

Why do I fast and pray on Yom Kippur?

Yitschak Kugler

Introduction:

A dear friend of mine declared that since Yeshua had accomplished eternal atonement there was no need to fast and pray on Yom Kippur in order to obtain atonement. To tell you the truth i was rather flabbergast at his statement. First of all nobody in our congregation thinks that by fasting and praying on Yom Kippur he gains atonement. If we say that the Messiah has provided the atonement and obviated the need for the Day of Atonement, then by the same logic we may say that Christ is our passover sacrificed for us, so there is no need to celebrate Passover. My friends response is a reflection of replacement theology in Christianity that has persisted in one form or another since the days of the Church fathers. So why do i as a Messianic Jew pray and fast on Yom Kippur?

Covenant Responsibility

First of all as a Messianic Jew, i am a member of the covenant which God has made with the people of Israel. God does not cancel covenants. In the Epistle to the Galatians, Paul declares that even with covenants of men no one comes with a subsequent covenant to modify or cancel a former covenant, and certainly not with covenants that are made by the faithful God. Perhaps the punishment clauses of the Covenant that God made with Israel in Leviticus and Deuteronomy provide first hand evidence that the Covenant is still in effect. The horrible persecutions, exiles, and the holocaust provide ample evidence of the precision to which these clauses are being executed. Even the return to Zion of our own days is included in these clauses of the covenant. Over and over again in Scripture, God declares through the prophets that even if Israel is sinful and unfaithful, God will remain faithful to His covenants and accomplish His will and plan with and through Israel. So if the covenant is still in effect, to ignore Yom Kippur is to sin against the covenant. In times past when things were not so well understood, we could understand that God would overlook our lapse, but in these last days when a better understanding of Scripture is at hand, how can we expect God to forgive a deliberate violation of one of the seven main appointed times of His covenant. No, as a member of the covenant, the Day of Atonement is given to me and our whole nation to keep.

Remembering the Atonement

Secondly, as a Messianic Jew, i have been atoned for by the gracious atoning work of the Messiah. That in itself is sufficient reason to observe the Day of Atonement. But more than that. As a believer in Yeshua, the fact is that i continue to sin - in spite of the fact that i have been atoned for my sins and that at a terrible cost of personal suffering and agony by the Messiah on a Roman Cross. This sad and miserable fact is sufficient reason for me to humble myself and afflict my soul in fasting and mourning at least one day of the year and that at the appointed time given to our people by God. God in His grace surrounds us with things and events to induce us to repentance and holiness, and one of these is the Day of Atonement. If i pay

attention to the confessional that is recited at Kol Nidre, I have to confess that many of the sins listed are ones of which I have been guilty, especially sins involving the tongue and the lips. I feel that it is a gracious opportunity to confess and apologize before the Lord my failure, determine in my heart to do all that I can to avoid repeating these mistakes again and pray the Lord's help by His spirit to enable me to overcome. As to the idea that by fasting and praying on the Day of Atonement I can obtain atonement, it is absurd. The Day of Atonement never provided atonement to the individual Israelite. Nor was it ever possible that the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. Rather we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of the Messiah Yeshua once for all time. Notwithstanding this every believer in Yeshua will give an answer to Him at the Judgement seat of the Messiah for every un-confessed sin. The day of Atonement provides me with one more opportunity to confess my sin before the Lord and receive His forgiveness by virtue of the atoning work of the Messiah. Of course I can do that at any time, but certainly I should do it on the Day of Atonement.

Mindful of those who do not have the Atonement

Thirdly, I am surrounded by people of my own nation who do not have the atonement provided by God in the Messiah because of their unbelief. I feel that on the day of Atonement of all days of the year, it is the opportunity to fast and pray before the Lord on behalf of those who are lost and perishing all about me. Of course I can and do pray that way many times. But on Yom Kippur I am impressed with the fact that Jewish people all about me are fasting and praying in a hopeless effort to tip the balance of judgment in their favor by amassing good works and prayers. This fact is heart rending and for me a clear reason to humble myself before the Lord in prayer and fasting. There is no better day of the year given to our people by God for fasting and praying for the atonement of our people and individual Jewish people than the Day of Atonement.

The Testimony of the Day of Atonement

My observance of the Day of Atonement with fasting and praying on that day provides a powerful and penetrating element to my proclamation of the Gospel of Yeshua to my people. I don't observe the day of Atonement in order to be a testimony but rather for the points listed above. But the fact that I do observe the Day of Atonement out of conviction serves as an augment to my testimony to my own people. The Day of Atonement and the Ten days of Awe preceding provide a powerful contextual statement of the reality of sin in the life of our people and our nation. No other nation or religious community dedicates 10 days of the year to think about sin, yet in Israel it is a deeply established element of our culture. In the world today and no less among the people of Israel today there is a wide spread and deeply engrained denial of sin. This psychological defense mechanism is even more deeply rooted because people do not have a sure way of expiation (atonement) for their sin. I as a Messianic Jew can point out that on Yom Kippur we all say "We have sinned, we have transgressed, we have committed iniquity..." and that God has not left Israel bereft and without His appointed means of Atonement, the Messiah's offering up of His own eternal soul to atone for the sins of our people.

Prophetic Significance of the Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement speaks of that day in the future when all Israel will be saved. As it is written:

And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication, so they will look to me whom they have pierced ... On that day their will be great morning in Jerusalem.

The seven appointed times listed in Leviticus 23 are a symbolic and prophetic outline of the work of God's salvation in the Nation of Israel, and for the whole world. Of all these appointed times, the long awaited great day of national salvation in which all of Israel who survive to that day will be saved - on the Day of Atonement.

Biblical Understanding of the place of the Day of Atonement

The classical hermeneutical framework of the Christian Church has been that Christ has inaugurated the New Covenant which supercedes the Old Covenant and that the Church replaces the people of Israel as the people of God. This hermeneutical framework of supersessionism has consistently lead believers in Yeshua to regard the Covenant that God has made with the people of Israel as being obsolete and void. During this century, Jewish believers have been slowly finding their way back into an understanding of their covenant relationship with God and with the people of Israel. The New Covenant does not replace the covenant of God, rather it enables its members to abide by God's Torah by virtue of God's Torah being written on the tables of our heart, it provides for a saving knowledge of the LORD, and it provides forgiveness of sin for the believer. By virtue of being a member of the New Covenant, i am able to observe and keep in a real and spiritual way the Day of Atonement.

If you would like to write to the author, please send an email to ykugler@actcom.co.il