

Facts of Yom Kippur

The purpose of these articles on the facts of religious holidays in the Jewish calendar is twofold. One is to communicate to the non-specialist the sophisticated thinking of modern scholars who study critically the sources in which the origins of the holidays are described. The other is to point up the truth that critical research invariably reveals: the holidays have an evolutionary nature. They were created by humans to serve human needs; and they were changed, at times radically, by humans as their needs changed. Understandably, the institutional services through which these holidays are celebrated, and the means whereby most people become acquainted with them, tell nothing of their evolutionary nature. Yet, although understandable, the failure to communicate this information is regrettable. For the fundamental inferences that can be drawn from the results of modern research may well be of critical importance for our future. Thus from the fact that the Jewish holidays were created and changed by humans in the past, according to their needs, we may infer that we, too, have the right to create new holidays or change old ones according to our needs. Another vital inference to be drawn is that the text for the survival of a religious holiday is a harshly pragmatic one. A holiday must serve the fundamental human needs for which it was intended or it will fall into disuse. Neither nostalgia nor habit will keep alive the holiday whose time for change has come.

Historically, the Yom Kippur underwent two major periods of evolution: its birth and development in the biblical period; and its subsequent recreation in the post-biblical rabbinic period into the very different holiday that is today recognizable in Orthodox and Reform Judaism. (Even the name "Yom Kippur" is not biblical; but derives from the late rabbinic period.)

The basic source of our knowledge of the biblical Yom Kippur is the Pentateuch, primarily Leviticus 16:1-28. Sin, according to the Pentateuch, is disobeying the deity Yahveh's commandments. It is sin that is the prime cause of human guilt, as well as the sole reason for any and all misfortunes that befall the human race. There is no notion in the Pentateuch of some neutral impersonal cause, such as "nature" or "chance" producing events. The universe is taken personally. Every event in the universe is believed to be deliberately and purposely produced by Yahveh in response to whether the Israelites obey Yahveh's will or sin against him. Droughts, military defeats, exiles, holocausts all come from deity as divine vengeance for sin. Fear of sin, therefore, was very great among the Israelites, and it was essential for a good life to make atonement for any offenses committed against the deity, whether willingly or unwillingly. Atonement was made through animal sacrifices. To understand the biblical Yom Kippur, it is important to keep in mind that according to pentateuchal religion, ordinary religionists were considered unable to converse with or pray to the deity. Prophets alone had the power to converse with deity and receive his commandments but no one else. Sin, therefore, could not be removed by the Israelites through directly addressing deity and asking his forgiveness. Rather, deity could be worshipped and his pardon attained only by obeying the commandments that he had revealed to the prophets, particularly the commandments relating to animal sacrifices. Accordingly, it was through sacrifices that the biblical Yom Kippur was observed and atonement made.

The Yom Kippur ritual described in Lev. 16:1-28 is essentially this: after sacrificing a young bull as a sin-offering to make atonement for himself and his household, the High Priest presented two male goats that had been obtained from the Israelite community. Lots were then cast by the High Priest upon the goats, one for the deity Yahveh and the other for Azazel (meaning unknown, perhaps an evil spirit of the wilderness). The High Priest first took the goat upon which the lot fell for the deity, and sacrificed him as a sin-offering, sprinkling his blood on the horns of the altar. Then the High Priest took the other goat, destined for Azazel, laid both hands upon its head, and confessed over it the sins of the Israelites. In this way, the sins and guilt of the Israelites were transferred to the goat, which was then sent off into the wilderness carrying the Israelites' sins far from their community. Sin and guilt are conceived of in the Pentateuch as "things", rather than as states or feelings of the psyche, and could, therefore, be transferred to other beings such as animals. The goat of the Yom Kippur, upon whose head the

sins of the Israelites were placed, received the name "scapegoat."

The scapegoat ritual is the earliest form of the Yom Kippur described in the Bible. In subsequent developments of the biblical period, additions to the scapegoat ritual appeared. For one thing, there had originally been no set date for the Yom Kippur. This was remedied, and the date of the Yom Kippur was established as the tenth of Tishri. Also, the character of the scapegoat ritual as a mechanical and vicarious means of atonement in which the High Priest was active but all other Israelites passive became recognized as such. Consequently, in addition to witnessing the scapegoat ritual, the Israelites on the Yom Kippur later were required to "afflict their souls" (fasting here may be meant but it is not stated), and refrain from all work (Lev. 16:29-34).

The Yom Kippur of post-biblical Judaism, that we think of today as the "traditional Yom Kippur," lay far in the future. This new Yom Kippur was created after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., and the exile of the Jews from Judea. A new form of Judaism arose to replace the sacrificial religion of the Petateuch which required the now-destroyed Temple. The concept of prayer was introduced, so that atonement could be made directly addressing and petitioning the deity. In addition, the Yom Kippur, which in the Bible had nothing to do with Rosh Hashanah, was now brought into relation with it, and made the last and climactic day of a ten day penitential period that begins with Rosh Hashanah. Still, the basic theology of sin that underlay the biblical Yom Kippur remained in the post-biblical Yom Kippur. Human guilt and misfortune continued to be attributed to sin, which arises when deity commands humans to behave one way, and they insult and offend deity by deliberately and presumptuously disobeying his wishes. It is only with the rise of polydox and liberal Judaism that a different concept of guilt arises in the Jewish continuum, one in which sin plays no part. For there is no evidence in liberal Judaism that deity's commandments have ever been received by humans, and no human's actions, therefore, can offend deity, since the deity has never commanded otherwise. (See Credo above) Polydox Judaism thus ushers in a third major period of the evolution of the Yom Kippur, which succeeds those of the biblical and post-biblical periods.