

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Yom Kippur



Context

The confessional is not a part of Jewish life. Although we may constantly strive to change and improve, we dedicate a chunk of the year to the endeavour of confronting our mistakes and sins, with the peak being reached on the Day of Atonement; Yom Kippur. As Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen of Manchester Reform Synagogue points out below, much that is confessed is done as a congregation, taking responsibility for each other's short comings, and sharing the burden as a community. But Yom Kippur has the potential to be a deeply meaningful process for us as individuals, taking hard work to begin the new year with more than a resolution to go to the gym more.

Content

'Yom Kippur becomes a kind of tallis in time – a prayer shawl to cover the confusions of the year.'

Arthur Waskow (Seasons of our Joy p.27)

Yom Kippur is a critical day in the Jewish calendar. It lies in waiting just after Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and given the restrictions of the day and the themes of atonement and repentance it could feel overwhelming and a day to be feared. Yet Arthur Waskow's description of Yom Kippur, as a 'tallis in time', hints that there is much more to Yom Kippur and its transformative potential. If we use the Hebrew word (יום־כִּפּוּר), Yom Kippur is truly awesome – awe-inspiring, wondrous and fearful. With the haunting melody of Kol Nidre beginning the day of prayers we feel the potential for change and growth in the air. And if we can use the time of Elul and the 10 days of repentance as a period of reflection and preparation for the Yamim Noraim (the days of awe) we may be able believe that transformation is possible as we have begun the work beforehand. Perhaps using the mikveh (ritual bath) would further enable our readiness for the journey that is Yom Kippur.

We can start where most of us start – pondering the five restrictions of the day: not eating/drinking, not bathing, not anointing the body with oil, not wearing leather shoes, and no sexual relations. For some, as we wish each other a good fast (a tzom kal), the fasting aspect of Yom Kippur is the beginning and end of the festival day. Yet fasting is merely an aid in our vast Jewish toolkit in engaging with this festival. (And if health or other reasons means fasting would be overly restrictive it should not be undertaken.) Indeed, on this day fasting can be understood to be an aid to mindfulness and a suspension of the everyday.

The restrictions of Yom Kippur also point to another important aspect of the festival which is beautifully encapsulated in Alan Lew's book, 'This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation'. We are taught that on Rosh Hashanah the book of life and death is opened and it is closed when the gates close at the last service of Yom Kippur, Ne'ilah. Yom Kippur marks the end of the 10 days of repentance started at Rosh Hashanah and is a 'compressed journey – k'fitzat ha derech – the voyage from birth to death' (Alan Lewⁱ). For some of us, whilst the idea of a hand in the sky scribbling our fate may seem fantastical, the power of the day, signified by this image, is immense. In our day to day lives we may forget that we are mortal beings. We concentrate on the pleasures before us and do all we can to live a successful, long life. Yet Yom Kippur enables us to recognise our mortality and realise that we cannot control everything – in some matters we are fragile and 'like clay in the hands of the potter'ⁱⁱ. Therefore, on Yom Kippur we mimic death by wearing a kittel (a white robe traditionally worn under the chuppah, on Yom Kippur

and on our death) and by fasting and abstaining from our worldly delights. If we understand Yom Kippur as a day where we truly stand before the gates of heaven its transformative power can be understood. How could we live our lives more fully? What wrongs have we committed? Where is our brokenness? How can we find peace? Who am I?

We seek teshuvah (a returning) for ourselves and a returning to wholeness. Over the years as our lived Judaism changed shape and we shifted from cultic rituals and sacrifice in the Temple, with the high priest uttering God's holy name in the Holy of Holies and seeking atonement on behalf of the community, our repentance has also shifted: towards prayer and the concept of teshuvahⁱⁱⁱ.

We ask forgiveness to those we have hurt, try to mend broken relationships, seek atonement from God and make our confessions alongside our community during the services of the day (Kol Nidre, Shacharit, Musaf, Mincha, Yizkor and Ne'ilah. The prayers of confession are called vidui and include the Al Cheit and Ashamnu prayers. The day ends with Havdalah). We beat our chest during the prayer, ashamnu, and go through an inventory of sins. Yet, as our machzor reminds us, Yom Kippur is not a chance for self-flagellation (for many of us are experts at being self-critical), instead recognising our brokenness is part of a process to let the light in: 'Before a person finds light they must know their own darkness'^{iv}. And, most importantly there is an end to this period of introspection – it is a limited time ending at ne'ilah, which is symbolised in the acrostic ashamnu prayer, listing our faults from aleph to tav. We move on from this period and 'choose life', as per our Torah reading on Yom Kippur afternoon. We come out of the day, hopefully, feeling refreshed and grounded. We realise that we are not trying to attain perfection; the Yom Kippur liturgy makes this clear as we return to the same words and the same confessions each year. We recognise we are human and liable to make mistakes whilst striving for change. Yet we continue to live a fuller and more meaningful life, day to day, contributing to our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around us.

Perhaps, having explored the transformative power of Yom Kippur we can understand why the rabbis exclaimed that Yom Kippur was a day of transcendent joy akin to the joyous festival of Purim. It really is a once in a lifetime opportunity to restore harmony with the divine, with ourselves and with others. We hope that our soul awakens and that, through teshuvah (repentance), tefillah (prayer), and tzedakah (charity and good deeds), we can find healing and shalom (peace). With a shofar blast completing Yom Kippur we are called to put our reflections into action, and to turn back into life fully and wholly.

ⁱ Alan Lew 'This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation', p.214.

ⁱⁱ Part of the prayer, Ki Anu Amecha, found on p.96 of the Reform Judaism Machzor and repeated throughout the High Holy Day liturgy.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thankfully we no longer practice kapparot (the scapegoat ceremony) where a rooster/hen is twirled around your head while reciting a prayer asking that this chicken be killed in your stead. Some communities in Israel still engage with this ritual or may use a handkerchief or money instead of a rooster.

^{iv} Found at p.566 in the Reform Judaism Machzor, and repeated throughout the Yom Kippur liturgy.

Contemplation

The first mitzvah to be performed after Yom Kippur concludes (and perhaps after the first cup of tea and slice of cake!) is to hammer the first nail into your sukkah. We move from a deeply reflective, spiritual, inward facing day, to immediately remind ourselves that we need to go back into the physical world, to be active parts of society, and to be present.

This Yom Kippur, whether the day itself achieves a huge change in you personally, you have an opportunity to make change real in the world. What will you do this year to make your 25 hours of Yom Kippur meaningful in the moment, and to effect change in the year to come?