

Day of Atonement

A Biblical Festival Quick Reference Sheet

Also Known As:

- **Day of Atonement**
- **Yom Kippur**: Biblically, it is literally “Yom Kippurim” (in the plural form, “Day of Atonements”).

Time of Year:

September or October. The Day of Atonement is on the 10th day of the 7th Biblical month, Tishri, ten days after The Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah) and five days before the Feast of Booths (Sukkot).

Scripture References:

Leviticus 16, Leviticus 23: 26-32, Leviticus 25:8-13, Numbers 29:7-11

Themes:

A traditional anniversary of two significant events

- It is said that on the Day of Atonement, Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets, signifying that God had forgiven the nation of Israel for the incident of the Golden Calf. According to the Sages, because of Israel's repentance, God made the Day of Atonement an eternal day of forgiveness. (See Exodus 34.)
- It is said that on the Day of Atonement, Jesus was tempted on the last day of His forty day fast. (Jesus' fast would have begun on the 1st of the Biblical month Elul, which begins the traditional 40 Days of Repentance, culminating on the Day of Atonement.) (See Matthew 4:1-11.)

A time of atonement

- Atonement in Hebrew is “kaphar” and means “to cover over, pacify, appease, forgive, cancel.”
- The Day of Atonement can be likened to a time of “spring cleaning” once a year to remove the Temple's ritual unfitness of a year's contamination. (See Leviticus 16:16.) The ritual unfitness was atoned for in order to maintain continual interaction with God's dwelling presence. In the Apostolic Writings, our bodies are likened to the Temple, which houses the Spirit of God. The Day of Atonement can serve as a yearly reminder to make things right with God and with others. The annual physical cleaning of the Temple reminds us that we need the Messiah to clean us inwardly. (See Hebrews 9:10-14, 10:4.)
- One of the Temple rituals on the Day of Atonement was the ceremony of the Azazel (or “scapegoat”). Azazel carried sin away and can be likened to a garbage truck that carries away the trash from a spring cleaning. The other goat in the ceremony was sacrificed as a sin offering, representing purification and cleansing from sin or ritual unfitness. (See Leviticus 16:7-10.)

A day of repentance

- The Day of Atonement is the climax of “Ten Days of Awe,” or the “Ten Days of Repentance,” which began on the Feast of Trumpets.
- It is a day of national repentance.
- Maimonides references four steps involved in repentance. 1) To recognize and acknowledge the wrong committed [whether in action or verbally]. 2) To make amends, however possible, for any damage caused. 3) To commit to oneself to not repeat the mistake again. 4) Indeed, to not repeat the wrong when confronted with the same set of circumstances.

The holiest day of the year

- The Day of Atonement is called the holiest day of the year. It is said that it is the day when, more than any other time, the “gates” of heaven are open and one can respond to God’s call and enter the Presence of the Almighty.

A day of confession and prayer

- Confession reminds us of our great need for God’s intervention. (See John 1:9, James 5:16.)
- The Day of Atonement is a reminder of the terrible cost of sin in our lives.
- On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies under the cover of a cloud of smoke created by incense. In Scripture, incense is representative of prayer and thus, prayer is a major focus on the Day of Atonement. (See Leviticus 16:13, Revelation 5:8.)

A day of self-denial

- Leviticus 23:27 says “afflict yourselves” on the Day of Atonement. Using the Scriptures, affliction has been equated with fasting. (See Psalms 35:13, Isaiah 58:3,10, Acts 27:9 [refers to the Day of Atonement simply as “The Fast”].)
- The Day of Atonement is said to be a rehearsal for dying, a day to come face to face with God, to confess, to ask pardon and to anticipate the final judgment.

A declaration of future events

- Eschatologically, the Day of Atonement represents the national restoration of Israel. It also pictures the Day of the Lord, ie. the Day of Judgment.
- When the Messiah returns, He will declare the year of Jubilee. The shofar will sound on the Day of Atonement to herald the beginning of the 50 year Jubilee. The Year of Jubilee declares freedom from bondage, remission of debt and forgiveness of sins. (See Leviticus 25:8-13.)

Messianic Significance:

- It is said that just as Yom Kippur brings atonement, so the death of the righteous brings atonement. Jesus is the atonement for our sins. The cleansing work of the Messiah has wrought for us forgiveness, pardon and right standing with God.
- On the Feast of Trumpets, God is said to inscribe names into the Book of Life and on the Day of Atonement, God closes the Book. The Apostolic Writings declare that a believer’s name is written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. (See Revelation 3:5,13:8, 20:12.)

Traditions:

- Any form of work is prohibited. The Day of Atonement is called the Sabbath of Sabbaths.
- It is traditional to wear white garments, like that used for burial. Some wear a kittel, a burial robe, over their clothing. This is not a morbid concept, for the heart of the Day of Atonement is that God offers redemption and new life. The wearing of white clothing also reflects the simple, linen garments worn by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, when he went through an extensive ritual of purification: physically, mentally and spiritually prior to entering into God’s presence.
- It is said that there are five afflictions on the Day of Atonement: 1) fasting, 2) not wearing leather [which is a sign of luxury], 3) no bathing, 4) no applying lotions or perfumes and 5) no marital relations.
- Special services include: Kohl Nidre (All Vows), where the previous year’s vows are declared null and void, three prayer services (morning, additional and afternoon) and Ne’ilah (closing) service followed by a final shofar blast. (See Isaiah 27:13, Matthew 24:31.)

Scripture Readings:

Morning: Leviticus 16, Numbers 29:7-11, Isaiah 57:14-58:14. Afternoon: Leviticus 18:1-30, the Book of Jonah.

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