

PICTURE PERFECT

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. It is a day of abstention, of prayer and meditation, of introspection, soul-searching and repentance. It is called the Sabbath of Sabbaths - the ultimate day of spirit and serenity. Jews dress in white (men usually wear a white robe called a "kitel" together with a white head covering during the synagogue service; women wear white blouses and/or skirts and no jewelry) as a sign of purity and as a sign of our mortality, for ultimately we are buried in white shrouds. The white garments are also a reminder of the costume of the High Priest worn on Yom Kippur during most of the Yom Kippur service in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The main service was conducted then and there with the High Priest wearing the four white garments - shirt, pants, belt and hat - without the four gold garments - the long coat, the breastplate, the head plate and the apron - that he ordinarily wore in performing his Temple duties. The gold garments are not worn on this day of asking forgiveness because they represent hubris, human majesty and are a potential reminder of the sin of the Golden Calf. Yom Kippur is a day of humility and a low and private profile. Fancy garments, especially gold garments, are really out of place and contrary to the prevailing spirit of this holy day.

On Yom Kippur, Jews abstain from doing any work, from eating and drinking, from marital relations, from wearing leather shoes and from washing one's body. Maimonides classifies these abstentions as forms of "rest," for Yom Kippur is the ultimate day of rest - the Sabbath of Sabbaths. We rest from the world and our ordinary necessities on this day. The day is marked with this atmosphere of serenity, coupled with a seriousness of purpose, though not with any tinge of sadness. For it is on this day that we have our sins erased and forgiven, and thus it is an occasion of joy and not one of sadness. We confess our sins in the prayer services of Yom Kippur nine times (including the afternoon Mincha prayer before Yom Kippur) and we beseech heavenly understanding of our frailties and weaknesses. We also pledge ourselves to try and improve and to become better Jews and finer human beings. However, all of these confessions refer only to sins between our Creator and us - the sins it is within the power of Yom Kippur to absolve. Yet, Yom Kippur does not absolve sins that were committed against our fellow human beings. Those sins are erased only when the wronged party forgives us our acts or statements.

Thus it is customary for Jews before the advent of the Yom Kippur day to seek out those who they may have possibly wronged during the course of the year and request their understanding and forgiveness. It is wrong for a Jew to withhold such forgiveness if sincerely asked to do so. Only if we are willing to forgive each other can we then, in good conscience, ask God to forgive our sins as well.

In the times of the Temple in Jerusalem, the afternoon of Yom Kippur was a time for matchmaking for those interested in finding proper mates. It was felt that the holiness of the day would be a positive influence on those involved and allow them to find their true physical and spiritual soul mates. The enemies of Israel always marked Yom Kippur as a special day of hatred towards the Jews. From the execution of Rabbi Akiva by the Romans on Yom Kippur in Caesarea in 139CE, to the Holocaust and to the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Yom Kippur carries stark memories for the people of Israel. These memories have also been woven into the prayers of the day. The Kol Nidrei prayer that introduces the Yom Kippur prayer services has overtones of the plight of the Jewish conversos of Spain after the expulsion of 1492. This prayer nullifies false vows and coerced undertakings and allows all of Israel, sinners and saints, to pray as one. There is perhaps no other day on the Jewish calendar that so unifies the Jewish people as Yom Kippur. It creates social amity, the repairing of relationships between human beings, service of God and a sense of personal immortality and connection with the generations past and future. Yom Kippur is the quintessential Jewish day, unmatched and not replicated by any other faith or nation in the world.

Shabat Shalom and fast well

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