What Does Yom Kippur Even Mean to Me?

Your 18Forty Holiday Guide explores the meaning and relevance behind each of the holidays in the Jewish calendar. Receive this newsletter in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions or feedback? Email Rivka Bennun Kay at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

Of everything you have let go, Yom Kippur is the one you never quite manage to drop. Tonight you will start a full day with no food and no water. You will stand for hours in a packed room and say sorry, out loud, for a year of sins, most of which you did not commit. Maybe you stopped believing a long time ago that a single day could wipe a whole year clean. But you are drawn back anyway, hungry and unconvinced, still asking yourself what any of this is supposed to mean to you.

The Torah barely asks for any of this. Vayikra 23 sets aside the 10th day of the seventh month, calls it a day of atonement, and tells you to afflict yourself and do no work. Nothing in those verses mentions cancelling vows, or a fast, or a confession for sins you did not commit. The tradition added all of that over the centuries, and much of it is what troubles you. So take each one in turn, starting with the vows.

RELATED: Yom Kippur: The Jewish Time Traveler's Manual

Why open the holiest night by cancelling my vows?

If the haunting melody of *Kol Nidrei* still touches you, it has done its job, which is to reach deep inside, even into someone who thought they were long past being reached. But listen to the actual words, and it is not really a prayer. It is a legal formula for cancelling vows, which is how Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes it. In the version most Ashkenazi shuls say, it does not release the promises you already broke. It cancels the ones you have not made yet, from this Yom Kippur to the next. On the holiest night of the year, the first thing the service does is give you permission to walk back your own word. But the point of the night is what lies beneath those words, and you have to dig for it.

So look at what *Kol Nidrei* can actually cancel. Only one narrow kind of promise, the vows between you and God, the private resolutions you make impulsively and forget by spring. It does not cover a promise you made to another person. The debt you owe, the contract you signed, the word you gave a friend, none of it is cancelled by *Kol Nidre*i.

For the wrongs against another person, no prayer helps you at all. The Mishna says it directly. Yom Kippur, together with repentance, clears what stands between you and God. It does not cover what stands between you and another person until you make it right with them. Rambam gives the same ruling, that returning what you owe is not enough on its own, and the wrong is never forgiven until you face the person and ask. And all of that was supposed to be done before tonight. Before you walk into shul, you were meant to have already gone, in person, to everyone you hurt this year, and asked them. Aaron Lazare spent decades studying apology, and he treats it as an encounter, something that happens between the person who did the harm and the person still hurt by it.

RELATED: How to Say Sorry

This is exactly what antisemites got wrong about *Kol Nidrei* for centuries. They held it up as proof that a Jew's word is worthless, that any oath a Jew swears is cancelled by the next Yom Kippur. The tradition makes a Jew's word to another person binding in a way nothing in the whole day can undo. Martha Minow, a legal scholar who studies forgiveness and its limits, said on the *18Forty Podcast* that real turning away from wrongdoing requires action. Saying something is not enough, and asking forgiveness is not enough either, because what counts is how you behave afterward.

There is one more thing in *Kol Nidrei*. Rabbi Sacks heard in it the voice of Jews who were forced, on pain of death, to renounce their faith in public, and who went on being Jews in private, whatever they were made to say out loud. He heard in it a Jewishness that outlives even a public break—in his telling, the Jews we are, Jews we hold ourselves to be, and Jews we will remain. That is what the night is really speaking to, the part of you that stays Jewish underneath everything you have done and not done, whether you left, or stayed, or never decided. It was there before you chose anything, and it stays whether you practice or not. It is the part of you that keeps pulling you back every fall, however far you think you have gone.

What is fasting all day supposed to accomplish?

Then the day itself arrives, and the hardest part of it is the fast, 25 hours with no food and no water. The Mishna lists the other things you give up for the day—washing, lotions, leather shoes, and intimacy—and every one of them takes away an ordinary comfort of the body. Nothing on that list explains why going without those comforts should do you any good. Going hungry all day looks like punishing yourself to feel holy, or bribing God with your own discomfort.

You are not the first person to ask that, and the Sages who chose what gets read on the day put the answer inside the service. On Yom Kippur morning the congregation reads Yeshayahu 58, where the prophet attacks fasting as a performance. Why do we fast, the people ask, and You take no notice? God's answer is that they fast while they drive their workers and quarrel, so their hunger buys them nothing. The fast He wants is one in which you unlock the chains of injustice and share your bread with the hungry. Hunger by itself accomplishes nothing, and you hear the prophet say so out loud in the middle of the holiest day of the year.

So what is the hunger supposed to do? For most of the morning and much of the afternoon, the honest answer is nothing at all. You watch the clock and work out how many hours are left before you can eat. The fast becomes the biggest distraction of the day, and it pushes you further from any honest look at yourself.

Late in the day the hunger only gets worse, but you stop bargaining with it, because by then you know it is not ending for hours, and you are too worn down to keep up the version of yourself you present every other day of the year. On an ordinary day you reach for the next small comfort, a coffee, a snack, your phone, long before you have to face anything hard. Matthew Crawford, in *The World Beyond Your Head*, argues that ordinary life is built to capture your attention, so that being present for anything now takes real effort. Yom Kippur takes those comforts away at once.

Each thing the Mishna lists is something your body wants, and for 25 hours you stop doing all of it. Yeshayahu's warning still stands, because if you go hungry all day and walk out the same way you came in, the hunger never reached you. But by the end of the day you have gone without food, water, washing, and every other thing you normally do for your body without thinking, so you have nothing left to distract you from the honest look at yourself you could not manage all morning.

By the last services of the day the prayers reach you differently. Rabbi Samuel Lebens, a philosopher, argues on the *18Forty Podcast* that fixed words, centuries old and identical every year, become new only through what you personally bring to them. He describes prayer as a duet rather than a solo, two voices saying the same words, your voice and God's. Whether you hear anything back is not something anyone can promise you. You can count on your own side of the duet, and when the confession comes around again in the closing hours, you will hear yourself saying words you may not have said in years, and you will know whether you mean them.

Why confess out loud to sins I never committed?

The confession comes back at every service. You stand, strike your chest, and read down an alphabetical list out loud and in the plural, we have betrayed, we have robbed. You have not robbed anybody. Neither has almost anyone else in the room, and all of you say it anyway.

You have heard the explanations. It is about humility. It is about standing together as a community. Nobody gets singled out, because everyone says every line, so the one person who did the terrible thing can say it without the room knowing. That last one is true. You are still standing there reading their line.

Begin with what this confession cannot do, which is settle anything you did to another person. The list names these things repeatedly, and they include cheating another person, slander, swearing to something falsely, and taking what belongs to somebody else. Saying the words changes none of it, because what you owe a person is settled with that person, which you already knew from *Kol Nidrei*.

The list is there to make you review your own year. You read down the list and ask yourself if you did any of these things. Betrayal and robbery you clear in a couple of seconds. Then it names business dealings, and you have to ask whether every deal you did this year was honest and ethical, and that one takes longer. Nothing you did would interest a lawyer, and you are still going through your year. Left to yourself you would have confessed the two or three things you already admit to and stopped there.

Rambam counts the saying out loud as the commandment. The regret and the resolve are part of what you say, and the act you are obligated to perform is putting the wrong into words. Thinking about something keeps it vague and you are past it in a second. Saying it makes you decide what you are admitting.

The things that you admit stay between you and God, and you are the only person who learns anything from the process. You have not looked at how you live in a long time. You were not avoiding it.

Rabbi Sacks wrote that the tradition understands repentance in two ways and that Yom Kippur does both at once. You say the wrong out loud, carry the guilt, and ask for atonement, which is the priest's way. And sin is distance from God, and teshuva, the Hebrew word for repentance, means coming back, which is the prophet's way.

June Tangney and Ronda Dearing spent years on guilt and shame. Guilt is focused on the actions that you took, and you can repair an action. Shame is focused on who you are as a person, and it does not point you toward repair the way guilt does. Most lines name something you did rather than something you are. Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin writes in *Sin·a·gogue* that a serious religious life has sin in it, because holding religious ideals means falling short of them. The same is true of a marriage or a job.

RELATED: Teshuva Is Endless

You will not be a different person tomorrow. You will go back to most of your habits, and by next Yom Kippur you will stand in shul and read the same lines off the same page. If the melody reaches you, it reaches the part of you that is Jewish whether or not you ever decided to be. You gave up food and water for the day, and set work and screens aside with them, so by the closing service there was nothing to do but stand there and think. Tomorrow you will go through your year line by line, which you do not do on your own. You will say a thing out loud that you would never have written down. And you know who you owe a conversation. Those things at least begin to answer what this day means to you.

RELATED: Change and Self-Acceptance: Rav Shagar's Paradox of Teshuva