

# Sacrilege and Sacredness on Yom Kippur

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/sacrilege-and-sacredness-yom-kippur>.

### Introduction

Yom Kippur, also known as the Day of Atonement, is considered by many to be the holiest day of the year in Judaism. It is a day of prayer and repentance, of inner searching and self-denial. Traditionally, it is observed with a 25-hour period of abstention from eating, drinking, and other physical pleasures, allowing the practitioner to concentrate on the holiness of the day, and on the process of soul-searching.

The texts in this resource kit represent this sacred moment in the Jewish calendar provocatively, asking questions about the nature of holiness, of righteousness, of religiosity, and of God. Playfully, honestly, and earnestly, they draw attention to the multiple ways people interpret religious rituals, the power that can be found in defying norms, and the ways that people's cultural, political, and individual identities lead them to religious conformity and nonconformity. They call attention to the relationship between sacrilege and sacredness in modern Jewish life and culture.

Cover image: Maurycy Gottlieb, "Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur" (1878).

### Subjects

Jewish Holidays, Music, Religion

### Reading and Background:

- For an overview of the history, rituals, and practices of Yom Kippur, teachers can consult chapter two of Arthur Waskow's *Seasons of our Joy*, which is an introduction to Judaism through the Jewish calendar. Teachers might also turn to MyJewishLearning.com's [Yom Kippur resources](#), which include FAQs about the holiday as well as articles on customs and liturgy.
- These biographical entries from the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* about [David Frishman](#) and [Sholem Aleichem](#) provide helpful background information on the authors. Teachers may learn more about Rosa Palatnik from the [biographical entry](#) in the Jewish Women's Archive Encyclopedia. Those interested in learning more about Ilan Stavans may enjoy [this podcast](#) from the Yiddish Book Center.
- In this [article](#), Eddy Portnoy describes the history of anarchist Yom Kippur Balls, explaining what the events looked like and what motivated them. This [article](#) by Rebecca Margolis provides rich details about Yom Kippur Balls in London, New York, and Montreal.
- This [article](#) on the performance genre of *kleynkunst* may be of interest in relation to the Jane Pepler song.

### Resources

#### 1: Excerpt from David Frishman's "Three Who Ate," 1929.

[David Frishman](#) (1859-1922) was a Hebrew and Yiddish writer, editor, critic, translator, and poet who wrote lyrical, sentimental fiction with didactic messages. As an editor and a literary critic, he hoped to see a body of Hebrew literature emerge that was on par with other Western European literatures. In his story "Three Who Ate," the Rabbi of a synagogue in a town in which a plague has spread insists that his congregation eat on Yom Kippur in order to maintain their strength and not fall victim to the plague. The Rabbi eats in front of the congregation, in violation of Jewish ritual practice, in order to demonstrate to his congregation the importance of their breaking ritual law in order to save their own lives.



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**Suggested Activity:** Have your students discuss the following questions: When is it a virtue to break a law (religious or otherwise)? Why do you think the *Rav* is weeping? Why does he refer to eating on Yom Kippur as “suffering”? Why do you think the *Rav* had to eat before his congregation would eat? Why did this act make such an impression on the narrator? Can you think of a moment in your own life when leaders or role models have acted in a way that was heroic or self-sacrificing? What impression did this make on you? How is eating on Yom Kippur related to the idea of religious tradition in this excerpt? Have your students compare *this* act of eating on Yom Kippur to the other instances depicted in this kit.

David Frishman, “Three Who Ate,” trans. Helena Frank in *Yiddish Tales, Translated by Helena Frank*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1912), 269-278.

## 2: Excerpt from Ilan Stavans, “Yom Kippur in Buenos Aires,” 2016.

In this short story by author and scholar Ilan Stavans, the narrator visits Buenos Aires and spends the holiday with his friend Osvaldo. Osvaldo’s older brother, who had become *ba’al tshuva* (embraced Orthodox Judaism) and had made *aliya* (immigrated) to Jerusalem, was murdered by a terrorist, and Osvaldo and his mother could not afford to attend the funeral. In this passage, which takes place several months after the brother’s murder, Osvaldo, who is not a practicing Jew, accompanies the narrator to *Kol Nidre* services.

**Suggested Activity:** Have your students discuss the following questions: Why do you think Osvaldo eats in the synagogue on Yom Kippur? What do you think of the congregation’s reaction? How would you react to this scenario if you were present in the synagogue? Why do you think Osvaldo finds that moment cathartic – why do you think he mourns his brother’s death through his presence at Yom Kippur services? How does Osvaldo’s act relate to the ideas of sacredness and sacrilege?

Ilan Stavans, “Yom Kippur in Buenos Aires.” *Jewishfiction.net* 18 (October 2016).

## 4: Excerpt and artifact concerning Yom Kippur balls.

Starting in London in 1888, and spreading to New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Montreal, and Havana, among other cities, Yom Kippur balls were a short-lived but highly publicized phenomenon in the radical Jewish world of the turn of the twentieth century. These events often lasted from *Kol Nidre* until *Neilah* the following day, and they were not only times for dancing and eating, but also for the study of anarchist propaganda, for listening to lectures, and for gathering with the radical Jewish community. The balls were put on by anarchist groups, and despite widespread opposition, they attracted prominent leaders from Jewish radical circles, enjoyed mass support, and received coverage from the Jewish and non-Jewish press.

The excerpt here is from the 2011 novel *A Bintel Brief* by John Nathan, which is a work of fiction based on the historical figure Abraham Cahan, the famous editor-in-chief of the New York socialist Yiddish daily newspaper, the *Forverts*, from 1903 to 1946. In this passage, Cahan describes his experiences at these rollicking, irreverent Yom Kippur balls. The image in this resource is an advertisement for a 1907 Yom Kippur Picnic held by the Progressive Library of New York, an anarchist group involved with Emma Goldman’s publication *Mother Earth*. The picnic was held in Liberty Park in New York City. According to Candace Falk in [this](#) biographical article on Emma Goldman, Goldman herself came to the party dressed as a nun and performed a dance she called the “anarchist slide.”

**Suggested Activities:** Have your students discuss the following questions: Could the Yom Kippur Balls be called “Jewish” events? How does that change or confirm how you think of the category of “Jewish” ritual? Are they an observance of Yom Kippur, or a violation of Yom Kippur, or both? What is the essence of the holiday, and how is it honored or violated?

The balls attracted serious opposition. Often noisy crowds gathered outside of the halls in attempts to disrupt the proceedings, and on more than one occasion, police were called in to diffuse the situation. Invite your students to imagine themselves as participants in the Yom Kippur ball scenario. Ask them to create protest signs with slogans that are either (a) anti-religious, to be displayed inside the ballroom or (b) in opposition to the Yom Kippur balls.

**Sources:** John Nathan, *A Bintel Brief*. (Xlibris Corporation, 2011), 97.

Advertisement for “Yom Kippur Picnic” from *Mother Earth* reproduced with permission from the Emma Goldman Papers. Image courtesy of the Jewish Women’s Archive, from a document study on [Jewish Radicalism and the Red Scare](#).

## 5: Song excerpt, Schmekel's "I'm Sorry, It's Yom Kippur," 2011.

In "I'm Sorry It's Yom Kippur" by the punk rock band *Schmekel*, which identifies itself as "100% Trans Jews," the narrators offer apologies, in the spirit of Yom Kippur, with humor and lightheartedness, reworking the traditional Yom Kippur liturgy of confession. The entire song can be found [here](#), though teachers should be aware that it contains some adult content.

**Suggested Activities:** Invite your students to write their own song about Yom Kippur. They can incorporate and reinterpret the liturgy or focus on one element of their experience of Yom Kippur. In what ways do they feel this is a religious exercise, and in what ways is it transgressive?

Schmekel, "I'm Sorry, It's Yom Kippur." *Queers on Rye*, 2011.

## 6: Song, "Di Naye Al Chet," lyrics by Morris Rund, music by Sholem Secunda, 1928, sung by Jane Pepler, 2016.

In "*Di Naye Al Chet*" ("The New *Al Chet*"), with lyrics by Morris Rund and music by Sholom Secunda, copyrighted in 1928, individuals confess their failings on Yom Kippur, even as they suffer from poverty. Drawing on text from the traditional confessional prayer (*Al Chet*) that is said on Yom Kippur, the song pokes fun at the characters for their grudging confessions, while also chastizing a God who would punish their small missteps with such hardship. Jane Pepler, who performs the song together with Aviva Enoch and Randy Kloko, translated the lyrics. She is a Yiddish music specialist who performs little-known Yiddish theater music from before the Holocaust. Her [Polish Jewish Cabaret](#) website features more than 100 Yiddish theater songs with English subtitles. She also hosts [Yiddish Penny Songs](#), a site featuring over a hundred tenement song broadsides from the beginning of the twentieth century.

**Suggested Activity:** Have your students listen to the song and ask the following questions: How is the song related to the Jewish traditions of Yom Kippur? Do you see the song as participating in prayer in some way? Is the song humorous? Is it bitter?

Invite your students to write a new stanza for the song that has a similar structure and tone but takes place in the present day.

"*Di Naye Al Chet*," lyrics by Morris Rund, music by Sholem Secunda, 1928, sung by Jane Pepler, 2016. *Lebedik Yankel: Yiddish Songs from Warsaw Volume 2*. Published with permission from Jane Pepler.

## 7: Excerpt, Rosa Palatnik, "The Yom Kippur Candle Went Out," 1953.

Rosa Palatnik (1904-1981) was born near Lublin and had both a religious Jewish and a secular education. In 1927 she immigrated to Paris, where she contributed to the Yiddish press. In 1936 she settled in Rio de Janeiro, where she published widely in Latin American Yiddish periodicals, composing roughly two hundred short stories. In this story, "The Yom Kippur Candle Went Out," Mirel, a Jewish immigrant living in Paris, recalls the Yom Kippurs of her past and decides to go to synagogue for *Kol Nidre* services. Even though in her hometown she had already begun secularizing, on Yom Kippur she rededicates herself to her promise to her father that she would remain a Jew. But just as she is preparing to commemorate the holiday she realizes that she has to work instead or she will lose her job.

**Suggested Activity:** Have your students discuss the following questions: Why does Mirel feel that it is important to observe Yom Kippur? What practices does she find most important? When she says to her daughter, "I am doing this for you," what is she referring to? Observing Yom Kippur or working on the holiday, or both?

Are there sacred and sacrilegious ways of breaking with religious tradition – and, if so, is Mirel's decision to work sacred or is it sacrilegious? If your students have read multiple texts in this kit, invite them to put them in order according to the extent to which the Yom Kippur practice described is sacred or sacrilegious. Have them discuss and defend their choices.

Does this story posit that Jewish religion is incompatible with immigrant life? Can you relate this to ways in which immigrants to America today may experience conflicts between their traditions and the demands of their new lives?

**Source:** Rosa Palatnik, *Kroshnik-Rio: Dertseylungen* (Kroshnik–Rio: Stories). Rio de Janeiro: 1953. Unpublished translation by Jessica Kirzane.

