



YOM KIPPUR 2018...IN PRISON, BUT MY BEST ONE YET!

Well, this is my third Yom Kippur in prison and it was not only the best Yom Kippur I've had here so far, it was the best Yom Kippur I have **EVER** had! As a matter of fact, it was such an extraordinary day that it made me feel like I've never celebrated it before! Why? Well...



First of all, here was my normal Shabbat at PFT: I would slide out of bed at around 8 or 9 AM, take a shower, press my clothes, and sometimes eat whatever the kids made for breakfast. Cheryl and the girls would get all their things ready (there was hair to do, hair bows to fight over, and clothes to borrow). I spent a couple of hours putting the last touches on my message and reviewing my PowerPoint. Cheryl would take off with the older girls around noon for worship practice while I did my best to keep the little ones corralled and alive (that's what we husbands do, right?) while I finished up everything else, got dressed, and headed out. There was very little **"rest"** and hardly any time to really **enjoy** the Sabbath. We were busy little modern-day, *Levitical bees*, trying to do our best to prepare the way for the rest of the congregation to enter into the final moments of Shabbat with thanksgiving and praise. If it was a feast day service, like Yom Kippur, multiply all the stress by ten and there you go. A minister's life is anything but

peaceful. It's 24/7/365. And if you're Jim Staley, you're going non-stop at 110 mph. (God has fixed that here while he upgrades my components here.)

That was then. This is now. Here's how THIS Yom Kippur went:

First of all, the evening before was spent setting up in my newly self-remodeled bed. ;-) I had a standard-issue, 25-year-old Bureau of Prisons (BOP) mattress that's as hard as a rock. But five gutted pillows later it has a nice, fluffy pillow top that's as comfortable as anything I slept on at home...I think. (It's been a while so maybe I'm just not as picky). I had three pillows propped up behind me so that I could sit up comfortably and had a stack of books to my left that was supported by a skinny cardboard box jammed between the gray metal bed post and the cinderblock wall – *creating a makeshift nightstand* – with an empty peanut butter jar for a pen holder; a small, cut-up plastic box (former mp3 player packaging) that I use to hold my ear plugs and my Chapstick; and my clear plastic alarm clock sitting to my left on top of another stack of books. Tucked under the covers with my arms folded and head down I entered fully into the spirit world; I was determined to make every minute of the next 24 hours count. *For once in my life, the highest holy day of the year was going to be just that: holy. No lights. No cameras. No action. Just Him.*

The next morning, my alarm clock went off at 5:30. I'm not normally an early riser but I popped out of bed and was excited to meet with my King. Juan and I had a sunrise service planned so I needed to hurry and wash my face and throw a shirt on. No picking out a nice outfit, no pressing my clothes, no need to shave or even comb my hair. I grabbed a baseball cap, my glasses, my water bottle, and my mesh book bag with my Bible books and was off to the chapel.

I woke Juan up on the way. (He must've still been stuck in the spirit world; he never sleeps in and is always up by 5:30 (one of those crazy people I see when I'm on my early morning bathroom run)). He arrived at the chapel a few minutes later with his coffee and I was already feeling the Spirit moving. The chapel looks like an old finished basement from the 1950s. It's lined with single-paned windows whose cranks no longer work (I'm pretty sure they stole them from my Catholic grade school); four 90s-era tube TVs with DVD/VCR combos attached (do they even make those anymore?); and beige carpet that I have no doubt was, at one point, the liner for a litter of Great Dane puppies on a local farm around here somewhere. It's no **PFT** sanctuary, *but it's our chapel and we're thankful to have it.*



By the time Juan showed up, I had already put up one of the little 6 feet by 2 feet tables and had some worship music going in the background. We opened the Scriptures and read multiple Psalms that declared His majesty and glory; we wanted the first thing out of our lips that day to be a recognition of just how amazingly glorious He really is. This was the day that He was to sit on His throne and judge mankind and we wanted to stand in awe, if you will, as the Judge took His place. My mp3 player was hooked up to the 1984-era amplifier by a makeshift cable my electrician buddy made me. A song by Kim Walker called *Holy* played in the background and for the next almost two hours we showered love and worship onto our King, thanking Him for even the rising of the sun in this place every day.

Afterward, I went back to my bunk and climbed into bed, pulled down the blanket from the top bunk so it hung like a curtain and gave me ample privacy, and turned off my light. I lay on my left side to thank Him for an amazing sunrise service. Unfortunately, I'm not sure I finished my first sentence before I was transported to a cabin in the woods where I was preparing to go deer hunting. I could hear my dad laughing and playing with one of my grandchildren – grandchildren I **DON'T** have – and was trying to distinguish if it was a little boy or girl. *Guess I'll have to wait to find out!*

I woke up about an hour later, just in time for our 10 AM prayer walk out on the track. Juan met me down there and we each prayed for one of our children on each lap. Juan has four kids and I have six. By lap seven the clouds had gotten darker and it had started to rain lightly. Instead of quitting, we walked over to the half-acre garden area and sat down on a couple of plastic chairs in front of the entrance to one of my friend's sections of the garden. The garden is surrounded by a five-foot-high hodge-podge of chicken wire and cattle fencing with tomato stakes tied on top to make it higher. Between the tomato stakes which are tied with every kind of rope, old soccer netting, and anything else that can be used to extend the fence and keep the deer out. Honestly, it looks more like a hillbilly zoo than anything else.

Right by where we were sitting is a creative awning one of the guys made to grace the entrance to his man-garden. He used tall stakes made down at the wood shop to prop up a 6x4 cloth blanket from his bunk so he'd have a comfortable place to sit all summer long. For me and Juan, it was our temporary prayer shelter from the cascading rain. We had one milk crate between us

and after we sat down and continued to pray for our daughters, the rain started to soak the tweed blanket and drip on our shoulders. The problem was that the thing is only 6x4, to begin with and the rain was coming down at an angle, cutting the dry area to about the size of the milk crate! We scooted our chairs closer together, trying to dodge the annoyingly random drops of water coming down on us from the roof. We needed to hurry up before another inmate saw us sitting almost shoulder to shoulder in the rain under this makeshift shelter; a sight like that could quickly *brand* you around here if ya' know what I mean. ;-)

After we finished praying for our families we headed back to the dorm and I emailed my family a blessed **Yom Kippur** and then went back to my bunk to read a good book and wait for our next service. By the time 2:30 rolled around we were back in the chapel. We chatted for a while and talked about what Yahweh had done in us through this experience. I shared with Juan some tips that Cheryl and I use to raise our kids His way and how we steer them back to the flock when they find themselves on the other side of the fence. It was a *Spirit-led* conversation and a blessing for both of us. We spent the rest of the time until 4 PM count praying for our government leaders, prison reform, Israel, Judah, Ephraim, a revival within God's people for the "*front of the book*," the future **PFT**, etc. We covered it all.

After the count, we found ourselves back in the chapel for our last service of the day. We spent the majority of the time reading through the *Al Chet* prayers, each taking turns and stopping when we felt the Spirit convicting us to pray more into that particular confessed sin. It's amazing how many sins you don't realize you're committing until you actually read them on a piece of paper. I think we covered every sin imaginable, including some I had never heard of before! We were interrupted at about 6:30 for an "*emergency count*," where everyone has to head back to the dorm to be counted again to make sure we were all still here (the prison has no fence and we're surrounded by woods). If you think you don't count in this world just come to prison; they'll count you six times a day!

After count cleared and we were free to move about the campgrounds, we headed back to the chapel to finish our service and celebrate the closing of this day of fasting and prayer with a *good-ol' TV dinner*, compliments of the BOP. Juan and I recently switched to a kosher meal plan where instead of the chow hall we now get kosher TV dinners! ;-) There's nothing like ending your fast with a pre-cooked meal on a black plastic tray that's been blessed by an official rabbi!

All in all, it was one incredibly blessed day. Juan said it was the most peaceful day he's had since he's been in prison. We looked at each other with one leg propped up on the table, leaned back in the ancient, soft-cushioned office chairs and said, "**This is what EVERY Shabbat is supposed to be like!**" I realized that it wasn't because it was Yom Kippur that it was so blessed. It wasn't because it was a High Sabbath that we felt the Spirit so strongly. It was because, *by faith*, we gave the **ENTIRE** day to Him, dedicating every moment. We "*invested*" in our relationship with Him, giving Him glory, interceding for others, and beseeching His Throne, and He answered by filling us up to the brim.

Like He's whispered to me before: "***Prison is not a place. It's the state of one's soul.***" To be honest, I have never felt freer, which hopefully means that my boot camp training is almost complete. How about you? Are you free? Or do you feel like you can't fully celebrate these

holidays because your spouse isn't "on board" or you have to take care of kids, or you're not sure how? *Or...fill in the blank.*

Yahweh isn't looking for you to get it just right. Our prayer walk didn't go as planned but we improvised and did our best. We didn't have a fancy room to pray in or nice clothes to put on. We didn't have a 5-star gourmet meal waiting for us at the end of our fast. We were interrupted several times by inmates poking their heads into the chapel, counts, and other things. But none of that mattered. What mattered to Him was that He could see our hearts were all-in; we never quit trying to please Him. It wasn't about perfection. It's **NEVER** been about perfection. It's always been about the **TRY**. When we reach as high as we can, He picks us up to help us reach the next rung. He's a Dad. He cares about helping us reach our full potential in Him.

I pray that your Yom Kippur was as blessed as mine. If it wasn't, maybe you need to grab yourself a milk crate, an old blanket, and some plastic chairs from a garbage dump and make a small shelter in your backyard. Then sit under it in the rain all day and pray until the sun comes back out. Oh, wait! That's called Sukkot!

Shalom everyone! I can't wait to see you soon! Keep praying!

Jim Staley

September 2018