

YOM KIPPUR IS MORE THAN FASTING AND CONFESSING SINS: A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING THE YOM KIPPUR SERVICES

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SESSION SUMMARY

The *Yom Kippur* service is extremely long and seems like it is rambling; however, it has a clear structure and, whatever your denomination, believe it or not, it contains most of the same material. Some services are abridged and some lengthened, but the structure remains constant. The authors of the *machzor* saw *Yom Kippur* as a journey through time — both through Jewish history and your own private history. Where are they taking us and why? Participants looked at this by way of some of the major pieces of the service that are added especially for *Yom Kippur*. With this knowledge, and great handouts, you will be able to adapt this to any age group you teach.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Yom Kippur liturgy was designed by the rabbis to take us on a full-day retreat that is intended to emotionally help us to understand the meaning and importance of the day. Like on Rosh HaShanah,¹ the Yom Kippur liturgy is based on the regular Shabbat structure with many additions added for Yom Kippur.² I am focusing here only on the specific sections that are added to the liturgy for Yom Kippur.

Before I take you through the structure of the day, I want to spend a moment to focus on the Selichot service, indicated in blue on the chart, which as you can see appears in each of the services of the day. There are powerful piyyutim added into the Selichot services as well as peppered throughout other services.³ (The Selichot service is also explained in the material that Everett Fox presented and is included in this publication).

The structure of Selichot is two litanies of expressed guilt (Ashamnu and Al Chet) interspersed with graphic piyyutim. It includes the formula given by God to Moshe when the Israelites sinned. (Exodus 34:6-7) These are known as the 13 Attributes of Mercy. The “problem” this addresses is that God is just and sometimes justice is too harsh. The attributes are said to mitigate Gd’s justice and bring out Gd’s mercy. A modern example of this would be mandatory sentencing. No matter what the circumstances, if you do a specific crime, you get a specific penalty. Judges don’t like it because there is no room for mercy in that formula. Gd’s reaction seems similar. Gd tells Moses that he can use this chant to appeal to his merciful side and remind Gd of compassion. We repeat this chant as we make a list of our sins which are inclusive of all Israel’s sins.⁴ There are some differences in the Selichot sections depending on the time of day, but they end with Shma Koleinu—asking Gd to hear our voice and have mercy on us. The prayer says that we have sinned, we are sorry, Gd please be compassionate and merciful and hear our voice, our prayers. When you think about it, Shma Koleinu is a summary of all the pleadings of Selichot—which literally means “the sorries”.

Let’s also take a moment to talk about Piyyutim found throughout the services. Piyyutim are poems, many from the middle ages that were added to the service to add meaning-- in the same way that we add contemporary readings to our service. As a result, it is not necessary to accept the theological ideas expressed by the poets which may or may not have been the mainstream thinking of their times. They take poetic license with their writings which can be enjoyed for their beauty and metaphoric understandings without necessarily buying into their theology. They are poetry not liturgy. One of the most famous of these is Unetaneh Tokef which troubles some people because of its judgement metaphor that seems to imply that Gd writes the good people in the book of life and the others die. (Of course, we know that the world does not work so neatly).

Another well-known piyyut is Avinu Malkeinu (which troubles some modern readers because of its use of male Gd language—“our Father, Our king”) This is one of the oldest piyyutim. Tradition says the first few lines of it were written by Rabbi Akiva who was born at the end of the first century. What is notable

¹ For this discussion, see my Rosh HaShanah workshop materials

² See Yom Kippur chart handout

³ All of the additions are explained briefly in the handout following the chart

⁴ It was done this way because it was considered safer to acknowledge the sins of a community rather than the sins of an individual.

here is that there are many more verses of Avinu Malkeinu than you have ever seen and clearly these verses were added in times of trouble throughout Jewish history. As an example, one verse says: “do it for the sake of those who went through fire and water for Your sake”. The liturgists today pick and choose from these verses to match our own times.

Having focused on two oft repeated parts of the service, what I want to talk about in greater depth is the journey of Yom Kippur and later, how to teach it in our schools.

The journey of Yom Kippur begins with Kol Nidre – a dramatic way to start any day. The community forms a court to decide that it is permissible to pray with those who have sinned. This lets everyone in the community present know that they have work to do in the course of the day, without pointing a finger at anyone specific person. Selichot in the evening is our first chance to confess our sins and the words seem jarring the first time we say them.

The morning service begins the way each morning service does until the Amida. There we see the first changes and additions. Among these are Zochreinu L’Chayim (Remember us to life) and B’sefer Chayim (write us in the book of life). These two phrases are interspersed within all the services as they were on RH in order to remind Gd and us, that we are standing here because we want to live another year and be written in the book of life, blessings and economic security for another year. It is an oft repeated mantra that dramatically ends hours from now in the Neilah service when we ask Gd not just to write us in the book but seal us.

The Torah reading takes us back to Temple times (Leviticus 16) where we read about the scape goat which was a major event that took place in the Temple on Yom Kippur. The Haftorah takes us to the time of the prophets where we read from Isaiah 57:14-58:14. Its message is almost surprising coming mid-day in a fast. Just when you are feeling hunger and the sacrifice of fasting, the liturgy reminds us that fasting is not the kind of fast that Gd wants, but rather to refrain from oppression of others and to engage in helping the hungry and the homeless and all less fortunate than yourself.⁵ This Haftorah must make the congregants think about the meaning of the day and shake them of their complacency.

The day moves through Musaf pretty normally except for the third repetition of Selichot until we get to the three services that are additions to the usual musaf service: Avodah, Elah Ezkarah, and Yizkor. I know that various rabbis and movements move these services around, doing Yizkor perhaps earlier in the day and Avodah and Ele Ezkarah later; however, I prefer to leave them where they are since I believe they are an essential part of the journey of repentance and ultimately forgiveness that marks this day.

I have included an Avodah service⁶ that was written for High Holiday services in my community which we stage as a play in order to reenact the service of the High Priest in Jerusalem. We no longer have these sacrifices or the Temple and most Jews do not want to return to that system. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z”l⁷ called this a paradigm shift away from sacrifices. He postulated that the end of

⁵ This message harkens back to the three paragraphs of U’vchen explained in my Rosh HaShanah session in this publication.

⁶ Handout of service written for The Chapel Service in Brighton, MA.

⁷ Paradigm Shift: From the Jewish Renewal Teachings of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Jason Aronson, 2000

the sacrificial system would have happened anyway since it is unlikely that animal sacrifices would have entered a modern era. There is great power in reenacting this ceremony, in remembering it.⁸ The High Priest's multiple changes of clothes; the confessions he makes; the scapegoats; the community gathered around prostrating themselves as he says the name of Gd; his entry into the Holy of Holies; and his heartfelt and powerful blessing to the people take us right into the Temple spectacle. This drama matches the drama of Kol Nidre and more. It takes us back in time to remember the people who we came from and the origins of our religion.

We are now on the journey of memory. As Theodore Gaster wrote: Remembrance is not merely an excursion into the past...Memory defies oblivion, breaks the coils of the present, establishes the continuity of the generations and rescues human life and effort from futility. It affords the only true resurrection of the dead. The act of remembering is thus in itself redemptive.⁹

Having remembered our people in ancient times, the service leads us into the remembrance of our people who died "al Kiddush Ha-shem"—our martyrs. I have included an outline¹⁰ of the original service which was, in fact, an aggadic midrash which was turned into liturgy as a Selichot for Yom Kippur. Forgive us our sins for the suffering of our ancestors is the general idea here. It recounts the story of the ten sages that the Roman Emperor put to death and was interpreted early on to be a retribution for Jacob's son's selling of Joseph into slavery. In the Bible, all sins go punished and this one did not seem to be; but for me, this is not a satisfactory explanation of the power of this text. Here, most liberal liturgies extend this to include martyrs from throughout Jewish history. Remembrances of the holocaust are of course common, but almost every year, my congregation is able to add a name taken from the headlines of the year—Daniel Pearl being one example among many.¹¹ Another stirring poem/song that can be added to the Eleh Ezkerah is called "My Sister Chaya".¹² Why do we take time on Yom Kippur to remember martyrs?¹³ We seem to be telling Gd that the deaths of our martyrs is enough to atone for the sins of the Jewish people just as the sins of the 10 rabbis atoned for the sins of Joseph's brothers. What Jew cannot hear the stories of the ten let alone the modern updates and not feel a sense that their ancestors suffered a lot so that we can be Jewish today. It is a kind of inspiration to remain Jewish and live an ethical life.

⁸ According to Talmud tractate Yoma, in the absence of a Temple, Jews are obligated to study the High Priest's ritual on Yom Kippur, and this study helps achieve atonement for those who are unable to benefit from its actual performance.

⁹ Festivals of the Jewish year: A modern Interpretation and Guide: Theodor H. Gaster, Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1978.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midrash_Eleh_Ezkerah

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Pearl

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPeuTao-0oA>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRPbIFDBKvK>

¹³ Rabbi Richard Saaron, blogrj.org—"The traditional *Seder Ha'avodah* ends with a series of laments, penitential prayers, and confessions dealing with the loss of the Temple and its rituals: "On account of our sins and the sins of our ancestors we are lacking all of these things," followed by, "Remember, Lord, Your compassion and loving-kindness . . . We have sinned, our Rock; forgive us, our Creator." *Eileh Ezkerah* follows immediately upon this. Its first line is a poetic inversion of Psalm 42:5 – "When I think of this, I pour out my soul," understood by the poet as, "When I call to mind/remember these ones . . ." The poem goes on to recount the martyrdom of the ten righteous Rabbis. whose deaths are understood to have atoned for the sins of the people"

Finally, it seems appropriate to me, to end the service with Yizkor. Having remembered ancient times, and the martyrs of our past, we now remember our own ancestors. Many years ago, at the suggestion of a congregant¹⁴ we began giving people an opportunity to speak about the people that they were mourning. This has added a powerful, personal element to our service. In our congregation, we have done this with 450 congregants and with 100. It works either way and is an idea worth incorporating if you have the time to do it. Hearing these stories of people's lives and about their demise, is sobering to say the least on a day dedicated to repentance and memory and finding "at onement" with ourselves.

Now, the service has left the congregation at the darkest point in the cycle of the day. The cycles of Selichot and the relentless rhythm of the day along with the fasting have left people feeling weak. The three sections of memory have left them vulnerable and sad. What is next?¹⁵

The Mincha service follows with its reading of Jonah—the tale of a prophet who doesn't understand prophecy. Jonah is a prophet who makes a mistake, repents and still doesn't quite understand his mission. I always feel a lightening of the congregation in the midst of this story. I believe the point comes when Jonah asks forgiveness, is given a second chance and is thrown out of the fish exactly at Nineveh where Gd always intended him to go, but this point may just be the beginning of the lightening, I can't say exactly. I do know that as we move into Neilah, the mood should be more intense, more frightening even, but it is not. The dominate symbol of Neilah is the locking of the Gates, but the tradition teaches they don't close for 10 more days at Hoshanna Rabba at the end of Sukkot—a joyous holiday. The music is also upbeat-- especially El Norah Alilah—a Sephardic piyyut that is finding its way into Askenazi services.¹⁶ The lyrics and translation can be found here and multiple versions of the tune on YouTube.¹⁷ Even though you can hear that the music is upbeat, I have heard it at twice the speed of this recording with people banging on the reading table in the Shul. Neilah can therefore, have an upbeat feeling. The day is over, we have done what we set out to do and most people feel good and perhaps forgiven.

The final Shofar that ends the day and our journey is not only dramatic but powerful and hopeful. On the other hand, the same time the ritual that ends the service is also the Vidui that the dying say on their deathbeds. So as we leave the day, we are reminded in a powerful way that we have pretended to be dead all day—no food or water, no luxuries such as perfume or leather shoes or washing, no sex. We end the day with the separation ritual for the dead. This reminds us that the actual day of our death will come for each of us and we must be prepared for it by living a good personal life and by helping others. Maybe the final cry of L'Shanah Ha-ba (next year in Jerusalem) here reminds us that we are not actually dead and there is still a hopeful chance that we will find ourselves living in a perfect messianic world in the year to come.

While the outline of the service I have used for this discussion comes from traditional prayer books, I learned from Lawrence Hoffman that all the parts of the High Holiday liturgy are included in the Reform

¹⁴ Sheila Clawson, Newton MA.

¹⁵ Of course, most congregations have a break scheduled in sometime during the day either here or before.

¹⁶ <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/el-nora-alila-god-great-deeds.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iR1enfnaGcE>

liturgy.¹⁸ They may be abbreviated or moved around the services but all the parts are represented. The newest Reform Machzor¹⁹ continues this tradition.

I believe then that Yom Kippur leads us from the court house to our death bed and resurrection or rebirth into a new year with its second chance to live a better life. It takes us on a journey of introspection and memory that gives us both atonement and perspective. The first sorry prepares us for the second and so on. The first journey to the past, brings us closer and closer to our own mortality which is a subtheme of the day. If you stick with the service and take the time to understand it, your day can be incredibly meaningful and helpful as you try to navigate life. We may not be born with an instruction manual but our tradition has one that leads us through the cycle of time and teaches us the Torah of life.

Teaching Yom Kippur

I believe that Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur should be part of the curriculum of every school whether it is a supplementary or day school, but I don't think it often is. It is mentioned but not in enough depth in my view. Of course, the High Holidays are one thing that most Jewish adults attend; and yet, they often feel lost in the synagogue. I am very aware that the calendar often works against teaching it because it occurs so early in the school year. So I am suggesting two approaches. One is that we recognize that the basic ideas of the holidays can be taught to very young children either in pre-school or in early grades such as kindergarten or first grade.²⁰ Why do we continue to teach those ideas throughout elementary school when we might move beyond them to real understandings of the prayers and the concepts of the holidays? Please read the list on the handout of what Maxine Handelman, a major expert in early childhood teaches to children under 5.

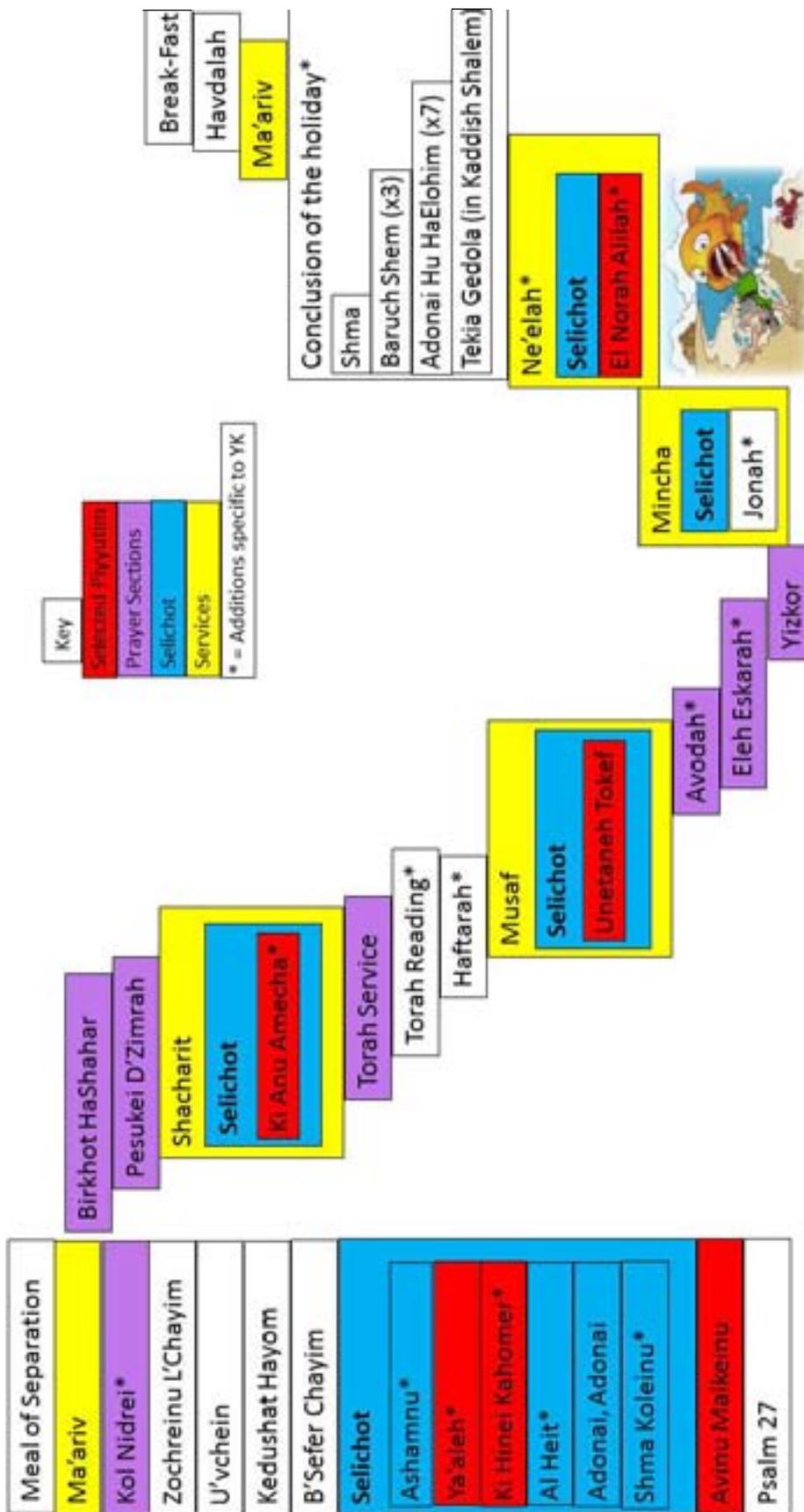
I have included a final page of handouts²¹ which takes the ideas of the High Holidays from 7-adulthood in a spiraled curriculum that could take 3-6 hours each year. Personally, I don't care if it is taught in September or some other time of the year, as long as it is taught. I have not written a similar curriculum for RH but clearly, it could follow the same basic idea—take the important prayers and concepts of the holiday and teach them. They cover not only religious concepts but life skills, such as how to handle failure, that you have the opportunity to teach children in a Jewish school setting. This Curriculum also suggests experiential activities for the child attending services with their parents and the suggestion of post-holiday discussions each year to check in with the teacher about what the students observed and learned from services.

¹⁸ Gates of Understanding 2 Appreciating the Days of Awe: Lawrence A. Hoffman, CCAR press 1984

¹⁹ Mishkan HaNefesh: by [Rabbi Edwin Goldberg](#) (Editor), [Rabbi Janet Marder](#) (Editor), [Rabbi Sheldon Marder](#) (Editor), [Rabbi Leon Morris](#) (Editor), CCAR Press, 2015

²⁰ Maxine Handelman [Jewish Every Day](#), Chapter 10, Behrman House

²¹ handout



Yom Kippur Additions * Only said on YK

***Kol Nidre** You can start with a clean slate with God

Zochreinu Le-Chayim—You are a God who delights in life. Remember us.

Kedushat Ha-Yom-Sanctify the day—This sets the tone for a day of reflection. Cleanse our hearts, remember your promised of mercy and redemption and absolve us of guilt.

B'Safer Chayim—May all Israel be remembered and recorded.

***Ashamnu (short confession)**—forgive the sins of our people from A-Z

***Al Chet (long confession)**—forgive the sins we have done with our mortal bodies

***Piyyutim** (Ya-a-leh; Ki-hinei Ka-homer; Ki-Anu Amecha; Hineni; Unetaneh Tokef; L-El Orech-Din; ve-kol Ma'aminim, El Nora Alilah)

Adonai, Adonai—the formula God gave Moses to say whenever Israel sins

***Shma Koleinu**, --asking God to hear our prayer and not abandon us

Avinu Malkeinu—Speaks of a God who is merciful like a parent and just like a judge.

Psalm 27—Hope in God, and yet be strong and courageous yourself.

U-ve-chen—The hope that the rule of God would replace the rule of oppressive governments and usher in the messianic age.

***Torah Readings** chosen for Yom Kippur (reading may vary)

***Haftorah Isaiah 57:14-58:1-14** Amount read may vary) God doesn't want a meaningless fast. The fast is meant to teach us to not to oppress our workers, to feed the hungry, take the homeless into your home, clothe the naked and not turn away from people in need.

***Avodah**—This service recounts the pageantry of the High Priest in Jerusalem on the day of atonement. The Reform Machzor has reformulated it to discuss what sacrifice means to us today and to suggest that there are 15 steps that we can take

***Ele Ezkarah:** Here we remember the sacrifices that our ancestors made in the name of maintaining their Jewish fate.

***Yizkor:** the service for remembering the dead in our family and the martyrs from the Jewish family including those who died in the Shoah. It was thought at one time that children with living parents should not be in the room when Yizkor was recited, but after the Shoah, this changed.

* **Book of Jonah**—The book of Jonah is read traditionally as part of the Afternoon Mincha service of YK. It tells a story of a man who learns about the power of God, about the power of repentance and about the power of prayer. As such, it is a perfect reading for the afternoon service because it is a hopeful story about a merciful God.

***Neilah**—The final service of YK. It uses the symbolism of gates that are open to encourage repentance and gates that are closing to emphasize that the time to repent is now. Ironically, in Jewish tradition, the final gate does not close until Hoshanna Rabbah giving us 11 more days to make things right with God and the ones we have wronged.

***Final Shofar Blast:** It is a powerful moment at the very end of Yom Kippur when the Shofar is blown. The final blast is preceded by the recitation of the Shma and a magical formula of words saying that we recognize that God is the Sovereign forever and that there is only One God of Creation. This is the same formula that is part of the “last rites” said on the death bed either by the one dying or his loved ones. Interestingly, the service is ended by the final kaddish and then the last sound—one final tekiya gedola. Ended with the hope that next year will be the year that the Messiah or Messianic age arrives and we will all be in Jerusalem.

***Havdalah:** How do you leave sacred space and go back to your lives as usual. How do you leave a day that acted out your death to going back to the mundane everyday chores of living? How do you end the Shabbat of all Shabbats? Havdala has an important place in allowing us to lose our special YK consciousness, our extra special soul and return to the everyday.

Concepts that can be taught to 3-6 year old's¹

It's important to be a good person
 People make mistakes
 We can learn to say I'm sorry
 We can learn to do better
 We can keep our promises
 Prayer is a way to talk to God

There are activities they can do

They can learn the Jonah Story
 They can hear the Shofar blast and learn the sounds
 They can learn the holiday greetings
 They can watch for the Torah in the synagogue
 They can meet a rabbi and cantor
 They can listen to holiday music
 They can visit a sanctuary and sit quietly there.
 They can read stories about the concept
 Make crafts and learn songs about these idea. They can
 make a calendar and other holiday props like a honey
 dish, greeting cards.

Day of Yom Kippur Educational opportunities:

Children hang out in the Synagogue or around it on Yom Kippur. Some communities do children's services or family services. Some provide playrooms for the kids and some encourage the kids to go inside to services.

Maybe we should think of this as an opportunity to educate the kids about the holiday. For younger children you could give them a lotto board and stickers that would guide them to specific things to look for in the service. Older kids could interview people in the hallway to find out what fasting means to them or what the high point of the YK service is. They would remember this conversations—no need to write it down until later. Even the services could include a close examination of one of the topics on the next page each year. If there are a lot of children they could be

¹ Maxine Handleman Jewish Every Day, Chapter 10

Divided by age where they could look at a specific age related topic. The teaching can be creative involving activities of whatever kind the teacher would like.

I know that people think the experience of the High Holidays is enough to give children when they are young. I believe on the other hand, that children need some type of framework within which they can place the things that they see.

I don't think it is 100% necessary to teach the High Holidays only in September or October. One could teach a little each year or integrate it into other subjects or one could spend a couple of months teaching HH as a discreet unit—say to a seventh or 8th grader.

HH like a Passover seder are things students are likely to grow up to do, so lets find a way to prepare them.

Thanks to Amy Ripps for a discussion that led to this comment

Elementary School (7-13 year olds)

7 years Learn what it means to be part of the community of the Jewish people on the HH. Learn about the mitzvah of gathering. Learn about YK in Israel and around the world.

Special blessing for YK over candles.

Shechecheyanu Blessing

8 years Learn about the Jewish calendar and the month of Tishrei.

Learn about the Mitzvah of Shofar and its blessings.

Learn the sounds of the Shofar. Learn the story of Mount Sinai where the Shofar was sounded.

9 years Learn the symbolism of Yom Kippur

Why do people dress in white/wear a kittel.

Why are the memorial lights in the synagogue lit? Learn about fasting and why people do it.

Learn about Idea of Gates. Neilah Service.

10 years Read the book of Jonah

Learn about calling out to God

Learn about Repentance

Learn about the 10 days of repentance

Learn the concept of Teshuva

Learn the steps of Teshuva

Why is there Joy at the end of Yom Kippur?

Adonai, Adonai El Rachum V-Chanun

11 years Learn about prayer as one way to have a relationship with God. Learn about promises and vows.

Learn the ways people say they are sorry—before the holiday and during the holiday.

Kol Nidre

Read the book of Jonah

Shma Koleinu

12 years Moral Development and Ethics

How do you become a better person

Learn about failure and how to learn from it

Develop a document that articulates the guiding principles of decision-making

Look at the Selichot Service

Look at the Haftorah for Yom Kippur morning from

Isaiah

13 years The God of Yom Kippur

Avinu Malkeinu/ Adonai, Adonai,

Zochreinu Le-Chayim (study concept of the book of life)

Be-safer Chayim

Learn about ways you can have a relationship with

God—prayer being one of them

Teenagers aged (14-18)/ And/or Adult Ed

14 years Haftorah of Yom Kippur Isaiah 57:14

Prayers for Peace on Yom Kippur

Social justice as it relates to YK

Look at the U'vechein paragraphs and Aleinu

15 years Unetaneh Tokef, Ki Hinei Ka Homer and other piyyutim. What are they and why do we read them.

16 years Eileh Ezkara or other history lesson on Jewish suffering.

Why do we want to remember terrible things that happened to us. Why have Jews been victimized throughout history? Is it a punishment? If yes, why? If no, why is this idea pervasive. How does it relate to Yom Kippur

Structure of the Yom Kippur Service with an emphasis on memory.

17 years The Avodah Service. Compare the service in various prayerbooks? What is the reason it is so different?

18 years Yizkor service and Jewish mourning rituals. Why is remembering such a large part of the HH? The End of the YK service and Jewish last rites.

Every year talk about how YK went for them and what they learned, heard and saw.