

High Holy Days: Yom Kippur Liturgy Study Guide On Forgiveness

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Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a day of deep self-reflection, as Jews worldwide fast and attempt to get closer to God. Our tradition teaches us that on Rosh HaShanah, every person is judged based on their actions in the past year, and on Yom Kippur, that judgment is sealed for the next year. This means that during the High Holy Days, Jews confess to their sins, try to make amends with each other, and seek repentance for times when they have “missed the mark.”

Yom Kippur is a day filled with prayer, and the liturgy speaks to the themes of repentance, confession, and sin. We encourage you to use this study guide of texts from our traditional liturgy and modern meditations found in our Machzor to reflect on the themes of the holiday. Additionally, we encourage you to consider the criminal justice system in the United States as you think about forgiveness and repentance during these holy days.

Text 1: Confession in the Plural

We have become guilty, we have betrayed, we have stolen, we have spoken slander, we have perverted, we have caused wickedness, we have sinned intentionally, we have extorted... - *Ashamnu*, from the confession to sin in Yom Kippur Liturgy

1. Why do we confess that “we” have done wrong instead of “I” have done wrong? What does it mean to take collective responsibility for each others’ sins?
2. Why is it important to take collective guilt for each others’ sins? In what ways are we responsible, even if we don’t commit crime ourselves, in the persistence of injustice in our society?

Text 2: Types of Transgression

For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another. -Maimonides, Laws of Repentance

1. What are the two kinds of sins that Maimonides speaks of here? Can you think of examples of each kind of transgression?
2. What does the Day of Atonement do? What are the limitations of the Day of Atonement?
3. What are our responsibilities to each other? As sinners? As people sinned against? What about society’s responsibility to those in the criminal justice system?

Texts 3 & 4 The Nature of Sin

At first sin is like a spider’s web; in the end it becomes as thick as a ship’s cable. At first it is a visitor; in the end it becomes the master of the house. -*Midrash*

One good deed leads to another, and one transgression to another. -*Mishnah B’rachot*

1. What do these texts tell us about the nature of sin? Why does one sin lead to another?
2. How can the cycle be broken? How can we create a society which helps people achieve rehabilitation and repentance?

Texts 5 & 6: The Nature of Repentance

“Open to Me (Song of Songs 5:2).” Make for Me an opening (of repentance), an opening as narrow as the point of a needle, and I will make the opening so wide (for pardon) that camps full of soldiers and siege engines could enter it. -Midrash

Return us to You, O God, and we will truly return. Renew our days as in the past. -Torah Service Liturgy

1. What happens when we confess and repent for our sins? What must we do to achieve repentance? How does God respond?
2. What do these texts tell us about how we should approach people who seek forgiveness? Is that possible for us?
3. How should society treat those who sin against it but seek rehabilitation and repentance? What prevents forgiveness from happening?