

An Open Letter to Ohev Yisrael Regarding Our Celebration of Yom Kippur

by
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Rosh Hashanah is referred to in Scripture as *Yom T'ruah* – the day of blowing trumpets. In my last letter to you I discussed the several themes of this day, but, one of those themes – personal introspection and repentance – has special relevance to *Yom Kippur*, the “High Holy Day” that will follow in ten days.

Yom Kippur literally means “day of covering,” but it is more commonly known as Day of Atonement because, under the Covenant given to Moses, the sins of Israel were to be covered over or atoned for on that day (Leviticus 16:17). *Yom Kippur* always occurs on 10 *Tishrei* on the lunar calendar (Leviticus 23:26-27) and will, this year, fall on October 2.

As with all commandments given under the Mosaic Covenant, New Covenant believers have to prayerfully seek God’s direction in order to know how to observe *Yom Kippur* today, given our changed circumstances. A good place to start is with the Scriptures that command us to keep *Yom Kippur* forever; there are several, but let’s look at Leviticus 16:29-34:

"This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells among you. For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the LORD. It is a sabbath of solemn rest for you, and you shall afflict your souls. It is a statute forever. And the priest, who is anointed and consecrated to minister as priest in his father's place, shall make atonement, and put on the linen clothes, the holy garments; then he shall make atonement for the Holy Sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tabernacle of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the children of Israel, for all their sins, once a year." And he did as the LORD commanded Moses." (See also, Leviticus 23:26-32).

The foregoing verses of Scripture (Leviticus 16:1-33) give great detail of how Aaron, the first Levitical High Priest, was to conduct the *Yom Kippur* sacrifices. He had to wash a certain way and dress a certain way and, only then, could he enter the Most Holy Place in order to sacrifice a goat and a bull. The bull was to atone for Himself and his family, while the goat (one of two chosen by lots) was sacrificed for the entire assembly of Israel for sin that any of them may have committed unintentionally (Leviticus 16:6; Hebrews 9:7). The goat that was not sacrificed on the altar was brought alive before the Lord “to make atonement upon it, and to let it go as the scapegoat into the wilderness” (Leviticus 16:10, 21-22) to carry all the sins of Israel out of the camp – not just the unintentional ones:

"Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and shall send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a suitable

man. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to an uninhabited land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness.” (Leviticus 16:21-22).

Clearly, for us who are in the New Covenant, complying with the foregoing instructions is not possible for various reasons that include the absence of the Temple, a non-functioning Levitical priesthood, and the fact that our atonement is through the blood of Yeshua and not through the blood of bulls and goats (Hebrews 9:11-12)! Let us therefore compare the two covenants and look for reasonable analogies that might help us:

1. In the Mosaic Covenant, the priesthood order was of Aaron; in the New Covenant, the priesthood order is of Mechizedek (Psalms 110:4; Hebrews 5:6, 10, 7:11).
2. In the Mosaic Covenant, Aaron was High Priest; in the New Covenant, Yeshua is High Priest (Hebrews 5:9, 6:20).
3. In the Mosaic Covenant, Israel was described as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” in which Aaron and his sons were appointed the priests; in the New Covenant, we who are believers in Yeshua, have also become “a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” and we have therefore become New Covenant priests (Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:5-11; Revelation 1:4-6).
4. In the Mosaic Covenant, shedding the blood of animals was required for the remission of sin; in the New Covenant, shedding of the blood of Yeshua was required for the remission of sin (Hebrews 9:11-12, 18, 22).
5. In the Mosaic Covenant, the blood of animals could not remove sin; in the New Covenant, the blood of Yeshua removes sin (Hebrews 9:25-26; 10:3, 11-12, 17).
6. In the Mosaic Covenant, the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place in the earthly Tabernacle once each year with animal blood; in the New Covenant, Yeshua entered the Most Holy Place in the Heavenly Tabernacle, once, for all, with His own blood (Hebrews 9:6-7, 11-12, 25-26, 28; 10:12).
7. In the Mosaic Covenant, only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place; in the New Covenant, we who are priests can enter the Most Holy Place with Yeshua (Leviticus 16:17; Hebrews 9:7; 10:19-22).
8. In the Mosaic Covenant, the High Priest placed the sins of Israel on a scapegoat; in the New Covenant, Yeshua, the High Priest, takes the sins of Israel upon Himself (Leviticus 16:21-22; Hebrews 9:11-12).

As I have said, it is our responsibility as New Covenant communities and individual believers, to prayerfully discern how to comply with commandments that were given in a former covenant and during a previous time. In regard to the commandments of *Yom Kippur*, Ohev Yisrael believes that a key to its observance today is to be found in 1 Peter 2:9-10:

“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.”

Since we who are believers have been made priests under Yeshua our High Priest, is it not logical that, during *Yom Kippur*, we should be doing priestly service for God as did the priests of old? The Levitical priests could not enter the Most Holy Place with their High Priest, but that has changed for us, for we read in Hebrews 10:19-22:

“Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Yeshua, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

With these two Scriptures in mind, we see that our priestly service on *Yom Kippur* must (1) employ the blood of Yeshua, (2) “proclaim the praises of Him who called you (us) out of darkness into His marvelous light,” and (3) apply these in a way that is analogous to the purpose of the *Yom Kippur* sacrifices conducted in the Tabernacle. Recalling that in Leviticus 16:21 Aaron laid his hands on the scapegoat while confessing over it “all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins,” it becomes clear that our chief role as New Covenant priests on *Yom Kippur* is to engage in priestly intercession for Israel – for its protection, for its survival, and especially for the salvation of its people so that Yeshua may return hearing all of Israel proclaim: “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”

So Ohev Yisrael’s *Yom Kippur* services will be geared first to proclaiming Yeshua as Lord and savior, and then asking God to lead Israel to repentance, forgive its sins, and bring it to salvation in Yeshua. Petitioning God to forgive Israel’s sins is nothing new; consider the example of Moses in Exodus 32:30-32:

“Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. So now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! Yet now, if You will forgive their sin -- but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.”

But let me now explain some Jewish traditions that you will encounter during Ohev’s *Yom Kippur* services many of which will, hopefully, help to move us toward our priestly goal.

Scripture commands us that *Yom Kippur* is a day of solemn rest and one on which we are to afflict our souls (Leviticus 23:27). Jewish tradition teaches that we afflict our souls through fasting for the entire 24 hour period from sundown to sundown, although an exception is recognized for young children and those whose health precludes fasting.

The first thing you will notice about our services is that there will be a more serious mood than on most Sabbaths. Reflecting on the salvation offered by Yeshua during *Yom Kippur* is a sweet yet serious experience – sweet because we rejoice in our own salvation, but serious because most of Israel has not yet received what we already have.

The first of our services comes just before sundown on Sunday, October 1. It begins a final self-examination of our personal walk with God (something required of all priests) – an examination that begins today, *Yom T'ruah*, with the blowing of trumpets (see also Matthew 5:23-24; 1 Corinthians 11:28). As early in history as the eighth century, Judaism added a special declaration called *Kol Nidre* to the *erev Yom Kippur* service that professes:

“All vows, oaths, and pledges which we may be forced to take between this Yom Kippur and the next, of these we repent and these we renounce. Let them all be nullified and voided, and let us be absolved and released.” (Translation by John Fischer).

This seemingly improper profession is believed to have its origins in rash vows made during persecutions where individuals were forced, upon torture or death, to disavow their Jewish faith and identity. In previous years, a re-composed Messianic version of *Kol Nidre* was sung at Ohev Yisrael but this year, for the purpose of teaching and historical significance, the original version will be canted – not as a prayer, but as “special music.”

The following morning (Monday, October 2), we will enter into worship, receive a short pastoral message about *Yom Kippur*, read from the Torah and other Scriptures, progress to a time of final personal reflection, and conclude with fervent prayer for the protection and salvation of the people and nation of Israel. Several Ohev homes will be made available, where members can gather at sundown to hear the final blast of the *shofar* and break the fast in the midst of fellowship.

One of the traditional prayers that will be said on Yom Kippur, *Al Chet*, deserves special mention because it is ritualistic in reciting and asking forgiveness for a long list of sins that most of us have not committed. The first thing that must be said about this is that believers, such as we are, are to repent and place our sin under the blood of Yeshua immediately whenever we recognize our need to do so; we do not wait for *Yom Kippur*. Also, merely naming a sin and saying “I repent” does not constitute repentance; God reads our heart which is where true repentance lies. So why do we retain *Al Chet* as a prayer? We are using it as part of our intercessory role in praying for Israel which, corporately and collectively, has most probably committed most of the sins named (it doesn't hurt to review them for ourselves either). One of the ways we intercede for Israel is to identify so completely with the nation that we pray “forgive us” – not “forgive them.” Yeshua gave us such an example when he taught us to pray:

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12).

Note also how Daniel confessed the sins of Israel although Scripture shows no occasion where he sinned personally (Daniel 9:5, 8, 11, 15).

There is one more Jewish tradition surrounding the prayer of *Al Chet* that I want to call to your attention – that of beating one’s chest with a closed fist at the mention of each sin. This symbolic expression of remorse is one that some of us have adopted from our earlier synagogue experience, but no one in Ohev should feel obligated to join in this tradition if it does not enhance their prayer.

It is tradition in Judaism that, on *Yom Kippur* afternoon, there is a short (perhaps 15 minutes) service for mourners known as *Yiskor*. Ohev Yisrael does not pray *Yiskor* because it is an un-biblical prayer, asking that God attribute merit to a deceased person's soul on the basis of the mourner's acts of charity or other good works. To replace it and still honor the tradition of remembering departed loved ones, Ohev will conduct a Yeshua-centered memorial service 30 minutes after the conclusion of the morning service, only for those who wish to participate. This will include reading several psalms, reciting *Kaddish* (an ancient praise to God), lifting up Yeshua as the focus of our hope, and allowing short testimonies of remembrance about departed loved ones.

I hope that the explanations and exhortation to priestly service that are contained in this letter will encourage all Ohev members to participate fully and with understanding. Please feel invited to call me at any time to discuss these matters or anything else that is on your heart.

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