

YLJC Judaism 101

YOM KIPPUR

Study pack
Set 1: Sin



Text 1

A VOCABULARY OF SIN

'Cheyt' is the most common word for sin, but in Biblical Hebrew, and in the prayerbook, there are three common words for sin. Often they are used synonymously, but in essence they have different meanings.

'Pesha' means rebellion. It refers to the attitude of mind where a person sets him or herself as sole judge of their actions, recognising neither God nor God's Law, nor the civil law. For this person there are no external standards of right or wrong. Whatever pleases them or furthers their aim, is right; whatever would frustrate their actions or displeases them, is wrong.

'Avon' means 'to be twisted' or 'crooked'. An inherent or developed trait in the character that seems to impel the person to do wrong, to be deflected from the paths that would otherwise be considered right.

'Cheyt' is the weakest term. It means 'to miss the mark'. It is used of an archer where arrows fail to hit the target. Cheyt is the occasion where a person has no real intention of doing wrong, but just strays from the right path or action. The careless driver, the over-indulgent or neglectful parent, the thoughtless child, all are guilty of cheyt. Blame is attached even to unwitting sin if it could have been avoided with the exercise of greater care.

The rabbis generally speak of sin as 'aveyrah': the opposite of mitzvah, the good deed, obeying God's commandment. Aveyrah comes from the root meaning 'to pass over' – passing over the line of what is right, it is a transgression against God's law.

Rabbi Louis Jacobs, 'A Guide to Yom Kippur', 1957

Text 2

Unlike Christianity, Judaism has never had a clear map of the hereafter. The exact nature of the state of the soul after bodily death has never been clearly defined in Jewish tradition.

All that can be stated is that, whilst life as we know it is limited to our current stay on earth, there is life after death. It is not necessarily more desirable and to be valued above this life, but rather a different stage.

In the absence of any further details, the best policy is to concentrate on the merits of the world we know and to use life here to the full. For many, therefore, the good deeds that we perform are because it is right to act in such a way rather than to earn reward in the next life.

Rabbi Jonathan Romain, 'Faith and Practice: a guide to Reform Judaism today', 1991

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Study pack
Set 2: Prayer



Text 1 (unless otherwise indicated, all texts are taken from the Liberal Judaism machzor [High Holy Day prayerbook])

Our Creator and Sovereign, we have sinned before You.

Our Creator and Sovereign, we have no Sovereign but You.

Our Creator and Sovereign, bring us back to You in perfect repentance.

Our Creator and Sovereign, pardon and forgive all our wrongdoing.

Our Creator and Sovereign, have compassion on us and on our children.

Our Creator and Sovereign, help us to conquer sickness, war and famine.

Our Creator and Sovereign, may we be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life.

Our Creator and Sovereign, bless us with prosperity and well-being.

Our Creator and Sovereign, let the new year be for us a good year.

Our Creator and Sovereign, give strength to Your people Israel.

Our Creator and Sovereign, help us to hasten the time of redemption.

Our Creator and Sovereign, accept our prayer with favour and mercy.

Our Creator and Sovereign, be gracious to us and answer us, for there is little merit in us; treat us with charity and kindness, and be our help.

Text 2

The English of [Liberal Judaism's machzor] is gender-inclusive. A prominent theme running through the High Holy Days is the sovereignty of God, epitomised by the much loved litany known as Avinu Malkeinu, literally meaning 'our Father, our King'. Various approaches were proposed for dealing with these irredeemably masculine words, and eventually we opted for 'our Creator and Sovereign', expressing in neutral language the key meaning of the two Hebrew words.

However, we have also developed the concept, first found in the machzor of the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism, of a creative prayer modelled on Avinu Malkeinu, addressing God by the ancient title of Shechina. This title denotes the Deity's feminine aspect and especial closeness to the people of Israel.

Text 3

Divine Presence, Source of our lives, shelter us under the wings of Your compassion.

Divine Presence, Source of our lives, cause us to walk in Your ways of love and compassion.

Divine Presence, Source of our lives, fortify our desire to do good, that we may overcome our tendency to do evil.

Divine Presence, Source of our lives, give us strength to restrain our anger and to control our aggression.

Divine Presence, Source of our lives, teach us to use the gentle answer that turns away wrath.

Divine Presence, Source of our lives, let us be among those who bring healing and peace to Your world.

Divine Presence, Source of our lives, grant that we and our children may have a future and a hope.

Text 4

The sin we have committed against You under duress or by choice.

The sin we have committed against You consciously or unconsciously.

And the sin we have committed against You openly or secretly.

The sin we have committed against You by our thoughts.

The sin we have committed against You by our words.

And the sin we have committed against You by our deeds.

The sin we have committed against You by hardening our hearts.

The sin we have committed against You by being arrogant.

And the sin we have committed against You by showing contempt.

The sin we have committed against You by profaning Your name.

The sin we have committed against You by defying the moral law.

And the sin we have committed against You by disrespect for parents and teachers.

The sin we have committed against You by foolish talk.

The sin we have committed against You by speaking slander.

And the sin we have committed against You by testifying falsely.

The sin we have committed against You by groundless hatred.

The sin we have committed against You by dishonesty in business.

And the sin we have committed against You by hurting our fellow men and women in any way.

Text 5

We didn't stop at red lights.

We didn't lower our high-beam lights.

We were aggressive on our trips.

We didn't turn on our lights during winter.

We didn't wear our reflective vests.

...

For the sin we have committed against You by forgetting that we were all once strangers in a strange land;

For the sin we have committed against You by supporting trade policies and murderous regimes that uproot people, families and communities;

And for the sin we have committed against You by drawing lines and turning away those who come to our country seeking a better life.

For the sin we have committed against You by demonising migrants as threats to be feared;

And for the sin we have committed against You by labelling human beings as illegal.

For the sin we have committed against You by internalising and assenting to racist ideologies;

And for the sin we have committed against You by allowing oppressive systems to continue unchecked.

For the sin we have committed against You by denying fair housing, public schools and greater opportunity to our black and brown communities;

For the sin we have committed against You by profiting off of weapons of death and destruction;

For the sin we have committed against You by blockading 1.8 million Gazans inside an open air prison;

And for the sin we have committed against You by rationalizing away Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people.

...

For the sin we have committed against You through renting houses to enemies.

For the sin we have committed against You through employing non-Jews with Jews.

For the sin we have committed against You through hiring Arab drivers to drive Jewish girls.

For the sin we have committed against You through encouraging national service with non-Jews.

For the sin we have committed against You through having seen the mother's tears and having kept quiet.

For the sin we have committed against You through encouraging get-togethers with Jewish and Arab youth.

Variously: quoted by Dalia Marx in 'Al Chet in Israeli culture: Israeli confessions over everything', via <www.academia.edu>; and Rabbi Brant Rosen.

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Set 3: Traditions



Dress

- One tradition is not to wear leather shoes. In the past this would have meant either bare feet or uncomfortable wooden clogs. These days the position may be slightly different...
 - *In his first year as Orthodox Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis arranged to visit several north London congregations throughout the day. He walked between them (as Orthodox Jews observe Shabbat-style restrictions on technology on Yom Kippur), accompanied by a number of police bodyguards. One of them said to him, “I see you’re wearing trainers because of all this walking you’re having to do – but how lovely that all the congregants in all the synagogues are wearing trainers too out of solidarity!”*
- Kol Nidre, the ‘erev’ or evening of Yom Kippur, is considered the holiest night of the Jewish year. It is also the only occasion when tallitot – white prayer shawls – are worn during an evening service.

Abstinence and non-abstinence

- Yom Kippur is most famously associated with fasting: from the emergence of three stars on Kol Nidre to the emergence of three stars the following evening (normally extended to around 25 hours, to be on the safe side), observant Jews who are old enough and healthy enough to fast will not eat or drink.
- The purpose of this is primarily to free up our concentration for prayer, rather than as a form of punishment or self-flagellation.
- Similarly, other earthly pleasures including sex, smoking, perfumery and bathing are off-limits.
- Those fasting will need large meals before and after Yom Kippur, so this would cause problems if it fell on a Friday or Sunday (because those Jews who don't cook on Shabbat would be unable either to break their fast or to stuff themselves beforehand). Therefore, when Yom Kippur is going to fall on these days, the preceding Jewish year is extended by a day, and Rosh Hashanah delayed, to bump it forwards.
- In Israel, Yom Kippur is often known as 'bicycle day', because the almost total absence of traffic makes the roads fair game for non-observant youngsters to do some extreme cycling.

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Set 4: Atonement



Text 1

If you say, “I will sin and repent, sin and repent,” you will not truly repent.

If you say, “I will sin and Yom Kippur will make atonement,” then Yom Kippur will make no atonement.”

Mishnah (Yoma 8:9)

Text 2

Rabbi Israel Lipkin Salanter once said: Most people repent during the Selichot week preceding Rosh Hashanah; the more pious during the month of Elul preceding Rosh Hashanah. But I say that one should begin to repent immediately after Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Salanter lived from 1809 to 1883

Text 3

For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur makes atonement, but for transgressions between two people, Yom Kippur makes atonement only if the offender has appeased the offended person.

Mishnah (Yoma 8:9)

Text 4

Orthodox Judaism, the official position of the State of Israel, makes an astounding provision for observant Jews: They may, by reciting the Kol Nidre prayer on the eve of Yom Kippur, receive pre-forgiveness for all the lies, deceit, broken contracts, etc. they may indulge in for the next year.

Kol Nidre is a big show. The Jews get worked up by the high drama and cantor [leader of musical prayer] singing the haunting Kol Nidre melody. They persuade themselves that every lie they have told over the past year is forgiven. They're off the hook!

Do I have this wrong? Incredibly, I don't. Despite the suspicion and revenge Kol Nidre has aroused, modern Judaism still considers its recitation one of the most sacred duties of Jewish life, liturgy, and tradition.

An anti-Semitic website

Text 5

ARAMAIC KOL NIDREY

Preliminary Note

According to traditional usage, the legal declaration of Kol Nidrey is recited in the setting of a formal court. Two leaders of the congregation holding Sifrey Torah stand at either side of the Rabbi or Chazzan, thus constituting a Beyt Din (Religious Court) of three, which is required for the legal procedure of granting dispensation from vows.

All vows, oaths and promises which we make to God from this Yom Kippur to the next and are not able to fulfil – may all such vows between ourselves and God be annulled. May they be void and of no effect. May we be absolved of them and released from them. May these vows no longer be considered vows, these oaths no longer be considered oaths, and these promises no longer be considered promises.

כָּל־נִדְרֵי וְאֶסְרֵי וְחַרְמֵי, וְקוֹנָמֵי
וְכַנּוּיֵי, וְקְנוּסֵי וְשְׁבוּעוֹת,
דְּנִדְרָנָא וְדֵאֲשֵׁתִּבְעָנָא,
וְדֵאֲחַרְמָנָא וְדֵאֲסִרְנָא עַל
נַפְשָׁתָנָא, מִיּוֹם כְּפָרִים זֶה עַד
יוֹם כְּפָרִים הַבָּא עָלֵינוּ לְטוֹבָה,
כְּלָהוֹן אַחַרְטָנָא בְּהוֹן. כְּלָהוֹן
יְהוֹן שָׁרָן, שְׁבִיקִין שְׁבִיתִין,
בְּטִלִין וּמְבַטְלִין, לָא שְׁרִירִין
וְלָא קַיְמִין. נִדְרָנָא לָא נִדְרֵי,
וְאֶסְרָנָא לָא אֶסְרֵי, וְשְׁבוּעָתָנָא
לָא שְׁבוּעוֹת.

Liberal Judaism machzor, p 436

Text 6

Prayer is likened to a mikvah [ritual bath] and repentance to the sea. Just as a mikvah is sometimes open and sometimes locked, so the gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes locked; but the sea is always open, and similarly the gates of repentance are always open.

Midrash (Lamentations Rabbah 3:15)