

Yeshua and the Olympics

Message given on Kol Nidre, the Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) Evening Service

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Tonight, many Jewish people around the world are starting a fast, believing this is what the Lord would have them to do based on His instruction in Leviticus 23:27 that they are to afflict their souls on this day. But as we study the Scriptures further, we will see that what is most important about this day is not what we do, but what He has done. We will find that atonement was never based on the righteousness of the people, and can only be obtained based on trusting in the Lord.

The Jewish people also believe that on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, each Jewish person's destiny in the world to come is sealed, should they die in the coming year. They are hoping that they will be deemed as having been good enough to have their names written in the Book of Life. We, as believers, know that our goodness comes not from our works, but the work of Messiah *Yeshua* on our behalf. We believe that the Scriptures reveal that the only way anyone can be seen as righteous enough to be inscribed in the Book of Life is through trusting in the way that God has provided, through the sacrifice of His son, Messiah *Yeshua*.

So as we observe this solemn day, as believers in *Yeshua*, we also have feelings of joy, knowing that we have received atonement for our sins, that we have experienced God's mercy and His grace, though we have done nothing to deserve any of it. We also have received the gift of eternal life, as Messiah's righteousness is imparted to us, such that after we die, we can spend the rest of eternity in the presence of a Holy and Righteous God.

As I mentioned earlier, many Jewish people will fast on this day. But what about us? Do we need to fast on this day? And even if we don't need to, should we? In other words, as Messianic believers, we might say on this night, with apologies to Shakespeare, "To fast or not to fast, that is the question."

Let's look at why the Jewish people fast on *Yom Kippur* to begin with. According to Leviticus 23:27, the Israelites were instructed *v'initem naf'shotachem*, translated as "and you shall afflict your souls," or some translations say "humble yourselves" or "deny yourselves."

And based on two verses in Isaiah 58, the Rabbis have concluded that fasting is the primary means of afflicting the soul. And here, we have no reason to disagree with the Rabbis.

Let's turn to Isaiah chapter 58. And I will read all verses tonight from the Hebrew Scriptures using a traditional Jewish Bible that we had in our home when I was growing up, the 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation. In verse 3, the Israelites are complaining that the Lord has not noticed their fasting. They ask, "Wherefore have we fasted, and Thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and Thou takest no knowledge?"

In verse 5, the Lord responds using the same terminology. "Is such the fast that I have chosen? the day for a man to afflict his soul?" In both verses, we find fasting and afflicting the soul used in a parallelism, a form of Hebrew poetry where a meaning is repeated, but using different words. As a result of this parallelism, the Rabbis have concluded that afflicting the soul is primarily accomplished through fasting.

The Lord responds to their complaint, "Behold, in the day of your fast ye pursue your business; and exact all your labours." In other words, they may appear to be fasting outwardly for the right reasons, but the Lord sees that they have continued to pursue earthly desires. In verse 4, the result is strife and contention. The Lord tells them, "Ye fast not this day so as to make your voice to be heard on High." Our purpose in fasting should be to deny our physical needs in order that we might focus in an even greater way on God's eternal truths, so that our voice might be heard on high. When we fast, we are supposed to be more concerned about His needs than ours.

In Isaiah 58:5, the Lord condemns one who bows his head low and spreads sackcloth and ashes under him while fasting. This is a big show for others to note his humility. But 1 Samuel 16:7 tells us that man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart. And here, the Lord clearly does not like what He sees. *Yeshua* said something similar in Matthew 6:16-18:

"Now when you fast, don't go around looking miserable, like the hypocrites. They make sour faces so that people will know they are fasting. Yes, I tell you, they have their reward already. But when you fast, wash your face, and groom yourself, so that no one will know you are fasting – except your Father, who is with you in secret. Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Fasting without a sad countenance should be easier for us as believers. Unlike what the Rabbis would have the Jewish people believe, we should be greatly relieved to know that our fate in the world to come is not based on our goodness.

Because Psalms 14:3 & 52:4 tell us that there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Jeremiah 17:9 describes the human heart as deceitful above all things. In Isaiah 64:5, our righteousnesses are described as being like a polluted garment.

And if our fate is based on our goodness, how do we know if we have been good enough? Who keeps score? Us? Are we really able to be objective with our eternal destiny hanging in the balance? How crazed would we be? How much margin for error would we like to have? Maybe God is keeping score. If He is, wouldn't it be nice if He would at least let us know where we stand? Maybe I'm one good deed short. That's something I'd like to know, wouldn't you? Actually He has, he has told us that all have sinned and fallen short of His standard of righteousness, fallen short of his glory. But he also provides His son that we might have forgiveness of sin, that we might be reconciled to Him.

When the Temple stood, our Jewish people knew where they stood with regard to atonement. The Talmud records that a red sash would be tied to the door of the Temple on *Yom Kippur*. When atonement was granted, the sash would turn white based on Isaiah 1:18, which says:

“Come now and let us reason together saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

The Talmud, in *Yoma* 39b, also records that in the 40 years prior to the destruction of the Temple, from around 30 AD onward, the sash failed to turn from red to white. Can you imagine what that must have been like?

The Olympics are coming again soon. It's supposed to be simply good clean competition, but the material rewards come mostly from winning a gold medal. And sometimes, a competitor misses out on a medal by a mere 1000th of a point. They will have to wait 4 years for another chance at an Olympic medal in the same event. And some will never get a second chance. They may get injured or not make the team the next time.

Now, think about your eternal destiny being based on God keeping score and you don't even know for sure what your score is. Even if you go to synagogue on the High Holy Days and say all the prayers, how do you know when you walk out the door that your score is high enough for a medal.

Continuing the Olympics analogy, the Scriptures I mentioned earlier mean that when it comes to goodness, we all have a score closer to 0 than the perfect 10's that are required to meet God's standard of righteousness.

But the good news is that an all-knowing God already knows that no matter how hard any of us try, we cannot give a performance that would deserve all 10's. So He provided His son, *Yeshua*, who always gets a perfect score, and is even willing to trade scores, taking our score and giving us His. So in God's sight, because of what *Yeshua* has done, we end up with the gold medal.

OK, let's leave the Olympics and head back to Isaiah 58.

Verses 6&7 of Isaiah 58 describe the fast that the Lord would choose:

“Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him, and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?”

God is saying that when we fast, our concern should not be for ourselves, but for others. We are to show concern for those who are struggling financially, providing bread for the hungry, shelter for those who have no home, and clothing for those who have none.

Now that we have a better understanding of how the Lord would have us to fast, we still have the issue of should we, as believers, fast on this day? From the parallelism of Isaiah 58, fasting is how our people Israel, afflict their souls, something the King of the Universe tells His people to do for one 24-hour period out of the entire year.

As part of the commonwealth of Israel, either by physical circumcision, or through Spiritual circumcision, the circumcision of the heart, I believe these instructions are meaningful for us as well because the Lord instructs his people in Leviticus 23:31 that the Day of Atonement is to be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.

We may also fast and pray to intercede on this day on behalf of the Jewish people, asking the Lord to forgive the sins of that nation. Applying similar principles, we can fast and pray on this day for the sins of our nation as well.

We also fast as believers because of our individual sins, the sins we have committed in the past, the sins we commit today, and the sins we will commit in the future that make *Yeshua's* sacrifice necessary.

In Judaism, we fast on this day by abstaining completely from food and drink. Some people cannot fast because of certain health issues and Jewish children are not expected to fast before the age of 13. But even in these cases, it might be possible to skip one meal or avoid desserts or drink water instead of flavored drinks. This is what we would encourage our children to do when they were younger, a denial of some sort, so that they might begin to understand that there is more to this life than just satisfying our fleshly needs.

We should also note that this day is called in the Hebrew of Leviticus 23, *Yom HaKippurim*, or *Yom Kippurim*. *Kippurim* literally means Atonements, plural. And this is consistent with what we find in the day of atonements ritual specified in Leviticus 16. Atonements are obtained for the High Priest and his family, then for the Holy Place, the tent of meeting, and the altar. Finally, atonement is sought for the children of Israel.

In Leviticus chapter 23, we find instructions for all of the Lord's *moadim*, a Hebrew word which is sometimes translated as "feasts" but really means "appointed times." After all, how can *Yom Kippur*, a day of fasting, be called a feast? I like to refer to the *moadim* of Leviticus 23 as divine appointments, special days that the Creator of the Universe has established to meet with His covenant people.

There are three additional instructions in Leviticus 23 concerning the Day of Atonements. There is to be a *mik'ra kodesh*, a holy convocation. Convocation is a fancy word for a time of coming together or meeting. *Mik'ra* also comes from the word *karah*, which means “to call.” We are called to these divine appointments and we are to observe them as a community, just like Israel.

We also find instructions in Leviticus 23 that an offering made by fire was to be brought to the Lord. Today, we bring our offerings to the Lord usually in the form of money, because that is what we use today to obtain our food, clothing, and shelter. *Yeshua* tells us in Matthew 6:33 to seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, take care of the spiritual first, and the Lord will provide for our basic physical needs.

Finally, we find 3 times in Leviticus 23 that work is prohibited on this day. Leviticus 23:28 tells us no work is to be done. Verse 31 says no manner of work is to be done and verse 32 says it is to be a Sabbath of solemn rest.

In Jewish tradition, *Yom Kippur* is observed with great solemnity as our people believe their fate is sealed on this day, should they die in the coming year. According to the Rabbis, a preliminary determination is made on *Rosh Hashanah* as to the very few who are deemed to have sufficient righteousness that their names are immediately inscribed in the Book of Life. But the verdict is not finalized until *Yom Kippur*, as most of the people need 10 more days to try to tip the balance in their favor as they seek to right their wrongs and to do good works including giving to charity. Then on *Yom Kippur*, they fast and pray, hoping that a favorable verdict has been rendered for them as the books are closed, the books that determine their fate should they die in the coming year.

But there is nothing in the Scriptures to suggest that we can spend eternity in the presence of a Holy and Righteous God based on righting our wrongs or doing good deeds or giving to charity. There's nothing wrong with doing these things, but they will not affect our salvation. We've already talked about what the Hebrew Scriptures say about our goodness and the New Covenant Scriptures tell us that while we were yet sinners, Messiah died for us; that without faith, it is impossible to please God; that the flesh, our selfish desires, completely oppose the things of God.

As we search the Scriptures, we do, however, find that Books are mentioned. The Book of Life is mentioned a number of times, including Psalm 69:29, where David writes concerning his enemies, “Let them be blotted out of the Book of the Living, and not be written with the righteous.”

Revelation 20:15 says concerning the final judgment, that anyone not written in the Book of Life will be cast into the Lake of Fire. This is consistent with Daniel 12:2, which says, “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to reproaches and everlasting abhorrence.” The Jewish Scriptures teach life after death, and they also teach two very different possible outcomes for how we will spend the rest of eternity. We believe that those who will awake to everlasting life are those who have their names written in the Book of Life. And we believe that it is only by accepting *Yeshua*'s atoning death as a blood sacrifice offered up on our behalf that our names are written in the Book of life.

The adversary, *HaSatan*, has succeeded in creating confusion concerning the appointed times. The Rabbis would have our Jewish people believe that their eternal destiny is decreed on the Feast of Trumpets and finalized on the Day of Atonement. Many in the church are convinced that these special days are not meaningful for them, that they are for the Jewish people only. But these divine appointments belong to the Lord, and He has established them between Himself and all who would put their trust in Him.

In Judaism, the Day of Atonement is observed in the synagogue with an evening service called *Kol Nidre* at the onset, as we are doing here, and services throughout the following day. As we said earlier, *Kol Nidre* means “all vows,” and is a renunciation of vows that our Jewish people do not want to have held against them as their eternal destiny is about to be sealed. Unfortunately, some of our people have been threatened with torture and/or death in the past for refusing to renounce their Jewish identity. Today, some well-meaning believers suggest this is what Jewish believers still should do, but we strongly disagree with this view.

And here's one reason why. I was asked to speak to a Jewish believer several years ago. When I first met him, he was 100 years old. He was concerned that by accepting Jesus, he had become a Christian, and had forsaken his Jewish identity. His family was concerned that he was about to renounce his Christianity because as he would tell them, “I was born a Jew and I will die a Jew.”

Both he and his family seemed greatly relieved as I explained that he did not have to choose between his Jewishness and his belief in *Yeshua*, the Jewish Messiah. So he came to understand that he did not need to renounce his vow to follow *Yeshua*. And two years later, I was asked to share this story at his funeral and to say the *Kaddish*, the traditional Jewish funeral prayer, as his believing family embraced his and their Jewishness.

For the High Holy Days, we redecorate the synagogue. We replace the dark fabrics in the sanctuary with white, as we have done with our *Torah* and the Ark. On *Yom Kippur*, the leaders often wear white, and in some congregations, the people also wear white. Wearing white is also connected with the garments that the high priest wore on this day and with Isaiah 1:18 as we talked about earlier with the red sash turning white.

It is a blessing that many believers are taking more of an interest in the Lord's appointed times, and we can help them with the benefit of our understanding, but we should not be telling others that they have to observe these times. Colossians 2:16 tells us, "So don't let anyone pass judgment on you in connection with eating and drinking, or in regard to a festival, or a new moon, or a Sabbath." It is my belief that this verse means we should not be judged by others as to how we observe these special times, and we should not judge others for how they observe them or even whether or not they choose to observe them.

I hope that we will make time to meet with the Lord during these divine appointments that He has established for us. May He be glorified through our trusting obedience. May we be light to a lost and dying world as we acknowledge him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. May our hunger on this day be a hunger to please our Heavenly Father, to know Him better, and to walk more closely with Him in the days ahead.