

**The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School**  
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living, South Dade  
<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/rhythms.html>  
Instructor: Marsha B. Cohen  
E-mail: marbcohen@gmail.com

## **Topic: Yom Kippur**

**Key Idea:** *Yom Kippur* is not a day of self-castigation and despair. It is a manifestation of the optimistic conviction in Judaism that human beings can improve both their characters and behavior through introspection, faith, and recognition their of ethical and moral responsibilities—*teshuvah* (return) *tefillah* (prayer) and *tzeddaka* (righteous acts). The atonement prayers emphasize these responsibilities, articulate the ideals of concern for others, and emphasize the involvement of the entire community in offenses that might have been prevented. We are repeatedly reminded that *Yom Kippur* brings pardon only for sins between humans and God, and cannot bring forgiveness from God for an injury done to another person unless an attempt has been made to repair the damage. At the same time, however, injuries to fellow humans are considered to be sins against God as well, thus requiring two levels of atonement.

Nor is *Yom Kippur* a day of mourning. The arrangement of the Yom Kippur service is designed to lead from guilt to joy and confidence in God's love and mercy. Fasting is intended raise us to a higher level of consciousness by attending to our spiritual, rather than physical, needs. According to the Talmud, on *Yom Kippur* Jews should not be somber or depressed, but should dress in white, symbolizing cheerfulness and purity. The traditional Yom Kippur greeting is "*G'mar chatima tova!*" (often shortened to *G'mar tov*) —“a good final seal.”

### ***Our discussion:***

**Text 1. Talmud, Rosh Hashana 16b.** Three "books" for the righteous, the wicked and the in-between that decided their destinies. Note that God, who has been envisioned as a shepherd deciding the fate of his sheep in a pastoral society, as king wearing royal robes and whose presence is announced by trumpets and greeted with cheers (probably based on encounters with Persian royalty during the early Second Temple period), is now a scribe, like the Rabbis.

**Text 2. *Pesikta Rabbati* Chapter 40.** A "middle period" (c. 640-900) *midrash* (homiletic commentary) states that God promises forgiveness to all who repent during the ten days between (and including) Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur.

**Text 3. *Mishna Yoma 8:1*** ("oral law" put into writing around 200 CE by Rabbi Judah the Prince). Yom Kippur prohibitions of physical indulgence.

**Text 4. *Seder Eliyahu Zuta, Chapter 1.*** Another "middle period" (c. 640-900) *midrash* (homiletic commentary) recounts that the Israelites fasted during the 40 days of Moses' second ascent of Mt. Sinai, and declared another sunset-to-sundown (of the following day) fast. God was moved to pity by the repentance that inspired the fasting, and the day (Yom Kippur) was made a perpetual day of atonement and forgiveness.

**Text 5. Laura Geller, *The Torah in our Lives.*** The significance of *Kol Nidrei*.

**Text 6. *Leviticus 16: 3-11; 15-16; 21-22; 29-32.*** The priestly atonement rituals performed in the Temple on Yom Kippur.

**Suppl. text. Isaiah 58:3-12.** The prophet Isaiah argues that fasting in a context unethical behavior and social injustice will not arouse God's mercy but rather will be ignored.

**Text 7. Rabbi Mark Washofsky, *Yom Kippur*.** The evolution of Yom Kippur from a day of communal atonement to a day based on reflection, forgiveness of others, and soul-searching.

**Text 8. *Avot De Rabbi Natan, Chapt. 4*.** The replacement of priestly atonement rituals by acts of lovingkindness as the expression of repentance and means to receive forgiveness.