

## Yom Kippur

Leviticus 16:1–34; Numbers 29:7–11; Isaiah 57:14–58:14; Hebrews 9:1–15

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*notes by Tim Hegg*

*You shall humble your souls...*

At the very first, when God gave the Yom Kippur commandments to Moses, He declared:

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; 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 Adonai. It is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute. (Lev 16:29–31, cf. 23:28, 32)

Twice the Holy One repeats the injunction that we are to “humble our souls” on this appointed day. Traditionally we fast on Yom Kippur as one of the means by which we might “humble our souls” by way of deeper reflection and introspection. Fasting and humbling one’s soul has good biblical precedence, for we find the Prophet Isaiah coupling both together in Isaiah 58:

Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice? (v. 3)

Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? (v. 5)

But what is the purpose of humbling our souls on Yom Kippur? What is it that HaShem intends such humbling to accomplish in our own lives of faith as we walk in the footsteps of the Messiah?

First, we should humble our souls on this day as a matter of simple obedience to God’s commandment. God’s commandments are for our good, and even if we cannot fully understand all of the reasons why, when we obey Him out of a heart of obedience, we inevitably find that His ways are good for us and that we benefit in ways we may not have foreseen. What is more, we should seek joy in the mere act of obeying, for our obedience is a way of expressing our gratitude and love to Him.

Second, Yom Kippur affords us a set time to stop and make an honest assessment of our own faith and progress in sanctification. Paul admonishes us to test ourselves to see if we are in the faith:

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Yeshua Messiah is in you—unless indeed you fail the test? (2Cor 13:5)

Among popular Christianity, testing oneself in regard to one’s faith is not often emphasized. Some would even say that such an exercise brings doubting, and that this is contrary to faith. But the Apostle tells us to do so. Yom Kippur, a day that incorporates a solemn reflection upon one’s own soul, affords the opportunity to take a more complete inventory of one’s own walk with the Lord, and to affirm a genuine faith in Yeshua as the only way to the Father (Jn 14:6).

Third, whether we like to admit it or not, it is a characteristic of our fallen human nature that we tend to take for granted things of immense importance. Even our confession of faith in Yeshua may sometimes become perfunctory, so that we can, almost nonchalantly, say “all my sins are forgiven” without being moved in our souls at the wonder of such a great salvation that we have been given. In many ways, the appointed times of the Lord safeguard us from such a detached, purely intellectual perspective of our faith, and Yom Kippur perhaps most of all. On this day of fasting we are afforded a time to contemplate and do a thorough soul inventory—to appreciate the full atonement made for us by the death of Yeshua, and to consider what riches He forfeited to make us rich.

But there is a caution we must heed as we humble our souls on Yom Kippur. All three of the Synoptic Gospels contain the words of Yeshua in which He warns His disciples about the “leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

And Yeshua said to them, “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” (Matt 16:6)

How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Matt 16:11–12)

And He was giving orders to them, saying, “Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” (Mark 8:15)

Under these circumstances, after so many thousands of people had gathered together that they were stepping on one another, He began saying to His disciples first of all, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” (Luke 12:1)

What exactly is the “leaven of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herod”? Luke tells us clearly that it is hypocrisy, teaching one thing but doing something quite different.

Why would I bring this up in connection to our fasting or humbling our souls on Yom Kippur? It is because in our day modern orthodox Judaism continues to hold to the belief that in one way or another, we must merit or earn God’s favor and mercy, and this is particularly evident in the observance of Yom Kippur. Note the words of *b.RoshHaShanah* 16b:

R. Kruspedai said in the name of R. Johanan: Three books are opened in heaven on Rosh HaShanah, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediate. The thoroughly righteous are forthwith inscribed definitively in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are forthwith inscribed definitively in the book of death; the doom of the intermediate is suspended from Rosh HaShanah till Yom Kippur; if they deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of life; if they do not deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of death.

Thus, from this and many other rabbinic references to gaining merit before God through one’s own

religious observance, rabbinic Judaism developed the teaching that a person must earn God's favor through repentance, charity, prayers, study of Torah, and keeping the *mitzvot*. For this reason, Yom Kippur is a day of awe, not for contemplating God's grace and mercy made sure through the work of the Messiah, but for wondering if one has sufficiently afflicted one's own soul and done proper repentance in order to be written in the book of life. Indeed, this is why, in rabbinic Judaism, the proper greeting for Yom Kippur is *G'mar Tov*, literally, "for a good finish."<sup>1</sup> One website instructs: "Please, don't wish people a Happy Yom Kippur; it's not a happy holiday."<sup>1</sup> Granted, Yom Kippur is a day of introspection and contemplation, and one which we as believers in Messiah should take seriously. But we also have the deep-seated assurance that, being "in Yeshua," we will never be cast away by the Father, but we now possess eternal life procured for us by an infinite atonement of infinite worth, even the death of our Messiah on our behalf. We cling to His merits, not our own. And it is this truth that moves us to repentance and turning to walk in His footsteps. That which motivates our repentance is His love and mercy, not an attempt to earn His favor.

But why does Yeshua use the metaphor of "leaven" in His warning to the disciples and to us? It is because like leaven which permeates the whole lump of dough, so the notion that mankind can, in one way or another, earn God's grace permeates the fallen nature. The flesh is attracted to the invitation that somehow, in my own merits, I can become acceptable to God—to be righteous because of what I have done and hope to do.

It is this (along with other things) that seems to attract people within the messianic movement to the teachings of traditional, orthodox Judaism. Clearly the orthodox Judaisms of our day present themselves as zealous for the God of Israel and eager to maintain strict traditions of a religious life. And indeed, many of these traditions are beautiful and have value for us in our walk of faith, but beware—their teaching is mixed with leaven. Let us not, even for a moment, think that we are humbling our souls on Yom Kippur in order to merit God's grace, or that observing Yom Kippur or any of the festivals (including Shabbat) somehow gives us greater favor with God. Or that somehow on Yom Kippur we can merit being "sealed" in God's grace for another year. Rather, we have been sealed forever by the Spirit Who dwells within us!

For as many as are the promises of God, in Him [Yeshua] they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us. Now He who establishes us with you in Messiah and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge. (2Cor 1:20–22)

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1 [www.jewfaq.org/express.htm](http://www.jewfaq.org/express.htm).