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Atonement: At One with God

According to Jewish tradition, from the very beginning, God understood that humans by nature would have their share of shortcomings, inevitably stumbling into sin at various points in their lives. If there had been no way to reverse that sinful behavior, the world would be doomed.

Therefore, God created the capability for complete atonement. God created repentance and the possibility to wipe the slate clean. What a demonstration of His love for us!

We first see atonement come into play with Cain who was forgiven by God. We later see it on a grander scale when God forgave the Israelites after sinning by building and worshiping a golden calf. God's forgiveness at that time was so powerful that *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, was established on that very day every year for all time.

In this month's Fellowship Study, we will explore the concept of atonement as it is explained and carried out in the Bible and how it is manifested in Jewish tradition today.

Join us on this powerful journey of one of God's greatest gifts to us all.



"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 . . ."

— LEVITICUS 16:29



Returning to God

Yom Kippur, the holiest days on the Jewish calendar, literally means “Day of Atonement.” This holiday has its roots in the greatest day of atonement of all time. On this day, the 10th day of the Hebrew month *Tishrei*, God gave Moses the second set of tablets with the Ten Commandments after the first ones were destroyed following the people’s sin in constructing and worshipping a golden calf.

On that day, not only did God renew His covenant with His people, but He also said to Moses, “I have forgiven as you have requested.” From that day onward, the 10th of *Tishrei* has been observed as *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, every year on the Jewish calendar.

But what exactly is atonement?

The Jewish sages make a distinction between forgiveness and atonement. Forgiveness means that God can overlook what we did wrong. But atonement is when God makes what we did wrong as if it never happened. God literally turns back the hands of time and rewrites history on our behalf.

After sinning by making and worshipping the golden calf, the Israelites were not worthy of receiving the Word of God. But God forgave them and granted them atonement so that they could receive the Ten Commandments once again.

This is absolutely stunning. The value of this gift of *teshuvah*, repentance, cannot be overstated. It gives us permission at any point in time, and especially on *Yom Kippur*, to begin again; to wipe the slate clean; to have a fresh start. This is why it is the custom to wear white clothing on *Yom Kippur*. God wipes us clean of all our sins.

In Judaism, *teshuvah* is a three-step process that can only be followed once a person stops engaging in sinful behavior. First, one must regret his or her misdeed. This first step must be sincere and heartfelt.

Second, the transgression must be confessed. This helps rid us of the spiritual toxicity of the deed and also makes our determination to change more real. Finally, the third step is to resolve never to repeat the sin. Like the first step, this must also be based in sincerity.

Teshuvah literally means “to return.” If we complete these three steps, we will have returned to our state of purity and also to our God. We will have achieved atonement.



Photo: engraving by Gustave Doré (1802–1883)

“ . . . Because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will clean from all your sins.”

— LETIVICUS 16:30

Two Goats, Two Choices

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, has a specific service described in the Bible, which during biblical times revolved around the Holy Temple. Today, prayer and Bible readings take the place of that service, but there is still much we can learn from this service that once was.

As commanded in Leviticus 16, two goats were brought before the High Priest. Lots were cast to determine which goat would be sacrificed to God and which would be sent into the wilderness, bearing Israel's sins.

After the fate of each goat was decided, one goat was slaughtered and offered up to God, while the other was set free in the desert. According to Jewish tradition, when the freed goat came to a cliff, it was pushed off, and consequently killed.

What can we learn from this seemingly bizarre service? What does it have to do with the personal changes we aim for on *Yom Kippur*?

On a simple level, the goats were a tangible way for the Israelites to connect to the two main purposes of *Yom Kippur*. The first is that God cleanses us of our sins. This is symbolically and ritually displayed by the original scapegoat — the goat that bore the sins of Israel and was sent away.

The second goal of *Yom Kippur* is to become closer to God. This was manifested by the goat offered as a sacrifice to God. Like all sacrifices, the goal is to see the animal as taking our place. Through the animal, we present ourselves to God on the altar and dedicate ourselves to Him.

Yet, if we break down the components of this ritual, there are even more lessons to be learned.

The goats were required to be identical in every way, completely equal in value. From the outside they looked the same, but as *Yom Kippur* reminds us, we see only the outer appearance of people, but God sees the heart. Two people may look the same, but God knows the difference between the two and will judge accordingly.

When the High Priest cast the lots determining the fate of each goat, one could view the act either as chance or as orchestrated by God. In the same way, we can see our lives as a random series of circumstances, or hopefully we know that no matter how things appear, everything is controlled by God for our very best.

Ultimately, each goat met the same end on *Yom Kippur*. This is a sobering reminder that each life has its end. The question is how we lived it. Did we bear sin or were we dedicated to God? On *Yom Kippur*, we are reminded to choose God and make our lives meaningful.



"Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat."

— LEVITICUS 16:9–10

The Service — Then and Now

During Temple times, the service itself was critical for achieving atonement. It was the one time a year that the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the most sacred room in the Holy Temple. According to Jewish tradition, for the entire week leading up to the service, the High Priest was sequestered in order to purify himself. On the night of *Yom Kippur*, he did not sleep at all, spending the hours in Bible study with other priests whose job it was to keep him awake and engaged in study.

The service included many elements that were deeply moving for the nation of Israel at that time. The service included different sacrifices and offerings, including the lottery which determined the fate of two identical goats. The High Priest would immerse himself in the ritual bath and change into special clothing for the different parts of the service. Every time the High Priest spoke the name of God, the entire nation would prostrate themselves on the ground. And when the High Priest finally emerged from the Holy of Holies, his face would shine with otherworldly luminescence that we still sing about in today's liturgy.

But for 2,000 years, we have not had the Temple nor the service that accompanied it. So how do we secure atonement according to Judaism in our times?

Today, *Yom Kippur* is a day entirely dedicated to prayer, repentance, and introspection. We spend almost every waking moment from the eve of *Yom Kippur* when the holiday begins, until sundown the next day, in the synagogue. This is because in our times, prayers have replaced sacrifices. As it says in Hosea: *"Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips.'" Translated from the original Hebrew, the last words specify that the words of our lips replace the animals. It is through our prayers that we repent and return to God.*

The unique prayer service begins at night with the *Kol Nidrei* prayer. This prayer, with its stirring melody, is about undoing the mistakes of the past. We ask that God nullify all promises we didn't keep and to release us from all standards that we did not live up to. During the daytime service, our prayers include confession of all sins while we symbolically beat our hearts, the seat of our passions. The high point of the daytime service describes what was once done in the Temple. We review and connect to the service that we no longer practice, but remember and recreate in our mind's eye.

In the afternoon service, we read the book of Jonah, which carries many lessons appropriate for this sacred day, including the ability for anyone to repent as the evil people of Nineveh did, and also the impossibility of running away from God — as Jonah did.

Finally, we end the day with a service called *Neilah*, which literally means "the locking." This is our final chance to repent, and we cry out to God so that we may receive full atonement before God seals the Book of Life for the coming year. The holy day concludes with a dramatic long blast of the *shofar*, the ritual trumpet, whose sound reverberates throughout the year.



*Take words with you
and return to the LORD.*

Say to him:

*"Forgive all our sins
and receive us graciously,
that we may offer the fruit of our lips."*

— HOSEA 14:2

Think About It

1. **What is your definition of repentance?** Many people think that repentance is changing into someone other than themselves. How do you see repentance as returning to who you truly are?
2. **If Yom Kippur is the greatest day of atonement for Jews,** what would you consider the greatest day of atonement for Christians? Why?
3. **Read Ephesians 1:3-10 and Colossians 1:13-14.** What do these verses teach you about the wonderful gift of atonement?
4. **Read Hebrews 9:24-28. What do these verses tell you about the work of atonement available to you?** In what ways is the Christian view of atonement similar and different from the scapegoat ritual?
5. **Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-32.** What do these verses teach about the right heart attitude to approach communion and repentance?
6. **According to Jewish teachings, prayer has replaced sacrifices in the process of securing our atonement.** Does considering this important role of prayer change your attitude toward this practice? How can you honor God with the "fruit of your lips"?



Apply It

1. **Engage in sincere repentance.** Take the time to really work on defeating bad habits. Confess your sins and sincerely resolve not to repeat them.
2. **Choose God.** Look for the meaning and spiritual significance in everything you do. Dedicate your actions to God — and when you do every action becomes holy.
3. **Feed your soul.** Pray, study the Bible, walk out in nature, find a quiet time, sing — do whatever nurtures your spiritual self.
4. **Ask for forgiveness.** Whether it's someone you may have offended unintentionally or someone you know you have definitely wronged, reach out and apologize.
5. **Take an "inventory of the soul."** In Hebrew, it's known as *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, which involves intense soul-searching to identify areas to improve upon. It is an important step toward repentance, as we cannot fix what we don't recognize as broken.

