

יום כיפור Yom Kippur

Prayers * Customs * Traditions * Shofar * Biblical Origin

The Torah sources for the **Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)** we find in the book Leviticus (Vayikra), chapter 16, verses 29 - 31.²⁹ “This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; ³⁰ for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the Lord. ³¹ It is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute.” (NASB)

As explained in the context of **Rosh HaShana** (the Jewish New Year), the Ten Days between New Year and Yom Kippur serve for asking for forgiveness and for atonement. These Ten Days are called “**Aseret Yemei Teshuva**” (the Ten Days of Atonement, Repentance), or also “**HaYamim HaNoraim**” (The High Holidays. Literally the days of fearful respect. The Hebrew words “nora, noraim” are based on the Torah usage which expresses the fearful respect of the Judgement of God.) According to the Jewish tradition during these Ten Days in the beginning of the year God judges about the future life of the people. The first decision is made on Rosh haShana (the New Year). The verdict is then made at the end of Yom Kippur. The verdict is finally confirmed (“sealed”)

at the end of **Simchat Torah** (ending the Tabernacles).

During the time of the Temple in Jerusalem a unique ceremony took place: the **High Priest** (haCohen haGadol) entered the holiest part of the Temple, the **Holiest of Holies (Kodesh ha Kodashim)** in order to ask for forgiveness and for the life of the people of Israel. It was only on that day of Yom Kippur that the High Priest was allowed to enter this Holiest of Holies in the Temple.

A further special ceremony during the ceremony of Yom Kippur during the Temple Time was the sacrifice of one bull and one ram. Further one of two goats was chosen by lottery and sacrificed as well. The ram served as a symbolic reminder of Abraham, who enjoyed a special love by God. It reminded of Abraham’s total obedience and devotion when he was ready to sacrifice his son Isaac.



The Binding of Isaac: Abraham fully trusted God that Isaac would survive, since Abraham was sure of the previous promises of the LORD to him. Abraham’s confidence that Isaac would survive can be seen when Abraham told his servants that

they both (meaning he and Isaac) would come back after they had performed the sacrifice. Genesis 22,5: “⁵ Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.”) This

Binding of Isaac is the background for the special tradition to blow the horn of a ram (**Shofar**) during the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur prayers in the synagogue. By “reminding” God of Abraham the hope is expressed that God may forgive the praying people even if they do not fully deserve it personally. God is asked to forgive them on behalf of his beloved Abraham. The musical melody and sequence of the Shofar Blow is conducted according to the instructions of the rabbis. It is important not to use a horn of a bull on Rosh Hashana or on Yom Kippur (even though a bull is kosher) because the bull could remind of the sin of the Golden Calf. This would not be helpful on days of judgement...

Yom Kippur is a day of fasting starting before sunset in the evening before Yom Kippur and ending after the sunset of Yom Kippur itself. (Usually, it takes more the 24 hours.) In order to manage the long fasting of no food and

no drinks a special festive meal takes place just before the fasting begins. This meal is called “**Seuda Mafseket**” (the separating meal). The **Ashkenazi** (relating to Jews of Germany and or central Europe) tradition is to include in this meal the so called “Kreplach”. These are little meatballs covered with dough. The meat symbolically stands for lust / covetousness. By covering the meat with dough the idea is indicated, that the sins should be abolished. This food should express the awareness that one should avoid these sins.



In the Jewish communities of Tunisia (Sephardi, not Ashkenazi community) the special meal included Quince marmalade (Ribat Chawushim). The Hebrew word “Chawushim” has a double meaning. It is the name of the quince as a fruit. It also means prisoners. Eating the quince marmalade expresses the hope that the verdict of God may be sweet and forgiving, even if a punishment could have been justified. It also expresses the hope that Jews imprisoned, just because they are Jews, should be free.

The most famous prayer of Yom Kippur is called “**Kol Nidrei**”. It means all my oaths / vows. With this prayer the Yom Kippur ceremony in the Synagogue begins. In order to verify the exceptional statement of renouncing all oaths, vows and promises made in the past year this prayer is repeated three times. It refers to all oaths, vows and commitments expressed by a person in the last year. The idea of

publicly annulling all these oaths is to do it, before God reaches his final judgement. So, one stands with less undone promises and unfulfilled vows.

During the last centuries the Rabbis formulated additional regulations to prevent the abuse of Kol Nidrei. Since the Middle Ages Jews had to repeatedly explain to the gentiles that the declaration of Kol Nidrei referred to commitments between man and God. It was often misinterpreted as if Jews intended not to

respect business vows or commitments taken towards gentiles. The regulations handled for example financial contracts and loan commitments. The restrictions were aimed to prevent that people would make such commitments shortly before Yom Kippur and then be unfairly free from the commitments due to the public prayer of Kol Nidrei.

The special melody of the Kol Nidrei Prayer is widely well known among Jews for centuries. There are even special stories of how Jews communicated to fellow prisoners during persecutions and during the Shoah that they are Jews by humming the Kol Nidrei Melody. Their fellow Jews would recognize the message even if it was without words.

Under the following link you may enjoy a Youtube video of The Kol Nidrei Prayer sung by the famous cantor (Chazzan) Naftali Herstik of the big Synagogue of Jerusalem together with the Hampton Synagogue Choir: “Kol Nidre - Cantor Netanel Hershtik & Hampton Synagogue Choir”
<https://youtu.be/WbROjSaB35k> .

On Yom Kippur a special Torah chapter from the **weekly portion “Achrei Mot”** is read. The text is from the book of Leviticus (Vayikra), chapter 16, verse 1 until chapter 18, verse 30. The text describes the event of the death of the two sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu. It is relevant for Yom Kippur because they were extreme in their devotion, so they even gave their lives in exaltation. Further a short passage from the book of Numbers (baMidbar) from the weekly portion **Pinchas** is read. Together the two texts elaborate about the 3 zealots.

The Haftara (a passage from the Prophets read after the Torah reading) on Yom Kippur is a quote from the book of **Isaiah**, the famous prophet of consolation, from chapter 57, verse 14 up to the end of chapter 58. It begins with the famous sentence “And it will be said, “Build up, build up, prepare the way, Remove *every* obstacle out of the way of My people.” and ends with the sentence of consolation “Then you will take delight in the Lord, And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; And I will feed you *with* the heritage of Jacob your father, For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

After the reading from the Torah and the Haftara from the Prophet Isaiah a special prayer of memorial, the **Yizkor**, is read. In this prayer one prays for the souls of relatives who passed away and of the victims who perished in the **Shoah**. It is a custom in the Synagogues, that persons whose parents are still alive, leave the room of the synagogue during the Yizkor prayer.



During the Yom Kippur afternoon prayer, the **Mincha** (the offering) also a short part from the Torah is read. The Haftara passage after it is very famous: it is the complete Book of **Jonah**. Reading the “Maftir Jonah” is considered to be a high honor and a blessing. Therefore people make substantial donations in order to be entitled for this reading. The reading from the book of Jonah is done to indicate the forgiveness and mercy which God demonstrated to Jonah concerning the people of the City of Nineveh. They had sinned, but they showed repentance.

It is generally a custom to make a donation for charity (Zedaka) before and / or after Yom Kippur. Often it is done in the context of the “Yizkor Memorial Prayer”. (The money payment itself is made before or after the holiday.) The Yizkor Prayer takes place in the Synagogue not only on Yom Kippur, but also at Shmini Azeret (at the end of Sukkot, Tabernacles) and on the seventh day ending the “Chag haMatzot” (nowadays called Pesach, even though in the Torah Pesach actually refers only to the first day of the Holiday). The Yizkor Prayer takes place also on the Shavuot (Feast of Weeks) prayer.

In the state of Israel Yom Kippur is an official Holiday. It enjoys a special respect. Businesses are closed. Public traffic is completely shut down including airports, seaports and public TV and radio stations. Only in case of a war, like in October 1973, the Holiday silence is interrupted. This closure is much more strictly observed and respected than during any other holiday. One may best realize its scope when looking at the traffic. Even the highways in

the metropolitan Tel Aviv have no traffic at all so that kids can freely ride on bikes on them during Yom Kippur. It is interesting to note, that Israeli Newspapers tend to make polls before Yom Kippur similarly to polls done before the Pesach Holiday. In these polls the Israeli Media find out repeatedly that ca. two thirds of the Jewish population of Israel declare that they fast on Yom Kippur. Many people say they go to the Synagogue for the opening Kol Nidrei Prayer.

About one half of those who fast admit that they do not observe many of the religious regulations during the year. For example, they drive on Shabbat or go out on Shabbat and make payments on Shabbat, things an Orthodox observant Jew would avoid. About 90 % of the Jewish population have their weddings conducted by Rabbis. Most of these 90 % also make the traditional Brit Milah Ceremony (circumcision) for their sons. According to these polls more than 75 % of the Jewish population reply that they celebrate the traditional Pesach opening meal, the Seder Evening. A vast majority of the Jewish population eats the Matzot (the unleavened bread) during the Pesach week, even if most of them do not strictly keep cleaning their homes from any leavened crumbs.

I mention these published polls in order to illustrate the special attitude of the Jewish Israeli population toward the Jewish religion and tradition. Even people who define themselves as ‘generally secular’, observe major essentials of Jewish belief, religion and traditions. For example, by living in the Land of Israel, by speaking Hebrew, by learning Torah in every school,

as well as by more or less observing a number of the major holidays and by keeping the tradition of a Jewish marriage and Brit Mila. Many even let their sons learn the reading from the Torah for the **Bar Mitzvah** ceremony in the synagogue, even if they rarely go to the synagogue otherwise.

The first Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel in modern times, **Rabbi Abraham Yitzchak Ha Cohen Kuk** (1865 - 1935) emphasized



that according to the Torah all the Children of Israel belong to the holy People of Israel. They have an intrinsic spark of Jewishness in them even if they say of themselves that they are secular.

In Hebrew the word secular “Chiloni” is derived from the word “Chol”, ‘sand’, indicating this as a contradiction to a holy place. Being Jewish does not only mean the belonging to a religious group, but is rather belonging to the Jewish nation, which is independent from one’s declared religiousness.

One of the popular and widely observed customs around Yom Kippur is that people wish each other a Happy New Year. In Hebrew the greeting “**Shana Tova**” means literally “A good Year”. Since the verdict of God relating to the coming year is sealed only at the end of the Sukkot holiday (Tabernacles) the good wishes are exchanged until then. The tradition is that people ask their fellow man before Yom Kippur for forgiveness in case they have insulted or hurt their feelings during

the past year. The general guideline is that people should seek forgiveness and reconciliation with their fellow man because God may forgive for sins committed towards Him but not for sins committed between people.



A famous tradition called **Kaparot** refers to the modern form of a substitute for the sacrifices of atonement during the Temple time. For example, the scape goat (**Seir la Azazel**) was a sacrifice in order to ask for forgiveness from God while praying for survival and peace. Nowadays the ceremony of Kaparot is done with a rooster instead of a goat. Nowadays it is also widely common to give a donation for charity (**Zedaka**) instead of sacrificing a rooster. For example, some people hold an envelope with their donation and wave it three times above their head. This movement symbolically communicates that the person asks for forgiveness for his mistakes by compensating with a good deed, in form of the donation.

Machzor: The special prayer book for the High Holidays Rosh HaShana (the New Year), Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), Sukkot (Tabernacles), Pesach (the Exodus) and Shavuot (Feast of Weeks). The Hebrew word “Machzor” means “the Cycle”. It refers to the annually repetitive holidays which take place every calendar year. Originally the Machzor Prayer books included all



the prayers of all days and holidays of the year. They serve mainly the cantors. Only after printing became popular the Machzor was more and more used by all people and not only by the cantors. The original cycle for the prayers and

the Torah readings in the time of the second temple was three years. The term Machzor is first found in the Mishna in the Masechet (treatise) Yoma, chapter 54. Among the first handwritten Machzor exemplars is the famous **Machzor of Worms** (Germany) from 1272, and from Nürnberg (Germany) of the year 1331. The first printed Machzor known to us is from Rome dated 1485. (My research relating to the subject of the Machzor is mainly based on the study of the famous prayer scholar Abraham Meir Habermann (1901 - 1980).

The prayer book for the everyday and Shabbat prayers is called **Siddur**. (Siddur means in Hebrew the orderly arrangement.)

The Number Seven is of unique importance since the Creation

Rabbi Zvi David Hoffmann has shown, that the Jewish holidays of Rosh HaShanah (the New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) are directly related to the unique significance of the number seven in the Torah. The 7th day of the week, the Shabbat (Saturday) reminds of the week

of the Creation by God. The Shemita year, the 77th year, is the year of rest for the land in the Land of Israel. Rosh HaShana is the beginning of each year as well as, therefore, the basis for the calculation of the 77th year, the Shemita year. The Shemita year reminds that the land belongs to the LORD.

Furthermore, after 7 times Shemita year (7 x 7) comes the Yovel (Jubilee) year which is the 50th year. The Jubilee year is crucial in the laws settling the state of ownership of land parcels in the Land of Israel. The idea is to remind the ownership of God. In the Jubilee year people who lost their land due to debts can get their property back under certain conditions.

The Torah counts 7 special kinds of fruit and cereals which symbolize the merit of the Land Israel.



The number 7 is also of special importance concerning other major Jewish holidays from the Torah: Sukkot (Tabernacles) lasts for 7 days. It is one of the three

major pilgrimage holidays, in which the Israelites went to the Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate. Since Jerusalem is circa 860 meters high in the mountains, the pilgrimage was perceived and called as holidays of ascendance, geographically and spiritually. Also, the pilgrimage holiday of Pesach is related to the number 7. It takes place in the month of Nissan. The month of Nissan is considered in the Torah as one of the four dates which are each called a new year. (Explanations follow below under the specific Holidays.) The first day of the holiday is the actual Pesach holiday. It is followed by the week called in the Torah "Chag Ha Matzoth" (the Feast of Unleavened Bread). Nowadays people call all the 7 days of Pesach and Chag HaMatzot with the one name of the "Pesach Holiday". Seven weeks after Pesach the Shavuot Holiday (Feast of Weeks) takes place. The 7 weeks counted from Pesach to Shavuot undergo a daily special counting called "Sefirat HaOmer" (the counting of the Omer). The Omer is a biblical measure of a barley quantity which is relevant for a sacrifice (it is circa 3.64 liters).

The holidays Rosh HaShana, Yom Kipur and Sukkot take place in the month of Tishrei, which is the 7th month of the year. The year (of the kings) begins biblically in the month of Nissan. The pilgrimage holiday Sukkot takes place in the 7th month after Pesach. (Note: Pesach is in Nissan, which is one of the four Jewish dates called a New Year.)

In Jerusalem there are 7 holidays defined as non-working holidays: 2 days in Pesach (at the beginning and at the end), 1 day in Shavuot, 1 day in Rosh HaShana (1 day was during the Temple time and only in the

city of Jerusalem. We know of the Rosh HaShana being celebrated of 2 days outside of Jerusalem. Today also in Jerusalem Rosh HaShana is celebrated for 2 days. Further details see above under the holiday of Rosh HaShana.), 1 day on Yom Kipur, one-day Sukkot and 1 day on Shemini Azereth at the end of Sukkot. Total: 7 days.

Yom Kippur is celebrated also outside the Land of Israel only for one day, unlike Rosh HaShana (the New Year) and other holidays existing already in biblical times. Holidays like Rosh HaShana,

Sukkot (Tabernacles), Pesach and Shavuot (Feast of Weeks) are celebrated outside the Land of Israel for two days. Yom Kippur is commonly considered as the holiest among the Jewish holidays. Actually, the Shabbat (Saturday) is holier than Yom Kippur according to the Torah. Nevertheless, Yom Kippur is the only holiday which is not postponed in case it occurs on a Shabbat.

Yom Kippur takes place on the 10th day of the month of Tishrei. The word "yom" means "the day". The word "Kippur" means atonement. Sometimes you may find the name of the holiday as Yom Kippurim. Kippurim is in Hebrew the plural form of Kippur.

Characteristic for Yom Kippur are the fasting and the day long prayers. On this day all shops in Israel are closed. Observing Jews worldwide do not go to work. In order to be able to concentrate on prayers and thoughts of repentance the Rabbis of the Mishna formulated 5 central rules forbidding 5 principal activities for the duration of Yom Kippur: eating, drinking,

washing of the body with oil, wearing leather shoes or sandals and sexual intercourse.

According to the Torah in the book of Exodus (Shemot) Moses climbed on Mount Sinai on the first of the month Elul. He spent 40 days on the mountain. Then Moses received for the second time the two stone tablets with the 10 Commandments, and went down with them back to the people of Israel. On that day practically God forgave the children of Israel their sin of the Golden Calf. That sin of the people with the Golden Calf led to the demonstrative breaking of the two tablets by Moses after he had received the 10 Commandments for the first time, which was on the 17th of the month of Tamus. We remember that the children of Israel had orally received the 10 Commandments for the first time on the sixth of the month of Sivan, when they assembled at foot of mount Sinai.

Background explanation: first the children of Israel heard the 10 Commandments on the 6th of Sivan. Then, 40 days later, on the 17th of Tamus Moses received on Mt. Sinai the 10 commandments on the first two stone tablets. But when he came down the mountain and saw the children of Israel with the Golden Calf he broke these two tablets. After punishing the sinners Moses climbed again on Mt. Sinai, and since God forgave the Israelites Moses received on the 10th of the month Tishrei

the second set of the two stone tablets with the 10 commandments. This is the reason that the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur takes place on the 10th of Tishrei. The relevant Torah source for this holiday we find in the book Leviticus, chap. 16, in the verses 29, 30, 31.

As explained concerning the Jewish new year holiday, Rosh HaShana, the 10 days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur serve for atonement and asking for forgiveness. These 10 days of repentance are called in Hebrew "Asseret Yemei Tshuva". These 10 days are also called "HaYamim haNoraim", which means "the ten days of awe". The Hebrew word "nora" means fearful as well as respectful awe.

According to the Jewish tradition in these 10 days God considers how to decide about the future lives of the Jewish people. The first decision takes place on Rosh HaShana. At the end of Yom Kippur God decides the verdict. At the end of the Succoth Holiday, on the 8th day (called Simchat Torah) the verdict, so the tradition, is sealed. During the time of the Jewish Temple on Yom Kippur a unique ceremony took place: The chief priest (HaCohen HaGadol) entered the holiest space in the Temple (Kodesh HaKodashim) in order to humbly pray for forgiveness on behalf of the whole people of Israel. The entry of anyone into the Holiest of Holies was strictly forbidden on all other days of the year.



Moses by Rembrandt

A personal story relating to Yom Kippur:

An example for human reconciliation and humility of man facing God. In the state of Israel, the Yom Kippur day since 1973 is inseparably linked with the memory of the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War which started in October 1973 in the Eve of Yom Kippur. Syria and Egypt surprised Israel strategically by attacking simultaneously across the Golan Highs in the North and across the Suez Canal in the South.

I belonged to the thousands of Israeli soldiers who were at home with their families (I was with my parents) having the festive meal of the Arucha Mafseket before the beginning of the fasting day. Suddenly a phone call from the IDF unit alerted me and ordered me to immediately return to base. Syria and Egypt took the occasion of the holiest Jewish Holiday to attack Israel with enormous military masses. During the three weeks of the war which started on the 5th of October 1973, over 2,500 Israeli soldiers fell in defense of the survival of the Jewish population of Israel. If one observes what is going on nowadays in Syria and Iraq between different Moslem and Arab groups, one can only imagine what could (God forbid) have happened, if Syria managed to enter Israel. I lost school comrades who were killed in the battles. The war ended when Israel stopped 40 km away from Damascus and 101 km from Cairo. Even though the Arab Armies of Syria and Egypt with the support from Iraq substantially outnumbered the armed forces of Israel (IDF), Israel survived. Egypt lost more than 15,500 soldiers and Syria over 4,000. These were heavy losses both for Israel as well as for the Arab Nations.

On the 19th of November 1977 the same **President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat**, who attacked Israel

in 1973, landed in Israel for the historic peace mission. On November 20th 1977 President Sadat stood in the **Knesset**, the Israeli Parliament in **Jerusalem**, the capital city of the state of Israel,



and made the historic speech under his Motto “No more war! No more Bloodshed!”. He publicly spoke in Arabic so that all his fellow Egyptians and the whole Arab world could understand him without any translation. He offered “Peace, Salam, Shalom”. When he did all that, practically most Jewish Israelis were overwhelmed and enthusiastically welcomed him. After his speech in the Knesset and the embrace with his host, **Israel’s Prime Minister Menachem Begin**, there was a ceremonial reception in the Knesset which was also transmitted live on TV worldwide. It then came to a moving scene of the meeting between President Sadat and Mrs. Golda Meir,

Israel Prime Minister at the time of

the Yom Kippur War. Since Yom Kippur means the Day of Atonement and relates to reconciliation between people, a journalist spontaneously asked **Mrs. Golda Meir** while she was shaking hands with President Sadat “Mrs. Meir do you, now that President Sadat came here, do you now forgive him?” All people present and millions of television viewers at home were anxious and tense to hear how Golda Meir would react. Nobody wanted a scandal to put the historic visit with the peace offer just made, to be at risk. Mrs. Meir replied: “I forgive him everything, except for, that he forced our young people to shoot at his young people.” Sadat smiled gratefully, shook her hand and gave her a gracious Arab compliment for wisdom with the words “The old Lady!” In the Middle East advanced age was then still a synonym for wisdom.

We, who lived to see both the Yom Kippur War in October 1973 as well as the visit of Egypt’s president Sadat in Israel on November 1977, were very grateful to have been able to witness these moments in 1977 and the signing of the Peace Accords between Israel and Egypt on the following 24th of March 1978 in Camp David. It was a remarkable illustration and manifestation

that **people who can forgive are also cable of making peace.**

Many observers of the peace negotiations between Israel and Egypt shared the opinion that because president Sadat a Muslim believer, PM Begin a Jewish believer and US president Carter a Christian believer, were all the three of them believers, they possessed the humility required on the road to peace.

This humbleness facing God is one of the key ideas of the Yom Kippur.



Here a photo of Ari Lipinski after Yom Kippur at the Kotel (Wailing Wall) with Tefilin (the prayer scrolls including central excerpts from the Torah contained in little leather boxes with leather straps to hold on the head and on the left arm.)