

Yom Kippur is not an easy day. “You shall afflict yourselves” is Leviticus 16:31’s description of the holiday, defined primarily by fasting from eating and drinking. Shabbat and other holidays are pleasant, fun, times for rejoicing and relaxing. Not Yom Kippur, designed from the outset to be hard, spiritual work.

Atonement is a lot of work. It’s not supposed to be easy. It’s not easy to change ingrained habits. But when you replace the undesirable habits and traits with new behaviors, doing more mitzvot, and with traits of integrity, honesty, alacrity, enthusiasm, joy, and other positive values, you will have fundamentally changed who you are. But there is a reason that we say, “easy come, easy go,” and that when you work hard for something, it has greater, lasting, value.

The Yom Kippur ritual that we read about, that we re-enact in words most years (although not this year!), describes the hard Biblical work of atonement. It is complicated, detailed, and must have been absorbing to take part in. It’s all about absolving Israel of their past sins. But we can’t do that unless we know what our sins are and we have done our best to repair that damage that we’ve done. And to do that, we need to overcome our ego’s need to say, “it’s not my fault. He started it. She made me do it.” We need to take responsibility for whatever we have done, for our part is messing up the world around us.

The Yom Kippur Biblical ritual gives us a literal scapegoat. Literally, that’s where the word comes from. One goat offered on the altar, the other goat has the sins of Israel placed on it and it escapes into the wilderness to carry them away from us. We might place our sins on a previous generation, on previous leaders or administrations, on other people. But at the core of our liturgy is the message that we have recorded our deeds in our own handwriting. God knows how we have contributed to the chaos that surrounds us. And God holds us accountable. No scapegoat allows us to evade the repercussions of our actions.

The one thing we cannot do is throw up our arms and abdicate our responsibility. We cannot give up. We cannot say that it is someone else’s problem. Voting is a mitzvah. Caring for our environment and advocating for responsible environmental laws is a mitzvah. Supporting local businesses that give back to the community is arguably a mitzvah. Working for racial justice, fighting antisemitism, supporting the State of Israel, and speaking of and treating all human beings with respect are all mitzvot.

The ills that beset our society, the violence and injustice, are on us to repair. And just we speak about God’s attributes of strict justice, *midat hadin*, or loving compassion, *midat haraḥamim*, and pray for the latter, we, too, can treat those around us with love and understanding. We can forgive others as we would like to be forgiven ourselves. We can judge others favorably *dan l’kaf z’khut*, as we would like to be judged ourselves.

The core message of Yom Kippur is that atonement requires sacrifice. Our sacrifice is to agree to devote time and energy, physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial resources, to engaging in mitzvot in order to do tikkun on ourselves, with our families, raise our communities, and repair our world.

The core message of Yom Kippur is to hear and respond to the words of Isaiah that we just read:

“This is the fast I desire:
To unlock bonds of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke.
To let the oppressed go free;

To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.
Then shall your light burst through like the dawn
And your healing spring up quickly.”
(Isaiah 58:6–8)