

A Messianic Jewish Perspective on Yom Kippurⁱ

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement is upon us. In ancient times this is when the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies, and the sins of the people would be atoned. The entire process is explained in detail in Leviticus 16. The duties of the regular people during that day are described in Leviticus 23:26-32. A central point is to “afflict your soul,” in some translations written as “deny yourselves,” or “humble yourselves.” This has traditionally been interpreted as fasting. The fasting, however, was not the main point of this holiday. The main points were the sacrifice, the scapegoat, the entering of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies.

The Talmud details a miracle that would happen every year at Yom Kippur. A scarlet thread called *Lashon haZehorit* would turn white if God forgave their sins, matching with the verse, “*Though your sins be like scarlet, they will be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they will become like wool*” (Isaiah 1:18). So if it did turn white, people would know that their sins were forgiven. If it didn’t, they would know that something wasn’t right, and that they might need to be more careful in how they performed the sacrificial system, making sure to follow the Torah better during the coming year.

However, the same source also states that about forty years before the destruction of the temple, the thread stopped turning white altogether. The destruction was in 70 AD, so the scarlet thread stopped turning white right around the time of *Yeshua*’s death and resurrection! From that moment, the atonement was already done, and God stopped the miracle. He no longer accepted the Yom Kippur sacrifice.

Many Christians will say that Yom Kippur is now irrelevant. Our sins are already atoned. We have forgiveness of sins 24/7. We can turn to God and repent of our sins whenever we want, not just on Yom Kippur. They do have a strong case, especially when we read what the New Testament says about Yom Kippur: “*But into the inner, once a year, the kohen gadol alone...⁹ It is a symbol for the present time... regulations for the body imposed until a time of setting things straight*” (Hebrews 9:7,9,10).

But should we really cease observing Yom Kippur altogether? I can’t see any scripture that supports a full cessation of keeping the holy days God gave us. The holiday carries a “forever” tag. There is a point with keeping it.

I have heard some Messianic Jews who solve this question by saying that this is a good holiday to celebrate our atonement. Rather than praying and crying over our sins, like the Orthodox Jews do, we can celebrate that our sins have already been forgiven. With all due respect, I think that celebrating *Yeshua*’s death on the cross is what we do on Pesach, not on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur was never intended to be a celebration. It’s a day of fasting, of self-reflection and of repenting our sins.

Here is where we find the true meaning of Yom Kippur for the Messianic Jew today. It is not THE day to ask God to forgive our sins, nor is it THE day to celebrate the forgiveness we have. But in keeping with the entire Elul theme that culminates at Yom Kippur then this is a day to repent. To take one day a year of fasting, praying, repenting and take stock of our life. Ask ourselves where we are on our walk with God and where we want to be. How can we do better next year? Where do we wish our spiritual life to be next Yom Kippur?

Yes, *Yeshua* obtained for us eternal forgiveness. Yes, our sins can be forgiven. But we are still required to **confess our sins – to bring them before God**. We can do this daily, but having one day a year that is intended to fast and pray over it is essential. It gives us a yearly opportunity to do what Paul told the Corinthians to do: “*Test yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Examine yourselves!*” (2Cor 13:5) Yom Tov!

ⁱ Based on *The significance of Yom Kippur for a Messianic Jew*, *Kehila News*, Tuvia Pollack, October 6, 2019