

When Was Your Yom Kippur?

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Yom Kippur is Hebrew for “The Day of Atonement.” The modern observance of this day by Jews around the world is based on the annual ceremony prescribed by God for Old Testament Jews in Leviticus 16. On this day the Jewish high priest would sacrifice



a bull, two rams, and a male goat as atonement for his sins and the sins of the people. The high priest would take some of the blood of the bull and the goat inside the holy of holies where he would sprinkle it on the mercy seat—the place on top of the ark of the covenant between the two golden cherubim. A second goat was then led away into the wilderness, symbolically carrying away the sins of the Jewish people. One modern Jewish source describes the importance of the high priest’s work this way:

The eyes of all Israel were raised toward the Kohen Gadol’s [high priest’s] order of service, which began toward the break of dawn. On his success, the atonement of all Israel was dependent.¹

The work of the Jewish high priest on the Day of Atonement was unarguably essential for God’s Old Covenant people. First of all, God commanded that it be done, so any neglect of the ordinance would have been disobedience. Secondly, we know that “without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22). But even in the Old Testament, there are clear indicators that the work of the Jewish high priest and the shedding of the blood of animals on the Day of Atonement was only symbolic, not effective as an atonement for sin.

Abraham, for example, was reckoned by God as righteous (i.e., justified) on the basis of faith well *before* the Levitical system of sacrifices was instituted (cf. Gen. 15:6). Other prophets, writing hundreds of years *after* the laws of sacrifice were given, spoke of atonement for sins through a future sacrifice. Consider, for example, the words of Isaiah as he spoke of the Messiah:

He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall upon Him. (Is. 53:5-6).

Although Isaiah seems to be speaking in the past tense, as if the event he was describing had already happened, a few verses later he affirms the *forward-looking*

purpose of God, saying that the Messiah “*will justify* the many, as He *will bear* their iniquities” (v. 11, emphasis added).

Most importantly, the New Testament assures us that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). The Jewish temple and the mercy seat inside the holy of holies were merely “copies of the things in the heavens” (Heb. 9:23). These *copies* could be ceremonially cleansed by sprinkling them with the blood of animals, “but the heavenly things themselves” required “better sacrifices than these” (Heb. 9:23). Thankfully,

Christ [the Messiah] did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; nor was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. (Heb. 9:24-26)

We do indeed rely on the work of a Jewish High Priest for the atonement of our sins, but not a priest who is “prevented by death from continuing” (Heb. 7:23). The only High Priest whose work makes an eternal difference is the One who died and rose again—Jesus Christ, who, “because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently” (Heb. 7:23). Only this High Priest is “able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:24). Furthermore, Jesus “does not need daily [or annually], like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself” (Heb. 7:27).

Many people around the world observe Yom Kippur as though the annual ceremony were necessary to please God. The truth is, however, the real and final Yom Kippur occurred on a tragic yet victorious day in first-century Palestine. Jesus Christ fully accomplished the salvation of God’s New Covenant people, consisting not only of many Jews, but people “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). On that true Day of Atonement, God’s great High Priest offered Himself once as the only effective sacrifice for sin. Any continuing work by another priest is unnecessary—actually *futile*—because, as Paul says, “there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). He is the One who “bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Pet. 2:24).

In the words of Jesus Christ Himself, “It is finished!” (John 19:30).

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¹ Orthodox Union website, <http://www.ou.org/chagim/yomkippur/ykavodah.htm>