



The Yom Kippur Dilemma

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If you journeyed back in time 3,500 years and saw Jewish life as our forefathers lived it, you would be astounded at how vastly it differed from today's practices. Instead of synagogues and Jewish community centers, you would witness a tent-like tabernacle, or at a later date, Solomon's magnificent Temple. And whether it were Temple or tabernacle, you would find the "services" totally foreign. In place of a chanted liturgy centered in the weekly Torah reading, you would discover a world of worship where animal sacrifice was the focal point. No rabbi would preside. Instead a kohen, a priest, would be responsible for the ritual handling of the animals' brood.

There were other differences as well. Unlike rabbis of today, the priest was not paid a salary. Rather, he received a percentage of the meat and grain offered by the worshippers. Whereas synagogue congregants today participate in the entire High Holy Day service, in ancient times the High Priest alone ventured into the sacred Holy of Holies. There, in solemn ceremonies, he made atonement for the nation. And what would the sermon topic have been, had there been a sermon? Certainly not "the brotherhood of man!" Instead, the major issue would have been atonement.

In essence, if time travel were possible it would reveal that the Judaism of today is something other than what was established by the God of Israel. Let's look more closely at this world of ancient Israel, and see how it compares with the modern expression of Jewish faith, especially as it relates to the High Holy Days.

A Saga of Sin and Redemption

Our ancestors knew that people sin and require atonement through the sacrifice of a life. Forgiveness for sins was provided through daily animal sacrifices. So thorough was Israel's awareness of sin that at least five different types of sacrifices were set forth by God. Some atoned for sin between man and God and others for sin between man and man.

The High Holy Days began, then as now, with Rosh Hashanah. However, Tishre was not the first month of the year but the seventh. Rosh Hashanah is not the original "Jewish New Year." In Bible times, it was a solemn day of assembly on which the shofar was blown, calling people to alertness and setting a somber tone in preparation for Yom Kippur.

Then, on the 10th of the month came the climactic sacrificial ritual of Yom Kippur. The High Priest entered the innermost section of the sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant rested. He cleansed the sanctuary and atoned for the people's sins through a series of rites. This involved the sprinkling of the blood of bulls and goats and the burning of sweet-smelling incense. In all these sacrifices, the blood (in other words, the death of the animal) was necessary. Moses himself wrote:

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. (Leviticus 17:11)



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Among the various commandments given for the observance of Yom Kippur in the Bible, we find "afflicting one's soul." ¹ Originally this may well have included fasting. But it meant more than fasting; it involved contrition. It is important to see that nowhere in the Bible is fasting and repentance alone sufficient for the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness of sin required sacrifice.

In the modern Jewish community, sin and atonement are seldom discussed apart from Yom Kippur. Blood sacrifice is written off as an ancient preoccupation and a primitive notion. Where sacrifice is acknowledged as the way of our people in days gone by, pronouncements like the following are given:

"At the time when the Temple stood, the altar brought atonement for a person; now a person's table brings atonement for him [through the hospitality shown to poor guests]."

"At this time, when the Temple no longer exists, and we have no atonement altar, there is nothing left but repentance. Repentance atones for all transgressions." ²

Yet God commanded sacrifice for a reason. Sin normally deserves death as its consequence: "The soul who sins is the one who will die" (Ezekiel 18:4). But the Bible describes God as "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." ³ Although we are deserving of death, God Himself provides a substitute in the form of a sacrifice.

This is dramatically highlighted in the story of the Akedah, Abraham's offering of Isaac. In this story, God forbids Abraham to sacrifice his son and provides a ram as a substitute for the lad. The provision of a substitutionary sacrifice originated with God, and this provision has never changed.

Ancient Arbitrators

"We don't need a middleman" is a popular Jewish slogan today, but you would never have heard it from our forefathers. The modern rabbi provides community leadership and instruction in the Torah, but the ancient kohanim, or priests, had an additional function: they were mediators arbitrating between two parties who could not communicate directly.

The role of "mediators" or "middlemen" is seen throughout the Bible. Abraham mediated between (God and the people of Sodom in the famous "bargaining" story of Genesis 18. The inhabitants of Sodom were estranged from God because of their sin and could not therefore have free communication with Him. Thus, there was the need for a mediator like Abraham.

Moses was also a mediator. In his case, the people had just finished making and worshiping the Golden Calf. They were estranged from God when Moses stepped in as a middleman:

¹ Leviticus 16:29.

² Hagigah 27a. quoted in Philip Goodman. *The Rosh Hashanah Anthology* (Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 1973), p 29: and Maimonides. *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 1.3*, quoted in Goodman, *The Yom Kippur Anthology* (same publisher: 1971), p.44.

³ Exodus 34:6-7.



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The next day Moses said to the people. "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses went back to the Lord and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written. (Exodus 32:30-32)

The entire priesthood existed to mediate between man and God. The great prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah were also mediators. The priests communicated from man to God, and the prophets communicated from God to man. The people did not claim to have a "direct pipeline to God." A person approached God through the priest, and God's message came through the prophet. This did not mean that an individual could not pray to God on his own, but the overall structure of religious life involved mediators playing key roles.

One with Whom?

Daily life in ancient Israel centered on a proper relationship with God: carrying out His commandments and finding atonement through sacrifice and receiving the help of mediators for sin. Indeed, life revolved around God and His requirements. The lives of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and King David, as well as the lives of the ordinary people, were focused upon a right relationship with the Holy One. Yom Kippur was above all the day to achieve "one-ment," or a reconciliation with God.

Today the holiday's focus has shifted from God to man. A problem for our people in ancient days was idolatry. In modern times the problem could well be described as "ethnolatry"—a veneration by a people of themselves and their traditions. Indeed we need to be concerned with the "survival" of the Jewish people. But for many, our twentieth-century preoccupation with our peoplehood has become of greater importance than the One who created us! "We Are One" runs the slogan. But pride in peoplehood instead of reconciliation with God is a poor exchange.

This writer had occasion a few years ago to attend a Yom Kippur service sponsored by the Hillel foundation of a west coast university. During the service, the outworking of ethnocentrism was vividly portrayed as various students came up to the bimah to recite poems forgiving God for all His sins against us!

Fortunately, few services reach this blasphemous extreme. But the example above demonstrates what happens when one's universe has man as its center and God as an outside entity. A more common outworking of this world view is a faith in which God requires no more of us than to stick together as Jews while we exercise a vague benevolence toward others. Truly, we have lost sight of the fact that God does require something of us.

As a result, the modern Jewish person is in a dilemma.

The Three-Fold Dilemma

Are All Religions Valid?

In his book *Judaism*, Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg wrote, "salvation is not only for the 'chosen people,' or those who join it by conversion. It is open to all, if they but obey the law of righteousness."



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What is this "law of righteousness?" It is difficult to determine, because Hertzberg also says that "good men can attain salvation in their own religions." ⁴

Rabbi Hertzberg speaks for many modern Jews in saying that all religions are equally valid. "Judaism," they say, "just happens to be the religion of Jews, but it is not necessarily more true than any other religion." In a sense, this view relegates Judaism to the status of a tribal superstition. It also allows for Judaism to be untrue, yet "useful" in holding us together. With such reasoning, to question whether or not a particular faith is true is considered to be unenlightened and narrow-minded on the part of the seeker for truth. It is "unenlightened" because modern Jews recognize that all religions are equally true (or equally false, depending on one's point of view). It is narrow-minded because truth is supposedly a matter of individual conscience and varies from person to person.

But let us take Rabbi Hertzberg's thinking to its logical conclusion. If the Jewish faith is valid, then it invalidates other religions which have contradictory tenets. If it's true that God created the universe as the Jewish faith teaches, then it can't be true that God is the universe as Hinduism teaches. The two concepts are undeniably exclusive of one another.

Here is another example: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" is the watchword of the Jewish faith. If the Sh'ma is correct in affirming the Oneness of God, then the polytheism of primitive tribal religions is untrue.

Therefore, how can modern Jewish faith teach that all religions are valid? If you believe that all religions are valid, then you invalidate the Jewish faith because it contradicts other religions regarding the Oneness and Creatorhood of God. Thus the liberal version of Jewish faith places us in a self-contradiction: if it is valid, then it is not valid.

So the first aspect of the dilemma compels us to look at the other alternatives.

Living "Jewishly" in the Twenty-first Century

If contemporary Jewish faith puts us in a self-contradiction, the faith of the Bible does not. If we believe that God requires something of us, the Scripture is a good place to discover what this "something" is. And if as Jews we're going to base our life-style on the Scriptures, what should we do?

For one, the need for mediators has never changed. Therefore the priesthood and the prophetic line would need to be revitalized. We would also need to reinstate the sacrificial system. Atonement for sin was, and is, by sacrifice. Moreover, recognizing the truth of the Jewish faith and the falseness of other religions, we would regard non-Jews as people who ought to be proselytized. We would need to influence the Gentiles to believe in the only true God and to follow His commandments. Just as we would have priests and prophets as our mediators, we ourselves would be mediators between God and the goyim. In fact, such a movement has begun in some Reform Jewish circles. Rabbi Alexander Schindler recently called for a full-fledged proselytizing program aimed at the religiously unaffiliated. ⁵

⁴ Judaism, ed. Arthur Hertzberg Washington Square Press, N.Y.: 1963), pp. 15-16.

⁵ See, e.g., "Reform Judaism Lifting Ban on Covert-Seeking," The Houston Chronicle. December 26. 1981.



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Is the path to take a return to the precepts of the Bible? Many of the precepts cannot be observed in modern times. The genealogies validating the priestly line are gone and so is the Temple where sacrifices must take place. The Orthodox answer is that in the absence of these institutions God has provided the teaching of the rabbis.

Nevertheless, the modern Jewish community offers little hope for discovering "the" teaching of the rabbis. In ancient times the Jewish faith was unified; God's spokesmen were clearly known. Is there a clear voice of authority among today's Jewry? Who can judge with finality as to who is correct? Shall we listen to the Reform, the Conservative, the Orthodox, the Hasid or the Humanist? Shall we follow the halakhah (legal decisions) of American Jewry and declare sturgeon kosher, or the halakhah of British Ashkenazic Jewry and pronounce it trayf (unfit for Jews)?

This lack of one central authority in Judaism is described by Efraim Rosenzweig as he looked at the American Jewish community in his book *We Jews: An Invitation to Dialogue*:

Within the framework of the American Jewish community, there is the widest possible diversity of thought on every conceivable subject—religious, political, educational, cultural. The common denominator lies in the fact that the people who hold these diverse and often antagonistic philosophies identify themselves as Jews...There is no Great Assembly, no Sanhedrin, no Steering Committee for American Jewry that, after due deliberation speaks with the united voice of the American Jews.⁶

The second aspect of our dilemma is that it is impossible to adequately follow the Tenach (because many precepts are currently unfulfillable) or modern Judaism (because it does not speak with one voice). No wonder many Jews follow the trend of the outside Gentile community....

They decide that there are no absolutes, that truth is relative, that God is unknowable, and therefore we must pick and choose our individual realities. Are we limited only to that possibility, or is there another option?

The Other Option

There is an alternative. Two thousand years ago, Y'shua of Nazareth, also known as Jesus, claimed that He was the Messiah.⁷ Most importantly for this discussion, He functioned as prophet, priest, sacrifice and mediator. Deuteronomy 18 records God's words to Moses:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. (Deuteronomy 18:18-19)

This prophecy was partially fulfilled in the Biblical line of prophets. However, by the end of the Second Temple Period, the common people were looking for the Prophet. A person would be the culmination of the prophecy:

⁶ *We Jews: An Invitation to a Dialogue*, Efraim M. Rosenzweig (Hawthorn Books N.Y.: 1977), pp.115-116.

⁷ See Matthew 16:16-17; Mark 14:61-62; John 4:25-26



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*Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."
They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"
He said, "I am not."
Are you THE PROPHET?"
He answered, "No." (John 1:19-21)*

The role of prophet was one which Jesus claimed for himself:

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."

He replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" (Luke 13:31-33)

And it was a role in which he was recognized by others:

*When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"
The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." (Matthew 21:10-11)*

After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." (John 6:14)

Moreover, Jesus claimed that by his own death he would become a sacrifice for the people, an atonement for sins:

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

*"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin."
(Matthew 26:28)*

Again, this claim was accepted by his followers:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins. (Ephesians 1:7)

But Jesus is not only a prophet and an atonement for sin. Because he willingly offered himself as a sacrifice, he also acts in the capacity of a priest:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. (Hebrews 4:14)



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Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own...But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. (Hebrews 9:25-26)

Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith. (Hebrews 10:21-22)

If Jesus is Prophet and Priest, Then He Must Also Be Mediator

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus the Messiah, who gave himself as a ransom for all men. (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

Anyone can make claims. But Jesus' claims were vindicated by his resurrection from the dead, an event which convinced his followers that he was indeed prophet, priest, mediator and sacrifice. Two thousand years later, he is still God's provision for "one-ment" with Himself.

The unity which the contemporary Jewish community seeks will only be found after we individually attain reconciliation with the One who has created us as a people: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This then is the dilemma of the modern Jew: whether to live with a contemporary, yet self-contradictory version of the Jewish faith; whether to return to the institutions of the Tenach (an impossible choice today); or whether to see that in the absence of a Temple, an altar, a priest and a prophet, God has already made provision for atonement and mediation in Y'shua.



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