

A SELECTION FROM THE SERVICE FOR YOM KIPPUR

Historical Perspective

The traditional, rabbinic view of the High Holidays is steeped in awe and terror. An omnipotent Yahweh undertakes an annual judgment of humanity, especially of the Jews, rendering an initial verdict on Rosh HaShanah and a final verdict on Yom Kippur.

In the face of Yahweh's terrifying presence and power, the safest human response was to appear as humble as possible. Appeasement ceremonies, including prayer, fasting, wearing torn clothing, weeping and breast-beating, were all ways to supplicate before God.

The Enlightenment undermined the old belief framework of the High Holidays and weakened the overwhelming sense of dread. Notions of divine record-keeping and supernatural rewards and punishments were questioned by the new rational inquiry.

Modern-thinking Jews revised their prayers and dispensed with some rituals entirely. They saw *kapparot*, the sacrificial slaughter of chickens, as an archaic practice unworthy of repetition. *Kol Nidre*, which excused Jews from carrying out promises, became a moral problem. *Tashlich*, the symbolic throwing of one's sins into a body of moving water, was also deemed less compelling, and fasting, likewise, seemed an unnecessary deprivation.

Some secular Jews regarded any celebration of the holidays as too religious and were likely to neglect them altogether. What they failed to realize is that the High Holidays, precisely because they are personal rather than national, have a special significance for humanistic Jews.

If human judgment replaces divine judgment, and if human power becomes the alternative to divine power, then Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur become perfect vehicles for celebrating a humanistic philosophy of life. It is appropriate for Jews to reflect on the moral quality of their behavior and to make decisions to improve it. It is also appropriate to revitalize rituals, customs, and ceremonies when they enhance our observance and celebration and are compatible with our values and philosophy.

Introspection and goal setting are traditional. They are also humanistic. A humanistic Yom Kippur allows us to seek and offer forgiveness among ourselves. It provides the occasion to re-state our belief in personal, human responsibility for our lives, behavior, and destiny. The High Holidays are not a punishment or threat, but an opportunity. It is up to us to take advantage of them.