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“The Day of Atonement and the Days of Awe”
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This past week, Jews around the world observed the Day of Atonement, known in Hebrew as Yom Kippur. This is a solemn day during which Jews approach God in remorse, repenting sins committed during the previous year and seeking forgiveness. But what is the religious logic of having an entire day set aside for repentance?

The question becomes more apropos when we realize that Judaism thinks repentance should follow quickly upon realizing one has committed a sin. To take a simple example, if a person hits their thumb with a hammer and swears, taking God’s name in vain, they should repent and request God’s forgiveness as soon as they get themselves under control. “Don’t wait a year, seek forgiveness now” is the dictum.

The yearly occurrence of the Day of Atonement places repentance and forgiveness into a time frame. We humans are known for procrastination, for putting off and avoiding doing things that are unpleasant and difficult. Asking for forgiveness is unpleasant; it requires repentance, a show of remorse and sincere effort to change one’s ways so that one does not repeat the sin. It require us to humble ourselves before the injured or offended person.

How does a person repent? Many rabbis have discussed the question and identified key aspects of this act. At the very least, it requires the acknowledgement of the sin and the regretting of it. It expects the sinner to approach the offended party in remorse and humility, whether this is God or another person. Repentance presumes that the sinner will change their behavior so as not to repeat the sin; indeed, they should act in a way opposite to the sin, perhaps even teaching others not to do it.

The remorse that following a sin should take in not just the immediate impact of the deed, but its long term consequences as well. This observation was made in the medieval period, and the consequences were imagined to be physical; if you steal a man’s cloak, he will be cold. But in today’s world we know about the psychological consequences of actions like constant or even one-time mental and physical abuse, and this needs to be understood as well.

This recognition of the difficulty of true repentance helps us see what is going on with the Day of Atonement. During this solemn 24-hour period, one fasts from food and water; a challenging action showing the sincerity of one’s remorse. Most waking hours are spent in the synagogue saying prayers that bring one spiritually before God. They describe how God examines each person’s soul and determines whether their repentance is pure. This of course entails much soul-searching in each individual as they examine their soul’s character along with God. Only when God is certain that one’s repentance is whole-hearted does he forgive.

But the Day of Atonement focuses only on sins committed against God. All of this earnest repentance and fasting concerns only one class of sins. Sins against fellow human beings are not forgiven here. That is what the Days of Awe are for.

The ten days preceding the Day of Atonement are for seeking the forgiveness of people who you have wronged. Known in English as the Days of Awe, the literal meaning of the Hebrew phrase is the “days of fear,” or more fully, “days of the fear of the Lord.” They look forward to the Day of Atonement where one will stand before God with one’s soul bared. He will be able to see the character of one’s human interactions.

The Days of Awe are the time when Jews must get up their courage, seek out those they have wronged, and one-on-one convince the person that they are truly sorry for the wrong they committed, take steps to ameliorate that wrong (if possible) and ask forgiveness. Since rabbinic authorities recognized forgiveness might be difficult to obtain from a person who feels wronged, they required the sinner to request forgiveness three times if necessary.

So the Day of Atonement prevents the festering of ill-will over years by bringing people before God with their souls bared to account for their actions. To be successful, during the preceding Days of Awe each individual must examine their interactions with other people and determine whether they have sinned or injured others and seek forgiveness where they have not already done so.