

Yom Kippur: A Time for Christians to Atone for Some Bad Theology

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Our Jewish friends just finished High Holy Days; Rosh Hoshana (New Year) culminating in Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). 10 Days of communal reflection for the Jewish people, on how to live well in relation to self, others, world, and God. One of our sacred obligations as a congregation is to unlearn the subtle and unsubtle anti-Judaism that has afflicted too much Christian theology, especially since our in-person gathering place is Temple Beth Emeth, a Reformed synagogue. The tendency to mischaracterized Judaism as a religion of dead works, of legalism, not grace. This infects conservative & progressive theology alike. I see it as Christianity's original sin—a breeding ground for subsequent otherings (racism, homophobia)

It's our work of atonement and it's a key to a more authentic faith since what we now call Christianity began as a movement within Judaism—part of ancient Judaism's diversity, composed of Sabbath observing, kosher keeping Jews who followed the teachings of a Jewish rabbi. Soon they were including non-Jews drawn to Israel's God through Jesus but doing so in a way that Jew & non-Jew could respect each other's distinct identities, while living together without discrimination based on those differing, but retained identities. It was an early experiment in multi-culturalism that got derailed and we could stand to reengage it.

Let's being with wider context of Yom Kippur. Found in book of Leviticus (which follows Exodus which follows Genesis.) Leviticus is a manual of temple rituals by and for priests. First thing to note: Israel didn't invent having priests, temples, sacrifice, ritual purity codes, food laws. In fact there was a rite very similar to Yom Kippur in Babylonian worship. Israel adapted existing forms and gave them sometimes radical new meanings based on their experience of the divine.

Israel understood its temple as God's home on earth—God with his people as a beloved neighbor. The holy of holies was a cube-shaped room in the temple, where the divine presence resided in all its intensity—power that preceded and gave birth to the universe, concentrated in a small space. Like the fuel rods in a nuclear power plant, only glorious Spirit power. The response could not be casual familiarity but awe, reverence, trembling. Ritual sacrifice happened daily in the temple, but not in the holy of holies. Only one

human, the high priest, once a year (on Yom Kippur), could enter the holy of holies through careful ritual observance.

We use rituals to embody-enact values in a mode beyond words. We undervalue rituals but can't live without them. Sports involve rituals. A baseball game is a ritual: Enacted in a ritual space (ball diamond) respecting a set of arbitrary rules—but the enactment conveys cultural values. “3 strikes you're out” is an ethic. After 9/11 George W. Bush said, one plane was an accident, two was intentional, third? an act of war. 3 strike you're out, 3 outs an inning, 3 sets of 3 innings, is a game. All the elements, the arbitrary rules, convey an ethic.

Yom Kippur included ritual sacrifice. We tend to mischaracterize the meaning of sacrifice. For example, Christianity has produced various “theories of atonement” (explaining why it was necessary for Jesus to die on the cross.) The Protestant Reformers introduced a novel one in 17th C, Penal Substitutionary Atonement. It's a radical break from a Jewish vision of atonement. It says God is very angry with all of us for all of our sins. Even the smallest sin separates us from God for eternity and this separation can only be overcome (on God's end) if God receives a bloody sacrifice (Jesus' death) to avert his anger. All his fierce anger goes on Jesus, as our substitute. This is the prevailing view of atonement among evangelicals. To me, It's not helpful. God had to arrange Jesus' death to satisfy God's own anger? To me, it puts God in a bad light, but it also misrepresents what the temple sacrifices were about.

It turns out, the temple sacrifices were NOT about appeasing an angry God. The temple was God's home. Bringing an offering of grain, wine, or meat, was understood as sharing hospitality with God—like you might take a bottle of wine to a friend who has invited you to dinner. The priests ate a portion of the offering as did the worshipper. It was all a sign of God's acceptance. The altar of sacrifice was analogous to the Israelite dinner table. Here's the thing: the main temple sacrifices were not focused on sin! Leviticus opens with instructions regarding five different sacrifices: burnt offering, grain offering, peace-being offering, purification offering, guilt offering. Burnt offering signified prayer (aroma of burnt offering ascending to heaven); grain offering was bread offered to God, same idea; peace offering expressed thanks to God; purification offering dealt with ritual impurity (a natural condition, with no moral implications); the guilt offering, was focused on

inadvertent offenses. So the main temple sacrifices were not about calming a God enraged by human sin. You can argue their focus on sin was marginal.

But what about bloody animal sacrifice? Seems brutal, primitive, cruel. Except it wasn't. The ritual sacrificial system placed severe limits on which species could provide meat for the Israelite table: among four legged creatures—only 3: cattle, sheep, goats. In Leviticus the Israelite, could only eat beef, mutton, and goat and only what had been brought to the temple for sacrifice. They weren't grabbing drive-thru burgers or cheap rotisserie chickens from Costco willy-nilly. Plus, their animals lived great lives under the care of shepherd who knew them as individuals. The means of ritual slaughter had to be quick and painless for the animal. All to say, before we get judgey about this ancient practice we should remember it was ethical light years ahead of our brutal, modern, cruel treatment of animals raised for food.

That's the wider context of ritual temple sacrifice of which Yom Kippur is a special, once a year example. Two goats were chosen by lot. Only one was sacrificed on behalf of the high priest who would enter the holy of holies only on that sacred day. When he came out, he laid both hands on the head of the other goat and confessed the transgressions of the people. So Israel was not obsessively focused on sin. Once a year they dealt with it and they did so communally. Remember, only one of the five regular sacrifices dealt with sin and that was inadvertent sin. On Yom Kippur they dealt with the whole range of transgression. Robert Alter describes it as dealing with the “accumulated sins, transgressions, pathologies, and inadvertencies of the Israelites that had built up a kind of smog of pollution that threatens the sanctity of the temple.” The temple was cleansed not the people.

This creates a very different psychology around the question of sin than sending middle school off to weekend retreat where they hear a talk about how their little sins meant that Jesus had to die a horrible death to keep God's anger from striking them down. Talk about internalized gloom and doom! (Jacob Milgrom the Jewish scholar of Leviticus says the earliest version of Yom Kippur was a day of joy, not gloom, a day that would end with maidens dancing in the vineyards of Israel.)

Back to that second goat, over which high priest confessed sins of people. It wasn't sacrificed but released into the desert. It wasn't “for the Lord” to blunt God's anger, but “for Azazel” —a mystery name. Rabbis identify it with an ancient deity-demon of desert

(again, not invented by Israel, but borrowed from surrounding nations.) It's not an offering to Azazel since it's not a sacrifice. It's sent to the place associated with Azazel, the wilderness. The idea was taking the sins of the people away from the people. We hear echoes of this notion when John/Baptist said at the start of Jesus public ministry: *behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of world*

Let's remember, rituals are physical enactments. The ritual itself conveys the meaning through enactment (which may include words, but not usually of explanation.) Any word-based explanations come later and can only be secondary or speculative. Thus, do rituals make room for many meanings. Like a piece of art—different aspects of the ritual connect with different aspects of our experience. Ritual of laying hands on the scapegoat to transfer sins reminds me of the psychological mechanism called projection. Our tendency to see in others what we don't like in ourselves, to divert attention from ourselves. The ritual reminds me that guilt can show up in our bodies like a physical weight—we hang our heads, our shoulders slump. In the ritual to see it treated like that—a physical thing transferred to something else and taken far away—convey a physical sense of relief. Another connection: I notice the scapegoat is not “for the Lord” or sacrificed to the Lord, but is released into the desert thought to the place of this demon-figure. Makes me think: Humans at our worst, do turn on innocent victims, thought to be guilty. Anti-Semitism, misogyny, white supremacy, colonization causing cultural and literal genocide of indigenous people, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia—nation-sized iniquities that represent humanity at our worst. Oh, what a crushing burden this places on dear people! And by our individual silence, by our refusal to acknowledge and repair, we can participate in this evil. So, we can be part of loving communities, but those loving communities can also morph into a mob mode ... and that feels demonic to me. So ... this too is the kind of meaning we might access as we imagine the enacted ritual of Yom Kippur in Leviticus.

So rituals can help us grapple with our experience. Most defy a single explanation. We have rituals because some meanings are beyond words. What's the meaning of death? Childbirth? Beauty? Suffering? Joy? The most profound human experiences have a meaning beyond words.

Yes, the death of Jesus and its commemoration in communion has echoes of Yom Kippur. Isaiah spoke of a servant who either was Israel or represented Israel, who bore the sins of the many.

That resonates with the image of the scapegoat on Yom Kippur. All of this can be part of the meaning matrix that informs communion. But these rituals—Yom Kippur and communion—are distinct. They stand alone but they can stand side by side. The Communion ritual doesn't have to supersede, let alone, replace the ritual of Yom Kippur, it can simply be informed by it. That's different. **Random memory:** in hospital age 6 after getting my tonsil out. Having an argument with my 6-year-old roommate along the lines of my dad can beat up your dad. That's emotional level of the idea that Christianity can only be good if it's better than, if it supersedes Judaism

Almost done. Falling in love is a multi-faceted phenomenon. If a partnership is forged, it entails getting to know a family you didn't grow up in. Generally best to focus on the in-laws' good points, not be overly critical. In my case, it's Huttarland—my partners expansive family, with their distinct culture. Into puns, crossword puzzles, have a treasury of stock jokes, trend nerdy, break into song sometimes like it's the Sound of Music. I just mention the charming things.

I'll admit, I came from atheism into faith in God when I became intrigued with the Jesus I met in the gospels. His vision of God moved me. It was akin to falling in love. I'm Just telling my experience not claiming it normative. He's become a recurring and organizing reference point in my life—we have those figures, don't we? We've had our rough patches, miscommunications, like any meaningful personal connection. I know him/don't know him—like any personal being, there's mystery. He's multi-faceted. Later in life I saw: Oh, he has a feminine side! I call Sophia.

Thanks to my non-binary friends I realize now I can experience Jesus as a non-binary they. They are a portal into the divine. But they come with a family with a culture different than the one I grew up with. A Jewish family, rooted in culture of ancient Israel, branching off like families do in many directions. TBE, is part of one branching, Reformed Judaism. I don't need to adopt this Jewish culture as my own lock stock and barrel, but I can learn to appreciate on its own terms. Just like I didn't become a Huttar, but I'm now part of Huttarland and Huttarland affects me. My kids call it Dad 2.0.

These are my thoughts this morning after our Jewish friends have completed their 10 Days of Awe, beginning with Rosh Hoshana, culminating in Yom Kippur. I hope it opens our heart to some of Judaism's ancient traditions and values and helps us sort through our own vision of God and maybe appreciate the value of rituals with ancient roots. Let's turn it over to Diane to lead us in a body awareness meditation—as transition to and preparation for our rituals—lighting of candles, communion.