



## ICJW Bea Zucker Calendar Study Series

### “Feminist Inspiration for Living on the Jewish Cycle”

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## Yom Kippur: A Day of Joy and Intimacy

### Introduction

*“On Rosh HaShannah we are inscribed [in the book of Life and Death], and on Yom Kippur our fate is sealed.” --from the UnetanaH Tokef Prayer*

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, holds a special position as “The Sabbath of Sabbaths” (Lev. 23), i.e. the holiest day in the High Holiday season. It is an opportunity to heal rifts that inevitably grow in our spiritual life, obtain forgiveness for misdeeds and to open a “new page,” so to speak for the coming year. In the time of the Temple, the High Priest would enter the [Holy of Holies](#) and perform the [Scapegoat ritual](#). In the modern era, more Jews flock to synagogues than any other day of the year, praying and fasting together, often dressed in white, symbolizing purity.

This unit will outline two approaches to understanding and experiencing fasting on Yom Kippur. On the one hand, fasting is an expression of a day of penance and fear, as indicated by the term “self-affliction.” At the same time, it is also a reflection of the day’s heightened spiritual state and our loving intimacy with God. Secondly, we will explore how intimacy with God is achieved through healing our relationships with one another.

### Observances

The Torah describes Yom Kippur five times as a day of self-affliction—understood by the rabbis to include:

1. No food and drink (first and foremost),
2. No bathing
3. No shoes
4. No [anointing](#) with oil, perfume or deodorant.
5. No sexual relations

It is easy to see fasting and other observances of Yom Kippur as forms of penance that show our contrition as we appeal our sentence before God. The very word *Kippur*, atonement, shares a root with the word *kofer*, ransom, as if to say, we are trying to make up for our sins, pay back some sort of debt or ransom our souls back.

The Hebrew word for affliction, *inuyei*, could also be translated as torture or hardship. In afflicting ourselves before God, it is as if we say, “Ruler of the Universe, You need not punish us, we are already so contrite that we have punished ourselves.” A penitent criminal throws himself at the mercy of the court and asks for leniency by demonstrating that he is already rehabilitated. Similarly, we show our contrition by spending a long day in synagogue, including ten-fold [confessions](#), repeatedly enumerating our sins and those of our community from A to Z and gently [beating our chest](#) with mention of each sin, and even adding a special fifth service called [Neilah](#).

Recited as the day comes to a close, *Neilah* is intended as a symbolic push to the finish line, holding open the gates of Heaven for one more prayer before they have a chance to close.

While showing contrition is mandated, the Mishnah makes clear that penance alone is insufficient:

*“Sins between humans and the Omnipresent, Yom Kippur atones. However, sins committed by one individual against another, Yom Kippur can only atone after the aggrieved individual has been appeased.” (Mishnah Yoma 8:9)*

For this reason, the days that precede Yom Kippur are customarily marked by asking forgiveness from family, friends and colleagues, and trying to heal broken relationships.

In sum, Yom Kippur is a day for showing regret in the Heavenly “court of appeals”—through self-denial, chest pounding, confession and supplication both before God and our community. However, all of this is only possible if we first heal our broken interpersonal relationships.

### **From the Sources: A Day of Joy and Intimacy**

At a deeper level, Yom Kippur should also be understood as a celebratory day of unprecedented intimacy with God. The clearest indication of this intimacy is the revelatory encounter that would take place in the Temple.

As we have already mentioned, Yom Kippur is the one day of the year that the High Priest enters the [Holy of Holies](#). The Temple furnishings suggest that this was equivalent to entering the inner chamber of God. The outer chamber contains a menorah, table and bread, analogous to a dining room. But inside the Holy of Holies, there is nothing save the Holy Ark in the First Temple, on top of which were the cherubs, which according to tradition had human faces that [intertwined as young lovers](#) when the relationship between the Israelites and God was strong (Talmud Yoma 54a). Thus, on a symbolic level, when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies, it is as Israel is entering God’s bedroom and consummating their marriage.

The High Priests’ encounter with God in the Holy of Holies is couched in a larger temple service in which God’s four letter name, usually referred to as the [ineffable name of God](#) because it was only pronounced in the Temple, is pronounced ten times. Each time, the priests and people who hear it fall on their face and exclaim “**בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלֻכּוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד**” “*Blessed be the Name of His Glorious Kingdom forever and ever.*” On this day, we know God like on no other.

Traditional liturgy recounts this Temple service during the Musaf prayer. In this context, modern worshippers also fall on their faces, bowing down with the same declaration, symbolically overcome by the encounter with God.

The special closeness between God and the Jewish People on Yom Kippur provides an alternative explanation for why we do not take care of our physical needs. Like Moses on Mount Sinai and the angels all year round, we have reached a spiritual height in which we are so focused on our experience of God that we transcend our physical

body—at least for one day!

Seeing Yom Kippur as a day of intimacy helps us understand Mishnah Taanit 4:8 which describes Yom Kippur as our wedding day:

*Rabbi Simon ben Gamaliel said: There never were greater days of joy in Israel than the fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement. On these days the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in white dresses which they borrowed in order not to embarrass anyone who had none...The daughters of Jerusalem came out and danced in the vineyards exclaiming at the same time, young man, lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself...*

The Mishnah continues:

*As Scripture says, "Go forth, daughters of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon, even upon the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, and on the day of the gladness of his heart." (Song of Songs 3:11) 'on the day of his wedding:' this refers to the day of the giving of the law. 'and in the day of the gladness of his heart:' this refers to the building of the Temple; (may it be rebuilt speedily in our days).*

The Sages interpret the Song of Songs as an allegory of the love between God and God's beloved, the Jewish People. In this allegory, the first Yom Kippur, in approximately 1200 BCE, is compared to a wedding celebration for the Jews and the Omnipresent. A few hundred years later, the same day is chosen to consecrate the First Temple.

Rashi (ad loc.) gives a short history lesson explaining why Yom Kippur should be identified as "the day of the giving of the law":

*"On the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, Moses descended Mount Sinai for the first time, [found the Jews worshipping the Golden Calf] and broke the tablets. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, he grounded up the Golden Calf, punished the culprits, and re-ascended for another 80 days. The first forty were spent praying for forgiveness for that sin, as it says (Deut 9) I fell before God in prayer for forty days and forty nights" and the next forty were spent receiving the Torah as had been done the first time...On the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei, Moses descended the mountain again and delivered the tablets."*

That Yom Kippur was the culmination of a long process of reconciliation. Together with God, we spent the summer in symbolic marriage counselling, praying for forgiveness and rewriting the tablets which serve as the marriage contract. While we were as if divorced on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, Yom Kippur was the ultimate remarriage. The first tablets are broken before they are ever delivered, but the second set symbolize an enduring reunion of the Children of Israel with God.

Rashi concludes this remark with the statement:

*"That very day was established as Yom Kippur to demonstrate that it is a day of forgiveness. That is my tradition."*

Thus for Rashi, Yom Kippur is the culmination of an annual reenactment of the spiritual process that occurred thousands of years ago. Every life is inevitably filled with cycles

of intimacy and alienation. This time of year is designated as an opportunity for us to recognize that distance and work to heal it. For this reason, Yom Kippur is the perfect day for the Temple to be consecrated. The Temple is the place for attaining spiritual union, as well as the place of forgiveness, obtained for by offering sacrifices. That long process of healing brings our relationships to new depths that could never have been achieved otherwise. "The spiritual stature of penitents cannot be attained by someone who has always been righteous" (Berachot 34b). What better reason to dance?

The motif of wedding day explains not only our receiving the second tablets, but also our presence in God's inner chamber and pronouncing the Divine name. Symbolically, Yom Kippur is a day of intimate union in which food and physicality are superfluous.

No wonder we women are dancing in joy in white gowns. But why are we calling out for the men to gaze at us specifically on this day? Perhaps the dancing of the daughters of Jerusalem functions on two levels. Women dance and invite the men to gaze, just as the Jewish people invite God to do the same. The earthly love relationship is embraced, especially on Yom Kippur, because it can become a mirror image of the love relationship with the Divine. Just as the Mishnah insisted on appeasing one's friends before Yom Kippur because Divine forgiveness is contingent on healing human relationships, so too, courting is encouraged on Yom Kippur because when we love one another, it facilitates our relationship with the Divine.

### **Gender Perspectives: Family Relations on Yom Kippur**

Having examined Yom Kippur as a day of intimacy with God and how our human relationships facilitate that intimacy, let us examine the following Talmudic story:

*Rabbi Rehumi frequented [the school] of Rava at Mahuza.  
He was accustomed to return home every year on the eve of the Day of Atonement.  
One day, his learning pulled him in.  
His wife was expecting [him every moment, saying to herself]  
"He is coming any second, he is coming any second."  
But he did not come.  
She was hurt, and a tear fell from her eye.  
[At that moment] he was sitting on a roof.  
The roof collapsed under him, and he died.  
[Talmud Ketubot 62b]*

After marrying, Rabbi Rehumi leaves home for multiple (perhaps even many) years for Torah study with the esteemed scholar Rava. He left his wife behind, visiting just once a year, on Yom Kippur. She awaits that single reunion anxiously, and when he misses it, she cries. His yearly visit to her is replaced with the visitation of Divine justice upon him in the form of a collapsing roof.

The narrator of the story condemns Rabbi Rehumi because family obligations are also religious obligations. His teacher Rava models the emotional intimacy essential to a strong marital relationship (Talmud BB12b, Berachot 56a, Ketubot 85a). However, Rabbi Rehumi neglects even the conjugal relations that are biblically mandated. The rabbis go so far as to legislate their frequency, dependent on the husband's profession

and ability to be at home. Torah students are expected to enjoy sexual relations with their wives not less than once a week, on Sabbath eve.

Without a doubt, the rabbis of the Talmud saw Torah study as the ultimate act of religious piety and were quick to promote devotion to it above all else. In their day, Torah study was the exclusive purvey of men, and pursuing it, like any other career, often demanded personal sacrifices at home. While Rabbi Eliezer (Mishnah Ketubot 5:6) and the Palestinian Talmud (Ketubot 30a) ruled that rabbinical students may not absent themselves from their wives for more than thirty days without permission, Rabbi Ada bar Ahava in the name of Rav permits travel for as long as two or three years. Rava says “The rabbis have relied on Rav Ada bar Ahava and acted *benafshayhu*” (Talmud Ketubot 62a). That Aramaic word can either be translated as “for themselves,” or as Rashi does, “at the expense of their lives.” Either way, by telling this story, the rabbis declare unequivocally that devotion to Torah cannot be justified at the expense of interpersonal obligations. This story is one of many that show that despite its power, Torah wisdom does not guarantee piety.

The rabbis who narrate the story about Rabbi Rehumy judge him very harshly, but it is helpful to try to imagine his perspective. Even as women, we can perhaps find sympathy for Rabbi Rehumy. He is devoting himself to the most important of causes—Torah study! He has no ill will towards his wife. Surely, he might justify to himself, she would benefit from the honor he would gain by achieving greatness in Torah. After all, Rabbi Akiva’s wife had encouraged in her husband’s extended absence. Rabbi Rehumy may even have obtained her permission to travel. One could even say that, Rabbi Rehumy had no intention of missing his annual visit, his love for Torah just got the best of him, and he lost track of time.

However, as advocates for women’s rights, we are also relieved that Rabbi Rehumy is condemned for his negligence. Human beings are created in the Divine Image, and neglecting them is tantamount to betraying God directly. As Isaiah says, in the Yom Kippur Haftarah reading, our Divine worship is hypocrisy, if we are not also kind to our fellow human.

*Is such the fast I desire,  
A day for people to starve their bodies?  
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush  
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?  
Do you call that a fast,  
A day when the Lord is favorable?*

*No, this is the fast I desire:  
To unlock fetters of wickedness,  
And untie the cords of the yoke  
To let the oppressed go free;  
To break off every yoke.*

*It is to share your bread with the hungry,  
And to take the wretched poor into your home;  
When you see the naked, to clothe him,  
And **not to ignore your own kin.** (Isaiah 58:5-7)*

In the context of our story, Isaiah's closing words resonate especially loudly. Often it is easier to have compassion for the poor stranger than to be truly present for our own families, and especially our spouses, where our desires can so easily be blurred with theirs and their support taken for granted. But as Mishnah Yoma 8:9 stated, if he does not appease his wife, the Merciful One cannot excuse Rabbi Rehumai's carelessness.

Thus we have examined three sources that teach that spiritual heights and Divine intimacy are reached through strong interpersonal relationships. Just as Mishnah Yoma 8:9 demands attaining human forgiveness before attaining Divine forgiveness, so too Isaiah makes clear that fasting is only secondary to taking care of the weak. Similarly, in our story, cultivating intimacy with God through Torah learning is not possible unless one also cultivates intimacy with one's spouse.

The sexual context of this story in the Talmud makes us especially sensitive to the timing of Rabbi Rehumai's yearly visit. Why go home for a visit on one of the only two days a year when sexual relations are forbidden?<sup>1</sup> Does Rabbi Rehumai come home on Yom Kippur because like Moses, he sees himself reaching a level of holiness that precludes sexual relations completely (Rashi Numbers 12:1-2, Talmud Shabbat 87a)? Like Moses, who abstained not only from sex but also did not eat for forty days and forty nights, Rabbi Rehumai perceives himself as a holy figure that should deny his own physical needs not just on Yom Kippur but all year round. He sits on the roof because he perceives himself as ascending Mount Sinai and receiving Torah. This approach exists within our tradition, but this Talmudic passage rejects it. Even his name, Rabbi Rehumai—the love rabbi (the root r.h.m. means love in Aramaic), is ironic in that he does not realize that the path to a love relationship with God has to be through love for his wife.

However, there is another justification for a home visit on Yom Kippur. Building on our deeper analysis of the day, it is also possible to see Yom Kippur as an especially appropriate time for a family reunion, just as the young women danced on this day in their white dresses to entice potential spouses. Indeed, a number of passages reflect an emphasis on family togetherness on Yom Kippur (Talmud Pesachim 109a, Shabbat 127b, Kiddushin 81a).

Three times, the Torah emphasizes that the High Priest makes atonement not just for himself but “for himself and his house.” (Lev. 16: 6, 11, 17). On a simple level, this includes his entire family, but the rabbis called their wives “their homes.” The rabbis viewed atoning as a family unit as so essential that Rabbi Judah suggests that just as there needs to be an understudy High Priest in case something went wrong with the first, there should also be a back-up wife (Mishnah Yoma 1:1). The High Priest cannot stand as an isolated individual before God; he must stand as a married man. Without her, he cannot perform the service. The wedding day between the Children of Israel and the Merciful needs to be mirrored by earthly togetherness as well. By demonstrating the wholeness of the interpersonal relationship, God is enticed to join the union as well. “If they merit, God's presence dwells between man and woman” (Talmud Sota 17a). Even though physical intimacy is prohibited on Yom Kippur, the family unit is key to achieving transcendence. According to this understanding, Yom Kippur is an ideal time for a home visit. Had Rabbi Rehumai reconciled with his wife

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<sup>1</sup> The other day is 9Av, see Dr. Bonna Haberman's article for ICJW on the topic [here](#).

after his long absence, the gates of the Heavens might have opened for him at the Neila service. But because he did not, the floor fell out from under him, and he descends to the depths.

We have examined the Divine judgment visited on a misguided rabbi who victimizes his wife. The rabbis severely criticize Rabbi Rehummi for his excessive sense of self-importance and callous self-centeredness. He should have realized that his relationship with his wife was not an obstacle to closeness with God, but a vehicle for achieving it.

From a modern perspective, second wave feminists taught us the importance of standing up actively and demanding our own liberation. Ironically, as women, some of us can now easily imagine ourselves as Rabbi Rehummi, too busy with professional and individual pursuits to make time for our family generally and our partners in particular. Still, more often than not, we are the ones making sacrifices for our spouses' or other family members' careers and personal pursuits. We cannot sit passively and allow ourselves to be victimized. Mrs. Rehummi suffers at the hand of her husband. Yet her fate is inseparably wrapped up with his, and when he is punished, she finds herself suffering together with him as a widow. At this time of year, whatever the gender of our spouse, when we stand in judgment and reflection, we need to sit together as a family and evaluate ourselves as the "household" that in many ways will ultimately be judged together.

While this is first and foremost a concern with our spouse, this personal reflection is also essential as we heal relationships with our parents, children and other loved ones. Are we taking care of both one another and ourselves, spiritually, physically and emotionally? Do we keep foremost in our consciousness that our love for one another is the most important tool we have for further connection and self-actualization, rather than another obligation and an obstacle in its way? There is no alternative, because if we cannot stand together with solid relationships with one another, there is no chance of achieving the spiritual completeness that Yom Kippur is meant to create.

Finally, we need to be cognizant that Resh Lakish's presumption that a woman would rather be married to anyone than dwell alone (Talmud Kiddush 7a) is thankfully no longer true. Women today have more options than Mrs. Rehummi had. Many women (and men) delay marriage, make the choice to leave unsuccessful unions, or are otherwise single. Because we as Jews see community and interpersonal intimacy as the best way to achieve transcendence, non-partnered Jews need to find alternate ways to build these relationships. Similarly, partnered Jews have a responsibility to make sure everyone is included.

### **Conclusions:**

Yom Kippur is a day of abstinence and self-affliction, manifested through fasting and abstaining from bathing, anointing, wearing shoes and sexual relations. It is a solemn day of chest pounding and confessing, and standing before God. On a deeper level, the intimacy achieved through our interpersonal relations become a vehicle not just for divine forgiveness but also for the most intense experience of love and unity with God on Yom Kippur.

## Questions for discussion in preparation for Yom Kippur:

Given that interpersonal relationships are so instrumental in facilitating our spiritual life, it is essential to do some serious **preparatory reflection** (in Hebrew, *Heshbon Nefesh*) before the holiday. I recommend Dr. David Bernstein's [Practical Teshuva Workshop](#). There he lists a series of questions designed to help us reflect.

In what ways do you connect with the narrative of **self-affliction** as a method of atonement and expiation? In your mind, which transgressions require some sort of payback, and which can simply be forgiven and forgotten?

We live in a culture which enshrines physical pleasure. At which moments in your life have you **transcended your physical needs**? To what extent has that been a spiritual experience?

At what moments have you felt your interpersonal relationships facilitated a transcendent connection?

Reimagine the Rabbi Rehumi story in today's day and age, cast the story first with a male protagonist and then with a female one. How much have our gender roles shifted? How should they continue to shift?

## Resources:

One of the things that is very special about Yom Kippur in Israel is that it is a “**buy nothing**” and “**car free**” day with compliance rates of which environmentalists in other countries can hardly dream. Read about the religious and environmental significance [here](#). And about the communal impact [here](#).

We mentioned the famous High Holiday prayer, **Unetaneh Tokef**, which has inspired many worshippers as well as artists. For a dramatic rendering of a powerful and now very popular tune composed in memory of 11 members of Kibbutz Beit HaShittah that fell in the Yom Kippur War, [click here](#). For Leonard Cohen's modern rendering, “Who by Fire,” inspired by the prayer, [listen here](#). To learn about the legend of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz and his composition of the prayer, [click here](#). And for an audio recording of a thoughtful class wrestling with the prayer and the complex theology of reward and punishment apparently underlying it, click [here](#).

One of the interesting customs mentioned above is the **full prostration**, and covering the floor if it is stone. For more on the bowing and its significance, [see here](#) and [here](#). For a demonstration, [see here](#). For details of the law [see here](#).

The Rabbi Rehumi story is part of a collection of stories about Rabbis, wives and traveling to study. It can be studied [here](#). Recently, Ruth Calderon retold the story in her powerful collection [A Bride For One Night](#). Check there for more extensive bibliography.

For more about the work life balance and exclusive devotion to Hashem at the expense of family, see my podcast on Moses for the [Torah portion Yitro](#).