

YOM KIPPUR

HISTORY

1. When did Yom Kippur originate?

Yom Kippur dates from biblical times. The Torah states in three separate passages that “the tenth day of the seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be a sacred occasion for you: You shall practice self-denial. . .” (Leviticus 23:27). That commandment became the basis of Yom Kippur.

2. Why does the Day of Atonement fall on the tenth day of the seventh month?

You will recall that the incident of the golden calf led Moses to shatter the first tablets of the law (Exodus 32:19). According to legend, he returned to Sinai, received a second set of tablets, then descended on the tenth of Tishri to find the Jewish people fasting and repenting. The midrash relates that God then forgave the people and established that day as a day of atonement for all generations.

3. How was Yom Kippur observed in ancient times?

The biblical ceremony of atonement, which reflected the strong belief in magic and superstition prevalent among peoples of that era, was quite different from that of today. The high priest of the Temple, or *kohen*, performed a rite of expiation on behalf of the entire people, as described in Leviticus 16:7-22. Two goats were brought before the *kohen*. One was sacrificed on the altar as a sin offering. The *kohen* then placed his hands on the head of the second goat and confessed over it all the sins of the people. The goat was driven off into the wilderness, supposedly carrying with it all the guilt that the Israelites had accumulated during the year. This primitive custom was the origin of the term “scape-goat,” the projecting of blame for personal deeds upon another.

4. How did Yom Kippur evolve after the Temple was destroyed?

After the destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE), the Jewish people were driven into exile. There they felt a deep need to find some means for absolution of guilt. Prayer, fasting, and the giving of charity emerged as a powerful means for attaining this spiritual release. Even after the Temple was rebuilt, these customs of repentance persevered. Thus, when the Second Temple fell (70 CE) and animal sacrifice was no longer possible, the seeds had already been sown for Yom Kippur as we know it today.

CUSTOMS

1. Why do we fast on Yom Kippur?

Fasting was originally seen as fulfilling the biblical commandment to “practice self-denial.” Midrashic writings also stress

fasting as a historical reminder of Israel’s repentance for the incident of the golden calf. More importantly, however, the Yom Kippur fast enables us, for at least one day each year, to ignore our physical desires and instead stress our spiritual needs. We concentrate on prayer, repentance, and self-improvement before returning to our usual daily routine.

2. Who has to fast?

According to tradition, all females from age 12 and all males from age 13 must fast. It was and is the custom in many communities to encourage even younger children to begin fasting for several hours each year, so as to prepare them for full participation in the holiday when the proper time arrives. The traditional fast encompasses a full twenty-four-hour period, beginning after the erev Yom Kippur meal and extending to the following evening. No eating or drinking is permitted.

3. Are there any exceptions?

Yes. Judaism has a deep reverence for life, and, though the Yom Kippur fast is of great importance, it should never jeopardize health. Those too ill to fast were prohibited from doing so, in spite of their protestations. Those who needed to take medication were allowed to break the fast, as were pregnant women or women who had just given birth. Jews ate in times of famine and plague, as did prisoners in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. The ancient affirmation of life is just as central in modern times.

4. Should we do anything special at the erev Yom Kippur meal in our home?

Actually, there are some things that should be done before the meal. For example, it is a basic Jewish teaching that Yom Kippur does not atone for wrongs committed against other people, but only for transgressions against God. It therefore has become customary for Jews to seek out friends and relatives whom they have wronged during the year and to personally ask for their forgiveness before Yom Kippur begins. The person asked for forgiveness *must* forgive, and thus Yom Kippur serves a healing function in the community. Yom Kippur is a time when all families should be at peace. Life is too short to indulge in petty arguments or to harbor grudges. Yom Kippur gives us a yearly opportunity to put aside past hurts and to make a new beginning.

A second set of customs relating to Yom Kippur involves perpetuating the memory of loved ones. Many Jews visit the cemetery the day before Yom Kippur and kindle twenty-four-hour *yahrzeit* candles in memory of departed loved ones. During the Middle Ages, this custom was seen as a means of atonement for the dead. Today, however, it is a beautiful expression of tribute and remembrance.

For the erev Yom Kippur meal, many families have a special *challah* in the shape of a bird with wings, symbolizing the aspiration of the Jew to ascend spiritually to the level of the angels. When the meal is completed, the family departs for services.