

The Good News of

Yom Kippur

in Seventh-day
Adventist Theology

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The Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) occupies a central place in Seventh-day Adventist theology. Parallel with Jewish understanding, Adventists regard the Day of Atonement as the most solemn and climactic experience of the entire round of holy days described in Torah. As in Jewish theology, *Kippur* is interpreted by Adventists as a time for the completion of a divine investigative judgment of human beings.¹

The Day of Atonement is regarded by Seventh-day Adventists as part of a sequence of annual holy days described in Leviticus 23 which have prophetic significance, preenacting the whole sweep of salvation history from the death of the Messiah to the time of the Age to Come.² The Spring holy days of the Hebrew festival calendar in Leviticus 23 are seen to be fulfilled on time (with the death of Yeshua at the very time of the slaughter of the Passover³ in the middle of the seventieth prophetic week of Daniel 9:26–27, 31 C.E.,⁴ and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the disciples at the time of Pentecost fifty days later [Acts 2:1–4]). Likewise the Fall High Holy Days of the seventh month, climaxing in *Kippur*, are found to be fulfilled on time as predicted in Bible prophecy.

According to the Adventist understanding, the

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annual *Yom Kippur* represents a period of time at the end of earth's history just before the second coming of the Messiah.⁵ Many clues from the Hebrew Bible show that prophetic time periods in Daniel employ the principle of a day for a year,⁶ and that the seventy prophetic weeks of Daniel 9 start at the same time as the 2,300 prophetic days referred to in Daniel 8:14: "For two thousand three hundred days; then the sanctuary shall be cleansed." Daniel 9:25 gives the point of time for the commencement of these two related prophecies: "From the going forth of the command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem. . ." This commandment was issued by Artaxerxes in 457 B.C.E. The prophecy of the seventy weeks of years thus lasted till 31 C.E. (457 B.C.E. + 70 weeks of years), and the 2,300 day (year) prophecy of Daniel 8:14 extended to 1844 (457 B.C.E. + 2,300 days=years).

The Adventist movement was born in the cradle of events surrounding the year 1844 C.E. At this time, there was an intense world-wide revival of hope centered in proclaiming the fulfillment of the 2,300 day (year) prophecy of Daniel 8:14 and other biblical announcements of end-time judgment such as Revelation 14:6, 7. This movement has been referred to by Christian historians as the "Great Advent Awakening." It extended from New England in North America (with followers of William Miller) to South America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Christians of many denominations were involved,

as well as leading Jewish expositors of Scripture (such as Joseph Wolff).⁷ At this same time a movement of Chabad and Yemenite Jews also experienced intense expectations of the coming of the Messiah.

According to the biblical (agricultural) method for reckoning the Hebrew calendar, *Yom Kippur* occurred on October 22 in the year 1844.⁸ Millerite Adventists eagerly awaited the “cleansing of the sanctuary” described in Daniel 8:14, which they interpreted as the return of the Messiah to cleanse the earth by fire and take His saints to heaven. When the Messiah did not return at this time, some Millerites abandoned their faith in the accuracy of the prophecies, but a small group restudied the prophecy of Daniel 8:14 in light of other Scriptures. These earnest seekers for truth came to realize that according to the prophecy of Daniel 7—which in content and structure precisely parallels the prophecy of Daniel 8—the sanctuary is not the earth, but the heavenly sanctuary, and the work of cleansing is not destruction by fire, but a work of investigative judgment (see Daniel 7:9, 10, 22).

The Adventist movement was forged in the realization that the prophecies of Daniel 7 and 8 hark back to the cleansing of the sanctuary (and attendant judgment) of *Yom Kippur* that is described in Leviticus 16 and 23. In long days and nights of prayer and wrestling with God over the correct interpretation of Scripture, the early Adventist pioneers came to the conclusion that on October 22, 1844, Yeshua had begun his *Kippur* ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. The work of the high priest in the earthly sanctuary every year at *Yom Kippur* (Leviticus 16) was seen to foreshadow the present work of the Messianic High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary. This heavenly ministry involved a work of cleansing or final atonement for the sins of God’s professed people (Daniel 8:14), and presupposed a work of investigative judgment (Daniel 7:10) leading to the vindication of God’s people (Daniel 7:22: “Judgment was made *in favor* of the saints of the Most High”).

In harmony with a strong and ancient Jewish tradition that identifies *Azazel* of Leviticus 16 with a demonic being,⁹ Adventist interpreters

found in Scripture (Leviticus 16) support for the conclusion that *Azazel* stands for Satan. The sending of the goat representing *Azazel* into the wilderness carrying the already-atoned-for sins of the camp of Israel (Leviticus 16:21–21) was seen to point forward to the time of the millennium and after (Revelation 20), when Satan as the originator and instigator of sin (Isaiah 14:12–15; Ezekiel 28:12–16; Revelation 12:3–4, 7–9) and malicious witness against the saints (Revelation 12:10; cf. Deuteronomy 19:16–21) must bear the final punishment to eliminate sin from the universe and vindicate God in His dealing with sin.

The doctrine of the pre-Advent *Yom Kippur* investigative judgment in the heavenly sanctuary has become one of the foundational doctrinal pillars of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹⁰ It is not a doctrine supported by only one or two biblical passages such as Daniel 7 and 8, but, as eminent non-Adventist, Jewish, and Christian scholars now recognize, the concept of a divine investigative judgment from the sanctuary is found in numerous passages of Scripture, and constitutes God’s regular procedure in dealing with individuals and nations throughout biblical history. Before executing judgment (either of condemnation or vindication) upon humans, God regularly convened a covenant lawsuit (Hebrew *rib*) or investigative judgment, in which He revealed the evidence in open court that He was just and fair and had done all He could to save those involved in judgment.¹¹ In the midst of these local judgments depicted in Scripture one regularly finds a revelation of the grace of God offering forgiveness and salvation to the repentant sinner. The final, climatic, universal investigative judgment beginning in 1844 is simply the outworking of the same principles of justice and grace on a cosmic scale that God has exercised throughout human history with regard to specific individuals and nations.

The meaning of the end-time investigative judgment for Adventists may be summarized by the multi-faceted meaning of the word in Daniel 8:14 that is often translated “cleansed.” The word for “cleansed” in Daniel 8:14, *nitsdaq*, comes from a root that has such a breadth of meaning

that it cannot be captured by a single English word.¹² There are three basic English nuances or extended meanings behind this Hebrew word: (1) to “set right/restore” to its rightful place (as emphasized in Deuteronomy 25:15); (2) to “cleanse” (as emphasized in Job 15:14; 4:17; and 17:5); and (3) to “vindicate” (as in Isaiah 50:8).

According to Hebrew thought patterns, it would not be unusual if all three of these English nuances were communicated in a single occurrence of this Hebrew word. And the context of Daniel 8 indicates that this is precisely the case in Daniel 8:14. In verse 13, we have a question with three parts. We can literally translate: “For how long is the vision: [1] the *tamid* (or ‘continual’), [2] the transgression that causes horror, and [3] the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled under foot?”

According to this verse, three problems exist. First, there is the *tamid* (or “continual”), which according to verse 12 is taken away. This word *tamid* is used in the Torah to describe the various parts of the daily service in the earthly sanctuary,¹³ and Adventists take this to refer to the “continual” mediation of Yeshua in the heavenly sanctuary which was substituted by the apostate power of the medieval state church with an earthly mediator and a counterfeit way of salvation.

Second, there is the “transgression which causes horror,” which according to verse 12 is the transgression of the host, i.e., the sins of the professed people of God. Finally, there is the trampling underfoot of the sanctuary and host—the persecution of the saints, and yet more than persecution. In ancient thought when a host (army) and sanctuary is trampled underfoot (by a conquering army), it is concluded that the god of the host is weak and undependable. Thus when the sanctuary and the host is trampled, the true God and His people and system of worship are defamed.

And what is the joyous news for all three of these problems? It is contained in the three-fold semantic range of the word *nitsdaq*—set right, cleanse, vindicate. First, the *tamid*, Yeshua’s

continual mediation in the heavenly sanctuary, the sanctuary truth which was taken away (from God’s people), must be set right and restored. Second, the transgression of the sins of God’s professed people causing horror in the heavenly sanctuary needs to be cleansed. And third, God and His people—defamed by the trampling down of the sanctuary and the host—must be vindicated.

Now there are separate Hebrew words for each of these ideas—“set right/restore,” “cleanse,” “vindicate”—but only the Hebrew word *nitsdaq* can simultaneously encompass all of these solutions. Herein is the holistic message of *Yom Kippur* encapsulated in a single word. Adventists find at the core of their *raison d’être* the mission to proclaim the good news of the restoring, cleansing, vindicating work of God in these last days of earth’s history.

The experiential essence of *Yom Kippur* in the Adventist understanding, as in the Jewish tradition, is summarized in the list of activities of the congregation on this day prescribed in Leviticus 23:26–32.¹⁴ In concert with the Jewish experience of *Yom Kippur*, Adventists regard

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the period of investigative judgment in which we now live as an occasion of deep solemnity and heart-felt affliction of soul (repentance and fasting). At the same time, both in Jewish and Adventist thinking, *Yom Kippur* is a period of joy and assurance of acceptance and cleansing by God.¹⁵ For Adventists it is part of the “everlasting good news” announced in the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14 (see vv. 6, 7). It is good news because Yeshua is our Substitute and Surety (Isaiah 53), our Advocate and Mediator (Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1), our Faithful and True Witness (Revelation 3:14), our Judge (John 5:22), the One who cleanses us and takes responsibility for our obedience (Ezekiel 36:25–27), and the One who vindicates us against the false charges of the accuser (Zechariah 3:1–4).

With such good news, we, like David, need not fear, but rather may welcome and eagerly await the judgment (Psalm 7:8; 26:1; 35:24; 43:1)!

During my first extended stay in Israel with my family many years ago, I had an opportunity to experience the Jewish traditions of *Yom Kippur* at the *Heikal Shlomo* synagogue in Jerusalem and at the Western Wall. I was joyously surprised and deeply moved as I realized how much I needed to learn from my Jewish brothers and sisters about how to really internalize the experiential essence of *Kippur*. Joining in the powerful Hebrew prayers of individual and corporate repentance, hearing the heart-rending recitations of the rabbi and the agonizing yet assured chants of the cantor, observing tear-filled scenes of reconciliation among erstwhile estranged worshipers, experiencing the piercing blast of the shofar at the end of the Day which captured in one clarion tone the message of repentance and awe and assurance and joy—I was enriched forever by the events of that never-to-be-forgotten day. Tasting that experience has brought me back again and again to other synagogues in succeeding years to savor more. I long for the Adventist and Jewish experience of *Kippur* to merge and mutually reinforce one another ever more intimately and beautifully in days to come.

¹ Babylonian Talmud *Rosh Hashanah* 16a: “It has been taught: ‘All are judged’ on New Year and their doom is sealed on the Day of Atonement”. See also Philip Birnbaum, *High Holyday Prayer Book: Yom Kippur* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1960), 508: “On Rosh Hashanah their destiny is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.”

² For evidence that the festival calendar of Lev 23 is not only commemorative and liturgical but prophetic, see, e.g., Richard M. Davidson, “Sanctuary Typology,” in *Symposium on Revelation, Book I* (Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, 6; ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 119–121.

³ See Richard M. Davidson, “Ponder the Passover!” *Shabbat Shalom* 53, no. 1 (2006): 4–9. This article, along with others cited below that I have written, may be accessed on my website: www.andrews.edu/~davidson.

⁴ For a Messianic interpretation of the seventy-week prophecy of Daniel 9, see, e.g., Jacques Doukhan, *Daniel: The Vision of the End* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 31–44.

⁵ The Second Coming of the Messiah is signaled by the blowing of the trumpet (Matt 24:31; 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16), which is seen by Adventists to be the fulfillment of the blowing of the “great shofar” (the Jubilee trumpet) described as taking place at the end of the Day of Atonement (Lev 25:9, 10).

⁶ For twenty-three biblical lines of evidence for the day-year principle in Scripture, most in the book of Daniel, see William Shea, *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation* (Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 1; Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 56–93; cf. the summary of this evidence in Richard M. Davidson, “In Confirmation of the Sanctuary Message,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 2, no. 1 (1991): 101–103.

⁷ For a description of the Great Advent Awakening and major participants world-wide, see LeRoy E. Froom, *Prophetic Faith of our Fathers*, vols. 3 and 4 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946, 1954), *passim*.

⁸ For explanation of this biblical method of reckoning the festival dates, based upon adding intercalated years so that the barley would always be ripe in time to wave a sheaf at Passover time (Lev 23:10, 11), see Froom, *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4:796–800.

⁹ See, e.g., *1 Enoch* 8:1; 9:6; 10:4–8; 13:1; cf. 54:5–6; 55:4; 69:2; *Apoc. Ab.* 13:6–14; 14:4–6; 20:5–7; 22:5; 23:11; 29:6–7; 31:5. Cf. L. L. Grabbe, “The Scapegoat: A Study in Early Jewish Interpretation,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 96 (1987): 152–167.

¹⁰ See Ellen G. White, Letter 208, 1906, cited in *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 221: “The correct understanding of the ministration in the heavenly sanctuary is the foundation of our faith.”

¹¹ See, for example, the divine legal investigative judgment of Adam and Eve in Eden after their sin (Gen 3:9–19), Cain (Gen 4:9–11), the antediluvian world (Gen 6:5, 12, 13), the people at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:5, 6), Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:20, 21), and numerous occasions of judgment with reference to the people of Israel in the wilderness (for 28 biblical examples of divine judgment from the sanctuary in the history of Israel, see Shea, *Selected Studies*, 1–24). For a sample of non-Adventist scholars who have recognized the motif of legal investigative judgment in the Hebrew Bible, see Richard M. Davidson, “The Second Advent and the ‘Fullness of Time,’” *Ministry*, June–July 2000, 42–43, 47. For use of the Hebrew term *rib* (“covenant lawsuit” or investigative judgment) for both condemnation and (even more often) vindication, see, e.g., Isa 3:13–14; 49:25; 50:8; 51:12; Jer 50:34; Hos 4:1; 12:1; Micah 6:1–2; 7:9. Cf. Davidson, “Confirmation,” 96–100.

¹² For more complete discussion of this Hebrew word, see, e.g., Richard M. Davidson, “The Meaning of *Nitsdaq* in Daniel 8:14,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 7, no. 1 (1996): 107–119.

¹³ See Angel Rogriguez, “Significance of the Cultic Language in Daniel 8:9–14,” in *Sympo-*

sium on Daniel (Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, 2; ed. Frank B. Holbrook; Washington, DC: Biblical Research Institute, 1986), 527–649.

¹⁴ For extended treatment of the Adventist application of these activities in the setting of the end-time Day of Atonement in process since 1844, see Richard M. Davidson, “The Good News of Yom Kippur,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 2, no. 2 (1991): 13–20.

¹⁵ Well-known is the Jewish emphasis upon repentance (cf. the *Yom Kippur* prayer book containing beautiful and moving individual and corporate prayers of repentance, and the Jewish practice of reading on *Yom Kippur* the biblical book of Jonah with its emphasis upon God’s acceptance of man’s repentance) and solemnity (as these High Holy Days culminating in *Yom Kippur* are called “Days of Awe”), but just as important is the emphasis upon joy and assurance. See the famous description by Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel of *Yom Kippur* as days of joy: “There never were in Israel greater days of joy than the fifteenth of Ab and the Day of Atonement” (Mishnah *Ta’anith* 4.8). Cf. Naph-tali Winter, ed., *The High Holy Days* (Popular Judaica Library; Jerusalem, Keter Books, 1973), 64: “Despite the repentance and abstinence practiced on Yom Kippur, it was never a sad day. Its atmosphere was solemn but this was always accompanied by the confidence and joy at finding atonement.”

Ancient prayer

for the Day of Atonement

by Yannay (6th century AD):

“He (God) watches for the wicked and delights when he is made righteous (*behitzadqo*) and all believe that He is Just (*Tsadiq*)”, see *Mahzor, High Holiday Prayer Book* (Hartford), p. 361.

Note that this old prayer is the only text, besides Daniel 8:14, which uses the rare grammatical form *nitsdaq* (passive of the verb *tsadaq*).

