

Yom Kippur: Say It Out Loud **Rabbanit Rivka Wietchner, Class of '24**

Confession, reciting our sins aloud, is a central part of our Yom Kippur experience, repeated at least 10 times during the prayer services. It was also a central part of the Yom Kippur service of the *Kohen Gadol* (high priest) during the Temple period, which we reenact during our own services. On Yom Kippur the *Kohen Gadol* used to confess three times (Yoma 3:8, 4:2, 6:2) on behalf of himself and the entire Jewish people. Rambam (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva, 1:1) codifies confession as our primary mechanism for personal *teshuva* as well.

Confession requires us to take responsibility for our sins. We must look inside ourselves and examine where we have gone wrong and consider how we might do better. When things go wrong in our lives, and in the world at large, it is tempting to imagine that it is all someone else's fault. By looking inside, checking our own behavior, and putting our shortcomings into words, we acknowledge our personal responsibility. Only then can we move forward in a better direction.

The goal of our confession, and of Yom Kippur itself, is to achieve atonement, *kapparah*. But, what does *kapparah* actually mean?

1. The root כ.פ.ר can mean to remove. Jacob uses this word when describing his approach to Esau, after so many years of enmity. He says (Bereishit 32:21) “*achapra fanav*” (אֲכַפְּרָה פָּנָיו), literally, “I will cover his face,” meaning, I will propitiate him. Rashi explains the phrase to mean “I will remove his anger,” indicating that “wherever the verb כפר is used in association with iniquity and sin and in association with anger (*panim*–face–can mean anger), it always signifies wiping away, removing...”
2. The root כ.פ.ר can mean to cover. This can be seen in the word *kaporet*, the cover for the Holy Ark, and in the description of Noah's ark, where God commands Noah “*v'chafarta (וְכַפַּרְתָּ) otah mibayit u'michutz bakofer*” – “cover it inside and out with pitch” (Bereishit 6:14).

This suggests the atonement we are trying to achieve on Yom Kippur involves both removing and covering over our sins.

The other central ceremony of the biblical Yom Kippur service, the Scapegoat service, is a tangible enactment of this removal and covering. The Torah describes that the *Kohen Gadol* would:

...lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated agent. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness (Vayikra 16:21-22).

By confessing their sins aloud, the *Kohen Gadol* takes the sins of Bnei Yisrael and places them on the goat. The goat then carries those sins away into the wilderness, effectively removing them from the people and hiding them or covering them in the wilderness. On the one hand, we sinned, and those sins existed in the world and affected the world. On the other hand, we have taken responsibility for them and have taken steps to move forward, so we are no longer the same people as we were when we sinned. The act of confessing and transferring our sins onto the goat tangibly carries the sins away, perhaps still out there, but inaccessible. This guarantees us atonement, *kapparah*, both removal and covering.

Yom Kippur is a miracle because “The day of Yom Kippur itself atones for those who repent” (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva, 1:3). On this day, we take a hard look at our behavior and state out loud courageously where we went wrong and where we can do better. That's the only way our actions are forgiven, erased and gone. At the end of this day, we get to move on, let go of the past, remember our goals, and try to renew our dreams and plans again.

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