

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



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 behaviour, 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 worshipping 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 *Limmud* we will study atonement as it is explained and carried out in the Bible and how it is manifested in Jewish tradition today. We will also look at the connection of Jewish atonement to atonement in Christianity and how this concept is similar and different in both faiths. Join us on this powerful journey of one of God's greatest gifts to us all.

With prayers for *shalom*, peace,

Rabbi Eckstein

Rabbi Eckstein



engraving by Gustave Dore (1832 – 1883)

LESSON 1: Returning to God

“ . . . Because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins.” — Leviticus 16:30

Yom Kippur, the holiest day 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 worshiping 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 worshiping 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 *teshuva*, 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, *teshuva* is a three-step process that can only be followed once a person stops engaging in sinful behaviour. 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.

Teshuva 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.

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It is important for Christians to note that the Day of Atonement wasn’t just a Jewish idea; this day and all its practices were God’s idea. God Himself is the One who created a way for His people to reconcile themselves to Him.

While Christian theology follows the teaching from the Hebrew Bible that all are sinful and in need of redemption (see Ecclesiastes 7:20), the means of that redemption shifts from individuals’ actions and heart attitudes to a matter of faith. For Christians, that atonement comes through faith in Jesus.

As Romans 3:23-25 says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith.”

Though the path to forgiveness and reconciliation differs, the problem is the same – sin separates us from God. But, thankfully, the end result is the same – a return to good standing with our merciful God. — CAMERIN COURTNEY, SENIOR STAFF WRITER

REFLECT

- What is your definition of repentance? A lot of people feel that repentance is changing into someone other than themselves. Challenge yourself to consider repentance as returning to who you truly are.

- If *Yom Kippur* is the greatest day of atonement for Jews, what would you consider the greatest day of atonement for Christians?

- Read Ephesians 1:3–10 and Colossians 1:13–14. What do these verses teach you about the wonderful gift of atonement?

RESPOND

- **Engage in sincere repentance.** While we talk a lot about repentance in both the Christian and Jewish faith, not everyone puts the idea into action. Take the time to really work on defeating bad habits. Confess your sins and sincerely resolve not to repeat them.



Sending Out the Scapegoat, illustration by William James Webb (1830-1904)

LESSON 2:

Two Goats, Two Choices

“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

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.

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The sacrifice of animals to atone for sin seems foreign in our modern world, but can seem especially odd to Christians, who know a different way to seek God’s forgiveness. But it’s important to appreciate the way in which God has historically related to His people and the way He foreshadowed and laid out His plan over the ages.

To bridge the gap between human sinfulness and God’s holiness, God, in His mercy, allowed for the sacrifice of animals throughout the year, and two goats specifically on *Yom Kippur*, to atone for sins. He set up this system, and in the New Testament that system changed in dramatic ways. For the Christian, the two goats are replaced by the Lamb of God.

Perhaps the most astounding thing is that God provides a way for our slate to be wiped clean. He knows us intimately and knows the ways in which we fail, but still welcomes us back to His holy presence . . . again and again. — CAMERIN COURTNEY, SENIOR STAFF WRITER

REFLECT

- 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 through Jesus’ sacrifice similar and different from the scapegoat ritual?

- Do you see your life more as a random set of circumstances or as completely controlled by God? What has shaped this view? How does this lesson impact your view?

- Review the three-step process for repentance that Rabbi Eckstein outlined in the first lesson. In what ways are these steps similar and different from the Christian understanding of repentance?

- Look up 2 Corinthians 7:10, Ephesians 1:7 and 1 John 1:9–10. What additional insights on atonement do you find?

RESPOND

- **Choose God.** To every physical act, there is a spiritual aspect waiting to be discovered. Look for the meaning and spiritual significance in everything you do. Dedicate your actions to God – and when you do every action becomes holy.



LESSON 3:

What God Can Not Forgive

“Do not do any work on that day, because it is the Day of Atonement, when atonement is made for you before the LORD your God.”

— Leviticus 23:28

As Scripture tells us, *Yom Kippur* is a day of atonement for all our sins. But there is some “fine print.” The Jewish sages explain that God can forgive us for everything that we have done wrong in regards to our relationship with Him. But when it comes to our relationships with other people — that is another matter.

It’s as if God says to us: “I can forgive you for going against My will, but I do not have the authority to speak on behalf of anyone else. Only the person you harmed can grant you forgiveness. All the tearful prayers in the world cannot wash away the hurtful words you said.”

That’s why *Yom Kippur* has become a time of asking forgiveness — not just from God, but also from the people around us. Jews recognize that if we are to walk away from this holy day completely cleansed, we must seek forgiveness from God and from everyone whom we may have hurt.

Traditionally, in the weeks and days leading up to *Yom Kippur*, Jews will call up friends and family to ask forgiveness. Sometimes it’s just a formality, particularly with those people with whom we have a generally good relationship, “just in case” we may have inadvertently

hurt their feelings.

More significant, however, is when a person knows that he or she has definitely wronged someone. Reaching out to a person we know we have hurt is extremely difficult, yet extremely necessary for total atonement. We cannot become at one with God if we are at odds with His children.

But what happens if we ask forgiveness and our apology is not accepted? The sages address this all-too-common situation. They explain that God only requires that we try — asking for forgiveness three times is considered sufficient. If, after several sincere attempts, forgiveness is still not granted, it is no longer our issue. We have done what we can, and the onus is now on the other person to complete the reconciliation process.

Ultimately, as uncomfortable as it is to admit we were wrong, and as difficult as it may be to humble ourselves before those we have wronged, we are doing ourselves a great service. Too many people go through life waiting for the right time to mend a relationship and then the right time never seems to come. *Yom Kippur* reminds us that when it comes to repairing relationships, the right time is now.

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The act of seeking forgiveness and granting it to others is a high value in Christian belief as well. There are many verses in the New Testament that directly command Christians to seek reconciliation and peace with others.

Romans 12:18 instructs, “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*” Those two words “*with everyone*” at the end of the verse up the ante considerably. Christians aren’t just told to live in harmony with the people we like and with whom we hold similar beliefs. Rather, peace is our goal with every person in our path.

Matthew 6:14–15 also offers strong words about forgiveness: “*For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*” This again directly relates the state of our relationship with others with the state of our relationship with God.

Though these verses (and others) set the bar quite high in our dealings with others, it seems altogether fitting and fair that the God who has gone to such great lengths to forgive and atone for our sins would not abide us denying the same grace to others. And when we place our attitudes and actions in the context of what He has done for us, it becomes unthinkable not to seek and extend forgiveness. — CAMERIN COURTNEY, SENIOR STAFF WRITER

REFLECT

- Why do you think it is so difficult for people to say, “I’m sorry, please forgive me?” What stops you from asking for forgiveness? Who do you need to forgive?

- When has someone sought your forgiveness for treating you wrongly in some way? How did that peacemaking effort make you feel? How does that feeling impact your desire to seek forgiveness from others? And how does it impact the way you perceive God’s forgiveness?

- What is the difference between forgiving someone and condoning their behaviour? How does knowing this difference make forgiveness easier?

RESPOND

- **Ask forgiveness.** Whether it’s someone you may have offended unintentionally or someone you know that you have definitely wronged, reach out and apologize. Mend the relationship. In doing so, you will fix something inside yourself as well.



LESSON 4:

Angel for a Day

“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

Every day of the year, we are engaged in the physical world in which God placed us. Some days we are able to inject a great dose of spirituality into our lives; other days we get completely consumed in the mundane and practical demands of living. Yet, if we don't check in periodically with our true purpose and spiritual calling, it's easy to get lost in the physicality of things. So in Judaism, once a year, on *Yom Kippur*, we have that reality check. We remember that although we have a body, we are really and truly a soul.

Our tendency is to think of ourselves as physical beings who from time to time have spiritual experiences. But the truth is that we are really spiritual beings, having a physical experience for the span of a lifetime. One day, this physical experience will come to an end. The body will return to dust; *“and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it”* (Ecclesiastes 12:7). We need to be prepared for our eventual return to God.

On *Yom Kippur*, as we remember who we really are, we strive for atonement. In order to help begin this transformation, the Bible mandated that we *“Hold a sacred assembly and deny yourselves . . . ”* The Jewish sages have appointed five physical behaviours that

we must refrain from on this holy day — we don't eat, drink, engage in marital relations, anoint ourselves with oils, or wear fancy leather shoes. We refrain from these physical activities so that we might discover, embrace, and focus on our spiritual core.

Jews believe, like the angels, we are all spirit on *Yom Kippur*. And like angels, who have no free choice and do only the will of God, we, too, strive to align our will with the Divine will. Along these lines, many have the custom of wearing all white on *Yom Kippur*, and most men wear a ritual white cloak called a *kittel*. White, as the symbol of purity, inspires us to be purified and cleansed before God.

To underscore our identifying with angelic beings on this day, we recite a praise out loud that is only whispered every other day of the year. Jewish tradition teaches that when Moses ascended to heaven to get the *Torah*, he saw the angels praise God saying, “Blessed is your Name, the glory of your Kingdom for eternity.” On all other days, this praise is incorporated into our prayers but in an undertone, as we recognize that we aren't on the same lofty level as the angels. However, on *Yom Kippur*, we shout this heavenly praise, demonstrating our true essence.

At our core, we are holy, we are whole, and we are one with God.

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The struggle to keep the big, eternal perspective in mind is universal. Our noisy culture and even the positive demands of family and work can take our eyes off God and His divine purpose for our life. But Romans 8:5-6 reminds us, *“Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.”*

Though Christians don't have the annual reminder of *Yom Kippur* to be governed by the Spirit, we have the words and actions of Jesus to guide us. Though divine, when Jesus walked the earth he *“often withdrew to lonely places and prayed”* (Luke 5:16). If he needed this time of solitude and prayer, how much more do we, his followers?

Mirroring the physical behaviours Jews refrain from on *Yom Kippur*, Jesus also encouraged a denying of self in order to focus on heavenly matters. We see this when he told his disciples, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”* (Matthew 16:24, emphasis added). Keeping the spiritual in perspective isn't always easy. But it is wonderful practice for the life to come, when we will join the angels in praising God, saying, “Blessed is your name.”

— CAMERIN COURTNEY, SENIOR STAFF WRITER

REFLECT

- Imagine that our physical bodies are like clothing that we wear for the span of a lifetime. They are not who we are, and only our true selves, our souls, are immortal. How might that impact your decisions and actions on a daily basis? On a long-term basis?

- What things might it be helpful for you deny yourself from for a time to help you focus on spiritual matters and on God?

- In what ways do you feel at one with God? How might you align your will with the will of God?

RESPOND

- **Feed your soul.** We never forget to feed our physical bodies, but when we remember that, at our core, we are souls, we become aware that our soul needs to be nourished as well. Pray, study the Bible, walk out in nature, find a quiet time, sing – or do whatever nurtures your spiritual self.



LESSON 5:

The Service — Then and Now

*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

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 also 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.

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Without a special annual service to focus our mind and spirit on atonement, Christians must make a concerted effort to prioritize prayer, repentance, and introspection — the hallmarks of the *Yom Kippur* service. As with Jews, repentance is available all the time through prayer, but sometimes we need an external reminder to avail ourselves of this wonderful gift.

Though Christians don't have an annual holiday focused on atonement, we do have the sacrament of communion, a physical act of commemorating the source of our atonement — the death and resurrection of Jesus. First Corinthians 11:23–26 tells us, “*The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you;*

do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” This sacrament focuses our attention on the high price paid for our atonement, prompting us to repent and thank our merciful God for creating a way for us to get right with Him.

Just as Jews do, Christians also repent and return to God through our prayers. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” God, who sees our heart and hears our ever prayer, rewards the truly repentant with a clean slate. — CAMERIN COURTNEY, SENIOR STAFF WRITER

REFLECT

- Read 1 Corinthians 11:27–32. What do these verses teach about the right heart attitude to approach communion and repentance?

- According to Jewish teaching, prayers have replaced sacrifices in the process of securing our atonement. Does considering the important role of prayer change your attitude toward the practice at all? How can you honour God with the “fruit of your lips”?

- If you knew that today was your last day, how would you spend it? *Yom Kippur* beckons us to do the things we want to accomplish, feel called to contribute, and know we must amend – now – while we still can.

RESPOND

- **Take an “inventory of the soul.”** In Hebrew, this is called *Cheshbon HaNefesh*. It involves intense soul-searching to identify areas that we need to improve upon. It is an important step toward repentance, as we cannot fix what we don’t recognize as broken.