

The Abridged Yom Kippur Prayer Service Companion

If you need to lead a Yom Kippur beginner service with short preparation time, print this and go...No matter what style of minyan you run, this Abridged Yom Kippur Prayer Service Companion will help to add insight and inspiration to your services. Machzor commentaries, stories, and discussion ideas are organized in the order of the five Yom Kippur services. Select from among the many quotes and insights to create a personalized commentary on the Yom Kippur davening. The Companion references the corresponding page in the standard ArtScroll Yom Kippur Machzor for each component of the tefillot and is indicated, for example, by AS: p. 118. Consider leading the *Teshuvah and Viduy Workshop* following Kol Nidrei to familiarize your participants with the concepts and practice of Teshuvah and Viduy before beginning Maariv.

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Note: Since there are components of the Yom Kippur service that are the same as on Rosh HaShanah, the Yom Kippur Prayer Companion contains some content found in the Rosh HaShanah Companion. It is up to the leader of the service to decide which insights and stories to say at which junctions.

Opening Remarks

Make opening remarks to introduce the service:

Rabbi Yaacov Haber, Yom Kippur with Simchah, www.torahlab.org – Yom Kippur offers the joy of a second chance.

Good Yom Tov! Yom Kippur is a Yom Tov (a festive day)! “There were no more joyous days for Israel than Yom Kippur and the Fifteenth Day of Av” (Mishnah, Tractate Ta’anit). Yom Kippur – like all the other festivals of the Jewish calendar – has the power to cut short and even entirely cancel the mourning period of a mourner. In the words of the Talmud: “The rejoicing of the nation pushes aside the mourning of the individual.” Yom Kippur must be seen as a day of joy.

Yet, how many of us feel Yom Tovdik (festive)? How many people are excited about the fast? The Torah says in two places, “and you shall afflict your souls...” (Lev. 23:32, Num. 29:7). So let’s decide now if we are in a joyous mood or are we feeling afflicted.

The joy of Yom Kippur is the joy of being given a second chance.

A chassid once asked his rebbe on the day after Rosh HaShanah, “Why pray on Yom Kippur? After all, we’ll inevitably transgress again.” “Look out the window,” the rebbe said, “I’ve been watching this child for days now.” The chassid joined the Rebbe at the window and watched a child learning how to walk. He kept standing, walking and falling. “Just keep watching.” Day after day the chassid returned to witness the same scene. At the week’s end the child stood without falling. “So with us,” said the rebbe, “we may fall again and again, but in the end, God gives us the opportunity we need to succeed.”

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the great fast of the Jewish Year. It is the day that we stand before God and we say, “Here we are again!” We are beating our breasts over the fact that we have not yet perfected ourselves, and at the same time we are smiling because the Av HaRachamim (merciful Father) is still there encouraging us to stand up once again and try to walk once again.

Yom Kippur is the Tenth Day of Repentance, and we can’t mask over the fact that we have looked deeply into our souls over these last few days, we have exposed our weaknesses and shortcomings, and that causes us to weep with anxiety and dread lest I be found wanting on the Day of Judgment. But Yom Kippur is also the Day of Atonement, when all sincere penitents are guaranteed a second chance.

As we begin our day of Yom Kippur, let us all be joyous as we stand up once again with a clean slate and a pure soul. Let's be sure to give everyone around us a second chance.

May God grant us all a new kind of year – where the sounds of our souls will be a sound of unmistakable joy. *Az yemalei schok pinu uleshoneinu rina!* Then our mouth will be filled with laughter and our tongue with glad song!

Section I. Kol Nidrei (AS: pp. 58-61)

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 138 – Kol Nidrei symbolizes the opportunity to free ourselves from the past.

Yom Kippur begins with the *Kol Nidrei* prayer, recited by the cantor and the congregation. In this prayer, we solemnly ask God to release us from any vows that we may have forgotten, made inappropriately, or been unable to fulfill in the previous year. It is essential to begin Yom Kippur this way because the sin of violating an oath is so serious that it may prevent one from achieving atonement. *Kol Nidrei* also symbolizes the idea of Yom Kippur as an opportunity to free ourselves from our past. The text of *Kol Nidrei* and the tune with which it is chanted are both of great antiquity, but unknown authorship. The poignant melody and the inspiring words set the tone for the rest of Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Yaacov Haber, Yom Kippur with Simchah, www.torahlab.org – Kol Nidrei is about letting the inner light shine out.

Recently I heard a remarkable story. During the Second World War, a German soldier was mortally wounded in battle, and as he fell, a priest rushed up to administer the last rites. With his remaining strength, the soldier pushed the priest's cross away, and said: "Ich bin ein Jude!" ("I am a Jew!") The priest replied: "Sorgen sich nicht, ich bin auch ein Jude!" ("Don't worry, I'm also a Jew!")

It is remarkable how every Yom Kippur all over the world, thousands upon thousands of people who otherwise never come near a synagogue, come to the Kol Nidrei service.

It is known that the Kol Nidrei prayer gained in significance during the persecution of Jews in Spain at the time of the Inquisition. People who had been forced to convert, the Marranos, behaved outwardly like their neighbors, but inwardly they remained Jews. Once a year they used this prayer to renounce the oaths they had been forced to make forswearing their own religion in favor of Christianity. Deep down, in their innermost souls, they remained Jewish. The Kol Nidrei was a proclamation that their vows, all their external behavior, was not really them. This prayer helped them cleanse themselves of their outer garments and reach their inner souls.

Today, although there are no such persecutions, there are still Marranos. We are not under pressure by the church, but simply by the environment in which we live. Our inner souls are cloaked with external garments which are just not ours. We walk, act, and talk in ways incongruous to our Judaism. Then there are the inverted Marranos whose outer appearance is that of a Tzaddik (righteous person), but who are lacking inside – missing the spirit and ethics of being Jewish. All of us together need Kol Nidrei; we need to get it together.

Rabbi Dessler in “Michtav MeEliyahu” writes that there is one part of our soul that burns like a tiny flame. That flame has the capacity to survive. No matter how hard its carrier might try to extinguish the flame, it will continue to burn.

This is what Yom Kippur and repentance are about, removing the outer garments and letting the light shine out.

Consider leading the **Teshuvah and Viduy Workshop** following Kol Nidrei to familiarize your participants with the basic concepts and practice of Teshuvah and Viduy before beginning the Yom Kippur Evening Service.

Section II. The Yom Kippur Evening Service (AS: pp. 66-163)

Part A. The Shema (AS: pp. 68-73)

One cannot overstate the significance of the Shema in Judaism. In the words of the Shema, we find the most profound and forceful proclamation of belief in God and the Torah. The Shema is so fundamental to our world view that children learn to recite it as soon as they can speak.

Rav Saadiah Gaon, Translation of the Torah, Devarim/Deuteronomy 6:4 – “Shema” means to know and internalize that there is only one God.

Know Israel, that the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair (ohr.edu) – In order to sense the reality that lies behind what our five senses tell us, we cover our eyes.

The message of Shema runs counter-intuitive to everything that our eyes tell us. Our physical senses do not teach us that nothing else exists except for Him. Quite the reverse. Our senses tell us that if anything exists at all – it’s me. From my point of view, the world could be an Ultra-High-Definition 3D movie with Surround Sound. My instinctive perception is that nothing else exists except for me. The Shema is the way we reverse this paradigm; the Shema is the way the Jew “sees” beyond the picture that his five senses paint.

Rabbi Shraga Simmons, Shema Yisrael, www.aish.com – The significance of the principle of the oneness of God.

Why is “oneness” so central to Jewish belief? Does it really matter whether God is one and not three?

Events in our world may seem to mask the idea that God is One. One day we wake up and everything goes well. The next day everything goes poorly. What happened?! Is it possible that the same God who gives us so much goodness one day can make everything go wrong the next? We know that God is good, so how could there be so much pain? Is it just “bad luck”?

The Shema is a declaration that all events are from the One, the only One. The confusion stems from our limited perception of reality. One way of understanding God’s oneness is to imagine light shining through a prism. Even though we see many colors of the spectrum, they really emanate from one light. So too, even though it seems that certain events are not caused by God, rather by some other force or bad luck, they in fact all come from the One God. In the grand eternal plan, all is “good,” for God knows best...

When a Jew says Shema, it is customary to close and cover one’s eyes. The other time in Jewish tradition that one’s eyes are specifically closed is upon death. Just as at the end of days we will come to understand how even the “bad” was actually for the “good,” so too while saying the Shema we strive for that level of belief and understanding.

Part B. *Baruch Shem Kevod*

Throughout the year, when we recite the Shema, we say the verse of “Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity” silently. On Yom Kippur, both in the evening and morning Shema, this verse is said out loud, in unison.

Tur, Orach Chaim 619:2 – Only on Yom Kippur do we say *Baruch Shem Kevod*...out loud.

It is customary to say *Baruch shem kevod malchuto l’olam va’ed* aloud, and there is a basis for this [custom] brought in the Midrash on Parshat Va’etchanan, which states that when Moshe (Moses) went up to the heavens, he heard the angels praising God with *Baruch shem kevod malchuto l’olam va’ed*, and he brought this [praise] down to the Jewish people.

Throughout the year, this praise is recited softly since the Jewish people have transgressions. However, on Yom Kippur when we are purified from our transgressions, we are compared to angels and can therefore say *Baruch Shem Kevod* out loud (See Devarim Raba, Va’etchanan 2:36).

Part C. The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (AS: pp. 108-123; see also Neilah Service, pp. 736-751)

A major feature of the Yom Kippur prayer service is the recital of the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy. Since it appears first on Yom Kippur evening, we have placed our commentary of it here. These ideas can also be used to highlight the Neilah service in which the Thirteen Attributes also feature prominently.

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 138 – The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy were taught to Moshe so they would be used at times of communal need.

Another powerful prayer vehicle is known as the Thirteen Attributes of (Divine) Mercy. Taught to Moses by God Himself as a means of breaking through to His mercy when dire threats arise, Moses utilized the Thirteen Attributes when he begged God to forgive the Jews for the sin of the Golden Calf. The Thirteen Attributes list various facets of God's mercy in His relationship to man:

Lord, Lord, God, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to Anger, and Abundant in Kindness and Truth. Preserver of Kindness for thousands of generations, Forgiver of iniquity, willful sin, and error, and Who cleanses.

This description of God is meant to be contemplated and internalized by the one seeking forgiveness. By focusing on these benevolent attributes of God, one forges a positive connection with Him, worthy of arousing mercy.

Eventually, after Moses used the prayer of the Thirteen Attributes, God did forgive the Jewish people on Yom Kippur and gave them a second set of tablets, replacing the broken first set. Fittingly, the Thirteen Attributes describing God's mercy are recited many times during the Yom Kippur prayers.

www.ou.org/chagim/elul/selichotattrib.htm – Brief Explanation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (Based on the ArtScroll Siddur).

1) *Hashem*. This Name denotes mercy. God is merciful before a person sins, even though He knows the evil lies dormant in the person. 2) *Hashem*. G-d is merciful after the sinner has gone astray. 3) *E-L*. This Name denotes power. God's mercy sometimes surpasses even the degree indicated by the name Hashem. 4) *Rachum*. Compassionate; G-d eases the punishment of the guilty, and He does not put people into extreme temptation. 5) *ve-Chanun*. And Gracious; even to the undeserving. 6) *Erech Apayim*. Slow to Anger; so that the sinner can reconsider long before it is too late. (Rav Moshe Cordovero in "*Tomer Devorah*," describes G-d as a "*Melech Ne'Elav*," an "Insulted King," Whose subjects disobey Him, yet He maintains their existence.) 7) *Ve-Rav Chessed*... And Abundant in Kindness...; towards those who lack personal merits. Also, if the scales of good and evil are evenly balanced, He tips them towards the good. 8) *...Ve-Emet*. And Truth; G-d never reneges on His word. 9) *Notzer Chessed La-Alafim*. Preserver of Kindness for thousands

of generations; The deeds of the righteous benefit their offspring far into the future. 10) *Nose Avon...* Forgiver of iniquity...; G-d forgives the intentional sinner, if he or she repents. 11) *...Va-Phesha...*and willful sin...; Even those who purposely anger G-d are allowed to repent. 12) *...VeChataah...*and error; This is a sin committed out of carelessness or apathy. 13) *VeNake*. And Who cleanses; G-d wipes away the sins of those who repent.

Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, Selichot and the 13 Attributes from www.aish.com – The Thirteen Attributes call upon us to emulate God’s virtues.

For serious Jews, what counts in life is meaning and substance, not the illogical or the quick-fix, quirky “spiritual” stuff. We’re not into playing games. Therefore it’s very puzzling that a good part of the liturgy for the High Holiday season includes repeated requests for God to recall our ancestors’ merits on our behalf, and invoking the “13 Attributes of Mercy” so that He may forgive us.

If the whole season is dedicated to growth and change, why are we looking for shortcuts? In other words, how do we celebrate growth while asking for mercy? We should spend the whole time soul searching and making resolutions for the future – yet the main focus of our prayer seems to be on escaping responsibility for our deeds! Additionally, if God has these “13 Attributes of Mercy,” why must we “remind” Him of it? Is He only merciful if we say this prayer?! What exactly are we trying to accomplish?

The classic Torah commentary “Tomar Devorah” explains that although the “13 Attributes” arouse divine mercy, the recitation of these alone is inadequate. Rather, we need to make sure that in action, our own lifestyles reflect these attributes as well. For example, the Talmud says that if you are patient with others, then God will be patient with you. You can only demand that God employ all these attributes if you apply them in your own relationships.

Ibid. – The Thirteen Attributes humble us by bringing us to recognize that despite our transgressions we survive on God’s mercy.

There’s a different approach that goes deeper. The purpose of mentioning the “13 Attributes” is to focus us on the nature of God, to realize that He is merciful. (Even though we already know this, we keep forgetting!) We have no trouble remembering what foods give us indigestion or to keep away from poison ivy. So when we have clarity on the existence of God and the truth of Torah, why do we forget?

The answer is because we’ve never really experienced spiritual indigestion. When you’ve had a bad experience with food, you’re careful after that. You’ve experienced the full consequences of your actions, and you remember what it feels like.

With the spiritual, your conscience may bother you, but you’ve never experienced

the full result of transgression. This is both because we're not fully in touch with our souls, but more importantly because in His mercy, God does not allow us to immediately suffer for what we've done wrong. According to the "attribute of justice," a transgressor should drop dead on the spot. We survive because the Almighty is merciful and gives us a chance.

This is why the "13 Attributes" speak of "God's patience." The same God Who created you with a clean slate and a world of opportunity gives you another opportunity after you've misused the first one. If you truly understand what "wrong" means, then even if you seem to be benefiting from your wrong actions, you have to tune into God's mercy and see what He's doing for you. Then, that success will not mislead you, because you'll be humbled. "I was rude to others and nevertheless I became popular – because God is patient and loves me." Rather than using your success as a way of clouding truth, use it as a way of appreciating God's care and closeness.

Part D. Discussion for YK Night – Explaining the Meaning of Fasting

There are five so-called "afflictions" that we take upon ourselves on Yom Kippur: not eating or drinking, not washing ourselves, not anointing (soothing our hair or skin with oils or lotions), not wearing leather shoes, and not engaging in marital relations. Seeing as fasting is the most commonly known of these forms of abstention, we will focus our discussion on it, although the same principle applies to all five.

Aish UK – What's all this fasting business?

Judaism doesn't advocate abstention. We relish physical pleasures and aim to leverage them for higher purposes. But we all face a constant battle between our natural biological instincts and our higher desires. Soul versus body. Sometimes we delay instant gratification for a long-term goal... and sometimes we don't. Sometimes, in a moment of anger, impulse, or temptation, we can ruin a relationship, or do something we regret. Our head tells us it's a bad choice, but our heart overrules, and – insanely – we do it anyway.

On Yom Kippur, we live as a soul without a body. Angels for a day. When we feel the body screaming, "I'm hungry!" we politely tell it it's going to have to wait; its chances of survival are pretty good.

On Yom Kippur, we live free of our physical drives, liberated from our lusts, and torn from our tempers. Free to be alone with our higher ambitions and deeper yearnings. Of course it's up to us. If we choose to focus on our empty stomachs, we'll be counting the minutes till it's over. But if we allow ourselves to spend the day as genuinely elevated spiritual beings, we'll be wishing it could last so much longer than 25 hours! It's an incredible opportunity to evaluate our actions and choices, and to create a new vision of what we can improve for the year ahead.

Section III. The Yom Kippur Shacharit Service (AS: pp. 234-477)

The Shacharit service for the High Holidays shares some elements of a regular weekday or Shabbat prayer service while other parts are unique to these days. It may be useful to offer insights on such concepts as the Shema and silent Amidah, even if they are standard to every prayer service.

Additionally, changes to the Amidah that highlight the significance of the day should be pointed out. Avinu Malkeinu, since it is such a well-known prayer, is a perfect opportunity to share insights. The Torah reading for Yom Kippur will be discussed in the Mussaf section since they share a common subject: the divine service of the High Priest. Finally, unlike Rosh Hashanah, the Yom Kippur Shacharit service concludes with Yizkor (Memorial Service) for whomever it is applicable.

Part A. Amidah

On the High Holidays we express our desire to see the world united in the recognition of the one God.

Uvchen ten pachdecha (AS: pp. 410-411)

Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzahl, Thoughts on Rosh HaShanah, from www.yutorah.org – We're asking for recognition, not revenge.

We pray to God: "*Uvchen ten pachdecha Hashem Elokeinu...*" And so, too Lord, our God, instill Your awe upon all Your works; let all creatures prostrate themselves before You; let everything that has been made know that You are its Maker." We hope and pray that the entire world comes to recognize God's rule.

Any judgment God metes out to the enemies of Israel is not revenge for its own sake, rather a means by which "to perfect the universe through the Almighty's Sovereignty." The purpose of the judgment is to reveal in a clear manner, that only one Force created this world, runs it, and will bring about its redemption. When every living being arrives at this realization, the world will reach its ultimate state of perfection. *Veyeda kol pa'ul ki ata pe-alto veyavin kol yetzur ki ata yetzarto*: "Let everything that has been made know that You are its Maker, let everything that has been molded understand that You are its Molder."

We pray not only for the Jews to recognize this, but for Germans, Arabs, and all other enemies of Israel that that they too should accept the Kingship of God. Accepting the Kingship of God does not imply that the evil people will die.

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, On Repentance – Why pray for fear? Because the fear of God, rooted in the recognition of His complete control over the world, frees us from all other fears.

An eminent psychiatrist once told me:

“Had I the authority to do so, I would eliminate the High Holy Day prayer that begins with the words, ‘Place Your fear...’ Fear is the major cause of the various mental illnesses that beset mankind. In order to preserve one’s mental health, one should be free of fears. There is certainly no reason why anyone should ever *pray* for fear,” he confidently pronounced.

His words actually helped me understand the true nature of this prayer, and this is what I told him:

“Everyone seems to be beset with fears of all kinds. Some are afraid that they will not succeed in their careers; others fear that they will lose their wealth or status, or that they will fail to achieve sufficient status. Many people fear sickness and bodily weakness, as well as a host of other possible problems and difficulties. Man is constantly plagued with all sorts of often insignificant fears. I am not a psychiatrist, but I do know that there is one fear that can eradicate all others – it is the fear of G-d! That is what we request in this High Holiday prayer: We pray that this most significant ‘fear’ will free us from all the others that adversely affect our lives.”

Part B. Avinu Malkeinu (AS: pp. 436-439; see also Neilah Service, pp. 758-763)

Avinu Malkeinu is a widely known prayer, particularly for the last stanza which is sung in a tune familiar to most of those who attend High Holiday services. As such, attendees will be interested in hearing explanation and insight.

The origin of the Avinu Malkeinu prayer is from the following Talmudic story:

Talmud Bavli, Ta’anit 25b – Rabbi Akiva was the first to use the formulation of “Avinu Malkeinu” as a prayer to God.

It is related that Rabbi Eliezer once [during a drought] stepped down before the Ark [in synagogue] and recited the twenty-four blessings for fast days, but his prayer was not answered. Rabbi Akiva stepped down after him and exclaimed: “Our Father, our King, we have no King but You; our Father, our King, for Your sake have mercy upon us,” and rain fell.

Machzor Masoret HaRav for Rosh Hashanah, pp. xli-xlii – Rabbi Akiva taught us that we have the power to approach God directly as His children.

The Mishnah in Yoma (85b) cites the famous statement of Rabbi Akiva: “Happy are you, O Israel! Before whom do you purify yourselves? Who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven!” What new lesson was Rabbi Akiva illuminating in his homily? Who besides God could grant purification?

God reveals Himself to us in two ways: as our Father and as our King. In the Beit HaMikdash, which is His palace and His abode that we are invited to enter, He functions as a King, and in that role, He is accessible only by means of a formal

protocol, with all the manifestations of majesty that accompany entering the presence of a king. To be granted atonement on Yom Kippur from God in His role as the King, the formal ceremony of the Yom Kippur Avodah is necessary, with the Kohen Gadol performing the service via an intricate series of offerings and rituals.

What Rabbi Akiva taught, however, was that the atonement of the “essence of the day,” of the day of Yom Kippur itself, no longer required formal ceremonies; our approach to God can now be unmediated and as direct as a son’s approach to his own father. When a son approaches a father, the formality is out of place; one can enter one’s father’s presence directly and at any time without the need for formal protocol. Rabbi Akiva thus stressed that it is our “Father in Heaven” Who purifies us: that we have complete access to Him even without the Beit HaMikdash. God then relates to us as a Father and is thus Himself the “Hope of Israel.” In light of the above, it is interesting to note that Rabbi Akiva is the author of the prayer Avinu Malkeinu.

Moshe Bogomilsky, “Who Sinned?” from www.chabad.org – We’re all in the same boat.

Our Father our King, we have sinned before You.

Why does the individual say “we sinned” in plural?

A passenger on a boat once noticed another passenger drilling under his seat. In astonishment, he bellowed, “What are you doing?” The other responded, “Mind your own business. I’m drilling under my seat. I paid my fare, and this is my seat.” The man said to him, “Fool, don’t you realize that if water comes in under your seat, we are all doomed!”

The Talmud says that all Jews are responsible one for another. The reason for this is that the Jewish people are like one body. Thus, the Jew who transgresses affects the entire Jewish nation. Likewise, when a Jew does a good deed it has a good effect and benefits the entire Jewish people.

Ki Ayn Banu Ma’asim

Rabbi Jacob ben Wolf Kranz (Maggid of Dubno), from Aaron Levine’s *The New Rosh HaShanah Anthology*, p. 171 – We ask for much, knowing that we have little to offer in return.

A retail merchant who dealt in fabrics made his way to his wholesale supplier to buy the goods he needed for his business. The wholesaler instructed his workers to wait on the merchant and to bring him all that he ordered. Standing in the middle of the warehouse, the merchant bellowed all sorts of orders and requests.

“I want 1,000 yards of that cloth, 2,000 yards of the blue velvet, 3,000 yards of that white silk,” he shouted, and on and on he went, requesting many other items. When it came time to reckon up the price of the goods and to pay the bill, the

merchant took the wholesaler to the side and, very embarrassed, whispered in his ear: “Listen, I can’t give you any money for this right now. Please allow me credit until I can pay you.”

So it is with us, said the Dubno Maggid. We shout out all sorts of requests to God in the Avinu Malkeinu prayer. We want forgiveness, health, a good life, wealth, redemption, and many other things. But when it comes down to the last verse (to pay the bill, so to speak), we whisper: “Our Father, our King, be gracious to us and answer us, though we have no worthy deeds (with which to pay You for our large order); please grant us charity and kindness, and save us.”

Part C. Torah Reading (AS: 452-469)

The rituals surrounding the Torah reading, such as the removal from the ark, kissing the Sefer Torah, and the calling up of Aliyot, will be familiar to those with any synagogue exposure. This is a good time for some “no-fear participation” and some familiar tunes.

The subject of the Yom Kippur morning Torah reading is the Temple service of the High Priest. Since this service is a major feature of Mussaf, it will be discussed below in that section (see Mussaf, Part B. The Service of the High Priest). As an introduction to the Torah reading, you might offer the following insights into the importance of the sacrifices and the services performed in the Holy Temple in ancient days with a focus on their meaning for us today:

Perhaps there is no area of the Torah which so challenges our “modern understanding” of things as that of sacrifices. Centuries ago, the Kuzari stated that had the Torah not legislated such a thing we would never have imagined that the idea of slaughtering and offering up an animal would bring us closer to God. But closeness is what it is all about.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Vayikra/Leviticus 1:2 – God’s closeness, achieved by the sacrifices, is the ultimate good.

The purpose of every sacrifice is closeness to God: “They will seek the closeness of God” (Yeshaya/Isaiah 58:2)...For closeness to God is the only yardstick by which to measure the truth of one’s worldview and one’s wellbeing. There, in the holy chambers of the Temple, it becomes clear that one’s spiritual and physical “wellbeing” will only develop out of closeness to God under the auspices of His law – and that this is the destiny of one’s purpose...there, the only good is found in closeness to God. Furthermore, only closeness to God is truly good for man: “God’s nearness is my good” (Tehillim/Psalms 73:28).

Rabbi Baruch Leff, Forever His Students, p. 90 – Sacrifice is the ultimate expression of closeness with God.

Sacrifices are an outgrowth of a tremendous drive to serve and relate to a higher power. A man who really loves his wife cannot simply tell her that he loves her. He feels compelled to buy her flowers or chocolates to express his love and to give

something of himself to her. So it is with relating to God. Because we are physical beings, we are driven to show our love and passion for God in some physical form. And this giving of oneself to God must be in an ultimate sense. I want to give my entire existence, my whole life to God. I express this with the offering of my animal's life. This is why the word for sacrifice in Hebrew is "Korban," meaning closeness.

Part D. Yizkor (AS: pp. 470-477)

At this point in the service, those who have lost a parent remain in the sanctuary for the Yizkor service. All others exit.

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, The Book of Our Heritage, Vol. I, pp. 90-91 – The good deeds of children atone for their parents.

Our sages ordained that children should remember the souls of their departed parents when praying on the Festivals. At that time, they should pledge charity on behalf of the departed souls, to serve as a source of merit and enable the souls to ascend even higher. This brief memorial service follows the Torah reading, preceding the return of the scrolls to the ark.

The *Yizkor* memorial prayer is recited on the last day of Pesach, on Shavuot, on Yom Kippur, and on Shemini Atzeret. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are considered to be one Festival in this matter, and therefore *Yizkor* is said only on Yom Kippur. This prayer is considered to be of greater significance on Yom Kippur than on the other Festivals, for the very essence of the day is the quest for mercy, forgiveness, and atonement, which are said to be as necessary for the departed as for the living. Although the verse (Tehillim/Psalms 88:6) states: Among the dead, there is freedom, which the Sages (Shabbat 30a) explained: "*When a person dies, he becomes free from [the obligation to fulfill] Torah and mitzvot,*" it is said that the departed nevertheless derive merit from charity that their children give on behalf of their souls. The Sages (Sifri to Devarim/Deuteronomy 21) derived this from the verse: *Grant atonement for Your nation Israel that You have redeemed;* the words *Grant atonement* refer to the living, while the words *that You have redeemed* refer to the departed.

This teaches us that the departed require atonement. How do they achieve atonement? Through the prayers and charity of the living on their behalf. Moreover, if the parents lived righteously and taught their children to pray, to fulfill mitzvot, and give charity, the fact that their children continue to do so after they have departed shows that the parents still exercise influence over their children, the parents' strength endures through the children's deeds, and it is as if they themselves were still living and practicing the mitzvot.

It is the Ashkenazic custom that one whose parents are both alive should leave the synagogue during *Yizkor*, for remaining inside might arouse the envy of those

who have lost their parents. Another reason is that he might inadvertently join the congregation in the prayers recalling the memory of those who have passed away and doing so would be like inviting the Satan to act. A third reason is that it is not fitting that one remain silent while others are praying.

In Sephardic congregations, the custom is for everyone to remain in the synagogue. The cantor alone recites *Yizkor*, and each individual gives him the names of his own deceased to be included in the collective prayer. Furthermore, the Sephardic custom is to recite the memorial prayer on every Shabbat and Festival.

Section IV. The Mussaf Service (AS: pp. 486-625)

The two main highlights of the Yom Kippur Mussaf service are Unetaneh Tokef and the service of the High Priest.

Part A. Unetaneh Tokef (AS: pp. 530-535)

The story of Unetaneh Tokef's origin is found in many Machzorim. Here we will focus on the content of the prayer.

Introduction to Unetaneh Tokef

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Koren Rosh Hashanah Machzor, pp. 564-567 – Unetaneh Tokef is divided into four movements: the scene, the stakes, the eternal Jewish hope, and the frailty of life.

No prayer more powerfully defines the image of the Days of Awe than does *Unetaneh Tokef*. The language is simple, the imagery strong, the rhythms insistent and the drama intense.

It is structured in four movements. The first sets the scene. The heavenly court is assembled. God sits in the seat of judgment. The angels tremble. Before Him is the book of all our deeds. In it our lives are written, bearing our signature, and we await the verdict.

The second defines what is at stake: Who will live, who will die? Who will flourish, who will suffer, who will be at ease, who will be in torment? Between now and Yom Kippur our fate is being decided on high.

Then comes the great outburst of faith that defines Judaism as a religion of hope. No fate is final. Repentance, prayer and charity can avert the evil decree. Life is not a script written by Aeschylus or Sophocles in which tragedy is inexorable. God forgives; God pardons; God exercises clemency – if we truly repent and pray and give to others.

Finally, there is a moving reflection on the fragility of human life and the eternity

of God. We are no more than a fragment of pottery, a blade of grass, a flower that fades, a shadow, a cloud, a breath of wind. Dust we are, and to dust we return. But God is life forever. By attaching ourselves to Him we may [attach ourselves to Infinity].

Teshuvah, Tefillah, Tzedakah

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “God’s Alarm Clock,” from aish.com – Relating to ourselves, others, and God.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are when we number our days. Asking to be written in the book of life, we think about life and how we use it. In this context the three key words of the “*Unetaneh Tokef*” prayer are fundamental: *teshuvah* (repentance), *tefillah* (prayer) and *tzedakah* (charity). *Teshuvah* is about our relationship with ourself. *Tefillah* is about our relationship with God. *Tzedakah* is about our relationship with other people.

Teshuvah means not only “repentance” but also “returning” – to our roots, our faith, our people’s history and our vocation as heirs to those who stood at Sinai more than 3,000 years ago. *Teshuvah* asks us: Did we grow in the past year or did we stand still? Did we study the texts of our heritage? Did we keep one more mitzvah? Did we live fully and confidently as Jews? *Teshuvah* is our satellite navigation system giving us a direction in life.

Tefillah means prayer. It is our conversation with God. We speak, but if we are wise we also listen, to the voice of God as refracted through the prayers of a hundred generations of our ancestors. *Tefillah* is less about asking God for what we want, more about asking God to teach us what to want. A new car? A better job? An exotic holiday? Our prayers do not speak about these things because life is about more than these things. It is less about what we own than about what we do and who we aspire to be. We speak about forgiveness and about God’s presence in our lives. We remind ourselves that, short though our time on earth is, by connecting with God we touch eternity. *Tefillah* is our “mobile phone to heaven.”

Tzedakah is about the good we do for others. Sir Moses Montefiore was one of the great figures of Victorian Jewry. He was a wealthy man and devoted much of his long life to serving the Jewish people in Britain and worldwide (he built the windmill in Jerusalem, and the area of which it is a part – Yemin Moshe – is named after him). Someone once asked him how much he was worth, and he gave him a figure. “But,” said the questioner, “I know you own more than that.” “You didn’t ask me what I own but what I am worth. The figure I gave you was how much money I have given this year to charity, because we are worth what we are willing to share with others.” That is *tzedakah*.

Part B. The Service of the High Priest (AS: pp. 554-575)

In the repetition of Mussaf by the *chazzan*, we relate the service that the High Priest would perform on Yom Kippur in the times of the Temple. In those times, the Jewish people would receive atonement through this service. Nowadays, since the Temple no longer exists, retelling the service of the High Priest on Yom Kippur can contribute to our atonement.

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 138 – Recounting the Avodah, the service of the High Priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur.

The Mussaf (Additional Service) of Yom Kippur morning describes the drama and significance of the High Priest's service in the Jerusalem Temple on Yom Kippur. The High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctum of the Temple only once a year, on Yom Kippur. There he would pray for the Jewish people's forgiveness and bring special offerings and incense. Mussaf describes the details of this service and the fervent prayers that the High Priest and the people recited while it was performed.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Koren Yom Kippur Machzor, pp. 878-9 – We recreate the scene of the High Priest's Service.

There now follows a unique feature of the Yom Kippur prayers: a narrative retelling of the order of service as it took place in the Temple. Every Mussaf Amidah contains a specific reference to the sacrifice of the day, but only here are we invited to re-envision it as it happened.

The service in the Temple on Yom Kippur was unique, the dramatic high point of the Jewish year. On the holiest day the holiest person, the High Priest, would enter the Holy of Holies and, with the holiest name of God on his lips, atone for the sins of all Israel. It was a supremely emotive moment, an entire nation confronting its faults, confessing its failings, and turning to God as its Source of forgiveness and hope: a nation focused on the service of one man, the Kohen Gadol, who prayed and confessed on their behalf.

For close to two thousand years we have not had the Temple, nor High Priest, nor sacrifice. That the Jewish people survived as a people, that Judaism survived as a faith, and that Yom Kippur survived in the absence of so much of what constituted the service of the day, are three of the more remarkable stories in human history. In effect, the sages said: in place of sacrifice, we have prayer. In place of the Temple we have the synagogue. In place of the service of the High Priest we have the service of each of us, turning to God, confessing our sins, committing ourselves to a different and better future, offering God our heart.

We no longer have the Temple ceremony, but we have the story; and we have the day itself, which atones even in the absence of the Temple. So on this day of days, more vividly than at any other time, the synagogue becomes a fragment of the Temple, and we re-create in our minds the scene that took place then on this holiest of days.

Bowing During the Service

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, The Book of Our Heritage, Vol. I, pp. 99-100 – In Temple times, bowing took place amid a miracle.

Fortunate was the eye which beheld all these things (that happened during the Yom Kippur service of the High Priest)! The masses of people who stood waiting in the courtyard (for the *Kohen Gadol*/High Priest to complete his service) were said to be like angels, no longer subject to the needs of mortal men. They were not weakened by their hours of standing, nor did they feel the crush of the tremendous, crowded mass. Their standing in the courtyard during the *Kohen Gadol's Avodah* (Service) was, as it were, their own simultaneous Avodah and prayer, thus sustaining them in body and soul.

They were all witnesses to a great miracle, for when the *kohanim* and all the people heard the Divine Name pronounced by the *Kohen Gadol*, they would kneel, bow, fall upon their faces, crying: “Blessed be the Name of His glorious majesty for eternity,” and confess their personal sins. Despite the enormous density of the crowds gathered there, each person had four *amos* (six to eight feet) of empty space around him so that no one could overhear the confessions of another.

As the people were thus prostrating themselves, the *Kohen Gadol* would prolong his pronunciation of the Divine Name with a chant so that he would conclude its pronouncement as they finished their confession. When they would stand after having finished their confession, he would speak the final words of the verse that he was reciting and would declare: You shall be purified.

Section V. The Minchah Service (AS: pp. 626-705)

At Minchah on Yom Kippur a Torah portion is read on forbidden relations, followed by the Book of Yonah.

Part A. Torah Reading (AS: pp. 630-635)

During Minchah we read about the forbidden relationships. Why, on the holiest day of the year, when we are focused on spiritual ideals, do we read this portion?

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, The Book of Our Heritage, Vol. I, pp. 89-90 – Why do we read the *arayot* (forbidden relationships) on Yom Kippur?

A wise man once explained that the reason this portion was chosen for the Torah reading on Yom Kippur [at Minchah] is to remind us that even though we sanctify ourselves, we should never be so complacent as to assume that we have managed to completely safeguard ourselves from falling prey to the most debased and vile inclinations. It is towards the end of Yom Kippur, when the nation has achieved a

level of purity of thought and deed that is unmatched throughout the year, that this very Torah portion is read. This serves as a reminder to all that man cannot relent for a moment in his battle against the enemy that lurks in his heart, who seeks to cause him to stumble, with all that is shameful.

Rabbi Frand on the Parsha, Vol. I, pp. 22-23 – Even at the most sublime moments we need to be reminded of our basic humanity.

When it came to choosing a name for himself, Adam seems to have been strangely uninspired. He chose the name Adam, because he had been formed from the *adamah*, the earth. A human being is the pinnacle of creation, the highest form of living being, spiritual, intellectual, creative, complex, profound, and formed, as it were, in “the image of the Lord.”

How then can it be that Adam, with all his insight and perception, could find no better definition of a human being than that he had been formed from the earth?

The Alter of Slobodka explains that, quite to the contrary, Adam’s choice of a name for himself showed his greatest insight. Man represents the ultimate paradox in creation. On the one hand, he is such a sublime creature, higher than the angels, capable of reaching the most transcendent levels of spirituality. And yet, at the same time, he is so painfully human, so incredibly frail. With one slight misstep, he can plummet from the highest pinnacle to the abyss. He can easily fall to the level of the humble dust from which he was originally formed.

This is a critical aspect of the human condition, one that man must always keep in sight and mind if he is to be successful on this earth. Therefore, the choice of the name Adam to recall the *adamah* from which he was taken touches on the very essence of a human being. He had the wisdom to recognize that man can never declare, “I am beyond temptation.” No matter how high he has risen, man is never far from the earth from which he was formed. Until the very end, man can always plunge to rock bottom. Ultimately, this lifelong struggle defines the greatness of mankind.

We find the same dichotomy on Yom Kippur. For the morning Torah reading, our Sages chose selections describing the divine service of the Kohen Gadol in the Sanctuary and the Holy of Holies. As we read these words, we are transported to the holiest place in the universe on the holiest day of the year. And yet, a few hours later, the Torah reading during Mincha enumerates the prohibitions against illicit libidinous encounters.

Is this what we need to hear on Yom Kippur after spending so many hours in fasting and prayer? Is this what we need to contemplate in our exalted condition during the waning hours of the day as Yom Kippur draws to a close? Why did our Sages choose this particular reading for us on the holiest afternoon of the year?

The answer is that Yom Kippur of all days is exactly when we need to hear this. On Yom Kippur, we allow neither food nor water to pass our lips, and we ascend into the heavens on wings of prayer. Ethereal spirits with but a tentative connection to the physical world, we reach for the highest, soaring above the angels, creatures of pure spirit. Therefore, our Sages remind us that even in our moments of greatest inspiration we are still human and capable of falling prey to our baser desires. They make us aware that we invite disaster if we ever lose sight of the abyss that stretches before us.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Yom Kippur Machzor* pp. 992-997 – Judaism teaches that sexual morality is central to ethical monotheism.

The fundamental difference between the life of the Abrahamic covenant and that of pagan societies is the presence in one, and the absence in the other, of a sexual ethic: an ethic of the sanctity of marriage and of sexual fidelity. Nor is it accidental that the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, Brit Mila, is circumcision. The sign of holiness is intimately connected with sexuality.

Why so? Sexuality is a fundamental theme of ancient myth. There were male gods of power and potency and female goddesses of fertility and allure, and the relations between them were amoral. They fought, conquered, schemed, sired. Often they killed one another; at times they killed their own children. It was a world of conflict and betrayal, of sexual lawlessness and anomie (or lack of social norms).

Judaism was and is opposed to this world, whether in its ancient forms of myth, or its more modern pseudo-scientific or philosophical counterparts, the neo-Darwinian myth (the “selfish gene”) that the fundamental driver of behavior is the desire to hand on one’s genes to the next generation, or the Nietzschean “will to power.”

Against this, Judaism sets forth an ethic of love and loyalty, concretized in the idea of covenant, whereby two parties, each respecting the integrity of the other, come together in a bond of mutual commitment and fidelity. The human counterpart of the covenant between God and humanity is marriage as a covenant between husband and wife.

A sexual ethic is therefore not just one among many features of Judaism. It is of its essence, for there is the closest possible connection between the way we relate to God and the way we relate to those to whom we are closest: our husband or wife, and our children. That is why Genesis, the story of our beginnings, deals only cursorily with the creation of the universe, and briefly with politics (a key theme of Exodus and Deuteronomy). Instead, it is a series of narratives about families, marriage partners, parents, children, and siblings.

One of the signs of a polytheistic or atheistic culture – where people believe that there are many gods or none – is the absence, subjectivity or relativity of sexual ethics. Marriage is seen as one lifestyle among many. Adultery, infidelity, promiscuity, and

sexual and child abuse are commonplace. Sexuality becomes the pursuit of desire. That is the world which Genesis contrasts with the life of the covenant. History supports this contention. Sexuality is often the primary force behind violence, and sexual decadence the first sign of civilizational decline.

So the Torah passage we read on Yom Kippur afternoon, despite its seeming remoteness from the themes of the day, is telling us a fundamental truth about Judaism as a whole. Holiness is expressed in our most intimate relationships within the family: in the love that is loyal and generous, self-sacrificing and kind, in the sensitivity of marriage partners to one another and their needs, and in our ability to recognize the integrity-of-otherness that lies at the heart of love.

Part B. The Book of Yonah (Jonah) (AS: pp. 634-645)

On Yom Kippur afternoon we read about the prophet Yonah, sent by God to admonish the non-Jewish people of Nineveh to do teshuvah. He initially attempted to run away from this mission, for he reasoned that they would indeed repent. The teshuvah of the non-Jews would reflect negatively on the Jewish people, who did not repent. To protect the image of his Jewish brethren, Yonah rejected God's command to travel to Nineveh.

Additionally, Yonah had another reason for disregarding God's orders. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, which God describes as the "staff of My anger" (Yeshayahu/Isaiah 10:5). Yonah knew that Assyria would be used to punish the Jewish people – indeed, the Assyrians exiled the Ten Tribes – and he therefore did not wish to rebuke them. Instead, he wanted their "quota of sin to be filled," so that they would be destroyed and would not harm the Jewish people.

Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit 16a – The Book of Yonah teaches the importance of real change.

[At the time when the community gathers to do teshuvah] the eldest and wisest person says, "My brothers, your fasting and wearing sack cloth [a sign of teshuvah] will *not* cause God to turn around. Rather, your teshuvah and good deeds will be the cause. For example, regarding the people of Nineveh, the verse does *not* say, 'God saw their sack cloth and fasting,' rather it says, 'God saw their actions because they had returned from their evil ways' [Yonah 3:10]."

Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller, Jonah and the Whale from www.aish.com – Yonah's journey is a metaphor for life.

The Vilna Gaon tells us that Yonah's journey is one that we all make. We are born with a subconscious realization of the fact that we have a mission. We seek escape, because our mission is often one that we are afraid to attempt.

In the text of the Yonah story we are told that the places that he sought were Yaffo and Tarshish. While these places actually exist and are known as Jaffa and Tarsis, the literal meaning of the names of these cities is "beauty" and "wealth." We comfort ourselves externally, by escaping from our inner knowledge of our mission through

the pursuit of wealth, and by surrounding ourselves with beauty. Our bodies are compared to Yonah's ship. We face moments in life in which the fragility of our bodies is inescapable, as in when we face illness, or confront moments of danger that seem to last an eternity until they are resolved.

The sailors on the ship are the talents and capacities that work for us. They too cannot save us from our futile desire to escape ourselves. The whale is the symbol of ultimate confrontation of the recognition that our ultimate fate is the grave. For some, that recognition almost feels like a welcome refuge. For others, facing death forces them at last into pursuing life!

As with Yonah, our recognition of our own vulnerability can bring us to finally transcend our ego, surrendering our desire to control events, and beginning at last to accept our mission in life, no matter what it is. We can suffer the vicissitudes of life, and recognize that we ourselves have caused the storms to toss us back and forth. We can move forward to fulfill our purpose, but we are still not free of conflict and anxiety until we finally recognize that every step along the way, we are embraced by Divine compassion. It is then that we are ready to return to God. While for each of us the path is our own, and never yet explored by any other person, Yonah knew the beginning and the end of the journey that we all make.

Section VI. The Neilah Service (AS: pp. 706-765)

The culmination of Yom Kippur is the Neilah prayer, said at dusk just as Yom Kippur is coming to a close. In this climactic service, we ask God to seal our fate for good.

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 139 – A description of the Neilah service.

Yom Kippur ends with the third special prayer, *Ne'ilah*, which means "closing of the gates." It is the culmination of a day devoted to repentance, intense concentration and prayer. *Ne'ilah* offers the last chance to seize the moment of Yom Kippur and to tap into the closeness with God that is so accessible on this holy day. *Ne'ilah* is said just before sundown, just before the metaphorical "closing of the Heavenly Gates." The Holy Ark containing the Torah remains open for the entire *Ne'ilah* service, which begins with the silent prayer of Yom Kippur. Instead of saying, "inscribe us in the book of life," as we have since Rosh Hashanah, we now say "seal us in the book of life." *Ne'ilah* is the time when the Heavenly judgment on each person is "signed and sealed," not merely inscribed. *Ne'ilah* continues with the repetition of the silent prayer, and the congregation joins in reciting the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy along with other prayers in which we literally beg for life and forgiveness.

The service ends with the entire congregation gathering its last reserves of concentration and emotion, and crying out *Shema Yisrael*, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One," followed by "Blessed is the Name of His glorious

kingdom for all eternity.” This is said three times, after which “The Lord – Only He is God!” is repeated seven times. The cantor then recites *Kaddish*, the *shofar* is sounded, and the entire congregation says aloud and in unison, “Next year in Jerusalem!”

In many communities, the congregation repeats this phrase many times while dancing with joy. The solemnity of Yom Kippur is transformed into happiness and optimism, an expression of our belief that God will indeed forgive us and bring the redemption for which we have been praying and hoping.

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, Yom Kippur Neilah 5773 – God is waiting for us to return to Him.

I heard a story from a friend over the summer about Rav Yitzchak Hutner that can help us learn how to reignite the candle inside for these last few minutes of Yom Kippur. Rav Hutner spent the last few years of his life in Yerushalayim. During that time, his Rebbetzin passed away. Two of the great Musser masters of that time, Rav Shlomo Wolbe and Rav Meir Chodosh paid him a shiva call. Rav Hutner told them the following story during that visit:

He told them that as a yeshiva boy in Slabodka, he was a student of the famous “Alter” of Slabodka. He said that in those days, he (Rav Hutner) was known as having a very sharp mind for studying Torah, but also for his sharp tongue, which he unfortunately sometimes used to make other yeshiva boys feel bad. He said that he was known as a “*lamdan*,” a talented Torah scholar, but not as *tzadik* (righteous person) because of his sense of *yeshut*, self-importance.

A few days before Yom Kippur one year, the Alter sent another boy over to him to ask him something. He replied sharply to the other boy, “I don’t need anyone to send a message to the Alter. I can speak to him myself.” The boy was taken aback. The young Yitzchak Hutner walked over to the East wall of the Beit Medrash to speak to the Alter, but as he approached, the Alter yelled to him, “Don’t come within my *daled amot* (near me)!” The Alter was known for his sweetness, so this was a particularly hard slap in the face. Young Yitzchak walked away and did not speak with the Alter about it. He said that he thought about it throughout Yom Kippur, but only from the perspective of his own ego. By the end of Yom Kippur he decided that if the *Mashgiach* (the yeshiva’s spiritual guide) spoke to him that way, he should find somewhere else to learn.

Immediately after Yom Kippur he went to the Alter’s home to say goodbye and ask for a blessing before he departed. He knocked on the door and the Rebbetzin answered. He asked for the Alter, and she asked who he was. He answered, “Hutner,” and she responded, “So you’re Hutner!” Expecting to get an earful, he waited to hear what she would say. She told him, “For the last six months, my husband has been crying, davening, and fasting for you.” He realized that the Alter saw great potential in him and was very worried about him and was davening very hard for

him to improve. He said that because of that encounter, he continued learning in the yeshiva. How could he leave a rebbe who cared so much about him that he spent six months davening, crying, and fasting for him?

Perhaps many of you feel as I do that after a year in which we have not been as good as we hoped to be last year on Yom Kippur. We may feel, “How could God want me near Him after how I’ve wasted this past year, or worse?” Perhaps we also feel we have experienced a slap from the One Above this past year. We may feel that the great “Alter” in Heaven must be saying “Don’t come near me!” But then, we knock on the door of our loving mother, the שכינה, the Divine Presence, and She asks our name. We answer with our names, and then she says “Oh *you?* The Holy One has been crying and hoping for you to return to him for years! You mean so much to Him!”

Ibid. – There’s still time to change.

It is never too late. Even in this last hour of Yom Kippur, we can make the decision to be better and seek forgiveness. It is well-known that the Amshinover Rebbe of Yerushalayim lives in his own time zone apart from the rest of the world. But with respect to Shabbat and Yom Tov, he certainly observes those at the regular times. There is a story that one year, Erev Yom Kippur, he was eating with the Chassidim, and it was getting closer and closer to Kol Nidrei. The Chassidim began getting very nervous, but the rebbe was teaching Torah and eating as if he was in no rush at all. The Chassidim asked one of the older men among them to say something to the rebbe. So the Chassid held up a watch and called out, “Rebbe, the watch!” The rebbe responded, “Ah, yes, the watch. I’m aware of the time. But I have two watches. One watch says, ‘It’s getting late!’ and the other watch says, ‘There’s still time.’”

It is not too late for us either. We have no idea of the spiritual rectifications we can accomplish just by saying the words of Neilah and trying to move our bodies and raise our voices just a little bit in the songs. It is very difficult in our generation to awaken our emotions and to have kavanah, concentration, in prayer. But we can say the words and try to sing them with a little force. This accomplishes great things.

Ibid. – Focus on resolving to improve and upon forgiving others.

If we do two things during Neilah, we can certainly have a great year filled with forgiveness and atonement. First, we must make an absolute decision to improve at least one thing in our service of God this year. It does not have to be “big,” but it must be a true commitment. This is the major ticket to success on Yom Kippur. With God’s help, we can build on that one thing, and we will be very big one day.

The second thing is that we must take the loftier perspective with which we are blessed on Yom Kippur and realize that any grudge that we have been holding against our friends, spouses, children, family, or any other Jew is silly and ultimately

meaningless. It does not matter whether the people who we feel have wronged us are here or not. We must make up in our minds right now to forgive all of the people who we feel have wronged us. In this merit, God will also forgive each of us for our sins against Him.

The Ben Ish Chai notes a beautiful, ancient custom from Baghdad, possibly going back to the times of the second Beit Hamikdash (Temple). Before Kol Nidrei, someone would call out, "*Rabotai, timchalu zeh lezeh!*" "Gentlemen, forgive one another!" And then the entire congregation would call out, "*Machalnu!*" "We forgive!"

In the merit of the improvements we take upon ourselves for the coming year and our forgiveness of one another right now, may God forgive us right now and bless us with everything good for the coming year and the ultimate good with the coming of Mashiach (the Messiah) and our return to Yerushalayim, may it come soon in our days.