

Yom Kippur 5776

The Day of Atonement

In 2015, Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement begins at sundown on September 22nd. The Tanakh says that the blood of the sacrifice is given to make atonement. The Hebrew words translated as “atonement” in English are *kippur* (noun) and *kapar* (verb). The root occurs about 150 times in the Tanakh, and is intimately linked with forgiveness of sin and with reconciliation to God. What does “atonement” mean?

Atonement means making amends, blotting out the offense, and giving satisfaction for wrong done; thus reconciling to oneself the alienated other and restoring the disrupted relationship.

Vayikra (Leviticus) 16 gives detailed instructions for a special sacrifice to be offered once a year, on the tenth day of the seventh month - Tishri. On that day the whole community of Israel was to gather at the Tabernacle (and later, the Temple) to fast and to pray. The high priest followed carefully prescribed steps and entered the Especially Holy Place (Holy of Holies), bringing the blood of the sacrificed animal. There he sprinkled the blood on the mercy seat. This animal was a sin offering for the people (16:15). That sacrifice was an ***"atonement ... to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites"***. Following that sacrifice, Israel was told, ***"You will be clean before ADONAI from all your sins"*** (v. 30).

It is important in looking at the Tanakh to realize that in it we see realities *acted out* that would be unveiled later. The whole of scripture is a progressive revelation of God. He reveals Himself more and more throughout human history. God planned for continuous enactments of reality, so that when Yeshua finally came to lay down His life for us, we would realize just what He was doing? Should we be surprised at the centuries of animal sacrifice, and the stress on the shedding of blood as necessary for forgiveness? **No**. In the repeated sacrifices of the Tanakh we are led to understand that, to God, death has always been the price of life for sinful men.

Yom Kippur in Yeshua's Time

Vayikra 16:7-10 states that the Cohen HaGadol (High Priest) is ***"to take the two goats and place them before Adonai at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Then (he) is to cast lots for the two goats, one lot for Adonai and the other for 'Az'azel (scapegoat). (He) is to present the goat whose lot fell to Adonai and offer it as a sin offering. But the goat whose lot fell to 'Az'azel is to be presented alive to Adonai to be used for making atonement over it by sending it away into the desert for 'Az'azel."***

There were also a few traditions that were added to the scapegoat ceremony. According to the Mishna, lots were drawn to decide the fate of both of the goats. The lot for the sacrifice said “for the Lord” and the lot for the scapegoat said “scapegoat.” The people considered it a good omen if the lot “for the Lord” came up in the Priests right hand. Also, a red sash was tied to the scapegoat’s horns and a portion of it was also tied to the door of the temple. The sash on the temple turned from red to white as the goat met its end in the wilderness, signifying to the people that God had accepted their sacrifices and their sins had been atoned for. This idea came from Isaiah 1:18 which says, ***"Even if your sins are like scarlet, they will be white as snow..."***

Also stated in the Mishna as well as the Talmud, four events occurred during the forty years before the destruction of the temple which foreshadowed its doom. (This would have started at the time when Yeshua was sacrificed once and for all.) For forty years:

- The lot that said “for the Lord” did not come in the Priests right hand...this was considered a bad omen.
- The portion of the red sash that was tied to the temple door stopped turning white with the death of the sacrifice.

- The westernmost light of the temple candelabra would not burn. This was crucial because this was the "shammash" (servant) used to kindle the other lights.
- The temple doors opened by themselves. The rabbis saw the ominous fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah 11:1 that says, "Open your doors, Lebanon, so that the fire can consume your cedars." In fact, fires did consume the cedars of Lebanon that may have adorned the inside of the temple.

Yeshua's Fulfillment

What should surprise us is that God would give His Son for us. What should amaze us is that the blood spilled on history's ultimate altar would be His own. But we should never be surprised that only the sacrifice of another life can exempt one from the death penalty that sin and guilt deserve. Sacrifice has always been central in the history of God's gracious dealings with men. Over and over again, that picture is presented to us. Over and over again we see the blood. Over and over - till with awed amazement we look at Calvary and suddenly the pictures from the past merge into one. And we bow, stunned by the reality.

He died.
He died for me.
He died for you.

Even in ancient times, God lifted the veil to let us peek beyond the shadows at the reality.

Isaiah 53 was long been understood by the Jews to speak of the coming Messiah - the Deliverer to be sent to them by God. In this passage we have a clear picture of Yeshua, and of sacrifice.

"Like a lamb led to be slaughtered" (v. 7).
"He would present himself as a guilt offering" (v. 10).
"He exposed himself to death" (v. 12).
"Actually bearing the sin of many" (v. 12).

We cannot read these words today with out realizing that they contain God's explanation for Yeshua's life - and for His death.

According to Hebrews Chapter 10, the sacrifices of old were **"a shadow of the good things to come, but not the actual manifestation of the originals"** (v. 1). The blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins (v. 4). The sacrifices only covered and concealed sin, thus permitting God to overlook His people's sins until Yeshua could come to actually *take away sins* by the sacrifice of Himself (Romans 3:25-26). What the ancient sacrifices foreshadowed, Yeshua accomplished! By one sacrifice, He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

In Yeshua our sins and lawless acts have been forgiven fully, and we have been cleansed. (Hebrews 10:14) Thus **"an offering for sins is no longer needed"** (v. 18). We just need to appropriate for ourselves the atonement of the shed blood of Yeshua.

The animal sacrifices had to be repeated again and again. Their repetition was a continual reminder to Israel that sin, while temporarily covered, must still be dealt with. The repeated sacrifices served to demonstrate that no animal's life could ever satisfy the righteousness of God. What a different message the bread and wine of Communion! No longer is fresh blood required. Yeshua has died, offering **"for all time one sacrifice for sins"** (v. 12).

It is enough.
Redemption's work is done.
By the blood of Yeshua, you and I have been set forever free.

The focal point of God's atoning work is Yeshua's death on the execution stake. Sha'ul wrote **"we were reconciled with God through His Son's death when we were enemies"**. (Romans 5:10) These words not only define the meaning of atonement, they reveal the heart of the gospel as well. At the beginning of His ministry, Yeshua was identified as **"the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world"** (John 1:29). The purpose of His coming was **"to give his life as a ransom for many"** (Mark 10:45). He explained His death in terms of His **"blood shed on behalf of many"** (Mark 14:24).

The relation of Yeshua's death to forgiveness of sins was implicit in the earliest Messianic preaching (Acts 2:21; 3:6, 19; 4:13; 5:31; 8:35; 10:43). Sha'ul proclaimed, **"Yeshua died for our sins"** (1 Cor. 15:3), that He was the "kapparah - atonement" (Romans 3:25 KJV; "sacrifice of atonement," NRSV, NIV; "expiation," RSV), that He became **"a cursed on our behalf"** (Galatians 3:13), and that those **"who were once far off have been brought near through the shedding of the Messiah's blood."** (Ephesians 2:13). Furthermore, Yeshua has been **"offered once to bear the sins of many"** (Hebrews 9:28) and has become **"a new and living way"** (Hebrews 10:20) into God's presence. He is the one who **"bore our sins in his body on the stake"** (1 Peter 2:24).

Though atonement is focused in the execution stake, the Brit Hadashah makes clear that Yeshua's death is the climax of His perfect obedience. He **"became obedient unto death, even the death of the execution stake"** (Philippians 2:8). **"Even though he was the Son, he learned obedience through his sufferings"** (Hebrews 5:8). Romans 5:12-19 contrasts Yeshua's obedience with Adam's disobedience. His sinless obedience qualified Him to be the perfect Sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 6:8-10).

The atonement for sin provided by Yeshua's death had its origin in divine love. No other reason can explain why **"God reconciled us to himself by Yeshua"** (2 Corinthians 5:18). The anthem that continuously peals from the Bible is that **"God so loved the world, that he gave his only and unique Son"** (John 3:16; see 1 John 4:9-10). This does not mean that God loves us because Yeshua died for us. Rather, Yeshua died for us because God loves us. Thus, **"God demonstrates his own love for us, in that the Messiah died on our behalf while we were still sinners"**. (Romans 5:8) Because atonement issues from love, it is always seen as a divine gift, never as human achievement.

No day was, or is, as sacred to the Jewish community as Yom HaKippurim, the Day of Atonements. After the high priest had made atonement for his own sins and those of his household, he proceeded with the rites of atonement for the whole community.

"God put Yeshua forward as the kapparah – the atonement – for sin through his faithfulness in respect to his bloody sacrificial death." (Romans 3:25) Scripture depicts all human beings as needing to atone for their sins but lacking all power and resources for doing so. We have offended our holy Creator, whose nature it is to hate sin (Jeremiah 44:4; Habakkuk 1:13) and to punish it (Psalms 5:4-6; Romans 1:18; 2:5-9). No acceptance by, or fellowship with, such a God can be expected unless atonement is made, and since there is sin in even our best actions, anything we do in hopes of making amends can only increase our guilt or worsen our situation.

As a perfect sacrifice for sin (Romans 8:3; Ephesians 5:2; 1 Peter 1:18-19), Yeshua's death was our redemption. He paid the price that freed us from the jeopardy of guilt, enslavement to sin, and expectation of wrath (Romans 3:24; Galatians 4:4-5; Colossians 1:14). Yeshua's death was God's act of reconciling us to himself, overcoming his own hostility to us that our sins provoked (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Colossians 1:20-22).

Yeshua's atoning death ratified the inauguration of a renewed covenant, in which access to God under all circumstances is guaranteed by Yeshua's one sacrifice that covers all transgressions (Matthew 26:27-28; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 9:15; 10:12-18). Those who through faith in Yeshua have **"received reconciliation"** (Romans 5:11) **"in him... become the righteousness of God"** (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We no longer need the blood of bulls or goats. Yeshua is our perfect atonement. He is the Messiah!