

## Fun Facts

The book of Jonah is chanted on Yom Kippur afternoon. While many people will mistakenly tell you about Jonah and the Whale, in actuality the Hebrew *Dag Gadol* means “big fish” (Jonah 2:1). But for some of the the earliest rabbinic commentators they weren’t satisfied with an anonymous “big fish” and instead concluded that it was the mythical Leviathan who swallowed Jonah (Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer 10). To make matters more confusing, the modern Hebrew word *Livyatan* (Leviathan) means whale!

““But on the tenth of this seventh month, it is a day of atonement, it shall be a holy occasion for you; you shall afflict yourselves, and you shall offer up a fire offering to the Lord. You shall not perform any work on that very day, for it is a day of atonement, for you to gain atonement before the Lord, your God.””

– *Vayikra/Leviticus 23:27-28*

# All about Yom Kippur

The Jewish Day of Atonement  
and culmination of the 10 Days  
of Repentance

Night of    Day of  
**Sep 24 – 25 / *Tishrei* 10**



A day where our atonement leads to  
at-One-ment!



# The Backstory

(Based upon Rashi's commentary to *Devarim* 9:18)

The Talmud (*Bavli Ta'anit* 26b) declares that there were no better days for the Jews than the Fifteenth of Av (*Tu B'Av*) and Yom Kippur. To understand how Yom Kippur, a day many of us experience as solemn, can be compared to *Tu B'Av*, a festive day fit for weddings, we must look back to the inception of the Jewish nation at Mount Sinai.

The covenant at Mt. Sinai starts in idealistic and optimistic fervor. The Israelites have been redeemed from slavery by God and are invited to be God's chosen nation – a privilege earned by and promised to our forefathers, but also a great responsibility. To this, the Israelites reply *Na'aseh v'Nishma* – 'we will do and we will hear', and the "contract" is "signed".

Moses then ascends the mountain for a period of 40 days and 40 nights, but the honeymoon period is shattered by the sin of the Golden Calf and the shattering of the first set of tablets containing the 10 commandments. To God, our infidelity means the relationship is severed and retribution is in order. Moses, however, successfully intervenes to save the relationship and convince God to provide us with a

second chance.

For another 40 days and 40 nights Moses returns to the top of the mountain while the people repent below, and then on the 10th of *Tishrei* (Yom Kippur) he descends with the second set of tablets. This moment of reconciliation, of renewed vows, is an ecstatic one. It sets the pattern for a day of interpersonal and Divine reconciliation which then carries forward throughout Jewish history as we engage in repentance on Yom Kippur. This day of relationship repair and preservation, then, is truly just as important and meaningful to us as a day of weddings.



## How We Celebrate

**The Festive Meal:** There is a tradition to eat a large festive meal in the afternoon prior to Yom Kippur night. A traditional food is *Kreplach*, ground meat wrapped in dough which is either fried, baked, or boiled in soup. The meat symbolizes judgement, whereas the dough represents sustenance and thereby God's mercy. The wordless prayer is that God's kindness should soften and sweeten any harsh judgments that may be in store for us.

**The Angelic Pursuit:** Throughout the 25 hours of Yom Kippur, certain practices help to elevate us beyond our physical selves until we are 'like angels.' In particular, we abstain from five core activities: 1. eating and drinking, 2. bathing, 3. applying oils or lotions to the skin, 4. sexual activity, 5. wearing leather shoes. Additionally, some have the custom to wear white clothing, often a *Kittel* – the white garment worn by many Jewish grooms.

**The Prayers:** In addition to the standard order of prayers, Yom Kippur includes several liturgical highlights. It opens just before sundown with *Kol Nidrei*, a prayer that punctuates the gravity of our commitments and whose haunting melody has become synonymous with the day. The *Al Cheit* confessional repeated through the prayers helps us identify the root causes of our mistakes so we can commit to fixing them and becoming better people. It is the one day each year when the *Baruch Sheim* verse of the *Shema*

prayer is recited at full volume, and the one day where full prostration occurs at *Aleinu*. The *Mussaf* service recounts the original serious yet joyful Temple service. *Yizkor* is recited, recalling the memory of our loved ones now departed. Finally, at the end of the day an additional *Ne'ilah* service, unique to Yom Kippur, is chanted as the 'gates of repentance' are closed and the books of life and death are sealed. The day ends with a triumphant exuberance and final blast of the Shofar, confident in our verdict.

**The Difficult Work:** Beyond any ritual service, Yom Kippur is first and foremost a day of introspection and critical self-evaluation. It is the day for seeking forgiveness from God, but more importantly from anyone we may have hurt intentionally or otherwise through interpersonal transgressions (see *Mishna Yoma* 8:9). *Teshuva* (lit. 'return'), the repentance which our forgiveness and restored relationship is predicated on, requires first sincere regret and cessation of hurtful actions, followed by verbal confession to own our mistakes, and finally an authentic resolution not to repeat the harmful behavior.

