the world would not survive because it would be filled with rampant, unchecked sinfulness. But as we also see in Scripture, God is perfectly holy and perfectly just; He rules His people and the world with justice as well. Yet, He cannot rule the world with strict justice either, because no one could stand up before His scrutiny and judgment. Instead, God rules the world with both justice and compassion.

We see evidence of these characteristics in the names that God calls Himself in the Bible. Elo-him, or “God,” refers to God’s justice, while Ado-nai, “Lord,” alludes to His mercy. Remember when God told Noah that He intended to bring a flood “to put an end to all people” (Genesis 6:13)? The name Elo-him was used. However, as the flooding began and Noah and his family were led safely into the ark, the name Ado-nai was used to show God’s compassion because He had saved them from destruction. We look to God, as David did in Psalm 103, to have compassion on us just as “a father has compassion on his children.”

The beauty of this spirit of repentance is the urgency and meaning that it gives to our lives, compelling us to live each day for Him — trusting Him, obeying Him, and appreciating His grace for all His children.

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A Time for Forgiveness

Another special service held during Yom Kippur is the Avodah service. During that service we recall how the High Priest in the ancient days entered the Holy of Holies to purge it of uncleanness and to pray for forgiveness for the House of Israel (see Leviticus 16).

This ritual was enacted in biblical times as the High Priest first made atonement for his own sin by making the appropriate sacrifices and then for the sins of his household. Finally, the High Priest would set aside two goats, and lots would be cast to choose one of the two to be the “scapegoat.” The High Priest slaughtered the one goat to atone for the sins of Israel and brought the blood into the Holy of Holies. Then the priest would lay both hands on the head of the other goat and confess the sins of Israel before sending the goat away to be lost in the desert.

The two goats, in effect, represented the two ways God dealt with the people’s sins: He forgave their sins through the sacrifice of the first goat, and He removed the guilt of their sins through the second goat that was sent into the wilderness.

Then, as nightfall approaches and Yom Kippur is about to end, Jews pray the Neilah, or “closing service.” The liturgy of this service describes the heavenly gates as closing, leaving man, the petitioner, with a last opportunity to plead his case before final judgment.

Part of the Neilah liturgy pleads: “Open unto us the gate at the gate’s closing time, for the day is almost over. The day is passing fast, and the sun is going home and setting, do let us enter your gates. Forgive us, pardon us, have mercy.”

The prayer service reaches its climax as the congregation declares the central Jewish affirmation, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One. Blessed be His glorious kingdom forever and ever.” and repeats seven times the phrase, “God is the Lord.”

The service concludes with one blast of the shofar, or ram’s horn. The congregation, trusting in God and confident of His favorable judgment, proclaims, “Next year in Jerusalem!” This proclamation reflects our love of the Holy Land as well as our desire that within the coming year Messiah will come and gather all his people to Israel with him — that next year we will be able to celebrate Yom Kippur with him. After this sentiment is sung in joyful song, the drama of the Day of Atonement has reached its finale. The High Holy Days have come to a close.
TRUE REPENTANCE

As we have mentioned before, repentance is at the heart of the Jewish High Holy Days. But what does true repentance look like? According to Jewish tradition, there are four components of repentance: feeling regret for past sins; stopping sinful behavior; confessing before God; and resolving not to sin in the future. As Psalm 34 entreats, we must “turn from evil and do good.” A change of heart and acknowledgement of our sin must be accompanied by a change in our behavior.

We find a similar invitation to repent and “turn from evil” in the book of Isaiah. In chapter 55, the prophet Isaiah extends God’s invitation to repentance and redemption. By looking at the verbs in verses 3–7, we get another glimpse into God’s heart. First, we are invited to come to God (v. 3) and to listen to Him so “that you may live.” Second, we are to seek God while He can be found and to call upon Him. There is a sense of urgency to our need to repent — this is not to say that God will move away from us, but rather our tendency is to move away from Him. Finally, we are urged to turn to God, to forsake our evil ways, for then God will have mercy on us and “freely pardon” us (v. 7).

What a beautiful — and encouraging — invitation. But it is up to us to accept that invitation and to act upon it. When we have truly repented, a burden is lifted from our hearts. Our soul is cleansed, and our inner turmoil caused by our sinfulness is replaced with spiritual tranquility and inner peace. We have tasted God’s goodness, and we are rewarded by an even greater desire to pursue goodness and righteousness. And we will know we have achieved true repentance when we choose not to sin in circumstances where we might previously have sinned.

What a divine miracle, a profound mystery, and a true demonstration of grace! Give thanks to God today that His invitation is open to us, and as the Psalmist writes, “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth” (Psalm 145:18).

GOING DEEPER

FOR CHRISTIANS

For a Christian perspective on repentance, read these Scriptures:

- 2 Peter 3:8–10

—Isaiah 55:7