



The Biblical holiday of *Yom Kippur*, meaning the Day of Atonement, is established as the holiest and most solemn day of the year for the nation of Israel. Prominently detailed in Leviticus 16 and 23, and Numbers 29, it takes place on the tenth day of the seventh month (*Tishrei*).

The Hebrew root word for atonement is *kaphar*, which literally means “to cover over” or “to wipe clean”. In passages like Leviticus 17:11, God establishes that “it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” In this sacrificial system, a blameless animal acted as a substitute, its life poured out to cover the people’s sins temporarily and to cleanse the sanctuary from spiritual impurity.

The centerpiece of the biblical holiday was an elaborate ritual performed exclusively by the High Priest, who was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies inside the Tabernacle only on this specific day. After washing and dressing in pure white linen garments, the High Priest offered sacrifices to purify himself, his household, and the sanctuary from the spiritual impurities of the nation.

A defining element of the ceremony involved two goats. One was sacrificed as a sin offering to God, with its blood sprinkled on the mercy seat (cover) on top of the ark of the covenant. The High Priest would symbolically lay his hands on the other animal, known as the scapegoat, confessing all of

the sins of Israel over it, before sending it away into the wilderness to visually represent the complete removal of the community’s guilt for another year.

On this day, God commanded the entire community—both native Israelites and *gerim* (Gentiles who worship Adonai, the God of Israel)—to observe it as a “Sabbath of solemn rest.” During this 24-hour period, the people were strictly forbidden from doing any work and were required to “humble themselves” (traditionally practiced as fasting) while the priest was atoning for their sins. Altogether, according to the Bible, atonement was accomplished by a mediator, and required sacrificial substitution, and the shedding of blood.

The Messianic way of life and worship, upholds the ongoing validity of those elements. For it is Yeshua, the Messiah of Israel, who serves as our mediator between God and humanity. And His sacrificial death, which involved the shedding of His blood, served as a substitute for the penalty that was due us because of our sins. Thus He could atone for our sins “once for all” (Hebrews 9:12).

In modern rabbinical Judaism, on the other hand, people are said to atone for themselves. Instead of being the result of the sacrifice of a substitute, atonement is earned. And instead of the essential element of shed blood, it is based on good deeds. The only commonality is the emphasis on repentance, which is commendable.

It continues to be customary to fast on Yom Kippur. For Messianic believers, it can be a meaningful practice, not as a means of demonstrating worthiness of atonement like non-believers do, but in humble recognition of the great price that was paid for our redemption.

Another common practice is the chanting of a liturgy called *Kol Nidre*, meaning “all vows.” It originated among Spanish Marrano Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism. But, by making the declaration, it was said the conversion was annulled in God’s eyes, and they could continue to live privately as Jews. For Messianic believers, it serves as a reminder not to make foolish or ignorant promises.