

MY FIRST YOM KIPPUR IN PRISON

In my opinion, the words *Yom Kippur* and prison should not be found in the same sentence. But unfortunately, for now – *in my world, at least* – they do and that's just the way it is. To be honest, every day here in prison has been like Yom Kippur. *Every day has felt like Judgment Day and every day has been a day of affliction and the purging of the old man from my soul.* At the beginning of my stay here, I spent all day in bed repenting of everything I could think of and shedding many tears. I was covered in “**sackcloth and ashes.**” I’m not ashamed to say that for the first two months I don’t think there was a single day that I did not have a breakdown at some point. The separation from my wife and children alone was beyond what I could handle. So if Yom Kippur is all about afflicting yourself and repenting for anything and everything to get ready for Judgment Day, then I pray that I am more prepared than I realize. Repenting, reflecting, and living in sackcloth and ashes has become the norm around here.



That being as it may, I would like to share my first experience of **Yom Kippur** in here with all of you. I've been celebrating the holiday for thirteen years now. And although I have really enjoyed each and every one, this Yom Kippur was probably the most powerful and intimate one yet. Because I used to be the pastor of a local congregation, I spent many Yom Kippur getting ready for a service where we would lead people from around the world in prayers of repentance and culminate in a praise and worship service. My responsibility as a leader did not always allow me the privilege of taking an extended time to really focus on the depth of the meaning of the day. *This time it was the complete opposite of what I was used to.* There were no cameras, no stage, and no large audiences to lead in prayer. It was just two close friends and me.

Due to the fact that the one and only Jew here, who also happens to be a rabbi, had the chapel reserved for the eve of Yom Kippur, my little threesome was forced to improvise. Blake, Cash, and I really had no private place to meet outside of a small little cubby hole in the administration building hallway. So we grabbed a few chairs and got cozy. Neither Cash nor Blake had ever celebrated Yom Kippur before and had no idea what to expect outside of what I had already taught them about it. We started off in prayer and asked the Father to accept our humble offering on that day as we sought to do our best with what we had.

Cash was fairly aggravated before we started. He didn't understand why we had to spend so much time repenting. He said, *"I repent every day of everything I do 'cause I mess up so much. What makes this any different?"* I personally think he was more agitated because he wanted to watch a movie and we had decided to do an opening prayer service at the last minute and were now stuck in this cubby hole. We let him vent, and I tried to explain to him that we are *all new* to this whole celebrating-Feast-Days-in-prison thing and to please give us some grace. Patience is not exactly this former Crips leader's strongest virtue.

The atmosphere in the room changed drastically after we opened in prayer and started to go through the *Al Chet* prayers of repentance. With each prayer, there was a tangible shift in all of us as we repented for the previous generation, our forefathers, and then ourselves. We prayed for well over an hour and only scratched the surface of the prayer book we were going through. When we finished, Cash was completely humbled, telling us that he had no idea there were that many sins to repent for. He said he would never have thought to repent for almost any of those sins and that this was one of the most amazing nights he had ever had. As I closed in prayer, something came over me and I began to get choked up. I stopped praying for a moment to compose myself because I wasn't sure what was happening to me. I had been perfectly fine just one minute earlier. But the more I prayed the more the tears rolled down my face. I struggled through the end of the prayer and thanked the Father for such a sweet time together. As I finished and said, "Amen," Cash stood up, smiled his famous Cash smile, and asked for a group hug. We all three put our arms around each other and hugged a hug that I will never forget. Two black former gang leaders who have pounded more people than you can imagine and one white preacher who has only pounded pulpits all huddled together in a powerful bond of love for one another and for Christ. *It was real. It was raw. It was powerful.* But that was only the first night.

The next day we met in the chapel at 10 AM and read various scriptures and continued our way through the Yom Kippur prayer book that someone had sent in for us. At 11, we broke for a couple of hours to let the rabbi use the chapel and then met back in there at 1. It was wonderful

to spend time with my King privately and to really reflect and focus on all the things that I rarely got to focus on in past Yom Kippur. A two-hour live service and the preparation that comes with just doesn't compare to an all-day focus on Him.



When we were almost finished, we came across a prayer that caused quite a stir between Cash and Blake. The prayer was something like *“For the sin of taking advantage of our closest brothers and friends because of their generosity...”* Blake raised his eyebrows, looked over at Cash through his black coke-bottle glasses, and cleared his throat. It was clear there was something there between them that I didn't know about. Cash looked up, smiled, and said in the high-pitched voice he uses when he knows he's in trouble, *“Whaaaaaat?”* Blake just smiled and looked back down at his bible. I looked at both of them with a smirk, wondering what on earth this was all about. Cash, trying his best not to laugh, confessed that he has a problem of going and asking Blake for a handful of Hot Hot BBQ potato chips knowing that Blake will just give him the entire bag because he's so generous. He then sneaks them down to his bunk so no one else will see him with them or ask him for any.

I think Cash is the only guy here that has two prison nicknames. The first one is Cash, which is what people called him in his street gang. But he's also called “Jaws”...and for a good reason. He talks and eats constantly. He's famous for walking in the room and saying, *“Well, well, well...look what we have here.”* Everyone laughs 'cause it's just Cash, one of those overbearing personalities that you just learn to love...although at this moment I don't think Blake was thinking so much of the Cash side more of the Jaws side.

Needless to say, Cash was, in his most hilarious way, confessing this problem he has of taking advantage of his best friend to get free food all the time. I sat there meditating and laughing hysterically the entire time. On one hand, I felt bad because this was supposed to be a time of a solemn assembly and serious repentance. On the other hand, I think I heard the Holy Spirit laughing in the background, too, and it was a much-needed break from all the serious repenting we were doing. We finished our day and broke our fast with one of the best meals Blake's ever made: hand-made Stromboli filled with cheese, rice, hot beef sausage, mackerel, and some sort of chili mixture topped with a jalapeno cheese sauce. *It was a perfect ending to the perfect day.*

Although I would trade the world just to be with my family during these holy days, under the circumstances, this was the most intimate and blessed Yom Kippur I've had to date. They say bigger isn't always better and in this case, the Spirit was evident just in the three of us. I'm grateful for the training I'm receiving and the intensity of this experience. It has *cut me to the bone* and *exposed and removed things that can only be seen under this kind of pressure*. Most people are scared to go under the knife of even the best surgeon, even when we know it's required to save our lives. We allow it because we trust the doctors in our midst but we run from our heavenly Father, that Eternal Surgeon who not only knows exactly what He's doing but can operate on us with such perfect accuracy that we'll be left completely healed and more equipped to accomplish our final purpose. If we stay on His operating table and submit to what He's trying to do in having us go through the trial and the tribulation (the knife of His choosing), we will come out standing taller and wiser than ever before.

At the beginning of my stay here, I fought hard to get off that operating table because I *knew* I hadn't done ten years ago what the government said I did. But I can see now that the straps holding me down were the heavenly straps of grace securing me for my good. ***All my questions*** – *Why was I the only one indicted? Why didn't the company owners get indicted? How could I be guilty of intentional fraud when I had no clue the product would fail? How am I responsible to pay restitution when the insurance companies admitted full guilt and said it was their fault?* – it all made sense now. The Father saw things inside me that needed to be dealt with to receive the upgrade needed so that I could fulfill my next mission and there was no way to slow me down from the speed I was going without serious intervention. He had to get me on that operating table somehow and this was just His way of strapping me in. But in the beginning, ***all I could see*** was the injustice of the government in how they manhandled me and my case. I now understand that the hand of God has allowed all of this and has used it to get me to the operating table so that if I pass all my tests I can qualify for whatever ***“upgrade”*** the Father has next.

For the believer, Yom Kippur always ends in celebration and feasting, as at the end of Judgment Day, we are elevated, upgraded, and redeemed to be who we are created to be. In the same way, every trial, every unfair situation, every deep laceration of the soul will, if we allow it, always lead to the conversion of something corruptible into something gloriously incorruptible. Many times we don't see the hand of our heavenly Surgeon through the circumstances that surround us. That's because our hemming in comes in many forms of sometimes the most unlikely agents from the most unlikely sources. Understanding this fact should increase our understanding of just how much our heavenly Father really is *in control of every incision in our lives*. It may be from the hand of our spouses, our employers, a friend who's betrayed us, or even the government.

Every step is ordained for the righteous...even the ones who land at the bottom of a well or in the basement of a dungeon.

For me, this year was about asking forgiveness for questioning His mighty hand in the circumstances of my life. My “Why’s?” turned into “Why Not’s?” and my tears of great suffering have turned into tears of broken humility and deep joy that He would choose to take all these measures so He could operate on me, upgrade me, and bless me the way He has. So the next time you find yourself questioning God and your circumstances, remember that the *resurrection power comes after the darkest night of death*. And sometimes in order to truly get the light that is deep inside out of you, He has to poke a lot of holes in you. Praise Him through the storm, my friends, because you will be feasting at the end of your Yom Kippur if you let Him do His great work in you to the very end.

Shalom,
Jim Staley