



## Yom Kippur Sermon 5780 -- Rabbi Aaron Alexander

I'd like to ask you to reflect on *why* you are here tonight/today? Articulate for yourself: just why have I arrived *here* on Yom Kippur? (I am here because...)

I'm going to do a show of hands, and in the spirit of Yom Kippur--please do this as honestly as you can, and please listen to your rabbi. *I know, I know, she's outside (upstairs).*

How many of you said: Expiation?

How about, confession?

Anybody for a pardon? How about Atonement? Anyone?

Who is here for Forgiveness?

How about Anti-Semitism? You are here to stick it to the haters...

How about some form of nostalgia... you crave the sounds and feelings that are provoked by this holiday?

How many just said to themselves some version of -- it's Yom Kippur, this is where I belong! Where else would I go? Jews belong in shul on Yom Kippur! Also, stop asking me questions!

Yes, most.

The Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Dr. Arnie Eisen, recently wrote, and I nodded my head:

Like two million other American Jews, I will be in synagogue next week in observance of Yom Kippur, and many of my fellow Jews will wonder during the long day of fasting and prayer, as I do virtually every year, just why we are there. Do we really believe the words we are reciting, literally or metaphorically? Can we convincingly reconcile a theology formulated many hundreds of years ago with notions of self and obligation, divinity and providence?<sup>1</sup>

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1. <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/standing-before-god-together/>

These questions resonate. But we rarely answer them. We tend to notice when, and how, we show up. But once here, the why fades away. Especially on this day, Yom Kippur, when it has become a communal and familial expectation.

In the last study I could find on progressively religious Jews showing up for religious Judaism, numbers once again confirmed that American Jews still considered Yom Kippur and Passover the most important holidays, which I imagine surprises nobody in this room. However, the generational divide is growing.

Those 60 and older were far more likely to pick Yom Kippur as central. Those in a younger cohort (18-39) were far more likely to choose Passover as primary. Does that surprise you?

Not me. Here are a few similarities and differences between them that I imagine accounts for both their popularity, and the growing generational divide.

--Passover and Yom Kippur are both centered on the group--in other words, they are celebrated amidst others.

--They are also both holidays of release, or freedom--On Passover--from Pharaoh's old and new, Today, Yom Kippur, we are released from our own mistakes.

--Both holidays require finding our selves in a National story, communal redemption on passover, communal atonement on Yom Kippur.

--Both holidays carry with them a core & nostalgic cadence--the sound of Kol Nidre, and the songs of the haggadah.

*The differences though, are somewhat more striking:*

- Passover--all food, if you consider Matzah food. Yom Kippur--not so much. Or, at all.

- Passover is home-based and family focused. Yom Kippur is synagogue based and communally focused, more broadly.

- Yom Kippur often feels like a mortality awareness holiday, in some ways a rehearsal for our deaths--This likely accounts for some of the generational divide.

- On Passover, we target an outsider oppressor, while Yom Kippur is self-targeted. We beat our own chests.

- And, while both holidays do require finding ourselves in a national story, one of them universalizes quite easily to all stories of slavery and freedom, while the other, a national

story of Atonement, more easily retains its particularity. And while we should never hesitate to take our message of love and justice outside these walls when necessary, Yom Kippur is essentially about us, here, now. This likely also partially explains the generational gap.

Since tonight/today happens to be Yom Kippur, I'd like to teach about the reason most of you are apparently **not** here. *Kapparah*, the day's namesake. Yom Kippur. Today is a day of Atonement. But what does that word even mean?

*Kapparah* can be translated about 12 different ways. It likely first meant to place a protective covering over something in order to hide it. Like, the covering of a sin to enable a person to go forward in relationship with God.

In context, though, *Kapparah* could mean anything from to cover, to pacify, to propitiate (I don't even know what that means) to wipe away or wash off, to expiate, to forgive, to pardon, or.. Atonement.

They all work for Yom Kippur--because YK at its essence is a covering of our sins, a wiping clean of our impurities, a propitiation to God, an objective forgiving of our many mistakes, a divine pardoning. A day of Atonement.

The translation we most commonly use for *Kapparah*, Atonement, was actually used in bible translation for the first time in the 16th century, by William Tyndale, the Christian scholar who laid the groundwork for the King James translation of the Bible, by far the most popular the world has ever known. Look it up in the dictionary and will find a definition that feels uncompromisingly Christian, even though *Kapparah* is unambiguously Jewish.

So how does it work, this *Kapparah*, our Atonement? The Torah reading lays it out--it begins with a High Priest, a bull and two goats. The High Priest, Aaron (no relation) kills a bull, and a goat, and sends another goat to the wilderness with all of our sins. Here's how the Torah describes some of that:

<p>יֵאָדָם וְהִקְרִיב אֶהֱרֹן אֶת־פֶּרַח הַחֲטָאת, אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ, וְכֹפֶר בְּעֵדוּ, וּבְעֵד בֵּיתוֹ; וְשָׁחַט אֶת־פֶּרַח הַחֲטָאת, אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ.</p>	<p>11 And Aaron shall present the bull of the sin-offering, which is for himself, and shall use it to make atonement for himself, and for his house.</p>

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<p>כא וְסָמַךְ אֶהָרֹן אֶת-שְׁתֵּי יָדָיו, עַל רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁעִיר הַחַי, וְהִתְוַדָּה עָלָיו אֶת-כָּל-עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶת-כָּל-פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל-חַטָּאתָם; וְנָתַן אֹתָם עַל-רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁעִיר, וְשָׁלַח בְּיַד-אִישׁ עֵתִי הַמִּדְבָּרָה.</p>	<p><b>21</b> And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of an appointed man into the wilderness.</p>

This is actually bizarre. Hands on a goat. Confession for all the people, at that time hundreds of thousands, if not more. The goat carries away all the sins, which based on what we know of the Israelites at that time, would have been billions. And poof, along with the sacrificed bull and other goat (yes, and some other important stuff!), **they are clean!**

כט וְהִיְתָה לָכֶם, לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם: בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּעֶשְׂרִי לַחֹדֶשׁ תַּעֲנֹוּ אֶת-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם, וְכָל-מְלֹאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ--הָאֶזְרָח, וְהַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם.

**29 And it shall be a statute for ever unto you: in the seventh month,** on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves, and shall do no manner of work, the citizen, or the stranger that journeys with you.

ל כִּי-בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם, לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם: מִכָּל, חַטָּאתֵיכֶם, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה, תִּטְהָרוּ.

**30** For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to purify you; from all your sins shall **you be purified before the LORD.**

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz noted something quite stunning about the Yom Kippur ritual I just described. He says:

"Yom Kippur is the day when reality transcends standard boundaries and conventions. It is the Festival celebrating the elimination of all flaws and transgressions and a return to the initial state of purity.

When Yom Kippur was observed in its fullest sense, it was a day on which the three sublime sanctities would converge, the sanctity of time, the sanctity of place, and the sanctity of person:

**The sanctity of time**, it has to be the 10th of Tishrei. It's a time-enacted obligation--*Mitzvah she-ha'zman grama*. Don't try Yom Kippur on Thursday.

And, we know the time is important for this holiday. You may have seen, based sociologically on families no longer living in close proximity to one another, that some gather close to Passover, but not on the 15th of *Nissan*, to have a Seder together. To experience that family, outside of time. Have you ever heard of that happening for Yom Kippur. Would you ever consider that -- hey, on our vacation this year, let's do Yom Kippur! Nope. None of us would. Today itself matters.

**The sanctity of place**: Only once each year the sacred Temple service was performed in the most sacred place, the Holy of Holies, *the Kodesh Kodashim*, the inner sanctum, where it is otherwise prohibited for any person to enter, under any circumstances;

and, the **sanctity of humanity**, of a human, as the Temple service is performed on this day exclusively by the High Priest, the most sanctified person in the congregation of Israel.

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Mix these three "holies" together, and God responds by gifting the entire community a continued relationship, purified from the past offenses we've committed.

But did you notice what's missing in this biblical and temple-based elixer? One word in particular.... **Teshuvah**, Repentance, that thing we clergy talk about incessantly before these holidays.

This may surprise you, but the repentance formula we now use is not in the Torah. Teshuvah as we know it, regret & apology--was not part of the biblical festival. If you pay close attention to your *Mahzor*, notice that it really isn't there, at least in the core, early, elements of the liturgy.

Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, redactor of the Mishnah, states it clearly:

רבי אומר: על כל עבירות שבתורה, בין עשה תשובה, בין לא עשה תשובה-- יום הכפורים מכפר.

For all transgressions in the Torah, whether one repented or did not repent, Yom Kippur atones,

The rabbis go on to qualify this.

תשובה בעיא יוה"כ, יוה"כ לא בעיא תשובה.<sup>2</sup>

Repentance requires Yom Kippur in order to complete the atonement, whereas Yom Kippur does not require repentance, but atones even without it.

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2. Yoma 85b

The day itself--ever potent. We stand here today in an some kind of other-wordly cosmic moment. Beyond convention. Beyond our typical boundaries.

And so I realized this year, and I understand this may deeply worry you--I've never fully understand what precisely is meant to happen on Yom Kippur. I've given dozens of Yom Kippur sermons, taught on it even more, and still, I over-use words that carry significant theological weight, but are burdened with a transcendence that beg us to ignore their actual meaning.

So here it is--this is where I'm at: Yom Kippur, all of its precision and intensity and solemnity and formality... and yes, ecstasy too---at its core--is essentially an act of grace by God. A gift from God, to us, and us back to God.

God *needs us **ready*** to be in relationship--communally re-purified at regular intervals--whether we deserve it or not, or else the whole project fails--the covenant erased.

And we need God to forgive, pardon, and grant atonement, or we are always on another side of a wall too thick to receive the abundant love that's supposed to flow our way--*Ahavah Rabba Ahavtanu.*

It's not grace in the Christian sense, because for each of us to receive atonement the ritual is critical, then and now. The work of the day, necessary. Communal confession, *with transparency and humility, matters*, and we do it well. We beat our chests and confess our sins, in the plural, for 25 hours. It's kind of intense. I can only imagine what it looks like from the outside.

But this communal confession, lots of Jews together in holy places, mixed in with the sanctity of this very day, enacts the wiping clean, the washing away, of the ways in which we fall short, religiously. This is difficult. But it's the Judaism we practice. **It** is why we are here.

If you do some searching around the internet for Jewish stories of Grace, it's going to be slim pickings, unless you are interested in the collected writings of famous author, Grace Paley. More likely, you'll find stories of Jews who accepted Jesus. I'm going to choose against highlighting those, here.

There's an old-world story--In a small village in the backwoods of Eastern Europe, many hours' journey from the nearest Jewish community, lived a Jewish family. Once a year, for the holy day of Yom Kippur, they would make the long trip to town in order to pray together with their fellow Jews.

One year, the villager woke bright and early on the day before Yom Kippur and readied himself for the journey. His children, however, not quite as industrious as he, had slept in. Impatient to get on his way, he said to his family: "Listen, I'm going to set out on foot while you get yourselves together. I'll wait for you at the large oak at the crossroads."

Walking swiftly, the villager soon reached the tree and lay down in its shade to wait for the family wagon. Exhausted from several days of backbreaking labor, he fell asleep. Meanwhile, his family loaded up the wagon and set out. But in the excitement of the journey, they forgot all about their old father and drove right by the sleeping figure at the crossroads.

When the villager woke, evening had already fallen. Many miles away, the *Kol Nidrei* prayers were getting underway in the town's synagogue. Lifting his eyes to the heavens, the old man cried:

"Master of the Universe! *Ribbono Shel Olam!* My children have forgotten me. But they are my children, so I forgive them. You, too, should do the same for those of Your children who have passed you by...." And then the gates opened up wide.

We don't deserve it. But divine love *transcends what it is* any of us deserve.

Here's how I know this. When the Israelites were in the desert, just after escaping slavery with God's significant help, they construct an idol, a golden calf--and the master of the world wants to sever the relationship, violently. But Moses appeals to God, he begs God to reconsider, regardless of how unworthy the Israelites. God's response to Moses--okay, I'll let this go, *Salakhti Kid'varekha* -- because:

*Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum ve--Chanun.*

"The Lord! The Lord! God, Compassionate and Grace-giving." *Chein*. Of course we translate it as gracious, so we don't have to directly confront the concept we believe represents another religion. But to be gracious, is to by definition to be grace-giving.

Were the ancient Sages as uncomfortable with this as I can see, and feel, you are? I think so. There are limitations to this, there have to be. That's why the Torah reading, from which I quoted earlier, is juxtaposed with a Haftarah from Isaiah, which overtly serves as a warning to those who would over-ritualize Judaism at the expense of a strong moral & interpersonal core.

And it's why you find this statement in the Mishnah:

עבירות שבין אדם למקום יוה"כ מכפר. עבירות שבין אדם לחבירו, אין יוה"כ מכפר עד שירצה את חבירו.<sup>3</sup>

Transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones; however, for transgressions between a person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person.

Our Talmudic Sages spend pages vigorously advocating for a *deep and earnest teshuvah, repentance--as if to say, we know it isn't in the Torah, so pay close attention*: a system by which the day itself provides atonement for the wrongs I do to you--that would be profoundly problematic.

Interpersonal relationships are unimaginably complicated. Teshuvah between people often needs its own timeline. Moreover, to grant that kind of forgiving power to God would promote a world in which nobody had to take responsibility for their actions.

As Anne Lamott once taught: "If earth is forgiveness school, family is your post-doctoral fellowship."<sup>4</sup> Yes, yes, & yes. Friends too.

But between you and God, me and God, us and God -- sincerely confess today, receive atonement today. It's that simple, because God is big enough to forgive the ways in which we don't live up to what we've been asked to do.

Call it grace, atonement, washing away, covering up -- It doesn't matter. It's remarkable. And it is necessary, precisely because we were perfectly created with infinite imperfections.

Come with an open, humble, heart, join this ever-fallible & mistake-ridden community, beat your chest, tell God everything with an intent to do better, to be better--receive your Atonement.

Rabbi Ethan Tucker said it well: The power of Yom Kippur--understood by our Sages as a gracious gift from God--lies in our recognition of the fact that usually we ourselves cannot fully undo what we have done. We need God's forgiveness and atonement, sources of renewal that stem from beyond the human realm.

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3. Yoma 85b

4. *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope*.



Because in a world in which almost nothing seems right, or fair, or equal--in a world in which justice rarely seems blind...this simple treasure bestowed upon us by God, then extended by the Sages, is so unbelievably precious, and abundantly generous.

As I was writing this I remembered a story about V.P. Hubert Humprey's death. A few days before he passed, as his cancer overtook him, he took precious moments to call friends and loved ones, former associates and world leaders, to say goodbye. He also called a former nemesis, for which there was no lovelost between them, and then-current Washington outcast--Richard Nixon.

It was Christmas eve, and he learned on that call that the Nixons were both sick, and very much alone. The next day, after the inability to forget how he felt during the conversation, he called Nixon and told him he had a farewell present for him. As told in the Post<sup>5</sup>: He would invite and make arrangements for him to attend the ceremony that would conclude the lying-in-state in Washington, and that he wanted him to be present and to stand in the place of honor for a former president.

Nixon, of course, had resigned from the presidency in disgrace only three years before and had not returned to Washington, where ever since he had been unwelcome. This seemed especially so, now in the first year of Jimmy Carter's presidency. He told Nixon that if anyone questioned his presence, he should say that he was there at the personal request of Hubert Humphrey.

In some versions of the story, Jimmy Carter himself senses Nixon's loneliness at the ceremony, and makes a point to spend some time standing next to him. Doubtful, but makes for a good ending.

Atonement doesn't grant us a longer life. It doesn't ward off evil. It can't predict or control the future. It doesn't even erase the past, and it certainly can't wipe away all our shame.

But it does offer a moment to feel free, once again. Whether you are 9 or 99, in remission or in unstable condition--for you and God--tomorrow is still fresh, somehow, against all odds.

We openly acknowledge, here and together--and with God's grace/graciousness, that while our past may stay with us, even haunt us, it need not totally define us. And that is something to celebrate.

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5. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1993/01/20/a-big-gesture/7f33ac12-b705-43e3-b4c0-127dac87c927/>

What does it feel like, this lifting off of our sins? The obvious answer is I don't know, exactly. For each of us it is likely different.

But I imagine, on some level, we are meant to walk out of *shul*, especially after Ne'ilah, with that unique vacation feeling--you know it--a couple days in with a few more to go. The adrenaline of what was left behind finally dissipates, and the anxiety of going back to life, is still a ways off. The moment when slow, deep breaths are natural and unforced.

The Mishnah teaches:

אָמַר רַבִּי שִׁמּוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל, לֹא הָיוּ יָמִים טוֹבִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר בְּאָב וְכַיּוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel said: There were no days of joy in Israel greater than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur.<sup>6</sup> Today is a day of joy.

The quintessential Jewish day of Joy & Happiness. Right now.

Now that you know the "why", I'm hoping we can feel it, experience it, together.

On Rosh Hashanah I asked you to look into a mirror, to look deeply at yourself and notice God looking right back at you. As Yom Kippur goes out tomorrow night/tonight, I'll ask you to exchange that mirror for a window. Wiped clean. Look outside. Know that God is waiting there with a gift, with an embrace, with love, with atonement & pardon, with opportunity.

That's Kapparah. It's why we are here. It's why we come back. There's no dinner table. No intoxicating, eternally relevant story of oppression. No obvious universal message. Just all of us together, once a year, standing, smiling & crying, confessing, and accepting God's graciousness.

G'mar Hatima Tova.

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6. Mishnah Ta'anit, 4:6