

YOM KIPPUR
D'VAR TORAH
MORNING SERVICE

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Salem, Oregon

September 21, 2026

10 Tishri, 5787

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a day devoted to self-reflection concerning our actions in the world and our treatment of others. It is a day that reminds us of our obligation to ask forgiveness from G-d and from those that we have wronged during the previous year, and thereby to repent for our wrongdoing, to cleanse ourselves from past sins, and to make a determination to avoid making the same and other such mistakes in the year to come.

Forgiveness for such actions is not guaranteed by our presence and prayer here in the synagogue on Yom Kippur; forgiveness is determined by G-d and by those whom we have wronged during the previous year. When it comes to G-d, we never really know if we have been forgiven or not. When it comes to humans, perhaps they will tell us. And when it comes to ourselves, perhaps we will recognize the issues ourselves.

In order to observe Yom Kippur, we read Leviticus 16, the account of the two goats offered as examples of the *Haṭṭa't*, the Sin Offering, as a central portion of the Yom Kippur

Shaharîr or Morning Service for the day. Leviticus 16 teaches us how the two goats were offered as Sin offerings on Yom Kippur when the ancient Jerusalem Temple, presumably both Solomon's Temple and the later Second Temple were standing. The first goat was to be offered by Aaron or one of his sons, who served as the High Priest or Cohen of the Jerusalem Temple, after he had appeared before G-d in the Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple to purify himself as part of the larger effort to purify the Temple and the people before G-d. Together with the offering of his own *Ḥaṭṭa't* in the form of a bull to ask forgiveness for himself and his family, the High Priest would also bring forward the two goats at the entrance to the Sanctuary, called the Tent of Meeting in the Wilderness Narratives of the Torah and later recognized as the Jerusalem Temple, to cast lots over them to determine the fate of each goat. After offering his own *Ḥaṭṭa't* to G-d on the sanctuary altar, the High Priest would then turn to the first goat, chosen by lot, to offer it as the *Ḥaṭṭa't* or Sin Offering on the altar on behalf of the Sanctuary.

The second goat, again designated by lot, would be left alive. This second goat would then be consecrated to bear the sins of the people at large. The goat would then be led out to the wilderness by a man designated to do so, so that the goat would carry the sins of the people, metaphorically speaking, to some separate and inaccessible region in the wilderness, where the goat would be set free to carry the sins of the people to Azazel. Azazel is a mysterious figure, generally understood to be some sort of a demon figure in ancient Israelite and Judean thought, who would then accept the sins of the people and carry them away.

The ritual of the scapegoat which carries the sins of the people of Israel and Judah off to Azazel in the wilderness was likely a matter of belief on the part of our ancestors in ancient

times, but in the modern world it is more likely that Azazel and the ritual just described must be considered as a metaphorical portrayal of the expulsion of the sins of our ancient ancestors. But whether it is understood literally, as some might be inclined to do, or metaphorically, as others might be inclined to do, the ritual conveys an important teaching, that is, we, as individuals and as a people, are responsible for acting to make atonement for the wrongs that we have committed against G-d, the sanctuary or Temple, and all others with whom we interact in the world of creation that we inhabit during our lifetimes. We may pray to ask forgiveness from G-d for wrongs done to G-d and the Sanctuary, and we must also ask forgiveness from those whom we have wronged during the past year.

Although we might be inclined to dismiss Azazel and the ritual just described as a superstition from a long-past society that has moved on to more “realistic” understandings of our roles and responsibilities in the world, we must recognize that Yom Kippur conveys some very central ideas that stand at the center of Jewish thought and the basis for our own behavior in this world. A key issue here is the question as to whether or not we will continue to do wrong in the year to come, and then stand here once again, G-d willing, to ask forgiveness for the sins that we will commit in the coming year. Such a question stands at the basis of moral thinking on the part of Christianity, a religious tradition that stands as the majority religious tradition in our modern, American world. Christianity considered this question seriously and posited that human beings, being finite and therefore imperfect in the world of creation, were incapable of making such changes in behavior through their own efforts. Christianity therefore holds that G-d sent his son, Jesus of Nazareth, to be sacrificed in order to atone for human sin. I do not make such a statement polemically—my own Father and his family were Christian—but such a

conceptualization is derived from the pagan religious traditions of the Greco-Roman world, which held that gods, such as Zeus, could father semi-human sons, such as Heracles or Hercules, to act in the world of human beings. Judaism, of course, does not hold to such a belief, insofar as it runs counter to divine instruction as expressed in the Torah. Christianity ultimately holds that human beings, due to their tangible nature, suffer from what is called theologically, “original sin.”

But Christianity was not entirely wrong in its assessment of human character; yes, we humans continue to act in manners that run contrary to divine expectation, and we Jews appear here every Yom Kippur to ask forgiveness from G-d for our sins of the past year. But Judaism made a very different choice in its assessment of the human character from that chosen by Christianity. Judaism maintains the ideal that human beings are capable of learning from their mistakes or experience of the past, and that we humans are capable of correcting our actions based on what we have learned. In Jewish ethics, we human beings are understood to be capable of free will, that is, the capacity to think for ourselves, to learn from experience, and thereby to correct our behavior in future action based upon what we have learned from past experience. Rabbinic tradition holds that we human beings, even with our finite or tangible natures, nevertheless possess an element of the divine within us that makes us able to recognize good and evil and to act upon that recognition. Rabbinic thought teaches us that we humans possess two important natures or inclinations, that is, the *Yetzer Tov*, the Inclination for Good, and the *Yetzer Ra*, the Inclination for Evil, within ourselves, and that we have the capacity to choose between them in our own behavior. Indeed, the recognition of the Inclinations for Good and Evil comes to us through the agency of Eve, *Havvah*, in the Garden of Eden according to the narratives in

Genesis 1—3. And due to Eve's agency in enabling us to recognize the *Yetzer Tov* and the *Yetzer Ra'*, we Jews—we human beings—have the capacity to recognize and choose the *Yetzer Tov* over the *Yetzer Ra'*. And indeed, we have the obligation to make the correct choice.

Judaism is a religion of choice, especially for we American Jews who could assimilate all so easily into American culture and never be recognized as Jews. My name is Sweeney, and no one would know that I am Jewish unless I assert my Jewish identity. But even for those of us who have more recognizably Jewish names, the choice to identify as a Jew—and the obligation to choose the *Yetzer Tov* over the *Yetzer Ra'* always stands before us. As we all no doubt already know by own experience of life in this world, the recognition of the *Yetzer Tov* and the *Yetzer Ra'* is not always an easy one to make. But the narrative in Leviticus 16 of the *Hatṭa't* or Sin Offering and the Scapegoat that is sent out into the Wilderness to carry our sins to Azazel teaches us that fundamental lesson. And so let us strive to do better in the year to come for—G-d willing—we will stand here next year at this time to ask G-d and those whom we have wronged for forgiveness next Yom Kippur.