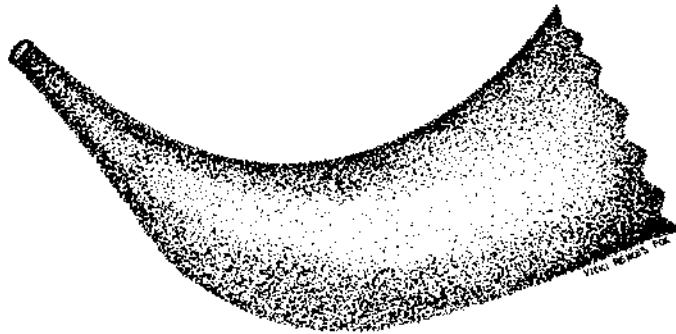


# 3

## YOM KIPPUR— WE ASK FORGIVENESS

**Y**OM Kippur, the Day of Atonement, occurs in early fall ten days after Rosh Hashanah. The last of the Days of Awe, it is a day to “atone for one’s sins” and ask forgiveness for one’s past failings.



This major holy day does not recall a specific Jewish historical event. Rather, it is experienced personally as a spiritual challenge involving reevaluation and change. Yom Kippur is one of the most difficult and soul-searching days of the year. It requires the ability to stand before God—and oneself; it demands the honesty to admit mistakes and to appeal for forgiveness.



Yom Kippur is a day of complete concentration. This is accomplished through fasting; no food or drink is consumed for twenty-five hours. The fast is based on the biblical phrase “For on this day, you shall practice self-denial/self-control.” This total abstinence blocks out distractions and allows a directed focus on the task of repentance.

All healthy adults are required to fast. There are special laws pertaining to sick individuals, pregnant women, and women who have just given birth. Although children may practice fasting while they are younger, they are expected to begin fasting by age thirteen.

## GREETINGS

The different greetings for Yom Kippur embody the various themes of the holiday: People say in Hebrew, “*G’mar Hatimah Tovah*,” which means, “May you be sealed for life the upcoming year.” (A short form is “*G’mar Tov*.”)

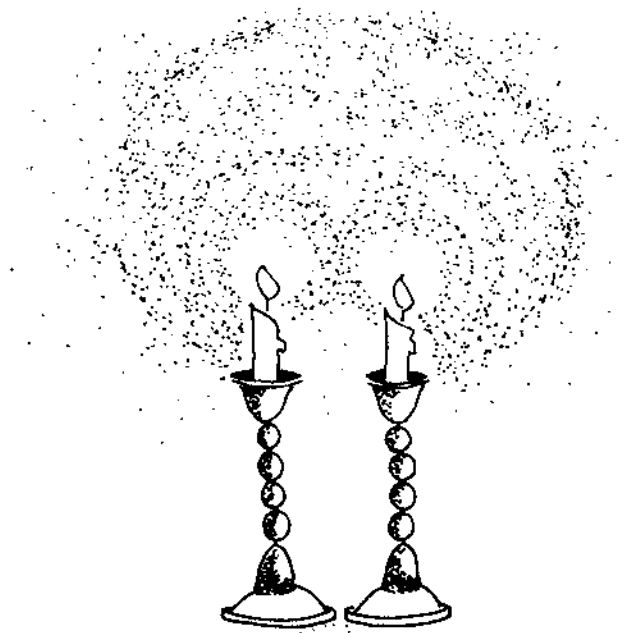
People will also greet each other by saying in Hebrew, “*Tzom Kal*,” which means, “May you have an easy fast.” In addition, it is always appropriate to wish someone in Yiddish a “*Gut Yontif*” or in Hebrew “*Hag Sameach*,” both of which mean “Good Holiday.”

## HOME TRADITIONS

The meal eaten before the start of Yom Kippur is festive, and takes place quite early to allow people to get to synagogue before sunset. The *Kiddush*, the prayer over the wine, is not recited, although the blessing over the uncovered bread is recited and round *challah* is eaten with honey. (The bread is uncovered for this holiday only because the blessing is not preceded by Kiddush.)

Because this is the last meal eaten for twenty-five hours, it is important to plan a meal that will sustain you. Many people believe that salty foods will make the fast harder, so salty foods are avoided before the fast. Others believe starchy food will make the fast easier because carbohydrates last longer. If you are a caffeine drinker, consider giving up caffeine for approximately one week before Yom Kippur to make the fast easier. Do whatever works for you and be sure to drink plenty of water before the start of the fast.

Just before leaving for the synagogue, several rituals are completed. It is customary to first light *Yizkor* candles, or memorial candles, for those in the family who are



deceased, although a blessing is not said when lighting these candles. (These special candles, which burn the entire twenty-five hours, can be purchased ahead of time at synagogues or Jewish stores.)

Then two holiday candles are lit and blessed *after* rather than before the meal. Lighting of the candles signals the beginning of Yom Kippur, and no eating or drinking occurs after the onset of the holiday. Parents bless their children for health and life in the new year. Finally, before leaving for the synagogue, Jews recite the *Shehehayanu*, the prayer praising God for having reached the season of introspection.

Additional Yom Kippur customs besides the fast were formulated by the rabbis, the codifiers of Jewish law. The rabbis expanded the concept of self-denial as it related to certain personal behaviors: not wearing any leather goods, not bathing, not using oils, makeup, or perfumes, not engaging in sexual relations on Yom Kippur. These limitations are practiced to enhance the inner spiritual awareness on Yom Kippur.

Another traditional custom is to wear white clothes on this holiday to symbolize a desire for purification and renewal. As you approach the synagogue at the beginning of Yom Kippur, you may notice men and women wearing white suits and dresses.

At the conclusion of the fast, it is traditional to have a “break fast.” Some synagogues offer a light meal at the conclusion of Yom Kippur services. Others offer glasses of orange juice to “jump-start” congregants on their way home for “break fasts.” (See the recipe on page 53 for a “break fast” *kugel*.)

## SYNAGOGUE TRADITIONS

There is always a sense of urgency for those arriving at synagogue to attend *Kol Nidre*, the service that begins Yom Kippur. Friends and family greet each other and hurry in to take their seats in time for the opening notes of this dramatic service.

### Kol Nidre

The custom of reciting Kol Nidre, the Absolution of All Vows, at the start of Yom Kippur began somewhere between the second and sixth centuries.

The Yom Kippur service begins with a plea for the remission of vows for the upcoming year. This is curious. Why should Jews appeal to God for the upcoming year rather than approach God to absolve their vows for the past year?

Throughout the centuries Jews lived in political situations in which their very lives were at stake. Sometimes they were forced to deny their Judaism and pledge allegiance to a different faith. The mechanism of Kol Nidre realized the precarious nature of Jewish life and provided a release for whatever religious vows these Jews might be forced to make during the upcoming year to ensure their physical survival.

Kol Nidre is restricted to vows which concern the relationship between the human being and God. It does not cancel personal, political, or business obligations.

The drama of this judgment scene can be felt by each individual. All stand as the *Torahs* are taken out of the ark. The eerie call of the music evokes tears as it is repeated three times, swelling to its poignant conclusion. The words evoke recognition of the unique relationship between God and the Jewish people. The memories of the past move individuals to feelings of longing and love.

The particular melody used by most Ashkenazic congregations first appeared among Jews of Southern Germany between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (A. Z. Idelsohn, "The Kol Nidre Tune," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 1931–32). Sephardic and other Jews of Oriental lands recite Kol Nidre in a less dramatic melody.

### Services During the Day of Yom Kippur

Services for Yom Kippur day contain various sections. Parts of the Torah are read twice, once in the morning and once in the late afternoon. Although services continue basically all day long, there is usually a break before the afternoon service. Some people gather for study sessions or discussions; others go home for a rest.



## Confessional

The *Vidui*, the confessional and recitation of sins, is repeated many times in the Yom Kippur liturgy, although the particular number of repetitions varies with individual prayerbook editions. This recitation follows a similar structure whether the confessional is recited in a Reform or Conservative, Orthodox or Reconstructionist synagogue. Although the melodies may vary, the music is always powerful, flowing from a deep, blasting call to God to a humble, repetitive communal listing of sins.

The confessional concludes with a gentler melody in which the whole congregation joins in asking: “For all these sins, forgiving God, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement” (J. Harlow, *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: A Prayerbook for the Days of Awe*, New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1972, p. 381).

The confessional begins by acknowledging that human beings accept their responsibilities and imperfections: “We are not so brazen or so arrogant as to say that we are perfect and have not sinned. For indeed we have sinned.” The prayer continues as congregants communally recite an alphabetical listing of human failures. These failures stress corruption in business, in politics, in love.

The whole of the confessional is recited in a plural form in public prayer. All the community stands responsible and vulnerable before God. Jews are not singled out for individual errors; rather they are allowed privacy in the communal confessional.

The prayer concludes by imploring God to forgive all Jews for transgressions. The congregants humbly appeal to God for compassion and understanding.

## Memorial Service

Yizkor, the memorial service for the dead, is recited several times a year and is a particularly emotional moment of Yom Kippur. Many people will enter the synagogue just before Yizkor to ensure their presence in memory of and respect for the dead. Orthodox and some Conservative synagogues recite Yizkor after the Torah service in the morning. Reform and other liberal synagogues will read Yizkor near the conclusion of Yom Kippur in the late afternoon.

Some Jews think that only those whose parents, children, spouses, or siblings have died should remain in the sanctuary during Yizkor. However, in many communities today all congregants remain standing together not only to remember their personal deceased but also to remember Jewish martyrs, and Kaddish, the memorial prayer for the dead, is recited for all of them.



## The Concluding Service

*Neilah*, the concluding service, is recited when the sun is setting and the evening shadows begin to emerge. It is the final opportunity on Yom Kippur to ask for forgiveness.

The word *Neilah* itself means closing. Some interpret this to mean that the gates of the heavens are closing, that the opportunities for confession and forgiveness are ending. Despite that imposed ending, we continue to pray for life in the New Year. *Neilah* concludes with the long, final blasting of the shofar, which is only blown on Yom Kippur at this final dramatic moment.

As congregants stream out of temple to break the fast, there is a tremendous feeling of relief that the day is ended and the prayers have been accepted. People hug and kiss each other joyfully as they once again wish each other a happy new year.

## INSIGHTS

### Fasting

The most widely known custom concerning Yom Kippur is the twenty-five-hour total fast. Praying with an empty stomach allows total focus as Jews examine the depths of their souls. Jews move from the physical world to that of the spiritual.

Fasting creates a sense of self-denial and self-control: If I can resist my hunger for food for one day, can I have strength to resist my hunger for things, for power, for control?

Fasting also teaches what it means to be hungry. You can experience in a microcosm what life might be like without the sources that support life. And when you conclude this day, you may ask: What can I do to feed the hungry in the world—those who are hungry for food and those who are hungry for emotional, spiritual nurturance?



### CHILDREN AND FASTING

*When I was little I used to think of Yom Kippur day as an opportunity to feast while my parents were fasting. After all, as they provided only minimal meals for us, my siblings and I would invariably scrounge up various delicious "treats" for ourselves. Now that I have children I have had to rethink what fasting on Yom Kippur should mean for them.*

*As they approach the age of fasting, children*

*can start "practicing" a little bit of the day, but they should not be encouraged to do a complete fast while they are still under age thirteen. With prior discussion, even young children can be discouraged from looking on Yom Kippur as a day of feasting. Show them that they can eat nourishing but not festive food as their part on this most solemn of Jewish holidays.*

—P.Z.M.



### Reading the Book of Jonah

On Yom Kippur afternoon it is customary to read the Book of Jonah in the synagogue. This ancient story offers opportunities for contemplation and discussion.

Jonah was drafted into being a prophet. He did not take to the job willingly. God told Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and make the inhabitants change their evil ways. Reluctantly, Jonah began his journey and only completed his mission after several strange things happened to him.

Adults and children might consider such questions as: How did the violence of the ocean storm during Jonah's voyage frighten the sailors and make them perform an evil act? How could the sailors throw Jonah overboard without caring about his life? Why is the whale such an important dimension of this story? What lengths did Jonah have to go through to make a strange city change its ways? What is so unusual about a whole city changing its ways? We can examine the story and apply the lessons to our own personal life. What one or two changes should we make in our lives? Why is change so hard for most people?

### Asking Forgiveness

The *Mishneh*, the first basic codification of Jewish law, reads: "Yom Kippur atones for the sins between human beings and God; however, when people have hurt one another, atonement is not possible until they have made peace with each other" (*Mishneh*, Yoma 8:9).



Judaism teaches that human beings can make amends with each other—can wipe the slate clean—and each year stand anew before God after having asked forgiveness of others. Wiping the slate clean demands that first an individual is internally aware of his or her mistakes and wrongdoings. It then requires a conscious sorting of words and deeds. And finally an action—a correction or apology—is offered.

One way of beginning this process may be to keep a journal that will trace your forgiveness process from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. Write down your thoughts and feelings, acknowledge your weaknesses, and evaluate your goals for the coming year.

Another step in the process of forgiveness is to approach individuals—family members or close friends—and ask them directly for forgiveness. All of us have encountered unpleasant situations within our work and personal lives. Sometimes things go on between friends that are painful and even embarrassing.

Parents and children might undertake this process together. What are the areas in which parents were weak as individuals? Parents can note times in which they might have acted abruptly or impatiently. Perhaps they even misjudged a child during stressful moments.

The parent can model asking for forgiveness. Parents can say: “Children, I would like to ask your forgiveness for my shortcomings. Can you please forgive me?” Each parent can spend separate time with each child so that the forgiveness process can open intimate communication.

This process of asking for forgiveness is difficult. In many ways, some people find it easier to sit in the synagogue fasting a full day than to approach a lover, a child, a parent, and ask for that person’s forgiveness. Imagine the difference in our relationships when we overcome hesitation and experience honesty and resolution as we approach Yom Kippur. By focusing on asking for forgiveness as a process prior to Yom Kippur, the individual can truly be ready to experience the Day of Atonement.

## RECIPES

Typically the “break-the-fast” meal is a light dairy meal. It may feature lox and bagels, herring, other fish, and sweets. Orange juice and coffee are always appreciated. *Kugel*, which takes many forms, can be made sweet for this occasion. Here’s one such recipe.



### STEVE'S BREAK-THE-FAST KUGEL

<i>1 8 oz. package broad noodles (cooked, drained, and cooled)</i>	<i>½ stick butter, melted</i>
<i>1 pint large curd cottage cheese</i>	<i>¼ cup sugar</i>
<i>¾ tsp. vanilla</i>	TOPPING:
<i>1½ cups milk</i>	<i>½ cup cornflakes, crumbled</i>
<i>1 cup buttermilk</i>	<i>½ tsp. cinnamon</i>
<i>4–5 eggs (beat just before adding)</i>	<i>1 tsp. sugar</i>

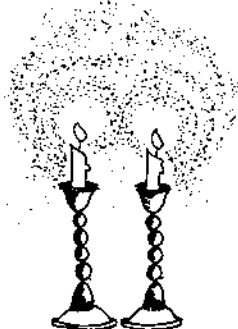
Make the day before Yom Kippur begins. Combine kugel ingredients in a large bowl. Add noodles. Mix. Pour into baking dish (glass 9" × 13" inch).

Cover and refrigerate overnight. Should be set when chilled. Mix the topping and spread over the kugel. Bake at 350 degrees for 1 hour or until golden brown.

Reheat when coming home from temple after the concluding service.



## YOM KIPPUR BLESSINGS



*Introductory meditation to be recited together after dinner before candle lighting:*

Today we gather to thank God for all the goodness in our lives, for the beauty of nature, for the love we feel for one another, for the Yom Kippur tradition which we share.

May our celebration increase our awareness of your ongoing gifts, O God.

*Candle lighting:*

(We recite this blessing, then light the candles.)

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, asher keedshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadleek ner shel (Shabbat v') Yom Hakeepureem.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who enables us to welcome (Shabbat and) Yom Kippur by kindling these lights.

*Shehehayanu:*

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, shehehayanu, v'keeyomanu v'higeeyanu laz'man hazeh.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and encouraged us to observe this Day of Atonement.

*Parents' blessing for their children:*

FOR BOYS:

May God touch you as you strive to live in the tradition of Ephraim and Menashe, leaders who carried our traditions with pride.

**FOR GIRLS:**

May God touch you as you strive to live in the tradition of Sarah and Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, leaders who carried our traditions with pride.

**CONTINUE BY SAYING:**

May the Eternal bless you and keep you.

May the Eternal bring you warmth and protect you.

May the Eternal embrace you and grant you peace. Amen.