

# Yom Kippur: You Can Start All Over Again (If You Really Want To)

*Parashat Vayelech*



## Parashat Vayelech

This Shabbat we read Parashat Vayelech. The final weekly Torah portions are read during the High Holidays, and therefore we usually combine lessons and topics related to the appointed times of Tishrei into the study of the weekly Torah portion. In a few days we will fast with all the people of Israel – the fast of Yom Kippur. In Jewish thought, this is the most frightening yet sacred day, the day of judgment.

### The Last Days of Moses

According to Jewish tradition, the story of Vayelech is said to have taken place on the last day of Moses' life. The tradition comes from Moses' statement at the beginning of the parasha:

*“I am now a hundred and twenty years old...” – Deuteronomy 31:2a [NIV]*

In the portion, Moses was commanded to come with Joshua to the opening of the tent of meeting, where the role of being the leader officially transferred over to Joshua.

Inside the tent of meeting, Moses received a prophecy from God. In this prophecy, God told Moses that the children of Israel will stray from the path of the Torah, and that all the evils and curses described in the previous parashot will occur.

Also found in this week's reading is the Song of Moses. After he wrote it, he gathered all the children of Israel together to hear it. This poem is both a prophecy as well as a reminder of what will happen in the future; we will read it in next week's Torah portion.

Moses finished speaking to the people of Israel as well as completed writing the Torah:

*“So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the Levitical priests, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel.” – Deuteronomy 31:9 [NIV]*

## Moses' Great Prophecy

The Torah is not in the heavens, nor is it beyond the sea. It must be close to each of us, so that we as a nation will always remember God and our history as a people. This commandment is private and personal, but at the same time it is also national. It connects us to the people of Israel, the God of Israel, our past, and hopefully to a better future. Of course, this will only occur if we keep the words that Moses wrote in the Torah, about which he warned us again and again.

The words of caution are uttered repeatedly by Moses, with the intent to prevent the people of Israel from sinning. Moses gathered all of the tribes and gave them the Torah, the testimony, the song, and the hope that the warning may succeed in causing the people of Israel, in the present and also in the future, not to sin.

The truth is that Moses knew what would happen; he received it in a prophecy. All of his efforts did not help in the end. The Israelites corrupted themselves and strayed from God and His commandments.

*“For I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn from the way I have commanded you. In days to come, disaster will fall on you because you will do evil in the*

*sight of the Lord and arouse his anger by what your hands have made.” – Deuteronomy 31:29 [NIV]*

Moses was also aware that this was not the end of the story. God would not abandon the people of Israel. After the periods of punishment, rebellion, conquering, enemies, and various exiles, God would eventually reassemble the people of Israel and bring them back to the Land of Promise to try once again.

Will we be prepared to keep the written covenant of God’s Torah this time? Or will we also decide to abandon the Torah? As it was written in last week’s parasha:

*“I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way...” – Deuteronomy 29:19 [NIV]*

## **The Importance of Preserving Our National Identity**

Today we often hear that the Torah is no longer necessary, it is not what God really wants. Some think that they know what God wants, He wants our hearts, faith, and worship. The Almighty does not desire lists of what to do and what not to do.

On a personal level, this statement is 100% correct. As far as we as believers are concerned, the essence of the Torah is to love God and our neighbors. It’s as simple as that!

However, on the national level, this statement is completely false. We must preserve our national identity as well as pass on our history to our children. This includes connecting them to their heritage concerning the whole episode of the Exodus from Egypt, the patriarchs of the nation, and also link them to the promises made to our forefathers.

What I am trying to say is, when I fulfill the commandment of the sukkah, or the blowing of the shofar, I primarily fulfill the mitzvah in order to educate the next generation, to connect them to the rest of the nation and to the collective memory of the Jewish people. The Torah is designed for the people to live at a certain level of morality and conduct towards those around us; the Torah is for the community as a whole.

## Why do We Observe Yom Kippur?

Our long and painful history teaches us that those who left the Torah and the tradition of Israel, abandoned their identity and their connection to the people of Israel and to the future of Israel. This is the reason why we fast on Yom Kippur.

I have complete faith in the atonement of the blood of Yeshua the Messiah, who has pardoned me and cleansed my life in the best and most perfect way.

We fast because we are not just private individuals. We also have a family, and it is our duty to connect the family to the people of Israel. I am also part of the Jewish people, and as such I participate in the nation's day of fasting and prayer. Together we are begging God to remember His people for the good, to have compassion on us, to remember the promises and the graces of the patriarchs, and to give us another opportunity to correct ourselves and live in a way that pleases God.

We sometimes think that asking forgiveness is a personal matter. Everyone is supposed to think about the mistakes he has made in private and repent. We are not supposed to make a public celebration of our private problems and personal sins.

Even though it usually works that way on Yom Kippur, asking for forgiveness from others becomes a collective effort. However I think that it's deeper than that. On this day we talk about our weaknesses and share our failures together as a nation, or even as a community. We do not do so just as individuals, but rather as a Messianic congregation, a believing and supportive community. Together we gather our strength to rise up and change our lives, in brotherly love, something that our connection to Yeshua calls us to do.

## Yom Kippur Grants Us a Second Chance

What great humility can be found in the ability to recognize a mistake, to repent, to re-examine our lives and our decisions, and to march on towards improvement. This very idea is magnificent. God gives us the possibility of repenting from our bad decisions and our mistakes.

Whatever happened happened, but it's not so important now. If we really want to, we can start all over again. In short, this is essence of Yom Kippur,

which is why it is considered the most holy and important holiday of the year.

On this day we stop time and the race of life to reflect on our actions and contemplate our path – are we on the right track? Do we live in accordance with the way we believe?

The idea of atonement for sin is at the center of Yom Kippur:

*“...because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins.” – Leviticus 16:30 [NIV]*

## Why We Should Ask Others for Forgiveness

Nevertheless, there is an issue here that needs to be resolved. According to Jewish tradition, Yom Kippur atones for the sins between us and God, and not for the sins that are between us and our friends. In other words, it is impossible to come on Yom Kippur before God and ask him to forgive me for the sin I committed towards a certain individual. According to Judaism, one must go to the person himself and ask forgiveness for the sin.

*“Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between a person and God, but for a transgression against one’s neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone, until he appeases his neighbor.” – Mishnah Yoma 8:9*

In my opinion, this is Yeshua’s teaching, Yeshua commands us to first be reconciled to our neighbor, and only then to come and stand before God:

*“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” – Matthew 5:23,24 [NIV]*

I think this is a good and healthy lesson for us today. Before we come to the congregation to praise God, let’s cleanse our conscience against those we hurt during the week, it can be a family member, friend, or co-worker. Let

us ask for His forgiveness and plead with him, and then we will come with a clear conscience to worship God rightly and truly, and to seek His face.

Shabbat Shalom and may we all have a meaningful fast.

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