

For some people it's a surprise: the mishnah teaches that Yom Kippur is one of the two most joyful days of the year.

At the end of Tractate Taanit,

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel said: There were no days of joy in Israel greater than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur. On these days the daughters of Jerusalem would go out in borrowed white garments and dance in the vineyards.

They would call to the men and say “look for a woman with good values.”

Yom Kippur seems an odd choice for a day of love and celebration. How did this seemingly somber day become one of the most joyful days of the year?

The truth is, Yom Kippur is not as somber as it might seem. While we may be terrified to stand before God and consider our wrongs in view of our destiny, Yom Kippur is actually a day of second chances and unbelievable grace.

There could be no more joyful thing than the opportunity to be forgiven for all of our sins and to get a brand new slate. And as a people, that is exactly what happens on Yom Kippur.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, the Rav, discusses the joy of Yom Kippur in his book *Al Hatshuvah, On Repentance*. He points to the difference between the Amidah that an individual says and the one that is said as the Repetition of the Amidah. When we say the Amidah privately, we are terrified and humble. We put the list of our sins at the very end of our prayers. But when the *chazan*, the cantor, leads the repetition of the Amidah, we sing our lists of sins proudly and with joy. The rabbis put the list of sins (*Ashmanu*) right into the center of the prayer, right after *Anu Amecha*. We are Your people, You are our shepherd. When we stand together as a community before God, we can be confident that any sins we bring before God will be forgiven.

The break-the-fast at the end of the day is another clue to the celebration of the day. It is designed to be a joyful event. The meal that ends the fast of Yom Kippur is in direct contrast to the breakfast at the end of Tisha B'Av, the day of mourning. Of course, at the end of Tisha B'Av, we are pleased to be eating again, but Jewish law demands that we have a simple meal: one dish, lasagna, mac and cheese. But the meal at the end of Yom Kippur needs to be made up of more than one dish. We're obligated to have a fabulous meal at the end of the day: lox, whitefish, kugel, chocolate cakes, whatever we love.

Yom Kippur can be terrifying. Singing *Unetaneh Tokef*, “*mi yichyeh umi yamut*” “who shall live and who shall die” is no light matter. We come so close to our own mortality, and by the end of the day, we are given a brand new lease on life. It’s as if we are reborn.

Think about the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, who enters the Holy of Holies on this one day of the year to say God’s holiest four-letter name. He enters terrified, with a red string tied around his ankle, so he can be pulled out of the Holy of Holies by his ankle, should anything happen to him. For the Kohen Gadol, Yom Kippur is a life or death situation. He himself is like the sacrificial goat. When he survives the day, he comes out so deeply relieved and certain that the people have been granted atonement. We have been granted new life.

So the feast that we hold for our family and friends is a parallel to the party that the Kohen Gadol throws when he comes out safe and sound from the Holy of Holies. It’s a feast of deep celebration, a feast of being reborn with a clean slate.

Of course, then, Yom Kippur is a day of joy. It is a day of forgiveness, a day that heralds a brand new life. When we blow the shofar at the end of the day, it is with shouts and song and celebration. To a new year with triumph, atonement and joy!