YH23 - Yom Kippur

The information from this session comes from The Book of Jewish Holidays by Michael Strassfeld Yom Kippur falls on the tenth of Tishri and brings to a close the ten days of repentance begun with Rosh Hashanah. In temple times, Yom Kippur was a day of elaborate cultic rituals to effect the atonement of the people. On this day, God's special name was pronounced by the high priest before the assembled masses in the temple courtyards. Yom Kippur has continued to be the day of atonement, though its setting has shifted from the temple to the synagogue, where we spend almost the whole day in prayer. To aid in focusing our minds on this task of repentance and atonement, we are told to afflict our bodies through fasting and other forms of abstinence. We are meant to feel that the natural course of our existence is suspended on this day while our lives, or at least the quality of our lives, hang in the balance. We are to face what a permanent suspension of existence &ndash: death &ndash: would be like, and thus to learn how to better embrace life. Even more exclusively than on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur&rsquo:s ritual is located in the synagogue. The day is structures around its services, which are five in number – one more than is usual for a Shabbat or festival. They are: Kol Nidrei – the evening service named after its opening prayer Shacharit – the morning service Musaf – the additional service, which includes the martyrology and the avodah – a description of the temple service Minchah – the afternoon service, including a reading of the Book of Jonah Neilah – the service that is unique in the liturgical calendar and concludes Yom Kippur Besides the services, Yom Kippur is also marked by a series of five restrictions, or afflictions, regarded by the rabbis as commanded by the Torah: (1) no eating or drinking; (2) no bathing; (3) no anointing of the body with oil; (4) no wearing of leather (shoes); (5) no sexual relations. All of these activities were considered physically pleasurable. To go barefoot or wear nonleather shoes was believed by the rabbis to be much less comfortable than wearing leather shoes. As the most solemn day of the year, Yom Kippur is treated more like Shabbat than like a festival with respect to the laws prohibiting work. Therefore, carrying, using fire, and cooking are not permitted on Yom Kippur (unlike other festivals), for the day is called Shabbat shabbaton – a Sabbath of complete rest (see Lev. 23:32). An old custom is kapparot (atonements), a form of scapegoat ceremony that involved taking a rooster or hen and twirling it around your head while reciting a prayer asking that this chicken be killed in your stead. The chicken was then slaughtered and given to the poor (who presumably could make use of your sins, if not the food). This ceremony evoked much rabbinic opposition, especially to its magical overtones (e.g. a white rooster was recommended as particularly efficacious for kapparot). It still survives, though most of those who observe it today have substituted money in a handkerchief for a chicken. What do you think of this ritual? for Yom Kippur is to keep in mind what the day is about – teshuvah (repentance). We should approach Yom Kippur as the end of a long process of introspection leading to change. We should already have begun a turning away from our old ways and a turning toward God, a turning toward the other people in our lives, and, most important, a turning toward our true selves. Amid the imagery of doom, judgment, and sin, it is important to remember that Yom Kippur is not just a turning away from the negative but is a positive turning as well. This process should have begun in Elul and continued at a faster pace through Rosh Hashanah and the ten days of repentance. Yom Kippur's purpose is to give us a sense that time is running out. Yom Kippur stands at the end of the race, urging us to make even greater efforts to cross the finish line before either time or our strength (commitment) runs out. As such, some people have found it useful to see the Yom Kippur experience as a brush with our own mortality – with death. Hence we wear a white kittel, a robe that will serve as our shroud one day, and we abstain from those routine physical activities that keep us alive – eating and drinking. On this day, we confront that which we spend most of our lives denying – that we shall die and be no more. Yom Kippur awakens us to lead our lives more fully because we come face-toface with and thus must acknowledge our own mortality. Another image of Yom Kippur is that of making a journey, an experience we share with our fellow travelers – that is, the others we will be praying with during the next twentyfour hours. Some people like to begin this journey through time, if not space, with a prayer for a successful journey. Each of us will engage in this process in ways best suited for us. Since on Yom Kippur we do not atone for sins between us and our fellow humans, we should try to obtain forgiveness before the holiday from all those we might have hurt in the Yom Kippur is supposed to lead from thought to deed – from looking at ourselves to transforming the way we act. Personal change is to lead us to work for social justice in the world, not to an ascetic withdrawal from the impurities of the world. Projects in support of tzedakah and social justice should be given extra attention at this time of Some groups gather to study if there is a break between services in the afternoon of Yom Kippur. The study is related to the themes of Yom Kippur. Alternatively, some groups gather to study after a break following Kol Nidrei. Since Kol Nidrei is over relatively early, there is a whole evening during which it is hard to find something appropriate to do. A study session fills the time with a worthwhile activity. What are the positive and negative points of Yom Kippur for you?