

I have a confession: I am terrible at keeping my car clean. Every so often I pull the car out of the garage and give it a thorough cleaning. Like any good Californian, I keep an emergency kit in my car in case of earthquake or fire — but I am really bad about cleaning and updating it. During my most recent cleaning I discovered that my emergency kit still contained diapers and long-dried-out baby wipes — my children are now 15, 17 and 19 years old. It seems that the only emergency I was equipped for was one that included time travel. I enjoy having a clean car, but I am not a big fan of doing the actual cleaning.

However, cleaning is what today is all about. Yom Kippur does not actually mean “Day of Atonement.” We often translate it that way: “yom” as day and “ki-PUR” as atonement... or if we are trying to be clever as a “Day of At-One-Ment” — but that’s not really what it means.

In the Torah the word “ka-PER” is a verb and it means to clean, to purge or to purify. Yom HaKippurim — what this day is called in the Torah — means a Day of Purifications, or a Day of Many Cleanings.

In the Torah, the purpose of Yom Hakippurim is to *ka-PER* — to clean and purify both the physical space in the Temple and the community. Our ancient ancestors believed that over the course of the year the transgressions of the community would build up and contaminate not only the holy space, but the items in it as well: the ark, the curtain, the sacred objects. Intentional as well as accidental transgressions were believed to defile the Temple in the same way that dirt and dust build up. Our ancestors believed that the Temple was the place where God dwelled, and so it was vital to decontaminate the space to make room for God. (1)

If we look in Leviticus where the rituals for Yom Kippur in Biblical times are described, we are told of three cleaning rituals that make up Yom HaKippurim: the physical cleaning and purification of the Holy of Holies (the inner sanctum of the Temple) that was done by the priests, the removing of sin from the community through the scapegoat, and the purification of the people through fasting and refraining from regular work. These three tasks are the rituals and cleanings that create a pure place for God to dwell.

We are an ancient, ancient people, and while our rituals for Yom Kippur are nothing like what is described in Leviticus, we still believe that our ancient practices have meaning and relevance

for us today. So if we are no longer cleaning out the Temple, how can we understand these rituals today? Since the destruction of the Temple, all Judaism is Reform Judaism, and Jews have replaced animal sacrifices with words of prayer... which brings us to our worship today, filled with prayer and song.

But we still recognize this desire to free ourselves and our community from sin; to spiritually clean the detritus from our souls and to wash away our wrongdoing. Today, the only one of the three *kippurim* that we still do as described in the Torah is purification through fasting and refraining from work. In ancient times, most of the rituals were performed by priests on behalf of the people, but fasting and not working was the part of the ritual that individuals were responsible for and this is the method they used to ka-PER, to purify, themselves. We often think that fasting and self denial — not wearing leather shoes, avoiding bathing or wearing perfume, and abstaining from intimate relations on Yom Kippur — is a punishment of sorts and how we atone for our sins, but I suggest to you that this is not about self-affliction.

Dr. David Ariel teaches that these are the same rituals of purification that the Israelites performed in order to prepare to receive Torah at Mount Sinai. He writes, “It is as if someone catalogued the specific actions that must take place in preparation for hearing God directly.” Ariel writes that rather than seeing these prohibitions as rituals of repentance, guilt, or self-affliction, we should see them as mystical rituals of preparation for hearing the Divine voice. “And,” he continues, “seen in this light, these rituals are pathways to a joyful outcome.” (2) We can reframe our fast so that it is not a punishment, but instead a way for us to make a spiritual connection. We fast, in whatever way we are able, because this is how we focus ourselves to be ready to receive Torah; we choose to take our focus off our bodies and put it on our spiritual needs. We remind ourselves that we have the self-control and self-discipline to choose not to give in to every craving. It’s not that we don’t feel that desire; it is that we can make choices based on our values (3) — and if we can do it today, we can continue to use our willpower all year long. Our self-denial is not about punishing ourselves; we are opening ourselves up to hearing the still small voice within us, guiding us to do better.

The other cleanings for Yom Kippur were specific to the Temple in ancient Jerusalem and were performed by the priests. The cleaning of the Holy of Holies was not just about sweeping up dirt and ash and repairing damaged ritual objects; there was also a spiritual cleaning to decontaminate the Temple and its objects from ritual impurity. Part of the way the priests

cleaned the ancient Temple was by sprinkling blood from specific sacrifices seven times on the curtain and on the altar. This is not anything remotely like what we would consider cleaning today, in fact it is the opposite and it is not as easy to see how this applies to our lives and our worship here today.

Rabbi Edward Greenstein suggests that the ancient notion of purifying the Holy of Holies is worth keeping in mind. On Yom Kippur we must clean *our own* “Holy of Holies” — our innermost heart. We must scrutinize our own lives carefully so that we do not allow unwanted behavior to become so rigid that it will be too difficult to undo. We must repair injured relationships before they become permanently damaged. (4) We must undo our bad habits before we become set in our ways. We are doing a different kind of spiritual cleaning than our ancestors did, but it is just as important.

The Jewish model for this is called a “cheshbon nefesh” — an accounting of our souls — but maybe it is easier to think of this kind of spiritual housecleaning in the same terms that professional organizers suggest we use to clean our closets or garages: take everything out of your car or your closet, evaluate each item, and sort them into three categories: the things we want to get rid of, the things that need repair, and the things we want to keep. In ancient times on Yom Kippur the High Priest would lay hands on a goat and place all the sins of the community on the goat’s head and then send it out into the wilderness, away from the community, ridding us of our sins. This is where we get the concept of the scapegoat, and, like that ancient goat sent to the wilderness, we should toss out our sins.

We need to get rid of our bad habits and take out our mental garbage. We need to let go of old resentments and hurts. We need to banish our meanness, cruelty and misplaced anger. We need to let unhealthy relationships go. We need to throw out the fears that hold us back. Letting go is not always easy; we tend to cling to our resentments. But holding on to resentment and grudges often only hurts yourself. We need to let go of the things that are no longer serving us, like unnecessary guilt. Rabbis ancient and modern have understood that it is for our own sake that we should do so. Rabbi Rami Shapiro teaches that after you have done t’shuvah, after you have used the feeling of guilt as a catalyst to make amends and change, on Yom Kippur you let it go. Shapiro also explains how to do this: “The next time the memory arises and threatens to overwhelm you with guilt, don’t give yourself over to the drama. Simply remind yourself that Yes, I did that. I won’t do it again.” (5) This is part of the forgiveness on

Yom Kippur: forgiving ourselves, and letting go of the things that are holding us back from growth.

T'shuvah can help us repair damaged relationships, but what about the other kinds of self-repair that we need to make? You probably already know some of the things about yourself you want to change — the things you know could fix and do better — but our self-reflection on Yom Kippur demands that we look deeper, that we recognize the things that are broken so we can fix them. The vidui, the confessionals that we repeat over and over today, list our sins and help us acknowledge that we all have work to do. Dr. Susan David, author of *Emotional Agility*, teaches that “One of the great paradoxes of human experience is that we can’t change ourselves or our circumstances until we accept what exists right now. Acceptance is a prerequisite for change.” (6) Our liturgy helps us to bring our broken parts into the light and is like a to-do list of what we need to repair to become whole again.

Some of these sins are the worst things about us and it is painful to acknowledge that we have done them. There is an anonymity in group confession that makes it easier for us to admit that we are guilty of some of the terrible sins on that list. We have to acknowledge that what we have done wrong, so that we can change. We have to admit the ways we are broken so we can fix ourselves.

There is a Japanese practice called kintsugi, which involves repairing broken pottery with gold, so that the repairs add to the beauty of the original work; the newly-repaired piece is considered even more beautiful than the pristine original. There is grace and beauty in the repairs; you can see the care in reconnecting the pieces and in filling in the inevitable missing shards with precious metal. We have all missed the mark, but on this day, we repair our souls, we open our eyes to see the purity of our souls; and we find that the repairs only add to our beauty.

And finally, as we engage in ka-PER we need to recognize what to keep. There is a midrash which teaches that someday in the future, even if we no longer have need for any other prayers, our prayers of gratitude will never cease. (7) From this we learn that it is just as important to remember the things we got right this year as it is to list the things we got wrong. How do we know what to keep? Think about the things that you are grateful for, the things that

fill your heart with joy. The family and friends who support you and the people who you want to thank just for being in your life. Just as when we clean, we find things we might have thought we lost — we can rediscover our passion, our energy, our sense of wonder. We can remember the old friends we want to reconnect with. We can recover the parts of our younger selves that we miss and thought were buried under the day-to-day detritus. Now is the time to remember the best parts of ourselves and to let our best qualities shine. We can also do the same for our loved ones, reminding ourselves of the things that made us fall in love with our spouses in the first place and letting ourselves feel that “new love” feeling again, seeing their best selves that have also been buried under the day-to-day of errands and chores and work. We can also do the same for our friends — remembering why we became friends to begin with and we can look for the best in our children.

You should hold on to the things that matter — the values that you continue to hold dear. If you are not sure what those are, Dr. David suggests, “answer a single question each night before bed: ‘As I look back on today, what did I do that was actually worth my time?’ This isn’t about what you liked or didn’t like doing on a particular day; it’s about what you found to be valuable.” (8) Now is the time to clarify our values are make them a priority.

We should hang on to our compassion, our ability to see the good in others and our sense of humor. You should hang on to the hard work you have done to be a better person this year than last. Think of all the good you have done in the past year, all the acts of generosity, all the time you offered love and support, all the times you treated others with care and respect, honored your commitments and kept your promises, all the ways you cared for the earth, forgave others, fed the hungry, took care of your health, encouraged others, and all the times you acted with honesty and integrity. (9) Part of the work you should be doing today is to remember all of the good — all of the things you got right, and all of the times you hit the mark you were aiming for — so you can continue to do it all year long.

We should not end this day hungry and defeated and weighed down by all of the times we missed the mark in the past year. Yom Kippur is a good day to sort our priorities and to decide what to keep, what to toss and what to repair; to let the power of this day wash us clean, so we end this long day with the blowing of the shofar, refreshed and ready to change.

Our tradition sees this kind of intense spiritual cleaning as a kind of heart transplant. Ezekiel teaches that God says, “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean: I will cleanse you from all your uncleanness. And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh.” (10)

Today we confess; we open our hearts to the pain of our past actions and we begin to heal. We clear out the things that are dragging us down, and we repair the things that need repair and we reconnect with our most cherished values. And it is as if we can become new and whole again.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Simeon Ben Gamaliel wrote that “Yom Kippur is the most joyous day of the year because it is a day of forgiveness and pardon.” Yom Kippur gives us each a fresh start, and Rabbi Gamaliel saw the joy and the relief in starting over, in letting go of the past and emerging fresh and clean by the end of this long day.

May this Yom Kippur be a day filled with the joy of pardon and renewal. May you let go of the things keeping you in the past. May you fill in all the cracks and empty spaces and see the beauty in the repairs. May you rediscover your favorite things about yourself and your loved ones. May we all find the joy that is at the center of this day of cleaning – and may we emerge from it refreshed and ready for the year ahead.

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## Notes

1. <http://thetorah.com/yom-ha-kippurim-the-biblical-significance/>
2. <https://www.ariellelearning.com/the-mystic-drama-of-yom-kippur/>
3. David, Susan. *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life* (p. 80). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.
4. *Kol Haneshamah* p. 19.
5. Rami Shapiro - in *Mishkan HaNefesh for Yom Kippur*, p. 385.

6. David, p. 71.
7. Vayikra Rabbah 9:7.
8. David, p. 123.
9. This list of positives is inspired by *Mishkan HaNefesh*, p. 313.
10. Ezekiel 36:25-26.