

Yom Kippur Overview

This brief overview of Yom Kippur laws and customs is not meant to be comprehensive but will hopefully help you prepare for and enjoy this High Holy Day season. For detailed or personal questions beyond the scope of this article, please contact a KJ rabbi at ckj.org/our-team.

I. Preparing For Yom Kippur

A. Physical and Spiritual Preparation

On the physical side, it is customary for men to wear a *kittel*, a special white robe, and for women to wear white. Wearing white shows our hope and confidence that our sins will be 'whitened' back to innocence again. On the spiritual side, preparations over the course of the 10 days of repentance should fit into 3 categories:

1. Teshuvah (repentance) – We think back over the errors, transgressions and rebellions we committed this year and repent for them. Formal repentance can be summarized by the "Three R's": **Recognition** – articulating our sins (making a list can be helpful), **Regret** – feeling sorry that we have done them, and **Resolve** – affirming that we will not repeat them. For sins that had an impact upon other people, asking their forgiveness is required first.

2. Tefillah (prayer) – We spend most of the Yom Kippur day in prayer.

3. Tzedakah (charity) – Giving *tzedakah* is encouraged at this time of year as an act of redemption. Therefore many synagogues have Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur appeals.

These 3 actions are said to "nullify the harshness of the decree," or to be the most effective ways of asking God for a good year to come.

B. Tashlich, Hatarat Nedarim (Release of Vows) and Selichot

If you did not do Tashlich (casting your sins into the water) or Hatarat Nedarim (annulment of vows,) earlier, you should do them before the onset of Yom Kippur. Selichot (penitential prayers) are said each day of the 10 days of Repentance and are a recurring part of the Yom Kippur service as well.

C. Kaparot

It is customary to give *tzedakah* the day before Yom Kippur. Some people do this by swinging an object of value over their head to 'transfer' their sins into and then donating it to *tzedakah*. For some, that object has been a chicken, but money in a handkerchief is preferable. Some people do not practice this custom.

There is an introduction to the swinging ("*b'nei adam*"), followed by the 3-time recitation of the following formula (for money): "*Zeh chalifati, zeh temurati, zeh kaparati, zeh ha-kessef yeilech litzdaka va'ani ekaneis l'chaim tovim arukim u'le-shalom.*"

"This is my exchange, this is my substitute, this is my atonement – this money shall go to *tzedakah* and I shall enter into a long and good life and to peace."

D. Eating Your Heart Out

According to our tradition, one who eats on the day before Yom Kippur and fasts on Yom Kippur gets credited as if they fasted for both days. According to most authorities, one should eat frequently over the course of the day, making many blessings, and enjoying their eating before the fast. One should avoid spicy or dehydrating foods, though.

E. Asking for mechilah (forgiveness)

One has to ask forgiveness from their fellow human beings before Yom Kippur for any wrongs one committed against them. This is a prerequisite to asking God to forgive us. Thus, it is customary to approach those people and ask them to

mocheil (forgive) you for what you have done to them. One should specify the wrong and state how sorry they are. If rebuffed, the rule is that you must try at least 3 times to gain forgiveness, before witnesses. Of course, you may choose to forgive those who have wronged you without them asking you for forgiveness as well.

F. Mikveh

It is customary for men (and in some places for women) to go to the *mikveh* (ritual pool) on the day before Yom Kippur. There are several *mikveot* in Manhattan that open especially for this purpose. One should bring his own towel and should shower before entering the *mikveh*. Some have the custom of completely immersing once, some 3 times and some 7 times. For information on available mikvehs in Manhattan visit ckj.org/jewishues.

G. Mincha

The afternoon service is said earlier than usual. Even though it is not yet Yom Kippur, there is a Yom Kippur confession service (with the confession - "*al cheit*" ("for the sin of...") and beating the chest) included in Mincha. This is both to get one prepared for Yom Kippur and in the rare event that one's life would come to an end before Yom Kippur, it gives one the opportunity of having done that confession first.

H. Se'udah ha-Mafseket (Final Meal)

In theory, one should have a festive holiday meal on Yom Kippur. Since this is impossible, this final meal before the fast takes its place. Many have the custom of dressing nicely, eating nice foods and making sure to eat bread (two challah rolls are not necessary, though) and recite grace after meals at this meal.

I. Lighting Candles and Blessing Children

Candle lighting this year is **6:32 pm**. The blessing is: "*Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel yom ha-Kippurim*"

Women should also add: *"Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-Olam sheh-hechiyanu, v'kiymanu, v'higiyanu laz'man ha-zeh."* (Men say this blessing in shul after Kol Nidrei.)

One should light the candles first (while covering the eyes) and then say the blessing. The match should not be snuffed out, but put on a fire-safe surface to burn out on its own.

It is customary to give children a special blessing at this time as well.

For boys: *"y'simcha Elohim k'efraim v'chi'Menashe"* (May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe)

For girls: *"y'simeich Elohim k'Sarah, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah"* (May God make you like Sara, Rebecca, Rachel & Leah)

For both, continue: *"Yevarech'cha Adonai v'yishmerecha. Ya-eir Adonai Panav eilecha vichuneka. Yisa Adonai Panav eilecha v'yaseim lecha shalom."* (Some feminize the blessing for girls.)

"May God bless you and protect you. May He shine His countenance upon you and find favor in you. May He lift His face to you and grant you peace."

Some people add the following prayer as well: "May it be Your will, (as we stand) before our Father in heaven, that You put in our heart the love and fear of You. That the fear of G-d will be in us all our life so that we do not sin. That we will devote ourselves to Torah (learning) and Mitzvot. That we pay attention to what we see. That our mouth will speak wisdom and our heart behave correctly. Our hands will be busy with mitzvot. Our feet will run to do the will of our Father in heaven. We will be given righteous sons and daughters, who will busy themselves with Torah and mitzvot all their lives. May our sources (of income) be blessed, and our income be provided with the permission, and easily and profitably from Your generous hand, and not (as a kindness) from people. That our income (will be sufficient) to free us to serve G-d. That we will be written and sealed for a good and long life with all the righteous of Israel. Amen."

J. Adding On

It is a (Biblical, to some) commandment to lengthen the beginning and end of Yom Kippur by a few minutes. This is called *tosefet al ha-Kodesh*, adding on to the holiness. For this reason, we conclude our preparations for Yom Kippur a little earlier than we really have to. One should start fasting at about candle-lighting, i.e. 6:15 pm.

K. Tefillah Zaka – prayer of purification

A particularly moving prayer was composed by the **Chayei Adam** (R. Avraham Danzig) and is recited by many in the time before Kol Nidrei. It is found at the beginning of most Yom Kippur prayer books.

L. Kol Nidrei

Kol Nidrei ("all vows") is really a pre-Yom Kippur service, which is similar to the annulment of vows, but on a communal level. We invite all the Jews to come pray with us – both righteous and sinners – and attempt to do a mass nullification of any outstanding vows in the community. It is a short service, done before sunset.

II. Yom Kippur Night

A. Ma'ariv

The Ma'ariv service includes the usual aspects of a night service: *bar'chu* (call to prayer), 2 blessings before and 2 blessings after Sh'ma and an *amidah* (silent devotion). The *amidah* has seven blessings, the middle one of which is the sanctification of the Yom Kippur day. The four insertions said during the 10 days of repentance are included as well. The Yom Kippur confession service (beating the chest) is said twice: once during the silent *amidah* and once during the *selichot* service that follows the *amida*. The most beautiful poem in this service is the *piyut* "Like the clay in the hands of the potter" ("*ki hinei ka-chomer*").

Before the first two and last two blessings of the silent devotion, short requests to be remembered and written for a good life this coming year are inserted. These are recited quietly in the silent *Amidah* and aloud by the congregation (followed

by the chazzan) during the repetition. Here are the first appearances: *"Remember us," "Who is like You," "And inscribe,"* and *"In the book of life."*

After the service, many have the custom to stay to recite special songs and/or to learn. (Some the study the mishna of Yoma, the tractate on Yom Kippur.)

B. Shabbat and Yom Kippur

All the negative prohibitions of Shabbat – from cooking to carrying – apply on Yom Kippur as well – it is called a "Shabbat Shabbaton."

All the restrictions of Yom Kippur apply both to the night and the day.

III. Yom Kippur Day

Yom Kippur day has its own power of atonement, just by living through it. However, combined with the power of *teshuva*, repentance, almost all sins are forgivable. There are five major prohibitions on Yom Kippur day:

- Eating and Drinking
- Wearing leather shoes
- Bathing or washing (ritual hand-washing is still done, up to the knuckles)
- Anointing (using oils or perfumes)
- Sex

Pregnant and nursing women and those with specific illnesses or medications should consult with both their doctors and a rabbi to establish a protocol for breaking one's fast. Fasting is meant to spur you to do *teshuva*.

Yom Kippur Prayer Insertions

Shacharit (morning service)

i. *Shir ha'ma'alot* – Psalm 130 ("From the depths, I called out to You") is inserted in the service preceding *Bar'chu* on Rosh Hashanah and all the 10 days of repentance.

ii. The line *"Baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam va-ed"* which is usually said in a whisper (immediately

after the first line of Shema Yisrael) is said in a loud voice (a shout) on Yom Kippur.

iii. *Four insertions in the amidah* – Before the first two and last two blessings of the silent devotion, short requests to be remembered and written for a good life this coming year are inserted. These are recited quietly in the silent *amidah* and aloud by the congregation (followed by the chazzan) during the repetition. In Ne'ilah, "write us" (*katveinu*) is changed to "seal us" (*chotmeinu*).

iv. In addition to this, the blessing "*ha'eil ha-kadosh*" (the holy God) is changed to "*ha-melech ha-kadosh*" (the holy King) on Yom Kippur. At the end of the kaddish, "*oseh HA-shalom*" is said instead of Oseh Shalom.

v. Confession (*vidu'i*, beginning with "*ashamnu*") is said in every silent *amidah* and every repetition except for Ne'ilah. A total of 10 confessions are made over the course of the Yom Kippur prayers.

Torah Reading

i. The Torah reading is the Yom Kippur service as described in Vayikra 16. The *maftir* (final Torah reading) is the sacrifice of the day, found in Bemidbar (Numbers) 29:7-11. The *haftarah* (prophetic portion) is Yeshaya (Isaiah) 57-58.

ii. **YIZKOR** is also said on Yom Kippur as a memorial to our departed relatives, martyrs and soldiers. Though it is often the custom for those whose parents are alive to leave during Yizkor, this is not required and it is preferable to stay in for Yizkor to serve as a comfort and support to those around us who are reciting it. There are special Yizkor prayers recited for Holocaust victims and those who fell defending Israel in her wars.

Mussaf

i. In addition to some of the same features as the Rosh Hashanah service, such as "*unetaneh Tokef*" and "*V'chol Ma'aminim*," there is one special feature to the *mussaf* service, which is the **Avodah**, the description of the Yom Kippur service.

The High Priest would do 3 separate confessions: one for himself (and his wife and family), one for all the *kohanim* (priests) and one for all of Israel. He would offer a special sacrifice to God and send out the scapegoat to the desert. He would also enter and (hopefully) exit from the Holy of Holies on this day. All of this is dramatically presented in the prayer book.

One of the high points of the service was when the *kohein gadol* (high priest) would utter the ineffable name of God and all the people would prostrate themselves in respect and awe. Most congregations still do this. In the *Aleynu* prayer (originally a High Holiday prayer) and at the end of each priestly confession, we bow down to our knees and foreheads.

ii. Ten Martyrs – this poem is said commemorating the 10 great Rabbis put to death by the Romans. It is called "*eileh Ezkara*," "These I remember."

iii. Blessing of the Kohanim – This is said in the Diaspora by Ashkenazic Jews only on a few festival days all year, but Yom Kippur is one of them.

iv. Psalm 27 (*L'David, Hashem Ori*) is recited in the morning and night or each day throughout the month of Elul and the holiday season, including Sukkot. Many congregations say it at the beginning of prayers on Yom Kippur.

Mincha (Afternoon Service)

Mincha has its own Torah reading (picking up where we left off) regarding prohibitions against sexual immorality. There are three *aliyot*. The fourth also reads a special *haftarah*, the book of Jonah. This is often one of the most coveted honors of the year and is often sold for a lot of money to benefit a synagogue.

Ne'ilah (Concluding Service)

This last-chance service is unique to Yom Kippur in contemporary Judaism. It is called Ne'ilah because it means "the shutting" (or locking) as in the gates of Yom Kippur being shut as the day ends.

No confession is said in Ne'ilah and, instead of the idea of "writing," we express the idea of "sealing." The verdict for the year is sealed as Yom Kippur comes to a close. The entire service is said with the ark open while standing (it is also a big honor to open the ark). The majority of Ne'ilah is a *selichot* service.

Most congregations finish Ne'ilah right as the day ends. The service concludes with:

1x - *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad* (*Hear o Israel, Hashem our God, Hashem is One*)

3x - *Baruch Shem K'vohd Malchuto L'olam Va-ed* (*Blessed is the name of His Kingship forever*) 3 times

7x - *Adonai hu ha-Elohim* (*Hashem is the [true] God*) 7 times.

This is followed by *kaddish*, BUT right in the middle, the *shofar* is sounded and "*l'shanah ha-ba-a birushalayim*" (next year in Jerusalem) is sung. (Some people blow just one note and some blow *tekiah-shevarim/teru'ah-tekiah*.) Some congregations have the custom to dance at the end of the service.

Tekiah is a long straight blast, shevarim are three broken blasts, and teru'ah are nine or more staccato blasts.

Following Ne'ilah, a number of additional prayers should be recited:

a) Ma'ariv for the next day – start the new year reconnecting with God with daily prayer b) Havdalah c) Kiddush Levana – the sanctification of the moon.

In addition, there is a custom to begin symbolically (one piece, e.g.) building one's *sukkah*, to go from forgiveness straight into a mitzvah. In any case, one should not rush to end one's fast, both add on to the day a little and also so to show that we are created in the image of G-d.

One should not begin to prepare their break-fast meal until after Yom Kippur has ended.